GOD’S GIFT OF THE LAND:  
CREATION, JUBILEE, AND RE-CREATION

Christopher K. Lensch

Introduction

Anyone who has vacationed in Philadelphia always visits the historic city’s number one tourist attraction: the Liberty Bell. Wide-eyed children crowd around this revered symbol of liberty and push forward to put their fingers in the famous crack in the bell. As they trace the crack upward, their eyes fall upon an engraved message on the bell’s crown: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land, and unto the inhabitants thereof….”

“Proclaim liberty!” What a simple, yet profound, statement of the aspirations of all freedom-loving people. More than a call for political liberty, this watchword was first used in American history as a celebration of religious liberty. The colonial statehouse commissioned the bell in 1751 to commemorate 50 years of success of what Mr. Penn had called “the holy experiment” in Pennsylvania. That new world experiment was the novel idea of religious freedom and toleration.

Our forefathers understood, perhaps better than we, that personal and political freedom must begin with religious freedom, freedom of conscience to follow the commands of our Maker before the commands of men. This is why Leviticus 25:10 was inscribed on the commemorative bell. In this otherwise obscure Bible verse coalesce the great themes of life and liberty, all in the context of a 50th year anniversary celebration—an emancipation proclamation in the year of Jubilee.

God’s Design for Mankind

From the very beginning of creation God’s Word reveals Him preparing and filling the earth with good things. These good things are intended for the use and pleasure of God’s “kingdom agents,” Adam and Eve with their posterity.

The “earth” or “land” is mentioned at least 19 times in half the verses of Genesis 1. Clearly much of the creation focus is on the land. This emphasis is not for the land’s sake, but is for man’s sake who will inhabit the earth. God did not design mankind to live in an underwater Atlantis nor to dwell in some corner of outer space. With the vastness of God’s great universe, there might be other hospitable environments for human life. Still the earth appears to be central in the biblical account of creation. Mankind was made for this earth. To be biblically correct, the earth was made for mankind.

The creation language of Genesis 1 is explicit:
26 Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” … 28 Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

It is important to notice that mankind has not taken control of the earth through might or even squatters’ rights. The habitable land was given by God with a charge to fill and subdue it. The Creator holds title to His creation while He entrusts humanity to use it and keep it “good” as seen by God in its pristine form. Ultimately, He alone is “possessor of heaven and earth.”

Paradise Lost

A simple Bible word search of “earth/land” (גאֹר, מַדָּר) reveals that this topic has a conspicuous place in the opening chapters of the Bible. After the creation account, the land next plays prominently in the flood narration. Instead of an earth filled with goodness and prosperity, God looks and finds it filled with violence and the wickedness of men’s hands.

Sadly, God’s image bearers have been poor stewards of the good things of the earth. While there undoubtedly was abuse of creation (6:6,7), the Lord’s indictment of mankind is not for pillaging the earth, but for his inhumanity to other men. This is an important clarification in the Christian’s dialogue with environmentalists. The greatest of judgments fell upon the race because of man’s attack upon God and those made in His image. God puts a premium upon the sanctity of human life. This truth is against our generation’s notion that the natural world is on a par with humanity.

Stewardship in the Promised Land

The message of Genesis tells us we came from the hand of God. He placed mankind on the earth with a stewardship over the lower creation. Genesis also tells us that man’s rebellion brought a curse upon himself and upon the land. The curse is the reason for all of life’s hardships, oppression, and finally, death itself.

This message is an important prelude to the message of Exodus, especially to Moses’ first audience in Egypt. The book of Exodus holds forth a message of redemption for toiling slaves in Egypt who had little understanding of the meaning of life apart from lingering hints of hope passed from their forefathers.

While Genesis speaks of origins and creation, Exodus speaks of deliverance and re-creation. The Mosaic covenant details God’s provisions for returning to a land of fruitfulness and of renewing a stewardship before Him. The promised land was the offer of “paradise restored.”
An important provision for the promised land were the periodic emancipations built into the life cycle of the redeemed nation. Every seven years, the land would rest and Israelites, who may have become indentured servants through circumstances of poverty, were set free; there was to be no permanent slave caste following the redemption from Egypt. Every 50 years the entire land was to be set free: not only would the land rest, but if a family tract had been sold, ownership would revert to the original family of record. So important were these cycles of rest that when they were neglected during the monarchy, God exacted their sum during the 70 year Babylonian captivity: “…until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years” (2 Chron. 36:21).

**Backgrounds of the Jubilee**

Unlike the irregular and random land restorations of Israel’s neighbors, the Mosaic economy established a periodic release of debt and the return of property to the original owners. Hammurabi and kings of other middle eastern countries occasionally proclaimed “releases” or “clean slates” to bring a return of economic balance. Otherwise absentee creditors would have amassed large real estate holdings, wiping out the middle class.

Whereas these proclamations were random and by royal decree, the Mosaic Jubilee was by law scheduled to follow a generational pattern. This law reinforced the idea that God Himself was Owner of the land and that His people were stewards upon it, rather than allowing the king to be the deciding agent above God’s law and the land’s God.4

Indentured servants were set free in the 49th year. Along with this emancipation came a year of rest for the land as well as for the community. On the heels of year 49, the 50th year of Jubilee was the seal of God’s blessing as a double portion of rest and celebration for God’s land and people.

When God brought Israel into the promised land, He apportioned the land to the 12 tribes as an inheritance. The right of family inheritance within the tribes was so critical that even female heirs with no brothers were given their due portion.5 The promised land was for the nation; a portion of the land was intended for each family in each generation, for its use, and also as a test of stewardship.

Significantly, later prophetical allusions to the Jubilee speak of it as God’s ultimate goal in bringing in the Messianic kingdom. Personal deliverance, freedom, prosperity, and rest flow together in the last Jubilee brought in by Christ. Confirmed by Jesus in His first publicly recorded sermon, Isaiah 61:1,2 is one of the clearest allusions:

> “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD….,”
Lessons from the Land of Jubilee

There are relevant lessons from the Jubilee for man’s relation to the land.

First, key to a biblical ecology is the fact that God does not intend arable land to lie permanently fallow, untouched by human hands as if it were sacrosanct. Radical ecologists who personify the land by speaking of “mother earth” think that the earth and nature are more important than human beings. This theology is idolatry, but the implied anthropology is not far from the truth. This less than trusting perspective tacitly and correctly belies an admission of the universal fallibility and depravity of our race: humanity is corrupt and, left unchecked, will corrupt its environment.

Like all humanistic perspectives, radical ecology has no room for redemption or the sovereign grace of God. Truth to tell, “save the earth” militants are saving the world for themselves and future generations in an attempt to save their own souls through their activism. These humanists cannot understand Christians who glory in Christ’s salvation. Christians live for Him and seek to obey Him in all matters of personal and universal stewardship.

Second, while our Creator gave the land for our well-being and for opportunities of stewardship, He maintains the prerogative of regulating our use of the land. Man was not allowed to rape the land nor endlessly exact the last ounce of its yield. The land was allowed to rest. More than that, man was reminded that he must rest also—rest and rejoice in the God Who gives an abundance from the earth. The land and its sabbath were made for man, not man for the land.

Third, we all answer to God for how we use the earth’s resources. God desires especially His people to be free and to have life opportunities of self-determining stewardship. Will we use our trust wisely? Will we use it for God’s service and for the good of others?

The Israelites had gone from slaves in Egypt to freemen in the land of promise. The Jubilee taught that even in tough economic times, God’s chosen should never be reduced through poverty to the status of a slave. An Israelite might become an indentured servant, but this was not permanent, and he always was treated as a brother.

Fourth, the Jubilee showed humanitarian concern for future generations who might descend from such impoverished citizens. An established middle class more easily lives by a sense of stewardship and seeks opportunities of development, as opposed to the impoverished who own nothing or the affluent who tend to live lives of self-indulgence.

Fifth, only through loyalty to God and faithful stewardship of the land could Israel as a nation ever hope to be free and independent of other masters. Missing the Sabbath years and Jubilee years was repaid during the Babylonian oppression.

Sixth, the natural corollary of the stewardship principle is the right of private property. The Bible in general and the Jubilee in particular teach the right of private property as a trust from God.
Modern environmentalists have imbibed the spirit of Jean Jacques Rousseau who taught that the first thief was the man who put up a fence and said, “This is mine.” The Bible says “NO” to such humanism that would remove the ancient boundary stones by force in order to give private real estate holdings over to a collective United Nations hegemony.

**Conclusion**

The Jubilee points us to a future day of deliverance and fruitfulness in the kingdom. The Jubilee was a time of rest for land and for man. More than that, it was also a time of celebration, even as modern usage of the word “Jubilee” implies.

Believers long for the day when the earth will be delivered from the curse. That day of deliverance will balance the scales of justice, remove oppression, and bring in everlasting righteousness. Along with the blessing of rest will come celebration and fruitfulness in the climax of God’s redemption.

“For the LORD will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in it, thanksgiving and the voice of melody.

‘Listen to Me, My people; and give ear to Me, O My nation: for law will proceed from Me, and I will make My justice rest as a light of the peoples. My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, and My arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands will wait upon Me, and on My arm they will trust. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look on the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish away like smoke, the earth will grow old like a garment, and those who dwell in it will die in like manner; but My salvation will be forever, and My righteousness will not be abolished.’

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1 Space station astronauts face medical problems like bone loss.
2 Genesis 14:19
3 Genesis 6:5,11
4 The proclamation of liberty for people and land (Lev. 25:10) is rooted in the truth that God owns the land: “...the land is mine,” says the Lord (Lev. 25:23).
5 Numbers 27.
7 Proverbs 30:7-9.
8 Romans 8:19-21.
9 Isaiah 51:3-6.