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The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets

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This volume is one of a series brought to us by the Prophetic Texts and Their Ancient Contexts group of the Society of Biblical Literature. These papers were presented in 2002 at the SBL Annual Meeting in Toronto. As with most anthologies, individual essays here may not be uniformly useful for everyone. On the whole, however, the book is fairly even in its strengths, drawing our attention to formerly neglected data and making a solid contribution to a number of long-standing issues in the study of prophetic literature and prophetic activity in ancient Israel.

Most of the questions that these authors address pertain to the history of Israelite religious life. What were historical characteristics of the roles of priest and prophet? How did they interact? To what historical realities of cultic politics and public worship are the authors of the prophetic books responding? Some pieces address these issues as they relate to specific passages in prophetic literature, while others concern themselves with the role of prophets in general vis-à-vis the cult.

Among those in the latter category, a number address the idea that there was bitter antagonism between priests and prophets. This notion has dominated Protestant scholarship for decades, if not centuries, with the claim that prophets of Yahweh preached a religion of ethics against priestly legalism and ritualism that sought not to

serve Yahweh but to imitate the imitate Israel's pagan neighbors. Several of the authors in this volume refute this claim quite nicely.

Bibb (31–43) focuses on how this theme takes shape among “Old Testament Theologians” who have used prophetic critique of temple practices to “construct a misleading and possibly libelous presentation of Israel's cultic life” (32). Bibb briefly addresses prophetic texts that explicitly call temple ritual into question, then turns to the work of Walther Eichrodt, Theodorus Vriezen, and Walter Brueggemann as case studies in the Protestant misrepresentation of prophetic critique. Bibb is careful to note that the problem is not so much the writers' desire to meet their Protestant audience's needs but their insistence that their theological interpretations are identical with a more objectively historical one.

Zevit (189–217) expands his exploration of the “antagonism theory” beyond the realm of biblical scholarship in an attempt to find the origin of this idea. His analysis of the prophetic texts that criticize manifestations of cult shows that the authors were not “opposed to the cult on principle” (208). Instead, Zevit finds the source of this idea in the earliest accounts of Jesus' trial before Caiaphas. Zevit hypothesizes that the “priests vs. prophet” antagonism that early Christians understood themselves to experience was read back into the Hebrew Bible by those same Christians and later reinvigorated during critical moments in Christian history.

Grabbe (79–97) is only interested in modern scholarly rhetoric to clear it away in order to understand better the nature of Israelite priesthood and the sociohistorical experience of Israelite ritual specialists. While the Latter Prophets do not leave us with a complete picture of what Grabbe calls the “priestly *gestalt*” (79), there are advantages to using them for this task. First, their critiques give us glimpses into a complete picture of religious life in ancient Israel, one that differs considerably from the orthodox view that dominates most texts. Second, the span of time over which these texts were written and edited indicates how cultic roles, values, and practices developed and shifted through time.

Ben Zvi (19–30) looks to Persian period Yehud for insight into priest-prophet relations in the Bible. In his analysis, any tension that may have existed between preexilic priests and prophets was interpreted by the “literati of Yehud”—the composers of much if not all of the Hebrew Bible—as specific to certain prophets and certain priests, not intrinsic to their categorical roles. Indeed, Ben Zvi sees not opposition but considerable agreement and “slippage of attributes” (20) between the preexilic prophets and priests as represented by the postexilic literati. The unifying factor is the Second Temple ideology of Zion's centrality and uniqueness. These literary elite would have identified with both priests and

prophets, as they themselves constructed them, as keepers Yahweh's word and law in the Jerusalem center.

Fleming (44–64) investigates the relationship between priests and prophets but as represented in the Mari archives. His exploration of the terminology for various cultic personnel during this period does not suggest any sort of tensions between different kinds of temple-based offices but instead shows a certain amount of cooperation in their service to their deities. Whether this offers us any insight into the ancient Israelite case is intriguing but unclear.

Two more narrowly text-focused articles also draw our attention to data beyond Israel's borders. Galambush (65–78) reexamines Rylands Papyrus IX, an Egyptian text that records a tour of Palestine by Psammeticus II and a contingent of Egyptian cultic personnel around 592 B.C.E. This may explain the reference in Ezek 44:7–9 to foreigners entering—and thus profaning—the sanctuary, even being stationed as guards there. Galambush proposes that during Psammeticus's tour some of his entourage were permitted entrance into the temple and that certain Egyptian priests may have tarried in important cities along the pharaoh's route—perhaps Jerusalem among them—to perform some cultic functions there.

Odell's article (134–48) also addresses a tricky passage in Ezekiel, this time the question of the “image of jealousy” in Ezek 8. Odell rejects the usual interpretation that this was an idol of Asherah. She proposes that the Phoenician practice of dedicating statues of children to the god Eshmoun as a substitute for real children may have been adopted into the worship of Yahweh. The image would then have been an “image of zeal,” a devotional offering to the deity. The deity rejected this mode of worship, but not because the foreign and syncretistic aspects of the offerings were sufficiently abominable. Instead, the ambiguous cultic value of child sacrifice in ancient Israel may indicate that the problem was the substitution of a statue for a child. This ritual would then have deprived the deity of an authentic offering and distracted the people of Israel from giving Yahweh what he really wanted: their hearts and minds.

The remaining articles focus exclusively on specific prophetic passages to elucidate both text and historical reality. Linville (98–114) offers an interpretation of the book of Joel as an affirmation of Second Temple priests and priesthood. This affirmation is made, says Linville, through the construction of a “word-world” (98) in the book where priests play an essential part in resolving a monumental crisis through temple-based ritual. For Linville, no element of the text reliably informs us about the historical reality during the time of Joel; we have access only to the ideology of postexilic editors. This Linville analyzes from a primarily phenomenological perspective. In this word-world, where

sacred order is thrown into chaos, the importance of priests was all but self-evident. This accounts for the relative paucity of references to priests, even though their role was so critical.

Nelson (115–33) uses Hosea as a case study in “prophetic lunacy.” The first half of the piece discusses the stereotypical behavior of Israelite prophets considered authentic, with special attention to peculiar activities that might be interpreted as madness but are intended as deeply symbolic acts. The remainder of the article examines Hosea’s marriage to Gomer, a promiscuous woman, in this light. This move by the prophet was certainly peculiar and left Hosea open to accusations of lunacy, but it fell squarely in the bounds of behavior stereotypical of prophets.

Patton (149–76) counters the usual scholarly neglect of ritual matters in the book of Jeremiah and asks how the various redactional layers, especially the final one, communicate ideologies of priesthood. Patton sees each layer wrestling in its own way with the question of revelation and mediation: Who can effectively mediate the word and will of the deity and the advocate for the people: priest or prophet? The final form of the text finds neither human mediator adequate to the task, and even though the text remains as a mediating witness, it too is ultimately impotent as an advocate.

Schaper (177–88) identifies the authors of the book of Malachi as a group of Second Temple priests in dissent from the mainstream priesthood. The dissident priests were not Levites—the book does not seem to recognize, accept, or be concerned with the distinction between Levites and priests—but rather a group of Zadokite priests who criticized and denounced other Zadokites who held the highest priestly offices at that time.

While some readers are likely to find reasons to quibble with individual articles here, all in all Grabbe and Bellis have provided a fine resource here for both teachers and researchers.