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Review of Thomas Overholt, Channels of Prophecy: The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity

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minimalist approach to reconstructing early Israelite views of the divine, see M. S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990]). D.M.'s study challenges fundamental assumptions about plausible reconstructions of early Israel. Indeed, it is notable that d.M. reconstructs more than a century of Israelite history prior to the first historical reference to Israel ca. 1200.

The major strength of this work, the massive reconstruction of early Israel, engenders some major questions. D.M.'s narrative of Israel's early history involves multiple layers of interpretation and reconstruction. D.M. necessarily fills gaps in Israel's early history when there are little or no data available. One major component of this approach is to use many early poems (e.g., Genesis 49; Exodus 15; Numbers 22-24; Deuteronomy 32 and 33) to reconstruct the early history of Israel. Yet the methods for dating such poems have come under increasing scrutiny. D.M. imputes to each of these poems a specific historical setting and dates the poems or an earlier form of the poems to the assigned setting; one senses a circular argument in this approach. At the same time, it must be said in d.M.'s defense that parts of these poems may be quite early, and little firm evidence has been offered against the pre-monarchic date for some of them (e.g., Judges 5). The plausibility of d.M.'s reconstruction is directly tied to the plausibility of the dating of these poems.

There is a second problem with d.M.'s use of these poems. Were one to grant d.M.'s early dates for these poems (or the early date of some form of these poems), do they constitute sufficient evidence to sketch religious movements and thinking within early Israel? There is a similar methodological issue not only with d.M.'s use of biblical texts, but also with other ancient Near Eastern material. On the basis of some texts d.M. offers psychological assessments of persons and cultures (e.g., pp. 83,88, 89,90,97,99,110,143). Many scholars will question whether the texts are sufficiently explicit in such psychological expressions to warrant generalizations about the psychological mood of entire cultures. Third, one may question d.M.'s interpretation of some biblical and Ugaritic words or their significance for his arguments; to be sure, the vocabulary of these texts is inordinately difficult and scholars frequently differ in their interpretations.

It is impossible in a review to do justice to a work of such complexity and creativity. D.M. has shown great scholarship and courage in his efforts. All future studies of early Israelite religion will need to engage d.M.'s multifaceted and challenging account.

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THOMAS W. OVERHOLT, *Channels of Prophecy: The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). Pp. xii + 193. Paper N.P.

Those who have followed Overholt's work on sociological perspectives of the biblical prophets and his particular interest in using comparative perspectives from native American "prophetic" activity will be very pleased with his most recent work.

After a helpful review of past approaches to understanding prophetic activity, O. constructs a new model for comparative analysis of prophetic activity. Since the work of Max Weber, the construction of “models” as a tool for sociological and comparative analysis has been a storm center of debate. It is obvious that data can be misrepresented by an incomplete or inadequate model, and that the unique aspects of the compared cases can be ignored in favor of the model. O. is aware of these problems and designs his model to focus on the comparative aspects of prophecy in various social contexts, without ignoring the unique historical details of the cases in question.

Overholt suggests various directions of interaction. The first is “vertical” (not a term used by O., I should add), between the prophetic agent and the “divine” (however the latter is perceived). The second is “horizontal,” between the prophet and the listeners—the society within which the prophet is active. O. points out that the reception of the surrounding society largely makes the prophet, or perhaps even determines whether it is an age of reception to prophets in general. Thus, a sort of triangular model is constructed with lines representing the various interactions or dialogue between the three sides. In chaps. 3 and 4, O. surveys examples of prophetic activity, comparing the 19th-century Ghost Dance prophet Wovoka among native Americans, the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake, and finally Jeremiah. The application of the model illustrates the various levels of interaction between the three sides in each case. Besides the inherent interest of the two native American cases particularly, O.’s model succeeds in illustrating many interesting common features of all three prophetic agents and their activity.

Overholt deals only briefly with “prophetic activity in societies” in a manner more familiar to Marxist-influenced sociological analysis. Those in a materialist tradition will almost certainly be uncomfortable with the absence of an analysis of what can be known about the socioeconomic factors of the societies and their prophets, the role of power relationships, or the role of social stratification and class conflict in prophetic activity, whether native American or biblical. O. is aware of these matters (as in the brief comments on crisis, pp. 112-15), but his concern and methodological interests lie elsewhere.

In the opinion of this reviewer, chaps. 5 and 6, based as they are on the earlier groundwork in chaps. 2-4, make the most interesting contributions of O.’s methodology to wider issues in analysis of the prophetic movement. Chap. 5 presents a more inclusive definition of “divination” activity, which reveals how “prophetic” activity is in actuality a form of divination. O. shows how divining activity did *not* cease after the Babylonian exile, as many scholars argue with regard to prophetic activity. This raises interesting questions about the relationship of apocalyptic literature to divination, although O. (wisely, perhaps) does not go into great detail on this beyond a review and critique of discussions about the transformation of prophecy in the post-exilic period.

Overholt’s final chapter raises the possibility of continued prophetic activity in the modern age. To his credit, O. does not avoid taking the bull by the horns, although I would have been more interested to see how O. would have dealt with those religious traditions where prophetic activity has long since been included in mature religious practice (e.g., Black Christian traditions, Caribbean Christian movements, Appalachian

Pentecostalism, South African “Zionist” churches, popular religious movements in Islam, various mature sects such as Quakerism, or perhaps even Medjugorje) rather than a focus on examples such as David Wilkerson’s *The Vision*, or the interests in “channeling” in the entertainment industry. Still, the chapter remains interesting and informative.

Overholt’s work makes a significant and welcome contribution to his important corpus of work on sociological analysis of the Bible, and O.’s cross-disciplinary interest in both biblical and native American prophetic phenomena makes his work among the more interesting sources for contemporary students of the Hebrew prophets.

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MARCEL PELLETIER, *Les pharisiens: Histoire d’un parti méconnu* (Lire la Bible 86; Paris: Cerf, 1990). Pp. 379. Paper F 110.

Intended for a general audience, this volume seeks to present a fair picture of the Pharisees by placing them in the context of Second Temple Judaism and discerning their positive goals and programs. Pelletier complains (correctly) that most Christians know the Pharisees only from what the Gospels say about them. So charged with feeling has the French word “pharisaïsme” become that the author prefers the neologism “pharisianisme.”

The aim of the book determines its content. It first traces Jewish history from the return from exile in Babylon, through Nehemiah and Ezra, to the Maccabean revolt. Then it discusses the origins of the Pharisaic movement during the Hasmonean period and sketches its development in the Herodian period. Using Josephus’ writings and rabbinic traditions, it discusses the evolution of Pharisaic thinking (with particular attention to Hillel and Shammai) and deals with the Pharisees’ approaches to the Torah, study, daily life (ritual purity, tithing, sabbath observance, etc.), other movements (Sadducees, priestly circles, Zealots, and Essenes), and the task of education. Next it explores the Pharisees’ attitudes toward Jesus—what they found offensive about him, and why he criticized them. The last few chapters take the story of the Pharisees through the late first century—the conflicts with the early church, and the attempt at reconstructing Judaism after 70 C.E.

This work of *haute vulgarisation* succeeds in achieving its basic objectives. It presents a lively narrative of Jewish history in the Second Temple period, and provides a sympathetic picture of the Pharisaic movement within that context. But it builds on shaky foundations and fails to lead its readers to the next stages of study. For the most part the ancient sources are taken at face value and strung together uncritically in a narrative about Second Temple Judaism. In many places there are no references at all to the sources, leaving the nonspecialist baffled to know where the information came from. Practically everything about the Pharisees is a matter of debate among scholars today. Yet one would not guess that from P.’s presentation. The research of J. Neusner, E. Rivkin, A. J. Saldarini, and others makes no visible impact.