

Editor's Foreword

WE CAN ASK MANY QUESTIONS OF THE TEXT we call the Old Testament. Among them are: How did ancient Israel organize its society? Who were its leaders? How were families structured? How were gender relations constructed? Did the nature of Israelite society evolve over time? And how does the structure of that society relate to its theology and its relationship to God?

Rainer Kessler uses the discipline of social history to describe ancient Israel by answering these and other related questions. The currency and sophistication of his argument makes this book a valuable resource for scholars and students of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel. But as Kessler points out in chapter 1, he is also keenly aware that the last question asked above is an important reason why many readers will be drawn to this book. Because of the claims made in Judaism and Christianity about the biblical God's involvement in human history, questions of social history are for many people of tremendous theological importance as well.

The *Social History of Ancient Israel* falls into three parts. First, in chapter 1, the author discusses the social history method itself by describing it as a historical discipline and method of biblical exegesis, reviewing the different rhythms of history, describing the two ways of doing social history, and reviewing the

history of scholarship on the analysis of biblical social history.

In part 1, chapters 1–5 review the available methods for studying Israelite social history: the geographical and historical environments of ancient Israel, the material remains we have from archaeology and epigraphy, the nature of the Hebrew Bible texts, and useful analogies for studying ancient Israel derived from its cultural environment and the work of modern ethnology and sociology.

In part 2, chapters 6–11 use social history methodology to review Israelite history, from its earliest origins as a kinship-based society in the Levant through the beginning and full development of the monarchy and a class-based society in both the south and the north, the exilic and post-exilic periods and their social consequences, and finishing with Israel under Alexander the Great and his successors and the development of the independent Jewish Hasmonean state.

The book concludes, in chapter 12, by describing the features of Israel's society that persisted throughout history, discussing the identity of the entity Israel, and examining the theological relevance of social history.

This fine translation by Linda M. Maloney is supplemented by maps and illustrations throughout, and a glossary of terms. Special thanks go to Andrew De Young, Lynn Kauppi, Joshua Messner, Bob Cronan, Christa Rubsam,

and the HK Scriptorium for their careful, conscientious, and creative work bringing the book to print.

In the text, asterisked passages are those that the author considers later, secondary additions to the original text: for example, "Micah 1—3*" indicates that the author understands these chapters to be a later addition to the book

of Micah that do not go back to the prophet Micah himself.

Additional resources for professors and students using this book are available on the Web at www.fortresspress.com/kessler.

Neil Elliott
Fortress Press

Preface

MY INTEREST IN THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF ancient Israel began in the early 1970s, when I was doing my doctoral work. At that time, Frank Crüsemann, Christof Hardmeier, and I met regularly in Heidelberg to discuss new methodological approaches to the Old Testament. After some major interruptions in my life, my interest in social history received a new impetus through Willy Schottroff's invitation to me, in 1985, to undertake some regular teaching in Frankfurt am Main. After that, my position as assistant to Frank Crüsemann at the Kirchliche Hochschule in Bielefeld, from 1987 to 1991, made it possible for me to devote myself entirely to this topic in writing my Habilitationsschrift. Since being appointed to Marburg in 1993, I have had repeated opportunities to discuss social-historical themes in my lectures and seminars. The open atmosphere that characterizes the faculty at Marburg, and good interdisciplinary work, especially with colleagues from social ethics, ancient Near Eastern studies, Semitics, and archaeology have given me a multitude of ideas that have issued in the present work.

Since 1985 I have also participated in a pleasant little circle that has called itself, from the outset, the "Heidelberg Working Group." Once a year, exegetes of both Testaments meet together with colleagues from the field of social ethics and people doing practical church work to discuss questions of social-historical

interpretation of the Bible and their significance for theology and the churches. Innumerable ideas emerge from these meetings, and I, also, come away with many new thoughts.

However, it was only when Eckart Otto invited me to describe Israel's social history in ninety lines for the article "Israel II.4" in the fourth edition of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* that I finally decided to write a separate volume entitled *Social History of Ancient Israel*. It was an easy decision: if over a thousand years of social history can be compressed into ninety lines, they can certainly be described in two hundred pages. I am grateful to the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft in Darmstadt for accepting the idea immediately and for successfully bringing the work to completion.

Besides what has already been said, special thanks are due to my previous graduate assistant, Dr. Uta Schmidt of Giessen. She read the whole manuscript and made many valuable suggestions that sometimes led to substantial changes and revisions. I also thank my undergraduate assistants Silke Arendsen and Christian Vosloh, who assisted in preparing the manuscript.

It is my hope that students of theology, pastors, teachers, and colleagues in the field of Old Testament may be able to derive something useful from this book to assist them in their work with the Hebrew Bible.