

Restitution in Sefer Ha-B'rit

This week's *Torah* portion, *Parashat Mishpatim*, is known as the Book of the Covenant, or *Sefer Habrit*. It contains the earliest collection of Biblical Laws. One way the *Torah* has often been read is, for example, to read this section of Scripture by looking up the laws pertaining to a subject matter and ignore the narrative. This way the various laws are identified and analyzed and then systemized as regulations. This is a helpful way of categorizing and understanding the individual laws, but it wrestles the covenant between *Adonai* and Israel out of its narrative framework, which establishes a relationship between God and Israel. Without the narrative link, the covenant, as articulated in Exodus 19–24, is devalued and read as another law book or law code, allowing the connection between Israel and God to be severed.

These laws and regulations, as well as the narration in the Book of the Covenant, depict *Adonai* as a moral, law-giving king who cares about every aspect of people's lives. He is the God of justice who prohibits perjury and demands complete impartiality in court (Ex. 21:1–3) and who distinguishes the guilt of intentional murder from unintentional manslaughter (Ex. 21:12–13). He expects people to treat each other properly and for us to exhibit holy behavior (Ex. 21:14–22:16). He even shows concern for what might be classified as disadvantaged classes of people—slaves, foreigners, widows, orphans, and the poor (Ex. 22:17–23:19). These are the very people who are most likely to become enslaved due to unpaid debts: “*The rich rule over the poor, the borrower is a slave to the lender*” (Prov. 22:7).

This concern for the disadvantaged classes is a good example of the relationship between the narrative context and the actual laws. The first laws mentioned in *Sefer Habrit* are about slaves (Ex. 21:2–11). This placement tells us that the treatment of slaves is a priority to *Adonai*. Our people were just released from being slaves themselves and thus, the “Golden Rule” needed to be applied. Therefore, the narrative of Israel's experience in Egypt is the basis for understanding these social-humanitarian regulations.

Placing the covenantal laws and statutes in their narrative context allows us to see that the covenant is not a list of dos and don'ts but an expression of *Adonai's* love, given to regulate the relationship between Israel and himself that was established when he brought us out of bondage. When observed through this relationship, the regulations bring freedom to us and to others. Such a perspective helps to set our minds on the things of the *Ruach* so we can live according to Him (Ro. 8:5) and be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Ro. 12:2).

Our *Torah* Portion outlines a way to deal with many crimes – restitution. Restitution includes compensating a person for stolen or damaged property or physical harm done to someone. Restitution laws cover a variety of circumstances: assault (Ex. 21:18–19); bodily injury (Ex. 21:26–27); liability (Ex. 21:33–36); theft (Ex. 22:1–4); property damage (Ex. 22:5–6); irresponsibility (Ex. 22:7–13); and the loss or damage of borrowed items (22:14–15). Voluntary restitution required the return of the item plus “one-fifth more” (Lev. 6:1–7). In most cases double restitution is required (Ex. 22:4, 7–9). Some crimes required payment of four (Ex. 22:1; 2 Sam. 12:6) or five (Ex. 22:1) times the loss or injury. Multiple-restitution was usually mandated for items that had extended value. Sheep reproduce at a high rate and their wool can be made into clothing. To steal a sheep is to rob its owner of present and future productivity. An ox has similar value plus the added ability to pull plows and carts, essential functions in an agrarian society. In all cases, laws of restitution placed a limit on revenge and a burden on the lawbreaker.

At the time of *Yeshua's* return restitution must take place: “²¹*whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began*” (Acts 3:21, *KJV*). There are two excellent NT examples of fulfilling the requirement to make restitution. The most well known case is that of *Zacchaeus* in Luke 19:2-10. *Zacchaeus* was convicted by the Spirit of God to make restitution. Was there a law (*Torah*) compelling him to do this? Yes, the thief is to make restitution. Did *Yeshua* quote this to *Zacchaeus*? No, He did not have to do this. The *Ruach* working with *Zacchaeus* convicted him to do what the Almighty required. He did not restore extorted tax money he had squeezed from his victims just

because the *Torah* of God *required* him to do so, although it did require him to do exactly that. *Zacchaeus* restored because the *Torah* acting in his heart (and his conscience) which could not be made clean without doing, immediately, what was necessary to clear his guilty, sinned-stained, record. *Yeshua* congratulated him: “*Today salvation has come to this home...*” (Luke 19:9) By following repentance with restitution (recompense), salvation came to the house of *Zacchaeus*.

In another, less well-known example of applying the Bible principle of restitution is found in the conversion and life of Paul, previously known as Saul of Tarsus. If you do not read the New Testament with understanding, you might miss the Truth, and wrongly conclude that Paul made no effort to compensate the victims and families of those he had put in prison or had put to death. Saul was the son of a rich Pharisee (Acts 23:6) of Tarsus who was sent to Jerusalem for an education “*at the feet of Gamaliel,*” one of the most eminent of all the rabbis and doctors of the *Torah*. Whereas some paid a great sum of money to obtain Roman citizenship, Saul was born a Roman citizen, probably through his wealthy father, Acts 22:28. Before his conversion, Saul became a brilliant rabbi and scholar of the *Torah*. Saul was a rich man educated in the best school of his day. But what happened when Saul became converted? He became a tireless evangelist, totally immersed in the Work of the Almighty. Rather than live off his means, or take tithes from the brethren, Paul often supported himself by making tents, Acts 18:3. This is the equivalent of Albert Einstein digging ditches. What happened to Paul’s money? The NT is silent, but there are important clues. Philippians 3:8 indicate that Paul divested himself: “⁸*More than that, I consider all things to be loss in comparison to the surpassing value of the knowledge of Messiah Yeshua my Lord. Because of Him I have suffered the loss of all things; and I consider them garbage in order that I might gain Messiah.*” The converted Paul got rid of his filthy lucre, and lived as a humble tentmaker. The same Spirit that motivated *Zacchaeus*, also motivated Paul to make restitution, if not to those whom he had directly harmed, then, as Numbers 6:8 states, to the Lord. Paul deserved execution for his many murders. Yet the Almighty had mercy on him. Therefore, Paul’s entire life after conversion was one of *active restitution*. He gave the rest of his life as a living sacrifice to God, and encouraged others to do likewise (See Ro. 12:1-2, Gal. 2:20). Many Christians believe that laws governing restitution are relics of the OT law that no longer apply. However, the NT tells a different story. *Zacchaeus* promised to make fourfold restitution because of his abuse of power as a “*chief tax-gatherer*” and being an oppressor of the poor (Luke 19:8). While restitution did not save him, it was evidence that he had truly repented in the way he abused his power. The Apostle Paul instructs the thief: “²⁸*The one who steals must steal no longer—instead he must work, doing something useful with his own hands, so he may have something to share with the one who has need*” (Eph. 4:28).

Restitution is one of the key doctrines of the Bible, yet so many in the Body of Believers today have never studied this subject nor realize its importance. The same Hebrew word (*shalam*) is used for both restitution and restoration in the *TNK*, e.g., “²⁵*And “I shall restore to you the years that the locust, the swarming locust, the canker-worm and the caterpillar have eaten—My great army that I sent among you” (Joel 2:25).* What a promise! I am looking forward to this being fulfilled in my life.

Repentance without restitution is like faith without works!