

**A TIME OF GRACE IN ORDER TO BEGIN ANEW**  
**THE SABBATH YEAR IN EXODUS 21:2-11 AND DEUTERONOMY 15:1-18**

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**Introduction**[\[1\]](#)

**In the biblical tradition the Sabbath Year is an important law and a tradition to safeguard the people of Israel. It is a time to begin anew. After a sequence of six years of work and also of economic successes and failures, the seventh year is considered to be a time in which social relations should be restructured. The tradition of the Sabbatical Year is an application of the days of the week to a sequence of years. In the Bible three variables of this theme are linked together: rest for the land in the seventh year (Exodus 23:10-11), the freeing of slaves (Exodus 21:1-11, Deuteronomy 15:12-18), and the forgiveness of debts every seventh year (Deuteronomy 15:1-11).**

**The law of rest for the land in the seventh year constitutes the oldest expression of this tradition. Possibly goes back to the period of egalitarian tribalism (1250-1000 BC), affirming the right of the land itself to a regular rest and ensuring that the poor and the animals would have their food.[\[2\]](#) The formulation of the law of the seventh year as a year for the liberation of slaves (Exodus 21, Deuteronomy 15) and as a year for the remission of debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-11) is probably an adaptation of this older tradition of the year of rest for the land to social and economic relations. The seventh year became a special year of liberation. It is a Jubilee time, a time of grace! In the formulation of these laws it could have had some inspiration or adaptation of customs from the cultural context of ancient Israel. Thus for example in the legislative tradition of ancient Babylonia there was legislation that set aside the fourth year as the year of liberation from debts (Code of Hammurabi 117). But without any doubt the theology of the exodus, i.e., the theology of the liberation of the people from Egypt through the gratuitous love of God “with a mighty hand and extended arm” of the Lord (Exodus 1-15, see Deuteronomy 26:1-11), is behind this important Jubilee tradition. The sabbatical year of liberation of slaves breathes the theology of the exodus.**

**Here we will seek to understand the logic of those laws and link them to the social and economic relations, above all debt contracts, that in ancient Israel transformed free Israelites and property owners into subjected and dependent persons forced to live under a temporal regimentation of slavery. The Jubilee tradition of the Sabbath Year as a year of liberation intervenes directly in the social and economic relations of the people of ancient Israel. By extension the biblical text seeks today also to inspire Christian spirituality and practice.**

**The following reflections are founded on three basic premises:**

- 1) The laws of liberation of slaves and remission of debts constitute a profound intervention in the social relations of dependence within ancient Israelite society, establishing a “time of grace” so that the impoverished and indebted can begin life anew.**
- 2) These laws of the Covenant Code (Exodus 20:22-23:19) introduce into the legislation of Israel the possibility of liberation within a regular rhythm of time. The Deuteronomistic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26) continues and amplifies this legislation.**
- 3) This legislation arose in the context of profound social and economic problems evidenced by the denunciations of the prophets of the Eighth Century BC, and laws of the Covenant Code (Exodus 20:22-23) seek to reconcile conflicts and contrary interests between powerful and impoverished/slaves within that historical moment. The Deuteronomistic Code continues that process, amplifying and updating that group of laws.**

**Liberation of Debt Slaves (Exodus 21:2-11)**

In the tradition of the Sabbatical Year we find the Covenant Code (Exodus 20:22-23:19), the oldest law regarding the freeing of slaves in the seventh year.<sup>[3]</sup> The attribution of this law to the mediation of Moses seeks give it validity for the people of Israel from its initial origins to the present time. According to the literary and theological development of the Pentateuch, the Mosaic attribution of the law is intended to give the impression of antiquity. In historic perspective, however, this law of the Sabbatical Year as a year for the liberation of slaves probably began in the midst of the conflictive reality of the Eighth Century BC.<sup>[4]</sup> To my mind this law is related therefore, to the critical activity of the prophets of Israel and Judah who were active during this period. By their social criticism the prophets identified the problem that the law later regulated, seeking to reconcile the conflicting interests in that society.

Exodus 21:2-11 deals with the freeing of slaves in distinct paragraphs:

(v. 2) *When you buy a male Hebrew slave,*

*he shall serve six years,*

*but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt.*

(v. 3a) *If he comes in single, he shall go out single.*

(v. 3b) *If he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.*

(v. 4) *If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters,*

*the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone.*

(v. 5) *But if the slave declares:*

*"I love my master, my wife, and my children."*

*He will not go out a free person.*

(v. 6) *Then....*

Formally the text is presented as a casuistic right. The phrases are expressed conditionally: "if...then...." The content clearly begins with a principal case (v. 2), which is the fact of the "purchase" of a "Hebrew slave," an affirms his liberation in the seventh year. This principal case is followed by three subordinate cases (v. 3, 3b, 4) that deal with the possibility of conditional liberation. V. 5 and 6 constitute a sub-case of v. 4.

For Exodus 21:7-11, which deals with the liberation of a woman who became a slave, the structure is similar. What changes, however, is the content. The main difference is that the woman will not go free in the same way as man.

(v. 7) *When a man sells his daughter as a slave,*

*she shall not go out as the male slaves do.*

(v. 8) *If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself,*

*then he shall let her be redeemed;*

*he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people*

*since he has dealt unfairly with her.*

(v. 9) *If he designates her for his son,*

*he shall deal with her as with a daughter.*

(v.10) *If he takes another wife to himself,*

*he shall not diminish the food, clothing,*

*or marital rights of the first wife.*

(v.11) *And if he does not do these three things for her,*

*she shall go out without debt, without payment of money.*

For the female slave is provided an enduring captivity as a concubine or, if certain rights are not fulfilled, her is conceded the possibility of redemption on behalf of the family. V. 7 deals with the principal case. V. 8-9 deal with two subordinate cases (a concubine of the *pater familias* and the son). The case of rejection by the son in v. 11 leads to three fundamental rights of the woman: food, clothing, and sex. Only in case of the neglect of these three rights the woman will go free without indemnization.

This biblical legislation concerning slaves is not unique in the ancient world. In the context of the ancient East there are similar and older traditions. Hammurabi Code 117, for example, speaks of liberation in the fourth year after three years of servitude.<sup>[6]</sup> That profane law seems to be more “progressive” than the biblical law.

The problem behind this law is the social institution of debt slavery. Such an institution was common throughout the ancient Near East, and it became part of the “regulatory system of the economy of ancient Israel.”<sup>[7]</sup> The vernacular formulation of the text often gives the impression of belonging to the buying and selling of slaves in the slave market. This, however, was not the reality of that era. We should remember that, historically, slavery as a social system and as a mode of production arose massively only with the Greek period, i.e., from the end of the fourth Century BC. Before that the dominant form of society was tributary, i.e., those who dominated took through tributes part of the agricultural production of free peasants and owners.

What the text reflects and legislates is a process of impoverishment of free Israelites, which culminated generally with the voluntary or forced enslavement of impoverished or indebted persons. This process of impoverishment in ancient times is related above all to the practice of indebtedness. Peasants, who through no fault of their own (drought, locust plagues, illness, etc.) were not able to harvest enough crops to survive through the year turned to credit from other Israelites or institutions such as the Temple itself. When they were unable to pay back their loans, many indebted Israelites had to turn over members of their family in payment (see 2 Kings 4:1).

The legislative text, Exodus 21:1ff, that deals with the liberation of slaves in the seventh year, begins with an intriguing formulation. It speaks of “buying” a “Hebrew slave” (Exodus 21:2). Here we should clarify some words. The Hebrew verb *qanah*, which is behind the usual translation “to buy” in Exodus 21:2 (see “When you buy...”), does not mean strictly the act of selling or buying as such. It designates above all a (temporary) transfer of the right of possession (see Amos 2:6b).<sup>[8]</sup> This verb appears several times as a synonym of another Hebrew verb *maker*, which has the same meaning of transfer of rights (see Amos 8:7). Thus poor Israelites had to work under the hand and authority of another Israelite. Free Israelites become slaves: in legal terms they are called “Hebrew slaves” (Exodus 21:2) They enter into a process of dependence and subjugation. And in this way a free “patriarchal house” within Israel might be extinguished. In this way there is an evident loss of rights of a free citizen.

In 2 Kings 4:1 we find a narration that illustrates very well the anguish of an indebted family that faces imminent execution of the debt claim by its creditor. This story is part of the so-called “Elisha cycle,” and it port

a reality of the Ninth Century BC.

*Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha,*

*"Your servant my husband is dead;  
and you know that your servant feared the Lord,  
but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves."*

As we know, in this story the anguish of the indebted widow had a happy ending because of the miraculous by the prophet Elisha. The miracle of the vessels of oil saved the widow's sons from debt slavery. The situation of family, without doubt, was not a unique reality in ancient Israel. It is just an example of that reality. Several decades later the prophets of the Eighth Century BC will speak of the problem of the poor and of debts as a much more extended and massive reality.

Reading prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Micah, we have the impression that such debt transactions and consequent impoverishment and subjugation were common in ancient Israel in the Eighth Century. Above all the prophet Amos, in his denunciations, reveals the relationship between impoverishment, debts, and slavery. In Amos 2:6b we read the resounding critique:

*...because they sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals.*

This denunciation marks the social limits between the status of free Israelites and debt slaves. The victims (*saddiq*/just and *'ebyion*/poor) are indebted peasants who still have a portion of land. Sometimes they could be so nothing ("for a pair of sandals!"). Others find that the authors of this operation (sale!) would be the judges in charge of jurisprudence. Here we find the same Hebrew verb *makar*, that according to what we saw above appears in Exodus 21:2 and expresses a relation of transfer of property. This prophetic denunciation deals with the relationships of loans and debts among peasants where both parties are still free Israelites, although one of the parties might be in danger of serious impoverishment. The prophet denounces here the process of subjugation of impoverished peasants.

In Amos 2:6 the expressions "because" (Hebrew: *ba'abur*) and "for" (=be), indicate, more than price, the motivation of the action: because. The Hebrew expression for money can take on the meaning of "debt (in money goods)." The expression "a pair of sandals" is used in a metaphorical sense to indicate a transaction of transfer of land possession. According to Ruth 4:7 and Psalm 60:10, the person who has or takes on a debt with another person can give his sandals to symbolize that he is mortgaging the right to his land portion. The typical situation behind Amos' denunciation is this: "A poor peasant receives a credit from another Israelite and on that occasion gives his sandals as a symbolic act for the mortgaging of his land. If he is unable to repay the debt, for whatever reason, the debtor becomes a dependent of the creditor; he becomes his servant. From that moment the creditor takes on right over the debtor and over his land portion."[\[9\]](#)

This same denunciation, with small differences, appears again in the book of Amos. In Amos 8:4-6 the prophet denounces the evil intentions and practices of Israelites who are deliberately willing to defraud those who must ask for loans.

(v. 4) Hear this,

you that trample on the needy  
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,

(v. 5) saying,

“When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain;  
and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?

We will make the *ephah* small and the shekel great,  
And practice deceit with false balances,

(v. 6) Buying the poor for silver

And the needy for a pair of sandals,  
And selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

This criticism is not directed so much against “commercial frauds in general,” nor are those criticized true “tradesmen.”<sup>[10]</sup> The criticism is directed against Israelites who have stored grain, who decide to offer it as a loan to those who need it. The denunciation of the prophet indicates that such transactions are fraudulent. In an ironic way, Amos even cites verbally those Israelites (v. 5b). When it is time to deliver the grain, they reduce the *epha*, which is the measure for grain (40 to 45 liters) and increase the *siclo*, which is the weight for measuring coin (corresponding to 11.4 grams).

“Different from today, grain was measured, money weighed. So by reducing the *epha* the dealers hid grain from the buyers. By increasing the *siclo* they received more money for the supposed value. And so they gained doubly. They gave less grain for more money. If even beyond that they falsified the scales for weighing the coins, fraud was tripled. To adulterated weights was added the falsified scales, probably “arranged.” Even if the *siclo* were correct, the trader would in fact gain through false scales. Then he would gain two times more through weighing coins.”<sup>[11]</sup>

The objective of such fraudulent actions is clearly indicated in the verbal citation of the exploiters present in Amos: to “buy” the weak for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals (Amos 8:5). The objective is “to buy” (*qana*) the weak through negotiations of money and their land through mortgages. The poor and the debtors become servants of the rich who make the loans. The wisdom for life from Proverbs 2:7 certainly reflects such situations from daily life at that time.

In Amos 5:7-17 we even have a prophetic saying where these relations of dependence and servitude are expressed. The center of the denunciation is found in Amos 5:10-12. There the cooptation of the popular institutions of jurisprudence in the gate to weaken the poor, to the point of debt slavery, is denounced (v. 12). After the denunciation and a conditional call (v. 15), the passage ends with the announcement of death for the masters of Israel (v. 16-17) that on that disgraceful day the slaves (*‘ikkarim*) will lament with funeral rites in the plazas. It is very interesting that the text of Amos makes no allusion to any right of liberation in the seventh year.<sup>[12]</sup> Servitude seems to last life-long and its duration is indefinite. Some authors affirm that the “silence” of Amos and also of the other prophets with regard to the “Mosaic Law” would express a prophetic ideal much more ample than the regulation of the law. Meanwhile, it may be taken as a clear indication that the institution of liberation in the seventh year is a juridical novelty at this historic moment. Reconciliation through the law is a consequence of the prophetic work that denounces these practices and these maneuvers in daily life in ancient Israel.<sup>[13]</sup>

For the era of the Eighth Century BC we can consult other prophetic texts that with small variations but with the same intensity denounce the economic and social problems that lead to slavery. In Isaiah 3:12-15 the prophet

Isaiah denounces the fact that “the spoil of the poor is in your houses.” What was robbed was probably mortgage Micah 2:1-5 and Isaiah 5:8-10 deal with the accumulation of lands among a few elites. The rich accumulated land because the poor Israelite families disappear as “houses,” i.e., as autonomous units of production and reproduction. The “desolate houses” are added to another’s patrimony and the lands are concentrated more and more in few hands. The prophetic pamphlet in Micah 3 demonstrates how, in the context of the ancient tributary mode of production process of exploitation and accumulation is tied to the interests of the city over against the peasant villages.[\[14\]](#)

By the Seventh Century BC the prophet Habakkuk, in his little book, takes up the theme of the conflictive reality of creditors and debtors. In Habakkuk 2:6-7 we read the following:

*2:6b Alas for you who heap up what is not your own (lo’lo)!*

*How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge!*

*2:7 Will not your own creditors suddenly rise,*

*and those who make you tremble wake up?*

*Then you will be booty for them.*

This prophetic witness speaks of the possibility of an emancipation of debtors over against the creditors and collectors. The possibility that debtors might organize a rebellion, an uprising, probably is very remote. Maybe something like a moratorium was intended. But just the possibility of a moratorium would already occasion sufficient disruption to end the tranquility of the creditors.

The reality of indebtedness was part of the daily life of the people in ancient Israel, above all in the turbulent times of the “era of prosperity” in the Eighth Century BC. The prophets testify very well. In the Ninth Century BCE Elisha looked for a solution for the situation through miracles. Habakkuk thinks of the possibility of a popular uprising or a moratorium. When, however, miracles, as in the case of Elisha (2 Kings 4:1), fail, or when there is a rebellion, as in Habakkuk, the solution is to reconcile the existing conflicts in the society through social laws. This is exactly what happened with the “Covenant Code” as a creative application of the Sabbath Year as a year of liberation of slaves.

The practice of the institution of debt slavery presupposed an indeterminate period of servitude. The law, however, sought to limit the period of slavery and dependence to six years. The seventh year offers a new possibility for liberation. Theologically and socially, said liberation in the seventh year constitutes the possibility of a new beginning for the indebted and dependent ones. Clearly this is a Jubilee time of grace.

This possibility of a new beginning of life in the seventh year is more possible for men than for women. The text of Exodus 21:7-11 does not provide for the liberation of women in the seventh year. Women were to be enslaved for their whole life. It is true that they were given certain rights, similar to “the right of daughters” (Exodus 21:9). Women should not and could not be treated as “domestic prostitutes,” which the prophet Amos (2:7) denounced. Women should be treated with certain rights: food, clothing, and sex, and that in relation only to the man of the house. If these rights were not respected, the women could leave but “empty handed. If they remained as slaves, they were often used by the head of the house as bait and hook to attract male slaves, above all young men. In Exodus 21:4, where it speaks of the male slave, the text says “if the master gives him a woman.” That woman was probably a domestic debt slave given up by some Israelite as payment for a debt. I suppose that many single young men were given into slavery, during their fertile time of life, and we may ask who would want to remain indefinitely in slavery “without a woman. If the head of the patriarchal household “gives a woman” to the male slave, that has consequences in the sense that there was no liberation of female slaves, many men would “voluntarily” chose to remain in slavery “for love of the master, the woman, and the children” (Exodus 21:5). Thus they became perpetual slaves, submitting to the rites that perpetuated publicly their submission (Exodus 21:5-6). Thus slavery was deepened even more.

This analysis shows that the Jubilee law of the Sabbath Year in Exodus 21:1-11, as a year of liberation of slaves is a social arrangement. The law allowed or provoked liberation in the seventh year for impoverished Israelite men. Even so, with this possibility the paragraphs and sub-cases of the law end up protecting privileges for the master. This is verified also in other paragraphs of the Covenant Code, above all in the section of Exodus 21:1-22:15, where matters of slaves, property, oxen, and debts are dealt with. In this respect Carlos Mesters affirms: “Here we see the conflicts, tensions, and doubtful commitments between various groups that formed part of the society. The Code took the side of the weak and taught the people how to live, looking for the promised well-being throughout the troubled land.”<sup>[1]</sup> The law does not provide all that the poor people had a right to; in many cases justice was incomplete, above all for women.

In this sense, the corresponding law in Deuteronomy presents some innovations and significant advances. We shall see as follows.

### Liberation of Male and Female Slaves (Deuteronomy 15:12-18)

The Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26) continues the tradition of liberation in the seventh year.<sup>[16]</sup> The problem is the same: debt slavery. There are, however, some modifications. The oldest law of the Covenant Code is up to date for the situation at the end of the Seventh Century B.C. Almost one hundred years later, around 625 BC, there are new situations and new demands, also in terms of rights for the impoverished. There is a new constellation of power.<sup>[17]</sup> Underlying the Deuteronomic Law there is also another theological intentionality: the principle of solidarity. This law proposes to be a statute for a “community of brothers and sisters.” Certainly this helped to create specific formulations. Concerning the Sabbath year as a year of liberation, we find the following text in Deuteronomy 15:12-18.

*(v. 12) If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman,*

*is sold to you and works for you six years,*

*in the seventh year you shall set that person free.*

*(v. 13) And when you send a [slave] out from you a free person,*

*you shall not send him/her out empty-handed.*

*(v. 14) Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press,*

*thus giving to him/her some of the bounty with which the lord God has blessed you.*

*(v. 15-17: casuistic formulations)*

*(v. 18) Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons,*

*because for six years they have given you services worth [double] the wages*

*of hired laborers;*

*and the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do.*

The principal modification in the formulation of the law is that there are no longer specific articles for the treatment of women. They will be treated in the same way as men (see “Hebrew”). This is different from the Covenant Code, where the term ‘*br*’ does not have an ethnic connotation. Here the validity of the law is specified for the “brothers” and “sisters.” In Deuteronomy this is equivalent to their own people. In the casuistic specifications likewise there are no references to the formation of family during slavery. Male and female servants are treated

individuals and are no longer seen within family relations. That can be a social advancement or also a sign of great family disintegration.

The period of servitude is limited to six years. In the seventh year it should lead to liberation (v. 13). Upon leaving, the male or female slave should receive a compensation for the time in servitude. It would be something like a kind of “trust fund for the time in service.” Slavery is no longer seen just as payment in work to the master/creditor as it was considered in Exodus 21:2-11. In the Deuteronomic Law there is an awareness that the servant generates profit for the master (see v. 18). That is expressed by the phrase in Deuteronomy 15:18: “because for six years they have given you services worth [double] the wages of hired laborers.” Slaves cost less than the daily wages of day laborers.

The compensation that the law proposes is a kind of “aid to begin life anew.” Such a proposal is typical of Deuteronomic thinking, according to which every Israelite should have peaceful possession of the land after liberation by means of which Yahweh-God conceded the statute of liberty and blessing for all, for all the people: “Remember you were a slave in the land of Egypt...” (Deuteronomy 15:16). Both the beginning anew and the minimum necessities for existence through the giving of this compensation by the master are related to the blessing. Divine blessing depends upon the practice of solidarity.[\[18\]](#)

The Deuteronomic Law should be valid for all Israelites individually and for the people of Israel as a whole. It is often affirmed that this Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26) would have served probably as a kind of “constitution” for the government of King Josiah. For that reason it is related to “the book of the law” spoken of in Kings 22-23 in the context of the so-called “Reform of Josiah.” Positively or negatively, that presupposes the practice of its instructions during the reign of Josiah as a regulatory instrument for social and economic conflicts. The king could propose a solution for conflictive social relations on the basis of this code.

The expectation of a regulatory activity by the ruler in social relations forms part of the ideal of the monarch. This is proposed, for example, in the reigning ideology of the ancient Near East, and it appears also in the so-called “royal psalms” (Psalm 2, 72, 110, etc.). “May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice” (Psalm 72:2). This forms part of the ideal of a good ruler (see also Isaiah 11:1f). It is very possible that behind Jeremiah’s praise of King Josiah there is some indication of the regulatory activity of this monarch in the social conflicts of the era: “did...do justice and righteousness...judged the cause of the poor and needy (*‘ebion*)” (Jeremiah 22:15-16).[\[19\]](#) Independent of this regulatory power, however, it is assumed that the laws of this Deuteronomic Code are practiced by all Israelites as a response to the grace of God’s love that freed this people from slavery in Egypt giving to the “juridical persons” (=the family patriarchs) the condition of peaceful possession of the land. The law should be in their hearts and be meditated upon daily (Deuteronomy 6:6f).

But it was not always that way. In the case of the law for the liberation of male and female slaves, we find in the book of Jeremiah a story that is very revealing in two senses. Jeremiah 34:8f tells that in the final phase of the monarchy in Judah, when the country was under siege by the Babylonians, King Zedekiah (598-587 BC), the last king of Judah, proposes to the Israelites “make a proclamation of liberty” so that “no one should hold another Judean as a slave” (v. 9). The proposal was accepted and celebrated with a ritual of covenant (*berit*) and applied. When the danger passed, however, the people repented (v. 11) and submitted again to slavery those who had been freed. The transgression of the word of God, signed by a covenant ritual, is used by the prophet as a metaphor for “granting release...to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine” (v. 17), which came to pass with the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BC.

This story is part of the general message of Jeremiah about the subjugation of the Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians, but he testifies about the attempt to free the slaves in the final phase of the monarchy in Judah, after Deuteronomy and under the initiative of the ruler. In that context it does not refer explicitly to the seventh year of liberation, but only makes reference to liberation (*deror*). It rather gives the impression of an isolated event motivated by the ruler. Be that as it may, the text demonstrates on the one hand the possibility of intervention by the ruler when there is political will to do so. On the other hand, it demonstrates also the fragility of intervention by

**regulatory monarchical power in social relations. It seems as if the “market relations” are stronger than public regulatory power.**

**Independent of the concrete and contextual conditions for its realization, the Deuteronomic Law proposes intervention within social relations that generate dependence and submission. It reinforces the tradition of liberation in the seventh year, both for men and for women. It even proposes that liberated slaves should receive reasonable compensation for them to begin life anew. The double form of the law proposes a time of grace. The later legislation of Israel, evidenced above all in Leviticus 25, will provide significant changes.[\[20\]](#)**

### **The Year of the Remission of Debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-11)**

**Together with the liberation of slaves, the Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26) includes another law the Sabbath Year. It is the year of the remission of debts, that should have been realized at the end of each seventh year. On that occasion there should be a remission (*shemittah*) of debts accumulated during the previous years.**

**This law of the Sabbath Year as a year for the remission of debts has no parallel in the previous social legislation of Israel. The Covenant Code, which is a collection of more ample and older laws prior to Deuteronomy includes the law for the year of rest for the land (Exodus 23:10-11). The law of rest for the land is not found in Deuteronomy but in its place emerges the law for the year of the remission of debts. We have already seen that in a modified way the “right of gleaning” is guaranteed to the poor each year in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 24:19-22). In a critical way one could say that this transformation assumes that it is easier to let the poor glean (gather grain left after the harvest) and forgive their debts than have them invade properties.**

**If the law of rest for the land is meant to intervene in relations of production with the land, if the law for the liberation of slaves is meant to reconcile conflictive social relations, the law of the year of remission of debts is meant to intervene more profoundly in economic relations, precisely where the whole vicious circle begins: in the process of indebtedness and dependence. Let’s look at the basic text in Deuteronomy 15:1f:**

*(v. 1) Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts.*

*(v. 2) And this is the manner of the remission:*

*every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor,*

*not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community,*

*because the Lord’s remission has been proclaimed.*

*(v. 3) Of a foreigner you may exact it,*

*but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you.*

*(v. 4) There will, however, be no one in need among you....*

**In biblical times, above all in the era of the Old Testament, tributes to be paid to the king and to the Temple constituted a heavy burden. In addition to tribute in kind there were services to be carried out for the monarch in an agreement typical of tributary, pre-capitalist societies: the peasants would have to carry out forced labor (see 1 Samuel 8:11-18). That already constituted an elevated level of obligation for an Israelite peasant family. Sometimes the tribute to the king or ruler was a central concern of social conflict, setting up a conflict between rural people and the city.[\[21\]](#) But there were still other “social obligations.”**

It was precisely the economic relations between the impoverished Israelites, in this biblical period, that constituted the principal mechanism for the servile subjugation of persons. It was above all a matter of transactive and relations that occurred in daily life, in general without the mediation of public power (the monarchy). The focus was on loans for poor families, who failed to get sufficient harvest or who suffered health problems, natural catastrophes or wars. In that case, the solution was to ask for a loan, often offering daughters, sons, and the land mortgage for the debt. Payment of the debt was generally associated with interest charged, sometimes at exorbitant rates up to 40 and 60% a year. The prophets were intransigent in their denunciation that such transactions often came cleverly tied to deceptive scales (see Amos 8:4-7) or fraudulent tribunals (see Amos 2:7, 5:10, Isaiah 10:1-3) the sense of “buying” the poor and robbing them of their rights. Through the economy and debt relations, the poor ended up being bought for a pittance (Amos 8:6) and “the borrower is the slave of the lender” (Proverbs 22:7). Jurisprudence played an important role in any case. The institution of slavery in ancient Israel had as its principal cause debt contracts. Thus the problem of indebtedness ended up dissolving the entire social structure of the country.

The institution of the law of the year of remission or of forgiveness of debts proposed by the Deuteronomist sought precisely to intervene directly in social and economic relations. Its principal function was to prevent impoverished Israelites from falling socially into the regimen of temporary slavery, thus losing full citizenship which happened to patriarchal family heads. The Deuteronomist Law sought to intervene deliberately in economic relations among their own people. Such intervention forms part of the “will” of God. The main objective of that divine-legislated intervention in the economy is expressed in Deuteronomy 15:4: “There will be no one in need among you.” By means of the law for the year of remission God sought to provide that there would be no poor among the people, that God’s “community” would be a sign/sacrament for a better world.

The concrete proposal of the law has a picturesque side. Forgiveness of a debt was accompanied by a symbolically practical act. The Hebrew term *shemittah*, that normally is translated remission in various translations of the Bible literally means “to open the hand.” What is presupposed here is the practice in which creditors went about with contracts in their hands. Such contracts were often written on tablets of clay, later dried in the sun. So it is said sometimes the creditors “walked heavily,” simply because of these contracts written on tablets of clay. To carry out remission of debt meant concretely to let the clay tablets fall so that they would break up on the ground. With the tablet made useless, the debt was forgiven. In current terms, the act of tearing up the promissory note or contract would be an equivalent act.

The proposal of the law is that such remission happen “at the end of the seventh year.” During this year the remission should be carried out. All debts received should be forgiven, and the creditor should renounce certain coercive mechanisms such as mortgages, which forced the poor into a relation of dependence. The idea of a periodic remission of debts has precedence and parallels outside of the cultural context of Israel.

In ancient Mesopotamia that tradition has an antecedent in the *mesarum* decrees, i.e., irregular edicts of debt forgiveness related to the enthroning of a new ruler or even in a case of extreme social crisis. The most preserved of these decrees is the decree Ammi-Saduqa (1646-1626 BC), one of the successors of the famous King Hammurabi in Babylonia. Here are some pieces from the decree:

1. *With regard to public debts of peasants, shepherds (...) workers occupied in pasture areas, palace providers that they can be strengthened and treated justly—it is decreed: the creditor will not use coercive mechanisms against the debtors.*
3. *Whoever has borrowed grain or silver from an Accadian or Ammorite as credit based on interest (...) and on that orders the making of a tablet (document) --by the act by which the king wishes to reestablish just order in the country-- the document will be considered invalid; according to the tenor of the document he will not be able (to order) to charge grain and silver.[22]*

The objective of this type of decree was the (re)establishment of just order in the country. This also included private debts. The intention of the law was to intervene in the mechanisms of indebtedness and dependence operating in society so that, preventatively or circumstantially, it would avoid the damaging effects of debt slavery and the endangering of life as a consequence.

Such an objective can be supposed for the situation of Judah toward the middle of the Seventh Century BC because at that moment there was a new constellation. Foreign domination was in full retreat. And internally in Judah there was a social movement led by "the people of the land" and Josiah was symbolic king. That social movement probably ensured the rights of rich peasants ("people of the land"), but very probably also took significant steps to alleviate social tensions, above all taxes on "the poor of the land." It is in this sense that we can understand Jeremiah's (Deuteronomist?) praise of the administration of Josiah (see Jeremiah 22:15b-16).

Faced with such legislation, the question could easily arise: "But who, then, will loan money or cereal to another person?" Precisely this questioning lies behind the formulations of Deuteronomy 15:7-11. In this text rich Israelites are exhorted "Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy brother" (v. 7) but "open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need (=of the poor)..." (v. 8). This is an exhortation or a legal admonition which in general is typical of Deuteronomist language. It exhorts the continual practice of loans precisely for those who perhaps do not have the possibility of repaying them. The practice of continuing to loan to needy persons depends on continuing divine blessing: "on this account the Lord your God will bless you in your work and in all that you undertake" (v. 10). The argumentation is theological. Blessing and prosperity, concretely the land, liberty, and production, are seen as a gift of the creator and liberator God. To believe in that God should have clear and definite ethical consequences in this "orienting law." It is true that this exhortation for the practice of loans and its link to the granting of divine blessing are set within the parameters of the theology of retribution. But that is the theological scheme with which Deuteronomy works. Liberation should have consequences for the liberty of all; on the contrary, the whole process is set back.

There are some problems with regard to the relationship with the "foreigner" or "stranger," who according to Deuteronomy 15:3 and 23:19-20 can take tribute or charge interest. It is often thought that here is a kind of xenophobia. Such a foreigner is not, however, a poor migrant or sojourner (Hebrew *ger*). The migrant (*ger*) enjoys the protection guaranteed among the "*personae miserae*." In Deuteronomy the *ger* is cited several times along with orphans, widows, Levites, and the poor (see Deuteronomy 14:29, 24:17), as clear beneficiaries of the Deuteronomist law. There is always a reference to the previous situation of Israel, for example, as *ger*/migrant in Egypt or in the situation of Abraham as a migrant in Canaan. The Hebrew term used here for "foreigner" is *nokri*. It seems to refer to persons foreign to the people, probably foreign traders, established in Israel with the strong intention of "becoming rich." With those persons there would be "commercial relations." They could be charged interest and tributes. Impoverished Israelites should receive loans necessary for their survival (see Deuteronomy 15:7-11, 23:19). The limitation of the project of this law probably lies in this differentiation.

The main objective of the law, however, is very clear: prolonged/chronic indebtedness should be avoided through the forgiveness or remission of debts so that no Israelite would be reduced to a relationship of dependence becoming a slave. Theologically this corresponds to the basic structure of Deuteronomy, according to which Yahweh-God liberated the people from slavery in Egypt in order that they might live as free people in a liberated land. For the Deuteronomist thought that is an individual blessing that should also be guarded collectively for all the people.

We should include here a final reflection. The legal proposal of the year of remission seeks deliberately to intervene in the economic relations of Israel in this period. That is characterized as the express will of God. Regard to forgiveness of debts seeks to lessen the yoke of debts. The forgiveness of debts, however, did not resolve the problem completely. It is to this probably that the rather enigmatic phrase of Deuteronomy 15:11 refers: "there will never cease to be some in need on the earth." Forgiveness alleviated the burden, but it did not eliminate the mechanism. Even though the Deuteronomist law emphasized in Deuteronomy 23:19 that loans to Israelites/Jews should be made without charging interest, in practice charging interest must have continued. That is how we can explain the flag

contradiction between Deuteronomy 15:4 ("there will be no one in need") and 15:11 ("there will never cease to be some in need").

## Summary and Perspectives

The Sabbath Year with its diverse emphases means a temporary interruption in the course of the history of the people of Israel. The liberation of slaves, rest for the land, and above all the remission or forgiveness of debts at the end of the seventh year constituted concrete interventions in the history and in the life of the people of God. That enabled the land and the poor of the land to experience concretely grace acting in history and, in particular, family and community life. Since these laws emerged in the midst of social conflicts, the laws themselves have ambiguous formulations, sometimes favoring rich masters. In theological terms, however, we can say that the reign of God is foreseen within history, even for brief moments. There are times of grace! The will of God becomes reality through and in the form of law and grace that act with concrete consequences in the life of persons. The Torah or the law way in which God intervenes to guide the course of the people in right and just ways, avoiding grave crises in the life of the people and preserving the blessing of God. The Sabbath Year is a strong time to begin anew.

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[1] This article is a summary and adaptation of Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of the book by Haroldo Reimer and Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Tiempos de gracia: El Jubileo y las tradiciones Jubilares en la Biblia*, Sao Leopoldo: CEBI/Paulus/Sinodal, 1999, p. 57-90.

[2] Cf. the article by Marli Wandermurem in RIBLA 33 and the book by Haroldo Reimer and Ivoni Richter Reimer, *op. cit.*, p. 57-65. Worth mentioning also is the article by Ludovico Garmus, "El descanso de la tierra: una relectura de Exodo 23:10-11 y Levitico 25:1-7," *Estudios Bíblicos* 58, Petrópolis/Sao Leopoldo: Vozes/Sinodal, 1998, p. 98-114.

[3] On the theme of slavery and slaves in the Bible, cf. the volume entitled "Esclavitud y esclavos en la Biblia" in *Estudios Bíblicos*, v. 18, Petrópolis/Sao Leopoldo, 1988. In particular see the article by Carlos A. Dreher, "Esclavos en el Antiguo Testamento," p. 9-26. There is an interesting book by Calisto Vendrame, *La esclavitud en la Biblia*, Colecao Ensayos, 72), Sao Paulo: Atica, 1981, which gives a panoramic view of the theme and above all compares the biblical legislation with that of the ancient Near East.

[4] For a more detailed explanation of the sequence of legal codes in the Old Testament, cf. Haroldo Reimer and Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Tiempos de Gracia, op. cit.*, p. 26-37. For basic orientation see Frank Crüsemann, *Die Tora--Theologie und Sozialgeschichte des alttestamentlichen Gesetzes*, Munique: Chr. Kaiser, 1992.

[5] Concerning the casuistic and apodictic form of the laws see José Luis Sicre, *Introducao ao Antigo Testamento*, Petrópolis: Vozes, 1995, Chapter 7.

[6] Cf. Emanuel Bouzon, *El Código de Hamurabi*, Petrópolis: Vozes, 5ª ed., 1992.

[7] Cf. Carlos A. Dreher, "Amós 8:4-7," in *Proclamar Libertacao*, v. 23, Sao Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1997, p. 181-188.

[8] Cf. Eduard Lipinski, "makar" in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, v. 4, 1983, col. 869-875 and "Sale, Transfer and Delivery in Ancient Semitic Terminology," in *Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur des Alten Orients*, v. 15, 1982, p. 173-185. On the relation to Amos, cf. Haroldo Reimer, "Agentes y mecanismos de opresión y explotación en Amós" in *Revista de Interpretacao Bíblica Latino-americana*, No. 12, Petrópolis, 1992, p. 51-60.

[9] Haroldo Reimer, "Agentes y mecanismos de opresión y explotación en Amós," *op. cit.*, p. 57.

- [10] On this cf. Rainer Kessler, “Die angeblichen Kornhändler von Amos VIII 4-7, in *Vetus Testamentum*, v. 29, p. 13-22.
- [11] Carlos A. Dreher, “Amós 8:4-7,” p. 183.
- [12] Also the text of 2 Kings 4:1 does not seem to deal with the possibility of a liberation in a “seventh year.”
- [13] For more details on Amos 5:18-27, cf. Haroldo Reimer, *Richtet auf das Recht! Studien zur Botschaft des Amos*, Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992, p. 122-135. On the relation between prophecy and law, cf. *idem*, p. 226-234.
- [14] Cf. Haroldo Reimer, “Ruina y organización: El conflicto campo-ciudad en Miqueas” in *RIBLA* 26, Petrópolis/Sao Leopoldo, 1997, p. 99-109.
- [15] Cf. Carlos Mesters, “El libro de la alianza en la vida del pueblo de Dios: Exodo 19-24,” *RIBLA* 23, Petrópolis/Sao Leopoldo, 1996, p. 104-122, esp. p. 104-105.
- [16] Cf. article by Julián Ruiz Martorell, “O ano sabático o Deuteronomio” in Juan Guillén Torralba (org.), *O ano da graça do Senhor*, Sao Paulo: Paulinas, 1998, p. 29-42.
- [17] Cf. Júlio Paulo Tavares Zabatiero, *Adoracao e solidariedade--a reorganizacao económica de Judá*, Sao Leopoldo: Instituto Ecuménico de Pós-Graduacao em Ciencias da Religiao, masters dissertation, 1995. See also the article by Rafael Rodrigues da Silva, “Resta esperanza para o resto de Israel,” *Estudos Bíblicos* 62, Petrópolis: Vozes, 1999, p.16-30.
- [18] On the theology of the Deuteronomic blessing cf. Crüsemann, *Die Tora*, esp. p. 262-266. See also the article by Haroldo Reimer, “Solidariedade, Bencao e prosperidade, Anotacoes a partir do Deuteronomio” in *Jornal Comunidade*, no. 4, Rio de Janeiro, 1995, p. 4.
- [19] Cf. the article by Haroldo Reimer, “Praticou direito e justice, Anotacoes sobre Jeremias 22:13-19” in *Tempo e Presenca* no. 290, Nov./Dec. 1996, 40-42.
- [20] For an analysis of Leviticus 25 cf. the article by Sandro Gallazzi in *RIBLA* 33. Cf. also Chapter 7 of the book by Haroldo Reimer and Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Tempos de graça*, op. cit., p. 91-102.
- [21] For the case of Micah at the end of the Eighth Century BC, cf. Haroldo Reimer, “Ruina e Reorganizacao, O conflito campo-cidade em Miquéias,” *RIBLA* 26, Petrópolis/Sao Leopoldo, 1997, p. 99-109.
- [22] Translation to Spanish from the German of F. R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen in altbabylonischer Zeit*, Leiden, 1984, p. 169-170. On this matter cf. J. Severino Croatto, “Deuda y justicia en tiempos del Antiguo Oriente,” *RIBLA* 5/6, Petrópolis/Sao Leopoldo, 1990, p. 35-39.