

helps to shape and deepen our understanding of the social and economic responsibilities of Christian fellowship. And if our eschatological interpretation gives us hope and assurance of the ultimate victory of God over all that spoils his creation, then that in turn feeds into our determination to advocate and apply biblical economic and ecological paradigms in the world today.

This threefold framework of interpretation, then, paradigmatic, typological and eschatological, releases the potential and power of Old Testament ethics into the whole range of Christian concerns for the church, for the world and for the ultimate future of both. It is a framework that we have arrived at in our study of Old Testament economics in particular, but it is valid, I believe, for the whole range of ethical principles operating in and from the Old Testament, as we shall see in the following chapters.

The jubilee: a case study

In order to see how these different angles and levels might work, let us look in some detail at one Old Testament institution deeply rooted in Israel's theology and practice of land tenure – the year of jubilee. First of all we shall study it within its own context, ensuring we have a good grasp of its background, rationale and objectives. For this purpose we shall work our way around the three angles of our basic triangle – the social, economic and theological angles – viewing it from each in turn. This will necessitate a certain amount of brief repetition of points made earlier in the study, for the sake of giving a complete overview of the method used. Then we shall do a brief exegetical survey of Leviticus 25 so as to have a grasp of the whole piece of legislation. Then, finally, in order to reflect on its potential within Christian ethics, we shall work down the three levels of interpretation – typological, paradigmatic and eschatological.

The jubilee (*yōbēl*) came at the end of the cycle of seven sabbatical years. Leviticus 25:8–10 specifies it as the fiftieth year, though some scholars believe it may actually have been the forty-ninth; that is, the seventh sabbatical year. And some suggest it was not a full year, but either a single day as an event within the fiftieth year, or an intercalary month after the forty-ninth year, with the same calendrical effect as our system of leap years. In this year there was to be a proclamation of liberty to Israelites who had become enslaved for debt, and a restoration of land to families who had been compelled to sell it out of economic need sometime during the previous fifty years. Instructions concerning the jubilee, and its relation to the procedures of land and slave redemption are found entirely in Leviticus 25. But it is referred to also in Leviticus 26 and 27. It is an institution that has inspired much curiosity in

ancient and modern times, and in recent years it has come to prominence in the writings of those committed to radical Christian social ethics.

The jubilee was in essence an economic institution. It had two main points of concern: the *family* and the *land*. It was rooted, therefore, in the *social* structure of Israelite kinship and the *economic* system of land tenure based upon it. Both of these, however, also had *theological* dimensions in Israel's faith. So we must look at the jubilee now from all three angles of our ethical triangle.

The social angle: Israel's kinship system

Israel had a three-tier pattern of kinship, comprising the tribe, the clan and the household. Gideon's modest reply to his angelic visitor shows us all three: 'Look at my *clan* – it is the weakest in the *tribe* of Manasseh; and I am the least in my *father's house*' (Judg. 6:15, my trans.). The last two smaller units (household and clan) had greater social and economic importance than the tribe in terms of benefits and responsibilities relating to individual Israelites. The father's house was a place of authority, even for married adults like Gideon (Judg. 6:27; 8:20). It was also the place of security and protection (Judg. 6:30ff.). The clan was a larger grouping of a number of father's houses and an important subunit of the tribe. The clans were named after the grandsons of Jacob, or other members of the patriarchal family tree (see Num. 26 and 1 Chr. 4 – 8). This makes visible the fact that they were units of recognizable kinship. But sometimes the clan name was attached to the territorial area of their settlement, such as a village or group of villages. So the clan had the dual constituents of kinship and territory. The clan had important responsibility in the preservation of the land allotted to its constituent households.¹⁰ The jubilee was intended primarily for the economic protection of the smallest of these units – the father's house, or the extended family. However, in Leviticus 25, it is interwoven with the economic practice of the redemption of land and persons, and those redemption procedures were primarily for the protection of the clan, and also a major functional responsibility of the clan. The two sets of provision (jubilee and redemption) were complementary, as we shall see.

The economic angle: Israel's system of land tenure

Whatever may have been the process by which Israel emerged in Canaan, once they were able to establish control over the land (which was not everywhere, of course, for quite a long time – especially in areas of Canaanite city

¹⁰ For further information on Israel's kinship system, see chapter 10 below, and also C. J. H. Wright, *God's Land*, ch. 2; 'Family'; Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh*, pp. 237–341; Leo G. Perdue, J. Blenkinsopp and J. J. Collins, *Families in Ancient Israel*.

domination), they operated a system of land tenure based on these kinship units. Thus the territory was allotted to tribes 'according to their clans', and within the clans each household had its portion or 'heritage'. Judges 21:24 describes the Israelite soldiers returning each to his tribe, his clan and to his (household) inheritance. This system had two features that stand in complete contrast to the preceding pattern of Canaanite economic structure:

- *Equitable distribution.* In Canaan the land was owned by kings and their nobles, with the bulk of the population living as tax-paying tenant farmers. In Israel the initial division of the land was explicitly to the clans and households within the tribes, under the general rubric that each should receive land according to size and need. The documentary evidence for this is to be found in the tribal lists of Numbers 26 (especially note vv. 52–56) and in the detailed territorial division of land recorded in Joshua 13–21. In Joshua the repetition of the phrase 'according to their clans' indicates the intention that the land should be distributed throughout the whole kinship system as widely as possible.
- *Inalienability.* In order to protect this system of kinship distribution, family land was made inalienable. That is, it was not to be bought and sold as a commercial asset, but was to remain as far as possible within the extended family, or at least within the circle of families in the clan. It was this principle that lay behind Naboth's refusal to sell his patrimony to Ahab (1 Kgs. 21), and it is most explicit in the economic regulations of Leviticus 25.

The theological angle: God's land, God's people

The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to me; for you are 'guests' and 'residents' with me.

Leviticus 25:23, my trans.

This statement, at the heart of the chapter containing the jubilee, provides the hinge between the social and economic system described above and its theological rationale. Having stated the inalienability rule, it goes on to present the two basic factors in the theological context of the jubilee and related laws: the theology of the land and the status of the Israelites.

God's land

Briefly to repeat and summarize what we saw in chapter 3, one of the central pillars of the faith of Israel was that the land they inhabited was the LORD's land. It had been his even before Israel entered it (Exod. 15:13, 17). This theme is found often in the prophets and Psalms, as part of Israel's cultic tra-

dition. At the same time, although ultimately owned by the LORD, the land had been promised and then given to Israel in the course of the redemptive history. It was their inheritance (Deuteronomy *passim*), a term that points to the relationship of sonship between Israel and the LORD.

This dual tradition of the land (divine ownership and divine gift) was associated in some way with every major thread in Israel's theology. The promise of land was an essential part of the patriarchal *election* tradition. The land was the goal of the exodus *redemption* tradition. The maintenance of the *covenant* relationship and the security of life in the land were bound together. Divine *judgment* eventually meant expulsion from the land, until the *restored relationship* was symbolized in the return to the land. The land, then, stood like a fulcrum in the relationship between God and Israel (see its position in Lev. 26:40-45). It was a monumental, tangible witness both to that divine control of history within which the relationship had been established, and also to the moral and practical demands which that relationship entailed. For the Israelite, living with his family on his allotted share of the LORD's land, the land itself was the proof of his membership of God's people and the focus of his practical response to God's grace. Nothing that concerned the land was free from theological and ethical dimensions – as every harvest reminded him (Deut. 26).

God's people

The Israelites are described in two ways in Leviticus 25:

1. 'You are guests and residents (RSV), aliens and tenants (NIV) with me' (v. 23).

These terms, *gerim wētōšābīm*, describe a class of people who resided among the Israelites in Canaan, but were not ethnic Israelites. They may have been descendants of the dispossessed Canaanites, or immigrants. They had no stake in the tenure of the land, but survived by hiring out their services as residential employees (labourers, craftsmen etc.) for Israelite landowning households. Provided the Israelite household remained economically viable, its resident alien employees enjoyed both protection and security. But otherwise, their position could be perilous. Hence they are frequently mentioned in Israel's law as the objects of particular concern for justice because of their vulnerability.

The Israelites were to regard their own status before God as analogous to that of these residential dependents to themselves. Thus they (the Israelites) had no ultimate title to the land – it was owned by God. The LORD was the supreme landlord. Israel was his collective tenant. Nevertheless, the Israelites could enjoy secure benefits of the land under the LORD's protection and in dependence on him. So the terms are not (as they might sound in English) a denial of rights, but rather an affirmation of a relationship of protected dependency.

The practical effect of this model for Israel's relationship with God is seen in verses 35, 40 and 53. If all Israelites share this same status before God, then the impoverished or indebted brother is to be regarded and treated in the same way as God regards and treats all Israel; that is, with compassion, justice and generosity.

2. *'They are my slaves whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt'* (vv. 42, 55). Three times in this chapter the exodus is mentioned, and twice more in the following chapter (26:13, 45). It was regarded as an act of redemption in which God had 'bought' Israel for himself. Freed from slavery to Egypt, they were now slaves of God. Therefore nobody could now claim as his own private property a fellow Israelite who belonged by right of purchase to God alone. The exodus redemption thus provided the historical and theological model for the social and economic practice of redemption and jubilee. Those who are God's freed slaves are not to make slaves of one another (25:39, 42).

This weight of theological tradition concentrated into 25:23 gives great moral seriousness to the economic measures outlined in the rest of the chapter. In order to understand these, we need to do an exegetical outline of the chapter.¹¹

Exegetical outline of Leviticus 25

1. *Verses 1-7.* The chapter opens with the law of the sabbatical year on the land. This is an expansion of the fallow year law of Exodus 23:10-11, which was also further developed in Deuteronomy 15:1-2 into a year in which debts (or more probably the pledges given for loans) were to be released.

2. *Verses 8-12.* The jubilee is then introduced as the fiftieth year to follow the seventh sabbatical year. Verse 10 presents the twin concepts fundamental to the whole institution; namely, liberty and return. *Liberty* - from the burden of debt and the bondage it may have entailed; *return* - both to the ancestral property if it had been mortgaged to a creditor, and to the family which may have been split up through debt-servitude. It was these two components of the jubilee, freedom and restoration that entered into the metaphorical and eschatological use of the jubilee in prophetic and later New Testament thought.

¹¹ Leviticus 25 is a complex chapter in which several different economic practices have been thrown closely together, along with parenthetical sections and exceptive clauses. Source critics have come to no kind of consensus over alleged documentary division of the material, and the multiplicity of theories is little help in understanding the chapter. However, in its present form the text has some definable paragraphs (as can be seen in the RSV and NIV), which guide us through its provisions.

3. *Verses 13–17.* The financial implications of a recurring jubilee are then spelt out. The apparent sale of a piece of land really amounted only to a sale of the use of the land. So an approaching jubilee diminished the cost for the purchaser, inasmuch as he was buying the number of harvests until the jubilee restored the land to its original owner.

4. *Verses 18–22.* At this point some exhortation is inserted to encourage the observance of the sabbatical regulations, by promising special blessing in the preceding year. The theological principle was that obedience to the economic legislation of Israel would require not prudential calculations but faith in the ability of the LORD to provide through his control of nature as well as history.

5. *Verses 23–24.* These central verses in the chapter constitute a heading to the remaining paragraphs, which are primarily concerned with the economic redemption of land and persons, interwoven with the jubilee. We have already noted the major theological traditions embodied in them.

6. *Verses 25–55.* We come now to the practical details of redemption and jubilee. In these verses there are three descending stages of poverty with required responses, interrupted by parenthetical sections dealing with houses in cities and Levite properties (vv. 29–34) and non-Israelite slaves (vv. 44–46). The stages are marked off by the introductory phrase 'If your brother becomes poor' (vv. 25, 35, 39, 47). Probably this phrase introduced an original series of redemption procedures, unconnected with the jubilee. The addition of jubilee regulations complicates matters in places, but, as we shall see, functions as a necessary complement to the effects of redemption.

a. Stage 1 (vv. 25–28). Initially, having fallen on hard times (for any reason: none is specified), the Israelite landowner sells, or offers to sell, some of his land. To keep it within the family, in line with the inalienability principle, it was first of all the duty of the nearest kinsman (the *gô'el*) either to pre-empt it (if it was still on offer), or to redeem it (if it had been sold). Secondly, the seller himself retains the right to redeem it for himself, if he later recovers the means to do so. Thirdly, and in any case, the property, whether sold or redeemed by a kinsman, reverts to the original family in the year of jubilee.

- (i) Exception (vv. 29–31). The above rules did not apply to dwelling places in the walled cities. This was probably because the primary intention of the redemption and jubilee provisions was to preserve the economic viability of families through the secure possession of their inherited land. City houses were not part of that productive economic base, and so need not be subject to indefinite redemption rights or jubilee return to seller. However, village dwellings were treated as part of the rural scene, and therefore were included.

(ii) Exception (vv. 32–34). This is a rider to exception i. Since the Levites as a tribe had no inherited share in the land but were allotted certain towns, their dwellings in them were to be subject to normal redemption and jubilee provisions.

b. Stage 2 (vv. 35–38). If the poorer brother's plight worsens and he still cannot stay solvent, presumably even after several such sales, it then becomes the duty of the kinsman to maintain him as a dependent labourer, by means of interest-free loans.

c. Stage 3a (vv. 39–43). In the event of a total economic collapse, such that the poorer kinsman has no more land left to sell or a pledge for loans, he and his whole family sell themselves to (enter the bonded service of) the wealthier kinsman. The latter, however, is commanded in strong and repeated terms, not to treat the debtor Israelite like a slave, but rather as a resident employee. This undesirable state of affairs is to continue only until the next jubilee; that is, not more than one more generation. Then the debtor and/or his children (the original debtor may have died, but the next generation were to benefit from the jubilee, vv. 41, 54) were to recover their original patrimony of land and be enabled to make a fresh start.

(iii) Exception (vv. 44–46). This is a reminder that the redemption and jubilee provisions applied to Israelites and not to foreign slaves or resident aliens. This reinforces the point that they were primarily concerned with the distribution of land and the viability of Israelite families, neither of which applied to non-landowning persons.

d. Stage 3b (vv. 47–55). If a man had entered this debt-bondage *outside* the clan, then an obligation lay on the whole clan to prevent this loss of a whole family by exercising their duty to redeem him. The list of potential kinsman-redeemers in verses 48–49 shows how the responsibility moved outwards from the nearest kinsman to the extent of the clan itself ('family' in RSV v. 49 is misleading; the Hebrew is *mišpāhā* – 'clan'). The whole clan had the duty of preserving its constituent families and their inherited land. It also had the duty to see that a non-Israelite creditor behaved as an Israelite should towards an Israelite debtor, and that the jubilee provision was adhered to eventually.

From this analysis of the chapter it can be seen that there were two main differences between the redemption and jubilee provisions. First, *timing*. Redemption was a duty that could be exercised at any time, locally, as circumstances required, whereas jubilee was twice a century as a national event. Secondly, *purpose*. The main aim of redemption was the preservation of the

land and persons of the *clan*, whereas the main beneficiary of the jubilee was the *household*, or 'father's house'. The jubilee therefore functioned as a necessary override to the practice of redemption. The regular operation of redemption over a period could result in the whole territory of a clan coming into the hands of a few wealthier families, with the rest of the families in the clan in a kind of debt-servitude, living as dependent tenants of the wealthy; that is, precisely the kind of land-tenure system Israel had overturned. The jubilee was thus a mechanism to prevent this, and to preserve the socio-economic fabric of multiple-household land tenure with the comparative equality and independent viability of the smallest family-plus-land units.¹²

Typological interpretation of the jubilee

This approach asks how the institution of jubilee was taken up by Jesus and applied in the New Testament to the age of fulfilment he inaugurated. How,

¹² The inevitable question arises, of course, did it ever historically happen? The fact is that there is no historical narrative recording a jubilee. But then, there is no historical record of the Day of Atonement, either. Silence in the narratives proves almost nothing. More divisive is the question whether the jubilee was an early law that fell into disuse, or a late piece of utopian idealism from the time of the exile. Many critical scholars affirm the latter, but others, especially those with in-depth knowledge of the ancient Near East, point out that such periodical amnesties for debt and restoration of land were known in Mesopotamia for centuries before the establishment of Israel, though nothing on such a regular fifty-year cycle has been found. My own preference is that it makes sense to see the jubilee as a very ancient law, which fell into neglect during Israel's history in the land. This neglect happened, not so much because the jubilee was economically impossible, as because it became irrelevant to the scale of social disruption. The jubilee presupposes a situation where a man, though in severe debt, still technically holds the title to his family's land and could be restored to full ownership of it. But from the time of Solomon on this must have become meaningless for growing numbers of families as they fell victim to the acids of debt, slavery, royal intrusion and confiscation, and total dispossession. Many were uprooted and pushed off their ancestral land altogether. After a few generations they had nothing to be restored to in any practicable sense (see Mic. 2:2, 9; Is. 5:8). This would explain why the jubilee is never appealed to by any of the prophets as an economic proposal (though its ideals are reflected metaphorically).

For bibliography of earlier works, see C. J. H. Wright, *God's Land*, pp. 119–127; 'Jubilee, Year Of'. More recent works include Jeffrey A. Fager, *Land Tenure*; Hans Ucko, *Jubilee Challenge*; and Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice*. A good, recent and balanced survey is provided by P. A. Barker, 'Sabbath, Sabbatical Year, Jubilee'.

in other words, did jubilee relate to the wider sense of Old Testament *promise* that Jesus fulfilled? Jesus announced the imminent arrival of the eschatological reign of God. He claimed that the hopes of restoration and messianic reversal were being fulfilled in his own ministry. The 'Nazareth manifesto' (Luke 4:16–30) is the clearest, programmatic statement of this, and quotes directly from Isaiah 61, which is strongly influenced by jubilee concepts. Robert Sloan observed that Jesus' use of the word for 'release', *aphesis*, carries both the sense of *spiritual* forgiveness of sin and also literal and *financial* remission of actual debts. Thus the original jubilee background of economic release has been preserved in Jesus' challenge concerning ethical response to the kingdom of God.¹³ Sharon Ringe traces the interweaving of major jubilee images into various parts of the Gospel narratives and the teaching of Jesus (e.g. the Beatitudes, the response to John the Baptist [Matt. 11:2–6], the parable of the banquet [Luke 14:12–24], various episodes of forgiveness, teaching on debts [Matt. 18:21–35 etc.]).

The evidence is broad, and conforms to the pattern already set in the Old Testament. The jubilee functions both as a future hope and also as an ethical demand in the present.¹⁴ Likewise, in Acts the jubilary concept of eschatological restoration is found in the otherwise unique idea of 'complete restoration'. The unusual word for this, *apokatastasis*, occurs in Acts 1:6 and 3:21, related to God's final restoration of Israel and all things. It seems Peter has taken the core of the jubilee hope and applied it, not just to the restoration of land to farmers, but to the restoration of the whole creation through the coming Messiah. Significantly, the early church responded to this hope at the level of economic mutual help – thus fulfilling the sabbatical hopes of Deuteronomy 15. Acts 4:34 with its simple statement that 'there were no needy persons among them' is virtually a quotation of the Greek Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 15:4, 'there will be no needy person among you'. The new age of life in the Messiah and in the Spirit is described in terms that echo the fulfilment of the hopes of jubilee and its related sabbatical institutions.¹⁵

Paradigmatic interpretation of the jubilee

This approach, we recall, has to do with identifying the coherent body of principles on which an Old Testament law or institution is based and which it

¹³ R. B. Sloan Jr, *Favorable Year of the Lord*.

¹⁴ S. H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*.

¹⁵ A full and helpful account of the way Jesus and the rest of the New Testament related to the rich scriptural traditions of the land is given by Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel*, pp.

embodies or instantiates. To do this it is helpful once more to move around our three angles and consider how Israel's paradigm speaks to us.

Economically, the jubilee existed to protect a form of land tenure based on an equitable and widespread distribution of the land, and to prevent the accumulation of ownership in the hands of a wealthy few. This echoes the creation principle that the whole earth is given by God to all humanity, who act as co-stewards of its resources. There is a parallel between the affirmation of Leviticus 25:23, in respect of Israel, that 'the land is mine', and the affirmation of Psalm 24:1, in respect of all humanity, that

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it . . .

The moral principles of the jubilee are therefore universalizable on the basis of the moral consistency of God. What God required of Israel reflects what in principle he desires for humanity; namely, broadly equitable distribution of the resources of the earth, especially land, and a curb on the tendency to accumulation with its inevitable oppression and alienation. The jubilee thus stands as a critique not only of massive private accumulation of land and related wealth, but also of large-scale forms of collectivism or nationalization that destroy any meaningful sense of personal or family ownership. It still has a point to make in modern Christian approaches to economics. The jubilee did not, of course, entail a redistribution of land, as some popular writing mistakenly supposes. It was not a redistribution but a restoration. It was not a handout of bread or 'charity', but a restoration to family units of *the opportunity and the resources to provide for themselves* again. In modern application that calls for creative thinking as to what forms of opportunity and resources would enable people to do that, and to enjoy the dignity and social involvement that such self-provision entails.¹⁶

Socially, the jubilee embodied practical concern for the family unit. In Israel's case this meant the extended family, the 'father's house', which was a sizeable group of related nuclear families descended in the male line from a living progenitor, including up to three or four generations. This was the smallest unit in Israel's kinship structure, and it was the focus of identity, status, responsibility and security for the individual Israelite. It was this social unit that the jubilee aimed to protect and periodically to restore if necessary.

¹⁶ Interesting and creative applications of the jubilee and other aspects of Old Testament economics are found in John Mason, 'Assisting the Poor'; and Stephen Charles Mott, 'Economic Thought'.

Notably it did so, not by merely 'moral' means – that is, appealing for greater family cohesion or admonishing parents and children – but by legislating for specific structural mechanisms to regulate the economic effects of debt. Family morality was meaningless if families were being split up and dispossessed by economic forces that rendered them powerless (see Neh. 5:1–5). The jubilee aimed to restore social dignity and participation to families through maintaining or restoring their economic viability.¹⁷ Debt is a huge cause of social disruption and decay, and tends to breed many other social ills, including crime, poverty, squalor and violence. Debt happens, and the Old Testament recognizes that fact. But the jubilee was an attempt to limit its otherwise relentless and endless social consequences by limiting its possible duration. The economic collapse of a family in one generation was not to condemn all future generations to the bondage of perpetual indebtedness. Such principles and objectives are certainly not irrelevant to welfare legislation or indeed any legislation with socio-economic implications. And indeed, taken to a wider level still, the jubilee speaks volumes to the massive issue of international debt. Not for nothing was the worldwide campaign to see an ending of the intolerable and interminable debts of impoverished nations called Jubilee 2000.

An interesting, and in my view convincing, paradigmatic handling of the jubilee institution is suggested by Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz in a chapter entitled 'The Jubilee: Time Ceilings for the Growth of Money', in Ucko (ed.), *Jubilee Challenge*. He comments on the powerful theology of time implied in the sabbatical cycles of Israel, and its contrast with the commercializing of time in modern debt- and interest-based economies. Time is a quality that belongs to God, for no created being can make time.

We enjoy time, we are carried along in the flow of time, everything is embedded in its time, so the very idea of exploiting the flow of time to take interest on money lent seemed preposterous. It does so no more because the sacredness of time has disappeared, even before the sacredness of the land vanished from the memories of our modern societies. Instead capitalist market economies have been elevated to global importance; they are enshrined with the qualities of omnipotence that border on idolatry. So the question arises: does it make sense to attribute to money qualities that no created thing can ever have, namely eternal growth? Every tree must die, every house must one day crumble, every human being must perish. Why should

¹⁷ A thorough attempt to apply the relevance of the Old Testament patterns regarding the extended family to modern Western society is made by Michael Schluter and Roy Clements, *Reactivating the Extended Family*.

immaterial goods such as capital – and its counterpart, debts – not also have their time? The capital knows no natural barriers to its growth. There is no jubilee to put an end to its accumulative power. And so there is no jubilee to put an end to debts and slavery. Money that feeds on money, with no productive or social obligation, represents a vast flood that threatens even large national economies and drowns small countries . . . But at the heart of this deregulation is the undisputed concept of the eternal life of money.¹⁸

Theologically, the jubilee was based upon several central affirmations of Israel's faith, and the importance of these should not be overlooked when assessing its relevance to Christian ethics and mission. Like the rest of the sabbatical provisions, the jubilee proclaimed the *sovereignty of God* over time and nature, and obedience to it would require submission to that sovereignty. This Godward dimension of the matter is why the year is deemed holy, 'a sabbath to the LORD', and why it was to be observed out of the 'fear of the LORD'. Furthermore, observing the fallow year dimension would also require faith in *God's providence* as the one who could command blessing in the natural order. Additional motivation for the law is provided by repeated appeals to the knowledge of *God's historical act of redemption*, the exodus and all it had meant for Israel. And to this historical dimension was added the cultic and 'present' *experience of forgiveness* in the fact that the jubilee was proclaimed on the Day of Atonement. To know *yourself* forgiven by God was to issue immediately in practical remission of the debt and bondage of *others*. Some of the parables of Jesus spring to mind, and the inbuilt hope of the literal jubilee, blended with an *eschatological hope* of God's final restoration of humanity and nature to his original purpose. There is a strong theological pulse beating in this chapter of Leviticus.

To apply the jubilee model, then, requires that people obey the sovereignty of God, trust the providence of God, know the story of the redeeming action of God, experience personally the atonement provided by God, practise God's justice and put their hope in God's promise. The wholeness of the jubilee model embraces the church's evangelistic mission, its personal and social ethics and its hope.

Eschatological interpretation of the jubilee

Our interpretation of the jubilee will be incomplete unless we also allow it to give content to our hope. Even for Israel it had a built-in future dimension.

¹⁸ Ucko, *Jubilee Challenge*, p. 109. There are some other creative interpretations of the jubilee in the same book.

Anticipation of the jubilee was supposed to affect all present economic values and set a limit on unjust social relations. It was proclaimed with a blast on the trumpet (the *yôbel*, from which its name derives), an instrument associated with decisive acts of God (cf. Is. 27:13; 1 Cor. 15:52). We have seen that the jubilee had two major thrusts: *release/liberty* and *return/restoration*. Both of these were easily transferred from the strictly economic provision of the jubilee itself to a wider metaphorical application. That is, these economic terms became terms of hope and longing for the future, and thus entered into prophetic eschatology. There are allusive echoes of the jubilee particularly in the later chapters of Isaiah. The mission of the Servant of the LORD has strong elements of the restorative plan of God for his people, aimed specifically at the weak and oppressed (Is. 42:1-7). Isaiah 58 is an attack on cultic observance without social justice, and calls for liberation of the oppressed (v. 6), specifically focusing on one's own kinship obligations (v. 7). Most clearly of all, Isaiah 61 uses jubilee images to portray the one anointed as the herald of the LORD to 'evangelize' the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives (using the word *dêrôr*, which is the explicitly jubilary word for 'release'), and to announce the year of the LORD's favour (almost certainly an allusion to a jubilee year). The idea of *redemption and return* are combined in the future vision of Isaiah 35, and put alongside a transformation of nature. Thus, within the Old Testament itself, the jubilee had already attracted an eschatological imagery, alongside its ethical application in the present. That is, the jubilee could be used to portray God's final intervention for messianic redemption and restoration; but it could also support an ethical challenge for justice to the oppressed in contemporary history.

This is the jubilee vision and hope that inspired prophetic passages such as Isaiah 35 and 61, with their beautiful integration of personal, social, physical, economic, political, international and spiritual realms. Our use of the jubilee must preserve a similar balance and integration, preventing us from keeping asunder what God will ultimately join together. And, in all our endeavours, the Old Testament jubilee holds before us the light of its own, as yet future, perfect fulfilment. For the day has yet to come when, in glorious jubilee celebration,

the ransomed of the LORD will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Further reading

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