

# **Dr. Michael Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers in Ancient Israel, Part 4, Widows, Orphans, and Resident Aliens Provisions [WORA]**

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This is Dr. Michael Harbin in his teaching on Social Justice for Social Outliers in Ancient Israel. This is Part 4: Widows, Orphans, and Resident Aliens Provisions.

Shalom, I'm Michael Harbin from Taylor University, and we are doing a study on social justice and social outliers in ancient Israel.

Today, we're looking at the last section, the fourth of four parts, and we will be discussing widows, orphans, and resident aliens, including the provisions that are provided for them. So far, we have looked at the overall structure of the social fabric of the nation of Israel following the giving of God's Torah at Mount Sinai. In the process, we have noted how they settled in villages surrounded by agricultural bases, a base of the community, and discussed how that layout would have affected a number of aspects of their society with regard to work, family relationships, and social norms.

We then define the concept of social justice as a balancing, concluding that it's a balancing of two things: two questions. Am I pulling my fair load, the burdens, prescriptive guidelines, and am I getting my fair share, the benefits, which are redemptive guidelines? And both are expected. We then looked at the nature of the extended family, looking within it for an overall pattern of society in terms of relationships.

And we looked at the whole situation for the nation of Israel, and we observed that the social fabric is a dynamic structure requiring regular mending to retain its strength. We noted how death, especially, could leave some individuals isolated without a supporting community. In the process, we noted the text specifically addresses three categories: widows, orphans, actually fatherless, and resident aliens, which we collectively denoted as the WORA.

At this point, we want to look at specific provisions that God provided to help those individuals. We suggested that the things that the WORA had in common, that they lacked agricultural resources in a culture where most people were directly dependent upon those resources. Without those agricultural resources, the WORA required special social justice provisions.

Incorporating a number of social justice provisions, the Old Testament actually reveals four programs specifically intended for this group. First is Levirate Marriage,

second is Gleaning, third is Tithes and Third Year Tithes, and then fourth is Sabbath Year Garnering. We will now look at those four in sequence.

Levirate Marriage. We've already mentioned that the first social justice program was Levirate Marriage. However, Levirate Marriage applied uniquely to widows.

Apparently, specifically widows still of childbearing age. The idea was that a relative would marry the widow with the specific intention of producing offspring, who would then take care of the widow in her old age. As such, it would seem that if she already had children, it was likely that a Levirate Marriage did not occur.

Since the term orphan really points to being fatherless, it would seem that the widow would be living with her offspring and taking advantage of other provisions. We see several examples of widows with offspring in the Old Testament. For example, Hiram of Tyre was one of Solomon's key workers in the construction of the temple.

He's described as the son of a widowed. The term here now is a widowed woman. This is an adult; Hiram is an adult who became a skilled bronze worker.

We're not told where he learned his skill, but apparently, he supported his mother, as indicated by the declaration that he was a widow's son. In 2 Samuel 14, a woman from Tekoa was brought in to confront David. Her story was that she had two sons.

Her husband was dead, and the two sons were working in the field, and they had a falling out. One killed his brother and thus was subject to execution since it was considered murder. Whether it was an actual or hypothetical situation is not clear.

But even if hypothetical, David accepted it as plausible and made a judgment. This would suggest an analogous situation existed in the land at the time. The woman's concern was the entire extended family was out and had risen up against her, demanding justice, that is, to compensate for the deceased by killing the other brother.

She feared losing her heir, who would be the person who supported her in her old age. The third example is in 1 Kings 17, where Elijah is told by God to go to Zarephath, where he is experiencing a drought and a famine. There was a widow there.

She's called a widowed woman. When he got there, he found her gathering sticks to make a fire to bake her last flour into bread and that she and her son would eat of it and then die. It's unclear whether the son was too young to work to support his mother or that she might have had land but could not work it because of the drought.

But in any case, through God's direction, her bowl of flour and jar of oil remained full for the entire period of the drought. Subsequently, the boy became sick and died, and God, through Elijah, raised the boy to support his mother. The basic idea seems to be that if a widow had children, it was expected that while she might care for her children while they're young, she, in turn, could expect them to care for her in her old age.

The main premise here is the expectation that the possession of the family land would be retained by the oldest son, and thus, when he was old enough, he could work the land and support his mother. The underlying principle seems to lie simply in the admonition that widows were to be provided for. In that culture, children were the primary source of support for the elderly, as we noted in Part 1. This provision was provided only if a widow had no children and was still young enough.

So, this applied only to widows without children who were young enough to have children. That is, the widow was young enough to have children. The idea is the brother of the dead man would marry the widow.

A little more background: Paul provides some commentary on this concept in 1 Timothy 5, writing to Timothy; he is apparently in Ephesus, a large Greek city. He provides a more urban take on the principle. He does not address the question of family land.

Rather, he begins with the adamant directive that the children or grandchildren of the elderly widow have primary responsibility for taking care of her. Should she not have children or grandchildren, then the church should pick up some of the support obligations. This is what Paul calls the list.

He does not seem to address situations where the widow has adequate support, but it may be inferred that where there was no need, the church had no obligation to fill it. Today, it would seem that these same ramifications of the basic principles still apply. The family had the first responsibility to support the elderly, especially the widows, followed by the church.

So, as we look at the concept of levered marriage, the son of this couple then inherited the name and the heritage of the woman's first husband. So this would be the provision of levirate marriage. Provided intended solely for the widow who had children but no husband.

The other three provisions had no children and no husband. The other three provisions seem appropriate for all three groups. Widows of whatever age who had not remarried, the fatherless who are likely living with their widowed mothers, and unemployed residents aliens.

So, our second provision is gleaning. This is the primary provision for the WORA and is applied to all three groups. Gleaning is an age-old process.

It entails going back through a field or orchard after it has been harvested to find produce that the harvesters had missed. While this would be a fraction of the harvested produce, it could be a sizable amount. I would note that, as a child, my parents' Sunday school class in southern Indiana would actually go out and glean cornfields after the harvest, even though they had mechanical pickers.

And then they would pick up enough to sell back to the farmer. The farmer paid for them to help provide money for the Sunday school class. So, gleaning is still present today.

Although the only illustration we have in the Old Testament of gleaning is Ruth in the grain fields, it's that image that comes to mind. The Old Testament gives guidelines not just for grain but for all other crops, mentioning vineyards, Leviticus 19, olive trees, and Deuteronomy 24, indicating that a person who gleaned would have multiple opportunities through the harvest, assuming that there were farmers who were following the biblical guidelines. The underlying principle seems to be that the farmer planned an intentional margin in terms of production.

While difficult to implement in any culture, Israel is generally deemed a subsistent culture, which means that the farmer struggled to harvest enough to supply one family for one year. However, Oded Borowski argues in his book, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*, that various innovations during the Iron Age, quote, resulted in a large surplus of foodstuffs, unquote. Biblically, the underlying premise was that if the people demonstrated trust in God, he would provide the surplus.

This may be indicated by the situation of Boaz, who apparently remained in the village that Elimelech left because of the famine, and apparently, Boaz prospered. While agricultural gleaning is far removed from most people today, the idea of developing an intentional margin to provide for one's personal future and to share with others is readily accessible for most. Israelite landowners are given guidelines in Leviticus 19:23 and Deuteronomy 24 designed to provide for the greatest possible opportunity for would-be gleaners.

Succinctly, they are as follows. When landowners harvested grain, they were not to reap to the corners. The grain left standard was intended for the gleaners, that is, for the WORA.

The text does not indicate how much of a field was left to be unharvested. The Mishnah, the commentary on the Old Testament practices by the early Jewish community in the time of Jesus, indicates one-sixtieth of the harvest was considered

the minimum. It also suggests that the provision depended upon factors such as the size of the field, the number of poor people, and how generous the farmer was.

Two, if a harvester dropped a sheaf, he or she was to leave it behind. In this case, the produce would already have been harvested and bound together. So the harvester has this sheaf of grain and probably carries half a dozen or more back to the storage place where they're getting ready, preparing it for either transportation or threshing.

And the harvester likely would have lost one. He is to leave it there. In that case, the sheaf was to be left on the ground so it could be picked up by one of the gleaners.

Three, the harvesters were not supposed to go back through looking for produce that had been missed. As noted, beyond grain, olive trees, and vineyards are specifically mentioned, emphasizing how the gleaning directive covered the entire harvest and not just grain. In an olive tree, while the olives will generally ripen at the same time, there will always be some that ripen later, and they are to be left behind.

Thinking back through these cornfields, I was always amazed. In fact, even today, I am amazed at how many years of corn you can see lying on the ground if you walk through a fully harvested cornfield where everything is lying low. In the case of vineyards, the admonition was that if any bunches of grapes were missed, or maybe they were just not yet ripe, they were to be left. In the case of olives, the harvesters would use sticks to knock the ripe olives off, and there would be some that wouldn't fall, and they were to be left. And then the gleaner could go through and pick them.

Four, given the scope of produce mentioned, it seems clear that the gleaning directive covered the entire harvest.

Now, what I mean by that is they would start with the first grain in the late spring, April-May timeframe, and work their way through the wheat and then into the other crops, ending with the olives in the fall. So, the expectation was that a gleaner would be able to gather more than just the barley or the wheat or the olives, more than just for the current need. The gleaner would have enough, although likely somewhat on the sparse side, to preserve for the off-season.

If so, the gleaner would then also have the same food preservation problems as the farmer. The produce left behind provided an opportunity for the needy. For example, Leviticus 19 mentions that they are to gather the residue for their own use.

It's significant that the gleaning process provided an opportunity for the Wara to gather food from land that they did not own and for which they had not participated in the sowing and tending of the crops. But they were required to put in the labor to gather that produce as well as to thresh it and then to take it home and process it. Given the scope of the crops listed, it would then seem that given, based on the

example of Ruth, one of the Wara was able to follow the harvest from barley in April and May on into the grape and olive harvest in the fall.

I see two underlying principles for consideration here. The first is the idea of a planned margin. When producing, plan for more than you could use.

There are two aspects to this. The first is that a person should live within his or her means. For Israelites living on a farm where they produced most of their food means that they developed their dietary patterns based on what they had.

At the same time, they planned crops. They were to plan on crops adequate to cover their needs. And they would provide a tithe that was in order to incorporate a tithe so you would have grown enough to give the tithe and still have enough to live on.

It would also require them to leave some for the Wara to follow the harvesters. Today, most of us do not live in agricultural communities, but we can still institute a similar practice. It might take looking at what it would take to provide a reasonable lifestyle for a person in our position to live.

Here, we need to recognize that we all tend to overestimate what we need. We tend to confuse our wants with our needs. We need to add in enough to tithe our income and still have adequate to live on.

And then we need some extra for those in need. After comparing this with our income, we have to make some choices. We may have to pair off a couple of those needs that we have, or it might require exploring through God's guidance ways to augment the income.

For the farmer, expanding what he planted might be required. It might require hiring another worker. The point is, is that we, the principals, seem to require preparation to be able to give.

Let's see. We've already covered this. We need to work tithes.

Applied to all Israelites, they were required to tithe all their products. By definition, that means that they were to return to God one-tenth of their harvest. This gets a little tricky.

The initial declaration of the tithe declaration requirement in Leviticus 27 prescribed that the tithe belonged to the Lord. But in Numbers 18, as this is clarified and amplified, it shows that the Levites represented the Lord in this case as part of their national inheritance. The text says the tithe is for the Levites.

Numbers 18 states three times the tithe was to be given to the Levites as their inheritance. This would explain why there were 48 Levitical cities scattered throughout the land. This would explain why they essentially became storehouses for the Levites, these cities.

However, according to Leviticus 18, a tithe of the portion that was given to the Levites was to be given as an offering to the Lord. It would seem likely that this was the portion that would be eaten in God's presence, although an option was given to sow it and purchase replacements at the places where God chooses to establish His name. Given the amount of material, a full corporate tithe of the entire nation, how much it would be included, J. A. Thompson is likely correct when he suggests that a representative portion would be taken to the central sanctuary for a feast and the rest stored at local cities.

If so, everything beyond the celebratory meal was to be given to the Levites. They would deposit it in the God's city. So the tithe of the harvest is given to God, the priest serves as God's representative, a portion is eaten before God, and then the rest is stored in 48 Levitical cities.

However, every third year, there is a different situation. Instead of having the celebration before God and giving the rest to the Levites, it was to be stored in the local towns, Deuteronomy 14. The nature of this third-year tithe is not clear, but it seems to provide produce for the WORA as well as for the Levites.

Again, it would seem to be stored in each local city. Basically, it would appear that these goods were to be available on an as-needed basis for the WORA in that region as well as for the Levites. As I understand it, this is likely to be a short-term, bail-them-out-of-a-hard-situation idea.

The text states that it would be reckoned as grain from the threshing floor or the full produce from the vine vat. This would suggest that the produce was processed before it was given and thus was ready for storage and thus for use. While not amplified, this will explain why the tithe was given every third year.

It was intended to be a welfare pantry for the widows, the aliens, and the orphans. And it's very interesting, the text says, in the alien and the orphan and the widow who are in your town. So, this is a direction to the Levites.

Unlike learning, there does not seem to be any requirement that the recipient must work for what he or she was to be given. As such, the distribution from the third-year tithe would seem to be rather minimal, perhaps a short-term bridge to cover a temporary need. The gleaning already mentioned would then provide for a longer period, perhaps serving the same purpose as food storage in a regular household.

If that's the case, this is an aspect of social justice that tends to get lost in the discussion. The principle here is very straightforward. God expected His people in Israel to return one-tenth, that is, a tithe.

For the Israelites, that meant a portion of the produce that they grew was given to the Levites, who apparently used it for themselves as teachers and guides of Israel and as well as for the WORA as needed. Interestingly, the New Testament gives no guidance for the Church in this regard. This may mean that it was felt that the Old Testament teaching here was clear enough that nothing further needed to be said.

An alternative view is that giving was to be based on God's leading. Regardless, the principle that a portion of what we earn should be given to God's representatives in an appropriate manner to support those who grew in God's work and to support those in need seems to underlie this entire principle. Our fourth item is Sabbath-year garnering.

This is a more difficult situation. First of all, the Sabbath year was the seventh year. In the seventh year, the Israelites were not to plant, tend, or harvest.

As I develop in my forthcoming commentary on Leviticus, it seems like they were required to do other work around the farm, but the land and the key is, the text says, the land was to rest. The specifics of the Sabbath year are difficult to follow. They're highly debated.

There are three primary issues that are related. First, by definition and the explicit directions given in Leviticus 25, the Sabbath year was every seventh year. That is a six-in-one cycle.

Six years of growing crops, one year of letting the ground rest. Second, was the purpose of the Sabbath year to let the land rest or to provide for the poor? I would argue that the text suggests it was to let the land rest. Although, we will see that the poor now have an opportunity to do something that they could not do during a regular year.

Third, tied into the second question, could Israelites eat from the Sabbath-year volunteer produce? Leviticus 25 seems to say no. Let me rephrase that. Leviticus 25, verses 4 and 5 seem to say no, but verses 6 and 7 seem to say yes.

With respect to the straightforward sixth and seventh-year cycle, various alternatives have been suggested since it seems very unlikely in the minds of most of us that we would be able just to rest a full year and not have any income. The proposal here is that each individual farmer would leave one portion, one-seventh of his land, or one proposal is that each individual farmer would leave one-seventh of his land to lie



fallow each year. And so, he would have his land divided up into seven parts and use six different sections each year.

Another perspective is that the concept was really just an ideal that was never done. Probably true, but I don't think that that was what was intended. A third approach is that the farmers rotated each year so that only the land of a certain farmer was fallow in any specific time frame, and then the others had to pitch in and help that farmer.

Probably the key argument against the universal seventh-year Sabbath is the idea of practicality. Could a farmer in a village spend two years on one year's crop? As one thing says, two other factors must be considered. First of all, Sabbath-year directions in the Exodus passage are followed immediately by sixth- and seventh-day directions for the Sabbath day.

This would suggest a correlation in the author's mind. Six days of work, one day off. Six years of work, one year off.

Second, 2 Chronicles 36 asserts that the failure to observe the Sabbath year was a cause factor for the exile, at least in terms of its length. Admittedly, the traditional understanding is difficult and impractical, but that seems to be the point. The text warns the people not to be apprehensive in the seventh year because God will provide adequate provisions in the sixth year to get them through to the harvest of the eighth year.

In other words, people will be given extra in advance. That could serve as a means to reduce the apprehension or anticipation of not sowing in the Sabbath year. Consequently, if they did not observe the Sabbath year, it was not just a lack of faith but overall defiance, open defiance of God.

Thus, it would seem likely here that Kuichi is correct when he states the Sabbath year is to be, quote, universal and simultaneous, extending to all the fields in every seventh year, end quote. Regarding questions two and three that we looked at here, let's see. The purpose of the Sabbath year seems to primarily be to give the land rest.

This would have automatically provided rest to the farmer and his animals since they were not to plow to sow or to reap. A key problem with understanding the Sabbath year as primarily providing for the needy is it was just one year out of seven, although Exodus 23 suggests that any volunteer produce could be picked and eaten. Leviticus 25.6 allows the farmer to participate as well.

So, it seems that Gordon Wenham is correct when the organization is, when the key is organized, harvesting is forbidden. As such, the apparent conflict between Leviticus 25:5 and 25:6 and 7, could be resolved by noting that the basic principle of

the seventh year was not to have business as usual. Specifically, during the Sabbath year, the land rested.

Everyone was to put an equal basis of trust on God's provision, which means that the farm owner and the WORA were on an equal footing. The Sabbath year, like the Sabbath day, served to remind the people that God was the creator and their provider. It served to remind the people that he would, the land owners, that the land was God's, and they returned it to him in the Sabbath year.

It said they were allowed to walk through, and if volunteer crops grew, they could harvest them. As we evaluate WORA provisions, it would appear that the two key concepts noted in part one of the study, which were embedded in the social structure and provided their foundation, gave each of them much more of their strength. But there's a third that emerges from the common religious structure of the tradition.

Okay, where are we? As discussed in part one, the embryonic nation of Israel emerged from Egypt with a social structure based on 13 tribes descended from the 12 sons of Jacob. When the exodus occurred 400 years later, that family structure was basically still intact. Although there are a couple of ramifications.

While a mixed company came out of Egypt, by the time of the conquest, ethnic outliers apparently had been largely absorbed into the existing tribal units. We noted Caleb as a key example. While not as clear, it would seem that a similar process occurred subsequently with the native tribes who were not eradicated during the conquest.

For example, through deceit, the Gibeonites preserved their existence and became servants of the nation, serving on the altar of God. Under David, Ishmael, the Gibeonite, was a noted leader. Later, Melithiah, the Gibeonite, is noted for assisting Nehemiah in rebuilding the wall after the exile.

As such, there seems to have been a willingness on the part of Israel to allow assimilation, exemplified by Ruth. However, with respect to assimilation, as well as to social justice, it would be the smaller units of the social hierarchy that would be important. What differentiated the two groups is not clear.

Joshua 15, 19 seems to show basic division by clan, which would seem to incorporate extended families. This suggests the settlement essentially placed kinship groups within given locations, such as the city and the villages. While clearly that kinship structure would underlie the practice of levirate marriage and the Goel responsibilities, it seems likely it would also affect the practice of harvesting in terms of location, the practice of gleaning and harvesting in terms of location, and associated practices.

For example, when Boaz gave generous instructions to his steward regarding Ruth's gleaning, it's tempting to tie this to romantic interests. But it may be that he was aware of Goel's responsibility since he was cognizant of his closer relative. Given the interrelatedness of the entire village, family ties would likely have heightened social pressures in terms of conformity and provision.

This would seem to suggest that the provision for the Wara needed to be done on a local level, the village level, where there was adequate knowledge for discernment of fulfilling the needs they might have. Part one also noted how an individual farm in a modern village of Kefr al-Maa consisted of several portions of land distributed throughout the fields surrounding the housing area. It would appear that having smaller parcels intermingled through the tilled ground would promote, dare we say, force cooperation between farmers.

At a minimum, given the fact that apparently there were no walls, the admonition not to harvest to the corner of their field would have enhanced the gleaning opportunities. The third-year tithe that's our third undergirding concept, which is not addressed in part one. While the Israelites were expected to tithe each year, during those two of those years, the tithe was kept by, taken by the, taken to the Levites in one of their 48 Levitical cities.

This provision was to be kept locally for easy access. This special provision would be collected by the community at large, community at large, drawing from its overall harvest. It's very interesting that this provision especially was to be administered by the Levites.

While this might suggest a religious system should be the framework around which social justice is built, it also should be noted that when set up, the Levite system was the only national system Israel had. So, during the third year of the tithe, the tithe was handled differently in that it was placed in a storage facility to be distributed to those who had special needs. As the Torah sets up the governing process for the nation of Israel, we'll note these three factors supporting it: integrated extended families, the dispersed land parcels as part of the community field, and the third-year tithes.

A key portion of these provides several strands of social justice. When summed up in the general statement, you shall love your neighbor as yourself; the concept is spelled out in the last six of the Ten Commandments, which govern relationships. But the Torah goes beyond this when it recognizes human frailties in a fallen world.

Although its social fabric was designed to support all members of society through relationships, including extended families and interrelated communities, it also provided Israel with means by which the tragedies of life could be ameliorated. For

the most part, this social fabric provides limits and protections for all the Israelite society. But the Torah gives special note regarding outliers on the frayed edge of society who might have special needs by providing a special safety net for the three categories of people who historically tended to be abused, as we call them, the WORA.

This study explored how several special provisions were made for the WORA against the backdrop of the social norms of the late bronze agricultural society. In the process, we have noted a balance in its provisions. Three provisions were applied to all three groups.

Two required the recipient work to avail him or herself in the assistance. In the case of gleaning, he or she had to get out in the field and labor to bring in the produce. The same is true in the case of the Sabbath year garnering.

In the same time, a second observation is that the provision needed to be made for short-term emergency needs. And the third-year tithe seems to be a welfare pantry in the local city where food was stored for distribution to those who had a sudden short-term need. They'd be distributed by the Levites.

There seem to be no obligations with regard to this provision, but since it would be the tithe of just one out of three years, it would seem it was not designated for large distributions. A third observation might be that a significant part of the social justice structure would require an intentional margin on the part of the overall community. Or, to put it in contemporary terms, living below their means in order to provide a surplus to share.

For Israel, the farmer would need to plant enough grain, for example, so that a normal harvest would provide for him and his family and, at the same time, have enough for a tithe and then plenty left over for whoever might glean. This would be a balance to the requirement that the WORA put in the effort or the burden to accrue the benefit. But it also anticipated that God would give the farmer benefit in response to his effort or to his burden.

And a fourth observation is that social justice was embedded at the local level. In the case of a widow and an orphan, the person would have been living in the village before the husband or father passed away. It's unlikely that the person left the village.

It's also likely that the extended family had a significant role to play in addressing the situation. In the case of the third-year tithe, the local level was the nearest Levitical city. All these factors indicate that, in essence, we see neighbors helping neighbors, not just somebody living next door, but somebody they really knew.

The Old Testament provisions for social liars we have looked at were given as part of a particular social structure and historical context. Specifically, they were oriented towards an extremely homogeneous agrarian society, very different from our own. They also focused on community action, largely within an interrelated population.

They also built on a single religious system in which the entire community was expected to participate. Still, keeping these provisions in mind, the underlying principles noted could serve as a springboard for developing contemporary social justice provisions.

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