

# Dr. Donald Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 7, Jubilee Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide Quiz, and 5) FAQs

## 1. Abstract of Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 7, Jubilee, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

**Dr. Donald Fowler's lecture** on Old Testament backgrounds explores the biblical concept of Jubilee, comparing it to similar practices in ancient Mesopotamia. **The lecture analyzes the economic and theological implications** of debt cancellation, land fallow periods, and the freeing of slaves, highlighting the connections between the Hebrew Sabbath and the cyclical nature of release. **It contrasts the divinely ordained, predictable system of the Jubilee** with the chaotic, unpredictable Mesopotamian releases tied to royal succession. **Fowler argues that the Jubilee's failure to be implemented in ancient Israel** had lasting consequences and points to its relevance in understanding both Old and New Testament concepts of social justice and God's kingship.

**2. 21 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 7 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Old Testament Introduction → Old Testament Backgrounds).**



**Fowler\_OTB\_Session  
n07.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 7, Jubilee

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture transcript by Dr. Donald Fowler on the Old Testament concept of Jubilee:

#### **Briefing Document: Dr. Donald Fowler on Jubilee and Old Testament Backgrounds**

##### **Introduction:**

This document summarizes the key concepts presented by Dr. Donald Fowler in his lecture on the Old Testament Jubilee, emphasizing its historical roots, economic implications, and theological significance. Dr. Fowler stresses the importance of understanding the broader context of the Ancient Near East to interpret biblical concepts accurately, particularly the parallels between Mesopotamian practices and the Israelite Jubilee laws.

##### **Key Themes & Ideas:**

##### **1. Historical Context - The Hyksos Empire:**

- The lecture begins by placing the biblical narrative within the context of the Ancient Near East, specifically mentioning the Hyksos Empire, which stretched from southern Turkey to central Egypt.
- Dr. Fowler points out that despite their significance to the Hebrew people, there are no Hyksos tablets that could provide a detailed history of this empire. This highlights the challenge in reconstructing the history of this era. "...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."

##### **1. The Concept of Release (Shmita) and Jubilee:**

- **Release (Shmita):** Every seventh year, debts between Israelites were to be canceled, land was to lie fallow, and slaves (who were in debt-related servitude) were to be set free. "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."

- **Jubilee:** Occurring every 50th year (after seven cycles of seven years), its relationship to the seventh-year release is debated. Some argue it was merely a more sacred 50th year, while others suggest a difference in its application of the laws. Regardless of specifics, both systems focused on debt release and freedom of slaves, with the land left fallow.
- Dr. Fowler emphasizes that slavery in this period was primarily an *economic* reality, not based on race or prejudice. It was a way for people to survive bankruptcy in a society that did not have formal bankruptcy systems. "In the Bible, it had literally nothing to do with race. It had to do with economics, mostly."
- He also noted that money was not used until the Persian period. Before that, silver was used as a weight and bartering was used to trade goods.

#### 1. **Mesopotamian Parallels: Debt Cancellation by Kings:**

- Dr. Fowler notes that the concept of debt cancellation has parallels in Mesopotamia, particularly in the Old Babylonian period.
- Mesopotamian kings would institute debt cancellation upon assuming the throne, not on a cyclical basis. This practice was known in Akkadian as *mesharum* and *andirarum*. The Hebrew words *Yashar* and *dirur* are etymologically the same. "The dirur is the true counterpart of the Mesopotamian andirarum"
- Dr. Fowler highlights that, unlike the Israelite practice, this was unpredictable and caused economic chaos, as people did not know when a new king would ascend. "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."
- He mentions the discovery of "protection documents" on cuneiform tablets from Chana and Newsy, created by creditors to protect their loans against royal debt cancellations.

#### 1. **Theological Significance of Release and Jubilee:**

- **Sabbatarian Cycle:** The seventh-year release is connected to the Sabbath cycle, reflecting God's rest on the seventh day of creation. The year was designed as a time of rest for both the land and people. "...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."

- **God as King:** The practice highlights God as the ultimate King who provides and protects his people. God, as King, institutes the release. "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."
- **Theocentric Design:** The entire system is meant to be theocentric, reminding both humankind and the land that they belong to God. The land's rest reinforces that it is not owned by the people but is a sacred resource belonging to God. "...the land belongs to God, and we, therefore, have no right to abuse it."
- **Horizontal Responsibilities:** There is a horizontal responsibility for proper treatment of the land and people. This responsibility stems from the vertical responsibility toward God.
- **Image-Bearers:** The debt cancellation and release of slaves is a reminder that all humans are image-bearers of God, and thus, economic abuse should be avoided. God created a system in which there was no poverty because everyone had their own land and could make a living equally. "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."

#### 1. **Failure to Implement the Jubilee System:**

- Dr. Fowler highlights that, despite God's intention, the Jubilee system was never fully practiced in Israel. "And we know from 2 Chronicles that the release, it tells us, was never ever practiced in the entirety of the Old Testament."
- The lack of consistent leadership after Joshua's death led to the collapse of the economic system. "In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes."
- The prophets often condemned the wealthy for abusing the poor, showing the system of justice and equality was not being implemented. "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."

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## 2. **Relevance to the New Testament and Modern Thought:**

- The early Christians in Acts may have been trying to replicate the Jubilee system by selling possessions and creating a community without poverty. "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."
- Dr. Fowler suggests that even secular governments could benefit from a similar system based on fairness and cycles of rest and restoration. The Jubilee system is a powerful vehicle for showing how God reveals himself.
- The idea of cycles is tied to a concept from Ecclesiastes 3, which presents 14 times of this and 14 times of that, which is 2 times creation. God created cycles to make life work better on the earth.

## 1. **Minimalist Scholars:**

- Dr. Fowler notes a minority group of scholars called minimalists who have tried to deny the connections between the Babylonian and Biblical release systems. He makes the argument that the release is tied to creation and the cycle that it established. "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."

## **Conclusion:**

Dr. Fowler's lecture underscores the profound depth and complexity of the Old Testament Jubilee laws. He highlights their roots in Ancient Near Eastern practices, their theological importance as a reflection of God's character, and the practical implications for creating a just and equitable society. The failure to implement this system in Israel is a reminder of the consequences of disobedience and the enduring relevance of these principles for believers today. The lecture serves as background for understanding later biblical concepts, particularly in the New Testament, and the ministry of Christ.

This document provides a detailed overview of the information presented.

## 4. Study Guide: Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 7, Jubilee

### Old Testament Backgrounds: Jubilee Study Guide

#### Quiz

**Instructions:** Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What is the primary challenge in studying Old Testament backgrounds, according to the lecture?
2. Where was the capital of the Hyksos Empire located?
3. What is significant about the economic practice of the Jubilee in the Old Testament?
4. According to the lecture, what were the economic realities that would force an Israelite into slavery?
5. How did the use of the term "shekel" differ in biblical times compared to today?
6. What is the difference between the release year and the Jubilee year?
7. What were *mesharum* and *andirarum* and what are their counterparts in the Hebrew Bible?
8. What was the purpose of "protection documents" in ancient Mesopotamia?
9. How did the Sabbatarian cycle relate to the release in the biblical tradition?
10. According to the lecture, why was the economic system of release never practiced in ancient Israel?

#### Answer Key

1. The primary challenge is that the biblical story occurs much later than the beginning of Mesopotamian history, making it difficult to understand without establishing historical continuity. One can't just jump into the biblical story, but must begin by understanding the history that came before it.
2. The capital of the Hyksos Empire was Avaris, located in Egypt. The Empire extended from the center of Egypt all the way to the Euphrates River.

3. The Jubilee involved the cancellation of debts every 50th year, the release of slaves, and the land lying fallow. This economic practice is considered remarkable because it ensured a periodic restart and social safety net.
4. Economic realities that could force an Israelite into slavery included crop disease, insect infestations, physical inability to work, or sickness. These factors could lead to bankruptcy in the ancient world forcing an individual to sell themselves or a family member into slavery.
5. In biblical times, the word "shekel" referred to a weight of silver used as a form of currency. Today, the word "shekel" is used to describe a coin.
6. The release year occurred every seventh year and involved debt cancellation, land resting, and the release of slaves. The Jubilee year was the 50th year, occurring after seven cycles of seven, and also involved similar practices. There is debate as to whether the Jubilee was an exact replication of the seventh year or included added components.
7. *Mesharum* and *andirarum* were Akkadian terms for the release of debts instituted by a new king in Mesopotamia. Their counterparts in the Hebrew Bible are *Yashar* and *dirur*, and *dirur* was used for the release mentioned in Deuteronomy.
8. "Protection documents" were used to protect creditors from losing money in the event of a king instituting a release. These documents stipulated that the loan was not subject to debt cancellation.
9. The release was part of a Sabbatarian cycle, reflecting God's rest on the seventh day of creation and a reminder that God is king. Just as God rested on the seventh day, the seventh year was a year of rest for the people and the land.
10. The economic system of release was never practiced because, after Joshua's death, there was no central leadership to enforce it and a failure of the people to follow God's laws. This lack of leadership and the absence of a king meant that the cycle of release was never implemented.

## Essay Questions

1. Discuss the Mesopotamian origins of the concept of debt release and its adaptation in the Old Testament. How does the biblical concept of the release differ from its Mesopotamian precedents, and what is the significance of these differences?
2. Explain the economic realities of ancient Israel that led to practices like selling oneself into slavery and how the release system addressed these. How was slavery viewed in this context, and why was it not racially based?
3. Analyze the theological significance of the Sabbatarian model in the Old Testament, particularly in the context of the release and the Jubilee. How does it connect to the concept of God as king, provider, and protector?
4. Describe the concept of the land in the Old Testament, specifically how it is not to be viewed as property for ownership. How does the concept of rest and fallow tie into the understanding of the relationship between people and land?
5. Explore the reasons why the system of release was never practiced in the Old Testament. What does this failure reveal about the leadership and social structure of ancient Israel, and what consequences did it have?



## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Avaris:** The capital city of the Hyksos Empire in Egypt.
- **Dirur:** A Hebrew word for release that is etymologically linked to the Mesopotamian term *andirarum*.
- **Hyksos:** An ancient people who ruled a large empire from the center of Egypt up to the Euphrates River and southern Turkey; noted in the lecture as important in the biblical context.
- **Jubilee:** A year occurring every 50 years as part of the Israelite economic system that included the release of debts and slaves.
- **Manumitted:** To set free from slavery.
- **Mesharum:** An Akkadian term referring to a release of debt in Mesopotamia, related to the concept of righteous order.
- **Old Babylonian Period:** A significant period in Mesopotamian history (roughly 2000-1600 BCE) when several kings implemented debt releases.
- **Release Year (Shmita):** The seventh year in the Israelite economic cycle that included the cancellation of debts, land rest, and the release of slaves.
- **Sabbatarian:** Relating to the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week of rest. The term is used to connect the practice of the release with the creation narrative and the seven day week where the seventh is a day of rest.
- **Shekel:** A unit of weight (originally) used as a form of currency in biblical times.
- **Theocentric:** Having God as the central focus.

## 5. FAQs on Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 7, Jubilee, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions: The Jubilee and Economic Practices in the Old Testament

- **What is the significance of studying Old Testament backgrounds, particularly the cultures of Mesopotamia, for understanding the Bible?**  
Studying the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia, such as the Old Babylonian period, is crucial for understanding the Bible because many biblical practices and concepts, including the Jubilee year, have parallels in Mesopotamian cultures. The Mesopotamian background provides a vital context, as biblical stories and ideas developed within a world much older than the Bible itself. Understanding these parallels sheds light on the Bible and deepens our appreciation of its message.
- **What was the Hyksos Empire, and what is its relevance to the Old Testament?**  
The Hyksos Empire was a significant power that stretched from southern Turkey down to the center of Egypt and east to the Euphrates River. It is important to note that the Hyksos controlled the land of Israel/Canaan in the period before the Israelite nation took control of that territory. While there are no Hyksos tablets to directly give us their history, they are considered a people of singular importance to the Hebrew people.
- **What was the 'release year' as described in the Old Testament, and how was it supposed to work?**  
The 'release year,' occurring every seventh year, was a divinely ordained economic and social practice in ancient Israel. In this year, all debts that one Israelite owed to another were to be canceled. Land was to lie fallow (unplowed), and enslaved Israelites were to be set free. This was a complete economic reset, intended to prevent long-term poverty and inequality within the community.

- **How did the practice of slavery in the Old Testament differ from the common understanding of slavery today?**
- In the Old Testament, slavery was primarily an economic issue, not racial. People often sold themselves or their children into servitude to pay off debts or survive financial hardships, especially during the agricultural cycle. It was a temporary state brought on by economic circumstances, and the release year was meant to offer relief for those who had become enslaved due to financial issues. It's important to note that this was a different form of slavery than what came later and is different from the slavery often taught in the modern world, which was primarily race-based.
- **What was the relationship between the Mesopotamian practice of debt release and the biblical concept of the Jubilee or release?**
- In Mesopotamia, kings would institute a cancellation of debts, usually in the first full year of their reign. While the biblical concept of the release and the Mesopotamian releases share etymological roots in their terminology, they differ in timing. The biblical release was a cyclic event, happening every seventh year, while Mesopotamian releases were tied to the accession of a new king and thus not predictable. Also, in Mesopotamia protection documents were used to help people avoid losses due to debt cancellation. These were not found in the Hebrew release tradition. The biblical model was also part of a larger system involving manumission of slaves and rest for the land, all done on a cyclic basis. The biblical system was therefore more robust and was tied to a theology of God's sovereignty and the need for rest.
- **What is the significance of the Sabbatarian cycle, and how does it relate to the release year?** The Sabbatarian cycle refers to the pattern of six days of work followed by a day of rest. It's connected to God's creation and the way he ordained the world to be. The release year is a part of this Sabbatarian cycle and acts as an economic expression of it. As God rested on the seventh day, the people and the land were to rest in the seventh year. This pattern is foundational to the theology and structure of the biblical release, and highlights the importance of rest and periodic renewal.

- **How does the concept of God as king influence the understanding of the release year?** The concept of God as king is central to understanding the release year. The release is something God instituted, much like Mesopotamian kings instituted the release in that culture. But because God is the king of Israel, the release reflects His identity as the provider and protector of His people, ensuring justice and well-being. The release itself is also part of God's nature as king and his provision and protection of his people. It highlights the unique aspects of the Hebrew system as God was their ruler not man.
- **Was the Jubilee/Release system ever fully implemented in ancient Israel, and what are the potential implications of this failure?**
- The Jubilee/release system, despite being a divinely ordained command, was likely never fully implemented in ancient Israel. This failure was due in part to a lack of consistent leadership after Joshua, which led to an absence of unity, and a general unwillingness to adhere to the law. The failure to practice the release contributed to societal inequalities and the economic abuse of the poor, and prophets repeatedly condemned the oppression of the poor in response to these inequities. The eventual Babylonian exile is even attributed partly to the failure to observe these Sabbath cycles and rest the land.