

in the days of Christ's first coming, or soon after. They are prophecies about Israel's future blessing, and are still valid today, awaiting their fulfilment. Attempts are wrongly made to explain many other prophecies in a similar way, and we hope to find space to consider more of these later

in the series. In the next article, however, we look at prophecies which are said not to have any fulfilment at all because they were conditional, and check whether this is a fair deduction.

(To be continued)



## Encounter

*Reprinted items from earlier issues, chosen by the Publishing Editor*

# The Law given through Moses

## 6. Sabbaths and jubilees\*

Islip Collyer

**T**HE LORD JESUS said that the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath (Mk. 2:27). Perhaps some students might find it difficult to reconcile this with the severity of the Mosaic regulations. It was decreed that anyone performing servile work on the sabbath day should be put to death, and readers may remember that there is one instance recorded of a rebel being stoned for gathering sticks on the sabbath day (Num. 15:32-36).

On reflection we realise that severity is often necessary even in conferring a blessing on humanity, for if rebels were allowed to have their own way the law would be spoilt for everyone. A definite rule was necessary, and when God was the Lawgiver any deliberate repudiation of that rule called for severity. This was not one of those matters in which a man with good intentions might fail through the weakness of the flesh. We cannot imagine any man feeling an overmastering urge to go out gathering sticks on the sabbath day. The stick gatherer was a rebel against Moses and against God, deliberately breaking a law which had just been given. His action was the expression of a strong and rebellious spirit and of stubborn flesh, not of a willing spirit and weak flesh.

Repeatedly God has shown a readiness to forgive the sins of human weakness, even when they are very evil; but there is no mercy for the cold rebellion of scornful men who despise the Divine law. There are some terrible penalties imposed by nature, which we come to recognise

and respect. When we are cold we can make a fire and draw near to its cheering and comforting warmth. If we plunged into the fire we should be burnt. It would be hard if we were forbidden to draw near, but it is no hardship to be warned against falling into the flames. We have learned the law and we respect it. So men could be warmed and cheered by the seventh day of rest. There was no reason for them to repudiate that rest, unless they were rebels desiring to treat the Law with contempt.

Clearly this law of the sabbath made a tremendous impression on the Jews. It was observed through the centuries, and still holds its place in their economy even after thousands of years of dispersion and persecution. In the last days of their life in Palestine there was a tendency with some of them to make the sabbath needlessly strict, and that was the reason for the protest of the Lord Jesus.

God will not tolerate a scornful flouting of this beneficent law, but He certainly did not desire that humble and obedient men should be tormented by man-made technicalities which would make the sabbath a day of fear rather than of rest. If a fellow creature or one of the animals suffered accident on the sabbath day it was right to give the necessary help. If men were hungry, and in accordance with the Law they took a handful of grain to eat (see Deuteronomy 23:25), they were not to be condemned on the ground that rubbing the ears of wheat in the hand amounted to forbidden work. As for the

objection to the works of healing on the sabbath day, this aroused the Lord's indignation. It was a hypocritical straining to find fault.

There was a searching meaning in that question put by the Lord Jesus just before he performed one of his works of healing: "Is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good, or to do evil? to save life, or to destroy it?" (Lk. 6:9). In the days of the Maccabees the doctors of the Law had been constrained to proclaim that fighting on the sabbath was legitimate. Men of the same order were now trying to condemn the saving of life. Here was the point of Christ's question. Was it lawful on the sabbath to fight and destroy, but not lawful to heal and save?

Nothing could have exposed the hollowness of the criticism more effectively. The sabbath was designed to be a blessing, not a torment of introspective doubts and fears, and certainly not a basis for harsh judging of other men. God will not permit any of His laws to be despised. Rebels are repudiated, but self-righteous men who try to bind grievous and unnecessary burdens onto humble servants are condemned almost as severely. It was said that some of the Pharisees suggested that it was not lawful to eat an egg if the hen had laid it on the sabbath day! This is an indication of the extremes to which some zealots will go, making a parade of scruples designed to impress men rather than to please God. The Lord Jesus shows the true way in this as in all other matters.

THE land laws of the Mosaic economy were connected with the sabbath, but they cannot be regarded as in any sense included in the Ten Commandments. They were additional laws, beneficent and ideal, but difficult to apply with anything approaching completeness in such a faulty community as that of Israel. They are plainly stated in Leviticus 25, and in the next chapter there is an equally plain indication that they would not be properly observed.

In harmony with this fact, we find that, whilst the seventh day of rest and worship was strictly commanded, with death the penalty for disobedience, there is no such severe injunction regarding the sabbath of years. No punishment was decreed for neglecting its provisions, and we read of no specific judgement to call the nation to its observance. Like some of the laws of the Christian religion, it cannot be said to have failed, for it has never been properly tried.

The law was that the seventh year should be a sabbath of rest for the land, in which there should be neither reaping or sowing. That which chanced to grow should be for the poor, and anything they might leave was for the cattle. Not until the eighth year should the routine of ploughing and sowing be resumed.

These conditions may have been observed during the early years of the inheritance, while the men who had witnessed the birth of the nation were still living. We read that the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua and of the elders who were contemporary with him (Judg. 2:7). The nation as a whole soon failed to observe the statutes given through Moses; and, as a result of this early neglect, conditions arose in which it would hardly have been possible to observe each seventh year as a sabbath.

IT is obvious that, for this law to have been kept strictly, a Divine guidance and control would have been continually necessary. This fact was clearly recognised and stated when the law was given. In Leviticus 25 we have the law defined, and then in verses 20 and 21 the natural question of practical men is propounded and answered: "And if ye shall say, What shall we eat the seventh year? . . . then I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years".

It is quite certain that this result would not come in the ordinary course of nature. It is far more probable that the sixth year would produce the poorest crops. Land may be improved by lying fallow for a year. It is nourished by the rain and dust that fall upon it, and it may have its fertility restored by the growth of certain weeds and by bacteriological agencies of extraordinary complexity. If the range of crops grown had been too limited, all farmers would agree that a rest was desirable. Then, in the ordinary course of nature, the first year after the rest would be the most fertile, whilst the sixth would be the worst. Only God could command such a blessing on the sixth year as to make the law practicable.

FOR how long did the people enjoy such conditions? In the twenty-sixth chapter of Leviticus they were assured of blessings which would come upon them if they walked in the Divine statutes: rain from heaven, the land yielding her increase, the trees bearing fruit, threshing reaching to vintage and vintage to sowing time, peace in the

land, and no sword to make them afraid. In such conditions the sabbath of years could have been a sustained reality and blessing.

Such conditions, however, only lasted for a short time. The book of Judges shows that with the passing of the first generation there came the first serious decline. There were periods of rest from war in the days of the judges. There were times of peace lasting for forty years and one period of eighty years. In such times of rest from war there may have been some revival of the land laws, as is indeed suggested in the book of Ruth. The description given towards the end of the book of Judges, that "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 21:25), shows that the nation as a whole had departed from the Law of Moses.

IF we continue to read the twenty-sixth chapter of the book of Leviticus, we seem to find that the curses loom larger than the blessings, and there is definite prophecy of all the evil that would come upon the people for their sins. In this connection the land's sabbaths are particularly mentioned. It is prophetically declared that, when the people would be exiled and scattered, the deserted land would enjoy the sabbaths that had not been observed during the time of inheritance. In reading the historical records, we may find many references to various commandments of the Law and their effect on the national life, but there does not appear to be any direct reference to the seventh year of rest.

We may take note of another fact bearing directly upon this subject. With abundantly filled stores, a year of rest would be a great blessing, if people knew how to use their leisure, but it would be a curse if they had not learned the way of wisdom. In the light of apostolic comment, it seems reasonable to think of the seventh year of rest as a shadow of good things to come rather than as a workable law for ancient Israel. The people when they inherited the land under the Mosaic economy were not righteous enough to have that constant protection apart from which the seventh year of rest was not practicable, and they were not wise enough to have found it a blessing. Like other good things, it failed through human weakness.

CLOSELY linked with the sabbatical year was the law of jubilee. It was provided that after seven sevens of years a jubilee should be proclaimed. Slaves should be freed, and land which

had been sold should return to the original owners.

It was an ideal statute, making God the real owner, so that the land could not be sold for ever. Men were lessees, with no 'ground rent' to pay, and no power to part with the land except as a temporary measure. All the people were to have an inheritance when the land was first divided, and the law of the jubilee would prevent thriftless men from impoverishing their families by selling their possession and squandering the money. At the fiftieth year the land would return to them. It was a most beneficial law, guarding against the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few.

The modern leasehold system, if it be regarded as in any way related to the old law, is surely the worst of all travesties. The modern law makes for inequalities with its strict reservation of all rights for the ground landlord. It gives houses and fruit trees and greatly enhanced values to those who are already wealthy. It opens the way to many abuses characteristic of modern days. The Mosaic law of the jubilee was utterly different. It was a blessing to the poor and a check to the avaricious.

WE cannot say for how long the people of Israel were able to keep this part of the Law, or what modifications were forced upon them by hard circumstances. These matters are not dealt with in the later books of Scripture for the benefit of enquiring readers. They only come out incidentally. In the days of Ruth the law was observed in the land of Judah. In the days of Ahab it seems that Naboth had a portion in Jezreel which he regarded as the inheritance of his fathers.

These incidental allusions indicate that there was some attempt to keep the land laws when the nation enjoyed a measure of peace. Enemies, however, took much of the land, even in the early days. Many of the Israelites were driven into the mountains, losing their possessions of land in more favoured parts. The prophetic statement in Leviticus shows that there were not many years of rest. The land did not enjoy her sabbaths while the people of Israel dwelt there (26:34,35), and it seems clear that there were not many who for any length of time were able to enjoy the blessing of the jubilee.

---

\* First published June 1947.