

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds,

Session 7, Jubilee

6-min. Video Overview

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So today, we're going to dive into one of the most radical economic laws ever thought up. I'm talking about an ancient system that was designed to literally hit a society-wide reset button, all to prevent poverty and make sure there was justice. It's an amazing story of a breathtaking ideal and, well, a spectacular failure.

But first, I want you to really think about this for a second. Just imagine a world where, like clockwork, every seven years, the entire financial slate is wiped clean. For everybody, no more student loans, no more credit card debt, no mortgages.

Sounds totally impossible, right? Well, for one ancient nation, this was actually the law. And this wasn't some fantasy utopia. It was a real law in ancient Israel, right there in their scriptures.

They called it the Release Year, or Shemitah, and it was meant to be the ultimate economic safety net, hardwired directly into the calendar itself. So here's how it worked. It basically broke down into three main parts.

First, all personal debts between Israelites were just erased. Gone. Poof.

Second, anyone who had sold themselves into servitude to pay off a debt, which was super common back then, was set free. And third, even the land itself got a year off. All farming just stopped.

It was a complete and total pause for the entire society. And the reason for all this, well, it wasn't just about economics. It was deeply, profoundly moral.

The entire system was engineered to stop generational poverty traps before they could even start. The goal, stated right there in the text, was to create a society where there was no permanent underclass. Okay, but this is where the story gets even more interesting.

Because while the Israelite system was definitely unique, this core idea of canceling debts wasn't entirely new. To find its origins, we actually have to look to their powerful neighbors over in Mesopotamia. I mean, this idea of a debt release is incredibly old.

We found records of Mesopotamian kings declaring a release from debts a thousand years before the law was even written down for Israel. Back in the old Babylonian period, it was just standard practice for a new king. And get this.

The connection is just... it's undeniable. The Akkadian words that the Mesopotamians used for these royal decrees, words like *underarum* and *misharum*, are basically identical linguistically to the Hebrew words used in the Bible. It's the same exact concept, using essentially the same word.

But here's the thing. Even though the core idea was similar, Israel introduced one crucial, game-changing innovation. It wasn't about what they did.

It was all about when they did it. You see, in Mesopotamia, the release only happened when a king died, and a new one took the throne. It was totally sporadic, completely unpredictable.

And this caused chaos. Lenders were so jumpy that they actually created legal loopholes, so-called protection documents, to try and shield their loans from the next surprise cancellation. But in Israel, the release was tied to a predictable seven-year cycle.

Everybody knew exactly when it was coming. It wasn't a shock to the system. It was the reliable, steady rhythm of the entire economy.

So why the cycle? Why make this huge shift from a random royal decree to a fixed, automatic law? Well, the answer is all tied up in this really big, profound theological idea that made Israel's system completely one of a kind. It's simple, really. In Mesopotamia, the release was granted by a human king.

But in Israel, it was commanded by God. And since God was seen as the true, eternal king of the nation, the law wasn't tied to the unpredictable lifespan of a human. It was built right into the fabric of time itself.

So the release year wasn't just some random rule. It was supposed to be a living, breathing national demonstration of what their king was actually like. He was the ultimate provider who owned everything, the protector of the poor and vulnerable, and the source of all real justice.

Their entire economy was supposed to reflect his character. And this whole system was based on their creation story, you know, the Sabbath principle. The idea was, just as God worked for 6 days and rested on the 7th, their entire economic and agricultural life was supposed to follow that exact same pattern.

The 7th day was for rest, and so was the 7th year. And this wasn't just some abstract, pie-in-the-sky idea, right? It had incredibly practical, real-world consequences. It meant that their responsibility to God wasn't just about Sunday worship.

It completely defined how they were supposed to treat the environment, and maybe most importantly, how they treated each other. So let's break that down. The principle was, the land ultimately belongs to God.

So the application? Humans are just stewards, just caretakers, and they have no right to abuse it. It has to rest. Or the principle was, all people are created in God's image.

The application? No one can be permanently owned or economically crushed. Human dignity always trumped a financial contract. What you end up with is something that, you know, allowed for hard work and prosperity, but it had a conscience built right in.

It put a hard limit on how much wealth you could accumulate and put a solid floor under poverty. No matter how badly things went for you, a fresh start was never more than seven years away. It's just an incredible, beautiful, theologically rich system for creating a just society.

Which, of course, leads us to the most important question of all. Did they really pull it off? Did ancient Israel actually manage to live out this radical vision of economic justice and regular renewal? The answer, when you dig into the historical and biblical records, is pretty shocking. It was almost certainly never, ever fully put into practice.

Not even once. So why did it fail? Well, after their early leaders died, Israel just fell apart into this long period of chaos and disunity. There was no central government, no one with the power to enforce a law this demanding.

By the time they finally got it together and established a monarchy, 400 years had gone by. And by then, the economic habits were just too set in stone. To suddenly try and implement a full-scale debt wipeout was just seen as too radical, too disruptive.

So they gave up on the ideal. And you better believe this failure had consequences. The prophets in the Bible are constantly calling out the wealthy for exploiting the poor, the exact thing the release year was designed to stop.

In fact, the book of 2 Chronicles makes this absolutely stunning claim: that the 70-year length of Israel's exile in Babylon was specifically calculated to pay the land back for all the Sabbath years of rest it had been denied. So this ancient story is about a lot more than just economics. It's really a case study in the massive gap that can exist between a society's highest values and its everyday reality.

And it kind of forces us to ask ourselves, you know, what are our most profound ideals today, and how well are we actually living up to them?