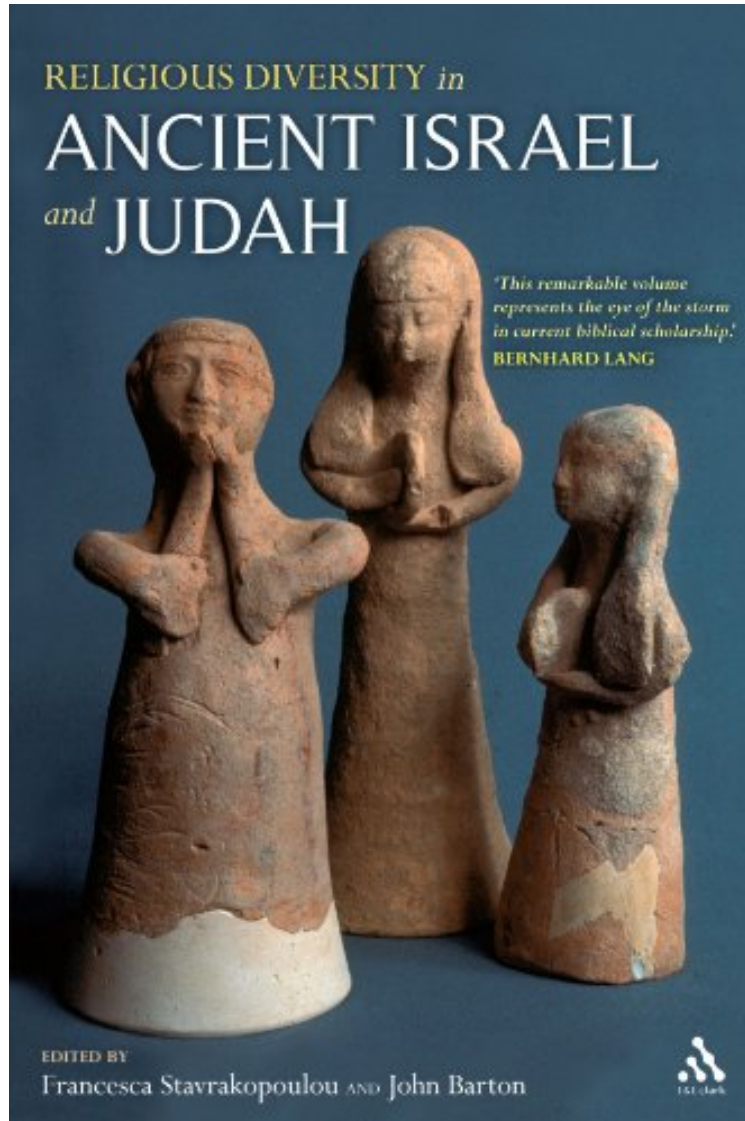


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Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah

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From Francesca Stavrakopoulou : Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A must-have book By Sheila Michaels All the contributors write well and clearly. If you wish to understand current thinking in Biblical Studies, religious studies, gender the history of the area, then this is a book you must read. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Five stars for scholarship; three stars for my enjoyment of the book By Ralph Blumenau There is much scholarly material in this collection of

papers on the sociology of religion in Israel and Judah, which happens not to be a particular interest of mine; and my review deals only with those results of recent biblical scholarship, some of it fairly recent and some much older, which overturn a number of preconceptions derived from the Bible and still held by many of the laity and by some orthodox believers. In a Postscript one of the editors acknowledges that most of these preconceptions were challenged by Julius Wellhausen as long ago as 1883 and by other writers since. (I am thinking particularly of Friedmans *Who Wrote the Bible?* of 1987). So, for all the citations of more recent authorities and for all the work done by the contributors themselves to this volume, I do not have the impression that this is a particularly ground-breaking book in respect of the areas which interest me. Research has shown that: 1. Israel came into existence WITHIN Canaan and was not the result of immigration into Canaan from Egypt. 2. Initially the beliefs of the Israelites were not so radically different from those of Canaan: they were polytheistic; YHWH was associated with the goddess Asherah. 3. Deuteronomist material is to be found not only in the Book of Deuteronomy but scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible, shaping or re-shaping the narrative to make it conform to the agenda of the Deuteronomist scribes. Many of the beliefs they ascribe to the Israelites were official beliefs and did not reflect the beliefs of the general population. That is fairly obvious from the Biblical account of the battles fought between the upholders of the official beliefs against the supporters of Baal and other gods. But the official beliefs may not have reflected even the beliefs of many members of the official classes, so that the distinction between official and popular religion is not all that sharp. That, too, would seem fairly obvious from the Biblical texts, in which some kings are chastised for worshipping false gods. The contributors take issue with the derogatory, condescending and westernizing attitude some scholars show towards the popular (primitive) religion. The popular religions, often involving fertility cults, were likely to be stronger in the countryside than in the cities; and it was in the cities that we would find the scribes who championed the official religion: since high literacy itself is an urban phenomenon, the Hebrew Bible represents an urban perspective on almost everything. 4. One paper underlines the surely well-known scholarly consensus that the Deuteronomist source was composed in Judah before and after the Babylonian captivity, and has an agenda consistently to denigrate the rival Kingdom of Israel, finding that kingdom especially guilty of worshipping other gods, even though it also accuses some of the Kings of Judah (Ahaz, Manasseh) of the same sin. 5. One essay has it that kings of Israel and Judah were regarded as divinities, as were kings in neighbouring areas. Horns were part of divine images; the essay says (p.72) that Moses descended from Mount Sinai with horns on his head, meaning that he had been transformed into a god. (So much for the notion that the Hebrew word *karan* meant shining - as in the AV, the NEB, the Jerusalem Bible, and the JPS Tanach. According to this essay Jerome had not made a mistake when he translated *karan* into Latin as *cornuta* - i.e. horned!) And it quotes Psalm 132.17 which says I shall cause a horn to sprout for David. Local gods were often portrayed as horned bulls, but even King Jeroboam of Israel, who was a worshipper of YHWH, set up golden calves in the temples at Dan and at Bethel. (It has been suggested that when the Bible talks about calves it really means small bulls or that when the scribes described them as calves, it was a derogatory, belittling term for a bull.) This is really a book for scholarly specialists, which I am not. Much of it is quite hard going; the style is stodgy, colourless and wordily academic with a lot of technical vocabulary. 15 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Not light reading, but a very important book. By Beth. The casual reader may find this book tough going because it makes extensive use of the vocabulary of archeology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, theology and history, and includes numerous citations from leading works in all of those fields. That well-informed interdisciplinary approach, however, makes it possible for the authors and editors of this book to offer the reader an unparalleled synthesis of a vast amount of recent data. Taken as a whole, this book makes major strides towards putting to rest for once and for all such hackneyed dogmatic intellectual sloppiness as the idea that there was a uniform "popular religion" and/or a uniform "official religion" across the Levant at any given time, or the notion that worship of any deity can ever exist in an historical or cultural or geographic vacuum (as some theologians might prefer to imagine). Generally (and refreshingly), the authors whose works are contained in this volume stand firmly in a middle ground between treating the bible as sacrosanct and disregarding it all together. In particular, I found the essay by Herbert Niehr (Chapter 3) to be one of the best, most insightful, discussions of the "Canaanite"/ "Israelite" biblical dichotomy that I have read anywhere. This is a scholarly book in the best sense of the word.

Understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of the ancient Israelites has changed considerably in recent years. It is now increasingly accepted that the biblical presentation of Israelite religion is often at odds with the historical realities of ancient Israel's religious climate. As such, the diversity inherent to ancient Israelite religion is often overlooked particularly within university lecture halls and classrooms. This textbook draws together specialists in the field to explain, illustrate and analyze this religious diversity. Following an introductory essay guiding the reader through the book, the collection falls into three sections. The first focuses on conceptual diversities. It deconstructs common assumptions about Israelite religion and reconstructs Israelite perceptions of the nature of the religious world. The second section examines socio-religious diversities. It studies the varied social contexts of ancient Israelites, exploring the relationship between worshippers' social locations and their perceptions and experiences of the divine. The third section deals with geographical diversities. It seeks to understand how geographical distinctions engender

certain characteristics within Israelite religion and impact upon religious perceptions. Underpinning each essay in this volume is a shared concern to: (1) explore the ways in which worshippers' socio-cultural contexts shape and colour their religious beliefs and practices; (2) assess the role, benefits and limitations of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in reconstructing ancient Israelite religion.

About the Author John Barton is Oriel and Laing Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture, University of Oxford. His previous publications include *What is the Bible?*, *People of the Book?*, *Love Unknown*, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* and *The Biblical World*.