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## Religious Intolerance in the Old Testament

### Abstract

In this article, the author articulates the relationship between monotheism and religious intolerance. The Jewish people obtained a unique relation from the One true God in multiple ways, one of them on Mount Sinai. God asked his people to respect Him as the only God and to avoid worshipping any other deity that they will encounter in Canaan. In history Jews people drifted away slowly into idolatry, causing a new reaction from God, that of speaking insistently through His prophets. One can describe prophets as persons called by God to bring back his Jewish people to the religious Truth and, implicitly, as promoters of intolerance towards any other foreign religions.



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## Keywords

revelation, religious truth, decadency, idolatry, religious intolerance

## 1 Introduction

By the supernatural revelation on Mount Sinai, a powerful spiritual bond was born between the Jewish people and Yahweh, with moral and social implications. Israel had an obligation to worship only this God and to remove with severity any tendency to worship another deity. This religious perspective was also based on the attitude on Abraham, who was the first monotheist among them to renounce idolatry to the unseen God, the Only Creator and true Almighty of the universe.<sup>1</sup>

This God told them: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God" (Numbers 15, 41). The new spiritual principal of this people is underlined explicitly through the words: "you shall have no other gods before me" and "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone" (Exodus 20, 3-5; Deuteronomy 6, 4). At that moment after experiencing the Egyptian plagues and the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, there was no place for disobedience among the Jewish people. However, because human negligence was already experienced by the Jews, it was decided that the unfaithful ones would be killed so that they would not corrupt others (Numbers 15, 30). This line of

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Christophe Attias, Ester Benbassa, *Dicționar de civilizație iudaică*, trans. by Șerban Velescu, (București: Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 2000), p. 164.

through was based on the principle that any other religious option causes implicitly different morale and other inter-social relations, which insults God (Leviticus 24, 14), desecrates the holy land of Israel and His creation because it is not according to the divine expectations.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the religious and spiritual noncompliance had to be treated with social exclusion and expulsion among the Jewish people, as a severe method to discourage any proliferation of idolatry and the wanderers from the Truth. Moreover, Yahweh's method to remind the Jewish people about this principle was to speak to them through His prophets for almost ten centuries (14<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.).

## **2 The Prophets, Heroes in the Fight against Idolatry**

The Old Testament includes in its revealed pages numerous pieces of information on the determining spiritual-moral role held by certain people called to the prophetic mission, a mission dedicated to the continual edification of the people, to making the people understand the moral responsibility in which they need to live towards God. The need for the emergence of this “institution” was felt after the conquest of the Holy Land from the Canaanite peoples by Joshua Navi. After the conquest, the Jews spread on a vast territory with different landscapes, maintaining their tribal organization with the local leaders, which was often anarchic and unstable (Judges 9, 5-22; 19, 30), to the detriment of the need for political and governmental centralization, which could have kept better the

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<sup>2</sup> Dumitru Abrudan, Emilian Cornițescu, “*Arheologie Biblică*”, (București: Ed. IBMBOR, 1994), p. 186.

cultural, social and most of all religious identity of Abraham's descendences.

Therefore, the prophet is a man called by God to an extraordinary mission. He is a man with a distinctive moral personality, a complete man in point of his spiritual-moral configuration, aware of his new quality – extraordinary envoy of God in the world. Situated in this unique position, the prophet is the representative of the true religion, the one inspired and desired by God Himself, by means of which man can know his Creator and relate to Him through adequate divine service acts.

The prophet is the man who transmits the true divine revelation, as he has had a calling "in the highest sense of the word"<sup>3</sup>, which is why God has chosen him to be his representative. Aware of the great responsibility entrusted to them and of their quality of messengers of God, the true prophets have endeavored with their whole being to accomplish the mission responsabilizing them in front of their own conscience but also in front of the people. This mission consisted in the communication of the will of God to the people, in guiding them in the keeping of the true faith in one God and in creating a social-moral atmosphere adequate to the practice of this faith. The divine intention has always been that of calling His errant sons to the true faith. For this purpose, He offered them the possibility to light their spirits through the guiding word of the prophet. The sending of Ezekiel to preach is edifying in this sense. God says: "I am sending you to their hard-headed and hard-hearted descendants, and you will say to them: The Lord God proclaims. Whether they listen or whether

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Prelipceanu, Nicolae Neaga, Gheorghe Barnea, "*Studiul Vechiului Testament*", (București: Ed. IBMBOR, 1985), p. 326.

they refuse, since they are a household of rebels, they will know that a prophet has been among them" (Ezekiel 2:4-5).

The prophets' main fight took place in the spiritual arena. They fought against the acceptance of the faith in foreign deities, borrowed from the religiosity of the surrounding peoples, but also against the tendencies of physical, idolatrous perception and representation of Yahweh. Their mission relied on a profound and responsible conscience, on their desire to save the Jews from the danger of abandoning the true religion. The consequence of this abandonment would have meant losing the effect of the covenant made between God and Abraham, namely:

- ceasing the divine spiritual paternity promised to the obedient sons of Israel;
- losing the divine protection against foreign invaders.

The abandonment of monotheism and the proliferation of polytheism would have meant giving up on the religious truth and mystifying it, replacing it by phantasms of the human mind. This spiritual battle was waged for several centuries, beginning with the coming of the Israelites in Canaan (13th century B.C.) and continuing until after the Babylonian slavery and the Seleucid rule (2nd century B.C.). Despite this and of Yahweh's prophets efforts, polytheism and idolatry emerged in the lives of the Jewish people.

The prophets' fight against the idolatry increasingly rooted in the people of Israel was constant and long, being meant to deal with the imposture, popular credulity, and disobedience to the revealed word. In time, the historical events proved the falsity of the idols and the authenticity of God's prophets, but also the need to punish a people that had preferred the sin of drifting away from the true God. This punishment took the form of the Assyrian and Babylonian invasion and enslavement of the Jewish people in the 8th – 6th centuries B.C.

For the prophets, their personal life no longer mattered, because, understanding the importance of the mission to which they were called to and the spiritual consequences involved, depending on the choices that the people would make, these prophets got the message and reached the goal of their lives, just as God had expected from them. The fulfillment of this goal was often made at the cost of their lives because some of their contemporaries chose to impose their idolatrous preferences through violence (1 Kings 18, 4; 19, 10).

### 3 The Idolatry of the True God

The first stage of the fight was waged against the representation of Yahweh in a material, physical form, which was forbidden by the second commandment (Exodus 20, 4-6) in order to preserve a high spiritual standard regarding a superior, spiritualized understanding of Yahweh, the true God, Who is above all creation.

The golden calf built on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:1-6), just as the priestly vest made out of the Midianites' gold by judge Gideon (Jud. 8:24-27), express the gross tendencies of an undeveloped spirituality, which calls for the need of physical concretization of the image of God, a tendency caused by the surrounding pagan influences<sup>4</sup>. This aspect was also speculated by King Jeroboam (932-910 B.C.)<sup>5</sup>, who ordered in his turn that Yahwe be represented under the form of “young bulls” made of gold, exhibited publicly at Betel and Dan, to counterbalance the

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<sup>4</sup> Athanase Negoită, “*Istoria religiei Vechiului Testament*”, (București: Editura Sophia, 2006), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Dumitru Abrudan, Emilian Cornițescu, “*Arheologie Biblică*”, p. 155.

religious and traditional attractiveness of the Jewish temple of Jerusalem (1 Kings 12, 27 -32).

The famous snake made of copper which saved the rebellious Jews during the 40 years pilgrimage through the Sinai desert (Numbers 21, 8-9), raised as a flag<sup>6</sup>, kept and respected with reverence continuously over the centuries, named "Nehushtan", became over time an object of idolatry. Its purpose to save the Jews bitten by venomous snakes ended long ago, but king Hezekiah (Hiskia, 728-699 B.C.)<sup>7</sup> chose to destroy it during the religious reform that he initiated (2 Kings 18, 4).

The Canaanite but also Semitic custom (also used by the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 22, 9; 26, 25; 35, 7) of building altars on the heights of the relief to offer incense and other offerings to the divinity, began to be practiced on a large scale to the detriment of the honor given to the Holy Tent and to the Ark of the Covenant (Hosea 4:13). In the beginning, the Israelites were, however, worshipping Yahweh on these heights (2 Chronicles 33:17). Yet the seeds of the practice of an individual cult, devoid of rules and sometimes principles, along with an unclear vision concerning the divinity manifested on Mount Sinai, produced the possibility of radical mutations by the offering of the religious adoration also to other divinities, borrowed from the surrounding populations (Ezekiel 22:9).

The altars build on heights lasted initially to the radical reforms of eradicating idolatry from the Juda Kingdom and were not destroyed neither by King Asa (912-871 B.C., 1 Kings 15, 12-14), nor by king Josaphat (871-849 B.C., 1 Kings 22, 43)<sup>8</sup> moreover, it is easy to understand the reason why: they were

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<sup>6</sup> Xavier Leon-Dufour, "*Vocabular de Teologie Biblică*", (București: Ed. Arhiepiscopiei Romano-Catolice de București, 2001), p. 680.

<sup>7</sup> Dumitru Abrudan, Emilian Cornițescu, "*Arheologie Biblică*", p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

too popular, they were not trying to represent Yahweh in a physical form, and some Jews were bringing Him offerings of just incense and sacrifices. However, kings Hezekiah and Josiah (642-609 B.C.)<sup>9</sup> acted radically towards them, as true religious reformers of the spiritual atmosphere in Judas' Kingdom (2 Kings 18, 3; 23, 4-20).

While these idolatrous tendencies of representation of an unseen God, however, referred to Yahweh, as supreme divinity, known and manifested to the Jews repeatedly, gradually, the Jews came to adopt other faiths, borrowed from the cults of the Semitic or surrounding Canaanite peoples.

#### 4 Yahweh vs. the Deities of Canaan

The first religious shock for the Jewish monotheism, the first slip of some Jews towards other deities happened at the Jewish emergence from the Sinai desert. The meeting with the Moabite women serving the deity Baal-Peor, women practicing sacred prostitution, attracted to their faith through sexuality, curiosity and moral lasciviousness some 24,000 young Jews (Numbers 25:1-9)<sup>10</sup>. Their condemnation to death and their punishment drew the attention on the danger of embracing a different faith, yet, for the next generation, the lesson was forgotten.

The deities of the Canaanite peoples, with a concrete (deities represented in a physical form) and sensual religion<sup>11</sup>, gradually corrupted the Jewish population along the centuries dominated by political and religious anarchy which installed

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Mihail Teodorescu, "Război și pace în cărțile Pentateuhului", in: Buletinul Universității Naționale de apărare, "Carol I", București, Nr. 3/2007, p. 470.

<sup>11</sup> Athanase Negoită, "Istoria religiei Vechiului Testament", p. 108.

themselves after Joshua Navi, although the warnings were not missing<sup>12</sup>. The period of the Judges favored the penetration of the polytheist idolatry in the Israelites' life (Jud. 2:1-3; 6-15), with irreversible effect, even though this decay had been foreseen and there had been firm warnings against it. Moses had said: "Cursed is anyone who makes an idol or an image - things detestable to the Lord, made by artisans - and sets it up secretly!" (Deut. 27:15).

The idolatrous tendencies of representing an unseen God can be considered normal in the in the religious need of an ordinary person, who suffers from the lack of a physical concretization of that God, which he needs in order to manifest his religious feelings and who cannot base it only on imagination in his cultic manifestations, while he is also surrounded by numerous forces of nature which he cannot explain. However, adopting other faiths, borrowing deities from the religiosity of the coinhabiting or surrounding peoples was a genuinely disastrous action for the Jewish spirituality. When King Solomon favored and practiced the worshipping of other deities (2 Kings 11:1-8),

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<sup>12</sup> "Be very strong. Carefully obey everything written in the Instruction scroll from Moses. Don't deviate a bit from it, either to the right or to the left. Don't have anything to do with these nations that remain with you. Don't invoke the names of their Gods or take oaths by them. Don't serve them or worship them. Hold on to the Lord your God instead, exactly as you've done right up to today... But if you should turn away and join the rest of these nations that remain with you, intermarry with them and associate with each other, then know for certain that the Lord your God won't keep on removing these nations before you. Instead, they will be a snare and a trap for you. They will be a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you vanish from this fertile land that the Lord your God has given you... If you violate the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you to keep, and go on to serve other gods and worship them, then the Lord will be furious with you. You will quickly vanish from the fertile land that He has given you" (Joshua 23:6-8, 12-13, 16).

many followed him, bringing to light the popular idolatrous inclinations formed a long time ago.

During the time of King Ahab of the Kingdom of Israel (Ephraim, 874-853 B.C.)<sup>13</sup>, during the time of the vehement opposition of the prophet Elijah, in the ten tribes of Israel that were part of the state there were only 7000 men left, with their families, who still refused idol worship (3 Kings 19:18).

The deities that corrupted the Hebrews were mainly of Semitic origin – Baal, respected by the Assiro-Babylonians, Phenicians, Philistines, and Canaanites, as master of heaven and creative power feeding the vegetal kingdom. The respective peoples added new touches to its image, attributing as well particular responsibilities to it, which attracted a specific name: Baal-Moloch (“devouring fire”), adulated by the Ammonites, Baal Berit (“Baal of the covenant”), Baal-Zebub (“Baal of the flies”) and Baal Peor or Chemosh, worshipped by the Moabites<sup>14</sup>. The city of Tyre, from where Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab of the Kingdom of Israel was coming, respected “the god of the sun or the skies” called Baal-Melkart<sup>15</sup>.

The goddess “Astarte”, known among the Assiro-Babylonians by the name “Ishtar”, was equally honored by the Canaanites, who dedicated it a sensual and obscene cult, based on the activity of sacred prostitution. Its popularity got even to the courtyard of the temple of Jerusalem, where it was practiced during the rule of King Manasseh, (699-644 B.C., 2 Chronicles 33:19), until the radical reform of king Josiah (2 Kings 23, 7)<sup>16</sup>. Despite these, idolatry became so spread that it could not be eradicated anymore, the idolatrians overwhelming ideologically

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<sup>13</sup> Dumitru Abrudan, Emilian Cornișescu, “*Arheologie Biblică*”, p. 155

<sup>14</sup> Athanase Negoită, “*Istoria religiei Vechiului Testament*”, pp. 93-95.

<sup>15</sup> Ion Acsan, note at Iosephus Flavius, *Antichități iudaice*, (București: Editura Hasefer, 1999), p. 480.

<sup>16</sup> Athanase Negoită, “*Istoria religiei Vechiului Testament*”, pp. 97-99.

and in numbers the monotheists. They could not be excluded from society and had to be accepted.

## **5 The Religious Intolerance of the Prophets**

Regarding these deities, the prophets always had a radical position, of opposition, considering the gods of the surrounding populations to be real imaginations of the people who did not know the divine truth. For the prophets, these gods are always vanity (Jeremiah 2:2-5). Any material representation of the divinity, including of Yahweh, is error and even guilty derision of a Truth that is beyond this world<sup>17</sup>. These idols of the peoples are dumb to men because they do not exist. Unlike Israel, who received the Law from God by Moses and speaks continually through its prophets, the silence of the idols is the concrete evidence of the inexistence of the gods. By comparison, the true God spoke directly to his chosen ones - the prophets -, yet He manifested His existence through many wonderful signs in the life of the people of Israel.

The person who is truly faithful to Yahweh and does not doubt His uniqueness and power has to admit the reality that the idols “are nothing” (Ps. 81:10, 1 Chronicle 16:26). Convinced of this truth, the prophet Elijah can afford to mock the god Baal invoked by an army of idolaters on Mount Carmel (3 Kings 18:27). Therefore, idols cannot speak, cannot prophesy to guide people and consequently cannot save man (Isaiah 48:5; 45:20). The way they are represented constitutes the expression of the human imagination because men create them. Even though they are made out of wood, stone or gold, for the prophets of

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<sup>17</sup> Xavier Leon-Dufour, „*Vocabular de Teologie Biblică*”, p. 260.

Israel, these idols are the target of justified mockery (Amos 5:26, Hosea 8:4-6, Jeremiah 10:3, Isaiah 41:6; 44:9-20).

Consequently, there can be no religious dialogue between what exists and what does not exist. The prophetic radicalism is justified because the faith in Yahweh addresses the true God - the One Who takes care of the world and leads man towards attaining his existential meaning. The idols are a falsification of the truth, as people adore the creature instead of worshipping the Creator, getting to the ridiculous situation in which "the creature adores his own creation"<sup>18</sup>.

Those who gave up on the true faith triggered two consequences: they gave up on the spiritual Person Who gave life to them, and they went out of the Covenant with God established by Abraham (Genesis 15, 18; 17, 2-21), which is the equivalent of the act of debauchery for a married woman who leaves her husband for another man. The setting in of sin inherently triggers the loss of the initial status. This vision is common to many prophets who prefer to call idolatry by the term "adultery" or "debauchery" (Jeremiah 7, 9; Ezekiel 16, 32-38), highlighting in this way the guilty loss of the superior status held once by a just wife or by an obeying son of Abraham. The prophet Hosea deplored this drifting away from Yahweh of his contemporaries, transmitting them the reproaches from God:

"My people seek counsel from their piece of wood, and their diviner's rod speaks to them. For a spirit of prostitution causes them to go astray; in their immorality, they desert their God. They offer sacrifices on the mountain tops, burning offerings on the hills, under oaks, poplars and terebinth trees, since their shade is very good. Therefore your daughters are prostitutes, and your daughters-in-law commit adultery. However, I am not going to punish your

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

daughters when they commit prostitution, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, because their men are themselves immoral – they offer sacrifices with prostitutes. These people who are not discerning will stumble. Even though you prostitute yourself, Israel – let not Judah incur guilt. Don't go to Gilgal, or visit Beth-aven, or swear an oath using the Lord's name" (Hosea 4:12-15).

The prophets have been a real stronghold against the proliferation of idolatry and of the pagan deities among the people of Israel. They concretely emphasized that there can be no religious dialogue between Yahweh and the idols, between Truth and imposture, between the Creator and people's imaginations concerning the supernatural world. "Those who worship vein idols forsake their true loyalty," said with spiritual ardor prophet Jonah during his life's mission (2, 9).

The monotheist religion does not allow mixtures with the deities of other peoples. The acceptance of any dialogue expresses a lack of faith in the unique God and guilty predilection towards idolatry and polytheism. The prophet Jeremiah warned: "The Lord of hosts, who planted you, has pronounced evil against you because of the evil of the house of Israel and of the house of Judah, which they have done to provoke Me by offering up sacrifices to Baal." (Jeremiah 11:17). The divine punishments will be according to the sin, the prophets making use of a right metaphorical arsenal to express the complex way in which Israel will be punished, both on an individual and on a community-social level (Jeremiah 14:16).

All these dramatic visions, yet perfectly realizable in the context of the proliferation of the evil in this world, often had the merit of awakening the contemporaries' mind, calling them to give more attention to the moral-spiritual life they need to lead in the context of the divine law, naturally treasuring the religious Truth, justice and mercy to the detriment of selfishness and evilness (Job 36:10). "The soul who sins shall die. (...) The

righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him" (Ezekiel 18:20).

## **6 Conclusions**

The mission of keeping and proliferating monotheism as the only religious Truth was the mission not just of the prophets but of the whole people of Israel, a mission understood and accomplished during their entire history. The knowledge of God by means of the supernatural revelation was not to become a preferential divine gesture, a privilege of Abraham's descendants, but on the contrary, a means of revelation, communication, and conversion, for as many people as possible of other nations.

This was, in fact, the only interreligious dialogue permitted to the prophets and implicitly to the Jewish people, as a real mission, that of helping all the peoples know Yahweh (Iona 3, 4-10; Daniel 6:27-28), so that an increasingly more significant number of people may know the supreme religious Truth, by which God must be received as the Unique God, Creator, and Divine Providence, and people can relate with Him if they accept and work on their own moral, spiritual transformation required and requested by Him.