

Leviticus

Lesson #17

Sacred Time, Part 2

(Leviticus 24: 1 – 25: 55)

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Review

In Lesson #16 we learned that “sacred time” punctuates the year, giving it a rhythm that mirrors the natural agrarian cycle of planting, growing, harvest and fallow, as well as God’s intervention into human history for his covenant people. The Jewish calendar incorporates seven major periods of “sacred time,” or holidays (e.g., “holy-days”):

1. Passover (Leviticus 23: 5)
2. Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23: 6-8)
3. First Fruits (Leviticus 23: 9-14)
4. Pentecost (Leviticus 23: 15-22)
5. Trumpets (Leviticus 23: 23- 25)
6. Atonement (Leviticus 23: 26-32)
7. Tabernacles (Leviticus 23: 33- 43)

In Lesson #16 we explored each holiday in turn.

Preview

As Leviticus 23 structured “sacred time” with seven holidays throughout the year, Leviticus 24-25 extends “sacred time” to include every seven years (the Sabbatical Year) and every “seven times seven” years (the Jubilee Year).

Every seventh year the land is to lie fallow, allowing it to “rest.” In addition, every “seven times seven” years all land is returned to its original owner and all personal debts are cancelled. Combined, the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee Year ensure that neither poverty nor wealth become systemic among God’s covenant people.

This command to “reset” the economy each generation lays the foundation for a just and holy society.

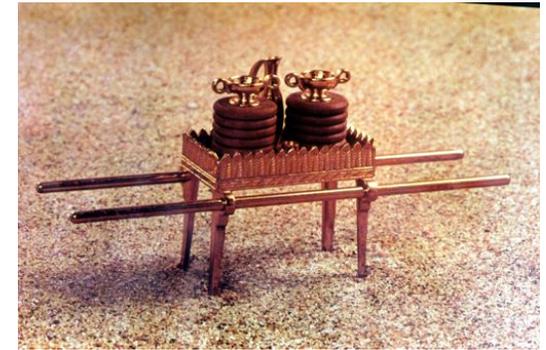


Before we move from the holidays in chapter 23 to the Sabbatical and Jubilee years in chapter 25, we transition through chapter 24, which includes:

- 1) daily maintenance of the Tabernacle; and**
- 2) the curious case of the blasphemer.**



Daily maintenance of the Tabernacle includes refueling the menorah and replenishing the showbread.



Refueling the Menorah

24: 1-4

“The Lord said to Moses: Order the Israelites to bring you clear oil of crushed olives for the light, so that you may keep the lamp burning regularly. In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that hangs in front of the covenant, Aaron shall set up the lamp to burn before the Lord regularly, from evening till morning, by a perpetual statute throughout your generations. He shall set up the lamps on the pure gold menorah to burn regularly before the Lord.”



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Replenishing the Showbread

24: 5-9

“You shall take bran flour and bake it into twelve cakes, using two tenths of an ephah of flour for each cake. These you shall place in two piles, six in each pile, on the pure gold table before the Lord. With each pile put some pure frankincense, which shall serve as an oblation to the Lord, a token of the bread offering. Regularly on each Sabbath day the bread shall be set out before the Lord on behalf of the Israelites by an everlasting covenant. It shall belong to Aaron and his sons, who must eat it in a sacred place, since it is most sacred, his as a perpetual due from the oblations to the Lord.”

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The pure, virgin olive oil provides fuel for the menorah that burns cleanly, producing no smoke—that's smart. But the priests eating the week-old bread—that must have been nasty!

Kinda' like eating stale dog biscuits!



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The Curious Case of the Blasphemer (Leviticus 24: 10-23)

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What do we know?

- He was *“a man born of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father”* (v.10)
 - The suspect was one of the *“mixed multitude”* that came out of Egypt. We were warned about such people in Exodus 12: 38. —they are potential troublemakers.
- The young man got into a fight with an Israelite man.
 - Our translation—*“a fight broke out”*—smears the action of a vivid, violent verb, better translated *“brawled,”* the same verb used of the two Hebrew men whom Moses rebukes in Exodus 2: 13, (as Robert Alter points out in *The Five Books of Moses*, p. 650).



Just the facts please!

- *“His mother’s name was Shelomith, daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan” (v.11).*
- **Stop right there: something doesn’t fit; something’s off!**

We don’t know the name of the young man, so why are we told the name of his mother, the name of his grandfather and the name of his tribe?



Mary Douglass (1921-2007),
Leviticus as Literature, 1999.

Mary Douglas offers an extremely clever explanation.

- The young man did two bad things: he cursed God and he blasphemed.

- To curse is “to despise” or “to make contemptible”; to blaspheme has the same verbal stem as “to pierce.”

- So, the young man made God contemptible, piercing with words the name of the Lord. In retribution, the Lord commanded that he be stoned.

- To “stone” means literally “to hurl” or “to pelt.”

If we engage in some ingenious literary word play, the blasphemer hurled insults at the name of God, so God had him die by stones being hurled at him!



Mary Douglas (1921-2007),
Leviticus as Literature, 1999.

To continue the word play . . .

- The blasphemer’s mother’s name is Shelomith, suggesting “retribution”; her father was Dibri, suggesting “lawsuit”; and his mother was of the tribe of Dan, suggesting “judgment.” The names have meaning, as do most Hebrew names in Scripture.

- So, put it all together and we have a story—an allegory—that goes something like this:

“Once upon a time, there was a man with no name—a nobody, neither Egyptian nor Israelite—son of a woman named Retribution, grandson of Lawsuit, of the tribe of Judgment, and he pelted insults at the Lord’s name . . . so the Lord said: *“Then it is my judgment that he die: he pelted my name, so he shall be pelted with stones and forever remain nameless—a nobody!”*”

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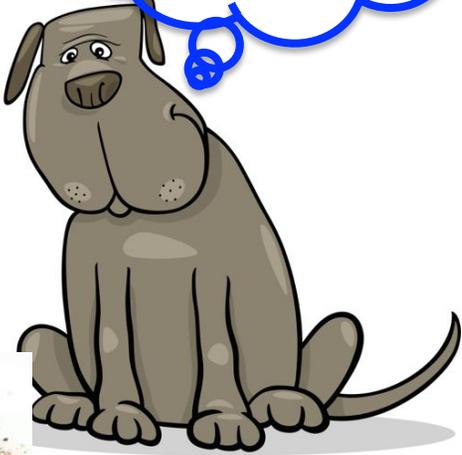


**Mary Douglas (1921-2007),
Leviticus as Literature, 1999.**

This punning word play draws attention to God’s tit-for-tat punishment, setting up the excursus on *lex talionis* (the principle of an “eye for an eye”) that follows in verses 17-22, an excursus that otherwise seems rather random and very much out of place.



Now, that really is
clever. Bravo,
Professor Douglas!



Someone threw a
stone at me once,
so I bit him.



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Now, we move on to Leviticus 25, continuing with the topic of “sacred time” introduced earlier in chapter 23.

As both God and humanity rest on the seventh day (the Sabbath), so must the land itself rest on the seventh year (the Sabbatical Year).

The Sabbatical Year

25: 1-7

“The Lord said to Moses on Mount Sinai: Speak to the Israelites and tell them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, let the land, too, keep a Sabbath for the Lord. For six years you may sow your field, and for six years prune your vineyard, gathering in their produce. But during the seventh year the land shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, a Sabbath for the Lord, when you may neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. The aftergrowth of your harvest you shall not reap, nor shall you pick the grapes of your untrimmed vines. It shall be a year of rest for the land . . .

The Sabbatical Year

25: 1-7

“. . . While the land has its Sabbath, all its produce will be food to eat for you yourself and for your male and female slaves, for your laborer and the tenant who lives with you, and likewise for your livestock and for the wild animals on your land.”



Crop rotation and letting the land lie fallow has a long history, dating as far back as 6,000 B.C. Near Eastern farmers alternately planted legumes and cereals, practicing 2-field crop rotation. They may not have known the exact science, but they knew what worked!

The Roman statesman and writer, Cato the Elder (c. 234-149 B.C.), recommended in his only surviving book, *De Agri Cultura* (“On Agriculture”), that farmers “*save carefully goat, sheep, cattle, and all other dung,*” using fertilizer to replenish the soil and to improve its structure.



With the Sabbatical Year in place, we move on to the Jubilee Year: seven times seven years, the 50th year being the Jubilee.

The Jubilee Year

25: 8-13

“You shall count seven weeks of years—seven times seven years—such that the seven weeks of years amount to forty-nine years. Then on the tenth day of the seventh month let the ram’s horn resound; on this, the Day of Atonement, the ram’s horn blast shall resound throughout your land. You shall treat this fiftieth year as sacred. You shall proclaim liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to your own property, each of you to your own family. This fiftieth year is your year of Jubilee; you shall not sow, nor shall you reap the aftergrowth or pick the untrimmed vines, since this is the Jubilee. It shall be sacred for you. You may only eat what the field yields itself. In this year of Jubilee, then, each of you shall return to your own property.



The Jubilee Year introduces a utopian vision of a just society, a society in which all land reverts to its original owners at the end of a 50-year cycle, and all personal debts are cancelled.

In an agricultural society, the Jubilee Year “resets” the economy, eliminating both generational wealth and generational poverty, ensuring radical social and economic equality.



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The Jubilee Year is based on two premises:

1. *“The land [Canaan, the “Promised Land”] must not be sold irrevocably; for the land is mine [the Lord’s] and you [the Israelites] are but resident aliens and under my authority” (25: 23); and*
2. *“The Israelites belong to me as servants; they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt, I, the Lord, your God” (25: 55).*



The land belongs to the Lord, and in Numbers 26 the Lord allocates a portion of his land to each of the tribes, a portion which must always remain in its possession as caretakers.

Each clan and family within a tribe is then allocated land, which becomes their ancestral home: they do not own the land, they are merely tenants on it, with God as the landlord; hence, the land cannot be sold, only “sublet” to another person for a fixed period of time, not to exceed 50 years.

We have a perfect illustration of this in the story of King Ahab: 1 Kings 21: 1-16.



Thomas Matthews Rooke. *Jezebel Promises to Obtain It by False Witness* (oil on canvas), 1879.
Russel-Cotes Art Gallery, Dorset, England.

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And, of course, Jesus’ “Parable of the Tenants” in Matthew 21: 33-46 draws heavily upon the same premise.



“Parable of the Wicked Tenant” (illuminated manuscript), c. 1450.

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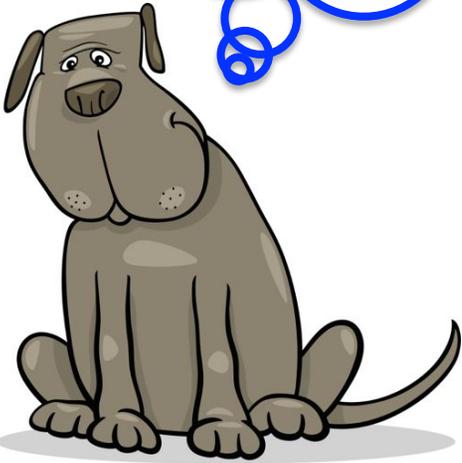
The second premise is that the *Israelites* belong to God, as well as the land; hence, an Israelite cannot be a slave, owned by someone else: at worst, he can become an indentured servant for a fixed period of time.

We learned at the beginning of our Scripture study in Genesis that the world of the Bible is patriarchal, monarchical, polytheistic and slaveholding: all four were unquestioned realities of life in the ancient world; and we learned that Scripture mirrors the time and culture from which it emerges.

Consequently, to say that the Israelites belong to the Lord—and hence cannot be slaves—is another radical statement, especially in light of the Israelites having spent the past 400 years enslaved in Egypt.



The magnitude of both premises is mind-boggling! Their social and political implications are utterly revolutionary.



Politicians today who want to redistribute wealth are pikers by comparison!

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To work through the rest of Leviticus 25 we need to understand how it is structured and how it achieves cohesion.

Jacob Milgrom—quoting from rabbinic Midrash—suggests the following sequence, so compelling, he says, *“that it reveals the logic of the chapter’s order and its underlying theology”*:



Chapter 25 begins with: “*The Lord spoke to Moses . . . the land shall rest*” (1-7), followed by the subject of the Jubilee (8-13).

- If he [the Israelite] has not observed the sabbaticals and Jubilees, he will ultimately sell his moveable possessions (14-24);
- if he repents, fine; if not, he will ultimately sell his land (25-28);
- if he repents, fine; if not, he will ultimately sell his house (29-34);
- if he repents, fine; if not, he will ultimately go begging (35-38);
- if he repents, fine; if not, he will ultimately sell himself to another Israelite (39-46);
- if he repents, fine; if not, he will ultimately sell himself to a gentile, not only himself, but all of Israel (47-55).



Notice that chapter consists of seven movements: the statement about the Jubilee, followed by six “if/then” statements.

Let’s follow the sequence and see what we can learn!



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If he [the Israelite] has not observed the sabbaticals and Jubilees, he will ultimately sell his moveable possessions (14-24).

“Therefore, when you sell any land to your neighbor or buy any from your neighbor, do not deal unfairly with one another. On the basis of the number of years since the last Jubilee you shall purchase the land from your neighbor, and so also, on the basis of the number of years of harvest, that person shall sell it to you. When the years are many, the price shall be so much the more; when the years are few, the price shall be so much the less. For it is really the number of harvests that the person sells you. Do not deal unfairly with one another, then; but stand in fear of your God, I, the Lord, am your God

“ . . . Observe my statutes and be careful to keep my ordinances, so that you will dwell securely in the land. The land will yield its fruit and you will eat your fill, and live there securely. And if you say, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we do not sow or reap our crop?’ I will command such a blessing for you in the sixth year that there will be crop enough for three years, and when you sow in the eighth year, you will still be eating from the old crop; even into the ninth year, until the crop comes in, you will still be eating from the old crop.

“The land shall not be sold irrevocably; for the land is mine, and you are but resident aliens and under my authority. Therefore, in every part of the country that you occupy, you must permit the land to be redeemed.”



On the Jubilee year all land reverts back to its original owner. Consequently, if the original owner chooses to sublet his land, the price is based on the number of crops that can be harvested until the next Jubilee year.

For example, if my land produces annual crops worth \$25,000, and if I lease my land to you for 24 years (the number of years left until the next Jubilee), you would pay me \$600,000 ($\$25,000 \times 24$ years). At the Jubilee the land would then revert back to me.

Since I must be fair, I may not charge you more than the value of the annual crops across the 24-year lease period.



For the mechanics of the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee to work, the Israelites must trust that God will provide crops prior to the Sabbaticals and Jubilees abundant enough to sustain the people when the land lies fallow.

The Sabbatical Year has been observed in modern-day Israel since its founding in 1948: the 1st was 1951; the most recent, 2014. As practiced today in Israel:

- Produce grown during the 6th year may be bought and sold during the 7th year;
- Produce grown on land owned by non-Jews (usually Arabs) may be bought and sold;
- Produce grown on land outside of Israel may be bought and sold;
- Produce grown in hydroponic greenhouses may be bought and sold, since the growth does not involve soil.



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“When one of your kindred is reduced to poverty and has to sell some property, that person’s closest relative, who has the duty to redeem it, shall come and redeem what the relative has sold. If, however, the person has no relative to redeem it, the person shall calculate the years since the sale, return the balance to the one to whom it was sold, and thus regain the property. But if the person does not acquire sufficient means to buy back the land, what is sold shall remain in the possession of the purchaser until the year of the Jubilee, when it must be released and returned to the original owner.”



If you sell [lease] your land to another, there are three ways to get it back:

1. A “kinsman redeemer” may buy the land back on your behalf.

A “kinsman redeemer” must meet three criteria to do this:

1. He must be your nearest relative;
2. He must have the resources to buy the land back; and
3. He must be willing to do so.

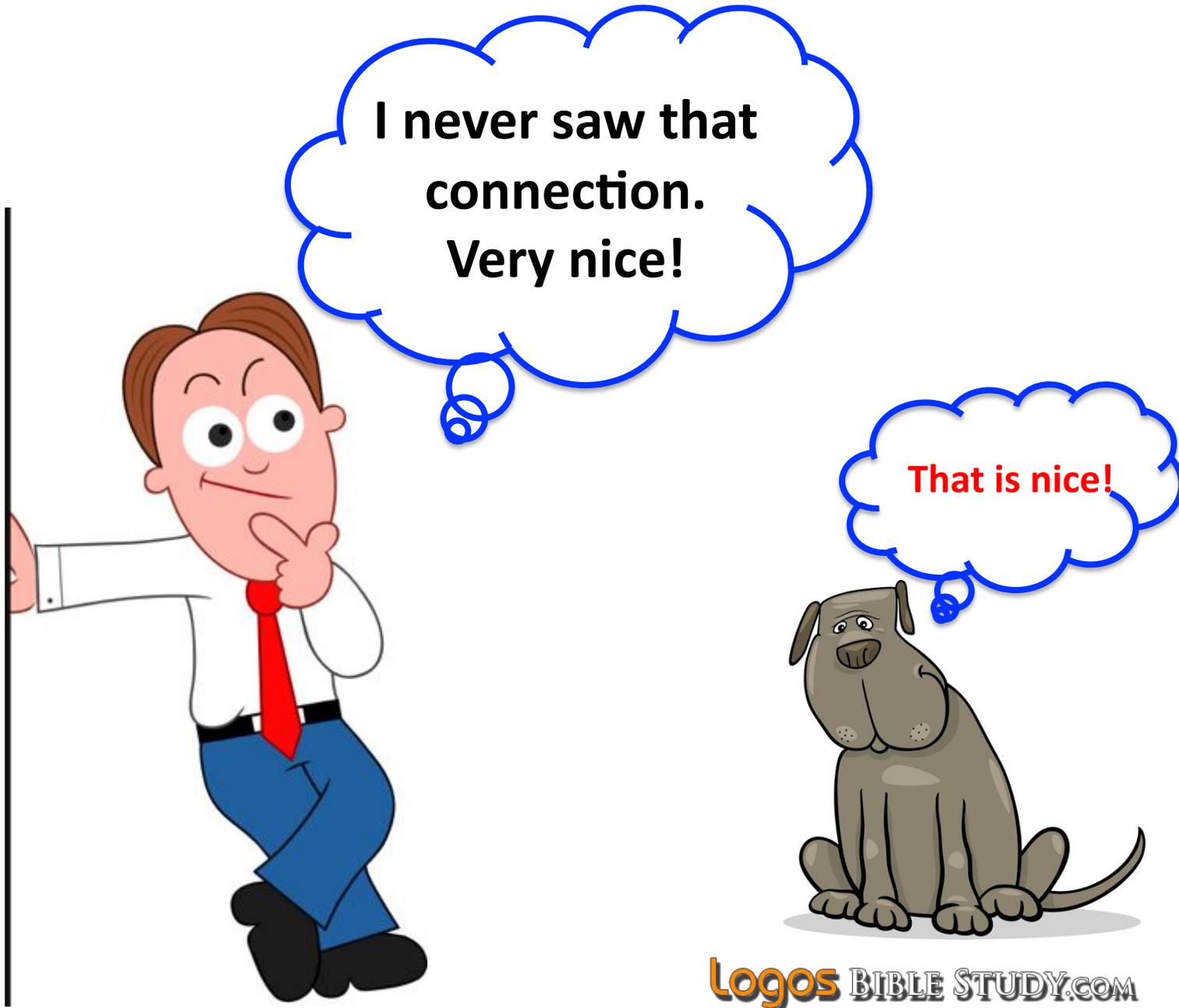
(In the story of *Ruth*, Boaz is Ruth and Naomi’s kinsman redeemer.)

2. You may return the money that you received for the land; or
3. On the Jubilee the land will automatically revert back to you.



As Boaz was Ruth and Naomi's "kinsman redeemer," so is Christ our "kinsman redeemer":

- 1. He is our nearest relative, both fully God and fully man;**
- 2. Being sinless himself, he has the resources to redeem us from our sin; and**
- 3. He willingly went to the cross on our behalf.**



**I never saw that
connection.
Very nice!**

That is nice!

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“When someone sells a dwelling in a walled town, it can be redeemed up to a full year after its sale—the redemption period is one year. But if such a house in a walled town has not been redeemed at the end of a full year, it shall belong irrevocably to the purchaser throughout the generations; it shall not be released in the Jubilee. However, houses in villages that are not encircled by walls shall be reckoned as part of the surrounding farm land; they may be redeemed, and in the Jubilee they must be released . . .



Homes on agricultural land are viewed as part of the land itself, the entire holding functioning as a productive farm; whereas, homes in walled [or fortified] towns are solely residences, not associated with earning a living.

Hence, homes in walled towns are treated differently from those on agricultural land.

“In levitical cities the Levites shall always have the right to redeem the houses in the cities that are in their possession. As for levitical property that goes unredeemed—houses sold in cities of their possession shall be released in the Jubilee; for the houses in levitical cities are their possession in the midst of the Israelites. Moreover, the pasture land belonging to their cities shall not be sold at all; it must always remain in their possession.”



In Numbers 26 God allocates land to each of the tribes—*except the tribe of Levi, the tribe of the priests*: God himself is to be their inheritance; they are not farmers, but serve at the Tabernacle/Temple, earning their living by functioning as priests.

However, in Numbers 35 the Levites do receive 48 cities, along with pasture land, distributed throughout the tribal territories. The priests and their families live in these cities, and since they do not own land, their homes and pastures remain in their possession.



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“When one of your kindred is reduced to poverty and becomes indebted to you, you shall support that person like a resident alien; let your kindred live with you. Do not exact interest in advance or accrued interest, but out of fear of God let your kindred live with you. Do not give your money at interest or your food at a profit. I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.”



When a relative is down on his or her luck, poor and impoverished, it is your responsibility to support them and help them get back on their feet:

- If you make them a loan, you are not to charge interest; and
- If they live with you, you are not to charge them room and board.



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“When your kindred with you, having been so reduced to poverty, sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. Rather, let them be like laborers or like your tenants, working with you until the Jubilee year, when together with any children, they shall be released from your service and return to their family and to their ancestral property. Since they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt, they shall not sell themselves as slaves are sold. Do not lord it over them harshly, but stand in fear of your God . . .



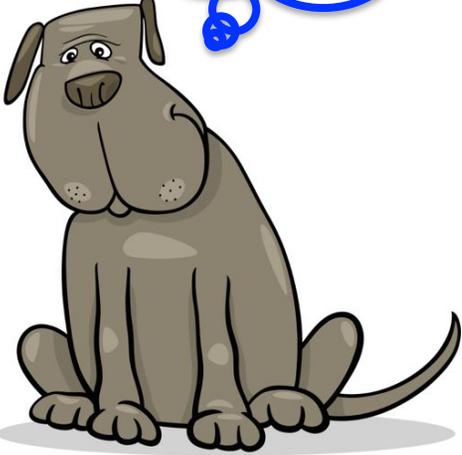
If an Israelite is so down on his luck that he is willing to sell himself to another Israelite, the conditions are that of an indentured servant, not a slave.

- **He is to be treated with dignity as an employee, while he works off his debt; and**
- **At the Jubilee he and his family shall return to their ancestral property, free of all debt.**

“. . . The male and female slaves that you possess—these you shall acquire from the nations round about you. You may also acquire them from among the resident aliens who reside with you, and from their families who are with you, those whom they bore in your land. These you may possess, and bequeath to your children as their hereditary possession forever. You may treat them as slaves. But none of you shall lord it harshly over any of your fellow Israelites.”



Wow! That's a shocker!!
Here God actually allows
slavery, as long as the
slave is not an Israelite.
What gives with that?



I'll bet Dr. C. is
going to tell us.

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Recall that the world of the ancient Near East is: 1) monarchical; 2) patriarchal; 3) polytheistic; and 4) ***slaveholding***. This was simply an unquestioned fact of life in the biblical world, a fact of life that is mirrored in Scripture. Although such cultural realities are offensive to us today, it would be absurd—and incorrect—to impose our present-day cultural values on an ancient text.

That said, St. Paul addresses slavery obliquely in his letter to *Philemon*, where he encourages Philemon (with more than a little arm-twisting) to accept Onesimus—his runaway slave, now a Christian—“*no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother*” (16).

And with that, St. Paul effectively ends slavery among Christians, forever.



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“When your kindred, having been so reduced to poverty, sell themselves to a resident alien who has become wealthy or to descendants of a resident alien’s family, even after having sold themselves, they still may be redeemed by their kindred, by an uncle or cousin, or by some other relative from their family; or, having acquired the means, they may pay the redemption price themselves. With the purchaser they shall compute the years from the sale to the Jubilee, distributing the sale price over these years as through they had been hired as laborers. The more years there are, the more of the sale . . .

“. . . price they shall pay back as the redemption price; the fewer years there are before the Jubilee year, the more they have as credit; in proportion to the years of service they shall pay the redemption price. The tenant alien shall treat those who sold themselves as laborers hired on an annual basis, and the alien shall not lord it over them harshly before your very eyes. And if they are not redeemed by these means, they shall nevertheless be released, together with any children, in the Jubilee year. For the Israelites belong to me as servants; they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt, I, the Lord, your God.”



This is the worst-case scenario: an Israelite sells himself and his family as slaves to a Gentile!

- Ideally, the Gentile—a resident alien living within the Israelite community—would respect the Jubilee and free such a person, but that’s a big assumption.
- In the end, though, it is a moot point, for in 722 B.C. the Assyrians conquer the northern kingdom of Israel, taking captive to Assyria those Israelites who survive; and in 586 B.C. the Babylonians conquer the southern kingdom of Judah, taking captive to Babylon those Judeans who survive.

When Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, conquers the Babylonians in 539 B.C., he allows the Jews to return home, but the people do not return to their ancestral, tribal land; they return as one people to rebuild Jerusalem. Most, however (about 90%), stayed behind in Assyria and Babylon, beginning the Diaspora—Jews scattered about the world—which continues to this day.



In a very real sense, Leviticus 25 presents a utopian vision of a just society, as the ancient Israelites envisioned God seeing it through his eyes.

In fact, it never happened. There is no evidence—in Scripture or outside of it—to suggest that the Jubilee ever occurred.

St. Thomas More wrote his famous *Utopia* in 1516, a satirical “novel” in which he portrays an ideal society on an island in the Atlantic Ocean. He coined the term “utopia” for his title. It is a Greek compound: οὐ (“not”) plus τόπος (“place”). “Utopia” means “no place.”

And so it is in Leviticus 25.

Questions for discussion and thought

1. In “The Curious Case of the Blasphemer,” who is the blasphemer?
2. Every seven years the land is to lie fallow. Why?
3. Is there a parallel between God providing daily manna in the wilderness and the Sabbatical Year?
4. Other ancient Near Eastern cultures practiced the forgiving of debt at periodic intervals, most often when a new king came to the throne. How does the Jubilee in Leviticus 25 differ from the surrounding cultures?
5. Can you think of a situation in modern times when the concept of a Jubilee might be a practical strategy?

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