

Leviticus 25v23-55

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

There is very little evidence that the Jubilee was ever put into practice in its fullest and literal sense. Following exile and loss of tribal affiliation, the Jubilee became nigh impossible to implement. Hence the concept of the Jubilee took on a more prophetic and messianic meaning. One of the functions of the future prophet Elijah is to inform the Israelites of their tribal groupings thus allowing a literal Jubilee to be observed when the Messiah arrives, perhaps even for the first time! At its core, the Jubilee is a part of God's economy. In God's economic ideal there is a reset button, whereby every 50 years property is returned to family owners in which the original claimant may be long dead. God declares again that the Land must never be permanently sold as it belongs to Him. While it is indeed true that the 'earth is the Lords and everything in it' (Ps 24vs1), He also has a particular piece of property portioned to His people. Purchased property must always be available for redemption by a redeemer, the *go'el*. Prophetically and theologically by extension, spiritual redemption is always available to everyone and at any time. Isaiah would later describe the Jubilee as the Year of the Lord's Favour in its prophetic and redemptive sense. In Leviticus, the land being discussed is the Promised Land. Territory outside Israel is not included in the redemptive activity of the Jubilee. People are! Whether you as an individual are in or outside Israel, the laws of redemption apply. The Jubilee has a universal application, particularly to those suffering from slavery.

Slavery has been a troubling topic for Christians through the ages. The Bible does not give a clear commandment against the ownership of slaves as we might expect it to. What it does do is describe the just treatment of slaves, their eventual release and potential inclusion into the people of God. Paul even admonishes a runaway Christian slave to be accepted back by his Christian owner in the Epistle of Philemon. The Hebrew Bible does not prescribe jails as we know them today or later in the New Testament. Punishments were enacted immediately and imprisonment was not one of the optional conditions. What we call slavery in the Bible comes in several forms. Economic hardship, poor business decisions, etc., might result in a person becoming an indentured servant while paying off a debt obligation. Slaves as we know the word, could also be procured through capture in war, then bought or sold as war booty, and some people might even willingly enter into a form of servitude for other reasons. The family of the slave always had the opportunity to redeem the person, and should they not have the means then servitude had a time limit with the hope of freedom always on the horizon. The responsibility to redeem was first on the human family with God enacting freedom should they be unable to fulfil the redemption. Redemption is never far off and God is always watching and involved. There has always been a partnership between heaven and earth. God can redeem of course, but He first sets the task for us to do. He does not leave us alone in that endeavour. He provides the guidelines and stipulations for how the redemption is enacted. The land is an eternal possession of the Lord and so are the Israelites; the Lord says they belong to Him as servants whom He rescued from Egypt. While they may become servants of another for a time, everyone in the end returns to Him. In a biblical agrarian society, anyone could fall on hard times, and Leviticus (the holiness code) repeatedly forbids taking advantage of another's misfortunes. Even interest of loans to fellow Israelites was forbidden.

And here we see that another difference is being made between Israelites and Gentile nations. There are different terms of service for Gentiles and Jewish slaves, different methods of doing business and commerce and different approaches to property. There are even differences and distinctions within the Jewish community itself. Property within gated cities and unwallled

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villages can be sold permanently. Levitical property cannot be sold, no matter in which location it is found. Agricultural land was to be returned to ancestral ownership. The call of Leviticus is a call to distinguish the sacred from the common. This includes priestly clans, urban and agricultural land, Jewish and Gentile nations.

The *redeemer* is called the *go'el*, rooted from the Hebrew word *ge'ulah* or *redemption*. He is a blood relative kinsman to the poor and indentured servant in question. He has the economic means to pay for the redemption. The laws of redemption do not detail a specific *go'el*; redemption is the responsibility of the entire family. Following the conquest of Canaan and into the period of the Judges we see new oral traditions develop on who the redeemer could be. In the book of Ruth, Boaz must first consult a 'closer' redeemer figure than himself. A hierarchy of redeemers had developed with the role of redeemer being given to a specific family member, usually a firstborn son. In urban areas, judicial courts were established over time and they took the role of settling property matters and inheritance issues. The individual responsibility of the *go'el* then developed along with the prophetic call of the Jubilee. The kinsman redeemer, the avenger of blood, became a future messianic figure who would enact his redemption during a Jubilee period. This concept develops during the Second Temple Period in Jewish literature that, while not included in our Bible, does form the basis of the theology of the New Testament. The source of the redeemer and the concept of redemption is here wrapped in the holiness code of Leviticus. Who is our redeemer? The Lord! Absolutely! Who will proclaim and enact the redemption? We will with the help of God! When can redemption be delivered? Today, if you will but hear His voice!