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# Jesus and equity in material distribution

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KEY WORDS: Jesus; equity; egalitarian; Bible; Mosaic Law.

### 1. Introduction

Whether Jesus promoted principles that might be regarded as egalitarian has caused division in contemporary Christian thought. One element in this debate relevant to the modern world is evaluated. The nature of precepts that Jesus taught is assessed, bearing on the distribution of material goods, equivalent to the term, economic distribution. Biblical interpretation and commentary on a range of Jesus' statements is reviewed that might have implications for the matter. The exegesis suggests that Jesus advocated greater equality in material distribution. This is a major principle of equity or fairness upheld by Jesus. A second aim is to ascertain whether this distributional orientation conforms to that contained in the Mosaic Law. Again, a division exists within contemporary Christian thought, an instance of which is reviewed. The conclusion is that Jesus' material distributional precepts can be construed as compatible with those of the Mosaic Law.

Theologians differ concerning the degree to which statements by Jesus can be interpreted as encouraging egalitarian tendencies. For instance, Elliott (2002) argues that Jesus was not an egalitarian, while Forrester (2001) sees Jesus' praxis as consistent with an egalitarian thrust in the Bible overall.<sup>1</sup> Partly, the disagreement stems from the particular interpreters and Biblical texts protagonists to the debate cite to support their cases and to criticise alternative readings. More importantly, the dispute revolves around the meaning of the word 'egalitarian' the different authors employ. Elliott, for example, gives certain dictionary definitions of egalitarian etc from 1944 to 1989, but in his subsequent discussion of Biblical texts, it is unclear which of these definitions is being applied (for example, in counterposing patriarchy against equality).

Contemporary secular debate about words such as 'egalitarian', 'equality', and 'equity' suggest that no hard and fast definitions exist for them. Each term is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional composite that gains meaning only from

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1 John Elliott, 'Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian . A Critique of an Anachronistic and Idealist Theory', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2002), 75-91. Duncan Forrester, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* (London: SCM, 2001).

the particular descriptive context in which it is employed. Thus, 'to speak of equality without qualification is to speak elliptically'.<sup>2</sup> Equality could be defined, for example, to mean that people should be treated similarly, but this does not resolve the problem, for conceptions differ concerning what 'similarly' might mean.<sup>3</sup> 'Similar' or 'equal' treatment could apply in relation to the law, political power, gender, opportunity for education, employment, income, wealth, respect, freedom, moral worth etc., but each of these qualities also requires specification. Another aspect of current debate revolves around equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome. Recognition appears to be gaining ground that the equal opportunity approach on its own can produce unforeseen inequitable results. For instance, Phillips argues that 'an initial equality of resources, combined with an equal opportunity to make what we choose of them' could produce unequal outcomes.<sup>4</sup> However, equality of outcome is also unspecific. An example of this is Miller who suggests that 'a just distribution of income would be substantially unequal, but the range of inequality would be considerably smaller than the range that now exists in almost all capitalist economies'. Because of these types of difficulties in addressing equality, Miller's summary of the present debate is that 'there is no agreed answer to the question "in what respect should people be judged more or less equal"', and this conclusion applies also 'to the question of measurement'.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, variation in meaning can exist between contexts in using even just one of the 'equal-related' terms above. The decision here is to say that a more 'egalitarian' social structure, characterised by greater equality, is one exhibiting a more even distribution of wealth as material goods between family units. Completely 'even', for instance, would mean that the value of material goods was distributed in proportion to the number of family units (appropriately defined). Each family unit would own the same percentage of the value of goods as any other. (This measure could be constrained more stringently to account for differences in family unit size, age structure etc.) Thus, a narrowly confined definition of 'egalitarian' is employed that seems necessary to avoid pitfalls that can otherwise arise with less qualified uses of the term.

Section two reviews a series of Jesus' sayings that might be construed as relating to issues of equity or principles of fairness in material distribution. Interpretation of the teachings is as given by a range of contemporary Biblical commentators. The conclusion is that Jesus *did* advocate greater equality in material distribution, as

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2 Albert Weale, 'Equality', in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* vol. 3 (ed. Edward Craig; London: Routledge, 1998), 393.

3 Thomas Nagel, 'Equality', in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (ed. Ted Honderich; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 248.

4 Ann Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 60.

5 David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 249-250; 'Equality and Inequality', in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought* (eds. William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore; Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 201.

defined here, but not extending to advocacy of a completely even distribution. A second matter assessed in section two is whether Jesus' distributional principles as deduced by the Biblical commentators can be construed as comparable to those contained in the Mosaic Law. This is not a perspective that has received much scrutiny. More typically, theologians and others have examined normative requirements for material distribution separately in the Mosaic Law (such as Soss 1973, Gottwald 1979, Kaiser 1983, Wright 1990, 1995, and Mason 1987, 1996), and in Jesus' teaching (for example, Blomberg 1999), but they do not appear to have compared them.<sup>6</sup> The comparison here suggests that Jesus' distributional advocacy is compatible with that of related intentions in the Mosaic Law.

The conclusions of section two raise a more general question canvassed in section three. This is whether Jesus' ethical teachings can be interpreted as upholding the intentions of the Mosaic Law. One view is that Jesus' ethical teachings ranged well beyond the intentions of the Mosaic Law on distributional and other matters. A prominent exponent of this perspective is James Barr, and his case is assessed in section three. This section's arguments run more in parallel with those of section two in that they are not addressed specifically to principles of economic equity but rather deal with the more general question of the compatibility of Jesus' ethical teachings with the intentions of the Law.

Material distributional tendencies promoted by the Mosaic Law are taken here as deduced by the five authors cited above who share a broadly common perspective on the matter. Neither their exegetical deductions nor the validity of their conclusions is evaluated, but accepted as an assumption for the present exercise. Their overall summary is that the distributional aims of the Law were to mitigate aspects of existing material or economic inequality between extended family units, fostering 'an egalitarian bias' in the sense used here.<sup>7</sup> As with Jesus' teachings, the Law's intentions were not toward a rigid, flat, arithmetical material equality. Rather, the aim was to maintain each extended family as economically viable, able to participate maximally in socio-religious life. A raft of measures sought to encourage this outcome. One set aimed to prevent debt, 'the greatest internal threat to the social foundation of the equality of all the Israelites'.<sup>8</sup> In

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6 Neal Soss, 'Old Testament Law and Economic Society', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 34 (1973), 323-344; Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979); Walter Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); Christopher Wright, *God's People in God's Land* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), *Walking in the Ways of the Lord* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995); John Mason, 'Biblical Teaching and Assisting the Poor', *Transformation* 4 (1987), 1-14, 'Biblical Teaching and the Objectives of Welfare Policy in the United States', in *Welfare in America: Christian Perspectives on a Policy in Crisis* (eds. S. Carlson-Thies and James Skillen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 145-185; Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Leicester: Apollos, 1999). Blomberg examines a greater range of Jesus' teachings concerning material possessions than reviewed here, considers diverse implications of this teaching, and is not focused as specifically on distributional issues.

7 Mason, 'Biblical Teaching and Assisting the Poor', 7.

8 John Hartley, *Leviticus* (Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 4. Dallas: Word, 1992), 424.

addition, 'the unnatural accumulation of wealth was kept in fairly balanced check' because land 'was the base line for the whole economy and this was shared equally' between extended family units.<sup>9</sup> Wright's summary of the Mosaic Law's distributional intentions is that 'the economic system was geared institutionally and in principle towards the preservation of a broadly based equality and self-sufficiency on the land, and to the protection of the weakest, the poorest and the threatened – and not to the interests of a wealthy, land-owning elite minority'.<sup>10</sup> These types of conclusions above conform broadly to those by other modern Old Testament scholars, such as Pleins, are less explicitly supported by others, like Albertz, but are rejected by some (for example, Barr).<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Jesus on equity in material distribution

Some of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Bible that might bear on material distribution, as interpreted by a range of Biblical commentators, are considered in this section. The discussion therefore deals primarily with various commentators' views of the texts in question rather than exegetical interpretation of the texts themselves. The issue is whether Jesus' teachings and actions conformed with, and illustrated the need for, greater equality in the distribution of material goods between family units, as defined above. Each of Jesus' statements discussed below is addressed to individual persons, groups, or humanity at large (whether just confined to Israel is not considered here). Given the socio-cultural environment of the time when Jesus is reported to have made the statements, each person described in them can be inferred as representative of extended family units, and humanity as so composed of such units. Jesus' hearers are likely to have drawn this implication, for they were more enculturated to think in family terms than in that of individual persons.

Many instances in Jesus' life would seem to support the contention that Jesus did advocate greater equality in material distribution, even though in each case, Jesus is promoting much more than just a need for greater material equality between families. For example, Matt. 19:21 has Jesus extolling the rich young man to perfection by selling all he had and giving it to the poor.<sup>12</sup> If this had occurred,

9 Kaiser, 95.

10 Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 155.

11 J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 54, 70; Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion* Vol. 1 London: SCM, 1994), 76; James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM, 1999), 237.

12 The issue of whether the 'poor' is an economic or a status concept in the Gospels is not debated here. The meaning of 'poor' is taken for each text as implied by the cited commentators. In general, their use infers a correlation between the economic poor and those of poor or low status. This is not to imply that the economically poor were materially destitute, but that relative to the rich they possessed little. Even those who view the Biblical 'poor' in terms of status or position do not deny or avoid an

the distribution of the 'all' to the poor would have resulted in a more equal distribution, as defined above. Of course, Jesus' main message in Matt. 19:21 is not commending enhanced material equality (as interpreted, for example, by Keener, Hare, Malina and Rohrbaugh), but it does include that advocacy nevertheless. To Malina and Rohrbaugh, for instance, the essence of Matthew 19:21 is that the young man's riches served as a barrier preventing loyalty to Jesus' new surrogate family, and Jesus' call to him was to make 'a sacrifice beyond measure'.<sup>13</sup> For the comparable texts of Mark 10:21 and Luke 18:22, selling all and giving to the poor in this instance is a condition for gaining 'treasure in heaven'. In Luke 12:33, Jesus instructs his disciples to 'sell your possessions, and give alms'. In these cases, selling all, and distributing it to a greater number of people (the economic and/or status poor), trend in the direction of greater equality in material distributional outcome than would prevail otherwise. This orientation is apparent also in the case of Zacchaeus, the rich chief tax collector in Luke 19:1-10 who gave half of his goods to the poor, and was prepared to restore fourfold anything he had defrauded. This gesture was extolled by Jesus as salvation on Zacchaeus' house. Certainly, Zacchaeus would still have remained a rich man, but Jesus praises Zacchaeus' action that is consistent with encouraging greater equality in material distribution – even though the story says far more than this (as per the exegeses of Just, and Stein).<sup>14</sup> Jesus' emphasis on the need for greater sharing of material goods is also crucial to criteria that will be applied to people for entering the kingdom of God at the Day of Final Judgement (Mt. 25:31-46). Here humankind will be divided into two groups, with those on Jesus' right hand entering the kingdom, 'for I was hungry and you gave me food' – again, greater distributional equality is proclaimed. The righteous on Jesus' right hand would wonder when they had ever done these things for Jesus; 'And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me"'. Exegetes disagree over who the 'least of these my brethren' were: the disadvantaged, outcast and persecuted generally, or just

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implied correlation between status and economic poverty; such as Bruce Malina, *The Social Gospel of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001, 98-101). The issue under focus here is redistribution, rather than who the poor were. As Malina has noted elsewhere ('Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament World', *Interpretation* 41[1987], 366), 'Jesus' injunction to give one's goods to the poor is about redistribution of wealth'. Bible quotations throughout this paper are from Herbert May and Bruce Metzger (eds.), *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

- 13 Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 475; Douglas Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 227; Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 123.
- 14 Arthur Just Jr., *Luke 9:51-24:53* (Concordia Commentary. St Louis: Concordia, 1997), 715-724; Robert Stein, *Luke* (The New American Commentary Vol. 24. Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 465-470.

Jesus' disciples (compare Patte with Harrington),<sup>15</sup> but this does not alter the substance of the case here. The necessary 'compassionate action toward the weak and the poor' would result in greater equality in material distribution.<sup>16</sup>

From the above New Testament (NT) texts, it does appear that Jesus upholds the precept of the Old Testament (OT) Law advocating greater equality in material distribution between family units, as interpreted by the five OT commentators above. Nevertheless, Jesus also opens up new dimensions to this norm. He amplifies and extends it, applying it in new contexts, and teaching it with a new spirit. This was a typical feature of Jesus' mission. Another instance is the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the concept of helping a 'neighbour' in the OT Law is extended beyond a fellow Israelite to anybody in need. This is not to suggest that Jesus taught *only* principles, distributional and otherwise, contained in the Mosaic Law. Jesus' main message was that he was the path to salvation. Whoever believed and had faith in him was on the road to eternal life. But to open the gate to eternal life required two things. One was to have faith in him as God's Son, as the Messiah. The other was to obey and carry out his commands. The question in focus here is whether Jesus' teachings impinging on material distribution reflected, and were consistent with, intentions embodied in the OT Law.

The case of the five interpreters of the Mosaic Law specified earlier is that the existence of wide disparities between rich and poor is contrary to an underlying intention of the Law. They do not maintain that wealth *per se* was the problem. There is no implication in their interpretations or in Jesus' teaching that the creation of wealth was undesirable; indeed, it appeared to be extolled in the Law. Unshared wealth was the problem. But Jesus also seemed to teach this particular intention in new directions and with new implications from both the Law and the prophets. He showed that the pursuit of unshared riches diverted people from seeking the kingdom of God, that it contradicted the care people should exercise for their less fortunate fellows, and that it produced a society rent by covetousness and greed.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus stressed these latter messages in many ways. One was his cautioning that the rich would find it difficult to enter the kingdom of God, that 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Mark 10:25; Matt. 19:24; Luke 18:25). Jesus said this after telling a rich young man how to win eternal life. Jesus told the man to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor so the man could follow him. Again, the implications of this story go far beyond relative riches and encouraging greater material equality, but it does that nevertheless. The choice to follow Jesus invariably involves giving up things people value, be they riches, family, fishing, collecting taxes, burying the dead, or saying goodbye

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15 Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 352; Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 358.  
16 Malina and Rohrbaugh, 151.

to those left behind (as interpreted by Keener, and Hagner).<sup>17</sup>

Jesus agonised over the unsharing rich because their wealth was a barrier against pursuing the kingdom of God. His pity and compassion extended across all economic groups, even to those with great wealth, as in 'woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation' (Luke 6:24). Jesus was showing that excessive, and therefore unshared, relative wealth produces a myopic self-oriented worldly contentment that gets in the way of commitment to God and of following God's intentions for living. In this way, Jesus was teaching the distributional principles of the Law in a new spirit. He was not merely denouncing the rich as the prophets had done. Jesus was lamenting that their relative riches obstructed his calling to them. Thus, Jesus did not condemn the rich, tax collectors, or any other sinners. Instead, he called them to return to God and his ways, and to believe in himself as the Son of God.

The ways in which unshared riches undermine the material distributional intentions underlying the Mosaic Law are explained by Jesus in the parable of the rich man and the poor man (Luke 16:19-31). Here, the rich man ends up suffering everlasting torment in Hades, while the poor man, Lazarus, is received into heaven. The evil of unsharing is one point of the parable, as interpreted by Green, and Ringe.<sup>18</sup> The relevance of Moses and the prophets in the parable is per the Mosaic Law, concerning responsibilities each person had for the wellbeing of their fellows. In the parable of Dives and Lazarus, the rich man suffers his fate because he did not ameliorate the material state of the poor man on earth. Both the lack of action by the rich man to relieve the suffering of the poor man, and the suffering of the poor man, are condemned by Jesus. Jesus was teaching that differential riches and poverty were only produced by ignoring God's norms in the Law. The unsharing rich, in the process of becoming and remaining rich, are not able to behave consistently with the intentions of the Law. Getting rich with others remaining economically poor contradicts these intentions, for it does not allow the rich to practise piety, humility and uplift of the poor. The parable suggests far more than the rich man suffering his fate only because he did not give alms to the poor man. Nor does it mean that only the 'evil' rich will suffer, those who have gained their riches through robbery or fraud. Similarly, it does not suggest that only the 'deserving' or 'moral' or 'status' poor will be rewarded. Lazarus is taken into heaven only because he was economically poor (irrespective of status), and had a life of suffering.

There is a clear theme throughout Jesus' teaching that giving is more important than receiving, that the main purpose in life is to love others as much as oneself. This love is to be action oriented, helping others practically. This message is

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17 Keener, 477-478; Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, 1995), 562.

18 Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 604-610; Sharon Ringe, *Luke* (Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 216-218.



reflected repeatedly in Jesus' sayings, from his encouragements toward greater material equality, to rendering practical aid, as in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Even Jesus' adage, 'you cannot serve God and mammon' (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13) reflects this orientation, for the pursuit of unshared wealth runs a high risk of fostering self-centred greed and the worship of money, at the expense of one's fellows (according to Keener, and Blomberg).<sup>19</sup> It can so easily lead to a denial of the Old Testament Law norm, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev. 19:18). Giving back and sharing with the poor is a message also in Jesus' teaching on inviting guests to a party (Luke 14:12-14). Do not invite your friends, brothers, relations or rich neighbours. No! Ask the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and so find happiness. Again, in the parable of the feast or Messianic banquet (Luke 14:15-24), the host instructs his servant to go out and invite 'the poor and maimed and blind and lame' when the invited guests refused to come. All the texts above encourage greater equality in material distributional outcomes than would exist otherwise. At a more fundamental level, however, they mean much more than this. Thus, Fitzmyer, and Bock suggest that the Messianic banquet parable implies Israel as the invited guests who refused to come, and the outcasts as the Gentiles who were belatedly invited.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus practised what he preached about unshared wealth. He and his disciples lived with little personal property. What they did have, they shared with each other and the socially disadvantaged. They survived from a common purse (John 12:6; 13:29), which, at times, was provided by the money of people who travelled with them (Luke 8:3). Whether Jesus came from an economically poor, or a middle income, tradesman's family is uncertain. But there is no question that he lived a lifestyle meant to show God's compassion for the economically unfortunate, as well as for those oppressed in other ways, such as by low status or illness. Jesus administered to all groups in society, including the impoverished and socially outcast. He sought out those despised by the conventional secular and religious establishment, lived in a way with which they could identify, and healed them. The oppressed saw no social barrier between themselves and Jesus. Clearly, Jesus' lifestyle aimed to show God's love for all people who were created of equal worth in his eyes. The idea of enhanced equality in material distribution is just one aspect of the care and love God intends for all people. Jesus demonstrated all aspects of God's love for all people. By his life and ministry to the oppressed,

19 Keener, 233-234; Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 124.

20 Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke Vol. 2* (The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1053; Darrell Bock, *Luke* (The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 395. As the commentators note, Luke 14: 15-24 should be viewed in the wider discussion in Judaism as to who would be found at the Messianic banquet. Thus, Craig Evans, *Luke* (New International Commentary. Peabody: Hendricksen, 1990, 10-11, 223-225, 227), discusses this matter extensively, summarising it (p. 224), that 'the parable thus refers to the great eschatological banquet when the righteous (or elect) enjoy God's fullest blessing and reward'.

Jesus embodied God's care for humankind. He was the living witness as God on earth to all God intends for people. Again, this is the application of God's equity intentions or principles of fairness in the Law but in a new spirit.

Potential inconsistencies and contradictions in Jesus' teaching on material equality can be considered. One possible discrepancy in Jesus' condemnation of excessive relative wealth and of unsharing behaviour is in the parable of the talents and the pounds (Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27). Here, the master berates the lazy servant for not investing the master's money with the bankers so the master could receive it back with interest. The servant had not done this, and further angers his master by claiming that the master is a hard man, reaping what he does not sow and gathering what he does not winnow. This 'worthless' servant is accordingly cast into 'the outer darkness' where 'men will weep and gnash their teeth' (Matt. 25:30). Ostensibly, this parable has Jesus praising personal enrichment, and rewarding those who reap what they have not sown (as well as accepting the payment of interest). The parable seems to punish those who do not enrich their masters, and reward those who do. It looks like a contradiction of Jesus' other teachings advocating greater equality in material distribution, and concern for one's fellows, as well as disconfirming such intentions of the Mosaic Law.

However, neither in conventional interpretation (such as Blomberg, Hagner, Fitzmyer, and Bock) nor in non-standard 'peasant' interpretation (reviewed in Wohlgemut)<sup>21</sup> is the message of this parable focused on money, interest or personal enrichment, just as the parable of the sower and the seed (Matt. 13:1-23; Mark 4 :3-20; Luke 8:4-15) is not on seed, sowing or farming. Conventionally, the parable of the pounds and the talents is taken to mean that each person is to use her talents or gifts for the master God's purposes rather than for personal glorification. If one does this, one's gifts expand through doing God's work. If people hide their talents and do not use them for God's work, they will be taken away, perhaps ossifying or decaying through lack of correct use, or misdirected into incorrect purpose. People's talents expand in their correct manner as they are used for God's work, which is up to each person to discover in cooperation with God. This interpretation also implies that when a person is asked to do something by God, she is expected to carry it out to the best of her ability. God's criterion of judgement is not the extent to which the person succeeds in the task, but the motive or spirit with which she undertakes it.

To suggest that the parable of the talents showed that Jesus favoured the payment of interest (Matt. 25:27) and therefore contradicted the Mosaic Law,<sup>22</sup> is to misread the purpose of Jesus' parables. A parable reveals its message under the

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21 Blomberg, *Matthew*, 375; Hagner, 737; Fitzmyer, 1232-1233; Bock, 477-478; Joel Wohlgemut, 'Entrusted Money (Matt. 25: 14-28)', in *Jesus and His Parables* (ed. V. George Shillington; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 103-120.

22 As per James Barr, *Explorations in Theology 7: The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1980), 92.

guise of another suggestively similar situation, it explains something in terms of something else. The actual descriptive narrative of the parable need be no more than a vehicle for the real message that may be a moral or spiritual argument.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the person telling a parable may even describe situations or use terms he does not like to get his message across. They are merely situations and terms with which his listeners are familiar. Jesus himself did this at times. For example, in the parable of the waiting householder, Jesus likens God to a 'thief' who comes when he is not expected (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39). In the parable of the unjust steward, 'the master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness' (Luke 16:8). Again, in Luke's version of the parable of the talents (Luke 19:11-27), the master was 'hated' by his citizens. They were ultimately rewarded by being slain in the master's presence. It would be mistaken to conclude that Jesus approved of hard men, slaughter, burglary, dishonesty, torture (in the *New English Bible's* version of Matt. 18:34), beating (Luke 12:48), or self-mutilation (Matt. 5:29; 18:8-9), just because Jesus does not condemn, and therefore appears to implicitly approve, these modes of behaviour. Jesus was not moralising on the detail making up the narratives of his parables. The point of Jesus' parables is not to interpret them at face value but to discern their underlying message or moral; they are a challenge to understanding, to organising and transforming situations.<sup>24</sup> So, when Jesus has the master in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:27) admonishing the 'wicked' servant for not having invested his money at interest, Jesus was not implicitly accepting the morality of interest, any more than he accepted the morality of human slaughter or burglary.

A second possible inconsistency in Jesus' teachings advocating greater material equality might be in Jesus' statement, 'you always have the poor with you' (Matt. 26:11; Mark 14:7; John 12: 8). Jesus might seem to be inferring that there will always be rich and poor, even when the kingdom of God comes, or irrespective of any measures taken to rectify the material situation of the poor. In this sense, as Sloyan points out, Jesus' statement 'has paradoxically become a watchword of callousness'.<sup>25</sup> Even Christians use this saying to support that Jesus teaches the poor will always exist.<sup>26</sup> However, it is possible that Jesus means

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23 Peter Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1999), 21-22; V. George Shillington, 'Engaging with the Parables', in *Jesus and His Parables*, 16; John Sider, *Interpreting the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 84.

24 David Gowler, *What Are they Saying About the Parables?* (New York: Paulist, 2000).

25 Gerard Sloyan, *John* (Interpretation Commentary. Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 153.

26 This interpretation might be consolidated by Dt. 15:11, that 'the poor will never cease out of the land'. Dt. 15:11 might appear to contradict Dt. 15:4, 'there will be no poor among you 'if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God'. Contemporary commentators do not view them as contradictory. For Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary. Leicester: Apollos, 2002, 259-261), Dt. 15:4 sets out the ideal that would be achieved if God's commands were followed. Dt. 15:11 describes the imperfect reality that is achieved. Similarly, Duane Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9* (Revised Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 6A. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001, 313), and Jeffrey Hamilton, *Social Justice and*

something different here. The alternative reading might be reflected in most widely used translations of the Bible, such as the *Revised Standard Version*, *New Jerusalem*, *King James*, and *New English*. None of these render the texts above as 'you will always have the poor with you'. The present tense of 'you have' is the correct translation from the original Greek. Jesus may well be talking in the present tense, relating to the social environment of his day. He may well be saying to his disciples that the poor are with you always 'and whenever you will, you can do good to them' (Mark 14:7). In a somewhat related manner, Mann suggests that 'the possibility exists that this was a Markan contribution in the distress of his own times and of his own community'.<sup>27</sup> The expression of John 12:8 in the *RSV* captures this intent well: 'the poor you always have with you'. The 'always' cannot be interpreted in the context of the above texts to mean that the poor will exist forever. The Greek word translates as 'always', 'at each moment', 'habitually', 'continuously'. The meaning of Jesus' statement could be that the poor are all around Jesus and his disciples constantly, all the time, habitually, they are everywhere. Admittedly, most exegetes do not interpret Matt. 26:11, Mark 14:7, and John 12:8 in these terms. They apply the 'always' to the future when Jesus' disciples will not have his physical presence (such as Whitacre). Mally puts it that Jesus contrasts his own fleeting presence among men with the inevitable continuance of poverty.<sup>28</sup> However, Jesus was also responding in these texts to the disciples' advocacy of donating the monetary proceeds from selling the ointment to the poor. In Mark 14:7, for example, Jesus answers this demand with, 'whenever you will, you can do good to them', inferring that he also advocates monetary distribution to the poor, but not in this particular instance. The texts do not tell against Jesus encouraging greater material equality, whether Jesus thought the poor would exist forever or not. Advocating greater material equity is consistent with the permanent existence of an economically poor stratum this side of the kingdom of God on earth.

Another indirect and tortured interpretation against Jesus' encouragement of greater material equality on earth might be inferred from his aphorism, 'render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' (Matt. 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25). This might be portrayed as Jesus making a distinction between people's activities on earth and their obligations to God. Perhaps these are two separate and disconnected spheres of human behaviour. In this viewpoint, as long as people paid their taxes and fulfilled their obligations to their earthly rulers, and their spiritual obligations to God, the equity basis

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*Deuteronomy* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992). Neither do the five OT interpreters taken here as summarising the Law's equity intentions view Dt. 15:11 as contradicting their overall assessment of the Law to encourage greater material equity.

27 C. S. Mann, *Mark* (The Anchor Bible. Garden City: Doubleday, 1986), 557.

28 Rodney Whitacre, *John* (The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. Downers Grove: IVP, 1999); Edward Mally, 'The Gospel According to Mark', in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (eds. Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), 53.

of people's material situation on earth is of no concern to God. This is a far-fetched interpretation of Jesus' saying that would be inconsistent with the case advocated here.

Standard interpretations of Matt. 22:21, Mark 12:17 and Luke 20:25 (such as by Keener, Patte, Fitzmyer, and Just) support the case here.<sup>29</sup> In the saying about Caesar, Jesus is emphasising the need to give to God all that comes from God: people's lives, talents, commitment, priorities, time and fruits of production. Caesar can have what is left – which, to Jesus, should be nothing of any value to God. The issue is between two separate kingships. Money and coinage are used by Jesus as a metaphor to represent one of the things of little value to God. Produced by Caesar, money and coinage can be returned to him. Jesus had already taught that no man can serve two masters in 'you cannot serve God and mammon' (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). To him, there was only one master, God, and all competing masters were of lesser account, whether Caesar, money, possessions or family. This interpretation does not deny that people have duties to both God and man. There is no question that people have spiritual and earthly responsibilities, but they are dependent on each other rather than being mutually exclusive. Being a Christian does not excuse people from having responsibilities to one's fellows.

In summary, this section suggests that Jesus in his teaching about diverse subjects incorporated advocacy of greater equality in material distributional outcomes between family units. Certainly, greater equality in distributional outcome was not the major or only orientation in the Biblical texts attributed to Jesus analysed above, but it was that alignment nonetheless. Jesus' advocacy of greater equality was there but not necessarily as the most important theme. His teaching encompassed a multitude of subjects, and his advice to the rich invariably exposed the dangers they faced in attaining the kingdom of heaven. Nevertheless, in each of Jesus' texts cited above, one implication is the necessity for the rich to share with the poor. This would have the effect of producing greater equality between family units in the distribution of wealth – thereby conforming to the Mosaic Law intention under focus, as interpreted by the five OT exegetes cited above.

### 3. Jesus and the ethical intentions of the Mosaic Law

The previous section leads to a reasonable presumption that Jesus taught and lived the intentions of the Law encouraging greater equality in material distribution, even though he interpreted them in new ways. Presumably, it would have not meant a great deal to Jesus' listeners in the context of his time for him to berate people for not practising the detail of the Law's measures relating to material distribution. By Jesus' time, none of those measures were followed, and most had probably been long forgotten by most people. The socio-economic structures of Jesus' day were inimical to the practice of those principles. For example, most

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29 Keener, 525-526; Patte, 309-310; Fitzmyer, 1293; Just, 773.

peasant farmers were tenants of private (often absentee) landlords not trustee landholders/'owners' in perpetuity, as in Mosaic Law times.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, the Mosaic Law measures governing land holding could not have been applied without enormous social, economic and religious reform. Nevertheless, Jesus applied the Law's equity intentions to certain concrete situations. But there was no practical possibility of Jesus demonstrating how all the Law's equity (or other) intentions might be applied in all contexts facing people at the time (let alone in other times and places). This section discusses the wider but parallel issue to the matters raised in section two of the extent to which Jesus' teachings conform to the ethical intentions of the Law, via assessing the views of James Barr.

Not all Christians are convinced that Jesus unwaveringly promoted such intentions in the Law *per se*. For example, Wilson holds that 'questions of wealth distribution are not addressed in the teaching of Christ'.<sup>31</sup> This view is not supported by the analysis in section two. Another critic is James Barr who holds that in contradistinction to the 'strong eudaemonistic element' in 'many parts of the Old Testament' – one certainly upheld in the Mosaic Law – in Jesus' ethical teaching 'these considerations are greatly minimized'.<sup>32</sup> Barr illustrates his contention with two examples, one relating to the emphasis on family cohesion in the Old Testament, the other to the reward of wealth to great men like Abraham and Job. If these examples are taken to be underlying intentions of the Old Testament, then, according to Barr, Jesus did not uphold them. However, the reward of wealth to particular God-fearing men cannot be regarded as a normative intention or principle of the Old Testament as a whole, and much less of the Law itself. More examples than Abraham and Job are reported in the Old Testament of wealth accruing to those who did not follow God. For instance, the psalmist and the early prophets frequently lament of the rich who persecute the poor, and cry for God's deliverance for the poor. Again, there are God-fearing men in the Old Testament, such as Moses or Joshua, who are never reported as becoming rich. Further, God-fearing men like David and Solomon, became rich by flouting the Law's precepts. There is just no consistency throughout the Old Testament of the relation between acquiring wealth and fearing God. A theological prosperity doctrine applied in the Law only to the whole Israelite society, rather than to individuals within it, in so far as that society was obedient to God and his raft of rules making up the Law. The five OT interpreters used here suggest that the eudaemonistic or welfare-enhancing nature of the Law discriminated against the rich and in favour of the poor. Section two argued that

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30 On the New Testament situation, see Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 1997), 67; Robert Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1994), 48; Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (London, SCM, 1976), 147.

31 Rodney Wilson, *Economics, Ethics and Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 72.

32 James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 17.

Jesus taught that individual riches can become a stumbling block to obedience to God, but they were not in themselves intrinsically so as long as the riches were shared.

The second of Barr's examples above of Jesus' ethical teaching supposedly contradicting the eudaemonistic element of the Old Testament Law is in relation to the family. Evidence for this is that Jesus taught that 'the family is a threat to one's obedience to God' and 'one has to be ready to drop one's obligations to it'.<sup>33</sup> Barr does not cite the Biblical texts to which he is referring, but presumably, he implies Matt. 10:34-37, Luke 12:51-53, and perhaps Luke 21:16. Nor does Barr provide exegetical analysis or evidence to support his judgments. As with the wealth of Abraham and Job, Barr gives only his own interpretation. As well, he appears to take individual texts in isolation, rather than assessing them in relation to other texts. On this basis, one could cite Matt. 7:9-11 as evidence that Jesus underlined the necessity for good parental care, Mark 14:36 and Matt. 21:28-31 that Jesus stressed the necessity of obedience of sons to fathers, and Luke 18:15-17 that Jesus valued children. Each of these texts is saying much more than these things alone.

According to common Biblical interpretation of Matt. 10:34-37, for instance, (as per Hagner, and Blomberg) – one text to which Barr presumably refers – Jesus was showing that anything could become a barrier to commitment to God.<sup>34</sup> Any form of idolatry could perform this function, including the family. Jesus was not commenting on the eudaemonistic value of family life so emphasised in the Old Testament. He was showing, contrary to any surface meaning of the words of the relevant Old Testament Laws concerning the value of family, that loyalty to the triune God came first – which is exactly what the Law said anyway. A standard commentary puts it for Matt. 10:34-37 that 'if the gospel introduces a division into families, then the disciple has no choice except to prefer the new community to the community of blood'.<sup>35</sup> Jesus was not saying, 'the family is a threat to one's obedience to God', but that it could be. There is no contradiction between Jesus' message here and the Law. Indeed, Jesus held the family in high regard. Francis points out that a pattern emerges in Jesus teaching 'whereby the obligations of family life are both affirmed and transformed' implying 'a certain radical critique of normative patriarchal structures'.<sup>36</sup> From a feminist theological perspective, Jacobs-Malina suggests that Jesus actually embodies the lynch pin of family life, that 'the image of Jesus presented in the gospels finds as its closest analogy the idealized role of the wife/mother as was established in the world of Jesus'.<sup>37</sup>

33 Ibid.

34 Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, 1993), 291-293; Blomberg, 181.

35 John McKenzie, 'The Gospel According to Matthew', in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 81.

36 James Francis, 'Children and Childhood in the New Testament', in *The Family in Theological Perspective* (ed. Stephen Barton; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 81.

37 D. Jacobs-Malina, *The Images of Family in Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 2.

There is no doubt that Jesus reinterpreted the Law, but the question is whether his re-interpretations changed the intentions of the Law. Barr thinks that Jesus did so. In a third example of his approach here, Barr points to Jesus' emphasis (in Matt. 5:21) that judgement falls on those who kill as well as on those who are angry. Since the Law is silent about God's judgement falling on those who are angry with another person, Barr takes this as evidence 'that Jesus in his teaching is not bound and controlled by these laws and goes far beyond them; the law does not constitute the basis and authority of his teaching'.<sup>38</sup> Contra Barr, it is not hard to read into Jesus' Matt. 5:21 statement a valid understanding of the Law's purposes, because numerous regulations of the Law condemned that to which anger leads, including killing. People do not murder (wars and pathology aside) unless they are angry; people do not fight physically and injure unless they are angry, a son does not strike his father except in anger, nor curse him, and so on. The list of such rules in the Law is extensive, but they all presuppose anger on the part of the offender. An underlying or implicit motive being condemned in these regulations is anger toward another person. It is not the case, as Barr argues, that Jesus proclaims 'a spiritual meaning' of the Law while denying its 'literal meaning', or that Jesus 'spiritualized' the Law's commands.<sup>39</sup> In Matt. 5:21, Jesus is proclaiming one of the Law's intentions which is to avoid becoming angry with another person. There is no need to hold with Barr that 'a new factor, other than the scriptural text, has gained authority and begun to determine the meaning'.<sup>40</sup> Any text, scriptural or otherwise, has to be interpreted to discern its meaning. In the context where Jesus lived, the motive of anger in killing was clear-cut. Jesus is concerned with the motive of people's actions more than with their result. It is curious Barr takes this line in relation to the interpretation of Matt. 5:21, because elsewhere, he illustrates for many texts in the Bible that their 'purport is something quite other than its surface meaning' implies.<sup>41</sup>

The mode of interpretation advocated here for Matt. 5:21 is supported by a variety of Biblical commentators. For instance, Keener objects to the depiction of Jesus' sayings in Matt. 5:21-48 as antitheses; rather Jesus is 'interpreting as a good Jewish scholar of his day would', a view supported by Gundry.<sup>42</sup> In Keener's view, describing them as antitheses indicates that 'prior theological commitments rather than solid exegesis' serve as the interpretive criterion. (Interestingly, Keener points out that the 5:21-48 'passage uses a weak form of "but" that often even means "and"'.) The motive or intention of the act of killing is the essential point of Matt. 5:21. Keener puts it that 'this text addresses not

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38 Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*, 15.

39 *Ibid.*, 15; James Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 121.

40 Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*, 15.

41 James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973), 55-57.

42 Keener, 181; Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 83.



just how one acts but who one is, that is, one's character the kind of heart that generates such behavior'. The intention of the Law is crucial, for 'God never wanted people merely to obey rules; he wanted them to be holy as he is, to value what he values'. Just as the Law eschewed anger, so 'Jesus' prohibition of acting in anger is a general principle'.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, to Hagner, the point of Matt. 5:21 'is that anger, as the root of murder, deserves in principle the same penalty' as murder. Thus, 'Jesus' teachings penetrate to the divinely intended (i.e. the teleological) meaning of the law', so that 'the ethical teaching of Jesus the Messiah is nothing other than the true meaning of the Torah'.<sup>44</sup>

Barr gives a fourth example of Jesus supposedly going beyond the Law's underlying intentions.<sup>45</sup> This is Jesus' statement in Matt. 5:38, 'You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil'. (Jesus was citing the expressions of *lex talionis* from Ex. 21:23-24, Lev. 24:19-20, and Dt. 19:21.) According to Barr, 'the ancient law says one thing, but Jesus says another; what he says is not identical with what the ancient law had said'. Only on a surface or mechanistic reading can it be said that Jesus' statement differs from the intention of the *lex talionis* expression in the context of the Law as a whole. Certainly, Jesus' statement is 'not identical' with the *lex talionis* expressed in the Law texts above. However, it can be debated whether Jesus actually contradicts the intentions of the Law underlying those expressions. At the least, the exegetical discussion that has ranged over this issue needs to be reviewed, which Barr does not do, and its modern version is surveyed briefly below. The problem with Barr's judgement is that the *lex talionis* expressed in the Law texts above cannot necessarily be regarded as a summary of the Law's approach to wrongdoing, much less of its intentions governing rectification where the Law's regulations were broken. Barr has not made an analysis of the content, intentions or principles of the Law, and mistakenly appears to assume that the *lex talionis* expression expresses the mode of dealing with people who broke the Law. Barr has taken one text (Ex. 21:23-24, Lev. 24:19-20, and Deut. 19:21) from the umpteen that constitute 'the ancient law', and presented it as though it were some sort of summation of the Law's method of dealing with wrongdoing, against which to pit Jesus' Matt. 5:38 statement. Again, this reflects Barr's approach of quoting individual Biblical texts without reference to other exegetical discussion of their meaning. Instead, he presents his own interpretation of the texts as a summary of some underlying purpose, design or teleology inherent in particular segments of scripture.

The problems in Barr's rendition above revolve around the intentions of the Law affecting wrongdoing or breaking the Law's codes. It is not the place here to analyse those intentions in general. Biblical exegetes and a long line of analysts,

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43 Keener, 182-183.

44 Hagner, 116, 106, 109.

45 Barr, *Beyond Fundamentalism*, 9.

from Daube through Kaiser to Wright have pursued this task.<sup>46</sup> The focus here has been to start from certain stated intentions of the Law relating to distributional aspects of socio-economic life, and to consider whether Jesus' teaching conformed to these particular intentions of the Law. However, something needs to be said about the intentions of the Law relating to dereliction, because Barr's claim above either stands or falls by it. A starting point is to note the numerous instances in the Law where the *lex talionis* expressions of Ex. 21:23-24, Lev. 24:19-20, and Deut. 19:21 did not apply. For example, in Ex. 21:18, when men quarrel and one injures the other but the injured party recovers, the perpetrator was to pay for the loss of the injured man's time. There was no 'wound for wound' of Ex. 21:23-24. Again, in Ex. 21:12, if a man kills another man via God letting the victim 'fall into' the murderer's hand, the murderer could flee to a place of safety. There was no 'life for life' of Ex. 21:23-24. So many exceptions existed in the Law to the *lex talionis* statements that it is hardly worth listing them. This raises the question why all the exceptions occurred. Was the Law self-contradictory, or did the exceptions reflect some other motive?

As is well known, the *lex talionis* principle was not unique to ancient Israel, but existed in the Code of Hammurabi, Middle Assyrian Laws, and Roman Law, although its application varied widely between these states. For Israel, most Biblical commentators argue that the purpose of dealing with infringements to the Mosaic Law was to ensure 'commensurate punishment for a crime', that 'retribution was to be fair, not arbitrary'.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, the *lex talionis* of the Mosaic Law is often regarded by exegetes as having functioned as a guide, not to be applied literally (except for murder) or intended for personal vengeance, and to operate only in the legal sphere where restitution was usually met by some form of compensation.<sup>48</sup> This latter view is reinforced by practice of *lex talionis* in other ancient Near Eastern societies.<sup>49</sup>

On the basis of these types of views, Jesus, as the sole authoritative interpreter of the Law, is seen by a variety of Biblical exegetes in Matt. 5:38, as taking the intentions of *lex talionis* one step further. From its origin as unbridled extra-legal revenge, through literal legal retribution, to legal non-literal compensation, Jesus takes *lex talionis* further in a positive direction (that for which it was intended) to the 'overcoming of force'. Hare expresses it that *lex talionis*, having moved from a 'strict' or literal interpretation to money compensation, is taken by Jesus in Matt. 5:38 to a 'love' compensation.<sup>50</sup> Jesus' substitution is by far the more

46 D. Daube, *Studies in Biblical Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947); Kaiser, 1983; Wright, 1990, 1995.

47 Mark Rooker, *Leviticus* (The New American Commentary. Vol. 3A. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 297, 298.

48 Erhard Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 366.

49 Baruch Levine, *Leviticus* (The JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society, 1989), 269.

50 Hare, 55; Also, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 330.

radical. Even Jesus' statements in Luke 6:31 and Matt. 7:12, 'as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them', might be thought of as reinterpreting *lex talionis* from the negative to the positive context. Jesus' inversion (exemplified in Matt. 5:38 and following) places the emphasis on right doing to others, not retaliating in vengeance to wrongdoing. In this, Jesus was only reiterating an underlying intention of the Law; 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev. 19:18). As the previous section notes, the five cited OT commentators suggest that specific socio-economic institutional constraints were contained in the Law in an effort to articulate the Lev. 19:18 intention in the material distributional sphere of Israel's life. Returning to Matt. 5:38, however, Jesus is interpreted by Keener as calling on his followers to transcend the previous modes of expression of *lex talionis* because they 'must be so secure' in their 'status before God' that they 'can dispense with human honor'.<sup>51</sup> In similar vein, Long puts it that the Law 'set human society on a trajectory of moderation and restraint, and, now, Jesus brings that curve to its logical destination'.<sup>52</sup> Although Jesus formally abrogates *lex talionis* in a literal sense, he actually intensifies its application, for Jesus 'is establishing a new covenant in which God's law is internalized in a way that prevents it from being fully encapsulated in a list of rules and that precludes perfect obedience'.<sup>53</sup> In this manner, Jesus' antitheses of Matt. 5:21-48 oppose 'not so much the law itself but a shallow and inadequate understanding of what the commandment entails' and 'penetrates to the deeper spirit of the law'.<sup>54</sup> Certainly, it might be possible to contend with all these cited exegetical interpretations of Matt. 5:38, but they have to be argued with, not ignored, as Barr (1984) did in relation to exegetical discussion of the issue at the time when he wrote.

In sum, the four examples given by Barr above of Jesus allegedly going well outside the intentions of the Law are not convincing. His exegesis of each of the relevant texts is not compelling in so far as no analytical apparatus is used to establish his interpretations, nor are any Biblical exegetes cited by Barr to support his interpretations. It is not being argued here that all Jesus' teachings represent his re-interpretations of the Law, as though the Law controlled his teachings absolutely. This issue is not the purpose of this paper and has not been examined here – nor has it by Barr. (Nor, indeed, by Barton when he claims that 'the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels are for the most part not an interpretation of Old Testament texts at all, not even ostensibly so'.<sup>55</sup>) What is claimed here (and by Kaiser et al.<sup>56</sup>) is that where Jesus dealt with the Law, he reinterpreted its underlying intentions in completely new ways but consistently with those

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51 Keener, 198.

52 Thomas Long, *Matthew* (Westminster: John Knox, 1997), 62.

53 Blomberg, 1992, 113.

54 Hagner, 1993, 112.

55 John Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter* (London, SPCK, 1997), 103.

56 Walter Kaiser Jr., P. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and M. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1996).

intentions. To note with Barr that Jesus 'seldom' took 'an Old Testament passage' and expounded it,<sup>57</sup> as though this demonstrates that Jesus overlooked the intentions of the Law, is to miss the point of Jesus' teachings. Jesus used all sorts of approaches, including parables, to get his message across. Despite Barr's assertion that 'pre-existing scripture is not the criterion for the truth of a parable,'<sup>58</sup> he does not in any way demonstrate this proposition, and the contention is debatable anyway. For example, what does Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan illustrate if not Lev. 19:18, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself'? Nevertheless, any intention or principle embodied in the Law or reinterpreted by Jesus can only be applied in specific contexts, today's being different from Old and New Testament times. Empirical detail confronting people in their own day and age becomes relevant. People have to make the interpretation and application, in which Christians may disagree among themselves.

#### 4. Conclusion

Two matters have been considered in this paper. First, Jesus' reported sayings bearing on material distribution, interpreted by a range of Biblical exegetes, were canvassed. The question was whether Jesus could be construed as teaching distributional precepts embodying a specifically defined egalitarian tendency. This was answered in the affirmative – Jesus did advocate greater material equality as defined. However, in each of the texts examined, Jesus conveys far more in so far as the material outcome grew out of the correct spiritual relationship with God. Blomberg puts it that right discipleship produces a stewardship of material possessions oriented toward greater distributional equality.<sup>59</sup>

The second matter was whether Jesus' encouragement toward egalitarian material distributional outcomes can be regarded as consistent with precepts contained in the Mosaic Law. The Law's purposes on this matter were taken as summarised by a selection of Old Testament scholars. This question was also answered in the affirmative with the qualification that Jesus amplified the Law's intentions on equity issues. Current Christian opinion is divided on both scores. Evaluating contrary viewpoints in both controversies was not pursued here. A counter perspective was assessed only in relation to a more general and parallel issue, encompassing the second matter. This broader issue was the evidence provided by James Barr that Jesus' ethical teaching ranged well beyond the intentions of the Mosaic Law. Examination of Barr's evidence suggests that his case is unpersuasive.

The conclusion is of a solid consistency between Jesus' teaching and the Law intention in question – the necessity for greater equality in material distributional outcomes between family units. This verdict may be fair warrant that this

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57 Barr, 1984, 12.

58 Ibid.

59 Blomberg, 1999, 126-127.

dimension of equality carries continuing and enduring normative weight for believers and the church, and that it provides a guide for humankind at large in so far as the church is the precursor of God's reign. This view is consistent with other recent Christian examinations of equality, such as Bauckham, Hicks, and also Forrester to whom 'the narrative framework of the Bible suggests that equality is the original, the final, and the proper condition for human beings'.<sup>60</sup> Elliott, on the other hand and as noted, argues that Jesus was not an egalitarian. However, neither Elliott's nor Forrester's conceptions of equality are restricted to material distribution, they are not identical to each other, nor are they precisely prescribed or specifically defined, and therefore they are not used consistently by each author. As stated at the beginning of this paper, equality is a phenomenon constituted by diverse attributes, and no one element can serve to encapsulate all its characteristics, issues well canvassed in recent secular discussions of equality. Since this is the case, posing a blanket term, such as 'egalitarian', and then asking how and whether particular segments of the Bible (such as Jesus' sayings) measure up to this composite term, is unlikely to yield determinate results.

### Abstract

Contemporary Christian thought is divided on the issue whether Jesus promoted egalitarian principles. Partly, disagreement stems from differences in how terms such as 'egalitarian', 'equality' and 'equity' are understood. Defining egalitarian only in relation to material or economic distribution, Jesus' statements as interpreted by a range of biblical commentators uphold the conclusion that Jesus did encourage greater equality in material distribution. This support conforms to certain principles or intentions underlying the Mosaic Law, as interpreted by a selection of cited scholars. The case of one theologian, James Barr, maintaining that Jesus' ethical teachings ranged well beyond the intentions of the Mosaic Law is found to be unsupported by Barr's evidence, and unsustainable concerning matters of equity or principles of fairness in material distribution.

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60 Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Douglas Hicks, *Inequality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Forrester, 82.