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"THE ATTITUDE OF THE
PRE-EXILIC PROPHETS TO THE
SOCIAL SYSTEM OF THEIR TIME."

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A very excellent paper

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Amen

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The Attitude of the Pre-Exilic Prophets to the Social System of Their Times.

The modern proponents of the "social Gospel" are sound in their claims that the ancient Hebrew prophets are their spiritual ancestors. It is especially true of the pre-exilic prophets that their ancient critics had a social message. It is true that their interests were primarily with the religious system, but in their times the Religious system was the social system. The culture was a religious-culture. The conception of religion as a personal thing, was hardly known. The idea of a personal salvation was not part of the thought of the Hebrew people as yet. We get its beginnings in the last of our pre-exilic prophets, but that is not the general conception of religion. Its function was to unite the state, to give order to all the elements going to make up society. Religion was the Culture of the times. Any criticism of it was a criticism of the social system and the social psychology back of the system. Furthermore, as we shall see, the criterion used by these fanatical critics were those of social experience. They criticized the system because it did not bring about the practical social results it claimed for itself. In the Pre-exilic prophets we have men who attack the social system on the grounds that it is not manifesting social harmony.

Those zealous reformers who would claim a prophet's ancestry must be reminded that the prophets were neither anarchists or participants in the class war. They were religious critics. They did not desire to overthrow the whole social system. Many of them were not the kind that could cheerfully revert to the simple life of a nomad. Their great hope was in the social system if only it would fulfill its proper function. The whole trouble was it was being abused. It was misunderstood. The idea was to regenerate the old system with intelligence. No can it be claimed of the prophets that they entered the class war on the side of the unfortunate. Certainly they were opposed to exploitation and persecution. But there were signs of a faulty social psychology, an inadequate culture, both of which were accepted as much by the poor as by the wealthy. These reformers wanted to change the motive power behind the whole conception of society. It was false as it stood as could be seen from all the social maladjustments. They were critics of the culture and the wrong view

which was its accompaniment. They were more than the champions of a class, they were champions of mankind and his rights and ~~particulars~~.

The social system at the time of the Pre-Exilic prophets can be most aptly described by the term - "Messianic Kingship". That was the culture pattern of the whole of the civilized world. It can be seen that this social pattern grew slowly on the nomadic tribes of Habiru which penetrated the land of Palestine. However of this time it was generally accepted. Certainly the pattern was well known. In the background was an agrarian economy. Life was more settled than in the nomadic economy. Time was given for cities to spring up. There was more wealth and more leisure. The prosperity of society at all times depended on the weather. The right cycle of the seasons was essential. Production was the main interest of every one, and those forces leading to productivity had to be summoned. Thus we have the function of the Messianic King. He is the focus of the corporate personality of the group. His prosperity represents the prosperity of the whole group. He is the incarnation of the supernatural powers the people worship. The great elaborate cultus operates to condition the king: - To - so manipulate the powers of fertility that they smile on the king and on his people. The practical result on the social psychology of the people is to build up confidence in the administration and in the goodness of life and society in general. It concentrated the attention of the individual on producing wealth for the community. It was also an attempt to give to the ruling class a commanding sense of responsibility. Like democracy the social system of these days had its doctrine of duties but its social psychology was so directed as to give more emphasis to its doctrine of privileges.

It must be remembered that not every one in Israel was in favour of this system. The topography and position of Palestine were such that it is ever open to infiltrating bands of Beduin from the desert. These people frowned upon the evils of civilization. They held to a democracy of a kind and reserved the right to criticize anyone they chose - especially the king. For this reason the social pattern of the Messianic kingship was a long time taking hold over the whole of Palestine. It was thus in the small city states as we can tell from the Amarna letters.

— The Habiru began to resemble to the culture as they entered the land but more readily as the imperial pattern began to break down. The sea people caused a collapse of any imperial designs by either of the ~~great~~ river peoples, Palestine was left to herself. The local tribes began uniting under this pattern. It grew on the country. David was the first to really adopt the pattern but he did not fill it altogether. Solomon, who according to the historian, was able to build the Temple, finally filled out the pattern. Especially in the northern kingdom the Royal theocratic system was never totally accepted. This opposition was there from the beginning and it formed part of the intellectual atmosphere into which the prophets came.

We have then a Religion - culture. all the elements of society were included in religion. - education, amusements, banking, the very functions of the king. By this system the king was given divine sanctions. He was looked upon as the divine incarnation of the gods as well as the corporate personality of the people. He was the link with the supernatural. - The cultus technique which was most elaborate, requiring the use of priests and oblations, elaborate festivals and sacrifices, was ordered to co-ordinate the powers of nature and the fortunes of war that the state might prosper at their hands. So the state was held together, -- by a motive of love for prosperity, and so the king was given his authority. This was the social system the Prophets faced. On the basis of its social manifestation it was criticized.

In Amos we have the first of these Hebrew prophets to record any of his work. His ministry was during days of prosperity. Assyria had destroyed the power of Damascus and then suddenly found herself busy with rebellion at home. Israel was left to herself in the corridor with no state strong enough to threaten her. Wealth was pouring in. The kingdom was prosperous. We hear of "winter houses and summer houses" and "ivory houses." It is a time when credulous people could easily be confident in the social pattern. Did it not indeed result in prosperity?

Amos however sees much amiss. It can be said of him that the treatment the poor received, was a strong element in his call to prophecy. He sees that his social system is exploiting rather than productive. The productive element is oppressed and the exploiting

making class is functional.

"— They have sold the innocent for silver
and the needy in exchange for a pair of sandals.

They who trample upon the heads of the poor
And thrust aside the humble from the way "... ②

The Religious - court groups which surround the king do everything but
revel at the expense of those who bring their fines to the altar. The
women of the court, important in the cultic rites, are to Amos of no
use whatever. They symbolize the exploitive nature of the social system

"..... you king of Bashan.

You who are on the mount of Samaria.

Who opens the week and ~~opens~~ the needy

Who say to their lords "Bring that we may drink." ③

It is because of these economic maladjustments among other things
that Amos, in spite of prosperity, sees his social system at
fault.

The great fault in the social system is that for all its purposes, it
exploits human personality. As we read the oracles against the foreign
nations with which the book of Amos opens, with any degree of
care we can see that in every case the reason for their impending
doom is not an attack against Israel. We have no purely nationalistic
sentiment here. Although taking the form of a ~~nationalistic~~, anti-
foreign oracle, the kind delivered on countless occasions by
the cult prophets, the sentiments expressed here are universal.
Doom comes to any nation that has no respect for human personality :-
that engages in wholesale slaughter simply to extend its boundaries,
or gain some material commodity. There are sins against the
order of the universe itself and will be punished just as surely
as a house cannot run upon rocks." - Destruction will follow
inevitably.

This general exploitation of the human personality is the result
of the social pattern. At least, it is the result of the wrong
application of the social pattern. To the people of the day, the
"day of the Lord" meant that day during the great cultic festival
when the king was home again. The state was reinvigorated because of
the manipulation of the cultic technique. Amos ridicules their optimism.

③ Amos 2:66-72

③ " 4'

"Woe to you who despise the day of the Lord
 What then does the day of the Lord mean to you?
 It is darkness, and not light.
 As though a man were fleeing from a lion
 And a bear should meet him.
 Or as he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall
 And a serpent bit him -
 Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light.
 And blackness will ~~be~~ brightness in it?"

El (Yahweh) hate, el spurn your feasts
 And el take no pleasure in your festival gatherings
 Even though you offer me burnt offerings and your cereal offerings
 El will not accept them.
 And the thank-offerings of your fattened beasts I will not look
 upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs
 And to the melody of your hymes I will not listen. (4)
 If they want a strong society, if they want prosperity, if they
 want security. The performance of rituals won't bring it to them.
 A society that rests on magic is doomed. The result is a social
 psychology of over-confidence, of complacency, and of conceit. Duty,
 a sense of responsibility, loyalty, all find themselves in an
 atmosphere that is foreign. -----

"You who delight in that which is not.

Say 'Have we not by our own strength
 acquired power for ourselves?' (5)

This conceit of control is the evil within the social system. The people
 believe that through proper manipulation they can be saved. They cannot
 see that their manipulations have brought them varied results. Plagues
 in some cities and droughts in other cities. Rust in places and plagues.
 Yet the clericalists love to "come to Bethel and Transjordan." According
 to Amos the one thing that will save Israel is loyalty to a high social
 ethic. The system of his day does not supply that. It centres
 the people's interest upon immediate productivity. It gives them
 a dangerous conceit. It does not emphasize the central things
 which are a sense of responsibility to do justice, to seek truth, and a

(4) Amos 5:18-23

(5) " 6:13

consistent loyalty. The social system has so emphasized the immanence of God that any demands on the higher loyalties of men are smothered by the lusts of the appetites. Amos points to the transcendent God. He demands loyalty to that God above the vanities which is considered worship to the other one.

Amos criticizes a social system which claims to be the sustainer of life because it has become exploiting, it results in ^{the} confusion, and the corruption of a functioning ruling class. Because it confines the thinking of men on the conceit of their own controlling powers rather than on their humility and responsibility. It is magic not religion. It is destructive of life not productive.

Hosea began his ministries during times following Amos. The predictions of this shepherd of Tekoa were beginning to come true. The confusion he could see in Jeroboam's court was very apparent in the courts of the numerous kings which followed. Regicide was rampant. Political groups fought for control of the king. Assyria was gaining back her power and Israel swung from loyalty to her - to a rebellious attitude usually upon the promptings of Egypt. Certainly the result of overconfidence and self complacent conceit were beginning to demonstrate themselves.

Hosea was well acquainted with the social system. He knew the priest hood and the political groups surrounding the king. He was disgusted with the whole performance.---

"From the day he became king, the princes have made him rich with the heat of wine

Worthless men have made him drunk
For their heart glows like an oven with their trickery
All night through, their anger sleeps.

Like the morning it blazes like a flaming fire." (6)

The court group is worthless, it spends its time in drinking and fornication.---

Hear the word of the Lord, O Zebulun
For the Lord has a quarrel with the inhabitants of the land
Because there is no fidelity, no kindness, no knowledge of God in the land.

Cursing, lying, murder, theft and adultery.

"They Break out and no crime follows one another." ⑦
 There is no security, no integrity. Plots are in every hand. Israel
 is like a Harlot, running here and there after false lovers.

"For she said 'I will go after my lovers
 who will give me my bread and my water

my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink'" ⑧
 In her foreign robes, Israel is just as vulnerable. She is like a
 foolish ass - wandering from Assyria to Egypt. Throughout all this
 corruption and uncertainty, the religion of the country is supposed to
 be binding it together. But how can bulls and libations of wine
 avail anything? The people must be given a social psychology
 that will make for confidence, for unity and integrity.

In the social system of his day, Hosea finds not unifying but
 disintegrating influences. The priests are like the people; they have
 put their faith in the products of the soil and the flocks and not
 in an all comprehending power that gave them. Their religion is
 magic not loyalty. Their so-called return to Yahweh, is not
 repentance and consecration but is a cultic technique. It is
 like a morning dew that vanishes as soon as the sun rises.

"You have ploughed wickedness, you have harvested wrong
 you have eaten the fruits of lies

In that you have trusted in your chariots and in your great
 might." ⑨

Here again we have the disintegrating effect of the conceit of control.
 However Hosea is most taken up with the idea that Israel is destroyed
 because of not knowing what Yahweh was like. As has been suggested.
 The people seek rather the fruits of productivity than him who gave
 them.

"They do not cry out with their hearts

But wait upon their couches for grain and wine" ⑩

Because material goods have been made the accredited social motive
 social disintegration has set in. We know the result in our own day ---
 an acquisitive society, making a venture and a self regulating
 control out of the profit motive, so it was with Hosea's times. The
 people had forgotten that a strong society must have a spiritual
 basis. By centering the attention of people on productivity, the

⑦ Hosea 4:12.

⑧ " 2:5

⑨ " 10:13

⑩ Hosea 7:14

social system of the Mesianic Kingdom, had resulted in a disintegrated society. Such a system was without a unifying force. It was on the basis of its effect on the social psychology of the nation that Hosea criticized the social system. It put too much faith in the mechanics of the cultus and not enough demand on the loyalty of the adherent. It would never comprehend the supernatural powers as something under its control rather than something to which the individual conformed. --

"For I delight in piety, not sacrifice

And in the knowledge of God, rather than burnt-offerings." ⁽¹¹⁾

He saw so little hope of the social system for all its corruption that he almost takes the historic position that the Kingdom ought never to have been.

The prophet also faces similar conditions in the sister Kingdom of Judah. Under pressure from the Egyptian powers around her, the social system is disintegrating. Anarchy is reigning.

"And boys will give them for princes

and children shall rule over them

And the people shall play the tyrant over each other

Every one over his neighbor;

And surely shall they behave the youth toward the old man

And the base man toward the honorable." ⁽¹²⁾

Like Amos, Isaiah's criticism is motivated to some extent by economic considerations. He too sees the social system as one leading to exploitation. He denounces the land grabbing nobility.

"Woe to you who join house to house

and add field to field

Till there is no more room

and you are left to dwell alone.

in the midst of the land

Therefore the Lord of Hosts has sworn in his burning

"If a tunnel shall many houses become a desolation

Houses great and lovely without an inhabitant.

For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but a bath

and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah." ⁽¹³⁾

⁽¹¹⁾ Hosea 6⁶

⁽¹²⁾ Isaiah 34:5.

⁽¹³⁾ " 5:8-10

These who seek are corrupt. They -- rise up early in the morning and run after strong drink.

"Ah the heroes at drinking wine
And the warriors at blending liquor
Who acquit the guilty for a bribe
And wrest the rights of the innocent from him." (14)

The women of the court are functionaries and corrupt. They spend all their time in making themselves attractive: -- doing nothing but attracting the opposite sex. In the eyes of Eliah -- a corrupt, dissipated, exploiting society.

To a larger extent than Hesea, Eliah finds the external political situation an index of Judah's lack of integrity. Her kings are opportunists, not the personification of the people's culture. During Eliah's life time Judah swings from a policy of isolation, to one of alliances with Assyria to one of revolt against Assyria and alliances with Egypt. Such carrying on could not result in public confidence or a strong creative social psychology. However as we can see from the prophet's interview with Ahaz, the king cannot see that a strong & unified social conscience is more important than a dangerous alliance. What if Judah does have to change the form of its worship? What if its national God is not secondary? What are spiritual values compared to wealth and armies?

Thus we see the centre of the king's faith and probably the people's faith. They depend on alliances for their salvation. But Eliah points out that Egypt is in no state to be trusted. She is always at civil war.

"I will spear Egypt against Egypt
And they shall fight brother against brother and neighbor against neighbor
City against city and kingdom against kingdom

--- Sheer fools are the princes of Zoon

And the wisest of Pharaoh's counselors are a senseless counsel. (15)

And Assyria is no more to be trusted, for when an alliance is made, ...

"On that day will the king shame off,

With a razor lined from beyond the river (even the king of Assyria)
The hair of his head and his body

his beard also will be swept away" (16)

According to Eliah foreign alliances at a time like this are not to be

(14) Isaiah 5:22,23

(15) " 19:14

(16) " 7:20

trusted. They are no basis for the strong spiritual faith that is necessary to hold a community together.

The social system creates the faith of the people in the wrong things. Because the defenses of the city have been repaired and a water supply insured the people become reckless.

-- joy and gladness

Slaying cattle and killing sheep

Eating flesh and drinking wine

Eating and drinking -- for tomorrow we may die". The

outer defenses have given a sense of over-confidence. No thought is given to the need for inner moral. The people don't see that the strength of a nation is its spirituality. Such nations are holy, they cannot die.

The religious side of the culture, that element whose function it is to give unity and order to the whole culture is functioning to give anything but unity. Sacrifices are large and many - there is "trampling in the horse's courts. Festivals come at the appointed time the cultus technique is employed. Yet as Isaiah sarcastically points out in the song of the vineyard, - the whole performance yields wild grapes. Signs are employed of the cult prophets and obiners. But they are meaningless. Destruction shall come to Jericho who trusts in the sign. "God is with us". The Religion of the social system asks "Consult the ghosts and spirits that chime and gibber! Should not a people consult its gods? on behalf of the living, should they not consult the dead for instruction and direction?"⁽¹⁶⁾

Because of religious false emphasis on the concept of control, Judah is over-confident.

"Because you say - "We have struck a covenant with Death

And have formed a compact with Shol

So, when the overwhelming scourge passes

it will not reach us

For this have we made our refuge⁽¹⁷⁾

And under falsehood have we hidden

The social system lulls people with a false sense of security. Responsibility is forgotten. The machinery of the cult, properly operated, will bring prosperity. But it is all lies. which tells us that social security can come only

⁽¹⁶⁾ Isaiah 8¹⁹.

⁽¹⁷⁾ " 28¹⁵.

through spiritual means. Only if the people seek justice, seek to identify their state with social principles of decency. A state cannot survive trusting in intrigues.

"Because you have spurned this word

And have trusted in cunning and crookedness

And rely on them ---" (18) Therefore a collapsed state shall inevitably follow. Salvation comes to a state with a social psychology of loyalty to an ethical ideal.

"For thus said the Lord God

The Holy one of Israel

By returning and resting shall you be saved.

In quietness and confidence shall be your strength".

Isaiah attacks the social system full of corruption, injustice and weakness on the basis that it is centering the attention of the people on the wrong things. - on inadequate objects of faith and loyalty. He sees in this misplaced emphasis the downfall of the state and the destruction of the people.

In Jeremiah we have the beginning of the conception of religion as a personal matter. It is the relation between the prophet and Yahweh. However it is not as yet universalized and it is not an element that enters into his criticism of the social ^{system}. It does not concern us here.

This thought, Cassandra of Hebrew History, carries on the traditional line of prophetic teaching down through the period of the final collapse of Judah. Conditions are much the same as in Isaiah's time only worse. Except for the slight respite during Josiah's reign when Judah was left her own way, the little kingdom was torn between the two great empires. This time it was Babylon, but as usual Egypt was enticing the kingdom's of the corridor to revolt. The kingdom was unstable. Its foreign policy un-predictable. Its courts full of intrigues. And through it all the people uncertain.

Jeremiah had access to the king. He was doubtless from a well known family at Anathoth. Yet he was a fearless critic. He was revolutionary in the implication of his prophecy. Persecuted for his life because his speech threatened the social institutions of the time. He is several times imprisoned for his teaching. Except that he is patronized by

one of the better families of the court he would have lost his life.

Jemimah is moved to some extent because of the economic injustice of his day. The social system has brought them up and because of them the nation will suffer.

"For knowers are found among my people

who lie in wait as fowls do

and set a trap to catch men

As a cage is full of birds

Their houses are full of fraud

so they become great and rich

They grow fat and sleek

They pass all bounds in wickedness

They uphold not the cause of the orphan, to carry it to success

and the rights of the needy they do not defend.

For these things shall I not punish them? is the wrath of the Lord

And on a nation such as this shall I not take vengeance?" (19)

--- From the least to the greatest of them

Each one traffics in ill gotten gain (20)

The story of the temporary "freeing" of the slaves when the siege of Jerusalem set in only to be raised for a while by the Egyptians shows us where the social integrity of the people was.

As with Hosea and Isaiah, Jemimah condemns his countrymen worshipping foreign deities. Certainly Egypt is not to be trusted, the best thing is to admit Babylonian domination and center attention on building up a strong ethical culture.

As with the others his interest is in the social psychology of the country. The results in this field of the present system, are confusion and disorientation - Jemimah is a "nestling young camel doubling on its tracks a wild ass used to the desert": One of the bulwarks of a strong society - the home is no longer a strong force. Home values and the integrity of the home are shot to pieces "With his mouth one speaks fair to his neighbor but in his mind he lays a trap" (21) There is no mutual faith between the people of the state. Yet the nucleus & the people seem to think that the machinations of the culture technique will bring about prosperity in spite of this corruption. The people say...

"We are our own masters, we will come no more to thee" (22)

(19) Je 5:26-29

(20) ..6:12b, 13.

(21) Je 9:8

(22) Je 2:31

It is this conceit of control that Jeremiah is concerned of most, the denunciations with all his vigor the "false" prophets. Those who obey the stubborn promptings of their own minds" who can see nothing but hope and prosperity for Israel. These evil leaders of the people make them feel secure. They are nothing but "yes" men with the nation as the drunk of cheerer they ought to be criticizing the social moral order with a view to strengthening it. Not helping it into accepting its corruptions.

For the cultus technique, the basis for this social system, the machine whence comes the control of productivity; the foundation of the confidence of the people, Jeremiah has nothing but scorn.

"For the cult of the people's vanity

They are but a timber which one cuts from the forest,
which the carpenter's hands have wrought with the ax.

Men deck it with silver and gold.

Foster it with hammer and nails.

And set it up so that it cannot move.

They stand like a scarecrow in a garden of cucumbers and cannot speak.

They have to be carried for they cannot walk" (23)

Not only are these cultic ceremonies abhorrent as in the human sacrifices in the valley Tophet but they avail nothing. This whole type of thing avails nothing.

"The harvest is past, the summer is over

and we are not saved" (24)

And it takes the attention of the people from the things they should be doing. In his Eulogy on Josiah, Jeremiah gives us the necessity for security. - It is not by "playing the king", or attempting to build bigger and better palaces - things required of him by the existing social system.

But... "Did not your father as to all and drank

Do justice and righteousness

Then all went well with him

He defended the cause of the poor and needy

Then all went well.

Is not that, how to know me?

Is the working the hard." (25)

(23) Je 10³⁻⁵

(24) .. 8²⁰

(25) .. 22¹⁵⁻¹⁶

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Social justice is the technique to weld society. Faith and life connected with ethical ideals is the strength of a nation. Social ethics are the life blood of a nation. Any system that centres people's interest and confidence in any other value is bound to collapse under pressure.

These are the merits of the four major pre-exilic prophets to the Hebrew culture of their time. Their basis of criticism of all of the men was its result in public moral. They brought to the system the test of social experience and found it wanting. It emphasized inadequate values. The result was a social psychology that resembled a house of cards. Put it to the test and it broke down. However these men began to put into Israel's culture elements that did not disappear. Their influence can be traced in the Hebrew books, the wisdom literature and the exilic songs. These great critics gave to their society gifts that it could not refuse. Out of the political collapse of Israel thus came the cultural rise, forming the lesson of the pre-exilic prophets: a lesson that men still must learn. -- that society to be strong must have some and high spiritual foundation.