

Sporen van animisme in het Oude Testament?
G. Ch. Aalders
The Princeton Theological Review 13:288-289. [1915]

In putting the question whether traces of animism are discoverable in the Old Testament the author takes animism in the most general possible sense as denoting “the primitive belief that spirit or spirits exist and exert influence in nature.” This is wide enough to include Lippert’s, Stade’s and Schwally’s theory of ancestor-worship, Robertson Smith’s theory of totemism, Piepenbring’s theory of fetishism, and Eerdman’s theory of a diffused soul-matter entering into or attaching itself to individual objects. In the subsequent discussion, however, a more restricted definition is brought into play, as on page 20, where it is argued against Stade, that the identification of soul and breath or soul and blood of itself affords no proof of the existence of animism, because characteristic of animism is the belief of a special influence of souls and spirits, which is either to be feared or sought. The author insists upon it that the method employed in determining the question at issue should be wholly direct and *a posteriori*. He rejects the procedure of postulating animism in Israel on the basis of phenomena which, with a greater or lesser degree or similarity, occur in other religions and there bear animistic significance. He further denies, as disproven by modern discoveries, the assumption that Israel’s original stage of culture was so low as to allow of no other than an animistic form of religion. Nor can such a conclusion be based on the general postulate that all peoples must of necessity have passed through an animistic period, because not a few recognized authorities in the field of comparative religion question the accuracy of this view. Dismissing all these *a priori* considerations, the author confines himself to the clean-cut issue, whether any Old Testament phenomena *demand* an animistic explanation. The argument is not directed towards the end of positively explaining the facts in a more satisfactory manner than the advocates of animism succeed in doing; it contents itself with rendering the verdict “not proven”. In view of the inveterate habit of the advocates of animism of representing their theory as scientifically established and no longer partaking of the vicissitudes of a hypothesis this method has its merit. It is very important to keep alive in the mind of Old Testament scientists the distinction between facts and the evaluation of facts and the injustice of accusing conservative scholars of blindness to the facts, when they only refuse to accept certain constructions more or less plausible or implausible evolved out of the facts. It is reassuring to learn that not even as excrescences in the popular religion, irrespective of the legitimate faith of Israel, can any animistic beliefs or practices with certainty be pointed out. Of course, even if this could be done, as the author observes, nothing would have been gained thereby in support of the thesis that these were survivals of an older common faith, and that animism was the original primitive religion of Israel. One feels, however, that all through the argument would have gained in force if it had been worked out more fully on the positive side and in each case, so far as possible, a conservative explanation of the phenomena within the frame of revealed religion provided. This is done only at isolated points, as e.g. where the author accepts Frey’s understanding of the mourning-customs as forms of *Verdehmüthigung*, only differing from Frey in not calling them cases of *Selbstdemüthigung*, because they are also imposed on others. There is a certain inconsistency in this, that on page 27 an objection is made to Eerdman’s animistic interpretation of the mourning-customs as defensive measures, on the ground that it does not explain why certain mourning-customs were prohibited and others allowed, and yet later on the *Verdehmüthigungs*-theory is favored without any corresponding attempt to give a reason for the prohibition in some, the allowance in other cases. Incompleteness in the induction also occasionally appears, as when the prohibition of the eating of blood is represented

as entirely due to the sacrificial use made of the blood on the basis of Lev. 17:11 and Gen. 9:4 is left out of account. While, no account of its negative purport and limited scope. Dr. Aalders' work will not take the place of the more exhaustive and positive contributions of Frey and Grüneisen, it can render excellent service as a first introduction to the study of the animistic controversy, all the more so since in the notes the literature is given with great fullness.