

INDIAN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

A Quarterly Published by St. Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bangalore.

EDITORIAL BOARD

L. Legrand mep, Bangalore; Bishop A. Rayappan, Bishop of Salem; Olivier Artus, *Catholic University of Lyon (UCLY)*; Jean-Noël Aletti sj, *Pontifical Biblical Institute*, Rome; M. Amaladoss sj, Chennai; Assisi Saldanha cssr, Bangalore; Antony Kolencherry msfs, Bangalore; Xavier Manavath cmf, Bangalore; Bishop Thomas Vazhapilly, Bishop Emeritus of Mysore.

Editor: *P. Joseph Titus*

Administrator: *Sunil Kumar D'Souza*

The *Indian Theological Studies* provides a forum for theological research either conducted in India or relevant to India.

The views expressed by the contributors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Editor and the Editorial Board.

Manuscripts for publication, books for review should be addressed to: **The Editor**, and business communications (subscription, back issues, change of address) and exchange copies of the periodicals to:

The Administrator

Indian Theological Studies

St. Peter's Pontifical Institute

Malleswaram West P.O.

Bangalore-560 055 (India)

E-mail: itspetersinstitute@yahoo.com

E-mail: stpetersinstitute@gmail.com

Subscription Rates

		Annual	Three Years
India	:	Rs. 500	Rs. 1300
Foreign Air Mail	:	50\$=46€	140\$= 130€

INDIAN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

VOL. LXII

MARCH 2025

No. 1

Published by
St. Peter's Pontifical Institute
Malleswaram West P.O.
Bengaluru-560 055 (India)

CONTENTS

Editorial.....	5
Hans Ausloos	
<i>“We Must Fan the Flame of Hope” (Pope Francis): The Biblical Origins of the Jubilee Year as a Sign of Hope.....</i>	9
P. Joseph Titus	
<i>“O Mortal, Eat this Scroll” (Ezek 3:1): Biblical Perspectives on Feeding on God’s Word.....</i>	41
Laurence Culas	
<i>Jesus and Jewish Feast in John: Symbolism of Light....</i>	69
Anthony J	
<i>Embracing the Synodal Journey: Opportunities and Challenges in the Light of the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality.....</i>	91
Arnald Mahesh Irudhayadhason SDB	
<i>Liberating Education: Paulo Freire’s Revolutionary Pedagogy.....</i>	113
Jaya Pradeep	
<i>Statement of the Catholic Biblical Association of India (CBAI) 2024: Annual Conference</i>	143
Book Review.....	153

**“WE MUST FAN THE FLAME OF HOPE”
(POPE FRANCIS):
THE BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF THE
JUBILEE YEAR AS A SIGN OF HOPE**

Hans Ausloos¹

*Catholic University of Louvain
Belgium.*

1 SPES NON CONFUNDIT ...

For centuries, a ‘Holy Year’ or ‘Jubilee Year’ has begun with the opening of the so-called Holy Door in St.-Peter’s Basilica in Rome. With its closing again a year later, the Jubilee Year symbolically comes to an end.² For the ‘ordinary’ Jubilee 2025, Pope Francis announced the dates of the opening and closing of the Holy Door – 24 December 2024 and 6 January 2025 respectively – in the

¹ The author is *Directeur de recherches* at the *Fonds de la recherche scientifique* (F.R.S.-FNRS) and professor at the *Faculté de théologie et d’étude des religions* at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCLouvain) (Belgium).

² On 29 December 2024, Pope Francis opened the Holy Door of St John of Lateran, his Cardinal Church; on 1 January 2025, it was the turn of the Holy Door of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, and on 5 January, the Holy Door of St Paul’s - basilica has been opened. On 26 December, the Pope opened the Holy Door of the chapel in the Rebibbia Penitentiary in Rome. For the bull, see https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html (accessed 11 February 2025). The term ‘bull’ is derived from the Latin word *bullā*, the – mostly lead – seal to a papal charter.

bull *Spes non confundit*, which he promulgated on 9 May 2024 (Ascension Day).³ This opening of the Holy Door is a beautiful symbolic act. As the pope writes in the bull, it expresses the hope that the Jubilee Year may lead everyone to a sincere, personal encounter with Jesus, whom the Gospel of John calls the door through which all who enter will be saved (John 10:7, 9).

In the bull *Spes non confundit* – this title, which is a literal quote from the Latin version of Romans 5:5, means: hope does not disappoint – Pope Francis invites Catholic Christians to be ‘Pilgrims of hope’ during the Jubilee Year. In doing so, not only the pilgrimage – especially to Rome – is given an important place.⁴ The pope also asks Catholics to be “tangible signs of hope for those of our brothers and sisters who experience hardships of any kind.”⁵ He speaks of hope for the sick, whose suffering “can be allayed by the closeness and affection of those who visit them”;⁶ hope for young people, who, often face “an uncertain and unpromising future, who lack employment or job security, or realistic prospects after finishing school,” “without the hope that their dreams can come true” and

³ Pope Francis announced the Jubilee 2025 on 11 February 2022 in a letter to Bishop Rino Fisichella, the President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation. The title of this contribution is taken from this letter. Amid the COVID crisis that plagued the whole world, and hopefully expecting the first medical results in combating the virus, the Pope wrote: “We must fan the flame of hope that has been given us [during the pandemic] and help everyone to gain new strength and certainty by looking to the future with an open spirit, a trusting heart and far-sighted vision” (see <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2022/documents/20220211-fisichella-giubileo2025.html>– accessed 11 February 2025).

⁴ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 5. On the bull, see also Jude Nirmal Doss, “Jubilee Year 2025: To be Tangible Signs of Hope (Part 1),” *Indian Theological Studies* 61 (2024): 219-236; Idem, “Jubilee Year 2025: To be Anchored in Hope (Part 2),” *Indian Theological Studies* 61 (2024): 379-391.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 10.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 11.

thus become “discouraged and listless;”⁷ hope for migrants, “who leave their homelands behind in search of a better life for themselves and for their families;”⁸ hope for elderly, “who frequently feel lonely and abandoned,” and deserve “esteem for the treasure that they are, their life experiences, their accumulated wisdom and the contribution that they can still make;”⁹ hope for “the billions of the poor, who often lack the essentials of life” and “suffer from exclusion and indifference on the part of many.”¹⁰

In addition, Pope Francis urges Catholics to be a sign of hope for prisoners “who, deprived of their freedom, daily feel the harshness of detention and its restrictions, lack of affection and, in more than a few cases, lack of respect for their persons.”¹¹ Very specifically, he calls on governments to take initiatives during the Jubilee Year that can give new hope to prisoners, for example by introducing “forms of amnesty or pardon.”¹² Doing so can help people to “regain confidence in themselves and in society,” which should facilitate “reintegration in the community, including a concrete commitment to respect for law.”¹³

In the bull, the pope also addresses the more affluent countries, urging them “to forgive the debts of countries that will never be able to repay them.”¹⁴ More than a matter of generosity, he argues, “this is a matter of justice.”¹⁵ Thus, Pope Francis seems to support movements such as *Debt*

⁷ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 12.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 13.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 14.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 15.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 10.

¹² Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 10.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 10. Against this background, the Pope also recalls the rejection of the death penalty. After all, capital punishment “eliminates all hope of forgiveness and rehabilitation” (§10).

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 16.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 16.

Justice that are advocating cancelling the unbearable debt burden that some of the poorest countries suffer from.¹⁶ Referring to his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, he also recalls the so-called ecological debt under which the poorest countries are burdened. This ecological debt has not only resulted from the export of some raw materials but has also been fuelled by the effects of global warming. Against this, the pope contrasts the biblical view that “the earth is the Lord’s” and that “all of us dwell in it as ‘aliens and tenants.’”¹⁷ Here, the bull quotes from Leviticus 25:23, a verse that is part of a text that leads to the Biblical origin of the Jubilee Year. Moreover, as will be argued later in this contribution, the pope’s call for ‘amnesty’ for those caught up in unfreedom and the remission of debts are among the main emphases of Leviticus 25,¹⁸ meant to be a text of hope to those who have lost all hope.

2 FREEDOM: THE CENTRAL THEME OF THE BIBLICAL JUBILEE YEAR

As it has been mentioned in the foregoing paragraph, the Biblical background of the Jubilee idea can be found in the Old Testament book of Leviticus – the book of the Levites. According to the book of Genesis, Levi was one of the sons of Jacob and Leah, and was considered the progenitor of the

¹⁶ See <https://debtjustice.org.uk> (accessed 11 February 2025). Advocacy for the cancellation of unsustainable debt in the political sphere goes back to several campaigns worldwide that had their origins in the 1990s, mostly in the run-up to the Jubilee 2000. See, for example, *Jubilee 2000* in the UK or *Erlassjahr 2000* in Germany.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 16.

¹⁸ At the occasion of the Jubilee Year 2000, I published the contribution “Invrijheidstelling en kwijtschelding van schuld: werkelijkheid of utopie? Het ‘jubeljaar’ in de joods-christelijke traditie,” in *Krachten voor de toekomst. Lessen voor de eenentwintigste eeuw*, eds. Bart Raymaekers and André van de Putte (Leuven: Universitaire Pers en David’s fonds, 2000), 103-129. The present contribution builds on and updates this article. For a Dutch version, see Hans Ausloos, “Sabbatjaar, Jubeljaar, Heilig Jaar: een Bijbelse kijk,” in *Maak mij met uw wegen vertrouwd. Pelgrims van hoop in het Jubeljaar 2025*, eds. Joris Geldhof and Dieter Van Belle (Antwerpen: Otheo, 2025) (in press).

eponymous tribe of Levi. It was this tribe that, as a kind of priestly stand, dealt with everything that concerned worship and (cultic) purity. These topics alone illustrate already that Leviticus is not immediately the most accessible book of the Bible. However, in the context of talking about the Jubilee, we can't get around it.¹⁹ Outside Leviticus 25, Leviticus 27:16-25 and Numbers 36:4 briefly mention the Jubilee Year.

¹⁹ Some excellent studies related to the Old Testament Jubilee are: Rainer Albertz, "Die Tora Gottes gegen die wirtschaftlichen Sachzwänge. Die Sabbat- und Jubeljahresgesetzgebung Lev 25 in ihrer Geschichte," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 44 (1995): 290-310; John S. Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran. A History of Interpretation*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 155 (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Michael Berner, "Jubilee, Year of. I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, ed. Hans-Josef Klauck, vol. 14 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 850-852; Jeffrey A. Fager, *Land Tenure and Biblical Jubilee. Uncovering Hebrew Ethics through the Sociology of Knowledge*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 155 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Michael Harbin, "The Manumission of Slaves in Jubilee and Sabbath Years," *Tyndale Bulletin* 63 (2012): 53-74; Jean-François Lefebvre, *Le jubilé biblique – Lv 25: exégèse et théologie*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 194 (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 2002); Didier Luciani, "Le jubilé dans Lévitique 25," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 30 (1999): 456-486; Robert G. North, *The Biblical Jubilee ... After Fifty Years*, Analecta Biblica 145 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000); Eckart Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*, Theologische Wissenschaft 3/2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994); Gnana Robinson, "Das Jubel-Jahr. Die Lösung einer sozial-ökonomischen Krise des Volkes Gottes," in *Ernten, was man sät. Festschrift für Klaus Koch zuseinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Dwight R. Daniels et al. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), 471-491; James A. Sanders, "Jubilee in the Bible," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 50 (2020): 4-6; Adrian Schenker, "The Biblical Legislation on the Release of Slaves. The Road from Exodus to Leviticus," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 78 (1998): 23-41; John van Seters, "The Law of the Hebrew Slave," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108 (1996): 534-546; Moshe Weinfeld, "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee in the Pentateuchal Laws and their Ancient Near Eastern Background," in *The Law in the Bible and in Its Environment*, ed. Timo Veijola, Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 51 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1990), 39-62; Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 113 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991); Christopher J.H. Wright, "Jubilee, Year of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1025-1030.

Leviticus 25:10 concisely and powerfully summarises what is to be understood by the notion of a Jubilee Year: “You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.”²⁰

Two Hebrew terms are significant in this verse. First is the term *yôbēl*, from which the English word Jubilee derives its origin, and which the NRSV translates as such. It is an oft-heard theory that this term *yôbēl* would be related to the blowing of the ram’s horn. After all, Lev 25:8-9, verses that talk about the starting signal with which the Jubilee Year is initiated, states: “You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month – on the day of atonement – you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land.” By the way, in texts like Exodus 19:13 and Joshua 6:4-6, where there is also mention of blowing the ram’s horn, the Hebrew author uses the word *yôbēl* to denote this musical instrument. However, this is not so in Leviticus 25:8-9, where the term *šôpar* – also meaning ‘ram’s horn’ – is used. Remarkably, the author of Leviticus 25:10 does not make a connection between the term *yôbēl* and the musical instrument of the same name (*yôbēl hiw ’tihyē lākem* – “the fiftieth year shall be a *yôbēl* for you”). Whatever the case, it is certain that the English term Jubilee goes back to the Hebrew root text via a Latin pun. After all, when Hieronymus translated the Hebrew Bible into Latin

²⁰ The quotations from the Bible are taken from the NRSV. The quote from Leviticus 25:10 is also on the famous so-called *Liberty Bell* in Pennsylvania (1751): “Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land unto All the Inhabitants thereof.” Fuelled by the Leviticus quote on the *Liberty Bell*, ‘abolitionism’ sought the abolition of slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries.

in the 4th century, he opted for the neologism *iobeleus* as an equivalent for the Hebrew term *yôbēl*. By doing so, he simultaneously gave a kind of transcription of the Hebrew term and, by deforming the common Latin term *jubilum*, meaning ‘shepherd’s song,’ he referred to the joyful aspect that characterises a Jubilee Year.

The Hebrew term *dārôr* is the second term of interest in Leviticus 25:10. The NRSV translates it as ‘liberty’: in the fiftieth year, “you shall proclaim liberty (*dārôr*) throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” What specifically this ‘liberty’ consists of is said in the remainder of verse 10: in the Jubilee Year, “every one of you shall return to your property and every one of you to your family.” It is this double impact of the Jubilee Year that is elaborated in the rest of Leviticus 25: (1) anyone who has lost his property due to insolvency regains his former property and (2) anyone who has had to sell himself (as a slave) for the same reason regains his freedom and may return to his family.

3 THE ADDRESSEES OF LEVITICUS 25

However noble the intentions may be of those who invoke Leviticus 25 to advocate cancelling debts or granting amnesty to prisoners, we should be wary of using a Biblical text as a recipe for solving current problems if we don’t want to risk misusing biblical texts in a fundamentalist way. After all, the authors of Leviticus 25 did not have the 21st century in mind when they wrote this text. In order to understand the meaning and scope of Leviticus 25 and prevent us from applying the prescriptions too easily to a completely different socio-economic context, we must try to understand the historical background of Leviticus 25.

To whom Leviticus 25 is addressing the text itself makes clear. The author undoubtedly has an audience living

in an agricultural society in mind.²¹ This, for example, becomes evident from Leviticus 25:3 (“Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield”) and Leviticus 25:11 (in the Year of Jubilee, you “you shall not sow, or reap the after growth, or harvest the unpruned vines”). Similarly, the anxiety that speaks from Leviticus 25:20 (what shall one “eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?”) suggests, at the least, that the author is addressing readers who had to earn their own daily living. A rash application of the regulations of Leviticus 25 to people of the 21st century, many of them living in an industrial and high-tech society, who do not live on what their land yields, would not only do an injustice to the intent of the text, but could rather lead to a disruption of society rather than to peace and justice. After all, the precepts imposed by Leviticus 25 presuppose precisely an agrarian society, in which family property and family ties are very important. Which, of course, is not to say that some elements of Leviticus 25 could not be a source of inspiration for contemporary commitment to a better world.

We can say little with certainty about the origins of and the way ancient Israel functioned – and thus also about the precise historical context in which the regulations on the Jubilee Year originated. Nevertheless, we can infer from Biblical texts – and this is also what the archaeology of the Holy Land learns – that ancient Israelite society may have consisted mainly of small farmers and shepherds, who had settled in small settlements. Each family had its own plot of land at its disposal, the so-called hereditary property

²¹ John S. Bergsma, “The Year of Jubilee and the Ancient Israelite Economy,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 59 (2017): 155-163, in particular 158.

(*naḥālā*), which was basically unsaleable.²² Perhaps this principle was intended to counteract large land ownership. After all, large land ownership implies the division of society into a small group of owners and a large group of people who have no land of their own – for farmers and shepherds, this means no source of income. And this in turn leads to a large group of poor versus a small elite that owns all the land. The principle of inheritance was meant to ensure that the land remained family property. This was also not insignificant from an emotional and identitarian point of view: the family land may also have contained the family graves, making the land a tangible link between past and future. Loss of the land would also entail loss of the family memories, and thus loss of identity.²³

However beautiful this principle of ‘inheritance’ may be, in practice it may not have been observed all the time and was an ideal rather than reality. At least some Biblical passages seem to testify to this. For instance, some pericopes refer to royal officials and merchants trying to expand their land at the expense of the peasantry. Some prophets would therefore speak out snidely against such practices. In Isaiah 5:8, for example, the prophet fulminates against those who “join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one” and they are “left to live alone in the midst of the land.” The story in 1 Kings 21 about King Ahab’s attempt to snatch Naboth’s vineyard also testifies to this – all too human – greed.

The fact that the rich got richer and richer by appropriating other people’s goods may also have to be seen against the backdrop of people’s inability to pay imposed taxes – the

²² Cf. Arndt Meinhold, “Zur Beziehung Gott, Volk, Land im Jubel-Zusammenhang,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 29 (1985): 245-261.

²³ Bergsma, “The Year of Jubilee and the Ancient Israelite Economy,” (n. 21), 161-162.

ancient Israelite royal household and the incessant series of wars against the surrounding peoples cost handsomely, – which was almost certainly the case in the event of crop failure or cattle disease. Consequently, one had to borrow from more affluent citizens who could rely on the inexorable law of credit. After all, to recover the money lent, they were allowed to demand sky-high interest rates. If the debtor was unable to pay these interest rates, the creditor was free to seize his property or even sell him and his children into slavery.

Such practices can completely disrupt and even ruin a society. After all, a society in which extreme poverty prevails is doomed. This is also why any society that does not want to be self-destructive creates social mechanisms to prevent entire strata of the population from falling into extreme poverty. Thus, some social reform efforts also arose within ancient Israel, the written record one finds in the social precepts of the three main Old Testament legislative collections: the so-called Covenant Book (Exod 20:22–23:33), the ‘Deuteronomic Law’ (Deut 12–26) and the Priestly ‘Holiness Code’ (Lev 17–26).

These three legal compositions should not be read simultaneously side by side, but rather as witnesses to different stages in the development process of the social and religious thought of ancient Israel, with the Covenant Book being the oldest, and the Holiness Code – of which Leviticus 25 is a part – the most recent.²⁴ Moreover, it should be emphasised that these laws – proclaimed as divine laws – may not have been legally enforceable. As far as we know, non-compliance did not bring a fine or imprisonment. However, there was a conviction that failure

²⁴ In this contribution, I follow this generally accepted hypothesis, being aware, however, that this is a hypothesis amidst others.

to keep the precepts, which were after all unquestionably presented as divine commandments, thoroughly disrupted the relationship with God and had and would unquestionably determine the course of Israel's history as 'God's people.' After all, keeping the precepts would lead to blessing, while violating the divine precepts would lead to curse.²⁵

It was mentioned earlier that 'release' or 'liberty' is the central concern of the Old Testament Jubilee Year (Lev 25:10). However, before looking at the Jubilee Year in detail, we should first reflect on the Sabbath Year, on which it builds. Indeed, the Jubilee cannot be separated from the Sabbath Year, on which the first verses of Leviticus 25 deal. Indeed, according to Leviticus 25:11, the Jubilee Year is a special kind of Sabbath Year.²⁶ For just as during the Sabbath Year, according to this verse, also in the Jubilee Year, one "shall not sow, or reap the after growth, or harvest the unpruned vines."

4 THE JUBILEE YEAR IN LEVITICUS 25

4.1 THE SABBATH YEAR (LEV 25:1-7, 18-22)

The institution of the Sabbath Year, which is the subject of Leviticus 25:1-7, 18-22, is peculiar to the book of Leviticus. According to these verses, Yahweh instructs the Israelites, once they will have arrived in the 'Promised Land', to let

²⁵ On the so-called doctrine of retribution, see Hans Ausloos, "It's a Matter of Justice! The Old Testament and the Idea of Retribution," *Old Testament Essays* 36 (2023): 151-165.

²⁶ Whether the Jubilee Year was the fiftieth year – as Leviticus 25:10 suggests – or coincided with the seventh Sabbath Year, is a much-debated issue. It has mainly been prompted by the question of whether it would be possible to survive for three consecutive years (the 49th, 50th, and 51st years) from the harvest of the 48th year. On this, see, for example, Robert S. Kawashima, "The Jubilee, Every 49 or 50 Years?," *VT* 53 (2003): 117-120; John S. Bergsma, "Once Again, the Jubilee, Every 49 or 50 Years?," *VT* 55 (2005): 121-125; Joram Mayshar, "The Jubilee Calendar," *VT* 71 (2021): 219-232.

the land lie fallow every seventh year: “Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD [*šabbāt la-yhwh*]: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard” (vv 3-4) What the land produces of its own will be more than enough to tide over during the seventh, eighth and even ninth years; even the strangers who are guests will be able to live from it (v 6). After all, if one keeps to His commandments, Yahweh will bless the land in such a way that one will be short of food. This commandment is underpinned by religious arguments. After all, the land must keep Sabbath “for Yahweh,” because it was Yahweh who gave the Israelites the land.

Although the term Sabbath Year is first used in Leviticus 25 – verse 5 deals with a *šənat šabbātōn* (a year of rest) – yet it did not just fall out of the sky. On the contrary, it has had a long pre-history. It probably goes back to an ancient peasant custom which, unlike in the book of Leviticus, was not legitimised on religious grounds. We still find a witness to this custom in the so-called Covenant Code in the book of Exodus. Exodus 23:10-11 prescribes that one may sow any piece of land for six years and harvest its produce. However, every seventh year one must leave it fallow. Perhaps this was not a measure that was applied to the whole country simultaneously. Rather, farmers were asked not to cultivate each individual plot once every seven years.

The original meaning of this seven-year rest of the land should perhaps be sought in the concern not to exhaust the soil completely. Like people (cf. *infra*), the land too must be given the opportunity to recuperate in due course (the so-

called *restitutio in integrum*).²⁷ Also, this Sabbath Year *avant la lettre* – after all, it is not referred to as a Sabbath Year in Exodus 23 – has a caritative function. That which the land produces from itself during the seventh year, even before the wild animals can eat from it, is intended for the poor. Since this may not have been enough to provide food for all the poor, vineyards and olive groves were also included in this custom. After all, even without care, grapevines and olive trees bear ample fruit.

The Deuteronomic reformers updated this ancient agricultural custom, applying it to debt matters.²⁸ In Deuteronomy, there is no longer any trace of the rule of letting the land lie fallow every six years. The Deuteronomic law takes a very different direction. According to Deuteronomy 15:1-11, every seven years all debts must be cancelled. Moreover, unlike the Covenant Code in Exodus, this measure applies simultaneously throughout the land

²⁷ Analogous to the Sabbath year, the Sabbath, before it became a religious institution – a Sabbath to Yahweh – from the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE onwards, also goes back to an ancient peasant custom, to cease agricultural activities for a day after six days of work (Exod 23:12; 34:21). Like the Sabbath Year, this day of rest, which was not initially named as a Sabbath – only the verb *šābat* (to rest) was used – did not yet have any religious significance. Its purpose, according to Exodus 23:12, was that “your ox and your ass may rest, and your slaves and the strangers who work for you may catch their breath.”

For a concise survey of the various theories on the origin of the Sabbath, see Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 3: *Exodus 20–40*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 49-59; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, Anchor Bible 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 301-309. Some scholars argue that the Sabbath in Israel was not originally the seventh day of the week. Rather, they relate the origin of the Sabbath to the day of the full moon. Only in (post-)exilic times (from 538 BCE onwards) would the monthly Sabbath have become a weekly day of rest. In support of this hypothesis, one refers to Isaiah 1:10-14; Hosea 2:11-15; Amos 8:4-5, where “new moon” and “Sabbath” are mentioned in the same breath. On this basis, one concludes that both the feast of the new moon and the Sabbath were originally related to the moon.

²⁸ For Deuteronomy 15 in particular, see Eckart Otto’s very detailed commentary, *Deuteronomy 12:1-23:15*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 1320-1373.

– foreigners are excluded from the measure. Unlike in Exodus, the poor no longer remain dependent on what they can raise from the land during the seventh year. By cancelling debts, the needy can now start with a clean slate. Such cancellation of debts is not typically Old Testament. It was not uncommon elsewhere in the ancient Near East.²⁹ Unlike in Deuteronomy, however, where it was a recurring affair every seven years, debt forgiveness in Old Eastern society was an exceptional act of grace by a ruler, for instance on the occasion of his ascension to the throne. In the Deuteronomic Code, however, this remission of debt is detached from the benevolence of the sovereign and becomes a regularly recurring religious institution.

That the prescription that debts were to be cancelled in a cyclical manner had enormous consequences for the possessing class may be obvious. Not surprisingly, when the seventh year approached, people could be tempted to refuse to lend to poor fellow citizens. On this point, however, the Deuteronomic Law shows itself to be very creative. Keeping the precept is defined as religion: it is remission “because of Yahweh” (Deut 15:2). Moreover, it is stressed that meeting the needs of the poor will be rewarded with God’s blessing (vv 10-11), thus being a witness to the so-called doctrine of retribution.³⁰

²⁹ One thinks, for example, of the edict of the Babylonian king Ammisaduqa, who reigned in the 17th century BCE. See John P.J. Olivier, “Restitution as Economic Redress: the Fine Print of the Old Babylonian *mesarum*-Edict of Ammisaduqa,” *Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 3 (1997): 12-25.

³⁰ With regard to this issue, reference also can be made to the so-called *prosbul*, instituted by Rabbi Hillel. This contemporary of Jesus observed that as the Sabbath Year approached, the poor were still struggling to get their hands on a loan. Consequently, the debtor could sign a document declaring that he would repay his debts even after the Sabbath year. On this, see Aaron Rothkoff, “Prosbul,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik, vol. 16 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 586-587.

Against the background of the religious institution of the Sabbath, which had become widespread during the Babylonian exile (587-538 BCE), which required observance of the seventh day as a day of absolute rest – the Priestly authors of the creation poem (Genesis 1:1–2:4) had legitimised the observance of the Sabbath by referring to God, who Himself rested after He had completed creation after six days – the Priestly authors of Leviticus 25 respond against the overly anthropological Deuteronomic interpretation of the ancient custom of letting rest the land after the lapse of six years.³¹ As already mentioned, Deuteronomy did no longer mention the *restitutio in integrum*. By introducing the Sabbath Year, the author of Leviticus 25 wanted to reinstate this custom. However, at the same time, they were convinced of the value of the Deuteronomic concern to cancel debts. Hence, besides the introduction of the Sabbath year, which focuses on the restoration of creation, most of Leviticus 25 is concerned with the issue of debt. The way Leviticus 25 deals with this is dealt with in the following paragraphs. Here, a distinction must be made between regulations concerning the release of lost property (vv 13-34) and what is said about the release of people (vv 39-55). Both parts are linked by the prohibition of asking interest (vv 35-38), whose central position makes it clear that the authors of Leviticus 25 make it literally central as the chief concern. Therefore, we first briefly consider this prohibition of asking interest.

³¹ There is no doubt that the text of Leviticus 25 in its present form is the result of a long and complicated process of writing and editing. However, this issue is beyond the scope of this article. For a detailed discussion of the literary-critical and historical-critical problems in Leviticus 25, reference should be made, inter alia, to Alfred Cholewiński's study, *Heiligkeitsgesetz und Deuteronomium. Eine vergleichende Studie*, *Analecta Biblica* 66 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1976), 101-118.

4.2 THE PROHIBITION OF ASKING INTEREST (LEV 25:35-38)

The prohibition against charging interest in Leviticus 25 is by no means new.³² Already the Covenant Code mentions it in Exodus 22:24-26. In this pericope, although the prohibition on interest is only in force with regard to poor members of the people (“If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you ...”). In the Deuteronomic Code, this prescription is extended to everybody. After all, according to Exodus 21, from non-poor Israelites interest could be demanded.

In Leviticus 25, as mentioned above, the prohibition on charging interest is given a central position amid the prescription to return lost property and to restore freedom to people who became unfree because of debts. This makes it clear that the author’s primary concern is to prevent the impoverishment of the population. It indicates, as it were, the direction in which the other commandments concerning the Jubilee should be interpreted. After all, all legislation is aimed at keeping society running. This is only possible if a society does not break down into a rich minority and an impoverished majority. Thus, even the biblical authors were convinced that extreme poverty could be a dangerous ignition mechanism for social unrest. To prevent this, they sought to a balance between the pursuit of self-interest on the one hand and the common good on the other.

Against this background, Leviticus 25, on the one hand, nowhere states that one may not recover debts – even

³² On the interest prohibition, see, for example, Eckart Otto, *Deuteronomy 23,16–34,12*, Herders Theologischer Kommentarzum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2017), 1791-1799. Otto rightly points out its problematic character: “Das deuteronomische Programm des Zinsverbots wie auch des Schuldenerlasses musste für jede Wirtschaftsordnung zu einem Problem werden, wenn es durchgesetzt werden und mehr sein sollte: ethischer Appell und freiwilliges Gelübde” (1795).

from poor people. On the other hand, the text is very clear in its prohibition of demanding interest from poor people to whom one lends. This transcends purely economic laws. For ancient Israel, faith in God demanded this. Standing up for the poor was a direct consequence of Israel's experience of being freed by God from Egyptian slavery (Lev 25:38). The commandments that frame the prohibition of interest –lost property must be released over time and people who became unfree by poverty must regain their freedom – fit entirely within this concern to balance self-interest and the common good.

4.3 RELEASE OF PROPERTY (LEV 25:13-34)

Unlike in Deuteronomy, where cancellation of debts is seven-yearly, Leviticus 25 talks about a cancellation of debts in the Jubilee Year. At first glance, it may seem that the Levitical measure of cancelling debts only after the passage of fifty years is a step backwards compared to Deuteronomy. However, this is not the case. For the Priestly reformers, even more than their predecessors, want to fight against the prevailing poverty. They therefore propose an entirely new principle by which deliverance from debt becomes possible and desirable even before the Jubilee Year. This is what verses 14-17 are about.

The framing of these verses makes it clear that the text deals with a forced sale by people who can no longer support themselves. Indeed, both verse 14 and verse 17 expressly state as a general rule that one should not oppress someone who has to sell his property. It also reiterates the old prescription regarding inheritance: the 'full ownership' is unsaleable (verse 16). The debtor relinquishes his usufruct for a number of years. In verse 23, this is legitimised by the statement that God is the owner of the land. Consequently,

it is not the plot of land itself that the debtor relinquishes, but a number of years that the creditor may use it.

Also, it becomes possible – and this is intended – to regain possession of the right to use the land before the Jubilee Year. Thus Leviticus 25:25 places strong emphasis on the family solidarity obligation. Indeed, the debtor's family has to buy back the land that a relative has had to give up out of necessity.³³ If the person concerned has no one who can buy back his property for him, then he himself, if he is able to do so at some point, can acquire back his land (vv 26-27). In doing so, the Priestly reformers rely on the principle of degressive debt repayment. If a person had to give up a plot of land at the beginning of a fifty-year period but would manage to accumulate enough funds to buy it back after twenty-five years, he would still have to pay only fifty per cent of the original price. After all, during the past twenty-five years, the creditor himself has been able to enjoy the produce of the field. Consequently, it should be clear that Leviticus 25 by no means treats economic facts lightly. On the contrary, in the first instance, every effort is made to do justice to both the creditor and the debtor. However, if the debtor has no one to buy back his property or fails to reacquire it himself, then – and only then – does the regulation of the Jubilee Year come into effect: the property must then return to its former owner during the Jubilee Year. After all, at that point there is no other way to break the downward spiral of poverty and debt. Strict economic laws are abandoned at this point. Therefore, the measures envisaged by the Priestly reformers can only be

³³ This requirement was perhaps influenced by the pre-exilic practice whereby kin could assert a kind of 'pre-emption' (see, for example, Jer 32:6-15 and Ruth 4). On this, see Jacob Milgrom, "The Land Redeemer and the Jubilee," in *Fortunate the Eyes That See. Essays in Honour of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Astrid Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 66-69.

understood from the concern to stand up for the weak and poor in society, and this from the religious conviction that God is the ultimate owner of the land. The Israelites had no right to the land. It was given to them by God.³⁴

4.4 RELEASE OF PEOPLE (LEV 25:39-55)

In order to understand the ordinances of Leviticus 25:39-55, which dealt with the release of people caught in slavery, it is again necessary to first scrutinise some precepts from the Covenant Code in the book of Exodus and the Deuteronomic Law. It concerns the complex issue of slavery. Unlike contemporary Western society, which considers treating people as slaves abhorrent, neither the Old nor the New Testament explicitly protest against slavery. It was part of everyday life.

Exodus 21:1-11 is probably the oldest surviving Old Testament law text that gives rules relating to slavery. It clearly refers to so-called debt slavery. This term refers to people who, because of their inability to pay their debts, were enslaved. Debt slavery differs from so-called possession slavery, by which one understood slaves who, for example, came into the possession of a master as prisoners of war or by abduction. The use of one and the same Hebrew term (*'ebed*) complicates the distinction between the two categories of slaves in Old Testament literature.

³⁴ Cf. Eckart Otto, "Wirtschaftsethik im Alten Testament," *Informationes Theologiae Europae. Internationales ökumenisches Jahrbuch für Theologie* 3 (1994): 279-289: "Auch wenn es um wirtschafts politisch intendiertere Reformideen dabei geht, so können sie dochnicht auf eine Legitimation verzichten, die über die Logik des Wirtschaftenshinausgeht und die im theologischen Argument gesuchtwird. Da Gott letztlich Herr allen Bodens sei, ist die Verfügung des Menschen darüber dort eingeschränkt, wo an der Verfügung des Menschen über den Boden sozialer Schaden für die Gesamtgesellschaft entsteht" (286).

In Exodus 21, perhaps for the first time in history, slavery is limited to six years, no matter how high the debts accumulated. Parallel to the agricultural custom of leaving the land fallow every six years for a year, debt slaves are only allowed to remain in service for six years. It should be noted that this rule only concerns Israelite slaves. Foreigners apparently cannot benefit from this rule. Moreover, the law ostensibly applies only to male slaves. A female slave is not released after six years of service.

The Deuteronomic reformers apparently struggled with this distinction between male and female slaves (Deut 15:12-18). According to Deuteronomy, both male and female slaves must be set free after six years of service. Moreover, the starting opportunities of the released slave are fundamentally improved compared to the regulations in Exodus. The master is now given the obligation to provide the freed slaves with some kind of starting capital. Although these regulations by no means abolish debt bondage, they erode its principles to some extent. After all, slaves no longer work solely to pay off their debts, but at the same time receive a 'salary' – albeit probably small – for their labour.

The Deuteronomic reformer wants to make this law, which may be difficult for the wealthy upper class to digest, plausible in two ways. First, he appeals to the master's economic acumen. After all, despite the compulsory release of slaves after six years of labour, working with debt slaves is more advantageous than employing day labourers (v 18). Furthermore, the author gives religious arguments, something to which the believing Israelite was no doubt sensitive. He motivates the release of slaves by the promise of God's blessing (vv 14, 18) as well as by the reference to the Exodus event (v 15). God's liberating action thereby

serves as an example for human action. As a member of the people of Israel, the master is reminded that he himself – or his ancestors – was once treated as a slave in Egypt and freed thanks to God’s intervention. Mindful of this religious conviction, the master must grant freedom to his slaves.

As with debt forgiveness, the authors of Leviticus 25 seem to take a step backwards in their prescription with regard to debt slavery (vv 39-55). Indeed, unlike the Deuteronomic law, which stipulated that slaves were to be released after six years of labour, Leviticus prescribes a service period of 49 years. There is also no longer any mention of the starting capital to be given by the master. Again, however, first impressions are deceptive. For on closer inspection, Leviticus 25 is much more radical than Deuteronomy 15. According to Leviticus 25, one may no longer consider the impoverished brother a slave at all and treat him with harshness (vv 43, 46). De facto, he is no longer a slave. Rather, he is wage labourer to be paid for labour rendered. As such, this rule guarantees that the impoverished Israelite will have an income until the next Jubilee Year. Moreover, since he is compensated for the work done, he may be able to buy back his lost land property and thus regain his independence.

Like the other commandments related to the Jubilee Year, this abolition of slavery *avant la lettre* is also underpinned by religious arguments. Since the Israelites were freed by God from Egyptian slavery and are supposed to recognise him as their Lord, every Israelite is now God’s ‘slave.’ Israelites among themselves, therefore, cannot and should not treat each other as slaves. However, the situation is different with foreigners. They can still be enslaved (vv 44-46). There are several reasons for this seemingly double standard. Firstly, throughout virtually the entire

Old Testament, written from the perspective of Israel, which had to endure hardship under foreign domination for virtually its entire history, the particularism of Israel as the chosen people is central. Non-Israelites had not been partakers of God's liberating action towards Israel. Further, the enslavement of foreigners posed no threat to holding the Israelite community together. And it was precisely as a buffer against the disintegration of Israelite society that the commandments of the Jubilee Year had arisen.

Israelites who by necessity ended up in 'slavery' with their fellow citizens and had to work for them are released in the Jubilee Year. Even an Israelite who had to sell himself to a foreigner can be ransomed by a people's companion or even free himself, while foreigners also are required to maintain the Israelite rule of degressive debt repayment. In any case, foreigners must also release their Israelite 'slaves' in the Jubilee Year. After all, as a result of the idea Yahweh having freed the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, no member of the people, however poor, can be a slave to anyone else (v 55).

5 THE JUBILEE YEAR IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Opinions differ widely on the origin and dating of the commandments related to the Jubilee Year. Anyway, several elements argue for dating – at least Leviticus 25 in its actual form – relatively late. After all, the rules about the Sabbath Year, on which the Jubilee Year builds, presuppose a historical situation in which the Sabbath as religious institution had a crucial position within the religious life of ancient Israel. This may have been the case only since the Babylonian exile. The Creation poem in Genesis 1 already points in this direction. This text was undoubtedly written against the background of the Babylonian exile, in order to establish the Sabbath as a substitute sign of reverence

for Yahweh in a historical situation in which Israel no longer had a material sanctuary – the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE: whoever wants to honour God maintains the Sabbath, because it was instituted by God himself as a day of rest.

Furthermore, there also seem to be a number of elements in the structure of the book of Leviticus that necessitate dating Leviticus 25 as post-exilic. After all, this chapter forms a diptych with Leviticus 23. In both chapters, both the Sabbath and the Day of Atonement – on which, according to Leviticus 25, the Jubilee Year begins – as well as the numbers 49 and 50 occupy an important place (according to Lev 23:23, on the fiftieth day, that is, after seven times seven days, one had to offer the first fruits of the new harvest to Yahweh). Well, this feast seems to presuppose the rebuilding of the Temple, which was completed in 515 BCE.

This post-exilic period in which Leviticus 25 was written was one of turmoil and uncertainty. Prophets like Isaiah may have promised the exiles a glorious return to the homeland, but the reality was of a very different order. Indeed, on their return, it turned out that their property had fallen into the hands of peoples who had not been deported to Babylonia. The question of the ownership rights of past possessions thus becomes burningly topical. In practice, it was simply not possible to return to the relinquished land. The non-exiled part of the population was not simply willing to return the land to the original owners returning from exile. Moreover, post-exilic Judah was in social crisis. From Nehemiah 5:1-5 one learns how Judean farmers, perhaps under Persian tax pressure, were forced to sell first children – the workforce – and then also fields and houses – the means of production. In the end, they had to sell

themselves as slaves. Consequently, the issue of lost land ownership and oppressive debt took centre stage (again) in the anything but rosy situation of post-exilic Israel. The provisions concerning the Jubilee Year may therefore have come about in response to prevailing social ills. However, this late dating of Leviticus 25 does not detract from the fact that some of the ideas in this chapter had already taken shape at an earlier stage of Israelite history, as evidenced by the passages from the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy already discussed.

6 THE JUBILEE YEAR: REALITY OR UTOPIA?

The previous paragraph has made it clear that the prescriptions of the Jubilee Year may have been formulated with a view to its actual implementation in order to get life back on track in post-exilic Israel. However, there is no evidence that the Jubilee Year was ever put into practice. In the Old Testament and in so-called Second Temple literature, at least, we do not find any witness to it.

In contrast, the regulations relating to the Sabbath Year seem to have been practiced within some pious circles of Judaism throughout history. This is attested to, for example, by Flavius Josephus, who mentions how Alexander the Great and Gaius Caesar exempted Jews from paying taxes during the Sabbath Year.³⁵

However, the fact that the Biblical Jubilee Year may never have been put into practice does not mean that the concept did not play a role. After all, in post-exilic Judaism, Leviticus 25 acquired an important place within eschatological thinking. In this respect, Isaiah 61:1-3 can be mentioned. In this pericope, the post-exilic author addresses

³⁵ Cf. Robert North, "Maccabean Sabbath Years," *Biblica* 34 (1953): 501-515, especially 503-505.

the Israelites who returned from Babylonian exile. They feel cheated by the promises that God would lead the exiles back to their land in a triumphant march through the desert and that Jerusalem would be rebuilt as a city of never-seen glory. In practice, however, nothing had come of this: only a few had been able or willing to return from Babylon, Jerusalem was still in ruins and the rebuilding of the temple was struggling to get under way. In the midst of this dire situation, Isaiah 61:1-3 announced a tremendous upheaval: Yahweh would soon intervene in history and deep sadness and disillusionment would give way to joy and jubilation: The one who comes will “bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken hearted proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Even if these verses were not originally meant to be messianic, the fact is that Isaiah 61:1-3, influenced in part by the general tendency to apply prophetic promises to an eschatological era, became a basis of hope for an eschatological, Messianic deliverance of Israel. Witness to this interpretation, for example, is 11Q Melchizedek, a text from the community of Qumran. In the manuscript named after its main character, Melchizedek, referring to the afore mentioned passage from Isaiah, is presented as a Messianic, end-time and heavenly – referring to Psalm 82:1, Melchizedek is called a ‘heavenly one’ – liberator. As a result, this Qumran text relates Leviticus 25 to an eschatological event. Hence, the remission of (material) debt is seen as an essential part of the final and definitive redemption.³⁶

³⁶ For further background and an English translation of this manuscript, see Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls. Study Edition. Volume 2 (4Q274-11Q31)* (Leiden – Grand Rapids, MI: Brill – Eerdmans, 2000), 1206-1208.

Against this background, one can also interpret Jesus' first public appearance in the synagogue of Nazareth, as narrated in Luke 4:16-19.³⁷ When Jesus enters the synagogue, he reads – at least this is how the evangelist presents it – the passage from the book of Isaiah quoted above. Doing so, he wants to evoke that the promise of Isaiah 61:1-2 is fulfilled with him: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Luke, however, does not have Jesus quote the pericope from Isaiah 61 verbatim. He adds a verse from Isaiah 58:6 (“to let the oppressed go free”). As a result, the evangelist includes a text that unequivocally sides with the oppressed and opposes the oppressors, whose behaviour is diametrically opposed to their religious piety. Luke presents Jesus from the beginning of his gospel not only as the one in whom Isaiah’s eschatologically interpreted promise is definitively fulfilled. More than that, for him Jesus is also the one who actually stands up for the poor and oppressed, thus giving shape to what Isaiah 58:6 was talking about. The texts in which Jesus resolutely sides with sick people in the rest of Luke’s Gospel are therefore numerous. As such, Jesus’ action is entirely in line with what the Old Testament Jubilee was about: deliverance and hope. At the same time, Jesus transcends the particularism that characterises many Old Testament texts – including Leviticus 25 and Isaiah 61: with him it is no longer about “those who mourn in Zion”

³⁷ In this regard, see, among others, Rainer Albertz, “Die ‘Antrittspredigt’ Jesu im Lukasevangelium auf ihrem alttestamentlichen Hintergrund,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 74 (1983): 182-206. See also J. Blair Wilgus, “Jubilee, Year of. II. New Testament,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, ed. Hans-Josef Klauck, vol. 14 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 852-853 and Christopher J. Luthy, “Jubilee Debt Cancellation and Luke’s Gospel,” *Novum Testamentum* 63 (2021): 304-322.

(Isa 61:3) alone. Jesus acts as an advocate for the unfree – whatever that might be – *tout court*.

7 THE JUBILEE YEAR: A SIGN OF HOPE

This presentation of the Old Testament origins of the practice of the Jubilee Year within the Church and its reception within intertestamental Judaism and early Christianity brings us back to Pope Francis' bull *Spes non confundit*. Clearly, the theme that the pope put forward for the Jubilee Year 2025 – hope that does not disappoint – and the call that accompanies it – to be pilgrims of hope – is clearly in line with the original Biblical Jubilee, which was undoubtedly meant to be a beacon of hope within the often hopeless situation in which people in ancient Israel found themselves. In particular, alongside his call to give (spiritual) hope to people who have lost or are in danger of losing all hope, his exhortation to be a sign of hope for prisoners through “forms of amnesty or reduction of punishment”³⁸ and countries being sucked further into the deeper depths by their unbearable debt burden to “forgive the debts”³⁹ are definitely in accordance with Leviticus 25.

In addition, there is also a whole section in the papal bull devoted to the so-called Jubilee Indulgence. It too relates directly to the central idea of the Old Testament Jubilee Year, namely liberation, albeit not on a material level, but on a spiritual one.⁴⁰ However, the issue of the Jubilee Indulgence is beyond the scope of this contribution. Suffice it here to refer to the first Jubilee Year in the history

³⁸ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 10.

³⁹ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 16.

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, § 23. As to the indulgence, the pope writes: “The sacrament of Penance assures us that God wipes away our sins. (...) Still, as we know from personal experience, every sin ‘leaves its mark’. Sin has consequences, not only outwardly in the effects of the wrong we do, but also inwardly.”

of the Church. When Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303) on 22 February 1300 proclaimed the year 1300 as Jubilee – which he retroactively allowed to begin on Christmas 1299⁴¹ –, he granted in the bull *Antiquorum habet fida relatio* to every pilgrim who visited Rome and for thirty consecutive days – for non-Romans, fifteen days sufficed – visited the basilicas of Saint Peter and Saint Paul a full indulgence, a privilege that until then had been granted only to the Crusaders.⁴² The pope also stipulated that from then on this Jubilee Indulgence could be obtained at every centenary. In the closing bull of 24 December 1300, he used the term *jubilee* for the first time to designate this year of penance and conversion.

However, against the background of the turbulent period that marks Church history of the first half of the 14th century – one thinks of the papal exile at Avignon –, as well as the wars and epidemics that proliferated during these decades, Pope Clement VI (1342–1354) decided to declare the year 1350 to be the Jubilee Year already, thus bringing the periodicity of the Jubilee Year in the church to 50 years. Pope Urban VI (1378–1389), the first pope of the

⁴¹ Little is known with certainty about the historical background of the introduction of the Jubilee Year. People often refer to the Roman centenary celebrations, known as *saecularia*. Perhaps the event of the centenary was also influential. In this context, millenarianism and penitential movements undoubtedly played an important role.

Also, Stephan Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, should be mentioned in this regard. Between 7 July 1220, the 50th anniversary of the assassination of his predecessor Thomas Becket, and 7 July 1221, a *jubilaeus annus* was celebrated in Canterbury on the occasion of the *translation* of Becket's relics – by *translation* is meant the transfer of the body of a saint from its original grave to a new resting place or from one church to another – through Langton's efforts. On this occasion, pilgrims to the reliquary at Canterbury were granted an indulgence. Together with Crusade mysticism and the scholastic teaching on indulgences and remissions, this local *jubilee* at Canterbury certainly played a role in Pope Boniface's decision to declare 1300 a Jubilee Year.

⁴² Even today, the pilgrimage plays an important role in the Catholic Jubilee Year. See Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, §5.

so-called Western schism, reduced the interval to 33 years – thus referring to Jesus’ age – and proclaimed a Jubilee Year at Christmas 1389 – thus seven years later.⁴³ An important change here was that to obtain the Jubilee Indulgence, one no longer had to pilgrimage to Rome. In 1449, Nicholas V (1447–1457) reverted to the fifty-year cycle of the Jubilee. In 1470, Paul II (1464–1471) set the interval at 25 years, with which the next Jubilee was celebrated in 1475. Perhaps from then on, the designation Holy Year was also used for the first time. Especially since the Holy Year proclaimed in 1500 by Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503), the practice of indulgences was increasingly emphasised.⁴⁴ He also abolished all full indulgences outside Rome in order to attract as many people (and revenues) to Rome as possible. Not surprisingly, since the 16th century, the tradition of the Church’s Jubilee Year has been viewed with suspicion by much of Christendom.

Needless to say, throughout history, the Church’s Jubilee focused mainly on the granting of indulgences, and paid little attention to a possible social impact. At least with Pope John-Paul II (1978–2005), this changed. In his bull *Incarnationis mysterium* (29 November 1998), in which he proclaimed the year 2000 as a Jubilee Year, the pope not only called for resisting all kinds of new forms of slavery, but also for a new culture of international solidarity and

⁴³ Since Leo X (1514), extraordinary holy years have also been celebrated. Here, for example, reference may be made to 1933 and 1983 as recalling the 1900th and 1950th anniversary of Jesus’ death respectively. Pope Francis additionally proclaimed 2016 as an Extraordinary Holy Year. Based on *Spes non confundit*, § 23, it looks like Pope Francis would at least want 2033 also to be proclaimed as an Extraordinary Jubilee Year.

⁴⁴ The opening of a so-called Holy Door, as a symbol of the beginning of a new period, may have happened for the first time in 1423.

cooperation.⁴⁵ He called for the pursuit of an economic model that would benefit everyone in the world and put a stop to the unbearable debt burden that is destroying the poorest countries.

This brings us again to the Old Testament Jubilee. Even though the discussion of the Jubilee Year in Leviticus 25 – and its predecessors in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy – has made it clear that the context in which these regulations came into being is no longer ours, and that putting the Biblical Jubilee Year into practice as such is also neither possible nor perhaps desirable, some lessons can be drawn from this 2500-year-old text.

A presentation of Leviticus 25, and in particular of its focus on the fact that its principles are the result of a growth process, has made it clear that religion can transform according to changing social circumstances, but without thereby denying its fundamental convictions. When (religiously motivated) rules do not (any longer) succeed in meeting the demands of new social realities, a living faith must be strong enough to re-energise and renew itself. After all, a religion that fails to take into account new circumstances with which it is confronted is doomed and in danger of falling ‘hopelessly’ behind.

Moreover, the ancient Biblical legal text of the Jubilee Year still has something to say today about the radicality of faith, without thereby implying that this text should be applied without question to today’s society. Far from being unworldly, this difficult legal text teaches that authentic faith advances to tangible social initiatives. As an attempt to respond a social crisis situation, the regulations on the

⁴⁵ Pope John-Paul II, *Incarnation is mystery*, § 12 (https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/bulls/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_19981129_bolla-incarnationis-mysterium.html) (accessed 11 February 2025).

Jubilee Year were the consequence of Israel's faith. After all, the Jubilee Year was to be a Holy Year, a year dedicated to God. The concrete actions called for by the Jubilee Year were rooted in Israel's faith in God. The Old Testament Jubilee Year called on believers not to simply be content and resigned to the *status quo* of an unjust society, but to be living signposts and signs of hope for a better life.

ST. PETER'S PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE
BANGALORE-560 055

St Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bangalore offers advanced courses leading to Licentiate Degree and Doctorate in the following subjects:

LICENTIATE DEGREE PROGRAMME

in

Biblical Theology

(2 year programme)

Missiology

(2 year programme)

Canon Law

(3 year programme)

Philosophy

(2 year programme)

DOCTORAL PROGRAMME

in

Biblical Theology

(Old and New Testaments)

Missiology

Besides the aforesaid postgraduate courses, the Institute also offers graduate and undergraduate courses in Philosophy and Theology, such as, Bachelor of Philosophy (B.Ph), Bachelor of Theology (B.Th), Diploma and Certificate in Philosophy and Theology.

Scholarship and Hostel accommodation are available for all deserving Post-graduate (Licentiate and Doctoral) students. A separate newly constructed hostel for religious women is available. As regards conditions, application forms and any other information, please contact:

The Registrar
St Peter's Pontifical Institute
Malleswaram West P.O., Bangalore-560 055, India

Mobile No: +91 7899891378 | + 91 9445886616

E-mail: stpetersinstitute@gmail.com

Website: www.stpeters.org.in

Reg. No. MAG (5) PRB-Decl. 191/91-98



Indian Theological Studies
St. Peter's Pontifical Institute
Malleswaram West P.O.
Bengaluru-560 055, India
Tel: 080 - 23315172