

The Year of Jubilee

JUBILEE, YEAR OF [Heb *š̄naṭ hayyôḇēl* (Lev. 25:13), or simply *hayyôḇēl* (25:28) < *qeren hayyôḇēl*—‘the horn of the ram,’ made into a trumpet (Josh. 6:5f)]; AV JUBILE. According to Lev. 25:9 a loud trumpet should proclaim liberty throughout Israel on the tenth day of the seventh month (the Day of Atonement), after a lapse of seven sabbaths of years, or forty-nine years. In this manner the fiftieth year was to be announced as a Jubilee Year. It possessed the function of an ordinary sabbatic year, thus allowing the land to lie fallow for two successive years (Lev. 25:11, 22; see SABBATICAL YEAR). But in addition, real property was automatically to revert to its original owners (25:10, 13); and those who had been compelled by poverty to sell themselves for indentured service to their brothers were to gain release (v 39).

I. Personal Liberty

The fiftieth year was to be a time of proclaiming liberty to all the inhabitants of the land. God had redeemed His people from bondage in Egypt (Lev. 25:42); and none of them was again to be reduced to the status of an *‘ebed*, or slave (v 39). Poverty could, even at its worst, reduce an Israelite to a status no less than that of a hired servant, a wage earner, and then only until the Year of Jubilee (v 40). God’s chosen child was not to be oppressed (vv 43, 46; see SLAVE). Indeed, as citizens of the theocratic kingdom, masters and servants had become brothers together (cf. Philem. 16). Thus, as seen in its widest application, only through its loyalty to God could Israel as a nation ever hope to be free and independent of other masters.

II. Restitution of Property

A second feature of the Jubilee was that of the restitution of all real property. The purpose was to demonstrate that the earth is subject basically to God’s law, and not to man’s desires: “for the land is mine: for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev. 25:23). God’s specific legislation concerned the inalienability of Israel’s land titles. It required the reversion of

all hereditary property to the family that originally possessed it and the reestablishment of the initial arrangement regarding God’s division of the land. It did not teach either the socialistic economic theory that a person is entitled to the ownership of goods on the basis of his need (in this case, the possession of the land that produced his living), or the free-enterprise system that allows an unlimited expansion of private property. On the contrary, it established a fixed title to the property assigned by God (cf. Dt. 21:16, on inheritance), so that the implied humanitarian factor is given a deeper theological foundation. It should also be noted that the restitution of Israel’s property appears to have typical significance, for the possession of the land by its individual Hebrew owners served as an acted prophecy of the blessings of the messianic age (Isa. 61:1–3). The Year of Jubilee foreshadows the restoration of all that has been perverted by mankind’s sin, the establishment of the true liberty of the children of God, and the deliverance of creation from the bondage of corruption to which it has been subjected on account of human depravity (Lk. 4:17–21; Rom. 8:19–23).

III. Resulting Property Values

Since the institution of the Jubilee Year excluded the possibility of selling any piece of land permanently (Lev. 25:23), it necessarily became the means of fixing the prices of real property (vv 15f; cf. 25–28). The same rule applied to dwelling houses outside the walled cities (v 31) and also to the houses owned by Levites, although they were built within walled cities (v 32). In the same manner the value of Hebrew bondsmen was to vary according to the proximity of the Jubilee Year (vv 47–54), and in 27:17–25 a similar arrangement related to such lands as were “sanctified unto Yahweh.” In all these cases the original owner was at liberty to redeem his own property or to have it redeemed by some of his nearest relatives (25:25–27, 29, 48ff; 27:19; Jer. 32:8; cf. ancient Babylonian parallels, B. Meissner, *Beiträge zum altbabylonischen Privatrecht* [1893], pp. 40ff). He might take action at any time, at a price

proportionate to the time lapse until the Jubilee.

IV. History

After the initial revelation of the Jubilee law (Lev. 25:8–34), the Year of Jubilee is mentioned historically as a living feature within Israelite society (Nu. 36:4). Its first observance seems to have occurred after Joshua's entrance into Canaan (cf. Lev. 25:2), or midway in the judgeship of Othniel (Jgs. 3:11). No reference, however, to such a celebration appears in Scripture (apart from the idealistic anticipation of Ezk. 46:17), though this hardly justifies its usual relegation by liberal criticism to an assumed postexilic Priestly Code of arbitrary and utopian dreams (cf. R. H. Pfeiffer, *Religion in the OT* [1961], p. 187). The influence of the Jubilee law upon the culture of Israel, with the permanent property rights that it guaranteed, helps to explain the conduct of Naboth and Ahab, ca 855 B.C. (1 K. 21:3f; cf. 22:1), and such prophetic rebukes as Isa. 5:8; Mic. 2:2. These very passages, however, testify to a contemporary neglect (cf. W. Eichrodt's contention for its early date, *Theology of the OT*, I [Engtr 1961], 96). Even as Israel's sabbatic years were not observed during the centuries before the Exile, so also the Jubilees were disregarded. But while the former were reinstated in the postexilic era (Neh. 10:31; 1 Macc. 6:49, 53; cf. frequent mention by Josephus), the latter are never mentioned again (cf. *Ant.* iii.12.3 [280–86]), living on only in principle and in the eschatological hope of the people of God.

Bibliography.—*Jew. Enc.* X, sv "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee" (J. D. Eisenstein); A. Jirku, *Reinhold-Seeberg-Festschrift* (1929), II, 169ff; W. G. Moorehead, *Studies in the Mosaic Institutions* (ca 1895); R. G. North, *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee* (1954); G. Oehler, *Theology of the OT* (Engtr 1883), pp. 342–45; J. B. Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* (1962), pp. 400f.

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