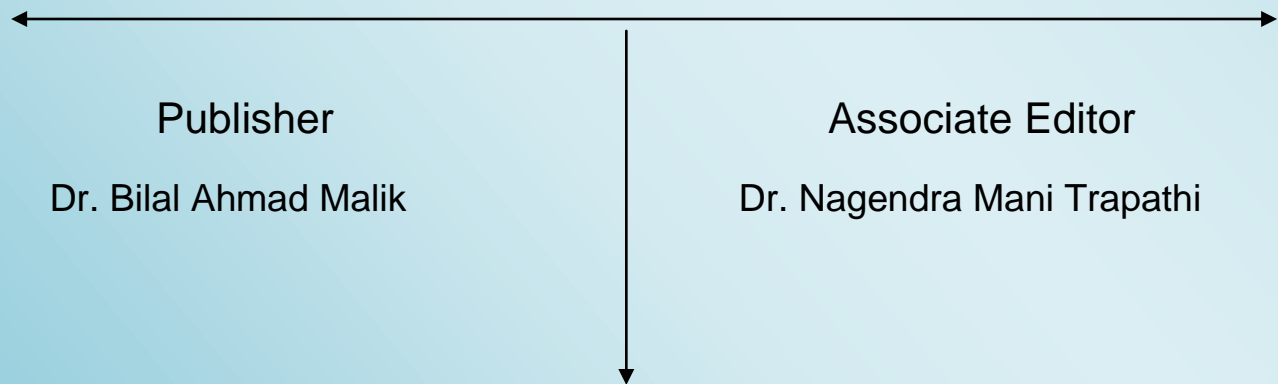


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**“THE POOR WILL NEVER CEASE FROM THE LAND:’
A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ISSUE
WITH APPLICATION FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH.”**

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ABSTRACT

The world has always been struggling with the problem of poverty. But in spite of numerous studies that have been done, and much resources allocated to tackle it, the problem persists, and in some quarters, gets worse. This paper engages in a theological understanding of social responsibility among God’s people, which needs to be taken into consideration if the church were to address the issue with success. It analyzes the seemingly contradicting statements of Deuteronomy 15:4, “there will be no poor among you,” with Deuteronomy 15:11, “there will always be poor among you.” Divine instructions and illustrations from the life of the ancient Israel are contrasted with the teaching and ministry of Jesus, and the experiences and practices of the Church in the New Testament. Ultimately, application is derived for the contemporary church. Thus, when God’s people live as members of covenant community, they will care for the needy, and no poor will be found among them.

Keywords: poverty, social responsibility, release, debt, needy, community.

INTRODUCTION

Canaan Banana, in his article, “Good News for the Poor,” notes that the twentieth century would be known as the century of revolt against poverty.¹ In recent years, several studies have been done to address the issue or, at least, to see how the Church has been addressing the issue.² But the persistence of the problem justifies the need of proper understanding the social responsibility of the Church.

¹Canaan Banana, “Good News for the Poor,” *CrossCurrents* 31/3 (1981), 320.

²Among others, see Gordon De Jong and Joseph E. Faulkner, “The Church, Individual Religiosity, and Social Justice,” *Sociological Analysis*, 28/1 (1967): 34-43; William McGuire King, “The Emergence of Social Gospel Radicalism: the Methodist Case,” *Church History* 50/4 (1981), 436-449; James D. Davidson, Alan K. Mock and Lincoln Johnson, “Through the Eye of a Needle: Social Ministry in Affluent Churches,” *Review of Religious Research* 38/3 (1997), 247-262; Don Gray, “Beyond Orthodoxy: Social Theology and the Views of Protestant Clergy on Social Issues,” *Review of Religious Research* 50/2 (2008), 221-240.

This paper deals with social responsibility in connection with what Peter Vogt calls the “vision of Deuteronomy,” using the translation of Deuteronomy 15:4, “there will be no poor among you.”³ How can that be when a few verses later, there is a condition “If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you,” and further, God clearly states “the poor will never cease from the land”? (Deut 15:11)⁴. The paper engages in the theological understanding of social responsibility among God’s people. Divine instructions and illustrations from the life of the ancient Israel will be contrasted with the teaching and ministry of Jesus, and the Church in the New Testament. Ultimately, application will be derived for the contemporary church.

My first step is to present the text, translation and interpretation of the *Shemittah* (law of release) in Deuteronomy 15. Theological understanding of the law is derived from its analysis. Then the paper will deal with how the New Testament perceives and applies it, and from there, draws some guidelines for the Church today.

The Text, Translation and Interpretation

אֶפֶס כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּכֶם אֶבְיֹן (Deut 15:4)

'epeskîlō 'yih^e yehb^e kâ 'e»^e yôn

כִּי־יִהְיֶה בְּכֶם אֶבְיֹן (Deu 15:7)

Kîyih^e yeh»^e kâ 'e»^e yôn

כִּי לֹא־יִתְּעַל אֶבְיֹן (Deu 15:11)

kîlō ' yeμ^e dal' e»^e yôn

Of the three verses, Deuteronomy 15:7 and 15:11 have not presented serious difference in translation. Deuteronomy 15:7 is thus commonly translated, “if there is among you a poor man,” and Deuteronomy 15:11, “for the poor will never cease from the land.” However, various translations which underlie different interpretations and understandings have been proposed for Deuteronomy 15:4. These may be mainly regrouped into four:

- (1) “Except when there may be no poor among you.” (So NKJV, Darby, Geneva, Targum Onkelos, Webster Bible, Young Literal Translation).

³Peter T. Vogt, “Social Justice and the Vision of Deuteronomy,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 51/1 (2008), 35-44.

⁴Unless otherwise stated, this paper uses the New King James Version of the Bible.

- (2) “However, there shall/should be no poor among you.” (So NIV, English Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New Revised Version, Louis Segond Version, Traduction Oecumenique de la Bible).
- (3) “Let there be no poor among you then.” (So Jerusalem Bible, New Jerusalem Bible, New Living Translation).
- (4) “For *thus* there shall not be a poor person in the midst of thee.” (So LXX Brenton English Translation).

With most translations adopting “there shall/should be no poor among you,” for Deuteronomy 15:4, it is not surprising to recognize difficulty in reconciling the two phrases, namely there will always be poor among you and there shall be no poor among you.⁵ Scholars have noted seeming contradiction between Deuteronomy 15:4 and Deuteronomy 15:7 and 11.⁶ According to A. K. Mukenge, some scholars used diachronic approach to tackle the problem, thus considering Deuteronomy 15:1-11 “as work from disparate sources.”⁷ Or, as Vogt asks, whether “this be taken as an inconsistency on the part of Moses.”⁸

Lending and Release. cursory reading of Deuteronomy 15 reveals that the text does not deal only with debt release⁹ but also lending. The two are inextricably tied together. Admittedly, prescription on the law of release is mentioned first (Deut 15:1-6), but the obligation to lend (even on the eve of year of release) follows (Deut 15:7-11). To the lender, God says, “you shall open your hand wide” to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. (Deut 15:8) and “give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart.” (Deut 15:10, NIV).

Deuteronomic Vision? The two phrases “there shall be no poor among you” and “there will never cease to be poor in the land,” have been viewed as part of the vision of Deuteronomy.¹⁰ In other words, Deuteronomy 15:4 “looks forward to the *result* of cooperating with the plan here set forth. . . . But the time would never come when there would be no opportunity to assist their fellowmen.”¹¹ Thus, many scholars have adopted an ideal view

⁵Jeffries M. Hamilton, “*Hā’āref* in the Shemitta Law,” *Vetus Testamentum* 42/2 (1992), 214.

⁶“Never Cease” [Deut 15:11], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, ed. F. D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1980), 1:1006.

⁷ A. Mukenge, “‘Toutefois, il n’y aura pas de nécessiteux chez toi’: La stratégie argumentative de Deut. 15:1-11,” *Vetus Testamentum* 60 (2010), 69.

⁸Vogt, 41.

⁹Though the word “debt” is not explicitly found in the text, it is rightly assumed. Many modern versions of the Bible such as NKJV, NIV, NAB, NRSV, have understood this and put “debt” in italic.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹“Never Cease” [Deut 15:11], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 1:1006.

of this law.¹²Lohfink Norbert who considers Deuteronomy 15 as part of Deuteronomic “utopia,” calls the church to engage in similar utopian theorizing.¹³The words of Hamilton provide the how for such an engagement: “the sense of the passage in this view is that among an ideal people, obedient and blessed, there will be no poor, but should reality not attain the heights of the ideal, there is a specific attitude which one should have toward the poor (unbegudging charity) and a certain act which one should do (freely give).”¹⁴

“Among You” vs. “Within the Earth”? Other commentators, Hamilton says, put the contrast between ‘among you’[15:4] and ‘within the earth’ [15:11], ‘earth’ here being taken to mean the world outside the bounds of Israel. The sense of the passage in this view is that within the land blessed by God and peopled by an obedient nation there will be no poor ones, while in the rest of the earth where these conditions (obedience and blessing) do not hold, poverty is an abiding presence.¹⁵

However, upon careful examination of the use of *'eref* (“earth,” “land”) in the book of Deuteronomy, “the particular reference to ‘the land’ in xv 11 cannot be other than a reference to Israel.”¹⁶ The law addresses the poor among God’s people within the land of Israel.

Except when there may be no poor among you. We presume that there is no inconsistency on the part of Moses in his statement in Deuteronomy 15:4 as contrasted with Deuteronomy 15:7 and 11. Of the four translations of Deuteronomy 15:4 presented above, the NKJV rendering of *'epeskîlō' yih^ēyehb^ēkā'e*»*ēyô*ninto “except when there may be no poor among you,” seems to be the best and fits the spirit of the year of release (*shemitah*) and its context. The chiasmic form of the passage (Deut 15:1-11) supports this:¹⁷

A Statement of the law (15:1)

B Application of the law (15:2-3)

C Eventuality where the law is no longer necessary (15:4-6)

B' Application of the law, even in extreme case (15:7-11a).

¹²Hamilton, 222; Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-21*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas : Word Books, 1991), 313 ; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2002), 259.

¹³Lohfink Norbert, “The Laws of Deuteronomy: A Utopian Project for a World without Any Poor,” *Scripture Bulletin* 26 (1996), 2-19.

¹⁴Hamilton, 222.

¹⁵Ibid., 214.

¹⁶Ibid. In this examination, *'ereis* used to refer to (1) specific country other than Israel (i.e. Egypt: 1:27; 5:6; 6:17, etc), (2) Israel (4:1; 7:10; 11:11; 12:29), and (3) earth (world) or the ground (13:8; 28:1,10,25).

¹⁷Mukenge, 74-75.

A' Confirmation of the law (15:11b)

Another linguistic element to take into consideration is the construction *'epes+kî*. *'epes* itself means “end,” “extremity,” which is derived from *'apēs* (“to cease,” “to have an end”).¹⁸ The expression *'peskîs* limiting, thus, it means “only that,” “except,” “unless.”¹⁹ Such a meaning is in line with the translation of Deuteronomy 15:4, “except when there may be no poor among you.” The existence of the poor prompts the need of both the law of lending and release. That is in complete agreement with the statement in Deuteronomy 15:7 and 11, which affirm that there will always be poor among God’s people. Jesus himself has confirmed that statement during the passion week (Matt 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8).

Following the above analysis, we may state that:

- (1) Though the law in Deuteronomy 15 contains the “vision of Deuteronomy,” it is more than a vision. The law clearly states a provision for the need of the poor: both in lending and in release.
- (2) The law of lending and release is calling the attention of each member of the Israelite community to recognize the reality of that need and face up his/her social responsibility.
- (3) It may happen that no brother is in need, which makes the application of the law unnecessary.²⁰

MEANING OF 'E»^EYÔN.

It is clear from the above structure that not having poor in the land is an eventuality. The fact is, people from among the Israelites may become poor (15:7), or more precisely, “the poor will never cease from the land (15:11). Then the question is raised: who is the poor?

In the OT, different terms are used for poor.²¹ The word used in Deuteronomy 15:4, 7, and 11, is *'e»^Eyôn*. *'e»^Eyôn*, the one used less frequently in the Pentateuch, occurs 25 times in the OT. An *'e»^Eyôn* is someone who is “in want,” “needy,” hence “poor,” who is subject to oppression and abuse.²² It is likely derived from the root *'»h*,

¹⁸Davidson Benjamin, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), s.v. “*'epes*.” See also William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), s.v. “*'epes*.”

¹⁹Benjamin, s.v. “*'epes*,” Holladay, s.v. “*'epes*.”

²⁰So, Mukenge, 79.

²¹*'e»^Eyôn* is used 25 times (as in Deut 15:4,7,9,11), *dal*, 43 times (as in Ex 30:15, but not in Deuteronomy), and *'anî*, 58 times (as in Deut 15:11; 24:12).

²²BDB, s.v. “*'e»^Eyôn*.”

“to lack, to be in need.”²³In other words, instead of “poor,” which is more general and less precise, it is best to translate *’e»^eyôn* into “needy,” a person who needs a thing he/she does not have.²⁴And naturally, it does not only denote lack but also an expectation or request by a person who needs “charity, alm.”²⁵

It is equally noteworthy that instead of the usual word *ptōchos* (“poor”) or *penēs* (“needy”),²⁶ the LXX consistently translates *’e»^eyôn* of Deuteronomy 15:4,7,11a into *endeēs*. *Endeēs* is an adjective, which basic meaning is needy.²⁷ Deuteronomy 15:8 lends supports to this: “You shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs.” The social responsibility to lend, thus taking care of the needy, remains even on the eve of the year of release (Deut 15:9) when the creditor may not be willing because of the fear of losing what he/she had lent.

Luke’s use of the same term to describe the situation of those who were in need in the early church corroborates that of social responsibility.²⁸ Though the context is different, the situation of the needy prompted the sharing of the possessions in the early church (Acts 4:34; cf. 5:1-11). Joseph A. Fitzmyer rightly observes: “Luke’s phraseology borrows words from Deut 5:4, 11 (LXX), which imply that the ideal stated there was actually governing the life of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.”²⁹

THE BENEFICIARIES OF THE RELEASE

It is clear from Deuteronomy 15:3 that the debt may be required from a foreigner in the year of release. The term used here (i.e. *nok^erî*) signifies that this is a foreigner, stranger, alien (a passer-by), not a permanent resident alien (*ger*) in Israel.³⁰ A *nok^erî* is a “stranger of another nation, standing in no inward relation to Israel at

²³ G. Johannes Botterweck, “’*h*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:28; W. R. Dörmann, “’*e»^eyôn*,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:228.

²⁴ Mukenge, 80.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Ptōchos*, occurring 94 times in the LXX, is the translation of *’e»^eyôn* (as in Ex 23:11 and Deut 15:11), and *penēs*, occurring 73 times, is the translation of *’anî* (as in Deut 15:11b). Statistical information is from George Morrish, *A Concordance of the Septuagint* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

²⁷ Barclay M. Newman, “*endeēs*,” *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 2010).

²⁸ *Endeēs* occurs only once (i.e. Acts 4:34) in the New Testament.

²⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible (New Haven & London: Doubleday, 1998), 314; L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 86.

³⁰ “The term *גֵר* [*ger*] in itself refers to a free alien who resides on a long-term basis away from his native country. The *גֵר* is thereby distinguished from the foreigner (*גֵרִי* [*nokri*] or *בְּנֵי־כַרְבָּן* [*bennēkār*]), who is also a free alien, but who is perceived to be away from his homeland only temporarily.” (Joram Mayshar, “Who Was the *Toshav*?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133/2 [2014], 227).

all.”³¹ Christensen further adds that these foreigners were “present in the country for the purpose of trade; goods or money given to them on credit were usually investments or advance payments on goods, not loans because of poverty.”³²

But the quality of the beneficiaries is clearly spelled out: the debt is to be released for an Israelite brother and neighbor (Deut 15:2-3). A neighbor (*rēa'*) may refer to an Israelite compatriot or simply a fellow human being (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20; etc), but usually compatriot is intended.³³ In Deuteronomy 15:2 and 3, brother and neighbor probably refer to the same person, the *waw* (“and”) being understood as explicative.³⁴ Even without biological relationship, the use of the term “brother” should prompt the creditor to grant a favorable response to another’s need and request. The law is to be lived out in the covenant community of brotherhood among God’s people.

SUMMARY

Deuteronomy 15 simply states as a fact there will always be poor among God’s covenant people within the land of Israel. In it, God instructs His people on how to deal with that reality: take care of the needy. And the care is to be demonstrated through remission of debt during the year of release, and lending.

Theological Understanding of the Law in Deuteronomy

We know from available information that the practice of release has been practiced outside, and even before Israel.³⁵ “The idea of a *release* is not peculiar to Israel. Babylonia law recognized a similar practice and the expression ‘to establish a (general) release’ (*andurāranšakāmum*) is related in meaning to the expression ‘to establish (social) justice.’”³⁶ For instance, the Code of Hammurabi (2nd Millennium BC), 117, sets the release in the fourth year: “If any one fail to meet a claim for debt, and sell himself, his wife, his son, and daughter for money

³¹ K. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, *Genesis to Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 1041.

³² Christensen, 312.

³³ J. Kühlewein, “*rē'*,” *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 3:1244.

³⁴ Christensen, 312.

³⁵ See, for example, Moshe Weinfeld, “Sabbatical Year and Jubilee in the Pentateuchal Laws and Their Ancient Near East Background,” in *The Law in the Bible and in Its Environment*, ed. T. Veijola (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 39-69.

³⁶ J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 186.

or give them away to forced labor: they shall work for three years in the house of the man who bought them, or the proprietor, and in the fourth year they shall be set free.”³⁷

More than a Law of Charity

Many questions are not fully answered, as Christensen admits, “the law of release has puzzled commentators, who are unable to find a point in time within the history of ancient Israel when such a law was ever put in practice, at least on face value.”³⁸ Whether it was actually practiced or not during the Old Testament time is still a matter of debate. However, there is some evidence of its practice (or at least an expectation for its practice) from the OT: Jeremiah 34:13-16; Nehemiah 5:1-13.

It is clear that the purpose of release law outside the Bible was purely humanitarian. But how should an Israelite view it? Humanitarian aspect itself is not excluded, but even in that aspect, Israelite law distinguishes itself from non-biblical law. G. Ernst states, “one of remarkable features of Israelites law . . . The principle behind the law was not ‘to everyman his due according to his importance,’ but rather, ‘to everyman his due according to his need.’”³⁹

Theology in Social Responsibility

If the *Shemittah* law is more than humanitarian law, then what is it? We may safely state that there is a deep theological ingredient in that law. In other words, the humanitarian is being dictated by theology which underlies it. Consequently, a lot is missed if that theological component is overlooked and not taken into account.

“Already” and “Not Yet”? Some compare the provision of Deuteronomy 15 with the eschatological concept of “already and not yet” of the New Testament, as Vogt aptly summarizes:

It envisages a society as it ought to be, and as it one day in fact will be. At the same time it is fully cognizant of the realities of life lived in a fallen world. There is a tension that is maintained between the ideal and the present

³⁷ For more pre-Israel evidences, see Brad A. Pruitt, “The Sabbatical Year of Release: The Social Location and Practice of *Shemittah* in Deuteronomy 15:1-18,” *Restoration Quarterly* 52 (2010), 87-88.

³⁸ Christensen, 310.

³⁹ G. Ernest, “The Book of Deuteronomy,” in *Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1953), 2:427.

reality. In this sense it may be compared to the NT conception of the kingdom of God, which is at once ‘already’ and ‘not yet.’⁴⁰

This view holds if the translation “there shall be no poor among you” (Deut 15:4) is adopted. But as we have seen, that does not seem to be the case, thus, making the expression “already” and “not yet” not fully supported from the reading of Deuteronomy 15.

Released by Grace. Thus, we are led to look from another angle. “This characteristic of Israelite law, so different from contemporary law, can only be explained as occasioned by theology, by the knowledge of God’s righteousness as shown in the Exodus, when a saving and unmerited love was shown to a weak and enslaved people.”⁴¹ As a matter of fact, included in the *shemittah* law is the release of slaves (Deut 15:1-18). The release of slaves in the year of release, and more significantly in the same passage, brings its own contribution to the theological understanding of *shemittah* and puts it into the right perspective. If the debt has not been released in the year of release, the brother is at risk of becoming a slave.⁴² The reminder of slavery in Egypt is evoked in Deuteronomy 15:15. Even the slave is to be freed during the year of release. “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.” The children of Israel were slaves in Egypt but God granted them release. In other words, there is no difference between a creditor and the needy. That should help Israelites to determine their attitude and course of action toward their brothers. In the debt release, they all share a common trait that of being released by God’s grace.

Command for Individual Obedience and Practice. This law in Deuteronomy 5:1-11 also primarily highlights the need to obey and put into practice God’s commands, and that need is addressed individually.⁴³ As seen in the LXX translation, the command is expressed through the use of singular form (2nd pers.) in future indicative active: “You will or you will not, “with an unusual frequency of no less than eleven times.⁴⁴ The use of the noun *entolē* (“command”) and the verb *entellomai* (“I command”) in Deuteronomy 15:5,11, further supports the command to obey.

⁴⁰Vogt, 41; see also Edward McLeod, “Between Text and Sermon: Deuteronomy 15:1-11,” *Interpretation* (April 2011), 182.

⁴¹Ernest, 2:427.

⁴²McLeod, 181.

⁴³In all this passage, the plural is used only once, but even that, the command is quick to clarify that it is addressed to each person, individually, “only if you carefully obey (*eisakousēte*, 2nd pers. pl.) the voice of the LORD your God, to observe with care all these commandments which I *command you* (*entellomaisoi* [2nd pers. sing.] today.” (Deut 15:5).

⁴⁴15:1, *poiēseis*; 15:2, *aphēseis*; *oukapaitēseis*; 15:3, *apaitēseis*; *poiēseis*; 15:7, *aposterxeis*; 15:8, *anoixeis*; 15:11, *danieîs*, *anoixeis*.

Promised Blessing. We see an element of persuasion in Deuteronomy 15 when it comes to convince creditors to lend to the needy even and particularly on the eve of the year of release. The recompense is clearly spelled out for the lenders. The phrase “The Lord will greatly bless you,” is repeated three times in the passage (15:4; 15:6; 15:10; see also 15:18). The closer the lending is to the year of release, the greater and more abundant the blessing lender will receive. But again, the Israelite must be reminded that he/she will not lend because of the blessing that has been promised. An Israelite lends to the needy because that is a command of the Lord.

APPLICATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

As discussed above, social responsibility, as prescribed in the law of release, was known outside Israel. It was known and expected in the times of Old Testament prophets (such as Jeremiah) and during the post-exilic times (Nehemiah). However, it was likely that it was not fully observed as it was written.⁴⁵

“And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” (Matt 6:12).

It is clear from the reading of the Lord’s prayer, that Jesus uses debt language. But as Lyndon Drake notes, the consensus among interpreters is that “Jesus used debt language here in a metaphorical sense for sin.”⁴⁶ Such an exclusive understanding of the Lord’s prayer does not seem to do justice to the text. In fact, literal sense is primarily intended.

Even though there is no direct allusion to Deuteronomy 15 about debt release in Matthew 19:12, verbal parallels exist through the uses of (1) *aphesis* (release, remission [of debts])/ *aphiēmi* (to release) and (2) *opheilō* (to owe) in Deuteronomy 15:1, 2,3 (LXX), and (1) *aphiēmi[ta ophilēmata]*, and (2) *ophilēma* (debt) in Matthew 6:12 (cf. Luke 11:4).⁴⁷ “The background of the New Testament verse therefore can well be the law of release of the ‘Seventh Year.’”⁴⁸ More precisely, “this argument can be carried even further by placing it in the historical

⁴⁵Allusion to *Shemittah* is found without providing hard evidence of its practice in 1 Maccabees 16:14. Drake, 236-237, citing Ben Zion Wacholder, reports some evidence of observance of release throughout the Second Temple Period, of which a Judean desert document Muraba’at 18 where the debtor promises to repay a debt even in *Shemittah* year.

⁴⁶Lyndon Drake, “Did Jesus Oppose the *Prosbol* in the Forgiveness Petition of the Lord’s Prayer?” *Novum Testamentum* 56 (2014), 234.

⁴⁷ Drake, 239-243, provides further evidence from the Gospels that Jesus primarily meant: (1) *ophilēma* typically refers to debt, (2) *aphiēmi* can refer to legal acquittal, but in the papyri when it is used together with *ophilēma*, they refer to debt release, and (3) Jesus explicitly enjoins debt release (Luke 6:34-37; 7:41-43; 16:1-8).

⁴⁸Samuel Tobias Lachs, “On Matthew 6:12,” *Novum Testamentum* 17/1 (1975), 7.

setting of New Testament times.”⁴⁹ It relates to the modified law of release, as enacted in the *prozbul*.⁵⁰ Danby explains :

According to Deut. 15:2, all loans were remitted in the Seventh Year. Lest this should lead to fraud or oppression (Deut. 15:9), Hillel enacted the rule of the *Prozbul*, which was a declaration made before a court of law by a creditor, and signed by witnesses, to the effect that the loan in question would not be remitted under the terms of the Seventh-Year law.⁵¹

The Mishnah *Shebhiit* 10.3-4 reads,

[A loan secured by] a *prozbulis* not cancelled [by the Seventh Year]. This is one of the things that Hillel the Elder ordained. When he saw that the people refrained from giving loans one to another and transgressed what is written in the Law, *Beware that there be not a base thought in thin heart.* . Hillel ordained the *prozbul*. This is the formula of the *prozbul*: 'I affirm to you, such-a-one and such-a-one, the judges in such-a-place, that, touching any debt due to me, I will collect it whensoever's I will.' And the judges sign below, or the witnesses.

In spite of some caution to ascribe the *prozbul* to Hillel, the consensus is that it predates Jesus.⁵² “The *prozbul* was the only way for pious contemporaries to avoid the Torah’s requirement to periodically forgive debts, and so Jesus opposed the *prozbul* by enjoining precisely the behaviour which the *prozbul* made unnecessary.”⁵³ In other words, Jesus “appears to argue that although lenders in his day had the option to recover their loans despite the pentateuchal law of release through the application of the *Prozbul*, he eschews this option and advocates the remission of debts according to the law of the Torah.”⁵⁴ The original intent of the law to help those in need must be recovered and applied.

Moreover, the inaugural sermon of Jesus in Nazareth which sets the stage for his earthly ministry brings more light into the understanding Jesus’ refusal of *prozbul* and any other similar practices, as derived from the prayer. The sermon was unequivocally related to the proclamation of the year of release and Jubilee:

⁴⁹Lachs, 7.

⁵⁰Herbert Danby, *Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 696, “the word is explained as an abbreviation of *pros boule bouleuton*,” i.e. a declaration before the court.

⁵¹Ibid., 796-797.

⁵²Drake, 236.

⁵³Ibid., 233.

⁵⁴Lachs, 8.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
 because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor;
 He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
 To proclaim liberty to the captives
 And recovery of sight to the blind
 To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19)

What distinguishes Jesus' proclamation from the year of release in Deuteronomy 15 is that it brought to year of release its full meaning and fulfillment. "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21). The release is a permanent release. There is no wonder that upon hearing the sermon, those in the synagogue were filled with wrath and tried to kill Him (Luke 4:28).

At this juncture, it is noteworthy to recall that the Lord's prayer in Matthew 9:12 has been preceded by a series of re-exposition of the Pentateuchal (or Jewish traditional) laws, where Jesus boldly states, "You have heard that it was said to those of old . . . But I say to you that . . ." (Matt 5:21:22; 5:27-28; 5:31-32; 5:33-34; 5:38-39; 5:43:44). That Jesus did not contradict the Pentateuchal law but brought its fuller meaning and fulfillment is demonstrated by His introduction of His exposition in Matthew 5:17-20. When this is taken into consideration, the Lord's prayer nicely fits in with the proclamation of His mission: the new era has dawned. The permanent year of release has been proclaimed for God's covenant people.

Additionally, the opening word of the Lord's prayer is extremely significant. "Our Father."⁵⁵ This address reminds both the lender and borrower that they have a common Father. They are brothers in the community of faith. And again, the allusion of Deuteronomy 15 regarding release of debt in the prayer evokes the shared experience of the members of the community, that of being released and redeemed by God's grace.

The Lord's prayer is clearly a call for debt forgiveness of the needy. By doing so, the creditor may call upon the Lord for sin forgiveness. Debt release is an integral part of the dawning of the kingdom (Matt 6:10).

⁵⁵The Matthean version has "Our Father in heaven," (6:9) while Luke simply has "Father," (11:2)

“For you have the poor with you always.”

This saying of Jesus, recorded in three Gospels (Matt 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12:8), has been pronounced during the passion week. A couple of days before the crucifixion, he was invited by Simon the leper. It was during that supper that a woman came to anoint Jesus with a very costly fragrant oil. Upon knowing of that “waste,” the disciples were indignant, saying “this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor.” (Matt 26:9).

Jesus’s response, “for you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always,” has been an object of debates. What is certain is that His saying, “for you have the poor with you always,” is likely a direct allusion to Deuteronomy 15:11, “for the poor will never cease from the land.” Cnaan Banana remarks, “the meaning of the words of Jesus is grossly twisted, as if he would be condemning the poor to some kind of fatality.”⁵⁶ Others go further, as Norman Gottwald says, “This declaration has been used, and abused, over and over again, in order to validate our dismissive attitudes toward alleviating poverty.”⁵⁷

It is undeniable that Jesus’ statement is a factual observation, i.e. the reality of the existence of poverty. But there is also the reality of the moment: a woman anointing him for his burial. Gottwald captures both of these in the reaction of Jesus:

Mark 14 is a typical “entrapment story,” in which the audience is trying to catch Jesus in a misreading of the Torah or some inconsistency between his teaching and his behavior. Those gathered at the table are quick to embarrass or shame Jesus as failing to care for the poor as he has stressed in his teaching. Even before they speak, Jesus senses what they are thinking. “Look,” he says, “I know your game. Your ‘care’ for the poor is a tactic to diminish and disrespect the gracious act of this woman. Any time you really want to give to the poor, you can do so. You know as well as I that the poor are not going away. For the moment, pay attention to what this woman is doing. Keep on topic!” The attitude of Jesus is in perfect keeping with the spirit and letter of the command to cancel debts in Deuteronomy 15.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Banana, 321. Also Cahal B. Daly, “The Poor You Have Always with You,” *The Furrow* 36/2 (1985), 71, “Our Lord’s words, ‘the poor you have always with you,’ must not be taken out of context or interpreted in a fundamentalist way. They do not imply that poverty is part of some divine dispensation. They do not sanction complacency towards poverty by society; they do not require fatalistic acceptance of their condition by those who are poor.”

⁵⁷Normal K. Gottwald, “Abusing the Bible: The Case of Deuteronomy 15,” *Review and Expositor* 111/2 (2014), 196; Hamilton, 222.

⁵⁸Gottwald, 198.

But in his affirmation of the act of the woman, Jesus equally pronounces a “serious indictment on ancient Israelite society’s failure to enforce the biblical mandate to prevent poverty.”⁵⁹ That both the affirmation of the woman’s act and the call to social responsibility is present in Jesus response is in line with His other pronouncement early during the passion week: “these you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.” (Matt 16:23b).

Acts 4:34

The connection of Acts 4:34 with Deuteronomy 15:4 has been recognized, particularly through the use of same term *endeēs* (“needy”) in both texts. In this vein, Johnson writes:

“The use of *endeēs*(“needy”)makes this an allusion to Deut 15:4 . . . Deut 15:5 states the condition for this blessing: ‘When you obey the voice of the Lord your God to keep all these commandments that I have commanded you this day.’ The commandment in question had to do with the sharing of possessions (Deut 15:1-18). The messianic community has ‘heard the voice of the prophets, has shared its possession, and thereby is enjoying the blessings promised by God.’⁶⁰

The early Church understood the sense of community, of being a family, a people of God (Acts 2:46; 4:32-37; 1 Pet 2:9). They wanted to live and experience that blessing. True indeed, obedience to the social responsibility law is a condition to receive the corporate blessings. But it was not the main reason for their action. They helped the needy because these were their brothers and sisters. They all were released from debts and redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

“There Will Always Be Poor among You” Today

How do we view going the social responsibility of the church today? More precisely, how do we deal with Jesus’ statement, “there will always be poor among you”?

We have seen that Jesus in the prayer He taught His disciples instructed them to release debts, so in the same way, their sins may be given by the Father. Apparently He was against the contemporary practice which

⁵⁹Robert Wafawanaka, “Is the Biblical Perspective on Poverty That ‘There Shall Be No Poor among You,’ or ‘You Will Always Have the Poor among You?’” *Review and Expositor* 111/2 (2014), 107.

⁶⁰Johnson, 86-87.

circumvented the law of debt release. The original intent of the law must be practiced to bring assistance to those who were in need.

- (1) Church needs to realize that there will always be poor among us.
- (2) Church needs to refrain from hardening their hearts or shutting their hand from the members of the covenant community who are in need.
- (3) Church needs to practice the Lord's prayer, "we forgive our debtors." The permanent year of release has always been proclaimed by Jesus at his inaugural sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-20). By releasing the debt owed to us, we will fully be able to experience our release and redemption by grace, and the forgiveness of our sins from our Father in heaven.
- (4) Church needs to realize that when permanent release of debt is done, more appropriate terms such as help or assistance to the needy are used. There was no lending/borrowing in the early Church (Acts 4:34).
- (5) Church needs to re-live the experiences of early church, so as to say that "there were no needy persons among them." Just because the church had taken care of their needs. In other words, by taking care of the needs of the poor who will never cease, there will be no needy among God's people.

Facing up its social responsibility toward the needy in its midst will be far from being only humanitarian treatment. Indeed, "Christians have unique contributions to make . . . and obedience and compassion (are our motivational factors)."⁶¹ But the church social responsibility must be informed by the important theological component of the action. These are brothers and sisters in Christ. Both they and us have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, and by forgiving debts, they experience the forgiveness of their sins from the Father. These "debts" turn into help/assistance. And any help/assistance extended to the needy is only but a recognition of that own release and forgiveness, and becomes a thanksgiving to the Lord.

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