To Carol, Peter, and Samuel
Contents

List of Illustrations  ix  
Preface to the Fourth Edition  xi  
Abbreviations  xiii

Introduction  1  
Reconstructing Israel’s Social World from Context  1  
Development of Biblical Literature  6  
Historical Geography of Bible Lands  6  
Approach of This Book  11  
Discussing Aspects of Everyday Life in Ancient Israel  13  
Discussion Questions  14

1. Ancestral Period  15  
   Historical Introduction  16  
   Physical Appearance and Fashion  20  
   Cultural Issues Faced by Immigrants  22  
   Herding Practices  29  
   Food Preparation and Diet  32  
   Marriage Customs  33  
   Religious Practices  39
Legal Customs 42
Weapons and Warfare 44
Discussion Questions 45

2. Exodus-Settlement Period 47
   Historical Introduction 48
   Village Life 54
   Agricultural Methods and Tools 58
   Weapons and Warfare 64
   Social Organization and Administration of Law 70
   Family Life 75
   Religious Practices 81
   Discussion Questions 90

3. Monarchic Period 91
   Historical Introduction 92
   The Israelite City 110
   Social Life 124
   Health Issues 133
   Law 140
   Religious Practices 148
   Weapons and Warfare 160
   Discussion Questions 165

4. Exile and Return 167
   Historical Introduction 168
   Life in the Diaspora 183
   Life after the Return from Exile 184
   Religious Life in the Diaspora, Yehud, and Samaria 193
   Discussion Questions 203

5. Intertestamental and New Testament Periods 205
   Historical Introduction 206
   Social Life 231
Contents

Economic Life 250
Religious Life 259
Discussion Questions 267

Glossary 269
Annotated and Select Bibliography 277
Index of Subjects 291
Index of Personal Names 297
Index of Place Names 299
Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Writings 301
Image Credits 317
List of Illustrations

Introduction    Geography of Ancient Israel    9
1.1 King Hammurabi    18
1.2 Painting of Semites from Beni-Hasan    21
1.3 Remains of Shechem    27
1.4 Beer-sheba    31
1.5 Well at Beer-sheba    34
1.6 Votive figurines    38
1.7 Canaanite-period sickle swords    45
2.1 Victory stele of Pharaoh Merneptah    51
2.2 Four-room house at Hazor    57
2.3 Stone watchtower    63
2.4 Spearheads from the Middle Bronze period    66
2.5 Egyptian relief of soldiers’ hands    70
2.6 City gate at Dan    73
2.7 Threshing floor near Bethlehem    79
2.8 Megiddo altar remains    82
2.9 Cult incense stand    88
3.1 Stepped stone structure    92
3.2 Amarna Tablet    103
3.3 Solomonic-period gate at Gezer    113
3.4 Plaza outside the city gates at Dan    116
3.5 Megiddo    120
List of Illustrations


(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
Preface to the
Fourth Edition

The first edition of this volume was published in 1988. Since that time both the field of biblical studies and I have continued to change. We have learned from and weathered the storms of interpretive differences and have been amazed by advances in the analysis of archaeological data. And our heightened precision in readings of ancient texts has come through the production of image-based, digital editions. With that in mind, I continue to believe that a book detailing the social world of ancient Israel deserves a place in classrooms and for private study. The editors of Baker Academic and I have decided that we should revise and expand this new edition so that it can be more effectively used as a textbook or as a supplement to other textbooks in classes on the Bible. The result of this new focus is that we have retained the best of what has appeared in previous editions, such as the historical summaries at the beginning of each chapter and the discussion of aspects of everyday life, while significantly expanding the text and adding new pedagogical features. Rather than serving primarily as a reference work, its aim is to spark conversation and to bring the narratives and the characters to life. The Bible deserves close study, and students should have the opportunity to exercise their critical thinking skills to raise questions and to seek out a fuller understanding of how the ancient world differs from their own. While they cannot physically enter Jerusalem in the time of King David, they can explore what it is like to live in a world without automobiles, electricity, and smartphones. Even though they may not experience being taken into exile after seeing their homes destroyed, they can be made aware through reading
what prophets like Jeremiah had to say about these devastating times, and they can feel the pain of musicians who no longer can sing a song to Yahweh in the temple (Ps. 137). And when they read one of Jesus’s parables, they can explore his use of agricultural metaphors and social situations and gain a better sense of what he meant by the “kingdom of heaven.” With that said, I commend this book to your use, and I hope it succeeds in advancing your study of the Bible and its world.
## Abbreviations

### Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Book Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen.</td>
<td>Genesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exod.</td>
<td>Exodus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev.</td>
<td>Leviticus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num.</td>
<td>Numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deut.</td>
<td>Deuteronomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh.</td>
<td>Joshua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judg.</td>
<td>Judges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Sam.</td>
<td>1–2 Samuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Chron.</td>
<td>1–2 Chronicles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neh.</td>
<td>Nehemiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps./Pss.</td>
<td>Psalm/Psalms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov.</td>
<td>Proverbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eccles.</td>
<td>Ecclesiastes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song</td>
<td>Song of Songs/Canticles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa.</td>
<td>Isaiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jer.</td>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lam.</td>
<td>Lamentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezek.</td>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan.</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mic.</td>
<td>Micah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hag.</td>
<td>Haggai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zech.</td>
<td>Zechariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mal.</td>
<td>Malachi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### New Testament

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Book Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matt.</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rom.</td>
<td>Romans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 Cor.</td>
<td>1–2 Corinthians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gal.</td>
<td>Galatians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eph.</td>
<td>Ephesians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col.</td>
<td>Colossians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Thess.</td>
<td>1 Thessalonians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Tim.</td>
<td>1 Timothy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heb.</td>
<td>Hebrews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Pet.</td>
<td>1 Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rev.</td>
<td>Revelation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal Works

1 Esd. 1 Esdras
1–3 Macc. 1–3 Maccabees
Sir. Sirach

Other Abbreviations

1QpHab Pesher Habakkuk (Dead Sea Scrolls)
Ant. Josephus, Jewish Antiquities
Apion Josephus, Against Apion
ARM Archives royales de Mari
ARMT Archives royales de Mari, transcrite et traduite
AUSS Andrews University Seminary Studies
b. Babylonian Talmud
BA Biblical Archaeologist (now Near Eastern Archaeology)
BAR Biblical Archaeology Review
BASOR Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
B. Bat. Baba Batra
BCE Before the Common Era
BRev Bible Review
BTB Biblical Theology Bulletin
BZ Biblische Zeitschrift
CE Common Era
CH Code of Hammurabi
Cor. Tertullian, De corona militis (The Crown)
EA El Amarna tablets
Eccl. Hist. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History
FEH Fides et Historia
Git. Gittin
Good Person Philo, That Every Good Person Is Free
Hist. Herodotus, Histories
IEJ Israel Exploration Journal
JANES The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society
JBL Journal of Biblical Literature
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOTSUP</td>
<td><em>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.W.</td>
<td>Josephus, <em>Jewish War</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KTU</td>
<td><em>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAL</td>
<td>Middle Assyrian Law Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEA</td>
<td><em>Near Eastern Archaeology</em> (formerly <em>Biblical Archaeologist</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opif.</td>
<td>Philo of Alexandria, <em>De opificio mundi</em> (<em>On the Creation of the World</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pirqe R. El.</td>
<td><em>Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quaest. rom.</td>
<td>Plutarch, <em>Quaestiones romanae et graecae</em> (<em>Roman and Greek Questions</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat.</td>
<td>Juvenal, <em>Satires</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satur.</td>
<td>Macrobius, <em>Saturnalia</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spec.</td>
<td>Philo, <em>De specialibus legibus</em> (<em>On the Special Laws</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ta'an.</td>
<td><em>Ta'anit</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Reu.</td>
<td><em>Testament of Reuben</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Hadr.</td>
<td>Dio Cassius, <em>Vita Hadriani</em> (<em>Life of Hadrian</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y.</td>
<td>Jerusalem Talmud</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One of the real joys of studying the Bible is reconstructing the manners and customs of the peoples of ancient times. The gulf of thousands of years that separates us from them can be bridged, at least in part, by garnering insights into their everyday life. What this requires, however, is a close examination of the biblical narratives and comparison of biblical data with written and physical remains from other ancient civilizations. Modern anthropological and sociological research and the discoveries and interpretations of archaeologists and art historians are also of prime importance in the reconstruction process.

**Reconstructing Israel’s Social World from Context**

In attempting to recreate the social world of ancient Israel, scholars draw on several sources of information. Written records from this period include
the biblical text and a host of extrabiblical documents that parallel but do not always corroborate the biblical narrative. Physical remains are limited to what has been uncovered by archaeologists. These remains—tomb paintings, garbage heaps, the ruins of conquered and/or abandoned cities, as well as less spectacular bits and pieces of someone’s life that have almost miraculously survived the elements and the centuries—provide only a partial picture of life in ancient times. It is also possible to reconstruct a sense of the social setting from the biblical text and, by analogy, from the study of other ancient and modern cultures. To be sure, not every aspect of life is described in detail by these ancient sources. After all, the narratives are speaking to an ancient audience that understood the nuts and bolts of everyday existence, and they did not need to have these minutiae included in order to grasp the meaning of the story. In addition, there were individual tastes in clothing, diet, and even worship practices that differed from one tribe or nation to another, and it would simply be impossible to recover every detail due to our lack of information, physical evidence, or understanding.

It is fortunate, however, that many of ancient Israel’s manners and customs persist over long periods of time. Modern anthropological methods of studying the social world of ancient Israel indicate that many of the traditions operative before the monarchic period (prior to 1000 BCE) continued into later periods of Israelite history. For example, tribal associations that sustained the ancestors carried over into the conquest and settlement periods when the text indicates that the tribes assisted one another in securing the land. Tribal affiliations continued to be significant as group identity markers throughout the monarchic period and sometimes were the source of dissent against the monarchy (see 1 Sam. 10:20–21 and 2 Sam. 20:1). Given the evidence of cultural continuity, it is possible, in many instances, to apply what we know about social customs employed in one era to another.

It becomes clear when reading the biblical text that it contains a wealth of information from many periods in Israel’s history. Subjects range from civil and religious law to standard building codes and typical harvesting techniques. While not always satisfying the appetites for data of modern historians, the text does provide glimpses of such things as the proper procedure for dealing with a delinquent son and the requirements for purifying a priest after he comes in contact with a corpse. And given the fact that much of what is recorded is centered on ritual and worship practices, it is not surprising that so much attention is given to specifying the proper times, places, and procedures for performing sacrifices to God as well as injunctions regarding the slaughtering of animals.

While impressive in its quantity and breadth, the sheer amount of information contained here means that the student must be careful not to miss
important social clues. As with any ancient text or modern technical treatise, confusion and data overload are real possibilities. Jargon associated with professional groups often requires additional explanation for the reader. For example, the word *selah* appears in thirty-nine of the Psalms and appears to be a technical term used in community worship or as a guide for religious professionals. Unfortunately, the meanings of some of these biblical terms are still mysteries that require further research and the careful use, when possible, of extrabiblical materials. For instance, the poetic texts found at the ancient seaport of Ugarit and composed between 1400 and 1200 BCE are similar in style and vocabulary to the Psalms and the epic sections of the biblical narrative. Comparative study of these texts has, in some cases, provided the key to understanding a word that has long remained obscure.

Occasionally the text includes the smallest and seemingly most insignificant details, monotonously reciting a series of genealogical “begats” or the dimensions of the pilasters and recesses of the temple (Ezek. 41). In other cases, however, the narrative may skip over the entire reign of a king, dismissing him with the phrase “he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (see 1 Kings 15:26). The narrator then summarizes the remainder of the king’s life in the tantalizing footnote, “Now the rest of the acts of __________, and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah?” (see 2 Kings 8:23). Allusions to this and other lost works, such as the “Book of Jashar” (2 Sam. 1:18), demonstrate that a great deal of information was available to the ancient writers that we will never be able to consult. These citations of lost works are a ready reminder that the received text is based on a heavily editorialized version of events from which to draw a picture of life in biblical times.

The book of Judges is another portion of the biblical text that appears to have had large segments of the narrative edited out, perhaps because the stories were so well known to contemporary readers. For the modern reader, however, the biblical account of the activities of the judges and other people of this time period leaves many questions unanswered. For example, why is this premonarchical society so violent and accepting of violence? Why do the judges have to rely on primitive weapons like ox goads and animal bones while their neighbors have swords, spears, and chariots? Why are political assassinations a cause for celebration (Judg. 3:12–30; 4:17–24)? Why is obedience to hospitality laws deemed more important than the life of a host’s virgin daughter (Judg. 19)? Ultimately, modern readers need to be cautioned that the culture of ancient Israel was quite foreign to our own. Sometimes it is only through the use of comparative materials from nonbiblical sources, such as texts from Ugarit or the cities of Mesopotamia, that a better understanding of life in ancient times can be obtained.
Even then it is necessary to be cautious when using extrabiblical evidence. Each of these sources of information represents another culture’s social perspective and therefore provides a slightly different picture of life in the biblical period than is found in the biblical text. An eagerness to draw conclusions from documents that offer some parallels to biblical narrative can therefore lead to wishful thinking and incorrect interpretations. For instance, the ancient letters from the Mesopotamian city of Nuzi (ca. sixteenth to fifteenth centuries BCE) describe family customs regarding marriage and the adoption of an heir. Superficially at least, these customs resemble those reflected in the stories told about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Genesis. However, the Nuzi texts are legal documents that record private family matters and commercial transactions. They do not attest to a covenant with God or any concern to maintain the cultural purity of a chosen people, two prominent features of Genesis. Without more complete evidence, one must exercise caution when using parallel materials to explain or clarify the biblical narratives.

While it has its limitations, archaeological evidence provides some of the most illuminating information on everyday life in ancient times. When archaeologists apply scrupulous methods in their excavation of ancient city and village sites, data that can aid our understanding of ancient cultures slowly emerges from the ground. Such methods include the systematic recording of finds by means of photographs and written descriptions and the sharing of this material with a wide range of experts who can draw on their specialized fields of knowledge to extract more information from the finds than the archaeologist working alone. For instance, the carbonized remains found in storage jars and on excavated threshing floors, when examined by teams of microbiologists, botanists, and paleobotanists, can reveal aspects of the diet of these ancient people. Conclusions can also be drawn about their general level of health and hygiene, as well as their methods of agriculture and animal husbandry. Careful record keeping of archaeological excavations also allows future generations of scholars to return to the evidence and perhaps, using new technologies or the application of new knowledge gleaned from other archaeological sites, draw new conclusions.

At the same time, to expect archaeological discoveries to prove conclusively “the truth of the Bible” is unreasonable. The findings of archaeologists offer only mute evidence of ancient life and cannot be forced into alignment with the biblical narratives. In other words, to say, as John Garstang did in the 1930s, that a particular wall found in the excavations at Jericho was the one that fell to Joshua’s trumpet blasts without examining all of the surrounding evidence (pottery, building styles, the relative depth of artifacts within the mound) is unjustified. Improved methods of excavation since his time have proven that even Garstang’s identification of the stratigraphic level of
Joshua’s Jericho was incorrect. While controversy exists about this site and many others, the general consensus is that archaeological research is merely one of many sources of data for the study of the Bible.

A more scientific approach to excavations requires that all finds must be interpreted in the context of the mound as a whole. Ancient cities are layered, with each level (stratum) representing a different phase in the life history of the site. Generally, objects found in lower strata in the mound can be assumed to be older than those found closer to the surface. Archaeologists use the artifacts recovered from these strata to establish a relative chronology of the various levels or strata.

However, some disruption of the strata does occur due to earthquake activity, the digging of refuge and storage pits, and the sinking of new foundations by later inhabitants at the site. Moreover, archaeologists can only determine the approximate age of these artifacts based on the strata in which they lie. To resolve the confusion of strata and to establish a fixed or absolute chronology for a city site, archaeologists study pottery types and other artifacts from each layer. They then compare these artifacts with finds from sites whose chronology is better understood. Carbon 14 dating, as well as other scientific dating methods, aids in this process of constructing an absolute chronology by establishing the approximate age of organic remains (bones, wood, carbonized grain).

Furthermore, due to the limitations of time and funding, archaeologists seldom are able or even attempt to uncover an entire mound. They carefully map out squares for excavation or dig exploratory shafts in those portions of the mound that surveys or ground-penetrating radar have shown to contain the most important structures (temples, palaces, gates) or a representative selection of objects of interest.

Modern archaeological techniques do try to obtain a broader perspective on the entire mound, but it is unlikely that every shovelful of dirt will be turned or every object uncovered. The fact that many sites were excavated before more scientific methods were developed magnifies the difficulties of obtaining a complete occupational picture. A great deal of valuable information has been lost forever due to indiscriminate digging, and unfortunately many artifacts now lie without any record of their historical context on museum shelves or in storage. Because archaeology is a destructive process, each level must be recorded and then removed to get to the level below it, and what has been removed can never be replaced. As a result, we learn through archaeology some, but never all, of what there is to know about life in these ancient cities and villages. Thus responsible archaeologists today intentionally leave some portions of a mound untouched for later generations and their more advanced excavation methods.

To complete this cautionary survey of aids to the reconstruction of life in the biblical period, it is important to point to modern anthropological
research. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, tribal peoples continued to live in the Near East in much the same way that their ancestors had thousands of years ago. Following the First World War, social patterns began to change, and a greater reliance on technology transformed society in the Middle East. Even so, anthropologists and ethnologists have been able to study tribal peoples in more remote regions who still engage in seasonal migration with their flocks and herds and, whenever possible, try to avoid the central government’s efforts to sedentarize them. The mutual suspicion that led Abraham to deceive Abimelech (Gen. 20) is still evident in the relations between pastoral nomadic groups and sedentary peoples.

The student who engages in comparative work, however, needs to understand that no cultural parallel is likely to be totally exact. While some customs and traditions can remain unchanged for centuries, each successive group of people inhabiting the same area and practicing the same basic economy is going to be different in some way from its predecessors. Therefore it is necessary to qualify most statements made when comparing ancient and modern peoples.

**Development of Biblical Literature**

Understanding the history of the biblical text is also important in exploring the information it reveals concerning the manners and customs of biblical people. The text as we have it is a compilation of narratives, stories that most likely began as oral traditions passed from one generation to the next in a fluid oral rather than written form. In their final written forms, these stories represent not only early memories of Israel’s past but also the political situations and religious claims of later editors. To fully appreciate the complexity of these traditions and texts spanning at least two thousand years, a reader must understand that each period of Israel’s history was marked by different events and conditions. The work of the authors and editors and the perspective of their audiences are reflected in these texts. As a result, the sometimes grand, sometimes subtle variations in the pictures painted by different authors and editors speak to the concerns of many different generations. Ultimately, these writings are the products of writers and editors trying to make sense of their national history in the light of their beliefs about their national deity.

**Historical Geography of Bible Lands**

In preparation for moving on to the initial chapter in this survey of the social world of ancient Israel, it is first necessary to sketch out the geographical
characteristics of the area that helped shape this ancient people. Ancient Israel lay in the midst of the so-called Fertile Crescent, which ranged from modern day Iraq and Iran in the east to the Nile Valley of Egypt in the west. It was the place of origin for the river valley cultures of Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria in Mesopotamia and the pharaoh-dominated, theocratic civilization of Egypt, both of which developed around 3000 BCE. Major cities with huge palace complexes and temples, as well as the large-scale bureaucracies and commercial activity needed to support them, are hallmarks of their achievements. Very early in their history the Egyptian and Mesopotamian city-states established trade contacts with neighboring regions, and succeeding periods saw a growth in these connections and in the competition for ultimate supremacy within the region by the superpower empires that eventually developed.

Given the arid character of the lands away from the Tigris-Euphrates river valley of Mesopotamia, direct travel east was hampered by the Arabian Desert, and overland trade routes by necessity followed the coast of Phoenicia and Canaan south to Egypt. The Egyptians employed ships north along the Mediterranean coast, especially to obtain the cedar trees from the Mountains of Lebanon. They also sailed a southern route down the Red Sea allowing them to touch various points along the Arabian Peninsula to obtain spices, fragrances (frankincense and myrrh), and the indigo dyes produced in India. For most of the biblical period (post-2000 BCE), the Mediterranean maritime trade routes were controlled by middleman states such as Byblos, Ugarit, and the Phoenician coastal city states of Tyre and Sidon.

All of these geographical factors contributed to making the area of Canaan inhabited by the Israelites a crossroads and a battleground for the superpowers and their allies/vassal states. Two major highways are worth noting. The Via Maris (“coastal road”) stretched from Syria eastward and cut through the Jezreel Valley in northern Canaan. The King’s Highway in Transjordan extended from north to south and connected the thriving population centers of Ammon, Moab, and Edom with the Gulf of Aqaba. Both trade routes helped to promote commercial travel between regions. Living on the road between empires, ancient Israel became both a beneficiary and a victim of its geographical location.

Although Israel proper is a relatively small land (250 miles long and 60 miles wide at its broadest point), several spectacular geographical features dominate the terrain and affect the people who live there. Starting from the west, ancient Israel had excellent sandy beaches but no deep-water harbors. This prevented large-scale sea trade and made the region more dependent on the ships and merchants of Phoenicia. Immediately inland from the coast, however, is a plain that gradually merges with a plateau region to the east known as the Shephelah (“lowland”). Settlement was relatively heavy in this
area (especially after the arrival of the Philistines after 1200 BCE), and the Via Maris ran along the coast, bringing trade as well as the armies of conquering nations.

Paralleling the Jordan River valley and bisecting the country north and south is the central hill country. While it is not a precipitous range of hills, the swift plunge eastward into the Jordan Rift (an area known as the “slopes”) causes a spectacular drop in elevation. Jerusalem and Jericho serve as one example of the differences in elevation that occur within a relatively short distance in this region. Lying in the southern portion of the hill country, Jerusalem’s elevation is over 2,500 feet above sea level. However, Jericho, just fifteen miles to the east and near the Dead Sea in an oasis near the Jordan River, is 840 feet below sea level. Such massive shifts in the earth’s surface make travel difficult and tend to cut off direct communication and cultural interaction. There were, of course, circuitous routes through the hill country following the curve of valleys, and these, like the Valley of Elah (1 Sam. 17:1–2), had their strategic and commercial value.

Three distinctive areas further divide the central hill country. In the north, the Galilee region enjoys the advantages of having the highest annual rainfall and the most fertile soil. The central portion of the hill country, once called Samaria, with its important population centers at Megiddo, Shechem, and Bethel, supports wheat farming along with fruit and olive orchards on its terraced hillsides. The southernmost section of the hill country, known as Judea, is dominated by the city of Jerusalem. At one time, irrigation farming was common here as well as terraced agriculture on the slopes of the hills. Further south is the most uncertain and fragile environment in ancient Israel, with low annual rainfall in the areas bordering on this wilderness and in the Negeb Desert.

The heart of the Canaanite landscape is dominated by the Jordan Rift, part of a massive fissure in the earth that runs from the Lebanon Mountains in the north southward into Africa. Within Israel, the rift contains the Jordan River valley. The river winds south along its course toward the Dead Sea, providing water for crops and livestock (mostly sheep and goats). The further south the Jordan flows, the more saline it becomes, thereby contributing to the country’s agricultural division, with wheat being planted in the north and more salt-resistant barley being grown in the south. What little water does finally reach the Dead Sea (1,275 feet below sea level) is so clogged with brine that plant life along its banks is limited to poplars and tamarisk trees.

Because of the dramatic geological character of the central hill range and the Jordan Rift, the climate of ancient Israel is also influenced by a north-south pattern. Temperatures follow a basic Mediterranean range, though snow does fall on the peaks of the mountains and occasionally in Jerusalem. Average annual
rainfall (concentrated in the months from November to March) ranges from as much as forty-five inches in the Upper Galilee region to eight inches in the Negeb Desert around Beer-sheba and Arad. There are years when these southern areas have no rainfall at all. Rainfall also declines from west to east since the hill country blocks the path of storms moving in from the Mediterranean. The result is an extremely arid region known as the Judean wilderness, where rain may not come for years. Its remarkable barrenness has made it a metaphor in the biblical text for pain, trial, and death (Ps. 78:17–20; Mark 1:13; Heb. 3:17). The southern portion of the Transjordanian plateau, east of the Jordan River, also tends to be semi-arid, especially in the regions associated with the kingdoms of Edom and southern Moab.

Transjordan, located on the east side of the Jordan River, contained several kingdoms that had dealings with the Israelites. Running from north to south, they were Bashan, Gilead, Ammon, Moab, and Edom. In some periods they were adversaries of the Israelite tribes, while in others they were vassal states of Israel or its enemies (see 2 Kings 3). These kingdoms were also a part of the Jordanian ecosystem, drawing water from the river and its tributaries and sharing in its climatic shifts. A major trade route, the King’s Highway, ran from the Gulf of Aqaba northward through Transjordan, linking the area with Syria and Mesopotamia.
Each of the regions and geographical features described above figured into the development of the various cultures that inhabited the regions of Canaan that eventually became the kingdom of Israel. They will be referred to repeatedly in the text of this volume, and thus it is advisable to become familiar with them and their place on the map in order to understand the history and social world of the Israelites.

It is also important to note that the names assigned to the land in question change from one period of history to the next. The land originally called Canaan becomes Israel during the settlement and early monarchical periods. When the monarchy divides, the land becomes Israel and Judah. During the exilic period, the land under Assyrian and Babylonian rule was again divided and renamed Judah, Samaria, and Megiddo. These names, which change yet again under Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman rule, reflect the various political entities that governed the land during its long history. There are other geographical names, such as the Levant (the lands from modern Turkey to Egypt that border the Mediterranean Sea), Palestine, and Syria-Palestine, which designate areas of the land regardless of which political entities govern them at any given time.

In modern times, the names Israel and Palestine are associated with a violent and prolonged conflict over land ownership. As a result, care must be taken when applying these names to different areas of the land as it is currently divided. For example, some modern Israelis reject the name Palestine when it is applied to any portion of the land. Conversely, some modern Palestinians deny use of the name Israel to identify the land on which they live. Sensitivity should also be used when applying the names Israel and Palestine when speaking about the land in ancient times. In this textbook, the term Israel will be used in three ways: (1) to designate the particular group of people who settled in the land of Canaan; (2) as a label for the independent political entity established by these people; and (3) as an indicator of the land on which this group lived. The terms Palestine and Syria-Palestine will be used as geographical terms, designating the land that Israel, as well as other peoples, occupied during various periods.

In speaking about the people of Israel, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms Israelite, Israeli, and Jew. The first term, Israelite, designates the ancient peoples that made up the nations of Israel and Judah and who worshiped the national God, Yahweh. The second, Israeli, is the name given to modern inhabitants of the State of Israel. The third term, Jew, is used today to speak of someone who believes in and practices Judaism. In antiquity, however, the term had a series of meanings that changed over time. Before the second century BCE, the term applied to the ethnic group that inhabited the land of Judah—in other words, to a Judean (Ant. 11.5.173). In the mid-second
century, the term began to be applied to those who did not necessarily have an ethnic or geographic connection to Judah but who believed in the God of the Judeans, Yahweh (2 Macc. 9:13; Ant. 20.2.38–39). This definition developed into the one used today.

**Approach of This Book**

This textbook is designed to assist students to more effectively read the Bible with the social world of ancient Israel in mind. In that way not only will the text come alive with the everyday activities of the characters but it will also be a further encouragement to read its stories, legal pronouncements, poems, songs, and wisdom admonitions with an eye for detail. Too often modern readers think they know what the text says without realizing that it is a product of another place and another time. That attitude is referred to by scholars as an *etic* perspective—one that applies an “outsider” viewpoint and makes little effort to be objective. What I hope will happen after you have worked with this textbook is that you will strive for an *emic* perspective—one that attempts to understand the “insider” viewpoint of the editors and storytellers who produced the biblical text. In that way, setting aside our own modern perspective as much as possible, the Bible can speak more clearly and give us a chance to look behind the text and examine the social scenery.

The biblical text is in fact a storehouse of very useful information. It can answer a variety of questions: What did they eat? What did they wear? How did they bury their dead? What forms of worship did they practice? However, it does take some delving into the stories to draw out the data it contains. And you might ask why you have to go to all this trouble. *Surely*, you might think, *I can learn all I need to know about the world of ancient Israel by just reading the text.* My answer would be that the desire to read the biblical narratives is a good first start. It is, however, not enough. If you truly wish to obtain a better understanding of the biblical world and the covenantal relationship that stands at the heart of ancient Israel’s origins and identity, then you will have to dig deeper.

When you begin a study of a place and its people, the place to start is the physical and social environment in which they lived. That means that we will have to ask about the physical, economic, and social demands placed on them by geography, climate, natural resources, and their neighbors. Since there is a tendency for peoples to borrow from each other, creating a sort of cultural stew, it will be necessary in our studies to trace what may be Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Canaanite, or even Philistine about the ancient Israelites. At that
point it will be possible, at least in part, to establish what was unique about Israelite culture and how they developed as a people distinct from the other nations. Of course, societies evolve over time, and therefore the answers that apply to one period of Israelite history may well change in another period. Israel did change its social attitude and customs over the two millennia of its existence before the Common Era, and thus the chapters in this volume will attempt to lay out the characteristics of the Israelites in each successive time period.

While this volume is intended for students, it should also prove useful to laypersons, clergy, and scholars in their study of the Bible. The biblical material is presented in chronological order, with chapters on each of the major periods of biblical history: ancestral, settlement, monarchical, postexilic, Hellenistic/intertestamental, and New Testament. This arrangement allows for the examination of the biblical peoples according to stages in their social development, starting with the pastoral nomadic, stateless culture of the ancestors and concluding with the subjugated, urban-based culture of Judea and Samaria in Roman times.

Each chapter provides a basic introduction to the historical and physical settings of the time period and sketches the basic elements of its social world. Specific scenes in the biblical text will be used to reveal details about everyday life in biblical times. Following the historical sketch are selected units dealing with specific social customs associated with that time period. These are divided into subheadings using examples from the biblical text, modern anthropological and sociological studies, and archaeology.

Additional aids designed to assist students include sidebars that provide extra information about the social world of the Bible, insights from other ancient Near Eastern cultures, and information about the sources of the various extrabiblical texts cited throughout the volume. There is also a set of questions designed to spark class discussion at the end of each chapter. Standard features are a glossary of terms highlighted in bold text, a select bibliography, and indexes of subjects, personal names, place names, and Scripture and extrabiblical sources. The table of contents lists the major units and comparative materials found in each chapter to aid you in finding material more quickly. Since footnotes and citations other than to the Bible or certain extrabiblical texts have been omitted, an annotated bibliography of sources is included as well as suggested additional readings.

Since this volume is not intended to be exhaustive, it will not contain explanations or discussion of every piece of information found in the biblical narratives. Instead, material has been selected to give as clear a picture of everyday events as possible while avoiding repetition. There is, however, a conscious effort to provide as much comparative evidence from other ancient
Near Eastern cultures as possible to demonstrate that ancient Israel did not exist in a social vacuum.

**Discussing Aspects of Everyday Life in Ancient Israel**

In addition to personal study and interaction with instructors, it is essential that students of the world of ancient Israel talk among themselves about the information they have encountered. With that in mind, I have provided below a set of terms and suggested discussion questions that will hopefully bring these ancient people to life as new ideas and perspectives are raised by the group.

Ancient Israel as presented in the biblical text, in extrabiblical documents from other ancient Near Eastern cultures, and through archaeological discoveries is only a partial picture. It is dependent upon what the biblical writers choose to include in their narratives, the purposes of ancient scribes who mention Israel in their political and economic documents, and the bits and pieces of ancient artifacts and architecture that emerge from archaeological surveys and excavations. As a result, the discussion questions listed at the end of each chapter in this volume ask you to consider larger issues rather than simply repeat what you find in the text.

Of course, there are some concrete items like ceramic remains, building foundations, ancient inscriptions, and the stratigraphy of tells that we can point to as evidence of occupation and the physical existence of inhabitants of particular places. It is exciting to be a part of an archaeological team that is carefully stripping away the layers of time that have hidden these artifacts. Still, care must be taken not to apply “wishful thinking” to our interpretations. It is best to simply say we have found an artifact whose purpose appears to be “such and such” rather than to immediately tie it to a specific biblical story and say it “proves” the truth of the Bible.

What I have attempted to do in this book is provide a means of linking what we know of the history of the ancient Near East with information on historical geography, archaeological data, and biblical references to life in ancient Israel. Sometimes these links are quite strong, and sometimes they are only speculation. Ultimately, what we know about ancient Israel is constantly evolving. New information appears every year, and new ways of interpreting this data are being developed. As a result, the answers to the questions listed below may well change, and that is something to look forward to rather than dread. There is a great deal that the Bible can tell us about the human spirit and the struggle to survive in a difficult geographic and political environment. It is therefore worth the effort to continue to explore its many facets and to
look forward to what it may be able to tell us about the ancient world and ourselves.

Discussion Questions

1. What ancient resources are available to assist with the study of the biblical text?
2. What role does archaeological evidence play in reconstructing the social world of ancient Israel?
3. In what ways do physical geography and climate impact the economic and social development of a particular region?
4. How was ancient Israel impacted by its contacts with Egypt and Mesopotamia?
5. What is the difference between an emic and an etic perspective, and how does this affect the interpretation of the Bible?