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Identity and belonging in the sojourner's practice of urban gleaning

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Abstract

This article examines urban gleaning as a material and relational form of sojourner belonging. Writing from my position as a Hong Kong doctoral student in Edinburgh, I reflect on collecting and sharing surplus food through Olio. I read this practice alongside gleaning laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, while keeping the ancient harvest and modern retail contexts distinct. I argue that these laws illuminate how access can be preserved when claims over food are limited. In my urban practice, belonging took shape through receiving, carrying, and sharing food. Such belonging remained provisional, bounded, and dependent on systems I did not control.

Within a few weeks of arriving in Edinburgh, I began collecting unsold food from a nearby supermarket through Olio, a food-sharing app. Several evenings a week, usually around 9:30 p.m., I walk with my husband from our flat to the shop. The walk takes about five minutes. The food is still edible and has usually been on sale earlier that same evening, but by then it is nearing the end of its retail window. After we bring it home, I list most of the items on the app for people nearby to request. The practice began as a response to food waste. It has become one of the rhythms through which

I receive, carry, and share food in Edinburgh. At first, Edinburgh appeared to me through this small, walkable geography. The short route between my flat and the shop, the timing of late collections, the weight of bags carried home, app messages, and doorways where people came to collect food became part of how I came to know the city.

In this article, I describe this repeated practice as 'urban gleaning'. The phrase points to a contemporary practice read in conversation with biblical gleaning, not to a direct continuation of it. Biblical gleaning is tied to fields, harvest, and landholding. In Leviticus, landholders are told not to reap to the edge of the field or gather all that remains from the harvest, while Deuteronomy prohibits returning for produce left or forgotten during harvesting (Lev 19:9–10, 23:22; Deut 24:19–22; cf. Ruth 2).[1] These commands preserve access to part of the harvest for those named by the laws, including the poor and the sojourner. My practice arises within a very different economic setting. Here, the edge is not the border of a field but the end of a retail window. I collect food close to being withdrawn from sale, carry it home, and make most of it available again through Olio for people nearby to request and collect.[2] Placing biblical gleaning beside this urban practice keeps the comparison analogical and critical. It allows me to ask how food at an edge can draw a sojourner into receiving, carrying, sharing, and being received.

I use 'sojourner' to name a form of belonging shaped by migration that is real, but partial and unsettled. I write as a Hong Kong doctoral student in Edinburgh, living with temporary residency, far from family, studying in a non-native language, and under financial pressure. This position is not equivalent to that of the Hebrew *gēr*, often translated as 'sojourner' or 'resident alien,' who is named among those for whom gleanings are left in Israel's laws (Lev 19:9–10, 23:22; Deut 24:19–22), nor to the experience of refugees, asylum seekers, or undocumented migrants. It is also marked

[1] Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 1979), 268; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible 3A (Doubleday, 2000), 1624–26.

[2] Olio Help Center, "What Is a Food Waste Hero, and How Do I Get Started?" https://help.olioapp.com/en/articles/12277114-what-is-a-food-waste-hero-and-how-do-i-get-started; Olio Help Center, "How Much Food Can I Keep from My Collection?" https://help.olioapp.com/en/articles/12399835-how-much-food-can-i-keep-from-my-collection.

by access, including legal residence, university affiliation, digital access, and the time and mobility to volunteer.

From this situated position, I proceed by way of practical-theological reflection.[3] I begin with a repeated practice of collecting and sharing surplus food in Edinburgh and ask how it may be interpreted theologically. The reading then moves among this practice, biblical gleaning, contemporary work on gleaning and surplus food, and Christian accounts of hospitality. This movement keeps the ancient field and the modern retail edge distinct, while asking how biblical limits on harvesting and possession can clarify questions of access and participation in this urban practice.

This article argues that urban gleaning became one way in which my sojourner belonging in Edinburgh took material and relational form. The gleaning laws in Leviticus 19:9–10 and Deuteronomy 24:19–22 portray the edge and remainder of the harvest as more than leftover space. They limit the landholder's claim over the harvest and preserve access for those named by the laws.[4] Read alongside my practice, this arrangement reframes urban surplus as more than a problem of waste management. It becomes a site where access to food, responsibility for surplus, and hospitality to neighbours are worked out in practice. Food that might have ended as waste is received, carried, and shared again. In that movement, belonging is not secured by possessing the city. It takes shape through participation in the material and relational life of shared food. This participation points to a creaturely form of belonging in which those who share remain dependent on land, labour, infrastructure, and the lives of others.[5]

Urban gleaning

From the beginning, my practice of urban gleaning was shaped by ecological concern and by the uneven visibility of need in the city. Near my flat, I encountered a troubling tension. Edible food could be removed from

[3] Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, eds., *Theological Reflection: Methods* (SCM Press, 2005), 2–5, 18–20.

[4] Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1624–26; Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary (Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 228–29.

[5] Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2–3, 120–21.

supermarket shelves and sent for disposal. On the same streets, I regularly passed people sleeping rough or asking passers-by for help. The people I passed were not necessarily those who later requested food through Olio, and food sharing could not fully address homelessness. Even so, their presence made it difficult for me to treat supermarket surplus only as environmental waste. In this urban setting, 'surplus' was not a neutral label. It named food's loss of its place as saleable stock, not its loss of capacity to nourish. Food that could no longer be sold could still feed. Urban gleaning began for me as a small way to keep such food in use and in circulation.[6]

Through Olio, this concern became a routine of collection and listing. On collection evenings, I collected surplus food from a nearby supermarket, carried it home, sorted it, and listed most of it for people nearby to request and collect. The platform made the food visible beyond my flat and connected the shop's surplus with nearby requests. Yet the food did not become shareable by visibility alone. It depended on the retailer's release, my labour, the platform's listing system, and the time and mobility of people who could collect. Access was therefore mediated from the start. Making that food shareable still depended on release, labour, technology, and movement.

The routine made a short walk into a small way of learning the city. On collection evenings, the walk between my flat and the supermarket was shaped by closing time, the weight of bags, the need to sort and list food quickly, and messages from people nearby. I learned where to go, when to arrive, what I could carry, and what needed to happen next. I no longer knew Edinburgh only through university buildings, my flat, or official documents. I also came to know it through the repeated movement of food.[7] In this small practice, belonging began with orientation and responsibility, not with settled status or security. It took shape in knowing when to walk, what to carry, how quickly food needed to be made visible, and whom it might reach.

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[6] Oona Morrow, "Gleaning: Transactions at the Nexus of Food, Commons and Waste," in *The Handbook of Diverse Economies*, ed. J. K. Gibson-Graham and Kelly Dombroski (Edward Elgar, 2020), 208–09.

[7] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 1–8; Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Routledge, 2000), 237–39.

This form of food sharing also had clear limits. Urban gleaning widened access only after the retail system had withdrawn edible food from sale and classified it as surplus. My practice could redirect where that surplus went next. It could not decide why edible food became surplus in the first place, or who controlled its release.[8] The belonging formed here was practical and provisional. It came through receiving, carrying, listing, and sharing food, without making my place in the city settled or secure. These limits are why I turn to Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Their gleaning laws come from a different world of fields, harvests, and landholders, and they cannot simply be repeated in a modern urban setting. Still, they name the sojourner at the point where food is left and made reachable. They frame the question that follows: How can access to food, the source of which a sojourner neither owns nor controls, become a bounded form of belonging?

Biblical gleaning at the harvest edge

The Torah's gleaning laws in Leviticus 19:9–10, 23:22, and Deuteronomy 24:19–22 sharpen the question of access by shifting attention from leftover food to the limits placed on harvest possession. The field remains the landholder's field, and the crop is not turned into common property.[9] The household's claim over the harvest, however, is not exhaustive. The laws preserve access for those they name. In Leviticus, these are the poor and the sojourner. In Deuteronomy, they are the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow. Their access is built into the limits placed on harvesting rather than added only after the harvest is complete. They are given a recognised way to approach and gather from produce whose source they do not control.[10]

These limits take concrete form in commands that tell the landholder where harvesting must stop. In Leviticus 19:9–10, those who reap are told, 'When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not finish reaping the edge of your field, and you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not glean your vineyard, and you shall not gather the fallen grapes

[8] Morrow, "Gleaning," 208–11.

[9] Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 268.

[10] Wenham, *Book of Leviticus*, 268; Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Baker Books, 2012), 260–61.

of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner.'[11] Gleaning appears here as a practice of restrained harvesting. The field and vineyard are not to be exhausted, and what is not gathered is left for the poor and the sojourner.[12] Leviticus 23:22 repeats the field command within the harvest calendar and again names the poor and the sojourner. Deuteronomy frames the limit differently. In Deuteronomy 24:19–21, the landholder is commanded not to return or collect a second time. 'When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not return to take it. It shall be for the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow' (v. 19). The following verses extend this restraint to olives and grapes. The landholder must not go over the olive branches again or glean the vineyard afterward (vv. 20–21). In the field, a forgotten sheaf is not to be retrieved. With olives and grapes, the landholder may not make a further pass.[13] Leviticus and Deuteronomy therefore place harvest restraint at different moments of agricultural practice. Leviticus prevents exhaustive harvesting of the field and vineyard, while Deuteronomy prevents the landholder from returning for what was forgotten or making a further pass over the olives and grapes. In both cases, food remains within reach of those named by the laws because Torah places a limit on the landholder's further reach.[14]

Deuteronomy 24:17–22 adds a second layer by placing harvest restraint within a sequence shaped by justice and memory. The opening command frames the treatment of the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow as a matter of justice. 'You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or the orphan, and you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge' (v. 17). The harvest commands then carry this concern into the field. In vv. 19–21, the commands concerning the forgotten sheaf, the olive harvest, and the vineyard name the same three recipients. They are the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow. Read within this sequence, the food left from the harvest is not simply dependent on the landholder's benevolence. It is made avail-

[11] Biblical translations are my own unless otherwise noted. I render Hebrew *gēr* as 'sojourner' in keeping with the terminology of this article. The Hebrew text follows Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5th rev. ed., ed. Adrian Schenker (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997).

[12] Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1624–29.

[13] Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 228–29.

[14] Christiana van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 107 (JSOT Press, 1991), 98.

able within an obligation toward those whose access to land and harvest is insecure.[15] Deuteronomy also grounds this restraint in Israel's remembered history. Immediately after v. 17, Israel is told, 'You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that YHWH your God redeemed you from there. Therefore I command you to do this' (v. 18). The appeal to slavery returns after the harvest commands in v. 22. Those who control fields, olive trees, and vineyards are therefore commanded to remember that they too were once slaves whom YHWH redeemed. Deuteronomy 24 does not remove their control, but it refuses to let that control become exhaustive. Remembered deliverance limits possession at the point where the landholder might return for more.[16]

What remains from the harvest is therefore made available within a framework of justice and limits on possession.[17] Across field, olive tree, and vineyard, the limits placed on further harvesting leave food within reach of those without secure access to land.[18] Gleaning does not make the sojourner a landholder or remove the vulnerability associated with life without secure kinship and patrimony.[19] It does, however, keep lack of land from becoming exclusion from the harvest. The law names the sojourner among those for whom access is preserved. The sojourner may gather produce whose source they neither own nor control.[20] This access does not amount to ownership, but it gives the sojourner a recognised place within the material life of the harvest.[21] The belonging implied here is therefore practical and bounded. It consists in participation in the food economy of a place without possession of its land.[22]

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[15] Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 260–61. Wright argues that the Hebrew construction often translated 'leave it for' is stronger than a discretionary gift, since what remains is marked for the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow.

[16] Wright, 260–61; van Houten, *Alien in Israelite Law*, 79. On land as gift and the sharing of land with those without power to claim it, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Fortress, 1977), 47, 66.

[17] van Houten, 97–98; Wright, 260–61.

[18] Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 228–29; van Houten, 98.

[19] Mark R. Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger as Kindred in Deuteronomy*, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 33 (SBL Press, 2018), 5–6; van Houten, 98.

[20] Wright, 261; Tigay, 228–29; van Houten, 98.

[21] Wright, 261; Glanville, *Adopting the Stranger*, 66–67, 93.

[22] Wright, 261; Glanville, 66–67, 93.

The gleaning laws therefore qualify the landholder's claim over the harvest. The field remains the landholder's field, and the sojourner does not become its owner. Yet YHWH's commands prevent that claim from becoming exhaustive, while Deuteronomy 24 ties this restraint to Israel's memory of deliverance. Produce at the field edge, the gleanings, and the forgotten sheaf remain accessible to those named by the laws.[23] Access to what remains is therefore governed by command and by Israel's remembered dependence on YHWH, rather than left entirely to the landholder's generosity. For the sojourner, this means that access does not depend solely on securing the favour of the landholder. It is a bounded participation in a harvest over which the landholder's claim has already been limited.

Receiving and sharing at the urban edge

With this analysis of biblical gleaning in place, I return to the urban edge and ask how food becomes reachable. Although these laws do not provide a direct model for a modern food-sharing app, they draw attention to how access to food is preserved, who may approach it, and what form of participation such access permits. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the landholder's claim does not extend to everything that remains after harvesting. The comparison is clearest at the point of access. In both settings, food becomes reachable to someone who does not own or control its source, but the timing and structure of that access differ. In biblical gleaning, access is protected within the harvesting process before the landholder's claim becomes exhaustive. In my urban gleaning, food became reachable only after it had moved through retail, lost its place as saleable stock, and been released as surplus through decisions and systems beyond my control.[24] This access therefore came late, but not too late to matter. Once the food was released, it could still be received, carried, and made available again.

After bringing the food home, my task was to keep it shareable while it remained usable. Because this access came only after the food had been released, participation took the form of time-sensitive bodily work rather than entry into a field. I carried the food home, sorted it, listed it, answered messages, and arranged collections while it remained within its use-by or

[23] Wright, 260–61; van Houten, 97–98; Glanville, 66–67, 93.
[24] Morrow, "Gleaning," 208–11.

best-before window.[25] Bread, fruit, vegetables, and prepared food had to be collected before they were no longer usable. This work gave me a specific material responsibility. I had to keep edible food available and make it reachable to people nearby. Through this repeated work, participation took the form of presence, time, hands, and attention. Such repeated involvement gave my belonging a practical form without making my place in the city one of ownership or settled security.

Listing shifted the work from keeping food shareable to arranging its collection by people nearby. Once the items appeared on the app, they were no longer only food that I needed to move before it spoiled. They became food that someone nearby could see, request, and collect. Messages had to be answered, and collection times had to be agreed. Unlike the harvest field of biblical gleaning, the doorway of my flat was not a place where people entered to gather food for themselves. It nevertheless became a point of contact where food became visible to people nearby, and people nearby became visible to me. The food could have been redistributed without creating any further relationship. In some handovers, however, repeated contact created brief moments of recognition. The app made food visible, while repeated exchanges gradually made some requesters more than names on a screen. These encounters remained brief and uneven. They did not amount to a settled community. They did, however, keep the redistribution of surplus from remaining entirely anonymous.[26]

Repeated handovers sometimes shifted who was giving and who was receiving. Many exchanges remained single collections arranged through the app. Others became familiar through repeated names, messages, and visits. In a few cases, repeated collection became friendship. Around Christmas, some people brought something back to me, while others occasionally offered food of their own. I read these gestures less as repayment than as signs that giving and receiving did not always move in one direction. Chris Allen's critique of British foodbank responses sharpens the problem of fixing people permanently on one side of this relation. He describes some foodbank responses as a 'theology of the giver,' in which

[25] Olio Help Center, "What Is a Food Waste Hero"; Olio Help Center, "How Much Food Can I Keep".

[26] Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Eerdmans, 1999), 73–75, 159–60.

users appear primarily as grateful recipients and may experience shame or humiliation.[27] My practice did not solve food poverty, nor was it equivalent to a foodbank. Yet within this small network, the positions of giver and receiver could sometimes shift. A person who came to collect could also offer, and I, as a volunteer, could also receive.[28] These exchanges did not make giving a condition of dignity or belonging. They did, however, show that receiving need not exclude agency, and giving need not place one person above another. Receiving and sharing could remain intertwined within the same fragile practice of belonging.

Biblical gleaning places limits on the landholder's claim before any later act can be described as giving. The commands already restrict what the landholder may gather and preserve access for others. My urban practice took place at a different edge, but here too sharing began from receiving. I could make food available only because it had first been released to me. The food's movement did not begin in my flat. It had already passed through land, weather, labour, transport, retail systems, and decisions about withdrawal and release. By the time I listed it, I was already dependent on other people's labour and on processes I did not control. Receiving therefore came before sharing in more than a chronological sense.[29] Sharing food was therefore not an act performed from above need, but a practice carried out from within dependence.

Nevertheless, this form of belonging remained bounded by conditions of access. Food became available only when the retailer released it as surplus, and people nearby could collect only if they had the app, time, and mobility to do so. The platform therefore shaped both what food could be listed and who was able to take part. These limits did not erase the contact, familiarity, and reciprocity described above, but they restricted how far such relations could extend. In this practice, access opened only at a late stage, after food had passed through retail and lost its place as saleable stock.[30] It could not change why edible food became surplus, who

[27] Chris Allen, "Food Poverty and Christianity in Britain: A Theological Re-assessment," *Political Theology* 17, no. 4 (2016): 361, 366–67.

[28] Pohl, 112–13, 122–23; Peter C. Phan, "The Ethics of Mutual Hospitality: Migrants as Guests and Hosts," in *Christianity and Migration: A Christian Theology of Migration for Our Age* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 329–30, 365–68.

[29] Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 2–3, 120–21.

[30] Morrow, "Gleaning," 208–11.

controlled its release, or who could receive it in practice. Within these limits, however, repeated acts of receiving, carrying, listing, and sharing gave my belonging in Edinburgh a practical and relational form. That belonging remained provisional and material, shaped by participation rather than by settled status or secure possession.

Conclusion

Urban gleaning began for me with surplus food near the end of a retail day. It became more than a response to waste. Through repeated acts of collecting, carrying, listing, and sharing, food drew me into a material rhythm of life in Edinburgh. It gave me a bodily route through the city and placed me in relation to people nearby. In this sense, belonging emerged through participation rather than through ownership or settled status.

The gleaning laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy bring this urban practice into sharper focus. Their world is one of fields, harvests, and landholders rather than retailers, apps, and surplus stock. They therefore do not provide a direct model for contemporary food rescue. They do, however, show how access can be preserved when a claim over food is limited. In biblical gleaning, this access is protected within the harvest itself. In my urban practice, food became reachable only later, after it had passed through retail and been released as surplus. Even at this late stage, however, it could still be received, carried, and shared again.

This practice did not resolve the inequities of the food system, nor did it make my place in Edinburgh settled or secure. Within these limits, it nevertheless gave my belonging a real but provisional form. This suggests that a sojourner's participation in a city need not depend on ownership or self-sufficiency. Such participation may take shape through receiving what one did not produce, taking responsibility for what has been received, and making it available to others. Sharing does not remove dependence but takes place within it.