

SABBATH, JUBILEE, AND THE REPAIR OF THE WORLD

by

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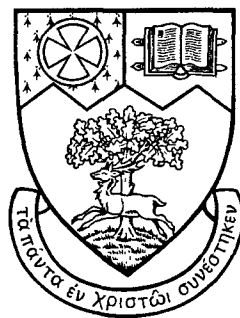
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## ABSTRACT

“Sabbath, Jubilee, and the Repair of the World”

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The ancient themes of Sabbath and Jubilee are woven throughout the biblical narrative and form the basis of the Israel's identity under Yahweh. Four threads in particular - the release of slaves, the forgiveness of debts, the fallowing of land, and the redistribution of capital - create the ethical backbone of God's people. These themes were amplified by the prophets and assumed by Jesus Christ himself as the content and thrust of his kingdom proclamation. Following Jesus, the early church implemented these Sabbath and Jubilee practices in their communities. Thus, the challenge today is for Christians to recapture these ancient laws as a guide to contemporary discipleship. As well, churches must be willing to envision their ministry and mission in light of this long overlooked Sabbath-Jubilee vision.



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Eastertide 2012

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# Introduction

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“The things that horrify the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world.”<sup>1</sup>

“We are never given a blueprint for God’s reign, but in the Jubilee images we get a glimpse of those points of intersection where the daily life of human design encounters the truth of God’s sovereignty.”<sup>2</sup>

## Four Crises of Our Time

We live in a world torn apart. The intricate tapestry of creation and the rich fabric of human civilization are tattered and frayed, strained and stretched, coming apart at the very seams. The wounds we see are social, economic, and environmental; they are systemic and accelerating, and four crises in particular account for the majority of the damage we see.

The first crisis we must acknowledge is the ongoing horror of human slavery and exploitation. Human rights abuses abound across our globe in the form of harsh labour, economic exploitation, slavery, sex trafficking, child abuse, racism, genocide and more. Even our western democracies were built upon the domination of indigenous people groups. These types of domination, while not always called slavery, continue to this day in their various, insidious forms both at home and abroad.

The second wound that rips across the fabric of our world is the ever-growing grip of debt. While wealthy western countries address the recent Debt Crisis, the Third World has been crippled by debt for decades. Loans, debt, and interest have become substitutes for direct investment in many poorer nations, and every new generation inherits the debts

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, xiv.

of their parents and grandparents. These debts create gross inequalities between nations and hamper efforts at renewal.

A third problem that our world is witnessing is the ever-growing stain of environmental degradation. Our unrelenting demand for natural resources and consumer goods has placed an impossible burden on our environment and upon human productivity. Both are stretched and strained to the breaking point. Every day the slow and steady march toward global toxification, land degradation, and climate change continues unabated, while society itself grows more exhausted from overwork.

The fourth and final tear in the fabric of our world is the accelerating concentration of wealth into the hands of fewer and fewer people. At the mercy of the free market, and without access to the basic, productive resources of life, the poor get poorer and the rich richer, creating a top-heavy financial system that is ready to collapse.

Human Slavery. Crippling debt. Environmental decline. Global Greed. The combined damage wrought upon our world by these four factors cannot be overstated. Yet, the Bible teaches us that these concerns are not unique to our time. Israel herself was born in the crucible of slavery in Egypt. The advent of the monarchy led more and more Israelite households into debilitating debt. The land, a major theme throughout the Bible, was constantly under threat of exhaustion from overuse. And despite their best efforts, in Israel too, the rich got richer and the poor, poorer. Our own crises are different only by degree, not by nature.

## Sabbath-Jubilee Threads

Yet embedded within those same scriptures, and amidst those all too familiar stories of destruction, are found the potential threads of healing and repair. It appears that the tendencies of humanity toward exploitation, greed, and ruin do not come as a surprise to God. Therefore, to counteract our propensity toward self-destruction, God provided a way forward in the form of the Sabbath and Jubilee ordinances of both the Old and New Testaments. Sabbath-Jubilee principles are a gift to our broken world. These directives are not mere “patch-jobs” providing interim solutions till we awaken one day in heaven. Instead they are systemic solutions for systemic problems. The Sabbath-Jubilee commandments teach us that God is concerned with justice, not charity, and that God is interested in the *tikkun olam*, the “repair of the world,” not our removal *from* this world.

Sabbath and Jubilee are related themes throughout the scripture. Sabbath laws govern the activities of God’s people both on the seventh day and on the seventh year. These laws emerged as Israel struggled to chisel out its own ethical responsibility under Yahweh as they traversed a land filled with other gods. Sabbath laws are concerned with rest, release, and restraint in relation to other humans and the earth as a whole. But God’s Sabbath vision is not ultimately about one-day-in-seven or one-year-in-seven, but about a particular way of life. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel points out, Sabbath is “like a palace in time, a kingdom for all. It is not a date but an atmosphere.”<sup>3</sup> Maria Harris echoes his sentiment: “Sabbath describes more than a length of time; it also describes a discipline of being in time that enables us to listen for what we are called to do in time.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord’s*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 27.

The year of Jubilee was meant to be an event that occurred every fifty years in Israel – a Sabbath of Sabbaths, and was marked by similar ethical challenges for Israel to adopt in order to maintain its distinctive relationship under Yahweh.

“You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty (*derôr*) throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you” (Lev. 25:8–10)

Like the Sabbath tradition, Jubilee years were marked by justice for slaves, forgiveness for debtors, and rest for the earth. A unique aspect of the Jubilee year was the redistribution of capital amongst God’s people as families were allowed to return to their ancestral properties. Several scholars believe that even though the scriptural texts that describe Sabbath-Jubilee legislation are difficult to date, they are probably exilic or post exilic.<sup>5</sup> However, while some texts may have been pre-exilic it is unclear whether they had the same concerns in mind.<sup>6</sup> It is also unclear how the weekly Sabbath day is related to the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year. Many view the Jubilee year and Sabbatical years as an expansion of the Sabbath day, but Lowery proposes that the development first ran in the opposite direction, with the Sabbath day being a “little Jubilee” or a “little Sabbath Year” much as Christians view Sunday as a “little Easter.”<sup>7</sup>

Today’s global state of affairs is vastly different from the agrarian, royal economy out of which the Sabbath-Jubilee laws were born. But our modern economy imposes an updated version of the ancient problem: too much work, too little money, and the

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<sup>5</sup> RInge, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, 26; Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee*, 60–63; Habel, *The Land is Mine*, 96–114.

<sup>6</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 5.

depletion/hoarding of earth's resources. Therefore, the ancient Sabbath-Jubilee vision has vital insights to add to our present day conversations about global sustainability. In this thesis I propose that the Sabbath-Jubilee vision can be separated into four synergistic and interrelated "threads," that when taken seriously, and woven into the fabric of our world, provide real opportunities for global, environmental and social reform. Keeping with our analogy, these four Biblical threads are the very solutions needed to mend the torn fabric of our world today.

The first such thread is the command to "Release the Slave" (the subject of Chapter 1). The Sabbath and Jubilee laws emerged from a freed community of people who had experienced release from bondage at the hands of Yahweh their liberating God. Sabbatical laws concerning slave release and the Jubilee hope of returning home were concrete guidelines to ensure that every person made in the image of God should live free.

The second thread woven through the scriptural story of Israel is the command to "Release the Debt" (the subject of Chapter 2). For a community of subsistence farmers, economic downfall was only one failed harvest away. At best, families lived on the brink of collapse; at worst their downfall would lead them into debt servitude and the loss of ancestral lands. Thus Israel devised specific laws to navigate the unavoidable reality of debt. Seventh year debt-forgiveness and laws concerning usury were crucial for family survival.

The third thread we find in the scriptural story is the command to "Rest the Land" (the subject of chapter 3). Israel was taught early in their relationship with Yahweh to exercise restraint in their use of earth's natural resources, and to practice rest themselves.



Sabbath laws about fallowing the land and providing refreshment to workers are the clearest expression of this concept.

Finally, the fourth thread is the Jubilean decree to “Share the Wealth” (the subject of chapter 4). Despite the first three threads, Israelite society still required a failsafe means of correcting the inevitable imbalance between rich and poor. In the ultimate act of distributive justice, the Jubilee year called for a redistribution of capital and a sharing of resources that was meant to periodically “level the playing field” of Israelite society. Freeing the slave, forgiving the debt, resting the land, and sharing the wealth: four threads to mend a broken world.

### **The Language of Jubilee**

The pivotal texts for our study are found in Leviticus 25, which is closely related to the debt-forgiveness and slave-release laws of Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 15. Amongst these texts (and others), a distinctive vocabulary arises to describe the effects of these innovative strategies. Foremost among them is the Hebrew word *derôr* which is translated “liberty,” and is used eight times in the Old Testament, seven times in referring specifically to the Jubilee tradition.<sup>8</sup> *Derôr*, therefore becomes a guidepost to tracing the Jubilary thread throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Closely related to *derôr* is the idea of “release” which in Hebrew is *shemittah*. *Shemittah* is found only in Deuteronomy where it refers to the periodic “release” of debts.<sup>9</sup> The word *shabbat* translates into the word Sabbath which literally means “to stop.” Cessation of work provided relief for both labourers and land in the Sabbath tradition. The word “Jubilee” itself presents problems

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<sup>8</sup> Arias, “The Jubilee: A Paradigm for Mission Today,” 38. See Lev. 25:10; Jer. 34:8, 15, 17, 17; Ez. 46:17; Is. 61:1.

<sup>9</sup> Deut. 15:1, 2, 9; 31:10.

for interpreters. “Etymologically, Jubilee’s meaning may come from the Hebrew verb *ybl*, which signifies release, especially from debt, although it is far more usual to find experts citing *yobel* as the foundation of the word. *Yobel* is the Hebrew term for a ram’s horn or trumpet sounded in a public arena”<sup>10</sup> (Lev. 25:9). Later, Jubilee came to be associated with the Latin word *jubilum* (to rejoice, to exalt), but as Trocmé notes the connection between the two words was merely a verbal coincidence.<sup>11</sup>

### **Jesus the Herald of Jubilee**

Sabbath and Jubilee were not themes confined to the Old Testament. Jesus himself took up these four healing threads and drew heavily from this tradition to shape his own ministry. Sharon Ringe comments that “Both the content and the pattern of the Kingdom of God proclamation are rooted in the Jubilee and Sabbath Year traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures.”<sup>12</sup>

In Luke 4, Jesus draws his famous quotation of Isaiah 58:6 from the Septuagint “to let the oppressed go free.” The Greek word *aphesis* used here is the same word that translates both *derôr* and *shemittah*.

In other words, what Jesus reads in Luke 4 includes the language of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15, Isaiah 61 and Isaiah 58, thereby forging a Jubiliary context, not only for that combination of passages, but for Jesus’ own reading of them, and thus for Jesus himself.<sup>13</sup>

“The Jubilean significance of *aphesis* in the first three gospels is beyond doubt.”<sup>14</sup> Liberation is the key word for Jesus’ message and for Jesus’ mission. Jesus himself sounds the trumpet of Jubilee and his ministry is filled with words and wonders

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<sup>10</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 96.

<sup>11</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Ollenberger, “Jubilee and Holiness,” 25.

<sup>14</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 16.

where *aphesis* is declared and demonstrated to be the heart of the gospel of the Kingdom of God. While it would be wrong to assume that *every* mention of the word *aphesis* is part of the Jubilee tradition, it is clear that Jesus' Kingdom message contains all the threads of Jubilee: release of slaves, forgiveness of debts, refreshment for the weary, and the establishment of a divine economy of grace. Furthermore, this liberty is not simply an event to be celebrated every fifty years, but is the defining character of God's ongoing reign.

### **Sabbath-Jubilee Churches**

Therefore, the Church's mission today must also be characterized by Jesus' gospel of liberty, release, and renewal. Those same four Sabbath Jubilee threads that are found woven throughout the scriptures, the same strands that Jesus' himself knit into the kingdom vision, must also set the agenda for the church today at all levels. The same God that declared through Moses "let my people go," (Ex. 9:1) declares through Jesus "He has sent me to bring release to the captives" (Luke 4:18). Sabbath and Jubilee unify and synthesize the gospel of both the Old and New Testaments, taking the original story of God and His mission and allowing us to join in that mission wherever we find ourselves. The Sabbath-Jubilee scriptures are the privileged loci that enable us to understand and define Christian mission.

Through their liturgy, preaching, and teaching, churches can begin to remember God's story of "release" and awaken a new social imagination. With a renewed sense of mission, churches can begin to weave that "release" into their own ecclesial identity and ministry. The thrust of this thesis is that the fourfold Jubilee command to release the

slave, cancel debts, rest the land, and share the wealth guides the church's mission today towards creative acts of justice such as liberating those who suffer, advocating for the poor, caring for the environment, and ensuring there is enough for all. In so doing, "Our churches and synagogues can become Jubilee communities, small laboratories in which we can practice alternative economic possibilities, try new forms of solidarity, and experience Jubilee spirituality together."<sup>15</sup>

## Methodology

The methodology employed in this particular thesis is rooted in the deep belief, that the gospel message of Jesus Christ, rooted in Israel's Sabbath-Jubilee tradition, is normative for both the individual Christian life and the life of the church today. This methodology assumes that hearing the gospel message in its first century context, complete with its Old Testament Sabbath-Jubilee overtones, will provide the truest picture of Christ's ministry, and consequently, give a clearer mandate for the church's mission in our own day and age.

This methodology can best be described as "Canonical Narrative Theology" and is well described by Graham *et al.* in *Theological Reflection: Methods*. "The theological task is to discern how contemporary experience can be interpreted through the story that the Church tells about Jesus and to identify forms of practice that are coherent with this narrative."<sup>16</sup> This method invites Christians and churches to develop a way of life through which the proclamation of Jesus continues to be incarnated. Therefore, each chapter of this thesis traces the development of Sabbath and Jubilee and then ends with

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<sup>15</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Graham et al. *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 78.

practical suggestions for the church's *habitus*, our "way of living in the world."<sup>17</sup> The emphasis is on scripture being normative for the church and for Christian identity. As such, worship becomes a key means by which God's people are empowered for this new way of life. Both the church and the world are subject to the power and message of God's revealed word, especially as it is embodied in the life and teachings of Christ.

The aim of a Canonical Narrative approach is to reflect on the biblical narrative with a vision toward merging the horizon of the biblical text with the horizon of lived experience. This means that in this thesis we will seek to understand the bible's teaching about Jubilee practices and then offer theological reflection on how this aspect of the biblical narrative can inform the life and ministry of the contemporary church. As Graham *et.al* write regarding this method, "[I]t offers an effective means of *Christian nurture*, a clear basis for *ecclesiology*, and a means of affirming *Christian Identity* in contradiction to culture."<sup>18</sup>

Employing a Canonical Narrative methodology is appropriate for a study like this one because in taking scripture seriously it provides a foundation for the kind of radical discipleship that a Jubilee theology inevitably call for. Examples of this method are found in the work of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* is both a valuable resource for the study of Jubilee, and a classic example of how Christian ethics are derived from the scriptural narrative culminating in the life of Jesus Christ. Yoder argued that within the biblical narratives of the historical Jesus we discern the nature of God, the reality of the kingdom, and the mission of the

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<sup>17</sup> Graham et al. *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 78.

<sup>18</sup> Graham et al, 105.

church.<sup>19</sup> Stanley Hauerwas argues in his own writings that without a sense of our formative story, Christians lose their distinct identity, and as such the church loses the vision for their special mission to the world.<sup>20</sup> The Church is a “story-formed community,” and in increasingly pluralist culture it is ever more appropriate for Christian to rediscover the resources that their narrative provides and shape a Church that can effectively witness to this story in a “post liberal age.”<sup>21</sup>

A Canonical Narrative methodology resonates with Scobie’s assertion that biblical theology can function as a bridge between the biblical text and the Church.<sup>22</sup> In each chapter we begin with a careful biblical study of a Jubilee theme and then let the biblical narrative lead naturally toward applications for the church as it discerns its role in our present context. Therefore, while the roots of this thesis are in Biblical Studies, the conclusions reach into the domain of Practical Theology and Ministry Studies. Charles Winquist states, “A revised and revolutionary concept of ministry can be fully articulated only in alliance with a revised and revolutionary concept of theology.”<sup>23</sup> It is the argument of this thesis that recapturing the biblical theology of Jubilee will lead to such a revolutionary concept of ministry.

Therefore, the approach of Canonical Narrative Theology traces the biblical narrative of Sabbath and Jubilee and seeks to allow that story to reshape the church’s own story. In this way Jesus’ Jubilee gospel is “good news” today just as it was two thousand years ago.

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<sup>19</sup> Graham et al. *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 101.

<sup>20</sup> Hauerwas, “The Story Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down*,” 9.

<sup>21</sup> Graham et al. *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Scobie, *The Ways of our God*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Winquist, “Revisioning Ministry,” 29.

# Chapter 1:

## Release the Slave

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“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today.”  
(Deut. 15.15)

“God’s reign and human liberation go hand in hand.”<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction:

The history of our world, particularly the western world, is significantly marred by the human experience of domination, exploitation and slavery. “The history of the West is the history of the annihilation of countries and the extermination of whole peoples and cultures.”<sup>2</sup> Even when it has not been called “slavery” the rise of western civilization has come through the rampant abuse and exploitation of nature and people. This domination includes,

domination of White Europeans over native and African peoples, men over women, rich and powerful elites over poor and disenfranchised majorities, various ethnic and social groups over others, owners and employers over skilled and unskilled workers, citizens over immigrants, military-economic-political empires over variously subjugated nations.<sup>3</sup>

Chilling stories from Latin America and Africa expose how greed for gold, silver, diamonds, and rubber led to the cruel disregard for human life and culture. Louis Chaltin, an officer of the Congo police force wrote in 1892 that “the native doesn’t like making rubber. He must be compelled to do it.”<sup>4</sup> As such, genocide, torture, kidnapping,

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<sup>1</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 32

<sup>2</sup> Duchrow, *Property for People Not for Profit*, 71

<sup>3</sup> Kinsler & Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 112

<sup>4</sup> Grab, “Jubilee: Memory and Atonement,” 28

and slavery were the unfortunate cornerstones upon which most of Western Civilization was erected.

In 1776 the Liberty Bell tolled to announce the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The designers of this famous one-tonne bell had inscribed around its rim a verse from Leviticus 25.10: "Proclaim liberty through all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." But much like the bell itself, the American and Western notion of liberty was "cracked and cracked again."<sup>5</sup> The irony is palatable, since the visionaries who signed the great Declaration had no intention to abide by the biblical notion of liberty, rooted in the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25. There was no intention to free slaves as Leviticus 25:4 states, nor, for that matter, was there any intention to practice the Sabbath commands to provide liberally for slaves, their families, and other indentured servants. Instead, Western liberty would come at the expense of other cultures and people groups.

Our own country has its particular connections with slavery too. Canada was the last stop on the Underground Railroad, offering safety to fugitive slaves in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, Canada also bears the shame of perpetuating that same industry. Native people in Canada enslaved and sold their conquered enemies to further their own tribe's fortunes. White settlers engaged in cultural and social dislocation of Natives as they were pushed off of ancestral lands onto reserves. Also, as part of the British Empire, black slaves were once brought to these shores, where they were bought, sold, lived, and died in chains.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Shriver, Jr. "Jubilee Shout or Indistinct Sound?" 5

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/news/interactives/slavery-canada/>



While slavery was abolished across the British Empire in 1833, it still exists throughout the world today, and is still implicitly condoned by the western world since much of our current lifestyle continues to be built and sustained through the exploitation of others. Whether it is through forced labour in the coffee, cocoa, and textile industry, or through the sex trade, or through the use of children as soldiers in third world war zones.

Not all slaves wear bonds of chain and rope, however. In our culture people may be bound by numerous addictions and ideologies that “enslave” them, albeit in a less visible way. Poverty, addiction, consumerism, physical and emotional abuse, neglect, social isolation, sickness, wrongful imprisonment: all of these day to day realities can be classified as forms of domination rooted in the same spirit as slavery itself.

Yet, while the dark cloud of slavery casts a pall over our own history, our age could just as easily be defined by the theme of liberation.<sup>7</sup> Religious historians of our century have suggested that beginning in the 1960s and continuing through to our own day, the theology of liberation has reshaped the religious landscape throughout the world. These calls for freedom emerged from the poorest of the poor in Latin America, and it was Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru whose work *A Theology of Liberation* gave voice to these oppressed peoples and awakened the worldwide church to the gospel of liberation. This movement has grown in recent decades so that, “by the beginning of the 1990s, theologians from Soweto to Managua to Manila to Seoul called for freedom and liberation out of their struggles against racial, economic, and political injustice.”<sup>8</sup> In 1985, South African theologians produced *The Kairos Document: A Challenge to the*

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<sup>7</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 5

<sup>8</sup> Brown, “Kairos International: Call to Conversion,” 1091

*Churches*, demanding an end to apartheid; in 1998, *Kairos Central America: A Challenge to the Churches of the World*, urged Central American churches to give special attention to the poor; and in 1989 *Kairos International* theologians from Philippines, South Korea, Namibia, South Africa, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua stressed the need for economic liberation since modern day colonialism “involves economic rather than political control... It features multinational corporations, unfair trade barriers, and military bases with nuclear weapons throughout the world.”<sup>9</sup>

While some churches earn great distinction for their liberating ministries, other churches today are guilty of spiritualizing the gospel, and ignoring the exploitation around us. After all, it was supposed “Christian” nations that undertook the conquests to dominate other people and their land. Some may argue that the Bible itself condones the ongoing practice of slavery (Colossians 3:22, Ephesians 6:5, 1 Peter 2:18).

However, the biblical story from beginning to end, is the story of Yahweh: the God who sets slaves free and calls his people to do the same. While the church has been part of the problem, it is precisely the church as a renewed, Jubilee rooted community that can champion, proclaim, and practice the good news that in Jesus Christ all are set free.

Therefore, it is appropriate to begin this study of the Sabbath-Jubilee story of liberation by examining the origin and development of the biblical hope of “release.” This chapter will begin with an overview of the Exodus as Israel’s foundational story. Following this, we will document how the vision of “release” shaped the seventh-year laws of release found in Exodus and Deuteronomy. We will discuss the Jubilee commandments found in Leviticus 25, and examine the prophetic voice of Isaiah

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, “Kairos International Call to Conversion,” 1091.

concerning slaves and captives. Finally we will see how Jesus and the early church incorporated the gospel of liberation and release into their own mission. Having surveyed the Biblical story of liberty, we will suggest some present day applications for the church and Christians today. As we shall see throughout, the four Jubilee threads are woven together, not in isolation, and at several points they overlap each other. “Touch one Jubilee tradition and all the others quiver,” writes Maria Harris.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the best place to start is the story of slavery and release because liberation is the dominant motif that is woven through all the Jubilee themes.

### **Israel’s Story of Slavery**

Israel’s most formative encounter with Yahweh, the encounter that would provide the bedrock of their relationship with this covenant making God was their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and their release from the Imperial bondage of Pharaoh’s reign. The call to Moses to be the divinely empowered deliverer was borne out of God’s compassion for the enslaved. “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them...” (Exodus 3:7–8) .

Ever since then, God’s people have always been intimately connected with the story of slavery and release. So much so that even the name “Hebrew” cannot be understood or translated apart from the story of slavery. The largest cluster of references to “Hebrews” comes in the book of Exodus, usually referring to Israel as a “permanent class of forced laborers in Egypt.”<sup>11</sup> From Exodus 3 on, Yahweh adopts the term to

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<sup>10</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 57

<sup>11</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 29

describe himself as he battles Pharaoh to free Israel from Egyptian slavery: “Say to [the king of Egypt], ‘Yahweh, God of the Hebrews, has met us’ (Ex. 3:18; cf. 5:3). The word “Hebrew” refers to those people who are aliens in a particular land, and also to those with the status of slaves. Both meanings came to define and describe Israel’s earliest self-understanding.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the initial relationship between Israel and Yahweh was one of slave and master. Israel, a people with no home of their own, were chosen by God, who led them to freedom and thereby claimed them as his own. Yahweh released Israel from their service to human lords, and brought them into his own possession. Faith was formed in the crucible of slavery in Egypt.

In the ancient world, granting freedom from human servitude was often described as dedicating the freed people or region to the service of a god. People who were dedicated as slaves to a god were released from service to human lords. In Exodus, “Hebrew” is inextricably bound to slavery and to freedom. In the first instance, Israelites as “Hebrews” suffer seemingly permanent slavery to the Egyptians. In the second instance, Yahweh as “God of the Hebrews” liberates them from slavery to Pharaoh by dedicating these Israelites “Hebrews” to divine servitude.<sup>13</sup>

In Leviticus 25:42 God declares, “They are my slaves (*‘ebaday*), whom I brought out of the land of Egypt.” However, God’s rule over these people will bear no resemblance to their former taskmasters. The Exodus therefore creates the “logic of liberation,”<sup>14</sup> a mindset which frames the thinking of Israel from their earliest experiences and all that follows.

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<sup>12</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Shluter, “Welfare,” 182.

<sup>14</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, 6

## Slavery Then and Now

Before venturing further it is important to note that the meaning of “slavery” and “release” conjures up images in the postmodern mind that are not consistent with the original social context that gave rise to the Jubilee legislation. The Biblical picture of slavery that the Jubilee sought to address bears little resemblance to the African slave trade, slavery in the American south, or present day slavery as it is still found.

Slavery, in the ancient Palestinian context, is better understood as debt-servitude between kinsfolk. Living in an agrarian context that practiced subsistence farming, families who fell on hard times would survive on loans borrowed from members of the extended family or clan (see Chapter 2). Failure to repay these loans could, over time, result in a householder selling his family into bonded servitude in order work off his debt. This is not the oppressive story of slavery that Israel experienced in Egypt, or that would come to characterize Oriental or Roman forms of slavery. The Greek and Roman form of slavery resulted in individuals with virtually no rights and little chance of obtaining freedom from one generation to the next.<sup>15</sup> Horsely describes the degradation associated with this type of slavery: “There were indeed different levels of social status in the Roman Empire. Slaves were considered virtually subhuman, and subject to severe beatings by their masters, who were also presumed to have sexual access to their slaves.”<sup>16</sup> Israelite “bonded labour” was very different. According to Schluter, the breadth of bonded servitude may include:

The Israelite man working as a bonded labourer for an Israelite employer, the Israelite woman, sold as a wife or concubine to an

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<sup>15</sup> Schluter, “Welfare,” 193.

<sup>16</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 141

Israelite man, the Israelite man sold to an immigrant (alien) employer, the immigrant or foreigner, sold to or captured by an Israelite.<sup>17</sup>

These slaves were essentially “people forced into the extreme measure of selling themselves and their families into indentured servitude in order to obtain money with which to pay living expenses.”<sup>18</sup> Also, this slavery was not necessarily a life sentence, since the creditor would theoretically use the lands and the labour acquired only until their revenue had paid off the amount of the debt.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the two Jubilee announcements concerning the release of slaves and the cancellation of debts are clearly intertwined and can be seen as two sides of the same liberating coin.

Just as our understanding of slavery must be reoriented, so too our definitions of captives and prisoners also need to be recast in their original context if we are going to understand how their release is good news as it was for slaves. Indeed, the prisoners that the Jubilee texts refer to are not the murderers and psychopaths we might imagine. In the Old Testament, prisoners were not criminals or convicts. Incarceration was not the penalty for civilian criminal acts. Rather, “they were prisoners of war or of conscience, debtors, captives, hostages, victims of militarism or government oppression.”<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that all prisoners in Israel’s history were misunderstood, “victims of the system,” but that the majority of those who were incarcerated were themselves casualties of injustice on some level.

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<sup>17</sup> Schluter, “Welfare,” 193

<sup>18</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, 18

<sup>19</sup> Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, 22

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 70

## The Covenant Code and Ancient Proclamations of Release

Having provided the context for understanding the nature of Biblical slavery and imprisonment, we can begin to unfold the scriptural story of Jubilee release. After their release from bondage in Egypt, God's people sought to enshrine this new freedom into their life as a redeemed people. "Having just been released from slavery, Israel had to learn to live in freedom... It was about remembering that they were liberated slaves, liberated to live in freedom."<sup>21</sup> One of the first ethical responses to their experience of slavery and release is found in the Covenant Code of Exodus 21.

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. But if the slave declares, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person," then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life. (Ex. 21:2-6)

This ancient piece of legislation is the first step toward Jubilee ethics, but it did not arise in a vacuum. Israel's wanderings exposed them to the other cultures and kingdoms, some of whose laws and customs resonated with their own experiences. So, as Lowery points out, the legislation to release slaves is not a new invention, but it is, "Israel's version of a very old Near Eastern law that puts an upper limit on the length of time a debt slave may serve to pay off his debt."<sup>22</sup> The Near Eastern law that Lowery refers to is the 18<sup>th</sup> C. Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, which states that "If anyone fails to meet a claim for a debt and sells himself, his wife, his son, or his daughter for money or turns them over to forced labor, they will work for three years in the house of the man

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<sup>21</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, "Jubilee Jesus' Message for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", 8

<sup>22</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 24

who purchased them... In the fourth year, they will be set free.”<sup>23</sup> This well-known Babylonian law would surely have informed Israel’s own reflection on the treatment of slaves. Weinfeld has catalogued other ancient examples of royal emancipations where slaves are released (often to serve the gods).<sup>24</sup> For instance, Manishtushu of Akka (2200 BC) “freed thirty-eight cities from corvee and from levy, that they might serve on behalf of the temple god Shamash.”<sup>25</sup> Pepi II (ca. 2400 BCE) and Seti I (ca. 1300 BCE) in Egypt made similar proclamations to their people. As well, Mesopotamian kings from the third millennium through the first declared liberty so debt slaves could serve the gods.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, Israel’s slave release laws were undoubtedly initially influenced by their Near Eastern neighbours.

In the midst of these influences, the Covenant Code became Israel’s legislative attempt to live as free people and these laws were drawn from Israel’s own saga of liberation. While Exodus 21:2–6 clearly foreshadows the Sabbatical Year texts of Deuteronomy 15 and Leviticus 25, the language of the Sabbath Year is not used at this point. Therefore, there is no mention of a particular year of release or of the general emancipation of slaves, but instead the text focuses on the proper treatment of individual Hebrew slaves. According to Sharon Ringe, a number of factors point to this as a primitive text.

First, the release is calculated from the date when service began rather than on some generalized release observed throughout society. Second, those released move into some halfway status in which they are partially dependent upon the people they served, since there is no provision for them to be given any capital to protect them from falling back into debt again. Third, the ear piercing ritual is a cultic act that

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<sup>23</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 25

<sup>24</sup> Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 16–17, 78–83, 97–131

<sup>25</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 29

<sup>26</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 29



presupposes the existence of many local sanctuaries, rather than a centralized temple?<sup>27</sup>

The aforementioned ear piercing ritual is an allowance made for those slaves who do not wish to be released and choose instead to remain in their master's service. For such a slave, "his master will bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life" (Exodus 21:6). All of these factors suggest that these laws come from a time when Israel was just beginning to discern the ethical consequences of its experience of being the people of Yahweh, the sovereign liberator. These laws are foundational for Israel since they attempt to elaborate on the Israelites' obligations to the God who had initiated a covenant with them.

### **The Deuteronomic Code and the Sabbatical Year**

If the Sinai Theophany of Exodus represents the first precursor of Jubilee release for slaves, then this idea is further developed in the Deuteronomic Code. While the Exodus material seems to reflect a decentralized and loosely organized Israelite culture, the Deuteronomic Code found in Deuteronomy 15 suggests a more "settled, urban society with a centralized political structure."<sup>28</sup> As well, these reworked laws are now included in a more formalized set of practices collectively practiced as part of the Sabbatical Year observance.

If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine

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<sup>27</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 20

press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today. (Deut. 15:12–15)

The Deuteronomistic Code uses the word *šěmittâh* to connote the meaning of “release.”<sup>29</sup> This notion of release clearly connects it to the early Exodus material. The connection to Exodus 21 is further reinforced by the reference to a seven-year period. The Deuteronomistic Code which was possibly compiled during the reign of Manasseh (687–642) contains several important modifications to the Exodus code.<sup>30</sup> First, slaves should not be released empty handed as the Covenant Code stipulated, but slave owners are “to provide liberally” for the slave as they begin a new life. This modification improves the released slave and family chances of establishing themselves instead of setting them up to immediately fall back into debt-slavery. Second, women bondservants are also included in the year of release. “You shall do the same with regard to your female slave” (Deuteronomy 15:17). Women (wives) by this time in Israel’s history had increased social security and so could be included not just as chattel in the transaction of a man, but released for their own sake.

The release of female slaves changes the rationale for voluntary permanent slavery in Exodus 21:5–6. In Exodus, the permanent slave is motivated by love of wife and children who must stay in the creditor’s household. In Deuteronomy, slave wives ‘go out’ with their husbands. So debt slaves who choose to become permanent slaves do so, not to keep their families intact, but because they have greater economic security as slaves than as free persons.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 41. *šemittah* literally means “to loosen,” or “to drop.”

<sup>30</sup> Ringe, *Jesus Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 32.

Third, the compilers of the Deuteronomic Code acknowledge the hardship that such a release may cause the slave owner and impresses upon them to view the transaction with a spirit of gratitude.

Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired laborers; and the Lord you God will bless you in all that you do. (Deut. 15:18)

However, Deuteronomy also leaves some things unchanged from Exodus 21. Unchanged is the idea that seven years of slavery begins and ends depending on each individual situation. Despite the Sabbatical Year context, the release of slaves was not marked by the community as a whole (as in the cancellation of debt), but was calculated based on the length of time a slave had served. As Ringe notes, “It appears therefore, that while these laws [Ex. 21 and Deut. 15] display “thematic unity” and are clearly related in their intent, they are not (yet) part of a uniform “corpus” of Sabbatical Year laws.”<sup>32</sup>

Finally, unchanged is the undergirding rationale for slave release. As in the case in Exodus 21, Israel’s actions are to be modeled on their experience of their own divine redemption from slavery. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.” (Deut. 15:15).

Between the writing of Deuteronomy and the Babylonian Exile another development toward the Jubilee laws is found in what might be called “royal proclamations of release.”<sup>33</sup> One such decree, the decree of Zedekiah is found in Jeremiah 34:8–22. It describes how when the army of Babylon was on the brink of

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<sup>32</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 22

<sup>33</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 22

sacking Jerusalem, King Zedekiah heeded the warning of the prophet Jeremiah and proclaimed a release to Hebrew slaves.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people of Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty (*děror*) to them - that all should set free their Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should hold another Judean in slavery. (Jer. 34:8-9)

The word *děror* used here means “liberty” and will become the central “Jubilee word” in Leviticus 25.

### **Proclaim Release: The Year of Jubilee**

The various pieces of Leviticus 25 appear to be woven together by a priestly editor (as is much of the Holiness Code) in the late exilic or postexilic period.<sup>34</sup> A common dating of these texts places them at the time of Israel’s return from exile, as they ponder how to live anew in the Promised Land. The priestly source who compiled the material established Yahweh as the sovereign in all such matters. However, since the Jubilee proclamation of slave release found in Leviticus 25 combines with the Sabbath Year laws (which proclaim the same thing) a puzzling scenario is created. As we have seen above, normally slaves would have an opportunity for release every seventh year, but it appears that the year of Jubilee would supersede that command by proclaiming a universal release that would affect all slaves regardless of the length of time they had been serving their masters.

If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property. For they are my servants, whom

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<sup>34</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 26.

I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. You shall not rule over them with harshness, but shall fear your God. (Lev. 25:39–43)

The universal release declared in the year of Jubilee appears to go one step further than either of the previous codes allowed, but makes sense in the context of the other Jubilee ordinances: forgiveness of debt and return of ancestral lands. If these latter two reforms were enacted then, *ipso facto*, landless, debt-slaves would naturally be set free, since the cancellation of debts would allow the slave to regain his ancestral ownership rights.<sup>35</sup> There would seem to be no reason why anyone would remain an indentured servant in the year of Jubilee since it is a once-in-a-generation chance to start over on equal footing with others.

The use of the Jubilee word *děror* links this Jubilee passage to Isaiah 61 as well as the royal proclamations of release mentioned above (Jeremiah 34, Ezekiel 46). In these passages no earthly sovereign like Hezekiah issues this proclamation: it issues from Israel's God.

The Levitical Jubilee holds out another, more intriguing possibility in that it contains hints in the legislation that would seem to abolish slavery for Israelites entirely. Leviticus 25:39 clearly states that “If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves.” Throughout verses 35–43 it seems explicit that treating Jewish debt slaves as debt slaves is forbidden. As Lowery has noted,

Verses 42 and 55 assert Yahweh's exclusive ownership of all Israelites effectively liberating them from enslavement to any human master. Therefore the trajectory of Sabbath-Jubilee legislation envisions total abolition of slavery for Jews. In this regard, it is much more radical

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<sup>35</sup> Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, 22–23.

than the Hebrew slave law in Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15, which only seek to limit the term and consequences of debt servitude.<sup>36</sup>

### The Prophetic Voice of Release

The challenge of Sabbath-Jubilee release continued to be amplified in the visions and poetry of Israel's prophets into the Second Temple period. Most notable among these was Isaiah's vision concerning the establishment of God's eschatological reign.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty (*dēôr*) to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. (Is. 61:1–2)

These verses were written at the end of the Babylonian exile by an anonymous prophet, "Third Isaiah," who announces the return of the deportees to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem.<sup>37</sup> The prophet announces this return as a proclamation of liberty (*dēôr*) and connects this release of captives and prisoners from exile with the "year of the Lord's favour." The adjective "favourable," in Hebrew *ratson*, comes from the verb *ratsah*, which means either "to pay a debt" when it refers to the person paying it, or "to be favourable" when it refers to God accepting the payment."<sup>38</sup> This "favoured year" combined with the inclusion of the word *dēôr* clearly sets this piece of scripture in a Jubilee context. It appears that in the midst of the optimism of the return to the land, and of the myriad details confronting the people as they sought to rebuild their society, Isaiah pictures God's future reign by drawing from the Jubilee tradition. If Israel's exile was interpreted as a divine judgment for neglecting the commands of Yahweh, then Israel's

<sup>36</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 68.

<sup>37</sup> Newsome, *The Hebrew Prophets*, 170

<sup>38</sup> Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, 15

return should be marked by a renewed commitment to justice, supremely demonstrated in the year of Jubilee.

### **Jesus and the Gospel of Release**

As we begin to examine how the Sabbath-Jubilee call to release slaves informed Jesus' own ministry, we must revisit the question of language. The Jubilee word *dě̄rô̄r* is translated *aphesis* in the LXX. The usage of *aphesis* therefore provides a linguistic pointer to possible Jubilee texts in the gospels. While not every mention of slavery in the New Testament, or every use of the verb *aphesis* is necessarily an allusion to the Jubilee, scholars like Myers and Enns refer to *aphesis* in the New Testament as the “Jubilee verb.”<sup>39</sup>

It seems apparent that the Kingdom of God that Jesus announced was clearly rooted in Israel's Jubilee tradition. Without a doubt, Jesus appealed to the Sabbath-Jubilee story of release at the outset of his ministry when he read from the scroll of Isaiah at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30). His chosen text was the aforementioned Isaiah 61:1–2, a text that at least twice uses the language of release. This quotation from Isaiah found in Luke is actually a composite text, where one phrase from 61:1 has been omitted and another phrase from 58:6 has been inserted. The quotation is also abridged in that the last two phrases of Isaiah 61:2 appear to have been omitted.<sup>40</sup>

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release (*aphesis*) to the captives and

<sup>39</sup> Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, i

<sup>40</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 39

recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free (*aphesis*), to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' (Luke 4:16-21)

As mentioned above, the Isaiah text is already rife with images of enslavement and liberation for Israel since it was written after the Babylonian exile to offer hope to Israel as they embraced a new freedom after years of oppression by another foreign empire. The returning exiles were the "captives;" they were the "oppressed" that had been set free from the darkness of their political dungeons. The text, as Jesus knew, had always been associated with the freeing of prisoners and the release of captives. As Lowery notes, it is entirely possible that the Nazarene congregation interpreted the Isaiah passage in light of their modern day subservience to Rome. This would explain their initial elation at Jesus' militant proclamation: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!"<sup>41</sup>

Insofar as the brief Lukan account reflects what actually happened, it could do no more than summarize the lively debate which ensued. The core of Jesus' message is that the good news of Isaiah 61, originally directed at the consolation of returned exiles from Babylon, is transposed into good news for all who are oppressed... The introduction of Isaiah 58:6 into the Isaiah 61 text intensifies the social implications of Jesus' message of freedom. Moreover, Jesus declares the moment of liberation to be Today.<sup>42</sup>

But not only does Jesus appeal to this memory of release: he casts himself in the role of the herald of this Jubilee. This undoubtedly has Christological significance, but it also harkens back to those royal decrees of release that were observed. Only the monarch could make such a statement. Only the king could grant release. And only Yahweh as the Lord of Israel had the authority to proclaim Jubilee release. Therefore Jesus'

<sup>41</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 138.

<sup>42</sup> Prior, *Jesus the Liberator*, 141.



declaration that Isaiah's prophesy is fulfilled in his announcement has both political and eschatological ramifications.

As we have already mentioned, the Old Testament release legislation primarily concerned those who were caught in the vicious cycle of debt-servitude. However, in the New Testament we begin to see that the Jubilee vision of "release" is deeper and more robust than this original meaning. As Sharon Ringe has traced, the Biblical development of Sabbath-Jubilee release legislation has broadened as it developed. "Release," she notes, "is more than a metaphor for God's work of redemption and reconciliation." Rather, "Release, in all areas of human life is portrayed as one of the principal characteristics of humankind's encounter with God's reign."<sup>43</sup> "Release" in Isaiah 61 refers to human captivity, but Jesus' use of the word *aphesis* leads to the broader contexts of application, so much so that release, "is linked to the proclamation and presence of Jesus in which the rule of all manner of evil is broken and the inauguration of God's reign becomes possible."<sup>44</sup> Hence, Jesus' subsequent teaching and ministry demonstrated that the scope of Jubilee release went far beyond exile, slavery, or debt-servitude. Jesus expands the geography of Sabbath-Jubilee release to encompass those whose captivity might be social isolation, sickness, sin, or economic exploitation. In the following paragraphs we will offer examples of these four expressions of Jubilee and observe how as God's eschatological reign is announced and enacted by Jesus, the Jubilee promise of release from slavery is transposed into good news for all who experience oppression.

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<sup>43</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, 66

<sup>44</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, 66

## A. THE GOSPEL OF RELEASE FROM SOCIAL ISOLATION

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' (*aphesis*) But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives (*aphesis*) sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' (Luke 7:36–50)

Each instance of Jesus' table fellowship with outcasts and sinners often effects a Jubilee release for those who have been ostracized from the community. In the story found in Luke 7:36–50 Luke refers to the woman as "a sinner" and there is some support for the traditional interpretation that identifies her as a prostitute.<sup>45</sup> This clearly would have placed her at the margins of society. But this same woman is overcome with love and gratitude at the realization that she has experienced forgiveness at the hand of Jesus. This forgiveness is both a forgiveness of sin, but also a "release" from the social bonds that excluded her from the community

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<sup>45</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 69

The same point is made in Luke 14:7–14, a pericope commonly known as the Parable of the Wedding Banquet.

He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’ (Luke 14:7–14)

Since seating at such functions was traditionally arranged in terms of power, prestige, and standing in the community, Jesus offers a radical turnabout in his Jubilee teaching on “release.” The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind were people with impaired social standing in the community, but with Jesus these same people are those “for whom God’s reign as Jubilee brings good news, healing, and liberation.”<sup>46</sup>

In both stories Jesus makes explicit what is implicit elsewhere, namely, “that in each case Jesus’ relationship with the outcasts is to be understood as an enactment of the ‘forgiveness’ or ‘release’ in which those persons are restored to their place in the community. The bonds that are broken with Jesus’ advent are the bonds that deprived people of a place in their society.”<sup>47</sup>

## B. THE GOSPEL OF RELEASE FROM THE BONDS OF SICKNESS AND SIN

The healing of the paralytic man in Mark 2:1–12 explores two further and intertwined dimensions of Jesus’ Jubilee message. This same story expands the meaning of Jubilee release in two directions: first into the realm of physical sickness which binds

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<sup>46</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 107.

<sup>47</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 71.

and disables God's people, and second into the realm where sin enslaves God's people and holds them back from fullness of life.

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' (*aphesis*) Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the paralytic— 'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.' And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!' (Mark 2:1-12)

Jesus responds not just to the paralysis which confines this man, but also to the multiple other bonds that prevent him from wholeness of life, namely exclusion and presumption of sin. Therefore, "release" for this oppressed man was received both as physical and spiritual release: "But so you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he said to the paralytic – 'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home'" (Mark 2:11). Here it is plain to see that physical healing or "release" from disease is explicitly linked to "release" or "forgiveness" of sins. Sharon Ringe acknowledges the inseparability of these two aspects of the Sabbath-Jubilee teaching of Jesus:

Indeed, ethical and cultic concerns in general can be distinguished but not separated in Gospel usage. Both are means of talking about the effect of the advent of God's Reign in breaking the tyranny of evil in all of its forms... Rather "forgiveness" and "release" in all areas of

human life is portrayed as one of the principal characteristics of humankind's encounter with God's Reign.<sup>48</sup>

### C. THE GOSPEL OF RELEASE FROM ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

A final example of Jesus' role as a Jubilee herald of "release" is identified by Ched Myers and Elaine Enns in their book *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*. Myers and Enns understand Jesus' call to the disciples (and their response) to be a call to be released from a tyrannical way of life as exploited fishermen.

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left (*aphesis*) their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left (*aphesis*) their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:16–20)

The fishermen, while not debt-slaves, were clearly subjugated to the laws and taxes of Rome that imprisoned them and other such subsistence workers in an economic and political system that prevented opportunity and fullness of life. For the disciples to leave their workplace would have entailed both loss of economic security and risked rupturing the social fabric of their extended families.<sup>49</sup> To join with Jesus required "an assent of the heart but an uncompromising break with 'business as usual.'"<sup>50</sup> The verb "they left their nets" is the familiar term of "release," *aphesis*, a key verb to understanding the Jubilee connotation of this passage. As the disciples "release" their nets, they also experience "release" into a new economy of grace. "Jesus is calling these

<sup>48</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 66

<sup>49</sup> Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 30

<sup>50</sup> Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 30

disaffected workers out of an exploitative system and back to a network of ‘fictive kinship’ that practices mutual aid and cooperation”<sup>51</sup>

A similar pattern of “discipleship as release” is seen elsewhere in the gospels. Though Jesus invited his followers to “take up their cross,” (Matt. 16:24) he also invited them to release their burdens: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28–30). Simon, Andrew, James and John all exchanged their burdens for the “lighter” burden of Jesus’ yoke. More will be said about the economic dimension of Jubilee in the following chapter

The ministry of Jesus begins with the Jubilee proclamation of “release” found in Isaiah 61, and so it continues as Jesus, through word and deed, broadens the horizon of *apheis* to encompass all manner of release: release from social dislocation, physical sickness, slavery to sin, and economic exploitation. The call to discipleship can only be understood properly from a Jubilee perspective, and the release of slaves is foundational to that Jubilee gospel. As Jesus stood with the oppressed, the unclean, and the outcast, people were “set free from the de-humanizing effects of social role definitions, disease, and economic oppression.”<sup>52</sup>

### **The Early Church as a Community of Liberation**

As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the post-Pentecost followers of Jesus did not hesitate to put into practice the Jubilee vision that Christ commanded. The early

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<sup>51</sup> Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 30

<sup>52</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 91.

church was comprised of a cross section of Roman Imperial society and as such contained a diverse group of people from different cultural and personal backgrounds. Prominent among the members of the early church were slaves.<sup>53</sup> Slavery in the Roman Empire was not the same as the bond-servanthood that characterized Israel's own social safety net. In Rome, "slaves were considered virtually subhuman, and subject to severe beatings by their masters, who were also presumed to have sexual access to their slaves. Freedmen and freedwomen, because of their servile background, were despised socially by free people, perhaps even more so if they were economically better off."<sup>54</sup> Thus the Jubilee message of "release" had immediate implications for the new community.

But it wasn't just those who bore the title "slave" who needed to hear God's word of liberation. The diverse socioeconomic background of the church created an environment where social dislocation and alienation were commonplace. Many members were slaves or former slaves, many were not of 'noble birth', and most were people who "worked with their hands." For instance,

In Philippi or Corinth, Paul, Prisca, and Aquila were starting from scratch to mold a community from a mix of people in a different culture with different personal backgrounds. ...Most significant economically, members of the assemblies of Christ were city dwellers, not peasants, and were slaves or artisans or underemployed wagedworkers, not farmers in an agrarian village.<sup>55</sup>

## A. THE LORD'S SUPPER

In the same way that Jesus used table fellowship to break these social barriers, Paul emphasized how the Lord's Supper was an important enactment of "release" for this new Jubilee community. Perhaps no passage in the Epistles is more foundational to the

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<sup>53</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 136

<sup>54</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 138

<sup>55</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 136

Jubilee call to social equality and release within the Church than 1 Corinthians 11:17–22, 27–29);

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!... Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

While there were various house churches in Corinth, occasionally wider gatherings would take place, often in larger homes owned by richer members. When these gatherings occurred, the wealthier members and their friends could often escape work commitments earlier and arrive on Sunday evenings before the poorer freedmen, slaves and spouses arrived later, tired and hungry. Upon their arrival they would find nothing to eat and drink, thus experiencing not only hunger but further humiliation for their inferior status.<sup>56</sup> This, says Paul, is to “show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing.” (v. 22)

In this honour-shame society persons of precarious means (slaves, the poor) or relatively low social condition (freedmen, women in general) were considered less honourable.<sup>57</sup> And yet, as a counter-cultural community, Christians of all social categories were to be welcomed into the fellowship. In that way the humble ones had

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<sup>56</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 143

<sup>57</sup> Foulkes, *Problemas Pastorales en Corinto*, 312



been given a large quota of honour by their inclusion. “They could say with heads held up high that the gospel of Jesus Christ dignifies people.”<sup>58</sup> But instead, according to Foulkes, “they were being humiliated by the wealthy members, covering them with shame and taking away the honour that they had recently acquired in that same group.”<sup>59</sup>

The shameful treatment of the poor at the Lord’s table was, according to Paul, a grave dishonor to them and also a denial of Christ’s body. “It is a blatant denial of the gospel. It is a direct contradiction of God’s rule, of Sabbath economics and Jubilee spirituality.”<sup>60</sup> Paul’s criticism is even more shocking when he says that those who eat and drink in an unworthy manner “will be answerable to the body and blood of the Lord” (v. 27). He then explains when the Corinthians “eat and drink judgment against themselves” it causes many to become “weak and ill,” and even has caused death because of such abuses of the Lord’s Supper. Paul’s logic here echoes the logic of the Sabbath-Jubilee mandates. Since they themselves had known slavery and been released by Yahweh, it was intolerable that they should practice slavery among themselves at the expense of lesser brothers and sisters at that table. Paul spoke of himself as a “slave of Christ” which echoes the ancient Hebrew texts that spoke of Yahweh as the rightful master of all God’s people. Under Yahweh’s reign they were freed from such inhuman behavior and given this new covenant so that all would be respected as equal members of Christ’s body. The eucharist therefore became the sacrament that reminded the early church of Jesus’ Jubilee promises and empowered them to create households and communities that subverted the imperial culture of the day.

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<sup>58</sup> Foulkes, *Problemas Pastorales en Corinto*, 312

<sup>59</sup> Foulkes, *Problemas Pastorales en Corinto*, 312

<sup>60</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 144

## Sabbath-Jubilee Release and the Church Today

Having followed the winding Jubilee thread of “release” throughout the scriptures, we come to the urgent challenge before the contemporary church: to take up that strand and continue to weave it into its ecclesial life and mission. The church, charged with the command to proclaim the gospel and make disciples, should realize that as it engages in the ministry of proclaiming release to slaves, it is standing on the very bedrock of the *missio dei*. Therefore, to proclaim the good news is to echo God’s announcement to Pharaoh: “Let my people go.” This demands two responses from churches: first, to develop a spirituality that is rooted in the Jubilee call of release, and second, to practice and embody that spirituality in bold and creative ways as God’s Jubilee community.

With regards to the first challenge, it is easy for the church to “turn a blind eye” to slavery, or simply to become overwhelmed with the scope of this task. Indeed when a church awakens to the tangled global connections that link even the local congregation to the dehumanization of slavery, exploitation, and isolation, the problem seems beyond our ability to repair. It is certainly easier to proclaim “release” than to embody it in a world that too often treats human life as a commodity. While the church may proclaim the “release” of Jubilee in the safety of our church buildings, does the church today that is built on the gospel of “release” have the courage to let this vision reign in their lives and shape their mission?

Proclaiming “release” to an enslaved world requires a prophetic boldness, one that is willing to take up the thread of *děror* and develop a new social imagination that will

mobilize our churches and communities to join in God's movement for liberation and full humanity of all people.

### **Liturgy as a Way of Remembering our Liberation Story**

In Walter Brueggemann's book, *Israel's Praise*, he develops the idea of liturgy as remembering, enacting, and hoping for liberation.<sup>61</sup> The purpose of liturgy according to Brueggemann is not to withdraw from the world, rather liturgy is a process of "world making."<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the church's calendar and liturgical structure become the means by which people's imaginations are shaped into a biblical worldview. The liturgy is an opportunity to celebrate what God has done: beginning with the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and continuing through the Bible and entire history of salvation. "Our liturgies are opportunities to dramatize and experience – through music and prayer, preaching and communion, Scripture and testimony – our present, ongoing liberation from all oppression and alienation and dehumanization."<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, before addressing the missional mandates of the Jubilee call to "release," let us first examine how these aspects of worship create a Jubilee people, shaped by God's story of liberation.

#### **A: PROCLAMATION: TELLING STORIES OF LIBERATION**

Our culture tells us a false story of how to live the "good life." It speaks of consumption, competition, and prosperity. This challenge is of course nothing new, since in every generation God's people have been "resident aliens" living in a world that has

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<sup>61</sup> Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*, 39

<sup>62</sup> Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*, 39

<sup>63</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 21

values and goals far different from the kingdom of God. What we cannot see for the images around us is that our freedom comes at the expense of others. And likewise, we are unable to see that we ourselves are slaves to the reigning ideology of entitlement. What Israel needed, and what the church today also needs, is a constant reminder of who we are and what our story is. The only way to avoid succumbing to the reigning story that enslaves us is to never forget God's story of release: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today" (Deut. 15:15).

Since the first step to becoming a Jubilee people is to remember our own release from slavery, the primary task of the preacher is to remind the congregation of God's story of "release" again and again, and in so doing, to challenge them to break free of other, competing stories that hold their imaginations captive and lead us into the enslavement, exploitation, and isolation of our brothers and sisters.

According to Maria Harris, Jubilee frees us *to* remember, "especially to remember captivity and release from captivity... memory and remembering mean bearing witness and telling stories."<sup>64</sup> Three times in the Leviticus 25 passage God speaks about the acts of deliverance he has accomplished in the past (see vss. 38, 42, 55) as a way of cuing Israel's collective memory to recall their story. In Exodus, Deuteronomy and Leviticus God speaks: "Remember. You must remember." The church must remember that they were slaves; they must remember God's vision of emancipation for slaves, they must remember that Jesus proclaimed this liberation in his life and teaching. As such, remembering is not a separate task from mission, since "to proclaim Jesus as the proclaimer of the Jubilee links recognition of Jesus as the Christ with response to the

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<sup>64</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 61

Jubilee message itself: to confess Jesus as the Christ is to participate in acts of liberation.”<sup>65</sup>

The church is a “story formed community,”<sup>66</sup> and the story that forms it must be the “right” story. A gospel that tells the wrong story, that has conceded too much to the reigning culture of the day, will not be able to awaken within God’s people their true identity as redeemed slaves under the Lordship of Yahweh. Therefore, the first step forward to becoming a Jubilee people is to look backward,<sup>67</sup> and the first task of the church is to rehear and rehearse the story of “release.” In *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, Steven Matthewson counsels preachers that “In a sermon on an Old Testament narrative, the preacher’s primary tactic will be telling the story well. To be more precise, the preacher’s primary tactic will be retelling the story well.”<sup>68</sup> Enabling today’s congregations to locate themselves in God’s ongoing narrative of slavery and release requires a renewed approach to exegesis and preaching. “Preaching the exodus as a paradigmatic text is a way of asking the church to imagine itself as former slaves, now freed and living a grace-filled life to which all others are welcome.”<sup>69</sup>

In remembering the past acts of God, God will become manifest and recognizable. The task of the sermon is to narrate the mighty deeds of God recorded in the Old and New Testaments. Narrative preaching includes vividness and illustrations... both a good narrative and right teaching in contrast with narrative preaching which emphasizes only narration. Both remembrance and narration belong to the basic structure of the sermon.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, xv

<sup>66</sup> Hauerwas, “The Story Formed Community. Reflections on *Watership Down*,” 9

<sup>67</sup> Terry Leblanc, a First Nations theologian, from a lecture given at Wycliffe College’s Refresh Conference 2011

<sup>68</sup> Matthewson, *Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 132

<sup>69</sup> Fleer and Bland, *Reclaiming the Imagination*, 61

<sup>70</sup> Varga, *The Homiletics of Rudolf Bohren*

Examples of such preaching may be hard to come by. Mitchell laments: “It’s my impression that Jubilee is rarely discussed in church circles, except when encountered in Bible Lessons. The topic is not exciting preaching material, either, I suspect.”<sup>71</sup> If it is true that the Jubilee “doesn’t preach well,” or is not “exciting preaching material” then perhaps our preaching must be challenged by the example of the prophets. Preaching Jubilee, according to Harris, is “fiery, prophetic, unrelenting justice, urged on us by a God of justice who demands not only that we preach it, but that we do it.”<sup>72</sup>

## B: EUCHARIST: BREAKING DOWN SOCIAL BARRIERS

The Eucharist is the central celebration of the Christian faith, the primary proclamation of the good news. We have already seen how Paul’s vision of the Lord’s Supper was a place of Jubilee equality, where divisions between rich and poor, slave and free were broken down, forming a community with no “outsiders.” All of this speaks to the importance of the Eucharist in our churches today as a way of practicing the liberty of Jubilee and shaping our communities into places of “release.” Churches need to reread Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11 and realize that Paul’s warning about eating and drinking judgment upon oneself was not a warning to withhold communion from those who were not theologically astute, or were involved in some unspecified sin. Rather it was a warning to avoid creating boundaries, cliques, and divisions within the church based on societal labels and taboos. Specifically, the warning directed toward the rich who ate their fill while their poorer brothers and sisters went hungry, and thus they did not “discern the body of Christ.” Societal divisions that exclude others have no place in

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<sup>71</sup> Mitchell, “Jubilee in My World,” 12

<sup>72</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 61

the church. The Lord's Supper is meant to train us in that truth. The congregations of many churches bear little resemblance to the diverse socioeconomic population of their surrounding communities. If a church is not representative of its community, then such exclusion may be happening, consciously or not. This presents a challenge to churches of every stripe to rethink the practice of Holy Communion from a Jubilee perspective. Churches may do well to elevate the status or frequency of Holy Communion in their worship calendar and ensure that the invitation to partake of this sacrament is extended to all.

There is a sharper challenge in Paul's teaching on the Lord's supper: in the church's global context, how many of our brothers and sisters in Christ go hungry every day while we eat our fill?

If it is a grave failure to discern the body of Christ when we do not wait for our sisters and brothers at the Lord's table, surely it is an abuse to fill our stomachs and our homes and our investments to overflowing when millions of our brothers and sisters are starving anywhere in the world. Surely we must do everything in our power to provide equally for them.<sup>73</sup>

## C: CONFESSION: MOVING TOWARD A SLAVE FREE CHURCH

One of the primary liturgical ways we respond to the gospel, and one of the primary ways we prepare for the celebration of communion is through corporate confession. The high demands of Jubilee naturally lead us to confess our shortcomings, and while each thread of the Jubilee legislation brings us to contrition, our failure to be people of "release" is surely a fact we need to confess. While Jubilee "release" calls us to set slaves free, churches have lost their prophetic voice around such issues, and have settled for a gospel that privatizes religion and spiritualizes Jesus' call to release slaves.

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<sup>73</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 145

While Jubilee “release” calls us to defend the exploited, the church knowingly or unknowingly often participates in a capitalist economic system that abuses the poor of our world. While the Sabbath-Jubilee tradition calls us to end social stigmatization of others, the church often creates labels for those we don’t understand, we foster communities that are unwelcoming to the poor, unfriendly toward strangers, and inwardly focused to the exclusion of others. Yet, “Forgiveness as a Jubilee image points to the political choice of standing with the oppressed”<sup>74</sup>

The church has much to confess, but at the heart of repentance is a turning, and starting over. Confession allows us not just to experience forgiveness for our failings and forgetfulness, but it allows us to recommit to a renewed effort to be faithful to Jesus, the Lord of Jubilee release. Confession therefore leads us to action, and one such action would be to make amends for the wrongs committed. This is why Ginger Grab says that confession is not enough; what is called for is *atonement*.<sup>75</sup> Remarking on how western countries have benefited from the exploitation of the African people and their land, she states:

An awakened historical memory renders it impossible for us in the West to maintain illusions about our current responsibility toward our African sisters and brothers... knowledge of what actually happened precludes a blind and arrogant stance of benign forgiveness. We are called to much, much more. We are called to atonement. Atonement means repentance and restoration.<sup>76</sup>

It is no coincidence that the Biblical Jubilee according to Leviticus begins on the Day of Atonement and we in the west have much to atone for. Sharon Ringe concurs with this assessment and warns against “whitewashing” the past:

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<sup>74</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, 95

<sup>75</sup> Grab, “Jubilee: Memory and Atonement,” 29

<sup>76</sup> Grab, “Jubilee: Memory and Atonement,” 29



To move too quickly to “forgiveness”... without addressing the way patterns of oppression have become institutionalized, risks simply perpetuating the *status quo*. Before “forgiveness” can find its way back into the lexicon of liberation, it must be linked with justice.<sup>77</sup>

We may look at another time and place and wonder how the church could have been so blind about the need to proclaim release. This is only tempting until we turn the questions of freedom and release back on ourselves and ask: What injustices do we overlook today? What are our sins of omission? What do we fail to see? Have we learned to pray regularly, “Free us, O God from the narrowness of our vision. Help us to know what we see, not merely to see what we know”<sup>78</sup>

In 1993 the Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada presented a formal apology to the National Native Convocation in Minaki, Ontario. The Primate (then Michael Peers) publicly acknowledged the Anglican Church’s role in the residential school program, a program that abused children and sought to cleanse them of their native cultural heritage. During that public apology, the following words were spoken:

I accept and I confess before God and you, our failures in the residential schools. We failed you. We failed ourselves. We failed God. I am sorry, more than I can say, that we were part of a system which took you and your children from home and family. I am sorry, more than I can say, that we tried to remake you in our image, taking from you your language and the signs of your identity. I am sorry, more than I can say, that in our schools so many were abused physically, sexually, culturally and emotionally. On behalf of the Anglican Church of Canada, I present our apology.<sup>79</sup>

In a similar way churches and individuals need to make amends for the times we have exploited, isolated, or excluded others. In the weekly liturgy of confession we declare to God that “We have sinned by what we have done and what we have left

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<sup>77</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 94

<sup>78</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 68

<sup>79</sup> Peers, “Anglican Church of Canada’s Apology to Native People”  
<http://www.anglican.ca/relationships/trc/apology/english>

undone. We have not loved you with our whole hearts. We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.”<sup>80</sup> This corporate confession should lead us into personal acts of reconciliation. In so doing, we see our neighbours not only as those in our own family, church, and community, but also our neighbours around the world who we have abused and oppressed.

#### D: ABSOLUTION: EXPERIENCING RELEASE FROM BONDAGE

Whereas in confession we admit our failure to offer Jubilee liberation to others, in hearing the words of absolution, we experience personal “release” from the bonds that ensnare us. Jubilee is not just a strategy for church outreach, but it is the gospel message that all churches need to hear and live by. Even the most affluent churches are filled with people who are stuck in types of bondage, longing to experience the gospel of “release.” We too experience social dislocation, alienation, loneliness and exclusion. We too experience exploitation, abuse, and prejudice. We too experience sickness, addiction, and depression. The gospel message needs to be more than the forgiveness of sins: it must be nothing short of “freedom.”

For Paul, “freedom” was at the heart of the gospel proclamation. “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery,” (Galatians 5:1) “For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ,” (1 Cor. 7:22) and “There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all in all!” (Colossians 3:11) *This* gospel calls the church to live as free people here and now! As Mel Lawrenz has written, “it isn’t enough

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<sup>80</sup> Anglican Church of Canada, *The Book of Alternative Services*, 198

for a person to find that Jesus Christ will forgive his or her sins and experience the broken chains that come with redemption; that is where grace begins, but hardly where it ends.”<sup>81</sup> The gospel leads us toward our own freedom: freedom from the bondage of our minds, bodies or spirits. “Freedom begins in admitting our bondage, and then reaching out to God and others.”<sup>82</sup>

Ross and Gloria Kinsler see in groups like Alcoholics Anonymous the type of Jubilee release that churches can offer to their own people.<sup>83</sup> In AA, the addict must choose to live in freedom, or continue on the road to dissolution and death. In AA recovering addicts meet regularly and journey with companions who can help them in times of struggle. This model is certainly a challenge to our understanding of church “In general we Christians gather together in our churches not as forgiven and recovering sinners, but as good people, upright citizens; we confess our sins routinely but have little sense that we are confronting, personally and collectively, the devastating oppressions of our time.”<sup>84</sup> We rarely recognize that we are victims of the domination system, and we fail to take the decisive steps to resist and actually overcome our struggles. The church must become more than a place where the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed, but an authentic community where freedom from bondage is enabled, experienced, and supported. Therefore, church support groups for addictions, relationship problems, grief, financial struggles, and sickness should all be mainstays for Jubilee congregations. In groups such as these Jubilee release becomes not just an intellectual proposition or a divine transaction, but a lived reality of “release.”

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<sup>81</sup> Lawrenz, *Jubilee: A Season of Spiritual Renewal*, 114

<sup>82</sup> Lawrenz, *Jubilee: A Season of Spiritual Renewal*, 116

<sup>83</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 129

<sup>84</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 130

## Witnessing to the Gospel of Liberation

The gospel of Jubilee release calls us to remember, practice and experience the liberating action of Yahweh so that we might be formed into “free” citizens of the Kingdom of God. Personal and ecclesial renewal lead us to social renewal – to proclaiming and demanding the release to those caught in the grip of slavery today. Mortimer Arias refers to Jubilee as the “Gospel of Liberation,”<sup>85</sup> and there are certain groups of captives desperately awaiting a Jubilee church to deliver them from captivity.

### A: CHILDREN

Slavery is still alive and well around our world today and children are perhaps the most defenseless and exploited category of people for whom the Jubilee church needs to proclaim and enact “release.” Children around the world are exploited to work in cruel and demanding conditions against their will. Children have been used to fight unjust wars for despotic warlords who kidnap, brainwash, and force children to kill. And of course, children in every country and place find themselves victims of abusive (or neglectful) parents, broken homes, and fractured families. Surely a special category of child slavery is the sex trade, whose primary victims are young girls and teenagers, many of whom are the children of desperate parents who sold them into a life of prostitution or “sex tourism.” This dehumanization and victimization of children cries out for God’s people to come to their defense. The scriptures foreshadow this call for justice by including children in the Levitical release ordered by Yahweh: “They [slaves] *and their children* with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property” (Leviticus 25:41). Yet, Maria Harris

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<sup>85</sup> Arias, “Mission and Liberation.” 42

rightly laments the fact that “Four thousand years after the Jubilee was first announced children continue to be exploited in obscene ways.”<sup>86</sup>

And so the church must refuse to participate in child exploitation. As Anna Quindlen, the New York Times columnist writes:

Would you buy a rug if you knew that it had been woven in India by 10 year olds beaten if they didn't work fast enough? Would you wear a shirt if it had been sewn by a nine year old locked in a factory in Bangladesh until production quotas for the day had been met? Would you eat sardines if the cans had been filled by 12-year-old Filipino children sold into bonded servitude?<sup>87</sup>

The answer for churches must be a resolute “no,” but unraveling the tangled connections between our consumption and child slavery requires an ongoing commitment to ethical sourcing of food, clothing, electronics and more.

Beyond non-participation, the church must actively raise awareness, demand justice, and support causes that promote the care and well-being of children. One such effort is the “It’s Not My Fault Campaign,” an organization that synergizes the efforts of several children’s agencies. This campaign was founded by Christian musician Lamont Hiebert who, through his world travels, witnessed first hand the realities of child slavery.<sup>88</sup> Other examples include UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund), the Tear Fund, World Vision, and other child sponsorship programs. Building and supporting orphanages in economically impoverished countries is another way that churches can care for children and help them escape the enslaving forces at work in their world. A girls’ orphanage near Jalapa, Guatemala which is run by the Roman Catholic Church has several benefactors and partners from around the world. The Nuns provide education,

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<sup>86</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 70.

<sup>87</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 71

<sup>88</sup> [www.itsnotmyfault.org](http://www.itsnotmyfault.org)

faith training, domestic skills and even computer classes to these vulnerable girls all in an effort to offer them “release” from the various predators they face.

Closer to home, churches can reach out to at-risk children and youth in their own communities by investing in youth ministry and outreach. With so many neglected and hurting children in our own neighbourhoods, churches can offer a safe place for youth to hear the good news of “release” – that their past hurts and abuses don’t have the last word.

## B: REFUGEES

A second way that churches can proclaim and offer “release” to the oppressed is through the support of refugees and their families. Over the last few decades our world has witnessed a massive increase in refugee movements and humanitarian tragedies. Whole nations have become victims of unjust socioeconomic and political structures, gross human rights violations and generalized violence. Semi-permanent concentrations of refugees accumulate in many parts of the world. At least 35 million people in the world—more than the entire population of Canada—have been forced to run for their lives, and are either temporarily or permanently exiled from their homes. Over half of them are women and children.<sup>89</sup>

Thankfully, those passages concerning the Biblical Jubilee include special mention of foreigners and resident aliens as groups of people who are vulnerable and in need of protection. Exodus 23:9 states, “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Caring for refugees was

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<sup>89</sup> Mayell, National Geographic News, June 16, 2003.  
[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/06/0616\\_030616\\_refugee1.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/06/0616_030616_refugee1.html)

deeply rooted in Israel's own story of "release." A "resident alien" in this context was someone from a different ethnic background who had taken up long-term residence in Israel. Yet, as part of the Jubilee mandate, such people were to be included in God's liberating vision. As Schluter states, "to a remarkable degree, the immigrant was treated before the law in exactly the same way as an Israelite."<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, after Jesus preached his Jubilee sermon in Nazareth, the mood of the crowd quickly turned against him when he reminded them of two particular stories found in 1 and 2 Kings about Elijah and Elisha. These stories made it clear that God's favour extended beyond their own borders to other nations and peoples. Jubilee release knows no boundaries, but Jesus' listeners found such an interpretation altogether too much for them which may explain why they tried to kill him. But his point was clear: "We cannot celebrate the universal reconciliation of Jesus' Jubilee, if at the same time we restrict reconciliation to our own people, and exclude strangers and refugees."<sup>91</sup> Churches can join in with the chorus of voices that call for refugee rights and safety by ensuring that their own country offers fair treatment to those fleeing persecution.<sup>92</sup>

On the other hand, there are also times when the church may be required to offer protection and "release" to refugees even when their government does not. On July 15<sup>th</sup> 2004 four parishes in the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster (known as a Jubilee Cluster of churches) joined together to offer sanctuary to Amir Kazemian, an Iranian refugee who claimed he would be imprisoned or killed if he returned to his native Iran. Amir's claim for refugee status with the Canadian government was rejected on the basis of what the church cluster believes was a "mistake." The decision to offer sanctuary to

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<sup>90</sup> Schluter, "Welfare," 178

<sup>91</sup> Schluter, "Welfare," 178

<sup>92</sup> [www.merc.ca](http://www.merc.ca), [www.jubileefund.ca](http://www.jubileefund.ca)

Amir was not an easy one. “This wasn’t a decision made lightly,” said Rev. Emilie Smith, but quickly added, “he [Amir] does give us an opportunity to practice what we preach, and he keeps coming up in sermons.”<sup>93</sup>

In another situation, Rodney Watson has been living in “sanctuary” within the walls of First United Church in Vancouver, B.C. since September 18, 2009. Watson, enlisted with the U.S. army in 2004 with the intention of serving his three year contract as a cook. Instead he was deployed to Mosul, Iraq and put in charge of searching vehicles and Iraqi civilians for explosives, while “keeping the peace” by monitoring Iraqi civilians who worked on the base and firing his weapon at Iraqi children who approached the perimeter. During his contract he witnessed continued hatred and racism toward the Iraqi people. When his tour was over, Watson was instead “stop-lossed” and told he would be required to serve beyond his contractual obligation. During a two-week leave, he fled to Vancouver and has been taken into sanctuary by the church community. Charged with desertion, if Watson returns to the U.S. he will face military prison and dishonourable discharge. The Canadian government has denied him refugee status and ordered him deported, yet Pastor Ric Matthews and his congregation continue to defend Rodney against the authorities that would deport him.<sup>94</sup>

### C: PRISONERS

A third and final category of people who need to experience Jubilee release are prisoners. All along the Biblical thread of Jubilee prisoners are included with slaves as people equally in need of liberation. We have already mentioned that these prisoners

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<sup>93</sup> <http://www.vancouver.anglican.ca/News/tabid/27/Mode/ViewArticle/ArticleId/12/Default.aspx>

<sup>94</sup> Platt, B. “A Sanctuary for Conscience,” lines 1-151



were best understood as political prisoners, or debt-prisoners, and not, for the most part, violent offenders posing genuine threat to society. Jesus adopts Isaiah's vision "to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1). Yet, prison ministry is fairly removed from most church communities. Pastors and laypeople are far more comfortable extending Jubilee release to the sick, the shut-ins, the aged and the grieving, than they are engaging in prison ministry. Jesus' words compel us to think again: "I was... in prison and you did not visit me" (Matthew 25:43).

There are serious questions that need to be asked about the effectiveness and fairness of the present judicial and penal system. These suspicions have always existed. Ched Myers and Elaine Enns having faithfully re-read the entire Biblical tradition as a resource for justice and peacemaking, note that the biblical writers shared a skepticism about the effectiveness of the penal system.

Matthew uses the term "prison" ten times in his Gospel, suggesting that it was part of his community's experience. His bias is clear: he does not trust the courts to adjudicate justice, much less to heal the wounds of violation. Nor was he alone in the early Christian movement; the apostle Paul shared his antipathy toward civil courts.<sup>95</sup>

The authors also note that prison overcrowding has a longstanding history: The ancient writer Juvenal complained that with so many people in prison, "that is how our iron is mostly used; and you may well fear that ere long none will be left for ploughshares, none for hoes and mattocks!"<sup>96</sup> The dehumanizing nature of incarceration is evidenced by the fact that Roman underground dungeons were so identified with the horrors of perpetual darkness that they became synonymous with the Greek word "Hades." Even as our own country contemplates the building of more prisons, and given

<sup>95</sup> Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 53–54. In 1 Cor 6:1–9 Paul chastises Christians who are taking one another to secular court, and he encourages them to settle their disputes among themselves rather than trust the "unjust" courts which are conducted by those "of no account" (6:4).

<sup>96</sup> Juvenal, *Satires III*, [302–314].

the fact that, incredibly, one in every 48 Americans is either behind bars or on parole, several problems need to be addressed. Foremost among these problems is the social consequences of such high rates of incarceration given the dehumanizing effects of prison life, and the lack of rehabilitation both of which are evidenced by high rates of recidivism. Second, the damage done to families must not be overlooked, given that 80% of women in the U.S. federal prison system are mothers. Children become the hidden victims of the current penal system. Third, there are a disproportionate number of visible minorities, poor, uneducated, addicted and jobless behind bars. Indeed it seems that “a rich boy’s prank is a poor boy’s felony.”<sup>97</sup> Fourth, very little opportunity for healing or closure is afforded to the victims of crime in the current penal system. Fifth, the present system is enormously expensive.<sup>98</sup>

Jubilee “release” for prisoners today is best proclaimed by advocating for alternative methods of achieving justice for both offenders and victims. Instead of retributive justice or capital punishment, new models of “Restorative Justice” offer hopeful alternatives. Walter Burghardt and others suggest that restorative justice is in keeping with the biblical idea of justice, which emphasized accountability, community involvement, victim participation, and healing. Restorative justice includes group conferencing between victims and offenders, admission of guilt by the offender and expressions of anger, grief, and understanding. Sanctions may still be imposed by a judge, but the community does the work of restoration. Such projects have been undertaken New Zealand’s juvenile system, where potential benefits have included: “reduced costs to the criminal-justice system, decrease in incarceration, decrease in

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<sup>97</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 68.

<sup>98</sup> Burghardt, “Jubilee for the Captive,” 10.

sentence length, less repeat offending, and more meaningful victim and community participation.”<sup>99</sup>

A recent lengthy statement of the Catholic bishops of the United States, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* presents a detailed program for reshaping the criminal justice system by focusing on “new approaches that rebuild lives, not simply build more prisons.”<sup>100</sup>

But before any such reform can gain momentum, and before churches can demand a Jubilee “release” from the current retributive penal system, God’s people need to soften their hearts toward prisoners and recognize the humanity in even the most violent of offenders. The local church may put this into practice simply by beginning a pastoral visitation program to local prisons and by offering counseling and support to the families of those in prison. In the early nineteenth century, a devout Christian philanthropist named Elizabeth Fry became a strong voice for prison reform in England. Today, the Elizabeth Fry Society continues the Christian work of ministering to inmates and their families. For example, when the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver realized that two-thirds of all women inmates are mothers, they initiated the Storybook Reading Program.<sup>101</sup> The purpose of the project is to give women prisoners the opportunity to connect with their children through reading them fictional storybooks using their own voice. These readings are recorded and a copy of the recording and the storybook are sent to the mother’s child. This Jubilee program opens our eyes to the

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<sup>99</sup> Burghardt, “Jubilee for the Captive?” 11

<sup>100</sup> See: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/crime-and-criminal-justice.cfm>

<sup>101</sup> See: <http://www.elizabethfry.com/programs/justice-children.htm>

humanity of prisoners, the pain of family disconnection, and the importance of facilitating the mother-child bond even in situations of imprisonment.

## Summary

Ross and Gloria Kinsler summarize well the centrality this Sabbath-Jubilee thread of release that is woven into the story of God's people from its very beginning down to this day. "The theological-spiritual foundation for all Sabbath-Jubilee mandates is, of course, the Exodus, liberation from slavery in Egypt... in ancient times and today the *raison d'être* of God's people must be to live in freedom, to practice justice, to struggle for freedom and fullness of life for all."<sup>102</sup>

From Israel's wilderness wanderings, to their entrance into the Promised land; from their exile to their return home; from the mouths of their prophets to the life of Jesus Christ himself - Jubilee release was the primary story of Biblical redemption. The early Church strived to practice the inclusive, healing power of liberation in their fledgling communities, and their witness stands as an example for the church today reminding us to preach and live the gospel story, the story God has been telling since the beginning: the story of release, deliverance, and liberation.

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<sup>102</sup> Kinsler & Kinsler, "Jubilee. Jesus' Message for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," 8

## Chapter 2: Forgive the Debt

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“If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them .. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 25:35–37)

“In little hamlets such as Nazareth, everyone was in debt.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction:**

“Suddenly everyone is talking about the economy.”<sup>2</sup> So writes Guy Brandon as he reflects on the “debt disaster” of 2008. Before 2008 the world of global economics was a dry, technical, domain understood only by a few. Today it seems that everyone has a reasonable grasp, at least in general terms, of what has happened. Creditors lent recklessly, debtors couldn’t repay, corporate losses accumulated, credit froze, businesses suffered, jobs were lost, a recession resulted. But while we struggle to understand “what” happened, grappling with terms like ‘subprime mortgages’, ‘toxic assets’ and ‘derivatives,’ very few are asking “why” this happened: what were the underlying cultural attitudes and personal values that brought us to this crisis? Was it simply the attitudes of entitlement, greed, and selfishness? Was it rooted in ignorance? Or was it the inevitable byproduct of Capitalism itself?

Whatever the cause, even after the scare of 2008, North Americans are still some of the most indebted people in the world. Between mortgage debt, credit card debt, credit lines, student loans, and car loans the average household debt in Canada is over

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<sup>1</sup> Chilton, “Jesus and Jubilee,” 18.

<sup>2</sup> Brandon, *Free to Live*, 2.

\$175,000. Most recently in 2011 the average debt-service ratio in Canada reached a new high of 149%.<sup>3</sup>

While the debt crisis of 2008 has highlighted our own struggle with debt, it pales in comparison to the enormous debt loads experienced by other nations. As we extend our gaze to other countries we are painfully reminded of the gross inequality that exists in our world today. Other lands and peoples have been experiencing lethal debt crises of their own for generations. Years ago, third world governments took loans they could not afford for projects that were environmentally destructive and economically unviable. Most of these loans accomplished little to advance the interests of their people. The result has been catastrophic. Never before in history has there been such a concentration of capital in the hands of so few people while the majority of people struggle to make ends meet. “The real debt crisis is the lethal, global, economic crisis where two thirds of the world’s population are oppressed by debt, living below the poverty line, dying of hunger, and subsequently excluded from the formal economy.”<sup>4</sup>

Within this scenario, children and working families in these countries today are repaying the very loans that financed the oppression and impoverishment of their own families! Richer nations have come to benefit greatly from this arrangement. In fact, many of the original loans were used to subsidize investment from western companies. In places like Latin America, “debt has become a substitute for direct investment” as a mechanism of extracting net financial transfers from poor to the rich.<sup>5</sup> Rather than invest in joint enterprise, rich nations would rather profit from loans and interest. The outcome is a gross inequality where poorer nations must submit to near impossible

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<sup>3</sup> Sherlock, “Canadian household debt reaches record high,” [5]

<sup>4</sup> Duchrow, *Global Capitalism*, 233

<sup>5</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 46.

repayment terms, all the while cutting essential programs to make payments. Most repayment efforts are barely enough to cover the interest on these loans

‘Debt restructuring’ programs imposed on these countries by the IMF and other lenders have had devastating social and environmental consequences. Poor countries have cut wages and slashed health care and education programs to attract international investment and the hard currency they need to keep paying on their debt. In many cases, the amount the original loan has been repaid. They are paying interest on the interest and will never be able to pay off the debt. Tanzania spends nine times more on debt repayments than on health care. Mozambique spends 33 percent of its national budget on debt payments, 3 percent on health and 8 percent on education. Every child born in Nicaragua inherits more than \$2000 of debt at birth, though the average annual income there is \$390. The UN estimates that if funds currently paid out on debt in these severely indebted nations were diverted back into health care and education, the lives of seven million children could be saved within a year.<sup>6</sup>

Today’s church also knows the debilitating effect of debt since most churches participate in this debt-based economy on a daily basis. They take loans to build structures that they cannot afford. They make financial decisions based on “pledges” instead of actual income. They invest surplus resources in financial products without examining the ethical consequences. Many churches are in debt, struggling to meet payroll and mortgage payments, playing by the rules (and at the mercy of) the banks and the global markets. As churches look inward at their own financial house, little energy is left for their wider Christian family. There is little room for ecclesial neighbourliness even within their own tribes and cities. While Anglicans in Tanzania are born into crushing, debilitating debt, Anglicans in Canada take loans to renovate expensive, outmoded buildings. The wealthy Baptist church on one corner turns a blind eye to the struggling church plant across the street.

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<sup>6</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 150

And yet, in our age of debt, it is precisely the church that holds the thread to mend the wounds of debt. When the Sabbath-Jubilee thread is stitched into our broken world, we discover an economy where the poor are cared for, where debt does not rule, and where the hope of forgiveness exists. The prophetic good news of Sabbath-Jubilee sharply challenges Christian communities to create alternative communities based on this alternative economy. The Sabbath-Jubilee regulations found in the Torah envision a community of mutual support where no one is left behind. Jesus takes up this theme in his own ministry proclaiming a gospel of forgiveness that begins with the forgiveness of debts, but extends that forgiveness to every area of our lives.

As we shall see, slavery and debt are two interwoven problems with the same root cause: slaves were really indentured servants whose condition was the result of the debtor's household being forfeited when a loan could not be repaid. Debt and slavery are really two sides of the same coin.

In this chapter we will trace the biblical thread of debt forgiveness as it arises in the Old Testament Sabbatical laws and as it is restated in the Levitical vision of Jubilee. We can then observe how this forgiveness is amplified by the prophets until Jesus himself renews God's call to forgive not just debts, but to "forgive everything we can."<sup>7</sup> Finally, we will observe how the early church applied this message to their economy of grace. In so doing we will garner insights and challenges for the church today.

## **The Making of Debtor**

Agriculture in ancient Israel was difficult even in "good years." Most farmers were subsistence farmers, producing a diverse number of crops to best meet the needs of

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<sup>7</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 42



the family unit and the local clan.<sup>8</sup> And while there was a high level of social solidarity amongst family members, and while households within a clan supported each other, debt was difficult to avoid. Ellen Davis, reflecting on Leviticus 25 traces the several stages of economic loss (and accompanying personal disaster) that an Israelite subsistence farmer might experience.

The first stage is redemption of the land (vv. 25–28), set in motion when an impoverished farmer puts up a portion of the ancestral holding as collateral for a loan (likely for the purchase of seed) secured from a creditor outside the kin group, and then, because of a poor harvest, is unable to repay it. His closest “redeemer” (*go'el*, vs. 25), a relative with means, is expected to enact the option of purchasing the right of usufruct, of working the land and taking its yield until the Jubilee Year; at that time, it reverts to the original owner... If the farmer's fortunes continue to decline, so that the whole property is lost, then this “brother” farmer must subsist with relatives as a “resident alien” (*ger wetsosab*, vs. 35), a tenant farmer... The third and lowest stage is reached when the impoverished brother cannot maintain his family even on these conditions and therefore is sold, entering the household of either a fellow Israelite or an alien.<sup>9</sup>

According to Lowery, the mutually supportive arrangement between households was further destabilized with the advent of the monarchy.<sup>10</sup> When Israel demanded a king, Samuel warned against the idea, citing the economic insecurity that would come with a monarch (1 Samuel 8:11–18). Samuel was right: “The rise of kings dramatically exacerbated the problem. Facing demands of taxes and offerings to support court and temple, ever larger numbers of families had to borrow in order to survive until the next harvest, when the cycle repeated itself over again.”<sup>11</sup> Royal tax and labour policies destabilized households, forcing families and clans to move beyond subsistence farming

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<sup>8</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 93

<sup>10</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 145

<sup>11</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 43

toward the riskier practice of surplus farming.<sup>12</sup> Surplus farming required a less diversified use of agricultural lands with a move toward monoculture. However, if crops failed, there was little security for families except to depend on loans from wealthier households. These loans were used to pay the royal taxes, but this put families in a tenuous situation that often ended in debt slavery and loss of ancestral property.

Interest debt usually was a vicious circle. Needy householders pledged tools, clothing, the labor of household members, the marriage value of daughters, or in extreme cases, the ancestral land itself as collateral for loans. Because it was hard to produce enough the next year to pay the king, repay the loan, and still feed the family, one loan led to another. Eventually, debtors lost ancestral property and entered into the creditor's household as debt slaves.<sup>13</sup>

According to Horsely, modern Bible translations give a misleading impression about what was involved in such borrowing and lending in ancient Israel by rendering Hebrew term(s) for “goods” as “money.” “But money as coinage was not even invented yet... Borrowing and lending in the local community involved such major items as draft animals and mainly, food (the staples grain, grapes/wine, and olives/oil), and seed grain. Lending therefore involved considerable risk, for lender as well as borrower.”<sup>14</sup> Taking a loan was a last ditch solution to financial hardship. “Paying debts was taken seriously... But debt was taken seriously from the lender's point of view too.”<sup>15</sup>

The ubiquity of debt in such a culture resulted in the polarization of the rich and the poor, and as today, inevitably led to the rich becoming richer and the poor poorer.

The vast majority of the population groaned under the oppressive burden of direct levies on land, crops, and persons, as well as numerous indirect tolls, duties, and market taxes. Imperial tribute obligations and local structures of taxation were both “designed to assert elite control over agrarian production. They functioned to redistribute up to two-

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<sup>12</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 21

<sup>13</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 14

<sup>14</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 41

<sup>15</sup> Brandon, *Free to Live*, 8

*thirds* of the wealth upward, from the peasant and artisan classes to the aristocracy... The social consequences of widespread economic marginalization driven by protracted debt, then and now, include banditry, crime, and interpersonal violation among the poor.<sup>16</sup>

It is not surprising that throughout this period, advocates of political reform focused on tax relief, while local armed rebellions often targeted centralized debt records for destruction – most famously after the liberation of the Temple from Roman rule in 66 C.E.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Covenant Code and Care for the Poor**

Having highlighted the roots of Israel's debt culture, we can begin to trace the thread of the Jubilee hope of debt release. It is apparent that borrowing and lending were about the only way that peasant village communities with limited resources could survive in such an economic climate. Therefore, as Yahweh's unique people, Israel developed several safeguards to improve the chances of its people in the face of this crippling debt. These begin to be expressed in the Covenant Code of Exodus 22–24 which is generally thought to contain the oldest legislation in the Bible.<sup>18</sup>

#### **A: COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY**

The first means of protecting and preventing extreme debt was rooted in Israel's strong community ethic. As Yahweh's people, their identity was rooted in a society of mutuality and reciprocity. The heart of the Sinai legislation is "You shall not oppress the resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt"

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<sup>16</sup> Myers & Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Rhoads, *Israel in Revolution*, 94; Myers & Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 73

<sup>18</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 51

(Ex. 23:9). Israel's community ethic may seem baffling to competitive individualistic Westerners, but in the face of common threats, Israelites would turn to neighbours, clans, and kinsmen for help. There was a sense of "what goes around comes around" in this way of life.

When a peasant family helped a neighbor family it thereby had a reciprocal claim on help in the future. The families understood that they were spreading the risk among them across a span of years... There is sometimes even a certain communal pride that develops among a clan that is able to feed and protect its member families.<sup>19</sup>

#### B: NO INTEREST:

A second means of security for Israel was the prohibition of interest taking on loans. Surely one of the most difficult concepts for our present day economic system which operates on the charging of interest on loans, is the Exodus principle of forbidding usury. "If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them" (Ex. 22:25).

Those who lent money were instructed to do so as an act of compassion and not to take advantage of their poor neighbor by charging interest. Covenantal laws against charging interest upheld the principle of not taking advantage of another's misfortune, of not gaining benefit from other people's need. "It seems highly likely that taking interest was understood as a prime example of violating the commandment not to covet-and-seize, perhaps also of the commandment against stealing."<sup>20</sup> Unlike the capitalist motivation, lending to others was not supposed to be a money-making opportunity. Those who lent money were instructed to do so as an act of compassion and not to take

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<sup>19</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 37

<sup>20</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 42

advantage of their poor neighbor by charging interest.<sup>21</sup> The refusal to take advantage of a needy neighbour was also demonstrated in the strictures involved in collateral for loans.

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbour's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbour's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? (Ex. 22:25–27)

Offering a well-worn cloak as collateral was only a ritual gesture and had little value to the lender, yet even in this instance Israelites were not to take advantage of their needy neighbour's misfortune.

Therefore, the roots of the Jubilee tradition of debt relief and care for the poor are already demonstrated in these ancient laws from Sinai. A combination of community solidarity and interest free loans provided a basic economic safety net. These laws are all rooted in the character of Yahweh himself: “And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate” (Ex. 22:27). Since Yahweh is compassionate so too are Yahweh's people.

However, these measures alone did not suffice to make up for bad harvests and crop failure due to drought and other damage. Nor were these able to offset the taxes of the emerging monarchy. Families who faced starvation were still forced to borrow, and these mounting debts would be difficult to pay off. Furthermore, officers of the king, who had control over large quantities of grain and other goods, exploited the situation by ignoring the usury laws and charging exorbitant rates of interest on loans. Therefore, if God's people, especially the most vulnerable members, were to find true economic freedom, an even better solution needed to be implemented.

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<sup>21</sup> Brandon, *Free to Live*, 8.

## The Deuteronomic Code and Sabbatical Year Forgiveness

The thread of Sabbath-Jubilee debt relief takes its next turn in the book of Deuteronomy, which as a whole, expresses a focused concern for social justice for the poor. In Deuteronomy, Israel stands on the brink of the Promised Land, about to launch in to a new stage of their history as “people who have their land.”<sup>22</sup> As we have already noted in the previous chapter, the commandments of Deuteronomy 15 are among the most important forces that develop the Jubilee thread as it weaves through the scriptures. And the same is true for this chapter’s concern with debt and poverty.

Deuteronomy 14:28–29, the passage immediately before the debt release law of chapter 15, proposes an extra provision for the Levite, the widow, and the orphan. This triennial tithe commanded that:

Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake. (Deut. 14:28–29)

Every third year this special offering helped to sustain those most at risk of debt and destitution. Again, this measure was rooted in the strong spirit of sharing and cooperation generated in village communities.

But an even stronger ethic was yet to come. Deuteronomy 15 begins abruptly: “Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts” (Deut. 15:1). This Sabbatical Year clearly represents a new development in Israel’s ethics of care for the poor and it is (as always) another way to apprehend and respond to the God with whom they live in covenant. The passage continues:

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<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, *Social Justice and Deuteronomy*, 2–3

And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit (*shemittah*) the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit (*shemittah*) your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. (Deut. 15:2–5)

Some writers have suggested that this command was simply a postponement or a moratorium on lending, and did not refer to an actual, once and for all cancellation of debt.<sup>23</sup> However, the text reads more naturally as referring to cancellation, and this is the way the ancient rabbis understood it as well. “The Deuteronomy passage does not refer to any point after the seven years at which repayment resumes, and the concern that some might not grant a loan to a needy person because the sabbatical year loomed near (15:9) makes little sense if the debt repayment was merely postponed rather than cancelled.”<sup>24</sup>

The only exception in this command is that Israelites may continue to exact their debt repayments from foreigners (15:4). While this exemption may seem like an uncaring attitude toward foreigners is perhaps better understood as a different type of loan. Loans to fellow Israelites were subsistence loans that needed to be remitted every seven years. However, loans to foreigners, according to Lowery, were not subsistence loans, but commercial loans and thus are categorically outside the command of the Sabbath Year Laws. “The issue is not the ethnicity of the borrower, but the nature of the loan. Subsistence help for (foreign) travelers was offered as a gift, not a loan – an act of hospitality, not a debt to be repaid. Loans to ‘foreigners’ – that is, nonresidents who fall outside the network of clan support – are by their very nature trade loans.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wright, “What Happened in Israel Every Seven Years?” 197–212

<sup>24</sup> Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 40

The Sabbath-Jubilee vision of Deuteronomy 15 holds forth the possibility that one day all subsistence loans will be eliminated. In that day,

There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you. (Deut. 15 4–6)

Through obedience to Yahweh, Israel will inhabit the land, and practice an economic way of life that stands in contrast to the ‘domination systems’ that they themselves had experienced and witnessed in other nations. In such a vision, subsistence loans are extinct as is poverty. “The concern is to build a socioeconomic order in which the needs of the poor are met.”<sup>26</sup>

However, as if anticipating the high challenge of this ideal, Deuteronomy 15 discloses a somewhat pessimistic progression from the idealistic to the realistic. Blomberg traces this progression by noting that while in verse 4 we read that there *should* be no poor among you, verse 5 acknowledges that this blessing is contingent on obedience, and then verse 7 recognizes the possibility that poverty will remain (“If there are poor among you...” ) and “because Israel never fully obeys,” by verse 11 the writer declares flatly ‘There will *always* be poor people in the land...’<sup>27</sup>

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord you God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,” and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so.

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<sup>26</sup> Kinsler & Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 74.

<sup>27</sup> Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 44



for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land. (Deut. 15:7–11)

### The Language of Debt Forgiveness

The close association between the release of slaves and the release of debts is further reinforced by the common usage of the Jubilee motif of release. While the word *derôr* connotes release and liberty to slaves, the word *shemittah* is used to announce the “release” of debts in the Sabbath-Jubilee ordinances.

The verb ‘release!’ (*shamôt*) is from the same root as the noun ‘release’ (*shemittah*). Its basic meaning is ‘to loosen’ or ‘to drop.’ The idea is that the one who holds the loan must ‘loosen his grip’ (literally, ‘release his hand’) on the debtor’s obligation to repay. He must ‘drop it.’<sup>28</sup>

The verb *shemittah* is found only in Deuteronomy and it means “letting drop of exactions, (temporary) remitting, release (from debt).”<sup>29</sup> “The law of release, *shemittah*, then is the exact opposite of being tightfisted toward needy neighbours. It is a concrete gesture of opening the hand to the poor.”<sup>30</sup>

In the New Testament (especially Luke’s text) the Greek word *aphesis* translates both *shemittah* and *derôr*. The common translation to *aphesis* draws these two Jubilee words together: sometimes meaning the liberation of a slave, sometimes meaning forgiveness, and other times meaning the remittance of a debt.

A further linguistic clue to the Jubilee language of debt remission is found in the Hebrew word *ratson*. *Ratsah* has two meanings; “to be pleased with; to take pleasure,”

<sup>28</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 41.

<sup>29</sup> Brown et al., *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 1030.

<sup>30</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 41

and the other meaning “to restore” or “to retrieve.”<sup>31</sup> In the Jubilee texts of Isaiah 61:2 (and Luke 4:19) the adjective “favourable” is taken from the verb *ratsah*, which means either “to pay a debt” when it refers to the person paying it, or “to be favourable” when it refers to God accepting the payment.<sup>32</sup> Trocmé cites Leviticus 26:43 as an example of its use: “For the land will be deserted by them and will enjoy its Sabbaths and they will pay (*ratsah*) for their sins.” Here, payment of debt is in view. Other passages, such as Isaiah 61:2, emphasize favour and acceptance: “The Lord has anointed me to... proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour (*ratson*).”

### **Jubilee Legislation and the Forgiveness of Debts**

The spirit of debt release is renewed and magnified in the book of Leviticus and given added weight since the thrust of Leviticus is the priestly author’s concern for moral behavior and holiness of life. As such, the provisions for the poor take on moral and ethical dimensions that were not so evident in Exodus or Deuteronomy.

The central Jubilee text of Leviticus 25, renews the command that bans lending at interest.

If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit. (Lev. 25:35–37)

Beyond this, extra rules about the care for the poor are found in Leviticus 25:35–43. Throughout these commands the most interesting and enduring aspect is the

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<sup>31</sup> There are two Hebrew roots *ratsah*, one meaning “to be pleased with, to take pleasure” (J E Hartley, Leviticus [WBC], 452), and the other meaning “to restore” (B A Levine, Leviticus [JPSTC], 189)

<sup>32</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 15.

underlying notion that Yahweh owns both land and people and thus Yahweh determines the terms of the land's use. The same principles apply to the poor, "whose vulnerable condition does not justify treating them or their labour as commodities to be exploited without limit."<sup>33</sup>

Yet, notable by its absence in the Jubilee texts, is any direct mention of debt release legislation such as found in Exodus 21–23 or Deuteronomy 15. In fact, of all the Sabbath-Jubilee threads (Slavery, Debt, Land, and Wealth), the command to cancel debts receives the least direct treatment in the Jubilee text of Leviticus 25. This is not unexpected since debt forgiveness must be assumed and included by implication with the other Jubilee laws.<sup>34</sup> For instance, it was observed in the previous chapter that the Jubilee laws found in Leviticus 25:39–43 and 47–55 mandates the redemption and liberation of kinfolk who have sold themselves into slavery. This liberation from slavery also necessarily means that the original subsistence loans which led to debt-servitude are also forgiven. Similarly, the central Jubilee provision which allows for the return to one's land must also imply the cancellation of debts, since with the restoration of real estate, the former debtor could hope to "attain economic independence instead of merely beginning a new cycle of poverty and indebtedness."<sup>35</sup> Thus, while formal language of seventh year debt release is absent in Leviticus 25, it clearly underpins the Jubilee year as a whole.

In fact, for the wealthy, the call of Jubilee presents an even greater challenge than the Sabbatical Year laws. "Even though the Jubilee years and the concomitant social upheavals would be further apart than the Sabbath years of release, their more dramatic

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<sup>33</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 70.

<sup>34</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 26

<sup>35</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 27.

consequences would make the Jubilee years even more difficult for the wealthy to observe.”<sup>36</sup> Lowery is right to call the Jubilee year a “social upheaval.” Since the scope of Jubilee debt forgiveness radically expanded the Sabbatical laws in at least two senses: firstly, Jubilee laws are public, general laws, affecting the whole country at once, and not private contracts between creditors and debtors as is the case in Exodus 21:2–6 and Deuteronomy 15:1–18; and secondly, the laws in Leviticus 25:47–54 provide for the release of those indentured to non-Israelites, which the Sabbath-year laws do not.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, Jubilee forgiveness becomes a radical challenge to all God’s people, being universal in its scope and publicly enacted in unison on the fiftieth year.

While different from the seventh-year laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the underlying principles of Jubilee are also rooted in a strong sense of social solidarity. It is clear to see how such a practice would completely redefine the economic life of Israel and how the poor could experience true release from the burden of debt and be given a chance to start over. It is equally clear how such a practice would be difficult if not impossible for the wealthy to observe who prospered during the intervening fifty years. This has even led some to dismiss the Jubilee as merely a “utopian” ideal and not practically possible in any country’s economy.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps for this reason Yahweh offers further reassurances that obedience will be rewarded.

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in due season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit... I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. (Lev. 26:3–4, 12)

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<sup>36</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 76

## Economic Reform Under Nehemiah

The book of Leviticus provides a moral compass for Israel as they return from exile and once again inhabit the land of promise. The book of Nehemiah tells the story of that return as the returning exiles undertake the reconstruction of Jerusalem amid hostile forces. During his time as governor, Nehemiah had the opportunity to make economic reforms according to the commands of Jubilee found in Leviticus. Nehemiah 5 outlines one such situation that demanded the forgiveness of debts.

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, 'With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.' There were also those who said, 'We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.' And there were those who said, 'We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.'

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, 'You are all taking interest from your own people.' And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, 'As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!' They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, 'The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.' Then they said, 'We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.' And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, 'So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.' And all the assembly said, 'Amen', and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. (Neh. 5:1–13)

The people's complaint to Nehemiah offers a textbook example of the destructive impact of the interest debt system that flourished under such ancient monarchies.

Subsistence households found it difficult to meet their royal tax obligations and still feed their families (especially in years of bad harvests). They were forced to borrow money and grain at interest from politically influential, wealthy landowners. To qualify for these loans they must offer household property and labour as collateral. Eventually, when they are unable to repay the principal and interest, debtors lose their collateral, forfeiting their ancestral property, and the households fall into debt slavery. "The rich get richer, adding land and labour to their household wealth, while the poor lose everything."<sup>39</sup>

When the outcry of these oppressed people reached the ears of Nehemiah his revulsion led him to decree a Jubilee response to remedy the situation. "Outcry" (*tsa`aqah*), according to Lowery, is a theologically explosive term that connects the plight of these debtors with the plight of Israel in Egypt.<sup>40</sup> In Egypt, God heard the "outcry" of his people (Exodus 3:7) and liberated them from their Egyptian taskmasters. "Rhetorically Nehemiah casts the wealthy creditors of Jerusalem in the frightening role of the pharaoh. Those who exploit the weakness of the poor are on the losing side of sacred history."<sup>41</sup> Nehemiah's decree appeals to priestly Jubilee texts of Leviticus 25. Yet, Nehemiah never directly refers to these Pentateuchal laws, but instead relies on the people's sense of honour. "These wealthy creditors have brought shame upon their own community. And, to make matters worse, they have done so during a time of crisis, when the community is under external threat."<sup>42</sup> The story in Nehemiah is not a dispute between honest debtors

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<sup>39</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 47.

<sup>40</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 55

<sup>41</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 56

<sup>42</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 48.

and dishonest creditors, in fact there is nothing in the text to suggest that this exploitation was illegal. “Rather it is a dispute between two models of community ordering, one conventional after the manner of every highly ordered economic community, the other a radical vision of covenant.”<sup>43</sup> Nehemiah’s solution is for these creditors to release the debt: to stop taking interest on subsistence loans (Nehemiah 5:10) as opposed to commercial loans and to restore the lost collateral to the debtors (5:11).

### **The Prophetic Amplification of Care for the Poor**

One of the most frequent themes in Israel’s prophetic literature is the bold denunciation of economic injustice toward the poor.<sup>44</sup> Instead of honouring Torah’s command to release debts and deal generously with each other, Israel and her leaders were guilty of worshiping idols made of costly things, extorting, robbing and oppressing others to gain more land, and then boasting of their wealth. Each of these themes is consequently addressed with powerful rhetoric and symbolic action throughout the prophetic books of the Old Testament.

As we trace the development of Sabbath-Jubilee debt forgiveness, we will revisit Isaiah’s important Jubilee text as well as consider Amos as one of the fieriest prophets in his condemnation of Israel’s emerging market economy.

#### **A: ISAIAH**

In her book *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, Sharon Ringe notes that Third Isaiah, “gives evidence that Jubilee imagery was as much at home in the poetry of

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<sup>43</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 147.

<sup>44</sup> Blomberg, *Poverty nor Riches*, 73.

the visionaries as in the legislation of their rivals.”<sup>45</sup> The key Jubilee oracle concerning the release of debt is found in Isaiah 61:1–2 which pictures God’s eschatological reign, but also projects Jubilee economics much further into the realities of everyday life.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1–2)

Here God is depicted “as creator and as the sovereign who carries out the royal obligation of doing justice among the people, as well as in the Jubilee traditions found in Leviticus 25.”<sup>46</sup> Isaiah’s accusation is that Israel’s piety and religious observance is not resulting in compassion toward the oppressed-poor. His message is that religion without justice (especially justice for the poor) is rejected by Yahweh who desires the liberation of his people.

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:3–7)

In Isaiah’s vision the Sabbath-Jubilee mandates are radicalized. “The concern of Yahweh is the creation of a socioeconomic-spiritual reality in which all human injustice and ailments are overcome, and genuine peace (*shalom*) is achieved.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 29

<sup>46</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 29–30

<sup>47</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, 83



## B: AMOS

Amos' wrote before Isaiah and his prophecies were directed to the Northern Kingdom. His messages were revised for the Southern Kingdom, and then reworked again during Israel's return from exile.<sup>48</sup> This makes Amos' words function on different historical levels all at once by addressing the harsh conditions of peasant life in Israel before destruction and exile, and also by pointing toward life in a restored Judah after the Babylonian exile has ended.

Amos understood that Israel's foundational vision was that of a people working together in the "common project of building a just and peaceful community guided by and animated by their covenant loyalty to their common God, Yahweh."<sup>49</sup> That vision depended on every person having access to life's basic necessities and the provisions for mutual aid. However in Amos' day, these Sabbath foundations were being crushed and thrown by the wayside.

Motivated by greed and a lust for power, and intent on aping the elegant and arrogant trappings of the court and ruling classes of imperial powers like Assyria, the nobility and rich merchant classes of the Northern Kingdom ignored the covenant obligations toward their fellow Israelites. Instead of low or no-interest loans to help a family through a period of economic hardship brought on by drought, for example, they charged exorbitant interest rates, often 50 percent or more. When people could not pay, they seized the land and either evicted the occupants or reduced them to a state of near slavery as tenant farmers.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps Amos knew from personal experience the hardships described above. As a shepherd and farmer who lived in a rural village, he would have been deeply aware of the suffering wrought upon the poor by the ruling class. Alternatively, he would have

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<sup>48</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, 53

<sup>49</sup> Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 199.

<sup>50</sup> Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 181.

been familiar with the traditional values of mutual aid, social justice, and economic equality that are rooted in Torah. “Amos was deeply concerned about the breakdown of earlier egalitarian economics, which the Sabbath and Jubilee mandates sought to maintain, leading to the accumulation of property by the rich and powerful.”<sup>51</sup> Thus his prophetic task is to enumerate the wrongs committed against the poor, and to declare Yahweh’s coming judgment all the while calling Israel to return to the covenant God made with them when he delivered them from such abuse.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals— they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way. (Amos 2:6–7)

Lowery views this and other texts in their relation to the emerging market economy in Israel. As royal taxes forced farmers to switch from subsistence farming to cash crops, the markets played an increasingly important role in Israel’s economy.<sup>52</sup> However, the market system could also be abused since the rich came to market with an inherent advantage over the poor. Therefore, several Sabbath passages, particularly in Prophetic books, deal explicitly with injustice related to market exchanges. For example, Lowery highlights Amos 8:4–7 as an example.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’ (Amos 8:4–7)

The accusation Amos levies on these rich traders is found in verses 4–6 in which the prophet exposes “the dispossessive power of markets and the debt system,

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<sup>51</sup> Kinsler & Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 53

<sup>52</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 110

highlighting the unjust intent of merchants and creditors by noting their impatient, though apparently scrupulous observance of new moon and Sabbath.”<sup>53</sup> This highlights the deep irony woven throughout Amos’ writing which is a fundamental misunderstanding of Sabbath. The wealthy apparently meticulously observe the Sabbath ban on commerce, but they completely misunderstand the significance of Sabbath relief. “By trampling the poor, the pious allies of the crown violate Sabbath, even while religiously taking a daylong pause. Sabbath is a day of rest, but more fundamentally it is a call to economic justice.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Economic Hardship in First Century Palestine**

As we trace the Sabbath-Jubilee thread of debt forgiveness into the New Testament we discover that the problem has not abated: the poor and indebted continue to struggle for financial freedom. Rome, although credited for greatly progressing human civilization, had no organized welfare program to protect its poorest members. The poor might receive aid from the rich who could function as patrons, although the motivation for such generosity was likely based on gaining honour for the benefactor rather than genuine compassion for the poor.<sup>55</sup> The peasant producers were under demands for tithes to the Temple, for Roman tribute, and for taxes from Herodian rulers who were often resident in towns like Galilee.<sup>56</sup> The result of this taxation was that borrowing and lending continued to be the primary means by which families survived while struggling to remain on their ancestral land. Chilton surmises: “In little hamlets such as Nazareth,

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<sup>53</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 110.

<sup>54</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 115.

<sup>55</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 139

<sup>56</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 109.

everyone was in debt.”<sup>57</sup> Blomberg offers a sketch of economic life in the ancient Roman empire:

Many villagers and farmers left the stability of rural poverty for the large cities with the hope of improving their lot, but only a handful managed to do so. In many instances they found their circumstances even more appalling, because jobs were unavailable and they had separated themselves from the support networks of family and friends who could care for them during difficult times. Meanwhile, the rich in Rome grew richer, as they bought up large tracts of land and imported vast quantities of luxury items from far-flung corners of the empire. Increasingly, too, the imperial treasury was replenished with larger and larger sums of tribute money from subjugated peoples. Unlike the Jews, the Greeks and Romans apparently never developed a graduated or progressive tax, but typically charged the amounts or percentages, so that the rich never made the same sacrifice as the poor.<sup>58</sup>

As an example, Ched Myers and Elaine Enns explore the plight of a subsistence fisherman in the new Roman economy.<sup>59</sup> When Tiberus became emperor, Herod Antipas began building a new capital city called Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The primary function of this city was to regulate the fishing industry around the sea of Galilee putting it firmly under control of Roman interests.<sup>60</sup> From here, all fishing was regulated by the state for the benefit of the urban elite – either Greeks or Romans who had settled in Palestine.<sup>61</sup> Hanson surmises that the Roman elite profited from the fishing industry in three ways: first they controlled the sale of fishing leases, without which locals could not fish. Second, they taxed the fish product, its processing and transportation. Third, they steadily restricted the industry for export, so that the majority of fish were salt preserved or made into fish sauce, and shipped to distant markets in the empire.

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<sup>57</sup> Chilton, “Jesus and Jubilee”, *Living Pulpit*, 18

<sup>58</sup> Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 105

<sup>59</sup> Myers and Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 25–26.

<sup>60</sup> Spencer, “Follow Me”, 145.

<sup>61</sup> Hanson, “The Galilean Fishing Economy”, 100

All these functioned to marginalize and impoverish formerly self-sufficient fishing families. “Leases, taxes and tolls were exorbitant, while the fish on which local people depended as a dietary staple were extracted for export. Thus fishermen were at the bottom of a increasingly elaborate economic hierarchy.”<sup>62</sup> It is no wonder that fishermen are the first converts to Jesus message about an alternative social (and economic) vision.

It won’t suffice to simply blame the Roman hierarchy for imposing harsh economic burdens upon Israel. The Sabbath economics that were meant to govern Israel’s internal affairs had also been neglected or intentionally sidestepped by Yahweh’s people and thus they had become accomplices in the exploitation of the poor. The tax collector Levi was one Israelite who was co-opted into Herod’s minions, and who represented the way in which God’s own people had been sucked into the story of imperial taxation. Such tax collectors were assumed to pad their own pockets through cheating and profiteering all with the help of police protection. Ironically, Levi’s name evoked the priestly tribe of Israel who were supported by the people’s tithes and offerings. “Here someone who symbolizes legitimate voluntary ‘taxation’ in Israel’s theocratic kingdom is working for ‘King Herod’ (in Rome’s hip pocket) to impose extra, onerous tax burdens on God’s people.”<sup>63</sup>

Another example of Israel’s reluctance to practice the Jubilee vision of debt forgiveness was the first century avoidance strategy known as *prosbol*. The Sabbatical Year laws concerning debt release created reluctance among creditors to grant loans before the seventh year release. As a result, during the second temple period subsistence

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<sup>62</sup> Myers & Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 26–27

<sup>63</sup> Spencer, “Follow Me”, 147

loans for the poor dried up in the sixth year and the credit market froze.<sup>64</sup> Deuteronomy 15 anticipated this problem, and urged “Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near’, and therefore view your needy neighbour with hostility and give nothing; your neighbour might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt” (Deut. 15:9). However, this moral sanction was not enough to remedy the situation and lenders became tightfisted. To get around the problem, Rabbi Hillel instituted a legal bypass which turned the debt over to the courts before the year of release, with the reasoning that *shemittah* is binding on individual Jews, but not on the courts.<sup>65</sup> The court did not have to forgive debts, and as such, the courts could continue to collect the loan and the poor’s debts were never forgiven.<sup>66</sup>

In the midst of Roman taxation and Israel’s own economic policy, messianic hope became associated with longing for economic release. In fact “the burden of owing what could not be repaid became the principal metaphor of that alienation from God.”<sup>67</sup> Mary’s Magnificat bears witness to the longing for an economic reordering in which the powerful are brought down from their thrones, the lowly are lifted up, and where, “he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:53).

Therefore, on the margins of society, John the Baptist prepared the way for the “one who comes after him” by calling the people to renew their commitment to Sabbath-Jubilee economic principles.

And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for

<sup>64</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 41.

<sup>65</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 41. See also Mishnah Sheviit 10:3, and Talmud Gittin 36a.

<sup>66</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 29

<sup>67</sup> Chilton, “Jesus and Jubilee”, *Living Pulpit*, 18.

you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’ (Luke 3:10–14)

The process of preparing for the messiah’s reign involved not just a spiritual reordering, but also a decidedly economic reorientation. John’s commands reiterate the financial legislation found in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus. The command to share an extra coat hearkens back to Exodus 22 and Deuteronomy 24:12 where taking a coat as collateral on a loan was prohibited for humanitarian reasons.

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbour’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbour’s only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? (Ex. 22:25–27)

John’s command to share food recalls the Sabbath laws of gleaning and the triennial tithe for those at risk (Exodus 23:9–12, Deuteronomy 14:28–29). Tax collectors were urged to live according to Sabbath-Jubilee principles and refuse the practice of usury, which was forbidden by God (Exodus 22:25). And soldiers, as representatives of Roman Rule, were not to engage in profiteering by abusing their positions of authority. They too could prepare for the coming Kingdom by refusing to participate in Rome’s heavy-handed policies. The kingdom of God that John announced is governed by a different set of economic “signals,” signals of liberation and release.<sup>68</sup> Even under the reality of Roman occupation, they could subversively align themselves with Yahweh’s kingdom by practicing liberation and *shemittah* in their economic dealings with each other.

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<sup>68</sup> Brueggemann, “Different Set of Signals,” *Living Pulpit*, 20–21

## Jesus and the Gospel of Forgiveness

John rightly anticipated the economic nature of the messianic message, for Jesus' ministry and teaching was thoroughly concerned with and economic *aphiemi* "release." The debts that Jesus forgave were not simply monetary loans, but the theme of debt forgiveness provides a critical, interpretive lens through which we discover the astonishing Jubiliary character of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The sheer volume of sayings, parables, and teachings on the topic of economics, stewardship, debt, and forgiveness reveal that the Kingdom of God was the realm where Sabbath Economics and Jubilee *shemittah* held sway.

In Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth, his passion for the poor is evident. He proclaimed:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ (Luke 4:18–21)

Shortly after preaching this sermon, the crowd, initially enthralled by the message, attempted to throw Jesus off a cliff. André Trocmé surmises that the reason for the crowd's violent reaction was that these wealthy listeners knew that such a Jubilee announcement would mean, among other things, "expropriating the lands of the wealthy and liquidating the usurious system by which the ruling class prospered."<sup>69</sup> What was good news for the poor was bad news for the rich creditors who prospered under the current system.

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<sup>69</sup> Trocmé. *Nonviolent Revolution*, 15



While the mission Jesus announced in Nazareth included freedom for the oppressed and healing for the blind, it was the poor who were singled out as recipients of Jesus' gospel. "At the supreme moment of history, when God took on human flesh, the God of Israel was still liberating the poor and oppressed and summoning his people to do the same."<sup>70</sup>

Jesus' special care for the poor was surely rooted in his own experience. As Ron Sider puts it, "God did not become flesh as a wealthy aristocrat."<sup>71</sup> Instead, the poor were Jesus' people. There is a very long tradition of viewing Jesus and his family as quite poor. Mary and Joseph only offered a pair of doves on their visit to the temple (Luke 2:24), an allowance made for the poor in Leviticus 12:8. The story of his birth among the animals in Bethlehem also suggests that Mary and Joseph had very little financial resources. As carpenters (*tekton*) Jesus and Joseph may have had a chance to earn a living, especially if they were able to find work in the larger cities of Sepphoris or Tiberias. By modern Western standards, this work would still seem appalling, but it was not quite the degrading poverty of rural debt-slavery. It may be appropriate to think of Jesus as part of the lower 'middle class.'<sup>72</sup> Jesus would have observed the effects of debt-induced poverty simply by observing life in his own community and beyond

Jesus looked at larger towns like Capernaum and Magdala through suspicious eyes... shocked by their prominent display of debt-acquired wealth. The bourgeoisie of these places, precisely because they were Jewish, offended him and many other Galilean peasants.. their efforts in Jesus' eyes were useless because you cannot serve God and mammon.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Sider, *Rich Christians*, 47

<sup>71</sup> Sider, *Rich Christians*, 49

<sup>72</sup> Blomberg, *Poverty nor Riches*, 105.

<sup>73</sup> Chilton, "Jesus and Jubilee," 18

Another key indicator of Jesus' embrace of this Jubilee theme is found in the language of debt forgiveness that arises in the text of the gospels. Once again, the most important of these words is *aphesis*. "It is remarkable that the verb most used by Jesus is *aphesis*, which means "remit, send away, liberate, forgive a debt."<sup>74</sup> *aphesis* (verb) and *aphiemi* (noun) are used to express (both) the release of slaves and the cancellation of debts in the LXX. "Such usage is consistent with the secular, legal significance that these words had in classical Greek where they referred to one's release from bonds, debts, or other legal requirements"<sup>75</sup>

Jesus connects the biblical *shemittah* tradition with the rhetoric of "debt" (*opheilema*) and "release." "The semantic range of the root verb *aphiemi* ("to loose, release, or set free") is virtually identical with that of the Hebrew verb *shemittah* ("to loose or release") in the seventh-year laws in Deuteronomy 15 and Exodus 23."<sup>76</sup> In fact, *aphesis* is precisely the Greek word that the Septuagint uses to translate *shemittah* in Deuteronomy 15:1–3 and Exodus 23:11. While these words begin as references to legal bonds or debts (especially financial ones), "they can also refer to forgiveness in the more usual religious, ethical and moral sense: as the removal of and atonement for sin."<sup>77</sup>

As such, Jesus' application of Jubilee forgiveness from debt is not limited to economics. His use of *aphesis* refers to the release from (or forgiveness of) monetary debts (e.g. Matthew 18:27, 32) and prisoners (Luke 4:18), but also sin (Matthew 6:14–15), thus including both the cultic and legal dimensions of human bondage.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Yoder, *Politics*, 62.

<sup>75</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 65.

<sup>76</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 139.

<sup>77</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 37

<sup>78</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Biblical Jubilee*, 93

Indeed, ethical and cultic concerns in general can be distinguished but not separated in Gospel usage. Both are means of the effect of talking about God's Reign in breaking the tyranny of evil in all of its forms. In that context... the economic image of the cancellation of debts is not simply another way to speak of God's forgiveness of humankind. Rather, "forgiveness" or "release" in all arenas of human life is portrayed as one of the principal characters of humankind's encounter with God's Reign.<sup>79</sup>

By introducing the language of the debt code into his own teaching Jesus elaborates and expands the geography of Jubilee forgiveness to include even those social and individual "sin debts" that people incur individually or collectively. Jesus argues and demonstrates that forgiveness must be realized in the many and varied debts we incur in our relationship with Yahweh and with each other. This does not mean that every use of the word *aphesis* can be read as a Sabbath-Jubilee reference, but many pericopes, upon careful examination, are rooted in the ancient Jubilee promises of *shemittah* debt forgiveness.

#### A: PROSBUL & THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

On one occasion Jesus was asked by Peter about the scope of forgiveness. "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times'" (Matthew 18:21–22). Jesus' response to Peter's questions suggests that the total number of occasions of forgiveness is so large that keeping a tally would be absurd. "What Matthew suggests by this hyperbole and by the

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<sup>79</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 66.

parable that follows is that forgiveness is not simply a function of ethical obligation, but is an expression of God's reign in the very fabric of human life."<sup>80</sup>

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released (*aphiemi*) him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (Matt. 18:23–35)

The parable of the unmerciful servant has often been detached from its sociological background. Instead of being seen as a clearly Jubilary parable, it has been understood as "a rather pale portrayal of the forgiveness of sins granted by God to those who forgive their brothers."<sup>81</sup> But the parable must be understood as a cautionary tale that grounds about the consequences of "ancient predatory lending."<sup>82</sup> Authors like Andre Trocmé and John Yoder see this story as a clear parable about the Jubilee year and the forgiveness of debt.<sup>83</sup> The debtor is a Galilean peasant who is the beneficiary of the year of Jubilee: all his debts are wiped away. Myers surmises that the absurdly large

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<sup>80</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 75

<sup>81</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 28.

<sup>82</sup> Myers and Enns, *Reconciliation*, 72.

<sup>83</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 28. Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 63.

figure of 10,000 talents is meant to parody the oppressive economics of “foreign debt” and the cynical policies of elite managers of the tributary regime.<sup>84</sup>

Jesus tells this parable when the majority of Israel did not practice the Jubilee, and so the second half of the parable, in which the forgiven servant refused to extend the Jubilee to another, is a critique upon the tight-fisted creditors of society, leaving the message of the parable to be thus: “There is no divine Jubilee for those who refuse to apply it on earth.”<sup>85</sup> The parable is usually spiritualized into a pious tale of our incredible debt to God, which misses the real, economic issues at hand.

The most common excuse levied against such forgiveness of debt was the serious inconvenience of frozen credit already indicated in Deuteronomy 13:7–11. The practice of *prosbol* was the well-known solution to this problem in Jesus’ day, whereby anxious creditors handed the job of collecting debts over to the courts as a way of avoiding the Sabbath-Jubilee command to forgive these debts. However, Jesus was decidedly opposed to the practice of *prosbol* and he alludes to the radical generosity required to make the Jubilee a reality.

If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful... give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’ (Luke 6:34–36, 38)

The rich should be generous, rejecting the fear of not being repaid because God will take care of them. But the honesty of the debtor must correspond to the generosity of the lender. “The debtor should not hide himself behind the protection of the law of the

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<sup>84</sup> Myers and Enns, *Reconciliation*, 76

<sup>85</sup> Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 64

Sabbath to avoid keeping his commitments.”<sup>86</sup> Thus he encourages debtors and creditors to make peace with each other through the Jubilee practice of release, rather than enter into the legal sidestep of *prosbol* (see Matthew 5:25 and 5:40).

## B: THE RICH YOUNG RULER

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.”’ He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’ (Mark 10:17–31)

In Mark chapter 10 the author is concerned with the covenantal economy of a renewed Israel.<sup>87</sup> The story of the “man” (he is nowhere identified as a “rich young ruler”) is a critique of the common desire to accumulate personal wealth at the expense of others. This runs diametrically against the covenantal sharing and cooperation necessary for mutual support and communal solidarity

According to Horsely, the man’s question to Jesus is a dead giveaway. “Only someone who is wealthy would be thinking about “eternal life.” The peasants that Jesus

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<sup>86</sup> Yoder, *Politics*, 66.

<sup>87</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 119

and the Gospel of Mark addressed would have been focused instead on how they could support their families, even on where the next meal was coming from.”<sup>88</sup>

When Jesus responds to the man’s questions he makes a point of reciting God’s commandments, while substituting “You shall not defraud” for “You shall not covet-and-seize.” This is a telling substitution because it infers that the desire to gain control of another’s goods or labour or land ultimately leads a person to defraud the poor. Adding the phrase “you shall not defraud” may well be a challenge to the wealthy elite of society, who tended to withhold wages, to take advantage of mortgages that the poor could not repay, and to charge interest on loans which was forbidden in covenant law. “The principal way that someone became wealthy in an ancient agrarian society such as Galilee and Judea was to take advantage of vulnerable peasants.”<sup>89</sup> The net result of such fraud is that the rich gain control of another’s labour and fields.

And so Jesus must challenge the “man” in Mark’s gospel to embody Jubilee economics in his dealings with others. Aspiring to personal wealth inevitably comes at another’s expense, but the Sabbath-Jubilee commands, as we have seen, were meant to protect the poor, and nurture an alternative community of sharing, cooperation, and mutual support. Put another way, the purpose of these laws was to create and maintain a socioeconomic order in which “all would have enough and none would have too much”<sup>90</sup> (see Chapter 4). Ironically, the questioning man who “kept the law” walked away shocked and grieving because the notion of cancelling debts and offering Jubilee *shemittah* to his debtors was too much for him. Jesus redefined what fidelity to the law means by connecting the commandments to the deep tradition of debt forgiveness.

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<sup>88</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 119

<sup>89</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 120

<sup>90</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Biblical Jubilee*, 96

## C: JESUS' CALL TO TAX COLLECTORS: LEVI AND ZACCHEUS

In Jesus' context, tax collectors were viewed as a notorious bunch: expected to collect taxes for both Roman and Jerusalem authorities, and to make a profit for themselves at the same time. Such a practice inevitably led to the exploitation of farmer peasants who were already in debt. Tax collectors "enriched the social and religious elites and also themselves by extracting whatever they could from peasant farmers, artisans, and small businesses."<sup>91</sup> These tax collectors were the very people who needed to remember the story of Jubilee forgiveness. These were the "sick" that needed a physician.

Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick: I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' (Mark 2:13–17)

It is tempting to read Jesus' words to the Pharisees as negative, but they may also be words of invitation to repentance. The Pharisees were excluding themselves from Jesus' table fellowship with "tax-collectors and sinners," and in so doing they were resisting the gracious offer of the Kingdom. Instead of participating in the liberation of the poor and the oppressed and instead of practicing community solidarity with sinners and debtors, they too (like the tax collectors) were acting as accomplices in a powerful

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<sup>91</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Biblical Jubilee*, 119



system of injustice. They too were in need of a physician, since the Pharisees had failed to see Jesus' teaching and actions as evidence of the coming of Jubilee.

Luke 10 tells the story of another tax collector who experiences a conversion from a life of abusing the poor, to a new life of Sabbath-Jubilee Economics.

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.' (Luke 19:1-10)

Zacchaeus was a higher ranking tax-collector and was "rich." Jesus once again crosses social boundaries and invited himself to Zacchaeus' house, which elicited the crowds disapproval. Yet, it is precisely Jesus' willingness to cross this boundary set by society that will result in Zacchaeus' transformation.<sup>92</sup> The conversion within Zacchaeus, led to a specific response. While the consequence of Levi's actions was to "follow" Jesus, Zacchaeus' response was to provide for the poor. "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (v. 8). While the specific wording of "proclaiming good news" and "release" is not used, the story resonates with the Sabbath-Jubilee mandates to redistribute wealth, forgive debts, and release slaves.

When Jesus declared, "salvation has come to this house," he insinuated that demonstrating concern for the poor is an appropriate way of confessing Jesus as the

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<sup>92</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 62-63.

Christ.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, both Levi and Zacchaeus are extricated from the dominant structure of oppression and now they both manifestly demonstrate “Sabbath economics, Jubilee spirituality, and liberty for God’s people.”<sup>94</sup>

#### D: THE LORD’S PRAYER AS A JUBILEE PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS

The Lord’s Prayer is clearly a programmatic prayer that delineates much of Jesus’ Kingdom vision. As such, it also is steeped in Jubilarly overtones, particularly in relation to the theme of debts and forgiveness. In the Lord’s Prayer the economic and religious meanings of debt and forgiveness intersect, providing a holistic understanding of the scope of *aphiemi* / *shemittah* release.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive (*aphiemi*) us our debts (*opheilema*), as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9–13)

Though the tendency of the church has been to translate “debts” as “trespasses” or even “sins” it is clear that the primary meaning is economic. Yoder, without hesitation, makes this point:

“Those numerous versions are in error which translate: ‘Forgive us our offenses as we forgive those who have offended us.’ Accurately, the word *opheilema* of the Greek text signifies precisely a monetary debt, in the most material sense of the term. In the ‘Our Father,’ then, Jesus is not simply recommending vaguely that we might pardon those who have bothered us or made us trouble, but tells us purely and simply to erase the debts of those who owe us money; that is to say, practice the Jubilee.”<sup>95</sup>

*Opheilema* can be translated as shortcomings, sins, or debts, but Willimon and Hauerwas suggest that the first meaning of *opheilema* is the “plain, economic

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<sup>93</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 63.

<sup>94</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Biblical Jubilee*, 120

<sup>95</sup> Yoder, *Politics*, 62

meaning.”<sup>96</sup> Harris affirms that, “Forgiveness is an essential component of Jubilee. The particular form of forgiveness that Jubilee emphasizes is forgiveness from debt, and every commentator on the topic names it first. Jubilee forgiveness starts not with remission of “sin” or “trespass” or “wrong” but with removal of the very specific burden of a monetary debt.”<sup>97</sup>

Thus the Lord’s Prayer is genuinely good news for the poor, and for all those who have debts which result in their own captivity and which deny them fullness of life. However, those who profited from these patterns of indebtedness or “business as usual” would not receive this as good news. The privileged people would have their security through debt-acquired wealth threatened.

For those people, the Lord’s Prayer would be a difficult one, because as a prayer for God’s reign to be established, it affirms the fact that between the human present and God’s future comes a proclamation of “release.” The petition concerning “forgiveness of debts” portrays in a condensed and economical way the radical change in relationships and behavior that is both required and made possible in the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus the Christ.<sup>98</sup>

But the meaning of *opheilema*, though primarily concerned with these financial debts, is expanded by Jesus to include the forgiveness of trespasses in general. “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14–15). In saying this, Jesus was establishing a strict equation between the practice of Jubilee and the grace of God. “This was Jesus most legalistic point: the *aphesis* of God toward you becomes vain if you do not practice *aphesis* toward each other.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Hauerwas and Willimon, *Lord Teach Us*, 79

<sup>97</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 37

<sup>98</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 80

<sup>99</sup> Yoder, *Politics*, 63

The Lord's Prayer was a summons to Israel to practice the Sabbath-Jubilee spirituality that had long been envisioned for Yahweh's people. It was a prayer for an "economy" characterized by forgiveness, and a statement of one's determination to participate in that economy as both one who has received forgiveness, and offered forgiveness to others. The Lord's Prayer is an eschatological prayer, that speaks of the advent of God's reign, or as Sharon Ringe describes, the Lord's Prayer is a "boundary moment" – the point of change from the old order to the new.<sup>100</sup> Under the monarchy Israel had abandoned the socioeconomic possibility of Jubilee economics, but the Lord's Prayer declares that with the advent of God's reign, those ancient ideals are being renewed and the forgiveness of debts is one of the implied consequences.

### **Jubilee Forgiveness Today**

To understand how the Jubilee challenge of Jesus might guide the life of contemporary Christian communities, it is helpful to reflect briefly on how the earliest church patterned its life around Jesus' Sabbath Jubilee gospel of forgiveness.

Beginning on the day of Pentecost, the earliest Christians understood their conversion to Christ as a transformation that had economic consequences on their individual lives and the corporate life of this fledgling new community. The Sabbath economics of that community required a personal lifestyle and a socioeconomic order that would prevent and overcome poverty. As Ron Sider points out, "The massive economic sharing of the earliest Christian church is indisputable."<sup>101</sup> Following Jesus' example and teaching, the early church cared for the poor and evidently eliminated each

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<sup>100</sup> Ringe, *Liberation*, 84

<sup>101</sup> Sider, *Rich Christians*, 77.

other's debts, as they shared all their possessions, and "there was not a needy person among them" <sup>102</sup> (Acts 4:32–34). The socioeconomic order of the earliest Christians both prevented and overcame poverty.

While there is evidence that the church was comprised of both rich and poor, the good news of the gospel appealed primarily to those who suffered under economic exploitation. Horsely writes that the church itself was comprised of primarily poor people. "Virtually all those who joined the assemblies of Christ, including both slaves and those who may have been heads of households, lived around the subsistence level. There is simply no evidence that any of them were wealthy." <sup>103</sup> An authentic community of solidarity and mutual support arose among them reminiscent of those earliest tribes of Yahweh who settled in the Promised Land. The economic principles of mutuality, support, and debt forgiveness reemerged in the Spirit led movement of the Jerusalem church.

Acts 6 relates how the church dealt with injustice during an instance when the Jewish speaking majority overlooked the needs of the Greek widows. When this discrimination was pointed out the response was startling: the church turned over its funds for needy widows to the minority group who had been discriminated against. The result of this new kind of financial fellowship was that "the word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem" (Acts 6:7).

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<sup>102</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, "Jubilee: Jesus' Message", 8.

<sup>103</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 139

## Forgiveness as Financial Stewardship

### A: LIVING WITHIN OUR MEANS

The costly generosity of the first church and their willingness to embody the Jubilee practice of *shemittah* stands as a challenge to the Church of our present age. Debt isn't the same thing today as it was then. What was then seen as a last resort in circumstances of dire need is now an integral part of life – our economy simply wouldn't function without debt, as we very nearly found out in 2008. Whereas Ezekiel viewed charging interest as robbery (Ezekiel 18:18) now, interest-bearing loans are seen, at best, as a necessary evil – few people would be able to buy a house without a mortgage – and at worst, “debt is a way of extending our income, deferring payment for a lifestyle we cannot currently afford.”<sup>104</sup> We live in an “age of debt” in which the mantra “buy now, pay later” governs too many of our financial decisions.

The Jubilee promise of forgiveness of debt should therefore start with Christians as they seek to cultivate an alternative way of living in the world that minimizes the need to accrue debt themselves. One of the easiest ways to do this is simply to live within our means, and not spend more than we have. According to Statistics Canada 47% of Canadian households spent more than their pre-tax income in 2001.<sup>105</sup> The discipline of simplicity and the practice of frugality and the virtue of patience are all essential qualities that need to be relearned if Christians are going to stand apart from this consumer culture that is built on debt.

Avoiding debt is also a lesson churches could benefit from, since many churches today operate “in the red” as they pay staff and maintain expensive buildings. Churches

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<sup>104</sup> Brandon, *Free to Live*, 8

<sup>105</sup> McFeat, “Buy Now, Pay Later Canadians in debt,” [27]

depend on credit to survive the lean months of summer, and even become indebted to their own denomination since those hierarchical structures of local, regional, and national ministries all have budgets of their own that must be met by local church assessments. Inevitably this arrangement leads some churches to become indebted to their Bishop, Diocese, or Head Office. Church leaders feel the pressure to raise money, and even parishioners live under the threat of losing their buildings if debts aren't paid. While churches preach about "financial stewardship" and hold "stewardship Sundays" to solicit more offerings from their people, very few consider the possibility of reducing their budget and paying down debts. Instead, churches build bigger and better facilities, believing that spending more money, even if it means borrowing more money, is the key to vitality.

Despite the urge to grow the church through the construction of newer and more contemporary buildings, sometimes smaller is better. And, though the image of a successful church is a modern building, with multiple staff, and big budgets, the early church model of Christians meeting in homes and holding "all things in common" must challenge this notion. The "Emerging Church" movement is proving that big budgets and high overhead are not required to "be the church."<sup>106</sup> Fresh Expressions UK, a British movement that has taken hold in North America, also has demonstrated this. Here, the revitalization of the church is occurring with people meeting in pubs, coffee shops, homes and other secular space.<sup>107</sup> With few or no paid staff at all, these marginal communities appear to be accomplishing the great commission in our time without that unholy alliance with banks, debts, mortgages and loans.

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<sup>106</sup> Sanguin, *The Emerging Church*, 30

<sup>107</sup> cf [www.freshexpressions.ca](http://www.freshexpressions.ca)

Church viability assessment tools, though unpopular, need to be employed by church organizations as a way of determining the financial health of a church. Faithful stewardship in the long run may mean selling buildings and restructuring regional ministries in a more efficient way. On the other hand, church hierarchies need to be willing to practice debt forgiveness within their own family. During the Jubilee year of 2000, Bishop Daily of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, forgave \$118 million dollars of debt that had been accrued by dozens of parishes, schools and church agencies. One priest declared upon hearing this news of fiscal absolution, “I felt very light. I felt like flying. This really liberates me and the parishioners.”<sup>108</sup>

Christian individuals, churches, and church leaders need to both forgive debt and avoid unnecessary debt as they go about the work of the gospel, but the removal of debt that underpins church ministry is a delicate task. If done too rashly, valuable ministries may be unnecessarily lost or cancelled. Indeed, it is often the case that month-to-month fluctuations in income and expenses require churches to carry an operating line of credit. Therefore, well-managed debt with a long term strategy toward debt elimination is in mind here.

## B: ETHICAL INVESTING

When churches or individuals invest their money they are enabling its use for certain ends. These ends may or may not be beneficial to individuals, society, or the environment, because in the complicated financial marketplace of stocks, bonds, bills, and funds it is difficult to “follow the money.” In many cases, Christians and churches may not even know what is being done with their money either because we don’t know

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<sup>108</sup> Barry, “Bishop Forgives \$118 Million,” [1-111].



how a particular business makes money in order to pay interest, or because an investment or pension fund is managed by someone else, and the fund's diversity is not our responsibility. As a result, individuals and churches may find themselves investing in ethically questionable companies that make their money through harmful environmental policies, child labour, or exploitative practices toward others. "It is contradictory to bemoan economic exploitation of low income countries and yet fail to realize that our interest and pensions are being secured by the same exploitation perpetrated in the name of shareholders and bondholders."<sup>109</sup> Therefore churches in their ignorance undermine their own proclamation by making unethical decisions on a day-to-day basis.

Quite simply, it is contradictory to run events and services to win people to Christ and bring them to a deeper faith if, in the process, we are feeding them with rice grown with child labour so that we can entertain them cheaply; seating them on chairs made from non-renewable wood that incentivizes deforestation and the destruction of natural habitats that God created; sheltering them in buildings mortgaged to banks that make their money by investing in tobacco, arms and pornography, exploiting low-income countries or through complex derivatives that harm the economy instead of benefiting others.<sup>110</sup>

An easy way to practice economic liberty and debt forgiveness is to be responsible in how we invest our money. Many banks offer "ethical funds" that might meet the Biblical criteria of an ethical investment, although the label "ethical" is no guarantee. In practice, there are "few morally flawless forms of investment."<sup>111</sup> Ultimately, Christians and their churches need to hold each other to account for their investment practices, realizing that "financial returns must come from somewhere – they do not spring automatically from the action of impersonal 'market forces'."<sup>112</sup> Our

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<sup>109</sup> Schlueter and Ashcroft, *Jubilee Manifesto*, 200.

<sup>110</sup> Brandon, *Free to Live*, 114.

<sup>111</sup> Brandon, *Free to Live*, 88

<sup>112</sup> Schlueter and Ashcroft, *Jubilee Manifesto*, 200

prosperity should not come at the expense of another. Instead, we need to ensure that a spirit of care, community, and forgiveness governs our financial dealings.

### C: SHARE THE PROFIT, SHARE THE RISK

The idea of “reaping where we haven’t sown” (Luke 19:11–27) sheds light on another warning that must be heeded in the world of commercial investing. In Jesus’ famous parable, the ‘hard man’ collected interest on his loans despite the failure of the debtor to make a profit. Most loans require payments at an agreed upon rate, regardless of the profitability of the business. If the business does well, the creditor receives a flat rate, even though his money has enabled another to gain greater wealth. On the other hand, if the business makes a loss, the same interest payments on the loan are still required, making the business more likely to fail. Even in the event of a collapse, the money must still be repaid. Therefore, “The creditor gains from the venture without assuming any of the risk. And by expecting a fixed return, both creditor and debtor make a presumption of future success – the folly of which the Bible points out more than once.”<sup>113</sup> Investors thus share in the profit, but bear little burden of risk. In the stock markets limited liability arrangements also shield shareholders from the potential implications of their investment. An investor only stands to lose what he has invested, even if the company is convicted of great environmental negligence, or unfair treatment of others. For example, investors were not held responsible in 2008 when numerous airlines went out of business.<sup>114</sup> The bankrupt airlines left passengers stranded at airports, and forced them to buy new flights to get home, yet the investor lost no more

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<sup>113</sup> Brandon, *Free to Live*, 87

<sup>114</sup> Brandon, *Free to Live*, 89

than their initial investment. In this manner, the unpaid debt of the company was offloaded to the customer.

An alternative to this unjust arrangement would be equity partnerships, in which the investor owns a stake in the business, and therefore shares both the risk and the reward. Loans and debts in this arrangement are more transparent and less exploitative, since there is a close link between the investment and return, and it requires a relationship to exist between the creditor and debtor as they undertake a shared enterprise.

### **Forgiveness as Community:**

Israel developed mechanisms to protect its weakest members against socioeconomic ruin. Forgiving each other's debt, not charging interest, gleaning, tithing to the poor: all of these only made sense in a community of mutuality and reciprocity, where "being your brother's keeper" was a moral obligation, rooted in Yahweh's own caring initiative, and sustained by a culture of honour and shame. Families, clans, and villages were honour bound to help vulnerable households by providing help to neighbours in need.

The church, as Christ's renewed community, enlivened by the Spirit should reflect the same community concern for all its members especially those in need. Today, personal financial struggles are usually hidden, and kept private. Today, a church may not be aware just how much its own members struggle with debt and are greatly in need. Many people hide their financial struggles, and many churches prefer to turn a blind eye to such concerns believing that financial assistance is the realm of social agencies and creditors. Mutuality and solidarity have been replaced by secrecy and individuality.

But if the church is to be the Jubilee community that God envisioned so long ago, then there needs to be real ways that churches can care for their own without bringing more shame upon them. The waitress who lost her job could be supported by her church family while she seeks reemployment. The single student struggling with loans and expenses could access a bursary and be adopted by a supportive family in the church. The parishioner who is paying too much in rent by an abusive landlord would have a church full of advocates to defend her. The young family with credit card debt could be counseled and educated toward a brighter future while the church helps them to refinance their debts at a lower interest rate. In such a community, the church membership gathers around the financially downtrodden and begins to resemble a Jubilee community that is united in care for each other, a place where financial struggles are acknowledged and addressed.

## **Forgiveness as Mission**

### **A: AMBASSADORS OF RECONCILIATION**

The Apostle Paul implored the church in Corinth to understand their vocation as that of “ambassadors of reconciliation.”

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5:18–20)

Paul’s message of reconciliation is rooted in Christ’s own ministry of reconciliation. As we have seen, Jesus expanded the notion of *shemittah* release to include various forms of *aphiemi* forgiveness. Forgiveness was social, political and

interpersonal. Therefore as the church embraces its Jubilee mission of forgiveness, then forgiveness becomes not simply a task to be done, but a “way of being in the world.”<sup>115</sup> Maria Harris encourages the church to see the Jubilee message of *shemittah* as a call to forgive “everything we can.” “As human beings we are called to forgive everything that is in our power to forgive.”<sup>116</sup> This surely involves striving to effect forgiveness and debt release for others, but it also includes more personal levels of forgiveness too: forgiving old hurts in our lives, forgiving resentment, forgiving those who have sinned against us. It might mean forgiving financial debts owed to us, especially if they have become points of bitterness, but Christians practice the full range of forgiveness in our families, with our spouses and children, which even includes forgiving ourselves. As we strive to become ambassadors of reconciliation, then it may be that when we are ready we can even forgive those “impossible to forgive” criminals of our world.<sup>117</sup> Lamont Hiebert explores the range of forgiveness in his song “Spark”:

As you forgive your mom/You forgive your dad  
 For the things they did/For the things they said  
     Not that what happened/was okay  
 But to free yourself from these bitter chains  
 You forgive your friends/You forgive your foes  
     All your enemies/to release their hold  
 And you find a way/through the hardest part  
 You forgive yourself/you forgive yourself<sup>118</sup>

## B: THIRD WORLD DEBT RELIEF

If we are going to “forgive all we can” then that must surely include “doing all we can” to release others from debt, especially the crippling debt of the third world. In her expansive notion of forgiveness Harris emphasizes that “All religious people of goodwill

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<sup>115</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 36

<sup>116</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 42

<sup>117</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 48

<sup>118</sup> Lamont Hiebert, “Spark”, *Jubilee*, 2008

ought to take on responsibility for petitioning both the World Bank and the US government to erase those foreign debts that are crushing our hemispheric neighbours.”<sup>119</sup>

Lowery adds:

Nowhere is the need for Sabbath and Jubilee greater than in efforts to relieve the crushing burden of debt on poor nations. Though not a simple matter to resolve, the international debt burden carried by the poorest nations, primarily in war-torn and poverty-stricken regions of Africa and Latin America, cries out for dramatic institutional solutions akin to biblical *shemittah* (release) and *deror* (liberty).<sup>120</sup>

In 1993 two Englishmen, Martin Dent and Bill Peters, co-founded the movement, “Jubilee 2000,” in order to forgive some \$100 billion in debts owed by 51 of the poorest countries in the world, principally in Africa.<sup>121</sup> Crushed by the AIDS epidemic, minimal access to the global economy, and corrupt political leadership, these countries acquired loans from the World Bank. The UN estimates that if funds currently paid out on debt in these severely indebted nations were diverted back into health care and education, the lives of seven million children could be saved within a year.<sup>122</sup> Since only about 10 percent of these nations’ debt is owed to private banks, most of the debt could be reduced or cancelled by direct government action of lending nations. And so Dent and Peters called for treating the year 2000 as a Year of Jubilee and millions of people around the world petitioned their governments to use taxpayer money to forgive the debts to these nations. The results were amazing as billions of dollars of debts *were* forgiven. In the case of Uganda \$1 billion worth of debt relief was received and used to double primary

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<sup>119</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 44

<sup>120</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 150

<sup>121</sup> Shriver Jr., “Jubilee Shout,” 7

<sup>122</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 150

school enrolment. In Bolivia, debt repayments were reduced from \$127 million to \$52 million which is allowing more to be spent on hospitals and housing.<sup>123</sup>

Even though the year 2000 has passed, the campaign continues through efforts like the Jubilee Debt Campaign and the Drop the Debt Campaign. Debt relief for poor countries is possible, if political will can be mustered. “The Sabbath and Jubilee vision of abundant life for all and its conviction that debt burdens have limits may help change the moral climate and create the necessary political environment for substantial debt relief.”<sup>124</sup>

### C: SOCIAL INVESTING: OIKOCREDIT

“Market Fundamentalism” is the idea that free markets have the ability, through their own power, to solve society’s economic problems by providing access to investment and credit.<sup>125</sup> But what if one has no money to put into the market? This is the condition of over a billion humans on earth who live on less than \$1 a day. Making the markets “work” for the poor requires imagination, and one bright example of such ingenuity is Oikocredit, and outgrowth of the World Council of Churches. Oikocredit works with other micro-credit organizations to provide small, low-interest loans to village-level people for business and basic survival needs. The program only works if individuals, churches and community groups are willing to invest their money at less-than-market rates of return: “a slight concession, one might say, to the spirit of Leviticus 25 that is better than no concession at all.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Elliot, “Candle Lit for Debt Relief”, [17]

<sup>124</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 151.

<sup>125</sup> Shriver, “Jubilee Shout,” 7

<sup>126</sup> Shriver, “Jubilee Shout,” 7

According to their own website:

We offer a dual return to our investors: financial and social. In addition to earning modest financial returns, investors are secure in the knowledge that their money is being used to fight poverty, promote fair trade and respect our planet's natural resources. Oikocredit brings people, the world over, one step closer to reducing poverty. Oikocredit puts social investors and business owners together into a cooperative network to exchange funds, stories and successes. Using business strategies to link investors and borrowers is a simple way for the poor to make a living in a fair, respectful and effective way. Poverty needs a remedy and microcredit is one of the ways to make this remedy happen.<sup>127</sup>

The non-profit organization Kiva has made the world of microcredit investing easy and accessible so that churches and individuals can personally help the world's poor access capital at an honest rate of return. Kiva enables Jubilee debt release through its mission to "connect people through lending to alleviate poverty."<sup>128</sup> Leveraging the Internet and a worldwide network of microfinance institutions, Kiva lets individuals lend as little as \$25 to help provide affordable (or even interest free) credit to small projects around the world, providing opportunity in some of the world's most needy areas. To date, nearly one million Kiva users have made \$250 million dollars worth of investment into small, life changing, entrepreneurial projects in more than 200 of the world's poorest countries.

## Summary

In Desmond Tutu's book "No Future Without Forgiveness" he reflects on the centrality of forgiveness in the South African Truth and Reconciliation process. Yet, this could be the title of this chapter, since those words clearly have Jubilary overtones without forgiveness, both personal and economic, our future and the future of our world

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<sup>127</sup> cf. <http://www.oikocredit.org/en/home>

<sup>128</sup> cf. <http://www.kiva.org/about>



is bleak. But the biblical Jubilee holds out the promise of forgiveness for all and the hope of a future for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. The Old Testament message of Sabbath-Jubilee forgiveness was taken up by Christ himself as a central motif in his life and teaching. Forgiveness of debts provides the foundation upon which the Kingdom of God was to be constructed. What began with the economic *shemittah* forgiveness of debilitating loans, has grown to embrace the fullness of *aphiemi* release. As such the church's mission today should be characterized by forgiveness in all its fullness.

## Chapter 3:

# Rest the Land

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“We who have lost our sense and our senses – our touch, our smell, our vision of who we are; we who frantically force and press all things, without rest for body or spirit, hurting our earth and injuring ourselves: we call a halt.” (United Nations Environmental Sabbath Service)<sup>1</sup>

“The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.”  
(Lev. 25.23)

### Introduction

Our world faces both a spiritual crisis and an ecological crisis that stem from the same root. Spiritually we are overworked, stressed out, and we chronically neglect the basic disciplines of spiritual growth and family nurture. While this problem is personal, its effects are far reaching and impact the whole of society. On average, more family members (parents and children) are working outside the home than 20 years ago and, “their absence, exhaustion, and anxiety about money for lifestyles take a toll on the family. The logic of consumption drives young and old to perpetual dissatisfaction. Our spirits hunger for wholeness.”<sup>2</sup> Our 24.7 world knows no stopping. New York City used to be known as the “city that never sleeps,” but today most cities never sleep and true rest is becoming a rare commodity. This overwork is just as much a problem within the church as without, as the busyness of church life takes a toll on many a ministry volunteer, and clergy “burnout” is becoming an increasingly common term.

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<sup>1</sup> earthministry.org/resources/worship-aids/sample-worship-services/the-united-nations-environmental-sabbath-service

<sup>2</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 2.

Related to the spiritual crisis is an ecological one. Because humankind has refused to “take a break,” nature has been denied any rest of its own. The growing global demand for energy, food, precious metals, and consumer goods has meant that the created world must work overtime to provide for humanity’s insatiable desire for more. The chronic overuse of creation is evident wherever we look. Calvin DeWitt in his book *Earth-Wise* has catalogued the Seven Degradations of Creation. They include:

1. Alteration of the Earth’s Energy Exchange: this includes global warming and the depletion of the Ozone layer.
2. Soil and Land Degradation: this includes a shift to monoculture farming, topsoil loss, and the devastation of soil life.
3. Consumption, Waste, and Ecosystem Dysfunction: this includes garbage, chemical waste, and air pollution.
4. Land Conversion and Habitat Destruction: this includes deforestation, and reclamation of wetlands.
5. Species Extinction: this includes the rapid extinction of birds, fish, and plant species.
6. Global Toxicification: this includes the proliferation of toxins, carcinogens, and various chemicals around the globe.
7. Human and Cultural Abuse: this includes the loss of family farms, and environmentally attuned people groups.<sup>3</sup>

Both the spiritual crisis and the related ecological crisis have at their source the same problem: lack of restraint. Humankind has forgotten how to say “no” to the many opportunities that seek to fill our lives with busyness, and thereby failed to practice restraint. Humanity has also been unable to take our hands off of the natural resources of our world so that the earth might experience a reprieve from our wants and needs.

In a famous essay published in 1967 Lynne White Jr. asked the question: “What did Christianity tell people about their relation to the environment?” His answer is that Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion that the world has seen. “Christianity... insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dewitt, *Earthwise*, 29–42

<sup>4</sup> White, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis”, 1203

Much has changed since White made that critique against the church, but not for the better. Ellen Davis comments that “we now read the Bible within an industrial economy that exploits both “natural resources” (itself an entrepreneurial term) and human beings on a wider scale than an economy the world has ever known.”<sup>5</sup> Public sentiment also confirms this. Churches are seen as unable to admit their complicity in the groaning of creation and slow to make amends through any radical response. The assumption about Christians is that, “They read James Dobson, Chuck Colson, and Jerry Falwell, not Wendell Berry, Herman Daly, or Al Gore; they focus on the family and the military, not the environment.”<sup>6</sup>

Over against the gloomy, pessimistic picture of our personal and ecological reality, this chapter will consider how the Sabbath-Jubilee thread of “rest” can heal these wounds. The mention of “Sabbath Rest” elicits nostalgic and antiquated images of a time when Sabbath observance consisted of closed up stores and regular church attendance. Barbara Brown Taylor paraphrases the fourth commandment in this light: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it boring.”<sup>7</sup>

But Israel’s tradition of Sabbath rest is far more exciting than this. The sacral ethic of human rest and land care leads us to an environmental ethic where land is seen as gift of God, deserving of rest, the personal property of God alone. The much needed ethic of restraint is woven into these traditions. Restraint is built into creation by God himself, and from the moment of creation, to the Promised Land, to the Prophets, to Jesus himself, Sabbath-Jubilee restraint is a recurring theme. Far from being antiquated, these

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<sup>5</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 72.

<sup>6</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 233

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 127

texts are the most valuable resources available for God's people in their attempt to respond to the twin crises of our day.

Holy days are nothing new, but the Jewish notion of fallowing the land, and refreshing humanity is utterly unique.

The idea of sacred days set aside for divine worship, communal celebration, and special festivals is utterly ordinary and completely common to both pagan and Jewish tradition. But the idea that every seventh day must be set aside as sacred rest is distinctively and uniquely Jewish.<sup>8</sup>

The church's historic attempts to assemble a Biblical, holistic environmental ethic have been fraught with difficulty. Certainly the biblical language of "dominion" and "subjugation" has been poorly understood and caused numerous setbacks, especially in an age of genetic engineering of plants and organisms. The bland language of "stewardship" has also failed to rouse hearts and minds and has been corrupted by power in the absence of restraint. The language of "Christian Environmentalism" has been perceived as too political to provide consensus across the theological spectrum. The hopeful language of "creation care" elicits more positive images of humanity's original vocation to "till the garden and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). Perhaps the pervasive and holistic language of "Sabbath-Jubilee Rest and Restraint" has the theological weight and wide-ranging appeal to bring renewed energy to the church's response to the environmental crisis. For,

Within Judaism there still exists a mechanism – the original mechanism – for reconciling stewardship's absolute need for human restraint and forbearance with the mundane exercise of power. For Jews it is the Sabbath, and the idea of the Sabbath that introduces the necessary restraint into stewardship. It is also the Sabbath alone that can reconcile the Jewish attitude toward nature with the attitude of secular environmentalism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 189

<sup>9</sup> Clowney and Mosto, *Earthcare*, 68–69

The Hebrew scriptures are storehouses of information on these topics. Israel knew hard labour during the Egyptian slavery, so Yahweh's call for rest from work is rooted in their own experience. Similarly, Israel as a nation is inseparable from their relationship with "the land," specifically the Promised Land of Canaan. Therefore, the divine mandate to care for the land is rooted in their very identity from the call of Abraham onward.

Following the biblical thread of "rest" and "restraint" begins with the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and continues with the Sinai discourse of Exodus. It is recapitulated in the Sabbatical Year laws of Deuteronomy, and is reinforced by the Jubilee texts of Leviticus. We will trace the thread through a brief survey of the prophetic literature followed by an examination of Jesus' own attitude toward the Sabbath. From all of this we will be able to glean practical applications to guide the church in its renewed mission as God's Sabbath people.

### **Sabbath Rest and Creation**

As we have seen, the Sabbath-Jubilee threads of slavery and debt release find their origins in the covenant code of Exodus. However, the Sabbath theme of "rest" with its personal and environmental possibilities has more primitive roots, being grounded in the Biblical creation story of Genesis 1–2. The creation story itself is filled with agrarian images of a God who creates the world by bringing order out of chaos.<sup>10</sup> The formless void of "pre-creation" is envisaged as an uncontrollable and shapeless wilderness, that is tamed, ordered, and blessed through the creative and nurturing acts of Yahweh. Just as farmers cultivate fields, carve out fertile land, manage their flocks, and build their

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<sup>10</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 82-85

homesteads, the creative God transforms disorder into ordered fruitfulness. Thus, God, the ultimate farmer, is able to take the chaos of primordial earth and fashion a world of abundance. The created world has more than enough fruitfulness to satiate creaturely life including humanity. Thus, the Jubilee theme of our final chapter, a world that contains “enough for all” also finds its origins in the prosperous potentiality of creation. Creation’s abundant and prosperous land has “built in” potential to provide for everyone.<sup>11</sup>

Humankind is created in God’s image and consequently imbued with a special sacredness that declares their unique value in the created order. This too resonates with Jubilee themes of justice and equality, since this divine image declares a person’s value whether they are slave or free, rich or poor, powerful or weak. This “humanity” is created and charged with a task:

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth. (Genesis 1:28)

The Lord God took the man and put him the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

Made in God’s image, humankind is to exercise “dominion” and is entrusted with the task of caring for the garden of creation. On this sixth day of creation, humans come “into their true power as makers of history, as representatives and emissaries of God, called to shape the world in imitation of the creator’s own primordial activity on the first six days of creation.”<sup>12</sup> Ecologically sensitive readers generally take offense at the notion that God commanded humans to exercise “dominion” over the earth and much debate has swirled around the best way to understand the way to exercise this mastery. Ellen Davis

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<sup>11</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 86

<sup>12</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 212

notes that the Hebrew preposition “over” can also mean “among” so that “the verbal phrase as a whole may denote rule that is characterized by firmness rather than harshness.”<sup>13</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner observe that the basic meaning of the verb is not to rule; the word actually denotes the travelling around of the shepherd with his flock.<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann suggests that these words intentionally echo the conquest narrative and as such provide hope to a landless Israel in the midst of the Babylonian exile.<sup>15</sup> Middleton interprets the authority given to humankind to be a communal authority exercised in concert with other creatures and organisms.<sup>16</sup> But perhaps Lowery summarizes best the interconnected relationship that exists between the image of God and the task of tending the garden:

God’s attentive care and generosity toward the world in the creation story is a function of God’s sovereignty, a matter of honour. So too, humans, by virtue of their creation in the image of God to rule and master the earth, have a special responsibility for the welfare of all living creatures, especially the most vulnerable. By portraying God’s sovereign rule as fundamentally benevolent, Genesis 1 authorizes God-resembling humans to exercise power in the world with responsibility and generosity.<sup>17</sup>

This dominion, therefore, cannot be construed as a brutal conquest of earth’s resources. It can only be understood in connection with humanity’s unique role as image-bearing emissaries of Yahweh.

However, a crucial element of the creation story is found at the beginning of Genesis 2.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God

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<sup>13</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 55.

<sup>14</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1190.

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann, “The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers,” 109

<sup>16</sup> Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 52

<sup>17</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 92



blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. (Gen. 2:1–4a)

An unfortunate chapter division between Genesis 1–2 has served to diminish the importance of the story of God’s rest on the seventh day.<sup>18</sup> According to the imposed chapter partitions the end of day six and the creation of humanity (1:31) marks the end of a distinct narrative unit. Consequently, the next sentence begins a new chapter (2:1) that includes the Sabbath day story. As such, Lowery laments:

Whatever the original intent of such a chapter division, its effect is to devalue Sabbath and exalt humanity. It implies that the story ends after day six, with humans created male and female “in the image of God” and authorized to “rule and master it.” It emphasizes work over rest and encourages an anthropocentric reading of the world that has had destructive consequences in the modern age.<sup>19</sup>

Literary clues in the story itself suggest that the narrative unit properly ends at Genesis 2:4a, climaxing with the story of God’s rest on the seventh day. Seen this way, God’s rest and enjoyment becomes the high point of the creation story. The importance of rest thus being highlighted, “rest” becomes a dominant thread and recurring theme throughout Israel’s ongoing story.

The final verses of the creation story introduce the verb *shabat* which means “to rest, cease, stop.” This is the verbal form of the noun *shabbat* that comes into English as “Sabbath.” When God rests it is a sign that creation is complete: what began as chaos and confusion is now finished and whole. God’s rest is also a sign of his sovereignty. During the conquest, and during the monarchy of David and Solomon, God periodically granted rest as a sign of security, victory over enemies, and political stability. Thus “God rests at the end of creation because God is able to rest. God’s benevolent rule in the

<sup>18</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 87

<sup>19</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 87

universe is unchallenged. Sabbath rest is a celebration of God's enthronement as universal sovereign."<sup>20</sup> Genesis leaves no ambiguity about the reason the seventh day is blessed and set apart. God "made it holy because on it God rested from all the work God created to do" (2:3b).

God's work and God's rest are held in subtle tension throughout the creation narrative. The story is both a celebration of divine power and creativity, and at the same time a story of divine delight and rest. Rest only has meaning in reference to God's creative work. "Sabbath rest is not the absence of work. It is work's fulfillment. It celebrates creative labour. Rather than saying 'no' to work, Sabbath says 'enough for now.'"<sup>21</sup>

*Shabbat* also provides perhaps one of the most relevant ideas for the future of Israel and our world today: restraint. Natural abundance coupled with personal, self-restraint (*shabbat*) stand at the heart of the creation story.

By God's own precedent, rest is woven into the fabric of the universe. Periodic self-limitation, deliberate relinquishment of power to work the world and control it, is by Sabbath example a cosmic principle. Creation climaxes and finally coheres in Sabbath rest. It is the glue that holds the world together.<sup>22</sup>

### **Wilderness Sabbath: Manna**

*Shabbat* is established as an ordinance of creation in Genesis 2, but the theme of Sabbath rest and restraint may have historically originated in the experience of Exodus 16. According to Walter Brueggemann both Genesis 1 and Exodus 16 are "creation stories," for just as God brought order out of chaos in creation, so too in Exodus 16, the story moves from chaotic insecurity, to serene security, from frantic anger and anxiety to

<sup>20</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 89

<sup>21</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 82

confident trust. The story of the manna in the wilderness is perhaps the “legitimizing legend” for Sabbath rest, even more so than the story of creation.<sup>23</sup>

The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, ‘If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread: for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.’ (Ex. 16:2–5)

The story begins with a complaint to Moses and Aaron because they were hungry. Already Israel is longing for the life they had in Egypt. The primary complaint concerns food security and land provision. “Egypt may have been slavery but it was filled with life-giving resources. Land always is. That is what land is. And wilderness is filled with hunger.”<sup>24</sup> However, God’s gracious response to their complaint is to provide “bread from heaven” even though Israel is still a landless people.

The manna has a peculiar characteristic, once every week it yields twice as much and lasts twice as long as it does on the other days. People do not need to worry about going hungry on the Sabbath. God would reliably provide food day by day, and on the sixth day God would provide enough to endure throughout the Sabbath. Thus, as in the creation story, God’s provision is coupled with the command of restraint. The manna is a life-giving gift to these wilderness wanderers, but it is also an opportunity for Israel to live within God’s limits by not hoarding and not gathering on the seventh day. As such

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<sup>23</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 29.

the whole experience of manna is described as a “test” of Israel’s ability to practice restraint in the midst of God’s abundant provision. Manna is “both gift and test.”<sup>25</sup>

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, ‘This is what the Lord has commanded: “Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.”’ So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, ‘Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. For six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.’ On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. The Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The Lord has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.’ So the people rested on the seventh day. (Ex. 16:22–30)

If manna was a test for Israel, then some of Israel’s number failed, since on the seventh day people went out to gather, finding none. God interprets their actions as a refusal to keep the commandments, and for the first time in the biblical account God is angered at Israel.<sup>26</sup> The Sabbath concept is still a new concept, and Israel must learn to trust in God’s provision. They must learn that Sabbath promises seven days of sustenance for six days of work. “It operates on the assumption that human life and prosperity exceed human productivity. We get more out of life than we put into it.”<sup>27</sup>

At this pivotal moment in Israel’s history, just after their deliverance through the Red Sea, *Shabbat* and manna are indicators that God’s new community will be founded on an alternative, countercultural economy. In Egypt the Hebrews experienced hard

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<sup>25</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 70

<sup>27</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 94

labour as they participated in an exploitative agricultural economy. The first chapter of Exodus describes their experience:

The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Ex. 1:13–14)

Food production in Egypt was controlled by Pharaoh, and accomplished through peasant workers. Landowners would be required to relinquish as much as half of the total yield to fill the royal granaries. “Exploitative agricultural economies were for millennia a fixed feature of various Near Eastern societies.”<sup>28</sup> In Egypt, “food is business,”<sup>29</sup> and was a source of great power and wealth. Ironically, Israel’s own monarchy would eventually place similar burdens on its own farming population. But the manna story works consciously against both of these cultural backgrounds, painting a new picture of work and rest for those who had left Egypt behind. The gathering of manna is clearly an agricultural image of field-work, meant to contrast the Egyptian and imperial images of food management with Israel’s new agrarian economy.

Eating is the most basic of all cultural and economic acts. Therefore at this liminal moment in the wilderness, the formation of Israel as a counterculture to Egypt begins with a negotiation between God and Israel that clarifies the principles and restrictions pertinent to the moral economy of eating.<sup>30</sup>

As Brueggemann asks: “What does it mean to receive bread in the wilderness, in a land without life supports? It surely means to receive bread (sustenance) that refuses to be administered and managed and therefore is not perverted by the destructive inequalities of land bread.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, manna is a gift that calls into question the entire

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<sup>28</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 72.

<sup>29</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 73

<sup>30</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 70

<sup>31</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 32

concept of “food production.” In what sense do humans “produce” food? Food production is God’s domain. The story of the manna demonstrates that food production is an expression of God’s sovereignty over creation and generosity toward humankind. “Those who see food as a concrete sign of God’s care understand that it “is not a ‘product’ but a gift that we must nurture.”<sup>32</sup>

The manna was both a “gift” which revealed Yahweh’s goodness, and a “test” to assess Israel’s willingness to practice a Sabbath restraint. The gift of manna allows Israel to rest from production, and in so doing see God’s glory revealed. “At evening you shall know it was Yahweh who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of Yahweh” (Exodus 16:6–7). God’s glory is seen in “making empty full.”<sup>33</sup> The manna taught Israel to “recognize God’s mighty acts on their behalf.”<sup>34</sup>

And yet, with the gift comes the requirement of restraint. Israel is not to hoard this gift, and they are not to gather this gift on the Sabbath day. When some tried to hoard, it went bad. When some tried to gather on the Sabbath, they found none. These lessons of restraint and God’s fruitful provision from the land come to Israel when the people are still “landless.” Sabbath rest emerges not in a context of abundance and security, but in a place without life supports. It is in the wilderness, wandering without a land of their own that God teaches them about the land’s fruitfulness and through these daily and weekly acts of restraint Israel learns to recognize that Yahweh is God.

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<sup>32</sup> Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 30

<sup>34</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 38.

## The Fourth Commandment: The Sabbath Day

The Manna account ends with the creation of a visible reminder: a jar with an omer-full of manna to be set “before Yahweh as a keepsake for the generations... before the covenant.” (Exodus 16:33–34) The experience of wilderness Sabbath must never be forgotten as Israel moves from a landless people to a landed people, and memory is something “in short supply in Israel”<sup>35</sup> To ensure that these Sabbath memories of creation and manna remain central in the developing life of Israel, the Sabbath day is enshrined into law as part of the Decalogue. For it was in the Ten Commandments that these instructions of Sabbath observance were demanded explicitly as the weekly memorial.

The fourth commandment occupies the pivotal position in the Decalogue, “standing at the crux of theology and ethics;”<sup>36</sup> the verses before the Sabbath commandment address Israel’s relationship with God, and the commandments that follow regulate social relationships within and between households. The fourth commandment is also the longest of all the commandments providing explicit instructions for observing the Sabbath day. It is recorded in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Ex. 20:8–11)

The theme of weekly rest that began as a restriction on one activity (the collection of manna), has now expanded to include a prohibition calling for cessation from any

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<sup>35</sup> Brueggemann, “Living with a Different Set of Signals,” 20.

<sup>36</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 106.

work. This law is binding for all of Israel, and applies across the socioeconomic spectrum by including slaves and resident aliens. Even animals are included in this required day of rest, which is not surprising since the rationale for the command is based on the creation story; because God rested on the seventh day of creation, all creation rests with him. *Shabbat* means stopping the work of both humans and working animals so that they and the land itself may be regularly released from the demands of labour and production. The implication of *Shabbat* is not only “rest,” but also to “have relief,” and to “be refreshed” (Deut. 5:12-15).

The fourth commandment as found in its other version in Deuteronomy 5 enumerates a similar list of Sabbath prohibitions, but offers a different justification for this required day of rest. Instead of rooting Sabbath observance in creation, Deuteronomy theologically grounds Sabbath rest in Israel’s redemption from slavery in Egypt.

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut. 5:12-15)

Central to all the Sabbath-Jubilee threads is the need to “remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt.” The experience of liberation in Egypt forms the bedrock for Sabbath observance because the God who acted on behalf of Israel in Egypt to save them from hard labour, is able to sustain them on a regular, weekly basis as they rest



from their labour. As Israel was released from slavery in Egypt, the Sabbath offers a weekly reminder of that liberation.

In the real, monarchial world, farm and village households faced excessive work and periodic shortages of food and other subsistence goods. In the world of Creation-Sabbath (Genesis 1), all people, created in God's own image, could expect seven days of prosperity for six days of work.<sup>37</sup>

Also, the Sabbath provides a day of rest and refreshment so that the story of liberation might be told, retold, pondered, remembered, and taught to a new generation:

When your children ask you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. (Deut. 6:20–21)

In both Exodus and Deuteronomy, the primacy of Sabbath observance is made explicit by its centrality in the Decalogue. Rest for land, people, and animals posed an essential part of Israel's covenant with Yahweh, a necessary expression of Israel's identity as people liberated from slavery. The inclusion of animals, ecology, and slaves in the mandated rest is no afterthought. The seventh day laws are humanitarian and ecological in nature. The seventh-day law requires Israelite householders to rest "so that your ox and donkey may rest, and your homeborn slave may be revitalized, along with the resident alien" (23:12). "Sabbath is meant to revitalize the most vulnerable workers in the household economy – the slave, the resident alien, and, first of all, the farm animals."<sup>38</sup> This prominent inclusion of farm animals is a result of humanity's original responsibility to care for all the creatures of the earth (Genesis 1:26–28). "Humans, though important in the universe, are not the sole focus of God's attention. The entire

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<sup>37</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 102

<sup>38</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 106

creation stands in relationship with God, and nonhuman species are, like people, subject to God's ongoing care."<sup>39</sup>

Animals and agricultural life are as deserving of rest as humans are. But as well, there is a connection between ecological rest and human rest, for when donkeys and oxen cease their labour, when fields cannot be farmed – humans are forced to rest as well.

In fact, Sabbath rest and the practice of ecological restraint was so fundamental to Yahweh's covenant, and so defining of Israel's new economy that failure to practice it was treated as a capital offense, tantamount to breaking the covenant and punishable by death.

You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. For six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. (Ex. 31:14–15)

A notable test case for this seventh day rest is found in Exodus 35:3 which states "You shall kindle no fire in all your dwellings on the sabbath day." A story of man who violated this command is found in Numbers 15:32–36 and is likely a midrash on this particular commandment.<sup>40</sup>

When the Israelites were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the sabbath day. Those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses, Aaron, and to the whole congregation. They put him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him outside the camp.' The whole congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. (Num. 15:32–36)

The severe penalty levied on this man is a result of a double violation of Sabbath law. Firstly, the gathering of firewood is an agricultural act that violated the command

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<sup>39</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 107.

<sup>40</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 107

that both man and land receive a weekly rest. But also, the firewood being gathered was likely firewood to be used for kindling a cooking fire. Therefore, the ban on kindling this type of fire on the Sabbath was meant to ensure that women, “will not be asked to fire up the oven to cook while men enjoyed Sabbath-day rest.”<sup>41</sup> Sabbath makes no distinction of gender or social class: “No one should be forced to work on the seventh day, male or female, slave or free – everyone is freed from toil. The man caught gathering firewood is not honoured for his hard work,”<sup>42</sup> but rather is punished for desecrating God’s nature, violating God’s covenant, and disregarding the God-given rest due his wife and daughters on the Sabbath day.

Sabbath observance sets Israel apart from surrounding nations.<sup>43</sup> Sabbath is a sign of who God is; it reflects the nature of God and the character of God’s relationship with Israel. It is a ‘little jubilee,’ “a weekly celebration of the hoped-for world of release, where debts are forgiven, property returned, and slaves set free.”<sup>44</sup> As such its importance cannot be overstated.

### **The Fallow Year in Exodus**

It is unclear how Israel’s weekly Sabbath is related to the Sabbatical Year and Jubilee. While the Biblical narrative seems to flow from the seventh day to the seventh year, it is possible that seventh year celebrations gave rise to seventh day legislation. It is equally unclear what differences may exist between pre-exilic and post-exilic

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<sup>41</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 107.

<sup>42</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 108

<sup>43</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 106.

<sup>44</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 102

understandings of Sabbath and sabbatical years.<sup>45</sup> Whether the sabbatical year is “Sabbath writ large,”<sup>46</sup> or whether the biblical Sabbath is a “little Sabbath Year” the humanitarian and environmental implications are evident in both cases.

Exodus 23:9–12 unites the seventh day and seventh year observances by grounding them both in concern for the poor (epitomized by the resident alien), and the environment (both animals and land). Both observances are concerned with justice for the oppressed and rest and refreshment for all creation.

You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. For six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your home-born slave and the resident alien may be refreshed. (Ex. 23:9–12)

The literary tool of “inclusio” is employed by the author to connect the cessation of work on the Sabbath with the fallow year. By repeating key works at the beginning and end of the passage the intervening material is highlighted. Both “resident alien” (*ger*) and “life” (*nefesh*) are placed at the beginning and end of the passage and the result is the effect is to create literary bookends for the material in between.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, “the ‘life’ of the ‘resident-alien’ is the glue that binds the fallow year to Sabbath.”<sup>48</sup>

Here the rationale for fallowing the land is not found in creation, or found in Israel’s release from slavery. Instead, there seems to be a twofold rationale for resting the land. The first reason is that land is in some way a “living being.” The similarity between the seventh year slave release law and the seventh year land rest law point to

<sup>45</sup> cf. Eskenazi et al., *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*.

<sup>46</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 106.

<sup>47</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 52.

<sup>48</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 52.

some common justification for release. Both are living beings, created by God, and must be released. Land can be enslaved just as humans can. The land is seen as a living organism that can be abused, impoverished, exploited, dominated, just as Israel experienced in Egypt. Wendell Berry has adopted the term “kindly use” to describe the intimate knowledge of land required by land owners which leads them to responsive and sensitive relationships with their piece of creation.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, as a living organism, it too should share in the prescribed “release” just as Israel herself does. Israel is called to responsibly tend the garden with deep reverence for the “soul of the soil” under their feet.<sup>50</sup> Speaking of this passage, Wirzba states:

When understood within the agricultural context of ancient Israelite life, this message is a ringing reminder that we depend on each other for our own well-being and that to damage creation is at the same time to damage ourselves. We need good work to make it through life, but we also need healthy animals and vibrant land in which all our living can be done. The protection and rest of land and animals thus become a major concern.<sup>51</sup>

But secondly, the motivation for fallowing the land every seventh year is based on Yahweh’s concern for the poor and is meant to provide for the economic support of the poor: “you must release it and leave it alone, so the needy of your people may eat” (23:11). Taxes, war, crop failure, and death frequently undermined the ability of families to survive. In such cases, the Sabbatical Year laws instruct economically secure households to give support to struggling families.

Gleaning went hand in hand with the fallow year and provided such a buffer for the poor. There are at least two perspectives on how this law was observed. Horsely argues from a traditional perspective that “Fields would produce crops even when not

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<sup>49</sup> Berry, “A Good Farmer of the Old School,” 160

<sup>50</sup> Habel, *The Land is Mine*, 114

<sup>51</sup> Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 146

plowed, planted, and cultivated.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, during its fallow year, the field’s spontaneous produce would be available only to the poor as a form of aid for the destitute. Norman Habel echoes this claim, stating that indeed “the land Sabbath, unlike the fallow law, applies to all arable land during the Sabbath year, every seven years all agriculture is to cease in the land.”<sup>53</sup>

But others have challenged this notion saying that Israel could never have survived such a period of self-imposed famine. “It is not clear how a nationwide ban on agriculture every seven years would benefit the poor – other than perhaps give them the cruel pleasure of seeing everybody else starve too.”<sup>54</sup> Leon Epsztein suggests that the land could not have been left fallow. He also suggests that “it is improbable that the fallow year was applied to all Israel at the same time; it is more probably that each farm adopted the measure at regular intervals in rotation.”<sup>55</sup>

However beneficial this provision of gleaning might be, it is possible that the book of Exodus has a more generous idea in mind. Lowery proposes an alternative reading. He notes that while the first half of the law is clear: “Six years you will plant your land and you will gather its produce,” the correct interpretation of the second half (v. 11) is less certain. The ambiguity centers on the precise meaning of the two verbs “release” and “leave alone,” and the noun to which their pronouns (“it”) refer.

“Land” (*‘erets*) in verse 10 is feminine singular. So grammatically “it” in verse 11 may refer to “your land” in verse 10. But “produce” (*tebû’ah*) is also feminine singular. “It” in verse 11 could just as easily refer to “produce” as to “land” in verse 10: “Release [its produce] and leave it alone.” In other words, this law may be focusing on the product rather than the process of agriculture. The issue may not be whether the land is planted... but who controls the produce at harvest

<sup>52</sup> Horsely, *Covenant Economics*, 40

<sup>53</sup> Habel, *The Land is Mine*, 103.

<sup>54</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 54

<sup>55</sup> Epsztein, *Social Justice*, 132.

time – as suggested by the rationale that follows the command. You must “release it” and “leave it alone,” so that the poor of your people may eat (v 11).”<sup>56</sup>

When most readers interpret these verses they are deriving the meaning from the later Jubilee legislation (Lev. 25:2–7) which clearly envisions a year of rest for the land, but the purposes of the laws in Leviticus and Exodus are quite different. While Exodus urges release “so the poor of your people may eat,” (Exodus 23:11) Leviticus makes no mention of the needy, (Lev. 25:4–5) here a true Sabbath is in mind, a fallow year, a year of complete rest for the land. The different intentions of Leviticus and Exodus may have required different practices. So it is possible that what Exodus 23 envisions is not a year of rest *for* the land, but an ancient “set-aside” year, where produce is relinquished for the poor *in* the land. If this program was practiced on a rotating basis then “Relinquishing crops from “set-aside” fields and vineyards every year on a seven-year rotation would provide ongoing relief for the poor without leading to periodic starvation among the non-poor.”<sup>57</sup>

### **The Fallow Year in the Deuteronomic Code**

In the book of Deuteronomy observing the Sabbath day has a lower profile than in the book of Exodus. While the fourth commandment is reiterated in Deuteronomy 5:12–15, it is not found in the Deuteronomic Code itself. The agrarian aspect of the Sabbatical Year is still upheld as a necessary part of Israel’s history and identity although very little is said about the fallowing of lands and the law of gleaning.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field,  
you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan,

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<sup>56</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 53

<sup>57</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 55

and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left, it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. (Deut. 24:19–21)

This text emphasizes the theme of restraint in the practice of agriculture. “You shall not go back to get it” is a difficult command in a culture where every little bit counts. And like in Exodus, this agricultural restraint is for the sake of the poor. But the law of the sabbatical year is conceived in a unique manner in Deuteronomy. While Exodus and Leviticus identify the sabbatical year as a year when all agricultural work must cease, and where the land should remain uncultivated, this is not the case in Deuteronomy. It is not the ‘release of land’ that the Deuteronomic law speaks of, but the ‘release of debts.’ The cancellation of debts (see Chapter 2) is the most important aspect of the sabbatical year in Deuteronomy, an innovation particular to Deuteronomy, and a theme which gets very little treatment later in Leviticus. This has led writers like Weinfeld to deduce that the sabbatical year in Deuteronomy has only a social significance. “It appears, therefore, that Deuteronomy, by regarding the primary function of the sabbatical year as the cancellation of debts and by ignoring the provision for land release, has divested the law of what, according to pre-Deuteronomic sources, was its original import.”<sup>58</sup> The priestly writers of Leviticus seem only interested in the sacral aspect of the seventh year, “while the author of Deuteronomy is interested primarily in its social aspect and completely ignores the sacral side.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 223

<sup>59</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 223.



The two laws (fallowing the land, and releasing debts) are not mutually exclusive: it is quite likely that both were observed or, both were regarded as obligatory and that there was some connection between them. Yet the different emphases of these Sabbath-Jubilee texts must be noted. Deuteronomy reinterprets the Sabbath Year laws in accordance with the author's own social tendency and sees the release of debt (rather than the release of land) as the essential purpose of the Sabbatical year.

### **The Sabbath Year in Leviticus**

The gleaning tradition that was developed in the Sinai discourse is reiterated in the book of Leviticus. In two places restraint is urged during the harvest, not for the sake of the land, but so that the poor and disadvantaged may share in the harvest.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 19:9–10)

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest, you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 23:22)

The untouched corner, the dropped produce, and the seventh-year yield belong to the poor by right. They have a “moral claim” on part of the harvest of every field, vineyard, and olive orchard.<sup>60</sup> In a fascinating development, Leviticus describes this support of the poor not simply as a handout: but in the words of Leon Epsztein, the Holiness Code offers the poor “a chance of sharing in the very act of production” not just

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<sup>60</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 55

in the act of consumption.<sup>61</sup> The poor have a share in the land and a share in the fieldwork.

Compared to Deuteronomy, the treatment given to fallowing of land in the Levitical law is immense and thorough. It also supersedes the Sinai discourse in Exodus in its explication of Sabbatical year agricultural practices.

When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound labourers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food. (Lev. 25:2–7)

Even before the mention of the fiftieth year laws concerning the Jubilee, Leviticus 25:2–7 draws attention to the weekly Sabbath by repeating the word Sabbath (or its equivalent, the phrase “complete rest”) six times in its initial verses. And, as opposed to the thrust of Deuteronomy, this Jubilee Sabbath is linked immediately to the land, and the word *land* is also used six times. “The formulation of the Sabbath year rest in the Holiness Code is even more striking. It repeats what was said in the Covenant Code but adds and emphasizes something else in first place. The land *itself* deserves a rest. This is not a question of human fallowing but of divine hallowing.”<sup>62</sup>

Leviticus then extends the rights of both the poor and the land. The poor have rights to the land, and to its produce and harvest. The land itself has rights: right to rest and rights to regenerate. These claims are derived from God himself who is the creator

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<sup>61</sup> Epsztein, *Social Justice*, 113.

<sup>62</sup> Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 190.

of both land and humankind. “Rest puts everything, even the land itself, back in a state of stasis, equity, equality.”<sup>63</sup>

In fact, as Weinfeld has noted, there is a certain line of development between the Covenant Code and Leviticus. According to Exodus 23:11, the owner of the field has no right at all to enjoy the fruits of his land in the Sabbatical year. For the owner, the land is a “complete taboo,”<sup>64</sup> only the poor people may eat from the production: what is left is to be devoured by the animals but not to be touched by the owner. In Leviticus 25 on the other hand, the product of the seventh year becomes ownerless property, which everybody may enjoy: the poor men, the animals, as well as the owner (v. 6). “The fact that the ancient law does not permit the owner to enjoy the fruit of his land, even in the case when there are no poor around, indicates that the point of the provenance of the law of release of land is to be seen in the sacral domain rather than in the social one.”<sup>65</sup>

The Levitical description of the Sabbath year is distinct in its approach because unlike the description in Exodus, there is no evidence that some kind of “set-aside” program is in mind here. It is not the produce of the land that is “released,” but the land itself that is to remain untouched. As such, authors like Lowery have suggested that the Priestly writer’s vision of the fallow year would be “utterly impractical” for Israel to observe. A complete cessation of agriculture, if fully implemented, would not benefit the poor or anyone else. Instead, “If fully implemented it would lead to mass starvation.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*, 191.

<sup>64</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy*, 223.

<sup>65</sup> Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy*, 223.

<sup>66</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 50.

## Jubilee Rest

Leviticus 25 transitions from the topic of seventh-year Sabbatical practices to the topic of fiftieth-year Jubilee laws. The fallow year precedes the discussion of the Jubilee year, suggesting that “only when this pattern of yearlong Sabbath for the land – an agricultural fallow year – has become habitual does the Jubilee proper arrive, with the counsels to count off seven times seven years, throughout the land to all its inhabitants.”<sup>67</sup> Seventh year observance is a prerequisite for the fiftieth year Jubilee observance. Thus the first seven verses of Leviticus 25 prescribe a condition essential to the rest of Jubilee. If there is to be a year of the Lord’s favour they must keep a yearlong period of complete rest, during which they let the land lie fallow. “They must hallow the land so it will know the blessing of re-creation and so the poor might eat its yield. But they must also rest themselves, in order to listen to the voice of God.”<sup>68</sup> Only then can the Jubilee properly be observed.

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. (Lev. 25:8–12)

From an agricultural point of view, the dawning of the Jubilee year is a call to an even more radical approach to land and agriculture. The Sabbath and Jubilee years combine to effectively “pull the plug on an entire mode of production” not just for one year, but for two, since both the forty-ninth year and the fiftieth year would be subject to

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<sup>67</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 20

<sup>68</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 20–21.

release.<sup>69</sup> It is difficult to imagine how an agrarian nation could survive on stored produce for one year, much less two years.<sup>70</sup> Not surprisingly, the Holiness writer anticipates anxiety around this command.

You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely. Should you ask, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’ I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old. The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land. (Lev. 25:18–24)

In response to the anticipated apprehension, Yahweh promises a triple harvest on the sixth year to sustain the whole nation for nearly three years! The people, “surely needed courage to let their land lie fallow every seventh year while counting on God to give them what they needed.”<sup>71</sup> Yet for most readers such a programme of agricultural restraint is unthinkable, and unfortunately for many people it moves the Jubilee concept into the realm of fairy tale.

Even in the unlikely event of a triple harvest in one year, it is difficult to imagine how an entire agrarian population could survive for two years on stored grains and fruits supplemented only by things that grow wild. This would be impossible in the modern world, with our historically unparalleled ability to produce and store agricultural produce. It is unthinkable that an entire nation in the ancient world could live for two years on stored food.<sup>72</sup>

Such a requirement makes it easy to understand why the Jubilee year was not regularly practiced by Israel. The agricultural requirements alone were so demanding that the nation likely balked whenever the fiftieth year arrived. This raises a question

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<sup>69</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 59

<sup>70</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 59

<sup>71</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 26

<sup>72</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 60.

about the very purpose of the Jubilee laws. Is Leviticus 25 meant to outline genuine social reforms, or does this utopian vision have another purpose?

On the one hand, a literal reading is certainly the author's intent, as Leviticus 26 prescribes both blessings and curses upon those who follow or neglect these laws. The reward for obedience is abundant harvest and satiation in the land.

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. (Lev. 26:3–5)

In contrast, the penalties for disobedience are ruin and violence. However, the purpose of such discipline is God's way of ensuring that the land does indeed get the rest it needs. If Israel does not observe the Sabbath year, and if the land is not given its due rest, then Yahweh will make it happen by force.

I will devastate the land, so that your enemies who come to settle in it shall be appalled at it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it. (Lev. 26:32–35)

A literal reading of Leviticus also unearths a perspective that is distinctly ecological in its sensitivities. Here the land is portrayed as needing a Sabbath (Lev. 26:34–35), though the major thrust is once again on helping the poor. Most strikingly too it helps the wild animals, who more frequently are viewed as a major threat to human survival.

This legislation while not comprehensive does seem to convey a gentle non-exploitative approach to the environment. Resting the land every seventh and fiftieth

year, giving first fruits to God, helping the poor and even the wild beasts are the reasons appealed to in order to justify these rules. Maximum yields, the texts suggest, will be achieved by putting God first and letting the poor share the harvest, not by overworking the land and retaining all its fruits for oneself.

However, if the Sabbath and Jubilee agricultural laws in Leviticus are neither practical nor responsible, then perhaps their purpose is theological instead. Perhaps the intent was simply a further restatement of the land's freedom under Yahweh's sovereign rule. "The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev. 25:23). To be sure, these agricultural laws reject an overly anthropocentric view of the world: even though humankind was tasked with the job of "ruling" creation, God's ownership cannot be overridden by human needs and wants.

It is also important to remember that Leviticus is a book written to returning exiles who are contemplating how to more faithfully live as God's people as they return to the land.<sup>73</sup> It is clear that the holiness code interprets the exile to Babylon partly as punishment for neglecting the Sabbath-Jubilee commands concerning the land: "As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it" (Lev. 26:35).

Even though the people of Israel may fail to participate in the rest and renewal of Sabbath and consequently be scattered among the nations, the land will do so nonetheless. It will "accept (or enjoy) its Sabbaths all the time it is desolate." (Lev 26:34) The Holiness writer perceives that the land cares how it is used or misused. It demonstrates a kind of moral sensitivity – even agency – "vomiting out" those who defile it, be they Canaanite or Israelite (18:25–28).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 69

<sup>74</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 110

Davis here suggests that the land “cares how it is used or misused.”<sup>75</sup> This “moral sensitivity” portrays the land itself as a living being.<sup>76</sup> This is a distinctly agrarian mode of thinking. The whole land is imbued with holiness.

Norman Habel identifies the social model implied in the Holiness Code as “an agrarian theocracy” and he comments, “As a jealous landowner, YHWH desires responsible tenants who will maintain an attitude of reverence and concern for the very soil and soul of the land.”<sup>77</sup> As J. Joosten observes, the people of Israel “are represented in the image of asylants granted the right to settle on temple lands... Anyone established in the land... must, therefore, adapt his actions, his words and his thoughts to the holy presence of the God of Israel.”<sup>78</sup> “The earth has its own vocation to obey and worship God, and its own worth apart from its usefulness to human beings.”<sup>79</sup> Borrowing language from Martin Buber, the land is a “thou” not an “it.”

“The I-Thou relationship between people and land is so important that the people must pay the price of exile for violating the land’s integrity... Failure to respect the integrity of the earth is the moral equivalent of kidnaping or murder. It is, for Israel, a capital crime.”<sup>80</sup>

### **Prophets and the Promised Land**

The value and sanctity of the land was firmly ensconced in the Creation, Sabbath, and Jubilee stories of Israel, even though they were a people yet without land of their own. However, the gift, promise, and challenge of caring for “land” would become far more real once they had crossed the Jordan.

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<sup>75</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 110.

<sup>76</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 110

<sup>77</sup> Habel, *The Land is Mine*, 114.

<sup>78</sup> Joosten, *People and Land*, 189–190.

<sup>79</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 62

<sup>80</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 62.



The crossing of the Jordan is the most momentous experience that could happen to Israel. The Jordan crossing represents the moment of the most radical transformation of any historical person or group, the moment of empowerment or enlandment, the decisive event of being turfed and at home for the first time. Nothing is more radical than this, that the sojourner becomes a possessor. The precarious sojourner has the heady new role of controller of what is promised and now given. The moment drastically redefines who Israel will be. Land entry requires of Israel that it cease to be what it had been in the wilderness and become what it has never been before. Land makes that demand. At this moment Israel does indeed become a new creation, a slave becomes an heir, a helpless child becomes a mature inheritor.<sup>81</sup>

Sometime in the fifteenth century BCE Israel began the slow process of taking possession of the land.<sup>82</sup> It is likely that by the twelfth or eleventh centuries they had developed a viable, small, farming network as families and clans distanced themselves from the Canaanite cities and built farms and communities upland.<sup>83</sup> However, the land was not managed well by Israel's monarchs whose political, economic, and military aspirations overshadowed their religious task of tending and keeping the garden. According to Ellen Davis, by the eighth century, "this culture of Israelite small farmers was beginning to crack under the pressure from their own monarchs, who had created new systems of centralized agriculture."<sup>84</sup> In this time of agricultural crisis the prophetic voice was raised up by Yahweh.

The prophet is precisely for the time in the land: 'When you come into the land... Yahweh your God will raise up for you a prophet' (Deut. 18:9–22). The land creates a situation in which the new decisive word of Yahweh must be made visible to Israel. It is the condition of being in the land that creates a prophetic situation.<sup>85</sup>

It was prophetic voices like Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah who over the centuries took up the cause of defending the land and the farmers who cared for it. Given the

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<sup>81</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 43

<sup>82</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 113

<sup>83</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 121

<sup>84</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 121

<sup>85</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 86

centrality and importance of the Creation-Sabbath-Jubilee commandments and their emphasis on creation-care, it is not surprising that Israel's oldest prophetic voices are distinctly rural and agrarian. In fact, Amos and Hosea were probably the world's first agrarian writers.<sup>86</sup> The basic elements of these earliest prophetic voices were as follows:

1. Fertile soil is a gift and trust of God.
2. Humankind's relationship to the soil, demonstrated primarily in our practices of food production and consumption, is fundamental to every other aspect of life.
3. Misuse of the gift of land, including maltreatment of those who work the soil, will ultimately undo every political structure, no matter how sophisticated, stable, and powerful it appears to be.<sup>87</sup>

A brief summary of these prophets will help us appreciate how this message can be found in their prophetic legacy.

#### A: AMOS

Much has been written about Amos as the champion of the poor, but it is a little noted fact that that Amos's prophecy is to a remarkable degree agrarian in nature and oriented to the fertile soil. The word *'ādāmā*, which means "arable land" appears ten times in Amos's prophecy (3:2, 5; 5:2; 7:11, 17 [3×]; 9:8, 15 [2×]). That word marks both the starting point and the end point for Amos's vision for the people of Israel on their own land.

Amos denounced the royal abuse of the land. He declared that kings were not free to manage the land as they wish, but because Israel is God's chosen people, they are meant to stand apart from other nations and manage the land in accordance with

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<sup>86</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 120.

<sup>87</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 121

Yahweh's Sabbath-Jubilee directives. Therefore, prophets like Amos were a thorn in the side of monarchs who sought to emulate other nations and pursue policies of land misuse.

The punishment that Amos foresaw for Israel's disregard for the sacredness of the land is nothing short of unbearable: "Israel will surely go into exile" (Amos 7:17). Israel, the people of promise on the land of promise risk losing the land altogether.

Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile from off its soil (*'ādāmā*)... Your wife will be a whore in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword, and your soil (*'ādāmā*) will be portioned out by lot, and as for you – on ritually unclean soil (*'ādāmā*) you will die, and Israel will surely go into exile from off its soil (*'ādāmā*) (Am. 7:11, 17)<sup>88</sup>

Walter Brueggeman suggests that Amos' critique is fueled in part by Israel's unwillingness to observe the Sabbath. Without the Sabbath both land and people suffer.

Landed people are tempted to create a *sabbathless* society in which land is never rested, debts are never canceled, slaves are never released, nothing is changed from the way it is now and has always been. The give and take of historicity can be eliminated, and all of life can be reduced to a smoothly functioning machine. That is the meaning of the producer-consumer consciousness that tempts Israel to betray the meaning of the land.<sup>89</sup>

Without the Sabbath the land never rests, animals never rest, and labourers never rest. Without Sabbath, "Land will be void of covenant. Everything can be bought and sold. Brothers and sisters, like land, become commodities."<sup>90</sup> People become slaves instead of caretakers and land becomes merchandise instead of an inheritance. Amos knew this and saw it happening:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.' (Am. 8:4–6)

<sup>88</sup> Translation by Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 127

<sup>89</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 61.

<sup>90</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 61

## B: HOSEA

Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel: for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hos. 4:1–3)

While Amos is concerned for farm families that are removed from their land, Hosea takes issue with the religious establishment's own cooperation with this abuse of people and the land. Hosea is well known for his marriage to a prostitute, but what is often overlooked is that his prophetic actions and raw language are meant to depict how Israel has been unfaithful in its treatment of the land.

When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for *the land* commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.' (Hos. 1:2)

Hosea's sexual language and imagery serves his purpose of demonstrating how the land itself had been defiled by Israel's lack of concern. Just as sexuality is damaged when it is isolated from other responsibilities and pleasures of the common life, so the same is true of Israel's covenant relationship with Yahweh and the land. Wendell Berry has often made the same connection between sexuality and agriculture and the fecundity of the land. He writes, "Sexual love is the force that in our bodily life connects us most intimately to the Creation, to the fertility of the world, to farming and the care of animals."<sup>91</sup> Elsewhere he notes the "uncanny resemblance between our behaviour toward each other and our behaviour toward the earth."<sup>92</sup> The same attitude that allows us to

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<sup>91</sup> Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 137

<sup>92</sup> Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 124

exploit each other enables us to exploit the earth.<sup>93</sup> This similarity between sexual love and farming perhaps led Hosea to use his image of prostitution.<sup>94</sup> For Hosea, “sexual activity outside of the ties and responsibilities of community life is a figure for appropriation of the earth’s bounty by the elite, to the impoverishment of the countryside.”<sup>95</sup>

Like Amos, Hosea suggests that Israel will pay the ultimate price for their unfaithfulness: exile. “My God rejects them, for they did not listen to him – and they will go wandering among the nations” (Hosea 9:16–17). Hosea’s poem offers a radical vision of the death of the nation whose undoing is in their exploitative lack of care for the land.

Yet, for all of Hosea’s vitriol, he ends his prophecy by calling upon Israel to remember and reclaim the right relations between them and the source of life.

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the Lord; say to him, ‘Take away all guilt; accept that which is good, and we will offer the fruit of our lips. (Hos. 14:1–2)

## C: JEREMIAH

While Amos and Hosea prophesied to the Northern Kingdom, Jeremiah also brought a distinctly agrarian message to the tribes of the south. Jeremiah more than any other prophet led Israel to discern God’s hand in the radical events of Babylonian exile. Jeremiah’s lament is as much for the land itself as it was for Israel.

Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the animals have fled and are gone. I will make

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<sup>93</sup> Davis, *Scriptures, Culture and Agriculture*, 175.

<sup>94</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 136.

<sup>95</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 136

Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a lair of jackals; and I will make the towns of Judah a desolation without inhabitant. Who is wise enough to understand this? To whom has the mouth of the Lord spoken, so that they may declare it? Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through? And the Lord says: Because they have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, or walked in accordance with it, but have stubbornly followed their own hearts and have gone after the Baals, as their ancestors taught them. (Jer. 9:10–14)

Jeremiah can hardly find images to say what it means for the people of promise to exhaust all the rich possibilities of the Promised Land. Central to Jeremiah's interpretation was that the Babylonian captivity was a judgment upon Israel for their neglect of honouring the Sabbaths of the land. Every seventh year, the people were to let the land lie fallow, but for nearly 500 years, Israel had failed in its task of living in harmony with the earth, and neglecting to observe the Sabbath years along the way.

This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon for seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. (Jer. 25:11–12)

Jeremiah decrees that seventy years is the penalty that Israel must pay for their disobedience. The Chronicler “does the math,” suggesting that for four hundred and ninety years, from King Saul until the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites did not honor the Sabbath. The land was given no Sabbath for nearly five centuries. Therefore, God took all of the Sabbaths at one time, one year for every Sabbath year that was not honored. That means seventy Sabbaths were taken at once, the approximate length of the Babylonian captivity, according to the prophecy of Jeremiah.

They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of

Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years. (2 Chr. 36:19–21)

While Biblical numerology and prophetic predictions can fuel various and wild interpretations, the idea of imposed rest for the land by means of exile is at least consistent with the holiness writers of Leviticus. In Leviticus, Yahweh stipulates that such a punishment could be expected for their disobedience.

I will devastate the land, so that your enemies who come to settle in it shall be appalled at it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste.

Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it. (Lev. 26:32–35)

“The fundamental reason for the fall of the state was the neglect of the Sabbatical Year, and by implication the neglect of the Jubilee Year as well.”<sup>96</sup> Without the regular Sabbatical and Jubilee Years to restore economic and ecological balance, Israel was incapable of sustaining a just society.

Therefore the prophetic literature of Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah offers a bleak anticlimax to the possibilities held forth in the Torah. The abundance of creation, the Sabbath day, the Sabbath year, and the Jubilee – all become squandered possibilities. Now, Israel has lost its chance. As Israel goes off into exile they will never again (in Biblical times) have the autonomy in their own land to enact Yahweh’s plan for creation care. Yet, even in Exile Jeremiah emphasizes the observance of the Sabbath as a key way that Israel will retain their uniqueness in a strange land (Jer. 17:19–27).

Nehemiah and Ezra would attempt to reorganize Israel in the land once again in the fourth century. Yet, living in the land controlled by another is a problematic

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<sup>96</sup> Rosenblum, “Is Gaia Jewish,” 195.

existence. With foreign powers taking turns ruling over Israel, observing the Sabbath and living in the land would forever be altered.

### **Jesus, Sabbath and Restoration**

During the life and ministry of Jesus, Rome held possession of the land, and Israel was an occupied nation, no longer free in the land promised to them. N. T. Wright has suggested that even though Israel was physically “in” the Promised Land, they still considered themselves in exile because pagans ruled them.<sup>97</sup> In this context, Jesus radically recasts the meaning of Israel’s Sabbath-Jubilee traditions in the context of a new Kingdom of God – not a kingdom affixed to a particular piece of land, but a kingdom where God’s people are subject to Yahweh’s rule and not Rome’s.

Yoder has rightly noted that Jesus does not speak directly of leaving the soil fallow. Yoder is optimistic in his explanation for this silence, suggesting that of all the Jubilee ordinances, fallowing the land on the Sabbatical Year was actually practiced with some regularity. Indeed, there is some evidence that Israel did observe the seventh year release of the land.<sup>98</sup> 1 Maccabees tells the story of how the city of Beth-Zur made peace with the imperial army, “because they had no provisions there to withstand a siege since it was a sabbatical year for the land... the Jews fought for many days, but they had no food in storage because it was the seventh year.” (1 Macc. 6:48–54)

Also, Josephus records the following decree of Julius Caesar in 47 BCE concerning taxes from the Jewish homeland:

Gaius Caesar, imperator for the second time, has ruled that they shall pay a tax for the city of Jerusalem, Joppa excluded, every year except

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<sup>97</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 151

<sup>98</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 64



the seventh year, which they call the sabbatical year, because at that time they neither take fruit from the trees nor do they sow. (Antiquities, 14:202)

Thus it could be that Jesus' relative silence on the issue was reflective of the modest, ongoing practice of the agrarian Sabbath and Sabbath year. Yet, exploitative attitudes toward workers and land were ever-present. Roman tariffs made farming extremely precarious. Farmers were required to switch from diverse, subsistence modes of farming and practice more intensive, monoculture methods of agriculture in order to have surplus income to meet Roman demands.<sup>99</sup> This method of agriculture was necessarily riskier. Letting land rest, or allowing the land to remain fallow every seventh year was a principle that occupied Israel could not easily afford. Therefore, many farmers in Israel fell into the peasant class.

The term peasant .. denotes a relationship of exploitation in which the vast majority who produce the food on which everyone and everything depends are consistently relieved of their surplus, so that a small minority have a huge surplus while most remain at a subsistence level. Simply: a peasant is a systematically exploited farmer.<sup>100</sup>

Agricultural and ecological exploitation were pressing concerns of first century Palestine. As well, Jesus himself could not have been too distant from the issues of farms and fields, since Jesus himself, growing up in agrarian Nazareth, would have had personal experience with caring for the land and living in concert with creation. John Meier writes:

In the gospels Jesus is nowhere portrayed as a farmer. To be sure, Jesus and the rest of his family may have been engaged in part-time farming of some plot of land. The size of the family (Joseph, Mary, Jesus, four brothers, and an undetermined number of sisters) would argue for both the need and the ability of his family unit to provide at least some of its food from farming – as one would expect anyway in the case of villagers close to the fertile slopes and fields of Lower

<sup>99</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 21

<sup>100</sup> Crossan, *The Essential Jesus*, 4–6

Galilee. This may help explain – though only in part – why a good deal of the imagery in Jesus’ parables and metaphorical language is taken from agriculture rather than from the workshop.<sup>101</sup>

## A: JESUS THE LORD OF THE SABBATH

In the gospels, Jesus speaks about the Sabbath only a handful of times.

Nevertheless, it is still evident that the Sabbath-Jubilee thread of rest and restraint was woven throughout Jesus’ ministry. Sabbath lies at the heart of an ongoing rabbinical dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees. The stated issue is whether certain actions (collecting grain and healing) are allowed on the Sabbath, but the deeper issue is how Sabbath observance reveals the character of God himself.

One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?’ And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.’ Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.’

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come forward.’ Then he said to them, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. (Mark 2:23–3:6)

Jesus’ disciples violate one of the primary tenants of Sabbath keeping: they went into the grain-fields, which is construed as agricultural work. There they helped themselves to the heads of grain. To justify his actions, Jesus refers to the story of David

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<sup>101</sup> Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, 279

and his comrades in 1 Samuel 21. In that story, David's eating of the bread of presence occurs during a time of transition and uncertainty. Saul's old reign was declining while David's new reign was ascending: a fitting story since Jesus' new interpretation of Sabbath laws seems to clash with the traditional interpretations offered by the Pharisees.<sup>102</sup> But in 1 Samuel, the physical hunger of David and his friends took precedence over the purity concerns of eating bread of Presence, reserved for the priest. Thus, the hospitality of God was not limited by priestly purity.

Jesus' opponents show that they fundamentally misunderstand the meaning of Sabbath. According to Jesus, Sabbath is properly observed not through purity and legalism, but through radical hospitality and concern for the poor and marginalized. "Sabbath is made *for* humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath". at the heart of Sabbath observance must be concern *for* humanity. "The Pharisees see Sabbath observance as a sign of cultural distinctiveness and cultic purity. Jesus sees Sabbath as a sign of justice for the vulnerable poor.

"The dispute between Jesus and his rabbinical opponents is not whether to observe Sabbath, but how to observe it. The Pharisees apparently interpret the disciples plucking of grain in light of Exodus 34:21, which explicitly forbids agricultural work on the Sabbath: "In plowing time and harvest, you must rest!" The more fitting association, however, is the gleaning tradition (Lev. 19:9–10, 23:22; Deut 24:19–21; Ruth 2), and the Sabbath and Sabbath-year laws in Exodus 23.9–12, which ground seventh day and seventh year in economic support for the resident alien. Jesus' disciples pluck grain, not as householders who own the crop and have the right to sell it, but as the economically vulnerable who have a God-given right to take what they need to survive."<sup>103</sup>

Jesus' rationale for his disciples gathering grain was simply that "they were hungry" (Mark 2:25), an oblique reference to the gleaning tradition, whereby the edges of

<sup>102</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 124

<sup>103</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 128.

the fields belong to the needy poor and the sojourner. Ched Myers sees this act of gleaning as a “protest of ‘civil disobedience’ over the politics of food in Palestine.”<sup>104</sup>

Against the Pharisees’ ‘reductive’ ethic, focused on keeping the Sabbath holy via prohibition, Jesus pits an expansive ethic, re-authorizing the work of gleaning on the Sabbath as a divinely ordained right of hungry people.<sup>105</sup>

Later on, when the scene shifts to the synagogue, Jesus further reinforces this point by healing a man’s withered hand. Symbolically the withered hand represents the loss of power and socioeconomic status. By healing this man Jesus has restored the man’s ability to work. At first glance this appears to be contrary to Yahweh’s divine command to rest from working. However, by restoring this man’s ability to work, Jesus has actually restored his ability to rest from work on the Sabbath day. “He has ‘violated’ Sabbath so the man may ‘observe many Sabbaths.’ Saving a life supersedes the sabbath.”<sup>106</sup>

The Kingdom of God is the place where Sabbath-Jubilee rest is observed and where creation is restored. Both fallowing the land and resting from work serve to restore God’s creation: both land and human being experience healing rest on the Sabbath. Therefore, Jesus’ act of healing on the Sabbath is entirely consistent with the Biblical purpose of the Sabbath even though his action could be construed as “work” by the Pharisees. Jesus states that acts of compassion, justice, and liberation are consistent with the Sabbath, not opposed, and the central meaning of the Sabbath is not only in

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<sup>104</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 161.

<sup>105</sup> Myers, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, 38

<sup>106</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 132.

resting the land and securing access to food but also in healing every infirmity.<sup>107</sup> As

Jesus stated in Luke's gospel:

Then he said to them, 'If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?' (Luke 14:5)

But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?' (Luke 13:15)

Jesus' upholds the Old Testament provision for creaturely rest but amplifies its meaning to include the untying, release, and healing of the sick, the marginalized, and the poor. "If we do this for land, and creatures, should we also not ensure that the sabbath is done for humankind?" His statements echo the gleanings and hospitality codes and make unmistakable allusions to the exodus story of liberation and social justice. The image here of donkeys being rescued and "shaking off the yoke" recall the theme of *shemittah*.<sup>108</sup> Saving lives and restoring people is allowable Sabbath work since Sabbath observance is not necessarily a time of limitation, but rather a demonstration of God's boundless mercy and unlimited care. Sabbath is a "little Jubilee,"<sup>109</sup> a weekly celebration of God's healing care and the opportunity for setting things right.

## B: CONSIDER THE BIRDS

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all

<sup>107</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 95.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 170, n. 65. Also, Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 49.

<sup>109</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 130.

his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matt 6:25–33)

The Levitical writers knew that the practice of agricultural restraint would be difficult for Israel to uphold. They would always be tempted to violate the commandments in an effort to secure one’s own future, not believing in God’s ability to provide apart from their own labour. And so, Yahweh offers his assurance: “Should you ask, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’ I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years” (Leviticus 25:19–20).

Jesus’ famous teaching on worry in the Sermon on the Mount has often been removed from its Sabbath-Jubilee origins. Yet when read in light of the pervasive Biblical theme of Sabbath rest, Jesus is clearly reinforcing the ongoing practice of Sabbath restraint. Speaking to his own audience, Jesus’ announcement of Jubilee elicited the same apprehensions from his hearers as their forefathers felt: “What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?” (Matthew 6:31–33). Jesus’ disciples doubt God’s ability to meet their needs apart from their own hard work. Their attitude is one of “scarcity.” But Jesus is repositioning Sabbath-Jubilee rest at the centre of his kingdom platform. He encourages them to practice restraint, to provide rest for the land, to allow for the worker to be refreshed, and to make the Sabbath a day of restoration and justice.

But both Jesus and the Holiness writer remind their audiences about the superabundance of God, and the built-in potentiality of creation. Trocmé interprets Jesus' exhortation as follows:

If you work six days (or six years) with all your heart you can count on God to take care of you and your loved ones. Let your land lie fallow without fear. Just as he does for the birds of the sky, who neither sow nor reap nor gather away in barns, God will also provide for your needs. The Gentiles who ignore the Sabbath are no richer than you are.<sup>110</sup>

By alluding to the birds and flowers of the field Jesus echoes the abundance of creation, a rich and lavish world overflowing with goodness and abundance.

Abundance is the grounds for work stoppage on Sabbath; it is ground for debt cancellation. There is enough, more than enough, so that I can stop work for a day. There will be more than enough for creditors without squeezing debtors. There will be more than enough land, goods and property, so that I need not keep what belongs to my neighbor.<sup>111</sup>

Jesus revisits the themes of Creation, Sabbath, Jubilee, and Land and in so doing reinvigorates the topic, and provides fresh impetus for a renewed appropriation of our task as tenders of the garden, exercising loving dominion over the earth and its inhabitants.

### **Living the Sabbath**

The problems of environmental degradation, human exhaustion, careless land management, shortsighted agribusiness, and unethical food production might seem like the domain of environmentalists, politicians, or even hippy "back-to-earth" activists. But these problems are so universal that they cannot be left to special interest groups to

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<sup>110</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 27

<sup>111</sup> Brueggemann, "Living with a Different Set of Signals," 20.

address. And, as we have seen, no one is more equipped to confront these tribulations than the church, whose scriptures contain the thread to repair the damage and propose much-needed solutions to these global problems. Therefore, the *tikkun olam*, “the repair of the world,” is the domain of the church. The church has long struggled for the appropriate language around environmental issues: moving from language of “stewardship” to “Christian environmentalism” to the more current language of “creation care.” This chapter has proposed a more thorough scriptural theme rooted in the Sabbath-Jubilee mandates. If the church can begin remembering, proclaiming, and enacting this Biblical vision for the renewal of creation, perhaps this all-encompassing theme will provide new traction in this urgent time. Thomas Berry offers an important thesis on the church’s role in renewing creation. He notes that:

Western Europe gave the world the theology of redemption and Latin America gave the world the theology of liberation. But given its capacity for science, technology, communication, and invention, as well as its affinity for creation theology, it now looks as if North America may be destined to give the world a theology of creation<sup>112</sup>

The Western church’s voice is desperately needed in our time: not to promote popular ideas of God’s rescuing his people *from* creation, or rehashing outdated notions of dominion, but rather to draw awareness to the sanctity of creation, and the need for restraint with respect to our world.

Environmentalists have used memorable “re”-words such as reduce, reuse, and recycle to promote care for the planet. In a similar way, the church’s response to our crisis can also be summarized in four additional “re” words: repent, restrain, reclaim, and return. Each of these words underscores the priorities for both the church and Christian people in general as we seek to discern solutions to the problems before us.

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<sup>112</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 66.



## A: REPENT - ACKNOWLEDGE OUR OWN COMPLICITY IN THE ABUSE OF CREATION

The first “re”-word that beckons the church is the word “repent.” If it is true that the church has been complicit in the destruction of creation then repentance is the first order of business. Lynne White Jr.’s accusation was that the church, having misread the creation story, paved the way for humankind’s destructive dominance over the environment. According to White, this anthropocentric view of the created order would continue to wreak havoc until Christian beliefs were reformed. While it is not fair to lay all the blame on Christianity, it is certainly true that the church has sometimes been obstinate and late in responding to our present crisis. “It is a sad fact of recent history that the churches have been slow to recognize the gravity of the ecological problem facing the earth.”<sup>113</sup> Whether Christianity has been part of the cause, or whether Christianity has refused to be part of the solution, it is time for the church to accept their fault in our present predicament and repent. Rebekah Simon-Peter echoes the same sentiment: “God has delegated divine authority to us. What has gone wrong? It seems that we who have been called to care for creation have become sinners against the creation. It is time to repent.”<sup>114</sup>

Many congregations have remained silent on the topic of creation care because environmental issues have been so politicized, and divisions between conservatives and liberals have made church leaders cautious about how to proclaim this message. But now

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<sup>113</sup> McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth*, 103

<sup>114</sup> Simon-Peter, *Green Church*, 18

churches need to find ways and means of acknowledging their own complicity in the decay of creation.

There is no question about God's condemnation of land abuse. Leviticus states that the land is God's and that his people are only tenants (Lev. 25:23). God declares that failure to give the land its rest will result in Israel's expulsion from the land (Lev. 26:32–35). And in the book of Revelation God declares that “the time has come to destroy those who destroy the land” (Rev. 11:18). Combined with the prophetic denunciation of Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah and others, there is no question: failure to care for creation is a sin. However, the primary consequences of our sins will be most evident in the future. The degree and sincerity of our true repentance will be measured by the future generations who inherit the world from us.

The Iona Community has found a way to put words to our guilt in the context of worship. The “Creation Liturgy” which celebrates the diversity and interconnectedness of nature, has at its heart the following confession:

Leader: O God, your fertile earth is slowly being stripped of its riches,

**All: Open our eyes to see.**

Leader: O God, your living waters are slowly being choked with chemicals,

**All: Open our eyes to see.**

Leader: O God, your clear air is slowly being filled with pollutants,

**All: Open our eyes to see.**

Leader: O God, your creatures are slowly dying and your people are suffering,

**All: Open our eyes to see.**

Leader: God our maker, so move us by the wonder of creation,

**All: That we repent and care more deeply.**

Leader: So move us to grieve the loss of life,

**All: That we learn to cherish and protect your world.<sup>115</sup>**

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<sup>115</sup> The Iona Community, *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, 132–133

Until Christians and churches can come to see how their own actions have contributed to the deterioration of our world there will be little impetus for change. But at the heart of the biblical notion of repentance is a “turning around,” a reorientation of values and goals. Repentance is the first step toward change, and change is exactly what White Jr. said the church would need to do in order to help heal creation’s wounds. In fact, it has been suggested that the act of repentance is the missing element that has the ability to embolden churches in acts of eco-justice. “As recognition of the magnitude of the environmental crisis and climate change increases, ecclesial repentance may be one of the many ways by which churches clarify their own positions and move toward greater engagement.”<sup>116</sup>

As the church moves from repentance to action, the world will take notice. Brian McLaren, a pastor and author who is also highly involved in repairing his own community’s ecosystem, has felt this change of attitude:

When I meet professional wildlife biologists and other volunteers, they’re surprised that a Christian pastor would be out here doing this sort of thing on his day off. They’re not used to seeing mud-smeared pastors groping around in bog muck for turtles... I know what they’re thinking: Christians are part of the problem, not part of the solution.<sup>117</sup>

Melanie Griffin, National Programs Director for the Sierra Club, comments on the large increase in the number of Christians involved in actively protecting creation. “They are leading stream cleanups, giving sermons about creation care, and jumping into the public policy arena. Christians bring a special energy and spirit to environmental work.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance*, 112

<sup>117</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 233

<sup>118</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 233.

## B: REST – REDUCE OUR BUSYNESS TO BE REFRESHED BY SABBATH REST

Even though repentance leads to renewed action and purpose, the second “re”-word that the church must adopt is actually “non-doing” rather than “doing.” “Rest” is a key word in the scriptural story: rest characterizes God’s action on the seventh day of creation, it describes Israel’s obedience in not gathering manna on the seventh day, and in Deuteronomy and Exodus the fallow year is a year of agricultural rest, where the fields are left untouched so that the poor may have something to eat. The rationale for the Fourth Commandment is that because God rested, God’s people must also exercise restraint and rest. As Matthew Sleeth writes, “On the seventh day God created rest; he didn’t just stop creating, he created something new, blessed it, and called it holy.”<sup>119</sup> Sabbath rest is a universal truth: because the Sabbath is built into the very fabric of creation, to keep the Sabbath is to maintain the order of the universe. Walter Brueggemann observes, “A life that cannot imitate the creator in rest is in the end self-destructive... Such a life... in the end violates the very fabric of creation.”<sup>120</sup> Creation itself dictates to us that the world is not a place of endless productivity, ambition, or anxiety. Rest, not production, occupies the high point in Israel’s creation story.

So, before we address the ecological and agricultural implications of Sabbath-Jubilee precepts, we must understand the need to rest ourselves, and to fallow the land of our own lives. That is, the first step in the task of renewing creation is the practice of cessation, *shabbat*, stopping.

Even as Jubilee teaches us to honour our relation to earth by letting it lie fallow and granting it a yearlong rest, there is another land to which we must attend and to which we must pay similar reverence. This is the land of ourselves, the tiny country each of us comprises, whose

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<sup>119</sup> Sleeth, *Hope for Humanity*, 5.

<sup>120</sup> Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” 845

geography we know so well. We are to let that land, the land of our bodies, our blood, our breath, and our bones lie fallow too.<sup>121</sup>

Before any acts of healing or restoration can occur, and before the Jubilee tasks of freeing slaves, forgiving debts, healing the land, or sharing the wealth the first task for the church is what Walter Brueggemann calls “covenantal work stoppage.”<sup>122</sup> This represents a significant shift in thinking for most churches. Churches have been conditioned to think that the solution to most problems is to find a new program, to preach a powerful message, to form a new committee, to recruit new volunteers. While the church is the hands and feet of Christ in the world, the first step in repairing the world is actually to do nothing and rest. Before the Jubilee Year comes the Sabbath Year, and so the first step in the renewal of creation is for the church is to become a Sabbath people.

Sabbath is the prerequisite for Jubilee. This is true in two senses. First, it is true chronologically, since the forty-ninth year of Sabbath immediately preceding the fiftieth year of Jubilee. Second, this is just as true spiritually: without slowing down, taking time to reground ourselves and experiencing rest, the Jubilee task of healing creation will seem overwhelming to us. As Harris continues, “...But they must also rest themselves, in order to listen to and answer the voice of their God.”<sup>123</sup> Perhaps the forty-ninth year of Sabbath rest was meant to be for Israel a time of reflection and preparation, a time where Israel remembered Yahweh’s glorious acts on their behalf, and a time when Israel considered how they are to live their life according to this unique story. Only then would their hearts be prepared to enact the difficult decisions that characterized the Jubilee year. Similarly, until the church has taken time to stop, reflect, and remember its own unique

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<sup>121</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 25

<sup>122</sup> Brueggeman, “The Book of Exodus,” 845

<sup>123</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 21

identity and mission in the world, until we have practiced Sabbath rest, our efforts address the problems of slavery, debt, and the degradation of creation will be rootless and ineffectual, paralyzing us with fear and exhaustion. The Jubilee year will never “make sense” until we have stopped to ponder God’s heart. Barbara Brown Taylor has commented that in our present state of exhaustion we are unable to be truly open to God’s call. When we spiritually and physically exhausted, “It’s hard to watch the eleven o’clock news with your heart wide open, letting in the misery of neighbors near and far.”<sup>124</sup>

It is harder than ever to observe the Sabbath day of rest. Just as Israel’s rationale for observing a Sabbath day of rest was because Israel was once a slave in Egypt, we too are “slaves” in need of relief. In some ways technology has become the new slave-driver of our day, preventing us from truly resting. Cell phones, email, television, and the Internet encourage us to pursue twenty-four hour a day productivity and connectivity. “People feel trapped by the technology that was meant to free them. It’s not uncommon to hear someone say they cannot give up their technology even if they wanted to.”<sup>125</sup> Whole households are deprived of rest as parents and children become enslaved to busyness itself. It may sound anachronistic and nostalgic to recommend a return to the Sabbath, but its value lay not in its nostalgia, but in its ability to refresh us for the work of God in our world. Matthew Sleeth lays out a possible formula for Sabbath rest: no shopping, no Internet, no emailing, no eating out. Instead, play games, go on walks, nap, pray, read, observe silence. Sabbath rest doesn’t just happen:

Preparing for the Sabbath takes forethought. If you don’t want to shop on the Sabbath or you don’t want to clean, you need to make sure

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<sup>124</sup> Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 124

<sup>125</sup> Sleeth, *Hope for Humanity*, 10

you've done those things ahead of time. If you don't want work to interfere, you have to wrap things up in advance, let colleagues know that you don't answer calls or email on the Sabbath, and close up shop.<sup>126</sup>

In addition to the seventh day, the seventh year might also provide opportunity for an extended period of fallowing the "human soil." Sabbaticals are not just for clergy. With advance planning many employers will allow for extended periods of rest.

This need for rejuvenating rest is just as true for the church as it is for individuals. The day to day busyness of church life, the stress of balancing budgets and dealing with conflict, and the pressure to run programs can all crowd out much needed rest. It is in times of rest and reflection that churches discern God's leading. Regular times of refreshment and renewal must therefore be built in to the church calendar. "Sabbath is a voice of gift in a frantic coercive self-serving world."<sup>127</sup> When a church practices Sabbath, slows down, and intentionally rests from the business of parish life, then they are enabled to hear the voice of God more clearly, to choose with love, feel with compassion, and act with wisdom. This is certainly true of church leaders, who can only lead their people into the Jubilee work of restoration once they have developed the ability to stop and listen to God. Without Sabbath it will be impossible for a church to become a Jubilee people.

Ensuring that clergy take a day off, making sure all staff are given rest and rejuvenation, beginning the practice of parish retreats or "days away," are all ways we learn to trust that God will provide even if we are unproductive. When we stop, then we

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<sup>126</sup> Sleeth, *Hope for Humanity*, 11

<sup>127</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 63

discover that life is more than production and consumption. As Wirzba writes: “We must learn to live by the manna falling all around us.”<sup>128</sup>

### C: RECLAIM - RECOVER OUR ROLE AS TENDERS OF THE GARDEN

Having repented of our abuse of the earth, and having embraced God’s gift of rest, the church is then poised to “re”-claim its proper role as stewards of creation and tenders of the garden. This act of reclaiming is a two-pronged movement: inward and outward. Inwardly, churches must ensure that a “green” discipleship is taking place within the community of faith; outwardly churches must reclaim the prophetic voices of Amos and Jeremiah and “speak truth to power” in order to advocate for large scale environmental reform within their cities, countries, and beyond.

“What kind of people ought we be? What kind of people need we be in order to properly care for the earth?”<sup>129</sup> This is the question asked by Steven Bouma-Prediger. His answer is that churches must strive to form disciples who excel in the work of earthkeeping. This is primarily done through character formation. In his book, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, Bouma-Prediger concludes: The good work of earthkeeping is impossible without respect, receptivity, self-restraint, frugality, humility, honesty, wisdom, hope, patience, serenity, benevolence, love, justice, and courage. To do the work God calls us to do, these fundamental traits of character are necessary “Character is central to the care of the earth.”<sup>130</sup> Therefore, the task of churches is to provide the means by which such character traits are developed. To do this the Sabbath-Jubilee themes of rest, restraint, and justice for creation must be emphasized throughout the

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<sup>128</sup> Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 38

<sup>129</sup> Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 132.

<sup>130</sup> Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 154.



churches worship and ministry. More and more churches are adopting Earth Sunday (the Sunday prior to Earth Day) as an annual celebration of God's creation and our stewardship of it. Churches have begun to recognize Earth Hour (the last Saturday in March) as an opportunity to take a break from our consumptive lifestyle and "turn of the lights" for an hour. Still other churches have placed a renewed emphasis on the celebration of St. Francis of Assisi Day (October 4<sup>th</sup>), since St. Francis is the patron saint of animals and ecology. Guest speakers, sermon series, environmental Bible Studies, movie nights, and parish retreats are all ways churches are striving to become greener disciples with earthkeeping character. For example, author Matthew Sleeth has recently published a DVD-based Bible study entitled *Hope for Creation* that not only studies the story of creation found in Genesis 1, but suggests practical steps toward environmental discipleship as well.<sup>131</sup> "Changed hearts=Changed Lives" is the subtitle he uses to suggest that caring for creation is a matter of Christian discipleship.

Calvin DeWitt not only categorizes the degradations of creation, but he also suggests numerous ideas for churches to put creation care into practice. Among these ideas are forming Creation Care Committees at churches, incorporating creation liturgies into Sunday services, and leading by example by making church buildings more energy efficient.<sup>132</sup>

Rebekah Simon Peter suggests the following energy survey for churches:

Energy-efficient lighting, heating, cooling, water heaters, appliances. Water conservation measures, a bike rack in the parking lot, accessible public transit, landscaped grounds appropriate to the climate, receptacles for trash. The author encourages parishioners to

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<sup>131</sup> cf. Sleeth, *Hope for Creation*.

<sup>132</sup> Dewitt, *Earth-Wise*, 69–75

speak with their pastor and trustees about their concerns and offer to assist in making positive changes.<sup>133</sup>

The fifth mark of mission in the Anglican Communion is "to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth."<sup>134</sup> To facilitate this mission, several dioceses have implemented the Green Parish Accreditation Program.<sup>135</sup> The Accreditation Program is divided into 15 categories which include lighting, water use, kitchen use, fair trade products, and worship. Each category has 3 levels to be achieved: Bronze, Silver and Gold. By implementing the required changes in 12 of the 15 categories churches become accredited as "Green Parishes."

Essentially, the church's message must match its actions. It is disingenuous to preach about Sabbath restraint and creation care, and then to invite people to coffee hour in our energy inefficient buildings, serving coffee that was grown by cutting down rainforests, seating them on furniture that is made of wood that wasn't ethically sourced, disposing of our garbage in landfills rather than recycling, composting, or reusing cups and plates.

More and more churches and synagogues are making conscious decisions to create church buildings with creation care in mind. One synagogue in Evanston, Illinois rebuilt their facilities in a way that honoured their commitment to the God of the Sabbath.<sup>136</sup> "They decided to go green from the ground up. Cypress wood reclaimed from barns in upstate New York was used for the new synagogue's exterior, white cinder blocks from the old building were crushed and recycled, and brown cabinet doors made

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<sup>133</sup> Simon-Peter, *Green Church*, 40

<sup>134</sup> [www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm)

<sup>135</sup> [www.niagara.anglican.ca/green/docs/Green%20Parish%20Accreditation%20program.pdf](http://www.niagara.anglican.ca/green/docs/Green%20Parish%20Accreditation%20program.pdf)

<sup>136</sup> Associated Press, "Some Houses of Worship Turn to Green Design."

from sunflower husks were hung in the offices.” Rabbi Brant Rosen said that the unique house of worship was built to make a “sacred statement.” “If we were going to talk the talk, we needed to walk the walk. The whole process forced us to look at our values in a deeper way.”<sup>137</sup> Along with the new construction, the congregation is encouraging every member to adopt environmentally friendly practices in their homes as well.

The outward thrust of reclaiming our Sabbath mandate is equally important as the inner one. The growing notion of “eco-justice” has equated creation with the oppressed. Who are the oppressed and poor? The answer has changed in light of our environmental crisis. Our natural environment must now be considered among the “new poor” and the “new oppressed.” Sally McFague notes, “if the Redeemer is the Creator, then surely God cares for the other 99 percent of creation, not just for the 1 percent (actually less than 1 percent) that humans constitute.”<sup>138</sup> Therefore, just as surely as Christians are called to speak out on behalf of poor and oppressed *people*, they also must be courageous to advocate for our burdened earth.

The Earth Charter<sup>139</sup>, The Evangelical Climate Initiative<sup>140</sup>, and The Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation<sup>141</sup> are all faith statements that have attracted thousands of signatories, many of whom are church leaders. By uniting around a common cause, their voices carry more weight in the political arena of policy decisions.

Individuals and churches can also reclaim their voice by supporting or protesting local and global environmental topics. Author Bill McKibben has founded the

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<sup>137</sup> Associated Press, “Some Houses of Worship Turn to Green Design,” line 19

<sup>138</sup> McFague, “An Ecological Christology,” 35

<sup>139</sup> cf. [www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html](http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html)

<sup>140</sup> cf. [www.npr.org/documents/2006/feb/evangelical/calltoaction.pdf](http://www.npr.org/documents/2006/feb/evangelical/calltoaction.pdf)

<sup>141</sup> cf. [www.creationcare.org/blank.php?id=39](http://www.creationcare.org/blank.php?id=39)

international, interdenominational movement known as 350.org<sup>142</sup> and more recently “Tar Sands Action.”<sup>143</sup> These movements gather people, organizations, and churches together to protest against environmental degradation, and to seek political support for environmental causes. In 2008 churches began holding public events where they rang their church bells 350 times to draw attention to the fact that 350 ppm is the upper limit of CO<sub>2</sub> that our atmosphere can tolerate. Ringing church bells, traditionally a call to worship, became a call to environmental action.

#### D: RETURN – GET BACK TO CREATION

The fourth and final “Re” word that is deeply rooted in the Sabbath story of rest and refreshment is “Re”-turn. Most of our abuse of creation is the result of our ignorance about creation. In Richard Louv’s book *Last Child in the Woods* he describes the human costs of alienation from nature and even suggested the ailment NDD (Nature Deficit Disorder) as a result of this disconnection.<sup>144</sup> Besides the possible health effects of our separation from the land (which include diminished use of senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of emotional illnesses) there is also an ecological and spiritual effect.

We care for only what we love. We love only what we know. We truly know only what we experience. If we do not know our place – know it more than in a passing, cursory way, know it intimately and personally – then we are destined to use and abuse it. So we need to experience our home place firsthand.<sup>145</sup>

In our increasingly technological culture, “Screen time” has replaced “Green Time,” more people live in cities, the family farm has all but died, and food production has become the domain of corporations and agribusiness. The consequence of this has

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<sup>142</sup> cf. [www.tarsandsaction.org](http://www.tarsandsaction.org)

<sup>143</sup> cf. [www.350.org](http://www.350.org)

<sup>144</sup> Louv, *Last Child in the Woods*, 99

<sup>145</sup> Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 21

been that nature, being devalued and reduced to a commodity, has failed to receive its rest.

Modern agriculture in particular has replaced Seventh day, seventh year, and Jubilee year rest for land with the relentless, massive, monoculture cash crop industry. In Iowa (and elsewhere) five to six bushels of topsoil is lost for every bushel of corn harvested. The depleted soil must be propped up with chemical fertilizers and pesticides to remain useful. Franklin Roosevelt said “A nation that destroys its soil destroys itself.”

Wendell Berry, the poet, philosopher, author, activist and farmer has long lamented the demise of the small, family owned farm. Small, family owned farms have the ability to “manage” their land, because families are intimately aware of the farm’s needs, whereas large industrial farms become inevitably mismanaged because the “ratio of eyes to acres” is too low.<sup>146</sup> Connected to Hosea’s image of monarchical agriculture being like prostitution, similarly Berry describes the proponents of modern agribusiness as “the pornographers of agriculture.”<sup>147</sup> Many factory-sized farms do not benefit the local community since they employ immigrant workers at subsistence wages as a cost saving measure. Meanwhile, Concentrated Animal Feedlot Operations (CAFOs) show no regard for animal life, become breeding grounds for disease and sickness, and are environmentally unsustainable since all animal food must be transported into the facility and all waste must be transported away. Modern day agribusiness in its effort to produce “bigger, better, faster, more” has violated the Sabbath requirement of restraint for both land and creatures.

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<sup>146</sup> Berry, “A Defense of the Family Farm,” 33

<sup>147</sup> Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 136

If a nation destroys itself by destroying its soil, then the corollary must also be true: A nation that renews its soil renews itself. Therefore, a return to small, sustainable, eco-friendly farming may well be one of the single most effective ways of achieving the goal of rest and restraint for the land and for creatures that God has established from the very beginning. There have always been “back to the land” movements that have sought to heal the rift between people and nature, and the church may continue to promote such sustainable approaches to life where people relearn how to practically “tend the garden.”

The Christian organization Arocha was birthed in England in 1983 by a handful of Christians concerned about the environment. Today it operates several Field Study Centres around the world where researches and curiosity seekers can visit, stay, and participate in the work of creation care and alternative agriculture. A recent issue of Arocha News was entitled, “Farming God’s Land” and included several stories of how Arocha farmers work their land in accordance with their daily faith commitment.<sup>148</sup>

Joel Salatin, a Christian farmer in Swoope, Virginia has established himself as the guru of Grass-Based Agriculture, holistic animal husbandry, and direct marketing to consumers. His innovative farm, Polyface Farm, has managed to exceed the production efficiency of most modern factory farms, while at the same time enriching and building soil. The low-tech farm operates through a delicate “dance” of crop rotation and rotational grazing. Despite his success and much sought after grass finished meats, Salatin has resisted the urge to grow his farm operation because he honours the God-given limits of the land. Instead, groups and individuals can visit Polyface Farm, go on a tour, even learn through an internship program. Salatin, who considers farming his ministry, has become an evangelist for biodynamic agriculture, spending 100 days each

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<sup>148</sup> Harris, “Farming God’s Earth,” 1

year travelling and speaking to environmental groups, agricultural conferences, and universities.

The concept of gleaning which flows through the Sabbath texts of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus is rooted in Yahweh's concern for the poor. "When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow" (Deuteronomy 24:19–20). Present day charities such as Second Harvest and Ontario Gleaners have taken this ancient biblical idea and applied it in our present day. The mission of Second Harvest is "to help feed hungry people by picking up and preparing excess fresh food and delivering it daily to social service agencies in Toronto."<sup>149</sup> Ontario Gleaners receives excess food from local farmers, dehydrates them and then produces a dried soup mix that is shipped around the world for relief and development.<sup>150</sup>

The Russet House Farm in Cameron, Ontario is an intentional attempt to practice Sabbath agriculture in our own day and age. The members of this community are concerned with living in ways that cultivate a sustainable relationship with creation. On their webpage they declare: "Rooted in an ecologically sensitive and culturally attuned Christian faith, we are committed to organic methods of agriculture, preserving rare breeds, renewable energy, local economic development, sustainable forestry, species diversity and creating a place of hospitality, education and celebration."<sup>151</sup> The farm also functions as a place of learning. From April to October, Russet House Farm opens its doors to volunteers who spend the morning working in the garden in exchange for lunch and an afternoon of wandering the trails or touring the farm buildings and gardens. In

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<sup>149</sup> <http://www.secondharvest.ca/mission-visions-values>

<sup>150</sup> [www.ontariogleaners.org](http://www.ontariogleaners.org)

<sup>151</sup> <http://www.russethousefarm.ca/who.htm>

addition, workshops, retreats, and conferences are held periodically. Every two years Russet House Farm co-sponsors the annual retreat called “Practicing Resurrection.” The conference features camping at the farm during the week along with keynote speakers (most recently Elaine Enns and Ched Myers), workshops, evening concerts and worship on the weekend.

Perhaps the best way that churches can join in this renewal of creation is to become deliberate in their own food choices. As Wendell Berry has written: “Eating is an agricultural act.” But Norman Wirzba suggests that our eating habits reflect one of our more profound, even if mundane, paths into the full awareness of God’s care and concern. Eating is a “Sabbath Witness,” a testimony to what we value in the world. However, the present method of food production shows little regard for the creatures, soil, or workers involved. “If we were to examine further, we would quickly discover that our food industry bears all the marks of an anti-Sabbath mentality: sacrilege and ingratitude, obsessive control and profiteering, insensitivity and destruction.”<sup>152</sup>

Therefore, Berry enumerates several ways to regain “food sovereignty” and practice Sabbath eating in our own homes: growing our own food, cooking our own meals, learning about the origins of our food, buying local food, and protecting ourselves against adulterated food.<sup>153</sup>

With every trip to the grocery store or farmer’s market Christians have the opportunity to promote Sabbath rhythms in our world by “voting” with their food dollars for sustainable, ethical, and local food choices. Churches have also participated in this reclamation of “Sabbath Eating” by devoting some of their church’s property to the

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<sup>152</sup> Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 24

<sup>153</sup> Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating,” 149–150



growing of food. Community gardens are becoming more common sights at churches, as are rooftop gardens. Church ladies groups, often famous for their cooking and baking, can prepare meals with foods from local farms, participate in Community Sponsored Agriculture, pledge to only use ethically grown foods, hold “100 Mile Dinners” and more. Just as Israel was called to set up a counternarrative to the Egyptian practice of land abuse, so too the church’s approach to food should demonstrate Yahweh’s “moral economy of food production.”<sup>154</sup>

### Conclusions:

“Anyone established in the land... must, therefore, adapt his actions, his words and his thoughts to the holy presence of the God of Israel.”<sup>155</sup> Embedded in the creation story are the raw materials for Israel’s Sabbath-Jubilee laws concerning rest. God brings ecological order out of chaos. In agricultural imagery, God cultivates a world of *bara*, a dual-pronged idea of created “fatness” and extravagance. Humankind is created in the image of God and thus tasked with the job of caring for creation. And the final act of the creation story is the often devalued principle of rest, which needs to regain its prominence as the climax of creation. The challenge for Israel is to demonstrate similar restraint in its own life. All of these images combine to form an impressive prologue of Sabbath Jubilee themes where God’s creative generosity provides richly for all people, and these people created in God’s image exercise godly care and restraint toward the earth, emphasizing the requirement of rest for all as part of creation’s design in the form

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<sup>154</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 72.

<sup>155</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 109

of seventh day, seventh year, and Jubilee release. Jesus proclaimed himself “Lord of the Sabbath” and reaffirmed the original, refreshing, healing intentions of Sabbath.

In radical contrast to our hurried world of work and anxious labor, Sabbath proclaims that the world is a creational gift and encourages us to nurture an attitude of basic trust. The Bible’s Sabbath laws and stories envision a world where the “natural laws” of scarcity, poverty, and excessive toil no longer apply, believing that God will provide even if we restrain ourselves from production. Our restraint leads to refreshment for overburdened workers and healing for the abused earth.

Therefore, Sabbath is a foretaste of the world as it should be, and it calls churches and Christians to accept the responsibility to make this world better. It calls us to examine the way we live, the way we work, the way we rest, and even the way we eat, and in so doing to make decisions that promote healing and refreshment for our world and for all God’s people.

## Chapter 4:

# Share the Wealth

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“The poverty of our century (20<sup>th</sup>) is...not as poverty was before the result of natural scarcity, but of a set of priorities imposed on the rest of the world by the rich. Consequently, the modern poor are not pitied... but written off as trash. The 20<sup>th</sup> century consumer economy has produced the first culture for which the beggar is a reminder of nothing.”<sup>1</sup>

“And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.” (Lev. 25:10–11)

### Introduction:

In recent months the world has witnessed the rise of a unique phenomenon known as the “Occupy Movement.” The Occupy Movement gained notoriety with the “Occupy Wall Street” protest in New York, but became an international protest that rallied thousands of supporters in hundreds of cities around the world. The goal of these mass protests was to draw attentions to the massive financial and economic struggles that have developed across the western world. The protesters demands included the request for more and better jobs, more equal distribution of income, bank reform, and a reduction of the influence of corporations on politics. One of the common slogans seen on placards at these events was: “We are the 99%,” a slogan which referred to the concentration of wealth among the top 1%. In 2007 in the United States, the top 1% of the population owned 42.7% of the wealth. Furthermore, the top 20% of Americans owned 85% of their country’s wealth. Protestors carried these signs to express solidarity with the poor and outrage over the growing inequality between the rich and the poor. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Berger, “The Soul and the Operator,” 234

financial inequality found within Western nations like the U.S. is only a snapshot of the gross inequality of wealth distribution that is seen on the world stage. In 1992 the United Nations Program on Development published a report that documented the spiraling

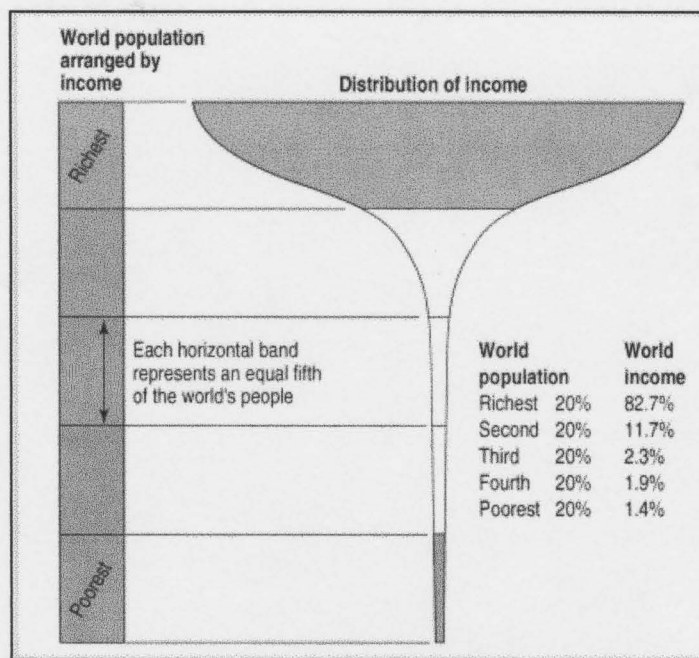


Figure 1: The Champagne Glass Analogy.

globe.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 graphically represents this unequal distribution of wealth in a diagram that has become known as the “Champagne Glass” analogy of world poverty. From the graph it is apparent that the richest 20% of the world’s population enjoys 82.7% of the world’s annual income, which is more than four times the total income of the other 80% of the world’s population.

“One might have known that there were a few extremely rich people in the world, but this suggests that there are now a billion people, including the large U.S. middle class, who enjoy enormous benefits from the existing socioeconomic system and will probably do everything they can to maintain their advantages or even to improve them.”<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to see that the top-heavy champagne glass is increasingly unstable, threatening to topple the entire system. “When one person or group of persons controls

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Program. *1992 Human Development Report*.

<sup>3</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 2.

so much, huge inequalities and injustices evolve.”<sup>4</sup> A situation that sets the stage for “Economic and Ecological Suicide.”<sup>5</sup>

According to Marie Dennis, the lack of access to a decent quality of life for millions of people impacts hardest upon certain groups: “Women are carrying enormous burdens; children and workers are more vulnerable; cultural values are threatened, as is the rich heritage of indigenous peoples; and uprooted people wander the globe.”<sup>6</sup>

The solution to this problem for many economists rests in the supposed “trickle-down” effect of global capitalism. Tax breaks and other economic benefits for the wealthy supposedly benefit all of society by improving the economy as a whole. It was Adam Smith who first popularized the notion of the “invisible hand:” the idea that individuals seeking only to maximize their own gains would, in a free market, end up benefitting all of society even though they had no compassionate intentions.<sup>7</sup> The ideology of the “Free Market” supports and sustains the preeminent capitalist, socioeconomic system of the West. In fact, capitalism has reached near untouchable status as the “only way” to make an economy work for the benefit of all. Hard work, shrewd business, and lucky breaks are presumed to be the very heart of free enterprise in Western democracies.

Evangelical Christians have traditionally defended free market capitalism since they believed “in a providential God, one who built a logical and orderly universe, and they saw the new industrial economy as a fulfillment of God's plan.”<sup>8</sup> The free market, they believed, “was a perfectly designed instrument to reward good Christian behavior

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, “Jubilee in My World,” 13.

<sup>5</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Dennis, “Jubilee. The Righting of Relationships,” 14

<sup>7</sup> Duchrow and Hinkelammert, *Property for People, not for Profit*, 40

<sup>8</sup> Cavalcanti, *Gloryland*, 146.

and to punish and humiliate the unrepentant.”<sup>9</sup> *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* written by Max Weber sought to demonstrate how capitalism evolved under the Protestant/Calvinist ethic of enterprise, trade, and wealth (though this hypothesis has been challenged)<sup>10</sup>.

However, while it is clear that capitalism works for some, it does not work for all.

Bruce Cockburn, in his song “Trickle-Down” laments the failure of the invisible hand ideology:

“Trickle down give ‘em the business / Trickle down supposed to give us the goods / Cups held put to catch a bit of the bounty / Trickle down everywhere trickle down blood”<sup>11</sup>

Indigenous peoples, women, farmers, the landless and unemployed, trade unions, ecological activists, solidarity groups and human rights organizations – these groups and more have experienced the pain and witnessed the destruction of unbridled capitalism.

They have all come up against the same causes:

an economic system geared purely to profit maximization and thereby having no regard for the life of human beings and nature, a political class that supports this system, and an ideology justified ‘academically’ by most economists and disseminated, consciously or unconsciously, by most of the media.<sup>12</sup>

Going hand in hand with free market capitalism is the anxious movement toward private ownership. Earned, or unearned and inherited, we hold ownership of our “things” to be sacred. A growing attitude of global scarcity has fueled this strong trend toward private ownership. “[This] dominant ideology regards the neighbor as a threat to my property, as a competitor for limited goods, as a rival in a world of scarcity.”<sup>13</sup> Walter

<sup>9</sup> Bigelow, “Let There Be Markets,” 34

<sup>10</sup> cf. Robertson, *Aspects of Economic Individualism*

<sup>11</sup> Cockburn, “Trickle Down,” *You’ve Never Seen Everything*, compact disc.

<sup>12</sup> Duchrow, *Property for People*, 1

<sup>13</sup> Brueggeman, “Living with a Different Set of Signals,” 20

Brueggemann observes the various “liturgies of scarcity” all around us focused on “money, sex, wealth, technology, and one-upmanship” all of which culminate in the ultimate vocation of the consumer: shopping.

Such shopping, based outside need, thins the memory, evaporates hope, reduces everything to image, and eventuates in rootless, visionless people on the make, who are rootless and visionless enough to accept easy practices of social violence as normal. Those who regularly engage in such liturgies are not easily attuned to the rhythms of Sabbath, Year of Release, and Jubilee<sup>14</sup>

Despite the champagne glass analogy, despite the inadequacy of “trickle-down” welfare, and despite the lack of freedom within the “free”-market, these ideologies are constantly defended with near religious zeal. Herman Daly referred to the World Bank as being like a church promulgating a bad theology.<sup>15</sup> Karl Marx commented that “economists are like theologians... Every religion other than their own is the invention of man, whereas their own particular brand of religion is an emanation from God.”<sup>16</sup> Catholic theologian Thomas Beaudoin has coined the term “theocapitalism” and has demonstrated that consumer media capitalism does for us exactly what any religion does for its adherents: provides identity, community, trust, conversion, and transcendence.<sup>17</sup> Any suggestion that there might be a more equitable, life-giving socioeconomic possibility is often met with the dismissive response citing the failure of socialism: it’s been tried before and it didn’t work. Within the church, the response is similar: Any suggestion that there might be a more faithful way to order our economic life in accordance with the scriptural story of Jubilee is met with accusations of “communism.” Donald Shriver Jr. comments that “One of the great modern embarrassments of

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<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann, “Living with a Different Set of Signals,” 21

<sup>15</sup> Daly, *Beyond Growth*, 10

<sup>16</sup> Marx, “The Misery of Philosophy”, quoted in Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 73

<sup>17</sup> cf. Beaudoin, “The Church Defender of Theocapitalism?”

Christianity is our easy dismissal of the Marxist rule: "From each according to ability, to each according to need."<sup>18</sup> Yet, who can deny that such an approach is rooted in the text of scripture? Who can condemn this suggestion after even a cursory glance at the life and ministry of Jesus Christ?

Instead, the church knowingly or unknowingly promotes (theo)capitalism and is guilty of stockpiling wealth itself. The value of church properties, decorations, artwork, endowments, and investments is staggering.

The Greek Orthodox Church is currently coming under pressure to take less and give more as the country faces a dire financial crisis that could have a global impact. The Church reportedly owns property worth up to 700 billion euros. That is more than double the country's national debt... yet it is the Greek state that pays the salaries and pensions of all Orthodox clerics in the country.<sup>19</sup>

Norman Wirzba laments the fact that there is a serious disconnection between what people profess about spiritual matters, and the decisions they make in their economic lives.

"Whether we care to admit it or not, the church bears a great responsibility for the fact that we are abettors and willing participants in one of the most rapacious, violent, and destructive economies the world has ever known, an economy in which natural habitats, families and local communities, and moral principles are regularly sacrificed for the sake of financial gain."<sup>20</sup>

Brueggemann was right: the dominant philosophy of the day has so clouded our vision that we are unable to see other possibilities; we are not easily attuned to the rhythms of Sabbath, Year of Release, and Jubilee. Shriver continues:

To be sure, there are no easy translations of ancient economic ethics to modern capitalistic societies. But a struggle to make some hard translations should belong to any disciplined Christian life and to the witness of Christians and Jews in every society. A "bias for the poor"

<sup>18</sup> Shriver Jr. "Jubilee Shout or Indistinct Sound?," 6

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8790126/Wealth-of-churches-vs-the-wealth-of-people.html>

<sup>20</sup> Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 117



is no invention of communists or liberation theologians. It is old as Amos, Exodus, and Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>21</sup>

The first evangelicals who defended the free market and supported a capitalist system as God's best choice thought that this arrangement would encourage virtuous behavior, but two centuries of individual pursuits have taught a different lesson, many times over. "The wages of sin are often, and notoriously, a private jet and a wicked stock-option package. The wages of hard moral choice are often \$5.15 an hour. Free markets don't promote public virtue; they promote private interest."<sup>22</sup>

The Biblical Jubilee offers a challenge to the present system of wealth accumulation and privatization of property, and presents a vision where wealth and resources are shared by many. The command in Leviticus 25 calls for a "Redistribution of Capital."<sup>23</sup>

"And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family." (Lev. 25:10-11)

Or in the words of Walter Brueggeman, the Jubilee is a command to "find out what belongs to whom and give it back."<sup>24</sup> We've already seen how Sabbath-Jubilee commandments placed limits on slavery, debt, and land use. In this fourth and final chapter we will investigate the Jubilee command to share resources and redistribute capital. We will trace the development of this idea through the scriptures and observe how Jesus Christ and the early church preached and practiced Jubilee sharing. Finally, we will heed Shriver Jr.'s advice and seek to "make some hard translations" of these ancient ethics to present day Christian living for individuals, churches, and society.

<sup>21</sup> Shriver Jr. "Jubilee Shout or Indistinct Sound?," 6.

<sup>22</sup> Bigelow, "Let There Be Markets", 38.

<sup>23</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 69

<sup>24</sup> Brueggemann, *Voices of the Night*, 6

## The Lesson of the Manna

Well before the Jubilee call to share Israel's wealth, God's people were tested and instructed into a different way of living. The primary training grounds for this lesson was the wilderness where Israel would learn that with Yahweh, "they lacked nothing" (Deut. 2:7). We examined the story of the manna in chapter three as a counternarrative to the unceasing workload of Israel in Egypt. Manna teaches Israel restraint: the restraint from work and the gift of rest. But the manna taught another lesson: the restraint from accumulation and hoarding, a theme that will culminate in the celebration of Jubilee. The manna was a "test" meant to instruct them in a different way of living. The manna was given on certain conditions to see whether Israel "will walk by [God's] teaching or not" (16:4). As the first major narrative following the story of liberation from Egypt, it provides an important revelation of Israel's mandate to become a different socioeconomic community.<sup>25</sup>

The story begins with Israel's complaint: they don't have enough. The wilderness fills them with the fear of scarcity and lack, and so they cry out:

"The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'" (Ex. 16:2-3)

In answer to their cry, the Lord provides the gift of manna.

This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.' The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, 'Let no one leave any of it over until morning.' But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until

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<sup>25</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 38.

morning, and it bred worms and became foul And Moses was angry with them. (Ex. 16:16–20)

Clearly this experience would teach Israel to rely on God for their daily needs, but there was a much more fundamental lesson being taught to the emerging Israelite community. Israel was to live by an economy of “enough for all” and reject an economy of excess accumulation for some and hunger and humiliation for others.

They were to gather only “enough” for each person in each household, an *omer* per capita, approximately four litres per person, and no more. If they gathered more or less than others, they still each only had enough. They were not allowed to stockpile manna or keep any for the next day (except on the Sabbath) or else it would rot. In the simple act of manna collection Israel would learn that there is enough for all. Amazingly, manna collection was self regulating: the one who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage.” But they would also learn the perils of stockpiling and hoarding. As Lowery notes:

“The bread from heaven cannot be hoarded. In verse 16, Yahweh commands that each Israelite gather “as much of it as each needs to eat, and omer per person.” Need is defined individually, not collectively, here. The welfare of the people is not measured as a long-term aggregate, Gross National Product, or average per capita income. Providential care is measured person by person. No individual Israelite will fall through the cracks... God’s reliable, providential care is limited only by the actual needs of each individual Israelite.”<sup>26</sup>

Once again, “restraint” becomes the proof of the knowledge of God. “No Israelite tent can be a silo; the Israelite camp cannot be a storage city.”<sup>27</sup> “To remember the Lord and the Lord’s deliverance from Egypt was necessarily to practice justice, to care for the

<sup>26</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 76

needy and vulnerable, to make sure that all God's people had enough. Israel's vocation was to create an alternative social possibility."<sup>28</sup>

This emphasis on community sharing also ensured that future generations had "enough" as well. Indirectly, the strict ban on hoarding ensured that each day the future was being protected. The manna story demonstrates what Davis calls "contemporaneous eating:"<sup>29</sup> a daily practice that teaches Israel not to impoverish future generations because of our present greed. It is an economics of "futuraity,"<sup>30</sup> a topic that touches us closely living as we do in a culture of unprecedented hoarding, consumption, and waste: "Our take is unlimited – the destruction already accomplished is staggering"<sup>31</sup>

This young Hebrew nation was being led to create an alternative economy that would stand in marked contrast to the violence and disproportion of the Egyptian systems from which they fled. Unfortunately, the reality would be less than ideal. Just as surely as some could not resist the temptation to hoard manna (Exodus 16:20), time and time again in the future Israel would easily succumb to the temptations of greedy excess and the injustices that such excess precipitates.

These lessons were being taught before Israel had land, wealth, flocks, or herds. Through the simple act of collecting, sharing, and distributing manna God already began the process of instructing them on how their wealth and possessions ought to be treated. This early lesson was meant to ensure that when Israel came into the Promised Land, when flocks, herds, and land were more plentiful, when they had what today we would

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<sup>28</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 39

<sup>29</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 77

<sup>31</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 76

call “capital,”<sup>32</sup> their management of this capital would be understood religiously. The lesson of the manna was that economic life could not be bracketed from the concerns of God, and the most basic intention of God is that everyone – and not simply the powerful or the fortunate few – should have access to the sources of life’s sustenance.<sup>33</sup> This is why Ross and Gloria Kinsler write that Sabbath-Jubilee practices are fundamentally economic and therefore “the separation of religion from economics, spirituality from materiality, is a later development that has plagued God’s people down through history.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Dividing the Land**

When Israel arrived at the Promised Land, new opportunities and new demands would be presented and required of this fledgling nation. Walter Brueggemann captures some of the significance of what “enlandment” would mean for Israel.

The Jordan crossing represents the moment of the most radical transformation of any historical person or group, the moment of empowerment or enlandment, the decisive event of being turfed and at home for the first time. Nothing is more radical than this, that the sojourner becomes a possessor. The precarious sojourner has the heady new role of controller of what is promised and now given. The moment drastically redefines who Israel will be. Land entry requires of Israel that it cease to be what it had been in the wilderness and become what it has never been before. Land makes that demand. At this moment Israel does indeed become a new creation, a slave becomes an heir, a helpless child becomes a mature inheritor.<sup>35</sup>

Compared to the wilderness, this new land offered abundant resources and capital they had never known. What the Israelites had learned in the test of the manna would

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<sup>32</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 69.

<sup>33</sup> Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 118

<sup>34</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 39

<sup>35</sup> Brueggemann, *The Land*, 43

now be applied to the distribution of land. Under Yahweh, Israel will define itself differently than the surrounding nations in the distribution of this new wealth of land. The biblical material on Israel and the land offers important clues as to what equality would look like.

Joshua 18 and Numbers 26 contain the two most important accounts of Israel's attempt to share equally the resources of land. Originally the land was divided among the clans of the tribes so that a relatively similar amount of land was available to all the family units.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: To these the land shall be apportioned for inheritance according to the number of names. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance; every tribe shall be given its inheritance according to its enrolment. But the land shall be apportioned by lot; according to the names of their ancestral tribes they shall inherit. Their inheritance shall be apportioned according to lot between the larger and the smaller. (Num. 26:52–56)

In distributing the land amongst the tribes, the general rule of equity was that larger tribes received more and smaller tribes less. Tribes differed in size and strength, and so Joshua 18 demonstrates that before the boundaries were drawn, each piece of land was “described” and assessed for its relative value. Such a value may have depended upon such factors as size, geography, arability, vegetation, access to water, and the presence of towns and cities.

Provide three men from each tribe, and I will send them out that they may begin to go throughout the land, writing a description of it with a view to their inheritances. Then come back to me. They shall divide it into seven portions, Judah continuing in its territory on the south, and the house of Joseph in their territory on the north. You shall describe the land in seven divisions and bring the description here to me; and I will cast lots for you here before the Lord our God. (Josh. 18:4–6)

The contrast between Israel's method of land distribution and the attitudes of surrounding societies was striking. In Egypt, most of the land belonged to the Pharaoh or

the temples.<sup>36</sup> In most other Near-Eastern contexts, a feudal system of landholding prevailed where the king granted large tracts of land to a small number of elite royal vassals, who then had it worked by landless laborers.<sup>37</sup>

This was not how Yahweh's people were to live. Yahweh the King owned all the land and made important demands on those to whom he gave it to use. The boundaries of each portion were distinctly drawn, and each family had their own land. The ideal was decentralized family "ownership" understood as stewardship under Yahweh's absolute ownership. Ron Sider writes, "Land was the basic capital in early Israel's agricultural economy, and the law says that the land was divided in such a way that each extended family had the resources to produce the things needed for a decent life."<sup>38</sup>

As well, both Numbers and Joshua speak of the land as an inheritance, an indication that the land was both a gift and a trust, meant to be passed down through the generations within families and tribes, and not amassed by a few wealthy elites. Yahweh was the God of "cosmic distribution"<sup>39</sup> who owns the land and who distributed the land fairly and equitably to the tribes and families of Israel and who demands that it be administered fairly and equitably by Israel who does not own it but simply administers it as resident aliens or tenant farmers for its Owner.<sup>40</sup> In Deuteronomy it is written: "You must not move your neighbour's boundary marker, set up by former generations, on the property that will be allotted to you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess" (Deut. 19:14). To adjust the boundaries was considered a grievous sin, hence the proclamation "Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbour's boundary marker" (Deut.

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<sup>36</sup> Sider, "Justice, Human Rights, and Government," 177.

<sup>37</sup> Sider, "Justice, Human Rights, and Government," 178.

<sup>38</sup> Sider, "Justice, Human Rights, and Government," 178.

<sup>39</sup> Crossan, *God and Empire*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Crossan, *God and Empire*, 66.

27:17). Such crimes are treated with such seriousness because “boundary stones mark out the cartography of justice, a geography of equity, and a divine fairness of distribution.”<sup>41</sup>

The justice of Yahweh (*mispāt*) is a ‘distributive justice’ that demands that all people are entitled to adequate access to the earth’s resources. Christopher Wright summarizes this point well: “The right of all people to have access to, and use of, the resources of the earth is a prior right to the right of any person or group to claim private ownership and use of some section of those resources.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, when we look at the emergence of the Israelite nation, it is clear that theirs was not a capitalist, consumer society. Rather, in a society where land was equity, that land was both a gift and an inheritance, not to be amassed by the few, but to be protected for generations to come, being apportioned and managed as a reflection of the justice of Yahweh.

### **Exile and Return: Jubilee Redistribution**

Over the years Israel sought to maintain the tribal land boundaries that were established in the time of the Judges. However, two key factors disrupted the plan for land to be passed perpetually as an inheritance from generation to generation, and thus sparked the need for the Jubilee reforms. First, as we discussed in chapters 1 and 2, land was often used as collateral for loans. As farming families struggled to cope with bad harvests and the additional burden of royal taxes, land itself might be sold and thus pass out of a family’s line. This selling of land, the very source of sustenance, was a last resort, a desperate act for families who had no other choice. Second, the Babylonian

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<sup>41</sup> Crossan, *God and Empire*, 66

<sup>42</sup> Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land*, 117



Exile forced the removal of numerous families from the Promised Land altogether. The two deportations in 597 and 586 B.C.E. may not have completely emptied the land, but certainly removed a significant population of politically influential and otherwise important families, while many others remained in Judah. In their absence neighbouring families annexed their land allotments. As well, neighbouring nations took some of the land for their own purposes.<sup>43</sup> Fifty years later when Persian king Cyrus declared liberty for the Judeans, the children and grandchildren of the exiles returned to find their land occupied by others. Land disputes were unavoidable.

Both the loss of land due to debt and the loss of land due to exile were precipitating factors for the reform that the year of Jubilee represented.

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. <sup>1</sup>And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. (Lev. 25:8–10)

The Jubilee year was Israel's attempt to maintain the distributive justice of Yahweh that they experienced when they received the land in the first place. The Jubilee legislation would have ensured that the fairness of that initial distribution was preserved through the generations. Land, a major productive asset in any society, could not accumulate in a few hands. The restoration of this ancestral property every fifty years was a massive social reform: a systemic solution to a systemic problem that required an ongoing commitment by Israel as a nation. Redistributing the land every fifty years would not provide any immediate relief for those in financial difficulty. In fact, since the

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<sup>43</sup> cf. Davies and Rogerson, *The Old Testament World*, 87 Also, Provan *et. al.* *A Biblical History of Israel*, 285

average lifespan of an Israelite would have been about forty years, many people would never live to witness the Jubilee at all.<sup>44</sup> Thus the Jubilee would serve to settle the one-time disputes related to the returning exiles, as well as provide ongoing relief to overtaxed households in the emerging royal economy of Israel.

While the Jubilee was a long-term strategy, it did make immediate impact on land values. Land value was adjusted as a result of the Jubilee reform, since acquired land only had worth until the year of redemption when it would be returned. Land sold forty years before the Jubilee was much more valuable than land sold four years prior to the Jubilee because the number of harvests it represented was greater.

In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. When you make a sale to your neighbour or buy from your neighbour, you shall not cheat one another. When you buy from your neighbour, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop-years. If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 25:13–17)

Several commentators and authors have marveled at the Jubilee laws as the “high water mark” of Israel’s attempt to live as a distinct, just community under their God. Ron Sider comments on how the Jubilee guarantee of land ensured that all families had dignity as participating members of the community:

Leviticus 25 is one of the most astonishing texts in all of Scripture. Every fifty years, God said, the land was to return to the original owners. Physical handicaps, death of a breadwinner, or lack of natural ability may lead some families to become poorer than others. But God does not want such disadvantages to lead to ever-increasing extremes of wealth and poverty with the result that the poor eventually lack the basic resources to earn a decent livelihood.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 68.

<sup>45</sup> Sider, “Justice, Human Rights, and Government,” 178–179

At the same time, Michael Schluter from the Jubilee Centre, a biblically based think-tank for social reform, admires how the role of land as a source of family roots took precedence over its role as productive asset. “It was more important in God's heart that families remained co-located, and thus connected and a source of mutual support and welfare, than that the most efficient farmers could get control of the land so as to maximize its productivity.”<sup>46</sup>

We have already suggested several societal factors that may have led to the Jubilee reforms, but the theological basis for these commands is paramount: Yahweh owns the land. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land” (Lev. 25:23–24). Since the land is God’s property, no one has absolute property rights and the right of each family to earn a living takes precedence over anyone’s “property rights.” William P Brown has argued that Jubilee “transforms private land into an eminently public domain.”<sup>47</sup> Jubilee serves to clarify key questions about ownership; the land is always God’s domain, and human ownership is limited to fifty years.

At the same time, Jubilee affirms not only the right but also the importance of property managed by families and extended families as those who understand that the land is a gift from Yahweh. Therefore the text does not support a Communist model of government, where the state owns the land. Rather, God’s plan is for each family unit to own the resources that will sustain their own livelihood. As such, Sider calls Leviticus 25

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<sup>46</sup> Schluter, “Relational Society,” <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/document.php?id=54>

<sup>47</sup> Brown, *Ethos of the Cosmos*, 118

a “pro-family” text.<sup>48</sup> Empowered families are given the freedom to participate fully in shaping their own destiny and at the same time preventing the centralization of power, “the oppression and totalitarianism that almost always accompany centralized ownership of land or capital by either the state or small elites.”<sup>49</sup>

Essential to the Jubilee legislation of land redistribution is the theology of “enough.” Creation, as Yahweh ordained it, has more than enough resources for everyone’s need. Therefore Jubilee sharing and redistribution simply echo God’s original generosity seen in creation. The Jubilee ordinance was not a moment of divine charity, but a direct reflection of God’s sovereign ownership and generous nature. Similarly, Israel’s practice of Jubilee was never meant to be an act of welfare for the poor, but rather a generous way of life and a just solution to the perennial problem of wealth accumulation. “Just as the acquisitive practice of private property is powered by scarcity, so this rhythm [of Jubilee] is energized by the certainty that there is more than enough given by God.”<sup>50</sup> The principles of Jubilee could never be sustained by a few individual acts of generosity and goodwill. If Jubilee were to become a reality in Israel then it would need to become a regular “rhythm” of life; a remembrance of God’s generosity and kindness. Observing a regular Jubilee would demonstrate God’s sovereignty in Israel and in the world, and as Richard Lowery observes:

“As royal householder of the nation, Yahweh’s honour was at stake in the welfare of the people, particularly the most vulnerable. Social justice in Israel had a theocratic rationale. Fairness, equity, and especially care for the suffering poor were signs of Yahweh’s sovereign authority among the people. Injustice and lack of compassion were acts of rebellion, public affronts to God’s sovereign power.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Sider, “Justice, Human Rights, and Government,” 179.

<sup>49</sup> Sider, “Justice, Human Rights, and Government,” 179

<sup>50</sup> Brueggemann, “Living With a Different Set of Signals.”

<sup>51</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 20

Thus, the Jubilee vision can never be viewed merely as a social program detached from God's defining character and sovereign will. More than redistribution of wealth, Jubilee seeks to restore life to something resembling "God's original and sovereign intention."<sup>52</sup>

### **Jubilee Justice and the Prophets:**

Given that the Jubilee was meant to be a true reflection of God's goodness and sovereignty, it is even more disappointing to learn that Israel never observed the Jubilee in reality. Donald Shriver Jr. laments that Leviticus 25 is a supreme example of a law which became a "dead letter." "There is no historical proof that, over a thousand-year history, any tribe of Israel observed the great Jubilee law of Leviticus 25. The trumpet of Jubilee (Lev. 25:9) blew softly if at all."<sup>53</sup> The consequence was predictable: Israel's neglect of the Jubilee legislation led to the concentration of land in the hands of large landowners, and drove smallholders into debt. The former were able to live in luxury, while the latter lost their land, and were forced to work as day-labourers or sell themselves and their families into debt-slavery. The systemic reforms that were meant to protect the equality of all were neglected in favour of a credit-debt system that privileged the wealthy. Ulrich Duchrow observes:

At the end of the kingly period they were desperately poor. The important thing is the nouveaux rich were able to achieve their property concentration quite legally by means of creditor-debtor contracts. But they formed an upper class in common with the civil service, military, and the royal court. These groups together had the political power, not just the economic power in their hands. Consequently they could manipulate the very law that, according to Israelite tradition, was supposed to protect the vulnerable and the poor.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, 120.

<sup>53</sup> Shriver Jr., "Jubilee Shout" in *The Living Pulpit*, 6

<sup>54</sup> Duchrow, *Property for People*, 15.

While the trumpet of Jubilee may never have sounded, this did not diminish Israel's prophetic voice that continually challenged the powers, defended the oppressed, and called God's people back to the spirit of Jubilee and distributive justice.

Equality has been one of the most powerful slogans of the twentieth century – and one of the most popular definitions of distributive justice. But what does “justice” mean? What does “equality” mean? The cry for justice found in the prophetic scriptures is rooted in particular language – language that resonates with the neglected Jubilee reforms. Firstly, the prophets cry was a cry for *mispat*. The key Hebrew word for justice is *mispat*, which has a variety of meanings such as “justice,” “judgment,” “rights,” “vindication,” “deliverance,” and “custom.” The roots of *mispat* are linked to Jubilee justice since originally *mispat* referred to “the restoration of a situation or an environment that promoted equity and harmony – shalom – in a community.”<sup>55</sup>

Connected with *mispat* is the Hebrew word *tsedaqah*. *Tsedaqah* often means “norm,” or “standard,” which connotes the way things “ought” to be. It may be translated as “justice,” but also as “righteousness.” *Tsedaqah* views justice as a picture of the world as it was intended to be, as it was created and ordained by Yahweh. Both *mispat* and *tsedaqah* are found as a matched pair in Hebrew parallelism and suggest a combined meaning of “justice as the norm of the way things should be.”<sup>56</sup> *Mispat* and *tsedaqah* are legal terms, but their application is not limited to the courtroom. They also refer to economic justice. The 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet Isaiah denounced Israel and Judah for their inability to practice *mispat* and *tsedaqah*. “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice

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<sup>55</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 78

<sup>56</sup> Sider, “Justice, Human Rights, and Government,” 168–169

(*mispat*), but saw bloodshed; righteousness (*tsedaqah*), but heard a cry!” (Isaiah 5:7). In the next verse we come to understand that the reason for this condemnation is that Israel has failed to practice the distributive justice prescribed in the Jubilee.

Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! The Lord of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. (Is. 5:8–9)

Archeologists have discovered that in the tenth century B.C.E. Israelite houses were of similar size, but by the eighth century there were larger houses in one area and smaller houses in another.<sup>57</sup> These discoveries seem to support Isaiah’s denunciation that many households in his time had lost their land and become poor because of the oppression of the powerful. Many of those who prospered by this injustice were government officials. The taxes and demands made by the state upon households proved too much, leaving families no option but to sell their ancestral land to the crown. “The crown literally gained ground for centralized agriculture through acquisition of the ancestral lands of small farmers who went into debt and put up their land as collateral.”<sup>58</sup> This land that was extracted from freeholders was given instead to the new aristocracy in a process known as latifundialization (“the making of wide estates”).<sup>59</sup> No longer did *mispat* and *tsedaqah* rule the nation, but rather acquisitive greed and systemic injustice

What Isaiah preached to the southern kingdom of Judah, Amos echoed to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Amos, a self-described farmer, surely knew the value of land as a productive resource that enabled each family to live with dignity. So he rightly condemned those who took more than their fair share of property from the poor.

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<sup>57</sup> Sider, “Justice, Human Rights, and Government,” 169

<sup>58</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 123

<sup>59</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 123

Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. (Am. 5:11–12)

Another contemporary of Isaiah and Amos was the prophet Micah who prophesied in Judah and whose message was directed primarily at Jerusalem. Once again his message was a challenge to greedy landowners:

Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. (Mic. 2:1–2)

Micah reminded Israel about God's requirement for justice: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice (*mispat*), and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6.8). Micah also envisioned a day when the land would once again be fairly distributed amongst the people, when Israelites "shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees" (Mic. 4:4).

The story of Naboth's vineyard found in 1 Kings 21 is perhaps the most famous account of a confrontation between covetous rulers and a local farmer's land rights. Not an isolated incident, Ellen Davis calls this an "emblematic tale,"<sup>60</sup> which depicts the conflict of two different economies: the economy of distributive justice and an economy of capitalist greed.

Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. And Ahab said to Naboth, 'Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.' But Naboth said to Ahab, 'The

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<sup>60</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*, 111



Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.’ (1 Kings 21:1–3)

Ahab approaches Naboth’s land as a simple piece of real estate, for him, the vineyard is an “interchangeable commodity,” whereas Naboth views his ancestral land as God intended: as an “inalienable inheritance,” a gift from Yahweh, meant to sustain his kin throughout the generations.<sup>61</sup> His refusal to sell is theological motivated; “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” This is the only sentence Naboth ever speaks and it encapsulates the covenant economics of Israel’s history. Ahab’s desire is to destroy the vineyard and plant a vegetable garden instead. A vineyard is the work of decades and represents a commitment to the land, whereas a vegetable garden is an annual summer’s work. Not only does Ahab’s plan contravene Israel’s laws, but it is also an unwise use of land, since wine, grapes, and raisins were a staple of Israelite diet and vegetables were not. It is therefore unclear what Ahab’s true motives were in this story. When Ahab complains to his wife Jezebel, her response reveals a complete misunderstanding of Israelite Torah: “Do you now govern Israel...I will give you the vineyard.” (v. 11) Walter Brueggemann dissects her words to reveal her callous assumptions.

The first comment shows that *govern* (literally, “do kingship”) means total control with capacity to dispose of land as one prefers. The second comment misunderstands *inheritance* because she proposes to give what cannot be given and in any case is not in her power to give.<sup>62</sup>

Contrary to Jezebel’s words, it is Yahweh who owns the land (Lev. 25:23), it is Yahweh who assigned the land (Num. 26), and it is Yahweh who commands that the land be redistributed regularly (Lev. 8–10). Here both the king and his queen have

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<sup>61</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 88.

<sup>62</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 89

overstepped their bounds. Nevertheless, with Jezebel's help Ahab has Naboth murdered, opening the way for him to get what he wants. "As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it." (1 Kings 21:18) It is the prophet Elijah who confronts Ahab about his violation, and his condemnation is crisp and unmistakable:

"Thus says the Lord: 'Have you killed, and also taken possession?... Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel'" (1 Kings 21:19–21)

Thus Ahab will suffer for his greed and the land will be avenged because of the deep connection it has with the covenant of Yahweh. Elijah's choice of words is poignant; Ahab "sold" himself to do what is evil. In a culture where families and households were sold into slavery in order to survive, Ahab sells himself, voluntarily forfeiting his kingly title, and sealing the fate of his royal household.

The prophetic voices of Isaiah, Amos, Micah and Elijah joined with the people and rulers of Israel to practice what Yahweh had been teaching them since he fed them with manna in the wilderness. "The integrity and legitimacy of the Hebrew nation, as the prophets repeatedly emphasized, depended on whether it promoted a God-inspired economy in which the hungry were fed, the poor and the orphaned well cared for, and the oppressed set free."<sup>63</sup>

### **Jesus and Jubilee Sharing**

As we have seen in previous chapters, Jesus Christ roots his own kingdom vision in the Sabbath-Jubilee hope set out in Israel's scriptures. Central to this vision is a

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<sup>63</sup> Wierzbza, *Living the Sabbath*, 117

renewal of the Jubilee concept of “sharing the wealth” amongst all God’s people

Typical of Jesus, he does not envision the Jubilee as a “once every fifty years” corrective, but rather as an ongoing way of life in the Kingdom of God. Thus when Jesus rose in the synagogue in Nazareth and proclaimed “the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:19) he was not announcing that he had merely calculated the next Jubilee annum, but that the distributive justice which characterized the Jubilee year, was now a daily way of life.

“Every day the rules of the Jubilee year can now apply.”<sup>64</sup>

Andre Trocme connects the Old Testament Jubilee with Jesus’ Kingdom through the greek word, *apokatastasis*. Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, made reference to the Jubilee by the term *apokatastasis* and like *mispat* and *tsedaqah* the word *apokatastasis* means to reestablish something or somebody to his previous state.<sup>65</sup> Such a term squares beautifully with the basic meaning of the Jubilee. Just as the Jubilee was meant to “reestablish” the tribes of Israel as they were at the time they entered Canaan, the New Testament itself uses *apokatastasis* several times to express the idea of restoration. For instance, it can mean the reestablishment or “recovery” of a sick person or it can refer generally to the “restoration” of the Kingdom of Israel (Matt. 17:11). In Acts 1:6 the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore (*apokatastasis*) the kingdom to Israel?” Elsewhere Jesus declared that he “must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore (*apokatastasis*) everything as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people...’” (Acts 3:21–22).

In the last passage, Peter describes Jesus as a second Moses, who will once again enforce the ancient ordinances. Moses’ return and

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<sup>64</sup> Duchrow, *Property for People*, 23

<sup>65</sup> Trocme, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 17

consequently the reestablishment of the Jubilee through repentance and remission of sins are described as the condition for the great restoration when Jesus returns. Whether referring to the healing of persons or the reestablishment of the kingdom, *apokatastasis* should be understood as having Jubilean connotations. The restoration of the sick, the reestablishment of Israel, and the reestablishment of property were all part of the Messiah's redemptive task. Jesus' mission was one of jubilee!"<sup>66</sup>

## A: THE FEEDING OF THE MULTITUDE

Several key stories from the gospels seem to support the notion that Jesus understood his ministry through the lens of Jubilee sharing and distributive justice. The first is the story of the Feeding of the Multitude recorded in each of the four gospels. This episode is reminiscent of the Mosaic stories of manna and the division of land, and it begins when the large crowd has followed Jesus into a "deserted place":

When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late, send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. (Mark 6:30-44)

Apparently the disciples were concerned about the welfare of the crowd and they suggest that the people be allowed to leave so that they can go to the surrounding villages and buy themselves something to eat. Jesus responds by telling his disciples to "give them something to eat yourselves." The disciples are indignant and assume that Jesus is asking them to spend their own money to feed the multitude. Twice the disciples suggest

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<sup>66</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 17-18.

to Jesus that the solution to the hungry crowds is to “buy” food. But the Kingdom of God operates on the basis of God’s economy of Jubilee sharing, not on the prevailing economy of buying and selling, and so Jesus’ solution to the problem has nothing to do with the dominant economic order. Instead, Jesus determines the available resources, organizes the people into groups, pronounces a blessing, and distributes what is available.<sup>67</sup> In the end, “all ate and were filled,” but as Ched Myers states, the real miracle is that Jubilee sharing was put into action.

We should be clear that there is nothing ‘supernatural’ reported to have transpired in this feeding of some five thousand men; only that “they all ate and were satisfied” (6:42). The only “miracle” here is the triumph of the economics of sharing within a community of consumption over against the economics of autonomous consumption in the anonymous marketplace.<sup>68</sup>

“When all share what they have, all have enough, and there is more than enough. Exodus 16 becomes, at least momentarily, a reality.”<sup>69</sup> Only in the light of the Jubilee mandate to share wealth, redistribute capital, and practice justice do we see the true meaning of Jesus’ actions.

## B: THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

Jesus’ teaching ministry was also rooted in the story of Jubilee. Several of Jesus’ parables can only be understood properly in the larger Jubilee context. One such example is the parable of the Rich Fool found in Luke’s gospel.

Then he told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods

<sup>67</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 206

<sup>68</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 206.

<sup>69</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee*, 98.

laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.” (Luke 12:16–21)

The rich man in Jesus’ parable is called a “fool” because he fundamentally misunderstands the purpose of such a miraculous harvest. According to Richard Lowery the incredible harvest is a sign of the forthcoming Jubilee, since according to Leviticus 25 the Sabbath and Jubilee years are to be preceded by an amazing triple harvest.<sup>70</sup>

Should you ask, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?’ I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the old crop; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old. (Lev. 25:20–22)

The rich man assumes that his great harvest should be spent on his own private enjoyment rather than used for the good of the community. Thus, he fails the test of the manna, choosing instead to hoard rather than share with others for the common good. The rich man represents the negation of Jubilee economics, and instead the expression of the predominant economics of wealth accumulation. Jesus warns about the danger of such greed: “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions,” (Luke 12:13) and the death of the rich man in the parable is, “simply one way of expressing the divine judgment upon that socioeconomic ethic and lifestyle, which proposes overabundance for some at the expense of many but ultimately leads to death.”<sup>71</sup> Marie Dennis also recognizes that the greed of the rich man was harmful to the nation as a whole: “The Jubilee was intended as Israel’s protection against

<sup>70</sup> Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee*, 142

<sup>71</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 106

the inevitable tendency of human societies to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few.”<sup>72</sup>

### C: THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

In another familiar parable, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we see even more Jubilean overtones

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (Luke 16:19–31)

According to Ross and Gloria Kinsler, the rich man in the story represents the small urban elite who "acquired their land by taking advantage of unpaid mortgages of peasant farmers, accumulating large landholdings."<sup>73</sup> Lazarus, on the other hand, represents the other side of the socioeconomic coin, the urban poor, who had lost their ancestral land, could not support their families, and who fell into extreme poverty. The

<sup>72</sup> Dennis, "Jubilee: The Righting of Relationships," 14.

<sup>73</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 121

story takes a surprising turn when both men die and find their situations reversed:

Lazarus now in heaven, while the rich man is tormented in Hades. The rich man's pleading goes unanswered since he and his family chose not listen to Moses or the prophets when they had their chance. While many interpretations have been made of the parable, none makes more sense than a simple application of Jubilee economics. Moses and the prophets, as we have seen, called Israel to practice an attitude of generosity and distributive justice amongst the people. Instead, the rich man chose to accumulate wealth at the expense of the poor. The common belief that the rich are blessed by God and the poor are cursed is challenged by Jesus' subversive Jubilee reminder about the truth of God's economy.

#### D: THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

One final parable that must be mentioned is the famous Parable of the Talents.

This parable at first presents a stumbling block to Jesus' Jubilee platform since it seems to teach his followers the value of hoarding and wealth accumulation.

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them: to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave, you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy



of your master.” Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt. 25:14–30)

The wealthy man has entrusted various sums to his servants with the expectation that they will produce a nice profit in his absence. When he returns he rewards the slaves who made the greatest profit and condemns the slave who merely buried his talent making no profit. At first glance, the text seems to affirm usury and market economics, however there is another way to read this parable – not as a representation of the Kingdom of God, but as its antithesis.<sup>74</sup> William Herzog suggests that the parable serves to unmask the world of oppression that it so aptly describes.<sup>75</sup> He suggests that because this is the exact economic system that Jesus came to resist, the rich man of the story does not represent God, but some wealthy elite who is described as “a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed” (Matt. 25:24). Concordantly, the poor slave is not a failure, but the “whistle-blower” who exposes his owner’s exploitative practices and refuses to participate in his economic plans. As such, he suffers the consequences – just as Jesus and his followers would be persecuted and killed for their resistance to the power structures of their day.

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<sup>74</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 103

<sup>75</sup> Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 150–168. Also cf. Myers and DeBode, “Towering Trees and Talented Slaves.”

Much of Jesus' Jubilee vision can be summed up in one of his most popular teachings:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 6:19–21)

This passage has usually been read as a “life insurance policy for eternity,”<sup>76</sup> but in the context of the Sabbath-Jubilee thread that runs throughout the scriptures it is clear to see that Jesus is calling his disciples to practice Jubilee in this life rather than accumulate wealth for oneself. Just as worms devoured the manna that was hoarded in Israel's early wilderness wanderings, so Jesus reminds his followers that moths, rust and thieves threaten to spoil our own stockpiles of wealth and capital.

### **Jubilee Practice in the Early Church**

It seems apparent that Jesus' life, teaching, and ministry demonstrated his commitment to a Jubilee way of life. Yet debate swirls about whether his example was ever meant to be normative for all Christians at all times and all places, or whether it was just a “counsel of perfection” directed to certain saints.<sup>77</sup> Yoder notes that traditionally the church has chosen the second solution, the easy one. However, by observing the practices of the early church as they sought to order their life in relation to the Kingdom of God it becomes apparent that Jubilee redistribution was “front and centre” in their response to the gospel.

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<sup>76</sup> Kinsler, “Jubilee – The Biblical Vision,” [108].

<sup>77</sup> Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 69

The book of Acts resonates with Jubilee and Sabbath imagery, as disciples sell property and fields, share wealth, break bread together, rest and study and restore community (Acts 2:43–46, 4:32–37). The classic text is Acts 4:32–35 where we see the nascent church voluntarily sharing its property.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

Commentators point out that the Greek word “distributed” (*diamerizo*) appears only two times in the book of Acts: once for the distribution of tongues of fire in 2:3, and again for the distribution of possessions in 2:45.<sup>78</sup> It seems clear that a direct result of the coming of the Holy Spirit was a sharing of property and wealth. As well the words “day by day” allude to the story of manna in Exodus 16 and the gathering of each day’s food. The word *koinonia* (fellowship) refers both to the community itself (2:42) and to the collected assets of that community (2:44, ‘*koinos*').<sup>79</sup> All of these indicators suggest that the sharing that occurred among the believers at Pentecost was not a spontaneous, one time response to a temporary need, but rather a fundamental characteristic of this new, Spirit-filled community called the church.

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<sup>78</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, 142

<sup>79</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, 142

Later on in Acts the Jubilee concept of sharing and redistribution continues to be normative for the community. As Ross and Gloria Kinsler note, “the *koinonia* experienced by the believers was not just religious, or charismatic, but socioeconomic.”<sup>80</sup>

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4.32–37)

This passage is followed by the contrasting and shocking story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), who like Barnabas sold a piece of land but did not distribute the proceeds from the sale with the community. Their actions were both deceptive and greedy, which ultimately led to their death. Such a story only serves to confirm both the necessity of truth and trust in a community, and also the seriousness with which the fledgling church took the Jubilee mandate to share their resources with each other. The Holy Spirit's coming and the Jubilee practice of distributive justice go hand in hand, and as such, “spiritual life” cannot be separated from the socioeconomic challenges of everyday life. As Ched Myers writes. “The Acts narrative of Pentecost is not about ecstatic individual spiritual experience, but a challenge to the entire order of things, personal and political.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 142.

<sup>81</sup> Myers, *Interpreting the Lessons*, 7

### **Learning How to Share the Wealth:**

As we have seen the Jubilee thread of distributive justice is woven throughout the scriptures from beginning to end. God's original plan for ancient Israel was instilled and prophesied down through the ages until it became part of the DNA of the first churches in Jerusalem. The question awaiting our generation is how can present day followers of Jesus Christ take up this Jubilee thread and continue the work of repairing the injustices around us?

### **A: ALTERNATIVES TO GLOBAL CAPITALISM**

On a "macro" scale the time has come for an honest reevaluation of our capitalist, free market economy. However confusing and futile this might seem, we must begin to think seriously about the shortcomings of the present system, a system filled with advantages for some and enormous disadvantages for others. The task is urgent, and nothing less than the "rehumanization of life" is at stake.<sup>82</sup> To critique the prevailing economic system is a daunting task. The free market global economy (which is rooted in the principle of private ownership) is considered "untouchable" and taboo by most economists and held up by proponents as the "only system that works." To defend their position, advocates cite the failure of communism and socialism as viable alternatives. Yet, as we have seen, the Biblical model of Sabbath-Jubilee economics is neither communist nor socialist, and certainly not capitalist. Jubilee economics are not communist since God allows private ownership and family inheritance of ancestral property. Jesus did not advocate a socialist program either, for if he did he would have created a monastic rule (similar to the Essenes) or some constitutional order to be

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<sup>82</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*,

implemented within a collectivist Jewish state.<sup>83</sup> And certainly Jesus did not advocate for any system that concentrated wealth into the hands of a few, while the majority suffered, a situation which characterizes our present global situation. Therefore the biblical Jubilee offers a hitherto unexplored middle way between the free market economy that tends to neglect the poor, and the socialist model that may infringe on personal, God-given liberties. As the ancient proverb goes, “If there are only two alternatives choose the third.”

Ulrich Duchrow and Franz Hinkelammert, an economist and a theologian, are seeking to build such economic outposts in our world today. They argue that in order to rethink our global marketplace we must first reshape our notions of private ownership in accordance with a wider Biblical vision that accounts for the common good. In their controversial books *Property for People not for Profit*, (and Duchrow’s book *Alternatives to Global Capitalism*) they trace the development of our present economic predicament and then offer new criteria for possible alternatives. Duchrow provides an insightful list of alternative business principles that are already changing the economic landscape of the West.

- Companies are making profits by appealing to investors, employees, and consumers on the basis of their ethical concern for labour, the environment, and the common good.
- Alternative technologies are replacing traditional Western technologies which are capital intensive, expensive and environmentally damaging.
- The dawn of “sustainable agriculture,” has sacrificed growth and profit in favour of local communities, small farms, food security, stable income, and renewable resources

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<sup>83</sup> Trocme, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, 35.

- Banks are offering their clients ethical investing opportunities that allow investment in poorer nations for reduced personal rates of return.
- Consumer boycotts have proven to be effective means of disciplining corporations for human rights and environmental abuses (e.g. Nestle's promotion of infant formula in the Third World)<sup>84</sup>

Christopher Wright offers four principles for economic reform in light of the Jubilee mandates that would form the bedrock of any alternative economy.<sup>85</sup> First, the sources of life must be available to all. This does not mean that everybody should have the same amount of land but that all should have enough to maintain a viable household. This basic economic principle flows directly from the belief that God owns everything and gives it to us as a generous gift. Second, society must resist the tendency for land to accumulate in the hands of a few. This would require clear, practical laws to redress inequalities and wealth polarities that would otherwise grow unabated. Third, economic policies must focus first and foremost on household units since the home is the place where social life is most directly nourished and sustained. Economic life should not prioritize national interests, corporate profits, the stock market or the GDP since prioritizing these interests would serve to sacrifice and degrade local economies and families. Fourth, economic policy must include safety valves so that temporary catastrophes do not condemn future generations of a household so that no one's life becomes utterly ruined.

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<sup>84</sup> Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism*, 254–277. The Nestle's boycott was prompted by concern about the Nestle's promotion of breast milk substitutes (infant formula), particularly in less economically developed countries, which campaigners claim contributes to the unnecessary suffering and even deaths of babies, largely among the poor.

<sup>85</sup> Wright, *God's People in God's Land*, 117.

In summary, Wright remarks: “The right of all people to have access to, and use of, the resources of the earth is a prior right to the right of any person or group to claim private ownership and use of some section of those resources.”<sup>86</sup>

The meaning of property has a varied history. It was not too long ago that property, in the United States, could include other human beings. Nothing short of a revolution brought about that change, and it may be that Christian voices today can unite to bring revolutionary change to our world’s economy.

## B: THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION

Identifying alternative economic systems that truly seek to share wealth and redistribute productive resources is a difficult task indeed. One possible example of a Jubilee oriented economy is found in the Sandinista experience in Nicaragua. Central American countries like Nicaragua have suffered immensely from the unfair distribution of wealth in our world. In a global marketplace prices must be competitive which means labour costs must be depressed as much as possible. The resources of Nicaragua are exported at bargain prices, while half of the country’s population lives below the poverty line. When the revolutionary wars in Nicaragua ended, the economic situation did not improve. That is because the real war had not ended: “What we should have understood – what is now evident – is that the war behind these conflicts was always an economic war against the poor.”<sup>87</sup> Rich landholders and businesses, national and transnational companies, foreign investors and banks, all continued to seek to maintain an economic system that favoured the rich few and perpetually impoverished the large majority

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<sup>86</sup> Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land*, 117

<sup>87</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 28.



In 1979 the Sandinista revolution managed to finally remove the corrupt Somoza family from power in Nicaragua. The Sandinistas inherited a country in ruins with a debt of 1.6 billion dollars, an estimated 50,000 war dead, 600,000 homeless, and a devastated economic infrastructure. There was an outpouring of public fervor for building a new nation founded on equality. Within months, the Sandinistas had launched a grass roots literacy campaign which accomplished the goal of reducing illiteracy from 53% to 13% in just a few short years. With international help similar progress was made in health care, housing, education, arts and crafts, and labour relations. Rural and urban communities organized to care for special needs, distribute essential foods.

A great effort was made at all levels to change the tradition of wealth accumulation to an economy of sharing. The greatest example of this was the Sandinistas Agrarian Reform Law that led to the redistribution of large amounts of farm land previously held by the Somozas. Homesteaders gained access to that land, and farm workers were encouraged to organize under cooperatives. They were also given access to necessary small loans with the assurance that bank foreclosures in the event of default on a bank loan were prohibited.<sup>88</sup> “The poor of Nicaragua did not have this strength and confidence before the Sandinista revolution. They have it now... this is an enduring success of the Sandinista revolution.”<sup>89</sup>

The United States embargo of Nicaragua and their support of the *contra war* resulted in the overthrow the Sandinista regime, effectively destroying “the dream of an alternative socioeconomic and cultural or spiritual way of life.”<sup>90</sup> Nicaragua is now the second poorest country in Latin America, with most of the social and economic reforms

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. Library of Congress, *Nicaragua: A Country Study*.

<sup>89</sup> Harper, “Post-Sandinista Nicaragua,” [27–30]

<sup>90</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 29.

having been reversed, “with progress again being measured not in terms of human development but simply in terms of GNP.”<sup>91</sup>

In 2006 Daniel Ortega, a founding member of the Sandinistas, was elected president of Nicaragua. Despite his own political missteps, Ortega has managed to reignite some of the original Sandinista vision for sharing the wealth. Recently Nicaragua launched the "Zero Hunger Program", which aims to provide families with the basic sustaining resources for life. Nicaragua will deliver a \$2,000 voucher to 75,000 rural families between 2007 and 2012. The voucher will consist of the delivery of a pregnant cow and a pregnant sow, five chickens and a rooster, seeds, fruit-bearing plants and plants for reforestation.<sup>92</sup> The project's short-term objective is to have each rural family capable of producing enough milk, meat, eggs, fruits, vegetables and cereals to cover its basic needs while its medium range objective is to establish local markets and export certain products.

The Sandinista experience is not a picture-perfect implementation of Jubilee principles. The young leaders of this revolution made mistakes along the way. Yet their story stands as a real-world attempt at large scale distributive justice.

## C: THE EARTH CHARTER

On an even larger scale, the spirit of Jubilee justice was demonstrated in the drafting of the 1992 Earth Charter. During the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, 20,190 people representing 9,358 nongovernmental organizations in 171 countries met nearby for their own Global Forum.

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<sup>91</sup> Kinsler and Kinsler, *Struggle for Life*, 29.

<sup>92</sup> Silva, “Sandinista’s Wage a New War Against Hunger,” [75]

One outcome of the meeting was the launching of the Earth Charter Action Plan. The Earth Charter

is a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the 21st century. It seeks to inspire in all people a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole human family, the greater community of life, and future generations. It is a vision of hope and a call to action.

The Earth Charter is centrally concerned with the transition to sustainable ways of living and sustainable human development. Ecological integrity is one major theme. However, the Earth Charter recognizes that the goals of ecological protection, the eradication of poverty, equitable economic development, respect for human rights, democracy, and peace are interdependent and indivisible. It provides, therefore, a new, inclusive, integrated ethical framework to guide the transition to a sustainable future.<sup>93</sup>

In the preamble to the Earth Charter the global crisis before us is laid out in unambiguous terms:

The dominant patterns of production and consumption are causing environmental devastation, the depletion of resources, and a massive extinction of species. Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.<sup>94</sup>

The charter goes on to suggest several interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life.<sup>95</sup> Many of these principles are implicit in the Jubilee instructions we have surveyed in this chapter. For example, the fourth principle resonates with the futuristic focus of the Jubilee to “Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.” To do this we will need to “Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified by the needs of future generations,” and the need to “transmit to

<sup>93</sup> Earth Charter, <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/What-is-the-Earth-Charter%3F.html>

<sup>94</sup> Earth Charter, preamble

<sup>95</sup> Earth Charter, preamble

future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.” Similarly, the tenth principle of the charter clearly has the Jubilee goal in mind of ensuring that “economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner,” which is to be accomplished by promoting “the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.”

The Earth Charter is not a “Christian” document and it has been dismissed by some church leaders as pagan and totalitarian. However the Charter’s resonance with Jubilee ideals is undeniable. This is perhaps why numerous denominations and church groups have officially endorsed the Earth Charter and promoted it among their churches. Local churches have formed “Earth Charter Action Groups” where the charter becomes a reference for discussion, reflection, and inspiration – going hand in hand with Bible study. Churches then take action in their own communities by implementing the Charter’s goals. As well, the charter urges churches and individuals to commit a percentage of all operating budgets and profits for “the restoration, protection, and management of Earth’s ecosystems and the promotion of equitable development.”<sup>96</sup>

#### D: THE SIMPLE WAY

As we have seen, incorporating Jubilee principles into macroeconomic systems is a complex and protracted undertaking, but necessary nonetheless. However, it is in smaller communities, churches and organizations that Jubilee economics is able to practiced with more freedom and vitality. The New Monasticism of recent years has

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<sup>96</sup> Earth Charter, preamble.

become fertile ground for Jubilee-rooted communities. Rob Moll describes these alternative communities:

Formed often independently by mostly young, single Christians, these communities are the latest wave of evangelicals who see in community life an answer to society's materialism and the church's complacency toward it. Rather than enjoy the benefits of middle-class life, these suburban evangelicals choose to move in with the poor. Though many of the same forces drive them as did earlier generations—a desire to experience intense community and to challenge contented evangelicalism—they are turning to an ancient tradition to provide the spiritual sustenance for their ministries.<sup>97</sup>

Among these ancient traditions that guide their communal life is surely a return to the Jubilee mandate of distributive justice. One of the most popular new monastic communities is The Simple Way, located in Philadelphia. The Simple Way was formed when Shane Claiborne (author, speaker and activist) and his friends from Eastern University held a protest in 1995 to fight the eviction of homeless women and children from an abandoned Philadelphia church. This proved to be the catalyst for the creation of The Simple Way: “a web of subversive friends” who now live in dozens of houses in the same Kensington neighbourhood. They share economic resources, help the needy, provide hospitality to strangers and lead disciplined, contemplative lives. Community members gather daily for prayer, and invite neighbours and friends to family dinners. One of the guiding principles of their life together is “Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.”<sup>98</sup>

According to the group’s website, the Simple Way is founded on the concept of simplicity, defined as “striving to live with only what one needs, not wants... committed to love.”

<sup>97</sup> Moll, “The New Monasticism,” [40–43]

<sup>98</sup> [www.thesimpleway.org/about/12-marks-of-new-monasticism/](http://www.thesimpleway.org/about/12-marks-of-new-monasticism/)

We believe that there is enough. Those with plenty can meet the needs of the poor, if s/he who can gather much will not gather too much (2 Cor. 8:13–15). We believe that the Kingdom of God is free of poverty and oppression. We echo and attempt to live out Christ's prayer that the "Kingdom come and will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We believe that begins now, with Jesus' followers, and continues throughout eternity.<sup>99</sup>

A number of years ago, The Simple Way performed a prophetic version of Jubilee at the Wall Street Stock Exchange. Having received a \$10,000 donation of money that had been invested in the stock market, the group decided that biblically this money belonged to the poor. They summoned the poor and needy of the city, assembled on the steps of the stock exchange, blew a ram's horn, and then dropped \$10,000 of cash and coins on the steps of the stock exchange. During the protest, the group read the following statement:

"Some of us have worked on Wall Street, and some of us have slept on Wall Street. We are a community of struggle. Some of us are rich people trying to escape our loneliness. Some of us are poor folks trying to escape the cold. Some of us are addicted to drugs, and others are addicted to money. We are a broken people who need each other and God, for we have come to recognize the mess that we have created of our world and how deeply we suffer from that mess. Now we are working together to give birth to a new society within the shell of the old. Another world is possible. Another world is necessary. Another world is already here."<sup>100</sup>

Communities like The Simple Way may seem small and powerless against the massive economic powers that control the wealth of society. But these communities are creating outposts in our world that show another way of life is possible.

"We are on a frontier surrounded by wilderness, and the job at hand is to make a clearing – to clear a space and determine that what goes on within that circle will be a prototype of the world as you would like it to be. The thrilling thing is to see those small circles begin to touch upon one another here and there, and overlap – sturdy outposts, ground for hope."<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> [www.thesimpleway.org/about/our-commitments/](http://www.thesimpleway.org/about/our-commitments/)

<sup>100</sup> Claiborne, *Irresistable Revolution*, 188.

<sup>101</sup> Robertson *et al.*, *The New Laurel's Kitchen*, 31

Though the new monasticism is a minority movement, its impact is felt well beyond its small constituency. As Rob Moll comments in *Christianity Today*: "None of these historical movements were ever a huge percentage of the Christian population," he says. "But they had a disproportionate impact on society. I think we're going to see that in the next 50 years."<sup>102</sup>

Churches and individuals can walk the path of simplicity without joining a monastic community. Richard Foster has written at length about the need to recapture the spiritual discipline of simplicity as a way of life in our world today. "The Spiritual Discipline of simplicity provides the needed perspective. Simplicity sets us free to receive the provision of God as a gift that is not ours to keep but can be freely shared with others."<sup>103</sup> Foster is also careful to note that true simplicity is not just a matter of outward action, but it begins with "inward simplicity." "The Christian discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that leads to an outward lifestyle."<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, some clear, outward actions that should define a life of simplicity are suggested. Foster's third, fifth, and ninth "controlling principles" are especially relevant for the average North American Christian seeking to live a life of Jubilee sharing.

"First, buy things for their usefulness rather than their status."

"Second, reject anything that is producing an addiction to you."

"Third, develop a habit of giving things away."

"Fourth, refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry."

"Fifth, learn to enjoy things without owning them."

"Sixth, develop a deeper appreciation for the creation."

"Seventh, look with a healthy skepticism at all 'buy now, pay later' schemes."

"Eighth, obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech."

"Ninth, reject anything that breeds the oppression of others."

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<sup>102</sup> Moll, "The New Monasticism", 46

<sup>103</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 85

<sup>104</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 79.

"Tenth, shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God."<sup>105</sup>

## E: ESTATE PLANNING

A final, short application of Jubilee sharing must be the realm of estate planning. Americans and Canadians today are the richest generation in history, having benefitted immensely from the market economy we live in.<sup>106</sup> Economists predict that before our generation dies we will make important decisions about how to redistribute between ten and twelve trillion dollars of our assets to the next generation. How will the Jubilee texts of Leviticus 25 affect the writing of our last will and testament? Will our money be left to those already wealthy, thus serving to concentrate the world's wealth even more toward top of the champagne glass? Or, will our death be a Jubilee moment, when our riches are redistributed to those at the bottom of the glass, giving them a chance to start over? The combined estates of our generation have the ability to impact the world's inequality on an immense scale. But the question remains: "When our survivors read the disposition of our assets, will they recognize that we 'have been with Jesus' (Acts 14:13)? Will they see that this Christian, in life and death, underwent 'pocketbook conversion' in favour of the world's poor?"<sup>107</sup>

## Conclusion:

Walter Brueggemann writes that sometimes we possess things so long we begin to think of them as ours even though they do not really belong to us. We neglect Leviticus

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<sup>105</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 88–95

<sup>106</sup> Shriver, "Jubilee Shout," 7.

<sup>107</sup> Shriver, "Jubilee Shout, 7.



25:23 with its sobering reminder that no thing and no one belongs to us 'in perpetuity.'

Instead, says the God of Israel, 'With me you are but aliens and tenants'. "God owns everything we go through the motions of possessing."<sup>108</sup> This foundational principle lies at the heart of the Biblical story of Jubilee.

The Hebrew people were divided by tribes and given stewardship over such of God's lands as they were supposed to have. In Leviticus, the Jubilee celebration is simply an opportunity to put the land back where God, the owner, assigned it in the first place. While Israel failed to practice the Jubilee with any integrity, the prophets continued to defend the poor against the greed of the rich. Jesus himself adopted the Jubilee theme to inaugurate his own ministry as the "year of the Lord's favour" and went on to apply the theme of restoration (*apokatastasis*) throughout his ministry and teaching. And no sooner had the Spirit of Pentecost empowered the church than the first Christians began implementing a generous program of Jubilee sharing.

Those who dare to implement the Jubilee in our world today take an enormous risk. The risk of being labeled "socialist" or "communist" (Ulrich and Duchrow), the risk of violence and political suppression (the Sandinista Experience), the risk of being tolerated or the risk of being pushed to the margins of society and labeled as hippy college grads (The Simple Way). Even the Occupy Movement endured its fair share of criticism for their attempt to draw awareness to our global problem of greed.

This should not surprise anyone who takes seriously the call to Jubilee living. Jesus himself was considered a threat to the vested interests in his time because he proposed to give land and dignity back to those who had lost it. His Jubilee announcement in Luke 4:16–21 was followed quickly by an assassination attempt in

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<sup>108</sup> Mitchell, "Jubilee in My World," 12

Luke 4:28–30. Jubilee justice is what revolutions are made of. Jubilee challenges the status quo and threatens the rich and powerful. Therefore since the problems Jubilee addresses are so systemic and resistant, it simply will not do to dismiss Jubilee activists as terrorists or communists. Walter Brueggemann writes that “the great revolutions of our time are an effort to redistribute land back into the hands of those who lost it... to redistribute land according to tribal conventions that have been gravely distorted in the interest of concentrated surplus.”<sup>109</sup>

The Jubilee goes well beyond present day notions of “welfare” and “charity.” At the heart of Jubilee is justice. Justice for people who have been cut off from their productive capability, as well as dignity that restores them to their participation in community. Leviticus 25 commands the people to fulfill the call to “make them strong again” so “they may live beside you” in the land (v. 35)

For those of us who are so privileged we have forgotten who owns what, Jubilee justice comes as a gift, for the particular meaning of justice that Jubilee stresses is the notion of “return,” not in the Jubilee journey sense of a return home but return as relinquishing, giving back, and handing over what is not ours to God and to those crying for justice throughout the whole, round earth.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Brueggemann, *Land*, 193.

<sup>110</sup> Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, 79

# Conclusion

“If they had actually been observed, the collection of Jubilee laws would have had a sweeping impact on the social and political life of any community governed by them.”<sup>1</sup>

“Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates ” (Deut 6:6–9)

## Answering the Call

The year of Jubilee is announced with a blast of a trumpet: an unmistakable, clarion call to action. Releasing slaves, forgiving debts, resting land, and sharing wealth were not mere ideas to be pondered, but rather commands to be obeyed when the horn sounded. “These actions are not undertaken out of an emotional ‘rush,’ but ‘on signal,’ under discipline, in response to a regular communal expectation.”<sup>2</sup>

Given the urgency and prominence of the Jubilee summons throughout scripture, the looming question remains: “Why was the Jubilee year never truly observed in Israel?” There is evidence of some partial application. Certainly, some slaves experienced release, some debts were probably forgiven, and land was left fallow at times. But there is no evidence that a regular, universal “release” was ever enacted in Israel’s history.

Neither Hebrew scriptures, nor the intertestamental literature, nor secular accounts mention the observance of a Jubilee Year in any part of the Jewish Community. The argument from silence would suggest, therefore that whatever the intent of these laws, they were

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<sup>1</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee*, 27.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, “Living with a Different Set of Signals,” 20.

not enacted as part of public policy. Surely... it would not have gone unnoticed.<sup>3</sup>

Mortimer Arias has pondered this question and offers some possible explanations for the lack of action. One reason for the disregard of the Sabbath-Jubilee vision might be that the vision was spiritualized. The Sabbath and Jubilee dream was seen as a utopian ideal, too good to be true, too difficult to enact. Such a dream could only be applied in the spiritual realm, not the real world.

Who are the 'poor' for whom Jesus brought 'good news'? Naturally, the spiritually poor. Who are the 'captives'? Surely those who are spiritual captives of sin. Who are the 'blind'? Of course, the spiritually blind, those who do not know the gospel. Who are the 'oppressed'? The spiritually oppressed, the slaves of sin and vice.<sup>4</sup>

It cannot be denied that all of the social sins of exploitation and greed are rooted in the human heart and spiritual in nature. However, our spiritualizing leads us to generalize and globalize these sins in such a way that we lose specificity: "We do not name the sins by their name and shape in society; we do not exorcise the powers and demons; we do not unmask the idols entrenched in our culture; we do not denounce the powers ruling our societies."<sup>5</sup>

As we have seen, the Sabbath and Jubilee threads addressed real societal evils in Israel's life and it was immensely relevant to the daily struggles of the people. The Sabbath-Jubilee commands were utopian ideals, but they were given by God and established into law. The purpose of the laws was to preserve human life, to allow human flourishing, and to make God's justice effective with his people. Jesus took seriously the real world applications of Jubilee. He was nearly killed by

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<sup>3</sup> Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Arias, "Mission and Liberation," 42.

<sup>5</sup> Arias, "Mission and Liberation," 42.

his fellow-citizens when he proclaimed the Jubilee year. Their angry reaction was not because his message was spiritual in nature, but because he was addressing real issues of greed and abuse.

Another possible reason for our avoidance of the Jubilee summons is not that the message is interpreted too spiritually, but that it is interpreted too literally. André Trocmé's thesis is that the year 26 CE, the very year Jesus proclaimed the Jubilee in Nazareth, was a mathematical Jubilee year. For Trocmé, Jesus was launching "a social revolution based on Moses' Jubilean law."<sup>6</sup> What risks being lost in this interpretation is the universal, ongoing spirit of Jubilee that constantly challenges our day-to-day lives. By relegating Jubilee to a periodic revolution, Jubilee as a "way of life" is lost.

This thesis suggests an alternative approach. Instead of a spiritualized or literalistic approach to the Sabbath-Jubilee mandates, we need to be able to see these four threads of "release," "forgiveness," "rest," and "redistribution," as the defining characteristics of kingdom living in our world today. These threads delineate the essential marks of Christian discipleship, and provide the guiding compass for contemporary church mission and ministry.

The "Year of the Lord's Favour" that Jesus announced is multi-dimensional, operating in the past, present, and in the future. In one sense, the Sabbath-Jubilee vision was an ancient ideal marking the golden age of Israel's ethical self-

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<sup>6</sup> Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*, 40.

understanding under Yahweh. Sabbath and Jubilee was Israel at its best. “Sabbath and Jubilee are the climax of the Torah.”<sup>7</sup>

In another sense, the Jubilee came into its fullness in the time of Christ, as he based his own agenda on the precepts of Sabbath and Jubilee. The early church, followed Christ’s lead and boldly established their communities on the Jubilee example of Jesus. The church today needs to continue in this work as this thesis has argued.

But in a third sense, the Jubilee was also an eschatological vision of the future, a projection of the final consummation of God’s own dream. “The inaugural message of Nazareth is both a point of arrival and a new point of departure. The kingdom is not only past event and future hope; it is present task and celebration – inauguration.”<sup>8</sup>

The world of creation is a peasant’s dream world, not the world of experience but the world as it should be – a world where debt slaves are treated with the dignity due beings stamped with deity. It is a world of abundance, self-restraint, universally shared power, and leisure, where wealth is distributed so that every single person has enough to eat. It is a world where everyone who is able works, and everyone gets what he or she needs to survive.<sup>9</sup>

## **The Possibility of Jubilee**

While the eschatological Sabbath-Jubilee vision may be a “dream world,” it is also a possibility here and now. Sabbath and Jubilee trace their roots to an equally impossible event: the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the opening of the Red Sea. This story forms the bedrock of Israel’s faith and ours too. As unlikely as it

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<sup>7</sup> Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Arias, “Mission and Liberation,” 47.

<sup>9</sup> Lowery, Sabbath and Jubilee, 103.

seemed, Israel was delivered from slavery, which underscored God's ability to make the impossible possible. It was this awesome act, as recorded in the Bible, which convinced Israel that God had power to free his people, and it is equally true that God is able to bring freedom to his people today. "God actually holds the power to make that Jubilee principle become a reality in human history."<sup>10</sup> In a similar manner, once enslaved African Americans were released from their bonds and on their day of emancipation Abraham Lincoln declared: "In reference to you, coloured people, let me say God has made you free."<sup>11</sup>

Could it be that we have forgotten who God is? Israel was a community established by a collective memory. Remembering the nature of this God, remembering that this God is the God of "release," "forgiveness," "rest," and "redistribution," gives His people hope that one day this Jubilee kingdom will come "on earth as it is in heaven." Israel is counseled again and again: "Do not forget the Lord who brought you out of slavery" (Deut. 6:12). A Sabbath-Jubilee world begins with our remembrance of our Sabbath-Jubilee God. "Jubilee homecoming and return from exile is impossible if God remains in exile, that is, if God remains absent."<sup>12</sup>

It was forgetfulness, "covenantal amnesia,"<sup>13</sup> that led Israel into the misery of exile. However, enshrined in the Torah are the stories and laws that helped them, and that can help us, to remember the truth of our God. The stories of Creation, Sabbath, and Jubilee, remind us of God's power and redemptive nature. The New

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<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, "Jubilee in My World," 13.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, "Jubilee in My World," 13

<sup>12</sup> Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 12.

Testament story of Jesus draws us back to these ancient stories, reminding us that the inbreaking kingdom bears the hallmarks of our liberating God.

While we journey as God's people, and as we remember these stories, we are therefore called to incarnate the gospel of Sabbath-Jubilee justice wherever we are; at home, at church, and in society. Even when hope seems to fade, we must never forget since "amnesia breeds apathy."<sup>14</sup> By living the Sabbath we are living the life God intends for his people. By embracing Jubilee justice we are joining in God's mission. The trumpet has sounded. Let us answer the call.

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<sup>14</sup> Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 12.



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