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THE FULFILMENT OF THE JUBILEE YEAR

by Gary North

And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family (Lev. 25:10).

It is usually encouraging to see people begin to turn back to Old Testament law in their search for answers to social questions. But when people who consistently deny the legitimacy of Old Testament laws in general keep turning back to one or two of them, citing them over and over (but no others), I grow suspicious. Why this or that law, but not all of them? Why the fascination with a particular law, when Old Testament law as a whole is categorically rejected as a legally binding code for New Testament ethics? Who, in short, is trying to "put the shuck on" whom? And why?

For over a decade, I have read defenses of a return to the Jubilee Year. What has struck me is that the writers who use the Jubilee Year as their example for New Testament times have concluded that this is an example — indeed, **the** example — of State interference with private property rights in the commonwealth of Israel. They have recommended that the New Testament church call for a similar redistribution of wealth in every nation today.

The most prominent proponent of the Jubilee Year is Ronald J. Sider. His book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (InterVarsity, 1977), is the most influential book on economics in neoevangelical circles. Prof. Sider comments: "Leviticus 25 is one of the most radical texts in all of Scripture. At least it seems that way for people born in countries committed to laissez-faire economics. Every fifty years, God said, all land was to return to the original owners — without compensation! Physical handicaps, death of a breadwinner or lack of natural ability may lead some people to become poorer than others. But God does not want such disadvantages to lead to greater and greater divergence of wealth and poverty. God therefore gave his people a law which would equalize land ownership every fifty years (Lev. 25:10-24)." (*Rich Christians*, p. 88.)

He makes the observation that land in an agricultural society is the primary form of capital. "At the beginning, of course, the land had been divided more or less equally among the tribes and families. Apparently God wanted that basic economic equality to continue. Hence his com-

mand to return all land to the original owners every fifty years. Private property was not abolished. But the means of producing wealth were to be equalized regularly."

Quite correctly, he cites God's justification for this law: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev. 25:23, RSV translation). The term "sojourners" was adopted by one of the radical anabaptist groups Sider is associated with, and they publish a magazine *Sojourners*. Another similar group which favors Sider's conclusions is the Jubilee Fellowship. So it is safe to say that where radical anabaptists are concerned, the Jubilee is an important concept.

Did the Jubilee Year mean what Sider says it meant? Is it still binding on New Testament societies? How should it be applied if it is still binding? What was, precisely, the Jubilee Year, and what economic effects was it intended to produce?

The Spoils of War

God owned the land of Israel. But He also owned the people of Israel and their tools, plus all other societies and their tools, and finally the whole creation. "For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills" (Ps. 50:10). "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). Comprehensive ownership by God is the starting point of all economic analysis. Men are stewards of God's resources, including their own lives. Men do not own even their own souls and bodies. The stewardship principle is comprehensive. The question must be raised: Why did God single out the Jubilee Year as a special manifestation of His ownership of the land? Was there something unique about His ownership of the land of Israel, compared with His ownership of everything else in the universe?

Furthermore, if God's ownership was the foundation of the Jubilee Law, isn't it still binding? Yes, it is still binding. The question is, in what way is it binding? To answer this question, we have to ask: To what end was it binding in Israel?

The people of Israel came into a land which God had promised to Abraham (Gen. 15). This land was captured intact, with its cities and fields and wells ready and waiting for the Hebrews (Deut. 6:10-11). This original appropriation was by **warfare**. The Israelites exterminated the inhabitants, or drove them out of the land, at the explicit command

of God (Ex. 23:22-33). They inherited the capital base which had been built up by the Canaanites, thereby confirming the reality of the principle enunciated by Solomon, “the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just” (Prov. 13:22b).

This military victory was God’s, and God established the principle by which the spoils would be divided up among His followers. The firstfruits went to Him alone: Jericho. All the wealth of Jericho was either to be destroyed — animals and people (Josh. 6:21) — or transferred to God’s treasury: silver, gold, vessels of iron and brass (Josh. 6:18-19, 24). (Iron was a scarce metal, probably a precious metal, in 1400 B.C.). The remainder of the land of Canaan went to Israel.

It was not simply that God was the owner of the land. He owned the whole earth. But He was to demonstrate His ownership of Canaan through military conquest in Joshua’s day. He had promised spoils to each of the tribes and families of Israel a generation earlier, under Moses. The distribution was made by lot — not random distribution in the sense of chance, but a division controlled by God (Num. 26:52-56). Larger families received larger portions, but the location of each tribe’s land was established by lot (Num. 33:54). The only exception appears to have been Caleb, one of the two men of the original dwellers in Egypt (the other was Joshua) who was allowed to come into Canaan. But Caleb first had to drive out the Anakim (giants) before he could take possession of this special hill, so no one could complain (Josh. 14:12; 15:14).

Ownership of Canaan was by military conquest. The Reubenites, the Gadites, and half the tribe of Manasseh had been promised land across the Jordan River, but Joshua told them they had to fight on the far side of the Jordan alongside their brethren before they could inherit their land, and they agreed (Josh. 1:12-16). No one in Israel could legitimately claim that any government official had rigged the distribution. No one could conclude that anyone but God was sovereign over land ownership in the promised land. He had proven His ownership on the battlefield.

No discussion of the Jubilee Year should ever begin without full understanding of the historical setting of the conquest of Canaan. The original distribution was made by lot for each tribe, and families received their distribution according to the number of people in each family. This was not primarily an egalitarian principle; it was a military principle. Larger families contributed more fighting men to the army of Israel. There was some degree of equality, but this contributed to better morale. Those families that risked more lives were promised a proportionally greater share of the spoils.

This generation had been preparing for the battle for 40 years in full knowledge of how the post-war division of the spoils would be conducted. Anyone who did not accept the terms of ownership, including the Year of Jubilee, did not have to participate in the conquest of Canaan. Any subsequent distribution of specific pieces of land every 50 years was simply the enforcement of a **voluntary contract** entered into by the original Owner of the land and His tenants. It was not a coercive redistribution scheme imposed retroactively by some new set of politicians in the name of a “higher social ethic” than the rights of private property possessed by lawful heirs.

What is my point? Simple: those socialistic anabaptists who claim to be part of the pacifist side of the anabaptist tradition have carefully refrained from discussing the military aspects of the origins of the Jubilee Year. They write as if the land just happened to fall into the hands of the

Israelites like a ripe fruit. I could better understand their commitment to the details of the Jubilee Year if they were forthrightly members of the bloody tradition of anabaptism, the one that sent hordes of peasants through towns and the countryside in a wave of violence and theft, 1525-35. (This aspect of the anabaptist tradition is discussed at length by Igor Shafarevich in his excellent book, *The Socialist Phenomenon* [Harper & Row, 1982], chapter 2.) Today’s left-wing anabaptists need to face up to the bloody origins of the Jubilee Year in Israel.

The Demographics of Dominion

When Israel left Egypt, there were 600,000 men, plus women and children (Ex. 12:37), plus a mixed multitude (Ex. 12:38). As many as 2.5 million Israelites may have been involved in the exodus. We do not know how many came into the land of Canaan with Joshua, but there were probably no fewer than the numbers who had escaped from Egypt. But the size of the land conquered by Israel was probably not much larger than 8 million acres. Thus, the per capita holdings of land were not that great.

Furthermore, the Israelites were given specific promises by God concerning covenantal faithfulness. If they remained faithful to God’s law, they would live long lives (Ex. 20:12). They would also avoid miscarriages; so would their domesticated beasts (Ex. 23:26). If a population experiences an increase in individual life expectancy and also a declining infant mortality rate, it will almost certainly experience a population explosion, unless the rate of conception is very low (under 2.1 children per woman, a minimum “replacement rate,” since some children fail to marry). This promise had been given to the society which had already experienced the most rapid sustained rate of population growth in the recorded history of man, from 70 families and their households in Joseph’s day (Ex. 1:5) to as many as 2.5 million people, in about 215 years (using the reconstructed chronology of Donovan Courville, *The Exodus Problem and Its Ramifications* [Loma Linda, California: Challenge Books, 1971]). I have calculated that the rate of population growth was over 3% per annum. At that rate, even if there had been no increase in the rate of population growth, the earth would have been filled with about 13 **billion** Hebrews — about three times the present estimated world population — in well under three centuries. The Egyptians had seen what was happening, and they had been fearful, for good reason (Ex. 1:9). Yet God had promised Israel even more rapid growth — no miscarriages.

Impossible, correct? Not at all. The dominion covenant is an ethical covenant. When men conform themselves rigorously to God’s law, through God’s grace, they are to expect incomparable blessings. The whole earth is to come under covenant man’s jurisdiction as rapidly as possible. The rule of God’s law on earth is not to be delayed “for old time’s sake.” God offered the Hebrews world dominion when they entered Canaan. Canaan was little more than a point of embarkation.

They did not respond ethically to the requirements of God’s law. But if they had, it should be clear how little the Jubilee Year would have been worth to any given family. With per capita land of about four acres per person when they entered Canaan, not counting any of the mixed multitude who may have covenanted themselves to Israel (Caleb, for example, was the son of a Kenezite: [Josh 14:6]), it was clear to them what large families would do to the inheritance of each family member. It would shrink to insignificance. The more faithful the Israelites were to the

covenant, the faster the inheritance per capita would shrink.

What the Jubilee Year represented to a faithful community was simple: **an incentive from God to spread across the face of the earth.** There could be no hope in land ownership in Israel for a covenantally faithful community. God was offering them **world dominion**; no family in Israel could hope to remain in the land and prosper. Each family had prepare its heirs to make plans to move to distant lands, to infiltrate and gain control over the kingdoms of the world, through such activities as money-lending (Deut. 23:12). The spoils of war in Joshua's day could not be relied upon for more than one or two generations, if the sons of the covenant remained faithful. **There would be too many sons of the covenant for the tiny nation to support.**

This is not the sort of exegesis we find in the socialistic interpretations of the radical anabaptists, yet the logic of the demographics of dominion is obvious. The Jubilee Year could become economically significant to a family only if the land was in sin, and the **curse of zero growth** was upon them. If the Jubilee Year worked at all in the land of covenantally faithful Israel, or in any land which came under the rule of God's law, it worked as a **disincentive** to remain in the land of one's fathers. It was God's way to tell faithful societies to have **no hope in geography.** Godly men cannot plan on inheriting a portion of an original inheritance, the spoils of war. They must make plans to move outward, bringing the whole world under God's law.

Naturally, the Year of Jubilee had ameliorative aspects. In an ethically rebellious land, Israelites could at least look forward to inheriting a piece of their father's land, or grandfather's land. But, then again, did they really have much hope? Would the law of the Jubilee Year be honored in a rebellious society? Would this one law of God be enforced, when all the other laws were being ignored? Doubtful. So the law was really no safeguard. If the authorities respected it, they were probably honoring most of the law of God. If they were honoring the whole of the law, then the Jubilee Year gave no economic hope to the multitudinous heirs of the original conquerors. But if they were not honoring the whole of the law, they would probably not honor this one, which involved transferring the key economic resource back to original families. The Jubilee Year made sense only if the authorities were faithful to its provisions, but not to the whole of the covenant.

Godly families would grow. **The more ethically faithful the family, the tinier the "equal" portions of the inheritance.** Therefore, they could have no hope in the land — either in their portion of the land, or in the land of Canaan itself. They had to look outward, toward the world at large. **The geographical wineskins of Israel had to be broken.** Covenantally faithful Israelites could not remain farmers forever, tied to the soil. They would have to become traders, entrepreneurs, skilled craftsmen, masters of foreign languages, and still remain faithful to the law of God at all times and in all places.

Jesus and the Jubilee

After Jesus' confrontation with Satan, He returned to Nazareth. He then announced the inauguration of His ministry. He went into the synagogue on the sabbath.

And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The

spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:17-19).

This citation from Isaiah 61:1-2 almost certainly refers to the Year of Jubilee in its broadest meaning: freedom from bondage, meaning bondage to sin and the effects of sin — sickness, poverty, and oppression. But it was also an announcement of the **failure of the Israelites** in not fulfilling the dominion assignment. What were they doing in Israel, still bottled up in the narrow confines of a territory captured by military conquest 1400 years before? That territory had never been intended to serve as a permanent residence; it was only an embarkation point, a kind of headquarters for a worldwide spiritual and economic conquest. Where was the promised population explosion? Where were their worldwide financial and trading connections?

Jesus announced the Jubilee, which meant **an end to the mentality of "Fortress Israel."** It was a call, not to arms, but to the proclamation of the gospel, the **real** tool of dominion and conquest. Jesus called men to ethical subordination to God, so that the old wineskins of Israel might be broken, and the new wine of the gospel be spread across the earth. **It was the end of geographical Israel as the residence of God's people.**

Within a century, the Jews were scattered abroad by the Romans. They had to learn about developing a way of life in foreign lands — something they should have begun to prepare for in Joshua's day. But they remained culturally and demographically **defensive.** The Christians took the offensive culturally. The Jews traded, the Christians conquered. The Jews preserved their way of life in a hostile world; the Christians captured the minds of the people in that hostile world.

Jesus was announcing the Jubilee Year. Its application changed, though its principle remained the same. The whole earth is God's. **As the owner, He was delivering the whole world to His people.** This time, military conquest is not the primary means of taking possession of the promised land. Instead, the preaching of the gospel is the acceptable means of cultural victory. There is to be no casting of lots to distribute the booty of a military conquest. There is no "original ownership" of specified territory through military conquest which establishes "title by bloodline." Families are divided by Christ's gospel (Matt. 10:34-37), as in the days of Cain and Abel. But the whole earth will be returned to God's people.

The Year of Jubilee was thus established **definitively** by Jesus Christ when He began His ministry. It will be fulfilled **finally** at the day of resurrection. It is going on **progressively** today, and has been since the day of Christ's announcement. Year by year, Satan and his army of squatters are being driven from the promised land, namely, the whole earth. Satan is conducting a defensive operation, just as the Canaanites did in Joshua's day. The ownership of the whole earth is God's; He has promised it to His sons as surely as He promised Canaan to Abraham. But the mode of conquest is different.

The Walled City

Land inside a walled city was not subject to the Year of Jubilee. A man who sold a house had one year in which to

buy back the house. If he did not buy it back, it became the permanent possession of the new owner (Lev. 25:29-30).

Where do we reside as Christians? Spiritually, we are citizens of the city with walls reaching up toward heaven, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:12-17). Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). (The word translated by the King James as "conversation" is better translated as "citizenship.") The Old Testament's law of land distribution no longer applies. We no longer hold property as heirs of military conquerors.

Conclusion

We should not be misled by the cries of the socialists that we must somehow reinstitute the specific land legislation of Old Testament Israel, or anything comparable to it. They appeal to this law because it is one of the very few laws in the Bible that appears to give power to the State to redistribute property. But the Year of Jubilee was not a case of "socialism after the fact." It was the requirement laid down by God in advance of the conquest of Canaan. God was the original owner of the land, and He established land tenure in a land which He gave to His followers through military conquest. Those who wanted the land had to **agree in advance** to the terms of ownership established by the covenant with the Owner. They knew exactly what these terms were. These terms were comparable to private building codes or other permanent restrictions on real estate (still called "covenants") which are inserted into the deeds by the developer of the property prior to his offering it for sale to the general public.

But what do we hear? In "Sing Jubilee," an article in the left-wing anabaptist journal, *the other side* (March, 1978), Merold Westphal argues that in today's world, the Jubilee principle means the following: "A large proportion of the productive wealth of this nation is owned in the form of liquid assets. This includes stocks, bonds, and savings accounts. (Yes, money itself is a form of productive wealth, as a quick look at Form 1040 will reveal.) Think what would happen if we redivided this wealth so that each family owned a 'roughly equal' share of our means of production.

The change would be immense. Were we to take the Jubilee seriously, the revolution would be far more sweeping than our most radical tax reform proposals. . . ."

Here it is: the call for **redistribution by retroactive legislation**. Yes, I can imagine that such a destruction of wealth and freedom would be far, far more radical than anything proposed by Congress. Either the program should be compulsory, meaning massive theft at the first redistribution and the destruction of people's trust in civil government, or else it should be voluntary, meaning that misled Christians alone would participate. This kind of Bible study is geared to the creation of guilt, not wealth.

Odd, isn't it, how we go from a specific form of wealth transfer, agreed to in advance — permanent land ownership by specific families — and arrive at the general redistribution of all forms of wealth, by retroactive legislation, which was never called for in the Old Testament? Yet this is what passes for serious Bible scholarship in a growing number of mainline evangelical churches and most theological seminaries. (Ron Sider has spoken at Westminster Seminary, Reformed Seminary, and Gordon-Conwell, and was well received, at least by tenured faculty members and probably a majority of students.)

Just so we wouldn't miss the point, Westphal's article is accompanied by a cartoon of a fat, bald, well-dressed man who has just taken a bite out of a globe, and whose mouth is covered with drippings. His eyes are closed, and he has a contented smile on his face. Ah, yes: the "new, improved" gospel of peace.

That socialists come in the name of the Bible and have the audacity to appeal to Leviticus 25 in their futile quest for biblical evidence favoring socialism only testifies to the weakness of their position and the incompetence of their exegesis. It is time to recognize such "Bible exposition" for what it is: **guilt-manipulation**. We must heed the warning in David Chilton's book; we are *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators* (2nd ed.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982; \$4.95).

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