



MONEY: ENDS & TRENDS 

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Jubileum Part II: Human Oppressors and Enslavers Restrained

By Wilfred Hahn

Just how did the biblical Sabbaths come about? It is a captivating story. We continue with Part II of our series on the Bible’s teaching on prosperity, “cancellation” and the prophesied restoration of God’s intended plan for the poor, both materially and in spirit.



It is well known that the principle of the Sabbath (commanded to the Hebrews) finds its original roots at Creation. God rested on the 7th day. “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done” (Genesis 2:2-3).

Ever since, all developed cultures—whether Asian, Western or otherwise—have operated on a seven-day, weekly cycle. It was only much later that the Sabbath laws were given to the Hebrews. This happened in a number of stages, as

we will explain. But first, a short word of clarification before we continue further. Our study of the seventh day of rest and God’s prescribed Sabbaths for the Hebrews is not meant to Judaize in any way. No suggestion is made that Christians are not to gather and worship on the first day of the week, as did the early Church. Rather, we want to explore God’s divine principles lying behind these ordinances, and most importantly, as we will conclude in Part III, how God’s rules for economic life parallel the salvation plan.

Whence Comes the Hebrew Sabbath?

The first we see mention of a Sabbath in the Bible is during the exodus of the He-





brews from Egypt. Moses pronounced a Sabbath rest. “Six days you are to gather it [manna], but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any” (Exodus 16:26). It was to be “[...] a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD” (Exodus 16:23). We can deduce from this that there had been no seventh-day rest practiced in pagan Egypt. Otherwise, Moses would not have needed to introduce its observance. As such, we can conclude that Egypt was a godless culture at that ancient time, bent on materialism as witnessed in most societies today.

The story of a seventh day rest continues. Somewhat later, during the wilderness journey, the Sabbath command was formally codified as part of the Ten Commandments to the Israelites. “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God” (Exodus 20:8-10), said Moses. Somewhat later again, the Sabbath command was elevated further to the status of a sign and a covenant. Said the Lord, “The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever [...]” (Exodus 31:16-17). To this day, the Jews are known by their observance of the Sabbath (the last day of the week, which was later named Saturday by the pagan Gentiles after the planet Saturn). It is not unfitting that Saturn should come to signify the holy seventh day, as Saturn was very likely the Star of Bethlehem which directly directed the Magi at the time of Christ’s birth.

Finally the seventh-day observance was extended to cover the land (Eretz Israel) in the form of the Sabbath Year. Just before entering the Promised Land (and as the provision of manna was stopped), God said to Moses on Mount

Sinai, “When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a Sabbath to the LORD. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops” (Leviticus 25:2-3). It is in this ordinance that many other commands



were embedded that related to wealth distribution and the economic life decreed by God to the Israelites. It is a most enlightening topic to study and brings us back to the main objective of this series.

The Economics of the Sabbath and Jubilee Years

God said through Moses, “At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts” (Deuteronomy 15:1). As such, we see that a seven-year debt cycle was instituted. We can conclude that there was to be no such thing as perpetual debt: every Sabbath Year, debts had to be laid flat. Those who could not pay back their debts by that time were forgiven this amount.

We can imagine just how different our economies would be today were this same convention applied. There would be no massive accumulations of debt as we see in our time. For example, according to recent forecasts of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the government debt of the advanced nations of the world is headed to historically unprecedented levels in the

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decades ahead. We are here only scratching the surface of the problem of over-indebtedness in the world today. However, the point to note is that whenever speaking of debt, it must always be remembered that it is only one side of a two-fold condition. After all, for every debtor there must also be a creditor; there must be someone that has the monetary capital to lend in the first place, as “for seller as for buyer, for borrower as for lender, for debtor as for creditor” (Isaiah 24:2). (This is the very same duality that this writer believes is portrayed in Zechariah’s fifth vision of the great, flying scroll found in Zechariah 5. The flying scroll had writing on both sides.) Therefore, when indebtedness soars, it is most always associated with a rising imbalance in wealth distribution.

Breaking the Cycle

Anyone familiar with the board game Monopoly will have observed that one person usually ends up owning all the property. When that happens, the game is over and a new one must be started. Effectively, the Sabbath Year served to slow this “winner take all” tendency of human economies, and moreover would reset the game every 7 years. With a Sabbath year being observed, the development of wealth imbalances and economic inequality would be restrained, though likely not entirely eradicated.

Industrious and entrepreneurial people would still be rewarded for their efforts. Individuals could still become wealthy. All the same, under this God-given 7-year debt cycle, it was much less likely

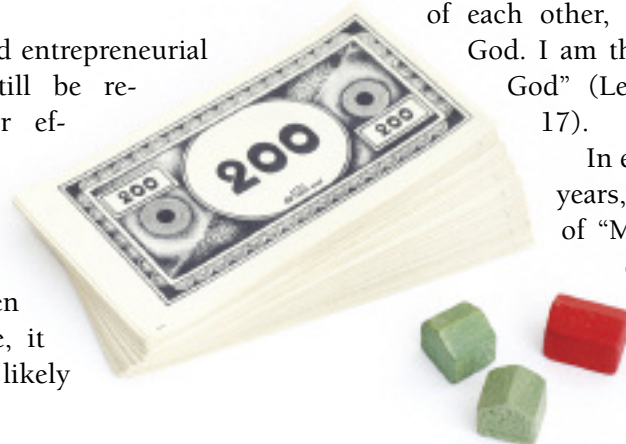
that an oppressed class of indebted and poor could emerge. However, even this 7th-year Sabbath was insufficient to complete God’s outline for economic fairness on earth. One more ordinance was commanded: the Jubilee Year.

The Great Jubilee Year

“Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan.” The 25th chapter of Leviticus lays out a detailed set of rules as to how the Jubilee Year was to be observed. Following is a partial excerpt:

“The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property. If you sell land to one of your countrymen or buy any from him, do not take advantage of each other. You are to buy from your countryman on the basis of the number of years since the Jubilee. And he is to sell to you on the basis of the number of years left for harvesting crops. When the years are many, you are to increase the price, and when the years are few, you are to decrease the price, because what he is really selling you is the number of crops. Do not take advantage of each other, but fear your God. I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 25:11-17).

In effect, every 50 years, a new round of “Monopoly” was decreed. Property was restored to its original





owners. The year prior (the 49th year being a Sabbath Year), all debts would have been laid flat as well. The main difference of the Jubilee Year as compared to the Sabbath Year, was that land was returned to the original tribe and family and indentured labor (slavery) was broken. Together, these two Sabbath ordinances (both the 7th Sabbath year and the Jubilee Year) ensured that freedom, wealth distribution and incentives for production and income stayed in balance.

How a Modern Jubilee World Would be Different

Were the principles behind these two Sabbath years observed today, our current globalized world of money would not be so dangerously imbalanced. Effectively, the maximum present value of any debt could only be worth 7 years of interest payments and principal repayment. If one bought a piece of property from a Israelite stakeholder, its maximum worth was the collective crop output of 42 years. (50 less eight Sabbath years). As the Jubilee Year approached, the value of any land held by a non-family stakeholder would effectively fall to zero by the end of the 48th year. There was no basis for debt becoming a major asset of wealth, thereby ultimately facilitating an ultra-rich class as we again see today. To illustrate this point in part, consider that more than half the value of securitized assets in the world right now are forms of debt.

The Jubilee Year ensured another benefit. There would be no permanent indentured slave class—either individuals or nation states. The maximum period of slavery could only be 50 years. As such, at least once in each person's lifetime, one could be saved from slavery. All could be saved. Poverty, there-



fore, had fewer tendencies to fester as an intergenerational problem.

More details about the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year can be found in the books of Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers and others. We will not be able to present the full richness of this topic here. To people living in the highly financialized times of our day, where merchant stores are open virtually around the clock and every day of the week, the conventions of the Sabbath Year and Jubilee Year will surely seem archaic. Nevertheless, they were the commandments of God to the Israelites, the very people that were created and called to be a "light to the Gentiles." Similar to all of the laws given by Moses, they proved beneficial for society and individuals alike. The modern world could do worse than to learn from these successful and ancient practices of the Hebrews.

The Lure of Money and Profit Prevails

Alas, the Israelites fell out of the practice of honoring the Sabbath and Jubilee years. Before long, they disobediently again chose to "work around the clock, 24-7," instead of allowing God's creation to rest. Prophets were sent to warn them of the consequences (i.e. Jeremiah and Ezekiel). Eventually, the Sabbath became nothing more than a ritualistic nuisance. Amos revealed the attitude of those times: "When will the New Moon

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In contrast, God commanded the Israelites not to be so overly taken up with productivity and the act of squeezing the last “mite” from every transaction. He told them to ease up. “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 23:22).

be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat? —skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat” (Amos 8:5-6).

We can imagine that the entire impulse of society then was business, trading and profits ... every day ... to the last penny. Who would deny that this same surfeit of materialism has enslaved our societies today? Just what generation in history has been exposed to more than 3000 advertisement impressions a day¹ ... or would sit through 12 minutes of advertising every hour on a movie channel (the movie itself riddled with strategic “product placements”)?

A possible capstone of such obsessive commercialism is found in this recent comment on Bloomberg News. “At one point, [two former employees say], Goldman [Sachs ... the most profitable Wall Street bank] top management was demanding hourly profit and loss statements from certain teams [at Goldman Sachs Asset Management].” Actually, with today’s advanced computing technology, it is possible to track sales and profits by the minute. Wal-mart, the world’s largest retailer, knows in real time what is being sold in all of its stores around the world by the hour.

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In time, God punished Israel and Judah for not observing this ordinance. The 70-year captivity in Babylon was directly proportionate to the number of Sabbaths that Judah had not observed for the previous 490 years, as Moses had warned (Leviticus 26:34). “The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy

years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah” (2 Chronicles 36:21).

Thoughts to Ponder

We see in the ordinance of the Sabbath also the divine division between the numbers six and seven. Six days (six being the number of man, as he was created on the 6th day) humans were to work. The seventh day was to be a holy day (Genesis 2:3) and belonged to God. Not without significance, we observe that the command for man to “gather” or “work” six days is mentioned exactly 6 times in Scripture. Indeed, the Bible is a miraculous book.

Most wonderfully, we see how God himself intervened in the productivity of the fields to allow sufficient food to be stockpiled for requirements for the Sabbath Year, when fields were to be left fallow. Since the Jubilee year followed the 7th Sabbath Year, there were two Sabbath years in a row every 50 years: “Count off seven sabbaths of years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a pe-



riod of forty-nine years” (Leviticus 25:8). As such, over the two years following the 48th year, fields were not sown. God allowed the fields to yield enough crops in every 6th (of seven) and 48th years to be sufficient to last through the following Sabbath years, and to last to the time of harvest in the first year that planting was allowed. Miraculous? Yes.

We also note in the Old Testament that God miraculously intervened in his creation so that the seventh day of rest could be observed. During the time of the Hebrews’ 40-year wilderness journey, not only did sufficient manna fall on a Friday for two days sustenance (Friday and Saturday), but also none was found on the ground on the Sabbath (Exodus 16:26). Could God similarly intervene in world affairs today, alleviating the food shortages and the ravages of soaring prices of agricultural commodities? Yes, of course. Yet today, it remains a fallen world. God has yet to unveil his wrath and to complete a restoration at the inception of the Millennial Period.

Will God also judge the rampant commercialism and economic injustices observed in the world today? The Bible says yes. Mankind’s systems will be brought to naught. What we also do know is that Israel has yet to fully atone for its broken Sabbaths. Referring to the current dispersion period of the Jews and the yet-coming Tribulation period, said the Lord, “I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins. Then the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the



The Gathering of the Manna
1614-1615
by Guido Reni, Italy

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country of your enemies; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it” (Lev 26:33-35).

Finally, readers will already sense how God’s plan of salvation parallels and shadows the Sabbath year ordinances. Both deal with liberating the poor (either physically or in spirit), freedom from slavery and bondage for everyone, and above all, forgiveness for all. These topics are the focus of the final Part III of this series. ^{MC}

ENDNOTE

- 1 According to the Media Awareness Network.
http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/marketing/advertising_everywhere.cfm
Accessed February 27, 2011.