In this comprehensive and well-informed study, Pleins draws together the best of biblical methodology and theological inquiry to produce a work that makes a major contribution to the field of biblical studies and offers readers new perspectives on a community’s social ethics that have pressing implications for creating a more just world order today. The volume consists of thirteen chapters that are systematically organized under the following headings: Introduction (ch. 1); Law (ch. 2); Narrative (chs. 3–5); Prophets (chs. 6–9); Poetry and Wisdom (chs. 10–12); and Conclusion (ch. 13).

In his opening chapter, “Literature and Location,” Pleins outlines his social-scientific methodological approach, uses the book of Jeremiah as a sample case study to elucidate his approach, and evaluates the work of past scholars who have contributed to the conversation at hand (Weber, Bizzell, Causse, and Wallis). Pleins acknowledges the advances made in biblical interpretation through the use of sociological methods and analyses that, when applied to the biblical text, have helped to illumine the texts’ social ethics. At the same time, Pleins rightly warns against fitting the biblical text into contemporary sociological theories and modern political biases. In his concluding comments in this introductory chapter, Pleins states boldly that he is not convinced of the antiquity of J, E, D, P, and thus his approach will be to treat these sources in his book as “products of movements in the early postexilic period” (27). Finally, Pleins affirms the
social-scientific, feminist, and liberation readings that have each contributed to an understanding of the biblical text’s ancient world and the world of the biblical authors.

In chapter 2, “Law and Justice: The Pentateuch,” Pleins considers haggadah and halakah, the two modes of theological discourse that have become foundational to Jewish social thought and practice. He then looks at specific law codes, namely, the Decalogue, the Exodus Covenant Code, the Deuteronomic Code, the priestly Code, and the Holiness Code. One of the central points that Pleins addresses is whether or not justice toward the poor is part of any or all of the law codes and, if so, to what degree. In the last section of the chapter, Pleins reassesses the prophets and covenant and draws two astute conclusions: (1) that “the prophetic writings stand in a rather ambiguous relation to the legal traditions of the Pentateuch” and (2) that “it appears that the prophets find little rooting in the traditions embodied in the Torah, a reality that allows them to bring to light injustices left unaddressed in the Bible’s legal traditions” (81).

In the third section of his book, “Narrative,” Pleins provides a careful study of selected biblical books: Genesis–Kings, Chronicles (ch. 3, “The Grand Narratives”), Exodus (ch. 4, “Political Deliverance”), and Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Ruth, and Daniel (ch. 5, “To Build a Just Society”). His purpose is to shed light on Israel’s social ethics and vision embedded within these texts. Pleins draws particular attention to the Chronicler and points out that for the Chronicler, divine compassion is at the heart of the texts’ hopeful social vision. With respect to social justice and the poor, Pleins concludes that neither Genesis–Kings nor 1–2 Chronicles have these concerns as part of their agenda. These historical writers are interested in broader issues such as land, family and procreation, political power and leadership, national sin, proper worship and priestly authority, and Israel’s survival, all of which have theological and social ethical implications for the community in its day.

In his examination of the Exodus text, Pleins makes the cogent observation that although the text does have liberation as a central theme, caution needs to be exercised when using the Exodus material for the purposes of liberating the poor today. To substantiate his claim, Pleins accurately uncovers the nationalistic, monarchic, and hierarchical agenda of the Exodus text as well as its ideology.

With respect to the last group of texts (Ezra–Daniel), Pleins notes that each book contains heroic figures who work against all odds to ensure the ongoing life of the Jewish community and its traditions. Pleins points out that, when viewed as a whole, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Ruth, and Daniel present a social vision that reflects both the reforms and the struggles of the Judahites both in and outside of Judah. Pleins views these reforms and struggles as integral to the building of a more just society.
Central to Pleins’s study is his analysis of the prophetic texts, which include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve. The Isaiah text as a whole gives evidence of an emerging social vision, one that bespeaks of YHWH’s attentiveness and action on behalf of the Israelite community in the midst of their suffering, affliction, and oppression. The book of Jeremiah, however, makes the most profound statement on behalf of the poor, otherwise known as the “exploited” and “disenfranchised” members of the society. Among the several conclusions Pleins draws about the book of Ezekiel, perhaps the most important is that Ezekiel’s vision is closely linked to Jerusalem and the temple and that the vision has as its goal the transformation of the social order in its entirety. Having provided an extensive study of the Book of the Twelve, Pleins draws many insightful conclusions about the texts’ social vision and the significant role that the prophets played in shaping that vision. Pleins’s analysis of the texts makes clear that the powerful leaders of the prophets’ day were keenly aware of the poverty and injustices within their respective societies but did little if anything to confront such situations and address the rampant exploitation of the poor by the wealthy. This section of Pleins’s study is particularly noteworthy because of the implications that one can draw from it for the development of a social vision for today.

In the final section of his work, Pleins explores Israel’s wisdom tradition in relation to the community’s social ethic and vision. In the first set of texts—Psalms, Song of Songs, and Lamentations—Pleins focuses on Israel’s poetic and cultic imagination and how its use in the aforesaid literature raises evocative questions pertaining to justice, gender, poverty, and YHWH’s presence. Pleins next turns to the book of Proverbs. Here he argues convincingly that this text reflects the educated elite of ancient Israel, and he makes clear that, according to Proverbs, the poor were considered to be inferior, lazy, a negative energy within Israelite society, and thus a complete burden. Unlike the other wisdom texts, the book of Job presents a deep social vision born of profound lament. Perhaps the most obscure of all texts is Qoheleth, which views the poor as victims caught in and exploited by a futile system that undermines any efforts at justice.

Pleins closes his study with a well-crafted conclusion (ch. 13) where he draws together the many complex texts and ideas presented earlier in his work. Pleins’s central point is that the Hebrew Bible’s greatest moral strength and enduring challenge is its rich diversity on ethical thought, especially as it pertains to justice and poverty. Pleins recognizes that the Hebrew Bible can make a significant contribution to the ongoing struggle to establish a more just society, which, for Pleins, is “the burden of torah study, but also its joy” (532). Most helpful to readers is the inclusion of a subject and author index and an index of ancient sources that follows the study’s final chapter.

This hefty, well-written, and well-researched text makes a major contribution to the field of biblical studies, particularly in the area of biblical ethics. Pleins’s methodology, arguments, suggestions, and conclusions are all well substantiated and represent both
profound and provocative thought. His affirmation of feminist and liberation readings of
the biblical text and their respective contributions to his discussion is particularly
welcomed and shows a balanced approach to the analysis of Israel’s social vision and
how that vision can have an impact on the world of biblical ethics then and now. I
recommend this work most highly to biblical scholars and students alike and to a general
readership interested in gaining a rich and clear understanding of Israel’s multifaceted
social world and polyvalent ethical vision.