



Buying God Off:

Jeremiah and the Problem of Religious Hypocrisy

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Reading parashat Tzav and the Haftarah assigned to it can be a jarring experience, since the two appear to contradict one another directly and dramatically.

After laying out an array of laws related to sacrifices, the parashah adds: “Such are the rituals of the burnt offering (*olah*), the meal offering (*minhah*), the purification offering (*hattat*), the guilt offering (*asham*), the offering of ordination (*milu'im*), and the sacrifice of well-being (*zevah ha-shelamim*), which the Lord commanded (*tzivah*) Moses on Mount Sinai, when [the Lord] commanded that the Israelites present their offerings to the Lord, in the wilderness of Sinai” (Leviticus 7:37-38). Twice in one verse (v. 38) Leviticus emphasizes that God directly commanded the sacrificial system. “The main thrust of this verse,” Bible scholar Baruch Levine explains, “is the assertion that, already in the wilderness of Sinai, the Israelites



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worshiped God with sacrifices.”¹ But now listen to the prophet Jeremiah: “When I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices”

¹ Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (1989), p. 47.



(Jeremiah 7:22). On the surface, at least, Jeremiah appears to baldly contradict the Torah's words. Reading Leviticus and Jeremiah together, then, one cannot but ask: Which one is it? Did God command Israel to offer sacrifices or not?²

In (ostensibly) repudiating sacrifices, the prophet tells the people what God *did* in fact enjoin: "But this is what I commanded them: 'Obey my voice, that I may be your God and you may be My people; walk only in the way that I command you, so that all may go well with you'" (7:23). How should we understand this? Should we assume that Jeremiah means his words literally—that he thinks God wants obedience *as opposed to* sacrifice? There was a time when many (mainly Protestant) scholars attempted to use Jeremiah's words to drive a wedge between what they considered genuine piety, on the one hand, and what they saw as Judaism's excessive focus on ritual, on the other. But few—if any—contemporary scholars accept this dichotomy; the anti-Judaism that animates it, in any case, is plain to see. Bible scholar Derek Kidner explains that "in fact [Jeremiah's] way of speaking is the Bible's strongest way of comparing one thing with another... putting it not in the mild form of 'this is better than that,'³ but with the starkness of 'not that, but this!'"⁴ In other words, Jeremiah

² The NIV translation tries to get around the problem by adding the English word "just": "When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them," it reads, "I did not *just* give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices." But the Hebrew does not actually say that; the text of Jeremiah appears to assert not that God did not *only* command sacrifice but rather that God did not mandate sacrifice *at all*. (Originally published in the 1970's, the NIV translation is one of the most popular translations of the Christian Bible in the world.)

³ Cf. 1 Samuel 15:22: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings (*olot*) and sacrifices (*zevalim*) as much as in obedience to the Lord's command? Surely, obedience is better than (*tov me*) sacrifice, compliance than the fat of rams."

⁴ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah: Against Wind and Tide* (1987), p. 50. Cf. Isaiah 1:11; Amos 5:21-25; Micah 6:6-8; and Psalm 40:7-9. Kidner rightly notes that Hosea "puts the two ways of speaking side by side": "For I desire steadfast love and not (*ve-lo*) sacrifice, obedience to God rather than (*me*) burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). Cf. also J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (2002), p. 99, n4.



speaks hyperbolically, insisting in the strongest possible terms that in order to have integrity or value, sacrifice must grow out of a broader commitment to covenantal obedience—to serving

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God with all we have, and all we are. Sacrifice without religious integrity is not just meaningless, Jeremiah avers; it is actually abhorrent in God's eyes. But the point is not that religious integrity is an *alternative* to sacrifice; rather, religious integrity is what renders sacrifice coherent and meaningful.⁵ (Were Jeremiah really seeking to disown sacrifice altogether, it would be impossible to understand his clear vision of a glorious future, when worshipers from every corner of the land will flock to Jerusalem "bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, meal offerings and frankincense, and bringing offerings of thanksgiving to the House of the Lord" (17:26).)⁶

In a similar vein, Bible scholar John Bracke argues that what Jeremiah means to say is not that sacrifices do not matter at all—or that they were not commanded by God—but rather that "they were never understood to be the central or most important aspect of the obedience God demanded from Israel." Bracke suggests that we attend closely to the structure of the book of Exodus. "If one reads the account of Sinai," he argues, "regulations about sacrifices do not occupy a central place." God begins with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and then proceeds to lay out a range of laws concerning everyday life (21-23). "It is only after the covenant is ratified" (24), Bracke reminds us, "that stipulations regarding sacrifice are given."

⁵ For a different approach to what Jeremiah is saying, cf. Jacob Milgrom, "Concerning Jeremiah's Repudiation of Sacrifice," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977), pp. 273-275.

⁶ Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah*, p. 50.

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From Bracke's perspective, then, the message of Exodus is clear: "Obedience to God was first defined as devotion to God alone (the first four commandments), and then through ways in which relationship with God was to be expressed in human interactions (commandments five through ten)." So Jeremiah is, on Bracke's account, a faithful reader of Exodus: "Jeremiah rightly claims that God had not commanded sacrifices as the essential feature of covenantal obedience."⁷ Indeed, the thrust of Jeremiah's fiery words is that "where the basic requisite of obedience was lacking, God refused to regard what went on in the temple as a true sacrifice."⁸

From the very first verse of the Haftarah, Jeremiah gives powerful expression to God's disdain for Israel's hypocritical worship. According to Leviticus, since burnt offerings are dedicated exclusively to God they must be entirely burned up on the altar (Leviticus 1:9); in contrast to other sacrifices, parts of which could be consumed by the worshiper, no part of the *olah* could be eaten by people. But Jeremiah reports God's startling words: "Thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: 'Add your burnt offerings (*oloteikhem*) to your other

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sacrifices (*zivoheikhem*) and eat the meat!" (7:21). What God tells the people, in effect, is that God is so unimpressed by their burnt offerings—indeed, so disgusted by them—that they might as well just eat them with the rest of their sacrifices.

⁷ John M. Bracke, *Jeremiah 1-29* (1999), p. 82.

⁸ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (1980). p. 288. In terms very similar to Bracke's, Thompson writes that "Jeremiah was really indicating that the order of revelation was indicative of the relative value of obedience and cultic observances."



The prophet's message is clear: "The normal rules of sacrificial offering to [God] are moot when the worshiper's sacrifice is tainted with the blood of the innocent and the disobedience of a covenanted people."⁹ What has Israel done to elicit such fierce condemnation? Earlier in the chapter from which the Haftarah is taken, Jeremiah inveighs against the people for being both unfaithful to God and cruel to one another. Blithely indifferent to their own waywardness and corruption, they persist in coming to the Temple, smugly self-assured they are secure regardless of their conduct. So Jeremiah asks: "Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear falsely, and sacrifice to Baal, and follow other gods whom you have not known and then come and stand before Me in this House which bears My name and say, 'We are safe'?" (7:8-9). The people violate six of the ten commandments in one verse (!) and still have the audacity to assume that God will protect them no matter what.¹⁰ Neither God nor the prophet can contain their revulsion.

Jeremiah wants to shake the people out of their brazen over-confidence. "Mend your ways and your actions," he quotes God as saying, "that I may let you dwell [*or perhaps*: that I may dwell with you]¹¹ in this place" (7:3). But the people appear impervious to rebuke, their hardness of heart seemingly

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⁹ Patrick D. Miller, "Jeremiah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 6 (2001), p. 639.

¹⁰ It is important to emphasize that Jeremiah's critique is not only that the people come to the Temple despite behaving unethically; his broader point is that they come despite not heeding God's will in any sphere. Ethics is obviously central here, but it is not the whole story. Cf., in a similar vein, Psalm 95.

¹¹ The Masoretic text reads "*Va-Ashaknah ethkhem*" (that I may let you dwell), but some vocalize "*Va-eshkenah itkhem*" (that I may dwell with you). Cf. the discussion in Miller, "Jeremiah," pp. 635-636.



reinforced by the fraudulent assurances of false prophets.¹² So Jeremiah thunders: “Do not trust in lies, and say: ‘The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord is this sanctuary’ (7:4).¹³ The prophet rails against “a pernicious form of false security, the assumption that God will never let the Temple, [God’s] dwelling place, be harmed, that [God] will always be present in the Temple and thus keep it and the people worshiping there from any kind of ultimate threat or danger.” The people likely recall God’s promise to protect Jerusalem from those who wish to do it harm—“I will protect and save this city for My sake and for the sake of My servant David” (Isaiah 37:37)—and conclude that God’s House serves as “a kind of protective shield over Jerusalem that could not be penetrated. What this [does] not account for [is God’s] own decision to remove the shield.”¹⁴ The prophet desperately wants the people to understand that God’s presence and protection are conditional;¹⁵ God

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will not dwell in a “den of thieves” (7:11).¹⁶

If Israel’s rebelliousness continues, the

¹² Cf. Jeremiah 5:12 and 6:14.

¹³ Following Jon Levenson, I take “*heimah*” as a scribe’s abbreviation for *ha-makom ha-zeh*, this sanctuary. Levenson suggests that the people rely on the phrase “the Temple of the Lord” as an “incantation to ward off adversity, that they treat it as “a mantra bled of meaning.” The threefold utterance of these words, Levenson argues, “indicates the mindlessness with which [the people] employ them.” *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (1985), p. 166.

¹⁴ Miller, “Jeremiah,” p. 636.

¹⁵ As Jon Levenson nicely puts it, in the Temple, “which bears God’s name (vv. 10, 11, 14), that is, which is [God’s] personal property, man comes as a guest and not as a proprietor. The decision to allow man to dwell there (vv. 3, 7) and the decision to place God’s name there (v. 12) are God’s. The Temple exists and functions in the spiritual universe by [God’s] grace alone.” *Sinai and Zion*, p. 166.

¹⁶ Terence Fretheim explains that in Jeremiah’s eyes, the Temple as the people actually inhabit it “is analogous to a hideout for robbers, where they could escape from the authorities and not be threatened with arrest. Then, when the coast was clear, they could again sally to do their wicked deeds.” But God ominously reminds them: “As for Me, I have been watching” (7:11). Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (2002), p. 136.



Temple will be destroyed and the land lost.¹⁷

In the wake of the destruction of the Temple, some Jews no doubt drew comfort from Jeremiah's prophecy, since it forcefully downplayed the significance of sacrifice. The covenant could and would endure even in exile, since what God "really" wanted—obedience and a life of goodness—were possible anywhere. And yet there is a certain irony in taking solace in Jeremiah's blistering words which were, after all, intended to provoke and unsettle. It would be an enormous mistake—and a patently self-serving one—to insist that the prophet's critique of Israel's religion is obsolete since the Temple is no longer standing. Addressed as they are to the "ongoing major disconnect that exists between worship and life,"¹⁸ Jeremiah's words are as urgent today as they were when they were first spoken in ancient Israel. The Temple may come and go, but religious hypocrisy endures.

Religion is a double-edged sword. At its best,
it prods and inspires us to bring God's will and

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God's presence into every corner of our lives; at its worst, it foments the illusion that there is a delimited sphere called "the religious." As long as we fulfill our obligations there, the rest of our lives can be comfortably labeled "secular" and thus remain beyond the reach of God's summons to the good and the holy. Martin Buber (1878-1965) expressed life-long skepticism about religion in part for this reason. When people commit to "religion," he feared, they are often trying to confine and thereby neutralize God. Buber insisted that the idea of God's unity and oneness should have a correlate in the human sphere: the "all-inclusiveness" of life.

¹⁷ Cf. Micah 3:9-12.

¹⁸ Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, p. 135.



According to Buber, humanity's "partnership with God cannot be confined or reduced to mere 'spiritual' attitudes, to devout feelings or a superstructure of ritual practices. It requires [a person's] whole life, in all its aspects and relationships. Man can have no real part in holiness without the sanctification of his everyday life." Buber argued that authentic Judaism "has always opposed so-called 'religion,' because it has seen in it the attempt to buy off God, who demands all, with a limited segment of life."¹⁹

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As Jeremiah's contemporaries show, theology matters in all this: We can serve a God who challenges and unsettles us, who asks us again and again who and what we are, and who

summons us each day to respond to God's will and to the suffering of the other. Or we can worship a God who only blesses and affirms us, who sanctifies our comforts, and guarantees us that no matter how we conduct ourselves, "we are safe." Our hypocrisies may (sometimes) be more subtle than ancient Israel's, but they are no less real. In this day and age, God may not actually kick us out of the synagogue, but God may abandon us there, leaving us alone with our hypocrisy and cant.

Jeremiah is not opposed to the sacrificial system laid out in parashat Tzav, or to ritual in general. But he is intensely worried that sacrifice and ritual can be used in hypocritical, counter-productive ways. It is easy to miss one of his subtlest, most telling criticisms of the Israelites (and, potentially, of us): They "trust" in the Temple (7:14) and in the web of "lies"

¹⁹ Samuel Hugo Bergman, *Faith and Reason: Modern Jewish Thought* (1961), pp. 94-95.



they have woven around it (7:8), but not in God. Their religion serves to displace and replace God instead of serving and being responsive to God. This is an elemental truth we should always keep in mind, and at heart: Few things can refine our souls and sanctify our lives like religion, but few things can be so easily exploited and corrupted. This is why, for the religious person, introspection and soul-searching are so fundamental; and it is why, for the religious community, self-criticism is as urgent as it can be rare.

Shabbat Shalom.

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