

The Vision of Deuteronomy 15 with Regard to Poverty, Socialism, and Capitalism

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Economic growth in the twenty-first century offers the possibility to eliminate extreme poverty in the world. This article argues that such a wonderful achievement would not contradict the vision of Deuteronomy 15:11 because the verse should be understood as referring to relative poverty, which, the verse maintains will always remain in the world. On the other hand, the eradication of extreme poverty in the world conforms to the vision of Deuteronomy 15:4 that there could be no poor from an absolute perspective. Thus, the vision of Deuteronomy 15 with regard to poverty is a potential world where relative poverty exists but not absolute poverty. This vision is in harmony with the capitalist system, which promotes economic growth but does not aim for absolute equality.

In a recent fascinating book, Jeffrey Sachs (2005) has argued that extreme poverty in the world can be eliminated by the year 2025. Sachs (20) defines extreme poverty as a situation where “households cannot meet basic needs for survival”; for example, “they are “chronically hungry” and lack “basic articles of clothing, such as shoes.” Sachs distinguishes extreme poverty from moderate poverty wherein a person’s basic needs are met, but just barely. This is based on the World Bank’s measurement of the number of people whose income is under one dollar a day (from a purchasing power parity [PPP] perspective) as opposed to the number of people whose income is between one dollar and two dollars a day. A person is considered in extreme poverty if his or her income is below one dollar a day, while those people whose income is between one dollar and two dollars a day are considered to be in moderate poverty.

Chen and Ravallion (2004) estimate that in 2001 in the developing world there were approximately 1.1 billion people in extreme poverty and 1.6 billion people in moderate poverty.¹ However, this enormous figure masks the substantial progress in reducing extreme poverty in recent times. Chen and Ravallion estimate that from 1981 to 2001, the number of people who are considered to be extremely poor in the world has declined from 1.5 billion to 1.1 billion, due mostly to the huge decline in poverty in China (422 million) and a large decline in poverty in India (23 million). However, in some areas, there was an increase in extreme poverty; for example, in Eastern Europe (14 million), in Latin America (14 million), and most significantly, in Africa where the number of people living in extreme poverty almost doubled from 163 million to 313 million.

This overall reduction in the number of poor people living in extreme poverty in the world has encouraged Sachs to argue that if the richer countries would offer financial assistance to the poorer countries to enable the poorer countries to get their “feet on the ladder of development” then the ensuing economic growth would lift all the poor people in the world out of the dire straits of extreme poverty by the year 2025. Furthermore, if this goal can be attained, then it can also be envisioned that if economic growth would continue, then even moderate poverty could be stamped out in the world. While the actualization of this noble goal remains in doubt, just the possibility of ending poverty in the world raises the question of whether such an outcome contradicts Deuteronomy 15:11, which records:

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.²

This question is not just theoretical but also textual because the biblical text itself, just seven verses earlier, postulates that it is possible that there could be a world with no poor people, as Deuteronomy 15:4 states:

There shall be no needy among you—since the Lord your God will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion.

What is the vision of Deuteronomy 15 with regard to poverty—a world that is always doomed to have poor people or a world with no poverty?

This article will examine various approaches to understanding the apparent contradiction between Deuteronomy 15:4 and Deuteronomy 15:11. It will be argued that the contradiction can be best explained by taking into consideration the difference between absolute poverty and relative poverty: Deuteronomy 15:4 refers to the case of absolute poverty, while Deuteronomy 15:11 refers to

the case of relative poverty. With this understanding, Deuteronomy 15:11, would not preclude the eradication of extreme and moderate poverty in the world, but it would reject the idea of universal communism/socialism of complete equality in the world.

Four Approaches to Understanding Deuteronomy 15:4 and 11

One popular approach to understanding Deuteronomy 15:4 and 11 by commentators both medieval and modern is that 15:4 refers to an ideal state where the people are obedient to the law, while 15:11 refers to the realistic state that there will always be poor people. For example, Wright (1996, 189) explains:³

Verses 4–6 portray an ideal situation: an Israel so rejoicing in God’s blessing that they fully obey God’s law, and thereby enjoy further blessing in a mutually reinforcing cycle of gift and response. In such a context, there need be no poverty.... Verses 7–11, on the other hand, are based on the equally characteristic Deuteronomic awareness that Israel would not fully obey God in the socioeconomic realm, and therefore those verses build their exhortation on the realistic assumption that there will be those who need special care and attention in society because of hardship and need.

This dichotomy between idealism and reality is not satisfactory. If Deuteronomy 15:11 is written from the realistic perspective that there will never be a period of full obedience to God and, hence, that there will never cease to be needy ones, then Deuteronomy 15:4 will never be fulfilled. Thus, this approach implies that the vision of Deuteronomy 15 contradicts Sachs’ goal of eliminating poverty in the world. Another difficulty with the dichotomy between idealism and realism is that Deuteronomy 15:4 is a motive statement for people to remit loans in the seventh year and that the remitting of loans will not cause one to become poor. However, a theoretical blessing that will never occur will not inspire people to remit loans. In addition, if poverty is the result of people’s sin, then the approach stigmatizes the poor: They are sinners. Accordingly, this would discourage people from lending to the poor, which contradicts the intent of Deuteronomy 15:11.

A second approach to understanding the verses is that they have a different geographical perspective; 15:4 is referring to the land of Israel where poverty could be eliminated, while 15:11 is referring to the rest of the world where there would always be poverty. Miller (1990, 137) writes:

Verse 11a should be translated, “For the poor will never cease *off the earth*.” As verse 4 has indicated, in a land enriched by God’s blessing and filled with those who obey the Lord’s instruction, there will be no poor. That word is to be taken seriously. Equally serious and realistic is the awareness that such conditions do not operate throughout the world.

With this understanding, the vision of Deuteronomy 15 only accords with Sachs’ goal in the land of Israel, but in the remainder of the world, the vision contradicts the goal of eradicating poverty. However, Hamilton (1992) rejects this distinction. He points out that Deuteronomy 15:11 is part of a section that begins with 15:7, which is intended to be a contrasting example to 15:4. Thus, he argues that both verses are referring to the identical geographical area, and Hamilton concludes (222), “the land in 15:11 cannot be other than a reference to Israel.”

A third approach to understanding these verses is to argue that 15:11 does not really mean that there will always be poor people. Friedman (2003, 614) writes:

It seems to me that the problem arises because everyone takes the verse to mean that there will never stop being indigent people. But it simply says “there won’t stop.” I take that to mean that poverty will not just come to a stop on its own one day—without any actions by humans.... The statements here (15:11) and in 15:4 are consistent: there will be no poverty only if people act to end it.

This reading means that Deuteronomy 15 fully accords with the goal of eliminating poverty in the world. This reading, however, is difficult even following Friedman’s translation of the verse 15:11, which is that “there won’t stop being an indigent in the land” because the verse still means that there will always be poor people. In his commentary, Friedman adds the qualifying phrase “without any actions by humans,” but this is not in the text.

A new and fourth approach to understanding Deuteronomy 15:4 and 11 is that the apparent contradiction between the verses can be resolved by taking into account the difference between the terms *absolute poverty* and *relative poverty*. Extreme poverty and moderate poverty are both examples of defining the term *poverty* from an absolute perspective,⁴ but poverty can also be defined from a relative perspective—that some people have less income than others. Many governments use this relative perspective to determine the poverty line in their countries. For example, in modern-day Israel, the poverty line is 50 percent of the median income of the country.

The Economist (2005) presents a fascinating example of the concepts of relative and absolute poverty. The journal compared two different individuals: an unemployed person living in America who receives \$521 a month from government assistance to a surgeon in the Congo whose salary is \$250 a month but who can earn another \$400 by working extra hours. While these two people had similar incomes, from a relative perspective, the unemployed person is considered to be poor in America where the median income is \$3,400, while the surgeon is considered to be well off in the Congo. However, from an absolute perspective, the poor in America live better than the surgeon. For example, the surgeon's house does not have running water, has electricity maybe twice a week, and has no air conditioning. In America 75 percent of the poor households have air conditioning.

These two definitions of poverty lead to different implications as to whether a society can eliminate poverty. For example, if the standard of absolute poverty is one dollar a day, and the standard of relative poverty is an income less than 50 percent of the median income of the country, then it is possible that there could be no poor people from an absolute perspective because everybody could have an income of more than one dollar a day. Still, there could be relative poverty in that a person has an income less than 50 percent of the median income.⁵ On the other hand, these different definitions could lead to the opposite case. In this scenario, there is absolute poverty but no relative poverty, as in the case where everybody in society has an equal income of fifty cents a day.

With this understanding of the terms *absolute* and *relative poverty*, the apparent contradiction of Deuteronomy 15:4 and 11 can be resolved. Deuteronomy 15:4 should be understood to mean that if the people follow the laws, then there will be no absolute poverty in society. Everybody would be able to purchase the minimum amount of goods needed to survive. Accordingly, a person should be willing to remit loans in the seventh year. Deuteronomy 15:4 concludes by recording that God would bless the land, which refers to absolute levels of wealth, but there is no promise of equality.

On the other hand, Deuteronomy 15:11 should be understood to mean that even if the people obey the laws, there will always be relative poverty because the national income will never be distributed completely equally in society. Accordingly, there is an obligation to lend to the poor who are less fortunate even if there is no absolute poverty. Thus, Deuteronomy 15:8 records that "you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs," which means that the lending is for all the needs of a poor person and not just to maintain a minimum level of subsistence.⁶

This understanding of Deuteronomy 15:4 and 11 means that Sach's plan to eliminate poverty by the year 2025 does not contradict the vision of Deuteronomy 15; his goal is to eradicate absolute poverty in the world. The large income gaps among the different nations in the world would remain, however. Yet, this understanding of Deuteronomy 15:4 and 11 raises questions as to whether the vision of Deuteronomy 15 accords with the idea of universal communism (socialism) of absolute equality in society.

Deuteronomy 15, Socialism, and Capitalism

In 1902, Nachman Syrkin (1868–1924) an early Zionist socialist leader invoked Deuteronomy 15:4 as a basis for socialism. He stated: "It was this people that thousands of years ago said that 'there shall be no poor amongst you' and made social laws such as the Jubilee, the sabbatical year and all the laws of gleaning in order that justice rule in the world."⁷ Apparently, Syrkin understood the term *poor* in Deuteronomy 15:4 from a relative perspective that there would be no relative poverty; thus the verse accords with the idea of absolute equality.⁸ However, as argued above, the term *poor* in Deuteronomy 15:4 should be understood from an absolute perspective. In this case, the verse corresponds better to the capitalistic system because capitalism generates greater economic growth than does socialism. For example, Chen and Ravallion (2004, 17) credit the economic reforms in China that "de-collectivized agriculture and introduced the 'household responsibility system' giving farmers considerably greater control over their land and output choices" as being the most likely reason for the large decline in the number of people living in extreme poverty in China in the 1980s. Thus, it was the introduction of capitalism in China that reduced the number of people living in absolute poverty. This relationship between Deuteronomy 15:4 and capitalism accords with Novak's (1991, 421) observation that "the strongest moral claim for democratic capitalism is that it is the most practical hope of the world's poor: no magic wand, but the best hope."

In addition, the differentiation between relative and absolute poverty in Deuteronomy 15 means that not only does Deuteronomy 15:4 not reject capitalism but also that Deuteronomy 15:11 is in harmony with the capitalist system. If the term *poor* in Deuteronomy 15:11 is understood from a relative perspective, then the verse proclaims that there will always be relative poverty; some individuals will have less income than others. These different levels of income are intrinsic to the capitalist system because it is these differences that serve as incentives for people to work harder. Yet, it must be noted that this

reading of Deuteronomy 15:11 does not justify all possible distributions of income in society. The verse requires one to aid the poor, which reduces the level of relative poverty. However, even with this aid, in the end, some income differences will exist and hence relative poverty will always remain.

Conclusion

Economic growth in the twenty-first century offers the possibility to eliminate extreme and moderate poverty in the world. Such a wonderful achievement would not contradict Deuteronomy 15:11, because the verse should be understood as referring to relative poverty, which, the verse maintains, will always remain in the world. On the other hand, the eradication of absolute poverty in the world would conform to the vision of Deuteronomy 15:4 that there could be no poor from an absolute perspective. Thus, the vision of Deuteronomy 15 with regard to poverty is a potential world where relative poverty exists but not absolute poverty. This vision is in harmony with the capitalist system, which promotes economic growth but does not aim for absolute equality.

Notes

1. Chen and Ravillion's data is based on poverty lines of \$1.08 and \$2.15 in 1993 PPP prices. Their estimates mean that in 2001, at least 44 percent of the approximately 6.1 billion people in the world were either extremely poor or moderately poor, and these numbers could be higher depending on the number of poor people in the developed countries.
2. This translation and all subsequent quotes from Deuteronomy are from Tigay (1996). This declaration is also recorded in Matthew 26:11, "The poor you will always have with you." See also Mark 14:7 and John 12:8.
3. Other proponents of this approach include the medieval commentator, Rashi (1040–1105, [1985 edition]), and modern commentators, Driver (1965), Von Rad (1973), Tigay (1996), and Christensen (2001).
4. It should be noted that both the one-dollar- and the two-dollar-a-day income levels are very low levels with which to measure absolute poverty. The United States also measures poverty from an absolute level, but the poverty line in the United States in 2004 was \$9,645 (U.S. Census Bureau) for a single individual, considerably more than two dollars a day.
5. This is the present-day situation in most Western countries if one accepts Sachs' (20) assumption that "extreme poverty only occurs in developing countries."

6. An interesting example of this understanding of Deuteronomy 15:8 is that the Babylonian Talmud (Ketubot 67b) explains that the verse obligates one to provide a horse and a slave to run before the horse for a poor person who had been accustomed to these amenities. The horse and the runner are not needed for the poor person to reach a minimal level of existence but are an attempt to alleviate relative poverty.
7. Quoted in Frankel (1981), 306.
8. Syrkin also invoked the laws of the Jubilee in Leviticus 25 as support for socialism, but these laws concerning the return of each person to his ancestral land every fifty years should be understood not as generating absolute equality but as an opportunity for the poor to better themselves.

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