

Dr. Michael Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 1: Ancient Israel's Cultural Background Resources from NotebookLM

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

1. Abstract of Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session1: Ancient Israel's Cultural Background, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Professor Michael Harbin's lecture explores the cultural context of ancient Israel to understand its approach to social justice, particularly for marginalized groups. He highlights the agrarian nature of the society in the Old Testament, contrasting it with modern Western culture and emphasizing the importance of understanding this background to interpret biblical principles. **Harbin utilizes archaeological findings and anthropological studies of similar modern villages to illustrate the close-knit nature of ancient Israelite communities and their agricultural practices.** This communal structure, with clustered housing surrounded by collectively managed fields, significantly influenced social relationships and provisions for vulnerable individuals like widows, orphans, and resident aliens. **The lecture also examines the distribution of land by tribe, clan, and extended family, noting the potential for a relatively homogeneous village population.** Ultimately, this initial part of the lecture series aims to establish a foundational understanding of ancient Israel's societal framework as a basis for examining its concepts of social justice for outliers.

**2. 24 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 1 –
Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (Theology → Old Testament Theology).**



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3. Briefing Document: Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session1: Ancient Israel's Cultural Background

Briefing Document: Social Justice for Social Outliers in Ancient Israel - Part 1: Ancient Israel's Cultural Background

Subject: An overview of the cultural background of ancient Israel, particularly focusing on its agrarian nature and village structure, as a foundation for understanding social justice for outliers (widows, orphans, and resident aliens - WARA).

Main Themes and Important Ideas/Facts:

This first part of Dr. Harbin's lecture series establishes the crucial cultural context necessary for understanding the Old Testament principles of social justice, particularly as they relate to vulnerable groups. The central argument is that while biblical principles appear universally applicable, they are deeply embedded in the specific, and often contrasting, culture of ancient Israel.

1. The Agrarian and Rural Nature of Ancient Israel:

- The Old Testament, especially the Torah (Pentateuch), was written for a society fundamentally different from our modern Western world. Ancient Israel was characterized by being "**rural, agrarian, low-tech, locally oriented, and slow-paced,**" in contrast to our "**urban, post-industrial, high-tech, globally oriented, and fast-paced**" society.
- Scholars like Joseph Blenkinsopp and Roland De Vaux agree that the Pentateuch presupposes a "**peasant agricultural society, agrarian society**" and aims to govern a "**community of shepherds and peasants.**"
- Understanding this agrarian context is crucial because God's cultural guidelines were designed for this specific setting. Applying these directives to our contemporary world requires careful consideration of the significant cultural gap.

2. The Importance of Community Relationships:

- Relationships within ancient Israelite society, particularly within the close-knit village structure, were vital and significantly impacted social justice issues. This aspect is often overlooked by scholars.
- The Pentateuch, believed to have been given at Mount Sinai and during the journey to Canaan, provided "**advanced guidance to the nation on how they**

were to live once they settled into the land." However, the subsequent Old Testament books suggest that these guidelines were likely followed only partially and for a short time.

3. The Structure of Ancient Israelite Villages:

- Archaeological evidence, supported by anthropological studies of modern villages like Richard Antoine's study of Kafr al-Ma'a in Jordan, reveals a typical farming community structure: **"a cluster of houses built in close proximity to each other, even to the point of having walls in common,"** surrounded by unfenced fields.
- This close housing and unfenced field system had profound implications for community relations and social justice. **"Two factors, the close village housing and the unfenced field help explain several aspects of Old Testament social justice issues."**
- Antoine's study showed farming techniques similar to those in the Old Testament, but more importantly, it highlighted how the social structure and physical layout of the village affected community relationships.

4. Land Ownership and Usage:

- While individual families owned portions of the agricultural land surrounding the village, the **"totality of the tilled land was viewed as a collective whole belonging to the community."** This is suggested by Ruth's gleaning in "the field" belonging to Boaz.
- The lack of fences between fields is notable, despite the abundance of stones in the region. While stones might have initially marked boundaries, Deuteronomy 19:14 warns against moving boundary markers, suggesting something more easily shifted.
- Threshing floors were often located somewhat away from the village, possibly communal, and the threshing process was a multi-day event, sometimes involving overnight stays.
- Grazing land for sheep and goats was typically located beyond the cultivated fields, the most distant portion within the village region.

5. The Settlement Process and Land Distribution:

- After entering Canaan, the land was divided first by the twelve tribes and then by smaller units like clans and extended families. This local distribution was crucial

for the daily lives of Israelites and formed the basis of their social organization and justice.

- Tribal land distribution, according to Joshua, was done by casting lots, believed to be a method through which God controlled the outcome. Larger tribes received more territory.
- The specific process of dividing land within tribes among clans and extended families is not fully detailed in the biblical text.
- Land inheritance was generally patrilineal, passed from father to son, with the oldest son receiving a double portion. Selling inherited land was generally prohibited to keep it within the family lineage.
- The initial land distribution aimed to provide resources for a new start after the wilderness experience, but the amount of land given to each extended family was likely limited by their ability to farm it (estimated around five acres per adult male).

6. Community Dynamics and Social Norms:

- The close proximity of dwellings and extended family relationships fostered strong community awareness of individual joys and sorrows, as well as significant peer pressure.
- Daily work involved walking to individual portions of the common field, with farmers often eating lunch on-site and returning home in the late afternoon.
- The distance farmers could walk to their fields likely limited the size of the agricultural community (estimated radius of 1-3 miles).
- Cities likely served as centers for administration, storage of agricultural surplus, social leadership, and the development of specialized trades. Satellite villages or hamlets may have existed to allow farmers to live closer to their fields.
- Extended families were likely expected to provide support for their members, which has significant implications for understanding the care of widows and orphans.

7. Introduction to the "WARA" Outlier Groups:

- The lecture introduces the three focus groups for the study of social justice: **Widows, Orphans, and Resident Aliens (WARA)**.

- Part three (mentioned but not included in the excerpt) will define these groups more closely, evaluate their position in ancient Israelite agricultural culture, and explore their commonalities as social outliers.

Quote Highlights:

- **"The Bible presents and provides principles given by God that appear to be applicable to all peoples in all cultures at all times. However, many of these principles must be extracted from the particular cultures in which they were embedded."** (p. 1) - Emphasizes the need for cultural understanding.
- **"While scholars debate the origin of the Pentateuch, they seem to generally agree that it was written for a culture tied to the land."** (p. 1) - Highlights the agrarian focus of early Israelite law.
- **"I would suggest that one area that needs careful examination is relationships. In this study, we will follow the traditional understanding that as presented in the text, the material in the Pentateuch that describes how the Israelites were expected to relate to each other was either given at Mount Sinai...or during the journey into the land of Canaan..."** (p. 2) - Underscores the importance of relational context.
- **"Archaeological evidence suggests that the typical farming community...was close, was a cluster of houses built in close proximity to each other, even to the point of having walls in common."** (p. 2) - Describes the physical layout of villages.
- **"Two factors, the close village housing and the unfenced field help explain several aspects of Old Testament social justice issues."** (p. 3) - Connects the village structure to social justice.
- **"This suggests that while certain portions of the agricultural land surrounding the village belong to different individuals, the totality of the tilled land was viewed as a collective whole belonging to the community."** (p. 5) - Explains the communal aspect of land.
- **"The biblical text sets forth a standard that the land that was inherited...could not be sold but would be passed on from a father to his son."** (p. 13) - Highlights the principle of land remaining within the family.

- **"This expanded picture might suggest that the extended family was expected to provide support for others within the family lineage."** (p. 14) - Introduces the role of the extended family in social support.

Conclusion:

Dr. Harbin's Part 1 lecture effectively lays the groundwork for understanding social justice in ancient Israel by detailing the unique cultural context. The agrarian lifestyle, close-knit village structure, specific land ownership and distribution practices, and strong community relationships all played a significant role in shaping the social norms and expectations, including provisions for vulnerable individuals like widows, orphans, and resident aliens. This foundational understanding is crucial for interpreting the social justice principles found within the Old Testament, which will be explored in subsequent parts of the series.

4. Study Guide: Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session1: Ancient Israel's Cultural Background

Study Guide: Ancient Israel's Cultural Background

Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each, based on the provided excerpts from Dr. Harbin's lecture.

1. According to Dr. Harbin, what is a key challenge when applying biblical principles to contemporary society?
2. What agrarian society does Dr. Harbin suggest the legal material of the Pentateuch was primarily intended to govern?
3. What two key features of ancient Israelite villages, supported by archaeological evidence, does Dr. Harbin highlight as impacting social justice issues?
4. How does Antoine's study of a modern Jordanian village contribute to understanding social structures in ancient Israel?
5. Describe the typical layout of an ancient Israelite village based on Dr. Harbin's description and the visual aids discussed.
6. According to Frank Frick, what was a primary distinguishing factor between a city and a village in ancient Israel?
7. How does the book of Ruth provide insight into the agricultural system and social norms of ancient Israel during the period of the judges?
8. Explain the likely implications of the close proximity of housing and the extended kinship ties within an ancient Israelite village.
9. Describe the general process of land distribution among the Israelite tribes and families after settling in Canaan, according to the lecture.
10. How might the practice of allowing younger sons to receive new portions of land have contributed to the social structure of ancient Israel?

Quiz Answer Key

1. A key challenge is that the biblical principles, while seemingly universally applicable, were embedded within the specific and very different culture of ancient Israel, which was rural, agrarian, and low-tech compared to our urban,

post-industrial society. Therefore, we must understand that ancient culture to properly extract and apply these principles.

2. Dr. Harbin suggests the legal material of the Pentateuch was primarily intended to govern a peasant agricultural society or a community of shepherds and peasants, emphasizing their close ties to the land and agrarian practices.
3. The two key features are the close proximity of village housing, where houses were clustered together, and the presence of unfenced fields stretching out around the village, both of which significantly influenced community relations and social justice issues.
4. Antoine's study of a modern Jordanian village revealed that the farming techniques were similar to those in the Old Testament and, more importantly for this study, how the social structure and physical layout of the village impacted community relationships, offering a parallel for understanding ancient Israel.
5. The typical layout involved a cluster of houses in a central area, often densely populated, surrounded by smaller garden fields, then olive groves, and finally the larger grain fields extending outwards, with woodlands further beyond used for grazing and gathering resources.
6. According to Frank Frick, the key difference between a city and a village was the level of administration; a city served to regulate agricultural surplus from surrounding hamlets (villages) and often, but not always, had walls.
7. The book of Ruth, set during the time of the judges, provides a glimpse into the agricultural system through practices like gleaning in open fields and also reveals social norms determined by the community structure, particularly concerning widows and resident aliens.
8. The close proximity of housing meant families were constantly aware of each other's lives, fostering strong peer pressure and impacting all relationships within the community. The extended kinship ties suggested a system where mutual support and shared responsibility were likely significant.
9. Land distribution initially occurred by tribe, according to lots, and then further divided among clans and extended families within their designated tribal territories. The local village or city elders likely played a role in dividing the collective fields into holdings for nuclear families.

10. Allowing younger sons to receive new portions of previously untilled land could have provided opportunities for new families to establish themselves and likely contributed to the growth and expansion of communities over time, addressing the needs of subsequent generations.

Essay Format Questions

1. Analyze the key differences between ancient Israelite agrarian society and modern Western post-industrial culture, and discuss the implications of these differences for interpreting and applying Old Testament principles of social justice.
2. Discuss the significance of the close-knit village structure and extended kinship ties in ancient Israel for understanding social norms and the potential mechanisms of social support for vulnerable individuals or groups.
3. Evaluate the role of land ownership and distribution in shaping the social and economic structures of ancient Israel, considering the initial tribal allotments and the subsequent division among families and clans.
4. Based on the information provided, describe the daily life of a typical farming family in an ancient Israelite village and explain how the village layout and agricultural practices influenced their routines and community interactions.
5. Consider the potential for both continuity and change in social customs and justice practices between the pre-monarchial period in ancient Israel and the influences of surrounding cultures, as suggested by the lecture.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Agrarian Society:** A society whose economy is predominantly based on agriculture or farming.
- **Social Outlier:** In the context of the lecture, refers to marginalized or vulnerable groups in ancient Israelite society, specifically widows, orphans, and resident aliens (WARA).
- **Pentateuch:** The first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), containing foundational laws and narratives for ancient Israel.

- **Torah:** Often used interchangeably with the Pentateuch, referring to the Law of Moses and divine instruction given to Israel.
- **Late Bronze Age:** An archaeological period in the Ancient Near East, roughly from 1550 to 1200 BCE, during which bronze was the dominant metal for tools and weapons.
- **Iron Age:** The period following the Bronze Age, characterized by the widespread use of iron, beginning around 1200 BCE in the Ancient Near East.
- **Clan:** A group of families united by descent from a common ancestor, forming a larger social unit than an extended family.
- **Extended Family:** A family unit that extends beyond the nuclear family (parents and children) to include grandparents and other close relatives living together or in close proximity.
- **Nuclear Family:** A family consisting of parents and their children.
- **Threshing Floor:** A prepared outdoor area where harvested grain is separated from the chaff (outer husks).
- **Winnowing:** The process of separating grain from chaff by exposing it to wind, which blows away the lighter chaff.
- **Gleaning:** The act of collecting leftover crops from the fields after the main harvest, often a means of sustenance for the poor and marginalized.
- **Jubilee Year:** According to Old Testament law (Leviticus 25), a year occurring every 50 years when debts were to be cancelled, slaves freed, and land returned to its original family ownership.
- **Resident Alien:** A non-Israelite individual living within the borders of ancient Israel, who had certain rights and responsibilities.
- **Lineage:** Descent from a common ancestor; a group of individuals connected by ancestry.
- **Satellite Dwellings:** Smaller hamlets or villages located around a larger central city.
- **Social Justice:** In the context of the lecture, refers to the principles and practices within ancient Israelite society aimed at ensuring fair treatment and protection for all, especially vulnerable groups.

5. FAQs Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session1: Ancient Israel's Cultural Background, Biblelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: Ancient Israel's Cultural Background and Social Justice

1. **Why is it important to understand the cultural background of ancient Israel when studying biblical principles of social justice?** The Bible presents timeless principles from God, but these principles were embedded within the specific cultural context of ancient Israel. To accurately interpret and apply these principles today, we must first understand the agrarian, low-tech, and locally oriented nature of that society, which differs significantly from modern Western culture. This understanding helps us avoid misapplying specific cultural practices as universal commands and allows us to extract the underlying justice principles.
2. **What were some key features of the typical village structure in ancient Israel, and how did this impact community life and social justice?** Archaeological evidence suggests that Israelite villages in the late Bronze Age were characterized by closely clustered houses surrounded by unfenced fields. This layout fostered close-knit communities where families were likely related and lived in close proximity, leading to significant peer influence and mutual awareness of each other's circumstances. The unfenced fields, collectively viewed as belonging to the community, influenced agricultural practices like gleaning and had implications for how social safety nets for vulnerable individuals might have functioned.
3. **How was land ownership and distribution organized in ancient Israel, and what were some of its social implications?** Land was initially divided among the twelve tribes, and then further distributed to clans and extended families. The process, often described as involving the casting of lots, aimed for an equitable distribution based on family size. Individual families received portions of the communal field for cultivation. Notably, inherited land was generally not to be sold permanently but remained within the family lineage. This system aimed to provide a basic means of sustenance for all families and had implications for social stability and the support of vulnerable members.

4. **How did the daily work life of an average farming Israelite relate to the village structure and social interactions?** Daily work involved walking from the central housing cluster to individual portions of the communal field. Farmers likely spent the entire workday in the fields, often eating lunch there. The limited distance one could travel by foot to the fields likely influenced the size and extent of the agricultural community. When not working in the fields, farmers would have been present in the village, interacting with other community members, reinforcing social bonds and shared awareness.
5. **What was the relationship between cities and villages in ancient Israel, according to the presented sources?** Cities served as administrative centers that regulated agricultural surplus and provided social leadership. They were often surrounded by smaller satellite hamlets or villages. These smaller communities likely provided mutual support for farmers who wanted to live closer to their fields. Cities also functioned as centers for commercial activity, where skilled craftsmen could establish themselves, indicating a more complex economic development. In times of unrest, walled cities could offer refuge to the surrounding village populations.
6. **How did the settlement process following the Exodus shape the social structure and norms of ancient Israel?** The settlement involved the division of land among tribes and families, providing a new start for the people after their time in the wilderness. The Torah provided guidelines and modified existing social mores to establish a more just society according to God's standards. Practices like the prohibition on permanently selling inherited land aimed to create a more equitable and stable social structure compared to what they might have experienced in Egypt or among other contemporary cultures.
7. **What were the likely living arrangements and social support systems for widows in ancient Israelite society?** As landowners aged, their land passed to their sons, and elderly parents, particularly widows, likely lived with their married sons. In this context, adult children were expected to support their aging parents, and widows would have been integrated into the household, potentially contributing labor as they were able. This familial support system formed a crucial baseline for the well-being of widows within the community.

8. **How did the communal nature of the village and land ownership potentially affect the social justice provisions for outlier groups like widows, orphans, and resident aliens (WARA)?** Given the close-knit nature of the villages and the understanding of the land as a collective resource, there would have been an inherent level of communal responsibility. Since villagers were often related, outliers like widows and orphans would likely have had connections within the community through extended family. The agricultural practices, such as leaving gleanings in the fields, facilitated by the unfenced nature of the land, provided a means of support for the poor and vulnerable. The social norms, reinforced by close proximity and peer pressure, likely played a role in ensuring that the needs of these outlier groups were at least partially met within the community framework.