

Foreword

Symbols and ceremonies associated with religion in the world of the ancient Near East have long intrigued modern scholars of religious studies. In the last few decades especially, numerous studies on various aspects of the religions of the peoples in the biblical world have come to light. Importantly, many employ multidisciplinary methods in their analyses and utilize textual evidence in concert with archaeological material. The latter approach, which was not always valued, recognizes that the words of a text, whether biblical or inscriptional, should, whenever possible, be balanced by an archaeological picture. In fact, it is often a discovery from the ground that helps to elucidate the written record. This is the case with the dry donkey bones from Tel Haror, which served to animate Kenneth Way's doctoral dissertation, now expanded into the present volume.

In 1992, while I was excavating at Tel Haror, an intact donkey burial was uncovered at the entrance of the site's Middle Bronze Age temple complex. This *in situ* burial with clear connections to a temple raised considerable excitement in the archaeological world because of its unique characteristics compared to other equid burials from the Levant. At the time, Professor Eliezer Oren of Ben Gurion University, the senior excavator of Tel Haror, noted the need for a comprehensive inquiry into the roles of the donkey in the cults of the ancient Near East. He remarked that, though the archaeological significance of donkey burials was deliberated on briefly in a few site reports, and possible associations with the donkey treaty sacrifices in the Mari Letters were discussed, no study had been conducted that systematically analyzes the collective archaeological evidence in light of the greater corpus of biblical and Near Eastern texts on the subject. He suggested that a study such as this would be a significant contribution to the field. The present work now fills that void.

In this study, Kenneth Way examines the large and diverse corpus of texts, comprised of Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian, Hittite, Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Hebrew sources, that in some way deal with the ceremonial and symbolic significance of donkeys. Simultaneously, he scrutinizes the archaeological records of varied equid burials from dozens of sites in Egypt, Israel-Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, including the recently discovered monumental burial complex at Umm el-Marra. The author then synthesizes and explicates the integrated textual and archaeological material attesting to the special status of the donkey in the cultic spheres of the region. This is especially key in elucidating certain literary texts and rituals in the Bible that seem to contain vestigial forms of earlier practices, as the Shechem traditions recounting Jacob's sons' dealings

with the clan of Hamor and the Exodus law stipulating the redemption of the first-born ass. Importantly, Kenneth Way does not feel compelled to arrive at monolithic conclusions in his study. Rather, his methods underscore the need to contextualize evidence so that even what appears to belong to a single category, in this case religious rites, may be variegated, requiring careful attention to distinguishing details rather than identifying general commonalities.

It is my great pleasure and pride to introduce this book, Kenneth Way's first substantive scholarly work, and I look forward to his future contributions to the field of religion in the world of the ancient Near East.

NILI S. FOX
Hebrew Union College
Cincinnati, OH