

THE TIME IS FULFILLED. JESUS AND THE JUBILEE ¹

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As the Millennium approaches, there is considerable interest in the Old Testament idea of Jubilee, but the New Testament application is unexplored. The Jubilee is a key element in understanding both the ministry of Jesus and Palestine in the first century CE.

The Old Testament prescriptions for the Jubilee year are set out in Leviticus 25: the land is to lie fallow and all people return to their own property. 'Proclaim liberty, *d'ror*, throughout the land... each of you shall return to his property and to his family (Lev.25.10). Leased land returned to its original owners, it being against the Law to buy and sell land in perpetuity. In addition, every seventh year was a Sabbath year in which land lay fallow and all Hebrews who had been enslaved for debt were released and the debt thereby cancelled. The oldest form of these laws occurs in the Book of the Covenant: a Hebrew slave was to go free in the seventh year (Exod.21.2) and the land was to lie fallow in the seventh year, with the vineyards and olives trees unharvested (Exod.23.10-11). This is directly linked to observing the weekly Sabbath as a time when animals and slaves could be refreshed (Exod.23.12) and both follow the commandment not to oppress a stranger because Israel was enslaved in Egypt. These were laws against exploitation. The land law appears also in Leviticus 25.2-7 and an expanded version of the law of slavery and remission of debt, *s'mittah*, LXX *`aphesis*, appears in Deuteronomy 15.1-18.

The laws of Sabbath year and Jubilee were given on Sinai (Lev.25.1), in other words, they were very important laws, and to break them brought severe punishment. Jeremiah condemned the aristocracy in Jerusalem for flouting the slavery law, when they released their Hebrew slaves in the seventh year and then re-enslaved them. Their punishment would be slavery to the King of Babylon and they would be set free to endure sword, pestilence and famine (Jer.34.8-22). The Chronicler observed that the exile also fulfilled Jeremiah's words, for the land was at last permitted to enjoy its (overdue) Sabbaths (2 Chron.36.21). When the second temple community was established, they took a solemn oath to obey this law; they swore first not to intermarry with other nations, second not to trade on the Sabbath and third that in the seventh year they would forego all crops and the exaction of all debt (Neh.10.30ff.). In the Maccabean War, the city of Beth Zur was unable to withstand siege because they had no provisions; it was the Sabbath year and there was no food in store (1 Macc.6.49,63).

There was disagreement as to whether the Jubilee year was the seventh Sabbath year itself, or the year which followed, i.e. the forty ninth or the fiftieth year. The traditional compromise was that it was reckoned as fifty years during the first temple period and forty nine in the second². The fifty year reckoning would have entailed two fallow years in succession, one sabbatical, the other Jubilee, but this does seem to be implied by Leviticus 25.21: 'I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year so that the land will bring forth fruit for three years' (not two). Isaiah's oracle of hope to Hezekiah also implies two fallow years at the Jubilee; the liberation of Jubilee is the prophetic sign of the liberation of Jerusalem from the Assyrian threat. 'And this shall be the sign for you: this year eat what grows of itself and in the second year what springs of it; then in the third sow and reap plant vineyards and eat their fruit' (Isa.37.30).

The command to eat only what grows of itself in the field (Lev.25.12) and the older injunction to share this equally with the poor and the animals (Exod.23.11), indicate that the Sabbath year was a time when the land and the people returned to their original state. When God created the human pair, he made provision for their food. 'Behold I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, I have given every green plant for food' (Gen.1.29-30). This was the state of creation which the God saw was very good before resting on the seventh day. It was only later, after the disobedience, that Adam was told that his food would be won from the soil by the sweat of his face (Gen.3.19). In the Sabbath year, all

Israel returned to the original state of creation, sharing equally with the animals whatever grew of itself from the earth.

The Jubilee, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, was proclaimed on the Day of Atonement (Lev.25.9) and so the custom of Jubilee must be understood in this context. Since atonement was itself a rite which restored the eternal covenant and enabled the whole creation, not just the community of Israel, to be restored to its original state³, the Jubilee was a practical application of the atonement. *The key figure in the rite of atonement was the high priest who was the visible presence of the LORD on earth⁴, and, just as the LORD had ordered the creation at the beginning, so he recreated it on the Day of Atonement at the New Year. The Jubilee recreated society by restoring people to their own land and by removing the burden of slavery and debt.*

The LXX of Leviticus 25.10 translates the key word *d'ror*, liberty, by *`aphesis*, remission, showing that by that period (perhaps the third century BCE), the characteristics of Sabbath year and Jubilee had combined, even though it is the tradition that the Jubilee was not literally observed during the second temple period⁵. The Jubilee was still used as a measurement of time, as can be seen from the Book of Jubilees.

The Jubilee was closely linked to the role of the Servant of the LORD, Isaiah's depiction of the royal high priest of the first temple⁶. He was to release prisoners (Isa.42.7), he was to bring back Jacob and gather in Israel, establish the land and allocate desolate inheritances (Isa.49.5,9). In their present context in the exilic prophecies of Isaiah, the reference is to the return from Babylon, showing that Jubilee was reinterpreted for the changed situation. The Targum understood these passages to mean that the Servant would bring back the exiles of the Diaspora and also bring Israel back to the fear of the LORD, another adaptation of the concept of Jubilee.

Isaiah 61.1-9 is a significant Jubilee passage; someone anointed with the Spirit is to bring good tidings to the poor, comfort the broken hearted and proclaim liberty, *d'ror*, to captives. This is the year of the LORD's favour, in other words, the Jubilee, and also the Day of Judgement, the Day of the LORD. The Song of Moses shows that when the LORD appeared to avenge the blood of his servants⁷, he atoned the land of his people (Deut.32.43). That the Day of the LORD was also the Day of Atonement when the heavenly high priest emerged from the sanctuary is confirmed by later texts such as the Assumption of Moses 10⁸. The anointed one in Isaiah 61 was to restore some ousted people to their former inheritance; they would be recognised as the LORD's people and given their rightful portion of the land (Isa.61.7). Here the concept of Jubilee gives hope to the dispossessed who had been deprived of their rights and their inheritance when the exiles returned from Babylon to establish the second temple. The indigenous but ousted worshippers of the LORD became the new exiles in their own land (Isa.63.15-19)⁹, and the Jubilee came to express the hopes of these dispossessed people, that one day their land would be restored to them. They called the new Jerusalem the harlot (Isa.57.7-10) and they threatened her with judgement from the temple itself (Isa.66.5-6). Their spiritual descendants produced the Book of Revelation.

The Jubilee was used to measure time in the second temple period even when a literal application of the land laws was no longer possible¹⁰. Later tradition divided the history of Israel into Jubilees, but the remarkable coincidence of important events and Jubilee years does suggest that the Jubilee system was a significant factor in Israel's actual history and not just in the memory of its historians. There was a Jubilee during the eighteenth year of King Josiah's reign, probably the reason for the temple refurbishment (2 Kgs 22 implies that the temple repairs uncovered the lawbook that led to his 'purge' whereas 2 Chronicles 34 implies that the temple repairs were the final act of his religious purge). Reckoning a fifty year Jubilee in the first temple period, this gives 622 BCE as the date of the temple restoration because there was another Jubilee in the fourteenth year after Jerusalem was conquered, 572BCE, the twenty fifth year of Ezekiel's exile (Ezek.40.1). His vision of the restoration was a Jubilee vision, with the LORD returning to his place in the temple (Ezek.43.1-5) and the land being allocated once more among the twelve tribes (Ezek.48.1-29). Reckoning back by fifty year Jubilees,

722 BCE was also a Jubilee year and the most likely date for Isaiah's Jubilee sign (Isa.37.30-32). Although the oracle is now incorporated in material from the time of Hezekiah and Sennacherib's invasion, it probably belongs with the earlier oracles to Ahaz. Assyria invaded and occupied the northern kingdom of Israel in 724BCE and captured Samaria after a long siege in 721BCE. The Jubilee oracle was probably a sign of hope for Jerusalem at that time.

Reckoning from Ezekiel's Jubilee vision in 572BCE gives another Jubilee year in 522BCE, a possible date for Zerubbabel and Joshua's coming to Jerusalem and attempting to re-establish worship there¹¹. There were also forty nine year Jubilees in 473BCE and 424BCE. One possible date for Ezra's return to Jerusalem is 428BCE¹², and it could well have been the Jubilee in 424BCE that prompted both this return and the covenant renewal when all 'foreign' wives were abandoned (Ezra 10). There was certainly some event at this time which caused many worshippers of the LORD to feel they had been excluded and that Jerusalem would be punished for what had happened. Daniel's seventy weeks of years were reckoned from this time 'when the word went forth to restore and rebuild Jerusalem' (Dan.9.25), and the seventy weeks of years were to end when transgression, sin and iniquity were finally removed and Jerusalem was destroyed (Dan.9.24,26). The Day of Atonement was also the Day of the LORD, the Day of Judgement¹³. The description indicates a final Day of Atonement when prophecy and visions are fulfilled and the Anointed One appears.

The seventy weeks of years, 490 years, were ten Jubilees, and the alternative way of reckoning this period was as ten Jubilees. Jewish tradition remembered that the 490 years ended in 68CE; calculation from the second temple Jubilee sequence beginning in 424BCE gives 66CE. A two year discrepancy is hardly significant in the light of what this implies, namely that the tenth Jubilee began in 17/19 CE. *In other words, tenth Jubilee fervour and expectations were the context for the ministry of Jesus.*

The Qumran Melchizedek text (11QMelch), written in the middle of the first century BCE but not necessarily composed at that time, describes the events of the tenth Jubilee¹⁴. Only fragments have survived so it is possible that the complete text described the other nine Jubilees also. The text begins by quoting the Jubilee laws in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15, interpreting them 'for the last days'. The captives who are to return are people whose teachers have been 'hidden and kept secret' and these 'people of the inheritance of Melchizedek' will return. There is insufficient text for certainty, but this looks like a group who have been secretly preserving the teachings of the first temple, when there was a Melchizedek priesthood. In the tenth Jubilee they would 'return', perhaps to the temple as priests? The liberty of the Jubilee is interpreted as release from iniquities, the beginning of the atonement which will occur on the Day of Atonement at the end of the tenth Jubilee. The return and the release from iniquity were to happen in the first week, the first seven years, of the tenth Jubilee i.e. approximately 19-26 CE. If Jesus was born in 7/6 BCE¹⁵ and was baptised when he was about thirty years old (Luke 3.23), he began his ministry during the crucial first 'week' of the tenth Jubilee.

11 QMelch alludes many times to the Jubilee oracle in Isaiah 61: '... the LORD God has anointed me... to proclaim liberty to the captives (Isa.61.1, 'proclaim liberty', *d'ror*. being a quotation from Lev.25.10). The coming Melchizedek is to rescue his own people (? the sons of light, but the text is damaged here) from the power of Belial. There was to be a messenger of peace announcing to Zion 'Your God reigns', thus fulfilling Isaiah 52.7. The messenger was probably Melchizedek, but again the text is too damaged for certainty. He would be the anointed one prophesied in Daniel 9.25, but described in 11 QMelch as 'anointed of the Spirit', a conflation with Isaiah 61.1. The anointed one would instruct in the end times of the world¹⁶ and some people (the text is broken here) would establish the covenant, another Day of Atonement theme.

This gives the context for the opening scenes of the gospels. In the first week of the tenth Jubilee Jesus was baptised with the Spirit, which was interpreted as his anointing (Acts 10.38). After his time in the desert he returned to Galilee announcing 'the time is fulfilled' i.e. the tenth Jubilee is inaugurated and 'Melchizedek' is here, 'the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent', because the final Day of Atonement was also at hand, 'and believe the good news' of the Jubilee release. Luke's

account of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth shows that he claimed to have inaugurated the final Jubilee; no other interpretation can be put on the claim to have fulfilled *that day* (Luke 4.21) the Jubilee prophecy in Isaiah 61 which was central to the Melchizedek expectations of the time.¹⁷

The first miracle was an exorcism (Mark 1.21-26), setting one of his own people free from the power of Belial. He spoke of a woman bound by Satan and released her (Luke 13.16), of slaves to sin whom the Son could release (John 9.31-38). He forgave sins and illustrated his teaching with a parable of two debtors whose debts were cancelled (Luke 7. 41-48). The healing miracles restored to the community people who would have been excluded as ritually unfit: the disabled, the lepers, a woman who was bleeding. This was the great ingathering of the Jubilee. Jesus spoke of those who would inherit the earth (Mat.5.5) and at the Last Supper, he spoke of the New Covenant and of his blood poured out for the remission of sins (*aphesis*, the Jubilee word, Mat.26.28).

The Jubilee also brought the Day of Judgement, vividly described in 11QMelch. Melchizedek would take his place in the heavenly assembly and, as described in Psalm 82.1, begin to judge the *`elohim*, the heavenly beings. This was to be the year of Melchizedek's favour, a very significant alteration to Isaiah 61.2, which proclaims the Jubilee as the year of the LORD's favour. Similarly with Psalm 82.1; it is Melchizedek who takes his place in the heavenly assembly, whereas in the original Psalm it is God. *The only possible conclusion is that Melchizedek, the heavenly high priest, was the LORD, the God of Israel.* In 11 QMelch he has armies and brings the vengeance of divine judgement, and these were expected to appear in the tenth Jubilee. 11 QMelch explains why Jesus is depicted as judge and warrior in the Book of Revelation and why the Book of Revelation is described as 'The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place' (Rev.1.1). These were the teachings of Melchizedek, revealing in the tenth Jubilee the ends times of the world. When the Lamb takes his place in the heavenly assembly (Rev.5.6-14 fulfilling Ps.82.1) the judgement begins. The Word of God rides out from heaven, wearing a white robe sprinkled with blood; he is the high priest who has taken the atonement blood into the holy of holies. He rides out with his with his army (Rev.19.11-16) and the judgement follows.

The letter to the Hebrews explained the role of Jesus as the new Melchizedek (Heb.7.11), the one who had attained the priesthood by ascent, being raised up, not by descent from Aaron¹⁸. The crucifixion and ascension had been recognised as the enthronement of the Lamb, exactly as described in Hebrews 10.12: 'When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, there to wait until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet'. The remainder of the tenth Jubilee was the time of waiting until the final battle and victory when the Great High Priest would emerge to complete the Atonement and conclude the Jubilee.

The years of the tenth Jubilee were difficult in Palestine; famines in the 40s and early 60s only made the situation worse and distorted the price of grain. In the end, oppressive action on the part of the Roman governors drove the people to revolt. The six seals on the scroll which the Lamb opened were prophecies of events in Palestine during the Jubilee and as each happened, so a seal was believed to have opened. The third seal was the great famine of 46-48CE, prophesied by Agabus (Acts 11.28) whose enigmatic words were preserved (Rev.6.6). The fifth was the martyrdom of James the Righteous who was murdered in the temple in 62 CE and buried where he fell¹⁹, and the sixth was Nero's persecution which followed the great fire of Rome in July 64CE, the great tribulation (Rev 7.14). *The seventh seal would bring the return of the heavenly high priest to complete the great atonement at the end of the tenth Jubilee which was, by that time, imminent.* In August 66CE, the nationalists gained entrance to the temple area and burned all records of debt²⁰, the start of the Jubilee.

Jubilee fervour must have been a factor in Judea in the first century first century CE. Zealot ideology was that of the ancient warrior priests, their great hero being Phineas who was zealous for his God and put to death those who broke the covenant laws (Num.25.13). Phineas's violent action was described as atonement, and this was also part of the Zealot agenda. Above all they wanted their own land restored to its rightful owners; it was a Jubilee campaign.

How deeply the Christians were involved in these nationalist movements is hard to say; there is a strong suspicion that disciples with names like Simon the Cananean i.e. Zealot (Mark 3.18 cf Luke 6.15) or Judas Iscariot, or Peter, known as Simon Bar Jona (Mat.16.17) when the *barjone* were the Zealots²¹ cannot have been unconnected with the nationalist movement.

The saints in the Book of Revelation were involved in struggles of the last days, but there was a strong economic element in their struggle. The beast was the antichrist, the antitype of the Messiah and the mark of the beast, or, using the language of 11QMelch, the sign of those who belonged to Belial, was worn on the right hand and the forehead, a parody of phylacteries (Deut.6.8). The followers of the beast were enemies within the Jewish people who had betrayed something very precious, the economic structures of the covenant people. The Book of Revelation originated in Palestine and so was written in Hebrew or Aramaic. The present Greek text has *charagma* for the 'mark' of the beast but this also means the mark left by the bite of a snake. In Hebrew, this 'bite' would have been *nasak*, which is the word used for interest paid on a loan. It was forbidden for Jews to charge interest to fellow Jews (Exod.22.25) and it seems that those who wore the mark of the beast had been involved in money lending at interest to exacerbate the plight of their people. The great harlot in Revelation 17 was Jerusalem condemned to destruction not for her idolatry, as in former times, but because of her ill-gotten wealth. As the city burned in Revelation 18, the saints rejoiced but the merchants wept.

Contemporary sources show just how deep was the hatred against those who exploited the poor of Palestine. There was the Wicked Priest in Jerusalem who 'forsook God for the sake of riches... heaping sinful iniquity upon himself' (1QpHab 8). 'The last priests in Jerusalem shall amass money and wealth by plundering the people but in the last days their riches and their booty shall be delivered into the hands of the Kittim' i.e. the Romans (1QpHab 9). These same sources also show how literally they believed there would be divine intervention in their final struggle. The War Scroll describes the angels who would fight alongside them, how the presence of the Holy Ones would enable them to scorn the mighty. Josephus describes how the zealot leaders refused all Titus's offers of honourable surrender, because they were confident that the One who lived in their temple would come to help them. John of Gischala was confident that the city would never fall because it belonged to God. The fighting men later hurled insults at God for his delay in punishing their enemies²². He records another remarkable incident; when the Romans began to bombard the city with huge white stones, the defenders must have believed it was the supernatural hailstorm which announced a theophany, the return of the LORD. As the stones came over the walls they shouted 'The Son is Coming'²³

There is insufficient evidence to say with confidence how closely the Parousia expectations of the early church were bound up with the Jewish nationalism of the first century CE. They had Jubilee expectations in common, but the present form of the gospels invites us to believe that Jesus spiritualised the Jubilee, interpreting release from debt and slavery as forgiveness of sins and release from the power of Satan. This, however, is exactly the interpretation in 11QMelch, which was quite clear about the events of the tenth Jubilee. A spiritual interpretation of Jubilee does not necessarily indicate a separate agenda from the nationalists. Jesus did warn that the blood of the prophets would be required of his generation (Luke 11.50), in other words, that the Day of Judgement would occur within the lifetime of his hearers. This explains the urgency of his words: 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the good news'.

¹ This article was first published in SJT 53.1 (2000) pp.22-32

² See 'Sabbatical Year and Jubilee' in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*.

³ See my 'Atonement: the Rite of Healing SJT 49.1 (1996) pp.1-20

⁴ See my *The Risen LORD* Edinburgh 1996 pp. 61-64.

⁵ See 'Sabbatical Year and Jubilee' in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*

⁶ *The Risen LORD* op.cit.n.3 pp. 121-130

⁷ The Qumran text 4Q Deut^q has 'sons'

⁸ See my 'Atonement' op.cit.n.2 pp.9-15

⁹ See my *The Older Testament* London 1987 pp. 184-220.

¹⁰ See 'Sabbatical Year and Jubilee' in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*

¹¹ Ezra 4.3-8 says they began in the second year of their coming to Jerusalem, but local hostility stopped the work until the second year of Darius, 520BCE (Ezra 4.24).

¹² This is argued, on other grounds than that of Jubilee, by John Bright, *A History of Israel* London 1960. .

¹³ See my 'Atonement' op. cit. n.2pp. 13-14.

¹⁴ Using the text and notes in DJD XXIII *Qumran Cave 11*. Garcia-Martinez and others Oxford 1998.

¹⁵ Herod the Great died in 4BCE, when Jesus was a young child Mat 2.19.

¹⁶ Translating *qsy* as 'ends of' rather than 'ages' as in DJD.

¹⁷ Jesus as Melchizedek is the theme of my *The Risen LORD op.cit.n.3*

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 22,27

¹⁹ Eusebius *History of the Church* 2.23

²⁰ Josephus *Jewish War* 2.427

²¹ b.Gittin 56a

²² *War* 5.459; *War* 6.99; *War* 6.4

²³ *War* 5.272