Joachim Schaper
Cultural Patterns in the Old Testament

Abstract: This essay presents observations and interpretations that arise when the "cultural pattern" category is applied to the search for the intellectual forces driving the production of the literature found in the Hebrew Bible. It therefore focuses less on, for example, the key ethical or theological concepts we find in that literature, and more on the cultural patterns that generated those concepts. The essay thus explores the cognitive "area" where the intellectual constellations were formed that gave rise to such concepts.

In diesem Aufsatz werden Beobachtungen und Interpretationen dargestellt, die sich aus der Anwendung der Kategorie "kulturelles Muster" auf die Suche nach den geistigen Antriebskräften ergeben, die die Literatur der Hebräischen Bibel hervorgebracht haben. Der Schwerpunkt liegt also nicht auf den ethischen oder theologischen Schlüsselkonzepten, die wir in dieser Literatur finden, sondern auf den kulturellen Mustern, die diese Konzepte hervorgebracht haben. Der Aufsatz untersucht den kognitiven "Bereich", in dem sich die intellektuellen Konstellationen bildeten, die solche Konzepte hervorbrachten.

True to the spirit of this volume and its focus on what effectively is a cognitive science approach to the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, I should like to present a few observations and interpretations made in applying the category of "culture pattern" or "cultural pattern" to the quest for the intellectual driving forces that produced the literature gathered together under the roof of the Hebrew Bible. Thus my focus is not on, say, key ethical or theological concepts we find in that literature, but on *the cultural patterns that generated those concepts*. I thus intend to dig deeper than is usually the case, to go beyond the reconstruction of the history of concepts and to enter the – I think, much more fascinating – area where the intellectual constellations were formed that gave rise to such concepts. In so doing, the notion of "culture patterns" promoted by Clifford Geertz is of special interest to me. Geertz was not the first scholar using this concept; it has its roots in the works of an earlier generation of American social and cultural anthropologists, but, as far as I can see, ultimately goes back to Cassirer's *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*.[1]

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[1] Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (PhB 607, 608, 609), 3 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2010), original publication: Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923–1929.

Be that as it may, Geertz forged the concept of "culture pattern" into a really useful tool of anthropological analysis. In his view,

> undirected by culture patterns – organized systems of significant symbols – man's behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless. Culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but – the principal basis of its specificity – an essential condition for it.[2]

Culture patterns give orientation to our species because for us human beings, "what are innately given", states Geertz, "are extremely general response capacities, which, although they make possible far greater plasticity, complexity, and, on the scattered occasions when everything works as it should, effectiveness of behavior, leave it much less precisely regulated".[3] It is this lack of precision in the regulation of human behaviour which culture patterns counterbalance: they enable human beings to function socially – in spite of being insufficiently programmed, so to speak.

What precisely are "culture patterns"? Geertz sees them as "models", and he differentiates between "model[s] *of* 'reality'" and "models *for* 'reality'":[4]

> Models *for* are found [...] through the whole order of nature; for wherever there is a communication of pattern, such programs are, in simple logic, required. [...] But models *of* – linguistic, graphic, mechanical, natural, etc., processes which function not to provide sources of information in terms of which other processes can be patterned, but to represent those patterned processes as such, to express their structure in an alternative medium – are much rarer and may perhaps be confined, among living animals, to man.[5]

When employing the concept of "culture pattern" along the lines suggested by Geertz, we should be keenly aware of the fact that that concept was severely criticised early on. Probably the best-known and most sustained criticism of Geertz's approach is the one formulated by Talal Asad in his essay "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz", published in *Man* in 1983. Summing up his results, Asad states that, while "[i]ts strength lies in its attempt to bring together a wide range of important questions", "an overall weakness of Geertz's position seems to be the hiatus it accepts between (external) symbols and (internal) dispositions, which parallels the hiatus between 'cultural system' and 'social rea-

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2 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, [1973] 2017), 51.

3 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 51.

4 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 100.

5 Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 101–2.

lity'".[6] Instead, Asad advises, "let us begin [...] by asking what are the historical conditions (movements, classes, institutions, ideologies) necessary for the existence of particular religious practices and discourses".[7] And he states that "[w]hat requires systematic investigation therefore are the ways in which, in each society, social disciplines produce and authorise knowledges, the ways in which selves are required to respond to those knowledges, the ways in which knowledges are accumulated and distributed".[8] Asad advocates the explanation of the social genesis of symbols advocated by Lev Vygotsky,[9] and claims that "[i]t must be stressed that this is not a matter of urging the study of the origin of symbols in addition to their function – such a distinction is not relevant here. What is being argued is that the authoritative status of concepts/discourses is dependent on the socially appropriate production of other discourses/activities; the two are intrinsically and not just temporally connected".[10] However, Geertz does not disregard this important point. He takes it seriously but focuses on an equally important aspect of symbols, that is, their use in "cultural acts":

> To undertake the study of cultural activity – activity in which symbolism forms the positive content – is thus not to abandon social analysis for a Platonic cave of shadows, to enter into a mentalistic world of introspective psychology or, worse, speculative philosophy, and wander there forever in a haze of "Cognitions," "Affections," "Conations," and other elusive entities. Cultural acts, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms, are social events like any other; they are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture.[11]

What is of central interest to us here is the fact that Geertz has identified the characteristics and uses of complexes of symbols that operate as culture patterns, and it is that insight that we use as the basis for our discussion of culture patterns in the Hebrew Bible, or, more precisely, in the societies of ancient Israel and Judah that produced the texts which were then assembled under the roof of the literary collection known as the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. How the authority of such discourses – and of the complexes of symbols that undergird them – is established and enacted is important, but it is not central to our enquiry. While it is

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6 Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz", *Man* (New Series) 18 (1983), 237–59, 252.

7 Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions", 252.

8 Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions", 252.

9 Cf. Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, revised and expanded edition (Cambridge, MA/London, England: MIT Press, 2012).

10 Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions", 240.

11 Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System", 98.

true that Geertz does not do justice to the extremely insightful work of Vygotsky and others who worked and are working at the interface of psychology and what is nowadays called "cultural studies", it is also true that "[c]ultural acts, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms, are social events like any other" – and that is what I would like to concentrate on. I am interested in identifying culture patterns that underlay and informed discourses, and that did so in ancient Israel and Judah at the time when the books of the Hebrew Bible were composed and redacted.

According to Geertz, in the context of religious practice, symbols generate their effects "by inducing in the worshipper a certain distinctive set of dispositions (tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, pronenesses) which lend a chronic character to the flow of his activity and the quality of his experience".[12] The same can rightfully be said of the use of symbols in other contexts. It seems to me that one of the main characteristics of Geertz's concept of culture patterns as "systems or complexes of symbols"[13] is that it actually works not just in the field of religious practice but in other societal contexts too. One may deplore, with Asad, Geertz's use of the concept of "religion", but Geertz's identification of culture patterns actually helps to avoid precisely those pitfalls which it allegedly, according to Asad, encourages. Far from promoting a facile use of the concept of "religion", it facilitates the analysis of the "work" done by symbolic interaction across the full range of aspects of a given culture, that is, of all its subsystems.

Do we find, then, in the Hebrew Bible, "complexes of symbols" that can rightly be called culture patterns in the sense intended by Clifford Geertz? I think we do. In this paper, I should like to concentrate on one of them – a pattern that may help us to understand something about the driving forces behind the practice of religion in ancient Israel and Judah and the formation of the Hebrew Bible that we have not fully, or maybe not at all, grasped: I should like to call it the "cosmic order" pattern. It is a complex of symbols that evolved over time and had a significant effect on cultic practices and everyday ethics.

A prime text that can illustrate the point I am making with regard to the "cosmic order" pattern is Psalm 19:2–13.[14] In much of earlier historical-critical scholarship the psalm was seen as an amalgamation of two earlier, originally separate

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12 Geertz, "Religion", 102.

13 Geertz, "Religion", 98.

14 Ps 19:1 contains the superscript, and vv. 14–15 draw the conclusion from vv. 2–13. It is clear from the mirroring between vv. 2–7 and 8–13 that suggestions to treat vv. 12–15 as a sub-unit – as suggested, for example, by Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen* (HAT I/15; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1996), 88: "Gebet eines Beschuldigten" – are likely to be mistaken.

psalms. Many scholars found it difficult to see the psalm's unity. Let us have a closer look at its structure (translation: RSV):

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8 תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נָפֶשׁ
עֵדוּת יְהוָה נֶאֱמָנָה מַחְכִּימַת פֶּתִי:
9 פִּקּוּדֵי יְהוָה יְשָׁרִים מְשַׂמְּחֵי־לֵב
מִצְוַת יְהוָה בָּרָה מְאִירַת עֵינָיִם:
10 יִרְאַת יְהוָה ׀ טְהוֹרָה עוֹמֶדֶת לָעַד
מִשְׁפְּטֵי־יְהוָה אֱמֶת צָדְקוּ יַחְדָּו:
11 הַנֶּחֱמָדִים מִזָּהָב וּמִפַּז רָב
וּמְתוּקִים מִדְּבַשׁ וְנֹפֶת צוּפִים:
12 גַּם־עַבְדְּךָ נִזְהָר בָּהֶם
בְּשָׁמְרָם עֵקֶב רָב:

13 שְׁגִיאוֹת מִי־יָבִין

מִנִּסְתָּרוֹת נַקֵּנִי:
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2 הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד־אֵל
וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו מַגִּיד הָרָקִיעַ:
3 יוֹם לְיוֹם יַבִּיעַ אֹמֶר
וְלַיְלָה לְּלַיְלָה יְחַוֶּה־דָּעַת:
4 אֵין־אֹמֶר וְאֵין דְּבָרִים
בְּלִי נִשְׁמָע קוֹלָם:
5 בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ ׀ יָצָא קַוָּם
וּבִקְצֵה תֵבֵל מִלֵּיהֶם
לַשֶּׁמֶשׁ שָׂם־אֹהֶל בָּהֶם:
6 וְהוּא כְּחָתָן יֹצֵא מֵחֻפָּתוֹ
יָשִׂישׂ כְּגִבּוֹר לָרוּץ אֹרַח:
7 מִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם ׀ מוֹצָאוֹ
וּתְקוּפָתוֹ עַל־קְצוֹתָם
וְאֵין נִסְתָּר מֵחַמָּתוֹ:
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2 The heavens are telling the glory of God
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

3 Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

4 There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

5 yet their measure goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In them he has set a tent for the sun,
6 which comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
and like a strong man runs [its] course with joy.
7 Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and there is nothing hid from its heat.

8 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple;

9 the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes;

10 the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true,
and righteous altogether.

11 More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.

12 Moreover by them is thy servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

13 But who can discern his errors?
Clear thou me from hidden faults.

The key point is that vv. 2–7 and 8–13 illuminate each other:[15] the order of the law mirrors the order of nature; the Torah mirrors the heavens (i.e., the cosmos); the testimony of the Torah mirrors the deeds, the handiwork of the creator; the precepts of the Torah mirror the knowledge of the heavens; and so on. Note especially the significance of the sun and of God being active through the Torah: nothing can remain "hidden" from the heat of the sun, and, similarly, God can clear the person from "hidden" sins, that is, nothing can remain undetected by him and his Torah. The order of nature, conceptualised as creation, is demonstrated with reference to the perceived revolutions of the heavenly bodies, especially that of the sun. The terminology used to describe those revolutions is significant – v. 7 especially stresses the regularity of the sun's supposed celestial course:

מִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם ׀ מוֹצָאוֹ וּתְקוּפָתוֹ עַל־קְצוֹתָם וְאֵין נִסְתָּר מֵחַמָּתוֹ׃

Again and again, the sun prescribes its complete course, and on its way nothing in creation can hide from it – or rather, him: given that *šemeš* is a masculine noun and that the sun gods of the Semitic cultures are conceived of as being male, the psalm conceptualises *šemeš* as a male. He establishes and guarantees order through the leadership that he gives to the celestial bodies and the whole course of nature.

The order of *nature* is then juxtaposed with that of society, that is, the order of the Torah, and the latter order is evidenced in the effect it has on human life. Both forms of order, that of nature and that of the Law, or Instruction, are actualisations of the all-pervasive *cosmic* order established by the creator; within the same overarching cosmic order they mirror and illuminate each other.

The psalm can be analysed with the help of one of the well-established methods of biblical exegesis, that is, that of tradition history (*Traditionsgeschichte*), as demonstrated in Hartmut Gese's essay on the worldview(s) (*Weltbild*) informing biblical authors.[16] One thus avoids the pitfalls of many earlier historical-critical exegetes, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, who saw the psalm as a composition consisting "of two originally separate poems", as did, for example, Charles and

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15 The following observations are partly based on Hartmut Gese, "Die Einheit von Psalm 19", in: Hartmut Gese, *Alttestamentliche Studien* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1991), 139–48.

16 Hartmut Gese, "Die Frage des Weltbildes", in: Hartmut Gese, *Zur biblischen Theologie: Alttestamentliche Vorträge*, second edition (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1983), 202–22 and Gese, Hartmut, "Tradition und biblische Theologie", in: Odil Hannes Steck, ed., *Zu Tradition und Theologie im Alten Testament* (Biblisch-theologische Studien 2) (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 87–111.

Emily Briggs in their Psalms commentary in the *International Critical Commentary* series.[17]

But there is another way of analysing such a psalm, an approach that is very different from any of those normally pursued in biblical scholarship. We can attempt to understand Psalm 19 as being informed by complexes of symbols, by "culture patterns". If we try to understand the cognitive processes of symbolising that *generate* the thinking which underlies our psalm, we are confronted with a fascinating question which will result in an answer that helps us not only to understand the psalm better, but to appreciate more deeply the way in which symbols and culture patterns worked in ancient Israel and Judah.

We have noted the close correspondence between vv. 2–7 and 8–13. Let us now look more closely at the way in which the celestial bodies are described. They seem to have a life of their own: they have a voice; they utter speech; the sun leaves its/his tent and runs its/his course. Yet ultimately it is clear that they are under the control of a god – *elohim* – who has established them to do their work. This view modifies the conceptualisation of the relation between gods and celestial bodies which we find in Mesopotamian literature. Take the text of a prayer (PBS 1/2 106 r. 13–14), for example, in which Šamaš and Sin are addressed as follows: "The lands rejoice at your appearance. / Day and night they entrust (to you) their ability to see."[18] As Francesca Rochberg concludes, "[t]he speaker seems to believe that to watch for the sun and moon in the sky is to await the appearance of the gods Šamaš and Sin".[19] The Israelite view is different because of the focus on *elohim* as the creator-god, but the underlying view is the same: the celestial bodies bring divine realities to appearance.

Noting the mirroring of vv. 2–7 in vv. 8–13, it is clear that we have here an instance of analogical thinking that draws a comparison between phenomena of the natural world and components of, and actions in, the social world. Once again, that has fascinating parallels in Mesopotamian literature. In Assyriology, the question whether or not analogical thinking existed in the ancient Near East has long been a bone of contention.[20] It has, in my view, been answered once and for

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17 Charles Augustus Briggs and Emily Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (ICC), Vol. I (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), 162–3.

18 Quoted according to Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature, Vol. II* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993), 684; discussed in Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 187.

19 Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 187.

20 Cf. the perceptive discussion of some of the earlier theories in Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 173–5.

all by Francesca Rochberg in her monograph *The Heavenly Writing*. Rochberg rightly states that "[c]elestial omens further instantiate the rather abstract idea of correspondence between the two cosmological domains, heaven and earth".[21] She also points out, with regard to texts like the incantation to Ea, Šamaš and Marduk found in LKA 109:1–8,[22] that "nondivinatory literature affords a better insight into the belief in the gods' active role in the world".[23] A pertinent passage from the incantation reads as follows:

> you are the ones who judge the law of the land,
> who determine the nature of things,
> who draw the cosmic designs,
> who assign the [lots] for heaven and earth.[24]

It is thus clear that analogical thinking – as expressed, for example, by "the rather abstract idea of correspondence between the two cosmological domains, heaven and earth"[25] – existed early on in the ancient Near East and was rooted in correlating a certain interpretation of the empirical observation of the movement of celestial bodies, on the one hand, with the experience of manual and intellectual labour and of the institution of kingship[26] on the other. It is remarkable to see that matters were conceptualised in a very similar manner in the Greek world, where "[t]he first instance of a cosmological doctrine expressed in social terms occurs in our earliest extant philosophical text",[27] that is, the famous Anaximander fragment:[28]

> ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσίς ἐστι τοῖς οὖσι, καὶ τὴν φθορὰν εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεών· διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν

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21 Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 191.

22 Erich Ebeling, ed., *Literarische Keilschrifttexte aus Assur* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1953).

23 Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 191.

24 Quoted according to Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 191.

25 Rochberg, *Heavenly Writing*, 191.

26 Cf. George Thomson, *The First Philosophers*, Vol. II, *Studies in Ancient Greek Society* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, second edition 1961, repr. 1977), *passim* (esp. 71–101) on the correlation between religious concepts and philosophical thought, on the one hand, and the experience of labour and social organisation, on the other.

27 Geoffrey Ernest Richard Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy: Two Types of Argumentation in Early Greek Thought* (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), 212.

28 For the text and a German translation, cf. Jaap Mansfeld and Oliver Primavesi, eds., *Die Vorsokratiker: Griechisch/Deutsch* (RUB 18971; Stuttgart: Philip Reclam Jun., 2012), 70–73; for the "classic" edition, cf. Diels-Kranz 12 A9, B1.

G. E. R. Lloyd sees this as "the first instance of a cosmological doctrine expressed in social terms" – the first one in the history of Greek philosophy, we should add. Lloyd points out that "this idea of a restoration of a cosmological equilibrium is expressed entirely in social or legal terminology". He draws our attention to the fact that "Anaximander refers not to the *supreme power* of an autocratic king (such as Zeus is, in Homer and Hesiod), but to the *rule of law*, which regulates the relationships between several factors which are *all of equal status*".[29] In that respect it is strikingly similar to Psalm 19 and its analogy between the cosmos and divine law (as opposed to divine *power*). Concrete experience led to the formation of a complex of symbols, a "culture pattern" pertaining to the perceived "cosmic order", that is, of the supposed order of "the two cosmological domains, heaven and earth". However, it needs to be stressed that Anaximander, while he uses an analogy between the cosmos and the social world of humanity, categorically excludes the divine. Yet there is a distinct similarity between his thinking and that of the author of Psalm 19, inasmuch as both draw an analogy between processes in the natural and in the social worlds; the difference is that Anaximander does not charge the social (in this case, the execution of justice according to legal principles) with concepts of divinity, whereas the biblical author does (by attributing divine origin to the law that regulates human social life). This brings me to my conclusion.

Conclusion

Psalm 19 is informed by essentially the same culture pattern that informs the Mesopotamian texts I have drawn attention to, and in that respect it even resembles early Greek texts like Anaximander's fragment: a complex of symbols, a "culture pattern", that was intended to model the reality of the celestial bodies and their perceived or real movements and to relate it to the divine and, through it, to the human, social world, with the ultimate aim of making a normative statement about the order of the social world. The fact that such a transfer from the natural to the social, and vice versa, was possible in the first place is due to the existence of the concept of analogy, the genesis of which is rooted in intellectual labour that was ultimately inspired by manual labour.[30] Therefore the question must be asked how precisely *cultural* patterns arose, ultimately, from the *social* world and

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29 Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy*, 213.

30 Cf. Peter Damerow and Wolfgang Lefèvre, "Tools of Science", in: P. Damerow, *Abstraction and Representation: Essays on the Cultural Evolution of Thinking* (Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 175; Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer, 1996), 395–404.

the concrete, everyday experience of the men and women of the ancient societies that generated them. While this question has been asked with regard to Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greek evidence,[31] the literature and artefacts of Israel and Judah have not yet been subjected to such scrutiny. It is to be hoped that the present volume will inspire work along those lines in Old Testament / Hebrew Bible studies.

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31 One "classic" example from a growing body of work done across disciplinary and national boundaries is: Peter Damerow and Wolfgang Lefèvre, eds., *Rechenstein, Experiment, Sprache: Historische Fallstudien zur Entstehung der exakten Wissenschaften* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 223–33.

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