

PART THREE

THE RELIGION OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Fig. 10.1. A Torah scroll is displayed at a former synagogue in Cologne, Germany.

Religion is a seeking and responding to holiness through acts of devotion, through proclamation and reflection, and through membership in holy communities with those who share common beliefs, concerns, ceremonies, and traditions.¹

Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²

Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as purely preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life.³

All books of Scripture are rooted in a historical context, so any attempt to understand their content requires at least a general familiarity with the history of the people who produced them. This is especially true for a collection like the Hebrew Bible, where virtually every book either narrates or refers to events that the authors believed took place in the times of their ancestors.

But the people who wrote, compiled, and edited these texts were not simply recording the past for posterity. The Hebrew Bible is a collection of religious texts, not a history book. When it speaks about the past, its vantage point is invariably religious—the people who produced it believed that the events of history were determined not by social, economic, or political causes, but by the will and actions of Yahweh their god. Thus even the so-called Historical Books of the Hebrew Bible were written to communicate a religious message.

When we turn to the other books in this collection, the religious orientation becomes even more apparent. References to the supernatural world appear on nearly every page, and much of their content revolves around the question of how the people of Yahweh should express their devotion to the deity.

As we turn to investigate what these books tell us about the religious beliefs and practices of the people who produced them, however, problems arise. Two issues in particular must be addressed before we can proceed with our investigation of the religious dimension of the Hebrew Bible: (a) What do we mean by *religion*, and (b) what is the relation between religion and books of Scripture?

THE HEBREW BIBLE AND RELIGION

The Hebrew Bible contains many passages whose link to religion is not at all apparent to contemporary readers. Consider the following passages.

Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death. (*Exodus 21:16*)

You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials. (*Leviticus 19:19*)

A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained. (*Deuteronomy 19:15*)

When you sit down to eat with a ruler, observe carefully what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you have a big appetite. Do not desire the ruler's delicacies, for they are deceptive food. (*Proverbs 23:1-3*)

How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride! how much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! Your lips distill nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue; the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon. (*Song of Solomon 4:10-11*)

While it might be possible to guess at the religious significance of some of these verses, the issues that they address do not sound particularly religious to a modern ear. In other passages the link to the supernatural world is clear, but a contemporary reader might wonder how such an issue came to be included in the sphere of religion in the first place. The following passages could be said to fit this category.

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. (*Genesis 17:10-12*)

When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean. (*Leviticus 13:2-3*)

If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement. (*Leviticus 17:10-11*)

Still other texts express divine approval for ideas and actions that run counter to the values of many contemporary readers. The passages below should be sufficient to indicate the nature of the problem.

But if the slave declares, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person," then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life. (*Exodus 21:5-6*)

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. (*Leviticus 21:16-21*)

If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman's father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives. (*Deuteronomy 22:28-29*)

If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, fearing this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will overwhelm both you and your offspring with severe and lasting afflictions and grievous and lasting maladies. He will bring back upon you all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were in

dread, and they shall cling to you. Every other malady and affliction, even though not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will inflict on you until you are destroyed. (*Deuteronomy 28:58-61*)

Clearly the people who wrote, compiled, and edited the Hebrew Bible had a different understanding of religion than is common in modern Western societies. In some ways their ideas and practices are more like those of traditional Native Americans or African tribal groups than like contemporary Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. If we wish to understand the religious dimension of the Hebrew Bible, we must be willing to lay aside our own cultural ideas and value judgments and enter imaginatively into the mind-set of people who viewed the world very differently than most of us do today. If we cannot do this, the world of the Hebrew Bible will remain forever closed to us.

WHAT IS RELIGION?

Religion is a notoriously difficult term to define. Like obscenity, most people probably believe that they know it when they see it—until they come face to face with a religious system that differs markedly from their own. Scholars of religion, by contrast, are more attuned to the richly variegated forms of religious expression that can be seen around the globe. Despite repeated efforts, they have found it difficult to formulate a definition of religion that could apply to them all.

Most scholars now recognize that any definition that would be broad enough to encompass every form of religion in the world today would be so general and abstract that its value would be minimal. Instead, scholars prefer to look for common features or patterns of religion that recur across different cultures. One system of analysis that many scholars have found helpful identifies six dimensions, or categories, of religious life that can be seen in virtually all forms of religion.⁴

1. *The mythological dimension.* Every religion relies on stories to transmit its beliefs and values from one generation to the next. The content of religious stories varies widely from group to group, but certain issues attract the attention of storytellers in every culture, including the



Fig. 10.2. The statue of *Laocoon and His Sons* depicts the myth of the strangulation of a Trojan priest and his family by snakes sent by gods who favored the Greeks in the Trojan War.

origins of the universe and its inhabitants, the history of their people, the lives of great leaders from the past, the activities of the supernatural world, and so forth. Some of these stories might be grounded in history, while others are clearly framed as fiction or fantasy. Scholars often use the term **myth** to describe both fact-based and fictional stories, since they are concerned primarily with the way the stories function within the religious community, not with their factuality. The term *myth* does not imply any judgment about the truth value of the stories.



Fig. 10.3. The Pope plays a central role in defining the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

2. *The doctrinal dimension.* Every religion has a set of beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality and the place of human beings in the cosmos. Most religions claim that there is more to reality than the visible universe, but their beliefs about the nature of the unseen world vary widely. Some groups attribute their beliefs to the insights of a wise teacher or leader from the past, while others follow the distilled wisdom of generations of ancestors. Religious beliefs do not have to be systematically organized or internally consistent to be accepted by a religious group, but they do have to be coherent enough to make sense to the followers of the religion. In cases where greater consistency is desired, religions often delegate the task to individuals who have special expertise in theological reflection. Some groups enshrine their most important beliefs in a formal **creed** or statement of belief, but most religious ideas are passed on

informally (often through stories) and taken for granted within the group.

3. *The ethical dimension.* Questions about proper and improper conduct are vital to every religion. Religions vary in the answers that they give to these questions, but there are certain points on which virtually all would agree, such as encouraging love and peace and discouraging harm to others. Disagreements

can usually be traced to differences in their histories or patterns of belief. Some religious groups have lists of laws or rules that define good and bad conduct, while others limit their instruction to broad moral principles and leave it to individual believers to apply these principles to their own lives. Many also offer moral guidance for the broader society in which they are embedded. Religions frequently reinforce their ethical teachings with promises of future rewards and punishments, whether in this life or beyond. Ethical instruction usually begins in childhood and continues throughout the life of the believer.

4. *The ritual dimension.* Rituals are formalized actions by which religious people seek to encounter, manipulate, or respond to the supernatural world. Rituals presume familiarity with the central stories and beliefs of a religion; indeed, most rituals can be interpreted as symbolic enactments of key beliefs. People who do not share the group's beliefs will not comprehend the meaning of much that is done in a ritual context. Some acts might even seem nonsensical or irreligious to an outsider. Rituals can be as simple and spontaneous as prayers before a meal



Fig. 10.4. The issue of gay marriage is an ethical question that has engaged the minds of many religious people in recent years.

or as elaborate and orchestrated as a multiday religious festival. Most groups distinguish between rituals that are used in public settings and rituals that may be performed in private by individuals. Some limit the performance of certain rituals, particularly those that involve the manipulation of supernatural powers, to trained specialists (priests, monks, shamans, and the like).

5. *The experiential dimension.* All religions believe that there is some kind of invisible reality that stands behind the visible order. Most contend that humans can experience this reality through the use of special techniques or rituals. Some believe that experiences of the supernatural are open to anyone who seeks them, while others insist that certain kinds of experiences are available only to trained experts or figures from the past. Religious



Fig. 10.5. A spirit house in Thailand where worshippers come to make ritual offerings to supernatural beings.

experience is closely tied to beliefs. Religious beliefs not only tell believers what is out there to be experienced but also help to define and explain the experiences that group members report. Since religions have different beliefs, each religion has its own ideas about the kinds of experiences that believers should seek, the means by which these experiences can be achieved, the effects of religious experiences, and the relation between experience and other aspects of religious life. Some religions place more emphasis on group experiences, while others emphasize the private and personal nature of human encounters with the supernatural realm.

6. *The social dimension.* Religions are by definition communal enterprises. Like other groups, they require organization and direction. Most have some sort of formal or informal organizational structure that designates certain individuals or classes of people as leaders and others as followers. Religious leaders fulfill a variety of roles, including defining and defending the beliefs and practices of the group; educating and disciplining group members; overseeing group activities; representing the religion to outsiders; and ensuring the continuation of the religion to the next generation. Not all religions hold regular public meetings, but most have some type of system by which members can interact with one another on a periodic basis, thus promoting a sense of group identity.



Fig. 10.6. A Buddhist meditates before a statue of the Buddha as a means of opening his mind to a religious experience.



Fig. 10.7. The Japanese Shinto ceremonies have a distinctly social dimension.

Many have rituals that can only be conducted in a group gathering. Most religions also encourage their members to give material and emotional support to one another, especially during times of crisis. Some also seek to influence or improve the society around them, while others do not see this as their responsibility.

These six dimensions of religion—the mythological, the doctrinal, the ethical, the ritual, the experiential, and the social—have been identified in virtually every religious group that scholars have studied, so there is ample reason to think that they will be useful in our study of the religion of the Hebrew Bible. There is nothing magical about the categories, however: simply pinning labels onto the various elements of a religion does not take us

very far toward understanding it. The chief value of these categories lies in the way they help us to recognize and make sense of the breadth and diversity of the cultural systems that we call religion.

People who know little about other religions have a tendency to interpret and judge them in the light of their own. By paying careful attention to these six dimensions of religion, we can learn to overcome this natural bias and allow ourselves to appreciate the richness, complexity, and uniqueness of the religious systems that come to expression in the pages of the Hebrew Bible.

EXERCISE 17

Read the following passages from the Hebrew Bible and see how many examples of the six dimensions of religion you can find in each passage.

- Exodus 24:1-18
- Nehemiah 8:1-18
- Psalm 135:1-21
- Jeremiah 7:1-29

SCRIPTURES AND RELIGION

As we noted in chapter 4, the creation of Scriptures requires literacy. During the time when most contemporary books of Scripture were being composed, this skill was limited to a small class of elite males. These people invariably left their mark on the contents of the books. Not only did they determine what kinds of material would be included and excluded, but they also shaped how the material would be presented. Usually this meant highlighting the beliefs and practices with which they agreed and belittling or ignoring competing ideas. This process of selection, composition, and editing helped to determine which elements of a diverse religious tradition would be preserved and which would be suppressed or lost. Unless their competitors had their own writings or

other means of preserving their traditions, their voices and ideas eventually disappeared.

When scholars study books of Scripture, they have to decide whether they want to focus on the form of religion that is affirmed in the texts (the religious vision of the final editors) or to use the texts as a resource for uncovering how the religion was practiced at some earlier point in the history of the community. Both approaches are legitimate as long as one is clear about the task that one intends to pursue.

In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the second approach is complicated by the long and convoluted history of the text. The Hebrew Bible is a collection of documents that were written and edited by a long series of mostly unknown people over the course of centuries. Many of these books passed through multiple stages of editing before they reached their present form. No one is sure when the collection was last touched by an editor. Materials from different times and places are mingled together so thoroughly that scholars find it difficult to reconstruct how individual books developed or to single out a specific stage for attention.

Over the last century, scholars have developed a variety of methods for detecting the presence of editorial layers within particular books. But many problems remain.

1. For those who choose to focus on the finished text, the primary problem is the diversity of the collection. Scholars can usually identify the editorial viewpoint of an individual book without much difficulty, but it is harder to decide whether a common perspective underlies the entire collection. There are enough disagreements among the books to raise serious doubts about whether the final edition reflects a consistent point of view or whether a variety of editors with different viewpoints worked independently on the individual books. The presence of similar ideas and themes across the collection can be taken as evidence for a broad-based editorial agenda or as a sign that the authors came out of a common **Yahwistic** tradition. The evidence is ambiguous enough that scholars can argue intelligently on both sides of the issue.

Scholars who choose to study the religious vision of a single book also face the daunting task of determining which parts of the book reflect the thinking of the edi-

tors and which represent ideas that were already present in their sources. They also have to decide whether the editors intended to endorse all of the views that they inherited from the tradition or whether some traditions were so well known and established that they could not easily be left out or changed. The results of these investigations are invariably quite speculative, but when handled carefully they can produce valuable insights into the beliefs and practices of the people who compiled and edited the biblical texts.

2. Scholars who seek to describe how religion was actually practiced in ancient Palestine also face problems. In addition to deciding which layers of the text belong to which period, scholars have to sift through the one-sided and biased information that appears in the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, the texts refer again and again to people whose beliefs and practices differed markedly from those of the biblical authors. Some of these people were followers of Yahweh, while others honored other deities alongside or instead of Yahweh. From this we can infer that the religious life of ancient Israel was more diverse than the views represented by the biblical authors. On the other hand, the texts cast virtually everyone who disagreed with the biblical authors in a negative light. No texts from these other traditions have survived to balance out the negative biblical images—no hymns to Yahweh and Asherah, no sayings from the prophets of Baal, no ritual texts explaining how to conjure up the spirits of the dead. This means that most of what we know about these alternate expressions of religion comes from the scattered comments of their Yahwistic opponents. These limited and biased materials offer little insight into what people were actually thinking and doing in these other groups. They also tell us little about the relative popularity of various forms of religion (including the forms upheld by the biblical authors) at different times in Israel's history.

Scholars who wish to uncover the diversity of religious life in ancient Palestine have to learn to read against the grain of the biblical texts in order to develop a more balanced understanding of the beliefs and practices that are criticized by the biblical authors. Information gleaned from textual studies can be supplemented by materials from archaeology and the records of surrounding cultures. Data from similar cultures at different times and

places can sometimes be helpful in guiding scholarly speculation where materials are lacking. Integrating these diverse and fragmentary materials into a coherent picture is not an easy task, and scholars disagree about many issues. But the results of this line of research—a more balanced depiction of religious life in ancient Israel—are sufficient to justify the effort.

A MIDDLE PATH

Deciding which of these two approaches to follow is difficult, since both have their strengths and weaknesses. Ideally, students should learn how to read the Bible from both perspectives. For that reason the following chapters aim to strike a balance between the two approaches.

1. The analysis of the biblical material is divided into six sections that focus on various aspects of the religion of the Hebrew Bible. Some of these categories coincide with the major types of literature in the Hebrew Bible, while others do not. Each of these sections is introduced by a chapter that presents a cross-cultural analysis of the phenomenon in question. As will be seen, the material in these chapters is rooted in our discussion of the six dimensions of religion, but it would be wrong to associate each section with a particular dimension.

2. Since the chief goal of this book is to introduce students to the Hebrew Bible, the bulk of the attention in each section will be given to the religious vision of the biblical authors and/or editors. Where possible, this vision will be linked to the social and historical context in which the authors or editors lived. Here and there students will be asked to think critically about how the process of transmission and editing might have affected the content and viewpoint of the biblical books.

3. Since we cannot hope to understand the biblical text without reference to its cultural and religious context, most chapters also include a section that compares

the religious vision of the biblical authors and/or editors with what we can know about the way religion was actually practiced during the era when the texts were written. Some chapters give more attention to this question than others. Through this process we can see more clearly what is common and what is distinctive about the religious vision that guided the biblical authors. The inclusion of competing views also serves to highlight the diversity that characterized religious life in ancient Palestine throughout the period covered by the Hebrew Bible. This in turn can make it easier for us to recognize the one-sided and polemical nature of some of the biblical materials.

CONCLUSION

The academic study of religion provides a variety of tools and methods for analyzing the different forms of religious life depicted in the Hebrew Bible. The model that will be used in this book focuses on six dimensions of religion—the mythological, the doctrinal, the ethical, the ritual, the experiential, and the social. This simple model can help us to understand and appreciate the diverse religious systems that were present in ancient Palestine.

Our analysis is complicated, however, by the fact that our primary source of information, the Hebrew Bible, favors one system of belief and practice over others and portrays alternative systems in a negative light. If our aim is to develop a balanced view of religious life in ancient Palestine, we must learn to recognize—and then compensate for—the social and religious agendas of the biblical authors and editors. This includes learning to read against the grain of the texts in order to gather information about beliefs and practices that the authors rejected. If done with care, this process can also help us to better understand what the biblical authors and editors were hoping to accomplish in their writings.

EXERCISE 18

Read the following passages from the Hebrew Bible and pay attention to how the author depicts competing forms of religion. Then choose one of the passages and answer the following questions.

- (a) What kinds of beliefs and practices does the author criticize?
- (b) What does the author say is wrong with these competing beliefs and practices?
- (c) What is the author's attitude toward people who follow these beliefs and practices?

- Deuteronomy 7:1-11
- 2 Kings 21:1-15
- Jeremiah 44:1-28
- Ezekiel 8:1-18