

# THE VISION OF JUBILEE

## *A Starting Point for Healthcare Reform In the United States*

*This fiftieth year you shall make sacred by proclaiming liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you.*

—Lv 25:10

Jubilee is not one of the major images in the Judaic-Christian Scriptures. It does not appear as frequently as the image of covenant or kingdom or prophecy. Jubilee itself is described in only two passages, both of which are found in the book of Leviticus (Lv 25:1-55; 27:16-24). Although the concept of Jubilee has been reflected in the notion of celebrations at particular moments (e.g., men and women religious celebrate their silver and golden anniversaries in terms of "jubilees"), the truly biblical concept of Jubilee has not been a major influence in Judaic-Christian theology. Recent writings, however, have witnessed a rediscovery of Jubilee and of its contemporary significance (see **Box**, p. 31).

The significance of a biblical image does not lie in its exact application to a contemporary situation. Rather, it is manifested as a context, an impetus for reflection, a grounding of our actions. When we examine Jubilee in terms of systemic healthcare reform in the United States, its significance resides not in a call to exact duplication but in the challenge it offers, the vision it contains, the hope from which it arises.

### THE CONCEPT OF JUBILEE

Chapter 25 of Leviticus provides a description of Jubilee. The chapter begins by talking about the Sabbath. This earlier tradition declared that each seven years the land was to lie fallow, slaves were to be liberated, and debts were to be released. No



crops were planted, and all the people ate from what grew naturally in the fields. Jubilee was to take place after seven Sabbaths (every 50 years). On the Day of Atonement, the most sacred day of the year, the ram's horn was to be sounded and Jubilee would begin.

The Jubilee provisions exceeded those of the Sabbath. The land was allowed to rest as it was in Sabbath years, but it was also redistributed. All land reverted to its original owners in Jubilee. Families and tribes who had lost their land through debt or some other loss returned to this land, and it became theirs once again. Slaves were released, and the gap between the rich and the poor was eliminated. At Jubilee, everyone was once again on an equal footing. Jubilee was a general liberation: The land was freed to rest and to return to its original owners, the slaves were liberated, and debts were released.

Whereas Sabbath was an older tradition, Jubilee was a new thing. It represented a new vision for society, a profound reform that would reverse the wrongs of previous times.

### THE BROADER CONTEXT

The full import of Jubilee becomes clearer when we look at some broader themes expressed in the Jubilee legislation.

**Time** The call for Jubilee reflects a particular understanding of time. Time is sacred, and it is of God. Time is neither a mere cyclical repetition of seasons, nor a purely human invention. God has created time and indicates how it must be revered and used. Sabbath and Jubilee are celebrated in imitation of the Creator who rested on the seventh day and thus blessed it and made it holy (Gn 2:3).

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Furthermore, the Jubilee text reminds us of the importance of rest and of contemplation in our use of time. Because time is sacred, it must be used with reverence and for reverence.

**Ownership** The redistribution of the land at Jubilee is based on the belief that only God owns the land. The land was given to the people by God at the end of the Exodus journey. It was for their use and cultivation, but it did not belong to them. Jubilee reminds

us that God is the owner of all and that the people are only caretakers and stewards. They must hold ownership lightly and humbly. Their use of the land must be in accord with the wishes of the Creator.

**Covenant** At the very heart of Jubilee is the reality of covenant. The Hebrew people understood themselves as joined with God and with each other. Chosen by God, they belonged to Yahweh and Yahweh belonged to them. The gift of the law symbolized this belonging. As God's people, they belonged to each other and were responsible for each other. Ways of life that led to the creation of rich and poor were unacceptable. Jubilee seeks to erase the gap between the rich and poor, to reestablish the fundamental equality that is the essence of covenant.

**Hope** Finally, Jubilee is an expression of brazen hope. This reform was described while the people were in exile. They could do nothing to achieve it while sojourners in a foreign land. Nonetheless, the vision was written down. Its articulation sprang from a conviction that the people would return to their land. When they did, they would create a new, more faithful society.

Recognizing that God had always been faithful in the past, the writers of the vision of Jubilee believed that God's fidelity had not abandoned them. Even more, they dared to believe in a future that would be even better than the best of their past.

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**ECHOES OF JUBILEE**

Although the word "Jubilee" appears rarely outside the Leviticus texts, significant echoes of the vision of Jubilee arise elsewhere. Isaiah 61:1-3 is a prophetic vision of the restoration of Zion. The text presents a new vision, a new order. It promises the announcement of a "year of favor from the Lord" (Is 61:2). This year of favor, like the Jubilee year, would both reverse and restore. It would reverse former injustices even as it restored the people,

the land, and the integrity of the people.

In the scene that initiates the public ministry of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, the Isaiah text is used as a summary description of the Jesus' mission. We are told that Jesus reads the Isaiah text and then sits down (the position of authority) and declares, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21).

In a very real sense, Jesus is the bringer of Jubilee. His work of announcing the good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives, restoring sight to the blind, and allowing the oppressed to go free is a manifestation of the Jubilee promise. When God reigns, Jubilee does not happen every 50 years; it is a constant reality. It is the constant struggle of the Christian believer to unveil and to unleash the reign of God in our world.

**JUBILEE TODAY**

Jubilee is not to be translated in all of its details. It does, however, speak to some important areas of our contemporary world. In the first place, the Jubilee vision tells us a lot about understanding *ownership*. It reminds us that we do not really own anything. All is a gift from God and must be used as God intends. What has been given to us for safekeeping must be held reverentially, responsibly, and somewhat lightly. We hold it only for the sake of others.

Second, Jubilee reminds us of *relationships*. It





reflects a deep and abiding sense of community. Jubilee cannot take place in a society that cares only for individuals. A commitment to the place of everyone within the community is fundamental. The erasure of divisions among the people, especially those created by injustice, is the very purpose of Jubilee.

Furthermore, Jubilee is a *vision*, and it tells us a lot about visions.

When we realize that this text was written while the people were in exile, we recognize that true vision knows no limits. It is limited to neither the probable nor the possible. Vision is inspired by a conviction that God is at work in history and that God will be at work in the accomplishment of the vision. The Jubilee vision did not attempt to change a few things. It represented a "new thing," a new, better reality. Jubilee speaks not so much of evolution as of revolution.

Finally, Jubilee is an expression of *hope*. Most scholars agree that the actual Jubilee never took place. They also agree that this is not of great importance. What is important is that—in a time that encouraged despair—hope prevailed. The vision of Jubilee reminds us that faith will not allow us to give up on the one who goes with us. It urges us to dream and to believe the dream will become real. It challenges us to act to make the dream come true.

### JUBILEE AND HEALTHCARE REFORM

The vision of Jubilee can perhaps offer some starting points in the struggle for reform of healthcare in the United States today. The following arise from, but do not exhaust, the promise of Jubilee:

- Jubilee is fundamentally liberation. As we approach reform, we must ask how that reform will make healthcare an experience that liberates all who are involved. Can healthcare be a reflection of God's liberation?

- Jubilee forces us to rethink our assumptions about ownership. The Jubilee vision tells us that

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ownership is neither absolute nor permanent. Is this understanding of ownership a conscious element in our vision of reform?

- Jubilee is based on covenant and community. The context of community needs to be explicit and formative in any systemic reform. How can this context affect the shape and content of reform?

- Jubilee allows everyone to start anew. It erases the gap between

the rich and the poor. How will any proposal for systemic reform erase that gap?

- Jubilee is a vision of a new thing, a sweeping reform. It reminds us not to "settle." Can we be instrumental and influential in the creation of something new?

- Jubilee is radical in its vision and scope. It leaves its creators in a place of great insecurity and vulnerability—and even greater hope. Can we allow such insecurity and vulnerability? Can we sustain the hope? □

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Mortimer Arias, "Mission and Liberation—The Jubilee: A Paradigm for Mission Today," *International Review of Mission*, January 1984, pp. 33-48.
- Robert Gnuse, "Jubilee Legislation in Leviticus: Israel's Vision of Social Reform," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, April 1985, pp. 43-48.
- Harry M. deLange, "The Jubilee Principle: Is It Relevant for Today?" *Ecumenical Review*, October 1986, pp. 437-443.
- Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1985.
- Arthur Waskow, "From Compassion to Jubilee," *Tikkum*, March-April 1990, pp. 78-81.
- Merold Westphal, "Sing Jubilee: How Leviticus 25 Could Affect Economic and Social Relations in Modern Industrial Society," *The Other Side*, March 1984, pp. 22-24.