

Celebrate God's Ownership

February 8, 2009

Purpose: To help us affirm that our relationships with others and with the environment are to be guided by our knowledge that all things ultimately belong to God

Key Bible reference: Leviticus 25

Key Verse: Leviticus 25.23

Biblical Background: What does it mean to say that God owns all things? Does God call us, as Jesus called the rich young man, to "sell [our] possessions, and give the money to the poor" (Matthew 19:21)? Most of us would be reluctant to give away all that we have, depriving those in our families who depend upon us.

The laws in Leviticus 25 do not demand that all God's people take vows of poverty. Indeed, the purpose of the sabbatical years and the jubilee was, in large measure, to guarantee the security of families. The God who owns all things does, however, call for justice and equal opportunity for everyone in society.

Leviticus 25 comes toward the end of a priestly law code, Leviticus 17-26. This law code is distinguished by the repeated phrase, "I am the LORD" (for instance, in this chapter alone, in verses 17, 38, and 55) and has as its theme the calling of God's people to holy living: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). For this reason Leviticus 17-26 is often referred to as the Holiness Code.

The particular concern of Leviticus 25 is the holiness of the land itself and the guarantee of economic justice. The land, promised from of old to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is not to be the property of Israel after all. Rather, the Lord declares, "The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Leviticus 25:23). To demonstrate that the land is indeed the Lord's, Leviticus 25 institutes the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee; to guarantee justice in the interim, the code outlines the laws of redemption.

Leviticus 25:17. Every seventh year, according to these provisions, the land is to be given a sabbath. Nothing is to be planted nor is any formal harvest to take place. Even vineyards are not to be pruned. "There shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD" (verse 4). Of course, it is possible that some produce will come up on its own. Such food is the common property of all who are in need: slaves, hired hands, and domestic and wild animals all have an equal right to what the land produces of itself (verses 6-7; see also Exodus 23:10-11). This could be regarded as good agricultural practice. Letting fields lie fallow for a year allows the soil to replenish itself. However, Leviticus does not regard this as a practical matter but as a spiritual one.

The land is the Lord's. The sabbatical year enforces that idea by setting apart a time when no one can use the land for personal profit. Deuteronomy 15:1-3 extends the idea of the release of claims upon the land in the sabbatical year to the remission of debts. In this year, the law states, no attempt shall be made to collect on a debt; and further, "the claim that is held against a neighbor" (Deuteronomy 15:2) shall be remitted.

It is appropriate to note that Hebrew slaves were to be freed after six years of service (Exodus 21:26; Deuteronomy 15:12-18). While this seventh year would not necessarily coincide with the sabbatical year, the

"sabbatical" reasoning is the same. The sabbath was an important part of Israel's identity. In Deuteronomy, sabbath is connected to the liberation of the people Israel (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). It is appropriate, then, that the sabbatical year should be a time of liberation and hope for the economically dispossessed and that the sabbath should mark the extent to which a Hebrew could be legally forced to remain in slavery. And for the priests, sabbath is linked to Creation (Exodus 20:8-11). Thus, in Leviticus 25 the land itself is given a sabbath rest—after every six years of cultivation.

Verses 8-12. Following the seventh sabbatical year comes a year of particular holiness. This fiftieth year is the year of jubilee. The word jubilee comes from the Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible. It is a rendering into Latin characters of the Hebrew name for this festival, *yobel* [yo-BALE]. *Yobel* (meaning "ram") apparently refers to the ram's horn blown on the Day of Atonement to announce the jubilee (*yobel* is used with the meaning "trumpet" in Exodus 19:13 and in Joshua 6:3-8, 13).

In the year of jubilee, as in the sabbatical years, the fields are to lie fallow. But the jubilee is far more than an extra sabbatical year. In the year of jubilee, the Lord says, "You shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family" (Leviticus 25:10). That is, all lands revert to the families that originally claimed them; and all Israelites who have been forced into slavery are set free. The jubilee law presupposes a very old system of land use, described in Joshua 13-21. Rather than the typical situation in the ancient Near East, where nobles held title to the land and the common people worked it as serfs, in Israel the people owned the land.

Ideally, the land was divided among the tribes; then the tribal lands were divided among smaller family groupings or clans. Finally, each individual family (literally, "father's house" in Hebrew) in the clan had a share in the clan's property. As far as possible, this land was to be kept in the family. However, hard times or unscrupulous dealings could lead to the loss of family lands. Eventually, many Israelites would have found themselves landless and would have been forced to sell their families and themselves into slavery to survive. But the jubilee reversed all that. Every fifty years, the land reverted to the family whose ancestors had claimed it. The slaves who were freed, then, had something to go back to. The jubilee gave everyone the chance for a fresh start.

Verses 13-24. The principle back of the jubilee is the Lord's ownership of the land: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (verse 23). The terms *aliens* and *tenants* refer to non-Israelites who lived in the land. Having no land of their own, they were dependent on the Israelites for their livelihood, often working as bondservants or as slaves. As these people are dependent on you, the Lord says, you are dependent on me. The Israelites do not own the land, any more than the tenant farmers who till the soil for their Israelite masters own the land. Therefore, the land itself cannot be bought or sold. At most, it can be leased: What is sold is the use of the land, not the land itself. That is why the purchase price is to be figured on the basis of the number of years until the jubilee (verses 14-17). One is purchasing the number of harvests between the purchase date and the year of jubilee, at which time the land reverts to the family originally given it.

The sabbatical year and the jubilee are intended to enforce economic equality. But observing the sabbatical year and the jubilee could also have meant economic hardship. If the harvest in the sixth year was poor, life in the seventh year, when planting and harvesting were forbidden, would have been hard indeed. The year of

jubilee, following as it did the seventh sabbatical year, would have been especially difficult. The harvest of the forty-eighth year would have had to feed the people through two fallow years in a row! To ease such fears, verses 20-22 promise that the harvest in the sixth year will be as great as any other three harvests. That is, the harvest will be sufficient to last through even the seventh sabbatical year and the year of jubilee.

Verses 25-34. The sabbatical years and the years of jubilee served to right the balance of economic justice in ancient Israel. But what about the years in between? To deal with trouble that arises in these times, the Law sets up the principle of redemption.

First, if hard times force someone to sell a piece of land, a member of the family shall step forward and, if at all possible, redeem the land, that is, buy it back from the purchaser and so keep the land in the family (verses 25-28). The original "owner" always has the option to redeem the land; but even if he cannot do so, the land will revert to him (or to his family) at the jubilee.

There are exceptions to this general rule. Houses in walled cities, which are not connected to ancestral lands, must be redeemed within a year of sale or they become the permanent property of the purchaser—they are not released in the jubilee (verses 29-30). However, houses in villages—that is, unwalled settlements closely connected to the land—are treated just like the land itself: They may be redeemed at any time and are released in the jubilee (verse 31).

The Levitical cities present another special case. The tribe of Lev. had no ancestral land claims (see Numbers 18:20-32; Deuteronomy 18:1; Joshua 13:14). The Levites were dependent on the people of Israel (and particularly on the tithe paid for Temple services and other priestly tasks) for their livelihood and were given forty-eight cities scattered throughout the land to live in (Joshua 21:1-42). Houses in the Levitical cities may be sold but can be redeemed at any time and will be released in the jubilee; the lands belonging to the Levitical cities cannot even be sold, "for that is their possession for all time" (Leviticus 25:32-34).

Verses 35-38. In the spirit of the old saying, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," these laws provide help to needy people before complete catastrophe strikes. When someone in the family is facing hard times and has no property to fall back on, the family is to band together and help him or her through. Family members are to give these persons work and to lend them money at no interest. Food is to be provided, but not sold for a profit. In no way should anyone think to use the misfortune of a family member for personal gain. The Lord reminds the families of Israel that they all were slaves in Egypt before the Lord delivered them.

Verses 39-46. Disaster cannot always be avoided. Blight, drought, warfare and violence, misplaced trust, or gross mismanagement may leave a person destitute; or a person may be born into extreme poverty and begin life with nothing. In the ancient world such landless poor were thrown entirely on the mercy of their neighbors. Ordinarily, these poor persons became slaves, condemned to labor without hope of deliverance.

This is not to be the way of life in Israel. Israelites who have been forced to sell themselves into slavery are not to be treated as slaves but as though they were hired hands (verse 40). Elsewhere, Scripture declares that Hebrews could only be compelled to remain slaves for six years (Exodus 21:1-6; Deuteronomy 15:12-17); although they could choose to remain with their master for life. A landless person who had found a kind master might well choose this option rather than face starvation or mistreatment.

Exodus 21:7-11 provides different rules for the slave woman, who can only be freed if she is redeemed. However, if she is taken as a wife by her master or his son, she must be accorded full rights as a free Israelite woman, not as a slave. Notice that in Deuteronomy 15:12-17, in keeping with the respect for human rights shown throughout this book, the law is the same for male and female slaves: Both are released after six years unless they choose to stay.

Of course, according to Leviticus 25, all such questions become moot in the jubilee when the slaves are freed: "Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property" (Leviticus 25:41). Twice each century, the land passes from the hands of the rich back into the hands of the landless poor. In the jubilee, everyone whose family has an ancestral claim to the land gets to start over. The situation is different for foreigners who serve as slaves: They are not released in the jubilee. This is, of course, unfair; Israel was still a long way from the modern democratic principle of equal rights for all. However, keep in mind that the intent of the jubilee was not just to release the slaves but to release them so that they could return to the lands claimed by their ancestors. The Hebrew slaves had somewhere to go. Not so the foreign slaves, for whom release would have meant homelessness and starvation. Unjust as the system of the jubilee is to foreigners, we can understand why many foreign slaves would have themselves preferred it—just as many Hebrew slaves may well have opted for continued slavery in the years between jubilees.

Verses 47-55. A final possibility remains to be reckoned with: What about the Israelite who has been forced to sell himself as a slave to a foreigner, a master who may well not recognize Israel's sacral law? First, every attempt is to be made to redeem this person—not just "one of their brothers" from within the family may redeem this person; but "their uncle, or their uncle's son may redeem them, or anyone of their family" (verse 49).

The NRSV translation "family" is misleading here; the Hebrew has, not beth 'ab ("father's house," or one's nearest kin), but mishpachah (literally, "clan"). The point is that, not just the family, but the entire clan is to use whatever resources they can muster to buy their flesh and blood out of bondage. But even if these attempts fail, Leviticus 25:53-54 insists that the rules regarding Hebrew slaves must apply. They must be treated kindly and released in the year of jubilee. In other words, the jubilee is not just a religious custom but a civil law, binding even upon foreigners living among the Israelites.

Prayer: O God, help us to walk your earth as good stewards and to proclaim liberty for all those in bondage to fear, want, and hopelessness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Credits

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