

## ***General Objections to Modern Interpretations of “Cult-Critical” Texts in the Old Testament***

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### **Introduction to the problem**

De Vaux's definition of cult aptly describes its purpose; cult consists of 'all those acts by which communities or individuals give outward expression to their religious life, by which they seek and achieve contact with God.'<sup>1</sup> It is important to realize with Stern that this outward expression of the religious life of Israelites in what he labels the Assyrian period was very similar to the one of surrounding nations: 'Except for the differing images of their gods, the various nations used the same cult objects, the same types of incense burners, chalices, goblets and bronze and ivory sticks adorned with pomegranates etc.'<sup>2</sup> Cult consists of rituals. In its cultic sense, a ritual is 'a prescribed order of performing religious or other devotional service.'<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists agree that where there is a religion, there is a ritual: 'For it is a mistake to suppose that there can be religion which is all interior, with no rules, no liturgy, no external signs of inward states. As with society, so with religion, external form is the condition of its existence.'<sup>4</sup> In the religion of ancient Israel during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple periods, the main responsibility for performing and maintaining rituals was assigned to priests. Naturally, therefore, the description and prescription of cultic rituals such as purification and sacrifices dominate the so called

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<sup>1</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*. Translated by John McHugh (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1961) 271.

<sup>2</sup> Ephraim Stern, "Religion in Palestine in the Assyrian and Persian Periods," in *The Crisis of Israelite Religion: Transformation of Religious Tradition in Exilic and Post-Exilic Times*, ed. Bob Becking and Marjo C. A. Korpel (OTS; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 246.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 13.992.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge classics; London: Routledge, 2002 (1966)) 77.

priestly tradition (P and H). Ethics as commonly understood by the 21<sup>st</sup> century western world seems to play the role of Cinderella here.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, there are several texts in the OT that appear to be critical of, even hostile to rituals.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the depreciation of ritual in these texts is juxtaposed with a commendation of some sort of ethical behaviour, creating an impression that the role of cult is taken over by ethics. The fact that most of these texts occur in the prophetic literature prompted many scholars to explain this discrepancy by comparing or contrasting the supposed ideologies of priestly and prophetic literature, or, more personally, the priest and the prophets.<sup>7</sup> Most of the studies on this subject fall into one of two groups – those that view the relationship between the two entities as antithetical and those that understand it as complementary.

### **Antithetical Interpretation**

The representatives of the first group often credit the prophets with antiritualism, promoting an internal religion as opposed to the external one of the priests. Since, as anthropologists claim, rituals and religion are inseparable, this antiritualistic attitude of the prophets would be rather immature and *nadve*. This, of course, is a real possibility, and various evolutionary models often use this *nadveté* to reconstruct the early stages of Israelite religion. The antithetical hypothesis must also deal with the problem of the origins of and the reasons for two opposing ideologies coexisting in one canon.<sup>8</sup> The relative dating of the priestly and prophetic materials becomes a prominent question that further subdivides this group. Those who put the prophetic material before P (most notably Wellhausen and his followers) often understand the priestly influence as overpowering the spontaneous interior religion of the prophets by the scrupulous exterior religion of the priests.<sup>9</sup> Priestly ‘formalizing’ of Israelite religion is seen

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<sup>5</sup> For the artificiality of applying cult and ethics as philosophical categories to the OT and a suggested solution to this problem, see Bohdan Hrobon, *Ethical Dimension of Cult in the Book of Isaiah*. (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010) 2-4.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., 1 Sam 15:22; Amos 5:21-27; Mic 6:6-8; Hos 6:6, 8:13; Isa 1:11-15, 58:2-5, 66:2-4; Jer 7:21-23; Pss 40:6-8, 50:8-13, 51:18-19; Prov 21:3. For lack of a better term, these texts will be referred to as cult-critical throughout this article.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent attempt to contrast priest with prophets, see, e.g., Ronald S. Hendel, "Prophets, Priests, and the Efficacy of Ritual." In *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, edited by David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman and Avi Hurvitz, 185-198. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> For the plausibility that opposite views on ritual can coexist in the same religious culture, see Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Barrie & Rockliff Cresset Press, 1970) *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> See Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 5 ed. (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1899) 101.

as a step backward, creating a tension that was eventually resolved in Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Those who date P before the Prophets (most notably Kaufmann and his followers) tend to understand the prophetic teaching as a progress toward the spiritualization of the Israelite religion, resulting in Judaism.

In spite of many valuable insights, a number of objections can be raised against both of the theories in this first group:

- The insufficiency of the textual evidence for the suggested developments forces the protagonists to look between the lines for the supposed contrasts and tensions, so some of the major arguments are from silence.<sup>11</sup>

- Some supportive arguments are circular, because both schools excessively rely on their own historical and sociological reconstructions of ancient Israel.<sup>12</sup>

- These studies interpret the criticism of rituals always in contrast to, not in connection with the juxtaposed endorsement of ethical behaviour.

- These studies tend to overlook the prophetic texts favourable toward rituals.

- The superimposed dichotomy between priestly and prophetic material results in a misguided search for two self-contained, even conflicting ideologies in one canon.<sup>13</sup>

- As the continuous coexistence of both theories paradoxically demonstrates, these evolutionistic or devolutionistic models do not do justice

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas considers this development unlikely: 'The history of the Israelites is sometimes presented as a struggle between the prophets who demanded interior union with God and the people, continually liable to slide back into primitive magicality, to which they are particularly prone when in contact with other more primitive cultures. The paradox is that magicality seems finally to prevail with the compilation of the Priestly Code,' Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> The notorious one is the absence of references to priestly writings in the early prophets and vice versa.

<sup>12</sup> 'Just as Wellhausen had his reasons for supposing that Second Temple Judaism was in a state of moral decline, so too Milgrom and Knohl have their reasons for arguing that First Temple Israelite tradition exhibited a linear positive, ethical development over time,' Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 51.

<sup>13</sup> What Ben Zvi states about prophetic books even more applies to the cult-critical texts in them, namely that in order to be accepted as authoritative literature 'the world of these books could not stand in a flagrant contradiction with the world of knowledge and the theological or ideological viewpoints shared by authorship and primary readership and rereadership,' Ehud Ben Zvi, "The Prophetic Book: A Key Form of Prophetic Literature," in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003) 289.

to both bodies of literature.<sup>14</sup> In the words of Kraus, 'Hegel's philosophy of history with its three stages of development is a system into which the Old Testament texts cannot be pressed.'<sup>15</sup>

### **Complementary Interpretation**

The second group consists of those who see the ideologies of P and of the Prophets as complementary. The differences between the two bodies of literature are not due to different ideologies, but to the different realms in which they operate, the different purpose they serve, and the different focus they have. The world of the priests is defined and represented by the Temple and all that belongs to it. The purpose of their writings is to maintain what the Temple symbolizes – the presence of YHWH in the midst of his people. Naturally, their main focus is on cult and rituals. Prophets, on the other hand, are thought to operate outside the temple precincts, closer to the people and the real world. Their concern, therefore, is society governed by YHWH and functioning according to his principles, so ethics comes to the fore as a matter of course. The negative treatment of cult and rituals in the Prophets is not to be understood as their repudiation, but as a rhetorical feature that forces the audience to focus on the importance of their ethical behaviour.

Again, although fruitful and constructive, this approach is not without shortcomings:

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<sup>14</sup> In this connection, Klawans rightly questions the assumptions that 'what is more ethical must be later, and what is earlier is deemed subject to due criticism,' Klawans, *Purity*, 51. Douglas sufficiently demonstrated that 'magical practice, in this sense of automatically effective ritual, is not a sign of primitiveness, ... nor is a high ethical content the prerogative of evolved religions,' Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Worship in Israel: A Cultic History of the Old Testament*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966) 19. If only Judaism is taken into consideration, Barton correctly states that rather than by Hegel or Darwin, Wellhausen was influenced by Herder and German Romanticism with its belief that 'human awareness of the divine does not *improve* over time; what is earlier is usually the best, and the later ages of a culture represent more a decline than a progress,' John Barton, "Wellhausen's *Prolegomena to the History of Israel: Influences and Effects*," in *Text & Experience: Towards a Cultural Exegesis of the Bible*, ed. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 327. Levenson also argues that Wellhausen's model of Judaism cannot be classified as Hegelian or evolutionary, because it works qualitatively in the opposite direction; it is 'degenerative', whereas Hegel's model was 'one of increasing manifestation of the Spirit.' However, when Wellhausen's view of Christianity with its gospel as the final, tension-resolving stage is brought into the picture, then the charge seems to be justified. For further discussion, see Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 11-12.

- Since the ritual as such is not seen as problematic, the protagonists of the complementary hypothesis are forced to look for the “true” object of the prophet’s criticism through an oblique approach to the cult-critical texts. The frequent suggestions are a manipulative use of rituals, excessive reliance on their effect, performance of a ritual without corresponding interior disposition, use of ritual to cover immorality, etc. Besides the lack of textual support, the fact that some rituals atone for moral failures presents a paradox for these interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

- The cult-critical language in some statements is too radical and too straightforward not to be taken literally, and its mitigation by attributing it to rhetoric does not seem to do justice to the text.<sup>17</sup>

- The studies in this group allow for very little interaction between the worlds of the priests and the prophets. If the ideologies have developed out of the same religion and are supposed to be complementary, one would expect a significant interdependency between them.

### **Methodological Objections**

In addition to the above objections, three methodological faults can be detected in both hypotheses. First, they often accumulate the evidence from texts that, although juxtaposing cult and ethics, apply to different situations or serve different purposes.<sup>18</sup> Second, these texts often mention sacrifices and, as Klawans argues, ‘the hard-and-fast distinction between ritual and ethics has prevented scholars from appreciating the degree to which ritual and ethics are inherently connected – and virtually inseparable – when it comes to sacrifice.’<sup>19</sup> Third, scholars often too hastily assume

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<sup>16</sup> A good illustration of this paradox is the prescribed sin and guilt offerings for the so called ‘inadvertent sins’ in Lev 4-6. As Cothey observes, ‘such sins are not confined to cases where the sin is a consequence merely of carelessness, accident or misfortune but can include actions that it would be impossible to commit while being wholly ignorant of the fact and without some sort of conscious intent, such as robbing or defrauding a neighbour (6.2),’ Antony Cothey, “Ethics and Holiness in the Theology of Leviticus,” *JSOT* 30 (2005) 131-151: 142.

<sup>17</sup> If sacrifices as such were not the issue, one would expect a more mellow tone, such as in Ps 50:2 ‘Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you ...’ The questions like the following ones of Klawans often remain unanswered: If prophets speak of sacrifices hyperbolically (better justice than sacrifice), ‘are we to understand that the priests and prophets had different priorities? If so, why, and what were they?’ Klawans, *Purity*, 81.

<sup>18</sup> One of the arguments and conclusions of the present thesis is that the efficacy of ritual and ethics depends on the situation into which the particular texts speak. Barton rightly accuses those who look for a unified ‘prophetic message’ across the Prophets of ‘a Procrustean approach which forces either pre-exilic or post-exilic classical prophets to conform to the image of the other,’ Barton, “Prophets,” 116.

<sup>19</sup> Klawans, *Purity*, 249. The same applies to purity and impurity; as Rodd correctly insists, ‘by speaking of purity and ethical systems we are separating concepts which had not yet

that a particular cultic or ethical term functions in a text as *pars pro toto*, using this text to support their theories about cult or ethics in general. The problem is not only in applying general categories to a prophetic oracle that addresses a specific situation,<sup>20</sup> but also in not dealing with a particular ritual or ethical conduct in its own right.

### Concluding Note

Obviously, the above objections need to undergo a much more detail treatment. The purpose of raising them here is to build an awareness of the possible weaknesses of the most common interpretations of the cult-critical text, because they have a significant bearing on the Old Testament theology and, consequently, on systematic theology as well. With all due respect to former research and researches in this area, it seems to be the time to approach these texts anew, in their own right, and without assumptions about differences and tensions between priestly and prophetic ideologies.<sup>21</sup>

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crystallized out in Israelite thought,' and that 'ethics within the Old Testament cannot be divorced from the question of purity,' Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) 12 and 17.

<sup>20</sup> This tendency to generalize is, fortunately, in decline. As Barton states, 'one of the great achievements of modern critical study of the prophets has been to stress that their message was always addressed to a concrete historical situation and that they did not enunciate theological systems or lay down general principles,' John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 141.

<sup>21</sup> For the authors attempt to do so with the cult-critical texts in the Prophetic literature, see his *Ethical Dimension of Cult in the Book of Isaiah*, Berlín, New York: De Gruyter, 2010, and in the Psalms, see his commentary on Ps 51 in P. Dubovský (ed.), *Žalmy: Komentár k Starému zákonu*, vol. 4 (Trnava, upcoming).

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