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Intolerant Monolatry in the Deuteronomistic History

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As the title of this study indicates, Juha Pakkala wishes to analyze the emergence in Israel of a theological position that Pakkala characterizes as “intolerant monolatry.” Such a characterization relies upon at least two different distinctions: first, a distinction between monotheism and monolatry; and second, a distinction between a monolatry that harshly criticizes and even attacks the worship of other gods (“intolerant monolatry”) and a monolatry that explicitly criticizes the worship of other gods only when such worship threatens the primacy of the main god (“tolerant monolatry”). While the first distinction is quite common in biblical scholarship, the second distinction is somewhat less so. Having argued for the importance of both distinctions, however, Pakkala attempts to reconstruct the process—or at least certain stages of the process that, in Pakkala’s view, have left traces in the biblical literature—by which a more “tolerant” monolatry gave way to an “intolerant” one.

At the center of Pakkala’s reconstruction is a literary and redaction-critical analysis of particular texts from Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History as well as certain passages in Exodus that are sometimes taken as earlier manifestations of intolerant monolatry. Since Pakkala’s monograph originated as a dissertation at the University of Helsinki under Timo Veijola, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that Pakkala’s literary analysis is carried out under the influence of Veijola’s approach to the Deuteronomistic History. While Pakkala is not afraid to disagree with specific conclusions of Veijola or of the “Göttingen School” (Smend, Dietrich, etc.) to which Veijola is indebted, the framework and results of Pakkala’s analysis clearly owe a great deal to the tradition of scholarship in which Pakkala stands. Passages from Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History that articulate an intolerant monolatry are for the most part considered to be “nomistic” or post-nomistic in origin and dated to the exile or later. Passages from Exodus that are sometimes taken as evidence for earlier periods are in fact, in Pakkala’s view, dependent upon the nomistic texts of Deuteronomy and so also later than is often believed. The pre-nomistic “history writer” of the Deuteronomistic History,

in contrast to the nomists, generally shows little interest in other gods but does express concern about the worship of Baal, who at least according to the argument of the history writer threatened to replace Yahweh as the chief god of Israel under the Omrides. In comparison with earlier periods of Israel's religious history, the perspective of the pre-nomistic history writer does represent a new development, according to Pakkala's analysis, inasmuch as the history writer wishes to stress the importance of cultic centralization and to condemn the "high places." However in Pakkala's view this stage of development risks being obscured by, because so often conflated with, later nomistic levels of tradition that do actually represent intolerant monolatry and associate the "high places" with the worship of other gods. Pakkala uses this distinction between the concerns of the history writer and the concerns of the nomists to stress the importance of not overstating continuities in religious outlook within the deuteronomistic tradition.

In contrast to some literary and redaction-critical analyses, Pakkala also devotes a chapter to a review of archaeological evidence potentially relevant to the overall focus of the study. Here Pakkala's discussion is heavily dependent upon the work of others, and Pakkala rightly notes that conclusions can be drawn from the archaeological evidence only rather cautiously. However Pakkala points out that archaeology has actually produced less evidence for the widespread worship of other deities in pre-exilic Israel than the rhetoric of the Deuteronomistic History might lead one to expect. Thus it seems likely to Pakkala that the writers of the Deuteronomistic History are actually not very familiar with the realities of pre-exilic Israelite religion at all. Such a conclusion is not surprising, of course, if one gives to the Deuteronomistic History (or to most of its stages of development) a date at least as late as the exile, as Pakkala, plausibly, does.

Pakkala's study will be of particular interest to two groups of scholars that sometimes, but not always, overlap: scholars interested in reconstructing the development of the Deuteronomistic History, and scholars interested in reconstructing the history of Israelite religion. Whether or not the Deuteronomistic History is actually good evidence for the history of Israelite religion is, of course, a debated question, but Pakkala deals capably with the relevant issues. Pakkala's distinction between "tolerant monolatry" and "intolerant monolatry" does seem potentially quite useful as a tool for analyzing the range of theological perspectives within the Hebrew Bible, though as one reads Pakkala's discussion of certain passages (e.g., the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4-9) one cannot help but conclude that the boundary between these two perspectives can become rather fuzzy.

With respect to methodological premises and procedures, there will be few qualms about Pakkala's assumptions that, in order to reconstruct in detail the emergence of "intolerant monolatry" in Israel, one must first take into account the likely dates of the biblical passages used as evidence and refrain from jumping too quickly to the conclusion that later passages can serve as evidence for earlier periods. Yet as Pakkala frequently notes, the precise dating of many of the passages and layers of tradition analyzed in the book is controversial – and, I would add, perhaps impossible to determine. Thus one could go on to ask whether the sort of enterprise in which Pakkala is here engaged can ever amount to more than guesswork, and whether the degree of confidence that one can have in detailed conclusions is sufficient to justify the time and energy devoted to the

analysis. I have to confess that, having completed Pakkala's volume, I am somewhat inclined to answer these questions negatively myself, not because of any lack of skill on Pakkala's part (indeed the book is for the most part carefully argued, given Pakkala's methodological premises) but rather because of difficulties inherent in the enterprise (difficulties that Pakkala does acknowledge throughout). Many scholars will, of course, prefer to answer the same questions more positively. Notwithstanding this sort of difference of opinion (which of course characterizes the discipline of biblical scholarship today), scholars on both sides of the issue will profit from a reading of Pakkala's analyses whether or not they agree with all of Pakkala's conclusions.