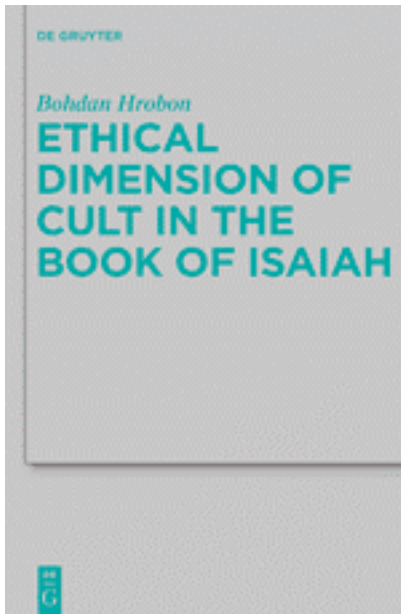


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**Hrobon, Bohdan**

***Ethical Dimension of Cult in the Book of Isaiah***

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This volume is the publication of the Hrobon's dissertation that he wrote at Oxford University under the supervision of Professor Hugh G. M. Williamson. Hrobon aims at contributing to the discussion of the role of cult and ethics in ancient Israel's religion from the perspective of the prophets. He states that "the present thesis brings the prophet and the priest closer by proposing that their conception of cult is essentially the same, reflecting the same theology and co-creating one and the same religion" (1). He limits his discussion to the following key concepts: sacrifice, purity and impurity, holiness, and the promised land. To him, these are the areas of real controversy between the prophets and the priests. Hrobon also expresses the view that he regards the cult as "God-oriented" and "moralized rituality" (4). The book is structured in two main sections. Part 1 lays the groundwork for the thesis of this study by disputing the view that the prophets were anticult and arguing that both prophets and priests had basically the same principled stand on ritual and social justice. Part 2 builds on part 1 by testing the thesis against passages in Isaiah: 1:10–17; 43:22–28; and 58:1–14.

Chapter 1 of part 1, "Conception of Cult and the Prophets," first defines the concepts cult and ritual. Hrobon then goes on to discuss the two views on the relation between the priests and the prophets as either antithetical or complementary. He makes the good

point that the differences between these two entities are due to the different contexts in which they operate and not so much because of differences in theological conviction. In the context of the temple, cult and ritual are the focus. The temple symbolizes YHWH's presence, with ritual as the means to respond to it. The prophets, from their side, had close interaction with the people and were concerned about how the people related to each other in terms of YHWH's demands, hence the focus on ethical aspects such as justice and fairness. Hrobon argues that criticism can be raised against both the antithetical and complementary approaches and that cult and ethics are inherently connected in sacrifice. He warns against applying generalized categories to prophetic oracles without acknowledging the specific context of such oracles. The exercise of a particular ritual or a specific ethical conduct should also be treated within its own right. In his discussion of ritual according to the Priestly tradition, Hrobon pays attention to sacrifices, purity and impurity, and the connection between sacrifices and impurity. He also addresses issues such as ritual and the preexilic prophets, the Documentary Hypothesis and the preexilic cult, differences between the First and Second Temple cults, Knohl/Milgrom's theory of P and H, and the preexilic cult and implications. Hrobon stresses the point in relation to cult-critical texts that the concern with sacrifices was not that they were made to cover up ethical transgressions. He applies what Klawans has said about sacrifices in terms of the priests to the prophets: "as a productive expression of their religious ideals and hopes: the imitation of the divinity, in order to maintain the divine presence among them" (32). According to Hrobon, the priests and the prophets share the view that the main purpose of the cult is to attract and maintain the presence of God. The presence of God in the temple was the concern of the priests, guarding against ritual impurity. The prophets were concerned about the presence of God outside the temple, thus the emphasis on moral impurity. Hrobon concludes the chapter by saying that "the value of ethics for the prophets was determined by cult, not vice versa as is often assumed" (36).

Chapter 2, "Conception of Holiness in the Book of Isaiah," notes that holiness is an attribute of God and is inherently associated with his presence. Hrobon offers a discussion of various aspects as they relate to holiness. He addresses holiness and purity, holiness as a cultic notion, holiness as an ethical notion, holiness in the book of Isaiah, as well as holiness in Proto-, Deutero-, and Trito-Isaiah. The temple, the land, and the people derive their holiness from God because they belong to him. Hrobon concludes this discussion by stating that the prophets accepted the cultic notion of holiness as portrayed in the ritual laws in the Pentateuch. In the book of Isaiah various aspects of holiness could be discerned, but still within the confines of the priestly definition of holiness.

Hrobon dedicates his third chapter of part 1 to "Conception of the Land in the Book of Isaiah." His discussion entails a view of the cultic conception of land in the Law, some

examples of the cultic conception of land in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and, finally, land in the Book of Isaiah. In Leviticus and Numbers the claim is made that the land belongs to YHWH and is also where he resides among his people; therefore the land should be regarded holy. Impure actions may defile the land, which may lead to YHWH withdrawing his presence and care from his people and the land. Hrobon concludes that the “cultic conception of the land as defined in the Law is present in the book of Isaiah” (70). In the next part, the ethical dimension of cult is investigated in three passages from the book of Isaiah.

Part 2 of the book also consists of three chapters, with chapter 4 dealing with Isa 1:10–17, chapter 5 with 43:22–28, and chapter 6 with 58:1–14. Isaiah 1:10–17 is an important and well-discussed passage concerning the issue of the preexilic prophets’ views on cult. Hrobon presents a detailed analysis of this passage, paying attention to the historical background, the literary genre, structural analysis, and text-critical issues. He also has a section called the functional analysis of Isa 1:10–17 that includes aspects such as surface reading and close reading with the aim of reaching a synthesis of the various elements that occur in the passage. He concludes that this passage most probably could be dated in the time of King Ahaz and that it should not be understood as anticult but as a reaction against an adulterous leadership who defiled the cult. The society under this leadership was impure because of idolatry, murders, various injustices, and unethical practices that affected the holiness of YHWH. He ends by saying that the conclusion reached in this passage underscores the thesis that the prophetic view in this passage is essentially the same as defined in the Priestly literature.

Chapter 5, on 43:22–28, follows the same approach in analyzing the passage in terms of the historical background, literary genre, structural analysis, and text-critical issues. Hrobon argues that this passage should not be understood as an accusation, as many do, but as a description of the present state of cultic practices, most probably absent, during the time of the exile. Hrobon does not exclude the possibility that this passage could be applicable to both the Judeans in Babylon and in Palestine. In his conclusion he states that salvation is only possible because of YHWH and not because of Israel’s cultic activities: “This important exilic lesson about the limitations of cult and ethics with regard to salvation is consistent with the Priestly teaching: sins and transgression lead to desecration and cause impurity that can be removed neither by rituals nor ethics” (150).

Hrobon then presents a thorough discussion of Isa 58, addressing the same matters as in the previous two chapters. However, he also pays attention to eschatology in Trito-Isaiah and the cultic background to Isa 58 in terms of fasting and the Sabbath. On the basis of scholarly consensus, Hrobon dates this chapter in the early postexilic period. He also relates his analysis of Isa 58 to chapters 59, 61, and 66:1–4. He remarks that chapter 58

reveals that the prophet viewed Israel's practices of fasting and the Sabbath as showing disregard of the ethical dimension. Both the practice of ritual and ethics can serve one's own interest when they become separated from their biblical roots. Hrobon concludes that ethics and cult are two sides of the same coin.

This monograph makes an important contribution to the debate on the issue of the prophets and their regard for the cult. It is well written, and the key supposition of the importance of the presence of YHWH in the cult as the deciding factor is well argued and skilfully presented. The textual analyses are thorough and show the competence of Hrobon as a scholar. As is often the case with a doctoral thesis, the central thesis tends to be overemphasized. The similarities between the priestly views and those of the prophets at times seem to be too positively stated, not allowing for the unique convictions or views either of these groups at times may have had. Some prophets were closer to cultic places and actions than others who operated more on the fringes of society, which is no doubt reflected in the various emphasises of their messages. This study had a focus on the book of Isaiah, and in terms of the argument presented in this book it underscores the assumption of Hrobon's thesis. It would be interesting to test the thesis in the books of Jeremiah or Ezekiel with their close relations with the priestly tradition. All in all, this is a very good book and a must read for Old Testament scholars.

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