

Knowing Justice and Doing Justice: Justice in the Old Testament

I. Interpreting and Applying the Old Testament

Continuities and discontinuities between OT Israel and other nations affect application of Old Testament ethical teaching to other historical settings.

Some Discontinuities between the OT and Us

- **Accommodation to historical context:** The Mosaic Law is not a permanent ideal for all times and places but rather a provisional system within a particular historical and social setting. It does not assume that all sin and evil could be eliminated; some evil was acknowledged and regulated in more humane ways (e.g., polygamy, divorce; slavery). It is not the last or ultimate divine word about how his character is expressed in human societies.
- **Fulfillment in Jesus the Christ:** Israel's history culminates and her mission is fulfilled in Jesus and the new covenant. Jesus is the fullest and most ultimate revelation of God and his intention for Israel and for all humanity. Therefore, earlier phases of God's work in history must be interpreted in light of the adjustments and advances that occur with its expansion and maturation in later phases.

Continuities between the OT and Us

- **The Creator's law:** The Mosaic Law comes from the Creator and Lord of all things.
- **A renewed humanity and paradigm for the nations:** Israel was a renewed humanity called to fulfill the universal purpose of God's image bearers and thus be a light and model of divine wisdom to all nations (Exod. 19:4-6; Deut. 4:5-8; cf. Isa. 2:2-3; 42:1-9). God uses Israel's prophets to hold Gentile kings (Dan. 4:27) and Gentile nations (Amos 1:3-2:3) accountable for injustice.
- **One divine story:** The story and scriptures of Israel are part of God's one story of creation and salvation of the world that continues in and through the work of Jesus and the Christian church. The new covenant and phase of God's kingdom later established by Jesus fulfills the OT covenants by transforming them but not rendering them irrelevant or useless. Thus, the NT treats the OT as divine revelation useful for guiding ethical life under Jesus' kingship in the era of the new covenant (Matt. 5:17-20; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 1 Cor. 10:1-13).

Thus, we apply the Mosaic Law by searching for principles and values that apply to modern contexts in ways that are analogous to the function and purpose of the law for human relationships in Israel's context and in light of the advances in God's plan for salvation fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

II. Covenant: The Theological Context of Justice

- **Election & Exodus → Covenant:** God created the nation of Israel by election (Gen. 12:1-3) for the purpose of doing justice and righteousness (Gen. 18:19), and he redeemed Israel from slavery via the Exodus (Exod. 1-19), which enacted justice on their behalf by liberating God's oppressed people from their oppressors. Thus, the Mosaic Law is a narrative of God's grace-based relationship with Israel embodied in the covenants that give structure to that relationship. Living in light of God's salvation both personally and as a nation is the constant refrain running throughout of the Law as its foundation and motive (e.g., Exod. 20:2; Lev. 19:34, 36; 25:38, 42; Deut. 15:12-15).

- **Love:** God's demands for justice are an expression of his love for his children, and Israel was to obey God's commands out of the context of gracious relationship with God that was (1) sovereignly initiated and sustained by God and (2) received and lived by faith and hope in God and love for God and neighbors (Deut. 6:5; 11:1; Lev. 19:18, 34). Israel's justice is based on the law of love.
- **Holiness:** God's commandments are an expression of God's holiness, and Israel is created to be a holy nation like God (Exod. 19:6). Thus, God holds Israel accountable and liable to judgment for rejecting him and violating his commandments (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; cf. promised judgments for unfaithfulness: Lev. 26; Deut. 28).
- **Salvation includes the social/political:** The existence of Israel and the scope of God's law for them shows that God's plan of salvation for the world is accomplished by a people who live according to a just social order (righteousness), a social embodiment of God's character and design for human relationships. If God redeems from us sin, and some sins are social, then salvation must include redemption from all of the manifestations of sin that corrupt and destroy human relationships at every level and institution of society.

II. Principles of Justice in God's Law for Israel

1. Judicial protections: impartiality, and equality before the law

- Equal judicial treatment: absolute impartiality was required for rich & poor alike (Exod. 23:2-3; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 1:16-17; 16:19-20), and bribes are prohibited (Exod. 23:8).
- Equal weights & measures had to be used for all economic transactions (Lev. 19:35-36).
- A king is not divine but rather a man subject to God's law (Deut. 17:14-20). The model of kingship is humble, repentant, sacrificial servanthood, not domination.

2. Provision and care for the needy, the vulnerable, and the victim

Justice in God's kingdom is inextricably and frequently connected to providing for the needy, protecting the vulnerable, and actively defending the weak who have been harmed and wronged by the strong.

- **Resources provided and protected:** God distributed the resources of the land in roughly equal proportions to the families of the nation. God's law established a social system in which justice and righteousness (obedience to God's law) would prevent chronic poverty and provide *every person and family with sufficient resources to fulfill basic human needs and dignity (food, shelter, clothing, work) and to flourish as a fully functioning member of the social fabric of the community* as worshippers, workers, family members, and friends (see Isa. 32:16-18).¹
 - There would be no poor in Israel if they obeyed the Law (Deut. 15:3).
 - Wages of hired workers had to be paid fully and promptly (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14-15).
 - Workers must receive rest via weekly Sabbath and annual religious festivals (Deut. 16).
 - Working animals must be fed (Lev. 25:4), rested (Exod. 20:10), and rescued from loss and harm (Deut. 22:1-4).

¹ This was unlike other ancient kingdoms (e.g., Canaanite tribes) in which the king or aristocracy owned all the land, and the people served as mere serfs and tenants.

- Israelites were to forego collecting debts owed by fellow Israelites for 1 year out of every 7 (Deut. 15:1-3).
- Israelites were to add an extra tithe every 3 years to support the landless Levites and the poor (Deut. 14:28-29).
- The Year of Jubilee restored property to individual households (Lev. 25) no matter the reasons it was lost. This provided a guaranteed amount of resources as *a safeguard against chronic, multigenerational poverty*.

- **Frequent emphasis on the “quartet of the vulnerable”:** widows, orphans, resident aliens (sojourners), and the poor. A biblical concept of justice always include care for the needy.
 - In the Law of Moses: Exod. 22:21-24; 23:9; Deut. 10:18-19; 14:28-29; 15:7-11; 24:17-19.
 - In wisdom literature: Ps. 146; Job 29:12-17, cf. 31:5-20; Prov. 13:23; 23:10; 31:8-9
 - In the prophets: Isaiah 1:16-17; 5:7-8; Jer. 22:3-4; Zech. 7:9-10

This frequent connection between justice and care for the vulnerable “makes us question whether the traditional understanding of justice as ‘strict impartiality’ is really at all appropriate in the biblical context. On the contrary, it is so clear that the LORD is especially attentive to the needs of the marginalized (see Deut. 10:18-19) that it would seem to be the very nature of justice, on God’s terms, for humans also to have such a prioritized concern.” (Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* [InterVarsity Press, 2004], p. 268.)

Why?

“Israel’s writers must have believed that when we look at the actual condition of widows, orphans, resident aliens, and the poor and compare it with the condition of other social classes, we discover that the former are not only disproportionately vulnerable to injustice but usually disproportionately actual victims of injustice. Injustice is not equally distributed. The low ones enjoy those goods to which they have a right—food, clothing, voice, security, whatever—far less than do the high and mighty ones. It takes no special insight to understand why Israel’s writers believed this. For any society whatsoever, it is likely that those at the bottom are suffering the most grievous injustice. Here is why. Robbery and assault are events, episodes. If the victim of a robbery is a wealthy person, the robbery is an episode in a life that likely has been going quite nicely. By contrast, it is all-too-likely that the daily condition of those at the bottom is unjust. Widows are burglarized and assaulted; episodes of injustice also occur in their lives. But in addition, their situation is all-too-often unjust—demeaning, impoverished, voiceless.” (Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* [Princeton University Press, 2008]. p. 78-79)

- **Multiple causes of need and injustice:**
 - natural disasters, e.g., famine (Gen. 47).
 - personal injustice, i.e., personal moral failure (Prov. 6:6-11; 12:11; 14:23; 20:13; 23:20-21)
 - oppression by the powerful and social/structural systems of power (see below)

• **Emphasis on oppression and systemic/structural evil:** Of all the sources of social injustice, the Old Testament most strongly emphasizes oppression by the powerful and social/structural systems of power. The vast majority of texts address God's indictment and commands to the strong and the powerful.

- Creditors may not charge interest from fellow Israelites (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-37; Deut. 23:19-20) and may not keep collateral that is necessary for the survival of the debtor (Exod. 22:26-27; Deut. 24:13, 17). Creditors must cancel debts (see above).
- Employers must pay their workers appropriately and give them rest (see above).
- Farmers were to leave some of their crops unharvested, which were free for the poor to gather (Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 24:19-22).
- People who own land and food should give landless people gifts of animals and food when they are released from service (Deut. 15:14).
- Citizens are to love as equals the people who own no land (the alien and sojourner) and have no citizenship in Israel (Lev. 19:33-34).
- The leaders of Israel must protect and provide for the weak and refrain from exploiting them: the shepherds of the nation (Ezek. 34:1-24; Ps. 82:1-4), kings (Ps. 72:1-4, 12-14; Jer. 22:2; Prov. 31:8-9), elders and judges (Isa. 5:22-23; Micah 3:1-12), and the wealthy (e.g., Job; Isa. 5:1-24; Amos 5:10-15, 24).

• **Impartiality and (primary) justice for all:** The critique of the powerful does not imply that God prefers the poor/powerless over others or that God shows partiality to the poor/powerless.

- There are righteous people in the Old Testament who are wealthy and powerful, who acknowledge that their power and resources are God's gift, and who act as stewards of those gifts with justice and righteousness, e.g., Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Daniel, Esther.
- God champions the cause of those who are needy and vulnerable and victims of injustice because he is impartial toward all and seeks to restore the equal dignity of all. God emphasizes his concern and care for the poor/powerless because he desires to establish primary justice (righteousness) for all by enabling all people to relate rightly to God and each other and to flourish as God created and saved them to do.