

# EXPLORING THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

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Prophet, priest, sage  
and people

Aaron Chalmers



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# PREFACE

The ultimate origins of this book can be traced back to my undergraduate studies at Tabor Adelaide. As a student in the Bachelor of Theology programme, I took classes in three major fields: biblical studies, Church history and systematic theology. Both biblical studies and Church history fascinated me, but I never particularly enjoyed systematics. At the time I didn't consciously reflect on why this was the case. Looking back on it now, however, I think a major reason for my lack of interest in systematics was that I found the discipline too abstract and 'ethereal'. Conversely, the reason I enjoyed biblical studies and history was because both disciplines are grounded in an 'earthy', lived reality. When studying the Bible or Church history we are, at least for the most part, concerned with real people who lived at a certain time, in a certain place within a certain socio-cultural context. It is this passion for the groundedness and earthiness of the Scriptures, and my desire to share this with others, that has led to the writing of this book.

The world of ancient Israel is an intriguing and fascinating place. It is also a world which is unlike our own in many respects. Significant differences were present in

virtually every aspect of life: socially (whereas the modern West emphasizes the value of the individual, the world of the Bible was dyadic, oriented towards groups and communities), ideologically (whereas the modern West promotes change and is always looking forward to the new and novel, the ancient Israelites endorsed stability and viewed change as a danger or threat) and religiously, including the presence of a variety of religious specialists in ancient Israel for which there are no exact modern equivalents (Matthews and Benjamin, 1993: xiii–xxiii). It is my hope that this book will transport the readers back to the world of the Bible, allowing them to develop a fuller and more accurate picture of the social location, training and roles of Israel's prophets, priests and sages, as well as the religious beliefs and practices of the common people. It will quickly become clear that, in contrast to much contemporary, fashionable biblical scholarship, I believe that the biblical text does, at least in part, reflect the reality of life in ancient Israel, and that through studying the text and other available sources (e.g. archaeology and comparative ANE documents) we can come to some understanding of what life was, in fact,

like. At the same time, the more we are able to grasp what life was like, the better the position we are in to understand the biblical text itself.

I would like to thank a number of people who have helped me in the process of writing this book. First of all, I wish to express my gratitude to Philip Law and the team at SPCK for taking a risk with a young author. It is unlikely that this book would have seen the light of day without their commitment to the project. The Revd Dr Stephen Spence, Deputy Principal (Academic) at Tabor Adelaide, ensured that I had time to work on the project and even managed to cast a critical eye over some of the chapters himself. A number of my OT colleagues generously gave of their time to read through draft chapters and offer

valuable feedback. I would particularly like to thank Prof. Patrick Miller, Prof. James Crenshaw, Prof. Norm Habel, Prof. Richard Nelson, Prof. William Dever and Prof. Beth Alpert Nakhai. Professor Joseph Blenkinsopp was kind enough to read through my proposal and offer valuable encouragement. The impact of his work, along with that of Lester Grabbe, should be obvious to the attentive reader.

On a more personal note, I would like to acknowledge Janelle Palmer (who manages to occupy my wife while I am busy at work), my family and, in particular, my mother and father who have remained a constant source of encouragement throughout my studies and now work. Finally, this book is dedicated to my wife, Catherine, without whom none of this would be possible.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library	JSOTSS	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
ALASP	Abhandlungen zur Literatur Alt-Syrien-Palästinas and Mesopotamiens	KTU	M. Dietrich, O. Loretz and J. Sanmartín, <i>The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places</i> , 2nd enlarged edn, ALASP 8. Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 1995
ANE	Ancient Near East/Ancient Near Eastern	LAI	Library of Ancient Israel
ANEP	James B. Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near East in Pictures relating to the Old Testament</i> , Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954	NEA	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i>
ANET	James B. Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament</i> , 3rd edn with sup. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969	OBS	The Oxford Bible Series
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American School for Oriental Research</i>	OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
BRS	Biblical Resource Series	OT	Old Testament
BS	The Biblical Seminar	OTL	Old Testament Library
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments	SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
HBIS	History of Biblical Interpretation Series	SBLABS	Society of Biblical Literature Archaeology and Biblical Studies
HdO	<i>Handbuch der Orientalistik / Handbook of Oriental Studies</i>	SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
IBT	Interpreting Biblical Texts	SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Supplement Series
		SHANE	Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East
		SWBAS	The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series
		ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>



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# INTRODUCTION

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there. (L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*)

For many people, even those raised in religious families, the OT is a foreign country. Apart from a few famous stories, such as Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, David and Goliath, there seems to be a general lack of familiarity with many of the key people, places and events of the OT. When I initially mention figures like Manasseh, Josiah or Cyrus to my first year OT students more often than not I am confronted by blank stares, in spite of how important these individuals are to the OT narrative. This situation is probably not helped by the ‘classic’ status of the Bible (which essentially means that we all think it is important, we all think we should read it, but relatively few of us, in fact, do!).

In addition to lack of knowledge, there is also the problem of widespread misconceptions. People may have a general acquaintance with the key people, places and events of the OT, but their knowledge is sometimes distorted or skewed, whether by the influence of the media, broader culture or even Church tradition. Perhaps

the best example of this is Israel’s prophets. The all too common view of these individuals as prognosticators of the (distant) future owes more to the figure of Nostradamus, I would suggest, than it does to the biblical text. In spite of the ‘evidence’ of many Christian bookstores with shelves labelled ‘prophecy’ there is little (if anything!) in the biblical prophets that foreshadows contemporary events in the Middle East. And while prophets may have at times announced God’s future activity, this was usually the imminent future or, to put it another way, the *future* for the prophets is the *past* for us. In some ways, such misconceptions are potentially more harmful than lack of knowledge because they distort our reading of the biblical text (we go looking for things that the author never intended us to look for) and blind us to our ignorance (we think we know more than we actually do).

In order to understand the message of a text, especially a narrative text, it helps to have some ideas of the characters involved. Take *The Lord of the Rings*, for example. The story would be virtually incomprehensible without some knowledge of who Frodo, Gandalf and Sauron are and what their

respective roles involve. Or consider *Pride and Prejudice*. To appreciate fully this work we need to familiarize ourselves with Mr Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet, Mr Wickham and the complex and changing relationships between them. The same principle applies to the OT: to understand this text we need to have some idea of the key characters involved, including the prophets, priests, sages and common people. In order to do this, I hope to transport you, the reader, back to the world of ancient Israel. Imagine, if you will, that time travel is possible and we could return to pre-exilic Israel. If you had wanted to track down a prophet, where would you have found one? If you had stumbled across a priest, what may he have been doing? If you had encountered someone who wanted to be recognized as a sage, what form of education and training might he (or she) have been undergoing? My hope in doing this is that the world, and thus the text, of the OT will come alive for its readers.

While this may sound like a relatively modest goal, the challenges are numerous. Our main source of evidence for reconstructing the social and religious world of ancient Israel, the OT, is not without its problems. Much of the OT, at least in its final form, clearly postdates the events it is recording, leaving its accuracy as a historical source open to debate. Furthermore, the OT itself is not primarily concerned with 'social world' questions, but instead focuses on religious and theological issues. Thus, it often does not address the questions we are asking in this study in a clear or explicit fashion. Our other main source of evidence, the archaeological record, while potentially helpful for shedding light on the faith and practices of the common people, will be less productive when it comes time to discuss

the religious leadership of the nation (esp. the prophets) as there are relatively few preserved remains that relate directly to these groups. Because of these challenges, I shall address the issue of our sources and their potential strengths and weaknesses in Chapter 1. To anticipate what I have to say there, I believe the available sources do allow us to shed some light on social world questions, even though these 'answers' are not as comprehensive or definitive as we might perhaps like them to be.

The rest of this book is divided into two main parts. In the first, we look at some of the key positions of leadership within the religious and social world of ancient Israel: prophet, priest and sage (along with a brief discussion of Israel's kings). I have chosen these groups because they are frequently encountered in the OT, their roles lay at the heart of the practice of Israel's faith (at least at a corporate level), and they are associated with, and perhaps responsible for, large portions of the OT text. For each of these figures we ask three key questions. How did you become recognized as a prophet, priest or sage? Where would you have found a prophet, priest or sage in ancient Israel? And what did a prophet, priest or sage actually do? By the end of each chapter, the reader should have a good idea how such people fitted within and contributed to the social and religious world of ancient Israel. Although each of these groups (esp. the prophets) has come under scrutiny in previous works, what I hope to achieve here has not yet been done: to consider not only the roles of such people but also their social location/s and training, and to condense and summarize relevant, contemporary OT scholarship in a way that is accessible to the non-specialist.

In the second part of the book we shift our focus from those who held positions of leadership to the ‘common people’. Even though such people made up the *vast* majority of ancient Israel’s population (by my estimates more than 98 per cent), they have traditionally received little attention in studies of Israel’s religion. One of the main reasons for this is that biblical scholarship has usually reflected the primary concerns of the OT text, with its dominant focus on important men and key events in the life of the nation. A study which attempts to do justice to the religion of ancient Israel as a whole, however, cannot afford to overlook this significant group. In this chapter we ask three questions. Who did the people worship (apart from Yahweh)? When did they worship? And where did they worship? Archaeology is in a unique position to help us answer these questions as the material remains preserve a record of the lives of all classes of the Israelite people, and thus allow us to hear the voices of a wider cross-section of the population than the biblical text alone.

Before we get underway, however, I need to acknowledge a couple of the key limitations of this study:

1 This book is intended for beginning students and educated, interested non-specialists – thus I have kept footnotes and technical comments to a minimum and assumed little or no prior knowledge of the field on the part of my audience. Key terms are usually defined and I have tried to introduce the reader to the work of important scholars at relevant points. Given the intended audience, I have attempted to make the work as accessible and engaging as possible, yet all the while grounding it in contemporary biblical,

ANE and archaeological scholarship.

I trust the result is easy to understand but not simplistic. If the reader is after more detailed treatments of the key religious specialists, I would recommend the works of Grabbe and Blenkinsopp.

2 This book is not a full-scale study of the religion of ancient Israel<sup>1</sup> – thus there will be little explicit treatment of ‘standard’ topics such as the sacrificial system, life and death, and the relationship between God and humanity. My goal in this book is far more modest: to approach Israelite religion through the lens of its leaders (prophets, priests, and the wise) and to consider the religious beliefs and practices of the common people.

Finally, a few comments on the choice of the title ‘ancient Israel’ are required. The decision to use the descriptor ‘Israel’ is potentially problematic as it is employed in a variety of different ways within the biblical text. For example, it can refer to the nation as a whole, the northern kingdom during the period of the divided kingdom, or the southern kingdom following the loss of the north in 722 BC.<sup>2</sup> For the sake of convenience, I will use it in its most general sense to include the nation and people as a whole. If greater precision is required, I will employ the terms ‘kingdom of Israel’ or the ‘Northern Kingdom’ and ‘kingdom of Judah’ or ‘the Southern Kingdom’. From a chronological perspective, the boundaries of this study are, in biblical terms, from the establishment of the monarchy through to the Babylonian exile or, in archaeological parlance, the Iron II period (c.1000–586 BC). I have chosen to focus particularly on this period as it provides the implied historical context for much of the biblical narrative and books and, thus, is likely to be of most interest to students of the OT.

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