

A Matter of the Heart: The Meaning of the Biblical Jubilee

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A friend recently toured Rome and to save on expenses he decided simply to be self-guided. Armed with his guidebook, he confidently followed Rome's various street signs. And sure enough, he reached such Roman jewels like the Colosseum, St. Peter's and the *Fontana di Trevi*. One street sign which intrigued him was one he found frequently enough, "Senso Unico." With curiosity taking the better of him he relentlessly followed the signs reading "Senso Unico." Only when he finally arrived at exactly the same spot from where he began did it dawn upon him what "Senso Unico" meant – *One Way!*

The same tragedy can befall most of us regarding the Jubilee Year. We all mouth the term but do we really know what it means? This early, one would think that the Jubilee Year would mean only visiting churches and gaining indulgences. Chances are, with incorrect perception, we may end up –after a full year– just where we began.

This article aims to explore the core meaning of the Biblical Jubilee. It will then show how the Jubilee ideal lives on into New Testament times. Finally, it will propose some concrete lines of action for the celebration of Jubilee 2000 as Filipino Faithful.

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The Term *Jubilee*

We often use the word "jubilee" to refer to anniversary celebrations or to connote some festivity in general. Thus religious communities regularly celebrate the golden jubilee of the religious profession of some of their members. We have our own *lolos* and *lolas* observing their golden jubilees of marital bliss. We even apply the term to anniversaries of shorter duration, like the silver jubilee of priestly ordination. But is festivity the primary concern of the Biblical Jubilee?

This perception can be traced to an inexact translation into Latin by Jerome of a sufficiently infrequent term, *yobel*, found only some twenty-six times (26x) in the Hebrew Bible. Whereas the LXX had opted to use ἀ[φεσι (release) for Lev 25,10, which even the Old Latin retained as a "year of remission,"¹ Jerome had preferred to transliterate it as "*ipse est enim iobeleus*," stressing the sense of rejoicing traceable to the Latin "jubileo."²

The etymology of the term *yobel* itself is uncertain.³ Although there are many possibilities, the discovery in 1845 at Marseilles of a Phoenician tablet enumerating the prices of sacrificial animals has generally secured the Phoenician philological root of the Hebrew *yobel*. The seventh line of this *Inscriptionem Marsiliam*, more popularly known as the Marseilles Tariff, reads: "for a *yobel* or for a goat, either full offering or peace offering, to the priest a silver shekel."⁴ In Hebrew usage, therefore, the *yobel* referred to the goat's or, more precisely, the ram's horn, the blowing of which ushered in the Jubilee Year.

This interpretation is supported by the only two instances the word *yobel* is found outside the Priestly Code, in the Elohist narratives of the theophany at Sinai (Exod 19,16-25) and the conquest of Jericho

¹ Theodotion simply opted to reproduce phonetically the Hebrew word. Josephus translated it with ἐλευθερία or liberty; cf. LESETRE H., "Jubilaire (Année)," *DB V* (1895) 1754. Jewish sources seemed to have done better. The Talmud and Rabbi Akiba both translated it with "ram"; cf. DE HUMMELAUER F., *Commentarius in Exodum et Leviticum* (Sumptibus P. Lethielleux, Paris 1897) 528.

² Augustine himself commenting on Psalm 99 translated as "jubilate Deo omnis terra"; cf. NORTH R., *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee* (Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome 1954) 97.108.

³ For more possibilities, cf. HOFFNER H., "ybl, yebul," *TDOT V* (1986) 364-367.

⁴ NORTH, 100.

(Jos 6,1-16).⁵ It was the blasting of the ram's horn which called the people to assemble at the foot of Mount Sinai as Moses ascended the mountain to receive the tablets of the Covenant (Exod 19,13). It was also the *soperot yobelim*, or trumpets of rams, which the priests sounded immediately preceeding the fall of the walls of Jericho (Josh 6,6). Note that each instance is somehow related to the covenant Yahweh made with Israel. In the first, the *yobel* is sounded before the actual giving of the covenant. In the second, the trumpet blasts serve to begin the fulfillment of the covenantal promises. The conquest of Jericho started the domino effect which resulted in the settlement in the Land of Promise. Already here the *yobel* is closely associated with the Covenant foreboding the essence of the Biblical Jubilee.

Legal Codes and Sabbatical Year

A systematic analysis of the Jubilee Year presupposes two things. Firstly, a general understanding of Old Testament laws is needed since what we know of the Jubilee Year is known to us through legal material.⁶ The institution of the Jubilee Year is found mainly in Leviticus 25, almost at the end of the Priestly Code. Mention of it is also made in Lev 27,16-25 and Num 36,4 also from the same legal corpus. In this vast expanse mainly of cultic legal details, one is surprised to find stipulations with heavy social orientation! Secondly, its location in Lev 25 already provides the hermeneutical context for understanding the Jubilee Year. It follows the Sabbatical Year injunctions and must be understood in relation to it.⁷

Key to interpreting Hebrew legal texts is a correct understanding of what Israel meant by "law." Whereas one today may perceive legal injunctions as stifling and curtailing individual freedoms, the Jewish understanding of the *Torah* was entirely different! The *Torah*

⁵ WRIGHT C., "Jubilee, Year of," *ABD III* (1992) 1025.

⁶ The Jubilee legislation is a good example manifesting the three stages of development of Israel's traditions of laws. It is the end product of a legal process. GNUSE R., "Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus: Israel's Vision of Social Reform," *BibTB* 15 (1985) 43-44. A good basic reading for the Jubilee Year is VAN SELMS A., "Jubilee, Year of," *IDB Suppl. Vol.* (1962) 496-498.

⁷ "Essentially the legislation for the Jubilee Year is a uniformizing development and refinement of the laws for the Sabbath year." NORTH R., "Jubilee Year," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol 7 (1967) 1141.

was not so much restrictive "law" as it was instruction or teaching meant as *the* guide for a humanly fulfilled living. The precepts of the Jubilee Year, therefore, are to be understood as for the welfare of humankind.

The legal tradition of Ancient Israel was codified over a long period of time, stretching some 800 years (13th-5th cent. BC). The first body of laws was preserved in what is now known as the Book of the Covenant (Ex 21,22-23,33). Dating from the time of Moses (ca.1250 BC), it hearkened back to an age when Israel entered and settled in the land. It reflects mainly an agricultural and rural society.

Israel's second code of laws traces its origins to the traditions of the schismatic Northern Kingdom. Formulated in the 8th cent. BC, it was discovered in the Temple during the time of the King Josiah in 622 BC and was used to implement what is now known as the Deuteronomic Reform. This Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26) preserved the traditions of a highly urban and economically well-off agricultural society and is generally more compassionate in character when contrasted to the staid Book of the Covenant.

Finally, the Priestly Code of Holiness [Lev 17-26] was started in the early 6th cent. BC, just before the Exile to Babylon where it was mainly codified. It reflects the situation of a society in crisis, emphasizing elements which distinguished it from foreign cultures, like the Sabbath and rejection of idol-worship. It drew strength from idealizing the institutions of an Israel now gone, especially those associated with the temple and its cult.

It is by tracing the progressive development of Sabbatical Year stipulations which would climax in the Jubilee Year promulgations that one will understand a primary coloring of the Biblical Jubilee.

***Release of Slaves*⁸**

In the Sabbatical Year legislation of the Mosaic Book of the Covenant the manumission of slaves applied only to the *Hebrew* slave at

⁸ For the following section on the stipulations of the Jubilee Year, I am indebted to a talk delivered by Fr. Carlos Abesamis, SJ, at the Don Bosco Center of Studies on 19 November 1999. The text can be found in ABESAMIS C., "What is in it for Mr. Pobre and Ms. Pobre? The Jubilee Year and the Sabbatical Year in the Bible" *Religious Life in Asia* 1 (October 1999) 24-55. Cf. also OSBORNE T. P., "The Year of Jubilee and the Remission of Debt," *Bulletin Dei Verbum* 51 (1999) 4-14.

this early stage (Exod 21,2). And, this was done unconditionally or “without paying compensation (v.2)! Not all was perfect, however, since the law applied only to *male* slaves (vv.7-8). It was not applicable to his wife, if he had come in single, nor to his children. Full liberation for Hebrew female slaves would be possible only with later legislation (Deut 15,12). Still this early, Israelite law reflected a gutsy God of the Old Testament with more humane and humanitarian concerns than most legal codes today!

The Deuteronomic Code, some six centuries later, improved on this. Now even the Hebrew woman was included in the release (Deut 15,12)! Furthermore, those who were released from servitude were to be provided for liberally and were not to go out empty handed (v.13)! Human experience showed that newly released slaves who were destitute simply reverted back to former bondage. The fact that the former slave was provided for liberally from the master's pastoral and agricultural resources (v.14) showed that the Deuteronomic Sabbatical Year ordinances were sincere. The motivation provided for enacting these laws is noteworthy. Being former slaves from Egypt, they were bid not to enslave (v.15). And acknowledging the difficulty of the undertaking, they were promised God's blessings.

In the light of this tradition, one can now appreciate the particularities of the Jubilee Year legislation in the Code of Holiness. Now the Hebrew slave was set free with his entire family (Lev 25,41)! And the reason given was not simply rooted in the historical past. The basis for release was the sovereignty of God, “for they are my servants” (vv.42). While in servitude, a Hebrew slave [*ebed*] was not to be treated as such. Instead they were to be dealt with kindly (vv.43.53), as one would deal with hired servants [*sakir*] or sojourners [*toshab*] (v.40). The freedom of God's people was so important that the whole injunction was basically stated twice (25,39-43; vv.47-55). In fact, one needed not wait for the Jubilee Year to release a brother from servitude but should do so once capable of doing so (vv.48-52).

Rest for the Land

In the Book of the Covenant, the rest of man and creation during the Sabbatical Year had anthropological underpinnings. Man allowed the land to lie in fallow, in order to let the animals, his slaves and himself some respite (Exod 23,10-13). Apparently this is in contrast to

the times of their slavery in Egypt with its unmitigated work (Exod 1,8-14). Note that a further reason for rest for the land was so that "the poor can take food from it," i.e. that the poor – and not only the rich! – may themselves enjoy the fruitfulness of the Land of Promise! (Exod 23,11).⁹

While not having any explicit teaching of the rest for the land during the Sabbatical Year, the Deuteronomic Code's teaching on the Sabbatical rest shows some refinement (Deut 5,12-15). Man needed rest! Abstinence from work was to be their celebration of the liberation brought by the Exodus. No longer slaves, they were now to celebrate the Sabbath as a day of joy, released as they were from the drudgery of servitude (v.15).

Written in the context of the Babylonian Exile, when Israel was already evicted from its land, it is understandable that the Code of Holiness would lay extra stress on the concept of land. Whereas the earlier laws enjoined the sabbath, and the sabbatical year rest was only for humans (Exod 28,8-11; 23,10-13; Deut 5,12-15), now the land is as if personified and must observe the sabbath rest likewise (Lev 25,2)! And whereas the sabbatical year rest for the land was considered solemn (vv.4.5), that done during the Jubilee Year was *sacred* (25,12). Here one encounters a peculiarly OT concept. Sacredness pertained not only to "spiritual things" or to pious acts. A thing was sacred because of the presence of God's Spirit. God's Spirit was what made something spiritual and holy. In the context of Leviticus 25 that meant that the Jubilee Year prescriptions were considered holy acts simply because they expressed God's will. In this sense the rest for the land was *holy*.¹⁰ Finally, the rest for the land was Israel's expression of faith in a provident God. No one would be hungry. Notice how the provision of food will all encompassing: you, yourself, your male slave [*ebed*], your *female* slave, your hired servant [*sakir*], the sojourner [*toshab*] (Lev 25,6); and not only for humans, but for both domesticated and wild beasts as well (v.7)!

⁹ These various laws which were social and humanitarian in orientation were meant to prevent the accumulation of wealth among few and to remedy the situation of the poor. IBANEZ-ARANA A., "Levitico," *Commentario al Antiguo Testamento* (Verbo Divino, Navarra 1997) I, 207.

¹⁰ ALONSO-SCHÖKEL L., *Biblia del Peregrino I* (Ediciones Mensajero, Bilbao) 268; NORTH R., "The Biblical Jubilee and Social Reform," *Scripture* 3 (1951) 334.

*Recall of Debts*¹¹

Strangely the Book of the Covenant is simply silent on this. It may reflect the state of entrance into the land when all were provided for with family property, and therefore they needed not have been poor. All had their family plots to till to sustain them.

The first explicit mention of this socially liberating injunction advocating the release from all debt is made by the Deuteronomist legislator (Deut 15,1-11); and this innovation is found *only* here!¹² Later Priestly teaching simply implies this (Lev 25). The reason given for the recall of debts is just as happily surprising: "There must, then, be no poor among you" (Deut 15,15). The elimination of poverty is very much the Divine Will (v.4). The repetition of the word *deror*, or liberation, is excessive – a full five times in two verses! (vv. 1-2) – and is explicitly acknowledged as the Lord's release (v.2). This must be the hermeneutical context when reading the contentious 15,11 which is also quoted by Matthew 26,11: "There will never cease to be poor people in the country." The eradication of poverty must be the ideal which spurs on the affluent to be "open-handed with [his] brother" (Deut 15,11).

In the Jubilee Year legislation, the recall of debts must be understood as implied in the release of slaves and in the restoration or property and land.

Restoration of Property and Land

Perhaps no other Jubilee Year practice was so representative of it as the restoration of property, particularly the ancestral land (Lev 25,23-34). This precept is found only here – not in the Book of the Covenant nor in the Deuteronomic Code. The underlying *raison d'être*

¹¹ In the Ancient World, high interest rates – which could be anywhere from 20-33% – led to a large population of debt slaves. Mosaic law prohibited the imposition of interest (Exod 22,25). Characteristically, the Deuteronomic Code permitted interest on loans only in cases of loans to foreigners. Cf. GNUSE, 44.

¹² This practice, however, was attested in other ANE texts. Tablets 5403 and 5373 of the 15 document *Nies Babylonian Collection*, which detail loans from the Shamash temple during the reign of King Naram-Sin of Sippur record a custom corresponding to the Hebrew year of Jubilee, when the king, upon certain occasions, would cause the breaking of the tablets thereby cancelling all debts and freeing all slaves. Cf. ALEXANDER J., "A Babylonian Year of Jubilee," *JBL* 57 (1938) 78-79.

for this injunction was well known – God owned the Land of Israel (v.23).¹³ When it was parceled out to his people (Jos 13-21), they were to be its stewards, not its owners. Ownership always remained God's and all land reverted back to Him on year of Jubilee for Him to re-distribute as of old. God's sovereignty and sole ownership of the land were also the reasons why land was never actually sold. What was disposed of in transaction was the productivity of the land (Lev 25,26-27). Much more will be said regarding land below.

What the preceding survey has shown is that the Biblical Jubilee was primarily concerned not with ritual purity but with socio-economic reforms. And as these expressed God's desires, the Jubilee legislation was actually spiritual! Present there were the distinctively Hebrew concept of man [not as the Hellenist would later dichotomize him into body and spirit, but as the whole person, the *nephesh*, which was an integral entity], and a concept of the world where God was so much involved in secular events.

This reality shows how the Biblical Jubilee already provided orientation and actually contained the kernel of what would be considered the Christian understanding of salvation. For salvation is not so much about entering into other-worldly realities, as it is about God dwelling *with us* (Rev 21,3). Earthly realities are not simply negated but form the basis of eternal blessedness (Matt 5,3-10). Salvation is about the renewal of all things which Christ brings (Matt 19,28). What the Biblical Jubilee showed was the need to emphasize, appreciate and transform the earthly realities we find ourselves in.

Despite this, the Jubilee cannot yet be considered as *already* salvation. It lacks the universal outlook certified by Christ. No mention is made of the release of non-Hebrew slaves, for example (Exod 21,2; Deut 15,12; Lev 25,44.46). In fact, slaves from other nations were simply to be treated as possessions (Lev 25,46)! Secondly, it does not have the focus which only the revelation of Christ brings, that salvation is *in the person of Jesus* (Acts 10,41).

What then lies at the core of the Biblical Jubilee?

¹³ A similar case can be found in Ancient Egypt where all the lands belonged to the Pharaoh as the deified human personification of Horus-Ra. The sole owner of land was the king. OFFORD J., "Archaeological Notes on Jewish Antiquities: XLI. Land Ownership in Ancient Egypt and the Jubilee Year," *PEQ* 50 (1918) 38.

A close reading of the Leviticus 25 shows that an element absent from previous Sabbatical Year legislation and found only in the stipulations for the Jubilee Year is the ordinance to "return to [the] land."¹⁴ Not only is it missing from earlier texts, but here it is stated thrice (Lev 25,10.13.28)! This together with other indicators such as the seeming personification of the land which "must keep the Sabbath's rest for Yahweh" (v.2) and the emphatic declaration of Yahweh's sole ownership of the land (v.23) all point to the time of the Babylonian Exile when this section of Priestly Laws were codified.

It was in exile, once already evicted from the Promised Land, that the people reflected on what brought them to that miserable state in the first place – their infidelities to the Covenant. In exile they realized that *ha'aretz Yisrael* was God's own, to give, to distribute and to recall. It was his symbol of fidelity to his people. During the exile, the land had its rest. Now after the exile, the people were bid to return to the land – now perhaps despoiled and forlorn but in God's providence would be restored. This was the time of the prophets Haggai and Malachi who had castigated the people for dragging their feet and preferring the comforts of Babylon to the challenges of rebuilding a nation (Hag1,1-10; 2,15-19; Mal 1,2-5).

Examining the Jubilee Year from the tripartite perspective of the Land, the People and the God of Israel shows why it is a synthesis of Israel's faith and *the expression of her covenantal fidelity*.

The Land of Israel

Seen from the point of view of anthropology, there is just something in each of us which longs for one's own land. In olden times the ancients thought that we, humans, were made from three elements: air, water and earth. Being animated creatures made of water and dust, everytime we breathe pure air enlivens us. On the otherhand, dehydration, or the loss of bodily fluids, saps our strength. The Bible also brings this out in the creation account of man, fashioned from the earth (Gen 2,7). Deep within, we long to trace our rootedness to the

¹⁴ Already the OT has taken note of the Jubilee as a year of liberation and has associated it with the Messiah (Ezek 46,17; Jer 32,7; 34,8). It is no wonder then that in the Lukan infancy narrative, Joseph is made "to return to the land" of his forefathers and that is where Jesus the Messiah is born (Luke 2,4).

soil from which we came. Those of us who have been OCWs, or expatriates, or *balikbayans* will know full well how difficult it is to live in a foreign land. And how beautiful it is to come back to one's own land.

For Israel, the promised land was more than just a homeland. First and foremost, it was *God's land*. The ownership of the land was Yahweh's – and his alone (Lev 25,23). Because it was his land, only Yahweh could apportion it to his people. Just before the ratification of the Sinai Covenant, the Lord pledged to lead his people into his land of promise and to give them to the land “of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (Exod 23,23). Promised just before the Covenant at Sinai (Exod 24), the land was not meant to be any kind of gift. More than any other, it symbolized the salvation Yahweh was bestowing on his people. *The Land of Israel was to be the sign of covenantal fidelity*. It was the most tangible symbol of the covenant.

No wonder then that at the brink of entering the promised land, Yahweh would remind Moses and the people the deeper meaning of the territory lying ahead of them:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live” (Deut 30,19).

Thus, failure in fidelity prevented those who had escaped from Egypt from entering the land, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb. Entrance into the land, in turn, was feted with the same celebration of the Exodus, the passover (Jos 5,10-12). Finally, centuries later the Israelites, obtuse in their unfaithful ways, were evicted from the land with the Exile. After fifty years when they were restored to the land, it was so only because the people had been reconciled with their God.

But it was also God's land at a deeper level of meaning. Yahweh confined himself to the Land of Israel. God's people believed that Yahweh was bound to the confines of *ha'aretz Israel*, i.e. that it was in the land of Israel that Yahweh lived and moved and acted¹⁵ – and in Israel

¹⁵ “Possession of the land was for the ancient Israelites a ‘sacrament’, enabling an authentic experience of God. The Land was a tangible witness to Israel's relationship with God and its moral consequences.” SAMAHA J., “Holy Year 2000: Biblical Origins of Jubilee,” *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas* 74 (July-August 1999) 474.

alone! Thus Naaman, the Syrian general, made *baon*¹⁶ of some of the land of Israel that he may continue to sacrifice to Yahweh, God of Israel, from his far away land. The belief of Yahweh's universal sovereignty would have to wait until after the Exile, when Israel experienced the call of the prophet Ezekiel by the banks of the river Chebar (Ezek 1,1f) and the Lord's incessant protection even in a foreign land. For now, his people believed Israel was God's land where Yahweh acted and where he performed his mighty deeds of mercy, and where alone God heard his people.

The land spoke of the presence of God to his people. And their security in the land was a sign of his covenantal fidelity. The exile, therefore, to Babylon in 587 BC was particularly harsh, not only because it was a punishment for infidelity, but because it brought the people away from God's land and his presence.

Since the land was God's land, men were simply let to use the land; they were merely stewards of the land. The people never really got to *own* the land as it always remained in God's custody. What fell under financial transaction was only the right of use of the land (Lev 25,16). It was the productivity of the land which was sold, i.e. its capacity to bear fruit. Thus every Sabbatical year, the land was made to rest. It was let to replenish itself. There was a deep-rooted respect of nature, because inherent in it was a cognizance that God would provide. God would continue to support his people even during this period of rest. This rest given during a Sabbatical year was repeated during the year of Jubilee.

But not only was the land God's land. It was also *God's gift* – not just to individuals, but to the family, the clan and the tribe.¹⁷

Upon entrance into the promise land, the territory was partitioned according to Israel's kinship structure. Israelite society had three basic units: the tribe, the clan and the family (cf. Judg 6,15). Thus the

¹⁶ "Baon" is what a wayfarer brings with him from his land of origin. Ordinarily it is to sustain him along his way. Here it is simply used in the sense of a keepsake.

¹⁷ In Babylonia "the work of irrigation, so essential and so arduous, was not left to individual enterprise, but was undertaken by the state and formed one of the principal departments of public works." NORTH, 47. This stress of family rights over individual ownership was also to safeguard against exploitation. *Ibid.*, 50. Cf. also BERGHEIM S., "Land Tenure in Palestine," *PEQ* 26 (1894) 191; NORTH, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 332.

nation was partitioned off by tribe (Jos 13-21). Each tribe divided its portion of the land by clan. Each family in the clan was given its inheritance according to its size and its need. Note that it was its need, and not the capacity to acquire, which was the criterion for the donation. In some sense this prefigures what will happen in Acts 4, 34-35 where each gave according to capacity and each received according to need. The divine plan made for an equitable distribution of the resources of the earth, especially the land.

The family land was passed on from one generation to another as a possession received from God. It was God's gift. Thus no worthy Israelite would sell his family plot and patrimony. It was not simply real estate. Thus in 1 King 21 we read how Naboth shed his blood instead of selling off or even exchanging his family's vineyard to the wicked king Ahab. Unfortunately, at times, dire poverty would cause Israelites to sell off their inheritance. Now this would not mean just losing one's property. Remember that theirs was an agriculture-based economy. Their land was their livelihood. Loss of their land also meant economic slavery. It meant the loss of economic viability, not just for one, but for many generations to come.

And here is where the Jubilee Year came in. Every Jubilee Year was a year of restoration. Things were restored according to the original divine plan. When Israel first settled into the land, each had their family share. No one need have been poor. Poverty was the result of indolence, and as such was condemnable. Each had their land to till. However, with the onset of the monarchy, the division in society and the rise of the powerful classes, people lost their land. These were sold to pay off debts, or worse, because of unjust practices. The aim of the Jubilee was the restoration of positions as they were of old. This was possible because *God still owned* the land. Families were given back their ancestral lands. All debts were cancelled. The Jubilee Year ensured that later generations would not have to pay for the mistakes of their fathers. It also tended to curb the uncontrolled accumulation of wealth, which oftentimes brought along with it oppression and alienation. The Jubilee enabled free persons to live in a free land.

The People of Israel

Underlying the Jubilee Year was not only a theology of the land. Correlated to it was how Israel viewed itself. The Jubilee legislation

showed how important was the family unit. God's gift of the ancestral land was bestowed not to individuals but to the family, tribe and clan. It reverted back to these same units as well. The Jubilee was not the celebration of individuals. It was communitarian.

Secondly, the experience of the Exodus and Sinai had taught Israel the value of freedom. They were a free nation and were to remain a free people. Not only was no Israelite to *be* a slave, but that also no Israelite was to *have* a fellow Hebrew slave. With his deliverance of the people from Egypt, Yahweh had bought Israel for himself: "They are my slaves whom I brought forth from the land of Egypt" (Lev 25,42.55). Nobody could now claim as his own private property a fellow Israelite. The right of purchase belonged to God alone. The Jubilee Year reminded Israel that they had once been slaves in a foreign land. It was only God's graciousness that had brought them out of Egypt. It was by God's act that they were set free. Now free, they were not now to keep slaves of others; at best they were to be treat very kindly as servants or sojourners. At every Jubilee Year all Hebrew slaves were set free. The Jubilee was a year of liberation.

This cry for liberation, in fact, was so imperative that one need not wait for the Jubilee Year to enact it out. The act of redemption, or the law of the *goel*, was to be exercised when a relative was capable. What made this Jubilee Year different from the act of the *goel* or the "act of redemption" was that "acts of redemption" were individual initiatives. The Jubilee Year was a national event. It was something done by a people. Moreover, acts of redemption could be exercised at any time, at any place and as circumstances required. The Jubilee was more specific. It was only done twice a century.

Finally, the Jubilee aimed to liberate not only from slavery but from all forms of oppression, particularly poverty. It had for its purpose not merely the preservation of land or persons. The Jubilee functioned as an override mechanism to prevent the debt of servitude by dependent tenants on the wealthy. It was a critique to prevent the accumulation of land and wealth in the hands of a very few.

Every Jubilee Year therefore was a year of liberation and restoration. It was a year of freedom from slavery and debts. It was a year of return to one's ancestral land and home. It was an event based not only on the concept of Israel as a nation endowed by God, or on the understanding of every individual Israelite. More importantly, the

Jubilee Year was based on *who the God of Israel is*, a God of graciousness and compassion.¹⁸

The God of Israel

The Jubilee proclaimed the sovereignty of God. Yahweh, as sole head of the nation, was an undisputable tenet during the times of the Exodus and the people's travels through the desert. It was in the tradition of the more powerful suzerain that Yahweh had made a covenant with the recipient party, Israel. To express this belief of the Lord as the sole ruler of Israel, no king was given to the people upon their settlement in the land. Instead, provisional military leaders, the judges, were given them for specific tribal conflicts. The monarchy had changed all that. Kings usurped the sole prerogative of God. The Jubilee rectified this as it reminded Israel that Yahweh – and he alone – was their sovereign. He alone owned the land and the people and could dispose or restore it as he willed.

The celebration of the Jubilee allowed the people to experience other aspects of Yahweh revealed during the Exodus. Just as he had shown his providence by sustaining his people with manna, water and quail during their travel through the desert (Exod 16-17), now during the Jubilee he manifested his providence by maintaining his people even during the year when the land was left to fallow. The practice of the Jubilee also reminded the people of how Yahweh the Liberator cared for the poor, the lowly and the downtrodden. He had once done that in Egypt, and continued to do so to those deprived of land and home.

The Jubilee, therefore, was a wonderful synthesis of Israel's faith. It enabled them to encounter their God. It clarified their status as his people. It showed the importance of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and his people, best symbolized by the Land of Israel.

It was more than just the remission of debts, the release of slaves, the restoration of property of the rest for the land. It was the celebration of salvation. It was the communitarian renewal of the covenant by God's people who saw in the land of Israel the symbol *par excellence* of their covenantal relationship to Yahweh. It was the systemic over-

¹⁸ Leviticus 17-26 is a code of laws inspired by the very sentiments of God; cf. IBANEZ-ARANA, 208.

hauling of Israelite society recommitting itself to its poorest members, thus affirming Yahweh's sovereignty over the land and over its people.

At its core meaning, the Jubilee Year was not just about "practices." It was about *covenantal fidelity*.

When was the Jubilee Year?

Just which year was designated the Jubilee is problematic. Lev 25,8 identifies this as the forty-ninth year. This means that the Jubilee Year was simply the last in a seven-fold cluster of sabbatical years. Its being termed "Jubilee" was merely to distinguish it from the other sabbatical years. This position is that preferred by Rabbinic tradition.¹⁹ It has also been suggested that the forty-nine years actually refer to the length of the Babylonian Exile.²⁰ Evidently this reading is based on the difficulty of having to accept the possibility of having two successive fallow years.

However, this second possibility is confirmed in the sign given to Hezekiah:

"This year will be eaten the self-sown grain,
next year what sprouts in the fallow;
but in the third year sow and reap..." (Isa 37,30)

There it is the fiftieth year (cf. Lev 25,10) which is identified with the Jubilee. What makes the determination difficult is that there are no directions for the start of the sabbatical year on which the Jubilee is based. It is however clear that the Jubilee was to begin on the very Day of Atonement (v.9). R. North suggests that the "fiftieth year" was

¹⁹ There was widespread belief after the exile that the inevitable coming of the Messiah would take place during the sabbatical year. WACHOLDER B. Z., "Chronomessianism: The Timing of Messianic Movements and the Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles," *HUCA* 46 (1975) 201.209-213 and ROTH C. and G. WIGODER, eds., *The New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* (1975) 1662.

²⁰ Although the royal court and more prominent citizens were sent in exile to Babylon in 597 BC, it was only ten years later (587 BC) that the Temple was destroyed and the people as a whole was relocated to Babylon. The Persian king Cyrus the Great decreed the release of all exiles in 539 BC, even if the actual return happened a year later. The approximate time for the duration of Israel in Babylon therefore was 587-538 BC or a total of forty-nine years [49]. During that time there was rest for the land of Israel, after which the people were bid to return to the land. CORTESE E., *Levitico* (Casa Editrice Marietti, Casale Monferrato 1982) 115.

actually the forty-ninth.²¹ Just as one would consider a child's actual tenth year of existence as his *eleventh* at its end. The fiftieth year was therefore more of a rounded symbolic number.²²

Others would see ancient agricultural influence in the selection of the the fiftieth year, similar to the Assyro-Amorite Calendar which bears witness to the pentecostad system.²³ Even today the span separating the commemorations of the first barley harvest (Unleavened Bread) and the last grain harvest (Pentecost) is still fifty days! The ancient Jubilee laws were based on an agricultural calendar which preferred the pentecostad. The main objection to this is the seemingly impossible two consecutive fallow years. Yet, there is support for this.

In lieu of the above difficulty others have posited shorter intercalary years. An example theorizes that since the Jewish year is composed of four seasons of ninety-one days each, totalling 364 in a year, in 49 year it would be lagging behind by forty-nine [49] days. This would have been considered the intercalary Jubilee year!²⁴

But the calculations for probable intercalary years are limitless and far too complex.²⁵ I would think that at its most ancient practice the Jubilee Year was based on the pentecostad agricultural system, much as the most ancient Jewish feasts had either agricultural or pastoral roots. Only when it had fallen into disuse did the commemoration shift to the forty-ninth year which was more into the priestly system of calculations.²⁶

²¹ NORTH, *Sociology*, 129; 186.

²² TAYLOR C., "Jubilee," *Calmet's Dictionary of the Holy Bible*, vol I (1829) 777.

²³ MORGENSTERN J., "Jubilee, Year of," *IDB*, vol 2 (1962) 1001; NORTH, 66-67; DE HUMMELAUER, 527; LEWY J. and H. LEWY, "The Origin of the Week and the Oldest West Asiatic Calendar," *HUCA* 17 (1942) 96.

²⁴ HOENIG S., "Sabbatical Years and the Year of Jubilee," *JQR* 59 (1968) 232; also GNUSE, 46.

²⁵ A. Klostermann for example calculates that the jubilee year is actually that six month intercalation which was added to 51 moon years (=18250 days) which was exactly equal to 50 sun years! Cf. NORTH, 109ff.

²⁶ T. Osborne even suggests that there may be some cabalistic word-pun here, noting the connection between the Hebrew roots *sb'* (seven), *sbt* (sabbath) and *shub* (return); cf. OSBORNE, 50.

Was it ever historical?

Scholars are divided on this issue. Many believe that the Hebrew Jubilee Year was merely an utopian fancy, that it was never realized. Those who hold this position point to the the difficult immediate post-exilic years as the context which gave rise to the concept of the Jubilee. Economic hardship and the need to have a theological basis for the return of the land to the returnees from exile were the reason for the creation of the Jubilee myth. The lack of historical references to the Jubilee in early Israelite documents seem to support this view.

Those who accept the Jubilee as an ancient institution ask why, if it were truly post-exilic in origin, is there no account of its institution, especially given the fact that post-exilic literature was zealous in observing the law.²⁷ They rebut the lack of references in early documents to the fact that the Jubilee was celebrated only once every fifty years, unlike the other annual feasts and festivals.

Those who support the historicity of the practice of the Jubilee date it to the time of the Patriarchs. The testimony of Lev 25 seems to support this view as it contains four rare terms, pointing to their ancient origin. These are *yobel*, "ram"; *mwk* "to become poor"; *prk* "ruthless"; and *litsmatoth* "in perpetuity."²⁸ Moreover, the fact that the legislation is taken for granted in the story of Ruth supports its antiquity. Finally, even if this concept of a general amnesty seems foreign to the modern mind, such was not so in ancient times. In ancient Near Eastern practice, where the king was the virtual owner and ruler of his city state, the monarch issued decrees cancelling both public and private debts. This is attested to in Nuzu, Akkadian and Old Babylonian documents.²⁹

²⁷ HARTLEY J., *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Word Books, Dallas 1992) 429-430

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 428.

²⁹ It is interesting to note that a similar case of full acquittal of salary-related debt is attested to in a possible pre-colonial Philippine document, the Laguna Copper Plate Inscription. Cf. POSTMA A., "The Laguna Copper Plate Inscription," *National Museum Papers Vol. 2:1* (Manila 1991) 1-25; also OCAMPO A., "Receipt of debt payment etched on copper," *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 15:2 (10 December 1999) 1 & 6. For a development on ANE legal parallels for the Jubilee and Sabbatical Years cf. GRAETZ M., "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee," *Encyclopedia Judaica XIV* (1971) 578 and NORTH, 57-69.

It is better to understand the Jubilee Year as an actual institution during the days prior to the monarchy.³⁰ In the days of the monarchy, stifling structures, rampant corruption and the trampling of the down-trodden relegated to oblivion the practice of the Jubilee. The origin of the Jubilee is pre-exilic,³¹ even if the legal framework and the formulation we have of it in the Bible is already a final product of the returnees from exile.³²

The Jubilee lives on

Despite its post-exilic phase-out, the ideals of the Jubilee lived on.³³ Thus we have the Songs of the Servant of Yahweh which sing of the weak and the oppressed. In line with it is Psalm 24 which proclaims that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it." The Isaian prophet identified his mission to be "to proclaim liberty to captives, release to those in prison... to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord" (Isa 61,1-2).

This Jubilee ideal received no better expression than that witnessed to by Jesus of Nazareth who, during his programmatic inaugural sermon at his hometown's synagogue appropriated for himself the mission of the Isaian prophet as he declared "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... Yahweh has anointed me" (Luke 4,18). In his teaching and ministry Jesus lived out the Jubilee ideals of liberation and restoration, pointing out in turn how we, his disciples,

³⁰ Scholars are still at odds as to the historicity of the Jubilee Year practice. For contrasting opinions see DE VAUX R., *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1965) 175-177 or GNUSE, 43-48, and WRIGHT, 1027-1028.

³¹ Traces of this can be found in the distinction made between property found within walled towns and those found outside these (lev 25,29-31). This referred to fortified towns during the period of settlement. Cf. NOTH M., *Leviticus* (SCM Press LTD, London 1965) 185; LESETRE, 1752-1753.

³² Testimony to later redaction on the text of Lev 25 is the alternation of second person singular and plural forms in the legislation. Even if the former is the prevalent form, 2nd person plurals are also found in vv. 9b-14, 17-24.38.44.55. Cf. NOTH, 186; CORTESE, 111. Late composition is also reflected in the spirit of the text which is more akin to the denunciations of the prophets. ALONSO-SCHÖKEL, 268.

³³ Both those who hold on to the historicity of the Jubilee institution and those who oppose this view agree that what is more important is the "vision of hope" which the Jubilee inspires. Cf. GNUSE, 47-48; ALONSO-SCHÖKEL, 269.

can make it part of our own lives too.³⁴ Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection has truly liberated us and restored us to our true homeland. Jesus has given us a Jubilee mentality. We are a Jubilee People. □

³⁴ LARKIN E., "Jubilee Spirituality," *Spiritual Life* 45 (1999) 5-6. For an even further focusing of the Jubilee Spirit to the pastoral and sacerdotal function of Jesus cf. THOMPSON W., "The Jubilee: Barometer and Challenge for the Priesthood," *Origins* 29:20 (1999) 318-324.

