

Biblical Motives for Alleviating Poverty: An Exegetical Analysis of Leviticus 25:35–38

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical imperatives for addressing poverty outlined in the Hebrew law codes in Leviticus 25:35–38. The study focuses on the motive clauses that underpin the commands to support the impoverished. A detailed exegetical analysis of the article explores how YHWH's character and redemptive acts serve as primary motivations for the Israelites' ethical behavior towards the poor. The study examines the grammatically subordinate sentences that convey these motivations, enhancing the understanding of biblical commands in their historical and cultural context. The article argues that the fear of God, the self-proclamation of God, and the redemption of the people by God were the central motives driving the Israelites' obligations to alleviate poverty. By unpacking these biblical motives, the study offers insights relevant to contemporary discussions on poverty and social justice, particularly in the African church. The findings underscore the theological and ethical foundations that should inform Christian attitudes and actions towards the less fortunate, advocating for a compassionate and just approach rooted in reverence for God and gratitude for his redemptive works.

Keywords: Poverty and Social Justice, Poor, Aliens, Strangers, Law of Moses, Fear of God

Introduction

The issue of poverty has been a persistent challenge across various cultures and historical periods. In examining the Hebrew law codes, particularly Leviticus 25:35–46, we find profound insights and motivations for the ethical imperatives of alleviating poverty. The motive clauses help better understand the theological and moral foundations underpinning the commands to support the impoverished. This article presents an exegetical analysis of Leviticus 25:35–38, emphasizing the role of motive clauses in shaping the attitudes and actions of the Israelite community toward the poor. It demonstrates that YHWH's character



and redemptive acts are the primary motivations for the Israelites' ethical behavior. In this study, the leading presupposition is that the selected texts are part of the inspired Word of God. Since God is its author, His Word is authoritative for faith, thoughts, and behaviors and is without error (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Thus, the task of interpreters is “to comprehend the biblical text as the God-given message it is.”¹ The meaning of the text is also relevant to contemporary realities.

Terms of Covenant in OT

Many writers of the Old Testament, particularly those of the Pentateuch, adapted a model from their world's political language and contextualized it to the relationship between God and Israel. A tiny, militarily weak state would sign a treaty² with a larger, more powerful state to secure that state's protection, even if it meant paying tribute in return. In these circumstances, the suzerain represented the monarch of the stronger state, while the vassal represented the king of the weaker state. A contract was frequently made out of the vassal's appreciation and as a result of previous acts of kindness by the great king, such as rescuing from foes.

Accepting the pact would often mean that formal ties with other lords were forbidden, and total loyalty to the great king was required. In exchange for adhering to the pact, the vassal would get benefits such as commercial advantages, protection from adversaries, and the ability to maintain sovereignty over their land. Treaty violations were frequently punished severely, resulting in exile and military destruction. In the suzerain-vassal treaties, the structure was according to what George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion³ present:

1. A preamble giving the titles of the suzerain
2. A historical prologue, giving the past good deeds of the suzerain in order to establish authority
3. The terms of the treaty which could be either expressed in an imperative/precatory form (“apodictic”) or, more commonly, in conditional clauses;

¹ Eugene Merrill, Mark F. Rooker and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 162.

² African kings were familiar with treaties (suzerain/vassal) and practiced them not only during the early colonialism period but also before the pre-colonial period. The British Lord Chancellor, Lord Selborne, gives us the content and competences which a suzerainty in the context of Africa's colonization: “Suzerainty means that the Suzerain is lord paramount of the people who are subject to it. The control of foreign and frontier relations essentially distinguishes a paramount power. No war can be made upon adjoining native tribes, no treaty can be made with (foreign) powers except by the authority of (the suzerain) country,” leaving the control over internal affairs to the subjected political entity. Lord Selbourne quoted in Charles Stubbs, *Suzerainty, or The Rights and Duties of Suzerain and Vassal States* (London, 1882), 279–280.

³ George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, “Covenant,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1180–82.



4. A requirement that the document be deposited in a temple of the major deities of the respective parties and be read at regular intervals
5. An invocation of divine witnesses
6. Blessings and curses which would result from obedience or non-obedience to the stipulations or terms of the treaty. Copies of treaties were deposited in a temple to be placed under the protection of the local deity. A provisional reading was provided, implying that the treaty's contents were binding upon the people.

A large portion of the Pentateuch suggests these kinds of comparable political treaties. From YHWH's majestic deeds (such as rescuing the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery and providing for them in the desert) to the treaty at Mount Sinai, it goes (Exod 19). The result is a political theology rooted in covenant theology.

The Hebrew people undoubtedly considered themselves as the people of God, a people set apart from other nations. When YHWH freed them from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, they set out on a journey to the Promised Land. The Pentateuch records how YHWH miraculously delivered them and how they came to settle at Mount Sinai. At Sinai, He entered into a covenant with them and gave them the Law, or the terms of the covenant.

The word "covenant" is used in the Old Testament to show an agreement or a legal contract between two parties (Gen 31:44; 1 Sam 18:3). In human covenants, YHWH is the witness who provides penalties for its execution (Gen 31:50, 53; 1 Sam 20:8, 13–16). However, the most important covenants in the Old Testament are covenants made by YHWH with the Hebrew people, particularly the covenant He made with them at Mount Sinai (Exod 19:1–25, 24:1–8). This covenant was confirmed through a religious ceremony in which Moses splattered the blood of the covenant on YHWH's altar and the people, followed by the Israelites' response to obey the terms of the covenant (Exod 24:6–8). This covenant was initiated as an act of God's grace towards the Israelites (Deut 7:6; 14:2). This implied that the Israelites would benefit from blessings from YHWH (Exod 19:5–6). Consequently, the Israelites were required to obey and fulfill the terms of the covenant. For instance, the laws on helping the poor in the community of Israel, found in Leviticus 25:35–46, are part of the terms of the covenant that Moses proclaimed at Mount Sinai and later explained in the land of Moab (Deut 1:1–5).



Exegesis of Leviticus 25:35–38

The following section presents an exegesis of Leviticus 25:35–38 to explore the biblical motivations for addressing poverty within the ancient nation of Israel.

Translation of Leviticus 25:35–38, ESV

If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God (Lev 25:35–38, ESV).

If Your Brother Becomes Poor (v. 35)

Leviticus 25 emphasizes the issues of poverty and how the Israelites were to respond to poverty when it hit a fellow Hebrew. Thus, the passage under our study starts with “when your brother becomes poor” (Lev 25:35). The waw consecutive “וְ” plus conjunction “כִּי” in Hebrew may be translated in two ways – ‘and if’ or ‘and when’ – depending on the context, ESV renders it as “if” showing that poverty is a matter of possibility. But if translated as “and when,” then poverty is a matter of certainty. This implies that some of the Israelites will certainly fall into poverty at some point. Moses elaborated on laws regarding how people should live holy lives in the land (Lev 25:1). The idea was that if your brother became poor, it would be more of a possibility.⁴

The phrase “your brother” (אָחִיךָ) can refer to a person who shares the same father and mother with another person or a blood relative. For instance, Cain is the brother “אָחִי” to Abel (Gen 4:8). In Leviticus 25, it can mean “a fellow Israelite” or “an Israelite as an individual.” Gerstenberger suggests that the word represents “one’s fellow in faith.”⁵ The pronominal suffix “ֶכָּ” is a second-person masculine singular which refers to an Israelite. Later in verse 46, the word ‘brother’ is used in plural with a genitival pronoun “כֶּם” (a second person masculine plural) to refer to the people of Israel (“וּבְאֶחָיֶכֶם” but over your brethren) who are distinct from other nations from which they may buy slaves, “over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another with harshness” (Lev 25:46).

⁴ The book of Deuteronomy has an idea on the certainty of finding a poor brother among the people of Israel in the land: “There will never cease to be the poor in the land” (Deut 15:11).

⁵ Erhard Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 386.



Before going any further, it is necessary to notice a sequence of “waw consecutives + perfect” in the first line. For instance, this section (vv. 35–38) is introduced by (וְכִי). The verbal root (מִוֶּדֶם) can be translated as “to become poor, to sink in poverty.”⁶ The verb וַיִּמָּטֵה is regarded as a Qal perfect of (מוֹט), which can be translated as “to totter, to shake, to slip,” “to become dependent on” (NRSV), and “to become indebted to” (NET). These translations carry the idea of someone unable to support themselves. The verb וַיִּמָּטֵה describes a situation of “being unable to support oneself” as a result of the previous situation of “becoming poor” because of the consequential waw consecutive + perfect. We have situations that build on each other due to the sequence of waw consecutive + perfects. The sequence continues with an apodosis introduced by a “-וְ” waw prefixing the Hiphil form of the conjugated verb “וַיִּתְּחַזְקֵהוּ” with the root verb “חָזַק” which can be translated as “to help or to make a loan to someone.” This verb is later discussed in this section. This suggests that verse 35 is a conditional sentence, as it is introduced by “כִּי,” which indicates a protasis.

The Rare Verb מִוֶּדֶם in Leviticus

In the first part of verse 35, we have the verb מִוֶּדֶם from the root verb “מִוֶּדֶם.” This verb appears five times only in Leviticus (25:25, 35, 39, 47; 27:8)⁷ and not elsewhere in the OT. Leviticus 25:25 begins with “כִּי-יִמָּוֶד אָחִיךָ,” which is an introductory clause that we find in three other places in Leviticus 25 with almost the same structure (25:35, 39, 47).⁸ The function of the waw in verse 35 has been discussed in the previous paragraph. Verses 25, 35, and 39 appear to have the same idea, where a brother becomes poor and, as a result, unable to support himself.

The instance in verse 47 is slightly different. We have all the previous elements like “וְכִי” and “עִמָּךְ” (besides you) and the same verb, “מִוֶּדֶם.” Yet in this case, the verb is not an imperfect but a waw consecutive + perfect in the first clause, “If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and a brother becomes poor” (v. 47a). The whole section from 25:47 to

⁶ See next paragraph.

⁷ In the first clause of Leviticus 27:8 we find the same verbal root “מִוֶּדֶם”. This clause starts with a conjunction in “וְאִם” (and if) which be translated the same way as the previous conjunction “וְכִי” (and when) in form (25:25, 35, 39, 47). Furthermore, the sequence of waw consecutive + perfect continues as well in this verse to suggest a consequence or an action resulting from the action of “making a vow.” The verb, which is a Qal perfect, suggests the idea of a person who becomes too poor to pay the vow he has made.

⁸ The only difference is in verse 25 which starts with “כִּי” followed by an imperfect of “מִוֶּדֶם” and then “your brother” (אָחִיךָ). In verse 35 it is slightly prolonged so that “כִּי” becomes “כִּי־”.



25:55, which is not part of this study, talks about the redemption of a poor brother from a foreigner.⁹

In the first clause of Leviticus 27:8, we find the same verbal root “גז.” This clause starts with a conjunction in “וְאִם” (and if), which is different from the previous conjunction “וְכִי” (and when) in form (25:25, 35, 39, 47). Nevertheless, the sequence of waw consecutive + perfect also continues in this verse to suggest a consequence or an action resulting from the action of “making a vow.” The verb, a Qal perfect, suggests the idea of a person who becomes too poor to fulfill the vow they have made.

Leviticus 25:23–34 talks about the redemption of an Israelite’s property (land, house, people, among clothes), which he had sold because he became poor (v. 25). If an Israelite had sold land or people are sold to pay off debts, the nearest brother of the debtor is to “redeem” the land or person by repurchasing them (25:15–16, 23–34, 47–55). If no one can redeem the land or people, both are released in the Jubilee. It appears, thus, that in verse 35, the fellow Israelite has become poor because he probably sold his property and cannot support himself. P. Collier, as quoted by Milgrom, argues, “Landless agricultural workers typically earn smaller incomes than land-owning peasants. In addition, the landless are much more vulnerable to destitution in periods of crisis than those who farm their own land.”¹⁰ Verse 35 suggests that the destitute are under the mercy of the well-off Israelites.

In Genesis 32:5, the Hebrew people are described as pastoral people who own “oxen, donkeys, male servants, and female servants.” During Jacob’s time, his family lived mainly in tents and did not possess cities. They only possessed movable things or goods, such as flocks and servants. Nevertheless, the goods were “recognized as personal property, while the right of water as well as grazing and burial grounds belonged to the group as a whole.”¹¹ From its entrance into the Promised Land, the ancient Israelites viewed wealth as both movable personal property (such as oxen, donkeys, servants, and cattle) and immovable property (including lands, fields, and houses).¹²

⁹ It is worth to mentioning that the whole section from verse 25:47 to 25:54 is supported by the motivation clause in verse 55, “For to me the people of Israel are servants They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

¹⁰ Jacob Milgrom. *Leviticus 1—16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible, Vol 3 (NewYork: Doubleday, 1991) 2211.

¹¹ Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), xx.

¹² When the Lord freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, he promised to lead them to the Promised Land. The book of Deuteronomy states that the Lord will give them the land which he swore to give to their fathers “a land with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant” (6:10–11). In brief, God promised material possessions to the Hebrew people. On the one hand, it is recognized that there will be no poor



In summary, the clause (וְכִי-יָמוּךְ אָחִיךָ וּמָטָה יָדוֹ עִמָּךְ) may be translated in this way, “And if your brother becomes poor and cannot support himself” (v. 35) or, to paraphrase, when a fellow Israelite loses his movable and immovable property (e.g., his donkey, oxen, lands, etc.) to the point that he becomes poor and unable to support himself, what should a well-off Israelite do? This question is answered in the subsequent point.

The Duty of an Israelite Towards a Poor Brother (vv. 35b–38)

With the phrase “your brother,” this section limits its application to the community of Israel or the people who are now in a covenant relationship with YHWH. The text presents two different kinds of responses Israelites ought to have toward the poor, depending on the person’s social identity. First, the text focuses more on the poor Israelite in the community of the people of God and how he should be attended to (vv. 35–38). Second, the text deals with Israel’s similar response to the poor from another nation different from Israel (vv. 44–46).

When the center of value or ‘ultimate concern’ shifts away from God and community to the individual self, social ethics disintegrate. Thus, the social ethic of Leviticus would concur with Mbiti’s idea, who writes, “the community must therefore make, create or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group.”¹³ Leviticus, however, has an element that Mbiti’s idea is missing. The text elaborates on four commands and two motive clauses in between them. In other words, the text instructs how an Israelite should treat a poor brother in the community. These instructions are supported by two kinds of motivations that need full attention. The following clauses seek to address the question of how a fellow Israelite should respond to a poor brother.

(1) *You shall support him as a stranger and a sojourner (v. 35b)*

The conjugated verb (תְּחַזְּקֶתָּהּ) is a Hiphil form of the root verb and (חָזַק), which, as discussed earlier, can be translated as “to support, to help, to make strong, to sustain, to support.” The verb is prefixed by a waw describing the apodosis of the conditional sentence. A protasis links the two previous situations – “and if... becomes poor and cannot support himself” (v. 35a) depends on the action of “helping the brother or making a loan to him.” The Hiphil, in this sentence, expresses a causative action in the active voice – to help, support, or strengthen. In this sense, the fellow Israel shall help his poor brother or make him strong again.

among the Hebrew people “for the Lord will bless you in the land the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess” (15:4). On the other hand, it also noted that “there will never cease to be poor in the land.” Some might look at these verses as contradictory but it is not; Torah is entirely realistic about the issue of poverty.

¹³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1970), 141.



Literally speaking, the Hebrew Bible is silent about the words coming between the verb and “a stranger and a sojourner.” However, the phrase “a stranger and a sojourner” functions as an accusative of state. One should acknowledge that the preposition (כִּי) is lacking before (גֵּר וְתוֹשָׁב). This is an adverbial accusative clarifying the verbal action. As a result, different English translations render it in various ways: “You shall support him *as though he were* a stranger and a sojourner” (ESV); “help them *as you would* a foreigner and stranger” (TNIV); “help them *as you would* a foreigner and stranger” (NKJV). The LXX translators have also recognized this as an adverbial accusative of state: the Greek Bible (LXX) uses the Greek word “ὡς,” which can be translated as “as” or “like.”

The well-off brother should support his poor fellow Israelite and relieve him of poverty, just as he would a stranger and a sojourner in the land. On the one hand, the word “גֵּר” or “stranger” is applied to anyone who resides in a country or a town of which he is not a fully native or land-owning citizen. For instance, it refers to the Israelites as strangers in Egypt (Gen 15:13) or Abraham as a stranger in the land of the Hittites (Gen 23). The word “גֵּר” can also refer to the Levites living among the Israelites (Deut 18:6; Judg 17:7) or Ephraimites in Gibeah (Judg 19:16). In Leviticus, (גֵּר) particularly refers to people from other nations living among the Israelites: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Lev 19:33–34). This treatment of the stranger is based on the historical recollection of how the people of Israel were also strangers in Egypt, as well as on the covenantal duty of the Israelites to their God.

Because the “גֵּר” would be at a natural disadvantage through his alienation, the Law gives him special protection. Thus, this special care must be given to a poor brother. The Law commands the Israelites to ‘love a stranger as himself’ (Lev 19:34); therefore, it should be the same with their poor fellow Israelites. In addition to this, the fellow Israelite has the advantage of release, but an alien does not.

On the other hand, the Torah emphasizes the instructions about the good treatments of the sojourners; they are to be treated with no partiality, they are to be treated justly on the same level with the Israelites (Exod 22:21, 23:9, 12; Lev 19:33–34; Num 15:15–16; Deut 10:17–19, 14:29, 23:7, 24:14, 17–21, 26:12, 27:19). However, other passages still affirm that Israelites are distinct from the sojourners. For instance, the Israelites are holy and set apart, unlike the sojourners (Deut 14:21); the Israelites could enjoy the cancellation of debts at the end of every seven years, unlike the sojourners (Deut 15:1–3, 23:19–20); a sojourner could



not be elected as king over the people of Israel (Deut 17:15). A sojourner is a resident alien who is temporarily living with his host since he cannot support himself.

The word “תושב” describes a sojourner or an alien who lives in a place without the full right of citizenship: a noncitizen or resident alien (Lev 25:6, 23, 35, 40, 45, 47). The word “תושב” is sometimes synonymous¹⁴ with “גֵר” (Gen 23:4). However, at other times it designates a less assimilated person (Exod 12:45). All the uses in Leviticus 25 are translated in the Septuagint with the Greek word πάροικος which means one who is living in an area that is not their normal country; he is a temporary resident.

In verse 35, a situation is raised where the poor brother ends up living alongside a fellow Israelite who is to treat him as “גֵר וְתוֹשֵׁב,” and the poor brother is to live (וָחַי) with him (עִמּוֹ). The verb “וָחַי” is prefixed by waw consecutive + perfect, which expresses the action of “living with the poor brother,” the result of the previous action of “supporting him.” Milgrom suggests that supporting the poor is “by not charging him interest.”¹⁵

Take No Interest or Increase from Him (v. 36).

The first clause starts with the verb “תִּקַּח” from the root verb “לָקַח” (to take) preceded by the negative adverb “אַל.” The verb is a Qal jussive, and it can be translated as “may you not take.” Verse 36 emphasizes that a well-off Israelite should take no “נִשְׁךְ וְתַרְבִּית” from his brother who is in trouble. In other words, he shall not support his brother to seek interest from him. In other words, the well-off Israelite will not request a deduction (or a penalty interest) from the money that was lent to the poor brother. This prohibition is followed by the verb “יִרָא” (to fear) to function as the motivation for the previous command, as discussed in the next point. The Law of Moses forbids the asking of such interests from a fellow brother (Exod 22:14–15; Deut 23:20). He shall neither take nor increase the interest from him so that the latter “may live with you” (v. 36).¹⁶ The last clause of this verse consists of a waw consecutive + perfect of (וָחַי) stating again that “your brother may live with you.” This same ultimate goal is in view in both v. 35 and v. 36.

¹⁴It is likely that the word “תושב” is synonymous with the word “גֵר”; perhaps it is used of less permanent sojourning. In Leviticus 22:10, it appears to suggest the idea of anybody residing with a priest. A תושב could not eat the Passover or the “holy” things of a priest (Exod 12:45; Lev 22:10). The children of the תושב could be purchased as permanent slaves, and the law of the Jubilee did not apply to them as to Israelites (Lev 25:45). He is expressly mentioned in the law of homicide (Num 35:15). His rights are probably similar to that of the “גֵר”.

¹⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus* 23–27, p. 2208.

¹⁶ In form the Hebrew term וָחַי (“shall live”) is the construct plural noun (i.e., “the life of”), but here it is used as the finite verb (v. 35).



The Fear of God in Motive Clauses (v. 36)

The above two commands are followed by another command that constitutes the supportive motivation for helping the poor brother out of poverty: *וַיִּרְאֵהוּ מֵאֵלֶיךָ*, “*but you shall fear your God*” (v.36). In other words, Moses is emphasizing that the people’s justice towards the poor should be the result of their fear for God. Thus, what does the command “*You shall fear God*” mean? Or what does it mean for an Israelite to fear (יִרְאֵהוּ) God? The verb יִרְאֵהוּ connotes the psychological reaction of being afraid. For example, it is used without a direct object, meaning “to be afraid.” Adam said to God: “... I was *afraid* because I was naked, and I hid myself” (Gen 3:10, emphasis added). One may be “*afraid*” to do something, as when Lot “was *afraid* to live in Zoar” (Gen 19:30, emphasis added). When it is followed by a direct, “יִרְאֵהוּ” it may convey the idea of being afraid of something or someone. In his prayer, Jacob says: “Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I *fear* him, that he may come and attack, the mothers with the children” (Gen 32:11, emphasis added). Another intriguing example is found in the account of Isaac, who יִרְאֵהוּ (Qal Perfect 3ms: *feared*) claimed that Rebecca was his wife, thinking that the Philistines might kill him and take her if he says the truth (Gen 26:7).

The verb “יִרְאֵהוּ” may be used of a person in an exalted position to mean “standing in awe.” This is not simply fear but reverence, whereby a person acknowledges the power and position of the person revered and renders him proper respect. In this sense, it may imply submission to a proper ethical relationship with God. When Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, his son, the angel of the Lord told Abraham: “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now, I know that you *fear* God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Gen 22:12, emphasis added).

In addition, the verb “יִרְאֵהוּ” can be used to refer to the holy attributes of something. At Bethel, where Jacob had a conversation with the Lord in a dream, it is written that “he was *afraid* and said, ‘how *being feared*’¹⁷ is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Gen 28:17, emphasis added). The people who were delivered from the Egyptians saw God’s great power, “feared the Lord, and they believed the Lord in the Lord and his servant Moses” (Exod 14:31). There is more involved here than mere psychological fear. The people also showed proper “honor” (“reverence”) for God and “stood in awe of” Him and of His servant, as their song demonstrates (Exod 15).

¹⁷ The verb “יִרְאֵהוּ” in this verse is Niphal Participle. Other translations have translated it as “awesome” or “dreadful.” Thus the translation “How awesome is this place!...”



After experiencing thunder, lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and a smoking mountain, they were “afraid” and drew back. However, Moses told them not to fear, “for God has come to test you, that the fear of Him may be before you, that you may not sin” (Exod 20:20). In this passage, the author uses the noun “יִרְאַה” which can be translated as “fear” or “dread” of the Lord. In other instances, the noun “יִרְאַה” may mean “fear” of men (Deut 2:25), of things (Isa 7:25), of situations (Jonah 1:10), and of God (Jonah 1:12); it may also mean “reverence” of God (Gen 20:11).

Other passages use the noun “מִוֶּרָא” to connote “fear” as well. For instance, the noun “מִוֶּרָא” is used in Deuteronomy to describe the reaction evoked in men by God’s mighty works of destruction and sovereignty (Deut 4:24). In this sense, it represents a strong “fear” or “terror.” The noun may also suggest the reaction of animals to men (Gen 9:2) and the nations to conquer Israel (Deut 11:25).

The word “יִרְאַה” is used in the sense of reverential awe of God in the context of Leviticus. However, this reverence is expressed in obedience to the Torah, as we can read in Deuteronomy, “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the LORD, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I command you today for your good” (10:12–13). This passage depicts the duties of someone who fears God: reverence and obedience.

The Semantic Range of יִרְאַה in Leviticus 25

In Leviticus, the word “יִרְאַה” has different meanings. First, the word “יִרְאַה” can mean to honor or to revere. Leviticus 19:3 expresses the idea of respect that is to be given to one’s own parents. Second, it can mean worship, with God as the object. Several passages of the Pentateuch portray YHWH as the exclusive object of fear when associated with worship (Exod 1:17; Lev 19:14; 25:17; Deut 10:12–13). Third, it can also refer to the reverence given to holy things belonging to God by not defiling them, as stated in “You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the Lord” (Lev 19:30; 26:2).

In Leviticus 25, the first clause of verse 17 reads, “You shall not wrong your neighbour.” Even though verse 14 reads, “You shall not wrong your brother,” the two verses convey the same idea: not doing harm to another individual in the community. In verse 17, however, the command against wronging your neighbor (or brother) is followed by another command: ‘You shall fear (וַיִּרְאֵה) your God and then another כִּי-clause, which is causal in



function, where the first-person singular pronoun is used referring to a first-person statement from the Lord concerning his identity.

In other words, the clause “you shall fear God” in verse 17 is preceded by the command. For instance, the command “You shall not wrong your neighbor” is contrasted with the clause “You shall fear God,” implying that the way one fears God is by not wronging one’s neighbor. Fearing God in this way is to follow the preceding command; fearing God means doing good to one another. The New Living Translation renders it, “Show your fear of God by not taking advantage of each other. I am the Lord your God.” In this verse, the clause “you shall fear God” implies an action.

The three places in Leviticus 25 where the word is used refer to “reverence to God,” which is shown by treating fairly a destitute fellow Israelite (vv. 17, 36, 43). Deuteronomy emphasizes the fact that fearing God (or revering) is something that can be learned and developed through hearing the words of YHWH (4:10; 17:19; 31:12–13) and by not forgetting the covenant (2 Kings 17:24–41). In summary, to fear God means revering Him through adoration and obedience to His instructions. Thus, supporting a fellow Israelite out of poverty is one aspect of fearing God or honoring Him. In the context of the passage, to honor YHWH means helping the poor in the community of Israel without charging them interest. Following this contrastive clause, the instructions continue in the following verse.

You Shall Not Give Money at Interest (v. 37a)

Verse 37 reiterates what has already been prohibited in the first clause of verse 36. In both clauses of verse 37, we have “לֹא-תִתֶּן” which is translated as “you shall not give.” Milgrom suggests that verse 36 focuses on the interest, and verse envisages that if the principal is money, the same amount will be paid back without interest.¹⁸ The well-off Israelite was not to take advantage of a poor fellow Israelite by charging interest for loans given to the brother in trouble. He should simply lend the poor what they need. This command is emphasized in Exodus, “If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a money lender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him” (22:25). In this way the lender should not use the impoverished state as an opportunity to make money by demanding interest.

You Shall Not Give Food for Profit (v.37b)

The well-off Israelites should simply give food without demanding profit from the poor. Milgrom suggests that “The creditor may not gain accrued interest either by charging interest

¹⁸ Milgrom, 2211.



or, if the price of the food has dropped, by demanding its monetary value at the time the loan was made.”¹⁹ In short, the creditor should not see in his act of lending to his brother a way to increase his wealth. Westbrook and Jasnow add,

Israel may have had a system of commercial credit to finance trading ventures, and may have facilitated borrowing such sums by providing for equitable rates of interest, but the loans that are mentioned in the Bible are not part of a commercial credit system; they are subsistence loans to ameliorate dire poverty. Such poverty was expected as a permanent part of social reality (Deut 15:11), and credit was to be extended as a social obligation to support others in the community. For this reason, it could not be an opportunity for the lender to make money by charging interest (Exod 22:24).²⁰

The poor were members of the community of Israel, and thus, his fellow Israelites were to help him graciously as a way of fearing God. He is to take no interest.

The Motive Clauses: The Character and Work of YHWH (v. 38)

In Verse 38, YHWH identifies himself by using the first-person singular pronoun “אֲנִי יְהוָה” but this sentence is extended by an אֲשֶׁר-clause followed by two “ל” + infinitive constructs expressing purpose. It starts with “I am YHWH your God,” and as if to ask, “Which YHWH?” the אֲשֶׁר-clause answers, “I am the one who brought you out of Egypt!” Two purposes, where the second is built on the first, are then expressed: 1) “In order to give you the land of Canaan” and 2) “In order to be your God.”

This section (vv. 35–38) ends with a clause serving as a motivation for the Israelites to redeem the poor: “I am Yahweh your God who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan to be your God” (Lev 25:38). This clause has two distinctive bases upon which Israelites were to respond with kindness towards their fellow brothers in poverty. First, God’s self-proclamation (אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם “I am YHWH your Elohim”); and second, his redemptive works (אֲשֶׁר-הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם, מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם “who brought you out of the land of Egypt”).

YHWH’s Self-Proclamation

The Lord who uttered the laws on debt slavery declares his name as the sole motivation for supporting the poor out of poverty. God’s name is the reason for their obedience to the laws on debt slavery. In Exodus, the author explains the meaning of YHWH in the account of Moses and the burning bush (Exod 3). God appeared to Moses, and he commissioned him to liberate the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to lead them to the Promised Land. However,

¹⁹ Milgrom, 2211.

²⁰ Raymond Westbrook & Richard Jasnow. *Security for Debt in Ancient Near Eastern Law Culture & History of the Ancient Near Eastern* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 251.



Moses asked, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his *name*?’ what shall I say to them?” (3:13). Thus, God responded “I AM WHO I AM... Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exod 3:14). The connection with the “I AM” of Exodus suggests that the name YHWH might mean “He who is.”

Thus, God’s name likely means “The One who is and who will be” or “He who is, the unchangeably existing one.” God is self-existent in the sense that his existence does not depend on anyone: he is the Eternal One, “the everlasting God, the permanent God, the God whose being and activity have stood through the ages that have preceded and will stand through the ages that will come. Before the world existed, YHWH was there, and after the world ceases to exist, YHWH will be there.”²¹ The Eternity of God and His self-existence suggest further reflections on other aspects of God’s character and nature. For instance, if God is everlasting, then his presence is continual. Moreover, if God is self-sufficient, then He is the Creator since He does not depend on any creature to exist (Gen 1:1–2). He is the One who “utters a decree from the throne, issues a fiat, and in the very utterance the thing is done.”²² Gerstenberger argues,

Acknowledgment of Yahweh, of the one, proven, trustworthy God, immediately includes acknowledgment of one’s fellow in faith as an equal fellow human being. The other person, even as a socially declassed person, stands in the same relationship of faith to Yahweh as the powerful person. So, both – the poor and the rich – are united with each other as siblings through God.²³

Therefore, the name or the character of God is the basis on which Israelites should base their obedience to the Law concerning poverty. Their knowledge of who God is should be their motivation to obey these laws concerning supporting a fellow Israelite in need.

The Redemptive Work of God

The verb (הוֹצִיאָהוּ) is a Hiphil form of the root verb of “צִא” which can be translated as “to bring out, to take out, to lead forth, to bring forth, or to send forth.” These translations express an active idea where the activity is confined to YHWH as the subject. The subject (YHWH) and the action (brought forth) are separated by the relative pronoun “אֲשֶׁר.” Brueggemann suggests that “with reference to Yahweh, the verb is in the causative *hiph’il* form, so that Yahweh is the agent who sanctions, propels, and enacts the departure of

²¹ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Vol.2. Israel’s Faith* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2006), 32.

²² Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 147.

²³ Gerstenberger: 1996, 389.



Israel.”²⁴ This suggests that it was God’s work to lead the people with the end (or the purpose) in mind: to the Promised Land and to be their God. This picture is well painted in the book of Exodus: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exod 19:4). The idea here is that they did nothing to save themselves. Their redemption from slavery is entirely attributed to YHWH. God delivered them miraculously from the hands of the Egyptians. Therefore, they were to obey God because of his identity and redemptive work of bringing them out of the land of Egypt to give them the land of Canaan (Lev 25:38). God uses His own example of generosity to the Israelites in liberating them from bondage by the Egyptians as the motivation for the community of Israel to follow.

The first purpose is that God led the Hebrew people out of the land of Egypt so that He may give them the land of Canaan. God reassured them that he would surely fulfill what he promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Lev 25:38). The land was a gracious gift from God. Brueggemann argues that “what Yahweh has sworn to Israel is land. It is plausible to imagine that this promise was first heard, received, and trusted by the landless, for whom the gift of land is the quintessential anticipation of all of life.”²⁵ Thus, God’s generosity is not only seen in liberating the people but also in giving them the land of Canaan. Due to such generosity, Israelites should be motivated to support their fellow Israelites out of poverty.

The second purpose is the second infinitive (*to be your God*), which suggests that God will be the object of their worship in the wilderness and in the land. Preuss indicates that “What was important to Israel about its God can be well recognized in the adjectives and construct relationships combined with Elohim (“God”). Moreover, the expressions ‘your (sg. and pl.) /our God’ are significant, for YHWH desires ‘to be (Israel’s) God and they are to be his people.’”²⁶ He observes that the pronouns “your” or “our” stresses the idea of a close connection that the Israelites have with God. It conveys the idea of exclusivity in worshiping God. Thus, the phrase ‘*your*’ Elohim carries a covenantal idea (Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12). The flow of these ideas suggests two purposes: the purpose of bringing the people out of the land of Egypt is to give them their own land and to be their covenant God, to bless them and prosper them, protect and defend them. God is to be the sole and exclusive object of their worship. In summary, lending money or giving food should be a form of charity toward one’s fellow Israelite in poverty rather than a form of investment that bears interest.

²⁴ Brueggemann, 174.

²⁵ Brueggemann, 168.

²⁶ Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology: Volume 1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 147.



Summary of the Motive Clauses

The exegesis of Leviticus 25:35–46 looked into the motive clauses that influenced the debt-slavery laws. The motive clauses we have studied in the previous lines can be categorized into these three statements:

1. *The Fear of God* (וַיִּירָא אֶת מַלְאֲכֵי יְיָ): Leviticus's laws on supporting the poor in the community are supported by the motivation of fearing God. In other words, the people are to carry out these laws with the fear of God as the motive. In this sense, supporting the poor is an act of honor to God when Yahweh is the object of the verb 'to fear.'
2. *The self-proclamation of God* (אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם): Leviticus presents God's name or character as the basis of the people's obedience to the debt-slavery laws. The identity of God and his attributes are essential to Israel's obedience to the debt-slavery laws.
3. *The redemption of the people by God*: God's redemption of the people from Egypt is seen as a motivation for their obedience to the debt-slavery laws. They are to carry out these laws out of gratitude for their deliverance from Egyptian slavery. Pentateuch presents God as both the giver of promise and promise-keeper in the sense that he promised deliverance of the people out of slavery in Egypt (Exod 6:6; Deut 6:23). Thus, this act of redemption should compel the Israelites to obey God's decrees not out of a burden, but out of gratitude and reverence of YHWH for the past mighty deeds of deliverance.

Conclusion

This study presented an exegetical analysis of Leviticus 25:35–38, focusing on the biblical motivations for alleviating poverty within the Israelite community. The study has demonstrated that the ethical imperatives for supporting the poor are deeply rooted in theological and covenantal principles. Three primary motives emerge from the text: the fear of God, the self-proclamation of God, and the redemptive acts of God. These motives serve as the foundation for the Israelites' obligations to care for their impoverished brethren.

The fear of God emphasizes reverence and obedience to his commands, framing the act of supporting the poor as an expression of honor to God. The self-proclamation of God highlights His eternal and self-existent nature, reminding the Israelites that their actions should reflect their understanding of His character. God's redemptive work in liberating the Israelites from Egyptian slavery serves as a powerful example of generosity and compassion, compelling them to extend similar kindness to their fellow Israelites.



The analysis has also underscored the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, which binds the community to uphold social justice and compassion. The laws on debt slavery and poverty alleviation are not merely legalistic mandates but are deeply intertwined with the Israelites' identity as God's chosen people. By obeying these laws, the Israelites demonstrate their gratitude for God's deliverance and their commitment to his covenant. The theological and ethical foundations presented in Leviticus 25:35-38 offer valuable insights for fostering a compassionate and just approach to addressing poverty in today's world. They challenge believers to view poverty alleviation not as a burden but as an act of worship and gratitude toward God. Leviticus 25:35–38 provides a profound theological framework for addressing poverty, rooted in the fear of God, the recognition of his character, and gratitude for His redemptive acts. These motives call for a holistic and compassionate response to poverty, emphasizing the importance of community, justice, and reverence for God. By embracing these principles, believers can contribute to building a society that reflects God's love and care for the less fortunate.

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