Loving Worship Too Much

Fiery messages from the God of Israel, spoken through the prophet Amos, are addressed to North Israel in the days of Jeroboam II. This outbreak of divine anger shocked and no doubt angered the “devout” worshipers gathered at the holy sanctuaries of Bethel and Gilgal. “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.”¹ The worship at these holy places is marked by a sanctuary-bound piety that ignores elemental acts of justice and kindness on the street. With heavy sarcasm, Amos mimics the call of the priest to worship and invites his contemporaries to come and commit sin at the sanctuaries of Bethel and Gilgal. He invites them to bring their sacrifices, tithes, thank offerings and make public their freewill offerings, “for so you love to do” (Amos 4:4-5). But what some Israelites love to do is fully unacceptable to God whose ear is turned only toward worshipers who want “justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

Amos’ attack on false worship at the sanctuaries is continued by his near contemporary Hosea, as well as by later prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah.² Israel’s sanctuaries, which were

¹ Amos 5:21-23 (NRSV).
² Hos 8:11-14; Isa 1:10-17; Jer 7:1-15; Ezek 8:1-18; Mic 6:6-8.

Fredrick C. Holmgren is research professor of Old Testament at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago.

* I am grateful to my colleague, Dr Richard W. Carlson, Professor of Ministry at North Park Theological Seminary, who helped me clarify several issues covered in this article.

Fredrick C. Holmgren

304
devoted to God, have been taken over by a priestly theology that transforms the God of Moses into a "friendly" deity — one who seemingly supports and approves a ritualized, nationalistic religion that severs believing from doing (Amos 5:23-24). The prophetic condemnation of the sanctuaries, therefore, is also a rejection of the priests who officiate at them (Amos 7:17). Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, is one such priest. He accuses Amos of conspiracy against the "king's sanctuary" and the "temple of the kingdom" because of Amos' announcement of disaster coming upon King Jeroboam and Israel (7:13). This announcement of doom for Jeroboam and Israel, however, is but one part of Amos' sharp judgment on the empty rituals occurring at the sanctuaries. Instead of addressing Amos' charge that worship at these sanctuaries embraced a piety that ignored basic justice for the needy, Amaziah chooses to depict the prophet as unpatriotic! Amos replied bluntly that disaster would come upon Amaziah, his family and the land of Israel (Amos 7:16-17; cf. Hos. 4:4-6).

PRIESTS AND TEMPLE:

AUTHENTIC INSTITUTIONS OF ISRAELITE FAITH

Not every priest or all temple worship is condemned by the prophets. They are not calling for a religion without priestly personnel or worship centers. Neither in Israel nor elsewhere in the ancient world was a religion without priests or temples thinkable. The comments of Artur Weiser are to the point: "No religion could do without a cult as the place where man again and again receives new power for the struggle of life through fellowship with God and other believers."

The Israelite cultus was not some sort of unauthorized development that slipped surreptitiously into Israel's life. It was and remained an integral part of Israel's faith experience. Abraham founded sanctuaries in various parts of what was later to become Israel (Gen 13:4-5) and the establishing of rituals is associated with the Exodus from Egypt (Exod 12:43-13:16). Samuel, one of Israel's earliest prophets, functioned as both priest and prophet (1 Sam 7:9-10; 10:8) and Elijah lamented that Israel had cast down

---


Priests and Prophets: Spirituality and Social Conscience

305
the altars of the Lord (1 Kgs 19:10, 14). Worship at altars or sanctuaries, overseen by priests, continued to be a central element in Israel's life as one can see from the books of Psalms and Leviticus. Further, Jeremiah belonged to a priestly family (1:1), Ezekiel is identified as a priest (1:3), and one other, Isaiah, may have received his call to prophesy while worshiping in the temple. No doubt their criticism of the counterfeit worship that was taking place in their day arose from their own experience of what worship should be. Although these prophets fiercely attacked the false worship of their day, there exists now in these prophetic books oracles which hold the conviction that the temple on Mount Zion will be a part of Israel's future. It seems clear that, in the eyes of the prophets, the divine anger was not concentrated on all priests nor on temple ritual itself. The cultus was not only an intrinsic element of Israelite faith from its earliest period but was considered an essential part of Israel's future. Prophetic criticism, therefore, was fixed, rather, upon some priests who were false to their calling and who led worshipers to believe that God was on their side no matter their behavior.

THE CULTUS:

NOURISHMENT OF PIETY AND SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

The Israelite cultus, as Ringgren observes, "was the original setting of most of the Psalms." A reading of the Psalms reveals therefore the character of the cultus. Here one can see that temple worship spoke to concerns that were not addressed by the prophets. It was here that people could find comfort and hope in times of sickness and distress (Pss 116; 118); could appeal to God — even call him to account — when they felt they had been wronged (Pss 22; 17; 26); could find communion with God which would give them strength and inspiration to live their daily life (Pss 16; 27); and could confess their sins and pray for forgiveness (Pss 32; 38; 51; 103).

In addition, however, to giving guidance and inspiration to persons facing numerous spiritual issues in the living out of their life,

Fredrick C. Holmgren

306
temple worship underscored the necessity of deeds of kindness and justice for others. Samuel E. Balentine points to this duality in the cultus with the observation: “Priestly ministry seeks to build communities of faith in order that communities of faith may build worlds where justice, no less than piety, orders life in accord with the Creator’s design.” This emphasis would become a major aspect of the “Word” proclaimed by the prophets. Worshipers in the temple were confronted by the God of Torah for whom righteousness has the highest value (Ps 89:14). God’s own concern for justice and kindness to the oppressed constitutes an implicit call to worshipers to emulate his ways in the world. This means standing with God on the side of those who live an upright life and having a heart for the needy (Pss 72:34; 41:1-3; 34:15-18). Those that would violate the Divine Teaching face severe consequences (Pss 1:4-6; 94:1-10). Once again, Ballentine strikes the right note: “Scholars particularly prone to dismissing ‘the priestly’ should note that ritual observance inculcates ethical and moral behavior. That the Torah envisions an inner cohesion between worship and justice is suggested by the strategic placement of the ‘Holiness Code’ [which emphasizes ethical responsibilities] within the priestly instructions preserved in Leviticus.” These so-called “prophetic” emphases did not change the priest into a prophet, for such concerns, together with the “spiritual” or worship emphasis, were an important aspect of the priest’s ministry within the temple community.

**THE CULTUS AND THE CLASSICAL PROPHETS**

The contrast between what was called for in worship, namely just behavior, and what took place on city streets was undoubtedly unsettling to many worshipers. Some were strongly grasped by the conviction that they must act to bring about justice in Israelite

---

* Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah's Vision Of Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1999) 176. Cf. pp. 14 and 175. Richard D. Nelson concludes his discussion of sacrifice with the following statement: “In the end, sacrifice was for Israel’s benefit, not for Yahweh’s, and its overall goal was community. Sacrifice created human community and linked that community with Yahweh’s presence and power. . . . Sacrifice understood as a gift or meal establishes vertical fellowship with Yahweh and horizontal community in Israel.” See *Raising Up A Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox 1993) 82, 173.

7 Ballentine, 176. See also pp. 14 and 175.

---

Priests and Prophets: Spirituality and Social Conscience
society and they became part of the prophetic movement either as followers of the prophets or as prophets themselves. Among the latter, as noted above, were Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jeremiah. One can assume that within the cultic community there lived many who bore the brunt of priestly and political corruption. It was among these people, pressed down by the powerful, that the prophets found strong support.\(^8\) Abraham Heschel has captured the temper and the message of prophecy in the following words: “Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor. . . .”\(^9\) People were drawn to the prophet because they saw him as one who voiced their pain and defended their rights. Such support was necessary for the survival of the whole prophetic movement, because the prophets, in times of moral crisis, spoke hard words that few audiences wanted to hear. Heschel characterizes the prophet in the following manner: “He rarely sings, but castigates. . . . The prophet is intent on intensifying responsibility, is impatient of excuse, contemptuous of pretense and self-pity. His tone [is] rarely sweet or caressing. . . . his words are often slashing, even horrid — designed to shock rather than to edify.”\(^10\) The prophet’s unrelenting opposition was aimed at entrenched powers at the highest levels in society. They were people who did not relinquish easily the advantages they enjoyed through their corruption. Without the advocacy of a significant part of the community, therefore, the prophet would have quickly been silenced and perhaps killed. We should not assume, however, that

---

\(^8\) It seems that a sizeable community gave their support to the prophets. In 2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 7, for example, we read of the “company [Heb.: ‘sons’] of prophets” who followed Elisha. They appear to represent the faithful poor in the cultic community (cf. 2 Kgs 4:1-2). Further, in Isaiah, we hear of the prophet’s “disciples” (8:16) who again, most likely, were faithful members of the cultic community. The same is probably true of those who interceded to save Jeremiah from death. In Jeremiah 26 the narrative concerns the response of people to Jeremiah’s warnings and calls for repentance. Some, including “the priests and the prophets” wanted to kill him, but the “officials and all the people” spoke out on Jeremiah’s behalf and saved him from death (Jer 26:16). The context of this narrative, that is, a gathering in the temple, suggests that those who interceded on behalf of Jeremiah were loyal members of the cultic community who shared Jeremiah’s views and supported him in his ministry.


\(^10\) Ibid., 7.

Fredrick C. Holmgren

308
the people who supported the prophet wanted to separate themselves from the cultus, for the prophet merely focused on one aspect of a theme that was present in the cultus, that is, right conduct in society. There were other spiritual needs, alluded to above, that people had, and it was the cultus, not the prophet, who addressed these needs.

It has been said that without the prophetic movement, Israel's faith would not have survived. It is seldom realized, however, that the reverse is also true. Without Israel's cult, which attended to the broad "spiritual" needs of the individual and community along with a strong call to ethical behavior, the prophetic movement would have been ineffective and short lived. In fact, if it had not been for the cultic community, the prophetic legacy may have disappeared completely because in the late post-exilic period prophetic activity came to an end (Tosephta Sotah 13:2). This was due to a number of reasons, for example, the rise of apocalyptic and the bad reputation that prophets brought on themselves (Zech 13:2-6). The cultus, headed by priests, however, unlike prophetism, survived and continued to exercise its influence in Jewish society. Although the age of prophecy came to an end, ironically the prophetic writings were preserved in the cultic community that the prophets had at times so severely criticized. In a time when the great prophets were long dead, their words continued to be "heard" within the temple community.

TEMPLE AND PRIESTS IN THE GOSPELS

This prophetic critique of temple practice and, by implication of priests who were in authority, surfaces also in the gospel's depiction of an angry Jesus confronting the activity of the money changers in the temple court (Matt 21:12-16; Mark 11:15-17). It seems clear, however, that in this event, as in the Old Testament, there is no denial of the validity of worship in the Jerusalem temple. In fact, as Peter Fiedler points out in an important article, the actions of Jesus depicted in the above texts, are in no way an attack on the temple, but rather demonstrate his desire to restore and preserve


Priests and Prophets: Spirituality and Social Conscience

309
the holiness of the temple. His anger is not directed against this holy place but against those who desecrate it — who make God’s house “a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17 and parallels; cf. Isa 56:7).

Further testimony to the validity of the temple and temple ritual may be seen in the gospel narratives in which Jesus is frequently associated with the temple. In the account of his birth, it is related that he was brought into the temple (Luke 2:22-27; cf. also Luke 2:41-51). Later in his ministry he often visited this historic sanctuary (Mark 11:11, 27; 13. 1) and, according to the synoptic gospels, taught there daily (e.g., Mark 14:49). Again, the gospel writers represent Jesus as one giving instructions to a healed leper to appear before a priest in order to make the traditional offering (Mark 1:44; Luke 5:15).

It is important to observe that nowhere in the gospels, does Jesus himself call for the removal of priests and the cessation of temple worship. Further, it may be noted that none of Jesus’ opponents ever accuse him of making statements attacking the validity of the priestly leadership or of the temple cult. If he had done so, surely his priestly opponents would have used such an attack to inflame the people against him. It seems likely then that Jesus did not oppose the temple cult any more than he opposed prayer. Rather, he strongly rebuked those who had lost contact with the true significance of the temple (Mark 11:15-17) as well as those who “used” prayer for self-promotion (Matt 6:5).

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples carried on their worship in the temple (e.g., Acts 3:1, 3, 8). Even Paul, according to Acts, did not view some cultic rituals as opposed to a sincere faith. He willingly complied with the request of leaders in Jerusalem that he join four men undergoing the rite of purification and pay the expense for such a ritual (Acts 21:23-24)!

In summary, we may infer from our above discussion that cultic rituals and worship in the temple were broadly affirmed by the actions of Jesus and the disciples. Nowhere in the gospels is a non-cultic, non-priestly religion advocated.

Fredrick C. Holmgren
Despite the above positive view of the temple and the acceptance given to the priestly role in the above-mentioned actions of Jesus and the disciples, within the Christian community priests and temple worship are often suspect. This is especially true of Protestant Christianity that centers its attention on the prophetic tradition. Priests are frequently singled out as examples of legalism, insincerity and shallowness. This judgment finds support today even though Christian readers find attractive the temple and priestly piety witnessed to in the book of Psalms. In fact, pastors and laypersons often observe that the book of Psalms breathes the air of the New Testament. The problem is, however, that modern readers view the psalm texts as if they were examples of personal, individualistic experiences with God. They fail to understand, as we have noted above, that the Psalms arise out of the temple cultus and that they preserve for us the character of temple and priestly piety.

In part, the severe judgment of the priests and temple ritual is due to the sharp critique of the prophets. Further influencing a negative view of the priests and by implication the temple, is the Gospel's devastating representations of priestly leaders (i.e., the "chief priests" and the "high priest") as corrupt conspirators in a plan to kill Jesus. These very negative portrayals of the priest have an especially strong influence upon the Christian reader because they occur mostly in those texts that speak about Jesus' suffering and death. The expression "chief priests" (often appearing together with scribes and elders) occurs some 46 times within the four gospels where they are seen as scheming, ruthless opponents of Jesus (e.g., Mark 14:1). The book of Acts, recounting the experiences of the Christian community after the death of Jesus, mentions some 8 times the continuing hostility of the "chief priests."

This accusation was a firmly accepted criticism of priestly religion by many Old Testament scholars from the time of Wellhausen (ca. 1885) until that of Eichrodt (1967), but it is no doubt still alive among pastors and laypersons today especially in the Protestant wing of the church. See the discussion of Richard D. Nelson in Raising Up A Faithful Priest, pp. 101-05 as well as that of Joseph Blenkinsopp, Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox 1995) 66-67.
In addition, the "high priest" is mentioned over twenty times in the gospels and Acts as a lead conspirator in bringing about the death of Jesus and as an adversary to the apostles (e.g., Matt 23:3-4; Acts 5:17-18). The frequent reminders of the evil acts and words of the "chief priests" and the "high priest" against Jesus and the apostles give the impression that the whole priesthood, from bottom to top, was corrupt. One should be wary of coming to such a conclusion. No doubt, in the priestly hierarchy, there was strong, even violent opposition to Jesus, but it is too much to assert that all of the priests, or even most of them, supported the plot of the "chief priests" against Jesus. If the priesthood of the first century was so thoroughly hostile to Jesus, his ministry and true piety, one would expect to find in the gospels words of Jesus that directly and unambiguously condemn the priests and reject their role as servants of God. But, as we observed above, Jesus makes no such all out attack on the priests. Further, one must ask: Could Judaism have continued to exist and effect its high moral influence on society (which continues to this day) if it were built on the pseudo-piety-quicksand of its priests and temple worship?

FROM PRIESTS AND TEMPLES TO MINISTERS AND CHURCH

The above discussion, regarding the priests and temple worship in both the prophetic literature and the gospels, touches on contemporary criticism of pastors and church worship. Admittedly, the precise charges made against the priests in the time of Amos and Hosea or against the "chief priests" in the time of Jesus, are not those generally made against modern ministers or priests. There is, however, a common thread in the charges made, namely, that of a sanctuary-bound piety. The "priestly" activity of the Christian minister in carrying on organized worship in the local church is sometimes severely criticized because of the perception that he devotes himself excessively to cultivating religious feeling and an

14 The Letter to the Hebrews adds to a negative impression of the priesthood and temple. Although in this book neither temple nor priest is under attack for insincerity or corruption, Hebrews portrays the cultus as something out-dated and no longer valid for the Christian community (Heb 10:1-10). It is only a shadow of the Reality that has arrived, namely, Jesus (Heb 8:5).

Fredrick C. Holmgren

312
individual piety within the congregation. A strong prophetic call to take a stand for justice in society, especially on unpopular issues, is too often missing. One such critic is J. J. M. Roberts, who makes the following comments comparing worship in the church today to that which took place in Israel: “Anyone with even a limited experience in the modern church will have encountered pious Christians who both claim and appear to be deeply moved by their participation in worship, and yet who seem to be oddly blind to the ethical and moral demands of the God they so reverently worship. Something far more important than a feeling, even a feeling of reverence, is at stake here. Israel’s worship was rejected, whatever feelings of reverence may have accompanied it, because it was unaccompanied by obedience to God’s other commands.”\textsuperscript{15}

It is not only Christian worship that is under attack. Within the Jewish community also there exists a sharp critique of worship in the synagogue. Catherine Madsen, a convert to Judaism from Christianity, has experienced worship in both communities. In her response to the introduction of a new liturgy in the synagogue, she offers a biting critique of modern worship. She likens some worship to “kitsch,” which is all about the creation of feelings or a “sense of feeding on one’s experience for spiritual uplift.”\textsuperscript{16} In a companion article, Rami Shapiro sharpens further Madsen’s critique. He expands the criticism from liturgy to the whole of organized religion, declaring: “Organized religion is designed to keep us safe from the immediacy of God and the radical universalism God-encounter brings.”\textsuperscript{17}

Organized worship may very well deserve the above criticism. Many Christian worshipers want, as did their Israelite counterparts long ago, to experience worship that is inspirational — one that gives spiritual uplift. In many churches, as parishioners leave the sanctuary they frequently thank the pastor for the service and for the pastor’s inspirational, helpful message. Prophets or their


\textsuperscript{17} Rami Shapiro, “Rami Shapiro Responds,” \textit{Tikkun} (March/April 2001) 49.
modern counterparts seldom receive such an appreciative response. More often their listeners come away silent, agitated or angry.

It does not lessen the force of the above critiques if we observe that they are often exaggerated accusations which are characteristic of prophetic denunciations.\textsuperscript{18} Carefully measured criticisms scarcely strike our attention as sharply as does the use of hyperbole. These strong criticisms, whether in ancient Israel or in contemporary life, shock us to the truth of what faith and worship should and should not be. They underscore the central message of both the temple cult and the Hebrew prophets, namely, that spirituality which does not nourish a longing for justice in society is worthless. Nevertheless, as we evaluate the significance of these modern criticisms, it is important to recognize that they are usually overstatements in need of qualification. Such criticisms may be valid for some or many churches; it is not likely, however, that all or even most worship services promote religious feeling apart from the creation of a social conscience.

Without turning a deaf ear to the above critical comments, we may observe that such critiques of modern worship fail to recognize that there is another side to the discussion. John O’Sullivan, writing in the \textit{Chicago Sun-Times}, warns of a growing secularization in Christian churches. He heads his article with the title: “Churches are losing their Religion” and declares that “in many West European cities it is hard to distinguish the local church from a secular social service agency.” Further, he asserts: “All too often when people come to the church for the bread of spiritual consolation, they are given the stone of social administration.”\textsuperscript{19} Pointing in the same direction are the remarks of a well-known ecumenical leader, Dr. Choan-Seng Song, president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. “Ecumenical organizations are in trouble spiritually,” he says, because they are not satisfying a “spiritual


Fredrick C. Holmgren

314
hunger" that is present in the world. They appear to be "stressing social and political action without spiritual strength." 20

Although, as we have noted, it may be that some churches give too much attention to worship that promotes spiritual uplift, one will not increase concern for social issues within the congregation by ignoring the spiritual needs that are present there. It is in those congregations where God is seen to be concerned about both the spiritual and physical needs of individuals that the call to social justice has the best possibility of being heard. Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of the Jewish journal Tikkun, lends a Jewish voice to the discussion. A strong advocate for the need of creating justice at all levels of society, he also emphasizes the necessity of spiritual growth. While admitting that those who ignore the "soul-destroying social realities" have embraced a pseudo-spirituality, he declares: "No amount of social change can replace attention to one's inner life. The fruits of social change won't last if they're implemented by people who are out of touch with their own spiritual dimension — and the change won't ever be achieved, because most people eventually drop out of social change movements before they've achieved their goals because they are so lacking in nourishment for the soul." 21

An emphasis on worship and spiritual nourishment is not to be seen as detracting from social responsibility. Admittedly, there are in our world today "spiritual" people who consider the world to be occupied by souls rather than real people in need. But we should not focus so much on this pseudo-spirituality that we overlook those who are spiritually alive and seek justice and practice kindness wherever they live. Prophetic persons, whether in Israelite or modern society, often find their strongest support within the


Priests and Prophets: Spirituality and Social Conscience
bounds of organized communities of faith. Without question such communities need the prophet, but what is seldom realized is that the prophet needs the cultus including the priest — and the pastor.

Frank C. Senn

Lutherans Are Natural “Splitters”

While writing a review of the Festschrift in honor of Paul Bradshaw for this journal, I pondered again the case Bradshaw has made for differentiating between “lumpers” and “splitters” in the study of early Christian worship. The issue interests me because, naturally, I want to assess my own placement among these categories, but also because how one approaches the data of liturgical history has some bearing on decisions about liturgical orders and texts today.

“Lumpers” are not just those who make too many generalizations about ancient texts, or read their own experiences and ideas back into ancient contexts. “Lumpers” are those who take the sparse textual data of the early Christian centuries and try to weave a linear thread of liturgical development through the varied times and places of antiquity. Their object is to construct a coherent picture of early Christian liturgical evolution in order to trace a line of development from apostolic to modern times. Many of us have done that in popular presentations. But, more importantly, at least in the so-called liturgical churches Christians want to

Frank C. Senn, STS, is Pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois, a past president of the North American Academy of Liturgy, the immediate past president of The Liturgical Conference, and Senior of the Society of the Holy Trinity.
