

# Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 41 • Number 1 • January 2017

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# Theology of Jubilee: Biblical, Social and Ethical Perspectives

Christopher J. H. Wright

THE JUBILEE (*yobel*) came at the end of the cycle of seven sabbatical years. Leviticus 25:8-10 specifies it as the fiftieth year, though some scholars believe it may have been actually the forty-ninth—i.e. the seventh sabbatical year. And some suggest it was not a full year, but either a single day as an event within the fiftieth year, or an intercalary month after the forty-ninth year, with the same calendrical effect as our system of leap years. In this year there was to be a proclamation of liberty to Israelites who had become enslaved for debt, and a restoration of land to families who had been compelled to sell it out of economic need sometime during the previous fifty years.

Instructions concerning the jubilee, and its relation to the procedures of land and slave redemption are found entirely in Leviticus 25. But it is referred to also in Leviticus 26 and 27. It is an institution which has inspired much curiosity, in ancient and modern times, and in recent years it has come to prominence in the writings of those

committed to radical Christian social ethics. Our purpose here is to see what it may contribute to a biblical understanding of holistic mission.

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

## I The Structure of OT Israel's Faith and Society

### 1. Social: Israel's kinship system

Israel had a three tier pattern of kinship, comprising the tribe, the clan, and the household. Gideon's modest reply to his angelic visitor shows us all three: 'Look at my clan—it is the weakest in the tribe of Manasseh; and

---

**Chris Wright** (MA, PhD, Cantab), an ordained Anglican minister, who taught at Union Biblical Seminary (UBS) in India from 1983. In 1988 he became Academic Dean, and later Principal of All Nations Christian College, UK. He has been International Director of the Langham Partnership International from 2001. This article is an edited extract from his book, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2004) and is used with permission.

I am the least in my father's house' (Judg 6:15). The last two smaller units (household and clan) had greater social and economic importance than the tribe in terms of benefits and responsibilities relating to individual Israelites.

The father's house was an extended family that could comprise three or four generations living together, along with servants and hired employees. This was a place of authority, even for married adults like Gideon (Jdg. 6:27, 8:20). It was also the place of security and protection (Judg 6:30ff.). The fathers' houses also played an important role in the judicial and even military functions, and was the place where the individual Israelite found identity, education and religious nurture.<sup>1</sup> The jubilee was intended primarily for the economic protection of the father's house, or the extended family.

## 2. Economic: Israel's system of land-tenure

Israel's system of land-tenure was based on these kinship units. As Joshua 15-22 makes clear, the territory was allotted to tribes, then 'according to their clans', and then within the clans each household had its portion or 'heritage'. This system had two features that stand in complete contrast to the preceding Canaanite economic structure.

<sup>1</sup> For further information on Israel's kinship system, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990; Reprint Paternoster, 1996), ch. 2; and, Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Family,' in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 761-769.

### a) Equitable distribution

In pre-Israelite Canaan the land was owned by kings and their nobles, with the bulk of the population living as tax-paying tenant farmers. In Israel the initial division of the land was explicitly to the clans and households within the tribes, under the general rubric that each should receive land according to size and need. The tribal lists of Numbers 26 (especially note 52-56) and the detailed territorial division of land recorded in Joshua 13-21 are the documentary evidence that the original intention of Israel's land system was that the land should be *distributed throughout the whole kinship system as widely as possible*.

### b) Inalienability

In order to protect this system of kinship distribution, family land was made inalienable. That is, it was not to be bought and sold as a commercial asset, but was to remain as far as possible within the extended family, or at least within the circle of families in the clan. It was this principle which lay behind Naboth's refusal to sell his patrimony to Ahab (1 Kgs 21), and it is most explicit in the economic regulations of Leviticus 25.

## 3. Theological: God's land, God's people

The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to me; for you are 'guests' and 'residents' with me. (Lev 25:23).

This statement, at the heart of the chapter containing the jubilee, provides the hinge between the social and economic system described above

and its theological rationale. It makes two fundamental statements about the land Israel lived on, and about the Israelites themselves. These are crucial to understanding the rationale for the jubilee.

### a) God's land

One of the central pillars of the faith of Israel was that the land they inhabited was YHWH's land. It had been his even before Israel entered it (Ex 15:13,17). This theme of the divine ownership of the land is found often in the prophets and Psalms. Far more often than it is ever called 'Israel's land', it is referred to as 'YHWH's land'. At the same time, although it belonged to YHWH, the land had been promised and then given to Israel in the course of the redemptive history. It was their possession, their inheritance, as Deuteronomy repeatedly describes it.

So the land was in Israel's possession, but still under God's ownership. This dual tradition of the land (*divine ownership and divine gift*) was associated in some way with every major thread in Israel's theology. The promise of land was an essential part of the patriarchal *election* tradition. The land was the goal of the exodus *redemption* tradition. The maintenance of the *covenant* relationship and the security of life in the land were bound together. Divine *judgement* eventually meant expulsion from the land, until the *restored relationship* was symbolized in the return to the land.

The land, then, stood like a fulcrum in the relationship between God and Israel (notice, for example, its pivotal position in Lev 26:40-45). The land was a monumental, tangible witness both to YHWH's control of history within

which the relationship had been established, and also to the moral demands on Israel which that relationship entailed.

For the Israelite, living with his family on his allotted share of YHWH's land, the land itself was the proof of his membership of God's people and the focus of his practical response to God's grace. Nothing that concerned the land was free from theological and ethical dimensions—as every harvest reminded him (Deut 26).

### b) God's people.

'You are guests and residents (RSV), aliens and tenants (NIV) with me' (23). These terms, (*gerim w'tosabim*), normally in Old Testament texts describe a class of people who resided among the Israelites in Canaan, but were not ethnic Israelites. They may have been descendants of the dispossessed Canaanites, or immigrants. They had no stake in the tenure of the land, but survived by hiring out their services as residential employees (labourers, craftsmen, etc.) for Israelite land-owning households.

Provided an Israelite household itself remained economically viable, then its resident alien employees enjoyed both protection and security. But otherwise, their position could be perilous. Hence these resident aliens are frequently mentioned in Israel's law as the objects of particular concern for justice because of their vulnerability.

The point of Leviticus 25:23 is to say that the Israelites were to regard their own status before God as analogous to that of these residential dependents to themselves. Just as they had resident guests living on with them in the land they (the Israelites) owned, so they

(the Israelites) were resident guests living on the land that YHWH actually owned.

Thus, they (the Israelites) had no ultimate title to the land—it was owned by God. YHWH was the supreme landlord. Israel was his collective tenant. Nevertheless, the Israelites could enjoy secure benefits of the land under YHWH's protection and in dependence on him. So the terms are not (as they might sound in English) a denial of *rights*, but rather an affirmation of a *relationship* of protected dependency.

The practical effect of this model for Israel's relationship with God is seen in verses 35, 40 and 53. If all Israelites share this same status before God, then the impoverished or indebted brother is to be regarded and treated in the same way as God regards and treats all Israel, i.e. with compassion, justice and generosity. So the theology of Israel's land and of Israel's status before God combine to affect this very practical area of social economics.

## II Practical Provisions

### 1. Fundamental concepts

In Leviticus 25, the jubilee provisions are interwoven with other provisions for the practice of redemption of land and slaves. As we have already seen, the economic mechanism of redemption is a vital piece of background for understanding the full meaning of God's redemption, as the exodus is called. So it is thus doubly interesting to see how the jubilee was supposed to work alongside redemption in Israel's system.

The chapter is complex and we

cannot do a thorough exegesis here.<sup>2</sup> It opens with the law of the sabbatical year on the land (1-7). This is an expansion of the fallow year law of Exodus 23:10f., which was also further developed in Deuteronomy 15:1-2 into a year in which debts (or more probably the pledges given for loans) were to be released.

The jubilee is then introduced in verses 8-12 as the fiftieth year to follow the seventh sabbatical year. Verse 10 presents the twin concepts that are fundamental to the whole jubilee institution, namely liberty and return.

- *Liberty*—from the burden of debt and the bondage it may have entailed;
- *Return*—both to the ancestral property if it had been mortgaged to a creditor, and to the family which may have been split up through debt-servitude.

It was these two components of the jubilee, (freedom and restoration, release and return), that entered into the metaphorical and eschatological use of the jubilee in prophetic and later NT thought.

### 2. Stages of implementation

The practical details of redemption and jubilee are outlined from verse 25 to the end of the chapter. In these verses three descending stages of poverty are presented, each with a required response. The stages are marked off by the introductory phrase, 'If your broth-

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed study see Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Jubilee, Year Of,' in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman, III, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1025-1030; and Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, ch. 6.

er becomes poor' (25, 35, 39 and 47). The sequence is interrupted by parenthetical sections dealing with houses in cities and Levite properties (29-34) and non-Israelite slaves (44-46), which we need not consider, but the overall legal framework is clear.

- *Stage 1—selling land (25-28)* Initially, having fallen on hard times (for any reason: none is specified), the Israelite land-owner sells, or offers to sell, some of his land. To keep it within the family, in line with the inalienability principle, it was first of all the duty of the nearest kinsman (the *go'el*) either to pre-empt it (if it was still on offer), or to redeem it (if it had been sold). Secondly, the seller himself retains the right to redeem it for himself, if he later recovers the means to do so. *Thirdly and in any case, the property, whether sold or redeemed by a kinsman, reverts to the original family in the year of jubilee.*
- *Stage 2—loans (35-38)* If the poorer brother's plight worsens and he still cannot stay solvent, presumably even after several such sales, it then becomes the duty of the kinsman to maintain him as a dependent labourer, by means of interest-free loans.
- *Stage 3a—bonded service (39-43)* In the event of a total economic collapse, such that the poorer kinsman has no more land left to sell or pledge for loans, he and his whole family sell themselves to, i.e. enter the bonded service of, the wealthier kinsman. The latter, however, is commanded in strong and repeated terms, not to treat the debtor Israelite like a slave, but rather as a resident employee. *This undesirable*

*state of affairs is to continue only until the next jubilee—i.e., not more than one more generation.* Then the debtor and/or his children (the original debtor may have died, but the next generation were to benefit from the jubilee, 41, 54), were to recover their original patrimony of land and be enabled to make a fresh start.

- *Stage 3b—redemption (47-55)* If a man had entered this debt-bondage *outside* the clan, then an obligation lay on the whole clan to prevent this loss of a whole family by exercising their duty to redeem him. The whole clan had the duty of preserving its constituent families and their inherited land. It also had the duty to see that a non-Israelite creditor behaved as an Israelite should towards an Israelite debtor, *and that the jubilee provision was adhered to eventually.*

## 2. Jubilee and redemption

From this analysis, it can be seen that there were two main differences between the redemption and jubilee provisions: First, *timing*. Redemption (of and or persons) was a duty that could be exercised at any time, locally, as circumstances required, whereas jubilee was intended to be twice a century as a national event. Second, *Purpose*. The main aim of redemption was the preservation of the land and persons of the *clan*, whereas the main beneficiary of the jubilee was the *household*, or 'father's house'.

The jubilee therefore functioned as a necessary over-ride to the practice of redemption. The regular operation of redemption over a period could result in the whole territory of a clan coming

into the hands of a few wealthier families, with the rest of the families in the clan in a kind of debt-servitude, living as dependent tenants of the wealthy—i.e. precisely the kind of land-tenure system that Israel had overturned.

The jubilee was thus a mechanism to prevent this. *The primary purpose of the jubilee was to preserve the socio-economic fabric of multiple household land tenure with the comparative equality and independent viability of the smallest family-plus-land units. In other words, the jubilee was intended for the survival and welfare of the families in Israel.*

### 3. Historicity

The inevitable question arises, of course, did it ever historically happen? The fact is that there is no historical narrative recording a jubilee happening. But then, there is no historical record of the Day of Atonement, either. Silence in the narratives proves almost nothing.

More divisive is the question whether the jubilee was an early law that fell into disuse, or a late piece of utopian idealism from the time of the exile. Many critical scholars affirm the latter, but others, especially those with in-depth knowledge of the ancient Near East, point out that such periodical amnesties for debt and restoration of land were known in Mesopotamia for centuries before the establishment of Israel, though nothing on such a regular fifty year cycle has been found.

My own preference is that it makes sense to see the jubilee as a very ancient law, which fell into neglect during Israel's history in the land. This neglect happened, not so much because the jubilee was economically impos-

sible, as because it became irrelevant to the scale of social disruption. The jubilee presupposes a situation where a man, though in severe debt, still technically holds the title to his family's land and could be restored to full ownership of it.

But from the time of Solomon on this must have become meaningless for growing numbers of families as they fell victim to the acids of debt, slavery, royal intrusion and confiscation, and total dispossession. Many were uprooted and pushed off their ancestral land altogether. After a few generations they had nothing to be restored to in any practicable sense (cf. Mic. 2:2,9, Isa. 5:8). This would explain why the jubilee is never appealed to by any of the prophets as an economic proposal (though its ideals are reflected metaphorically).<sup>3</sup>

## III Ethical and Missiological Relevance

Elsewhere I have argued for a paradigm-

---

<sup>3</sup> For bibliography of earlier works, see Wright, *God's Land*, pp. 119-127, and Wright, 'Jubilee, Year Of,' . More recent works include Fager, Jeffrey A., *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee*, JSOT Supplements, Vol. 155, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); Hans Ucko, ed. *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility: Jewish and Christian Insights* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997); and Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem, Minneapolis: Magnes Press, Fortress Press, 1995). A good, recent and balanced survey is provided by P. A. Barker, 'Sabbath, Sabbatical Year, Jubilee,' in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. Baker David W. Alexander T. Desmond (Downers Grove and Leicester: Intervarsity Press and IVP, 2003), 695-706.



matic approach to handling the laws of the Old Testament as Christians, in order to discern their ethical implications in the contemporary world.<sup>4</sup> This means identifying the coherent body of principles on which an Old Testament law or institution is based and which it embodies or instantiates. To do this, it is helpful once more to move around our three angles and consider how Israel's paradigm, in the particular case of the jubilee institution, speaks to Christian ethics and mission.

### 1. Economic: access to resources.

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

The moral principles of the jubilee are therefore universalizable on the basis of the moral consistency of God. What God required of Israel in its land reflects what in principle he desires for humanity on the earth—namely broadly equitable distribution of the resources of the earth, especially land, and a curb on the tendency to accumu-

lation with its inevitable oppression and alienation.

The jubilee thus stands as a critique not only of massive private accumulation of land and related wealth, but also of large scale forms of collectivism or nationalization which destroy any meaningful sense of personal or family ownership. It still has a point to make in modern Christian approaches to economics.

The jubilee did not, of course, entail a *re-distribution* of land, as some popular writing mistakenly suppose. It was not a re-distribution but a restoration. It was not a free handout of bread or 'charity', but a restoration to family units of *the opportunity and the resources to provide for themselves* again. In modern application, that calls for some creative thinking as to what forms of opportunity and resources would enable people to do that, and to enjoy the dignity and social involvement that such self-provision entails.<sup>5</sup>

The jubilee, then, is about restoring to people the capacity to participate in the economic life of the community, for their own viability and society's benefit.

### 2. Social: family viability

The jubilee embodied practical concern for the family unit. In Israel's case, this meant the extended family, the 'father's house', which was a size-

---

<sup>5</sup> Interesting and creative applications of the jubilee and other aspects of Old Testament economics are found in John Mason, 'Biblical Teaching and Assisting the Poor', *Transformation* 4.2 (1987), 1-14, and Stephen Charles Mott, 'The Contribution of the Bible to Economic Thought', *Transformation* 4.3-4 (1987), 25-34.

---

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, ch. 9.



able group of related nuclear families descended in the male line from a living progenitor, including up to three or four generations. As we have seen, this was the smallest unit in Israel's kinship structure, and it was the focus of identity, status, responsibility and security for the individual Israelite. It was this social unit, the extended family, that the jubilee aimed to protect and periodically to restore if necessary.

Notably it pursued this objective, not by merely '*moral*' means—i.e. appealing for greater family cohesion or admonishing parents and children to greater exercise of discipline and obedience respectively. Rather, the jubilee approach was immensely practical and fundamentally *socio-economic*. It established specific structural mechanisms to regulate the economic effects of debt. Family morality was meaningless if families were being split up and dispossessed by economic forces that rendered them powerless (cf Neh 5:1-5).

The jubilee aimed to restore social dignity and participation to families through maintaining or restoring their economic viability.<sup>6</sup> Debt is a huge cause of social disruption and decay, and tends to breed many other social ills, including crime, poverty, squalor and violence. Debt happens, and the Old Testament recognizes that fact.

But the jubilee was an attempt to limit its otherwise relentless and endless social consequences by limiting its possible duration.

The economic collapse of a family in one generation was not to condemn all future generations to the bondage of perpetual indebtedness. Such principles and objectives are certainly not irrelevant to welfare legislation or indeed any legislation with socio-economic implications.

And indeed, taken to a wider level still, the jubilee speaks volumes to the massive issue of international debt. Not for nothing was the worldwide campaign to see an ending of the intolerable and interminable debts of impoverished nations called *Jubilee 2000*. And many Christians have instinctively felt a moral imperative to support the campaign, not only out of compassion for the poor, but out of a biblically rooted sense of justice and what God requires of us.

Another interesting, and in my view convincing, paradigmatic handling of the jubilee institution is suggested by Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz. He comments on the powerful theology of time that is implied in the sabbatical cycles of Israel, and its contrast with the commercialising of time in modern debt and interest based economies. Time is a quality that belongs to God, for no created being can make time.

We enjoy time, we are carried along in the flow of time, everything is embedded in its time, so the very idea of exploiting the flow of time to take interest on money lent seemed preposterous. It does so no more because the sacredness of time has disappeared, even before the sacredness of the land vanished from

6 A thorough attempt to apply the relevance of the Old Testaments patterns regarding the extended family to modern western society is made by Michael Schluter, and Roy Clements, *Reactivating the Extended Family: From Biblical Norms to Public Policy in Britain*, (Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 1986). See further, Michael Schluter, and John Ashcroft, ed. *Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda & Strategy for Christian Social Reform* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), ch. 9.

the memories of our modern societies. Instead capitalist market economies have been elevated to global importance; they are enshrined with the qualities of omnipotence that border on idolatry.

So the question arises: does it make sense to attribute to money qualities that no created thing can ever have, namely eternal growth? Every tree must die, every house must one day crumble, every human being must perish. Why should immaterial goods such as capital—and its counterpart, debts—not also have their time? The capital knows no natural barriers to its growth. There is no jubilee to put an end to its accumulative power. And so there is no jubilee to put an end to debts and slavery. Money that feeds on money, with no productive or social obligation, represents a vast flood that threatens even large national economies and drowns small countries... But at the heart of this deregulation is the undisputed concept of the eternal life of money.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Theological: a theology for evangelism?

The jubilee was based upon several central affirmations of Israel's faith, and the importance of these should not be overlooked when assessing its relevance to Christian ethics and mission. As we observed with the exodus, it would be quite wrong to limit the

challenge of the jubilee to the socio-economic realm and ignore its inner spiritual and theological motivation. From a holistic missiological point of view, each is as important as the other, for all are fully biblical and all fully reflect the character and will of God. The following points stand out in the text.

- Like the rest of the sabbatical provisions, the jubilee proclaimed the *sovereignty of God* over time and nature, and obedience to it would require submission to that sovereignty. That is, you were to keep the jubilee as an act of obedience to God. This Godward dimension of the matter is why the year is deemed holy, 'a sabbath to YHWH, and why it was to be observed out of the 'fear of YHWH.
- Furthermore, observing the fallow year dimension of the jubilee would also require faith in *God's providence* as the one who could command blessing in the natural order and thereby provide for your basic needs (18-22).
- Additional motivation for the law is provided by repeated appeals to the knowledge of *God's historical act of redemption*, the exodus and all it had meant for Israel. The jubilee was a way of outworking the implications within the community of the fact that all Israelites were simply the former slaves of Pharaoh, now the redeemed slaves of YHWH (38, 42-43, 55).
- And to this historical dimension was added the cultic and 'present' *experience of forgiveness* in the fact that the jubilee was to be proclaimed on the Day of Atonement (9). To know *yourself* forgiven by God was to issue immediately in practical remis-

<sup>7</sup> Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz, 'The Jubilee: Time Ceilings for the Growth of Money', in Ucko, ed. *Jubilee Challenge*., 109. There are some other creative interpretations of the jubilee in the same book.

sion of the debt and bondage of *others*. Some of the parables of Jesus spring to mind.

- And the inbuilt future hope of the literal jubilee, blended with an *eschatological hope* of God's final restoration of humanity and nature to his original purpose. There is a strong theological pulse beating in this chapter of Leviticus.
- To apply the jubilee model, then, requires that people obey the *sovereignty* of God, trust the *providence* of God, know the story of the *redeeming action* of God, experience personally the sacrificial *atonement* provided by God, practise God's *justice* and put their hope in God's *promise* for the future. Now if we summon people to do these things, what are we engaging in? Surely these are the very fundamentals of evangelism.

Now of course I am not suggesting that the jubilee was 'evangelistic' in any contemporary sense. What I do mean is that the fundamental theology behind it also lies behind our practice of evangelism. The assumptions are the same. The theological underpinning of the socio-economic legislation of the jubilee is identical to that which undergirds the proclamation of the kingdom of God. It is no wonder, as we shall see in a moment, that the jubilee itself became a picture of the new age of salvation that the New Testament announces. It is an institution that models in a small corner of ancient Israelite economics the essential contours of God's wider mission for the restoration of humanity and creation.

When appropriately set in the light of the rest of the biblical witness, *the wholeness of the jubilee model embraces the church's evangelistic mission, its*

*personal and social ethics and its future hope.*

## IV Future Hope and Jesus.

The future orientation of the jubilee serves additionally as a bridge to seeing how it influenced Jesus, and helps us answer questions as to whether our insistence on a holistic understanding of mission is sustained in the New Testament.

### 1. Looking to the future

Even at a purely economic level in ancient Israel, the jubilee was intended to have a built-in future dimension. Anticipation of the jubilee was supposed to affect all present economic values (including the provisional price of land). It also set a temporal limit on unjust social relations—they would not last forever. The jubilee brought hope for change. It was proclaimed with a blast on the trumpet (the *yobel*, from which its name derives), an instrument associated with decisive acts of God (*cf.* Is. 27:13; 1 Cor. 15:52). However, as time went by, and even when the jubilee probably fell into disuse in practice, its symbolism remained potent.

We have seen that the jubilee had two major thrusts: *release/liberty*, and *return/restoration* (from Lev. 25:10). Both of these were easily transferred from the strictly economic provision of the jubilee itself to a wider metaphorical application. That is, these economic terms became terms of hope and longing for the future, and thus entered into prophetic eschatology.

There are allusive echoes of the jubilee particularly in the later chapters of Isaiah. The mission of the Servant

of YHWH has strong elements of the restorative plan of God for his people, aimed specifically at the weak and oppressed (Is 42:1-7). Isaiah 58 is an attack on cultic observance without social justice, and calls for liberation of the oppressed (6), specifically focussing on one's own kinship obligations (7).

Most clearly of all, Isaiah 61 uses jubilee images to portray the one anointed as the herald of YHWH to 'evangelize' the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives (using the word *deror* which is the explicitly jubilary word for release), and to announce the year of YHWH's favour (almost certainly an allusion to a jubilee year). The hope of *redemption and return* for God's people are combined in the future vision of Isaiah 35, and set alongside the equally dramatic hope of a transformation of nature.

Thus, within the Old Testament itself, the jubilee had already attracted an eschatological imagery, alongside its ethical application in the present. That is to say, the jubilee could be used to portray *God's* final intervention for messianic redemption and restoration; but it could still function to justify ethical challenge for *human* justice to the oppressed in the present.

When we see how the jubilee vision and hope inspired prophetic passages such as Isaiah 35 and 61, with their beautiful integration of personal, social, physical, economic, political, international and spiritual realms, our own missional and ethical use of the jubilee must preserve a similar balance and integration, preventing us from putting asunder what God will ultimately join together.

## 2. Looking to Jesus

How, then, was the institution of jubilee taken up by Jesus and applied in the New Testament to the age of fulfilment that he inaugurated. How, in other words, did jubilee relate to the wider sense of Old Testament *promise* that Jesus fulfilled? Jesus announced the imminent arrival of the eschatological reign of God. He claimed that his people's hopes for restoration and for messianic reversal were being fulfilled in his own ministry. To explain what he meant, he used imagery from the jubilee circle of ideas (among others, of course).

The 'Nazareth manifesto' (Lk 4:16-30) is the clearest programmatic statement of this. It is the closest Jesus comes to a personal mission statement, and it quotes directly from Isaiah 61, which as we have seen was strongly influenced by jubilee concepts. Most commentators observe this jubilee background to the prophetic text and Jesus' use of it. It certainly builds a holistic dimension into the mission that Jesus sets out for himself by reading this scripture and claiming to be its embodiment.

Luke will not allow us to interpret this jubilee language as flowery metaphors or spiritual allegories. ... Jesus fulfilled the Jubilee that he proclaimed. His radical mission was the very mission of God found in the Old Testament proclamation of Jubilee. It is presented in Luke's Gospel as holistic in four aspects:

1. It is both proclaimed and enacted.
2. It is both spiritual and physical.
3. It is both for Israel and the nations
4. It is both present and eschatologi-

cal.<sup>8</sup>

Other examples of the influence of the jubilee on Jesus' thinking are suggested by Robert Sloan and Sharon Ringe. Sloan observed that Jesus' use of the word for 'release', *aphesis*, carries both the sense of *spiritual* forgiveness of sin and also literal and *financial* remission of actual debts. Thus, the original jubilee background of economic release has been preserved in Jesus' challenge concerning ethical response to the kingdom of God. If we are to pray the Lord's prayer, 'release for us our debts', we must be willing to release others from theirs. It is not a matter of deciding between a spiritual and a material meaning, for both can be included as appropriate.<sup>9</sup>

Ringe traces the interweaving of major jubilee images into various parts of the Gospel narratives and the teaching of Jesus. There are echoes of jubilee in the beatitudes (Mt 5:2-12), in Jesus' response to John the Baptist (Mt 11:2-6), in the parable of the banquet (Lk 14:12-24), in various episodes of forgiveness and especially teaching on debts (Mt 18:21-35 etc.).<sup>10</sup>

8 Paul Hertig, 'The Jubilee Mission of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Reversals of Fortunes', *Missiology* 26 (1998), 167-179, 176-177.

9 R. B. Sloan Jr, *The Favorable Year of the Lord: A Study of Jubiliary Theology in the Gospel of Luke* (Austin: Schola, 1977).

10 S. H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). For a concise survey of various interpretations of the way Luke uses Isaiah 61 here, see also, Robert Willoughby, 'The Concept of Jubilee and Luke 4:18-30,' in *Mission and Meaning: Essays Presented to Peter Cotterell*, ed. Anthony Billington, Tony Lane, and Max Turner (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 41-55.

The evidence is broad, and conforms to the pattern already observed in the Old Testament. The jubilee serves both as a *symbol of future hope* and also as an *ethical demand in the present*.

## 2. Looking to the Spirit

The book of Acts shows that the early church had a similar combination of future expectation and present ethical response. The jubilee concept of eschatological restoration is found in the otherwise unique idea of 'complete restoration'. The unusual word for this, *apokatastasis* occurs in Acts 1:6 and 3:21, where it speaks of God's final restoration of Israel and all things. It seems Peter has taken the core of the jubilee hope (restoration) and applied it, not just to the restoration of land to farmers, but to the restoration of the whole creation through the coming Messiah.

Significantly, however, the early church responded to this future hope not merely by sitting waiting for it to happen. Rather, they put into practice some of the jubilee ideals at the level of mutual economic help. Luke almost certainly intends us to understand that in doing so they were fulfilling the sabbatical hopes of Deuteronomy 15. Acts 4:34, with its simple statement that 'there were no needy persons among them', is virtually a quotation of the Greek Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 15:4, 'there will be no needy person among you'.

The new community of Christ, now living in the eschatological era of the Spirit, is making the future hope a present reality in economic terms. Or to put it another way, the church by its internal practice was erecting a sign-

post to the reality of the future. The new age of life in the Messiah and in the Spirit is described in terms that echo the jubilee and its related sabbatical institutions.<sup>11</sup> And the effect was a

community in mission, marked by a holistic combination of verbal proclamation (the evangelistic preaching of the apostles), and visible attraction (the social and economic equality of the believers). Not surprisingly, the church grew in numbers, strength, maturity and mission.

---

**11** In addition to my own work, already referred to, a full and helpful account of the way Jesus and the rest of the New Testament related to the rich scriptural traditions of the land is David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Cov-*

---

*enant or Two?* (Grand Rapids and Leicester: Eerdmans and Apollos, 1995), 85-112.

## PATERNOSTER BIBLICAL MONOGRAPHS

### Joy in Luke-Acts

#### The Intersection of Rhetoric, Narrative, and Emotion

David H. Wenkel

The Gospel of Luke has been called the 'gospel of joy', and the joy theme has also been recognized in Acts. This theme, though, has received relatively little attention in NT scholarship. *Joy in Luke-Acts* examines the joy theme from a socio-rhetorical vantage point, showing that the joy theme empowers the Lukan rhetoric of reversal. The theme is a primary method in which the narrator seeks to persuade the reader to enter into the values and beliefs that characterize the 'upside-down' world in which YHWH has visited his people in Jesus.

*'David Wenkel succeeds wonderfully and lucidly in his attempt to unpack the place of joy within the narrative fabric of Luke-Acts as a whole and coherent unity.'*

Paul Borgman, Professor of English at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts

*'David Wenkel has approached Luke's writings with skill and courage; adding to our understanding of the text. This is just the kind of result I have longed for, and I hope others will follow his lead.'*

Matthew Elliott, President of Oasis International (Chicago)

David H Wenkel is on the Adjunct faculty, Moody Bible Institute, Chicago

ISBN 9781842278192 (e.9781842278871) / 195pp / 229mm x 152mm /  
£24.99

Available from: 01908 268500 or [orders@authenticmedia.co.uk](mailto:orders@authenticmedia.co.uk)