*Introduction*

The most unusual observance that God commanded the Israelites through Moses was the keeping of the year of jubilee. For most people this celebration occurred only once in their life time, and for many not even that, as it occurred only once every 50 years.

At this year of jubilee all Israelites who had sold themselves into slavery were set free, and all land that had been sold reverted to its original owner. This meant that no Israelite could ever be in permanent slavery; nor could any Israelite permanently lose his inheritance.

The English word *jubilee* comes from the Hebrew word *yobel* meaning a trumpet or ram’s horn. These rams’ horns were blown on the Day of Atonement to announce the start of the year of jubilee. The word *jubilee* should not be confused with the word *jubilation* which comes from a Latin word meaning to *rejoice*. The year of jubilee was no doubt a time of great jubilation, but the similarities of the two words are (at least humanly speaking) a coincidence.

To understand the year of jubilee more clearly we must first review the concept of the Sabbath.

**The Sabbath**

Sabbath observance was part of the ceremonial law that God gave Israel through Moses. Normally we think of the Sabbath as a day of the week, but its meaning in scripture is much wider. Its teaching applies not only to the seventh day of the week, but also to the 7 festivals of Israel’s calendar and to periods of 7 years and 7 times 7 years. Such is its importance that, unlike any other part of the ceremonial law, its keeping is even one of the 10 commandments.

The words of the fourth commandment are: ‘Six days shall you labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.’

The ancient Israelites understood the Sabbath as a literal day of the week, the seventh day which corresponds to our Saturday. On that day they strictly refrained from all work. This was a sign and covenant between them and Yahweh their God, which separated them from the tribes who surrounded them.

In Exodus 31: 15 God prescribed the death penalty for anyone who broke the Sabbath. ‘For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death.’

In Deuteronomy 5, where the commandments are repeated, we find this addition to the fourth commandment: ‘Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.’

God said that the Sabbath was to be a holy day. This simply means a day that is set apart or different from other days. It was set apart as a day of rest.

Why do we find this ceremonial commandment to keep the sabbath numbered among the 10 commandments? It is the longest of all the commandments and is even placed before all the moral commandments such as ‘Do not murder’ and ‘Do not steal’? I suggest 3 reasons:

1. The sabbath embodies the gospel. Central to the whole gospel message is the fact that God *gave*. Man did not *earn.* We have earned or deserved nothing. God freely gave his only son to save us from our sin.
2. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. Slaves are not given days off! The whole idea was absolutely new and revolutionary.
3. The sabbath, as we will now see, is the foundation of all other Hebrew festivals.

**Annual Festivals**

The idea of a sabbath rest is the foundation of all the other celebrations of the old covenant. When we look at the festivals we find that no unnecessary work must be done on any of them.

Pentecost is the Greek name for the Hebrew שּבֻעוֹת (shavuot) or Festival of Weeks. This is how it is described in Lev 23: 15, 16: ‘From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD.’ We see then that this festival was a sabbath of sabbaths.

The sabbath is a special day. That is what the word *holy* means - set apart or special. The seventh sabbath is a special day among special days.

The seventh day of the week or sabbath was a special day, and we also find that the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar was a special month. In it there were 3 festivals and 4 extra sabbath days. The first day of the seventh month was the Festival of Trumpets. This was also a sabbath. Likewise the tenth day of the seventh month was a sabbath. This was the great Yom Kippur or Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur was followed on the fifteenth day of the seventh month by the 8 day Festival of Booths or Tabernacles. The first and last days of this festival were also sabbaths.

We see then that not only was the seventh day of the week a special day, but also that the seventh month was a special month containing 3 festivals and 4 extra sabbath days.

**Sabbatical Years**

The seventh day was special and the seventh month was special, and so also was the seventh year. It was a sabbatical year. Leviticus 25: 1-4 reads: ‘The LORD said to Moses on Mount Sinai, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.’"’

The sabbath *day* was a time of rest for everyone, male, female, masters, servants and even animals. The seventh *year* was a time of rest for the land.

Why does the human body need about 8 hours sleep in every 24? What happens during those 8 hours? Scientists still cannot answer these questions. We understand the need for food, but why should we need sleep? God has so designed creation that everything needs rest. He could have designed it a different way, but he chose to build the need for rest into the very fabric of creation. He did this to teach and illustrate a vital spiritual lesson.

**Jubilees**

This brings us to the main subject of this writing. Verses 8 to 55 of Leviticus 25 describe the year of jubilee. The first few verses are as follows: ‘Count off seven sabbaths of years -- seven times seven years -- so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan.’

Like the day of Pentecost, the year of jubilee is a sabbath of sabbaths. It is a special year among special years. Its climax was the great Day of Atonement What happened then on this momentous once-in-a-lifetime occasion? Trumpets were sounded throughout the land of Israel, and 2 amazing things took place.

All Hebrews slaves were set free.

All land returned to its original owner or owner’s family.

We cannot understand the full impact of this without knowing its historical background. For more than 80 years before the Exodus, the Israelites had been slaves in the land of Egypt, without freedom and without possessions. When they reached the land of Canaan, Joshua divided the land among their tribes and their families, so that each had his own inheritance. Every adult male among them became a land owner. This land was a permanent possession that could never depart from his family. If a man became poor he could sell part or all of his land, but *only temporarily.* It would always revert to him or his descendants at the year of jubilee. If he became even poorer and was unable to pay his debts, he could sell himself into slavery, and work to pay off his debts. Again that slavery could only ever be temporary. When the great Day of Atonement in the year of jubilee came he became a free man once again and repossessed his inheritance.

What a marvellous provision this was! How many landless slaves in the poorer countries of the world today would wish they lived under such laws!

These then were the laws of the sabbath, the festivals, sabbatical years and jubilees that God gave to ancient Israel through his servant Moses.

A study of the Bible’s chronology reveals the remarkable fact that unknown to Israel God observed special jubilee years. **5 of the most important and significant events in Bible history occurred exactly on key jubilee years.** We will now look at these 5 great jubilee events and see how the 2 main aspects of jubilee - freedom and repossession of inheritance - have been fulfilled in them. We will then look forward to their fulfilment in an even greater jubilee in our present times.

**Past Jubilees**

The day of Pentecost, as I have said, was the 50th day and was the day following the 7 weeks from the Passover. The year of jubilee occurred after 7 sabbatical years, or 49 years. It began on the Day of Atonement in the 49th year and ran on till the Day of Atonement in the 50th year.

**The Birth of Abraham**

The first notable jubilee that God (unknown to man) observed was the birth of Abraham. This happened exactly 40 jubilees or 2000 years in Bible reckoning from Adam.

We cannot exaggerate the future importance of what was at the time a quiet, unspectacular event. It was the start of God’s redemptive purposes for the whole creation. Without Abraham there would have been no Israel, no Moses, no law, no exodus from Egypt or Babylon and no Jesus. Abraham was God’s new beginning.

Abraham was born in a city called Ur of the Chaldees in the land of Babylonia. This was a corrupt place and the first thing God did was to call him out of it. His first recorded words to Abraham were: ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.’

Here we find the seeds of the jubilee. Abraham left Babylon (which was later to become the land of captivity for the Jews) and went to the country which God was going to give him for an inheritance. We will see these two themes - freedom from slavery and possession of inheritance - repeating themselves in the other great jubilees that followed.

**The Exodus**

Most amazing for its timing is what happened in the year that was exactly the 50th jubilee from Adam.

A jubilee itself is a very special year, being a sabbath of sabbaths. What then is a 50th jubilee but a jubilee of jubilees So what happened in the year 2500 from Adam - this jubilee of jubilees?

This was the very year that the Israelites came out of Egypt! This event was a wonderful sabbath. The Israelites were able to rest from their hard labour in the land of Egypt. It was also the ultimate fulfilment of the Bible law of jubilee. The 2 great jubilee features were both remarkably present.

The Exodus was the greatest setting free of slaves the world has ever seen. It was also the start of the process by which the land of Canaan returned to its rightful owners. God had promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants. When they were set free from Egypt the way was open for them to march in and claim their inheritance.

50 days after the Exodus on the day of Pentecost, the Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai. We read in Exodus 19: 16 ‘On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.’ This was no other than the trumpet of jubilee.

**The Dedication of Solomon’s Temple**

500 years on from the Exodus came the high point in Israel’s national history. During those 500 years the Israelites had wandered through the desert under Moses, and then conquered Canaan under Joshua.

After several centuries under the judges they had their 3 greatest kings. Saul defeated the Amalekites who were their most powerful enemies. David went on from Saul’s foundation to gain victory after victory. Solomon could then enjoy the fruits of David’s victories and turn his attention to amassing wealth and building great buildings.

Solomon had the privilege of building the temple or house of God. How great and wonderful was the occasion when the temple was finally finished and the time came to dedicate it to God. The year (unknown to Solomon) was the 60th jubilee from Adam and the time was the Festival of Tabernacles. On this most special occasion the Holy Spirit came down with great power, and the priests were unable to stand to minister because of the glory of the Lord (1 Kings 8: 11).

This moment in history was the completion of everything that had begun at the Exodus. The Israelites were for a brief period a totally free people living in their own land - a status they soon lost and did not regain at any time in their history till the last century.

**The Return from Babylon**

The following 500 years were an unhappy period of decline for Israel. At the end of it the unbelievable happened. God, who cannot lie, had twice promised the land of Israel to Abraham as an ‘everlasting possession’ (Gen 17: 8 and 48: 4). That promise had been marvellously fulfilled. Israel had gone from being a rabble of slaves in a foreign land to being a powerful independent people in their own kingdom. Now again they became captives in a foreign land. What had happened to God’s promises?

This captivity was very different from the time in Egypt. It was a judgement and a consequence of sin. Most especially it was a judgement on the people of God for worshipping other gods. It was a judgement on religious sin.

Babylon in scripture is a picture of man’s religion. For centuries manmade, man-centred, man-controlled religion has held the true people of God in captivity.

Daniel and Nehemiah fasted and wept and confessed their sins and the sins of their people, and God granted deliverance. Cyrus, king of Persia, issued a decree that the Jews should return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1: 1-5).

*This decree was issued at exactly the 70th jubilee from Adam*. Once again we see the terms of the jubilee fulfilled. The captives were set free and returned to possess their inheritance.

**The Death and Resurrection of Jesus**

490 (reckoned as 500) years on from the Jewish return from Babylon we reach the times of the New Testament. This time period is clearly described in Daniel’s prophecy: ‘Seventy ‘sevens’ are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy..’ (Dan 9: 24).

What happened to fulfil this prophecy?

Nothing less than the greatest event in all recorded history: the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Appropriately this occurred at the 80th jubilee from Adam, the number 8 and its multiples being associated especially with Jesus and his resurrection.

The children of Israel were set free from Egypt at the Exodus. The Jews were set free from Babylon after their 70 years of captivity. Jesus at his resurrection was set free from death. We also read in Mat 27: 52, 53 that ‘The tombs were opened and the bodies of many saints who slept were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.’

This was an expression of jubilee that exceeded all previous jubilees. Jesus himself was set free from the ultimate imprisonment. He overcame death for himself and opened a way of deliverance for the whole creation.

Jesus began his ministry with a clear reference to the year of jubilee. In the synagogue at Nazareth he read these words from Isaiah: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ (Isaiah 61: 1, 2 and Luke 4: 18, 19). He spoke of freedom to the prisoners and releasing the oppressed and proclaiming the *year* of the Lord’s favour. What other year could this mean but the year of jubilee? After proclaiming it he went on to bring deliverance from sin, sickness and Satan to multitudes of those who were bound and afflicted. All this culminated with his own deliverance from the chains of death, and 50 days later the deliverance of his followers from all fear on the glorious day of Pentecost. They in turn proclaimed deliverance and release to captives wherever they went.

**A Future Jubilee**

We have considered 5 great jubilees that occurred in Bible times. The following table shows these jubilees with their equivalent number of Bible years from Adam. I have added one further jubilee which we will now consider.

So do the first 5 great jubilees of the past all point to the still greater sixth jubilee to come?

What is there in scripture that indicates that this is so?

**1. Paul’s specific prophecy.**

Paul looked forward to an event, which in Romans 8 he described as *the manifestation of the sons of God.* He wrote, ‘The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the sons of God.’ When we look more closely at the context of these words, we find an exact parallel with the Exodus from Egypt. His words are filled with the language of jubilee. Rom 8: 18-23 reads as follows:

‘I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.’

The children of Israel groaned in their sufferings for more than 80 years in Egypt. They were crying out for deliverance and freedom. God was preparing Moses to be their deliverer. Moses was, I believe, the prototype of the manifested sons of God. For 40 years God had been setting him free from all that belonged to Egypt. After that preparation at last he was ready, in the mighty power of God, to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt and into their promised inheritance.

**2. Jesus said: "I will come again".**

Many Christians all over the world have been taught to expect a literal fulfilment of these words. They expect Jesus to return physically in person and set up his kingdom on this earth. He will come with the clouds, and every eye will see him; but those clouds will not be clouds of physical water. Rather they will be a great cloud of witnesses who have been spiritually drawn up from the earth to reign with him in heavenly places.

**3. The Festival of Tabernacles.**

As stated earlier, the Hebrew religious calendar had 3 great festivals, namely Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. These festivals have deep prophetic meaning. They speak of 3 stages of spiritual experience in the lives of the people of God, both as individuals and as a whole.

The church as a whole has experienced Passover and Pentecost and many individuals have celebrated these festivals in their personal lives. However the Festival of Tabernacles remains largely unfulfilled.

The Festival of Tabernacles was the climax of Israel’s religious calendar. Unlike the one day festival of Pentecost its celebration lasted a full 7 days. It was the final harvest festival of the year when all the crops were gathered. It was the festival of fullness and perfection.

This festival remains to be fulfilled and I believe it corresponds to the great sixth jubilee.

**4. The Sabbath.**

The writer to the Hebrews wrote: ‘There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God’ (Heb 4: 9). He looked forward to a time that was yet to come. A Jubilee of consummation.

**Conclusion**

Jesus like Moses comes to deliver a people from bondage. Jesus does in the spiritual realm what Moses did in the natural realm. The exodus was the birth of Israel, the natural people of God. This jubilee was the birth of the true church, the spiritual people of God.

The sixth jubilee is and will be the fulfilment and culmination of all previous jubilees.

For centuries the true people of God have been held captive by manmade religious systems. God is now calling them out of this captivity, and more and more people are hearing, understanding and obeying that call.

We have seen that whereas the Exodus was a birth and a beginning, the jubilee of Solomon was a climax and a culmination.

Moses lead an undisciplined rabble of slaves out of Egypt. 500 years later they were a powerful people with a country, a capital and a king.

In the centre of it was the newly built temple of God, and the glory of God descended to fill it. This occasion was far more glorious than the Exodus, but it owed everything to it. Without Moses there would have been no land of Israel, no Jerusalem and no temple.

In the same way this consummation jubilee will be far more glorious than the New Testament jubilee, but it will be wholly founded on the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Without Jesus there would be nothing. Without Pentecost and Peter and Paul and the scriptures they wrote there would be nothing. What they all did was the foundation; this will be the completed building. Its glory will exceed everything that has gone before.

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Anointed), and he will reign for ever and ever.’

Amen