

The Death of God on Zion

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Is not my word like fire — oracle of Yahweh —
And like a hammer that shatters the rock? (Jer. 23:29)

THE contemporary form of theology which is variously labeled as "radical," "secular," or "death of God" is not new at all in its basic stance — at least as it is represented by such men as Harvey Cox and Gabriel Vahanian. In fact, in the Bible itself there is witness to a proclamation much more radical, for it involved not only the rejection of a certain cultural order, but also placed the life of its proclaimer at stake.

I am referring to Jeremiah's message concerning Zion: more specifically, concerning the city of Jerusalem and the temple of Yahweh, God of Israel, located on Mt. Zion. In the face of the developing threat from the powerful city-state of Babylon, Jeremiah stationed himself in the temple courtyard and delivered an oracle which concluded with this verdict:

And now, because you have done all these things — oracle of Yahweh — and when I spoke to you persistently you did not respond, and I called you, but you did not answer: therefore I will do to the house over which my name is called, in which you trust, to the place that I gave you and your fathers, as I did to Shiloh (i.e., destroy it). I will cast you from my presence just as I cast out all your brothers, the offspring of Ephraim. (Jeremiah 7:13-14)

Why this destruction of the temple? Because, according to the prophet, the people had trusted in deceptive words ("the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh" — 7:4) and had broken the commandments which were at the root of Israel's covenant order? (7:8-10) No, it was more than this: the people were unresponsive,

they could not "hear" Yahweh's word. This conflict between Yahweh's word and the people's unwillingness to hear was one that Jeremiah experienced as embodied in himself, for he as a person was not at one with his prophetic office and felt "two wills" battling within him (see the "confessions" of Jeremiah, e.g., Jer. 20:7-18).

So as Jeremiah interpreted the immediate historical situation, Yahweh would employ Babylon as the instrument of his judgment upon his people. Consequently, Jeremiah later urged capitulation to the Babylonian invaders. (27:12-17; 32:3)

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

You'll die for sure! Why have you prophesied in the name of Yahweh, "This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant" (26:8-9)?

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 recount 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)

This understanding of Israel's existence was evidently dominant in Jerusalem and its environs, and although it stood in great tension with the old Yahwist traditions of the tribal confed-

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eracy, it would exert the greatest influence after the Babylonian exile in the form of Jewish Messianic expectations and concentration upon Jerusalem as the "holy city," the sacred center of Jewish existence. This attitude toward Jerusalem had begun to develop in conjunction with David's successful kingship. Under David and Solomon the "David-Zion" tradition began to take form, and included the motifs of David's "everlasting dynasty," the king's sacral status, and the sacredness and inviolability of Mt. Zion as the special residence of God. Jeremiah's message not only threatened the lives of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, which was bad enough; it also envisioned the end of the cultural order rooted in the David-Zion theology. To translate into terms with which we are now familiar, Jeremiah's statements were tantamount to asserting that "God is dead" as far as the worshipers at the temple were concerned. For if Jerusalem, the "city of God," conceived after the image of the primordial cosmic mountain, were shaken could Yahweh still be "alive" (i.e., effective)?

Jeremiah would say yes, but not in the way the people had believed. That is, however, not our main concern in this essay. Let us note here that Jeremiah was tried, acquitted, and escaped with his life (he later had other difficulties with Jerusalemite leaders, for which he was once imprisoned and once thrown into a cistern, but each time there were supporters who aided him). How did he gain this acquittal? He did defend himself, but his defense amounted to no more nor less than the assertion that Yahweh had sent him to deliver this oracle (26:12-15). Hardly a plea that would stand up in a modern court of law! As a matter of fact, in itself it was probably considered insufficient in ancient Israel. At least we know that Judean leaders attempted to supervise such charismatics as Jeremiah (see Jer. 29:26), and the Book of Deuteronomy exhibits a concern to

formulate criteria for evaluating and controlling prophetic utterances. (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:15-22)

There seem to have been two reasons for Jeremiah's acquittal. Jeremiah was defended by certain "princes" and "elders" (some of whom, perhaps, had supported King Josiah's reform in 621 B.C.), who cited precedent: had not the prophet Micah, almost a century before, announced Jerusalem's destruction?

Zion shall be plowed as a field,
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,

And the mountain of the temple a wooded height.

(Jer. 26:18; see Micah 3:12)

And King Hezekiah had not executed him.

The second reason, only implied in the text, was the popular fear of and respect for the prophet. There was undoubtedly a great deal of superstition wrapped up in this attitude, and the common understanding of the prophetic word, even among the prophets, appears to have construed it as having magical effect. As Yahweh's spokesman, the prophet could speak words that work themselves out inexorably as blessings or curses.

But granting this popular attitude, we should yet observe that Israelite culture allowed and even supported the function of an office that could not be easily managed within the framework of Israelite society. Some people in different historical situations were willing to recognize and respond to what they believed to be the transcendent source of Israel's corporate life. This response might even entail the acceptance of the shattering or superseding of previous orders or religio-cultural patterns, for Jeremiah was advocating nothing less than continued faithfulness to a god who would carry his people into exile. Israelites could pray to Yahweh anywhere (Jer. 29:7-9). There fore, a temple, a sacral order perpetuated in the cult, and the assurance of protection and prosperous residence in

Judah were not absolutely necessary. After all, in the beginning had Yahweh not been a god who journeyed with his people, a god not to be identified with any one place, natural phenomenon, or visual representation, though he might reveal himself anytime and anywhere? These were among the ancient Yahwist motifs that Jeremiah presupposed and creatively interpreted.

The message that the prophet directed against his own cultural order raises two points concerning dissent in our own situation. First, dissenting figures like Jeremiah should be considered in assessing the modern Arab-Israeli conflict. Why? Because in ancient Israel — and throughout Jewish history, for that matter — there were various proponents of a dissenting “minority tradition,” who opposed, in different historical situations, an exclusively ethnocentric view of Israel’s existence under Yahweh. They at least raise the question whether there is a land that indisputably belongs to Israel, or a sacred spot (such as the wailing wall in Jerusalem) where God is especially present. This is to say that Israel’s own traditions are ambiguous with respect to the relation of Israel as a people to the “promised land.” In general, Israel’s sacral traditions held that the land belongs to Yahweh, God of Israel. Is that tantamount to saying that Israel has an inherent claim upon it?

So the primary factors that should be considered in the explosive Near Eastern situation are those that center in current and recent political and social realities. Israel has no more inherent claim to the land of the Palestinian area than the ancient Canaanites or Hittites, or the Arab peoples who lived there for so many centuries. The question we must ask, in regard to the rights and needs of both Arabs and Jews, is: what do *mishpat* and *sedaqah* (“justice” and “righteousness”) demand in the present situation? A question that a prophet—or at least some prophets—might ask! God is indeed “dead” to a people who

identify themselves with a land or one place considered sacred.

Which brings me to the second point. Is not God “dead” for many people in the United States? I mean “dead” in the most immediate way as far as our daily lives and our actual self-understanding are concerned, for a God of the past is **passed**: he has slipped away into the world of lifeless or inadequate forms. God is God (and by definition, of course, God could not **not** exist) only to those who see and help to create new forms and visions emerging in history. And this means, among other things, the creation of an order that encourages **dissent**, for the vision of a “new state of things” as over against the “present state of things” (the **status quo**) usually involves dissent.

Among many of us the reaction to dissent is as enraged as the reaction to Jeremiah in his time. Or if our reaction is not enraged, it is often blind, lacking understanding. Suppose we were to place Jeremiah, *mutatis mutandis*, in Washington, D.C. before the White House or Pentagon building. Imagine furthermore that it is a time of war and that the enemy is approaching by sea or via Canada or Mexico. What would be the fate of someone with a message like that of Jeremiah? What should it be? The second question is extremely difficult to answer. It has been a universal policy of nations to silence or execute anyone exhorting capitulation to the enemy in a time of national peril or otherwise making statements that could give “aid and comfort” to the foe.

But of what worth is the destiny of a nation that reacts in a paranoid fashion to those who refuse to conform to national illusions of “manifest destiny,” to prevailing convictions according to which our nation is a “chosen people,” superior to the rest of the world, with sacred shrines that should not be subject to cries of opposition? Consider the furor aroused in some quarters by the statement on “The Rule of Law and the Right to Dissent” by the Uniting Con-

ference. This statement was in no way "revolutionary," yet some of us have so equated God and State that we raise howls of anguish and protest ("protesting the right to protest" we might call it).

We are now living through a process of transition. An old order of meaning is being shattered and a new age lies before us — if we can see it. But the journey to a new cultural order will be difficult, perhaps even filled with violence. We have had a foretaste of this in occurrences associated with the Democratic National Convention and other events, but it is *only* a foretaste. The difficulty of the journey is enforced by the contradictions in our history. Do not we, like ancient Israel, live with conflicting traditions — traditions which on the one hand support a belief in the United States as a "promised land" and a "chosen" nation, while on the other hand there are traditions which legitimate the voice of dissent and thus the possibility of questioning the national "religion?"

Ancient Israel did better than it knew. For somehow most of the figures whom we recognize as prophets were able to survive and proclaim that Israel's true situation was other than it

thought. And they survived and spoke out because some Israelites took with full seriousness a transcendent source of order and dissolution. Therefore, the prophets who saw destruction and disorder when the prevailing mood was one of optimism (perhaps forced and riddled with anxiety) were listened to by some. The right of the prophets to speak was validated by a historically oriented idea of transcendence that imagined history as the function of willing: the will of Yahweh to destroy old orders and create new ones, and the will of his people to be responsive or unresponsive to new situations in history and open or close themselves to the future. Without such an idea of transcendence, a transcendence or ultimate reality which affirms the world and thus is truly "secular," does any movement, group or nation have an adequate basis for advocating action that presupposes the ultimate worth of human existence? For what is the source of this ultimate worth? Is it simply something that we arbitrarily decide we are "in favor of"? This is among the many questions that Jeremiah and ancient Israel leave us with.

Has the fire begun burning and the hammer shattering?

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