HOLY YEAR 2000
Biblical Origins of the Year of Jubilee

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The Book of Leviticus is hardly one of the more popular books of the Holy Bible. Its pages of laws are a little numbing to read, and not exactly inspiring for Biblical students and readers.

In the Roman Catholic Lectionary’s three-year cycle of Sunday readings, selections from Leviticus appear only twice. In the two-year weekday cycle, Leviticus is used just three times.

Significance of Leviticus
This third book of the Pentateuch (the Torah or Law) is concerned mainly with the laws and rubrics. The story of the Chosen People is interrupted.

Leviticus taught the Israelites the necessity of holiness in every aspect of their lives. For example Lev 19, 8 – 19 is a clear lesson on justice.

But presently the Book of Leviticus is receiving new attention. In Lev 25, especially verses 10 – 13, Pope John Paul II has found a major sourse of information and inspiration for his letter on the Church’s preparation for what he calls the Great Jubilee 2000, the Holy Year to mark the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. Tertio Millenio Adveniente (TMA), “As the Third Millenium Draws Near”, concentrates on ancient Israel’s observance of the jubilee described in Leviticus 25.

Meaning of Jubilee
The concept of the jubilee year is detailed in Leviticus 25, 8 – 31.

The word jubilee comes to us through the Greek from of the Hebrew yobel, which means horn. The beginning of a jubilee year was proclaimed by the blast of a horn.

The law prescribed that after 49 years each man shall return to his landed
property. The soil is not to be cultivated in the 50th year. Property sold between jubilee years was considered leased rather than sold. In the ideal and tradition of ancient Israel God was the true owner of the land and all the Israelites his tenants. His land should be shared by all members of His people equally. Should an Israelite be forced to part with his land, it should return to him or his family in the jubilee year. Land monopoly in the hands of a few was considered contrary to God’s will. Land monopoly was among the social evils denounced by the prophets (Is 5, 8 – 10).

**Similar Situation Today**

The jubilee was a unique Israelite social and economic institution, and is difficult to comprehend in terms of our society. Their social conventions were nothing like ours.

The roots of the jubilee were imbedded in ancient Israel’s agricultural economy and in the kinship or family relationship structure of that society. The value of the ancient jubilee is one that peoples of every age and culture can appreciate: the family and its economic viability.

**The Concept of Family**

The Old Testament idea of family is not the modern nuclear family comprised of parents and their children.

The Hebrew expression *bet’ab* (and similar expressions in other Semitic languages), usually translated as ‘family’, literally means ‘the father’s house.’ The ‘house of the father’ was an extended family including all the descendants of a single living ancestor in a single line, excluding married daughters, who joined their husband’s families.

The *bet’ab*, the father’s household, comprised the head of house, his wife or wives, his sons and their wives, all unmarried sons and daughters, and unrelated dependents such as resident labourers and slaves.

The clan was a larger grouping of several families living in the same region. The tribe was a grouping of clans.

The people of ancient Israel identified themselves by family, clan, and tribe.
The Importance of Land

The idea of jubilee developed as an economic strategy to protect the family. Like all nations of the world at that time, Israel had an agricultural economy. Ownership of land was the chief means of production, the difference between wealth and poverty.

In most ancient countries the land was owned by kings and nobles. The rest of the population were simply tenant farmers. In Egypt, for example, the temples and their priests controlled about 80% of the arable land. Most Egyptians were like serfs who worked the temple holdings. When the Israelite tribes occupied Canaan, they broke with that pattern of land distribution which stratified societies economically.

Israel aspired to be a community of brothers and sisters under God, people who had equal access to the means of production, arable land. This new economy was based on two principles: the land was to be distributed equitably and the land owned by families was inalienable.

The Israelite tribes divided the land of Canaan among their clans and families. The amount each received was based on its size. The Book of Numbers explains the details.

To maintain the system of equitable distribution, Israelite law did not allow the land to be bought and sold as a commercial asset. Each family was to maintain its land as an inheritance from God as Deuteronomy directed. One function of the clan was to guard that the land holdings of the families remained intact.

Problems with Property

Land was a family value. The story of Naboth’s vineyard in 1 Kings 21 illustrates this. Human avarice provoked problems concerning the ownership of land. Farming was difficult in ancient Israel as elsewhere. Setbacks and disaster were always threatening the small landowners who were subsistence farmers. Crops were not always sufficient. Raiding nomads, wartime incursions, oppressive taxation by despots, and natural disasters were regular occurrences. Some small landowners were tempted to sell in times of difficulty, and the greedy were ready to take advantage of such a predicament. People without land in an agricultural economy were faced with destitution.
In principle no one was to be poor in Israel (Dt 15,4). All families were to have sufficient land to support themselves. But it was not always possible for each family to maintain its hold on its land. In critical situations the unprincipled acted unscrupulously in buying small farms to amass wealth for themselves, something Isaiah condemned (5,8).

To take advantage of another family’s misfortune by buying its land undermined the unique economic system of ancient Israel. Then as now, an economy could be controlled by a few powerful landowners who could subject others to tenant farming.

**Saved by the Sabbath**

In Leviticus 25 we find the economic plan for maintaining the values of equitable land distribution and inalienable ownership of land. Verses 1-7 describe the law of the sabbatical year. This is a development of the law in Exodus 23, 10-11 that required Israelite farmers to give their land a Sabbath rest every seventh year to benefit the poor. In that season the natural produce of the land was free for the taking. Deuteronomy 15, 1-2 elaborates on this law by requiring forgiveness of debts during the Sabbath year.

The next verses (Lev 25, 8-12) explain the jubilee, which is the 50th year, the year following the seventh sabbatical year. The twofold theme concerns liberty and return. “This 50th year you shall make sacred by proclaiming liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when everyone of you shall return to his own property, every one to his own family estate” (25, 10).

The jubilee freed every poor family from the burden of debt. Family members sold into slavery to relieve their family’s indebtedness were freed to return and any land that was sold reverted to the family who had mortgaged it. The intention of this law was to prevent a permanent underclass in Israelite society.

Leviticus makes it clear that it is impossible to sell land. The landowner was merely selling the use of his land for a time. In the jubilee year land was restored to the original owners to enable them to make a fresh start.

Since the Israelites were the descendants of the Hebrew slaves, it was not appropriate for them to claim another Israelite as their property. The jubilee offered a means of freeing those held as slaves to settle their debts.
Considering Land as “Sacrament”

If families found it necessary to sell their land to alleviate severe circumstances, the sale could not be permanent. A family’s separation from its land could last only until the next jubilee, not more than a generation.

But in addition to the jubilee’s economic principle, the jubilee was also an expression of Israel’s faith. It was a fundamental belief that their land belonged to God (Ex 15, 13. 17).

Possession of the land was for the ancient Israelites a “sacrament”, enabling an authentic experience of God. The land was tangible witness to Israel’s relationship with God and its moral consequences. An Israelite family working its land was expressing its experience of God’s goodness, bounty, and providence. Loss of land cut off people from God’s influence in their lives.

Leviticus taught Israel to consider the jubilee as a holy event, a practical demonstration of faith.

The jubilee affirmed God’s sovereignty. The land of Israel belonged to God not to Israel. The jubilee acknowledged that the land was a gift, not a right.

Like the Hebrew slaves delivered from Egyptian bondage, all Israel was once in the position of helplessness. The jubilee provided people of means an opportunity to do for their compatriots in need what God had done for them. The jubilee reminded them that all people are in God’s debt.

Leviticus mandated that the jubilee begin with the blowing of a horn on the Day of Atonement, the day on which all Israel fasts and prays for forgiveness. The jubilee presented an opportunity for Israel to experience God’s forgiveness by pardoning debts and restoring all bond slaves to their families.

Isaiah had criticized Israel for being a society of elaborate ceremonies but without social justice. He called for the fulfillment of the obligations of kinship (58, 6-7).

The first Christians were committed to the ideal of jubilee. The mutual economic support they gave each other was inspired by the final jubilee, which they believed
began with the public ministry of Jesus. Acts 4, 34 paraphrases Deuteronomy 15, 4 when it declares that no one in the Christian community was in need because those who believed shared their goods with one another.

Call for a New Jubilee

The social and economic values embodied in the jubilee year remain basic to Christianity. They are a significant part of our heritage from the religion of ancient Israel. Although the social conventions and economic institutions of the first millenium before Christ are not the same as those of today, they do exemplify for those who are approaching the third millenium after Christ the values of Leviticus which passed into the Good News. Those values ought to help shape the Christian presence in our world.

The Holy Father directs our attention to the jubilee of the Old Testament to demonstrate that the jubilee is still a powerful model for Christian social ethics. In Tertio Milenio Adveniente Pope John Paul II recalls that the “jubilee year was meant to restore equality among all the children of Israel, offering new possibilities to families which had lost their property and even their personal freedom” (TMA, 13). He explains how the jubilee critiques an economic system that accumulates land and wealth and concentrates them in the hands of a few, how it challenges any form of totalitarianism that destroys personal freedom and responsibility (TMA, 35).

The Holy Father considers the Church’s teaching on social justice an ideal preparation for the new millenium (TMA, 22) Then he challenges all Catholics to raise “their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not cancelling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations” (TMA, 51).

A special concern shared by the Pope, American society, and many nations is the family, the focus of identity and the means of exercising responsibility and achieving security. The jubilee protected families. What good were “family values” if families were being destroyed by economic pressures?

To prevent the total economic collapse of the family and the impoverishment of its members, the jubilee restored the family’s dignity by giving back its economic
viability. Today Christians are called to develop a means to help families as the jubilee did.

In anticipating the Third Christian Millenium the emphasis is the Christian hope for the future, for the restoration of humanity and nature to their original purpose by assisting families to reclaim their inheritance and restore the equitable distribution of land according to God’s intention.

To accomplish this, Christians are invited to a life of integrity that will acknowledge God’s sovereignty and providence, experience God’s forgiveness, practise God’s justice, and strive for the final and complete restoration of this world according to God’s will.

The Book of Leviticus provides a springboard for “the Great Jubilee” (TMA, 17) proclaimed by the Holy Father. It is a wellspring of the family values and social justice that will help shape the manner in which we Christians will celebrate our Great Jubilee.

The year 2000 is not meant to be a continuous party. We are called to renew and intensify our acceptance of Jesus Christ as God made man. It heralds a new beginning.

**Conclusion**

This was the Hebrew heritage of the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The spirit of Jubilee is embodied in the Canticle of Mary (Luke 1, 46-55), which is frequently used in the liturgical prayer life of the Church and is a favorite prayer of many in their personal devotional life.

We want the world to be a better place. We want to be better people. This calls for the reawakening and the revitalization of the spiritual instinct within each person.

Faith in Jesus Christ today means tomorrow must be different for me and for society. We are called to make a new start. This is the message of the Third Millenium. Mary, the first and most faithful disciple of Jesus, is our model.