

Justice and Mercy: The Law Codes of The Ancient Near East in Scriptural Perspective

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I. INTRODUCTION

The problems of social justice have been serious issues in different countries. People have been noticing numerous drawbacks which result from social injustice and there are even scholars who argue that all social problems are consequences of unjust behavior.¹ Among all these corollaries of injustice, one is the problem of uneven distribution of wealth which affects numerous people around the world. The rich are staying affluent whereas the poor are becoming more destitute. The consequence of this social phenomenon is the problem of debt which has been troublesome at all times and in all lands. In the history of human beings, how to distribute wealth well has been a notorious problem throughout centuries. The root of many chaotic phenomena has something to do with this. Therefore, the way to achieve an ideal society in which everyone can have sufficient wealth becomes the central issue in the economic activities. Many nations have attempted

¹ Kris J. N. Owan, "Championing the Cause of the Less Privileged: Human Promotion in Nigeria in the Light of Prophet Amos," *Revue Africaine de Théologie* 17 (1993): 37–57.

to establish different measures to impartially dispense assets, and to institute regulations to circumscribe squandering. The resources, however, are limited but desires of human beings are limitless.² Although almost every country has tried to establish an ideal society, the problem of wealth distribution still has not been solved. Ancient kings tried to overcome these problems through their wise reigns whereas the Scriptures provide important concepts to deal with them. Ancient Israelites were nomadic but there were no clear differences of ranks and consequently slaves were regarded as a part of the family. Nevertheless, when Israelites began living in the land of Canaan, these Canaanites lost their lands and consequently resulted in the problem of debt.

On the other hand, the transmutation of the old into new economic system, from a society of even distribution of lands to a society of commercial, also led to the problem of debt.³ Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the spirit of the laws in the Bible so that we can grasp the idea of how God expects people to solve this problem. The principles behind these texts will serve as standards for both ancient and contemporary to learn how to deal with the problem of debt and to understand God's consideration concerning social justice on this topic.

This paper will focus on the problem of debt. I will analyze ancient law codes to understand how legislative systems treated these problems; the concepts concerning these issues in the Bible will be probed in order to grasp the spirit of the Scriptures. This paper will conclude that merciful actions within the covenant relationship, depending on God's blessing, serve as the resolution to this perplexity through the years.

² This saying is the foundation of economy by Adam Smith.

³ Ernst Bammel, "πτωχός," *TDNT* 6:889; Harvey Perkins, "The Poor and Oppressed," in *Evangelism and the Poor-A Third World Study Guide*, ed. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, 1983), 33–43.

II. ROLE OF LAWS IN ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The Law Codes in the Bible did not appear haphazardly but were rooted within the context of the ancient Near East,⁴ where the role of laws was different from that in the modern world. It is easy for people to notice that the number of ancient laws is quite small.⁵ There were two famous law codes in the ancient Near East, the Laws of Hammurabi (abbreviated as LH) and the Laws of Eshnunna (abbreviated as LE). The power of King Eshnunna held sway over most of the East Tigris, Assyria and part of Upper Mesopotamia.⁶ The code of Eshnunna was the first code in the Akkadian language, which was written before Hammurabi reigned.⁷ On the other hand, there were 282 laws in the laws of the Babylonian king, Hammurabi, in which there was no reference to the structures of family and society, nor addressing the legal rights and obligations.⁸ The function of these codes basically is to reveal a self-glorification of the king and to show what would be rights and justice in this king's mind.⁹ Therefore, it is quite difficult to practice these laws directly as case-laws due to their insufficiency. For instance, in the Laws of Hammurabi, item 195 said: If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off. In this clause, we can observe that the cases of the fights between daughters or mothers are not addressed. The characteristics of these laws show that probably they are "somewhere

⁴ J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 80.

⁵ The total numbers of the laws in different countries nowadays are more enormous than those in the ancient worlds.

⁶ Eshnunna and Albrecht Göetze, *The Laws of Eshnunna*, trans. Albrecht Göetze (New Heaven: Dept. of Antiquities of the Government of Iraq and the American Schools of Oriental Research, 1956), 2.

⁷ Enrique Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge: A Study of Justice in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 5.

⁸ Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, trans. Zainab Bahrain and Marc Van De Mieroop (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 161. Furthermore, Lyon addresses two parts of the structure of the laws of Hammurabi. See David Lyon, "The Structure of the Hammurabi Code," *JAOS* 25 (1904): 254–65.

⁹ Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 183.

between the formulation of rules and accounts of actual cases judged by the king."¹⁰

Regarding the legal texts in the Bible, similar phenomena appear. The texts do not cover all kinds of cases and are insufficient for judges to make judgments according to case study. For instance, Exodus 21:37 (22:1 in NRSV), it declares that when someone steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. The problem arising here is that if this is a case-law, there is no solution to deal with the case in which a camel or a goat is stolen.¹¹ Therefore, the ancient laws were not regarded as case-laws but presented as a vehicle for propaganda to show the concepts of the lawgivers, no matter whether they are gods or kings.¹² Nevertheless, the difference between the laws in the ancient Near East and those in the Bible is that there is a distinct spirit in each legal text. The laws in the ancient Near East were established within the social context and served as a system to solve real problems within society.¹³ On the other hand, there are three law codes in the Old Testament: Covenant Code (Ex. 20:19–23:33), Deuteronomic Code (Deut. 12–26), and Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26).¹⁴ These codes were announced before the Israelites

¹⁰ There are no names of the victims in these laws and the elements of these cases are removed. These clues lead to the conclusion of understanding these laws not as case-laws. See Van De Mieroop, *King Hammurabi of Babylon: A Biography* (Blackwell Ancient Lives. Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 102–3.

¹¹ The standard of monetary recompense is depending on the animal and the value of it to the owners. See Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1974), 474.

¹² Nardoni, *Rise Up, O Judge*, 79.

¹³ The Laws of Hammurabi were set up 38 years after the king enthroned. See Van De Mieroop, *King Hammurabi of Babylon*, 100.

¹⁴ There is no agreement about the dates of these codes. In this paper, however, we are going to focus on the content and the issues about debts. The issue of dating these codes, therefore, will not be discussed here. Further discussion see John Van Seters, "Law of the Hebrew Slave: A Continuing Debate," *ZAW* 119 (2007): 169–70; Adrian Schenker, "The Biblical Legislation on the Release of Slaves," *JSOT* 78 (1998): 23–24; Calum Carmichael, "The Three Law on the Release of Slaves (Ex 21, 2–11; Dtn 15, 12–18; Lev 25, 39–46)," *ZAW* 112 (2000): 524–25; Bernard Levinson, "The Birth of the Lemma: The Restrictive Reinterpretation of the Covenant Code's Manumission Law by the Holiness Code (Leviticus 25:44–46)," *JBL* 124 (2005): 617–39.

conquered the land of Canaan and served as important materials for us to discuss the model of the ideal society. Therefore, the law codes were set up not only to solve social problems but to manifest the ideal society which God expects.¹⁵

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Theory

Since the law codes belong to the genre of legal texts, these texts were not asserted haphazardly. Regarding the social interaction among people, legal prescriptions were set up in order to solve problems within society. These texts provide important clues for us to reconstruct the ancient world. The shared motifs and formulations of Mesopotamian laws depicted the legal literature and tradition in the ancient world.¹⁶ The concept of comparative method is a significant way to analyze these legal texts. The contradistinction of different law codes provides a path to understand the wider context of the texts. The differences and similarities highlight the values of coincidence and uniqueness.¹⁷ In terms of these legal texts, they are usually recorded as casuistic cases which present legal situations and prescriptions. The situation in the protasis serves as typical in society and the prescription in the apodosis presents the elements which need to be considered in the court. In order to understand legal cases in detail, Eichler provides two principles for

¹⁵ Regardless the dating of these codes, there are several examples which show that these texts were transmitted earlier before Israel went into the land of Canaan. In Lev. 25:2, it is said, "[God said to Moses] Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you come into the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a Sabbath for the Lord." In Deut. 6:1, the text says, "Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the ordinances, that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy." These verses remind us not to neglect the probability that the laws were set up before Israel entered the promised land.

¹⁶ B. L. Eichler, "Literary Structure in the Laws of Eshnunna," in *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner*, ed. Erica Reiner (MI: American Oriental Society, 1987), 71.

¹⁷ Meir Malul, *The Comparative Method in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Legal Studies* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1990), 158–59.

us to analyze these cases. The first is the principle of polar cases and the second principle is the concept of association.¹⁸

Finkelstein remarks that ancient law codes did not present numerous cases but instead provided a limited number of cases.¹⁹ These polar cases leave a large discretionary area in the middle for judges to consider whether the final judgment should be guilty or innocent. The second principle establishes a system to be aware of the association among different cases and spread a vertically juxtaposed connection which goes beyond the horizontal relationship resulting from the first principle. These two principles provide both horizontal and vertical analyses concerning legal cases. Alongside with the comparative method, the texts will be probed in a broader context so that we can figure out the concepts of the law givers which lay behind these texts.

2. Process

In this paper, I am going to argue that to trust God's abundance and the new relationship within the covenant community are two major keys to practice justice concerning debt issues. In the previous section, I have already argued that the function of the laws in the ancient Near East, taking the Laws of Hammurabi (LH) and the Laws of Eshnunna (LE) as examples, is to reveal the concept of the lawgivers. In what follows, the principles of association and polar cases will be employed to analyze these texts concerning debt issues so that the spirit of these laws will be presented. Thirdly, I will also employ these two principles in the Biblical texts, especially on the issues of interests (Ex. 22:24–26 [25–27]; Lev. 25: 37; Deut. 15:7–8, 23:19–20, 24:6, 25:10–11) and the year of release (Ex. 21:2; Lev. 25: 39–41; Deut. 15:1–2, 12). In addition, I will compare these different law codes to tease out similarities and differences among them so that the meaning of these texts can be extracted and the will of God the lawgiver who set up these laws can be understood. Besides comparing

¹⁸ Eichler, "Literary Structure in the Laws of Eshnunna," 72.

¹⁹ Jacob J. Finkelstein, "Sex Offenses in Sumerian Laws," *JAOS* 86 (1966): 364.

the law codes, I will address the similarities and differences between the laws in the ancient Near East and the legal texts in the Bible will be addressed and the spirits of these two kinds of texts can be understood so that the uniqueness of the Bible will be emphasized. Finally, the texts concerning debt issues in the New Testament will be analyzed, especially the passages in which Jesus explains the meanings of the laws. In Matthew 5:17–48, Jesus reveals the fulfillment of the Law, including the general principles (Matt. 5:17–20), six examples (Matt. 5:21–47) and the summary (Matt. 5:48).²⁰ The examples in Matthew 5:21–47 serve as a type of legal text which represented how Jesus interpreted the spirit of the laws. Therefore, in the last stage, the principles of polar cases and association will be employed to analyze this passage so that we can understand these laws. The theme of applying social justice concerning debt issues from the Old Testament to the New Testament can be used to argue that God's blessings and covenantal relationship are foundations of practicing social justice.

IV. DEBT ISSUES IN LH AND LE

In antiquity, money could be used for buying food. The records of debit and credit can be found in archaeological documents. At Nuzi, there was someone who traded a piece of land which was 1.5 *imēru* (about 27 square meters) for barley of 1.2 *imērū* (about 101.04 liters), three sheep and three goats for five years. There was another person who used 3 *imēru* (about 54 square meters) for barley of 10 *imērū* (about 1010.4 liters). At that time, the rate of agricultural products for each *imēru* was about 5 to 9. This means that people used less barley to trade a land which could produce more barley so that they could gain quick profits.²¹

²⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 178.

²¹ The categorization and function of debit can be found in these documents. Besides money and food, fields were another important item. See Raymond Westbrook and Richard Jasnow, *Security for Debt in Ancient Near East Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 328–29; Maynard Maidman, "Nuzi: Portrait of an Ancient Mesopotamian Provincial Town," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), 2: 931–46; Carlo Zaccagnini, "The Price of the Fields at Nuzi," *JESHO* 22 (1979): 1–31.

On the other hand, there were records which showed that the rates of interest in the ancient Near East were 33 percent for food and 20 percent for money.²² This rate was so high that many people had to sell their lands, family, children or themselves to survive in this kind of environment.²³ The reality of the great difference between the rich and the poor has existed for a long time. Many kings or rulers had attempted to solve this problem and their plans were reflected by these legal texts.

1. The Laws of Hammurabi

The items of 113 to 119 in the Laws of Hammurabi deal with debt issues:²⁴

LH §113: If anyone have consignment of corn or money, and he take from the granary or box without the knowledge of the owner, then shall he who took corn without the knowledge of the owner out of the granary or money out of the box be legally convicted, and repay the corn he has taken. And he shall lose whatever commission was paid to him, or due him.

LH §114: If a man have no claim on another for corn and money, and try to demand it by force, he shall pay one-third of a mina of silver in every case.

Item 113 shows that even those creditors who have consignment cannot take away debtors' possessions without the knowledge of the owners. This rule provides protection of the debtors because they need the corn or money to live and pay the debt before the deadline.

²² These documents include the Laws of Hammurabi, the Laws of Eshnunna, *ana itti* (The Assyrian Law codes around the 7th century BCE), the Laws of X (2050–1800 BCE), etc.

²³ There were two kinds of sales, unconditional sale and conditional sale. In the situation of unconditional sale, the parent(s) would hand over the child with the price in full whereas in the situation of condition sale, the sold minor was adopted by the buyer. See I. Mendelsohn, "Slavery in the Ancient Near East," *BA* 4 (1946): 76.

²⁴ The English version is from the website: <http://www.phillipmartin.info/hammurabi/hammurabi_law101-150.htm> (accessed 25 April 2021).

Regarding the creditors, if they are in a hurry to take back the corn or money, they may never get what they had lent in the first place because the debtors will lose their ability and chance to pay the debt in the future. Therefore, this item protects both the debtors and the creditors and offers an opportunity for the debtors to pay their debts. In terms of §114, this item goes to the other extreme. In 113, it is about those who have consignment, but in 114 it is about those who do not. Although item 114 is not associated with debt issues directly, this item was set up to warn people not to take debts as excuses to usurp others possession.

LH §115: If anyone have a claim for corn or money upon another and imprison him; if the prisoner die in prison a natural death, the case shall go no further.

LH §116: If the prisoner die in prison from blows or maltreatment, the master of the prisoner shall convict the merchant before the judge. If he was a free-born man, the son of the merchant shall be put to death; if it was a slave, he shall pay one-third of a mina of gold, and all that the master of the prisoner gave he shall forfeit.

The association between 115 and 116 is about the case of imprisonment and we can see that the penalty for creditors is to release debts. The polarity of these two items is surrounded by the idea of whether the debtors die a natural death or because of maltreatment. If a natural death is the case, creditors should give up their rights and release the debts, but if maltreatment is the case, creditors have to pay extra. Further, the status of the debtor also matters. For a free-born man, the death penalty should take place whereas for a slave, then creditors have to pay extra money. The spirit of these legal texts is not to practice imprisonment, even though these debtors owe creditors money. The high rate of interest has served as exploitation toward the poor. If the practice of imprisonment is not under control, that will make the situation even worse. Comparing items 113 and 114–116, we can realize that the lawgiver expected the debtors to have the chance to live and have opportunities to work so that they can pay back the money.

LH §117: If any one fail to meet a claim for debt, and sell himself, his wife, his son, and daughter for money or give them away for forced labor: they shall work for three years in the house of the man who bought them, or the proprietor, and in the fourth year they shall be set free.

LH §118: If he give a male or female slave away for forced labor, and the merchant sublease them, or sell them for money, no objection can be raised.

LH §119: If any one fail to meet a claim for debt, and he sell the maid servant who has borne him children, for money, the money which the merchant has paid shall be repaid to him by the owner of the slave and she shall be freed.

Now we come to items 117–119 which focus on debtors. For the poor, the labor power becomes their last possession which can help them to pay back the money. The legal texts here, therefore, address the two cases: the first one is to indenture people to others and pay the debt with the money. The other one is to sell people to the creditors so that they can work there as slaves to pay the debts. If the persons who are sold are members of the debtors' family, they have to be released in the fourth year whereas if they are slaves, they could become creditors' slaves if debtors do not redeem them within three years. The exception here is that if the maid servant bears the debtor children, she belongs to the debtor and can be redeemed with money. Therefore, these rules protect the slaves from being maltreated by creditors. Again we see that the lawgiver attempted to help debtors to pay back the money and prevent them from being persecuted by creditors.

2. The Laws of Eshnunna

The texts in the LE concerning debt issues are items 22 to 24:²⁵

LE §22: If a man has no claim against a(nother) man, but (nevertheless) distrains the (other) man's slave-girl, the owner of the slave-girl shall

²⁵ The English version is from *The Laws of Eshnunna* by Albrecht Göetze.

declare under oath: "Thou hast no claim against me" and he (i.e. the distrainor) shall pay silver in full compensation for the slave-girl.

LE §23: If a man has no claim against a(nother) man, but (nevertheless) distrains the (other) man's slave-girl, detains the female seized in a distress in his house and cause (her) death, he shall give two slave-girls to the owner of the slave-girl as a replacement.

LE §24: If he has no claim against him, but (nevertheless) distrains the wife or the child, detains the female seized in a distress in his house and causes (her) death, it is a capital offence. The distrainor who distrained shall die.

Although these laws do not address debt issues directly, we can still recognize them as regulations to deal with illegal cases.²⁶ According to the principle of polar cases, there is a contrast between laws 22 and 23. One is the case in which the slave-girl is alive whereas the other one is that the slave-girl is dead. If the slave-girl is still alive, the distrainor shall pay silver in full compensation. If she is dead, however, the distrainor shall pay an extra slave-girl to the owner. Therefore, if she is alive, the creditor will gain a slave-girl plus silver and if she is dead, the creditor can have two slave-girls. The spirit of these laws shows that creditors shall not maltreat the slave-girl who is imprisoned. Comparing this spirit to the following text, law 24, we can see that this law deals with different statuses of people who are imprisoned. Maltreatment practiced upon the debtor's family will result in the death penalty. These laws prohibit seizure of people but they only deal with unlawful distress with proper compensation and nothing about the fate of these slave-girls is mentioned.²⁷ These kings attempted to protect the poor and the best they could do was to prevent oppression.

²⁶ Yaron proposes that these laws are dealing with issues of theft. Nevertheless, since they follow the regulations of debts (§ 18A–21), it is probable that these laws should be regarded as rules concerning debt issues. On the other hand, there are other laws which deal with problems of theft (§ 6–8). Therefore, we still take these legal texts as laws concerning debt issues. See Reuven Yaron, *The Laws of Eshnunna* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988), 275–78.

²⁷ Eshnunna and Göetze, *The Laws of Eshnunna*, 74–75.

V. DEBT ISSUES IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Since we can conclude the same idea behind the law codes, which is to trust God's blessing and to love brothers and sisters within the covenant community, the spirit of the laws will not change in different contexts.²⁸ The same concept was handed down from the Pentateuch to the history of Israel. People did not observe God's laws and many prophets were sent to preach the message of repentance. Isaiah proclaimed that YHWH is a God who seeks for the poor and helps people in need. In Jeremiah 34:8–16, we can see that it was serious if God's people did not obey God's commandments, especially the law of seventh-year release because of one's selfish reasons.²⁹ Jeremiah adopted the concept of the new covenant to encourage people to have the hope of justice whereas Ezekiel served as a prophetic-priestly voice to criticize both religious and social problems. According to the law codes in the Old Testament, debt slavery was highly forbidden, but people broke these laws because of selfishness. Although debt issues were not often addressed directly, these cases were mentioned as examples for prophets to criticize people that they did not obey God's commandments. For instance, Amos reproached injustices had crept into the economic system so that more people had fallen into debt (Amos 2:6, 8:6).³⁰ After the exile, there was another event which concerns issues of debts in Nehemiah 5:1–13. In this case, the older laws were referred to in order to serve as normative for the social measure and the spirit of Jubilee was introduced for establishing the society which returned from the exile.³¹

²⁸ No matter how we date these codes, it is probable that they were recorded in different time and contexts. The same consideration behind the laws can be seen in these codes. This shows that the spirit is everlasting, regardless different contexts or time.

²⁹ John Bright, *Jeremiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 223–34.

³⁰ Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible*, 369–72.

³¹ Niels Peter Lemche, "The Manumission of Slaves-The Fallow Year-The Sabbatical Year-The Jubel Year," *VT* 26 (1976): 54.

The interpretation of the spirit of these laws is clearer in the New Testament. Although there are no passages in the New Testament which address the issue of debts directly, there are two passages concerning this issue which are worth addressing.³² We will first look at the passage in Matthew:

Matt. 5:42: Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Although there is no direct teaching in the New Testament, we still can grasp the principles in Matthew 5:42, which echoes the idea in Deuteronomy 15:7–8.³³ The polar case here represents as the range between begging and borrowing, and the response to these two points to give and not refuse. Taking Matthew 5:21–46 as the context, we can recognize the settings from this passage. This passage is a part of the Sermon on the Mount which has a neat structure³⁴ and presents a didactic character.³⁵ According to the principle of association, the examples in Matthew 5:21–46 should be related. Jesus discusses reconciliation with brothers (5:21–26),³⁶ adultery and divorce (5:27–32),³⁷ vows (5:33–

³² Scholars argue that the author of James describes that the rich are those who drag the poor into the court. This situation could result from the motive of extracting taxes from the poor or forcing them to pay debts. There should be more evidence to prove this. Since this is beyond the scope of this paper, I will not discuss the passage in James here. See Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works Is Dead* (NY: Crossroad, 2002), 29.

³³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 131.

³⁴ 5:3 may be related to 6:19–21 (and possibly 7:21–23); 5:6 may be elaborated in 6:24–34 (especially 6:33); 5:7 may find its counterpart in 6:12, 14–15, and 5:9 may correspond with 5:43–48. See Gary A. Tuttle, "The Sermon on the Mount: Its Wisdom Affinities and Their Relation to Its Structure," *JETS* 20 (1977): 229.

³⁵ Tuttle, "The Sermon on the Mount," 214.

³⁶ Tuttle, "The Sermon on the Mount," 220. There is a structure: leave gift → go ; be reconciled → offer gift. We may find this teaching in Proverbs 25:9 and 6:3. The advice is the same as what Jesus said, "Make friends quickly with your accuser."

³⁷ The Greek phrase πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι (5:28) could be a purpose infinitive. However, this section should be included with 31–32, which is also about the inner relationship with spouses. See. M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 191.

37),³⁸ retaliation,³⁹ and love of enemies.⁴⁰ These teachings present the framework not just to criticize violence but also to terminate brutality and force with abounding goodness.⁴¹ Furthermore, in the end of chapter five, Jesus gives a pattern of teachings which is not only to maintain social security, but to deal with the deeper problem which is that human beings lack love. Putting the reaction of the polar case in Matthew 5:42 and the problem in other examples, we can conclude that love becomes the main issue which needs to be emphasized. The teaching in Matthew 5:42 takes a positive direction by a generous and benevolent response to those who are in need.⁴² To love others motivates people to practice this verse. In addition, in the last passage in Matthew 5, God's action toward both the evil and the good (Matt. 5:45) serves as the deeper thrust for Christians to practice love. This teaching reminds us that we do not have right to our money. Right and strict justice are not the standard for Christians, but the principle of love on the cross.⁴³ To the broader co-text, the prayer in Matthew 6:9–13 also provides clues for us to understand the spirit of the teachings. The concept of the word *οφείλημα* in Matthew 6:12 is based on a financial

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| 38 | Either | By heaven | For it is the throne of God |
| | Or | By earth | For it is his footstool |
| | Or | By Jerusalem | For it is the city of the great King |
| | And do not | By your head | For you cannot make one hair white or black answer |

See Tuttle, "The Sermon on the Mount," 221.

³⁹ Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 86.

⁴⁰ Scholars argue that there are a parallel merism with chiasm (43–45) and rhetorical questions (46–47), and then the conclusion is given in 48. Indeed the teaching techniques are reminiscent of Wisdom. The principle stated here is framed there in practical terms. And the rhetorical question is also a common Wisdom feature, especially the rhetorical question that anticipates a particular response. See Tuttle, "The Sermon on the Mount," 221–24.

⁴¹ Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1983), 92; William Foxwell Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 69.

⁴² David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 175.

⁴³ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 132.

obligation which is similar to the idea in Deuteronomy 15:1–2.⁴⁴ Here the text does not provide a conditional situation but to describe a condition of being more than doing.⁴⁵ The heart's attitude and the better righteousness are two major focuses in this teaching. Jesus teaches his disciples to give endless generosity to others.⁴⁶ This principle shows that to receive forgiveness comes with a responsibility which is to extend pardon to others.⁴⁷ Forgiveness is the key to maintain the social and cosmic order and serves as the obligation of reflecting the divine action for we are by nature debtors to the justice of God.⁴⁸ In Deuteronomy 15:1–2, the reason of releasing debts is that God had released our debts and similar concept also appears in Matthew 6:14–15.⁴⁹ Therefore, people who are aware of their sins will recognize that they have to learn forgiveness and the foundation of forgiveness is Jesus who died on the cross.⁵⁰ Jesus on the cross has provided what human beings really need and people who trust

⁴⁴ The wording in the Lord's Prayer shows that to ask for the remittance of debts was an extreme act of royal care for the people. Therefore, on the basis of the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman contexts, this prayer represents the divine protection. The real situation, however, in the first century might be more complicated. Since Israel was under the reign of the Roman Empire, there was not enough evidence to show that people were practicing the laws of remission at that time. In Sir 28:2, it is said, "Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray." The word debt here refers to our guilt before God which God is requested to forgive. Further discussion see Giovanni Battista Bazzana, "Basileia and Debt Relief: the Forgiveness of Debts in the Lord's Prayer in the Light of Documentary Papyri," *CBQ* 73 (2011): 511–25; David A. Fiensy, "Jesus and Debts: Did He Pray about Them?" *ResQ* 44 (2002): 233–39; J. Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1964), 14; J. M. Ford, "The Forgiveness Clause in the Matthean Form of the Our Father," *ZAW* 59 (1968): 127–31; Ernst M. Conradie, "Mission as Evangelism and as Development? Some Perspectives from the Lord's Prayer," *International Review of Mission* 94 (2005): 569.

⁴⁵ Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman, "Learning to 'Pray This Way': Teaching the Lord's Prayer," *WW* 22 (2002): 75.

⁴⁶ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. T. Longman and D. E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 156.

⁴⁷ Turner, *Matthew*, 188–89.

⁴⁸ Warren Carter, "Recalling the Lord's Prayer: The Authorial Audience and Matthew's Prayer as Familiar Liturgical Experience," *CBQ* 57 (1995): 525; David N. Beckmann, "Praying the Catechism: A Prayer Based on the Larger Catechism's Exposition of the Lord's Prayer," *Presbyterian* 16 (1990): 86.

⁴⁹ Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 95.

⁵⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 147.

his blessing from salvation will gain the ability to practice the law. His blood was shed for the realization of practicing forgiveness.⁵¹

In the following passage of Matthew 6:25–34, Jesus urges disciples not to worry because God will provide all things we need. The same theme of trusting God threads throughout the whole sermon and gives people a stable ground to give those who beg and not to refuse those who borrow from others. People who trust in God will know that God watches over the detail of their lives. This idea echoes the spirit of God's blessing as the promise to those who practice the law in the Old Testament. Now Jesus' blessing serves as a new foundation for us to bravely help people who are in need.

On the other hand, God's perfection by loving both the good and the evil (5:45–48) establishes a new understanding of love.⁵² Throughout Matthew 5:43–47, there is an expression of God's impartiality and goodness,⁵³ and the mention of sun and rain serves as the way God shows his love. That means our brothers and sisters are no longer those whom we love already, but also those we think are evil. In the law codes, to love brothers and sisters sets up the boundary to practice the laws. God's reaction and Jesus' sacrifice, however, offers a broader boundary to everyone in the world.⁵⁴ This concept amplifies the idea of covenant community in the Old Testament because at that time, aliens were strangers of promise but not are united because of the new covenant which Jesus makes. God's blessing and the covenant community are still two main focuses to practice social justice while the deeper meanings of these two are revealed by Jesus.

⁵¹ Nathan Mitchell, "The Amen Corner," *Worship* 77 (2003): 56–69.

⁵² Roland Deines, "Not the Law but the Messiah: Law and Righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew—An ongoing Debate," in *Built upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Daniel M. Gurtner and John Nolland (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 81.

⁵³ Isabel Ann Massey, *Interpreting the Sermon on the Mount in the Light of Jewish Tradition as Evidenced in the Palestinian Targums of the Pentateuch* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1991), 55–56.

⁵⁴ This idea is the same as that in Eph 2:14, "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

Besides the teaching in Matthew, there is another passage in Luke which is concerning the same topic:

Luke 6:34–35: If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

This passage indicates the forms of how to behavior in order to go beyond sinners.⁵⁵ According to the principle of association, there is a connection between the passage of Luke 6:32–33 and Luke 6:34–35. The interrogatives in Luke 6:32–33 imply that people will not gain the credit if they love those who love them and do good to those who do good to them. Nevertheless, if a person could love their enemies which is proved by doing good to them, this person will have credits and become truly a child of God.⁵⁶ It is the promise of being God's children in Luke 6:35 which becomes the credits and guarantees that people who practice this teaching will not lose. Therefore, God's blessing again serves as the foundation for people to practice love. The polar case in this passage focuses on sinners and those who follow Jesus. Sinners give and expect to take back everything they give. In the Greco-Roman world, almost every time people gave, they did so in order to get something back. It was a common financial activity in the ancient world.⁵⁷ Jesus, however, takes a higher standard to the disciples and the foundation to love their enemies is to surrender to the mind of God and to realize the divine passion toward human beings.⁵⁸ In addition, the polar case here shows that the area of practicing love is broad. Whereas

⁵⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 257–58.

⁵⁶ Johannes Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1950), 212–13.

⁵⁷ The phrase τὰ ἴσα refers to what was paid. See Martin M. Culy, Mikeal C. Parsons, and Joshua H. Stigall, *Luke: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 203.

⁵⁸ William Manson, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 70.

sinner love only those who love them, Jesus' disciples stretch their love toward those who do not love them, or even their enemies.

This concept also matches the teaching in Matthew 5:46 and both these passages are established upon the foundation of Jesus' sacrifice for those who did not love him in the first place and became his enemies. The comparison in Luke 6:34–35 does not focus on lending, but on giving. To love enemies is a new relationship among people and this command is connected with a promise: to be children of the Most High.⁵⁹ Therefore, to be merciful within the new relationship which is under the covenant of Christ redefines the boundary of practice this teaching and God's promise and blessing is again regarded as the foundation of love.⁶⁰ Besides, comparing the passages in Matthew and Luke together, we can notice that there is the passage of Beatitudes at the beginning of both of them. The Beatitudes with their blessings on the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek,⁶¹ the pure in heart and the peacemakers, point to their centrality in the kingdom of heaven.⁶² Possessing the kingdom becomes a divine reward for fulfilling a required precondition, and that results from the blessing of God.⁶³ The poor and people who are in need can have a new opportunity to get rid of debts only if people practice the teaching of Jesus sincerely. The problem of the gap between the rich and the poor could result from and result in unjust social activities. There should be something which

⁵⁹ François Bovon, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas (MN: Fortress, 2002), 238–39.

⁶⁰ Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. T. Longman and D. E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 894.

⁶¹ The word meek means a subservient and trusting attitude before God in biblical language, and this makes meekness generally a vertical virtue rather than a horizontal one. See James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 37–38.

⁶² There is another passage discussing about the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 13.

⁶³ David Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 359; Jacobus Leibenberg, *The Language of the Kingdom and Jesus: Parable, Aphorism, and Metaphor in the Sayings Material Common to the Synoptic Tradition and the Gospel of Thomas* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 457–60.

is above the cruel reality of the limitation of resources, and only God can play the role of providing this situation. The real justice can be framed only on the basis of those who trust God and are aware of the importance of the new relationship within the new covenant.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have discussed the ideas of the laws in the ancient Near East. Comparing the laws of Hammurabi and Eshnunna, we can see that these kings attempted to protect the needy with their wisdom. They established many important and helpful laws and somehow solved the problems of debts of the poor. They employed many measures to avoid oppression. Their considerations, however, were restricted within a world with limited resources. Even though their plans were wise enough to solve problems, the reality of limitation forced them not to be able to successfully practice justice. In addition the greed of human beings restrains the achievement of justice. Everyone understands the laws with selfishness, and practices what is regulated only if there is some benefit of doing this. These two problems, limitation of resources and selfishness, heavily produce unjust behaviors so that there is no way to establish the ideal society. The Law Codes in the Old Testament, however, proffer a new standard which produces probability of practicing justice. This standard is based on the trust of God's abundance and generosity so that the limitation of resources no longer inhibits the will to elicit justice. God will bless those who obey the laws and care for the needy. The issue of oppression and hope can be united through works because God is the one who cares for the poor and those who imitate God's action will receive his blessing.

In addition, the area of practicing justice within the covenant community produces another perspective of dealing with debt issues and slavery. The issues of debts can be solved according to the idea in the laws. Caring for the needy is established upon the brotherhood of human beings. People shall understand that all are the children of the one God and to practice the law with mercy will serve as the key to

remove poverty and injustice.⁶⁴ The willingness to help brothers and sisters will generate a new thrust to make the ideal society into reality.

Unfortunately, the history of Israel tells us that these people failed to practice these laws because they did not trust God. Since social justice played an important role in ancient Israel, the prophets reproached these kinds of deeds seriously.⁶⁵ Because of Jesus' salvation, the dawn has come in terrible situations and the darkness of the history of human beings. Jesus sacrifices himself on the cross in order to show the love of God, which became our standard of life.⁶⁶ His sacrifice for human beings provides two important consequences. The first is that the salvation from Jesus who died on the cross manifests God's provision and blessing. Those who follow Jesus will realize that it is trustworthy to set foot on the same path which Jesus has walked through. Secondly, Jesus' sacrifice becomes a model for his followers to act as he did so that the new relationship can be reestablished in this new covenant.

Although situations nowadays are still arduous, the basic attitude to care for the poor is the assurance of God's blessings which produces true endurance.⁶⁷ The early church was a shining example of practicing deeds of mercy and justice by self-giving love. It was powerful to witness the gospel and became one of the reasons for the early church to grow in the first three centuries.⁶⁸ To trust God's abundance and to imitate God's action to care for the needy in the community of the new covenant are two master keys to unlock the problems of debts.

⁶⁴ Henry H. Shires and Pierson Parker, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 428–29.

⁶⁵ For instance, Amos the prophet reproached the oppression toward the poor in the north kingdom of Israel which induced God's serious judgment (Amos 3:9–14). See Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 357–59; Jules Francis Gomes, *The Sanctuary of Bethel and the Configuration of Israelite Identity* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2006), 144.

⁶⁶ Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 160–61; Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 76.

⁶⁷ Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, 74–75.

⁶⁸ Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 218.

These two concepts have been implied in the Law Codes in the Old Testament and are revealed in Jesus' teachings and deeds.

ABSTRACT

There are various problems of social justice, and among all corollaries of injustice, one is the problem of uneven distribution of wealth which affects numerous people around the world. In the history of human beings, how to distribute wealth well has been a notorious problem throughout centuries. Although many people have tried to establish an ideal society, the problem of wealth distribution still has not been solved. Ancient kings tried to overcome these problems through their wise reigns whereas the Scriptures provide important concepts to deal with them. On the other hand, the transmutation of the old into new economic system, from a society of even distribution of lands to a society of commercial, also led to the problem of debt. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the spirit of the laws in the Bible so that we can grasp the idea of how God expects people to solve this problem. The principles behind these texts will serve as standards for both ancient and contemporary to learn how to deal with the problem of debt and to understand God's consideration concerning social justice on this topic. This paper will focus on the problem of debt and will analyze ancient law codes to understand how legislative systems treated these problems; the concepts concerning these issues in the Bible will be probed in order to grasp the spirit of the Scriptures. This paper will conclude that merciful actions within the covenant relationship, depending on God's blessing, serve as the resolution to this perplexity through the years.

撮 要

關於社會公義，充斥着各式各樣的問題，然而當中有一個重要的影響在於財富分配不均，此議題影響着無數的人，不同經濟體系的轉變，也容易帶來債務的問題，故而在歷史中，許多人都在嘗試尋找如何妥善分配資源的方式，但在各樣的嘗試之後，此議題卻似乎仍無法得到完全的解決。就在古代許多帝王嘗試通過他們的政策來解決此事時，聖經亦提供了重要的思考線索。因此，認識聖經中關於律法的精神，能夠幫助人知道神希望人如何解決此問題，經文背後的原則成為古代與當代學習如何處理債務的重要依據，也能以此知道神期盼人如何考慮社會正義。於是本文將透過債務問題的相關討論，分析古代法典

以了解立法系統如何處理這些問題；並且將進一步探討聖經中有關此議題的概念，以掌握當中重要的精神。最終本文將論述：在盟約關係中的憐憫，將帶來神的賜福，成為解決此問題的核心概念。