

THE JUBILEE [THE 50th SABBATH YEAR]□ Leviticus 25

There are those who use Leviticus 25 as the main basis for what they call "Sabbath or Jubilee Economics" This is said to be an economy of enough, an economy of economic equality, an economy that rejects private property, an economy that is not based on a free market and the profit motive. These commentators insist this is Biblical Economics. Are they correct? Read this Essay and decide for your self.

Originally, all the Land occupied by Israel was divided up according to Tribes, Clans and Families. Each family's property was not only for their subsistence (the family farm), but was a sign of their membership in the Covenant People of God. They recognized that the Land, all of it, always belonged to God. It was His gift to them and each family was responsible to Him for their portion of it.

23 The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me.□ 55 ...to me□ the people of Israel are servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Through the years, some families were forced off their family farm, through personal hardship, war or by people who had the means to buy or take over the land. Thus there were some landless people in Israel. Some of them became indentured servants (slaves). The Jubilee was in the Law for the sake of all these people who had lost the land that had belonged to them.

10 you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan.

In order to make this return possible, those who had become landless and poor and had consequently sold themselves into indentured servant hood would have to be released. Leviticus 25 is not a Biblical warrant for "across the board" debt-cancellation. Canceling their debt is a part of allowing them to return to their family farm. There is nothing here about commercial transactions, let alone international debt.

39 If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: 42 For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. 43 You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God. he shall be with you as a hired servant and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. 41 Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers.

Notice that the Jubilee did not include the release of actual slaves

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44...you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. 45 you may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. 46 You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule... ruthlessly.

During the Sabbath year, the land was not to be cultivated. God would miraculously see to it that the land would still be productive.

11 That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. 12 For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field. 19 The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and dwell in it securely. 20 And if you say, 'What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?' 21 I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years. 22 When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating some of the old crop; you shall eat the old until the ninth year, when its crop arrives.

Knowing the 50th year was approaching, many current users of the land tried to make unfair profits off of it before they had to let it go. This was forbidden.

14 And if you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. 15 You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of years for crops. 16 If the years are many, you shall increase the price, and if the years are few, you shall reduce the price, for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you. 17 You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the LORD your God. 24 And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land and "slaves" [indentured servants]

25 "If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. 26 If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, 27 let him calculate the years since he sold it and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property. 28 But if he has not sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the year of jubilee. In the jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.

Houses built on the land remain with that land when it is returned to the original owner, if the houses are not in a "walled city", ie if they are in a rural area. Houses [and the land they are built on] in a city are not included in the Jubilee restoration.

30...the house in the walled city shall belong in perpetuity to the buyer, throughout his generations; it shall not be released in the jubilee. 31 But the houses of the villages that have no wall around them shall be classified with the fields of the land. They may be redeemed, and

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they shall be released in the jubilee.

The Jubilee is not about economics. It is about heritage, about family identity. It is about birthright- about having and enjoying the gift that God has given. It is about being responsible for the care of that gift.

There is no evidence that the Jubilee Year was ever enforced in Israel. It is said by some that Jesus saw it as his purpose to revive the Jubilee Year. That would have been simply impossible to do. Centuries had gone by, not just 49 years. How could property be returned to the original owners after all that time? Many people now lived in houses in cities. How were they to return, even if they wanted to, which is highly dubious, to the family farm of generations past? The entire clan would have to return. Then what? What would be the point of such upheaval? Of course, people who still lived on their original family land would remain there. Land not originally theirs, if they had some, would be taken from them, but if any of their original land had been taken, that would be returned to them. The object was to restore everyone to their original heritage of land.

There is no warrant to believe the idea that Jesus was trying to take land from rich, large landowners and give it to the masses of landless poor. That is not what the Jubilee or Jesus were about.

As for Jesus quoting Isaiah in his message at Nazareth-

Luke 4 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus is simply telling his audience what he is about to do in his ministry and he did exactly these things during the next 3 years. There is no warrant to use Leviticus 25 as a Biblical basis for any program for the redistribution of economic wealth to secure economic equality for millions of people living in the industrial/postindustrial Twenty First Century.

Should Wealth be redistributed by the Government?

The Jubilee would not have created equality of wealth. The original "Promised Land" was not divided equally. The original Tribes were of different sizes (population) and a study of an atlas will reveal that the portions of land given to them at God's order were also of different sizes. The Jubilee was not about restoring equality. It was never there. The value of each parcel of land would be different, depending on geology and geography and the degree of development. Some of it might have been barren or fallow. Some of it might have been richly cultivated or had structures built on it while others may have been neglected or wasted. All of that would make for inequality. Just going home again to the family farm wouldn't make all farmers equal.

The difference between Equity and Equality

A distinction must be made between equality and equity. Equality is sameness, likeness, uniformity in size, value, qualities, etc. Equity is fairness, impartiality, everyone getting or having their "due", justice. The Bible is concerned with equity, not equality. That is a crucial distinction. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul talks about equality of treatment: one church should be treated the same as another, equally. When one receives help, another should also. The usage of the word "equality" in that text carries the same meaning as "equity". Nowhere in Scripture is the idea that all income shall be the same (equal) or that wealth should be distributed or redistributed equally among all- and certainly not by the State.

1 Samuel 27 The LORD makes poor and makes rich

Deuteronomy 8:11 "Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, 12 lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, 13 and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, 14 then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery... 17 Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' 18 You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers

Should Nations cancel loans to other Nations?

Leviticus 25 is not a passage advocating zero interest on all loans. The verses about charging interest (36-37) relate to personal loans to fellow Israelites [and resident aliens, but not foreigners] who have become landless poor. They are family. They are not to be exploited. No profit is to be made from helping them. The original Jubilee was a Sabbath. It was about God and faith in God. It must not be divorced from this context. It was about Israel. It was about maintaining the religious heritage of Israelites, about their family identity. It was about their birthright- about having and enjoying the gift that God had given to them – Land. It is about the family farm. It is about that family, in relationship with its entire clan, being responsible for the care of that gift.

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How does any of that translate into a secular, global economic system for masses of people in today's urban world? It doesn't! It is not justified to say that so-called "Sabbath or Jubilee Economics" is Biblical Economics.

And it is not honest to say that there is no Biblical alternative or that evangelical Christians, who reject "Sabbath Economics" on Biblical grounds, have not done work in the field of Economics. These views are simply not true! There are many other passages in Scripture that do give us principles for economics in today's world. Please study my notes on Biblical Economics posted on this website.

Recommended Evangelical Bibliography for the study of Economics

An Eye for an Eye by C J H Wright, IVP

Toward Old Testament Ethics, Walter C. Kaiser, Zondervan

Poverty and Wealth , Ronald Nash, Crossway Books

Stewardship, Ben Gill, Summit Publishing

Biblical Principles & Economics, Richard Chewing (ed.), Navpress

Economics Today, Donald Hay, Eerdmans Publishing

Biblical Economics, R.C.Sproul Jr., Draught Horse Press

Where Garden Meets Wilderness E.Calvin Beisner, Eerdmans Publishing