



FIVE MYTHS ABOUT JUBILEE

BY ART LINDSLEY, PH.D.

I was brought up in the evangelical community and have read all the usual books on wealth, poverty, and social justice. I repeatedly heard all the usual speakers on such themes. There were certain assumptions they all had about the Biblical passages on Jubilee – particularly that it involved forgiveness of debt and redistribution of land. Over the past few months I have been studying Biblical passages on economic themes (Jubilee included) and have been stunned by the differences between what the text clearly says and what I had been taught. I shared my preliminary thoughts with some friends on the discrepancy between the text and its popular interpretation, and they expressed disappointment with what I was saying. I felt like the little boy who said that the “Emperor has no clothes.” I have no desire to pop peoples’ balloons but it is better to make arguments for forgiveness of debt (etc.) on solid Biblical grounds rather than believing myths or half-truths.¹

For those who don’t know the context of this discussion, the sabbatical years occurred every seven years, and Jubilee was celebrated at the end of seven cycles of sabbatical years—the fiftieth year (or forty-ninth, as some argue). During the sabbatical years the Israelites rested from their labor and allowed (among other things) the land to rest.

While there is some evidence that sabbatical years were observed, it seems that according to II Chronicles 36:21 it only happened sporadically. This text says that the number of years for the captivity in Babylon corresponded to the number of sabbatical years that were not observed. If sabbatical years were infrequently observed then there is a question as to how often (if ever) Jubilee was observed.² But whether Jubilee was observed or not, Jubilee was God’s law for His people and needs to be taken seriously by all who believe in Biblical authority. Even if God’s people were disobedient to these laws, they could still teach us valuable principles.

When the Israelites reached the Promise Land, God distributed land to the 12 tribes (Josh. 13:7, 23:4), and the purpose of the Jubilee law was to keep the land in the hands of the tribes and families to which he had given the land in the first place.

¹ Jubilee was the basis for “Jubilee 2000,” which called for cancelling Third World debt by the year 2000, claiming that at Jubilee “all debts are cancelled.” It is also used to justify periodic redistribution of land and property by the government.

² For historical evidence of the observance of sabbatical years, scholars point to the extra-Biblical works of 1 Maccabees (6:49), the Talmud (“Moza’e Shebi’it”), and the writings of Josephus (*Antiquities*, bk. 11, ch. 8, sect. 4-5). Historical evidence for the celebration of Jubilee years is less prevalent and more disputed. Some scholars point to mentions of Jubilee in the Babylonian Talmud (Arakin 12a and Megillah 14b) and the Samaritan “Book of Joshua” (Chapter XV) as possible evidence of its celebration.

There are five common myths about Jubilee that seem to be contradicted by the text of Leviticus 25.

Myth #1: Jubilee meant a forgiveness of debt.

It is clear in the Old Testament text and to many commentators that in Leviticus 25 Jubilee does not involve forgiveness of debt, at least in the way we normally use the term. There is no debt forgiven because it has already been paid. The key verses missed (or not read at all) are Leviticus 25:15-16. In verses 8-10 a ram's horn is to be blown on the day of atonement of the 50th year (or 49th), and each family is to return to their property. Verses 15-16 tell how this process is to work:

¹⁵ Corresponding to the number of years after the Jubilee you shall buy from your friend; he is to sell to you according to the number of years of crops. ¹⁶ In proportion to the extent of the years you shall increase its price and in proportion to the fewness of the years you shall diminish its price; *for it is the number of crops he is selling to you* [emphasis added].

So if an Israelite family member has a debt they can go to someone and ask for a lump sum payment priced according to the number of years before the Jubilee. The price would be determined by the projected amount of crops to be yielded prior to the Jubilee. To put it in modern terms, if you had a debt of \$250,000, there are five years prior to the Jubilee, and each crop is worth \$50,000, then the lender (or “buyer”) would give you \$250,000 for the rights to farm the land, and at the time of Jubilee you would receive your land back because the debt had been paid off. So the “buyer” does not really own the land but leases it. The debt is paid off by the land (crops).³ The buyer or leaser would be paid according to the terms of the lease. We don't know exactly how the price was determined for each year of crops, given the uncertainty due to bad weather or other factors that could lead to a poor or lost crop. Perhaps the price took into account that some years would be more profitable than others.⁴

Now at the time of Jubilee you would of course rejoice that your debt had been paid and your land returned to your full use, but you would not (I presume) thank the leaser for “forgiving” your debt. The Jubilee Declaration might be analogous to a “mortgage burning party.” You would celebrate with friends that this significant debt was paid, but you would not thank the bank for “forgiving” your debt. The debt is not “forgiven” or “cancelled” because it is paid. I would love for someone to pay off my mortgage or cancel my debt, but that is not what happened at Jubilee.

This understanding of Jubilee as the payoff of a lease is common in Old Testament commentaries. Here are some scholars and commentaries that have made this observation –

³ In the year of Jubilee there is no distributive injustice (no loss of capital).

⁴ Michael Harbin estimates that a crop was worth about “one and half to two years’ wages,” depending on “the quality of the soil,” “how well watered it was,” and other market forces of supply and demand. Because of the inherent variance in harvests, Harbin conjectures that the future crop yields might have been priced at “an understood depreciated flat-rate value for a year of crops” (“Jubilee and Social Justice.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 4 (2011): 692). Jacob Milgrom asserts that the buyer would still bear significant risk, however; “for in the case of a crop failure, the loss was the buyer’s” (*Leviticus 23-27* (AB 3B; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2178).

Matthew Henry (1710):

Thus it was provided that the lands should not be alienated from their families. They could only be disposed of, as it were, by leases till the year of the jubilee and were then to return to the seller or his heir.⁵

The Interpreter's Bible:

In the year of Jubilee all indentured labor, in regard to Hebrews, was to come to an end, all leases were to expire; the Hebrew might not alienate his agricultural land, but he might lease the right to farm it, the sum to be paid being the estimated value of the crops up to the year of Jubilee, when the lease would automatically end.⁶

R.K. Harrison:

Land could not be sold in a conventional sense, and any payments for property amounted to the purchaser taking a lease on it until the next Jubilee year... since only the produce of the land could thus properly be bought or sold.⁷

Gordon Wenham:

Leviticus 25 prohibits anyone from selling himself or his land off permanently. In effect he may only rent out his land or his labor for a maximum of forty nine years. The rent is payable in one lump sum in advance, as if there was a sale, but in the Jubilee year the land reverts to its original owner and the slave is given his freedom.⁸

Derek Tidball:

Purchasing land was like purchasing a lease.⁹

Ron Sider:

Before and after the year of jubilee land would be "bought" or "sold." Actually, the leaser purchased a specific number of harvests.¹⁰

Walter Kaiser:

Verses 13-17 of Leviticus 25 go on to spell out the financial implications of this transaction, for what appeared to have been the sale of the land was in fact only the sale of the *use* of the land. Therefore, as the year of Jubilee approached, and the years were

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Holy Bible (Genesis to Esther)* (Nashville, Royal Publishers, Inc., 1979), 279.

⁶ *The Interpreter's Bible, Volume II* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1953), 122.

⁷ R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1980), 225.

⁸ Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus (NICOT)* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1979), 317.

⁹ Derek Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2005), 296.

¹⁰ Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, 5th Edition* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2005), 68.

few, it diminished the value and the cost of the land to the purchaser, depending on the number of harvests the land could produce until the Jubilee.¹¹

There is thus significant consensus among Biblical scholars that Jubilee actually entailed the completed payment of a debt, not its forgiveness.¹²

If the debt exceeded the value of the crops that would be harvested before the next Jubilee, the one leasing could supplement the amount of the lease by selling his labor for those years as an indentured servant.¹³ At any time the lease could be paid off by a family member or the original person leasing the land with no early payment penalty. The price would be the number of years' worth of crops remaining on the lease.¹⁴

Even though Jubilee is not a "forgiveness of debt," you could find other Biblical grounds for the idea. Jesus in the parable of the "Unmerciful Slave" (Matt. 18:23-35) portrays a king who has a slave brought to him who owes him 10,000 talents (about \$10,000,000 or more). Since the slave has no means to repay the debt, the king commands that he, his family, and his goods be sold. The slave pleads for mercy and receives it from the king. His debt is forgiven. Later that same slave meets someone who owed him 100 denarii (a denarius is a day's wage), and when this debtor cannot repay, the slave has him thrown into prison. Other slaves observe this scene and report what he has done to the king. The king says, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?" Jesus here commends the voluntary and merciful act of the king and holds that one who is shown such mercy over a very large debt should be merciful to one with a much smaller debt. Forgiving debt is not here a matter of justice but of mercy. Although the context of this parable is a chapter that wrestles with the importance of forgiving sin, we certainly see that forgiving a debt is a merciful (though not mandatory) option. It is also possible to pay off another's debt. This is certainly encouraged by stories in the early church about some Christians who sold themselves into slavery in order to get money to buy others out of slavery.¹⁵

¹¹ Walter Kaiser, "Ownership and Property in the Old Testament Economy." *Journal of Markets & Morality* 15, no. 4 (2012): 234.

¹² Cal Beisner points out that Leviticus 25 has indeed radical implications for laissez-faire capitalism but not for the reasons many give: "It would seem radical because it put a strict requirement on borrowers by requiring collateral to secure all loans, and because it put a maximum limit on the number of years for which a loan could be extended" (*Prosperity and Poverty* (Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 64).

¹³ Leviticus 25:39-41: ³⁹ If a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you, you shall not subject him to a slave's service. ⁴⁰ He shall be with you as a hired man, as if he were a sojourner; he shall serve with you until the year of jubilee. ⁴¹ He shall then go out from you, he and his sons with him, and shall go back to his family, that he may return to the property of his forefathers.

¹⁴ Leviticus 25:47-52: ⁴⁷ Now if the means of a stranger or of a sojourner with you becomes sufficient, and a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to him as to sell himself to a stranger who is sojourning with you, or to the descendants of a stranger's family, ⁴⁸ then he shall have redemption right after he has been sold. One of his brothers may redeem him, ⁴⁹ or his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or one of his blood relatives from his family may redeem him; or if he prospers, he may redeem himself. ⁵⁰ He then with his purchaser shall calculate from the year when he sold himself to him up to the year of jubilee; and the price of his sale shall correspond to the number of years. It is like the days of a hired man that he shall be with him. ⁵¹ If there are still many years, he shall refund part of his purchase price in proportion to them for his own redemption; ⁵² and if few years remain until the year of jubilee, he shall so calculate with him. In proportion to his years he is to refund the amount for his redemption.

¹⁵ Lampe, Peter, "Early Christians in the City of Rome" in *Christians as a Religious Minority in a Multicultural City*, vol. 243 of *The Library of New Testament Studies* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 24.

Leviticus 25 encourages family and friends of the debtor to pay off his debt so that the use of the land is back in the original family's hands (Lev. 25:47-55).

Michael Harbin, in a thorough academic paper on "Jubilee and Social Justice" (available on IFWE's website – tifwe.org) concludes that, "Jubilee does not involve forgiveness of debt... since there was no debt, there was nothing to be forgiven... Jubilee is then really a semi-centennial national expiration of land leases."¹⁶

Certainly there is a Biblical basis for voluntary debt forgiveness. But there is a significant difference between a debt that is paid and the mandatory forgiveness of debt. Jubilee is clearly an example of the former and not the latter. Jubilee is not a celebration of forgiveness of debt but of freedom from debt now paid.

Myth #2: Jubilee involves a redistribution of wealth (land).

I've heard it said that Jubilee is the paramount example of a mandatory legal (government) redistribution of wealth. Whether the Jubilee was ever practiced or not, the argument goes, God required by law that land be redistributed every 50 years.

It should be clear from the previous section (Myth #1) that if Jubilee does not involve the forgiveness of debt but the celebration of a debt paid by leasing the land (crops), then there is no redistribution of wealth. There is no redistribution of wealth because the land (legal title) never left the ownership of the original family to which God had given the land. Michael Harbin concludes, "Jubilee did not entail the forgiveness of debt and nor did it require a periodic redistribution of wealth... Actual ownership of the land really did not change hands, but remained with the family who had inherited it from God."¹⁷

Other passages in Leviticus 25 indicate that some property could change hands permanently. In other words, there are some Biblical "footnotes" or "asterisks" to this leasing process. Jubilee only applied to land in the country (outside the city). Inside the city (a walled city) a house that is sold could be redeemed for a full year after the sale, but after that it was the permanent property of the one who bought it. Since the Levites had no permanent land, they could sell ("lease") their homes in Levitical cities, but could redeem the house at any time or wait till the year of Jubilee when the house would be returned to their use (Lev. 25: 29-34). There was no redistribution of permanently owned houses in the cities, and there was no redistribution of wealth gained through leasing the land. If there were bountiful harvests each year then the profit remained in the hands of the one who had leased the land. So only land in the country was returned to the original owners of the land.

Far from being an argument for redistribution of land and wealth, Jubilee keeps the distribution in exactly the same place as where it started. It is not redistributed to a different family, but returned to the same one according to God's original distribution.

Myth #3: Jubilee shows the relative nature (relativization) of private property.

¹⁶ Michael Harbin, "Jubilee and Social Justice." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 4 (2011): 696.

¹⁷ Michael Harbin, "Jubilee and Social Justice." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 4 (2011): 685.

The way that this myth is argued is that since God owns the land (Lev. 25:23) there are no absolute rights to private property. Therefore, this provides warrant for government to take private property (land or wealth) and redistribute it. If you have been following the argument of this article you will see that Leviticus 25 argues the exact opposite. God owns the land, but has given the Promised Land to the tribes and families of Israel with the condition that private property cannot be sold, squandered, or given away permanently. The property rights remain in the hands of the tribe or family that was given the land in the first place. Jubilee underlines the value and importance of private property (for the tribes of Israel). The family farm cannot be taken away from them permanently. No matter how tragic the circumstances, no matter how immoral a family member becomes, or how unwise they are in maintaining their property, the family is not permanently deprived of their land. John Schneider in his paradigm-altering book *The Good of Affluence* writes the following:

To the extent that Jubilee involved the legal distribution of property, the shares were unequal to begin with. The Levites got no land; first-born sons received twice the land given to the other sons (Deut. 21:17); daughters neither owned nor inherited anything. And non-Israelites had no share in the land. They could perhaps lease land and use it for a while, but they could not really buy and own it. For jubilee would actually take it back from them and return it to the natural owners... The people whom the Jubilee helped were not the poor but the families of original affluence. The Jubilee (if practiced) guaranteed that they endured in their landed affluence regardless of whether they wanted (or deserved) it... What the jubilee did was restore property and power to old landed families, the true Israelites, and there is no condition relating to whether they needed it or not... For by limiting the property rights of non-Israelites or other buyers to a form of leasing, rental, or temporary investment, it literally prohibited the liquidation or sharing of assets for ethical purposes.¹⁸

Far from being relativized, private property rights in Israel were established permanently.

Myth #4: Jubilee leads to income equality.

Some argue that the periodic “redistribution” of land at Jubilee kept the rich from getting richer and the poor from getting poorer. Jubilee certainly did prevent any one person or small group of people from buying up most (or all) of the land. It did stop those “who add field to field, until there is no more room” (Isa. 5:8). But it did not prevent some from becoming wealthier than others. If a lender leased the best land available before Jubilee and diligently worked to make it productive, they could accumulate significant assets prior to each Jubilee. That would allow them to lease even more properties during the next 50 years. So some individuals or families could over time accumulate effective control over large amounts of land even though they did not have permanent ownership. The accumulated assets could also allow these individuals or families to buy up unlimited numbers of houses in walled cities, which after a year (unless redeemed) would be their permanent property. So while the Jubilee law did prevent all the land from being permanently owned by one family or a few families, it did not prevent some from becoming much wealthier than others.

¹⁸ John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 82-84.

One commentator says that, “Jubilee sets...limits on the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.”¹⁹ This is only true with regard to the permanent acquisition of land. But I don’t see anything in the passage that would necessarily prevent income inequality. The primary intent of the law is not economic equality at all. God wanted to prevent Israelite families from losing their ability to enjoy the Promised Land. God had promised His people freedom from slavery and a land flowing with “milk and honey.” A land where they could prosper and enjoy life with their family using their creativity (Gen. 1:26-28) to farm the land and enjoy the fruits of their labors. There is a verse in Micah (4:4) that has captivated many authors (including the founders of America) that says, “Each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree.” This verse communicates safety, security, productivity, and enjoyment of God’s creation. John Schneider argues that the theme of the Bible from the Garden of Eden, through Noah and the patriarchal narratives, is the “promise of God to bring his people quite deliberately into conditions of material prosperity and power.”²⁰ This is particularly true with regard to the Promised Land (Deut. 8:7-10):

⁷ For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; ⁸ a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; ⁹ a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper.¹⁰ When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you.

God’s intent, argues Schneider, is material delight, great affluence, and a lack of scarcity. There are of course spiritual dangers to this wealth, and God warns His people about the dangers of forgetting the giver (Deut. 8:11-15) or boasting in themselves as the source of the wealth (Deut. 8:17-18). The Israelites were also to share of their wealth with those in need. They were not to harvest around the margins of their fields but allow the “poor and sojourner” to glean (Lev. 19:9-12; 23:22). No collateral was to be required of the very poor and no interest charged on loans (Ex. 22:25-27). Just weights and measures were to be used (Lev. 19:35-37). Strangers and sojourners were to be loved as you love yourself (Lev. 19:35-37).

However, the main purpose of Jubilee seems to be not “forgiveness of debt” or “redistribution of land” or “income equality” but the preservation of the prosperity in the Promised Land that God had promised His people. Schneider argues:

It seems the main purpose of the jubilee was rather to preserve the original integrity of the land as God had apportioned it in the beginning. And in that way its aim was to preserve the substance of the promise of delight to the people of Israel too. In sum, the jubilee made it harder for people to ruin the basic structures that God had created to secure their prosperity.²¹

This redemptive-historical approach has the advantage of avoiding the debates about capitalism or socialism that we might put forward. The purpose of Jubilee was not income equality but that

¹⁹ Derek Tidball, *The Message of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2005), 301.

²⁰ John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 70.

²¹ John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 84.

no Israelite would permanently lose the enjoyment of sitting under “his vine and under his fig tree” (Mic. 4:4). Cal Beisner sums up the message of Jubilee on income equality:

The law of jubilee was designed not to promote income equality, but to prevent one family member’s destroying an entire family’s means of productivity, not only in his own generation but also in generations to come, by contracting huge debts and selling, permanently, the family’s means of production.²²

Jubilee was also designed to perpetuate the family’s enjoyment of the fruit of their labors as they used their creativity to turn their land into an approximation of the Garden of Eden.

Myth #5: Jubilee is a universally applicable principle (applies to all people).

Actually Jubilee applied only to Israelites and not to aliens and sojourners (non-Israelites). This is another significant “footnote” almost entirely omitted from the normal narrative about Jubilee. Even though an alien (sojourner or stranger) might be able to “lease” land or hire an indentured servant, they could not permanently own land or slaves (Lev. 25:47). Only Israelites could own land or own foreign slaves (Lev. 25:44-46). There was no “redistribution” or return of the land to foreigners, and foreign slaves were not freed at Jubilee. The poorest “people of the land” were to be included in feasts (alien, widow, orphan), but they did not have property (land) rights (except to houses in walled cities). Schneider says:

Writers on the subject almost universally miss the point that its provisions applied only to members of the original Israelite tribes. The poorest people in society were unaffected by it. For aliens, sojourners, non-Israelite debtors and slaves possessed no land in the first place and thus had no share in its repossession on the day of jubilee. Their economic need, however dire, played no role in the redistribution. Strange as it may seem, given the function of these texts in modern theologians’ discourse, the people whom the jubilee helped were not the poor, but the families of original affluence.²³

Calvin in his commentary on Jubilee notes Jubilee’s exclusive benefits for Israelites and place in God’s history of revelation:

Thus the land of Canaan was an earnest, or symbol, or mirror, of the adoption on which their salvation was founded. Wherefore it is not to be wondered at that God was unwilling that this inestimable benefit should ever be lost; and, lest this should be the case, like a provident father of a family, He laid a restraint on His children, to prevent them from being too prodigal; for, when a man has any suspicions of his heir, he forbids him to alienate the patrimony he leaves him. Such, therefore, was the condition of the ancient people; yet it cannot be indiscriminately transferred to other nations who have had no common inheritance given them.²⁴

Michael Harbin summarizes on the question of universality:

²² E. Calvin Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty* (Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 65.

²³ John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 83.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume III* (Grand Rapids: Bakerbook House, 1984), 169.

While it may be true that private property would be good for everyone, this is never expressed as an objective and certainly does not seem to be part of the Jubilee principle. The fact that the Jubilee principle only applied to one group of people out of the entire world on a one time basis seems to undermine the argument of those who would universalize this Jubilee principle.²⁵

There are of course many Biblical passages on the importance of caring for the poor. The Bible also stresses that the gospel is for people of every tribe, tongue, people and nation (Rev. 5:9). Because of the gospel message the nations will be glad.

Certainly the Gospel does go out to all nations and there are hints that may point to Jubilee being fulfilled in the preaching of Jesus.²⁶ But present day application of the Jubilee laws are not immediately clear and certainly not as easy as those who perpetuate these myths want to maintain.

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²⁵ Michael Harbin, "Jubilee and Social Justice." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 4 (2011): 696.

²⁶ There is in Jesus' inaugural sermon, sometimes called the "Nazareth Manifesto" (Luk. 4:18-19), a possible allusion to Jubilee. Jesus' text was Isaiah 61:1f.:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners.

Robert North observes that the word "release" from Isaiah 61:1 was the same as the word in Leviticus 25:10 (*Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1954), 213-231). So perhaps the acceptable or favorable year of the Lord is inspired by the Jubilee year. The physical application of Jubilee to the land becomes a spiritual application to be applied as a result of the Gospel. So although the Jubilee (Lev. 25) was not applied universally (to all people), perhaps it serves as a type, shadow, or hint of a larger spiritual application of the Gospel.