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The Old Testament and the Neighbor

ROLF A. JACOBSON *and* KARL N. JACOBSON¹

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?—ENTERTAINING AN ANCIENT QUESTION

Luke 10 recounts an exchange between Jesus and an expert in interpreting the biblical law. The two of them volley questions and answers back and forth, like Roger Federer and Serena Williams on the tennis court.

The legal expert serves up the first question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus quickly returns, crosscourt: “What is written in the law?” The legal expert handles this easily by citing the Great Shema and the Holiness Code: Love the Lord (Deut 6:5) and love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18).

Jesus replies with an apparent winner: “Do this.”

But the legal expert deftly returns a question that has a little backspin: “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus charges the net. He tells a powerful story about a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. The first two bypass a wounded man on a road; the Samaritan offers

¹Rolf and Karl Jacobson did not always play well together as children, so they make up for it as adults by working and writing together. They have collaborated on *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms* and *Crazy Book: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms*.

The dispute between Jesus and the legal expert in Luke over the question of “the neighbor” was certainly not a new conflict. It is possible to understand the Lucan exchange as a Midrash on sections from the Pentateuch and the Hebrew writings. Rolf and Karl Jacobson delve back into the Old Testament to find the roots of the Lucan dispute, and shed further light on this important biblical concept.

him extravagant help. “Which one of these three,” he asks, “became a neighbor to the man in need?”

The expert refuses to say “the Samaritan,” and instead weakly replies, “The one who showed mercy.”

“Go and do likewise,” Jesus says, winning the point.

When Jesus and the legal expert debated this question—*Who is my neighbor?*—they were not starting a new dispute. Rather, they were joining what was already an ancient debate before the first century. Even before Jesus was born, Israelite prophets and priests, Samaritan teachers and legal experts, and Jewish rabbis and scribes had played with this question for centuries.

This essay explores some of the ways that the question was already being explored in the Old Testament.

THE NEIGHBOR IN THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments are the heart of God’s law.² One of the most striking features of the Ten Commandments is how often God’s concern for the welfare of the neighbor is prioritized. In fact, it is not too strong to say that the main point of the Ten Commandments is God’s concern for the welfare of the neighbor.

Riffing off of the title Joel Osteen’s book, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living Your Full Potential*,³ we often joke that we are going to author a corrective book on the Decalogue to be entitled, *Your Neighbor’s Best Life Now: 10 Commandments for Loving Your Neighbor Fully*.⁴ Starting with the last commandment working backward, notice how often the neighbor is mentioned in the Decalogue:

You shall not covet *your neighbor’s* house. You shall not covet *your neighbor’s* spouse...or anything that belongs *to your neighbor*.

Comment: Take careful note of the overwhelming emphasis against desiring the wrong thing, that is, the neighbor’s relationships and property. God prohibits the very act of wrongly desiring the neighbor’s life-stuff, because evil so often begins with wrongful desire.

You shall not bear false witness *against your neighbor*.

Comment: This is not a general commandment against lying, against harming one’s own soul by being means of deception. Rather, this is a commandment against hurting the neighbor with our words. God could have said, “Don’t lie.” Instead, God said, “Don’t hurt your neighbor with your words.”

You shall not steal. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder.

Comment: The commandments against theft, adultery, and murder are clearly about the neighbor. To steal is to harm the neighbor by damaging or taking the

²See Patrick Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster, 2009).

³Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living Your Full Potential*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Faithwords, 2015).

⁴(Somewhere: Someone, Someday Soon). Copyright Rolf and Karl Jacobson.

necessities of life. To murder is to harm the neighbor's person. The commandment against adultery is not a commandment against premarital sex or fornication in general, but a specific command against intimacy and sex with the neighbor's spouse. God could have said, "Don't have sex outside of marriage." But instead, God said, "Don't have sex with anyone else's spouse." This is a commandment against harming the neighbor—and especially the neighbor's children—by taking the neighbor's spouse.⁵

Honor your father and mother.

Comment: The elderly—really the grandfather and grandmother in the community—are your neighbor. This is a command is about caring for and respecting the elderly as age takes away their physical vitality. It is also a command to care for the disabled as made clear by two laws in Lev 19: "You shall rise before the aged and defer to the old" (v. 32) and "You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block in front the blind" (v. 14). The elderly, the disabled, and the infirm are your neighbors, too!

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy...you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

Comment: Notice that in the full, biblical version of the Sabbath commandment, the purpose of the Sabbath was as a day of social justice. God commands the heads of household to give the powerless rest—children, servants and slaves, animals, and resident aliens. It is not too strong to say that the Sabbath command is a justice command.⁶ In Deuteronomy the command is made explicitly in light of Israel's own past, "Remember that *you* were a slave in the land of Egypt..." (Deut 5:15). The Sabbath command expresses God's love for the most powerless neighbors, and God's intention and expectation that we regard the powerless neighbor in our workweek and labor laws.

THE NEIGHBOR IN LEVITICUS 19—EXACTLY WHO WAS THE RE'A?

Concern for the neighbor begins in the Ten Commandments, but it also spills out from there and sanctifies all of the law with the divine concern for the neighbor.

As noted earlier, God's concern for the neighbor is embedded in the central texts of the biblical law, such as the Holiness Code of Lev 17–26. Concern for the neighbor is especially well known from two passages in one of the weightiest parts

⁵In Jesus' teaching on this commandment in Matt 5:27–28 he goes even further, pointing out the inherent and fundamental danger all of this is to human relationships and communities. Jesus argues that if one even thinks about committing adultery, the damage is already done.

⁶See Rolf A. Jacobson, "Oppression, Interrupted: The Sabbath and Justice." *Word & World* 36/2 (Spring 2016) 219–227.

of the Holiness Code, Lev 19. Those passages are quoted in fuller context, in order to explore “who” the neighbor was that Israel was expected to love. Here is the first passage:

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. (Lev 19:17–18)

The question we wish to pursue here is exactly “who” was the neighbor (Hebrew: *re’a*).

The occurrence of the word *re’a* in 19:17–18 suggests that, originally, *re’a* referred to a fellow Israelite—a “neighbor within one’s own people.” The term occurs in parallel with “anyone of your kin” (literally *’akh*, “brother”). The English of the NRSV uses the term “neighbor” in vv. 17 and 18 to translate two different Hebrew words. In v. 17, “you shall not reprove your neighbor,” the Hebrew word translated as neighbor is the relatively rare term *’amit*. This term means “people” as in one’s “ethnic group” of origin. Thus, the occurrence of *re’a* in parallel with two terms for one’s own people seems to indicate that originally the “neighbor” one was commanded to love was the fellow members of one’s own people.

*the question we wish to pursue here is exactly “who” was
the neighbor (Hebrew: re’a)*

This view is also supported by the debt and slavery laws in Deut 15. There, Israelites are commanded to forgive the debts of their “neighbor who is a member of the community” (*re’a* and *’akh*, “brother”) every seven years (Deut 15:1–2). But “of a foreigner you may exact it” (v. 3). Further, it is commanded that every seven years “a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman” who has been sold into slavery within Israel shall be set free and given a financial nest egg to use as start-up cash. Nothing is said of the foreigner who has become a slave, but the context implies that Israel was not originally commanded to set those slaves free every seven years. There are other passages that confirm this understanding of *re’a*, but these are enough to establish the initial point (see also Exod 2:13; Deut 19:14).

But there is also warrant to interpret *re’a* as applying to non-Israelite neighbors. In the Exodus account, as Israel was leaving Egypt, they were commanded to “ask his neighbor and every woman is to ask her neighbor (*re’a*) for objects of silver and gold” (Exod 11:2). Here, the term clearly refers to the non-Israelite Egyptians from whom Israel was taking leave (and taking gold and silver, apparently).

Even more important from a theological and ethical point-of-view, however, is a second passage from Lev 19:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you

shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:33–34)

The term “alien” (*ger*) here does not necessarily mean “foreigner.” It can simply refer to a person within Israel who either has no family or who has nobody in their family who will act in love on their behalf. The term *ger* has alternately been translated as “sojourner,” “resident alien,” “alien,” or “stranger.” Perhaps the best dynamic translation comes from an old African American spiritual: “motherless child.” The *ger* is one who has no family to offer love.

In the Pentateuchal law, the “neighbor” whom God’s people are commanded to love are not just the members of one’s own tribe, faith, or country. God’s people are commanded to love all neighbors.

In the context of Lev 19:33–34, it is clear, however, that the *ger* God has in mind is the foreigner who lives within Israel or within the relational reach of an Israelite: “you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” God gives two motives to Israel as reasons they should love the foreigner as themselves. First, Israelites were once *gerim* in the land of Egypt. So they know what it is to be motherless children. Second, the Lord is holy. As Walter Kaiser writes, “Holiness is the essential nature of God.”⁷ It is God’s very character to be holy, and since God has chosen Israel, God’s very character is to be reflected in the internal and external lives of Israelites.⁸ Therefore, as God showed love for Israel when it was a *ger* in Egypt, Israelites must show love for the foreigner—the neighbor who is not like us, the neighbor who is from a different race and ethnicity, the neighbor who worships a different god.

The Pentateuchal law to love the neighbor—even the neighbor who shows enmity and hostility—can be seen in this law concerning the imperative to care for one another’s property: “When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free” (Exod 23:4–5).

This brief survey of the data in the Pentateuchal law reveals a vital element of Old Testament theology and ethics. In the Pentateuchal law, the “neighbor” whom God’s people are commanded to love are not just the members of one’s own tribe, faith, or country. God’s people are commanded to love all neighbors.⁹

⁷Walter Kaiser, “The Book of Leviticus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume 1*, ed. L. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 985–1191; 1131.

⁸As Samuel Balentine argues, “the list as a whole makes it clear that here, as in the framing chapters, the summons to holiness can be fulfilled only when fidelity to God is embodied with equal passion by both ethical and religious commitments.” Samuel Balentine, *Leviticus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003)160.

⁹It should be noted here that at least one Jewish interpreter of the Pentateuchal law has concluded that the witness is not clear. Asking “who is my neighbor?” within the Jewish context and tradition, Ernst Simon subjects the

THE NEIGHBOR IN THE PSALMS

The identity and role of the neighbor in the Psalms and the Prophets is similar in many ways to what is commanded and imagined in the Pentateuchal law, and may well be read with the Torah in the back of one’s mind. In both the language of Israel’s worship and the discourse of God’s messengers, the social and ethical edges between neighbors are vigorously explored.

The book of Psalms begins with the first psalm’s poetic reflection on the difference between the righteous and the wicked: The righteous are rooted in God’s word, the wicked are not so. The righteous rely on God, the wicked do not.¹⁰ One of the ways in which both the Psalms and Prophets characterize the wicked is in their treatment of their neighbors.

Psalm 15 is an entrance liturgy to the temple, which asks and answers a question.

- ¹ O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?
- ² Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;
- ³ who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;
- ⁴ in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honor those who fear the LORD;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
- ⁵ who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Here, as in Ps 1, there is a comparison of the righteous (those “who walk blamelessly”) over against the wicked; wickedness is slander, reproaching one’s neighbor (*qrob*) and doing evil to a friend (*re’a*). Psalm 15 offers this comparison as instructive, and directive; the one who may abide in the presence of God, is the one who treats the neighbor well.

Psalm 28 makes this comparison into a petition:

- ¹ To you, O LORD, I call;
my rock, do not refuse to hear me,
for if you are silent to me,
I shall be like those who go down to the Pit.

.....

term *re’a* to a “semantic analysis.” Working only on the semantic level, Simon concludes that “the scriptural evidence is by no means decisive.” Ernst Simon, “The Neighbor (Re’a) Who We Shall Love,” in *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975) 30–56, 30. It should be noted that after a careful consideration of the command to love the neighbor in the rabbinic tradition and in the context of modern, Jewish diaspora realities, Simon concludes: “When we know in the depths of our being that our neighbor is every man, and when we truly honor him as we love ourselves, only then will the Holy One allow Himself to be known as the God of Israel” (54).

¹⁰See Jerome Creach, *The Destiny of the Righteous in the Psalms* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008).

³ Do not drag me away with the wicked,
with those who are workers of evil,
who speak peace with their neighbors,
while mischief is in their hearts.

The plea of the psalmist is that she be spared the fate of the wicked, presumably because when she speaks “peace,” there is no mischief or malice behind it. To paraphrase James, she lets her “peace be peace.”

Psalm 101 crafts this comparison into a claim, a declaration of covenant loyalty aligning the psalmist with God’s word and will (presumably) as laid out in the Pentateuchal law,

¹ I will sing of loyalty and of justice;
to you, O LORD, I will sing.
² I will study the way that is blameless.
When shall I attain it?
I will walk with integrity of heart
within my house;
³ I will not set before my eyes
anything that is base.
I hate the work of those who fall away;
it shall not cling to me.
⁴ Perverseness of heart shall be far from me;
I will know nothing of evil.
⁵ One who secretly slanders a neighbor
I will destroy.
A haughty look and an arrogant heart
I will not tolerate.
⁶ I will look with favor on the faithful in the land,
so that they may live with me;
whoever walks in the way that is blameless
shall minister to me.

In each of these cases the one who prays these prayers or sings these songs takes up the theologically framed ethical question of how one will conduct oneself in regard to the neighbor. The comparison and the tension that this comparison is intended to engender in the reader serves to press that ethical question home. It slightly reframes the initial question, from “Who is my neighbor?” to “To whom am I neighbor?”

Often the prayers of the sick and/or the marginalized, the psalms that talk about the neighbor also wrestle with the problem of neighbors who have turned away from or even against us. Psalm 41 paints just such a picture:

⁵ My enemies wonder in malice
when I will die, and my name perish.
⁶ And when they come to see me, they utter empty words,
while their hearts gather mischief;
when they go out, they tell it abroad.
⁷ All who hate me whisper together about me;
they imagine the worst for me.

⁸ They think that a deadly thing has fastened on me,
that I will not rise again from where I lie.

⁹ Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.

The pain that the psalmist feels is expressed as malicious glee at his misfortune. Most painful is that it is not merely his enemies who in their “hearts gather mischief,” but even his “bosom friend” (literally “my man of *shalom*”). This friend has turned his heel—and his tongue—against the psalmist. The one who should be expected to be neighbor has turned hostile. In the Gospel of John (13:18), Ps 41:9 is used to describe Judas, the “bosom friend” who ate with Jesus, only to betray him. The closeness—that friend has become foe—makes the betrayal all the more painful.

A final example of the neighbor turning away is particularly telling. Psalm 38 is the prayer of a lonely sufferer, whose physical torment is matched only by her sense of loss when those she needs most are avoiding her. Having described her physical distress, she prays,

⁹ O LORD, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you.

¹⁰ My heart throbs, my strength fails me;
as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me.

¹¹ My friends (*'ohabay*, lit. “those who love me”) and companions (*re'ay*) stand
aloof from my affliction,
and my neighbors (*qrobay*, lit. “those close to me”) stand far off.

The sharp and painful irony of this complaint is palpable. The ones who love the psalmist fail to show or live out that love; one’s companions, those who are expected to be with one in such a time, stay away; and those who ought to be *right there*—which is what this particular Hebrew word for neighbor literally means, *qrb* is one who has “come close”—standing far off. The neighbor has failed to *be* the neighbor, and so the prayer of this psalm feels cut off, separate from her people.¹¹

In terms of volume, betrayal or “piling on” by one’s neighbor in one’s time of trial is the more common in the Psalms (cf. Pss 31:11; 44:13; 79:4–12; 80:6; 88:18; 89:41). And in most of these examples this betrayal takes the form of speech, probably gossip;¹² the neighbor, instead of offering words of comfort and support, offers scornful slander and malicious taunting.

All of this is abrogation of God’s law, and a reversal of what one ought to expect from one’s kindred, friends, and neighbors. Psalm 133¹³ envisions the promise of life together:

¹ How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred (*'akhim*) live together in unity!

² It is like the precious oil on the head,

¹¹Psalm 69:8, “I have become a stranger to my kindred, an alien to my mother’s children.”

¹²That speech often lies at the heart of the issue raises again the question of and the importance of the commandment not to bear false witness; see above.

¹³See also Proverbs 17:17, “A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.”

running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.

Psalms 50 makes the reversal of this expectation a harsh rebuke:

- ¹⁸ You make friends with a thief when you see one,
and you keep company with adulterers.
¹⁹ You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue frames deceit
²⁰ You sit and speak against your kin (*'akh*)
you slander your own mother's child.

THE NEIGHBOR IN THE PROPHETS

In the Prophets, the neighbors whom God's people are called to love are often characterized as the most vulnerable people in society—the widow, the orphan, the stranger. The world-weary, weeping prophet Jeremiah wonders, however, if the powerless can ever be trusted to love the powerless:

- ⁴ Beware of your neighbors,
and put no trust in any of your kin;
for all your kin are supplanters,
and every neighbor goes around like a slanderer.
⁵ They all deceive their neighbors,
and no one speaks the truth;
they have taught their tongues to speak lies;
they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent.
⁶ Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit!
They refuse to know me, says the LORD. (Jer 9:4–6)

The last line of this passage brings us full circle, in a sense, to the question raised by the various commands to “love one's neighbor” in the Pentateuch. “They refuse to know me,” is a telling critique of Israel, and potentially of us who read these texts as normative and authoritative. In both the Psalms and the Prophets there is an expectation that the Pentateuchal laws will be in play. We are called, commanded, to love our neighbor; to not do so is to show that we are not like the righteous. To fail to love our neighbor is to show that we “do not know the way of the LORD, or the law of our God” (Jer 5:4).¹⁴

As was noted above, the identification of the neighbor was by no means confined to one's kin, to one's fellow Israelites. Quite early on, the concept of “neighbor” was extended beyond Israel's borders. Again in both the Psalms and the Prophets, concern is expressed for three too often marginalized groups or types of people: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. A few examples will suffice:

¹⁴Jeremiah 34:13–17 applies the law explicitly in condemning Israel; for failing to observe the law as laid out in Deut 15:12ff. by retaking slaves who have been set free in the year of Jubilee. Israel has failed to obey the command to love the neighbor and, “Therefore, thus says the LORD: You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbors and friends; I am going to grant a release to you, says the LORD—a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth” (Jer 34:17).

- ¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.
- ¹² When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
- ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.
- ¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
- ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow. (Isa 1:11–17)

The rejection of ritual acts of worship in favor of theologically sound, ethical behavior is common among the eighth-century prophets (Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Mic 6:6–8; see also Ps 50:7–23). The emphasis on an ethic that is love-driven and inclusive, caring for the neighbor, is central to many of the core prophetic leaders in early Israel, driving the prophetic calling for Israel to know God's way and return to it.

A later prophet, Zechariah, writes:

The word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying: Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear. They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the LORD of hosts, and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus

the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and a pleasant land was made desolate. (Zech 7:8–14)

The call to be true in judgment and generous in dealing with the marginalized came, in Zechariah, with a consequence: because Israel would not listen to the neighbor, Israel would not be heard by God.

The Psalms, too, pick up this language of the stranger as neighbor, and the pending indictment of those who do not care for the stranger (widow and orphan) hangs in the balance once more.

⁶They [the wicked] kill the widow and the stranger,
they murder the orphan,
⁷and they say, “The LORD does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive.” (Ps 94:6–7)

Psalm 94 goes on to ask the rhetorical questions, “The LORD who planted the ear, does he not hear? The LORD who formed the eye, does he not see? The LORD who disciplines the nations, who teaches knowledge to humankind, does he not chastise?” The answer to each of these questions is a resounding “Yes!” There is, again, a warning for those with ears to hear. What Ps 94 sets up as the tension between those who claim that God does not pay attention and those who live as though God does, Ps 146:9 states as pure promise:

The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

WHICH ONE BECAME A NEIGHBOR TO THE ONE IN NEED?

We began this essay by placing the exchange between Jesus and the biblical interpreter about “Who is my neighbor?” as a debate that was already ancient by the time Jesus was born.

It is also a debate that still rages around us. Jesus—faithful to the Old Testament—orients us away from ourselves and toward the neighbor. In the twenty-first century, the world of neighbors grows both larger and also smaller. Even as global population grows, digital media connect us more closely to our neighbors. This world of neighbors also grows more diverse in many ways—age, race, religion, culture, and so on.

In this growing, diverse world of neighbors, God calls us still to love the neighbor. God sends us out to love, serve, and bless this world of neighbors—and even as God sends us, God goes ahead of us. When we go out and love the neighbor, we will find the God who sends us also awaits us there. ⊕

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