

OF MUZZLES AND OXEN: DEUTERONOMY 25:4 AND 1 CORINTHIANS 9:9

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In Deut 25:4, we find the short apodictic statement, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is threshing.”¹ Paul quotes this verse in 1 Cor 9:9 and 1 Tim 5:18 to make the point that a minister of the gospel should be allowed to live from his work. Various scholars have spent a great deal of effort investigating how Paul used this text. Did he cite Deut 25:4 in an allegorical, a typological, or an analogical way?² However, very little discussion has centered on establishing the meaning of the OT verse (Deut 25:4) in its literary context. In this article, we will first analyze the meaning of the verse in Deuteronomy. How does this verse fit into the broader context of Deuteronomy 24–25? Is Paul reading this verse in the same way as the author of Deuteronomy intended it?

1. THE INTERPRETATION OF DEUTERONOMY 25:4

1. *Survey of interpretations.* Most scholars comment on the meaning of this verse with the NT references in mind. We can identify three different interpretations in the various commentaries. The first interpretation views this passage as a proverbial saying, not really applicable to an ox, but showing

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¹ The Septuagint reading is identical to the MT but the Vulgate expands the reading a little: *non ligabis os bovis terentis in area fruges tuas* (“Do not bind the mouth of an ox threshing your crop on the threshing floor”). This reading is, of course, similar to the Vulgate reading of 1 Cor 9:9, *non alligabis os bovi trituranti* (“Don’t bind the mouth of an ox threshing”).

² W. C. Kaiser, “The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:8–10,” *JETS* 21 (1978) 3–18; Joop F. M. Smit, “You Shall not Muzzle a Threshing Ox: Paul’s Use of the Law of Moses in 1 Cor 9:8–12,” *EstBib* 58 (2000) 239–63; D. I. Brewer, “1 Corinthians 9:9–11: A Literal Interpretation of ‘Do not muzzle the ox,’” *NTS* 38 (1992) 554–65; J. T. Noonan, “The Muzzled Ox,” *JQR* 70 (1979) 172–75; but see Eduard Nielsen, “You shall not muzzle an Ox while it is treading out the Corn,’ Dt. 25:4,” in *Law, History and Tradition* (Kopenhagen: G. E. C. Gads, 1983) 94–105, who deals more with the place of this law in its context, and other possible related laws and their connection to old taboo laws; Gerhard Lisowsky, “Dtn 25:4 ‘Du sollst dem Rinde bei seinem Dreschen nicht das Maul verbinden,’” in *Das ferne und nahe Wort: Festschrift Leonhard Rost* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1967) 144–52; H. J. Boecker, “‘Du sollst dem Ochsen, der da drischt, das Maul nicht verbinden.’ Überlegungen zur Wertung der Natur im Alten Testament,” in *Gefährten und Feinde des Menschen: Das Tier in der Lebenswelt des alten Israel* (ed. Bernd Janowski, Ute Neumann-Gorsolke, and Uwe Gleßmer; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1993) 67–84.

concern with the laborer and his wages.³ The second interpretation focuses on the humanitarian character of the law: the concern is for the care of the animal.⁴ The third interpretation is very similar, but understands that the concern for the animal shown is a natural outcome for the care that should be given to the weak in a society, that is, the widow, the orphan, and the alien, but is here extended to include also the animals.⁵

2. *The traditional interpretation.* From all this we may conclude that the most common, traditional interpretation of this verse is the humanitarian notion that a man was not allowed to muzzle his ox while it was working, thus preventing the ox from eating. This was inhumane because the animal, which was helping to provide for the food of the community, deserved better. The humanitarian character of the Law in general is often stressed, using the law in Deut 25:4 as an example that the law is even humane towards the animals (at least here represented by the bovine class of the animals).

³ Keil and Delitzsch state that the verse should be “understood in the general sense in which the apostle Paul uses it in 1 Cor 9:9 and 1 Tim 5:18, viz. that a laborer was not to be deprived of his wages” (*Commentary on the Old Testament, The Pentateuch*, part 3 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 424).

⁴ J. Ridderbos considers this verse to be taken literally: the animal has a right to a just and compassionate treatment. If the animal has a right to a just and compassionate treatment, then how much more right does a human laborer have, following a traditional *Qal-wahomer* argument (*Het boek Deuteronomium*, deel 2 [Kampen: Kok, n.d.] 57); G. Von Rad sees Deut 25:4 and Deut 22:4, 6 as derived “from an animal-loving attitude (*Deuteronomy: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966] 154). J. A. Thompson considers this verse to be a clear reflection of the humanitarian nature of the text: “Love and kindness were to be shown to all God’s creatures.” He states that Paul is using an “a fortiori” argument, along the same lines as Ridderbos (*Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary* [London: InterVarsity, 1975] 250); P. C. Craigie does not see any connection between the phrase and its immediate context. The text expresses general concern for the animal in the same way that the fourth commandment expresses concern for the Sabbath (Deut 5:14). The prohibition is given so that the ox could eat while it is doing work on behalf of man (*The Book of Deuteronomy* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 313). Patrick D. Miller also sees the welfare of the animals as the main reason for Deut 25:4: “The animal ought to be allowed to eat while it is working hard” (*Deuteronomy* [Louisville: John Knox, 1990] 171). Eugene H. Merrill categorizes this law under the heading “Respect for the dignity of another.” He states: “the very lowest creatures on the ‘social’ scale, the animals themselves, fell under the protection of the Lord and the covenant” (*Deuteronomy* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994] 325–26).

⁵ S. R. Driver comments on the humanitarian character of the law in this verse: “The law affords another example of the humanity which is characteristic of Deuteronomy, and which is to be exercised even towards animals.” The quotations of this law in the NT illustrate the principle that “the laborer is worthy of his hire” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903] 280). Earl S. Kalland considers verse 4 a continuation of verses 1–3, dealing with the just but humane judgment of the guilty person: the guilty person is not to be humiliated. Kalland sees the same spirit of compassion in the law of the muzzling of the ox: “Animals must be treated with kindness” (*Deuteronomy* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] 149). Raymond Brown comments on the sudden introduction of a law which protects animals, but then continues to stress the humanity of this law: “The God who wanted the widow, orphan and alien to have food on their table was also concerned about animal welfare” (*The Message of Deuteronomy* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993] 240–41); J. G. McConville states that “the entitlement of the ox to have what it needs of the farmer’s produce for its health is analogous to the rights of the poor and the disadvantaged. . . the wholeness of the covenant society extends even to its livestock” (*Deuteronomy* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002] 368–69).

Most commentators make some observations as to the appropriateness of Paul's quotation and his use of this text to support the idea that workers of the gospel deserve to be supported by the people to whom they are ministering.

3. *Problems with the traditional interpretation.* First, we must note that the traditional interpretation presumes to read, "A man shall not muzzle his ox while it is threshing." This is not how the Hebrew reads, which says, "Don't muzzle *the* ox while it is threshing." To whom is this law addressed? About whose oxen are we talking? There are three possibilities: (a) the owner of the ox is threshing somebody else's grain;⁶ (b) the owner of the ox is threshing his own grain; or (c) the owner of the grain is threshing it, but with an ox which does not belong to him, which he is either borrowing or renting. The traditional interpretation, with its focus on the ox, does not provide answers for a number of questions that arise. In the first case, why would the owner of the ox muzzle his ox if he were threshing somebody else's grain? If the ox eats of the grain, he is not the one who would lose out economically, and furthermore, why should he muzzle the ox, thus preventing it from eating while it is doing strenuous work? In the second case, the owner of the ox who is threshing his own grain would prevent losing any of his threshed grain if he muzzles the ox, but, on the other hand, he would weaken the animal while it is doing heavy work. The economic value of the ox far outweighs the value of the threshed grain that an ox could eat while it is threshing. A weakened animal would be less valuable to the owner. It would not be able to do the same amount of work as an ox that is well fed. Economically, it would not make sense if the owner of the ox muzzled his own ox while it is doing hard labor. This leaves us with the third case, the owner of the grain is threshing his grain with an ox that is not his own. We will discuss this case further below.⁷

If this law is an example of how God is concerned about how people treat animals, then the law is unique in its humanitarian design. Nowhere else do we find a law where the primary focus is an *express* concern for an animal.⁸

⁶ In the Tosefta (*B. Meṣ* 8, 11) we read of two such cases. In the first, an Israelite is treading out grain with the ox of a non-Israelite; he is not allowed to muzzle the ox, or it would be a transgression. In the second, a non-Israelite is treading his grain with the ox of an Israelite. If the non-Israelite muzzles the ox, the Israelite is not culpable for the transgression.

⁷ The fact that the law is meant here to protect the animal and with the animal the rights of the owner of the animal is illustrated well in the Babylonian Talmud (*B. Meṣ* 90b). In this discussion, the Talmud lists a number of other ways that one could devise to prevent the ox from eating the threshed grain: to put a thorn in the animal's mouth; to cause a lion to lie down outside the field in which the ox was threshing and thereby frightening off the animal from eating; or if someone were to spread out a leather cover over the grain to be threshed. The reverse scenario is discussed as well: what if the owner of the ox (who has hired out his animal) lets it go hungry, so that it eats a lot more from the threshed grain? The owner of the grain is allowed to tie a bucket with fodder to the animal. If the owner of the grain does muzzle the ox, he will be flogged and will have to pay the owner of the ox the amount that the animal would normally eat in a day (91a).

⁸ S. R. Driver mentions two other texts where he sees humaneness toward animals expressed (Deut 22:6-7; Prov 12:10). In Deut 22:6ff the law regulates what you can take when you find a nest with eggs or young birds and the mother; you are not allowed to take all of them. Craigie sees

This is not to say that God has no concern for animals. A few NT passages seem to hint at God's care for animals.⁹ In addition, this is not to say that people mistreated their animals. On the contrary, mistreatment of one's own animal led to a diminished value of the animal, and thus an economic loss for the owner, and mistreatment of someone else's animal was punishable in the ancient Law codes.¹⁰ It was a foolish, uneconomical thing to do.

Furthermore, the traditional explanation does not provide us with a clear answer as to why this law is placed here in the text of Deuteronomy. It seems out of place in relation to the surrounding laws. Various commentators have noticed this:

Although all the other laws in this passage concern human rights, a commandment is suddenly introduced which protects animals from owners who are more concerned about working them hard than feeding them well.¹¹

If the primary concern of this law is indeed the welfare of animals, then it stands unconnected to its immediate context of Deuteronomy 25. The previous law focuses on the penalty and not on the actual infraction of the law. If there is a dispute between men, and the guilty party deserves the penalty of a beating, then the man shall receive the number of stripes according to his guilt. The maximum number of stripes is forty. Otherwise, the guilty person is not only beaten but also degraded. The following law deals with levirate marriage. No clear connection with the law concerning oxen can be seen according to the traditional interpretation.

II. A NEW READING OF DEUTERONOMY 25:4

In order to mitigate the problems of the traditional reading, we will now present a new interpretation of Deut 25:4.

1. *Oxen in the Bible and the ancient near East.* If we look at all the non-cultic texts concerning the OT laws and the ancient near Eastern laws where oxen are the focus of the law, we find the following contexts:¹²

an economic and not a humanitarian reason for this (*Deuteronomy* 288–89). This is not to say that being humane towards animals was not practiced, but a humane attitude was a natural outcome of any person who listened to God's law. Such a person would have a great deal of respect for God's creation (see Prov 12:10). Von Rad also mentions Deut 22:4 (*Deuteronomy* 154). This law deals with the care one should take if one sees one's neighbor's donkey or ox fallen down by the way; one should help the animal. Still, I do not think the main aim is the animal, but the care one should extend to the possession of one's neighbor. The reference made to animals in the Sabbath law has more to do with the sanctity of the Sabbath than with being humane to animals and giving them a day of rest. In any case, if both the owner and his servants were to observe the Sabbath, then who was left to work the animals?

⁹ In Matt 6:26 Jesus states that God feeds the birds. In the parallel text in Luke 12:24, the ravens are specifically mentioned.

¹⁰ For example, see "Laws about Rented Oxen 1–4," in Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 40–41.

¹¹ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy* 240. See also J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* 368–69.

¹² The references to the ancient laws are all taken from Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections*.

- laws concerning the injuring of an ox;¹³
- the context of surgery on animals, including an ox;¹⁴
- the context of renting an ox;¹⁵
- the context of shepherding or safekeeping of an ox;¹⁶
- laws concerning the goring ox;¹⁷
- laws concerning the theft of animals (including the ox).¹⁸

Not one of those laws deals with the humanitarian care for the oxen. Even the law in Exod 23:4, which admonishes a person who comes upon the wandering ox of his enemy and is asked to return the ox to him, is really written out of a concern for the relationship between the man and his enemy rather than out of concern for the welfare of the animal.¹⁹

2. *The economic angle of civil laws.* Most of the civil laws have a clear economic concern from which they should be viewed. For example, the law of the ox goring another ox has as its main aim to provide fair compensation to the owner of the gored ox.

If one man's ox hurts another's so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide its price equally; and also they shall divide the dead ox. "Or if it is known that the ox was previously in the habit of goring, yet its owner has not confined it, he shall surely pay ox for ox, and the dead animal shall become his." (Exod 21:35–36 NASB)

The first case laid out in verse 35 states what must be done if one ox gores another and it was not a case of dereliction of duty. The live ox will be sold, and the proceeds of the sale will be divided equally. The live ox, of course, is not as valuable anymore, since now it is marked as a goring ox, and therefore its value has decreased. The dead ox is also sold and divided equally. In this case, the loss is carried by both owners, since the owner of the live ox could not have known that a fight would break out between the two animals. The second case laid out in verse 36 is a case of negligence. The live ox is known to have gored before, and the owner knows about it, but fails to tie up the animal properly. In this case, the owner of the goring ox is to bear

¹³ "Laws about Rented Oxen 1–4"; Hittite Laws 77b; Exod 21:33–36.

¹⁴ Codex Hammurabi (CH) 224–25.

¹⁵ CH 241–51, 268; "Laws about Rented Oxen 5–9"; Lipit Ishtar, law a and 34–37; Sumerian Law Exercise Tablet, laws 9' and 10'; Sumerian Laws Handbook of Forms, section vi (11–15, 16–22, 23–31, 32–36); Eshnunna 3; Hittite Law code 72, 75, 78, 79, 151, 178.

¹⁶ CH 262–63; Exod 22:9.

¹⁷ Eshnunna 53–55; Exod 21:28–32.

¹⁸ CH 7 and 8; Middle Assyrian Laws C4 and C5; Hittite law code 74; Exod 21:37; 22:3, 8.

¹⁹ A similar idea is expressed in Deut 22:1, but there in relation to the ox belonging to one's countrymen, which is wandering away. If our law in Deut 25:4 was primarily concerned with the humanitarian care of the animals, then Saul's deeds in 1 Sam 11:7, where he cut up a yoke of oxen and sent them throughout Israel as a rallying sign for war, would have been an odious, horrific act to any pious Israelite. But as one reads the text, it becomes clear that people responded because Saul threatened to cause them economic loss if they did not heed his call to arms by killing the oxen of the person who was not willing to respond to this obvious travesty of justice, namely the threat of gauging out the eyes of all the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead (1 Sam 11:1–2).

the full brunt of his negligence. He must compensate the other owner for the full price of a non-goring live ox, but the dead animal is his. He still has his live goring ox, and since the animal has already been marked as a goring ox, it is unlikely that its value would decline even further.

A second example comes from Deut 24:1–4, which reads:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance. (NASB)

The focus of the law is on the man who has divorced his wife. If she remarries, and later becomes either widowed or divorced, the first husband cannot take her back. The question, of course, is, "Why?" A man takes a wife, but then there is something related to his wife, which he describes as that which makes him reject the woman, "nakedness of a thing."²⁰ The accusation is left somewhat vague on purpose, but the accusation is serious enough: it has to deal with some shortcoming that at least warrants a divorce.²¹ But this was a divorce in the best possible conditions for the husband, since the accusation of "an indecent thing" allowed the husband to divorce the wife without giving her back her dowry,²² and without giving her any divorce money.²³ The woman remarried, possibly being reinvested with a dowry by her family. The next part of the law is continuing the protasis: "If the second husband died, or he divorced the woman . . ." This time it is only stated that he "turns against her" (lit. "hates her"). Westbrook has argued convincingly that this term is used to show that the action arose from a subjective motive and without objective grounds to justify it.²⁴ A husband who divorces his wife

²⁰ עֲרוּת דָּבָר.

²¹ The exact phrase is used also in Deut 23:15, where it refers to something that was indecent and that would cause God to turn away from the camp of the Israelites (see also McConville, *Deuteronomy* 358). For an extensive and excellent treatment of this text see R. Westbrook, "The Prohibition on Restoration of Marriage in Deuteronomy 24:1–4," in *Studies in Bible* (Scripta Hierosolymitana 31; ed. S. Japhet; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986) 387–405.

²² R. Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 155–56.

²³ While the Bible does not highlight what happens in case of divorce, we have several ancient near Eastern Law codes that do elaborate on this: Codex Ur-Nammu 6–7: "If a man divorces his first wife, he must pay 1 mina of silver; if it is a widow whom he divorces, he must pay ½ mina of silver." In Codex Hammurabi 138–40 we read: "If a man divorces his first wife who has not borne children he shall upon divorcing her give her money in the amount of her bride-price and make good to her the dowry that she brought from her father's house. If there was no bride-price he shall pay her 1 mina of silver as a divorce settlement; if he is poor he shall give her ½ mina of silver." Also, in the Mishnah we find a similar regulation. The divorcee is allowed back her dowry and received some additional compensation money (the *ketubah*), 200 zuz for a virgin bride, half that if the bride was a widow (*Ket.* 1:2).

²⁴ Westbrook, "The Prohibition on Restoration of Marriage in Deuteronomy 24:1–4" 402.

without justifiable grounds must pay a divorce settlement, and so the wife leaves her second husband with possibly her dowry and her divorce money. The first husband could not turn around and act as if the fact which led to the first divorce did not bother him anymore.²⁵ Since the second marriage ended, either in the woman being a widow and in control over her second dowry, or in a regular divorce with the woman also in control of her second dowry, plus some divorce compensation, the law was meant to protect the woman from a scheming first husband. He was not allowed to marry her again, and thus for a second time take control over her dowry.²⁶ While the law aims to provide justice in this special case, there is definitely an economic aspect to the law that should not be overlooked.

Justice and fair economic compensation were at play in the two aforementioned laws, so also with our law of Deut 25:4.

3. *The case of the rented ox.* If we read Deut 25:4 in the context of a rented or borrowed ox, then the law makes more sense. The person who hired an ox for threshing cannot attempt to shortchange the owner of the ox by not allowing the animal to eat while it is doing the work. He might be tempted to do this, since he could then get a greater amount of produce or straw, which he could use for his own purposes. But the ox would be returned to the owner in a weakened state and thus result in an economic loss for the owner. With the renting came the obligation to take care of the animal. The law is not primarily concerned with the welfare of the animal but with the economic responsibilities of the person who rents an ox from his neighbor.²⁷

One could object, of course, on the basis that we do not have a clear reference that the ox is rented. However, we have to understand that we are dealing here with a short apodictic statement. Only in casuistic law does one expect to be provided with a fuller context. This is a general comment of which the most logical focus or application would be the person who is borrowing or renting the ox. Even in some casuistic statements from the ancient near East, the reference to the renter or rented ox is presumed but not stated. In the "ancient student exercise" tablet dealing with rented oxen, the fact that the ox was rented was assumed and therefore not mentioned at all.²⁸ In the "Sumerian Law Exercise Tablet, n. 10" we read, "If a wandering ox is lost, he will replace ox for ox." Martha Roth has in her translation of the text the

²⁵ This is what is called estoppel: "A legal bar to alleging or denying a fact because of one's own previous actions or words to the contrary" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th edition [Springfield: Merriam Webster, 1993]).

²⁶ For other examples see C. Wright, "What Happened Every Seven Years in Israel?" *EvQ* 56 (1984) 129–38; R. Westbrook, "Adultery in Ancient Near Eastern Law," *RB* 97 (1990) 542–80; idem, "Slave and Master in Ancient Near Eastern Law," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70 (1995) 1631–76.

²⁷ We see the same concern for the welfare of the rented oxen in the ancient near Eastern law codes: Hammurabi 245: "If a man rents an ox and causes its death either by negligence or by physical abuse, he shall replace the ox with an ox of comparable value for the owner of the ox" (see also Hammurabi 246–48; Lipit Ishtar 34–37).

²⁸ See Martha Roth, *Law Collections* 40–41; "The Sumerian Laws Handbook of Forms," vi: 11–15, 16–22; 22–31, and 32–36.

word “renter” in brackets, while it is not found in the Sumerian text, but Roth adds it to make the law clear.²⁹ Also in the “Sumerian Laws Handbook of forms” do we have a presumption of the case of a rented ox, while it is not mentioned in the laws themselves.³⁰

4. *Deut 25:4 and its context.* When we look now at the context of this law, starting in Deuteronomy 24, it seems at first just an amalgamation of laws, unconnected and unstructured. After further investigation, however, we see a clear progression and structure in this section. All these laws seem to deal with situations that show how one should deal with one’s fellow man. Starting in Deut 24:1–4, as discussed above, the concern is for the woman, protecting her from a calculating ex-husband. In Deut 24:5, the concern is for the woman recently married. The man will not have to serve in the army or do corvée for at least one year, but he is “to gladden his wife.”³¹ The next law (v. 6) deals with items that can be taken as a pledge. Items that one needs in order to make a livelihood are not to be pledged. The laws following deal with kidnapping (v. 7), leprosy (vv. 8–9), laws concerning pledges (vv. 10–13), and laws to protect the weak in society (vv. 14–22). Chapter 25 begins with a command to limit the number of blows a person can receive as part of punishment. To give a person more than forty blows would dishonor or kill the person (vv. 1–3). A person who refuses to marry the wife of his dead brother to establish his brother’s name will have to undergo a ritual where the wife will “pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face” (v. 9). The brother has wronged his sibling by not giving him offspring.³² These laws have a common denominator in that they all deal with how we should act justly with our fellow man. If we take Deut 25:4 the traditional way, we have a clear disconnect with the context. However, if the verse is understood as talking about how to take care of a neighbor’s ox, which was being used to thresh one’s grain, it would fit in again perfectly.

III. PAUL’S USE OF THE TEXT IN 1 CORINTHIANS 9:9

Of course, Deut 25:4 would never have received this much attention if it had not been quoted by Paul in the NT. Paul’s reference to this verse has sparked a lot of discussion concerning the method of his interpretation. We must therefore reexamine how Paul is quoting this verse and how he comes to his application of this verse in the NT context.

1. *The context.* In 1 Cor 9:9, Paul is quoting Deut 25:4 in the midst of an argument in which he is trying to prove that he and Barnabas have the right to benefit from the labor of their ministry. As ministers of the word,

²⁹ Ibid. 44–45.

³⁰ Ibid. 52; “The Sumerian Laws Handbook of Forms,” vi: 11–15, 16–22; 22–31 and 32–36. We have to admit that this example might be problematic, since the beginning column of this law is missing, which may have explicitly mentioned the context of renting oxen.

³¹ Could this refer to making his wife pregnant?

³² J. van Bruggen, *Het lezen van de Bijbel* (Kampen: Kok, 1991) 138.

they should be supported by the believers to whom they minister. To strengthen his argument, he uses examples from everyday life. A soldier is paid by the army in which he serves (1 Cor 9:7). A man who plants a vineyard also reaps the benefits of his work, the grapes produced by the vineyard. A man who tends a flock gets to drink from the milk that the flock produces. In at least the first example, we find a clear case where one man is in the service of someone else and that person rewards him for his service. In the second example, the fact that the owner of the vineyard partakes of the fruit of his vineyard does not need to be stated since this is an obvious fact. However, if the man is a servant and taking care of the vineyard of his master, it would require further explanation that he is indeed allowed to eat from the grapes when he is hungry. The third example is of the hired hand who is tending someone else's flock. Although it is not his flock, he still has the right to drink from the milk of the flock when he is thirsty. All these examples accentuate the fact that a workman needs to be justly sustained while he is working.

In the next verse Paul writes, "Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing?" (1 Cor 9:8). Paul is not denigrating human experience, when he states *κατὰ ἄνθρωπον* (translated by the NIV as "a human point of view"), but he is actually using it to stress the fact that not only does human common sense argue for this but the Law follows the same reasoning. He continues by quoting from the Law of Moses (Deut 25:4) as an example of the previous argument. Paul ends the verse by stating: "God is not concerned with oxen, is he?" In the verses that follow, Paul makes a link between the oxen threshing the grain unmuzzled and his own situation of ministering the Word of God and being allowed to be supported by the ministry. It is, of course, this interpretation that has drawn most discussion by scholars.

2. *Various interpretations of 1 Cor 9:9ff.* Over the years, scholars have postulated different interpretations of these verses, with far-reaching conclusions for the area of exegetical methodology. We will now look at the various interpretations in greater detail.

a. *Sensus plenior.* The interpretation that comes closest to this is the one from F. F. Bruce.³³

His argument may clash with modern exegetical method and western sentiment, but he must be allowed to mean what he says: The animal creation, according to Gen. 1:28ff, exists for man's benefit; the commandment of Deut 25:4 (while it was certainly to be fulfilled literally) was accordingly given for man's benefit, so that *plowman* and *thresher* should profit by the *crop* for which they labour and, more particularly that workers in God's field should *reap some material benefits* from those among whom they *have sown spiritual good*.³⁴

³³ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 84–85.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

So while the text has a literal fulfillment, there is also a fulfillment that does not follow normal exegetical rules, but must be allowed since the apostle is guided by the Spirit to a greater sense of fulfillment.

b. *Allegory.* The verse, while being literally true and fulfilled, also has a deeper meaning. In general, this view would hold that the Law “as a whole, has a spiritual, Christian meaning underlying the more immediate application of its provisions.”³⁵ According to Robertson and Plummer, “Jewish interpreters sometimes abandoned the literal meaning of Scripture and turned it entirely into allegory.”³⁶ Conzelmann argues that Deut 25:4 does state a command concerning oxen and not man, but here Paul is using a Jewish Hellenistic principle, “that God’s concern is with higher things, that accordingly the detailed prescriptions of the law are to be allegorically expounded.”³⁷ Of course, not all scholars who hold that Paul used an allegorical interpretation would extend this method to the whole Law and claim that the whole Law has a Christian meaning.

c. *Figurative meaning.* The argumentation is very close to the allegorical interpretation. Leon Morris even wonders if Deut 25:4 was not meant “figuratively from the very first.”³⁸ Grosheide argues that since the context of the passage is concerned with human relations, it should not be considered impossible that “Paul’s application of these words to human relations is not at variance with their original meaning, which is the same as saying that Deut 25:4 refers to human beings in a figurative sense.”³⁹ Here we are not just talking about a different application, but have really moved into the arena of allegorical interpretation.

d. *Primary application.* This interpretation would hold that the primary application lies with humans and not with oxen. F. Godet states that the command was given by God “to cultivate in the hearts of His people feelings

³⁵ Thomas Charles Edwards, *A Commentary of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (2d ed.; New York: A. C. Armstrong & Sons, 1886) 230.

³⁶ A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911) 184. For them the saving characteristic of Paul using this methodology lies in the fact that Paul does not reject the literal meaning but sees beyond the literal also a spiritual meaning.

³⁷ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 155. See also A. T. Hanson: “It is technically allegory, for there is no integral connection between the clergyman and an ox” (*The Living Utterances of God: The New Testament Exegesis of the Old* [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983] 136); D. Instone-Brewer, on the other hand, argues that allegorical interpretation was missing from mainstream rabbinical exegesis prior to AD 70: “If allegory was absent from rabbinic exegesis, it would not be surprising to find it absent from Paul” (“1 Corinthians 9:9–11: A Literal Interpretation” 555–56).

³⁸ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (IVP commentary series; London: InterVarsity, 1958) 134. Morris goes on to say that the rabbis did distinguish between “a spiritual, as well as a literal sense, in much of Scripture. Paul is doing something rather like that” (134–35). This is very close to an allegorical interpretation of the passage.

³⁹ F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 205.

of justice and equity.”⁴⁰ Arguing from the context where the moral object is also seen in the corresponding context of this law: returning a poor man’s pledge at sunset (Deut 24:10–13), to pay the poor laborer on the same day in which he contributed his labor (24:14–15), not putting a son to death for the crime of the father (24:16–18)⁴¹ Godet concludes:

Does not this whole context show clearly enough what was the object of the prohibition quoted here? It was not from solicitude for oxen that God made this prohibition; there were other ways of providing for the nourishment of these animals. By calling on the Israelites to exercise gentleness and gratitude, even toward a poor animal, it is clear that God desired to inculcate on them, with stronger reason, the same way of acting towards the human workmen whose help they engaged in their labour. It was the duties of *moral beings* to one another, that God wished to impress by this precept.⁴²

Godet argues that if the authorial intent by Moses was to instill gentleness, gratitude, and justice in a man’s dealing with the oxen, then how much more so if the object is man, and how much more so if the object is the Christian minister.⁴³ Walter Kaiser, agreeing with Godet, states: “Thus it was not so much for animals as it was for men that God had spoken, but both were definitely involved in God’s directive.”⁴⁴

e. *Qal vahomer*. This interpretation sees the immediate context related to the oxen and understands that the “divine intent included mankind as well.”⁴⁵ H. A. W. Meyer states: “Manifestly in this way the apostle sets aside the actual historical sense of that prohibition in behalf of an allegorical sense, which, from the standpoint of a purely historic interpretation, is nothing but an application made ‘a minori ad majus.’”⁴⁶ Orr and Walther maintain, “Paul takes a point of the Deuteronomic code (25:4) and interprets it by the rabbinic principle of argument from the lesser to the greater: if God decreed that the oxen must be allowed to eat from the grain which they are threshing, a man must be allowed to eat from the work he is doing. . . .”⁴⁷

⁴⁰ F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1898) 2.11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.* 13.

⁴⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, “The Current Crisis in Exegesis” 14.

⁴⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *First Corinthians: A Contemporary Commentary* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1975) 144. Clark goes on to say, “The conclusion will soon follow: if the ox earns his food by working, and if men who plough and thresh do so as well, all the more does God provide a means of livelihood for ministers and apostles” (p. 145).

⁴⁶ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to the Corinthians* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884) 201.

⁴⁷ William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *1 Corinthians* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1976) 241. Orr and Walther also state that “Paul’s exegetical procedure in his use of the Old Testament citation is much less precise than modern hermeneutical standards allow” (p. 238). See also D. Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 9:9–11: A Literal Interpretation” 559; Instone-Brewer further states that “Paul also argues from the contemporary understanding of the term ‘ox’ in the Law as a reference to all types of labourer, human and animal” (p. 560) This, of course, begs the question if Paul’s contemporary understanding is the same as that of the writer of Deut 25:4.

f. *Principlization*. This methodology allows for the literal meaning, but the literal meaning is built upon an ethical principle that is also true in other situations. Charles Hodge states it this way:

Does God take care of Oxen? It is perfectly certain that God does care for oxen; . . . Although the proximate end of the command was that the labouring brute should be treated justly, yet its ultimate design was to teach men the moral truth involved in the precept.⁴⁸

Similarly, Fee argues that “Paul does not speak to what the law originally meant, . . . [but] what it means, that is, with its application to their present situation.”⁴⁹ Paul works from a general principle from the law, upon which the application is based.

Of all these methodologies, the ones that seem to be most in tune with a single authorial intent are principlization, *qal vahomer*, and the primary application approach.

3. *1 Corinthians 9:9 in light of the new reading of Deuteronomy 25:4*. What still needs to be investigated is how we understand Paul’s use of Deut 25:4 in 1 Cor 9:9. If our thesis is correct that the law in Deut 25:4 relates more to how one deals with someone else’s property, or, to put it even more pointedly, how one should not cheat another person out of their rightly deserved compensation, then Paul’s understanding may be not that far off from the literal reading of Deut 25:4. Paul even puts it very straightforwardly in 1 Cor 9:9b: “God is not concerned about oxen, is he?” Following the principlization method, the general principle stated in verse 9 is, “Do not withhold just compensation from the one who has offered you service or labor.” If the law’s primary idea was not the humane handling of animals, but properly taking care of someone else’s borrowed or rented property, then Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 9:10 becomes more understandable. “Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.”⁵⁰ Paul applies the principle to other agricultural cases, not just the borrowing or renting of an ox, but to the plowman or the thresher. Verse 11 is a natural outcome of the application of the principle to Paul and Barnabas’s

⁴⁸ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: George H. Doran, 1857) 157.

⁴⁹ G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 408.

⁵⁰ Scholars have debated extensively as to the function of the conjunction ὅτι. Three viewpoints can be found (for an excellent presentation of the different views see Joop F. M. Smit, “You Shall not Muzzle” 240, upon whom I have relied for the presentation of these various viewpoints): (a) ὅτι-recitativum introducing a new quotation (see, e.g., D. Instone-Brewer, “1 Corinthians 9:9–11: A Literal interpretation” 558, where he describes that Paul is actually quoting from an oral law which was later included in the Mishnah); (b) ὅτι-argumentativum in which the argument continues to explain why the quotation was written for us (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* 408–9); (c) ὅτι-explicativum, after which Paul gives a further explication of the preceding quotation (see Smit, “You Shall not Muzzle” 239–63). I believe the third option is the correct one. For further elaboration of this position see the aforementioned article by Smit.

situation, while still using the agricultural imagery: "If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?"

4. CONCLUSION

There is a decidedly economic undertone in the various civil laws. The law in Deut 25:4 was not directed to oxen, but to man. It does not make economic sense for a man to muzzle his own ox, but a man renting an ox from his neighbor would profit from muzzling the ox, since he does not lose the grain or straw that the ox could eat while it is threshing. Reading Deut 25:4 this way also makes a lot more sense in the context of the surrounding laws. If it was just a humanitarian law for the ox, the law is clearly at odds with its context. However, if it is a law dealing with the economic responsibility of someone using someone else's property, the law fits nicely in the context. Paul seems to follow this principle in his quotation of the law of Deut 25:4. Far from using an allegorical interpretation, Paul applies the principle upon which this law is a concrete example to his own situation, as an apostle sent by God working on behalf of the Corinthian church. He demonstrates that just as in the world where a person is rewarded for his service, so also Paul and Barnabas should have the right to be supported by the people benefiting from their ministry.