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A Singular Israel in a Pluralistic World¹

Abstract

The question of Israel's distinctiveness in the ancient Near East was a central concern of the biblical theology movement in the mid-twentieth century. The excessive claims and overstatements of that movement were corrected later in the twentieth century. Most scholars today assume the question is settled in a consensus that Old Testament Israel was not distinctive, and was completely at home in the ancient world in every respect. This paper explores three ways in which ancient Israel was indeed at home in ancient Near Eastern culture, while also suggesting ways in which Israel's religious convictions led to a genuinely unique profile in the ancient world.

Keywords: Israelite worship, Temple, sacrifices, sacred festivals

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Introduction

The Church has struggled throughout Christian history with precisely how the people of God are “in the world” but not “of the world” (John 17:11,14,16). The *missio Dei* has at times been complicated, or even jeopardized, by the assumptions that culture and societal norms are somehow identified with the core of Christian faith. Expressions of human institutions familiar to a particular (often Western) cultural expression of Christianity can become enmeshed with the Gospel, complicating the task of cross-cultural communication of the message. The early Church, by which I mean the first three centuries of Christian antiquity that Wesley called the “primitive church,” provides examples of how we can think outside our cultural boxes in preaching the Gospel, as can of course the New Testament itself (for example, illustrated by the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15; Arnold 2014:63-83).

In recent years I have come to believe that in order for the Church to overcome these stumbling blocks to adequate cross-cultural communication of the Gospel, we must go further back in our faith heritage. We need to reach deeper into our roots in ancient Israelite religion to find even better examples of cross-cultural communication of the message of God. In this brief study, I offer three examples from Israelite culture to illustrate the point. Along the way, I hope to honor Professor Oswalt’s career-long focus on Israel’s distinctive worldview – one of transcendence over and against continuity – which goes a long way toward explaining ancient Israel’s distinctiveness (Oswalt 2009:185-94).

At the outset of this investigation, one caveat to keep in mind is that anthropologists acknowledge a certain uniformity in human experience that makes cultural comparisons tenuous. In some ways, what we experience in life today is not all that different from ancient societies, or what is sometimes called “primitive” cultures (a term not intended to be derogatory). At the same time, we must consider the variety in human experience, and focus on what Mary Douglas has called the “differences which make comparison worthwhile” (2002[1966]:96).² And so, I shall be considering three key cultural similarities between the Israelites and their nearest neighbors in the ancient world, while at the same time asking about the differences that make these observations compelling.

It seems perfectly obvious that no culture, ancient or modern, is created *ex nihilo* – whole cloth, or “out of nothing.” And so it was with ancient Israel. The three features I will highlight here demonstrate that ancient Israel “absorbed freely from their neighbors, but not quite freely” (Douglas 2002[1966]:61). Many

cultural elements of their neighbors in the ancient Near East were compatible with the worldview they inherited and continued to develop throughout their history, while others were clearly incompatible. Our objective in this exercise is to offer an interpretation of those ideological differences by highlighting the cultural similarities.

The Temple Pattern

The familiar three-part pattern of the Solomonic temple is clear enough from textual references (1 Kgs 6:1-5), and paralleled by the structure of the tabernacle in the wilderness (e.g., Exod 26:31-37). The architectural plan of both structures, tabernacle and temple, divided and organized Israel's worship life in accord with God's boundaries established at creation between the holy and the common – the three-part pattern organizing space into ordered and graduated zones of holiness (Haran 1985:158-77). The series of enclosures draws one in by increasing degrees of holiness as one moves from the common world outside to the sacred space of the courtyard, then to the holy place, and finally to the holiest of holy places. Such an architectural design invited a direct approach to the deity in the inner sanctum, which was the last enclosed portion of the building. The graduated zones of holiness are made manifest by other features such as furniture, priestly appurtenances, and utensils used in service to Yahweh.

For purposes of this investigation, we note simply that the design, structure, and to a certain extent function of this sanctuary pattern is completely at home in the Syro-Palestinian world of the southern Levant. Specifically, we have known for some time that such tripartite architectural structure was characteristic of cult sites and temples in the region among Phoenician exemplars, even stretching back to second-millennium Syrian and third-millennium Anatolian precursors (Fritz 1987:38-49).³ I do not mean to suggest that all Levantine cult sites and worship centers had such a structure; in fact, the archaeology suggests a great diversity of patterns used.⁴ On the other hand, we can trace the three-part design back through several times and places to Israel's neighbors in the Levant as one particular shared cultural feature of temples. In the most thorough study of this topic to date, Michael B. Hundley observes that among a great deal of variety in Syro-Palestinian temples of the Middle Bronze Age to the Iron Age, there are nonetheless several shared features, confirming what Amihai Mazar has called a "common" temple pattern of the time (Hundley 2013:107-18). The best attested form of this pattern includes temples with a broad porch or vestibule (often with two columns, like Jakin

and Boaz; 1 Kgs 7:21; 2 Chr 3:17), a long sanctuary, and often within the sanctuary, an inner sanctuary or sanctum.

And so, we might conclude, ancient Israel was no different from its neighbors in having such a sacred space for worship. And yet, here we find the difference between Israel and the other people groups of the ancient Near East that ‘makes this comparison worthwhile,’ as Mary Douglas would say. This inner sanctum in other temples was constructed, without fail as far as we can determine, to house the deity in the form of a sacred statue. Such statues in Syria-Palestine represented the deity in one of four well-attested forms: anthropomorphic, theriomorphic, mixed, or as inanimate objects (Hundley 2013:342-43). Indeed, we need to widen the discussion beyond Syria-Palestine in this observation, in order to say that similar cult sites and temples throughout the ancient Near East, including Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Anatolian Hittites, exhibited “a remarkable general commonality...regarding conceptions of deity and divine presence” (Hundley 2013:363). That remarkable commonality can be summarized as representing the major gods in cult images or statues, making communication with the deity possible, and to some degree, making control of the deity attainable. Israel’s neighbors represented their gods in cult images that were typically small enough to be housed and sheltered in the confines of a temple inner sanctum. This is precisely what makes Israel’s “ark of the covenant” so remarkable, as a throne representing a visible sign of the invisible presence of Yahweh. One text contains what appears to have been the full name of the ark: “the ark of the covenant of Yahweh of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim” (1 Samuel 4:4, NRSV; Arnold 2003:94-95). For Israel, Yahweh was perceived as inhabiting their inner sanctum without iconic representation,⁵ and that inner sanctum was perceived as a throne room for the cosmic King. Instead of a statue representing Yahweh, the Israelites were distinctive in having an empty throne, in which Yahweh was known to have reigned supreme over the earth. And in this also, Israel was distinctive, because no ancient Near Eastern deity was perceived as “supreme in power, presence, or perception” (Hundley 2013:363). The remarkable similarities of Israel’s tabernacle/temple only highlight the differences in their perception of God.

The Sacrifices

Israel’s way of speaking about animal sacrifice was another shared feature of Syro-Palestinian culture during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages. We do not have the kind of impressive evidence for sacrifice as we saw for temple architecture,



owing of course to the simple fact that archaeology does not afford the physical evidence for such practices beyond structures that we typically identify as altars. For example, of the forty-five limestone altars (33 horned and 12 without horns; cf. Exod 30:1-7) excavated in the Levant, approximately half have been associated with the Israelites (Nielsen 1986:28-29). Most scholars assume, for good reason, that the Israelites incorporated Canaanite altars and priestly vessels rather than developing their own special types of altars. And yet, these are routinely difficult data to interpret, and leave us questioning at times the precise practices at work. However, we can say without equivocation that (1) Israel did indeed practice animal sacrifice, as did most peoples of the ancient world, especially throughout Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine, and more specifically that (2) for at least a few of Israel's neighbors in the Levant, the terminology used to describe the types of sacrifices was quite similar.

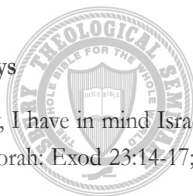
The Old Testament text gives a vivid portrait of Israel's sacrificial system. Of the animal sacrifices, Israel had four basic types: the burnt offering (Lev 1), the sacrifice of well-being (Lev 3), the purgation offering (Lev 4:1-5:13), and the guilt offering (Lev 5:14-6:7).⁶ In all likelihood, Canaanite sacrifices were the same, or at least, very similar to the first two Israelite offerings in this list. The origins of such animal sacrifices are clouded in mystery. It appears that the basic sacrifice of slaughter (*zebad*), what I have called here the sacrifice of well-being, was Israel's oldest expression of worship derived from pre-conquest desert traditions. This term has Ugaritic parallels (from the thirteenth century BC in the northern Levant) suggesting the meat of the slaughtered animal was eaten by the worshipper, and in Israel, perhaps only its fat was burned in sacrifice to Yahweh (Milgrom 1991:218). The burnt offering (*ōlā*) also seems original to Canaan and others in the Mediterranean cultures (de Vaux 1961:438-41). Unlike the *zebad*-sacrifice, this "ascending offering" (connotation of the Hebrew name) is turned completely into rising smoke and disappears before Yahweh, leaving nothing to be consumed by the human worshipper. The Ugaritians had a similar concept in their "burnt sacrifice" (the noun *šrp* from the verb "to burn"), which confirms that the Israelites shared this practice with their neighbors in the Levant, some even suggesting the Israelites inherited this particular practice from the Canaanites (Kellermann 2001:98).⁷

The frequent combination of these two, "burnt offering and sacrifice," covers the category of animals offered on the altar to God. In fact, one verse suggests that Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who was a priest of Midian, taught Moses and Aaron in the proper ways of animal sacrifice using precisely these two types of offering (Exod 18:12). And so we seem justified in seeing here another

way in which Israel was completely at home in the southern Levant, sharing in practice, perception, and in at least one case, even the linguistic specifics of offerings and sacrifices. Yet it is precisely in the similarities that we once again detect profound distinctiveness in the Israelite worldview. These two basic types were also transformed by ancient Israel from the concept of feeding and appeasement of the deities into “an act of donation to, communion with, or exculpation by the deity” (Halo 1987:6). While sacrifices in the ancient world were thought to appease the deity to ensure continued relationship, and especially to ensure continued divine favor, slaughter-sacrifices and offerings became more in Israelite thought. And this is especially manifested in Israel’s development of unique additional offerings, such as the purgation offering (Lev 4:1–5:13, also called “sin offering”), and the guilt offering (Lev 5:14–6:7). The former purged or purified the inner sanctuary of Israel’s temple/tabernacle, and made forgiveness for the offender possible. The guilt offering was a subcategory of the purgation offering, was also expiatory, providing forgiveness for the Israelite worshipper by focusing on reparations. So far, we have no such carefully conceived uses of sacrifice elsewhere in the ancient Near East; only Israel was so devoted to animal sacrifice as a means of purification of the temple and people, as well as forgiveness and restoration. On the contrary, animal sacrifice was used at times, especially in Mesopotamia, as a means of clairvoyance to discern future actions of the deity, especially by means of extispicy, the divinatory practice of “reading” a dead animal’s entrails for signs of activity in the divine realm. Not only are all such divinatory practices related to animal sacrifice absent in ancient Israel, but in a remarkable contrast, Israel linked the entire sacrificial system to their covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Canonically, the instructions for sacrifice are placed at the heart of the Torah (Lev 1-7), and historically they are placed at the foot of Mount Sinai during the last month and a half the people were encamped there (Exod 40:17; Num 10:11). Nothing comparable to this use of animal sacrifice occurs among other peoples of the ancient Near East, where such sacrifice was thought to return life or energy to its divine source, restoring the power of that source for the good of nature and humanity. Israel’s view of a singular deity, Yahweh, as independent and self-sustaining, meant their views and practices of animal sacrifices were distinctive.⁸

The Holidays and Holy Days

Under this category, I have in mind Israel’s festival calendars, which are detailed in five texts of the Torah: Exod 23:14-17; 34:18-26; Lev 23; Num 28-29;



and Deut 16:1-17. In this brief treatment, I can only take up the role of the Sabbath (Lev 23:3) and the three pilgrimage festivals (*hagim*) of early Israel, which also receive most attention in these texts: Passover (Lev 23:4-8), the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost (Lev 23:15-22), and Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths (Lev 23:33-43). Of the three pilgrimage festivals, it can be said in passing, although not without some controversy in the scholarship, that all three underwent historical development and became associated with key events in Israel's history (de Vaux 1961:484-506).⁹ While this could be contested today, I believe the following summary is still valid. The Passover was originally an agricultural festival among pastoral nomads associated with the annual sheepshearing, and came only later to commemorate the exodus from Egypt (Exod 12-13; Geoghegan 2008:147-62). The Feast of Weeks was also agricultural in origins, marking the end of wheat harvest, and although the Old Testament itself does not link it to a specific historical event, later Jewish tradition associates it with the giving of the law on Mount Sinai and covenant renewal in general (VanderKam 1992:896-97). And finally, the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths marked the final harvest of the agricultural year in the fall, marking the end of the agricultural season, and came to commemorate the wilderness sojourn (Lev 23:42-43).¹⁰ In sum, an agricultural calendar – one held in common in the southern Levant – has become for Israel a sacred calendar commemorating Yahweh's mighty acts of salvation in their past. The pilgrimage festivals have been historicized and the new historical explanations take priority over the older agricultural origins of the festivals.

Perhaps this alone would be enough to suggest ancient Israel may serve as a model for relating culture to faith. But more needs to be said here based on the rather confusing way the Old Testament marks time in its divergent calendars. We have ample evidence that early Israel shared a common calendar with their immediate neighbors, which may be called “the Canaanite-Israelite Calendar” (Cooley 2013:263-71 and 277-87). This was a luni-solar calendar (reckoning months by the moon and years by the seasons) with its beginning in the fall, and was intimately connected to the yearly agricultural and seasonal cycle. And this was only natural because of the origin and source of Israel's cultic celebrations, which as we have seen, were agricultural in nature. Then, at a point in time impossible to determine and much disputed in the scholarship, the Israelite authors created a different calendar, one based not on the agricultural nature of the traditional festivals. This calendar, sometimes called “the Sabbath Calendar” is neither completely lunar nor solar, but based instead on a 364-day cycle, being easily divisible by 7, so that any particular date in the year falls on the same day of the week every year (Cooley

2013:278-79). Rather than the moon or sun, this calendar is primarily based on the septenary Sabbath. In this way, the length of a month is disconnected from the observable lunar cycle. Month names are replaced with ordinal numbers for the 12 months, a different Hebrew term for month is used (*hodes* instead of *yerah*), and the year begins in the spring rather than the fall. Some scholars have asserted that the Sabbath Calendar is “denaturalized,” because it diverges from observable celestial phenomena, even while it still approximates those realities (Cooley 2013:279-81).¹¹ This Sabbath Calendar intentionally disconnected the Bible’s method for marking time from the agricultural origins of the traditional festivals, and by putting a septenary Sabbath at the head of the festivals (Lev 23:3), it sets Sabbath observance at the center of the festival calendar unhinged from observable celestial phenomena.

The remarkable import of Gen 1:14 is instructive on these points. The opening chapter of the Bible intentionally prepares the reader for the “appointed festivals” of Yahweh (Lev 23) by detailing the creation of time in Gen 1:3-5. And this merely prepares for the creation of sun, moon, and stars “for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (Gen 1:14b), setting up a trajectory for Lev 23. Time itself and the time-markers of the great sky-dome are created for the express purpose of notifying the Israelites when they must observe their sacred festivals, making the sky itself a kind of sacred, liturgical calendar (Arnold 2012:339-42). Specifically, the sun, moon, and stars were created in order to mark Israel’s religious festivals (specifically for Lev 23) by providing calendrical calculations easily accessible by all Israelites. In this way, the “signs” of Gen 1:14b may refer to the festivals in general, or perhaps denote the Sabbath itself. The “seasons” denotes not the four seasons generally but specifically the festivals in the liturgical calendar. Similarly, the phrase “days and years” points to the individual days of the festivals (Lev 23:6-7,8,28) and to the Sabbath Year (Lev 25:1-7) and the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8-17; Arnold 2012:341-42; and compare Cooley 2013:315-16). In such a way, any significance in Israel’s heritage in the West Semitic world, drawn perhaps on astral religion associated with celestial phenomena, has been transformed into a liturgical schedule for the proper worship of Yahweh.

Concluding Reflections

An earlier generation of scholars overemphasized the uniqueness of Israel in the ancient world because of a theological *Tendenz* fueled by Israelite exceptionalism. Frank Moore Cross led the way in objecting to scholarship preoccupied “with the novelty of Israel’s religious consciousness” and with

portraying Israel as wholly discontinuous with its environment.¹² Instead, Cross insisted our work must “describe novel configurations in Israel’s religion as having their origin in an orderly set of relationships which follow the usual typological sequences of historical change,” and therefore must follow a consistent and valid scientific historical method. Cross led the field in a needed correction away from such preoccupation with Israelite exceptionalism.

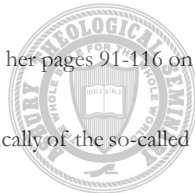
I want to be clear that I am in no way attempting to return in this study to an overstatement of Israel’s uniqueness. The twentieth century produced new data from the West Semitic world, especially from Ugarit but also from numerous archaeological finds in the southern Levant, making it impossible to argue today that ancient Israelites were anything other than completely at home among their neighbors in Syria-Palestine. At the same time, this exploration of the temple pattern, the sacrifices, and sacred festivals offers greater similarities, which perhaps make the comparisons worthwhile. This particular configuration addresses where, how, and when the Israelites worshiped their God, Yahweh, and fits into Cross’s category of “novel configurations in Israel’s religion.” In each case, some subtle but significant differences were introduced to religious practices. And perhaps this is precisely where Israel can serve as a model for the Church today. The distinction between form and substance may be helpful here, since formally, Israel was no different at all from its ancient Near Eastern neighbors. Similarly, cultural forms and societal norms should be no stumbling block in the Church’s communication of the Gospel. But we might also suggest that Israel was substantially different from others in the ancient world, which is reflected in the pages of the Old Testament and partly explains why the Old Testament left an indelible mark on human history.

End Notes

¹ On the question of ancient Israel’s distinctiveness in the ancient Near East, I cannot calculate the influence of Dr. Oswalt’s teaching and scholarship on my thinking. I have also benefitted from the wisdom and anthropological insights of my colleague, Michael A. Rynkiewich, on this topic. And I wish to express here my indebtedness to my former student, Samuel Long for assistance with this article, especially for his help on the use of altars in the Levant.

² And see in general her pages 91-116 on “primitive worlds” for more on this.

³ Fritz speaks specifically of the so-called “broad-room” temple structure.



⁴ Especially in the Late Bronze Age and Iron I periods (Mazar 1992:169-83). For examples from one prominent city, see Robert A. Mullins (2012).

⁵ The previously mentioned “inanimate objects” as idols were at times unadorned stones or wooden pillars, appearing in the Bible as *maššebâ*-stones and *ššērû*-poles, and are therefore examples of “material aniconism.” But Israel went a step further by insisting upon “empty-space aniconism,” conceiving of God as residing over the ark and between the ark’s cherubim. For definitions, see Trygve N. D. Mettinger (1995).

⁶ There was also a grain offering (Lev 2), but I am limiting this discussion simply to animal sacrifices.

⁷ For the Ugaritic parallels, see Olmo Lete and Sanmartín (2003:844-45).

⁸ Related to the question of the distinctiveness of Israel’s sacrifices is the curious fact of Israel’s blood prohibition. The food laws of Lev 11 and Deut 14 are curious enough, but they are fascinating also for their prohibition against eating carcasses (*nēbēlâ*; Deut 14:19-20). This is most likely related to a concept of vegetarianism, which, once lifted, needed explicit modification; hence the food laws. See Milgrom (1991:704-13, esp. 706).

⁹ On the undeniable similarities between the Israelite festivals and the Hittite festival calendar, see Milgrom (2001:2076-80). Yet the historicizing descriptions of Israel’s festivals in the Old Testament remain unique.

¹⁰ For possible parallels to an Ugaritic ritual, see Olmo Lete (1999:122-23).

¹¹ Although Cooley believes the assertion has been overstated. The evidence suggests early Israel observed the new moon and a Shabbat day at the full moon, although the rule of rest on the seventh day was added later (Grund 2011:19-133). Perhaps the rule of rest was added at the same time as the transition to the Sabbath Calendar.

¹² Quotes in this paragraph are from Frank Moore Cross (1973:vii-viii).

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