

Theology and Economics in the Biblical Year of Jubilee

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It is curious that a book on Christian Theology and Market Economics (CTME) begins with Aristotle and not with Moses. Despite a discussion of Old Testament texts on usury (pp. 29-31), the entire historical section of this volume (chapters 1-4) lacks interaction with the economic patterns woven into the festivals and temple operations of ancient Israel.¹

This is not, however, an oversight on the part of the editors of CTME. The book accurately reflects the unfortunate fact that western society has historically looked to Greece for models of civilized institutions to the neglect of ancient Near Eastern institutions. Thus, it is accurate for this book to trace the history of western economic thought as interacting with Greece. Nevertheless, this is a hole in western economic thought that a study on Biblical theology and economics should address.

For millennia, western scholarship has continued under the spell of prejudices against the intellectual value of the “barbarian” societies the Greeks conquered. There were important innovations that fueled the narrative that Greece was “civilized” compared with their “barbarian” neighbors. The Greek invention of vowels gave rise to the first truly literate culture capable of conceptual discourse.² Related to that innovation, the development of democratic institutions and the first “rule of law” society sparked a revolution in Greece deserving historical wonder.³ To some extent, Greece deserves accolades for “inventing civilization.” Add to such achievements the stunning success of Alexander’s armies, humbling the great empires of the east, and it is no wonder the charm of Hellenism has cast its spell so effectively over the world—and over history.

Although the scholars of the late antique and medieval west had little access to, and little interest in, the economic wisdom of the ancient world beyond Greece and Rome, these scholars did possess and reverence the library of ancient Hebrew society: the Bible. As reported in CTME, early scholars did use biblical texts when addressing economic topics (like usury), but it seems

1 Though barely scratching the surface: cf., Marty E. Stevens, *Temples, Tithes, and Taxes: The Temple and the Economic Life of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006).

2 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

3 Eric A. Havelock, *The Greek Concept of Justice: From Its Shadow in Homer to its Substance in Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Martin Ostwald, *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law: Law, Society, and Politics in Fifth-Century Athens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

there was never an attempt to draw upon the economic institutions of biblical Israel for western economic wisdom.

Consider, for example, the biblical Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8-55). Hebrew law encodes significant economic reforms into this quinquaginary festival, yet historical treatment of this text has tended to overlook its economic insight to draw primarily upon its spiritual typology. For instance, in the year 1300, Pope Boniface VIII declared the first documented Christian Jubilee year, extending freedom from sin's penalties to those fulfilling prescribed rites of repentance and renewal. This papal Jubilee continues to be proclaimed, currently every twenty-five years. The next papal Jubilee will take place in 2025. But such a "spiritualization" of the Jubilee Year oddly overlooks the intense concern for economic bondage in the original Jubilee.⁴

In this paper, I want to look at the economic reforms built into the Hebrew Jubilee Year. In the course of this paper, I will also draw upon other ancient Near Eastern economic institutions that are widely discussed among Hebrew Bible scholars and Assyriologists, but have not been taken seriously in the halls of economic thought. It is my hope to accomplish two goals in these pages: first, in a small way to point beyond Greece to other ancient sources for economic models worthy of attention; and, in particular, to uphold the biblical Jubilee Year as an important focus for rediscovering the relationship between theology and economics.

I. The Economic Function of Israel's Cultic Calendar

Ancient Israel's cultic calendar was structured around the year's natural seasons. Other ancient nations similarly integrated their cultic calendars around seasonal cycles. Regarding the powers of nature as expressions of the powers of heaven, ancient ritual calendars enabled a people to interact properly with their deities (or, in Israel's case, their Deity) who governed the natural seasons on which the people's agricultural produce (their economy) depended.

Ancient Ugarit, for example, recognized a death and resurrection pattern in nature's seasonal cycle. This pattern became the core of their ritual calendar whereby worshipers identified annually with the defeat of Baal by Mot (prior to the dry season) and then his restoration as the Storm God (at the start of the rainy season) bringing rains and life again to the land.⁵

Israel's calendar was similar to those of other nations with one major distinction: Israel's calendar was rooted in religious history not religious myth. By definition, a mythical calendar is one that relates events in the realm of humanity (such as seasonal changes) to contests and occurrences in

4 Notably, one recent Papal Jubilee did serve as the impetus for a major debt-release campaign. The Jubilee Debt Campaign (jubileedebt.org.uk) was founded in 1996 as Jubilee 2000 to use the Papal Jubilee announced for the year 2000 as a focal point for lobbying western governments to forgive debts of the world's most impoverished nations. While the policies of the Jubilee Debt Campaign are not derived from Leviticus, the unique model of grace extended in that biblical paradigm provided the inspiration (and the name) for this remarkable campaign.

5 G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 111; Johannes C. de Moor, *The Seasonal Pattern in the Ugaritic Myth of Ba'lu: According to the Version of Ilimilku* (AOAT 16; Kevelaer: Butzon and Bercker, 1971).

the realm of deity (e.g., battles between the gods). Israel's religious calendar lacked this mythical character. Instead, Israel's calendar relates two layers of this-worldly events: the annual seasonal changes and the memory of God's intervention in human history in the events of the exodus. Despite this notable distinction, the Hebrew calendar shared in the same project as its neighbors: relating a nation's theology (its beliefs about the divine) to its economy (its participation in the bounty of the land).

In addition to the annual festivals mapped over annual seasons, Israel also had multi-year cycles incorporated into its calendar: a septennial Sabbath Year and the seventh, seventh year Jubilee. While the significance of the septennial Sabbath Year is debated, it is likely tied to the need of the land for a periodic fallow. Modern fertilizers have enabled today's farmers to plant and harvest fields continually, artificially restoring nutrients to the ground. Without such technologies, ancient societies would have discovered by experience that planting a field continually eventually leads to its declining production. The ancient farmer likely had little awareness of the natural processes behind soil nutrition and how the soil is sapped from over-farming. Nevertheless, through generations of experience there would have emerged an awareness that an occasional fallow year increases the fruitfulness of fields. This is what was likely normalized in the septennial fallow year.

The Ugaritic calendar reflects a similar conviction: "the ending of one [seven-year] cycle without a harvest was believed to bring on a seven-year cycle of plenty."⁶ The similarity of timing—both Hebrew and Ugaritic calendars observing a seven-year cycle—should not be over-pressed. Nevertheless, Israel was not alone in its observance of such fallow-year convictions. Ritual fallow years provided "a year of solemn rest for the land" (Lev. 25:5).⁷

Contrary to popular notions about the practice, a fallow year most likely did not require an absolute cessation of planting. It was a year to cease income production from the land and to limit planting to what supports a subsistence diet. The relevant passage instructs: "You shall not sow (*zāra'*) your field or prune (*zāmar*) your vineyard. You shall not reap (*qāṣar*) what grows of itself in your harvest... The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves and for your hired servant and the sojourner who lives with you, and for your cattle and for the wild animals that are in your land: all its yield shall be for food" (vv4-7). The key point here is that the land is not to be sown, pruned, and harvested (terms of agricultural production); it is to be given a rest from labor. Nevertheless, the land is still a source of sustenance: "all its yield shall be for food." There is permission here to produce food on the land, but only what is needed for food.⁸ The people were not constrained to foraging nuts and berries for the year. They were to live off food stores from previous years and to garden what was necessary for subsistence. This allowed the land to recover its nutritional potential and increased the land's overall fruitfulness.

6 Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature: A Comprehensive Translation of the Poetic and Prose Texts* (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1949), 5. Cf., Cyrus H. Gordon, "Sabbatical Cycle or Seasonal Pattern? Reflections on a New Book," *Or* 22 (1953): 79–81; Edward Neufeld, "Socio-Economic Background of Yōbēl and Šemiṭṭā," *RSO* 33 (1958): 53–124; Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 113; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 42–3.

7 Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

8 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27* (ABD 3B; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2160.

The septennial land sabbath was an economic practice embodied within a theological institution. The same can be said about the quinquaginary Jubilee Year.

As we take up the Jubilee Year, we first have to resolve the question of its frequency. Readers are often confused by the switch from the number “forty-nine” to “fifty” in the way the Jubilee Year is numbered: “You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet... And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land...” (vv8-10). Is the proclamation of liberty marking the forty-ninth year as the Jubilee, or introducing the subsequent fiftieth year as the Jubilee?

The confusion is quickly resolved when one recalls that Hebrew counting was inclusive. Thus, for example, Jesus’ burial on Friday evening and his resurrection on Sunday morning constitutes three days in the tomb (inclusively counting Friday, Saturday, and Sunday). By western conventions, we would count that as two days spent in the tomb: Friday to Saturday being one day, and Saturday to Sunday being a second day. We generally count exclusively on the North American continent, meaning that we do not count the starting day (i.e., the Friday when Jesus was buried) when measuring time from a beginning point to an ending point; but Hebrew counting was inclusive.

One of the implications of inclusive counting is evident in the way the weekly sabbath is counted in Scripture. When Scripture speaks of the sabbath day on its own, it is called “the seventh day” because it is the seventh day of a given week. When, however, the sabbath is counted with respect to the previous sabbath, it is called “the eighth day” (e.g., Lev. 23:39; John 20:26). The second sabbath is the eighth day from the previous sabbath when counted inclusively. It is in this manner that Leviticus calls the Jubilee Year the forty-ninth year (i.e., within the given sequence of seven groups of seven) and also the fiftieth year (i.e., with respect to the previous Jubilee Year).⁹

Some commentators believe the Jubilee Year was an additional “leap year” (a fiftieth year) added after the forty-ninth year, resulting in two years of land fallow in a row!¹⁰ This is unlikely, however. The Jubilee Year is simply the seventh Sabbath Year in a series, with special economic liberations attached to this “high sabbath year” that was observed, essentially, once a generation.

It is that “once a generation” character of the Jubilee that seems to be the natural, economic cycle which this festival governed. Annual festivals track the yearly seasons of agricultural production. The septennial festival tracks the fallow cycles of soil fertility. The Jubilee provides a theological

9 Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (JSOTSup 141; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 318–21.

10 John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 434–6. Contra, the traditional Talmudic view (b. Ned. 61a, b; Ros Haš. 9a, Sifra Behar 6); Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 319. Benedict Zuckerman identifies six major ways that the Sabbatical and Jubilee Year cycles have been related through history: Benedict Zuckerman, *A Treatise of the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee: A Contribution to the Archaeology and Chronology of the Time Anterior and Subsequent to the Captivity; Accompanied by a Table of Sabbatical Years* (A. Löwy, trans.; New York: Hermon Press, 1974 reprint), 10–17.

overlay for the social, economic reforms typically required with every generation for the sake of proper land management.

Every individual landowner in Israel managed his estate in trust as a family heritage. In every generation, there would be business leaders and farmers who—through greed, incompetence, unavoidable circumstances, or oppression—might lose their family heritage, its properties and perhaps its persons. The once-a-generation “proclamation of liberty” (v10) was to preserve the family heritage across the losses of “weak link” generations. It also held in check the economic disparity and oppression that otherwise tends to develop in society over time, as wealth is concentrated into certain families and clans while other families and clans become trapped in a heritage of poverty. Although the Jubilee cycle has more to do with social forces than the forces of nature, it nevertheless shares in the same concern for protecting the balance of land management and production. Note that the Sabbath Year cycle actually contained both a land fallow requirement and a debt-slave release, thus already combining social and natural forces in its purview (Deut. 15:1-23). In an oral society, social forces and natural forces and divine forces would not be so distinctly separated. The ritual calendar of Israel provided a system for regulating the nation’s economic balance with respect to all the relevant forces.

Once again, Israel’s Jubilee Year finds parallel practices in neighboring societies of the ancient world. The topics of the Hebrew Jubilee—and even one of its titles (“proclaim liberty [*derôr*],” v10; cf., Akk., *andurârum*)—are matched by the economic reforms proclaimed generationally in Mesopotamia. However, the Old Babylonian proclamation of liberty was timed for each generation by the inauguration of a new king rather than a specified number of years.

When a new king arose to the throne in Mesopotamian lands, he would review the economic condition of the nation and issue an edict with a specific, targeted cancellations of debts and manumission of slaves. The purpose of this edict was to solidify the new king’s position as the defender of the poor and oppressed and to correct economic imbalances from his predecessor’s reign. Too much wealth tended to concentrate in too few hands, especially through the course of a lengthy reign. A proclamation of liberty restored economic balance to the land.

For example, the second millennium ruler of Isin, Lipit-Ishtar, recorded the following description of his ascent to the throne:

At that time the gods An and Enlil called Lipit-Ishtar to the princship of the land ... in order to establish justice in the land, to eliminate cries for justice, to eradicate enmity and armed violence, to bring well-being to the lands of Sumer and Akkad. At that time, I, Lipit-Ishtar ... established justice in the lands of Sumer and Akkad. At that time, I liberated the sons and daughters ... of Sumer and Akkad, who were subjugated [by the yoke(?)], and I restored order.¹¹

Realistically, such an inaugural edict gave opportunity for a new king to undermine the threat of the powerful elite of the previous regime who might desire to dominate a young monarch. It also

¹¹ LL, i.20–ii.15. Translation from Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (SBLWAW 6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 24–5.

allowed the new king to strengthen those he deemed loyal to himself for his own reign. Such edicts certainly could be used sincerely to redress the oppressed, or they could be abused to manipulate the balance of power in the new king's personal favor. Nevertheless, the stated purpose of these proclamations was to restore order (Akk., *mīšarum*) and liberty (Akk., *andurârum*) to the land at the start of a new generation.

The customary timing for such edicts was at the start a new king's reign (i.e., once a generation),¹² but the king also had the authority to proclaim occasional "surprise" edicts of liberty (always with carefully defined parameters) at any time he saw it was needed.¹³ Several scholars have provided insightful comparisons between these Mesopotamian edicts and the Hebrew "proclamation of liberty."¹⁴ There are significant differences, but there are also striking parallels. In particular, Israel's Jubilee shares the same basic expectation that economic reforms are necessary once a generation to protect the prosperity of the land from the oppression of a concentrated circle of elite.

The most distinctive feature of the Hebrew liberation contrasted with its Mesopotamian counterparts was its fixation to a regular calendar (every forty-nine years).¹⁵ Under Moses, Israel had no human king and thus no generational change marked by a transfer of the throne. God himself was to be Israel's perpetual king. It is politically significant that Moses took a traditionally kingly declaration and affixed it to the festivals of the Temple. The forty-nine-year cycle envisions the same once-a-generation economic reset, but Moses attached it to the perpetual reign of God within the theo-economic calendar of the Temple. (Later in this paper, we will look at how Israel's release proclamations were observed once Israel did appoint a human monarch.)

With this broader context, I want to focus next on the specific economic reforms of the Hebrew Jubilee Year. By the foregoing, I have endeavored to show that entire ritual calendar of Israel—and, indeed, the calendars of the wider ancient world—offer a wealth of insight into the economic

12 Note that ancient societies restarted their counting of years at the ascent of each new king, thus identifying generation change with the reign of each king.

13 Cf. the detailed discussion of Ammišaduqa's Edict by J. J. Finkelstein, "The Edict of Ammišaduqa: A New Text," *RA* 63 (1969), 45–64.

14 J. J. Finkelstein, "Some New MISHARUM Material and Its Implications," *Assyriological Studies* 16 (1965), 233–46; "The Edict of Ammišaduqa: A New Text," *RA* 63 (1969), 45–64; Moshe Weinfeld, "'Justice and Righteousness' in Ancient Israel Against the Background of 'Social Reforms' in the Ancient Near East," in H.-J. Nissen and J. Renger, eds., *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn (Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale 25)*; Berlin: Reimer, 1982), 491–519; *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); D. J. Wiseman, "Law and Order in Old Testament Times," *VE* 8 (1973), 5–21; N.-P. Lemche, "Andurârum and mīšarum: Comments on the Problem of Social Edicts and their Application in the Ancient Near East," *JNES* 38 (1979), 11–22. For a critique of such comparisons, cf., J. P. J. Olivier, "The Old Babylonian Mēšarum-Edict and the Old Testament" (D. Litt. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1977).

15 Raymond Westbrook, "Jubilee Laws," *Israel Law Review* 6 (1971) 209–26. Reprinted in Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 113; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 36–57.

institutions of sophisticated societies beyond the scope of our Greco-Roman heritage. In what follows, we will focus on the Jubilee Year, specifically.

II. The Nature of the Jubilee Year Law

As we take up this section of Hebrew law, we first need to appreciate what kind of law it is that we have before us. It is not legislation of the type familiar in western societies. Greco-Roman notions of law have had significant impact on our western legal systems.¹⁶ The Athenians were the first to give written-law a position of regulatory power over courts and thrones (i.e., the “rule of law”); outside the orb of classical Greece, laws were written to capture the essence of justice without attempting to provide comprehensive regulation.¹⁷ Bernard Jackson has coined the term ‘wisdom laws’ to capture this distinct function for law-writings in the ancient Near East, placing them in the same general category with proverbs rather than classifying them with modern legislation.¹⁸ The expectation that a legal provision would present a comprehensive set of verbal formulas, hermetically tight and secure from loopholes, is an assumption completely foreign to ancient Near Eastern law collections like the books of Moses.

We should not read the Jubilee Law in Leviticus 25:8-55 as a set of regulations ready for rote implementation, in the modern sense of legislation. It is, instead, an outline of Israel’s Jubilee patterns which succinctly captures the vision of Israel’s generational liberations; but there is no intention to provide comprehensive regulation here. It would still fall to the leaders of Israel in each Jubilee Year to honor the moral force of the Jubilee Law in how they implement it, precisely.¹⁹ Disabusing ourselves of the modern expectation of legal regulations, we are able to admire the legal wisdom about generational, economic reform in the Hebrew Jubilee Law.

After introducing the timing for its observance (vv8-12), the passage states the primary concern of the Jubilee Law: “If you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, *you shall not wrong one another*. You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the jubilee... *You shall not wrong one another*, but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God” (vv14-17). The Jubilee Year occurred only once a generation, but it would spread its shadow over all forty-eight years leading up to it. Like any system with built-in points of accountability, the

16 Michael LeFebvre, *Collections, Codes, and Torah: The Re-characterization of Israel’s Written Law* (LHBOTS 451; New York: T&T Clark, 2006); Joshua Berman, “The History of Legal Theory and the Study of Biblical Law,” *CBQ* 76.1 (2014), 19–39.

17 Thus Aristotle’s critique of barbarian laws that “enunciate only general principles but do not give directions for dealing with circumstances as they arise” (*Pol.* 3.10.4).

18 Bernard S. Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 314; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 70–92; *Wisdom Laws: A Study of the Mishpatim of Exodus 21:1–22:16* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3–39.

19 Ancient Near Eastern law-writings belong to the broader genre of “scientific list,” along with medical and divination texts, which employ the same “if the circumstances are X, the diagnosis/treatment is Y” form. (Raymond Westbrook, “Biblical and Cuneiform Law Codes,” *RB* 92.2 (1985), 247–64; *Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Law* (CahRB 26; Paris: Gabalda, 1988); Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (Zainab Bahrani and Marc van de Mieroop, trans.; London: University of Chicago, 1992), 76–7.

whole nation's economy had this generational point of accountability primarily for the purpose of promoting honesty and charity in all economic dealings during the generation leading up to the Jubilee. The way the rest of the chapter is written makes it evident that the primary benefit of the Jubilee Year was the way its anticipation shaped economic interactions every year.

Most of the chapter is spent discussing the opportunities for redeeming property prior to a Jubilee, or the nature of property sales and debt-slavery at all times knowing that the year of release was coming. The sale of family properties were never permanent (vv15-16, 23), debt-slavery was never chattel slavery (vv34-3), and the deeply indebted poor always labored in hope (v35). One of the most important features of the Jubilee Year reforms was the accountability and hope they infused into the entire economy every year. Thus, when Israel governed its economic activity according to these 'wisdom laws', God promised that the community as a whole would flourish (vv18-22).

III. The Economic Reforms of the Jubilee

Leviticus 25 outlines a series of scenarios that the Jubilee Year would address, each resulting from indebtedness. The focus of the entire passage is on the impact of debt, leading to the loss of property (vv23-34) or the loss of personal freedom (vv35-55). In the latter section (dealing with the release of slaves), it is important to bear in mind the slavery in view is *debt-slavery*. Ancient Israel did not practice chattel slavery (i.e., the ownership of persons as "living tools," to quote Aristotle).²⁰ Israel had been redeemed out of chattel slavery in Egypt and was never to engage in the same practice (Exod. 21:16; Lev. 19:32; 25:42; Deut. 15:15; 23:15-16; cf., Job 31:13-15). In fact, Mesopotamian societies had distinct terms to designate *chattel slaves* from *debt-slaves*, but Hebrew simply has the single term *ēbēd* ("servant") to describe all forms of obliged service. Milgrom explains the existence of this sole term for "servant" as reflecting a social reality: "For Israelites, both kinds of slavery, chattel and debt, are prohibited: chattel-slavery is abolished, and debt-slavery is transformed into work for hire."²¹

The slavery here in view is that slavery undertaken due to unresolved debt. There was no debtor's prison in Israel and no bankruptcy provision. When a debtor defaulted on a loan, he would fulfill the debt by working without pay for the creditor or (more often) by being "sold" to liquidate the loan and work in the buyer's estate for the time required to satisfy the debt (e.g., Exod. 21:1-6; Deut. 15:7-15; Neh. 5:4-5). Such debt-slavery was supposed to be temporary, but often exorbitant interest on loans effectively rendered the indebtedness (and the resulting slavery) perpetual.²² Thus, the entire focus of the Jubilee, whether dealing with the restoration of lost properties or lost persons, is on the impact of indebtedness. The topics of the release are discussed in verses 23-55, as follow:

²⁰ Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.4 (1253b23).

²¹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2213. Cf., the heavily qualified ascription of chattel-slavery to Israel in, Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel*, 145–85.

²² Milgrom cites the modern example of India, where the close to 15 million "untouchables" are actually the offspring of those originally enslaved for unpaid debts and whose posterity continue in bondage for perpetuity because interest rates mount faster than labor can pay them off. (Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2215.)

Redemption of property (vv23–24)

- a. Scenario: Loss of agricultural property (vv25–28)
- b. Scenario: Loss of urban house (vv29–30)
- c. Scenario: Loss of village house (v31)
- d. Scenario: Loss of Levite’s house (vv32–34)

Redemption of persons

- a. Scenario: Neighbor impoverished (vv35–38)
- b. Scenario: Neighbor impoverished and enslaved (vv39–43)
- c. Scenario: Hebrew master with non-Hebrew slave (vv44–46)
- d. Scenario: Non-Hebrew master with Hebrew slave vv47–55)

The first half of the passage deals with the topic of *property loss*. The basic principle behind all property exchanges is introduced (vv23-24), followed by four scenarios that exercise our understanding of that principle (vv25-34). The fundamental principle is that God is the one who owns the land. Even though the people will receive tracts of the land by lot, assigned by families, they are always to regard themselves as “strangers and sojourners with me” (v23). God would be the true owner of the land—the “feudal lord” who allots portions to each tribe, clan, and family as his “vassals.” Every resident is to respect the family allotments made by God (Num. 33:50-56; Josh. 14-19).

It is helpful to recall that Israel was preparing to enter a land which was already populated by the Canaanites, but was largely undeveloped. The tribes would receive plots of territory with the duty to farm and develop the land. As families grew, they could increase their property by developing portions of their allotments that were still wilderness. The Jubilee Law is prepared with the settlement and development of Canaan specifically in view; the divine appointment of each tribe’s largely undeveloped lot, and the expectation each tribe will multiply to fill and develop their allotment, stands behind these instructions. Four scenarios of property loss and restoration follow.

A. Recovering Agricultural Property

In the first (vv25-28), a man is said to have lost his family property through impoverishment. If, through financial losses, a man is compelled to sell his family property, he is free to do so. And another is free to purchase that property in order to increase his own production. This is actually a remarkable freedom introduced into Israel’s economic exchange. Even though the original owner is a steward of his inherited estate and he is responsible to maintain it for his descendants, he is free to sell the property when he needs income. Of course, it is not strictly the land that is changing hands, but the years of its production until the next Jubilee (v16: “for it is the number of the

crops that he is selling to you”). This law grants the poor landowner the freedom to seek income from his family holdings, while also granting another landowner the freedom to increase his own production by purchasing those extra fields. However, the cross-generational heritage of that land is protected by the a series of provisions for redemption.

The first line of redemption is that a member of the landowner’s own clan (a kinsman redeemer) ought to be the buyer of the land (cf., Jer. 32:7), or to buy the land back into the family as soon as possible. At that point, the kinsman redeemer takes over production of the land. The redeemer does not buy it back for his impoverished brother; he buys it back into the family, and he takes over its production as an addition to his own business holdings until the next Jubilee. The income of the land becomes his own, but at least it is back within the broader kinship group. The only conditions under which the original owner “return[s] to his property” (v27, v28) are when he comes into adequate funds to redeem it himself, or when the Jubilee arrives and all lands are released by the trumpet blast on the Day of Atonement.

B. Recovering Urban or Village Houses

The second and third scenarios address the loss of houses, contrasting the loss of an urban house (vv29-30) and a village house (v31). Houses in walled cities may be sold permanently: “it shall not be released in the jubilee” (v31). Meanwhile, houses in unwalled villages “shall be classified with the fields of the land” and thus “shall be released in the jubilee” (v31). Read through the lenses of modern legislation, one would conclude that the determining factor is whether the house is in a community with a wall around it. However, recognizing that ancient law-writing often uses stereotypes,²³ the distinction is one of the *stereotypical* city house versus the *stereotypical* village house. It is not strictly the presence of a wall that determines the different ways of handling these sales. Rather, the distinction is between a house of mercantile exchange and a house associated with the family’s agricultural inheritance.

As indicated in the text, the stereotypical village house is an agricultural outpost. It is associated with the fields outside the village that the inhabitant farms. An example of this is Boaz of Bethlehem, who lived in the town of Bethlehem and then went out to his portion of the surrounding fields for the workday (Ruth 2:3-4). In many areas of Israel, fields were marked out according to their owners, but the owners did not live on the farmland; the owners lived together in a nearby village. It is that stereotype that is captured in the image of the “houses of the villages that have no wall around them” (v31).

The stereotype of the house in a walled city is, in contrast, a house of trade or other production.²⁴ There is no field or family heritage (stereotypically) associated with such a house. The urban centers in Israel were places where grain was brought, stored, and redistributed. Crafts and trades—like the manufacture of sickle blades or pottery production—as well as service professions were associated with the walled cities. These cities were typically located along major trade routes

23 On “narrative” versus “literal” readings of law, see Bernard S. Jackson, *Wisdom-Laws*, 24–9.

24 Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary* (JPS; New York, Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 176.

in order to conduct trade and to collect tolls. That is why they needed walls, because of their strategic business and military locations. But residents of the walled cities did not (stereotypically) live off the land. These were not the family holdings and were not the “bread and butter” of the predominantly agricultural economy of Israel. Thus, non-agricultural businesses and their properties could be sold, permanently. Such “a dwelling house in a walled city” could be redeemed within a year of its loss due to economic trouble, but after that its sale was final—even through the Year of Jubilee. Such industries were not regarded as a family heritage.²⁵

C. Recovering a Levite’s House

The final property scenario addresses the unique situation of the Levite and his house (vv32-34). Here is the one exception to the previous statement about houses in walled cities. The Levites did not own fields to farm; their houses, whether in villages or walled cities, *were* their allotments given to them by God. Thus the houses of the Levites were always redeemable and would be restored in the Jubilee. Furthermore, the pastureland of the Levitical cities could never be sold (v34). Pastures outside the cities were not privately owned; they were communal pastures belonging to the city as a whole. Thus, no individual’s financial decline could lead to restrictions on the community’s pastures.

These scenarios about property are by no means exhaustive; they are not adequate to regulate the topics they address in every detail. They are, nonetheless, a rich exercise in the way the theology of God’s ownership of the land and his atonement guarantee economic balance in Israel.

The final half in the chapter addresses the redemption of *persons* (vv35-55). The care for impoverished persons in this section amounts to a biblical outline for social welfare.

D. Supporting an Impoverished Neighbor

The first case introduces a member of the local community who can no longer support himself (vv35-38). In other words, this is a person whose family property (and thus source of income) was sold under one of the earlier discussed property scenarios. He no longer controls the land that formerly fed him and his family. Now that he has lost his property, he requires opportunities to work for someone else to win his food (and possibly to earn enough to purchase back his heritage; v27). The emphatic concern in this scenario is that this poor man be able to remain “with you” (twice in v35). The goal is to ensure that he, having already lost his property, does not fall further to the point of having to sell himself into slavery. Debt-slavery typically involved relocation away from one’s own clan. The first line of provision is for the surrounding community to do all that is possible to provide day-labor jobs that keeps this brother “with you.”

The command given is twofold. First, the community is (if at all possible) to provide work for him. Like any “stranger and sojourner” in the land (v35), he should be provided with hired labor opportunities. Secondly, the community is to allow the poor man to buy food at cost without making any profit from his purchases of basic needs. Likewise, when loans are needed (i.e., for basic necessities), no interest is to be charged. Interest-bearing loans were legitimate in business

25 Milgrom, *Leviticus* 23–27, 2198.

transactions, but no interest was to be charged when making loans to the poor for their basic needs (Deut. 15:7-11).

Notice how this first scenario says nothing about gifts for the poor. That silence should not be interpreted as a discouragement of generosity to the poor, a virtue commended frequently in Scripture (e.g., Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 15:7-11; Psa. 112:9; Prov. 19:17; 22:9). However, the focus of the Jubilee Year provisions is on restoring the poor to income-producing labor. There is no Jubilee release from poverty, but the Jubilee (and the stipulations assigned for the forty-eight years leading up to Jubilee) will restore the individual to an ability to produce income for himself and his family.

E. Recovering an Enslaved Neighbor

The second scenario (vv39-43) treats the situation when, despite the aforementioned efforts or for lack of adequate day-labor opportunities, a poor neighbor must sell himself into debt-slavery. The Torah's slave-release laws ensured that no Hebrew would ever become so hopelessly indebted that he would spend his entire life in debt-slavery. There is, however, a seeming contradiction between the debt-slavery release assigned to the Sabbath Year and that assigned to the Jubilee Year. Elsewhere in the Pentateuch, it is stated that Hebrew debt-slaves may serve a maximum of six years, being released in the Sabbath Year (Exod. 21:2; Deut. 15:12-18); in the present passage, release is promised for debt-slaves in the Jubilee Year (v40).

The difference is often explained as the result of competing schools and different textual sources.²⁶ The best explanation is probably that of Gregory Chirichigno who proposed that the presumption behind the scenario in Leviticus 25:39-43 is that the family property has been lost and *the head of the household* has been sold into debt-slavery; when the entire estate is lost and the head of the household is in bondage, the debt is of such magnitude to fall into the category of a Jubilee Year release.²⁷ Thus the loss of family property by the head of the household may impact his generation, but the Jubilee ensures the next generation will not continue in poverty due to his losses. The septennial restoration in the Sabbath Year, in contrast, refers to a different scenario. The Sabbath Year restoration envisions a situation where the head of the household is still in possession of his land, but he has been compelled to sell family members into slavery. When debts began to default, it was typical for sons and daughters to be sold into debt-slavery first, since their hope of redemption rested in their father continuing to work the family fields to gain income (cf., Neh. 5:5). Those family members may serve a maximum of six years and, if not bought back prior to that time, be released in the next Sabbath Year.

F. Two Special Cases involving Gentiles

The final two scenarios (vv44-46, 47-55) are actually variations on the previous debt-slavery example. After the main example of debt-slavery is given, two dilemmas are introduced to help strengthen our wisdom concerning the Jubilee principle. What if the debt-slaves purchased are

²⁶ See the discussion of various approaches by Hartley, *Leviticus*, 430–33.

²⁷ Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel*, 328–36.

not Hebrews (and thus, are not among the people redeemed from Egypt by God)? What if the debt-slave is Hebrew, but *the master* is not? The application of the Jubilee principle to debt-slavery in those two instances is explained in the remaining paragraphs of the chapter.

The answer to the first question (is a *non-Hebrew* debt-slave released in the Jubilee?) is no (vv44-46). This release from slavery is not a human right, but a special privilege provided to God's people through his atonement. By right, every person is responsible for his debts. Therefore, debt-slaves who are not partakers in the Day of Atonement (v9) do not share in the Jubilee Year release. Notably, the Jubilee Year trumpet was blown, not at the beginning of the year, but on the Day of Atonement during that year (v9). Release took place, not on the first day of the Jubilee Year, but on the tenth day of the seventh month of that year (the Day of Atonement). It was an economic release, not as a human right but a divine gift flowing from the atonement. It is the scenario of the *non-Hebrew* debt-slave that makes this point most clearly.

The last scenario (vv47-55) addresses the Hebrew debt-slave of a *non-Hebrew master*. This debt-slave is to be released. The surrounding Hebrew community is to hold the Gentile master accountable to ensure that he treats the Hebrew debt-slave properly and permits his redemption when provided for; note the call to accountability in verse 53: "He shall treat him as a hired servant year by year. He shall not rule ruthlessly over him *in your sight*." The community must ensure that Gentiles in the land allow Hebrew debt-slaves their proper redemption rights. But this law also assures the Gentile businessman receives his due from the Hebrew bound to him. It upholds the right of the non-Hebrew sojourner to conduct business and secure the labor of a Hebrew debtor unable to pay his obligations. But he, too, must honor the redemption purchased by Yahweh for his people.

The conclusion of the passage repeats the same basic methods for redemption outlined under the first scenario in the passage. The catalog of scenarios began with the example of lost property, listing the ways in which that property could be redeemed (in vv25-28). The last scenario closes with the same methods of redemption, this time applied to the redemption of persons: a family member of the enslaved Hebrew may, if it is within his means, pay off the debt to redeem his brother (vv48-49a); if the slave himself comes into funds, he is guaranteed the right to pay off his remaining years of labor (vv49b-52); finally, if no provision emerges before the Jubilee, even the non-Hebrew master must release when the horn is sounded on the Day of Atonement in the Jubilee Year (vv53-55). The very first scenario of the Jubilee Year passage (vv25-28) and the last scenario (vv47-55) repeat these same three methods of potential release. As an *inclusio*, these opening and closing scenarios remind us that all circumstances of economic loss may be redeemed through these methods, with the Jubilee Year release as the ultimate source of assurance.

Jacob Milgrom eloquently captures the economic significance of these Jubilee provisions: "In sum, the people of Israel and its land belong solely to God; neither can be owned in perpetuity... Persons and land may be leased, not sold. The question cannot be resisted: Has a more sublime safeguard against the pauperization of society ever been found?"²⁸

²⁸ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2233.

IV. The Theology of Jubilees

The name Leviticus gives for this forty-ninth year is “the year of *yôbēl*” (lit., “Year of the Ram [Horn];” v13). Uncertain how to translate the term *yôbēl* in this instance, early scribes simply transliterated the Hebrew word, giving us “jubilee” (Eccl. Greek, *iobelaios*; Latin, *iubilarius*; English, *jubilee*). However, this translation decision obscures the titular centrality of one particular act behind this Hebrew festival. It was the blowing of the ram’s horn (the *šôpār*) on the Day of Atonement (v9) that was the “proclam[ation] of liberty throughout the land” (v10).²⁹ The entire year was the Year of the Ram’s Horn; but the special release of that year did not take place until the Day of Atonement when the horn was sounded. That the release took place on the Day of Atonement is the key theological anchor for the economic redemptions provided.

The year presumably would begin like any other Sabbath Year with the observed land fallow. But in the seventh month of the year, on the evening of the ninth day, the people of Israel would begin a twenty-four hour fast for the humbling and repentance that was part of the Day of Atonement. At the end of that fast, the people gathered for “a time of holy convocation” on the tenth day of the month, culminating in a national “food offering to the Lord” (Lev. 23:26-32). It was on that tenth day, probably in conjunction with the end of the fast and God’s acceptance of the sacrifices, that the Jubilee Year trumpet was blown: “You shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall...proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants...” (Lev. 25:9-10). That would be the point at which properties would revert to their proper heritage and debt-slaves would be set free. Fittingly, just five days later the people gathered for the final and most joyful festival of the yearly calendar: the festival of booths and its end-of-harvest feasting (presumably limited, though not barren, by the reduced food production of a fallow year; Lev. 23:33-43).

The freedom from economic bondage carefully worked out in the Jubilee was explicitly tied to the gift of atonement provided by God for the redemption of his people from sin. The Lord’s atonement has both spiritual and economic ramifications, guaranteeing the heavenly king’s release from the bondage of sin as well as the bondage of poverty and indebtedness.

V. The Practice of Jubilees

At this point, it is fitting to ask how the Sabbath Year and Jubilee Year proclamations were practiced in Israel. There is actually very little evidence of their observance in the biblical histories. Some scholars therefore conclude that these provisions were utopian and never implemented.³⁰

Indeed, these laws would not have been implemented in a mechanistic fashion. We have already observed that such “wisdom laws” were not intended to function in the same, self-effecting and mechanistic fashion as modern legislation. Nevertheless, there is an insightful passage in Jeremiah

29 Cf., the custom in Mesopotamia to call such liberations the “proclamation by fire,” since the king’s edict of liberty was proclaimed with the raising of a torch. (Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*, 73.)

30 Jeffrey A. Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee* (JSOTSup 155; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 34–6.

34:1-22 concerning a proclamation of liberty (*liqěřō' děrôř*) in the days of King Zedekiah that offers important insight into the observance of these laws:

⁸...King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty (*liqěřō' děrôř*) to them, ⁹that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves... ¹⁰And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people... ¹¹But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them into subjection as slaves. ¹²The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ¹³“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your fathers when I brought them out of ... the house of bondage, saying, ¹⁴‘At the end of seven years each of you must set free the fellow Hebrew who has been sold to you and has served you six years; you must set him free from your service’ [quoting Deut. 15:12; cf., Exod. 21:2]. But your fathers did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. ¹⁵You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty (*liqěřō' děrôř*),... ¹⁶but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back his male and female slaves...

¹⁷“Therefore, thus says the Lord: You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty (*liqěřō' děrôř*), everyone on to his brother and to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim to you liberty (*qōřē' děrôř*) to the sword... ²¹Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials I will give...into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon...”

There are two points of interest in this passage for our purposes. First of all, we see in this passage that when Judah did have a king, it fell to the king to make the royal proclamation of liberty as typical in other ancient Near Eastern lands. Evidently it was expected that the Mosaic vision, drawn up with a direct heavenly reign in view, would be adapted to the circumstances of human monarchy once a divinely anointed throne was erected on Mount Zion. King Zedekiah is commended for doing what was right when he made a declaration of liberty in keeping with the Mosaic law.

Secondly, Zedekiah’s slave release was not implemented on the Day of Atonement, nor is there any reference to its timing during a Sabbath Year or Jubilee Year.³¹ Indeed, Zedekiah’s release takes place during an invasion of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 34:1). Nevertheless, Jeremiah commends Zedekiah’s release (vv14-15) as a proper fulfillment of the Sabbath Year instructions in Deuteronomy 15. This suggests that, just as the Mesopotamian kings could pronounce edicts of release at unexpected times when deemed necessary, the Hebrew rulers were expected to take to heart the need for economic balance taught in the Mosaic Law and to enact liberation edicts as necessary. This is in keeping with the nature of the theological expression of these ‘wisdom laws’,

31 Although Nahum Sarna has attempted to establish that Zedekiah was making a Sabbath Year proclamation at the fall festival of that year. (Nahum M. Sarna, “Zedekiah’s Emancipation of Slaves and the Sabbatical Year,” in *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* [Harry Hoffner, ed.; AOAT 22; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973], 143–9.) Others have discounted Sarna’s arguments as unlikely. (William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26–52* [Hermenia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989], 239; Westbrook, *Property*, 16–17 n. 4.)

which present the paradigm from which rulers are responsible to deduce just applications based on their circumstances. It is common for interpreters of Old Testament Law to assume the laws functioned like modern regulations; that is, that these laws were designed for rote implementation. However, as the biblical histories show,³² the Mosaic law is intentionally utopian in its character because it teaches the ideals of justice with realistic wisdom laws'. But no law system accomplishes righteousness in itself; each generation's leaders must wrestle with the wisest implementation of the ideals and promises taught in the Mosaic vision. This is clearly the case with respect to the economic release upheld in the Jubilee Year cycle.

In Zedekiah's day, Nebuchadnezzar's army was marching through Judah when Zedekiah suddenly decided to repent and proclaim liberty. He was commended by God for this release as being a proper application of the Mosaic redemption-law models. Because of Zedekiah's obedience, God caused Nebuchadnezzar's army to withdraw (Jer. 34:21). Tragically, once the pressure was off, Zedekiah reversed his liberation edict, leading to the subsequent oracle that the kingdom would be turned over to Babylon.

The striking impression left by this passage is that the vision of a periodic rebalancing of economic conditions was strictly tied to the ritual calendar in the Torah as a teaching method: to show Israel the nature of God's gracious kingship and to establish the requirement for rulers to rule God's people in light of God's atonement. It would have been the duty of Israel's kings to consider the economic conditions of their day and to implement—in connection with the festivals and, as needed, at other times—the re-ordering decrees appropriate for a people for whom God had atoned and whom God had redeemed from slavery. Perhaps some rulers implemented Sabbath Year and Jubilee Year releases with great regularity; perhaps others less so.

In the modern west, we tend to place our confidence in the laws of the land, expecting those laws to preserve justice even when rulers are unjust. In the ancient world, no such illusion was even considered. Law-collections provided an ideal picture of justice in proverbs-like "wisdom laws," but it ultimately fell to rulers to implement justice. Thus the need for kings and judges who "fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe" (Exod. 18:21).³³ The entire calendar of Israel, with its ritual and social controls, presented a model of "theological economics" for real implementation, albeit according to the practicalities of the day as discerned by the rulers in each age. Thus the Passover was often neglected (2Chr. 30:5), and other religious institutions of the festival calendar were variously implemented (e.g., the reforms of Josiah; 2Kgs. 23:1-27) depending on who was on the throne. The Zedekiah passage above fits unremarkably into this ancient Near Eastern conception of law, showing that these periodic releases were in fact observed,³⁴ but that the faithfulness and exact provisions of their observance would have varied in ways offensive to modern sensibilities

³² E.g., LeFebvre, *Collections*, 58–87, 103–31.

³³ Bernard Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 314; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 118–21.

³⁴ Check Weinfeld citation in n31 on p178 of: Jeffrey A. Fager, *Land Tenure and the Biblical Jubilee* (JSOTSup 155; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

of law but commended by the Lord through his prophet Jeremiah.³⁵

VI. Conclusions

In this final section, I want to reflect on some of the economic lessons that can be drawn from the biblical model of Jubilee. There are many reasons why a rote implementation of the Jubilee would be neither practicable nor appropriate, today. First, the Jubilee Law was never designed for rote implementation; it would always require adaptation to the circumstances of the time (see “The Practice of Jubilees,” above). Second, the Temple and its festivals are no longer in place and we do not, today, have tribal land allotments by divine appointment. Third, the specifics of the Jubilee Law are clearly tailored to an ancient, agrarian society. The realities of a modern industrial, and increasingly knowledge-based society would require very different provisions than those epitomized in the Leviticus 25 model. For these and other reasons, the rote implementation of a Year of Jubilees is not possible today. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be drawn from these provisions. I will suggest seven lessons here, beginning with the more strictly theological lessons and gradually moving into some more practical, economic implications.

For the first and most important lesson, it is necessary to re-assert that rote implementation was never the point of the Jubilee Law. As discussed in the body of this paper,³⁶ Hebrew laws are not legislation, but legal paradigms of righteousness idealized in terms of the realities of their own time. The primary purpose of a law like Jubilees is not rote implementation, but instruction in the kind of justice the heavenly King promises. Implementation of the paradigm is important as national submission to the heavenly King; but regardless of the wisdom or folly of human rulers, these laws promote a vision of God’s justice for the people’s hope (cf., Psa. 119). The foremost value of Jubilee is its testimony to God’s concern for the economic injustices suffered by his people under human oppressors. Like the singer of the Psalms, God’s people find delight in the vision of God’s kingdom gained by meditating in his law day and night amidst the oppression, injustice, and suffering experienced in human kingdoms (Psa. 1:1-6).³⁷

Whatever else might be gained from a study of the Jubilee Year, this lesson must always be cherished above all: Jubilee teaches us that the atonement secures real redemption, not only from sin but also from the effects of sin including its economic effects. Under the government of human rulers, the implementation of just economics will always fall short of our Bible-informed hope. But these laws give assurance that God’s love sees even our economic sorrows and his atonement secures their ultimate redemption to be fully realized in the consummation of his kingdom.

Rather than relating theology to economics to improve economic policy, the best reason to relate

35 See esp. the thorough review of the evidence by Raymond Westbrook who concludes, “Our verdict, therefore, on the biblical law of Jubilee is that while its basic idea of a release reflects a practicable and practiced institution, that part thereof which is academic and theoretical is the *stipulation of its regular recurrence every fifty years.*” (Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* [JSOTSup 113; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991], 50.)

36 See, “II. The Nature of the Jubilee Year Law,” on pp. 37, above.

37 Michael LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 104–9.

theology to economics is to improve our faith in the face of economic failures. Certainly there are practical lessons that can be gained, but we should not take up those practical lessons until we have first given full weight to the faith such provisions inform.

A second, key lesson of Jubilee is that sin is the core problem which corrupts economics. The choice to blow the Jubilee trumpet on the Day of Atonement makes this point clear. Many economic theorists regard political policy, or education, or other social corrections as central for rebalancing a struggling economy. Leviticus 25 teaches us that the root of economic imbalance is sin. Yairah Amit draws the same conclusion, stating it this way: “The jubilee law is, therefore, an attempt...[to] overcome the curse of banishment from the Garden of Eden.”³⁸

The identification of sin as the core problem behind economic imbalance is at once a theological insight and a practical one. It means that economic corrections ought to take into consideration the moral failures of a government and a society as well as political and market issues. Furthermore, the health of the church—the central institution for promoting the atonement—is beneficial to the economics of the society.

A third lesson of Jubilee—and one that straddles both the realms of theology and practice—is the model of debt-forgiveness provided in this text. The poor were not granted an immediate release from their economic burdens. The Jubilee held forth the promise of eventual debt-forgiveness which preserved hope, but debtors continued to bear responsibility for their circumstances. The interests of both the creditor and the debtor were upheld in a careful system that always preserved the hope of the impoverished (and kept creditors from extending perpetual loan arrangements). This balance was achieved by establishing debt-forgiveness in a manner that was not immediately available, but which was a real and certain eventuality. Its distance motivated the debtor’s efforts in the present while its eventual certainty motivated the creditor’s humane respect for the debtor’s efforts. Thus the creditor’s interests were protected; yet, the final option of full debt-forgiveness had to be part of the system. Without grace somewhere in an economic system, pure market economics will always become the tool of creditors and the bane of the poor. Modern bankruptcy law borrows, to some extent, upon this notion. The Jubilee offers an ancient foil for critiquing modern approaches to bankruptcy.³⁹

A fourth insight from Jubilee is that debt-forgiveness is always a matter of grace, not rights. The Jubilee release only applied to participants in Israel’s atonement and not to outsiders. The Jubilee Law does not regard debt-release as a basic human right. “Forgiveness is the act of putting away and canceling claims... It is invoked precisely when the [obligation]...cannot be justified or

38 Yairah Amit, “The Jubilee Law—An Attempt at Instituting Social Justice,” in Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman, eds., *Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and their Influence* (JSOTSup 137; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 47–59.

39 Cf., Paul B. Rasor, “Biblical Roots of Modern Consumer Credit Law,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 10 (1993–4), 157–92; Richard H. Heirs, “Biblical Social Welfare Legislation: Protected Classes and Provisions for Persons in Need,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 17 (2002), 49–96.

excused.”⁴⁰ In Israel, it was on the basis of God’s ultimate ownership of the land and his atonement for sins that debt-forgiveness and the restoration of property was legitimated. Even if a secular society institutes debt-forgiveness without recourse to the Christian God, such forgiveness will always require grace. It should not be pursued as a point of human rights, but through recourse to the moral mandate of grace. In the words of N.T. Wright, “There is no reason in the world’s terms why one should cancel debts. If you have people in your power, why not keep them there? Debt cancellation is inexplicable in terms of Marx, Nietzsche or Freud... It is a sign of hope, of love, of the gospel.”⁴¹

A fifth lesson of the Jubilee Law is the importance of protecting the economic opportunity of future generations from the impact of economic disaster in the present generation. The impoverished neighborhoods of modern America provide far too much evidence that, without some system of economic grace, those born into poverty rarely ever break out of it. The specific system of Jubilees may not be practicable in modern society, but there is wisdom in its underlying commitment to policies that hold the present generation responsible for their debts while guarding future generations from becoming trapped by them. Similar protections in modern society would be worth exploration.

A sixth Jubilee lesson is the importance of identifying the cornerstone of prosperity in a given society and regulating the economy around that core concern. In ancient Israel, preserving broad ownership of farmland from generation to generation was the key to sustaining a balanced, prosperous nation. Other industries could change hands with little restriction, but agricultural properties were protected from becoming concentrated into the hands of a wealthy elite. Jubilee represents a system of regulations that ensured the society’s core means of wealth—agricultural property—remained widely held across the whole society and through generations. This focus of regulation on core economic interests in society and not others stirs us to nuance which engines of prosperity ought to be protected, not as a matter of rights but as a matter of grace.

Finally, the Jubilee Law reminds us that economic prosperity is not the work of the state alone. Nor is it the result of government and business cooperation, only. Economic prosperity is the fruit of a society where religion, government, and business work harmoniously together. A good political system cannot secure economic balance by itself. The government enforces civic order and business promotes economic activity, but religion restores human dignity. “Human law cannot possibly police every sin. When Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that anger is a form of murder and to lust is to commit adultery, he underscores the pervasiveness of God’s law. But an obvious secondary implication is that human law must have more modest aspirations.”⁴² The Jubilee shows the necessary relationship between the ministry of atonement by the church

40 Chantal Thomas, “International Debt Forgiveness and Global Poverty Reduction,” *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 27 (2000), 1715.

41 N. T. Wright, *The Millenium Myth: Hope for a Postmodern World* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 108.

42 David A. Skeel, Jr., “The Unbearable Lightness of Christian Legal Scholarship,” *Emory Law Journal* 57 (2008), 1510.

and the economic enforcement of government.⁴³

The American Liberty Bell—legendarily rung over Independence Hall on July 4, 1776—is inscribed with the words of Leviticus 25:10: “Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof.” This quotation ironically seizes upon the economic promise of the Jubilee Year while overlooking its theological foundation stated in the previous verse: “*On the Day of Atonement* you shall sound the trumpet... And proclaim liberty throughout the land...” (vv9-10). There are many ideals and inspiring phrases of liberty that can be borrowed from Scripture. However, to distill biblical wisdom and leave behind biblical theology is to leave behind the greater part. It benefits the economic and social liberty of a nation when the ministry of atonement is flourishing in its midst.

43 The modern argument for such a direction was classically expressed by the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian, William Symington, *Messiah the Prince: The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2012 reprint); cf., Roy Blackwood and Michael LeFebvre, *William Symington: Penman of the Scottish Covenanters* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 205–8, 263–99.