

*"Worship, in the biblical sources and in liturgical history, is not something a person experiences, it is something he does, regardless of how he feels about it, or whether he feels anything about it at all. . . . Baalism provided a rich array of 'worship experiences.' Israel and the Christian church insisted that worship was the proclamation of the will of God and the call for human response to it."*

# BAALISM AND YAHWISM UPDATED

BY EUGENE H. PETERSON

WHEN someone talks about reforming worship, I listen. In Ezra Pound's words, "I guzzle with outstretched ears." I know worship is often done badly, hurting the Christian in his growth and damaging his witness in the world. I know that it is central to the Christian church. I know that if it is improved, benefits will spill out on all sides. I'm "reform-ready."

In such a mood I find there are plenty of persons around to advise me. Rebukes abound; suggestions proliferate. I am accused of acquiescing to ancient forms that are meaningless in the modern world. I am blamed for perpetuating rural forms of worship in the midst of urban change. I am put down for persisting in conservative styles in a revolutionary age. Meanwhile the experts are ready with new wineskins: rock music, folk liturgy, multimedia presentations, light shows, sacred dance, plastic art, dialogue.

In the crossfire of advice and example, I am wary. I know that it is easier to make changes out of a panicky sense of inadequacy than because of a clear vision of what is required by the word of God. The accusers are skilled at making me feel inadequate; they are not quite as convincing in their exposition of the word of God. My caution builds. I don't want to be caught changing the style of worship in a superficial imitation of cultural trends that have no theological substance. How am I to sort through the flurry of admonitions? How am I to discriminate between what is merely fashionable and what

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penetrates to the roots of the truth? I don't want to "marry the fashion of the present generation only to find myself a widower in the next one." But neither do I want, stubbornly, to maintain a fossilized routine which will soon have only museum value.

## I

Caught in this kind of ambiguity and confusion, I have been helped greatly by reflecting on a lengthy episode in the history of the people of God, the conflict between Baalism and Yahwism among the Hebrews in Canaan.

Familiarity with this historical episode provides one of the most useful orientations for the nature of common worship available. For the person who has to make leadership decisions about worship, it is a case history in the possibilities of health and pathology in worship. The person who feels this history in his bones, this historical experience which involved several centuries of stormy competition between the cult of Baal and the community of Yahweh, will have absorbed the kind of theological and liturgical insights that will give him a sure hand in conserving the authentic core of biblical experience while he makes the changes that lead Christians to worship intelligently and responsibly.

Baalism was the worship of the Canaanites when Israel occupied the land under Joshua. It continued as a competitive threat to the worship of Israel until the time of the Exile. Sometimes it was exterminated, other times suppressed. Sometimes it broke out and dominated the whole culture.

The emphasis of Baalism was on psychophysical relatedness and subjective experience. The gulf between man and God was leveled out of existence by means of participatory rites. The terrifying majesty of God, his "otherness," was assimilated to the religious passions of the worshipper. The god of the bull image, the god of wine, the god of the fertility figurine was the god of relevance, fulfilling personal needs with convincing immediacy. The desires that inflamed the soul were fulfilled in the cultic act of worship. The transcendence of the deity was overcome in the ecstasy of feeling.

Sensory participation was featured. Images were necessary—the bolder, the more colorful, the more sensational, the better. Music and dance became the means for drawing persons out of their private diversities and merging them into a mass response. Sexual activity in the cult was frequent since it achieved the primary Baalistic goal so completely—the ecstatic plunge of the whole sensory person into the passion of the religious moment.

Sacred prostitution thus became the supreme expression of Baalism. It was rooted in magical, homeopathic practices designed to ensure increased fertility and secure divine power through sexual

intimacy. The *qadesh* and *q'desha* of Canaan were standard accompaniments of the worship of Baal (or Asherah).

When, for instance, Ahab imported the Melkart cult, Jehu summed it up as simply whoredom and witchcraft (II Kings 9: 22). "Harlotry" was the stock criticism of the worship of the people when it had been assimilated to Baalistic forms (Hos. 1ff.; Jer. 3: 1ff.; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Amos 2: 7; Hos. 4: 13; Jer. 5: 7; 13: 27; 23: 10; 23: 14; Micah 1: 7).

While the prophetic accusation of "harlotry" had a literal reference to the sacred prostitution of the Baal cult, it extended its meaning into the entire theology of worship. It referred to worship that sought fulfillment through self-expression, worship that accepted the needs and desires and passions of the worshiper as its raw material. "Harlotry" is worship which says, "I will give you satisfaction. You want religious feelings? I will give them to you. You want your needs fulfilled? I'll do it in the form most attractive to you."

The divine will which sets itself in opposition to the tastes, pre-occupations and perceptions of men is incomprehensible in Baalism and so is impatiently discarded. Baalism is worship reduced to the spiritual stature of the worshipper. Its canons are that it should be interesting, relevant, and exciting.

## II

Yahwism established a form of worship which was centered in the proclamation of the word of the covenant God. The appeal was made to the will. Man's rational intelligence was roused to attention as he was called upon to respond as a person to the will of God. In Yahwism something was *said*—words which called men to serve, love, obey, act responsibly, decide.

In contrast to Baalism, Yahwism exerted continuous pressure to elevate worship into the sphere of conscious intelligence and clearly defined concepts. In Israel, worship was not just the work of the priest by himself; he was joined by the prophet and the prophetic word was incorporated into the temple worship. Israel in its maturity had a worship dominated by the prophetic word of God.

Worship in Israel was no side-line. It sought, and to a great extent succeeded, in achieving authentic expression of a living religion that penetrated the whole of human life. It caught up the personal, the spiritual, and the national life at the same time as it gathered the physical side of life (buildings and bodies) as media for its proclamation of God's word.

God's covenant word initiated and controlled worship, but sensory participation was not excluded. There were bodily actions of kneeling and prostration in prayer. Sacred dances and antiphonal singing gave community solidarity. The garb of priests and the stylized preparation of sacrifices developed dramatic energies. Solemn si-

lence accompanied the offering of the holy gifts to God and sensitized ears to listen. Clouds of incense billowing up from the altar gave a sensory expression to prayer. Man was taken seriously in his totality as a psychosomatic being. The sensory life played its part in his relationship with God. But as rich and varied as it was, it was a part defined and controlled by the word of God. Nothing was done simply for the sake of the sensory experience involved. There is the "complete penetration and exposition of the cultus by the spoken word, in which is established the supremacy of the individual person's spiritual relation to God over the sacramental experience of God" (W. Eichrodt).

The distinction between the worship of Baal and the worship of Yahweh is a distinction between approaching the will of the covenant God which could be understood and known and obeyed, and the blind life-force in nature which could only be felt, absorbed, and imitated. The sexual-orgiastic complex which was bound up with the magic and divinization of nature was always a temptation and frequently a snare, but it was consistently rejected by the community as a whole and by its prophetic leaders.

### III

In today's hortatory literature on liturgical reform, two phrases keep recurring. Both are reminiscent of Baalism, enough so to earn the label, "Neo-Baalism." The phrases are: "Let's have a worship experience" and "I don't get anything out of it."

The phrase "let's have a worship experience" is the recent substitute for the old "let us worship God." The difference is between cultivating something which makes sense to an individual and acting in response to what makes sense to God. In a "worship experience," a person sees something which excites his interest and tries to put religious wrappings around it. A person experiences something in the realm of dependency, anxiety, love, and a connection is made with the ultimate. Worship is a movement from what man sees, or experiences, or hears, to prayer or celebration or discussion in a religious atmosphere. Subjectivity is encouraged.

But neither Bible nor church uses the word "worship" as a description of experience. Pastors hear this adjectival usage in sentences like, "I can have a worship experience with God on the golf course." That means, "I can have religious feelings reminding me of good things, awesome things, beautiful things nearly anyplace." Which is true enough. The only thing wrong with the statement is its ignorance, thinking that such experiences make up what the church calls "worship." The biblical usage is very different. It talks of worship as a response to God's word in the context of the community of God's people. Worship is neither subjective nor private. It is not what I feel when I am by myself. It is how I act toward God in responsible relation with God's people. Wor-

ship, in the biblical sources and in liturgical history, is not something a person *experiences*, it is something he *does*, regardless of how he feels about it, or whether he feels anything about it at all.

The one place where we know that "worship experience" was encouraged was in Baalism. When you were terror-stricken you offered a sacrifice; when you were anxious about the crops you made a visit to the temple prostitute; when you were joyful you ingested the wine god. You did what you felt like doing when you felt like doing it. In between, you got on with your ordinary life. Feelings called the tune, feelings of panic, of terror, of desire, of enthusiasm. Baalism provided a rich array of "worship experiences."

Israel and the Christian church insisted that worship was the proclamation of the will of God and the call for human response to it. The word was authoritative and clear. Nothing was dependent on feelings or weather. All was determined by Scripture. No man was left to do what he felt like doing. The "shape of the liturgy" gave shape to their lives. God revealed his nature and demanded obedience to it. Worship was the act of attending to that revelation and engaging in obedience to it.

#### IV

The other phrase of "Neo-Balism" is "I don't get anything out of it." When it refers to Christian worship, it is accepted as a serious criticism and a valid excuse from further participation in something which personal experience testifies is irrelevant and uninteresting.

The assumption that supposedly validates the phrase is that worship must be attractive and personally gratifying. But that is simply Baalism *redivivus*: worship trimmed to the emotional and spiritual specifications of the worshipper. The divine will which declares something beyond or other than what is already a part of the emotional-mental construct of the worshipper is spurned. That worship might call for something *beyond* man is shrugged off as obscurantist.

And so the one indispensable presupposition of Christian worship, the God of the covenant who reveals himself in his word, is deleted. A Freudian pleasure principle is substituted and worship is misused for the purpose of "harnessing God to human requirements" (Eichrodt). Worship is falsified into being a protective cover for self-seeking. That the self-seeking is in the area of the psychic rather than the sexual does little to improve the results over the old Baalism. A man may be entertained, warmed, diverted, or excited in such worship; he will probably not be changed, and he will not be saved. His feelings may be sensitized and his pleasures expanded. But his morals will be dulled and his God fantasized.

V

The accumulated evidence of the experience of the Hebrews in Canaan shows that the significant thing was not that they rejected the material of Baalism totally and blindly. They did incorporate new elements and provide new motivations. The significant thing is that everything new derived its content from the historical revelation of the covenant God. There were, of course, vast areas that were rejected—sacred prostitution, use of images, child sacrifice—but some elements of the old Baalistic worship were retained. But they immediately became something very different and very new; they became media of the revelation of the God who spoke at Sinai.

Since that word has become so much more plain and definitive in Jesus Christ, there is less excuse than ever for being seduced by Baalism, or Neo-Baalism. And no excuse at all for failing to let the word of God in Christ control and dominate worship.

There are many exciting reforms taking place in Christian worship today, reforms that assimilate new experience and perception to the authority of the gospel in word and sacrament. Much of the remarkable breaking out of joy and celebration in contemporary worship has been successfully shaped by the glad word of Christ's redemption.

That shows that a thorough familiarity with the worship experiences of Israel and the church will not make a person cautious in matters of changing and innovating worship forms. But it will save him from making changes for wrong reasons. And it will give him a basic confidence that every aspect of life has been and can be brought "captive to obey Christ" (II Cor. 10:5) in the common worship of the church.