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To Glean or Not to Glean ...



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According to Old Testament law (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut 24:19–22), harvest leftovers should be reserved for the poor. While gleaning is still practised in some countries, elsewhere it is unwelcome. Yet there are many hungry people today and an urgent need to make agricultural surpluses available to them.

KEYWORDS

harvest, glean, poor, surplus, Leviticus 19:9–10; 23:22, Deuteronomy 24:19–22

Many readers will associate gleaning with Ruth, the Moabite widow who accompanied her mother-in-law Naomi when she returned to her homeland. As widows they had no land of their own, and so were dependent on others for their welfare. After obtaining permission from the harvest supervisor, Ruth gleaned in the field of Boaz, a relative of her father-in-law (Ruth 2:1–7). The story emphasizes the generosity of Boaz, who not only allowed her freedom to do this, but ordered protection and sustenance (vv. 8–14) and ensured that there was plenty of grain ‘left’ to glean (vv. 15–16).

The purpose of this article will be to understand better the practice of gleaning in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament, and to reflect on the relevance of this ancient practice for modern society.

Ancient Near East

Gleaning is mentioned only rarely in the ancient Near Eastern texts which have been discovered, though the information available suggests it was not uncommon.

There is an explicit reference in the harvest section of the Sumerian Farmer’s Almanac (lines 73–86):

The gleaners must do no damage; they must not tear apart the sheaves. During your daily harvesting, as in ‘days of need’, make the earth supply the sustenance of the young and the gleaners according

to their number, [and] let them sleep [in your field] as [in] the [open] marshland. [If you do so] your god will show everlasting favour.

The first sentence assumes there will be gleaners at harvest time, and sets limits to their activity, while the next two sentences specifically encourage the practice. The harvester is exhorted to leave fallen ears of barley on the ground for needy children and gleaners, and this is considered a charitable deed for which he will receive divine blessing.¹

The Instruction of Amenemope refers implicitly to gleaning:

Do not pounce on a widow when you find her in the fields
And then fail to be patient with her reply ...
God prefers him who honours the poor
To him who worships the wealthy. (§28)

This advice fits with what is known from other Egyptian sources, which indicate that gleaning was commonplace, though not too popular with the landowners.²

¹ According to the interpretation of Samuel Noah Kramer (*The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 108, 341), whose translation I have used above.

² Pierre Montet, *Everyday Life in Egypt in the Days of Rameses the Great* (trans. A. Maxwell-Hyslop and M. Drower; London: E. Arnold, 1958), 116.

Old Testament

Apart from the book of Ruth, gleaning is mentioned in Judges (8:2) and Jeremiah (6:9; 49:9), but the clearest picture of how it was understood in Old Testament times is found in the laws.

In the Holiness Code there is a pair of laws:

*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edge of your field; or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, and the fallen grapes of your vineyard you shall not glean; you shall leave them for the poor and the resident alien. I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:9–10)*³

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edge of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the resident alien. I am the LORD your God. (Lev 23:22)

The two laws are almost identical, except that the former deals with fields and vineyards, the latter only with fields.

The first begins a series of laws with an ethical focus (Lev 19:9–18). It is formulated with a pair of double prohibitions, concerning fields and vineyards respectively. The first part of each prohibition instructs the farmer to deliberately leave part of his crop unharvested; the second part forbids him to go back after harvesting to gather grain or grapes which have been unintentionally missed. The law is concluded with an explanation of its purpose – to provide for the poor and the resident alien – and the characteristic theological refrain of the Holiness Code: ‘I am the LORD your God.’ The relevance of the refrain here may be clarified by Proverbs 22:23: ‘For the LORD will plead their cause; and rob of life those who rob them.’⁴

It is not specified exactly how much of the ‘edge’ of the field should be left for the poor, or how many grapes should be left on the vine, and this provided considerable scope for rabbinic discussion with a whole tractate of the Mishnah being devoted to harvest leftovers. In the case of grain, according to an early tradition, harvest leftovers are one of those things which have no measure, like first-fruits, offerings, deeds of charity, and study of Torah

³ I have made my own translation from the Hebrew for the texts cited in this article.

⁴ According to Rashi, so Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1629.

(*m. Peah* 1:1); but later a minimum of one-sixtieth of the crop was stipulated, and more if necessary to supply the needs of the poor (*m. Peah* 1:2).⁵

The second law is placed immediately after instructions for celebrating the Festival of Weeks, in the context of sequential legislation about the various religious festivals. At that point in the year it would be much too early to harvest grapes, which may explain why gleaning of vineyards is not mentioned.⁶ The purpose of repeating the law in this context may be to teach the people that fulfilling religious obligations by giving to God does not excuse them from fulfilling social obligations to give to the poor.⁷

Deuteronomy takes up the matter of gleaning again, as follows:

When you reap your harvest in your field and you forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the resident alien and the orphan and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you, in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the branches again; [what is left] shall be for the resident alien and the orphan and the widow. When you gather the grapes in your vineyard, you shall not strip it bare afterwards; [what is left] shall be for the resident alien and the orphan and the widow. Remember that you have been a slave in the land of Egypt; that is why I am commanding you to do this. (Deut 24:19–22)

The essence of the Deuteronomic law is the same as that in the Holiness Code, but the wording and details are different. Some interpreters assume the Deuteronomic version to be earlier on the basis of standard historical-critical theory,⁸ but in fact several features of this text suggest it to be later.⁹

⁵ On rabbinic discussions concerning harvest leftovers, see further Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1625–28; Frank M. Loewenberg, *From Charity to Social Justice: The Emergence of Communal Institutions for the Support of the Poor in Ancient Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2001), 92–96; David Instone-Brewer, *Prayer and Agriculture* (vol. 1 of *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 121–67.

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).

⁷ John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1992).

⁸ E.g. Rudolf Kilian, *Literarkritische und formgeschichtliche Untersuchung des Heiligkeitgesetzes* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1963), 42.

⁹ See Christian Feucht, *Untersuchungen zum Heiligkeitgesetz* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1964), 120–21; Eduard Nielsen, “‘You Shall Not Muzzle an Ox

In the Holiness Code, the harvest leftovers are reserved for the poor and the resident alien whereas in Deuteronomy they are for the resident alien, orphan, and widow. This fits with the Deuteronomic context, where the law is part of a longer section beginning with verse 17 on resident aliens, orphans, and widows. Although such people have no land of their own, this law entitles them to a share of the harvest.

Concerning grain (v. 19), the law prohibits returning to collect a forgotten sheaf. This is supplementary to the instructions in Leviticus that the 'edge' of the field should be deliberately left unharvested and grain which accidentally falls to the ground should be left for the poor to glean. The rabbis debated at some length about the definition of a forgotten sheaf, so that gleaners would be able to distinguish such sheaves from those deliberately left behind because the harvest had not yet been completed (*m. Peah* 5:7–6:6).

Concerning grapes (v. 21), the provision here is essentially the same as the first part of the law in Leviticus: a prohibition of going over the vines a second time to collect clusters that were not fully formed when the main harvest took place.

The law concerning olives (v. 20) is unique to Deuteronomy, but the principle is the same as that for grain and grapes. It was usual to beat olive trees and then gather the fruit which fell to the ground (cf. Isa 17:6; 24:13), and the law instructs the owner to do this only once, leaving it to those without land to come later and gather any remaining fruit. By making this addition, Deuteronomy includes all three characteristic crops of the promised land in the gleaning law (cf. Num 18:12; Deut 7:13; 11:14; 12:17; 14:23; etc.).

Two theological reasons are given for the observance of this law. First, looking to the future, those who are generous to others are promised the blessing of God in their own lives (v. 19b; cf. 14:29; 15:10, 18; 23:20). The second reason, looking to the past, is remembrance of slavery in Egypt (v. 22; cf. v. 18; also 15:15; 16:12). The LORD had mercy on the people of Israel, giving them freedom and a land

to call their own; so they must always remember that the land and its harvest is theirs not by right but by grace. It follows that they too should be merciful to people in need, sharing the blessing they receive with others. The first reason tends towards 'prosperity theology', while the second is more closely related to the concerns of 'liberation theology', and the combination of these two emphases in one text suggests that neither of these theological approaches should be adopted uncritically without reference to the other.

So it is clear that the right of the landless to glean, and the duty of the landowner to facilitate this, is stipulated in these laws. This provision for the poor involves the recipients in the work of gleaning, maintaining a balance between generosity and dignity. The landowner is not burdened with extra work in being generous to the poor, and the poor have the privilege of working to supply their needs.¹⁰

It is also notable that the donor does not decide who will receive his or her donation, as would normally happen with modern charitable giving, but it is left to the poor to come and collect produce from the fields as needed. Some commentators have suggested that this passivity on the part of the donor is intended to emphasize that the land belongs to God, who has entrusted it to the whole covenant community for their sustenance, and therefore the landless have as much right to benefit from it as the landowners (cf. Lev 25:23).¹¹

It has frequently been suggested¹² that these laws originally had a religious function, probably to placate the spirits of the land, and later the focus moved to social concern, but this suggestion is purely conjectural.¹³ No doubt there were such practices in

¹⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976).

¹¹ Loewenberg, *Charity*, 93–94.

¹² E.g. Martin Noth, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (trans. J. Anderson; London: SCM, 1962); Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (trans. D. Barton; London: SCM, 1966); Andrew D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (London: Oliphants, 1979); Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 299 n. 21; Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (trans. D. Stott; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

¹³ None of the scholars mentioned in the previous footnote offer any evidence. It seems the idea was first proposed by August Freiherrn von Gall ('Die Entstehung der humanitären Forderungen des Gesetzes: I. Ein vergessenes Baalsopfer', *ZAW* 30 (1910), 91–98), followed by Georg Beer ('Das

While It Is Treading out the Corn", Dt. 25, 4' in *Law, History and Tradition: Selected Essays* (Copenhagen: Gads, 1983), 94–105, esp. 100–102; Alfred Cholewinski, *Heiligkeitgesetz und Deuteronomium: Eine Vergleichende Studie* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1976), 270.

the ancient world, as there still are in parts of the world today, for example the ritual of the last sheaf in Kabylia, Algeria,¹⁴ and the Javanese practice of making offerings (*sajian*) to the spirits at key points in the agricultural year, including harvest.¹⁵ However, this does not prove that the Israelites took over animistic practices and refashioned them as social regulations. There is no indication in the biblical text that this was the case, and the ancient Near Eastern references to gleaning mentioned above are clearly concerned with social rather than religious issues. So there is no good reason to doubt that from the beginning these laws were formulated for the sake of the poor.¹⁶

Gleaning Today

Gleaning in Palestine continued until the modern era,¹⁷ and is practised today in other countries. In America, for example, gleaning programmes inspired by Leviticus 19 were active in eleven states in 1983.¹⁸ The Oregon Hunger Prevention Act of 1988 defines the practice as follows:

To collect unharvested crops from the field of farmers or to obtain agricultural products from farmers, processors or retailers, in order

to distribute the products to needy individuals, including unemployed and low-income individuals. The term includes only those situations in which agricultural products and access to facilities are made without charge.

It has been estimated recently that more than ten thousand low-income households in the state benefit from this practice.¹⁹ The Society of St Andrew involves some thirty thousand volunteers each year in gleaning projects, salvaging vast quantities of food that would otherwise be wasted.²⁰ If gleaning takes place in a prosperous society like America, it is of course even more important in developing countries, such as India and Bangladesh.²¹

On the other hand, gleaning is not welcome everywhere. For example, the European Union has regularly paid farmers to withdraw surplus crops from the market, on the basis of its policy of guaranteed minimum prices for agricultural products from within the Union. Sometimes more than half the expenditure in the fruit and vegetable sector has gone on withdrawal, and in 1992/93, 60 per cent of the produce withdrawn was destroyed, 38 per cent used for distillation and animal feed, and just 2 per cent distributed to charities. In 1993/94 around 2.5 billion kilos of fruit and vegetables were bought up and destroyed. There was widespread criticism of these policies, and a reform in 1996 was designed to reduce unnecessary production and regulate what is done with surpluses. In particular, article 30 says that withdrawn products should preferably be used for human consumption and

Stehenlassen der Pe'a Lev 19 9', ZAW 31 (1911), 152) and Carl Steuernagel (*Das Deuteronomium* (2nd edn; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923)), on the basis of a developmental view of the history of religion.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. R. Nice; rev. edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 133–35. T. Canaan, ('Plant-Lore in Palestinian Superstition', *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 8 (1928), 129–68, esp. 141) describes a similar (obsolescent) custom in Palestine, of burying the last sheaf in the place where it had been reaped while reciting the Islamic creed. James George Frazer (*The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (abridged edn; New York: Macmillan, 1922; repr. 1958), 463–77) describes various superstitions in Northern Europe related to the last sheaf.

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960; repr. Chicago, IL: University Press, 1976), 41–42.

¹⁶ Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2011.

¹⁷ As described by Canaan, 'Plant-Lore', 140–41 and Gustaf Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, vol. 3 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1933; repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964), 60–62.

¹⁸ Report in *Los Angeles Times*, cited by Milgrom, *Leviticus* 17–22, 1627.

¹⁹ Oregon Food Bank, 'What Is Gleaning?' (2005) <http://www.oregonfoodbank.org/ofb_services/food_programs/gleaning/> accessed 4 August 2005. Examples from other areas are given by Donna Schaper, 'Gleaning: It's an Idea Worth Keeping', *The Lutheran*, August 2003 and Joan Gandy, 'Harvest of Hope: Cary Churches Glean to Feed the Hungry', *Cary Community News*, 20 July 2004 <http://www.carynews.com/our_town/story/1476641p-7624130c.html> accessed 4 August 2005.

²⁰ Society of St Andrew, 'Gleaning Network' <<http://www.endhunger.org/gleaning.html>> accessed 4 August 2005.

²¹ Amitava Mukherjee, 'Micro-Level Hunger in Contemporary India: Perspectives of the Hungry', *Indian Economic Journal* 49.4 (2001–02), 1–26, esp. 6; Kirit S. Parikh, 'Poverty and Environment: Turning the Poor into Agents of Environmental Regeneration' (working paper; United Nations Development Programme, Social Development and Poverty Elimination Division, 1998), 9.

may be freely distributed to charity organizations, children's holiday camps, schools, hospitals and old people's homes. Nevertheless, although there was some reduction in the waste, more than 1 billion kilos of fruit and vegetables were still withdrawn from the market in 2001/02, with the vast majority destroyed and only a tiny proportion made available for human consumption.²²

Europe is notorious in this matter, but by no means unique. Japan, for example, has a similar policy of keeping vegetable prices stable, and one way that policy is achieved is by destroying surplus crops.²³ In West Africa, cocoa prices declined in 2000, and as a result four leading cocoa-producing countries agreed on the creation of a crop withdrawal mechanism, intended to ensure the destruction of at least 250,000 metric tons of cocoa beans in 2000/01.²⁴ The complex economic

issues involved in such agricultural policies are obviously beyond the scope of this article, and I do not intend to suggest that it would be an easy task to distribute surpluses to the poor without threatening the livelihood of farmers. However – from a theological and humanitarian perspective – it must surely be true that the destruction of good food is an iniquitous practice, considering the significant numbers of malnourished people in Europe and the many starving to death elsewhere in the world. One big step towards 'Making Poverty History' could be to facilitate twenty-first-century ways of gleaning, making the surplus of agricultural produce in some parts of the earth accessible to those who desperately need it elsewhere.²⁵

²² Suzi Leather, 'The CAP Regime for Fruit and Vegetables' in *Health Impact Assessment of the EU Common Agricultural Policy: A NIPH Policy Report*, ed. Margaret Whitehead and Paul Nordgren (Stockholm: National Institute of Public Health, 1996), 17–22; Liselotte Schäfer Elinder et al., *Public Health Aspects of the EU Common Agricultural Policy: Developments and Recommendations for Change in Four Sectors: Fruit and Vegetables, Dairy, Wine and Tobacco* (Stockholm: National Institute of Public Health, 2003), 34–36.

²³ Kenzo Ito and John Dyck, 'Vegetable Policies in Japan' (Electronic Outlook Report from the Economic Research Service; United States Department of Agriculture, 2002), 6.

²⁴ ICCO, 'Annual Report for 1999/00' (electronic edn; London: International Cocoa Organization, [2000]), 12.

²⁵ A related issue is that of wasted food from supermarkets. Although I have not made a thorough study, resources available on the Internet and information supplied by local supermarkets indicate that the vast majority of food which passes its expiry date without being sold, even though it is still in perfectly good condition, is simply destroyed. The reason given is generally that this is a legal requirement, and if someone were to become ill through eating food that had been given away the supermarket would be held liable. Only one major chain (Marks & Spencer) regularly makes date-expired food available to local charities, and one other sends fresh produce to a local zoo (Sainsbury's). Some supermarkets make price reductions near to the expiry date, which help to reduce food waste, though the aim of these is presumably to minimize financial loss rather than to help the poor. It would seem that a great deal more could be done to make this surplus food available for the increasing number of poor people in Britain.

CORRECTION: On page 330 of the May issue of *ET* (117/8), G. A. Studdert Kennedy's name was inadvertently misspelled after a quotation from his poem, 'A Sermon'. We regret this error, and wish to include the final lines of the poem:

*O, by Thy Cross and Passion, Lord,
By broken hearts that pant
For comfort and for love of Thee,
Deliver us from cant.*

For those who are interested in the poetry of G. A. Studdert Kennedy, 'A Sermon' as well as the entire collection of *The Unutterable Beauty* can be found at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/dasc/TUB.HTM>.