

The Year of Jubilee

A Most Holy Observance

^{ESV} Leviticus 25:1 The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying,
² "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the LORD.
³ For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits,
⁴ but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the LORD. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.
⁵ You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land.
⁶ The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves and for your hired worker and the sojourner who lives with you,
⁷ and for your cattle and for the wild animals that are in your land: all its yield shall be for food.
⁸ "You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years.
⁹ Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land.
¹⁰ And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan.
¹¹ That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines.

¹² For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field.

¹³ "In this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his property.

¹⁴ And if you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another.

¹⁵ You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of years for crops.

¹⁶ If the years are many, you shall increase the price, and if the years are few, you shall reduce the price, for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you.

¹⁷ You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the LORD your God.

¹⁸ "Therefore you shall do my statutes and keep my rules and perform them, and then you will dwell in the land securely.

¹⁹ The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and dwell in it securely.

²⁰ And if you say, 'What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?'

²¹ I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years.

²² When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating some of the old crop; you shall eat the old until the ninth year, when its crop arrives.

²³ "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me.

²⁴ And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land.

²⁵ "If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold.

²⁶ If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it,

²⁷ let him calculate the years since he sold it and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property.

²⁸ But if he does not have sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.

²⁹ "If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, he may redeem it within a year of its sale. For a full year he shall have the right of redemption.

³⁰ If it is not redeemed within a full year, then the house in the walled city shall belong in perpetuity to the buyer, throughout his generations; it shall not be released in the jubilee.

³¹ But the houses of the villages that have no wall around them shall be classified with the fields of the land. They may be redeemed, and they shall be released in the jubilee.

³² As for the cities of the Levites, the Levites may redeem at any time the houses in the cities they possess.

³³ And if one of the Levites exercises his right of redemption, then the house that was sold in a city they possess shall be released in the jubilee. For the houses in the cities of the Levites are their possession among the people of Israel.

³⁴ But the fields of pastureland belonging to their cities may not be sold, for that is their possession forever.

³⁵ "If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.

³⁶ Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you.

³⁷ You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit.

³⁸ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.

³⁹ "If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave:

⁴⁰ he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee.

⁴¹ Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers.

⁴² For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves.

⁴³ You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God.

⁴⁴ As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you.

⁴⁵ You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property.

⁴⁶ You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly.

⁴⁷ "If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner with you or to a member of the stranger's clan,

⁴⁸ then after he is sold he may be redeemed. One of his brothers may redeem him,

⁴⁹ or his uncle or his cousin may redeem him, or a close relative from his clan may redeem him. Or if he grows rich he may redeem himself.

⁵⁰ He shall calculate with his buyer from the year when he sold himself to him until the year of jubilee, and the price of his sale shall vary with the number of years. The time he was with his owner shall be rated as the time of a hired worker.

⁵¹ If there are still many years left, he shall pay proportionately for his redemption some of his sale price.

⁵² If there remain but a few years until the year of jubilee, he shall calculate and pay for his redemption in proportion to his years of service.

⁵³ He shall treat him as a worker hired year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight.

⁵⁴ And if he is not redeemed by these means, then he and his children with him shall be released in the year of jubilee.

⁵⁵ For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

(Lev 25:1-23)

It's All About the Economics?

Today we will look at the famous **year of jubilee** as it is found in Leviticus 25. In the year 2000, the Vatican promoted what it was calling “**The Grand/Great Jubilee**” where there was to be “**an emphasis on repentance and reconciliation among religious bodies; over two dozen Canadian church partners joined together in the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative to ‘sound the strongest call for social justice that has ever been heard’ to ‘work for social and ecological justice through release from bondage (including bondage of indebtedness), redistribution of wealth, and renewal of the earth.’**”¹ That same year, an international coalition movement in over 40 countries named “**Jubilee 2000**” called for the cancellation of third world debt, claiming that in the biblical year of jubilee, “**all debts are cancelled.**” In the same vein, **Jubilee USA Network** advocates what it calls “**Jubilee justice,**” which it defines as the forgiveness of international debt.² One Evangelical author calls the topic as he sees

¹ Kurt C. Schaefer and Edd S. Noell, “Contract Theory, Distributive Justice, and the Hebrew Sabbathical,” *Faith & Economics* 45 (Spring 2005), n. 7, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251332788_Contract_Theory_Distributive_Justice_and_the_Hebrew_Sabbatical.

² Michael A. Harbin, “Jubilee and Social Justice,” *JETS* 54.4 (Dec 2011): 685. <http://tifwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Jubilee-and-Social-Justice.pdf>.

Leviticus present it as “jubilee land redistribution,”³ and an “economic revolution.”⁴

Meanwhile, on the other political end of the same economic interpretation, Pat Robertson once said,

The Bible contains a solution to the problem of excess accumulation of wealth and power. Every 50 years during the year of Jubilee the people had to ... cancel debts. Every debt outstanding, by every debtor, was canceled ... All agricultural land, what we would term today the means of production, was to be returned to the families who had originally owned it ... The biblical year of Jubilee is something that our society ought to learn.⁵

Whether it is a kind of radical social justice interpretation of forced redistribution of wealth, a pagan “save the planet” interpretation which destroys businesses to “give the earth a break,” a conservative cancellation of all debts in order to jump start ravaged economies,⁶ or as some of us were

³ Richard H. Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 68.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵ Pat Robertson, *Answers to 200 of Life's Most Probing Questions* (New York: Nelson, 1985). Cited in Schaefer and Noell, n. 7.

⁶ For example, Erik Kain, “Could a Debt Jubilee Help Kickstart the American Economy,” *Forbes* (Oct 5, 2011), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2011/10/05/could-national-debt-forgiveness-help-kickstart-the-american-economy/#7680e14c289a>, cited in Art Lindsley, “5 Myths about Jubilee,” *TGC* (Nov 26, 2012), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-myths-about-jubilee/>.

discussing a while back, something that they might consider if somehow America was to get off a centralized banking system and return to some kind of real currency-backed system like a gold standard, someone has rightly said that, “Leviticus 25 is one of the most radical texts in all of Scripture; at least it seems that way to people committed either to communism or to unrestricted capitalism.”⁷ This same author has his own economic view of the jubilee,

Every fifty years, God said, the land was to return to the original owners! Physical handicaps, death of a breadwinner, or lack of natural ability may lead some families to become poorer than others. But God does not want such disadvantages to lead to ever-increasing extremes of wealth and poverty with the result that the poor eventually lack the basic resources to earn a decent livelihood. God therefore gave his people a law to guarantee that no family would permanently lose its land.⁸

Even though I disagree with his conclusions to some degree,⁹ he has got something right here. The focus is on the

⁷ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (5th ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), PDF, n.p.

⁸ Sider, *ibid.*

⁹ I was led to Sider’s book (along with the book from Lowery) in Harbin’s article where he cites this quotation immediately prior to asking the questions, “This raises a number of questions

land. Certainly, there were **economic implications** in this law for the people of Israel. Those in turn should work in tandem with the **moral implications** of this chapter so that we would not abuse others in our business transactions today. However, the central focus of Leviticus 25 surrounds the issue of the **land**. All other things, including any kind of modern economic application of this beautiful law have to run through the context of the Land, and not just any land, but ancient Canaan, **the land of Israel**.

Leviticus 25 and Its Structure

Jubilee (*yobel*, change the Y to a J and eliminate the vowels in the English word and both have the same three consonants: j-b-l) is a word that is related to a “**ram’s horn**” “**When the ram’s horn [hayyobel, where “hay” is “the”] sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain**” (**Ex 19:13** NAS). So, it should not surprise you then to see that the year of jubilee begins this way, “**Then you shall sound the loud trumpet [shophar, NAS = ram’s horn] on the tenth day of the**

regarding Christian social justice. The present paper focuses on just two: ‘Is this concept of social justice a valid understanding of the OT institution of Jubilee?’ and ‘Is the OT institution of Jubilee applicable today?’ His conclusion is that Sider (and Lowery) are not interpreting the text properly. And I agree with Harbin and will explain why as we go through the chapter.

seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout your land” (Lev 25:9).

Through the blast of the horn, the most basic idea becomes that of an announcement. Of what? Good news. “The jubilee legislation had as its basic theme the liberation of that which was bound.”¹⁰ Hence, Lev 25:10 says, “You shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you...” With all this, it is no wonder that we derive our word “jubilation” from this.¹¹

Now, fiftieth is not a number we have seen before in Leviticus. However, it is intimately related to a series of numbers we saw in the Feasts of Israel. 1, 8, and 15 are, in relationship to the days of the week, all the first day of the week. Fifty follows that pattern of 1, 7+1, 7+7+1, and now 7x7+1. What we are going to see in our chapter is that like the feast chapter, which dealt both with “sabbath” sevens and 1st “ones,” so also does the year of jubilee.

¹⁰ R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 225.

¹¹ See Anthony George Hartzel, “Theological Perspectives on Land Restoration in Leviticus 25:8-55,” Master of Philosophy Dissertation to the University of Stellenbosch (March 10, 2006), 45-46, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/37321379.pdf>. Hartzel brings up the point that since the Jubilee is announced on the Day of Atonement, there could hardly have been jubilation. However, while a very somber and serious occasion, this was the day their sins were forgiven!

As we will see later,¹² there is something exciting embedded even in the OT through this number 50. If the original creation took place in seven days, then the eighth day can signify a “**new creation.**” This is a hint that the law was a kind of typological/prophet celebration not only of the release and freedom obtained for past debts, **but also of events yet to come.**

Let’s look at the **arrangement and placement** of this chapter in Leviticus in order to help us figure out a deeper theology that is here. Remember our picture of the tabernacle and that Leviticus is deliberately written to **emulate its three-tiered structure.** At the end of the previous chapter, we came upon the **second warning story** which acts as a kind of literary “screen” that signals you are about to move into another sacred space. In this case, that space is now **the Most Holy Place** wherein resides the ark of the covenant, the law of God, and the LORD himself sitting between the Cherubim.

To signal this, the first verse, which has our now common introductory formula, adds something we have not seen before. “**The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount**

¹² Note here, **Helen Paynter**, “The Ethics of Jubilee in Leviticus 25,” *Ministry Today* (Spring 2016), 2 1-6, https://www.academia.edu/20986788/The_Ethics_of_Jubilee_in_Leviticus_25.

Sinai, saying...” (Lev 25:1). Why add the “on Mount Sinai?” There is an historical reason. It is telling us precisely when this particular law was given to Moses. It wasn’t with the other laws as they were wandering in the wilderness and Moses would go into the tent. Rather, it was right there at the beginning, when God met with him on the mountain.

But now, think about Mt. Sinai as itself a holy place, a temple. Remember, the Angel of the LORD told Moses here that the place he was standing upon was holy ground (Ex 3:1, 5). That’s temple language.

Like the Tabernacle, it had three basic areas of sacredness. There was the base of the mountain in which the nation of people resided as (a nation of priests; Ex 19:6). Then there was the middle of the mountain, the lower access of which had very strict limits set so that the people might not wander up there and be killed by God (Ex 19:12-13). Here, only the seventy elders, Moses, Aaron, and his sons were allowed to go (Ex 24:1-12). Finally, there was the top of the mountain where, like the high priest in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle, only Moses was allowed to go (Ex 24:12).

The question is, where did God give these instructions to Moses for the law of jubilee? On the top of the mountain.

In other words, in the Most Holy Place of that particular sanctuary. In this way, Leviticus is teaching you that you that have come through the warning screen, you are now entering into [the Most Holy Place of laws](#) that surround the presence of God like the cherubim surround the ark of the covenant. Mary Douglas explains,

In the innermost, holiest part of the tabernacle, under the shadowing protective wings, the testament of the covenant lies in the coffer, or ark. At the very end of [Leviticus] ... to discover the secret of what is inside the ark, read what Leviticus says is contained in the coffer. Read chapter 26 and find nothing less than the terms of the covenant itself.¹³

Chapter 26 is very similar to chapter 19 in this regard. It gives us [the heart of the Law of God](#), the very thing found in the ark. Recall that on either side of chapter 19 we had two pillars (chs. 18, 20) that acted both as frames and like guardian cherub chapters, protecting the innermost law. The same is now true here.

Chapter 25 gives [the great proclamation of liberty](#). It does not talk about liberty and justice in the abstract, but as usual

¹³ [Mary Douglas](#), *Leviticus as Literature*, 241-42.

it uses analogies, making patterns in time with movements across space: ‘And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his family’ (Lev 25:10ff.). [This] first side of the frame, chapter 25, deals with person-to-person obligations, the release of slaves, their return to their homes, redemption of property, remission of secular debts. The second side, chapter 27, deals with the same topics from the point of view of debts to the Lord...¹⁴

In this way, rather than the “somber and punitive tone” of chapters 18 and 20 with their prohibitions against sexual sins and their respective punishments, these chapters are joyous in tone. Hence, jubilation.

In terms of what the chapter itself is about, there are three main sections. The first seven verses tell us about the “Sabbatical Year.” This sets the stage for the year of jubilee. About halfway through the chapter, we move to the third section which deals with implications of the jubilee in ancient Israel.¹⁵ We can outline it as follows:

¹⁴ Douglas, 243-44.

¹⁵ Bergsma says that “Didier Luciani creates an intriguing chiasmic structure for the legislation, centered on v. 20: ‘What shall we eat?’ (“Le jubilé dans Lévitique 25,” *Revue théologique de*

I. The Sabbatical Year (vv. 1–7)

II. The Jubilee Year (vv. 8–22)

A. Instructions for Its Observation (vv. 8–13)

B. Implications for the Sale of Property (vv. 14–17)

C. Encouragements for Its Observation (vv. 18–22)

III. Implications of the Jubilee for the Redemption of Property (vv. 23–55)

A. Statement of Principle (vv. 23–24)

B. The “Stages of Destitution” (vv. 25–55)

1. The loss of lands (vv. 25–28)

2. The loss of home (vv. 29–34)

3. The loss of independence (vv. 35–38)

4. The loss of freedom (“slavery”) (vv. 39–46)

a. True slavery forbidden for Israelites (vv. 39–43)

b. True slavery permitted for non-Israelites (vv. 44–46)

5. The loss of freedom to a foreigner (vv. 47–55)¹⁶

Louvain 30 [1999]: 456-86, esp. 466-77.” I got access to this journal (https://www.persee.fr/doc/thlou_0080-2654_1999_num_30_4_3042) and the chiasm appears like this:

A. For yourself and your male and female slaves and hired worker and sojourner (2-7, emphasis on vv. 6-7)

B. Each shall return to his property and each shall return to his clan (8-13, emph. vs. 10)

C. Make a sale to your neighbor, wrong one another, pay your neighbor (14-17, emph. 14-15)

D. What shall we eat? (18-24, emph. 20)

C¹. Brother becomes poor, redeem what brother has sold, calculate and pay back (25-34, emph. 25, 27, 28)

B¹. Go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers (35-43, emph. 41)

A¹. Sold himself, owner, hired worker (44-55, emph. 50)

Christine Miller also has work on this. Her’s spills over into Lev 26:2, has several lesser chiasms and centers on vv. 17-19. See **Christian Miller**, “Leviticus 25:1-26:2, behar ‘on the mount’ chiastic structure, *ALittlePerspective* (May 10, 2014) <https://www.alittleperspective.com/leviticus-251-262-behar-on-the-mount-chiastic-structure/>.

¹⁶ **John Sietze Bergsma**, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 115 (Boston: Brill, 2007), 84.

Leviticus 25

Seven Year Sabbaths (1-7)

As we enter the passage, we find the LORD speaking again to Moses, this time from the top of Mt. Sinai (**Lev 25:1**). Christ tells him to speak to the people and tell them that when they come into the land that he will give them, **the land shall keep a Sabbath to the LORD (2)**. You can see right away that the land is going to be very important to this chapter. Which land? The land that Yahweh gives them.

Let's **talk about this land for a moment**. Yahweh giving land to his son (**Ex 4:22**) is the language of inheritance. To fully appreciate this, we need to recall the Deuteronomy 32 worldview when it happened also in the heavenly realms. Moses sings, **“Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations ... When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the people according to the number of the sons of God” (Dt 32:7-8)**. Fixing borders and giving inheritance is “land” language. **Each nation received a land**. That land corresponded to the way God had divided up the earth as he gave the heavenly sons of God their territory.

Plato echoes Moses here saying, “**Hephaestus** and **Athene** ... both obtained as their common portion this Land [Greece] ... **Poseidon**, receiv[ed] for his lot the island of Atlantis” (Plato, *Critias*). The Egyptians believed the same thing, “Egypt has been assigned [to Ra] as portion, He owns it forever to protect its people.” (*Poetical Stela of Merneptah* 15). So God gave to each nation a land and this was fixed as an inheritance for them and the seemingly fallen “angels” as Jubilees (**Jub 15:31-33**) calls them that he assigned to rule over them as punishment for the Tower of Babel.

Moses next sings about Israel and its God. “**But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance**” (**Dt 32:9**). If “LORD” here is parallel to the “sons of God,” then the LORD here would have to be **the Son of God**, the Angel of the LORD, Christ. At this point in time, the Most High, that is the Father of Lights as James calls him, gave to Christ the land of Canaan and the people he would inherit who were not around at Babel. They are Christ’s inheritance as the Son of God. They were created out of nothing, by Father, Son, and Spirit, through a miracle, through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now, as they are exiting Egypt and the land of Ra, they are entering the land of Canaan, which is given to the Angel of the LORD.

The point of this is to tie you in your interpretation to *this land*, the LORD's land, the land he is giving to Israel that they would now inherit through Christ. This is the land in view here. Not any old land. Of course, you might say, but the whole earth is the LORD's, so what sense does this make? It is true, that it all belongs to the Father. It is also true that God created it all through the eternal Son of God. But in his good purposes for history, he divided it up as an inheritance for his sons (heavenly and earthly) to demonstrate whether they would rule justly. Consider it a kind of lease on the land that he is giving them. *If one will rule justly, he will inherit the earth!*

Let's continue on now with this *Sabbath for the land*. They were to sow their fields for six straight years, pruning their vineyards, gathering in its fruits (*Lev 25:3*). But in the *seventh year*, which would be a "*Sabbath of solemn rest for the land*," they were not to sow the fields or prune the vineyards or reap what grows of itself or gather grapes of undressed vines at all, for this was a Sabbath to the LORD (*4-5*), and his land would receive its rest.

There is something curious here. *The land must rest?* Yes. For it is producing and working for the people. The idea that it must rest is embedded into creation. *God rested.*

God gives his **people** a sabbath. In the Fourth Commandment, he gives the **animals** and **servants** a sabbath. Here, he gives **everything** else a yearly sabbath.¹⁷ This includes the slaves and field workers who are not having to plow and sow and reap. You can't get away from the principle of resting in the Bible. It is universal and transcendent. God created this world to work and then to rest. Growth and work is hard. God is not. He created all things to work and then have their proper rest.

You might wonder, **what are they supposed to eat**, if they can't do any planting or harvesting for an entire year? Keep reading. **"The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you,"** that is for male and female slaves, hired workers, sojourners who live in the land, cattle and wild animals (6-7). As the land lies fallow, resting and preparing for its next six years of work, **"The children of Israel are to behave like the nomads they were before the conquest. Anyone can pick**

¹⁷ An interesting, albeit strongly influenced by literary criticism, article that compares Genesis 6-9 with Leviticus 25 and concludes that the Flood was a Sabbatical Rest (caused by our sin, my words) is **Josh Spoelstra**, "The Flood as Sabbatical Rest: A Comparison of Genesis 6-9 and Leviticus 25," *Journal for Semitics* (2019): 1-10, https://www.academia.edu/43435248/The_Flood_as_Sabbatical_Rest_A_Comparison_of_Genesis_6-9_and_Leviticus_25.

and gather whatever he finds, wherever it is. This should be of special benefit to slaves and other landless persons.”¹⁸

Not only would this give them a rest, but it would remind them of where they came from, in this wilderness journey, and this would impress upon them the kindness and goodness of the God who has allowed them to reap the produce of the land flowing with milk and honey. It would also strengthen their faith, for they had to trust that God would bring them enough food for the year, though they did not farm.

The Year of Jubilee (8-22)

After this, they were to “count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years” (8). You can hear the seventh day sabbath idea throughout this. $7 \times 7 = 49$. These “weeks” remind them of the creation week. But these weeks are actually years—forty-nine years. On the fiftieth year, on the Day of Atonement, they then sound the trumpet throughout all the land, proclaiming liberty to all

¹⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 318.

the inhabitants. This is the jubilee, “when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan” (9-10). We will see as it goes on how this returning is a liberty for the people.

Vs. 11 says that in this year they are also not to sow or reap or gather grapes from undressed vines. “It is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field” (12). In other words, the jubilee is another Sabbath year. They called it **the great sabbath year**. After forty-nine years and seven sabbath years, this one is greater than the others, for each man returns to his property (13).

It begins to explain what this means. It is **prefaced** with a very important law regarding **transactions**. **If they make a sale to their neighbor or buy from them, they were not to wrong one another** (14). We will see what this law pertains to in a moment. “**You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of years for crops**” (15). If there are many years until the next jubilee, you increase the price; if fewer, you reduce the price, “**for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you**” (16).

This law of transactions is therefore specifically dealing **with land transactions**, not any transaction about any good

or service. It is the land that is in view. This is vital for properly interpreting this chapter. It is the land—the land of Canaan—that is in view. This is reinforced in vv. 17-18. “You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the LORD your God. Therefore you shall do my statutes and keep my rules and perform them, and then you will dwell in the land securely.”

So what’s going on in all of this. Remember that like the sons of God, each tribe was given an allotment of land. It was a very specific place in Canaan. 2 ½ tribes were east of the Jordan. Judah got Jerusalem, and so on. Within each tribe, the various families originally went and picked out their own land. This became their family land for all time. Now, sometimes a family might want to lease the land to someone would work it for them. They would settle on a price for that land that would be equitable for both parties—a fair lease for the land as well as a fair enough price that the tenant could make his own money selling the extra crops. In this way, both tenant and land holder would hope to make some money.

But why might a landholder want to lease his land and not farm it? Perhaps he had to travel to another country. Perhaps he wanted to learn a trade in the city. Perhaps he

was **physically unable** to farm it himself. There are lots of reasons. The point here is that they were to work out a price that had the jubilee in mind, such that when the jubilee came, the property would return to the original owner.

Vitally, **if they did this as God commanded**, then the lease on the land would run out at the jubilee. In other words, no one would be losing anything suddenly and unexpectedly. There would be no injustice of some large debt that was still owed being unpaid. It's like if you **lease a car for five years**. At the end of the lease, you are "free" from the debt and the car returns to the dealer. This is **written into the contract**. This isn't unexpected and it isn't unfair. It was an equitable agreement that benefited both parties. You didn't have to pay for the whole car, you get to use it and benefit from it, but you also don't get to keep it.

It is only when people perverted their land transactions that a problem would arise making it seem unjust to have a year of jubilee. But remember, the law doesn't go away just because you were spiritually negligent and didn't account for the jubilee in your contract. Israel may not have celebrated it, but that would be in disobedience to the LORD.

One question should arise in your mind about this fiftieth year. It is a question raised in vs. 20. “If you say, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’” (This is actually the center of a possible chiasm, see n. 16). The same question would be doubly on the mind in the *fiftieth* year, for this would make two years in a row of no farming. The LORD predicted this question and vs. 19 cuts it off. “The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and dwell in it securely.” Vs. 21 adds, “I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years.” And 22, “When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating some of the old crop; you shall eat the old until the ninth year, when its crop arrives.”

In other words, you have to have faith in God that he will do what he promised. This faith is hard. It seems irrational. The law also presupposes that your faith is working itself out in obedience—in not working the land during the seventh years and in how you are doing your transactions by keeping in mind the jubilee. If you do what he says, it shows your faith, and this verse will not be hard at all.

Implications: The Poor Land Owner (23-28)

Vs. 23 takes us to the third and final section of the chapter. It begins with a vital rule. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me.” An entire sermon could be preached here, but this is why I spent the time on the inheritance of land earlier. Canaan is not actually Israel’s land at all. They are all tenants leasing free of charge Yahweh’s land. In one sense there are human owners (the original tenants); in another there are no landowners except Christ here. The point of this is to help the children of God deal rightly with one another. If they don’t actually own the land themselves, then they can’t lord it over anyone else.

It now gives some examples. The first is about a poor Israelite (“brother”) who has to sell his property. Here, the nearest kinsman redeemer would buy what his brother had sold (25). This was to keep the land in the family. He would make an agreement with the temporary owner to buy it back with the debt ending at the jubilee. This was a moral duty as we learn in the story of Ruth and Boaz (see Ruth 4). Since the redeemer is family, the land is staying in the family, and the title now belongs to him.

If the man who was poor and through the selling of the land he is able to become **prosperous**, then he can **buy it back himself**, calculating the years since he would it and paying back the balance with the jubilee in mind as they make the deal (26-27).

Vs 28 is really important to keep all that we have said in mind. “**But if he does not have sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.**” In other words, the original agreement to sell the land because he was poor had *in its original contract* the view that **the buyer was not keeping it** permanently. Hence, the “sale” of the land was actually a “lease” and their agreement was always supposed to have had this in mind.

The problem would arise if the **buyer somehow got greedy** and took advantage of the poor seller or if they both were negligent of the jubilee. Under these conditions, you can imagine all kinds of ways that if Israel actually celebrated the jubilee and the land returned back to the original owner, that someone could be out a lot of money. Imagine that I own a field, but I suddenly need money for some reason, and I sell you the field. You pay me the full amount up front and

in exchange figure you will more than recoup your losses over the next 20 years. But let's say now that this all happened the just two years before the jubilee and we forget about this law. Suddenly, in year two, you have to give the land back to me! You are out almost all of your money. Why? Because that's just the way social justice works because I was a **greedy capitalist**? Because that's what we needed to **jumpstart the economy**? No. Because we were fools and disobeyed God's law. If we had both kept the jubilee in mind, we would have settled on an agreement that would have taken this into account, both of us could have been helped, and no one would be out anything.

Implications: Houses in Walled Cities (29-34)

The law moves on next to the **selling of houses in walled cities** (such as Jerusalem). This will help you see that the jubilee is really about the sale *of land*, **not equal redistribution of wealth**. If you sell a house in a city, you can redeem it within a year of its sale. That is, you can buy it back. This is your right of redemption (vs. **29**).

If you do not **choose to buy it back**, then this house *will belong forever to the buyer, throughout his generations* (**30**). It shall

not be released at the jubilee. This demonstrates that it isn't everything that returns to the original owner every fifty years. Pat Robertson was simply wrong. Not every debt was cancelled. If you owed a debt on this house and it was the jubilee, you kept paying in order to permanently keep the house. Any interpretation that tries to apply this law today to anything and everything has fundamentally misread this law. Jubilee is about the sale of ancestral lands of Israel that go back to the division of the lands to the twelve tribes, which goes back further to the Yahweh's inheritance as the Son of God. All of this rests upon the sovereign prerogative of God to call them to himself, to give them the law, to dwell in their midst, and to give them his land and let them walk in it. That's what it means to be in the Most Holy Place.

There is an exemption to the housing rule. If the house is not in a walled city, it must be returned at the jubilee (31). Why? Because, it is considered part of the ancestral land, whereas the cities were special cases that were not about land but commerce and in the case of Jerusalem, places of worship.

Finally, many of these cities were also cities given to the Levites who received no land (Num 35:1-8). These special 48 cities were to always belong to them, and so he could

redeem his house that he sold at any time (32-33). Those cities also had their own pastureland and those fields could not be sold (34).

Implications: Poor Brother with No Land (35-43)

The law moves to **poor brother who cannot continue to live** with you (35). He is to be **supported** as though he were a stranger or sojourner and he shall live with you (36), not through hand-out, but through commerce carried out in brotherly love. That commerce is discussed in vv. 36. “**Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you.**” Vs. 37 gives a couple of examples. “**Do not lend him money at interest, nor given him your food for a profit.**” This is the biblical way of dealing with the poor among you, at least those who are able to work. You are not to take advantage of him for “**I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, ad to be your God**” (38).

If he was so poor that he feels he has to **sell himself to you**, you were **not to make him serve as a slave** (39). Rather, he would be like a **hired worker or a sojourner**. He was to

be treated as free and not under your lordship. And he would serve at maximum until the jubilee (40). The purpose here then is to help him get back on his feet. However you transacted this servitude, whether it be for a year or 49 years, the end goal was to help him return to prosperity through your enabling help. If you did this right, his going out along with his children, returning to his own clan and the possession of his fathers would not be a hardship to either one of you (vs. 41). You would remember that you were sold as slaves in Egypt and God brought you out and gave you your freedom in his land (42). If you got greedy or forgot, the jubilee would be a terrible burden that you would resent, for you are losing your slave and all his free labor. Do you see how this law indirectly stabilizes or destabilizes a civilization, depending upon its faith in God? Hence, “You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God” (43).

Implications: Slaves (44-55)

You were allowed to buy slaves (male or female) from the nations around Israel (44), and the strangers and clans in Israel that were not Jewish (45). The reason, in part, has to

do with continued states of holiness—not intrinsic holiness, but holiness related to God’s presence. The nations were not holy; God did not dwell among them. Israel **never had chattel** (property) slaves like we think of with black slavery in America. Yes, vs. 45 calls them “**property**,” but it was not sub-human property that had no rights. They were always regarded as human beings with basic inalienable rights throughout the Middle East, much more in Israel. It was also never about race. It was more like indentured servanthood.¹⁹ Unlike your brother, that person belonged to you until the slavery period was completed.

Under this condition, if you were old, you could pass the slave down to your sons after you (46). But you could not do this with a fellow brother. I believe it is this that is the chief differentiator between an Israelite and a foreign slave.

It tells of a situation where a **stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich** while your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner or member of their clan (47). The law states that if this happens, you may have a relative redeem him (48), or he prospered

¹⁹ For more on Slavery in the ancient world see my sermon “Slaves and Masters” on Eph 6:5-9 (Sept 1, 2019) <https://www.rbcnc.com/Ephesians%206.5-9%20Slaves%20and%20Masters%20big%20font.pdf>.

during his slavery he could redeem himself (49). (By the way, [prospering during his slavery](#) should show you that this kind of slavery was nothing like what we had in America and exists today in many other parts of the world.) The point here would be to bring him out from an oppressive indentured slavery to a foreigner, to one that would have his future benefit at heart as a fellow brother.

They were to [calculate with the buyer](#) from the year when he sold himself to the jubilee and settle on a price with that in mind (50-52). He is to be treated as a hired worker year by year until his service comes to an end at the jubilee (53-54).

All of this is [concluded](#) by causing Israel to remember that they are [God's servants](#) (55). The word used here is *ebed*, and it is translated elsewhere in the chapter as “slaves.” The reason for using “servant” here is probably our own association with an evil form of slavery; at the same time, since we have that association already, it makes using the term of foreign slaves something that is prone to misunderstanding). God brought them out of slavery to Egypt to serve him. He is the LORD your God (55). And to him they owed all of their allegiance and obedience.

Jubilee Today

As we think about this law today, my hope is that you are now able to see that turning this into some kind of principle of absolute freedom from all debts at some magically derived time like the year 2000 is not what this is about. Jubilee is about three things. “Completely stopping agriculture [i.e. resting], restoring ancestral property, and returning (from debt slavery) to one’s clan of birth.”²⁰ It is also about God’s people learning to treat one another lovingly, though also fairly and equitably.

There is a question as to whether Israel actually ever carried out the jubilee. Scholars are divided.²¹ We have no evidence outside of the Bible that they ever did. They probably did keep it at that original time in the days of Joshua (Josh 11:23?). But after that? We don’t know. If they had kept their eyes on jubilee while conducting their transactions, it would be no more impossible to carry out than leasing a car and returning it at the end. On the other hand, if they had taken their eyes off of it, it seems to me that from that time forward it would have been nearly

²⁰ Lowrey, 67.

²¹ See a short discussion in Lowrey, 66.

impossible to keep it, for the accumulation of wealth and the injustice of breaking contracts that didn't keep it in mind would have been nearly impossible to overcome. But again, that would in no way justify stopping the practice, for this was God's law to them.

Perhaps referring to [the jubilee](#), Hebrews tells us, “[If Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on](#)” ([Heb 4:8](#)). What day might he have in mind? He refers to it as a sabbath, a sabbath-rest which remains for the people of God ([9](#)). But what sabbath rest?

I propose that the jubilee fit the greatest OT of this, because it is the $7 \times 7 + 1$ that no other sabbath day, week, or year could emulate. I say in light of [our Lord's first words in the synagogue](#) when he read the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus picked up the scroll of Isaiah and read, “[The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor](#)” ([Luke 4:18-19](#); cf. [Isa 61:1-2](#)). This is nothing less than [the jubilee](#)! And when he read it, he rolled up the scroll and said to them, “[Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing](#)” ([Luke 4:21](#)).

The Gospels do something else with this jubilee idea. Someone says of the jubilee, “It is well understood in Old Testament scholarship that a seven-fold cycle in the Hebrew Bible, is likely to be pointing back to the creation narrative, where God is described as creating the earth in six days and resting on the seventh. Moreover, when something happens on the eighth day, or the eighth year, we are meant to understand that this is new creation symbolism. The seven days are over, so the eighth is, as it were, Day One again.”²² As a 7x7+1, jubilee would be the greatest of all the eighth day celebrations.

I would propose that the Lord’s resurrection from the dead on the first day symbolizes this great jubilee, an unending year that proclaims the Lord’s favor until Christ returns. Remember, this announcement took place on the Day of Atonement, the day that the sins of Israel are forgiven. For us, anyone who turns to Jesus by faith for the forgiveness of their sins will have it any day that they do it.

Perfect jubilee, the fulfillment of that Great Sabbath, has come in the person of Christ.²³ Remember when I said that

²² Helen Paynter, “The Ethics of Jubilee in Leviticus 25,” *Ministry Today* (Spring 2016), 2.

²³ Origen, Didymus of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, Procopius Gazaei, and other Fathers all interpreted the Jubilee this way. See Jonathan Stökl, “Proclaim Liberty Throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants Thereof!': Reading Leviticus 25:10 Through the Centuries,” *History of European Ideas* 44:6 (2018): 17-19.

if someone would have ruled well over the land that they **would inherit the earth**? Jesus did just this over his land—as both God (elohim-Angel) and man. He gave just laws in the OT to the people of Israel. He carried out his **blessings and punishments** as a just King. As one of us, it began with **his ministry** of setting the poor and the possessed free. It continues with his **death** and the proclamation that will now set the prisoners free. It moves into his **resurrection** on the First Day. It goes into **Pentecost**, fifty days later, when the Spirit descends, and the church is created.

According to the promises, all the earth now belongs to the God-man (Ps 2:8; 82:8). Therefore those who come to him may know true jubilee from their sins no matter where they live. He told us the meek will inherit the earth. That's believers in Christ. And now he “leases” his land to us to live on it even as he liberates us from our debts to him.

This moment, as you hear the news of its fulfillment in his person, *you* may be released from all the debts you owe to God for your sins. You can come into his land, Beulah Land, across Jordan, and find release and rest from your slavery to sin and indebtedness to God. So turn to Christ in faith and repentance of your sins. Pray to him to save you, for you have heard the Word of God who brings you to life.

Are there **any more implications of this law** in our world now? I am personally hesitant of any idea that would apply it to societies today. We are not Israel. Our land is not their land. Furthermore, that would be pretty ironic, considering that this law itself says that foreigners are not to participate in the jubilee!

I also see many misapplications. **This is not the wiping out of debt so people can get a fresh start.** That doesn't mean such a concept wouldn't rest on biblical principles of love and mercy and indeed, jubilee itself does have the wiping out of debt in mind as it regards land, even if your contract didn't plan for it. But this isn't what the jubilee is really about. There was no debt when done properly when jubilee came. So there is nothing to be forgiven.²⁴

There is **no redistribution of wealth** here, at least not the way that is talked about today. In a book grounded in the jubilee someone writes, **“The poorest billion have hardly any capital, so they and their children waste away in malnutrition and starvation. To endorse market economies without redistributing resources so the poorest have access to the capital to earn a decent living is damnable defiance of**

²⁴ Harbin, 696.

the biblical God of justice.”²⁵ I heartily sympathize with his anger at the mass poverty and starvation in so much of the world. But I couldn’t disagree more with the solution. Just looking at the year of jubilee, the land is not redistributed equally, much less everything else. It simply reverted back to the original family to whom God had given it.

It is important to say here that this reversion is about God and his gifts to the Twelve Tribes, not about some kind of “social justice.” In this way, the Year taught them about the character of God, his releasing them from slavery, his given them his land, his providing for them while they rest. And oh, how we still see this today through the mercies of Christ. Because of this, the nation that does not recognize these things cannot every possibly hope to carry out any kind of law like this.²⁶

Another is the idea that it kept people from becoming too wealthy. Someone writes, “This new creation image has broader ramifications ... [It] proclaimed a sort of freedom, not just for the slave and the debtor, but also for the wealthy. For those bound up in the cycle of acquisition, Jubilee represented an opportunity to be freed of the burden of

²⁵ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (5th ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997)

²⁶ This point is made strongly by Harbin. “The Jubilee principle is valid only in a society that collectively recognizes God as sovereign” (p. 697).

excess.”²⁷ It’s a nice sentiment to try to legislate greed, but it just isn’t true of the jubilee, not if done according to the actual commands. There is nothing in the jubilee itself, if done properly, that would prevent the acquisition of wealth in anything other than acquiring massive amounts of land that is always yours.²⁸ So this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the law.

Certainly, there are principles here of being stewards not owners of some things, of being slaves to God, of the need to trust God for provisions, of not holding too tightly to this world, and so on. But the law itself? Not so much.

If there is any economic impact to be learned, far from being a “massive, uncompensated redistribution of wealth” that would have been impossible to carry out in practice (as so many authors believe), it actually would have been a workable law that did not necessarily require coerced participation, and would have had a positive effect on

²⁷ Paynter, 2.

²⁸ Even though they are considered tenants in one respect of God’s land, in another, the whole point here is that the original tribal lands were permanent and therefore this law is also not some kind of argument against private property rights. For this and several other misconceptions about the Great Jubilee see the very helpful article Art Lindsley, “5 Myth about Jubilee.”

commercial vitality.²⁹ This is because the law benefits both parties when entered into rightly.

But it demands faith in God which cannot be coerced. Much less can a secular nation have such a thing. So even though pagans had secular counterparts to the year of jubilee, those were usually done when one nation took over another and the conquering king had nothing to lose and everything to gain. That's not faith in God. But true faith, however, cannot help but produce fruit and obedience. Along with its stated ethics, this in turn encourages fairness, fosters stewardship, love towards brother, and caring for the economically vulnerable by seeking the well-being and prosperity of your poor brother through the establishment of contracts that have as their end goal their final release from service and returning to their own family and ancestral lands.

Make sure that in your own thoughts on these matters, you consider rightly God's law on jubilee and most of all that you turn to the Christ who has fulfilled it so that you might enter the Kingdom of God.

²⁹ Schaefer and Noell, Abstract and see the whole article. 1-19. Another interesting paper is John E. Anderson, "A Biblical and Economic Analysis of Jubilee Property Provisions," *Faith & Economics* 46 (Fall 2005): 25-41, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255609085_A_Biblical_and_Economic_Analysis_of_Jubilee_Property_Provisions.

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