

Jesus' New Economy of Grace The biblical vision of Sabbath economics. *by Ched Myers*

The Hebrew Bible's vision of Sabbath economics contends that a theology of abundant grace and a communal ethic of redistribution is the only way out of our slavery to the debt system, with its theology of meritocracy and private ethic of wealth concentration. The contemporary church, however, has difficulty hearing this as good news since our theological imaginations have long been captive to the market-driven orthodoxies of modern capitalism.

Our fears have persuaded us that the biblical Jubilee is at best utopian and at worst communistic. Yet we find it awkward simply to dismiss the biblical witness, so an alternative objection inevitably arises, as if on cue: "Israel never really *practiced* the Jubilee!" If genuine, and not simply a strategy of avoidance, this challenge is best addressed by considering both the "negative" and "positive" evidence.

By "negative" evidence I mean the fact that Israel's prophets repeatedly and relentlessly criticized the nation's leadership for betraying the poor and vulnerable members of the community. This strongly suggests that the Sabbath vision of social and economic justice remained a measuring stick to which they could publicly appeal.

There can be no question that the Sabbath disciplines of seventh-year debt release and Jubilee restructuring were regularly abandoned by those Israelites who wished to consolidate social advantages they had gained. The historical narratives in the Hebrew Bible indicate that as the tribal confederacy was eclipsed by centralized political power under the Davidic dynasty, economic stratification followed inexorably. Indeed, the prophet Samuel warned that a monarchy would be linked intrinsically to an economy geared to the elite through ruthless policies of surplus-extraction and militarism (1 Samuel 8:11-18).

Prophets and Jubilee

Israel's betrayal of its Sabbath vocation became a central complaint of the prophets. When Isaiah charged the nation's leadership with robbery (Isaiah 3:14-15), he was echoing the manna tradition's censure of stored wealth in the face of community need (see also Isaiah 5:7-8; Malachi 3:5-12). Amos accused the commercial classes of regarding *shabat* as an obstacle to market profiteering, and of treating the poor as an exploitable class rather than guaranteeing their gleaning rights (Amos 8:5-6; see Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 19:9-10; Micah 7:1).

Hosea laments that fidelity to international markets had replaced Israel's allegiance to God's economy of grace (Hosea 2:5). Most telling of all, however, is the tradition that attributed the downfall of Jerusalem to the people's failure to keep Sabbath: "God took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped the sword...to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land *had made up for its Sabbaths*. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years" (2 Chronicles 36:20-21; see Leviticus 26:34-35).

But there is also positive evidence that the Sabbath vision was practiced. Jeremiah blasts King Zedekiah when he reneges on his declaration of Jubilee manumission (Jeremiah 34:13-16). Naboth resists King Ahab's attempt to assert eminent domain by invoking his traditional "ancestral rights" to the land (1 Kings 21). And the reformer Nehemiah resurrects the Levitical prohibition of interest (Nehemiah 5:6-13) as well as the Sabbath strictures on commercial production, transaction, and

finance (10:31).

There are also eschatological visions of Jubilee. Sabbath redistribution is remembered by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 45:8; 46:17-18; 47:13-23), and the most well-known appropriation of the Jubilee vision is found in Isaiah 61:1-2: the prophetic commission that begins with a call to "bring good news to the oppressed poor" and ends with a proclamation of "the year of the Lord's favor." Of all the possibilities in his scriptures, it is *this* text that Jesus of Nazareth chose to define and inaugurate his mission, according to Luke's gospel (Luke 4:18-19). And it is in this latter-day Hebrew prophet that the vision of Sabbath economics is wholly rehabilitated.

Jesus and Jubilee

IT WAS THE LATE Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, in his now classic work *The Politics of Jesus*, who popularized for my generation the notion of Jesus as a Jubilee practitioner. Yoder rightly pointed out that Luke's gospel is organized around Isaiah's proclamation of "good news for the poor" (Luke 7:22; see 14:13, 21). Only real debt-cancellation and land-restoration could represent *good news* to real poor people—unless we would spiritualize the entire tradition (against the specific advice of James 2:15-17). Similarly, a Jubilee gospel is usually unwelcome news to the wealthy (as in the Magnificat's annunciation that God "has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty," Luke 1:53; see Mark 10:22). But the evidence goes far beyond a few widely acknowledged texts. In fact, a revisioning of Sabbath economics defined Jesus' call to discipleship, lay at the heart of his teaching—and stood at the center of his conflict with the Judean public order.

The gospels agree that Jesus' first substantive clash with the authorities arose as a result of his practice of "unlicensed" forgiving of sins, which has clear Jubilee overtones (Mark 2:1-12; John 5:9-17). Although the words "sin" (*hamartia*) and "debt" (*opheileema*) are different in Greek, there are many indications of their semantic and social equivalence in the gospels. Most of us have noted it, for example, in the Lord's Prayer according to Luke: "Forgive us our *sins*, for we ourselves forgive everyone *indebted* to us" (Luke 11:4). Their correlation is further suggested by the fact that here and throughout the New Testament the same verb (*aphiemi*) is used to "forgive" sin and "release" from debt. Unlike our society, which refuses to see the economic dimensions of moral and criminal dysfunction, the gospels do *not* spiritualize "sin" and ignore the realities of "debt," but rather see the two as fundamentally interrelated.

We see this correlation in Luke's version of the story of the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her hair (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus prefaces his "absolution" of the woman's sins (verses 39, 48-50) with an object lesson describing how a creditor forgave debt (verses 41-43). Matthew does the same in his instructions on reconciliation within the community of faith: The exhortation to forgive sins "seventy times seven" (perhaps an allusion to the Jubilar "seven times seven" of Leviticus 25:8; but also to Genesis 4:24) is illumined by a thoroughly political-economic tale about the settling of accounts in the debt system (Matthew 18:15-35).

In Mark's gospel Jesus identifies himself as the "Human One" who has the authority to forgive sins (debts) (Mark 2:10). Shortly thereafter Jesus instructs his disciples to help themselves to field produce, justifying it on the basis of a story about the right of hungry Israelites to food regardless of social convention (Mark 2:23-26). Then comes his punchline: "The Sabbath was created for humanity" (2:27). This is neither a proprietary statement nor a Messianic abrogation of the Sabbath discipline! Quite the contrary: It reiterates the Sabbath as part of the order of God's good creation (Genesis 2:2-3), and confirms that its purpose is to *humanize us* in a world where so much of our socioeconomic reasoning and practice is dehumanizing. Jesus then asserts his authority to interpret true Sabbath practice (Mark 2:28). In fact, Jesus' central struggle with the political leadership was not over theology, but over the meaning of Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13:10-17; John 7:22-24, 9:14-16). This "Human One," claiming the authority to cancel debts and restore the Sabbath, is a Jubilee figure indeed!

Jesus' Jubilee orientation is also seen in his efforts to rebuild community between socio-economically alienated groups. His "outreach" to tax collectors, who made their living exploiting debtors, is a case in point. Luke begins and ends his narrative of Jesus' ministry with such stories. Following Jesus' call to discipleship, Levi renounces his tax-collecting work and throws a banquet for

Jesus and his clientele of "sinners" (5:27-32). Why does this provoke strenuous protests from the authorities? The answer is made explicit in the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). This wealthy creditor is also invited to host Jesus—but he (rightly) understands this to mean he must first practice substantial economic reparation. It is to this program of socioeconomic "leveling" that the official adjudicators of debt object—in Jesus' day and our own.

But while Levi and Zacchaeus embrace Jubilee liberation through redistribution, another man with "much property" rejects it (Mark 10:21-23). Jesus expects his followers to enter into the new economy of grace. Interestingly, the formulaic discipleship phrase "they *left* and followed" (Mark 1:18-20; Luke 5:28) uses the verb *aphiemi*, which we have seen also means to forgive sin-cancel debt. Jesus promises that whoever *leaves* "house or family or fields" (the symbols of the basic agrarian economy: site of consumption, labor force, site of production) will receive the same back "hundredfold" (Mark 10:29-30).

Discipleship thus means forsaking the seductions and false securities of the debt system for a recomunitized economy of enough for everyone. In such an economy, which Jesus calls the "kingdom," there are no longer any rich and poor—by definition, therefore, the rich "cannot enter" it (Mark 10:23-25). So contrary is this vision to our accepted horizons of possibility, however, that disciples ancient and modern have difficulty truly believing (10:26).

Jesus' call for radical social restructuring at all levels, from the household (Mark 3:31-35) to the body politic (Mark 10:35-45), is summarized by the Jubilee ultimatum: "Many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:31). He typically chooses the venue of table fellowship in order to both show and tell object lessons that illustrate this. Meals lay at the heart of ancient society: Where, what, and with whom you ate defined your social identity and status. Thus the table was a "mirror" of society, with its economic classes and political divisions.

In the extended banquet story in Luke 14, Jesus systematically undermines prevailing conventions and proprieties, while advocating a new "table" of compassion and equality. The opening episode deals (not surprisingly) with a dispute over the Sabbath practice (Luke 14:1-6). Next comes Jesus' attack on the dominant system of meritocracy, with its hierarchies, prestige posturing, and ladder-climbing, and his invitation to "downward mobility" (verses 7-11). He then offends his host by criticizing his guest list, rejecting the reciprocal patronage system of the elite, and calling instead for a focus upon "those who cannot repay" (verses 12-14). The series concludes with Jesus' pointed little fable about an exemplary host who finally understands the bankruptcy of meritocracy and decides instead to build a Jubilee community with the poor and outcast (verses 15-24).

Grace vs. Mammon

There is no theme more common to Jesus' storytelling than Sabbath economics. He promises poor sharecroppers abundance (Mark 4:3-8, 26-32), but threatens absentee landowners (Mark 12:1-12) and rich householders (Luke 16:19-31) with judgment. In order to teach the incompatibility of the economy of grace with the dictates of "Mammon," Jesus spins a parable that portrays a hapless middleman caught in the brutal logic of the debt system who decides to "trade" instead in Jubilee-style debt release (Luke 16:1-13). When faced with a dispute over inheritance rights, Jesus counters with a parable about the folly of storing up wealth (remember the manna!), and then exhorts us to learn the lessons of grace and subsistence from the "great economy" of nature (Luke 12:13-34; see James 5:1-6).

The notorious parable of the talents (pounds) shows how Sabbath perspective as an interpretive key can rescue us from a long tradition of both bad theology and bad economics (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-28). This story has, in capitalist religion, been interpreted allegorically from the perspective of the cruel master (= God!), requiring spiritualizing gymnastics to rescue the story from its own depressing conclusion that haves will always triumph over the have-nots (Matthew 25:29). But it reads much more coherently when turned on its head and read as a cautionary tale of realism about the mercenary selfishness of the debt system. This reading understands the servant who refused to play the greedy master's money-market games as the hero who pays a high price for speaking truth to power (Matthew 25:24-30)—just as Jesus himself did.

In light of this evidence, it should come as no surprise that the archetypal manna story, which as we

saw in part one represents the foundation for Sabbath economics, should have a central place in Jesus' consciousness. At the outset of his ministry, Jesus must face again the wilderness temptation concerning bread and sustenance (Matthew 4:1-4 = Deuteronomy 8:2-3 = Exodus 16). At key junctures he re-enacts that wilderness feeding—and all who participate "have enough" (Mark 6:42; 8:8). And at the heart of the prayer he teaches his disciples is the double petition: "Give us enough bread for today, and forgive us our debts as we forgive others" (Matthew 6:11-12).

These are some of the "Jubilee footprints" in the Jesus story. It is important to note that the early church which produced these gospels also *practiced* Sabbath economics. The most obvious example—similarly maligned or ignored by modern exegetes—is the Acts account of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost—the Jubilee-tinged celebration of *Shavuot* (Acts 2). This occasions a portrait of the church's first experiment in wealth redistribution, echoing the manna story with the report that "assets were distributed to any as had need" (Acts 2:45, 4:35). Similarly, central to the itinerant ministry of the apostle Paul was his invitation to the new Gentile churches to learn Sabbath economics by practicing interchurch mutual aid. Significantly, in his most elaborate articulation of this commitment (2 Corinthians 8-9), the *one* scriptural justification Paul employs is a citation of the manna story: "As it is written, 'Those who had much did not have too much; and those who had little did not have too little' (2 Corinthians 8:14-15)!"

BIBLICAL INTERPRETERS SKEPTICAL of the Jubilee tradition have not found evidence for its practice because they have not been looking for it. But once we restore Sabbath economics to its central place in the Torah, we hear its echoes *everywhere* in the rest of scripture. The standard of economic justice is woven into the warp and weft of the Bible; pull this strand, and the whole fabric unravels.

If we are going to dismiss the Jubilee because Israel practiced it only inconsistently, we should also ignore the Sermon on the Mount because Christians have rarely embodied Jesus' instruction to love our enemies. But it is time to move beyond such rationalizing theology in our churches. We must rediscover the gospel as good news for the poor, and the economic disciplines of *shabat* as the path of humanization.

Fortunately, the "subversive memory" of Jubilee has kept erupting throughout church history, among early monks, medieval communitarians, and radical reformers. Even with the ascendancy of modern capitalism—with its fierce antipathy toward Sabbath economics—this vision has not been extinguished. We see it in tracts by the 18th-century "leveler" Thomas Spence in his struggle against the move to enclose (i.e. privatize) the Commons in early industrial England: "Since then this Jubilee/Sets all at Liberty/Let us be glad/Behold each man return to his possession." And we hear it in the 19th-century spirituals of African slaves sung in American fields: "Don't you hear the gospel trumpet sound Jubilee?"

Those of us who would insist that the Bible's ancient socioeconomic and spiritual disciplines remain relevant today have hard work to do. We must diligently and creatively explore what contemporary, concrete analogies might be to Jubilee practices of old. The task is as imperative as it is daunting; the alternative is the "capital-olatry" of the runaway global economy. In all of this, the church can help nurture commitment and creativity by promoting "Sabbath literacy," a spirituality of forgiveness and reparation, and practical economic disciplines for individuals, households, and congregations.

"Who, then, can be saved?" (Mark 10:26). Mark's epilogue to the call of the rich man (Mark 10:17-25) anticipates our incredulity: Does Jesus *really* expect the "haves" (that is, us) to participate in Sabbath wealth redistribution as a condition for discipleship? Can we imagine a world in which there are no rich and poor? To the disciples' skepticism, and to ours, Jesus replies simply: "I know it seems impossible to you, but for God all things are possible" (10:27). In other words, economics is ultimately a theological issue. And this is why our churches must talk about it, and talk about it in light of our unique tradition of Sabbath economics.

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