

RESEARCH ESSAY:
THE SABBATH YEAR AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

SUBMITTED BY ALICIA BRITT CHOLE

NOVEMBER 30TH, 2012

TOWARD THE FULFILLMENT OF
DMin 512 SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF THE MINISTER
PROFESSOR: DAN BRUNNER

THE SABBATH YEAR AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Outside of the scope of this paper lies a multitude of technical, agricultural allowances for application of an ancient command within modern society.¹ Outside of definable and defensible arguments for this assignment lies the continuous struggle regarding the land of Palestine and whether or not this particular command should be heeded beyond what is physically deemed the land of Israel. Outside of the immediate interest of this writer lies dating discussions of calendars and cycles. Of focus are three quests:

1. What were the commanded components of the Seventh Year?
2. How might such components have contributed to the spiritual formation of the First Hearers?
3. What significance might the Seventh Year hold for spiritual formation today?

Components of the Seventh Year

Listed among the first recorded commands of God in Exodus and among the last recorded words of Moses in Deuteronomy, Seventh Year instructions prescribed four actions. Every Seventh Year, God's people were to free Hebrew slaves (Exod. 21:2 [NIV], Deut. 15:12-15), let the land rest (Exod. 23:10-11, Lev. 25:1-7), cancel all Israelite debt² (Deut. 15:1-3, 31:10), and hear the Law as a community (Deut. 31:9-13).

Freedom for Hebrew Slaves

God commanded a community of recent slaves to commit to freeing future slaves every Seventh Year (Exod. 21:1-4). Deut. 15:12-15 adds that this release was to be accompanied by

¹ On current Jewish agricultural application of the seventh year, see Mordechai Kuber, "Shmittah for the Clueless," *Jewish Action: The Magazine of the Orthodox Union* 68, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 68-75.

² On debt and usury in Israelite society, see Martin Goodman, "The First Jewish Revolt: Social Conflict and the Problem of Debt," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33, no. 1-2 (March 1, 1982): 417-427.

generous gifts of livestock, grain, and wine.³ Turnham explains that the male slave “enters service as a result of poverty....He has become one of the poor of the land, a status which not only humiliates the individuals, but also reprimands the other Hebrews. The concern of the entire Hebrew society is to remove this man from the status of being poor....The Sabbath Year laws help the slave to escape the societal role of being poor.”⁴ Discussion exists as to whether Hebrew slaves were to be freed in the seventh year of their service or during the community’s Sabbath year.⁵ However, since Deuteronomy discusses the freeing of slaves alongside the canceling of debts—a clarion emphasis of the Seventh Year⁶—this essay will include the release of slaves as a Seventh Year component.

Rest for the Land

Andrew Shead addresses the Seventh Year amplification of the ancient relationship between covenant and land:

The place in which this [covenant] relationship was to find expression was the land, which itself is called in Deuteronomy 12:9 “the rest...which YHWH is giving you”....The land was thus a new Eden, a new creation in miniature...By giving the land itself a Sabbath the people had an opportunity to realise this eschatology even more completely, as they and the land experienced a year-long alleviation of the curse.⁷

³ See Moses’ preparatory encouragement in Deut. 15:1-18.

⁴ Timothy John Turnham, “Male and Female Slaves in the Sabbath Year Laws of Exodus 21:1-11,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 26 (January 1, 1987): 548.

⁵ See Robert Grady North, “Maccabean Sabbath Years,” *Biblica* 34, no. 4 (January 1, 1953): 503.

⁶ In Deut. 31:10, Moses describes the Seventh Year as the “year for canceling debts.”

⁷ Andrew G. Shead, “An Old Testament Theology of the Sabbath Year and Jubilee,” *Reformed Theological Review* 61, no. 1 (April 1, 2002): 19-20, 24.

This prescribed Sabbath rest for the land⁸ included the following instructions: (1) the counting of years commenced upon entrance to the Promised Land, (2) the land could not be sown, pruned, or harvested for profit, (3) the regulation applied to farmland as well as vineyards and olive groves, and (4) whatever volunteered in the land could be eaten by landowners, servants, hired workers, the poor, the alien, livestock, and wild animals.⁹ According to Don Blosser, “it should be noted that this volunteer growth was not to be harvested or sold commercially. It was to be made available to the poor, the widow, the sojourner, etc.”¹⁰ North further explains:

The Sabbath year began with Tisri/October, and with a practically untouched new harvest. Special rationing must have been enforced regarding the consumption of this harvest during the winter and spring while no sowing or other agricultural operations were taking place. In this way the *previous* year’s crop would have sufficed not merely *through* July of the sabbath year (as was normal in any year) but well into the autumn. The real pinch of the Sabbath year would have been felt only in the winter and spring *following* its conclusion in October.¹¹

The Cancellation of Debts Owed by Fellow Hebrews

In the Seventh Year, debts owed by fellow Israelites were to be cancelled as commanded in Deut. 15:1-2: “This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD’s time for canceling debts has been proclaimed.” The language used in the subsequent verses of Deut. 15:3-18 emphasizes responsibility to the brotherhood, generosity toward the poor, the Promised Land as an inheritance, and a blessing that the obedient would become lenders instead of borrowers.

⁸ On the personification of the promised land, see Jeffrey Stackert, “The Sabbath of the Land in the Holiness Legislation: Combining Priestly and Non-Priestly Perspectives,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (April 2011): 243.

⁹ See Exod. 23:10-11 and Lev. 25:1-7.

¹⁰ Don Blosser, “The Sabbath Year Cycle in Josephus,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 52 (January 1, 1981): 130.

¹¹ North, 506.

The Reading of the Law as a Gathered Community

The fourth component of the Seventh Year is only mentioned within Moses' final address. Every Seventh Year, during the Feast of Tabernacles which ushered in the new year, all who resided in the Promised Land were to hear the law read as a community so that they could listen, learn, fear, and follow (Deut. 31:9-13). The audience for this reading was inclusive regardless of age, gender, or even nationality. Resident aliens as well as children were to be assembled, for this command was a critical means of instructing the next generation in God's ways.

Spiritual Formation through the Biblical Seventh Year in the Lives of the First Hearers

How might the Seventh Year have contributed to the spiritual formation of the First Hearers? What was the spiritual purpose of this commandment? The *Jewish Encyclopedia* cites three possible purposes of the Seventh Year: (1) continuity with the creation-story seventh day, (2) ecological conservation and economic redistribution, and (3) the establishment of a God-ruled state "to promote the idea of theocracy: that one year in seven might be devoted 'to the Lord...'"¹² Additionally, Shead identifies two premises that undergird Seventh Year and Jubilee legislations, both of which emphasize God as the Giver of land and soul.

First, land cannot be owned because God already owns it (v. 23). Israel possessed it only by gift, their inheritance as members of a divine-human kinship system.... Secondly, because Israelites are God's slaves, they cannot be one another's slaves or sold as slaves to outsiders (vv. 42, 55).¹³

Moses' stated purpose seems to affirm Shead's conclusions: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today"

¹² Isidore Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnals, 1906), s.v. "Sabbatical Year and Jubilee," <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12967-sabbatical-year-and-jubilee> (accessed November 5, 2012).

¹³ Shead, 22.

(Deut. 15:15). In other words, as you free slaves, remember how God freed you. As you rest the land, remember who truly owns it. As you cancel debts, remember who cancelled yours. As you listen to the Law, remember the price your forefathers paid for not listening. Shead notes that “the theological associations of Sabbath and jubilee—associations of forgiveness, deliverance and fullness of life with God, were readily recognized by Jews of all backgrounds, as the evidence of the Septuagint and the New Testament shows.”¹⁴ Whereas such remembrance would have sown humility, actual application would have sown trust. Hardship was embedded in the Seventh Year experience and the most challenging of hardships awaited the year’s conclusion.¹⁵

The spiritual formation potential of the Seventh Year was rich indeed. However, such wealth appears to have been unrealized until after the Israelites’ exile. When the command was initially given, God identified exile for his people and rest for the land as a consequence of disobedience (Lev. 26:27, 33-35). True to his word, God “carried into exile to Babylon the remnant...The land enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah” (2 Chron. 36:20-21).¹⁶

Around 445 BC, Nehemiah came to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. Upon its completion, the community made a binding agreement with God. Among their commitments, they stated that “[e]very seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts” (Neh. 10:31). However, even though the promise was reinstated, significant debate exists over the “when” and even the “if” of Seventh Year application among God’s people.

¹⁴ Shead, 30.

¹⁵ See Blosser, 131, and North, 506.

¹⁶ See also Jeremiah 34:12-17.

North maintains that “there is no peg in any historical document for the actual date of any general Sabbath fallow, and much less for a recurrent cycle.”¹⁷ Several scholars adamantly disagree, including Don Blosser,¹⁸ August Strobel,¹⁹ and Ben Zion Wacholder, who asserts that there is sufficient evidence for the certainty of Sabbath Year cycles “in Palestine from the post-exilic period to the fifth or sixth Christian century.”²⁰

Regarding ancient records, 1 Maccabees 6:48-63 references the Seventh Year in an account of Judah Maccabee who, during a siege, yielded a city due to the lack of provision arising from the Sabbath Year cycle. Additionally, in *Antiquities* Book XI 8.6, Josephus²¹ briefly references Sabbath Year regulations in his account of an interaction between the Sidonians and Alexander during his conquest of Judea.²²

The scholarly discussion appears to lean toward the establishment of a Seventh year cycle following the exile. During exile, the generation of First Hearers passed away while the Promised Land rested. The spiritual formation potential of the Seventh Year awaited discovery by subsequent generations.

Modern Spiritual Formation Application of the Concept of a Seventh Year

Today, many of God’s people still gather together in some form to hear God’s Word. Most still have debt and debtors. Some still live in agricultural societies. Comparatively few still

¹⁷ North, 514.

¹⁸ Blosser, 129-130.

¹⁹ August Strobel, “Die ausrufung des jobeljahres in der Nazarethpredigt Jesu: Zur apokalyptischen tradition, Lk 4:16-30,” *BZNW* 40 (1972): 45.

²⁰ Ben Zion Wacholder, “Chronomessianism, the Timing of Messianic Movements and the Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles,” *HUCA* 46 (1975): 203.

²¹ For a critical review of Josephus’ references, see Robert Grady North’s article, “Maccabean Sabbath Years,” *Biblica* 34, no. 4 (January 1, 1953): 501-515.

²² Josephus, 244.

reside within the biblical Promised Land. And, hopefully, none still own slaves. What significance, then, does the Seventh Year hold for believers today?

A breathtaking bridge from the Old Testament Sabbath Year regulations to Jesus' New Testament announcement of *release* is built by Shead, who sees a crescendo in the Sabbath and jubilee emphases that reaches a peak in Jesus' bold recitation of Isaiah 61. Though an extended quote, Shead's explanation is simply too beautiful to paraphrase:

The pinnacle and culmination of this process, in terms of where the OT witness is heading, is the sermon of Jesus recorded in Luke 4. And the key word of the sermon, a word which, almost on its own, carries the process from Leviticus to Luke is ἄφεσις -- which brings us to the Septuagint. . . . Indeed, the long evolution of Leviticus 25 can virtually be equated, in the LXX, with the evolution of the meaning of ἄφεσις. One might almost say that its original legal-economic, and subsequent political edges have rubbed away, leaving behind the word used now in the NT to mean 'forgiveness' What has been offered since Luke 4 is forgiveness and restoration to a life of sabbatical blessedness in a new creation. Jesus' miracles of release for the oppressed and sight for the blind were signs of this, but the real sign was the miracle of his resurrection from the dead. It is only here that the Day of Atonement timing of Leviticus 25:10 makes complete sense.²³

In Christ, debts are cancelled and slaves are released. Seventh Year rest is entered into through the cross. Jesus fulfilled²⁴ the Seventh Year Cycles.²⁵

Personal Conclusions and Application

The unique rest of the Seventh Year was—and still is—discovered through *active remembrance* of our former slavery, of God's great mercy, and of land as inheritance; *active release* of current slaves and temporal debt; and *active resistance* to oppression, accumulation, and exhaustion. Today, we are in great need of sacred space to cancel debts, release slaves, rest, and hear God's Word in community. Marjorie J. Thompson states that "[i]n a world driven by

²³ Shead, 31, 32-33.

²⁴ Ibid., 29.

²⁵ On dating the Seventh Year cycles with reference to Daniel's prophecy of 70 weeks, see Robert C. Newman, "Daniel's Seventy Weeks and the Old Testament Sabbath Year Cycle," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16, no. 4 (September 1, 1973): 229-234.

the need to accomplish and acquire, in a world where we judge one another on the basis of performance, God calls us to the radical trust of rest.”²⁶

Personally, after two year-long sabbaticals where I rested from my assigned “work” as a speaker, mentor, and writer in 1994 and 2006, and a year-long fast from accumulation and the purchase of anything personal in 2011, I now sense God inviting me to soak every year in Sabbath generosity toward others and my own soul. For me, the ancient command of the Seventh Year is an ongoing exercise in open-handed existence, as I explore in *The 7th Year*:

In the beginning, we open our eyes and instinctively tighten our grip around all that is placed in our hands. In the end, others close our eyes and our hands are incapable of gripping a thing. Perhaps on the other side, we may see this life as a journey from keeping to releasing; from gripping to entrusting. A clenched fist displays the delusion of ownership. An open hand reveals the realities of stewardship.²⁷

The Seventh Year mentors us in the journey.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blosser, Don. “The Sabbath Year Cycle in Josephus.” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 52 (January 1, 1981): 129-139.

Chole, Alicia Britt. “Movement One, Week 4.” In *The 7th Year: A 52-Week Spiritual Formation E-Journey*. Rogersville, MO: Onewholeworld, 2011, www.the7thyear.com.

Feinspan, Jacob. “A Call for a Sabbath Year to Repair a Broken World.” *Tikkun*, May-June 2007: 60-62. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 28, 2012).

Goodman, Martin. “The First Jewish Revolt: Social Conflict and the Problem of Debt.” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33, no. 1-2 (March 1, 1982): 417-427.

Kuber, Mordechai. “Shmittah for the Clueless.” *Jewish Action: The Magazine of the Orthodox Union* 68, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 68-75.

²⁶ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 48.

²⁷ Alicia Britt Chole, “Movement One, Week 4,” in *The 7th Year: A 52-Week Spiritual Formation E-Journey* (Rogersville, MO: onewholeworld, inc., 2011), 1, www.the7thyear.com.

- Newman, Robert C. "Daniel's Seventy Weeks and the Old Testament Sabbath-Year Cycle." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 16, no. 4 (September 1, 1973): 229-234.
- North, Robert Grady. "Maccabean Sabbath Years." *Biblica* 34, no. 4 (January 1, 1953): 501-515.
- Shead, Andrew G. "An Old Testament Theology of the Sabbath Year and Jubilee." *Reformed Theological Review* 61, no. 1 (April 1, 2002): 19-33.
- Shults, F. LeRon, and Steven J. Sandage. *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Singer, Isidore, ed. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. New York: Funk and Wagnals, 1906.
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12967-sabbatical-year-and-jubilee>
 (accessed November 5, 2012).
- Stackert, Jeffrey. "The Sabbath of the Land in the Holiness Legislation: Combining Priestly and Non-Priestly Perspectives." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (April 2011): 239-250.
Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed November 28, 2012).
- Strobel, August. "Die ausrufung des jobeljahres in der Nazarethpredigt Jesu: Zur apokalyptischen tradition, Lk 4:16-30." *BZNW* 40 (1972): 45.
- Thompson, Marjorie J. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- Turnham, Timothy John. "Male and Female Slaves in the Sabbath Year Laws of Exodus 21:1-11." *Society Of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* no. 26 (January 1, 1987): 545-549.
- Wacholder, Ben Zion. "Chronomessianism: The Timing of Messianic Movements and the Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46 (January 1, 1975): 201-218.
- . "The Calendar of the Sabbath Years During the Second Temple Era: A Response." *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54 (January 1, 1983): 123-133. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 5, 2012).