

CHRISTIANITY AND HENRY GEORGE

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**“Land must
not be sold
in perpetuity
for the land
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and you are
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and guests.”
Lev 25:23.**

Georgism really has no borders. We embrace the rich and the poor. Our philosophy tempers right and left thinking. We are rich in philosophy and yet we have always maintained a strong respect for research of current economic situations. Land is at the heart of our economic practices and the way we manage our land and resources reflects all our relationships with each other and creation itself.

Those of you who have read *Progress and Poverty* know that George was a deeply religious man. On sending a copy of his book to his father he wrote in a letter to him “... It is with a deep feeling of gratitude to Our Father in Heaven that I send you a printed copy of this book. I am grateful that I have been enabled to write it and that you have been enabled to live and see it. It represents a great deal of work and a great deal of sacrifice but now it is done. It will not be recognized at first maybe not for some time but it will ultimately be considered a great book.”

George clearly felt that his work had been inspired. He was sharing a great truth of creation with his readers. He was at the service of both God and humanity. This missionary zeal is sometimes misunderstood by believers and non believers alike.

In *Social Problems* George wrote. “The intelligence required for the solving of social problems is not a thing of the mere intellect. It must be animated with the religious sentiment and warm with sympathy for human suffering. It must stretch out beyond self interest, whether it be the self interest of the few or of the many. It must seek justice. For at the bottom of every social problem we will find a social wrong.”

Christians are well aware of the dangers of using the Bible to prove something. We have all seen how the bible has been used to justify slavery, wars, the subjugation of women to name just a few. There is however a biblical text which always interests Georgists. It can be interpreted in

different ways but its fundamental meaning remains. When we understand the economic nature of land i.e. that when communities develop by their presence and activity they bring about a locational value in land that should be captured for the common good, they see in the biblical verse of Leviticus 25:23 a profound truth. Archer Torrey in *Biblical Economics* remarks on “The Church’s habit of seeing this as a trivial issue” affects the general attitude of scholars and readers alike. And yet it is not a trivial issue as biblical verse refers to it time and time again.

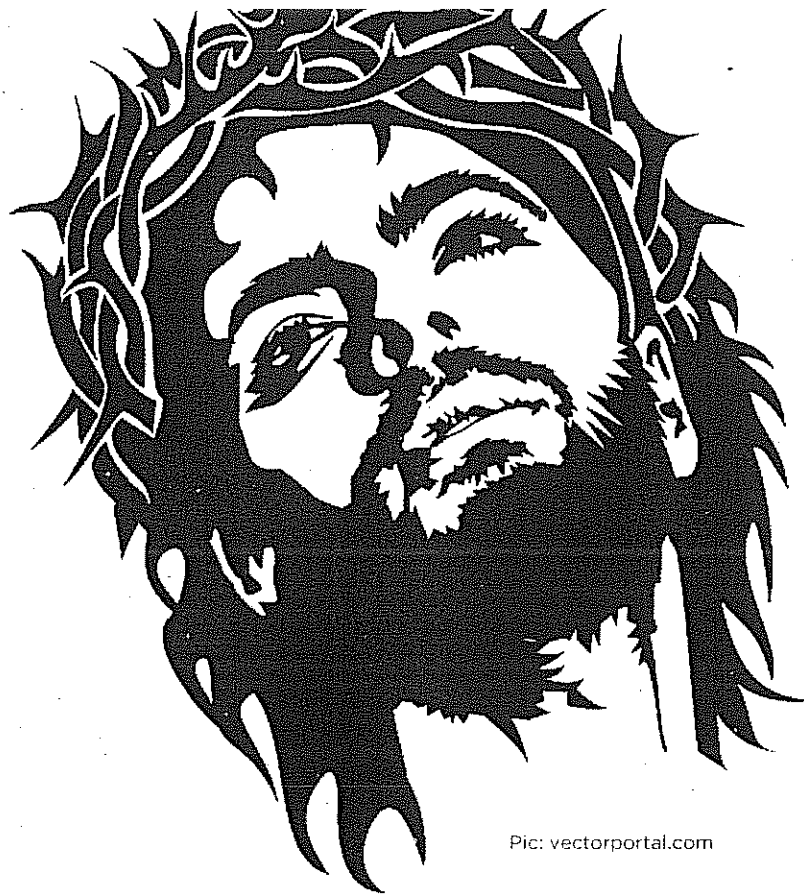
Leviticus 25:23 “Land must not be sold in perpetuity for the land belongs to me and you are only strangers and guests.” Lev 25:10. “Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim freedom throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you; each one shall return to his family property and each to his own clan.”

We recognize the profound

understanding of the nature of land economics and relationship and of human nature in these verses. There is a timeless and universal quality about it. It is not a tool for specific land rights claims but it is a recognition that all people are born with an alienable right to land. There is always a grave danger in using the Bible to prove a point. We do not use it to point to the fact that georgism is right or that certain people have a right to a particular parcel of land. Georgists do not want the economic truth of this biblical passage to be lost in spiritual interpretations but to see that it receives its full earthly interpretation.

Even when we take this passage at face value there is a fathomless depth of meaning and imagination. And this is how it is read. It is not particular to the Judaic scriptures but is also found in the historic manuscripts of Mesopotamia where we hear of the King ascending his throne and finding his subjects burdened with debt. An indebted people have no loyalty and would be pathetic in battle. It was in the king's best interest to rule over a free people and so there was often a systematic releasing of debts on the enthronement of a new monarch. Leviticus uses this practice to show how their heavenly king expects his people to reside in the land.

It is a very good land plan. It first of all recognises the universal right to the land. It recognises the vicarious ways of doing business. Some families have good health, wise and enduring knowhow, ambition and family harmony. Others become sick, suffer misfortune, are slothful and for one reason or another fall on bad times. They are forced into debt to help to survive the bad patch which can linger on for generations. Leviticus does not judge but says carry on with business. Exchanges can be positive but carry on with the knowledge that in the year of Jubilee (every fifty years) land must be returned to the original recipient and thus maintaining a balance. It was



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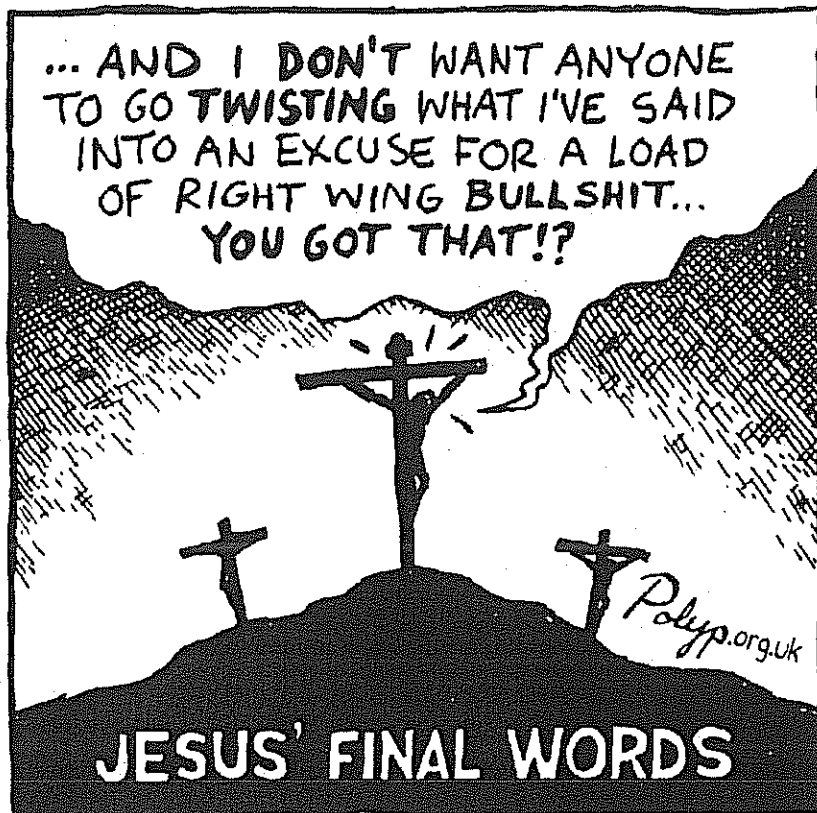
not enough to simply carve up land titles as in Deuteronomy but must go further. Leviticus releases the land in the same way that it releases slaves. It puts a brake on the extent that you can own a slave and likewise land.

The Jubilee passages are treated in three different ways by biblical scholars. The first group claims that the institution of Jubilee actually took place and date back to the time when Israel took possession of their land and that its purpose was to maintain a just distribution of land as God intended.

The second group of scholars notes the parallels with the Ancient Near East. In antiquity in order to bring stability to his kingdom the king would cancel debts, emancipate the slaves and restore alienated lands. This ensured a loyal army as an indebted people has nothing to fight for. This group believes that the laws were practiced intermittently.

The third group of biblical scholars believes that the law of Jubilee was never put into practice but was a utopian ideal which looked back nostalgically at more peaceful times. The Jubilee concepts were part of Israel's consciousness since its early beginnings but the final redaction (editing) was the work of post exilic writers. The Babylonian exiles wanted to establish their rights to land when they were released from captivity by the Babylonians and so gave the Jubilee passages more prominence.

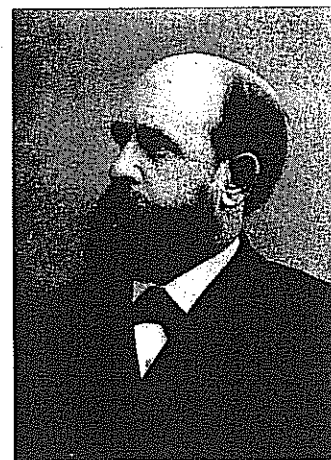
“In order to bring stability to his kingdom the king would cancel debts, emancipate the slaves and restore alienated lands.”



"It was more than a utopian ideal. It was part of the moral framework of the biblical people."

more favourable circumstances. This is an economic axiom that wealth gravitates to more wealth. Ownership of paintings is one thing. Ownership of land is another. In Leviticus the laws of God say that it is wrong for land to end up under the control of the few.

As Henry George said "at the bottom of every social problem there is a social wrong." The severe debt and recession problem which is now hitting us will only be righted with recognizing the fundamental issue that land has been accumulated to the extent that economies can no longer operate. We have learnt nothing since ancient antiquity. We have little choice but to restore economic harmony through returning the rightful ownership of the rent of land to all people.



Henry George

Leviticus land laws may not have been systematically practiced but they were part of Israel's identity. This is shown in the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 20) where the king greedily commands Naboth to sell him his family's land. However Naboth chose to stand by the holy law of Israel and so lost his life. Prophets such as Amos condemn the plundering of the poor with "woe to you who join field to field until there is no more room so that you squat alone in the midst of land". And the prophet Isaiah speaks of the year of Jubilee and is quoted by Jesus when he proclaims Jubilee. It was more than a utopian ideal. It was part of the moral framework of the biblical people. It was part of the future to which the people aspired.

When the modern reader and scholar merely looks on Leviticus land laws as a quaint agrarian practice they miss the meaning entirely. There is a profound worldliness attached to these texts. They understand the workings of the business world. What biblical scholars need to do is to simply

read the texts at face value and marvel at the timeless and universal economic truth that they contain.

Leviticus jubilee laws are about debt and land. The primitive call to return to the land of their fathers is the expression of the law that none are to be excluded from the human family. We all have a right to the fruits of our labour i.e. a birthright to the land. Land is not a commodity to be bought and sold. By its nature land is gradually accumulated into the hands of the few unless special measures are taken. Georgists take this seriously. And that is the reason for a well managed land rent scheme.

Perhaps it is now time for an economic reflection. We can imagine a poor family from any time and any place being given a priceless gift of say a painting. This painting will not stay in the hands of the family for very long. Everyday needs of food, education and shelter will mean that the beauty of the painting will be forfeited to the rooms of the more wealthy so that the poor family can exist under