

Israel's Religious History: The Persian Period

The interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures cannot prescind research done in the field of global religious thought and practice, in particular as far as the Ancient Near Eastern beliefs are concerned. The Bible itself witnesses to significant changes along the millenary trajectory of Israel's faith. Much of this development over time is tied up to sociological variations, from wandering clans to sedentary village life, from tribal customs to bureaucratic statehood, and last, but of supreme importance, from diaspora-life in semi-autonomous communities to foreign domination. Only during that latest phase did Israel – lay people and priests, scribes and Levites, women and men – truly come to embrace Yahweh as their exclusive, zealous deity. Only then was the Torah compiled and installed as the sole orientation for a dispersed people. Only now has the separation of the holy, elected community turned out to be a hotly de-bated issue. The spiritual and social formation at least of the Judean deportees took place not so much "under Persian influence," but within an intellectual and cultural climate permeated by Mesopotamian and Persian patterns of thinking (just like in our days all of humanity is using capitalist and communist modes of thought, regardless of vernacular traditions).

See also: [Israel in the Persian Period](#) (German original 2005; Engl. translation Atlanta, GA: SBL 2011); *Theologies in the Old Testament* (German original 2001; Engl. translation T&T Clark: London and Minneapolis: Fortress 2002)

By Erhard S. Gerstenberger

Philipps Universität Marburg

December 2011

1. Social stratification and religious developments

Human beings follow their inner drive whenever they search for their individual or collective origins. Where do I come from? Which historical circumstances gave birth to our ethnic group, national entity, and confessional religion? This phenomenon to look back for a distant beginning also moves many a Hebrew scriptural tradition, with quite different results, to be sure. Biblical sources variably pinpoint the sojourn in and exodus from Egypt (Exod 1-13; Hos 11:1) as the germinal situation, or the wanderings in the desert (Exod 15-18; esp. 15:25; Hos 9:10), the theophany at Mount Sinai

(Exod 19) respectively Mount Horeb (Deut 5), the rallies at Mount Garizim and Ebal, respectively in Transjordan (Deut 27-29) or at the ancient site of Shechem (Josh 24). Still other traditions make Mount Zion and/or the Davidic Dynasty the real starting point of Israel's history with Yahweh (Psalms 46; 48; 74; 132; 2 Sam 7), some reach back as far as Abraham and Jacob/Israel to mark the initiation of their faith history (Gen 12; 35). The Hebrew Bible reflects a veritable gamut of endeavors to reconstruct the fountainhead of Israel's existence as the people of Yahweh. We cannot expect documentary evidence of early covenants, but the richness of retrospective conceptualizations is indeed impressive. Ancient Israel has always been, like modern Judaism and all of Christianity (as well as other religions on this globe), a very complex, heterogeneous and continuously changing entity. There is no uniform and one-dimensional religious group behind any label or categorization (cf. Zevit, *Religions* 2001; Sand, *Invention* 2009).

Still, modern historical scholarship could never be content with such a despondent answer. We want to know, according to our own frames of reference, where and how faith in Yahweh may have emerged in the middle of Ancient Near Eastern cultures and religions (Sasson, *Civilizations* 1995; Walton, *Thought* 2006: The latter cuts out entirely old Iranian religion). Modern historians have to consult all available evidence relevant to their topics of research: Ancient Biblical and non-biblical texts, archaeological findings of two centuries of digging, general insights of the sciences of religion, anthropological discoveries and theories, etc. Most promising, to my mind, is a conjunction of all sources and methods under the umbrella of socio-political considerations as to the group-identity and social organisation of those people who really practiced certain manifestations of faith. Wherever Yahweh was venerated we have to ask, in my opinion, for the cultic community carrying out a particular worship. Texts and archaeological objects do not speak for themselves, they have to be visualized in their original life-setting ("Sitz im Leben") in order to be fully understood.

Today's Old Testament scholars by and large have given up the idea of an Abrahamite or Mosaic foundation of the Yahweh-faith-community. Historical, social, and cultural conditions inside the "land of Israel" between 1600 and 1100 B.C.E. did not offer space or opportunity for a people of Yahweh to unfold. Israel had not come into existence yet (Donner, *Grundzüge* 1995) in spite of an ominous reference to Israel in a Merenptah-inscription of the year 1219 B.C.E. (Donner, op. cit. 105-106). The name does not testify to "Yahweh" at all, but only to the God "El." Therefore, instead,

most experts are favoring a beginning of Yahweh-worship on a tribal level (Yahweh the warrior: Exod 15:21; Judg 5; Psalm 68) and thereafter with the installation of the Davidic dynasty (Psalm 89; 2 Sam 5-7). While David does establish a state-cult, the population keeps on venerating household protective deities (cf. Exod 21:2-6: note the house-god at the doorpost v. 6) and local gods, often Baal and Asherah, at small sanctuaries throughout the country (cf. Judg 6). Such dedication to “other gods” later on was denounced vehemently by 6th/5th century Hebrew theologians (cf. Deut 7:4; 11:16,28; 13:3,7,14; 1 Kgs 3:2-3; 13:2; 22:44; 2 Kgs 17:32; 23:5.9.20, etc.). Even the retrospective condemnation of illicit cult-practice is a sure sign of its former existence. It is small wonder then that modern exegetes do count on popular indiscriminate belief in various deities until the end of the monarchies (722 B.C.E. for Northern Israel, 587 B.C.E. for the kingdom of Judah; cf. Barstad, *History* 2008; Smith, *Origins* 2000). If the limitation of original Yahweh worship to tribal and state levels of organization holds true, all speculations about a broad popular Yahweh-faith community in earlier centuries are losing their ground. Neither Elijah and Elisha in the 9th century B.C.E. (cf. their stories inserted into 1 Kgs 17-2Kgs 8) nor the classical prophets in the 8th century B.C.E. or the so-called “Deuteronomic Reforms” allegedly of the 7th century B.C.E. (cf. 2 Kgs 22-23) in historical reality met that covenant community the texts are portraying in retrospect. There may have occurred some confrontations of prophets and contemporary kings in northern Israel or southern Judah, like they are extant also in some Mari-letters. Also, occasionally groups or neighborhoods close to the royal court may have included Yahweh veneration into their own religious faith, but there very probably did not exist, before the end of the monarchy in Judah, a coherent, exclusive community of faith fixed on the veneration of the one, unique, and zealous deity of Judean dynastic provenance. Archaeological discoveries of Yahweh’s name (often being an element of a person’s appellative) in various artifacts and inscriptions from the 9th to the 7th on Judean soil (cf. Tigay, *Gods* 1986; Keel, *Gods* 1998) all fit in very well with this evaluation of the religious history of ancient Israel. – There is a good chance, then, that Israel’s development toward a kind of monotheism (or bet-ter: monolatry = preferential veneration of one God only?) came to its height in later exilic-post-exilic times (6th - 4th centuries) mostly under Persian rule.

2. Formation of Israelite faith and community

If the emergence of the Judean/Israelite covenant and Torah community can be approximately dated into the 6th to 4th century B.C.E., the era of outgoing

Babylonian and incoming Persian rule, we should pay much more attention to the socio-political and spiritual- theological fabric of those times than traditional Old Testament scholarship has done. The mental climate in the Near East is to be understood as the productive background of Judean thinking. Jason M. Silverman has already noted, on the present website, the importance of the ancient Persian mentality for Biblical contemporary authors, promising more details in his forthcoming book *Persepolis and Jerusalem*. Indeed, the late Babylonian and Achaemenid Persian context can be expected to account for the germinal matrix or nutrient solution in which older Israelite traditions grew to their final shape and meaning.

Old Iranian mentality and religious thought are, however, a very complex matter in themselves. Western research in the epoch of Achaemenid rule (539-331 B.C.E.) has more and more emphasized the autochthonic value – beyond ancient Greek and modern Christian misconceptions (Stausberg, *Religion* vol. 1, 2002) – of the prevalent religions, in particular the new teachings of Zoroaster (Widengren, *Geisteswelt* 1961; Boyce, *History* vol. 2, 1982; Stausberg, *Religion* 2002-2004). His revelatory witness proved to be most influential, at least from the imperial perspective: Achaemenid kings boast of their being commissioned by Ahura Mazda, the sole and universal God (cf. the Behistun inscription of Darius I, 520-519 B.C.E.). They do not mention the prophet Zoroaster, but their religious language and concepts are congruent with much of Old Avestan (Avesta = sacred writings of Zoroastrianism) terminology, sufficient reason for us to focus on the global aspects of official and elitist religion. After all, the Judean deportees in Babylonia also belonged to the upper classes and reportedly were close to the royal elite in the Persian capital (cf. 2 Kgs 24:15-16; Esra 7; Neh 2:1-11).

How may we describe those common features of Zoroastrianism and Hebrew Scriptural theology, resulting from their rootage in a common “Geisteswelt”? The question includes socio-economic and mental-spiritual connotations. The oldest parts of Avesta, the so-called “gathas [hymns] of Zoroaster” (Humbach, *Gathas* 1991) display a number of concepts which transcend earlier Mesopotamian thought. There appear, for example, distinct ideas about the unity of the world, not only in a political sense (world = empire), but also in that very creational and teleological dimension we also know from the Bible. Thus Yasna (= a book of Avesta) 31 speaks about primeval truth, cf. also 37:1; 39:4; Yasna 30 testifies to the two opposed spirits inherent in this world; Yasna 30:11; 31:14; 31:22; 34:13; 40:2-3; 41:6, etc. yearn for a final fulfilment of good powers. History has a definite start and does end up with the ultimate victory of the good

principles. There is no eternal return of eons but a course of continuous events to be mastered by mankind. In later Avestan writings, these longings are elaborated into apocalyptic speculations about the end of history. – The Sovereign of creation and history in Zoroastrian faith is the supreme Ahura Mazda, “Lord of Wisdom,” who never is named “king,” or “marshall,” or “warrior” though. The early Avestan writings depict him as the head (sometimes perhaps a “member”) of those spiritual powers which govern the world (ameša spentas) and ward off the evil demons of lie, chaos, death. – Human beings, regardless of their ethnic background, gender, social class, have incessantly to opt for the “good” and Ahura Mazda. They have to confess their alliance with him and denounce the daevas, “demons.” “In truth, I do not in the least know anyone other than You” (Yasna 34:7). “But you, O you Daevas all, are seed (sprung) from evil thought” (Yasna 32:3). The individual is responsible for his or her behavior; allegiance to the “truth; rightfulness; universal law” in Ahura Mazda, and the practice of the “good,” in thought, speech, and deed will decide over his or her life beyond death. – Unequivocally, there is a certain dichotomy of truth and lie, darkness and light, good and evil in Zoroastrian faith, a rigidness of ethical norms, not unknown to us from some parts of the Hebrew Bible. The wide range of cultic prescriptions, especially the norms of purity in regard to sexuality and contact with dead bodies and defiling creatures, in both religions may have grown in the same mental soil. There is ample space for much research along these lines.

The situation of Judeans became precarious after their defeat by the Babylonian armies and the deportation of several thousands of their elite citizens. With the Davidic dynasty, temple, home-territory, and political autonomy gone, they had to create a new identity, a new and different social structure, and an efficient form of religion. Because the beaten and dispersed people were deeply immersed in Mesopotamian and Old Iranian patterns of life and thought, they hardly had another choice save to make use of common ways of construing their own spiritual heritage derived from family, clan, and tribal/state tradition. In this vein they clad their own cosmology, anthropology, ethics, history, religion to a great extent into the intellectual visions of the dominant cultures they were living in or had contact with (Babylonian; Hittite; Egyptian, and most of all: Persian). The Persians, anyway, were tolerant enough to grant their subjects religious freedom as long as they paid their taxes and kept aloof from uprisings against their rule.

The social organization Judeans built up in those formative centuries was unique and has become the prototype of all western religions and the Islam. Religion, more precisely: a book-oriented religion on a strong confessional foundation, which may exist without support from political powers, turned out to be the spinal column of “new Israel’s” communities. Priests and lay-people, scribes and wise men formed spiritual associations (congregations) with ecumenical ties among each other. They rallied around Yahweh, his Torah, and religious symbols like Sabbath, circumcision, yearly feasts, kosher food, social solidarity. Interestingly enough, we can glean from Avestan texts that the followers of Zoroaster also formed non-governmental groups; they also considered their prophet the prime mediator of God’s will, an Iranian Moses. They as well collected orally his communications with God to be written down in later times. The time and intellectual climate along with the social and political living-conditions had become ripe for the discovery of non-state confessional organizations we call “churches” or “religious bodies” today.

Bibliography

Barstad, Hans M., *History and the Hebrew Bible. Studies in Ancient Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography* (FAT 61), Tübingen: Mohr 2008.

Boyce, Mary, *A History of Zoroastrism*, vol. 1 and 2, Leiden: Brill 1996 and 1982.

Donner, Herbert, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel und seiner Nachbarn in Grundzügen*, vol. 1, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 2. ed. 1995.

Humbach, Helmut, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra and Other Old Avestan Texts*, vol. 1, Heidelberg: Carl Winter 1991.

Keel, Othmar and Uehlinger, Christoph, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1998.

Sand, Shlomo, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, London and New York: Verso Books 2009.

Sasson, Jack (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 4 vols., New York: Scribner’s Sons 1995.

Smith, Mark S. J. M., The Origins of Biblical Monotheism, Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts, Oxford: University Press 2000.

Stausberg, Michael, Die Religion Zarathushtras. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Rituale, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer vol. 1-3, 2002-2004.

Tigay, Jeffrey H., You shall have no Other Gods. Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions (HSS 31), Atlanta: Scholars Press 1986.

Walton, John H., Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2006.

Widengren, Geo, Iranische Geisteswelt, von den Anfängen bis zum Islam, Baden-Baden: Holle Verlag 1961.

derselbe, Die Religionen Irans, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1965.

Zevit, Ziony, The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches, London: Francis Pinter 2001.