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The theology of the “Free Slaves”

Introduction

Old Testament history, as well as the development of the theological ideas within it, is often viewed upon from a narrower theological-exegetical perspective which often overlooks a deep connection between the religious and the social aspects. Although the Old Testament represents a wide range of theological ideas which were eventually modified, there are internal, deep structures that could be named “the truth of faith”, which framed and ideologically directed theological contemplation of the Biblical writers. One of the basic postulates of Yahweism was that faith in God includes an adequate attitude towards another man. The religious aspect is inseparable from the social one. A man’s internal religious belief by nature is reflected on the social level. In this regard, it is important to recognize the link between the religious and social elements of the Biblical theologians, especially the prophets, in relation to the world in which they lived. This reveals a great, one could say essential, difference between the then-valid religious and social principles and the prophetic theological insight.

1. The religious-social understanding of the world in which the Israel originated

The ancient Israel, as a nation, arrived to the stage of history when many kingdoms and many Middle Eastern nations had already went through a long period of their civilizations’ development and had created rich cultures. This is the age of the Egyptian New Kingdom - the age of the great boom and expansion. At the same time, Egypt was a civilization dating back as many as fifteen centuries. In Mesopotamia, Sumerians and Akkadians have long since disappeared from the historical scene. Sargon the Great, Hammurabi, Zimri-Lim already belonged to the long past ... Hebron was then a city several millennia old; The Phoenicians have long since crossed the Mediterranean Sea. It was a time when the political scene was dominated by: Egypt, Hittite Empire, Assyria, Mitanni. Literacy was prevalent throughout the biggest part of the Middle East; *The epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Enûma Eliš*, *The Lessons for King Meri-ka-rea* etc. were written a long time ago. The Great Pyramids - a masterpiece of the Egyptian engineers – were built a thousand years ago. The world in which Israel emerged had long since built its temples, cities, roads, had its own theology, powerful state and its ideology.

The people of the old Middle East had built up an ethical and aesthetic vision of the world. The basis of their ethics and aesthetics was a religious belief. In fact, the ancient Middle East basically built up a religious picture of reality that dominated all the aspects of

human life. Of course, the religious consciousness had also undergone several transformations. There were different variations on, often very similar, religious models. At the stage of history, the nations were taking turns. Each one introduced some of their own characteristics, although the basic structure remained identical. This can, above all, be seen in the religious and political consciousness which were intertwined. In general, the ancient civilization of the Middle East was quite complex and rich. In the earlier times, many prejudices (often ideological) of the Eastern despotism, slavery society, pre-critical thought etc. were present in the biblical science. In recent years, an increasing number of discovered records and other artifacts have shed a new light on the world of the ancient civilization.

Regardless of the many unknowns, and at the risk of somewhat simplifying the old Middle Eastern thought, the main spiritual structure can essentially be reconstructed. Namely, the life of man was conformed to the life of the broader community ruled by a clear social order. The social structure was an accentuated pyramidal-hierarchical structure. The old Mesopotamians and Egyptians believed that the monarchy was a God given form of functioning society. The ruler was at the top of the social ladder as the undisputed master. His status was special compared to all the others. After him came the members of the royal family, who often occupied high state positions, then came the high court officials (advisers, officials, high priests). The representatives of these classes were mostly also large landowners. A high and important place in society was occupied by the local managers and their officials. On the lower level were merchants and craftsmen, while the lowest level consisted of the farmers, laborers and slaves. The entire social structure was based on their work.

The ruler was the crown of the pyramidal socio-political structure. In Mesopotamia, in the earlier past, he was the guardian of the city-state in the name of the divine patron saint. In later empires, his domain extended over the whole country. The texts of the middle of the third millennium testify of a very developed sovereign ideology based on a religious belief. A part of the inscription of the city-state of Lagash (ca. 2450) describes the ruler as a divine being – he was created and fostered by gods:

Ningirsu (patron-god of Lagash) implanted the semen for Eanatum (king of Lagash) in the womb [...] rejoiced over Eanatum. Inanna (a goddess) accompanied him, named him Eana-Inanna-Ibgalakatum (his full name: 'worthy in the (temple) Eana of Inanna of Ibgal'), and set him on the special lap of Ninhursag (a mother of goddess). Ninhursag [offered him] her special breast. Ningirsu rejoiced over Eanatum, semen implanted in the womb by Ningirsu. Ningirsu laid his span upon him, for (a length of) five forearms he set his forearm upon him (He measured) five forearms (cubits), one span! Ningirsu, with great joy, [gave him], the kin[gship of Lagash].¹

The rulers were, in a special way, the "sons of God". Hammurabi himself says that he was born from the God Son, and Lipit-Ishtar was perceived as the son of god Enlil. A ruler's holiness was expressed in several ways. He was "the ruler of the country" or "master of the four corners of the universe," which was originally attributed to the gods. Of an Akkadian ruler is said: "Naram-Sin, the strong man, the god of Akkad, the ruler of the four corners (ie, the universe): Lugal-ušumgal, the scribe, the governor Lagash."²

¹ *Corpus des Inscriptions "royales" présargonique de Lagash*, Ean. 1: iv-v, E.Sollberger/J.Cooper, 1971, 1C5acf.

² F. Thureau-Dangin, *Reueil des tablettes chaldéennes*, Paris 1903, 165-166.

Similar views have also existed in Egypt. At one point Amenofis II of Amade celebrated pharaoh: “beloved bodily son of Re... good God, this Re’s creature, ruler ... image of Horus on the throne of his father, great in power.”³ The title appears in the New Empire, particularly in the 18th dynasty, “Re’s image”, “Re’s holy image”, “the living image on the earth” and so on. Pharaoh is “a bright image of the lord of the universe and the creature of the gods of Heliopolis ... Re has created him... as a living image”.⁴ One text says of him: “He is a God who makes us alive through his works”. Thus, Akhenaten means “the creative manifestation of Aton”.⁵ The pharaoh says to himself: “I am his (Osiris’) son, his protégé, his image that comes from him.” At one point Amon says to Amenofis III: “my living image, a creature of my limbs.” The ruler’s label “image of God” is present in the area of Canaan as well. Thus, one text says: “The king’s father, my lord; was the image (salam) of Baal; and the king, my lord; is the image of Baal.”⁶ The ruler lived in close connection with the gods, but at the same time resided among the people. He represented the essential link between the gods and men, between the cosmic and the social. Through participation in the divine life he was the creator of life and fertility.⁷

The ruler was the guarantor and defender of the cosmic order whose earthly parallel is “law and order”.⁸ The state order has a religious foundation; religious and secular are an integral form of social reality. At the head of the political-religious order stood the ruler himself.⁹ All the other roles (positions) were derived from it, whether they were a religious or a political-economic one. In fact, the ruler and his subjects should imitate the gods, because the gods are responsible for the cosmic order. The cosmic order is the paradigm of social order. The framework established by the gods (with the supreme god) must be reflected in the country. Therefore, people were obliged to consecrate the ground. The construction of temples and cities, as well as the cultivation of agricultural resources is a sacred act, because it frees creation of wilderness and chaos. Through conceived interventions order is established in the nature, the order overcomes chaos. Through order the natural elements are overcome, and such a structure ought to rule in the human society as well.

According to the Egyptian theology, the world is governed by *maat*, a term which could be translated as “truth”, “justice”, “the correct order”, “balance” and the like. The pharaoh was the incarnation of the divine *maat*. *Maat* is a connection between the divine and the human.¹⁰ The embodiment of divine *maat* - Pharaoh also kept (maintained) cosmic and social order; therefore he was the bearer of life. Since the social order is one aspect of the cosmic order, it was thought that the empire existed since the beginning of the world.¹¹ The creator was also the first emperor - cosmogony and the origin of state

³ Cf. H. Wildberger, *Das Abbild Gottes, Gen 1, 26-30* (ThZ 21), 485.

⁴ Cf. W. H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschaft*, Neukirchen 1964, 138.

⁵ J. van Dijk, *The Amarna Period and the Later New Kingdom*, in: *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (ed. I. Shaw), Oxford University Press, 2000, 276.

⁶ Cf. W. H. Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 140.

⁷ M. Eljajade, *Istorija verovanja i religijskih ideja I*, Beograd 1991, 69.

⁸ A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000 – 300 BC*, London and New York 1995 / Beograd 2004, 145 (serbian translation).

⁹ A. Kuhrt, *op. cit.*, 31 (serbian translation).

¹⁰ J. Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil. Politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa*, München/Wien 2000, 38-39.

¹¹ M. Eljajade, *op. cit.*, 81.

are simultaneous, these are two aspects of the same reality. The first emperor was a god and was later inherited by the pharaohs. This, in essence, meant that the state and social institutions are the expression of the divine *maat*. God Ra "establishes order (*Maat*) instead of chaos" in creation. He appointed the Pharaoh to rule the country "always and forever", while the ruler on earth, imitating divine intervention, brings order instead of disorder. The very God of heaven establishes the order in the country. Disorder or chaos is perceived in the destroyed social order or the invasion of external enemies. Other nations that potentially or indirectly threaten the country are the embodiment evil and chaos. However, the Pharaoh was unable to govern arbitrarily – regardless of *maat*. He had to govern in accordance with it; it is only in this way that the link between the heavenly and the earthly was established. Ruling according to the divine *maat* meant the maintenance of the cosmic order. After death, the pharaoh crossed over into the divine pantheon. The preservation of pharaoh's mummy – which is why they built the pyramids – meant the salvation of the state and its subjects. The very social structure, which was extremely pyramidal-hierarchical, pointed to the divine. There is the one who is on the top and he places everything in order.

Every Egyptian was required to harmonize his life with the all-governing *maat*: "I was a man who loved *maat* and hated sin, knowing that God is terrified (of sin)". The order is possible if all social structures governed according to the governing *maat*. Essentially, this meant that everyone fulfilled their social role, regardless of one's class. Changes in the social order were considered to be an opposition to *maat*, which meant sin and injustice (*isfet*). This is certainly one of the main reasons why there were no serious social revolutions in the Old East. The existing social structure was accepted as a God given form, as a sacred order. Such a view was also fostered by a pessimistic anthropology, especially in Mesopotamia. Specifically, according to the Mesopotamian myth *Enûma Eliš*, the man was created from the blood of the evil demon Kingu. His role on the earth is to serve the gods and to support the order which they established.

Although life on earth ought to imitate the heavenly patterns there was a significant difference between these two worlds. The old Middle Eastern religious ideas clearly limited man. The border between gods and men is insurmountable. It was one of the key motifs of *the Epic of Gilgamesh*. The only possibility of participation in the divine is to accept God-given order, embodied by the temples, ziggurats, the pyramids, the imperial palace ... It was the center from which the order was established pyramidally, which was, as such, a consecrated expression of existence. It was the dominant paradigm of the ancient world which was, with certain modifications, valid from the beginning of the Sumerian city-states until the end of the Roman Empire. The freedom of the individual in relation to the established order would have been unimaginable.

2. Israel – a counterweight to the ruling ideology

Compared to the great peoples who built the old Middle Eastern civilization, Israel was, in political and cultural terms, a negligible historical phenomenon. Of Israel as a nation one can only talk after their entry into Canaan. The earliest this could be is 13th century B.C. Researchers believe that somewhere in this period, a smaller group of Israelites left Egypt and headed to the Promised Land. Regardless of the extent to which the narrative of the Exodus corresponds to historical reality, one aspect is of particular impor-

tance. Namely, according to the biblical narrative, God has chosen the Egyptian slaves and made a covenant with them. The Exodus tells the story of the people who escaped from slavery in Egypt, entered into a covenant with God at Mount Sinai and headed to the Promised Land. While in other Middle Eastern nations, the holders of alliances and special relationships with God (gods) were the rulers, Israelites established their relationship with God through the entire nation, which had previously been enslaved.

The ups and downs through which the Israelites go, moving from Egypt to the Promised Land, testify in an unusual way to a deep sense of freedom. The narrative is often imbued with tension between Moses (God) and the people. Nothing is presupposed. The participants of the event actively and freely make decisions. On the way to the Promised Land, the rest of the nation often opposes Moses (Ex 32). The description of the central event – the making of the covenant – clearly testifies. Moses – the mediator between God and Israelites – tells the people the will of Yahweh for them to accept it (Ex 24, 3.7). When contributions were being collected for the ark, God speaks to Moses: *You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give.* (25, 1). Contribution to the offer to God should be from the heart, it is given in freedom and love. In fact, the whole concept of the Exodus is based on the idea of freedom.

No less important is the entry into and the conquer of the Promised Land. The biblical report of a lightning-fast war can not be taken as a true reflection of historical events. In the biblical teaching, there is a theory that Israel peacefully integrated into Canaan and eventually became the dominant ethnic community which founded its own state. In recent decades there appeared another very interesting hypothesis, which merits special attention. In fact, according to a number of prominent experts,¹² Israel has emerged as a result of social rebellion within Canaanite society and unification with a group of escaped slaves from Egypt. The runaway slaves entered the Promised Land carrying a theologically based idea of freedom and equality. At first they lived in a hilly part of Canaan, and they were later joined by the lower social strata from the Canaanite cities, who at the time of the great invasion of “Sea People” rebelled against the ruling classes and escaped into the hills, joining the Israelites. There is plenty of compelling scientific evidence supporting this thesis.

In this context, it is important to mention one archaeological discovery which is in favor of this hypothesis. Specifically, it is the phenomenon of the so-called Israelite houses from the pre-monarchy period. While in the cities of Canaan and throughout the Middle East there existed a concept of urban settlement according to which there were clearly separated parts of the city for the rich and the poor strata of the population, which was also reflected in the richness of the buildings, the Israelite type of house and the whole village was represented by an egalitarian social concept. The houses were simple and there are no urban solutions according to which some parts of the village were separated from the others in the sense of social stratification of the residents. This suggests that the early Israel, in the years of its origin and the first centuries of presence in the area of Canaan, was based on the religious organization, the foreground of which emphasized social equality – of course, corresponding to the broader social and political-economic

¹² Cf. G. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of Biblical Tradition*, Baltimore 1973; N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh. A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B. C. E.*, New York 1979; G. Ahlstrom, *Who Were the Israelites?*, Winona Lake, 1986; N. P. Lemche, *Early Israel: Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society before the Monarchy*, Leiden, 1985.

system. It is from this perspective that one should consider the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11), as well as the statement that the first founder of the city was Cain – fratricide (Gen 4, 17). The stories of early Israel and the listed texts from the Biblical narrative are implicitly very critical of the then prevailing social system.

Two important historical narratives related to the Exodus and the settlement of Israel are fundamentally based on the idea of freedom and equality. Between these two events stands a desert as a place in which Israel felt that kind of life to the greatest extent. The desert will later, in the consciousness of the prophet, play precisely that role. The prophets called upon the ideal of the desert, criticizing the internal stratification of Israel (Hos 13, 5). In general, the nomadic-desert way of life carries a basic egalitarian concept,¹³ which was not possible in the then-civilized urban system. However, unlike the earlier tribal equality, which was represented in many ancient nomadic peoples, in the ancient Israel the idea of human equality received special theological outlines.

The latter history of Israel brought ordeals for the ancient ideals. Namely, after establishing ethnic superiority over other nations in the territory of Canaan, Israelites encountered great challenges in confrontation with the Philistines and other nations. The better organized surrounding nations were superior on the field of battle, and eventually the question of the internal organization of Israel arose. The solution was the establishment of the monarchy. This would soon lead Israelites to a position that, at the time of kings David and Solomon, they were the dominant political factor which took over control of the country. Biblical writers largely idealized the works of King David. However, the very next the king, Solomon, was designated as the originator of collapse (1Kings 11). Of course, this issue ought to be viewed from a wider angle. The Israelites, of nomadic mentality, had increasingly more intensive contact with the Canaan's agrarian culture. This was reflected in their basic habits and lifestyle. Agrarian cults were basically the starting point of the contemporary pagan religious consciousness and the driving force of civilization process.

Soon, there appeared the prophets who were vehemently opposed to new trends within Israel. Yahweh, in their consciousness, could not become a God of the state and the weather conditions. He had a very different nature, and could not be compared to the gods of the neighboring Syrian world.¹⁴ There was a real danger of 'Canaanizing' Yahweh, as the new circumstances, especially related to fertility cults, could draw the very cult of Yahweh into a similar ritual form. It was a very real ordeal. Canaanites were in the civilizational and cultural sense incomparably superior to Israelites. Other nations which came to the area of cultural and superior nations usually adopted their traditions and continued to operate under a similar religious and social matrix. However, the Israelite prophets and groups of loyal Yahweists did not accept such a model. Behind many of the biblical narratives and prophetic condemnation one can clearly see fierce opposition to Canaanite cults.

The criticism of Canaanite cults was a criticism of a lifestyle that profoundly reflected onto the religious consciousness, while at the same time springing from it. This criticism is also found in the narrative of Cain and Abel. Cain was a farmer, a paradigm of the Canaanites. His sacrifice was not accepted by God, but the shepherd-nomad Abel's was. The

¹³ H. W. Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, Philadelphia 1964, 18-20.

¹⁴ F. Stolz, „Unterscheidung von Gott und Welt: Monotheismus“, *Weltbilder der Religionen, Kultur und Natur. Diesseits und Jenseits. Kontrollierbares und Unkontrollierbares*, Zürich 2001, 146.

8th century prophets Hosea and Amos criticized the pagan rituals particularly. The essence of immorality to the Israelites of that time, according to the prophetic understanding, lied in their perverted religious practice and preference of Canaanite cults, "Baal and Astarte". Even when they formally confessed Yahweh, they had more respect for him as Baal, the god of goods and property. So, Hosea, in the image of an unfaithful woman, regards the entire Israel that is similarly in prostitution with Canaanite gods (2, 5). The purpose of such a religion is to achieve material prosperity, which is made possible through the rituals devoted to fertility deities.¹⁵ In such cults, strong elements of magical consciousness are present. Certain ritualistic operations had to have been performed in order to achieve the desired effect. The very cult of Yahweh was frequently ritualized and transformed into the established religious patterns, which obscured the original meaning of the faith.

The prophets were not only a minority, but they were often persecuted and considered a disruptive element within the nation, as evidenced by the narrative cycles of Elijah and Elisha. The majority of Israelite community, led by the Emperor and the court, accepted the system that was too similar to other nations'. Israel as a political entity could survive as an empire only if it was established by the models applicable to those times. The problem was that by this, Yahweistic ideals were crumbling. It is understandable that the biblical writer attributed the sins to Solomon and his introduction of foreign cults which spoiled the true faith in Yahweh. In essence, with Solomon and the development of the state apparatus a systemic corruption of the earlier ideals is introduced. The ideals of liberty and equality are disappearing in the process of establishing a hierarchically organized state. In fact, the prophets criticized the very concept of the empire (ref. Hos 9, 15). In 1 Sam 8, 1ss one reads of the champions coming to Samuel to ask him to appoint them an emperor. The biblical writer describes the reaction of Samuel: *He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.* (1Sam 8, 11-18). In these words the theological vision of a theological movement that has strongly opposed the very idea of the empire is expressed. In the biblical studies it is referred to as the anti-monarchist (cf. 1 Sam 8; 10, 17-25; 12).

The tensions between the Yahweists and the syncretists culminated in the 8th century, when a greater social stratification occurred. It was a kind of a period of social transition. The state apparatus was built on a hierarchical basis, which presupposed the formation of a layer of wealthy people. The conquest of the new territories contributed to this. The increase in power and wealth of certain social strata was happening at the expense of the poorer (cf. Micah 2, 2). The faith in God Baal – a landowner, implied such

¹⁵ Cf. J. Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament*, Oxford 1999 / Beograd 2003, 179-180 (serbian translation).

a cult. The sign that God is on one's side was evident in his material possessions, the abundance of crops. Today it is possible only to assume (based on the current analogy) in which perfidious ways such a transition was performed. The prophets were involving themselves in the fight against it. An example of this is the prophet Elijah who was opposed to Ahab and Jezebel and was engaged in active struggle with the pagan cults and customs (1Kings 17–19).¹⁶ It was probably sometime in this period that the Israelite theologians made the idealized division of the country according to their tribes and conducted numerous genealogies. Although these parts of the Old Testament may seem boring and pointless to contemporary readers, they had a distinct theological importance at the time of occurrence as well as later. This was the way it was shown that the country is divided by tribes and families, and therefore needs to be owned by them, while the genealogy aimed to demonstrate genealogical bond between the then oppressed and disenfranchised with their ancestors who were given the land.

Almost the entire period of the monarchy was marked by tension between the Yahweists and those prone to respecting other gods.¹⁷ However, it would be difficult to understand such a protest of the prophets against a mere difference between the ritual in the cults of Yahweh and the other gods, or that it was about a whole-hearted affection towards a national god. The prophets, because of the sins of Israel, often announced the ruin their own people (2Kings 21, 12-15; Hos 7–8; Amos 3, 9-11). Israel's God is the one who brings the Assyrians as a punishment that should come upon Ephraim and Judah. God also raises the Babylonian emperor to demolish Jerusalem. Criticism by the prophets on account of Israel testifies that Jehovah is not a national god in the classical meaning. At the same time, in the Old Testament writings, one can find many instances where the Israelites are shown as no better than others or even on the contrary – worse than others. Some texts mention non-Israelites that were very honorable people (Pharaoh in the narrative of Abraham and Sarah, Abimelech, Uriah the Hittite, the people of Nineveh who repent). In fact, belonging to the true Israel implied a distinctive way of life, which overcame national framework and placed the emphasis on the fulfillment of the provisions of the Covenant. Certainly, one should be aware that the prophets often depicted almost pure ideals and utopian views, of which they themselves were often aware (cf. Is 2, 12, 13, 6.9; Joel 3, 14; Amos 5, 18-20; Ob 1, 15). However, these ideals were supposed to be important religious imperatives.

The essential difference between Yahweism and pagan belief lied in the belief system. This is especially related to the Yahweistic understanding of the man. The prophets often criticize Israel for incorrectly respecting God - offering sacrifices while doing injustice to one another (cf. Am 2, 6; 3, 10; 4, 1; 5, 11-12). The prophets reject such a cult clearly and vigorously: *I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.* (Am 5, 21-23) or: *For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.* (Hos

¹⁶ Cf. E. F. Kempbell Jr., *A Land Divided*. Judah and Israel from the Daeth of Solomon to the Fall of Samaria, in: *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. M. Coogan), Oxford University Press 1998, 221-223.

¹⁷ Cf. B. Lang, *Der monarchische Monotheismus und die Konstellation zweier Götter im Frühjudentum*: Ein neuer Versuch über Menschensohn, Sophia und Christologie, Ein Gott allein?, OBO, Freiburg Schweiz 1994, 559-563.

6: 6). The knowledge of God consists of keeping the law, which is primarily related to an adequate attitude towards another man. What the knowledge of God means can be read from the following words: *He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?*” declares the Lord. (Jer 22, 16). The true faith in Yahweh necessarily implies the prophet’s instructions: *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy.* (Mi 6: 8). In contrast to the cult in which the relationship to the neighbor was neglected, the prophets emphasize: *But let justice roll on like a river; righteousness like a never-failing stream!* (Am 5, 24).

Of course, this raises the question of what the justice is to the prophets. It is known that in ancient Egypt, in the Amarna period, abundant sacrifices were offered to the gods, while the largest number of population was suffering from malnutrition. That in itself might not seem so daunting were it not in a religious context. However, the shocking fact is that such practices did not provoke criticism by the Egyptian theologians. It was a fulfillment of some higher justice (*Maat*), which holds all in existence. In the Amarna period, the status of the righteousness (*maaty*) was acquired through the complete loyalty to the monarch and order (*Maat*) which he embodied.¹⁸ In such a conception, the importance of individual personality was obscured. Slavery was based on this scorn of the common man. The people could only imitate and respect the existing order (justice), which did not exist for their sake.

However, to the Old Testament prophets, the righteousness was measured by respect towards the fellow human being. The fulfillment of Justice reflected, above all, in love and compassion toward the fellow man: *He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws... but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked.* (Ez 18, 5.7c). Isaiah summed it up: *“The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations – I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow* (1, 11-17). Everyone was required to uphold justice. This related in every sense to the emperor (Jer). Emperors did not need to have a lot of *horses, women, silver and gold* (Deut 17, 16-17), but they needed to fulfill the law: *and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites* (Deut 17, 20a). In these provisions of Deuteronomy the Old Testament ideals radiate: all are equal before God, and they should remain such between each other. The ideal emperor – David, was a shepherd in his youth. This refuted any divine origin of the Israelite emperor.

It has been said that the Egyptians and other nations, the only one who was god-like was the ruler. Contrary to such beliefs stood the Old Testament understanding that

¹⁸ Cf. J. van Dijk, *op. cit.*, 277-278.

every man is God-like (Gen 1, 26-27). The Bible especially emphasizes human dignity, so in one place the psalmist says that the man is slightly *lesser than Elohim* (Ps 8, 5). In this respect, there is a consistent match between basic theological ideas. The God who made a covenant with the runaway slaves is the God who created a man by his own image. A proper relationship with God is achieved through a relationship with the neighbor, because he is God-like. There are no value differences between the people; there is no awareness of the classes. Israel self-reflected as a brotherhood of the people of God.¹⁹ The expressions *re'a* (the neighbor) and *'âh* (brother) include all the members of the Sinai covenant.²⁰ The 'Sons of Israel' were the people of brotherhood, whose bodily origin is of the twelve brothers. An example of a strong connection between the chosen people can be seen in relation to the debtor or servant, a member of the same people (Lev 21, 2.16; 22, 25; Deut 15, 2.12; 23, 20; 24, 7).²¹

According to the Old Testament understanding, the true religion was based on the fulfillment of the obligations undertaken by the Covenant. Israel was called upon to be a holy nation: *You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy* (Lev 20, 26). Holiness meant the fulfillment of justice and having love and compassion. In the so-called Code of holiness one finds: *Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord* (Lev 19, 17-18). The maintenance of the Covenant with Yahweh meant the fulfillment of the commandments, which demand a love of God and neighbor. To love one's neighbor as oneself implied, among other things, to experience him as an equal. Such a theology the ancient world did not know.

¹⁹ H. W. Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments*, Gütersloh 1973, 272.

²⁰ J. B. Bauer, *Nächster* (BhW II), 903.

²¹ Cf G. von Rad, *Das Gottesvolk im Deuteronomium* (BWANT 47), 1929, 12.