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Jubilee & Third World Debt (Lev.25:1-55)

You may have heard about the request of the Pope to the international community to cancel the debts of Third world countries. Why does the Pope want such a request to be effective in the year 2000? Apart from the Y2K bug, the coming of a new era and advanced technology, etc, why do we need to pay attention to the year 2000?

To prepare the year of jubilee, the church proclaims "reunion" as the main theme of celebration. Reunion includes different aspects. For example, reunion with God, humankind, the nature, ourselves, and the society, of course. To ask for reunion is to maintain social and economic justice. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the waiving of third world debt which is under the economic justice, together with Lev. 25:1-55, and try to look for a new meaning of jubilee year to the Christians.

Celebration of the Jubilee Year since 1300

According to the Old Testament, a jubilee year occurs every fifty years. According to Jewish law, a piece of land will be left fallow, free from any agricultural activity, for a year after being cultivated for six years. This seventh year is the Sabbath Year. The year after every seven Sabbath Years, that is, the year after every forty-nine years, is a Jubilee Year, a Year of Joy or a Holy Year. In this year, the land is to rest; slaves are freed; debts are waived, farmland is re-distributed to its original owners. (1)

The Church's celebration of a Jubilee Year began in 1300. The Europe of that time experienced continuous wars, rampant infectious disease and social instability. In view of this, Pope Boniface VIII on Christmas Day 1299 declared the year 1300 as a Year for the Forgiveness of Sin. Since then, the tradition of a Holy Year celebration gradually developed. (2)

Principles of the Jubilee Year

In the book of Leviticus (Lev. 25:1-55) we see clearly that God takes the side of the poor. The return of land and property to its owner, the release from slavery and the redistribution of resources in the Jubilee Year imply that the suffering Israelites are given a chance to start all over again. J. H. Yoder has even pointed out that the requirements of the Jubilee Year include exemption from debts, the return of family property, the resting of land and the release of all slaves. (3)

Lev. 25:13 tells us that in the Jubilee Year the Israelites will get their family property back. Verses 14-17 give the details. For example, every land sale cannot involve any deal that is unfair. The land should be priced according to the period between the present time and the previous Jubilee. The longer the period, the more time a landowner has cultivated the land, the higher the land price will be, and vice versa. (4) Moreover, with reference to verses 23-28, land cannot be sold in perpetuity. The reason is that Israelites believe in God's ownership of the land and human beings are his tenants. Thus, land or a house sold because of poverty can be redeemed e.g. by a close relative. Verse 28 also mentions that the land must be released and returned back to the original owner in a Jubilee Year. In verses 29-34, houses, except those in walled towns, are to be released

back to the owner in the Jubilee. In other words, during the jubilee year, houses and land become again the property of the original owners.

The Sabbath Year is to be observed in the Jubilee. In verses 18-22, during the Jubilee, Israelites shall not sow, nor prune the vineyard, nor reap the harvest. The land shall have complete rest. During this period, they are only to eat what grows in the wild. In the cycle before Jubilee, cultivation occurs from the first till the sixth years. Complete rest occurs in the seventh year. Sowing occurs in the eighth year but there should still enough from the abundant crop of the sixth year. To observe this rule is difficult, especially when agricultural production is regularly affected by natural disasters and pests. There is no real guarantee of a sufficient harvest. Thus, some scholars doubt if the Israelites observed the Law to the letter. According to the explanation of S. L. Hon, Jubilee is merely to present the Israelites with principles for just behavior. The real owner of land is God; human beings are housekeepers with no real ownership of the world's goods. (5) Of course, some scholars also think that the Israelites did observe this law. (6)

Moreover, it is a principle of care for the poor. In verses 35-38, Leviticus requires that help be offered to the poor neighbor. Interest on a loan is not to be exacted either in money or in kind nor is food to be given at a profit. Despite no interest or only a low interest rate recorded in ancient Near East economic documents, only the Israelites forbade any interest being collected from the poor. (7)

Lastly, there is the principle of releasing slaves. Slavery was common in the ancient world. Some slaves were captured in war. Some were forced into it by bad debts. Some were descendants of slaves. Some were simply gifts from relatives or passed on from parents. Whatever the reason, slaves lost all freedom. The jubilee year demands the release of Israelites' slaves, that is, the recovery of their freedom. (8)

Jubilee Year: Humanity and Social Justice

From this, we can see that the rules for the jubilee year were established on the basis of social ethics and humanitarian thinking. Regarding land, "if your brother is poor...in the Jubilee...redeem him". Regarding houses, "in the Jubilee...they should be returned". Regarding slaves, "if your brother becomes poor and is sold to you to work...let him be like a hired servant...working with you until the jubilee year (when he and his family are released and return to their ancestral land). These rules demonstrate that people should make good use of the property entrusted to them for the just and humane treatment of both society and the environment. (9)

The aim of the Jubilee is to prevent the wealth of the Israelites coming concentrated in the hands of a few. Everyone is to enjoy the right to individual freedom and familial unity. If, because of poverty, people have to sell land, houses or themselves, in the Jubilee, they will recover the right to freedom and the return of their property. Resources are redistributed and redeveloped again. (10) This set of principles is surely applicable to the debts of the Third World countries.

Waiving the international debts of the Third World

According to some statistics, the annual debt repayment of the Third World countries is three times higher than the donations from the rich western countries. The cost to African countries of debt repayment is four times higher than what is spent on health and welfare. The global gap between the rich and the poor is also growing. In the past thirty years, the ratio for the wealth of the richest 20 percent in this world to that of the poorest 20 percent has gone from 30:1 to 60:1, i.e. a twofold increase. (11) The above figures indicate that the Third World countries have not benefited

from loans. On the contrary, their debts are compounding and the global gap between the rich and the poor is growing rapidly.

The increasing debt burden of the poor countries goes back to the 70's when the interest rate was much lower and the wealthy western countries encouraged the Third World to borrow loans for huge sums for economic development. However, later on, interest rates and oil prices skyrocketed, resulting in huge debts in the Third World. (12)

The debt issue is treated differently for those in wealthy countries compared to those in the poor nations. For example, the business of a Canadian merchant failed and he went bankrupt with a \$20 billion debt. It was settled for 5 billion. Even though he declared bankruptcy, he was able to keep property worth \$12 million. Sometime later, with this sum of money, he started all over again and recovered his former business. By way of contrast, if people in countries, like Mozambique in southwestern Africa, go bankrupt, they will encounter very harsh conditions in borrowing loans, not to mention, keeping their property. Those living in poor countries need loans due to lack of capital but often have to pay a higher interest than those in the wealthy countries. (13)

While we celebrate the approach of a new century in the Jubilee Year, we cannot ignore this opportunity for the Third World to make a new start. The bad debt burden plunges the Third World into an unbreakable debt cycle. Those who originally got the loans may not be the same people who now shoulder the debt burden. In order to repay these debts, the poor countries have to cut down on essential government expenditure. (14) The International Monetary Fund has made recommendations to the Third World for debt repayment: currency depreciation, interest rate increase to reduce consumption, the addition of trading embargoes, decrease in government expenditure to reduce inflation, privatization of state-owned properties and the development of large private corporations. The disadvantages of these recommendations may come before the advantages. Taking currency depreciation as an example, the immediate effect is a decrease in salary and consumer power. Taking the decrease in government expenditure (such as education and welfare expenses) as another example, people in these countries cannot acquire the necessary skills, knowledge for a better standard of living. Eventually, these countries lose their competitiveness and, in the long run, became even poorer. (15)

Therefore, the request to cancel the bad debts of the Third World is with the intention of giving them an opportunity to start again. And this is an issue of justice. The implementation of this request still demands, after the granting of debt exemption, the safeguarding of benefits to the poor and not just for the governing elite. It requires setting reasonable standards for debt liability which protect both borrower and debtor.(16)

From all this, we can see the Jubilee Year as a timely wake-up call of the need for social justice. If so many injustices still exist in society today, 2000 years after the coming of Christ among us, there is a powerful reminder of the imperative need for the implementation of social justice among the world's poor.

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蔡惠民，《聖年手冊——修和（資料篇）》，香港：香港教區聖年二千籌備委員會，頁1。同上，頁1~2。尤達著，廖湧祥譯，《耶穌政治》，香港：信生出版社，頁73。洪同勉，《利未記（卷下）》，香港：天道書樓，頁729。韓承良，《肋未紀釋義》，台北：思高聖經學會，頁208。洪同勉，《利未記（卷下）》，香港：天道書樓，頁737~743。同上，頁746~747。同上，頁735~736。同上，頁746~748。同上，頁748~749。

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(11)Paul Spary, "Five Areas for Jubilee Today", in Hans Ucko edited, *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility?*, Switzerland: WCC Publications, p.137.

(12)Kathy Vandergrift, "Jubilee 2000: Let's Forgive Third-World Debt", in *The Banner*, 27 April 1998.

(13)ibid.

(14)ibid.

(15)Norman Solomon, "Economics of the Jubilee", in Hans Ucko edited, *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility?*, Switzerland: WCC Publications, p.153.

(16)Paul Spary, "Five Areas for Jubilee today, in Hans Ucko edited, *The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility?*, Switzerland: WCC Publications, p.135-36.