

Psalm 51 and the Criticism of the Cult: Does This Reflect a Divided Religious Leadership?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this publication will be twofold: Firstly, to view Psalm 51, especially those verses which can be designated as cult-critical. Secondly, to indicate that the prophetic critique is part of a larger prophetic rhetoric to convict of sin, to explain God's plan, and to indicate the hope of salvation. The cult criticism of Psalm 51:18-19, however, is not a repudiation of the cult and cultic practices: the fact that a later redactor added the last two verses (Ps 51:20-21) after verses 18-19, proves this point. Therefore, it would be incorrect to see the prophetic critique of the priesthood as a sign that the priests and the prophets were incompatible, or that the prophets wanted to discredit and discard the temple cult.

A INTRODUCTION

In a rather infamous moment in his *Theology of the Old Testament* Ludwig Köhler (1957:181) stated as follows:

There is no suggestion anywhere in the Old Testament that sacrifice or any other part of the cult was instituted by God ... But it is begun and continued and accomplished by man; it is works, not grace; an act of self-help, not a piece of God's salvation. Indeed, the cult is a bit of ethnic life. Israel takes it over from the heathens ... Just because the cult is a bit of ethnic life the prophets are always setting question marks against it, doubting its propriety, rejecting it.¹

Many scholars of the Hebrew Bible do not share the idea expressed in this paragraph today – whether they are Jewish or Christian (Bibb 2006:31). This dismissive attitude toward the cultic life of Ancient Israel has been deconstructed on two fronts – historically and theologically. Historians of ancient religion have come to recognise the dynamic relationship between the idealistic form of religious thought and the practice we find in the Hebrew Bible on the one hand and the varied, often syncretistic practices of the multi-faceted

¹ Cf. also the following remark by Wellhausen (1965:77): “Der Kultus ist der allgemein ethnische Ausgangspunkt der Religion auch bei den Israeliten, er trennt sich nicht von den Heiden, sondern verbindet sie mit ihnen.”

Israelite community on the other hand (cf. Becking 1998:148-160; Dijkstra 1998:59-92; Hermann 2004:41; Smith 2002:7, 195; Vriezen 1998:31-32.).²

Israel, as a matter of fact, had an authentic sacrificial practice that was not merely a cheap copy of “heathen” nature religion(s). From a theological point of view, it seems that the old dilemma of whether Israelite theology sipped from the chalice of ancient Near Eastern mythology, or whether their theology expressed a reaction against their environment, has been declawed (Bibb 2006:31). Both arguments had their merits.

However, the fact remains that despite these new insights in the religious practices of ancient Israel, the prophetic text still lingers; and it contains a thorough critique of Israel’s cultic practices. Therefore, it was widely thought that the classical prophets of ancient Israel were individuals who were primarily concerned with Israel’s ethical behaviour (Zevit 2006:189). For them it seemed as if adherence to the ethical stipulations of the covenant was deemed more important than the punctilious fulfilment of cultic minutiae. To make their point, prophets condemned the cult in Yahweh’s name. Amos 5:21-24 (NRSV) plays a significant role in this regard:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream.

If it is true, as the consensus maintains, that prophets valued ethics over the cult and cultic practices, it is at least clear that they must have given some thought to the priests, who were the promoters of what they felt impeded their fellow-Israelites from fulfilling their ethical covenantal obligations. Following this line of thought, it is reasonable to postulate that some prophets must have felt ani-

² According to Grabbe (2004:253-254) “[T]here were several levels or spheres of religion in the ancient world. The ruler often had a favoured cult or deity which he would promote. This cult was not always the only national cult since, in a polytheistic society, there would usually be a number of cults given state sponsorship. These cults can be designated by the term ‘official religion’; however, the term can also be applied to other sorts of religious structures: the religion of the ruling class; the religion of a dominant ethnic group; the religion of a conqueror; even the most popular religion of a people when there is a national deity. In most cases, though, there will also be minority forms of the religion or minority separate religions. The ‘official religion’ is often – though not always – at a certain remove from the religion as practised by the common people ... ‘Popular religion’ in the Persian period would be those beliefs and practices of the common people apart from the temple, especially those that would be frowned on by the temple establishment. Unfortunately, because of elements that were viewed with distaste by the temple authorities, popular religion may well be ignored by the preserved sources. Practices such as magic, astrology, divination, the cult of the dead, and analogous rites can be included under popular religion.”

mosity toward the priests, and their hostility should have been imprinted in the preserved literature (Zevit 2006:190).

However, not only do we encounter such criticism in the prophetic books, but we also come across examples of prophetic cult-critical relativisation in the book of Psalms – for example in Psalms 40 (vv. 7-9), 50 (vv. 7-15), 51 and 69 (v. 32). Even though it seems hard to believe that the psalmists advocated a religious world without the cult, this is the impression one gets from the above-mentioned texts. In fact, scholars, historians, and especially theologians, have sometimes come exactly to the same conclusion.

The aim of this publication will be twofold. First I want to analyse those verses in Psalm 51 that can be designated to be cult-critical. Second I want to indicate that the prophetic critique is part of a larger prophetic rhetoric to convict of sin, explain God's plan, and sometimes to hold out the hope of salvation (Grabbe 2006a:2). Prophets went to great lengths to get their message across. It is within this rhetorical freedom that one must interpret the prophetic critique of ritual. Furthermore, it could also be seen as part of a critical position of the priesthood, which is a characteristic shared by post-exilic prophecy. The focus will now be on Psalm 51.

B PSALM 51

In Psalm 51:18-19 we encounter an example of cult-critical relativisation.³ To begin with, these verses are to be seen in connection with the preceding verses.⁴ They do not only serve as a justification, but also as a qualification of the supplicant's praise (תְּהַלֵּל – 17) of God's salvation (תְּשׁוּעָה – 16) and God's deliverance/righteousness (צְדָקָה – 16). In verse 17 the supplicant appeals to God to open his lips and to allow his mouth to declare the praise of God. Verses 18-19 continue this prayer by giving a reason for this prayer. The supplicant emphatically emphasises that the merciful action of God will not be received on the basis of sacrifice alone. In fact, according to these verses the confidence of the supplicant is placed in that which God will certainly accept, namely a "broken and contrite heart" (לֵב-נִשְׁבָּר וְנֹדֵד). The point is that burnt offerings or other sacrifices, which God will accept, must express the sacrificial reality of the "crushed" heart of the supplicant(s) (Seybold 1996:214; Seybold 2009:297-299; Spieckermann 1998:147-8; Weber 2001:235).⁵ This statement bears wit-

³ Cf. Ps 51:18-19: "For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (NRSV).

⁴ Cf. the particle *כִּי* introducing verse 18.

⁵ In this regard Hossfeld & Zenger (1993:310) infer as follows: "JHWH verweigert die Schlacht- und Brandopfer wegen des kultischen Leerlaufs und der Diskrepanz von Kult und Ethos, allerdings im Urteil des Beters. Die »Schlachtopfer Gottes«, auf die es ankommt, sind ein zerbrochenes und zerschlagenes Herz".

ness to the fact that this supplicant must have criticised sacrificial practices severely.

Taken in this way, these verses make a powerful statement of the subordination of sacrifice to confession, as well as those personal qualities which are acceptable to God and necessary for forgiveness. The supplicant, who thus offers a broken spirit (רִיבֹנִי נִשְׁבָּרָה) as sacrifice, whether accompanied by burnt offerings or not, can be sure of divine acceptance. This statement therefore advances toward a “new” theology of sacrifice: offering to God not just any gift that is intended to symbolise the saved person, but him/herself as a human being who has been renewed in both heart and spirit. This is the sacrifice that God – as the creator and the saviour – expects from the supplicant: the self-satisfied, hard-hearted and proud sinner must allow him/herself to be “crushed” and made “lowly and poor” before God (Hossfeld & Zenger 2000:55; cf. also Dalglisch 1962:192-4 and Schmidt 1994:358).

The psalm herewith expresses the real meaning of sacrifice: confession, forgiveness, total dependence on a merciful God and a joyful new life that emerges from that process (Tate 1990:26-8; cf. also Courtman 1995:52-6). According to Hossfeld & Zenger (2000:54)⁶ these verses actualise the prophetic cult criticism which, instead of sacrifices, requests obedience to God as well as that justice and righteousness be done.⁷ However, one should categorically state that this statement does not aim to exclude either the sacrifice or sacrificial cult practices at all. Mowinckel (1961,VI:51) warns against such a view. With regard to this text (as well as other cult-critical texts) he remarked as follows:

Eine Nichterwähnung oder gar eine Geringschätzung des Opfers ist nicht notwendig dasselbe wie eine Verwerfung der Kultreligion oder ein Abstandnehmen von ihr. Meistens handelt es sich nun hier nicht um eine Verwerfung des Opfers, sondern einfach um eine Verschiebung in der Wertschätzung der einzelnen Momente des Tempelkultus.

⁶ Cf. also Gunkel & Begrich 1998:287-90.

⁷ Cf. for example Hosea 6:6 (“for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” – NRSV); Micah 6:6-8 (“with what shall I come before the Lord ...? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings ...? ... and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” – NRSV); Amos 5:21-24 (“... even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon ... but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” – NRSV). Compare also Isaiah 1:11-17 and Jeremiah 7:21-23. We even encounter this line of thought in the wisdom tradition: see Proverbs 15:8; 21:3.27; 28:9, and especially Sirach 34:21-35:22.

Von Rad (1989:368-369) shares his point of view and warns that we must take care not to see in these statements the “most valid criticism, and indeed the spiritual ‘supersession,’ of worship by blood-sacrifice as such”. These therefore did not supersede the sacrifice, and were not meant to do so. These utterances were therefore rather viewpoints, intended by the authors to be taken radically as they were well suited to shake people out of their complacency, which was a constant danger besetting the sacrificial cult.⁸

One should thus be cautious not to conclude that verses 18-19 of Psalm 51 point to a repudiation of cultic worship and that they encourage a kind of spirituality wholly detached from sacrifices. In this regard Leene (1996:70) justly infers as follows: “in that sense this psalm remains within the religious environment in which the Psalter originated: a world in which animal sacrifices were offered”. It is not a case of the “song of praise” (51:16-17) vis-à-vis the sacrifice of animals. By means of this remark the supplicant only appraises the value of the “song of praise” higher than that of the bloody sacrifice. He does not reject the sacrifice fundamentally, but instead he emphasises the laudation vigorously (cf. Bauer 1990:414; Coetzee 1986:167; Fohrer 1970:114; Hermisson 1965:39).⁹ It is within the framework of rhetorical freedom that we should interpret the supplicant’s critique of ritual (Bibb 2006:34). Although the cult is questioned, the text surely does not call for the elimination of ritual practice, or does it? How could a world without cult and ritual be envisaged? Modern interpreters, who can envision such a world, indeed who live in such a world, are the ones who read into this critique of ritual a preference for a non-ritualistic religion.

Jones (1963:30) clearly fails to recognise this fact. He therefore explains the cult-critical remarks in these psalms as the result of a total cessation of the sacrificial practices after the destruction of the temple in 587/6 B.C.E. Tournay (1991:171-172) holds the same opinion. However, the destruction of the temple does not seem to have put an end to worship in Jerusalem. In any case, in Jeremiah 41:5 we read that some eighty men came from Shechem, Shiloh and Samaria and arrived at the “house of Yahweh” to offer a sacrifice of cereal and incense. We are not told explicitly that the sanctuary in question was in Jeru-

⁸ Schenker 2006:506. Cf. also Würthwein (1995:564): “Man hat diese Äußerung vielfach als gegen jeglichen Kult gerichtet verstanden und der priesterlichen Religion des Kultes eine prophetische Religion der Sittlichkeit gegenübergestellt. Es handelt sich aber nicht um grundsätzliche Ablehnung des Kultes, sondern darum, daß sich Jahwe Opfern und Gebeten von Kultteilnehmern verschließt, die unter Gottes Gericht stehen, weil sie fremde Götter verehrt (Am 5,25), Jahwes Weisungen mißachtet (Hos 8,12 Jer 6,19), Blutschuld auf sich geladen und nicht Recht und Gerechtigkeit geübt haben (Jes 1,15ff).”

⁹ I disagree with Barton (2005:117) who regards the cultic critique in the Psalms (he however refers to Psalm 50 in his discussion) as a total opposition to the practice of sacrifice.

salem. In the discussion of this text in the book of Jeremiah it is assumed, nevertheless, that this was the case (Fischer 2005:385-386;¹⁰ Jagersma 1994:184). Most likely an altar was soon reconstructed on the site of the temple. It is difficult to conceive that there was no activity at all in the sphere of worship, religion and so on in Judah during the time of the exile, and it is quite clear that Jerusalem and the place where the temple had stood would have played an important role again. In this regard Ackroyd (1980:28-29) infers as follows (cf. also Blenkinsopp 1998:26):¹¹

Rebuilding after the exile ... does not appear to have been from a totally disused site, and this would also suggest an earlier revival, a clearance of the site, an improvised or temporary site ... The general probability is that so sacred a site as that of the Jerusalem Temple could not have been thought to have lost its sanctity entirely and that some attempts must have been made at re-use.

Psalm 51 does, however, not end with these verses (18-19). In order to get a full picture of what the psalm has to say about sacrifice, it is necessary to briefly focus on the last two verses as well.¹² Verses 20-21 were most likely added by a later redactor who (re-)interpreted the psalm in terms of Israel's corporate experience.¹³ Whereas verses 3-19 are marked by a speech in 'I'-form, in verses 20-21 all the interest focuses on the success of Zion and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. In other words, a collective emphasis has been added to the prayer of an individual.¹⁴

¹⁰ Cf. Fischer (2005:383): "Aus der in V 4f. anklingenden Wallfahrt nach Jerusalem könnte es sich dabei um eines der Feste handeln."

¹¹ Willi-Plein (1999:60) also postulates as follows: "Allerdings kann auch erwogen werden, daß ein gewissermaßen inoffizieller Brandopferaltar auf dem Areal des zerstörten Tempels bereits unmittelbar nach 587 eingerichtet und während der ganzen Exilszeit von der im Land verbliebenen Bevölkerung unterhalten wurde."

¹² Ps. 51:20-21 read as follows: "Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar" (NRSV).

¹³ Hossfeld & Zenger (2000:45, 54f.) give an outline of the process of "Fortschreibung" which took place at the end of the text. Cf. also Becker 1966:68; Dalglisch 1962:201-7; Schmidt 1994:346, 358 and Tate 1990:29-30. For contra-arguments see Leene (1996:72-3): he regards the text as a unity.

¹⁴ Cf. Weber (2001:235) in this regard: "20f. sind möglicherweise eine nachexilische Ergänzung (vor Nehemias Mauerbau um 450 v.Chr.), mit der die Bitte um individuelle Erneuerung durch eine die Gemeinschaft betreffende Wiederherstellungsbitte bezüglich Jerusalem erweitert wird – falls man nicht von Anfang an metaphorisch eine endzeitliche Auferbauung Jerusalems (vgl. Tobit 13,10.16f.; 14,5) zu denken hat. Anknüpfend an die Opferthematik von 18f. wir mit einer Kultrestitution auf dem Zion gerechnet, wobei eine Akzentverschiebung von der spiritualisierenden Opferauffassung von vorhin zu einer (wieder) eher 'realistischen' zu konstatieren ist. Die beiden Schlussverse wurden nicht einfach 'angehängt', sondern sorgfältig mittels Begriffs-

A certain tension indeed exists within the first part of the text (vv. 3-19): Jerusalem (and Zion) do not appear in the picture before this, and the statements in verses 18-19, critical as they are of sacrifices, are in tension with the sacrificial theology in verse 21 (Hossfeld & Zenger 2000:45). It is obvious that verses 18-19 represent a restrained attitude towards sacrificial practices. In verses 20-21 the redactor wants to revise such a view in a more orthodox direction (Marttila 2006:158). The form of these verses is that of a prayer for the restoration of Jerusalem, so that sacrifices could be made on the altar in the temple. And whenever God restores Jerusalem, sacrifices taking place there on the altar will be acceptable to him again. When the redactor thus refers to “right sacrifices” (lit. “sacrifices of righteousness”), he surely has sacrifices in mind wherein Yahweh will find the right spirit and which are thus truly symbolic of the supplicant’s complete dedication to both cult and ethos (cf. Mosis 1992:212, 214).

The psalm thus concludes with the vision of the eschatological renewal of Zion (Hossfeld & Zenger 2000:54). This is a topic within post-exilic theology, especially the school of Isaiah, which dreamed that Yahweh would make Zion a place of salvation and righteousness – not only for the oppressed and scattered people of God – but also for all other nations. In such a renewed city of God, Yahweh will have joy in the “sacrifices of righteousness” (v. 21), which will no longer be subject to prophetic critique. These sacrifices, then, are recognition of and thanksgiving for the presence of the “God of righteousness” in the midst of his people, in a twofold sense: they are public recognition of Yahweh’s rule over Zion (the city of God) and over its inhabitants.

The question, however, which will be dealt with in the subsequent section is whether this text of Psalm 51 (with its later redactional layers included) reflects a division within the religious leadership.

C DOES THIS TEXT REFLECT A DIVIDED RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP?

The prophets and the priests formed the religious leadership of Judah in the post-exilic period (Tiemeyer 2006:1). The concerns for Israel’s cult sometimes placed priest and prophet side by side. As a matter of fact, there are examples where the identity of the prophet and the priest coincide: the exilic Ezekiel is the most well-known example of a prophet of priestly descent. Jeremiah, Zechariah and Malachi also could have belonged to this category (cf. also Grabbe 2006b:91).

Sommer (1998:150) argues that the opponents against whom the last chapters of Isaiah argue are the same groups that Ezekiel and the editors of the

aufnahmen angewoben, so dass die Hauptteile I und II/III eine identische Grösse (je 20 Zeilen) erreichten.”

Pentateuch attacked – Judeans who worshipped various gods in addition to Yahweh. The dichotomy thus drawn between these groups seem to be too strong. On the contrary, the last part of Isaiah shares with priestly literature a love of the temple in Jerusalem and an abhorrence of improper forms of worship. Thus, Trito-Isaiah's polemics against priestly literature are not evidence enough to postulate a social rift of extreme nature in the Persian era. They rather represent disagreement on specific, albeit important issues within the same group.¹⁵

At other times, the priests' and prophets' differences in understanding God and the cult caused them to be in opposition to one another (Tiemeyer 2006:2). According to Otto (2006a:939) we encounter a discussion about the covenant in the late layers of the book of Jeremiah and the Pentateuch. For example, Jeremiah 31:31-34 reacted directly to the post-exilic Pentateuch and its theory of the covenant and its idea of revelation. There were different prophetic schools in the post-exilic period linking themselves to different prophetic figures like Isaiah,¹⁶ Ezekiel or Jeremiah.¹⁷ Each of these schools reacted in a certain degree to the priestly theories of revelation we encounter in the Pentateuch. Otto (2006b:291, 300) furthermore remarks that the Jeremianic school was the most critical in this regard. Jeremiah 31:31-34 contradicted the Pentateuchal-priestly theory that the divine revelation had come to an end with Moses' death. This Jeremianic text announces a New Covenant through prophetic revelation. It also contradicts the Pentateuchal theory that the Torah had been transmitted by Moses once and for all. The Torah will thus not be written

¹⁵ In this regard Schramm (1995:179) argues as follows: "The fact that all the cultic practices attacked by Third Isaiah are summarily condemned not only by the pre-exilic prophets but also by the Pentateuch is of crucial importance. First of all, it shows that Third Isaiah and the 'priestly' Pentateuch, at least in regard to these basic cultic issues, are in total agreement. And secondly, if the Pentateuch had already been established as the official religious document of Judah and Jerusalem, all that Third Isaiah would have had to do in order to make its case is appeal to it. But it does not. The most logical inference is, therefore, that the Pentateuch had not yet been established as the official religious document of Judah and Jerusalem at the time when the oracles of Third Isaiah were composed."

¹⁶ With regard to the prophetic book of Isaiah, Achenbach (2007:58) infers as follows: "Jesaja erscheint also gleichsam als ein Prophet, mit dem der mosaischen Tora eine jesajanische Tora gegenübersteht. Liest man diese komplementär zum Pentateuch, erscheint sie als Aktualisierung des Mose-Tora (Dtn 18,18), liest man sie als prophetischen Entwurf in Gegenüber zu der Pentateuch-Redaktion, so sieht die jesajanische Sammlung in einer kritischen Spannung zu den Priesterkreisen, die die Mose-Tora überliefern (Dtn 34,10-12)."

¹⁷ Otto (2007a:1) concludes as follows: "In der nachexilischen Tradentenprophetie wurden Prophetengestalten als Diskursgründer mit Legitimationsautorität noch nach Jahrhunderten verehrt, denen noch nachexilisch verfasste Worte zugeschrieben wurden." In this regard compare also Otto 2007b:134; 2007c:261.

on tablets anymore (cf. Deut 4:6, 13, 31; 31:9-13) but on Israel's hearts. These examples are indications that there had been an intensive discussion between the priestly and the prophetic circles of the post-exilic period of the Fifth Century B.C.E., which was the period of the final formation of the Pentateuch and the book of Jeremiah.

Different texts from the Hebrew Bible tell us that, throughout the recorded history of Israel and Judah, the prophets and the priests sometimes disagreed about the way in which God should be worshipped. In these disputes, the opinions of the prophets are transmitted to us more fully; as recorded in the prophetic books, the prophets are recorded to have cried out against what they perceived to be the priests' failures. It is hardly surprising that a certain amount of professional rivalry would have existed between the priests and the prophets (Grabbe 2006b:90). Each group regarded itself as having a unique means of access to the divine. The priests usually held a hereditary office, and prophets felt they had a unique calling from God. Given the overriding interest of the *Nebi'im* in Israel's private and public cultic behaviours, it was therefore inevitable that the priests (as a group) would fall within the purview of their critical gaze and that the priests and their activities would become an object of their cogitation and cavilling evaluations (Zevit 2006:193). The prophets rejected the cultic practices of their times when they had the impression that these practices covered up the social injustice and misery in society (Albertz 1994:171).

The increase in prophetic criticism of the priestly parties is likely to have been triggered by the historical circumstances of early post-exilic Judah. We must therefore seek to comprehend it against this particular background. The post-exilic Judahite community was characterised by conflict, religious controversies and debates about the sacrificial cult at the temple as well as its institutionalisation. This conflict derives from the debates in the post-exilic community about the "whether" and the "how" of the institutionalisation of the temple as well as the sacrificial cult. It reflects an internal dispute about the role the cult should play in the late post-exilic Jewish society. It can be ascribed to the different views held by different groups, namely, on the one hand those who advocate the prophetic cult criticism and on the other hand those who advocate an institutionalised temple as well as sacrificial cult (Albertz 1994:506). These two rival groups can be – rather roughly – designated as, on the one hand, the hierocratic group (also called "theocratists") and, on the other hand, the prophetic group (also called "eschatologists").¹⁸ Hossfeld & Zenger (2005:179) postulates that the hierocratic party could be indicated as those propagating the "salvific presence" of God and the prophetic group as those propagating an "eschatological" realisation of God's presence. The hierocratic

¹⁸ According to Achenbach (2007:61): "Theokratisch orientierte Priester-Tora steht hier gegen die eschatologisch orientierte Propheten-Tora priesterlich geschulter Schriftgelehrter."

party had a very strict anti-eschatological viewpoint; they totally rejected any idea of God's final judgement that would still come in the future and, corresponding with it, any idea that only then the truly pious – that is to say, Yahweh's true Israel – would be revealed.

The early post-exilic period was in many respects a time of soul-searching for the people of Judah. The majestic promises of Isaiah 40-55 – of a mighty return from exile – accompanied by lavish blessings upon Judah, were not yet fulfilled. It seemed that there was a delay which caused the people of the period to look for an explanation. In the prophetic literature we encounter various attempts to find a justification for the setbacks of this period. According to Tiemeyer (2006:2) the shared factor of most of the explanations posited is the idea of a culpable priesthood. The prophets desired to bring the priesthood closer to what the prophets perceived to be the ideal. And what was this ideal? The essence of the critique concerns the priests' worship of Yahweh: the prophetic texts claim that the priests' unorthodox worship had brought about the defilement of the cult and the inability of the people to attain ritual purity. In addition, the prophets raged against the priests' failure to perform the existing cult of Yahweh in a satisfactory manner, their failure to teach the people, and finally, their failure to be the champions of social justice (Tiemeyer 2006:3).

It would, however, be incorrect to see the prophetic critique of the priesthood as a sign that the priests and the prophets were incompatible, or that the prophets wanted to discredit and discard the temple cult. The earlier viewpoint of placing the prophets and the priests in opposing camps receives little support from the biblical texts (Otto 2007c:262; Zevit 2006:189ff.). At the same time, the claim that there was only "prophet-priest cooperation" in the post-exilic period cannot be accepted (contra Zevit).¹⁹ More probably we often have attempts at reform. It is a situation where prophetic voices, unhappy with the state of the priesthood, sought its renewal and reform. Only in a few cases (Isaiah 56-66) are we speaking of a rejection of the current priesthood, and even then, what is envisioned is not the abolishment of the temple worship and the priesthood – but rather its transformation.²⁰

Even when these books are certainly not anti-priestly, we may find a case of a prophetic diatribe against priests who failed to perform their duties (Mal 2:1-3). On the contrary, they affirm the importance of proper priests and the centrality of the temple (Ben Zvi 2006:23). The books of Haggai and Zechariah communicate to their readership that the presence of a properly run temple is crucial in the divine economy. It also has worldwide implications.

¹⁹ Cf. Tiemeyer's analysis of the relevant texts (2006:16-72).

²⁰ In this regard Otto (2007c:263) states the following: "Eine Welt ohne Kult und Ritual sei den Propheten undenkbar gewesen. Zeil ihrer Kritik sei nicht die Abschaffung, sondern die Erneuerung des Kultus gewesen".

The texts conveying the central role of the Jerusalemite temple in the divine design for the world are not confined to these books, but are part and parcel of the biblical corpus of prophetic literature. It is voiced by many prophetic characters (cf. Isa 2:2-4; Isa 60; Mic 4:1-5; Hag 2:6-9).

It goes without saying that the existence of such a central temple requires by necessity the presence of faithful priests. It is thus worth stressing that one of the most ubiquitous ideological topoi in prophetic literature and Hebrew Biblical literature in general, is the centrality of Jerusalem/Zion.²¹ This fact rests fully on its association with the ideologically sole legitimate temple for the one and only existing deity in the universe. In other words, Jerusalem is important and unique because of the temple, rather than vice versa. The ideological presence of a temple implies that of the priests as well. These considerations led to a clear conclusion: Within the Jerusalemite centred, post-monarchic discourse(s) that reflected and shaped the ideology of the literati responsible for most of the biblical books in their present form, there was no room for the construction of authoritative characters (prophetic or otherwise) that would have stood in a non-contingent situation of opposition to the priests, and indirectly, to the temple *per se* (Ben Zvi 2006:24).

According to Ben Zvi (2006:24) there is widespread agreement – though certainly not unanimity – that the prophetic books, and most of them, if not all the biblical books, in their present form were composed by literati in the post-monarchic period, and for the most part within the Persian period of Yehud. It would suffice for the particular purposes of this contribution to emphasise that most likely the Jerusalemite temple fulfilled a central role in the manifold processes that granted social, economic and ideological sustainability to the bearers of high literacy that were necessary for the composition and continuous reading and rereading of the prophetic books in Judahite Jerusalem. In other words, the Jerusalemite Temple of this period was most likely an important link in the processes leading to the production and consumption of the prophetic books.²² This situation is not surprising at all, given the considerations about the role of the Jerusalemite temple, as well as matters of social cohesion and self-identification within a very small elite group who made claims about the temple, its high status and uniqueness within the divine economy. The literati themselves, who are in some way also the product of the abovementioned pro-

²¹ Cf. Ego 2004:361-389; Hartenstein 2004: 125-179; Janowski 2004:229-260; Zenger 2002:180-206.

²² In this regard Van der Toorn (2007:183) states that, for example, references in the books of Amos and Jeremiah suggest that the prophets had a predilection for the temple as being a platform for their performances. The prophets also belonged to the religious establishment – on a par with the priests and the sages (Jer 18:18) – and the temple was thus also home territory for them. On religious days and festivals they surely would have had an audience at the temple and the temple ground. It could even be that the temple scribes recorded their prophecies.

cesses, seemed to have identified fully with the central tenets of the second temple Jerusalemite ideology. The centrality and unique role of Jerusalem/Zion and the temple vis-à-vis any other city or temple – even when they are Yahwistic in nature, can be referred to here.

It can thus be stated with certainty that the ideological and social centrality of the temple, and indirectly of its priests, may have led to critique – sometimes even harsh criticism – of the latter’s perceived misbehaviour and of the earth-shattering consequences this may have had on the divine economy (Ben Zvi 2006:26). It is precisely this situation that caused the authorship and readership’s discourse to be fully permeated by the ideological assumption of the crucial role of the temple and its priests. This fact provides the background to hyperbolic critiques of the latter by the prophetic characters that populated the world of the prophetic books composed, read and reread by Judah’s literati.

This fact stands in direct opposition to any claim about an essential, non-contingent opposition between the “priests” on the one hand and constructions of prophets of old, prophetic characters in the prophetic books, and above all, those who gave voice to them, that is the literati themselves on the other hand. In other words, it is because the prophetic characters shaped the prophetic books, and those who shaped and embodied them in readings and re-readings actually held in high esteem the office of the priest, that the presence of the so-called “anti-priest” texts, make sense to us today (Ben Zvi 2006:26).

We can even consider a situation in which there was a partial social overlap between priests and the other literati who shaped the images of the prophets of old through their writings. We can even speak of such an overlap in the instances where they who embodied these prophets of old in their writings and in the texts written in the first person fulfilled both roles in the Judahite society.

D CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion: we hear the voices of both the priests and the prophets through the literati, namely through the books composed and edited to present a particular message and ideology by the small elite literate circle responsible for writing and book production. As has been said before: sometimes the viewpoints of the prophets and the priests concur, and sometimes they differ in their understanding of God and the cult. The cult criticism of Psalm 51:18-19 should also be seen against this background. It should, however, not be seen as a repudiation of the cult and cultic practices: the fact that a later redactor added the last two verses (Ps 51:20-21) after verses 18-19, proves this point.

It bears notice that not only the Judahite literati who formed the authorship and (re)readership of these psalm texts, were socialised and educated to accept the main theological claims advanced by the social, religious and ideo-

logical centre of their day, that is, the Jerusalem temple. Their activities and their literary products were thus related in one way or another to the temple, and they themselves were very unlikely to have run their lives separately from those of many of the Jerusalem priests (Ben Zvi 2006:26-27). The entire population of Jerusalem was very small at that time, and the bearers of high literacy in Persian Yehud or Jerusalem were most likely very small. In such a society it is highly improbable that simultaneous and compartmentalised elites of minimal numbers could have existed. It is most likely that the literati closely interacted with the contemporary priests.

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