

VII. PROPHET AND CULT IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

A question that has received considerable attention in OT studies in recent years is that of the relationship of the prophet to the cultic life of ancient Israel. (When we speak of "cult" we are referring to the outward forms which religious activity assumes. In Israel this consists primarily in the sacrificial system and the ceremonies associated with temple worship - thus not "cult" in sense of an unorthodox sect or some sort).

Mowinckel, p. 16, Vol 1, Psalms in Israel's Worship: Cult = "The visible and audible expression of the relation between the congregation and the deity."

A. The view that the prophets were anti-cultic

1. Explication of the view

There has been a time, (still to an extent, but less than some years ago) when the general critical view was that there was a sharp antithesis between the prophets and the cult. The prophets were said to be anti-cultic. Not just that they were against a particular form of the cult, but that they were against the cult as such.

The proponents of this view said that the prophets were the promoters of a worship of God which consisted in loving ones neighbor, justice and high ethics. They did not just place morality above the cult, but in place of it.

An important proponent of this idea was the OT scholar Paul Volz (Mose und sein Werk, 1932). According to him the prophets sought a return to Mosaic religion which he viewed as cultless. He attributed the rise of cultic activity in Israel to Canaanite influence, and this constituted a decline from its Mosaic height. Volz could say this in spite of the fact that in the Pentateuch the cultic receives a great deal of attention, since as a follower of Wellhausen he maintained that all of this was merely the product of priestly ideas from the time of the captivity.

Similar ideas were promoted by Ludwig Köhler, Theologie des alten Testaments, 1936 (see ET, 72, 181,182). He also felt Israel took their cult over entirely from the heathen. For this reason the prophets opposed it. They did not propose a purified system in its place, but the practice of social justice. **CC 10**

2. Scripture adduced for support of the view

Isaiah 1:11-17

Amos 5:21-27

Hosea 6:6
 Micah 6:6-8
 Jeremiah 7:21-23

3. Assessment of the view

It cannot be denied that the above scriptures contain strong negative statements with regard to the cult. The question is whether we should understand them in the sense proposed by Volz and others, i.e. that the prophets were anti-cultic and promoted a cult-less religion.

Here it must be noted that there are also pronouncements by the prophets in which they do not appear to be anti-cultic, let alone promoters of a cultless religion.

Isaiah who spoke out against the temple worship in Jerusalem nevertheless speaks of the temple as the house of the LORD, (2:2,3). He speaks of the LORD dwelling in Mount Zion (8:18). For him the temple is the place of God's special presence. The significance of the cultic activity at the temple for Isaiah is made clear in the vision he had when he was called to be a prophet. When he cried out "Woe is me for I am undone and am a man of unclean lips," a seraph took a coal from off the altar and touched his lips and said "your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (6:7). True, this occurred in a vision, but here is clearly expressed the significance of the temple ceremonies. They speak of the purging of sin.

Jeremiah, speaking in the name of the LORD, frequently designates the temple as the house which is called by my name (Jer 7:10; 32:34; 34:15). This phrase is best understood as a reference to ownership (see 2 Sam 12:28).

From such expressions it should be clear that the prophets were not anti-cultic in the sense that they desired a religion without cult.

In fact, this is a rather strange idea. Certainly Israel's religion was never cult-less. The idea of Volz that Mosaic religion was religion without cult, without offerings and feasts is completely in conflict with the data of Scripture. The Pentateuch teaches us that Israel had a cult, including the tabernacle, offerings, purifications, the priestly functions etc. Only by ascribing all of this to someone writing in later time can one come to a reconstruction such as that proposed by Volz.

And further it might be asked what is religion without a cult? Does such a thing exist? Is morality a religion? This is a philosophical idea in which ethics are absolutized to the highest good. Many of the critics see the prophets simply as preachers of morality. This reduces religion to

moralism. But in this sense morality is the destroyer of true religion. In fact it can be argued that true religion without cult does not exist. Certainly the Christian religion cannot exist without cult. What is any religion without prayer, offering, and religious gatherings.

True religion is in its deepest essence, fellowship with God. This fellowship must express itself in religious acts. Religion must express itself not only in moral acts, that is in acts of a man to his neighbor, but also in acts of man directed toward God. These acts are not only individual and private, but also communal and public. (Horizontalism, verticalism).

It is thus contradictory to both the Pentateuch and to the nature of true religion itself to assert that there was a time when Israel's religion was cult-less. It is true that heathen elements crept into religious observances in Israel, but the cult as such was a gift of God to his people, cf. Lev. 17:11. "I have given it for atonement."

Thus sacrifice and the associated cultic observances were not assimilations of heathen practices by Israel, but were given to Israel by God - whether or not there were some resemblances between such practices in Israel and outside Israel is not the question. In Israel God reveals his grace in the cultic observances. They were given as a means of atonement for sin, in anticipation and symbolization of the sacrificial work of Christ. Thus it is unthinkable that the prophets would have opposed the cult as such.

What the prophets did condemn was the heathenisms which entered the Israelite cult, combined with a formalistic opus operatum concept of the ritual system.

In the time of Hosea, Baal worship was prevalent all over the Northern kingdom. The fruits of the land were ascribed to Baals (Hosea 2:5,8). The worship of the LORD was reduced to another type of Baal worship (Hosea 2:16,17). The people followed many heathen practices (Hosea 4:11,12) including temple prostitution, the idea being that this enhanced the fertility of the land (4:13,14).

It was for these reasons that Hosea cried out against the cult. They had made idols (8:4-6). They had made sacred pillars (10:1). But with all of this they still went through the ceremonies. They felt that there was safety in the outward form. But to Hosea such a cult is worthless, it makes no difference if sacrifices are brought under such circumstances - God asks for more than this: "For I desired mercy and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6; cf., 1 Sam 15:22).

We see the same with Isaiah. The people bring sacrifices (1:11), but their hands are full of blood (1:15). They had turned from the LORD in their hearts and were merely going through the forms. This is an abomination to the LORD.

Amos 5:21-25 is a crucial passage in this discussion. Verse 25 is difficult to interpret. It appears that the question is asked with the intended response of NO. Some understand the implication of this to be that Israel was disobedient already in the wilderness period and did not bring sacrifices to the LORD during that time (see McComisky, ExBible, Vol. 6, 316). **CC 12** McComisky views the waw which begins vs. 26 (untranslated in the NIV) as an adversative: "But you have lifted up . . ." He then views the verse as referring to the idolatrous worship of an unknown astral deity in the wilderness period. He sees the flow of the passage as calling for obedience in vs 24 and the judgment section in vss 25-27 affirms their disobedience over a long history of unfaithfulness.

J. Ridderbos (223-226), however, questions this type of approach and asks whether this sort of construction really fits. In the preceding context the issue is the LORD's rejection of the presently brought offerings. He thinks it is difficult to maintain that the LORD would reject present offerings on the basis that they had neglected to bring offerings in the wilderness period. Ridderbos suggests that vs 25 continues the thought of vs 22 in the sense that the bringing of sacrifices is not the primary and only thing that the LORD asks of Israel. According to the Pentateuch the sacrificial system was instituted in the wilderness period with the intent that Israel would at least partially observe the regulations during the wilderness journeys. Thus in Num 16:46 the fire of the altar is mentioned and daily sacrifices are presupposed. But apart from Num 16:46 there is no further explicit mention of sacrifices in the 38 year period of the wilderness wandering. No doubt offerings were brought - but it is quite probable that the regular and complete observance of the ritual laws was not possible and not done (circumcision and the passover were also not observed ; cf Joshua 5; cf. Num 14:34). Ridderbos suggests then that the purpose of Amos is less absolute than it might appear. He is not suggesting that no sacrifices whatever were brought in the wilderness, but rather that in the 38 years in the wilderness much was lacking. His purpose is to make the people understand that sacrifices do not have the significance which they attached to them - namely that ritual observances are the essence of religion. True religion is a heart desire to be obedient to the LORD (cf. 1 Sam 15:22).

A third suggestion is understanding vs 25 in the sense "have you offered only sacrifices . . ." The answer is also No but does not assume the sacrificial system was not observed in the wilderness. The purpose is to combine the emphasis of vss 24, 25. They are inseparable components of

true religion and obedience to God's will. Sacrifice in itself is not sufficient.

Jeremiah 7:21-23. Vos, 272,273 says this is the most convincing passage from the critical point of view. Yet from the critical standpoint it is difficult to attribute to Jeremiah the opinion that the "Mosaic legislation" imposed no ritual demands on Israel. They generally assume that Jeremiah had a hand in the Deuteronomic reform movement that laid the Deuteronomic code on the people. Wellhausen believed that Jeremiah cut himself loose from this reform movement in a reversal of his own position, and understands the statement in 8:8 "the false pen of the scribes has wrought falsely" as a bitter word spoken by the prophet against his own past.

But how then are we to understand the statement of Jer. 7:21-23? Vos's suggestion (p.273) is: "It was at the very first approach of Jehovah to Israel with the offer of the berith, even before the Decalogue had been promulgated, it was at this earliest coming together of Jehovah and Israel, that God refrained from saying anything about sacrifices, and simply staked the entire agreement between Himself and the people on their loyalty and obedience to Him (Ex 19:5)."

O.T. Allis (The Five Books of Moses, p. 170-173, **CC 11**) suggests that the 'al (lu) "concerning" in KJV, "about" in NIV = "because of," "for the sake of". The idea is He did not speak to the fathers as if He needed sacrifices and would suffer hunger unless fed by these grudging offerings. God has no need of sacrifice. Obedience was the real aim of the Sinai legislation (Ps 50:8-14). Allis builds from the context. In 7:21 the LORD says "Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves!" No part of the burnt offering was to be eaten. This statement implies that many of the Israelites resented the prohibition of eating the burnt offering. It reflects a completely wrong attitude toward sacrifice. So the LORD says in effect that those who "grudged Him that part of their offerings which He has claimed as His own are welcome to keep the whole for themselves." He doesn't want or need that kind of sacrifice.

B. The view that the prophets were cultic functionaries.

1. Explication of the view

Today it is recognized much more than 50 years ago that the prophets were not anti-cultic. But now there is a tendency on the part of some to tie the prophet and the cult so closely together that the prophet as well as the priest is viewed as an official cult functionary. Advocates of this view claim that the prophet's place was in the temple or at local sanctuaries.

The prophet and the cult were not in antithesis because the prophet was himself a cultic official.

The most concise presentation of this view in English is that of Aubrey Johnson, The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel, see pp. 60, 74. **CC, 12**

It has been particularly the Scandinavian OT scholars who have promoted the view. Of primary significance in the development of the view is the Norwegian scholar Sigmund Mowinckel. In the 1920s he published his famous Psalmstudien. The 3rd study bore the title Kultprophetie und prophetische Psalmen, 1923. In this he pointed out that in the Psalms God sometimes speaks directly (see for example: Ps 75:2ff; 81:6ff). Mowinckel maintained that the form and style of these sections were for the most part the same as is found in prophetic writings. From this he concluded that all the Psalms with few exceptions originated in the cult and that these words were spoken by prophets who were connected with the cultic observances, namely cult prophets. "This 1st person singular was taken then as an oracular response of the prophet who was concerned to bring the contemporary reply of God to his worshipping people" (R. K. Harrison, O.T. Intro. p. 748). These prophets had a place and task in the cult and spoke there mostly on request the Word of God. They were, in addition to the priests who brought the offerings at the temple, a sort of oracle bearer. Thus prophet and priest represented two different offices in the temple. Sometimes they might be united in one person, although not usually according to Mowinckel.

2. Scripture adduced for support.

See the discussion of E. J. Young, My Servants the Prophets, Chapter 6, pp. 95-124.

Mowinckel cites numerous scriptures to bolster his argument such as: Samuel was attached to the holy place at Shiloh, 1 Samuel 3. He was closely related to the place of sacrifice at Ramah, 1 Samuel 9. Prophets are frequently mentioned in one breath with the priests (Isa 28:7; Jer 4:9; 6:13; etc). Elijah was connected with the sacrificial scene. Prophets appeared in the temple (cf. Jer. 7:1).

3. Assessment of the view.

E. J. Young, My Servants the Prophets, p. 103, says: "For our part we would leave the question as to the precise relation between the prophets and the Temple unanswered. We do not think that sufficient evidence has been given in the Scriptures to enable one to pronounce with certainty upon the matter. Johnson's monograph, however, serves as a very wholesome antidote and corrective to the attitudes which became prevalent under the school of Wellhausen. According to this school, there

was an almost irreconcilable antagonism between the prophet and priest. The prophets decried sacrifice and the cult, and taught on the other hand a "spiritual" religion. . . . Johnson's monograph serves as a wholesome corrective to the extravagant view of the older liberalism. It does cause us to see that there was indeed some connection between the prophets and the place of sacrifice. What this connection was, however, we for our part, are unable to say. We are unable to follow Johnson in his contention that the prophets were cultic specialists."

Indeed the basis for the "cult prophet" position is largely inferential. J. A. Motyer in the NBD, p. 1043 says: "It is difficult to see how any theory could be stable when it rests on such slight foundation. For example, the apparently strong connection established between prophet and Temple by the allocation of quarters in Je. xxxv.4, is utterly negated by the fact that the same verse speaks of chambers allocated to the princes. Again, the fact that prophets and guilds are found at cultic centres need mean nothing more than that they too were religious people! Amos was found at the sanctuary of Bethel (vii.13), but this does not prove that he was paid to be there. David's consultation of his prophets tells us more about David's good sense than about his prophets' cultic associations. The theory of the cultic prophet remains a theory."

- C. The view that the prophets were neither anti-cultic as such, nor cultic functionaries, but simply the proclaimers of divine revelation.

It has been our contention that the prophetic function rested solely on divine calling. God could call a priest to this function, or a Levite, but this was not necessary. God could call a farmer as Elisha and Amos. Whoever it was, was called to proclaim God's word and urge the people to covenant faithfulness.

In this sense the prophets were neither against the cult as such, nor professional cultic officials formally tied to the temple or local sanctuaries as cultic personnel. Sometimes they cried out against the cult when it deviated from its intended purpose, but what they promoted was the **covenantal unity** of the inward disposition of the heart to love the LORD and the outward expression of this love in both moral uprightness and the performance of ritualistic worship according to the divinely prescribed standards.