THE RELEVANCE OF THE JUBILEE IN TODAY'S WORLD
(Leviticus 25)

If there is one aspect of contemporary life in which we cannot take it for
granted that the Scriptures have something to say to us, it is the field of
economics. What relevance could these ancient writings have for us who
live in this complex modern society, characterized by the integration of
production, commerce and finance in gigantic international corporations?

The text that we have chosen for our reflection is Leviticus 25, the
well-known chapter in which the laws regarding the Year of Jubilee are
defined. Even to the uninitiated reader the centrality of economic issues in
this biblical passage is obvious. But of what use to us are these Jubilee
laws, designed for the rural lifestyle of a people that lived thousands of
years ago? The question becomes even more complicated when we take
into account that, according to accepted scholarly opinion, there is no
evidence that the Jubilee was ever put into practice (cf. de Vaux 1976:175-
177). On this basis it could be argued that if not even Israel - the original
recipient of the regulations which we are considering - practiced the Ju-
bilee, much less can we expect that these laws should help us in shaping the
economic life of our society.

We dare to affirm, however, that in today's world there is nothing more
urgent than an ethical revolution that takes seriously the very values rep-
resented by the laws of Jubilee. Capital has become the determining factor
not only in the field of economics, but also in practically every area of
human life. Under the tyranny of Mammon, king and master of the global
economic system, millions and millions of people in every part of the
world live submerged in misery. In spite of this fact, it is claimed that this
perverse system is the only one possible and that the very suggestion of
another alternative is not realistic. In the face of the fatal claims made by
this economic imperialism it is imperative that we Christians recognize
that an essential dimension of our mission is to reaffirm the ethical values
that are part of our heritage. The present Bible study is an invitation to
reflect on these values on the basis of Leviticus 25 in the context of the
tragic situation created by the present economic system.

In spite of the time that has passed since they were formulated, the
Jubilee values maintain their relevance for the following reasons:
1. God's purpose for humanity and the creation remains unchanged, and one of the essential elements of that purpose is that human relations, including those that have to do with economics, be based on love and justice.

2. "The gifts of land to live in and law to live by were intrinsic to the way God shaped Israel to be a 'model' people" (Wright 1995:148). There is a paradigmatic relationship between Israel and the rest of humanity.

3. The basic problems that hindered human relationships in biblical times continue to obstruct human relationships today: the abuse of power, the ambition for material gain, the exploitation of the poor.

The Old Testament prophets appealed to Mosaic teachings to criticize the oppressive structures of their times and looked forward to a new world of justice and peace. In line with them, Jesus Christ proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, an era in which the Jubilee prescriptions regarding the remission of debts, the liberation of slaves, and the redistribution of capital would be fulfilled (cf. Yoder 1994:60-75). Today again a return to the ancient teaching is urgently needed in order to witness to God's purpose for economic relations and for human life in general.

I. Ecological Integrity and Liberation
(Leviticus 25:1-2)

If anything demonstrates that the present economic system, dominated by the neoliberal ideology, is in need of drastic transformation, it is the deepening of the serious economic problems of our day: environmental contamination and poverty, aggravated by unemployment. These are structural problems, and their solution demands a political decision based on the recognition that human life does not depend on the possession of many things.

Without this recognition, the economic plan adopted by many national governments in today's world leads to an increase of poverty and of the destruction of the environment. Evidently, the "science of economics" on which this plan is based helps to corroborate the ideology of the powerful, but does not take into consideration the statistics of social and ecological devastation that this plan is producing.

What answer does biblical revelation have to offer to the cry of creation and to the cry of the poor caused by this horrible devastation?