

Occupy, Debt, Morality, Jubilee

"The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender." – Proverbs 22:7

The Biblical Tradition of Jubilee

Leviticus 25:2 – Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them: When ye come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a sabbath unto HaShem.

3 Six years thou shalt sow thy field, and six years thou shalt prune thy vineyard, and gather in the produce thereof. 4 But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath unto HaShem; thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard.. 8...And thou shalt number seven sabbaths of years unto thee, seven times seven years; and there shall be unto thee the days of seven sabbaths of years, even forty and nine years... 10 And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and **proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof** ¹; it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family. 11 A jubilee shall that fiftieth year be unto you; ye shall not sow, neither reap that which groweth of itself in it, nor gather the grapes in it of the undressed vines. 12 For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy unto you; ye shall eat the increase thereof out of the field. 14 And if thou sell aught unto thy neighbour, or buy of thy neighbour's hand, ye shall not wrong one another. 23 And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine; for ye are strangers and settlers with Me. 24 And in all the land of your possession ye shall grant a redemption for the land. 25 If thy brother be waxen poor, and sell some of his possession, then shall his kinsman that is next unto him come, and shall redeem that which his brother hath sold... 28 But if he have not sufficient means to get it back for himself, then that which he hath sold shall remain in the hand of him that hath bought it until the year of jubilee; and in the jubilee it shall go out, and he shall return unto his possession.

39 And if thy brother be waxen poor with thee, and sell himself unto thee, thou shalt not make him to serve as a bondservant. 40 As a hired servant, and as a settler, he shall be with thee; he shall serve with thee unto the year of jubilee. 41 Then shall he go out from thee, he and his children with him, and shall return unto his own family, and unto the possession of his fathers shall he return. 42 **For they are My servants, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as bondmen.** 43 Thou shalt not rule over him with rigour; but shalt fear thy G-d.

Roots in other ancient cultures

Traced back to the Hittite/Hurrians/Babylonians, "The Song of Debt Release" ², also found in 6th century BCE Greece, *Seisachtheia* law (Greek: σεισάχθεια, from σείειν seiein, to shake, and ἄχθος achthos, burden, i.e. the relief of burdens). Egypt – the famous Rosetta Stone is a new King announcing among other things the forgiveness of tax debts and the release of prisoners.

Was this practiced?

From *The Lost Tradition of Biblical Debt Cancellations*, by Michael Hudson ³

Radical as the idea of canceling debts and restoring the population's means of subsistence seems to modern eyes, it had been a conservative tradition in Bronze Age Mesopotamia for

some two millennia. What was conserved was self-sufficiency for the rural family-heads who made up the infantry as well as the productive base of Near Eastern economies. Conversely, what was radically disturbing in archaic times was the idea of unrestrained wealth-seeking...

...The Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule have become so dissociated from the economic legislation of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy that whoever takes these laws in earnest is considered utopian and anachronistic if looking backward nostalgically, or radical if adopting there as a guide for current activism. Yet these laws formed the take-off point for Christ upon his return to Nazareth's synagogue, and for his denunciation of the money-changers who had taken over Jerusalem's temple. As late as medieval Spain the tradition of the Jubilee Year was kept alive by Maimonides and Ibn Adret...

Until fairly recently most Biblical historians doubted that these policies really were applied in practice... [but] it has become clear that the freedom advocated by the Covenant Code of Exodus, the septennial year of release in Deuteronomy and the Jubilee Year of Leviticus's Holiness Code were not just abstract literary ideas, but concrete legal practices freeing rural populations from debt servitude and the land from appropriation by absentee foreclosers. What made the revival of these releases revolutionary in Israel was their removal from the hands of rulers to become a sacred popular commandment.

Slavery and debt-slavery

Lev 25:42 makes a clear link between slavery and wage-slavery

Nehemiah 5:3 Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth. 4 There were also that said, We have borrowed money for the king's tribute, and that upon our lands and vineyards. 5 Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren, our children as their children: and, lo, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants, and some of our daughters are brought unto bondage already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our lands and vineyards. 6 And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words. 7 Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. **And I set a great assembly against them.**

What made Nehemiah, Ezra and other contemporary founders of Jewish religion unique was the way in which they reworked these archaic cosmological traditions to **elevate the spirit of social justice to the plane of sacred covenant.** – Michael Hudson

Debt and Morality

David Graeber, an economic anthropologist, was one of the founders of the Occupy movement and probably its leading intellectual. His *Debt* ⁴ is largely the story about the evolution of monetary debt and its questionable relationship to morality:

In Sanskrit, Hebrew, Aramaic, 'debt,' 'guilt,' and 'sin' are actually the same word. Much of the language of the great religious movements – reckoning, redemption, karmic accounting and the like – are drawn from the language of ancient finance. But that language is always found wanting and inadequate and twisted around into something completely different. It's as if the

great prophets and religious teachers had no choice but to start with that kind of language because it's the language that existed at the time, but they only adopted it so as to turn it into its opposite: as a way of saying debts are not sacred, but forgiveness of debt, or the ability to wipe out debt, or to realize that debts aren't real – these are the acts that are truly sacred.⁵

The way violence, or the threat of violence, turns human relations into mathematics will crop up again and again...it is the ultimate source of the moral confusion that seems to float around everything surrounding the topic of debt (*Debt*, p14)

It seems to me that we are long overdue for some kind of Biblical-style Jubilee: one that would affect both international debt and consumer debt. It would be salutary not just because it would relieve so much genuine human suffering, but also it would be our way of reminding ourselves that money is not ineffable, that paying one's debts is not the essence of morality, that all these things are human arrangements and that if democracy is to mean anything, it is the ability to all agree to arrange things in a different way. (*Debt* p 390)

Jubilee as Relief Valve

Market economies tend to concentrate wealth in the hands of the few and reduce the many to poverty and debt-slavery. Regardless of the justice or injustice of this fact, it generates social instability and the threat of violence as a last-resort method of changing property relations.

To avoid such violence, a variety of alternative social relief mechanisms have been invented, such as the periodic resets of Jubilee or more continuous efforts to redistribute wealth by the state.

This dynamic seems to have operated in the ancient world and continues up to this day. We can see the social upheavals of the industrial era as born out of the immiseration of the working class, and the ideologies of Marxism and Fascism as failed efforts to restore to balance what capitalism has unbalanced. Notably Nazism was born out of the hyperinflation of the Weimar era which in turn can be traced to the war debts imposed on Germany after WWI.

Thoughts, Points, and Questions

It's notable how much of the Tanakh is basically about economics and commercial law.

God's property

Lev 25:23 *And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine; for ye are strangers and settlers with Me.*

This is a very different view of property ownership than the current market-based view. While this reflects a kind of truth that land is not really owned by individuals – it also gives rise to theologically-inspired wars over land ownership.

The 50-year cycle is too long for individuals; it is a reset for clans or families

Bankruptcy law is a form of individual debt forgiveness.

Debt forgiveness and restructuring, default, hyperinflation

Even conservatives like Niall Ferguson⁶ have floated this idea as real possibility for dealing with the financial crisis. Inflation is a way of reducing effective indebtedness; but can cause massive social upheaval.

Would a modern jubilee be *fair*?

Suddenly my mortgage is forgiven and I own my house, but a renter doesn't get any advantage?

Jubilee destroys the credit system; this can be harmful

PROSBUL: a declaration made in court, before the execution of a loan, to the effect that the law requiring the release of debts upon the entrance of the Sabbatical year shall not apply to the loan to be transacted...The institution of the prosbul is ascribed to Hillel: "Seeing that the law which prescribed the release of all debts every seventh year brought about the harmful consequence that people refused to loan to one another and thus violated what was written in the Law, namely, that a money loan should not be withheld because of the approach of the Sabbatical year, Hillel instituted the prosbul"⁷

Solution: Stochastic jubilee!

With a fixed date for wiping out debt obligations, the economy would come to a standstill many years in advance...The solution is obvious: rather than fixing a date for the jubilee, it should be a random draw with a 2% chance in any given year. This would necessitate an additional 2% risk premium on all contracts—a burden to be sure, but one that is bearable...

One way to think about the agonizing negotiations taking place in Europe today is that they are attempting to work out the dimensions and modalities of a partial jubilee in real time under crisis conditions. Wouldn't it be a lot easier to work out a preventive system that operates routinely and, except for its timing, predictably?⁸

Footnotes:

¹ this excerpt appears out of context on the Liberty Bell.

² <http://chronicle.uchicago.edu/960201/hittites.shtml>

³ <http://michael-hudson.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/HudsonLostTradition.pdf>

⁴ *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, David Graeber, Melville House 2011

⁵ An Interview with Economic Anthropologist David Graeber <http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2011/08/what-is-debt-%E2%80%93-an-interview-with-economic-anthropologist-david-graeber.html>

⁶ <http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2009/01/niall-ferguson-america-needs-to-cancel-its-debt>

⁷ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12390-prosbul>

⁸ Peter Dorman, <http://econospeak.blogspot.com/2011/07/for-stochastic-jubilee.html>

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