



The Justice Imperative in Scripture

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Abstract

The Hebrew Bible and New Testament reveal an abiding concern for the poor, including the creation of a just society. Economic stratification in the ancient world and the tendency for those in difficult circumstances to receive unfair treatment lead to a passionate defense of justice, which in many passages requires equitable treatment of all persons. This essay probes key biblical texts on such matters as interest, bribery, outreach to the poor, and the question of an afterlife to underscore a “justice imperative.” Despite arguments to the contrary, social justice and economic fairness are core themes in Scripture.

Keywords

Economic justice, Usury, Bribery, Payday loans, Oppression, Wealth and poverty

Introduction

Union Presbyterian Seminary is located on the Northside neighborhood of Richmond, Virginia, one of the city’s most beautiful and historic areas, where century-old houses, wide streets, and expansive public spaces are enduring features. Yet many individuals on the Northside struggle to make ends meet, especially when unforeseen expenses arise, such as car repairs or medical bills. A rapacious practice known as “payday lending” has arisen in response to those in vulnerable circumstances, a practice that is occurring across the United States. Within two miles of the seminary, there are more than ten payday-lending facilities that provide cash loans with astronomical interest rates.

In the majority of instances, the lending company offers “fast cash” in the initial transaction as a means of enticing vulnerable borrowers. The process generally begins when an applicant requests immediate funds in advance of the next paycheck, or they can use the current value of their automobile as collateral (a “car title loan”). The borrower receives a cash amount, with interest rates as high as 300 percent.¹ Because challenging circumstances prompted the loan application in the

1 See the 2012 Pew Charitable Trusts Study, “Payday Lending in America: Who Borrows, Where They Borrow, and Why,” www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2012/PewPaydayLendingReport.

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Cash-advance billboard advertisement in Nashville, Tennessee.
Photo credit: M. Blickenstaff.

first place, borrowers usually lack the ability to pay off the full amount, plus interest, within the specified loan period. Consequently, the lender offers “rollover plans,” such that the borrower has to accept additional fees and interest charges. This practice has become a forty-six-billion-dollar industry in the United States, with profits largely made on the backs of the poor.

Suppose a single, working mother experiences car trouble, necessitating a \$350 repair. She cannot get to and from work without her own vehicle (public transportation is spotty in Richmond), and therefore she takes out a payday loan to meet this expense. Because she lacks discretionary income to pay back the loan, she has to extend the loan period by more than a year, thereby incurring higher interest rates. The woman likely will pay more than \$450 in fees and interest on top of the initial loan (an effective interest rate of 128%) to extricate herself from the spiral of debt.²

According to the study, median income for payday loan borrowers is just above \$22,400, and more than eighty percent of loans are “rolled over” within two weeks, thereby continuing the cycle of debt. Moreover, the average borrower takes out eight loans of \$375 each per year, thus spending \$520 on interest. See Jessica Silver-Greenberg, “Consumer Protection Agency Seeks Limit on Payday Lenders,” *The New York Times* (February 8, 2015), <http://dealbook.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/consumer-protection-agency-seeks-limits-on-payday-lenders>; and Gary Rivlin, *Broke, USA: From Pawnshops to Poverty, Inc.: How the Working Poor Became Big Business* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

- 2 See Rivlin, *Broke*. Attempts to reform the practice of exorbitant interest rates have failed in most state legislatures across the country, due to savvy and intensive lobbying by the payday lending industry. Most economic analysts and reform advocates recognize the need for stopgap lending, but they are seeking substantial reductions in the exorbitant fees.

While this scenario is disturbing, such practices are not unusual; in fact, they represent a timeless aspect of financial exchanges throughout the world and across the centuries. Predatory lending also occurred in the ancient contexts for the Bible, and the legal traditions of ancient Israel and surrounding cultures sought to regulate it. In the Covenant Code (Exod 20:23–23:19), the earliest legal collection in the Hebrew Bible, one admonition recognizes the intrinsic vulnerability of poor, landless individuals to oppressive creditors: “If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest [Heb. *nešek*] from them. If you take your neighbor’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor’s only clothing to use as cover” (my translation).³ This regulation acknowledges the susceptibility of poor individuals to entrapment, particularly when a greedy lender senses the opportunity for profit.

In response to such exploitative practices, many of the sacred/legal traditions of ancient Israel advocate for the poor by offering a concrete principle of “justice” (Heb. *mišpāt*). Those who worship the God of Israel must refrain from corrupt practices *and* offer assistance to those in need. According to the laws and prophetic oracles of the Hebrew Bible, benevolence is not optional but a core requirement for members of the covenant community. These persistent obligations in Scripture underscore a “justice imperative.” A variety of biblical passages demand special protection for vulnerable persons, particularly widows, orphans, and resident aliens. Throughout the Bible, one finds an honest assessment of the plight of the poor and explicit remedies for inequality, many of them structural rather than situational (e.g., the Sabbatical Year law and the Jubilee legislation).

The following discussion will address the Bible’s “justice imperative,” with the bulk of our attention centering on the Hebrew Bible and its insistent vision of an egalitarian society. Key topics will include the agrarian context for ancient Israel, systemic reform efforts like the Jubilee Year laws, and wariness about bribery. The reliance of the New Testament on these earlier witnesses will also receive consideration, including brief discussion of the promise of an afterlife. Our exploration will affirm a central thread in Scripture: the laws in the Torah, the social critiques included in the prophetic corpus, the incisive observations of the sages responsible for the Wisdom literature, and the sayings of Jesus all affirm the fundamental conviction that the God of Abraham and Abraham’s descendants demands fairness, advocates specifically and passionately for the poor, and expects all followers to build a society where everyone has access to essential resources.

The Meaning of “Justice”

At the outset, it is essential to consider the semantic range of the primary Hebrew term for “justice,” *mišpāt*. This pivotal noun appears throughout the Hebrew Bible and derives from the root *špt*, which means “to judge” as a verb. As a noun, *mišpāt* can refer to a judicial decision or verdict, the act of resolving a matter. A representative example is 1 Kgs 20:40: “The king said to him, ‘So shall

3 The Hebrew word for “interest” in this verse, *nešek*, also describes the bite of a serpent.

your judgment [*mišpātekā*] be. You yourself have decided it.” Often *mišpāt* has the connotation of “edict” or “ordinance,” as in Num 15:24: “[T]he whole congregation shall offer one young bull for a burnt offering, a pleasing odor to the LORD, together with its grain offerings and its drink offering, according to the ordinance [*mišpāt*].” Here and with other, similar examples, *mišpāt* simply indicates a regulation that the covenant people are to follow. The “ordinances” and “edicts” that appear in the Hebrew Bible reflect the will of the Deity, who mediates reward and punishment in the earthly realm through such figures as Moses (e.g., Exod 21:1; 24:3).

Yet “justice” can also have a socioeconomic connotation in the Bible, such that it relates to protecting the vulnerable from destitution and entrenched social hierarchies. With this meaning, justice is the antithesis of oppression. If oppression represents “the extraction of goods and services from a vulnerable individual or social subgroup by a more powerful person or politico-economic subgroup,” *mišpāt* indicates the opposite of such actions, the *presence* of righteousness.⁴ With this connotation, *mišpāt* (justice) stands for the divine norm that seeks a fair society.⁵ For example, the prophet Isaiah delivers a passionate message from God that the people should “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa 1:17; cf. Isa 56:1; 61:8; Mic 6:8). Here and in similar passages, justice entails fairness and special concern for those most susceptible to poverty. Isaiah and other prophets encourage not only kindness but also the formation of egalitarian social structures that prevent corruption and poverty. Several passages condemn the frequent tendency of the wealthy to swindle the poor. A saying in Proverbs illustrates the point: “The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice” (literally “through the absence of justice”: *bēlō mišpāt*).

The New Testament also contains a pivotal Greek word in regard to justice: *dikaioynē*. While Paul can employ the word to indicate the significance of the Christ event (pictured as an expression of God’s “righteousness,” as in the NRSV of Rom 3:21–26), it also has a legal and/or ethical connotation in many passages. For example, Matt 5:20: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness [*dikaioynē*] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The Sermon on the Mount, of which this verse is a part, includes concern for socioeconomic justice, such as the admonition to care for the poor and to give alms (Matt 6:2–3). Consequently, the justice imperative extends to the New Testament, particularly in light of the numerous passages that enjoin care and respect for the poor (see below).

Agrarian Context and the “House of the Father”

Before proceeding with a more thorough examination of economic justice, it is critical to note ancient Israel and Judea’s preindustrial, agrarian economy. Most individuals were agriculturalists, subsistence farmers who worked the land on family plots. Anthropologist Gerhard Lenski offers

4 Harold V. Bennett, “Justice, OT,” *NIDB* 3:477; cf. B. Johnson, “*mišpāt*,” *TDOT* 9:86–98.

5 Johnson, “*mišpāt*,” 92.

the category of an “advanced agrarian economy.”⁶ Unlike more primitive reliance on hoe-cultivation and less efficient tools, persons living in an advanced agrarian economy have sophisticated techniques for plowing, including the use of metal implements, and the maximizing of animal power. In an advanced agrarian economy, there is usually an elite class and/or ruling state with a great deal of proprietary control.

This type of society is the most accurate description for the context in which the bulk of the Bible was written. A majority of households engaged in some form of agricultural activity in the arid climate of the Palestinian region; they confronted persistent challenges because of difficult farming conditions, the potential for members of the elite class to seize a family’s land, unfair lending arrangements, and other predatory maneuvers by elites and foreign rulers. A clear example of how difficult it can be to obtain fairness in this type of economic setting is the crisis described in Nehemiah 5, where a wealthy class of opportunistic lenders preys upon poor farmers during a famine (see below for further discussion). Such a dynamic is in line with Lenski’s model, where the majority of the population struggles under tenuous economic circumstances, often to the financial benefit of a wealthy and powerful ruling class.

Of equal importance in a discussion of economics is the significance of the “house of the father” (Heb. *bêt ’āb*), a social structure that dictated life in ancient Israel. Ancient Near Eastern society was largely built on networks of households, most having a patriarch at the head of a hierarchical structure of offspring and siblings.⁷ Whatever his or her age or gender, an individual’s best chance for survival depended in large measure on secure membership in a *bêt ’āb*. Terminology in the Bible reflects the significance of this framework; for example, “David left there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; when his brothers and *all his father’s house* heard of it, they went down there to him” (1 Sam 22:1). Abraham’s leap of faith in Genesis involves the great risk of departing from the security of his father Terah’s “house” and trusting in the promise of God (Gen 12:1). When marriages were made, a woman usually left the household of her father to join the *bêt ’āb* of her new husband.⁸ These examples illustrate how familial relations, landownership, and residential patterns largely revolved around this “house of the father” structure.

If attachment to a secure household offered the best opportunity for economic viability, then those who lacked such a membership faced dangerous circumstances. It is no coincidence that the three categories of persons needing the most special protection in the Hebrew Bible are widows,

6 Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1966; repr., 1984).

7 On the significance of this framework, see the landmark study of J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Studies in the Archaeology and History of the Levant 2; Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 2001); cf. Shunya Bendor, *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel: The Institution of the Family (Beit ’Ab) from the Settlement to the End of the Monarchy* (JBS 7; Jerusalem: Simor, 1996).

8 The process of a woman joining the household of her husband is known as a *patrilocal* system.

orphans, and resident aliens.⁹ Persons falling into these groups usually lacked the security of a functioning household, with no longstanding ancestral plot, network of family members and associates, and reliable sources of food and supplies. The tenuous circumstances of individuals in these categories are clear, as certain injunctions in the Torah demonstrate; e.g., “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge” (Deut 24:17).

The story of Ruth highlights the difficulty of being a foreigner *and* a widow, with social marginalization and penury as ever-present threats to security. Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi understands the delicate nature of her own situation and that of her daughter-in-law, precisely because these two women lack membership within a secure household. Naomi’s message to Ruth prior to the threshing floor scene with Boaz reflects this issue of a widow’s vulnerability: “Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you’” (Ruth 3:1). She then sends Ruth to an inebriated Boaz with a deceptive plan for both of them to join the household of this wealthy man. The fact that Boaz is a distant relative (“kinsman”) to Ruth seems to motivate Naomi’s actions, especially since Boaz takes charge of the situation in chapter 4 and protects both widows and the ancestral plot of their deceased spouses.¹⁰ While one might question Naomi’s methods and whether her scheming indicates a “trickster story,” this colorful narrative provides a more vivid depiction than any legal code of how important it was for a person to have secure membership in a viable household.¹¹ With his wealth and social standing, Boaz offers safety to Ruth and Naomi and the possibility of preserving their land.¹²

Usury and the Justice Imperative

The poor agriculturalists who made up the majority of the population in ancient Israel were susceptible to predatory lending, whether or not they lived in a secure household. The challenges of farming in the region, which included land seizures by foreign and local elites, famine, and drought,

9 A “resident alien” (Heb. *gēr*) is a foreign person who “sojourns” among the Israelites for a lengthy period and becomes a convert to the sacred traditions involving YHWH. The status of such an individual lies somewhere between a foreigner and an Israelite, but the importance of such a person attaching to a secure household appears throughout the biblical laws (e.g., Exod 20:10). See Jacob Milgrom, “Religious Conversion and the Revolt Model for the Formation of Israel,” *JBL* 101 (1982): 169–76 (170). Cf. David L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands?: Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 178–80.

10 For the law of levirate marriage, see Deut 25:5–9.

11 On the possibly questionable tactics that occur in the book of Ruth, including the decision to send Ruth to the threshing-floor in chapter 3, see Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990).

12 For a recent study of the sociocultural context for Ruth and the motivations of the characters, see Peter H. W. Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach* (BZAW 416; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

made borrowing a regular necessity.¹³ Wealthy lenders recognized such vulnerability and frequently sought to take advantage of those in need. Extant Mesopotamian legal codes and contracts indicate the exchange of goods and/or legal tender, with usury an integral part of the transaction. In many cases, the rates were exorbitant for such essentials as grain.¹⁴ Legal codes like Hammurabi and Eshnunna acknowledge the tendency of wealthy lenders to take advantage of vulnerable borrowers and seek assurances of repayment. Yet as we have seen with contemporary payday lending, those in an advantageous position might change the terms of the loan and demand an even higher interest rate, especially when repayment did not occur in a timely fashion. This tactic is known as antichresis, and such antichretic loan arrangements frequently allowed lenders to demand additional goods, land, and often labor as payment, with debilitating results for the borrower.

One of the clearest examples of such opportunistic lending occurs in Nehemiah 5, where the governor Nehemiah (fifth-century BCE) receives the following complaint:

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, “*We are having to put up our sons and daughters as collateral*,”¹⁵ we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.” There were also those who said, “We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.” And there were those who said, “We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others” (Neh 5:1–4).

Significantly, those who are oppressing the struggling farmers in this scenario are fellow believers in Y^{HWH} and part of the community in which such practices violated covenant law (note the mention of “Jewish kin” in v. 1). Moreover, this passage points to the practice of debt slavery, which amounted to mortgaging the labor of one’s offspring or oneself as collateral for a loan.¹⁶

This story in Nehemiah indicates that such systemic practices of exploitation occurred, despite the fact that many antecedent laws sought to protect the subsistence farmer and other vulnerable persons from the usurious schemes of those who would deprive them of meager necessities or force them into debt slavery. For example, the legal statutes of Deuteronomy expressly forbid

13 On the challenging conditions, see Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Boston: ASOR, 2002); Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

14 Michael C. Hudson and Marc van de Mieroop, eds., *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East* (International Scholars Conference on Ancient Near Eastern Economies 3; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2002); Reuven Yaron, *The Laws of Eshnunna* (rev. ed.; Jerusalem: Magness, 1988), 235–46.

15 The phrase is my translation, reading “collateral” (*rbym*) rather than “many” (*rby*), a slight textual emendation that many commentators make.

16 For background, see Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (JSOTSup 141; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993).



Persian gold stater (5th cent. BCE). Israel Museum (IDAM), Jerusalem, Israel. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

rapacious lending: “You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, and interest on anything that is lent. On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess” (Deut 23:19–20). While Nehemiah will not or cannot repeal the king’s tax paid to the Persian rulers who control the larger region, he plans to restore the property of those who have mortgaged all their possessions and family members (Neh 5:11). Such a benevolent move by Nehemiah honors the justice imperative and most likely indicates knowledge of the law in Deuteronomy or similar statutes.

Two legal traditions regarding usury offer further evidence of the justice imperative in Scripture: the Sabbath release and the Jubilee Year legislation.

With regard to the former custom, the law of “release” (*šēmittā*) stipulates that all land has to lie fallow during the seventh year, and debt forgiveness is part of the process (Deut 15:1–6; cf. also Exod 23:10–11 and Lev 25:20–22, which do not mention debt forgiveness). Usurious arrangements among fellow Israelites are not tenable during this period of renewal: “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts” (Deut 15:1). References to this practice appear in later texts. Along with a refusal to conduct business on the Sabbath, the following statement appears in Nehemiah: “and we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt” (Neh 10:32b [31b]).¹⁷ Later references also discuss the Sabbatical year, though the historical accuracy of these passages is open to dispute.¹⁸ What is clear is that the legal traditions of the Hebrew Bible

17 The language of Neh 10:32 [31] conflates the legal formulations of the Covenant Code (Exod 23:11) and Deut 15:1 on Sabbatical release. Such legal blending is common in postexilic books like Nehemiah. See Joshua Berman, “The Legal Blend in Biblical Narrative (Joshua 20:1–9, Judges 6:25–31, 1 Samuel 15:2, 28:3–25, 2 Kings 4:1–7, Jeremiah 34:12–17, Nehemiah 5:1–12),” *JBL* 134 (2015): 105–25 (106).

18 1 Maccabees 6:48–54 mentions the inferior position of the Jews in their battles against the Seleucids (second century BCE) because of inadequate provisions during the Sabbatical Year. Similarly, Josephus discusses a tax reprieve under the reign of Julius Caesar because of low agricultural output during the seventh year (*Ant.* 14.203).

demand widespread restoration of land and debt forgiveness as an ethical obligation toward fellow Israelites.

In similar fashion, the presentation of the Jubilee Year in Lev 25:1–26:2 represents one of the most detailed illustrations of the justice imperative in the Hebrew Bible. The fundamental idea behind this law is to provide an escape from the endless cycle of indebtedness and servitude that can occur in an advanced agrarian economy. The Jubilee Year legislation offers a resetting of property/indebtedness claims by restoring all land to the original owner and forgiving all loans. The law seeks to protect Israelites who face vulnerable circumstances through specific remedies, including the liberation of all persons serving as debt-slaves. Within the framework of Leviticus 25, different levels of indebtedness exist, each more serious than the last: (1) selling a portion of one's land to cover a debt (Lev 25:25–34); (2) serving as a tenant farmer, but without interest, as part of the loan agreement, so that the individual receives the same treatment as a resident alien (vv. 35–38); (3) working off a loan “as hired or bound laborers [i.e., not as slaves]¹⁹ . . . until the year of the jubilee” (v. 40). Then at the “year of the jubilee,” all persons shall return to “their own family” and “their ancestral property” (v. 41), effectively pressing the reset button on loan and debt slavery arrangements.

Most scholars who have studied the complex regulations in Leviticus 25 doubt the historical authenticity of such a widespread practice of debt forgiveness and property restoration. We have no external validation that the Jubilee Year was even an occasional practice, and many ancient documents show that charging high interest rates was a common aspect of everyday transactions.²⁰ Nevertheless, the benevolent spirit of this Jubilee legislation highlights the justice imperative in the Torah and elsewhere in Scripture and demonstrates a willingness to show forbearance in financial transactions, not taking advantage of fellow Israelites whose financial difficulties have become acute. The Jubilee Year regulations are the antithesis of payday lending.

Some interpreters are skeptical that an egalitarian vision lies behind such seemingly benevolent passages as the Jubilee Year. Instead, they have argued that the preservation of an unjust status quo is the motivation for certain legal injunctions and narrative accounts. While the justice imperative might seem operative upon first reading of a passage like Leviticus 25, one can mine below the surface for ulterior motives. Such readings often reflect the interpretive lens of Marxist theory. For example, a recent study by Roland Boer notes the tendency of non-farmers to expropriate goods and land, even when they have no territorial claims.²¹ Boer compares the Jubilee Year to

19 Jacob Milgrom notes that the debtor serves as a temporary member of the lender's household but ultimately retains independent status (*Leviticus* 23–27 [AB 3B; New York: Doubleday, 2001], 2207–8).

20 The examples of usury in Judean society are numerous and never mention the Jubilee Year as the ultimate remedy (e.g., Nehemiah 5; Sir 29:14–20; the discussion of the *prosbol* by Josephus in *J.W.* 2.427).

21 Roland Boer, *The Sacred Economy* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 23, defines “extraction” as “the appropriation of the produce of labor by those who do not work (the willing unemployed, namely, the ruling class and its hangers-on). Extraction takes place by means of either exploitation or expropriation: the former designates the extraction of surplus from what one possesses—land, machinery,

Babylonian *mīšarum* (or *andurārum*) edicts, where the king would declare widespread debt cancellations at the beginning of his reign to make himself seem generous, when in fact consolidation of power was his actual goal. According to this interpretation of such practices, officials frequently sought to pull indentured workers away from greedy landlords so that these poor individuals could serve the state and other elites more freely. Mesopotamian rulers and the elite class of ancient Israel used “justice” rhetoric to appear benevolent, but they were in fact “consummate propagandists.”²²

Similarly, Douglas Knight surmises that royal and non-royal elites stood to gain from the ongoing subjugation of poor farmers at the village level, and laws like the Jubilee Year represented a “cynical, devious practice” that was highly effective, especially since we have so few indicators that these ambitious reforms occurred with any degree of frequency.²³ Such skeptical readings remind us that all laws and principles are contextual, and that political motivations play a role. Politicians, judges, and scribes in a variety of contexts offer seemingly benevolent programs that often do more to serve those in power than help the poor.

Yet these cautionary notes do not invalidate the justice imperative that underlies the ethical constructs found in the Bible, and do not diminish their considerable impact. Even with his more skeptical reading, Knight acknowledges that such laws as the Jubilee Year legislation represent “some of the most dramatic, memorable, reform-oriented provisions in the history of social and economic ethics.”²⁴ One should not ascribe the ideal communitarian vision in Scripture entirely to the manipulative tactics of the upper class. Even if the altruistic expectations in the Torah and the Prophets represent utopian vision more than actual practice, systemic reform efforts often aim for far more than is reasonably possible. These ancient laws and oracles set a standard that might yield better conditions for society’s most vulnerable members. Such ambitious visions have guided generations of believers, including the nascent Christian movement. For example, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew adopts the reformist spirit of the laws against interest: “And forgive us our debts [Gr. *opheilēmata*], as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12). Interpreters often spiritualize this petition and overlook the economic specificity of this pivotal line from the Lord’s Prayer and its focus on debt forgiveness. In the Gospels, Jesus regularly focuses on socioeconomic reforms as a means of inaugurating the kingdom of God.²⁵

labor—while the latter concerns the extraction of surplus from what one does not possess but is possessed by another.”

22 Boer, *Sacred Economy*, 291.

23 Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 222.

24 Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice*, 220.

25 Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3–7:27 and Luke 6:20–49)* (ed. Adela Yarbro Collins; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 400–4.

Bribery as Denial of the Justice Imperative

Along with wariness about interest on loans, the Hebrew Bible contains stern warnings about bribes. In the ancient record, bribery has a meaning similar to our usage today: a bribe is an act by an individual or group to influence another person or persons through the bestowal of money and/or gifts. Such an action often stems from devious intentions and usually occurs in private. Characteristic examples appear in the Torah and the Wisdom texts of the Hebrew Bible: “Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe [*šōḥad*], to shed innocent blood” (Deut 27:25). While some passages acknowledge the effectiveness of bribing others, especially the powerful (e.g., Prov 17:8), these exchanges work to solidify an unjust status quo and economic stratification. Bribery threatens fairness and marginalizes those who lack access to powerful circles. One of the most vivid examples of the justice imperative in this regard is the warning in Deuteronomy 16:

You must not distort justice [*mišpāṭ*]; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (Deut 16:19–20)

The repetition of “justice” (*mišpāṭ*) in these verses is significant: the covenant people are to create an equitable society, with God as sovereign, where bribes do not alter mutual trust, and everyone has a “sphere of genuine autonomy.”²⁶ What this latter phrase means is that a society faithful to God values the dignity and worth of every individual, and all persons have the opportunity for self-sufficiency.²⁷ Because bribery reinforces stratification and marginalizes those who cannot participate, the practice should be avoided. This warning is still highly relevant in many contemporary political cultures of reciprocity. Those with access to the corridors of power through lobbying and financial contributions can curry favors, while most of the population lacks such influence.

Obligatory Care for the Poor

The justice imperative in Scripture extends beyond the avoidance of unfair interest charges or bribes, since all persons have an obligation to care actively for those on the margins. Special efforts are necessary to assist those in need; the mere avoidance of malicious behavior does not suffice. The book of Ezekiel expresses this mindset clearly in the prophet’s discussion of personal responsibility. In a hypothetical series of stipulations, Ezekiel outlines acceptable conduct, with both positive and negative examples.

If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right—if he does not . . . oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from

26 Carl Joachim Friedrich, *Transcendent Justice: The Religious Dimension of Constitutionalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1964), 16–17.

27 S. Dean McBride, “Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy,” *Int* 41 (1987): 229–44, outlines the comprehensive nature of the vision for justice in Deuteronomy.

iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the LORD God. (Ezek 18:5–9)

For present purposes, the most noteworthy aspect of this list of requirements is the combination of obligatory and voluntary activities. A person must refrain from such acts as excessive interest charges and robbery, but it is also necessary to offer food to the hungry and clothes to those who are in need. J. David Pleins calls this framework a “theology of obligation,” which begins with the Covenant Code and extends throughout the Hebrew Bible and into the New Testament.²⁸

In this “theology of obligation,” the God of justice creates a sphere for human activity, as in Ps 99:4: “Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.” Because this just God allows us to flourish, human beings are to respond in kind to neighbors, not merely through abstaining from evil acts, but also by providing care to those who need it the most.²⁹ The familiar language from the eighth-century prophet Micah asks the faithful person “to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). This is not an abstract, spiritual wish, but a call for concrete action. Earlier in the book, the prophet rails against evildoers who plunder their neighbors’ houses (Mic 2:2), so that justice involves voluntary acts of reconciliation and kindness. Similarly, the postexilic writings of the prophet Zechariah describe the pursuit of justice in socioeconomic terms: “Execute true justice; deal kindly and mercifully with one another, do not defraud the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor; and do not plot evil against one another in your hearts” (Zech 7:9–10; cf. Jer 7:5–6).³⁰ Those who make laws and are in powerful positions have a duty to assist the poor, but this obligation extends throughout the society. Such responsibility stems from the example of the Deity, “who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry” (Ps 146:7).

Social ethics in the New Testament reflect the same spirit of these legal and prophetic traditions in the Hebrew Bible, while also casting the justice imperative in eschatological terms. One of the clearest examples is the great judgment scene in the Gospel of Matthew, where the person who has given food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, and hospitality to the stranger will receive eternal life (25:31–46). The concern for economic justice is even more palpable in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus underscores the need for benevolence, most clearly illustrated in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). Jesus depicts a stark contrast in the socioeconomic status of the characters. The rich man’s decadence and refusal to help the poor man lead him to Hades, “where he was being tormented” (v. 23), and he only can look longingly at the formerly poor Lazarus, whose needs he ignored, but who now is resting in the bosom of Abraham.

28 J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 52.

29 Moshe Weinfield, *Social Justice in Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magness, 1995), surveys the use of “justice and righteousness language” in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts.

30 This is the translation in Weinfield, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*, 43.



Lazarus at the gate of the rich man's house. Fresco from San Clemente di Tahull, 12th cent. CE. Museu d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.
Photo Credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

In this teaching moment, a scolding Abraham appeals to the justice imperative of the Torah (“Moses and the prophets” in vv. 29, 31). Abraham reminds the wealthy fellow that his living brothers (who are headed for the same end) only need follow the specific laws and principles involving fairness and outreach to avert the fate of their brother. Such a contrast offers perhaps the most vivid illustration of the “theology of obligation” in all of Scripture, but now with eternal consequences.

The timeless relevance of these images is compelling: as John Carroll explains, the proliferation of gated communities and the growing chasm between wealthy and poor in the United States and in many other countries demonstrate that this parable is “far from an exotic, archaic tale.”³¹

A Litmus Test for the Justice Imperative

Is it possible to determine the inbreaking of justice in a broken world? How does one decide if the mandate of Amos—“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream” (5:24)—is at least partially occurring in any particular context? In addressing this question, the economist Amartya Sen offers the standard of *basic capabilities*. Every human being requires certain “basic capabilities” that are essential to life, such as shelter, food, and adequate medical care, and these indicators are more important than actual financial holdings.³² Sen’s “capability approach” has revolutionized the manner in which poverty, gender equality, and a host of other issues are identified, evaluated, and addressed. In his empirical work, Sen pays close attention to gender concerns, including the particular victimization of women and girls in many countries. He calls basic needs such as shelter and food “functionings,” that is, the things necessary for people to

31 John T. Carroll, *Luke* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 339.

32 Amartya Sen, “Capability and Well-being,” in *The Quality of Life* (ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen; Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 30–53.

exist and maneuver in a society.³³ He maintains that these functionings are more important markers than actual finances. The better a person's "functionings" are, the more "capable" he or she will be in a particular society. Sen combines his study with an emphasis on morality to ask if a particular nation is succeeding in providing basic capabilities for every person.³⁴

One of the more consequential litmus tests in this regard is whether persons in a society can appear in public without shame. Many women around the world cannot appear in public without shame, which endangers their basic autonomy and survival. Sen cites the prevailing opportunities available to men and boys that are unavailable to women and girls in cultural contexts around the world. Educational levels, number of emergency room visits, annual salaries, and even food intake can differ dramatically between genders, with females receiving far less than their male counterparts.³⁵ Such preferential treatment not only endangers basic capabilities for women; it can lead to women's relative inactivity within a culture due to social marginalization. Consequently, many women do not or cannot appear in public because of inadequate resources and social standing, and thus they effectively cede the public stage, with all of its possibilities for employment and well-being, to their male counterparts. Such marginalization occurred in the patriarchal context of the ancient world, and it persists today.

Various statistics support Sen's framework. If societies in the ancient world regularly failed to develop basic capabilities for many individuals, particularly regarding the empowerment of women, it would be erroneous to conclude that our modern, industrial economy has succeeded in this area. The United States has a homeless population of more than half a million persons. As of 2014, the national poverty rate was 14.5 percent, or 45.3 million persons.³⁶ The threshold for membership in this subset is low, as it includes individuals who earn less than \$12,119 and couples with two children who earn less than \$23,624. Many persons who fall above this very low threshold struggle to attain basic capabilities. Similar hardship prevails around the world, from the abject poverty that continues to confront many African nations, with women faring far worse than men in terms of basic capabilities, to the persistent economic troubles in Greece and the rising levels of inequality in India. Industrial, technological advances have facilitated many new possibilities for communication and commerce, but endemic poverty persists around the world.

33 On Sen's use of "functionings," see also Douglas A. Hicks, "Gender, Discrimination, and Capability: Insights from Amartya Sen," *JRE* 30 (2002): 137–54 (139–40).

34 Martha Nussbaum (*Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000]) uses Aristotelian categories to expand on Sen's model, with a particular emphasis on the importance of political participation.

35 Amartya Sen, "Over 100 Million Women Are Missing," *New York Review of Books* (December 1990): 61–66.

36 Carmen DeNavas-Walt and Bernadette D. Proctor, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013* (United States Census Bureau, September 2014), <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p60-249.pdf>.

Conclusions

A few years ago, political commentator and radio show host Glenn Beck had the following to say about finding a church: “I beg you, look for the words ‘social justice’ or ‘economic justice’ on your church website. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words. . . . If you have a priest [who] is pushing social justice, go and find another parish.” Beck then argued that “social justice” represents an alteration of the Christian message, akin to socialism or communism, and he called it a “perversion of the gospel.”³⁷ The rationale for this polemic against social justice echoes the writings of novelist and social theorist Ayn Rand, who seems to have influenced Beck and others who support such views. Rand espoused her belief in “objectivism” and the primacy of the individual over any understanding of a common good.³⁸ Many detractors have denounced Beck’s remarks as purposefully volatile and uninformed, and these criticisms have come from across the theological spectrum.³⁹ Nevertheless, his controversial rant demonstrates how loaded even the most basic terms “economic justice” and “social justice” can be.

Though such arguments as Beck’s might win a following in our hyper-individualized culture, even the most cursory reading of the Bible demonstrates the centrality of the justice imperative in Scripture. Though modern interpreters disagree on their relevance or on solutions that answer the call for fairness in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the concern for basic capabilities appears throughout the canon. One of the clearest examples is the narrative account that describes life among the earliest devotees of Jesus, after he ascends to heaven in the book of Acts:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32–35)

The emphasis in this passage is on shared responsibility and fellowship (*koinōnia*). The Greek word for “in common” (*koina*) comes from the same root as *koinōnia* and underscores the justice imperative in Acts. In the same spirit as the Jubilee Year and the reforms of Deuteronomy, this egalitarian vision in Acts urges believers to care for those on the margins, create an equitable exchange of goods and services, and pay special attention to the most vulnerable, including widows and orphans (cf. Acts 6:1).

37 *The Glenn Beck Radio Program*, March 2, 2010 (www.glennbeck.com/content/show/2010-03-02).

38 The most famous illustration of Rand’s thought-world appears in her 1957 novel, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957; repr., New York: Dutton, 1992), where the protagonist (John Galt) asserts his excellence over and against a meddlesome and obstructionist government bureaucracy and network of “moochers.”

39 For example, see http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/12/us/12justice.html?_r=0 and <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/marchweb-only/20-51.0.html>.

Even if the historical reliability of such an equitable framework is questionable, this passage and the others examined in this essay commend justice as a baseline goal in Scripture for human relations. The ambitious nature of such passages demonstrates the central importance of reformist visions for the biblical writers and their audiences, even if mixed motives were also part of the equation. By asserting the ongoing relevance of this witness, interpreters affirm the timeless nature of the advice, the persistent stratification that threatens to engulf communities and nations around the world, and the God of justice and righteousness who advocates specifically and passionately for those persons who lack basic capabilities and who require the support of their communities. The justice imperative remains one of the core themes throughout Scripture.



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