

Directions:

- (1) *Imagine that you are students in a course on religion. Assume you have been introduced to some key passages from the Old Testament, have been given an idea of some basic themes (the role of monotheism, the idea of covenant, etc.), know basic biblical chronology, and have been shown some examples where there's clearly historical background that's not explicitly discussed in the text.*
- (2) Pair up with someone sitting near to you (one group might have 3 people).
- (3) Read the following passage by Mark Smith, making notes or underlining passages if you like. (It is from the introduction to a book he wrote, where he is explaining approach he will take in the book. He is not approaching the Old Testament from a particular faith perspective, but rather looking at it as a historical document: he wants to understand what was happening when the various books of the Bible were written, combining biblical evidence with evidence from other contemporary sources of information.)
- (4) Your goal of this exercise is to understand Smith's position: what are the assumptions he is making when he reads the Bible? Your job is not to agree or disagree with him. You just should understand what it is that he thinks.
- (5) Jot down two questions, things you don't understand about the passage. Then take turns asking (and answering) your questions.

Finally, the modern study of Israelite religion considers both what some biblical sources consider "normative" and what appears to be outside the norms set by biblical laws or prophetic criticisms. Although the Bible and the religious claims made in it are entirely relevant to the task of reconstructing the history of Israelite religion, they do not represent the sum of Israelite faith in Yahweh. All religious data, including the Bible, inscriptions, iconography, and other archaeological data, are pertinent to the attempt to understand the religion of ancient Israel. The notion of an essence of religion apart from the sum total of a people's religious beliefs, words, and actions constitutes a secondary abstraction. When expressions of a religious essence of ancient Israel are based on biblical statements about religious norms, the expressions represent statements of personal faith and not historical description.

Biblical statements and sometimes contemporary claims about religious syncretism constitute one type of attempt to make distinctions between a normative, religious essence of Israel, on the one hand, and illegitimate or non-Israelite practices infesting Israelite religion, on the other. Although it is historically true that some practices were secondarily incorporated into the religion of Israel from Israel's neighbors, other practices classified as being the result of syncretism [borrowing] belonged to Israel's ancient religious heritage. Both original and borrowed features constitute legitimate subjects of historical inquiry. Ancient Israelite religion included both officially sanctioned practices and practices not sanctioned by various authorities; both official and popular religion belong to any historical description of Israelite religion. The historical enterprise examines the historical limitations and presuppositions of biblical claims.

The task of reconstructing the cult of Yahweh includes biblical claims and sets them within a wider framework that accounts for the available information. The data in the attested sources indicate a pluralism in religious practice in ancient Israel that led sometimes to conflict about the nature of correct Yahwistic practice. It is precisely this conflict that produced the differentiation of Israelite religion from its Canaanite heritage during the second half of the monarchy. As a result of this conflict, some elements of faith appear transformed or muted in the Bible in a variety of ways.