

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

Steven R. Boguslawski, The Psalms: Prophetic Polemics
Against Sacrifices

The role of sacrificial worship is central to any thoroughgoing investigation of the people of Israel. This past century especially has witnessed a resurgence of critical investigation into the sacrificial cult of Ancient Israel. Concomitantly, a renewed interest in the role of prophecy and in the Psalms as cultic prayer is evident. The cultic worship of the Hebrew people is the common domain of these seemingly disparate disciplines. In several instances within the prophetic texts, especially among the pre-exilic prophecies, the question of the authenticity/efficacy of cultic sacrificial worship is raised. Similarly, the Psalter of the Second Temple reflects "residual" elements of these pre-exilic, anti-sacrificial polemics; Psalms 40.6-8, 50.7-15; 51.16 and 141.2, for example. Might lex orandi, lex credendi be applicable in these specific instances?

Because the Psalms constitute the "prayer of the people of God", and include reference against sacrificial worship, they must be jointly considered with similar prophetic texts. Indeed, some scholars, e.g. Sigmund Mowinckel, posit a direct relationship between an institutional, prophetic role in Israelite cultic worship and Psalm form and content: "There is a... connection between... (the) view of sacrifice and the relation of the prophets to the sacrificial cult - namely, insofar as the prophets had representatives among the Temple personnel to whom we owe the Psalms." /1

Herman Gunkel had previously identified the "prophetic tendencies" of the Psalter as a consequence of prophetic teaching. However, he also concluded that "laments", for example, "were evidence of the emancipation of religious piety from the cult and expressions of a custom originating within circles of pious laymen..." /2

And this view was widely regarded "in earlier psalm interpretation, which had not yet discovered the connection between psalmography and Temple service. Even Gunkel, who had seen the connection, still maintain(ed) that most Psalms (were) private poetry." /3

Mowinckel, however, contends that "the presence of such material could be accounted for only on the theory that it was composed by prophets who were themselves members of the sanctuary personnel." /4 The issue is by no means decided. Hence, three strands of Israel's life are interwoven: sacrificial worship; the function and teachings of pre-exilic prophets; and Psalm content and form. Therefore, the aforementioned Psalms must especially be considered as they portray an anti-sacrificial polemic and reflect an evolution in the religious piety of the Hebrew people.

1. The Prophets and the Cult

Before the above task may be undertaken, the role of Israelite sacrificial worship must be explored. Was sacrificial worship indigenous to Israel from her constitution as a people by Covenant? What is the prophetic attitude toward cultic worship, especially as reflected in Amos 5.21-25 and Jeremiah 7, for example? (Are the prophets absolutely opposed to cultic sacrifice, or do they reflect a relative opposition?) And, finally, do Psalms 40, 50, 51 and 141 reflect an absolute or mitigated opposition to cultic, sacrificial worship? Perhaps such citations are merely remnants of mitigated, pre-exilic, prophetic polemics found in the post-exilic Psalter, yet they may embody a more primitive, anti-sacrificial tradition. The first two strands will be considered together: sacrificial worship (and its indigenous nature) and the pre-exilic, prophetic function and attitude toward the cult. The pertinent Psalms, the third strand will then be exegeted.

Amos and Jeremiah: Relevant Texts.

(The text of Amos shall serve as the primary exemplar. Other prophetic texts will be cited as appropriate).

Amos prophesied in the mid-eighth century BC under the reigns of Israel and Uzziah of Judah. His prophecy primarily concerns the northern kingdom, Israel, although Samaria's infidelity does not escape his purview. Amos was acutely aware of Israel's movement away from God, as witnessed especially in the cult. Her austere moral faith had, generally, slipped into

immorality and syncretism.

The book of Amos begins with "seven uniform strophes... working toward a climax." /5 (Amos 1.3-2.16). A judgment on the surrounding nations of Israel is delineated for atrocities of war. The nations are culpable since the will of the "God of History" is known to them albeit imperfectly. They do not escape judgment. Israel, more pointedly, is judged for her atrocities in peace. The sons of Israel had become enemies - one to another - therefore God was now their enemy. Greed, injustice, bribery in the courts, and oppression of the poor and defenceless provoke the impending reckoning. "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" (Amos 4.12) What emerges from this description of grave infidelity is a peculiar posture toward cultic worship which is specifically our concern. The prophetic utterances are striking:

Come to Bethel, and transgress;
to Gilgal, and multiply transgression;
Bring your sacrifices every morning,
your tithes every three days.
Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving
of that which is leavened;
and proclaim freewill offering, publish them,
for so you love to do, O people of Israel!
says the Lord God.

(Amos 4.4-5)

Amos' biting sarcasm illustrates the incongruity of Yahweh's will and Israel's worship. The proclamation, cast in the form of priestly torah, heightens the juxtaposition of Israel's behaviour and Yahweh's desire for righteousness and justice. "Come to the sanctuary and SIN. Multiply your transgression!" /6 The paradox underscores infidelity. "Amos usurps the role of the priest and exhorts the congregation in a shocking parody of ecclesiastical language that must have sounded like irreverent blasphemy." /7 He strikes at the heart of cultic worship. The initial zabah sacrifice, (understood as a communion meal) and the tithe, (a

portion of the land's yield), are pejoratively "mandated." The frequency of cultic offering, every day and every third day respectively, multiplies transgression. So also the freewill offerings, meant to be a modus operandi of praise and thanksgiving arising from personal devotion, are blasphemous. The freewill offerings are sullied - they are published and proclaimed - by the motives of the offerer. Amos' caustic parody of "priestly exhortation" concludes with the declaration: "for so you love to do, O people of Israel!", rather than the normative formula, "for I am Yahweh, your God!" Amos' meaning is clear. "It is not the Lord, but the self of Israel which is the ground of their worship." /8

God has chastized his people, yet they do not return to him (4.8-11). Amidst Amos' dirge for the fallen nation (5.2), the sacrificial polemic intensifies. Cultic sanctuaries are not the locus of proper worship. Thus Amos prophesies:

For thus says the Lord to the House of Israel:
Seek me and live;
but do not seek Bethel,
and do not enter into Gilgal
or cross over to Beer-sheba...(Amos 5.4-5)

Amos replaces the sites of worship with "He Who is" to be worshipped. He urges the people to seek Yahweh and thereby live. Amos imitates the torah of sanctuary officials, and, in effect, turning it against the cult. "In the mouth of the officiating priests the exhortation was an instruction to turn to Yahweh as the source of life, to come to the sanctuary where He was present to receive the dispensation of the blessing that conferred security and prosperity." /9 But the torah of officialdom does not explicitly require nor effect the needed change of heart. Proof surrounds the prophet. The priests of the sanctuaries validate worship as a separate, unrelated entity within the context of daily life. Therefore Amos declares that "Gilgal shall go into exile, and Bethel shall come to naught." (Amos 5.5). Those who persist with insincere worship shall come to naught as well, because these sites are under Yahweh's judgment.

Furthermore, Amos addresses those who have "turned justice to wormwood" and have "cast down righteousness to the earth." (5.6) The "doing of justice", therefore, remains the significant "clause" in sustaining the covenantal relationship with God. Indeed God's righteousness makes the unwavering demand. Therefore Amos proceeds to the scathing, descriptive violations of mispat (ordinance) and sedaga (righteousness). The conjunction of these texts is not a casual rendering of perceived sin. Rather Amos charges that the tenuous link, the covenantal requisite of the "doing of justice", has been ruptured. The sanctuary cult of officialdom proffers an empty "guarantee" of righteousness, deceptively bolstered by the acts of Yahweh in the past. But the "Day of the Lord" - the anticipated vindication of God's elect - would be "darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it." (5.20). Amos here captures the essence of smug self-satisfaction and turns the hope of vindication into stern chastisement. Next follows his most forceful repudiation of cultic practice, a theme echoed in the Psalms:

I hate, I despise your feasts,
 and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and
 cereal offerings,
I will not accept them
 and the peace-offerings of your fatted beasts
 I will not look upon.
 Take away from me the noise of your songs:
 to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
 But let justice roll down like waters,
 and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,
 5.21-24

Amos leaves no doubt. Yahweh rejects this cult. The individual facets of Israelite worship are refused. Festivals (hag) (v21) and feast days ('sara) are rejected. The former term sometimes refers to the feasts of Unleavened Bread, Weeks and Harvest, while the latter denotes festive times (Isaiah 1.13; Joel 1.14) when the people took a holiday from work to celebrate. Neither the burnt-offering ('ola), nor the communion offering (selem,

zabah, s^elamim) are acceptable. Finally, the cultic hymns (sir) of praise shall not be listened to by Yahweh. /10 God does not delight in..., accept..., or look upon these offerings, nor will he listen to....the noise of the songs, nor the melodies of the harps. (5.21-24) Once again Amos turns familiar ritual formulae back upon his hearers. God has, in effect, repudiated this cult as a means of divine commerce. Instead, justice and righteousness are counterpoised in images of ample waters and ceaseless streams - a vivid prophetic demand of authentic worship.

Jeremiah (625 BC) also decries the futility of cultic worship rendered by a self-complacent people who place their trust in the possession of the Temple, the locale of ritual sacrifice. He warns:

Do not trust in these deceptive words:

This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord
the temple of the Lord

Jeremiah 7.4.

He accuses them:

Behold, you do trust in deceptive words to no avail.

Will you steal, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods you have not known and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are delivered - only to go on doing all these abominations?"

Jeremiah 7. 8-10

The people are adjudged guilty of grave infidelity. The prophet sees his callous co-religionists alienated from Yahweh. Their hearts are hardened and cult is a reflection of the general malaise. Jeremiah prophesies that "though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offerings and cereal offering, I will not accept them...." Yahweh rejects the sacrifice of impenitent peoples who spurn justice:

Hear, O earth; behold, I am bringing evil upon these
people,

the fruit of their devices,
Because they have not given heed to my words and
as for my law, they have rejected it.

To what purpose does frankincense come to me from Sheba
Or sweet cane from a distant land?
Your burnt offerings are not acceptable
nor are your sacrifices pleasing to me.

Jeremiah 6. 19-20

This brief survey of texts from Jeremiah makes it evident that the prophet inveighs against cultic, sacrificial worship, divorced from concomitant, covenantal concerns, viz mispat (justice), s^edaqa (righteousness) and hesed (mercy). The need for reform is evident.

Moreover, Jeremiah rejects, not only the efficacy of such sacrificial worship, he challenges its very origin. He contends that Yahweh did not demand sacrifice by the Hebrews during the Exodus and implies a deeper inauthenticity of the cult. The already familiar messenger formula begins this harsh pronouncement:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel:

"Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings. But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.'" Jeremiah 7. 21-23

What God demands is obedience to his voice. Jeremiah, like fellow-reform prophets, summons his hearers to "walk in the way of the Lord". However, he was not the first to have raised an objection to the seemingly indigenous nature of sacrifice simultaneous to Israel's constitution as a people peculiarly of the Lord. Amos earlier had posed the question: "Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?" (Amos 5.24) The provocative question urges a negative response that God did not require sacrifice in the desert. For Jeremiah, such an understanding ought not to be improper. He was flatly opposed to Davidic theology and thought in the Deuteronomist's terms of a covenant which requires obedience in manner of life. Amos' opposition to cult is already

clear: justice at the city gate characterizes his conception of true worship. And so the matter remains: Are these texts a forthright repudiation of all sacrificial worship? Or might the "tradition" in which Amos and Jeremiah stand be so overwhelmingly concerned with the acts of God in the Exodus, Wilderness and Conquest, and the requirements of the Covenant".....such that "the relatively true (rejection of bad cult) is raised to absolute fact in order to set the folly of the (people.) in starkest relief?" /11

An answer to the foregoing questions must be qualified in terms of highest probability. There is no definitive proof. But the prophetic function within the cult and anti-sacrificial polemics found in the Psalms must be considered to yield such probability.

The Prophetic Function and the Cult

Some scholars envisage the prophets as unalterably opposed to the cult, the so-called "Absolutists". Wellhausen's Prolegomena to the History of Israel (1855) presents such a posture. He has been succeeded by numerous proponents of "absolute prophetic opposition", among them J.E. McFadyen who writes, "If the prophets mean what they say, they were unquestionably the implacable opponents of the cult; and if it is argued that so bold a challenge of the ritual....is inconceivable, it may be answered that with men of their insight and calibre, it is precisely the inconceivable that is possible." /12 Roland de Vaux, O.P. arrives at similar conclusions in Studies in OT Sacrifice (1964), based on the dating of pertinent Pentateuchal texts after Amos. He believes that Jer.7.22 and Amos 5.25 not only "condemn the formalized cult practised by their contemporaries" /13 but do indeed deny the origin and practice of sacrificial worship during the "wilderness period".

Other scholars hold a mitigated view, i.e. that the prophets are characterized as opposed to cult only in a relative manner. H.H. Rowley presents this view succinctly: ".....There is no reason to suppose that the prophets condemned the cultus as such, but only the cultus that was regarded as an end in itself." /14 He notes that the polemics usually involve a condemnation of

covenantal infidelity - an unnecessary element if the prophets solely desire to condemn cultic practice and origin. Furthermore, Rowley, in Worship in Ancient Israel posits an interrelatedness of prophets and cult in an official capacity, a result of Gunkel's studies mentioned above. However, Rowley urges caution by making an important distinction: although elements of prophetic teaching and style are evident within the Psalter, "this does not justify...supposing that all prophets had such (an official capacity), especially in view of inner divisions among the prophets" themselves. /15 These cultic prophets were sanctioned functionaries, participating in official services, not self-appointed, non-affiliated seers frequenting the Temple court. Mowinckel similarly suggests that the prophet may have spoken "in the name of the Lord" in response to the petition of priest, penitent or people. He notes Psalm 27 as an example of this thesis. The plea for help is responded to in v14: "Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord!" Perhaps these institutional prophets provided the intercessory prayer itself, to which another might respond. Eventually these responses acquired some regularity or stereotypical form enabling antiphonal formulae. "With this altered perspective on the prophetic function, it (is) possible to see priest and prophet....working for the furtherance of religion without continually being at cross-purposes." /16.

It is under this purview that the Psalm texts may be exegeted. The question arises: Do Psalms 40, 50, 51 and 141 reflect the influence of a mitigated prophetic polemic regarding sacrifice, or do they support an absolutist perspective? Furthermore, might they incorporate a more primitive substratum which denies the indigenous character of Israelite sacrifice?

2. The Psalms and Cultic Sacrifice

A cursory survey of Psalm texts provides sufficient incentive for investigating their relationship to sacrificial worship. For example,

Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire;
but thou hast given me an open ear,
Burnt-offering and sin-offering thou has not required.
Then I said, "Lo, I come; and in the roll of the
book it is written of me;
I delight to do thy will, O my God;
thy law is within my heart.

Psalm 40. 7-8

This sentiment is seemingly echoed in Psalm 50.14: "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving," or rather, in a variant rendering, "Make thanksgiving your sacrifice to God." The latter translation is certainly feasible when viewed in conjunction with v23: "He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honours me; to him who orders his way aright, I will show the salvation of God!" Also, in Ps 51, succeeding the plea for "uprightness of heart," the Psalmist declares: "For thou hast no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt-offering thou wouldst not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart. O God, thou wilt not despise." (vv15-17) In fact, the addition of vss 18-19 indicates (in a via negativa) the intent of the anti-sacrificial polemic found in the previous verses. Similarly, Ps 141.2 petitions the Lord to hear the Psalmist's voice, such that "prayer be counted as incense.....and the lifting of hands as an evening sacrifice." At first glance, the "doing of the will of God", the "offering of thanksgiving", "a contrite spirit" and "raised hands lifted in prayer" appear to replace cultic, sacrificial worship. The interior disposition of the suppliant constitutes authentic worship in lieu of "the blood of bulls and goats." (Ps 50.13). The question as to whether these anti-sacrificial polemics ought to be seen as relative or absolute opposition, requires a closer examination of the texts.

Psalm 40

Most commentators discern two distinct psalms conjoined by a "seam" at v12, although other exegetes eg Ridderbos maintain the integrity of the text and label vv1-12 as introductory material. In vv1-11 we have a composition of thanksgiving rendered to the Lord "(who) drew (the

Psalmist) up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set (the poet's) feet upon a rock, making....steps secure." (v2). Oesterley characterizes vv1-11 as expressive of gratitude for restoration to health. This segment is artfully connected to verses seen again in Ps 70, i.e. vv13-17, seemingly a prayer for deliverance. Sabourin stresses the Psalmist's deliverance from "danger of death", as a logical extension of the motive clause in v2; whereas successive verses denote a characteristic, but less specific, petition. This results, perhaps, from liturgical adaptation. Ps 40 is post-exilic in its present form. Oesterley dates both psalm segments as post-exilic: the former because of the repudiation of sacrifice and its stance regarding the Law; and the latter because of the opposition established (v16) between "those that seek thee" and Hellenized Jews.

Dahood translates v1 "Constantly I called Yahweh." /17 He notes that such a rendering of "qawah" does seem to mean "call" in other biblical texts, eg. Ps 52.11; Job 17.13. The once afflicted man has been drawn up from "the pit of noise" or, literally, "tumult" (Ps 88.3-5; Isa 14.15) rendered elsewhere as Sheol. This is shown by another parallel construction of "healing" and "Sheol" in Ps 30.2-3: "O Lord my God, I cried to thee for help, and thou hast healed me. O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit." Akin to Ps 27.5, "He will set me high upon a rock", here the author's restoration (v2) is acclaimed complete - attributable only to the Lord. Indeed, "he put a new song into my mouth, a song of praise to our God" (v3) with the result that "many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord" (v3b). "Very significant is the way the Psalmist ascribes to divine inspiration the psalm he composes...." /18, a point to be considered later with regard to v8. False idol worshippers are contrasted next with those whose faith is in the Lord, He who wondrous deeds and works are numberless. What is engendered is the desire to "proclaim and tell of them" (v5) in endless acclaim. But even as the Psalmist speaks of the "corporate works" of Yahweh, the wonders of Israel's history, "...the most fervent

thanksgiving and eloquent witness to that greatness of God in the hymnic praise of the congregation are not able to do justice to the divine reality." /19 Paradoxically, this inability establishes the context for proper worship delineated in vv6ff.

Verses 6-8 are disordered and corrupt in the Hebrew text. Nevertheless, Oesterley notes: "Generally speaking, in the psalms the sacrificial system is taken for granted, which makes (this) passage....all the more remarkable." /20 Indeed, Weiser argues further that herein the poet categorically pushes aside the whole sacrificial cult! /21 "Sacrifice (zebah) and offering (minhah) thou dost not desire.....Burnt-offering ('ola, also called kalil) and sin-offering (bata'th) thou hast not required." (v6) These sacrifices are declared unacceptable and lacking divine "initiative". Exegetes claim this to be the resultant influence of prophetic polemics, Jeremiah in particular

C. Briggs qualifies this observation. He dates the code of D (Deut 12, 16) and E (Ex 23.14-19) before Hosea and Micah. He contends that ritual sacrifice antedates all Hebrew law and is not peculiar to Israel. As a consequence, ritual offering cannot be regarded as original to the Hebrew people in virtue of the law of Yahweh. But more important than an alleged indigenous quality to Israelite sacrifice, "they are incorporated in his Law and given a meaning, and that meaning is his command rather than the sacrifices themselves. This is the unanimous consensus of the prophets from Samuel onward." /22 Arthur Weiser concurs: "this axiomatic repudiation of the whole sacrificial cult is to be accounted for...by...the wrong basic attitude to God which is expressed in the sacrificial cult, and which in origin and nature was borrowed from the sphere of a different cultus." /23

Sacrifice offered to God by an impenitent people is non-efficacious - an attitude strongly attested in prophetic texts. But here, a sacrificial offering of thanksgiving for deliverance is acknowledged tenuous at best, and, moreover, is repudiated in favour of v8, "I delight to do your will, O my God; thy law is within my heart." For God has already given the Psalmist an "open

ear"; the Hebrew text is literally rendered: "ears thou hast dug for me." The divine initiative which now inspires the Psalmist (v3) also precedes the "doing" of the law and prepares for the true hearing of God. Accordingly Dahood translates v6, "made my ears receptive" and thereby "open to divine inspiration." /24 Admittedly, there are difficulties with the order and context of vv6-8. One commentator (Vogt) claims that vv7 and 8 to be subsequent additions to v6. Vogt theorizes that a marginal gloss wherein the "pious reader had scribbled his wish to abide entirely by the law" in response to the "Psalmist's liberal views on sacrifice" was later incorporated. /25 Briggs prefers to translate, "then had I the covenant," /26 whereas Ridderbos constructs a sense which proposes vv7-8 as a newly anointed king's ritual pronouncement to Yahweh, "...On the day of my coronation I presented myself before you with a copy of the law with me, symbolizing my intention of living according to thy will. I carry thy law in my heart." / 27 The corrupt nature of vv6-8 generates these varied interpretations. One element, however, remains constant among all variant translations: the locus of authentic worship is interior.

Although Oesterley writes, "While the prophets strongly condemn sacrifice when offered in the wrong spirit, they did not condemn them if offered in sincerity of motive"; he also notes that "Jeremiah was the one exception, and with him the Psalms.....(40,50,51) (wherein) sacrifices per se are repudiated and a purely spiritual worship is advocated. This was an advance in religious belief and practice which was...characteristic of certain circles during the late post-exilic times." (Sacrifices in Ancient Israel, 1937, cf). /28 Therefore the "doing" of the internalized will of God, the Law, literally, "in the midst of my inwards" (cf 22.15) accords "with the teaching of Deut 30.10-13(14)" and in turn with v8. /29 Thus Ps 40.1-10 recalls supplication (v1); expresses deliverance (v2), exhortation (v4), proclamation of the mighty works of Yahweh and the rationale for praise (v5), repudiation of cultic, sacrificial worship (v6), interiorization of the locus of

worship through Yahweh's inspiration (vv3,8) and the proclamation anew of God's steadfastness "in the great congregation." (vv9,10)

It is at this juncture that Weiser extrapolate the contextual integrity of vv11f. The radical awareness of the Psalmist is that of creaturliness and dependency. God alone can save and set the heart aright. The illusion of "cheap grace" via sacrificial offering is unmasked. In the prophetic mode, the "still,small voice" (Kings 19.12) calls for obedience to the doing of Yahweh's will in trust and faithfulness. It is this same confidence of faith which, according to Weiser, permits the author to petition God. Verses 1-10 are propaedeutic because the Psalmist acquires (and later expresses) the confidence to approach God amidst tribulation - whether derived from external or internal threat. Such is the "psychological trend" of the psalm which accounts for Weiser's contextual interpretation of vv11f. Although the integrity of vv11f is held by few commentators, Weiser makes a significant point which ought not be overlooked. It is especially applicable with reference to the sacrificial polemic of vv6ff:

What some expositors want to regard as an incongruity in the psalm and as justifying its divisions into heterogeneous portions, shows itself to be the tension which is inherent in faith itself and present wherever a genuine faith is in action. In the realisation of this truth lies the realism of this psalm and its trueness to life, things one should not seek to dispute.

/30

The Psalmist grasps this ambiguous tension, especially as it pertains to authentic worship and cultic sacrifice.

Psalm 50

The same dynamic tension is embodied in Ps 50. The rib genre, familiar in prophetic literature, heightens the ambivalence.

The present composition of the psalm dates from the Persian period. The pre-exilic prophets' influence (regarding psalm content) is not immediately evident. The psalm reflects the "consolidation of the Jewish congregation

in the Persian period and the toning down of the fiery moral preaching of the prophetic movement which took place during the development of the Jewish "religion of the Law." /31 As a consequence, some expositors interpret Ps 50 in the manner of dialectical negation with regard to cultic sacrifice. Dialectical negation connotes a complete negation which is meant to be interpreted relatively. Still other exegetes (e.g. Weiser) see neither a muted prophetic influence nor a mitigated anti-sacrificial polemic. Mowinckel, for example, believes that Ps 50 "...has the form of a prophetic word, the severe lecture and admonition of a prophet with the emphasis on the commandments and with a conditional promise attached to it ...". /32 The psalm form and content therefore do exemplify the genre of pre-exilic prophetic reformers.

The setting for the psalm may be a festival of Covenant renewal due to the accent upon the Decalogical traditions and the commandments of the Covenant (Mowinckel). The internal structure of the composition is clear: (vv1-6) an awesome description of the Theophany introduces the text, and the sacrificial polemic proper follows (7-15). A descriptive disregard of Covenantal duties in vv16-21 and a concluding warning in vv22-23 (which re-iterates sections two and three) complete the psalm.

Dahood translates v1, "The mighty one, God the Lord" (RSV) as "The God of gods is Yahweh." /33 He thereby emphasizes Yahweh's supremacy. Unmistakeably, the Lord sits in judgment; he "summons the earth..." and calls to heaven above. The divine lawsuit, the rib, is thus constituted as Yahweh establishes heaven and earth as witnesses, so "that he may judge his people" (v4b). Similarly, he calls to himself the faithful ones who made covenant with him by sacrifice, for Yahweh alone is the righteous judge (vv5-6). The trial scene is ready.

Verses 7-21 present "the actual rebuke uttered by Yahweh. The section denounces in two (subdivisions) the dishonouring of God as expressed in the sacrificial cult (vv7-15) and in the moral life of the wicked (vv16-21)." /34. The union of these spheres - sacrifice and covenantal obligation - is a frequently attested

"the influence of the reform prophets on the temple prophets and their oracles is not limited to mere outward form; it also includes the actual experience and, to a certain degree, even the content of ideas and the type of piety." /38 Does Ps 50 reflect such a shift of liturgical piety?

The above question is especially applicable with reference "...to the critical way...the prophets looked on the sacrificial cult; and to the claim for a more personal and spiritual temple service, for the offering of heart and personality and feeling and will rather than animals." /39 Is this development reflected in these verses? Cultic sacrificial offerings, although abundant, are unaccepted by Yahweh. Therefore, "...the Psalmist's positive demand is to offer to God a "sacrifice of praise". The cultic terms (according to Weiser), "to offer sacrifice" and "to pay vows" are retained, but...used...in a metaphorical sense, with the result that the materialistic cultic significance of the whole is abolished." /40 What must be inculcated is an inward disposition of true worship in accord with the ethical demands of the Covenant and thus the will of God himself. God does not need animal sacrifice and manifests no dependent sacrificial worship. Rather, Weiser maintains that "...the attitude (of prayer)...alone befits a man in his relationship to God. It is on this level that true worship takes place...." /41 Furthermore, an interior renewal of prayerful submission is the sole remedy for a spiritually lax people. This reflects the "absolutist" interpretation of the polemic.

In a more moderate fashion, Mowinckel contends that Ps 50 "...testifies to a deepening and spiritualizing, even, to some extent, to a rationalizing of cultic religion (cf 50. 9ff), and insofar bears witness to the progressive line in the revealed religion of the OT." /42 He does not see vv9f, condemning sacrifice per se, nor as purporting the dissolution of cultic religion. In this manner, the Psalmist retains an element of sacrificial "validity", while yet envisaging a more spiritual worship. Oesterley, too, is in accord with this interpretation: "The time had not yet come for the abrogation of the

sacrificial system; but the Psalmist was preparing...minds for this...the contemplation of purely spiritual sacrifice." /43

Neither "absolute nullification" nor a "spiritualizing tendency of cultic worship" is acknowledged by still other commentators regarding v14. Briggs, and to a lesser degree, Anderson, exemplify a third interpretative school. They contend that the sense of "sacrifice of thanksgiving" is governed by the use of the verb zbh, meaning, literally, "to slaughter" /44, while "pay your vows to the Most High" (v14) "can only be understood of votive offerings." /45 Hence ritual, cultic sacrifice is integral to proper worship, despite the seeming polemic. Prayer and thanksgiving would necessarily accompany such an offering, and, therefore, are not to be viewed as antithetical to animal sacrifice. Indeed the emphasis is reversed. It seems a distinctive voluntary offering is outrightly encouraged. Anderson, however, is not fully convinced that this conclusion is completely defensible. Rather, he admits of the possibility that todah in fact might be used here to designate a hymn of thanksgiving (as in Ps 26.7; 42.4; 69.30). In his estimation, both alternatives are possible, although a sacrificial mandate is probable. The Psalmist, in such case, does not advocate abolition of sacrifice, but is concerned that "it...become a vehicle for expressing the right attitude to Yahweh, and a means of blessing for the worshipper." /46 The decision, however, whether sacrifice is indeed positively encouraged, reservedly tolerated or absolutely condemned, must await discussion of vv22-23.

The concluding admonition (vv22-23) summarizes the two preceding sections (vv7-15; 16-21) and significantly qualifies the former (7-15). Those who have forgotten the law of God are urged to become mindful "lest Yahweh rend and there be none to deliver!" (22). Furthermore, in v23, the Psalmist teaches that "he who brings thanksgiving to his sacrifice honors (the Lord); to him who orders his way aright, I will show..salvation". Covenantal obligation and the sacrificial polemic are thus taken up again. Indeed, the author unites a rectified manner of life with thanksgiving as THE sacrifice which honours the Lord! These summary verses, at the very least, substantiate a

prophetic theme. Here their interrelation is highlighted by the juxtaposition with vv5-6 and reference to the initial sacrifice which accompanied the ratification of the Covenant and Israel's constitution as a nation. And he who made them his own now testifies against them! (v7f) The challenge is awesome. "The zeal of the cultic offering is not to be reproved, but the Lord needs no offering of animals, he does not 'eat the flesh of bulls nor drink the blood of goats', he is the owner of 'every beast of the forest and the cattle on a thousand hills'".

/35 The chastisement is based on no mere rubricism. Yahweh enumerates forthrightly the terms of indictment: "you hate discipline" (v16) ... "you cast my words behind" your back, ... you are "friends" of thieves (v18), adulterers (v18b) and deceitful slanderers. Guilt goes beyond a mere association with the wicked, rather the Covenant is actively spurned - as they participate in evil deeds. Ritual reproof need not be explicit; it is rendered superfluous by weightier matters of the Law. Multiplicity of sacrifice - "your burnt-offerings are continually before me" - is of no avail. "I will accept no bull from your house, no he-goat from your folds." (v9) An indignant negative response is implied by the question posed in v13: "Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" Even the most prized bulls of Bashan are worthless.

Dahood notes not only an allusion to a primitive notion of satisfying a "god's hunger, but more immediately, to the carnivorous goddess Anath..... described as devouring the flesh of her brother Baal and drinking his blood."

/36 This reference is further indicated because the deity, Baal, had sometimes been represented by a bull and was alleged occasionally to assume its form " e.g., ut 76: ibr which in Hebrew is abbir is one of the words found in the...verse". /37 Yahweh is not Baal. "I am God, your God!" (v7)

Instead, what Yahweh desires is to offer a "sacrifice of thanksgiving, pay one's vows....and call upon him in the day of trouble." (vv14-15) Another rendering of v14 states: "make thanksgiving your sacrifice to God (RSV)." The two translations present an obvious difficulty. Is sacrifice being abrogated? Mowinckel believes that

mitigated sacrificial polemic and the spiritualizing tendency of the psalm noted by Mowinckel and Oesterley. Moreover, verse 23 might be interpreted as explicating the Psalmist's radical opposition to sacrifice as claimed by Weiser. In either case, Ps 50 marks a significant "prophetic" shift of piety. It is with reference to psalms 50 and 51 that Mowinckel writes:

The view of the prophets coincides with one tendency in the Psalmists: that of deprecating the sacrificial practices. But there is one basic distinction: the reform prophets emphasize the right fundamental relationship to God in faith, obedience and the social ethic, whereas the Psalmists emphasize the offering up of praise and prayer, the thanksgiving psalm and the penitential prayer.It is an outcome of ideas which might possibly grow out of the soil of cultic religion - out of the spirit prevailing in the tora liturgy - which are likely to have been stimulated also by the prophetic movement.

/47

Psalm 51

The prophet and the Psalmist are again "one" in Ps 51 with its emphasis upon a "contrite heart and a broken spirit" (v17). This psalm is most familiar of all the penitential psalms and is traditionally ascribed to "David when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba" (v1, also 2 Samuel 11). Such specificity of attribution is doubtful, at the very least! The text has been variously categorized as an individual and communal lament. Briggs, for example, claims Ps 51 to be a collective penitential prayer of the congregation in the time of Nehemiah, cast in an "I-form" but representative of the nation. Other commentators propose that "the psalm be interpreted as a collective lament of the exile period"; thus v5 would refer to a guilty Jerusalem and the "crushed bones" of v8 and the "bloodguilt" of v14 would reflect exilic, prophetic themes as they pertain to the nation (Ezekial 7.23; 9.9; 37.1-14). /48 Mowinckel similarly identifies Ps 51 as a psalm of collective worship. Oesterley disagrees. He maintains

that the Psalmist speaks as an individual because "the personal note sounded all through the psalm, culminating in such words as "in iniquity was I brought forth".... (which) make it abundantly clear that the whole psalm is the outpouring of an individual in reference to himself." /49 This observation has merit. In virtue, however, of the psalm's preservation in the Psalter, its individual expression of lament cannot be limited solely to the personal sphere. The incorporation of Ps 51 within the Psalter attests to its communal application although not written originally with this intention.

Dating

The original psalm (excluding vv18-19 which the majority of exegetes claim to be post-exilic additions) is generally attributed to the sixth century BC. The current textual composition cannot be dated later than the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah in 444 BC.

Psalm 51 may be divided as follows: (vv1-2) A prayer for God's mercy and cleansing in virtue of Yahweh's steadfast love and abundant mercy. The terms, "Blot out"... "wash me"...."cleansing me" are paralleled by "transgression""iniquity" and "sin". The fervour and "intensity of the psalmist's penitence is shown by (these) reiterated expressions." /50 The author pleads that Yahweh should literally "un-sin" him. In verses 3 to 5 the penitent confesses transgression, acutely aware that sin is an offence against the Lord. The author declares, "I was brought forth in iniquity" and sinful from conception. This is not to be interpreted as a theology of "original sin", but rather a preliminary declaration that "the divine words of condemnation are justified and the sentence pronounced is vindicated." /51 In a related fashion, Dahood translates "transgression" as "my rebellious act", noting that "the root "p s" can be connected with covenant violations on the part of vassal against his suzerain and are therefore acts of rebellion of the gravest nature." /52 These acts warrant God's just judgement, however distinguished. In verse 6 to 12 the penitent prays for wisdom or fear of the Lord; cleansing, joy and gladness; rejoicing; a re-created heart; forgiveness of

sin; a new and steadfast spirit; the assurance of "thy holy spirit"; the joy of salvation and a willing heart. All these requests are prefaced by the desire for "truth in the inward being" (v6) and, by inference, faithfulness. Perhaps the reference to "broken bones" implies the need for physical healing, and is not simply metaphorical. In vv13-17 the author vows to teach transgressors so that "sinners will return" to Yahweh. The poet, too, begs to be delivered from "bloodguiltiness" - at this juncture - a petition seemingly out of context. Many attempts have been made to harmonize this puzzling verse. Among the solutions offered are: "bloodguilt" resembles "silence" in the Hebrew text and is to be rendered as such (Gunkel, Oesterley); or, by a textual emendation, may denote the place of death, namely Sheol...the place of tears per excellence (Dahood). /53 Once heard, the suppliant will sing aloud of the gracious deliverance and proclaim the praises of Yahweh.

This fourth section also contains an anti-sacrificial polemic. In lieu of ritual sacrifice, a broken spirit and contrite heart are adjudged best; an already familiar prophetic theme. Verses 18-19 are post-exilic additions. These verses attempt to render the aforementioned polemic less stark in view of a "renewed" sacrificial cultus. Briggs and Dahood, however, maintain the authenticity and integrity of these verses. The former, based upon his communal understanding of the psalm; the latter, on the basis of metrical considerations.

As noted earlier, the psalm, as a result of the prophetic stance echoed by vv16-17, although originally applicable to the individual, was later broadened to have national application. The psalm's shift from the particular to the universal, from individual penitence to the national sphere, demands emendation. Although the point of evolution remains unclear, the original psalm suggests that, in themselves, sacrifices are of no merit and of no divine command. Furthermore, only as they represent something significant in the inner religious life can they be regarded as worthy expressions of the worship of God. /54 Indeed, G.C. Oxtoby believes that the Psalmist has been imbued with this

prophetic understanding of the sacrificial cult from Amos and, especially, Jeremiah. Oxtoby even declares that in Ps 51 "the rejection of the sacrificial system is complete." /55 Weiser notes that the Psalmist "accomplishes a far reaching transformation of the notion of sacrifice. The sacrifice that God demands is a sacrifice of man's self-will and self-importance; in other words, the surrender of man's own self to God." /56 This is an unquestionable demand which subsequent editors sought to modify in accord with their understanding of cultic worship and its national significance. Verses 18 and 19 are, therefore, the understandable result of a redactor's longing for the restoration of Jerusalem, either during or immediately after the exile. The exilic period produced an unparalleled awareness of the nation's infidelity and sin, and, in addition, gave impetus to the nascent prophetic hope of restoration. It would be in the exilic/post-exilic era that the individual, penitential lament became pertinent to collective worship and demanded adaptation, hence vv 18-19.

Do good to Zion in thy good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
then wilt thou delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt-offerings and whole burnt-offering;
then bulls will be offered on thy altar.

Neither the sacrificial polemic nor the spiritualizing tendency of the Psalmist is fully obscured by the additions of the redactor. Indeed the transformation of the psalm attests to its original import.

The psalms previously discussed reflect a distinctive evolution in the piety of the people. Mowinckel summarizes the change succinctly:

The ancients, and certainly the Priesthood...put the main emphasis on the sacrifice as the means of winning the goodwill of Yahweh and bringing about atonement and blessing for the congregation and individuals. The Psalmists also knew how to prize sacrifice, but in an increasing degree they gave vent to the opinion that it is not the sacrifice of animals, but psalms of penance and thanksgiving, which are most congenial to the right relationship to God and what he demands from man.

Psalm 141

An example of this development is Psalm 141. The text is an individual lament incorporating a plea for divine deliverance. The Psalmist is helpless but for the assistance of Yahweh: "I call upon thee, Lord, make haste to me! Give ear to my voice, when I call to thee! (v1) Dahood dates this lament as pre-exilic due to Phoenician correspondences which "appear only in the eighth-century Karatape Inscriptions." /58 Most scholars, however, posit a post-exilic date of composition, among them Tournay (third century BC) and Oesterley (late post-exilic). The psalm mid-text has suffered considerable corruption and has therefore been variously schematized. One idea, however, is clear despite the structural difficulty: "prayer is remarkably compared to incense and the lifting of hands, that is, supplication (pss 28.2, 63.4, 77.2, 88.9) to evening sacrifice." /59 (for the contrary, cf. Briggs, ICC., p507). Moreover Oesterley claims that the psalm "foreshadows what in later days was to become actual fact; for in the synagogue the forms of prayer for daily worship corresponded to the original daily sacrifices." /60

Psalm 141, presumably, is offered during the time of the evening oblation (Lev.2.1). "The lifting up of my hands" (v2) continues a custom known in Canaan described in Ut, krt: "Lift up your hands toward heaven. Sacrifice to Bull, your father El; with your sacrifice make Baal come down." /61 Although the ritual gestures accompany the Canaanite sacrifices, there is no mention of accompanying animal offerings in this psalm text. Rather uplifted hands and prayer are reckoned as cultic sacrifices. The author then asks the Lord: "Set a guard over my lips....keep watch, ...and incline not my heart to evil." (vv3-4). Perhaps this is a reference to preservation from syncretistic worship. Certainly the concern for proper speech reflects the Wisdom tradition of Israel. Verses 5-7 are unclear in the Hebrew text, and perhaps were not part of the original psalm. Verses 8-10 reiterate the Psalmist's sole refuge in the Lord God, and continue the plea for deliverance. An element of retributive justice

concludes the text: "Let the wicked together fall into their own nets, while I escape."

Whether the worshipper of Psalm 141 be living far from Jerusalem, i.e., a pre-exilic Israelite living in the northern diaspora after the fall of Samaria (Dahood) or is actually present in the Temple with "eyes fixed on the Lord God" (v9a) (Weiser), it matters little. In either setting the notion of sacrificial piety has changed substantially. "The incense of...prayer wraps the worshipper up like a splendid ornament" before God. /62 The prophetic, anti-sacrificial polemics have thematically come to fruition in the offering of oneself in prayer to Yahweh. Simultaneously, there is an awareness of covenantal obligations and of utter dependence upon the Lord. The spiritualizing tendency, exemplified in the Psalms exegeted above, is here complete.

3. Conclusion

At the outset it must be acknowledged that direct, prophetic influence upon individual psalmists is an exegetical deduction. Greater or lesser probability is all that can be had. Consequently, both critical schools of absolutist or relativist sacrificial opposition have merit.

Psalm 40 clearly exemplifies the perceived dichotomy of ritual sacrifice as dissociated from "delighting in the will of God" (v8). Psalm 50 focusses upon the bankruptcy of sacrifice and the disparagement of covenantal concerns. Psalm 51 replaces cultic sacrifice with emphasis upon a "broken spirit and contrite heart", while Psalm 141 literally embodies with "the lifting of hands" and the prayer arising like incense. The shift of cultic piety is evident, if not yet complete. It is too simplistic to claim that cultic worship changed from a purely external locus to a wholly internal forum; or from sacrificial (material) worship to spiritual worship. Such conclusions require qualification. Nor is it possible to delineate distinct stages within the process. As with the entirety of Israel's faith life, psalmic evolution is sporadic - spurred on by historical events, e.g., the reform prophets, the Exile. The people's sitz im leben

generated broader and, consequently, adaptation and emendation of individual psalm prayers. The tension between cultic sacrificial and non-sacrificial worship, the material and the spiritual, the old and the new, is reflected in some textual ambiguity. This pertains also to the question of the indigenous nature of sacrifice, the prophetic stance toward the question, and the Psalmist's response to the prophetic polemics. Certain psalmic elements reflect the minority absolutist opinion. Others exemplify a mitigated perspective. Individual psalmists perhaps do preserve intact a primitive substratum of prophetic tradition which discounts the indigenous quality of sacrifice - either during the wilderness period or as subsequently interpreted by the cultus itself. The replacement of sacrifice with prayer would be a logical outcome of such an attitude. The rationale is clear. Since God had not commanded ritual sacrifice at the time of Israel's constitution as a people, it is to be viewed as a transitory stage toward perfect spiritual worship. Such an understanding would undoubtedly meet staunch resistance. These psalms, however, may not reflect this radical opposition with regard to the indigenous nature of sacrifice. It is not essential that they do so. But, unquestionably, the psalms demand the transformation of cultic worship with a distinctive spiritualizing trend. And even this process would be intentionally obscured by subsequent redactors! Certainly the compilation of cultic psalm prayers would not strongly reflect an attitude in opposition to the prevailing, cultic, sacrificial practice. Psalmic polemics would be excised or emended to bring the psalm into liturgical conformity and usage. Obviously this type of psalm would be infrequent in the Psalter. Textual evidence, therefore, is necessarily limited, but what we have is unremitting in its cultic challenge and exemplary of a corresponding change in piety. The psalms examined echo the prophetic call to authentic worship.

Notes

1. Sigmund Mowinckel, The Psalms in Israel's Worship, New York 1967, Vol.2, p24

2. op.cit., p19
3. op.cit., p19
4. C.F. Whitley, The Prophetic Achievement, Leiden 1963, p67, citing S. Mowinckel, Psalmenstudien III, Kultprophetie; und prophetische Psalmen 1922, e.g., pp.1-29
5. R.B.Y. Scott, The Relevance of the Prophets, New York 1968, p135
6. James L. Mays, Amos, A Commentary, Philadelphia 1969, 974.
7. op.cit. p74
8. op.cit. p74
9. op.cit.
10. op.cit. pp106-7
11. op.cit. p111
12. Whitley, op.cit. p64, citing J.E. McFadyen, The People and the Book, Ed. A.S. Peake, London 1925, p210
13. Roland de Vaux, O.P., Studies in OT Sacrifice, Cardiff 1964, p20
14. Whitley, op.cit. p66, citing BJRL, 29, 1945-1946, pp347-48, H.H. Rowley
15. H.H. Rowley, Worship in Ancient Israel, Philadelphia 1967, p157
16. op.cit. p174
17. Matthew Dahood, S.J., The Psalms, New York, Vol 16, p243
18. W.O.E. Oesterley, The Psalms, London 1939, p234
19. Arthur Weiser, The Psalms, London 1962, p337
20. Oesterley, p234
21. Weiser, p338
22. Chas A. Briggs and Emile Briggs, The Psalms, New York 1914, Vol 1, p354
23. Weiser, p338

24. Dahood, op.cit. p246
25. Leopold Sabourin, S.J., The Psalms, New York 1969, Vol 2. p126
26. Briggs, p351
27. Sabourin, op.cit., p127
28. Oesterley, p235.
29. Briggs, p355
30. Weiser, p341
31. Mowinckel, p71
32. op.cit.p70
33. Dahood, p304
34. Weiser, p394
35. Mowinckel, p23
36. Dahood, p308
37. op.cit.
38. Mowinckel, p70
39. op.cit.
40. Weiser, p397
41. op.cit.
42. Mowinckel, p22
43. Oesterley, p269
44. A.A. Anderson, Psalms, London 1972, Vol 1, p386
45. Briggs, p419
46. Anderson, p386
47. Mowinckel, pp70-71
48. Sabourin, p50
49. Oesterley, p271
50. op.cit.p272

51. op.cit.
52. Dahood, p3
53. Sabourin, p50
54. G.C. Oxtoby, 'Conscience and Confession', Interpretation, Vol 3, 1949, p423
55. op.cit
56. Weiser, p410
57. Mowinckel, p22
58. Dahood, p304
59. Sabourin, p85
60. Oesterley, p562
61. Dahood, pp309-310
62. Sabourin, p86.