THE PRIESTLY DOCUMENT: ANTI-TEMPLE?

By

TERENCE E. FRETHEIM

Minneapolis, Minn.

It is commonly maintained that the Priestly tabernacle is "a description of a temple, under the guise of a portable tent sanctuary" 1). It is assumed that, for P, "the Jerusalem temple is the only legitimate sanctuary" 2). The Priestly writers could not use the temple for their sanctuary because they were governed by their chosen setting, the pre-temple period. It is this assumption which we call into question. In fact, we would maintain that the Priestly writers were basically opposed to the idea of a temple, believing that only a portable sanctuary such as the tabernacle was consonant with true Yahwism. Moreover, we suggest that the Priestly document is the crystallization of a long-standing tent tradition that is to be tied up with circles that were opposed to the building of the first temple.

It is quite common for scholars to date P sometime during the fifth century B.C., thus reflecting the cultic situation of that period 3). There is now, however, an increasing tendency to regard P as stemming from the exile 4) sometime shortly before the completion of the second temple in 515 B.C. 5). The latter position is probable in the light of the purpose of the work as a whole. This purpose was programmatic 6). As R. E. Clements 7) puts the matter, P is "a product of the exile in which the traditions of the past

1) R. E. Clements, God and Temple, Philadelphia, 1965, p. 111. G. von Rad, Old Testament Theology, I, (New York, 1962), p. 78, states that "we must regard, even if we are not ready to give up altogether, the oft-repeated assertion that the tabernacle of P is none other than the Temple projected back into the period of the wilderness as an inadmissible oversimplification".
4) An exilic provenance is granted by most scholars. Cf. von Rad, op. cit., pp. 78f.
5) So, e.g., Noth, op. cit., p. 17; Clements, op. cit., p. 111.
6) So, e.g., those cited in note 5; von Rad, op. cit., p. 78.
were reflected upon in the light of the history of Israel and Judah, and, in view of the lessons of this history, a programme was made for the restoration of the community”. The Priestly writing, “containing as it does so many explicit regulations for life and worship, was intended as a paradigm of the future ... as a programme to be fulfilled, so that Israel might once again enter into its ancient heritage”. As such, it “provides a theological basis for the reconstruction of Israel” 1). Or, as K. Koch 2) states succinctly, “As it once was, so it must be again”.

The form which this programme takes is historical narrative. The regulations and ordinances with which the writer is primarily concerned are rooted in definite historical events, and thereby they receive their historical sanction. On the other hand, history receives its meaning and goal from the cultic institutions that emerged from that history; all creation and history are intended to lead toward an Israel centering its life around the dwelling of God in its midst 3).

The history which provides the setting for the programme of the Priestly writers is that which extends from the creation to the eve of the entry into the land 4). This period was no doubt chosen because of the conviction that Israel must return to the real basis of her existence; this period was constitutive for the life of the nation. Yet, the historical parallels were also certainly significant. Once again Israel was about to take up life in the land; the Mosaic heritage must again serve as the permanent norm, the foundation for the faith and life of the people. Consequently, in addition to the ordinances regarding faith and cult, the questions of nationhood and the possession of the

1) Ibid., p. 122.
4) So, e.g., Notth, Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch, Stuttgart, 1948, pp. 7ff.; Clements, op. cit., p. 109. Cf. D. N. Freedman, “Pentateuch”, I.D.B., III 1962, p. 717. It is at present a disputed point whether the Priestly writing extends into the conquest narratives or assumes the existence of the Deuteronomic history. If, however, the work is programmatic, originating in exile before the reclamation of the land, then it would be quite natural that the narratives should end before the entry. The promises to the patriarchs had yet to be realized in their time. The references to the tabernacle at Shiloh (Josh. xviii 1; xix 51; xxii 19, 29; cf. 1 Sam. ii 22) may be considered a Priestly attempt at establishing historical sanction for their programme. What happened then after the return is what should happen now after the return. Such a view assumes that the P material in Joshua consists of only a few glosses. Cf. J. Bright, “The Book of Joshua”, I.B., II, (New York, 1953), p. 546.