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Release from the Slavery of Debt: The Jubilee Year for Ancient Israel and the Modern Global Economy

Laura Kelly Fanucci

The concept of the jubilee year described in Leviticus 25 calls for a proclamation of liberty throughout the land every fifty years. The jubilee is a sacred year which heralds the restoration of ancestral lands and a release from the burden of indebtedness. The mandates of the jubilee year illustrate ancient Israel's understanding of the need for regular social reform in order to maintain balance in relationships, justice in the economy, and equality in society. The jubilee year stands as a necessary theological symbol for the world of ancient Israel, and this key component of covenant law still makes demands on God's covenant people today. An examination of how the jubilee was understood by ancient Israel will lead to an application of its principles to the contemporary crisis of the debt burden in the Developing World. This paper will explore three aspects of the meaning of the jubilee year: its necessity, its theological foundations, and its symbolic value. As a necessary ritual restoring right relationship within the covenant, a theological expression of who God is and who God's people are called to be, and a symbol of how humans are to live in the world, the jubilee year continues to pose a provocative challenge for the world today.

To understand the full meaning of the jubilee year, its context within the larger book of Leviticus must first be established. As part of the Priestly tradition (P) which was written during the postexilic period, the book of Leviticus contains a collection of laws concerning ritual purity.¹ Its rules establish the rituals and practices by which the ancient Israelites were to remain holy for their covenantal relationship with God. As part of the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17–26, the jubilee year legislation in Leviticus 25 demonstrates how the ritual laws govern not only the people's religious practices, but their social and economic interactions as well.² The jubilee laws describe important moral and religious beliefs held by the ancient Israelites, including “the equitable distribution of land, the exchange of land when necessary without deception, and the importance

of the connection between land and the family.”³ All the mandates which make up the jubilee year in Leviticus 25—necessary fallow cycles for the land, the prohibition against usury, and the redemption of debts—are ultimately concerned with maintaining right relationship with God.

The holiness of the jubilee year laws is evident through the Levitical text. First and foremost, Israel's belief in the divinely ordained nature of the laws is revealed in the description of their origin as given by the Lord to Moses on Mount Sinai (Lev 25:1). Second, the computation of the calendar by which the jubilee year is determined is itself of holy significance. Given the sacredness of the number seven in ancient Israelite culture, a cycle of “seven weeks of years,” or forty-nine years, would have indicated a heightened sense of holiness for the jubilee year (25:8). Third, the sacred nature of the jubilee year is intensified by the fact that its proclamation takes place on Israel's Day of Atonement, the most solemn day of the year on which the high priest atones for the sins of the community (25:9). The jubilee year is therefore established as an unmistakably holy moment within the Israelite calendar.

The description of the jubilee year in Leviticus 25 begins with the purpose of its proclamation—to announce liberty for all: “This fiftieth year you shall make sacred by proclaiming liberty in land for all its inhabitants” (Lev 25:10).⁴ During the jubilee year everyone is to return home, and all land is returned to its proper owner: “In this year of jubilee, then, every one of you shall return to his own property” (25:13). The year of jubilee is also a sabbatical year in which there is to be no sowing or reaping and food will be taken directly from the field for all (25:11-12). The jubilee year is to govern business dealings in all other years since it serves as both the time marker

³ David A. Leiter, “The Year of Jubilee and the 21st Century,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 47, no. 3–4 (Summer–Fall 2002): 178.

⁴ The importance of the jubilee year proclamation is evidenced by its announcement by a trumpet blast from a ram's horn whose Hebrew name (*yobel*) gives the jubilee its name: “on this, the Day of Atonement, the trumpet blast shall re-echo throughout your land” (Lev 25:9). (See note to Lev 25:10 in *New American Bible* [New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1992], 126.)

¹ R. Norman Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 123.

² *Ibid.*, 130

and the price standard in all economic transactions (25:14-16). The majority of chapter 25 (vv. 23-55) is devoted to explanations of how the absolute law regarding redemption of property is to be carried out: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine, and you are but aliens who have become my tenants. Therefore, in every part of the country that you occupy, you must permit the land to be redeemed” (25:23-24). Leviticus 25 thus describes multiple aspects of the ritual return to family and ancestral property every fifty years.

Having sketched in broad terms the legislation of Leviticus 25, we turn our attention to an examination of the necessity of the jubilee year within ancient Israelite culture. As a regular ritual celebration, the jubilee year provides a fundamental rhythm for the life of all creation—humans and the land. Since Leviticus 25:11-12 clearly states that the jubilee year involves the celebration of a sabbatical year, the jubilee has aptly been described as the climax of the Sabbatical cycle.⁵ The jubilee year therefore affirms the fundamental unity of creation, since both people and the land are intended to observe the sabbath:

When you enter the land that I am giving you, let the land, too, keep a sabbath for the LORD. . . . While the land has its sabbath, all its produce will be food equally for you yourself and for your male and female slaves, for your hired help and the tenants who live with you, and likewise for your livestock and for the wild animals on your land. (25:2, 6-7)

The fallow year of the land’s sabbath allows the earth to rest and rejuvenate, yet the people will not starve since God will provide enough food to sustain all humans and animals. The “calendar cycles” provided by Leviticus therefore establish a structure that governs all of Israel’s life “for the preservation of creation and for the liberation and well-being of all God’s people.”⁶ Following this cyclic understanding of time, the jubilee year serves as a recurring moment of renewal for both the land and those who work it.

The jubilee year is necessary not only for the good of creation, but for the good of the people’s covenantal relationship with God as well. Robert Kawashima thus views the jubilee year primarily as

a purificatory ritual:

[T]he Jubilee Year symbolizes and completes an atonement of socioeconomic pollution. The Priestly system of thought imagined Israel, at the moment of its creation by divine fiat, as an ideal correlation of people and land, a sacred order, which not unlike the organization of creation itself as described in the Priestly cosmogony of Genesis 1, must periodically be restored.⁷

Following this understanding of Israel as a nation (the chosen people and the promised land), Kawashima argues that the Priestly author of Leviticus views “slavery and the loss of ancestral land as instances of socioeconomic pollution, since in both cases an Israelite is removed from his proper place in society, namely, from family and land.”⁸ Such a disruption from the proper order results in chaos which has to be periodically and ritually set right. Therefore the mandates surrounding the jubilee year are “sacred, not just civil, obligations,” which take place in order to reestablish right relationship with God.⁹ The return of the people to their families and ancestral land signifies “the return of cosmic order to Israel”—the original pure state of the nation, both people and land.¹⁰ Vision meets reality, and God’s reign of peace and justice is once again restored throughout the land:

Within the Priestly system of thought, then, the Jubilee Year embodies the highest degree of purity attainable on earth, the highest good according to the priests’ philosophical idealism. Every fiftieth year, everything is at it should be, where it should be.¹¹

The proclamation of the jubilee year on the Day of Atonement confirms its purificatory nature: “on the very day that the scapegoat disposes of the people’s sins in the wilderness, the people and the land return to their original, sacred distribution.”¹² The jubilee year thus serves as a necessary means for reestablishing right relationship with God through the purification of Israel as a nation.

Having thus established the necessity of the jubilee year, an examination of its theological foun-

⁵ Calum Carmichael, *Illuminating Leviticus: A Study of Its Laws and Institutions in the Light of Biblical Narratives* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 123.

⁶ F. Ross Kinsler, “Leviticus 25,” *Interpretation* 53, no. 4 (1999): 397.

⁷ Robert S. Kawashima, “The Jubilee Year and the Return of Cosmic Purity,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2003): 372.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Kinsler, “Leviticus 25,” 397.

¹⁰ Kawashima, “The Jubilee Year,” 372.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 389.

¹² *Ibid.*, 384.

dations naturally follows. According to the biblical author (P), the theological basis for the jubilee year is the Exodus event. The divinely-instituted legislation in Leviticus 25 is grounded in Israel's covenantal relationship with God which brought about their liberation from Egyptian rule: "For to me the Israelites belong as servants; they are servants of mine, because I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I, the LORD, your God" (Lev 25:55). The primary place of the Exodus in Israel's understanding of the jubilee year is seen in many of the motive clauses attached to jubilee laws which explain the necessity of their observance: "Since those whom I brought out of the land of Egypt are servants of mine, they shall not be sold as slaves to any man" (25:42). The basis for justice in the jubilee year is reverence for the Lord of the Exodus who brought Israel out of slavery: "Do not deal unfairly, then; but stand in fear of your god. I, the LORD, am your God" (25:17). The people are to live with each other in remembrance of how God has treated them with compassion and justice: "When one of your fellow countrymen is reduced to poverty and is unable to hold out beside you, extend to him the privileges of an alien or a tenant, so that he may continue to live with you" (25:35). Through the calendar rhythms of sabbath, Israel ritually remembers the experience of the Exodus: "The fundamental foundation for the Jubilee year, as for the Sabbath year and the Sabbath day, was the Exodus. God's people were to treat each other, even those who fell into slavery, in ways radically different from the other nations, because YHWH had delivered them from Egypt."¹³ This cultic and cyclic remembrance of Exodus through the various manifestations of the sabbath is thus both foundational and formational for the ancient Israelites: "It was, in a way, a sort of institutionalized exodus in which, in obedience to God, the experience of liberation from slavery was renewed and a new day of justice and peace dawned."¹⁴

In addition to the formative Exodus event, a second theological foundation for the jubilee year is Israel's belief that God is the true owner of the land: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine, and you are but aliens who have become my tenants" (Lev 25:23). Since the land belongs to God, all of God's people have an equal right to the land and its fruits. Similarly, no one can sell the land,

¹³ Kinsler, "Leviticus 25," 396.

¹⁴ C. René Padilla, "The Relevance of the Jubilee in Today's World (Leviticus 25)," *Mission Studies* 13, no. 1–2 (1996): 22.

but only the right to use the land, since all property must be returned to its original owner at the jubilee year. God's ownership of the land is understood as a basic fact: "the Lord is the guarantor of adequate right of access for all to the source of supply which is what is meant by 'the Land.'"¹⁵ The notion of redemption—having a member of one's kin put forth financial support to free one from the bondage of slavery or destitution—is understood by some commentators as the broader theological underpinning of the jubilee mandates regarding property: "It is ultimately as 'Owner of All Land' that God, by the Jubilee, 'repurchases' the land of its former owner, to guarantee that it will remain as 'family possession.'"¹⁶ The right to private property is not guaranteed as an absolute right, but the ultimate ownership of the land by God is instead proclaimed as the foundation of all economic dealings.

Having thus established the necessity of the jubilee year for ancient Israel, as well as its theological foundations, the following questions inevitably arise: Was the jubilee ever practiced as a real law or was it simply a utopian ideal? Could the universal implementation of such sweeping systematic reform ever be practically executed, and what would have been the economic and social impacts of such a dramatic upheaval? Was the jubilee ideal instead envisioned simply to give hope to Israelites who were devastated economically by the Babylonian exile? The historicity of the jubilee year continues to be debated by scholars.¹⁷ Yet what matters most for the application of the jubilee laws in contemporary society is "the intent of those who preserved the Jubilee as a biblical institution."¹⁸

The fact that a majority of the jubilee legislation is devoted to discussion of the redemption of debts has been the focus of recent biblical scholarship, as

¹⁵ Robert North, *The Biblical Jubilee . . . After Fifty Years* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000), 121.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

¹⁷ The positions taken by scholars on the historicity of the jubilee year is largely determined by their view on the dating of Lev 25: "The 'utopian' view is largely linked to a later exilic dating of the Jubilee (or of the whole chapter), which probably is somewhat more common among commentators, often linked with Isa 61 or with the return from exile. . . . Those who maintain a historical reality, if not of Lev 25,10 itself, then at least of an earlier tradition which it retrieves, have generally found that the likeliest historical period for the emergence of such a tradition was the time of the settlement attributed to Joshua, when Israel's hopes were high and the fulfillment was so far off as not to seem implausible" (North, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 11–12).

¹⁸ Leiter, "The Year of Jubilee," 170.

well as a primary concern for those who raise the issue of debt reduction for the Developing World today. The Levitical author condemns interest-bearing loans in no uncertain terms: “Do not exact interest from your countryman either in money or in kind, but out of fear of God let him live with you. You are to lend him neither money at interest nor food at a profit” (Lev 25:36-37). The burden of debt is clearly understood as contrary to God’s will for humankind. The fact that laws decrying slavery are included in the discussion of loans and debts has led some scholars to conclude that “debt is regarded as slavery” in Leviticus 25.¹⁹ In particular, the problem of crippling loans which become essentially unpayable is decied as an evil which must be expunged from society. Therefore debts cannot simply be cancelled; a more comprehensive solution is needed to get at the roots of the problem, namely the presence of sin and inequity within the community:

For this reason, as puzzled commentators have noted, Leviticus 25 makes no mention of canceling debts; precisely on the Day of Atonement of the Jubilee Year, all debts have been paid off *by design*. . . . For it is the strict program of amortization together with the prohibitions of interest and of permanent sale that purge debt by paying it off.²⁰

The question of applying the program of jubilee year legislation to the present unbalance within the global economy can be addressed by examining the same key factors which established the jubilee’s meaning for ancient Israel—its necessity, theological foundations, and symbolic value—in order to determine what meaning the jubilee holds for the present age.

First, the necessity of a jubilee proclamation seems pressing, given the growing divide between developed- and developing-world countries as a result of the burden of national debt. Poorer countries, including many in sub-Saharan Africa, have amassed such staggering external debts that they struggle even to pay the interest to foreign banks and governments of industrial nations, depleting their nation’s financial resources at the expense of addressing the basic needs of their own citizens, “such as food, health care, clothing, and housing.”²¹ The debts of many nations have become largely unpayable, and some indebted countries have simply ceased payment.²²

¹⁹ North, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 18.

²⁰ Kawashima, “The Jubilee Year,” 388.

²¹ Padilla, “The Relevance of the Jubilee,” 26.

²² An analysis of the current situation regarding international debt

International organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have recognized the burden of staggering national debts, but much recent social activism has come from religious groups, due in large part to their application of the Levitical jubilee year to the current crisis.²³ The mandate of the jubilee year is to protect the poor from exploitation through economic slavery, “to avoid precisely the situation which agonizes us today: a world or a nation where too few have far too much, and millions starve.”²⁴ The basic stance toward the economy and ecology in Leviticus 25 stands in stark contrast to much of the current approach toward the world market and natural resources: the poor and vulnerable are not to be exploited; the land is not to be used to the point of exhaustion.

Second, the theological foundations of the jubilee year also call for the application of its principles to the current global economy. Drawing on its connection with Exodus, the proclamation of the jubilee can be seen as “a ‘celebration of release’ which must somehow involve a more just distribution of indebtedness among the poorer populations.”²⁵ The belief that all of creation ultimately belongs to God also compels a contemporary application of the Levitical jubilee legislation: “Two-thirds of the world is hungry and in need of ‘release from its debts; repossession of its land.’ ‘The Land is the Lord’s’—to be used for reasonable (even if never perfectly equal) benefit

can be found in the World Economic Outlook, a survey from the staff of the International Monetary Fund in September 2003; in particular chap. 3, “Public Debt in Emerging Markets: Is It Too High?,” <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2003/02/pdf/chapter3.pdf> (accessed 5 December 2007).

²³ The international movement called Jubilee Year 2000 brought together diverse religious groups around the world in an effort surrounding the year 2000 to campaign for debt relief for the Developing World. This movement coincided with the Catholic Church’s declaration of 2000 as a Jubilee Year, “an important religious event calling for forgiveness of sins, reconciliation between adversaries, and a commitment to serve God with joy and peace” (Leiter, “The Year of Jubilee,” 182). Pope John Paul II was a leader in the effort to awaken public consciousness to the need for a significant change in global economic policy toward the debts of developing countries. The Jubilee movement’s work to rally political leaders and powerful financial institutions continues today; notably the year 2007 was declared a “Sabbath year” by the Jubilee USA: “Inspired by the Jubilee vision of liberation and fullness of life for all, people of faith and conscience around the world are calling their political leaders to observe a Sabbath Year in 2007, seven years after Jubilee 2000.” Jubilee USA: The Sabbath Year, <http://www.jubileeus.org/index.php?id=239> (accessed 5 December 2007).

²⁴ North, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 122.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 125–26.

of all people everywhere.”²⁶ The theology of the jubilee year also raises the ethical question of whether religious practices govern decision-making in today’s world: “The Jubilee was concerned with basic ecological and economic realities—the care of the land and those who worked the land, debts, slavery, and the distribution of the land. These practical concerns were presented as critical spiritual matters.”²⁷ The jubilee was never intended to be simply a political or an economic decision, but rather a powerful theological reality. It is described by the Leviticus author as an ethical and religious mandate intended to transform people’s ways of thinking about their fellow humans, their attitudes toward justice, and their transactions in the business world. The jubilee is a sacred matter, concerned with the restoration of right relationship with God throughout all of creation.

The symbolic value of the necessary and theologically grounded jubilee year is the third and most significant aspect of the Leviticus 25 legislation for contemporary application. Regardless of whether it was ever practiced as actual law or functioned merely as a utopian ideal, the jubilee remained an important theological symbol for ancient Israel. The Israelites’ belief in this divinely ordained legislation suggests the value of the jubilee year “to serve as a symbol to the community that everyone has a claim to own and work the land.”²⁸ The symbolic meaning of the jubilee year holds great potential for the transformation of society today as it did for ancient Israel: “The value of these rules was not their effectiveness as an enforceable law but their effectiveness for serving as a symbol for those who advocated an egalitarian society and for those who were sympathetic with people who wielded little economic power.”²⁹ Even without accepted agreement in scholarship on whether or not the jubilee was ever practical legislation, the law can be called upon to govern economic and ethical practices in today’s society.

Understanding the jubilee year as a potent symbol follows an established tradition of biblical interpretation:

The Hebrew Bible contains numerous legal rules that are problematic from a legislative standpoint, yet they have remained part of the biblical tradition. . . . Such laws do not function effectively as enforceable legislation but tend

to take on other functions that serve the society that created them in the first place. Such functions normally fall under the realm of the symbolic and the didactic.³⁰

Laws thus have multiple functions: not only to legislate expected behavior and to prescribe punishments in case of disobedience, but also to symbolize and to instruct. Laws communicate the moral values and ethical norms of a given culture, as well as teach the community’s most important beliefs. Thus even if the jubilee laws were never practical or realistic from a legal and economic standpoint, they still held great importance and meaning for ancient Israel.

It is in this symbolic nature that the jubilee year continues to hold its greatest value as a model for the modern world:

Even today the Jubilee rules serve in didactic and symbolic ways to send a moral message to the world. These rules serve to educate the general public and the world’s leaders that economic inequality is inappropriate and must be addressed whenever it occurs in cases such as the international debt crisis. They also serve as a symbol for those who feel compelled to bridge the gap between the rich and poor.³¹

To a certain degree, all laws are based on utopian visions. Humans create rules with the expectation that most, if not all, will not always be followed to the fullest. Yet the standard is still set high in the hopes of future progress and human potential. Such hopeful standards are needed to inspire the imagination and encourage real action: “We need to ask not whether it is realistic or practical or viable but whether it is imaginable. . . . The imagination must come before the implementation.”³² As the jubilee year stimulated the imagination of ancient Israel, so too can its symbolic value function to inspire and direct actions today.

The concept of the jubilee year raises difficult questions. What do freedom, solidarity, stewardship, justice, and equality mean in today’s world? How can balance be brought to the global economy? Those who accept the book of Leviticus as Sacred Scripture are called to look beyond the historical circumstances of ancient Israel to apply the meaning of the jubilee year to contemporary life. As a universal

²⁶ Ibid., 126.

²⁷ Kinsler, “Leviticus 25,” 395.

²⁸ Leiter, “The Year of Jubilee” 178.

²⁹ Ibid., 179.

³⁰ Ibid., 175.

³¹ Ibid., 181.

³² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 44–45; quoted in C. René Padilla, “The Relevance of the Jubilee,” 30.

declaration of liberty, the jubilee can be understood today in terms of a worldwide call for freedom from the slavery of crippling debt loads: “The message of the Jubilee for today . . . is a proclamation of global unity in working to relieve economic unbalance.”³³ The jubilee year continues to respond to present-day calls for justice and dignity to play a central role in global economic decision-making:

At the very heart of the Jubilee lies the firm conviction of the equality of all people before God, equality that can never be reduced to an abstract ideal, but rather is realized in the concrete possibility that all people have their basic needs met.³⁴

The hopeful vision of the jubilee legislation broadens its message beyond the particular historical situation of Israel to assert powerful relevance for present reality; it is a call to examine what is and to ask what should be. As a necessary theological symbol, both for ancient Israel and for the world today, the jubilee year invites believers to examine their own social and business dealings, as well as to challenge the economic practices of their banks and governments in order to bring about a more just and equitable world in which all of creation is honored and allowed to live freely. †

³³ North, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 120.

³⁴ Padilla, “The Relevance of the Jubilee,” 22.

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Silhouette Chapel

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