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ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND THE BIBLE[§]

(The Marett Lecture, April, 2012)

Adam Kuper

Abstract:

The anthropology of religion was shaped by – and sought to influence – new understandings of the scriptures. Maintaining an uneasy, often unacknowledged, usually one-sided dialogue with biblical scholarship, the Victorian anthropologists introduced new comparative perspectives. Succeeding schools of anthropology applied their own particular analytical methods. Over a period of 150 years, despite changes in intellectual fashions, the anthropology of the bible has been a testing ground for the anthropology of religion.

I

A young philosophy don, a Jerseyman at Oxford, Robert Ranulph Marett was intrigued by the subject set for the 1893 Green Prize in Moral Philosophy: “The ethics of savage races”. He immersed himself in the literature on primitive religion, won the prize, and was befriended by the only anthropologist at Oxford University, E. B. Tylor.

Tylor was the father figure of the new anthropology that had emerged in the 1860s. It was a baggy, ambitious discipline, and Tylor himself wrote about race and technology and language and marriage, but especially about religion, and this became Marett’s main interest too. The first objective of the anthropology of religion was to characterize the earliest creeds and rites. The anthropologists then explained the advance of humanity from the long dark age of magic and superstition to the sunny uplands of a more spiritual religion; or they showed how metaphysical error gave way to rationality and science.

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In any case, they took it for granted that religion, technology, and the social order advanced in lockstep through a determined series of stages. At each stage, the beliefs and customs of societies at a similar level of development were essentially the same. So contemporary primitive societies could be treated as stand-ins for past societies at an equivalent stage of development. The notions of the American Indians, perhaps, or at a higher level, the Tahitians, provided living instances of conceptions and beliefs that had once been very widespread. To know one was to know all. Captain Cook had introduced the word *taboo* from Tahiti. Soon taboos were being discovered all over the place. Other exotic terms were soon taken up – *mana*, another Polynesian word, *totem* from the Ojibwa, *potlatch* from the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, *voodoo* from West Africa. All were elements of a universal primal religion. So Victorian anthropologists could write about Australian totems and American Indian taboos. They could even identify totem and taboo in ancient Israel.

Such beliefs and practices may once have been universal but they were surely irrational. How could so many people have believed so many impossible things for so long? Some missionaries saw the hand of the Devil here, but the anthropologists argued that there was something about the ways of thinking of primitive people that led them to make mistakes of perception and logic. After all, Darwin had shown that human evolution was paced by the development of the brain. It was widely assumed that the brains of the various races developed at different rates. The smaller-brained savages, and indeed the early Israelites, were simply not capable of thinking very clearly.

So how *did* they think? Tylor argued that primitive peoples relied on “analogy or reasoning by resemblance” (Tylor, 1881: 338). For Frazer, such “reasoning by resemblance” accounted for the belief in magic. Robertson Smith agreed that for the savage mind there was “no sharp line between the metaphorical and the literal,” and he blamed the “unbounded use of analogy characteristic of pre-scientific thought” for producing a “confusion between the several orders of natural and supernatural beings” (Robertson Smith, 1894: 274). Pre-scientific thinkers were particularly likely to get into a muddle when it came to causality. Robertson Smith found that primal religion was characterised by “*insouciance*, a power of casting off the past and living in the

impression of the moment” which “can exist only along with a childish unconsciousness of the inexorable laws that connect the present and the future with the past” (Robertson Smith, 1894: 57).

Tylor supposed that the very earliest religion arose from a misapprehension. People everywhere have dreams and visions, but primitive people confuse dreams with real experiences. When they dream of the dead they imagine that they exist somewhere else, in another state, the state that living people experience in dreams, trances and fevers. And so, “the ancient savage philosophers probably made their first step by the obvious inference that every man has two things belonging to him, namely, a life and a phantom” (Tylor, 1871 (2): 12). They then generalised this conclusion to embrace the rest of the natural world. Even trees and plants, even the planets, had souls. This was what Tylor termed “animism”.

Rituals soon developed, notably sacrifices. In primitive animism, offerings were made to the spirits of the dead after they had appeared in dreams. In what might be called the higher animism, sacrifices were also made to “other spiritual beings, genii, fairies, gods”. These sacrifices were gifts: “as prayer is a request made to a deity as if he were a man, so sacrifice is a gift made to the deity as if he were a man.” (Tylor, 1871: 2: 375). Sacrifices took the form of burnt offerings, because spirits demanded spiritual food, the souls of animals of plants (Tylor, 1866: 77). Vestiges of the primitive cult – which Tylor called “survivals” – recurred in the ceremonies of the most advanced religions.

In 1899, the young Marett achieved a certain notoriety by challenging Tylor’s thesis that animism was the primeval religion. Marett identified a pre-animistic religion based on the Polynesian belief in *mana*, which he took to mean a sort of psychic energy and power. Mana was inseparable from taboo. “Altogether, in mana we have what is *par excellence* the primitive religious idea in its positive aspect, taboo representing its negative side, since whatever has mana is taboo, and whatever is taboo has mana” (Marett, 1911). His theory made some converts in Germany and in France, most notably Marcel Mauss, who made mana the dynamic force behind both the gift and sacrifice.

Tylor was already a frail old man when Marett became his friend, and Marett took responsibility for the development of anthropology at the university. He was instrumental in instituting Oxford's diploma in anthropology in 1908, and he succeeded Tylor as University Reader in Social Anthropology, a position he held for a quarter of century. When the university created a chair in anthropology in 1936 he held it for a year before the appointment of Radcliffe-Brown. From 1928 he was Rector of Exeter College. He also served for many years as Treasurer of the University Golf Club. A busy man then, but, he recalled:

All this time ... Anthropology was becoming ... a passion with me ... Yet I was still attending to the subject with my left hand, while the right tackled the philosophy which after all I was paid to teach. In fact, I became a scandal to my friends, so that one of them wrote: "A man of your talents seems rather wasted on the habits of backward races." As it was, I divided my attention impartially between the beliefs of the savage and those of the Oxford undergraduate (Marett, 1941: 164).

II

Tylor's theory of animism was hardly original. It was in the direct line of enlightenment accounts of the development of rationality. Indeed, it was remarkably similar to the theory that had been advanced by Charles de Brosses and Auguste Comte. (De Brosses, 1760; Comte, 1830-1842.) But Tylor was also responding to the scandal provoked by two books that challenged traditional understandings of the bible. *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, presented a scientific alternative to the Book of Genesis. The following year *Essays and Reviews* appeared, seven essays by intellectuals in the Church of England, including Benjamin Jowett, Mark Pattison, and Frederick Temple (who was to become Archbishop of Canterbury). (Parker (ed.), 1860.) They downplayed miracles, questioned the story of the Creation, denied the doctrine of eternal punishment, and endorsed German critical scholarship which demonstrated that the bible was a compilation of sometimes contradictory texts dating from different periods.

The continental champions of the new biblical criticism, Wellhausen and Kuenen, further insisted that the Jewish religion had pagan roots. The original religion of Israel was a family cult. In time the family cult became a tribal and then a national religion. Only with the emergence of great empires in Mesopotamia and Persia, which subjugated Israel, had prophets begun to formulate a universal spiritual religion, foreshadowing Christianity. But pagan elements survived. (Wellhausen, [1883] 1885.)

Perhaps the ordinary church-goer could ignore these challenges. Owen Chadwick remarks that Victorian churches were full of “worshippers who had never heard of Tylor, were indifferent to Darwin, mildly regretted what they heard of Huxley” (Chadwick, 1970 (2): 35). But the educated public did debate these new ideas, passionately. Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, son of William Wilberforce, provoked a famous public confrontation with Huxley over the descent of man. (“Is Dr Huxley descended from a monkey on his father’s side or on his mother’s side ...”) (Hesketh, 2009). The Bishop also moved to have *Essays and Reviews* condemned in the Convocation of Canterbury.

However, a new science of religion was emerging, with biblical and comparative wings, that engaged with the ideas of Darwin and Wellhausen. It brought together theologians, linguists, folklorists, archaeologists and anthropologists. (Wheeler-Barclay, 2010.) The particular project of Tylor and the anthropologists was to discover the origins of religion, origins which could never be completely outgrown, the vestiges of ancient cults haunting even the most advanced religions.

And they had fresh evidence at their disposal, for they were able to draw on a stream of reports on primitive religions from all over the world, many of them the work of missionaries. These sources were themselves shaped by the bible and by biblical scholarship. Protestant missionaries especially made it a priority to translate the bible into the local language. This obliged them to identify indigenous notions that were roughly equivalent to god, spirit, sin, sacrifice and holiness. These concepts, and their ritual representations, were taken to be the essential constituents of a religion.

There is in fact no word for “religion” in the Hebrew bible, but it seemed obvious that ancient Judaism was the prototype of authentic religion. The bible also gave examples of

false religions, which were those of Israel's idolatrous neighbours. Similar beliefs and practices were abundantly represented in the societies to which the missionaries were called. They could now be identified as not only pagan, but primitive. The idols of false religions were totems. Their laws were barbarous taboos and had nothing to do with justice or morality. Their ceremonies, shocking exhibitions of greed and lust, featured ghastly acts of cruelty, including human sacrifice. Missionary ethnographers read the reports of their colleagues, which described surprisingly similar pagan religions in distant parts of the world, and they welcomed the guidance of Tylor and Frazer, who pointed out what they should be looking for, and explained the hold of superstition.¹

So the anthropology of religion was from the first very largely an anthropology of the bible, with comparative notes from all over the primitive world. Precisely because it had consequences for Christianity, it seemed to be very important. Tylor was raised as a Quaker and he believed that rituals always depended on magical thinking. Frazer argued that the comparative method "proves that many religious doctrines and practices are based on primitive conceptions, which most civilized and educated men have long agreed on abandoning as mistakes. From this it is a natural and often a probable inference that doctrines so based are false, and that practices so based are foolish" (Frazer, 1927: 282). Robertson Smith believed on the contrary that he was clearing away the debris of folklore and tribal custom so that the prophetic and historical truths in the Hebrew bible could be properly appreciated. For their part, missionary ethnographers delighted in discovering in the most primitive communities some faint intimations of more advanced doctrines, crude versions of biblical stories, even traces in the language of the passage of one of the lost tribes of Israel. In the 1920s and 1930s this sort of thing became a speciality of the Vienna school, then a hot-house of Catholic missionary anthropology.

III

In parallel with these studies of the development of religion, another foundational research programme of anthropology addressed the rise of marriage and the family. Was there some connection between religion, morality and social organization? In 1869, J. F.

McLennan provided Tylor's animism with a social context. McLennan had himself proposed a model of the earliest societies (McLennan, 1865). They were marauding nomadic bands, matrilineal and exogamous, practicing marriage by capture. He now argued that these bands had an appropriate religion. Each band believed that it was descended matrilineally from a particular natural species, its totem, which was worshipped as an ancestor god and placated with rituals. Totemism was at once a religion – rather like animism, as McLennan conceded – and a social system.

Long ago, totemism had been universal. McLennan identified traces of a totemic system in Siberia, Peru, Fiji, and even in classical India. The Greeks had their natural spirits. Totemism was also the point of departure of later systems of thought. It planted the seeds not only of religion but also of science. When the names of animals were given to constellations of stars, this was a legacy of totemism but also the first inklings of astronomy. Beliefs about the descent of human beings from animals gave a faint hint of what would become the theory of evolution.

McLennan suggested in passing that the serpent story in Genesis may have had a totemic significance, but his theory of totemism was first systematically applied to the Hebrew bible by his friend, William Robertson Smith, who had been appointed to the chair of Hebrew and Old Testament at the Free Church College at Aberdeen in 1870. (See Black and Chrystal, 1912.) Robertson Smith accepted Wellhausen's demonstration that the bible was a compilation of sources of various dates, and that it included mythological as well as historical elements. Following Wellhausen again, he aimed to identify the religious beliefs of the most ancient Israelites, and to trace their progressive enlightenment. He also adopted Wellhausen's view that rituals were often hangovers from more primitive times, but given fresh justifications.

How were the primitive elements to be identified? An obvious first step was to consider the practices and beliefs of Israel's pagan neighbours. Robertson Smith wrote that some ancient Jewish laws were based on principles "still current among the Arabs of the desert" (Robertson Smith, 1881: 340). He himself traveled in the Arabian interior to collect first-hand materials. However, even the Bedouin had progressed beyond the

totemic stage, and they had been Muslims for many centuries. The comparative method practiced by McLennan offered an alternative approach. Early Israel could be understood with reference to better-documented societies at the same level of development.

In 1880 Robertson Smith published an essay entitled “Animal tribes in the Old Testament”, in which he argued that ancient Semitic societies were totemic. The evidence was admittedly patchy. Robertson Smith pointed to the Queen of Sheba as proof of early matriarchy. Some Arab marriage rituals might be interpreted as survivals of marriage by capture. Taken together with other hints scattered in the literature, Robertson Smith later pronounced, “These facts appear sufficient to prove that Arabia did pass through a stage in which family relations and the marriage law satisfied the conditions of the totem system”(Robertson Smith, 1894: 88).

Similar bits and pieces of evidence might indicate that the early Arabian religion was also totemic. Tribal groupings were often named after animals, and sometimes after the moon and sun. Sun and moon were evidently worshipped as gods, so animals presumably were also once treated as gods. And crucially it seemed that totemic beliefs survived in ancient Israel, if in an attenuated form. Robertson Smith suggested that the heathen practices against which the Hebrew prophets inveighed were totemic in origin. And the second commandment itself was apparently directed against nature worship.

This argument did not go down well with his employers. The General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland issued a swift condemnation:

First, concerning marriage and the marriage laws in Israel, the views expressed are so gross and so fitted to pollute the moral sentiments of the community that they cannot be considered except within the closed doors of any court of this Church. Secondly, concerning animal worship in Israel, the views expressed by the Professor are not only contrary to the facts recorded and the statements made in Holy Scripture, but they are gross and sensual – fitted to pollute and debase public sentiment. (Black and Chrystal, 1912: 382.)

Yet Robertson Smith was not cast into outer darkness. He became co-editor of the famous ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (and was reputed to have read every entry). In 1883 he was appointed Reader in Arabic at Cambridge and in 1889 he became Professor. And he elaborated his initial thesis on early Semitic religion and social organization, notably in *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885), and in his masterpiece, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889).

He remained wedded to McLennan's theory of totemism. Primitive people believed that they were physically descended from founding gods. Gods and their worshippers were originally thought of as kin who "make up a single community, and ... the place of the god in the community is interpreted on the analogy of human relationships." A more sophisticated doctrine developed in ancient Israel. The divine father was conceived of in spiritual terms. But initially gods and their worshippers were thought of as blood relatives. This was also the origin of morality, for "the indissoluble bond that united men to their god is the same bond of blood-fellowship which in early society is the one binding link between man and man, and the one sacred principle of moral obligation" (Robertson Smith, 1894: 53).

The totemic gods were associated with shrines or sanctuaries. At certain times, a yet more intimate contact with the gods was required. This was achieved through sacrifice, which Robertson Smith termed "the typical form of all complete acts of worship in the antique religions". (Robertson Smith, 1894: 214) Sacrifice had been, of course, the central rite celebrated in the temple in Jerusalem, as in the temples of ancient Greece and Rome. It remained a vexing problem for Christian theology and for critical scholarship of the bible. The priestly code represented sacrifices as acts of atonement, but Wellhausen insisted that this interpretation was anachronistic. Textual criticism revealed that the code was a post-Exilic document, which superimposed a late-priestly theology on earlier ritual practices. Originally, sacrifices were not even performed in the temple. They were associated with what Wellhausen called a natural religion, which was situated within the life of the family. Robertson Smith speculated that sacrifice was originally a sort of family meal. "The god and his worshippers are wont to eat and drink together, and by this token their fellowship is declared and sealed." The most primitive sacrifices were

therefore not gifts, as Tylor had thought, but were “essentially acts of communion between the god and his worshippers”. (Robertson Smith, 1894:243, 271).

But what was sacrificed, what was eaten at that communion meal? Robertson Smith declared that the totemic animal itself was the original sacrificial object. Normally, a totem animal could not be killed or eaten. It was “unclean” - taboo. Taboos were primitive anticipations of the idea of the sacred. Robertson Smith pronounced the evidence “unambiguous”. “When an unclean animal is sacrificed it is also a sacred animal.” He concluded that among the Semites “the fundamental idea of sacrifices is not that of a sacred tribute, but of communion between the god and his worshippers by joint participation in the living flesh and blood of a sacred victim” (Robertson Smith, 1894: 345).

The argument was clearly leading up to a climax in which something would have to be said about the sacrifices of gods themselves in Semitic religions, perhaps in connection with a communion rite. Robertson Smith took the step in this passage:

That the God-man dies for His people and that his Death is their life, is an idea which was in some degree foreshadowed by the oldest mystical sacrifices. It was foreshadowed, indeed, in a very crude and materialistic form, and without any of those ethical ideas which the Christian doctrine of the Atonement derives from a profound sense of sin and divine justice. And yet the voluntary death of the divine victim, which we have seen to be a conception not foreign to ancient ritual, contained the germ of the deepest thought in the Christian doctrine: the thought that the Redeemer gives Himself for his people. (Robertson Smith, 1889: 393).

Frazer cited this passage in his obituary essay on Robertson Smith and remarked that it was dropped in the posthumously published second edition of the *Religion of the Semites*, which had been edited by J. S. Black (Frazer, 1894: 800-807).

Like Robertson Smith, James George Frazer was a Scot, and the son of a clergyman. When Robertson Smith arrived at Cambridge to take up his new professorship he commissioned Frazer to write entries on “Taboo” and “Totemism” for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Frazer’s essay on totemism turned out to be too long for the publishers, but Robertson Smith encouraged him to write a book on the subject. *Totemism* marked Frazer’s debut as an anthropologist in his own right.

Frazer’s most famous book, *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890, followed up Robertson Smith’s speculations about the sacrifice of a totemic god. He also drew on the theory of a German folklorist, Wilhelm Mannhardt, who had explained German peasant cults of sacred trees as survivals of ancient fertility rituals. (Mannhardt, 1875.) Combining these elements, Frazer constructed an ethnological detective story. It began with the ritual strangling of “the King of the Wood”, the priest of the sanctuary of Nemi, near Rome. This sacred king was the embodiment of a tree-spirit. He was not simply murdered, but was sacrificed to ensure the fertility of nature. Clues drawn from a vast range of ethnographic sources showed that primitive people identified their well-being with the fate of natural spirits, whose priest-kings were sacrificed in fertility rituals. “The result, then, of our inquiry is to make it probable that ... the King of the Wood lived and died as an incarnation of the Supreme Aryan god, whose life was in the mistletoe or Golden Bough.” (Frazer, 1900 (2): 363.) Might this not imply that the Gospel accounts of Christ’s crucifixion were further versions of the myth of the sacred king? Frazer wrote in a letter to a friend, in 1904, that “the facts of comparative religion appear to me subversive of Christian theology” (Ackerman, 2005: 236).

Frazer then turned his attention to the Hebrew Bible. In 1904 or 1905 the Regius Professor of Hebrew in Cambridge, Robert Hatch Kennett, was persuaded to offer a private beginner’s class in Hebrew. (Ackerman, 1987: 183-4.) It attracted a very select clientele: Jane Harrison, F. M. Cornford, A. B. Cook, and Frazer. Frazer became competent enough to read the Old Testament in Hebrew and he gradually put together an anthropological commentary on the bible, just as he had earlier issued a six volume

commentary on Pausanias' description of Greece. He published the three volumes of his *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament* in 1918.

Frazer's method was to select a myth or custom in the Bible and to identify parallels in "primitive societies". So in Volume 2, Chapter 4, a 300 page essay entitled "Jacob's Marriage", he analysed Jacob's marriages to his cousins, the two daughters of his mother's brother, Laban, and posed the question whether Jacob was following established customs, and whether such customs were to be found in other primitive societies. He was, of course, able to show that these practices were indeed widespread. A chapter on Cain explained that all over the world murderers were marked in order to protect them from ghosts. Similar exercises showed that "primitive peoples" also prayed and sacrificed to their gods, and had their myths of creation, floods, etc. As a modern biographer of Frazer comments, "the implicit purpose of the work ... [was] to undermine the Bible and religion by insisting on its folkloric stratum, thereby associating it with savagery" (Ackerman, 1987: 182-3).

Émile Durkheim was also inspired by Robertson Smith. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) he adopted Robertson Smith's thesis that religion was rooted in social arrangements, and in particular that early religions developed out of family cults (a thesis that had been independently proposed for ancient Rome and Greece by Durkheim's teacher Fustel de Coulanges (Coulanges, 1864)). Among the aboriginal peoples of Australia – apparently the most primitive surviving society – the exogamous kinship group, the clan, was associated with an emblem, the totem, which was the object of taboos and sacrifice. It was, Durkheim declared, sacred.

For Durkheim, "the sacred was the religious" (Lukes, 1973: 241), and he praised Robertson Smith for remarking the ambiguity at the core of the notion of the sacred, the biblical *qadosh*. The ambiguity lies in the fact that *qadosh* may refer to something that is holy in the Christian sense, or it may designate something that is unpropitious and taboo, like a field sown with a mixed harvest, or the *q'desha*, the temple priestess who is a cult prostitute. The key is that sacred things are set apart from profane beings. "A whole group of rites has the object of realizing this state of separation which is essential. Since their function is to prevent undue mixings and to keep one of these two domains from

encroaching upon the other, they are only able to impose abstentions or negative acts” (Durkheim, 1971: 299).

Maureen Bloom argues that Durkheim was in reality characterising biblical Judaism, and that he was drawing upon his own education in the Hebrew bible. (Bloom, 2007: cap.7.) After all, Durkheim was the son of the rabbi of Épinal, and had been destined for the rabbinate. So once again, by another route, the Hebrew bible shaped the anthropology of religion.

V

The influence of the great Victorians was prolonged. The second edition of Oesterley and Robinson’s influential *History of Israel*, published in 1937, still relied on Wellhausen, Robertson Smith, Tylor and Frazer. Frazer himself continued to publish on the Hebrew bible until the 1930s. Freud – another fan of Robertson Smith – produced exercises in speculative anthropology, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1937), that were, at least in point of method, thoroughly Victorian.

Within anthropology a reaction set in against just-so stories of origin, but the comparative method remained in favour. Marcel Mauss (who was the grandson of a rabbi) suggested that the situation of the Hebrew patriarchs was similar to that of pastoralist elites in East Africa, who lorded it over sedentary farmers (Mauss, 1926). Franz Steiner compared the patriarchal families to Nuer clans and lineages (Steiner, 1954). Occasional attempts were made to rewrite chapters of *Folklore in the Old Testament* in a functionalist idiom, anthropologists citing observations from their own fieldwork to cast light on mysterious episodes in the bible. Isaac Schapera, for example, devoted a Frazer lecture (appropriately enough) to ‘the sin of Cain’ (Schapera, 1955).

And from the 1950s biblical scholars began to draw on more recent anthropological theories. (See Rogerson, 1979, 1989.) Some were influenced by theories of nomadism (though not, surprisingly, by the ideas of Ibn Khaldoun). Functionalist studies of

segmentary lineage systems were taken as a model of the social system of the patriarchal age. Some scholars combined the lineage model with models of state formation, or with the typology of bands, tribes and chieftaincies developed by Elman Service (1962).

Inevitably, perhaps, biblical scholars tended to place too much confidence in their chosen anthropological models. It was readily assumed, for instance, that anthropologists were quite sure what lineages are (and indeed, that any expert can distinguish minimal from maximal lineages).² The only issue was to identify the ancient Hebrew terms for these social units. This turned out to be very difficult. Experts could not agree whether the biblical *bet av* or *mispahah* should be translated as a “lineage”, or whether the Hebrew words *sebet* or *matteh* referred to a “tribe” or a “clan”. As Niels Peter Lemche remarks, “It is clear that the traditional literature of the OT employs a very loose terminology to describe the lower levels of the society, since [Hebrew terms usually rendered as] ‘house’ and ‘father’s house’ are used indiscriminately of the nuclear family, the extended family, and also of the higher kinship group, the lineage.” As for the very general view that the term *mishpaha* means “clan”, “no scholar has troubled to define precisely what he meant by the word ‘clan’” (Lemche, 1985: 260. Cf. Vanderhooft, 2009.) Yet Lemche himself was perhaps too ready to identify “lineages” in biblical times, and to conclude that “clan endogamy” was widely practiced. (Lemche, 1985: 272-4.)³

VI

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (1990) has proposed a return to the comparative method, and attempts continue to generalize from exotic practices in order to illuminate puzzling Biblical stories.⁴ Old-fashioned ideas about primitive society still cast a long shadow in essays on the Bible. The ghosts of Robertson Smith, Frazer and Marett might find some recent exercises in the comparative method rather familiar.

But N. H. Snaith chided Biblical scholars for paying more attention to primitive parallels than to textual analysis (Snaith, 1944). Within anthropology there was increasing concern

with the meaning of beliefs and practices for the people themselves. Marett had demanded this almost from the first. “How then are we to be content with an explanation of taboo that does not pretend to render its sense as it has sense for those who both practice it and make it a rallying point for their thought on mystic matters? ... We ask to understand it, and we are merely bidden to despise it.”(Marett, 1909: 97). The post-WW1 generation of anthropologists, the first to spend extensive periods in the field, insisted that customs had to be studied in action. Only modern ethnographic fieldwork could deliver a properly sympathetic understanding of exotic beliefs.

This was also the message of the newly fashionable linguistic philosophy. Wittgenstein read the *Golden Bough* in 1931, and reacted with furious contempt. “Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, for these savages will not be so far from any understanding of spiritual matters as an Englishman of the twentieth century. His explanations of the primitive observances are much cruder than the sense of the observances themselves.” (Wittgenstein, 1979: 8) In Wittgenstein’s view, meaning was a matter of context and use.

And so they came to agree, the philosophers and the anthropologists, that concepts and practices could be understood only by appreciating their use in the business of everyday life in particular communities. Context was all. Peter Winch’s *Idea of a Social Science*, published in 1958, identified the doctrines of the later Wittgenstein with the analytical practice of Oxford’s new professor of social anthropology, E. E. Evans-Pritchard. As Mary Douglas put it, summing up what she took to be the position of Evans-Pritchard, “Everyday language and everyday thought set into their social and situational context have to be the subject of inquiry”(Douglas, 1980: 26).

Evans-Pritchard had read history at Exeter College as an undergraduate, and he recalled Marett as an affable fellow. When he became in his turn professor of social anthropology at Oxford and lectured on theories of primitive religion, he borrowed Marett’s critical characterization of the theories of Tylor and Frazer as “intellectualist”. He also questioned the value of psychological and sociological accounts of religion. The son of an Anglican clergyman, Evans-Pritchard was a recent convert to Catholicism, and he was inclined to believe that all religions contain a kernel of spiritual truth. This now seemed

to him to be their most important feature, and he urged that spiritual beliefs should be treated seriously in their own right. (Evans-Pritchard, 1965.)

Evans-Pritchard came to deprecate the comparative method (Evans-Pritchard, 1963), but he was prepared to reverse the procedure, claiming in the introduction to his *Nuer Religion* that the religion of the Nuer and Dinka “have features which bring to mind the Hebrews of the Old Testament”. He quoted in support an American Presbyterian working among the Nuer, who remarked that “the missionary feels as if he were living in Old Testament times, and in a way this is true”. “When therefore [Evans-Pritchard concluded] I sometimes draw comparisons between Nuer and Hebrew conceptions, it is no mere whim but is because I myself find it helpful, and I think others may do so too, in trying to understand Nuer ideas to note this likeness to something with which we are ourselves familiar without being too intimately involved in it.” (Evans-Pritchard, 1956: vii.) African informants, familiar with the bible, often made such comparisons themselves (see, e.g., Turner, 1967: 135). However, Evans-Pritchard clearly intended to suggest that the Nuer had a sort of pre-knowledge of scriptural truths. In the very last sentences of the monograph he wrote that the meaning of Nuer rites “depends finally on an awareness of God and that men are dependent on him and must be resigned to his will. At this point the theologian takes over from the anthropologist.” (Evans-Pritchard, 1956: 322.)

VII

According to the practitioners of the comparative method, the essential ingredients of primitive religion were totem and taboo. Its defining ritual was sacrifice. In 1950-1951 Franz Steiner – an émigré Jewish mystic, a German poet, a friend of Elias Canetti, a lover of Iris Murdoch, and a lecturer in the Oxford institute of social anthropology – gave a course of lectures on taboo, which were edited and published after his death. (Steiner, [1956]1999.) His central thesis was that the constructs of the comparative method had been lifted from specific ethnographic contexts. In the process they were stripped of their particularities and lost much of their meaning. When modern ethnographers apply these

constructs in their own analyses, they have to be qualified if they are to be of any use at all. “They are then redefined, and by this process they become so narrow as to lose all significance outside the individual analytical study to which they were tailored.” For example, he suggested, “The broad significance which ‘Totemism’ had as a comparative category has evaporated.” (Steiner, 1999: 105.)

Steiner tagged taboo as “a Protestant discovery”, while the notion that taboos regulated social order and morality was “a Victorian invention,” one that was peculiarly interesting to prudes and snobs. (Steiner, 1999: 132.) But taboo was actually a Polynesian concept, and Steiner proceeded to analyse the specific meaning of *tabu* in the context of Polynesian language, thought and religion. It turned out that *tabu* was not at all the same thing as the “taboo” of the anthropologists.

Steiner then reviewed Robertson Smith’s thesis that the notion of the sacred originated in ideas of taboo. Steiner had an educated knowledge of Hebrew and he argued (along the same lines as Durkheim) that the Hebrew idea of *qadosh* could not be translated simply as taboo, certainly not in the sense in which the Polynesians used the term *tabu*. He concluded that neither the Polynesian *tabu* nor the Hebrew *qadosh* were useful cross-cultural categories. The only universal was that all societies define certain acts, words and situations as pregnant with danger.

So much, then, for taboo, and perhaps even for the category of the sacred. Evans-Pritchard, gave the Henry Myers lecture in 1954, which he entitled “The meaning of sacrifice among the Nuer”. He remarked that “in Nuer sacrifice there are different shades of meaning. The pattern varies. There are shifts of emphasis.” It was difficult, if not impossible “to present a general interpretation, to put forward a simple formula, to cover all Nuer sacrifices...” (Evans-Pritchard, 1954, 30.) Many Nuer sacrifices regulated social relations, and might be amenable to a sociological analysis. But Evans-Pritchard noted that Father Crazzolaro, a Catholic missionary among the Nuer, had distinguished a category of piacular sacrifices that were not connected to social events but, much more interesting, were concerned with a universal quest, “the regulation of the individual’s relation with God” (capitalized here, so no mere tribal deity) (Evans-Pritchard, 1954)..

So taboo was a Victorian invention. Sacrifice was a broad term for a range of ritual practices with unpredictable meanings, resistant to sociological analysis and to comparison. That left totemism. Lévi-Strauss's short book, *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui*, published in 1962, deconstructed the concept, concluding that totemism also was not a useful cross-cultural category. Anthropologists should rather investigate the truly universal process by which all societies classify and relate social groups and natural phenomena. In a more extended study published a few months later, *La Pensée Sauvage*, Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that arbitrary features of natural objects were given significance by their position in a series of binary oppositions. Natural species were classified with reference to these oppositions. So too were the parts of the society. They were then related to one another.

VIII

These exemplary critiques disposed of the classical components of comparative religion, totem, taboo and sacrifice. Yet the change of paradigm was incomplete. A close reader of Steiner and Lévi-Strauss might still be inclined to study the place of taboo and totemic marriage rules in biblical religion, even if these elements were now understood rather differently. According to Lévi-Strauss, all societies establish parallel classifications of social and natural phenomena by making a series of binary contrasts. That was totemism, properly understood. And Steiner indicated that every society marks off certain social and natural categories as dangerous. Properly understood, then, taboo was a property of a system of classification. Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas now proposed structural accounts of biblical taboos on food and marriage.

Their projects might have been similar, but Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas – like Robertson Smith and Frazer before them – began from very different points of view. Leach was a crusading atheist. His mother had hoped that he would be a missionary. Instead he became the president of the Humanist Society. Mary Douglas was a conservative Catholic. Reviewing Mary Douglas's *Natural Symbols* in *The New York*

Review of Books in 1971, Leach wrote: “All her recent work gives the impression that she is no longer much concerned with the attainment of empirical truth; the object of the exercise is to adapt her anthropological learning to the service of Roman Catholic propaganda” (Leach, 1971). Reviewing Leach and Aycocock’s *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*, also in *The New York Review of Books*, Mary Douglas claimed that Leach imposed his own meanings on the myths, just like Frazer, and she concluded that the “ingenious argument is extremely interesting and, to readers who are unfamiliar with Old Testament scholarship, quite plausible” (Douglas, 1984).

And yet the two anthropologists had much in common, including a tendency to read back into the biblical world their own ideas about European Jews, whom they were inclined to think were too picky about food, and unreasonably prejudiced against intermarriage. To be sure, the projection of a particular understanding of the present into the past, even the very distant past, is hardly unusual. But Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas also shared more specialized ideas. Priority is difficult to establish – copies of papers circulated in draft before publication – but clearly they were already working on very similar lines in the early 1960s, drawing heavily from Lévi-Strauss.

In 1961 Leach published an essay, “Lévi-Strauss in the Garden of Eden”, which flagged his conversion to structuralism and introduced Lévi-Strauss as a better guide to the bible than Frazer. (Reprinted in Leach, 1969.) Biblical scholars since Wellhausen and Robertson Smith had recognised mythical elements in the Hebrew bible, the deposits of very ancient traditions, but they struggled to distinguish myths from historical texts. Leach insisted that it was all myth. And although the elements of the texts were no doubt of diverse origin, the editors of the Hebrew bible had imposed a coherence upon this body of myth. The analyst should accordingly act “on a presumption that the whole of the text as we now have it *regardless of the varying historical origins of its component parts* may properly be treated as a unity.” (Leach and Aycocock, 1983: 89-112. Similar pronouncements prefaced a number of Leach’s biblical essays.)

In his 1961 essay “Lévi-Strauss in the Garden of Eden”, Leach analysed the construction of the world and its creatures in the opening chapters of Genesis by way of a series of binary contrasts. In Leviticus xi: “creatures which do not fit this exact ordering of the

world – for instance water creatures with no fins, animals and birds which eat meat or fish, etc. – are classed as ‘abominations’” (Leach, 1969: 13). Here and in a paper on “Animal categories and verbal abuse”, published in 1964, he argued that classifications constructed by a series of binary contrasts will always throw up elements that breach boundaries. These are tabooed. (Leach, 1964.) And taboos on anomalies reinforce boundaries.

Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger*, published in 1966, was directly inspired by Steiner’s lectures. It became famous for her first attempt at an anthropology of the bible, a chapter on the abominations of Leviticus. Her analysis was very similar to that of Leach, the argument being that classificatory anomalies were tabooed. She did not at this stage identify the social context of these taboos, but she soon began to identify various possible functions. “We should see taboos as the performative acts which stop the careless speaker from getting the categories confused ... The performance protects boundaries around classifications ... On this distinctly Durkheimian approach, impurity and taboo supply back-up for the current system of control” (Douglas, 2004: 159-162).

The most important taboos concern sex and food: “bed and board”, as Mary Douglas put it (Fardon, 1999: 186). Leach was more interested in the bed side of things, and he treated the biblical stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and Ham, Lot and his daughters, and Abraham and Sarah as a set of structural transformations on the theme of incest and endogamy. Arguing that all societies struggle with similar concerns he compared these stories to the myth of Oedipus, which Lévi-Strauss had selected for exemplary analysis in the first presentation of his structural method for the analysis of myth. (Leach, 1969; Lévi-Strauss, 1963, chapter XI.)

According to Lévi-Strauss, myths grapple with existential issues, generating temporary resolutions of intractable problems. In “The legitimacy of Solomon”, Leach set out “to demonstrate that the Biblical story of the succession of Solomon to the throne of Israel is a myth which ‘mediates’ a major contradiction”(Leach, 1969: 31). The contradiction is between the assertion that God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people, and that they should be endogamous, and the reality that the land accommodated a number of different populations, with whom Jews – even kings – intermarried, and for good political reasons.

Leach argued that central myths in the Hebrew bible offered resolutions of this structural contradiction.

Mary Douglas came to agree that the ancient Hebrews were obsessed by endogamy. Rereading Leach's essay, "The legitimacy of Solomon", "brought home ... with a resounding thud something which Old Testament scholarship had been agreed upon for a very long time ... that the Pentateuch was full of concern for the evils that flowed from marriage with foreigners." (Douglas, 1975: 208.) Commenting on this passage, Richard Fardon remarks that "Tracing a general analogy between animal classification, food rules and sexual mating required, as she put it, something of a 'conversion' to alliance theory in the analysis of kinship" (Fardon, 1999: 186).

Dating the redaction of the Tanach is still a controversial matter, but Leach (and Mary Douglas after him) adopted the view, held by some experts, that it had been put together in its final form shortly after the return from Babylon in the 6th century BCE, and the construction of the second temple. Leach and Douglas assumed that the editors imposed a unity on the various texts incorporated into the Hebrew Bible. Their motives were political. Leach accepted the thesis that the editors were following the party line of Ezra and Nehemiah, who led the return from exile and ruled Palestine for their Persian overlords. The texts were edited to support the policies of these satraps: their land-grabbing, their xenophobic nationalism, and their insistence on Jewish endogamy. Yet if there was a party line, it was not always consistent. Leach thought that myths were bound to put alternatives into play, and that myth-makers were never completely in control of their material. "What the myth then 'says' is not what the editors consciously intended to say but rather something which lies deeply embedded in Jewish traditional culture as a whole" (Leach, 1969: 53).

Mary Douglas took the view that different factions had edited particular sections of the bible. She agreed with Leach that the Persian satraps, Ezra and Nehemiah, who had led the exiles back from Babylon, were concerned with imposing endogamy, which enforced social and political boundaries.⁵ But a priestly party, responsible for what biblical scholars identify as the P sources in the bible, were prepared to tolerate exogamy. Their power base was in the temple, and their special privilege was the performance of

sacrifices. In consequence, the priests were obsessed with the levitical taboos, the rules of purity and holiness. And so distinct and conflicting political interests could be discerned behind the purity rules, on the one hand, and the rules on intermarriage on the other.

The ark, the tabernacle, and the temple were the most sacred sites of Judaism. Leach sketched the outlines of structuralist geography of these sacred places (Leach, 1976: 84-93). Mary Douglas argued that the rules regulating behavior in sacred sites provided models for everyday activities. The concern for purity that regulated temple sacrifices also informed the food taboos. This was because the body was itself a temple. “To conclude”, she wrote in her final collection of essays, *Jacob’s Tears*, “the levitical food prohibitions have plenty to do with the tabernacle. They frame the analogy between tabernacle and body: what goes for one, goes for the other” (Douglas, 2004, 172). It was not enough to analyse systems of classification. One had to connect – food taboos and marriage rules; the laws of *kashrut* and the laws of sacrifice; the body and the temple; the temple and Mount Sinai and the sanctuary. In *Leviticus as Literature*, published in 1999, she introduced a further structural parallel, between the form of the book itself – a “ring structure” – and the layout of the temple.

Some French literary structuralists also wrote essays on the Bible⁶. Yet although he had provided the inspiration, Lévi-Strauss (a grandson of the rabbi of Strasbourg) disapproved of these studies. A year after the publication of *La Pensée Sauvage*, the journal *Esprit* arranged a discussion between Lévi-Strauss and a group of philosophers led by the Christian existentialist Paul Ricoeur (Lévi-Strauss, 2004). Ricoeur had just made his famous linguistic turn, and he now believed that only a hermeneutic interpretation of signs, symbols and texts could yield an understanding of the human condition. Lévi-Strauss was, of course, all in favour of a linguistic turn, but his linguistics was very different. Ricoeur charged Lévi-Strauss with privileging syntactics over semantics, structure over meaning. He conceded that this might be appropriate in analyzing the ideas of simple societies, which really had very little to say for themselves. It was not helpful when it came to more complex intellectual systems. Similarly, the play of transformations in the myths of “cold” societies were very different from the historical, logically sequential myths of “hot” societies like ancient Greece and Israel. They had

produced great narratives that were vehicles of profound reflections about human existence. Could Lévi-Strauss's method be applied to such myths?

Lévi-Strauss responded that myths did not make sense in the way that Ricoeur imagined. They did not send messages. Rather they commented on one another. Symbols had only a positional significance. But Lévi-Strauss rejected the notion that there was a difference in kind between the mythologies of cold and hot societies. After all, persuasive structuralist studies of Greek myths were being published. However, the bible was different. The problem with the bible was, first, that while it incorporated mythical sources, these had been edited and, Lévi-Strauss said, distorted. Moreover, to understand myths one had to have some basic ethnographic information about the society in which they were current, but the ethnographic information to be gleaned from the bible had very probably itself been mythologised. (Cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1987.)

IX

Biblical scholars may well share Paul Ricoeur's reservations about the structuralist approach. Another reasonable complaint is that anthropologists generally lacked the scholarly preparation that their projects required. For instance, J. A. Emerton exposed Leach's dubious etymologies and other errors. He also pointed out that Leach's approach to the bible was very selective. Leach exaggerated any biblical concern with purity of blood, and ignored that fact that intermarriage was denounced for religious rather than for racial or political reasons. The real fear was that men would follow their wives and worship foreign gods (Emerton, 1976). However, Mary Douglas has been treated with more respect than Leach, perhaps in part because she was a believer and he was a crusading atheist. Distinguished scholars of the Hebrew bible, Jacob Milgrom (2004, *passim*) and Jacob Neusner (2006: 149), have made gracious comments on her work (and see Duhaime, 1998, Hendel, 2008).

In any case, structuralism, broadly defined, remains the prevailing method of anthropological studies of the bible. Leach was followed by a number of scholars, who delivered persuasive readings of biblical myths. For instance, David Pocock analysed the structural opposition of north and south in the book of Genesis (Pocock, 1975), Seth Daniel Kunin (1995) covers much the same ground as Leach, but with impressive scholarship, and Édouard Conte is engaged in the structural analysis of koranic texts on descent and incest that present further transformations of the myths of the patriarchs and the genealogy of Israel. (Conte, 2011a and 2011b.) Other anthropologists, following on from Mary Douglas, have brought out unexpected and suggestive connections – between systems of classification, rules governing sacrifices and food prohibitions, pollution beliefs, restrictions on marriage, the politics of legitimacy, and sacred architecture and landscape. The themes of these studies are, however, rather restricted. Strangely, neither Leach nor Douglas considered the ample evidence of a preference in biblical times for cousin marriage, which had been documented long ago by Frazer (1918, II, chapter 4)). And studies of kingship have been limited to rather old-fashioned exercises in the comparative method.

The Gospels have also been relatively neglected. Leach's rather old-fashioned comparative essay on virgin birth (Leach, 1966) did not attract attention from biblical scholars. His hint that the Christian Mass is a transformation of the Jewish Passover (Leach, 1976: 93) was, however, developed by Gillian Feeley-Harnick, who analysed the last supper as a structural transformation of the Passover seder, where “every critical element in the Passover is reversed” (Feeley-Harnik, 1981: 19). The Talmud and the Koran are still little studied by anthropologists, though Maureen Bloom has produced a sophisticated anthropological analysis of mysticism and magic in the Talmud, relating Talmudic conceptions to biblical and to Babylonian sources (Bloom, 2007).

Biblical scholars may be reassured that these authors do usually know Hebrew and Aramaic, even if they seldom have a mastery of the tools of bible criticism. For their part, biblical scholars are usually uncritical in their application of anthropological examples, and rely too often on dated and discredited anthropological models. There are exceptions – R. R. Wilson's superb study of biblical genealogies comes to mind. Yet

more inter-disciplinary collaboration would obviously be a good idea. "While a number of scholars make more or less overt reference to advice or counsel given by anthropology colleagues in the course of their work," James Martin remarked in 1989, "no publication has appeared over the joint names of an anthropologist and an Old Testament scholar." (Martin, 1989: 103.) I believe that the same statement could be repeated now, more than two decades later.

But perhaps the deeper problems are conceptual rather than methodological. Citing Clifford Geertz, Gillian Feeley-Harnik suggested that 'anthropologists have been studying their own religions all along, disguised as the religions of "exotic others"'. (1981, 3.)⁷ The flip side is that anthropologists have constructed 'religions' for those 'exotic others' in the image of their own.

Although the Hebrew Bible had no word for religion, it bequeathed enduring paradigms of both genuine and false religions, setting the parameters for the classification of exotic beliefs and rituals. The 'high religions' of the East were distressingly polytheist, even inclined to idolatry, but they might be accepted as genuine because they had sacred texts, temples, hymns and prayers. Pagan cults, however, were equated with the false religion of the Philistines. They had idols instead of deities, magicians in the place of priests, orgies rather than solemn rituals. A romantic like Andrew Lang might prefer pagan sensuality, fairy tales and nature worship to the puritan church. But his was a challenge to the orthodox believer, not to the idea of religion itself. In the 20th century, relativist anthropologists were inclined to treat all religions as equal, but the notion of religion itself was seldom put in question.

And so a distinctive realm of study was constituted, the anthropology of religion: a sacred space, occupied by myths, taboos, idols, and sacrifice. Even the most secular and skeptical anthropologists accepted the parameters. They might argue about whether the distinctive feature of religion was belief or ritual, and what, if anything, distinguished religion from magic, but despite a succession of paradigm changes, the

field – and its subject-matter – remained remarkably stable for 150 years. Yet surely its analytical core, the very notion of religion, is ripe for deconstruction.

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Notes

¹ Some missionary scholars were also aware of the new biblical criticism. The first Anglican bishop of Zululand, John Colenso, produced sympathetic account of Zulu beliefs and practices, even endorsing polygamy, which, he noted, and as the Zulu remarked, had been practiced by the biblical patriarchs. Colenso also published contributions to the new biblical criticism, and was duly tried for heresy in Cape Town. (Guy, 1883.)

² For a critique see Kuper, 2005, chapter 8.

³ For some sophisticated attempts to apply the segmentary lineage model to ancient Israel, see Bendor [1986], 1996, Frick, 1985, Wilson, 1977. For a review see Goldberg, 1996.

⁴ For instance, Pitt-Rivers (1977) suggested that enduring themes of Mediterranean culture explained some puzzling biblical episodes. Gilbert Lewis compared the treatment of lepers in New Guinea and ancient Israel (Lewis, 1987). Meyer Fortes identified the biblical figure of Job as the prototype of some west African beliefs (Fortes, 1959). Notwithstanding his clearly stated reservations, Lévi-Strauss himself published a playful comparison of origin myths of circumcision among the ancient Israelites and the penis-sheath among the Amazonian Bororo (Lévi-Strauss, 1988).

⁵ In her treatment of these Persian satraps, Douglas seems to have projected back from an understanding of contemporary Middle Eastern politics. Richard Fardon remarks: “Parallels with the range of political positions occupied in contemporary Israel may be implicit in Douglas’s account, but they are certainly not lost on her” (Fardon, 1999: 203).

⁶ French scholars from various disciplines contributed structuralist analyses of biblical texts. See, e.g., Barthes et al., 1971, and Soler, 1973.

⁷ ‘From one point of view, the whole history of the comparative study of religion from the time Robertson Smith undertook his investigations into the rites of the ancient Semites ... can be looked at as but a circuitous, even devious, approach to a rational analysis of our own situation, an evaluation of our own religious traditions while seeming to evaluate only those of exotic others.’ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago University Press, 1971, p. 22.