Pleins, J. David

*The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction*


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**Overview**

Pleins begins by situating himself within the history of ethical reflection using social-scientific analysis of the Hebrew Bible (Weber, Bizzell, Causse, Wallis), before outlining his own hermeneutical approach. Pleins seeks for a multidimensional “social reading” of the Hebrew Bible that incorporates sensibilities drawn from a variety of critical methodologies (including archaeology, social-scientific research, rhetorical and postmodern exegesis, and source analysis of the text). This is an ambitious project, for it incorporates critical methodologies that have often ignored or even undercut one another: ranging across the hermeneutical continuum from the world of the author through the world of the text to the world of the reader. This multifaceted approach guides Pleins in the “art of reading struggle-ridden texts.” Key, therefore, within Pleins’s view of the text of the Hebrew Bible is the belief that these texts have arisen out of social struggle within Israel’s society and that the various streams of traditions (Deuteronomic, Yahwistic, Elohistic, Priestly) arose “in large measure as products of movements in the early postexilic period,” making “attempts at recovering the previous layers behind the texts” rather “problematic at best.” Thus, key to understanding Pleins’s approach is that it highlights the multifaceted character of the biblical witness, a witness that in turn highlights the multifaceted (and often antagonist) character of the community that gave
rise to these texts. This lays the foundation for speaking to the modern context, as he reviews: “Once we have heard the contributions of the competing biblical voices, we will be ready to develop a modern theological discourse about social ethics, one that is unafraid to engage the conflicts of our present moment in history” (29).

After the introduction, each chapter begins by placing the various corpora in the Hebrew Bible in their respective ancient Near Eastern contexts. In this way it is an ambitious project for any scholar in the present information explosion. Nevertheless, Pleins evidences a sweeping grasp of the many historical-critical issues related to each of the books in the Hebrew Bible.

For the legal aspect of Torah, Pleins notes that each of the main tradition streams (JEDP) have preserved a core legal summary, with E (Exod 20) and D (Deut 5) providing two versions of the Decalogue, both of which, however, can be treated in a restricted sense as a “communal political enterprise” that focuses on the individual responsibilities of the people, possibly a subtle critique of the monarchy. J’s contribution (Exod 34:10–28, additions to Exod 20:4–5; Deut 5:8–9) encompasses specifics in the ritual life of Israel, while P (Lev 19:1–18), rather than the expected ritual program, “presents a set of religious and social principles that offer a clear challenge to the Ten Commandments of E and D” (49). The basis for ethics in E is in the escape from Egypt, in D in sheer obedience, in J in acts of divine conquest, and in P in holiness. The Covenant Code of Exod 21–23 (following and interpreting E’s Decalogue), a corpora that arose as a negotiated settlement between rural village elders and the monarchy, offers not only direction for individuals but also to social structures (sabbatical year, gleaning). Deuteronomy, however, adopts and subverts the Covenant Code by shifting the focus from village to city, from decentralized to centralized worship. This project was undertaken by gentry seeking rebellion from foreign overlords (Assyrian). Although the poor continue to have a place in the Deuteronomic project, they are mentioned as a minor note to catalogue evidence of the royal house’s infidelity to God. The Priestly social vision arose as a Second Temple “alternative to the collapsed royal project of Israel’s monarchic period” (61). In the priestly code of Lev 11–15, the poor are mentioned, but the focus is always kept firmly on the priests, showing that in priestly perspective care for the poor reinforces the hierarchy. The poor are not considered impure but rather those who are offered a reduced rate for approaching their holy God. In the Holiness Code of Lev 17–26 priests are established as champions of YHWH’s poor, for their legislation protects the poor, women, the aged, the stranger, and even the environment. “For these writers, the success of the reconstruction after the exile was a direct function of the care with which the disenfranchised were treated economically, socially and legally” (70). There is thus “a broad social vision that attempts to concretely address the situation of the urban and
village poor in ancient Israel as part of a larger social enterprise of rebuilding the languishing commonwealth” (70).

Pleins begins his review of the grand narratives (Genesis-Chronicles) by noting that there are competing theologies in the streams underlying these canonical works, contrasting “P’s refined God of ritual law and community,” “J’s autocratic deity of blessing,” and “E’s God of fearful obedience.” While the Deuteronomic History presents a view of the recovery of kingship as a key balance to priestly power, it makes clear that monarchial revival must exemplify the concerns of the community. Those responsible were situated among the landed gentry who could benefit from the monarchy, especially against an increasing temple establishment seen in P. The role of the prophet in the DtrH is to confront abuses of royal power rather than to call into question the monarchic institutions. These abuses are related to the protection of landholdings, clearly advantageous for the landed gentry. The narratives of J envision Israel as “a royal people who are a blessing for all nations” (140). The blessing motif offered the compiler of J a way forward from the curse of exile, thus representing a royal stream that offered a positive counterbalance to DtrH’s negative perspective. E represents an attempt to update J in relation to reform encountered by those returning from exile. It offers a way forward through using the imperial system and living among non-Jewish neighbors. The pictures of Nehemiah and Ezra paint the idealized picture reflected in E. While DtrH “offers little for the community to cling to in order to survive beyond the catastrophe part from hopes of a royal revival; J extends promises of blessing; E offers utopian fantasies for reclaiming the North; whereas P provides the community with a way of restoring its ritual and mythic heritage after the catastrophe” (142). P as well as Chronicles should be appreciated anew. What is clear, however, in Pleins’s review is that the issue of social justice for the poor is not a priority agenda item within the grand narrative traditions in the Hebrew Bible but rather land, family, procreation, political power and leadership, national sin, proper worship and priestly authority, and the nation’s survival. These are the governing analytic categories for social ethics in this literature.

The exodus is not considered in the discussion of grand narratives because of its importance both within the Hebrew Bible as well as in contemporary ethical reflection. This section stands out from the rest of the book in that it offers far more space to recent theological appropriations and rejections of the social vision of the Hebrew biblical material. This is understandable in light of the way that African American, Latin American, and South African figures have appropriated the exodus event for their own social visions. Pleins contrasts the liberation reading of the Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez, who leveraged the exodus event to bolster his claims for liberation, with that of the Palestinian Naim Ateek, who recognized how the exodus event had been used to limit his own people’s liberation. Pleins concludes that the exodus is not “the manifesto of the
ancient poor in their struggle against their oppressors” but rather is “replete with the political aims of the dominant class” (174). Therefore, the exodus tradition is not a useful source for reconstructing a positive social vision, as was once thought.

Turning to the Writings, Pleins sees in the final form of Nehemiah a rhetorical move to cast him, together with Ezra, as figures who laid the foundation for a priestly commonwealth. These stories of Nehemiah encouraged the community to stand together in terms of social justice and religious identity. The original layer of Neh 5 represents another installment of the prophetic mission to convince the nobility to do justice. In the priestly revisionist form found in the latter chapters, however, one finds echoes of the approach of P and Leviticus to social and ritual restructuring. The book of Ezra also emphasizes priestly interest over royal aspiration as the heart of the reconstruction movement. The fiction of Esther emphasizes through Purim that “community, cult and conduct are one” (194). Ruth is not “overtly a social ethics work” but is filled with overtones that reinforce values and conduct seen in legal form in the Pentateuch. Daniel offers a political vision for those living in imperial times, one in which the person of integrity might either support or resist foreign rulers based on proximity to the commonwealth’s values and institutions. These five books “continue to speak to the reforms and struggles that are integral to the construction of a more just society” (204).

Pleins’s treatment of the prophets begins with Isaiah, where he finds exilic writers and compilers wrestling with the devastation of exile and in so doing expanding the scope of the term ‘āni, as the nation is recast into a position of oppression through reuse of the exodus symbol. While in the first half of the book it was the exploited peasants who looked for relief from the oppressive elite, in the second half the entire community now longs for release from oppression. “The process of exile has made the entire nation ripe for release, readying a people to build a new and just national order” (270). This reuse of the older prophetic attack on oppression to describe the experience of the community and even elite in exile is a trend seen in much of the prophetic tradition. Thus Jeremiah represents a complicated amalgamation of traditions centered around the invasion of Judah by foreign powers. However, there are distinct perspectives, beginning with a foundational layer that linked this invasion to the “intersection between idolatry and social injustice,” the latter of which is theologically potent as it is “defined in terms of concrete and vivid violations of the poor” (313). Such a social vision “uproots and tears down the cherished beliefs and political arrangements of the elite” (314). This foundational layer, however, has been taken up and reinterpreted by the former elite (those responsible for the DtrH) “for new political ends,” a phase by which “a strong voice for social justice” has become “obscured” (314). Those responsible for Ezekiel most likely were seeking control of the “priestly political program” during the early Persian period before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. In this book we find a balance

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between the priestly emphasis on the restored temple and priesthood and the prophetic emphasis on social criticism. This tradition affirms a reduced role for the royal house in connection with the temple and is clearly an urban program with the temple in Jerusalem as the center of the social vision. Pleins’s study of the book of the Twelve reveals a vast spectrum of approaches to social ethics but does show that many of those responsible for these books, both from rural and urban contexts, “had a clear understanding of the nature and origins of poverty and injustice in their society” and as a result criticized “power politics, ritual commitment, social oppression, and the advance of the elite in society” (409). This concern for justice, however, at times is co-opted by the very elite that once it critiqued, as they cast themselves in the position of the oppressed to “shore up” their “own claims to power” (396).

Pleins describes the poetic materials in the Hebrew Bible as “evocative texts that concretely raise questions of poverty, justice, gender and divine presence” (443). The Psalter presents a celebration of God’s kingship and a new role for the royal psalms in the postmonarchical context. The liturgy’s role will be to mourn the failure of political institutions, which permits social newness and revitalization. This is largely a priestly emphasis that through the spring festival and the regular rhythm of worship provide a “potent voice for justice in the postexilic community” (427). Interestingly, the “monarchic past becomes a banner and wellspring for imagining a more just future” (427). The Psalter also contains laments that “preserve the universal cry of the poor” and thus “continue to hold out poverty and justice as key issues for their community and any group that seeks to take up the Psalter to frame its liturgical life” (429). However, Pleins is well aware that this language is “malleable to the same sort of transformation we have seen in the concept of the ‘ānî in Second Isaiah” (429). The Psalter also contains a strong stream of wisdom, but Pleins finds this stream slightly at odds with the wisdom tradition of the Proverbs (to which he will soon turn and criticize), since these psalms picture the pursuit of wisdom and torah as directed “toward a transformative ethical end, a vision that is keenly open to the plight of the poor in their oppression” (436–37). This difference he credits to priestly compilers of the Psalter. Pleins’s work on Lamentations honestly describes the cry of the oppressed so prevalent within this book alongside the social context in which this cry was written and in so doing admits that the “elite who once were the oppressors becomes defined through this text as the oppressed” (441). Even so, he studies this text for the ways it advances the justice discussion by creatively mining “the liturgical tradition for language that might move the community beyond mute suffering toward an engagement with the God of judgment” (442). Thus, he concludes, “In seeing the tradition literally renew itself, we have a profound example of the way in which the elite, the carriers of the old liturgical voice, became the standard-bearers of the prophetic voice in a new way” (442).
Pleins leaves the main wisdom corpus to last and finds within it two fundamental streams. The first, Proverbs, is clearly attacked for its view that poverty is to be avoided at all costs and often caricatured as the result of lives that are “lazy, lacking in diligence, morally obtuse, and socially inferior” (474). In light of this, poverty is rarely protested against. Such a view protected the wisdom creed’s views of wealth and status and established its own peculiar social ethic. Social inequities were to be overcome by the generosity of the rich, who would be rewarded for such generosity. The other view of poverty, that is, that it is the result of oppression and injustice, is not the focus, although Pleins does admit that Prov 22:22 and Prov 30–31 were “prophetic chinks in the proverbial armor” (474), that is, “not typical for the wisdom of Proverbs” (471). Job and Qoheleth, on the other hand, do provide a more positive perspective on social ethics within the wisdom tradition. The latter, however, does not go far enough in this regard, for although Qoheleth identifies the poor as “victims of the vast system of futility” (510), it does not move to solidarity with the poor. Such a posture is evident in Job, where there is an empowerment to articulate grief at God’s inaction in the face of injustice, especially through the vocabulary of lament.

**Evaluation**

There is no question that Pleins’s work is an exhaustive piece, showcasing for critical scholars what it means to pay close attention to the various texts in the Hebrew Bible with consideration of not only their ancient historical and literary contexts but also their significance for theological discussion today. In this way it offers a recent example that intertwines the older disciplines of history of religion and biblical theology. He is to be commended for not merely citing the way this theme is developed in the Hebrew canon in an abstract and universal way but rather for paying close attention to the diversity within the canonical witness, the discovery of which is only made possible as one pays close attention to the historical rootedness and original social contexts of the various books and pericopae. Pleins is at least honest at the outset about his hermeneutical approach, and in the main he carries out this project based on that approach, at least in terms of his use of critical methodologies. The adoption of such a plethora of methodologies, however, leaves him open to criticism on many sides, even if one must applaud him for his courage.

One problem does arise from incongruity between his initial agenda on the various streams of tradition (Deuteronomic, Yahwistic, Elohist, Priestly), all of which he believes arose as “products of movements in the early postexilic period.” He claims that “attempts at recovering the previous layers behind the texts” are rather “problematic at best.” However, throughout the book he is consistently taking the reader behind such streams by noting their connection to preexilic abuses. This is an important strategy, for
in this book it is clear that the royal house is singled out for the strongest rebuke by the disapproving Pleins.

One must admit that the royal house is certainly deserving of strong social rebuke. However, at times there is a sense that Pleins plays down any positive role that royal ideology played for social justice. His caricature of the royal house and tradition does not take seriously the many formative royal pieces that focus on social justice as the key role for the king to play, calling the royal stream in the Psalter “a banner and wellspring for imaging a more just future” because it “functioned to underscore the need for a corporate embodiment of justice, as opposed to the pietistic isolation of individual believers” (443). It is uncertain why he could not have admitted that, even though the royal house failed miserably in this regard, it was responsible for the preservation of justice within Israel, to protect the oppressed from the oppressor. His work on Lamentations is at least honest about the fact that the cry for justice is declared by the former elite, even if he then tries to rehabilitate this voice because it represents the important rhetoric of vehemence toward the God of justice. In the book of Lamentations the strong voice of Lam 3 declares to all that the former elite need to turn to this God of justice in repentance. Thus the voice of “vehemence” is not a voice that should be leveraged in this case for the cause of social justice, as Pleins has noted, but rather should be transformed to a voice of penitence, which more appropriately embodies the values of justice (see M. J. Boda, “The Priceless Gain of Penitence,” HBT 25 [2003]: 51–75).

While the attack on the royal stream is expected, surprising is Pleins’s championing of the priestly movement. He sees in the literature that resulted from the Hebrew priestly stream a sensitivity to the construction of a larger societal structure that would protect the poor. For Pleins the social message of the priests is to be put on equal if not higher footing to that of the prophets, the latter often the champions of earlier reviews of the social vision of the Hebrew Bible:

Those today who so loosely champion the prophetic texts would do well to remember that it was the priestly tradition that saved Judaism from almost certain extinction as a political and national entity both in the land and in exile. In fact, as we shall see in chapter 4, if the prophets played a role in the postexilic reconstruction, it was in energizing the priestly program of return to the land, rebuilding the temple, and restoring the commonwealth! (70)

Wellhausen and others in the nineteenth century were wrong to cast the history as a shift from prophetic insight to priestly negligence, for the effective shift to the postexilic consensus was to be most fully effected within the constraints and confines of priestly educational and legal commitments. (143)
This consistent exaltation of the priestly stream, however, needs to be weighed against significant recent work on the social context of the early Persian era, the very period in which Pleins has placed the development of all the major tradition streams in the Hebrew Bible. Whether one can accept fully theories on the citizen-temple community (Weinberg, recently Janzen), what is clear to most scholars working in the early Persian period is that the priestly caste played a major role among the elite who returned to the land in this tenuous period of Israel’s history. They can hardly be separated from the abuses that Nehemiah encountered in Neh 5 and are clearly rebuked (alongside the people of the land) in Zech 7 for their lack of social justice. This injustice accompanied the liturgical rhythms that are so essential to the priestly social vision. Surprisingly, in Pleins’s work the priestly Ezra and Nehemiah are praised for their focus on reinstituting the social structures that offered hope for transforming society, yet the issue of divorce that was the result of this transformation is quietly subsumed under the rubric of “intermarriage” and sidelined almost as an aberration through redactional comments. It appears that, even if his redactional comments could be accepted, such redaction could hardly be distanced from the priestly preservers of the Ezra tradition.

Although Pleins does not overlook the prophetic movement, he is clearly trying to bring down the prophets from their liberal Protestant pedestal at least on par if not below the priests. This is encapsulated in his strong statement:

For those who wish to dip into the prophets for their contemporary social protest, this comparison should make it clear that the prophets do not constitute the exclusive preserve of constructive social programs in the biblical tradition. . . . the prophetic literature often fails to advocate the kinds of concrete mechanisms that would be necessary for the alleviation of poverty in society. Each of the bodies of Torah legislation examined in this chapter [2] goes far beyond the prophetic literature in this regard. (78)

Although the focus of the prophetic witness is on the rebuke of a community rife with social injustice, the prophets did offer a future vision of a community in which the Torah of justice would reign supreme. For example, it is this vision that drives the transformation from fasts to feasts in Zech 7–8 as the community creates a place in which God’s presence is noticed by the Gentiles. Isaiah 2 envisions Zion as a mountain to which the peoples of the earth are drawn and from which the Torah goes forth to bring justice and peace to the world. Such a positive vision is surrounded by the negative prophetic rebuke of social injustice (see Isa 1:15-17), a reproach that is intimately linked to the priestly social liturgical rhythms that were often manipulated by the leaders to their own means. These examples from Zechariah and Isaiah remind us of the need for both priestly and prophetic social visions to create a Zion and world of justice.
Clearly Pleins’s treatment of the book of Proverbs reveals his strong bias against the royal tradition. Pleins focuses his attention on wisdom’s caution about poverty. Pleins has no patience for such advice issuing forth from the royal tradition that played such a large role in the oppression of the poor. However, although one cannot deny the role of the monarchy in the literary shaping of this literature (M. V. Fox, “The Social Location of the Book of Proverbs,” in Texts, Temples and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran [ed. M. V. Fox et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996], 227–39), one senses a lack of sensitivity to rural family context as a major source of wisdom in Prov 10ff. (see C. Westermann, “Weisheit im Sprichwort,” in Schalom [ed. K.-H. Bernhardt; AzTh 68; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1971], 149–61; R. E. Murphy, Wisdom Literature [FOTL 13; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 7; R. N. Whybray, The Composition of the Book of Proverbs [JSOTSup 168; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994], 62). While highlighting this stream of proverbial caution, Pleins plays down the evidence of a compassionate approach to the poor in the book, calling any such passages atypical. However, a considerable number of the proverbs on wealth are concerned with thwarting oppressive practices among the leadership of Israel. As Gottwald reminds us, “no more than one-third of the evaluative proverbs and admonitions about wealth and poverty support the alleged wisdom dogma that the rich and the poor deserve their fortunes… By contrast, the largest single category of ‘socioeconomic appraisals’ attributes existing wealth and poverty to the oppression and dishonesty by which riches are in effect stolen from the poor” (The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 573). It would appear that this is indeed more than a passing concern for the poor. Furthermore, there is great concern in Proverbs with the protection of the integrity of the justice system, a concern that shows a sensitivity to larger structural issues. Pleins’s subsequent exaltation of Job because of its vocabulary of lament and empowerment to articulate grief against God in the face of justice sounds strikingly familiar to his treatment of the book of Lamentations. However, he seems to forget that ultimately Job is granted wealth in this book as a sign of God’s favor and that it is the loss of wealth that is the sign of dystopia. Although the book does present the cry of pain and even protest, such a voice is ultimately ignored and denied any answer by God.

These criticisms, however, do not undermine the considerable value of this book for the study of social justice in the Hebrew Bible. In it we find a powerful example of how historical-critical research can do more than create museum pieces out of these ancient texts but rather contribute to a larger critical enterprise that can ultimately speak theologically and creatively within our present cultural and religious context. Although many within the guild will disagree with Pleins’s evaluation of the various corpora and their historical and social settings, few will disregard this volume, because it contains not only a sweeping review of the key texts and themes that must continue to inform our own
social vision but also the articulation of a hermeneutic that showcases the impact of employing the full spectrum of critical methodologies on one’s description of the ideologies of the Hebrew Bible.