

# **Dr. Michael Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 3: What is Social Justice? 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 3: What is Social Justice? Biblicalearning.org, BeL**

**Dr. Harbin's lecture** introduces the concept of social justice, tracing its modern understanding back to the 19th century and highlighting various interpretations, such as distribution and equality. He critiques these contemporary views as potentially truncated by focusing primarily on benefits without adequately considering individual responsibilities. **Drawing from the Old Testament**, Harbin proposes a more holistic understanding of social justice rooted in divine principles, emphasizing both the expectation of individuals to contribute their abilities and the provision of a safety net for those facing unforeseen hardships. **The lecture series** aims to derive timeless principles for social justice from the ancient Israelite social structure, relevant for application in today's culture.

## **2. 24 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 3 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalearning.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 3: What is Social Justice?**

Briefing Document: Dr. Michael Harbin on Social Justice in Ancient Israel, Part 3

#### **Executive Summary:**

In Part 3 of his lecture series, Dr. Michael Harbin delves into the question of "What is Social Justice?" He begins by contextualizing the concept within ancient Israel, emphasizing the Torah's role in establishing a unified "kingdom of priests" with guidelines for communal living and a strong social fabric. While the term "social justice" is modern, Harbin argues that its concepts are woven throughout the Old Testament. He then examines various modern interpretations of social justice, drawing heavily on Michael Novak's critique, before proposing a more comprehensive understanding rooted in the Torah's emphasis on both individual responsibility ("pulling one's fair load") and communal support for those who face hardship ("social outliers").

#### **Main Themes and Important Ideas:**

##### **1. Contextualizing Social Justice in Ancient Israel:**

- The Torah (Pentateuch) provided guidelines for the newly formed nation of Israel to become a unified "kingdom of priests."
- Leviticus, in particular, outlines principles for corporate worship and the "social fabric" of the nation.
- These guidelines, while not explicitly termed "social justice," embody its concepts, designed to preserve the national and social structure.
- Ancient Israel was a collection of socially isolated communities bound by common ancestry, the Exodus experience, a shared worship system, and a common teaching on societal function.

##### **2. Modern Understandings and Critiques of Social Justice:**

- Dr. Harbin notes that the term "social justice" is relatively modern, originating in the 19th century.
- He presents Michael Novak's five popular uses of the term and his critiques:

- **Distribution:** Defined as the distribution of advantages and disadvantages. Novak objects to the implication of an "extra-human force" (government) dictating distribution.
- **Equality:** The premise that equality is good and should be enforced. Novak argues this distorts equality, separating it from fairness and equity.
- **Common Good:** While sounding worthwhile, the problem lies in who defines the "common good," with Novak suggesting the bureaucratic state has preempted this authority, leading to unaccountability.
- **Progressive Agenda:** Developed as a reaction to the social upheaval of the industrial age, aiming to correct the negative consequences of this transition.
- **Compassion:** Often used as a justification for actions ostensibly helping the poor, but Novak warns of the potential for abuse, citing historical examples of atrocities committed in the name of compassion.
- **Quote:** "more sins have been committed in the name of compassion in the last 150 years by the Nazis, by the communists, and by the African and Asian despots who justify their regimes as socialists than by any other force in history."

### 3. Examining Definitions Focusing on Rights and Opportunities:

- Many modern definitions of social justice emphasize equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities.
- Dr. Harbin acknowledges the affirmation of rights, referencing the Declaration of Independence's "unalienable rights."
- However, he raises critical questions:
- **What constitutes a right?**
- **What is the authority that delineates these as rights?** He points to Jefferson's Judeo-Christian perspective of rights endowed by the Creator, contrasting this with an evolutionary framework where survival of the fittest negates inherent equal rights.
- **What happens when rights conflict?** He uses Locke's "fair share" concept of gathering acorns to illustrate the complexity of defining and limiting rights, particularly with non-perishable goods and private property.

- **What is opportunity?** While generally viewed as the elimination of arbitrary barriers, Harbin highlights that many non-arbitrary factors (family, abilities, accidents) also affect opportunities. He uses Jesus' teaching on eunuchs and Ecclesiastes 9:11 to illustrate the inherent limitations and the role of "time and chance."
- **The role of failure:** He notes that taking an opportunity does not guarantee success, citing failure rates in new businesses and higher education, often linked to preparation, resources, and even moral choices.

#### **4. A "Truncated Concept" of Modern Social Justice:**

- Harbin argues that many modern definitions present a "truncated concept" of social justice by focusing primarily on "what I should get" (fair share, rights, opportunities) while neglecting "what I should give" (responsibilities, burdens).
- The concept of "fair share" is often undefined and subjective, sometimes driven by "jealousy and greed."
- The idea of "distribution" can be ambiguous, used passively (random dispersion) or actively (intentional correction of inequalities, potentially eradicating advantages).

#### **5. A Broader Definition Incorporating Benefits and Burdens:**

- Drawing on Clayton and Williams, Harbin proposes a broader definition where social justice involves decisions affecting the distribution of both "benefits and burdens."
- True social justice considers wealth, opportunities, and privileges alongside the "production of wealth, the dangers involved, and the responsibilities within a society."
- This leads to two fundamental questions individuals should ask: "Am I getting my fair share?" (benefit) and, more importantly, "Am I pulling my fair load?" (burden).

#### **6. Historical Perspective on Fair Share and Fair Load:**

- Historically, the concepts of "fair share" and "fair load" were interconnected, with one's share potentially varying based on the load carried.
- Jesus' statement in Luke 12:48 ("From everyone who has been given much, much will be required") reflects this principle.

- The French concept of "noblesse oblige" also suggests that those with privilege have greater responsibility.
- Even Karl Marx, in his early work, linked fair distribution to equal labor ("to each according to his ability, to each according to his need"), connecting share to load.

### **7. Critique of Communal Property and the Importance of Private Property:**

- Harbin critiques the progressive view of eliminating private property to combat greed, arguing it's based on a "naive view of human nature" (both biblical and evolutionary).
- Greed is seen as a manifestation of inherent self-centeredness, present in everyone, not just the wealthy.
- Collective ownership often leads to a lack of care and responsibility, resulting in a "loss of fair share" as motivation to work diminishes.
- The experience of the Plymouth Plantation demonstrates the failure of communal systems and the success that followed the allocation of private land.
- John Locke, in contrast to Marx, advocated for private property as a product of labor but proposed limits based on what one could reasonably use before it spoiled.

### **8. The Biblical Foundation: God as Creator and Humanity as Stewards:**

- The Old Testament concept of social justice begins with the premise that "God is the only Creator."
- Humans are stewards or managers of God's creation (Genesis 1:28-30, Genesis 2:28).
- Israel's role as a "kingdom of priests" involved being stewards of the land God gave them.
- Individual Israelites did not own the land outright but managed a portion for their extended family.

### **9. Torah Guidelines for Preventing and Correcting Social Injustice:**

- Within this context of stewardship, the Torah provides guidelines for communal living to enable each person to "enjoy life to the fullest," aiming to prevent social injustice.

- These principles emphasize the "Am I following my fair load?" question.
- The Old Testament acknowledges that individuals are not equal in social status, economic status, family status, or natural ability ("social lottery" and "natural lottery").
- Instead of offsetting these differences, the Old Testament standard involves different expectations and loads based on these varying factors, with the expectation that individuals use their abilities and positions for the good of the community (e.g., the priesthood).
- Success and failure were viewed both corporately and individually, contingent on maintaining a proper relationship with God and using God-given abilities.
- However, the Old Testament recognizes that the world is fallen, and not all hardship is a direct result of individual failing (as seen in the book of Job and everyday occurrences).

#### **10. The "Safety Net" for "Social Outliers":**

- Because of the realities of a fallen world, the Torah lays out a "safety net" to support individuals who experience unexpected tragedies, allowing them to recover.
- These individuals are referred to as "social outliers."
- Specific stipulations within the Torah detail these safety nets, which will be covered in Part 4 of the lecture series.

#### **Key Quotes:**

- "Today, we often think of these collectively as social justice. While that term is not used in the Old Testament, the concepts are there being woven into the Torah or the teaching that God was given."
- (Novak quote) "more sins have been committed in the name of compassion in the last 150 years by the Nazis, by the communists, and by the African and Asian despots who justify their regimes as socialists than by any other force in history."
- (Declaration of Independence quote) "certain unalienable rights which include life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."
- (Locke quote) "before it spoils. Whatever is beyond this is more than his share."

- (Ecclesiastes 9:11 quote) "The race is not to the swift, the battles not to the warriors, and neither is the bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability, for time and chance overtake them all."
- (Luke 12:48 quote) "from everyone who has been given much, much will be required."
- (Plymouth Foundation quote regarding communal living) "that the taking away of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing, as if they were wiser than God."
- (Plymouth Foundation quote after adopting private land ownership) "had good success, for it made all hands very industrious."

**Conclusion:**

Dr. Harbin argues that a robust understanding of social justice, particularly from a biblical perspective, must move beyond modern truncated definitions focused solely on rights and distribution. By examining the Old Testament context, he highlights the crucial importance of individual responsibility ("pulling one's fair load") as a foundational element alongside the provision of communal support ("safety nets") for those who inevitably face hardship in a fallen world. This perspective offers a more holistic and historically grounded approach to considering the principles of social justice.

## 4. Study Guide: Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 3: What is Social Justice?

Study Guide: Social Justice for Social Outliers in Ancient Israel, Part 3

### Quiz

1. According to Dr. Harbin, what was the primary purpose of the book of Leviticus for the newly formed nation of Israel?
2. How does Dr. Harbin explain the concept of social justice in the Old Testament, given that the term itself was not used?
3. What are some of the popular modern understandings of social justice identified by Michael Novak, and what are Novak's primary criticisms of these views?
4. Explain the difference between passive and active distribution as it relates to the concept of social justice.
5. What two fundamental questions does Dr. Harbin suggest are crucial for understanding true social justice, and why does he believe one is often overlooked?
6. How did the early settlers of Plymouth Plantation's experience with communal ownership differ from John Locke's perspective on property and fair share?
7. What is the foundational premise from the Old Testament regarding ownership of resources, and what role does this assign to humanity?
8. According to the Torah, were all individuals within ancient Israel considered equal in terms of social, economic, or natural abilities? Explain.
9. How did the Old Testament view the relationship between individual ability and responsibility within the community, using the example of the priesthood?
10. What is the role of a "safety net" in the Old Testament concept of social justice, and why was it considered necessary?

### Answer Key

1. Dr. Harbin states that the book of Leviticus aimed to provide the newly created nation of Israel with guidelines on how to become unified as a kingdom of priests. The first part focused on corporate worship, and the latter part gave guidelines for communal living, forming the social fabric of the nation.

2. While the term "social justice" is not in the Old Testament, Dr. Harbin explains that the concepts are woven into the Torah, the teachings given by God. These precepts, if followed, were intended to produce a strong social fabric and preserve the national and social structure.
3. Novak identifies distribution, equality, common good, progressive agenda, and compassion as popular understandings of social justice. He criticizes distribution for implying an extra-human force, equality for distorting the idea of fairness, common good for potential bureaucratic overreach, progressive agenda as a reaction to industrialization, and compassion due to its misuse throughout history.
4. Passive distribution suggests a random dispersion of advantages or disadvantages beyond one's control (e.g., natural abilities). Active distribution implies that societal forces, intentionally or accidentally, influence the distribution, and social justice literature often aims to correct these inequalities.
5. The two questions are: "Am I getting my fair share?" (benefit) and "Am I pulling my fair load?" (burdens). Dr. Harbin believes the second question is often overlooked, despite historically being essential to the understanding of justice.
6. The Plymouth colonists initially suffered under communal ownership, leading to starvation due to a lack of individual incentive. This contrasts with Locke's idea of fair share limited to what one can use before it spoils, as the communal system removed the direct link between labor and personal benefit.
7. The Old Testament premise is that God is the ultimate Creator and owner of all resources. Humanity is seen as stewards or managers of what God has created, responsible for its care and use.
8. No, the Torah does not present all individuals as equal in these aspects. It acknowledges differences in social-economic status, family status (social lottery), and natural abilities (natural lottery) as being tied to God's sovereignty.
9. The Old Testament standard suggests that expectations and the "load" individuals bear should be based on their abilities and positions, for the good of the community. The priesthood, limited to the tribe of Levi and then Aaron's descendants, illustrates how specific roles with greater responsibilities were assigned based on family status and perceived divine appointment.

10. The safety net in the Old Testament concept of social justice refers to provisions within the Torah designed to assist individuals who experience unexpected tragedies or hardships, enabling them to recover. It acknowledges that "time and chance overtake them all" and life is not always "fair."

## Essay Format Questions

1. Discuss the tension between individual rights and communal responsibility as presented in Dr. Harbin's analysis of social justice in ancient Israel. How does this compare to modern understandings of social justice?
2. Analyze Dr. Harbin's critique of contemporary definitions of social justice, particularly focusing on the concepts of distribution and equality. How effectively does he use historical and biblical perspectives to support his arguments?
3. Explore the significance of the "Am I pulling my fair load?" question in Dr. Harbin's understanding of social justice. How does this concept challenge or complement modern approaches to addressing social inequalities?
4. Compare and contrast the economic and social structures of ancient Israel, as described by Dr. Harbin, with modern industrialized societies. How might the principles of social justice derived from the Torah be applied (or face challenges in application) in today's context?
5. Evaluate Dr. Harbin's argument that a proper understanding of social justice must consider both "fair share" (benefits) and "fair load" (responsibilities). To what extent do modern discussions of social justice adequately address both of these aspects?

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Torah:** The first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), containing God's laws and teachings given to Moses.
- **Pentateuch:** Another term for the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, synonymous with Torah.
- **Kingdom of Priests:** A concept from Exodus 19:6, suggesting that the nation of Israel was intended to be a holy nation serving God and mediating between God and other nations.
- **Social Fabric:** The interconnected network of social relationships, norms, and institutions that hold a society together.
- **Outlier:** In this context, an individual who falls outside the typical social and economic structures or norms of their society, often due to misfortune or circumstance.
- **Distribution (of advantages and disadvantages):** A common modern understanding of social justice as the way in which benefits and drawbacks are allocated within a society.
- **Equality:** Another modern concept of social justice, often emphasizing the idea that all individuals should have the same opportunities and outcomes.
- **Common Good:** A philosophical concept referring to what is beneficial for the community as a whole.
- **Progressive Agenda:** A set of political and social goals often aimed at addressing perceived injustices and inequalities, historically arising with industrialization.
- **Compassion:** A feeling of empathy and concern for others, often used to justify actions aimed at helping the less fortunate.
- **Unalienable Rights:** Rights that are considered inherent and cannot be legitimately taken away, as expressed in the US Declaration of Independence.
- **Fair Share:** The idea of a just or equitable portion of resources, opportunities, or benefits within a society.
- **Fair Load:** The concept of a just or equitable contribution of work, responsibility, or burdens within a society.

- **Noblesse Oblige:** A French term meaning that nobility extends beyond mere entitlement and requires the person who holds such status to fulfill certain obligations, particularly to those of lower status.
- **Common Course and Condition:** The term used by William Bradford to describe the early communal economic system of Plymouth Plantation.
- **Steward/Manager (of creation):** A biblical concept that humans are responsible for the care and use of God's creation.
- **Social Lottery:** The idea that one's circumstances in life are significantly influenced by the social status and advantages of the family into which one is born.
- **Natural Lottery:** The idea that one's opportunities and achievements are affected by the natural abilities and talents with which one is born.
- **Prescriptive Justice:** An approach to justice that emphasizes what individuals ought to do and the responsibilities they have.

## 5. FAQs Harbin, Social Justice for Social Outliers, Session 3: What is Social Justice? Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Social Justice in Ancient Israel: A Biblical Perspective

**1. How does Dr. Harbin define the scope of his study on social justice?** Dr. Harbin focuses on understanding social justice within the context of ancient Israel, specifically during the period when God gave the Torah (the Pentateuch) and the land to the nation. His study centers on the guidelines provided in the Torah, particularly the book of Leviticus, which he argues were intended to unify the newly formed nation as a "kingdom of priests" and establish a strong social fabric that would sustain them. He aims to derive principles from this ancient social structure that can inform our understanding of social justice today.

**2. Why does Dr. Harbin believe it is important to first define "social justice"?** Dr. Harbin emphasizes the need to clarify the meaning of "social justice" because it is a relatively modern term with varied and often loosely defined interpretations. He notes that thinkers like Friedrich Hayek and Michael Novak consider it a recent concept, and Novak identifies at least five popular ways the term is currently used (distribution, equality, common good, progressive agenda, and compassion), each with its own underlying assumptions and potential pitfalls. Therefore, understanding these different conceptions is crucial before examining the concept within the Old Testament.

**3. What are some of the modern definitions of social justice that Dr. Harbin examines and what are his initial reactions or questions regarding them?** Dr. Harbin examines definitions from dictionaries, the National Association of Social Workers, and the Office of Social Justice and Human Rights. These definitions commonly focus on the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges, emphasizing equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities, as well as equitable treatment and fair allocation of community resources. While initially affirming the idea of inherent rights, Dr. Harbin raises several critical questions: What constitutes a right? What is the authority that defines these rights (especially for those without a Judeo-Christian worldview)? What happens when rights conflict? And what exactly is meant by "opportunity" and how do we address the various barriers to it, both artificial and natural?

**4. According to Dr. Harbin, what are the limitations of defining social justice solely in terms of "fair share" or distribution of benefits?** Dr. Harbin argues that defining social justice primarily as the distribution of a "fair share" is a truncated concept for several reasons. First, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a "fair share," and the basis for comparison remains unclear. Second, this perspective often focuses solely on what individuals should receive (benefits) and neglects the crucial aspect of what individuals should contribute (burdens or their "fair load"). He highlights that historically, justice was understood in tandem with both receiving a fair share and pulling a fair load, with the former potentially varying based on the latter.

**5. How does the Old Testament's perspective on individual differences (social status, abilities) contrast with modern egalitarian views of social justice?** The Old Testament, according to Dr. Harbin, acknowledges and even emphasizes that individuals within the nation of Israel (and humanity in general) are not equal in terms of social-economic status, family background, or natural abilities. Rather than viewing these differences as random or something to be offset through societal engineering, the Old Testament perspective ties them to a sovereign God. The standard is not necessarily to create equality of outcome, but rather that the expectations and the "load" borne by individuals should be commensurate with their abilities and positions, ultimately for the good of the community. The example of the priesthood, limited to the tribe of Levi and then further to Aaron's descendants with specific responsibilities and higher standards, illustrates this point.

**6. What role do the concepts of "corporate" and "individual" responsibility play in the Old Testament understanding of success, failure, and social well-being?** Dr. Harbin explains that the Old Testament views success and failure on both corporate and individual levels. Individually, success is linked to maintaining a proper relationship with God and using God-given abilities appropriately. Corporately, the idea is that if the entire nation trusts God and fulfills their respective roles, God would bless the nation as a whole, and individuals would share in that collective blessing. However, the Old Testament also recognizes that we live in a fallen world where "time and chance" can lead to hardship, and not all failures are a direct consequence of individual sin or lack of effort, as illustrated by the book of Job.

**7. How does Dr. Harbin connect the idea of stewardship and God's ownership to the Old Testament concept of social justice?** Dr. Harbin emphasizes the foundational premise in the Old Testament that God is the sole Creator and owner of everything, including the land. Human beings, therefore, are seen as stewards or managers of what God has created. In the context of Israel, individual families were given portions of land to manage, but they did not ultimately own it. This concept of stewardship underlies the guidelines in the Torah for how people were to live together and prevent social injustice, ensuring that each person could enjoy life to the fullest within the framework of their responsibilities as God's managers of His creation.

**8. What does Dr. Harbin suggest is a key but often overlooked question when considering social justice, and how does this relate to historical and biblical perspectives?** Dr. Harbin argues that a crucial and often overlooked question in modern discussions of social justice is, "Am I pulling my fair load?" He contrasts this with the more common focus on "Am I getting my fair share?" Historically, he contends, these two questions were considered in tandem. The biblical perspective, as exemplified by Jesus' words in Luke 12:48 ("From everyone who has been given much, much will be required"), reinforces this idea that responsibility and contribution are integral to justice. This contrasts with truncated modern views that may overemphasize the distribution of benefits without adequately considering the corresponding obligations and efforts of individuals within a society.