Stewardship in the Bible is about generosity and hospitality—God’s generosity and hospitality first, and therefore also ours. When Sarah and Abraham showed generosity and hospitality to three strangers, who dropped by their house one day, it resulted not only in the reassurance that Sarah would have a child within a year, but it established them as models of what stewardship means. The author of Hebrews admonishes us readers: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb 13:2).

The Ceremony of the First Fruits

Deuteronomy 26 talks about a simple ceremony at harvest time when a farmer took the first fruits of the grain harvest, put them in a basket, and brought them to the temple. There he confessed to the priest that God’s promise of the land, first made to Sarah and Abraham, had come true, whereupon the priest placed the basket by the altar.

The farmer then testified how his ancestor Jacob had been a wandering Aramean, who lived as an alien in Egypt where he became a great and populous nation. When the ancestors had been oppressed and treated harshly in Egypt, they prayed and the Lord delivered them from slavery to freedom, with many signs and wonders. Then the Lord brought Israel to the promised land and gave them access to all its produce. That generous gift of land and produce led to the farmer’s generosity toward God and to his forthright confession.

Self-reliance is a kind of idolatry—one fears, loves, and trusts in one’s own ability, one’s own efforts. God’s gracious generosity creates our faith and trust in God, and such faith, as Luther stated, needs to be active in love. The lessons Israel learned in its long wilderness wandering had to do with the ultimate basis for life: “[God] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor
your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that human beings do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut 8:3).

Such astonishing faith and generosity were discovered by Elijah in the nameless, Canaanite widow of Zarephath. She was down to her last cup of meal and last tablespoon of oil, that she planned to use for a last cake for herself and her son before they died of hunger, when Elijah asked her for a handout. She listened to and trusted in God’s promise delivered through Elijah so that he, and she, and her whole household were able to eat for many days (1 Kgs 17:10-15).

Luther once said that fasting and bodily preparation are indeed wholesome preparations for receiving the Lord’s Supper, but those individuals are truly worthy and well-prepared, who have faith in these words: “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” Our liturgy is often defined as “the work of the people,” but it can also blind us to the needs that lie all around us. What “work of the people” is most appropriate for us? The book of Isaiah recognizes that there is good fasting and there is bad fasting, there is fasting that concentrates on oneself and there is fasting that concentrates on the needs of others. With God’s rebuke also comes God’s promise in Isaiah 58: “6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? 8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.” The fasting God wants is concern for others; God also promises those who fast in this way that he will continue to march before and behind them, as in the Exodus from Egypt.

We are often appalled at those who promise prosperity and riches as the benefits of Christian faith. Such theology of glory overlooks the seriousness of our sin and underestimates the value of grace. But the Old Testament is replete with proverbs that indicate that those who worry that generosity will bankrupt them are only rationalizing their stinginess. Consider this proverb: “Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want” (Prov 11:24). Or again: “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full” (Prov 19:17).

**Tithing**

Talking about stewardship in Old Testament times brings up the concept of tithing, or setting aside a tenth of one’s income for religious or charitable purposes. Just remember, however, that Israel was an agricultural society that did not use coins or money until the Persians minted coins in the late sixth century. So a tithe was a tenth part of the grain or olive harvest, a tenth part of the grape crop, and a tenth part of the animals one raised.

Israelites actually had three kinds of tithes. With the first kind of tithe one took the tithe to the temple in Jerusalem where the whole family ate the tithe in the temple precincts. In some respects this tithe resembles our thanksgiving or harvest festivals. In harvesting crops or raising animals one recognized that there had occurred an act of receiving and not just of producing. Hence one celebrated that harvest in the temple, in God’s presence, with one’s whole family (Deut 14:22-23).
A second kind of tithe took place every three years when one stored the tithe in one’s hometown. The Levites, who had not been allotted land with the other tribes in the book of Joshua, could draw on these food reserves. So could the widows, the orphans, and the resident aliens, the Old Testament’s common references to the marginalized and the poor. This kind of tithe has many things in common with our food pantries. Perhaps it was even better since the Levites, the poor, and the marginalized could “eat their fill”! The result of such generosity in setting aside one’s tithe for the benefit of the needy would be that the LORD would bless all the work undertaken by those who contributed to this local food storehouse (Deut 14:28-29).

Such generosity and hospitality for the needy are expected in the harvesting process itself. “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of the harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God” (Lev 19:9-10). Generosity and hospitality toward the needy require more than the occasional donation or the gift of a Christmas basket. They also should lead us to address the causes of poverty and seek to change these situations through community-wide actions. Our political priorities are a central part of our stewardship.

The third type of Old Testament tithe comes closest to the use of our contributions to support the church and its ministries. According to Numbers 18:20-32, all tithes were to go to the Levites, the second-rank clergy who carried out their ministries in connection with the tabernacle and later the temple. This tithe is called an offering to the LORD and compensates the Levites for not having any agriculturally based income. But the Levites became tithers too since they were to give one tenth of their income to the priests or higher-ranked clergy. One might conclude that Levites outnumbered priests by about ten to one. Anyone who violated this obligation was subject to the death penalty. Passing on a tithe received to others resembles the ELCA custom of congregations contributing to synodical and churchwide budgets.

The prophet Malachi reports an interesting dialogue about tithing. The LORD had promised the people that he would return to them if they returned or repented. “How shall we return?” the people ask. And God responds, “Would anyone dare to rob God, and yet you have robbed me?” “How so?” the people respond. The divine answer: “By not giving the full tithe to the temple.” Give me a try, the LORD says, “and see if I will not open the windows of heaven and pour down for you an overflowing blessing” that will lead to abundance in grain and the fruit of the vine (Mal 3:6-11).

We can draw several conclusions about tithing in the Old Testament. First, it was an opportunity for rejoicing in God’s generosity and expressing thanksgiving for it. Secondly, it was a means of providing adequate food for the poor and the marginalized. In a sense, poverty was outlawed in the Old Testament: “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy” (Deut 15:4). But if and when there is someone in need, the Bible urges Israel not to be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward the needy neighbor (Deut 15:7). Generosity and hospitality

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1. According to 2 Chr 31:2-12 and Neh 10:32-39 and 12:44-45 the people brought their tithes to both the priests and Levites, apparently a later development.
are self-understood obligations of the people of God. Thirdly, in some passages dealing with tithing, the tithe is used explicitly and exclusively for the support of various kinds of clergy personnel. How the apparent conflict between this third tithe and the first and second uses of the tithe was resolved is not clear to us. All three understandings are surely salutary. In any case, tithes were by no means the only offerings Israelites were expected to make since there were also burnt offerings, peace offerings, sin and guilt offerings, and wave offerings.

The concept of one tenth of one’s income for the church and charity is certainly a worthy goal. In some cases, it may be more than a person can reasonably afford. In other cases, it may be too little. Remember the widow Jesus watched giving in the New Testament. What she gave was a trifle, but it was all she had!

**Stewardship of Time and Talent**

Stewardship does involve our money and our willingness to contribute it to church and to agents of social change, but stewardship also involves everything we are and everything we do. The church cannot survive without financial support, but it cannot thrive without love and care and even committee meetings. There’s a wonderful story in the book of Exodus about Moses’ need for the time and talents of others. Israel was being attacked by the Amalekites, and whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses, senior citizen that he was, could not keep his hands up in the air all the time. That’s where Aaron and Hur came in. They sat Moses on a rock and then held up his hands on either side. The clear victory was Israel’s (Exod 17:8-13). Israel would have lost this battle without two busy people taking the time to support Moses and using their hands to make his blessing of the troops continuous.

Where would Jeremiah have been without his faithful servant Baruch to record his words? He might still be in the king’s cistern had not Ebed-melech the Ethiopian fished him out. How could Jeremiah have sent his famous letters to the exiles without messengers and lectors like Elasah (Jer 29:3) and Seraiah (Jer 51:59)? His famous temple sermon might have been his last utterance had not the elders of the land cited the precedent of the prophet Micah, who had said equally harsh things about Jerusalem and the temple, that led Hezekiah to pray so that the LORD changed his mind about destroying Jerusalem (Jer 26:17-19).

**Stewardship of Creation**

One of the greatest challenges in the twenty-first century is how to care for
Global warming threatens catastrophic changes in climate and in rising ocean levels. Oil, iron, coal, and other natural resources are finite. They must be used wisely, with full consideration of those who come after us. Many plant and animal species are threatened with extinction or with loss of habitat. All of these threats to our planet are directly affected by human behavior.

Discussions of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis identify human responsibility in the care of creation. In Gen 1:26, God says: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” This is commonly referred to as the image of God. That is, women and men are assigned a rulership role or even a royal role in the world. We are to rule God’s world in God’s name and for God’s stead. Dominion, however, can be either domination or beneficent rule. And that’s where this drawing from ancient Mesopotamia comes in. It shows an ancient king or perhaps even a god exercising royal rulership. That means defending against external enemies like this attacking lion, but also exerting kind and healing protection over an endangered deer. In this image of royal rule there is no place for exploitation or violence.

The second chapter of Genesis has a complementary picture of the human vocation. Here the Lord God takes the man and puts him in the garden of Eden “to till it and to keep it” (v. 15). Instead of “till,” other English versions have “dress it” (KJV), “tend it” (NLT), or “cultivate it.” But the Hebrew Bible actually has a verb that is translated literally as “serve it.” In this understanding, humans are not so much over creation as under it. Ours is a servant role, making sure that the earth, its environment, its natural resources, its plants and animals survive, thrive, and grow.

I find these two images of our stewardship of the earth complementary to each other. We are to exercise God’s generous rule over the created order, and we are at the same time in a servant’s role to help brother/sister earth, our master, live up to its full potential.

Conclusion

We can learn much about stewardship from the Old Testament while recognizing that our challenges—and our resources!—are different and even greater than theirs. When Israel told the history of its story with God in Psalm 136, beginning with creation and continuing with the rescue from Egypt, the gift of the land, and God’s memory of them in their low estate, they repeated twenty-six times, God did all this, “for [God’s] steadfast love endures forever.” Steadfast love, mercy, grace, loyalty—however you translate the underlying Hebrew word—that is the attribute of God that we imitate, and that is the attribute of God that makes our generosity and hospitality possible.