

THERE SHOULD BE NO POOR AMONG YOU –

A study of the Sabbath and Jubilee in the Bible

By Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon

1. INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a way of life for more than half of the world's people. Along with environmental degradation, it is regarded as a major problem facing the world today.¹ Through poverty, men, women and children made in the image of God are reduced to living on one meal a day or less. Poor nutrition, often combined with harsh working conditions, leads to poor health and for many to an early death as with Lazarus (Luke 16:20). At the same time, and frequently side by side in the same nation, other people are living in luxury. This socio-economic phenomenon has been the breeding ground for political revolutions down through history, yet it still persists. Even extensive efforts by the Church to reduce poverty have met with limited success

Turning to the Bible for some teaching about poverty we find that it is a subject which arises early in the history of God's people. They were reduced to poverty through the oppression of the king of Egypt (Exodus 1). The king made them into slaves, and forced them to toil for long hours so that their lives became bitter. They groaned in their slavery and their cry for help went up to God (Exodus 3:23). Through Moses, God brought about a mighty deliverance of these oppressed people. It was a deliverance meant to demonstrate to the whole world the sovereignty of the God of Israel, and a deliverance never to be forgotten by Israel. They were delivered for a purpose – that they might be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests for God (Exodus 19:6), enjoying the rich blessing of God in his good land. "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Exodus 6:7).

To live as God's people they were given laws to obey; laws in relation to God and in relation to community. Embedded within these laws is the express command of the Lord – "there should be no poor among you" (Deuteronomy 15:4). In addition to the command to be generous towards the poor, specific legislation was aimed at maintaining an egalitarian society. This legislation is largely contained within the provisions for a Sabbath day, a Sabbath year and the Jubilee. This legislation has been studied by many scholars (e.g. North, 1954; Wright, 1990) but there is still disagreement as to the feasibility of the Jubilee or even Sabbath legislation. Some call for full implementation of these laws as a cure for the economic problems of society today (Yoder, 1972; Rushdoony, 1991). Others conclude that they are completely eschatological and spiritual, and were never even implemented in Biblical history.

In this paper an exegesis of Old Testament legislation on the Sabbath and Jubilee will be attempted, along with some hermeneutical understanding of the passages. Jubilee concepts in the New Testament have been the subject of a number of studies which will be evaluated. Wright (1990, p.113) sees many similarities between the Israelites possession of the land and the New Testament concept of fellowship – "both must be seen as part of the purpose and pattern of

redemption...both are linked to the status of sonship and the related themes of inheritance and promise".

There are three ways in which the Jubilee can be understood:

1. Typological or eschatological. In Jesus the Messiah, the Sabbath and Jubilee laws are fulfilled. In Jesus release from sins and true rest is obtained. The Church is the community of fulfilment. Within this category there is division as to whether this fulfilment is in a totally spiritual sense or whether an ethical dimension remains.

2. Paradigmatic. The Jubilee laws are models within the particular cultural context, of principles of justice and equality.

3. Literal. The laws as given should be implemented in the economic laws of modern society.

These ways of understanding the Sabbath and Jubilee legislation will be discussed with particular concern for upliftment of the poor in the Church and society today.

2. ANALYSIS OF SABBATH DAY

The Hebrew word 'sabbat' comes from the root 'sabat' meaning 'to desist' or 'to cease'. In Genesis 2:3 the root form occurs – "for in it (God) rested (Hebrew 'sabbat') from his work of creating". This rest which God took on the seventh day becomes the basis for man to take rest on the seventh day also (Exodus 20:11). This pattern was enshrined in the law given to Moses at Sinai. It was a command to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, a Sabbath to the Lord (Exodus 20:8-9).

Because of the occurrence of the word 'sabbatum' in Babylonian texts some hold that the Sabbath concept was derived from Babylonia. However, these were not days for cessation from labour. "Contracts from Mari (Tel el Hariri) show that work was performed, sometimes over a period of several days, without any interruption every seventh day" (Bruce, 1982, p.1042). The nations surrounding Israel were not Sabbath keeping nations. Possibly under the influence of other cultures or because of greed, the observance of the Sabbath had disappeared in the post-exilic community. Nehemiah found men working and trading on the Sabbath and rebuked them (Nehemiah 13:15f).

Even before Mt Sinai, the Sabbath was observed with regard to the collection of manna (Exodus 16:21f). The normal work of collecting manna was suspended on the Sabbath. A double portion was to be collected on the sixth day. For forty years in the desert the Israelites lived in this way. This experience must have left an indelible impression upon them and their culture. So the giving of the law regarding the Sabbath was not a new concept for them. They learnt that God would provide twice as much on the sixth day.

In the Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue the motive for the Sabbath is the Exodus rather than creation. The people were to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt and that the

Lord delivered them (Deuteronomy 5:15). 'You were once slaves who suffered oppression so do not oppress your servants by making them work every day' seems to be the reasoning behind this command.

To keep the Sabbath holy therefore, the people were to cease from work. Not only themselves but their whole family, their servants and even their animals (Exodus 20:10). It seems that a component of holiness is concern for family, servants and animals.² The behaviour of the people when the manna was given demonstrated the potential situation in the economy of the promised land. Apart from trying to store up the food for the next day some attempted to gather it on the seventh day but there was none on the ground (Exodus 16:27). Greed rather than faith was ruling in the hearts of many of the people. Without a command to rest on the seventh day many people would no doubt have forced their servants and animals to work seven days a week.

The command to remember or observe the Sabbath day had a strong focus towards the poor in Israel – a "humanitarian emphasis" (Bruce, 1982, p1042). It was a day holy to the Lord, a day to remember their Creator and Redeemer. They were to remember by taking a break from their daily labour and allowing their servants to do the same. They were to trust God to provide extra resources during the other six days to cover the Sabbath requirements. It was a day of blessing, not of God withholding things (Isaiah 58:13-14).

Observance of the Sabbath Day

The Sabbath day was observed more or less continuously throughout the history of Israel. Through the period of the Judges and into the Monarchy, and even in the morally dark days prior to the Exile, the Sabbath day was observed, at least outwardly (Isaiah 1:13 cf; Isaiah 58:13). Upon returning from Exile, Nehemiah found people working and trading on the Sabbath day (Nehemiah 13:15) and rebuked them.

By the time of Jesus, the teachers of the law had produced an additional set of laws (the 'Halakah') to explain in detail what activities were permitted or not permitted on the Sabbath. Although Jesus often contended with the religious leaders concerning these additional Sabbath laws, he kept the Sabbath day holy, as the one who is "Lord of the Sabbath" (Luke 6:5). "The Sabbath was made for man" Jesus declared (Mark 2:27), echoing the original concern of Yahweh for all creatures to have rest and remember their Creator and Redeemer on this day.³

3. SABBATH YEAR

In Exodus 23 the Sabbath concept is extended to a Sabbath year. In the seventh year:

1. The land was to have a Sabbath rest

It was to lie fallow for the year. Crops were not to be sown or harvested by reaping. The only harvesting was to be by self effort of the owner, his servants, the poor or animals (Leviticus 25:6-7). "Then the poor among your people may get food from it" (Exodus 23:11).

Fallowing of the land is 'good agricultural and ecological practice' (Harrison, 1980, p.223). In many traditional societies fallowing of the land in some way has been practiced, at least in the past. Continuous cultivation of the soil leads to structural breakdown, decreased fertility and accelerated erosion. Scientific research is showing the benefits of having a fallow in the cropping system. However, economic pressures 'force' modern agriculture into continuous cropping. The Sabbath year was designed to protect this valuable resource from exploitation. The land was to enjoy a Sabbath rest just like the people and animals (II Chronicles 36:21).

There is debate concerning the synchronisation of the fallow year. North (1954, p.118 20) argues that it would be very difficult economically for the whole nation to observe the fallow year at the same time. He suggests that to meet the needs of the poor the seven year cycle was followed independently on each farm, or even in each field on a farm. For Fager (1993) a universal fallow would have been "difficult but not impossible". Wright (1990) argues from Exodus 23 that because of the humanitarian motive the fallow would have been observed individually by farmers though "it is not made explicit in the text" (p.145). When he comes to Leviticus 25 however, he says "it is almost certain that the seventh year fallow has become a single year for the whole land" (p.146). Wright (1990) feels that a development has taken place in which the humanitarian aspects have almost all been removed. This is an adventurous conclusion in the context of Leviticus 25 in which concern for the poor is stated no less than four times.⁴

The command in Leviticus 25 states "when you enter the land..." The entry into Canaan was on a specific day and was a day to be remembered (Joshua 4:8-9). Although the conquest was only affected in some places years later, technically the land became the possession of Israel by gift of God at the time of entry. Like the Sabbath day, the Sabbath year had cultic significance from the beginning, and was not simply a humanitarian or environmental regulation.

2. All debts were to be cancelled

In Deuteronomy 15 alone, the latest of the three Sabbatical law accounts according to Wright (1990, p.147), the Sabbath year regulations are extended to include the cancelling of all debts; "at the end of every seven years you must cancel (Hebrew 'semitta') debts" (Deuteronomy 15:1). Out of concern for the poor, and in recognition of the blessing of the 'Lord your God', all debts were to be cancelled in the Sabbath year. Clearly the peasant could not pay debts from the produce of his land if the land was fallow.

This was not a suspension of repayments for a year as some suggest. Deuteronomy 15:2 can be translated to mean "let every creditor (literally 'owner of a loan') drop his hand in regard to what he has loaned to his friend". On this basis The Jewish Publication Society of America (1962: in Thompson 1974, p.187) and others (Wright, 1990, p.148) interpret this text to mean a 'release' for one year. If it was simply suspension of repayment, however, then the warning of Deuteronomy 15:9 would not be meaningful.

This text shows that the seventh year was a singular calendar year for the whole nation, and that it was a year in which debts were not just deferred but cancelled. The dominant feature of the Sabbath year was humanitarian concern for the poor. Yet it was to be carried out as 'unto the Lord' and not 'grudgingly' or with 'tight fists'.

3. Hebrew servants were to be set free (Hebrew 'semitta' = letting go)

After six years of service slaves were to be released in the society of Israel (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12). In these references the release of slaves was not necessarily in the proclaimed Sabbath year, but rather seven years from the year of being bought- he is to 'serve you for six years'.

Cole (1973) suggests that these laws on slave release may be 'patriarchal, dating from long before Moses since the term 'Hebrew' was used of Abram (Genesis 14:13). Others (Fager, 1993; Ringe, 1985) conclude from ancient texts (e.g. Code of Hammurabi – 18th century BC) referring to the general release of slaves by directive of the king, that the Mosaic laws are dependent on such ancient codes of neighbouring nations. In any case they are 'casuistic laws, 'not apodictic' (Cole 1973, p.165).

The slave was to be released and sent away with generous gifts to help him start a new life. If he chose not to go despite such a gift then his ear was to be pierced and he would become a servant for life (or at least until the Jubilee).

In the Sabbath year therefore the indebted poor in Israel would have his debts cancelled. He could in effect make a new start. The poor who had sold himself into slavery, to work for a landlord without pay for six years, was given the option to go free.

Observance of the Sabbath Year

Unequivocal evidence for the observance of Sabbath years is not to be found. There are two historical events which are cited as possible Sabbath year observances.

a. Jeremiah 34. The manumission of slaves ordered by King Zedekiah.

The King made a covenant with the people and everyone freed his Hebrew (fellow Jews) slaves immediately. However, there was a change of heart later on, probably when Egyptian intervention temporarily brought a lift to the siege of Jerusalem. Some say that these slaves became free but had no land (Wright, 1990, p.258) – they were happy therefore to return to slavery. Jeremiah did not see it this way. He condemned the people and proclaimed the judgment of the Lord for violating his covenant (Jeremiah 34:18).

Maintaining that the release of slaves as proposed in Deuteronomy 15 and Exodus 21 was after a six year period and not in the Sabbath year, I suggest that this instance in Jeremiah was because for many years slaves had not been released i.e. all had served at least their six year term. Alternatively some see this event as an attempt to obey the Jubilee law. Wright (1990, p.259) states that the word for 'release' in Jeremiah 34 (Hebrew 'deror') is the one from the Jubilee milieu rather than the one found in Deuteronomy 15 (Hebrew 'semitta'), but despite this argues that the Jubilee concepts were irrelevant in this event. The case for an allusion to the Jubilee in Jeremiah 34 cannot be so easily dismissed.

b. Nehemiah 5. The agreement of creditors to release pledges of land and persons.

Again it is not certain that this incident is related to a Sabbath or Jubilee year. The cause for indebtedness was a famine in the land. Loans were given but usury was being taken in breach of the Holiness Code. Some had entered into slavery also. Nehemiah told the assembled people to return field and houses which had been mortgaged, a scene not unlike that of the Jubilee. His concern for the poor went even further – he did not partake of the rich food allotted to the Governor (Nehemiah 5:18).

4. THE JUBILEE YEAR

The word 'Jubilee' is a transliteration of the Hebrew 'yobel' meaning 'ram's horn'. The ram's horn was blown to inaugurate the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25:9). The LXX translates the Hebrew by the Greek word 'aphesis' meaning 'release'.

The year of Jubilee was after seven Sabbaths of years i.e. after 49 years (Leviticus 25:8). Like in the Sabbath years, slaves were to be set free and the land was to be left fallow. In addition, in the Jubilee year everyone was to return to his own property (Leviticus 25:13). The main purpose of the Jubilee was to restore the family ownership of land. Each person was to return to the land allotted to his clan in the original division of the land under Joshua.

In the rural and largely subsistence economy of Israel, land was the principle resource for production. Without land, people did not have the means to support themselves, let alone to produce monetary income. Land therefore became valuable as a means of accumulating and securing wealth. The rich and powerful would have a vested interest in seeing that the Jubilee was not regularly practiced in Israel.

During the period of the Monarchy we read of Ahab seeking to purchase, then forcibly taking the land of the small landowner Naboth – land that was the "inheritance of my fathers" (I Kings 21:3). In Isaiah 5:8 the prophet condemns latifundism ("you who join field to field and add house to house") in no uncertain terms. This would not have been possible if the Jubilee regulations were operative. Ultimately the nation was judged and sent into exile because of this disobedience and oppression of the poor (Jeremiah 34:17ff).

The Land – Divine Ownership

The Lord declared that the land belonged to him and must not be sold in perpetuity (Leviticus 25:23). The word translated perpetuity (Hebrew 'lisemitut' = to 'exterminate' or 'annihilate') implies destruction "presumably of the seller's right to recover the land thereafter" (Wright, 1990, p.59). This terminology parallels that found in Ugaritic land transactions.

Yahweh's ownership of the land can be viewed from three perspectives:

a. Cultic concept

Although the concept of land as a gift from God is found as early as the promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12, Gerhard von Rad considered the concept of divine ownership as cultic

and derived from Canaanite Baal worship. He tried to exclude this from the divine gift and settlement tradition (Wright, 1990, p.12). Wright maintains that "cult only had meaning within the context of Israel's relationship with God" (Wright, 1990, p.60).

b. Politico-territorial concept

This was the idea that a particular god had claim over a particular territory and the king had divine right within this territory. However, Leviticus 25:23 is not concerned with national interests but to preserve the claim of every Israelite to his own land.

c. Theological-economic concept

In the context of Leviticus 25, Yahweh's ownership is "affirmed to ensure the security of individual families by preventing permanent alienation of their land" (Wright, 1990, p.63). Divine ownership of the land was a truth to be remembered at the Jubilee and should lead to worship of Yahweh directly. However, as the theological basis for economic equality among the Hebrews before God, it comprised indirect worship of Yahweh.

Land could only in effect be leased and not sold. If the family fell into financial hardship they could lease out their land for the number of years until the next Jubilee. Leviticus 25:25, 35, 39 and 47 all begin with the phrase 'if one of your countrymen becomes poor'. If the man still cannot support himself even with the kinsman's redemption, the kinsman must provide interest free loans to help the poor relative (vv.35, 36). As a last resort, being unable to make a living on his land even with all this help, the poor man could sell himself and family into the service of his kinsman as a hired worker (v.39).

There were three ways in which the lessee could redeem his land:

1. A kinsman could pay off the debt (Leviticus 25:25). This may be before the land is sold (Jeremiah 32) or after it has been sold outside the kin (Ruth 4).
2. The lessee could redeem himself if he came into good times economically (Leviticus 25:26).
3. At the Jubilee he would automatically regain his land (Leviticus 25:28, 54). "For the Israelites belong to me as servants. They are my servants" (v.55). Hartly (1992, p. 443) and Sloan (1977, p.7) point out that in this case Yahweh was acting as the redeemer (Hebrew 'goel'), liberating his kinsman's property. Even the foreigner in the land or resident alien had to obey the Jubilee laws to free debtor slaves and return the land of Israelites.

The Family

Wright (1990) translates the word 'mispaha' as kin-group and states that this was the most important social unit to which the individual belonged in Israel (p.49). It was important from the viewpoint of kinship as well as territorially. The kin-group was the basis for the redemption laws, especially the redemption of land (eg. Ruth and Jeremiah). It was a "protective association" (Gottwald, 1979). Another word 'betab' Wright translates as 'father's house' the most important small unit which made up the 'mispaha'. It most likely comprised all the descendants of a single living ancestor. It was this smaller household unit which was the target of the Jubilee laws. It was

a necessary override of the redemption laws which operated within the wider 'mispaha' group and could lead to land coming into the hands of just a few within the clan or kin-group (Wright, 1990, p.124).

Origin of the Jubilee

There is little agreement among scholars regarding the origin of the Jubilee laws: their source, date or editing.

Source:

Every society has its laws regarding land and its ownership, and the nations of the ancient Near East were no exception. The law code of Hammurabi contains parallels to the Mosaic legislation. Royal amnesties for slaves are referred to in these laws and property alienation was restricted. Ringe (1985) stressed the influence of these ancient Near Eastern societies upon the development of the law in Israel. She proposed that Sabbath laws and royal amnesty laws from Mesopotamia were combined in the Jubilee laws. Fager (1993, p.27) draws parallels between the development of law codes in Israel and neighbouring nations but concludes that Israel is not dependent 'but not isolated from these forces of the ancient Near East milieu'. Much of the Mosaic legislation however, has no parallel and it is best to accept the Biblical text as it stands, as being given to Moses by Yahweh (Leviticus 25:1).

Date:

Basically there are two views regarding the date of composition:

1. An exilic or post-exilic date. Some argue that a few prophets or priests of the exilic community devised the laws. The priests were thought to be eager to gain the upper hand in the resettled community (Fager, 1993, p.120). The references to the year of freedom in Ezekiel 46:17 and Isaiah 61 are cited as supporting a late date for the Jubilee. Others simply argue from a socio-political standpoint that the Jubilee laws are idealistic, utopian views of the returning exiles or that the setting of social and economic oppression came late in the history of the nation. But Fager (1993, p.65) does not agree – "sources which produced the Holiness Code are close to circles that produced Ezekiel". Some argue that it began in somewhat earlier in the Monarchy period as it would need a king to implement such laws.
2. An early origin for the Jubilee is argued from the following points:
 - a. rare terms in Leviticus 25 which indicate an early origin. 'Jubilee' itself comes from 'yobel' meaning 'ram's horn'. The terms 'ruthless' in vv43, 46 & 53 and 'in perpetuity' are also obscure and probably ancient words.
 - b. although references to the Jubilee are rare, there are some which indicate the existence of the Jubilee at an early time. Leviticus 27:16-25 and Numbers 36:4 are such texts. Jeremiah 34 has already been mentioned as drawing upon ancient legal tradition that was widely understood.

c. North (1954, p.212) argues that the Jubilee concept was much more likely to have been embraced by the followers of Moses than the dispirited exiles returning to Judea.

Hartley (1992) states that since the Jubilee occurred only every fifty years, it is not surprising that there are so few references in the Old Testament. Moreover II Chronicles 36:21 states that Israel failed to observe the Sabbatical years. If the Jubilee is the product of the post-exilic community then where are the references to its implementation in that period (p.429)?

Editing:

Many believe that the Jubilee legislation went through several stages of development. Hartley (1992, p.245) found three distinctive styles and concludes that this legislation went through at least two editions. However these various stages are no longer discernible. Fager (1993) found five stages – the first level were debt-sale laws and the latest were priestly editors of the exile who added theological warrant to the laws. Fager (1993, appendix) believes he can identify the contribution of these five editors to the Leviticus 25:8-55 text. Whilst some editing is apparent in the passage, the stages stipulated by Fager (1993) stem from his suppositions regarding the date of composition rather than from analysis of the text itself.

The problem of slave release – comparing Deuteronomy 15 with Leviticus 25.

If slaves were released after seven years of service then why is there any need for a release of slaves at the Jubilee? This is a question which confronts the analysis of Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25, and many attempts have been made to answer it.

a. S.R.Driver proposed that the older Deuteronomic laws with release after six years were impractical and the Levitical laws were actually reforms of these laws. The new legislation helped the rich by providing a more stable supply of labour.⁷ But this would be in direct contradiction of the original purpose of the legislation.

b. In a similar vein Lemche (1976) argues that the economic impact of a Sabbatical year was such that it was shifted to every 50 years.

c. Wright focuses his attention on the terms 'Hebrew' in Deuteronomy and 'brother' or 'countryman' in Leviticus. He concluded that the different sets of laws applied to different classes of people. The 'Hebrew' was a class of landless people who laboured for others, while the 'Israelite' of Leviticus was a landed person who was forced into hired labour because of debt but retained the right of redemption. Paradoxically this understanding would mean that the landed person would be bound for a much longer period than the landless class of worker (Hartley 1992, p.432)

d. The Deuteronomic laws do not address the issue of land which is central in the Leviticus account. The Leviticus laws were overriding on the other laws. Rather than the variable years which came up when the slaves were freed after six years, the Jubilee was a release in the one year for the whole nation. This seems logical remembering that everyone was to return to his own patrimony. Even the slave who bound himself for life in the seventh year was released at this time. The Jubilee 'had as its goal the restoration of all Israelites to the status of free citizens with a patrimony' (Hartley 1992, p.433).

The time span of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:20-22)

"You may ask what will we eat in the seventh year if we do not sow or harvest our crops?" (Leviticus 25:20). The answer was that the Lord would provide sufficient for three years. They would sow in the eighth year and harvest again in the ninth. Many attempts have been made to solve the calendrical riddle of this passage. North (1954) spent a full chapter discussing this problem in his dissertation. He, along with others, protest at the economic and social hardship which two consecutive years of fallow would have been i.e. if the Jubilee followed a Sabbath year. 'Economically a single universal fallow would have been unsound, if not disastrous' (North 1954, p.13). He proposed that the Jubilee was not the fiftieth year but the forty ninth and therefore coincided with the Sabbath year. He was impressed by calculations for an intercalary short year but was not convinced that this solved the problem. North simply concludes that 'as elsewhere in Hebrew numeration fiftieth is used simply in the sense of forty ninth'.

Wenham took up the idea of the Jubilee as an intercalary year. Leviticus 25:8 can be interpreted to read 'seven Sabbaths of days rather than years'. Wenham proposed that the Jubilee was a leap year of 49 days to realign the lunar calendar with the solar calendar. Hartley (1992) argued that 49 days is not sufficient to realign the calendars – 61 days are needed.

Since the Exodus the Jewish new year was at Passover in the month of Nisan (Exodus 12:2), or the modern March-April.⁸ This was the time for harvest of the winter crops. The Sabbath year beginning at this time would mean that the harvest could not be taken by commercial reaping but that everyone, the owner and poor alike were free to take what they needed. Later this year in October-November there was no sowing since it was a fallow year. At the beginning of the eighth year the self sown crop was again available for harvest, and sowing was in the October-November of the eighth year. The Jubilee year however, began with a trumpet call on the Day of Atonement in the seventh month – the modern September-October. The Sabbath year was already in progress but the Jubilee year extended until the September-October of the eighth year. The winter crop could be sown in the eighth year and was ready for harvest in the ninth year. This clearly explains the times in Leviticus 25:22. It also explains why the sixth year was to provide sufficient for three years- the sixth, seventh and eighth. Isaiah 37:30 appears to refer to a double year of fallow similar to that outlined here in Leviticus.

Such a picture need not be disastrous from the viewpoint of the poor as North (1954) suggested. At the beginning of the seventh year a sown crop ready for harvest would be available. The law in fact makes this available to the poor rather than for commercial gain. In the eighth year, which overlapped with the Jubilee, the self sown crop was available for all. Moreover, the Lord clearly stated he would send a special blessing in the sixth year. North (1954, p.111f) does not 'deny the possibility of a recurrent miracle' but really does not accept it in his thesis. Hartley (1992) proposed a similar overlapping of the Sabbath and Jubilee years but goes to great length to explain that the number fifty is 'more emblematic rather than a specific calendar number'. The Jubilee would have been the most memorable year in the life of any Israelite, especially the poor and disenfranchised. That it was a special calendar year overlapping two normal years would have been quite acceptable to the Israelite.

Observance of the Jubilee

There is no unequivocal evidence of a Jubilee being celebrated in the history of Israel. Isaiah 37:50 may allude to such an occurrence and also Jeremiah 34.¹⁰ In Numbers 36:4 and Leviticus 27:18 the Jubilee is referred to in contexts separate from Leviticus 25. In I Macabees 6:49, 53 the land is spoken of as having a Sabbath – this may have been a Sabbath or Jubilee. The prophets condemned land monopoly and predicted the exile in terms that 'verbally echo the Jubilee' (North 1954). They proclaimed a year of release; Isaiah 61:2 in particular proclaimed the year of the Lord's favour. Moreover, similar practices to the Jubilee are known to have been implemented in Mesopotamia from very early times.¹¹

In any case it cannot be concluded that the Jubilee could never have been implemented because it would have meant an intolerable economic upheaval. Rather it was a concept fully in keeping with the theology of God's ownership of the land and of his concern to preserve the socio-economic viability of each household.

The existence of the 'prosboul', a legal document devised by the Pharisee Hillel to bypass Jubilee laws, is strong evidence for the operation of Jubilee laws into the intertestamental period (Neufeld 1958; Ringe 1985). Yoder (1972, p.70) argues that the very existence of the 'prosboul' proves that 'there was at the time of Jesus a strong current favouring the strict application of the provision of the Jubilee for periodic remission of debts'.

5. INTERPRETATION OF SABBATH AND JUBILEE LAWS

Having undertaken an exegesis of the Sabbath and Jubilee laws as found in the Old Testament, it remains to interpret these for the church today. Are these just archaic and even utopian laws of no relevance today? Or do they remain valid laws which can and should be implemented in the church and society? Or are there other ways of understanding these laws for the church in the twenty first century?

The words of Deuteronomy 15:4 'there will always be poor people in the land' are as applicable nowadays as they were in the time of Moses. Certainly, economic realities have changed greatly and the concept of return to ancestral land may have become meaningless. However, there is no lack of landless people suffering exploitation and debt slavery. The *raison d'être* for such laws therefore still exists.

We are not forced to leap from Leviticus straight into the present day. The prophets, especially Isaiah, then the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, and the response of the early church will assist us in the interpretation of these laws.

a. Literal

Out of concern for the poor and suffering communities of the world today it is tempting to invoke Jubilee laws. Yoder (1972) and Rushdoony (1991, p.94) are two modern writers who promote a literal application of the Jubilee. Yoder refers to various passages in Luke's gospel in which Jubilee images are discernible (Nazareth manifesto, sermon on the plain, Lord's Prayer and some parables). He concluded that Jesus proclaimed a Jubilee in AD 26, and that such a 'redistribution of capital, accomplished every fifty years... would today be nothing utopian' (p.76).

Fager (1993, p.121) guardedly states that the 'Jubilee does not retreat to an eschatological age or utopian society, rather it seeks to insinuate itself in the very existence of the real world...but the world does not seem to recognize true reality presupposed by the Jubilee, making literal observance...impractical'.

Yoder's interpretation of Luke 4:18-19 lacks thorough exegesis. Jesus was quoting from Isaiah, a popular eschatologically understood Scripture, and claimed fulfilment of that Scripture (Sloan 1977). Yoder skips over this eschatological understanding of the prophet and goes directly back to the Leviticus law code.

b. Paradigmatic

We cannot maintain that Luke 4:18-19 was only a socio-economic proclamation but this does not mean that it is devoid of social content (Sloan 1977, p.17). Luke presents this Nazareth manifesto as programmatic for the whole of his two books – 'the preaching of good news to the poor'. Within this framework he presents the paradigmatic sermon (6:20-38) and paradigmatic prayer (11:2-4), both having a background in the Jubilee.

Wright (1990, p.111) also protests that a socio-economic dimension of the land remains. While the Jubilee laws cannot be lifted out of their socio-economic context and transplanted directly into modern society, they are relevant today. The way God directed the land to be occupied and utilized serves as a paradigm from which we draw principles and objectives for society today (p.176).

Wright (1990, p.113) draws an analogy between the 'land' in the Old Testament and the 'fellowship' in the New Testament. The purpose of the Exodus was for enjoyment of God's blessing in his good land; the goal of redemption through Christ is for "sincere love of the brethren" (I Peter 1:22). Paul in Ephesians 3:21 refers to "glory in the church and in Christ Jesus" as the goal of redemption. The church is of course the same as the fellowship, recognising that Christ is the head of the church. The church is to be 'merciful just your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36). John paints a clear picture of the relationship between love for a brother and fellowship with God – we cannot claim the latter if we ignore the former (I John 1:6 and 2:11). And love for a brother in need is practical and costly (I John 3:17).

The oneness of believers in Christ (Jew and Gentile: Ephesians 2:18, 22) has implications in the social and economic realms for fellowship ("koinonia") in the New Testament church. Indeed fellowship in the New Testament church reflects a background of the Jubilee. We can ask why the believers sold their possessions and gave to the needy (Acts 2:45), why there were no needy persons among them (Acts 4:34), why Paul and the apostles remembered the poor (Galatians 2:10), and why Paul collected for the poor and encouraged equality (II Corinthians 8:13)? Indeed Paul bases this 'equality' in the Exodus event of the Lord feeding the people manna. Financial giving to the poor is proof of obedience to the Gospel (II Corinthians 9:13). The Jubilee is not referred to by name in the life of the early church but the outworking of Sabbath and Jubilee concerns for the poor are discernable.¹²

c. Typological

"The Sabbath, Sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee function in later Scriptures as typologies of the ideal age when Yahweh will reign supreme over the entire globe" (Hartley 1992, p.446). The typology is contained within the concept of release – release from slavery and from debts.¹³

Isaiah 61 is the principle passage in the prophets in which release is proclaimed. He proclaims release ('deror' as found in Leviticus 25) for prisoners (or 'the blind' – the Hebrew word can mean either), for the captives and the brokenhearted.¹⁴ The release is proclaimed by the servant of Yahweh, the Messianic figure of this prophecy, who is endowed with the Spirit of the Lord. This proclamation was good news, just as the Jubilee was good news to the slaves and indebted of Israel. This time is described as the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance. Only the poor looked forward to the Jubilee – it was of no benefit to the rich and powerful who tried to escape such legislation. Similarly only the poor, those who recognise their poverty before the Lord will rejoice in this day of salvation.

The main historical use of the Jubilee is eschatological. It is a type of the Last Day. The Old Testament prophets employed Jubilee imagery in describing the future salvation. Not only Isaiah but also Ezekiel foresaw a 'year of freedom'. In the ideal Israel 'none of my people will be separated from his property' (Ezekiel 46:18b). In other Hebrew documents, *viz.* the Book of Jubilees and 11Q Melchisedek (a Qumran document), the Jubilee is clearly portrayed as eschatological (Hartley 1992, p.446).

In the future age of salvation all nations will be able to enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of God's people. While the family plus-land units had a basic role in Israel's understanding of their relationship with Yahweh, Wright (1990, p.110) discerns a progressive "loosening" of the family-land basis in the later prophets. In the eschatological emphasis, the foreigner (Isaiah 56:3-7), the barren woman (Isaiah 54:1), and the alien are included in 'my people'. This is a significant development of the Leviticus code in which only Israelites had an inheritance, and makes it difficult to apply these laws literally in the modern day.

At the inauguration of his ministry Jesus of Nazareth identified himself with the servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 61:1) and proclaimed the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18-19). Reading these words on the Sabbath in the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus makes the astonishing claim that 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:21). This fulfilment was not in the sense of proclaiming a single Mosaic Jubilee in AD 26 as Yoder (1972, p.76) suggests. Rather his audience would have understood 'fulfilment' eschatologically via the prophecy of Isaiah.

Sloan in a detailed study concludes that the overwhelming association of the word 'release' with the Jubilee would have been 'lost on no one in either Jesus' or Luke's audience having any contact with Mosaic traditions'. Luke casts these words as programmatic of Jesus' mission. This claim of Jesus was offensive to the Jews (Lincoln 1982), although the severe oppression under Herod the Great and the Romans must have intensified the eschatological appeal of Jubilee law (Neufeld 1958).

Luke's account of the beatitudes (Luke 6:20-38) reveals shaping by the Jubilee more than Matthew's account. In Luke 7:22 Jesus alludes to the Jubilee when he answers the question of John 'are you the one who was to come?' This reflects the continuing impact of Isaiah 61 upon Jesus' own self-understanding and his message. Jesus is good news to the poor.

Further allusion to the Sabbath and Jubilee are discernable in the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. The Greek word 'opheilma' meaning a monetary debt occurs in this text, as the King James Version and Revised Standard Version correctly translate Luke 11:4. The Septuagint regularly uses this Greek term (noun 'aphesis') for the Jubilee.¹⁵ It seems certain that the Jubilee was not only in Jesus mind but also enabled his hearers to comprehend what he was saying at this time. Moreover, as he told them to pray 'give us today our daily bread' his disciple's thoughts probably went back to the provision of manna in the desert and the Sabbath rest involved in this historical event.

According to Wright (1990, p.111), "Christ himself takes over the significance and function of the land-kinship qualification. 'In Christ', answering to 'in the land', denotes a status and a relationship, a position of inclusion and security, a privilege with attendant responsibilities. This is the typological understanding".

6. CONCLUSION

The Jubilee legislation has contributed to the Western ideal of every family having a right to own property rather than the state or landlords owning all the land. However, since land is negotiable, unlike in Israel under Jubilee legislation, the rich are able to amass land (latifundism) and speculate in buying and selling land. This displaces the poor, feeds inflation and generally increases poverty.

The ban on interest or usury within Israel was a safeguard for the poor. Only since the Reformation in the 16th century has the charging of interest on loans become lawful in the West with its inimical effect upon the poor.¹⁶

An egalitarian or classless society in which there were no poor was the ideal of the Jubilee, and indeed is the stated aim of many societies. But an equitable society has to be based upon moral and spiritual principles (Harrison 1908, p.230). It is not sufficient to legislate for such conditions. People must be willing to obey. The evidence suggests that Israel could not implement the Sabbath and Jubilee laws because they lacked the will to obey (Isaiah 58:13). They, like all people born into this world, were first and foremost in bondage to sin, not social, economic or political forces.

The **Old** Testament Jubilee is fulfilled in an eschatological sense in Christ. He, rather than the land, is the means of our relationship to God. He is the agent of the new age which he inaugurated at Nazareth. This is an age of release from the bondage of sin through faith in Jesus Christ. There will be a restitution of all things at the end of the age in the new heavens and new earth (Luke 16:19-31, Hebrews 4:9, Revelation 21:4).

Yet the Jubilee is not just futuristic. It should also be 'being' fulfilled in the practical, socio-economic sense in the church, the community of people released from the bondage to sin through Jesus Christ. This does not mean that the Old Testament Jubilee laws have to be implemented as proposed in Leviticus 25; rather the principle that there should be no poor among you

(Deuteronomy 15:4) must be a concern of the church. The New Testament church was fulfilling the Jubilee when everyone sold their possessions and gave to the poor. So today those "those who desire the spiritual renewal of the inner life of the Church would do well to take seriously its deep roots in the social and economic soil of the Old Testament" (Wright 1990, p.114).

A society in which there are no poor may seem utopian but can be demonstrated to the whole world from within the church of God. We have learnt two simple truths in this study which will go a long way to removing poverty:

1. Time belongs to God is the lesson of the Sabbath
2. Land belongs to God is the lesson of the Jubilee

Basic to these principles of course is a humble and continual recognition of the sovereignty of the Creator God (Psalm cf. Exodus 20:11) and our redemption through Christ Jesus (II Corinthians 8:9 cf. Deuteronomy 5:15).

Footnotes

1. United Nations sponsored world conferences on the Environment (Rio de Janeiro 1992) and on Poverty (Copenhagen 1994).
2. "an ethical pattern...the fulfilment of one's obligations to God by means of the discharge of one's responsibilities for one's fellows" (Wright, 1990, p.148).
3. It is not within the scope of this study to examine in detail Jesus' response to the Sabbath and the question of which day is the Sabbath. Carson (1982) has published a comprehensive study of these questions.
4. Hartley (1992, p430) "a comparison of Exodus 23:10-11 with Leviticus 25:2-7 offers no discrepancies".
5. Hartley (1992, p443) and Sloan (1977, p7) point out that in this case of Yahweh was acting as the redeemer (Hebrew 'goel'), liberating his kinsman's property.
6. Wright (1990, p.126) states that the majority of modern scholars argue for an early date and that he agrees with them as they have done the most exhaustive work on the subject of the Jubilee.
7. Ginsberg (1931-32).
8. contrast Hartley (1992, p.436) who states 'there were no directions for the start of the Sabbatical year'.
9. North (1954) says of this explanation 'this seems tardy and involves controverted and unacceptable dating'.
10. Neufeld (1958, p.117ff) thinks that attempts may well have been made to revive the Jubilee during the revolution of Jehu and the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah.
11. Wright (1990, p.127); Harrison (1980, p.228); Harrison (p.229) further states that 'there are very few references in fact to other major festivals of the Hebrew religious year, the most probable explanation for which is that the occasions were so normal a part of national life as to be taken for granted'.
12. Wright (1990, p.113) – 'this kind of language (remember the poor) in the New Testament fellowship leads me to the view that it has deep roots in the socio-economic ethics of the Old Testament'.

13. Sloan (1977, p.177) states that 'release' is the word 'crucial; for understanding the nature of Sabbath and Jubilee years...both cultic and social aspects of the Mosaic legislation belong to the act of 'release'. The forgiveness of sin, for example, and the forgiveness of debts'.

14. North (1954) argues that Isaiah was not speaking of true prisoners but of those shackled by paupering economic and social conditions.

15. again Yoder (1972, p.66-70) from this 'Jubilee prayer', claims that Jesus is saying 'to erase the debts of those who owe us money; which is to say practice the Jubilee...here and now, once in AD 26. But it is difficult to substantiate the fact that Jesus was calling for a full implementation of the Old Testament Jubilee'.

16. Hartropp and colleagues (1987) at the Jubilee Research Centre in Cambridge have documented the disastrous effects of interest rates on the economies of poor families in Britain. Indeed interest rate is the principal factor driving major economies of the world and contributing to poverty in less developed nations.

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