

# GIVE UNTO THE LORD

A BIBLE STUDY ABOUT TITHING, BY MARISSA BECKLIN



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## About the Author



### **Marissa Becklin, M.Div.**

Born and raised in Dubuque, IA, Marissa Becklin is a 2014 graduate of Luther College in Decorah, IA (with a double major in religion and psychology), and a 2018 M.Div. graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. While at both institutions she spent time as a tutor, teaching assistant, and former of spiritual leaders, which fostered her love for teaching and for empowering leaders in our church. She is also one of six ELCA seminarians who were invited to present at the Hein-Fry Book of Faith Challenge in 2018 (the source of this study). She completed her internship at Christ the Servant Lutheran Church in Waukesha, WI, and is in the call process in the Lower Susquehanna Synod. Marissa enjoys reading, hiking, and spending time with her family.



This study was presented in 2018 as part of the Hein-Fry Book of Faith Challenge (HFBFC), an annual initiative that invites ELCA seminarians to craft and present bible studies that engage a specific topic or theme. The 2018 theme was “Creating an Open Table”, which invited seminarians to create bible studies that have the potential to bring together folks from a variety of backgrounds, especially considering differing levels of education and biblical experience.

## Using This Study: A Note for Leaders

### Concept

Every week we pass the offering plate without spending much time thinking about why we do so. Likewise, in a country where we spend so much time talking about money, we often forget that God has put a claim on the entirety of our lives. What might God's claim on our whole lives mean for how we notice and share our gifts with God and others? What would it be like to promise to give a little bit of our whole lives to this world that God so loves? How would that change how we view money? How would that change how we view the neighbor?

### Intent

This study seeks to answer these questions through four sessions that closely examine Deuteronomy 14:22-29 and the command to tithe one's grain, wine, and oil. Throughout these sessions you will learn about Deuteronomy, about the ancient world, about what kind of living and generosity are implied by God's command of the "tithe", and you will spend time translating that command to our own life in community today. Through eating, drinking, and learning about the food and resources in the ancient world and in your own community, you will come to a more holistic understanding of God's claim on your whole life.

### Approach

This study is designed in a manner that empowers lay leaders to lead. While it is up to each congregation how they engage this study, the following structure is suggested:

- Give every participant a copy of this packet—this way folks can read on their own if they prefer, can reinforce concepts on their own time, or can see what they've missed if they aren't present at all sessions.
- Session 1 is an introductory session and is more content-heavy. Sessions 2-4 respectively examine the threefold command to tithe grain, wine, and oil, and follow the form of devotion, scripture, large-group learning, small-group discussion, and closing prayer. Proposed session length is an hour and a half, though content could be adjusted to decrease this time frame.
- Leader (lay or not) reads ahead each week, plans to share content from the packet out loud to the group (**note:** you can either read this information together as a group each week, or one leader can use the information in the packet to prepare content to share with the group).
- As you gather together for each of the four sessions of this study, you will light a candle as part of your opening devotion. While the conversations that we have

outside of the sanctuary can feel like “school”, let this candle serve as a reminder to the community gathered in conversation that your company with one another is holy and sacred space. As you engage in discussion together about giving unto God, this time and these relationships are one form of this gift. May this time of discernment and conversation be a blessing to you and your community.

- Sessions 2-4 will begin with song and prayer as part of the devotion as well.
- Reading Scripture Aloud: Follow these instructions together each time you gather. Extra handout for this practice of reading is provided on following pages.
- As you make your way through each session, be sure to stop for the discussion questions!
- Sessions 2-4 also each have suggestions for group activities that can occur outside of the allotted study time (or as separate sessions). Use these as they are useful opportunities for your own community.

### **Guiding Principles of This Study**

- **Historical Context is Key**
  - As we read Deuteronomy, it is crucial that we learn about the world that this text was written in. Only when we understand the world behind the text can we understand what this text is saying to our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives.
- **We All Have Knowledge About God to Share**
  - Even though we are not all biblical scholars or theologians, we have knowledge about God because we are people whose lives are touched and claimed by God. Our experiences may be different, but we all have something to share about what God’s love and grace have meant for our lives and can mean for whole world.
- **We Read Scripture in Community**
  - The book of Deuteronomy was written to be read by people who lived in community, not by people who were isolated from one another. We read the text out loud together during this study because we believe in the power of the living Word, believe that God uses these texts to speak a word of hope anew to us today, and because we believe in the power of encountering the Holy Spirit in community.

### **Materials Needed for Each Session**

- Packets for participants
- Enough Bibles to share
- Candle and lighter
- Enough ELW hymnals to share

## Reading Scripture Together Handout

- Appoint someone in the group to read the passage aloud.
- After the passage has been read once, silence follows.
- After it is read a second time, members of the group are invited to say aloud a word or phrase that stood out to them from the passage.
- The passage is read a third time, and members of the group are once again invited to speak, lifting up anything that they think God is saying to the community in this passage.
- During the first session (and afterward, if you'd like), ask the following questions:
  - What do you notice about this passage?
  - What imagery catches your attention in this passage?
  - What challenges or confuses you in this passage?
  - What brings you joy in this passage?
  - Does this passage stir up memories or stories for you?

## Session One: Introduction: What is Tithing? Learning from Deuteronomy 14:22-29

*Light candle to mark the beginning of your time together.*

The theme of giving unto God is familiar to those of us who take part in worship regularly. We are likely used to hearing announcements from the Stewardship Committee about annual giving and capital campaigns, a vast majority of churches in the area have robust involvement in food donation and feeding programs, and the offering plate passes through our hands during the course of worship each week. The words we speak in worship emphasize the importance of God's gifts. Though each liturgical season is accompanied with different words spoken or sung in the preface portion of the Great Thanksgiving, these words remain consistent: "It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through our Savior Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, in one of the most well-known phrases from our variety of Offertory prayers, we thank God for the gifts of "our selves, our time, and our possessions,"<sup>2</sup> which are signs of God's gracious love and are gifts that we are called to share with all of creation. The words that we recite in the midst of worship and the actions that we embody in our life lived as community point to what we believe it means to give unto God.

A common understanding of the concept of "offering" is related directly to money—after all, when the offering plate is passed around the sanctuary each week in American settings, this is usually what people give. Some congregations will divide the monetary offering between different local or global charities, and will often allot a certain percentage of the gifts of the congregation for upkeep of the building and congregational needs as well. But is money all that offering is? In order to examine this question of what it means to "give unto God", we can turn to the book of Deuteronomy to understand *why* giving unto God is important.

### A Look at the Book of Deuteronomy

The English name of the book of Deuteronomy comes from the Greek term "deuteronomion," which is a compound term meaning "Second Law-giving". This Greek title references the book's claim about itself to "transmit a record of Moses' divinely authorized proclamation of covenantal law in the plains of western

### Reflecting Together

In your group, reflect on some of the ways in which your community expresses its values and its view of "giving unto God". Does offering usually make you think of money? Of food? Of time? Of your own self? Who is offering *for*?



Icon of the Prophet Moses  
by Mikhail Alexandrovich  
Vrubel, 1884

Moab.”<sup>3</sup> Describing itself as composed by Moses, Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of the Pentateuch (also including Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers). Deuteronomy is often referred to by “classical rabbinic and later Jewish sources” by the opening phrase of the book itself, “*allah haddevarim*” (“These [are] the words”), which is spoken about in the shortened term “*devarim*”, meaning “[Book of] Words”.<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy has a complex literary history, and many scholars believe that it was composed “in several stages over an extended period”<sup>5</sup> of time. It is generally thought that the main portion of this book that serves as a “constitutional blueprint for Israel’s corporate life in its divinely granted homeland”<sup>6</sup> was composed during the later 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when the kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians and was in exile.<sup>7</sup> This time period would have been marked by prophetic voices who were examining why such tragic destruction had occurred, and how it could be avoided in the future. The covenant code in Deuteronomy highlights the post-exilic reality of Israel—the temple has now been centralized in Jerusalem, worship practices are being rethought, and a renewed understanding of the community’s relationship and agreement with God is being propagated.



Page from the Book of  
Deuteronomy  
in the Aleppo Codex

Different scholars divide Deuteronomy differently when examining it as a literary piece. For our purposes in this study, the passage that our group is studying over the next few weeks falls within what some view as the second portion of the larger narrative of Deuteronomy—this is sometimes called the “Covenantal law-giving in Moab” and contains Deuteronomy 4:44-28:68.<sup>8</sup> Within this declaration of the law, section 12:2-26:15 is considered a compilation of “statutes and ordinances”<sup>9</sup> which is set in an explicitly covenantal framework and defines the “national institutions, principal obligations of citizenship, offices, and social policies divinely mandated to enable Israel to live faithfully and securely in its homeland.”<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 14:22-29 is about the law of tithing, and this passage can help us to understand the purpose of tithing for ancient Israel (and what its purpose might be today, in our community).

### Reading Scripture Together:

Appoint someone in the group to read Deuteronomy 14:22-29 aloud. After the passage has been read, reflect together on the following questions:

- What do you notice about this passage?
- What imagery catches your attention in this passage?
- What challenges or confuses you in this passage?

- What brings you joy in this passage?
- Does this passage stir up memories or stories for you?

After your reflection, have a second person read the passage aloud once more. Following this reading, the leader will move the group into a discussion of the background of this text.

### **The Deuteronomic Law of Tithing**

The tithing that is instituted in Deuteronomy 14:22-29 is of two different sorts: first, on an annual basis, we hear the command to *eat* the “tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.” A caveat is offered for those who live far away from the temple in Jerusalem that they are to use money to purchase “whatever foodstuffs they wish to consume in the presence of the sanctuary as their tithes.”<sup>11</sup> It is actually likely that this caveat was added to the passage at a later date, in order to “bring tithing practice into line with the centralization of the cult” in Jerusalem. If this is the case, then verse 23’s reference to “the place which God will choose” “is likely to have referred originally to a range of local shrines, not to the Jerusalem temple.”<sup>12</sup> Here we see the ways in which tithing practice develops over time in the life of the Israelites.

Secondly, a “modification or adaptation of the general regulation outlined in verses 22-27”<sup>13</sup> requires that every third year the full tithe ought to be distributed locally to “the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns.” These are all

### **What does “tithing” mean?**

If you have heard of the concept of giving ten percent of what you have as an offering to God, that comes from how people have interpreted the roots of the word “tithe”! Many believe that the term “tithing” comes from same root as the numeral ten, giving the verb “tithe” the meaning “to take a tenth of.”<sup>1</sup> Tithing is an “ancient form of offering in Israel, the Semitic world in general, and beyond.”<sup>2</sup> The word refers to the manner in which an individual or family evaluates the gifts that God has given them and decides how to “remove some of those gifts from common use”<sup>3</sup> and give them back to God and the wider community. The custom of tithing is older than the Deuteronomic tradition (see Genesis 28:22, Leviticus 27:30, and Amos 4:4), though the law of tithing in Deuteronomy 14:22-29 “brings an old law into a new context and gives it a new meaning.”<sup>4</sup>

It is possible that tithing began as a collection by the ruler for the “upkeep of the local shrine,”<sup>5</sup> and developed historically into what we read about in Deuteronomy 14. This passage points to tithing as a type of “taxation system, whereby a tenth of what one produced in the fields, vines, and orchards, together with the firstlings of one’s herds, is to be consecrated to God.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mayes, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy*, 245.

<sup>2</sup> Cairns, *Deuteronomy: Word and Presence*, 127.

<sup>3</sup> Mayes, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy*, 245.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>5</sup> Cairns, *Deuteronomy: Word and Presence*, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Alpert Nakhai, “R’eih: Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17, Laws and Loyalty,” in *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, 1127.

vulnerable individuals within Israelite society, who are “economically weak”<sup>14</sup> and without an ability to own land. As such, based on the economic structure of ancient Israelite society, these individuals entirely relied on the rest of the community to ensure that they had food. Though in the third year the entire tithe went to these individuals, it is likely that they also were fed during the annual tithe. As one scholar notes, the idea behind the tithe was that “offerings should provide food, especially for the poor and destitute in Israelite society, so that all may rejoice.”<sup>15</sup> The idea that the families giving one tenth of their annual produce could eat it all is unlikely (it would have needed to be shared), as some have calculated that a family of twenty would need to invite one thousand in order to eat an entire offering in one sitting.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the concept that when those who have a long distance to travel are still required to convert their money to food and drink once again “indicates that the primary purpose of the tithe is not the upkeep of the sanctuary...but that the offerer and household [and community] should eat before Yahweh.”<sup>17</sup>



*Tithing in the Temple*  
by Pierre Monier

The motif of eating is desperately important in Deuteronomy’s understanding of *why* tithing takes place, as it highlights the principle that “the enjoyment of the benefits of the land depends upon the readiness to relinquish them.”<sup>18</sup> Balance is essential in the tithe between “celebration and concern for the needy and concern for those far away (Jerusalem) and for those near at hand.” As Ian Cairns says, “festivity and concern for the poor need not be mutually exclusive.”<sup>19</sup> When the gifts that are bestowed upon some are recognized as God’s and redistributed to the entire community, it is cause for celebration because *all* of God’s children have been cared for and fed.

**“The relationship to God remains intimately tied to economic relationships with other humans.”**

Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading*, 74.

This celebration for community and the gifts of God do not erase the reality of systemic evils and oppression, however. As one Jewish scholar states about the Levites, the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow: “Note that the Torah does not offer a systematic way to integrate them into alternate family settings so that they could be cared for and protected by clan elders; neither are they given resources that would enable them to fend for themselves. Rather, they are placed at the mercy of others who are charged with the responsibility to provide for them.”<sup>20</sup> As we think about how Deuteronomy 14’s institution of tithing law might apply to us today, we also need to think about the ways in which our

service to others might contribute to their oppression. Discussing this passage's relevance to social-service oriented institutions today, Harold V. Bennett says that they should "be critical of the services they proffer to the underdog. That is to say, in providing services to homeless, indigent, or disenfranchised persons, social-service organizations should be guided by a systematic process that seeks to ameliorate the circumstances of this category of people."<sup>21</sup> Perhaps one of the best ways that we can express thanksgiving to God for the gifts that we have been given would be to engage our baptismal call to "care for others and the world God made" by "working for justice and peace."<sup>22</sup>

Tithing was considered a "requisite for inclusion in God's holy community."<sup>23</sup> Beyond this, however, tithing also served as a sacred interruption to the grind of life in ancient Israel. As scholar Dennis T. Olson writes:

"The statutes and ordinances in Deuteronomy 14:22-16:17 reflect the required interruptions in time, work, and ambition that are at the heart of the commandment to keep the sabbath holy. In the cycle of years and annual harvests, the interruptions include structured time to remember the gifts that God has given, time to give offerings back to God, time for worship, time for celebration, time for sharing with those in need, time for releasing debts and slaves and giving to the poor...time is punctuated by interruptions that call the community back to remember their vocation as the people of God."<sup>24</sup>

The concept that tithing served as a holy interruption or reminder of Israel's abundance and blessing in God's sight is important, and the need for these interruptions points to the reality that it was easy for Israel to quickly forget their covenant with God and with the community. In his book *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, scholar Walter Brueggemann lifts up the fact that Israel's blessing could become its own enemy when they did not recognize that it was a gift from God (and not something they earned of their own merit or good work). He states that:

"Land can be "the enemy of memory, the destroyer of historical precariousness. The central temptation of the land for Israel is that Israel will cease to remember and settle for how it is and imagine not only that it was always so, but that it will always be so. Guaranteed security dulls the memory...one can hardly re-experience one's pre-satiation days."<sup>25</sup>

As your group moves into discussion, reflect first on this issue of forgetfulness in the face of blessing. How does this forgetfulness play a role in your own life or the life of the community? How do issues of fear of scarcity and clinging to abundance impact the life of the community and its relationship with itself and God?

**For Discussion**

1. What has your experience with tithing been throughout your life? What narratives about tithing have you been shaped by?
2. Where does your congregation usually send its offering? How does the offering function in the life of the congregation and the wider community?
3. Who are the vulnerable in your own community? How does this congregation seek to live in relationship with these people?
4. What would it mean to tithe in a more holistic manner (for yourself, and for the community at large)?
5. Deuteronomy 14 speaks of rejoicing with God. What do you imagine this rejoicing looks like? What does it feel like?

## Session Two: “Grain”

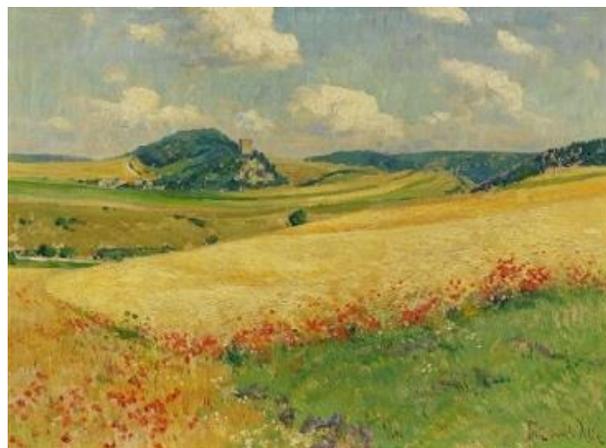
### Opening Devotion

Light the candle that will serve as the source of centering for this conversation, then proceed with the following hymn:

**ELW 687:** Come to Us, Creative Spirit

### Opening Prayer

Holy God, gracious and merciful, you bring forth food from the earth and nourish your whole creation. Turn our hearts toward those who hunger in any way, that all may know your care. Amen.



**Painting of Grain Fields  
by Fritz von Wille**

### Reading Scripture Together:

Appoint someone in the group to read Deuteronomy 14:22-29 aloud. After the passage has been read once, silence follows. After it is read a second time, members of the group are invited to say aloud a word or phrase that stood out to them from the passage. The passage is read a third time, and members of the group are once again invited to speak, lifting up anything that they think God is saying to the community in this passage.

Following this reading, the leader will move the group into a discussion of the background of this text.



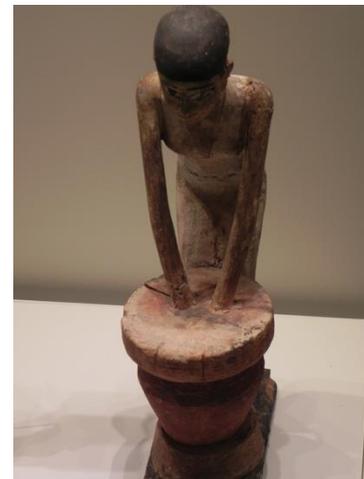
**Statuette of Egyptian Servant  
Processing Grain  
Photo by Einsamer Schütze**

### The Role of Grain in Ancient Israelite Society

Having read the Deuteronomy 14:22-29 excerpt a few times now and having discussed some of the basic purposes of the tithe in ancient Israelite society, we now turn to verse 23 of this passage. Verse 23 states that as a part of the annual tithe, God’s people are called upon to give a certain amount of their grain, wine, and oil. To our modern ears this sounds a little bit like a grocery list—we might guess that these three ingredients are important staples in a Mediterranean, near-East diet, but we probably don’t really understand what role these items played in ancient Israelite society (and thus what it would have meant to give a tithe of these items specifically). In the next three sessions we will look specifically at these three foodstuffs, reflecting on what role they played in ancient Israelite society. We will also reflect on what role these foodstuffs play in our modern society, on what

other things in our lives reflect the role that grain, wine, and oil used to play in ancient Israelite society, and on how this might change our view of what tithing is.

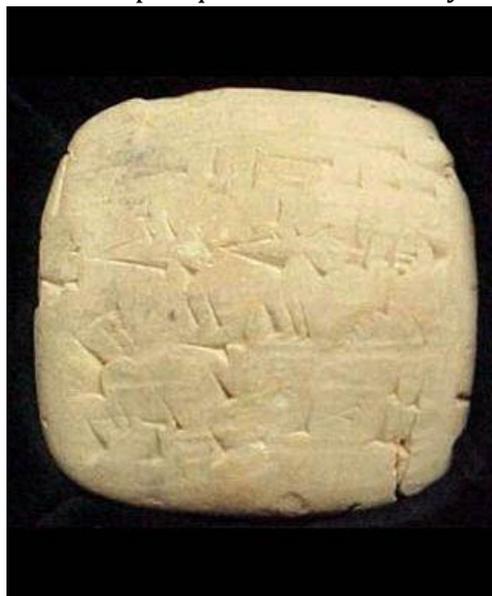
During the Iron Age, society looked much different than it did today—families lived in communal settings during this time period, with individual houses and common spaces for cooking and socializing together. Women were the primary individuals to take on domestic tasks like childcare, gardening, small animal care, and textile and food preparation, while men were involved in agriculture and care for livestock.<sup>26</sup> It is estimated that women spent a “minimum of ten hours a day engaged in domestic labor, two alone in grain processing.”<sup>27</sup> During all of this time spent working, women engaged in “cooperative labor”<sup>28</sup> amongst themselves. Vast networks of women were formed in these communal environments, which led to the sharing of tools and resources, knowledge, and the creation of “intra-community alliances.”<sup>29</sup> These alliances were more than simple friendships—they functioned in a way that formed and upheld trade relationships. The processing of grain, therefore, helped to provide “crucial structure and cohesion among kinship groups and local neighborhoods”<sup>30</sup> during the Iron Age.



**Statuette of Beer Brewing  
from the Israel Museum in  
Jerusalem**

Grain was a major staple in the ancient Near East climate, and the processing of this crop required an extremely long and labor-intensive ordeal. The equipment necessary for the processing of grain included tools for grinding, mixing, and serving, and the baking or brewing of grain required even more (cooking vessels, ovens, etc.). Beyond its ability to grow in the climate of ancient Israel, grain was a staple because of its nutritional value. Scholar Delwen Samuel describes the importance of cereal in ancient diets:

“Cereals are staples for agricultural societies in temperate zones throughout the world. Their primary contribution to diet is food energy, although they are also important for vitamins and minerals as well as protein. Cereals, like all other plant foods, lack some essential components for human health, and cannot on their own provide a balanced protein intake. Food energy is supplied by starch, which makes up 69-79 percent of the cereal grain.”<sup>31</sup>



**Sumerian tablet c. 2050 B.C.E.  
Signed receipt for delivery of  
beer, by brewer named Alulu**



Iron Age Beer Vessel

Grain was used for both bread baking and beer brewing, and the two were closely connected as brewing was an “offshoot of bread production.”<sup>32</sup> Some scholars believe that beer was made from “malted bread cakes”<sup>33</sup> which, after they were baked, were crumbled and added to water in jars. With the addition of yeast, fermentation occurred, and the beer would have been spiced and shared with the community. Beer drinking was a social event, and also had the benefit of putting the harvest to smart use:

“By choosing to use grains to make beer rather than bake bread, people greatly increase the caloric intake from their harvest and added protein and other vitamins to their diet. Furthermore, the small amount of alcohol killed off bacteria, making it safer to drink than water.”<sup>34</sup>

Though both bread and beer were difficult to make and involved long, complex preparation, they provided nourishment in an area where other crops were difficult to grow. The food preparation process was, in itself, an event that led to the formation and upkeep of important economic and political relationships, and the sharing of food was a way for the community to come together and socialize. Keeping in mind the all-encompassing role of grain in ancient Israelite community, the call from Deuteronomy to annually tithe this product takes on a new meaning.

### For Discussion

1. Noting the important role that grain played in ancient Israelite society, what do you think tithing this item would have meant? What would a community be truly tithing if it tithed this item?
2. Grain played an important role in nutrition, trade, political and economic structures, and the processing of it functioned as a way to build relationship. What kinds of items or spaces play these important roles in your own community?
3. What would it mean for this community to tithe those resources?
4. How would the tithing of these resources change the relationship of the community with itself and with God?

## **Closing Prayer**

God of relationship and love, you call your children to rejoice in the gifts that you have given them. As we continue to discern what it means to live in true community and rejoice in our presence, bless our conversations and reflections that they might be signs to us of your love in this time and place. Help us to envision the peace and justice of your kingdom. In your name we pray. Amen.

### **Group Activity Suggestion**

Visit and tour a local bakery together in order to learn about where local grain comes from and how it is processed. You might also visit and tour a local brewery to learn about local beer production. As you visit these places, reflect on how many hands have played a role in the preparation of the food that you eat in this community. What important roles do these businesses and foodstuffs play in your local community? What would it mean to tithe some of these resources to God for the community?

Hint: Panera Bread has a “Day-End Dough-Nation” program that includes the donation of its unsold bread and baked goods on a daily basis. Your group might learn about this program and reflect on how this does or does not reflect the call to tithe!

## Session Three: “Wine”

### Opening Devotion

Light the candle that will serve as the source of centering for this conversation, then proceed with the following hymn:

#### **ELW 689: Praise and Thanksgiving**

#### **Opening Prayer**

God of all creation, all you have made is good, and your love endures forever. You bring forth bread from the earth and fruit from the vine. Nourish us with these gifts, that we might be for the world signs of your gracious presence in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.



6<sup>th</sup> century mosaic of grapes and vines in Chapel of St. Polyeuctos, Jerusalem

#### **Reading Scripture Together:**

Appoint someone in the group to read Deuteronomy 14:22-29 aloud. After the passage has been read once, silence follows. After it is read a second time, members of the group are invited to say aloud a word or phrase that stood out to them from the passage. The passage is read a third time, and members of the group are once again invited to speak, lifting up anything that they think God is saying to the community in this passage.

Following this reading, the leader will move the group into a discussion of the background of this text.

### The Role of Wine in Ancient Israelite Society

Wine, like grain, was a major staple in ancient Israel. Though it had an extremely low alcohol content,<sup>35</sup> the alcohol that it *did* contain helped moderate bacteria levels—thus, wine was a common beverage in ancient Israel because it was safer to drink than water. One scholar goes as far as saying that “if one were to search the textual records and agricultural evidence from the ancient Near East for a single product, aside from the olive, that had a particularly profound effect upon the economy and upon the sense of personal and collective prosperity, it would have to be the grape.”<sup>36</sup> Though there are many passages in the texts of the prophets that condemn those who drink wine to excess, the metaphor of wine and the vine itself is also commonly used in the Bible to point toward economic and social prosperity and stability. The relevance of this imagery is often lost on our modern ears, because while we may understand the concept of viticulture in today’s times it is unlikely that we have an understanding of viticulture in ancient Israel.

Viticulture, or the practice of growing and cultivating a vineyard, required “total devotion”<sup>37</sup> on the part of its laborers. The process was an extremely long and arduous one, with long stretches of time between harvests. One scholar describes the process of viticulture:

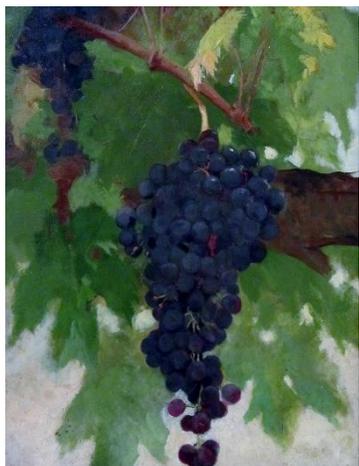
“This included clearing the land from weeds and stones and digging the ditches in which to place the plant. Shoots had to be pruned and trained either to run the ground without rotting or to rise on trellises. As in the Greco-roman worlds, olive and fig trees were commonly made to support the vine, and this explains why frequently Scripture links these three plants within the same passage.”<sup>38</sup>



**Relief from Assyrian Royal Palace (c. 800 BCE)**  
(Note vines climbing up trees in upper right hand corner)

Soil quality and irrigation were major points of concern for viticulturists in the ancient Near East, along with issues of cultivation and pruning during the process of growth. Tools for irrigation and for pruning (that were able to “harvest the fruit without damaging the vine”<sup>39</sup>) needed to be constructed, and this was a costly endeavor. About the time and money needed to invest in viticulture, one scholar states:

“The economics of viticulture necessitate a long-term investment in labor and capital outlay. Not only must the farmer wait six years before harvesting a crop and context with the continual problems of weather, pests, and greedy tax collectors. It is simply a reality of the farmer’s life that throughout their existence the vines must be carefully tended, pruned, and protected.”<sup>40</sup>

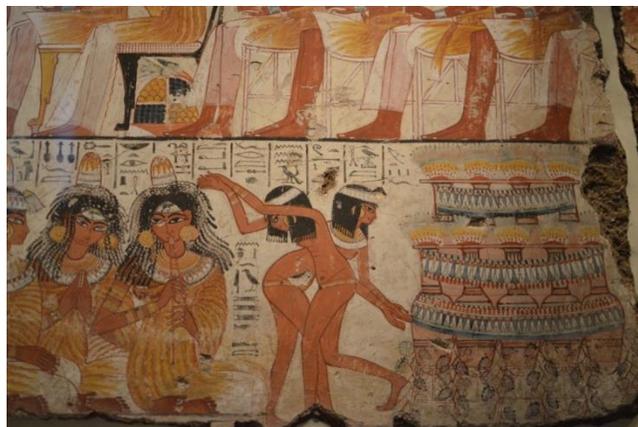


***Uvas* by Celia Castro**

After grapes were finally harvested (four to six years after planting), the community would come together for the processing of the grapes themselves. Fermentation began almost immediately due to Israel’s warm climate,<sup>41</sup> thus the processing of grapes needed to be completed quickly and efficiently. Grapes would be placed in a “treading trough” which was a tool made with mud brick that was large enough for many men to climb into, hold onto a horizontal post, and mash the grapes using their feet.<sup>42</sup> Artistic depictions of these scenes usually show musicians nearby the trough, and scholars believe that the music provided a steady beat

for the treading of the grapes. Winepresses were massive and expensive tools, that were present in “nearly every village and hill country”<sup>43</sup> in the ancient Israelite region.

Due to the fact that the land ultimately belonged to God, a community that was able to successfully harvest the fruit of the vine was seen as prosperous and favored by God. Thus, wine played an extremely important role in many aspects of society—it was a safe beverage (with less bacteria) that provided a way to receive nutrients, it played a role in the midst of social gatherings, its harvesting itself was a social gathering, it was an important crop for economic purposes, and it served as a sign of living in right relationship with God.



**Egyptian Tomb Painting of Wine  
Being Served at a Royal  
Gathering**

Photo taken at The British Museum

### **For Discussion**

1. Noting the important role that wine played in ancient Israelite society, what do you think tithing this item would have meant? What would a community be truly tithing if it tithed this item?
2. Wine played an important role in nutrition, food safety, social gatherings, and the economy. The harvesting of this item brought whole communities together. What kinds of items or spaces play these important roles in your own community?
3. What would it mean for this community to tithe those resources?
4. How would the tithing of these resources change the relationship of the community with itself and with God?

### **Closing Prayer**

Creator God, thank you for the beauty of the Earth. We pray that you might renew life and creation on this planet. Empower us to be your hands and feet, tending to this place with care and love. Help us to live in relationship with this world and one another in the manner that you intended. In your name we pray. Amen.

**Group Activity Suggestion**

Visit and tour a local vineyard together in order to learn about how local grapes are grown and how they are processed. You might consider visiting the vineyard from which your congregation's communion wine comes from (or at least learning more about this winery if it is not local). As you visit these places, reflect on how many hands have played a role in the preparation of the wine that you drink in this community. What important roles do these businesses and foodstuffs play in your local community? What would it mean to tithe some of these resources to God for the community?

## Session Four: “Oil”

### Opening Devotion

Light the candle that will serve as the source of centering for this conversation, then proceed with the following hymn:

**ELW 680: We Plow the Fields and Scatter (*Aramos nuestros campos*)**

#### **Opening Prayer**

Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions. Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.



*Olea europaea*  
Photo taken in Athens, Greece

#### **Reading Scripture Together:**

Appoint someone in the group to read Deuteronomy 14:22-29 aloud. After the passage has been read once, silence follows. After it is read a second time, members of the group are invited to say aloud a word or phrase that stood out to them from the passage. The passage is read a third time, and members of the group are once again invited to speak, lifting up anything that they think God is saying to the community in this passage.

Following this reading, the leader will move the group into a discussion of the background of this text.

### The Role of Oil in Ancient Israelite Society

Olives played a major role in the life and diet of the ancient Israelites. Beyond the fruit of the olive itself, the “cultivation of olive trees, the product of olive oil, and its transshipment were significant components of the economy”<sup>44</sup> of ancient Israel. As we have noted in the past few sessions of this Bible study, grain, wine, and oil all operated as a sort of Mediterranean trifecta in their importance to ancient diet, society, and economy. These three crops were so collectively important to the ancient Israelites, in fact, that only in places where all three could be cultivated did settlement occur.<sup>45</sup>

The olive itself was an important basic food in ancient Israel, but beyond this the olive served a variety of important uses:

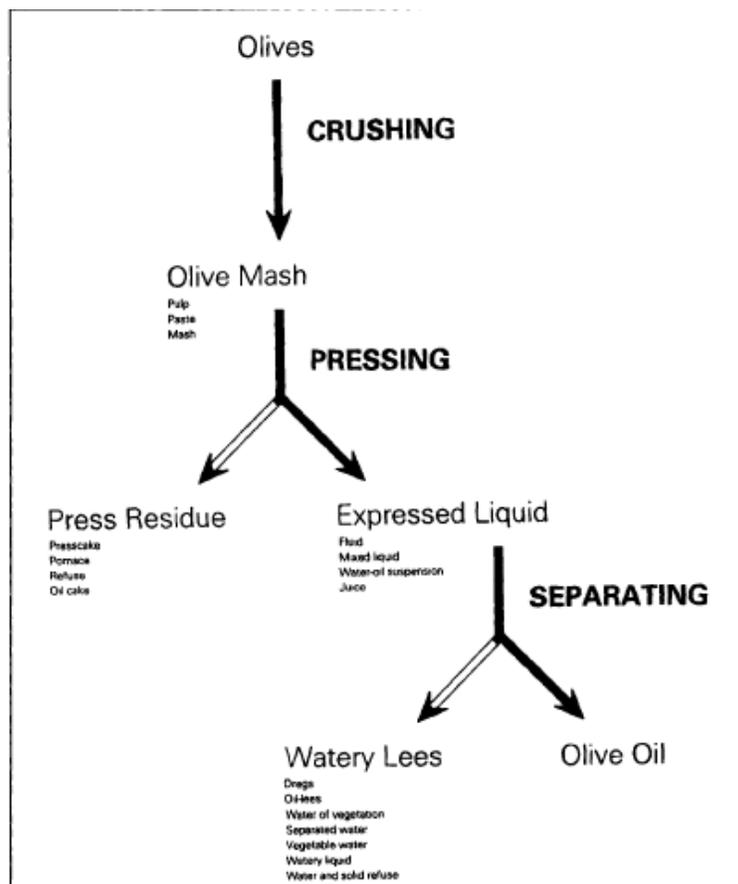
“For food, cooking, treating leather, fuel in lamps, cosmetic manufacture, medicinal purposes, as a cultic offering, and in rituals such as anointing a person for an office. Olive bark found medicinal use as a vulnerary [this means it was used to heal wounds] and the leaf as an astringent and febrifuge [this means that it helped to reduce fever]...olive wood, which has a variegated grain, was used in construction, for ornaments, and for making household utensils.”<sup>46</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a single crop playing such a massive role in the life of an American community today, due to the wide range of resources that communities in this country have access to. In the discussion portion of this study, you will be invited to reflect on which resources play a major role in your own life/the life of the community.

The production of olive oil, the product mentioned in Deuteronomy 14:23, was a three-stage process. It included crushing, pressing, and separating (see figure to the right). Different tools for these steps were developed over the passage of time, and included the mortar and pestle, human feet, stone rollers, and lever-and-weights presses (these were massive!). In addition to these necessary tools, copious numbers of jugs were needed to store in the oil.<sup>47</sup>

The production of olive oil grew into a massive economic industry during the time of ancient Israel, and became an important economic export.<sup>48</sup> In addition to its production as an export and trade item, olive oil needed to be processed in massive quantities for local consumption. Some scholars have calculated what local consumption of olive oil would have been in ancient Israel, and when one looks at the numbers it becomes immediately clear how important this crop was to community life:

“Olive oil consumption per individual per year = 17-20kg.; oil consumption per year for a family of 5 = 100kg. Assuming an average yearly crop of 25kg. of olives per



**Figure Outlining the Steps of Olive Oil Production**

Frank S. Frick, "Oil From Flinty Rock,"  
in *Semeia 86: Food and Drink in the  
Biblical Worlds*, 7.



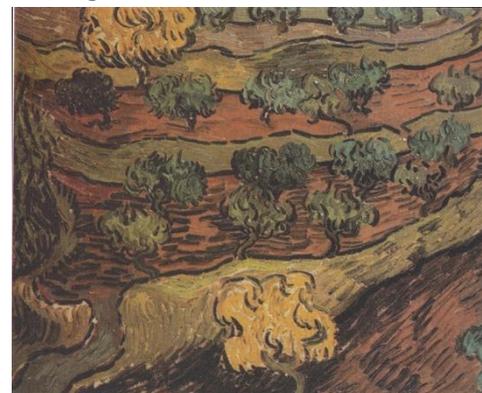
Olive Tree in the al Maiser region of Hashimiyya, Ajloun, Jordan.

tree, producing 5-10kg. of oil, we arrive at 10-15 trees, or one “dunam” of trees, per household...a typical Israelite village, 6.2 dunams in area on the average, would need 31 dunams planted in olive trees for its own use [this equals 310-465 trees].”<sup>49</sup>

This number of trees is *only* an estimate of what would have been needed for local consumption, and does not include an estimate for the number of trees needed when including economic export. Due to the fact that olives and olive oil played such an important role in the life of ancient Israel, olive oil “production complexes”<sup>50</sup> were integrated into the settlements of villages and urban areas so that people would have access to the necessary tools. In this manner, the processing sites of olives became a place for social gathering and community relationship building.

### For Discussion

1. Noting the important roles that the olive played in ancient Israelite society, what do you think tithing this item would have meant? What would a community be truly tithing if it tithed this item?
2. The olive plant played a massive role in the life of the community in ancient Israel. In your group, reflect on what resources play a large role in your own life and in the life of the community. Where do these important products come from? Who plays a role in their production?
3. Olive presses became places for communal relationship building. What places and spaces play this role in your community?
5. What would it mean for this community to tithe those resources?
6. How would the tithing of these resources change the relationship of the community with itself and with God?



*Olive Trees Against a Slope of a Hill*  
Vincent van Gogh  
November-December 1889

### Closing Prayer

God of plenty, fill this community and place with your Holy Spirit and empower us to serve as witnesses to your kingdom. As we discern what it means to tithe our lives and resources to you, help us to rejoice in the abundance of your love and grace that we experience in community. In your name we pray. Amen.

### **Group Activity Suggestion**

1. Visit and tour a local olive oil store together in order to learn about how olives are grown and processed in a modern context and how they are distributed locally. As you visit this place, reflect on how many hands have played a role in the preparation of the olive oil that you eat in this community. What important roles do these businesses and foodstuffs play in your local community? What would it mean to tithe some of these resources to God for the community?

2. Reflect as a group on the role that anointing plays in your community. Do you have regular services for healing? Have you or a loved one ever been visited in the hospital and anointed? How does your congregation procure oil for the anointing at baptism? What does the experience of anointing mean to you, and how do you view God's role in the act of anointing? After reflecting on this, your group might participate in a service of anointing amongst yourselves. How does care for the physical body in anointing reflect God's desire for us to tithe ourselves, our time, and our resources for the sake of the community?

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<sup>1</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leader's Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 224.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>3</sup> S. Dean McBride, "Book of Deuteronomy," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Volume 2*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, Samuel E. Balentine, Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, Eileen Schuller, Brian K. Blount, Joel B. Green, and PHEME PERKINS (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 108.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Kugler, "Tithe," in *NIDB: Vol. 5*, 608.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Cairns, *Deuteronomy: Word and Presence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 145.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>14</sup> A.D.H. Mayes, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 246.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>16</sup> Cairns, *Deuteronomy: Word and Presence*, 144.

<sup>17</sup> Mayes, *The New Century Bible Commentary*, 246.

<sup>18</sup> J.G. McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: The University of Sheffield, 1984), 83.

<sup>19</sup> Cairns, *Deuteronomy: Word and Presence*, 145.

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<sup>21</sup> Harold V. Bennett, "Triennial Tithes and the Underdog: A Revisionist Reading of Deuteronomy 14:22-29 and 26:12-15," in *Yet With a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Randall C. Bailey (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2003), 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 228.

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- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 42.
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- <sup>37</sup> Sasson, “The Blood of Grapes,” 401.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Matthews, “Treading the Winepress,” 20.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 29.
- <sup>41</sup> Sasson, “The Blood of Grapes,” 401.
- <sup>42</sup> Matthews, “Treading the Winepress,” 20.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 22.
- <sup>44</sup> Frank S. Frick, ““Oil From Flinty Rock” (Deuteronomy 32:13): Olive Oil Cultivation and Olive Oil Processing in the Hebrew Bible—A Socio-Materialist Perspective,” in *Semeia* 86: *Food and Drink in the Biblical Worlds*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 7.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 4.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 10.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 13.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.