

WERE THE PROPHETS OPPOSED TO SACRIFICE?

JACOB CHINITZ

Were the prophets opposed to sacrifices, or only to false sacrifices? Did they expect sacrifices to be resumed when the Temple was rebuilt? A text by text examination yields some surprising results, in light of the conventional assumption that from Isaiah to Malachi the prophets were against sacrifices.

ISAIAH

Dismayed by the people's superficial ceremonies of sacrifices without inner repentance, Isaiah begins by crying out on the Lord's behalf: *What need have I of all your sacrifices?* (1:11). *Your new moons and fixed seasons fill Me with loathing* (v. 14). *And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you* (v. 15). However, the prophet promises that if Israel will reject its callousness and apostasy, *By this shall the iniquity of Jacob be expiated When he makes all the stones of the altar as chalkstones that are beaten in pieces, So that the asherim and the sun images shall rise no more* (27:9).

Isaiah wants to smash the altars of idolatry, but he also testifies that God longs for properly-motivated sacrifices by His children. When Israel is in exile in Babylonia, not able to bring sacrifices, a later passage in the Book of Isaiah envisions God lamenting: *'You have not brought Me the small cattle of your burnt-offerings, neither have you honored Me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with a meal offering, nor wearied you about frankincense'* (43:23). God is not objecting to sacrifices, but is ready to accept them as welcome. At the Lord's inspiration, this prophet speaks of a utopian apocalypse centered upon the offering of sacrifices:

I will bring them to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer; Their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon My altar. For My House shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples (56:7) *All the flocks*

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of Kedar shall be gathered together unto you. The rams of Nebaioth shall serve your needs with acceptance on Mine altar, And I shall glorify My glorious house (60:7).

Clearly, sacrifices are not abjured but expected to be part of the glorious future.

To sum up the view in the Book of Isaiah: Sacrifices in themselves are lawful and acceptable acts of worship, provided they are not simultaneous with practices, both social and ideological, which God loathes.

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah also begins his prophetic oration with an attack on the moral corruption of the populace and the travesty of insincere sacrifice: *And I will utter My judgments against them touching all their wickedness, in that they have forsaken Me, and have offered unto other gods (1:16)*. This is not a declaration in opposition to offerings themselves, but to offerings to false gods.

In accents familiar in prophetic criticisms, Jeremiah cries out in the name of the Lord: *To what purpose is to Me the frankincense that comes from Sheba, And the sweet cane from a far country? Your burnt-offerings are not acceptable Nor your sacrifices pleasing unto Me (6:20)*. The Soncino commentary¹ emphasizes that there is nothing to suggest that Jeremiah (or the other prophets) opposed sacrifices as a religious institution. What they denounced was external conformity to the demands of the Temple service without observance of the moral law. With despairing sarcasm, Jeremiah exclaims:

Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely and come and stand before Me in this house . . . and say: we are delivered, that you may do all these abominations? Is this house . . . become a den of robbers in your eyes? (7:9-10).

It is not the house as such that the prophet abhors, but its misuse and corruption. *I spoke unto you . . . but you heard not. Therefore, will I do unto the house . . . as I have done to Shiloh (v. 13)*.

The issue is not that Shiloh in its day and Jerusalem currently were not to have houses of the Lord in which to sacrifice to expiate sins, but that Israel and Judah did not heed the spoken word of God to the ancient forebears of the people:

For I spoke not unto your fathers . . . concerning burnt-offerings or sacrifice. But this thing I commanded them: Do My bidding, that I may be your God and you may be My people; walk only in the way I enjoin you Hearken unto My voice (v. 21).

The context, the Soncino says, makes it evident that a contrast is drawn between offerings on the altar and the moral laws enjoined in the Decalogue. True, continual burnt-offerings were obligatory upon the community, not upon the individual, but the prophet's scorn for the misplaced emphasis upon sacrifice is not to be taken as a rejection of the sacrificial system as a whole. He writes, the Soncino comments:

as though the ceremonial system of worship formed no part of Israel's duty To take his expressions and argue that he condemned Temple sacrifices as intrinsically wrong . . . is a pedantic interpretation. The system was degraded only: *Because they have forsaken Me, and have estranged this place and have offered in it unto other gods . . . and have built the high places to Baal to burn their sons in the fire for burnt-offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not . . . (19:4).*

Nevertheless, God wants His house, and His accusations against Israel of corrupting it with abominations and improper sacrifices are intended to be a prelude to cleansing it. Jeremiah foresees that the day will come when

Again in this place there shall be [heard] . . . the voice of those who cry, 'Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His kindness is everlasting' as they bring thanksgiving offerings into the house of the Lord (33:10-11) Neither shall there be an end to . . . the priests, the Levites, before Me to offer burnt-offerings, and to burn meal-offerings, and to do sacrifice continually (33:17).

Certainly this is a promise for the future, not an everlasting condemnation of sacrifices.

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel is in many ways the harshest critic of the people. In verse after verse, he calls them harlots and whores, turning to worship strange gods, misusing the gifts that God had given them. They beautify themselves, and corrupt His house to commit sins of wantonness and idolatry, even unto sacrific-

ing their own children: . . . *And didst set Mine oil and Mine incense before [these gods]. And My bread also which I gave you, fine flour and oil, and honey, wherewith I fed you, you did even set it before them for a sweet savor . . . (16:18).*

The prophet protests using God's due to serve false deities, but he does not protest proper sacrifice. Rather, he awaits its proper return:

For in My holy mountain . . . there shall all the house of Israel serve Me in the land. . . There will I accept them and there I will require your heave-offerings, and the first of your gifts with all your holy things. With your sweet savor will I accept you . . . (20:40).

Thus, Ezekiel actually predicts a renewal of the sacrificial worship in the future . . . *where the priests that are near unto the Lord shall eat the most holy things. There shall they lay the most holy things, and the meal offering, and the guilt-offering . . . (42:13).* So enthralled is he with this vision that he duplicates from Leviticus:

. . . the ordinances of the altar in the day when they shall make it, to offer burnt-offerings thereon, and to dash blood against it . . . (43:18). The priests shall make your burnt-offerings upon the altar, and your peace-offerings. And I will accept you, says the Lord God (43:27).

As if the moment is already at hand, the prophet chastises the use of improper priests, and predicts the reinstatement of the proper priesthood who will minister to the sacrificial service when

it shall be the prince's part to give the burnt-offerings, and the meal-offerings, and the drink-offerings . . . he shall prepare the sin-offering, and the meal-offering, and the burnt-offering, and the peace-offerings, [for the proper priest] to make atonement for the house of Israel (45:17).

The propriety, and almost the tangible reality, of sacrificial offerings are indeed manifest in Ezekiel's pronouncements.

HOSEA

For the children of Israel shall sit solitary many days without king, and without prince and without sacrifice . . . (3:4), moans Hosea. The prophet does not condemn sacrifices; he regrets the absence of sacrifice. God will not

respond to empty ritual, Hosea declares, *For I [God] desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings* (6:6). Obviously, the prophet is railing against sacrifice without mercy and knowledge of God, not against sacrifice itself. It is this theme that underlies Hosea's pronouncements on sacrifice:

For Ephraim [Israel] has multiplied altars to sin, altars have been unto him to sin (8:11). *As for the sacrifices that are made by fire unto Me Let them sacrifice flesh and eat it. For the Lord accepts them not, now will He remember their iniquity . . .* (8: 13).

The many altars are for the wrong purpose, and because of the people's iniquity, He does not accept their sacrifice.

Soncino adds: "Their meals in exile will not partake of the nature of a holy repast, since they will not be graced by the blessing of the priests in the name of God. They will not be able to drink wine, since no libation-offerings will be possible."

They shall not pour out wine-offerings to the Lord, Neither shall they be pleasing unto Him. Their sacrifices shall be unto them as the bread of mourners, All that eat thereof shall be polluted. For their bread shall be for their appetite, It shall not come into the house of the Lord (9:4).

Sacrifices in Jerusalem will be missed, but they are condemned.

JOEL

Joel's prophecy begins with a detailed description of an attack of locusts and other elements of nature upon the land and people of Israel, as a result of backsliding from the proper faith and worship of God. Whether the locusts are real or symbolic of a foreign power that invaded the land, the point is that it is a punishment. The land is bereft, the religious rituals in the Temple are suspended: *The meal-offering and the drink offering is cut off, from the house of the Lord* (1:9). Sacrifice is not rejected here; the absence of sacrifice is regretted: *Gird yourselves and lament, you priests, wail, ministers of the altar. For the meal-offering and the drink offering is withholden . . .* (1:13). The tone is that of disappointment, not of satisfaction that sacrifice is no longer practiced. Yet, like his fellow prophets, Joel holds out hope for restitution, if only the people will turn back unto God: *Who knows whether He will*

not turn and repent and leave a blessing behind Him? And what shall be the sign of this newly-restored blessing? Even a meal-offering and a drink-offering, unto the Lord your God. (2:14). The rituals of sacrifice in the Temple.

AMOS

I will punish the altars of Beth-El, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off . . . (3:14). This refers to the altars of a shrine belonging to the Northern Kingdom, not to the Temple in Jerusalem. Flinging consummate sarcasm on those who *oppress the poor, that crush the needy (4:1)*, Amos tells the people:

Come to Beth-El and transgress, to Gilgal and multiply transgression. Bring your sacrifices in the morning . . . and offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings . . . for so you love to do . . . (4:4).

Devotions of empty pageantry cannot confuse God:

Though you offer Me burnt-offerings . . . I will not accept them. Neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, And let Me not hear the melody of your psalteries (5:22).

When Israel sins, not only are sacrifices not wanted, but also songs and prayer are rejected. *Did you bring unto Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years? (5:25).* Apparently, Amos considers the offerings in the desert less lavish than those brought in the land, and yet God's favor rested upon the people in the desert, for they followed Him into a howling wilderness and demonstrated their faith in Him.

JONAH

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly and they offered a sacrifice unto the Lord . . . (1:16). This can hardly be taken as a negative attitude towards sacrifice, but rather a tribute to the piety of the sailors on Jonah's ship. *But I will sacrifice unto You, with the voices of thanksgiving . . . (2:10).* Jonah is obviously engaging in an act of gratitude in promising to sacrifice.

MICAH

Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, And bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before Him with burnt-offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, With ten thousands of rivers of oil? (6:6).

This is the most direct condemnation of sacrifice we have found in the prophets. However, in the context of the moral imprecations of Micah, it is obvious that his point was not a blanket labeling of sacrifice as evil, but that the lack of ethics and morality make them vain and useless in gaining God's approval.

MALACHI

The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi (1:1) demands that the prophet express himself with bitter scorn:

You offer polluted bread upon My altar and you say: Wherein have we polluted You in that you say: the table of the Lord is contemptible. And when you offer [unfit animals like] the blind for sacrifice, it is no evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, it is no evil? Present it to your [earthly] governor, will he be pleased with you? (1:7).

Malachi is not criticizing sacrifice, but, on the contrary, he is censuring the people for bringing faulty sacrifices in a kind of rebellion against God.

Oh, that there were even one among you that would shut the doors, That you might not kindle fire on My altar in vain. I have no pleasure in you Neither will I accept an offering at your hand. For from the rising of the sun even unto the setting of the same, In every place offerings are presented unto My name, even pure oblations But you profane it, in that you say: The table of the Lord is polluted And you have brought that which was taken by violence Should I accept this of your hand? But cursed be he who deals craftily whereas he has in his flock a male and vows and sacrifices unto the Lord a blemished thing (1:10-14).

The idea of sacrifice has been betrayed by God's own people. It not sacrifice against which the prophet inveighs, but the degraded, unlawful, insulting quality of Israel's offerings, in comparison with those elsewhere. Here sacrifice is praised and valued, not held in contempt.

CONCLUSION

The pattern of the prophets is clear: Notwithstanding the sins of God's people, that they so boldly and graphically denounce, they promise reconciliation between God and His children. Far from condemning sacrifice, the prophets proclaim that the re-establishment of the ritual of sacrifice will be the sign of this reconciliation. In the words of Malachi, the last of the prophets, whose harsh criticisms of the people we have just read, this persistent theme is reiterated:

Behold, I send My messenger, And he shall clear the way before Me And he shall sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver and he shall purify the sons of Levi And there shall be they that shall offer unto the Lord offerings in righteousness. Then shall the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the Lord as in the days of old and as in ancient years (Mal. 3:1,3).

NOTES

1. Citations in this article to the Soncino edition are paraphrases from the editor's notes on specific verses. Soncino Bible, Ed., Rev. Dr. A. Cohen (London: Soncino Press, 1949).



QUIZ ME ON THE TORAH

1. What is the significance of each of the three major pilgrimage festivals?
2. How does the Torah describe the Promised Land?
3. Who named Moses and why?
4. It burned with fire and was not consumed. What is the reference?

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