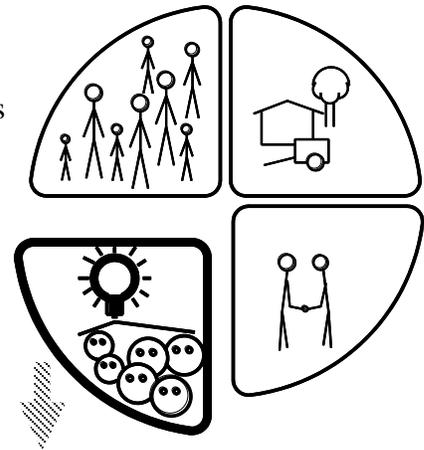


6: Ancient Israelites *Model Category: Shared Ideas*

Ideas, Values, Beliefs, Assumptions

Members of groups share important ideas and values. Ideas are invisible, of course, so must be inferred from what group members say and do. Important Patterns of Action are generally motivated by Shared Ideas.



Important subcategories of Shared Ideas include beliefs and assumptions about:

- The basic nature of humans: Are people considered “naturally” good, evil or neither? What’s the relative value of people of various ages? Of males and females?
- Time: Is the past different from the present? If so, how? Is the present different from the probable future? Will the future be better, worse, or about the same?
- “The good life:” What do people want their children to be, do, and have when they become adults?
- Ownership: What are the rules for owning? What does “owning” mean? Should most things be owned by individuals, or by groups? What kinds of things are owned? How is ownership transferred?
- Acceptable action: What’s OK and not OK to do?
- Authority: Who should make important decisions affecting many people? How do officials get their power? How is it transferred to others?
- Status: Who’s considered important? Not important? Why? What can people “do” with high status or prestige?
- Causality: Why do things happen? What causes events, disasters, change?
- Outsiders: Who’s considered “them” and “not one of us?” Why?”

As you think through your investigations, you may choose to add other categories to this list.

Investigation: A Change in Shared Ideas

If you were able to ask either ancient Egyptians or Mesopotamians about their beliefs about life, their answer would probably be something like this:

“The skies tell the truth about all things. Each day the sun is born, travels across the sky, dies in the west and journeys into the underworld, to be born again the next morning.

“The moon, likewise, journeys from this world to the underworld, except she changes her appearance from night to night, sometimes showing her whole face, then gradually hiding it until she disappears, then she reappears again.

“The stars show us the passage of a year. Every spring, the same stars rise in the east, but these are different from the stars that rise in any other season. The stars show us when the river will rise and bring new life.

“Just like the sun, moon and stars, seeds must go into the ground and die before they can sprout and grow into new plants.

“People are the same. They are born like the morning sun, live their lives, then die and travel to the underworld.

“Some years the river rises more, some years less, but the world is much the same as it has always been since the creating god caused it to form.”

According to the recorded traditions of the Israelites, about 1850 BCE a tribal leader named Avram (also called Abram in many translations), originally from Ur but living in Harran in Mesopotamia, had the following experience:¹

God said to Avram, “Leave your country, your relatives, and your father’s house. Go to a country that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and bless you, making your name honored. Those who bless you I will bless, those who curse you I will damn, and every clan on earth will pray to be blessed like you.”

[God] took Avram outside and said, “Look up to the sky and try to count the stars. That’s how many descendants you will have.”

Read the description of the Shared Idea category “Time” on Page 1, then decide how a fundamental idea expressed in the account about Avram differs from the views of Egyptians and Mesopotamians (top box). Which view is more like those shared by most people you know? Record your conclusions.

¹ Genesis 12:1-3, 15:5. (Paraphrased from various translations)

The land where the descendants of Avram (who was renamed “Avraham”—“father of many nations”) settled was part of the “Fertile Crescent,” located between two major ancient civilizations—Egypt and Mesopotamia. Avraham’s people were primarily herders of sheep, goats and donkeys, and were moving into territory already occupied by Canaanites—a society of farmers and seagoing people also called “Phoenicians.” Originally the Canaanites occupied much of the area in light green between the coast and the Jordan River on the map below, along with the dark green coastal area to the north. Archaeology shows that many Israelite ways of living (especially farming) were adopted from the Canaanites. The two groups spoke very similar languages and wrote with similar alphabets.

The area along the coast and inland for some distance has a Mediterranean climate, with winter rains that vary from year to year, and dry summers. The region east of the Jordan River valley, around the Dead Sea and south, is mostly desert.



<http://www.worldreligions.psu.edu/maps-judaism.htm>

Investigation: Other Shared Ideas

Check the categories of Shared Ideas on Page 1 and continue your analysis of ideas shared by the Israelites as indicated in the data that follow:^{1 2}

When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering, and drives out many nations before you—Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations that outnumber you and are more powerful—God will give you power to conquer them.

You must put them to death. You must not make a treaty with them or spare them. You must not intermarry with them. Do not take their daughters for your sons, nor give your daughters to their sons. If you do, they will draw your sons away from the Lord and make them worship other gods. If this happens, the Lord will be angry with you and will destroy you.

This is what you must do to them: tear down their altars, break their sacred pillars, cut down their sacred poles and use fire to destroy their idols. Do this because you are a people set apart from all others by the Lord your God, who chose you out of all nations on earth to be his special possession.

God spoke these words:

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Do not have any other god besides me.

Do not make for yourself a carved image of anything in the sky, on earth, or in the water. Do not bow down to such images or worship them...

Do not use the name of the Lord your God in wrong ways. The Lord will not leave unpunished the man who misuses His name.

Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. You have six days to labor and do all your work, but the seventh is set aside by the Lord your God. Do no work on that day, nor should you let your son, daughter, slave or slave-girl, your cattle or strangers among you do any work...

Honor your father and mother, so you may live long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

Do not commit murder.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not steal.

(Continued)

¹ First selection: Deut. 7:1-5 (adapted)

² Second selection: Exodus 20:1-17 (adapted)

Do not lie when you testify about your neighbor.

Do not wish to possess your neighbor's house, his wife, his slave, his slave-girl, his ox, his donkey, or anything that belongs to him.

Above and previous page: The Ten Commandments. Are all of them universal rules for all humans? Give reasons for your answers.

More commandments:¹

You may eat any animal which has a parted foot or a cloven hoof and also chews the cud; those who only chew the cud or only have a parted or cloven hoof you must not eat...the pig, which has a cloven hoof but does not chew the cud, you must not eat, for it is unclean. You must not eat their flesh or even touch their dead carcasses.

Of creatures that live in water you may eat all those that have fins and scales, but you must not eat any that have neither fins nor scales...you may eat every clean insect.

Do not boil a kid [young goat] in its mother's milk.

When one of your fellow countrymen in any of your settlements...becomes poor, do not be hard-hearted or close-fisted with him in his need. Be open-handed towards him and lend him, on his pledge to repay you, as much as he needs.

A fragment of a two-thousand-year old scroll—part of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Written in Hebrew, the scrolls have parts of most of the Tanakh—the Jewish scriptures called the “Old Testament” by Christians.



¹ Middle box: Deut. 14:6-9, 21, 15:7-8 Next page: Deut. 19:16-21, 21:18-21 (adapted)

If a witness with evil motives comes forward to give false testimony against another man, the two in dispute will stand before the Lord and the priests and judges then in office. If, after careful examination by the judges, the witness is proved to be lying about the other man, then you must treat him as he intended to treat his fellow. This will rid you of this wickedness. The rest of the people, when they hear what happens to liars, will be afraid, and never again will this kind of wickedness be done among you. Show no mercy—take a life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, and foot for foot.

When a man has a son who is disobedient and out of control, and will not obey his father or his mother, or pay attention when they punish him, then his father and mother shall seize him and bring him out to the town elders at the town gate. They shall say to these elders, “This son of ours is disobedient and out of control. He will not obey us; he is a lazy oaf and a drunkard.” Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. Thus you will rid yourselves of this wickedness.

Investigation: Exile and Return

Background: According to Israelite tradition, some of their ancestors were held as slaves in Egypt. They escaped (probably about 1250 BCE) under the leadership of Moses. The story is told in the first half of the book of *Exodus* in the Bible, and in several feature films.

Israelite civilization began developing after about 1200 BCE, and reached its peak size and power under the three original kings—Saul, David, and David’s son, Solomon. Their story is told in the Bible’s Book of *Kings*.

After Solomon’s death, about 931 BCE, the kingdom split into two parts, and a time of troubles began for both parts, each with its own king. Weakened by rivalry and growing dissention, the northern kingdom (Israel) was conquered by Assyria in 722 BCE, and its inhabitants carried off into Mesopotamia. Apparently these captives were assimilated by their captors, because they’re never heard of again.

The southern kingdom—Judah—hung on for over a hundred years, but eventually was threatened by Babylonians, who had conquered the Assyrians. A man named Isaiah—a prophet (“one who speaks forth”)—had much to say on the subject. Some of his words follow.

What reasons does Isaiah give for Judah's problems? How does this fit with other shared ideas of the Israelites?¹

You people of the house of Jacob! God has abandoned you because you have allowed in and mingled with traders and barbarians and the children of foreigners like the Philistines. Your land is filled with silver and gold belonging to these outsiders; there is no end to their treasure. The land is filled with their horses, and there is no end to their war chariots. The land is filled with idols, and people who bow down to the work of their own hands, to what their fingers have made.

Everyone will be brought low; all men shall be humbled. How can you raise yourselves?

Go to the rocks, hide yourselves in caves, hide from the wrath of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty...For the Lord of a multitude of heavenly beings will bring a day of doom!

Jerusalem is struck down and Judah fallen because they have acted against the Lord.

The kingdom of Judah *did* fall. Babylonian attacks began in 597 BCE, and ended in 587. The conquerors destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and carried off the leaders and many other people (now called "Jews") into captivity in Babylonia. Only the poor were left behind.

Assyrians were the first to carry Israelites into captivity. Here a captive is forced to bow before an Assyrian king.



http://40.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_m95tp3TXIp1ryfivao1_1280.jpg

¹ Isaiah 2:6-12, 3:8 (adapted)

What ideas and emotions are expressed in the following poem written while the Israelites were in captivity? [Zion is another name for Jerusalem, especially the hill in Jerusalem where the temple was built.]¹

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the willow trees we hung up our harps,
for those who carried us off demanded music and singing.
Our captors called on us to be merry, ordering:
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”
How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange, alien land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither away,
Let my tongue lock to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

O Babylon, Babylon the destroyer,
Happy the man who repays you for all you did to us!
Happy is he who shall seize your children and dash them against a rock.

During their nearly fifty years in captivity, the Jews kept their identity. Then their dreams came true when the Persians, under Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylonia. In 538 BCE, Cyrus ordered that all captives be released and allowed to return to their homes. Another prophet—possibly also named Isaiah—celebrated the return to the homeland:²

Compare the ideas here with those in the exile poem (top of page). How are emotions related to Shared Ideas?

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says the voice of your God.
“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and tell her this—
She has fulfilled her term of bondage, her penalty is paid.
She has received at the Lord’s hand double measure for all her sins.”

A voice cries, “Prepare a road for the Lord through the wilderness,
Clear a highway across the desert for our God.
Every valley shall be filled up, every mountain and hill leveled down,
Rugged places shall be made smooth,
And mountain ranges become a plain.”

Then shall the glory of the Lord shine forth,
And all mankind together shall see it,
For the Lord himself has spoken.

¹ Psalm 137 (adapted)

² Isaiah 40:1-8 (adapted)

Follow-Up: Shared Ideas Here and Now

Sometimes a single Shared Idea creates vast patterns in a society. For example, most North Americans believe *“It’s good to be young. The best years of most people’s lives are between the age of 18 and 35 or so.”*

As the “baby boomers” get older, this idea is changing, but it still results in billions of dollars being spent on cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, physical conditioning, clothing with a youthful look, and so on. Advertisements show happy people in the “ideal” age range, or acting like people in the ideal age range.

The “big ideas” shared by many Americans tend to be taken for granted—ideas that create major patterns of action. (Most people who study “national character” come up with between six and a dozen or so main ones for each society.)

List the main pattern-forming ideas for your community. Check the idea categories in your Model (Page 1), and look at ideas of ancient Israel for clues about what’s important.

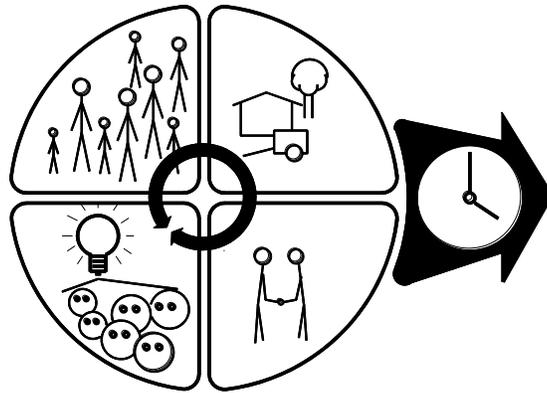
Other clues will be indicated by your answers to a few questions:

What situations make most people angry? What shared idea or ideas are being violated in these situations?

What motivates people to spend a lot of money?

The simple question, “Why does it rain?” can yield evidence of fundamentally different, incompatible explanations about something really important—a society’s assumptions about cause.

The direct answers to such questions may (or may not) be “deep” enough to show a really fundamental Shared Idea. **Check each answer by asking yourself “why?” then “the ‘why’ for the ‘why,’” to see if you can get an even deeper idea or belief.**



For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:

As with other parts in this series, learning “facts” about the ancient Israelites isn’t the objective, but rather **gaining understanding of the meta-concept “Shared Ideas.” It’s the fourth major element of the Model—what will eventually become the learner’s primary and permanent tool for describing and analyzing reality and tracing the dynamics of change.**

In the study of humanness, “Shared Ideas” is the Model component with the greatest explanatory power. As we said in *Investigating American History*:¹

“Ideas or states of mind broadly shared by the members of societies or other organized human groups go by various names, such as, "core beliefs," "cultural assumptions," "dominant values," "societal premises," and "worldview."

“When we attempt to make sense of what humans think and do, nothing is more useful than insight into a group’s shared states of mind. If schools were able to send graduates on their ways with a thorough understanding of just one thing, this would probably be that "one thing" because it explains so much—everyone’s ordinary, daily behavior, the day’s news, art, architecture, music, politics, economics, customs, jokes, laws, religions—just about everything.

“What makes these ideas particularly powerful is the fact that they're so taken-for-granted most people aren't aware they have them. As a consequence, they don't get lifted into consciousness, and their appropriateness and usefulness are not carefully examined. The old saying, "A fish would be the last to discover water," captures the nature of the problem.”

Professor Carroll Quigley concisely expressed this view in a 1968 article: <http://www.carrollquigley.net/Articles/Needed-A-Revolution-in-Thinking.htm>.

Egyptians (at least those with high status) believed “My existence continues after I die if my body is carefully treated and protected.” This, as we’ve seen, shaped important Egyptian behavior.

Babylonians believed, “Making sure the flooding rivers benefit us next year requires that we raise high temples honoring the gods.” As a consequence, they built ziggurats and focused on annual ceremonies and sacrifices.

Other beliefs down through the ages that have shaped societies:

“Our highest leader is chosen by the gods, and does their will, so must be obeyed without question.”

“Women are less important than men, and are men’s possessions. They cannot own property or make important decisions.”

“If a person is born into a group that is given nasty jobs, it is because in a previous life that person’s actions were not satisfactory, and he or she is being punished by the gods.”

¹ Marion Brady and Howard Brady, *Investigating American History* (formerly *American History Handbook*), v. 3.1. p. 47. <http://www.marionbrady.com/AHH.asp>

“Every person has an equal chance to succeed or fail in life. If a person fails, it’s his or her own fault.”

Each society has a collection of shared ideas like these that, collectively, “explain” the important patterns within that society. Most often, a dozen or fewer shared ideas can be identified that are most significant for each society. A discussion of the important ideas in present-day American society is in Appendix B of *Investigating American History*.

Notes on the Investigations:

Investigation: A Change in Shared Ideas

Thomas Cahill, in *The Gifts of the Jews—How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*, asserts:

“...As Henri-Charles Puech says of Greek thought in his seminal *Man and Time*: ‘No event is unique, nothing is enacted but once...; every event has been enacted, is enacted, and will be enacted perpetually; the same individuals have appeared, appear, and will appear at every turn of the circle.’

“The Jews were the first people to break out of this circle, to find a new way of thinking and experiencing, a new way of understanding and feeling the world, so much so that it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.”¹

Seeing time as not cyclic, but linear—proceeding from a unique past, through “now,” to a differing future—is the new idea he attributes to the Jews. The Jews, in essence, invented history as a concept. It is now so much a part of Western Civilization’s way of thinking that it is difficult to conceive of the older alternative.

This is the point of the first investigation.

From the point of view of cultural anthropology, shared views of time in different societies fall into several categories:

- Static—every day, every year is essentially the same as those before
- Circular—described in this unit. In some cases (e.g. Mesoamerican Maya) the dimensions of the time circle may be quite large.
- Linear—the future will be different from the past, also described in this unit. The most common form of this (linear ascending) assumes the future will be better than the past, perhaps leading to a “golden age.”
- Descending—the “golden age” is in the past, and it’s downhill since, e.g. the Renaissance idealization of the Classical past.

Giving learners these categories—a ‘sub-model’—may assist them in this and future analysis of societies.

Investigation: Other Shared Ideas

Most of the data in this section fall clearly into one of the subcategories of “Shared Ideas” listed on Page 1. Attitudes toward “outsiders,” and what is considered “acceptable action”

¹ Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*, (New York, 1998, Nan A. Talese/Anchor Books) p. 5

are the two most important categories exemplified in the Biblical data selections. The available data for ancient Jewish thought are rich enough that every Shared Idea category could, of course, be illustrated, but examples here are limited by class time and traditional expectations.

Outsiders have often characterized the Jewish concern for laws as excessive. The Jewish people do not perceive them as a burden, but as a symbolic way of living in God's presence. Sacred living demanded separation—"milk from meat, clean from unclean, and Sabbath from the rest of the week."¹

Investigation: Exile and Return

Solid historical evidence supports the biblical stories of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BCE. (Even the locations where Jewish settlers resided in Babylon and nearby are known.) This experience profoundly shaped Judaic thought, with a new emphasis on local synagogues as centers of learning and worship, a deep concern with national freedom (reflected in the increased importance of the stories of earlier exile in Egypt), and a final move to pure monotheism, where the possible existence of other gods is denied and the use of idols is ridiculed.

Psalms 137 and the selection from Isaiah Chapter 40 illustrate an important principle—the intimate link between shared values and emotions. Anger and joy are arrows that point to important shared ideas.

Follow-Up: Shared Ideas Here and Now

For more on this subject, refer to Appendix B of *Investigating American History* (formerly the *American History Handbook*) available for free download at <http://www.marionbrady.com>.

(HLB) June 2015, Minor revisions September 2015. Quigley link added October 2017.

¹ Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God*, © 1993, New York, Ballantine Books, p. 65