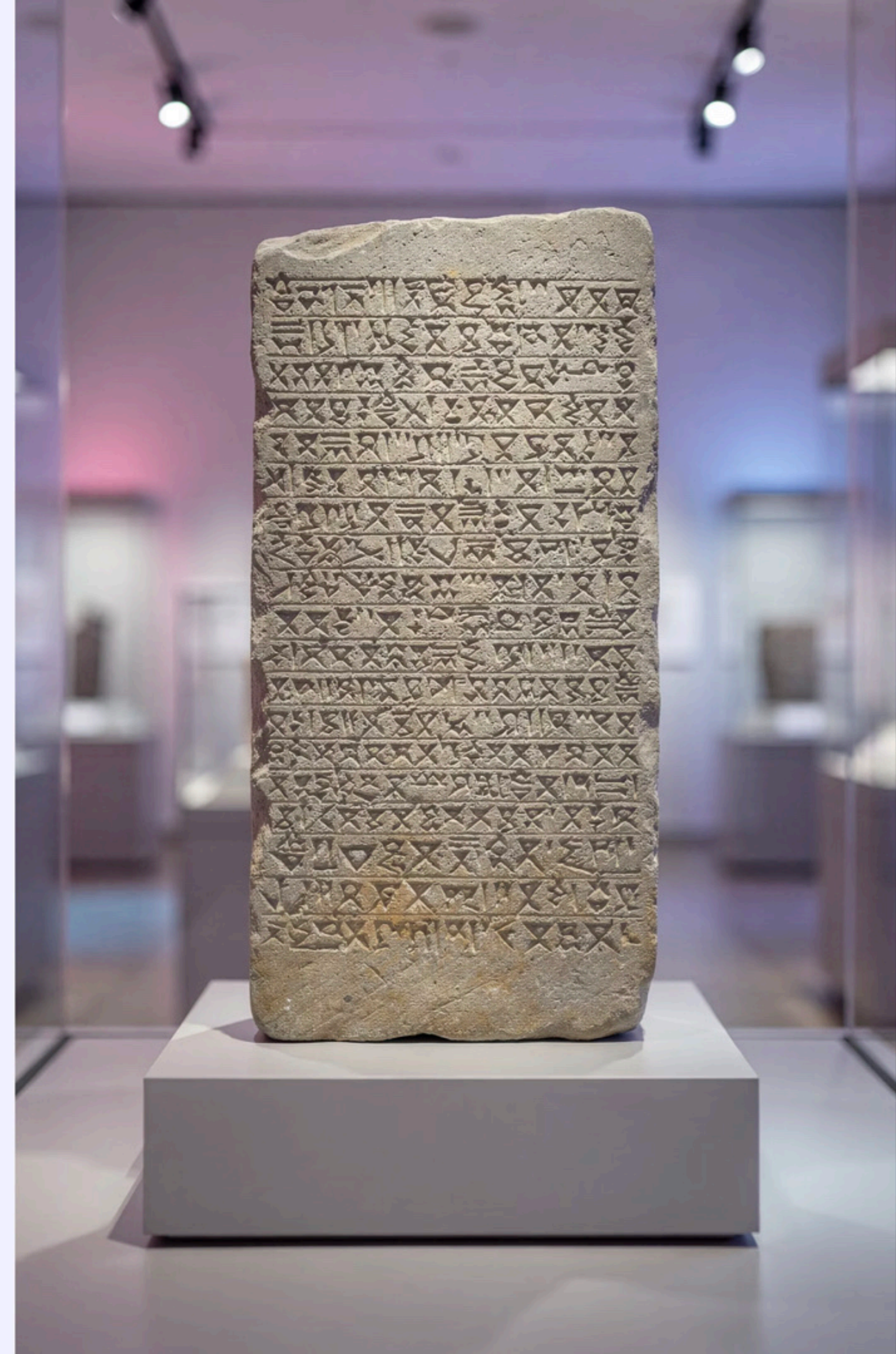


The Proclamation of Liberty and the Concept of Freedom

An exploration of [liberation proclamations](#) across ancient Israel, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece – tracing the deep roots of freedom, justice, and righteousness in the ancient Near East.

MOSHE WEINFELD

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
(1995)



Overview

Two Dimensions of Freedom Proclamation

Freedom proclamations in the ancient Near East operated along two temporal axes: those that [referred to the past](#) (restoring prior conditions) and those that [referred to the future](#) (inaugurating new arrangements). Understanding this distinction is essential to reading the biblical and Mesopotamian evidence correctly.

Retrospective Proclamations

Restorations of lands, persons, and status to prior conditions – undoing accumulated injustice.

Prospective Proclamations

Grants of *kidinnūtu* or *zakūtu* – forward-looking exemptions from taxes and levies for cities and estates.

📄 Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem; Minneapolis: Magnes Press; Fortress Press, 1995), 17.

Andurāru: Neo-Assyrian "Liberation"

During the Neo-Assyrian period, the technical term for this cluster of privileges was *andurāru* – "liberation." Its concrete content was remarkably consistent across time and region.



Return of Exiles

Displaced populations were restored to their home cities and ancestral properties.



Restoration of Towns and Temples

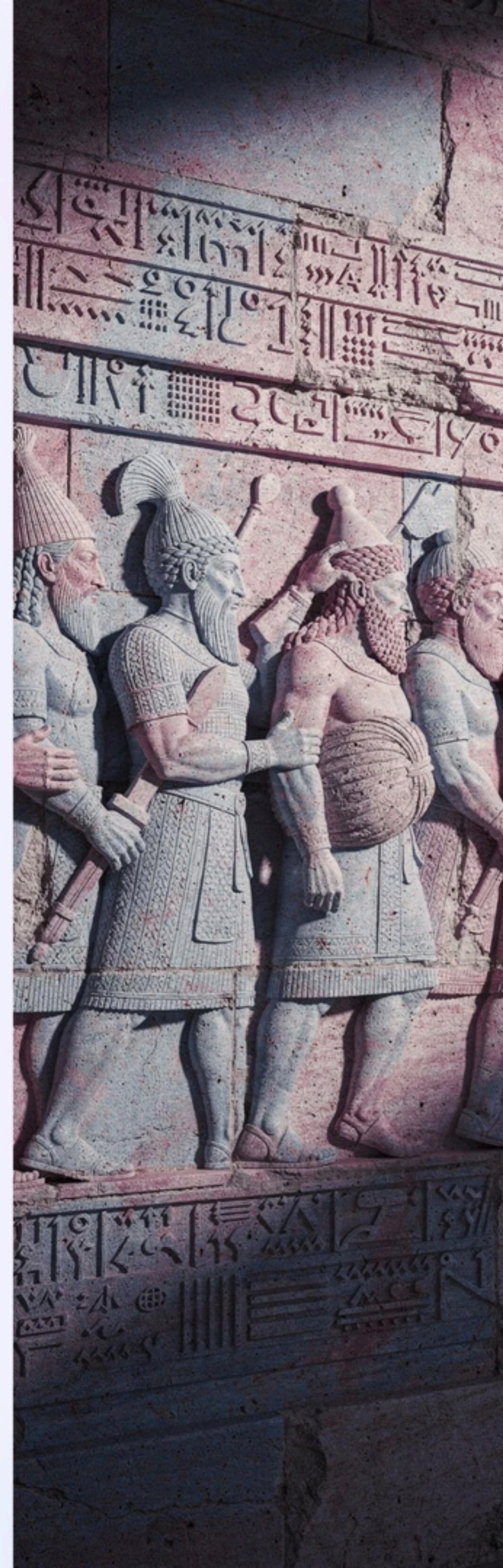
Ruined civic and cultic structures were rebuilt as part of the liberation package.



Release of Prisoners

Incarcerated persons, including debtors and captives, were freed under the proclamation.

- Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 17. Cf. B. Levine, "Mulūgu/Melûg: The Origins of a Talmudic Legal Institution," *JAOS* 88 (1968): 271–285.



Egyptian Parallels: "Release" and the Return of Exiles

In Egypt, the concept of "release" (*wḏ nsw*) similarly involved the liberation of convicts, rebels, and various categories of guilty parties. The most characteristic expression of Egyptian liberation was [the return of exiles to their homes](#) – a motif that runs parallel to Mesopotamian practice and finds resonance in the Hebrew Bible.

Egyptian proclamations of liberation typically began with the formula announcing that "prisoners and the guilty ones are to return to their cities, their homes and their inheritance." This structural parallel with Israelite and Mesopotamian texts is striking and not coincidental.

Key Egyptian Parallels

- Pepi II (Sixth Dynasty, 2345–2181 B.C.E.) – temple holdings freed for service to god Min alone
- Seti I (ca. 1300 B.C.E.) – lengthy freedom proclamation for servants of Osiris at Abydos
- Standard formula: return to city, home, and inheritance

📄 Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 17–18. Cf. J. Wilson, "The Oath in Ancient Egypt," *JNES* 7 (1948): 129–156.

Second Isaiah and the Prophetic Vocabulary of Liberation

The prophecies of [Deutero-Isaiah](#) (Isaiah 40–66) employ the language and conceptual framework of ancient Near Eastern liberation proclamations to describe Jerusalem's restoration following the Babylonian destruction. The prophet draws on an internationally recognized idiom of freedom.

"To *proclaim liberty* to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound ... They shall build up the ancient ruins ... they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastation of many generations." – Isaiah 61:1–4

The elements of this proclamation – release of captives, return of exiles, rebuilding of cities – mirror exactly the content of *andurāru* proclamations in Assyria. See also Isaiah 42:1–7 and 49:8–9 for parallel passages in the same prophetic corpus.

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 17. Cf. C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, OTL (London: SCM, 1969), 365–370.

The Mechanics of the Royal Freedom Proclamation

The [proclamation of freedom](#) – in scriptural Hebrew, the *qerí'at dĕrôr* (קריאת דרור), literally the "calling" (קרי) of "freedom" (דרור) – was structurally a royal act. Its theological and political dimensions were inseparable.

1

Anointed Royal Figure

The messenger who proclaims freedom (Isa. 61:1) bears the Holy Spirit, like the anointed king upon whom God's spirit rests (Isa. 11:2).

2

Divine Servant

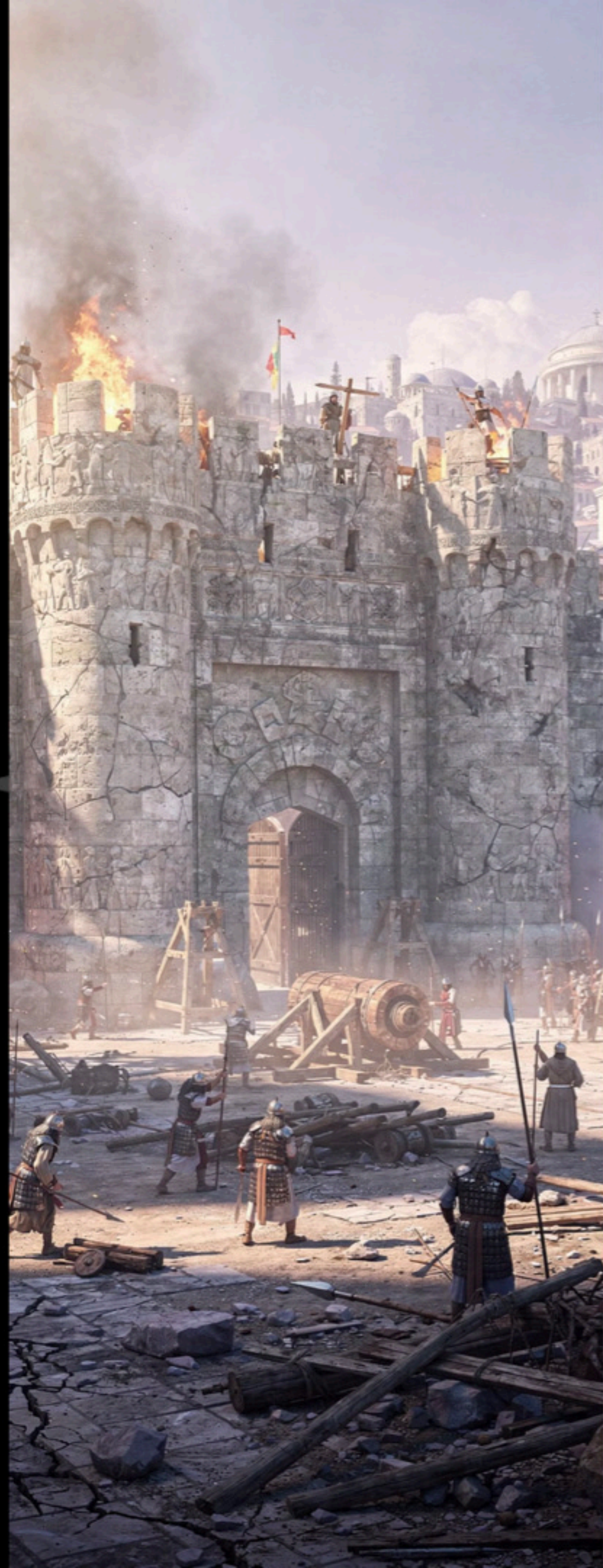
Alternatively, the proclaimer is God's servant upon whom the Divine King places His spirit *to establish justice in the land* (Isa. 42:1–7).

3

Akkadian Overlap

The phrase "establish justice in the land" directly overlaps the Akkadian *mīšaram ina mātīm šakānum* – a technical phrase for royal proclamation of equity.

- Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 17–18. Cf. F. R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen in altbabylonischer Zeit* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 47–68.



Case Study

Zedekiah's Proclamation of Liberation (589/88 B.C.E.)

In 589/88 B.C.E., King [Zedekiah](#) proclaimed liberation (*děrô*) for Hebrew slaves – an act recorded in Jeremiah 34:8–11. While the immediate motivation was political (related to the Babylonian siege), Weinfeld raises the possibility that this proclamation coincided with the Jubilee year.

If so, the year in which [Cyrus ascended to power](#) (539/38 B.C.E.) and declared the return to Zion falls *exactly fifty years* after Zedekiah's liberation – the very interval prescribed by the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25. The prophet of comfort (Second Isaiah) may have perceived this chronological alignment as theologically decisive.

- Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 18. Cf. M. Greenberg, "The Biblical Concept of Asylum," *JBL* 78 (1959): 125–132.

Cyrus: God's Anointed as Liberator

Cyrus as the Fulfillment of *Děřôr*

- Return of the exiles to Judah
- Rebuilding of the cities of Judah
- Rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple
- Proclamation "by voice" and by letter (Ezra 1:1)

Cyrus is explicitly called God's "anointed" (*māšîaḥ*) in Isaiah 45:1 and fulfills the classic functions of *andurāru*. His proclamation – conveyed "by passing a voice" and by letter (Ezra 1:1; cf. 2 Chr. 36:22–23) – mirrors the known mechanics of Mesopotamian freedom proclamations.

Cyrus' activities, along with those of Darius (Ezra 6:6ff.) and Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:12ff.) concerning Jerusalem, correspond to the orders granting *kidinnūtu* (sacred city freedom) to the holy cities of Assyria and to the privileges granted to sacred cities throughout the Hellenistic Near East.

☐ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 18. Cf. A. Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JOT* 25 (1983): 83–97.

The Mīšarum of Ammi-Šaduqa

The most detailed surviving proclamation of *mīšarum* (equity/justice) derives from the reign of King [Ammi-Šaduqa](#) of Babylonia (17th century B.C.E.), the fourth successor of Hammurabi. This text provides critical comparative material for understanding the biblical institution of *děrôr*.

Intended for Public Hearing

The opening of the edict specifies that its contents were *to be heard in the land* – a formulaic expression of public proclamation.

Content of the Edict

Cancellation of debts, release of debt-slaves, restoration of alienated properties – all elements paralleled in Leviticus 25 and Jeremiah 34.

Scholarly Significance

F. R. Kraus's critical edition (*Königliche Verfügungen in altbabylonischer Zeit*, 1984) established the edict as the benchmark for studying all ancient Near Eastern liberation texts.

☐ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 18. F. R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen in altbabylonischer Zeit* (Leiden: Brill, 1984). Cf. also J. J. Finkelstein, "Ammisaduqa's Edict," *JCS* 15 (1961): 91–104.

Chapter Break

Signs of Freedom

How liberation was signaled to the people – the shofar, the torch, and the pole across Israel, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Hittites.

WEINFELD, SOCIAL JUSTICE, 18–19

The Shofar: Israel's Signal of Liberation

In Israel, the [blowing of the shofar](#) was prescribed at the beginning of the Jubilee year of liberation (Leviticus 25:10). Over time, this act became the primary acoustic symbol of freedom and redemption in Israelite religious consciousness.

Leviticus 25:10

The shofar is to be blown on the Day of Atonement (10th of Tishri) to inaugurate the Jubilee year of *děrô*.

Isaiah 27:13

The "great shofar" signals the eschatological ingathering of exiles – freedom on a cosmic, universal scale.

Jewish Daily Prayer (Amidah)

The liturgical benediction "Blow the great shofar *for our freedom*" stands adjacent to the benediction for the establishment of righteousness and justice – reflecting the ancient semantic link.

📄 Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 18–19. Cf. B. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 171–175.

Torch, Pole, and Banner: Visual Signals of Freedom

Mesopotamia

A **torch** was lifted as the sign of a one-time proclamation of freedom. For permanent grants of *kidinnūtu*, a *pole* was placed beside the city gate or at the border of an exempted territory (*kudurru*).

Egypt

Where temple holdings were freed from levies, a **banner** was placed beside the gate of the beneficiary temple – a visual marker of the grant's ongoing validity.

Hittites

A **wooden pole** was placed beside the gate of a house declared free of taxes – a close structural parallel to both Mesopotamian and Egyptian practice.

These visual signals – torch, pole, banner – constitute a remarkably consistent cross-cultural vocabulary of liberation across the ancient Near East, from the 3rd millennium B.C.E. into the 1st millennium.

📄 Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 19, 102–103. Cf. J. Lewy, "The Biblical Institution of Dērôr in the Light of Akkadian Documents," *Eretz-Israel* 5 (1958): 21–31.

The Pole (֊) in Israelite Scripture

In Israel, the raising of a pole or standard (֊) served as a widespread means of communication and was deeply integrated into prophetic imagery (Jer. 4:6; 6:1; Isa. 5:26; 11:12; 49:22; 62:10).

In certain prophetic texts, the pole functions specifically as a *symbol of freedom* – its raising signals to captives, exiles, and prisoners that their *liberation* has been proclaimed and their return to their homes authorized:

“He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.” – Isaiah 11:12

“Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples; and they shall bring your sons in their arms.’” – Isaiah 49:22

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 19. Cf. R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1–39*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 122–126.

The Meaning of Freedom: Return to Origins

The **primary purpose** of ancient Near Eastern freedom proclamations was not abstract liberty, but a concrete, spatial act: *the restoration of the individual to his home and to his inheritance.*

Sumerian: *Amargi*

The earliest known word for "freedom," *amargi*, literally means "return to the bosom of the mother": *ama* (mother) + *ar-gi* (return). Earliest attestation in Lagash, ca. 2400 B.C.E.

Leviticus 25:10

Freedom (*děrô*) is defined as "each man returning to his property and to his family" – a definition structurally identical to Sumerian *amargi*.

Egyptian Formula

Egyptian liberation proclamations open with the statement that prisoners are to "return to their cities, their homes and their inheritance" – the same spatial-familial restoration.

- Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 19–20. Cf. T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 78–79; B. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 171.

Chapter Break

New Testament Parallels to the Signs of Freedom

How the ancient signals of liberation – the shofar, the torch, the pole, and the return of exiles – find their ultimate fulfillment in the person and work of Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah.

MATTHEW 24:30–31

ISAIAH 61:1

JOHN 8:12

JOHN 3:14

Yeshua as the Light of the World: The Torch of Liberation

In ancient Mesopotamia, a torch (dipāru) was lifted as the visible signal of a one-time proclamation of freedom. In the Gospel of John, Yeshua explicitly identifies himself as the fulfillment of this ancient symbol.

The Mesopotamian Torch

- The torch (dipāru) was raised to signal a royal proclamation of freedom
- Its lifting announced the cancellation of debts and the release of bondservants
- A one-time, unrepeatable act of royal grace

Yeshua's Declaration

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." – John 8:12

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives..." – Isaiah 61:1 (Luke 4:18)

Just as the torch announced liberation to those in bondage, Yeshua's self-identification as the "light of the world" signals the eschatological proclamation of dĕrōr – freedom from sin, debt, and death – to all who follow him.

☐ Cf. Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 18–19 on the Mesopotamian torch as signal of freedom proclamation.



The Cross as the Pole (נֵס): Lifted Up as a Sign of Liberation

In ancient Israel and across the Near East, the raising of a pole or standard (נֵס, nēs) was the visual signal of a royal proclamation – gathering the scattered and announcing freedom. Yeshua’s crucifixion outside the city gate, on a wooden pole (tree), directly fulfills this typology.

The Bronze Serpent (Numbers 21:8–9)

Moses lifted a bronze serpent on a pole (נֵס) in the wilderness – all who looked upon it were healed and lived. This is the explicit type Yeshua himself invokes.

Yeshua Lifted Up (John 3:14–15)

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” – John 3:14–15

Outside the Gate (Hebrews 13:12)

“So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.” – Hebrews 13:12.

The freedom proclamation was enacted outside the city – at the pole – for all to see.

The cross stands as the ultimate nēs – the pole raised outside the gate, visible to all, signaling the royal proclamation of eschatological dērôr. Dying on a tree (עץ), cursed and cast outside, Yeshua enacts the liberation that the ancient pole only signaled.

☞ Cf. Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 18–19; Galatians 3:13 – “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”

The Great Shofar: Matthew 24:30–31 and the Eschatological Liberation

In Israel, the blowing of the shofar was the acoustic signal of the Jubilee – the proclamation of *dĕrôr* (Leviticus 25:9–10). Yeshua explicitly employs this imagery in his eschatological discourse to describe the final, cosmic liberation of God's people.

"Then will appear in heaven the sign (σημεῖον) of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call (σαλπιγγοσ μεγαλης / רִפוּשׁ לְיָדָי), and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." – Matthew 24:30–31

The Jubilee Shofar (Leviticus 25:9–10)

- Blown on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)
- Announced the Jubilee year of release
- Signaled the return of every person to his inheritance
- Sounded across the entire land

The Eschatological Shofar (Matthew 24:31)

- Blown by angels at the coming of the Son of Man
- Announces the final year of the Lord's favor (Isaiah 61:2)
- Signaled the gathering of the scattered elect from the four winds
- Sounded across the entire cosmos

The "great trumpet" (σαλπιγξ μεγαλη) of Matthew 24:31 is the eschatological shofar – the final Jubilee proclamation, gathering the exiles of all nations to their ultimate inheritance. Cf. also 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and 1 Corinthians 15:52.

☞ Cf. Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 18–19 on the shofar as signal of liberation; Isaiah 27:13 – "And in that day a great trumpet will be blown..."

The Return of Exiles: Yeshua's Proclamation of the Jubilee

The primary purpose of the ancient freedom proclamation was the return of the individual to his home and inheritance. Yeshua quotes Isaiah 61:1–2 at the outset of his ministry, explicitly identifying himself as the one who proclaims the eschatological return – the ultimate ingathering of exiles.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." – Luke 4:18–19 (quoting Isaiah 61:1–2)

Yeshua closes the scroll and declares: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." – Luke 4:21



Isaiah's Promise

The prophet announces *děrôr* – release for captives, return for exiles, the year of the Lord's favor (Isaiah 61:1–2; 49:22)



Yeshua's Claim

Yeshua reads Isaiah 61 in the Nazareth synagogue and declares its fulfillment in himself – the anointed herald of the eschatological Jubilee (Luke 4:16–21)



The Ingathering

The gathering of the scattered elect "from the four winds" (Matthew 24:31) fulfills the ancient promise of return to inheritance – the ultimate *děrôr*

The return of exiles – the core content of every ancient freedom proclamation – finds its eschatological fulfillment in Yeshua's proclamation of the "year of the Lord's favor" and the final ingathering of God's people to their eternal inheritance.

☐ Cf. Isaiah 49:22 – "I will lift up my hand to the nations... and they shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders."

The New Testament Parallels: A Unified Overview

The ancient signs of freedom – torch, pole, shofar, and the return of exiles – converge in the person and work of Yeshua. The following table maps each ancient signal to its New Testament fulfillment.

| Ancient Sign | Ancient Context | New Testament Fulfillment | Key Text |
|----------------------|---|---|--|
| Torch (dipāru) | Lifted in Mesopotamia to signal a one-time royal proclamation of freedom | Yeshua: "I am the light of the world" – the eschatological torch of liberation | John 8:12 |
| Pole / Standard (DJ) | Raised outside the city to gather the scattered and signal freedom | Yeshua lifted up on the cross (tree/γυ) outside the gate – the ultimate nēs | John 3:14; Hebrews 13:12; Galatians 3:13 |
| Shofar (שופר) | Blown on Yom Kippur to announce the Jubilee year of release | The great trumpet at the coming of the Son of Man gathers the elect from the four winds | Matthew 24:30–31; 1 Cor. 15:52 |
| Return of Exiles | The core content of every freedom proclamation – return to home and inheritance | Yeshua proclaims the year of the Lord's favor; the ingathering of the scattered elect | Luke 4:18–21; Isaiah 61:1–2 |
| Servant of God | Liberation = return to serve one's divine master | The liberated believer is freed from sin to serve God through righteousness and covenant love | Romans 6:18–22; Galatians 5:1, 13 |

Each ancient signal finds its ultimate referent in Yeshua – not as mere metaphor, but as the eschatological enactment of the royal freedom proclamation that the ancient Near Eastern tradition had always anticipated.

☐ Cf. Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 18–21; Luke 4:21 – "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The Ultimate Act of Righteousness: The Gift of Salvation

If the ancient royal *mīšarum* was the supreme act of justice and righteousness – the king canceling debts, freeing slaves, and restoring the dispossessed – then the gift of salvation through Yeshua is the ultimate divine *mīšarum*: God himself, as the Divine King, performing the definitive act of *ḥṣṣ* (righteousness) on behalf of all humanity.

The Royal Pattern

- The king performs justice and righteousness upon accession
- Debts are cancelled; slaves are freed; exiles return
- The act is unilateral, royal, and gracious – not earned by the recipient
- It establishes a new order of equity (*mēšārīm*) in the land

The Divine Fulfillment

- God performs the ultimate act of righteousness through Yeshua's atoning death
- The debt of sin is cancelled; bondage to death is broken; exiles are restored
- Salvation is unilateral, royal, and gracious – "the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8)
- It establishes the new covenant order of righteousness and peace

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." – 2 Corinthians 5:21

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." – Romans 6:23

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." – Ephesians 1:7

The gift of salvation is not merely analogous to the ancient freedom proclamation – it is its eschatological fulfillment. God, the Divine King, has issued the final and irrevocable *mīšarum*: all debts cancelled, all captives freed, all exiles returned – not by royal decree inscribed on clay, but by the blood of the Messiah, the living Word.

☞ Cf. Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 20–21 on the divine performance of justice and righteousness; Romans 3:21–26 – "the righteousness of God has been manifested... through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."

The Full Semantic Range of דְּרוֹר (Děrôr)

"Freedom" in the broad sense encompassed a cluster of social, economic, and political measures.

Weinfeld summarizes this comprehensively:

**1. Freeing
of slaves
and debtors**



**2. Pardon
to prisoners
and rebels**



**3. Release of
captives and
return of exiles**



**4. Annulment
of taxes**



**5. Restoration
of estates to
families**



**6. Division of
land to the
needy**



The Hebrew term דְּרוֹר therefore incorporated both *political* and *economic* freedom – freedom from political dictators *and* from creditors simultaneously.

- Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 20. Cf. N. P. Lemche, "Manumission of Slaves – The Fallow Year – The Sabbatical Year – The Yobel Year," *VT* 26 (1976): 38–59.

Greek Parallels: Hippon of Syracuse (356 B.C.E.)

Hippon's Argument at Syracuse

ἰσότης (equality) = the beginning of
ἐλευθερία (freedom)

δουλεία (slavery) begins with the
impoverishment of the propertyless

∴ Land redistribution = a prerequisite for
genuine freedom

In a public assembly at Syracuse in 356 B.C.E., the democratic leader **Hippon** proposed a new division of land and houses, arguing that *equality* (ἰσότης) is the foundation of freedom (ἐλευθερία), while the beginning of slavery (δουλεία) is the impoverishment of the propertyless.

Though the primary struggle was against the tyranny of Dionysus, Hippon insisted that political liberation was inseparable from economic equality – anticipating the comprehensive definition of *děrōr* by two centuries and confirming a broader Mediterranean understanding of freedom as multidimensional.

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 20. Cf. Diodorus Siculus 16.82.4; M. I. Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), 97–115.

Chapter Break

Servant of God

The liberated person as servant of God – contrasting Israelite theology with Mesopotamian and Egyptian temple-service ideology.

WEINFELD, SOCIAL JUSTICE, 20–21

The Liberated Person as Servant of God

Across Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece, the granting of freedom was theologically interpreted as the [return of the individual to his god](#): man ought to serve his divine master rather than a human one. This principle finds direct biblical expression in Leviticus 25:

“For they are My servants, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves.” – Leviticus 25:42

“For to Me the people of Israel are servants, they are My servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt; I am YHWH your God.” – Leviticus 25:55

The principle that human liberation means divine servitude is thus not uniquely Israelite – what is distinctive is Israel's understanding of *what that service entails*.

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 20. Cf. J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, AB 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2222–2226.

Temple Service in Mesopotamia: Maništušu and Ishmedagan

In Mesopotamian freedom proclamations, service to God was understood *literally*: liberation meant release from obligations to the state or to other humans in order to serve the god in his physical temple.

Maništušu of Akkad (22nd c. B.C.E.)

Freed thirty-eight cities from corvée and levy "that they might serve on behalf of the temple of the god Shamash alone." The liberation is explicitly instrumental: freedom *for* temple service.

Ishmedagan of Isin (1953–1935 B.C.E.)

Freed the people of Nippur – the holy city of Enlil – from taxes and military conscription for the sake of the cults of Enlil, Ninlil, and Ninurta. (Cf. the parallel Sumerian royal hymns of the Isin dynasty.)

The Three Holy Cities of the 1st Millennium

Nippur (Enlil), Sippar (Shamash), and Babylon (Marduk) were released from taxes and military service by divine council decree – their inhabitants were to serve their patron gods in their temples.

- Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 20–21. Cf. I. J. Gelb, "Prisoners of War in Early Mesopotamia," *JNES* 32 (1973): 70–98; J. Lewy, "The Biblical Institution of Dērôr," *Eretz-Israel* 5 (1958): 21–31.

Temple Service in Egypt: Pepi II and Seti I

Pepi II (Sixth Dynasty, 2345–2181 B.C.E.)

In his proclamation, the people of the temple holdings of the god [Min in Koptos](#) are freed to serve their god *alone* – explicitly prohibiting their conscription for any service outside the temple. This text is one of the oldest royal exemption decrees surviving from Egypt.

Seti I (ca. 1300 B.C.E.)

The lengthy freedom proclamation for the servants of the [temple of Osiris in Abydos](#) is the most detailed Egyptian parallel to the Mesopotamian *mīšarum* edict. Its content, structure, and theological rationale closely mirror Mesopotamian precedents.

Violation of these grants was believed to provoke the god to abandon his temple – leaving the city and land desolate. This theological sanction appears in both Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts.

📄 Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 21. Cf. W. F. Edgerton, "The Strikes in Ramses III's Twenty-Ninth Year," *JNES* 10 (1951): 137–145.

The Decisive Israelite Difference

Mesopotamia and Egypt

Servitude to God = *literal* physical service in the god's temple. The liberated person performs material cult service – cooking, cleaning, building, sacrificing – in the deity's house.

Israel

Servitude to God = *submission to the divine will* and to God's religious and ethical commandments. The liberated Israelite is not a temple functionary but an ethical agent bound by covenant law.

This is, in Weinfeld's formulation, "[a decisive difference](#)." The Israelite demythologization of temple service transforms a cultic institution into an ethical one. The freed Israelite serves God not in stone temples but through justice, righteousness, and care for the vulnerable.

📄 Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 21. Cf. M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90 (1970): 184–203.

The Mythological Background: Creation and Servitude

The Mesopotamian view rests on a specific [cosmological premise](#): human beings were created to bear the burdens of temple service, so that the gods themselves would be free from labor.

According to Mesopotamian myth, at the time of Creation, "liberation" was proclaimed for the *gods* – but not for men. Humanity was created as a labor-substitute for the lesser divine beings.

The Israelite counter-narrative is radical: [God the Creator declared freedom for the created beings at the time of creation](#). Human obedience to God is itself the *result* of that originary freedom – not its precondition. The Sabbath theology of Genesis 2 and the liberation legislation of Leviticus 25 both reflect this theological inversion of Mesopotamian cosmology. Cf. the *Enuma Elish* (Tablets VI–VII) and *Atrahasis* (Tablet I, col. i–ii) for the Mesopotamian myth.

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 21. Cf. W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 42–65.

Chapter Break

Justice and Righteousness

The performance of justice and righteousness as the obligation of the individual – from Ezekiel to Ben-Sira, and from the Qumran community to the Gospel of Matthew.

WEINFELD, SOCIAL JUSTICE, 12–17

Justice and Righteousness as Individual Obligation

Just as the ruler performs *justice and righteousness* (תְּשׁוּבָה וצְדָקָה) toward his people – freeing them from enslavement – so, according to the Israelite prophetic vision, the **individual** must do justice and righteousness to his neighbor and release him from his enslavement and anguish.

→ Refraining from Evil

Ezekiel's "righteous man" abstains from oppression, seizing pledges, theft, usury, and injustice (Ezek. 18:7–8, 12–13, 16–17).

→ Active Beneficence

But restraint is insufficient. The ideal of *performing justice and righteousness* consists *primarily* in doing good: giving bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked (Ezek. 18:7, 16).

→ Royal Parallel

There is a deliberate similarity to the royal freedom proclamation: the king who grants liberation also feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, and clothes the naked.

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 12–13. Cf. W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 378–385.

Isaiah 58: The Fast Day and the Demands of Justice

Isaiah 58 is set against the background of a fast day – widely identified as the Day of Atonement, the very day on which the Jubilee liberation was proclaimed (Lev. 25:10). Crucially, the chapter is recited in Jewish liturgy on Yom Kippur.

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free ... to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him." – Isaiah 58:6–7

The prophet castigates Israel for failing to perform justice and righteousness (Isa. 58:2). The acts demanded – releasing bonds, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked – are precisely the acts of the king who grants freedom to his people. The *děrōr* of the national year becomes the template for individual ethical obligation.

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 13. Cf. J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66*, AB 19B (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 172–181.

Isaiah 61: The Year of the Lord's Favor

In Isaiah 61:1–2, the same prophet defines national דָּרוֹר ("freedom") as "the year of the Lord's favor" – an eschatological Jubilee in which all the elements of ancient liberation proclamations converge: release of captives, proclamation of liberty, comfort for mourners, rebuilding of ruins.

Elsewhere (Isa. 59:13–14), the prophet describes the withdrawal from justice and righteousness in terms strikingly parallel to Jeremiah 9:3–5: lying, exploitation, speaking ill, and uttering false words – all the antitheses of the royal *mīšarum* proclamation that establishes truth and equity.

Key Vocabulary

- děrô: freedom/release – דָּרוֹר •
- šenat rāṣôn: year of – שְׁנַת רְצוֹן •
favor
- mišpāṭ: justice – מִשְׁפָּט •
- ṣēdāqāh: righteousness – צְדָקָה •
mēšārîm: – מִישְׁרִים •
uprightness/equity

📄 Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 13–14. Cf. C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*, OTL (London: SCM, 1969), 363–370.

Justice and Righteousness in Wisdom Literature

The demand for justice and righteousness as deeds of personal kindness appears prominently in Israelite [Wisdom Literature](#), especially in the Book of Job.



Job 29:12–16

Job "wears" justice and righteousness: he saves the poor and the orphan, cheers the heart of the widow, is eyes to the blind and legs to the lame – a comprehensive list of active beneficence.



Egyptian Epitaphs

Similar catalogues of beneficent acts appear in Egyptian tomb inscriptions. The difference is crucial: Egyptian epitaphs glorify *princes and officials*, while Israelite texts frame such acts as the universal obligation of any righteous person.

📄 Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 14. Cf. S. Terrien, *Job*, CAT 13 (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1963), 195–197.

The Development of צדקה וחסד in Second Temple Judaism

During the Second Temple period, the concept of "justice and righteousness" underwent a significant **semantic deepening and expansion**. The classical pair *mišpāt-ṣĕdāqāh* gave way to the pair **ṣĕdāqāh-ḥesed** (righteousness and kindness), which acquired a broader, more personalized meaning.

01

Righteousness (צדקה) with money

Almsgiving and material support for the poor – Ben-Sira 37:11 [2, 4]; Mishnah Avot 1:2.

02

Deeds of Kindness (גמילות חסדים)

Personal acts: visiting the sick, escorting the dead, comforting mourners, welcoming wayfarers (b. Sukkah 49b; y. Peah 1:5, 15b–c).

03

Duties to the Dead

Ben-Sira 7:33–34 adds: doing kindness to the dead and mourning with mourners; the LXX version adds visiting the sick.

04

Community Covenant (Damascus Document)

CD 14:12–16 requires members to practice hospitality, redeem captives, provide for the bride, escort and bury the dead, and ask after the peace of each neighbor.

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 14–15. Cf. CD 14:12–16 in J. M. Baumgarten, *Qumran Cave 4: The Damascus Document (4Q266–273)*, DJD 18 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

The Gospel of Matthew and the Jewish Inheritance

Matthew 25:31–46 — The Final Judgment

- Feeding the hungry
- Giving drink to the thirsty
- Clothing the naked
- Welcoming the stranger
- Visiting the sick
- Caring for prisoners

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Weinfeld identifies a tradition that [drew upon Jewish norms](#) – specifically the expanded concept of *gēmîlût ḥāsādîm* that had developed in Second Temple Judaism. The six criteria for eschatological judgment in Matthew 25 correspond closely to the duties listed in the Damascus Document and in rabbinic texts on deeds of kindness.

This connection demonstrates the *continuity* between ancient Near Eastern royal liberation ideology, Israelite prophetic ethics, Second Temple Jewish practice, and early Christian teaching – a single trajectory of expanding the concept of freedom into the realm of human solidarity.

☐ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 15. Cf. U. Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 264–278.

Chapter Break

Righteousness in the Kingdom of God

The divine performance of justice and righteousness – at Creation, at the Exodus, and in the eschatological future – as the cosmic counterpart of royal liberation proclamations.

WEINFELD, SOCIAL JUSTICE, 15–17

God as King: The Divine Mīšarum

The final and most theologically ambitious dimension of Weinfeld's analysis: just as a mortal king performs *justice and righteousness* upon his accession to the throne, so does the [Divine King](#) perform justice and righteousness – establishing מִישָׁרִים – when He ascends His cosmic throne.

"The King's strength loves justice. You have established equity (מִישָׁרִים); you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob." – Psalm 99:4

The establishment of מִישָׁרִים in Psalm 99:4 is identified with the same term *mīšarum* used in Mesopotamian royal edicts – a deliberate terminological overlap that places Israel's theology of divine kingship within the broad framework of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, while transforming it.

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 15–16. Cf. F. R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 1–10; J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, SBT 32 (London: SCM, 1976), 167–175.

Three Moments of Divine Justice

God performs *mišpāṭ* and *šedāqāh* and establishes *mēšārîm* in three interconnected historical-theological situations, all of which are connected with His enthronement as king:

1. Creation

At the beginning of creation, God prepared His throne "with justice and righteousness, with kindness and truth and uprightness" (Ps. 96:10; 93; cf. Ps. 33:5–6; 89:3–15). This signifies the imposition of order and harmony upon cosmos and the defeat of chaos.

2. Exodus and Sinai

After the Exodus, God appears as King of Israel (Ex. 15:18), redeeming His people (Ex. 20:2), giving laws on Sinai (Deut. 33:4–5; Ps. 99:4ff.; 103:6–7), and saving His people from enemies (Judg. 5:11; 1 Sam. 12:7; Mic. 6:5): social equality and political freedom.

3. Eschatological Redemption

In the period of universal redemption, God will sit on His throne "to judge the world with justice and peoples with uprightness and truth" (Ps. 67:5; 75:3ff.; 96:11ff.; 98:7–9), revealing justice and salvation to all nations (Isa. 51:4–5; Ps. 67; 98).

☐ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 15–16. Cf. M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 233–243.

Psalm 72: The Royal Template

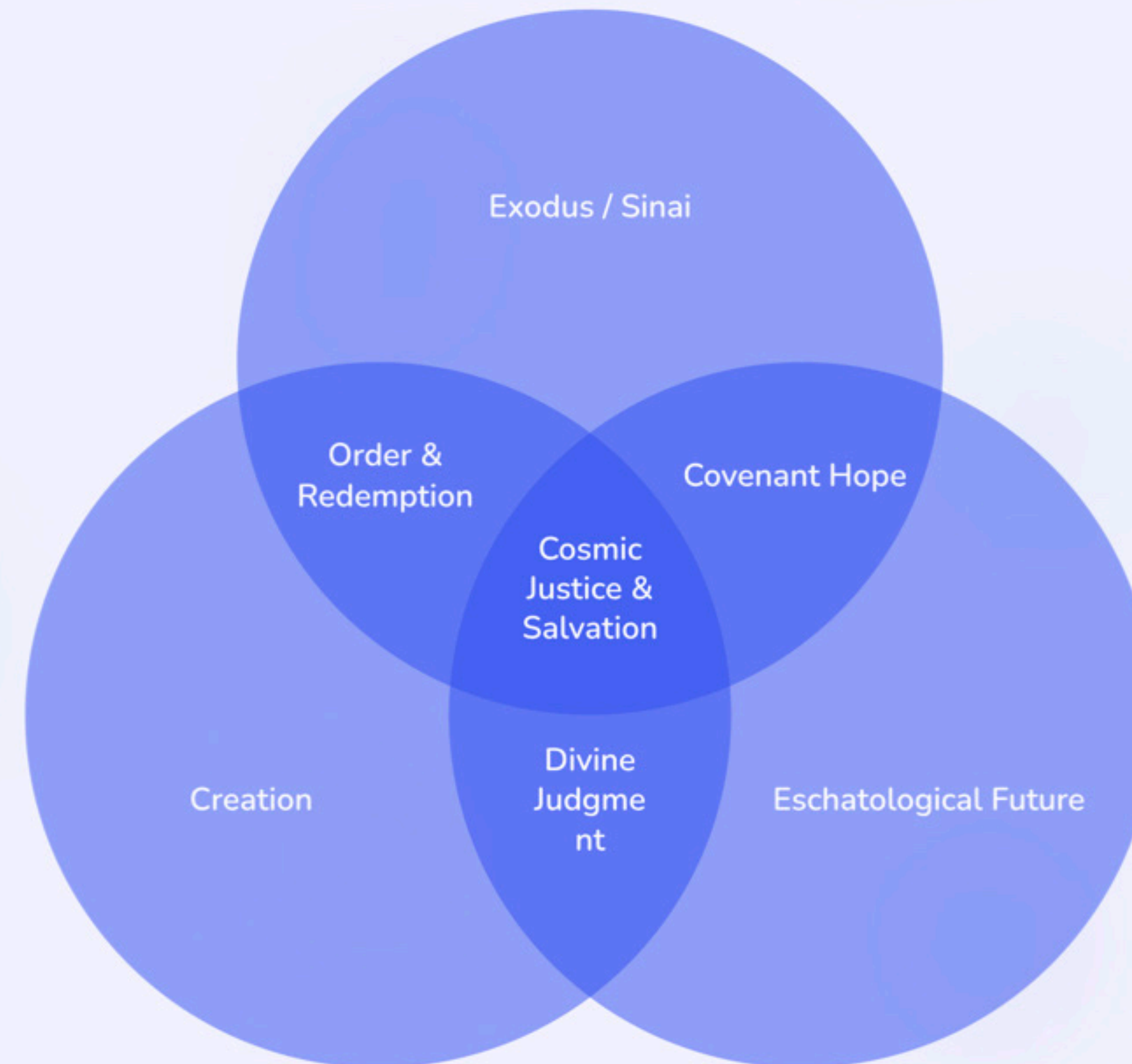
Psalm 72 provides the clearest articulation of the connection between royal justice and the salvation of the vulnerable – a text that serves as a bridge between earthly royal ideology and the theology of divine kingship:

"May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor!" – Psalm 72:4

The three actions of the ideal king – defending the poor, delivering the needy, crushing the oppressor – mirror the three-part content of *mīšarum* edicts. The [Divine King](#), when He ascends His throne, will perform precisely these acts for Israel and for all humanity. The purpose of divine justice is not retributive but *restorative*: redeeming the weak from the strong in both the socio-economic and the political-state realms.

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 16. Cf. H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 73–80; F. R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen*, 47–68.

The Three Redemptions: A Unified Continuum

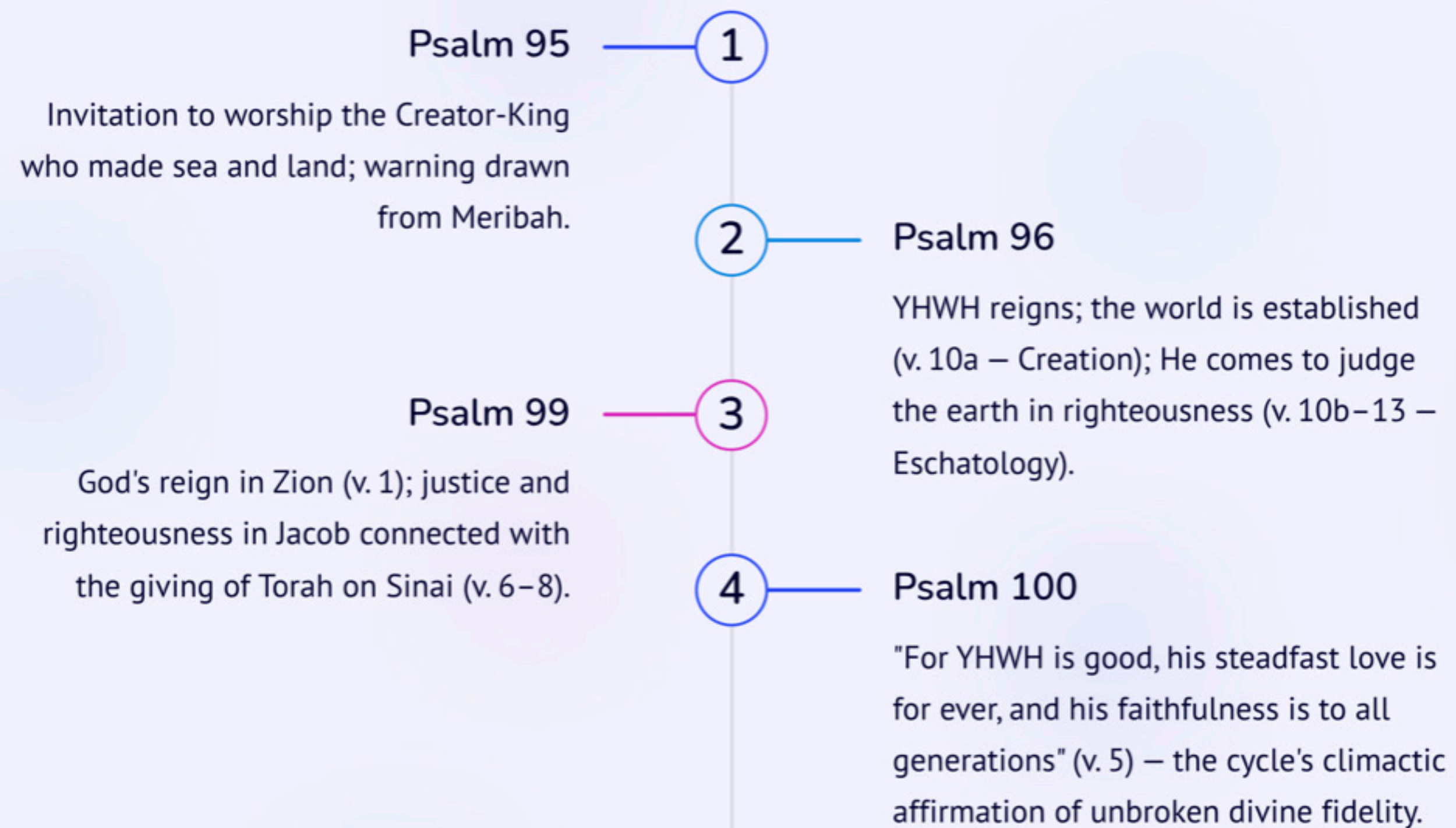


Weinfeld argues that in the prophetic and psalmic imagination, these three moments are not sharply separated but constitute a [single continuum](#). The poet and the prophet see past, present, and future as a unified expression of God's uninterrupted justice, kindness, and faithfulness.

☐ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 16–17. Cf. Ps. 100:5; Second Isaiah passim.

Psalms 95–100: The Cycle of Divine Kingship

The cycle of Psalms 95–100 provides the most concentrated biblical expression of the theology of divine kingship and justice. Weinfeld traces the movement from creation to eschatology within these texts:



□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 16–17. Cf. H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 251–270.

Mīšarum in Heaven and on Earth

Weinfeld's concluding observation on the theology of divine justice is structurally powerful: the [custom of royal liberation proclamation](#), which originated in the social realities of ancient Near Eastern kingship, was transposed into the theological realm. What earthly kings did at their coronation, God does when He "ascends His throne."

Earthly Kingdom

Good kings proclaim freedom, cancel debts, restore properties, and release prisoners – at the beginning of their reign or on other special occasions. Attested from Lagash (ca. 2400 B.C.E.) through the Hellenistic period.

Kingdom of Heaven

God the Divine King performs the same acts – but cosmically and permanently. His *mīšarum* encompasses Creation, historical redemption, and eschatological salvation – "his steadfast love is for ever" (Ps. 100:5).

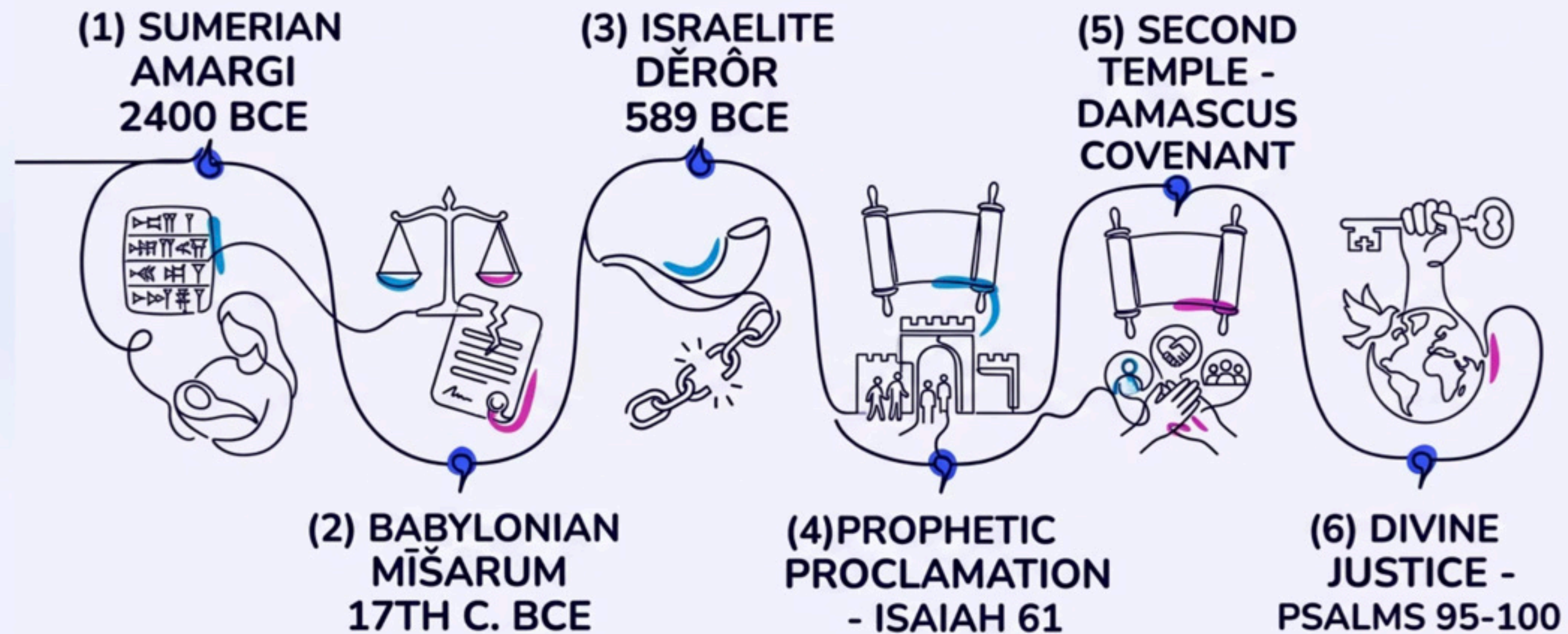
- ☐ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 17. Cf. M. Weinfeld, "Justice and Righteousness – מִשָּׁר וְצִדְקָה – The Expression and Its Meaning," in H. G. Reventlow and Y. Hoffman (eds.), *Justice and Righteousness* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 228–246.

Chapter Break

Synthesis

Bringing together the full arc of Weinfeld's argument – from the Sumerian amargi through Second Temple Judaism and the kingdom of God.

The Trajectory of Freedom: From Sumerian to Eschatological



- Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 12–22. Cf. F. R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen* (Leiden: Brill, 1984); B. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989).

Cross-Cultural Comparison: Liberation Proclamations

| Culture | Term | Primary Content | Signal | Key Text |
|--------------|------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Sumer/Lagash | <i>Amargi</i> | Return to family and property | Royal herald | Uru-inimgina reforms, ca. 2350 B.C.E. |
| Babylonia | <i>Mišarum</i> / <i>Andurāru</i> | Debt cancellation, slave release | Torch, royal edict | Ammi-Šaduqa edict, 17th c. B.C.E. |
| Assyria | <i>Andurāru</i> / <i>Kidinnūtu</i> | City exemptions, return of exiles | Pole at city gate | Neo-Assyrian city privilege texts |
| Egypt | <i>Wd nsw</i> | Temple exemptions, return of exiles | Banner at temple gate | Pepi II; Seti I (Abydos) |
| Hittites | Tax-free household grant | Household exemption from taxes | Wooden pole at gate | Hittite land-grant texts |
| Israel | <i>Děrôr</i> / <i>Yôbēl</i> | Slave release, land restoration, debt cancellation | Shofar, pole (D) | Lev. 25; Jer. 34; Isa. 61 |

□ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 17–20. Cf. J. Lewy, "The Biblical Institution of Děrôr," *Eretz-Israel* 5 (1958): 21–31; F. R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen* (Leiden: Brill, 1984).

Key Scholarly Sources on Liberation Proclamations

Weinfeld (1995)

M. Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem; Minneapolis: Magnes Press; Fortress Press, 1995) – the foundational synthesis for this entire discussion.

Kraus (1984)

F. R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen in altbabylonischer Zeit* (Leiden: Brill, 1984) – critical edition and analysis of Babylonian royal edicts including the Ammi-Šaduqa mīšarum.

Finkelstein (1961)

J. J. Finkelstein, "Ammisaduqa's Edict and the Babylonian 'Law Codes,'" *JCS* 15 (1961): 91–104 – first major English-language analysis of the edict.

Lewy (1958)

J. Lewy, "The Biblical Institution of Dērôr in the Light of Akkadian Documents," *Eretz-Israel* 5 (1958): 21–31 – established the Akkadian-Hebrew lexical and conceptual parallels.

Lemche (1976)

N. P. Lemche, "Manumission of Slaves – The Fallow Year – The Sabbatical Year – The Yobel Year," *VT* 26 (1976): 38–59 – analysis of Israelite slave-manumission in ANE context.

Additional Primary and Secondary Sources

- Leviticus and the Jubilee

J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, AB 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2220–2260; B. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 168–177.

- Mesopotamian Cosmology

W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); T. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

- Cyrus and Persian Policy

A. Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JSOT* 25 (1983): 83–97; P.-R. Berger, "Der Kyros-Zylinder," *ZA* 64 (1975): 192–234.

- Second Temple Texts

J. M. Baumgarten, *Qumran Cave 4: The Damascus Document (4Q266–273)*, DJD 18 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); CD 14:12–16 for the community duties of the ḥăbûrâh.

- Psalms and Divine Kingship

H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989); J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms*, SBT 32 (London: SCM, 1976).

Conclusion: One Concept Across Many Worlds

Weinfeld's analysis reveals that **freedom**, **justice**, and **righteousness** in the Hebrew Bible are not isolated or uniquely Israelite inventions, but belong to a rich, millennia-long tradition of liberation ideology spanning Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, Egypt, Anatolia, and Greece.

What is distinctive about Israel is not the concept but the *transformation*: the demythologization of temple service into ethical obligation; the democratization of royal beneficence into personal duty; and the extension of the temporal frame from the coronation moment of a mortal king to the eternal, unbroken justice of the Divine King – "for YHWH is good, his steadfast love is for ever, and his faithfulness is to all generations" (Ps. 100:5).

- Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem; Minneapolis: Magnes Press; Fortress Press, 1995), 12–22.