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# THE RELIGION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: WHAT ARE WE STUDYING?

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During the past seven years, I have given a course of lectures under the general title "The Religion of the Old Testament" to finalist students for the London BD degree. It soon became apparent, from the confusion in my own mind and in those of the students, that an introductory lecture exploring some of the commoner causes of such confusion would be desirable. What follows is largely a reflection of the final form which that lecture has reached. It has changed over the years, very much as a result of the questions and comments that have been raised. I am most grateful to successive groups of students for keeping me thinking about this matter, and hope that what is set out below may stimulate further questions – and perhaps even some answers! – among others grappling with the Old Testament.

## I HISTORICAL ROOTS OR FINAL TRADITION?

Every serious student of the New Testament soon becomes aware of the problem: is the primary object of study Jesus of Nazareth, his life and teaching? Or is it the writings about him, for which his actual life was in effect a necessary preliminary? The same question arises when we consider any prophetic tradition in the Old Testament, and, on a larger scale, in the study of the religion therein described. It is on principle likely that the "religion of the Old Testament", as set forth in the final official collection, will differ significantly from "the religion of ancient Israel", as actually practised. There are two very obvious reasons for such a judgement: first, actual religious practice will surely have varied over a period of more than a millennium, under greatly differing social and political circumstances, whereas the final form of the Old Testament, if not all the product of one period, certainly represents the considered view of what was acceptable as religious expression and practice. Secondly, it is necessary always to keep in mind the probability that there will be a polemical element in the final form of the Old Testament, which will in effect have been an attack upon the actual religion of ancient Israel. Thus, when Deut.12 stresses that there is only one sanctuary where Yahweh has caused his name to dwell, and at which he may properly be worshipped, this must surely be seen as an attack upon rival claims from other sanctuaries that they were the repositories of true Yahwism.

## II CULTUS AND BOOK

The idea of the "holy book" is the product of one, relatively modern, religious tradition, that of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the ancient Near East there might be authoritative texts, but they were concerned with the proper performance of rites, for example those relating to sacrifice or to funerary customs. They were not a Bible; religion meant cult.[1]

On this matter study of the Old Testament is particularly important, for here we are concerned *both* with an ancient religion, whose natural expression was cultic, *and* with a shift to the veneration of the written word as such. The shift in emphasis here implied is conventionally associated with the finding of the "book of the law" (2 Kings 22), but is also illustrated by the setting down of prophetic oracles in fixed written form. In particular this had the effect of universalising individual prophetic condemnations of cultic practice and thus limiting very severely the places and circumstances under which such practice might be maintained. In their original context it seems clear that the condemnations found in, for example, Isaiah 1 or Amos 5 were much more limited and specific; otherwise, if taken literally they would have implied the rejection of all religious practice.

It may be relevant here to mention two other dangers which are liable to cause misunderstanding for the modern Western student of the Old Testament. The first is the tendency to intellectualise religious themes, as if in some philosophical discussion. We talk about "covenant", for example, as an idea, something about which books and essays are written; yet – though much remains obscure about the meaning of the Hebrew word *berith* – the covenant must surely have been actualised in some specific cultic/liturgical setting, which was no doubt taken for granted by the Old Testament writers and so never spelt out in any text which has survived. (The well-known attempt by A. Weiser to explain many Psalms in the context of a covenant-renewal festival was based on a sound instinct, even if his particular reconstruction has not won general assent.)

The second danger arises from the tension between religion as belief and religion as practice. Even today the correlation is imprecise, but it would be widely felt that certain types of belief would be the basis for particular practice. Those who engage in church worship, that is to say, are expected to be those who take a particular view of the world in which they live, and specifically, believe in the existence of God. But this kind of distinction is scarcely an Old Testament concept. There is a Psalm which begins by referring to the fool who says, "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1; 53:1), but it is very widely held that this is "practical atheism", a failure to take God into account in one's behaviour, rather than a deliberate intellectual judgement.[2] For the Old Testament community, religious practice was an accepted, almost an instinctive, part of life; it would therefore be quite anachronistic to interpret the prophetic attacks upon religious practice as if the worshippers had entered into some kind of private commitment which merely showed their hypocrisy – as if, like some moderns, the prophets were saying, "They go to church a lot but they're no better than the rest of us".

## III THEORY AND PRACTICE

We have already noted that there is a potentially confusing tension between the study of the Old Testament in its final form as a witness to Israelite religion and the attempt to explore its historical development. A related, but different, tension arises when we consider the way in which official religious texts seem not to correspond to actual practice. No doubt many formal statements of religious or ideological belief have an ambiguous relation to what is actually carried out under their aegis; surely this is true in the Old Testament, where we can often discover violent polemic against what was regarded as false belief and practice.

A good example would be the attack upon the worship of the "queen of heaven" found in Jeremiah (7:18; 44:17f). The most natural interpretation of such an expression would be that Yahweh was pictured in some circles as having been accompanied by a consort. For the official theory, such a thought was not merely wrong; it was utterly unthinkable, and so it is impossible from the evidence that has come down to us to be certain whether it was indeed the case that the understanding of Yahweh himself changed significantly, or whether Jeremiah's words are addressed to those who had fallen away from the worship of Yahweh. (The discoveries at Kuntillet Ajrud would, in the judgement of some, make the former the more likely alternative.[3])

We may therefore assume both that the polemic within the Old Testament implies that there was false belief and practice which justified such polemic, and that the Old Testament itself will not provide a fair and balanced account of the belief and practices being condemned. This causes additional difficulty if the "polemical" and the "biblical" levels are mixed, and polemic against, say, Canaanite religion is taken as objectively accurate. It is clear that it may have been pictured as depraved for many reasons other than the need to give an objective description. Problems of this kind run right through the Old Testament; they can still be found, for example, in the assessment of the attempt by Antiochus IV Epiphanes to achieve religious unity within the Seleucid Empire in the second century. The Old Testament is "witness" in the crusading rather than the dispassionate sense of the term.

Polemic against false views naturally implies the advocacy of true practice, and this needs to be remembered when we read of good kings or of religious reforms. Not all would necessarily have shared the view of the compilers, but this became the officially accepted line. It would not be difficult, for example, to build up a strongly critical view of the political and religious activity of Hezekiah and Josiah, both of whom are praised by the authors of Kings and Chronicles. More generally, it is important to remember that all Old Testament books have undergone a "Jerusalem edition", even though their contents may have originated elsewhere (cf. Hosea, a northerner, to whose words have been added Jerusalemite allusions such as 3:5).[4] Indeed, a number of recent studies have argued that it was only at about the time of the Exile that a "Yahweh alone" movement finally imposed its views as normative;[5] earlier Yahweh had been regarded both as more like and as compatible with other gods.

All of this brings out in acute form the difficulty of deciding whether particular "history-like" statements are indeed records of historical fact or expressions of ideals. Thus: was Josiah's reform (2 Kings 22-23) the bringing about of a new state of affairs universally recognised as good and implying that Yahweh could henceforth only legitimately be worshipped in Jerusalem? Or was the biblical account a pious ideal pleading on behalf of such an understanding? (In this case archaeological excavations from sites such as Shechem, Bethel or Arad show no dis-use of the sanctuaries there from this period, and there are literary references to the shrine at Elephantine in Egypt.) In other words, the polemical element in the Old Testament is not directed only against what could be regarded as "foreign" (that is, Canaanite) but also against other groups within Israel who claimed to be the true upholders of genuine traditions.

Complexities of this kind provide one of the reasons why the methodological distinction which is often drawn between "History of Israelite religion" and "Old Testament theology" is not entirely satisfactory. The Old Testament in its final form already represents a theology, a particular way of interpreting God's dealings with his people. The historical material has already in the form in which it has come down to us been shaped in the interest of a particular interpretation which could be called a "Jerusalem theology". This has not reduced the Old Testament to uniformity, because the editorial process, in a way which we might regard as naive, often allows the variations pointing to different traditions to remain visible.

## IV CANONICAL FORM AND "ORIGINAL"

One of the most puzzling features of the New English Bible to anyone not inoculated by familiarity with the odd ways of biblical scholars is the frequently-found footnote which takes the form: "Probable Reading: Hebrew adds . . .". This clearly does not refer to simple mistakes which can creep into any written text. Rather, it assumes that there is an "original", in principle traceable, underlying our present Hebrew text, which is in some unexplained way more biblical than the Bible. (Whether such an original is in any given case traceable in practice is not an issue with which we are here concerned.) Carried to its logical extreme this would be obvious nonsense: the underlying fragments of Psalms, prophetic oracles and the like would become the real Bible.

But the practice of the New English Bible is only bringing out in acute form what underlies much biblical scholarship, that is to say, an assumption that "redactors" are in some way second best, and that the quest should be to get back to the original words of the prophet, or the basic form of the law. Surely such an assumption is a confusion of two distinct exercises. In a prophetic book it may be proper to spend time trying to discern which words go back to the time of the prophet himself, though such an exercise is notoriously vulnerable to circular argument; discovering conditions in (say) the eighth century by reference to the prophet, and then proclaiming genuine those passages which corroborate the picture just discovered. In any case it is much more questionable whether a historical exercise of this kind should be determinative for those whose interest is to study the texts that have been handed down as "Bible". For those whose main concern is the religious practice of the ancient Near East, the historical question must be the prime one; for students of theology such an assumption is at least open to challenge.

We are confronted, that is to say, with a difficulty analogous to that which we discovered when we were exploring the "historical roots/final tradition" tension; here again it would seem as if logically our main consideration should be for the material in its final form, though in practice commentaries and textbooks generally give much more attention to the material usually regarded as primary.

## V THE UNIQUENESS OF ISRAEL'S RELIGION

Questions relating to uniqueness have very much come to the fore in recent study.[6] Sometimes the question is discussed at a surprisingly superficial level; of course each of us is unique as an individual, and so are the communities that we form and the institutions which those communities develop. Equally, there are certain characteristics and demands made upon all religious systems, which will mean that comparable institutions can be found over very wide areas.

These points are familiar and obvious enough, but they need to be borne in mind when we are confronted with some considerations of Israel's religion vis-à-vis the religious systems of her neighbours. Thus, some of the writers of the "biblical theology" school have wanted *both* to draw attention to the similarities between Israel's religious expressions and those of other ancient religions in order to demonstrate the antiquity of particular texts or of Israel's religion in general; *and* to stress the incomparability of Israel's religion as something sharply differentiated from her immediate environment. Again, in the various forms of "patternism" which have been put forward, it has often been assumed without adequate examination of the evidence that any gap in one part of the assumed common pattern of ancient Near Eastern religion can be supplied by reference to alleged parallels elsewhere. In fact, it seems that we may have to say, the picture offered by the surviving evidence is much less tidy than this would imply. As Israel developed its conscious identity (whether as migrants into the land as the overwhelming biblical tradition maintains, or as an indigenous but formerly oppressed group as proposed by some modern scholars), much established religious practice was taken over, apparently without question: holy places, festivals, personnel. Only later did there develop a conscious claim to difference, and with it a deliberate rejection of all things Canaanite. This is traceable in Hosea, and very markedly so with the Deuteronomists. Why such a development should have taken place, and whether the appropriate questions to ask in attempting to analyse it are historical or sociological or theological are issues which can scarcely be pursued here.

It is, however, worth noting that even so brief a survey as this encompasses two different understandings of uniqueness. One relates to the specific detail of religious practice: were Israel's customs in this regard fundamentally different from those of her neighbours? An answer to this question can only be attempted on the basis of a full assessment of Israel's religious practice and a comparison with other ancient Near Eastern evidence. The other issue relates to Israel's self-understanding: did Israel view its history, and God's action in that history, in a way without parallel elsewhere? Here we may note that the claim has often been made, especially in the context of claims about "salvation history", that Israel had an understanding of God's action in history radically different from any found elsewhere in the ancient world. This claim has, however, come under considerable criticism in recent years, especially in B. Albrektson's study, *History and the Gods.*[7]

There is, however, one possible pointer to the uniqueness of Israel's religion which should be noted, even if final decisions are scarcely likely. It is possible to find ancient Near Eastern parallels for the greater part of the material in the legal sections of the Old Testament, and for the demands expressed by Israel's prophets; the links between the wisdom literature and Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources are, of course, well-known. Even where no parallels exist, it is difficult in all this to see anything particularly distinctive, such as might form the foundation for a different basis to Israel's religion. What is more noteworthy is the way in which, in the Old Testament, the demands made seem to be bound up with the very nature and character of God. In other Near Eastern texts, the god or gods are pictured rather in the manner of distinguished visitors who come along, as it might be to a school prize-day, make speeches of encouragement and exhortation, and then withdraw from the scene. This is in striking contrast to the immediacy of Yahweh's presence with his community. It is unlikely that the often proposed parallels between Hittite vassal treaties and Old Testament covenant-making should be pressed as showing any kind of dependence, but they do illustrate the immediacy of the relation between the suzerain and his subjects.

One illustration must suffice. Parallels have often been drawn between the Code of Hammurabi and the Pentateuchal legislation; yet how great is the difference between the distant elaborations, invoking a host of deities, of the Hammurabi text, and the direct introduction of the Decalogue: "I am the LORD your God who . . .".

Such a point can of its very nature be no more than a tentative suggestion. At least it serves to remind us of the fact that, despite the many similarities between Israel's religion and that of her neighbours, there was some element in this one alone of all the religions of the ancient Near East which enabled it to survive every kind of disaster, so that its progeny are alive and well, living all over the world today.

**FOOTNOTES:**

1. See the title essay in C. F. Evans, *Is "Holy Scripture" Christian?*, London, 1971.
2. This understanding is the most probable one, though the cautions of J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford, 1961, p. 62, should be borne in mind.
3. See J. A. Emerton, "New Light on Israelite Religion: the Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud", ZAW, 94, 1982, pp. 2/20.
4. This still seems to be the most probable explanation of that verse despite the reservations expressed by G. I. Emmerson, *Hosea: an Israelite Prophet in Judean Perspective*, Sheffield, 1984, esp. pp. 101-116.
5. See in particular B. Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority*, Sheffield, 1983. Lang's views have been strongly challenged in a collection of essays edited by E. Haag, *Gott, der Einzige*, Freiburg, 1985.
6. This debate was given fresh impetus by the detailed study by N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, Maryknoll, 1979, esp. pp. 667-709.
7. Lund, 1967. A brief but helpful discussion of this aspect of uniqueness is offered by J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, Leicester, 1981, esp. pp. 77-79.