

jubilee

## JUBILEE YEAR

(shenath ha-yobhel; etos tes apheseos; annus jubilaeus, "year of jubilee" (Lev 25:13), or simply ha-yobhel, "the jubilee" (25:28; compare Num 36:4), the King James Version and the English Revised Version Jubile): The Hebrew word yobhel stands for qeren ha-yobhel, meaning the horn of a ram. Now, such a horn can be made into a trumpet, and thus the word yobhel came to be used as a synonym of trumpet. According to Lev 25:9 a loud trumpet should proclaim liberty throughout the country on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month (the Day of Atonement), after the lapse of 7 sabbaths of years = 49 years. In this manner, every 50<sup>th</sup> year was to be announced as a jubilee year. All real property should automatically revert to its original owner (25:10; compare verse 13), and those who, compelled by poverty, had sold themselves as slaves to their brothers, should regain their liberty (25:10; compare verse 39).

In addition to this, the Jubilee Year was to be observed after the manner of the sabbatic year, i.e. there should be neither sowing nor reaping nor pruning of vines, and everybody was expected to live on what the fields and the vineyards produced "of themselves," and no attempt should be made at storing up the products of the land (25:11 f). Thus there are three distinct factors constituting the essential features of the Jubilee Year: personal liberty, restitution of property, and what we might call the simple life.

1. Personal Liberty: The 50<sup>th</sup> year was to be a time in which liberty should be proclaimed to all the inhabitants of the country. We should, indeed, diminish the import of this institution if we should apply it only to those who were to be freed from the bonds of physical servitude. Undoubtedly, they must have been the foremost in realizing its beneficial effects. But the law was intended to benefit all, the masters as well as the servants. They should never lose sight of their being brothers and citizens of the theocratic kingdom. They owed their life to God and were subject to His sovereign will. Only through loyalty to Him were they free and could ever hope to be free and independent of all other masters.

2. Restitution of Property: The institution of the Jubilee Year should become the means of fixing the price of real property (25:15 f; compare verses 25-28); moreover, it should exclude the possibility of selling any piece of land permanently (25:23), the next verse furnishing the motive: "The land is mine: for ye are strangers and sojourners with me." The same rule was to be applied to dwelling-houses outside of the walled cities (25:31), and also to the houses owned by Levites, although they were built within walled cities (verse 32).

In the same manner the price of Hebrew slaves was to vary according to the proximity of the Jubilee Year (25:47-54). This passage deals with the enslaving of a Hebrew by a foreigner living among the Jews; it goes without saying that the same rule would hold good in the case of a Hebrew selling himself to one of his own people

In 27:17-25 we find a similar arrangement respecting such lands that were "sanctified unto Yahweh." In all these cases the original owner was at liberty to redeem his property at any time, or have it redeemed by some of his nearest relatives (25:25-27,29,48 ff; 27:19).

The crowning feature, though, was the full restitution of all real property in the Jubilee Year. The primary object of this regulation was, of course, the reversion of all hereditary property to the family which originally possessed it, and the reestablishment of the original arrangement regarding the division of the land. But that was not all; for this legal disposition and regulation of external matters was closely connected with the high calling of the Jewish people. It was a part of the Divine plan looking forward to the salvation of mankind. "The deepest meaning of it (the Jubilee Year) is to be found in the apokatastasis tes basileias tou theou, i.e. in the restoring of all that which in the course of time was perverted by man's sin, in the removing of all slavery of sin, in the establishing of the true liberty of the children of God, and in the delivering of the creation from the bondage of corruption to which it was subjected on account of man's depravity" (Rom 8:19 ff) (compare Keil, Manual of Biblical Archaeology). In the Year of Jubilee a great future era of Yahweh's favor is foreshadowed, that period which, according to Isa 61:1-3, shall be ushered in to all those that labor and are heavy laden, by Him who was anointed by the spirit of the Lord Yahweh.

3. The Simple Life: The Jubilee Year, being the crowning point of all sabbatical institutions, gave the finishing touch as it were to the whole cycle of sabbatic days, months and years. It is, therefore, quite appropriate that it should be a year of rest for the land like the preceding sabbatic year (Lev 25:11 f). It follows, of course, that in this instance there were two years, one after the other, in which there should be no sowing or systematic ingathering. This seems to be clear from Lev 25:18-22: "And ye shall sow the eighth year, and eat of the fruits, the old store; until the ninth year, until its fruits come in, ye shall eat the old store." Thus in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> years the people were to live on what the fields had produced in the 6<sup>th</sup> year and whatever grew spontaneously. This shows the reason why we may say that one of the factors constituting the Jubilee Year was the "simple life." They could not help but live simply for two consecutive years. Nobody can deny that this afforded ample opportunity to develop the habit of living within very limited means. And again we see that this external part of the matter did not fully come up to the intention of the Lawgiver. It was not the simple life as such that He had in view, but rather the laying down of its moral and religious foundations. In this connection we must again refer to 25:18-22, "What shall we eat the seventh year?" The answer is very simple and yet of surpassing grandeur: "Then I will command my blessing upon you," etc. Nothing was expected of the people but faith in Yahweh and confidence in His power, which was not to be shaken by any doubtful reflection. And right here we have found the root of the simple life: no life without the true God, and no simplicity of life without true faith in Him. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4; compare Deut 8:3).

We may well ask: Did the Jewish people ever observe the Jubilee Year? There is no reason why they should not have observed it in preexilic times (compare Lotz in The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, X, under the word "Sabbatical Year" and "Year of Jubilee"). Perhaps they signally failed in it, and if so, we should not be surprised at all. Not that the institution in itself was cumbered with any obstacles that could not have been overcome; but what is more common than unbelief and unwillingness to trust absolutely in Yahweh? Or, was it observed in post-exilic

times? Here, too, we are in the dark. There is, indeed, a tradition according to which the Jubilee Year has never been observed-neither in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah nor at any later period. The truth of this seems to be corroborated by the silence of Josephus, who, while referring quite frequently to the sabbatic year, never once mentions the Year of Jubilee.