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Leviticus 25's History of Inspiring Freedom as a Moral Challenge to Literary-Historical Interpretation

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Abstract

Though Leviticus 25's description of the Jubilee sounds unrealistically utopian to many biblical scholars, the Jubilee ideal has stimulated many movements for freedom and economic reform in the last 500 years. It most famously motivated enslaved people to resist and abolitionists to challenge the institution of slavery. Today it continues to inspire reform movements for land redistribution and fair housing, for sovereign debt relief, and for developing environmentally sustainable economies. The contrast between scholarly assessments of the chapter's meaning in its literary and ancient historical contexts and its proven power to inspire movements for freedom that were unimaginable to its writers poses a moral challenge to the conventional methods of biblical scholarship. This article describes the Jubilee's ideological context in four historical settings: in Israel's ancient Middle Eastern political economy, in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movement to abolish slavery, in contemporary movements for economic reform, and in modern biblical studies to explore how biblical scholars can credibly account for the chapter's historical and contemporary power to inspire mass freedom movements in their descriptions of the meaning of Leviticus 25.

Leviticus 25 and its Pentateuchal parallels are the principal texts in the Bible that address issues of land ownership, debt, and slavery. The chapter sounds idealistic, even utopian, by mandating that land be restored to Israelite families every fifty years in the Jubilee, when Israelite debt slaves must also be set free. Leviticus 25 states its thematic claims clearly. The semi-narrative description of how debt defaults can force sale of land, then sale of labour, and eventually sale of bodies is bracketed by YHWH's claims that "the

land is mine" (v. 23) and that the Israelites "are my slaves" (vv. 42, 55). These claims of divine ownership of land and people turn all sales of Israelite slaves and agricultural land into term contracts and leases that expire in the Jubilee year, which begins with a proclamation of "freedom" (v. 10).

This chapter has therefore been cited prominently in political conflicts over such issues in Jewish and Christian societies, especially in the last 500 years. While contextual literary and historical interpretation of this chapter has been deployed to support inequitable institutions of private property, including chattel slavery (vv. 44-46), the chapter's positive moral influence has been felt primarily through its thematic proclamations about freedom (v. 10) and the equal standing of people and land before God (vv. 23, 42, 55). This chapter's history of interpretation and influence therefore presents a moral challenge to conventional practices of scholarly biblical interpretation.

I establish parameters for addressing this moral challenge by describing the Jubilee's ideological context in four historical settings: in Israel's ancient Middle Eastern political economy, in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movement to abolish slavery, in contemporary movements for economic reform, and in modern biblical studies. This sets the stage for asking how interpreters can credibly account for the chapter's historical and contemporary power to inspire mass freedom movements in their descriptions of the meaning of Leviticus 25.

The Jubilee in its Ancient Contexts

The regulations for a Jubilee every fiftieth year (Lev. 25:8-55) express a static ideal of Israel's economy remaining just as it was in the time of Israel's settlement in the land. This ideal of each family retaining its ancestral land reflects peasant ideology (Houston 2006, 194-95) which was often politically powerful in the ancient Middle East. By grounding land grants in a divine gift, Leviticus 25 turns land tenancy into a spiritual as well as economic ideal. This religious theme is reflected in Ezekiel's vision of redistributing the land to returning exiles (Ezek. 47:13-23) and also in the divine declaration of release and forgiveness after the exile in Isa. 61:1. This spiritual ideal developed further in late Second Temple Judaism: for example, the Melchizedek document from Qumran (*11Q13*) forecast the declaration of Jubilee and Sabbath Year laws in the eschaton, when they will proclaim release from the consequences of sin.

The word, "Jubilee," however, goes unmentioned in surviving pre-rabbinic literature, apart from Leviticus 25-27 and one mention in Num. 36:4. Neither other Pentateuchal sources, nor the Prophets or Writings show any knowledge of Leviticus's rules

for Jubilee years. Only Ezekiel may reflect them by requiring the return of land gifts in שנת הדרור "the year of freedom" (Ezek. 46:17; cf. Lev. 25:10), but it does not use the word יובל "Jubilee." However, the idea of the Jubilee has wielded considerable influence in later Jewish and Christian cultures, especially in modern times, because of its economic implications.

Leviticus 25 develops much older economic ideals expressed already in third- and second-millennium Mesopotamian edicts. The ideal of continual family control of agricultural land and its produce was widespread in ancient cultures, and still is in many recent ones. It exerted pressure on kinship groups to try to support indebted members against outside creditors (Chirichigno 1993, 51; Hudson 2002, 27). Ancient rulers sometimes found it politically opportune to portray themselves as upholding this agrarian ideal by defending dispossessed landowners and debt slaves. At royal inaugurations and, sometimes, at irregular points during their reigns, Mesopotamian kings would proclaim the cancellation of debts and the liberation of debt slaves (see Chirichigno 1993, 55-60, 85-92). Decrees to "establish equity" were repeatedly issued six to ten year apart by several kings of lower Mesopotamia in the second millennium B.C.E. in order to cancel taxes, cancel debts or arrears, and issue other economic reforms (Westbrook 1991, 45-46; Chirichigno 1993, 57-58; Hudson 2002, 29-32; Kaplan 2019, 185-87). Cancelling debts led to releasing debt slaves and returning forfeit property. Documents recording petitions and legal cases caused by these decrees show that they were enforced and had real economic effects. The best-preserved Mesopotamian decree of release (Ammi-sadaqa's Edict §21; Chirichigno 1993, 89) explicitly excluded chattel slaves from being released, just like Lev. 25:44-46. In first-millennium Mesopotamia and Egypt, however, declarations of liberty also freed exiles and prisoners of war (Weinfeld 1995, 9-15, 75-96, 140; Milgrom 2001, 2167-68).

Ray Westbrook (1991, 47) argued that such decrees served to tamp down social unrest due to economic inequality and to legitimize the king's rule as just and blessed by the gods. They also shored up the manpower needed for armies, which is why Hammurabi's Laws (§§26-39) prohibited the forfeiture of soldiers' lands due to unpaid debts (Hudson 2002, 30). Plutarch recorded such edicts also in Greek cities, where they served the political goals of both autocracy and democracy (cf. *Ag. Cleom.* 7, 8, with *Dion* 37:5). Solon's cancellations of debts and redistribution of Athenian lands in the early sixth century B.C.E. were celebrated as giving Athenians greater equality, but Plato observed that such actions generate social unrest as much as they settle it (Plato, *Laws*, 3.684, 5.735; Weinfeld 1995, 11, 145). Greek sources

therefore depicted debt cancellation measures, according to Lucia Cecchet (2018, 128), "either as related to the prevention or ending of civil strife, or, on the contrary, as a tool employed by demagogues to gain the people's support and fuel turmoil in the city." She noted that Athenian jurors swore an oath to *not* cancel debts.

This ideal also appears in the Hebrew Bible in the complaints of Israel's prophets against large landowners who, by aggregating land, oppressed small farmers economically:

Woe to those who plot evil and wicked deed on their beds.
When morning dawns, they do it because it lies in their power.
They desire fields and seize them, houses and take them away.
They exploit men (sg) and their houses, people and their inheritance.

(Mic. 2:1-2; cf. Isa. 3:13-15; 5:8; Hos. 12:9; Amos 2:6-8; 5:11; 8:4-6; Ezek. 46:18)

Leviticus 25 modified this ancient ideal of preserving peasant land holdings by making the years of release or freedom (דְּרוֹר v. 10; cf. Ezek. 46:17; Isa. 61:1; Jer. 34:8, 15, 17) fall predictably on every "fiftieth" year.¹ This has the practical effect of turning sales of inherited land and debt slavery into tenancy and labour agreements with set terms that expire at the next Jubilee. Therefore, prices for land and debt slaves must be adjusted to reflect these terms (vv. 15-16, 50-52; Guillaume 2012, 193). Just as in Mesopotamia, where human kings displayed their justice by proclaiming release, these laws show the justice of YHWH, Israel's divine king (Weinfeld 1995, 10; Watts 1999, 91-109). YHWH's *torah*, however, does not consist of occasional edicts but of "permanent mandates throughout your generations" (e.g. regarding the Sabbath in Lev. 23:14, 21, 31, 41; also 3:17; 10:9; 24:3). Therefore Leviticus 25 mandates periodic restoration of the Israelites' property, because YHWH claims that "the land is mine. You live under my custody like immigrant tenants" (v. 23).

Many historians have argued that fallow years and slave releases would have originally been calculated separately and individually, because that makes more sense to them agriculturally and economically (see especially Wellhausen 1885, 116-20; North 1954, 33; Westbrook 1991, 51-52). This view has been challenged by the discovery of the long-standing Mesopotamian custom of

¹For arguments about the exact meaning here of the number "fifty," see Kawashima (2003), Bergsma (2005), and Kim (2010). What this debate reveals is that, despite the command to סָפַר "count off" the years (v. 8), Leviticus 25 does not explain exactly how to determine the next Jubilee year. Instead, its rhetoric focuses on how to calculate payments for land in light of that future date (vv. 15-16, 27, 50-52).

royal decrees declaring universal cancellations of debts and the return of property to its original owner, which existed alongside individual periods for indentured slavery (Weinfeld 1983, 127; 1990, 43-58). Therefore, most interpreters now conclude that the writer of Leviticus adapted an old institution of unpredictable royal grants by making them repeatable and predictable (e.g. Westbrook 1991, 50-51; Milgrom 2001, 2241-42).

Leviticus 25 in the Abolition of Slavery

The ideal of the Jubilee has stimulated many attempts to reform society and economics for the better. It has been enlisted since the sixteenth century in causes to redistribute land and reduce the debts of individuals and of nations. In the seventeenth century, Leviticus 25 provided a precedent for land reform and redistribution for intellectuals like Baruch Spinoza, Carlo Sigonio, and Petrus Cunaeus (Nelson 2010, 71-78, 130-34; Stökl 2018, 696-97) and for populist movements like the agrarian Diggers and Jacobites in England (Parten 2020, 301).

The Jubilee exerted more profound and far-reaching influence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movements to oppose and abolish slavery. This was first-of-all the case for many slaves themselves. The Jubilee ideal permeated the oral traditions of enslaved Black people in North America, as preserved in songs of the era. The *Song of the Coffle Gang* is a famous example:

See these poor souls from Africa,
Transported to America:
We are stolen and sold to Georgia, will you go along with
me?
We are stolen and sold to Georgia, go sound the jubilee.
See wives and husbands sold apart,
The children's screams! — it breaks my heart;
There's a better day a coming, will you go along with me?
There's a better day a coming, go sound the jubilee.²

For African Americans, as Bennett Parten (2020, 306) observed, "faith in the idea of a coming Jubilee affirmed the belief that there was justice in the world and that one day justice would reign, just as God had always planned." The Jubilee also became a rallying cry for the abolitionist movement. The Jubilee idea united the freedom ideal with millennial expectations to generate confidence in the success of the abolitionist movement among Blacks and White abolitionists alike. Thus Frederick Douglass in 1857

²*Song of the Coffle Gang*, printed in *The Liberty Minstrel*, compiled by George Washington Clark (New York, 1844), and in *The Anti-Slavery Harp*, compiled by William W. Brown (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1848), <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/absowwba29t.html>.

confidently expected "a celebration of the American Jubilee, in which four millions of our countrymen shall rejoice in freedom." Such rhetoric from slaves and many other abolitionists in addition to Douglass led Parten (2020, 298) to conclude that the idea of the Jubilee provided

a collective means of imaging profound political change.

Indeed, as a theory of history with millennial connotations, Jubilee encased the movement's faith in moral progress and divine inevitability in a powerful and accessible idea.

Leviticus 25's influence has not always been so positive. Verses 39-46 and other biblical slave texts seem to have naturalized the two-tier model of American slavery (see further in Watts 2021). The conversion of Native Americans to Christianity, first in Spanish and Portuguese colonies, raised the question of their legal status. Franciscan friars justified their missionary activities as, among other things, providing Indians with legal rights against enslavement. In reaction, the medieval prohibition on enslaving Christians was limited to Europeans, that is, to White people. Non-White peoples of the Americas and Africa were subject to chattel slavery regardless of whether they were Christians or not. Though rarely cited, Leviticus 25's rule that Israelites be enslaved only temporarily while foreigners can be enslaved permanently (vv. 44-46) seems to have naturalized the system of White indenture and Black chattel slavery in the early North American colonies. White indentured slaves were used to populate the English colonies in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while the slave trade in African Blacks supplied even more agricultural labour. The absolute distinction between indentured slaves and chattel slaves is illustrated by the fact that northern U.S. states that abolished slavery continued to allow indentured servitude (Steinfeld 1991, 13). Lack of overt challenges to this system in the seventeenth century left the biblical justification for it mostly implicit.

Biblical slave texts moved from unchallenged cultural background to polemical foreground in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when abolitionists mounted explicitly biblical arguments against slavery. In Massachusetts in 1700, Samuel Sewell published a tract citing biblical texts to argue for abolishing slavery. He included Lev. 25:39, 46 to show that Israelites could not enslave each other, and referred to other biblical texts to demonstrate the common humanity of all people (Johnson 2010, 232). Within the year, a slave-owner responded in print, citing Lev. 25:44-46 and other biblical texts to justify the institution of slavery (Moore 1866, 83, 87, 251). Over the next century-and-a-half, Quakers and Evangelicals wielded the Bible to denounce slavery and the slave trade, while enslavers answered with point-by-point

exegesis. For example, in 1780-81, a New Jersey newspaper published competing essays attacking and defending slavery. The defenders cited Lev. 25:44-46 not only to show God's endorsement of chattel slavery but also "the special care God took of property" (see Dreisbach and Hall 2014, 188). While religious fervour stirred the abolitionist movement, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese (2005, 473) observed also that "religion became the *sine qua non* for the South's defence of slavery."

Protestant convictions on both sides led debaters to shed previously common appeals to Roman law and natural law (Watts 2021), and instead argue on the basis of scriptural mandates alone. So, in 1844, a defender of slavery claimed that "I recognize no code of morals but that proclaimed in the Sacred Scripture." He then cited Lev. 25:44-46 to argue that God sanctions slavery in the American South because it is like biblical slavery of foreigners (Mell 1844, 9-10; similarly Priest 1852, 119-20). Other defenders of slavery argued that the appearance of Lev. 25:44-46 in the same biblical book as 19:18 shows that slavery is compatible with the love commandment, as well as with the Golden Rule (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005, 261). American Jews also engaged in this debate. For example, Rabbi M. J. Raphall (1861) preached in New York City that the Bible does not prohibit slavery but rather endorses it, citing Lev. 25:44-46 and Deut. 22:3.

Abolitionists countered by arguing that biblical slave rules applied only to ancient Canaanites, or by contesting the translation of the vocabulary (is עֶבֶד "slave" or "servant"?), or by maintaining that Israelites were required to treat slaves as servants who were part of their families (Lev. 25:39), or by arguing that the Bible's slavery rules are superseded by the love commandment (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005, 508-510). They evoked the ideal of release in the Jubilee (25:40) to argue for abolishing the institution of slavery, a rhetoric shared by the slaves themselves. Such arguments continue today in the efforts of many biblical interpreters to show that biblical texts do not or need not be read as endorsing slavery if they are contextualized against other ancient cultures as progressive improvements in law and morality (e.g. C. J. H. Wright 1990, 239-49; D. Wright 2010, 126).

Defenders of slavery, however, pointed to the rules for foreign chattel slaves in vv. 44-46 to argue that slavery is not only permitted, but actually commanded by scripture (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005, 509-510). They emphasized the coexistence of the love commandment with slavery rules even within Leviticus 19, as well as the NT's toleration of the institution (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; Tit. 2:9-10; Philemon; 1 Pet. 2:18-21a). Some prominent abolitionists therefore turned away from the literal text of ancient scripture to embrace contemporary inspiration by the

Holy Spirit, but Southern preachers invoked the Holy Spirit in defence of slavery, too (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 2005, 487, 542, 565). The issue of slavery in America was not settled by theological argument, much less by scriptural exegesis, but rather by a brutal civil war. This outcome led Fox-Genovese and Genovese (2005, 526) to conclude that

the abolitionists did not make the case for slavery as sin—that is, as condemned in Scripture. The proslavery protagonists proved so strong in their appeal to Scripture as to make comprehensible the readiness with which southern whites satisfied themselves that God sanctioned slavery.

This conclusion is misleading, however, on the longer scale of history. What was exceptional in nineteenth-century America was not that enslavers used religion to justify holding labourers in bondage. That had been the case more or less explicitly for millennia. What changed is that people who were neither enslaved nor enslavers became so morally outraged about the institution of slavery that they abolished it legally in Britain and elsewhere and, in the United States, fought a war to suppress it. Of course, other issues also motivated the American combatants, especially the defence of national union and loyalty to individual states. Nevertheless, the movement to abolish slavery lit the fuse and, at least by the end of the Civil War if not earlier, had become its highest justification in the minds of most Unionists. (For the argument that Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party intended to abolish slavery from the very beginning of the war, see Oakes 2012.)

With the success of the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement, the moral idealism of Leviticus 25's declaration of "release" in the Jubilee finally overwhelmed this chapter's support for holding foreigners as chattel slaves. In many people's minds, biblical slave laws could not withstand the universalism implicit in commands to love neighbour and immigrant (Lev. 19:18, 34; Deut. 10:19; quoted in Matt. 5:43–48; 19:19; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–37; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; Jam. 2:8) that was intensified by biblical claims for human equality before God (Lev. 24:22; also Job 31:15; Matt. 28:19; Acts 17:26; Gal. 3:28; so e.g. Equiano 1789/2003, 331–34; see Davis 1984, 130–36). Jesus' quotation in Luke 4:18 of the prophetic declaration of freedom to captives (Isa. 61:1) was taken as a mandate for abolition. The Christian tendency to interpret law on the basis of underlying principle (Matt. 7:12) became, in the nineteenth century, a political force to abolish the slave trade and slavery throughout the Atlantic world.

When emancipation from slavery finally came about in the United States in 1863–65, the liberated slaves celebrated it as the coming of Jubilee. Their hopes for Jubilee, however, were more

concrete than those of their White allies. The Jubilee ideal as expressed in Leviticus 25 created the expectation that the liberated farmers would receive ownership of the land they had been working when enslaved (Parten 2020, 312-13). The policies of Reconstruction failed to meet these expectations, which were completely betrayed by Reconstruction's abandonment in 1877. Nevertheless, the anniversaries of January 1st, 1863, when U.S. President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves, and June 19th "Juneteenth," 1865, when the Proclamation finally reached Galveston, Texas, continue to be celebrated in African-American communities to this day as "Jubilee." Juneteenth was finally declared a national holiday in the United States in 2021.

Despite the legal abolition of slavery in the nineteenth centuries, slavery and forced labour has not yet been completely relegated to the past. Human traffickers still use violence and fraud to trap millions of people into coerced labor that is poorly compensated or not paid at all. Indentured servitude flourishes in many countries and often enables coercion and abuse like slavery (Hepburn and Simon 2013; Malloch 2016). Publicity about human trafficking has led to new legislation against it in the twenty-first century by the United Nations and by many nations (Allain 2013). Nevertheless, indentured servitude's convenience for employers seeking long-term and low-cost labour has also continued to generate political proposals for weakening Western labour laws (Ron and Norwood 2018).

Leviticus 25:44-46 and the Pentateuch's other slave laws remain influential parts of the Bible despite slavery's legal abolition. Biblical interpreters therefore need to be aware that their audiences still include people suffering enslavement in one form or another, as well as people conscious of being descended from slaves, whose views about the text should be taken into account. For example, Mende Nazer, who was enslaved in her native Sudan for six years, told Bernadette Brooten:

I am disturbed that Muslim, Jewish, and Christian texts allow slavery and that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim people practiced slavery for so many hundreds of years. ... I have not found a form of slavery that was better than others. ... there are some differences, but the differences do not change what it is to be enslaved. I understand that some Jewish, Christian, and Muslim people believe that their religions made slavery more humane. But I don't think that any form of slavery is humane. (Brooten 2010, 310-11)

Scriptural endorsements for enslaving people also continue to wield a negative influence on a broader range of attitudes about human exploitation, as Jennifer Glancy (2010, 144) pointed out:

Christian indifference to the sexual exploitation of slaves continues to play itself out in various ways in contemporary churches and ... in modern ... society. ... For example, when a bishop treats a priest who has sexually abused a child as a wayward sinner who requires forgiveness and restoration ... while ignoring or minimizing the harm done to the child, the bishop's moral choices conform to the priorities of ancient Christian tradition In a different vein, ... many Americans view sexual violence in prison, for example, as an ordinary component of state-mandated punishment.

Therefore, not only history but also contemporary human trafficking and exploitation implicate the Bible and biblical studies for perpetuating practices and attitudes that permit or excuse violent abuse of other people. These conditions impose a moral imperative to use the tools of biblical scholarship and bible publishing to counter the text's pernicious influence, as Mende Nazer said explicitly:

I call upon scholars of these religions not only to describe slavery in these historical texts, or to compare the different forms of slavery in these texts, but also to find religious solutions to these texts' toleration of slavery. Description and comparison are not enough. ... People need to listen to those who have experienced slavery if they want to begin to understand it. (Brooten 2010, 316)

Though hardly sufficient by itself, one way of responding to this moral imperative is to strike through vv. 44-46 and other endorsements of slavery in the typography of the HB and the NT, as I am doing in my commentary on Leviticus (Watts forthcoming; also Watts 2019), to mark clearly their failure to meet the most basic standards of contemporary Jewish and Christian ethics.

The Jubilee in Contemporary Political and Economic Rhetoric

Leviticus 25's rhetoric of Jubilee is widely recognized as promoting political and economic freedom in Jewish and Christian cultures. For example, the bell installed in the Pennsylvania State House in 1751 was inscribed with Lev. 25:10 (KJV): "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." After England's American colonies declared independence in that hall, abolitionists made the inscribed bell a symbol of their cause, calling it "the Liberty Bell." There are many other examples. The First Zionist Conference in 1897 called for establishing a fund to buy land in Palestine which would then be inalienable, only capable of being leased for forty-nine years as per Leviticus 25 (Prior 1997, 110). More recently, a "Leviticus Fund" has for four decades invested in building affordable housing in the greater New York city area under the slogan, "The Land is not ours to own for

it belongs to God," citing Lev. 25:23. "Jubilee Homes" promotes the same cause in Syracuse, New York. In Kenya today, the ruling party has been named "the Jubilee Party" since 2016. There are many more examples today of the word, "Jubilee," being used to evoke and enact the ideals expressed in Leviticus 25.

The Jubilee described in Leviticus 25 continues to motivate political movements for social justice and reform. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Jubilee 2000 campaign for sovereign debt relief mobilized prominent Catholics (e.g. Pope John Paul II), Protestants (e.g. rock musician Bono), and evangelicals (e.g. televangelist Rev. Pat Robertson) to pressure wealthy nations into relieving the debt burdens of the poorest countries. Citing the Jubilee vision of Leviticus 25 (though debt cancellation actually appears only in Deuteronomy 15), the campaign succeeded in convincing "donors to more than double the amount of debt relief In 2005, a successor [campaign] induced rich creditors to commit to write-off 100% of the debts the poorest countries owed" (Busby 2007, 249). The financial crisis of 2008, caused by speculation in housing mortgages, led to growing calls for individual debt-relief, sometimes citing Leviticus's Jubilee. One-time debt forgiveness was enacted at the national level in Iceland in 2010-12 and in Croatia in 2015 (Krantz 2016, 24-25).

The Jubilee 2000 campaign was supported by some biblical interpreters (e.g. Milgrom 2270-71), but religiously conservative and economically neo-liberal interpreters denied the relevancy of Leviticus 25 for contemporary economic conditions (Hill and Lunn 2007; Harbin 2011).³ Thus the political success of the Jubilee ideal has made it a contentious ideological topic today. While reformist interpreters try to universalize the economics of the Jubilee legislation, conservative readers try to restrict its economic application to the special circumstances of ancient Israel living on God-given land. They limit any broader implications to religious faith alone. Just as in pre-Civil War America, much biblical exegesis of Leviticus 25, both popular and scholarly, now aims to confirm the ideological inclinations of conservatives, liberals, and reformers. Nevertheless, the success of the abolitionist movement and of the Jubilee 2000 campaign illustrates the power of the Jubilee idea to break through the constraints of narrow exegesis to motivate large-scale social justice movements.

³Libertarian funders (the industrialist brothers, Charles Koch and David Koch) paid for the writing and distribution of this neo-liberal critique in popularized versions such as Art Lindsley's "5 Myths about Jubilee" (2012) distributed by *The Gospel Coalition* and the Family Research Council.

Today, many commentators recognize Leviticus 25 as a resource for advocating greater economic justice both on a global and a local scale beyond issues of debt and slavery. For example, Thomas Hieke (2013, 1045-46) argued that the chapter's emphasis on returning to ancestral lands provides a call to stabilize the politics and economics of nations to allow refugees to return home. By far the most common contemporary application of Leviticus 25 engages the environmental crisis. Biblical interpreters have started to invoke Leviticus 25 in efforts to make agricultural production more ecologically sustainable (e.g. Davis 2009, 90-94; Krantz 2016; Simkins 2020, 217-29). The chapter's emphasis on God's ownership of the land (25:23) resembles claims by many indigenous cultures that land is inalienable and even sacred. Leviticus 25 has therefore been recruited into efforts not only to redistribute and return stolen lands, but also to reimagine the relationship between humans and land along more indigenous and environmentally sustainable lines (e.g. Kaunda and Kaunda 2019).

The Rhetoric of Leviticus 25 in Modern Biblical Studies

Nevertheless, modern biblical scholars have usually ignored their own ideological stakes when interpreting Leviticus 25.

The above summaries of the Jubilee's influence on modern debates about, land, debt, slavery, immigration, and the environment have shown the significant impact of Leviticus 25 on the beliefs and practices of Jews and Christians over the past five centuries. Biblical interpreters, however, have mixed opinions about the chapter's contemporary application. Some caution that the chapter's economic vision cannot simply be applied to contemporary society (e.g. Wright 2010, 139: "the Bible does not so much provide answers but presents problems and questions for debate"). Others emphasize that, for contemporary interpreters, the most important task is to expose the text's historical and contemporary role in supporting oppressive ideas and regimes (e.g. Johnson 2010, 244-45). But as we have seen, many people still celebrate the power of the Jubilee ideal to bring about social reform and justice today.

Histories of the Jubilee's interpretation and influence categorize its various applications differently. John Bergsma, for example, distinguished legal and economic meanings of Jubilee from religious or eschatological uses of the idea. The former focus on individuals while eschatology focuses on the people of Israel corporately (Bergsma 2007, 2, 297-304). Jonathan Stökl, on the other hand, categorized the "theological, economic, and social principles" of the Jubilee in the Hebrew Bible separately from later political movements for independence and freedom (Stökl 2018,

692). The implicit but deeply ideological investments in distinguishing these kinds of applications should make us pause in applying them so readily. As this review has shown, the history of the meaning of Jubilee has mixed together moral, economic, religious, and political implications. The thematic proclamations in the biblical text itself (vv. 10, 23, 55) as well as their recent invocations for social reform focus on the fate of impoverished and enslaved people while simultaneously staking group identity in expressions of equality and economic solidarity. The academic urge to distinguish and classify meanings of this text obscures the original and continuing power of the Jubilee ideal. This conclusion is especially important because of the history of using the Bible to debate slavery (see above).

Discussions of social justice in the Bible give much attention to the Jubilee of Leviticus 25 (e.g. Weinfeld 1995, 75-178; Houston 2006, 190-202). It has also attracted stand-alone ethical and theological analyses from both liberals (Ringe 1985; Lowery 2000) and conservatives (C. J. H. Wright 1990). Unlike many other parts of the Bible, the titles of monographs on this chapter regularly refer to its ethical implications (e.g. Fager 1993: "uncovering Hebrew ethics"; Meyer 2005: "a theological ethical interpretation"). However, wider surveys of biblical ethics and theology often give the Jubilee only cursory treatment, probably because the word "Jubilee" is restricted to Leviticus 25 and 27 (exceptions: Otto 1994, 249-56; Brett 2016, 109-10). Perhaps they were unsure how to integrate its economic vision, thereby missing an opportunity. As Lefebvre (2003, 385-86) pointed out, the four motive clauses in Leviticus 25 provide a remarkable synopsis of the Pentateuch's message, which can be summarized in their language as "The land is mine. You live under my custody like immigrant tenants. ... The children of Israel are slaves to me. They are my slaves whom I brought out of the land of Egypt. I am YHWH your God" (vv. 23, 55).

A significant barrier to integrating Leviticus 25 into biblical theology and ethics is posed by describing the Jubilee rules as "utopian." The writers of Leviticus realized that the Jubilee turns land sales into land leases, but many interpreters think that they did not anticipate how credit would dry up as the Jubilee approached. Labelling this chapter "utopian" communicates a negative judgment on its economic practicality. Interpreters then debate what this means for understanding the writers' intentions. Raymond Westbrook (1991, 40), for example, observed that the apparent impracticality of the Jubilee legislation has led interpreters to search for its origins either in early Israel on the assumption that it reflects very primitive economic conditions, or to depict it as late and utopian speculation. He himself took the

latter option, though he regarded the rules for redeeming land (vv. 29-30) as much older on the evidence of Ruth 4 and Jer. 32:6-15. In Leviticus 25, however, they have been adapted to fit the Jubilee (Westbrook 1991, 53).

However, Leviticus 25 can be labelled "utopian" in a more technical sense that is less dependent on interpreters' ideological commitments. Some literary theorists distinguish utopias from myths and apocalypses by their emphasis on the power of humans to reform society (so Claeys 2011, 13). Such utopian thinking is usually considered a feature of modern ideology, and as a literary genre can be traced back to Thomas More's novel, *Utopia* (1551). But utopian thinking is not limited to one genre of literature. Defined as idealistic programs of reform, some ancient texts also belong in the category. Katherine Gwyther (2019, n. 16) cited "Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, Al-Farabi's *The Virtuous City*, Zeno of Citium's *The Republic*, and Euhemerous' *Sacred History* ... [as] examples of pre-Morean utopias." This emphasis on human agency in social reform suggests also including almost all ancient Near Eastern law collections in the utopian category. The laws of Ur-Nammu, Hammurabi, and others did not record legislation or dictate legal practice, but instead recorded the legal ideals of scholastic scribes. They were often published to characterize a king's exceptional justice, but they also tried to provide models for legal practice (Westbrook 1991, 202-203; Watts 1999, 21-22). Biblical laws differ primarily by being ascribed to God, thus giving social reform a mythic frame. However, the enactment of these legal ideals still depends on humans, not God, as the sanctions of Leviticus 26 make explicitly clear.

The ideal projected in Leviticus 25 is a kinship patronage system controlled by male landowners in which God is the ultimate patron and owner of the whole land (Houston 2006, 197; Berman 2008, 107-8; Kaplan 2019, 200). The chapter aims to persuade human landowners to fulfil their patronage obligations. Therefore, like all biblical law, it may be considered utopian if that is defined as human efforts to build ideal societies, since the chapter portrays how society should be run rather than the actual practice of Israelite law and religion. Houston (2006, 192) observed: "Its object is not to administer but to persuade, and in its interpretation canons of rhetoric are more significant than those of law" (similarly Fager 1993, 101). What Houston (2001, 42) called "the truly utopian feature" of this chapter is that it "seems to mediate between the deep-rooted conviction of the inalienability of the peasants' land and the reality of impoverishment in the cash economy." Leviticus 25 then was no different in its original conception than the rest of Pentateuchal law, even if it has subsequently proven more difficult to apply than many other

biblical rules. It differs from its context not in its purpose, but in the political obstacles to its application.

Leviticus 25 projects an economic ideal—every Israelite farming their inherited land as granted by God—that is grounded in the HB's depiction of Israel's history in settling the land. Our review of other ancient ideals of debt release and land restoration has made clear that the chapter participates in an older ideal of restoring some original circumstance when families of farmers peacefully supported themselves on small plots of land—a view still prominent among farming families today (Houston 2001, 42-43). This ideal also resonates widely today because of world-wide colonial experiences of subjugation and impoverishment due to losing control of land (see e.g. Mtshiselwa 2016). Debates over whether the idealized original situation ever really existed to any great extent, either in ancient Israel or elsewhere, are therefore not just debates over archeological and historical evidence but claims about ideological coherence. Similarly, arguments about whether the Jubilee laws were ever practical or are instead utopian dreams are also claims about ideological possibility. Yet classical economic theories do not have the conceptual tools to describe ancient economies adequately (Brett 2016, 105).

Modern biblical interpreters therefore engage this chapter not just with the historical and theological concerns typical of their scriptural subject, but also with ideological commitments about different kinds of economic systems. Economic realism lies in the eye of the beholder, as Walter Houston (2006, 194-95) observed about Leviticus 25:

The text assumes an essentially classless society, ... If this type of society is presupposed, there is no reason why people should not behave in the ways that the text demands. ... Given a society where the dominant sentiment was a conviction of the equal value of all the members, it would not be inconceivable for people to act in accordance with that, even against their material interests.

In the biblical worldview, it was also realistic to think that economic injustice will be punished by God, as Lefebvre (2003, 396) pointed out: "quel est le plus irréaliste, de tenter de rendre les rapports économiques et sociaux en Israël conformes au projet du Seigneur sur son peuple, ou de laisser faire en pensant qu'une société où règne l'injustice peut perdurer indéfiniment aux yeux de Dieu?" The threat of divine enforcement is stated explicitly and at length in Leviticus 26.

The claim that God, not people, owns the land resonates today with three different kinds of traditions. Many indigenous cultures, though very different from each other, nevertheless agree that land is not private property. It belongs to the community or,

often, to the gods. Such views support an agrarian philosophy that is likely to assert that "the land does not belong to us, rather we belong to the land" (Kaunda and Kaunda 2019, 91; so also Gerstenberger 1996, 382; Davis 2009, 109). Environmentalists also criticize Western traditions of private land ownership, especially corporate ownership, for exacerbating environmental destruction for the sake of private profit. In 1949, Aldo Leopold already complained that "Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us" (Leopold 1949, viii). Though Christian and Jewish traditions have been strong supporters of private property, Leviticus 25 reveals an alternative biblical tradition more aligned with these indigenous, agrarian, and environmentalist ideas about land.

The history of biblical interpretation has not often utilized this verse to support agrarian and environmentalist movements because Jewish tradition applied these rules only within the boundaries of Israel's territory (see Milgrom 2184-85) and Christian traditions spiritualized and individualized them (e.g. Radner 265-78; for other examples, see Elliott 269-81). The Hebrew Bible, however, provides resources for universalizing an agrarian ethic in its claim that not just Canaan, but the entire world belongs to God (e.g. Exod. 19:5; Ps. 24:1). In this theological context, the Jubilee's land ethic provides a potent basis for making common cause with indigenous and environmental philosophies of the land. Jewish environmentalists are now embracing the principle of the Sabbath year, *shmita* (see the history of the movement in Krantz 2016), and Christian biblical scholars are exploring the Bible's compatibility with agrarian principles (e.g. Davis 2009; Simkins 2020).

Utopian ideals often claim to reproduce some past conditions. The possibility of an ideal future is more persuasive if it already existed in the past, so utopias make the argument that if it happened in the past, it can happen again. Ideological commitments are therefore baked into historical judgements about whether the Jubilee legislation was ever implemented or is even possible. Ronald Simkins (2020, 229) concisely summarized the consequences of recognizing the ideological presuppositions in these modern critical arguments:

From the perspective of a world of unlimited economic growth, these biblical ideas perhaps give the appearance of being unrealistic or simply utopian ideals. They are not. Rather, they are reforms that sought to ensure just economic relations in the ancient world, and they can contribute to a contemporary economic ideology for living well in a limited world.

The Meaning of Leviticus 25

Where does this context of competing ideologies leave the interpretation of Leviticus 25? Both literary reading and historical research depend on bracketing one's own moral, theological, and ideological commitments, at least momentarily, to imagine the viewpoints of a text's writers (Watts 2007, 154-72). That is necessary to understand the semantic structure and literary form of the text. We therefore translate based on what we think the writers meant. For example, Jonathan Stökl argued for translating *וְרָוַר* in v. 10 as "release" rather than "liberty" or "freedom" because the real aim of this legislation is to ensure the economic underpinning of the social ideal that each Israelite family had the same minimum amount of land ... liberty is more of a theological, economic and social principle than one of political or personal independence and freedom. (Stökl 2018, 692)

Uncovering the text's likely meaning in ancient Judah may, however, lead to disappointment. That was Esias Meyer's experience after he concluded that Leviticus 25 was intended to bolster the economic power of the returning exiles from Babylon: "It seems (to me at least) that the liberating image of this text is the result of the effectiveness of powerful slogans in our consumer driven world and not the result of really being liberating" (Meyer 2005, 3; also 252-54). For many biblical scholars, the commitment to investigating the text's history as accurately as possible in its ancient linguistic, literary, and historical contexts overrides moral concerns about its message (e.g. Harbin in Berner et al, 2017). For others, a truly critical stance also requires an ideological critique of the text's commitments and purpose (so Meyer 2005, 11-58, 279-86; Johnson 2010, 245; Fontaine 2013, 116).

Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood demonstrated in this journal that modern biblical studies developed in reaction to Enlightenment moral critiques of the Bible to forestall them through every-more-detailed historical investigations (Moore and Sherwood 2010). It is therefore past time to adopt interpretive approaches that give both moral and historical issues their due. Historical study lays the necessary foundation for understanding why the text has taken this form and why it has exerted influence. However, the basis for ideological assessment is broader than just a text's early history. That is especially the case with a text, like the Bible, that has exerted broad and extensive influence in very many different cultural and religious contexts. Its wide influence and varied meanings to different readers should lead us to question critically what interpreters mean when they cite the "real" meaning of the text and speak of what it "really" says. The stark juxtaposition of this chapter's influential justification for chattel slavery (25:44-46) with its idealistic calls for freedom and

restoring land to the poor (vv. 10, 25, 55), which have had little economic influence but have been politically potent, adds poignancy to Sylvester Johnson's call for interpreters to "mitigate the destructive consequences ... of a history of struggle between slaveholders and slaves, men and women, peasants and landholders, colonizers and colonized" over this text (Johnson 2010, 244).

In my commentary on Leviticus, I take the position that the text means what listeners and readers say it means (Watts 2013, 86-90). Understanding its *form* requires careful investigation of the rhetorical purposes and historical contexts that led to its composition and redaction. Understanding its *meaning*, however, requires attention to its history of interpretation and use. Its meaning changes with every change in the kinds of readers and in their cultural and religious contexts. That is true of the meaning of events as well as texts, as Nancy Jay pointed out:

The meaning of any action not only varies with the way in which it is interpreted, it *is* the way in which it is interpreted. ... For meaning is not a simple and direct product of action itself, but of reflection upon it. And the act of reflection is always another act, socially situated in its own way. (Jay 1992, 8).

The fact that textual meaning is also the product of separate, contextually situated acts is patently obvious from even the briefest survey of the Bible's history of interpretation. Yet most biblical interpreters resist its implications for their judgments about the meaning of individual texts.

When interpreters recommend one meaning over others, their recommendation can only be defended by reference to these interpreters' own cultural contexts and the audiences that they address. In other words, there is no "real" or "original" meaning of a text. There are, however, "better" and "worse" meanings, and these value judgments must be justified based on the entire range of culturally relevant values, including moral relevance and contemporary social impact as well as philological accuracy, literary context, historical plausibility, and traditional significance. In determining textual meaning, no one of these methods or values automatically trumps the others, nor can their influence be ranked hierarchically without reference to the interpreter's own context and intended audience. The best interpretations are those that make sense of the text as a confluence of all of them, as judged by different readers in their own religious and cultural contexts and individual circumstances. In my own case, as a middle-class White male cis-gendered American biblical scholar descended from enslavers (see Watts 2019, 240) addressing this journal's audience of (mostly) professional biblical scholars, I think that our twenty-first-century context requires us to challenge the heritage of

slavery and colonialism by allowing contemporary struggles to overcome racism, sexism, and environmental destruction to inform the meaning of the biblical texts we interpret, especially Leviticus 25.

Over the last half-century, inspired by liberation theology's call to listen to the voices of marginalized lay people as much as expert elites, many biblical interpreters have grappled with the problem of how to balance these voices (see Houston 2006, 4-16; Dada 2010; West 2014, 2; Lim 2019, 1-17). That task becomes especially urgent in texts about poverty, like Leviticus 25. Kari Latvus, for example, advocated an "intercontextual" approach that distinguishes and balances four contexts: that of the writers, that of the indebted and enslaved people whom they wrote about, that of the contemporary interpreter, and that of contemporary indebted and impoverished people (Latvus 2012, 289-303). Carole Fontaine argued similarly that, with adjustments for context, Leviticus can make a profound contribution to contemporary human rights discussions:

Although biblical legal documents are addressed to the elite males of the community, if we promote all human beings—women, children, foreigners, elderly, the disabled, and other inferiors and outcasts—to the ideal level occupied by the elite males of the designated group receiving the texts, it is possible to establish a universal ethic, one that represents the highest ideal of the text itself. ... So, on this basis, we have a clear dividing line between those texts we might reject and those we might wish to retain. (Fontaine 2013, 103; similarly Watts 2019)

This program becomes even more compelling when we remember that including everyone in "the designated group receiving the texts" is not a modern innovation, but a goal that the Pentateuch itself already envisioned (Deut. 31:12). Though the writers of Leviticus 25 may have addressed only male land holders, Deuteronomy 31 and the compilers of the Pentateuch already expanded the group of addressees. A staple belief in both Jewish and Christian traditions is that scripture addresses everyone in the community.

Leviticus 25 also lays the basis for universalizing its moral application in its claims that both people and land belong to God. As prophets and preachers have regularly noted, placing absolute priority on service to God relativizes all other loyalties, debts, and dependencies. Universalizing this claim also individualizes it to apply to every human being. Other biblical texts already recognize the common humanity of slaves and masters in relationship to God (Gen. 1:27; Job 31:15; Gal. 3:28; see Otto 1994, 256). Recognizing a common relationship to God then provides the conceptual basis

for recognizing equality with each other. The fact that God's claims relativize human differences explains the historical and contemporary potency of Leviticus 25 in supporting movements to abolish slavery and to liberate people from other forms of economic oppression. However, depicting God as an enslaver brings its own problems and universalizing the Bible's ethical claims carries its own moral danger of encouraging self-righteous persecution of difference. These large issues require discussion elsewhere (see Meyer 2005, 268-77; Rainey 2019; Watts 2020), but point to the conclusions that the chapter's theocentric message must be carefully nuanced to avoid reproducing reprehensible results.

The revolutionary potential of God's claim to own the land has only recently begun to be felt in debates over contemporary economics and politics. Leviticus 25 explicitly and controversially uses God's ownership to undermine any claims to land as purely private property and, therefore, any economic systems based on private real property. As with the claim that the Israelites "are my slaves" (v. 55), universalizing the claim that "the land is mine" (v. 23) lays the basis for including the Earth and all of Earth's inhabitants within a reciprocal ethic of mutual rights and responsibilities. Here in Leviticus 25, the land already has the right to rest (vv. 4-5) and wild animals have the right to eat what grows on it (v. 7). Offending against the land's Sabbath rights is cause for divine retribution (26:34-35). Therefore, YHWH's claim that both people and land "are mine" establishes a basis for envisioning reciprocity, even "socio-relational justice" (Kaunda and Kaunda 2019, 95), between all earthlings and their planetary home.

That vision, of course, is a step further than Leviticus 25 goes. But that step is not a very big or innovative one, as the very long tradition of universalizing its ethics shows. Though the chapter reflects an ancient worldview constricted by ethnocentrism, patriarchalism, and a debt economy, it explicitly states moral principles that are, in its own words, liberating (v. 10). Enslaved people, abolitionists, and advocates of land and debt reform were right to find support here, as are advocates for indigenous rights, environmental justice, and animal rights today.

Conclusion

The power of this chapter's Jubilee ideal to motivate later movements to redistribute land, abolish slavery, revise bankruptcy laws, and cancel the debts of poor nations has a lesson to teach us about ideals and utopias, and about scriptural texts. The fifty-year cycle of land return has rarely, if ever, been implemented, very likely because persisting doubts as to its feasibility served to rationalize landowners' desire to avoid enacting this legislation.

Their interest in limiting its impact is already evident in Leviticus 27. Nevertheless, the Jubilee legislation inspired a reform that even the writers of Leviticus 25 regarded as impossible, namely, the abolition of chattel slavery. Though nearly everyone from antiquity to the nineteenth century thought that slavery was intrinsic to human economic relationships, moral reforms under the religious slogans of freedom and Jubilee (v. 10) motivated enough people that they succeeded in suppressing slavery through legislation (in Britain and many other nations) or through civil war (in the United States). The Jubilee ideal of freedom overwhelmed pragmatic considerations in the end, and for an outcome better than the writers of Leviticus 25 could have ever imagined.

The lesson of this history, it seems to me (similarly Houston 2001, 45), is that the meaning of a text cannot be restricted to just its literary context and ancient historical context. Single phrases and sentences frequently mean more to readers who admire a well turned phrase or are inspired by a pertinent aphorism than does a chapter's or book's overall message. A book, and especially a scripture, often exerts most of its impact in short excerpts. Scripturalizing Leviticus in the Torah and in later canonical collections extended this typical feature of reading lists to the scripture's entire contents (Watts 2017, 48-49).

Biblical scholars have long deplored this fact. Since the late Middle Ages, many of us have focused our efforts on establishing the original meaning of biblical passages in their literary and historical contexts and have called on preachers and readers to pay more attention to every verse's contextual meaning. The history of the Jubilee ideal shows, however, that literary contextual exegesis, which was deployed effectively to justify chattel slavery, may produce morally repugnant results. The ideals of the Jewish and Christian traditions and arguably of the Bible itself are better expressed by Leviticus 25's thematic summaries about freedom and the equal standing of people and land before God (vv. 10, 23, 55). Of course, citing short excerpts out of context can also be used immorally and violently, such as the so-called "curse of Ham" (actually of Canaan) in Gen. 9:25-27 that was commonly cited to justify the racialization of early-modern slavery (Park 2021). My point here, however, is that emphasizing literary and historical contexts in interpretation provides no inherent moral advantage (so also Rainey 2019, 259). These methods of interpretation have been used effectively to entrench violence and injustice as well as to fight them. These moral consequences should lead us to reconsider our commitment to prioritizing interpretation in literary context and ancient historical context for either descriptive analysis or prescriptive advocacy.

At the descriptive level, the field's long-standing commitment to interpretation in literary context prevents biblical scholars from explaining how the Bible actually works historically and in contemporary cultures. For example, dismissing revolutionary appeals to Jubilee as misreading the biblical text prevents interpreters from wrestling with the literary and cultural specifics of how communities actually employ scriptures (an important exception is Vincent Wimbush's focus on "signifying scriptures," e.g. Wimbush 2012). This omission confirms the charge of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1971) that biblical scholarship only describes the Bible "before it was the Bible" and so fails to adequately explain the very phenomenon that defines the field. To describe and explain the Bible as scripture, interpreters should no longer use literary and historical context as the yardstick for judging the adequacy of all interpretations, especially interpretations that arise out of and motivate congregations and larger communities.

At the prescriptive level, interpreters of Leviticus 25 should refrain from judgments about economic and social expediency. The variety of human cultures in the world is far too great for such evaluations to be anything more than ideological expressions of pre-existing commitments. Such scholarly estimates of the chapter's realism interfere with its proven rhetorical potential. Biblical interpreters should not get in the way of this text's rhetoric by deciding what is or is not "real," much less by pretending to know what is or is not economically and socially possible. Morally preferable, by far, are interpretations that, on the one hand, condemn the text's pernicious influence in supporting slavery and aristocratic privileges and, on the other hand, take the proclamations of Lev. 25:10, 23, and 55 as a license to dream creatively about better futures and take action to bring them about. We might then learn, as Sharon Ringe (1985, xiii) did from her study of Leviticus 25, "about the power of images to shape human life."

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