# Religion in Iron Age Israel, Judah, Egypt, and Mesopotamia (4-5.30)

The invitation for this afternoon asked each of us to present a five-minute "opening statement" that expresses their view on this topic as a whole or on some relevant aspect of the study of ancient Near Eastern religion, the Hebrew Bible, and related matters that we think is significant today. I replied by saying that I was puzzled to be asked because the invitation implied that I know something about the subject, whereas I don't.  It’s not been the focus of my involvement with the Old Testament. I’m an exegete and a theologian. To which Brad’s response was “Yes, that’s why we asked you. How does the subject look from that angle?” So I couldn’t get out if it; and here is my five minutes.

1. It’s important to distinguish between religion and theology. Religion suggests the kind of things that people do in connection with their relationship with God or the gods. Theology implies some reflection on the implications of their practices for the way they and other people think about God.
2. It’s important to distinguish between the religion that people practice and the religion their culture officially approves or their sacred writings approve. In connection with the Old Testament, it’s important to distinguish between the religion the Old Testament approves and the religion that Israel and Judah practices at different periods. Both the Old Testament text and archeological work draw attention to this difference.
3. In this connection, it’s really useful that study of Canaanite texts and of Palestinian archeology has illumined the actual religion of Israel, though it’s weird that both more liberal and more conservative scholars often talk as if this study has produced results that contrast with those of the Old Testament text. Archeological findings indeed do nothing to support the idea that Moses tried to get Israel to believe in Yahweh alone, but they fit with the implication in the Old Testament text that if he and some of his followers did attempt to get Israel to believe in Yahweh alone, they failed.
4. It’s important to be careful about interpreting Old Testament religion in light of the religion of other middle-eastern peoples. Fifty years ago, it was common to interpret Israelite festivals in light of Babylonian festivals, specifically the New Year Festival. Many scholars assumed that Israel must have celebrated the New Year in a similar fashion to the Babylonians, but this involved reading into texts.
5. I think that for a variety of reasons scholars now don’t pay as much attention to the interpretation of the actual Old Testament text as they might, and I wish they would. Scholars are interested in Qumran and reception history and postcolonial criticism and reconstructing the history of Israel and doing theological interpretation and anything but studying the Old Testament text in order to find out what it has to say, and I’m sad about that fact, because I think the Old Testame t text is really exciting and illuminating, though at least it leaves scope to weird people like me.
6. When I was at high school the standard text in English on Israel’s history and religion was by Oesterley and Robinson, and it was fairly Wellhausen-ish. When I was an undergraduate, the topic was the subject of an argument between Albright and Bright on one side and Alt and Noth on the other. Nowadays there’s no history before the eight century and/or the entire Old Testament comes from the Persian period. In another twenty years things will have changed again. Scholarly works and textbooks speak of advances in our understanding of history and religion, but actually there are no advances, only changes. What’s the point about historical study? I don’t think there is one.
7. For Christians, the chief significance of a study of the traditional religion of Canaan is the fact there is a close parallel between the way Israelite religion assimilated to the traditional religion of its culture and the way Christian spirituality in the West, and especially in California, assimilates to the spirituality of its cultural context. As this assimilation brought disaster to Israel and Judah, so it will to the church here. We are living in the time of Jeremiah.

# Interpreting the Bible in Today’s Context: Opportunities and Challenges (5.45-7.30)

The most insightful lines of inquiry/research interests in my career

\*I can hardly judge which are insightful, but what I am working on is “Do We Need the New Testament?”—we do, of course, but our attitude to the New Testament eans we think we can do without the Old Testament.

How might biblical studies contribute to contemporary society?

\*I don’t know what changes cultures, but I wonder if we need to encourage the development of popular culture that embodies a biblical world view (e.g., movies) and to resource pastors in shaping their congregations (the biggest figures in the Enron scandal were people who were in church every Sunday)

What concerns do I have about the status of biblical studies?

\*The equivalent of our business model is broken (“publish or perish”); we emasculate the performative nature of scripture; we assume that we are right and evaluate scripture in light of that assumption; contempt is prior to investigation; we don’t allow the text to teach anything, only to provide us with support for what we already think; we have lost interest in the text itself in favor of (e.g.) reception history and theological interpretation, we’re just involved an inter-scholarly (intertextual) debate