

REPARATIONS AND THE BIBLE

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2020

As people call for "reparations" today, can a case be made from the Bible for reparations? What are some Biblical models, and is there even one which could apply? Here are some cases to consider:

1. Restitution for theft.

The OT calls for restitution of two-five times as much for theft. Consider the following examples in Exodus:

22:1 "If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.

22:2 ¶ "If the thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account.

22:3 "But if the sun has risen on him, there will be bloodguiltiness on his account. He shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.

22:4 "If what he stole is actually found alive in his possession, whether an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double.

22:5 ¶ "If a man lets a field or vineyard be grazed bare and lets his animal loose so that it grazes in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best of his own field and the best of his own vineyard.

22:6 ¶ "If a fire breaks out and spreads to thorn bushes, so that stacked grain or the standing grain or the field itself is consumed, he who started the fire shall surely make restitution.

22:7 ¶ "If a man gives his neighbor money or goods to keep for him and it is stolen from the man's house, if the thief is caught, he shall pay double.

22:8 "If the thief is not caught, then the owner of the house shall appear before the judges, to determine whether he laid his hands on his neighbor's property.

22:9 "For every breach of trust, whether it is for ox, for donkey, for sheep, for clothing, or for any lost thing about which one says, 'This is it,' the case of both parties shall come before the judges; he whom the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor.

22:10 ¶ "If a man gives his neighbor a donkey, an ox, a sheep, or any animal to keep for him, and it dies or is hurt or is driven away while no one is looking,

22:11 an oath before Yahweh shall be made by the two of them that he has not laid hands on his neighbor's property; and its owner shall accept it, and he shall not make restitution.

22:12 "But if it is actually stolen from him, he shall make restitution to its owner.

22:13 "If it is all torn to pieces, let him bring it as evidence; he shall not make restitution for what has been torn to pieces.

22:14 ¶ "If a man borrows anything from his neighbor, and it is injured or dies while its owner is not with it, he shall make full restitution.

22:15 "If its owner is with it, he shall not make restitution; if it is hired, it came for its hire.

None of these could apply. These examples all involve current situations, not one from generations back.

The situation is further complicated by the principle of individual responsibility which does not hold ancestors or descendants responsible:

Deut 24:16 ¶ "Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.

And from Ezekiel:

18:4 "Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die.

18:5 ¶ "But if a man is righteous and practices justice and righteousness,

18:6 and does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period --

18:7 if a man does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing,

18:8 if he does not lend money on interest or take increase, if he keeps his hand from iniquity and executes true justice between man and man,

18:9 if he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully -- he is righteous and will surely live," declares the Lord Yahweh.

18:10 ¶ "Then he may have a violent son who sheds blood and who does any of these things to a brother

18:11 (though he himself did not do any of these things), that is, he even eats at the mountain shrines, and defiles his neighbor's wife,

18:12 oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore a pledge, but lifts up his eyes to the idols and commits abomination,

18:13 he lends money on interest and takes increase; will he live? He will not live! He has committed all these abominations, he will surely be put to death; his blood will be on his own head.

18:14 ¶ "Now behold, he has a son who has observed all his father's sins which he committed, and observing does not do likewise.

18:15 "He does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor's wife,

18:16 or oppress anyone, or retain a pledge, or commit robbery, but he gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing,

18:17 he keeps his hand from the poor, does not take interest or increase, but executes My ordinances, and walks in My statutes; he will not die for his father's iniquity, he will surely live.

18:18 "As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was not good among his people, behold, he will die for his iniquity.

18:19 ¶ "Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity?' When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live.

18:20 "The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.

Holding descendants accountable for what their ancestors did is thus problematic.

2. The Gibeonites.

The city-state of Gibeon deceptively entered into a covenant with Israel when Israel was beginning to conquer the land of Canaan. Israel was obligated to protect Gibeon, and Gibeon was obligated to be servants to Israel (see Joshua 9:3-27). Israel did indeed rescue Gibeon when Gibeon was attacked (Josh 10:1-14).

A few hundred years later, Saul killed a number of the Gibeonites, and God sent a famine as punishment to Israel:

2SA 21:1 Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the presence of Yahweh. And Yahweh said, "It is for Saul and his bloody house, because he put the Gibeonites to death."

2SA 21:2 So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them (now the Gibeonites were not of the sons of Israel but of the remnant of the Amorites, and the sons of Israel made a covenant with them, but Saul had sought to kill them in his zeal for the sons of Israel and Judah).

The restitution the Gibeonites requested was this:

2SA 21:5 So they said to the king [David], "The man who consumed us and who planned to exterminate us from remaining within any border of Israel,

2SA 21:6 let seven men from his sons be given to us, and we will hang them before Yahweh in Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of Yahweh." And the king said, "I will give them."

Israel was held accountable for what the dominant nation (the suzerain) had committed to the dominated nation (the vassal). However, is this the solution, and if so, who do you want executed?

3. The Amalekites.

Here is another example of the relationship of one people group to another. Hundreds of years earlier than Saul's time the Amalekites had mistreated Israel, and they were a continual problem (Exod 17:8-16). Israel was commanded to "deal with" Amalek when they entered the land of Canaan (Deut 25:17-19). Amalekites were among people groups who oppressed Israel during the days of the Judges (Judges 3:13; 6:3-6,35; 7:12; 10:12). King Saul actually defeated the Amalekites on at least one occasion (1 Sam 14:47-48).

However, when God commissioned Saul to destroy the Amalekites, Saul disobeyed, so God ended Saul's dynasty (1 Sam 15; 28:18). It was David who finally carried out the mission (1 Sam 27:8; 30:1-19).

If this example applies, then which people of European ancestry do you wish to slaughter and plunder their possessions? All of them? Only those whose ancestors were here during the Civil War? Descendants of slave-owners? Those who fought for the Confederacy? With the way marriage/intermarriage works in the USA, how do you sift this out? (I am at least English German French Dutch Scottish Italian with a Welsh family name, and I have ancestors who fought for the Union, with no evidence of slave-owner ancestors, and there are many like me.) What about all the European immigrants since the mid-1800's?

4. So what Biblical precedents are there today for "current situations"?

A. Passing a counterfeit bill is a type of theft. Restitution, 4-5x as much, should be the penalty per offense, i.e., \$80-100 (Exod 22:5).

B. The unjust killing of an accused criminal in custody is murder, and the perpetrator(s) should be punished accordingly (Exod 21:12; Lev 24:17; Num 35:16-21; Deut 5:17; 19:11-13).

C. Falsely accusing people of wrong with the intent of taking their property, or illegitimately using the legal system to do the same, is coveting (Exod 20:17; 34:24; Deut 5:21), evil, and subject to God's judgment (cf. 1 Kgs 21).

D. As noted above, perpetrators of crimes are to be punished, not their families. If a community protects evildoers, then the community is to be punished (Judges 20:12f). But read how this worked out—most of the tribe of Benjamin was wiped out.

E. The following principles still apply to looters:

You shall not ever steal (Exod 20:15; Lev 19:11; Deut 5:19).

You shall not follow a multitude in doing evil. . . (Exod 23:2).

The bottom line is that there does not appear to be a good Biblical precedent for the reparations for which people are calling. You need to go somewhere else to justify reparations for generations-old offenses.