

The Cry of the Widow, the Fatherless, and the Stranger

The Covenant Obligation to Help
the Poor and Oppressed

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On January 14, 1847, President Brigham Young, who was at Winter Quarters organizing the Saints for the trek west, received a revelation from the Lord that would become section 136 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The revelation was entitled “The Word and Will of the Lord concerning the Camp of Israel in their journeyings to the West” and commanded the Saints to “be organized into companies, with a covenant and promise to keep all the commandments and statutes of the Lord our God.” The “covenant and promise” included the commandment to care for each and every one of the Saints. In this revelation the Lord alluded to and quoted from Exodus 22, which was addressed to covenant Israel, when he commanded the Latter-day Saints to care for “the poor, the widows, the fatherless, and the families of those who have gone into the army, that the cries of the widow and the fatherless come not up into the ears of the Lord against this people” (Doctrine and Covenants 136:8). In

this study we will examine the theological basis of God's concern for the poor and oppressed and the laws given for their care, and we will also examine how this concern was to be implemented by society in general and by the individual—as exemplified by Job—and how the concern for the poor expressed in the law of Moses was embodied by the Messiah.

In the Old Testament the covenant community is charged with the care of the poor and the helpless, the oppressed and the disenfranchised. When the members of the covenant community do not fulfill their obligation, the Lord hears the cry of the oppressed and responds by sending his prophets to call the people to repentance. This study will look at how this charge was central to the law of Moses and how it was an important feature of other ancient Near Eastern law codes as well.

The image of the widows and fatherless is known from the law revealed on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus. As part of the covenant, the Lord commanded Israel in no uncertain terms to care for the helpless and vulnerable among them when he declared: “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. 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 22:21–24).¹ The Lord expressed the seriousness of this covenant obligation by attaching a solemn curse to not caring for the poor, and in the law of Moses the neglect of the poor is at the level of a capital offense.

The Ideal of a Just Society in the Ancient Near East

In the ancient Near East, including in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel, there was an ideal of a just society in which the rights and needs of the vulnerable and helpless were acknowledged and respected.

This concept was exemplified in the various cultures by terms such as *mišarum* (“righteousness” or “justice”) in Akkadian, *ma’at* (“justice”) in Egyptian, and *šedek* or *šadāqāh* (“righteousness” or “justice”) and *mišpāt* (“righteousness” or “justice”) in Hebrew. The ideal of a just society and the responsibility for caring for the poor and oppressed is attested in ancient Near Eastern law, royal proclamations, and other literary works.²

For example, in the third millennium BC, the Sumerian king Urukagina promises the god Ningirsu that he would not deliver the widow and orphan to the powerful (Ukg. 04 B XI 30–31)³; and Ur-Nammu (ca. 2100 BC), in the prologue of his law code, declares, “I did not deliver the orphan to the rich. I did not deliver the widow to the mighty. I did not deliver the man with but one shekel to the man with one mina (i.e. 60 shekels)” (A iv 150–161, C I 22–ii 29).⁴ Similarly, in the prologue to his famous law, the Babylonian king Hammurabi (ca. 1754 BC) proclaims his responsibility to deliver the oppressed “to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak” (31–33, *ANET*³, 164).

While no ancient Egyptian law code has yet been discovered, these values are also present in various Egyptian literary texts. In the “Instruction for King Meri-ka-Re” (twenty-second century BC), a ruler instructs his successor, “Do justice whilst thou endures upon the earth. Quiet the weeper; do not oppress the widow” (*ANET*₃, 415). And the Egyptian text “The Protest of the Eloquent Peasant” (twenty-first century BC) recounts the story of a peasant who was traveling on a journey to Egypt when he was beaten and robbed. In his plea for aid from the Pharaoh, the peasant addresses the royal steward as “the father of the orphan, the husband of the widow, the brother of the divorcee, and the apron to him that is motherless” (*ANET*₃, 408). Likewise, while no legal code has been found at Ugarit, the values of justice are found in the “Epic of Aqhat,” in which Daniel the king is described as “judging the cause of the widow, adjudicating the case of the fatherless” (*ANET*₃, 151).

In the ancient Near East and the rest of the biblical world, the ideal of a just society was based on the cosmic idea that the gods (meaning Jehovah for Israelites) embodied righteousness and justice. In the cultures that developed a state, the divine values of justice and righteousness were then given to the king, the royal court, judges, and the community. In the case of Hammurabi's law, the god Shamash is called the "judge of heaven and earth"; and by giving the divine law to Shamash, Hammurabi becomes the representative of justice to the poor. Fensham describes this model in the Babylonian law code: "The protection of the weak is regarded vertically and horizontally. The vertical protection comes from the god Shamash, which therefore falls in the religious sphere, while the horizontal protection comes from the king, the substitute of the sun-god, which thus falls in the social sphere."⁵ A similar concept occurs in ancient Israel, where justice is mandated from above by Jehovah. Yet it must also be administrated in large part by the covenantal society that includes the king, judges, priests, and the people themselves, all of whom are responsible to adopt and implement the Lord's values in taking care of the poor and oppressed.

The Cry of the Oppressed in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible

The image of a "cry" is a vivid and dramatic image that appeals to the senses of people who are in desperate need of help or deliverance—desperate enough to vocally cry out for aid. The image of the cry of the oppressed is also found in connection with the expressions of the ideal of a just society in the ancient Near East. For example, Ur-Nammu ends the prologue with the optimistic claim that he has "eliminated enmity, violence, and *cries for justice*. I established justice in the land" (A iv 169–70, C ii 40–51).⁶ In the prologue to the laws of Lipit-Ishtar (ca. 1930 BC), the gods An and Enlil called Lipit-Ishtar to be a "wise shepherd . . . to establish justice in the land, to eliminate *cries for justice* . . . to bring about well-being to the lands of Sumer

and Akkad” (i.20–37).⁷ Another interesting example is found in a letter from Mari where Nur-Sin writes to Zimri Lim (a contemporary of Hammurabi) and quotes an unnamed Mesopotamian prophet’s words: “I do not demand anything from you, *when a wronged man or wo[man] cries out to you*, be their and judge their case (I.52–55).”⁸ This language is similar to Psalm 72, which describes the Lord giving the king of Israel his mandate to rule in justice: “For he shall deliver the needy when he crieth; the poor also, and him that hath no helper. He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall save the souls of the needy. He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence: and precious shall their blood be in his sight” (72:12–14).

There are many terms in the Old Testament for “crying out.”⁹ In fact, the phrase “to cry to the Lord” is often used to describe prayer. In terms of the cries of the poor and oppressed, there are two prominent Hebrew terms that are used interchangeably: *á‘āqāh* (56 uses) and *zá‘āqah* (18 uses). A few examples give us a flavor of the range of cries in the Old Testament: the blood of Abel “crieth” from the ground (Genesis 4:10); the Lord hears the “cry of Sodom and Gomorrah” (Genesis 18:20); the children of Israel “cried” in their afflictions of bondage in Egypt (Exodus 2:23; 3:7, 9; Deuteronomy 26:7; 1 Samuel 12:8); the fatherless, widows, and orphans “cry” in their afflictions (Exodus 22:23); the children of Israel “cried” to the Lord in the wilderness (Numbers 11:2); in the days of the judges, Israel “cried” to the Lord to deliver them from oppression (Judges 3:9); and, Job 34:28 mentions the “cry” of the poor ascending to heaven.

The Poor and the Needy, the Widows, the Fatherless, and the Strangers in Ancient Israel

The disadvantaged, vulnerable, and helpless people in ancient Israel can be defined in four categories: the poor and the needy, the widows, the orphans, and the strangers. These categories serve to represent all the categories of helpless and oppressed people in society.

Throughout the Bible the “poor” and the “needy” are frequently mentioned using various terms (*‘ānī*, *dal*, and *‘ebyōnīm*) that identify people who have little or no money, land, or possessions and thus have little power, influence, or social standing. The law of Moses defines the rights of the poor and legislates programs to help them, programs that lend money with no interest (Exodus 22:25), allow poor people to glean the fields (Leviticus 19:10; 23:22), and mandate legislation to be fair when hiring and paying the poor (Deuteronomy 24:12). The prophets viewed the neglect and oppression of the poor as a sign that Israel was not living up to the covenant. The prophets specifically charged the wealthy with taking advantage of and oppressing the poor.¹⁰ Sometimes the poor were forced to sell themselves into bond slavery to other Israelites in order to pay off their debts (Deuteronomy 15:12–15). The laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee¹¹ were designed to liberate such people from debt and oppression. Deuteronomy especially champions the cause of the poor. The Lord commands Israel to remember

thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the LORD against thee, and it be a sin unto thee. Thou shalt surely give him [thy poor brother], and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land. (Deuteronomy 15:9–11)

And Proverbs includes a sobering proverb: “Whoso stoppeth his ears at the cry of the poor, he also shall cry himself, but shall not be heard” (21:13).

A passage in Exodus 22 identifies three more categories—the widows, fatherless, and strangers—and says, “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child” (22:21–22).

These three groups are people who are helpless, disenfranchised, and vulnerable, and thus they have often been oppressed in societies throughout history. The pairing of the widows and the fatherless, or orphans, occurs in thirty passages in the Old Testament and is distributed throughout the law, the prophets, and the writings,¹² and the trio of the widows, fatherless or orphans, and strangers occur together in nineteen passages.¹³ Let us examine each of these categories to get a sense of what each of these groups represent.

A widow (Hebrew *'almānāh*; 55 uses in the OT) is a woman who has lost her husband and therefore her means of economic support. Because the personal, economic, and even social well-being of women in many ancient societies was inextricably connected to their relationships with men (their husbands, brothers, or sons), this put a woman without a husband in a precarious situation. A woman's ability to own and inherit property was severely limited, so marriage and the bearing of sons was essential to her welfare and security. In terms of financial security, widowhood in the Old Testament was associated with poverty,¹⁴ indebtedness (2 Kings 4:1), and vulnerability to exploitation.¹⁵ In terms of her own personal life, a widow's widowhood is associated with loneliness (Lamentations 1:2), mourning (2 Samuel 14:2), and weeping (Job 27:15; Psalm 78:64). In addition, widows often suffered from social abandonment and reproach (Isaiah 54:4–5). Thus we see in this ancient culture that a negative ethical value was attributed to this category of widowhood.

The fatherless, or orphans (Hebrew, *yātôm*; 42 uses in the OT), were children who were without parents for some reason. Some scholars believe that the Hebrew term *yātôm* technically means “fatherless” and refers to children who have lost their fathers, which is the way the King James Version (KJV) translates the term.¹⁶ Others argue that the term means “orphan”—a child who has lost both of his or her parents.¹⁷ Regardless, the orphans are described with many of the same terms as widows are in terms of poverty, vulnerability, and helplessness.

The third category of people associated with the marginalized in ancient Israel was the *gēr*, which means “a foreigner living in Israel” (92 uses in the OT)¹⁸ and is variously translated as “stranger,” “sojourner,” “resident alien,” or “foreigner.” A modern translation could render “immigrant.” Following the KJV, we will use the term *stranger* (NJPS uses *stranger*; NRSV, *resident alien*; NIV, *foreigner*). This category of people consisted of foreigners who lived in ancient Israel but did not share full membership in the covenant community. These people were also perceived as having a lower social class.¹⁹ Because they were cut off from webs of family support, they may have had a difficult time acquiring land²⁰ and were thus reliant on their hosts, the Israelites, for work, sustenance, and support. However, the Lord commanded Israel to give the strangers equal treatment. Deuteronomy in particular stressed the Israelite role to take care of the strangers by giving them access to gather from the fields and glean the vineyards,²¹ to receive of the Israelites’ tithes,²² and to benefit from the Sabbatical year.²³ Israel was commanded to extend impartiality in justice to the strangers.²⁴ Finally, the strangers were invited to participate in Israel’s worship as they rested on the Sabbath.²⁵ The Lord impressed upon ancient Israel the need to find love and empathy for the strangers in their midst when he said, “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9 NJPS). Later, the Lord commanded Israel to love the strangers: “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:33–34 NJPS).

Justice and Righteousness in Caring for the Poor, the Widows, the Fatherless, and the Stranger

As noted earlier, caring for the poor and the oppressed is a central theme in the Old Testament, and there is a particular set of

vocabulary the Lord uses to explain Israel's covenant promise to care for each other. Among the many terms that express the ideal of a just society, two of the most prominent Hebrew terms were *mišpāt* and *šedek/šəḏāqāh*, “judgment and righteousness.” The term *mišpāt* derives from the verb *šaphat* that means “to judge”; connotes a legal decision, judgment, or claim; and is thus translated as “judgment” in the KJV. The terms *šedek* and *šəḏāqāh* derive from the verb *šəḏāqāh* that means “to be in the right” or “to be just.” These related terms can both mean “blameless,” “righteous,” or “justice” and are translated in the KJV as “righteousness” or “justice.” The two terms *mišpāt* and *šəḏāqāh* often occur together as the hendiadys “justice and judgment” (*mišpāt ūšəḏāqāh*) (Genesis 18:19; Ezekiel 45:9) or “righteousness and judgment” (*šəḏāqāh ūmišpāt*) (Psalm 33:5).

The meaning of words can be best understood from context. Often these terms are found in contexts that denote “righteousness,” or “justice” in social settings and describe caring for the poor and the vulnerable in society. For example, see Psalm 72:1–4:

Give the king thy judgments [*mišpāt*], O God,
and thy righteousness [*šəḏāqāh*] unto the king's son.
He shall judge thy people with righteousness [*šedek*],
and thy poor with judgment [*mišpāt*]. . . .
He shall judge the poor of the people,
he shall save the children of the needy,
and shall break in pieces the oppressor.

The biblical teaching employing these terms in the setting of caring for the poor is often described as social justice.²⁶ Let us review the history of social justice in ancient Israel as recorded in the Bible.

Justice and Righteousness Are Attributes of God

Justice and righteousness are attributes of God, and the scriptures teach that the origins of these ideals are described as the foundations of creation. The Psalms describe justice and judgment as the

attributes of God, attributes that prescribe the values of his creations and his children.²⁷ Psalm 68:5 describes God as “a father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation.” Psalm 89:11–15 says the following:

The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine:
 as for the world and the fulness thereof, thou hast founded
 them. . . .
 Justice [*šedek*] and judgment [*mišpāt*] are the habitation of thy
 throne:
 mercy and truth shall go before thy face.
 Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound:
 they shall walk, O LORD, in the light of thy countenance.

The image of the Lord’s children walking in his light suggests that they should adopt these divine attributes of justice and judgment. Throughout the Psalms, God promises to deliver the oppressed. For example, Psalm 103:6 says, “The LORD executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed.” Psalm 146:7 says, “Which executeth judgment for the oppressed: which giveth food to the hungry. The LORD looseth the prisoners.”

Justice and Judgment and the Covenant of Abraham

In conjunction with the Abrahamic covenant, Genesis recounts the story of Abraham and Sarah offering aid and hospitality to the messengers coming from the wilderness. This story of patriarchal hospitality is juxtaposed with the Lord seeking to determine the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah since he declared he has heard “the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah . . . because their sin is very grievous” (Genesis 18:20). From Ezekiel 16 we learn that the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, in addition to their immorality, was their “pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness . . . neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy” (16:49).

In this story of Abraham and Sarah the Lord commended Abraham and prescribed the patriarchal virtue of hospitality to his promised posterity in the covenant: “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice [*ṣādāqāh*] and judgment [*mišpāṭ*]; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (Genesis 18:19). Thus Abraham and Sarah demonstrate the hospitality that is lacking in Sodom and Gomorrah. When the messengers go there they find hospitality only with Abraham’s nephew Lot, who demonstrates the same hospitality to the visitors as Abraham had demonstrated (see Genesis 19:1–3).

Justice and Judgment and the Law of Moses

In the story of the Exodus the Lord demonstrated his concern for the oppressed as he heard Israel’s cry and delivered them from bondage: “The children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Exodus 2:23–24).²⁸ The Lord, through his deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, became their king (Exodus 15:18), and at Mount Sinai he became the Lawgiver. The virtues of judgment and justice were given by commandment to Israel and were to be adopted and practiced. The Lord defined himself to Israel using similar attributes: “The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth” (Exodus 34:6). Just as God is merciful, he expects his covenant people to be merciful as well.

Thus the care of the poor, vulnerable, and oppressed is at the heart of the law of Moses and was an integral part of the covenant (Exodus 22:21–14). The point of the law of Moses was to create a holy people: “Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Part of this holiness was to adopt the divine values of justice and righteousness. The Holiness Code in Leviticus 17–26 includes numerous

injunctions to care for the poor.²⁹ This involves the values of justice and righteousness. For example, Leviticus 19:15 says, “Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.”

This concern for the poor and the oppressed is an integral part of the Pentateuch and is central to all three of the law codes in the Old Testament.³⁰ It is also central to the message of the prophets and to the Psalms and Wisdom literature. In a legal setting Israel was commanded in Deuteronomy 1:17 thusly: “Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God’s: and the cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto me, and I will hear it.” Israel is also commanded similarly in Leviticus 19:15: “Thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty.” An important part of the covenant was the blessings and curses connected with the giving of the Mosaic law on Sinai.³¹ As noted in Exodus 22 the curse of not taking care of the widows, orphans, and strangers was destruction. This was further emphasized by the curses in Deuteronomy 27:19: “Cursed be he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow.”

Commandments for Loving and Taking Care of the Poor in the Law of Moses

As we have noted above, the ideal of justice in caring for the poor was regularly stated in the prologues of ancient Near Eastern law codes, but there is little (if any) actual legislation that protects the poor and the oppressed in the law codes. Theologian Norbert Lohfink has observed, “There is no social legislation in the code of Hammurabi. Nor is such to be found in the laws of Ur-Nammu, nor in the laws of Lipit-Ishtar, nor in any other law collection of Mesopotamia. To be sure, some few laws in these codes make a distant approach to the topic of

the problems of the poor. But they never deal directly with the poor or with their rights in society.”³²

In contrast, the legal texts in the Old Testament do provide serious and sometimes comprehensive commandments and laws to covenant Israel in order to help the poor and oppressed. From these laws we can derive spiritual and temporal principles that can help us as we seek to aid the poor in the new and everlasting covenant. Throughout the scriptures God promises to hear the cry of the oppressed and deliver them. In the case of the Exodus, God demonstrated his ability to deliver through the miracles of the Exodus and by delivering his people from bondage. But most often the Lord expects his covenant people to hear the cries of the oppressed and act as instruments in the hand of the Lord to deliver these people from poverty and oppression.

Here are four examples of specific laws that the Lord revealed in the law of Moses.

1. *Sharing the harvest through gleaning.* The first example is a series of laws given in which the Israelites were taught to be generous in sharing the fruits of their crops. The law as given in Leviticus 19:9–10 says: “And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the LORD your God.”³³ Israelites were commanded to leave the corners of their fields and vineyards unharvested for the gleaners. The amount of the harvest left in the fields and vineyards depended on the charity and generosity of the land owner. According to the Mishnah at least one–sixtieth of the harvest should be left, taking into account the abundance of the harvest, the financial resources of the owner of the field, and the needs of the poor (*Pe’ah* 1.1–2). A description of this process is demonstrated in the book of Ruth, where two widows are allowed the opportunity to glean the fields for their sustenance.

The principles taught by this commandment are simple. Those that have should share with those that don’t. Those who own land

and plant and nurture the plants should generously share their harvest with the poor. There is a built-in requirement for the poor to extend themselves and harvest for themselves. This is an opportunity for those who have resources to exercise their generosity. Of particular note regarding this commandment is the notice that this generosity is to be given to the poor and the stranger. While many ancient Near Eastern law codes express concern for the poor, which parallels Israel's concern for the poor, Israel is unique in its concern and legislation on behalf of the strangers among them.³⁴

2. *Third-Year Tithe*. As part of the law of Moses the Lord commanded ancient Israel to give a tenth of their annual produce to the Lord.³⁵ Tithing was a common feature in other ancient Near Eastern cultures as annual offerings to the king. In Deuteronomy, every two out of three years, the tithes were to be brought to the temple, given to the Lord, and celebrated with a feast. In the third year the tithes were to be stored in the cities where they could be used to meet the needs of the poor and the Levites, the widows and the orphans.

In Deuteronomy 26:12–13 the Lord commanded the Israelites to give their third-year tithes to the fatherless, the widows, and the orphans: “When thou hast made an end of tithing all the tithes of thine increase the third year, which is the year of tithing, and hast 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 not transgressed thy commandments.”³⁶ The prayer prescribed in Deuteronomy 26 that accompanies the tithe beautifully illustrates the thoughtful gratitude that should accompany obedience to the commandments and sharing with the poor. In this prayer the Israelite is to say, “I have hearkened to the voice of the LORD my God, and have done according to all that thou hast commanded me. 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” (26:14–15).

3. *Sabbatical and Jubilee*. While not specifically designated just for the poor, there is a festival in the law of Moses that delivered relief for the poor and provided liberation for those in debt. The Sabbatical—to be celebrated every seventh year—was a nationwide remission of debt, freedom of slaves, and a celebration of the mercy of the Lord.³⁷ The Jubilee was a special Sabbatical celebrated at the end of seven times seven years—in the fiftieth year (Leviticus 25:8–13). The Israelite festival was designed to liberate Israelite slaves from debt-servitude and liberate others from debt, and the festival was similar to a tradition well-attested in Mesopotamia where the kings, usually at the beginning of their reigns, proclaimed a remission of debt and a release of debt slaves. This ritual of remission was known as *mišarum* (“justice”) and the release of slaves was known as *andurārum* (“release”).³⁸ The purpose of this law is described as follows: “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the LORD your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today” (Deuteronomy 15:4–5 NRSV). Israel is specifically commanded here to be generous in lending to the poor, even though the seventh year of release was approaching, lest “thy poor brother . . . cry unto the LORD against thee, and it be a sin unto thee” (15:9).

The celebration of the Jubilee was also celebrated in the times of the Restoration. In 1880 at the fiftieth year anniversary of the founding of the Church in 1830, John Taylor, as President of the Church, declared a Jubilee year in the Church. On this occasion President Taylor, in the tradition of the Israelite Jubilee year, forgave half of the outstanding debt owed by the poor to the Perpetual Emigration Fund, while those who were able to pay were still encouraged to do so. President Taylor also urged all the Saints throughout the Church to forgive the debts of those who were unable to pay, and he promised the Saints that if they would forgive the debts owed to them by others, the Lord would do the same for the Saints.³⁹

Social Justice and the Monarchy

With the establishment of the monarchy in ancient Israel, the Lord gave the kings the covenantal task of caring for the poor and the oppressed. This is expressed in Psalm 72:1–2: “Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king’s son. He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment.” The Old Testament describes how David’s rule established “judgment [*mišpāt*] and justice [*šədāqāh*] unto all his people” (2 Samuel 8:15), how the Lord commissioned Solomon “to do judgment [*mišpāt*] and justice [*šədāqāh*]” (1 Kings 10:9), and how Ezekiel and Jeremiah called on the kings of Judah to “execute judgment [*mišpāt*] and justice [*šədāqāh*]” (Jeremiah 22:3; Ezekiel 45:9) and warned them of destruction if they didn’t (Jeremiah 22:5). And Jeremiah saw a future Davidic king who will “execute judgment [*mišpāt*] and righteousness [*šədāqāh*] in the land” (Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15) similar to other Near Eastern kings.

Social Justice and the Prophets

The Bible describes how in the history of Israel, especially during the period of the monarchy, the kings and the children of Israel continually slipped into apostasy by breaking the covenant. A significant sin was the forgetting of their covenantal obligation to judgment and justice and to give heed to the cry of the poor. The Lord sent prophets, who based their calls to repentance on the blessings and curses of the covenant, to call the kings and the people to repentance. Prophets continually warned ancient Israel of impending destruction if they did not repent. Let’s look at a few of their dramatic warnings.

Amos was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel and was a champion of justice for the poor. He described the sins of Israel, “Ye who turn judgment to wormwood, and leave off righteousness in the earth” (Amos 5:7) and prescribed that Israel “let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream” (5:24). Amos also

warned of impending destruction: “For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes; that pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor, and turn aside the way of the meek” (2:6–7).

Isaiah, in his memorable allegory of the vineyard, describes the Lord’s condemnation of Judah with a delightful wordplay: “he looked for judgment [*mišpāt*], but behold oppression [*mišpāh*]; for righteousness [*šədāqāh*], but behold a cry [*šə’ākāh*” (Isaiah 5:7). In his sermon about the fast, he says, “Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house?” (Isaiah 58:6–7).

Jeremiah warned the kings of his time period that “thus saith the LORD; Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, And say, Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, that sittest upon the throne of David, thou, and thy servants, and thy people that enter in by these gates: Thus saith the LORD; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place” (Jeremiah 22:1–3).

Social Justice and the Individual

While the responsibility of caring for the poor was assigned to the king and his bureaucracy in the law of Moses, and while the priests and Levites were assigned to preside at the altars of sacrifice and help distribute the tithes and offerings, the responsibility of caring for the poor ultimately depends on the acts of individuals. Both the Law and the Prophets address individuals. Deuteronomy addresses the Israelites and commands them to imitate God’s mercy to the poor, love the stranger, and humble themselves by circumcising their

hearts: "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked. For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:16–19).

Ezekiel 18:8 describes the "just man" as the individual who has "executed true judgment between man and man" and declares that such individuals will have life:

But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right,
And hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath
lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel . . .

And hath not oppressed any, but hath restored to the
debtor his pledge, hath spoiled none by violence, hath given
his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a
garment;

He that hath not given forth upon usury, neither hath
taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity,
hath executed true judgment between man and man,

Hath walked in my statutes, and hath kept my judgments,
to deal truly; he is just, he shall surely live, saith the
Lord God." (18:5–9)

Additionally, Zechariah urges individuals to establish charity in their hearts: "Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your hearts" (Zechariah 7:9–10). Let us now look at an individual who did adopt the divine attribute of justice in his own life to help the poor.

Job: A Model of Justice (*mišpāt*) and Righteousness (*šədāqāh*)

Job is a figure who exemplifies this call of acting with individual consciousness and goodness toward his neighbors. He is an example of compassion, mercy, and righteous living, even in the midst of great wealth and abundant blessings—sometimes a difficult feat to achieve without the refining experiences of hardships. When Job’s life is thrown into chaos and he loses everything of value—including his own family and health—he is berated even by his three friends who come to call him to repentance. It is in response to their judgmental sermons that Job remained steadfast in his statement of innocence: “God forbid that I should justify you: till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me” (Job 27:5). Job then defended himself by giving a declaration that embodies the model of righteousness and justice that the law of Moses demanded:

When the ear heard me,
then it blessed me;
and when the eye saw me,
it gave witness to me:
Because I delivered the poor that cried,
and the fatherless,
and him that had none to help him.

The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me:
and I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy.
I put on righteousness, and it clothed me:
my judgment was as a robe and a diadem.
I was eyes to the blind,
and feet was I to the lame.
I was a father to the poor:
and the cause which I knew not I searched out.
And I brake the jaws of the wicked,
and plucked the spoil out of his teeth.

Then I said, I shall die in my nest,
and I shall multiply my days as the sand. (Job 29:11–18)

Job heard the “cry” of the poor and fatherless and was moved to act. He “caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy” and was “a father to the poor,” perhaps going beyond mere relief in making an effort to meet the desires and needs of the disenfranchised. Job even went one step further—he worked to stop some of the oppression: “The cause which I knew not I searched out” (Job 29:16). In addition to his personal acts of kindness to others, Job made an effort to effect change in his society: “I brake the jaws of the wicked, and plucked the spoil out of his teeth” (29:17). He took action on two levels; providing immediate relief to the destitute and making an effort to root out the cause of some of their problems. Job manifests personal righteousness (*edek*), and his judgment (*mišpāt*) was “as a robe and diadem” (29:14)—he is an exemplar in both areas.⁴⁰ Later, when Job offered a series of oaths of innocence (see 31:13–28), he sums up his attitude toward the less fortunate like this: “Did not he that made me in the womb make him? and did not one fashion us in the womb?” (31:15). For Job, we all come from the same place and are all children of one God.

The Messiah as the Embodiment of Compassion and Mercy

The law given to Moses and the words of the prophets taught ancient Israel that the heart of their religion was to love God and to love their neighbor (Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5). In practice this meant to care for those who needed it most: the weak, the poor, the oppressed, and the helpless. The children of Israel learned this through the divine compassion showed them by God’s delivering them from Egyptian bondage and by his mercy that he bestowed on them to continually protect and bless them in the promised land. In addition to *righteousness* and *justice*, the Lord God of Israel is defined in the biblical record by two additional adjectives that describe his

feelings toward his children: *rahûm*, meaning “compassionate,” and *hānnûn*, meaning “merciful” or “gracious.” “The LORD! The LORD! a God *compassionate* and *gracious*, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6 NJPS; emphasis added).⁴¹ These two adjectives, *compassionate* and *gracious*, are translated almost interchangeably in the different modern translations of the Bible. God, by nature, is full of compassion and mercy and, by nature, cannot but help to hear the cries of the oppressed, the needy, and the suffering. Israel was commanded to behave in the same way in imitation of their God.

The great prophet Isaiah taught Israel that it was through these characteristics of compassion and mercy that they would recognize the Messiah: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD” (Isaiah 61:1–2).

When Jesus read Isaiah’s words to those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth and then proclaimed, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears” (Luke 4:21), the people were amazed. “And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth” (4:22). Although they did not believe him, as evidenced by their desire to cast him over the brow of a hill, Jesus would demonstrate during his ministry, death and resurrection—the very fulfillment of this passage in Isaiah. Jesus preached to the meek that all may be saved through faith on his name. He bound up the brokenhearted as he healed the blind, the lame, those overwhelmed by evil spirits, and those overcome by grief because of the death of a loved one. He proclaimed liberty to the captives by freeing the burdened from their sins and opening the spirit prison of those bound by lack of knowledge and ordinances. He walked among the people of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, all the while reaching out to the poor and needy, caring for the widows and orphans, and blessing the strangers. In very deed, Jesus of Nazareth was the living embodiment of

the compassion and mercy taught by the law of Moses, and he would extend this compassion and mercy to all of humankind through his Atonement.

At the end of his ministry Jesus invited us all to imitate his compassion and mercy: “For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. . . . Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:35–36, 40). In preparation for his return we are entreated to hear the cry of the oppressed and to do as he did so that we may be ready to witness the fulfillment of the end of that passage in Isaiah: “To comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified” (Isaiah 61:2–3).

Social Justice and the Messiah

In the end time, when God returns to the earth as the Messiah, he will sit on his throne founded on justice and judgment, and he will judge the world in justice and righteousness. Isaiah saw this day: “And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment [*bamišpāt*], and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness [*bišəḏāqāh*” (Isaiah 5:15–16). In addition, Isaiah eloquently expressed God’s compassionate and merciful nature when he described what that day will be like when the Lord God “will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces” (Isaiah 25:8) and when “the voice of weeping shall be no more heard . . . nor the voice of crying” (Isaiah 65:19).

Until that day when Jesus Christ will establish final justice and righteousness (Ezekiel 18:5–9), we as his covenant people are called to become like him in compassion and mercy” (Psalm 86:15), and we are entrusted to hear and respond to the cries of the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the strangers and to love them and give them succor (Deuteronomy 10:16–19). As expressed by the Lord in Doctrine and Covenants 136:8 when he commanded the latter-day Saints to care for “the poor, the widows, the fatherless,” the cause of Zion that we are building is to be “of one heart and one mind,” to dwell “in righteousness,” and to have “no poor among” us (Moses 7:18).

Notes

1. If not otherwise noted, the Old Testament scriptures are cited from the King James Version (KJV).
2. See F. Charles Fensham, “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 2 (1962): 129–39; Philip Johannes Nel, “Social Justice as Religious Responsibility in Near Eastern Religions: Historic Ideal and Ideological Illusion,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 26, no. 2 (2000): 143–53.
3. Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1995), 49.
4. Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 76.
5. Fensham, “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor,” 130.
6. Roth, *Law Collections*, 16.
7. Roth, *Law Collections*, 25.
8. Letter #1 in Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 19–20.
9. For a comprehensive study on “the cry,” see Richard Nelson Boyce, *The Cry to God in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).
10. See Amos 4:1; Isaiah 3:14–15; 10:2; Ezekiel 16:49.
11. See, respectively, Exodus 23:11 and Deuteronomy 15:1–8.

12. Exodus 22:22, 24; Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19, 20, 21; 26:12, 13; 27:19; Job 22:9; 24:3; Psalms 68:5; 94:6; 109:9; 146:9; Isaiah 1:17, 23; 9:17; 10:2; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; 49:11; Lamentations 5:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5.
13. Exodus 22:21–24; Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19, 20, 21; 26:12, 13; 27:19; Psalms 94:6; 146:9; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5. All eleven occurrences in Deuteronomy include widows, orphans, and strangers; Isaiah pairs widows and orphans in Isaiah 1:17, 23; 9:17; 10:2. Jeremiah has the triad of widows, orphans, and strangers in 7:6; 22:3 and has widows and orphans in 49:11. Ezekiel 22:7, Zechariah 7:10, and Malachi 3:5 also include all three categories.
14. See Ruth 1:21; 1 Kings 17:7–12; Job 22:9.
15. See Isaiah 1:23; 10:2; Ezekiel 22:7; Malachi 3:5.
16. Lamentations 5:3 says, “We are [y *tômim*] without a father.”
17. See J. Renkema, “Does Hebrew YTW M Really Mean ‘Fatherless’?,” *Vetus Testamentum* 45 (1995): 119–21.
18. Several Hebrew terms have similar meanings: *gēr*, meaning “stranger” or “resident alien,” probably refers to people who were living in Israel more or less permanently. The terms *zār*, *nokrî*, and *tôšāb* refer to sojourners who were foreigners living in Israel more or less temporarily.
19. See, for example, the mention of strangers in the Ten Commandments, where they are listed after the servants and cattle in Exodus 20:10, and their frequent listing together with widows and orphans.
20. See Leviticus 25:23–24.
21. See Leviticus 19:10; Deuteronomy 24:19–21.
22. See Leviticus 14:29; Deuteronomy 14:29; 26:12–13.
23. See Leviticus 25:6.
24. See Deuteronomy 1:16–17.
25. See Deuteronomy 5:14. See also Mark R. Glanville, “The *Gēr* (Stranger) in Deuteronomy: Family for the Displaced,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 3 (2018): 599–623.
26. For a comprehensive discussion, see Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*.
27. For example, see Psalms 33:5–6; 93; 96:10.

28. Compare “oppression” in Exodus 3:9; Deuteronomy 26:7.
29. Some of these injunctions are found in Leviticus 19:10, 15; 23:22; 25:25, 35.
30. The law code in Exodus 20:23–23:19 is known by scholars as the Covenant Code, the collection of laws in Leviticus is known as the Priestly or Holiness Code, and the collection of laws in Deuteronomy is known as the Deuteronomic Code.
31. See Leviticus 26 and the Plains of Moab sermon recorded in Deuteronomy 27–30.
32. Norbert Lohfink, “Poverty in the Laws of the Ancient Near East and of the Bible,” *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 34–50. See, however, Fensham, who argues that there are some laws in Mesopotamia, especially in terms of laws of inheritance and credit-slavery that were designed to protect the vulnerable. See Fensham, “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor,” 131.
33. See also Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19–21.
34. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1627: “Concern for the poor, the widow, and the orphan is widespread throughout the ancient Near Eastern codes and edicts. Israel, however, is unique in its solicitude for the *gēr*, the alien.”
35. See Leviticus 27:30; Numbers 18:21–24; Deuteronomy 14:22–29.
36. See also Deuteronomy 14:28–29.
37. See Exodus 21:2–6; Leviticus 25:1–7; Deuteronomy 15:1–18.
38. See Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 75–96.
39. B. H. Roberts, *Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1892), 333–35.
40. Timothy Keller has a wonderful discussion of Job as a model of personal *ṣādāqāh* (“righteousness”) and suggests that if we all had this personal *ṣādāqāh*, it would render justice (*mišpāt*, which punishes offenders and cares for the victims of their unjust treatment) unnecessary. Keller, *Generous Justice* (New York: Dutton Penguin Group, 2010), 10–13.
41. See Nehemiah 9:17, 31; Psalm 86:15; Psalm 111:4; Joel 2:13.