

# FAITH, WORK, AND ECONOMICS



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## *The Year of Jubilee and the Ancient Israelite Economy*

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The Israelite institution of the Year of Jubilee has attracted and fascinated believers, intellectuals, and especially social reformers throughout the history of Western civilization. The fact that words from the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25 are inscribed on the iconic “Liberty Bell,” that symbol of American independence and abolitionism, demonstrates the influence exercised by this text over the popular imagination. The Jubilee vision of a society that, at least once in each average lifetime, erased all debt and all forced servitude, and restored all ancestral property to the appropriate families, has inspired the impoverished, oppressed, enslaved, and otherwise disadvantaged to dream of a more perfect social order.

For all the interest and inspiration the Jubilee has inspired over the years, no nation or society has attempted to implement its exact provisions. Most public leaders, even those committed to social reform, have rightly sensed that literal application of the Jubilee laws in modern economies would result more in disruption and confusion than in peace and justice. So then, is the Jubilee legislation simply a dead letter today, an inspiring but hopelessly impractical text without contemporary application? Many would be content to say it is, but such an answer cannot satisfy either Jews or Christians who believe the Scriptures to be the word of God, and as such to retain a permanent relevance to the people of God. In the following, I will argue that the Jubilee legislation was clearly directed toward, and designed for, a tribal agrarian subsistence economy that characterized the people of Israel prior to the rise of the monarchy, and for a long time into the monarchic period as well. While the specific adaptations of the legislation for such a simple economy are unworkable in a modern society, it is possible to identify the social *goods* (in the classic philosophical sense) that the Jubilee sought to promote and preserve, and then search for appropriate ways to achieve those goods in the contemporary context. Therefore in what follows, based primarily on the research for my monograph *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>John S. Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, VTSup 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Extensive discussion, citation, and documentation for most of the issues discussed in this paper may be found in this volume.

I will seek to answer the following questions: (1) what kind of economy is presumed by, and reflected in, the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25, (2) whether the economy presented in the text reflects a reality, or a rhetorical ruse masking ulterior motives on the part of the redactors of the text, and (3) given the nature of the economy presented, what are the social goods the Jubilee legislation intended to promote and preserve?

### **The Economy Presumed By and Reflected in the Jubilee Legislation**

The Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25 reflects and presumes a tribal, agrarian, subsistence economy, as can be seen by the following features of the text:<sup>2</sup>

(1) *The addressees of the text are presumed to be intimately and personally engaged in agricultural activity.* This is evident throughout. We need not belabor the point with an exhaustive list of examples, but a few will suffice:

“Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruits . . .” (v. 3).

“A jubilee shall that fiftieth year be for you; in it you shall neither sow, nor reap what grows of itself, nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines . . .” (v. 11).

“What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather our crop?” (v. 20).

Elsewhere I have shown that the “you (pl)” of the Holiness Code refers to the landed Israelite male heads of families. This is evident from what the “you” is assumed to have: wife, children, servants, land, livestock, even a beard.<sup>3</sup>

(2) The agricultural activity appears to be subsistence, with a direct connection between what is grown and what is eaten within the same year. This is evident several times in the text.

(3) During the fallow seventh year, the natural growth of the uncultivated fields will provide food for the whole community, “The sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for you yourself and your male and female slaves etc.” (v. 6).

(4) Likewise in the Jubilee Year, the addressees of the legislation are envisioned as foraging directly from the fallow fields: “you shall eat what it yields out of the field.”

(5) The legislation anticipates the fears of the addressees that they will starve if they do not plant and reap for one agricultural cycle: “What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?” (v. 20). This

<sup>2</sup>For more detailed discussion of the economy presumed by the Jubilee, see Bergsma, *Jubilee*, 65–75.

<sup>3</sup>See discussion on the addressees of the Holiness Code in Bergsma, *Jubilee*, 100–01.



is not the complaint of wealthy consumers for whom food is a purchased commodity, nor for whom the practicalities of the production of food are a distant reality. It is the complaint of persons who are accustomed to growing all their own food and consuming the same within a single agricultural cycle.

(6) Surplus food sufficient for several agricultural cycles is regarded as a miraculous act of divine providence. The text promises a divine blessing on the produce of the sixth year, sufficient for three years of food (v. 21), enabling the addressees to consume old produce until the harvest of the new crop after the successive fallow Sabbath and Jubilee Years (vv. 21–23). Eating stored food for such a duration is regarded as unusual and requiring divine intervention; therefore, the addressees of the legislation appear accustomed to a reality in which each harvest provided only enough sustenance to sustain them to the next.

(7) The only commodities mentioned are agricultural land and agricultural labor. Procedures for buying and selling land are described in vv. 13–17, but it is presumed that the addressee is purchasing land near—probably adjacent to—his own, since he is buying from his “neighbor” (עִמּוּת), and it is not the land itself but the *produce* that is being sold, “it is the number of crops that he is selling you.” So obviously this is arable, agricultural land that is being exchanged.

Likewise, self-sale of Israelites as agricultural laborers is envisaged in various passages from vv. 25–55. If one Israelite kinsman purchases another, the purchased man is to be treated like a hired man (*shakir*) who will “serve with you” (יַעֲבֹד עִמָּךָ) or “work with you,” a phrase envisioning a situation in which landowner, servant, and hired man all worked together in agricultural labor. This social environment is reflected also in other biblical texts set in the pre-monarchic period, in which characters like Boaz, Saul, and David, though landowners or heirs, nonetheless engage in agricultural labor alongside the hired men and servants of their estate.

(8) Urban life appears as exceptional in the text and is excused from the operation of the jubilee. In verses 29–34, the Jubilee legislation addresses the issue of property owned within major urban centers (walled cities), and essentially excuses them from the operation of the Jubilee. They may be redeemed within a year, but otherwise may be sold in perpetuity. Urban property does not have the sacral character and the close association with familial identity possessed by agricultural land in the countryside. Because the unit verses 29–34 seems to interrupt what is otherwise a logical progression of units dealing with the successively deepening impoverishment of an Israelite man (see vv. 25–28; 35–38; 39–46; 47–55), some have suggested that it is an interpolation by a later hand. Whether it is secondary or not, however, we can recognize it as a digression dealing with kinds of property with which the Jubilee is not essentially concerned. It serves to demonstrate that urban property—indeed, urban life generally—is not the concern of the legislator. The legislator envisions a society of Israelites spread throughout the land, living on and working their ancestral agricultural plots. This structure of

society is normative and needs to be preserved; city life is exceptional and need not follow the sacred regulations.

(9) The tribe- or clan-structure of society is assumed to be present and operational, and is given primary responsibility for the alleviation of crisis poverty. Much of the legislation found in Leviticus 25 concerns not the functioning of the Jubilee Year, but the *go'el* or kinsman-redeemer system. The *go'el* has the first responsibility to redeem alienated property (v. 25). The “you” to whom the legislation is addressed is also a male Israelite who participates in the *go'el* system and thus has responsibility to support his impoverished kinsman (see vv. 35–46). In verses 48–49 the chain of *go'el* responsibility for redemption of the impoverished kinsman is articulated: first a brother (v. 48), then the oldest paternal uncle (the *dôd*, the head of the extended family, v. 49), then any paternal uncle (v. 49), then any male relative of his clan (*misbapachab*, v. 49).<sup>4</sup> The Jubilee Year is only a last resort in the unlikely event that an impoverished male Israelite lacks any male relatives with the means to redeem him. The clan is given primary responsibility in the fight against progressive impoverishment.

(10) The addressees of the text are envisioned as living on or near the land that they own and work. This is presupposed in verses 5–7 and 12, where the addressees are able to walk through their fallow fields to consume the spontaneous produce directly from the field. Since reaping and gathering the spontaneous produce of the fallow was forbidden, one could only eat directly from the field, thus presuming sufficient proximity.

Also, the repeated refrain of “he shall return to his property” (וּשָׁב לְאֶחָזְרָתוֹ, vv. 10, 13, 27, 28, 41) implies that impoverishment and the associated servitude separated persons from proximity to their ancestral land, but redemption—whether by the *go'el* or the Jubilee—allowed physical return to the land. Verse 10, in which “he shall return to his land” is in poetic parallelism to “he shall return to his clan” (וּשָׁב אֶל־מִשְׁפַּחָתוֹ) implies that return to land and clan were simultaneous, because the clan lived on the land or in close proximity to it.

To summarize this section: the text of Leviticus 25 clearly presumes and reflects a tribal, agrarian, subsistence economy in which Israelite extended families lived in close proximity to one another and to their ancestral land, which they personally worked—along with family members, servants, and hired men—in order to raise food for their own consumption. This is also the kind of society and economy presented by other texts of the Bible that set their narratives in the pre-monarchic period. Even the wealthy and the leadership classes of Israel in this time period were involved personally in agricultural labor. So Gideon, future judge and leader of the nation, is first discovered while threshing out grain in a wine press. Boaz is regarded as a

<sup>4</sup>Notably absent is the man’s father. Perhaps it is assumed that, for the majority of landed Israelite heads of families, their own fathers are deceased or else themselves dependents. Or, perhaps it is taken for granted that any father would immediately redeem his own son, and so this need not be legislated.

very wealthy *go'el*, yet personally supervises and socializes with his workers in the field during harvest. Saul, future king, is discovered while looking for a herd of donkeys in the company of a family slave. David, likewise, must be called in from shepherding sheep in order to be anointed king. These texts present the picture of a society with relatively little social stratification, economic diversification, or vocational specialization.

### The Jubilee Economy: Reality or Ruse?

But the question needs to be addressed: is the economic picture presented by the Jubilee legislation a reflection of reality at some point in Israel's early history, or is it a utopian projection that masks other, perhaps less-than-noble agendas harbored by the author(s) or redactor(s) of the text?

Several scholars who have written on the Jubilee legislation in the past fifty years have insisted on approaching it with a hermeneutic of suspicion. Perhaps the most common proposal among these scholars is that the Jubilee laws are a ploy by the post-exilic Jerusalem priesthood to create a legal basis for their attempts to regain their land after the return from Babylonian exile.<sup>5</sup> It has been argued that the 50-year duration of the jubilee cycle was taken from the 50-year duration of the Babylonian exile, calculated from 587–537 B.C. Thus, the returning Jerusalem priesthood created a fraudulent legal text establishing the principle of the return of land to its original owners every fifty years, in order to substantiate their efforts to reclaim ancestral property after fifty years of exile.

There is no direct evidence for this view of the origin and purpose of the Jubilee legislation, and in fact, several considerations make the view highly unlikely. First, the largest number of priests, and the priests of the highest ranks, were taken into Babylonian captivity in 597 B.C. Thus, the persons most likely to be responsible for an exilic redaction of the Pentateuch experienced an exile of at least sixty years, not fifty. Second, it is not necessary to appeal to the length of the Babylonian exile to explain the length of the Jubilee cycle. The forty-nine or fifty years of the Jubilee is the result of multiplying the sacred number seven by itself, creating a time period of “seven sevens” and thus of unique significance to the Israelite mind. The Jubilee is a “Sabbath of Sabbath-years,” the ultimate expression of the Sabbatical principle that shaped the rhythm of the Israelite liturgical calendar.

Third, the text is clearly unconcerned either with priestly lands or the reality of exile. Rather, the major concern of the text is the prevention of permanent impoverishment of an Israelite landholder, as can be seen in verses 25–55. Neither priests nor exile are ever mentioned. If the Jerusalem priesthood returning from Babylon *had* wished to create a legal basis for the return of their land after the exile, all that was necessary would have been to

<sup>5</sup>For a refutation of the is view, see Bergsma, “The Jubilee: A Post-Exilic Priestly Attempt to Reclaim Lands?” *Biblica* 84 (2003): 225–46; and Bergsma, *Jubilee*, 53–79, esp. 75–77.

attribute to Moses a short line as follows, “If a man is taken by the enemies of the LORD into a foreign land, but the LORD grants him favor in the eyes of his captors, and he returns to his home and to his clan, you shall restore to him his ancestral inheritance.” Such would suffice; one does not need all the cumbersome stipulations of the Jubilee legislation in order to accomplish such a simple task. In fact, brief laws establishing the right of returned exiles to be restored to their property can be found in the Code of Hammurabi §27 and the Laws of Eshnuna §29:

If a chieftain or a man be caught in the ‘misfortune of the king’ [i.e. captured in battle], and if his fields and garden be given to another and he take possession, if he return and reaches his place, his field and garden shall be returned to him, and he shall take it over again. (CH §27)

If a man has been [made prisoner] during a raid or an invasion, or has been carried off forcibly, (and) [dwelt] in another land for a l[ong] time, another indeed took his wife and she bore a son: whenever he returns, his wife he may [take back]. (LE §29)

The Jubilee legislation is an extremely clumsy and indirect means of establishing a right to the return of property after exile—and in point of fact, the Jubilee legislation nowhere establishes such a right. The approach that views the Jubilee laws as a post-exilic priestly ploy to regain lost land—as well as other views that attempt to situate the Jubilee in some exilic or post-exilic social context—require one to ignore the manifest concerns of the author of the legislation (alleviation of the impoverishment of the landed Israelite male and the preservation of the trustee family on its ancestral property) and substitute instead anachronistic concerns that are nowhere clearly reflected in the text.

It is my judgement, for a variety of reasons enumerated elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> that the Jubilee is an earnest text, reflecting the reality of a tribal agrarian subsistence society that existed in Israel prior to the rise of the monarchy, and in rural areas well into the monarchic period. The archeological work by Finkelstein<sup>7</sup> and others on the growth of early Israelite highland settlements in the early Iron Age has been interpreted by Karel van der Toorn<sup>8</sup> (and others) to support the view of pre-monarchic Israel as a relatively simple society with little social stratification, dependent on subsistence agriculture: the very society presupposed in the Jubilee laws.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Bergsma, *Jubilee*, 53–79.

<sup>7</sup>E.g. Israel Finkelstein, “The Emergence of the Monarchy in Israel: The Environmental and Socio-Economic Aspects,” JSOTSup 155 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup>Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria, and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

<sup>9</sup>See Bergsma, *Jubilee*, 78n100.

### What Social Goods Did the Jubilee Aim to Preserve and Promote?

Although a literal implementation of the Jubilee laws in a modern, radically different economy and society—even if it were possible—would likely do more harm than good, it is possible to consider the social goods of the Jubilee and ponder appropriate ways to work for those same social goods in the contemporary context.

Arguably, all the social goods of the Jubilee ultimately coalesce to one: the preservation of the *identity* and *integrity* of the Israelite extended family or clan—in Hebrew, the *mishpachah*.

Obviously, the Jubilee is concerned that liberty be restored to all the people of Israel on a periodic cycle, “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants” (v. 10). But the purpose of this liberation is that the people may return to their property—yet even the return to the property is not an end in itself, but rather is the necessary condition for returning to the extended family (*mishpachah*): “each of you shall return to his property, and each of you shall return to his *mishpachah*” (v. 10). Therefore, while servitude for the Israelites is undesirable, the primary evil of servitude is the destructive effect it has on the clan, resulting in the dissolution of the clan.

Likewise, in verses 25–28 and 35–55, the primary concern is to stop the vicious cycle of impoverishment of the landed Israelite *paterfamilias* at the earliest point possible. This body of laws follows the progression of impoverishment: sale of property (vv. 25–28), arrival at a state of indigence (vv. 35–38), self-sale to a fellow Israelite (vv. 39–46), and self-sale to a foreigner (vv. 47–55). In each of these situations, it is significant that the kinship-group—in this case, the extended network of male relatives who are potential *go’elim*, “redeemers”—have the first responsibility to come to the aid of their kinsman, by redeeming his property, maintaining him on his property, employing him as a hired worker, or redeeming him from slavery respectively. Society-wide intervention by means of the Jubilee institution is only the last resort to restore the basic equality that is presumed to have existed when the land was settled and apportioned. The Jubilee ensures that there is an absolute limit to any of the forms of impoverishment listed above, and that at least once in the average lifetime each Israelite will go free, “he and his children with him, and go back to his own *mishpachah*, and return to the possession of his fathers” (v. 41).

The Jubilee is concerned that the land stay united to its family, probably because of the role that real property plays in memory and identity. The graves of the familial ancestors lie on the family land. The family land also forms an environment that has been experienced and shared by the members of the family transgenerationally. The land forms a tangible connection between family members of past and future generations. Without the land, it becomes easy to lose family memories, and the loss of memory causes the loss of identity. Thus, the person with severe amnesia quite literally forgets who he is. The Israelite permanently alienated from his ancestral land faces



the real possibility of familial amnesia and thus the trauma of loss of identity. The Jubilee serves to foster the familial identity of the Israelite community, that throughout all generations they will not forget who they are, their family history, and especially what God has done for them: “they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt” (25:55). The Jubilee is thus one of many ways that biblical religion fosters the perpetuation of sacred memory and thus the identity of the people of God. Other means include the great sacred festivals like Passover, and in the New Testament, the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19).

Besides the concern for the maintenance of the integrity and identity of each Israelite clan or extended family, the Jubilee also shows a liturgical-ecological concern for the land and a humanitarian concern for the working conditions of each Israelite landholder.

The point of observing a fallow year for the land every seventh year, and then again on the fiftieth or Jubilee year, is to allow the land “to keep a sabbath to the Lord,” a year of “solemn rest for the land.” The Israelite Sabbath concept appears to consist in showing honor to God by ceasing from labor in order to rest in communion with him, that is, to experience rest with him according to the cycles of divine rest. In the Jubilee legislation, the land—that is to say, the very environment—also has this obligation to observe the sacred rest in communion with God. So one may speak of a concept that all nature is ultimately oriented to the glorification of God: the cosmos is a temple for the divine worship. Thus, the environment itself should not be overworked and abused, but rather periodically given the opportunity to glorify God by returning to a state of restful communion.

There is also genuine humanitarian concern for the individual Israelite landholding male, lest his working conditions become intolerably severe. Three times in the legislation (vv. 43, 46, 53) it is prohibited to “rule over” an Israelite kinsman “with harshness” (לֹא־תִרְדֶּה בוֹ בְּכֹפָרָיִם). “With harshness” (בְּכֹפָרָיִם) is an extremely rare Hebrew phrase (6 times in MT) associated with enslavement in Egypt (Exod 1:13–14). Since God has liberated his people from the harshness of slavery, it is unacceptable that they should be reduced to such a state again, especially at the hands of their fellow Israelites (vv. 42–43, 46, 55).

To summarize, then, there are at least three social goods the Jubilee seeks to preserve and promote: (1) the integrity and identity of the Israelite extended family, (2) the incorporation of the land into sacred cycles of rest and worship, (3) the protection of each Israelite from oppressive and demeaning labor.

### **The Continuing Relevance of the Jubilee**

While the exact provisions of the Jubilee are not appropriate to a modern economy and society no longer based on subsistence agriculture,

Christians can engage in creative thinking about social and economic policies which would promote the goods sought by the Jubilee.

Ancient Israel was a sacral community with no distinction between Church and state. The vision for Israel presented in the Pentateuch does not conceive of a mixed society including those who worship the LORD God of Israel as well as those who reject and oppose him. Accordingly, within Christian thought, the contemporary analogue for ancient Israel would be the Church itself, the community of Christian believers, and not secular society as a whole. Nonetheless, the Jubilee points to goods which are necessary for human flourishing by virtue of their rootedness in natural law, that is, in the nature of the human person and in the natural environment. Therefore, it is appropriate for Christians to advocate for these goods even within secular society, out of concern for the common good.

Arguably, two of the identified goods of the Jubilee enjoy widespread contemporary support and recognition, while the third does not.

The human right to be free from oppressive and demeaning working conditions is widely recognized internationally today, even if human trafficking continues to be a reality, and conditions of employment in the developing world often remain harsh. Nonetheless, most governments and NGOs recognize this principle, and efforts to improve working conditions and employment freedom can count on public and international support.

Likewise, concern for the environment enjoys widespread international support, even if the liturgical *telos* of creation is not recognized. A uniquely Judeo-Christian contribution to the environmental movement may be made by re-asserting the nature of the cosmos as temple, that the natural environment itself is finally intended for the glorification of the Creator. "Green" social and economic policies need not be based on atheist materialist philosophies, nor on neo-pagan forms of pantheism, all of which tend toward an exultation of the natural environment *in preference to* policies that foster human flourishing and human exceptionalism. It is possible to develop a very rich ecological theology out of the Bible itself, and in fact I would argue one is already implicitly present in the Pentateuch. Moreover, a Biblical ecological theology would not be opposed to human flourishing and exceptionalism, but would presuppose them.

So, while humanitarian concern for workers and ecological concern for the environment are already internationally recognized goods, concern for the integrity and identity of the extended family is sorely neglected in national (U.S.) and international policy. The Jubilee stresses the role of the extended family as the first line of defense against processes of progressive and debilitating impoverishment, and it also established institutions (the Jubilee year, the *go'el*) to foster the maintenance of the extended family as a unit, and its connection to ancestral land.

Social policies in the U.S. and other developed nations since World War II have tended to expect very little of the extended family, and in fact have worked to discourage family formation through marriage, as well as

property ownership. The results have been disastrous, as impoverished classes in the U.S. and elsewhere, especially among certain minority groups, have become self-perpetuating and characterized by an extreme collapse of familial bonds, with a resultant loss of a sense of personal identity and familial identity. The loss of social capital has been incalculable. Christians should advocate for social policies that promote mutual responsibility within the extended family, the maintenance of the integrity of the extended family, and property ownership as a means to foster trans-generational memory and identity.