

PROCLAIM JUBILEE

DEBT CANCELLATION IS THE BIBLICAL NORM – NOT THE EXCEPTION

The Jubilee campaign's origins are linked with the Biblical Year of Jubilee, outlined in Leviticus 25 - 26, a magnificent and widely ignored text which calls for periodic complete overhaul of the economy. In the Jubilee, there is release for those enslaved because of debts, a Sabbath

Years were ever adequately observed is a secondary question for the prophets – regardless we are called to accountability.

In the Biblical view, debt is always the responsibility of creditors as well as debtors. In the ancient Near East,

“Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof....”

Lev. 25:10

rest for land and people, redistribution of lands lost because of debt, and a reordering of prices for land and labor based on proximity to the next Jubilee.

Leviticus 25 never explicitly mentions debt—but the Jubilee is all about debt cancellation, restored community, and freedom from debt bondage. The Jubilee cycle of release builds on the Sabbath Year debt release and rest cycle outlined in Deuteronomy 15 and Exodus 21:2 and 23:10 - 11, building from an every seventh year rest and release to a super-release in the 50th year. It was no accident that rebels against colonial authority chose a line from Lev. 25:10 “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof....” as the inscription for their liberty bell.

The theme of Jubilee runs deep in Scripture. God's identity as liberator is fundamental (Ex. 20:1 - 3; Deut. 5:6 - 7). A good case can be made that the Bible actually consid-

even pagan kings periodically cancelled debts to allow the poor a measure of respite from harsh conditions. The Biblical mandate goes much further, reordering the whole economy around the need for periodic cancellation of debt and restoration of community. The Talmud (the oral law teachings collected by the Rabbis) strictly forbids charging interest to either Jews or non-Jews when a loan is made for basic needs rather than profit. The Rabbis held that the testimony of anyone who charged interest on a loan was not acceptable in court. Our global economy is built on compound interest—consider the implications!


Jesus begins his public ministry in Luke's gospel by quoting a Jubilee text from the prophet Isaiah (61:1 - 2), salted with sermon illustrations on God's mission to all the nations. He read the scripture for all to hear, announcing that God has sent good news to the poor and had announced freedom for the prisoners and the oppressed (Luke 4:16 - 30). By proclaiming the kingdom of God as

The Debt is a faith issue for those of us who believe in a God of life.

ers Jubilee non-negotiable—if people do not obey, the demands of Jubilee justice remain outstanding until fulfilled, regardless of chronological time. Leviticus 26:34 - 35 says the land will take her Sabbath even if we humans ignore God's word. Prophets and leaders regularly called Israel to account for neglecting the demands of the Sabbath and Jubilee texts (for example, Nehemiah 5:1 - 13; Jeremiah 34:8-18; Amos 2:6 - 7, 8:5 - 6; Ezekiel 18: 7 - 9, Isaiah 58). Whether the Sabbath and Jubilee

a form of Jubilee, in the present tense, for all the nations, Jesus opens the Jubilee for layers of additional meaning and interpretation.

In the Jubilee, as in all of Scripture, nothing occurs in isolation. Debt cancellation is not just an economic transaction, nor simply a spiritual matter. Jesus linked forgiveness of money debts and spiritual debts (Luke 7:36 - 50, 11:2 - 4, 16:1 - 13), and made forgiveness of our debts contin-



‘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

gent on our forgiveness of the debts of others (Matthew 6:9 - 15, 18:21 - 35). Early Christians applied the call to practice debt cancellation literally and spiritually. The parable of the unrighteous steward (Luke 16:1 - 13) speaks of a man who apparently cheats his master by writing down debts. The master—perhaps understanding the linkage with the reordering of prices according to Jubilee standards (Lev. 25:14 - 16, 26 - 27, 50 - 52) – approves of the steward’s action.

The book of Acts resonates with Jubilee and Sabbath imagery, as disciples sell property and fields, share wealth, break bread together, rest and study and restore community (Acts 2:43-46, 4:32-37). The Sabbath-Jubilee theme gets

The problem of the global debt crisis today, as in the biblical communities, is that the debtors not only pay with their lives, but also with the lives of future generations. Part of God’s creation has been diminished, the covenant broken.

extra emphasis in Acts 4:34’s close paraphrase of Deuteronomy 15:4: “There was not a needy person among them...” And Barnabas, a Levite, sells a field and gives the proceeds to the whole community, modeling Jubilee restoration of blessed community.

What about forgiving the debts of impoverished nations today? In both the Torah and the New Testament, Israel is a model of a covenant that is for all the nations (Genesis 12:2 - 3; Exodus 4:23; Acts 3:25 - 26). Thus, Jubilee is not just for Israel. Christians believe Jesus is the fulfillment of all the promises, law and prophets. What would Jesus do? Would not Jesus, the one who said the nations will be judged by what they do and do not do for the least of these

The Qur’an teaches, “If the debtor is in strated circumstances, then let there be a postponement to the time of ease; and that you remit the debt as an act of charity would be better for you if you did but know” (al-Baqarah 2:280)

my brethren, (Mt 25:31 - 46) stick with his original line—forgive us our debts? Would he not say further that debts incurred by the rich in the Global South and North together, debts which are now paid by orphans and widows, the poor and oppressed, are not only forgiven but fundamentally illegitimate?

WHAT DO WE SAY?

**For more faith and worship resources and to find out about our Jubilee Congregation program see:
www.jubileeusa.org – under Jubilee Congregations**