Gard Granerød


Granerød’s *Dimensions of Yahwism* is an intervention. The historical study of Persian-period Judean religion has, Granerød alleges, been enchanted—even “brainwashed”—by the Deuteronomists (21). Religio-historical scholars have mistaken the image of Judaism canonized in the Hebrew Bible for Judean religion as it was lived and practiced, and thus have read the sole worship of YHWH, Jerusalem-centeredness, and the epoch-making character of the Babylonian exile onto history. To this creeping biblicism, Granerød poses a challenge: the archive of Elephantine. Here, Granerød argues, is a source for Yahwism in the Persian period that is more time-stamped and representative than the unprovenanced and partisan texts of the Hebrew Bible.

As a window into Judean religion “on the ground,” what this cache of Aramaic documents reveals is religious *multidimensionality*. Granerød intends the titular plurality of dimensions in two ways: first, Elephantine shows that Yahwism in the Persian era was basically diverse and not, as in its canonical portrait, relatively single-stream. Second, even the single form of Yahwism practiced at Elephantine consisted in a variety of dimensions. Granerød’s five body chapters unfold these dimensions like petals of a single corolla: the social, material, ritual, mythic, and ethical aspects of Yahwism at Elephantine (23). Granerød’s employment of these categories, borrowed from Ninian Smart, also guards against importing concepts and ideas from the Bible (17; 327).

*Dimensions of Yahwism* presents, then, a series of sketches, drawn from the Aramaic papyri, of “practiced religion in situ” (330). Or does it? Curiously, although Granerød refers to household religion, i.e., matters such as clay figurines and burial practices, he brackets the subject in view of his own preeminently textual focus (16). So, too, even his chapters on the social or material dimensions of Elephantine Yahwism ply questions about the temple theology of the Judeans, or their theology of sacrifice. These are lines of enquiry which, though social and material, are at least as concerned with the content of Judean beliefs. Granerød admits as much when he writes summatively of his project as “a (descriptive) theology of Persian-period Yahwism” (339). Of course, beliefs and theology constitute important aspects of any lived religion, and to a certain extent, Granerød’s approach simply reflects what is available in the textual remains. But the topics of Granerød’s research also bear a suspicious resemblance to the interests of the Hebrew Bible itself: priesthood, temple,
ritual, myth, ethics—and the theology pertaining thereunto. In staging an act of resistance to the mental programming of the Deuteronomists, Granerød’s treatment of Elephantine religion mirrors their own preoccupations.

But this theological-mindedness is no fault in Granerød’s scholarship, and in fact lends freshness and distinction to his engagement with the Elephantine texts. Granerød’s comments overall are quite original, but his real achievement emerges by addressing new questions to the well-trod documents—especially questions that are new because so theological. For example: in his first body chapter on the social dimension of Judean religion, Granerød asks, “what was the self-consciousness of the priests of YHW in relation to [others]?” (52), i.e., what did they believe about themselves as such? Granerød concludes that the priests of YHW viewed themselves as sharing the same office as the functionaries of the Jerusalem temple, and differentiated themselves, even terminologically, from the priests of the local Egyptian god Khnum. More practically, Granerød also suggests that the Persian satrap may have appointed the priestly leadership of the YHW temple, and that the Elephantine Judeans financed its operations themselves. Granerød’s following chapter on the material dimension of religion surveys the YHW temple’s history and archaeology, and then asks on that basis about the beliefs the Elephantine Judeans held about it. He finds that the Judeans considered their place of worship a fully-fledged temple and not a house of prayer; they also regarded their temple as complementary to the Jerusalem temple, and not as its rival or successor. “For them”—contra the Deuteronomists—“poly-Yahwism was, religiously speaking, a valid form of Yahwism” (328).

Granerød’s third body chapter examines the ritual dimension—and seeks to describe a theology of sacrifice. Elephantine Judeans offered sacrifice to YHW because they believed YHW would requite sacrifice with benefit to the offerer or to someone else in their name. Judeans may also have made sacrifices to YHW out of belief that they sustained the deity, although Granerød observes that the suspension of sacrifice while the temple lay in ruins did not mean the Judeans thought YHW had died or gone away; YHW remained available to them by other means, including communal prayer (133). So, too, Granerød asks how the Judeans could have theologically countenanced the restriction on animal sacrifice which the governors of Judah and Samaria imposed on the second, rebuilt YHW temple. Granerød argues on analogy with Lev 1-7 that for the Elephantine Judeans, burning was the constitutive element of sacrifice and not slaughter.

Granerød cites his chapter on the mythical dimension of Elephantine Yahwism as one of his book’s signature contributions. The draft petition letter of Yedoniah claims that the YHW temple antedated the conquest of Cambyses
(ca. 525 BCE) and received exemption from the Persian king’s destruction of other Egyptian temples. Regardless the historicity of Yedoniah’s claim, Granerød identifies it as a Judean foundation narrative in the same class as the patriarchal narratives of Genesis or the biblical exodus tradition. Granerød shows how this tradition about the YHW temple underwent change in the process of its transmission, particularly at the hands of the Persian authorities. His chapter on myth also investigates how Judeans conceived of the relationship between YHW and other gods. Granerød reasons from textual evidences that the Elephantine Judeans saw YHW as continuous with his counterpart manifestation in the Jerusalem temple—but also continuous with the Aramean god Bethel and the royal Persian god Ahuramazda. The book’s final, fifth body chapter on ethics details how the Elephantine oath practices and the imprecatory prayer of the draft petition reflect belief that YHW punished wrongdoing. Both chapters are attentive to the presence and influence of Persian imperial propaganda in the thought-world of the Judean garrison.

Another notable contribution of Dimensions of Yahwism bears on one of its besetting problems. Granerød argues in his introduction that the journey from Elephantine to Jerusalem took a month or so, whereas the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem took 3 or 4 months. These results counteract the occasional depiction of Elephantine Judean religion as an exotic phenomenon, cut off from the Judean homeland and gestating in isolation at the world’s edge. Granerød’s excursus on distance is helpful, but it does not substitute for a more sustained argument demonstrating the Judean-ness of the Elephantine Judeans. Granerød’s entire intervention depends on the membership of Elephantine Yahwism in the same larger phenomenon (“Judean religion”) to which the idealized religion of the Bible belongs. But Granerød declines to speculate about the Elephantine community’s point of origin or date of arrival on the island; he also makes little of cases when a man is identified in one text as Judean and in another as Aramean, data that have led some scholars to classify the community as Judeo-Aramean rather than Judean per se.

Dimensions of Yahwism develops a wide-ranging and interesting disruption to the lure of the Deuteronomists on religio-historical scholarship. The present author hopes Granerød will summon his textual expertise and theological alertness to challenge constructive and confessional biblical scholarship, too, with the Elephantine archive, as he indicates he would like to (vii; 333).

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