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The Social History Method

KEY POINTS

- Social history is the history of a society's organizational development.
- Social history investigates the social conditions that created the contradictions in biblical texts.
- Different "speeds" of history (Fernand Braudel):
 - natural phenomena (ice ages, climactic change)
 - (individual) events
 - social history (the development of a society over time)
- Types of social history:
 - the history of social institutions
 - the history of eras or time periods
- The history of biblical social-history scholarship:
 - "Biblical antiquities" approach—Roland de Vaux's *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*
 - Sociology of ancient Judaism—Max Weber; influenced Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth
 - Post-1968—liberation theology; use of sociological and anthropological theory; Marxism

Social History as Discipline and as Method

Social History as a Subdiscipline of Historical Studies

THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF ANCIENT ISRAEL IS treated in these pages as a discipline of historical study. At the same time, it is an essentially theological discipline, because the Hebrew Bible, as the fundamental theological document of Judaism and Christianity, tells the story of God—but not "mythically," as is the case with the legends of the gods. Rather, the Bible tells the story of God as the history of God's interaction with human beings, focused on the history of God's interaction with God's people, Israel.

Without understanding the history of this people, it is impossible to understand the history of God's interaction with them. Israel's social history is therefore necessary for an understanding both of ancient Israel as a historical entity and of the theological reality that is the Hebrew Bible, a document of that ancient Israel.

The history of a people in a particular era, here the history of Israel in the time to which the writings of the Hebrew Bible refer and the period in which they were composed, is always social history to the extent that a people is a social entity. Nevertheless, social history as a discipline within historical studies has an object of its own. It stands alongside other special historical fields such as history of religions, literary history, or art history.

However, in this case the particular object is less evident than in other specialized fields of historical study. We cannot speak about the social structures of a society without taking into account its economic system, which is the subject of economic history. Nor can we leave out of view the system of laws, the object of legal history. The same is true of political structures and institutions, the description of which falls within the field of political science.

Despite a certain blurriness, which we concede, the subject of social history can, nevertheless, be limited in the sense that it does *not* have to do with any particular *statements* of a society or primarily with particular *events*. The subject of social history is, rather, the *form* of a society itself. Of course, the word “form” suggests something static, which is not at all the case. A society’s form is subject to constant change, often proceeding nearly unnoticed, but sometimes dynamic and intensely rapid. That is why social history, as its name implies, is always concerned with the form of a society as it evolves throughout history.

Social History as an Exegetical Method

In discussions of Israel’s social history over the last thirty-five years, of course, scholars have not been content to regard social history as a subdiscipline of historical studies whose purpose was to describe the shape of society in ancient Israel. For as a theological discipline, a subdiscipline of Old Testament exegesis, it was also always concerned with biblical texts. And here the newer, social-historical oriented exegesis inquired not only about the setting in life of a particular genre (its *Sitz im Leben*), as earlier form criticism had done, but about the *interests* traceable in the texts. This question was associated with the reverse inquiry: how

did the religious views we can discern in the texts in turn affect the social developments of the period?¹

Since social interests are traceable in the biblical texts, this type of exegesis, working with social-historical methods, proposes that a society contains a variety of partly overlapping, partly coexisting interests, which are capable of diverging or sharply conflicting. And it presupposes that texts also participate in this interweaving of interests, though as a rule not in the sense of simply reflecting a particular interest in a particular text. “Contradictions between different statements in the Bible prove . . . as a rule to be occasioned by the different social origins of the texts in question.”² If the questions are posed in this way, this interweaving of interests has to be described, the social and historical circumstances of the different interests have to be investigated, and the interaction of these interests and the dynamics of their changes must be understood.

We have to be content here simply to indicate the consequences of such a conception of social-historical interpretation. They affect our relationship with the biblical texts, so that social-historical biblical exegesis “in contrast to all the ideological tendencies to cover up, excuse, and harmonize that are to be found at all times in the history of human societies . . . names the real social conflicts of the past and present and so acts as a critique of ideology.”³ The consequences of a social-historical biblical exegesis thus conceived extend even to social-ethical and practical theological questions so that, not to put too fine a point on it, one may say that “social-historical biblical exegesis” reveals “itself to be an aspect of liberation theology.”⁴

We cannot draw out this line of thought here,⁵ nor is it necessary to share all the implica-

tions and consequences of this understanding of social-historical biblical exegesis in order to enunciate what follows. I will, however, mark what I myself am interested in knowing by stating that in my own conception, the “social history of Israel” encompasses more than what I am about to attempt in these pages, which is to reconstruct the social history of Israel as a subdiscipline of the history of ancient Israel.

The History of Events and “the Long Term”

Defining social history as an investigation of a society’s social structure within history is an attempt to join a static and a dynamic element. In the real world of living organisms, the dynamic element of time does not proceed as a steady continuum, but moves with different intensities. Periods of accelerating change alternate with long phases of relative stability in which, at least on the visible surface, almost nothing changes.

Every type of historical study must take account of these differing dynamics in or

speeds of history. Since the foundational 1946 work of the French historian Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean, it has been customary to distinguish three differently paced rhythms in history: “history over the long term” describes people’s relationship to their natural environment; since the latter is a given, this kind of history moves “at an unaltered and even pace” (at least that was true, to a degree, when Braudel wrote his book). The “history of events,” the object of traditional historical writing, by contrast, concerns itself with individual events, rapidly shifting surface movements. Social history, which Braudel called “that of groups and groupings,” lies between the two. It must take into account the natural conditions that are not perceptible in themselves. But it must also have an eye to “events” (in our case, for example, the successive conquests by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks) and investigate their effects on the community’s social organization.⁶

Every form of historical writing must take these different rhythms into account, but each has a different focus. In the sphere of history of events,[†] for example, there is a contentious

The Rhythms of History		
Type of History	Historical events covered	Examples
History over the long term	Natural events	Ice ages, climatic changes, ecosystem changes, changes in Palestinian ecology over time
Social history	Social changes, major historical eras	The history of the family, the history of a government, the history of the twentieth century, the history of the evolution of Israel’s monarchy
History of events	Specific historical events	Wars, assassinations, elections, new discoveries, the fall of Jerusalem in 587/6.

[†] Translator’s note: The author speaks of “history of events” (*Ereignisgeschichte*) to refer to what is commonly called in English “political history” or more often, and inaccurately, simply “history.”

discussion about whether the conquest of Jerusalem took place in 587 or 586. For social history this one-year difference is inconsequential. For literary history it is interesting to consider whether prophets like Amos or Micah wrote down their oral statements themselves or whether that was the work of their disciples and adherents after the death of the individual prophet. But for social history, which uses these texts as its sources, the question is incidental.

Examples could be multiplied but should not create the impression that questions of political or literary history are inconsequential, since whether a prophetic text is pre-exilic or represents a projection backward from a postexilic time is, of course, relevant for social history as well.⁷ And whether the military, diplomatic, or commercial-political incidents reported of David or Solomon rest on historical facts or represent literary fictions is interesting for social history, too.

Nevertheless, it must be said that social history is “a history of slow rhythms.”⁸ Certainly, insofar as it is a form of historical writing it is concerned with changes. But in the first instance it intends to apprehend the form, or better, the different forms, assumed by the society being studied, and that have remained stable over certain longer periods of time. Therefore it need not concern itself with every event and does not require a precise dating in terms of the decade for its sources. Social history can permit itself a certain controlled vagueness for the dating of events and sources.

A Description of Social History

Since it is the task of social-historical writing to link the static moment in which a society's form is described with the dynamic description

of its historical development, two approaches to that description are, in principle, possible. Social historical description can begin with the form of society and explicate this amorphous phenomenon, “form of society,” or it can begin with historical development and offer a division by epochs “with a slow rhythm.”

Social History as the History of Institutions

Society is a very broad and abstract concept. If we try to characterize a particular society using a single concept (for early periods we may think of concepts like “agrarian society” or “feudal society,” and for the present expressions such as “consumer society” or “experiential society”)—as a rule we only succeed in capturing one particular feature of the society, even though our intention is to typify it. But this method does not bring the whole fabric of social relationships into view by ignoring gender, family structure, military organization, and similar such factors.

Hence we are invited to differentiate this abstract and amorphous phenomenon called “society” into constituent parts. If we consider the whole society as a grand system, we could speak of subsystems. Following the tradition of French sociology, I will employ the concept of *institution*, which is broader in scope than the corresponding popular expression in German.⁹

If we begin our social-historical description with institutions, the static element necessarily dominates. However, the dynamic element is not absent since, first of all, every institution has, in turn, its own history, and second, particular institutions, such as kingship in Israel and Judah, are limited to particular historical locations. These two circumstances constitute the strength of a social-historical account based on institutions. It can take into account

that various institutions develop according to a variety of rhythms. Thus, for example, familial structures are stable over extended periods of time, while military institutions were subjected to numerous changes during the relatively short period of the monarchy. A further and closely allied advantage is that we can establish a certain hierarchy of institutions. So, for example, Erhard Gerstenberger precedes his “theologies in the Old Testament” with a “summary of the social history of Israel” and divides it as follows: family and clan; village and town; tribes; the monarchical state; confessional and parochial communities.¹⁰ The first three represent basic institutions that, although they change, are relevant for the whole era covered by the Old Testament, while the monarchical state or the confessional and parochial communities are obviously secondary to the former and only exist at one time or another during limited periods.

This last example shows that even a depiction of social history oriented to institutions must have a general notion of the periods into which it will divide the era in question. This suggests the possibility of making the period division itself the starting point for the description.

Social History as the History of Time Periods (Epochs)

If the depiction of social history always begins with one period’s institutions, that represents an alternative form of presentation, but by no means the *right* in contrast to the *wrong* method. Both belong together; it is only that the accents are differently placed. As the description of institutions must always have a concept of time periods, so a description that

follows time periods must always have a concept of the institutions it intends to depict.

The method of presentation we have chosen here, following time periods, emphasizes historical development; the description of social structures is subordinated to the division of time periods. Otherwise one would have to speak of a sociology of Israel rather than a social history. The weight of this presentation thus lies more on the radical shifts within society and what is characteristic of a particular period than on the continuing features such as family structures. This is intended to sharpen awareness that even a premodern society underwent altogether dramatic developments in the thousand years or so to be described here.

The choice to pursue a description following time periods in no way devalues a presentation according to institutions; rather, it remains in many ways and at multiple points related to and dependent on it. But it does represent a choice that implies a certain position as regards the history of scholarship. I will explain this more fully in the next section.

History of Scholarship

The history of Israel in biblical times as well as the so-called *realia*—the material objects, places, and social institutions mentioned in the Bible—have been of interest ever since there was a canon of the biblical writings that required interpretation. For, despite teachings about multiple meanings of Scripture, the *sensus literalis* has always played a deciding role, and no such sense can be derived from the text without knowledge of history and material remains. In his own description of “Hebrew Archaeology,” Immanuel Benzinger gives a short summary of the history of this discipline from ancient times onward.¹¹

Chronology

The historical value of the stories of the patriarchs is uncertain.
Modern scholars have often proposed a date of 1800 BCE for Abraham.

1250 BCE (approx.)	Exodus from Egypt (disputed)
1250–1000	Emergence of Israel in the highlands of Canaan
1000–960 (approx.)	King David; beginning of monarchy in Jerusalem (disputed)
960–922 (approx.)	King Solomon; building of the Jerusalem temple (disputed)
922	Division of kingdom: Israel in the north, Judah in the south
722/721	Destruction of Samaria, capital of Israel, by the Assyrians End of kingdom of Israel
621	Reform of Jerusalem cult by King Josiah Promulgation of “the book of the law” (some form of Deuteronomy)
597	Capture of Jerusalem by Babylonians Deportation of king and nobles to Babylon
586	Destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonians More extensive deportations; beginning of Babylonian exile
539	Conquest of Babylon by Cyrus of Persia; Jewish exiles allowed to return to Jerusalem; end of exile; Judah becomes a province of Persia
520–515	Rebuilding of Jerusalem Temple
458	Ezra sent from Babylon to Jerusalem with a copy of the Law
336–323	Alexander the Great conquers the Persian Empire
312–198	Judea controlled by the Ptolemies of Egypt (also a Greek dynasty, founded by one of Alexander’s generals)
168/167	Persecution of Jews in Jerusalem by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, king of Syria; Maccabean revolt
63	Conquest of Jerusalem by Roman general Pompey
66–70 CE	First Jewish revolt against Rome Destruction of Jerusalem Temple
132–135 CE	Second Jewish revolt under Bar Kochba; Jerusalem rebuilt as Aelia Capitolina, with a temple to Jupiter Capitolinus

However, since the nineteenth century this discipline has enjoyed an unexampled upswing. The deciphering of hieroglyphics and cuneiform writing, excavations in the Near East, the increased travels of European scholars and new forms of documentation (for example, photography) augmented knowl-

edge in such quantity that a new quality arose as well. For whereas previously the Bible itself was almost the only source for the history and material lore of ancient Israel, it now became one source among many others whose value had first to be determined.

This new situation led to the appearance, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, of a flood of summarizing works that, however, stood entirely within the tradition of older investigations of biblical antiquities.

The Tradition of Biblical Antiquities

Immanuel Benzinger, already mentioned, begins his *Biblische Archäologie* (its first edition appeared in 1893) with a definition. Biblical archaeology, he says, is the name “of a special historical discipline whose task is the scientific depiction of all the living conditions, customs and usages, civil and religious institutions of the Hebrews.”¹² On the one hand, this is a much broader notion of archaeology than had been used heretofore, as it had previously been limited to excavations and their results. On the other hand, however, it was still only a subdiscipline “of the whole, still to be sought, of a cultural history” from which, in such a concept of biblical archaeology, “political history, literary history, and religious history” can be derived.¹³ The structure of Benzinger’s work can serve as an example of such presentations. It contains four parts: land and people, private antiquities, public antiquities, and sacred antiquities.

Benzinger’s demand that a comprehensive presentation should also consider “political history, literary history, and religious history,” was fulfilled in a sense by Rudolf Kittel. In his *Geschichte der Hebräer* [“History of the Hebrews”], the first edition of which appeared in 1888–92, he undertook to integrate elements of a history of culture and religion, in that each section of the work, which divided chronologically according to political history, was supplied with a description of the culture and religion of the period.¹⁴

What for Kittel is part of the overall history of Israel becomes the title of the work of Alfred Bertholet. He called his 1919 book *Kulturgeschichte Israels* [*Cultural History of Israel*].¹⁵ But the major impetus to a cultural history of Israel was developed in the work of the Dane, Johannes Pedersen—whose first volumes appeared in Danish as early as 1920—in its English translation, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, published in four volumes 1926–40.¹⁶ Here, for example in the 160-page section dealing with the Hebrew idea of the soul,¹⁷ we find integrated into social history what French historiography has called the history of mentality. Sal Wittmayer Baron undertook something similar in his monumental *Sozial- und Religionsgeschichte der Juden* [*Social and Religious History of the Jews*] in 1937, which, however, remained almost without influence in Europe.¹⁸

The writing of social history in the tradition of biblical antiquities reached a certain climax with Roland de Vaux’s *Institutions*. If we consider the subtitle of the two volumes, we find once again the same structure as in Benzinger’s *Biblische Archäologie*: volume 1 treats “Nomadism and Its Survival; Family Institutions; Civil Institutions,” while volume 2 deals with “Military Institutions” and “Religious Institutions.”¹⁹

The works described here have two consistent similarities. They are, first of all, descriptive in their form and avoid any attempt to construct theories about the form of ancient Israelite society they describe. Frants Buhl, who presented an analysis of “Israelite social conditions” in 1899, expresses it this way: his intention was to give “a simple and clear presentation of the material in the Old Testament, devoid of any theories and constructs.”²⁰ Second, the presentations, with the exception of Kittel’s *Geschichte Israels*, are kept historically flat. In his *Die biblischen Altertümer* (1914),

Paul Volz asserted: "Within the individual sections, material from very different periods has often been brought together without hesitation."²¹ There were two reasons for this: namely, that diachronic development (development through history) within social institutions is often hard to follow, and that ways of life have in any case changed very little in the course of time. A third, and probably unconscious, reason may be added: the historical picture in these presentations is exceedingly biblical to the extent that the early period, which is equated with what is depicted in the Pentateuch, plays the decisive role. As a rule there are only two eras, namely before the occupation of the Land and after. As a late phenomenon of the Romantic longing for origins, there is genuine interest only in the early period up to the monarchy. So Kittel ends his history of Israel with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587.

In contrast to the authors to be treated next, the works in the tradition of biblical antiquities can thus be summarized as "descriptive works with a general abstinence from theoretical construction."²² Works of this type should rather be categorized with presentations of social history as history of institutions than with its depiction in terms of time periods. But just as an orientation to periods does not devalue an orientation to institutions, so also the descriptive portrayals of conditions in ancient Israel are not outdated, which is why, in the most recent state of research, such depictions are still again and again necessary.²³

The Religious Sociology of Ancient Judaism

Biblical archaeology, as characterized above, has always regarded the investigation of mate-

rial facts and social relationships as merely an auxiliary science, subordinate to the purpose of understanding the biblical writings.²⁴ Religious sociology's view of ancient Israel is quite different: its purpose is to understand the religion itself and the society that produced it. For this field of scholarship the biblical writings are not the real aim of the work, but the source and at most a part of the religion and society being studied. This is exemplified by Max Weber's posthumous (1921) study, *Ancient Judaism*.²⁵ The very fact that it appeared as the third volume of his collected essays on religious sociology shows that its systematic location is not within biblical scholarship, but rather in the sociology of religion.

Of course, Weber relies on the works of biblical scholars, as he acknowledges in a six-page note on the title "ancient Judaism."²⁶ But Weber is posing a different set of questions, which arise from the observation that, "from a sociological point of view," the Jews were a "pariah people,"²⁷ something that, according to Weber, has been true of Judaism from the Babylonian exile to the present. "Thus the problem is: how did the Jews become a pariah people with this highly specific and unique character?"²⁸

In attempting to answer this question, Weber begins with the upper classes of the pre-national society, the Bedouins, the city dwellers, the farmers, and the semi-nomads. But he is not content with a superficial description of the various groups; he posits a constellation of interests: "However, over against the city patricians and the Bedouins stood two groups: farmers and herders in equal opposition, and in this opposition to the first two groups, the latter two developed a community of interests."²⁹ Weber then, beginning with the concept of "covenant," calls the social form within which this constellation of interests reached a

relatively stable balance a “confederation.”³⁰ This confederation is “a military covenant under and with YHWH as the war god of the covenant.”³¹ “This fragile Israelite community had, until the royal period, as far as we can see, no enduring political organs at all.”³²

This characterization already implies that the rise of the monarchy brought with it a new epoch in the social history of ancient Israel. That was not yet true of Saul’s kingdom or David’s early years, but was so in the “altogether different structure of the kingdom that began when David took up residence in the city, and became definitive from the time of Solomon.”³³ What was decisive about this new structure was the city location, as well as the “resulting change in the organization of the army.”³⁴ “Out of the loose confederation of farmers, herder tribes, and small hill towns, Solomon . . . sought to create a tightly organized political structure.”³⁵

Naturally the end of the kingdom constituted the transition to the third epoch, that of what Weber called the “pariah people,” even though the roots of that existence were to be found earlier, especially in the preexilic prophets. “Pariah people” was to be understood as “a nation of resident aliens, separated ritually, formally or actually, from its social environment,” from which could be derived “all the essential characteristics of its relationship to its environment, especially its . . . self-chosen ghetto existence and the nature of the dualism between its internal and external morality.”³⁶

Weber’s thesis about a pariah people cannot be discussed here; as a matter of fact, it found no followers.³⁷ What is important for us is the overall evaluation of Weber’s initiative that arises from it. Unlike the descriptive presentations of biblical antiquities, Weber’s work focused on a theoretical conception of the society under study; he calls it a confed-

eration, a monarchy, and a pariah people. And unlike the ahistorical depictions, or those that distinguished only a period before entrance into the Land and the time of existence in the Land, Weber was interested in the characteristics of the epochs as such and in the transitions, and he did not (in contrast to Kittel’s *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* [“History of the People of Israel”]) stop with the end of the monarchy, but devoted the second of two parts of his study entirely to the topic of “The Establishment of the Jewish Pariah People.”

Weber’s work had a profound influence on German Old Testament scholarship, even though the authors affected by it seldom acknowledge this explicitly. Above all, Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth took up Weber’s theoretical interest in social formations and their developments and transitions. Likewise, individual theories such as the transhumance of nomadic herders, the tribal military confederation of the pre-national period, the importance of the contrast between city and country in the royal period, or the description of postexilic Israel as a cultic community can be traced without difficulty to Weber. Add to these some new theories such as the thesis of an amphictyony in pre-national Israel or the categories drawn from the Middle Ages and applied to Israel’s royal period (vassal status, fiefdoms, royal estates, and similar medieval categories).³⁸ These theories and categories are not found in Weber’s work, it is true, but they are certainly “influences . . . derived from Weber’s thesis.”³⁹ As with Weber, they aid the attempt to understand the social and religious reality of ancient Israel with the assistance of sociology, especially the sociology of religion.

Although no notice was taken of it in Germany for a long time, there developed in France, from the end of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century, an alto-

gether independent image of ancient Israel that, nonetheless, can be compared in its basic intent and structures to that proposed by Max Weber. Its most important results were found in the work of the Strasbourg Protestant Old Testament scholar Antonin Causse, *Du groupe ethnique à la communauté religieuse. Le problème sociologique de la religion d'Israël*. The book's dedication page shows the tradition within which Causse stood and how it differed from the German scholarly trend represented by Weber. That is, the book is dedicated to Professor Lévy-Bruhl, the "master of studies of the primitive mind."⁴⁰ And Causse also sees in the deficient "attention to the primitive structure of the mentality, of the social order in Israel" the weakness of Weber's study, even though he shows a great deal of admiration for his "intuitive" grasp.⁴¹

In spite of this weight given to the history of ways of thinking, which characterizes French historiography to the present time, Causse continually pursues a goal comparable to Weber's: "The principal problem is in recognizing how the transition from this primitive, pre-logical, and group mentality to more developed ethical, rational, and individualistic ideas took place. In studying, in the following pages, the crisis of social groupings in ancient Israel and the origins of the Jewish community, I have attempted to point out some aspects of that transition."⁴² As with Weber, there are two points to this agenda. On the one hand the social structures and the mentalities associated with them in the several epochs are to be described in sociological terms ("ethnic group," "religious community," "nation,"⁴³ "sect"⁴⁴). On the other hand, there is a fundamental interest in the transitions. This is clear from the occurrence already in the title of the formula (which then recurs so frequently) of "from . . . till." Again and again he speaks of

"*passage*," that is, transition, as in the sentence quoted above, and the title of two out of four major sections contains the phrase "the crisis of social groups."⁴⁵

Thus it is entirely appropriate that Peter Welten, after "descriptive works that as a general rule fashion no theories," links the works of Weber and Causse as a second "related group" of predecessors of the newer social history under the rubric of "works presenting a non-Marxist theoretical construction."⁴⁶

Since 1968

It was characteristic of the period after World War II that the images of ancient Israel that had been developed in the inter-war period were at first unquestioningly regarded as valid. References to Alt and Noth in German-language scholarship, to Pedersen among Scandinavian, English-speaking, and Dutch scholars, and to Causse and related authors in the French-dominated Romance-language realm⁴⁷ indicate a broad consensus. Certainly there were always critical voices, but they remained in the minority, and on the whole interest in social history was minor—so minor that after the emergence of the "new social history" the dominant impression was often that this was something entirely new and without precedent.⁴⁸

This movement to a new social history was related in a twofold way to the—real and symbolic—year 1968. In the first place, 1968 was the year in which a nonelectoral political, social, and cultural movement took the field in most of the Western nations. Part, though certainly not an especially large part, of that movement in Germany was made up of students of theology, members of student groups who were also active in church organizations,

especially the synods (church districts). In critiquing the political and social situation and striving for changes in society and church, they rediscovered with special enthusiasm, among other biblical traditions, the prophets' social critique. The "Critical Papers" that appeared that year in Westphalia adopted the programmatic name "AMOS."

Likewise, in an intensification of symbolism, 1968 was the year that Latin American liberation theology was born.⁴⁹ In that year the second conference of the Catholic bishops of Latin America, at Medellín in Colombia, following Vatican Council II, officially sanctioned the new position of the Bible and the preferential option for the poor. In 1970, then, the programmatic *Teología de la liberación* by Gustavo Gutiérrez was published in Spanish in Lima, Peru; by 1973 it had been translated into English, and also into German.⁵⁰

The larger part of the extra-parliamentary movement's publications in Germany (and other Western countries), as well as an important segment of what took place in the base communities in Latin America under the name of *lectura popular*, belongs to the realm of "gray literature."⁵¹ As far as the history of scholarly research is concerned, such pamphlet literature⁵² had at first only an indirect influence, but its impact was all the broader for that. It found expression in a multitude of articles on the subject of prophetic social criticism.⁵³ To a lesser extent they employed this newly awakened interest in a positive sense, but the majority rejected the implied or expressed claims that the Old Testament prophets were something like social revolutionaries or liberation fighters.⁵⁴ The flood of literature shows what a stimulating effect this external impulse had, in spite of the fact that it was not even aimed at scholars. At the same time this should not be overemphasized, since the studies of the late

1960s and early 1970s dialogued with their scholarly predecessors.⁵⁵

After the initial reaction to the new social developments, first recorded in some fairly short articles, there began to appear from the mid-1970s onward some works that renewed engagement with questions that had been proposed since the 1920s. The older theories were tested, and dismantled, for example, Noth's "amphictyony" by C. H. J. de Geus (1976) and Weber's "confederation" by Christa Schäfer-Lichtenberger (1983).⁵⁶ But in spite of the critique of the specifics of the older proposals, their interest in a theoretical understanding of social structures was seen in a positive light. In particular, Max Weber's sociologically oriented initiative was retained, as evidenced especially by the cooperation of many biblical scholars in the two volumes on Weber's studies of ancient Judaism and on his view of ancient Christianity, edited by Wolfgang Schluchter in 1981 and 1985 respectively.⁵⁷

Of course, dismantling the old theories was not the end of research; new proposals took their place. On the basis of the works of the sociologist and anthropologist Christian Sigrist, Frank Crüsemann and Rainer Neu described pre-state Israel as a segmentary lineage-society and a regulated anarchy.⁵⁸ Oswald Loretz introduced the concept of sharecropping, borrowed from Hans Bobek, to describe the social relationships in the background of the prophets' social critique, while Hans G. Kippenberg preferred, following Karl Marx, to speak of an ancient class society.⁵⁹ Again, postexilic Israel was described by Joel Weinberg as a citizen-temple community.⁶⁰

The influence of Marxism on the new theoretical constructions was relatively small.⁶¹ It is true that many authors use the concept of social classes and attempt to understand social developments in terms of the dynamics of

class conflict; likewise, great weight is given to economic and social conditions, with special attention paid to property relationships. But all that is found in Max Weber as well. Thus the decidedly Marxist sixty-four page study by Moscow professor M. Lurje on the “economic and social conditions in the Israelite-Jewish kingdom” remains an exception (published in 1927 in the series *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*⁶²). Instead, we should reckon rather with a vague influence of Marxism mediated by works that were written in conversation with Marxism.

Naturally, the newly awakened interest in social history was not restricted to theoretical proposals. Most of the work is found in a multitude of individual studies. These concentrate on particular epochs, such as “The Formation of the State in Ancient Israel,” or “State and Society in Pre-exilic Judah”;⁶³ they investigate particular institutions: for example, “Officialdom in the Israelite Royal Period,” or the “concept of the social type” of the “foreigner” (*ger*);⁶⁴ or they study particular biblical texts with a special social-historical interest such as “The Social Criticism of the Book of Amos in Historical-Critical, Social-Historical, and

Archaeological Perspective” or “Social Justice in Israel’s Prophets.”⁶⁵ These are some examples of monographs among a great many, to say nothing of the multitude of essays and dictionary articles.

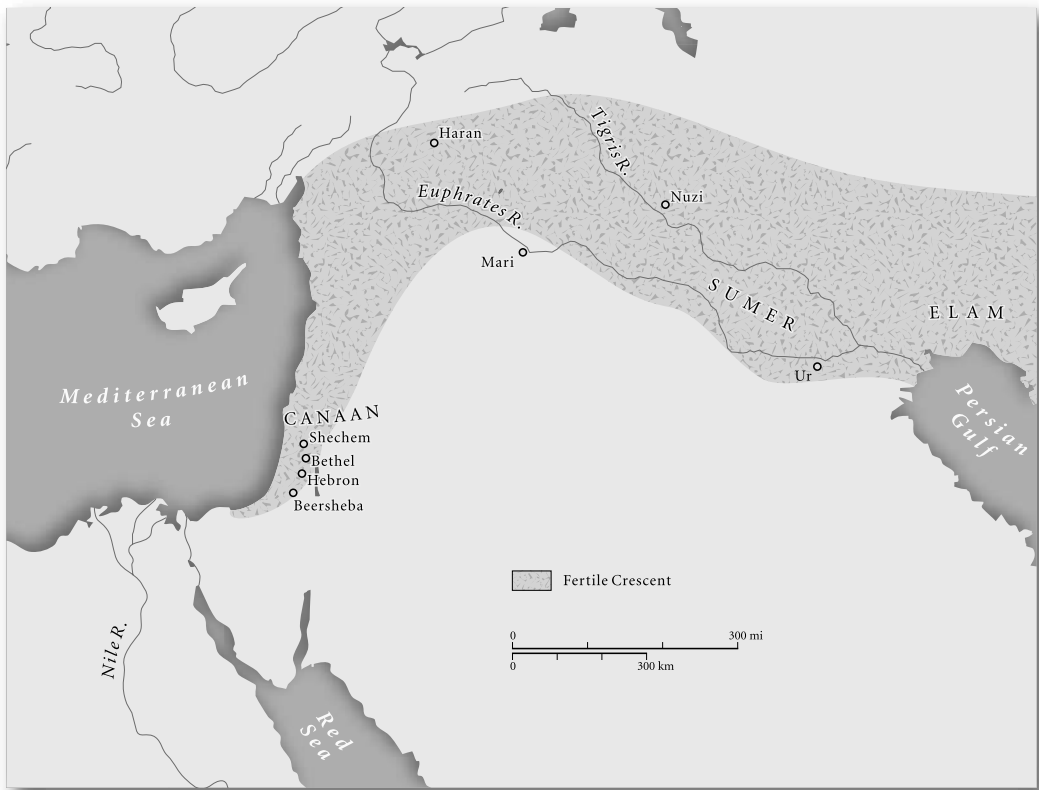
However, there has been some hesitance to attempt an overview of Israelite social history. A first, important impulse came in 1988 from Niels Peter Lemche, who subtitled his *Ancient Israel* “A New History of Israelite Society.”⁶⁶ In German, we may mention Rainer Albertz’s 1992 *Religionsgeschichte Israels* and Erhard Gerstenberger’s 2001 *Theologien im Alten Testament*.⁶⁷ It is true that these belong to a different field, but they describe their respective subjects against the background of social-historical developments in the several epochs of Israel’s history. In English-language literature, two books in the American series Library of Ancient Israel, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* by Paula McNutt (1999) and *The Politics of Ancient Israel* by Norman K. Gottwald (2001) deserve mention.⁶⁸ And much as in the case of Albertz and Gerstenberger, J. David Pleins’ study of *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible* (2001), although devoted to ethical concepts, may be seen as social history.⁶⁹

PART ONE

Methods for Studying the Social History of Israel

NOW THAT WE HAVE INTRODUCED THE question of *what* a social history of Israel will deal with, we must consider *how* to achieve a social history of Israel. We must take into account three multiple overlapping fields. First, there is the framework within which the social history of a community develops, its geographical and historical environments.

Then we must have proper methods for dealing with the archaeological, epigraphic, and literary sources on which the description must draw. Finally, and intimately related to the question of sources, issues of theory and especially the search for analogies and the appropriateness of categories that may be used in the social history also play a role.



Map of the world of the patriarchs