

# Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Lecture 7, Jubilee

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This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament backgrounds. This is session 7, Jubilee.

Well, welcome back. One of the things that's most difficult about the course Old Testament backgrounds is that all of us, including myself, are interested primarily in the story of the Bible. But the problem is that most of the Bible story is really a thousand years after the story of Mesopotamia really starts. So you can't just drop into it like a parachute into that region.

You have to at least start to create continuity. But we're finally getting to the place in the old Babylonian period where the parallels to the Bible are really interesting, and I think you'll find that to be true. I located a map of the Hyksos Empire that I wanted to show you, and this will give us a little bit of a visual picture of this great empire.

As you can see on the screen, we have the Hyksos Empire stretches all the way up to southern Turkey. You can also see, by the way, at the end of the S on Hyksos, you can see where Yom Kippur was at. So here is a map showing you the very impressive physical region that the Hyksos actually ruled.

All the way from the center of Egypt as you can plainly see here, they ruled all the way to the center of Egypt. The capital of the Hyksos Empire was Avaris in Egypt, and then they ruled all the way up to the Euphrates River. So, this was, of course, a great empire, but what I want you to remember with me primarily is that they were a great people, and we don't have a single Hyksos tablet, so it's not like we can write a meaningful history of these people the way we would like, but they were people of singular importance to biblical studies, or to the Hebrew people.

So, with that, let me turn to what I think is a fine example of just how fruitful the study of Old Testament backgrounds can be. In this bottom paragraph, I mentioned that perhaps the most difficult economic practice to institute was that of the Jubilee. In the Old Testament, every seven years, there was to be a release, that is, a cancellation of debts.

Now, one of the best biblical passages showing us this is in the book of Deuteronomy, where it reads like this: at the end of every seven years, you shall grant a remission of debts. And this is the manner of remission. Every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor.

He shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. So, from a foreigner, you may exact it, that is, when you loan money to a foreigner, you can force him to pay it back, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother. And of course, God says the reason for this practice is the famous passage of verse 4, that there be no poor among you.

So, what we want to point out to you is that there was an economic practice that seems to have started in Mesopotamia with the Amorites, and that practice was a king instituting a cancellation of debts. In Mesopotamia, there was an interesting practice in the old Babylonian period, when in the first full year of the new king's rule, he would institute a cancellation of debts. Well, we're going to talk about that, but I think there is a possibility that that led to this concept in the Bible, in which it was not done on the basis of a new king, but it was done on a cyclic basis of every seventh year in ancient Israel, debts were to be canceled, the land was to be fallow, and slaves were to be set free.

I use the word manumitted. This is arguably the most amazing economic practice of the entire ancient world. What God revealed to Moses was an economic practice that on a cycle, the seventh year was the year of what's called the release year.

This is what happened in the release year. In the seventh year, all debts that an Israelite incurred to another Israelite were to be canceled. Furthermore, the land was not to be plowed in the seventh year, and all slaves were to be set free.

Now, you notice I put this in a separate category, but in reality, the manumission of slaves was simply another case of debts being canceled. In our culture, we think about slavery in racial terms. In the Bible, it had literally nothing to do with race.

It had to do with economics, mostly. In a farming community, lots of things could happen to bankrupt a farmer: crop disease, insect infestation, the farmer's physical inability, or maybe the farmer got sick.

So, there were things that could happen that would force a man into what we call bankruptcy in our culture. Well, they didn't have bankruptcy in the ancient world. So, the only way a man could protect himself in the catastrophe of total failure, economic failure, was to sell himself or to sell one of his children into slavery.

However, I just want to say it again for the camera. This had nothing to do with prejudice or race. This was an almost completely economic reality.

It happened in a world without real money. In this era, there were no coins. The closest thing they had to money was weighing silver, a shekel.

The Hebrew word shekel today describes a coin, but in the Bible, the word meant a weight, W-E-I-G-H-T. You would weigh out on a scale a measure of silver, and that could have the effect of money. But in reality, money didn't exist in coinage until the Persian period.

Without money, people dealt in goods. So, if you're a farmer and you have no goods, all you have is your land. Well, in the Hebrew tradition, God gave a law that said you could not sell the land. So, literally, as a last resort, all a Hebrew farmer could sell was himself or one of his children.

So, because that was an economic practice, by the way, I think this is one of the most interesting and misunderstood concepts in the Bible. Just allow me to take two minutes to go beyond where we're at because this concept of slavery makes its way into the New Testament. But there, it actually becomes a well-known metaphor for how we become children of God.

We assume the status of slavery. That is so misunderstood, I truly wish I could take the time to explain that to you. However, slavery in the New Testament was just a metaphor for the reality that human beings were owned by God.

We are both his sons and his slaves. That's a bit of a stretch for us to absorb, but they're both just metaphors. We really aren't the sons of God in the sense that we have biological descent from God.

We are sons of God metaphorically. We're slaves of God metaphorically. It's a very interesting subject area.

A lot of good work is being done in this today. But to return to this practice, the release, which has its own language in the Hebrew Bible, is not to be confused with the Jubilee. The Jubilee is the result of seven times seven, so the 50th year is the Jubilee year.

By the Way, the Jubilee appears in Leviticus 25. Much of the chapter is given over to discussing the Jubilee. The Jubilee may or may not have been identical to the release year, which was the seventh year. We know beyond any shadow of a doubt that this practice of the cancellation of debts was to occur on a cycle of seven.

We're not sure. There's debate on how to explain this, whether the 50th year was simply a sacred 50th year or whether there was an actual difference in the way in which it worked. What we do know is that God had put Israel on an economic program that was characterized by the cancellation of debts and the freeing of slaves. Maybe the land-lying fallow is something that occurred just in the 50th year, the 50th year you didn't plant crops.

We can't really say with certainty, but what we can say with certainty is that God had created an economic system for Israel, a system that owes its origin to the Hebrew concept of the Sabbath so that debts were to be canceled. So, if we can come back to our notes up here and look at this, we can see that this concept may go back to a Mesopotamian release that reaches back into the old Akkadian period as early as Sargon. Thus far, we have at least 48 references to different royal releases in Mesopotamia.

So, I know I got onto a further discussion, let me go back and say to you, in Mesopotamia, you might remember, the release did not occur on a cycle, it occurred when a new king took the throne. When a new king took the throne, there was a release, a cancellation of debts. The two Akkadian words are mesharum and andirarum, which correspond to the Hebrew words Yashar and editor, which are etymologically the same.

The dirur is the true counterpart of the Mesopotamian andirarum, so you don't need to know all of this perfectly, I just want to say to you that the terminology for the release in Mesopotamia is etymologically identical to the terminology in the Hebrew Bible. In Deuteronomy 15, when God talked about the release, that's the word shmita, but there's also the word dirur, which is etymologically identical. So there is some justification for arguing that the language of release is the same in the Bible as it was in ancient Mesopotamia.

We have a total of 48 different releases that we have accumulated, maybe today it's over 50, we there was a time when I used to tell my students that we have found about a quarter of a million cuneiform tablets, well today it's over a million. And it takes sometimes a generation to get those tablets put into print, so there's a real lag of time from when we find data to when data becomes part of our system. But today there are probably over 50 different releases that have been found in Mesopotamia, 50 different mentions of releases that were instituted.

However, the earliest reference to a Mesopotamian release is probably to that of Aconitum in about 2500. The vast majority of the releases in Mesopotamia occurred in the most fruitful period for biblical studies, the early Babylonian period. All of the kings of the early Babylonian period, all of them instituted a release.

As a matter of fact, the last of the old Babylonian kings, Ammi-Saduqa, he actually had two releases that he instituted. So, let's come back then to our information. You can imagine the economic chaos that would come when in your culture you had no idea when there would be a cancellation of debts.

In Mesopotamia, you had several things that had to have occurred. The old king needs to have died, the new king takes the throne, and it's not until his first full year that you have the release. All of that is completely unknown.

So, what that meant in the economy of ancient Mesopotamia was chaos. God's plan worked on a cycle that everybody could prepare for. Their plan was, which was tied to the centrality of kingship, their plan was unpredictable and unknown.

Therefore, I mentioned to you in my notes here that three tablets have been found at Chana, a small kingdom in the middle course of the Euphrates River, just west of Babylon, which deal with the release in some form or another. These tablets are usually what are called protection documents against a release. All right, let's see if I can set up for you how this worked.

There always has to be some form of credit. But suppose, let's say that, in modern terms, you come to me, and I've got money, and you say to me, I would like to borrow \$50,000 from you as seed money for a business that I'm working on. Well, I look at you and say, I think you're trustworthy, but what do I do about the problem that I loan you \$50,000, the current king dies, the new king institutes a release, I am out \$50,000, you gain \$50,000 of free money.

Well, the ancients were just as smart as we are. In many ways, they were smarter, because they knew how to survive in a more hostile world than the one we live in. So the ancients created a credit protection device so that if I loaned you the money, we would sign a document together, which would protect me, the creditor so that I wouldn't lose my money.

I would loan you the money, but we would state on a cuneiform tablet that this loan was not subject to debt cancellation. Well, we find these documents, these protection documents, throughout the Old Babylonian period. A number of tablets have been found at another site called Newsy, mentioning the release, and they are also protection documents.

So here's my comment as we look at this practice in Mesopotamia. All of the old Babylonian kings had at least one release, Ammi-Saduqa had two. Note his claim, and think about your Old Testament as we read about Amid Saduqa's release.

It was the year in which the humble shepherd, who hearkened to Anu and Enlil, arose for the land like the sun, and for all the people created a righteous order. I've underlined the righteous order because that's the word mesharum, one of the biblical words for the release. In his tenth year, he claimed that it was the year in which the true shepherd, the favorite of Shamash and Marduk, released the debts of the land.

All right? So, what I'm going to do is split our comments now into two subject areas, and so let me write it on the board here so that I can set it up for you so that it hopefully will be a little less confusing. So the two subject areas are the biblical

concept of release and, secondly, the favored term of kingship when it comes to the release, which is the word shepherd. All right? So, what we're going to do is launch into two informative lectures.

I am not silly enough to think that they're great lectures. They're just informative lectures that help us understand profoundly things that reverberate right down into the public ministry of Christ. All right? So, the first of these two that we're going to look at is the term release.

What we see in this cycle of seventh-year release is a cycle that I would call Sabbatarian. Okay? It is clearly a reproduction of the reverberations of the seventh day that God introduces to us in Genesis 1 and 2. Six days God created the earth. On the seventh day, God rested.

That's what we mean by sabbatarian. All right? Well, this release that we see in the biblical tradition is clearly a continuation of that Sabbath cycle. The seventh year is the rest year.

Just as God rested on the seventh day, so in the seventh year, the Hebrews were to rest. The whole year was set aside to rest. So, what we see unfolding before us is a phenomenon in which the Sabbatarian cycle appears in an economic format.

All right? So, I'll start writing my rather sad attempt at creating a graph for you to illustrate what we're talking about. So, let's start out with the single most important revelatory phenomena. In the Hebrew tradition, it is that God is king.

Okay? As king, there are two important qualities to God's kingship: that he is the provider and that he is the protector. Now, this is all very complex, and if I were teaching these things at a great university like the University of Chicago or the University of Michigan, the professors there would laugh at me for the simplistic way in which I'm presenting this to you.

But in order to have something to build on, we have to start, I think, from simple ideas that we can absorb before we start getting to complex things that can be where we can split the hairs. But what we're seeing is, in the biblical tradition, there is one all-important factor in the biblical tradition, and that is that the text is designed to reveal to us the identity of God. If you're God and you created the heavens and the earth, you're franchised with a need to tell all subsequent generations about who you are and how you function.

So, central to the biblical picture of God is that he is king. Now, I realize that there are other terms that describe God, but I think this is the most important one. And if you stop and think about the reality of kingship with me, it might make sense to you, because why? There is nobody above the king.

In Mesopotamia, we have seen that the king is all-powerful, we've seen the king owns all land, we've seen that the king is the center of the whole social system. So, it provides a perfect metaphor for revealing the identity of God. God is the only one.

There is no other king. He is the only one. He is above all.

He owns all. He is all. So, it's the perfect metaphor for revealing the identity of God.

So, by instituting a release, you notice the connection in Mesopotamia, who institutes the release? It's the king. Well, who institutes the release in the Bible? God. Because God is the king of Israel, all other kings are kings only because they are the vassal to the great king.

So, it's as king that God can reveal to us his identity, but not just his identity, because his identity is that he's a king. But what the release tells us is what the king does. He provides and he protects.

He's just. So, with that in mind, let me point out to you then that this amazing economic phenomenon of the release, this amazing economic phenomena deals with three entities that are below this. One is it obviously deals with land.

Two, it deals with mankind. I try in my classes to use the word humankind since I believe Adam and Eve comprise the image of God, not just Adam. But I'm short of space, as you can see, so I'm just going to put man because it's smaller than humankind.

So, what the release deals with is it deals with two phenomena, the land and man, humankind. Well, when you think about Genesis 1 and 2, where all of this seems to start from, what's emphasized in Genesis 1 and 2? The land that God creates and the man that God creates to live on the land. Well, in ancient Near Eastern thought, which is what we think is the background for understanding biblical thought, what this tells us is that God is using the events of Genesis 1 and 2, and 3 I might add, he's using as connectors which at their core are pointing to God.

Maybe I need to switch the colors of my pen so that you can see this a little more clearly. These things actually draw our attention to God. I understand that you and I like to go to the mall to watch people because people are so interesting.

In fact, in biblical thought, God is the being we should observe. This is designed to explain to us who God is and what he does. So, when we think of land in biblical thought, we think of God as the creator, and we think of him as the provider.

Alright? So, if we can put that into our mind, then what we can work with is a phenomenon in which as God communicates his kingship, then he does so on this Sabbatarian model. We are a culture. I'm not really being paid enough money to tell you how old I am. I might be over 39.

But I do remember when I was younger that when Sunday came, Sunday was largely a day when things closed. And in the course of my lifetime now, that, of course, has changed dramatically where Sunday has very little difference from the rest of the week. Well, that's because the influence of Christianity had taken Sunday and turned it into the Sabbath day of the Old Testament.

And so, we rested on the Sabbath day. Well, what this all is doing is making this connection that the economic plan of Israel was not just an economic plan. At its core, the whole thing was designed to be theocentric.

The whole thing was designed to get us to think about God. And so, as the giver of land and as the creator of humankind, God is shown in both events to be king. But he's also now putting us into a situation where the energies of action work not just vertically as we think about God but horizontally as we realize that the release has a horizontal energy that is working like this.

What I mean by the chart is to show you that this is rest and cancellation of debts not just for humankind, but for the land itself. So, since God the great king gives land, God has built a system in which there are horizontal responsibilities between humankind and the land that emanate from our vertical responsibilities to God. So, here's where my thoughts are going.

In God's amazing plan, I'm going to use a word. I don't like this word because, in our culture today, there are so many politically sensitive terms, but the word does embody some of the ideas. What we see occurring here is that God is teaching humankind that by giving the land rest, just as human beings have rest, God is giving us the reminder that it is utterly sacred.

This is not our land. All land belongs to God, and therefore, all land is to be treated with the same respect and dignity that we treat the humans who live on it. So, just as humans get a seventh year of rest, so does the land.

This has lots of theological implications that I'm not sure we can; I am pretty sure we can't get all of them out today in our lecture, but what it's doing is reminding humankind and the land that both of us belong to God. So, the land gets its rest, and so does humankind. I think this does spin off into the reality that from a Christian perspective, we argue for respect of the land, not because the land is best served when there are no people on it, which is sometimes the impression I get with certain



more extreme forms of ecologists, but that the land belongs to God, and we, therefore, have no right to abuse it.

It just turns out that we now know by accident that it's good not to farm the land every year in perpetuity. We now know that if the land isn't given periodic rest, we drain the soil of its fecundity. So, I think there may have been a possible ecological reason why the land was given its rest because, just like human beings, we not only replicate the Sabbath concept, but all of us need rest.

The Sabbath model is not just a model that we think about in light of creation. It also is a practical reality that the earth needs to rest periodically, and humans need to rest periodically. So, there is both a theology to this, but there also is a practical concept.

So, he's teaching us that there's a way in which we should think about the land, and that means it belongs to God. It's not ours to abuse. It's God's land, and you and I are, to put it in modern terminology, what we are on this earth is we are sharecroppers.

We farm the land, but it belongs to God. So, this is one aspect of how we can think about this cancellation of debts. The other aspect is that I think it reminds us that even though in Western thought, we focus on freedom of humanity, we're also in a world where humans, even in America, abuse humans.

So, what this is designed is to teach the Hebrews that by canceling all debts every seventh year and setting slaves free, God is reminding his creation of something that's obvious and sacred, but it's not so obvious in Genesis 1 through 2 and 3. Every man and every woman is created in the image of God, and because that's true, we have no right ever to economically abuse another human being. This system, which is dramatically theocentric at its core, is also a system that teaches us how to live on this earth. So, what it means is in the ancient world that, God was giving an economic system in which human beings, if you'll allow me this statement, which might be too dramatic for reality, human beings are unable to abuse one another economically because every seventh year everyone gets a brand new start.

Every loan has to be canceled. If you sold yourself into slavery, you have to be set free. And so, what it meant is contrary to forms of capitalism. What we've got is a capitalistic system with a conscience.

That is to say, if you work hard in your six years, you can prosper. But if you have fallen on hard times or perhaps your neighbor's just shrewder and smarter than you are and he gets ahead of you, then God was creating a system whereby every seventh year, there was a brand new creative start. And in this creative start, there

was not just a reminder that God is at the origin of all these things, but there is a system that will work for life on this earth.

This is a truly, I think, theologically amazing system that God created. And I think it has to do with a proper view of ecology and, I would say, a proper view of relationships. I lost; you can't see the end of the word over there, but a proper view of the relationship.

When you read Deuteronomy 15, we won't take time to do it because we don't have enough time this week to get everything in. But if we took the time to do it, you would see the word brother appear repeatedly. You'd also see that the word poor appears repeatedly.

You'd also see that God's plan for how this system works was centered around the divine goal over and over in chapter 15 of Deuteronomy, that there be no poor among you. I think I could say from this that it is not God's will for there to be poor people. God's desire is that as the great king, God's desire is that all of his people have a way of making a living equally.

In ancient Israel, what it meant was that everyone had their own vine and their own fig tree. Now that's a metaphor, not everyone had fig trees, not everyone had vines, but that's a metaphor for the fact that everybody in Israel owned property. It was a farming world. There was no industry.

So, God created a system whereby everybody had equal property, so to speak, and everybody was able to avoid poverty because every seventh year, the land reverted to the original owner. And thus, we have the most amazing combination of theology and economics that I know of anywhere in the place of the Hebrew Bible. So, this system seems to have its origin in Mesopotamia.

It seems to have been adapted by God, save that in the Hebrew tradition he's the king, and it seems to be built on the creation model, which meant that God intended for this to be permanent, at least among Israel. And it seems to be the kind of thing that created an economy that would have had a rebirthing experience on a cyclic basis. Here's the problem.

It was literally never done. Now we can't say with certainty, but we think this was the problem. In 1400 BC, Moses wrote about this.

In 1360, Joshua brings them into the promised land, and things are going pretty well for some decades, but then a sad event happens, Joshua dies. And then if you remember your biblical story, you'll remember that when Joshua dies, there is no successor. The biblical text makes a big deal out of the fact that Joshua is the exact successor to Moses.

But when Joshua dies, there is no successor to Joshua. And so, for the next 340 years, we'll just put 300 plus years, we're in the book of Judges. In the book of Judges, what we have is a book that tells us, are you thinking with me now? In those days, there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The word that's translated right is also the root word of the word release. So, with Joshua's death, we no longer have a united people and no united leadership.

And for the next 300 years, there is no release. So that by the time we finally have the first king in roughly 1050 with Saul, by the time we have the first king, we've already been 400 years without any release. And we know from 2 Chronicles that the release, it tells us, was never ever practiced in the entirety of the Old Testament.

Thus, we have the problem, without leadership, without people following leadership, then there is no one to introduce the release, and there is no one to follow. And by the time kingship finally appears, it is apparently too difficult to interrupt the economic flow at a later date. And so, the release in the entirety of the Old Testament was never ever practiced.

Now remember, before we leave this, let me make the point. God said that there be no poor among you. When we enter into the period of the monarchy, we also enter into the period of the prophets.

And what we have is messengers that God raised up to condemn the abuse of humans by humans. And there's hardly a subject area that the prophets address more passionately than the subject area of how the rich abuse the poor. This is a Christian concept of the first order.

I'm also privileged to teach the book of Acts at Liberty University. And I'll just make a quick connection, if I may, between what we've been talking about. It's not an accident that when we get to the book of Acts, the earliest Christians in Acts, all of whom were Jewish, sold their possessions and created an economy, best as they could, in which there were no poor.

I would suggest to you that the early believers in Acts may well have been following this model of Deuteronomy 15, in which they were trying to replicate the true community that God intended. Now, I'm not at all sure how far to push this into the modern Christian era that we're in. But what I can say is, whether dealing with the Old or the New Testament, it's a Christian concept to try to deal with the problem of poverty.

It is an ethical concept that is rooted in creation itself. When God created this cancellation of debts, he was creating something that was designed so that each human being could more effectively reflect his image-bearer status. You know, if we can treat people as if their lot in life is that they are poor, then we have created a psychological reality that I don't see them as real image-bearers.

I see them as in another class. They're poor people. And this is the story of the human race, isn't it? So, I don't know that there are too many places in the Old Testament that are more dramatic and more important than what we're looking at right here.

This is background information not just for the Old Testament but is also background information for the New Testament. So, it leads us then to point to the reality that because this was disobeyed by the Israelites, everybody from David onward, including David, when God sent Israel into exile, 2 Chronicles 36.21 tells us that God determined the number of years of exile in Babylon by the number of Sabbath years that were violated. As many Sabbath years as they violated determined how many years they would be in exile.

Seventy Sabbaths, 70 times 7, and so on and so forth. So, I think this is all tremendously important information that is part and parcel of the Old Babylonian period, but it's alive and dominant throughout the rest of the Old Testament. In the late 70s, a new and, I would say, a noisy minority group of scholars called minimalists emerged.

They're so-called because they deny the historicity of any biblical passage unless that passage can be scientifically proven to be a fact. And they came to deny the connections that I've been trying to make here between the Babylonian release and the release that's mentioned in the Bible. For my part, as you can plainly see, it's not just an economic release. It's a release that's connected to creation itself.

In creation, God was establishing an endless cycle. An endless cycle that is perhaps captured by Ecclesiastes 3 because in that passage in Ecclesiastes 3, about a time for this and a time for that, the author of that passage gave us 14 times. 14 times of this, 14 times of that.

Time to live, time to die. That's obviously a number that is creation times two. Double creation.

So, what I would suggest that God did is he created a set of times that, if properly followed, would be a set of times that would make life on this earth work in a better fashion. Now, the good news for you as you watch this video is I'm not running for office. If I'm elected president, I cannot do this or that.

But I believe with some measure of passion that even a secular government could follow a system like this and make it work in a superior ethical fashion to what's happening in, say, the world around us. So, the system was never practiced because of human sinfulness. There were consequences to that.

Those consequences revert even to our world today. But I would like to suggest to you that this concept served as a vehicle for our Lord revealing himself. We'll prepare ourselves to take a break. But as we do so, let me introduce to you where we're going to go on our break.

And where we're going is Luke's quotation in Luke 4, a quotation in which Jesus cites Isaiah 61. And Isaiah 61 obviously is referencing the Leviticus 25 concept. So, what we're going to do when we go to our next video is point out how this concept of the release becomes a vehicle for our Lord's self-revelation in Luke chapter 4. I think you'll find it interesting.

And what we will then focus on in the next hour after we make that point, what we'll focus on in the next hour then is the concept of shepherd, which is associated with a release in Mesopotamia. So, we'll go ahead and finish this video and start the next later.

This is Dr. Don Fowler in his teaching on Old Testament backgrounds. This is session 7, Jubilee.