Occupy the Jubilee: Scripture and the 99%

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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.¹

When this conference’s theme, “Public Scripture,” was first announced, it called to my mind the hermeneutic of John Howard Yoder, in which outsiders become necessary for the interpretation of Scripture in Christian communities. He states:

The hermeneutic role of the community is...by no means an exclusive possession....When the empirical community becomes disobedient, other people can hear the Bible’s witness too. It is after all a public document. Loners and outsiders can hear it speaking, especially if the insiders have ceased to listen. It was thanks to the inner Tolstoy and the outsider Gandhi that the churchman Martin Luther King, Jr....was able to bring Jesus’ word on violence back into the churches. It was partly the outsider Marx who enabled liberation theologians to restate what the Law and the Prophets had been saying for centuries, largely unheard, about God’s partisanship for the poor.²

In Yoder’s work, Christian communities do not only need outsiders in order to aid them in practical, Scripture-based reform. Rather, openness to outsiders is itself constitutive of the political posture that arises from and is necessary for the right interpretation of Scripture. In Yoder’s circle of interpretation, Christians need to be open to the presence and insights of outsiders in order to read their Scripture well. And when they read their Scriptures well, they are open to the presence and insights of outsiders. With Yoder’s hermeneutic in the background, I turn to the recent Occupy Wall Street movement as an example of how outsiders appropriate the Scriptures of religious communities and how that appropriation may or may not shape insiders’ readings.

The language of Scripture permeated the Occupy Wall Street movement at several points, including injunctions by the Hebrew prophets against wealthy oppressors, Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels about wealth, and, especially, the idea of the “jubilee.” According to divine commands in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, the jubilee was to be a regularly occurring year in biblical Israel in which debts were remitted, slaves freed, and land returned to original ownership. In some cases, uses of such scriptural language by individuals within the Occupy movement may have been tactical—an attempt to draw in potential allies from religious groups. However, the use of biblical imagery of jubilee by key activists was not mere strategy, but a convincing self-description of their movement’s aims. These activists’ calls for a jubilee were

not only rhetorically effective, but self-descriptively sound, and thus could form a key entrée into scholarly study of the movement.

However, the Occupy movement was not only inspired by the scriptural jubilee—an inspiration shared by earlier movements—but elements of the Occupy movement self-consciously enacted the jubilee in spontaneous grassroots debt forgiveness programs. Coming from outside the organized bounds of the Christian and Jewish religious communities, this enactment stands as a challenge to those within such communities. This challenge may or may not be assimilated into these communities’ reading practices. However, that performance has stretched and expanded the meaning of Scripture. Just as, in Yoder’s terms, Marx, Tolstoy, and Ghandi opened or re-opened possibilities of reading for Christians and Jews, Occupy’s appropriation and enactment of Scripture has rendered the scriptural jubilee newly available not only for the internal reform and action of such religious communities, but also as a tool for public discourse, critique, and collective action. Scripture has been occupied.

**Jubilee as Class-Consciousness**

The aims of the Occupy Wall Street movement, which began in Zuccotti Park, New York City, on September 17, 2011, are notoriously difficult to synthesize, given the localized and consensus-based nature of the movement after it spread from New York. Each chapter of the Occupy movement had its own specific goals, galvanized by overlapping concerns about inequality and corporate dominance. Some Occupy activists described the movement as an attempt to reset the economy for the American people as a whole. Benjamin Kunkel and Charles Petersen, in an essay in the fall of 2011, write:

The celebrated social movements of the past half century achieved their successes—however achingly partial they remain—by demanding full citizenship for Americans whose racial or sexual identity barred them from equality….The different challenge facing Occupy Wall Street can be seen, ironically, in the movement’s most distinctive slogan: *We are the 99 percent.*

That is to say, rather than highlighting another marginalized community, the Occupy movement attempted to “redefine the American populace at large as an excluded group, cast out from the democracy and prosperity that supposedly form the national birthright.” Occupy invited people to envision themselves as part of that excluded group preparing collective action to set the system to rights. For instance, the popular microblogging Tumblr site “We are the 99%” featured individuals holding up handwritten accounts of their education, their health history, their debt, or their (un)employment, all generally ending with the phrase “I am the 99%.” Scholars might understand the fundamental aim of the Occupy movement as an attempt to knit together a more active public capable of reform for the good of the whole. In Marxist terms, Occupy was

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4 Kunkel and Petersen, “The Politics of the Poor.” Emphasis original.
the attempt to raise the oppressed class to consciousness both of its own oppression and its capacity for collective action.\(^5\)

What does this call to class consciousness have to do with Scripture? In a word, jubilee. While Occupy largely consisted of the kind of consciousness-raising associated in Marxism with epoch-making change, that desired change was often narrated in continuity with the past—rather than rupture—through the scriptural jubilee, understood as a perennially necessary pattern of reform. Parts of the explicit rhetoric of the Occupy movement and, I contend, a great deal of its internal logic, are centered around this notion of a jubilee.

While many of the specific changes called for by the Occupy movements had to do with regulating the banking industry and campaign contributions, perhaps the deepest well of protest focused on the constricting role of ordinary household and student debt. The Occupy movement generated many calls for student debt forgiveness, household and credit card debt forgiveness, debt strikes, and grassroots-funded debt purchasing and forgiveness. Many of these calls insisted that debt in the United States—and worldwide—increasingly entraps the vast majority of people in the service of the elite and that a radical restructuring is necessary. As one activist wrote, “The rise of [Occupy Wall Street] allowed us to start seeing the system for what it is: an enormous engine of debt extraction. Debt is how the rich extract wealth from the rest of us, at home and abroad.”\(^6\)

Accordingly, some Occupy Wall Street organizers took up the language of “jubilee” as both a tool of analysis and a call to action. A conference on Occupy and debt in late 2011 demonstrated this with particular clarity. Several speakers narrated human history around the concept of jubilee. From the debt forgiveness practiced “in ancient Mesopotamia” to the prohibition of usury in medieval Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, to the elimination of the gold standard and the role of inflation in the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries, “there’s always some overarching institution to protect debtors so that you don’t have everybody becoming enslaved and the system breaking down.”\(^7\) So, “the jubilee…is a way of setting the reset button” when “we have a system that’s utterly out of whack.” Even the founding of the United States, in this view, took place as a partial—deliberately racially partial—act of jubilee, in which white indentured servants were freed and bankruptcy law was built into the Constitution. Read this way, the jubilee is a scripturally-enshrined, continuous historical program of reform once again rendered radically necessary by curtailed bankruptcy laws, spiraling health and education costs,

\(^5\) “Only the conscious will of the proletariat will be able to save mankind from the impending catastrophe…the fate of the revolution (and with it the fate of mankind) will depend on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e., on its class consciousness.” (Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971], 70.)


\(^7\) David Graeber, “Debt: A Panel Discussion,” *Occupy Onward Conference*, December 18, 2011, accessed at http://nplusonemag.com/debt. In this sense, the call for jubilee is, in Yoder’s words, “not primitivism, nor an effort to capture some pristine purity. It is rather a ‘looping back’…a rediscovery of something from the past whose pertinence was not seen before, because only a new question or challenge enables us to see it speaking to us.” (Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, [Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame: 1984], 69.)
predatory lending, and perhaps most of all, manipulative banking practices no longer held to account by the rule of law.

**Enacting Scripture: The Rolling Jubilee**

Contemporary calls for debt relief have taken inspiration from the biblical jubilee before. The “Jubilee 2000” movement sought to prompt widespread forgiveness of debt for developing countries. This high-profile campaign, spearheaded by religious leaders including, most prominently, then-Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, achieved a small measure of success in pressuring the British and American governments to forgive some debt. In contrast, the Occupy movement, insofar as it was not organized by religious groups, was somewhat distinctive in its appropriation of the language of jubilee.

Even more distinctive was the Occupy movement’s enactment of practices modeled on the jubilee, in addition to calls for government action on public debt relief. The various calls for debt reduction, abolition, or forgiveness in the Occupy movement took form most prominently in an organization called Rolling Jubilee and its parent, Strike Debt. Otherwise secular in tone, the creative grassroots efforts for debt cancellation pioneered by the Rolling Jubilee organization were conceived explicitly in training manuals and on websites as the restoration and re-enactment of a scriptural event. Rolling Jubilee collected small-scale donations, bought bundled packages of private medical debt from collection agencies, and forgave the debt. Debtors received a letter from Rolling Jubilee informing them of this gift and encouraging them to become active in debt resistance. In contrast to initiatives like “Jubilee 2000,” Rolling Jubilee focused on private rather than national debt and acted directly to relieve it. From its founding in 2012 to its most recent and apparently final debt buy in 2013, Rolling Jubilee collected around $700,00 in donations—a seemingly small sum—bought just under $15 million in outstanding medical debt, and forgave it. At the end of 2013, Rolling Jubilee shifted its attention from raising donations and buying debt to organizing and educating about individual and collective debt resistance. However, the rhetoric of jubilee still pervades its publications.

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9 The only previous organization of this kind of which I am aware was the “Society for the Relief of Persons With Small Debts” active in the UK from 1772 until the middle 1800s. This society, however, looked rather more like a palliative than an attempt to renew the system of debt and credit.

10 Private debt that creditors do not expect to be repaid can be sold for pennies on the dollar to third party collections agencies. For example, a collections agency can buy debt worth $5000 for $50 and demand the full amount from the debtors. Rolling Jubilee leveraged this system to buy and forgive debts worth vastly more than it raised. (“Occupy Wall Street Activists Buy $15m of Americans’ Personal Debt,” *The Guardian*, November 12, 2013, accessed at [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/12/occupy-wall-street-activists-15m-personal-debt.](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/12/occupy-wall-street-activists-15m-personal-debt.))

11 “We know that actions like small-scale debt abolition have limited practical consequences. Fifteen million dollars is barely a dent in the debt market. We’ve said from the beginning that the Rolling Jubilee is just one tactic, not the solution.... Accordingly, we are making sure that the attention that Rolling Jubilee has generated is directed towards other, more collective tactics. We will stop accepting new donations to the Rolling Jubilee fund by the end of the year.” (“Rolling Jubilee- Third Debt Buy,” November 11, 2013, accessed at [http://strikedebt.org/rjupdate3/#more](http://strikedebt.org/rjupdate3/#more)) Why the Rolling Jubilee buyout program was not continued as, at the very least, an effective consciousness raising technique, is disappointingly unclear.
Indeed, the “Strike Debt Organizing Kit,” a manual for activists in debt abolition, describes part of its work as the renewal of faith communities through re-encounter with scriptures that they have forgotten. An “Outreach Case Study” on religious communities in this manual suggests that while the “idea of the jubilee...originates in ancient Israelite law as a divinely-ordained, periodic forgiveness of debts,” and that while “from their origins, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have each denounced the sin of usury,” activists should not “expect that members themselves will be [conscious of this history].”\(^\text{12}\) The last words of this section in the handbook are persistently hopeful:

Someday, the language of usury may come back into use, and modern usurers will have to face the shame of their congregations. But getting there will not be easy, requiring learned and prophetic voices within religious communities to articulate it for themselves. In the meantime, with practical tools and our solidarity, we can help equip these communities to drive the predatory lenders from their temples and spread the spirit of jubilee.\(^\text{13}\)

While the writer seems to position herself as an outsider to religious communities, at least in her capacity as an activist, the language of Scripture soaks into these words. They are both a source of her action and the means of educating and enlisting potential religious allies. The phrase above, “drive the predatory lenders from their temples,” evokes for readers familiar with the gospels the story of Jesus driving the tax collectors from the temple in Jerusalem. “It is written,” Jesus said to them, publicly invoking the words of the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, “My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers.”\(^\text{14}\) Scripture, in the hands of this writer, has become a tool to reform religious communities from the outside and thus enlist such communities in the cause of debt resistance, a cause, in turn, given shape by Scripture.

**Meaning and Enactment**

However, narrating Occupy in terms of the jubilee ought not to become a way of appropriating Occupy to Scripture. This scriptural motif renders one aspect of the Occupy movement clearer, but it does not exhaust its identity. To reduce the Occupy movement to a rehearsal of a scriptural theme would be a misreading of both the Occupy movement and Scripture. As Susannah Ticciati has written, although the “most obvious way to interpret” the universality of the Bible is to “inscribe all others into the biblical world, indifferent to and even against the grain of their own self-understanding,”\(^\text{15}\) this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the persistent strangeness of Scripture itself. Scripture is strange, Ticciati writes, not only in the sense that a foreign culture is strange, but also in that Scripture “cannot be equated with any particular appropriation of it.” To say that Scripture is abidingly strange is but a way to restate


\(^{13}\) “Strike Debt Organizing Kit,” 9.

\(^{14}\) Mathew 21:12, NRSV.

both its “resistance to interpretation” and at the same time its capacious interpretive generativity.\textsuperscript{16}

In this sense Occupy cannot be assimilated to Scripture. Instead, the Occupy movement as a whole might helpfully be understood as not merely using Scripture—or being used by it—but also as enacting a scriptural motif and thus transforming the possibilities that that Scripture has for its readers. The “no” spoken by Occupy is not only a cry for jubilee, but it is the attempt to bring it about. Indeed, the performance of Scripture by an outsider is a paradigmatic case of the enduring strangeness of Scripture, and identity. As Ticciati states, “[Scripture’s] strangeness is…embodied in the Bible’s resistance to interpretation. Further…this resistance to interpretation finds indispensable embodiment in the resistance of others to inscription within its universe.”\textsuperscript{17} The meaning of the jubilee is simply not in the hands of any particular religious community, but is always there to be re-appropriated, refashioned, and renewed. In this way, the Occupy movement refuses assimilation into the world of Scripture, or religious communities. Learning how to read Scripture well is, Ticciati argues, partly a matter of continuous “radical dispossession,” for “the biblical world” claimed by the reader “is inherently strange, and so remains strange even to the one who finds her identity within it.”\textsuperscript{18} If this is so, then Occupy’s enactment of Scripture is training, for Christian and Jewish religious communities, in how to read their Scripture better just insofar as it teaches them that their Scriptures are not their own.

\section*{Conclusion}

Occupy’s enactment of Scripture has rendered the scriptural jubilee available in new ways not only to religious communities but also as a tool for public action and discourse. In many ways, this enactment seems to have gone unheard. How indeed has Scripture been visibly transformed? After all, Occupy has already been consigned, in public discourse, to the broader failure of leftist populism in the United States. As one dispirited occupier asked in late 2012, “Is it time for organizers to close up shop, buckle down, vote for Obama, and start reading our emails from MoveOn.org again?”\textsuperscript{19} Is it time to buckle down and read Leviticus the way we used to?

A few responses are in order. First, the Occupy movement did in fact shift national discourse on wealth inequality, and its use of scriptural images has, to a lesser degree, accompanied that shift.\textsuperscript{20} Second, while the jubilee did not come for everyone, it did come for the three thousand debtors whose medical bills no longer imprison them as a result of “Rolling Jubilee.” In this vein, small as it is, we might say that in keeping with its radically democratic origins, the Occupy movement has not so much disappeared as splintered into the myriad local

\textsuperscript{16}Ticciati, “SR and the Formation of Identity,” 422.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19}“All of this is Going to End.” \textit{Occupy: An OWS-Inspired Gazette} #5, \textit{N+1}, September 17, 2012, accessed at http://nplusonemag.com/occupy. Her self-description discloses both her sadness and her heightened critical consciousness: “I am an indebted graduate student researching student indebtedness at the same time that I am earning a salary financed by the debt being accumulated by those same students.” Emphasis original.
initiatives around cooperative banking, living wage campaigns, and so on that have sprung up around the country in its wake. So too for Occupy’s scriptural legacy. For the individual congregations that in some way encountered the Occupy movement and Rolling Jubilee—whether antagonistically, enthusiastically, or apathetically—Scripture is a bit different now. Or at least these words are available, less distant, in a way they have not been before. As Yoder states, “A new question permits the old event to respond in ways that earlier patterns of questioning had not made self-evident or perhaps had hidden.”

Here, outsiders are “hearing the Bible’s witness” after the “insiders have ceased to listen” and “restating,” in a new way, “what the Law and the Prophets had been saying for centuries.”

Occupy and Rolling Jubilee stand as challenges to those religious communities from the outside. Scripture has been enlarged, its public availability stretched and expanded. Now it is possible to see the jubilee as a central motif of human history with a vigor and urgency previously lacking. Now the practical measures to reduce and resist debt have been clarified and publicized. Now the distance between the text and the present moment has been compacted. Now, when Christians in the United States say, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” those words have a new kind of concreteness. Scripture is new, again, after Zuccoti Park, after Rolling Jubilee, after the 99%.

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21 Yoder, Priestly Kingdom, 69. I hope that in an analogous way, recent discussions in the Mennonite Church about Yoder’s sexual harassment and abuse will enable the events of Yoder’s life, his work, and the biblical texts that most animated it to become signs not just of oppression, but also, against themselves, of healing and hope for the victims.

22 Occupy could also be a fruitful locus for closer examinations of the themes of occupation, violence, and Scripture. How is Scripture itself conceived, written, and received in moments of occupation—whether for liberation or domination? The Garden of Eden, the conquest of Canaan and destruction of its peoples, the exile and return of Israel to and from the land, the Incarnation—divine occupation of human flesh—and ecclesiology all come to mind here as useful departure points in such a thematic study. Thanks to Charles Mathewes’ comments at the “Public Scripture” conference for provoking thoughts in these directions.