

Cultural Differences between the Modern West & Ancient Near East

It is critically important that when reading the Old Testament we recognize that the worldviews and ancient culture reflected in it do not necessarily match our own. Here are some differences as explained by John Pilcher in *Introducing the Cultural Context of the Old Testament*.

MODERN WEST PRIORITIZES...	ANCIENT NEAR EAST PRIORITIZES...
Egocentric Identity	Group-centric Identity
Promote independence	Promote interdependence
See the parts	See the whole
Urge uniqueness	Urge conformity
Seek autonomy from social solidarity	Primary obligation to others & development of the group
Group membership results from renewable contract	Group membership results from one's inherited social & familiar place in society
Behavior is governed by rights & duties specified from one's personal goals	Behavior is dictated by the group's mores & sanctions or the leader's authority
Individual worth is based on individual achievements or individual possessions	Individual worth is rooted in familial status, social position, class, or caste
Status is achieved	Status is ascribed
Achieving & competing are motivational necessities & the norm	Achieving & competing are disruptive to the group
Assert one's own rights	Submit personal rights to the group
Equality is a key value	Hierarchy is the key value
Friendships are functional	Friendships involve long-term loyalties or obligational commitments
Any group is viewed only as a collection of individuals	Any group is viewed as an organic unit, inextricably interlocked
The individual self is viewed as an entity separate from the physical world and from other persons	The individual self is viewed as organically connected with the physical world and with other persons
Any personal decision is made by the self alone, even if it is not in the group's best interests	Any personal decision is made in consultation with the group and often in obedience or deference to its will
Private autonomy	Corporate solidarity
Strong personal identity	Strong familial identity
Self-reliant achievement	Interdependent collaboration
Strong desire to be personally satisfied	Strong desire to be interpersonally satisfying or satisfactory