

JUBILEE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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In the United States, the biblical year of Jubilee has long been associated with issues of social justice. During the nineteenth century, the focus was on slavery as reflected by a number of Civil War era songs.¹ This seemed to be a very logical connection since one of the parameters of the year of Jubilee was the directive to “proclaim a release through the land to all its inhabitants” (Lev 25:10 NASB),² a phrase understood by many abolitionists as referring to the freeing of slaves. More recently, the subsequent phrase in the Leviticus passage for “each of you” to return to “his own property” in the year of Jubilee has been used as an argument for “redistribution of wealth.”³ Ron Sider calls this the “Jubilee Principle” and uses the year of Jubilee as an important underlying principle for his view of Christian social justice.⁴ This Jubilee principle has been expanded in a number of directions, perhaps most notably in terms of international debt. Jubilee 2000 called for the cancellation of third world debt by the year 2000 claiming that in the biblical year of Jubilee, “all debts are cancelled.”⁵ In the same vein, Jubilee USA Network advocates what it calls “Jubilee justice,” which it defines as the forgiveness of international debt.⁶

This raises a number of questions regarding Christian social justice. The present paper focuses on just two: “Is this concept of social justice a valid understanding of the OT institution of Jubilee?” and “Is the OT institution of Jubilee applicable today?”

I. THE ORIGIN OF THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

The year of Jubilee is presented in Lev 25:2–46 as part of the Sabbatical year discussion. According to the Torah (or Pentateuch), Genesis, Exodus, and

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¹ The American Civil War Music web site (<http://www.pdmusic.org/civilwar2.html>) includes both music and lyrics for a number of these songs which correlate emancipation with Jubilee.

² Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

³ For example, see Richard H. Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000) 68–69; and Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (5th ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997) 230–31.

⁴ Sider, *Rich Christians* 67–70. See also Ronald J. Sider, *Just Generosity* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 76–79.

⁵ Jubilee2000 UK web site (www.jubilee2000uk.org) accessed May 18, 2010.

⁶ Jubilee USA Network states on its web site: “In the Jubilee Year as quoted in Leviticus, those enslaved because of debts are freed, lands lost because of debt are returned, and community is restored” (www.jubileeuse.org/about-us, accessed May 19, 2010).

Leviticus were given by God at Mt. Sinai (Lev 27:34).⁷ Within the context of the Torah, the primary purpose of Leviticus itself seemed to be to teach the priests and people the implications of God's holiness, specifically in terms of how the people of Israel were expected to respond.⁸ This expected response was a lifestyle different than anything anyone in the receiving audience had experienced to that point, and the year of Jubilee was just one aspect of it. The audience at Sinai consisted of Israelites (descendants of Jacob) and a "mixed multitude" (Exod 12:38) who had been settled in Egypt for several generations. In essence, they were emerging from corporate slavery within Egypt and would have been a group of people feeling their way into freedom. As presented in the text, at the time of Sinai there would have been no slaves, no land owners, and while they would not have been wealthy,⁹ no one would have had any debt.¹⁰ Thus it was a group of people who had not yet developed any real social stratification.¹¹ What is more, the land into which this population group was going was very different from the one they had left. The Egypt they knew was flat, devoid of trees, and watered by the Nile and its floods. Canaan was hilly, largely forested, and watered by rainfall. The agricultural calendars were also different as were some of the crops.¹² While it is likely that some of the Israelites had farmed in the Egyptian delta, the irrigation methods used there would have been very different from the dry land-farming methods required in Canaan. To complicate matters, by the time of the actual conquest, the generation which might have farmed in Egypt would have died off. At best, some of the under-twenty group which entered Canaan would have had limited Egyptian farming experience, but that would have been forty years in the past.¹³ Consequently, when they entered the land of Canaan and the

⁷ This particular section is clearly attributed to Sinai, although modern scholars debate whether it was actually given there; see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27* (AB 3B; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 2151–52.

⁸ Gary Edward Schnittjer, *The Torah Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 33–37 and 289–96.

⁹ Given that the people had despoiled the Egyptians prior to leaving the land (Exod 12:35–36), one could argue that the Israelites were "well to do." However, it is unlikely that the Egyptians they "plundered" were themselves rich, although they would have been better off than the Israelites who were their neighbors. Perhaps the best way to put it would be to say that as a result, "the Israelites were not hurting."

¹⁰ These three factors would have been significant issues affecting how the people responded to the guidelines given at Sinai, which have not yet been given adequate evaluation.

¹¹ This is an important point, since one of the premises of the modern application of Jubilee is that the OT concept was based on debt held by wealthy land owners who used this to oppress the poor. Gregory C. Chirichigno notes that "it remains unclear when social stratification began in Israel" (*Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* [JSOTSup 141; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993] 139–40). Even with the beginning of social stratification he maintains that Israel was never as stratified as Mesopotamia or Canaan, and that only two social classes can really be distinguished in Israel—free citizens and chattel-slaves. Thus, while wealth would have promoted some stratification, it would have been limited (at least early in the nation's history) and there would also have been significant mobility both upward and downward.

¹² Cf. John Baines and Jaromír Málač, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Facts on File, 1992) 14–16; and Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009) 31–44. For example, olives, a mainstay of Israelite agriculture, do not do well in Egypt.

¹³ It is generally assumed that the tribes that went into Canaan were all shepherds because Jacob's family, as it descended to Egypt, was all shepherds (Gen 47:3). However, this does not fol-

manna stopped (Josh 5:11–12), all would have had to learn an entirely new economic system rather rapidly.¹⁴

The key is that the Torah presents a situation of a population group about to receive developed land with cleared fields, furnished houses, orchards producing fruit, and the various necessities of functioning farms such as plows and olive presses. In this situation, the Torah gives guidelines anticipating situations which the embryo nation had not yet encountered. Some of these were presented as possibilities dependent upon how the nation responded to God.¹⁵ It is suggested that the year of Jubilee was one such contingency.

II. THE NATURE OF THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

As the OT law addressed aspects of life that the people would encounter in this new place, a major category was finances. As presented in the Torah, during the wilderness period, finances were not an issue since their food was provided through the manna and their clothing did not wear out (Deut 8:3–4). Likewise, when the Israelites moved into the land, there would have been few immediate needs. Each family would have been able to set up quickly house-keeping and farming as it settled into the land that God provided. However, the text also anticipated that the people would not be faithful in following God. Although expressed as a contingency, it was expected that the people would turn from following God, and consequently situations would arise where individuals, families, tribes, and even the entire nation would experience financial difficulties from a variety of causes.¹⁶ The Law given at Sinai (and reiterated

low. According to the biblical text, the descendants of Jacob lived in the land of Goshen almost four hundred years. Numbers 11:5 notes that the people recalled the “cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks and the onions and the garlic,” suggesting gardening skills. Other references suggest other occupations. Exodus 1:11 notes that they built the cities of Pithom and Raamses, through which they would have developed masonry skills. Bezalel and Oholiab were skilled in a variety of trades including working with gold, silver, bronze, stone engraving, and carpentry, as well as weaving, and perfume mixing (Exod 31:3–11). Others within the nation had similar skills (Exod 36:1). As such, it seems that in Egypt the Israelites had developed a complex social-economic structure incorporating many skills.

¹⁴ If, as I suggest elsewhere, the conquest took five years, it is likely that the Israelites would have learned some agricultural techniques from the peoples they were displacing (*The Promise and the Blessing* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005] 190). This is especially the case since some of the local tribes (such as the Gibeonites) were absorbed, and others were not displaced immediately (pp. 196–97). An analogous situation would be how the early American settlers are reported to have learned from the Native Americans.

¹⁵ While those possibilities depended on national response, some of them are presented in the text as certainties as God foresaw the future. For example, Moshe Weinfeld asserts that “the pentateuchal laws assume slavery to be a given” (“Sabbatical Year and Jubilee in the Pentateuchal Laws,” in *The Law in the Bible and in its Environment* [ed. Timo Veijola; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990] 42). However, this does not necessarily mean slavery existed in the nation of Israel at the time that the law was given. Rather, it could indicate that God knew that it would be in existence at some point in the future. A similar situation might be Deuteronomy 15 where the people are told that they would have no poor in their midst if they listened and obeyed (Deut 15:4), and then a few verses later they are told that they would always have the poor (Deut 15:11).

¹⁶ We need to be careful not to read too much into this, since the Bible clearly shows that not all adversity in our fallen world is a result of disobedience and judgment (see the book of Job). At

in the Trans-Jordan in Deuteronomy) provided guidance to the nation on how to respond to these difficulties, both corporately and individually.

In general, it was expected that family and neighbors would provide financial aid to those with needs when necessary.¹⁷ The Torah describes two types of financial aid: short-term and long-term. Short-term aid was associated with the Sabbath year laws. Long-term aid was associated with the year of Jubilee.

In the Torah, short-term financial aid was a small loan with collateral consisting of small items such as a cloak. This type of loan was to be paid back within a period of up to six years, that is, by the next Sabbath year. Any of these debts not repaid by the Sabbath year were to be forgiven.¹⁸ An alternative method of repayment of these debts seemed to be “debt-slavery.” Debt-slaves were individuals who served their lenders in order to repay their debt. While the Hebrew word is translated “slavery,” a better term might be “indentured servanthood.”¹⁹ The key characteristics distinguishing debt-slavery from chattel slavery²⁰ seem to be that debt slaves entered this service voluntarily²¹ and served long enough to work off their debt.²² Any individual who went into debt-slavery to repay his debt was to be manumitted in the Sabbath year, whether the debt was completed or not.

While outside of this study, this issue does present several problems. First, the Hebrew word עֶבֶד can denote both debt-slaves and chattel-slaves, as well as servants, which has produced significant confusion. Distinguishing between servant and slave seems to be marked by the positive and negative connota-

the same time, the OT is clear that much of the adversity the nation of Israel faced was a result of God’s judgment (see the book of Judges).

¹⁷ John E. Hartley notes that “nearest kinsman” suggests a “successive line of responsibility” (WBC 4; *Leviticus* [Dallas: Word, 1992] 438. However, the term “countryman” suggests that the obligation goes beyond just relatives, although neighbors might have a lower responsibility.

¹⁸ This takes the phrase “six years” in Exod 21:2 as indicating the maximum period allowed for repayment.

¹⁹ R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973) 165. The Hebrew word is עֶבֶד from the root עָבַד which means “to work or serve” (*TWOT* 1553).

²⁰ Chirichigno points out that in contrast to debt slaves, chattel-slaves were slaves who had become the property of their “owners” (*Debt-Slavery in Israel* 30). In the ancient Near East, chattel-slaves could be individuals who had been captured in war, had been kidnapped, or had actually been born into a slave situation. They could be bought and sold, and in general had few rights, although in Israel the OT law called for a status which recognized their identity and dignity as human beings. For example, while the OT seems to condone slavery in the case of prisoners of war (Deut 20:10–18), Exod 21:16 suggests that kidnapping slaves was a capital offense. Key for our purposes here is that two different situations are addressed.

²¹ While the NASB and NIV both use the verb “buy,” the Hebrew is בָּיַע (*TWOT* 2039), which means “to get or to acquire.” This is the normal verb used to denote “buying,” that is, acquisition by the use of money. While money might have changed hands in this process, it seems likely that we have read too much into the transaction. If this is an issue of “debt-slavery,” in most cases the individual “selling” himself was “selling” his labor to pay off the debt. If money exchanged hands, it would have been in the case of third person debt where the person “selling” himself received the money to give to another debt holder.

²² As Gordon J. Wenham puts it, it is similar to “enabling a man who could not pay a fine to work off his debt directly” (*The Book of Leviticus* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979] 322). This is a good analogy which illustrates an important point which in general seems to be overlooked—that is, the debt was finite, and could be paid off through labor. As a result, debt-slave servitude was temporary, and in general debt-slaves had some rights.

tions within the context.²³ However, the chattel-slave/debt-slave distinction is more difficult, and careful evaluation of the situation is required to determine which type of slave is intended.

Long-term financial aid was associated with the year of Jubilee and involved a different situation. As described in Leviticus 25, this aid was not a loan, although commonly viewed as such.²⁴ This situation came about when an individual reached a point where his monetary needs were so great that he would have to “sell” his farm. However, the land was not allowed to leave the family, therefore, in reality this was not a sale. The text of Leviticus 25 specifies that the “price” of the land would be the number of crops remaining until the next year of Jubilee at which point the use of the land would revert to its original owner. As such, the “sale” would be better termed a “lease.”²⁵ The year of Jubilee, which was every fiftieth year (Lev 25:11), was the conclusion of the lease when the land returned to its rightful owner. The Leviticus text makes several important points regarding the institution of Jubilee.

1. *The land was a gift.* First, and of primary importance, the land involved was land that God *gave* each family as an “inheritance” (Josh 13:7, 23:4).²⁶ While the word “inheritance” is used, this is clearly a gift from God given to his people. This is made clear in Lev 25:23, where God tells the Israelites that the land is his, and that they are “sojourners” with him. This point is critical to any discussion of what is involved in the subsequent use of the land, especially in terms of it being “collateral” for loans.

2. *The land belonged to the extended family.* This inheritance was given to the family and was to remain in the family in perpetuity. Specifically, the land could not be “sold permanently” (Lev 25:23).²⁷ While the text uses the terms “buy” (קָנָה) and “sell” (מָכַר), the only thing being bought and sold was the crops.²⁸ Consequently, when talking about the land involved, we should more properly understand the transactions as leases. If these criteria were followed, then foreigners would not have been able to acquire land permanently in Israel (at least in the portion of the land distributed at the time of the conquest).

²³ Ralph W. Klein maintains that while the OT uses the one term, context differentiates between slave with negative connotations and servant with positive (“A Liberated Lifestyle: Slaves and Servants in Biblical Perspective,” *CurTM* 9 [1982] 212).

²⁴ Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008) 266.

²⁵ Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 173.

²⁶ D. Howard Jr. observes: “God gave the land to his people as an inheritance, which they were to take possession of” (*Joshua* [NAC 5; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998] 300). He goes on to note: “The portrait of Israel’s inheritance of the land of Canaan, the land promised to Abraham, is a richly textured one. First and foremost, it was a gift from Israel’s God, Yahweh. It involved a legal transfer to the Israelites of Canaanite lands, which Yahweh owned” (p. 306).

²⁷ This is a point of confusion as some commentators seem to take the view that the issue is actual sale of the land with an opportunity for repurchase (e.g. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel* 326).

²⁸ Levine, *Leviticus* 173.

3. *God's land distribution was a one-time event.* The land distribution at the time of the conquest, which was the base of the Jubilee concept, was a unique event which was limited to that generation and a specific land area.²⁹ While there is some indication that more land was promised for the nation to possess in the future (see Deuteronomy 19), there are no indications that a subsequent divine land distribution would be given in that case.³⁰ What is more, guidelines for future military expansion of the land were given at the conquest, but there were no directions for a later casting of lots to distribute the new territory (e.g. Deuteronomy 20). This suggests that those future expansions would be subject to a different type of allocation, probably of a "spoils of war" type. The prototype of this projected distribution may well have been the allocation of the Trans-Jordan region to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh.³¹ It is an open question then whether land which was outside of the original heritage could be bought or sold.

4. *Cities had different rules.* Different regulations applied to non-agrarian property within the cities. A house in a walled city could be sold permanently, although there was a one year right of redemption (Lev 25:29).³² The exception was houses in the Levitical cities, which maintained a permanent right of redemption.³³

5. *Land "sales" did not incur debt.* Given the nature of the transaction, by definition the money given to the original owner of the land was not a loan. It did not need to be repaid since the "lender" actually received the crops for the term of the lease as payment. Admittedly, the original owner of the land could get the use of the land back prior to the end of the lease by buying back the lease for the same rate for which he sold it—that is, the value of the number of crops remaining until the next year of Jubilee.

²⁹ Numbers 34:1–12 gives the specific borders of the land which was to be divided (Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* [NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 639). This land was actually somewhat less than the land which had been promised to Abraham (Gen 15:18). What is more, it appears that the actual possession of some of the land which was distributed was deferred until a future time (Josh 23:4–5). In this latter passage (and others), Joshua challenges the Israelites to be faithful so that God would continue to deliver the land.

³⁰ Deuteronomy 19:8–9 discusses the three cities of refuge to be set aside on the west side of the Jordan. Eugene H. Merrill suggests that Moses made allowance for such additional sites (*Deuteronomy* [NAC 4; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994] 277). However, the text notes that they were to add an additional three cities of refuge if they carefully obeyed all the commandments and should God give the nation all of the land which had been promised (i.e. up to the Euphrates; Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002] I:936).

³¹ The Trans-Jordan region does not seem to be part of the land promised to Abraham, which is generally understood to lie west of the Jordan River. It also is not part of the land description of Numbers 34 which specifically sets the Jordan River between the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee) and the Salt Sea (the Dead Sea) as an eastern border of the land which was the nation's "inheritance." While Num 32:33–42 relates how that land was given to those tribes, it does not tell how they divided this Trans-Jordan region, although it does not appear that it was by lottery.

³² Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27* 2198–2200.

³³ *Ibid.* 2201.

6. *Land leases had a maximum length.* The leases involved in Jubilee were of limited duration—specifically until the next year of Jubilee, that is, no more than forty-nine years. The price of the transaction was fixed by the number of years remaining until the next Jubilee. As such, the person leasing the land would not be out any money when the land reverted. Rather, he would have received the number of crops that he had “bought” within the terms of the lease.³⁴

7. *Slavery was not involved.* Given these data, it becomes clear that the individuals who “sold the land” were not slaves in any sense of the word. This would explain why the text specifically says that they were not to be considered slaves (Lev 25:35–46, especially v. 39), and as will be shown below, how they seemed to have a much different status.³⁵

With this background, we note that Lev 25:8–55 presents the year of Jubilee as a “consecrated year” following the seven Sabbath year cycle noted in verse 8.³⁶ It began by the blowing of the ram’s horn throughout the land on the Day of Atonement at the beginning of that “fiftieth year”³⁷ to show that it was consecrated.

While the land was to rest as in a normal Sabbath year, the focus of Jubilee was related to the land which had been given as an inheritance. Specifically, in that year all agricultural land which had been given as part of the national inheritance was to revert to the family to which it had been given at the time of the conquest. A second element of that year amplifies the issue of individuals in debt (Lev 25:35–46). While this is commonly viewed as a manumission of “slaves,” that term is not used here.³⁸ What is more, there is nothing in this passage that suggests any remission of debt in the year of Jubilee.

III. THE JUBILEE PROCESS

We noted that Leviticus 25 provides a contingency for an Israelite property owner who had a significant financial need which necessitated that he “sell” his land. In this case someone who could provide help which could be a “friend, associate, or relation,”³⁹ provided financial assistance by “buying” the land. As

³⁴ Milgrom asserts that in the case of a crop failure, the loss was the buyer’s (ibid. 2178).

³⁵ Contra Jeffrey D. Mooney, “Israel in Slavery and Slavery in Israel,” *SBJT* 12/3 (2008) 75–76.

³⁶ Two other passages give specifics regarding that year. Lev 27:16–21 addresses the case of a person who dedicates a field to God establishing the value in terms of the redemption time before Jubilee. Numbers 36:1–9 addresses the case of the daughters of Zelophehad as they inherit the land of their father to insure that the land remained with the tribe of Manasseh, not with their husbands’ families or tribes in subsequent years of Jubilee.

³⁷ The word “Jubilee” seems likely to be basically an Anglicization of the Hebrew word יִבְלֵ which denotes a ram’s horn (*TWOT* 835e). Nobuyoshi Kiuchi suggests an alternative derivation from the verb *yābal* meaning “to be carried” (*Leviticus* [Apollos OT Commentary; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007] 457). Milgrom notes several other suggestions, but opts for the ram’s horn (*Leviticus* 23–27 2169).

³⁸ See Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary* I:469; Kiuchi, *Leviticus* 462; Wenham, *Leviticus* 322; and Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel* 302.

³⁹ The word used is עֲמִית, which can mean any of those three (*TWOT* 1638a).

noted, the actual sale was the crops that the land produced. Thus it is more correct to say that he provided financial assistance by leasing the land.⁴⁰

This raises many questions regarding the amount of money changing hands. Perhaps the key question would be: What was the value of a crop? While we do not have exact data, we do have some information which helps. Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat suggests that in Mesopotamia the value of an average crop would have been approximately one and half to two years' wages. She also maintains that the typical farm of 3–8 acres was adequate to support a family.⁴¹ This would correlate well with other data that suggests that a typical Israelite farm would have been about 5 acres.⁴² So, while it is difficult to compare different cultures, these figures are suggestive.

However, both land prices and crop prices are variables. Land prices then, like today, depended upon the quality of the soil, as well as how well watered it was. Also, crop prices, like today, depended on the abundance or scarcity of the product. So, while Lev 26:16 says "it is a number of crops he is selling to you," how the "value" of a crop was determined is not stated. At first glance, this would seem to be market value, but not necessarily. Even in the OT, market values were erratic as seen in the incident of 2 Kings 7 where grain prices climbed during a siege and then dropped overnight.

This uncertainty would have affected both parties of the lease. In the case of the leasing party, we have already noted that this transaction was not a loan, and even if it were, Israelites were not to charge interest from fellow Israelites (Lev 25:36). This seems to leave the sole motivation of taking the lease as philanthropic, that is, one of helping out a family member (or neighbor) at the risk of buying a future crop at a given price and then experiencing a bad crop.

Consequently, it seems likely that there would have been some financial incentive applicable to the lease so that the person leasing the land would have expected to receive return for his efforts and risk. One possibility is that there was an understood depreciated flat-rate value for a year of crops, and the leasing farmer might hope for a bumper crop and thus a profit. While plausible, we do not have any record showing that to be the case.

Then we need to consider the case of the individual leasing out the land. Given that the agricultural land was likely the primary source of income for the individual who needed to lease out his farm, then the reason for leasing it out would necessarily have been extreme financial need. In that case, how would that person live until the next Jubilee?

⁴⁰ Because of fallow Sabbath years, this would seem to be from 1 to 42 crops (Milgrom, *Leviticus* 23–27 2178). Given that the last year before Jubilee was a Sabbath year, the latest one could "lease" his land would be two years before the Jubilee year with one year of crops. Based on the same factors, this means that the earliest one could "lease" his land would be the year after Jubilee.

⁴¹ Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Mesopotamia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 257. Variables would have included the actual size of the farm, the fertility of the land, as well as how fruitful a particular year was.

⁴² Michael A. Harbin, "An Old Testament Model of Social Justice," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (New Orleans, 2009) 4.

1. *Possible provision for the impoverished.* One possibility of provision for the person leasing out his land might have been some of the cash that he had received from the lease. However, it is likely that much, if not all, of that would be needed to pay off the debt that had led to the “sale.”

Another possibility was that he could ply another trade. While he could remain in the settlement where he was currently dwelling, he more likely would move into a city. But that, too, would involve other costs, unless he had someone there to move in with.

A third alternative was that he may move to another country where he could either buy or lease land, or perhaps work another’s farm. This seems to be the case in the book of Ruth when Elimelech, Naomi, and their family left and moved to Moab because of a famine.⁴³

A fourth possibility which would have worked to the advantage of both parties is suggested by the Leviticus passage. Farming has always been a labor intensive process, especially prior to the industrial revolution. Consequently, the amount of land that a family could work, regardless of the amount owned, was directly proportional to the manpower available. So, unless the person leasing the land had excess labor (either in the form of a large family, many slaves, or hired workers), he would not be able to utilize the newly leased land of the Israelite that he had bailed out. A solution might be for him to “hire” the bailed out Israelite to work the land which he had just leased out, with a portion of the crop being used as wages. Several items in the Leviticus passage suggest that this was a common, if not the usual, practice.

a. *The poor and sojourners.* Leviticus 25:35 mandates that a poor person be treated as a sojourner (a resident alien). Since sojourners were not able to buy land, they must have worked as hired laborers (although as seen later in the chapter, they could become “slaves” in which case they were provided sustenance instead of wages). As hired laborers, they would have provided agricultural help for Israelite farmers who were able to develop land beyond what they and their families could work.⁴⁴ That Israel anticipated hired workers is evident from Lev 19:13, which directs that the wages of a hired man “are not to remain with you all night until morning.”

⁴³ Aspects of this story are hard to follow. It is clear that Elimelech possessed land in Israel (Ruth 4:3) and that there was a famine and he left to go to Moab (Ruth 1:1). It is not clear what he did with the land. He may have abandoned it and it lay fallow during the years he and his family were gone. If so, when Naomi returned, she would apparently try to sell it (i.e. lease it out) since she was not able to farm it. It is also possible that he had “sold” (i.e. leased it out) it prior to leaving for Moab. In that case, the land was in someone else’s hands until the year of Jubilee, and Naomi would not be able to farm it unless it was redeemed. Both terms are used in the passage. The latter seems more likely, but in either case, since they returned at the beginning of the barley harvest, it was too late in the year to farm, and the land question would need to be settled (“redeemed”) prior to the fall planting season.

⁴⁴ We do not have wage data from Israel, but Mesopotamian data point to a daily wage of about 10 liters of barley (Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life* 264). She also provides a conversion of 300 liters of barley equating to 1 shekel of silver (p. 257). She notes that this official wage applied from the Ur III period (about the time of Abraham) onward, for about two thousand years, although “actual hiring contracts showed that most people earned less.”

b. *Limited service.* Leviticus 25:40–41 states that this poor Israelite was to serve as a hired man and would only serve until the year of Jubilee, that is, until the land reverted to his family at which time the individual himself would return to his family.

c. *Slaves in Israel.* While this passage clearly indicates that the Israelites in these circumstances were not to be viewed as “slaves,” it was anticipated that Israelites would have slaves. For example, Lev 25:44–46 allows that Israelites might acquire slaves from sojourners or pagans from the lands around them. Here “slave” seems to be understood to be “chattel-slave.”

2. *Probable provision for the impoverished.* Nemet-Nejat maintains that in Mesopotamia the most common way of working the land during the Old Babylonian period was through tenant farming. She states, “The tenant received seed, animals, and tools, for which he paid a set percentage of his harvest in return.”⁴⁵

If this is the type of situation that Leviticus describes, then, in essence, the Israelite who leased out his land would have become a tenant farmer.⁴⁶ While legally the land was his, he would no longer have actual control of it, but would continue to work it. The net result would be that a set amount of the harvest (either percentage or flat rate) would go to the person who had leased the land, which would help explain the Lev 25:15–16 statement regarding the number of crops. As a result, the financially hurting Israelite would have the status of a hired worker, even though it was on his own land. Thus, in this situation, the leasing Israelite would have bailed out his countryman by providing long term financial assistance. There would be motivation for him since he would be making income (“profit”) each year on the land he leased as it produced a new crop. Likewise, the Israelite who leased out the land would have financial support, and could remain in his own community—basically his support network.

IV. REDEEMING THE LAND

In any event, it was anticipated that the individual who had leased out his land (or his family) would desire to regain control of it. To do so, he had two options. In the short term, he would have to buy back the lease from the person who had leased it.⁴⁷ The second option, the long-term one, was to wait until Jubilee.

Since Jubilee occurred only once every fifty years, it is likely that the original land owner would now be deceased and it would be his heirs who would receive the land back. The key here is that land belonged to an extended family

⁴⁵ Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life* 257.

⁴⁶ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27* 2204–5.

⁴⁷ While R. Hubbard argues that the only way that could be done was in the case of an inheritance, this is one of the functions of a *go'el* (גֹּאֵל) or “kinsman-redeemer,” although that is another study (“The *Go'el* in Ancient Israel: Theological Reflections on an Israelite Institution,” *BBR* 1 [1991] 3–19).

rather than to smaller nuclear families with which we are more familiar today. While more work needs to be done on the nature of the extended family,⁴⁸ it likely would have been the extended family which had the responsibility of returning to the land in the Jubilee year.

It is not clear whether the nation ever observed the year of Jubilee and land redemption. As Kiuchi notes, “References to the year of Jubilee are scarce in the rest of the OT, and there is no evidence that the institution was ever practiced (cf. Jer. 34:8–17).”⁴⁹ Hartley suggests that the infrequency of the Jubilee schedule (once every fifty years) helps explain this scarcity.⁵⁰ On the other hand, we have the situation of Naboth who recognized the principle of family ownership in perpetuity (1 Kgs 21:3). We also have the situation of Boaz who presented the challenge to his relative to “redeem” the land of Elimelech, their now deceased kinsman (Ruth 4:4). The modern tendency seems to be to view the situation in homogeneous terms. That is, it is often assumed that the culture as a whole either observed or failed to observe the legal system. As suggested by the nation’s rather haphazard observation of the worship of God (not to mention overall human nature), it is more likely that complying with a rather complex civil law like this was haphazard at best with some regions following it, and others ignoring it. Thus it is extremely likely that while a majority of the people ignored these laws (like Ahab), a minority respected them and tried to follow them (like Naboth).

Even if the nation did observe Jubilee, the national impact would have been uneven. While the entire nation would have been expected to let the land lie fallow demonstrating its trust in God, the evidence is that most Israelites did not.⁵¹ It is also likely that few Israelites would have actually leased out their land during the previous forty-nine years under the Jubilee guidelines. Of that group, some would have “redeemed” their land in the interim, meaning even fewer would be expecting to return to their family land during Jubilee.⁵²

V. IMPLICATIONS

Jubilee was just one aspect of the Israelite economic safety net, and the other aspects (e.g. Sabbath-year provisions and provisions for widows, orphans, and resident aliens) need to be addressed separately. While there is question as to whether Jubilee was ever observed, the legislation does model

⁴⁸ Archaeological evidence suggests extended families of up to approximately 25 individuals (Uzi Avner, “Ancient Agricultural Settlement and Religion in the Uvda Valley in Southern Israel,” *BA* 53 [September 1990] 132). That would seem to reflect an extended family of three generations (with the youngest being pre-adolescent) including perhaps 4–6 nuclear families living in one agrarian complex.

⁴⁹ Kiuchi, *Leviticus* 467.

⁵⁰ Hartley, *Leviticus* 429.

⁵¹ According to 2 Chron 36:21, the failure to observe Sabbath years was a key factor in the exile. If the nation did not observe the Sabbath year, it is even more unlikely that it did not observe Jubilee.

⁵² To argue then that Jubilee represented a utopian vision of exiles which was never observed because “[w]holesale exchange of property every fifty years would produce economic chaos” reflects significant misunderstanding of the issues involved (Robert Gnuse, “Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus: Israel’s Vision of Social Reform,” *BTB* 15 [1971] 46).

how a culture could handle severe economic distress for some of its citizens. However, there are several problems in trying to use it as a foundation for social justice today.

1. *Jubilee did not entail the forgiveness of debt nor did it require a periodic redistribution of wealth.* Since there was no debt, there was nothing to be forgiven. What is more, since the land involved reverted to the family to which God had given it, there was no redistribution of wealth. Rather Jubilee was designed to periodically reset that nation at a God-designated socio-economic baseline. The baseline was the family possession of the land promised by God to Abraham and his descendants throughout Genesis, which was actually distributed in the book of Joshua. As noted in Lev 25:23, God owned the land and gave it to the person he desired.

That there was no debt remission or wealth redistribution seems to be the most evident implication of this study deriving from clear statements in the text. As noted, Leviticus specifically states (and repeats for emphasis) that the financial transactions leading up to Jubilee were the sale of annual crops produced by the land (Lev 25:15–16). Consequently, the person giving the money was not lending it, but buying a product. Likewise, the person receiving the money was not incurring a debt, but was providing a product which would be delivered on a periodic basis in the future. Actual ownership of the land really did not change hands, but remained with the family who had inherited it from God. Under this understanding, Jubilee is then really a semi-centennial national expiration of land leases. As such, the first gap to bridge is that between an agrarian society where families all possessed land and were largely self-reliant to today's highly integrated post-industrial society where many have few, if any, capital assets to lease out.

2. *The year of Jubilee is a culturally specific demonstration of the character of God.* Sider is correct when he states that “[m]odern technological society is vastly different from rural Palestine.” Because of this, he validly concludes, “It is the principles, not the details, that are important today.”⁵³ It is of concern, however, that Sider seems to work from misconceptions regarding what the actual principles are. For example, Sider claims that the Jubilee principle implies “private property is so good that God wants everybody to have some.”⁵⁴ Based on his understanding of Jubilee, Sider subsequently concludes that “God wants society’s pool of productive assets to be distributed so that everyone has the resources to earn his or her own way.”⁵⁵

While it may be true that private property would be good for everyone, this is never expressed as an objective, and certainly does not seem to be a part of the Jubilee principle. The fact that the Jubilee principle only applied to one specific territory given to one group of people out of the entire world on a one time basis seems to undermine Sider’s contention. Sider himself

⁵³ Sider, *Rich Christians* 73.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 74–75.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 161.

seems to sense this as he later looks at the life of Jesus and backs off from this position. There he states that economic relationships were transformed in the community of the disciples where they shared a common purse. He implies that this is the new standard.⁵⁶

What seems to be overlooked in the process, however, is that “social justice” should not be viewed as an end in itself. Rather, God’s basic desire is that all people come to him.⁵⁷ Not only is this relationship the foundation of social justice, without it there can be no social justice, which leads to the next implication.

3. *The Jubilee principle is valid only in a society that collectively recognizes God as sovereign.* The basic premise of Jubilee is that God is the true owner of the land (Lev 25:23). While it is true that God, as Creator, is the owner of the entire cosmos, Jubilee was based on a specific tract of land having been given by God to a specific generation for a specific purpose. Those who desire to apply this principle to today’s culture struggle at this point since no nation today is built on this premise.⁵⁸ While some argue that the church now has this responsibility, this still leaves us with a number of issues.⁵⁹ For example, the church does not possess the legal authority to enforce property rights. At best, the church may exert moral authority and even this is problematic because the “church” is divided on how it should apply the OT laws.⁶⁰ The alternative is that the church should enlist as an ally a secular government, which by its very nature rejects God’s ownership of anything.⁶¹ This is one of Chilton’s key criticisms of Sider.⁶²

⁵⁶ Ibid. 75–76. Part of the ambiguity may be that Sider changed his views over the thirty years between his first edition and the fifth edition. For example, he notes in the preface to the fifth edition that he has thought a lot about the biblical view of equality and equity. He states that he still feels strongly about “economic equality,” however (p. xiv). In this light, Andrew Hartropp’s observation is insightful when he states “economists typically have little to say, as economists, about justice in economic life” noting that there is extensive analysis of “equality” (*What is Economic Justice? Biblical and Secular Perspectives Contrasted* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007] 1–2).

⁵⁷ Richard J. Foster notes this when he observes that while a “genuine danger” of evangelicals is to preach a gospel that overlooks the social dimension, “these dangers pale when compared to the pitfall in the Social Justice Tradition of caring for social needs without reference to the condition of the heart” (*Streams of Living Water* [San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1998] 179).

⁵⁸ Christopher Wright expresses it as follows: “To apply the jubilee model, then, requires that people face the sovereignty of God, trust his providence, know his redemptive action, experience his atonement, practice his justice, and hope in his promise” (“Jubilee, Year of,” *ABD* 3:1029).

⁵⁹ Sider, *Rich Christians* 73.

⁶⁰ Ibid. He argues that while ceremonial law is not applicable to the church, moral law is. Civil law seems caught in the middle. Sider argues that civil law contains “embedded” principles to “guide the church and inform our understanding of economic justice for society.” While Sider is undoubtedly correct that the OT law exemplifies principles that show how people might best live together, he is not clear on how to find those principles. Consequently, one is left wondering if his conclusions on how it should work are really valid. This is evident in David Chilton’s very strong criticism of Sider’s work. Writing from a different perspective, but like Sider claiming to follow biblical principles, and identifying the church with Israel, Chilton reaches conclusions exactly the opposite of Sider (*Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators* [Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1986] 18–25).

⁶¹ Sider, *Rich Christians* 233–35.

⁶² Chilton, *Productive Christians* 34

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined two questions. With respect to the first, the conclusion is that the current idea of the “Jubilee principle” is not a valid understanding of the OT institution of Jubilee since, contrary to the current understanding of the Jubilee principle, there was no debt to be forgiven and there was no redistribution of wealth. The answer to second question, however, is more problematic. On the surface, the OT institution of Jubilee is not applicable today for several reasons. However, the Israelite institution of Jubilee does seem to demonstrate principles on which models of social justice may be built today. It is imperative that we ensure that any principle we derive is valid. This means that it must faithfully represent the underlying truths that the Leviticus event demonstrates, rather than merely try to carry that event across a wide cultural gap, or read into the ancient culture current socio-economic realities. At a minimum, it means that the principle must correlate with the actual nature of the event as delineated in Leviticus, which seems to eliminate arguments for a periodic equalizing of “the means of producing wealth”⁶³ or the forgiveness of debt.⁶⁴

Valid analogies require that we look for clear expressions of the character of God as well as the nature of mankind which the year of Jubilee illustrates, and use those characteristics as the principles on which we build any model of social justice. Valid character traits will also be evidenced elsewhere throughout Scripture. While there seem to be a number of these that we could explore, we will just briefly note three which seem very evident within Leviticus 25.

1. *God is sovereign, and as the Creator-God owns the entire cosmos (Lev 25:23).* If God does indeed own the entire cosmos, then it necessarily follows that whatever is within the cosmos also belongs to him. That is the underlying truth to God’s claim to own the land that was given to Israel. That is also a universal truth, going back to Gen 1:28, suggesting that human beings are but stewards of the world in which they have been placed. As a universal truth, it is also applicable to today’s culture. As a sojourner dependent on and responsible to the Creator-God, I must be careful to ensure that I manage whatever it is that I possess in accordance with his expectations. While Jubilee hints at guidelines, further work needs to be done to evaluate how modern parallels might be derived from this principle.

2. *God is gracious in that he gives gifts to people who are undeserving (Lev 25:2).* As the nation of Israel prepared to enter the land, the people were warned by God that they should not think that they were being given the land because they were righteous (Deut 9:4–6). Rather, it was because of the wickedness of the people who were being driven out. As Israel displaced those nations, it was so that they would be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6) serving as intermediaries between God and the other nations.

This seems to amplify the first principle of God’s ownership. If God is the owner, and I am undeserving, then I should manage what he has given me

⁶³ Sider, *Just Generosity* 76–79.

⁶⁴ Jubilee 2000 (www.jubilee2000uk.org).

not only wisely, but with a great sense of humility and as noted in the next section with compassion. In the NT, this principle is applied to the church in Eph 4:8 and 1 Cor 12:4–7 among other passages. However, the idea of compassion needs careful evaluation to ensure that it is not misplaced and counterproductive.

3. *God is just and righteous and expects mankind to exhibit justice and righteousness in the way they manage the gifts God gives them (Deut 6:25).* While not stated directly in the Leviticus passage, this is an implication that appears repeatedly throughout both testaments. The bottom line is that I will be held responsible for how I manage the assets given to me with the key operative terms “justice” and “righteousness.”

Justice denotes fair treatment of others.⁶⁵ For the nation of Israel, this was spelled out repeatedly throughout the Torah. In legal terms, this meant not showing partiality either in favor of the rich (Lev 19:15) or in favor of the poor (Exod 23:3), nor taking bribes (Exod 23:8; Deut 10:17; 16:18–20). In social terms, this meant actions such as returning a wandering animal even if it was an enemy’s (Exod 23:4–5), allowing the needy and the stranger access to “the gleanings” of the harvest (Lev 19:10), and giving a hired person his wages in a timely manner (Lev 19:13).

Righteousness is more complex. The root of the word suggests conformity to a moral or ethical standard.⁶⁶ However, it also carries a connotation of compassion. For example, in the case of a loan, while the lender had a legal (and moral) right to retain collateral, in some cases at least, it was directed that the lender return the collateral to the borrower. The sample situation is the case where the collateral is a cloak, and it is implied that this is what the poor person would sleep in. In that case, the lender is assured that not only would the borrower bless him, but this compassionate act would be viewed by God as righteousness (Deut 24:13). The remission of the debt in the Sabbath year would seem to demonstrate the same idea.

The two terms coupled together suggest that within the covenant community of Israel, people were to treat their fellow Israelites fairly, ethically, and compassionately. This was the foundational principle of Jubilee. Jubilee itself is one of a number of various case study laws which illustrate specifics on how fair, ethical, and compassionate treatment outlined in what we call the Ten Commandments might be worked out. Jubilee worked when one Israelite was willing to lease the land of another Israelite who was struggling financially, recognizing that at the end of that lease the use of the land reverted back to the owner (in the year of Jubilee) and in the interim he faced the risk of crop failure on that land. How that might be worked out in a non-agrarian culture must necessarily be the subject of subsequent studies. In any case, the year of Jubilee is but one example of a broader concept of social justice, not a principle underlying it.

⁶⁵ B. Johnson characterizes it as “what is right and proper” (see, “צדק”, *TDOT* 9:92).

⁶⁶ “צדק,” *TWOT* 1879. Hartropp suggests that it denotes “the idea of conformity to a norm; and it usually has a relational meaning” (*What is Economic Justice?* 14).