

Old Testament Backgrounds: Jubilee

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Donald Fowler examines the historical and theological foundations of the biblical Jubilee and debt release systems, comparing them to Mesopotamian royal releases. Unlike unpredictable Mesopotamian debt cancellations decreed upon a new king's ascension, ancient Israel's debt release operated on a divinely ordained, predictable seven-year Sabbatarian cycle designed to relieve poverty, free enslaved debtors, and let the land rest. This theocentric economic framework underscored God's ultimate ownership of both land and humanity, emphasizing a capitalistic economy balanced by divine social justice. Although Israel consistently failed to observe these Sabbath release years—leading directly to the seventy-year Babylonian exile—the concept provides vital background for prophetic critiques, early Christian fellowship in Acts, and Jesus's messianic mission in Luke 4.

Outline

I. Introduction to Old Testament Backgrounds and Historical Context

- A. The challenge of continuity in Old Testament Backgrounds studies**
 - 1. Primary interest in the biblical narrative vs. ancient Mesopotamian timeline
 - 2. Mesopotamian history predates biblical events by over 1,000 years
- B. The Hyksos Empire and its geographical expanse**
 - 1. Territorial extent: Southern Turkey to central Egypt, extending east to the Euphrates River
 - 2. Capital city located at Avaris in the Egyptian delta
 - 3. Historical significance for Israelite history despite the absence of native Hyksos cuneiform tablets

II. The Biblical Concept of Debt Release and the Sabbatarian Cycle

- A. The Deuteronomy 15 mandate for economic remission**
 - 1. Seventh-year cancellation of debts (Shmita) among fellow Israelites
 - 2. Exemption permitting debt collection from foreign traders
 - 3. The core divine mandate: 'that there be no poor among you' (Deut. 15:4)
- B. The three core provisions of the Israelite release year**
 - 1. Cancellation of all financial debts owed by fellow Israelites
 - 2. Sabbatarian agricultural rest: leaving crop lands fallow

3. Manumission (liberation) of debt-indentured Hebrew slaves

C. Socio-economic context of ancient Israelite debt slavery

1. Causes of personal insolvency: crop disease, insect infestation, illness, or disability
2. Absence of bankruptcy laws or coinage (transactions performed via weighed silver shekels)
3. Inalienability of ancestral land holdings under divine land tenure laws
4. Voluntary self-sale or indenturing children as the final economic safeguard
5. Debt slavery as a non-racial economic mechanism rather than an ethnic institution
6. Theological adaptation in the New Testament (believers as metaphorically both sons and slaves of God)

D. Distinction between the seventh-year Release (Shmita) and 50th-year Jubilee (Lev. 25)

III. Mesopotamian Royal Releases versus Biblical Sabbatarian Release

A. Ancient Mesopotamian royal release decrees

1. Over 50 recorded cuneiform references spanning from Eannatum (~2500 BC) and Sargon of Akkad
2. Concentration in the Old Babylonian period (e.g., King Ammi-Saduqa's two releases)
3. Linguistic parallels: Akkadian *mīšarum* and *andirārum* matching Hebrew *yāšār* and *derōr*

B. Systemic contrast between Mesopotamian and Israelite models

1. Mesopotamian model: irregular, unpredictable, and tied to a monarch's ascension
2. Economic volatility caused by unpredictable Mesopotamian debt cancellations
3. Mesopotamian credit protection devices: contracts from Hana and Nuzi waiving release rights
4. Israelite model: predictable, cyclic 7-year rhythm rooted in divine law rather than royal whim

IV. Theocentric Foundations of the Sabbatarian Economic System

A. The Divine Kingship model in ancient Israel

1. God as the supreme King, ultimate Provider, and Protector of Israel
2. Human monarchs operating strictly as vassals under divine sovereign authority

B. Creation theology applied to Land and Humankind

1. Grounded in Genesis 1–3: God as Creator and owner of all earth and humanity
2. Humanity as 'sharecroppers' steward-farming God's sacred land
3. Shared Sabbath rest for land and humanity to prevent environmental degradation and human exploitation

C. Social justice and 'Capitalism with a Conscience'

1. Balancing hard labor and private gain (6 years) with systematic economic reset (7th year)
2. Preventing systemic multi-generational poverty and structural oppression
3. Preserving equal opportunity and landownership ('every man under his vine and fig tree')

V. Israel's Historical Non-Observance and Its Divine Consequences

A. Historical record of disobedience

1. Timeline from Moses (~1400 BC) to Joshua (~1360 BC)

2. Leadership vacuum during the Judges era (~300+ years): 'everyone did what was right/release in his own eyes'
3. Total failure to observe Sabbatical release years throughout the monarchical period

B. Prophetic denunciation of economic oppression

1. Prophetic messages repeatedly condemning rich elites for exploiting the poor
2. Affirming divine desire to eliminate poverty as an ethical imperative

C. The 70-Year Babylonian Exile as divine restitution (2 Chron. 36:21)

1. Exile duration strictly calculated on the 70 violated Sabbatical years (490 years of neglect)
2. Land resting in fulfillment of the unobserved Sabbath rest years

D. New Testament echoes and Messianic fulfillment

1. Communal sharing in the early Jerusalem church (Acts) attempting a poverty-free community
2. Jesus's inaugural proclamation in Luke 4 (citing Isa. 61 / Lev. 25) fulfilling the true Jubilee release