

The Jubilee and the Millennium Holy Years in the Bible and Their Relevance Today

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The end of the second Christian millennium is an appropriate time to examine the significance of the holy years which acted as landmarks to divide periods of history in the Bible, in particular the *sabbatical year* (every seven years) and the *jubilee year* (every fifty years), and to reflect on their meaning for us as we prepare to celebrate the year 2000.

The sabbatical year

Terminology

Hebrew uses two distinctive terms in connection with the sabbatical year, namely *šabbat* ('rest', cf. Gn 2:2-3; Ex. 23:12) and *šemiṭta* (š-m-ṭ). The verb š-m-ṭ. in Exodus 23:11 means to 'let (the land) rest' by leaving it fallow in the sabbatical year; whereas in Deuteronomy 15:1 *šemiṭta* means to 'cancel' a debt. Driver (1902) and Craigie (1976) suggest that this verse only legislates for the deferring of debts during the sabbatical year, not their cancellation, but it would appear from the following verses that cancellation is intended (so von Rad 1966b; Clines n.d.). Comparison with practice in Mesopotamia points to cancellation rather than deferment (Weinfeld 1995: pp. 167-68). Josephus and the rabbinic interpreters agree that it means cancellation of debts, and that is the understanding in NIV, NJB and NRSV. Presumably the repayment of debts would be scheduled to be complete by the sabbatical year, and cancellation would only be necessary in the case of a poor person who was genuinely unable to repay.

The agrarian context

In the 'Book of the Covenant' (Ex. 21-23) there are two regulations concerning the sabbatical year, one about agriculture and one about slavery.

First, the regulation concerning agriculture is found in Exodus 23:10-11:

For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unploughed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. (NIV)

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For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. (NRSV)

The land is to rest in the sabbatical year, by lying fallow, just as human beings and animals rest on the seventh day (Ex. 20:9-10).¹ During that seventh year, the produce of the land which grows of its own accord becomes the property of the poor, not of the owner of the land, and the owner of the land is expected to eat the produce which has been put aside from the previous year (*cf.* Lev. 25:20-22).² A seven-yearly rest would no doubt increase the fertility of the land, but that is not the main purpose, rather a side-effect. The main purpose is to honour God as the ultimate owner of the land (*cf.* Lev. 25:2, 23) and to show concern for the needs of the poor.

Secondly, although *slavery* was not abolished in ancient Israel, a number of regulations were designed to limit its effect. In Exodus 21:2 we read:

If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. (NIV)

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. (NRSV)

When someone became bankrupt in the ancient world, he was often forced to sell himself or his children into slavery in order to pay his debts (*cf.* 2 Ki. 4:1-7; Ne. 5:5). So it is stipulated that an Israelite³ who is impoverished to the extent of becoming a slave of another Israelite may only be held for a maximum of six years before he is released.⁴ In other words, he is not a slave in the full sense of the word but enters into a working contract as a bonded labourer ('hired worker', NIV for a limited period of time (*cf.* Lev. 25:39-43). This regulation is quite different from that which applied to foreign slaves, who were usually enslaved for life (Lev. 25:44-46).

In Exodus 21:3-11 the regulation is elaborated further. It is interesting that the author envisages the possibility of a slave preferring to stay with his master rather than to become free (v. 5). This seems to imply that Israelite slave-owners treat their slaves humanely, so a slave who is unable to live independently (*e.g.* because of disability or old age) might well be better off by staying in the family of his master.

¹ It is unclear here whether the intention was for the sabbatical year to be observed simultaneously throughout the whole land, or separately according to when a particular piece of land was taken possession of, but comparison with the following verse suggests that it was fixed on a national basis (*cf.* Dt. 15:1, 9; 31:10-11). Ginzberg (1932: pp. 352-354) suggests that it was originally fixed separately by different land-owners, but in due course became fixed.

² This regulation is elaborated further in Lev. 25:2-7, and there it would appear that the owner of the land was allowed to collect the produce of the land which grew of its own accord, as could the poor, so that effectively all the people of Israel returned temporarily to the nomadic life-style which had been theirs before they entered the promised land (Wenham, 1979: p. 318).

³ The exact meaning of the term 'Hebrew', and its relationship to the group of people called Habiru in the ancient Near East, has been long debated (see Thompson 1974: pp. 189-190; Astour 1976; Lemche 1992). It is generally used in the OT in a somewhat derogatory sense, almost always by others in referring to the Israelites rather than by the Israelites concerning themselves. In this context it seems that the reference is to an Israelite slave (Chllds 1974; *cf.* Dt 15:12; Je. 34:9). Perhaps the word 'Hebrew' is used since the idea of an 'Israelite' being a slave was abhorrent.

⁴ According to de Vaux (1961: p. 173), the six years were counted from when the person began to work for his master; but it may also be understood to mean that all people in this category were released simultaneously in the sabbatical year, *i.e.* every seventh year as observed on a national basis.

The urban context

In Exodus and Leviticus, in the context of an agrarian economy, the sabbatical year is prescribed as a year of rest for the land

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and freedom for Hebrew slaves. In Deuteronomy 15:1-18 the regulations for the sabbatical year are formulated again for a new context, that of a trading economy which is more urban in nature. (Perhaps we could see this as an ancient example of contextualisation.) There is one new stipulation, then some of the former regulations are repeated in more detail and with some variation. It would seem that Deuteronomy 15 is intended for a later time in the history of Israel, when the people are living in towns and the gap between rich and poor has begun to get wider.⁵

The new stipulation in Deuteronomy is that at the end of seven years all debts of fellow Israelites are to be cancelled (vv. 1-3)!⁶ This stipulation is formulated using the term *šemiṭta* ('remission, cancellation') which is used in Exodus 23:11 with reference to leaving the land unplanted during the sabbatical year. The object of such a radical provision is presumably not to encourage people to be negligent about the repayment of their debts, but to provide a way out for poor people who have tried to repay them but been unable to do so.

In an ideal situation, it is recognised that there should not be any poverty among the people of God, if they are faithful and obedient to him (Dt. 15:4-6); but this legislation is directed towards an actual situation—where there is poverty—rather than the ideal, and so it is essential to provide protection for the poor (v. 11). It is the duty of an Israelite to help a poor person by means of a loan, as much as he needs, even though the sabbatical year is near and the possibility of being repaid is relatively slim (vv. 7-10; cf. Lev. 25:35-38; Lk. 6:34-35).

In verses 12-18 the regulation concerning the liberation of a Hebrew slave (Ex. 21:2-6) is repeated and expanded. In Deuteronomy the same regulation applies to both male and female slaves (15:12), whereas Exodus has a different regulation for females (21:7-11)⁷. The slave is described here as *ah* ('brother, fellow'), a term not found in the earlier regulation, and the freed slave is to receive part of the produce which resulted from his work (vv. 13-14). This regulation is based on the conviction that God has released his people Israel from slavery in Egypt, and therefore they must be willing to free their slaves (v. 15).⁸

This celebration of the sabbatical year is linked in Deuteronomy 31:9-13 with the reading of the Law every seven years. When a covenant was made in ancient times, an official document

⁵ There are very different views of the development of ancient Israel's social and economic structure (e.g. Robinson 1932: pp. 355-67; de Vaux 1961: pp. 164-67; Gottwald 1976; Bendor 1996), which cannot be discussed here. I am assuming that there was a movement from a relatively egalitarian society based on the family during the early period of the settlement in Palestine to one with much greater differentiation in wealth and weaker family bonds during the divided monarchy.

⁶ There are precedents in Mesopotamia for such remissions of debt (Weinfeld 1995: pp. 162-68).

⁷ Apparently the rationale for this was that the female slave was sold by her father as a concubine and so she became a (relatively) permanent member of the creditor's family (Childs 1974; Durham 1987). As such she had certain rights (vv.9-10), and in certain circumstances she could also be made free (vv. 8, 11).

⁸ For a detailed study of debt-slavery in Israel and the ancient Near East, see Chirichigno (1993). I am unfortunately unable to discuss the interpretation of the relevant laws within the confines of this article.

was usually kept in a mutually agreed place and read publicly from time to time. So also the Law, as the official document of the covenant between God and Israel, was to be read regularly to the whole people of Israel; and the time specified for this was in the sabbatical year.⁹

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The observance of the sabbatical year—which included rest for the land, freedom for Hebrew slaves and cancellation of debts for the poor—should have functioned to reduce the gap between rich and poor which developed after Israel settled in Palestine. However it was obviously not easy to put into practice a law which benefited the poor at the expense of the rich, since those with power and influence in society would inevitably oppose it (Amit 1992: pp. 50-53).

Sadly, it seems the sabbatical year was not consistently observed in OT times.¹⁰ Indeed Israel's failure to keep the regulation about rest for the land is mentioned as one of the sins which resulted in their eventual exile from the promised land (see Lev. 26:34-35, 43; 2 Ch. 36:21). There is no direct evidence of its observance before the Exile, though it may have been observed in some periods, *e.g.* in the reign of Josiah (*cf.* Kaufman 1984). We have only one instance of slaves being liberated, towards the end of the monarchy, when Jeremiah reminded the people of Judah to free their Hebrew slaves (Je. 34:8-22). Apparently they were not in the habit of doing this, since they needed a prophecy to persuade them to do so, and not long after the liberation took place they changed their minds and took the slaves back again! Only after the exile do we find a record of the remission of debts in the seventh year taking place, by Nehemiah, which was accompanied by rest for the land (Ne. 10:31). Similarly, the reading of the Law to the whole people is only mentioned once, towards the end of the OT period, by the priest Ezra (Ne. 8).

The jubilee year

Terminology

Two distinctive Hebrew terms are used in connection with the jubilee year, namely *yobel* and *deror*.

Most scholars consider the word *yobel* to originate from the trumpet made from a sheep's horn that was sounded at the beginning of the jubilee year (Lev. 25:9; *cf.* Ex. 19:13; Jos. 6:4-5). North (1990) disagrees, linking it instead with the verb *y-b-l* ('lead back, lead forth', Is. 55:12; Je. 31:9). This suggestion is supported by the translation of *yobel* in the Septuagint as *aphesis* ('liberation'), and Josephus gives its meaning as 'freedom'. But whatever its etymology, it is clear enough that the primary reference of the word *yobel* is to the Israelite observance of the fiftieth year (Lev. 25:10).

⁹ It is difficult to be sure whether the whole Law, or only part of it, was to be read; also whether it was envisaged that all Israel would gather in one place at one time, or whether just representatives would attend. For a discussion, see Thompson (1974).

¹⁰ On the observance of the sabbatical year after Old Testament times, see Rothkoff (1972) and Wacholder (1976). In modern Israel the institution is continued by orthodox Jews and the next sabbatical year will fall in the year 2000/01 (Jewish year 5761).

The word *deror* is related to *anduraru* ('liberation') in Akkadian, and in the OT means 'liberation' or 'freedom', particularly in the context of the jubilee year (Lev. 25:10; Is. 61:1; Je. 34:8; Ezk. 46:17).¹¹

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The jubilee legislation is set out in Leviticus 25, preceded by a summary of the regulations for the sabbatical year (vv. 2-7). After seven cycles of seven years (v. 8), the fiftieth year is designated as an extra sabbatical year, a sort of 'super-sabbatical' (v. 10):

Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. (NIV)

You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. (NRSV)

In that year liberty (*deror*) is to be proclaimed for (almost¹²) all inhabitants of the land (v. 10a). As in the sabbatical year, no sowing is to take place on the land during the jubilee year (vv. 11-12). Moreover land which has changed hands is to be returned to its original owner (vv. 10b, 13), except in the cities (vv. 29-30). In the socio-economic situation of the city, a house and the land on which it stood can only be redeemed in the first year after it has been sold, and if it is not redeemed in that time then it becomes the permanent property of the purchaser. This exception does not apply in the levitical cities (vv. 32-34), because those cities are the only land they possess (Num. 35:10).

This regulation apparently means that two sabbatical years are to be observed in succession (the 49th and 50th years), which raises the question of whether it would be feasible for the land to remain unplanted for two successive years. One suggestion is that the jubilee year is in fact the forty-ninth year, which by inclusive reckoning is called the fiftieth year (*e.g.* van Selms 1976; Hartley 1992: pp. 434-36). Inclusive reckoning, which counts the first and last element in a period of time, was certainly common in ancient Israel (*cf.* Jn 20:26, where 'eight days' is the inclusive reckoning for a week, and the NT tradition that Jesus rose again 'on the third day', which was two days after he had been crucified). Another suggestion is that the fiftieth year is an intercalary 'year', inserted in the calendar to harmonise the lunar year with the solar year, and its length is just 49 days (*cf.* Lev. 25:8; see Hoenig 1969; Wenham 1979). Its function would be comparable to the additional day inserted every leap year in the Julian calendar. But even if the correct reckoning is uncertain, there is no lack of clarity about the social measures which are to be taken in the jubilee year nor about its theological meaning.

One of the most important themes in the understanding of the jubilee year is freedom, and Ezekiel actually refers to it as the 'year of freedom' (Ezk. 46:17, NIV). The people of Israel have

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¹¹ For a thorough discussion, see North (1978).

¹² This does not include foreign slaves purchased on the slave-market (vv. 44-46).

been freed by the Lord God from slavery in Egypt and thereafter must not be enslaved by anyone, because they have become God's own slaves (Lev. 25:39, 42, 55). Leviticus 25 stipulates that if an Israelite is impoverished to the extent of becoming a bonded labourer to another Israelite (vv. 39-40), then in the jubilee year he must be freed from that bond and return to his family and property (v. 41). And if he should sell himself to a foreigner or temporary resident (v. 47), that could only be permitted on the condition that he and his family retain the right of redemption (vv. 48-52). So he also has the status of a bonded labourer, even though in practice that may not be very different from being a slave (v. 53). If he is not redeemed earlier, then in the jubilee year he must be allowed to go free without payment (v. 54).¹³

All the regulations for the sabbatical year also apply in the jubilee year, but the distinctive characteristic of the jubilee is the restoration of land to the owner designated by God when Israel took possession of the promised land (Schaeffer 1922: pp. 68-98; Ginzberg 1932: pp. 369-74). Land which has been sold should be redeemed at the first opportunity by the closest member of the family (Lev. 25:24-25; *cf.* Ruth 4; Jer. 32:7-10), and if that does not happen the person who sold the land retains the right to redeem it himself later on if he becomes able to do so (vv. 26-27).¹⁴ But if neither of these provisions succeeds in restoring the land, in the jubilee year it must be returned to its original owner (v. 28).¹⁵

This regulation effectively means that land in ancient Israel was not to be sold, but simply leased until the jubilee year (*cf.* vv. 15-16). Thus anyone who became poor and was forced to 'sell' his land, would receive it back at the latest in the fiftieth year. There was a theological basis for this: the land belonged to God (Lev. 25:23; *cf.* Ex. 15:13,17). He had given it to his people Israel (Gn. 15:7; Ex. 6:3; Lev. 20:24; 25:38; Dt. 5:16), and they lived there as temporary residents, not absolute owners (1 Ch. 29:15; Ps. 39:12; *cf.* Heb. 11:13). The land was distributed to each tribe and clan when Israel entered Palestine (Jos. 14-21), in accordance with God's command to Moses (Num. 26:52-56; 34), and therefore the inheritance of one person must not be taken over by another (*cf.* 1 Ki. 21:3). This attitude is clearly different from that of the previous inhabitants of Palestine to the land. Abraham, for example, had bought burial land from Efron the Hittite (Gn. 23) and David bought land to build an altar from Arauna the Jebusite (2 Sa. 24:18-25). This was no problem to them, because it was understood simply as a commercial transaction.

This also had the corollary that a daughter who inherited land (*cf.* Nu. 27:1-8) must marry within her own tribe (Nu. 36:1-12), so her portion of land would not become the property of another tribe (v. 7). If a woman were to inherit land, then marry outside her own tribe, that land would become the property of her husband's tribe and not be restored in the jubilee year (Nu. 36:3-4).

¹³ This regulation is rather difficult to harmonise with Exodus 21:2-6 and Deuteronomy 15:12-18. The liberation of Hebrew slaves was prescribed for the sabbatical year in Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15, whereas in Leviticus 25 bonded labourers were liberated in the jubilee year. For a discussion of various interpretations, see Hartley (1992: pp. 431-33). However that may be, the principle of freedom for the people God is clearly enunciated in all these texts.

¹⁴ For a thorough discussion of the redemption of land in ancient Israel, see Westbrook (1991): chapters 3 and 5; *cf.* Milgrom (1995).

¹⁵ In Leviticus 27:16-24 there is a regulation about land which has been 'consecrated', *i.e.* handed over to the priests so that its produce might be used for the maintenance of the temple. Without discussing the details of this regulation (on that, see Wenham 1979), suffice it to say that in general the principle of restoration of land to its original owner in the jubilee year also applies in this case.

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The main purpose of this legislation, according to Wenham (1979), was to prevent bankruptcy and to reduce the gap between rich and poor which began to appear during the monarchy. This was not done simply by appealing to the rich to become benefactors and give some of their surplus to the poor; the concept of jubilee included a legal mechanism to order property rights in accordance with social justice (Sider 1978: p. 80). In particular, every poor person was entitled to receive back his patrimony in the fiftieth year; and if he had become a bonded labourer, then he must be freed without any redemption payment so that he could return to his own family and land.

It may seem that the regulations for the holy year in Israel were unrealistic from an economic point of view. Indeed the biblical writers anticipated some would object to such radical legislation (Lev. 25:20; *cf.* Dt. 15:9). Radical improvements to the situation of the poor cannot happen without loss on the part of the rich, because levelling is necessary if all people are to have enough. In spite of what is often said by the proponents of prosperity theology, faithfulness to God does not necessarily lead to wealth in the worldly sense (*cf.* Jackson 1989; Herlianto 1992; Nicholls 1996). Nevertheless the regulations for the holy year are accompanied by a promise applicable in this world, that those who keep them will be blessed by God with security (v. 18) and an adequate harvest (v. 19). The promise is elaborated in Leviticus 26:3-13 and Deuteronomy 28:1-14.

Scholars disagree about the origin of the jubilee institution and whether the regulations concerning it come from Israel's early period or from after the Exile.¹⁶ There are clear parallels in ancient Mesopotamia, in particular the royal decrees for the establishment of *andurarum* ('liberation, release', *cf.* Hebrew *deror*) and *mišarum* ('justice, equity') which were proclaimed from time to time by kings who wanted to show favour to their people (Weinfeld 1995: ch. 4, 8; *cf.* Lemche 1976; 1979). These decrees could include such measures as cancellation of debts, freedom from slavery, the return of mortgaged property and amnesty for prisoners. So the provisions of the jubilee year were not unprecedented in the ancient Near East, but the idea of observing it on a recurring basis every fifty years appears to have been distinctive to Israel. Mesopotamian kings might institute reforms and show favour to their subjects if it pleased them, but the people of Israel were expected to take specific measures to promote social justice and equality at the times appointed in the law, whether or not it happened to suit them (*cf.* Hallo 1977: pp. 15-16).

Observance

As in the case of the sabbatical year, we need to consider how far the jubilee year was in fact observed regularly in ancient Israel. De Vaux (1961: pp. 175-77) is of the opinion that this is an idealistic regulation which was never carried out in practice,

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¹⁶ See Schaeffer (1922: pp. 93-95); Ginzberg (1932: p. 381); de Vaux (1961: pp. 176-77); van Selms (1976); Wenham (1979: p. 318); Westbrook (1991: pp. 38-52, 55-57); Amit (1992: pp. 55-59); Wright (1992: p. 1028); Hartley (1992: pp. 427-30); Fager (1993: pp. 25-34); Weinfeld (1995: p. 177); *cf.* Wacholder (1976).

whereas van Selms (1976) believes the jubilee year was observed but only irregularly. Westbrook (1991: pp. 38-52) concludes that the jubilee regulations reflect an institution which was observed from time to time, as also was the case in ancient Mesopotamia, but not regularly every fifty years.

It must be admitted that there is little evidence in the OT for the observance of the jubilee year.¹⁷ In the historical books it is not mentioned, except perhaps in 2 Kings 19:29. In the prophetic writings there are only three references: Isaiah 37:30 (= 2 Ki. 19:29), Ezekiel 46:17 (about the future, not Ezekiel's own time) and Isaiah 61:1-2¹⁸. On the other hand, as Hartley points out (1992: p. 429), the jubilee was only to be celebrated every fifty years, and so there would not be any reason to mention it unless a particular event took place during the jubilee year (and only then if that fact was considered significant).

The Pseudepigrapha contains a book called 'Jubilees', written in the second century BC; but the jubilee idea is only used in it to divide world history into periods of seven times seven years, and the book contains no evidence that observance of the jubilee year was a current reality at that time. Josephus refers to the jubilee year but does not make it clear if the institution was actually observed (Fager 1993: p. 35). Jewish tradition, as preserved in the Talmud, assumed that the sabbatical and jubilee years were observed regularly in Israel until the Exile; but after that the jubilee year became irrelevant because the Judeans no longer lived on their original family property as assigned when they first entered the promised land (Safrai 1972; Fager 1993: p. 36). The church fathers, on the other hand, tended to interpret the jubilee allegorically or messianically (*ibid.*).

It would appear that the jubilee year was not observed regularly in ancient Israel. However, the values enshrined in the institution were clearly important for the people. They understood land as family property, on the basis of their conviction that the land was given by the Lord God to his people. Therefore they were reluctant to buy and sell land, though no doubt it did happen on occasions; and there are several examples of the redemption of family property in the OT. Also the principle of freedom for each member of the people was important in ancient Israel, even though it was not always a reality and in practice some Israelites became slaves and bonded labourers. Whether they were freed at specific times, as stipulated in the regulations for the holy year, we cannot be certain.

The year of the Lord's favour

Isaiah 61

Apart from the sabbatical and jubilee years, there is also what is described in Isaiah 61:1-2a as 'the year of the Lord's favour'.

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¹⁷ Of course the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. There is no account in the OT of the people actually celebrating the Feast of Weeks, and the NT contains little evidence of the practice of holy communion, but that does not necessarily prove that these festivals were not celebrated by the ancient Israelites and early Christians respectively.

¹⁸ This last text will be discussed below. Jeremiah 34 also uses the term *deror* (vv. 8, 15, 17) but it would seem that the sabbatical year is intended there, or perhaps an extraordinary measure outside the cycle of holy years.

In this text, the prophet reinterprets the jubilee year eschatologically:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favour
and the day of vengeance of our God. (NIV)
The spirit of the LORD GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God. (NRSV)

The messianic age¹⁹ is described as 'the year of the Lord's favour' (v. 2a), an idea which draws at least some of its inspiration from that of the jubilee. One of the prophet's tasks is to 'proclaim liberty' (*qara deror*, v. 1c), a distinctive phrase found in the jubilee regulations (Lev. 25:10).²⁰ In the messianic age, according to the prophet's message, the poor and oppressed will be freed from their suffering (Is. 61:2b-9). The expression 'day of vengeance of our God' seems to indicate that freedom for the oppressed will be accompanied by judgement on the oppressors (*cf.* the 'day of the Lord' in Amos 5:18-20 and Joel 2:28-32). What is more, in accordance with the principle of 'restoration' in the jubilee year, ruined cities and deserted habitations will be restored (v. 4).

Isaiah 58

A similar idea is found in Isaiah 58:6:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? (NIV)
Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (NRSV)

The expression *šallah hopšim*, translated 'set free' here, is different from *qara deror* in the previous text, but its meaning is almost identical. Although the prophet does not specifically mention the jubilee year, there are many similarities between Isaiah 58 and the jubilee regulations, as shown by Hanks (1983: pp. 99-103; *cf.* Weinfeld 1995: p. 18). In particular:

- the prophecy of Isaiah 58 is opened with the simile of a trumpet (v. 1), and the jubilee year is to be announced by

¹⁹ Note the use of the word *masa* ('anoint') in v. 1.

²⁰ The words are translated the same in NRSV, but in NIV Leviticus reads 'liberty' whereas Isaiah reads 'freedom'.

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blowing a trumpet (Lev. 25:9)²¹;

- the theme of Isaiah 58 is true fasting (vv. 3-6), the only fast legislated for in the Law is the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-31), and the jubilee year begins precisely on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 25:9)²²;
- Isaiah 58:5 refers to a fast day as 'a day acceptable to the Lord' (yom raon ladonay), whereas Isaiah 61:2 describes 'the year of the LORD'S favour' (šemat raon ladonay)—in other words, the year of raon (jubilee year, Isa. 61) will be opened with a day of raon (Day of Atonement, Isa. 58);
- Isaiah 58:7 urges people to provide shelter, food and clothes for the poor, and not to close their eyes to the needs of their fellow Israelites, matters which are also mentioned in the regulations for the jubilee year (Lev. 25:35-37, 47-49);
- in Isaiah 58:13-14 there is a directive about the Sabbath, and the jubilee year is a sabbatical year;
- Isaiah 58:14 promises the restoration of the people of God to 'the inheritance of your father Jacob' after the Exile, a promise which fits very well with the theme of restoration of family property in the jubilee year.

Clearly Isaiah 58 takes up the idea of the jubilee and develops it as a challenge to the people of Israel who want to be free from the oppressor but are unconcerned about freedom for underprivileged members of their own society.

In a just and prosperous society as envisaged in this prophecy, there will be no more slavery or oppression (vv. 6, 9). On the contrary, the needs of the hungry and the oppressed will be satisfied (vv. 7, 10). The 'ancient ruins' will be restored (v. 12; *cf.* 61:4). All of this will be based on *šedaqa* ('righteousness, justice') and the presence of the good Lord (vv. 8, 11).

Luke 4

According to the New Testament, the messianic age has begun with the coming of Jesus Christ, as he himself declares in his first sermon recorded by Luke, in the synagogue at

²¹ Hartley (1992: p. 447) points to a connection between the jubilee and the messianic era in the symbolism of the trumpet, which is to be sounded when the exiles return to worship God in Jerusalem (Is. 27:13) and when the Messiah enters the holy city in triumph (Zc. 9:9-10, 14-16). He also suggests that the NT takes up this imagery in its proclamation that the return of Jesus Christ will be announced by a trumpet (Mt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52).

²² It is not entirely clear what it means for the jubilee to start on the tenth day of the seventh month, but we do know that there was more than one way of calculating the 'year' in ancient Israel: *e.g.* a religious year beginning in the spring (1 Abib/Nisan, *cf.* Ex. 12:2; Dt. 16:1; Est. 3:7) and an agricultural year beginning in the autumn (1 Ethanim/Tishri, *i.e.* the 'seventh month' of the religious year; *cf.* Ex. 23:16; 34:22; 1 Ki. 8:2; Gezer calendar). Perhaps we may compare this with the modern academic and financial years, the church year and other religious years, which often do not coincide with the calendar year. *Cf.* Hoenig (1969: p. 231); Vanderkam (1992).

Nazareth (Lk. 4:16-21). Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1-2a, with an insertion from Isaiah 58:6²³, and announces that the prophecy about 'the year of the Lord's favour' has begun to be fulfilled that day.

Trocmé (1973: ch. 2) argues that Jesus in his speech in Nazareth was proclaiming a jubilee year (*cf.* Strobel 1972). He reckons AD 26-27 as a sabbatical year and suggests it was on the Day of Atonement (10 Tishri) that year (*i.e.* September/October 26) that 'Jesus announced the complete restoration of the jubilean practices in Israel' (p. 39). How far this can be reconciled with other indications of the dating of Jesus' ministry according to the gospels is uncertain (*cf.* Marshall 1978: p. 184). Even more uncertain is whether

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Jesus was proposing an immediate enactment of the jubilee laws, as Trocmé claims, involving 'expropriating the lands of the wealthy and liquidating the usurious system from which the ruling classes lived' (p. 30). The lack of evidence in the gospels for Jesus' involvement in politics and economics, and his refusal to interfere in a dispute over the ownership of property even when one of the parties appealed for help (Lk. 12:13-14), indicate rather that Jesus was using the jubilee idea metaphorically (*cf.* Willoughby 1995).

Rodgers (1981) interprets the proclamation of 'the year of the Lord's favour' as 'an eschatological use of the theme of the Jubilee legislation, which rests on the principles of release, restitution and freedom for all who trust in the Lord' (*cf.* Seccombe 1982: pp. 54-56). She further argues that the purpose of Jesus' ministry, according to Luke, is the salvation of the lost by means of the forgiveness of sins, and that this is 'an entirely spiritual concept'. In other words, Jesus did not advocate political and economic reforms, but 'came to suffer and to die and on the third day to rise from the dead so that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His Name to all nations'. Thus 'the year of the Lord's favour' came 'in Him'.

Perhaps the truth lies in between the extremes of understanding Jesus' speech as a literal proclamation of the jubilee, to be enacted by immediate social reforms, and of interpreting it in a purely spiritual way which limits its reference to the forgiveness of sins. Arias (1984) suggests that the jubilee should be seen as a 'paradigm of the kingdom action in the world', as both an 'expression of hope' and a critical approach to things "as they are"²⁴. Nolland (1989: p. 202) puts it thus: 'It encompasses spiritual restoration, moral transformation, rescue from demonic oppression, and release from illness and disability'.

Other allusions

When Jesus answered John the Baptist's question about his identity, he alluded to his fulfilment of Isaiah 61:1-2a and other prophecies (Lk. 7:22//Mt. 11:5; *cf.* Ringe 1985: pp. 45-

²³ The words 'to release the oppressed' are found in v. 18, apparently taken from Is. 58:6. Some interpreters believe that later Christian interpreters inserted these words, but Hanks (1983: pp. 98-104) argues that the linking of the two prophecies originates with Jesus himself. *Cf.* Lk. 7:22, an adaptation of Is. 35:5-6 with an insertion from Is. 61:1.

²⁴ Sloan (1977: p. 166) concludes that the vision of jubilee 'served primarily for Luke the theological function of a paradigmatic, OT *Vorbild* of the present/future eschatological salvation of God that has been inaugurated by and will be consummated through Jesus the Christ'.

48). During his ministry Jesus taught a number of principles from the legislation for the sabbatical and jubilee years, including the cancellation of debts (Lk. 6:35; 7:41-42; Mt. 18:23-34²⁵), sharing of material possessions (Lk. 12:33; 18:22; *cf.* 19:8; Acts 2:44-45; 4:34²⁶), and trust in God for day to day needs, rather than in human ability to plant and reap (Mt. 6:25-34//Lk. 12:22-31).

However a complete fulfilment of the prophecy of 'the year of the Lord's favour' must await the second coming of Christ. At that time the last judgement will take place, which is the subject of Jesus' last sermon in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 25:31-46). One of the emphases of that sermon is on attitudes to the poor,

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developing some of the themes of Isaiah 58:7. At the end of time, there will be a reversal of fortunes when the rich become poor and the poor become rich (*cf.* Lk. 6:20-26; 16:25; Jas. 5:1-8).

The jubilee in the OT looks back to the divine liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt (Lev. 25:38,55) and the gift of the promised land as a place of rest and to be their inheritance (*cf.* Dt. 12:9). Its predominant themes are freedom, restoration and rest (*cf.* Lev. 25:10-12). In contrast, the prophecy about 'the year of the Lord's favour'—both in Isaiah and Luke—looks forward, to 'the time of universal restoration' (Acts 3:21, NRSV), which will happen in 'new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home' (2 Pet. 3:13, NRSV).²⁷

Theological reflection

Three major themes have emerged from our study of holy years in the Bible, namely *rest*, *freedom* and *restoration*. Let us now take these themes one by one and reflect on their relevance today. Some of the practical suggestions I mention can be based on wider OT data, including the very first chapter of Genesis, but the three themes I identify here emerge from the particular data I have examined. Although many of my suggestions are familiar, I believe them to be faithful to the biblical materials.

Rest

One of the most basic elements of the meaning of sabbath is 'rest'. According to the story of creation, God rested on the seventh day because he had finished his work (Gn. 2:1-3; *cf.* Ex. 31:17); and mankind is expected to take regular rest on that day too (Ex. 16:22-30; 20:8-11; 23:12). It is a 'holy day' (Gn. 2:3), set apart from ordinary working days (*cf.* the modern word

²⁵ Trocmé (1973: pp. 42-43) argues that the Lord's Prayer refers to the remittance of debts. In many modern translations Mt. 6:12 reads 'Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors' (NIV; NRSV; *cf.* NJB) rather than the traditional 'Forgive us our trespasses'. It is true that the primary meaning of the Greek word *opheil_*ma is 'debt', but used in a religious sense it refers to 'sin' as a 'debt' (*BAGD*) and that this is the meaning in the Lord's Prayer is clear from the parallel passage in Lk. 11:4 which uses the word *hamartia* 'sin'. A different view is put forward by Ringe (1985: pp. 77-80), who argues that both debts and sins are referred to in the prayer.

²⁶ The first part of this verse is similar to Dt. 15:4, which is part of the legislation for the sabbatical year.

²⁷ For a detailed study of 'the year of the Lord's favour' in Luke, see Sloan (1977).

'holiday'). The sabbatical and jubilee year regulations also include the idea of rest, in particular for the land (Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 25:2-5,11; *cf.* 26:34-35).²⁸ For six years the land serves mankind, but in the seventh year it is allowed to rest.

In this way men and women acknowledge that they do not have any absolute right over the land (*cf.* Tsevat 1972: pp. 453, 455). They may not exploit the land indiscriminately for their own profit, driven by the pressures of consumerism, because they have been permitted to live there and enjoy its produce as a blessing from the owner of the land himself, the Lord God (Ex. 15:17; Lev. 25:23; Dt. 8:7-18). As the psalmist says, The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it' (Ps. 24:1, NIV).

What is our attitude towards the land today? For many people born and brought up in towns and cities, that may seem a strange question. The only time they think about land is when they buy or sell property, and even then their interest may well

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be in the house more than the land on which it is built. But even with increasing urbanisation, a very large number of people in the world still live on and depend on the land, as farmers; not a few city-dwellers have made their fortunes by the exploitation of the land, or have become landless and migrated to the city in the hope of better fortune; and all of us still eat food grown on the land. So we cannot ignore the land, however urbanised we may be.

If we own agricultural land, we could put the OT regulations about rest in the seventh and fiftieth years directly into practice, although it would seem that rarely happens nowadays. Generally alternative methods are used to ensure the continuing fertility of the land: crop rotation and the use of natural or artificial fertilisers. If a piece of land is used for housing or industry, of course it is impossible to allow it to 'rest' in certain years. In any case, it is obvious that often it is not practical to apply these ancient regulations literally, and we need to work out an appropriate contextualisation in the modern world.

We may begin by suggesting that the idea of 'rest' points towards restraint in the exploitation of the land, indeed of the whole environment. The sabbatical and jubilee year institutions invite us to accept the produce of the land as a gift from God, rather than as an absolute human right. The natural world was made by God, just as we are, and deserves respect as something of great intrinsic value. Also we should consider our children, and their children, who will have to live in the environment that we are busy polluting today.

We can show respect for human beings and outlaw slavery, for example by setting maximum working hours and a minimum wage. So also the environment should be treated responsibly, by observing certain limits, not exploited mercilessly. We do not have the right to bleed natural resources dry, so that the land becomes a desert. To take just one example, the vast rainforests are God's creation, not private property that can be cleared at human whim without considering the impact of doing so on the balance of the whole environment. The demand for wood and paper in more wealthy parts of the world has depleted resources in the Amazon and elsewhere. But the West does not have a monopoly on destruction of the environment. In 1996 there were major floods in Jakarta and those who suffered most were the poor living in

²⁸ See Andreasen (1972: pp. 104-13, 213-25).

the shacks by the River Ciliwung and in other areas prone to flood. It was reported that one cause of the floods was the felling of trees in the hills of Puncak, south of Jakarta, to build luxury villas, golf courses and so on. Suara Pembaruan, one of Indonesia's most respected newspapers, published a report in July 1996 indicating widespread illegal lumbering, with the authorities apparently turning a blind eye. In one Sumatran nature reserve, there were five sawmills processing illegal lumber! In 1997 forest fires raged through vast tracts of Sumatra and

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Kalimantan, causing smog in much of South East Asia, apparently caused by developers wanting to expand their plantations in the cheapest way possible, choosing to burn trees rather than make use of them, and then unable to control the fires at the onset of the dry season.

Perhaps we need to develop a theological ecology, in which the conservation of natural resources is based on the conviction that God created them and God has the right to determine how they are used. A corollary of this, on the basis of love for God and for neighbour as the two great commandments, would be that we aim to leave the world in good condition for the enjoyment of future generations. Such a theological ecology has an entirely different foundation from an economic ecology, which is only interested in conservation as a means to make even more profit from the natural world. Lumy (1994) expresses this difference in his contrast between *homo imago dei* and *homo economicus*.²⁹

However the theme of rest is not only relevant to the subject of ecology. According to Deuteronomy 12:9-10, the people of God were to be given 'rest' when they entered the promised land.³⁰ Rest meant that their wandering in the wilderness had come to an end and Israel could enjoy security, even though surrounded by enemies. In Psalm 95:7b-11 this theme appears again together with a warning to the people not to harden their hearts as their ancestors had done in the wilderness and as a result failed to enter the 'rest' which God had promised them. Hebrews 3:7-4:11 takes up the same theme and interprets it eschatologically. The writer exhorts Christians also to try to enter the place of rest which God has prepared for them.

What is meant by that rest and how can we enter it? Jesus explains it as follows (Mt. 11:28-29):

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and
I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am gentle,, and humble in heart, and you will find rest
for your souls.³¹ (NIV)
Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying
heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest

²⁹ For theological discussion of the problems of ecology, see Osborn (1993), Hallman (1994) and Nash (1996).

³⁰ See also Dt. 25:19; 1 Ki 8:56; cf. 1 Ch. 22:9; 2 Ch. 6:41. Cf. von Rad (1966a); Andreasen (1972: pp. 221-25).

³¹ Jesus uses the word *anapausis* 'rest' in these verses. The same word is used by the writer of Hebrews for the place of rest which God has prepared for his people.

for your souls. (NRSV)

On the one hand, 'rest' may be experienced now by everyone who becomes a follower of Jesus and finds 'rest for the soul', even though they still live in a world which is full of uncertainty and far from secure. However Jesus' invitation should also be understood in the context of the whole Bible, and that understanding will be incomplete if it does not mention the land and city longed for by the faithful witnesses in the OT (Heb. 11:16), that is our heavenly place of rest. This eschatological rest will only become a reality when that

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'gentle and humble' Lamb becomes 'Lord of lords and King of kings' (Rev. 17:14) and those who 'die in the Lord' can 'rest from their labour' for ever (14:13). That will truly be rest!³²

Freedom

When the people of Israel left their slavery in Egypt they became a free nation. This freedom was given by the Lord God, as recalled in the prologue to the Israelite constitution (Ex. 20:2). Because of that, they were forbidden to oppress the weak within their own society (Ex. 22:21-23:9) or to enslave fellow Israelites (Lev. 25:38-42). Unfortunately in the ancient world, as in the modern world, there were always those who tried to control and restrict others, and so reduced their freedom.

One of the great themes of the sabbatical and jubilee years in the Bible is freedom. The people of God should be able to enjoy the freedom which he has given them, and if that is not the case then action must be taken to restore that freedom. A number of measures with that in mind are associated with the holy year. One of the most important is the liberation of slaves and provision of capital so that they can make a new start as free men and women. Parallel to that, if debtors are unable to repay their debts by the time the holy year comes, then the debts are to be cancelled so that they are freed from a burden that it has become clear they are unable to shoulder.

As mentioned above, Jesus inaugurated the messianic age by announcing the arrival of 'the year of the Lord's favour', as an eschatological reinterpretation of the jubilee year. He declared good news to those who were suffering, promising that they would obtain freedom (Lk. 4:18b):

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners ... to release the oppressed. (NIV)

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives ... to let the oppressed go free. (NRSV)

Yet sadly, until comparatively recently, the church in many places paid rather little attention to the needs and rights of the weaker members of society. The gospel was understood as a heavenly message about spiritual salvation, and not seen to be relevant to the oppression that is so widespread in this world. Sometimes the church was on the side of the oppressors or even became an oppressor itself. In the 19th century, a number of figures in the English evangelical movement became involved in the struggle for social justice, such as Wilberforce

³² On the concept of 'rest' in Judaism and the NT, see also Lincoln (1982).

who pioneered the abolition of slavery and Shaftesbury who fought for the rights of factory workers, particularly children and women. Then towards the end of that century liberal theologians in America developed what has often been called 'the social gospel', as they demonstrated the relevance of Jesus' preaching to the exploitation of workers and other social problems.

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The 20th century in Latin America saw the beginning of the 'liberation theology' movement, which noted the political aspects of the exodus from Egypt and the gospel of Jesus, and also various other kinds of political theology (black theology, theology of revolution, etc.). Liberation theology was certainly a new development in the history of Christian theology, though perhaps there is some similarity with Jewish messianic theology at the time of the New Testament, which looked for the coming of a saviour who would act in the political arena to free the people of God from Roman power.

Our study of the holy years should remind us that the Bible does not only promise better things in heaven for the oppressed ('pie in the sky when you die') but encourages concrete action to bring them freedom from suffering in this world. Hopefully today Christians from different theological backgrounds can agree that the gospel is not only concerned with spiritual matters but also with the affairs of this world.

However we should note that the Greek word *aphesis*, translated 'freedom' (NIV) or 'release' (NRSV) in Luke 4, usually refers in the Bible to forgiveness of sins (*i.e.* release from the punishment for sin, *e.g.* Lk. 3:3; 24:47). Jesus did not only preach a gospel of liberation from suffering in this world (the horizontal or socio-economic aspect) but also—what is eschatologically even more important—liberation from sin in this world and the world to come (the vertical or spiritual aspect). So also the mission of the church today should include a holistic witness to the gospel, not concentrating exclusively on its social or its spiritual aspects. Our aim should be that every person may experience true freedom, free from oppression and free from sin, now and for always (Jn 8:36; Rom. 6:18; 8:21; 2 Cor. 3:17).

How can this be actualised today in our 'global village'? Many things can be done. In Indonesia, for example, political prisoners have been released and working conditions for factory workers have been improved. This sort of thing can only happen as a result of much hard work behind the scenes by people working for justice and equality. Probably more needs to be done in both of these areas, but there are also other oppressed groups of people who have been relatively ignored, such as the 'workers' in brothels who are often virtually slaves, and the physically handicapped beggars who are put on the streets by their own families or others who then take most of their 'income'. Christians today should be taking the lead in working for improvements in the social and political spheres, bringing freedom to those who are deprived and oppressed, following the example of Wilberforce and others like him in previous centuries. We need to fight the human lust for power over other human beings which shows itself in so many shapes and sizes, including direct control of individuals (slavery in its various modern forms) and nations (power-politics), and also

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indirect exploitation by means of trade (monopolies), economics (international debt), culture (fashion, the media) and so on.

But in all this we should not forget the need for self-examination. As we condemn the obvious injustices in the world at large, we ought to check carefully that we ourselves are not involved in oppression and exploitation, directly or indirectly. If we are an employer, how do we treat our employees? If we run a business, how do we treat our customers? If we work in the civil service, are we really serving the needs of society or primarily lining our own pockets? Whatever work we do, do we pay our taxes with integrity? Do we look down on other people, by male chauvinism or militant feminism, racial discrimination or religious bigotry? And even if we do nothing to oppress or exploit others, we might ask what we actually do to help powerless members of society—the homeless and hungry, old people living alone and single parents, street children, beggars and pedlars—so that they may be freed from poverty and fear. It is easier to criticise the oppressors than to acknowledge that our own lives may need changing, but dare we claim that we have no sin (Mt. 7:3; Jn 8:7)?

Restoration

The third key theme in the biblical idea of a holy year (specifically the jubilee) is 'restoration', in particular the restoration of land. Because the land belongs to God, who divided it fairly when Israel entered Palestine, the rich must not expand their estates by buying land from the poor (*cf.* Is. 5:8). If in extreme circumstances someone is forced to sell their land, this may only be done on a leasehold basis with the owner retaining the right of redemption at any time; and in the jubilee year any unredeemed land is to be restored to its original owner. So the jubilee year, if put into practice, should help to remove inequalities in society and give a new start to those who have become poor and lost their land or even their freedom.

The relevance of the jubilee idea to the problem of accumulation of land in the hands of a relatively small land-owning class today is clear enough. For example, in certain areas of Indonesia, I have heard that businessmen from the cities come and make attractive offers to simple country people who are prepared to sell their land. The people are happy, because they have cash in their pockets from the sale, but do not realise that the payment they have received is far below the real value of the land. Also, attracted by the opportunity to make a quick profit, they have not considered the implications of giving up property which could have provided food for their family for many generations. Another method used by those devoted to the pursuit of wealth at all costs is to enter an area and pay local inhabitants to destroy their own environment, for instance by felling trees in the forests. The labourers get a reasonable wage and do not complain, but the businessman makes much more

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profit and the long-term loss to the environment is incalculable. From a legal point of view, the land does not change hands in this case, but its wealth has been plundered and it becomes of little value to its owner.

We are called to realise that the earth and everything in it belong to God (Ps. 24:1), and we have no right to treat the earth as though it were our private possession. Although there are no verses of Scripture to define boundaries of land in our modern-day world, the principle of

division according to need (Num. 26:54)—rather than desire or power—is surely a good one which we should endeavour to apply today. Ordinary landowners could be given some protection from the expansionism of the rich and powerful by appropriate legislation. Even more radical measures will be needed to reverse the trend and begin a move towards equality, so that land may be divided more fairly between its inhabitants. It won't be easy, but change is possible! For example, Milgrom (1997) mentions that the percentage of farmers in South Korea owning their land, rather than working as tenants, increased from 50% to 94% between 1952 and 1954.

The idea of restoration in the biblical jubilee focuses particularly on land ownership, but need not be limited to that. Isaiah 35 describes the liberation of Israelite exiles in Babylon and their restoration to their own land; it also envisages restoration of the environment (vv. 1-2, 6b-7; *cf.* above: section on *Rest*) and health (vv. 5-6a). In the NT, Luke uses the term *apokatastasis* with reference to the end of time when God will restore 'everything' (Acts 3:21).

Perhaps we feel helpless, when we see rampant greed and the inability of the poor to oppose it. It would seem ancient Israel faced the same problem in connection with the sabbatical and jubilee years: they were a good idea, but the rich did not want to take a cut in their salaries and profits so that others would have enough. Nevertheless we cannot remain silent. The prophetic voice of the church is needed to censure the greed of people who exploit their fellow human beings, beginning with those who sit in pews on Sundays and going on to address all who treat other people as means of making money rather than as God's creatures who were made to be loved. Yet perhaps even more important is for Christians to live in accordance with the gospel, following Jesus' directive not to accumulate treasures on earth (Mt. 6:19; *cf.* 5:40-42; 19:16-26; Lk. 3:11; 12:13-21; 19:8-10) and working towards equality in salaries, opportunities and privileges. To quote the Chinese proverb, it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Postscript

It is uncertain how far ancient Israel followed the seven and fifty-year cycles for the holy years, and in any case it would be

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quite unrealistic for us to revive them now in any literal sense. However we do celebrate anniversaries (every year), silver and golden jubilees (25 and 50 years respectively) and centenaries (100 years), and presently the whole world is looking forward to celebrating the millennium (1000 years). Often such occasions are treated as opportunities for extravagant parties; how much better it would be if we made them times for reflection and renewal, reviewing what has gone wrong in the past and taking specific action to put it right!

As we have seen, the biblical idea of the sabbatical and jubilee years includes three great themes: rest, freedom and restoration. How about making these our millennium themes? Can we challenge both the church and the world to celebrate the year 2000 by:

- resting from exploitation of the environment;
- striving for liberation of the oppressed and the poor; and

- taking measures to promote equality in ownership of land and other material wealth?

One initiative in this direction has been taken by the Jubilee 2000 Campaign, in their call for the cancellation of international debts. The text of what Jubilee 2000 hopes will be 'the world's biggest petition', to be presented to leaders of the richest countries at the G7 Summit in 1999, reads as follows:

- We, the undersigned, believe that the start of the new millennium should be a time to give hope to the impoverished people of the world.
- To make a fresh start, we believe it right to put behind us the mistakes made by both lenders and borrowers, and to cancel the backlog of unpayable debts of the most impoverished nations.
- We call upon the leaders of lending nations to write off these debts by the year 2000. We ask them to take effective steps to prevent such high levels of debt building up again. We look for a new beginning to celebrate the millennium.

Similar initiatives could be taken by Christians in relation to other major issues, such as the environment, fair trading, ethical investments, modern forms of slavery and so on. At the same time we should remember that it can be easier to tell others what to do than to do it ourselves. We must be careful to 'practise what we preach', and ensure that in our personal lives we act with integrity and compassion to those in need around us.

Finally, we should remember that the meaning of a holy year will only be truly understood if it points us to God as the Creator of heaven and earth, who invites us to take part in his great work of sustaining the world, until the time when he

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makes all things new (Rev. 21-22). If we maintain this prophetic and eschatological perspective, and commit ourselves to translating these ideas into action, then we will be able to make the year 2000 our holy year.

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