

Covenantal Command

Love Thy Neighbor

Kerry Muhlestein

President Russell M. Nelson taught that “the covenant that the Lord first made to Abraham and reaffirmed to Isaac and Jacob is of transcendent significance.”¹ He has taught in a number of settings over a sustained period of time that the Abrahamic covenant is particularly relevant for us in our day.² Yet many may be asking how they are connected to this covenant or how it is relevant to them. The Abrahamic covenant is another name for the new and everlasting covenant.³ Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints voluntarily enter into this covenant at baptism.⁴ The covenant we are part of is, in its essence, the same covenant that Abraham or Israel entered into. Yet it is important to understand that while the Abrahamic, or new and everlasting, covenant is essentially the same throughout time, the details of how it is administered and what is expected therein can and do change according to the specific circumstances and culture in which it is administered.⁵ For example, the

covenant as it was administered to Israel at Mount Sinai was specifically a renewal of the covenant given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet, as it was given there, an intricate set of laws and expectations was delineated that do not seem to have been included when God entered into the covenant with Abraham.⁶ Just as policies and procedures in our day evolve, so would the laws given to the ancient Israelites likely change over time to adjust to their changing circumstances. While we could technically differentiate the details between the covenant as it was administered to Abraham and the form it took at Mount Sinai, because the covenant is essentially the same, we will refer in this paper to either of these early forms as the Abrahamic covenant for purposes of simplification.

Again, today baptized members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are part of the Abrahamic covenant. While the specific ways we fulfill our covenant obligations have changed over time, such as dietary restrictions or the kinds of sacrifices asked of us, the principles behind our covenantal obligations remain constant.⁷ One of these principles is the covenantal obligation to care for those who are in need. Though the mechanisms for providing and administering care for those in need are different today than they were in the days of ancient Israel, still an examination of the practices and principles behind this aspect of the Abrahamic covenant in the Old Testament can help us understand both the covenant itself and the reasons God established such a covenant with us. Here we can do only a brief survey of the principles and practices behind caring for those in need. Each element discussed here can and should be explored in greater depth in other settings.

The Covenant Forms Relationships

Jennifer Lane writes that “making a covenant in scriptural terms can best be understood as forming a new relationship.”⁸ She could not be more correct. While there are many aspects to the covenant, we will find that they all hinge around forming and heightening

relationships. The primary relationship at issue is our relationship with God. While the principal obligation of covenant holders is to keep the commandments, these commandments are designed to create the framework for the relationship between the parties of the covenant, or between God and his people. This arrangement is most obvious through the central and greatest commandment within the covenantal laws: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). This obligation is so critical that Moses reiterates it numerous times within his discussion of the covenant (Deuteronomy 6:10–13; 10:12; 30:6, 10, 16, 20). At the end of Moses’s instructions about the covenant, he again teaches the children of Israel their primary duty. He told them that “the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live” (Deuteronomy 30:6). Moses further explains that he had taught them these things about the covenant “that thou mayest love the Lord thy God, *and* that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them” (Deuteronomy 30:20).

When the ancient Israelites fulfilled their part of the covenant, they naturally drew closer to God and experienced a heightened relationship with him. They also experienced a variety of other blessings and promises that were intertwined with their special relationship with Jehovah. While we cannot delve into every aspect of these promised blessings in this paper, some are particularly pertinent to our topic. For example, covenant holders who truly keep the covenant are promised that they will be a peculiar treasure, or a special people, to God (Exodus 19:5).⁹ They will also be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). While aspects of holiness vary, at its core this is a way of saying that covenant-keeping Israel will be blessed with a more godly nature, a higher state, and the heightened relationship we have been speaking of.¹⁰ In other words, the commandments of

the covenant teach God's people how to emulate him, which actions combine with God's enabling power to make them more like God and closer to him. This is stated in the law as "ye shall be holy; for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44).

This closer and more intimate relationship also brings about a special kind of love and mercy extended to those within that close bond. There is no good English word to capture the kind of covenantal love and mercy that the Hebrew term *hesed* signifies, but this concept is a key component of the covenant. Simply put, those who have bound themselves close to God will find that he will always extend to them extra opportunities to receive mercy. In other words, God will unendingly offer Israel the chance to repent and return to him.¹¹ Just as within a marriage, *hesed* is a natural outgrowth of forging a special bond with each other and then creating shared, unifying experiences while working together within that bond. God's desire to extend mercy to his people is an overarching reason for much of what he does, as well as for many of the laws discussed below in which he asks for those who receive mercy from him to extend that mercy to others.

Other pertinent covenantal blessings include the promise to inherit a chosen land (Genesis 12:1, 7; 13:15; 13:17; 15:7, 16, 18; 17:8; Abraham 2:6) and that God would both prosper (Leviticus 26:3–10; Deuteronomy 28:3–30; Abraham 2:9) and protect (Genesis 15:1; Leviticus 25:18; Deuteronomy 28:7–12) his people within that land. These are all expressions of how God took care of those who were in a special relationship with him. Thus they are the natural result of our loving God and serving him.

A Second Kind of Relationship

In the New Testament we read the account of Christ being asked what the greatest commandment in the law was. Since keeping the law was the primary covenantal obligation, in effect the lawyer who posed the question was asking Christ what their greatest covenantal obligation

was. It should have been no surprise to his audience that Christ quoted the commandment to love God as found in Deuteronomy 6:5, as cited above. This command was regarded in Judaism as the core of their religious identity.¹² What is somewhat surprising is that he added the second great commandment from a passage found at the end of laws about gleaning and justice being done in Israel (see Leviticus 19:18).¹³ From that passage the Lord said, “the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:39).¹⁴

This introduces a second relationship that is a focus of the covenant: our relationship with each other. The scriptures clearly teach that the Abrahamic covenant is not solely aimed at binding us to God and heightening our relationship with him but also at binding us to each other and strengthening our communal relationships.

The covenant consists partially of a distinct communal aspect. Some oft-quoted scriptures about the covenant help us to realize this on some level. For example, Alma’s injunction as he baptized people at the Waters of Mormon included the obligation to mourn with those that mourn, to comfort those who stand in need of comfort, and to bear one another’s burdens (Mosiah 18:8–9). Even acknowledging this element of the covenant does not fully recognize just how communal the covenant is. A careful study of the Old Testament or Book of Mormon reveals that God speaks far more about saving Israel as a whole than he does about saving Israelite individuals.¹⁵ Moreover, a high number of the laws that were to be kept as part of the covenant had to do with governing relationships between individuals.¹⁶ God’s covenant with Israel contained a central focus on creating loving bonds within the covenant community. As a part of this, each person has a very clear covenant obligation to care for other covenant holders who are in need, as well as for the stranger.¹⁷ It is this latter aspect that we will study further in this article.

Covenantal Laws for Those in Need

As was noted above, one important aspect of the covenant was that God showed *hesed*, or covenantal mercy, to those in a covenant relationship with him. He clearly desired that those who received *hesed* from him should also show it to each other.¹⁸ The laws of the covenant provided specific ways to show this mercy. In particular, the laws involved showing compassion to those who could not fully care for themselves. This also hinged on other aspects of the covenant mentioned above—namely, the ability to have land, to prosper, and to be protected. Several categories of people were at an inherent disadvantage when it came to receiving those blessings, and these are exactly the people whom the covenant laws most fully protected. As part of keeping these covenantal promises, the law was clear—those who were able were obligated to help those in need.¹⁹ This covenant obligation is a fitting personal expression of Jehovah’s covenant with Israel. Because God was the one who blessed and delivered the children of Israel from bondage, their covenant with him demanded that they in turn bless and deliver other covenant individuals,²⁰ especially those who were disadvantaged in being able to partake of the covenant blessings noted above.

The protected groups mentioned most often in both the Law and the Prophets are widows and orphans. Orphans are not necessarily a child without any parents, for a child without a father was considered an orphan in terms of the law and how it affected them. Most often orphans are referred to by the term *fatherless*. These two groups needed extra protection, for they had fewer rights to land and resources and less access to other legal aspects of the society. Further, they were often less capable of using whatever resources they did have in a way that would produce prosperity. They were also less able to protect themselves.

Similarly, foreigners, or resident aliens, referred to as “strangers” in the King James Version, had no inherent rights to land. Thus they were not inherently part of the covenantal promise of land and

therefore were innately at a disadvantage in terms of being able to prosper or to be protected. Such strangers, referred to as resident aliens hereafter, are mentioned almost as consistently as the widow and fatherless in the Law and Prophets. Together the three constitute the most commonly referred to protected groups in the law.²¹

Yet another disadvantaged group is the poor. The poor are mentioned less frequently than the other disadvantaged categories, but they are included in many passages. Not enough information is available to determine exactly what constituted someone being “poor,” thus qualifying them for assistance. One group that would almost certainly have received that label would have been those who were indebted and those who had gone into servitude because they could not pay their debts. Already these individuals were not prospering, but they were also either in peril of losing their land and resources or had already lost it. Thus they were certainly at a disadvantage.

While most of Israel’s neighbors also had laws regarding the care of widows and orphans, they did not have the kinds of laws that Israel had concerning the poor.²² Other cultures certainly had various kinds of literature that spoke of the needs of the poor,²³ and the prologues of law codes might mention the poor, yet their laws were not equivalent to Israel’s laws that specifically addressed caring for the poor.²⁴

While a general covenantal obligation requires us to love and care for everyone, we have a very specific covenantal responsibility to care for these designated groups who were unable to care for themselves. While the mechanisms for doing so have changed over time, surely the obligation to care for those who cannot care for themselves has not changed. Studying the laws, or mechanisms, that were part of these covenantal obligations in the Old Testament era will help us not only understand the scriptures in general but also can help us better comprehend the principles still in place today for covenant holders.

The laws of the covenant were given over several periods of time. A set of laws commonly referred to as the Covenant Code was given at Mount Sinai during the initial encounter of the ancient Israelites

with God as they entered into a covenant with him there. These laws are found roughly in Exodus 20–23.²⁵ Leviticus contains a great many more laws that were received later—much of this is referred to as the Holiness Code.²⁶ Deuteronomy contains the account of Moses reviewing the covenant and reestablishing it with the next generation of Israelites. Deuteronomy contains both clarifications of the law already given and expansions on it.²⁷ Thus the law of the covenant expanded over time, with later additions emended to the text. Many scholars posit great lengths of time between these periods, and there is not always agreement as to which set of laws came first.²⁸ Regardless of the length of time it took, clearly the law developed or was revealed in some distinct stages. Still, we will examine the law as a whole, focusing on how it stands as a received text today.²⁹ This holistic approach will best allow us to see the perceived intent behind the covenantal obligations. As one scholar observed, “a concern for the widow, the orphan, and the poor is permanently woven into the fabric of those crucial sections dealing with the covenant,” both when the law was originally given at Sinai, when it was expanded upon, and when it was reconfirmed in Deuteronomy.³⁰ Care for others, especially those in need, is an integral and innate part of the covenant and is reflected in many of the commandments Israel was obligated to obey within the covenant.

Laws designed to help maintain the disadvantaged

Ideally, with a few provisions being made to help and protect them, the disadvantaged would be able to maintain a sustainable and enjoyable way of living. Some laws seem to be aimed at making this possible by creating circumstances in which they or their families could care for themselves. These include the law of levirate marriage and laws related to gleaning.

Levirate marriage. In order to help those who had experienced a devastating blow that could plunge them into untenable circumstances, Israel practiced a custom that was common throughout the Near East at the time.³¹ When a woman’s husband died and she did

not have children to care for her, the dead husband's family took over her care (Deuteronomy 25:5–10).³² This is commonly referred to as levirate marriage, which is based on the Latin word *levir*, or “husband's brother.”³³ It receives this name because it became the obligation of the brother-in-law to become a special kind of husband for the widow. He would provide for her all that she needed and represent her in society the way her husband would have.³⁴ If she had no children at all, it was his responsibility to provide her with a child who could both eventually inherit her husband's land and take care of her.³⁵ If she had male children who were not yet old enough to care for her, the brother-in-law would provide for all of them until the son(s) could inherit their father's land and care for their mother. In this way all widows were, in theory, to be cared for. Of course in practice circumstances did not always turn out this way. Still, the idea was that land was provided or maintained for the family, as was protection and the opportunity for prosperity. Further, in this way lands did not pass out of family lines, which was important for the ability of families to maintain themselves.

Gleaning. Providing enough food to be sustained was a major concern for the disadvantaged. One of the most important ways all such people were to be cared for was by others providing them the opportunity to glean.³⁶ Typically, gleaning meant gathering that which had been dropped or had been overlooked in a harvest. In most societies the owner of the field could either glean it himself or hire others to do it for him. This was not the case with Israel, for the gleanings were meant to be left for those in need, especially and specifically the resident alien, the fatherless, the widow, and the poor (Leviticus 19:10; Deuteronomy 24:19).³⁷ Further, the Lord commanded Israel to do a number of other things that would increase the gleaning opportunities for the groups God had decreed he would protect. The corners of fields were to be left unharvested so that the needy could glean them (Leviticus 19:9).³⁸ Any sheaves that were forgotten as they were initially gathered to threshing floors were to be left for the poor (Deuteronomy 24:19). Olive trees were not to be beaten a second time,

leaving olives in them to be gleaned (Deuteronomy 24:20). Similarly, grape vines were not to be fully cleared of their grapes (Leviticus 19:10). The promise was that the prosperity poured out upon those who kept the covenant this way would more than make up for what they had lost in leaving these things for those in need (Deuteronomy 24:19).

Perhaps the most famous story involving gleaning is that of Ruth.³⁹ Ruth was not only poor, she was also a widow and a resident alien. Thus she fit into several protected categories. Undoubtedly there were many Israelites who did not leave gleanings as they should have, just as today there are many who do not pay tithing or a generous fast offering. Yet clearly some understood the spirit of caring for those in need, as Boaz did. He not only left the required gleanings, he also invited Ruth to fall under the protection of his own servants, invited her to drink of his water and to eat with his servants, and secretly instructed his servants to drop more of the harvest than usual so that Ruth could glean all the more (Ruth 2:9–16). This is an example of how the laws were ideally kept, with full intent of heart.

Continued aid, or providing for those who had become unable to care for themselves

In many circumstances these laws would not be enough for the disadvantaged to maintain themselves. In some cases perhaps just a little more help would make the difference. In others, perhaps they were far from being able to care for themselves and needed significant measures to be taken in order to prevent a further slide into desperate circumstances. Other laws did not just provide ways for those in need to help themselves but gave them opportunities to be helped regardless of what effort they put forth.

The tithe. A fundamental way to care for the needy is to provide food and goods for them.⁴⁰ Every three years each Israelite was to take a tenth of their increase and bring it to their village or city. This tithe was to be stored and administered to the stranger, the fatherless, the widow, and also the Levites, who also had no land (Deuteronomy

14:28–29).⁴¹ This obligation was so important that each Israelite had to swear that they had fulfilled it (Deuteronomy 26:12–13). Cities typically had some storerooms near the gates where the tithes would most likely have been gathered. Presumably village elders and city governors would be those who distributed these stored goods to those in need.⁴² As we will see, the Lord expresses great unhappiness when those who were charged with using these goods to care for the poor did not do so honestly and generously.

Festival offerings. The Israelites were commanded to keep a number of festivals. Three of these were fairly large and involved food or harvest in one way or another. These were the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Israelites were commanded both to remember that they had been in bondage in Egypt before the Lord had delivered them, and in consequence to remember the Levite, the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow during these festivals (Deuteronomy 16:1–14).⁴³ Those in need were to come to the festivals and were to receive the gathered food as part of the festivities.⁴⁴ Israel was instructed that all this was because the Lord was blessing them in their increase (Deuteronomy 16:15). For each of these festivals they should not come with empty hands; rather, “every man should give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord thy God which he hath given thee” (Deuteronomy 16:16–17). Yet they were not only to give, they were to rejoice together. Festivals in general were to be a time of “rejoicing” in all that the Lord had given Israel (Leviticus 23:40; Deuteronomy 12:7). At the same time, Israelites were commanded to not just rejoice by themselves, but to “rejoice before the Lord your God, ye, and your sons, and your daughters, and your menservants, and your maidservants, and the Levite that is within your gates; forasmuch as he hath no part nor inheritance with you” (Deuteronomy 12:12, also 12:18). Regarding these three festivals, the Israelites were specifically to rejoice not only with their household, its servants and the Levites, but also with the stranger, fatherless, and widow (Deuteronomy 16:14–15). This rejoicing together as they jointly held festivals and gave to the disadvantaged brought those

groups into their household and family, providing a sense of unity and belonging that was likely as important as the food was. Thus their physical, social, and emotional needs were all addressed in these festivals. The Israelites were then told that they, and especially their leaders, should do all of this justly, “that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee” (Deuteronomy 16:20). By linking the giving of food to those in need to inheriting the land, the Lord was making it clear that this generosity was part of the covenant and that the promise of covenantal blessings hinged upon their fulfilling this covenantal obligation.⁴⁵

Helping those who had become unsustainably indebted

Even with all these laws in place, some people reached a point, through either circumstances or poor choices, in which they not only were unable to sustain themselves, but they had indebted themselves beyond what they could hope to repay.

Such a situation could easily occur for those in the disadvantaged groups. Of course some who were not a resident alien, fatherless, or a widow also fell upon hard times. Others regularly incurred debt that they could not pay. This situation arises easily in an agrarian-based culture, such as in ancient Israel. This is because poor farmers need a tremendous number of resources, such as seeds, in order to begin their planting cycle, and many months pass before they are able to reap their harvest and make an increase on their initial investment. Borrowing was often necessary in order to make the initial planting. Surely numerous other circumstances necessitated borrowing in order for people to get by.

Lending laws. Israelites were commanded to lend liberally and not to charge interest when lending, but rather to lend out of a desire to help. This was in contrast to their neighboring cultures, who charged interest in the 23–50 percent range.⁴⁶ In fact, Israelites were to lend to the poor even in situations that might result in an economic loss for themselves (Deuteronomy 15:9–10).⁴⁷ The promise was that such losses would be made up for in the blessings showered out upon them

for keeping their covenant (Deuteronomy 15:10).⁴⁸ This was one way in which they were to care for the poor. Further, if someone lent money to the poor and took an individual's cloak as surety of repayment, the lender had to return that cloak by nightfall lest the poor person be cold during the night. Thus the Lord made it clear that lending to the poor should not put the borrowers in dire straits, something that likely protected their dignity as much as their physical well-being. Everything was supposed to be aimed at helping the poor rather than taking advantage of their situation in order to profit.⁴⁹

As nature takes its cyclical course, harvests, at times, are not as abundant as hoped. In these and various other circumstances, many Israelites found themselves unable to repay their debts. In such cases declaring bankruptcy was not an option. Instead the indebted Israelites must do all they could to repay the debt. This repayment included selling land (which deprived them of their means for prosperity) or selling children, spouses, or themselves into something like indentured servitude.⁵⁰ These situations all created circumstances that would typically lead to a cycle of poverty. The laws of the covenant included many instructions designed to provide relief from such circumstances.

Redemption. One of the ways individuals could be saved from their indebtedness was through a redeemer (Leviticus 25:25–34). Any close kinsman could act in the role of a redeemer. The closest male relative, typically the father or oldest brother (the birthright brother) was obligated to fulfill this role if he was able to. If land had been lost from the family because of indebtedness, a family member could buy it back. If a member of the family had become a servant to meet a debt, that member could be purchased back. If a kinsman redeemer was willing to redeem that family member, the kinsman could not be refused, no matter how much the new owner desired to retain their new possession or servant. If the law of redemption were practiced perfectly, no Israelite would remain in servitude and no land and its attendant opportunity for prosperity would pass out of family hands (Leviticus 25:23, 28).

Sabbath years. Every seventh year fields were to remain fallow (Leviticus 25:1–8). No planting or harvesting was to take place. Any crops that grew spontaneously—which could happen in any field, but especially took place with crops such as grapes or olives—could be eaten by the owners, but were not to be intentionally harvested. Instead anyone was free to eat from these crops. Thus the poor were given yet another opportunity to find food.

Further, personal debt was to be forgiven during the Sabbath year. Lenders were specifically warned not to refrain from lending in the sixth year (Deuteronomy 15:9). The purpose of lending was not to make a profit but rather to help the poor. Thus lending at all times, but especially in the sixth year, was supposed to be done and was deemed an extra opportunity to help the poor.

To further the clemency, those who had become servants because of failure to pay their debt were to be set free during the Sabbath year (Deuteronomy 15:12).⁵¹ When servants were set free, they were not just turned out of the house of their masters. If such were the case, they would still have been in a difficult economic position that may well have led to their quickly falling back into a cycle of poverty and losing their freedom once again. Instead, they were to be given food and other necessary goods in generous amounts (Deuteronomy 15:12–14).⁵²

The laws of the Sabbath and Jubilee years (see below) seem to aim not only at providing relief from crushing debts, but also at creating an opportunity for those who had been in such unfortunate circumstances to start over with a chance to flourish. Indeed, it has been argued that the key principles behind the Deuteronomic laws about the poor were about restoring an opportunity to create wealth, not about redistributing it.⁵³

The Lord promised great bounty to anyone who observed the Sabbath year laws (Deuteronomy 15:10, 18). Thus, when kept properly, those who forgave debt or freed servants were blessed within the covenant, and simultaneously servitude and debt could never be crushing in the long term, for the covenant provided relief from it.

Jubilee years. After seven sets of Sabbath years, or 49 years, the next year was a special year, called the Jubilee year. In this year, on the Day of Atonement, the trumpet was to be sounded and liberty to be proclaimed (Leviticus 25:9). Then all captives or servants were to be set free, including those who lived in the land but were not Israelites (Leviticus 25:10).⁵⁴ Further, all land that had been claimed because of failure to pay a debt was to be returned to the original owners or their descendants (Leviticus 25:10, 13). The exception to this rule concerned houses within walled cities (Leviticus 25:30),⁵⁵ which properties were presumably not the ancestral homes of their owners.

Just as in Sabbath years, slaves were to be released, apparently with generous provisions. Because the Jubilee also included the release of seized lands, if all had been done properly, these released slaves would also receive restored access to land that they could work. In other words, they were to be given a fresh start with a decent chance of setting up a life situation in which they could prosper.⁵⁶ An important parallel can be drawn here—in a way this provision was designed to allow the ancient Israelites to emulate their God, who freed them from bondage and sent them into a land flowing with milk and honey, carrying with them the treasure of their former captors.⁵⁷

Keeping all these Jubilee laws was coupled with a specific promise. “Wherefore ye shall do my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; and ye shall dwell in the land in safety. And the land shall yield her fruit, and ye shall eat your fill, and dwell therein in safety” (Leviticus 25:18–19). Dwelling in the promised land (Genesis 12:1, 7; 13:15, 17; 15:7, 16, 18; 17:8; Exodus 6:8; Leviticus 18:24–30; 25:18; Deuteronomy 5:33; 6:1, 18; 30:16, 20), doing so in safety (Leviticus 26:6–8; Deuteronomy 6:19; 28:7), and having that land yield abundantly (Leviticus 25:19; 26:4–10; Deuteronomy 28:4–12; 30:9) are all specific and prominent parts of the Abrahamic covenant. Thus keeping the Jubilee laws, including those laws designed to help the disadvantaged, were highlighted as a covenantal obligation.

Failure to Keep the Law and Oppression

These measures and laws all demonstrate that God is clearly serious about fulfilling his covenant obligations to his people. In part, this is why he asks each covenant member to protect and aid other covenant members. Underlying the laws and descriptions of the covenant is the idea that God comes to the aid of those who are unable to help themselves; similar conduct is expected of those who are in a covenant relationship with him and thus have experienced or expect to experience his redeeming power in their lives (Deuteronomy 24:17).⁵⁸

On the other hand, if covenant holders are ever guilty of oppressing those whom God has promised to protect, they will find themselves in danger of God's wrathful protective measures.⁵⁹ Within the Covenant Code, the consequences of afflicting those whom God had pledged to protect were spelled out: "Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; and my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless" (Exodus 22:22–24). Similarly at the later ratification of the covenant recorded in Deuteronomy, the Lord said "Cursed be he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow" (Deuteronomy 27:19).

The laws that protected the disadvantaged presume that those responsible for upholding the laws would fulfill their obligation. For example, the Psalmist says, speaking of righteous kings acting on God's behalf, "He shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper" (Psalm 72:12). Further, the Psalmist tells us that God and the king will "judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor" (Psalms 72:4).⁶⁰ Failure to use one's position of power to help the needy is considered oppression.

Another form of oppression occurs when those in power take advantage of those who are weak. The laws mentioned above are based on the fundamental principle that no one should exploit or take

advantage of others, especially the most vulnerable members of the covenant community.⁶¹ Using a position of power to take advantage of the poor in order to aggrandize oneself was especially egregious.

Oppression also includes the failure of any covenant member to fulfill his or her covenantal obligations to help those in need.⁶² Thus failure to bring a tithe or to leave gleanings was seen as oppressing the poor. This puts such covenant breakers in great danger, for God has promised to relieve his covenant people from oppression, and this typically happens by punishing or removing the oppressor. God defends and aids his covenant keepers, and God's prophets were quick to warn those who withheld their aid that they were in danger of God's wrath.⁶³ The prophets consistently condemned those who oppressed the poor by any means, including withholding their aid.⁶⁴

For example, in Jeremiah we read that the king insisted that those in Jerusalem honor the Sabbath year and free their servants. The powerful in Jerusalem did so because they were forced to, but the next day they compelled those same individuals to return to servitude (Jeremiah 34:8–11). In response, God reminded them that “setting at liberty” those captives was part of the covenant they had made with him and that they were now in breach of the covenant (Jeremiah 34:13–16) and had put his people into subjugation. God then informed them that because they had not set his people free, he would free the sword and the famine to come upon them to scatter them (Jeremiah 34:17). Thus God informs Judah that one of the primary reasons they are to be taken captive is because they oppressed the poor by failing to help them in the way they had covenanted to.

We can see a similar sentiment when Isaiah writes about the Jubilee year, speaking of it as a time to proclaim liberty to the captive—language taken from the description of the Jubilee in Leviticus. Isaiah says this is the acceptable year of the Lord, but he says more about it than that. He says “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn” (Isaiah 61:2). The juxtaposition of the Jubilee, or acceptable, year with a day of vengeance and comforting signals that God will

comfort those in need by giving them liberty, even if that liberty has to come by striking down those who should be caring for them but are not.

Principles behind the Laws

These detailed laws were all based on underlying principles, each of which is linked to the Abrahamic covenant. We must remember that the covenant is about creating relationships and that the foremost relationship is that between God and his people. As noted, an important aspect of that was that God's people must become holy just as he is holy. In other words, God wants those who are in a covenant relationship with him to become more like him.⁶⁵ As a result of this, we find that covenantal obligations, including our obligations to love and care for our fellow beings, are based on emulating God.⁶⁶ In particular, we are to fulfill for others the same covenantal promises God fulfills for us.

We have already noted that we are to show covenantal mercy to others just as God shows it to us. As can be seen in the statutes cited above, under the law of Moses a covenantal obligation is the opportunity to help others maintain their ability to possess the land of their inheritance. The inheritance of the land by specific Israelite families was part of the Abrahamic covenant as it was specifically applied by Moses to the children of Israel as they entered the promised land; thus maintenance of that land within Israelite families was specifically tied up with God's desire to bless those in a covenant relationship with him.⁶⁷

Associated with this is the idea that the land has always really belonged to God and that Israelites were merely stewards of the land (Leviticus 25:23).⁶⁸ Thus they were not only to apportion the land as directed by God through Moses, but also to restore it as directed by God to those who had lost it. Furthermore, God was the bestower of life and prosperity, and thus it behooves those who were serving and emulating him to bestow opportunities for a prosperous life to

others.⁶⁹ It is incumbent upon each member of the covenant community to further God's plans for saving and liberating God's people from any kind of oppressive situation they may be in, for covenant members are to be godly.⁷⁰ They are to value others in the same way Jehovah values them.⁷¹

Also, because God views his people as a peculiar treasure, covenant holders should likewise regard each other in this way. Thus, all covenant holders are obliged to foster the prosperity of others. Additionally, needy groups were to be protected, along with their land and the opportunity to prosper. In each of these instances covenant holders are asked to assist God in fulfilling his promises to his people that they may become the holy nation he envisions. As covenant holders emulate God, not only do they become more holy, but that holiness deepens their relationship with him. Thus the two most important aspects of the covenant are achieved as covenant holders help one another. The reverse is also true. God continually calls covenant holders his people but also tells us that if we are not one, we are not his (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27).

Conclusion

Loving our fellow beings and caring for them is central to God's covenant, and this centrality is expressed in Moses's summary of the covenant as found in Deuteronomy. There, Moses tells Israel that by paying their tithes (and presumably also after providing opportunities for gleaning, and so forth), they had "given it unto the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within thy gates, and be filled; Then thou shalt say before the Lord thy God, I have brought away the hallowed things out of mine house, and also have given them unto the Levite, and unto the stranger, to the fatherless, and to the widow, according to all thy commandments which thou hast commanded me: I have not transgressed thy commandments, neither have I forgotten them." After this, the ancient Israelites were to note that they had not engaged in forbidden actions, such as

not using for unclean purposes those things they were to dedicate to God and his people. When they could verify that they had met the requirements of the covenant law, they could request of God, “look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel, and the land which thou hast given us, as thou swarest unto our fathers, a land that floweth with milk and honey” (Deuteronomy 26:12–15). The reference to God swearing to give the patriarchs a land is a clear reference to the covenant. Thus Moses was teaching the children of Israel that when they had properly cared for the needy, they could in turn claim their covenant promises from God.

As a result, Moses went on to instruct the Israelites that when they could thus “avouch,” or affirm, to the Lord that they were walking in his commandments and judgments, then God would honor his part of the covenant and transform them. Moses said that God “hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, . . . to make thee high above all nations, . . . that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy God, as he hath spoken” (Deuteronomy 26:17–19). Clearly keeping the covenantal obligation to care for others was a central component to being a covenant people and receiving covenant blessings.

Notes

1. Russell M. Nelson, “Children of the Covenant,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 33.
2. See, for a few examples, Russell M. Nelson, “Remnants Gathered, Covenants Fulfilled,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 1–17; Russell M. Nelson, “The Gathering of Scattered Israel,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 79–81; Russell M. Nelson, “Covenants,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 86–89; Russell M. Nelson, “The Book of Mormon, the Gathering of Israel, and the Second Coming,” *Ensign*, July 2014, 26–31; Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Hope of Israel” (Worldwide Youth Devotional, June

- 3, 2018); and Russell M. Nelson, "Sisters' Participation in the Gathering of Israel," *Ensign*, November 2018, 68–70.
3. See Kerry Muhlestein, Joshua M. Sears, and Avram R. Shannon, "New and Everlasting: The Relationship between Gospel Covenants in History," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 21–40.
 4. Muhlestein, Sears, and Shannon, "New and Everlasting," 33.
 5. Muhlestein, Sears, and Shannon, "New and Everlasting," 26–27.
 6. Muhlestein, Sears, and Shannon, "New and Everlasting," 24–25. See Kerry Muhlestein, *God Will Prevail. Ancient Covenants, Modern Blessings, and the Gathering of Israel* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2021), 23, 25–29.
 7. Muhlestein, Sears, and Shannon, "New and Everlasting," 25–27; Muhlestein, *God Will Prevail*, 25–28. See also Michael A. Goodman, "The Abrahamic Covenant: A Foundational Theme for the Old Testament," *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003): 43–53.
 8. Jennifer C. Lane, *Finding Christ in the Covenant Path: Ancient Insights for Modern Life* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020), 8.
 9. The word *peculiar* really implies that they are precious because they belong to him and are rare. The people of Israel are a special treasure to God because they are different from all his other treasures. See Muhlestein, *God Will Prevail*, 77.
 10. Muhlestein, *God Will Prevail*, 76–78.
 11. Gordon R. Clark, *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978); and Daniel L. Belnap, "'How Excellent Is Thy Lovingkindness': The Gospel Principle of Hesed," in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009).
 12. Norman Lamm, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1998), 1.
 13. Christopher D. Marshall, "Christian Care for the Victims of Crime," *Stimulus* 11, no. 3 (2003): 11. Marshall characterizes this as an obscure

reference; indeed it is if by that one does not expect for Christ or the lawyer to draw from laws of gleaning to find the second most important commandment in the law.

14. This is how it is reported in the Matthew account. The encounter with the lawyer who asked questions about the law is also included in Mark 12:28–31, where it is also recorded that the Savior stated what the second great commandment is. In Luke 10:25–27 the Savior has the lawyer answer his question himself, and thus in this account it is the lawyer who both states that loving God is the first commandment and adds that loving our neighbor is the second.
15. See H. G. Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 87–110; Gerald G. O'Collins, "Salvation," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:907–14; and Heather Hardy, "The Double Nature of God's Saving Work: The Plan of Salvation and Salvation History," in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 15–36.
16. Mary Anne Poe, "Good News for the Poor: Christian Influences on Social Welfare," in *Christianity and Social Work*, ed. Mary Anne Poe (Botsford, CT: North American Association of Christians in Social Work, 2002), 63–65.
17. This is well demonstrated by Bruce C. Birch, "Hunger, Poverty, and Biblical Religion," *Christian Century* 92 (June 1975): 593–99; it is also well outlined by Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).
18. Muhlestein, *God Will Prevail*, 66; Aaron Lockhart, "Toward a Unitive Understanding of *Hesed*" (paper available at https://www.academia.edu/40178748/Toward_a_Unitive_Understanding_of_Hesed_Mercy_Defined_and_Displayed), 9–10.
19. Poe, "Good News for the Poor," 64–66.

20. Ronald A. Simkins, "Care for the Poor and Needy: The Bible's Contribution to an Economic and Social Safety Net," *Supplement Series for the Journal of Religion and Society* 14 (2017): 10.
21. Peter J. Vogt, "Social Justice and the Vision of Deuteronomy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 1 (March 2008): 35–44.
22. Norbert Lohfink, "Poverty in the Laws of the Ancient Near East and of the Bible," *Theological Studies* 52, no. 1 (March 1991): 37–38. Lloyd R. Bailey, "Exodus 22:12–17 [Hebrew: 20–26]," *Union Seminary Review* 32, no. 3 (1978): 286–90, also noted this, though he urged caution since there are surely other law codes from ancient Near Eastern cultures yet to be found.
23. Richard D. Patterson, "The Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in the Old Testament and the Extra-Biblical Literature," *Biblioteca Sacra* (July 1973): 227. Patterson not only notes this, but provides an example from the Ugaritic tale of Keret.
24. Simkins, "Care for the Poor and Needy," 6. See also Richard Hiers, "Biblical Social Welfare Legislation: Protected Classes and Provisions for Persons in Need," *Journal of Law and Religion* 17, nos. 1–2 (2002): 50.
25. Scholars differ slightly as to which verses are actually part of the Covenant Code, with some restricting it to Exodus 21:1–22:16.
26. Henry T. C. Sun, "Holiness Code," in Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:256.
27. Blessing O. Boloje, "Deuteronomy 15:1–11 and Its Socio-economic Blueprints for Community Living," *Harvard Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (October 2018): 1–7, argues that Deuteronomy is the most liberal in its laws for caring for those in need.
28. See, for example, Simkins, "Care for the Poor and Needy," 7–8, who considers the Covenant Code to come first, then the Deuteronomistic reform of the Covenant Code, and then a Priestly counterreform. See also Hiers, "Biblical Social Welfare Legislation," 58n36.
29. The issue of timing of the creation of various sections of the Bible is complicated. This includes questions about when different laws of the covenant were created, including laws having to do with caring for the poor. See, for example, Ray Brasfield Herron, "The Land, the Law, and the Poor," *Word*

and *World* 6, no. 1 (1986): 76–84; or Robert Gnuse, “Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus: Israel’s Vision of Social Reform,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15, no. 2 (1985): 43–44. This issue is bigger than we can examine in this context. Many would argue that key portions of the covenantal laws about the poor were created during the period of the divided kingdoms or even as late as the postexilic period. I hold to the notion that the essence of the law existed by the divided kingdom era, though some tinkering and expansion likely continued for centuries. Regardless of which portion was received at what time, it appears that at any given time the Israelites and Judahites thought of the law as a unified law and took all of it as binding (though they did not always live up to it, as no society ever does fully live up to its legal expectations).

30. Patterson, “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor,” 228.
31. Millar Burrows, “The Ancient Oriental Background of Hebrew Levirate Marriage,” *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 77 (February 1940): 2–3.
32. Millar Burrows, “Levirate Marriage in Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, no. 1 (March 1940): 23–33.
33. Burrows, “Hebrew Levirate Marriage,” 2–3.
34. Victor P. Hamilton, “Marriage,” in Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:559–69; Michael C. Kirwen, *African Widows: An Empirical Study of the Problems of Adapting Western Christian Teachings on Marriage to the Leviratic Custom for the Care of Widows in Four Rural African Societies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 12.
35. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), s.v. “ybm; yābām; y’bāmâ.”
36. Paula S. Hiebert, “‘Whence Shall Help Come to Me?’: The Biblical Widow,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 134–37.
37. Herron, “Land, the Law, and the Poor,” 78–80. While we cannot say for certain that other societies did not have similar laws, we have no record of such laws elsewhere, and since we have extensive lists of laws for other societies, this seems to be unique to Israel.

38. David L. Baker, "To Glean or Not to Glean . . .," *Expository Times* 117, no. 10 (2006): 406–10.
39. Kerry Muhlestein, "Ruth, Redemption, and Covenant," in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. Jared W. Ludlow, Kerry Muhlestein, and D. Kelly Ogden (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 189–208.
40. Eugene Borowitz, *Exploring Jewish Ethics: Papers on Covenant Responsibility* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 74, notes that this is how Old Testament peoples put into practice the command to help one another.
41. Herron, "Land, the Law, and the Poor," 78–81; Hiers, "Biblical Social Welfare Legislation," 71–72.
42. This aspect of the law was clearly designed to work just as well in a small village as in a highly centralized city. See Lohfink, "Poverty in the Laws," 40.
43. See also Bailey, "Exodus 22:12–17," 286–87.
44. Hiers, "Biblical Social Welfare Legislation," 69–70.
45. On inheriting promised land as language that indicates invoking the covenant, see Kerry Muhlestein "Recognizing the Everlasting Covenant in the Scriptures," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 43, 52, 54–55.
46. Bailey, "Exodus 22:12–17," 287–89.
47. See Deuteronomy 15:9, for example. Also see Lohfink, "Poverty in the Laws," 45–50.
48. Joel S. Kaminsky, "'The Might of My Own Hand Has Gotten Me This Wealth': Reflections on Wealth and Poverty in the Hebrew Bible and Today," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 73, no. 1 (2019): 11.
49. Boloje, "Deuteronomy 15:1–11," 3–5.
50. David L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 139–40, 279–285. Also Boloje, "Deuteronomy 15:1–11," 2–4.
51. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands?*, 23.
52. Gnuse, "Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus," 44. The Deuteronomy command to send them forth with liberal gifts differs from the command to send a released slave forth with what he had brought that is found in Exodus 21:7–11.

53. John Bolt, "Christian Obligations: 'The Poor You Will Always Have with You,'" *Journal of Markets and Morality* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 568–69.
54. Herron, "Land, the Law, and the Poor," 83–84. It is not completely clear that this applies to "strangers," or non-Israelites. Leviticus 25:10 says that liberty is proclaimed throughout the entire country, and every man is returned to his family, which strongly suggests it applies to all residents regardless of whether they are Israelite or not. At the same time, Leviticus 25:35–37 speaks specifically of strangers and sojourners, but only says to lend to them and avoid charging them usury. This could be taken as the only stipulation made for foreigners, but the earlier reference of setting every man free seems to say that even foreigners are covered under the Jubilee.
55. Herron, "Land, the Law, and the Poor," 82–84.
56. Nolan P. Bolt, "Toward an Ethical Understanding of Amos," *Review and Expositor* 63, no. 4 (1966): 405–8.
57. Gnuse, "Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus," 43–44.
58. Patterson, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor," 233.
59. See Birch, "Hunger, Poverty, and Biblical Religion," 595–97.
60. Walter Houston, "The King's Preferential Option for the Poor: Rhetoric, Ideology and Ethics in Psalm 72," *Biblical Interpretation* 7, no. 4 (October 1999): 341–67. See also Eben H. Scheffler, "Pleading Poverty (or Identifying with the Poor for Selfish Reasons): On the Ideology of Psalm 109," *Old Testament Essays* 24, no. 1 (2011): 192–207. The law itself does not account for the presence of a king but rather speaks of leaders and people in general. The Psalms seem to take into account the law and apply it to the king.
61. Paul B. Rasor, "Biblical Roots of Modern Consumer Credit Law," *Journal of Law and Religion* 10, no. 1 (1993–94): 157, 167.
62. Boloje, "Deuteronomy 15:1–11," 5–7.
63. Poe, "Good News for the Poor," 63–67. Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995), 35–36, has demonstrated that the frequently employed terms *judgment*, and *righteous judgment*, when used by the prophets and Psalms, refers to taking care of the needy, not to executing juridical proceedings.

64. Nolan P. Howington, "Toward an Ethical Understanding of Amos," *Review and Expositor* 63, no. 4 (1966): 405–12.
65. Muhlestein, *God Will Prevail*, 78.
66. Liz Theoharis, "The Poor We Have with Us: A Deeper Look at Jesus' Words on Poverty," *Christian Century* 134, no. 9 (April 26, 2017): 26–29, notes that such emulation of God within the covenant bridged the gap between helping the poor and worshipping God.
67. Herron, "Land, the Law, and the Poor," 79.
68. Boloje, "Deuteronomy 15:1–11," 5–7.
69. H. Eberhard von Waldow, "Social Responsibility and Social Structure in Early Israel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (1970): 187–89.
70. Birch, "Hunger, Poverty, and Biblical Religion," 597–99.
71. Hiers, "Biblical Social Welfare Legislation," 60.