

# Social Justice in the Old Testament

## Social Justice and the character of God

### Psalm 146

<sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

<sup>2</sup> I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

<sup>3</sup> Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man,  
in whom there is no salvation.

<sup>4</sup> When his breath departs he returns to the earth;  
on that very day his plans perish.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the LORD his God,

<sup>6</sup> who made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and all that is in them,

who keeps faith forever;

<sup>7</sup> who executes justice for the oppressed,  
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

<sup>8</sup> the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the LORD loves the righteous.

<sup>9</sup> The LORD watches over the sojourners;

he upholds the widow and the fatherless,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

<sup>10</sup> The LORD will reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, to all generations.

Praise the LORD!

## Israel – a community of social justice

### Deuteronomy 15:4-5

<sup>4</sup> But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess – <sup>5</sup> if only you will strictly obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today.

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## Israel's social justice laws:

### (1) Land ownership was evenly distributed in Israel

#### Numbers 26:52-56

<sup>52</sup> The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>53</sup> “Among these the land shall be divided for inheritance according to the number of names. <sup>54</sup> To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance; every tribe shall be given its inheritance in proportion to its list. <sup>55</sup> But the land shall be divided by lot. According to the names of the tribes of their fathers they shall inherit. <sup>56</sup> Their inheritance shall be divided according to lot between the larger and the smaller.”

#### Joshua 11:23

So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses. And Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments.

#### Deuteronomy 19:14

You shall not move your neighbor's landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.

## (2) Land ownership could never be permanently transferred

### Leviticus 25:23-28

<sup>23</sup> The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me. <sup>24</sup> And in all the country you possess, you shall allow a redemption of the land. <sup>25</sup> If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold. <sup>26</sup> If a man has no one to redeem it and then himself becomes prosperous and finds sufficient means to redeem it, <sup>27</sup> let him calculate the years since he sold it and pay back the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and then return to his property. <sup>28</sup> But if he has not sufficient means to recover it, then what he sold shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the Year of Jubilee. In the Jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his property.

## (3) Every 50 years, the original equitable distribution was restored

### Leviticus 25:8-17

<sup>8</sup> You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. <sup>9</sup> Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the seventh month. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land. <sup>10</sup> And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. <sup>11</sup> That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. <sup>12</sup> For it is a Jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You may eat the produce of the field. <sup>13</sup> In this year of Jubilee each of you shall return to his property.

<sup>14</sup> And if you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. <sup>15</sup> You shall pay your neighbor according to the number of years after the Jubilee, and he shall sell to you according to the number of years for crops. <sup>16</sup> If the years are many, you shall increase the price, and if the years are few, you shall reduce the price, for it is the number of the crops that he is selling to you. <sup>17</sup> You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the LORD your God.

## (4) Every seven years, the produce of the land was for the poor

### Exodus 23:10-11

<sup>10</sup> For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, <sup>11</sup> but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat.

### Leviticus 25:18-22

<sup>18</sup> Therefore you shall do my statutes and keep my rules and perform them, and then you will dwell in the land securely. <sup>19</sup> The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and dwell in it securely. <sup>20</sup> And if you say, “What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?” <sup>21</sup> I will command my blessing on you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years. <sup>22</sup> When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating some of the old crop; you shall eat the old until the ninth year, when its crop arrives.

## (5) Each year, a portion of the harvest was set aside for the poor

### Leviticus 19:9-10

<sup>9</sup> When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. <sup>10</sup> And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

### Deuteronomy 24:19-21

<sup>19</sup> When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. <sup>20</sup> When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. <sup>21</sup> When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.

### Deuteronomy 23:24-25

<sup>24</sup> If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. <sup>25</sup> If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.

## **(6) The poor were to be given interest-free loans**

### **Exodus 22:25-27**

<sup>25</sup> If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him.

<sup>26</sup> If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, <sup>27</sup> for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

## **(7) The debts of the poor were cancelled every seven years**

### **Deuteronomy 15:1-2**

<sup>1</sup> At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. <sup>2</sup> And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the LORD'S release has been proclaimed.

## **(8) The tithe was for the poor**

### **Deuteronomy 14:28-29**

<sup>28</sup> At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. <sup>29</sup> And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

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**Thus, when the Bible talks about justice for the poor, this is not merely criminal justice, but *economic/social justice***

### **Deuteronomy 27:19**

Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. And all the people shall say, "Amen."

### **Deuteronomy 15:4-5**

There will be no poor among you.

## **Therefore, righteousness includes a deep concern for social justice**

### **Ezekiel 18:5-9**

<sup>5</sup> If a man is righteous and does what is just and right – <sup>6</sup> if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, <sup>7</sup> does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, <sup>8</sup> does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, <sup>9</sup> walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully – he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord GOD.

## **The NT church was to fulfill this vision of social justice**

### **Acts 2:44-47**

<sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

<sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

### **Acts 4:32-35**

<sup>32</sup> Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold <sup>35</sup> and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.