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Self, Society, and the Divine in Ancient World Cultures

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Stephen Houston teaches at Brown University, where he serves as Dupee Family Professor of Social Sciences and Professor of Anthropology. A MacArthur Fellow, Houston specializes in Classic Maya civilization and comparative studies of royal courts and kingship. His book publications include Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya (co-ed., 2001); The Decipherment of Ancient Maya Writing (co-ed., 2001); The First Writing Script Invention as History and Process (ed., 2004); The Classic Maya (co-auth., 2009); and The Fiery Pool: Maritime Worlds of the Ancient Maya (co-auth., 2010).

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Series Editor’s Preface

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

The purpose of this series is to pursue important social, political, religious, economic, and intellectual issues through a wide range of ancient or early societies, while occasionally covering an even broader diachronic scope. By engaging in comparative studies of the ancient world on a truly global scale, this series hopes not only to throw light on common patterns and marked differences, but also to illustrate the remarkable variety of responses humankind developed to meet common challenges. Focusing as it does on periods that are far removed from our own time, and in which modern identities are less immediately engaged, the series contributes to enhancing our understanding and appreciation of differences among cultures of various traditions and backgrounds. Not least, it thus illuminates the continuing relevance of the study of the ancient world in helping us to cope with problems of our own multicultural world.

The present volume picks up a topic tackled 70 years ago in a visionary project by members of the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute: the world view of three important Near Eastern civilizations (Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel). Under the title *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, the contributors used the extant texts produced by highly developed, sophisticated, and literate societies to reconstruct their views on the place of human beings in society and state, in nature and cosmos, in space and time, in life and death, and in relation to those in power and the world of the divine. This book proved highly popular and successful. Although it is still in print, it is badly outdated. The present volume reassesses the book’s accomplishments and shortcomings, establishes a theoretical foundation for such a project in the twenty-first century, and offers insights into what a new version, up-to-date not only in theoretical underpinning and approach,
evidence and scholarship, but also in scope, might include. Much broader in its coverage, it encompasses not only the “original three” but many other eminent civilizations around the globe and illustrates the variety of ways by which these ancient or early societies embarked on their unprecedented intellectual “adventures” of discovering and defining their place in the world and dealing with the challenges posed by this world.

Earlier volumes in the series are listed at the very beginning of this volume. After *Slavery and Social Death* (eds John Bodel and Walter Scheidel) is in preparation.
Several years ago, Francesca Rochberg and I discovered that we both had independently thought of preparing a modern version of a classic but outdated book, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (see this volume’s Introduction). We decided to collaborate on this project and to initiate it by inviting potential contributors to a workshop at Brown University. This workshop, at which early versions of most chapters were presented and discussed, took place in March 2008, under the aegis of the Program in Ancient Studies (now Program in Early Cultures). Chessie participated with her typical critical intelligence, broad knowledge, and enthusiasm in the preparation and realization of this workshop and in the early phases of the editorial process; the volume’s title, only minimally modified, is her suggestion as well. I regret deeply that personal circumstances forced her to withdraw as a co-editor and am grateful that she was still willing to share the introduction and contribute a crucial theoretical chapter. The preparation of this volume has taken far too long, and I wish to express my sincere thanks to all contributors (not least those who joined the project after the workshop: Benjamin Foster and David Konstan) not only for their valuable chapters but also for their patience and cooperation. I am also deeply grateful to Haze Humbert at Wiley for her enthusiastic endorsement of this volume, and to her staff for their help in producing it.

The 2008 workshop was sponsored and funded, apart from the Program in Ancient Studies, by Faith and Frederick Sandstrom, the C.V. Starr Foundation Lecture Fund of Brown University, the Department of Classics, the Department of Egyptology and Ancient Western Asian Studies, the Program in Judaic Studies, and the Royce Family Fund for Teaching Excellence. I express my sincere thanks for all this support and especially thank all those without whose assistance this project could not have been realized, most of all the Program’s Administrator, Maria Sokolova.

Providence, August 2014

Kurt A. Raaflaub