“The Mutation Peculiar to Hebrew Religion:”
Monotheism, Pantheon Reduction, or Royal Adoption of Family Religion?

Review essay of Albertz & Schmitt Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant (Eisenbrauns, 2012)

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Did Family Religion Exist? The Coherence of Iron Age Culture from Household to State

Was religion a unifying force in ancient Judah and Israel? In what way did people in this region even have the same religion across different areas and time periods? And what were the fundamental units of religion—were its basic divisions political, into the kingdoms of North and South, geographical, like the coast or highland areas, or individual villages or houses? This book, written in alternating sections by two accomplished historians of Hebrew religion and literature, is a major argument for how to approach religion in the ancient southern Levant, in the form of an encyclopedic scholarly resource. In particular, it presents the most detailed claim to date that the Iron Age (11th–7th centuries BCE) was a coherent cultural period when seen from the smallest scale, the viewpoint of families and dwellings. As a result, it allows both the biblicist and the scholar of ancient Near Eastern religions access to a unique

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1 Interestingly, neither is an archaeologist, though both are clearly quite conversant with the archaeological literature and Schmitt’s survey of excavations is very rich.
resource: to examine cultural patterns across the Iron Age Levant that have not been powerfully influenced by a religion imposed from above.

A remarkable aspect of this book is the very fact of what is under debate in it: it is a defense of the existence of family religion as a distinct entity—connected to but analytically separable from state or local religion—in the ancient Levant. This question has been essential to Biblical studies from its beginning: scholars have debated how different the religion of the individual and family was from that of the court and scribes since the time of de Wette and Wellhausen. In the study of religion more broadly this point was made most forcefully by Numa Fustel de Coulanges (1864), who argued that family religion and ancestor cult, not official or state religion, were the foundations of the *polis* in Greece and Rome.

The long-recognized question has always been how to gain access to a religion that was not that of writers and therefore never left a creed, let alone written hymns, myths, or rituals. In response, archaeologists have developed sophisticated ways of reading material evidence, but the question of how to integrate it with language remains interesting and challenging. It differs from the related question of “popular religion” because of its greater specificity about social location: rather than simply being the assumed “other” of elite or state religion, domestic religion has always had a concrete return address, in the homes of its practitioners.2

In 1988 Carol Meyers defined two obstacles to understanding family religion: the tendency to focus on monumental objects and buildings in archaeology and a theological focus on orthodoxy: “Although these archaeological and theological barriers to the recovery of popular religion are breaking down, the material evidence for a private or family religion at any period in Israelite [history] has yet to be systematically collected and studied” (Meyers 1988: 158, cited by Albertz on p. 9). Thus the goal of the present book: “to demonstrate that this specific religious dimension actually existed in the region of the Levant and show how it functioned in discontinuity and continuity with other aspects of life—namely, local and state religion. Our goal is to provide a compendium for studying the ancient religion of Israel and of its Levantine environment from a specific analytical perspective” (xv).

Why might it be necessary—indeed incalculably valuable—to provide a massively documented argument that such a widely-studied category as domestic religion even existed as a major factor in the ancient Levant? Here

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2 The category of “popular religion” has a particularly fraught history and has been argued to be empirically incorrect with respect to pantheon (e.g. Olyan 1988); for a recent critique of the category as analytically incoherent see Stavrokopoulou 2010.