THE ACCEPTABLE YEAR OF THE LORD: 
The Jubilee as Imaginative Possibility

Sandra K. Olewine
Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies
August 1997

I. INTRODUCTION

The last few decades of the twentieth century have been marked by efforts to deconstruct Western ways of knowing and dismantle many people's belief in their universal validity and meaning. People whose voices have been silenced by these epistemological constructs have demanded to be heard and have shown that what was "assumed" to be universal, general and eternal truths are more accurately described as local, particular and ephemeral ones. Those marginalized by these prior truths are proclaiming their own centers of meaning, creating an atmosphere which calls on people everywhere to listen with new sensitivity to and awareness of the diversity of experience and reality.

Few fields of inquiry have remained untouched by this social earthquake. From science to philosophy, from economics to religion, the shifting foundations in theory and practice have often brought crisis and chaos to laboratories, lecture halls, board rooms and sanctuaries. The profusion of voices has been threatening for some who see in these changes a movement toward relativism and anarchy. For others, the transition has been seen as an opportunity to conceive new ways of being in community with each other and in relationship with the whole of creation.

While human beings often seek stable ground in turbulent times, Walter Brueggemann in his book, Texts Under Negotiation, offers a different response to this period of ambiguity:

"The core of our new awareness is that the world we have taken for granted in economics, politics, and everywhere else is an imaginative construal. And if it is a construal, then from any other perspective, the world can yet be construed differently."¹

To come to understand that which we have accepted as "given" as something which we have constructed out of our knowledge and own experience, creates the opportunity to receive knowledge and experience which differs from our own not as threat but as alternative possibility. We gain the gift of imagining new paradigms and effect a place of transformation, a movement towards conversion.

This emerging awareness impacts not only how we approach contemporary theological reflection but also how we appeal to sacred story as a partner in that reflection. Engaging our sacred texts with a willingness to see the world in a new way is not a new idea or even a particularly human one, rather something which is part of God's own hope for humankind.² "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:18-19a) God calls us to see the new things which God is doing, to use our imaginations to engage and participate in the ever-unfolding drama.

Imagination does not imply a flight of fancy or naïve speculation. Rather, as Brueggemann defines it, it is "the human capacity to picture, portray, receive, and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens."³ We are not to be so arrogant to believe that we have God figured out, but rather, to be willing to always question our certainties to see if God might have a different intent for the world and ourselves. In fact, is not the very nature of Christian proclamation to urge us to let God, through the text by the power of the Spirit, engage our lives in such a way that we begin to see new possibilities for faithful and abundant living? Sallie McFague argues that "as far as the Bible presents its traditions by means of and in the form of images, the authority of the Bible must be understood in a way that is not rigid or literalistic but

²Ibid., 37.
³Ibid., 13.
that itself embodies tension, dialectical patterns, openness, growth and relativity."\(^4\) To this end, people of faith who strive to be responsive to the Living Word of God, are called to engage in acts of imagination -- visioning and living a transformed world.

Within the framework of imaginative engagement, there is a recognition of the importance of the interaction between biblical content and contemporary context. A new world is not imagined in a vacuum, but out of the concrete time and place in which we find ourselves. As we ponder the implications of the biblical texts for our contemporary situations, there exists a need for thoughtful and prayerful examination of the images, attempting to hear them in their own context as much as we are humanly able, remembering the historical distance between text and present context. Then, we begin to ask what possibilities these images spark in our imaginations when we engage them through the lens of our particular current situations. Brueggemann suggests that "the tension between governing text (memory, tradition) and the situation that cries out for transformation creates an imaginative moral restlessness in a community that has a serious moral home."\(^5\) This tension, or chaos, becomes the creative energy which ignites the hope of new possibilities.

II. CONTEXT AND CONTENT

Many places in our world today cry out in restlessness for the possibility of transformed existence. The city I currently call home, Jerusalem, is one such place. In fact, those of us living in Israel/Palestine today do so within a moment of time in which this cry is deafening. The collapse of the Oslo process has fueled once again the cycles of violence: physical, political, economic, religious, social and psychological. The intransigence of political leadership has created an atmosphere which limits public discourse to little more than the rhetoric of blame, with all parties placing total responsibility for the deteriorating conditions at the feet of the other. The political crisis, however, is not the only crisis; maybe even more fundamental to the conflict is the underlying theological crisis which the conflict represents. The ways in which people understand God and their own relationships to God, the connections those understandings have with how people view the "other" and their relationships with the "other" and how power is used within and between the communities based on those understandings all become intertwined with each other in the tensions and debates.

There is little doubt that new ways of engaging the "other" are absolutely necessary if the peoples of the region are to move out of the nire of broken promises, frustrated dreams, unmet expectations and escalating hostilities. A need to construe the world differently, to adjust the lenses through which the situation is viewed, seems to be essential for creating an atmosphere which will assist Israelis and Palestinians to move towards a mutual coexistence based on justice and peace. Against this backdrop, then, this paper will bring one tradition found in the Old Testament into dialogue with the contemporary context in Israel/Palestine. The numerous images found in the particular texts offer possibilities for picturing and practicing a different reality in the land. Which tradition is that? The Jubilee:

> And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you to your property and every one of you to your family. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you.

Leviticus 25:10, 12a-b

Next year in 1998, the fiftieth anniversary of the declaration of the state of Israel will be observed. It will be also, therefore, the fiftieth year since the first Arab-Israeli war over the land. This current historical situation seems to naturally link the images of the biblical Jubilee to the task of visioning future relationships through theological considerations. The purposes of this article, then, are three-fold, (1) to briefly review the Jubilee images within the Old Testament, (2) to explore some of their implications for contemporary theology, and (3) to reflect on the Jubilee images as important sources for imagining an alternative reality for the two peoples of the three faiths which call the land holy.


Before beginning this process, however, two important limitations must be acknowledged. The first is that I am neither a Palestinian nor an Israeli. I am an ex-patriot United Methodist clergywoman from the United States who serves as the United Methodist Liaison to the Middle East Council of Churches in Jerusalem (MECC/JLO). This is a new relationship between my denomination and MECC/JLO which broadens the mandate of the United Methodist presence and strengthens our resolve to work in ecumenical partnership in this region. It symbolizes a commitment to strengthen the Body of Christ by providing support to undergird the Christian ministry as envisioned by the local churches and their constituencies. It is an agreement which enhances our desire to be in solidarity with the local Palestinian Christian communities by responding to their agenda and direction.

While I have had extensive connections to the people and issues in this part of the world for the last four years, at best, I still stand on the margins of the various communities involved in this intricate and complicated struggle. To attempt to do contextualized theological reflection about a situation in which I am an outsider is laden with difficulties. However, I have been requested to engage in this process of reflection by the MECC/JLO specifically because I do stand on the edge. The hope is that my vantage point will offer a slightly different perspective which might stimulate dialogue about the issues in Palestine and Israel among people of faith in many parts of the world. I offer this paper, then, in a spirit of humility. I pray that I do justice to the request and that in some small way, it might contribute to the search for a new reality in the region.

The second limitation concerns engaging the biblical texts as a partner in theological wrestling, particularly those texts dealing with the concepts of land, within the Palestinian and Israeli context. The problems of such a process warrant a major paper on their own. There is deep pain and tragic loss which has occurred, in part, because of the conflict of sacred story in this place. To give proper acknowledgment to this simply is not possible in such a short exposition. However, a brief summary is necessary to help establish the context for this paper. Many Jewish and ex-patriot Christian communities in Israel/Palestine read these texts in ways which give divine sanction to Israeli presence in and authority over the land today. This theological framework allows people, at best, to see Palestinians as aliens who do not belong to this place and whose rights or concerns are insignificant. Too often, this position has become the justification for the dehumanization, disenfranchisement and displacement of the Palestinian people.

Local Palestinian Christians have been at the forefront of a call to hear the texts differently. They have raised their voices against codes of interpretation which ignore their presence in the land and their own God-given rights to live there. The biblical passages which are offered as one of the rationales for modern-day Zionism represent occupation, destruction, injustice and displacement to the local Palestinian people. Within the tradition of the text, a voice cries out, "Where is God for the Canaanites of the story? How can conquest of another people be of God's purpose and will?" These vital questions of hermeneutics and application need to be addressed seriously by all faith communities which include the Old Testament as part of their sacred story. They are important as we grapple with the texts within their own setting and as they intersect our lives today.

In the confines of this paper, as I focus attention on the particular texts surrounding the Jubilee traditions, these same issues and questions certainly arise. Which communities were to experience the joy of liberty and the promise of return? Did one have to forgive the debts of "resident aliens" or not? The text can be interpreted to support the stance that they applied only to the Israelite community. For example in Leviticus 19:17-18b, the neighbor is clearly defined as a member of the covenant community.

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Yet, later in that same chapter, another verse indicates that the ethical parameters are just as clearly extended to include even the "resident alien" living among the Israelite people. They too are neighbor; they too are "kin."

---

6Naim Ateek, Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).
When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:33-34

Throughout the legal codes in the Old Testament, there exists this embedded tension. In one verse the boundaries around the covenant community are sharply drawn and in the next, they appear permeable and fluid. These passages represent a collection of laws and guidelines developed across many different historical realities. Each period offered shape and definition in what became a complex collection of interwoven texts. Attempting to carefully tease out the specific situations that gave rise to any one verse or passage is very difficult, if not impossible.

For the sake of this essay, then, I chose a literary approach to the text, rather than a historical-critical one. In so doing, the purpose was not to avoid these various problematic issues and questions, but rather to attempt to move the conversation in another direction. Exploring the images contained within the Jubilee traditions offers a way around some of the roadblocks which get set up when doing historical criticism. The hope is that the subsequent reflection on the images might create some space for a different type of dialogue with the texts and with each other.

IV. JUBILEE TEXTS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; ... you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all the land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.

Leviticus 25:8-9a, 9c-10a

As one reads the text announcing the year of Jubilee, images of pageantry, trumpets, celebration and joy come to mind. The declaration of liberty to all inhabitants of the land has the power to quicken the hearts of people still today. It is the proclamation of freedom and the promise of renewed community which sets the contours of the biblical Jubilee. This glorious announcement found in Leviticus, and the subsequent details of what that proclamation would mean to people does not exist in a void, however. It is but a part of a wider tradition which appears in various forms in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. Echoes of the Jubilee themes of release and liberty are found also in the prophetic traditions and later, in the Christian Gospel narratives.

In order to explore the whole of the trajectory of the Jubilee tradition would require a far longer and more in-depth paper, in part because there is a great deal of scholarly debate concerning the period and purpose of these texts. For example, some see the Leviticus composition as a late, idealistic formation developed in the same period as the holiness code in the Priestly compilation, the work of an idealistic theocratic writer living after the exile of 587 BCE. Others regard the Jubilee as part of Israel's earliest, pre-monarchical laws which fell into disuse. While there is no direct evidence of a Sabbath year or a national Jubilee being observed in the Old Testament period itself, some argue there is sufficient evidence to affirm that it was an ancient institution and not a post-exilic invention. In a summary exposition, then, which deals with texts about which the range of opinions is so diverse, care must be taken not to collapse the tradition, making general statements which blur the distinctions or avoid the problems.

However, regardless of which position scholars take concerning the texts, almost all agree that the Jubilee tradition occurs in a variety of literary forms which arose out of diverse historical circumstances. While the images form the text do not always carry the same connotations or follow a neat trajectory of development from one to the other, the Jubilee still cannot be taken simply as an ancient and outdated social proposal. It remains vitally important for communities today because of its literary authority. There is a resilient power in the Jubilee themes exactly because

9Ringe, 17.
it reminds us of images which are still poignant and striking, even in our new circumstances.10 Therefore, the following paragraphs will highlight some of those images found in Exodus, Deuteronomy and Leviticus, with a brief perusal at the use of the images in the prophetic texts.

Exodus and Deuteronomy

From the earliest periods in Israelite memory, land played a fundamental role as part of Israel's faith. From the promises to Abraham in the early chapters of Genesis to the explicit objective of the Exodus from Egypt to the major historical tradition from Joshua to David, land was understood as divine promise and gift. Land itself became a sign of Israel's covenant relationship with God. Therefore, anything to do with the division, tenure and use of the land became ethically significant because it fell within the maintenance of this covenantal relationship.11

The Jubilee traditions were developed out of the recognition that there was a connection between how one lived and what one did with the land and the worshipping of God who is at once sovereign and liberator of Israel. While there is no clear reference to the Jubilee or Sabbath year laws outside of Leviticus, the traditions there seem to be clearly an expansion of the simpler laws found in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Exodus 21-23 is known as the Covenant Code. These series of laws and rights are given to help govern the life of the people in the land, conceiving a settled rather than a nomadic existence. Within this section of texts are two passages, Exodus 21:1-6 and 23:10-11, which both highlight images found in the Jubilee tradition of Leviticus. The first is set within a social context of indebtedness, which allowed for an Israelite to go into servitude to satisfy the debt. This text speaks to the issue of release from liability of these slaves after six years of service. When released, they are to be totally freed from any debt still owed and given an opportunity to begin a life of liberty again. The image of "release" captures the heart of this passage:

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.

Exodus 21:2-3

In the second text, Ex 23:10-11, the image shifts from describing a condition of "release" for people to that of "rest" for the land. While there is no clear reference to a Sabbath year here, a fallow year, a year of rest, is presented as a requirement for cultivated fields after six years of use. This "rest" is not presented for the sake of the land, however, but for the sake of the poor.

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and its fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

Exodus 23:10-11

The requirement of the fallow year is clearly for humanitarian purposes. In letting the land rest, the poor, those without land of their own, are allowed to come to the fields and gather what is spontaneously produced in the field that year. Everything which is grown, the grapes, olives and grains, are to be left for those who have not.

In this passage is set within a larger context of concern for justice and mercy. In Exodus 23:6 there is a call for justice for the poor, for those least likely to be able to afford to defend themselves. "You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits." In Exodus 23:9, the people of God are reminded that they are not to oppress the resident aliens within the land in which they are to live. "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. Giving "rest" continues the development of these justice images from earlier verses in chapter 23.

Moving to Deuteronomy, the images in chapter 15:1-18 return to a concern with the remission of debts: verses 1-6 focus on cancellation of debts for a neighbor, verses 7-11 on the release of debts to the poor and verses 12-18 on forgiving of debts toward and freeing of slaves. While there is no specific mention of an agricultural fallow year in Deuteronomy 15, the reference to a 7-year period and the use of the concept of "release" or "remission" do function to link this collection of laws to the ones in the Covenant Code of Exodus.12

Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of the remission:
every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is
a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed.

Deuteronomy 15:1-2

Brueggemann argues that the grammatical construction of this passage underlines how significant it was for the community. In verses 1-11, there are five uses of an absolute infinitive, an infrequent construction in Hebrew, which essentially intensifies the verb used in each verse. For example, in verse 5, the sentence could read, "if only you will really obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today" or in verse 8, "You should really open your hand, willingly really lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be." Brueggemann suggests that this emphasis is rooted in an exodus vision of social reality which overrides economic reality with the more elemental reality of human community. It counters the "common sense" of the market in which the poor must pay their debts or remain in servitude by offering a forgiveness of debts and an opportunity to begin an unbound life again.13 Here, the biblical image of forgiveness, or release, is rooted in economic relationships first and foremost.

Leviticus

In the previous texts, the images of release and rest were evident. Leviticus 25 continues those themes in both the Sabbath year laws and the Jubilee observance by developing three major aspects in the legislation: regulations concerning land, debt and slaves.14 As mentioned previously, the sabbatical year, strictly speaking, is only found in Leviticus 25:2-7.

Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vines: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.

Leviticus 25:2-5

While in the Exodus 23 passage, the seventh year rest was primarily presented as a benefit for the poor, in this section of Leviticus, the sabbath rest is for the land itself. This shift underscores an essential theological point of reference which can not be overstated. The people of God are to remember at all times that land is a gift. Ownership is not vested with them, or any human being, but with God. "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." (Psalm 24:1) This theme is stated again in the Jubilee text in which the people of God are reminded of their status in relationship to the land and that they are not free to do as they wish with it.

The land shall not be sold into perpetuity for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.

Leviticus 25:23-24

Based on this awareness and theological understanding, there was then a call to a new age which visioned a time of rest and release - not only for the land, but for the people as well. It is the announcement of the Jubilee. In verses 8-17, there is some confusion within the text whether the seventh year (seven sets of seven years) was the year of

12Ringe, 20.
13Brueggemann, Texts Under Negotiation, 76-78.
Jubilee or if the Jubilee was the year following the seventh Sabbath year, or the fiftieth year. Whichever it was, the powerful words evoke images of renewal and hope.

In this passage, the images of rest and release are joined by the introduction of a new image, that of return. For those removed from their ancestral lands for reasons of debt, the proclamation is simple -- they are free to go home.

*It shall be a jubilee for you; you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you.*

Leviticus 25:10b-11a

Seemingly meant to offer a different ethic of property management, this law protected the ancestral holdings from being swallowed up by others. Again the strong theological premise that the Israelites were aliens and tenants on the land shaped this pronouncement. It did not belong to them by right, but as a gift of inheritance not to be handled speculatively. The "Jubilee aimed to restore social dignity and participation to families through maintenance and restoring of economic viability."15

Other Texts

Images within the Jubilee traditions can also be found throughout the prophetic literature. There are two major thrusts in the development of these Jubilee themes within these sections of texts: release and liberty, return and restoration. For example, in Isaiah 35, redemption and return for the people are combined in a future vision with the transformation of nature itself. In Nehemiah 5:1-13 family morality codes are shown to be meaningless if families were being split up and dispossessed by economic forces rendering them powerless to live in ways which were holy and just. In Isaiah 58, echoes of the Jubilee highlight God's strong restorative plan for God's people being linked specifically to how the weak and oppressed are treated.16

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; ... Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Isaiah 58:6-8a, 12

Summary

The Jubilee aimed to restore social dignity and participation to families through maintenance and restoring of economic viability. The images developed within this tradition portray an essential commitment to justice, mercy and forgiveness as part of an economic institution which at the heart of its concern was family and land. All of this rested in the kinship structures of Israelite society and the system of land tenure that was based upon it. The laws attempted to prevent economic exploitation by stressing that the ownership of the land rested in God rather than in human beings.17 The images lifted up in these passages are the images of a time of God's reign, a time of "unhindered blessing on a perfectly obedient people."18

You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God: for I am the Lord your God. You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely.

Leviticus 25:17-18

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

15Wright, Vol. III.
16ibid.
17ibid., 16.
18Sloan, 16.
The images found from within the Jubilee traditions provide a provocative background out of which to do theological wrestling. Listening to the text, we hear prophetic words describing a new vision, one which offers freedom and opportunity to the oppressed and poor. At the same time, we hear economic systems challenged and sense the chasm between human existence and God's sacred reign and desires for all creation. Yet, as we move from lifting up images within ancient texts to reflecting on them within any contemporary situation, some caution is necessary. Two opposing positions can be assumed in this process. The first is to move straight from the text to the situation we want to apply it to and the other is to dismiss the text as having any relevance because it comes from a different time and social reality.

Ringe argues that the "attempt to draw simple, direct or literal connections between the Jubilee tradition in the Bible and contemporary situations of pain or of human need is not a legal approach."\(^{19}\) When we do so, we collapse the historical distance between the texts and ourselves, ignoring the thousands of years which separate our world from theirs. Also, making literal connections between the texts and our present context often leads to prescriptive solutions. Doing so moves us away from exploring the text as image and toward understanding it as a recipe book. The text loses its power to stir up within us new ways of looking at a situation and to challenge our own current constructs. We can become convinced that God is on our side and the solutions are only directed at those to whom we have established are on the other side. Finally, to attempt to simple, direct application of the Jubilee images can limit their ability to help us look at all places where life of human design encounters the reality of God's sovereign will for humankind. We limit the situations and experiences in which those images might provoke new reflection and insight.\(^{20}\)

While care must be taken to avoid the above described approaches, leaning towards the other response, that of dismissing outright their significance to contemporary reflection, is also a problematic position. Some argue that since we cannot draw straight lines of analogy and because extensive debate exists about whether the Jubilee was ever actually implemented or functioned we can discard the images as impractical and irrelevant for today. Because they describe an economic and social situation so different than our own, the images cannot legitimately be applied to current situations. Yet, choosing to ignore the importance of these images for our imaginative reflection in current situations seems as dangerous as a literal application. "The historical fact of its being applied or not, is not as important for us as the ethos that inspired such legislation."\(^{21}\) The Jubilee is more than ancient proposal, outdated due to time. It is a powerful metaphor which carries enormous possibilities even in our new situations.\(^{22}\)

Against this backdrop, then, as we reflect on these images within which the specific context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we must be mindful of the cautions highlighted above. Parallels between issues addressed in the Jubilee passages and the issues at the center of the current struggle between the two peoples are easy to draw. The land, who lives on it, and how one lives while in it are key concerns for both Israelis and Palestinians. The fact that the people of Israel stand at the threshold of their national jubilee, the fiftieth anniversary of the declaration of statehood, is what provoked this paper in the first place. Therefore, in this context the tendency to move from the biblical images toward definitive prescriptive solutions is tempting and care must be taken to avoid doing so.

Yet, this awareness should not prohibit or exclude our examination of these texts. In fact, we must not shy away from wrestling with these images precisely because they do hold the potential to unsettle or disturb our conventional way of looking at the situation. Within the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, there are multiple truths in tension with one another. Allowing the Jubilee images to provide a framework by which to engage those truths creates the possibility for new insights about the other and different perspectives of the situation to be developed. But, in order for that potential to develop, both sides will need to listen to the story of the other, acknowledge the other's truth and allow it to critique and interact with their own in order to forge a new way forward.

\(^{19}\)Ringe, 91.
\(^{20}\)Ibid.
\(^{22}\)Brueggemann, "Introduction," Jesus, Liberation and the Biblical Jubilee, xi.
VI. IMAGINATIVE POSSIBILITIES

As mentioned earlier, the images found within the Jubilee traditions help us to recognize what can happen whenever humankind encounters the reality of God's sovereignty over all of life: new relationships, new community, new liberty is proclaimed in word and deed. From them, one could argue that God's primary intentions for humankind, for all of creation, is for justice, compassion and mercy to shape our relationships and that these intentions destabilize our conventional, settled perceptions of reality and invite our visioning of an alternative that can be practiced. 23

Four primary images are interwoven within the various strands of the Jubilee traditions: rest, release, return and restoration. They are important to the current context because they are images which can invite us "to reflect upon the social power and social leverage that makes some strong and some weak, some worthy and some undeserving,... to reflect upon social leverage and mortgage, upon advantage and humiliations, upon attitudes driven by mean calculation, and upon actions that can overcome fatedness." 24 What follows is only an initial engagement with these images. The examples are not meant to be exhaustive but merely to stimulate reflection on and prod discussion of the issues in Israel-Palestine in ways which might move people beyond the old patterns of discourse and static views of the situation.

REST

The image of rest is primarily focused on the land, either for its own sake or for the sake of the poor. Set within the Jubilee, it is a time in which people are to remember God's sovereignty and to assess their lives in accordance to God's purposes for human relationships, to move them out of their regular patterns of commerce and negotiation, creating space in their lives for acts of liberty and justice. For Palestinians and Israelis, this image is a critical one because land is at the very heart of the conflict. In this forty-ninth year of Israeli statehood, a year in which one people celebrate their claim and rights over and in the land and another mourn their continuing loss of claims and rights, letting the land "rest" is an image worthy of consideration.

There are many different ways in which this image of "rest" might be helpful in the current context. New frameworks could be developed to approach numerous outstanding questions which both peoples face in relationship to their use of the land, such as concerns over agricultural practices or significant environmental problems. However, probably the most important issue which might be reframed through using this image is that of the continuing construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank areas, Gaza and East Jerusalem by the Israeli government. This is one of the most divisive issues between the two peoples today, particularly as the final status negotiations concerning the division of land is pending. With the building of these settlements, Palestinian families are often displaced from their homes or lose significant portions of their farm land. Roads are constructed to join the various settlements which then crisscross over the land, cutting the Territories into small isolated pieces and thus severely impacting the future possibility for the development of a sovereign Palestinian state.

One of the reasons given for the continued building by Israeli politicians is that to stop construction would be seen as a sign of weakness and vulnerability. But, what might happen if that sense of weakness were reinterpreted? What if a decision was made to halt all present construction on the internationally-recognized disputed land not because of being weak but because of honoring a covenant with God? What would happen if the state of Israel, as part of its national Jubilee, decided to let the land "rest" as it sought to work out its relationship with the people they have termed "resident aliens" in the land? How might "rest" be interpreted within Israeli society as a time to discern the direction and goals for the nation during the next fifty years, to create time to ask who they are and who they will be? Would this not also provide the same opportunity to the Palestinian people, offering them a time in which to establish themselves as a people and a nation? To work out their positions without feeling under the threat of losing more and more territory? Allowing the land to "rest" could create open spaces for such questions to be asked.

23ibid., 1.
24Brueggemann, Texts Under Negotiation, 78.
RELEASE

Within the Jubilee traditions, the image of release or forgiveness is at the heart a political one; it is meant to set people free from the dehumanizing effects of the cycles of consuming debt and oppression. To engage in such acts is to participate in one of the essential elements necessary for encountering God's reign on earth. And, in fact, choosing to ignore the need for such action, maintaining instead patterns of "unforgiveness," produces a living death. 25 In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the image of "release" is not an easy one with which to wrestle. Doing so seems to require that both peoples be willing to forgive debts owed them by the other, debts of many different types, both real and perceived. Yet, to avoid reflecting on this difficult image, seems likely to ensure the continued deterioration of relationships.

The list of "debts" which need to be forgiven in this context is quite long. There is evidence people from both sides feel that the "other side" owes them and often this feeling perpetuates calls for vengeance or retribution. Numerous wars, the Intifada and the current political reality have each contributed to creating this list of perceived and real debts owed by one people to the other. One aspect of "release" which might be explored is that of the Palestinians forgiving the "debt" of land which was obtained by the Israelis during the 1948 war. Over 750,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes in this war. The vast majority of these people became refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, and other surrounding Arab countries. Others immigrated to other parts of the world, beginning the significant diaspora of the Palestinian population. One "release" which the Palestinians could offer would be to acknowledge the presence of the state of Israel, to support its right to exist and to recognize the borders of the state as defined by the pre-1967 war. They would release their claim on that land in order to assure the Israelis that their homeland is secure. This is not an easy thing to ask of people who lost their land and homes, most of which had belonged to their families for centuries; however, it is one "release" which might allow the patterns of discourse to move beyond the circles of historical blame and injury.

RETURN

There may be no more poignant image in the biblical narrative than that of return. The pronouncement of the Jubilee is intimately connected to all the hope, promise and joy which this image evokes, of people separated from their land and families returning home. It is this opportunity to return which hallows the fiftieth year, which signifies people's recognition of both God's sovereignty over the land and its people and the ethical imperatives required of such a recognition. In the land today, the image of return is no less powerful. For Israelis the image has under girded one hundred years of modern Zionism, with the land being seen as a refuge for a people who felt they had no home in the world, no place to call their own. For Palestinians, the return of the Jewish people to the region has most often meant forced displacement from their ancestral lands, creating their own reality of longing for families to be reunited and homelands to be returned.

The "right of return" is one of the most precious of Jewish-Israeli options. Almost anyone who is able to establish that he or she is of Jewish background is able to emigrate to Israel and to receive substantial support for at least one year to make the adjustment to living in the country, including housing subsidies, language schools, education supports and employment development. Palestinians, who have their own large refugee and diaspora communities, also long to have the right to return to this land. Currently, there is no legal way for them to do so, and if Palestinians are willing to make the above mentioned "release," then hundreds of thousands of their people would most likely never be able to return to their previous homelands.

One way in which the Jubilee image of "return" might be formulated would be in reference to the Jewish settlements which have been built since 1967 in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem areas. If the final status negotiations are to begin again, one of the major issues which will have to be addressed is the status and rights of the Palestinian refugees. What would happen if the Israeli government agreed to relocate the Jewish settlers from the territories to housing within the pre-1967 Israeli borders and then made some or all of the housing in the settlements available to the Palestinian refugees as compensation for the land and homes lost in the 1948 war?

25 ibid., 79.
How might this transform the discussions about the final status of the land and the possibility of a future Palestinian state? How might this relieve the crisis in housing which Palestinians already living in the territories are experiencing? How might this impact the Palestinians considerations of the borders for Israel and their acceptance of new configurations? How might this impact the stabilization of the Palestinian society and the related concern for Israelis of their security?

RESTORATION

This last image, restoration, is the most elusive and yet, probably the one which is key to the other three. It comes most sharply into focus in the various prophetic texts which continue the Jubilee themes. It is about becoming a people again, of being restored as a community that honors the covenantal relationship with God by seeking to live in righteousness and truth. It is for a people who have lost their way and seek earnestly to repent of past transgressions, to revive their sense of purpose and renew their commitment to the God who is liberator and sovereign. The restoration concerns not only the people's relationship with God but also with other people. It is about restoring human dignity.

Certainly one of the most pressing needs within the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the need to see one another as children of God, as human beings worthy of respect and dignity. Often, when tensions rise and tempers flare, shortsighted and belittling comments are made about the other communities. The level of misinformation and ignorance about the other is great. Coming to a new way of living with each other requires that people push through their stereotypes and prejudices, to "restore" the other to human being created of God. What impact would "restoring" the other to human dignity have on all the negotiations? How would it transform the religiously-motivated insults and attacks on members of the other traditions? Might it shift the content of public discourse from attacks and accusations to reasoned and thoughtful comments? What climate would it create for people to respond to hate-filled or ignorant statements and actions by members of their own community toward members of the other?

VI. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Throughout the history of Israel, from the sabbath-year laws in the Covenant Code to the interpretation of them in later texts, the traditions associated with the Jubilee appear to affirm two things. The first is that God is sovereign over Israel and the second that the structure of life - economic and social - must embody the affirmation of that sovereignty. In other words, God's reign and humankind's liberation go hand in hand. The continuing power of Jubilee language is not as a legal insistence nor as a didactic proposal for one people, but as a powerful metaphor for all. Wherever the sacred texts are taken seriously and the images continue to push forward into the life of a community, then what was sociological proposal takes on a literary rhetorical power well beyond the specific social situation in which it was proposed.26

The images push us to wrestle with God's liberation and healing intentions for all creation. Within the specific context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, using these images as a framework to view the issues offers the possibility for engaging the situation in some different ways. What has been offered here is merely a beginning, a highlighting of some of the possible questions and issues which might be addressed as the Jubilee traditions interplay with this context.

This approach has been proposed because of a belief that our political, economic and social realities do not provide mere illustrations of the way in which God's reign is experienced, but rather, that they are the precise arenas in which the impact of God's reign is felt.27 Those of us who live in Israel/Palestine can not hope to create new ways of being with one another, new forms of community, without striving to bring those areas of our shared life into relationship with God's intentions for the world. If we are willing to struggle with the biblical images in ways which create space for discussion, then maybe we might begin to see the new things that God is doing. Maybe then, we would see the acceptable year of the Lord.

27ibid., 92-93.