

Abandoning Jubilee: The Structural Causes of Poverty

Randy Ridenour
Oklahoma Baptist University

December 18, 2017

Abstract

The Jubilee law of Leviticus 25 is a radical economic plan which requires a leveling of real assets every fifty years, thus providing an economic structure that regularly dissolves large economic inequalities. It is impossible to follow the letter of the Jubilee law in a modern non-agrarian economy, but this should not free us from the responsibility of adhering to the spirit of the law. A survey of social structures in the United States reveals an economy that is contrary to the spirit of Jubilee, one that not only makes inequalities possible, but makes escaping from poverty nearly impossible.

Keywords

inequality, jubilee, Leviticus, poverty

Cases of economic injustice are, unfortunately, far too common. A 2008 study of workers in low-wage industries found that the average workers lose 15 percent of their pay because of wage violations by their employers. When injured, workers were pressured to not file for compensation. The majority of workers did not receive pay documents, making it difficult to know if they were being paid fairly.¹ Although these incidents are far more common than anyone imagined, they are still cases that are covered by existing law. With a little effort, they could be detected, and there are existing procedures for rectification. Prevention of such cases would require little more than a commitment to detect violations and to enforce the existing law.

Note, though, that in these cases, it was not the system that was unjust. The system granted employees rights that were being denied them by their employers. The only reason that these cases were likely difficult to detect was that the employees either did not know what their rights were, or were put in a position in which it was impossible to know if those rights were being violated. Once

1. Steven Greenhouse, "Low-Wage Workers Are Often Cheated, Study Says," The New York Times, September 2009, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/02/us/02wage.html>.

the facts were made known, however, the injustice was clear, because the principles that were violated were themselves part of the system. What if, though, it is the system itself that is unjust? Are there any means for measuring the level of justice of an entire economic system?

The jubilee law of Leviticus 25 provides us some guidance. The year of jubilee was a leveling of real assets that occurred every fifty years. Although this practice would not eliminate all inequality, it would make it impossible for families to be trapped in poverty for generations. The proposal is not that we should adopt the specific mandates of the jubilee law, for that would be, in all honesty, impossible in a non-agrarian society. Rather, we should examine the extent to which our own economic system captures the spirit of jubilee. In so far as a system prevents people from escaping a cycle of poverty, that system has abandoned jubilee.

1 THE JUBILEE IN SCRIPTURE

Leviticus 25 opens with the surprising claim that even the land shall enjoy a sabbath rest. The people of Israel were to sow their fields and prune their vineyards for six years, but they were to allow the land to rest during the entirety of the seventh year. This was to cause no hardship to the people, though, for God would provide a great bounty, three years worth, in the sixth year.² After seven of these sabbath years, the year of jubilee was to be celebrated. Any Israelite who had become enslaved as the result of a debt was to be set free. Families that been forced to sell their land because of economic hardship were to have their land restored to them. The jubilee, then, was an economic institution with surprising consequences.

The year of jubilee was to be the fiftieth year, or the year after the seventh sabbath year.³ Verse 10 contains the two primary concepts of jubilee, liberty and return — liberty from bondage and the return of families, both to the land and to each other. Since all land was to be returned at the next jubilee year, what was actually purchased was a right to use the land until the next jubilee. This amounted to buying a certain number of harvests. So, the closer the jubilee, the fewer the number of harvests, and the less valuable the use-right was to the buyer.

The second half of the chapter details the varying degrees of poverty that could lead to the loss of one's land or freedom and the required responses in each circumstance. Because of some economic hardship, the land-owner offered to sell some his land. It then became the duty of the nearest kinsman to either buy it, if it had not yet sold, or to redeem it, if it had been sold. The seller always

2. Deut. 15:1–2 expands the concept of the sabbath year to include forgiveness of debts.

3. One would think that this would be fairly uncontroversial, since it is a straightforward reading of the text. Objections seem to be rooted in the recognition that this would require the land to rest fallow for two consecutive years, which would be a significant burden. A common resolution is to have the seventh sabbath year and the jubilee year coincide. See Robert S. Kawashima, "The Jubilee, Every 49 or 50 Years?," *Vetus Testamentum* 53, no. 1 (2003): for arguments and a rebuttal. An alternative view is that the jubilee was only forty-nine days long. For this, with objections and replies, see Sidney B. Hoenig, "Sabbatical Years and the Year of Jubilee," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 59, no. 3 (January 1969): 222–236.

retained the right to redeem the land for himself, if he later found himself in the position to do so. If he could not redeem it himself, then the land, whether sold outside the extended family or redeemed by a kinsman, would revert to the original family in the year of jubilee.

Houses in walled cities were partially exempt from the jubilee law. They could only be redeemed within one year of the creation of the purchase of the lease, after that, the full property right was transferred to the purchaser. The jubilee law protected the economic status of families, guaranteeing the relatively secure possession of their inherited land. Houses in the city were not part of this inheritance, nor did they play a role in economic production in an agricultural society. Houses in villages, though, were treated just like the land. A notable exception concerned the cities belonging to the Levites. Since they did not have inherited land, their property was subject to the same redemption rules as the land.

If, after the sale of land, the seller became even more destitute, then it became the obligation of the kinsman to support him with interest-free loans. In the event of becoming completely destitute, then the person and his family were to sell themselves into the service of the kinsman, but they were not to be treated as slaves. Then, at the next jubilee, they were to go free and return to their original portion of land. If an Israelite sold himself to someone outside the clan, then it was the responsibility of the clan to redeem him. This responsibility began with the closest relatives, then expanded outward through the clan. The clan was to ensure that non-Israelite creditors observed the jubilee law with respect to their Israelite debtors. An act of redemption could be exercised at anytime that one had the means; jubilee, on the other hand, took place as a single national event only every fifty years.

Jubilee had both a social dimension and a theological dimension. The social dimension of jubilee involved the protection of the equitable initial distribution of the land and the kinship structure of the nation. The kinship structure of ancient Israel had three levels: the tribe, the clan, and the household, or father's house. When Israel was able to finally establish control of the land of Canaan, the land was distributed according to these units. Territories were first allocated to the tribes, which were then divided up between the clans. The clans then divided their allotment between each household. This distribution of resources differed from the Canaanite practices of the day in two important ways.

First, it was an equitable distribution. Economic practices of the existing Canaanite cultures tended to more closely resemble western medieval feudalism. In Canaan, kings and nobles owned the land, while labor was provided by tax-paying tenant farmers. In Israel, the land was divided between the tribes, clans, and households according to size and need.⁴ After the completion of the census, "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: To these the land shall be apportioned for inheritance according to the number of names. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you

4. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 199.

shall give a small inheritance; every tribe shall be given its inheritance according to its enrollment.” (Numbers 26:52–54)

Second, the initial distribution was protected by making the land of the extended family inalienable. Ideally, land was not a commercial asset to be bought and sold; it was to stay within the extended family as much as possible.⁵

This is not simply an arbitrary rule on God’s part, it has a deep theological foundation. The land could not be permanently sold by the families, because they did not own the land. They were merely “aliens and tenants” on God’s land. (Lev. 25:23) These were terms used to describe people who were residents in the land with the Israelites, but were not themselves ethnic Israelites. They survived by providing labor and services for the land-owning households of the Israelites. Since they had no land, they had no economic power of their own. Their economic security in the land depended completely on the well-being of their employers. If the household did not do well, then their position could quickly become dire. It is this vulnerability that makes them, along with widows and orphans, objects of particular concern with respect to justice.⁶

The Israelites had an analogous status. As the resident aliens were to their Israelite employers, so were the Israelites to God. Ultimately, they had no property right to the land. It was God’s land before they arrived, and it continued to be God’s land. They enjoyed the benefits of the land, but were always dependent on God. So, just as God graciously protects and cares for them, they are to do the same for each other.

The historical event at the heart of the jubilee law is the exodus from Egypt: “For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold.” (Lev. 25:42) In the exodus, God redeemed his people; that is, God “purchased” Israel for himself. No one, then, could take a fellow Israelite into slavery, for that Israelite belonged to God alone.⁷

The question of dating Leviticus 25 is particularly important for one’s understanding of jubilee — the later the date, the more cynical one tends to be about the purpose of the jubilee law. Proposals range from the time of Israel’s settlement in Canaan, to the time of the monarchy, and finally to the time of the exile and return. If the law was a reaction to concerns that were prevalent during the monarchy, then the jubilee law may have been a response to the changing social and religious nature of Israel, as power moves from rural areas to the cities. If the law was formulated during the exile or shortly after, then it has been suggested that it was a strategy of exiled priests intended to help them regain their lands when they returned.

John Sietze Bergsma has raised persuasive objections to these alternatives. If the jubilee law was a ploy by exiled priests to regain their property, then it was a remarkably incompetent one.

5. When Ahab offered to buy a vineyard from Naboth, Naboth replied “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” (1 Kings 21:2–3)

6. See, for example, Leviticus 19:9–10, 33–34; 23:22; 24:22; Deuteronomy 10:17–19; Psalm 146:9; Jeremiah 7:2–7; 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7–29; and Malachi 3:5.

7. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 199–201.

Priests would be expected to have property concentrated in Jerusalem, yet the law does not protect property in the cities. A law that simply demanded the return of all property to exiles would have been a simpler and more effective way for those exiled to reclaim their property. The law is also unlikely to be an invention during the period of the monarchy. The kind of society that is presupposed by Leviticus 25 best matches early, tribal Israel when the clan structure was still prominent, the economic system was very simple, and society was rural and agrarian.⁸

There are hints of, at the very least, an acknowledgment of the jubilee law and practices in the prophets. In 2 Kings 19:29, Isaiah proclaims a two year fallow period to King Hezekiah of Judah. Jeremiah 32:1-15 describes how Jeremiah exercised the right of redemption to buy a field owned by the son of his uncle. The release of the Jerusalemite slaves under Zedekiah in Jeremiah 34 was not, strictly speaking, an instance of following the law of jubilee, but the release was certainly in the spirit of jubilee, that is, until it was abandoned. Those who released their slaves took those same people back into slavery, prompting Yahweh to say:

I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, "Every seventh year each of you must set free any Hebrews who have been sold to you and have served you six years; you must set them free from your service." But your ancestors did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. You yourselves recently repented and did what was right in my sight by proclaiming liberty to one another, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name; but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back your male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them again into subjection to be your slaves. Therefore, thus says the Lord: You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbors and friends; I am going to grant a release to you, says the Lord—a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. (Jeremiah 34:13–17)

Many references to jubilee can be found in Ezekiel. Some are implicit: 7:12–13; 11:15; 18:13, 17; and 22:12. Ezekiel 34:4 contains this admonition of Israel's leaders, "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them." The idiom used here, "To rule over with harshness," occurs only here and in Leviticus 25. Finally, Ezekiel 46:17 explicitly mentions the year of release.⁹

The jubilee themes of liberty and return are broadened in Isaiah to become a call to end oppression and to seek justice. In 42:3, he describes the servant of Yahweh as one who faithfully brings forth

8. John Sietze Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 56–79.

9. Ibid., 149–187.

justice. Chapter 58 is a harsh condemnation of religious observances that are not accompanied by social justice.¹⁰ Note Isaiah's use of another jubilee theme, that of kinship obligation:

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?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

It is telling that the most explicitly jubiliary passage in Isaiah is also the text that Jesus chose to read from in the synagogue at Nazareth. Luke reports that Jesus was handed a scroll of Isaiah, and read directly from Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

He then said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The Greek word translated "release" and "free" occurs roughly fifty times in the LXX, twenty-two of those occur in the jubilee passages of Leviticus 25 and 27. Of course, the Hebrew used by Isaiah is the same as that in Leviticus 25.

When Jesus proclaims that this has been fulfilled, he is announcing an eschatological year of jubilee, when God graciously pardons debts and frees those who are oppressed. It is a mistake, however, to understand this announcement as purely eschatological with no socio-economic implications.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to ask, "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." He uses language that refers specifically to monetary debt. His disciples are to erase the debts that are owed to them. In other words, they are to practice jubilee.¹¹

10. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 208.

11. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Yoster*, 2d (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 61-62.

Was jubilee ever practiced, though? The only component of the sabbath year law that was regularly followed was the requirement to let the land lay fallow.¹² Even so, there is some reason to believe that the sabbath year was at least noted. Ancient writers linked various historical events to sabbath years, and coins were minted commemorating sabbath years.¹³ There were two amnesties, one described in Jeremiah 34, and the other in Nehemiah 5. Neither of these, though, were conducted with explicit references to the jubilee law, and seem to be unique events.¹⁴

There is some evidence that kinship redemption was practiced. Besides the previously mentioned example of Jeremiah, there is also the account of Boaz's redemption of Elimilech's land in Ruth 4. There is, however, no explicit evidence of a nation-wide jubilee in any known historical documents of Israel. The remission of debts was known to happen in ancient Near Eastern cultures when a new king came to the throne, so the jubilee law concerning debt certainly could have been followed during the early years of the nation of Israel.

There is, however, no evidence that it was ever practiced, but there is evidence that the law was, nevertheless, taken seriously. Deuteronomy 15:7–11 warns against the likely response to the Jubilee law: "Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing;..." Systematic debt forgiveness would result in freezing credit, paralyzing the economy. So, Hillel worked out an ingenious solution, called the *prosboul*. A creditor could transfer a loan to the court. The court then, would be able to demand payment of the loan when the lender, restricted by the jubilee law, could not.¹⁵

As the socio-economic fabric of Israel changed, jubilee became more and more difficult to maintain. The jubilee law presupposes that a landowner, no matter how impoverished, would always hold title to the family's land, and could always be restored to that land. As more and more families succumbed to hardship and debt, as more were forced into slavery, as more lands were siezed by the throne, and as more families were uprooted and dispossessed, the more impossible the constraints of jubilee seemed. The call to jubilee ceased to be jubilant.

12. See Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 60–61. As Yoder points out, this places Jesus' admonition to not worry about food, etc. in the Sermon on the Mount in a new context. Jesus is not advocating laziness, but rather not letting fear keep one from the Sabbath rest. 1 Maccabees 6:49–53 describes the unfortunate consequences of fighting a war during the sabbath year.

13. Stephen Pfann, "Dated Bronze Coinage of the Sabbatical Years of Release and the First Jewish City Coin," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 24 (2006): 101–113.

14. N. P. Lemche, "The Manumission of Slaves—The Fallow Year—The Jubel Year," *Vetus Testamentum* 26, no. 1 (January 1976): 56.

15. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 64–65.

2 FORSAKING JUBILEE

Although jubilee was apparently never fully practiced, it remains a powerful moral vision that deserves to be considered when formulating a Christian biblical ethic. The law of jubilee could only be explicitly followed in an agrarian society with no scarcity of usable land. That does not mean, though, that we are free to ignore the law. Although we cannot replicate the practices of Leviticus 25 in a contemporary economic setting, we can still identify the objectives and consequences of those practices. Then, we can ask to what extent our own economic practices satisfy those objectives and achieve those consequences.

The jubilee served to protect an equitable distribution of land, the primary resource in Israel's economy.¹⁶ Jubilee was not strictly egalitarian; that is, it would not prevent some from having more wealth than others. Someone could, presumably, purchase leases from destitute families and profit from those leases. At jubilee, they would only need return the land; any profit was theirs to keep. What jubilee would do, though, is prevent primary resources from being concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few.

Jubilee is the recognition that the land, ultimately, is God's. As David affirmed in Psalm 24, the earth is indeed the Lord's, along with everything, and everyone, in it. What God would require of Israel, he also requires of us, an equitable distribution of the earth's resources. As Wright notes, this not only precludes the concentration of resources into private hands, but also precludes social collectivism that destroys the concept of family ownership.¹⁷

Jubilee ensured that an economic crisis would not lead to a cycle of inescapable poverty. If a family became destitute, future generations were protected by the structural mechanisms of jubilee. Indebtedness was a temporary state, not a perpetual one.

If these consequences of jubilee are taken to be the measure of a just economic system, then how do we fare in the 21st century?

Here are some things to consider:

The richest 20 percent of the world owns 80 percent of the wealth in the world.

The richest 1 percent owns 40 percent of the wealth in the world.

16. Note that jubilee is not a redistribution of resources. No resources would have been unjustly taken that needed to be redistributed. A lease was purchased at a price that both parties presumably agreed upon, and when the lease ended at the jubilee year, the land was returned. Of course, it's difficult to ensure that a commercial transaction is fair when the two parties do not have the same bargaining power. The impoverished person needing the money is at the mercy of the other party, who is free to set the terms to his advantage.

17. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 210.

The world's richest eighty-five have the same amount of wealth as 3.5 billion people — eighty-five people have as much wealth as one-half of the world.¹⁸

Between 1978 and 2014, CEO pay increased by nearly 1,000 percent when adjusted for inflation. The average worker's pay increased only 11 percent over the same period.

In 1965, the ratio of between average CEO pay and average worker pay was 20-to-1. In 2015, it was 303-to-1. This increase in relative CEO pay is not matched by a corresponding increase in corporate productivity.¹⁹

These statistics do not bode well for the spirit of jubilee in our world. Now, for some particular practices:

One way that Jubilee prevented perpetual debt was through the use of loans at no interest. This may be impossible in contemporary society, but it is certainly possible to get loans at very low interest — that is, unless borrowers are poor, in which case, they must turn to so-called “payday” loan services. Interest rates at such institutions can be as high as 400 percent annually. Of course, no one intends to pay 400 percent interest, because the loans are intended to be very short-term loans designed to help the borrower respond to an immediate crisis. If there is just one crisis, then the payday loan services tend to work well. If another crisis occurs, though, before the borrower has paid back the original loan, then another loan becomes necessary, and soon the borrower is trapped underneath a growing mountain of debt.²⁰

Jubilee guaranteed a return to the land. A return to the land would be pointless, however, if the land were unusable. Critical resources include not only money and capital, but also, just as in ancient Israel, clean water and a healthy environment in which to live. These, though, are things that the poor in society often lack. The water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the Louisiana industrial corridor, often referred to as “Cancer Alley” are recent examples.²¹

The jubilee law provided security to the extended family and helped to guarantee its continued stability. One of the greatest threats to family stability in the United States currently is mass

18. Shane Claiborne, “Jubilee on Wall Street: Taking the Bull by the Horns,” *Tikkun Magazine* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 23.

19. Paul Hodgson, “Top CEOs Make More Than 300 Times the Average Worker,” *Fortune*, 2015, accessed December 17, 2017, <http://fortune.com/2015/06/22/ceo-vs-worker-pay/>.

20. The data on payday loans is complex. Some studies show that the industry is a needed benefit for some. Other studies seem to show that the loans have harmful effects on borrowers. What is clear is that payday loans work well for 60% of borrowers, but can be devastating for the other 40%. See Stephen J. Dubner's interview with people in, the people who study, and people who advocate for users of, the payday loan industry. Stephen J. Dubner, “Are Payday Loans Really as Evil as People Say?,” *Freakonomics Radio*, 2016, accessed December 17, 2017, <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/payday-loans/>

21. Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 52.

incarceration. In 2015, there more than 2.17 million people incarcerated in the United States²² A majority of those incarcerated have minor children, and 45 percent of them were living with their children before they were imprisoned. A recent incarceration reduces the likelihood of owning a vehicle and having a bank account, both valuable for procuring housing and employment. Incarceration leads to a loss of assets both for the prisoner and for their immediate family members.²³ Only one-third of families with an incarcerated family member are able to meet their family's basic needs. More than 75 percent of former inmates report that finding employment is either difficult or impossible. 67 percent are either unemployed or underemployed five years after release. Quality housing is much more difficult to find. Fees, fines, and income loss lead to increased debt and decreased economic opportunities. Alicia Walters, Movement Building Director at Forward Together, describes the effects of mass incarceration this way: "Decades of bad policy have torn families apart, typically leaving mothers to make up the difference and bear the brunt of these costs."²⁴

A troubling trend is the generation of revenue for cities by law enforcement, a trend that came to light after the civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. A Department of Justice investigation found that 1.38 million dollars of the city's revenue was generated by the municipal court in 2010. By 2014, the city had budgeted for 2.63 million dollars of revenue to be produced by the court. This revenue was generated using unjust police and municipal court practices that disproportionately targeted African-Americans. African-Americans were over twice as likely to be subjected to a search, even though white drivers were far more likely to be found in possession of contraband. African-Americans were more likely to be cited and arrested than whites for the same violations. Initial citations were compounded by fines for non-payment, even when attempts were made to make partial payments. For one woman, an initial 151 dollar fine turned into a 1,091 dollar expense — the consequences of a payday loan without the benefits of the loan.²⁵

Finally, entry-level, minimum wage jobs may be stepping-stones to a better life for suburban youth, but are a trap for the working poor. They tend to pay so little, that there is little opportunity to save money for the security deposit of one month's rent on an inexpensive apartment. This forces workers to stay in more expensive residential motels. Housing with no kitchen facilities means that food becomes much more expensive. Working hours are sporadic, making child-care

22. This is the second highest incarceration rate (698 per 100,000) in the world, surpassed only by the Republic of Seychelles, an island nation in the Indian Ocean. The rate for all European countries under 200 per 100,000. Canada's incarceration rate is 106 per 100,000.

23. Paola Scommengam, "Studies Document Mass Incarceration's Toll on Families," Population Reference Bureau, March 2017, accessed December 18, 2017, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2017/Mass-Incarcerations-Toll-on-Families.aspx>.

24. Wesley Lowery, "Former Inmates: Incarceration Makes Economic Stability Nearly Impossible for Our Families," The Washington Post, 2015, accessed December 18, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/09/15/former-inmates-incarceration-makes-economic-stability-nearly-impossible-for-our-families/?utm_term=.fcdd3778f3dc.

25. *Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department* (United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2015), accessed December 18, 2017, https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf.

impossible to arrange.²⁶ These positions often offer neither vacation time nor sick leave. One broken fan belt leads to a day of missed work, which, in turn, leads to the loss of one's job, and ultimately homelessness.

3 RECOVERING JUBILEE

We, like Israel, have forsaken the spirit of jubilee, albeit not always consciously or intentionally. We often just do not realize the systemic obstacles that keep our fellow human beings in poverty. Instead, we blame poverty on those who are poor.

There is hope, though.

Religious communities are taking the lead in advocating for more just lending practices. We also need to become greater advocates for creation care; not simply with respect to global climate change, but also to ensure that all people have access to clean water and healthy communities.

We need to develop more programs like the poverty simulations of Savannah, Georgia. Government, business, and civic leaders spend several hours role-playing as people in, or near, poverty. In the simulation, they learn the challenges that people with little resources face. These simulations sometimes lead to genuine structural changes that can radically improve the ability of people to escape poverty.²⁷

The jubilee demonstrated God's concern for the family. There is a tendency now to attempt to protect the family solely by an appeal to virtue or duty, penalizing those who neglect their moral obligations.²⁸ Virtue, though, is little help if external economic forces split the family. There is certainly a moral component to the jubilee law, but it does not end there. The jubilee also protected the family with structural mechanisms that prevented economic catastrophe.

Ensuring economic security is a means of protecting the family, but the converse holds also. The stability and durability of the family is itself a means to economic security. Only five percent of American families that are headed by a married couple live below the poverty line. If the head of the family is an unmarried man, then that number increases to thirteen percent. If the head of

26. All things discovered by Barbara Ehrenreich when, in preparing for her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, she took jobs in the various low-wage entry level positions that are generally available to women. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010)

27. See Steve Inskeep, "A City Steps Up: Savannah Confronts Poverty," 2006, accessed December 17, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5232545>. These changes can be simple. A president of a bank was assigned a role of a single mother that was dependent on public transportation. He realized that he, in that role, could not get a better job without a car, but could not get a car without a loan. He also realized that he could not get a loan at his own bank, because the bank closed before his shift was over. After the simulation, he promptly extended banking hours.

28. This is an example of what psychologists call the fundamental attribution error, overestimating the role that character plays in explaining human behavior, while underestimating the role of the situation.

the family is an unmarried woman, it jumps to 29 percent, even with government assistance.²⁹ and³⁰

Education is also an important factor in economic well-being. 24 percent of those who fail to finish high school live in poverty. If a person simply finishes high school, then that drops to 11 percent. Even in single-parent families, increased access to education of the parent can drastically improve the well-being of children.³¹

There is no doubt that poor choices can lead to broken families or a failure to graduate from high school. There is also no doubt that young people are sometimes forced to make difficult choices between finishing their education and providing for their siblings. Even so, the jubilee law is not concerned with why a family has lost its power to support itself, only that it has. The jubilee was a means to restoring social dignity to those families that had lost it. This should prompt a critical analysis of our systems of retributive justice, social welfare programs, and any legislation with social and economic effects.³²

Some of these changes would cost very little. Others may be significantly more expensive. A commitment to jubilee frees us from the fear of the cost of acting. The jubilee proclaimed the both the sovereignty of God over the land and his people, but also his providential blessing during the fallow season.

It is significant that the jubilee was proclaimed on the Day of Atonement. The practice of jubilee was an intrinsic part of Israel's experience of God's forgiveness. Recognizing that one has been forgiven and freed by God should result in forgiveness and liberty being given to others.³³

When Jesus framed his own mission in the context of jubilee. To live in the spirit of jubilee is to acknowledge the sovereignty of God and to trust in his providential care. It is to experience God's atonement and to practice his justice. Finally, it is to hope in the great promise of our reconciliation, both to God and to each other. Jesus taught us "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." If we are to do so without hypocrisy, we must assume that jubilee is our mission as well.

29. Steve Monsma, *Healing for a Broken World: Christian Perspectives on Public Policy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 136.

30. Stephen D. Sugarman, "Single-Parent Families," in *All Our Families: New Policies for a New Century*, 2d, ed. Mary Ann Mason, Arlene Skolnick, and Stephen D. Sugarman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 14–39.

31. Eun Koh et al., "Generational Impact of Single-Parent Scholarships: Educational Achievement of Children in Single-Parent Families," *Journal of Family Issues* 38, no. 5 (2017): 607–632, doi:10.1177/0192513X15576963, eprint: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X15576963>, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X15576963>.

32. As this is being written, the United States Congress is about to pass far-reaching changes to the tax code. It appears, unfortunately, that the direct beneficiaries of these changes will be the wealthy, not working families.

33. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord*, 212.

REFERENCES

- Bergsma, John Sietze. *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*. Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 115. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- Claiborne, Shane. "Jubilee on Wall Street: Taking the Bull by the Horns." *Tikkun Magazine* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 23–25.
- Dubner, Stephen J. "Are Payday Loans Really as Evil as People Say?" Freakonomics Radio. 2016. Accessed December 17, 2017. <http://freakonomics.com/podcast/payday-loans/>.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010.
- Greenhouse, Steven. "Low-Wage Workers Are Often Cheated, Study Says." *The New York Times*. September 2009. Accessed December 16, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/02/us/02wage.html>.
- Hodgson, Paul. "Top CEOs Make More Than 300 Times the Average Worker." *Fortune*. 2015. Accessed December 17, 2017. <http://fortune.com/2015/06/22/ceo-vs-worker-pay/>.
- Hoenig, Sidney B. "Sabbatical Years and the Year of Jubilee." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 59, no. 3 (January 1969): 222–236.
- Inskip, Steve. "A City Steps Up: Savannah Confronts Poverty." 2006. Accessed December 17, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5232545>.
- Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department*. United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2015. Accessed December 18, 2017. https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf.
- Kawashima, Robert S. "The Jubilee, Every 49 or 50 Years?" *Vetus Testamentum* 53, no. 1 (2003).
- Koh, Eun, Kim Stauss, Carmen Coustaut, and Caitlin Forrest. "Generational Impact of Single-Parent Scholarships: Educational Achievement of Children in Single-Parent Families." *Journal of Family Issues* 38, no. 5 (2017): 607–632. doi:10.1177/0192513X15576963. eprint: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X15576963>. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X15576963>.
- Lemche, N. P. "The Manumission of Slaves—The Fallow Year—The Jubel Year." *Vetus Testamentum* 26, no. 1 (January 1976): 38–59.

- Lowery, Wesley. "Former Inmates: Incarceration Makes Economic Stability Nearly Impossible for Our Families." *The Washington Post*. 2015. Accessed December 18, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/09/15/former-inmates-incarceration-makes-economic-stability-nearly-impossible-for-our-families/?utm_term=.fcdd3778f3dc.
- Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia D. *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.
- Monsma, Steve. *Healing for a Broken World: Christian Perspectives on Public Policy*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008.
- Pfann, Stephen. "Dated Bronze Coinage of the Sabbatical Years of Release and the First Jewish City Coin." *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 24 (2006): 101–113.
- Scommengam, Paola. "Studies Document Mass Incarceration's Toll on Families." Population Reference Bureau. March 2017. Accessed December 18, 2017. <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2017/Mass-Incarcerations-Toll-on-Families.aspx>.
- Sugarman, Stephen D. "Single-Parent Families." In *All Our Families: New Policies for a New Century*, 2d, edited by Mary Ann Mason, Arlene Skolnick, and Stephen D. Sugarman, 14–39. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.
- Yoder, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Yoster*. 2d. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.