

The Responsive Self

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THE ANCHOR YALE BIBLE REFERENCE LIBRARY

The Responsive Self

Personal Religion in Biblical
Literature of the Neo-Babylonian
and Persian Periods

SUSAN NIDITCH



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Contents

Acknowledgments, vii

Introduction, i

1. Sour Grapes, Suffering, and Coping with Chaos: Outlook on the Individual, 17
2. Personal Religion in Ecclesiastes and Job: Conventional Wisdom, Responses in the First-Person Voice, and the Problem of Suffering, 32
3. From Incantation and Lament to Autobiography, 53
4. The Negotiating Self: Vowing and Personal Religion, 72
5. Material Religion, Created and Experienced: Burial Sites, Symbolic Visions, and Sign Acts, 90
6. Experiencing the Divine Personally: Heavenly Visits and Earthly Encounters, 106
7. Characterization and Contrast: Dynamics of the Personal in Late-Biblical Narration, 120

Conclusion, 134

Notes, 139

Bibliography, 163

General Index, 179

Scripture Index, 183

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Introduction

Upheaval and instability are wellsprings of personal and cultural creativity. In the history of early Judaism, the period from the conquest of Judea by Babylonia through the subsequent takeover and rule of Judea and Samaria by the imperial Persians provides settings for the composition of a rich and varied corpus of works preserved in the Hebrew Bible. These writings evidence a strong interest in the religious responses of individuals and an intimate engagement with the nature of personal experience in a world controlled by a powerful and enigmatic deity. This book deals with matters of self-representation and the presentation of selves. How does late-biblical literature portray individuals' emotions, disappointments, desires, and doubts within particular cultural and religious frameworks? The goal is to explore ways in which followers of Yahweh, participating in long-standing traditions and specific sociohistorical settings of late-biblical times, are shown to privatize and personalize religion.

I am interested in a variety of phenomena, including the use of first-person speech in literary creations, the assumption of seemingly autobiographical forms and orientations, the emphasis on individual responsibility for sin and punishment, the creative and daring challenge to conventional ideas about the way the world operates, the interest in the emotional dimensions of biblical characters, the portrayal of everyday small things that relate to essential aspects of worldview, and descriptions of self-imposed ritual. This set of interests lends itself to exciting approaches in the contemporary study of religion, rooted largely in the sociology of religion. The concept of "lived religion," developed by Robert Orsi, Meredith McGuire, and others, and related ideas about material religion, explored,

2 Introduction

for example, by Colleen McDannell, involve understanding and describing what people do and believe in cultures of religion. I argue that religion as lived is as relevant a concept to ancient Israelite tradition as it is to contemporary religions, allowing us to think about its variety, syncretisms, and synergies and to appreciate the interplay between individuals and communities, tradition and innovation, official and unofficial religion. Within the context of lived religion, writers of the period under study expressed and experienced their religious identities in a variety of ways that emphasize the individual. Personal religion in this sense is not confined to late writings, but I make the case that it finds a good deal of overt expression in the preserved literature of this period and that there are reasons of setting and worldview that make it so.

Preexilic Israelite religion as described by Judean writers who put their stamp on the Hebrew Bible was rooted in a national communal identity related to key shared institutions: the homeland, the monarchy, the temple. Land, king, and temple continue to have deeply symbolic and mythological significance even in modern Judaism, but the Babylonian exile brought significant challenges to the social structure and accompanying adjustments in worldview. The monarchy was no more, and Solomon's temple was destroyed, to be replaced by a more modest building funded by Persian conquerors. The holy land was a holding of imperialist and colonialist outsiders. Perhaps in response to these perceived tears in the social fabric and related adjustments in worldview, early Jewish literature written and preserved by an array of writers increasingly included an emphasis on the individual's relationship to God, his or her psychology, and view of his or her place in the world.

Israelite religion, among Judeans of the South and Israelites of the North, had always included prayer, a means of individual connection with the deity.¹ There had always been incantations, a means by which human beings could attempt to overcome adversity or encourage hope. There are ancient graffiti from the First Temple period, such as those at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, that provide a window on individual, spontaneous, immediate religious sensibilities, a kind of fast-food religion. People believed that divine beings could appear to individuals in powerful theophanies, accepted the revelatory significance of dreams and visions, and relied upon the efficacy of divinatory techniques. Material culture of the First Temple period included the presence of female figurines found buried beneath households. These figurines surely had some connection to matters of fertility and the

personal address to higher powers believed to bestow such blessings. Carol Meyers, Joseph Blenkinsopp, Rainer Albertz, and others point to evidence in literature and material culture of additional aspects of “household religion,” such as family altars.² Death customs and burial sites reveal loci for individual religious expression in the face of personal crisis throughout the history of Israel.

The literature of the exile and early Second Temple period, however, is especially rich in expressions and media of personal religion. Authors have preserved in writing concerns and content that emphasize and represent the individual, personalizing in various ways the religion of ancient Israel even while drawing upon traditional forms and threads in pan-Israelite culture, itself a diverse and complex phenomenon. This literature reveals the special concerns and orientations to life that emerged from particular theological, political, and cultural challenges in the wake of the Babylonian conquest.³ Ways of thinking about “religion as lived,” and related concepts of “material religion” and “personal religion,” are thus relevant to the study of ancient Israel in general and to an understanding of the late-biblical period in particular.

Lived Religion

The sociologist of religion Meredith B. McGuire begins her book *Lived Religion* with a reflection on her own changing realizations about the nature of religious identity. Early in her career, she “thought it would be easy to find out what each interviewee’s religion was,” and she “assumed that individuals’ religious worlds would be linked (sometimes firmly, sometimes loosely) with the beliefs, moral norms, and religious practices promoted by the particular religious organizations of which they were members.”⁴ She describes having come to realize that her interviewees’ religions were much more complicated than she had originally thought. Focusing on individuals, diversities within groups and practices, the interplay between “official” and “unofficial” belief, and the cultural threads that influence and intertwine in surprising ways within religious identities, McGuire concludes that religion at the individual level is “an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy—even contradictory—amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important.”⁵ She writes of “personal religion” and “lived religion,” examining the experiences that people “consider most important” and “the concrete practices that make

up their personal religious experience and expression.”⁶ She grapples with “how to comprehend individuals’ religion as practiced, in all their complexity and dynamism.”⁷

Most interesting for our study of personal religion in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods, McGuire asks whether these questions and approaches to the study of contemporary religion apply as well to religious identity in premodern cultures. McGuire answers in the affirmative and presents a case study from medieval Christianity that reveals the relevance of her approach for the study of cultures in which informants are not live, observable subjects. I intend to follow McGuire’s lead and explore religion as lived in the period following the Babylonian exile. Key terms serve as headings to important concepts. Already mentioned are “concrete practice,” “diversity,” “official and unofficial,” “dynamism,” and “individual.” Related terminology includes “material religion,” “embodied practice,” “syncretism,” and “the self.” Let us unpack the ideas suggested by these key terms with help from an array of scholars in sociology, anthropology, and religion and begin to explore how they may be relevant to the religion of ancient Israel in general and to the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods in particular. The biblical book of Ruth provides an excellent example.

Set in the period of the judges, the tale purports to tell the story of David’s ancestor heroine, a young Moabite widow of an Israelite man who embraces Yahweh and, with her mother-in-law, Naomi, travels to the older woman’s home in Bethel. There, in the romantic and fecund time of the harvest, Ruth meets and marries Naomi’s wealthy kinsman Boaz and bears him a son in her deceased husband’s name in a rough approximation or evocation of the levirate law of Deuteronomy 25:5. A postexilic dating seems probable for this anthological narrative that is based on Genesis 38 and includes direct allusions to it. The movement of action in the Genesis tale, with its terse dialogue and minimalist description, contrasts with the beautiful monologue of Ruth 1:16–17, the more expansive interactions between characters in the story, and the way in which the author builds up to the scene at the threshing floor. The book of Ruth is a short story or romance rather than a folktale, as indicated by stylistic issues explored in more detail in chapter seven. I argue that Ruth is from the Persian period and that it richly exudes qualities of personal religion and religion as lived.

The sociologist of religion Robert Orsi urges us, when we study people’s religion, to think of “the circle of friends and kin among whom they lived, memories they held (their own or those borrowed or inherited from

others), their sense of place in their immediate world . . . the stories they were told by relatives they loved, bonds of commitment and loyalty to particular friends and kin.”⁸ The biblical tale of Ruth, with its emphasis on family and return to the land of one’s origins, its sensitivity to the movement of the seasons with their related patterns in the agricultural cycle, and its frequent mention of God’s blessings and induced trials evoke these concerns of lived religion, as do the “intimate contexts” in which religion is expressed and contoured:⁹ invocations of the deity between a mother-in-law and daughter-in law, between potential lovers at a threshing floor, between elders at the city gate. Orsi reminds us that religion is always “religion-in-action,” “religion in relationships between people”¹⁰—for example, the kindness offered one’s kinsfolk at the harvest time. Orsi is interested in “what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds . . . and how they are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making as they make these worlds.” He explores religion as “situated amid the ordinary concerns of life, at the junctures of self and culture, family and the social world”¹¹—such scenes dominate the book of Ruth.

Orsi seeks to undermine the boundary often maintained by scholars of religion between private and public, noting that “lived religion cannot be separated from practices of everyday life” or from the ordinary, mundane spaces where life unfolds:¹² in the case of Ruth, the field, the town, the household. McGuire similarly points to the artificiality of boundaries drawn between sacred and profane.¹³ Scholars of lived religion pay special attention to the physical, material aspects of religious identity, expression, and engagement, including an emphasis on the personal body itself, loci where culture and the individual, society and self, sacred and profane, and ordinary and transcendent can come into intimate contact. Colleen McDannell notes that “people build religion into the landscape, they make and buy pious images for their homes, and they wear special reminders of their faith next to their bodies.”¹⁴ She adds, “Experiencing the physical dimension of religion helps bring about religious values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes.”¹⁵ The body, our own physicality, is critical to the material dimension of religion, for as McDannell writes, “Human beings cannot appropriate religious truths or be ‘grasped by an ultimate concern’ without involving their bodies.”¹⁶ McGuire describes a contemporary religious setting in which the hands are a veritable channel to the divine, “conduits of God’s power,” filled with healing power. She describes objects, cloths, boxes, and

pendants that take on religious meaning and that are integral to religious identity and experience.¹⁷ Material religion in these manifestations is also critical to understanding Yahwism as lived.

In contrast to McDannell, Orsi, and McGuire, we cannot talk to interviewees or observe what they do, what objects they hold dear, or how they employ their bodies, but we do have access to ritual and narrative accounts that, however literary or stylized, richly reveal their composers' views of religion as lived and the impressions they preserve. We have blessings and curses etched into walls or painted on pieces of clay pots or sherds. Graffiti may provide great insight into religion as lived and into the personal needs, experiences, worries, and desires of the writer and may provide quintessential examples of personal religion. And thanks to the work of archaeologists, we can visually reconstruct the contours of domestic spaces—the setting, for example, of home altars.¹⁸ Indeed, our work with archaeological evidence is not so different from McDannell's use of a photograph to speculate on a subject's religious orientation or identity. The subjects are no longer alive, the interpretation is hers, the objects are static and were possibly arranged by the photographer, and yet information can be gleaned from them, even though, as McDannell notes, the scholar needs to stay aware of her own orientations, prejudices, and sociocultural settings.¹⁹

Archaeologists have discovered a variety of religiously relevant objects, paraphernalia, statuary, and painted images, tactile media that exemplify what Patricia Cox Miller, a scholar of late antiquity, has called "a touch of the real."²⁰ Joseph Blenkinsopp has coined the phrase "religion in ordinary time."²¹ For the Persian period, we might point to Melody Knowles's discussion of incense altars, suggesting tactile religious practice that stimulates the senses.²² Miller invokes this language of the real to describe a particular aesthetic of self-identity that is critical to any study of personal religion. She inquires further whether certain periods and settings are more conducive to manifestations of the religious real than ones that tend to locate the self in more transcendent ways, for example, by reference to cosmic imagery. Similarly, McGuire asks whether particular settings tend to manifest personal and private religion, popular and unofficial dimensions, rather than the official, realizing there is always a feedback loop between the two sides of this dichotomy.

To be sure, people always pray independently in unofficial settings, and family-home-based customs are common in any cultural group, as noted above. The question is, however, when are manifestations of unofficial re-

ligion preserved in official sources and manifested in official settings? An illustration is provided by my own experience as an American Jew during childhood and adulthood. In the 1950s in the suburbs of Boston, where I grew up, there were no public, noticeable manifestations of “unofficial religion.” The service in the Conservative synagogue attended by my family was always the same in order and in content, led by an ordained Jewish Theological Seminary-trained rabbi who followed the traditional liturgy, as practiced in any American Conservative synagogue of the period. There were no folksongs or modern poems, no healing circles, no meditation classes, nor any impromptu discussions with the congregation concerning the day’s Torah reading—all of which did appear in synagogue services of the 1980s. The same could be said of the Catholic and Protestant churches in my hometown—no rock groups, no special affects, no talking in tongues (in non-Pentecostal churches).

I would argue that such patterns are reflected in ancient Israelite religion as well and that the early exilic and Persian periods are those in which preserved sources reveal increased emphasis on the real or material, the individual or personal, and the unofficial or popular aspects of religion. There is also evidence of the interplay between unofficial and official, personal and public dimensions of religious experience and expression. With a nuanced approach, Knowles urges us to think of aspects of religious life in the Persian period “such as private prayer and unrecorded communal gatherings, as well as practices that have left only textual evidence, such as the development of penitential prayer.”²³ We might also mention in this context the exilic-period graffiti accompanied by line drawings in the burial cave near Khirbet Beit Lei. In Frank Cross’s reading, the writing on the wall includes a request for deliverance: “Deliver [us] O Lord”; a request for absolution: “Absolve [us] O merciful God! Absolve [us] O Yahweh”; and “a prophetic oracle in which Yahweh speaks in the first person, and in poetic form.”²⁴ Cross suggests that these prayers and the oracle were left behind by a prophet and his followers fleeing the troubles in Jerusalem. They are personal requests to God in a time of emergency, formulaic in form and thus part of a shared communal cultural identity, and made material and permanent by having been written on a physical surface, where they remain to this day.

These particular writings are in a cave, unofficial and immediate. However, we also know much about what we are calling “personal religion” from the nature and content of the datable works preserved in the public,

official tradition of the Hebrew Bible that were being collected at this time. Knowles, for example, views Psalms 120–134 as possible evidence of pilgrimage customs in the Persian period. In her view, these psalms at least “reflect the concerns that pilgrims manifest.”²⁵ And once again, as Orsi notes, “the study of lived religion directs attention to institutions *and* persons, texts *and* rituals, practice *and* theology, things *and* ideas.”²⁶ The pilgrimage is a personal, moving experience for the individual, undertaken at his or her own physical and financial cost, but it is also a communal and ritualized event, and a public display of religious identity enjoined in written texts preserved and approved by the official, institutional representatives of ancient Judaism.²⁷ We will examine manifestations of these complex, interactive patterns in culture in due course, but we first need to attend to the theme of religion and the self, the meaning of “selfhood,” and a related issue concerning the typological nature of traditional literature and the voice of the individual.

The Self, Convention, and Individuation

Suggesting that the “self was a religious concept” in antiquity, David Brakke, Michael Satlow, and Steven Weitzman ask, “What can be recovered of ancient selves, or of ancient perceptions of the self from the surviving textual sources?”²⁸ Influenced by Judith Butler, they ask further, “Does a text that purports to describe an author’s inner life give access to a real self, or is that self a fiction—not what generates the text, but what the text generates?”²⁹ When we read Jeremiah’s confessions or Nehemiah’s memoir, are we learning about these men, or are we reading “persistent tropes”? Are these works “shaped by shared perceptions about what selves are supposed to be like?”³⁰ As Brakke and colleagues note, the text is “a product of a cultural process in which linguistic conventions, social institutions, and individual agency, as well as individual experience, collude in creating and re-creating selves.”³¹ Saul Olyan suggests that we can find individual voices in special and creative uses of *topoi*. When authors innovate upon traditional forms, we can begin to identify the self.³² The Tibetologist and scholar of comparative religion Janet Gyatso too has explored portrayals of the self in traditional cultures. Gyatso examines the interplay between the individual and the typological, portrayals of the self and the demands of cultural convention, in the autobiography of a Tibetan lama of the eighteenth century who, to complicate matters further, is believed in his tradition to be a reincarnation of a previous lama. She notes that cultural historians have

long suggested that “a sense of personal individuality [is] a unique marker of modern Western identity.”³³ Gyatso, however, shows that the genre of this Tibetan work is indeed autobiography and that traditional authors, like modern ones, engage in “discourse in which the question ‘who am I?’ is answered by a narrative that tells ‘how I became who I am.’”³⁴ Yes, there are conventions and tropes, but there is also “room for personal variation.”³⁵ Like Olyan, she asks how one distinguishes trope from detail, the traditional and culturally shared from the individual, and seeks to understand the historical settings conducive to the production of autobiography or lack thereof.³⁶

Stephen T. Katz’s comments on the new and yet derivative aspects of mystical experiences and reports provide a relevant parallel. On the one hand, the mystical experience can be viewed as radical, powerfully personal, and a challenge to religion as usual. On the other hand, tradition rather conservatively influences the contents and form of the mystical experience and the language in which it is described.³⁷ Indeed, many mystics study canonical literature, whose form and content then make their way into mystical experience. In a largely oral culture in which texts as texts are not studied, the oral tradition has an equally strong or even stronger influence upon the content of a vision or the way the underworld looks. John Miles Foley has pointed to the “immanently referential” quality of language and experience in traditional societies in which the deity looks a certain way, certain phrases evoke certain emotional responses, and the larger tradition brings itself to bear on any piece of it that is employed or re-created.³⁸ Thus, as we trace some of the recurring literary forms in which personal religion is preserved and presented, we will point to specific individual and sometimes innovative scenes and messages that are nevertheless clothed in the imagery, meaning-world, and linguistic expectations of the tradition. Katz’s work, like that of Brakke, Gyatso, Orsi, and McDannell, points to the way in which official and unofficial religion, the cultural and the individual, the self and tradition, interact and interface. Exploring these overlapping categories so central to an understanding of personal religion as presented in late-biblical material offers special challenges.

Challenges

A recurring subtheme of this study involves the difficulty of dealing with Yahwist cultures and literatures of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods, as underscored by the lively debates among scholars. The

distinguished Israeli biblicist Shemaryahu Talmon frequently observed that the entire Hebrew Bible is to some degree a Second Temple-period document.³⁹ What Talmon meant is that while Hebrew Scriptures contain writings and traditions datable to earlier periods, the Hebrew Bible, a complex anthology or library of works, was given its essential compositional form during the intensely creative period of scribal activity following the conquest of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, the destruction of the great Solomonic temple in Jerusalem, and the exile of the Judean elite. Babylonia itself was defeated by Persia later in the sixth century BCE, and a replacement temple was built under the auspices of the Persian government, which allowed for the return of willing Judeans to the homeland. In the context of Persian rule and perhaps, in part, under the influence of Persian culture, the collecting, composing, and preserving of older and newer traditions took place. I agree with Talmon that an understanding of the Babylonian–Persian–early Second Temple period is crucial for an appreciation of the literature and culture of ancient Israel.

In the last few decades there has been an explosion of interest in Jewish cultures of the period following the Babylonian conquest. Certain themes emphasized in scholarly conversations have a direct bearing on ways in which we approach matters of religious identity and expression among Jews in the period following the conquest.

A first critical area comes under the heading of physical environment. Scholars including Oded Lipschits, Avraham Faust, Kenneth Hoglund, Charles E. Carter, Jeffrey R. Zorn, and Menachem Stern have mined archaeological evidence in an attempt to draw a picture of the contours and contents of the physical environment that reflected and helped shape daily life and religious practice.⁴⁰ Observations about the physical and material worlds where people lived lead to disparate expectations and ideas about their religious responses and expressions. The physical and material environment integrally relates to a range of cultural and psychosocial maps, affecting identity and modes of self-expression. A second related area of concern involves questions about continuity and discontinuity in material culture as it relates to social realities.

Many articles on material culture in the Persian period begin with their authors' declaration—an apology of sorts—that the available archaeological evidence is extremely difficult to interpret and that new evidence may well alter present conclusions. Lively debates question whether the material culture of Judah, or Yehud, during particular periods and places is character-