

# HOLY LAND FOR HOLY ISRAELITE PEOPLE IN THEIR ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

ROY E. GANE

Andrews University, MICHIGAN

## Abstract

There are several ways in which Israelites and other ancient Near Eastern peoples shared similar understandings of the relationships between themselves, their deities, and their lands. However, the Pentateuch instructs YHWH's holy Israelite people how to live in a special covenant connection with Him that profoundly affects how they view, treat, and live on the land that He gives them. Comparison and contrast between the Pentateuch (especially Leviticus) and other ancient Near Eastern texts show the unique aspects of the YHWH-human-land relationships.

*Keywords:* land, holy, sabbatical, Jubilee, Leviticus, covenant, ancient Near East

## 1. Introduction

The Torah (Pentateuch) teaches God's holy Israelite people how they should relate to, treat, and live on the holy land that He gives them.<sup>1</sup> The biblical instructions accord with some practices of other ancient Near Eastern (ANE)

<sup>1</sup> This article expands on an invited paper titled "Care for Holy Land According to Leviticus" that was presented in a session of the "Old Testament Backgrounds and Ancient Near East Section" on November 15, 2012 at the annual national meeting of the *Evangelical Theological Society* in Milwaukee, Minnesota, USA.

peoples. However, the Torah also shows unique aspects and implications of the connection between the Israelite deity YHWH and His land and people.

The present essay explores the connection between the Israelites and the land that God gave them in selective contextual comparison and contrast with other ANE texts.<sup>2</sup> This comparison, which highlights the uniqueness of the biblical instructions, will primarily focus on the book of Leviticus (including the reason why the Jubilee began on the Day of Atonement). The investigation will address the following subtopics:

1. Divine sovereignty over people and land
2. Holy land
3. Benefits to land under divine rule
4. Human response to divine benefits
5. Sabbaths of the land
6. Jubilee year
7. Lack of divine need for human service
8. Consequences of divine displeasure affecting land
9. Cessation of divine displeasure affecting land

## 2. Divine Sovereignty Over People and Land

ANE peoples believed that deities ruled them and their lands. For example, an Egyptian text known as “The Great Hymn to Osiris” contains praise for Horus, the divine son of Osiris:

The crown placed firmly on his head,  
He counts the land as his possession,  
Sky, earth are under his command,  
Mankind is entrusted to him,  
Commoners, nobles, sunfolk.  
Egypt and the far-off lands,  
What Aten encircles is under his care,  
Northwind, river, flood,  
Tree of life, all plants.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On the contextual comparison and contrast approach, see, e.g., K. Lawson Younger, Jr., “The ‘Contextual Method’: Some West Semitic Reflections,” in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 3 of *Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), xxxvii–xlii.

<sup>3</sup> “The Great Hymn to Osiris,” trans. Miriam Lichtheim (COS = *The Context of Scripture* [William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds.; 3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2003] 1.26:42;

In *Enūma Elish*, the Babylonian “Epic of Creation,” Marduk’s victory over chaos and establishment of order through creation gives him authority to assign locations of gods and humans and to establish ways in which the latter should serve the former.<sup>4</sup>

Israelites also believed in divine sovereignty. As the Creator, their deity YHWH possessed the right to assign territories to nations, including Israel, His special portion (Deut 32:6–9). Unlike Marduk, YHWH did not assign other deities to lordship over various parts of the cosmos. YHWH owned the Israelites’ land and benevolently ruled them as His privileged tenants, who were safe and secure in their dependent relationship with Him (Lev 25:23; Num 23:21).<sup>5</sup> As the ultimate owner, the Lord had the right to require portions of harvests as firstfruits offerings (Exod 23:19; 34:26; Lev 23:10–20; Deut 18:4) from His Israelite tenants and to make stipulations concerning the use of the land. Such requirements included leaving some of their harvests for the poor and immigrants to glean (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut 24:20), sabbatical year fallows, and release in the Jubilee year (see below).

God’s gift to them of the very good, fertile land (Deut 8:7–10) gave evidence of His beneficent covenant relationship with them.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the land was a member of a tripartite covenant relationship between God, His chosen Israelite people, and the land that He gave them to use.<sup>7</sup> However, it was not a covenant between equals but a suzerainty covenant/treaty that the superior sovereign YHWH gave to the Israelites.<sup>8</sup> This covenant was unique.

cf. “The Famine Stela,” transl. Miriam Lichtheim, *COS* 1.53:131–32).

<sup>4</sup> “Epic of Creation,” trans. Benjamin R. Foster (*COS* 1.111:398–402).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Douglas J. Moo and Jonathan A. Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*, Biblical Theology for Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 96; Christopher J. H. Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 64. Regarding the Israelites’ dependence on God, as shown by His gift of the land to them, cf. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity: 2004), 85–86.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 88.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel I. Block points out that the land of Israel was formally integrated into this covenant by a ritual (Deut 27:2–8) when the Israelites first entered the land and inscribed YHWH’s Torah on large plastered stones that belonged to the land (Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework of God’s Grand Plan of Redemption* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021], 258–59). Cf. Wright’s triangular diagram of the relationship between God, Israel, and their land, within and reflecting the larger relationship between God, all of humanity, and the whole earth (Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 183).

<sup>8</sup> For a concise introduction to the Old Testament covenants in relation to ANE treaties, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Library of Biblical Interpretation

ANE texts show no evidence that any other deity made a covenant/treaty with a nation.

Another basis for YHWH's rule over the Israelites and their land made divine-human-land connections tighter than elsewhere in the ANE: Their divine Lord had brought them from Egypt to give them the land of Canaan (Lev 25:38) that He had promised to them (e.g., Exod 3:8, 17; 12:25).

### 3. Holy Land

Outside Israel, lands contained holy places, such as temples. In Mesopotamia, temples of the gods were located in cities, which had patron deities and were viewed as holy to some extent because they were believed to be founded by the gods. Nation states developed from such cities, and the people of Babylon believed that their god Marduk ruled the world from their city. However, it does not appear that entire lands were called holy in Akkadian literature,<sup>9</sup> except in some myths.<sup>10</sup>

In Egypt, cities were regarded as made by and for the gods. Each Egyptian city belonged to a deity, and the state was made up of deities and temples that owned the land.<sup>11</sup> So, it seems that national territories could be viewed as holy in an extended sense.

According to the Bible, Israel had only one authorized central holy sanctuary/temple of YHWH, where He resided among His people (e.g., Exod 25:8; 29:44; 40:33–35) and from which He was believed to rule the world (e.g., Ps 24:1; 93:1; 96:10–13).<sup>12</sup> Jerusalem, the national capital, became the

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 95–109.

<sup>9</sup> CAD = *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, 25 vols. (Oriental Institute: Chicago, 1956–) 13:146–147 under *qasûdu*, “holy,” and 13:294–95 under *quddusûu*, “holy.”

<sup>10</sup> The Ugaritic myth of “Dawn and Dusk,” otherwise known as “The Birth of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods,” describes how the god *Illu* banished his wives and sons to *mdbr qdsû*, which Dennis Pardee tentatively renders “the holy steppe-land” (“Dawn and Dusk,” trans. Dennis Pardee [COS 1.87:282, line 65], but see Pardee’s note on this line). In *Enuëma Elish*, Marduk was formed “In the midst of holy Apsu” (“Epic of Creation,” COS 1.111:392, Tablet 1, line 82), and later “He made Ea, Enlil, and Anu dwell in their holy places” (“Epic of Creation,” COS 1.111:399, Tablet 4, line 146).

<sup>11</sup> John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006, 2018), 254–56.

<sup>12</sup> Archaeologists have found remains of other temples in Israel, including a temple at Arad in Judah and the temple built at Dan in the north for idolatrous worship by Jeroboam I. But these temples were not authorized by YHWH.

permanent location of the temple (e.g., 1 Kgs 6–8). So, only Jerusalem was the holy city in that sense (Joel 4:17 [Eng. 3:17]; Dan 9:24), although it was not regarded as founded by the deity.<sup>13</sup> Several pieces of evidence indicate that the entire territory of Israel was holy land (Zech 2:16 [Eng. v. 12]),<sup>14</sup> although the Pentateuch does not explicitly refer to the whole land as holy:<sup>15</sup>

(1) YHWH dwelt in the land (Exod 15:17; Num 35:34), so it was a holy place.<sup>16</sup>

(2) The Lord, who gave the Israelites a unique covenant that was holy because a deity gave it to them, gave them the land of Canaan as their dwelling place. In accordance with this covenant, they were to be a unique people in that all of them were to be holy, emulating divine holiness by living according to the Lord's principles (Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:26).

(3) The Lord called the Israelites to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6 ESV). Thus, the whole land in which they dwelt was viewed as an extension of the sanctuary, to which all of them were connected as “priests” in a broad sense, although only Aaron and his descendants were authorized to officiate in the cult.<sup>17</sup>

(4) Immoral behaviors could “defile” not only the people who did them (Lev 18:20, 23, 24, 30) but also the land (vv. 25, 27, 28), implying that the land too, was supposed to be holy and therefore kept pure.

(5) The land was to benefit from holy Sabbath years of rest, just as the people were to rest on the holy Sabbath day (Exod 23:10–12; Lev 25:1–7, 11–12; cf. 23:3; see further below).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 256. But YHWH created/founded the entire world (e.g., Gen 1–2; Ps 24:2; 89:12–13 [Eng. vv. 11–12]; Jer 10:12).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ps 78:54 if גְבוּל refers to the territory of the land here (so, e.g., ESV, CEB, NIV 2011, NET Bible).

<sup>15</sup> Some pieces of land could be holy in a sense: an Israelite could consecrate a field to the Lord (Lev 27:16–23); Deut 23:15 (Eng. v. 14) states that (the area of) an Israelite war camp must be treated as holy; and Ezek 45:1–4; 48:8–12, 14 specifies a holy district for the ideal temple and its priests.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Randall Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor: An Old Testament Theology of the Jubilee” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 172.

<sup>17</sup> Joosten observes another connection between the land, the people, and the sanctuary: “In fact, the land, and the camp which prefigures it in important aspects, is viewed as an extension of the sanctuary. The Israelites, each of whom has received a holding of landed property, are pictured as asylants having found refuge on temple lands. In consequence, they have to honour the divine owner and Lord of the land, through their gifts and through observance of his laws” (Jan Joosten, *People and Land in the*

#### 4. Benefits to Land under Divine Rule

ANE peoples believed that their gods provided benefits of nature, including favorable agricultural conditions, that were necessary for survival and prosperity. For example, “The Great Hymn to Osiris” from Egypt expresses adoration of Osiris:

Plants sprout by his wish,  
Earth grows its food for him....

He [Geb] placed this land into his hand,  
Its water, its wind,  
Its plants, all its cattle.<sup>18</sup>

“The Marduk Prophecy” from Mesopotamia predicts well-being under the god Ningirsu that is comprehensive, including not only agricultural and economic prosperity, but also social order and ethical rectitude that impact quality of life in the land:

ŌNingirsu will rule. The rivers will carry fish. The fields and plains will be full of yield. The grass of winter (will last) to summer. The grass of summer will last to winter. The harvest of the land will thrive. The marketplace will prosper. He will set evil aright. He will clear up the disturbed. He will illumine evil. The clouds will be continually present. Brother will love his brother. A son will fear his father as if he were a god. Mother [...] daughter. The bride will marry. She will fear her husband. He will be compassionate toward the people. The man will regularly pay his taxes. That prince will [rule all] the lands.<sup>19</sup>

Leviticus agrees that the deity provides well-being, but the deity is YHWH rather than Ningirsu. Notice the similar literary construction in Lev 26:5: “Your threshing season will last until the grape harvest, and the grape harvest will last until planting time” (CEB here and in subsequent biblical quotations).

The covenant blessings of Lev 26:3–13 exemplify comprehensive well-being in the Promised Land for those who are loyal to the Lord. These

*Holiness Code*, VTSup 67 [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 198; cf. 196–97).

<sup>18</sup> “The Great Hymn to Osiris,” COS 1.26:41–42. cf. “The Famine Stela,” COS 1.53:131–32.

<sup>19</sup> “The Marduk Prophecy,” trans. Tremper Longman III (COS 1.149:481, lines iii 1’–20’); cf. “To Nanshe,” trans. Wolfgang Heimpel (COS 1.162:526, lines 11–15); “Ritual and Prayer to Ishtar of Nineveh,” trans. Billie Jean Collins (COS 1.65:164, §7).

blessings feature agricultural prosperity (vv. 4–5, 10), peace and safety from human and animal enemies (vv. 5b–8), population growth (v. 9), and divine covenant presence (vv. 11–12).<sup>20</sup>

## 5. Human Response to Divine Benefits

ANE people were expected to be grateful to the deities who provided for them on their land. The “Great Hymn to Osiris” continues:

Everybody jubilates,  
 Hearts are glad, breasts rejoice,  
 Everyone exults,  
 All extol his goodness:  
 How pleasant is his love for us,  
 His kindness overwhelms the hearts,  
 Love of him is great in all.<sup>21</sup>

People expressed gratitude to their gods in tangible ways. Thus, the Hittites performed the *purulli* festival in the cult of the Storm-god of Heaven when the land thrived.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, gods obliged humans to perform service in order to continue receiving divine blessings. In *Enūma Elish*, Marduk commands humans to build temples for their deities and sustain them with food offerings. Those people who remember the ways of Marduk and revere him will be safe and their land will prosper.<sup>23</sup>

The Sumerian “Nanshe Hymn” (c. 2100–2000 BC) attests divine requirements not only for cultic service, but also for ethical behavior. Persons who depended on the temple of the goddess Nanshe for their livelihood were judged at the New Year according to their adherence to Nanshe’s rules throughout the previous year.<sup>24</sup>

YHWH gave His people opportunities for voluntary expressions of gratitude, such as donating materials and labor for the construction of His sanctuary (Exod 35) and presenting thanksgiving offerings (Lev 7:12–15). He also required offerings that acknowledged His sustaining power on behalf of His people, including agricultural tithes (27:30), “firstfruits” offerings of

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Lev 25:18–19.

<sup>21</sup> “The Great Hymn to Osiris,” *COS* 1.26:42.

<sup>22</sup> “The Storm-God and the Serpent (Illuyanka),” trans. Gary Beckman (*COS* 1.56:150, lines A i 1–8).

<sup>23</sup> “Epic of Creation,” *COS* 1.111:402.

<sup>24</sup> “To Nanshe,” *COS* 1.162:526–31.

the land's produce (23:10–11, 16–17, 20), the “bread of the Presence” that acknowledged His provision of food as Israel's Creator-in-Residence (24:5–9; see below), and sacrifices at harvest festivals (chap. 23; Num 28–29).

The Lord also gave the Israelites many other laws to regulate their lives, especially their interactions with other people, in accordance with His character of holiness, which includes justice, kindness, and generosity.<sup>25</sup> For example, as mentioned above, He commanded His people to leave some produce of their harvests for the poor and immigrants. Thus, God's people were to share His bounty with others.

Some of God's laws directly concerned care for the land of Israel (Lev 25; see below) and crops and trees grown on it (Lev 19:19, 23–25; cf. Deut 20:19–20; 22:9). However, His interest in the land was not only for its ecological well-being; His people's treatment of the land that He gave them would reflect their attitude toward Him and whether or not they acknowledged that the land ultimately belonged to Him, and therefore was holy. Would the holy people take care of YHWH's gift of the use of the holy land entrusted to them and worship Him with gifts gratefully offered from the produce of the land (e.g., Exod 23:16, 19; Lev 2:14–16; 23:10–21; Deut 26:1–15)? Would they honor His benevolent rule over them on their land by following His wise and beneficial instructions in all areas of their lives so that other peoples would be drawn to them and thereby to Him (Deut 4:5–8; Isa 2:2–4; Mic 4:1–3)?<sup>26</sup>

The Lord's Israelite people, by their faithfulness or unfaithfulness to Him throughout their generations, could profoundly affect the duration of their enjoyment of the bountiful land that He had given to them, ideally forever (e.g., Deut 11:18–21).<sup>27</sup> For one thing, if they obeyed God's commandment to honor their parents, they could “long endure on the land” (Exod 20:12 NJPS; cf. Deut 5:16), not merely in terms of individual longevity, but as a people, to whom the commandment is addressed.<sup>28</sup> But progressive

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> On YHWH's relationship to the land and Israel's consequent responsibilities, cf. Eugene Carpenter, *Exodus 19–40*, *Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2016), 120.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Herbert C. Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife—A Biblical Complex,” *HUCA* 44 (1973): 50.

<sup>28</sup> Brichto, “Kin, Cult, Land, and Afterlife,” 30–31. Brichto goes on to suggest that the fifth commandment of the Decalogue primarily calls for respect for parents after they have died, involving “protection from disloyalty or impiety,” which specifically could include giving parents proper burials and appropriately allocating their property (31).



weakening of their society, moral fiber, and courage due to departure from dependence on God and His practical principles could lay the Israelites open to foreign invasion and oppression that would disrupt their benefit from agriculture on their land, which provided the food supply that enabled them to survive and flourish (e.g., Lev 26:17, 25–26, 29, 32; Deut 28:25, 30b–31, 33, 48–57; cf. Judg 6:1–6, and see further below on the punishment of exile).

## 6. Sabbaths of the Land

ANE texts mention fallow periods for agricultural land. A Hittite text, “The Storm God at Liḫ’zina,” includes the broken sentence: “In the fallow land the [...] of things/words is/are weak.”<sup>29</sup> In the Ugaritic calendar, “the ending of one [seven-year] cycle without a harvest was believed to bring on a seven-year cycle of plenty.”<sup>30</sup> An Assyrian text speaks of the “(month in which) Šamas establishes the freedom and repose of the soil (i.e., the time of year when no crops are grown).”<sup>31</sup> Here the sun-god determines the fallow period as part of the yearly agricultural cycle.

The God of Israel called for regular fallow years:

For six years you should plant crops on your land and gather in its produce. But in the seventh year you should leave it alone and undisturbed so that the poor among your people may eat. What they leave behind, the wild animals may eat. You should do the same with your vineyard and your olive trees (Exod 23:10–11).

Here the fallow period skips an entire annual cycle of agriculture every seventh year for a humanitarian purpose.<sup>32</sup> It is only fair that those who do the work of sowing should reap the results. But in the seventh year, there is no sowing and therefore anyone can eat what comes up by itself—for exam-

No doubt the intent of the commandment includes this aspect. However, comparison with laws against mistreatment of living parents in the Pentateuch (Exod 21:15, 17; Lev 20:9; Deut 21:18–21) seems to indicate that respect for them while they are alive is at least as important.

<sup>29</sup> “The Storm God at Liḫ’zina,” trans. Billie Jean Collins (*COS* 1.69:172).

<sup>30</sup> Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature: A Comprehensive Translation of the Poetic and Prose Texts* (Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1949), 5, cited by Michael Lefebvre, “Theology and Economics in the Biblical Year of Jubilee,” *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* 2.1 (2015): 33.

<sup>31</sup> CAD 4:313, citing *Keilschrifttexte aus Assur verschiedenen Inhalts* 218 A iii 15 and 22 (Astrolabe B).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. the benefit of weekly Sabbath rest for humans and animals in the next verse (v. 12).

ple, from kernels spilled during the previous harvest—when the land returns to its original state and its yield is provided only by the Creator.

The connection with Creation is indicated by the parallel between the sabbatical year in Exod 23:10–11 and weekly Sabbath rest in the next verse (v. 12). The sacred weekly Sabbath commemorates God’s cessation/rest when He completed His work of creating the world (Gen 2:2–3; Exod 20:11; 31:17, etc.). This parallel implies that the sabbatical year, like the weekly seventh-day Sabbath, is holy time that reminds human beings that God is the Creator of them and the good earth on which they dwell. So they are dependent on and accountable to Him.

Leviticus 25:2–7 expands on the law of the sabbatical year for the land in Exod 23:10–11.<sup>33</sup> Here the Lord specifies that the cyclical fallow requirement would apply only in the Promised Land. Perhaps unlike the fallow prescribed in Exod 23:10–11, the fallow according to Lev 25 would be simultaneous for all farmers, as shown by the fact that the national Jubilee would follow a certain number of sabbatical years (vv. 8–10). The fact that this seventh year is a sabbath “to the Lord” (vv. 2, 4) indicates that it is holy time. So does the descriptor שְׁבֻתֹתָן שְׁבֻתֹתָן, “a special sabbath rest” (v. 4), which elsewhere is applied to the holy weekly Sabbath (Exod 31:15; 35:2; Lev 23:3) and the Day of Atonement sabbath (Lev 16:31; 23:32)—the two S/sabbaths when cessation from *all* work was required. There is no evidence of such a regular, simultaneous, holy fallow period elsewhere in the ANE.

Leviticus 25 clarifies that in the sabbatical year, landowners and their households would live from day to day on what grew by itself, but they should not carry out systematic sowing, pruning, or harvesting because the sabbatical would be “a year of special rest for the land” (v. 5). This rest allowed the soil to recover its depleted nutrients, likely as only part of a more extensive necessary practice of fallowing that could involve alternating usage of fields.<sup>34</sup> The rest for the land would also provide rest for the farmers by suspending agricultural labor for a theological reason during the sacred time, temporarily returning the nation to subsistence gathering of food. This would not cause undue hardship because the people also would have been able to store food before the sabbatical year.

Why this return to a primitive way of life on the bountiful Promised Land? There could be several reasons:

<sup>33</sup> On this expansion, see Wright, *God’s People*, 145–47; John S. Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, VTSup 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 48–50.

<sup>34</sup> David C. Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan: Agricultural Life in the Early Iron Age*, SWBA 3 (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 194–95, 200–202.

- (1) The sabbatical year would honor God as the Creator of all, as an extension of the weekly Sabbath.
- (2) Living off the land without tilling it would be a reminder of the original, ideal life in the garden of Eden, before the curse of sin (Gen 2–3), and a foretaste of life in a restored earth (cf. Rev 21–22).
- (3) Return to gathering what God provided, reminiscent of the Israelites' life in the wilderness (Exod 16), would reinforce their dependence on Him, leading them to contemplate their present experience in light of His past provision.
- (4) The sabbatical would allow people to recover from demanding agricultural work and give them time for other activities with their families, just as the weekly Sabbath would do on a much smaller scale.
- (5) The sabbatical would be egalitarian in the sense that everyone—rich or poor, socially advantaged or marginalized, human or animal (including both domestic and wild animals)—would be free to help themselves to the natural produce of the land as if ownership of land parcels did not exist. This could be a healthy corrective to greed, elitism, and entitlement at the expense of others.

## 7. Jubilee year

This section of the present article begins with a discussion of the biblical text before turning to ANE analogues. The primary legislation regarding the Jubilee year appears in Lev 25:8–55, with some additional implications of Jubilee releases in 27:17–18, 20–24; Num 36:3–9. Leviticus 25 introduces the Jubilee year in vv. 8–12:

You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field (ESV).

The Jubilee involves several elements, to which verses 8–12 refer.<sup>35</sup> First, it was a holy year that culminated a cyclical super-sabbatical period of  $7 \times 7$  years. Second, as during a sabbatical year, the Israelites were to leave the land fallow, not sowing or reaping crops. Third, the Jubilee called for Israelites to return portions of ancestral land to their original owners. Fourth, it required the people to release any Israelite bonded workers so that they could return to their clans. Fifth, the holy year was to be proclaimed by a trumpet on the Day of Atonement.<sup>36</sup> The rest of Leviticus 25 provides more information regarding the second, third, and fourth of these elements and also instructions concerning redemption of land and persons (vv. 24–27, 29–33, 48–52, 54), as well as encouragement to help those in need, including by not charging them interest on (non-commercial) loans (vv. 35–37).<sup>37</sup>

Art Lindsley contradicts five common misconceptions about the Jubilee in Leviticus 25. It does not (1) involve forgiveness of debt, or (2) entail a redistribution of wealth, or (3) show that there are no permanent rights to private property, or (4) lead to equality of income, or (5) apply to all people (only to the Israelites).<sup>38</sup>

The Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25 is complex, and the scholarly literature concerning its details is vast.<sup>39</sup> Here we can only briefly highlight some aspects of the elements of the Jubilee listed above.

1. *Holy year culminating a cyclical super-sabbatical period of  $7 \times 7$  years.* Scholars debate whether the Jubilee 50th year after 49 years is concurrent with the seventh sabbatical year, i.e., year 49, by inclusive reckoning,<sup>40</sup> or whether

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 443.

<sup>36</sup> The Hebrew term יִבְלֵ, “Jubilee” (Lev 25:10) can also refer to a ram (Josh 6:5—“horn of the ram”) or a ram’s horn trumpet (a kind of שׁוֹפָר; Josh 6:4, 6, 8, 13). So it seems clear that the name of the “Jubilee” year of remission is derived from the word for a trumpet that announces it.

<sup>37</sup> Details of redemption and interest are beyond the scope of the present article.

<sup>38</sup> Art Lindsley, “Five Myths About Jubilee,” Institute for Faith, Work & Economics, 2012, <https://tifwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Five-Myths-About-Jubilee-Lindsley.pdf>. Also Michael A. Harbin recognizes that nothing in Lev 25 indicates remission of debt or redistribution of wealth in the Jubilee year (“Jubilee and Social Justice,” *JETS* 54.4 [2011]: 691, 696, 698).

<sup>39</sup> Some especially helpful recent or fairly recent treatments, which contain references to many other publications on the Jubilee, include those of Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor”; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, AB 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2162–71; Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran*.

<sup>40</sup> E.g., Lefebvre, “Theology and Economics,” 34–35; Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 143–47.

the Jubilee followed the seventh sabbatical year as a separate 50th year.<sup>41</sup> We cannot engage that debate here, but either way, the timing of the Jubilee greatly emphasizes the holy sabbatical (seven) pattern correlating with its sanctity as consecrated time (vv. 10, 12) because the Jubilee comes at the end of seven sabbatical year cycles, called in Hebrew “seventh sabbaths [שְׁבֻעֹת] of years” (v. 8, so NKJV and NASB 1995, but rendered by ESV as “seven weeks of years”).<sup>42</sup>

There were ANE parallels to releases of land and bonded workers (see below). However, none of them were established by deities or cyclical, occurring at regular, pre-set intervals.

2. *Fallow year.* As mentioned above, there are no ANE parallels to the regular, simultaneous, holy fallow periods that the Israelites were to observe. Leviticus 25:20–22 answers a question that the Israelites likely could ask regarding the fallow requirement in v. 11–12:

Suppose you ask, “What will we eat in the seventh year if we don’t plant or gather our crops then?” I will send my blessing on you in the sixth year so that it will make enough produce for three years. You can plant again in the eighth year and eat food from the previous year’s produce until the ninth year. Until its produce comes, you will eat the food from the previous year.

Here in the instructions for the Jubilee year, the sixth year would belong to the seventh sabbatical year cycle. The fact that Lev 25 addresses this issue in the context of the Jubilee, rather than earlier in the instructions for the sabbatical year (vv. 1–7), could be taken to support the view that the Jubilee fiftieth year follows the seventh sabbatical year, so that there would be a special problem of two consecutive fallow years.

In any case, the Israelites would need to depend on God’s promise of a special blessing so that the harvest of the sixth year would produce enough for three years.<sup>43</sup> This would “require faith in *God’s providence* as the one

<sup>41</sup> In which case the Jubilee year was both the 50th year of one Jubilee cycle and the first year of the following cycle (cf. the Festival of Weeks on the 50th day, the first day of the following week, after seven weeks; Lev 23:15–16). E.g., Milgrom, *Leviticus* 23–27, 1999, 2166, 2250; cf. 2181–83; Bergsma, *The Jubilee*, 88–90; Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 432–34. For rejection of theories in addition to those described here (concurrent with 49th year or consecutive 50th year), see Milgrom, *Leviticus* 23–27, 2250; Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 143.

<sup>42</sup> On the Jubilee as the climax of the Sabbath spectrum, see Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 127–30.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Norman C. Habel, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies, Overtures to Biblical*

who could command blessing in the natural order."<sup>44</sup> Meeting this test of faith would expand the trust that the Israelites had to exercise in the wilderness, when God provided a double portion of manna on the sixth day of every week to free them from collecting it on the Sabbath (Exod 16:5, 22–30).<sup>45</sup>

3. *Returned portions of ancestral land to their original owners.* The Jubilee law reinforced the fact that YHWH was the ultimate owner of all land, which was "crown property." He allocated a piece of agricultural land to each Israelite family, which had the right to utilize it, but not to permanently sell it (Lev 25:23; cf. Num 26 [esp. vv. 53–56]; Num 34; Josh 13–19).<sup>46</sup> This was the basis of Israelite property rights: "Land holdings were the allotments of the divine giver, and therefore were held in trust from God."<sup>47</sup> The Jubilee release was to maintain the egalitarian distribution of ancestral agricultural land that He had set up.

If someone experienced difficulty maintaining a livelihood for himself and his family, other Israelites were to help him and not take advantage of his vulnerable situation (Lev 25:35–37). If he had to sell the use of some or all of his land (i.e., lease it) so that he and his family could survive and/or so that he could pay off indebtedness that he had incurred, he had a right to redeem it, i.e., buy it back, if he could. Alternatively, a relative of his could redeem it, presumably for his own use, but thereby keep it in their extended

Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 104.

<sup>44</sup> Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 209 (emphasis original).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. the Joseph story (Gen 41), in which bountiful harvests provided for following lean years (Calum Carmichael, "The Sabbatical/Jubilee Cycle and the Seven-Year Famine in Egypt," *Bib* 80 [1999]: 228–30).

<sup>46</sup> This rule did not apply to houses in walled cities, except in cities of Levites that were their inheritance in place of agricultural territory (Lev 25:29–34). Leviticus 27:16–25 regulates another kind of transaction: dedication of land to the sanctuary, including effects of the Jubilee release on varieties of such transfers. Numbers 36 protects inheritance of land within the tribe with the rule that women who inherit ancestral property must marry within their own tribes so that the land would not go to another tribe in the Jubilee year.

<sup>47</sup> Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 90. Here Wright points out that Naboth was correct when he told Ahab that he had no right to exchange or sell his ancestral land to Ahab (1 Kgs 21:2–3) because God actually owned it and he only "held it in trust from the Lord for the benefit of his family." Wright further observes that on the global level, "The right of all to use the resources of the earth seems to be morally prior to the right of any to own them for exclusive enjoyment" (Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 148; emphasis original).

family (vv. 24–27).<sup>48</sup> If resources for such redemption were lacking, the land would revert to the original owner at the Jubilee year, when he could have a new start (Lev 25:10, 13, 15–16, 28).<sup>49</sup>

4. Released Israelite bonded workers so that they could return to their clans. If someone who had to sell the use of his land during hard times additionally had to sell himself as a servant in order to survive (not sold into debt slavery),<sup>50</sup> he would regain his freedom and be reunited with his extended family at the Jubilee year (vv. 10, 39–41, 47, 54), when he would reclaim his land, on which he could make an independent living.<sup>51</sup>

John S. Bergsma points out that the Jubilee instructions in Lev 25 address people in a “tribal, agrarian, subsistence economy” that existed in ancient Israel before the period of the monarchy and continued into the monarchic period in rural areas.<sup>52</sup> The Jubilee legislation primarily served the purpose

<sup>48</sup> On redemption of real property to keep it in the extended family, see, e.g., Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law*, JSOTSup 113 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 58–63; Geoffrey Parsons Miller, “Property,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Law*, ed. Brent A. Strawn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2:178–79.

<sup>49</sup> It is possible that until the Jubilee, the owner could continue to work the land as a tenant farmer, giving an agreed amount of the harvest to the individual who had leased the land (Harbin, “Jubilee and Social Justice,” 694; cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2204–5).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 191.

<sup>51</sup> See Gane, *Old Testament Law*, 290–91 on this kind of “famine servitude,” which differs from debt slavery, from which the slaves were to be freed after six years of service (Deut 15:12; cf. Exod 21:2). According to Lev 25:48–52, an Israelite who sold himself in famine servitude to a foreigner would have the right to redeem himself or be redeemed by a relative, if possible, before the Jubilee year. Raymond Westbrook mistakenly regarded the Jubilee as providing release of debts, which in normal human business terms would be impractical because the release was cyclical and predictable and therefore would dry up credit (Raymond Westbrook, “Social Justice in the Ancient Near East,” in *The Shared Tradition*, vol. 1 of *Law from the Tigris to the Tiber: The Writings of Raymond Westbrook*, ed. Bruce Wells and Rachel Magdalene [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009], 159; but see Deut 15:9–10, which directly addresses this problem in the context of the seventh year debt release). Lefebvre also interprets the Jubilee as release from indebtedness and consequent debt-slavery (LeFebvre, “Theology and Economics,” 38–39, 42–43, 49–50).

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., John S. Bergsma, “The Year of Jubilee and the Ancient Israelite Economy,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 59 (2017): 156–60; Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 36–41. On ancient Israelite agriculture, which occupied and supported most Israelites, see Oded Borowski, “Seasons, Crops, and Water in the Land of the Bible,” in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 414–15. For a summary of the challenges of subsistence agriculture in the land

of preserving “the *identity* and *integrity* of the Israelite extended family.”<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the Jubilee incorporated the land “into sacred cycles of rest and worship” and protected Israelites “from oppressive and demeaning labor.”<sup>54</sup>

Elements of the Jubilee were well known in the wider ANE.<sup>55</sup> Bergsma summarizes these:

(1) the promulgation of “freedom” proclamations involving release of slaves, debts, and land (Lev 25:10), (2) the dedication of certain populations and regions as servants (slaves) of a particular god (Lev 25:42); (3) the observance of special festivals in the seventh month involving temple purgation, re-assertion of the rule of the patron deity, and acts of (at least symbolic) social justice (Lev 25:9–10); (4) the practice of fallowing fields (Lev 25:4); (5) the inalienability in principle of ancestral land, with its corollary — redemption laws (Lev 25:23–55); (6) the use of a calendar based on multiples of seven and fifty ( $7 \times 7 + 1$ ) (Lev 25:8–10).<sup>56</sup>

In Mesopotamia, the Akkadian term *andurārum*, which is the cognate of the Hebrew term לְדִרְוֹר, “liberty” that describes the Jubilee (Lev 25:10; cf. Isa 61:1; Jer 34:8, 15, 17), refers to release of a person or thing (e.g., land) from an obligation. If the obligation was debt, such a release could free persons from debt slavery so that they would be reunified with their families.<sup>57</sup>

Another Akkadian term for a release was *mišarum*, which was a general royal decree that benefitted certain classes of people (not including, e.g., house-born slaves) through provisions that could include canceling debts

of Israel and the strategies, labor force, and social relations necessary to meet them, see Hopkins, *The Highlands*, 265–75.

<sup>53</sup> Bergsma, “The Year of Jubilee,” 161.

<sup>54</sup> Bergsma, “The Year of Jubilee,” 162.

<sup>55</sup> Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law*, 48.

<sup>56</sup> Bergsma, *The Jubilee*, 50–51; cf. details on these ancient Near Eastern antecedents of the Jubilee legislation in pp. 19–37. Bergsma also discusses a parallel between Lev 25 and the practice of Egyptian, Anatolian, and Mesopotamian kings to dedicate holy temple cities to the service of gods. This gave its citizens special rights (called *kidinnutu* in Akkadian), freeing them from future civil obligations (including taxes), slavery, and confiscation of property. Like the people of such a temple city, the Israelites were completely devoted to God as His sacred servants (Exod 19:6), so they had the ongoing right not to be sold as slaves (Lev 25:42) and their holy land could not be permanently sold (Lev 25:23; Bergsma, *The Jubilee*, 27–30, 51).

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Bergsma, *The Jubilee*, 22–23 on the decrees of Entemena, king of Lagash (ca. 2400 BC) and Lipit-Ishtar (ca. 1934–1924 BC), king of Isin; cf. p. 26 for royal proclamations of *andurāru(m)* at Nuzi.



(which could include back taxes), which resulted in the release of debt-slaves and return of land that had been seized to pay debt, along with various other economic reforms.<sup>58</sup>

However, there were key differences between the Mesopotamian releases and that of the biblical Jubilee. First, the Mesopotamian releases were enacted by monarchs, but “Leviticus 25 puts the responsibility on individual Israelites.”<sup>59</sup> Second, the Mesopotamian releases targeted certain segments of society, but the Jubilee was broadly applicable to the entire society of Israelites.<sup>60</sup> Third, the Mesopotamian releases were ad hoc and unpredictable, initiated by human kings at their discretion, typically at the beginnings of their reigns (i.e., once per generation), or at other times to solve pressing economic problems. Kings issued such decrees when they felt that it was their religious duty to show that they were rulers of justice by promoting social stability through addressing problems of enslavement of debtors or loss of their land.<sup>61</sup>

By comparison, the deity YHWH demonstrated the justice of His theocratic rule by initiating the Jubilee as a regular, cyclical institution to permanently ensure that His people, who in their early history had no king, would have the opportunity to enjoy independent life with their families on their own agricultural land at least for a time every generation.<sup>62</sup> Their right to a parcel of land and its return to them after a time, if they lost the usage of it, was not based on human economics or politics, but on God’s allotment of this property to them.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Westbrook, *Property and Family*, 44–46; Westbrook, “Social Justice in the Ancient Near East,” 151–56; Bergsma, *The Jubilee*, 22–26. There are two extant texts of such decrees by Ammisaduqa (1646–1626 BC) and Samsuiluna (1749–1712 BC).

<sup>59</sup> Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 41.

<sup>60</sup> Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 41.

<sup>61</sup> Westbrook, *Property and Family*, 45–47; Westbrook, “Social Justice in the Ancient Near East,” 156–58; cf. Lefebvre, “Theology and Economics,” 35–36. Cf. King Zedekiah’s agreement with the people of Jerusalem to proclaim liberty (לְחֵרֶת), to the effect that all Hebrew slaves should be freed (Jer 34:8–9).

<sup>62</sup> Cf., e.g., Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 41.

<sup>63</sup> Extended discussion of other issues concerning the Jubilee, such as the dating of the Lev 25 legislation, whether it was practical or utopian, and whether it was actually observed at any point in ancient Israelite history are beyond the scope of the present article. Regarding the authorship of the Jubilee legislation, Breland points out: “Leviticus 27 offers a powerful argument against the popular position that Leviticus 25 is the invention of post-exilic priests attempting to make a land grab. Why would priests write laws that allowed for land to be redeemed once it was ceded to the control of the priests?” (Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 203). The Israelite Jubilee likely

5. *Proclaimed by a trumpet on the Day of Atonement.* Exceptionally, the Jubilee year is to begin on the tenth day of a month (the seventh month), which is the Day of Atonement, rather than on the first day of the month. Scholars have suggested several reasons for or implications of the Jubilee commencing on the Day of Atonement:

(1) The trumpet signal for the Jubilee is on the tenth day of the month in order to not confuse it with the trumpet signal on the first day of the month (Lev 23:24).<sup>64</sup> However, this does not explain why the Jubilee signal should come specifically on the Day of Atonement, rather than on another day, such as the second, third, or fourth day of the month.

(2) "A 'holy' year (*wěqiddaštem*, v. 10) would be initiated only after the sanctuary and, symbolically, the people and land have been purged of their impurities."<sup>65</sup>

(3) The economic release of the Jubilee is "a divine gift flowing from the atonement" made on the Day of Atonement.<sup>66</sup> This atonement provides "release from the bondage of sin as well as the bondage of poverty and indebtedness."<sup>67</sup> However, the Jubilee does not release debts or

originated before the Israelite monarchy because Lev 25 prescribes no role for a king. See Bergsma, *The Jubilee*, 297 for some biblical references to the Jubilee as law that was meant to be practiced. Regarding practicality, suffice it to say that Jeremiah 34 "shows that the 'impracticality' of the instructions in Deut. 15, as well as Lev. 25, was not inherent. These social-justice measures could be implemented if the people chose to unselfishly help their needy kinsmen, as Walter Houston has recognized: 'The impracticality is not a matter of physical impossibility but of motivation'" (Gane, *Old Testament Law*, 293, citing Walter J. Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament*, LHBOTS 428 [London: T&T Clark, 2006], 194).

<sup>64</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2164.

<sup>65</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2164.

<sup>66</sup> Lefebvre, "Theology and Economics," 43. Lefebvre maintains that the fact "that the release took place on the Day of Atonement is the key theological anchor for the economic redemptions provided" (Lefebvre, "Theology and Economics," 44).

<sup>67</sup> Lefebvre, "Theology and Economics," 45; cf. p. 48; cf. Breland, "The Year of the Lord's Favor," 40–41, 150–51; Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, Publications of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research in The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Jerusalem and Minneapolis: Magnes and Fortress, 1995), 208–12. Weinfeld cites an Ugaritic parallel to spiritual release on the Day of Atonement in a ritual ceremony (KTU 1.40) to provide the people of Ugarit, including the king and queen, and foreigners who dwell there, with release (*mšr*, apparently equivalent to Akkadian *mišarum*, which referred to a royal decree of freedom from debts, etc.), i.e., expiation, from their sins (Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 212–14). Milgrom refers to the similar allegorical view of Philo (Philo, *de Congressu*, 107–8): The Day of Atonement "celebr-

necessarily free people from poverty, although the poor who had fallen into “famine servitude” would be released. Nevertheless, the spiritual-economic connection based on the idea of release can be supported by the meaning of the Hebrew Piel of כ-פ-ר (e.g., Lev 4:20, 26, 31; 16:6, 11, 16; commonly translated “make atonement”), which is “effect removal.”<sup>68</sup> Such removal/expiation on the Day of Atonement provided moral purification of the people resulting from the purgation of YHWH’s sanctuary (v. 30), not initial forgiveness such as YHWH granted at other times (e.g., Lev 4:20, 26, 31).<sup>69</sup>

(4) The pairing of spiritual and physical releases serves as a reminder of maintaining a right relationship with the Lord, their master, who provides for them.<sup>70</sup>

(5) The Jubilee on the Day of Atonement “taught faith in God’s providence, a faith that was motivated by the memory of the Exodus redemption.”<sup>71</sup>

(6) The remedies for sin on the Day of Atonement and for resulting economic problems at the Jubilee beginning on that day demonstrates that sin corrupts economics, creating imbalance.<sup>72</sup>

(7) The Jubilee on the Day of Atonement, which remedies the curse of sin, “makes Israel long for and look to the day when God will reverse the curse and restore mankind to its proper relationship with the Lord and with the land.”<sup>73</sup>

We can suggest (in this and the following paragraphs) a major additional reason that is related to some of the above points and also to ANE practices. The announcement of the Jubilee year on the annual festival of the tenth day of the seventh month with blasts (תְּרוּעָה) of a ram’s horn trumpet (שׁוֹפָר; Lev 25:9) parallels that of the annual festival that occurs on the first day of the same month, the Festival of Trumpets. At that time, blasts (תְּרוּעָה), pre-

rates the liberation (*dě̄rô̄r*) of the body and soul” (Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2164).

<sup>68</sup> William K. Gilders, *Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 29. The noun כִּפּוּרִים, “atonement,” on the “day of atonement” (Lev 25:9) is derived from the same root כ-פ-ר.

<sup>69</sup> Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 233–35, 274–77.

<sup>70</sup> Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 151.

<sup>71</sup> Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 131.

<sup>72</sup> Lefebvre, “Theology and Economics,” 49.

<sup>73</sup> Breland, “The Year of the Lord’s Favor,” 151.

sumably of such a trumpet (although it is not specified), proclaim a memorial/remembrance (זָכַרְוֹן; 23:24; cf. Num 29:1).

Usage of similar terminology elsewhere indicates that the תְּרוּעָה blasts on the first day of the seventh month would signal remembrance of the Israelites by YHWH, i.e., as a special annual reminder of the divine-human relationship that benefitted God's people.<sup>74</sup> The word תְּרוּעָה can refer either to trumpet blasts or shouts.<sup>75</sup> The function of תְּרוּעָה that fits the context of Num 23:24 is the one expressed by Balaam when he declared regarding God in relation to the Israelites: "He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel. The LORD their God is with them, and the shout [תְּרוּעָה] of a king is among them" (Num 23:21 ESV; word in brackets supplied). Here the king is YHWH, who is with His people and acclaimed by their shouts. So it makes sense that the תְּרוּעָה blasts on the first day of the seventh month signal remembrance of the Israelites by YHWH as *their king*.<sup>76</sup>

If so, what could additional תְּרוּעָה blasts ten days later on the Jubilee Day of Atonement signal? If YHWH's kingship already has been commemorated on the first day of the month, could the Day of Atonement have anything more to do with His sovereign rule? Yes. After the coronation of a king, he exercises his authority and demonstrates his character by carrying out justice and rewarding those who are loyal to him while punishing the disloyal.<sup>77</sup>

This is what happened when human ANE kings began their reigns and served as the judges of their people, as evidenced by proclamations of

<sup>74</sup> Such תְּרוּעָה blasts could be used as signals for the Israelites in the wilderness to break camp and set out, resuming their journey (Num 10:5-6). They could also be used as war signals (Hiphil of *r-w-*, verb from the same root as the noun תְּרוּעָה) "so that you may be remembered [Niphil of *z-k-r*] by the LORD your God and be saved from your enemies" (v. 9; word in brackets supplied). Blasts that are not called תְּרוּעָה were to be blown at festivals and beginnings of months over sacrifices as "a reminder [זָכַרְוֹן] of you before your God" (v. 10 ESV; word in brackets supplied). However, the context of Lev 23:24 does not concern setting out on a journey or warfare.

<sup>75</sup> See DCH 8:677-78.

<sup>76</sup> Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 401-2. Milgrom interprets the תְּרוּעָה on the first day of the seventh month as petitioning God for rain during the following agricultural year (Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27*, 2018).

<sup>77</sup> Breland observes that the trumpet blasts on the first day of the seventh month "recalled Yahweh's theophany at Sinai which was accompanied by the sound of a loud trumpet (Exod 19:13, 16). The Jubilee trumpet continued this Sinai motif" (Breland, "The Year of the Lord's Favor," 149). The awesome manner of YHWH's theophany at Mt. Sinai emphasized His sovereignty over His Israelite people, who were accountable for obeying the covenant stipulations that He proclaimed there.

release (see above) and actions toward toward their loyal and disloyal subjects. A striking biblical example of such actions is the commencement of Solomon's reign. After his coronation, Solomon carried out his father's (David's) last will (1 Kgs 2:1–9) by executing Joab and Shimei (vv. 28–46a), and he also executed his brother Adonijah (vv. 22–25) and banished Abiathar the priest (vv. 26–27). Then “the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon” (1 Kgs 2:46b). It is one thing to be proclaimed king and it is another to effectively consolidate power and carry out the sovereign will. This is not automatic; it is a process.<sup>78</sup>

A similar pattern appears in Babylonian religion. During the Babylonian New Year (Akītu) Festival of Spring in the first eleven or twelve days of the month of Nisannu, the first month of the year, a convocation of the city gods of the Babylonian kingdom (represented by their idols or cult symbols) determined that Marduk, the city-god of Babylon, would be supreme and hailed him as their king on day 8. On day 11, there was a second determination of destinies by the gods, of whom Marduk was king, that showed the fate of the land of Babylon and its people during the coming year.<sup>79</sup> So proclamation of divine kingship was followed by a kind of divine judgment.

Paralleling this pattern, Marduk gave the human king the symbolic tablet of destinies at the second determination of destinies and established this king as the supreme ruler of Babylon.<sup>80</sup> After the assembly of gods had proclaimed a good destiny for the human king, his servants pledged their loyalty to him, just as the gods had given their allegiance to Marduk.<sup>81</sup> Textual evidence suggests that when a king's sovereignty was affirmed at the New Year, officials and vassals “praise the king, kiss his feet, roll in dust before him, and having presented gifts to him, abdicate their offices, after which

<sup>78</sup> For comparison between treatment of loyal and disloyal subjects by David and Solomon in 1 Kgs 2 and YHWH's treatment of loyal and disloyal people, as evidenced on the Day of Atonement (see below), see Gane, *Cult and Character*, 344–54.

<sup>79</sup> Julye Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival: Religious Continuity and Royal Legitimation in Mesopotamia*, Gorgias Dissertations 2, Near Eastern Studies 2 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004), 89–90; cf. Karel van der Toorn, “Form and Function of the New Year Festival in Babylonia and Israel,” in *Congress Volume: Leuven, 1989*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 43 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 4. For an overall outline of the major events of the festival, see Mark E. Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993), 438–39. For a more detailed description of the events, as reconstructed from ancient cuneiform texts, see Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival*, 46–106.

<sup>80</sup> Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival*, 90.

<sup>81</sup> Van der Toorn, “Form and Function,” 3; cf. p. 5.

the king, seated on his throne, reappoints them to their offices."<sup>82</sup> So (re-)establishment of human kingship was followed by a kind of judgment in which the king rewarded those who were loyal to him and demonstrated humility.

The Day of Atonement (Lev 16) was Israel's judgment day, when accountability to YHWH's sovereignty was demonstrated. First, YHWH's justice in treatment of His people was vindicated by the ritual purgation of His sanctuary from forgiven sins of His loyal people, for which He bore judicial responsibility, and from rebellious sins of disloyal people, who remained condemned. Second, the Lord's people were to show their humble loyalty to Him by practicing self-denial and abstaining from work, i.e., keeping a sabbath (Lev 16:29, 31; 23:27–32). Those who did this received the benefit of moral purity that was gained for them by the vindication of God as the divine Judge who had forgiven them (Lev 16:30). Those who failed to show loyalty in these ways were condemned (23:29–30).<sup>83</sup>

The Jubilee Day of Atonement expanded on YHWH's role as the divine king and judge of His people. There was a proclamation of liberty that manifested His justice by resetting Israelite society in terms of Israelite ancestral land tenure and the status of disadvantaged Israelites who had lost their freedom. This Jubilee resetting to an earlier ideal state correlates with the resetting of the Lord's sanctuary on the Day of Atonement to its pristine purity at the time of its initial consecration (Lev 8). This is most clearly shown by the stated result of the high priest sprinkling blood seven times on the outer altar on the Day of Atonement: He would thereby "purify it and consecrate [i.e., reconsecrate] it from the physical ritual impurities of the Israelites" (Lev 16:19; trans. Roy E. Gane).

YHWH's authority in returning people to their land and clans would remind all Israelites that He had given them their freedom and land in the first place when He brought them from Egypt to Canaan. The fallow of the land would remind them of the land before they had settled on it and started to work it. These observances would reinforce their memory that He was their redeemer and the ultimate owner of the land, so they were accountable

<sup>82</sup> Simo Parpola, "The Assyrian Cabinet," in *Vom Alten Orient zum Alten Testament. Festschrift für Wolfram Freiherrn von Soden zum 85. Geburtstag am 19. Juni 1993*, AOAT 240, ed. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker and Neukirchener, 1995), 393, cited by Bidmead, *The Akitu Festival*, 91.

<sup>83</sup> See Gane, *Cult and Character*, 305–23. Compare the rabbinic idea of judgment at the New Year (*Mishnah*, Rosh Hashanah 1:2; *Babylonian Talmud*, Rosh Hashanah 16a–b; *Jerusalem Talmud*, Rosh Hashanah 1:3).

to Him for how they treated each other. As He had freed them, so they should free one another, and those who fell into hard times and lost their freedom could have hope for liberty in the future. As He gave them Sabbath rest, so they should give sabbatical rest to the land.

The Jubilee also expanded on the Day of Atonement test of loyalty to YHWH. There were two requirements for the people on the Day of Atonement: practicing self-denial and keeping a sabbath of rest. For the Jubilee, there were three requirements: observing a sabbatical of rest from agricultural labor and thereby allowing the land to rest, releasing land, and releasing bonded servants. Would the Israelites faithfully keep these commandments, or not?

As mentioned above, the cyclical return of Israelites to their ancestral properties and the fallow of the land would remind them of their past entrance into the land at the beginning of their history with God there. Somewhat analogous to this celebration of renewal by commemorating initial entry were the cyclical Mesopotamian *akītu* festivals, including the annual Babylonian New Year Festival of Spring. These festivals celebrated renewal by reenacting the past mythical entrances of gods into their cities.

In Babylon, for example, the idol of Marduk, accompanied by those of other deities, were conveyed in a spectacular procession to an *akītu* temple outside the city, where they remained for a couple of days and nights. Then they were brought back into the city.<sup>84</sup> Mark Cohen has suggested that the reason for taking gods out of a city to an *akītu* temple was to bring them back in, thereby reenacting the mythological original entrance of the city's chief god (Marduk in this case).<sup>85</sup> Another, complementary interpretation is that the *akītu* house outside a city represented chaos, while the city symbolized order.<sup>86</sup>

Such a Mesopotamian event differed from the Israelite Jubilee in that it took place every year, rather than every half century, and it celebrated the entrance of a deity into a city, rather than God bringing His people into their land. But both the Mesopotamian and Israelite commemorations would powerfully remind people of their relationship to the deity who controlled their dwelling place.

<sup>84</sup> Bidmead, *The Akitu Festival*, 94–101.

<sup>85</sup> Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars*, 404, 440; Mark E. Cohen, *Festivals and Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2015), 400. For celebration of YHWH's entrance into his city, see Ps 24:7–10.

<sup>86</sup> Bidmead, *The Akitu Festival*, 118–19.

## 8. Lack of Divine Need for Human Service

Ancient Near Eastern peoples thought their deities really needed their service, including offerings of food from the land they worked. Therefore, the Hittite Emperor Mursūili II attempted to persuade the gods to remove a plague from his land for the reason that decimation of their human servants would cause them suffering.<sup>87</sup>

In the old Babylonian epic *Atraḥasis*, deities became hungry and thirsty when a great flood wiped out the human population. Consequently, they crowded around like flies when they smelled the sacrifice of *Atraḥasis* after the flood.<sup>88</sup> The relationship between humans and gods was symbiotic.

YHWH instructed the Israelites to build Him a sanctuary (Exod 25:8), but He did not need it as a shelter for Himself (1 Kgs 8:27). Rather, His people needed Him to dwell among them (Exod 33:12–17). He required food offerings (Num 28:2), but He was not dependent on them as His sustenance (Ps 50:12–13). Most of the food offered to Him went up from the outer altar of burnt offering in the form of smoke as a pleasing aroma to Him (e.g., Lev 1:9; cf. Gen 8:20–21), but it did not nourish Him.

The “bread of the Presence” was exceptional in that it was a presentation offering placed on the golden table in the outer apartment of the tabernacle. Nevertheless, the ritual by which the bread was renewed (Lev 24:5–9) showed that the Lord did not really need human food. First, new bread was placed only once per week (v. 8), unlike the twice daily presentation offerings by which non-Israelites fed their gods. Second, and more significantly, the Lord gave all the week-old bread to the priests (v. 9). Third, and most importantly, when the priests received the bread, He received the frankincense that was offered with it as His token portion (v. 7).<sup>89</sup> This showed that the frankincense was all he utilized; He did not in some sense consume the bread first and then assign it to the priests.<sup>90</sup>

The twelve loaves of the “bread of the Presence” represented a “permanent covenant” between God and the Israelite tribes, and it was changed every Sabbath (Lev 24:5–6, 8). The Sabbath celebrated God’s Creatorship (Gen 2:2–3; Exod 20:9–11; 31:16–17) and also represented the covenant bet-

<sup>87</sup> “Plague Prayers of Mursūili II,” trans. Gary Beckman (COS 1.60:159).

<sup>88</sup> W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Ḥasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1969, repr. 1999), 98–99 (*Atra-Ḥasīs* III v 30–36). Cf. Gen 8:20–21, where YHWH smells Noah’s sacrifice, but there is no indication that the deity is hungry.

<sup>89</sup> Presumably by a priest burning the frankincense (cf. Lev 2:2, 9, 16; 6:15 [Hebrew v. 8]).

<sup>90</sup> Roy Gane, “‘Bread of the Presence’ and Creator-in-Residence,” *VT* 42 (1992): 179–203.



ween God and Israel (Exod 31:16). So the token offering of bread, which was basic food, not only denied that the Lord needed humans to feed Him; it taught exactly the opposite: He was the Creator-in-Residence, who promised to provide food for His covenant people in the land that He was giving them.<sup>91</sup> His relationship with them was not symbiotic. Rather, they were totally dependent on His care.

## 9. Consequences of Divine Displeasure Affecting Land

In the ancient Near Eastern world-view, all went well as long as a deity kept providing for his/her land so that the humans who worked it prospered and reciprocated by serving the god(dess). However, the dynamic balance could be upset if either the divine or the human party failed to perform properly. This could precipitate dire consequences for the land and its people. A number of “disappearing god texts” exemplify such problems with Hittite deities.<sup>92</sup> One Hittite text describes how agricultural fertility languished when Telipinu, a Storm-god, became angry and vacated his post of responsibility for the land.<sup>93</sup>

The “Plague Prayers of Mursūli II” identify human bloodshed as the cause of an epidemic in the land of the Hittites, by which the gods caused many of its people to perish. Mursūli, a Hittite emperor, believed that the devastating plague was punishment for a wrongful killing committed by his father, Šuppiluliuma I, and others. Mursūli says that earlier, during the reign of Šuppiluliuma, the land of Ḫatti prospered.

[Humans], cows, and sheep became numerous in his time.... But later you came, O gods, [my lords], and have now taken vengeance on my father for this affair of Tudḫaliya the Younger. My father [died] because of the blood of Tudḫaliya. And the princes, the noblemen, the commanders of the thousands, and the officers who went over [to my father] also

<sup>91</sup> Roy Gane, “Bread of the Presence,” 179–203.

<sup>92</sup> “In the Hittite view, the operation of the universe required that each deity and human conscientiously perform his or her proper function within the whole. Calamity manifested in some sector of the cosmos was an indication that the god or goddess responsible for it had become angry and had abandoned his or her post” (introduction to “The Wrath of Telipinu” by Gary Beckman [COS 1.57:151]).

<sup>93</sup> “The Wrath of Telipinu,” trans. Gary Beckman (COS 1.57:151).

died because of [thisaffair]. This same affair also affected the (entire) and of Ḥatti, and [Ḥatti] began to perish because of [this] affair.<sup>94</sup>

In the Pentateuch, YHWH's covenant stipulations clearly specified what His Israelite people were to do in order to maintain a healthy relationship with Him so that He would bless them in the land that He ruled. His laws comprised a wholistic, integrated system.<sup>95</sup> Persistent departure from any part of this system by the Israelites could build up momentum that would have negative consequences for the land and the people's relationship to it.

Some laws in Leviticus concern *physical ritual* impurities originating from carcasses, genital flows, and scaly skin disease (chaps. 12–15; cf. 11:24–28, 31–40; 21:1–4, 11; Num 19, etc.), which were not to defile the holy sphere of God centered at the sanctuary (Lev 15:31; cf. Num 5:1–4). These could be remedied by ritual means. However, the latter part of Leviticus, commonly called the “Holiness Code” (chap. 17 on), warns against *moral* defilement of the holy land by transgressions such as sexual immorality and idolatry. Those who committed them could not receive expiation through ritual, but were subject to punishment by their human community and/or God Himself (Lev 18, 20; cf. Num 35:30–34).<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, defilement of the land would ultimately lead to exile.<sup>97</sup> Leviticus 18 warns that if God's people would defile the land by violating the prohibitions against sexual immorality and idolatrous Molech worship in this chapter, the land would vomit them out “just as it vomited out the nations that were before you” (v. 28; cf. 20:22–24).<sup>98</sup>

In Num 35, murder also defiles the land where the Lord dwells:

You may not pollute the land in which you live, for the blood pollutes the land. There can be no recovery for the land from the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You will not make

<sup>94</sup> “Plague Prayers of Mursūili II,” COS 1.60:156–57.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 209–10 regarding the wholistic approach to physical health in pentateuchal law.

<sup>96</sup> The ritual in Deut 21:1–9 absolves the community of responsibility for an unsolved murder, but this does not benefit the murderer.

<sup>97</sup> On differences between remediable ritual impurities and irremediable moral impurities, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, AB 3A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1326; Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially 21–31; Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 139–53.

<sup>98</sup> On the reason for inclusion of Molech worship here (v. 21) along with sexual immorality, see Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 321.

the land in which you live unclean, the land in the middle of which I reside, for I the Lord reside among the Israelites (vv. 33–34).<sup>99</sup>

The blessings and curses in Lev 26 outline trajectories resulting from loyal obedience to the Lord’s covenant stipulations versus disloyal disobedience. The chapter is introduced by reiteration of some crucial principles: prohibition of idolatry and the requirements to keep the Lord’s sabbaths and reverence His sanctuary (vv. 1–2). His sabbaths, which acknowledge His lordship over the people and land, would primarily refer to the weekly Sabbath (repeating 19:30), but in the context of chapter 26 could also extend to the septennial sabbaths for the land (cf. Lev 25:1–8).<sup>100</sup>

The blessings in Lev 26:3–13 for those who obeyed God, which we mentioned earlier, have a lot to do with the land. So do the curses for the disobedient (vv. 14–39). Possessing God’s gift of territory was not enough; His people needed His care of the land (Deut 11:12), including His conditional blessing of rains at proper times that He provided, for its agricultural productivity so that they could thrive and survive (vv. 10–15; cf. Lev 26:4–5). “The abundance and fruitfulness of the land is not to be taken for granted but is always to be a source of thanksgiving to God. It is a gift, not a given.”<sup>101</sup>

In Lev 26, the Lord warns that among other punishments, “I will destroy your prideful power. I will turn your sky to iron and your land to bronze so that your strength will be spent for no reason: your land will not produce its yield, and the trees of the land won’t produce their fruit” (vv. 19–20). Thus, the sky would block any rain from reaching earth, so that the land would dry up and become as hard as metal.<sup>102</sup>

The curses of Lev 26 escalate in severity, culminating in exile from the land, especially for sins of idolatry and other forms of false worship (vv. 30–

<sup>99</sup> According to Deut 21:22–23, leaving the corpse of a criminal exposed (thereby shamed and shown to be cursed by God by hanging his body up on a tree after he is executed) overnight also defiles the land.

<sup>100</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2278, 2285.

<sup>101</sup> Douglas J. Moo and Jonathan A. Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*, Biblical Theology for Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 91.

<sup>102</sup> Deuteronomy 28:23 reverses the metals, with heavens as bronze and earth as iron. Similarly, curses in the succession treaty of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon warn that the gods will “make your ground like iron (so that) nothing can sprout from it. Just as rain does not fall from a brazen heaven so may rain and dew not come upon your fields and meadows” (S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, eds., *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* [Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988], 51).

31) and failure to observe the legislation regarding the land that is strategically placed in the preceding chapter (chap. 25).<sup>103</sup> The Lord serves notice:

I will personally devastate the land so much that your enemies who re-settle it will be astonished by it. I will scatter you among the nations. I will unsheathe my sword against you. Your land will be devastated and your cities will be ruins. At that time, while it is devastated and you are in enemy territory, the land will enjoy its sabbaths. At that time, the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths. During the whole time it is devastated, it will have the rest it didn't have during the sabbaths you lived in it (Lev 26:32–35).

Thus, “If the people deplete the land by failing to grant its sabbatical respites, they will be deleted from it. It is as if the exhausted land heaves a mighty sigh of relief and settles down to a long nap to recover from its sleep deficit.”<sup>104</sup>

Lest anyone suppose that God didn't mean what He said in Lev 26, the third to last verse in the Hebrew Bible, 2 Chr 36:21, interprets the Babylonian exile as fulfillment of the curse in Lev 26: “The land finally enjoyed [verb רצה] its sabbath rest. For as long as it lay empty, it rested, until seventy years were completed.”<sup>105</sup> Due to the fact that the Israelites had not observed

<sup>103</sup> On juxtaposition of the two chapters to form the climax of the “Holiness Code,” see Wright, *God's People*, 149–51.

<sup>104</sup> Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 454.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Jer 25:8–12; 29:10. NJPS translates 2 Chr 36:21: “until the land paid back [verb רצה] its sabbaths.” However, NJPS renders the same verb רצה in Lev 26:34, which 2 Chr 36:21 quotes, as “shall . . . make up for.” Gary A. Anderson maintains the interpretation of the verb רצה as “repay/repaid” in both verses (Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009], 78; cf. Anderson's discussion of רצה in Isa 40:2 in “How Does Almsgiving Purge Sins?” in *Hebrew in the Second Temple Period: The Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and of Other Contemporary Sources*, ed. Steven E. Fassberg, Moshe Bar-Asher, and Ruth A. Clements, STDJ 108 [Leiden: Brill, 2013], 5–6). Both “enjoy/take pleasure in” and “repay/restore” are possible meanings of the verb (or verbs from two homophonous roots) רצה. See Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill: 1994–1999) 3:1281–82; David J. A. Clines, ed., *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 9 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014) 7:540–41; cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus* 23–27, 2323, referring to the meanings “appease,” “complete,” and “accept” in payment. However, it seems clear that in Lev 26:34 and 2 Chr 36:21, the land is the beneficiary of its sabbath rest (as animals and humans benefit from rest in Exod 23:12), with the resting of the land emphasized by repetition in Lev 26:35. Thus, the land enjoys (in the sense of benefiting from) its sabbaths, rather than repaying them (cf. Lev 26:34 LXX; 2 Chr 36:21,

sabbatical years implies that they also have neglected the related Jubilee years.<sup>106</sup>

Why would sabbatical years of the land, an ecological observance, be so crucial? As pointed out above, these years were holy time, just as weekly Sabbath days were holy time. By allowing the land to rest, God's people would acknowledge His lordship as its Creator and Redeemer, just as weekly Sabbath rest from work reminded them that they belonged to Him, their Creator and Redeemer (Exod 20:1–2, 8–11; 31:12–17; Deut 5:12–15). If they failed to observe the cyclical fallow years that the Lord required of them as His tenants, they would commit sacrilege by profaning holy time and would insult God by taking the land for granted as if His lordship did not exist and they were its sole owners. Lacking a sense of obligation to God, they would exploit it and live on it as they pleased. The Lord's final remedy for such insubordination would be exile from the land.

Eugene Carpenter aptly summarizes:

Ecology was a theological issue in Israel, and not to take it seriously was a theological failure, a sin against the Creator/Redeemer, and derivatively a sin against the environment itself, which God created to "serve" humankind. When these rules concerning the land were not observed, the land did not fulfill its ecological function and it could not fully render its blessings on the people.<sup>107</sup>

There was another factor. Keeping sabbatical years required the Israelites to have faith that God would provide for them every seventh year, and even more at the Jubilee year (see above). If they lacked this faith, they could not permanently stay in the land. The land was for people of faith.

## 10. Cessation of Divine Displeasure Affecting Land

A common ancient Near Eastern remedy for divine displeasure was performance of rituals. This approach worked with Telipinu, who subsequently returned home and paid attention to his land.<sup>108</sup> However, the plague during the reign of Mursūili II persisted despite rituals to expiate bloodshed that were performed by his father and also by himself, and despite the fact

and Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2323 on Lev 26:34: "the *justice* of God decrees that Israel must repay the land for its lost sabbaticals" [emphasis original]).

<sup>106</sup> Breland, "The Year of the Lord's Favor," 214.

<sup>107</sup> Carpenter, *Exodus 19–40*, 120 on Exod 23:10–11.

<sup>108</sup> "The Wrath of Telipinu," *COS* 1.57:152–3.

that the perpetrators of the crime were all dead. Therefore, the emperor was motivated to plead with the gods through prayer, in which he tried to reason with them and promised additional ritual, “with reparation and propitiatory gift on behalf of the land.”<sup>109</sup>

An Israelite acquainted with YHWH’s Torah would not be surprised that Mursūili II had a frustrating experience. In pentateuchal law, no rituals, gifts, or ransom could expiate for murder, which defiled the land (see above). According to Num 35:33, only the execution of the murderer for his crime purges the land. This explains why there was a three-year famine in the land of Israel during the reign of David because of the ethnic cleansing that King Saul had carried out against the Gibeonites (2 Sam 21:1–2). Saul was already dead. However, like the father of Mursūili, he had not been executed for murder. Therefore, the effect of his crime outlived him, so that God made punishment fall on the land, which afflicted its inhabitants. The deity connected the moral and natural domains, so that a cause in the former had an effect in the latter. Only the deaths of some of Saul’s descendants, who continued his identity, could suffice to purge the land (vv. 3–10, 13). After that, “God responded to prayers for the land” (v. 14).<sup>110</sup>

In Lev 26, no ritual could free the Israelites from the national punishment of exile. Nevertheless, the Lord promises that if His exiled people would confess their iniquity and that of their fathers, humbling themselves and accepting their guilt, He would remember His covenant with their ancestors, and He would remember the land (vv. 40–42). The remedy of last resort was simply amazing grace.

Why was the Lord so determined to gain the loyalty of Israel? He intended to bless the community of Abraham’s descendants in their land as they accepted and implemented divine principles that were for their benefit (Deut 10:12–13) and that reflected His holy character (Lev 19:2). In this way, He would reveal the comprehensive spiritual, social, physical, and economic advantages of His rule so that other peoples would choose to follow Him and receive His blessings as well (cf. Gen 12:2–3; 22:17–18; Deut 4:6–8). In this sense, the purpose of all His laws was missiological.

## 11. Conclusion

Texts from the ANE indicate symbiotic relationships between deities,

<sup>109</sup> “Plague Prayers of Mursūili II,” *COS* 1.60:157.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Carrie Rhodes, “Theodicy and Execution for Expiation in 2 Samuel 21:1–14” (MA thesis, Andrews University, 2010).

people, and land. A deity could rule a land and its inhabitants, who worked the land, benefited from its fertility, and gave offerings to the deity. This dynamic balance could be upset if the deity did not provide fertility for some reason, such as the possibility that human actions had offended him/her.

Leviticus attests to a similar conceptual framework, but with important modifications. First, although YHWH required offerings, He was not dependent on them as His sustenance. Second, the Lord tightened connections between Himself and His people and land, which was holy (see above).

The Israelites were accountable to the Lord for maintaining the holiness of their land, which was affected by their physical treatment of it and lifestyle on it. Physical treatment was to include allowing the land to rest during holy sabbatical and jubilee years. "Thus, the environment itself should not be overworked and abused, but rather periodically given the opportunity to glorify God by returning to a state of restful communion."<sup>111</sup> Holy lifestyle required obedience to the Lord's commands, which expressed principles in radical contrast to those followed by the former inhabitants of Canaan. If the Israelites failed to treat the land as holy or if they defiled it by unholy conduct, they would jeopardize the divine blessing of its productivity for their benefit or even their right to use it at all.

YHWH is the Creator of all, so everything that human beings "own," including land and all that comes from it, is ultimately a gift from Him (cf. Deut 8:18). In this sense, the whole world is holy land. Consequently, God's people should act responsibly with the resources that He has given them to manage, even if they do not live in the land of Israel.<sup>112</sup>

Human beings should show love for God by emulating His love for and care of His creation.<sup>113</sup> We should consider long-term effects on human and non-human forms of life that the Lord has made, rather than exploiting land and its resources for their own benefit even if this causes harm to the environment that they share with all living things.<sup>114</sup> Instead of seeing their good

<sup>111</sup> Bergsma, "The Year of Jubilee," 162.

<sup>112</sup> The New Testament no longer treats the land of Israel as holy territory in the sense of continuing to play a special theological role in God's redemptive purpose. This purpose is achieved in Christ, who binds all believers in Him and in fellowship (involving social and economic responsibilities) with each other within His new covenant (Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 187–98).

<sup>113</sup> Jay Sklar, *Leviticus: The Lord's Holy People Living Out His Holy Character*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 685–86.

<sup>114</sup> Stephen Dunbar, L. James Gibson, and Humberto M. Rasi, eds., *Entrusted: Christians*

management as entitling them to hoard for themselves (compare Luke 12:15–21), God’s people should view the divinely enabled blessings of their success as an opportunity and responsibility to share with others, thereby emulating God’s justice and mercy, so that they too can survive and enjoy independent living.<sup>115</sup>

Leviticus 25 repeatedly refers to a needy person as “your brother” (vv. 25, 35–36, 39, 47), i.e., fellow Israelite, thereby emphasizing that such an individual is not merely an “other” person, but one with whom there is a bond of mutuality and in whom there should be vested interest. What is good for your brother is good for you because you belong together and share life within the same group, the well-being of which impacts you, so investing in your brother is investing not only in your brother, but also in yourself (cf. Lev 19:18b—“you shall love your neighbor as yourself”).<sup>116</sup> This does not mean that we are to act from selfish self-interest, but it is helpful additional motivation to do the right thing.

Several elements of the biblical sabbatical and Jubilee years are well attested in the ancient Near East. These include fallow periods, and releases of land and bonded workers by royal decrees. However, unlike the Jubilee, the ANE releases were not established by deities or cyclical.

We have found that connections between the annual Israelite Day of Atonement and the 50th year Jubilee, which was to commence on the Day of Atonement, shed light on both the Day of Atonement and the Jubilee.

*and Environmental Care* (Mexico: Adventus, International University Publishers, 2013). On sustainability and restraint in the use of land and its resources, see Moo and Moo, *Creation Care*, 93–95.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Harbin, “Jubilee and Social Justice,” 699; Gane, *Old Testament Law*, 282–87, 290–95, 307; Roy E. Gane, “Social Justice,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Law*, ed. Pamela Barmash (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 22–27. Regarding types of Jubilee benefits applicable to modern life, recognizing that “the exact provisions of the Jubilee are not appropriate to a modern economy and society no longer based on subsistence agriculture,” see Bergsma, “The Year of Jubilee,” 162–64. Here Bergsma observes that two kinds of benefits of the Jubilee are widely recognized today: the right to freedom from oppressive working conditions and concern for the environment. However, “concern for the integrity and identity of the extended family is sorely neglected” (Bergsma, “The Year of Jubilee,” 163). See Sklar, *Leviticus*, 707 on economic and social ways in which the Jubilee laws were designed to strengthen families, including extended families. On economic, social, and theological Jubilee principles and their modern application, see also Wright’s “paradigmatic” interpretation of the Jubilee (Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 207–9).

<sup>116</sup> Lev 19:34 extends this principle to the non-Israelite immigrant, who is one’s neighbor in the broader sense of a fellow human being (cf. Luke 10:29–37).



Both of these were times of renewal for resetting the covenant relationship between YHWH and His Israelite people to an ideal state, with vindication for YHWH and moral purity for the people on the annual Day of Atonement and additional restoration of land and liberty on the ultimate Day of Atonement at the Jubilee. Both the Day of Atonement and the Jubilee were times of judgment when YHWH demonstrated His justice and tested the loyalty of the Israelites, thereby exercising His supreme sovereignty over His holy people and their holy land for the continuation of their well-being.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>117</sup> This essay has significant implications for modern practical applications and eschatology, but exploration of these are beyond the scope of this study.