

## THE HISTORY OF RELIGION AND THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL

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The purpose of this essay is to discuss the adequacy of the historical approach to Israel's religion in the hope that some of the issues raised may be relevant to the study of religion in general.

The historical treatment was first applied rigorously to the religion of Israel in the late eighteenth century when the newly developing discipline of biblical theology saw as its task the setting out of the history of the religion of both the Old and New Testaments. However it should be borne in mind that the word "history" has almost as many different connotations as the word "myth", for the idea of history behind biblical theology in its earlier stages was not history for its own sake but history as the means of discovering religious truths which could then be put into systematic form by the dogmaticians.<sup>1</sup>

As the nineteenth century progressed, the emphasis shifted from the theology to be discovered by studying the history of Israel's religion to the study of this history for itself. The basic motive for the enterprise now was that by explaining how a religion developed you understood what that religion was. Old Testament theology proper appeared to have been dissolved, but in the 1920s it re-emerged.

Broadly speaking it was distinguished from the history of Israelite religion in that whereas Old Testament theology concentrates on those features of Israel's faith that are still of existential importance, the history of Israelite religion tries to give a picture of what that religion was like whether or not all its aspects are of concern to us now. Obviously the two disciplines overlap even in the minds of those who practice them,<sup>2</sup> but by and large the distinction is maintained between two very different sorts of academic undertaking.<sup>3</sup>

The emergence of this distinction explains why the student of the Hebrew Bible has a sense of *deja vu* when he sees the debate going on within the International Association for the History of Religion between proponents of scholarly study for its own sake and those who wish *Religionswissenschaft* to have a wider application.<sup>4</sup> Might not the way the distinction between Israelite religion and biblical theology was worked out fifty years ago provide some sort of model for a similar accommodation in the world of *Religionswissenschaft*?

However the main purpose of this paper is not to settle a wide ranging debate but to discuss the adequacy of the history of Israel's religion as a means of understanding that religion. The aim of this study as defined by Georg Fohrer is "to depict the course of this religion's development as the history of one normal religion among others, without undertaking theological value judgements or giving weight to apologetic considerations".<sup>5</sup> Fohrer goes on to point out that Israelite religion was neither homogeneous nor static and different tendencies and movements often existed side by side in the same period. The emphasis is on the continuity between the dominant forces and the aim is to describe the shape of the history in the light of subsequent developments. This historical approach can be described as vertical since its

emphasis is on showing the course of Israelite religion as it comes down through the centuries.

I think it is fair to make two observations on this sort of study. First one is in effect dealing with the winners and why and how they won. Secondly the extent to which others are given attention is often due to a combination of literacy and luck. For example the fact that some Israelite writers looked on Ahab more favorably than did the Deuteronomic historian is shown by an excerpt from a historical work they composed which by luck was taken up into 1 Kings 20. But might not these supporters of Ahab have played a greater role than their meager literary remains suggest? The question is whether the history of a religion can by itself give a complete understanding of that religion. Here it is assumed, admittedly in the face of opposition, that the aim of the study of a religion is to enter into the world of the believer, to appreciate not only what he believes but to some extent what it means to him personally. It is also assumed that it is possible to do this even in the case of religions of the past though obviously with less assurance than with living religions.

It is on this point that the adequacy of the history of religion has been challenged in this century by the type of phenomenology of religion represented by van der Leeuw and Pettazoni.<sup>6</sup> Van der Leeuw described his method in the following words:

In doing this I realised that this phenomenology of religion consisted not merely in making an inventory and classification of phenomena as they appear in history, but also a psychological description which necessitated not only a meticulous observation of the religious reality, but also a systematic introspection; not only the description of what is visible from outside, but above all the experience born of what can only become reality after it has been admitted into the life of the observer himself. In other words, I realised that in carrying on the magnificent, but essentially unphilosophical, work of Chantepie and Lehmann, I was in the very centre of the great phenomenological stream which was at that time flowing through philosophy, psychiatry and other sciences.<sup>7</sup>

This entry into the inner workings of the mind of the believer is of course scarcely open to scientific validation in the strict sense of the word, but then van der Leeuw was sufficiently aware of existentialist philosophy and psychology to be able to see that the objective-subjective dichotomy thought to be basic to science was in fact less sure than it was believed to be. However the point I wish to make is that systematic introspection such as van der Leeuw suggests leads legitimately and properly into complexities not usually recognized in the history of Israel's religion.

I would like to suggest that in the study of a religion we are up against a problem similar to philosophy's hardy perennial of the relationship between universals and particulars, namely the relationship between a religion and its adherents. It is of course necessary to bear in mind the opposite problem of the relationship of the individual believer to his religious tradition and in the treatment of biblical religion this was dealt with by de Wette over a hundred years ago.<sup>8</sup> But if one wishes to talk about the history of a religion one has to put the question the other way round — what is the relationship of a religion to those who profess it?

Clearly if one is going to talk about a religion as a distinct entity, then the religion must in some sense extend beyond the individual believer; otherwise one is not dealing with a religion but only a number of separate instances of

piety. But how does one draw the line between those within and those without? A few years ago a controversy arose over who is a Jew. To say that a Jew is anyone who wishes to say he is a Jew seems imprecise; but the more usual definition that a Jew is anyone born of a Jewish mother is not without its inconvenient side, if for no other reason that in the absence of more exact information it would appear to exclude the children of Moses himself. No doubt certain religions at certain times in their history have been very particular about whom they admitted to be members in good standing, but often the lines they drew are difficult to justify on rational principles; for example Origen was labelled a heretic but Lucian of Antioch a saint.

Furthermore there is a danger that in talking about the individual believer we may postulate a unified personality consciously striving for consistency as well as excellence. But such a person is a rarity as any observation of human nature will show. For example in the biblical tradition magic is definitely out of keeping with the idea of God, yet it is possible to find a good church going woman who will charm away her grand daughter's warts by using a piece of string and, of all things, the Bible itself. Any study of religion that fails to take into account the complexities and inconsistencies of human nature is unrealistic.

Therefore in trying to understand the meaning of Hebrew religion to its adherents it is convenient to distinguish four distinct approaches to religion that ancient Israelites exhibited. It should be emphasized that here we are dealing with types of approach to religion, not necessarily types of individuals since we are all familiar with the primitive animism of the chemistry professor who keeps a rabbit's foot on his key chain.

The first type of approach to religion is that of the founder or the re-interpreter of a religious tradition. Whether we wish to call him a creative individual or the recipient of divine revelation is a matter of opinion, but the effect is the same, namely a founding or a reform is carried out in terms of certain principles put into practice with an inner consistency that disregards or is hostile to the customary. In terms of Israel's religion this sort of person is represented by Moses and a few of the prophets; in later times this sort of thinking is represented by founders of sects within Judaism or the writers in the later wisdom tradition.

The second approach to religion is that of the traditionalist, the person who understands the basic tenets of his religion and who is often prepared to defend them against all comers. The traditionalists in the Hebrew Bible are represented amongst others by the Deuteronomic historian on one hand and by the established priesthoods in Bethel and Jerusalem on the other. Here one can see that sometimes traditionalists are found ranged on opposing sides in a conflict thanks to the choices involved in a given situation; for example faced with Jezebel should one conform in the interests of preserving the established order or should one disagree on the basis of one's beliefs about the essential in Israel's religion?

The third approach is that of the obedient faithful. This approach is marked by undoubted sincerity combined with a limited awareness of the wider implications of the faith, especially in new or unusual circumstances. The person adopting this approach does his best to carry out his obligations, but this is combined with a pragmatic appreciation of what is helpful or useful. Furthermore the person may well incorporate heterogenous elements into his faith without being aware of their incongruity and may even bring pressure to

bear on the traditionalist to legitimate these different practices. In modern terms one can think of the church going legionnaire who considers that his country's army and God's army are synonymous and who is outraged by any suggestion from the pulpit that pacifism might be a Christian option after all. An example of obedient faithful functioning as a pressure group on the traditionalists is the charismatic movement which in the major denominations has tended to exist despite traditional authorities but has nonetheless won some legitimation from them.

The fourth approach is that of the disobedient faithful. This is clearly a contradiction in terms, but then people do tend to act in inconsistent ways. The person exhibiting this approach remains attached to his religion for a variety of reasons but he is unwilling or unable to recognize anything more than the most token of observances as binding on his life. In ancient Israelite religion the disobedient faithful is often mentioned in the Psalms in the hope that the Almighty will make it necessary for him to wear dentures, but however much the ungodly may scheme and plot with the use of necromancy and other abominable practices, the fact remains that for the purposes of the census he would say with a certain amount of conviction that he is a Yahwist in religion.

Two points should be made about these four approaches to religion.

First in the way they have been discussed here the series is marked by a decrease in the logic of belief and an increase in the number and variety of beliefs. It is in the less coherent outlooks of the obedient faithful and the disobedient faithful that one can expect to find believed and practiced ideas and customs of archaic or foreign origin. While creative individuals or militant traditionalists may make some impression on these two groups, the effect is never clear-cut, for human beings have always shown a remarkable tenacity for carrying on with what they are used to doing or what they want to do.

The second point I would like to make is that when the history of Israelite religion is discussed, it is the attitudes of the first two groups which are paramount in the scholar's mind even though he is talking about only a small minority of the Israelites living at any given time. Unfortunately the beliefs of the marginally literate or illiterate from whose ranks most adherents of the third and fourth approaches came in antiquity are usually represented by artefacts from excavations. Here the problems of interpretation are notoriously difficult. For example in the later period of the Israelite occupation of Palestine a considerable number of female figurines are found. Unlike figurines from earlier strata which show the complete female anatomy with grossly distorted sexual features, these later artefacts show only the top half of the female figure, albeit with enlarged breasts. W. F. Albright argues that these later statuettes were not sexual in nature but were milk charms of the *dea nutrix* type.<sup>9</sup> Apart from the problem of whether everyone sees such an object in the same way, or even whether one person consistently has only one interpretation of an object, one is still left with the question of who was the *dea* in question and how did she fit in with Yahweh in the general piety of the day?

The fact of the matter is that in Hebrew religion at any given time there were wide varieties of practice and belief. This tends to be obscured in even the best histories of Hebrew religion; in fact a legitimate historical statement may have the effect of obscuring our appreciation of the situation as it existed. For example George Widengren says that in the religion of Israel we see a tension between ritual practice and spiritual interpretation.<sup>10</sup> This is probably as true as any general statement ever can be, but I am not sure that it helps us to

understand how ancient Israelites themselves saw their religion. As a test case let us take the famous confrontation between Amos and Amaziah at Bethel as described in Amos 7. How does Widengren's historical statement help in appreciating what was actually happening?

Amos was working on the first level of religion discussed above. His point was that the cult of Bethel was valueless in the eyes of God if rampant social injustice was ignored by the worshippers. Amos would have found Widengren's use of "spiritual" puzzling; he would not have made a distinction between spiritual and formal but rather between obedience and disobedience to Yahweh as the spirit of Yahweh indicated. Furthermore it is far from certain that Amos was against ritual practice for its own sake; he possibly saw it as a necessary but not sufficient form of worship.

Amaziah, the high priest of Bethel, has had a bad press, not altogether without justification. However to understand him one should realize that he was functioning at the second level of religion, he was a traditionalist, concerned with the preservation of the traditions of his faith. Had Amaziah been faced with Widengren's statement he might well have retorted that he personally as an expert could see no such tension between ritual practice and spiritual interpretation. Indeed prophets possessed by the spirit were very much a part of his sanctuary staff. Although there were a few unbalanced characters such as Amos about, surely every religion has its share of cranks who suddenly decide that day light saving time is against the will of God, but is it fair to characterize a whole tradition by a few eccentrics? Amaziah could have gone on further by pointing out that as far as Amos' condemnations were concerned, much of what he described was in full accord with established legal practice and while there were indeed unfortunate side effects to the new economic order and even miscarriages of justice from time to time, surely what existed was so much better than conditions under the Syrian oppression that it was simply unpatriotic of Amos to express sentiments which made him a tool of imperialist aggressors such as Assyria. Amaziah's parting shot might have been that had it not been for people like himself teaching the ten commandments and the story of the covenant for four hundred years, people like Amos would never have been able to form their ideas, let alone hope to be understood.

Those at the third level of religion, the obedient faithful, might well have been troubled by Amos and his exchange with Amaziah. Some, especially those whose own families had been the victims of social injustice, might have been tempted to agree with Amos, but by and large the obedient faithful would have gone home saying that surely the high priest of Bethel cannot be all that wrong.

As far as the fourth level of religion is concerned — the disobedient faithful — they would have been too busy enjoying the custom of temple prostitution to worry about its morality. Uninspiring as they might have been, it is possible that they outnumbered the supporters of Amos and Amaziah put together.

Where then is Hebrew religion in the time of Jeroboam II? The history of religion shows where the future lay — with Amos and traditionalists different from Amaziah — but one should beware of taking Widengren's statement as a description of how ancient Israelites themselves thought. It is no doubt valid as a historical generalization, but it must be seen as an external description cast in modern terms that has as much relationship to how ancient Israelites actually saw their religion as a road map has to a colour photograph.

Now it has been argued so far that the vertical dimension of history has to be filled out with the horizontal dimension of entering into the variety of people's actual beliefs at a given time. But it can also be added that the history of religion itself can miss its own specific target by ignoring the horizontal dimension. What the two groups of the obedient faithful and the disobedient faithful actually believe and practice is clearly chaotic. But in this chaos there is the opportunity for beliefs and traditions to continue and flourish long after the creative intelligences and the traditionalists have forgotten about them. Then at some later date these old beliefs suddenly re-emerge with a startling vitality that gives the optical illusion that they are new creations rather than old survivals.

For example Fohrer says that in late Judaism belief in demons took on greater importance than in Old Testament times.<sup>11</sup> That demonology was better recorded in later Judaism and that it received certain developments and embellishments is indisputable. But to say that it was necessarily more prominent ignores the implications of one detail in the Day of Atonement ritual described in Leviticus 16. In this ancient ritual involving two goats, one of the goats is sent into the wilderness "to Azazel". Now this is the only mention of Azazel in the Hebrew Bible, yet from the context it is not only clear that he was some sort of desert demon but that he was so well known that simply to mention his name was sufficient, for it is only the new or the unfamiliar which needs an explanation. I would argue therefore that at the level of the obedient faithful and even more that of the disobedient faithful, demonology was as important in Old Testament times as after; the difference was that in the later period pressure from these two lower levels of religion forced demonology up into the two other levels where it was recorded, even as in the history of Latin Christianity essentially pagan beliefs and practices were forced into the normative theology of Gregory the Great.

The persistence of unfashionable belief outside the levels of creative thinker and traditionalist is the explanation why figures like Job and Daniel suddenly emerge; in fact they were there all along but only caught the eye of a writer at a certain period. Here again the principle of luck and literacy applies. In the apocalyptic visions of great beasts we find the re-emergence of all sorts of creation motifs that had been more or less systematically weeded out of the normative Hebrew scriptures. How had these motifs been preserved? This is no mystery to anyone who has had students repeat stories from the apocryphal gospels fully convinced that they came from Mark, for even the most heretical documents can be treasured by enthusiasts among the obedient faithful. The historian of religion must be always aware of the possibility of this underground flow of ideas and practices if he is not to mistake the reasons behind changes in the mainstream of the religion he is studying.

In conclusion then my argument can be summed up as follows. At any time any religion is marked by a wider divergence of belief and practice than one might suspect by consulting its more learned and articulate members. Whether or not one considers these beliefs and practices to be strictly in accord with the basic tenets of a given religion is beside the point; the fact is they exist. In the history of religion we are dealing principally with those beliefs that had a future, that is the beliefs that won out in the end. We should preserve ourselves from the illusion that these winning beliefs were the dominant ones at all times in a religion's history if we wish to understand its adherents "from within". Finally our awareness of the various levels of religious response at any given



time can enable us to appreciate non-literary factors in the history of religion and to avoid erroneous or unfounded conclusions.

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## REFERENCES

1. This is the point made by J. P. Gabler, "*De justo discriminae theologiae biblicae et dogmaticae*", 1787, reprinted in T. A. and T. G. Gabler, eds., *Opuscula Academica* (Ulm: Stettin, 1831), 2:179-198.
2. The description of Israelite religion is a setting out of what Israelites did, not what a scholar thinks they should have done. Thus when Kaufmann argues that certain magical practices, only too common amongst Israelites, were somehow "pagan" and not Israelite, he is introducing his own conception of what was theologically proper to Israelite religion and to this extent has passed into the area of biblical theology. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, tr. and abridged M. Greenberg (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961).
3. Thus Georg Fohrer in the foreword to a history of Israel's religion announces his intention of eventually writing a theology of the Old Testament. G. Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion*, tr. David E. Green (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 5.
4. See E. J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 267-293.
5. Fohrer, *History*, 23.
6. See for example Raffaele Pettazoni's article, "'History' and 'Phenomenology' in the Science of Religion", in J. Waardenburg, ed., *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973) 1: 639-642.
7. As quoted in Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, 231.
7. W. M. L. de Wette. *Biblishe Dogmatik* (Berlin: Reimer, 2nd ed, 1831) 1-28.
9. W. F. Albright, *Archeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1946), 115.
10. G. Widengren, "Israelite-Jewish Religion", in C. J. Bleeker and G. Widengren, knowledge with their readers.
11. Fohrer, *History*, 176. In fairness to Fohrer it should be added that he does discuss as thoroughly as possible the Old Testament passages dealing with Azazel and other demons. My disagreement with him is that I do not consider that the lack of passages concerned with demonology in the Hebrew Bible necessarily indicates a lack of belief in demons in Israel. It is only in modern times that authors have begun to record what they considered to be common knowledge with their readers.