The Social Location of Israelite Prophecy

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I

THIS essay is intended to address the question, "What was the social location of Israelite prophecy?" with particular reference to an essay written by Peter L. Berger. Berger has sought to interpret the socio-cultural framework in which and to which the prophets spoke. The "social location" of Israel's prophets, he maintains, should not be identified with the content of their messages or their verbalized attitudes, which in the case of many of the "classical" or "canonical" prophets was anticultic. Berger concludes that the prophets—even the classical prophets—did not function as isolated individuals, but were closely related to the cult and perhaps even performed as cultic officials.

For support of his thesis Berger is heavily indebted to secondary literature flowing from numerous modern studies of the prophets. He correctly points out that in the formative period of biblical criticism the classical or canonical prophets were usually viewed as the "great Protestants" of ancient Israel, solitary critics of Israelite society and religion, whose insights represent the high point of Israel's religious development. It was with these prophets that true "ethical monotheism" first emerged in history. This kind of interpretation of Israel's history in general, and of Israel's prophets in particular, received its decisive impetus from the pioneer biblical critic Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), whose original "liberalism" became the cornerstone of an "orthodox" stance in biblical study engaged in by most biblical scholars.

A reaction against this interpretation of Israel's history so influenced by concepts of linear religious evolution and the assumptions inherent in focusing upon literary criticism, began developing after World War I and remained vital into the 1950's. Characteristic of this reaction was the methodology employed in form criticism. An especially important figure in this development, as indicated by Berger, was the Norwegian scholar Sigmund Mowinckel. Mowinckel presented the thesis that there was a prophetic office in the Israelite cultus. The responsibility of the prophetic office was that of mediating the divine word to participants in the ritual ("sacramental" function; cf., e.g., Psalms 60:6–8; 75:8; 110:1–4). This office was not the same as the priestly office, through which the community's sacrifices and prayers were mediated to God ("sacrificial" function). Mowinckel's distinction between the offices, however, does not mean that he saw the cultic personnel as distinct, separated into various divisions for various functions. The same official may well have performed several functions in the cultic celebration.

However one may evaluate Mowinckel's thesis of the "prophetic" office in the cult, it is highly questionable whether it can be applied to the canonical or literary prophets as a whole without obscuring their function and distinctive self-understanding. We cannot simply assume a cultic Sitz im Leben for figures and passages whose social location is not clearly given in the literature to be studied—figures who even engage in radical polemic against the cult in their respective social situations (see below).

Moreover, Berger's discussion of Mowinckel's thesis is misleading, for he implies that Mowinckel places the canonical prophets within a cultic office of the prophets and prophetic literature see G. Fohrer, "Zehn Jahre Literatur zur alttestamentlichen Prophetie (1951–60)," Theologische Rundschau, XXVIII (1962–63), 1–75; 235–97; 301–74. — Sigmund Mowinckel, whose studies on this question are pivotal in the history of biblical scholarship, will be discussed below. I should add that Berger believes Gunneweg and Würthwein represent a consensus in modern Old Testament studies, which is questionable.

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situation. As a matter of fact, Mowinckel does not do this. Perhaps it is best to let Mowinckel speak for himself:

If, however, the psalm [Psalm 10] is "prophetic," this does not mean that it can be clarified out of the spiritual world of the so-called great judgment and literary prophets. In the main it stems out of the idea-forms and thoughts of a cultic situation. Also in the condemnation of sacrifice it distinguishes itself from an Amos or Isaiah or Micah. These men reject the external actions in general as they were then practiced, "the noise of the songs" not less than the smoking offerings (Isa. 1:10-17; Am. 5:21-23). Our point, to the contrary, finds the cultic songs (and also the rites corresponding thereto) beautiful and pleasing to God, and the offerings necessary because commanded, although not fully comparable to the songs in value.1

So here I wish to call into question the misapplication of Mowinckel's thesis. The supposed "prophetic office" in the cult hardly lends itself to an adequate understanding of the classical or literary prophets.

Berger's essay on the social location of Israel's prophets deals primarily with the problem of cultic prophecy. Therefore "social location," in this context, refers primarily to professional status or role within the cult as over against detachment from cultic institutions. In Max Weber's work, from which Berger takes his point of departure, it designates also such social life-situations as military prophecy, court prophecy, and prophecy originating in literary circles and political ideologists.2 But Berger concentrates on the problem of prophecy in a cultic setting.

Berger's analysis and conclusions are informed by a distinction between norms and behavior, between ideas and symbols and the socio-cultural forces and institutions with which they are associated. Or to state it in another way, social location is not necessarily deducible from a certain kind of message, be it "religious" or otherwise. Whatever the relation of ideas to social processes may be, there is abundant evidence to indicate that a social location, i.e., a position within or without any of the voluntary or involuntary associations of society, is no certain clue to one's self-understanding or ideology, and vice versa.

To take an example, suppose one should hear or read a statement like the following:

Our contemporary church-going populace is infected with a false kind of religion, a religion of success and peace of mind. Yet those who relax in their comfortable pew are summoned to a message and way of life which takes them into the world of suffering, where men really live. For only in identifying with men in their problems and working to alleviate these problems can we understand the message of Christ.

A statement like this might be heard on any given Sunday in many Christian churches, or, with a few changes, on Friday evening or Saturday morning in Jewish synagogues. Yet such a message is no sure clue to the social location of the speaker. As a matter of fact, the speaker would more than likely be the minister of a white middle-class congregation who lives little differently from his parishioners and functions almost entirely within an institutional framework.

Berger's distinction between ideology and social location is illuminating. But even if one grants that it is a good distinction to keep in mind, it must nevertheless be related to the evidence — or what seems to be fairly certain or "evident" to most interpreters — which is adducible from a given socio-cultural context. I wish now to show that although the distinction between message and social location is always a possibility in the history of societies, and has in fact frequently developed, one must mold the evidence into all sorts of twists and contortions to hold that many of the classical prophets, especially those who lived before the Babylonian exile (587 B.C.), were cultic officials or were closely attached to the cult.

In the succeeding sections of this essay I shall question the understanding of the prophetic role that Berger has borrowed from Mowinckel and applied to explicate his thesis, and examine his thesis in light of key passages from Amos and Isaiah.

III

In his *Psalmenstudien* Mowinckel states that a "prophet" could be any official who is believed to mediate a divine word to an audience. What he is really talking about is "prophetic activity," i.e., activity with certain features that are especially characteristic of prophets. But this will not suffice for the historian, sociologist and historian of religions. If applied stringently it tends to make an entire socio-cultural milieu into an undifferentiated blob. What Mowinckel says about the prophetic role could be applied to other figures in ancient Israel (which Mowinckel would not deny). By various means other figures not called prophets are reported to have received a message from God.
that prophecy, in the Israelite tradition, required any one thing or place. In the self-understanding of the prophets to whom I am referring, prophecy required only that the spirit or hand of Yahweh had come upon the prophet or—as stressed especially by the classical or literary prophets—that he be called by Yahweh and deliver Yahweh’s word.

The authority of the prophets, which they understood to be based upon Yahweh’s word that they proclaimed, originated in a premonarchic culture that bestowed leadership, especially in times of crisis, upon charismatic individuals whose only legitimation was the belief that Yahweh had spoken to them or Yahweh’s spirit had come upon them. This tradition of charismatic leadership came into conflict with monarchical claims and interests (cf. 1 Sam. 15–16; 1 Kings 21), but the prophetic voice legitimated by this tradition continued to express independent criticism until well into the post-exilic period (after ca. 538 B.C.). We can, in fact, trace the background of prophetic authority in Israelite culture to a period long before the rise of the monarchy when, in nomadic or seminomadic situations, those clans that originally accepted Yahweh as their god believed him to be a god who journeyed with his people, a god not to be identified with any one place or with the phenomena of nature, although he might reveal himself in various places and through manifold natural forces. Yahweh could, in principle, appear here, there, or anywhere, and likewise a person could be seized by Yahweh’s spirit or receive his word at any place or time, no matter what his background might be.

However, the complex of motifs and symbols intertwined in the David–Zion tradition, i.e., the everlasting dynasty of David, the king’s sacred status and the sacredness and inviolability of Mount Zion, came into conflict with the old Yahwist traditions. Indeed, the Yahwist and David–Zion traditions were really combined only in the exilic period and afterwards, and even then there remained a tension between the two.

Is it strange that Jeremiah was seized by some of the people in the temple court and told,

You’ll die for sure! Why have you prophesied in the name of Yahweh. “This house shall be like Shilo, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant”? (Jer. 26:8–9a)

Not strange at all, when we observe the understanding of Israel’s existence expressed in Psalm 2:

“I have anointed my king on Zion, my holy hill.”
I [the king] will rule Yahweh’s decree: He said to me, “You are my son, This day I have begotten you (vv. 6–7).”

Or Psalm 46:

There is a river whose streams gladden the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in her midst, she shall not be shaken; God will help her without delay. (vv. 4–5; cf. also Psalms 48 and 74)
Prophets like Jeremiah threatened the socio-cultural order rooted in the David-Zion theology. They opposed any tradition justifying a belief in election and protection which precluded Yahweh's acting in a new way in Israel's history.

This prophetic tradition presents the prophet as a charismatic figure who is not subject to the institutional forms governed by the ruling groups of society, which forms had become predominant since the establishment of the monarchy. His functioning could pose a threat to the institutions that supported the power structures of his society. This is seen very clearly in the cases of Jeremiah and Micah, discussed above, and also Amos (cf. Amos 7:10-17).

The prophet, in many cases, was a charismatic, threatening functionary, and this is proved by the problems that arose when Israelites tried to decide how to detect a true prophet of Yahweh. In the Jerusalem temple in the period of Jeremiah there was a priest in charge of supervising "every madman and prophet" (Jer. 29:26). That the "prophet" referred to here is in every case a cultic prophet is doubtful. In Judah's situation of military and political crisis it would have been precisely those not closely attached to governing institutions, and thus not easily controllable, who would pose such a threat.

It was difficult to arrive at criteria for determining true prophecy, and it was hard to control prophets. For example, the Book of Deuteronomy, which is primarily a law- and cult-oriented document whose nucleus (chs. 12-26) took its present form in the late seventh century B.C., exhibits a concern to control prophecy by legislation (Deut. 13:1-5; 18:15-22). This indicates that in ancient Israel the most common understanding of the prophet considered him a figure whose office, though itself an "institution," gave him a certain unpredictability. Therefore, whether or not there was a "prophetic office" in the cult, in the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole the prophet almost by definition seems not to have been a cultic official.

So I find it difficult to accept Mowinckel's hypothesis of a "prophetic office" in the cult as a category-bin for all of Israel's prophets. Unless the word "cult" is employed in the broadest sense, my conclusion is that many of the prophets of Israel, especially those whom we call "classical" or "canonical," were completely outside of cultic institutions. Certainly they were not among the cultic personnel in such great cultic centers as those at Jerusalem, Samaria, Bethel, Gilgal and Dan.

This is a frequently quoted passage. It is often interpreted as castigation of cultic practice in its prevailing form, as a denunciation of "religious" ritual faithfulness that does not encompass the establishment of social justice. But how does such an interpretation square with the following verse (Amos 5:25)?

Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings for forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

This is a rhetorical question, the implied answer to which is "No!" Conclusively Sacrifices are completely invalid now, whether they are offered by more blameless hands or not. Whether or not Amos was historically accurate

14 Here it is pertinent to this discussion to comment on Hosea's vision of a new which he interpreted through the symbolic act of "purchasing" or "ransoming" a "beloved of paramours" (Hos. 3:4; cf. 6:6). Hosea speaks of the "many days" as an interim period could be debated whether or not the new age itself, when Israel again would worship Yahweh's wife, would be accompanied by renewal of monarchy and cult. I would probably not, and think that Hosea's vision is analogous to Jeremiah's vision, according which the people Israel's heart would be "single" again (Jer. 31:33; 32:39). This form of "religion" would be eliminated, because everyone would know Yahweh (Jer. 31:34). So sacrifices and all else pertaining to the cult are not integral to Yahweh's ordering Israel's life. At any rate, if Hosea's words apply only to the time of discipline, it is significant that they indicate the abolition of the fixed orders of Israel's political and religious life.
his implied denial of sacrifices in the wilderness (cf. Exod. 24:4 ff.)\(^\text{18}\) he employed this denial in his anticultic polemic.

At any rate, there should be little doubt concerning Amos’s attitude toward cultic ritual. If I am correct in my interpretation of 5:25, he brings even the simpler sacrifices on the many banot (hills) into question, although his denunciation is directed primarily against the state sanctuary at Bethel and such important cultic centers as those at Gilgal and Beersheba. Consider Amos 4:4:

Go to Bethel and transgress,  
To Gilgal and multiply transgression.

Or 5:4–5a:

For thus Yahweh has said to the house of Israel,  
“Seek me and live, but seek not Bethel,  
Enter not Gilgal, cross not into Beersheba...”

What these passages in Amos imply goes much further than the analogies demonstrating tension between ideology and social location that Prof. Berger presents. Whereas one may often find a thinker or spokesman denouncing an institution in which he is socially located, if he wishes to identify himself in any way with that institution he would seldom, if ever, deny the very validity of its existence or pronounce its imminent destruction. Rather he would exercise criticism, and work and hope for reform. In the case of Amos there is no good evidence that he was ever located, \textit{qua} prophet, within the cult (this is not to say he was not influenced by traditions, symbols, images; etc. preserved in cultic religion, but that probably amounts to no more than saying he was influenced by his culture). There is, on the other hand, much evidence that on the basis of his understanding of normative events in Israel’s salvation-history he considered the existence of cultic centers and the offering of sacrifices invalid.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^\text{18}\) We should observe that Exod. 24 is a passage coming from the Sinai tradition, which is not so obviously integral to the motifs of exodus, wandering in the wilderness, and possession of the promised land in the ancient Yahwist tradition. See Deut. 26:5 ff., Judg. 24:2–13, and G. von Rad, “Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuchs,” in \textit{Kommentare Studien zum Alten Testament}. München: Kaiser Verlag, 1961, pp. 18, 20–27, 41–42.

\(^\text{16}\) For helpful essays on Amos and cultic traditions see J. Crenshaw, “The Influence of the Wise upon Amos,” \textit{ZAW}, LXXIX (1967), 42–52 and “Amos and the Theophanic Tradition,” \textit{op. cit.}, 203–15. Crenshaw argues that cultic terminology influenced Amos more than Wisdom motifs, and lists the themes he borrowed from the cult (“Influence of the Wise upon Amos,” 51): (1) covenant of brotherhood; (2) apodictic law; (3) Day of Yahweh; (4) execution ritual; (5) theophanic language; (6) Immanuel; (7) eyes of the Lord; (8) seek Yahweh; (9) thy God; (10) Exodus; (11) doxologies. It seems to me that am. 8–10 are extremely tenuous unless cult is understood in the broadest sense. As for am. 2, apodictic law, this probably does not originate in the cult but in clan wisdom. See L. Gerstenberger, “The Woe Oracles of the Prophets,” \textit{JBL}, LXXXI (1962), 249–63 and \textit{W. D. M. Ramsey}, “The Alas-Oracles of the Eighth Century Prophets,” \textit{HUCA}, XXXVIII (1967), 162–84.

My case concerning Amos’s social location has in effect been made for Jeremiah and Hosea. Now for a few comments on Isaiah. Isaiah was decisively influenced by the David-Zion tradition;\(^\text{17}\) yet he seems to have ironically reversed the accepted understanding of the mythical complex of symbols and images found in this tradition.\(^\text{18}\) A good example is the conclusion of a hear-oracle in Isa. 28:

For the bed is too short for stretching out,  
The cover too narrow for wrapping around;  
For as at Mr. Perazim Yahweh will rise up,  
As at Gibeon Valley he will rage  
To do his deed — strange is his deed!  
To work his work — alien is his work!  

(vv. 20–21)

It is “sheer terror” to understand this message (v. 19): Mt. Zion will no longer be a security blanket. Jerusalem, the great Ariel where sacrifices are continually offered — this Ariel will become an Ariel (“altar-hearth”) for Yahweh (Isa. 29:1–4).

Such oracles clearly show that the contemporary Jerusalem cultus had no saving significance as far as Isaiah was concerned. This is also seen in such a key oracle as Isa. 1:10–17. However we may interpret this oracle, we must agree that Isaiah does not even hint in his closing exhortation to combine moral uprightness and cultic faithfulness. Here, as elsewhere, he simply presents in hortatory form the wisdom known not only in Israelite culture but among all peoples: \textit{“Wash! Clean up!”} (v. 16a). How?

Remove your evil deeds from my presence,  
Cease doing evil,  
Learn to do good,  
Seek justice,  
Correct oppression,  
Defend the fatherless,  
Dispute for the widow. (vv. 16b–17)

This is the \textit{torah} of the God of Israel (v. 10), who so transcends the temple that his train fills it (Isa. 6:1), who is simultaneously true sanctuary and rock of stumbling for Israel (Isa. 8:14). In this light, it seems to me that to place Isaiah’s social location in the cult, especially in any professional sense, is to beg the question of his prophetic stance. Is not Isaiah denying the validity of the existence of the Jerusalem cultus? Does he state or imply that it was founded by Yahweh, or give any indication that the sacrificial system will be


important in the new age? Even Isa. 2:1-4, whose Isaianic origin is disputed, takes no reference to prominent features of cultic practice at the recreated world center, the “mountain of Yahweh’s house.” The torah, the word of Yahweh, will be fulfilled in establishment of human community:

He will arbitrate between the nations,  
And decide for many peoples;  
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
And their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
Never again shall they learn war. (2:4)

I have tried to show elsewhere that the vocabulary and themes in pronouncements by the eighth century prophets concerning the cultus, especially important state locales, have so much in common that their attitude was basically one vis-à-vis cultic institutions. These comments should suffice to illustrate my own position and the kinds of questions I would direct to an interpretation such as Berger’s. Another way to approach the relation of literary prophets to the cult would be a study of their call in connection with their collected oracles and their probable social situation. Gerhard von Rad has asked, “If a prophet held such a definite position in the cult, would he have laid so much stress upon his call?” His answer is “No,” one with which I agree. Such accounts as Amos 7–9, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, Ezekiel 1–3 and Isaiah 40:3–8 (cf. also 1 Kings 19:19 ff.) are all nigh impossible to understand within a cultic context. With what is there to compare them in such a context? Was there a cultic “call”? Then where is the evidence?

Or to approach the problem in another way, one could ask whether the Sitz im Leben was conducive to the idea that Yahweh enters into judgment with his own people. Von Rad speaks to this question in passing. The incompleteness of von Rad’s statement at this point leaves his position unclear. He seems to be speaking of future judgment, and the judgment to come must be emphasized. Many psalms and other passages with a clear cultic setting express a judgment that has occurred and been assimilated (from the

One difficulty in attributing this passage to Isaiah is that in 11:1–9 the recreated world community, with Jerusalem at its center, will be governed through the agency of the perfect charismatic judge, the representative man of the new creation, and not directly Yahweh himself as in 2:1–4. The ruler is called a “Shoot from the stumps of Jesse,” but it is significant that David is not mentioned, nor is the ruler called a king (melek). He is described as a judge (cf. Isa. 1:26). Admittedly, however, a somewhat different complex of motifs is found in 9:1–6, which means that a strong case cannot be built on the basis of any of these passages that are so uncertain in relation to one another.


Ibid., p. 53 and n. 7.

post-exilic period see Neh. 9). But does any cultic institution, whether a se or a national cult, characteristically envision judgment coming upon itself?

There are other ways to approach the question of prophecy and cult, but enough has been said. Berger’s thesis could probably be maintained and greater credibility, as I see it, if applied to canonical prophets like Nahum and Haggai. Certain earlier, “nonliterary” prophets, e.g., Samuel, Elijah and Elisha, are yet another case, since some of them were associated with cultic practices; specifically, they offered sacrifices (cf. 1 Kings 18:30 ff.). But it is difficult to connect these prophets with any one altar or sanctuary. Then there were court prophets: Nathan is an outstanding example. Yet as indicated in the first part of Nathan’s oracle addressed to David’s desire to build a temple in Jerusalem (II Sam. 7:4–11a), Nathan’s understanding of Yahweh preceded the notion that his presence could be especially associated with any one place. Be it a temple or a sacred hill or otherwise. The message and social locales of these prophets was obviously related to their various socio-historical situations, so a sweeping statement about them cannot be made in toto.

Berger’s distinction has the status of a logical possibility in sociological and historical interpretation. A logical possibility entails recognition that a certain situation might be a possibility in any given historical context, but that does not guarantee its accuracy or fruitfulness in interpretation. It must be related to the “evidence” that one has and to a host of variables.

Verbal expressions are important in sociological and other studies. Of course, Prof. Berger would not deny. And I would agree that information gained from nonliterary sources, plus a well-informed “reading between the lines,” may at times allow us to posit a conflict between verbalization and experience and of ideas and social location. Furthermore, I would agree with Max Weber, whom Berger cites, that certain ideas and social forces were “attracted” to one another in history, demonstrating an “elective affinity” (Wahlverwandtschaft) to each other. So it was that the Israelite Yahweh could, and by a certain point in time, did become a bearer of certain prophetic ideas and traditions within a framework of hierocracy and cult-oriented by

My point is that when we focus upon certain prophets — Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hosea in this essay — we must conclude that they were completely alienated from cultic observance; either that, or they were really schizophrenic. Their messages have no meaning that men could be expected to comprehend if they were socially located within the cult.

In conclusion, I find the value of Berger’s treatment of Israelite prophetic to be his attempt to bring different areas of inquiry into closer context.

I have maintained that his thesis is too sweeping to do justice to some important prophetic traditions in ancient Israel and to a complex of evidence originating in different periods of Israel's history.

It is a significant contribution to biblical studies when scholars in other disciplines bring their own background to bear on important problems. Those of us engaged in biblical interpretation should be willing to hear, but also to question our colleagues in other areas of study. The questions involved in a study of Israel's prophets would benefit from such interdisciplinary discussion, for these questions are right at the heart of the quest for an adequate theology in the modern world: in Israel's classical prophets we encounter creative experience and speech that is simultaneously iconoclastic. The prophets were men struggling, like many in our own culture, to understand themselves and their world in light of a new age. It is for this reason that I believe insights and perspectives from those engaged with broad-ranging concerns in sociology, literature and psychology may help us to shed new light on the prophets.