

**Francesca Stavrakopoulou and John Barton, (Editors) *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*, London and New York: T&T Clark International, A Continuum Imprint 2010, 207 pp, ISBN 978 0 56 703215 7 (Hardback), US\$152.95; 978 0 56 703216 4 (Paperback) US\$52.95.**

Reviewed by John Noack

An international team of eleven scholars has addressed the key and often controversial aspects relating to the issue of the religious pluriformity in ancient Israel and Judah. Bernhard Lang's comment on the book's cover suggests that this book 'represents the eye of the storm in current biblical scholarship'.

These scholars explore both the available textual and the artefactual evidence, while being honest about their interpretational problems and about the need for a new paradigm in relation to the origin, the sources and to the traditional depiction of the development of religion in Ancient Israel and Judah.

The editors Francesca Stavrakopoulou from the University of Exeter and John Barton from the University of Oxford have organised their book into four main sections, including conceptual, socio-cultural and geographical diversities and a final postscript reflecting on religious diversity. They also have included brief introductions to and academic biographies of the eleven writers and their topics.

### ***Conceptual Diversity***

The theme and issue of 'conceptual diversity' is explored by Susan Niditch from Amherst College, who addresses herself to experiencing the divine in heavenly visits, in earthly encounters and in the land of the dead. Herbert Niehr from the University of Tübingen explores the relationship between Israelite and Canaanite religion, including the depiction of the Israelite and Judahite religions as subsets of West Semitic Religion. Editor Stavrakopoulou then investigates the practice, perception and portrayal of the concepts of Israel's popular over against its official religion.

### ***Socio-religious Diversity***

'Socio-religious diversity' is the scholars' next major theme. Nicolas Wyatt from the University of Edinburgh deals with royal religion within ancient Judaism. Diana Edelman investigates cultic sites and complexes beyond the Jerusalem Temple and Philip Davies explores the vexed issue of the relationship between urban and rural religion.

Carol Meyers from Duke University continues this theme with her analysis of household religion and Rainer Albertz from Münster explores personal piety.

The final major theme of 'geographical diversity' is developed by Jeremy M. Hutton from Princeton Theological

Seminary, who investigates the 'southern, northern and trans-Jordanian perspective' and Lester L. Grabbe from the University of Hull looks at the question of Yahweh outside of Judah and in the Jewish diaspora.

Extensive bibliographies are provided at the end of each chapter and the 'Abbreviations' of scholarly academic journals alone take up six pages.

### ***Need for a New Paradigm.***

An over-riding theme is the need for a new paradigm, which relates to the clashes between Maximalist and the Minimalist approaches and presuppositions and to the scholarly need to balance the contents of the ancient texts with archaeological artefacts and with academic and scientific methodology. The Historical Past is supposed to be the depository of factual history but it can also be the mental world for the imagination, for the retrojection of later created constructs and for an idealized history. Few would now continue to claim that the Deuteronomic or Priestly biblical writers aimed to present an unbiased and objective biblical history of the Israelites and Jews.

Each scholar has provided a very challenging and well-documented chapter in this very up-to-date and exhaustive exploration of religious diversity in ancient Israel and Judah.

The reviewer has been impressed by these scholars' many thought-provoking insights. Niditch comments that 'the boundary between official and unofficial, popular and institutional, vulgar and elite religion is a porous and artificial one' (11) and she observes that the symbolic vision, as expressed by the classical prophets, tended to make their deity more distant (p 19). Niehr challenges the traditional presentation of the Canaanites as 'abominable'. He suggests the need for 'a real paradigm shift', which takes into account such inscriptions as those at Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the Negev which associate Yahweh with the goddess Asherah and which is deconstructing the 'simple, biblically based and coherent picture of Israel's past'. He further suggests that the biblical Canaanites 'were invented in the counter-image of what Israel claimed to be' and that Yahweh can take his place with Baal, Addu/Haddu as a weather god. He also suggests that the Judahite and Israelite religions can be viewed as subsets of West Semitic religion (pp 24-30).

Editor Stavrakopoulou challenges the portrayal of 'official' Yahwism with the state, with being formal and with being orthodox, in contrast to its 'popular' version labelled as folk, heterodox and non-conformist. She blames a confessional approach within biblical study for this bias (p 39).

Wyatt's exploration of royal religion involves past kings whose existence is problematic. He suggests that the Davidic kingship is a reflection of kingship in the period of Manasseh and that David was a heroized and epicized local, who was constructed as an 'archetypal king' (p 63). The king as prophet, priest, king are also explored and

the king's status from Psalm 8:5 is seen to imply that he was viewed as 'divinely begotten', who was included in the context of matrilinearity and matrilocality as a king of Judah (pp 72-75).

### ***Yahweh in the 'Promised land'***

Edelman takes her investigation of cultic sites back to the time of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or Israel and then to the many cultic sites used in the 'Promised Land' (p 84). In relation to archaeological artefacts and evidence, Edelman warns that only 'a very limited number of sites have been excavated and usually less than 20 per cent of a site is dug systematically and then not always to bedrock. Thus, even a site that has been excavated may well contain cultic areas and complexes that have failed to come to light' (p 90). The thought-provoking solar shrine at Lachish is included, along with the two staircases on the main building at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, which gives access to an upper floor above the storeroom (p 97). These arise in connection with the ongoing study of Yahweh as the Sun.

In addition, Davies proposes the retrojection of the later contemporary scene back into the time of David and Solomon. He affirms that 'How far the biblical portrait of Judah's religion is historically reliable constitutes perhaps the single most important and hotly debated issue in current biblical scholarship' (p 108). Davies also suggests that the urban rather than the rural religion was viewed as a reflection of the heavenly court of the deities (pp 108-9), although the fertility aspect of rural agriculture encouraged the reverence for the 'Queen of Heaven' and for the goddess Asherah, which expressed the need for both the masculine and the feminine principles and energies for agricultural rebirth and growth (p 111). Yahweh as Warrior is seen in the title 'Yahweh of Armies', who was carried in the Sacred Ark of the Covenant into the Israelites' battles (p 113).

### ***Yahweh beyond Israel and Judah***

Grabbe's chapter on Yahweh's boundaries and influence explores, by using textual and artefactual data, such sites and areas as Ebla, Mari, Ugarit and Northern Syria. Yahwism in these sites is scarce but the Jewish diaspora communities such as those at Mesopotamia, and at Elephantine and Leontopolis in Egypt took their deity Yahweh with them. Grabbe concludes that 'the Yahweh deity and Yahweh cults were unique to Israel and Judah' and that 'Yahweh originated in southern Palestine' (p 184).

Barton's closing thoughts remind us that we can examine religious practices but it is difficult to examine what people thought or believed about the divine realm. Certainly the Hebrew Bible is a religious document but it is also a theological document, presenting the Yahwistic perspective of the biblical writer. 'The varied thoughts they had are also part of the religious diversity in ancient Israel and Judah' (p 193).

This review's brief outline of the contents and the above highlights should reveal the extent to which this book can correctly be described as representing 'the eye of the storm in current biblical scholarship'.

John Noack  
Melbourne