

The
HEBREW PROPHETS
AND THEIR
SOCIAL WORLD

AN INTRODUCTION

Second Edition

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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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A previous edition of this book was published in 2001 as *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets*.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4861-6

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12 13 14 15 16 17 18 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Abbreviations

Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esther	Esther
Job	Job
P ^s (s).	Psalm(s)
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel

Hosea	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians

Col.	Colossians	Apocrypha	
1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians	Bar.	Baruch
1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy	2 Esd.	2 Esdras
Titus	Titus	Jdt.	Judith
Philem.	Philemon	1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees
Heb.	Hebrews	Sir.	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
Jas.	James		
1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter		
1–3 John	1–3 John		
Jude	Jude		
Rev.	Revelation		

General

<i>ANET</i>	J. B. Pritchard, ed., <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) [cited by page number]
BCE	“Before the Common Era”—used in place of BC, but the dates are the same. <i>NOTE</i> : all dates in this book are BCE unless otherwise stated.
CE	“Common Era”—used in place of AD, but the dates are the same
<i>OTPar</i>	V. Matthews and D. Benjamin, <i>Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East</i> , 3rd ed. (New York: Paulist, 2006) [cited by page number]

Introduction

Examining any text in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible from a social world perspective requires an understanding that this material has a particular place in history and a social context that may be difficult for modern readers to interpret. The authors and editors of the biblical materials reflect their own time period even when they are editing a story or narrative originating from an earlier era. Similarly, when prophets speak, they do so within the social, economic, and historical context of their own time. They are primarily concerned either with current events or recent happenings, and not the far future. Therefore, as we explore the social world of the Hebrew prophets, we must first recognize that these persons, both male and female, spoke within their own time, to an audience with a frame of reference very different from ours. This is not to say that their message had no influence on prophets and writers centuries after their deaths. The many references to earlier prophetic speech (e.g., Jer. 26:18 quoting Mic. 3:12) or the reuse of their words in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 1:23 quoting Isa. 7:14; and Matt. 2:18 quoting Jer. 31:15) demonstrate both the power of these statements and the way in which they became proof texts for events occurring in later periods.

Although the world and words of the Hebrew prophets and their audiences often revolved around urban centers like Jerusalem, Bethel, and Samaria, the country as a whole was rural and agriculturally based. During the period 1000–587,¹ most of the population still lived in small farming communities of 100–250 people. We get an indication of just how pervasive this cultural setting actually was through the large number of pastoral and agricultural images employed by the prophets (Isa. 5:1–7; Amos 8:1–2). It simply would have been worthless to speak of shepherds and herds, vineyards, and summer

1. All dates in this book are BCE unless otherwise identified.

Insider/Outsider Perspective

Emic = Insider

Modern readers often have difficulty comprehending the perspective of the biblical writers. We lack the “insider” (*emic*) information that functioned as the basic cultural environment of the ancient audience. *Emic* is a term that anthropologists use to indicate the way that members of a culture understand and explain their own society.

Etic = Outsider

Modern readers have a tendency to impose their own cultural perspectives on what they read in the biblical text. Their “outsider” (*etic*) viewpoint therefore can get in the way of exploring the original cultural context of the narrative. Without a sense of what it meant, for example, to be a member of Tekoa’s small community of hill country farmers and herders like Amos or to be an exiled Levite from Anathoth functioning as an unpopular prophet in Jerusalem like Jeremiah, the reader only skims the surface of the text.

fruit to people who had had no experience of them. This insider perspective, however, presents some problems for modern readers and scholars. For readers who did not grow up on farms or live in rural areas, many of the images and metaphors employed by the Hebrew prophets will not have as great an impact as they did on the original audience. One task of this survey of the prophetic materials therefore will be to shed some light on what it might have been like to live in ancient Israel during the time of the Hebrew prophets.

With that said, it must be understood that the life of an average Israelite was not an easy one: the Mediterranean climate with which these people had to contend brought rain only during the winter months (October through March), and the land they occupied was hilly, badly eroded, and rocky. Thus their lives were hard, often quite short, and too often dominated by environmental and political forces beyond their control. Their ability to feed their families and occasionally produce a surplus for trade or as a hedge against future privations was often limited. In addition, political and economic forces from outside their immediate area—along with the demands of temple and palace for sacrifices and taxes—added to the pressures of daily existence.

Because few modern students share these aspects of everyday life in ancient Israel, one of the greatest challenges for modern readers is to become acquainted with the social and historical forces that played such an important role in the lives of the prophets and their audiences. To assist with that process, I designed this survey as an introduction for students of the Hebrew prophets and of the basic elements of their literature and their social world. In order to accomplish these goals, I will

- introduce each prophet as he or she appears chronologically in the biblical narrative,
- sketch out his or her social and historical context,
- explain aspects of historical geography where relevant to their message,
- examine the economic and social forces that dominate that particular moment in time,
- explain the literary images and metaphors used by the prophets, and
- make continual references to intertextual links between the prophets.

1

Historical Geography

A close reading of the biblical materials makes it possible to establish some aspects of the spatial perspective of the Hebrew prophets. However, since very few modern readers of the Bible have an intimate knowledge of the historical geography of the ancient Near East, it is important to begin this survey of the world of the Hebrew prophets with a brief examination of the topography and climate of these lands. Keep in mind that when the prophets mention a geographic site or feature, they are generally describing a place that they and their audience know intimately. They have walked over each field, climbed the nearby hills, seen the foliage, and smelled the various aromas associated with herding sheep or with cultivating an olive orchard or vineyard. Because their frame of reference is that of a geographic insider, they do not have to go into great detail to conjure up a picture in the minds of their listeners. And because ancient Canaan is a relatively small place, certain place-names or landmarks will reappear over and over again in the text. Even at that, modern readers often become lost amid the strange-sounding place-names and descriptions of places that are either unknown or so foreign that they cannot even be imagined. In order to acquaint modern readers with this unfamiliar world, I provide here a basic description of the major geographic regions of the ancient Near East and their significance to the Israelites. Additional comments on geography or climate, when necessary to describe the words of a particular prophet, will be given in each chapter.

The ancient Near East can be divided into three primary areas: Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), Egypt, and Syria-Palestine. Adjacent to these regions are the Anatolian Peninsula (modern Turkey), Persia (modern Iran), and the island of Cyprus. Each of these subsidiary areas will figure into the history and the development of Near Eastern cultures during the biblical period. For instance, the Hittite Empire in Anatolia and portions of Syria and northern Mesopotamia provided a firm cultural link to the Indo-European nations of Europe and also influenced the political development of Syria-Palestine just prior to the emergence of the Israelites in Canaan. Cyprus and the Syrian seaport city of Ugarit functioned as early economic links with the burgeoning Mediterranean civilizations based on Crete and in southern Greece during the second millennium. For example, the epic literature from Ugarit (dating to 1600–1200) provides many linguistic and thematic parallels to the biblical psalms and the prophetic materials. The island of Cyprus, located just off the western coast of northern Syria, was also a prime source of copper, a metal essential to the technology of the Near East for much of its early history. Finally, Persia developed in the sixth century into the greatest of the Near Eastern empires just as the Israelites were emerging from their Mesopotamian exile. Persian religion (**Zoroastrianism**) and administrative innovations, including coined money, would contribute to the development of the postexilic community and Judaism both in the **Diaspora** and in the new Persian province named **Yehud**, centered on Jerusalem.

Travel between and within the various segments of the ancient Near East and the eastern Mediterranean required a willingness to face the dangers of the road, political cooperation among nations, and technological advancements that allowed for heavier loads. Early shipping hugged the coasts, but by 2000 ships were making regular stops at the Mediterranean islands as well as up and down the coasts of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. Evidence for such far-flung travel can be seen in the list of luxury items and manufactured goods found in Mesopotamian and Egyptian records and in the speeches of the Hebrew prophets (e.g., the depiction of the Phoenician port city of Tyre in Ezek. 28:11–19).

Overland trade routes generally gravitated toward the coasts, where seaports (Tyre, Sidon, Aqaba) could take raw materials and grain to far-flung markets. In Syria-Palestine, two highways linked Mesopotamia and Syria to the Palestinian coast and on to Egypt: the **Via Maris** and its extension, the Way of the Philistines, which provided a coastal route; and the **King's Highway**, which extended from Palmyra to Damascus and south through Transjordan to the Gulf of Aqaba. Caravan routes also followed the Arabian coastline and made it possible for traders to carry frankincense, myrrh, and other exotic goods (ivory, gold, animal skins) from Africa and India up the Red Sea and into the heart of the Near Eastern civilizations.

Mesopotamia

The Tigris-Euphrates River valley is the dominant feature in the area known as Mesopotamia. Today this region contains the nation of Iraq and parts of Iran and Syria. The dual river system flows over an increasingly flat expanse of land as it travels from north to south. There is little rainfall in much of this land, but the melting snows in the mountains of eastern Turkey feed the rivers. Life therefore was often precarious, dependent on the little rain that fell and the volume of water available from rivers and wells. In fact, the river system comprises a vast floodplain that could be inundated when water overflowed the riverbanks. Disaster also could strike very quickly in such a fragile environment, where life-giving winds and rain could be replaced by the drying effects of the desert wind, the *sirocco*. The epic literature of this land attests to the inhabitant's dependence on water sources and the capricious character of their gods: "Enlil prepares the dust storm, and the people of Ur mourn. He withholds the rain from the land, and the people of Ur mourn. He delays the winds that water the crops of Sumer, and the people of Ur mourn. He gives the winds that dry the land their orders, and the people of Ur mourn" ("Laments for Ur," *OTPar* 252).

Given these environmental conditions, cities and towns could be established only close to the rivers, and only the introduction of massive irrigation projects made possible population growth and an increase in arable land. The cooperative efforts necessary to construct and maintain irrigation systems eventually served as a major factor in the political development of the region. **City-states** and monarchies appeared very early in Mesopotamian history, while the formation of empires encompassing all or most of Mesopotamia did not occur until the eighteenth century.

No major geographic features provide natural barriers or defenses for Mesopotamia. As a result, waves of invasions by new peoples and the rise and fall of civilizations mark the history of the entire area from as early as 4000. The land also lacked an abundance of natural resources. What forests may have existed in antiquity did not survive into historical times. Mineral resources were found to the north and east of the Tigris-Euphrates valley, but less so within it. To make up for their lack of natural resources, the city-states of Mesopotamia established a brisk river trade to transport goods and large quantities of grain downriver very early in their history. The Mesopotamians also sent caravans into the Arabian Peninsula and east into Persia and the Indus valley of northwestern India. Such widespread trade links brought a further degree of cultural mixing and created a more **cosmopolitan** culture.

The first civilizations to appear in Mesopotamia were in the extreme southern area and became known as Sumer (ca. 4000). These people took advantage of the wetlands and trade links associated with the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers as they flowed into the Persian Gulf. The city-states of Ur, Kish, Lagash,