CHAPTER ONE

THE JUBILEE AND ITS
HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

1. Introduction

In various times and places throughout history, the ancient Israelite jubilee year has exercised a powerful influence on the religious imagination of Jews and Christians. In contexts as diverse as the African-American spiritual tradition, the cultic calendar of the Catholic Church, and the writings of modern liberation theologians, the year of jubilee has served as a symbol of freedom, both spiritual and material, and inspired efforts to attain it.

The influence of the jubilee on religious thought and life—most recently visible in the celebration of the Jubilee Year 2000 in many Christian communities and the associated movement for the forgiveness of third world debt—naturally raises curiosity about the origins and history of the institution described in Leviticus 25. The most frequently asked question is invariably whether the jubilee was actually observed in ancient Israel. Unfortunately, neither the biblical nor the archeological data enables us to give a definitive answer to that question. What the biblical data does indicate, however, is that the meaning of the jubilee for the people of Israel developed over time. Thus, the reinterpretation of the jubilee in more recent times—for example, as a metaphor for the quest of African-Americans for full civil equality—stands in a long tradition of jubilee reinterpretation throughout the history of ancient Israel and early Judaism, as the religious needs and experience of the community changed and developed.

The aim of this study is to survey the history of that process of reinterpretation, from the roots of the jubilee year in ancient Near Eastern law and practice, to its original formulation in pre-exilic Israel, through its various re-uses in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Second Temple literature, and Qumran writings as a legal, ethical, chronological, eschatological, and messianic concept.1

1 The present study will stop short of the first-century texts (e.g. the New Testament,
In the course of our study, the several different senses the jubilee obtains in Israelite and Jewish literary history will be explicated. The legal (or socio-economic) sense is the first: that which obtained when the legislation was formulated. Following and building on the work of Jacob Milgrom, Moshe Weinfeld, and others, it will be argued that sometime in pre-exilic Israel the jubilee legislation was composed in a form similar to our extant texts, by Israelite priests as part of a more comprehensive code, in response to—or anticipation of—the growth of latifundia and debt-slavery, drawing upon older Israelite legal traditions (the Covenant Code) as well as the example of royal proclamations of release and forgiveness in surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures. It was intended as earnest legislation reflecting the values and structures of pre-monarchic tribal Israel, regardless of the extent to which it was practiced or enforced.

A second, or eschatological sense can be found in the exilic period in the books of Ezekiel and Isaiah, and in the Second Temple literature. The prophetic authors of Ezekiel 40–48 and the Isaiah 40–66 had meditated on Israel’s scriptural traditions, but did not foresee a simplistic return to a previous stage of Israel’s legal and religious development. Although each alludes to the jubilee in a different way, both seem to re-apply the concept of the jubilee from the individual Israelite debtor to the nation as a whole, viewing the anticipated end of the exile and return to the land as a corporate jubilee for the nation. This may be called a corporate re-application of the text. For these authors, the return from exile would involve the restoration of Israel and the inauguration of an eschatological age, for which the jubilee was one among several images.