

65. The Ethical Horizon

Isa 1:11-17, Amos 5:21-24, Hos 6:6, Micah 6:6-8, 1Kgs 8:27-53, Psa 50

Animal sacrifice bulks large in the Hebrew Bible, especially in those parts of it where priestly interests are most strongly on view. But there were other interests, and with the Exile, which itself deeply challenged the orthodox view, those interests found their voice, and began generating texts of their own.

Those new texts were subversive. They rejected the slaughter of animals, and the slaughter of peoples in the name of the god who demanded sacrifices, for something more individually meaningful. In the world behind the texts, society itself was changing.

Rejection of sacrifice expressed itself, not in complete texts, but in passages added to earlier texts, like so many graffiti, or like covertly posted broadsides. One of several passages often mentioned in this connection is Isaiah 1:11-17. Here it is, *italicized*, to show the contrast with its context:

Isa 1:10. Hear the word of Yahweh, ye rulers of Sodom!. Give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah!

[11] *What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices, saith Yahweh. I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or lambs, or he-goats.*

[12] *When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to trample my courts? [13] Bring no more vain oblations, incense is an abomination unto me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies – I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting. [14] Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary of bearing them. [15] And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. [16] Wash you; make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil, [17] learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed; judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.*

[18] Come now, and let us reason together, saith Yahweh; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. [19] If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land, [20] but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword, for the mouth of Yahweh hath spoken it.

The context urges repentance, in the usual sense of not worshiping other gods (Isa 1:28, “But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together;” Isa 1:29, “For you shall be ashamed of the oaks in which you delighted.”). The interpolation, at its end in 1:17, picks up on the idea of injustice in the immediate context (the “fatherless” and “widows” of 1:23; charity to the helpless is a recurring feature of the idea of Biblical justice). It has been very cleverly placed, urging, as it does, a *radical* reform in the very presence of a call to *conventional* reform.

In his 1870 study of Isaiah, Cheyne quotes this passage as showing how carefully Isaiah, like others, had studied “the ideas and even the phraseology of his predecessors.” Indeed they had. Cheyne next mentions Amos 5:21-22. The whole passage is 5:21-24. Here it is, italicized in context:

Amos 5:21. Woe unto you that desire the day of Yahweh! Wherefore would ye have the day of Yahweh? It is darkness and not light.[19] As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him. [20] Shall not the day of Yahweh be darkness, and not light? Even very dark, and no brightness in it?

[21] *I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies. [22] Yea, though ye offer me your burnt-offerings and meal-offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts. [23] Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs . . . [24] But let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.*

[25] Did ye bring unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? [26] Yea, ye have borne the tabernacle of your king and the shrine of your images, the star of your god, which ye made to yourselves. [27] Therefore I will cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus, saith Yahweh, whose name is the God of Hosts.

Here, a threat of doom as a punishment for idol worship (despite the offering of proper sacrifices) is interrupted by a rejection of *all* forms of sacrifice.

Cheyne’s third and last example is Hosea 6:6. Here it is:

Hos 6:5. Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth; and thy judgements are as the light that goeth forth
[6] *For I desire goodness, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt-offerings.*

[7] But they like Adam have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me.

That single verse interrupts a denunciation: I have told them, but they disobey.

Perhaps most often cited is Micah 6:6-8, again *italicized* in context:

Micah 6:5. O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him; remember from Shittim unto Gilgal, that ye may know the righteous acts of Yahweh.

[6] *Wherewith shall I come before Yahweh, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? [7] Will Yahweh be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? [8] He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth Yahweh require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?*

[9] The voice of Yahweh crieth unto the city, and the man of wisdom will see thy name: hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it.

A conventional call to righteousness is suddenly interrupted by a second voice, calling for entire replacement of the old system of virtues and punishments.

Says Smith **Twelve** 1/455, who does not consider it an interpolation, “These four lines sum up the preaching of the prophets, as Christ summed up the teaching of the Law: *Thou shalt love Yahweh thy God and thy neighbor as thyself.*” Well said. The Jesus sect did indeed search the Scriptures, for a way out of the impasse of their own times. This was one thing they found.

With that different vision went a widening of the idea of God. Was Israel indeed the Chosen People? What about *other* people? Did they exist merely to be exterminated? Is only Israel called to justice, or has justice a wider scope? That question was taken up in the most audacious of all these passages, an addition (1 Kgs 8:27-53) to Solomon’s Prayer of Dedication of the Temple:

1 Kgs 8:22. And Solomon stood before the altar of Yahweh in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven; [23] and he said, O Yahweh, the God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven above or on earth beneath; who keepest covenant and lovingkindness with thy servants, that walk before thee with all their heart; [24] who hast kept with thy servant David my father that which thou didst promise him; yea, thou spakest with thy mouth, and hast fulfilled it with thy hand, as it is this day. [25] Now therefore, O Yahweh, the God of Israel, keep with thy servant David my father that which thou hast promised him, saying, There shall not fail thee a man in my sight to sit on the throne of Israel, if only thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me as thou hast walked before me. [26] Now therefore, O God of Israel, let thy word, I pray thee, be verified, which thou spakest unto thy servant David my father.

[27] *But will God in very deed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?* [28] *Yet have thou respect unto the prayer of thy servant, and to his supplication., O Yahweh my God, to hearken unto the cry and to the prayer which thy servant prayeth before thee this day; [29] that thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place whereof thou hast said, My name shall be there; to hearken unto the prayer which thy servant shall pray toward this place. [30] And hearken thou to the supplication of thy servant, and of thy people Israel, when they shall pray toward this place: yea, hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place; and when thou hearest, forgive.*

[31] *If a man sin against his neighbor, and an oath be laid upon him o cause him o swear, and he come and swear before thine altar in this house, [32] then hear thou in heaven, and do, and judge thy servants, condemning the wicked, to bring his way upon his own head, and justifying the righteous, to give him according to his righteousness.*

[33] *When thy people Israel are smitten down before the enemy, because they have sinned against thee; if they turn again to thee, and confess thy name, and pray and make supplication unto thee in this house; [34] then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy people Israel, and bring them again unto the land which thou gavest unto their fathers.*

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[35] *When heaven is shut up, and there is no rain, because they have sinned against thee; if they pray toward this place, and confess thy name, and turn from their sin, when thou dost afflict them; [36] then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy servants, and of thy people Israel, when thou teachest them the good way wherein they should walk; and send rain upon thy land, which thou hast given to thy people for an inheritance.*

[37] *If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, if there be blasting or mildew, locust or caterpillar, if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities, whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be, [38] what prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, who shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house: [39] then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place, and forgive, and do, and render unto every man according to all his ways, whose heart thou knowest; for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men); [40] that they may fear thee all the days that they live in the land which thou gavest unto our fathers.*

[41] *Moreover concerning the foreigner, that is not of they people Israel, when he shall come out of a far country for thy name's sake [42] (for they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy mighty hand, and of thine outstretched arm); when he shall come and pray toward this house, [43] hear thou in heaven thy dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calleth to thee for, that all the peoples of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee, as doth thy people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by thy name.*

[44] *If thy people go out to battle against their enemy, by whatsoever way thou shalt send them, and they pray unto Yahweh toward the city which thou hast chosen, and toward the house which I have built for thy name; [45] then hear thou in heaven, their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause.*

[46] *If they sin against thee (for there is no man that sinneth not), and thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captive unto the land of the enemy, far off or near; [47] yet if they shall bethink themselves in the land whither they are carried captive, and turn again, and make supplication unto thee in the land of them that carried them captive, saying, We have sinned, and have done perversely, and we have dealt wickedly; [48] if they return unto thee with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray unto thee toward their land, which thou gavest unto their fathers, the city which thou hast chosen, and the house which I have built for thy name, [49] then hear thou their prayer and their supplication in heaven thy dwelling-place, and maintain their cause;*

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[50] *and forgive thy people who have sinned against thee, and all their transgressions wherein they have transgressed against thee; and give them compassion before those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them* [51] *(for they are thy people, and thine inheritance, which thou broughtest forth out of Egypt, from the midst of the furnace of iron);* [52] *that thine eyes may be open unto the supplication of thy servant, and unto the supplication of thy people Israel, to hearken unto them whensoever they cry unto thee.* [53] *For thou didst separate them from among all the peoples of the earth, to be thine inheritance, as thou spakest by Moses thy servant, when thou broughtest our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord Yahweh.*

[54] And it was so, that, when Solomon had made an end of praying all this prayer and supplication unto Yahweh, he arose from before the altar of Yahweh, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread forth toward heaven. [55] And he stood, and blessed all the assembly of Israel . . .

And there followed the planned sacrifice: 220,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep, on a new altar especially constructed for the purpose.

Ignoring the long interpolation, we see that the original prayer of Solomon was concerned *solely for the bargain between Yahweh and David*, the promise of a perpetual Davidic line. Solomon sought to assure himself that this bargain had been confirmed with his fulfilment of David's promise to build the Temple.

So far Solomon. But the audacity of that interpolation is amazing.

No less audacious was it when, at a date no longer recoverable,¹ a musician of the Asaph guild put that sentiment into the mouth of God. Here is Psalm 50 in its entirety, with the words of God **emphasized**. It is the longest single speech of God in the entire Psalter. This is what it says:

- Psa 50** (01) The mighty one, God, YHWH hath spoken
and called the earth from the rising of the sun
to the going down thereof.
- (02) Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,
God hath shined forth.
- (03) Our God cometh, and doth not keep silence;
a fire devoureth before him,
and it is very tempestuous round about him.
- (04) He calleth to the heavens above,
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:
- (05) "Gather my saints together unto me,
those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice."
- (06) And the heavens shall declare his righteousness,
for God is judge himself.

Selah

[Continued]

¹"Perhaps even the exile" (Terrien 399).

- (07) **Hear, O my people, and I will speak:
O Israel, and I will testify unto thee.**
- (08) **I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices,
and thy burnt-offerings are continually before me.**
- (09) **I will take no bullock out of thy house,
nor he-goat out of thy folds.**
- (10) **For every beast of the forest is mine,
and the cattle upon a thousand hills.**
- (11) **I know all the birds of the mountains,
and the wild beasts of the field are mine.**
- (12) **If I were hungry, I would not tell thee,
for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof.**
- (13) **Will I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?**
- (14) **Offer unto God the sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay thy vows unto the Most High.**
- (15) **And call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.** [Selah]²
- (16) **But unto the wicked God saith,
What hast thou to do to declare my statutes,
and that thou hast taken my covenant in thy mouth,**
- (17) **Seeing that thou hatest instruction,
and castest my words behind thee?**
- (18) **When thou sawest a thief, thou consentedst with him,
and hast been partaker with adulterers.**
- (19) **Thou givest thy mouth to evil,
and thy tongue frameth deceit.**
- (20) **Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother,
thou slanderest thine own mother's sons.**
- (21) **These things hast thou done, and I kept silence;
thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself;
but I will reprove thee, and set in order before thine eyes.**
- (22) **Now consider this, ye that forget God,
lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver;**
- (23) **Whoso offereth the sacrifice of thanksgiving glorifieth me,
and to him that ordereth his way
will I show the salvation of God.**

Here are mingled the twin themes of rejection of animal sacrifice to God (“*If I were hungry, I would not tell thee*”) and of obedience to a God who, through the medium of his Law, instead makes *ethical* demands of men; not to consort with thieves, or to oppose one’s own brother – not, in short, to violate the elementary civic prescriptions that are at the heart of the Decalogue.

²This “Selah” is present only in LXX; like some other Selahs, it was later lost in M.

The Books of Kings are a sort of requiem for the Kingship. They take us to the Exile. The last King, his sons having been killed to assure that there would be no one to resume the legitimate kingly line, spent his last days thus:

2 Kgs 25:29b. And Jehoiachin did eat bread before him continually all the days of his life, [30] and for his allowance, there was a continual allowance given him of the king, every day a portion, all the days of his life.

And with the end of “all the days of his life,” the Promise to David was over.

We may recall the interpolation in Solomon’s Prayer, especially this part:

If they sin against thee (for there is no man that sinneth not), and thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captive unto the land of the enemy, far off or near; yet if they shall bethink themselves in the land whither they are carried captive, and turn again, and make supplication unto thee in the land of them that carried them captive, saying, We have sinned, and have done perversely, and we have dealt wickedly; if they return unto thee with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray unto thee toward their land, which thou gavest unto their fathers.

That interpolation can only have been written *during* the Exile. It expresses the searching for new directions which the Exile itself insistently demanded.

The Exile ended. Some returned. The sacrifices were renewed; the Temple was eventually rebuilt. Someone then undertook to rewrite the Books of Kings, taking a more optimistic view of the future. That rewrite is Chronicles (§58). We pick it up, to see how the writer will handle the insert in Solomon’s Prayer.

He keeps all of it. It was known, it was familiar, and things like that would be missed if they were omitted. But following that extended prayer (which thousands have read, without realizing that it takes them into another world), Chronicles continues with the actual arrival of Yahweh at the Temple:

2 Chr 7:1. Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt-offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of Yahweh filled the house. [2] And the priests could not enter into the house of Yahweh, because the glory of Yahweh filled Yahweh’s house. [3] And all the children of Israel looked on, when the fire came down, and the glory of Yahweh was upon the house; and they bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement, and worshiped, and gave thanks unto Yahweh, saying, For he is good; for his lovingkindness endureth forever.

In that fire from Heaven, the sacrificial once again takes over from the ethical, and we are back once more with the Yahweh of the previous age.

And in such manner did the mind of Israel, and the moral reach of Israel, oscillate back and forth, as they continue to do “unto this day.”