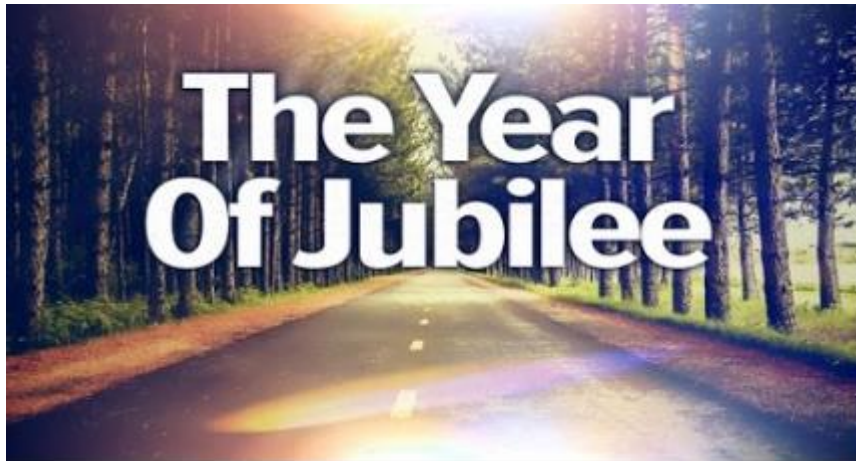


Five Myths about Jubilee

By Dr. Art Lindsley



Found in Leviticus 25, the biblical practice of Jubilee is becoming ever more prominent in discussions about justice, poverty, and debt relief. Many evangelical authors mention Jubilee as a biblical example of debt forgiveness and redistribution of land. It has also gained popular attention in the news media.

Jubilee has been offered by several sources as a solution to our current economic crisis. [At Forbes, Erik Kain asked](#), "Could a debt jubilee help kick-start the economy?" Reuters [profiled economists](#) who are seriously considering Jubilee as a tool for ending the recession, and the *Huffington Post* [linked the practice](#) to the demands of Occupy Wall Street. In an age of crushing federal and consumer debt, a practice that forgives financial burdens is naturally becoming quite popular.

But what is the context for the scriptural practice of Jubilee? When the Israelites reached the Promised Land, God distributed land to the 12 tribes ([Joshua 13:7, 23:4](#)). The purpose of the Jubilee law was to keep the land in the hands of the tribes and families to which he had given land in the first place.

In [Leviticus 25:8-10](#), a ram's horn is to be blown on the day of atonement of the 50th year (or the 49th), and each family is to return to their property. Verses 15-16 details how this process should work:

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.

Today, many myths persist about this ancient practice. We'll deal with five of the major ones.

Myth 1: Jubilee means a forgiveness of debt.

It is clear in the Old Testament text and to many commentators that in Leviticus 25, Jubilee does not involve forgiveness of debt, at least in the way we normally use the term. There is no debt forgiven because it has already been paid. Let me explain. If Israelite family members have a debt they can ask the person farming their land for a lump sum payment priced according to the number of years before the Jubilee. The price would be determined by the projected amount of crops to be yielded prior to the Jubilee. To put it in modern terms, if you had a debt of \$250,000, there are five years prior to the Jubilee, and each crop is worth \$50,000, then the "buyer" would give you \$250,000 for the rights to farm the land, and at the time of Jubilee you would receive your land back because the debt had been paid off.

So the "buyer" does not really own the land but leases it. The debt is paid off by the land (crops). We don't know exactly how the price was determined for each year of crops, given the uncertainty due to bad weather or other factors that could lead to a poor or lost crop. Perhaps the price took into account that some years would be more profitable than others.

At the time of Jubilee, you would of course rejoice that your debt had been paid and your land returned to your full use, but you would not thank the leaser for "forgiving" your debt. The Jubilee declaration might be analogous to a "mortgage burning party." You would celebrate with friends that this significant debt was paid. The debt is not "forgiven" or "cancelled" because it is paid.

Numerous commentators endorse this understanding. For instance, Derek Tidball says, "Purchasing the land was like purchasing a lease." [1] And R. K. Harrison says, "Only the produce of the land could thus properly be bought or sold." [2]

Myth 2: Jubilee involves a redistribution of wealth (land).

I've heard it said that Jubilee is the paramount example of a mandatory, legal (government) redistribution of wealth. So the argument goes: God required by law that land be redistributed every 50 years.

However, if Jubilee did not involve debt forgiveness, and instead celebrated a debt paid off, then there is no redistribution of wealth. There is no redistribution because the land never left the ownership of the original family to whom God gave the land.

Jubilee keeps land and wealth in the same place they started. Wealth and land are not redistributed to a different family. They are returned to the same one according to God's original distribution.

Myth 3: Jubilee shows the relative nature of private property.

This myth purports that since God owns the land, there are no absolute rights to private

property. If there are no absolute rights to private property---land or wealth---this provides warrant for the government to take private property and redistribute it.

Actually, Jubilee honors property rights by giving land back to its original owners. God owns the land, but has given the Promised Land to the tribes and families of Israel with the condition that private property cannot be sold, squandered, or given away permanently. The property rights remain with the tribe or family that was given the land in the first place.

Jubilee underlines the value and importance of private property for the tribes of Israel. The family is not permanently deprived of their land. Rather, private property rights in Israel were established permanently and enforced by the practice of Jubilee.

Myth 4: Jubilee leads to income equality.

Some argue that the periodic "redistribution" of land at Jubilee kept the rich from gaining more wealth, and the poor from descending deeper into poverty. But there is nothing in the passage that necessarily prevents income inequality.

Jubilee certainly did stop any one person or small group of people from buying up most or all of the land, those "who add field to field, until there is no more room" ([Isaiah 5:8](#)). What Jubilee did not do was prevent some people from becoming wealthier than others. They could buy houses in towns that were then permanent possessions ([Leviticus 25:30](#)). If they made a profit during their lease, they could lease even more land during the next 50 years.

The primary intent of the law is not economic equality. Rather, God wanted to prevent the Israelites from losing their ability to enjoy the Promised Land. He promised his people freedom from slavery, and a land flowing with "milk and honey," where they could prosper and enjoy life, using their creativity to farm the land and enjoy the fruits of their labors.

The purpose of Jubilee was not income equality, but rather that no Israelites would permanently lose the enjoyment of sitting under "his vine and under his fig tree" ([Micah 4:4](#)).

Myth 5: Jubilee is a universally applicable principle.

Actually, Jubilee applied only to Israelites. This is another significant point almost entirely omitted from the normal narrative about Jubilee.

Non-Israelites might have been able to lease land or hire indentured servants. They could not permanently own land ([Leviticus 25:47](#)). Only Israelites could own land ([Leviticus 25:44-46](#)). There was no redistribution or return of land to foreigners. The poorest people of the land---widows, orphans, and aliens---were to be included in feasts, but they did not have property rights outside the walled cities.

Jubilee and the State

This redemptive-historical approach to understanding Jubilee has the advantage of avoiding the debates about capitalism or socialism. Given the complexities and misunderstandings surrounding Jubilee, the present-day applications of this practice are not immediately clear. They are not as easy to interpret and apply as those who perpetuate these myths want to maintain. But it is clear that Jubilee cannot be used to defend redistribution of wealth by the state.

Of course, even if the Bible doesn't require the state to redistribute wealth, the state may still do so. Whether the state is the best vehicle to meet the needs of poor people is a separate issue.

There is a case to be made that the state should provide a safety net for the poor. But state involvement does not absolve Christians of individual or corporate responsibility. Certainly Christians must be concerned about the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan because God requires us to do so. Jesus says that whoever serves one of the "least of these" serves him ([Matthew 25:45](#)).

Biblical commands are not given to the impersonal, secular state, but to Christians to care personally for those in need with our time and treasure.

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- [1] Derek Tidball, [The Message of Leviticus](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 296.
[2] R.K. Harrison, [Leviticus](#) (NICOT) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 317.