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What is needed from Christian educators is a response that is biblically responsible and reflective. I propose a response of 'doxological teaching' or training. 'Teaching,' suggests Jerry Root of Wheaton College, 'is coming shoulder-to-shoulder with a person, looking out at a reality and describing it in such a way that captures their imagination and desire to do something about it.' Doxological teaching, then, is recognizing or discovering that 'God is here! God is in this place!' and then designing learning experiences which open the learners' eyes to see how big and glorious God is. In global crisis and change, in sorrow and in joy, God is at work in our world completing the 'Big Picture' of his kingdom. God is in this place. There is hope. People Groups are becoming worshippers!

To this end, cultural changes, technological innovations, and instructional developments can be made allies in moving missions into the 21st century. But the missions educator that is needed must own more than cable TV, the latest computer, and most recent book on leadership training. We need teachers who themselves have been caught by the Lord of the universe, who can see clearly God's sovereign hand moving in the affairs of the world, and who burn with a passion to raise up other worshippers who long to tell 'the story of His glory' among the nations! They alone will be suited to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with missionary candidates from countless nations and help them detect the glorious movement of what God is doing in our day!

*'For the earth will be filled with the kingdom of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.'*

[Habakkuk 2:14](#)

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# **The Biblical Jubilee**

**Leonardo De Chirico**

**Keywords:** Jubilee, land, wealth, property, poverty, Sabbath, justice, covenant, prophecy, Messiah, servant, community

## **INTRODUCTION**

'Jubilee' is a word we hear more and more with each passing day. All over the world extraordinary efforts are being made over this event associated with the fateful date of 2000. Millions of people, lay and religious alike, are getting ready to make a form of 'pilgrimage'. Many voices are raised urging us to not make this millennial event merely a grand media event or a commercial jamboree of global proportions, and the sentiments

of these calls are worthy. The problem that remains, however, is the lack of direction. Many know that the word 'Jubilee' comes from somewhere in the Bible, yet they would not be able to describe this 'Jubilee' that the biblical writers spoke about.

In Italy, the Roman Catholic church has assumed a leading role in promoting the 'Jubilee'. The Pope has worked tirelessly for this, and has initiated a very ambitious project. But can we speak of the 'Jubilee' without defining it? With this aim of deepening our understanding, our starting point must be where the 'Jubilee' idea was born: The Bible.

## THE YEAR OF JUBILEE IN THE BIBLE

### A. the Institution of the Year of Jubilee

In order to understand how the 'Jubilee' is presented in the Bible, we need to start from a long passage taken from [Leviticus 25](#) vv.8–55. This third book of the Pentateuch contains a collection of laws that confirm and clarify the terms of the covenant that God had established with the people of Israel after having freed them from slavery in Egypt. In it, the types and modes of sacrifice that Israel must offer as an integral part of their worship of the Lord are prescribed. The principal emphasis of Leviticus concerns the holiness of Israel as a chosen people, having been liberated and set apart for the service of God, who has amongst his attributes that of being Holy ([11:44–45](#); [19:2](#)). In this context, the festivals and celebrations that Israel must keep are presented. Amongst these is the Jubilee which is described in [Leviticus 25](#).

#### A) Derivation

The similarity to the Latin verb *jubilare* (from which comes the English 'jubilation') must not deceive us concerning the derivation of the term Jubilee. Jubilee is a word that comes from the Hebrew word *yôbêl* that occurs 27 times in the Old Testament. The meaning of *yôbêl* is 'ram's horn',<sup>1</sup> the instrument that was used to gather the assembly, to sound the battle against the enemy's forces or to mark a sacred moment for the people of Israel. By extension, the 50 yearly event introduced by the sound of the ram's horn is called in the Bible, the year of *yôbêl*, the year of Jubilee. On the other hand, the Hebrew verb *ybl* (to make restitution, send away)<sup>2</sup> evokes the idea, linked to the Jubilee, of the restitution of property or of people. The word, therefore, can indicate both the musical instrument that announces the Jubilee and the principal actions that characterize it. Finally, there is another possibility for the derivation of this Hebrew term, which is not an alternative but complements the preceding ones. Given the theological weight of the institution of the Jubilee—which we will detail later—the word itself can be an expression of faith in YHWH, the God of Israel. In this sense, YHWH (*Yô-*) is recognized as *bahal* (*-bêl*), Lord, that is, as the one true Lord, thus *yôbêl*, Jubilee.

#### B) The Specific Characteristics

In [Leviticus 25](#), there are three fundamental provisions, around which turn all the legislation concerning the Year of Jubilee. These three important elements are developed and extended by examples, but, taken by themselves, are the essence of the Jubilee legislation.

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Cf. [Ex. 19:13](#) and [Josh. 6:4–6, 8, 13](#).

<sup>2</sup> 2. Cf. [Isa. 23:7](#) and [Job 21:30](#).

Firstly, comes the order to leave the land fallow, which is to let the land *rest* (25:11–12, 19–22). In the Jubilee Year, the normal activities linked to cultivating the land must be suspended completely. The fields must not be sowed, the produce must not be gathered, the vines must not be tended (11). A whole year of complete rest must be observed, both for the land under cultivation and for the labourers. In order to eat, the crops stored from previous years must be relied upon (12), or, better, from the year before the Jubilee, given that God promised such a blessing upon the harvest of that season as to make it sufficient for the following three years (21–22). The Year of Jubilee is to all effects a sabbath year, a year in which all labour ceases and which is consecrated for the resting of the earth and of man.

The second key provision of the Jubilee concerns the *redemption* of property (land or houses) on behalf of the original owners who, for various reasons, had lost them during the previous fifty years (25:13–18, 23–24). On the Jubilee, the land must be returned to those to whom it originally belonged—that is, to the original ordered division of plots of land amongst each Israelite nuclear family after the conquest of the land of Canaan by the people of Israel. If the ups and downs of life had brought about a series of transfers of land, the Jubilee was the occasion to return things to their initial allocation. Selling was never an absolute transfer of property (23) because, due to the Jubilee, lands sold later returned to their vendor. But this was not all. The Jubilee also influences the determination of the selling price. It was established that the price was calculated according to the time remaining until the next Year of Jubilee (15–16). Thus the further from the Jubilee the higher the price, and vice versa. Naturally, nothing stopped a seller of a field from buying it back before the automatic redemption which came through the Jubilee. In that case, however, the usual commercial terms applied (25–28), although fairness was still expected (14, 17a). The exception to the rule of the Jubilee redemption concerned houses situated in walled cities. These could not be redeemed in the Year of Jubilee and could revert back to the owner only if they were repurchased within a year of their sale (29–31). As for the priestly tribe, the Levites, they were especially protected in that they had the permanent right to redeem their property (32–34).

Lastly, the Jubilee laws commanded the *liberation* of Hebrews from their servitude (25:35–55). With this command, a remedy is given if an Israelite had been forced to ‘sell himself’ after being unable to repay his debts. In this case of servitude due to insolvency, on the Jubilee the servant and his children were returned to his clan (39–41). In any case, the relationship between the master and his servants was not to be one of domination (43, 53). The people from the surrounding tribes or foreigners who lived amongst the Israelites could, however, be acquired as slaves (44–46), but this could never apply to the Israelites themselves (42b, 46b). If a foreigner acquired Israelite slaves, these could be redeemed by his family by an amount directly proportional to the number of years before the next Jubilee (47–54). As well as restoring the servants to their dignity as human beings, this section from [Leviticus 25](#) underlines the requirement, often repeated in the law of Moses, not to take advantage of people in difficulty nor to expect interest on loans nor to practise usury, but instead to help the neighbour who is in need (35–37).

### *C) The Socio-Economic Context*

The Jubilee laws set out in [Leviticus 25](#) cover the people of Israel at a particular point in their history and relate to a particular social reality. Thus, we should not think that the provisions of the Jubilee can be uprooted from their specific context. Bearing this in mind, it must be remembered that the social structure of pre-monarchical Israel was founded essentially on a system of clearly-established family descent, firstly to a tribe, then in turn to a clan based on the father’s line and finally to a nuclear family. Every Hebrew found in

these last two the social groups which provided reference points for his life. This explains why the conquered land of Canaan was divided amongst the various clans.<sup>3</sup> The clans, in particular, had the task of preserving the well-being of the families, whose source of wealth came from their allocation of the land.

Despite these ideals, the maintenance of the original division of land was jeopardised by a series of factors that favoured the creation of large estates on the one hand, and the breaking of the fundamental link between the allocated land and the families to whom it had been given, on the other. This deprivation of land threatened the survival of the family itself, and would have destroyed the social fabric. The growth of servitude would also have had a disruptive impact on the whole social system. These effects would not have been merely economic, but fundamental for the lives of the people. In fact, the person, the family and the land are linked and interdependent, so that having an impact on one of them meant affecting all three. In the prescriptions of the Mosaic law, 'a person cannot survive without belonging to a family and without a land to cultivate; a family cannot be guaranteed without possessing a property and without respect for each of its members; the dignity of the land passes through the way in which it is cared for and cultivated by families and individuals'.<sup>4</sup>

The year of Jubilee therefore operates as a counterbalance so as to prevent the concentration of property in the hands of a few clans to the detriment of the smallest and weakest families and also to return servants to liberty. In this way, the clans and the families should have been safeguarded through the periodic return of their property and the cessation every fifty years of their servitude. The properties would also have thus conserved the link that united them to the families to whom they had been originally assigned.

#### *D) The Theological Background*

Chapter [25](#) of Leviticus is a legal text which follows a clear theological framework over and above the social and economic prescriptions that it contains. The Jubilee is prompted, justified and legitimized theologically in the sense that reference to the God of Israel runs right through its institution, its necessity and its meaning. The Jubilee finds its rightful place in a theological setting which must be clearly understood, else it will be misinterpreted. With this in mind, it is interesting to observe that each section of [Leviticus 25](#) concludes with an exhortation to the people to remember that God is the Lord ([17, 38, 55](#)) and that the Jubilee laws in question are founded completely on his lordship. Before the inescapable presence of this God, they were called to live a life developing the fear of God, showing respect and obedience before him ([17, 36, 43](#)). In more detail, there are four big references that give sense and theological weight to the Jubilee.

First of all, the Jubilee evokes the *creation* of God and the *providence* of God. It has already been seen how the Year of Jubilee was established on a calculation based on sabbatical years. Every seven cycles of sabbath years, a Jubilee year must be celebrated (8). In its turn, the Sabbath Year ([25:1-7](#)) had been instituted to commemorate the ceasing of God's creative activity on the seventh day.<sup>5</sup> Just as God had rested on the seventh day, so the people of Israel had to suspend their ordinary activities, not only every

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<sup>3</sup> 3. Cf. [Num. 26:52-56](#) and Josh. chaps. [13-21](#).

<sup>4</sup> 4. A. Pitta, *L'anno della liberazione. Il giubileo e le sue istanze bibliche*, (Cinisello Balsamo (Mi): Edizioni San Paolo 1998), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> 5. Cf. [Ezek. 20:8-11](#) and [31:13-17](#). In [Deut. 5:15](#), the sabbath is related to the liberation from the bondage of Egypt.

seventh day but every seventh year. The resting of God at the end of the work of creation acted therefore as a model to guide the rhythm of life for the people. Based on this, in the biblical legislation, both a day of rest at the end of a cycle of six days of work and a year of rest at the end of a cycle of six years of work was established. The Jubilee is celebrated also to honour this creation ordinance. If it were fully respected, God would bind himself to provide the means of sustenance which are still necessary when productive activity has stopped. In this sense, the requirements for the Year of Jubilee were underwritten by the promise of the provision of God (20–21). God is the One who created the world but he is also he who controls the cycles of nature, bringing forth their produce. The Jubilee makes clear that those who honour God will not fail to be abundantly repaid, as not only the beginning of the world but also its continuing natural processes depend upon him.

Secondly, the Jubilee is set forth in relation to the *covenant* established between God and his people on the day after their liberation from Egypt. This key, formative event in the history and the identity of the children of Israel acted as a reference for every aspect of life (38:55). God is not only the universal Lord who has created everything, but also he who liberated his people from Egypt and the God of the Covenant of Mount Sinai; in short, ‘your God’ (17, 38, 55). In terms of the Jubilee, the provision by which the servants receive back their original liberty is based on the act by which God took Israel out of slavery and gave them the gift of serving him, the only true God. The freeing of servants is possible and indeed necessary because of this previous liberation.

In addition, the reference to the covenant is an appeal to the duties that the people took on when they made this treaty with God. Because they are bound to him in covenant, the people of God could no longer live independently of his will, either in the life of religious worship or in the socio-economic sphere. The Jubilee is an integral part of the arrangements that enforce the covenant established on Mount Sinai.

But there is more. Beyond just pointing to the creation of God, his providence and bringing to mind the covenant between God and his people, the Jubilee is also an assertion of the *right* of God to rule over his creation and his people. The Jubilee laws are legitimate because of the divine prerogative over all reality. This is not the claim of some political or religious authority over land or people. No, God reserves for himself the right to have at his complete disposal the earth and its inhabitants, in that he, as creator of the world and Lord of the Covenant with Israel, has an original and absolute right over all people and all things. Thus, the plots of land can be redeemed as ‘the land is mine’ (23). The property rights acquired in the fifty years preceding the Jubilee are therefore relative to those of the Lord, who can manage the earth as he likes. God is therefore the planner-owner-creator of the world while men are ‘aliens and tenants’ (23) in respect to the land that they cultivate and manage. Because of this, one cannot do as one pleases with God’s creation.

In addition, the people who through various circumstances lived in servitude can regain their liberty as ‘they are my servants’ (42, 55). The state of being a servant of God, common to all human beings, makes one free with respect to all other men. Nobody must be the servant of another because we are all servants of God.

The Jubilee is therefore a concrete expression of the right of God to intervene in the affairs of men to bring honour to the order of creation and to correct the distortions upsetting the lives of his people. This prerogative of God is not an illegitimate interference nor an unwarranted meddling in the human sphere of action. Instead, the Jubilee is an integral, justified and incontestable assertion of the fact that God is creator, provider and Lord of the world.

Finally, the Jubilee is linked to the *atonement* of the sins of the people of God. Here also, the theological dimension of thinking about the Jubilee is illuminating in that it sheds



light on the necessity of dealing with sin. To underline this connection, the blast of the ram's horn that signals the start of the year of Jubilee is also sounded during the 'Day of Atonement' (9) and the arrangements for the Day of Jubilee come into force from that special day in the Hebrew calendar.

According to [Leviticus 16](#), the 'Day of Atonement' was an event that occurred every year in which the High Priest offered atoning sacrifices for the sanctuary, for the priests themselves and for the whole nation. The coincidence of this day with the day of Jubilee encourages reflection. The fact that it starts on the 'Day of Atonement' means that it started with an invitation to contrition for sins and with the asking of forgiveness from each other whereas it is clear that the social processes that produced the inequality on which the Jubilee intervenes have a cause largely linked to the exploitation of the poor by the rich. This is the fruit of mankind rebelling against God. The ultimate cause of the injustice is found here. Sin is a force, as real as it is perverse, that has irreparably corrupted every area of life.

The Jubilee is not merely a legislation with idealistic social aims inspired by some egalitarian ideology; instead, it is a necessity that is prompted by an awareness of the state of sin in which all exist and of the consequent need of atonement. According to the true spirit of the Jubilee, it is important not merely to correct the perverse effects of past developments, but above all, to confront the central issue for man, which is that of being a sinner before God. The need for atonement precedes and accompanies the needs of social justice.

#### *E) Summary*

Reading [Leviticus 25](#) is a fascinating exercise that cannot but stir both novice and expert Bible students. There are a number of reasons for such a reaction.

First of all is the *radicalism* of the Jubilee. The ordinances that are found in [Leviticus 25](#) have huge ramifications. The restitution of land to the original owner, the freeing of servants, the rebuilding of families are very drastic measures, that, if applied literally, would radically change the social fabric of a people. The Jubilee does not pursue a strategy of marginal corrections or of minimal adjustments to the social-economic system. On the contrary, it is a comprehensive reform project that breaks the existing order so as to create a substantially new one, or at least one that is very different. The Jubilee acts on the structures of society, even if this society continues to be exposed to the dynamic processes that will, over time, recreate inequality. The Jubilee covers all social relations with a view to reordering them on bases formed from an original definitive model of social justice.

In addition to this, the cyclicity of the Jubilee is striking. It is not simply provisions for a once-off change, inspired by a utopian egalitarianism or by a populist dictator. The Jubilee is instead a set of precepts that, at least in the intentions of the Book of Leviticus, must be applied every fifty years. The Jubilee regulations are based on an awareness of the need to act periodically upon the social structures of a society and on property-based relationships and to uphold the downtrodden. Behind the Jubilee lies the conviction that, left to itself, a social grouping manifests unacceptable inequalities and grave injustices. The sin introduced into the world by the fall of Adam and Eve has also structural ramifications that disrupt the social life of man. The Jubilee is an occasion every fifty years to start again, to rebalance the disparities of income in society that were produced by the social dynamics of the fifty previous years.

Thirdly comes the surprising *spirituality* of the Jubilee. In [Leviticus 25](#) is found not only a programme of social reform, that is both radical and cyclical, but a real demonstration of the faith of Israel through these same reforming provisions. The

underlying theme of the Jubilee is the recognition of the lordship of God the creator, provider and saviour, to whom one's very existence is owed and who is worthy of all honour. The institution of the Jubilee takes us back to a holistic vision of life, in which God is God and the lives of men depend on their relationships with him. From this viewpoint, the arrangements of the Jubilee are expressions of an authentic spirituality. In [Leviticus 25](#), the confession of faith in the God of Israel and the measures taken to restore equality combine to form something of extraordinary theological worth and of remarkable social impact. The biblical Jubilee highlights a true conception of the world which manifests itself in concrete arrangements, but which is nurtured by all the richness of the reality of who God is and what he does.

## **B. The Prophetic Promise of the Jubilee**

The biblical Jubilee is not found solely in [Leviticus 25](#). On the contrary, this is merely the starting point, being the foundation and introduction to all that the rest of the Bible has to say concerning it. In fact, the Jubilee theme is evoked many times in the story of salvation, from the pre-monarchical period to that of the prophets, from the life of Jesus to the early church. The images surrounding the Jubilee act as a rich reference point in understanding the complete sweep of biblical revelation.

### *A) Jubilee and Prophecy*

Despite the institution of the Jubilee stated in [Leviticus 25](#), there is no evidence in the Scriptures that the Jubilee arrangements were ever fully put into practice, or their fifty year cycle followed. That legislation did not translate into full practice, even if there were single episodes inspired by a Jubilee sentiment.<sup>6</sup> In the story of the people of Israel, even after the period of the conquest of the land of Canaan, the problem of poverty continued to afflict society, ancestral property rights were denied and the dignity of people continued to be ignored. No political or religious authority was able to guarantee or command the implementation of the Jubilee regulations, neither were the mere prescriptions of the Jubilee a sufficient deterrent against social injustices or the oppression of the poor.

This systematic contravention of the ideals of the Jubilee, however, did not lead to a fatalistic sense of resignation to the existing order of human wickedness. These contraventions instead provided the inspiration for the preaching of several prophets who, observing with sadness the social inequalities present amongst the people, did not fail to call forcefully for heartfelt repentance and for full respect for the obligations of the covenant with God.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the high social concern of the message of the prophets which was inspired by the Jubilee, does not exhaust the ways in which these same prophets interpreted and expounded the *yôbêl*, the year of freedom foreseen in the book of Leviticus. With this in mind, it is worth referring to a passage from the prophet Isaiah ([61:1-3](#)) which brought an extraordinary development to the meaning of the Jubilee.

The prophecy in question is part of the 'servant songs' that are scattered throughout the book of Isaiah from chapter [42](#).<sup>8</sup> In these poetic sections, the prophet speaks of how the Messiah was to come to fulfil the plan of God for his people, in his capacity as 'servant' of the Lord. In this 'song' in particular, the servant announces his being chosen by God for

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<sup>6</sup> 6. Cf. [Num. 36:4](#); [Neh. 5:1-13](#); [Jer. 34:8-22](#).

<sup>7</sup> 7. Cf. [Isa. 3:14-15](#); [10:1-2](#); [Amos 2:6](#); [4:1](#); [8:4-6](#); [Mic. 2:1-2](#); [3:1-4](#).

<sup>8</sup> 8. Cf. [Isa. 42:1](#); [49:1](#); [50:4](#).



a task, gives the reason for his mission and also the beneficiaries of his work. The points of contact with the Jubilee cannot fail to be observed, being so clearly discernible.

### *B) The Mission of the 'servant'*

The 'servant's' action concerns the announcement of 'freedom for the captives', a message that corresponds to the expression used in [Leviticus 25:10](#) regarding the proclamation of amnesty for the servants. In addition, if the Jubilee was aimed at those who were impoverished (25:35.39), the servant looks to those who are 'afflicted'.<sup>9</sup> Also the 'humble' (*.anawim*) to whom the 'servant' turns, are identified in the book of Isaiah with the wretched, the poor—in short, those who are being exploited by the rich.<sup>10</sup> The mission of the 'servant' is also to bind up the 'broken hearted', the same expression of contrition called for in the 'Day of Atonement' that preceded the start of the Jubilee.

Yet there is more; as we have seen before, the Jubilee was the year of the restitution of property, of liberation for slaves, of respect for creation ordinances and of keeping the requirements of the covenant. In parallel, the 'servant' announces 'the year of the Lord's favour' that is also the 'day of vengeance of our God'. Throughout the text of Isaiah, God proclaims a year of extraordinary favour in which he himself guarantees the fact that justice will be done for those to whom it had until that time been denied. The year of amnesty of the Jubilee becomes the year of God's favour.

Between the Jubilee and this 'servant song' there exists therefore a parallelism that makes us think of how the preordained work of the Messiah can be seen as the proclamation of a great Jubilee in which God intervenes to reestablish justice. The Jubilee becomes an eschatological reference tool for understanding the actions of the 'servant'. God, in the person of the 'servant', will put his Jubilee into effect. However, there is a great difference. If in the intention of The Book of Leviticus, the Jubilee should be repeated cyclically, the year of favour prophesied by Isaiah is instead announced as a unique intervention, decisive and definitive on the part of God.

In the prophetic vision, the Jubilee is not solely a pre-monarchical law to be referred to when denouncing grave religious hypocrisy and crushing social injustice. In the prophecies relative to the Messiah, the mission of the 'servant' is framed as a great Jubilee event in which God intervenes through his 'anointed one' to reclaim those who were under varying yokes of oppression. Being unable to rely upon the prescribed implementation of the law, these people will have God himself to restore their personal and social dignity.

## **C. The Messianic Fulfilment of the Jubilee**

In the New Testament we do not find direct quotes or explicit references to the Jubilee, as presented in [Leviticus 25](#). But this is not to say that it is completely absent or that it had been relegated to something only of historical interest to the people of God.

### *A) The Jubilee of the Messiah*

In the New Testament the theme of the Jubilee came via the realization of the Messianic prophecies announced by Isaiah and fulfilled through the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah sent by God and 'servant' of the Almighty. It is not by chance that the text of

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<sup>9</sup> 9. In the LXX, the 'poor' of [Lev 25:25.35](#) (*penētai*) corresponds to those 'who mourn' in [Isa. 61:2](#) (*penthountas*)

<sup>10</sup> 10. Cf. also [Isa. 3:14–15](#); [10:2](#); [14:30](#); [24:6](#); [25:3](#); [29:19](#); [41:17](#); [58:7](#).

[Isaiah 61:1-3](#) is quoted extensively by Jesus on the occasion of his visit to Nazareth ([Luke 4:16-30](#)).

The episode reported by the evangelist Luke refers to the beginnings of the ministry of Jesus in the land of Galilee. On this occasion he was in Nazareth, the city 'where he had been brought up'. The reading of the Scriptures in the midst of the synagogue service offered him the opportunity to declare the meaning of his coming in the light of the prophecies of Isaiah. The affirmations of Jesus thus set forth his manifesto. That which Isaiah had written concerning the 'servant', Jesus attributed to himself and to his work. In Jesus and with Jesus that prophecy 'was fulfilled'. The expectations regarding the coming of the Messiah in his guise as 'servant' were realized with the presence of Jesus at Nazareth. It was thus clear that if the prophetic announcement concerning the Messiah had had as its paradigm of reference the promise of a great Jubilee from God, the fulfilment of that promise in the person of Jesus was the crucial moment in the realization of the plan of God. The history of salvation was taken to completion: the Jubilee prefigured in the Mosaic legislation and prophesied in the preaching of the prophets found in the coming of the Messiah the decisive point in its fulfilment.

It is clearly possible to extend the strong parallelism noted between [Leviticus 25](#) and [Isaiah 61](#) to the text of Luke quoted above, not least because the Gospel text quotes almost verbatim the text of Isaiah. In particular, we can observe that the passage read by the Lord Jesus indicates that he was sent to evangelize 'the poor' (*anawim*), who, as already demonstrated, are amongst the beneficiaries of the provisions of the Jubilee. With reference to [Isaiah 61](#), in Jesus' reading there is also the insertion of a clearer specification of the mission of Jesus which brings it closer to that of the Jubilee. In fact, bringing liberty to the oppressed (18)<sup>11</sup> is a fundamental part of the Jubilee which is also an essential part of the missionary work of Jesus.

[Luke 4](#) allows us to go a step further in defining the beneficiaries of the Jubilee. Now the Jubilee of Jesus Christ is no longer reserved solely for the children of Israel, as had been the case in the Old Testament. With the incarnation of the Son of God the beneficiaries of divine favour are all people and all nations, the whole of humanity. The Gospel of Luke records the hostility of his fellow villagers following Jesus' stating that the horizons of God are not limited to territorial boundaries or to the people of Israel but extend much further. The reference to the widow of Sidon (26) and to Naaman the Syrian (27) proved the reality that the plan of God knew no limitations, despite the nationalistic convictions of the Hebrews of the time. The text leads us to think (although explicitly stated elsewhere only in Luke,<sup>12</sup> and above all in the Acts of the Apostles<sup>13</sup>) that the benefits from the Jubilee of the Lord Jesus have a universal application, belonging to all men of whichever race, tribe or language, despite the complaints of the villagers.

Whereas the Jubilee of Leviticus maintained a distinction of treatment between Hebrew 'servants' and foreign 'slaves', the Jubilee announced and fulfilled by Jesus completely eliminated it. Thanks to him, men and women from every race, could be liberated from their conditions of servitude. All could regain their dignity that had been taken away through sin, and justice could be reestablished, a justice which had been compromised with the fall of the human race. With the incarnation of the Son of God, the Jubilee could no longer remain the exclusive prerogative of the Hebrews, given that his

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<sup>11</sup> 11. 'Setting the oppressed free' is not part of [Isaiah 61](#) but is a quotation from [Isaiah 58:6](#).

<sup>12</sup> 12. E.g. [Lk. 2:32](#).

<sup>13</sup> 13. [Acts 1:8](#); [9:15](#); [11:17-18](#).

work was meant for the whole world. Hence 'all nations' were the aim of the mission entrusted to his disciples ([Mt. 28:19](#)).

### *B) The Interpretation of the Work of Jesus Christ in the Light of the Jubilee*

The Jubilee is therefore an interpretive key to what Christ came to achieve on the earth. His message, his miracles, his death and his resurrection are all ways that establish the Jubilee.

His *teaching* made known the truth about a God who has the power to liberate. Knowing the message of Jesus means knowing him who is True ([1 John 5:20](#)) whilst remaining in his word makes us truly free ([John 8:31-32](#)). The cry for liberty associated with the Jubilee finds in the declaration of the 'good news' of Jesus the only possibility of its being satisfied. To be free, the first thing that a person is called to do is to hear the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

His *miracles* prove the reality of a divine power, a power far above the limitations of men, the cycles of nature or the dynamic processes of history; it can resolve situations which are, humanly-speaking, impossible, 'doing good' to people ([Acts 10:38](#)). In the same spirit of the Jubilee, the poor are called blessed ([Luke 6:20](#)), the oppressed are returned to liberty ([Mk. 9:17-27](#)), the hungry are satisfied ([Mk. 6:34-44](#)). Thanks to him, the beneficiaries of the Jubilee will no longer stay crushed because Jesus, with his powerful works, has demonstrated his power to change any situation, even the most intractable and entrenched. The miracles of Christ, especially his healings, are extraordinary anticipations of the blessings that the Jubilee of the Son of God will one day make concrete.

The *sacrifice* of Jesus on the cross demonstrates the fact that Jesus wanted to confront the central issue of the problem: the sin of mankind. He did not limit himself to denouncing the abuses of power by the rich against the poor, nor did he want simply to express his solidarity with the poor. His death testified to the reality that at the root of the human wickedness which produces such inequality there is humanity's rebellion against God, the breaking of the covenant and the offence to God's honour by humanity. The Jubilee laws also were framed in the knowledge that sin was the source of all the disruptions in life and so the start of the Year of Jubilee was preceded by the repentance of the Day of Atonement. Thus, even for the Jubilee in the Book of Leviticus, sin could never be confronted and resolved in a complete way by legal decrees or by social programmes, despite their importance.

With his sacrifice, Jesus has finished the only task necessary and sufficient to overthrow sin. At the cross, he voluntarily took the place of man, paid for him and substituted himself for him. In contrast to those prescribed by the law of Moses, the sacrifice of Christ was once and for all and unrepeatable. The sacrifices that were offered in the Day of Atonement were surpassed by the sacrifice of Christ, offered 'once and for all' ([Heb. 9:1-12, 24, 28](#)). The Jubilee of Jesus Christ solved the root of the problem for which the Jubilee in Leviticus offered a partial, temporary remedy.

The *resurrection* of Jesus also assumes a deep significance in the light of the Jubilee. Rising from the dead, the Lord Jesus proclaimed his victory over sin. His Jubilee is not mere high-sounding theory. Although the Jubilee in the Book of Leviticus had encountered very strong resistance when any attempt was made to enforce it, in time it had become part of the Hebrew system of justice, but it had lost most of its power. Instead, what Jesus had promised with the announcement of his great Jubilee, he could maintain because he had defeated sin and overcome death. That which Jesus obtained with his sacrifice he is able to put into practice because he rose on the third day. Given that Jesus is living, he is the judge of the living and the dead ([Acts 17:31](#)) and he will avenge those who have

suffered ([Rom. 12:19](#)). Justice can finally be re-established because the legislator is also the enforcer of the Jubilee.

Through the reference to the Jubilee it is therefore possible to understand important aspects of the work of Jesus on behalf of mankind in that the ideals of the Year of Jubilee find in Christ their true and full expression. More precisely, it can be said that the *rest* foreseen in the Jubilee for the land or for the labourers has been freely given by Jesus Christ. He offers his rest to those who are weary and burdened ([Mt. 11:28-29](#)); the salvation that Jesus has made possible through his work is the real 'sabbath-rest of God' ([Heb. 4:1-11](#)).

The *redemption* of lost properties is guaranteed by Jesus Christ who makes those who believe in him partakers of his incalculable riches ([Eph. 1:7, 18; 3:8, 16](#)) and who declares the believers heirs of his glorious reign ([James 2:5](#)). The value of this glorious inheritance will far exceed that which has been lost. Jesus is the one who 'though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' ([2 Cor. 8:9](#)). The *freedom* of the slaves associated with the Jubilee is put into practice by Christ who, more than freeing his sons from the slavery of sin ([Gal 5:1](#)), will also free the whole of creation from the structural sins that afflict them ([Rom. 8:21](#)). Those who have lost their dignity can be honoured with the title of 'son of God' ([1 John 3:1](#)).

In summary, the Year of Jubilee prescribed by [Leviticus 25](#), the year of the Lord's favour heralded in [Isaiah 61:2](#) is fulfilled 'today' with the coming of the Messiah. Christ proclaimed the advent of the 'Year of the Lord's Favour' (19). He himself is the realization and fulfilment and the putting into practice of the Jubilee.

#### **D. The Jubilee in the Early Church**

The coming of Jesus Christ represented the key moment for the understanding of the Jubilee according to the Scriptures and for the putting into effect of the Jubilee provisions on behalf of the people of God. After the ascension of Jesus to the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the early church became the ambassador of the 'Year of the Lord's favour' that the Son of God had inaugurated and of the proof of his work of salvation for those who would believe in him. In order to conform the extension of the benefits of the Jubilee of the Messiah to all, the mission of the church had to extend to the 'ends of the earth' ([Acts 1:8](#)). The believers took on the task of witnessing given by the Lord, preaching the 'good news' of Jesus. In this way the church became the publiciser of the coming of the Jubilee that Christ had brought about through the proclamation of his liberating words, through his atoning death and by his resurrection, all proving his divine power.

In addition to this, God wanted to accompany their words by accomplishing miracles through them, that were, like those of Jesus, visible demonstrations that gave a foretaste of the fullness of the Jubilee of Christ. In all this, the church gave testimony about the Jubilee of its Lord. However, the preaching of the gospel or the miraculous works were not the only ways in which the reality of the Jubilee was lived and shared within the first group of disciples.

##### ***A) The Sharing of Wealth***

One of the most characteristic aspects of the first Christian church at Jerusalem was certainly the way in which it organized and lived out the communal life. The sharing out of wealth, described in [Acts 4:32-35](#), was an example of this. The picture is clear enough: those who, in the grace of God were added to the original band of disciples of Christ chose to have everything in common, selling their property and pouring the proceeds into a common fund managed by the apostles. In passing, it should be noted that the 'lands and

houses' mentioned (34) were the same things covered by the arrangements in the Jubilee of [Leviticus 25](#).

However, in this decision there was no element of pressure upon the new believers, much less any hint of coercion by anyone. Instead, it was a spontaneous initiative on their part which had not been imposed as a condition of entry into the Christian community or as an integral part of following the 'way'. Its voluntary nature was clearly shown by the words of Peter to Ananias concerning the absence of compulsion in the selling of his field ([Acts 5:4](#)).

The decision to share goods in common was a response above all to the wide poverty in the city of Jerusalem and to provide for more than just the spiritual needs of the followers of Jesus Christ. By doing so, the Christian church took care of the physical conditions of its members and sought to overcome the situation by organizing a communitarian life such that all had something 'as each had need'.

The sharing of wealth was the means that allowed them to overcome the poverty of those without property. Thanks to putting resources together and their consequent redistribution according to the needs of each person, there were no 'needy persons' in the church (*endeês*). Nobody could claim to be in a desperate and irredeemable state of need. The legislation concerning the sabbatical year ([Deut. 15:4](#)) set out the objective of alleviating the conditions of the 'needy' (LXX: *endeês*) and, as we have already seen, the Jubilee law defended the needs of the 'poor' ([Lev. 25:25, 35, 39](#)). Now in the primitive Christian community, an attempt was made to put into practice this sensitivity to the poor which runs through the whole biblical revelation: in the community of Christian disciples, the needy were no longer only objects of written directives but finally saw their needs satisfied.

### *B) The Jubilee Community*

The motivation that made possible this type of church life was faith in Christ: the sharing of faith made possible the sharing of goods. Thus this common faith was the starting point for meeting the needs of the community of believers. In this sense it can be said that in the early church 'alongside the need of following Christ', there is the ecclesial need for solidarity.<sup>14</sup>

The distinctions between the church and the world are nowhere clearer than in those between the values of the church and those of the world. If society encourages the selfish accumulation of property, the church encourages the sharing of property. If society produces violent conflicts amongst men, the church leads to communion between believers. If society generates great differences in access to resources, the church ensures that all have 'as they had need'. If society itself undermines human dignity, the church defends and safeguards it. In all this, the spirit of Jubilee clearly pervades the model of the common life which the early church followed.

The alleviation of poverty and the restoration of the self-respect of people are objectives which link the Jubilee laws to the practice of the Jerusalem church. In the preaching of the gospel, in the miracles done by God through the disciples, in the sharing of wealth between the believers, the church could be recognized as the true *Jubilee community* that announces, demonstrates and experiences the Jubilee of the Lord.

More can be said about the model of community life that is found in the first chapters of Acts. It is not just a phenomenon to be described in sociological terms, but it contains principles that must be borne in mind for the life of every church. The early church proves

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<sup>14</sup> 14. A. Pitta, *L'anno della liberazione. Il giubileo e le sue istanze bibliche*, (Cinisello Balsamo (Mi): Edizioni San Paolo 1998), pp. 114-115.



the possibility of the aims of the Jubilee finding their application in the life of the Christian community. A true spirituality prompted by the Jubilee must have some application in the socio-economic context in which it is born. Its example justifies, encourages and directs us to consider and bring about the actions and initiatives that echo the Jubilee arrangements and extend its spirit throughout the varying circumstances in which we are called to live.

It is not a question of mechanically transplanting the specific communitarian experience of Jerusalem, as if such a 'community' were the ideal or norm for every church. Instead we are to find ways and means in the life of every church which give concrete expression to the fact that this is a community that was born and which exists thanks to the Jubilee of the Lord. The church in every place and in every time must be able to call itself a Jubilee community, regardless of the failures of its efforts or the weakness of its grasp of the problems. The sense of Jubilee must always surround those people who are liberated and redeemed by grace and who are moved to testify to the world that the Jubilee of Jesus Christ has been fulfilled. Where Christ is present, there we find the Jubilee; where the church is, there we find a Jubilee community.

## **THE YEAR OF JUBILEE TODAY**

So, in the light of all this, what should the Jubilee mean for us today? The biblical Jubilee sets out something extraordinary. It is not a utopia or simply an ideal, but a glorious reality for those who believe in him who has accomplished it for them. Jesus Christ gives his rest, providing full redemption and freedom for those who trust in him. The benefits of the Jubilee are bestowed upon the disciples of the master. The sin that blights existence and that disfigures creation can be defeated because Jesus died and rose again. His Jubilee transforms everything, restores dignity, satisfies the thirst for justice, reforms ways of thinking and acting, changes the heart and creates a community of people who share their wealth. His Jubilee is an opportunity for starting again for those who have taken the wrong road, gives a new start for those who are at a standstill, gives a new life for those who have lost it. The 'today' of the Lord's Jubilee is also the 'today' of the call of God for heartfelt conversion: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion' ([Heb. 3:7, 13, 15](#)). This 'today' of God is not yet finished; there is still time to believe in him. The 'Year of the Lord's favour' is not over yet; his Jubilee is still in operation. What better occasion to honour the biblical Jubilee than to convert from one's idols to the living and true God?

With the coming of the year AD 2000, millions of people will be involved in celebrations and festivities that are hard to reconcile with the Jubilee. Many religious-sounding words will be uttered, many religious activities will be encouraged. Nevertheless, the God of the Jubilee will be absent, the ideals of the Jubilee will be compromised, the call of the Jubilee will be drowned out by the sensationalism of the media and the excitement of the crowd. A true Jubilee, however, is where there is conversion to God. 'Today' can be the day of your Jubilee.

Believers in Christ are the only people that can accomplish Jubilee acts that reflect the biblical Jubilee in its completeness. The Jubilee community is composed of those who have benefited from the Lord's Jubilee and is the only one that can fully honour it, announcing it with conviction and practising it with courage. In fact, only those who have experienced the Jubilee can work it out worthily and faithfully through life's difficulties. The preparation and the bringing about of Jubilee acts could be a precious opportunity to work together as believers in the same city with a view to a joint Christian witness. In short,



acts inspired by the Jubilee cannot be announced and brought about except by the Jubilee community.

What does the Jubilee mean today? Perhaps we can summarize like this: it is to live *believing* in the Lord of the Jubilee, to live *acting* in the spirit of the Jubilee and to *live* with a Jubilee perspective.

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## A New Immortality?

Brian Edgar

**Keywords:** Immortality, theanthropology, biotechnology, telomere, aging, DNA, causality, genetics, personality, process, time

One of the theological challenges of the twentieth century has been to respond to those issues relating to the *creation* of human life. Whether theology has adequately met the challenge or not, birth control and enhancement techniques must rank as one of the major social developments of the century. The contraceptive pill and abortion have had an enormous impact on social structures, family relations, female and male roles, sexual attitudes, work patterns and global economics. Birth enhancement techniques, including the various reproductive technologies, in vitro fertilisation, genetic engineering, cloning, genetic screening and gene therapy are set to have a similar impact. All of these developments require a theological understanding of the nature of the person and of the way in which humanity reflects the image of God both individually and socially and it is probable that the twenty first century will not see any easing of the imperative to describe the nature of the human person in theological terms. In fact, it is more likely that an even more intense scrutiny of theanthropology<sup>1</sup> (the theology of the human person) will be needed due to developments concerning the *extension* and then the *ending* of human life. This will come about because of the probability that we are soon to be presented with the prospect of medical technology, known as telomere therapy, which will enable human life to be extended by hundreds of years and perhaps indefinitely. This paper will focus on the theological implications for the understanding of immortality in the context of this possible development in the third millennium.

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Theanthropology is simply a conflation of 'theological anthropology'. It is a convenient way of referring to the theological understanding of humanity which avoids the non-inclusiveness of 'doctrine of man' and the absence of convenient nouns and adjectives relating to the 'doctrine of humanity'. It is, of course, possible to use 'anthropology' and 'anthropological' but these refer to the study of humanity in the widest possible sense and when used without qualification are usually taken to refer to what is more properly called 'cultural anthropology'.