

Ask Away – March 18

1) What does it mean when it says that at the end of every seven years “every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor”? (Deut 15:1-2)

The Hebrew word translated “release” is from the root *šmt* which means “to let drop, to let go, release.” Thus in the seventh year, every creditor was to let go of whatever they had lent to their neighbor. There is debate about whether this release was a complete cancellation of the debt or just a suspension of payments during the seventh year (cf. Exod 23:11). To me, several factors point toward cancellation: 1) the following verses speak of God’s desire to alleviate poverty in Israel and for them to lend to other nations (Deut 15:3-6); 2) the unworthy thought of not lending anything because the release was near implies cancellation (Deut 15:9); 3) there is a connection between the seventh year release (Lev 25:1-7) and the crowning Jubilee Sabbath of permanent release (Lev 25:8-55); 4) later Jewish tradition understood this to be a complete cancellation of the debt.¹

2) Moses said, “There will be no poor among you” and then later said, “There will never cease to be poor in the land.” Is this a contradiction? (Deut 15:4, 11)

This is a good example of the tension in Deuteronomy between God’s standard and Israel’s sinfulness. God’s plan was for Israel to be a community of brothers and sisters united in their love and devotion to Him and bound together in their love and care for each other. Yet God was very much aware that Israel would fail to live up to this ideal (cf. Deut 4:25-28; 9:4-6, 24; 28:15-68). Indeed, God told Moses as much when He gave him the song of witness (Deut 31:16-22).

In light of this, we should understand Deuteronomy 15:4 as speaking of the ideal that would be experienced if Israel would obey God—they would be so showered with His blessings that there would never be any poor—and Deuteronomy 15:11 as speaking of the reality that would be experienced when Israel failed to obey God—they would always have the poor among them. When seen this way, Deuteronomy 15:1-2 is actually a mercy on God’s part. He knew Israel would sin, and He sought to minimize the impact of their sin by mandating a release of debts and generous lending.²

¹ Main sources: (1) Peter T. Vogt, “Social Justice and the Vision of Deuteronomy,” *JETS* 51.1 (March 2008) 36-38; (2) John D. Currid, *Deuteronomy: EP Study Commentary* (Evangelical Press, 2006) 280-281. Scholars favoring complete cancellation include: Braulik, Cairns, Christensen, Grisanti (esp. p. 633, Note 1), Hall, Hamilton, Mayes, Merrill, Thompson, and Tigay. Scholars favoring suspension of payments include: Craigie, Driver, Keil, McConville, Ridderbos, and Wright). For the view that this involves the creditor returning a “pledge” (collateral) to the debtor, see Christopher J. H. Wright, “What Happened Every Seven Years in Israel? Old Testament Sabbatical Institutions for Land, Debts and Slaves. Part 1,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 56.3 (July-Sept. 1984): 129-138.

² Vogt, 41-42. Other examples of this tension: Deut 17:14-20 (cf. 1 Sam 8:1-9) and Deut 24:1-4 (cf. Matt 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-7).