

A

CRITICISM  
of  
PROPHETIC RELIGION  
by  
J. PHILIP HYATT

George Braswell  
April 14, 1959

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J. Philip Hyatt's, Prophetic Religion, is a readable but uninspiring account of the major prophets in the life of Israel. After having read in parts the books of Scott and Buber on the prophets, I arrived at the conclusion that Hyatt needs to re-edite his work so that it might be more inclusive and at the same time demonstrate just as much enthusiasm and inspiration as the above mentioned authors. In this brief critique of Hyatt's book, his presuppositions, purpose, method, and conclusion shall be examined with the intent to constructively criticize his work and to show his impact upon my own reading and understanding.

The title of his book impresses upon the reader's mind that the prophets had a particular religion of their very own. Prophetic religion is different from prophecy and religion, for the former phrase at least slightly infers that religion is static. For Hyatt states that the prophetic movement began in 800 B.C. with Samuel and Saul, and since he considers anything before this date, mentioning prophecy, as later additions, his title seems to infer that the prophets had a religion of their own after 800 B.C. I readily agree that Hyatt does note some background out of which prophecy arose, but this is so scant that it is unimportant. This point will be further elaborated upon in my consideration of his method. Hyatt cuts off the flow and dynamics of religion while he dwells on the particular prophets. Thus, the title, Prophetic Religion, to this reader's mind, is a mis-

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the title, Prophetic Religion, to this reader's mind, is a mis-

leading and stagnant label to the major prophets in the light of how Hyatt treats the entire prophetic movement and the history of the religion of Israel. The presuppositions upon which he works are carried throughout the book. He assumes that the seven prophets--Amos, Hosea, Isaiah of Jerusalem, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah are normative for the study and understanding of prophetic religion. He also assumes that prophecy began around 800 B.C. with Samuel and Saul. His other assumptions will be encountered as this paper progresses.

Hyatt states two distinct purposes which he wishes to accomplish, a purpose "within" the book and a purpose "outside" the book. The purpose "within" the book is to treat the chosen prophets as normative for the type of religious thought termed "prophetic". This has been discussed briefly above and more will be said in discussing his method. The purpose "outside" the book is to address all those "who have intellectual curiosity about their religion." The book is written for laymen, ministers and scholars. "I hope that some ministers may be inspired by these chapters to make their own ministry more prophetic, and that some laymen may be encouraged to allow their ministers to be prophets." However, there seems to be a little inconsistency when Hyatt asks forgiveness for not touching on the relevance of the prophets to the present situation. If it is his wish that ministers make the relevance of the prophets subject to their

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own time, then why is it that he excludes any consistent discussion of this subject from his book? Also, if he assumes that we are curious about our religion, then why does he not place the prophetic religion, as he states it, in perspective to the religion before the prophets, which enabled it to become as it did, and why did he not extend his study, if only in a few consistent statements, to its relevance for ministers of our day?

His methodology or presentation of the material is quite confusing at times, and quite out of order in places. Also, it is inconsistent and illogical in presentation. In so many instances Hyatt presents only a list of the prophets and a few statements concerning each one; this tends toward monotony. His listing of scripture is quite irritable, yet I realize this is valuable in aiding some people to better understand his view. But apart from such incidentals in method, there are larger criticisms toward that which he left out, and the arrangement of his materials. Basically, he does not place the seven prophets historically in their context. There are many avenues that might lead from this criticism. First, there is not enough background of the faith of Israel which has brought the prophets to their historic stand. In his chapter on the prophetic view of past history, he only recognizes that there were great moments in Israel's past when God acted, but there is no enlightenment. He only says that the prophets viewed God as a God of

...and that, then, it is in fact an exercise of consistent discrimination of this subject from his book. And, it is assumed that we are aware of the nature of religion, that we can place the progressive religion, as he states it, in perspective to the religion before the progress, which enabled it to become as it did. And why did he not extend his study, in only a few consistent statements, to its relevance for ministers of our day?

His methodology of presentation of the material is quite containing at times, and quite out of order in places. Also, it is inconsistent and illogical in presentation. In so many instances that present only a list of the methods and a few statements concerning each one; this takes toward methodology the listing of scripture is quite arbitrary, for I realize this is value in giving some people to better understand his view, but what is the method? In method, there are many other things to be said that which he left out, and the arrangement of his material, basically, he does not place the very progress historically in their context. There are many advances that might be seen from this criticism. First, there is not enough background of the faith of Jesus which has brought the progress to their historic state. In his chapter on the progressive view of Jesus history, he only recognizes that there were great moments in Jesus' past when he acted, but there is no analysis of only what the progress viewed as a person of



history and of purpose, and that Israel was a chosen nation. But there are no statements concerning the historic faith which the prophets were sometimes merely reiterating, and at other times, standing upon and building from. Within this same point there is no discussion of what makes a prophet or who is a prophet. In his discussion of the "called of God", Hyatt gives mainly points in each prophet's message, rather than the facts behind making the prophets. The nature of prophecy is very weak in his discussion; he so often digresses.

Second, within their own context, the prophets are not plainly related to persons and events with which they play a vital role. In his discussion on the patriotism of the prophets and the prophetic view of future history, Hyatt gives more of an abstract message than of the concrete decisions which confronted them and what was actually happening. I don't mean to say that Hyatt did not give some incidents in his presentation, but it could have been more enlightening if he had presented the concrete historical situations to which the prophets were actually reacting. In this same context Hyatt states that, "Chronologically and quantitatively a prophet may have been mistaken." Is this to say that the prophet was a perfect saint in every expression, every feeling, every thought? Hyatt's statement has a ring of absolutism which man, not even the "prophet man", can not claim. I question our author's judgment at this point.

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Thus, it seems that Hyatt left out valuable information needed to give the reader more insight and understanding of why the prophets say and act the way they do. Background of the faith of Israel, prior to and necessary to the understanding of the prophets' message, and the relation of the prophets to the historical context in which they found themselves are two areas, I believe, in which Hyatt should have been more careful.

Some chapter arrangements of the book itself seemed puzzling and out of order. Hyatt stated that the prophets first must be evaluated by theological standards, yet he waits until the closing chapters to discuss the prophets' idea of God, sin and forgiveness. This is the heart of the matter, but why did he leave it until the end? At the beginning he speaks of the Prophets' criticism of life, their views of past and future history, their attitude toward ritualism and their socio-political thought and relations; yet he leaves his discussion of God until the closing round. The prophets' concept of God is basic; their view of sin is also basic; for a meaningful presentation, they should have been presented at the beginning, possibly within the call of the prophets or shortly afterwards. Hyatt, himself, says that the mission of the prophets was actually not to present new ideas of God, but to correct at some points mistaken notions and to widen and deepen Hebrew understanding of God's nature. If this be so, then why did Hyatt not include this discussion first and then branch off

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into other areas, and too, does his statement not obviously present the need for some discussion of Israel's religion prior to the time of the prophets? In one of his final chapters Hyatt speaks about the prophetic view of sin, while in a former chapter, "the prophetic criticism of life", he enumerates four types of sin and the prophets' reaction to these types. Hyatt would have presented a more coherent view if he had presented this material in a block, instead of separating it by five or so chapters. As has been stated above, he did not discuss the relevance of the prophets for our time in any systematic discussion which, in his purpose, he had expressed the hope that contemporary ministers would make the prophets' message relevant for their time.

Hyatt does have some good points both in the way of presentation and in thought forms. Especially did I think his follow-up of prophetic thinking in the life and thought of Jesus to be of some value. He points out that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, while at the same time he says that Jesus is much more than this. Hyatt's presentation of the prophetic conception of the role the nation was to play is most enlightening and inspiring. This role was not to be seen in a great imperial, cultural or commercial power. The nation must be true to the only greatness open to them by nature and divine decree—that greatness in being a bearer of a unique revelation, a nation famous for its moral and spiritual power. I believe this is a

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genuine incite into the message and feelings of the prophets. Hyatt does make some statements which might be challenged by other scholars, and which are opposed by other views and, perhaps, this is a good sign. For instance, he says that the prophets denounced the ritualistic system of Israel absolutely. Their words suggest not purification but elimination. This is a statement open to criticism. Also, he states that the messianic passages in Jeremiah are not written by him, and also the messianic passages in Isaiah are questionable. He does give a brief resumé of the pro and con arguments for the messianic passages in Isaiah. Hyatt also makes other statements which are highly questioned by other scholars, and which are still in question. He said that the best the prophet hoped for was the repentance of a remnant; monotheistic religion, if not stated as in second Isaiah, was implied from the prophet Amos on; the prophets viewed the sacrificial system as pagan and non-Mosaic; he considered the prophets as absolutists and radicals on the ritual system also. Thus, these are a few statements which, I believe, are still open to question.

Within the above statements, I believe I have offered some criticism of his presuppositions, his purpose, his method, and his conclusions which appear through-out the book. Hyatt left out much to be desired, both background facts of faith and religion and of contemporary relevance of the prophetic message

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