Dr. Michael Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 2: Widows, Orphans and Resident Aliens 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, Session 2: Widows, Orphans and Resident Aliens, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Harbin's lecture defines the social outliers in ancient Israel, specifically widows, orphans, and resident aliens (WORA), explaining why these groups received special social justice consideration. **He examines the typical Israelite social structure**, emphasizing extended families and land ownership, to understand the precarious situations faced by WORA. **The discussion clarifies the Hebrew terms** for these groups, highlighting nuances different from modern English interpretations. **Harbin posits that these outliers shared economic vulnerability**, primarily due to their relationship to agricultural land and the prevailing social norms. **The lecture sets the stage for future discussions** on the specific social justice provisions designed to aid these marginalized individuals.

2. 14 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 2 – 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, Session 2: Widows, Orphans and Resident Aliens

Briefing Document: Defining Social Outliers in Ancient Israel (Harbin, Part 2)

Main Themes:

This document provides a detailed exploration of the social context and definitions of widows, orphans, and resident aliens in ancient Israelite society during the late Bronze and Iron Ages. Dr. Harbin challenges some common Western interpretations and emphasizes the importance of understanding the socio-economic structures of the time, particularly the prevalence of extended "molecular" families and village-based life, to grasp the specific vulnerabilities and needs of these outlier groups.

Key Ideas and Facts:

- **Challenging the "Nuclear Family" Lens:** Harbin argues against viewing ancient Israelite society through a modern Western lens of nuclear families (parents and children). He posits that the more typical family structure was a three-generational "molecular family" consisting of a man, his wife, their children, and his parents (often the surviving grandmother).

- *"To contrast this with our conception of a two-generation nuclear family, I have adopted the title of a molecular family to show a more typical structure for Israel—man and wife, parents of the man, and then children."* (p. 3)

- **The Interconnectedness of Village Life:** The social fabric was tightly knit, with most relationships being within the same village or nearby villages, emphasizing blood ties and extended family networks. This has implications for how social support might have functioned.

- *"For Old Testament Israel, settled in the land, most of those relationships would either be in the same village or other villages in the near vicinity."* (p. 4)

- *"Clearly, the social fabric of the culture would have been closely knit, producing a situation where a tear in the social fabric would have widespread implications."* (p. 4)

- **The "WORA" Triad:** Widows, orphans, and resident aliens are consistently grouped together in Old Testament social justice provisions, leading to the

question of what commonality they shared that merited this special attention. Harbin uses the acronym WORA for ease of reference.

- *"Likewise, given the strict separation commanded with respect to non-Israelites, one must also wonder not only that the special social justice provisions were provided for widows and orphans but also for them and that they are regularly included with the widows and the orphans as a triad, which I have abbreviated as this phrase, WORA. Widows, Orphans, Resident Aliens."* (p. 1)

- **Widows (Almanah and Other Terms):** Harbin discusses the complexities of the Hebrew terms translated as "widow," referencing Naomi Steinberg's work which distinguishes between *almanah* (widow in destitution) and other terms like *ishah almanah* and *eshet hamat* (potentially widows with some property rights). He questions the assumption that all widows were necessarily homeless and without support, given the extended family structure.

- *"By definition, the English word widow denotes a, quote, woman who has lost her husband to death and has not remarried."* (p. 7)

- *"While the English word is most commonly a translation of the Hebrew word almanah, the situation is more complex."* (p. 7)

- *"In contrast, an almanah is deemed a widow in destitution, who may have living male relatives, male adult relatives who are either, quote, too poor or unwilling to offer her economic support."* (p. 7)

- **The Case of Naomi and Ruth:** The story of Ruth is examined as a complex case involving widowhood, potential levirate marriage (though debated), and land redemption. It highlights the intricacies of the social and legal expectations surrounding widows.

- *"According to the English text in Ruth 4:3, Naomi was going to sell some of the land that belonged to Elimelech."* (p. 9)

- *"In essence, these neighbors point out that one of the functions of this son was to be a sustainer of her old age."* (p. 9)

- **Orphans (Yatam - Fatherless):** Harbin clarifies that the Hebrew term *yatam*, translated as orphan, more accurately means "fatherless." This is significant because in the extended family structure, a child who lost their father might still have a mother and other relatives for support. The frequent pairing of widows and orphans suggests single-parent families headed by the mother.

- *"The Hebrew word translated orphan is really understood to be a child who lost his or her father, a connotation that gets lost in the translation."* (p. 10)

- *"Consequently, it is concluded that the consistent connection of orphans with widows indicates a single-parent family headed by the mother working together to gather food to survive."* (p. 11)

- **Resident Aliens (Ger - Sojourner):** Resident aliens, or *ger*, were distinct from foreigners (*nakri* or *nakar*) in that they lived permanently in the land but had fewer rights and privileges than native Israelites. They could be descendants of groups who remained after the conquest (e.g., Canaanites, mixed multitude from Egypt) or later immigrants.

- *"The glass group is called that of the ger, translated as stranger in the King James, sojourner in the ESV or the revised standard, the English Standard Version or the revised standard, or alien in American Standard or the New International Version. The word means sojourner. The resident alien should be distinguished from a foreigner, a nakri or nakar, in that he or she would be residing in the land as opposed to visiting it."* (p. 12)

- *"David Barker, in his book Tight Fist or Open Hands, expands on this stating, quote, the status of the resident alien is somewhere between that of the natives and the foreigners, and resident individual aliens may be incorporated into the community by becoming dependent members of an Israelite family, under the protection then of the household head, and he cites Exodus 20."* (p. 12)

- **Economic Vulnerability as a Common Factor:** Harbin concludes that the primary commonality among widows, orphans (fatherless children in single-parent households), and resident aliens was their vulnerability to economic hardship, often stemming from a lack of access to or ability to work agricultural land, the primary resource of the time.

- *"So, these three groups seem to have two points in common. First, they were subject to serious economic difficulties. Second, these economic difficulties seem to stem from a lack of resources, which in that culture would primarily be agricultural land."* (p. 14)

- **Challenging the Notion of Universal Homelessness:** Harbin questions the idea that all members of these outlier groups were necessarily homeless. Widows likely lived with family, and resident aliens, while potentially itinerant upon arrival, would likely seek work and shelter within villages. The concept of

homelessness in ancient agricultural societies differed significantly from modern urban homelessness.

- *"As already noted, a widow likely lived with her adult children. Even if that were not the case, as noted in Part 1, a widow was not necessarily homeless. The same is true of a resident alien."* (p. 6)

- *"Likely the migrant would be homeless for some time, but as noted above, it meant that he generally would be sleeping and foraging in the wild as opposed to begging on the street in the city."* (p. 14)

Significance:

This part of Dr. Harbin's teaching lays the foundational understanding for exploring social justice provisions in ancient Israel. By carefully defining the social context and the specific situations of widows, orphans, and resident aliens, he sets the stage for analyzing why these particular groups were targeted for special care and how the social safety net of the Torah addressed their vulnerabilities. The emphasis on the extended family structure challenges simplistic interpretations based on modern Western social norms.

Next Steps (Implied):

The document concludes by indicating that Part 3 will delve into the concept of social justice in the abstract and will likely further explore the specific provisions designed to support these outlier groups.

4. Study Guide: Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 2: Widows, Orphans and Resident Aliens

Study Guide: Social Justice for Social Outliers in Ancient Israel, Part 2

Key Concepts and Themes:

- **Social Outliers:** Understanding who constituted the socially vulnerable groups in ancient Israel (widows, orphans, resident aliens - WORA).

- **Israelite Social Structure:** Examining the village-based society, the importance of extended families (molecular families), and kinship ties in the late Bronze and Iron Age.

- **The Tension Between Ideal and Reality:** Recognizing the dichotomy in the Old Testament regarding poverty (Deuteronomy 15).

- **Definitions and Nuances:** Exploring the complexities of the Hebrew terms for widow and orphan, and the distinction between resident aliens and foreigners.

- **Economic Vulnerability:** Identifying the primary economic challenges faced by WORA, particularly their relationship to agricultural land.

- **Challenging Western Assumptions:** Questioning the application of modern nuclear family structures to understand ancient Israelite social dynamics.

- **The Role of Family Support:** Analyzing the expected support systems for widows and orphans within the extended family structure.

- **Homelessness in the Ancient World:** Understanding the differences between ancient and modern concepts of homelessness.

- **Assimilation of Non-Israelites:** Investigating the integration of groups like the mixed multitude and remaining Canaanites into Israelite society.

- **The Levirate Marriage:** Comprehending the purpose and application of this custom in relation to widows without heirs.

- **Gleaning Laws:** Considering the significance of these provisions as a social safety net for vulnerable populations.

Quiz:

1. Describe the typical social structure of ancient Israelite society during the late Bronze Age, as presented by Harbin.

2. Explain the tension highlighted in Deuteronomy 15 regarding poverty in Israel and how God provided a response to this reality.

3. What does Harbin mean by the acronym WORA, and why are these three groups often mentioned together in the Old Testament?

4. Contrast the Western cultural understanding of a nuclear family with the more typical "molecular family" structure in ancient Israel.

5. According to Harbin, what are some of the complexities and questions that arise when considering the social and economic situation of widows in ancient Israel?

6. Explain why the English translation of "orphan" might not fully capture the meaning of the Hebrew term (yatam) in the context of ancient Israelite society.

7. How did the loss of a father impact a child's social and economic standing in ancient Israel, and what potential support systems might have existed?

8. Distinguish between a "resident alien" (ger) and a "foreigner" (nakri or nakar) in ancient Israel, and what characterized the status of a resident alien?

9. Provide examples of how non-Israelite groups might have become residents in the land of Israel and how they were eventually integrated into society.

10. What two primary factors does Harbin suggest were common to widows, orphans, and resident aliens, leading to their economic vulnerability in ancient Israel?

Answer Key:

1. Ancient Israelite society during the late Bronze Age primarily consisted of villages, described as closely clustered dwellings surrounded by a common agricultural area divided into individually owned portions. This village structure fostered strong family and kinship ties.

2. Deuteronomy 15 presents a tension between God's promise that there would be no poor in Israel if they obeyed and the warning that the poor would never cease to be in the land due to disobedience. God's mercy provided a social justice safety net in the Torah to aid those facing adversity.

3. WORA stands for Widows, Orphans, and Resident Aliens. These three groups are frequently mentioned together because they were considered particularly vulnerable members of society who lacked independent means of support and were thus designated for special social justice provisions.

4. Western culture typically views the nuclear family as two generations (parents and children), while ancient Israel often featured a "molecular family" which included three generations: a man and wife, the man's parents (often the grandmother), and their children.

5. The situation of widows was complex because, contrary to the idea of being legally homeless, they often lived with adult sons or had extended family support. The Hebrew terms for widow also suggest varying levels of property control, raising questions about the necessity of provisions like gleaning laws.

6. The English word "orphan" usually implies a child who has lost both parents, while the Hebrew term (yatam) primarily referred to a child who had lost their father. In ancient Israelite society, the loss of the father, the primary defender and economic provider, carried significant weight.

7. The loss of a father in ancient Israel meant the child lacked a primary defender and provider, making them economically and socially vulnerable. However, the extended family and kinship group were expected to provide support, although the specifics of this support are debated.

8. A resident alien (ger) was a non-Israelite who lived permanently within the land, having more privileges and responsibilities than a visiting foreigner (nakri or nakar). Resident aliens could become integrated into the community, sometimes as dependent members of an Israelite household.

9. Non-Israelite groups like the mixed multitude from Egypt and the remaining Canaanite tribes became residents in the land. Over time, many of these groups were assimilated into Israelite society through intermarriage, language acquisition, and integration into tribal structures.

10. Harbin suggests that widows, orphans, and resident aliens shared serious economic difficulties stemming primarily from a lack of access to or the inability to work agricultural land, which was the primary resource in their culture. For resident aliens, this was often due to the prohibition against Israelites selling their inherited land.

Essay Format Questions:

1. Analyze the role of the extended family structure in ancient Israelite society and discuss how this structure might have both supported and failed to support vulnerable individuals like widows and orphans.

2. Critically evaluate the assertion that widows and orphans were "legally homeless" in ancient Israel, drawing upon Harbin's discussion of their potential living arrangements and familial ties.

3. Compare and contrast the social and economic circumstances of widows, orphans, and resident aliens in ancient Israel, highlighting the specific challenges faced by each group and any overlaps in their vulnerabilities.

4. Discuss the significance of the distinction between the Hebrew terms for "widow" presented by Steinberg and analyze how different economic circumstances might have influenced the social standing and available support for widowed women in ancient Israel.

5. Explore the ways in which the integration and assimilation of non-Israelite populations, such as the mixed multitude and remaining Canaanites, might have impacted the social fabric and the provisions for resident aliens in ancient Israel.

Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Social Outlier:** Individuals or groups within a society who are marginalized, vulnerable, and often lack the same level of social, economic, or political security as the majority.

- **Molecular Family:** A term used by Harbin to describe the typical three-generational household in ancient Israel, consisting of a man, his wife, their children, and the husband's parents (often the grandmother).

- **WORA:** An acronym coined by Harbin to refer collectively to Widows, Orphans, and Resident Aliens, highlighting their shared vulnerability in ancient Israel.

- **Almanah:** The most common Hebrew word translated as "widow," often implying a state of destitution or lack of economic support.

- **Ishah Almanah:** A Hebrew term that might be better translated as "widowed woman," potentially indicating a widow with some property rights or control.

- **Eshet Hamat:** A Hebrew term best translated as "wife of the dead man," possibly referring to a widow who has inherited property but whose husband died without fathering an heir.

- **Yatam:** The Hebrew word most often translated as "orphan," understood primarily as a child who has lost their father.

- **Ger:** The Hebrew word translated as "resident alien," "stranger," or "sojourner," referring to a non-Israelite who lived permanently within the land of Israel.

- **Nakri/Nakar:** Hebrew words translated as "foreigner," referring to someone who was visiting the land but not a permanent resident.

- **Levirate Marriage:** An Old Testament law (Deuteronomy 25) requiring the brother of a man who died without sons to marry the widow and raise up an heir for the deceased.

- **Goel (Kinsman-Redeemer):** A male relative who had the responsibility to redeem family members or property in danger of being lost, as seen in the book of Ruth.

- **Gleaning:** The practice of collecting leftover crops from the edges of fields after the main harvest, a provision in the Torah to provide food for the poor, widows, orphans, and resident aliens.

5. FAQs Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 2: Widows, Orphans and Resident Aliens, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: Social Outliers in Ancient Israel

1. Who are the "social outliers" that the Old Testament emphasizes for social justice provisions, and what does the acronym "WORA" represent in this context? The Old Testament specifically highlights three groups for social justice provisions: widows, orphans, and resident aliens. Dr. Harbin uses the acronym WORA as a convenient way to refer to this triad of vulnerable individuals in ancient Israelite society.

2. Given the strong extended family structures in ancient Israel, why were widows and orphans specifically singled out for social justice provisions in the Torah? While extended families provided a safety net, the loss of a husband (in the case of a widow) meant the potential loss of the primary means of agricultural labor, even if the widow retained land rights. Similarly, the loss of the father (in the case of an orphan, understood primarily as a fatherless child) meant the lack of a protector and provider, potentially leaving the remaining family unit headed by the mother in a precarious economic situation. The specific provisions acknowledged that even within a close-knit society, these individuals faced unique vulnerabilities.

3. How does the understanding of "family" in ancient Israel differ from the modern Western concept of a nuclear family, and how did this impact the social support systems? Ancient Israelite society typically revolved around a three-generational "molecular family" consisting of a man, his wife, their children, and the husband's parents (often the surviving grandmother). This contrasted with the Western nuclear family model of just parents and children. This extended family structure meant that upon the death of a spouse, the surviving widow often lived with her adult son and his family, who would have inherited the land and responsibilities. However, this norm didn't eliminate the vulnerability of widows entirely, as evidenced by the specific provisions.

4. What complexities arise when defining "widow" in the context of ancient Israelite society, and how might property ownership have played a role? The Hebrew language has multiple terms translated as "widow," suggesting nuances in their social and economic standing. While "almanah" typically denoted a widow in destitution, other terms might have referred to widowed women who had inherited some control over

their deceased husband's property. However, even with potential land ownership, a widow might lack the physical strength for essential agricultural labor like plowing, highlighting the need for social support beyond just land rights.

5. How is the term "orphan" understood in its ancient Israelite context, and why are orphans so often mentioned alongside widows in social justice provisions? The Hebrew term for orphan ("yatam") primarily refers to a child who has lost their father, rather than both parents. The consistent pairing of orphans with widows suggests a common vulnerable scenario: a single-parent family headed by the mother trying to raise minor children after the death of the father. Even if the family retained land rights, the lack of a male head of household for protection and heavy labor would create significant challenges.

6. Who were the "resident aliens" (ger) in ancient Israel, and what distinguished them from other non-Israelites or foreigners? Resident aliens (ger) were non-Israelites who lived permanently within the borders of Israel, unlike temporary visitors or foreigners (nakri/nakar). They held a status between native Israelites and foreigners, possessing certain rights and responsibilities within the community. These individuals often lacked ancestral land ownership, as Israelites were prohibited from selling their inherited land, making them economically vulnerable and in need of social welfare provisions.

7. What were some of the likely reasons why resident aliens might have faced economic hardship in ancient Israelite society? Resident aliens, not being part of the Israelite tribal land inheritance system, typically did not own agricultural land, the primary economic resource. While they might find work as skilled laborers, merchants, or hired hands, their employment could be precarious due to factors like economic downturns or discrimination. The lack of land and secure employment made them particularly susceptible to poverty.

8. What common factors might have contributed to the vulnerability of widows, orphans, and resident aliens in ancient Israel, necessitating specific social justice provisions? Despite the differences in their circumstances, widows, orphans, and resident aliens shared two key vulnerabilities: serious economic difficulties and a lack of direct access to or control over essential resources, primarily agricultural land. In the case of widows and orphans, this could stem from the loss of a male head of household and the physical limitations for heavy agricultural labor, even if land was nominally retained. For resident aliens, it primarily resulted from their exclusion from the Israelite land inheritance system, making them reliant on potentially unstable forms of labor.