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JACOB'S TEARS

THE PRIESTLY WORK OF RECONCILIATION

MARY DOUGLAS

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The Priestly Work of Reconciliation

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Preface

THIS is another anthropologist's book on the Bible. It is my third on the priestly books, Leviticus and Numbers, but even now my sense of trespass is still acute, and my sense of debt.

I should start by thanking the scholars who have been so remarkably generous and tolerant of my efforts. It is impossible to acknowledge such a numerous host of helpers who have been giving me much needed back-up for over twenty years. I have tried in each chapter to acknowledge particular debts. Here I should thank the convenors of three seminars which have made an immense impact on my thought.

First, in 1995, John Sawyer convened a Colloquium at Lancaster University. It was a first in the full sense, since until that occasion I had never heard of any seminar or set of lectures on Leviticus at all. It was a heartening occasion which shored up my faint confidence, and I am grateful to all who contributed. It produced the volume, *Reading Leviticus*, edited by John F. A. Sawyer, (JSOTSS 227, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). Then there was the big seminar on Leviticus at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Jerusalem in 1998, instigated by Jacob Milgrom and Harvey Goldberg, with Sara Japhet in the Chair, and brilliantly supported by many other famous Bible scholars. It was like a rite of passage for the would-be student of the Bible, an unparalleled opening of my mind. And third, in 2002, a seminar on Ritual Purification, convened at Oxford by Robert Parker and Martin Goodman. This reached more profoundly into the subject of impurity, so prominent in Leviticus and Numbers, because it was focused on both biblical and classical Greek sources. These occasions were very specially privileged times for a newcomer to Bible studies.

I should not fail to thank the editorial staff of the Oxford University Press who have helped me to an extraordinary extent in bringing this text up to their standard. I should mention here that all citations from the Bible are given in the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized).

This time I am trying to set the priestly books in context. They are two books of the Pentateuch which hardly seem to fit closely with Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy; two which, coming from a separate editorial source, have enjoyed a kind of guarded esteem. To my mind they are books with a strong, shared, political commitment, but it is an unpopular one. Just when the Second Temple community was drawing in its boundaries and redefining itself as an exclusive religious group, just when Samaria was standing out as a dangerous enemy, the priestly editors were trying to keep alive the legendary alliance of the twelve sons of Jacob, and particularly to remain at peace with Samaria. This is my theme, the focus is very much on the relations between Joseph's descendants and those of Judah.

Vacationing in the Bible

Since Frazer wrote *The Golden Bough* British anthropologists have been offering their interpretations of the Bible, using their special experience of exotic cultures. Far from our usual work, it may seem to other anthropologists like a leisure-time occupation, or a stay in a kind of picturesque holiday resort. To the Bible scholars we probably look like tourists who have taken an old mansion for the season: the men irreverently hang their baseball caps on the trophy antlers in the hall; the women bring down an antique chamber pot and fill it with a display of flowers; we all earnestly discourse on the local customs, and claim that the present-day owners of the sacred books don't really understand them. We used to be able to say what we liked, for no one was going to hold us accountable. The Bible scholars were unlikely to read what we wrote, and the regular anthropologists didn't know the Bible anyway.

Times have changed. We have to be more careful. Bible scholars not only read us, but they review our books, and they can quote anthropology with the best.[1] I am not pretending to be innocent myself while scoffing at my predecessors. There are two temptations. One is the humanist fallacy, to suppose that all humans think in exactly the same way. The anthropologist feels free to impose a local

[1] Bernard Lang (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1985); Shemaryahu Talmon, *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible, Form and Content* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1993).

theory on the biblical material. The other is the grandmother's mistake, thinking to teach her grandchildren how to suck eggs. This is the case of the anthropologist who claims to have discovered something which is actually well known already.

Personally, I don't want to be on vacation in the Bible. For fifteen years the Bible has been my main interest and the central focus of all my work. I know that I can be faulted for not having read deeply or widely enough. And admittedly my boldest argument puts me in the class of vulgar tourists, since I claim that from antique times the priestly books, Leviticus and Numbers, have been read through a distorted lens. I do believe that the priestly editors have been misrepresented, originally for reasons of political bias, and also for stylistic difficulties. This has been the touristic aspect of my own work on biblical subjects. In this volume I try to strengthen my case by showing clear instances of ancient misinterpretations.

This Book

The original intention was to reprint in a single volume a selection of scattered essays on the priestly work. The publishers suggested that it would be a good idea to make them into a coherent, continuous, 'book'. Thus the idea of what is a book, and what is a collection of essays, has been very much in my mind as I read Bible scholars' discussion of whether the Pentateuch is one book or five books collected under one heading. Evidently a book has some connecting threads, a story, or a plot or theme. I have had to find a theme for my own collection, which means jettisoning some and adding other essays.

A strongly characterized genre wraps its exemplars in a recognizable package; one knows what to expect from a story that is clearly in the pastoral genre, and something quite different from an epic or elegy. Kathryn Gutzwiller[2] identifies a true genre as a literary form that moulds its material to produce a unique inner structure, thus providing an analogy of the outer literary form. It is a kind of literary reflexivity, the structure of the contents mirrors the literary structure. A dirge is a dirge, not a nursery rhyme; the materials, the style, and

[2] Kathryn Gutzwiller, *Theocritus' Pastoral Analogies: The Foundation of a Genre* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991).

the matter must be fitting for a dirge. The genre shows all the way through the exemplar.

If we are reading an ancient text without knowing the relevant classification by genres, we will miss what is going on in the writing. I am not concerned with our contemporary misunderstandings, it is no news that we are reading from a great distance. We can gratefully use the guidance of the Mishnah and rabbinical commentators only a few hundred years after the redaction. It is in every way better to rely on them than on commentators writing one or two millennia later. But alas, only two hundred years of shock and destruction are quite enough to dislodge the memory. The sages who wrote at the time closest to the redaction are also closest to the stark political polarities. They will have been politically involved themselves. For that reason they will be the commentators who are most likely to mislead us.

It would be a start if we knew why these sacred books were written in the first place. We need to approach subsequent interpretations in terms of social and political changes affecting Judah in the last half century from 600 BCE. My thesis is that the redactors of Genesis and Numbers have one overriding concern, that is for the prospects of the priestly corporation which they belong to, and which includes their northern brethren in Samaria. Their books are making common cause with their fellow priests facing similar calamities in other parts of the region.

One of the themes of Genesis is the origin of the tension between the sons of Leah, led by Judah, and the sons of Rachel, Joseph, and Benjamin. The tension is reflected in the post-exilic history of the province of Yehud in the relations between the sons of Judah and the sons of Joseph. The priestly books are as much on the side of the Josephites, the Northern Kingdom, as the book of Chronicles is on the side of Judah and against Israel. Once alerted to this political bias in the priestly books, it is not difficult to demonstrate it in the text.

The Genesis stories mirror their contemporary case: the priests in Samaria and the priests in Jerusalem were also rivalrous brothers descended from a common ancestor, sometimes loyally rescuing, sometimes betraying each other. The title of this book refers to the tears that Jacob wept when he saw Joseph's coat bedraggled with blood, proving that his favourite son was dead. The history of the sons of Jacob develops a plea which surfaces in Numbers and Judges, a plea for solidarity between the descendants of the brothers. Another major theme in Exodus and Numbers is the history of the Aaronite

priesthood. The recurring themes of fraternal jealousy and refusal of support would have corresponded to a current deep anxiety. The biggest political question facing the Jerusalem priests in the Second Temple period would be their own relations with other descendants of Levi, priests outside Jerusalem, some serving in the important shrines, Shiloh, Bethel, and Shechem outside Judah. Over a long history their relations with their cousin-colleagues would have varied according to the times, sometimes each counting the others as allies and at other times regarding them as dangerous rivals.

Tension between the priestly editors and the government of Judah sharpened to breaking point after the arrival of Ezra and his following of returnees from exile. A great gap lay between Nehemiah's view of the Law of Moses, and that which the priestly editors recorded in Leviticus and Numbers. On many important points, such as the doctrine of defilement, their views were radically opposed. The priests were not infected with the xenophobia which inspired the governor and his supporters. So far from being against intermarriage with foreigners, they themselves had always been in the habit of intermarrying with the Levites living outside Judah. They did not count them as foreigners, but Ezra did. Rejection of foreigners became a settled attitude in Judah; in the debates, the priestly assimilationists lost out.

The effect of Ezra and Nehemiah on the religion is a main factor in our attempts to interpret the priestly work. The scholars have assumed too easily that Judah was an inward-turning sectarian community, rejecting the outside world. Christine Hayes has collected evidence that shows that there were many views on the rightness of intermarriage with foreigners, and that the dominant bias shifted through different phases of political history.[3] To my reading there is a more important issue than whether foreigners were rejected and refused membership of the cult: the crucial question is who counted as a foreigner. It is very clear that the editors of Numbers regarded all the tribes descended from the sons of Jacob as full members of the congregation of Israel. But Ezra regarded only the returned exiles from Judah as 'all Israel', which is a very different matter. This automatically excluded those living outside the boundaries of Judah, and especially the people of Samaria and Manasseh, the

[3] Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities, Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

sons of Joseph. At the time of the redaction a policy that was in favour of fraternal ties with Samaria would have been, in the eyes of ruling politicians, deeply unpopular, not to say traitorous. But this is the dangerous view taken by the priestly editors of the Pentateuch.

Religion after a Total Disruption

Many of our controversies about interpreting the Pentateuch stem from the loss of continuity. The Mishnaic scholars, through whom the texts were safeguarded, passed them on to us with an idiosyncratic reading. The culture of Judah had been on a downward slope long before the exile. It had been a brilliant cosmopolitan culture with scholarly learning bridging the Mediterranean world. But even before the sack of Jerusalem and the deportation to Babylon, the culture of Judaea would have been drying up. The political stalemate and the interminable wrangling between political leaders would have put the religious institutions on hold for decades and run the priests into a dead end.

In the rubble left after invasion and exile, we can only surmise what happens to collective memory. We would expect disruption and chaos to lower the level of intellectual life by several notches. A major break in continuity would install a new generation of sages who could not understand what their predecessors were talking about. This simple argument would seem to explain why, after two millennia of pious reading, we are not even aware of any specially erudite and elegant literary construction of Leviticus and Numbers.

Who were the priestly editors? They obviously came from a high tradition of learning, both literary and scientific. It is reasonable to assume this tradition would be lost when the crash came, defeat by Babylon and the destruction of the temple, followed by the long exile. When a learned community which has been dispersed reassembles, the successors would lack role models, and they would also lack an agreed canon. We should not underestimate the difference in training: many of the priests would have been the sages who were taken with the rich and noble families of Judah to exile in Babylon. They were up to the standard to talk with the famous Babylonian astronomers and mathematicians. They were unsurpassed masters of rhetorical techniques. When they came back from exile, and rejoined those of their brethren who had been left behind, it is doubtful

whether anyone else in the post-exilic period would have been able to appreciate the depth and the subtlety of their thinking.

Such traumatic events entail great losses. But on the other hand, if the religion was becoming isolated from the people, static, desiccated, uninspired, a long period of exile could have had some positive effects.[4] The uprooting of the learned men would have disengaged them from oppressive institutions and freed their minds. It was a time for religious revival. At the same time, the disengagement of the priests from any fixed institutional frame would encourage abstract formulations: 'As each empire collapsed, subsumed under the heel of the next, (Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Hellenism, Rome), the process led to the transformation of the local cultures into "ideologies".'[5] According to Jonas, supported by Wyatt, the experience of political frustration and institutional collapse leads to religious renewal, attempts to purify the traditional creed and focus on strictly theological qualities. Practice is superseded by 'ideology', an intellectualizing of faith. As the priestly editors took their austerely intellectual course, other spiritual leaders would be taking up occultism and ecstatic forms of religion.

Ecstatic Cults

There is a bias in the sociology of religion which tended to regard religious ecstasy and religious fury as exceptional, as deviations from the norm of ritual calm that need to be explained. The anthropologists' experience suggests that religion has much to do with dealing with anguish, the pains of choice and loyalty, and the rage of betrayal. For anthropologists religious violence and ecstasy are as normal as conventional ritual.

Ecstatic cults are spontaneous by nature and hard to control, they are often proscribed as politically subversive, only the loyal hierarchical religions being favoured by the authorities. The priests, in exile and on return, would have been confronted by a variety of new religions. Now that they were released from the old controlling institutions, they themselves could contemplate change. But like other

[4] This idea I received from H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon, 1963), cited supportively by Nicolas Wyatt, *Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Near East* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

[5] Wyatt, *Space and Time*, 331.

hierarchical religions, their training at the temple would have set them against spontaneity and occultism. A whirling stream of competing spirit cults, nature cults, mystery cults, would have provoked them sorely. A combative, competitive, religious environment would have inspired them to rework what they knew. No longer under governmental protection (because of their deviant views on foreign policy), they would have been writing in defence of their own religion, and against the others. The result is the imposing cosmology that we find in the Pentateuch. It was abstract, logical, more orderly, more fully theorized than the other local cults in the neighbouring regions. It was new—not a new religion, but the old religion renewed.

Translation and Meaning

Much of this volume is about problems of interpretation. In the fraught conditions of life in the post-exilic community, highly structured analogies would be too fragile to withstand the disruption of learning and the cutting down of memory span. As soon as the supporting social framework has been changed, once well-understood analogies work loose from their foundations and fragment. Then they become odd sequences of folk tales or rituals for the delight and mystification of academics.

I appreciate Lester Grabbe's assertion that 'Leviticus is a profoundly theological writing with a deep spiritual message.'[6] One of the rewards of rereading is to discover that Leviticus is literally a microcosm. Chapters 5 and 6 will explain how a microcosm is essentially a total organization of possible experience within a single interpretative system. It works by creating identities through classing diverse elements together in one comprehensive system of ordered analogies. In this case, the shape of the sacred book is a projection of the shape of the desert tabernacle in which God's glory dwells, and both book and tabernacle correspond to the mountain on which his laws were given to Moses.

On my reading, the Pentateuch has two main concerns. The editors deplored the growing rivalry between themselves and the other sons of Levi in the powerful state of Ephraim, later to become

[6] L. Grabbe, 'The Priests in Leviticus: Is the Medium the Message?', in R. Rentdorff and J. Kugler (eds.), *The Book of Leviticus: Composition and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 224.

Samaria. The latter are the priests of the same religion who will eventually build their own temple at Mount Gerizim (not till the third century). The priestly editors may well have been worried lest their own congregations move away to Samaria. But when, later still, they themselves came under attack from Ezra, they might have seen their brothers-in-religion as a refuge from dangerous politics in Jerusalem. This will be discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. The role that Ezra played in the transformations that Judah underwent under his brief rule as a Persian governor will be discussed in Chapter 3. The chapter on Balaam the foreign prophet illustrates the political ambiguities that ensnare all interpretation of these times.

We sadly underestimate the editors if we see their work as a mere gathering up of old traditions. That would be to trivialize their seriousness and intellectual power. Their main intention was to remake the old religion. In carrying out this task, they focused on the tabernacle. Only by accepting that they were acclaiming a religion of renewal can we hope to take in how radically they transformed the old. Everywhere else they saw the vision of true monotheism contaminated by other beings inhabiting the spiritual world. The priestly writers found no space in their universe for demons or ancestors, or magic. In the spirit of renewal they preached a rational God, they were inspired by joy in God's love and liberation from the dark superstitions of old.

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1

The Legacy of Jacob's Sons

Fig 1.1 Blind Jacob blesses Joseph's sons: a right-handed blessing for Ephraim and left-handed for Manasseh (Genesis 48. 8–20)

1
Counting Jacob's Twelve Sons

What motivated the priestly editors to compose the Pentateuch? It may sound like a silly question. They were theologians, and theologians tend to write theology; their vocation is teaching and preaching.

Such a slick answer is unworthy of these brilliant and passionate books. True that Genesis is matched by other creation stories in the region at the time. But even if we compare Leviticus and Numbers to ancient parallels the question still stands. What was the vitally important issue that drove them to prepare the two books which look like law books, but are so much more?

For example, why did the editor of the book of Numbers keep on listing the names of the twelve tribes of Israel? To that, one answer could reasonably refer to a pastoral agenda shared with other books in the Pentateuch, a general priestly mission to preach the unity of Israel and piously to rebuke jealousy and violence in their congregation. Another answer, equally unsurprising, would be that the priestly editors were using the stories of the patriarchs as an allegory of their own concerns about the unity of the cult of the Hebrew God. This is my own preferred answer, but I need to be more specific about which of their current concerns was dominant: I maintain that it was a strictly professional, priestly, concern. Their choice in the redaction of Genesis to write so often about fraternal rivalry was not arbitrary.

Fraternal Strife

It seems fairly obvious that one particularly distressing antagonism between brothers affected the priestly editors' own lives directly. It traced back to Jacob's two marriages the bad relations between his sons, the descendants of his wives, Rachel and Leah. The family history of Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, carried a strong contemporary lesson. For the editors one fraternal rivalry that grew from those distant beginnings became the prime

political anxiety, that is the relation between the brother peoples, Samaria and Judah. They count as brother tribes because their founding patriarchs were Joseph and Judah, sons of the same father, Jacob.

The motivation for writing about the old legends of brothers' betrayals and oustings was to focus on festering political dissensions which had recurringly erupted into war. In the eighth century Samaria had been conquered by Assyria, a large part of her population was deported, and new elements imported who did not worship the God of Israel. Consequently the accusations of apostasy which each country had been hurling at the other became conspicuously true in the case of Samaria, the population was not all reared in the religion taught by Moses. However, in this crisis Jerusalem was flooded by refugees from Samaria, who were hospitably received. When the outlook for Judah was black the priests would probably not be disappointed in their hope of finding refuge in the north. H. G. Williamson suggests that this is what happened and that among the early founders of the religious community of Samaritans was 'a dissident group of liberal-minded priests from Jerusalem'.[1]

The people who came to be called the Samaritans believed themselves to be the true Israelites, the keepers of the law of Moses.[2] And there is evidence that even in the fifth century the Samaritan faith was totally monotheistic, strict on Sabbath observance, punctilious in practising circumcision, and austerely aniconic.[3] Naturally there is matter for argument in all of this. At the time of Nehemiah's governorship, when we first hear of the religious movement of the Samaritans,[4] they were accused of idolatry, apostasy, and large-scale religious syncretism. We can take this as the mud-slinging usual when politics uses heinous crimes to blacken an enemy's reputation. It is on a par with charges of cannibalism and human sacrifice, not to be credited without sure evidence.[5] John Bowman has described Samaria as, 'this much insulted and frequently misunderstood com-

[1] H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 71.

[2] R. Pummer, 'Art', in A. D. Crown (ed.), *The Samaritans* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1989), ch. 2, p. 135.

[3] R. J. Coggins, *Samaritans and Jews, the Origins of the Samaritans* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975).

[4] A. D. Crown, (ed.), *The Samaritans* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1989), 2.

[5] William Arens, *The Man-eating Myth, Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

munity' and affirmed that it 'preserved its ancient conceptions of faith and customs'.[6]

In the sixth century BCE the people of Judah had been threatened by political antagonism from close neighbours or distant mighty empires, and it was the same in the fifth century when they came back from exile. The priests of Jerusalem had both rivalry and long-standing friendship with the priests of Samaria. Conflict between the two countries was against the priests' interests on both sides of the political border. Both priestly groups, we can surmise, wished for peace and reconciliation. Both adhered to the tradition that the Jews living in Samaria were the remnants of the old Northern Kingdom of Israel.

These disputes concern my thesis closely, because the friendship of the Jerusalem priests with the priests of Samaria, however rivalrous in the detail, would have inspired them with an ultramontane loyalty. It reminds me of the political implications of the Catholic priests' allegiance to Rome in post-Reformation England. It would be as reasonable to accuse the priestly editors of treason as to assume the English 'recusant' Catholic families were spies and enemy agents. Compare Ezra's anxiety about the 'adversaries of Judah' (Ezra 4. 1). The parallel cause would create parallel mistrust between the priestly editors and the government; the Jerusalem priests could easily have become politically suspect.

As I develop this thesis I assume that they, in the sixth and fifth centuries, held vividly in mind the record of the break-up of the united kingdom after Solomon. They grieved over the ancient split between Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel; they dreaded another rift between the two great communities, both descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, both worshipping the same, unique, omnipotent God, both heirs to the great promises of Genesis.

It is important to insist that I am proposing this concern for Samaria as a specifically priestly point of view, not one necessarily shared by all priests, not by the majority of their flock, and not one acceptable to the government. The people of Judah may have hated and despised the people of Samaria; their government had certainly made war on the Northern Kingdom of Israel and was embroiled

[6] John Bowman, *The Samaritan Problem: Studies in the Relationship of Samaritanism, Judaism, and Early Christianity*, trans. Alfred Johnson, Pittsburgh Theology Monograph Series (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1975).

with them in the sixth century. The priestly loyalty to their one-time allies was both unpopular and dangerous. It needs to be examined further because it is a perspective on the Pentateuch that explains much that has been left in obscurity.

My argument is based on the external threats presented to the successive governors of Judah. She was surrounded with enemy states, Idumea on her southern border, Moab and Ammon on the east, and on the northern border was Samaria, by this time a rich and powerful province of Persia. For centuries they had all been jostling for territory. But Samaria, so the priests would have seen it, should have been a natural ally of Judah because of their shared descent and shared religion. When Nehemiah appeared on the scene, in 445 BCE, the governor of Samaria, Sanballat, was at the height of his power.[7] He was a Samaritan and his family had been governors of Samaria through the whole Persian period.[8]

> The northerners and Samaritans under Sanballat had more power in Palestine during the entire Persian period than the Jews of Jerusalem, because the lieutenant governor ruled from Schehem. The remainder of the House of Joseph, along with the opponents of Jerusalem, and the ones excluded during the life time of Ezra, outnumbered the Jews of Jerusalem even up till the time of the Greeks.[9]

So Judah was precarious and vulnerable. Ezra thought it necessary to distance Judah from the governor, Sanballat, and sought to impress on the government of Persia that the religion of the Jews was quite distinct from that of Samaria.

God Angry and God Forgiving

When I started my Bible study it happened that I began with the book of Numbers. It draws a grim picture of God, which I took for granted. Only later, after I had read Leviticus carefully, did the contrast between the idea of God in each book force itself on my attention. And then, later still, after I had started to attend to the literary style, I realized that that question, so interesting for us, if it was on the agenda of the editors' concerns at all, was not a burning issue.

[7] Peter Ackroyd, *Israel under Babylon and Persia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 173.

[8] Crown, *Samaritans*, 9.

[9] Bowman, *Samaritan Problem*, 5.

Numbers presents a ferocious God. He encourages his people to wage total war and to commit wholesale genocide after each important conquest. Destroying foreign enemies is a routine formula, but even with his own people he is brutal if they disobey him or his chosen leaders. In chapter 16 when they defy Moses and Aaron he inflicts spectacular punishments on them: first he makes an earthquake to swallow the leaders of the protesters (Num. 16. 35–25), and then he burns up their 250 captains (Num. 16. 35), then, when the congregation still defy him, he sends a plague that wipes out 14,700 of them. In chapter 25 the crime to be punished is worshipping false gods (Num. 25. 1–3), and the plague that he sends kills 24,000 (Num. 26. 9). At the same time, the people of Israel provoke him sorely, and the story of Numbers is full of great acts of divine mercy and forgiveness.

By contrast the God of Leviticus is consistently benign and unruffled. Some commentators of the book describe him in relatively negative terms, as impersonal, unemotional, formal.[10] But to my eye this book portrays God more positively, as compassionate and forgiving. He institutes rites of sacrifice to provide forgiveness for all the sinners, and he carefully describes what is and what is not a sin.

The two books seem to be utterly different approaches to the same theme, God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Two priestly books, and two opposed ideas about God—are there two authors? No, they share the same language of the priestly school in the Second Temple community. One way to resolve the puzzle would be to emphasize the distinctive styles that can be adopted within a single great opus. In the style of Leviticus everyone behaves with reserve. In the style of Numbers, Moses can throw himself on the ground, fall flat on his face (Num. 16. 4). In Genesis, Jacob and Joseph can weep freely; in Leviticus no one bursts into tears. It is a different style.

I venture to judge Numbers to be an epic. Shemaryahu Talmon has presented a learned literature on biblical genres, in which the epic is thought not to be in the biblical repertoire. The scholars are seeking a very fine-tuned definition, but Talmon allows more latitude, saying that 'The epic is not a clear-cut literary form which can be identified sufficiently by a given number of techniques.'[11] Within this latitude

[10] I. Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Knohl is not arguing that the whole of Leviticus presents God in this light, but chs. 1–17 and others attributed to the P editor.

[11] Shemaryahu Talmon, 'Did There Exist a Biblical National Epic?', in S. Talmon, *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible, Form and Content* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1993), 104.

I can stay with my opinion: the essence of an epic is a heroic story of great courage and daring, with huge stakes. The heroes of epic must be heroic, they must fight against fearsome odds, they must be faithful to their cause and completely loyal to each other. The numbers slain in battle are an index of the heroism involved. It is the epic style of Numbers that requires the pitiless slaughter, not God's character. Suitably for an epic, the grandiose display of force demonstrates his power and glory. His part in loyally supporting his people through the harrowing scenes does not indicate anything else about the divine attributes except his faithful help in their distress.

By contrast, Leviticus uses as its model a set of instructions for the cult. God is presented (most of the time) as calm, majestic, and serene. The genre is poetic, it works through symmetry and balance, it uses laws to forge recursive chains of ritual which at every level place the tabernacle, with the covenant in its ark in the Holy of Holies, at the centre of the created universe.

However, it is a mistake to try to explain the different content of the two books by their different styles. A work and its style are one and the same;[12] the style is not an arbitrary decoration on the work, it conveys the meaning. Consequently, epic magnification does not explain an apparent difference in theology.

When the priestly editors collaborated to produce a brilliant, large-scale composition, I doubt that their main intent was to give a general account of God's dealings with his people. Whether God showed his loving side or his easily roused anger would not be a big issue. That topic is too unfocused for a book written with such concentrated passion. I am not convinced that what is theologically taken for granted about the basis of existence can be the main theme of the Pentateuch's teaching. It is too general and too diffuse. Only some pressing anxiety, something desperately longed for or deeply dreaded, would have stirred them to write. The focus must have been sharper. Theology books describing eternal principles tend at the same time to address contemporary problems that affect the theologians themselves.

Numbers, the Book of Censuses

Underlying all the superficial distinctions of style and genre, there is a more sharply pointed common theme: the twelve sons of Jacob, the

[12] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976).

patriarchs and their descendants, co-heirs to the covenant, must never quarrel or fight. This theme keeps recurring. After idolatry the grave and unforgivable crime is fratricide.

As I was reading the book of Numbers I found that many modern commentators since Wellhausen have followed his view that the book is a disorderly work. To an anthropologist that sounds so implausible that I worked hard to uncover the rhetorical structure. I knew nothing about ring composition then, so it was a surprise to discover a consistent twelve-point ring pattern organizing the whole work.[13]

The book is highly structured and has to be read strictly according to its literary form. Just try the synoptic reading, not linear from one sentence to the next, but across the matching sections of text. It is like reading a sonnet where the rhyming and metre carry the beginning forward to the end. The quick jumps across the text make sense together, the sense of disorder fades away; a highly organized book with a new set of meanings emerges. Numbers read in this attentive, expectant way, gives a message loud and clear. It is a political message about the twelve tribes of Israel. Its first lesson is that all the descendants of Jacob are brothers, fraternal loyalty is required, absolutely. Its second lesson is that God endorses the authority of Aaron and his children.

Genesis presents stories of jealousy between mothers and between brothers, Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau. Exodus and Numbers make of the story of the march of the Israelites through the wilderness to the Jordan a framework for the laws. The narrative in Numbers consistently presents the theme of the unity of the people of Israel. The recital of events is held up seven times for long name-by-name lists. With variations in their ordering the lists show that there are always exactly twelve tribes,[14] even after the exclusion of Levi from the first census (Num. 1), and after the name of Joseph has been dropped. At this point, when Joseph is dead and Levi's descendants are made into temple servants, the total of tribes would be only ten. To make up for two missing names each of the seven lists has inserted the names of Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, bringing it up to twelve.

[13] M. Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the book of Numbers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), and for brief details see ch. 6.

[14] G. Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (London: SCM, 1988), ch. 10, pp. 121–6.

Table 1. Seven lists of the descendants of the patriarchs in Numbers

1.	1. 1–44	The first census at Sinai names twelve tribes, excluding the Levites who are counted separately.
2.	2	Twelve tribes encamped with Levites stationed in the middle round the tabernacle.
3.	7. 12–84	The offerings for the tabernacle from the leaders of each of the twelve named tribes.
4.	10. 14–28	All twelve tribes, named again, set out in marching order. Plus two families of Levites, Gershon and Merari.
5.	13. 1–16	A man from each of the twelve named tribes selected to join Joshua to spy out the promised land.
6.	26. 1–62	A new census in the plains of Jordan counts all the twelve tribes.
7.	34. 16–29	In the plains of Moab, by the Jordan, the same twelve tribes are each allotted their portion of land.

Seven full listings; that makes a total of seven emphases on the twelve tribes. Wilfried Warning's numerological analyses of Leviticus,[15] have demonstrated that when anything is said or happens seven times in this book the number is very significant. It confirms that the seven listings convey the overall message of Numbers: Jacob did indeed have twelve sons, and their descendants are the twelve brother tribes of Israel.

Over and over again! What lesson is being driven home with such heavy repetition? Twelve is a sacred number, but that in itself is not a reason for this strong emphasis, there are lots of sacred numbers. There are twelve months in the year—yes, but what of it? To keep on listing the twelve tribes is not a fortuitous decoration, it is well chosen to express the obligations of fraternity. Numbers takes over the legend of descent of all the tribes from one father, Israel, and insists on their solidarity. It is as if their inheritance depends on it: as if the covenant made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his offspring depends upon their descendants remaining together as a unit. It follows that (in the priestly editorial view) the words, 'the congregation of Israel', or 'all Israel', refer to them all, not just to Judah. This is going to be an important point of disagreement between the editors and Ezra.

[15] W. Warning, *Literary Artistry in Leviticus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

Put negatively, the lesson of Numbers is a warning not to secede. This is made very explicit in chapter 32 when the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh, who had been travelling with and fighting alongside the others, saw that the lands of Gilead and Jazer were very fine pasture for cattle. In spite of the fact that this territory is not within the region of the promise, they petition Moses to be allowed to take it for their possession, instead of claiming a territory with the others in the designated land on the other side of the Jordan. Moses furiously reproaches them for breaking up the armies and taking land for themselves before their military mission is fulfilled. Very angry, he sees it as a proposal to defect, and envisages dire retribution from God if it weakens the morale of the congregation. They pacify him by promising that they will fight alongside their brethren until all the promised land is conquered, but they just ask to be able to leave their children and cattle there and to come back to them when the fighting is over. The warnings and affirmations take up a whole chapter of forty-two verses, and evidently it is a very important episode as it is referred to again (Deut. 3. 12–22; Josh. 13. 8–32).

It is tempting to see Moses' reaction as perfectly normal in a long military campaign: of course he had to discourage defection. But that was all a long, long time ago, in mythological time. We can suppose that the priestly editors, in exile and in Judah at the time of the Second Temple community, were making their own selection among rich piles of mythological stories. In my reading of Genesis, and of the whole Pentateuch, the dominant principle of selection was a doctrine of the unity of the sons of Jacob. Its underlying theme was that defection is a grave sin. The brother tribes should not defect from their allegiance to one another, nor should individual members of the tribes defect. The editors would have been using military desertion as an allegory for some breach of solidarity that seriously threatened their own congregation.

The Sons of Joseph

We need to be clear about the readers whom the priestly editors intended to address. Theologians write for other theologians, philosophers write for other philosophers, astronomers for colleagues who will appreciate the mathematical proofs. Though the specialists expect to influence a larger public, their own colleagues are the

primary targets. It makes a difference to our interpretation if we can agree that the priestly books were written for other priests. Then we would look for the dominant thesis as something that would have been worrying all the priests at the time, some defection that the Jerusalem priesthood wanted to forfend.

What was happening in their vicinity to make the priestly editors so obsessed with the villainy of defection? Certainly they lived in perilous times and might well be afraid of losing their allies. However, I doubt if the urgent provocation for producing these books would have been the dangers either from hostile neighbouring states, or from great empires competing in wars of territorial expansion. A state of constant alert against military attack would have been normal background for the little settlements of Judaea. They might expect their scattered brother tribes to come armed to their help in a siege or attack (though the tribal brethren of the priests were not warriors). That is too general, and too military, to be the right level of explanation. Something more precise and closer to home, most likely something to do with the cult, must explain why the priestly editors were particularly opposed to disaffection between brothers.

In fact they had every reason to be concerned about their fellow priests in Samaria, and their congregations. According to Bible sources, the central highlands in the north were allotted to the sons of Joseph, to the people of Ephraim (Josh. 16), and to the other half of the tribe of Manasseh (Josh. 17; Judg. 1. 27–8). It seems very probable that the Jerusalem priestly editors' insistence on fraternal loyalty was directed at the clergy ministering to the once-prosperous congregation in Samaria. Many of the priests in Ephraim and Manasseh would have been their cousins. While in government and literary circles the relations with Samaria would have been strained, often hostile, the priests intermarried with their Samarian co-religionists.

Samaria had been prosperous, powerful, and highly civilized with a famous literary tradition, in the days of the kings of Israel. In the eighth century BCE the country was invaded by Assyria, and large numbers of the population deported, while other peoples were brought in to fill their place. The Assyrian invasion and destruction of Samaria gave a new impetus to Judaean culture, which had been flagging at this time. Floods of refugees arrived in Judah where they were hospitably received. A new spirit of religious fervour was stimu-

lated.[16] Judaea entered on a period of high culture, as well as economic and population growth. It would be natural for the Jewish priesthood to have looked on Samaria as a future support should they themselves suffer such calamities.

On this line of thought, fear of defection would not be the right word. Defection would apply to the armed forces of Israel counted in Numbers, but it is a figure for the real problem facing the priestly editors immediately before, during, and after the exile. The unity they were interested in would have been ecclesiastical, the right word would have been schism. The two great powers committed to the worship of the same one God were Samaria and Jerusalem. The two communities of clerics needed each other's support. The more that the two provinces were torn apart by political events, the more important it became to try to keep the religious congregations intact in their doctrinal and cultic solidarity. The one thing the priests would have deplored would have been rivalry and quarrelling between two sections of the one religion. And the priests at Jerusalem would have been facing great financial losses if their temple lost its position of top prestige in the region.

Yahweh Alone

As Morton Smith[17] has simplified the history of that confused period after the return from exile, there were two important political parties in Jerusalem, the assimilationists who were content to live among and intermarry with the various neighbours and immigrants into their area, and the Yahweh-Alone party who developed a sectarian concern for religious purity and strove for social separation from other cults and peoples. The contest between the two would have been old, but it was crystallized by the rule of Governor Nehemiah (See Ch. 3 below). Formerly the priests in Jerusalem were probably free to choose their political preference, though they were required to choose wives from their own line (Lev. 21. 14). As the Cohens and Levis in Jerusalem would have been intermarrying with Cohens and Levis in the Ephraimite area, they would have had many relatives there. If the new governor, Ezra, wanted to count Ephraim as a

[16] See Knohl, *Sanctuary of Silence*, 223, on the stimulus to spirituality that came to the Jerusalem priesthood from Samaria.

[17] M. Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1971).

land of strangers, instead of a land of brothers, the Jerusalem clergy would be in distress. It seems plausible to read their denunciations of schism between Jacob's sons as dire warnings of the true-life schism they dreaded, and could not prevent.

Under Persian rule Samaria was outbidding Jerusalem in importance. I see this as the recurring hidden theme, Judah versus Joseph. One of the threads running through the Pentateuch concerns the relation of Judah to Rachel's children, the three tribes, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. The tension that it creates pulls the narrative along, past the Pentateuch, past Joshua. The theme is very much on top in the book of Judges where we read a horrendous account of fighting between the tribes of Israel, a war between the sons of Jacob in which Benjamin is nearly annihilated and about to disappear, but forgiveness prevails at the end (Judg. 21. 13–15)

It makes sense to reread Genesis for clues to the attitudes of the priestly writers to their fellow-clergy in the other state. In particular, I need to track how the rift between the Northern Kingdom and Judah was treated in Genesis. There we also find a strong plea to both the north and the south of Israel to stay together.

Jacob's Favouritism

The story starts, of course, with Jacob himself, his anger and griefs against certain of his sons and his obvious preference for others. Or it really starts further back with the jealousy of two sisters, Leah, the elder, and plain, and Rachel, the younger, and beautiful. His family expected Jacob to marry one of them; he fell in love with Rachel; he served his cheating father-in-law seven years for her, but when it came to the day after the marriage he found he had slept with the elder daughter, Leah, in the bridal bed. Laban explained next morning that he had changed the women to uphold the custom of the country which did not allow the younger to marry before the elder daughter. So Jacob accommodatingly undertook to marry both sisters, and served Laban another seven years for the beautiful Rachel. In all, he did fourteen years of labour.

Leah had six sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun), and a daughter, Dinah. Her handmaid bore him two more (Gad and Asher). Rachel bore only two children, Joseph and Benjamin, both arriving late in the sequence of Jacob's sons, and her

handmaid produced Gad and Naphtali. Her relative infertility created the imbalance of numbers across the two sides of the family which laid a heavy hand on the story of early Israel, but it was not Jacob's fault, as he angrily told Rachel (Gen. 30. 2) when she complained to him. There was nothing wrong with his fertility.

The beloved Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. The sons of Leah grew up well aware of their father's blatant preference for the sons of Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin. Joseph made their hostility worse by boasting of his dream of domination over them. They had had enough of their father's favourite son and decided to get rid of him. They sold him to travelling Ishmaelites, and told Jacob that he had died, bringing his fine coat of many colours stained with goat's blood for evidence. Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes and wept for Joseph (Gen. 37. 35). From that episode the story of the Josephites runs like a scarlet thread through the biblical narratives. Deuteronomy lays oblique blame on Jacob for his arbitrary dealings with his sons:

> If a man has two wives, one of them loved and the other disliked, and if both the loved and the disliked have borne him sons, the firstborn being the son of the one who is disliked, then on the day that he wills his possessions to his sons, he is not permitted to treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the disliked, who is the firstborn. He must acknowledge as firstborn the son of the one who is disliked, giving him a double portion of all that he has; since he is the first issue of his virility, the right of the firstborn is his. (Deut. 21. 15–17).

Calum Carmichael has a plausible theory that the laws were made to prevent repetition of the patriarch's misdeeds.[18] I am supposing, a little differently, that the connection between laws and narratives is due, rather, to the fact that the same editors were selecting them both to express their own latter-day political interests. These lines from Deuteronomy seem to support Leah's children against Rachel's. They might be construed as giving a warmer support to Judah against the northern states, but I don't find this strongly developed in the first four books of the Pentateuch. Rather, it would seem as if Genesis is hoping that the Josephite group will quietly accept the authority not of Judah but of Aaron.

[18] C. Carmichael, *Law and Narrative in the Bible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

Always quick in riposte, Jacob could have replied shortly to the Deuteronomist that there was no fixed order of inheritance in Israel, no rule favouring primogeniture. According to Robertson Smith, and confirmed by recent anthropologists in Arab cultures,[19] birth order does not indicate which of a man's sons will be his heir. The matter of succession is left to the father to decide as he likes. His blessing on his chosen heir is what counts. It was not by a rule of primogeniture but because Esau provided game for table that he became Isaac's favourite and his father's intended heir (Gen. 27. 4). Jacob could equally well have responded to the preaching tone of Deuteronomy that this was not the first time in human history for jealousy to be caused by one son being favoured over the other, recalling God's preference for Abel's offering from his flock to Cain's offering from the hunt (Gen. 4).

Almost accidentally Jacob seems to have started to follow a rule of primogeniture, assuming that his successor would have been his firstborn, Reuben. But Reuben disgraced himself by sleeping with Jacob's concubine (Gen. 35. 22). Then the next in birth order, Simeon and Levi, got themselves into trouble by the destruction of Shechem (Gen. 34). Jacob was furious with all three of them, he cursed them on his deathbed, and he accepted that the fourth son, Judah, should succeed. As it was by his father's choice, it would not have seemed to be a shaky claim to succession.

Jacob as a Person

Jacob is an engaging character. He was a 'quiet man', in itself an attractive quality. He had been his mother's favourite. Quiet, but he was also clever and somewhat devious, as we know from his dealings with Laban. He must have had a powerful physique and great determination, as the angel with whom he wrestled discovered (Gen. 3. 34). He was kind and hated cruelty, as his dying speech shows in reference to Simeon and Levi (Gen. 49.5–7) He was emotional: tears welled up when he was deeply moved. I don't recall anyone else in the Bible who wept so freely, except Joseph. Jacob wept when he first saw Rachel, the wife his parents had chosen for

[19] W. R. Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885); R. Murphy and L. Kasdan, 'The Structure of Parallel Cousin Marriage', *The American Anthropologist* (1959), 17–29.

him (Gen. 30. 11). He broke down and wept when he found that Esau had forgiven him his early treachery over the matter of a birthright and a blessing (Gen. 33. 4). His heart fainted when he heard that Joseph was still alive (Gen. 45. 26).

Jacob was also an incorrigible cheat. With his mother's connivance he cheated his old, blind, father, he cheated his brother of the 'birthright blessing', taking mean advantage of his hunger. He repeatedly cheated his father-in-law, Laban. Of course his father-in-law had started it by cheating him first with the matter of slipping the wrong girl between the sheets. Jacob asserted that Laban reduced his wages to lower levels, several times. They had agreed that for Jacob's reward after fourteen years' labour, all the sheep that were not white would belong to Jacob. No sooner had they made this agreement than Laban cheated by quickly removing all the speckled and striped sheep from his flock and giving them to his son, so that there were none for Jacob to breed from. But Jacob was not to be so easily cheated; he used a clever piece of magic to ensure that the sheep he was still herding would always give birth to striped or variegated lambs (Gen. 30. 33–40).

Pragmatist, opportunist, cheerful cheat, Jacob suggests a mythical trickster figure who can always squirm out of the traps his enemies have set for him. He is a biblical Ulysses, crafty, brave, and good for a laugh. A man of strong feelings, he was enraged when his sons, Simeon and Levi, perjured his promise of peace to the King of Shechem, and slew the whole community (Gen. 34). I am arguing that his outcry against their perfidy and bloodshed was inserted into Genesis to represent the editor's case against the government of Judah's foreign policy.

In the rest of this chapter I will take three episodes from Genesis to demonstrate the political thesis. The first is Jacob's sons' perfidious butchery of the people of Shechem. Sarna says that this ancient city's relations with Israel have been 'shrouded in mystery' and the subject of much speculation.[20] I will focus more on its political significance in the Second Temple period when Judah was a province of Persia, and ruled from Shechem.

The second is the oath taken under the thigh, which suggests that once Joseph had been sold as a slave he was disinherited, and Jacob's

[20] Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 406.

remedy the twisted blessing on Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. The third is the way that Jacob's dying blessings and prophecies on his sons subtly distinguishes Joseph's destiny from Judah's.

Shechem: Why Jacob Cursed Simeon and Levi

Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob, was ravished by the heir-apparent prince of a neighbouring kingdom, Shechem. A tremendous row ensues. Shechem, the king, and his son lead a deputation to call on Jacob to apologize, and seek the girl in marriage. Jacob agrees that his people will forgive the outrage and live in brotherly peace with the people of Shechem, on one condition proposed by Dinah's brothers: they must be circumcised. The rulers of Shechem agree and conform forthwith. All seems set for a peaceful resolution. But Simeon and Levi, two of her brothers, go out and, without regard for their father's given word, slay the people of Shechem and lay waste the kingdom.

One can see this conclusion of the story as indicating the difference between two generations, Jacob's and his sons' on the moral question of honour and perjury. The younger generation minds about honour and the older generation minds about peace. This is how it is read by Julian Pitt-Rivers in *The Fate of Shechem*.[21] He there clarified the various principles of honour that have prevailed since time immemorial around the shores of the Mediterranean. Whereas in the Bible words meaning defilement apply to sins against God or infraction of rules protecting the tabernacle; in Mediterranean countries, whether Christian or Moslem, defilement refers to personal honour, to family honour, and to sexual behaviour—a woman's chastity. Julian Pitt-Rivers puts the Bible incident into the full context of a double-pronged honour system. One prong was personal honour, the reputation for keeping to one's word or promise. The other was sexual, the defilement of a daughter of the house and the duty of revenge.

Normally in a country organized on an honour code, when personal honour is gone a man is no more a figure to be reckoned with; nothing he says can be trusted; a man of no honour is no man. In direct consequence of the broken word, Jacob's people would seem to be in jeopardy. Notice that old Jacob, without saying a word about his

[21] J. Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem, or the Politics of Sex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

honour, bemoaned: 'You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land . . . my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household' (Gen. 34. 30). The avenging brothers were unmoved; for them it was an imperative, they had no choice but to avenge the honour of their sister. To their father's protests they just answered laconically: 'Should our sister be treated like a whore?' (Gen. 34. 31). They could be referring to the honour of the family, but their father was not by any means a man of honour. His sons took after him. They probably thought it was funny that their enemies had just been circumcised and were still sore when they were attacked. Where was the honour of Simeon and Levi? This society was not organized by an honour code. If Jacob was expected to avenge his daughter's dishonour, he would never have made peace with her seducer's people.

Honour systems are different in different cultures. In some regions the custom requires the defiled woman to be killed. For example, the case of a recent 'honour-killing' in Sweden in January 2002: a young woman in a Kurdish exile community was beaten up in Uppsala by her brother for refusing to give up her Swedish lover. As she remained adamant, her father shot her dead in front of her mother and sisters. According to the specific logic of an honour culture, protecting one's honour is an obligation that 'transcends religious, ethnic and national boundaries . . . if a woman refused to comply with the rules set down by her cultural community, her "immoral behaviour" contaminated the whole family. If other strategies to make the woman comply failed, the only remedy was for her male relatives to kill her in order to protect the family honour. Thus murders were officially sanctioned and designed to uphold a specific moral order.'[22]

In the Greek mountains honour was much more than a system for controlling the women. The ideal of female purity described by John Campbell for the Saraktsani shepherds in contemporary Greece[23] required the brothers of a woman who has been defiled to kill her seducer and his brothers. As in Shechem, it was the woman who put the men's lives at risk. But the whole society was organized around a competitive striving for honour. If a family lost its honour by not avenging a shameful attack, they went spiralling down the rungs of

[22] M. Kurkiala, 'Interpreting Honour Killings', *Anthropology Today*, 19/1 (Feb. 2003), 7.
[23] J. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964).

the status ladder. The lower they found themselves in the honour ratings, the less hope they had of making good marriages for their sons and daughters, which meant less economic resources, less chance of getting good pasture land for their own flocks, and a very gloomy, poverty-stricken future as despised, marginalized, and dishonourable.

What is this Greekish story doing here in Genesis? Several answers have been offered. When Jacob first hears what Dinah's brothers had done, he is not worried that they had broken his word. He is much more troubled by the practical fact that their cruelty and violence have turned peaceful neighbours into dangerous enemies for his household. The story explains why the second and third sons of Jacob were taken out of the line of succession, so that Judah could succeed his father, and it gives the context for Jacob's dying prophecies of doom. Jacob's deathbed prophecies all came true. When Genesis took its present form, the only two significant sons of Jacob remaining on the political scene were Joseph and Judah, represented by Samaria and Judah.

Julian Pitt-Rivers thought that the story of Shechem might have been inserted here because of the issue of honour. I doubt it because of the historic importance of Shechem itself. This city was on the site of deeply cherished memories (or call them legends if you will). This was where Abraham made his first stopping place on arrival from Haran, where he received his first vision from God and built an altar, the place where Jacob had the same experience and bought a plot of land, and the burial-place of Joseph. Amid such a concentration of symbolic events, the city (set in the middle of old Josephite country) became the first capital of the Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam. In the Persian period it was the centre of Sanballat's government over Samaria.[24] Sanballat also ruled over Judah from Shechem. I suggest that the story about Shechem is inserted into Genesis expressly to carry a message for the Governor Sanballat and the Samarian ruling class. It would soften Judah's rulers' hostility to this province to show that originally Jacob himself had wanted friendship with the King of Shechem. It also showed that Jacob disapproved of the violence perpetrated by his sons, evidenced by the harsh terms of his curse upon Simeon and Levi for destroying the city. The editor is saying: 'Whatever the aggressive policy of our present government, our old

[24] Sarna, *Genesis*, 405–7.

father Jacob wanted us to live in peace with Samaria . . . and we are true to him.'

Joseph: The Oath under the Thigh

The next episodes that demonstrate the priestly editors' lively concern for the Josephite connection are about Judah's succession as head of the whole community of Israel after Jacob's death. It is true that he took on himself all the responsibilities of burial. But the Chronicler actually suggested that legally the rightful heir to Jacob after Reuben would have been Joseph: 'though Judah became prominent among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph' (1 Chr. 5. 2). It is a strange statement to find here. For one thing, the Chronicler consistently comes down on the side of David in any contest with the northern states, which would mean backing Judah against the Josephites. For another, it opens a fascinating surmise: with such a history of jealousy would the tribes under Joseph's leadership have been solid enough to keep Jacob's covenant intact? It never came to the test. The priestly editors would have preferred a theocratic solution, led by the descendants of Aaron.

In a situation of absolute power, Joseph proved himself a ruthless public administrator. The Genesis story does not flatter him. It records his heartless management of the famine crisis which he used to turn a population of Egyptian freeholders into landless serfs of the Pharaoh. Wildavsky sees him as the binary opposite of Moses: Joseph enslaved the people of Israel in Egypt, Moses made them into freeholders in a new land.[25] Joseph was ruthless. He also turned out to have been a wily negotiator when it came to dealing with his brothers when they arrived in Egypt. Of course he was unlikely to have done so well without the authority of the Pharaoh. It is an unedifying record. Nothing suggests that the Genesis redactors were building up a case in favour or against the Josephite party. So why did the editors do nothing to protect Joseph's reputation and his rights? In fact, they did a lot.

Jacob himself, even if he had wanted to, could not have installed the eldest son of his favourite wife as his heir. Franz Steiner, another

[25] A. Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father: Moses as Political Leader* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1984).

of the English school of anthropologists I mentioned in the Preface, provides a technical legal explanation for the peculiar oath that Jacob asked Joseph to take.[26] Selling a brother into slavery means cutting off ties of kinship with him, really making an end of kinship. Once Joseph had been sold, he would not count as kin unless he were redeemed (bought back) by his kinsmen (Lev. 25. 47–9). There is no imaginable way in which a destitute refugee such as Jacob could have offered to buy back the most powerful man in Egypt. He couldn't even have tried to calculate what would be the appropriate sum, to say nothing about how he would ever have managed to raise the money.

Jacob recognized the problem when, near his time of death, he first humbly asked Joseph to do him a last favour, to bury him in the land of his fathers (Gen. 47. 30–1), and then asked him to swear an oath to that effect, an oath to be solemnized by placing his hand under his, Jacob's, 'thigh'. Joseph was being told to swear by Jacob's genitals. It was a well-attested oath-form in the region.[27] Abraham had required the same oath from his servant when he sent him to choose a bride for Isaac (Gen. 24. 2–3; 9). It was all right for a servant to take the oath, but what is not well-known is that it was unthinkable for a man to swear by his own father's genitals.[28] That Joseph was asked to do it proved that he no longer counted as one of Jacob's sons, he had lost kinship with Jacob's family.

It would mean that proven descent from Joseph would not give membership of the twelve tribes of Jacob. If the contemporary inhabitants of Samaria wanted to prove that they were descendants of Jacob they could not have withstood the challenge. This may well have influenced Nehemiah when he rejected their offer to help rebuild the temple. Manasseh and Ephraim were the progeny of Joseph all right, but Joseph himself had been struck off the list of Jacob's sons when his brothers sold him. His sons could not be heirs to the promises God made to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, unless they had been reclaimed by a special rite of adoption.

[26] F. Steiner, 'Enslavement and the Early Hebrew Lineage System: An Explanation of Genesis', in J. Adler and R. Fardon (eds.), *Taboo, Truth and Religion* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999).

[27] N. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 162 n.

[28] Steiner, 'Enslavement and the Early Hebrew Lineage System'.

The editors saw to it, and wrote the details of the ceremony of adoption. They made Jacob insist on adopting Joseph's two eldest sons as his own, to replace the two (Simeon and Levi) he had cursed because of their vile misdeeds at Shechem (Gen. 34). In giving the blessing, old, blind, Jacob crossed his arms and gave the blessing from his right hand to Joseph's younger son, Ephraim; their father protested, but Jacob insisted that this was what he wanted to do, and Manasseh, the elder, had to be content with the left-handed blessing. Without this formal act of adoption, Manasseh and Ephraim would not have been able to figure in the lists of the sons of Jacob in the book of Numbers. This would have made the censuses in Numbers rather irrelevant to the time of the production of the books. By that time Manasseh no longer counted, but Ephraim, whose territory was Samaria, was very much to be reckoned with. By the time of the redaction in the sixth and fifth centuries, or later, there was Judah, then there was Ephraim, a much bigger territory, more populous, richer, and more significant in the Persian administration.

It seems more likely than ever that the deep anxiety of the redactors, expressed by condemning military desertion from the alliance of the brother tribes, was inspired by fear of a rift between these two peoples. The priestly editors insisted that they must be staunch friends, never abandon their brothers, fight with them shoulder to shoulder; but as we know, political forces were going to be too much for them. The threatening rift between the brothers' progeny lay ahead.

Prophecy, Time Forward and Backward

When Jacob is ready to die of extreme old age, he calls his sons and utters a prophecy for each of them. He roundly curses the three older sons, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. They had deserved their father's curse, so you might expect them to be cut off from their inheritance. For Jacob they no longer counted as his sons, but when we get to the last census of the book of Numbers, after the long journey and forty years in the wilderness, the names of the three cursed brothers are still on the roll-call of the children of Israel (Num. 26). However, God sees to it that the prophecies of doom come true eventually.

First to be cursed is his eldest son, Reuben. Jacob says: 'Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up on to your

father's bed; then you defiled it' (Gen. 49. 4). None the less, curse or no curse, Moses gave the Reubenites a large territory, (Josh. 13. 15–21; Num. 32. 1). In a special blessing, which appears to have softened the effects of the curse, he said: 'May Reuben live, and not die out, even though his numbers are few' (Deut. 33. 6). Chronicles describes the Reubenites' big army, and says that God was with them, they trusted in him, and they prospered well enough to be able to dwell in their territory until the exile. It doesn't sound like too much hardship (1 Chr. 5. 18–22). Their fate was more lenient than the fate of the Simeonites, and less honourable than that of the Levites. A clever lawyer might have argued that Reuben's sin was less vile than the sins of Simeon and Levi. Perhaps they had earned remission by going across the Jordan with Moses and fighting alongside the troops of Israel, even though they had been granted lands for themselves on the near side of the river (Num. 32). In this their behaviour conformed impeccably with the book of Numbers' ideal of brotherly collaboration, reinforced in Deuteronomy (Deut. 22. 1–4).

On the other hand, Reuben was named for having joined the Levites' revolt against Moses (Num. 16. 1). And in the end 'they transgressed against the God of their ancestors, and prostituted themselves to the gods of the peoples of the land'. Together with Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh whose territory bordered on theirs, they were invaded and eventually carried away as prisoners by the King of Assyria (1 Chr. 5. 26). Simeon and Levi, having sinned in concert, got a joint curse on their father's deathbed: 'Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords . . . in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel' (Gen. 49. 5–7).

This time Jacob's prophecy is quickly fulfilled. Simeon and Levi are 'divided in Jacob' by God's proclamation that the Levites must not inherit any land, and that they will serve the priests in the temple, a gift as it were, from God to the sons of Aaron (Num. 1), and their task is to carry the tabernacle and its furnishing on the coming journeys. Not possessing any land, the sons of Levi cannot live as neighbours of the sons of Simeon, they are literally 'scattered in Israel'. The Levites are also to be scattered by the laws made for their cities, one in every tribal territory (Num. 35. 1–15). God fulfilled Jacob's prophecy for Levi while actually doing him honour. From

being another warrior tribe he was transformed into a temple servant, landless, but estimable.[29]

Similarly, though Jacob could not forgive them, God saw to it that the sons of Simeon got off lightly. They were never dropped from the Pentateuch's list of sons of Jacob. Nothing more is said about the curse. They are counted in all the censuses of Numbers (Num. 26. 12). They were represented by a census taken when the territory was finally being distributed among the tribes (Num. 34. 20). But they were not a big population, only 22,000, compared with Manasseh, over 52,000, and Benjamin, 45,600. They were obviously dwindling and it could count as a punishment that the land they were allotted was within the land of Judah: in a true sense they lost their political independence (Josh. 19. 1–9). Jacob's prophecy was right again.

Jacob's Blessings for Joseph

We need to pay special attention to Jacob's dying words, because his curses and blessings occur again in Numbers' chapters on Baalam the prophet (Ch. 4 below). Into Jacob's mouth the priestly editors had put prophecies for his sons which were later fulfilled by events. His blessing on Joseph's two sons (Gen. 48. 11) was also justified. Jacob, in spite of Joseph's protests, managed to cross his arms so that Ephraim, the younger son, received the right-handed blessing, Manasseh, the elder, got the left-handed one. This story doubles the story of Jacob's own blessing stolen from Esau, but it is not for mere irony's sake. As events turned out, the receiver of the right-handed blessing, Ephraim, became a powerful province of Persia. Jacob's prophecy was validated. His elder brother, Manasseh, who got only the left-handed blessing, made a nuisance of himself, when the Promised Land was divided into territories and assigned to each tribe. He complained to Moses: 'Why have you given me but one lot and one portion as an inheritance, since we are a numerous people? . . . The hill country is not enough for us' (Jos. 17. 14–16). He was boasting; Moses yielded to him, but we know that he failed to drive out the inhabitants living there, but put them to forced labour (Josh. 17.13). Eventually he shared the fate of Reuben, and his people were

[29] Moses' reproach to the Levites in Num. 17.

carried off as prisoners to Assyria (1 Chr. 5. 26). Would the right-handed blessing have endowed him with better judgement?

There is no need to go through all Jacob's prophecies. Most of them are aphorisms with a prophetic edge. All the enigmatic prophecies had their grain of truth by the time of editing. We must by now be interested in what Jacob says about his two best-loved sons, Joseph and Benjamin. The whole story of his coming to Egypt was based on his love for Joseph and Benjamin. The prophecies[30] are presented in birth order, first the sons of Leah, and then the sons of Rachel. The two prophecies for Judah and Joseph respectively are very long, grandiloquent, and carefully balanced against each other. The difference between them is striking.

In the first verse Jacob has referred to the anger which his other sons felt when Joseph told them of his dream of their sheaves of wheat bowing down to his sheaf (Gen. 37. 5–11). Joseph's arrogance had led them to sell him. Jacob says to Judah: 'Your father's sons shall bow down before you' (Gen. 49. 8). The prophecies for Judah are about wealth and good living, and especially power (Gen. 49. 8–12): 'Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up' (Gen. 49. 9). Judah is announced as a beast of prey to be feared by his enemies, the metaphors are carnivorous. The prophecies for Joseph are not about power:

'Joseph is a fruitful bough' (Gen. 49. 22–6). Joseph is presented as a victim, peaceful and benign, the metaphors are vegetational. In Jacob's time, supposedly so many centuries before the editors' lifetime, to foretell kingship and power for Judah was simple prophecy led by hindsight. But why does Judah get the comparison with predatory beasts? And why, likewise, is Benjamin a predator? 'Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey, and at evening dividing the spoil' (Gen. 49. 27). It is certainly flattering to Judah to be likened to a lion. Jacob includes himself in the attribution of royalty: after all, he is the father of the lion's whelp. In this warlike, militaristic culture, to be likened to a wolf may be quite inoffensive. But we notice that only Joseph gets blessings; Judah gets no blessings, only prophecy of dominance; blessings are all that Joseph gets, no prophecies of dominance. The prophecies for Judah dwell on his prowess in battle and politics, and also on his prospects for high living. Notice that nothing is said about any blessings from God; for all that the speech

[30] Editor's note on Gen. 49 in *New Oxford Annotated Bible* (RSV, 1973), 64.

shows, Judah could have achieved his pre-eminence all by himself. By contrast, Joseph is not credited with any military or political victories, or any future of leadership, royalty, or even acclaim. Recall that Joseph, as well as having been the eldest son of Jacob's favourite wife and his own favourite child, was at this time the most powerful man in Egypt. The prophecy for Joseph is a beautiful poem conveying multiple, marvellous, blessings (Gen. 49. 22–6), militarily he would count for nothing. Whereas Judah carries a sceptre and a ruler's staff, (Gen. 49. 19) Joseph wears a crown of blessings on his head (Gen. 49. 25–6). Though they are well balanced, they are different in respect of secular authority and power. If Jacob wanted to persuade his beloved Joseph not to lead his grandsons into conflict with the authority of Judah, he couldn't have said it more clearly.

The editors have not made Joseph the butt of their anxieties about the current exploits of his sons' and brother's progeny. But they have left pin-pricks here and there, so that anyone then who knew the present dangers to the temple and the cult, could recognize the threat that the sons of Joseph represented, and why it was essential to keep insisting on the unity of the twelve tribes. The ending of this volume goes beyond the Pentateuch, to the book of Judges. An urgent concern makes a clear link between Genesis and Numbers, the three books remind the sons of Jacob that they are all part of a single kinship unit.

The next chapter shows that the priestly editors were right to be worried for their own future as a priestly fraternity.

2
Jacob Weeping for Joseph

The last chapter argued that the book of Numbers was teaching two things. The first lesson was that all the sons of Jacob were indisputably the co-heirs of the Covenant. The other teaching was that authority rested with the Aaronite priesthood. In the period of editing the first teaching would have been seen as subversive because of the authorities' strong hostility to Samaria, included in the book of Numbers as one of the twelve, under the name of Ephraim. This was the territory where the Josephites had been established before the eighth-century Assyrian invasion, deportation, and repopulation. If it was politically dangerous to declare that all Israel were descended from the twelve brothers, this tradition might have been discredited by all and sundry, but not by the priestly editors and their school. They had their own reasons for adhering to it. To have been more outspoken would have occasioned a rift among the learned people of Judah, some priests being indifferent, some taking the line of the Chronicler, bitterly blaming the Northerners for not supporting David, and others living in the present, deeply regretting hostilities against Samaria.

As to the second lesson, the priestly books, Leviticus and Numbers, exalt the role of Aaron as High Priest. But Aaron does not have a role at all in Deuteronomy:

> neither Deuteronomy nor the Deuteronomistic history refers to priests as Aaronite or to Aaron as a person discharging priestly functions, and Deuteronomy mentions his name only once, in a disparaging reference to the episode of the golden calf (Deut. 9. 20). Indeed, no tradition of Judaean origins which can plausibly be regarded as ancient, that is, pre-exilic, so much as mentions Aaron occupying a priestly role or as discharging priestly functions . . .

An early version of this chapter was presented at the SOTS meeting in 2000 at Oxford. It was published as 'The Go-Away Goat' in R. Rendtorff and R. Kugler (eds.), *The Book of Leviticus, Composition and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 121–41. I thank many friends for advice and help on earlier versions, especially including J. Blenkinsopp, S. Hornblower, H. Seebass, S. Trigano, K. Jenner, J. G. Oosten, H. Maccoby, J. Sawyer, and J. North.

> Anyone attempting to understand the Judaean priesthood in its historical development has to take seriously the fact that, apart from the Priestly material, (P), and Chronicles, our sources are silent both on Aaronite priests and on Aaron as their priestly eponym . . . the narrow band of attestation for Aaron qua priest and for priests named after him is significant nevertheless.[1]

Is it not surprising? Here are these scholarly priests who edit the Pentateuch, they have recorded that God established his priesthood with their line forever (Num. 25. 13): 'I hereby grant him a covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of a perpetual priesthood' (Num. 25. 12–13). And yet they have disappeared. Once the nomadic herders of Numbers have turned into townsmen, and once Israel comes under the rule of kings, nothing is heard about the Aaronite priestly line. Priests there are, indeed, but not descendants of Aaron. Something happened to the first line of priests, they were chased away, or somehow silenced, or they died. Blenkinsopp suggests a kind of compromise may have been found for the rival priestly houses. This is a mystery to be kept in mind in the later chapter about the clash between the priestly editors and Ezra. First we must continue the argument started in the previous chapter, adumbrating the anxiety of the editors about solidarity between Judah and the descendants of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

The Day of Atonement in *Jubilees*

Among some of the many communities and sects of Judah in the post-exilic period there was a tradition that associated the Day of Atonement with Joseph. We find it in the *Book of Jubilees*. Admittedly, that is a late date to find an ancient tradition. The book was written by a Pharisee between 135 and 105 BCE. It purported to be a history of Israel written to confront the Chronicler's standpoint, which was frankly against the Northern Kingdom, with a pharisaic view. With that objective it would be likely to delve deeply for points of disagreement.[2] The Chronicles aimed to justify David, and for good measure, they criticized and belittled the Northern Kingdom for breaking

[1] Joseph Blenkinsopp, 'The Judaean Priesthood during the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods: A Hypothetical Reconstruction', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 60/1 (Jan. 1998), 25–43.

[2] R. H. Charles (trans.), *The Book of Jubilees or The Little Genesis* (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1902).

away. On the other hand, the author of *Jubilees* believed that the sons of Jacob had the strong duty to be at peace with one another. He absolutely forbade intermarriage or even contact with foreign peoples, but he would not count the sons of Joseph as foreigners. He was not an altogether scrupulous editor. He rewrote the Genesis story of Dinah seduced (or raped) by prince Hamor of Sechem (*Jub.* 30), saying nothing about Levi and Simeon breaking their deceitful promise of peace (Gen. 49. 5–7). It is not sure that he approved of their destroying the ancient city, but he kept quiet. He changed the Genesis story of Esau to justify enmity with Idumaea (*Jub.* 35. 1–27). He was fair to Ishmael's life (*Jub.* 20. 12–13), but left out his splendid funeral, though Genesis' full description shows how effectively God had kept his promise to bless him.

When it comes to Joseph, the author of *Jubilees* approved of a Day of Atonement set aside every year to do penance for the sinfulness of the brothers who sold him into Egypt:

> For this reason it is ordained for the children of Israel that they should afflict themselves on the tenth of the seventh month—on the day that the news which made him weep for Joseph came to Jacob his father—that they should make atonement for themselves thereon with a young goat on the tenth of the seventh month, once a year, for their sins; for they had grieved the affection of their father regarding Joseph his son. And this day hath been ordained that they should grieve thereon for their sins, and for all their transgressions, and for all their errors, so that they might cleanse themselves on that day once a year. (*Jub.* 34. 18–19)

The ceremony described in *Jubilees* is a straightforward sin-offering with one goat, so either it comes from a very old source, before the more elaborate rite of Leviticus 16, or else the author has dropped the second goat from the ceremony. He does not describe the two goats and the casting of lots upon them which features so prominently in the Leviticus account of the ceremony. What is striking for the argument here advanced is the connection that he makes between the Day of Atonement and comforting Jacob for his sorrows on behalf of Joseph.

The Scapegoat

Bible scholars are divided on the meaning of the scapegoat—which should not be a surprise to the anthropologist. More surprising, the

accepted meanings of 'scapegoat' are at variance with the original biblical piece in which the scapegoat figures. In common usage 'to scapegoat' has become a verb meaning to persecute or to blame. Réné Girard uses it in this sense when he develops the idea that slaughter, blood, and killing have always been the central elements of religion, the main form of communication with the gods.[3] He uses 'scapegoat' to refer to a variety of persecutory behaviours, whose unity he says we grasp intuitively. However right he may be theologically, he can't possibly derive this meaning from the biblical rite where the scapegoat is not attacked, shamed, nor harmed. The English word comes from Tyndale's 1530 translation of the Bible, meaning the goat that is *not* sacrificed, or the goat that *escapes* from being killed as a sacrificial victim. It follows a Hebrew interpretation of 'Azazel', taken to mean the 'go-away goat'—in secular terms you might say, 'the lucky goat' compared with his fellow who stays and is killed for a sacrifice.

Where does Girard get the scapegoat as an image of persecution? Apparently from a Greek rite, *pharmakos,* which has nothing to do with the Bible and nothing to do with goats though in English it is called the 'scapegoat' rite. Robert Parker's *Miasma, Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*,[4] gives an account of Greek 'scapegoat rituals', but these rites, though they correspond well to Girard's idea, do not look remotely like the Bible instance except they have a common object, to rid a city of impurity.[5] So it turns out that when talking about scapegoats in everyday parlance we are drawing upon Greek rituals to rid the city of scum, discarded elements, and useless and dirty people. For the Bible there is only this one text, which richly prescribes the rites of the Day of Atonement; the Greek sources have no prescriptive text, they are rich in brief descriptions of a customary rite being performed, in different places, at different times, with varying details, sometimes historical and mostly legendary.

Greek and Hebrew Compared

In Leviticus ch. 16, the Yom-Kippur ceremony requires two goats, one to be sacrificed and one released. Both are real *goats*, the escapee

[3] R. Girard and J. Smith, *Violent Origins* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 73–148.

[4] Robert Parker, *Miasma, Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), ch. 9, pp. 257–70.

[5] Bernard Grasset, *Le Bouc Emissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982), trans. R. Girard, *The Scapegoat* (London: Athlone, 1986).

is a goat, not a person, whereas the Greek riddance ceremonies focus on a *human* (not a goat), who may probably not escape. The Greek rituals humiliate the 'scape-person, often cruelly; in mythical versions he is even killed. However, no violence whatever is committed against the Leviticus scapegoat. The latter is one of a pair, the Greek 'scape-person is usually one individual. In the biblical ceremony both goats are involved in an elaborate and important sacrificial rite, but not the Greek 'scape-person. He tends to be a subversive or marginal person picked from among miserable wretches, the very poor and ugly, marginal categories, or non-Greeks.[6] He is sent out of the city with a procession, accompanied by discordant music; he may be whipped with wild plants, a humiliating rite at the very least.

In the Greek case the rite has a punitive aspect, the 'scape-person is a representative of the evil that is being expelled, he carries the blame and guilt with him. But in fact no stigma is attached to the Bible scapegoat: it is chosen randomly by lot from a pair of goats. Both must be unblemished when they are first chosen, since it is not known which will be sacrificed and which will escape, and each is to be presented to the Lord. It is true that the sins of the people of Israel are formally laid on the scapegoat, which is then led away to a distant place, but there is nothing obviously punitive about the levitical rite. Another important difference between the two contexts is that the biblical rite is absolutely central in the religion, a major ceremony in the liturgical year, whereas the Greek case does not sound like a rite at all, it is associated with no deity, it is more like an officially condoned lynching.

Seeking for similarities between the Greek and the Bible instances, Jan Bremmer picks out the fact that in some (but not all) Greek versions the selected 'scape-person is decorated, which he sees as parallel to a biblical rule that the goat's horns shall be bound with scarlet thread.[7] However, this rule is post-biblical, a rabbinical touch. It does not appear anywhere in the text of ch. 16, but even if it did, the comparison would be misplaced. Scarlet thread figures without a decorative function in other rituals, as in the purification rites for cleansing from leprosy, or in the preparation of ashes from a red cow where the scarlet thread is produced to be burnt (Num. 19. 6).

[6] Parker, *Miasma*; '*Pharmakos*' in S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[7] J. Bremmer, 'Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 87 (1983), 299–320, esp. 306.

In effect, there are fewer similarities between the two so-called scapegoat rites than differences. Between Jerusalem and Athens the concept has moved from a might-have-been animal victim, who has definitely escaped death, to a real human victim who will surely be hurt and may be killed. Part of my argument is going to be that the punitive interpretations not supported by the biblical description have been imported by late interpreters, perhaps from Greece or Mesopotamia. The more important question is whether a single category of scapegoat rites can be justified at all.

Category Problems in Studying Religion

Frazer's *Golden Bough,* after comparing scapegoat rituals round the world, concludes that the rite was originally a fertility cult.[8] Perhaps he was right and the biblical ceremony should not be classed with riddance ceremonies at all. The solution will lie within Leviticus itself and not in indiscriminate comparisons. Imagine a research assistant of James Frazer in modern times. He is trained to pick out similarities. When he has attended a number of weddings he will notice the focus on a big white cake. He recalls a white cake at Christmas, and more white cakes for birthdays and christenings. Soon a category of 'white cake ceremonies' emerges in his mind, like the kava drinking ceremonies of Melanesia, or the peace-pipe smoking of the American Indians. If he is bold he may even be tempted to class cake-ceremonies with the Eucharist.

In this spirit Jan Bremmer's note in the *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* on the scapegoat, recently announced 'a hitherto neglected parallel from Tibet which shows a striking resemblance to the Greek ritual'.[9] The search for parallels allows the Greek idea of riddance or elimination of evil to dominate the discussion, and dubious solutions lend support to each other. S. Talmon's old essay on 'The "Comparative Method" in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems' gives a thoroughgoing trouncing to undisciplined 'comparatist approaches' on the grand scale.[10]

[8] J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1911), ix. pt. 6. [9] See n. 8.

[10] Shemaryahu Talmon, 'The Comparative Method in Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Problems', in W. Zimmerli (ed.), *Congress Volume: Gottingen, 1997* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 320–56.

Walter Burkert said, 'blood and violence lurk fascinatingly at the very heart of religion' and claimed that sacrificial killing underlies the experience of the sacred.[11] About the same time Réné Girard placed the same emphasis on human cruelty in *Violence and the Sacred*.[12] Their writings, which in our time have coloured so heavily the interpretation of ancient religion, are themselves coloured by their own period. First the guilt of the Holocaust, and then revulsion against violence and cruelty during the Vietnam War and after. Yes, we must agree that humans tend to be violent and persecutory, and also that religion tends to be pervasive. We can agree, yes, again, that violence and religion will be likely to coincide in human history. But does that account for the basic experience of the sacred? With as much right others would offer different candidates for a basic religious experience: search for truth, longing for ecstatic union, the idea of an external moral imperative, the desire to make sense of existence, to experience a transcendent reality, for example.

In Oxford in the 1950s anthropologists used to deride the 'If-I-were-a-horse' principle of intepretation.[13] If I were a horse, I would regard my rider as a divinity, I would irrationally believe in the value of rituals such as point-to-point horse races, I would do my best to win, supposing my salvation depended on it. Arguing on these lines Burkert and Girard can believe that if I were an ancient Hebrew I would perform sacrifice, though feeling horror and guilt at the bloodshed. Burkert exemplifies 'If-I-were-a-horse' thinking with his idea that the inventors of the biblical scapegoat rite intended to express rejection or at least reservation about the violence of blood sacrifice, and by adding a goat that purifies without dying they intended to release the congregation from feelings of anxiety and guilt.[14] He himself is the one who is feeling horror and guilt. Furthermore, not all the religions of the world require blood sacrifices. As for the smell of roasting meat, it usually implies the pleasing prospect of a convivial meal. Saying grace consecrates a meal: if Girard and Burkert were to count all types of consecrated meat-eating as sacrificial violence they would certainly stretch the idea of sacrifice. It would make sense if they are vegetarians.

[11] W. Burkert, *Homo Necans* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972).

[12] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Girard, *The Scapegoat*; Burkert, *Homo Necans*.

[13] Franz Steiner, *Taboo* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

[14] W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

Azazel

What follows is an attempt to honour the levitical purification ceremony in its full integrity without importing assumptions from other similar-seeming purification rites. But first observe that purification rites are polysemic, they have many meanings: purification is a prerequisite for coronations, marriages, initiations, reconciliations, and many other situations. The rite confers status, it affirms identity, sometimes for a group, sometimes for a single person, and in a major rite opportunity is generally taken to re-enact the historic identity of the group. To focus simply on the preparatory riddance of evil impoverishes the interpretation. A recent survey[15] which challenges current interpretations of the biblical scapegoat rite finds it incongruous that a creature treated as 'scum' should be able to remove our sins. In such a muddied field, this seems to be a sensible starting point.

In the text for the annual atonement ceremony, Aaron is instructed to wash himself and put on the holy garments (Lev. 16. 4). He must offer a bull as a sin offering for himself and for his house (16. 6, 11), a ram for a burnt offering, and two male goats, one of which will be sacrificed for the sin-offering for the people of Israel, and one will go free:

> he shall take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting; and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel (16. 6–8). And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD, and offer it as a sin-offering; but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, so that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel. (16. 9–10)

Who or what is Azazel? The word has been disputed since antiquity. In Hebrew there are no compounds that are not proper names. In recognition of this philological fact it is spelt in English as a name, with a capital initial, Azazel. For that reason only it has been assumed that it is the name for either a person or a place.

Levine gives three possible interpretations.[16] His simplest interpretation (which is followed here) is that Azazel is the name which designates the goat that is chosen to go away, the go-away goat.

[15] H. Janowski, et al., 'Der Bock, der die Sünden hinausträgt Zur Religionsgeschichte des Azazel-Ritus Lev. 16, 10, 21 ff.', in Bernd Janowski, Klaus Koch, and Gernot Wilhelm (eds.), *Religionsgeschichtliche Beziehungen zwischen Kleisasien, Nordsyrien und dem Alten Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993).

[16] Baruch Levine, *Leviticus, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 102, 257.

This is an old interpretation followed in both the Septuagint and the Vulgate. It underlies the rabbinic characterization of 'the goat that is dispatched' so well rendered in the French, *le bouc emissaire*. The second is that Azazel is an unexplained place in the wilderness, expected to be the habitation of demons (e.g. Isa. 13. 21; 34. 14). The third is that Azazel is the name of the demon ruler of the wilderness.

Milgrom notes that the latter is dominant in the Midrashic literature dating back to the early post-biblical period.[17] The differences rest on very slight shifts among the prepositions 'for' and 'to' in ch. 16 vv. 8, 10, 22, and 26, mostly depending on whether the word Azazel or the word 'goat for the scapegoat' is used. These are the only places in the Pentateuch where the word Azazel is mentioned. It has to be said that the claims for Azazel as demon in the wilderness rest on shaky grounds. There are no other biblical contexts which can explain a gift or the payment of tribute to a demon ruler out there. But surprisingly, this, the third view, is currently the most accepted. In its support the *Book of Enoch* 6. 5–7 is cited because it names Azazel among the rebellious angels, but Enoch itself may been written under Greek influence or the Enoch writer may have got the word from Leviticus 16.

Levine finds the solution of the word meaning the name of the goat or the name of a place 'over-contrived'.[18] If his own preference rests mainly on pre-biblical angelology, it is weak in another way. Moreover, his description of the system of casting lots suggests support for the Septuagint and Tyndale's solution that Azazel is the *name* given to the goat. He explains that for the casting of lots in v. 8 two stones would have been prepared as lots, one with an inscription 'For the Lord', or 'Belonging to the Lord', and the other, 'For Azazel', or 'Belonging to Azazel'.[19] This would correspond to the practice of assigning an animal to be sacrificed with a formal declaration and a name. The *Sifra* cited by Rashi explains the sacrificial procedure as follows: 'When he [the High Priest] places the lot upon it [the goat] he gives it a name and states, "To the Lord as a sin offering".'[20] So

[17] Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 1020. But see also Levine, *Leviticus*, 102, 257.

[18] Levine, *Leviticus*, 102.

[19] Ibid. 251 says that it had currency in late antiquity, referring to *1 Enoch* 6–13 where Azazel was considered to be one of the fallen angels.

[20] Ibid. 50–1, 103.

after all the goats do have names! This suggests that 'the goat as Azazel' could be inscribed on the lot as a compound word to designate the goat that the lot will choose to be the 'Go-away goat' or the 'Scapegoat'.

Consequently there is no need to invent a gift for a Goat-Lord of the wilderness, which would anyway be completely out of character for the book of Leviticus. For in the very next chapter, Leviticus 17. 7 gives a strong injunction against what is assumed to be a popular custom of sacrificing to demons, satyrs, or spirits in the fields. That Aaron be told in the middle of this very important rite for the consecration of the tabernacle to send a messenger or a gift to the demon Azazel is a very implausible translation.

The etymologies of the word do little to favour one interpretation over another, and the decision rests mainly on willingness to dabble in conjectural pre-biblical cosmology. Most of the arguments in favour of the demon solution depend on late sources, *1 Enoch* and certain Qumran documents which mention a fallen angel with a satanic role.[21] To depend on these later sources is awkward; either it implies that there has been continuity of a unitary tradition of reading, unbroken from the date of the redaction. This should be seriously disputed, unless it involves establishing a much later date of redaction than is commonly accepted. With so much against the demon in the desert, even after two thousand years of argument, the anthropological preference for overall coherence would support the view that Azazel is quite simply the name for the goat chosen by lot: 'This is the goat that will be chosen to be the "Go-Away Goat" '.

Atonement

After the mention of Azazel follows the account of the sacrifices which Aaron makes for atonement. Aaron has contributed a bull which he sacrifices to make atonement for himself and his house, the people of Israel have contributed two male goats for a sin-offering and one ram[22] for a burnt offering (16. 3–5). He sacrifices one of the goats for the people (16. 9, 15). He sprinkles the blood of these two

[21] M. E. Stone, *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, CRINT 2/2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), ch. 3.

[22] Nothing more is said about the ram.

sacrifices on the holy of holies to 'make atonement for the holy place because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, because of their transgressions, all their sins, and he shall do so for the tent of meeting which abides with them in the midst of their uncleannesses', and the same for the altar (16. 15–20). By this time he has made atonement for himself, for his house (that is, for his fellow priests), for all the assembly of Israel (16. 17), and also for three places, the tabernacle, the altar, and the holy of holies. The ceremony has come to a pause; it says he has 'made an end of atoning' or finished atoning (16. 20). Now he turns to the live goat that has been waiting. Since the atonement seems to have been completed, we can expect to have reached the central element in the ritual sequence.

> And when he has made an end of atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat; and Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins; and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and send him away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities upon him to a solitary land; and he shall let the goat go in the wilderness. (16. 20–2)

Note that the scapegoat ceremony is set within a complex series of sacrifices: the goat has been moved forward and back, now with his brother goat and now without, and presented to the Lord for atonement for the holy place, etc. Now Aaron lays both hands on the goat and confesses the sins of Israel over its head. We do not know which sins he confesses; logically they should be sins not included in the earlier atonement rites. After this Aaron has no further contact with the goat. He takes off the ritual garments and washes (v. 24) , and apparently supervises the disposal of the carcasses of the burnt offerings, the bull and the other goat.

The man who led away the goat and the man who has carried out the burning of the skin and flesh of the sin offerings, both have likewise to wash before returning to the camp (vv. 26–9). To make too much of the act of washing has the unwarranted implication that it has a magical effect. Like assuming that the desert is a punitive exile for the goat, it suggests more Hellenic influence. The idea that Aaron has to wash because he has had contact with something very foul completely contradicts the solemn act of presentation to God. It is probably enough to interpret the washings as marking a clean break in the

ceremonial sequence.[23] The washings prescribed in the atonement rites would be like punctuation marks; they show that the ceremony has been concluded, they wrap it up. The strong focus of the rite was the transfer of sins on to an animal—but what sins? Atonement for holy places has been made on a comprehensive scale. Whose sins? Atonement for living persons has also been done comprehensively.

The Transfer of Sins

Why do the iniquities of Israel need to be transferred at all? Are they different from the iniquities that have already been atoned? We keep it in mind as a question: Whose sins are laid on the goat? What is involved in 'bearing sin'? Is it possible that the simple transfer of sins is not the main motive of the scapegoat rite? It could be that the significant element is neither the sacrifice of the one goat, nor the sending away of the other, but something about the two goats initially seen as a pair and then separated. We first must examine closely what the bearing of sins means.

Bearing Sin

Biblical theology makes a strong distinction between sin and guilt, requiring different animals for a sin offering and a guilt offering, and different actions to be done for them. The word for bearing sin is *nasa awon*. When someone incurs guilt, he, the sinner, bears it; the word also means 'to carry', which suggests literally that a sin is a burden for him to carry around. But this is a too material interpretation of guilt, for when guilt is transferred to another it is not like the shifting of a heavy weight from one person to another. Baruch Schwartz explains it as a transformation: what was a weight, once it has been transferred, has stopped being a weight. It is not to be carried on the

[23] The break may announce an end to a ritual situation, or a beginning, as well as much more. J. M. Safran has well written, 'In Islam, the ritual of ablution is an essential component of worship, ushering the believer into a sacred spiritual and physical state . . . a transformatory experience', 'Identity and differentiation in Ninth Century al-Andalus', *Speculum*, 76 (2001), 573–98, cited in J. M. Safran, 'Rules of Purity and Confessional Boundaries: Maliki Debates about the Pollution of the Christian', *History of Religions*, 42/3 (2003), 197–213.

shoulders of the second person. It is just blotted out, cancelled. He says, the terms for bearing sin,

> always mean precisely what they say: 'to bear', that is, to hold up, haul about, carry sin. . . . In this particular idiom, sin is a burden, a load that must be borne. When the sinner himself 'bears' his sin, he *may* suffer its consequences if such there be . . . However, when and if another party—most often, but not necessarily, God, 'bears' the sinner's burden, it no longer rests on the shoulders of the wrongdoer; the latter is relieved of his load and of its consequences, once again if such there be . . . a metaphor for the guilty party's release from guilt . . . The sinner whose burden someone else bears has not transferred its weight to another; the bearer is not weighted down by the weight of the sin as the sinner formerly was.[24]

On this interpretation the word 'to bear' has two senses, one means 'to carry about', 'to be laden with', which applies to the sinner bearing his own sin before purification, and the other, used for relieving the sinner of his burden, means 'to carry off, take away, to remove' the guilt,[25] or cancel. (English gives the word 'to bear' the same range of meanings. Bearing his own guilt would mean accepting responsibility for what he had done). The goat which bears the sins of the congregation would, by having them transferred to itself, simply lift them off, blot them out, remove or eliminate them, etc.[26] There would not be any scope for interpreting the rite as making the scapegoat materially carry the sins on its shoulders to the desert.

Aaron has to bear transgressions against the holy things of God, (Exodus 28.38), but in doing so he does not take on the liability or punishment for the sins of the community. It is enough that he is charged with their removal, their elimination.[27] This teaching corrects a very material idea of sin and an unduly magical concept of transferring sins. Both are changed to a teaching more in keeping with the austerely spiritual religion of Leviticus. For someone else to bear his guilt is equivalent to the sinner being forgiven. The guilt is no more, the guilt is cancelled, blotted out, obliterated, forgotten.

[24] Baruch Schwartz, 'The Bearing of Sin in the Priestly Literature', in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies presented to Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 3–21.

[25] Schwartz, 'The Bearing of Sin', 9–10.

[26] 'More significantly, the most prominent epithet of God in His role of forgiver is literally he who "lifts off sin" (Ex. 34.7, Num. 14.18)', *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971), 'Forgiveness', 1434.

[27] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 54–5, 512, 623, 1045 (quoted in Schwartz, 'The Bearing of Sin', 16).

According to the anthropological reading of this book[28] God is not punitive, he is not obsessed with sin, but he expects to make a lasting covenant with his people. If a ritual transfer eliminates the sin, it means that when the sins of Israel are transferred to the scapegoat, that is an end of them. The goat is not being made to carry the sins of others away with him into the desert. The sins are no more—a great contrast with the Greek *pharmakos*. By being received on the shoulders of the scapegoat the sins (for which atonement has already been made), are now definitively cancelled. The goat is the medium of atonement (16. 16) and forgiveness. On this view his role would be honourable, to say the least.

While the comparison with the despised Greek 'scape-person begins to look very wild, other elements of the ritual gain in sense. For example, Aaron is told to lay his hands on the head of the goat (16. 20). The verb means to lean on, or to press it down strongly. It is a ritual gesture known as *semikhah*, the laying on of hands. For a sacrifice the person making the offering has to press one hand down on the head of the animal being offered (Lev. 1. 4; 4. 4), the gesture assigns a sacrificial victim. Once assigned in this way, the offering is sacred and belongs to God.[29]

Evidently the scapegoat has been assigned to God, since the same words are used for bringing him forward, near to the altar, making him stand before the Lord,[30] and having the priest's hands laid on his head.[31] D. P. Wright says succinctly, the rite of laying on hands is 'the means of designating the focus of the ritual action . . . in the case of the scapegoat it signifies: "This goat is the recipient of the sins of the people".'[32] The scapegoat has been consecrated to God after its brother has been sacrificed, and its role is to receive the sins of the congregation of Israel. It would have made sense for the goat to be sent away punitively to an inhospitable region (though the text does not justify that translation) if by receiving the sins it has become a guilty creature (an example of the meaning pre-empted by prior assumptions). But if it is not guilty, and not shameful, and is not going to be

[28] Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[29] Levine, *Leviticus*, 6.

[30] The JPS trans., instead of 'shall be presented alive before the Lord', says, 'shall be left standing before the Lord' (16. 9), Levine, *Leviticus*.

[31] This passage has drawn a rather confused response from the commentators, Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1043.

[32] David Wright, 'The Gesture of Hand-Placement in the Hebrew Bible and in Hittite Literature', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 106 (1986), 436.

carrying a burden of sins around with it, why should it be sent away to a fiercely hostile environment? The question can be resolved by starting with the parallel rite of two birds, one sacrificed, one freed, and noting that the one that is not sacrificed goes free, not to a desert.

The Goat Punished

We do not know how old is the idea that the exile in the desert is a punishment for the sin-bearing animal. It may go back to the Hellenic period or further back still. The text itself goes back long before the sages returned to Judah after the second destruction of the temple by the Romans. The original editors would have been deceased some four or five hundred years earlier. The sages could have made use of unwritten traditions based on ancient memories of the great Hittite civilization.

In the Hittite rite the priest's hand was laid upon the scapegoat, it was sent out to the plains, as an offering to the god out there. Moshe Weinfeld[33] also mentions that the Hittite rite for the scapegoat purification closely paralleled the biblical rite with two birds. Similar purification rites are reported from contemporary Babylon.[34] However, the interpretative style that picks parallels from the neighbouring regions has to be supplemented with close examination of the text itself. These other ceremonies may have been more like the Greek *pharmakos*. Since their text does not support the condemnatory and punitive interpretation,[35] it is a fair surmise that the editors of the Hebrew Bible adapted the antique rite to their own more conciliatory purposes.

Parallels within Leviticus: Two Birds

It is time to pay attention to the clues within Leviticus itself, starting with the parallel rites, the two goats and the two birds. When a leper has been cured, the rite of cleansing which prepares him to re-enter

[33] M. Weinfeld, 'Traces of Hittite Cult in Shiloh, Bethel and in Jerusalem', *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis*, 129 (1990), 455–72.

[34] H. Krümmel, 'Ersatzkönig und Sündenbock', *ZAW* 80 (1968), 289–318.

[35] Janowski et al., 'Der Bock', 106–69.

the community requires the priest to take two birds, and to sacrifice one of them:

He shall take the living bird with the cedar wood and the crimson yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the fresh water. He shall sprinkle it seven times upon the one who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease; then he shall pronounce him clean, *and he shall let the living bird go into the open field.* (Lev 14. 6–7; italics mine)

Then the same for the cleansing of a house, the lesson is repeated: two birds again, one of them killed, the other dipped in its blood and set free: '*and he shall let the living bird go out of the city into the open field*' (Lev. 14. 53; italics mine). Notice that the same language is used for the freeing of the scapegoat: '*he shall let the living bird go*', and he '*shall let the goat go*'. The same form and word, *shillah*, are used in Exodus for a strong imperative when Moses was told to say to Pharaoh, '*Let my people go!*' (Exod. 10. 3; italics mine). Neither bird that is released is being sent to its death, or even condemned to a hard life, going out of the city even suggests going to a better situation. If the bird is set free to fly into the open fields we can revise the interpretation of the place in which the scapegoat is released. Is it the inhospitable desert, or just somewhere remote from human habitation?

There is a choice to be made among the meanings of 'wilderness', but the treatment accorded to the Greek-style scapegoat has so pre-empted other interpretations that it is generally assumed nowadays that 'wilderness' refers to the true desert. Talmon[36] distinguishes three subgroups in the geophysical reference to *midbar*. One, it designates agriculturally unexploited areas, mainly in the foothills of South Palestine, which serve as grazing land for the flocks and cattle for the agrarian population; this would be delightful for a goat set free. Two, it is the borderland between cultivated land and desert, thinly inhabited spaces on the outskirts of a permanent settlement; this also would suit a goat well. Three, it is true desert, arid zones beyond the edge of the cultivated land, a place of utter desolation unfit for human habitation (Lam. 5.9). Those who espouse the persecutory meaning of scapegoat have adopted unquestioningly the last, the arid zone of parched earth.

[36] Shemaryahu Talmon, 'The Desert Motif in the Bible and in the Qumran Literature', *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1993).

This is one of the biased choices which supports the desert-demon interpretation and endorses the other wobbly assumptions. The teacher responds to questioning by saying: 'It makes sense that they should send it into the desert or kill it out there, since they are repudiating the iniquities with which it is laden—If I were a horse, or an ancient Israelite, I would send it to a nasty place.' But since we have rejected the desert demon Azazel and raised serious doubts about the transfer of sins, we must also hesitate before reading *midbar* as a desolate arid zone. The first meaning, the wilderness as simply the pasture which lies outside the camp, has sometimes been adopted along with the idea that the scapegoat rite originates with the nomadic period of Israel's early history. Problems about nomadism and about early Israel have caused it to be discredited.[37] But the goat set free, either in outlying pastures or in the outskirts of settlements, can still figure in an interpretation shorn of conjectural history. Goats are hardier than sheep. A goat could live well in outlying pastures, and since this reading of *midbar* keeps the goat-rite in line with the bird-rite it is the interpretation that is most compatible with the Leviticus text.

Parallels in Genesis: Two Brothers

Having dispensed with the demon god, and also with the arid desert in which he reigns, we are in danger of making nonsense of the whole rite, since we have apparently removed the motive for sending the goat away. If the goat is not carrying the sins of the people of Israel, why should it be driven out at all? We have paid some attention to how the book sets certain rites in parallel to each other. Until we have checked parallel themes of the Pentateuch it is premature to look for explanations in *Enoch*, or in Hittite, Greek, Babylonian, or, further afield, Tibetan rites.

As ever, the right place to start is Genesis, where the theme of conspicuously uneven destinies occurs prominently. Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, of two brothers one is chosen and the other is not. On this showing the Leviticus rite of atonement points to the central theological theme of the Pentateuch, a chosen people

[37] Janowski et al., 'Der Bock'.

and the contrast with the people who have not been chosen. The Genesis stories are about the eldest sons, for example Ishmael and Esau, being superseded. Their respective younger brothers, Isaac and Jacob, destined before birth to the disciplines of the Covenant, would parallel the goat on which the lot of the Lord fell. Ishmael and Esau would parallel the bird and the goat not chosen, set free in a remote uncultivated land. The analogy between these stories and the two goats on the Day of Atonement is obscured by the Hellenistic focus on guilt carried by the scapegoat. But if we accept the teaching that guilt transferred is guilt expunged, the scapegoat is guiltless, as were Ishmael and Esau. It is important to know that in Genesis each of the escaped persons goes free and receives honour.

Ishmael's mother has run away from her harsh mistress but is sent back. The angel of the Lord prophesies that her unborn son will have innumerable progeny, he will grow up to be a 'wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him' (Gen. 16. 12). 'Wild ass' is not an insult in a warrior culture, nor a pejorative term. Here it is an animal which cannot be domesticated, like a lion 'born free'. The narrative makes a big point that Ishmael grew up beloved of both Abraham and God, for when Abraham prays for a favour on his behalf God replies: 'As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year' (Gen. 17. 20–1). After Ishmael was born, Sarah wants to get rid of him lest he prejudice the rights of her son. Abraham does not want to cast him out, but the Lord promises to look after the mother and child. Accordingly Abraham 'sent her away' to the wilderness, the same word as that in Leviticus for 'sending away' (*shillah*) and the same place as the scapegoat went to. Against the dichotomy of wilderness as place of demons and tabernacle as place of God, notice that 'God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow' (Gen. 21. 20). The Bible recognizes him as son of Abraham, he was circumcised by his father, his descendants were not idolators. The implication is that God is with them, even though he has not given them a covenant.

The text contrasts freedom with the covenant. As between the goat that is for the Lord and the goat that gets away, in a religious context the higher destiny is obviously consecration. Normally only unfit

animals are not sacrificed. The ancestor who fails to become a patriarch does quite well in his life. Ishmael and Esau do become great rulers. Ishmael died as honoured patriarch of the Ishmaelites, Esau became the mighty ruler of Edom.

So it is suggested here that the two goats on the Day of Atonement stand for the two pairs of brothers; in each pair only one becomes a patriarch of Israel. Isaac was chosen before he was born, it was no merit on his part that earned him God's choice, and no lack of merit caused the unborn Ishmael to be sent away. It was also foretold of Esau and Jacob, before either was born, that the older would serve the younger (Gen. 25. 23). The strong parallel confirms that the wilderness in the rite of the Day of Atonement means precisely what is said, a place outside the habitations of Israel. Among the people who live in that wilderness some are descendants of Abraham and Isaac, but not of Jacob. They do not come under the covenant, but they are not for that reason unblessed.

It has been objected that the anthropologist herself has fallen face first into the 'white-cake fallacy' by taking the pair of goats for figures of pairs of patriarchs: 'Pairs of brothers abound in Genesis. You have selected the pairs that suit your thesis. What about Cain and Abel, one of them was killed and the other favoured. The vaunted anthropological method seems to give free rein to the imagination!' In practice, no, the rule is to stick closely to the text, and to find the interpretation that fits most closely the editor's usage. There is nothing sacrificial, expiatory, or covenantal about the killing of Abel and the exile of Cain. Obviously, until Isaac and Jacob come into the Genesis story their covenants have not been established. The scapegoat rite takes place in the precincts of the tabernacle, the contrast between sacrificed and not-sacrificed refers essentially to the formally instituted cult. Leviticus is strongly grounded in covenantal thinking. In the pairs indicated by this rule, the one who has been chosen and the one who gets away are distinguished by the fact that one must obey the strict rules of the covenant, and the other will be free. Cain and Abel are right outside this comparison which puts freedom and covenant in antithesis. And it should be noticed that this interpretation is compatible with an early one that has been displaced by the desert-demon thesis, the version of the goat that is to be despatched, as accepted in the Septuagint and early rabbinic reading, giving rise to Tyndale's translation of 'the scapegoat'.

Joseph is a better parallel to the Go-Away Goat. When the first three sons of Leah had been passed over in the succession to Jacob, the eldest son of Rachel might well have been chosen as heir to Jacob instead of Judah. But the brothers got rid of him to Egypt, a land which was certainly very remote, though not inhospitable to him, and where he eventually succoured his father, Jacob, and his brothers. Calum Carmichael's vivid analysis of the story of Joseph makes the patriarch's sin of despatching their brother the origin of the scapegoat rituals. 'The drama of the brothers' actions becomes a ritualized annual confession of the historic sin. The performance telescopes all the individual transgressions of all the Israelites living at any one time into the manageable form of their ancestor's offence.'[38] His emphasis is on the performance aspect of the rite, and the confession bringing forgiveness, and the teaching of the lessons of history on the Day of Atonement. This is the point at which the purification rite is transformed into a rite of affirming identity and dramatizing Israel's history. The rite can recall other historic splittings and divisions among the patriarchs, and also perennial family quarrels about succession.

The sin which made Jacob weep was not covered by the several atonements made by Aaron. He made atonement for all the members of the assembly of Israel, but that would have meant all the extant, living members. Something big had been left out, the sins of the forefathers (and the question of the children being punished for them).

The redactors' views of political obligations between the sons of Jacob were very sensitive. Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy insist that the 'sojourner' residing in the land has the right to join in the major rituals; none of these books forbids marriage with outsiders as such.[39] Their views would have been contested by certain contemporary groups, in circumstances described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as we saw in Chapter 3 above. It would have been consistent for the priestly editors to have set up the ritual of the second goat to salute the tribes who were not chosen. Speculatively, one of the meanings of the scapegoat rite could be to recall that Judah should be at peace with the descendants of the other sons of Jacob

[38] C. Carmichael, 'The Origin of the Scapegoat Ritual', *Vetus Testamentum*, 50 (2000), 167–182.

[39] This view is developed in Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the book of Numbers* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), and Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*.

now living in the region. A mission of peace to separated brethren would be a worthy assignation. To perform it, the goat would have to be sent away, not to a shameful death, but as an envoy formally despatched to the outlying borders of Israel. This line of interpretation is strongly against the derogatory versions of the scapegoat's role widely accepted by scholars and sages. It certainly needs further justification.

The Commission

The laying of hands on the goat assigned to it a function. When an animal is offered for sacrifice, the giver must put one hand on its head; this is the rite of assigning it to God. But the scapegoat is not offered for sacrifice. Moreover, Aaron is told to perform the rite with both hands. This difference is not for nothing. It makes the assigning of the scapegoat more like the commissioning of the Levites. In the book of Numbers the Israelites are told to bring the Levites forward to the Lord, and to lay hands[40] on the Levites, for their consecration to God's service (Num. 8. 9–10). Then the Levites, thus solemnly dedicated to their task, must similarly assign the bulls to be sacrificed by laying hands on the animals' heads (Num. 8. 12). The parallel between Levites and the sacrificial offerings is explicit. As the Levites were commissioned, so was the animal assigned to be sacrificed, but the Levites were not going to be sacrificed, any more than the scapegoat. The two-handed laying on of hands commissioned the Levites for a role. The other parallel is the two-handed commissioning of Joshua. When Moses commissioned Joshua to succeed him, God told him to:

> Take Joshua, son of Nun, a man, in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him; *have him stand* before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and commission him in their sight. . . . So Moses did as the LORD commanded him. He took Joshua and *had him stand* before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation: he laid his hands on him, and commissioned him—as the Lord had directed (Num. 27. 18–19, 22–28; italics mine)

[40] The text is ambiguous; it allows of this action being in the plural either because many people are laying one hand on the Levites or because many people are doing it with both hands.

We conclude that by the same gesture the live goat was formally assigned a commission before the Lord. But what was the commission? On the reading constructed above, its role was to represent the former kinsmen of Judah, an envoy of peace to the surrounding peoples. To enact this role it had to go to live outside the habitations of Israel. Also, as a figure of Esau who (in Gen. 33) forgave Jacob, and of Joseph who forgave his brothers, the scapegoat who has lifted the past sins of Israel is charged to pardon Israel for driving it out, and charged to stay at peace in the border marches. Remember Jacob's bitter reproaches to Simeon and Levi who had made him odious to his neighbours: '[M]y numbers are few, and if they . . . attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household' (Gen. 34. 30). These are grave enough matters for a Day of Atonement.

Conclusion

To return to the original question, nothing much is left of the idea of a levitical scapegoating ceremony. One could suppose that random misreading is the natural course of interpretation. But the transformation of a consecrated animal into the persecutory meanings of scapegoat is not really random in this context. The text of Leviticus suggests a rite of reconciliation on the Day of Atonement, contrition and forgiveness for all the sins. That would explain why it came to be misread so drastically by people who did not believe in the possibility of reconciliation. Their political bias would make them ready to accept the Hellenized distortion. In the final period of redaction, which here is taken to be the sixth and fifth centuries, the rite would have had international political implications. Repatriates from Babylon, who sympathized with the exclusionary religious policy of governors such as Ezra and Nehemiah and those priests who were on their side, would have been very hostile to the open, liberal political stance of the priestly editors. In those circumstances a banal, foreign-inspired interpretation, even though full of contradictions, would have had the advantage of papering over the cracks between the political parties.

Wellhausen's perception of the priests as remote from the concerns of their congregation survives in a Protestant prejudice against the

cult.[41] The argument outlined above rests on another version of the priestly editors' concerns: they were deeply interested in politics and morals,[42] but discreet, perhaps to a fault. Not wishing to cause trouble for their flock, they wrote deviously in parables, but dramatized their teaching in vivid rituals.

[41] Stephen Geller, *Sacred Enigmas* (London: Routledge, 1996).
[42] Douglas, *In the Wilderness.*

II

Who is ‘All Israel’?

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3
Ezra Redefines 'All Israel' as Judah

Ezra's memoir is so grotesquely histrionic that it is hard for a modern reader to suppose he is sincere. Alberto Soggin quotes C. C. Torrey's theory of 1910,[1] and recently G. Garbini's personal view that Ezra never existed, his person is the ad hoc creation of the redactors of the two books (the Chronicler or whoever), who sought in this way to legitimate their own theory of what must have been the composition, organization, and faith of the new community of the restoration.[2] However, he has to be taken seriously. His name stands at the watershed where old things disappear and new things come forward as if they were the oldest of all. His arrival in Jerusalem with a band of returnees marks the complete transformation of the religious life of the people of Judah. His name marks it, but he did not achieve it: these things would have happened without him because of the pressure of events. Total confusion follows defeat in war. Ideas and memories are destroyed along with the ruin of a city's walls, its buildings, and its temple. Somehow the stunned population finds the will to make some new beginnings. This is what happened in Judah.

The previous chapter was on the conflicting meanings attached to the scapegoat ceremony, turned from a rite of fraternal reconciliation into an unbrotherly rite of rejection. It illustrates the conflicts of meaning that would have confronted responsible leaders as their political world tottered towards disaster. For the present argument it does not matter whether the priestly books were compiled before or after the catastrophes of war, they were a warning of further calamity to come. The worst thing that could yet happen was the destruction of their religion. They were saying to their congregations and brother

An early version of this chapter was published as 'Responding to Ezra: The Priests and the Foreign Wives', *Biblical Interpretation*, 10/1 (2002)), 1–23. I thank Cheryl Exum for inviting me to present this at a seminar at Sheffield University, and for her editorial help.

[1] A. Soggin, *A History of Israel: From the Beginnings to the Bar Kochbar Revolt, AD 135* (London: SCM, 1985), 276.

[2] G. Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (London: SCM, 1988), 154–5.

priests: 'Hold fast! We need each other! Stand together!' And to the government they were saying: 'The sons of Joseph have their share in the covenant with our God. We must be loyal to our brothers.'

We are entitled to suppose that what they wrote down as the very ancient law conveyed to Moses by God was a 'development of doctrine'. Their teachings were challenged by the newly arrived returnees from exile who supported Ezra's separatist policy. This in itself would have strained the priests' relations with Ezra's party. They could not have adopted a separatism which amounted to the expulsion of the sons of Joseph from the congregation. In regard to strangers and foreigners, the priestly editors' attitude was distinctly assimilationist. The temple was a cosmopolitan centre to which crowds came from all over the Near East. The books of Moses contain nothing to endorse Ezra's exclusionist policies, least of all the prohibition of intermarriage with outsiders. The priestly editors were not about to allow the books of Moses to be cited to support populist xenophobia.

The Exclusionist Debate

The Second Temple community is hardly a controversial context for the editing of the Pentateuch. It is useful to be able to situate the redaction process amidst the hostilities and griefs of that community. Admittedly the period is not well documented; the books of Ezra/ Nehemiah tell us most of what we know about the Persian province of Yehud at this time, and there are immense problems with treating them as valid history.[3] If they can be trusted at all, they suggest that Leviticus and Numbers would have been compiled in the throes of a hot political debate. I will argue below that the way to interpret their strong interest in the laws of impurity is to assume that the latter are written as a riposte to the Governor's use of the idea of defilement as a political weapon. If this thought runs into anachronism because the

[3] H. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary 16 (Waca: Word Publishing, 1985); Joseph Blenkinsopp leaves the historicity issue more or less open, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, The Old Testament Library (London: SCM, 1988). Others take the easier course of doubting whether Ezra ever existed: C. Torrey, 'The Composition and Historical Value of Ezra-Nehemiah' *ZAW*, ser. 2 (Giessen, 1896); *Ezra Studies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1910); L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (London: Routledge, 1998), 147–52; Morton Smith treats the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as fiction to be used as ammunition in a war of 'novellas', *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1971).

date of the redaction is held by highly qualified historians to be much earlier than Ezra, I would say that these same problems would have been endemic for a long time before. But the later date is contested. Hugh Williamson surveys all the proposed solutions for the various enigmas of these two books, and decides in favour of an early date, 458 BCE, for Ezra's journey to Jerusalem.[4]

Ignoring the historical difficulties, the anthropologist must notice a major discrepancy between the doctrine of defilement in Ezra and in the priestly books. Ezra wants to expel the foreign wives and he deploys the doctrine of impurity against them in the usual way.[5] That is to say, he uses the doctrine to accuse the foreign residents of defilement. The priestly editors have something different to say about impurity, and this, as well as the issue of marriage with foreigners, would align them against Ezra.

A large number of the priests, whether they had been taken to exile in Babylon and were now among the returnees, or whether they had been left behind, would be on the side of assimilation and toleration of foreigners. Though it was all in ruins, their tradition taught them how much the prosperity of Judah and the wealth of the temple had depended on Jerusalem's cosmopolitan status. They were used to high levels of cultural exchange, interaction, and intermarriage with foreigners. They had been in control of the material and fiscal resources of the temple, and had wide-flung alliances with the rich and the noble in Judah and around.[6] Jerusalem had always had a mixed population. Talmon suspects the biblical historiographers of playing this down; they would not like to admit that foreigners had become the main support of the Davidic dynasty. The 'resulting population mix appears to have brought about a liberal attitude concerning the admittance of individuals and groups of ethnic foreigners into Jerusalem society and the cult'.[7]

On the other hand there were many, including Second Isaiah, who regarded the foreign element as polluting (Isa. 52. 1). He is clearly on the side of the repatriates, many of whom had grown up in a Jewish enclave in Babylon, who were probably a sectarian, exclusionary

[4] H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 89–90, 85–96.

[5] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966).

[6] Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, 68–9.

[7] S. Talmon, 'The Significance of Jerusalem in Biblical Thought', *Journal of Jewish Art: The Ideal and Real Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Art*, 23/24 (1997/8), 1–12.

culture, against intermarriage. A lot was at stake, passions ran high. The argument that the cultural and religious identity of the Jews was imperilled are well documented by Christine Hayes in *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities*.[8] A political victory for Ezra's party would have been worrying for the priestly redactors and their wives and children.

At that time the province of Yehud was divided into a crisscross of parties and lobbies. Those who had been left behind in 586 when Nebuchadnezzar deported the nobles and skilled craftsmen were 'the poorest people of the land' (2 Kgs. 24. 14; Jer 40. 7), agricultural labourers, 'vine-dressers and tillers of the soil' (2 Kgs 25. 12). The inhabitants were mainly rural, in contrast with the superstructure of officials in Jerusalem.[9] Even though their fortunes had probably recovered since 586, an economic gulf would separate locals and the new arrivals. As we know, there were also present priests, prophets, and administrative officials. Furthermore, the political scene would have been cross-cut by a generation distinction. Plausibly, the young would have been more likely to join extremist parties and millennial cults, the old more likely to be traditionalist. The religious scene was also diversified. Ezra was supported by an ardent reformist movement determined to create a pure Israel.[10] They evidently had the backing of the Persian authorities. They were active proselytizers, committed to stamping out rival religions, among which were various parties of dissenters, reformists, and traditionalists, as well as the religions of foreigners.

How far Ezra's vision of the holy seed of Israel, purged of foreigners, included all the twelve sons of Jacob in Israel, is difficult to say from the text of his book. Sarah Japhet argues convincingly that it was a root and branch division, counting the returned exiles as 'all Israel', and excluding those who had not been seized and deported by Nebuchadnezzar. These were described as 'the people of the land', denounced as idolatrous Canaanites.[11] Joseph Blenkinsopp and Hugh

[8] Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities, Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[9] S. Talmon, 'The Internal Differentiation of Judaism within the Early Second Temple Period', in id. (ed.), *Jewish Civilization in the Hellenistic Period* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 16–43.

[10] Called 'the Yahweh Alone' movement by Morton Smith (1971), and the *haredim* by Blenkinsopp (1988), because their 'trembling' suggested ecstatic fervour, like the Quakers and Shakers of our own history (Ezra 10. 9).

[11] Sara Japhet, 'People and Land in the Restoration Period', in G. Strecker (ed.), *Das Land Israel in biblischer Zeit* (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 103–25.

Williamson separately consider the question at some length. Blenkinsopp concludes by interpreting Ezra's vision of 'all Israel' as the original twelvefold community of Genesis.[12] Williamson puts more weight on the star role of Ezra in the Jewish tradition, the hero who saved them from disintegration and loss of faith and identity.[13] Whatever they may say about the political realities and the pressure to define the people of Judah very strictly, no one is able to say who counted as foreign when it came to expelling the foreign wives. The crux for this chapter is whether Ezra counted the Josephites as foreign.

Tensions of Homecoming

Add to this potent brew the inevitable problems of land ownership. People who come home from exile expect to return to their former habitations, but those who have in the interim been working the land for generations want to hold on to it. Though the book of Ezra says that the Persian government has given Ezra plenipotentiary powers, including the right to expropriate land as a punishment for disobedience (Ezra 7. 25), we never hear that he can use this power to redistribute land to reward loyal returnees. Even if he had the power, to do it would contravene Mosaic law, as we shall see below, and so bring him into even deeper conflict with the priests. It is safer to assume that there were unresolved tensions about land rights between the returnees and the local inhabitants, and that the priests would have been concerned. There is doubt about whether the cult had really fallen into desuetude and needed radical transformation.

The absorption of returning exiles into an existing community is bound to intensify political strains, specially in a poor country divided by rival sects.[14] The resentment of foreigners and anxiety about intermarriage would have been old and familiar.[15] Pious and enthusiastic, Ezra arrived with the strong backing of the Persian government,

[12] J. Blenkinsopp, 'A Theological Reading of Ezra', *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association*, 12 (1989), 29.

[13] Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 69–76.

[14] S. Talmon, 'The Emergence of Jewish Sectarianism in the Early Second Temple Period', in *King, Cult and Calendar in Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1986), 165–201.

[15] Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics*; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*.

and a specific mission to re-establish the old religion. Soon after his arrival he was given a report which (he said) disturbed him greatly:

> After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, 'The people of Israel, the priests, and Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way'. (Ezra 9. 1–2)

Ezra took it from the start that the sinners, identified in the report as 'the people of Israel', included the repatriates. He explicitly said that he was appalled at 'the faithlessness of the returned exiles' (Ezra 9. 4). Weeping and praying, he accused them of increasing the guilt of Israel by marrying foreign women. When they heard Ezra's accusations the people started weeping bitterly (Ezra 10. 1). Ezra himself had been weeping all night, aghast at the faithlessness of Israel in disobeying 'the law'. His supporters would have wept in sympathy with him, the devout religious reformists would have wept for the sins of the community, and he would soon give those who had intermarried some very practical cause for tears.

Ezra put all the returned exiles under heavy duress to come to a general assembly. He threatened to use his plenipotentiary powers in a proclamation that went 'throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, and that if any did not come within three days, by order of the officials and elders all their property should be forfeited, and they themselves banned from the congregation of the exiles' (Ezra 10. 7, 8). This was coercive dictatorship. When they came, they were commanded to send away their foreign wives. The returnees, if they came but then refused to send away their wives, could expect even more stringent penalties. Listening to his prayers (9. 1–2, 10–15) they had heard their wives' families classed with the ancient Canaanite idolators. If that was not enough of an insult they might well have wept, guessing what lay ahead if they did not obey. They would have wept for their own economic future, wept for their lands likely to be expropriated, and for themselves destined to debt-slavery—wept for their children.

Some of them promptly swore the oath and put away their wives and children. At this point Ezra's book stops (Ezra 10). Ezra had

fallen. He disappeared completely. Morton Smith realistically attributed his fall to protests made to the Persian court by the leading families whose daughters were to be dismissed: his mission having lost the support of the Persian government, he was summarily recalled.[16]

Who was 'Israel'?

How could Ezra seriously have imagined that after the deportation to Babylon the land of Judah was left empty? Was he being cynical when he acted out the myth that it was deserted, and that the fields were enjoying the seventy years of fallow which the prophet had foretold?[17] The myth gave him licence to suppose that the people he found in Yehud must be of foreign extraction, although inconsistently he talks about them as if they were natives.[18] The phrase, 'the peoples of the land', cheatingly gives him scriptural backing and the basis for the discourse on the uncleanness of idolatry which he uses against them. He said: 'The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their abominations' (Ezra 9. 11). The question of who counted as an Israelite took on new urgency. And so did the question of pollution.

It would be a mistake to assume that Leviticus supports the idea that the land at that time was still unclean. Rather, Leviticus makes it possible to doubt whether there were any of the original populations left in the land after they had been destroyed directly by divine action, and by automatic sanctions from the land itself: 'Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants' (Lev. 18. 24). There could not have been any left. However, pretending that they were still around, Ezra went on to say: 'Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and

[16] Smith, *Palestinian Parties*, 131; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 179.

[17] 'to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years' (2 Chr. 36. 22; and see Jer. 25. 11–12; 29. 10)

[18] Sara Japhet, 'People and Land in the Restoration Period', 112–13.

leave it for an inheritance to your children forever' (Ezra 9.12) Whereas it seems to me that Ezra had not read or learnt from Leviticus, it is certain that he drew heavily from Deuteronomy. The latter book says that the original idolators were still around and specifies how they should be dealt with:

> When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. . . You shall devour all the peoples that the LORD your God is giving over to you, showing them no pity; you shall not serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you. (Deut. 7. 1–3, 16; and see Exod. 23. 23–4)

It must be noted that there are no instructions of the kind in Leviticus. Note also that the parallel passage in Numbers cannot endorse for the fifth century the crucial rule against marriage with the peoples of Canaan, because they are all going to be destroyed.

> When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their figured stores, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all their high places. You shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess. (Num. 33. 51–3).

Judah is not one of the tribes which failed to clear the inhabitants out of the land when they entered it, so there should be no descendants of these ancients left.

This chapter will attempt to strengthen what is at present only an argument from silence. Ezra was using a transparent trick to apply to the current inhabitants of Yehud the same archaic prohibitions on intercourse with enemy inhabitants as of over a thousand years ago. It was like telling the English of today that it would be dangerously polluting to have anything to do with the Anglo-Saxon descendants of Hengist and Horsa or Boudicca. Ezra's justification for extending the rule to the present day would be that if the people of the land commit idolatry they deserve the same treatment as the original Canaanites. If pressed he could have found scriptural backing for

the analogy, again from Deuteronomy: 'Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today' (Deut. 5. 3). Leviticus and Numbers are also strong against idolatry (Lev. 19. 4 ff; Num. 25. 1–5), but Ezra is doing something different. He has turned a law against marrying idolators into a law against marrying any foreigners whatever.

It is the definition of a foreigner that counts. For Ezra the little group of returned exiles were the only descendants of Jacob inhabiting the country of Yehud. They were his political base, narrow and precarious, but he called them the 'people of Israel'. Sara Japhet says it straight:

> according to Ezr.-Neh. only one Israelite community exists in the land of Israel: that of the returned exiles! . . . What then is the book's attitude to those Israelite groups who did not belong to the returning exiles, those who remained in the land, in Judah and Samaria? The answer is very simple: according to Ezr.-Neh. there are no such people at all![19]

Who Were the Peoples of the Land?

There is another important point: Ezra called all the then current inhabitants of Judah 'peoples of the land', but their womenfolk he called 'foreign' (Ezra 10. 2). The term *nokri*, foreign, was used in Exodus for men who were uncircumcised foreigners as distinct from *gerim*, strangers or sojourners (Exod. 12. 43). There might have been a pejorative suggestion in his usage, which could have coloured the case against the wives. As his labelling was so indiscriminate there is reason to suppose that at least some of these families were not *nokri*, but sojourners. A large proportion of them could have been true descendants of the other sons of Jacob whose own tribal territories had been conquered and who were living in Yehud: Ephraimites, Reubenites, Gadites, Benjaminites, sons of Manasseh. In that case

[19] Sara Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and its Place in Biblical Thought* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1989). The expression 'peoples of the land' is usually taken to refer to autocthones descended from the Canaanites of centuries ago, but H. G. Williamson remarks that the phrase 'is not one to which the same meaning can be attached at every occurrence in the Old Testament' (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 46). He suggests that the outlawing of foreign marriages would be a defence against powerful foreign landlords who had 'apparently assumed control of a good deal of the territory of Judea, and the difficult economic circumstances that the returned exiles faced could have placed them at the mercy of these powerful neighbours' (p. 160). Interesting idea, but it doesn't sit very well with the reference to early inhabitants.

they would have been circumcised as a matter of course, and would have had claim to the ritual access guaranteed to the *ger*, or sojourner (Exod. 12. 44–9; and also Deut. 16. 14; 24. 19; 26. 11, 13).

The *gerim* were the other dwellers in the land of Israel of whom the famous lines were written that they had to be loved, strangers for whose sake Israel should remember that she had once been a stranger in the land of Egypt (Lev. 19. 32–4). That passage in Leviticus refers to a Mosaic context, where the strangers dwelling among the people of Israel were Egyptian, not Israelites at all. I am not sure whether in the context of the Second Temple community the term could have been taken to refer to members of the tribe of Judah who had not been exiled.[20]

Given the problems with the Ezra-Nehemiah text, all that we can safely take from it is that in the Second Temple period xenophobia was very much alive. For any priesthood moved by the tribulations of its flock, Ezra's decree contained plenty of inflammatory matter. Ezra and Nehemiah had cited the book of Moses as backing for their policies (Neh. 8. 1–2; 13. 1); the law of God was in the priestly domain, consequently they had responsibility to give their opinion to their flock. We saw in the first chapter that Moses' repeated censuses of the tribes of Israel reinforce the editors' favourite points against Judah. The descendants of Judah are not the sole heir of the promises to Abraham; Judah had eleven brothers and two nephews, the sons of Joseph.

The Book of Moses

As I have said, Leviticus turns out to have been misinterpreted in important ways. There has been a traditional assumption that the priests were a small, privileged group, segregated from politics, and indifferent to matters moral and political not pertaining to the cult.[21] This may have been true in earlier centuries, but Israel Knohl in his *The Sanctuary of Silence* recognizes the priestly editors of the final redaction as of a very different mark altogether. This might help my main thesis which assumes that Leviticus and Numbers were designed precisely to confront currently burning issues.

[20] R. Rendtorff, 'The *ger* in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch', in *Ethnicity in the Bible* (forthcoming).

[21] Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence, The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 226.

Leviticus and Numbers, along with Exodus, are traditionally referred to as the law books of the religion. But comparison with the other cultures in their region shows up major omissions on this score. Leviticus and Numbers have no cult for ancestors and ghosts, they ignore demons altogether, they make no direct connection with illness or death as the penalties of sin, they do not specify rituals that will cure. As to domestic law (marriage, inheritance, succession, and divorce), Leviticus ignores it, Numbers has some scattered things to say on the vows of a woman (30. 3 ff), and on the woman suspected of adultery (5), and the marriage of heiresses (27, 36).

Significantly for my argument, the book of Numbers ends with a plea from the descendants of Joseph. First in 27. 1–11 the daughters of Zelophehad consult Moses about the right to inherit their father's land; he had no male heirs, they feared that on his death it would pass to their husbands. Here, we have the editors taking the part of the descendants of Joseph and protecting their rights. Moses confirms that the land of a man without male heirs can pass to his daughters. This ruling has been taken to be the main purpose of the passage. However, it occurs again, in almost the same words, at the very end. Chapter 36 is not an afterthought, but a tightening of the whole composition. It follows on the distribution of the promised land in the previous chapter, and explicitly connects Numbers 27 to the first chapter (1. 10), where the children of Joseph are numbered with the other tribes. The original numbering was for going forth to war, and implicitly, for conferring a right to own land (36. 2). This can be inferred from the fact that the Levites, who had no right to land, had to be numbered separately. Moses replied:

> The descendants of the tribe of Joseph are right in what they are saying. This is what the Lord commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, 'Let them marry whom they think best; only it must be into a clan of their father's tribe that they are married, so that no inheritance of the Israelites shall be transferred from one tribe to another; for all Israelites shall retain the inheritance of their ancestral tribe. Every daughter who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the Israelites shall marry one from the clan of her father's tribe, so that all Israelites may continue to possess their ancestral inheritance.' (Num. 36. 5–8).

In the perspective being developed here, it seems that this oracle has been carefully drafted. Notice that the law of heiresses only applies to women in whose family there is no son to inherit: it does not apply to

women with brothers; they may marry men of other tribes. Another is that it only applies to women, it says nothing at all against men taking foreign wives, so it is not forbidding intermarriage. Furthermore, it gives divine support to the claims of the Josephites not to be counted as strangers. This is the statement that declares that the sons of Joseph are full members of the people of Israel, a statement which would surely be a stumbling block for the separatist claims that Ezra tries to find in the law of Moses.

Purity

It has not been sufficiently noticed that the laws of purity expounded in Leviticus and Numbers are completely at variance with those of other antique religions. Everywhere else impurity has an important social function. Like accusations of sexual deviance or dirty habits the charge of impurity works on the side of the law and censorship. Breaches of purity rules have severe sanctions. The risk of being accused of impurity protects social distinctions, such as intrusion into royal precincts or touching the head of a chief. It has a policing function that biblical impurity altogether lacks. If we can assume that the Canaanites, or Babylonians, used purity rules like other people, to protect, punish, and exclude, we ought to ask why (and how) the editors of Leviticus took all the bite out of the purity laws of the Bible.

There is no denying that Leviticus shows a marked interest in impurity, but it is framed in a much larger doctrinal context. The rules about impure bodily emissions, contact with corpses, and impure classes of animal foods combine to constitute a theological microcosm of God's universe.[22] By focusing their teaching about purity on a symbolic construction of the universe the priestly books have transformed purity rules into something more like a taboo system, as I shall show in Chapter 9.

Effectively the levitical doctrine of impurity is a brand new institution. There is no way that it allows impurity to be used, not privately, not politically, not malevolently. At that time, in that place, the innovation was momentous. According to Leviticus, defilement could not be used to stop the lower classes from intruding on their betters, nor commoners from approaching aristocrats, nor for

[22] M. Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

expelling women or foreigners from any assembly. By that change the Bible came, 2000 years ago, to be like a modern religion. Here it is claimed that how and why it broke with a near-universal tradition is one of the unintended effects that can be laid at Ezra's door.

Fathers and Sons

To continue with Ezra's story, we should draw on history and anthropology to fill in the social context. Deuteronomy had quoted Moses forbidding intermarriage with either sons *or* daughters of the Canaanite idolators, but Ezra only denounced the foreign *wives*. The burning topic for Ezra and Nehemiah was taking *foreign wives*, *foreign husbands* seem to pose no danger. The stated objection was that the woman will exert influence in favour of foreign gods. But why is it a one-sided risk?[23] And why send away the children? The experience of anthropology suggests that religious dilution was not the main point, inheritance was at issue. As Moses made clear, a woman did not take rights to the patrimony with her on marriage (Num. 36), so a foreign husband was not a threat at the level of inheritance unless there were no male heirs. A foreign wife is another kind of threat.

The returnees from Babylon in the fifth century, even if they had no traceable kin, would have needed to establish kinship links in order to make a claim on their ancestral lands. Strong religious restrictions controlled the transfer of land: originally land could only be acquired by conquest or inheritance;[24] according to levitical law it could not be sold outright, but only leased for fifty years (Lev. 25. 1–7). At the same time, the returned exiles would absolutely have needed vineyards, olive plantations, and farms for pasture and cereal growing. Without well-established rights to land they would soon run out of funds and perhaps even be reduced to working as labourers. On the most favourable scenario, their old family lands would still be worked by their local kinsfolk. Consequently they need to make very

[23] H. Zlotnick-Sivan, 'The Silent Women of Yehud, Notes on Ezra 9–10', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 51/1 (2000), 3–18. But note that Nehemiah discussing the same problem puts the sons and daughters on the same footing (Neh. 10. 30).

[24] B. Levine, 'On the Semantics of Land Tenure in Biblical Literature', in M. Cohen, D. Snell, and D. Weisberg, (eds.), *The Tablet and the Scroll* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993); G. C. Chirichigno, 'Debt-slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East', *JSOT* 141 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 124.

close links with their relatives. Marriage is the obvious way for the new arrivals to insert themselves into the farming economy. However, the practice of polygamy creates a scarcity of unmarried women. Depending on the scale of polygamy, that is, depending on whether a few men have several wives or hundreds, there will always be a tendency for more men to be looking for wives than women looking for husbands.

In the politically delicate situation of returned exiles trying to recover access to land, it might make more sense for the fathers rather than the sons to marry the daughters of the local inhabitants. A repatriate father would relate to prospective in-laws, not as a giddy youngster, but as a serious, senior relative. However, his sons by previous marriages could feel threatened by the thought of his marrying a distant kinswoman with land. As a mother she will follow precedent if she persuades her husband to nominate one of her own children as his heir. His sons by earlier marriages could reasonably be afraid of being excluded. Fraternal rivalry and mistrust are endemic in this system.[25] It is understandable that the elder sons would fear their half-siblings, and so we hear the demand that the children be sent away (in effect, disinherited), along with their mothers.

A polygamous marriage system tends to create tension between fathers and sons. There are never enough women to go round; if the older men marry two or three wives the sons just have to wait for a bride. Polygamy prolongs the time of the sons' minority and promotes discontent.[26] On the side of the local inhabitants, that is, those who had stayed behind, we can surmise that it would have been a great inducement to a poverty-stricken family to marry one of their daughters to a returned exile claiming to be a cousin, rich, and offering to take care of the family's debts. In those dangerous times he could also provide them with a useful link with the Persian authorities. Nothing could be more natural than to accept alliance with a returned exile, and nothing more natural than for him to stipulate some right of access to land. Why would anyone object to such a satisfactory arrangement? Who would ever dream that it broke the law of God? How could the repatriates imagine that they were

[25] A discussion of marriage, succession, and inheritance in ancient Israel is given in M. Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993).

[26] The shortage of females is indicated by the rules of war given in Num. 31. 17–18 where the soldiers are told to kill all the boys but to keep the captured girls for themselves.

negotiating with ancient Canaanites? This is very speculative, but it makes more sense when we know more about the family structure.

Internal Politics of the Returnees

Everybody had been making foreign marriages from time immemorial. Strong pressure must have forced Ezra to make so much of the defilement of 'foreign wives'. Normally one might think that he could have extemporized, but he went ahead forcefully. Only the foreign status of the women seems to have counted against them. Even though idolatry was ostensibly the whole point of the exercise, there is no sign that he made any investigation into their religious practice. We should not brush aside the dire effects of a law against intermarriage. It is a common practice for the older generation of an enclave to try to control the next generation, and it always causes strife. A law prohibiting foreign marriages before they happen is bad enough, but a law that the wife should be returned ignominiously to her family cuts much deeper, especially when no previous law had forbidden intermarriage.

Along with the other discords, there could well have been a rift between the generations. Between the older and the younger, Ezra's constituency would have been the younger, the men of the future, the most ardent adherents of religious reform. Some evidence comes from the book of Ezra. Shecaniah (who must have been a young man because his father was also present) came forward while Ezra was praying, weeping, and casting himself down on his knees in front of a big assembly: 'Even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children' (Ezra 10. 1–3). A more divisive solution could hardly be imagined. In the seething cauldron of Palestinian politics Shecaniah's proposal offered Ezra a choice between two ways of committing political suicide. Either he could reject foreign marriages, and so risk making the country ungovernable by driving a wedge between the locals and the small group of new arrivals. Or he could alienate his own supporters by allowing foreign marriages, so splitting his party and being denounced for protecting idolators. Perhaps Ezra hesitated, for the young speaker added authoritatively: 'Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you; be strong, and do it' (10. 4). As we know, Ezra took the first option, as the separatists demanded. He

made all the leading priests and Levites and 'all Israel' (i.e. all the repatriates) swear an oath to put away their foreign wives.

Some consider that his career was wrecked on the issue of intermarriage.[27] If anyone doubts that there was intergenerational tension, let them study the list of swearers. There we find that Jehiel, the father of Shecaniah, and his five brothers, had all taken foreign wives (10. 26). Shecaniah had entrapped his own father and uncles.

Priestly Editors Politically Subversive

If Ezra was in a difficult situation, so also were the priests: in such turbulent times they could not stand apart in elitist neutrality. Their congregations would be coming to them, distraught, and asking, 'Is it true that foreign marriages are forbidden in the book of Moses?' The priests might have been tempted to point out that Moses himself had married a foreign wife (Zipporah was the daughter of a Midianite priest (Exod. 2. 16–21)), but given Ezra's emotional state and his heavy-handed threats, to say that might be deep trouble.

Here is Ezra, reading the Torah to the people;[28] he claims that there is a law against intermarriage;[29] his racist officials talk about wrongful mixing of 'the holy race'.[29] He calls on the people to study 'the words of the law', and he reads to them from 'the book of the law of God' (Neh. 8. 13, 18), 'from the book of Moses' (Neh. 13. 1).[30] Much of what Ezra says contradicts doctrines that the priestly editors have cherished about Moses and the just and merciful God of Israel. By this and by his overweening and arbitrary behaviour Ezra has given the priests an awesome agenda. Without his provocation they might not have had to try so hard; now they must promulgate the law clearly, once and for all, so that it cannot be traduced for political purposes. The scared and mystified congregations would have to be answered, however dangerous the duty.

Ezra's story can be taken to stand for all the rulers who have been in a weak political position and tried to improve it by expelling unwanted ethnic minorities. Let us suppose that the older members

[27] Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics*.

[28] Neh. 8. 2–6, 13; 9. 3.

[29] Ezra 9. 11, 14: 'Shall we break thy commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practise these abominations?'

[30] Ezra 9. 2.

of the congregation, dismayed to learn that it is sinful to marry foreigners, go to their priest and ask: 'Where is this law written?' In all honesty, the priest will have to have the courage to say: 'Nowhere at all.' Indeed, neither Leviticus nor Numbers says how the people should choose their marriage partners. Even Deuteronomy, the book from which Ezra quotes, is at one with the priests on intermarriage. It goes so far as to allow three generations of intermarriage with Egyptians and Edomites as a qualification for entry into the assembly of Israel (23. 8). Leviticus tells the priest that his wife must be virtuous, but commands nothing about her ethnic origin, nor about anyone else's (Lev. 21. 7); the chief priest shall 'marry a virgin of his own kin' (21. 14), but that rule specifically applies to his office.

Numbers has rather pointedly drawn attention to Moses' wife. Already Exodus has recorded Moses' marriage with a real foreign wife, Zipporah. Numbers has underlined the point by drawing attention to Moses' good relations with his foreign father-in-law. It describes how respectfully and affectionately Moses greeted Jethro, the priest of Midian (18. 7–10), how he received and followed his advice (18. 24 ff). Even more significantly, in Numbers 10. 29, Moses begs his foreign brother-in-law, Hobab, to act as guide to the Israelites on the march. This is bizarre since the previous chapter has just reported how the Israelites on their journey from Sinai were led by the cloud of God. Why would they need a human guide?[31]

The argument we are following suggests that the request for the redundant services of Hobab serves another purpose. It demonstrates Moses' trust in the family of his foreign wife. Moses can foresee that ethnic conflict will continually rear its head in human history; this passage reaffirms that in the law of Moses enmity with the foreigner is not acceptable. The priests had evidently wanted to emphasize the point in the period of racial conflict: they had it on record that it was Zipporah herself who actually circumcised her son (Exod. 4. 25), and the text is obscure enough to leave some room for thinking she also circumcised Moses![32] So they have inserted an exemplary instance of a foreign wife who actively supported the religion of her husband.

[31] A close comparison of Deut. 23. 3–5, and Neh. 13. 1–2, etc., will need separate treatment.

[32] The point has been noted by commentators, see Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers, the Traditional and Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 79.

The same interpretation explains why God, in Numbers, was so angry with Miriam and Aaron after they 'spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married'. They had challenged Moses' authority, as if having taken a foreign wife undermined his claim to lead (Num. 12. 1–2). The foreign wife is one matter, the challenge to authority another. God's defence of Moses against his challengers does not explicitly say that Moses had every right to marry a foreign woman, but it is an implicit defence.

These references suggest strongly that the priestly editors defended the practice of intermarriage. Admittedly, there are some counter-references. For example the story of how Phinehas turned away God's anger: Aaron's grandson, Phinehas, killed Zimri and the Midianite princess Cosbi, when he found them in close embrace in the inner room of the tabernacle, for which deed God commended Phinehas, giving him and his descendants a covenant of perpetual priesthood (Num. 25. 6–15).

This has been an important text for later generations justifying refusal of intermarriage with foreign women. That may be correct, but in the full context of the book of Numbers the more heinous crime would have been unauthorized entry into the inner room of the tabernacle. No woman would have been allowed to go in. To focus on the ethnic origin of Cosbi seems far-fetched, only plausible to a generation which does not understand the transcendent sacredness of the tabernacle. The story in Leviticus 24 of the stoning of the half-Israelite, half-Egyptian blasphemer is another instance, which will be shown below to be ambiguous. Here we only note a traditional association[33] between idolatry and seduction by women, and especially by foreign women.

A Solemn Response

With this background the coherence and completeness of the priestly books can be vindicated. They can now be seen as compilations expressly edited to refute a specific interpretation of God's law, a limited and laudable objective. Our interpretation would be unbalanced if we were to forget the Torah's message of God's love and forgiveness. This message has indeed been overlaid by centuries of

[33] I am grateful to Cheryl Exum for this interpretation.

selective emphasis on God's dire punishments for sin. But that traditionally punitive reading of Leviticus and Numbers creates impossible paradoxes for the doctrine that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was loving and merciful as well as just.

The punitive reading supports the popular idea of the priestly culture as a separate stream of thought in the Torah, and the idea of a distinctive priestly concept of religion,[34] to be explained by the priests' obsession with cultic matters and lack of interest in the welfare of their congregations.[35]

There was every reason for the priestly editors to resist Ezra's interpretation of the law; so they composed a book on the doctrine of divine forgiveness. Leviticus, in chs. 1–3, starts in the simplest possible way by teaching the people how to make a sacrifice. In chs. 4–7, sin by sin, sinner by sinner, the doctrine of atonement is expounded. Comfortingly, it recognizes that everybody sins: priests sin, the ruler sins, individuals sin, and even the whole congregation of Israel. If they have sinned inadvertently or in ignorance, the priest will make atonement and their sin will be forgiven.

In Ezra's book the men who confessed that they had sinned in marrying a foreign woman made a 'guilt offering' (*asham*), one ram each (Ezra 10. 19). This rite is probably one of the very old ceremonies by which individual atonement was made (Lev. 7. 7). Ezra does not seem to know about the sin offering to obtain atonement for the sins of an entire congregation. He has been treating the news of intermarriages as the occasion of a major collective sin, for which the sin offering (*hattat*, which requires a bull), would have been more appropriate (Lev. 4). If he had known Leviticus, he would not have fallen into such a state of despair about what he took to be the returnees' grievous sin. If he had consulted the priestly editors they would have told him what to do. The following verses of Leviticus could have been written expressly to comfort him: 'If the whole congregation of Israel errs unintentionally and the matter escapes the notice of the assembly, and they . . . incur guilt; when the sin . . . becomes known, the assembly shall offer a bull of the herd for a sin-offering' (4. 13–21; also Lev. 26. 40–2 ff). Numbers repeats it:

[34] Point made to me by Shulamit Ambalu.

[35] Arguing for the unity of the priestly work within the Torah is the main thrust of my own anthropological reading of these books, 1993 and 1999.

But if you unintentionally fail to observe all these commandments . . . then if it was done . . . without the knowledge of the congregation, the whole congregation shall offer one young bull for a burnt offering . . . and one male goat for a sin-offering. The priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the Israelites, and they shall be forgiven; it was unintentional . . . and all the congregation of the Israelites shall be forgiven. (15. 22–6)

If Ezra had asked them, the congregation could have pleaded inadvertency: they definitely did not know, and could not have known, that the marriages they had been making were sinful. At the next stage, after the sacrifice, there was no reason to send the wives away, still less their children who would normally have adopted the religion of their fathers.

In this perspective, Numbers and Leviticus are complementing each other. Like a duet, Leviticus raises a topic, then Numbers goes into it more thoroughly. First Leviticus has said repeatedly that inadvertent sins can be forgiven, but not much about what 'inadvertent' means. Numbers takes it up and gives a thorough analysis of the meaning of inadvertent sin, with examples (35. 15–28). For Numbers the unforgivable sinner is the one who sins defiantly or 'high-handedly', he knows what he is doing and does it brazenly, unrepentantly (15. 30). He does not want to be reconciled. The emphasis on the attitude of the sinner reinforces the idea that 'the priestly doctrine of repentance' allows subjective feelings of remorse and a verbally spoken confession to convert a deliberate sin into an unwitting sin, after which atonement may be made.[36]

If this sounds almost too easy, Numbers gives examples of sins that cannot be atoned: wilful murder, or dishonouring of the sabbath by the man who gathered firewood (15. 32–6). Kohath's revolt against the authority of Moses and Aaron was defiant, and the sinners were swallowed up in an earthquake (16. 1–32). There is a question of whether repentance alone may be enough. Miriam and Aaron sinned by challenging Moses' authority (Num. 12. 1–15), but there is a tradition that when Aaron confessed that they had sinned and 'acted foolishly' they were instantly forgiven and the leprosy was lifted from Miriam's flesh.[37] The joint message about sin from Leviticus and Numbers is that the Lord is forgiving and merciful, and

[36] I. Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 124–57.

[37] Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 373–8.

has instituted atonement with the blood of an animal for forgiveness (Lev. 17. 11).

Even so, the puzzled congregation might still be worried: 'We don't recall worshipping any idols. Could someone commit idolatry by mistake?' Deuteronomy has made it clear that the abominations of the ancient Canaanites are cultic (18. 9–12). Leviticus describes the most abominable deeds imaginable, all set in the context of foreign cults (chs. 18–20).[38] 'If you attend a foreign friend's wedding or funeral you might find yourself involved in a collective act unwittingly, but when you realize your guilt, you know what to do.' Partly reassured, the congregation are curious to know one more thing: 'If foreign marriages do not pollute the land, what does?'

Numbers answers succinctly: 'Deliberate murder pollutes the land' (35. 9–34). In Numbers' inventory of sins the most grave are those directly affecting God's honour, his name, and the sanctity of the tabernacle. Person-to-person sins are reclassified as a grave matter as soon as the sinner refuses to make restitution or to seek purification.[39]

The two books can be mined for further responses to the plight of their congregations. In each case Numbers takes up and develops what Leviticus has started. The people may well ask more about the alleged law that it is a sin to marry a foreign woman: 'Who counts as a foreigner?' And the priests could be very interested to know whether marrying with the Cohens and Levys in Ephraim was to be stopped.

Foreigners

When the priestly books insist on protected status for the foreigner[40] sojourning in their land, they refer to the *ger*, the stranger or sojourner. Chapter 7 below goes into this question in more detail: Exodus puts the *ger* under God's protection: 'You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt'

[38] Milgrom, *Numbers*, 98.

[39] Further sign that Numbers believes the Lord to be forgiving is the institution of the new rite of purification. In the time of exile, or in early post-exilic days when the temple had not been rebuilt, how were the people to be purified from blood and corpse contact? And even when there was a temple in which sacrifice could be made, for many urban dwellers to produce a ram for purification could be too costly. So Numbers introduces the cheap and easy way, the person impure from corpse contact can be made pure by sprinkling with the powdered dried blood of the red heifer sacrificed and burnt for the purpose (19. 1–13).

[40] C. Van Houten, *The Alien in Israelite Law*, JSOTSup 107 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

(23. 9). Deuteronomy gives the stranger, *ger*, protected status (24. 17–25), and commands the people of Israel to see that the *ger* is treated justly (25. 17, 19; 26. 11, 13). It also admits him to the rites of the cult and allows him to observe the Sabbath (5. 14) and the feast of Tabernacles (16. 11, 14). Numbers also insists that the stranger, *ger*, may keep the Passover (9. 14), he is entitled to make sacrifice (15. 14), and he has rights to purification (19. 10). Ezra uses the term *nokri*, perhaps to evade the biblical strictures on behalf of the resident foreigner, *ger*.

Numbers never seems to tire of repeating[41] the law of Exodus: 'One law and one ordinance shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you' (Exod. 12. 49). This reiteration may have been part of a debate in which Ezra's supporters claim that foreigners are a menace to cult and society. The priestly riposte would be that the outsiders (whatever you call them) pose no threat as they are subject to exactly the same laws as the people of Israel. Leviticus would be making the same point when it tells of the man whose mother was an Israelite and his father an Egyptian (24. 10): when he blasphemes God's name he is punished by death like a full Israelite would be. The context here being presented would plausibly reverse the usual idea that the story is a sign of xenophobia; on the contrary, it demonstrates the needful point that foreigners and their children will be kept under control, the law sees to it that they constitute no danger either to religion or civil society, it is safe to meet them socially (and, parenthetically, even to intermarry).

The Numbers editor develops the principle that in the book of Moses none of the descendants of Jacob are foreigners in any sense. That is the point of all the census-taking in Numbers (see Table 1). Though the order is changed slightly, the total is always twelve. This is not pointless repetition, it is hammering home that all twelve tribes are the heirs of the covenant, none is formally disinherited. It is a major issue on which the priestly editors disagree with Ezra's party. The priests, because of their ancient family ties with the priests in Samaria, would remember that this was the land allotted by Moses to the Josephites, Ephraim and half of Manasseh; they reckoned that their cousins inhabited Samaria until the Assyrian king defeated them in 676 BCE and deported large numbers of the population. A number were supposed to have been deported to Judah by Esar-haddon (Ezra

[41] Num. 9. 14; 15. 14, 16, 26; 19. 10.

4. 2). This ancient history was probably written off by the authorities as irrelevant. Taking it seriously was what got the priestly editors into trouble. And though the numbers taken into exile were probably much exaggerated, the population of Samaria would have been thoroughly mixed by the time of the return. When a deputation of Samarian deportees came to the Yehud authorities offering their help in rebuilding the temple, they declared: 'Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria, who brought us here' (Ezra 4. 2–3). But the authorities refused their help, suspecting them to be spies and saboteurs. They may have been spies, but if they were Josephites they should not have been counted as foreigners. The book of Numbers counts an Ephraimite as descended from Joseph, and therefore a member of Israel. One of the key messages of Numbers is that the Josephites must not be treated as one of 'the nations', but as true descendants of Jacob.[42]

Almost everything that Ezra wanted to do would have been seen by the priestly editors as against the law of Moses and against God's immemorial justice. His threat to expropriate the lands of those who did not attend his meeting raises a group of questions about rights to sell land or to sell people, about slavery and debt. Here again the priests give a clear and comforting statement of the law. There can be no outright sale of land. The land belongs to God and is to be returned to him in every Jubilee year. A kinsman has duties to help his brother in debt or enslaved. A slave must be treated kindly, slaves are sent home and debts remitted in the Jubilee year (Lev. 25; Deut. 15).

Conclusion

On many of these issues the priestly books are in harmony with Deuteronomy. Several conspicuous differences remain: the collection and distribution of tithes; the responsibilities of the Levites in Deuteronomy contrast with their inferior status in Numbers; the importance in Leviticus and Numbers of the Day of Atonement contrasts with its complete omission in Deuteronomy. On most scores Ezra/Nehemiah follow Deuteronomy. These important topics must be postponed for

[42] This is the reading proposed in Douglas, *In the Wilderness*.

another study. The central argument of this chapter is that the priestly editors were compiling the law of Moses to confound political tyrants. It explains a lot about the construction of Leviticus and Numbers.

Consider also the effect of this political conflict on the style of the two books. The learned editors would have been writing primarily for the guidance of fellow priests. They wanted to repudiate incorrect references to the law of Moses made by their powerful opponents in government. Knowing what they wrote to be explosive stuff, dangerous for themselves and dangerous for the faithful, they wrapped their political dynamite in elegant literary conventions (perhaps the wrappings that so disconcert modern readers were overdone). These will be described in Chapters 5 and 6 below.

The general argument provides a fresh explanation of some of the omissions listed above. The editors had a limited objective, they were not trying to cover all aspects of religious law. Their work was an urgent, priestly, engagement with the times, a profound response to sin and guilt, and a simple, direct teaching about confession and reconciliation. They had to omit domestic law because marriage would have been a very sensitive matter, too dangerous to speak of directly. Other omissions, such as demons and ancestors, were just not part of the specialized agenda. Their responsibility was to make a society in which God could dwell amongst his people. In the light of their sustained efforts it would be frivolous to charge them with aloofness from politics or indifference to the plight of their flock.

Finally, they emasculated impurity.[43] The government summoned support for its exclusionary policies by invoking danger of religious defilement. The charge of idolatry in that place and time was equivalent to the charge of heresy or witchcraft in Christian Europe, a rabble-rousing, inflammatory accusation, not requiring any objective evidence. Such a populist strategy of defamation is difficult to divert because the category of dangerous persons is already marked out by popular suspicion.[44] For the priestly editors to have defused impurity, and thus disarmed the old defamatory weapon was a signal achievement. Changing the definition of impurity was parallel to the Chris-

[43] M. Douglas, 'Sacred Contagion', in J. Sawyer (ed.), *Reading Leviticus* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1996), 86–106.

[44] M. Lianos and M. Douglas, 'Dangerization and the End of Deviance', *British Journal of Criminology*, 40 (2000), 261–78. (It takes courage to speak out for philo-Semitism in an anti-Semitic culture).

tian nations' decision in the seventeenth century not to allow prosecution for witchcraft. Separating the secular from the ecclesiastical courts effectively neutered the beliefs in witchcraft.[45] If it is possible to take official action against unpopular persons by accusing them of occult crimes, the witchcraft and similar beliefs will flourish, but as soon as there is no action to be taken the beliefs wither away.

The priestly editors had seen the danger of irresponsible defamation, and had taken action on behalf of their religion, about a thousand years ahead of the rest. As far as we know, they did not confront the danger directly, they quietly redefined religious defilement so as to exclude what Ezra and Nehemiah were doing. It would seem that the priests' group had much more support than the books of Ezra/Nehemiah imply. The fall of Ezra in itself is telling; the Pentateuch survived; the great demographic upsurge of the population of Jews in the next few generations[46] suggests the cause of intermarriage was won. But the priests themselves lost out on other scores, and so much was forgotten.

[45] M. Douglas, 'Witchcraft and Leprosy, Two Strategies of Rejection', in *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1992), 83–101.

[46] A point for which I thank Joseph Blenkinsopp.

4

Balaam Delivers God's Blessings on All Israel

Balaam's story is a delightful burlesque about a foreign prophet whom God chooses to be his mouthpiece (Num. 22–4). It is like a fairy tale, with a talking animal, an ass who sees God, and a rider who does not, and with everything happening in threes. Balaam is a figure of fun, ridiculous in pretending to be able to bestow God's blessings and curses. The ass is funny and touching, and the king of Moab is even more of a comic turn than Balaam. In keeping with the early rabbinical commentary, I read it as a satire throughout. It needs to be included in this volume because at the end, when Balaam as God's mouthpiece is spouting blessings on Israel, he takes the opportunity to adjust the terms of Jacob's blessings on Judah and Joseph.

Amid the fantasy, a serious aspect should take centre place: Balaam's encounter with God. On reading the story one naturally concludes that Balaam became an ardent convert and faithful follower of the God of Israel. How could he do otherwise after his close encounters with God? But then, many chapters later, after the story is ended, we discover that he was evil and had betrayed the Israelites. This is one of several puzzles.

An early version of this chapter was given as the Huxley Memorial Lecture to the Royal Anthropological Institute, 1993, and printed as 'Balaam's Place in the book of Numbers' in *Man, The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 28/3 (Sep. 1993). I thank Jacob Milgrom for his unsparing care at all stages. Richard Coggins actually invited me to try out a reading of Balaam's story on his class in King's College, and criticized the text from his knowledge of the post-exilic literature, for which I am extremely grateful. I also thank Graham Auld and John Sawyer for talking to me about the post-exilic community; Jacob Neusner for early advice; and Mark Geller and David Goodman for reading the text of the original Huxley Memorial Lecture. In addition to Bible scholars, Ruth Finnegan and Josep Llobera were invaluable on anthropological interpretations of mythology; Arthur Hatto was characteristically generous with his comments on epic structure; and Wendy Doniger on the mythological background to talking horses. I owe special thanks to Robert Littman, Lin Fox Hall, and Conrad Leyser on synecdoche in Greek and Latin classics, and to Rodney Needham and Milena Dolezolova for guidance on archaic literary forms.

According to some, there were pre-Israelite traditions in Canaan in which Balaam would have been a powerful, good, and honourable person, though for the people of Israel he came to be portrayed as an enemy.[1] In another argument based on linguistic evidence the story of his ass's vision of God would be a late interpolation.[2] The tale is so well contrived that the different sources can hardly be disentangled to any useful interpretative purpose.[3] The two places in the text where Balaam is found on the enemy side (31. 8, 16) are thought to be late interpolations (presumably by an editor who doesn't like his message), and not part of the original book, so therefore to be ignored. This would simplify some things, but it does not fit my idea of the final priestly editors, which will appear as the tale unfolds.

The story begins when the King of Moab, frightened by the advancing armies of Israel, sent his men to hire the famous seer, Balaam, to put a curse on the people of Israel. The King of Moab would not waste his money on an amateur. Obviously the foreignness of Balaam is important to the story. Prophets tended to be mocked, as Chronicles tells us: 'All the leading priests . . . were exceedingly unfaithful . . . they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets' (2 Chr. 36.14–16). It would not do to insert into the book of Numbers a story that mocked a prophet of Israel, so I surmise that this is why Balaam has to be a foreigner, because he prophesies. Recall how angrily Leviticus denounces magicians (20. 6). This is the only place in the Bible where a foreign diviner, magician, soothsayer, call him what you will, is the source of true prophecy and blessing. Numbers is an important book, and the story of Balaam takes up three big chapters. The fact that a foreign seer recognizes the God of Israel and speaks with him, and is even God's chosen mouthpiece, is fascinating. The blessings which come pouring out of Balaam's mouth when he is inspired by God are some of the most exquisite poetry in the Pentateuch. His simple and direct relation with God seems to testify to a noble character. Yet in many later rabbinical commentaries Balaam is treated as a thoroughly bad man, the enemy of Israel, the personification of greed and deceit.[4]

[1] J. de Vaulx, *Les Nombres* (Paris: Gabalda, 1972), 257.

[2] Budd, P., *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word Publishing, 1984), 263–4. Philip Budd summarizes the elements that might represent a Yahwist strand intertwined with an Elohist strand; the ass part of the story is obviously Yahwist, an accretion to the earlier version.

[3] Ibid. 271.

[4] 'La tradition juive . . . depuis les Targums palestiniens, jusqu'aux écrits rabbiniques de la mishnah et du torah en passant par Philon et Josephe: Balaam accepte l'invitation de

There is the question of why the story figures in the book of Numbers at all. Traditionally it was included because of the blessings on Israel. The story also has the merit of celebrating the powerlessness of Israel's enemies.[5] It is thought to be a very old story, or rather several very old stories, since it is based on a variety of different sources. The summoning of Balaam by King Balak closely echoes other callings of prophets by kings in the Bible (or is it the other way round?). Balaam resembles the prophet Micaiah who always prophesied evil to the King of Israel (1 Kgs. 22. 9 ff.). His story also resembles Elijah's dealings with Ahazia, King of Samaria, also at war with Moab (2 Kgs. 1. 1–17). In both cases the bad king sends his messengers to the prophet, Micaiah or Elijah, who, respectively, twice refuse to go with them. When the third time he does go, the king who sought to employ him comes to a disastrous end. The story also has perverse echoes of Elisha's delivery of the King of Moab into the hands of Israel (2 Kgs. 3. 6 ff.)

Its many precursors suggest that it is not written in a priestly tradition.[6] My own view is only that the priestly editors would not have kept it in the final redaction if it did not serve their purposes: the satire will have been aimed against a policy of which they disapproved. My thesis is to reveal how the full story (Num. 22–4) serves the priestly interests. Balaam's divinely inspired blessings on Israel carry the essential priestly message to Judah and Samaria, that they are destined to be one great people. Its other objective may be to poke

Balaq par cupidité et vanité: il veut maudir par plaisir, aveuglé par passion, il ne comprend pas l'nterdiction divine. Ni le miracle de l'anesse, ni la vision de l'ange ne lui ouvrent l'esprit; il ne bénit que par contrainte et trouvera sa revanche dans les mauvais conseils donnés aux Midianites. Personnification de la cupidité, de l'orgueil, de la haine et de la ruse, il est l'ennemi d'lsrael, le Mauvais par excellence . . . avec la seule exception de Pseudo Philon' (de Vaulx, *Les Nombres*, 263). Note also the harsh comments of Jewish and Christian writers on Balaam: 'Then King Balak, son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand' (Josh. 24. 9–10); 'they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Yet the LORD your God refused to heed Balaam; the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the LORD your God loved you' (Deut. 23. 5); 'They have . . . follow[ed] the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of doing wrong, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness' (2 Pet. 2. 15–16); 'Woe to them! For they go the way of Cain, and abandon themselves to Balaam's error for the sake of gain, and perish in Korah's rebellion' (Jude 11); 'Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the people of Israel, that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication' (Rev. 2. 14).

[5] Budd, *Numbers*, 271. [6] Ibid.

fun, perhaps at the King of Persia, and perhaps at his henchman the Governor of Samaria.

Balaam's Story

Balaam's story opens after the Israelites' victorious campaign against the Canaanites (21. 3). The armies of Israel have travelled to Moab's border, and now pose a threat to Moab.[7] Their military triumphs have made Balak, King of Moab, afraid (22. 3). He summons a foreign magician, Balaam, to utter a curse against the armies of Israel. King Balak's messengers arrive in Balaam's home; they deliver the message: 'Come now, curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I . . . for I know that whomsoever you bless is blessed, and whomsoever you curse is cursed' (22. 6). Notice that it concludes with the famous words that conclude God's blessing on Abraham (Gen. 12. 3). The emissaries stay overnight while the sage consults the Lord, who actually comes to him and says: 'You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed' (22. 9–12). That the non-Israelite can communicate directly with the God of Israel is in itself extraordinary. Obedient to God, Balaam resists the temptation of a huge fee and refuses to go with the messengers; they return to Moab and report to King Balak. The king sends his emissaries to Balaam a second time, offering more wealth and honours. Balaam flatly refuses with no hesitation: 'Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God, to do less or more' (22. 18). However, he invites the messengers to stay overnight once more, so that he can consult the Lord again. This time the answer is enigmatic: if the men ask him again, he is to go with them, but he will only do what the Lord tells him to do. Evidently they do ask him a third time, for next morning Balaam saddles his ass and with two servants goes to accompany the princes of Moab. God is angry with Balaam for going (22. 22), though Balaam had formally been given permission to go with them.

On the journey the angel of the Lord bars his path with a drawn sword. No one sees the angel except the ass, who tries to turn aside. Balaam beats her, but the angel of the Lord still bars the way, which is now a narrow path between two walls; trying to avoid the angel the ass

[7] de Vaulx, *Les Nombres*, 254.

crushes her rider's foot against a wall, for which Balaam beats her again. The third time the angel leaves no room for evasion, and the ass does what her kind always does when frustrated: she lies down under her rider. And he beats her again. Then the Lord opens the ass's mouth and she speaks to Balaam as a faithful servant might reproach an unreasonable master: 'What have I done to deserve these three beatings?' Balaam is furious, says she is making a fool of him, and wishes he had a sword, for then he would kill her. A funny thing to say, for what man ever took a sword against the ass he is sitting on, and still less against a she-ass? It is true that the patient beast of burden makes Balaam into a figure of fun. To be sitting on an animal which lies down is bad enough, but when the animal turns round and rebukes her master, that begins to be absurd, and when the master enters into angry dialogue with his mount, that is sheer farce.

All this time Balaam has not seen the angel of the Lord, who now appears and rebukes him for beating the ass three times; the ass has recognized the angel three times and turned out of the path three times, and if she had not done so, the angel would have killed Balaam and saved the ass (22. 31–3). So Balaam was saved, but saved by an ass! What a humiliating rescue for the great foreign sage. Balaam abjectly begs forgiveness, saying that he did not know that the angel of the Lord was standing in his way; he proposes to turn round obediently and go straight home. The angel now instructs him to pursue his journey, but warns him that he can speak only the words that he, the angel of the Lord, gives him to speak.

Milgrom's commentary follows early rabbinic interpretation to the effect that the ass's part is to travesty Balaam, the seer who is not so clever as his mount. The ass, 'beholding divine visions with eyes unveiled', is to Balaam as Balaam is to Balak.[8]

After this Balaam meets King Balak, and warns him that he can speak only the words that the Lord will put in his mouth (22. 38). Three times King Balak tries to persuade him to curse Israel; three times, when Balaam opens his mouth, glorious praises and blessings on Israel pour out. For the last time Balaam repeats the words of his greeting, that he would not, for any amount of gold or silver, be able to go beyond the word of the Lord. King Balak then dismisses him in disgust (24. 10–11).

[8] J. Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional and Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary, Excursus 58 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 469–71.

Before going home Balaam gives three more oracles, praising and blessing Israel and foretelling the downfall of Moab and the great empires (24. 15–24). The story is over, King Balak goes to his place and Balaam goes his way.

In spite of all this correct behaviour, the Jewish tradition is that Balaam was false, and greedy for the wealth that King Balak promised him. Since he could not earn the gold and silver by cursing Moab's enemy, he used his magician's art to teach the women of Moab to seduce the men of Israel. On Moses' word, no less, we learn in ch. 31 that the idolatry of Israel described in ch. 25 was the outcome of Balaam's wiles. But Numbers 31 is held to be a later interpolation, as also the whole of the episode with the angel and the ass.

The judgement of posterity has been hard on Balaam, but it has not been clear to all commentators that Balaam deserves the harsh verdict. From the tale itself it is hard to see that Balaam was not a God-fearing, honest man. It is true that he forbore to mention that Israel was blessed. I believe that this is the only reason to doubt the sincerity of his protests and apologies. It is a thin plank on which to base a reputation as a treacherous, corrupt magician: he is foolish, yes, but surely not a sinister monster. True, he failed to see the angel, but was it his fault that the angel did not reveal himself? He punctiliously said that he would utter only what the Lord told him; was that not praiseworthy? He repented when the angel told him he was wrong. 'Saint or Sinner?' is the title of Jacob Milgrom's essay on Balaam.[9]

Interpretations

Though he actually blessed Israel, Balaam gets no credit for that. The only good word for him is from Micah who recognizes him as a true prophet (Mic. 6. 3–5). He is otherwise remembered as the prophet who would have sold Israel to the King of Moab had God not circumvented him. Deuteronomy implies that he did utter some curse against Israel, to which God in his mercy refused to listen (Deut. 23. 4–5, also Josh. 24. 9–10). But as far as we are told in the story, Balaam never pronounced any curse. The Christian interpretation is just as hard on him. Peter counted him among false prophets, castigating him for his love of gain (2 Pet. 2. 14–15); Jude classed him

[9] Ibid.

with Cain (Jude 11). In Revelation Balaam dwells near Satan's throne (Rev. 2. 14).

The unbiased reader might well feel sorry for a good name slandered, and ask why, if it is calumny, is it so bitter? How are we to account for this slightly ridiculous anti-hero becoming a monster of evil in post-biblical interpretation? Why was this story selected for inclusion? The whole style of the story suggests a satire; then part of the interpretation must be to know who or what is being satirized. Who is the target? Who does Balaam represent? Who is the King of Moab? And who is the ass?

The historicity of Balaam is not the question. The most fanatical realist must admit that not everything that happened on the march of the people of Israel to the Promised Land could be recorded in the Bible. We want to know why the editors selected this particular folk tale from early Israel or pre-Israel.

It does not help the answer to know that the story has parallels with that of Abraham. Called by God, Abraham rose up early and saddled his ass; Balaam, called by King Balak, rose in the morning and saddled his ass; both took two servants; Abraham was obedient, for love of God, Balaam was disobedient, for hate of Israel. In each case the angel appeared and cancelled what had been taken by the protagonists to be God's intention, for Abraham understood he had been instructed to sacrifice his beloved son, and Balaam understood that he could go with the messengers. Abraham took up his knife to kill his son (Gen. 22. 10) and Balaam wanted to kill his ass with a sword. J. D. Safran, who developed this parallel, observes that in Abraham's story the ass is passive and a minor character, while the ass in Balaam's story is a major character, possessing will and intelligence and able to discern divine revelation.[10] We could go further and see a parallel between Isaac, who is carrying the load of wood for his own sacrifice, and Balaam's beast of burden who recognizes the angel of the Lord; Isaac is saved by the angel from his father's knife and the ass is saved by the angel from Balaam's sword. To display a curious inverted parallel is hardly a strong reason for inserting this story into the Pentateuch.

Safran mentions another less fanciful analysis which proposes that the ass's story is a burlesque of Balaam, inserted to ridicule the foreign

[10] A. Rofe, *The Book of Balaam* (Hebrew edn., Jerusalem, 1979), cited in J. D. Safran, 'Balaam and Abraham', *Vetus Testamentum*, 37 (1988), 10–30.

seer who might otherwise be thought to have too sympathetic a character.[11] Here we have two levels of reference, one inside the other: the ass ridiculing Balaam, and Balaam's disobedience presented as a 'reflection' or mirror of Abraham's obedience. Unfortunately for the theory, no disobedience on Balaam's part is on record. All these subtle interpretations relate Balaam's story to other biblical books, never considering that it develops the theme of the book of Numbers itself, and few of them take account of the words of the blessings that the Lord puts into Balaam's mouth.

The story within the story

The thesis here proposed depends on acknowledging the literary genre of the book of Numbers. It is an example of the so-called ring composition which will be fully described in Chapters 5 and 6 below. This rhetorical form calls for great literary control. It is subject to formal conventions and deploys self-referencing literary conceits. For the reader or listener who keeps track of the ingeniously contrived lateral reading it gives intense pleasure. Curiosity is excited about how the poet is going to solve the technical problems. Admiration is roused for the inventive and often witty solutions. The acrostic form compels a salute to the skills which have achieved it while yet contriving to conceal the art. The enjoyment is of the same order as the pleasure of a sonnet or a play.

The story of Balaam is a ring with an internal structure of parallel rungs. It is opened and closed by the Lord's command, 'You shall say only the words I put into your mouth,' given at the beginning and duly repeated by Balaam at the midpoint when he first meets the king, and again at the end. As to the ladder form of the internal structure, Balaam's three refusals to obey the angel on the path pair with the three blessings on Israel which the Lord brings out of his mouth, and these with the three prophecies against Israel's enemies with which he concludes.

A story within a story has certain distinguishing signs. First, the context is completely framed. Second, it deals with a new set of characters. It is a narrative interrupting the main text, a digression, often a recital by one of the characters or a framed-off scene in a

[11] Rofe, *The Book of Balaam.*

picture. In the *Iliad*, Book 8, Achilles' shield, made for him at his mother's request by the god Hephaestes, is a metonymic image of this kind. Six scenes are engraved on it. The first presents two cities, one under siege by the other; the besieged warriors have rashly strayed outside the city walls and are about to be caught by their enemies, a picture of the plight of Troy besieged by the Greeks; the second is of cattle about to be attacked by a ferocious lion, against whom the herdsmen are helpless, an image of Achilles himself, and so on; the last scenes are idyllic images of pastoral life. In the *Aeneid*, the same literary device is presented for similar self-referencing purposes: Aeneas's shield made for him by Vulcan at his mother's request, in Book 8, has engraved on it a series of prophecies for the future history of Italy. In each of these cases the synecdochal device refers the reader to the central theme of the epic; it is no mere embellishment, but a strong reminder of the main purport of the long poem.

Identifying Balaam's story as a story within a story explains one of the curious points observed by commentators, that it is so firmly cut off from the main narrative. It is staged in a charmed world governed by the fairy-tale style of three-times-three: the ass turns aside three times; Balaam strikes her three times; the angel appears three times; the king invites Balaam to curse three times (23. 1–10, 13–24; 24. 2–9), and he blesses three times; his final prophecy has three parts (24. 15–24). First there is the book of Moses, then inside that, the story of Balaam, and inside that again, the story of the talking ass, a humble (comic) version of the noble steeds who warn or admonish their riders in ancient epics.

The frequency of 'three times' is interesting. For us it is the slightly comic magic formula of children's stories, but in Judaism it is quite different, more solemn, a sacred number.[12] I don't know how to interpret that. The story within the story can be recognized by being self-contained in its own virtual space and time, with its own dramatis personae. In the case of the pictures on the heroes' shields, there is no spatial or temporal continuity at all. In the case of Balaam, the temporal sequence of the history of the people of Israel is suspended while we engage with a new set of characters. The space covers a long mysterious journey to King Balak; further strange spatial effects are created[13] by the change of scene on the journey and the changes of view that Balak arranges for Balaam from different mountain tops. Com-

[12] Shmuel Trigano, personal communication.
[13] Milgrom, *Numbers*, 469–71.

mentators who have tried to follow these geographic indications have been unsuccessful in locating the places on the map.

The function of synecdoche is to contain the whole in a part. It is a distanced and condensed summary of the main theme. To know what the story of Balaam is doing in the book of Numbers, we therefore need to know the main theme of the book. Or because the whole is in the part, the story of Balaam may be allowed to point for us the meaning of the book, and the book will tell us who is being satirized. We need to read very carefully everything that God says, and particularly to study the words that he puts in Balaam's mouth.

Cursing and Blessing

First, look back to the beginning of Numbers (chs. 1–4) where the Lord tells Moses to count the people of Israel by tribes, but only to count those tribes which will bear arms. The Levites are called to serve around the tabernacle, and much later we learn that they are not heirs to the land (Num. 18. 20–1). The second census of the tribes is expressly for partitioning the land, and this time again the Levites are counted separately and the same reason given, that they will have no inheritance (26. 62). Though the prologue does not mention land rights, it is made clear that the Lord's promise of land for the descendants of Abraham is what the counting is about. Telling Moses how they are to stand on four sides of the tabernacle, the Lord describes a diagram that serves as a paradigm for the whole book. The book is about the promise. The first part of the message is that all the sons of Jacob are the heirs, except the Levites. Supporting this is the second message, that all the Lord's promises are fulfilled, all the prophecies made in his name have come true. It is well in line with the book's interest in prophecy that Balaam as the mouthpiece of the Lord repeats the old prophecies which have been fulfilled within the story's bounds, and utters some new ones.

The first time that Balaam consulted the Lord, he was told: 'you shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed' (22. 12). This was clear enough, and Balaam accordingly dismissed the messengers. This seems to be impeccable. The same thing happened the second time. They came, pressing the invitation with promises of even greater reward, Balaam answered them, no. But he invited them to stay overnight, so that he could consult the

Lord again. And now the Lord gave him an ambiguous answer: 'If the men have come to summon you, get up and go with them; but do only what I tell you to do' (22. 20). Balaam goes with them, and the Lord is angry.

My own suggestion as to why he might be angry is that Balaam never told the messengers of Balak that he had learnt that the people of Israel were blessed. If he had, they might have suspected that they were wasting their time and would not have stayed for the results of the consultation. So he would have received no fee. They would have known the dubiety of proceeding to curse a people whom the Lord had blessed. Or perhaps, as they were only messengers, they might have taken the chance. But Balaam knew: either the people of Israel were available to be cursed, in which case Balaam could accept the fee and try to curse them, or they were blessed.

A delicate theological point turns on Balaam's recognition of Israel's God. The unrecorded consultation would have taken the form of Balaam asking the Lord whether they were really blessed, and whether the Lord might be persuaded to lift the blessing. The Lord would have declared again that they were really blessed. That might explain why he was angry with Balaam when in the end he did go with the men. Balaam's deceitfulness and love of gain might appear obvious to anyone who knew what a blessing meant. Part of the joke is that when Balaam does utter the blessings it only makes Balak furious, so he gets no fee after all.

We may think of a blessing as a hopeful form of words, an incantation which may or may not be efficacious. But in the region of Mesopotamia and Canaan a blessing meant calling on God and procuring an effective protection; a blessing amounted to a complete transformation of the blessed person's prospects. It was not like a coat of paint which could subsequently be scrubbed off or painted over. Any blessing that was accepted by the Lord was fixed, unless the Lord removed it and allowed a curse. A blessing had the solidity and projectibility of a covenant. Moreover, from the story of Esau and Jacob we know that it was a thing that could be stolen, and once uttered, it could not be altered (Gen. 27). Now, reflecting on the nature of blessing, we realize a possible reason why the story of Balaam was pegged out on the story of the binding of Isaac. All the readers of Numbers would have known that in Genesis the angel of the Lord blessed Abraham for his obedience in the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22. 15–18), and that the Lord blessed Isaac (Gen. 26. 2–5).

These reflections support the traditional interpretation that God could read Balaam's heart and knew that Balaam was secretly determined to get the fees for damaging Israel even if he could not curse her. If King Balak and his messengers did not know the supremacy of the one God, Balaam knew. If King Balak wanted to pit the power of Balaam's magic against God's blessing, Balaam knew that it could not be done. When he met King Balak he affirmed that he could speak only words that the Lord put into his mouth (22. 38). Outsiders to the tradition might construe this disclaimer as honesty on his part, but insiders would know that he said it because the Lord had put that into his mouth as well as everything else he was to say. Because Israel was blessed, the journey would be fruitless both for King Balak's wish to damage Israel and for Balaam's wish for pecuniary reward. So his setting off with the men could count as an act of deception.

This, I submit, clarifies the question of Balaam's moral worth. Balaam was a comic figure but not a wicked one. Not a saint, and not much of a sinner: he tried to cheat, but failed. The tone of parody is sustained throughout; the mode of the pantomime villain becomes him better at every step. The string of famous blessings and prophecies that spouted from his mouth every time he opened it to curse would have evoked only merriment from the instructed public for whom Numbers was written. He couldn't help it, like the French and German fairy tales where a spellbound person has gold coins, or frogs, or a string of nonsense, come out of his mouth. And now we know why his words came out in the form of divine poetry, more beautiful even than the rest of the book of Moses: they were poems of the Lord's own composing.

It is still quite plausible that Balaam went on trying to deliver Israel into the hands of Moab. It is completely plausible that the two revelations of his deliberate treachery in ch. 31 were inserted at a later time. We have to find out why some late editor thought it important to paint Balaam as evil, and so to distract from the more obvious moral of the story. Studying the blessings that spoke themselves through his mouth will tell us what that moral was.

Jacob's Blessings on his Sons

The first thing Balaam says is, 'How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not

denounced?' (Num. 23. 8). He goes on to quote Genesis, where in Jacob's dream the Lord said: 'I am the LORD the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac: the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south' (Gen. 28. 13–14). The version that comes out of Balaam's mouth repeats the reference to dust: 'Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number the dust-cloud of Israel?' (Num. 23. 10). When he has finished giving this first prophecy, King Balak complains that he hired Balaam to curse his enemies, not to bless them (Num. 23. 11). Next time Balaam opens his mouth he utters an amalgam of Jacob's deathbed blessings on Judah and Moses' blessing on Joseph. He says:

> The LORD their God is with them, acclaimed as a king among them. God, who brings them out of Egypt, is like the horns of the wild ox for them. Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, 'see what God has done!' Look, a people rising up like a lioness, and rousing itself like a lion! It does not lie down until it has eaten the prey and drunk the blood of the slain. (Num. 23. 22–4)

This blessing is the crux of the whole story. Notice that the reference to 'horns of the wild ox' actually repeats Moses' own blessing on Joseph: '... the prince among his brothers. A firstborn bull—majesty is his! His horns are the horns of a wild ox; with them he gores the peoples, driving them to the ends of the earth; such are the myriads of Ephraim, such the thousands of Manasseh' (Deut. 33. 16–17). The reference to a lion repeats Jacob's blessing on Judah: 'Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness—who dares rouse him up?' (Gen. 49. 9). Remember that Jacob's blessings had allotted royal dominion to Judah, and peaceful prosperity to Joseph, who was called, 'a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall' (Gen. 49. 22).[14] This strongly implies that there will be room for only one ruler over the people of Israel, and that Joseph will be subject to his brother. But Balaam's blessing has combined the two different blessings, and has applied both to a combined Israel. The way he uses the word 'Israel' here signifies the people of Israel under Moses who would, at that point in time, be marching on Moab.

[14] The echo of Jacob's blessing in Balaam's is brought out by E. Burrows, *The Oracles of Jacob and Balaam* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1938).

The Moabite king now makes Balaam have a third try. Balaam lifts up his eyes and sees Israel camping, 'tribe by tribe', perhaps in the order which has been decreed in the beginning of Numbers. Balak thinks he is going to curse, but Balaam blesses them:

How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! Like palm groves that stretch far away, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that the LORD has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters. Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall have abundant water, his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. God, who brings him out of Egypt, is like the horns of the wild ox for him; he shall devour the nations that are his foes, and break their bones. He shall strike with his arrows. He crouched, he lay down like a lion, and like a lioness; who will rouse him up? Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you. (Num. 24. 5–9)

We are safe in assuming there was nothing haphazard in the earlier mention of the lion and the wild ox, since both have now been repeated. Balaam has also quoted two of the old blessings on Joseph, for the gardens and waters recall Jacob's blessing on him. Notice that Jacob and Israel are not two separate persons, their blessing goes on in the masculine singular, they definitely share one prosperous future.

The last blessing picks up the opening theme with which the story began, King Balak's wish to have Israel cursed. But ominously for the king, Balaam has repeated the Lord's very first words to Abraham: 'And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse' (Gen. 12. 3). They are also the very same words which Isaac used to bless Jacob:

'Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you' (Gen. 27. 29; and see Exod. 23. 22, where the Lord says: 'I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes'). King Balak at last gives up and dismisses Balaam angrily. Balaam delivers a parting oracle in which he roundly curses Moab, Edom, Amalek, and the Kenites, and foretells the destruction of the Assyrian empire. He adds a slightly altered version of Jacob's messianic prophecy, saying: 'A star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel' (Num. 24. 17). Jacob's original blessing promised the sceptre to Judah, not to Joseph: 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet' (Gen. 49. 10). Out of Balaam's mouth the Lord has said that the sceptre was in Israel, comprising both Joseph and Judah. Is this an accident? Has the editor been

caught nodding? Did Balaam make a mistake? No! Remember that it is not Balaam who is saying these things, he is just the Lord's passive mouthpiece. The author is the Lord himself. It is not possible that the Lord misremembered or became muddled. Jacob gave different blessings to Joseph and Judah, but God through Balaam bestowed them both on Israel. It is clear that in doing so he was not giving the blessing to the Northern Kingdom, under the head of 'Israel', for one of Balaam's rhetorical turns is always to name both Jacob and Israel, the one whenever he names the other; the names Jacob and Israel are put in apposition: 'Come, curse Jacob for me; Come, denounce Israel!' (Num. 23. 7); 'He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob, nor has he seen trouble in Israel' (23. 21); 'how fair are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel!' (24.5). In his vocabulary Jacob and Israel are one. This contrasts with the usage of Zechariah who prayed for a joint triumph to include both Judah and Joseph, but always distinguished them: 'you have been a byword of cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel' (Zech. 8: 13); 'the family ties between Judah and Israel' (Zech. 11. 14). 'He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem' (Zech. 9. 10). 'For I have bent Judah as my bow, I have made Ephraim its arrow' (Zech. 9. 13). 'I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph' (Zech. 10. 6). Zechariah's political philosophy was universalist: he looked forward to the day when all the nations that came against Jerusalem 'shall go up year by year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the festival of booths' (Zech. 14. 16). In arguing that the blessing that falls from his mouth is a blessing for the whole of Jacob, that is, for the whole of Israel, we are following Williamson's chapter on Chronicle's usage.[15] Note also that Balaam never mentions the name of Judah at all, and always puts Israel and Jacob together.

The Lord, speaking through Balaam, did not misquote Jacob's blessing, he adjusted it, he extended it to both the sons of Jacob. In case the reader is bemused about the value of Balaam's sayings, he has been given the great declaration: 'God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it?' (Num. 23. 19). This puts the story squarely back into the theme of Numbers. The ancient prophecies

[15] H. G. M. Williamson, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

have come true and God's promises have been kept. Balaam's prophecy of the doom of Moab (24. 17) is fully in line with the enmity to Moab shown in the rest of Numbers. Within the scope of the book both were true prophecies. Those other promises whose time for fulfilment has not yet come will be fulfilled. Canaan had been routed. Moab shortly was to lose its allies, 'five Midian kings' and their armies destroyed (Num. 31. 8). The tale within the tale has kept true to form: it is a narrative summary of the main themes of the book.

Numbers in Context

The dominant theme of Numbers, as was argued in Chapter 1, is the priestly editors' concern for the unity of Israel. Remembering this makes it obvious why Balaam combined the blessings on Judah and Joseph. This concern is high on the priestly editors' agenda; their hope is affirmed in the words spoken by the Lord himself. It is not Balaam speaking, but God. This is what I regard as the obvious moral of the story. To understand why some later editor felt impelled to insert two laconic reports of Balaam's death and his iniquity (31. 8, 16), the later history of Judah and Samaria has to be scrutinized. Even before the rift came, it could have been dangerous to leave this book unamended. It could have been politically unpopular to be longing to revive the amity between the two rival provinces.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah provide a confusing source of documentation for the early post-exilic period. As colonial administrators Nehemiah and Ezra felt, probably with reason, that they were victims of conspiracy. Moab, Edom, and Samaria were the three dangerous neighbours for foreign policy to beware. Moab was the powerful Persian province on Judah's eastern border. Edom, later called Idumaea, was a rival province on the southern border, claiming descent from Esau. The most threatening neighbour of all was Samaria, the remnant of the old Northern Kingdom, richer, more populous, and politically better placed. Samaria was now a separate Persian province, and until very recently, had been the Persian province within which Judah was included.

Bowman says that 'The Northerners and the Samaritans under Sanballat had more power in Palestine during the entire Persian period than the Jews in Jerusalem, simply because the Lieutenant Governor rules from Shechem. The remainder of the House of

Joseph, along with the opponents of Jerusalem, and the ones excluded during the life time of Ezra, outnumbered the Jews of Jerusalem even up till the time of the Greeks.'[16] Given their relative fewness, it is not surprising that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah express deep anxiety about conspiracies against Israel fomented by Sanballat, the Governor of Samaria. In trying to curtail his ambitions the Governor of Judah would have wanted to stress the authenticity of the religion of his province, and the falsity of claims made by other groups of alleged 'Jews'. In this way the land problem and the foreign relations problem become enmeshed with religion when the leaders of the Samarian community in Judah claimed a right to help the rebuilding of the temple: 'Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-Haddon of Assyria who brought us here' (Ezra 4. 2). Who but the sons of Joseph and the sons of Judah would worship the God of Israel? Nevertheless, the provincial administrator vehemently rejected their offer, insisting: 'we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us' (Ezra 4. 1–3). He had been empowered by the Persian king to appoint magistrates and judges, with authority for life and death, banishment, imprisonment, or confiscation of property. These powers were to be used against anyone who 'will not obey the law of your God' (Ezra 7. 25–8). But who was going to decide what the law of God required? It would have been in order for Ezra to refer these religious claims to the Chief Priest, but he based his decision on the authority of the King of Persia, and thereafter he preached, instituted religious festivals, and declaimed the law of God on his own authority. The preceding chapter has indicated how much room for disagreement there was between the priests and Ezra.

In the sixth to fifth centuries, Judah considered Samaria to be given over to idolatry. Samaria considered that she was faithful to the old forms of worship, apparently with some justice, according to John Bowman, who describes Samaria as 'This much insulted and frequently misunderstood community'.[17] Eventually Samaria, the territory of the Ephraimites and the tribe of Manasseh, repeatedly rejected by the returnees in the Second Temple period, struck out on

[16] J. Bowman, *The Samaritan Problem: Studies in the Relationship of Samaritanism, and Early Christianity*, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph 1 (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1975).

[17] Ibid.

her own and instituted her own temple.[18] In all but one aspect of theology the Samarians were orthodox: monotheistic, aniconic, circumcising, and Sabbath-observing.[19] This one thing, the building of the temple at Gerizim, which roused so much hostility, was in itself a response to the rivalry between the two cultic centres, Jerusalem in Judah, and Gerizim in Samaria. The priestly editors had failed. Their agenda of friendship with the sons of Joseph was blocked. Judah was cut off from her ancient allies. And worse was to come. This suggests an explanation of why some later editorial hand blackened the name of Balaam in Numbers 31. 8 and 16.

Balaam as Political Satire

The path is cleared for reading Balaam's story as a political satire. Each of the three main protagonists of the story may be seen as a player in the political scene in post-exilic Judah. Balaam is a brilliant pastiche of a colonial governor, flourishing his big stick, beating up the people, making threats of worse violence (if only he had a sword). The name Balaam can be read to suggest 'Lord of the people', a pun on names for which Bible readers should be prepared.[20] Nehemiah could be the model, but Ezra or any administrator would fit who used the backing of Persia to impose his party's policy. King Balak, whose name means 'destruction', would be a distant, idolatrous ruler, say Nebuchadnezzar or the King of Persia, ignorant of the Lord's power to bless. Who could the patient she-ass be? Who was the beast of burden with the gift of speech, the humble creature made into a type for Isaac, the animal whom the Lord wanted to save? She would be none other than the people of Israel, so often referred to as a woman by the prophets. This would be why Balaam is presented riding on a she-ass. Israel was forced into the wrong path against her will, she was beaten by her unenlightened master, she recognized the angel of the Lord and tried to obey, she was exalted at the end of the story by the words of Balaam's prophecies. The story within the story works very

[18] S. Talmon, 'The Emergence of Jewish Sectarianism in the Early Second Temple Period', in *King, Cult and Calendar in Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1986).

[19] R. Coggins, *Samaritans and Jews: The Origins of Samaritanism Reconsidered* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 132–6.

[20] M. Garsiel, 'Puns upon Names as a Literary Device in 1 Kings: 1–2', *Biblica*, 72 (1991), 379–86.

well as a political parody, emanating from a priestly faction opposed to government exclusionary policies.

It would be appropriate to find an anti-government satire in the middle of the book of Numbers. Although Numbers seems to be above and beyond politics, having clothed its message in the antique garments and literary conventions of a pastoral idyll, it has gone to great lengths to count all the sons of Jacob, naming and numbering tribes which had ceased to exist for centuries, ever since the time of Solomon. The only tribes remaining to the day of editing were Judah, Ephraim, and the runt of Benjamin. Yet, ostentatiously, Numbers counts all the tribes and says they are all the heirs. So far from excluding Ephraim, Moses will train Joshua, an Ephraimite and hero of the revolts in the desert, to succeed him. Why would Moses' repeated censuses of heirs to the land be so important at the time of editing? I surmise it was because of the growing threat of Samaria.

The policy of the government would have had populist support; declaring the immigrants and people of the land idolators, taking their land would have had support from the land-hungry remnant returned from exile. But Numbers is concerned with the theological issue of how to define the boundaries of God's promise. When the governor in the Second Temple period takes it on himself to define the congregation of Israel, he encroaches on the priestly prerogative.

It would not have been difficult for anyone involved in those political controversies to interpret Balaam and Balak as parodies of the governor and the emperor. Sheer pantomime: the demon king struts round his domain, fussily shifting the site of the curse, muttering his absurd complaint: 'I hired you to curse and you do nothing but bless': the sly magician, ever so humble, says over and over that he could speak only what God told him to speak. Each destroys the other: King Balak loses his allies and treasure to the enemies he tried to have cursed; Balaam, who had wanted to use a sword on the ass, dies by the sword, no death for a professional holy man.

The theological doctrine at issue was whether all the sons of Jacob should inherit the land. The sense of 'land' in Numbers is the eschatological 'land'. This would include the rights of the sons of Jacob to be treated as heirs of the promise. Sharing the promise they would share the land. The Lord declares in Leviticus, 'The land is mine' (Lev. 25. 23), just as the people of Israel are his, whom he brought out of the land of Egypt (Lev. 25. 42). It would be in defence

of this doctrine that God, speaking through Balaam, changed the words of Jacob's blessing so that the separate promises to Judah and to Joseph should be combined as one great destiny for all the people of Israel.

So why would one of the late priestly editors have added ch. 31 which gives cause for blacking the name of Balaam? Because, as the life of the Second Temple community developed, the original agenda of the priestly books became unacceptable. Making fun of the government was dangerous. The idea of poor, struggling Judah being absorbed into the rich, powerful, and allegedly idolatrous Samaria was frightening. Joining up with Samaria could only mean Israel being subordinated and incorporated. The politicians and the priests would be directly in conflict on this point. The priestly vision of union with all the sons of Jacob was a lost cause.

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III

Before and After Exile: The Gap in Learning

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Problems in Reading the Priestly Books

The political argument gains strength when we remember the high culture of the priestly editors. At the time of the redaction Jerusalem had inherited a very learned tradition. The editors would have shared their love of learning with their colleagues in priestly circles around the Mediterranean hinterland, and admired the famous libraries of their nearest neighbours in Samaria. Their mutual high regard supports the argument about their wish to preserve the unity of Jacob's sons. They were writing for each other, not trying to persuade political enemies, but to affirm their common values. The high quality of their work shows at all times, but especially when we go beyond the prose to consider the construction of Leviticus and Numbers. This field of study explains why these two volumes have been so little understood; they had a style of work that had been fashionable but was fast becoming esoteric and obscure.

In his study of Hebrew poetry G. B. Gray[1] says that by the second century CE 'poetry based on parallelism had recently become an obsolete type—pushed out by the new art of rhymed, metrical poems . . . contemporaries of Josephus were still employing parallelism skilfully . . . later only meagre traces of parallelism were to be found'. In this judgement he was certainly overestimating the erosion of the old

I first glimpsed the topic of this chapter as I prepared the essay 'Poetic Structure in Leviticus', in the Festschrift for Milgrom (D. Wright, D. Freedman, and A. Hurvitz, *Pomegranates and Golden Bells*, (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns 1995)). I am especially grateful to the editor of that volume, David Wright, for his criticisms and advice. In a sense this whole book is based upon it, and upon *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). I gratefully acknowledge the inspiration and help I have had from Richard Coggins, Milena Dolozelova, Christos Doumas, and John Van Sickle, who were so good as to read the early draft of the article, and to others who helped me on background problems: Wendy Doniger, Ronald Hendel, Douglas Lewis, Robert Murray, and Wolfgang Roth.

In this chapter on literary structures I will focus mainly on Leviticus, because I have written at length on the structure of Numbers, *In the Wilderness* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

[1] G. Buchanan Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 18, 37.

style. He claimed that he could find parallelism in certain 'poems' of the Bible, in Psalms, the book of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Canticles, but he declared it absent in the Pentateuch, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, etc. Thanks to Jacob Milgrom's commentaries on Leviticus and Numbers we now know that this was an oversight and that both books definitely use verbal and thematic parallelism extensively. The style was not obsolete yet, but becoming archaic, an indication that the intellectual climate changed radically between the time of redaction and the later post-exilic period.

When I claim that the Pentateuch is a religion of renewal and that it tends to repudiate its present and its immediate past, I do not at all mean that the context of the religious teaching is new. The main elements of the old religion are still there: monotheism, the Sabbath, the covenant, sacrifice, and circumcision. Style may have changed, and extraneous elements have been identified and discarded, but we are still talking about the same religion, now being renewed. Such a religion tends to trace its origins to the earliest times, and to present its archive in a rustic idiom. A religious mood that cultivates a love of littleness and abhors aristocratic grandeur and artifice is going to develop an appropriate style. Rejecting the grandiose trappings of the great tradition, the dissenting form of the religion exalts innocence and simplicity; it painstakingly sets its complex teachings in an idyll of shepherds and shepherdesses.[2] To be sure, this show of rustic simplicity does not encourage readers to look for the origins of the text in a refined civilization well connected with international science and learning. But that would have been the correct context for the redaction of Leviticus in the late Second Temple period.

The priestly editors certainly seem not to have been around when the sages returned after the second destruction of the temple. Political animosity being strong, and the priests having been losers, they had evidently lost credibility and been thrust aside. In the early Second Temple community, through promotion by Nehemiah and Ezra, the Levites had succeeded to their role. This meant that there was no priestly or holiness school to interpret to the next generation of teachers what the priests had edited. It must have been like a college where the janitors and tea-ladies are taking the classes because the teachers have gone away.

[2] Kathryn Gutzwiller, *Theocritus' Pastoral Analogies: The Foundation of a Genre* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 24, and see the chapter on 'The Herdsman and the Heroic Ideal'.

For my argument it is important to insist on the educational gulf which would have come between the editor-priests and their congregations. It responds to a certain attack to which my interpretation of both books, Leviticus and Numbers, is exposed. The attack rests on the improbability of a new interpretation being correct if it has not been anticipated anywhere in the preceding two millennia. Something as strange as a book designed to correspond to the proportions of a tabernacle, or a book arranged in a circle of twelve matching pairs, if genuine, surely would have been noticed before—therefore it can't be right. My case is that it can be right if the readers have not hitherto searched the books for clues to their own structure. To do so was not in the mood of the early rabbis. There was a gap before the rabbis took over the responsibility of interpreting the Torah and after the priests had vanished from the scene. The gap was filled by the Levites.

Interpretation by Levites

Morton Smith, writing about the role of the Levites in the spread of synagogue worship in the Persian period gives a poor impression of their learning.[3] Their understanding of their religion was based mostly on their collections of 'Psalms, pilgrim songs', some of which were edifying prayers for the people as a whole, but others had 'a sectarian tone better suited to conventicles of the self-righteous, hostile to the society around them'. They collected hymns that had come down to them, and added some:

> the religion expressed is the deuteronomic tradition, as modified by the peculiar interests of the Levites: Yahwe is the god of Israel, Israel the people of Yahwe. Worship Yahwe alone and trust in him and he will deliver both his people and his trusting servant from all evils. This is occasionally proved by appeal to the national legend . . . But such references are rare. . . . This recalls the Chronicler's near elimination of all history prior to the planning of the Temple; a major deviation from the deuteronomic line. Emphasis is no longer on the past history, but on the present God.[4]

It sounds like a major change of curriculum; it would be bound to lead to a dumbing down, a general lowering of scholarly standards

[3] Morton Smith, 'Jewish Religious Life in the Persian Period', in W. D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, i. *The Persian Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), ch. 10, pp. 219–78.

[4] Ibid. 260.

We should not expect less learned Jewish interpreters of Leviticus to deal well with the stylish ambiguities worked into the text by the editors of Numbers. In this period the previously fashionable elaborate parallelisms were out of date. Poetry was beginning to be governed by metre. It is even possible that by the fourth century only very few people knew how to read a poem composed in old-fashioned parallelisms.

James Kugel, with his caustic comments on rabbinical writing, is part of a crowd of others who identify a drop in the level of intellectual sophistication. He takes a commentary on the Passover law to illustrate the point. Deuteronomy 16.3 says, 'You must not eat with it anything unleavened. For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread'. At first reading there seems to be no ambiguity, it is just a prohibition on eating leavened bread in that period. But Kugel quotes some rabbis who managed to read it as a positive injunction obliging the faithful to eat unleavened bread every day of the prescribed period.[5]

Other examples of this literalist, simplistic thinking are found in the Midrash *Sifra* to Leviticus.[6] The text in Lev. 1. 14 (RSV) says: 'If his offering to the LORD is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtledoves or of young pigeons.' The rabbi's comment goes on at great length to interpret what is meant by 'young' pigeons. First he deduces that no other bird can count as a fowl except turtledoves and young pigeons only, then that only the small and not the fully grown pigeons qualify for sacrifice, and to speculate on the qualifying and disqualifying age of the bird. With these casuistical preoccupations with the application of the laws, it is no wonder that the commentators did not have the opportunity to speculate on the structure of the book as a whole. They see it only as a source of laws.

At all times the peak cultural development is precarious and fragile, very liable to be broken by political bias, one way or another. When religious control is threatened the common response is intolerance, and formal and informal censorship of talk and thought. We can take Morton Smith's low view of the ancient Levite's intellectual resources as just one example of the consecutive pendulum swings which now raise and now lower standards of discourse, sometimes opening enquiry and curiosity, then closing them down. The major

[5] James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), ch. 3.

[6] Midrash *Sifra* to Leviticus, with trans. and commentary by Rabbi Morris Ginsberg (published by the Gainsford family and Leshon Limudim Ltd., Jerusalem, 1994), 148–9.

decline of learning in late antiquity is discussed in Charles Freeman's survey[7] of the history of intellectual freedom in Western Europe. He quotes John Chrysostom saying: 'Restrain our own reasoning, and empty our mind of secular learning, in order to provide a mind swept clear for the reception of divine words.' And Basil echoing him: 'Let us Christians prefer the simplicity of our faith to the demonstration of human reason . . . For to spend much time on research about the essence of things would not serve the edification of the church.' Freeman comments that this amounted to 'a total abdication of independent intellectual thought'.

Something very like this quenching of intellectual exchange would seem to have happened in the Middle East after the Babylonian Exile. It behoves me now to say something about the dominant style of Numbers and Leviticus, parallelism and chiastic structures, to give some idea of the elegance of the high style they used.

Bishop Lowth's Discovery

Bishop Lowth is generally accepted as the eighteenth-century discoverer of biblical parallelism.[8] Robert Lowth's 1753 lectures were given in Latin from the chair of Professor of Hebrew Poetry in Oxford. Lowth described parallelism as a typical pairing of line, phrase, and verse: 'So that in two lines (or members of the same period) things for the most part shall answer to things, and words, to words, as if fitted to each other by a kind of rule or measure.' Thematic parallelism is sometimes called 'thought rhyme' because the thought has two parts, the second pairing the first, running in parallel with it. Something asserted in the first part is repeated with affirmation or denial in the second part. The paired parts may be simple:

> 'Saul has smote his thousands,
> And David his ten thousands.' (1 Sam. 18. 6)

They may be very complex, one complete pair being used as the first part of another, more comprehensive pair, and that, when completed, used as part of another. The text may be composed so that

[7] Charles Freeman, *The Closing of the Western Mind: The Rise of Faith and the Fall of Reason* (London: William Heinemann, 1988), 322.
[8] Brian Hepworth, *Robert Lowth* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978).

the pairs may run parallel, or so that one may be an introversion of the other.

James Kugel asks how something so 'striking and fundamental' as what Bishop Lowth called *parallelismus membrorum* could have been overlooked for so many generations of Bible reading, before Lowth described it. Kugel's jibe is that 'in a very real sense it is not so much a discovery as an invention'.[9] He claims that Lowth just invented a title for a very common habit of speech and writing: no mistake, parallels were there in the texts sure enough, but the worthy bishop mistook a modified repetition for a new kind of thing. In my view he underestimates the elaborate conventional features that it developed. Kugel may be right in the question of priority: the literary device is far too widespread over the world to have lain undiscovered. Gray[10] names a precursor, Ibn Ezra (1093–1168 CE) who found parallelism in the psalms and the Pentateuch, and attributed them to Moses. Lowth didn't invent parallelism, though he formalized it.

I have recalled, in Chapter 3, the circumstances in which the government of Judah relegated the Aaronite priesthood, and the decline of learning that followed. We should not be surprised at a general lowering of the intellectual level of a population ravaged by war and humbled by severe defeat. I will support this by calling to mind some of the then current characteristic methods of reading sacred texts that would have obscured questions of structure, and explain why something that was there all the time may not have been noticed.

Parallelism

Parallelism is a typical convention of Semitic literature. Verses are linked into patterns of the ABC/ABC parallel variety, or of the crossed over, chiastic kind, ABC/CBA.

The work of linguists, and anthropologists of the last fifty years has produced a richly documented discussion of parallelism over the world. A magisterial review of the topic by James Fox places Roman Jakobson's analysis of Russian poetry at the beginning of modern understanding.[11] The techniques of parallelism are found in

9 Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 57.

10 G. Buchanan Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 18.

11 James Fox, 'Roman Jakobson and the Comparative Study of Parallelism', in C. Lisse (ed.), *Roman Jakobson: Echoes of His Scholarship* (Lisse: the Peter de Ridder Press, 1977).

widely scattered regions of the world, including China, Vietnam, Burma, and Thailand. The traditional poetry of Finland and North America influenced Longfellow's writing of 'Hiawatha' in parallelisms. This rhetorical form corresponds closely to the basic demands of grammar and syntax.

Roman Jakobson described parallelism in literature as 'a system of steady correspondences in composition and order of elements on many different levels'. Jakobson identified it in the literature of the Ural-Atlantic area, and far beyond.[12] Parallelism has been practised world-wide. It is known worldwide. It also stretches back into prehistory.

A lot of repetition is characteristic of the style, because of the need to mark structure. The verses are arranged to correspond with one another, echoing the words and themes like rhyming line-endings and metre-structures in modern poetic traditions. Parallelism inserts some very obvious correspondences between the matching verses as aids to recognition, not just semantic likeness, but clear verbal cues. Two sentences, or two paragraphs, or two whole stories, may be constructed in parallel so that one is in a position of structural equivalence to the other. Their correspondence is analogical. There are always verbal clues for recognizing the match. Sometimes the units are laid out in parallel lines, as with the lines of a verse with rhyme endings A, B, C, followed by the same for the next three lines, giving ABC, ABC. The second series takes up the first set of themes in the same order, giving each a different slant, so that the story, or sermon, or victory ode, develops by transforming the initial materials.

Here is an example of an ABA construction:

A. If her husband offers no objection from that day to the next,
    B. he has upheld all the vows and obligations she has assumed.
    B′. he has upheld them
A′. by offering no objection on the day he found out. (Num. 30. 15)

The words 'objection' and 'day' both occur in the first and last line.

This example based on straight repetition is too simple. More elaborate parallel sections, arranged chiastically, cross over in the middle, with the ending often using the very same words as the beginning. A true ring composition has a mid-point where the first

[12] R. Jakobson, *Dialogues Between Roman Jakobson and Krystyna Pomorska* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 102–3; 'syntactic constructions, grammatical forms and grammatical categories, lexical synonyms and total lexical identities, and finally combinations of sounds and prosodic schemes'.

string of themes turns round, and step by step the original sequence is retraced in inverse order: ABC CBA. It ends by completing the circle, at A where it began, hence the name 'ring composition'. Predictably, when read like this, following the direction along which it was meant to be read, the sense is different from what it would be if read linearly. The meaning has been carefully placed at the centre and the rest arranged as a frame for it.

Like the sonnet form, ring composition is a satisfying literary convention. It is simple in the sense that it consists entirely of two strings of analogies which match each other, section by section in strict sequence. It comes out very spontaneously in short speeches, but when carried through longer compositions it is a high style. It is the eloquent form of writing or recitation used when the humdrum level of everyday thinking needs to be dignified, as for a victory ode, or a funeral oration, or a sacred history.

It is easy to see why the ring-shaped rhetorical form has not always been recognized. The modern Bible scholars are expecting a linear progression; they study a ring text and consider it to be marred by omissions, repetitions, jumbled matter, leaps and non-sequiturs. A ring calls for synoptic reading. As one reads a sonnet, holding in mind the whole encompassing pattern of metre and rhyme, and expecting a series of correspondences, so does the ring composition reveal itself, from the beginning, through its unfolding, to the end which is fully expected to come round to link with the beginning.

Parallellism has the great merit of limiting the possible vagaries of meaning. Once you have been warned to listen for it, the pattern is simple to read and hear. But it makes a fairly complex structure. For one thing, it sets the strong statement of the main theme precisely in the middle, not at the end, nor at the beginning. This is a major cause for misinterpretation. Another is that it is highly repetitious, which leads western readers to mistake it for a badly organized composition. Repetition is one of its devices for signalling points of reference along the structure; it is easy to lose the central meaning if you don't know where to look for it.

Mishnaic Parallelism

The early rabbis in the first century had an elaborate technique of interpretation based on parallelism, but their prime concern was not

to discover the original meaning of a text, but to exploit its implications. A quotation from Jacob Neusner summarizes its characteristic features:

> The dominant exegetical construction in Leviticus Rabbah was the base-verse/intersecting verse exegesis. In this construction, a verse of Leviticus was cited (hence base-verse), and then another verse from such books as Job, Proverbs, Qohelet, or Psalms was cited. The latter, not the former, was subjected to detailed and systematic exegesis. But the exegetical exercise ended up by leading the intersecting verse back to the base-verse and reading the latter in terms of the former . . . a multiple-layered construction of analogy and parable. The intersecting verse's elements always turn out to stand for, to signify, and to speak of something other than that to which they openly refer. Nothing says what it means, everything important speaks elliptically, allegorically, and symbolically. All statements carry deeper meaning . . . But the exegetical exercise ended up by leading the intersecting verse back to the base-verse . . . [13]

This sounds like a privileged adaptation of the style of parallelism, privileged because it is exempted from following rules. Instead of the task of decoding the original writer's style, the later commentator is encouraged to display his own ingenuity. Freely seeking connections between words and phrases in the original manuscript, the exegete makes a new composition parallel to the first. This peculiar method in itself accounts for some of the loss of the meanings originally written into the Pentateuch by the redactors. Heavily relying on the unity of the whole, it is calculated to relate a more or less arbitrary selection of texts to different parts of the biblical canon. The objective is not to make a textual analysis of the original composition itself, it is a meditation on divine things, a midrash.

It would be quite wrong to infer from this that the rabbinical scholars were not interested in verbal accuracy. They devoted scrupulous care to determining the exact meanings of the words, as we saw for example in the case of the young pigeon deemed fit for sacrifice. The main difference between their traditions and later ones lies in their strong assumption of the unity of the larger text, so they could extract meanings by combining any two parts.

The new reading shatters the world and presents the shaken image through a kaleidoscope. This method of reading rests on an

[13] J. Neusner, *Self-fulfilling Prophecy: Exile and Return in the History of Judaism* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), 138–9.

essentially arbitrary principle: the free selection of the second, the 'intersecting verse', depends on the commentator, and in default of clues in the text, the meaning alleged to be 'deeper' will generally be a moral axiom. It would be a fine method for developing pious analogies—very good for devotional reading, but useless for revealing what the original texts were about. It is partly in consequence of this method of reading that Leviticus tends to be downgraded to the status of a rule book for the cult. So the structure of Leviticus was either not expected to be a firm structure of rings within rings, or if that was admitted, there was no idea that the original structure itself carried an important message.

In the next chapter I hope to show how much of a loss it has been for the ensuing millennia to read Leviticus without regard for the constraining rules of rhetoric, and without sensitivity to the main divisions of the book. The theological understanding which infuses Leviticus and gives the book its shape is the doctrine of the tabernacle as the microcosm. This old, very central, idea has been obscured in reading Leviticus, partly by the doctrine of impurity, and partly by ignorance. The bold claim about Leviticus' structure which I am making needs a special kind of introduction. This chapter is intended as preparation for what the next chapter will present. The climax there will be to show how the book Leviticus is modelled on Moses' tabernacle.

The Structure of the Book of Leviticus

Various commentators' different ideas[14] about how the book is divided up makes it clear that each kind of structure depends on the criteria used for analysing it, and on the different structuring principles invoked. Discovering one structure need not exclude the others, though points of detail may seem contradictory. Having said that I still think that there is something very extraordinary about its construction, one of those elusive things that is obvious once it has been pointed out, but hidden before.

It is not possible to compare Leviticus with the structure of the book of Numbers, they are utterly unalike. The latter is ordered in a classical chiastic form, with a central place from which the rest

[14] R. Rendtorff and R. Kugler (eds.), *The Book of Leviticus, Composition and Reception* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

radiates out. In this literary convention, known as a ring composition, every ring has a centre. The topological idea of the centre illumines the meaning of the whole piece. The centre of the composition is strongly marked, and effectively designed to correspond to the exposition at the beginning as well as to the conclusion.

In the case of Numbers the rhetorical structure itself is meaningful, the relations between its parts are a model that corresponds to current doctrines. It is a twelve-part design which is modelled on the *sefirot,* cosmic attributes expressed as the twelve months of the year. In the case of Numbers the clearly marked centre is the place where the authority of Moses and Aaron is affirmed, and the holiness of the tabernacle demonstrated.

Because I started with the book of Numbers I got used to expecting strongly centred ring formations whenever I examined a new part of the Bible. It is not difficult because the centre is usually signalled very clearly. But finding a centre for Leviticus turns out to be controversial. So difficult is it to locate one convincingly that I personally doubt that the book has a mid-turn centre. It is not organized in an abstract chiastic circle, like Numbers, a two-dimensional drawing. It is organized on the model of a mountain, or a temple, everything reaches up towards the peak, or in towards the interior, which is the same thing. It is not a ring composition, that is for sure. The focus, which is equivalent to the centre of the tabernacle's sequence of tents and holy places, is at the point of the innermost and smallest sector, in the furthest interior room. If you were standing on top of Mount Sinai, looking down, the summit would be the centre, on top of larger and larger encompassing rings reaching to the foothills. If you could turn the desert tabernacle and stand it on its base, looking down from the cone-shaped summit, you would be at the centre.

The microcosm expressed by projecting Mount Sinai and the Jerusalem tabernacle on each other, and the projection of both on God's universe is essentially an intellectual feat. The next chapter will explain how it works. Here is another reason for the structure of Leviticus being forgotten. It would be easy to hold the model in mind while the actual temple was standing and in use. Its rituals called for behaviour that recognized God's presence in their midst. The practice of the cult would be a continual reminder. Once the temple was destroyed, and until it was rebuilt, the doctrines would be heading for oblivion for sheer lack of public enactment. And no one would be interested in remembering the construction of Leviticus, the book.

The Babylonian conquerors of Jerusalem carried off the skilled and learned, the noble and rich families. Their life in exile was urban and literate, and many would have enjoyed membership in a learned community. The original editors themselves living in exile in Babylon would not have been country bumpkins, nor scribes and menial copyists. Before the exile they knew enough mathematics and astronomy to discuss the calendar with other learned exiles and with the Babylonian specialists. In exile they would have had opportunity for improving their knowledge of science and the arts. Initially the post-exilic community of the Second Temple, no less than the famous kingdom of Solomon, should have been able to draw on an international scientific tradition for astronomy, mathematics, poetry, and music. The actual construction of Leviticus bears shining witness to the same literary sophistication as in the book of Numbers.

But when it came to reading the books a generation or two later, the doors to the international learned discourse had been shut fast by Ezra and Nehemiah. Little Judah was about to be segregated from the nations, including her old and learned rival, Samaria. This generation would not recognize a cosmogram if it was staring straight at them. The de-skilling of the literary classes accounts for the view of Leviticus as a practical handbook for the cult. For that category of writing, the expected structure would be based on a natural ordering of the text based on the calendar of rituals and their performance through the course of the year. Yet, several modern scholars have pointed frustratedly at its lack of order. In addition to this reproach, its readers have to bear another reproach. Perhaps from the first century BCE, or perhaps from the very beginning of Ezra's influence, their emphasis on impurity severely unbalances the book. Its reputation has primitivized Leviticus.

Impurity made Prominent

Purity laws certainly loom large among the detailed instructions for consecrating and sacrificing the animals, and among lists of transgressions to be atoned. The modern reader gets the impression of a culture that is besotted about defilement. The topic keeps reappearing. In the first fifteen chapters a lot of attention is paid to bodily defects, leakages, and eruptions. Physical impurities take up more space (Lev. chs. 11–15) than moral offences (Lev. chs. 4–5) in the list of

actions requiring forgiveness and expiation. Surely few other religions focus quite so strongly on impurity? This is the question that strikes a newcomer reading the first part of the book. It stimulated my own interest in ritual defilement.[15] The rules of purification have all been gathered together in this one volume and for that very reason the other books of the Pentateuch have nothing to say about impurity. But there is more to it than that.

If the readers are themselves worried by intrusions and contaminations in their everyday lives, words about impurity will jump out of the page at them, reinforcing their existing bias. Because of the grave anxieties that beset the leaders of Judah before, during, and after the exile in Babylon, the book of Leviticus was almost bound to be misread. They would devoutly receive its message about avoiding impurity; it seemed to reflect their own anxieties. How to deal with impurity was taken to be the central teaching, obscuring the other side of the religion, its messages of joy in the Lord and his creation, and his nearness.

With the calm of distance, we can read it as a sophisticated exercise in parallelism. The local rules of rhetoric tell us that the book's focus is upon the tabernacle, and that its purpose is to exalt the God who dwells in it. The danger of impurity is the negative side of the glory. Somehow, at some point, knowledge of the connection between the two was severed. According to the old idea, written in the book, the laws of uncleanness are part of a totalizing set of symbols which encompass God's universe. They are not about dirt in itself, they are an attempt to accommodate the idea that God himself, unlike other gods of the region who live in the sky or on mountain tops, actually dwells in the temple.

It was a terrible responsibility to have God living in his house, there among his people. If the Hebrew God were to go away it would be an unimaginable disaster, and this might happen if they didn't protect the temple from intrusions of every kind. Living beings are models of the temple; they need to follow the same rules of purity. To follow the purity code in all its details is to make the life of a person conform to the divine microcosm, the whole universe infused with the same principle, everything related to the tabernacle. Microcosm flourishes in stability; in a major perturbation it disintegrates, and with it are lost the cultural foundations of knowledge. To understand it you have to

[15] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966).

be familiar with microcosmic thinking, and this I will address in the next chapter.

Problems with Uncleanness

This understanding explains several curious things about the levitical rules of impurity. At my own first reading they seemed to be a systematization of spontaneous ideas about dirt.[16] Like the first rabbis, I picked out this side of the teachings. I went on to study them as the manifestation of a general cognitive bias, rejection of whatever does not fit the positive system of categories. Though this theory still holds at a general cognitive level, I now recognize some problems with the way I tried to fit Leviticus into a theory of dirt and pollution in *Purity and Danger*. At first it seemed to work. Over time, and thanks to criticism, the analogy between biblical uncleanness and other systems of pollution began to break down. The main weakness of my attempt to naturalize and generalize purity concepts is that local definitions of pollution are the negative aspect of specific normative schemes of the world. I knew that the negative side cannot be compared across the board without also comparing the positive side.

The misfit between biblical and other pollution ideas starts with its lack of power for social criticism. Pollution rules tend to be used popularly as an instrument for keeping apart different classes of the same population. They tend to be applied in favour of a category that deems itself superior but threatened by the claims of the lower elements, or they may be invented by males and females for the sake of demarcating separate spheres of control—and so on. When secular, spontaneous pollution rules are systematized in a religious code they tend to reflect these mundane concerns in a strong pattern that repays sociological analysis. But uncleanness in Leviticus is about protecting the tabernacle from contamination, it is not primarily about mundane things. This is why Leviticus gives so little sign of social demarcation maintained by pollution rules. Quite the contrary, the book insists over and over again that the poor and the stranger are to be included in the requirements of the laws. In saying, 'Love the

[16] This I have discussed in *Purity and Danger*, and with more emphasis in 'Sacred Contagion', in John Sawyer (ed.), *Reading Leviticus*, JSOTSup 227 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 86–106.

alien as yourself' (Lev. 19. 34), the rules of Leviticus are applied to every person. No one in the community, or visiting, is excluded from the benefits of purification. This is strikingly different from what we expect from a list of rules about defilement.

The levitical rules of impurity continued to gain prominence because the normal response to persecution is to become very exclusionary. What the persecuted Jewish communities saw in the holy books in the aftermath of the exile and under the exigencies of Persian rule reinforced their own fears of contamination. Outsiders and intruders were judged to be sources of impurity. There is another important reason for the misreading of an elaborately constructed text from a much earlier period: the rhetorical conventions had been lost. Modern literary conventions do not do justice to the balanced harmonies of either book, and the meanings are hidden as well.

The Altar, the Focus of the Religion

Commentators agree that the religion of the sages and priests who compiled Leviticus and Numbers, and who inserted crucial passages in Genesis and Exodus, was focused on the altar. Jacob Neusner has put it eloquently:

> The altar was the centre of life, the conduit of life from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven. All things were to be arrayed in relationship to the altar. The movement of the heavens was demarcated, and celebrated at the cult marked out the divisions of time in relationship to the altar. The spatial dimension of the land was likewise demarcated and celebrated in relation to the altar . . . all things in order and in place. The natural order of the world corresponded to, reinforced and was reinforced by the social order of Israel. Both were fully realized in the cult—the nexus between the opposite and corresponding forces, the heavens and the earth.[17]

This focus was never lost. Neusner goes on to describe how the doctrine that first focused on the cult and the priests was transposed onto the everyday life of the people. The return from exile was in 586; in the four centuries that followed Judah was a province in a succession of foreign empires, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman. The sages preserved the old religion by developing a new focus on everyday experience. The cult was no longer confined to the priests, and

[17] Neusner, *Self-fulfilling Prophecy*, 43.

sacred space not confined to the temple. Domestic life, the table, and the food were to be sanctified by the same rules of purity that governed the cult.

Two and a half centuries after the exile, the Pharisees and the Essenes fulfilled the concept of a nation of priests by systematizing the old purity rules. The congregation could see themselves as equivalent to the priests, their table equivalent to the altar, and their meals equivalent to the sacrificial offerings. By a principle of sustained analogy they extended the holiness rules to the domestic sphere. Enacting these principles the people endowed themselves with a strong identity that carried them through the disasters that were still on the horizon. The book of Leviticus became indeed what it has ever since been taken to be, a handbook of the cult. This included the cult of the Sabbath, the cult of the table and food, the cult of the body, as well as the cult of the temple.

The book was revered and cherished. What was lost was a literary understanding of how it had been composed. And I suspect that the mystery of the temple as the sign of the covenant was also dissipated. The editors of the Pentateuch had chosen familiar models for the framework of their writing. A container would be a better word, a prepared mould into which they poured their theology. To make the structure fit the theme is like a subtle joke: Genesis took the cycles of a family saga for its structuring frame, Exodus took an escape story, Numbers took an epic journey. Leviticus took an architectural model, the design of the book corresponds to the architecture of the tabernacle. This follows a respected literary tradition in Greek literature, as Hesiod in *Works and Days* used trade and seafaring themes to carry his philosophy, or as Virgil used agricultural practice in the *Eclogues* as a literary frame for his homilectic purpose.

Features of Style

Reading antique literature, we do not want to be entrapped by our own misconceptions or subjective bias. Formal markers of structure such as metre, rhyme endings, punctuation marks, are the most reliable clues. The example of the book of Numbers teaches us to look for methods adopted by the poet for automatic self-signalling of structural divisions. Numbers marks the switches between narrative and law with formally constructed endings. I have searched Leviticus

and found no clear equivalent marking system. My main idea is that the primary structure is based on two violent events placed so that they divide the text into three parts. Originally (in *Leviticus as Literature*) I regarded these violent events as the only two narratives in the book. Now, some helpful criticism has convinced me of a misnomer because the whole book is in narrative mode, the main Sinai narrative. To avoid problems about what does and does not count as a narrative, I refer to 'violent events'.

Leviticus is not based on a macro-ring. The whole of the book can be presented as composed of one large and several small rings. The large ring, chs. 1–17, turns at chs. 8, 9, 10 where Moses is carrying out God's instructions for consecrating the priests, a suitable point for the mid-turn. At the end of this mid-turn, in ch. 10, there occurs the first violent event, ending in the death of Aaron's two sons (10. 10–23).

There is only one other violent event in the whole of Leviticus. It occurs at the end of 24. 10–23, the episode in which the blasphemer was stoned to death at the command of the Lord. If these two violent events are major markers for the structure of Leviticus, they divide the book into three parts, large, small, and smaller. The tabernacle has two screens which shut out unqualified persons from each of the two inner compartments. Two screens, two violent events, I am persuaded that this is the model of the tabernacle and of the literary pattern of the book.

The argument is based partly on the diminishing size of the texts, corresponding to the diminishing size of each compartment in the tabernacle. It is magnificently confirmed by the way the contents of the text for each part matches the content of the corresponding compartment of the tabernacle. The construction of the tripartite text corresponds very pertinently to the equivalent parts of the tabernacle. The first part of the text is devoted to the doctrines of sacrifice, sin, and uncleanness, which well correspond to the actions and discussions which would be taking place in the great court of sacrifice. There is a similar correspondence between the second section of text and the second compartment: only priests are allowed through the screen to the sanctuary (18–24) and the equivalent part of the text prescribes the family duties and required rituals of the priests. The last innermost section is the Holy of Holies, and this is where the text fittingly speaks of justice and covenant. I submit that these complex and consistent correspondences are beyond the scope of coincidence.

Two Violent Events

Leviticus is nearly all cast coherently in a main narrative in which the Lord is teaching Moses and Aaron and the congregation. The whole book is in the narrative mode, but though in Numbers the same Sinai narrative has a lot of action, in Leviticus it is a narrative almost without events. The newly promulgated laws and rituals are announced in sub-narratives, mostly dialogues: 'The LORD spoke to Moses' (Lev. 16. 1), and 'Moses did as the LORD had commanded him' (16. 34). The Lord gives laws to Moses and Aaron, and sometimes to the people of Israel; they accept; and then he tells them more laws. Within this law-giving Sinai narrative two stories are distinguished by their violence. In the whole of Leviticus these are the only two violent events, apart from animal sacrifices. They are brutally intrusive, they burst upon the serene exposition of laws. They can't be ignored. There could hardly be a more noticeable pair of markers.

The first violent event interrupts the Sinai narrative: in chs. 8–9 the congregation is obeying divine instructions for the consecration of Aaron and his sons. A fire that comes out of the sanctuary and sets light to the burnt offering miraculously confirms the rightness of the occasion; then the glory of the Lord appears to them. It all takes place within the Sinai narrative frame.

Then, suddenly, in ch. 10 something awful happens. Two of the sons of Aaron put fire into their censers; it is alien fire, they have done something wrong, and immediately they pay the penalty with their lives: fire comes forth again from God and burns them up. Moses promptly arranges for the other sons of Aaron to remove the corpses and take them out of the camp. He issues instructions so that the danger won't spread (10: 6–8).

The fire event of ch. 10 is not a story within a story, like the tale of Balaam, where the whole scene shifts into a fairy-tale mode, with characters who have never been heard of before. Yet, to my eye, the fire event is a genuinely separate story. The site and time are given, the dramatis personae are hardly changed. It is true that we haven't heard of Abihu and Nadab since their names first appeared in the genealogy in Exod. 6. 23, but Aaron's delinquent sons fit into the continuing main Sinai narrative more smoothly than some characters in Numbers (for example, Zimri and the Princess Cosbi in ch. 25, who emerge, make love, die, and disappear).

Leviticus describes the one other violent event in the middle of ch. 24. Interrupting a peaceful account of how to prepare oil and show-bread for the table in the sanctuary, a quarrel erupts and a blasphemy (24: 10–23). The blasphemer and his family descent are completely unknown and have to be introduced to the reader. The people brought the blasphemer to Moses, who consulted the Lord, who ordered him to be stoned to death. And the people did so. End of story. No more is heard about that man or his family.

Each of the two violent events is made the occasion of reciting the law; in the first case, the laws about respecting the difference between clean and unclean (10: 10), in the latter case, the law of talion (24: 16–23).

A Three-Part Book with Three Centres

The two violent events divide the Leviticus narrative into three sections, unequal in length. I argue that these divisions model the book on the proportions of the desert tabernacle, constructed according to the instructions given by God in Exodus. I have gone into it more thoroughly in *Leviticus as Literature*, and will say some more in the next chapter.

The point to make here is that I did search in Leviticus, and I did not find a few verses or a chapter that would serve for the turning of the whole book. Instead, each of the three segments of Leviticus has a strong point of focus. I call it a solemn triad, because it consists of three closely related chapters in an ABA design. The middle one of each triad is impressively powerful, marks a climax, and is flanked by a closely related pair of chapters. The first triad is chs. 8, 9, and 10, the next is 18, 19, 20, and the third is 25, 26, 27.

1. *Solemn Triad*, chs. 8-9-10 form a clearly separated narrative. Chapter 8: After the anointing and clothing of Aaron and his sons, Moses officiates for the sacrifices of the bull of the sin offering, the ram of the burnt offering, the cereal offering and the ram of ordination for the consecration of the priests; there is a pause for seven days to complete their ordination. Chapter 9: The mid-turn of the triad: Aaron officiates for a sin offering, a burnt offering, a cereal offering; then for the people's sin offering, burnt offering, and cereal offering, and the sacrifice of the peace offering. When he had finished, and blessed the people, the glory of the Lord appeared before all the

people, and consumed the burnt offering on the altar, 'and the people shouted and fell on their faces'. Chapter 10: Immediately after ch. 9 follows the calamity of the false fire and Aaron's two sons are burnt to death.

2. *Solemn Triad*, chs. 18-19-20. The sequence, 18, 19, 20, is a very clear example of chapters forming an ABA triad: 18 and 20 are obviously a frame for 19 as they respond to each other so closely and say exactly the same things, only the order of saying is different. In between the pair of paralleled chapters 19 stands as a major statement about the meaning of righteousness. The two framing chapters cover sexual offences and idolatries. Their repetition is so exact that the third element, ch. 20, is obviously there to fulfil a structural purpose, to make the second side of a frame for 19. Incidentally, there is only one mention of uncleanness in this triad that lists transgressions (20. 25).

In between the lists of crimes, ch. 19 describes the fair, just, and merciful behaviour that the Lord requires his people to show each other.

3. *Solemn Triad*, chs. 25-26-27. These form a solemn triad, with 26 in the middle and 25 and 27 paralleling each other on either side. Chapter 25 starts with the seven-year sabbath and the forty-ninth-year Jubilee, and injunctions to be fair and generous to their poor brothers; ch. 27, the last in the whole book, is also about rules of fair recompense, but this time it is the fairness which the sanctuary is expected to display on God's behalf to the people. The two match each other, making the ABA pattern.

In between them, 26 has one theme in three movements: the central theme is God's covenant with his people. First (vv. 1–13), the Lord promises kindness and prosperity to his people if they obey his statutes; second (vv. 14–39), he says what desolation and despair await them if they turn against him; third (vv. 40–6), matching the first part, the forgiving ending typical of Leviticus: if they repent and confess, he will remember the covenant he made with their forefathers.

I am not so confident about the importance of the solemn triads for the structure of the book as I am sure of the two violent events which carve out a three-part structure. If challenged about them, I will probably retreat. But in default of challenge I suggest that each of the three parts of the Leviticus book is centred around its relevant triad.

Centred at Chapter 19

Leviticus 19 is a marvellous chapter, it has so many cross-references to the beginning and the end of the book that it satisfies all the most stringent requirements for a mid-turn. Composers in this medium frequently make allusion to their own artifices. I don't know whether 19 is the centre of the whole composition, but if it is, the placing of the law for just scales and fair measures at the very balance point where the composition is about to make its own turn can be no coincidence. 'You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. You shall have honest balances honest weights' (Lev. 19. 35–6). That, in every sense, is righteousness. The theme of due measure floods powerfully across from the listing of measures, weights, and payments, to the second account of a blemished animal in 22. 23: 'An ox or a lamb that has a limb too long or too short' (in the King James Version it reads: 'anything superfluous or lacking in its parts').

The middle chapter of this solemn triad, 19, does make very explicit connections with the rest of the book, as a well-conceived mid-turn should. It touches base with many of the preceding chapters (ch. 3, the peace offering in 19. 5; the prohibition against eating blood, chs. 7. 26–7 and 17. 14, repeated in 19. 26; not to swear by the Name falsely, 24. 10 ff., repeated in 19. 12, and many others). Indeed, in the middle of the middle of three triads, ch. 19 is brilliantly structured, fit to integrate the whole volume.[18]

Chapter 26 is unique in a different way. The solemn triad starts with ch. 25 (the great institutions of the Sabbath and the Jubilee), and ends tamely with ch. 27's accounting of debts to the Lord's sanctuary. Chapter 27 is sometimes thought to be supernumerary, not integral to the rest of the book. If it is a late addition, it could have been added to perform its structural role, to complete the second side of the frame around ch. 26. Early or late, it is indispensable to the total design.

The three solemn triads are definitely markers; they either mark beginnings, as 18-19-20 mark the beginning of the sanctuary space, or endings, as 8-9-10 mark the end of the Court of Sacrifice. The triad 25-26-27 marks the end of the whole composition and represents the most sacred space of all. If we need confirmation that these last chapters have brought us to the equivalent last point in the tabernacle

[18] D. Luciani, 'Soyez saints, car je suis saint, Commentaire de Lévitique 19', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 114/2 (1992), 212–36.

building, the place where the ark of the Covenant is reserved, we find that the word 'Covenant' is repeated seven times in ch. 26 (vv. 15, 25, 42 three times, 44, 45). We are on the right track.

Conclusion

Notice that this structure does not emphasize purity or impurity. Impurity is clearly subordinate to the positive view of the theistic universe against which it balanced. How purity rules work to police our thoughts and behaviour we shall see in the chapter on taboo. As to the book, the central place in the teaching is given to righteousness (in Lev. 19) and the Covenant (26). Impurity is the foil for displaying the meaning of righteousness. When we have disposed of impurity as the focus of the book, we are ready to look for the focus in a general doctrine of the tabernacle in Jerusalem, the navel of the world.

We have now outlined the major problems of interpretation: not just that the Bible is foreign, not just that it is also antique, but that (to put it harshly) the priestly books were handed down to the next generation by teachers who did not understand them. In order to explain why the tabernacle should have been modelled on Mount Sinai, and why the book of Leviticus should have been modelled on both, I have to make a digression. Microcosmic thinking might not have needed to be spelt out at the time of redaction (and not even for everyone in the first century). I shall return to this theme after I have set up a wider context for situating Leviticus' microcosm.

6
The Body/House Cosmogram

The literary scheme of Leviticus and the annual ritual cycle of the priests in the tabernacle both celebrate the same, all-embracing model of the universe. The model holds good for Mount Sinai, the Covenant, and the Tabernacle. It is a microcosm.

Leviticus, unlike Numbers, is not constructed as a ring.[1] It is, in itself, a cosmogram. A ring composition makes its own context and radiates out from its own centre. A microcosm doesn't need a centre. Itself, it is the centre of a system of thought. If William Harvey, the anatomist who had discovered the system of the circulation of the blood, were asked to make up his mind whether the body's centre was the heart or the head, he would have probably said the heart. But when he started to use the idea of microcosm analogically, comparing the heart of the body to the position of the king, he said the king is both the head and the heart. He wrote a letter dedicating his book, *De Motu Cordis*, to the King:[2]

> To the most serene and most puissant
> Charles
> King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland
> Defender of the Faith

Most serene King!
The animal's heart is the basis of its life, the ruler of all, the sun of its microcosm; on the heart all its activity depends, and from it emanates all its power and strength. The King is equally the basis of his kingdoms, the sum of his microcos, the heart of the state; from him all power emanates and all grace proceeds. In offering your majesty—as is the custom of the time—this account of the heart's movement, I have been encouraged by the fact

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[1] See M. Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 218 ff.

[2] William Harvey, *De motu cordis*, Eng. trans. K. J. Franklin (London: Everyman, J. M. Dent, 1993). See Commentaries of A. Wear, 'William Harvey and "The Way of the Anatomists"', *History of Science*, 21 (1983), 223–49, and J. J. Byleby, 'The Growth of Harvey's *De Motu Cordis*', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 47 (1973), 42–70. I thank Helen King for this comparison.

that almost all our concepts of humanity are modelled on our knowledge of man himself, and many of our concepts of royalty on our knowledge of the heart. An understanding of his heart is thus of service to the king as being a very special portrayal, if on a more modest level, of his own functioning. Placed, best of kings, as you are at the summit of human affairs, you will at least be able to contemplate simultaneously both the ruling power of the human body and the likeness of your own royal power. Accept, therefore, I most humbly pray your most serene majesty, with your accustomed good will and graciousness, this *new account* of the heart. For to you, who are yourself the new splendour of this age, and indeed its whole heart, its central figure abounding in virtue and grace, we rightly refer whatever good obtains in this England of ours, whatever pleasure in our life within it.

Your most august Majesty's most
Devoted servant,

WILLIAM HARVEY

So we may conclude that the centre of a microcosm can be at the summit, and also the heart. This will be congenial to my view. The centre and the top are equivalent positions. The head or the heart, the top or the innermost recesses of a body, or of a building, can manifest the same point on the microcosm that dominated Judaic thinking in pre- and early post-exilic times. To this I shall return, after amplifying the concept of a microcosm.

Microcosm

A full-blown microcosm makes a model of the universe, based on established similarities. Analogy creates similarities, it doesn't find them ready made. An analogy has to be a cultural construct. If a likeness seems to hit you in the eye, such as a likeness between the majesty of a lion and the majesty of a king, or if you don't see the majesty but see an obvious likeness between lions and other less noble-looking carnivorous predators, your cultural training has selected the points of comparison for you. There is nothing in nature that produces similarities.[3] Similarity is constructed.

The similarity that underlies the elements of a microcosm is based very often on an analogy based on parallel proportions. Equivalent orientations and positions provide a geometric basis for the analogic

[3] Nelson Goodman, 'Seven Strictures against Similarity', *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), and repr. in M. Douglas and D. Hull, (eds.), *How Classification Works: Nelson Goodman Among the Social Sciences* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

system. Rituals organize space and time in conformity with established cosmic analogies, and in doing so, stabilize and reinforce volatile thoughts that would otherwise be quickly dispersed. Because a building is laid out in space and time, the ideas that are plotted upon it have an abstract geometrical expression. This abstraction enables the cosmic scheme to be lifted up from one given material context and made to apply to any selected circumstance with the right proportions. We shall see below that this is how the tabernacle can be a model of Mount Sinai. A threefold structure of low lands, middle, and summit can be attributed to the mountain and the tabernacle can be designed with a tripartite design. Even a body can become the model for a house, because some selected proportions will be attributed to both.

A microcosm is invasive. Its analogies tend to expand and to incorporate insatiably more and more territory. In a stable community a burgeoning system of parallels based on matched proportions finishes by assimilating everything that there is to its dimensions of time and space. On the other hand some useful analogies just never turn into a microcosm. For example, take a page of writing: if you say that something on the last line is at the 'foot' of the page, and something on the first line is at the 'head' of the page, you have made an equivalence between two sets of positions and two places in space. The positions at the top and bottom of the page are equivalent to the positions of head and feet on a body. About a turbulent meeting you might say, 'tempers ran high'; this assumes a scale of emotional qualities projected on a vertical dimension in space.[4] These little analogies, however well-turned, have no power to go further. Probably some already existing microcosm which has greedily absorbed the space is preventing them from taking off.

Finally, the microcosm relates society to the universe. A powerful microcosm is conservative in its effects. Social structures map upon work structures, the relative positions of bodies map on to a system of relative status, and as a result the patterns of work and the patterns of power and authority can be synchronized and sustain each other. In the film of *The King and I* it was taboo for any one's head to be higher than the head of the king of Siam. It amused him to defeat protocol and embarrass his court by lying on the ground.

[4] Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

Dealing with Ambiguity

One of the benefits of a developed and well-established microcosm is that it reduces the options for interpretation, thus making communication more secure. It reduces ambiguity, which obviously menaces clear communication. Whatever the medium of expression, meaning constantly leaks out, it never stands still, in spite of various constraints which allow only one meaning to come through at a time. However hard we try, interpretation keeps threatening to run wild. When a set of meanings can be established, beyond mistake, the achievement is something to celebrate.

However, we may not condemn ambiguity out of hand. In a famous essay William Empson mentions ambiguities that are intended.[5] The speaker or writer is aware of obvious alternative interpretations in what has been uttered, but does not wish to close the options. He may even deliberately want double meanings. Keeping several open is a common rhetorical strategy. Poetry gains by the added richness produced by synonyms (though theologians often come near to self-contradiction as they try to sustain complex analogies). Synonyms are good for laughter: satire, puns, *jeux de mots,* we can't do without them.

A dominant microcosm collects, organizes, and absorbs knowledge as providing elements of a world scheme. This is one of the ways in which ambiguity is reduced. Doubtful meanings can be established by considering where they fit into the general microcosm; they are precarious if they don't fit onto the rest of the scheme. The microcosm concentrates meaning, and by that means helps to hold it steady. Since the same words or symbols are used in many different contexts, each use plays back its meanings on the others, making a powerful control of meanings. It works to limit ambiguity. But outsiders do not recognize a local microcosm when they hear it. Consider the problems that can arise when an analogy between house and body is developed, when the word for a house is used as the word for a body.

Body/House in the Gospels

Here follows a famous example of a body/house conflation. In the Gospel of John, Jesus was accused of having said that if the temple

[5] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930).

were destroyed he would raise it up within three days: 'The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body.' (John 2. 18–21) 'We heard him say, "I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands'" ' (Mark 14. 58). Notice this misquote has added the hands: 'At the last two [false witnesses] came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days'" ' (Matt. 26. 60–1). Another misquote, the original did not say 'temple of God'. The misquoting was aggravated later when Stephen was brought before the council and accused of quoting Jesus to make trouble: 'They set up false witnesses, who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us' (Acts 6. 13–14).

Some scholars attribute the mistake to the fact that the text does not show the gestures. If Jesus pointed to himself as he said the word 'temple', it would have helped. But I venture to doubt whether the body language would have been necessary. One of the dominant microcosms of the old Jewish religion was the association of body and temple. There is reason to think that their equivalence was well understood in Judah in the first century. Not by everyone: not all who attended the temple had been trained in Jewish theology. It was ambiguous, and the ambiguity was fatal, for when certain factions of the Jewish community in Jerusalem wanted to get him into trouble they reported it.

It is worth spending some time illustrating microcosm in general, and the dominant microcosm of the ancient Hebrew religion in particular. I have already speculated on why the original rhetorical fences which protected it from confusion broke down after the return from exile and after the original redaction of Leviticus (Chapter 5). Now I can use the case of intellectual decline following on social disaster for thinking further about microcosm. It is not a purely verbal trick, the microcosm actually helps to build a community by providing mirrors for reflexivity, and at the same time the microcosm depends on the life of the community; it loses its control over their thinking if the community is severely disturbed.

The Chinese Emperor

Marcel Granet made famous the Chinese cosmology as the example of an all-embracing microcosm.[6] The Chinese emperor is the son of heaven; his palace is the centre of the world; his life and body partake in the existences of the sun and moon and the passage of the seasons. All the elements of the universe are mutually involved in his person, he maintains them, and reciprocally they maintain everything. Any particular ceremonial has its proper colour to be worn, time of day for its performance, date of the month and the year to be respected, the right direction to face, entrances and exits. The temporal structure of the seasons and some crucial proportions in space, are plotted on to numerical points, and these are made to govern projections made on palaces, temples, houses, and bodies. Every building in the realm must be organized on the same system of principles as the royal palace. This means that the mental construct is made visible by its physical parallels.

The emperor must act in harmony with the stars in their courses, his acts must honour the cardinal points, he must wear the right colour on the right day, eat the right food. In every action he must respect the system of numbers, itself laden with cosmological meaning. He must perform the correct sacrifices on the correct days, and so on. If he fails, the seasons will go out of sequence, then floods or droughts may ensue. The functioning of the universe and all the objects in the world are projected on to the cardinal points, and on to his body. This is how microcosmic thinking works. The emperor's body is a holy icon, and the model of everything. All the bodies of his subjects come under the same laws. So the view of every single thing is constrained by its meanings in the imperial system. As they sit down to eat, lie down to sleep, and rise with the sun, their actions are in harmony with the universe.

Inevitably we are led to ask whether the modern industrial West has an invisible microcosm of its own. In practice, we do start out thinking along the microcosmic way. Our own contemporary microcosm has been developing over two hundred years. It is modelled on a person, it has a physical body, which is credited with feeling pain and satisfaction, and with understanding cost-benefit. It is the body of the sovereign, choosing, rational being driven by self-interested

[6] M. Granet, *The Religion of the Chinese People* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975).

motives.[7] Its range of application keeps expanding. The homunculus started in economics as a being whose satisfactions can be related to the marginal costs of attaining them. The idea of this rational being has gone on to dominate explanations in psychology, genetics, biology, and other human sciences.

These scholars start their theorizing about human behaviour with a solipsist model of cognitive development: just one person is trying to think and behave. It is like the Victorian anthropologists' model of the evolution of the brain from primitive to modern. According to this model the infant is not innately endowed with sensitivity to signals from other humans. It has to learn how to relate to other people without any native talent for sociality; it does not respond to facial signals of distress. Until this solipsist model of the person is superseded by the model of an inherently social person, psychology and anthropology will go on having a hard time. Apart from the social sciences, it influences biological sciences. It is the model for inference about the behaviour, feelings, and intentions of other animate beings. But it doesn't apply to inanimate objects, or to religion, so it is not a complete microcosm.

The Flow Model of the Lele

The people called the Lele, in the middle of the Congo, whom I studied in the 1950s,[8] modelled the concept of the house and the body on a pattern of flowing water. The two big rivers in their region run from south to north. The microcosm they developed from that directional flow was so pervasive in their language that it reopens the question of ambiguity. Their ancestors came there originally from the south, which is upstream of the rivers Loange and Lumbundji. Prestige is associated with their upstream origins and southern orientation. And the flow of the streams matches historical flow. The upstream water runs clear and pure; downstream it is polluted by the detritus of upstream neighbours. As it happens, the peoples who live to the upstream (south) of their territory are kinsmen or friendly neighbours; the people who live to the downstream north are

[7] M. Douglas and S. Ney, *Missing Persons: A Critique of Personhood in the Social Sciences* (Berkeley: University Press of California, 1998); my co-author and I presented the rational being referred to as *Homo Economicus* as a microcosm, pp. 175–85.

[8] M. Douglas, *The Lele of the Kasai* (London: International African Institute, 1963).

dangerous and unreliable foreigners. The source of their history is tacitly assimilated to the source of the rivers.

The same flow model is applied to the Lele village which is a tight little corporate unit. The word for upstream, *tende*, is applied to a southerly position within the village, regardless of which way it is facing. It has its own internal orientation. The upstream and downstream of the village are fixed without reference to the flow of the rivers. The entry to the village is the source, and referred to as upstream; the far back of the village is downstream. You arrive, and ask someone, 'Where is so-and-so?' The other will jerk a thumb and reply, 'Downstream', or 'Upstream'. Be careful not to look for the flow of the rivers, if you are trying to follow the directions based on the orientations within the village.

The same flow model is extended to the inside of the square houses built from raffia palms: as the village is a square they all face different directions, and each has its own internal orientation. The back of the house, where the hearth and the beds are, and where the grain is stored, is the downstream of the house, the small entry is the upstream.

And the same flow model also applies to pouring water out of a calabash. The narrow mouth, where the water is poured in, and can be seen when it is full, is the upstream from which the water flows if it is being poured out. When it is nearly all poured out you are reaching the downstream of the vessel, which anyway fulfils another aspect of the model by being full of dregs.

The Lele also see the body as a river. The esteemed upstream at the source of the river corresponds to the mouth where food and drink are taken into the body and travel down it. 'Upstream' is rarely used for the top end of the body, perhaps because there are words for each part: mouth, teeth, eyes, head, etc. But the pair word, downstream, is in regular use for the Lele are extremely circumspect, with high standards of decent discourse. They avoid mentioning the excretory and sexual organs. If they must refer to the lower parts of the body, they refer politely to the groin as the downstream of a person. This is a modified anthropomorphism of the river's flow. The village, the house, the body, and all containers from which seeds or liquids flow out have an upstream entry, and a downstream equivalent of the exit of the liquid. The inside of the square house also bears another anthropomorphic projection, the right and left side project gender, feminine to the left, masculine to the right. The village also has two hands: the right-hand and the left-hand side of the village.

As a woman, I could never have taken the secret diviners' course on how the Lele universe was built up. But I know enough to assert that their healing arts and their religion made use of this water-flow model of orientation by marking out territorial spheres which had to be kept apart. Strong rules prevented the water sphere, the deep forest, from intruding on the village sphere, and vice versa, on certain days and times the forest had to be protected from human intrusion. Fertility spirits lived in the sources of streams: hence an elaborate classification of the animals by habitats. Water animals (including wild pig) were distinguished from sky animals, birds and squirrels, and from burrowing and land animals.

Dietary rules plotted the microcosm onto the human body. The connection between women and water was complex because the sources of streams were central to the fertility cult. Women wishing to conceive needed to eat water animals, once they had conceived they must avoid fish and only eat sky animals, until safely delivered. They could never eat a species of antelope which escaped from the hunters by taking refuge in streams. The idea of stopping leakage appeared in medical practice: the hair of a sick person might have to be bound up to prevent escape of precious soul-stuff from the body. The body was seen to conform to the principles that govern the world. This is going to be an important principle for interpreting the dietary rules of the Torah, and for justifying the argument that the Jewish religion was governed by a dominant microcosm.

The Lele example shows how a microcosm might start to build up. It also shows how ambiguity is kept under control. Confusion came from my supposing that the reference to the downstream of the village had something to do with the direction of the stream itself, and partly because I carried in my head the reverse association with the north, the upward direction on a page or map. So when they said, 'His house is upstream, you will find him there', the word for 'up' would instinctively turn me to the north, even if they were pointing the other way. I was like the Roman onlooker in Jerusalem who would have been bound to misunderstand the words: 'This is the cup of my blood . . . unless you eat my flesh', etc. For insiders to the culture it was clear, in spite of the use of the same word for different meanings. The analogy is unidirectional, it relates to only one dimension, which gives it simplicity. The context restricts its large scope of possible reference. The context was normally clear. For native

speakers, the Lele microcosm wins a good score for convenience. However, for an outsider it used to be baffling.

The Berber House or the World Reversed

The Lele cosmology is further relevant to the study of microcosm in another aspect. It is obviously a constructed model, yet we cannot easily imagine a particular person or group of persons setting out to construct it. It is useful to be able to conceive of something now called 'social construction' as a gradual emergence from the experiences of people living together along the banks of a major river. The same applies to the perversities of the Berber construction of the inside/outside dimension of houses, to which I will briefly turn. Notice that in both cases the meanings are defined and sustained by actions.

In *The Logic of Practice*[9] the late, lamented, anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu grounded the whole of the Berber analogical system on the division of labour by gender. Men and women do different work through the year; different foodstuffs are available through the year. The annual round of labour and the round of the seasons provide the framework of a working model of everything there is. The structure of work is a symbolic model of the world, but it is not an intellectual fantasy spun out of thin air. It is sturdily based on physical action in a 3D environment, as real as the Lele rivers Lumbundji and Loange.

The Berber house does not work out a direct or obvious parallel with the human body. It is a complex microcosm based on the cardinal points. It is inauspicious for a man to start the day's enterprises in a westerly direction. So the doors of houses need to face east; but this means that on re-entering the house from the east a person is facing the inauspicious west. To counteract this effect the cardinal points are artificially reversed inside the house. The east is where the light comes from: entering the house one is facing west indoors, the sunlight falls on the opposite wall, so inside the house the west is at the east, the north is at the south, the orientation is reversed. The house has gendered quarters, the female side where the weaving is done, in the light, at the internal east; the other is the male side, internal west; there is a warm part for the living, a cold part for dead bodies, whether

[9] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), first published in French as *Le Sens Pratique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

carcasses of meat, or for the corpse if there has been a death. In their comprehensive complexity the two worlds mirror each other: the inside of the house and the outside world. The spaces of the house are also gendered by the seasons because they respond to the seasonal demands on male and female labour. Both house and work cycle are structured by spring, birth and youth, maturity and harvest, winter and old age, and dying. The inside of the house and its outside match each other in a consistent, complex pattern that refers to this cycle.

It is clear from a vast literature on house symbolism that variations on the theme of the equivalence of house and body are very common round the world. Obviously they are constructed quite knowingly, though not necessarily deliberately. Sometimes they may carry no more cosmic significance than the head and foot of a page in our speech.

Analogy and Practical Reason

Practice pre-selects some features of the seasons, the rivers, openings, boundaries, and enclosures, and organizes them according to abstract patterns. Thus several discrete items are brought into regular correspondence: two or more patterns coincide. The entry and exit points of a house, a body, and a village can be projected onto the flow of a river, or indoors/outdoors work, or seasonally varied foods; these natural features can be assimilated to human life, gender, reproduction, ageing, ranking. Body achieves its cross-references because its complex functioning can be projected onto other functioning systems. Their relations provide a compact and convenient way of speaking and thinking. Each natural exemplar, the house or the body, goes through a reductive process; the exemplar is stripped down to a bare set of points making a very simple pattern; everything else is ignored. The upshot of these comparisons is that anything can signify anything unless there is some quasi-contractual understanding about what signifies what. Ambiguity is always rife. Reason is defended against ambiguity by its rooting in practice.

Philosophy used to disdain the practical form of reasoning, and focused more respect on the speculative, a priori, deductive mental processes. At the same time, the mundane, earthily inductive practical reason has always had its defenders. Recently Ian Hacking[10]

[10] I. Hacking, *Intervening and Representing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

restores proper balance in the history of science by his defence of the practical hands-on instrument makers against the claims of the pure theoreticians. He forces us to recognize experimentation and instrument-making as the true and principal sources of innovation, it was they who promoted the growth of scientific thought. Cognitive science and psychology have become interested in the links between the stages of conception and the practical creative processes.

Brain science has newly prepared us for an integrated understanding of reason. The aeons we have spent trying to understand the brain and the mind separately are superseded. The next step is for brain scientists to study their simultaneous interaction. They are parts of one organism, each serves the other and would be useless without it. Thinking about the mind entails thinking about society. We admit now that we should pay attention to things, objects, and their classification. It has become necessary to ask about the classes on which logical operations are performed. How do these units get formed? How do they achieve enough coherence to acquire names and be placed in sets?[11] In other words, what has to take place before classification arises? The answer will be to do with the requirements of community life.

Classes come to be defined through involvement in practical situations. Working together, playing together, making music together, humans need to attach names to classes of events and things. Classification is the essential precondition of social life, a response to the need for co-ordination. Microcosm, like classification, is itself a form of co-operation and the basis of collective thought. Émile Durkheim first restored practical reason to its proper place of esteem by grounding logical relations upon social analogies.[12] He introduced a social dimension into the philosophy of mind by showing that human classifications of themselves were the basis of their classification of animals, the one abstract set modelled on the other.

In *The Savage Mind*[13] Claude Lévi-Strauss, following Durkheim's original approach to classification, explained totemism as an ana-

[11] Jean-Pierre Poitou (ed.), *Concevoir et Construire, de la Trière au Picoteux* (Érès, 'Technologie/Idéologie/Pratiques', Revue de l'anthropologie de la connaissance, 1998).

[12] Émile Durkheim, *Les Formes Élementaires de la Vie Religieuse* (Paris: Alcan, 1912), first English edn., *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1915).

[13] C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), first French edn., *La Pensée Sauvage* (Plon, 1964).

logical tool not merely for an intellectual exercise in classification, but for actually organizing social relationships. He chose to exemplify his argument with classifications that start from very practical contexts in which bodies, blood, bones, take part in practical enterprises such as cooking, building, hunting. From these familiar material bases their meanings are projected outwards to less material contexts, such as marriage rules and group membership. And in the creative process of making consistency and coherence, the same meanings embellish mythology and religion. Along this line of thought Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss accorded its proper dignity to analogical thinking.

The so-called practical reason does much more than supply the needs of practical co-operation in building houses, cooking, boating, or hunting. It serves the project of living together. In the process it provides the materials for coherent and satisfying mythologies. Thus Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that practical reason is necessarily always there: necessary for living, we knew that, but specially necessary for sustaining the flights of speculative reason.

Paul's Microcosm

My prime example of ambiguity is that Jesus' statement about restoring this temple and rebuilding it in three days may have been an instance of his 'speaking in riddles', one of his sayings which the disciples did not understand until after he had died. Then, why did they not understand it at the time? John says: 'After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken' (John 2. 22). Did they remember in the surprised mode of those to whom a new and wonderful mystery has been revealed? Or in the mode of one who feels he should have known it all along and claps his hand to his head, exclaiming: 'Of course! Why didn't I see it straight away?' If they had been educated men, it would have been the latter. But the apostles were unlettered, 'unlearned and untrained men', as we are told in Acts 4. 13. Paul was learned and trained, but he was not present on the occasion. If he had been there, would he have known that Jesus meant his own body, by the words 'this temple'? I suggest that he would. Something in the tone of voice would have warned him. His letters to the Corinthians keep harping on the equivalence of body and temple: 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and

that God's Spirit dwells in you?' (1 Cor. 3. 16); 'If anyone destroys God's temple God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple' (1 Cor. 3. 17); 'Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body' (1 Cor. 6. 19); 'For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens' (2 Cor. 5. 1); 'For we are the temple of the living God' (2 Cor. 6. 16). Paul would certainly have known his Leviticus. His turn of phrase, 'How could you not know?' suggests that this equivalence was well established. Whether one could fairly expect the ambiguity to have been resolved depends on how educated in the Jewish religion the hearers would have been.

The Microcosm in Leviticus

I hope that the ground is now prepared for Leviticus' body/temple analogy as a functioning microcosm. I have demonstrated that not any pair of equivalences will do. To count as a well-developed model of the universe, the analogy would have to rest on a basis of proportionality. It should also project a pattern of social relations on the physical world. I argue that in the book of Leviticus, the anatomy of the sacrificial animal, and the shape of the tabernacle, are on the same tapering, tripartite, design, and that both correspond to proportions on Mount Sinai where the original epiphany took place (Exod. 19. 16–25). This meets the stipulation of proportionality. The whole design is strictly structured according to the proportions of the desert tabernacle, proportions which were given to Moses by God in the book of Exodus (chs. 25–7). The book gives the law which corresponds to the Sinai Covenant between God and his people, and brings their relations with their livestock and all animal kinds into conformity. This meets the stipulation that a microcosm patterns social relations on the laws of the universe. These are the grounds on which I claim that Jews instructed in their religion (perhaps at an earlier time) would have recognized the sacred parallel between body and temple.

The altar of sacrifice and the laver are in the Court of Sacrifice; the first screen, the incense altar, the lamp, and the table of showbread in

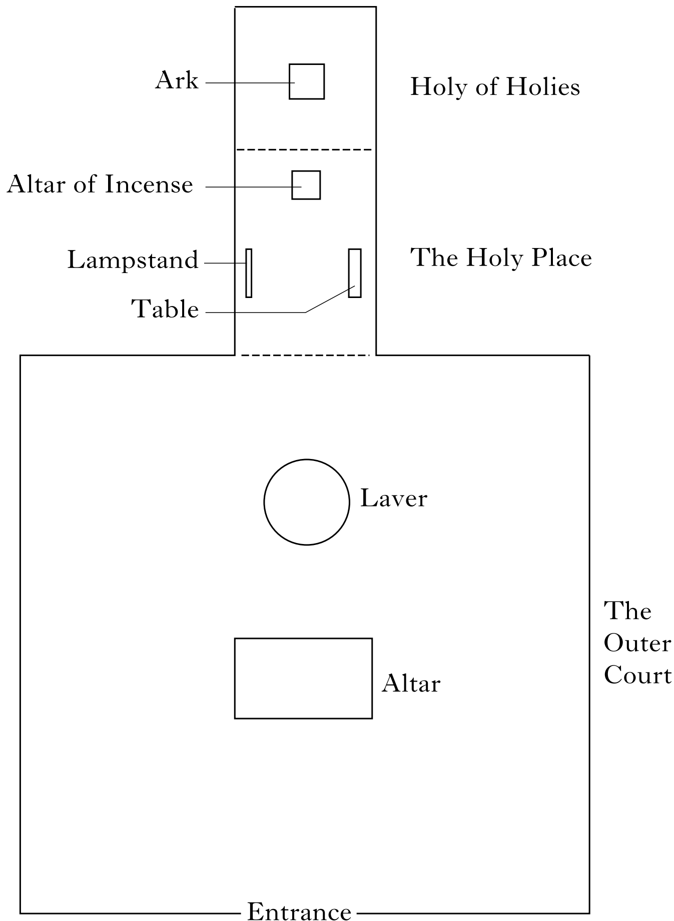

Fig 6.1 The three-part tabernacle building and the position of everything in it

the Holy Place; then the second screen and the next and last compartment, the Most Holy Place, which is the tiny room containing the ark of the covenant.

The community who understood the model has been broken up, the temple was destroyed again in the second century, the learned Jews who subsequently read and interpreted the Pentateuch did not recognize the unity or equivalence of the dominant symbols, body,

mountain, and altar, corresponding to each other as they corresponded to the structure of God's universe. They made what has become the usual interpretation of Leviticus, with the concepts of purity and impurity dominating the book.

In modern times the theme of impurity still dominates the interpretations, but there is an opposite trend: commentators on Leviticus play down the body imagery, almost apologizing for the grossness of the subject matter. The peculiar culture of the priestly editors is taken to be sufficient explanation for their unattractive interest in sexual fluids, bodily decay, leprosy, castration, maiming, putrefaction, and death. I have explained why this is a misreading of the book: understandable, since the community for whom it was first edited has long since disappeared.

The body as symbol is totally open to ambiguity. Its interest and significance is culturally defined. Any live community strongly censors what can be said about the body, how it is said, and when and where. Body can symbolize anything that a community has agreed to assign to it. It cannot hold on to those conventionally established meanings if the community has dispersed, or been invaded.

The Book as a Body

The shape of the three parts of the book is very widely agreed. Philologists have minutely combed the text for terminology found in earlier or later sources. It is accepted that the first part, Lev. chs. 1–17, are based on a much older source.[14] This section of the book is held to have been written down from very ancient (probably oral) records by the Priestly editors, hence called P. It deals with private sacrifice, sin, uncleanness; there is much about sins that need forgiveness and how bodies become unclean and so unfit for entering the tabernacle, and how to purify. The next section, chs. 18–24, recognized as the Holiness School in source criticism, is considered to be later; it deals with the rules pertaining to priests and their public duties, which includes more about sacrifice. It is much smaller than section 1, and the last section, chs. 25–7 is smaller still. It gives the law of the Jubilee, the regularly recurring joyful times when special

[14] I. Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence, The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). The author updates source criticism and reverses the traditional historical order, giving the P material, Leviticus 1–17, an earlier date than the 'Holiness School'.

sacrifices are made to the Lord, slaves are freed and sent home, and debts cancelled. For the anthropologist it is satisfactory to find that this strong partitioning of the book (tripartite and diminishing in size towards the end) identified by source criticism, is compatible with the structure described in the last chapter where the book is divided into three unequal portions by two violent events erupting into the middle of the smooth announcements of law. They divide the book into approximately the same three sections.

In Exodus Moses is given the exact measurements of the tabernacle he is to build. The first part is very big, called the Court of Sacrifice, and it is the part to which the public (in a pure state) must come, bringing their sacrifices, as they seek to be forgiven and to give thanks. It is separated from the next compartment, called the Sanctuary, by a screen which no one may pass except the priests. The Sanctuary is separated from the Holy of Holies by a second screen. The two narratives each come at the exact point in the book at which the corresponding building of the tabernacle has a screen protected by law against unauthorized entry. This works very well in accounting for the distribution of the contents of the book. Several commentators have confessed to being mystified by that. But once we know that the first chapters, 1–16, correspond to the Court of Sacrifice where the general public bring their personal sacrifices, it makes good sense to find in these chapters exactly that: instructions for doing what is supposed to be going on in that part of the building. And the same goes for chs. 17–24, which correspond to the sanctuary where the priests have access, and where the altar of showbread and the menorah (candelabra) are placed. These chapters give instructions for the preparation of the bread and oil, also for the sacrifices on the public holidays that the priests must organize, the rules for the priests' marriages, food, and avoidance of corpses. The last chapters of the book are about God's covenant with his people; in the innermost recesses of the tabernacle is the container in which the covenant document is supposed to be placed.

So far there is nothing directly about the body, though a lot about bodily impurity and sacrificed animal bodies in the first section. I shorten the exposition by saying that the human body is assimilated to the altar. Within the sense of the microcosm, as the tabernacle is equivalent to Mount Sinai, so is the body equivalent to the tabernacle. It must be kept pure, like the altar. No meat can be taken into the body and consumed as food that may not be laid on the altar and

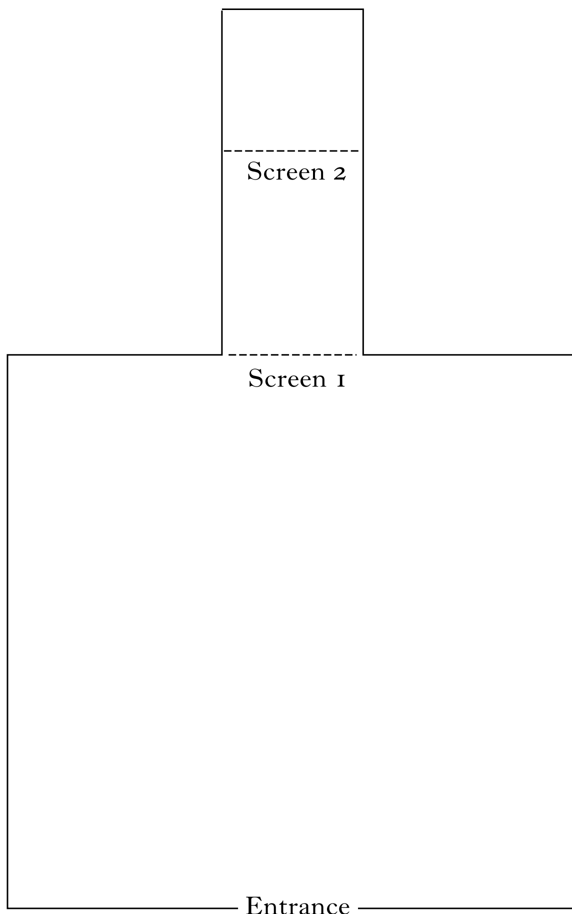

Fig 6.2 The two screens of the tabernacle

consumed by fire. The same rules for each. The body and the altar are modelled on each other by the medium of rules. Blood, certain meats, that is, those things which are solemnly forbidden to be offered as human food, exactly match the rules controlling what may not be sacrificed on the altar. Blood is never sacrificed, it is poured out. The people of Israel are strongly prohibited from eating blood, suet fat, and the long liver lobe.

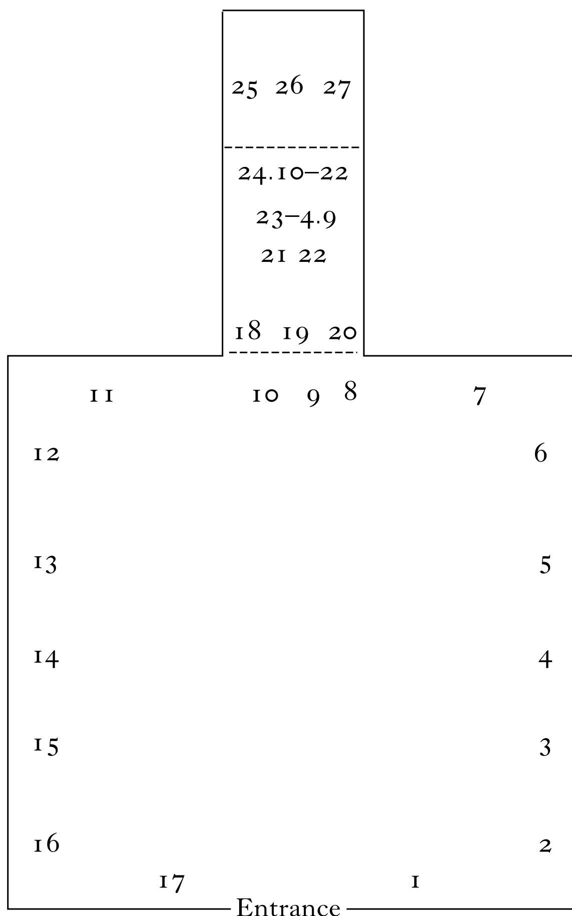

FIG 6.3 Leviticus projected onto the ground plan of the tabernacle

Now consider the instructions for putting the sacrifice on the fire on the altar.[15] The liver lobe and the suet have been placed separately on the altar first. Then the head, then the main carcass carved up,

[15] J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991). Leviticus 1. 8 rules that first the animal is to be skinned and quartered. The first time I studied this section of the sacrificial rules in Leviticus I gained the picture of a large space for the wood, on top of which was to be placed the different parts of the animal, 'in due order'. First on the sacrificial pile goes the head, the liver lobe, and the fat (suet) of the animal, then the pieces of meat, then the entrails and the forelegs of the animals, which have to be washed.

then last, the procreative organs, euphemistically described as legs, go on last.[16] The sacrificed carcass has been reconstructed upside down, the vital part on top. Dismembered, it is now in the shape of a steeply peaked triangle. Such an interpretation fits with the mystic idea of the tabernacle as the site of the ecstatic meeting of God with his people, and with the texts which present this meeting in terms of sexual union, and the emphasis on fertility.

If they were in imagination to be laid one on top of each other, the three parts of the tabernacle of unequal, diminishing, size, would correspond also to an image of Mount Sinai, the largest slopes first, narrowing towards the summit. There is an age-old association between the tabernacle and the holy mountain, which the book of Exodus also divides into three parts of unequal size. The lower slopes of the mountain were the area for the lay congregation, on the middle slopes a banquet is prepared by God for Moses, Aaron, and seventy elders. On the summit, the smallest part of all, only God is found, and God called Moses to come up to him (Exod. 24).

The tripartite tabernacle building is matched by the tripartite slope of the holy mountain, and the sacrificial body is also divided into three by the prohibition against eating suet fat. This is as strong

Some render *kera ʿayim* as 'legs', quite simply, others as 'hind legs', because these would be soiled by excreta and in need of washing, Milgrom says, 'Yet all the evidence points to the meaning "shins", that is to the legs below the knees (pp. 158–61), the leg below the point at which the skin was to be removed. He sees no ambiguity in the association of 'legs and entrails'. But if there is a specific order for the laying of the meat on the fire, on the wood, on the altar, an order which puts the head first, the order suggests to me an up-side down pattern with the legs in the air together with the entrails on top of the pile. Which leads me to question why they should be laid out in this particular order. I recall that in biblical language 'legs' and 'feet' are sometimes euphemisms for the procreative organs. In Gen. 49. 10, Jacob on his deathbed prophesied that, 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet.' I suggest that there is nothing careless or haphazard in the positioning of the head. It corresponds to the rank order of holiness in the layout of the tabernacle. The lowest rank is the entry for the lay public by the large space of the Court of Sacrifice. In the middle the priests pursue their avocation, the sacrificial cult. At the top or innermost part is the Holy of Holies, the ark of the covenant, the sign of the dedication of Israel to God. I have thought that the placing on the altar of the parts of the sacrificial animal in due order was an analogue of the construction of the tabernacle, in which the innermost part is the most sacred. Jacob Milgrom persuades me that my interpretation is too speculative. But I am reluctant to leave the positioning of animal parts uninterpreted.

[16] This has only circumstantial support in the text, but it has a practical support: as any boy scout would know, to try to place the largest parts on top will unbalance the pile, scatter the embers, and put out the fire.

TABLE 2. Three paradigms

Mt. Sinai	*Animal offering*	*Tabernacle*
Summit or head, cloud like smoke (Exod. 19. 18); God came down to top, access for Moses (Exod. 19. 20–2)	Entrails, liver lobe, genital organs	Holy of Holies, cherubim, ark, and testimony of Covenant
Perimeter of dense cloud, access restricted to Aaron, two sons, and seventy elders (Exod. 24. 1–9)	Midriff area, dense fat covering kidneys, burnt on altar	Sanctuary, dense clouds of incense, symmetrical table and lampstand, restricted to priests
Lower slopes, open access	Head and meat sections, access to body, food for people and priest	Outer court, main altar, access for people
Mountain consecrated (Exod. 19. 23)	Animal consecrated (Lev. 1.8)	Tabernacle consecrated (Lev. 16)

a law as the law that forbids eating blood (Lev. 7. 26, 17. 14). Look into the carcass of the sacrificial animal, and see that the suet is an internal barrier between the upper body, the chest, lungs, etc., and the lower abdomen. Hard suet protects the entrails and procreative organs.

Once you know that the microcosm is based on the correspondence between tabernacle and the holy mountain, and you know that fog occludes the vision near the mountain top, and you know that the incense smoke does the same in the sanctuary, then what about the (hitherto) uninterpreted rule against eating suet? You know from the dietary laws that the human body is a model of the altar. I suggest that the rule against eating suet brings the microcosm of the body to completion. The suet occludes the sight of the internal organs and corresponds to the fog on the mountain and the incense smoke in the sanctuary in the other two models.

A Virtual Tabernacle

If indeed Leviticus was initially composed and edited in the exile, in that phase of their history there was no tabernacle and no practice of the cult described in the book. The second temple was built after the exile. How did the meanings change through the two millennia that followed the writing of the sacred books? It was no accident that Solomon's magnificent temple was not copied. The model for the book was the little portable tabernacle described in Exodus. Solomon's temple would suggest gross pretension of power and authority, uncongenial to religious renewal. The desert tabernacle was the obvious choice for a new religion, which rejects pomp and outward show. But the people who returned from exile with Ezra were not touched by those considerations. They may have read Leviticus but they couldn't remember what it was about. A lot more had changed during their absence in Babylon.

Leviticus, the book, expresses a powerful, anguished hope, a dream. The Israelites in diaspora would be able to hold the book in their hands, and, reading it, they could perform a virtual walk round a virtual tabernacle. They would obviously start in the big Court of Sacrifice; there, they could reflect on what was done in that place. Then they stop in front of the first screen. Somehow they have to negotiate a passage through it, to enter the priests' quarter; there they would see the table of showbread, the candelabra, and the incense altar. At this point in the book they will read the restrictions on the priests, whom they can marry, what they can eat, their servants and children, and the public sacrifices and appointed feast days for which the priests are responsible. Facing the second screen in the building, in the book they will read of the dense smoke hiding the presence of God, smoke of the incense which will protect the High Priest when he goes through that screen once a year into the Holy of Holies. Surely they wouldn't, even in fantasy, dare to go past the second screen, but in the corresponding part of the book they can read and reflect on the meaning of the Covenant whose scroll they know is kept in that small, holy place.

This book, so ingeniously contrived, itself is a model of its subject, the tabernacle. Since the earliest commentaries this reading has disappeared. It is tacit, only to be inferred from the text. The explanation is buried in the history of the Jews, subjugated after the destruction of the second temple. The experience of oppressed peoples turns their interests anxiously towards fragile boundaries and contaminating

impurity. The community in exile and the early Second Temple community had a strong interest in purification. For this reason Leviticus would commend itself as a central document for the thing that interested them most: the preservation of the religion from diffusion, syncretism, and contempt. The temple had always been vulnerable to impurity, but now the temple was gone, their interpretation developed a different side of the microcosm; they focused on purity of the body.[17] As they read it, everything was ordained to protect the body from impurity. The changed scene of action changed the reading of the text. We can trace the decisive moment of change from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. After the exile, when the returnees wanted to establish a pure Israel, a strong political interest was served by their concern about the evils of intermarriage with foreigners.[18] For the politicians that was a much more immediate and powerful concern than the representation of the whole Covenant and of the Law in the dimensions of the tabernacle. So that will be why the structure of Leviticus was not observed.

Conclusion

I started out saying that microcosm allows a community to establish some conventions about meanings. I conclude by saying that without a strong community a microcosm cannot flourish. So the service of support is mutual. As community dissolves, so conventions come under challenge. In our generation, where this is happening, uncertainty is becoming the order of the day. To make communication easy a community needs to reduce ambiguity. When the conventional understandings are diffused, as they must be in a mixed community, the meanings threaten to surge out of control. This is a problem in reading any ancient texts. We need to know the history of previous readings.

Finally, in conclusion, we can ask why the desert tabernacle was chosen for the microcosm, rather than the famous temple built by King Solomon, rich, spectacular, and overwhelmingly impressive. For one simple reason: it would have been a hideous anachronism

[17] J. Neusner, *Self-fulfilling Prophecy: Exile and Return in the History of Judaism* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), 70.

[18] M. Douglas, 'Responding to Ezra: The Priests and the Foreign Wives', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 10/1 (2002), 1–23.

in the narrative about the nomadic cattle herders led by Moses. Furthermore, it would never have been the temple that the book of Leviticus would exalt. Remember that the book was compiled by ardent young reformers. A people who were striving for spiritual renewal would have doctrinal reasons not to honour the grand version, and for choosing the little, portable desert tabernacle that the Levites could carry to the carts for the journey and reassemble on arrival. Its simplicity would please the young editors, but this appeal would soon wear thin amid further turmoil in the next generation. Supposing a sage was to read Leviticus one or two hundred years after the return from exile—the rustic charm of the little portable tabernacle would be lost, and its subtle presence in the structure of the book lost as well.

It is difficult to understand a foreign people's microcosm because, by definition of the problem, the outside view is intellectual and so distorted. From inside it is practically impossible to see, because the microcosm is the lens through which all experience is interpreted. You can't see the lens you are seeing through.

IV

Magic and Monotheism

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7

Uncleanness and Taboo Draw the Lines of the World

'Purity' is one of those traps for the scholarly that Wittgenstein warned us about, a typical philosophical problem about words. Sometimes the screen of my PC goes blank and a little box appears with the message: 'You have done an illegal action', then appears an error number and a penalty. It is often like this when we use the word 'purity': we get into trouble when we seem to assign to it some specific existence. The screen goes blank, the penalty is confusion; one error was to have picked out bits and pieces of the biblical laws on impurity, with no eye for the whole text. Another error was to have paid attention to the word 'purity', whereas all the attention in the Bible is on impurity. Another again was to focus on the puzzling concept, forgetting that it is always known in a series of actions for removing impurity. The remedy is to log off and start again, focusing on impurity.

We have inherited these great texts, but we are not sure what they meant. The previous chapter indicated that memory does well when supported by arrays of objects, a temple, for example, its doors and furnishings, and the things that are done with them. Once the temple is destroyed, it is difficult to remember what it meant. There are also literary rules for protecting meaning from dissipation and leakage. One of the literary techniques would be parallelism. By themselves literary rules are weak, they only function to hold steady the meanings of words by contriving a literary context for them.

Taboos are more effective for guarding thought. This chapter is about the equivalent role of performance in protecting what is known. We should see taboos as the performative acts which stop the careless speaker from getting the categories confused. Taboo

This chapter was first given as a paper at a Seminar on Ritual Purification, Bible and Classics, Oxford, 15 October 2002; Robert Parker and Martin Goodman were the convenors. Robert Parker, by his invitation to rethink impurity, and by his own arguments in *Miasma* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), has forced me to change my ideas.

imposes performance, walking round, not touching, not speaking, not eating something, or not eating it on Tuesdays. The performance protects boundaries round classifications. Purity rules may demand physical washing after the breach of rules, but because the rules are known they also have an anticipatory effect: they honour the boundaries of definitions and meanings.

I confess that in my first writing about the dietary rules in Leviticus I did commit the well-known errors. I isolated food impurity, I did not relate it to defilement of the tabernacle, or defilement of the body; I treated it merely as a conceptual problem. My theory was that the forbidden animals of Leviticus 11 (the camel, the pig, the hare, the hyrax, and the teeming creatures on the ground), were examples of category infringement: an intellectualist approach.

I thought it was enough to say that the dietary taboos in the Bible tidy up the conceptual world and reduce ambiguity. But Robert Parker points out that a lot of ambiguity has to be tolerated at all times; every anomaly cannot be treated as a threat; there must have been further reasons for picking on these species.[1] Parker also makes a point about the argument from silence. Because Homer says nothing about purification scholars have suggested that ritual pollution came to Greece after Homer had lived. But he warns us that because Homer's story says nothing about purification, it does not mean that purification was not going on in the background. Search the James Bond films for statistics of twentieth-century churchgoing and you will find none, but it doesn't signify that the viewers were not going to church.

The difficulties in dealing with ancient texts are formidable. We cannot go back and observe or consult. Both the Greek and the biblical sources, being literary, fasten our attention on genre and context. In these two civilizations our information about impurity comes from completely different literary genres. Leviticus has codified its law of impurity; the Greek sources are uncodified. I have mentioned already the widespread assumption that Leviticus is in the genre of a ritual handbook. And I am still arguing that this is a misreading. To read the book in this way is to ignore the consummate elegance of its rhetorical style. Over the millennia the book has been mined for clues about impurity, much else in the great philosophical masterpiece has been backgrounded.

[1] Parker, *Miasma*, 62.

Impurity in General: Three Approaches

One of the anthropologist's problems will be to justify the use of the word 'taboo' in comparisons with Greek 'pollution', because the former, the word 'taboo', seems to be irrational while the latter, Greek pollution ideas, are inspired by the rational idea of justice. The difference is caused by trying to explain individual taboos separately; when we relate them to the whole taboo system in which they belong, that difference fades, though others remain, but it would still be hard to say which is the most rational.

The Greek system of pollution is mainly recorded at a judicial level, where disaster punishes gross injustice, but this is not the only level to consider. Taboo systems operate at several levels. The Levitical system of defilement is focused on the desecration of the temple; in doing so it honours the design of God's universe. The context in each case being so dissimilar, no wonder the comparison is difficult. The general concept of impurity works at several levels. At the social level people are vehemently warning each other of the dangers of pollution. Impurity is a warning of danger that will befall if the rules for purity are infringed; the list of transgressions and consequent dangers produce spontaneous accusations and punishments. The idea of impurity allows sinners to be blamed for provoking disasters. I tend to think vaguely of the blaming processes as the social level of impurity, but more precisely blaming for breach of taboo functions is a judicial level; identifying pollution is like the work of an unpaid auxiliary police.[2] It allows the rank and file to control each other or attack oppressive leaders. However, there is another aspect to enforcing social conformity; it depends on monitoring cognitive boundaries as well as physical ones. Pollution debates perform a particular kind of policing function: they patrol the mind.

Politics of Purity

Any debate about how to live together is replete with political attack and rebuff; judgement and appeal raise questions of definition: What is a human? A woman? A child? A foreigner? An animal? This is the intellectual activity, it supplies the definitions needed to justify

[2] Ibid. 243–4.

decisions. Interacting with the judicial level the intellectual level makes the building materials for the third level, the construction of the phenomenal world.

Strictly, purity means unadulteration; it derives from the verb 'to purify', to remove adulterating material, 'pure' being defined in a narrow context, such as that of pure milk, pure intentions; it can relate to almost anything. Impurity is a slightly more manageable word.

Over the world, the only thing that impurity rules have in common is that they provide backing for negative commands, 'Don't do this, don't do that'. First comes the command, then comes the attribution of impurity; saying that the forbidden act is impure legitimates the rule. Taboo does the same, so at this point they can be treated together. Interestingly, the legitimacy they bestow is categorical. They justify the negative command by tacit agreement on what is fitting and right. The legitimacy admits of no discussion. References to dirt and impurity articulate those grunts and groans which express disapproval.

On this distinctly Durkheimian approach, impurity and taboo supply back-up for the current system of control. The more fragile the control system, the more the community is afraid of its own collapse, and the less able to discipline its members by physical coercion. This is the context in which accusations of impurity flourish. It recalls Robert Parker's reflections on the trade-off between effective judicial institutions and pollution of murder.[3] If everyone knows that crime will surely be discovered, judged, and punished, there is no need to invent crime-busting pollution effects.

In a small community public order rests shakily on a delicate balance of privileges and claims, a mere frown or eyebrow raised could undermine it. Consequently it is not acceptable to ask questions about the basis of taboos. If you do ask, no one will be able to explain, except by reference to traditional knowledge, 'The ancestors told us.' Many pollution rules get authentication by being inserted into the system of nature. A warning of automatic penalty makes 'Don't play with dirt' equivalent to 'Don't play with fire.' If you defy the warning, your next calamity will demonstrate the rule to yourself and to all your disapproving neighbours.

They cannot ask, but for our part, *we must* ask, where impurity gets its authority. How does it back up a prohibition? Or rather, why is it credible? One answer would be in the philosophical debates on

[3] Ibid. 128.

legitimacy and shared moral values. Classical scholars cannot evade these debates because the West has received concepts of justice from the classics themselves. It is not entirely for lack of competence that I prefer to focus on credibility. The ultimate questions about credibility are open to more empirical solutions than the questions about justice. If the people do not believe they are not going to conform in their behaviour, and conformity can be put under observation. This brings us to the next level, after the policing of behaviour, we consider the policing of language, the making and protecting of definitions.

Forensic Problems

Pollution as a semi-judicial punishment is the most familiar, most often exemplified—one might call it the elementary form of pollution behaviour. But it depends on the monitoring of ideas. I used to think that this function might be undeveloped in a community where social life is dispersed. If argument is continually interrupted and inconsequential, definitions don't matter. Where the population is very various in its origins it would be a hopeless task to try to impose uniformity. So the development of taboo would require a certain density of population and a certain homogeneity and stability.

Colin Turnbull compared the Ituri pygmies' culture with that of the Bantu agriculturalists.[4] A pygmy can always go to join another band if he has made himself unpopular at home, but agriculturalists have a stake in a defined bit of land and so cannot move at will. I would have argued that having to live in permanent proximity encourages the community to develop a consensus on ideas about wrong and right. The more they depend on mutual co-ordination, the stronger the mutual monitoring. From this, since hunting people do not achieve very complex co-ordination, I would not expect to find a rich range of taboos among hunters. But I would be wrong.

The late Valerio Valeri, in *The Forest of Taboos*, brilliantly describes a taboo system that essentially protects intellectual categories.[5] The book starts with analysing and classifying all the previous theories of pollution. Then it reveals the simple hunting culture of the Huaulu in the Celebes Islands. Here they have developed a very extensive

[4] Colin Turnbull, *The Forest People* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).

[5] Valerio Valeri, *The Forest of Taboos, Morality, Hunting and Identity Among the Huaulu of the Moluccas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

system of taboos which mainly serve to reinforce the integrity and consistency of the classifications.

Huaulu taboos maintain the oppositions that construct the universe. Animal/human, male/female, and other such oppositions shore up the delicate distinctions that could easily dissolve into each other. The taboos stop the cosmos from disintegrating. It is a process of learning by not doing. The strange connections that taboos make between actions and consequences are not due to faulty logic but to a formidable intellectual effort to link nature and morality into a single scheme. Valeri was personally against metaphysical dualism, such as Aquinas' distinction between sin and defilement, or Descartes's distinction between spirit and matter. He took note of divisions in order to transcend them. Like their ethnographer, the Huaulu make a continual effort in their daily lives to reconcile opposites, especially relations between ideas. They mirror their social order in the precariously balanced positions and dynamic contests that mark all relations, human, animal, plant life. In politics they strive to balance frail hierarchy and thrusting equality.

Valeri devotes seventy pages to summarizing previous theories of taboo. He distinguishes 'relational theories', 'house-keeping theories', moral theories, proximity and invasion theories, and others. He scoops the lot with a single model of mind that incorporates all these various interpretations. His central construct correlates spatial and temporal perceptions of distance and proximity with relations of similarity and likeness, familiarity and strangeness, friendship and enmity. Excessive distance, which pairs with strangeness and enmity, needs to be marked. Also excessive closeness, which pairs with persons or things invading from another sphere, needs to be classified. By following these principles, taboos construct the subject's own identity, and the identity of the other. Bit by bit, they bring the whole cosmos into a coherent pattern.[6]

This classificatory aspect is not highly developed in the Greek sources on pollution, nor is it as centralized as the Hebrew notions of uncleanness. I doubt if it would be empirically valid to say that where taboo stops, philosophical questioning takes over, or that taboo systems hinder the growth of philosophy. But what about turning it the other way round? Perhaps taboo steps in to compensate for the

[6] M. Douglas, 'Deep Thoughts on the Forbidden', review of Valerio Valeri, *The Forest of Taboos*, in *Science*, 289 (2000), 2287.

absence of an explicit philosophy. It makes a plausible trajectory of development: in a taboo system moral and political concerns are not separated from other kinds of facts about the world; so long as they are combined, philosophical questioning is disadvantaged.

In the chapter on microcosm, I waved an arm vaguely in the direction of coherence. I was wanting to say that living together in society creates a pressure for coherence and consistency. Taboo systems provide the evidence, without explaining it. The Huaulu benefit from an extremely coherent system of definitions and rankings; their life is very spontaneous, there is no sign of a political power coercing them to behave in concert, they have achieved an admirable consensus on the metaphysical foundations of their world, and a vocabulary for talking about it. Why do the Huaulu go to so much trouble? Why can't they live like the rest of us, with our ideas in confusion and contradiction? Even to consider this question, we would like to know whether their taboo system is truly unusual.

Building Blocks for World-Making

Valeri kept the focus steady and repeated his visits to the Celebes for twenty-five years. Perhaps such prolonged and dedicated scrutiny might reveal comparable data anywhere. This puts the spot on the ethnographer bold enough to deny it. The main motive of the Huaulu in creating a comprehensive grammar of the world may be the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure it affords. It would be something like making poetry or music. Or like a performance which choreographs the standard grammar. To perform a ritual avoidance is formally to recognize a category distinction, and to honour the system of categories. The next stage after that is to weave the themes together to make an intelligible world.

Performance Anthropology had not emerged when I was writing *Purity and Danger*, and even when I recognized the power and originality of Victor Turner's views on performance,[7] I didn't see their implications for taboo avoidances until I had read a lot of Nelson Goodman, especially *Ways of Worldmaking*.[8] Even that did not show

[7] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors, Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974). V. Turner and E. Bruner (eds.), *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

[8] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

me at once the relevance of performance to cognition. This connection may have been obscured by the dazzling implications for medical anthropology that Turner enlarged upon. He reported healing rites that pulled out all the emotional stops, involved all the community, invoked all the powers in the universe, brought all this to bear on the patient overpowered with smoke and smells, music and dance. In so far as the patient's will to recover is effective, these African rites produced healing. But they could not have worked if the cosmic orchestration of meanings had not been shared through the community. In other words, a shared microcosmic scheme was resonating in their minds and bodies to produce consent and mutual understanding.

Anthropologists and Bible scholars tend to be content to discover analogies, and to use the idea of metaphor for explanation.[9] But the boldly radical philosopher, Nelson Goodman, roundly dismisses any move to base an argument on similarity. 'Similarity cannot be equated with, or measured in terms of, possession of common characteristics . . . similarity is relative and variable, as undependable as indispensable.'[10] He teaches that any perceived likeness is a construct. He denounces as a snare and delusion the idea that analogy, or metaphor, or simile, is based on an inherent likeness in two ideas.

The analogy makes the likeness. Anything could be similar to anything else, according to the restrictions made by the context. Perceptions of similarity and difference being inherently labile, stable understandings have to be entrenched by practice and habit. This does a lot to explain taboos. A taboo system entrenches a cognitive scheme by making the community act it out, turn cognition into a physical performance.

Leviticus 1–17: Silence about Forensic Impurity

My preconceptions about impurity in other religions led me to expect Leviticus to license the citizens of Judah to rebuke each other for impurity, for causing danger to the community. But nothing of the

[9] Criticized by M. Douglas in 'The Pangolin Revisited: A New Approach to Animal Symbolism', in Roy Willis, *Signifying Animals, Human Meaning in the Natural World* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

[10] Nelson Goodman, 'Seven Strictures against Similarity', *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), and repr. in M. Douglas and D. Hull (eds.), *How Classification Works, Nelson Goodman Among the Social Sciences* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 19, 20.

kind: impurity in Leviticus 1–17 is defined so that no one can get someone else into trouble by an accusation of defiling behaviour. Birth and death, menstruation, nocturnal emissions, leprosy and corpse contact cause uncleanness. Impurity is not something that the bad guys do. It happens to everyone by virtue of their shared biological condition. One can get into trouble for failing to get purification but not for having incurred the impurity. To me, this was astonishing, and had to be interpreted.

I was amazed to find in this book of religious laws that illness and misfortune are not diagnosed as punishments for individual sin. In 1 Kgs. 18, the widow connects the sudden illness of her son with her own sins.[11] When Leviticus tells the congregation to ask the priest to make atonement so that their sins will be forgiven, it never tells them that they will individually suffer if they don't.[12] Chapter 4 lists the actions that are sinful: murder, cheating, lying, perjury, injustice, all of them need atonement, according to the sinner's status. Chapter 5 sandwiches contact with uncleanness (5. 2–3) between two kinds of sins, false witness and false oaths, both of which apply to the cult: all three classes of offence require atonement. Without atonement no unclean person can eat the meat of sacrifice (7. 19–21) (which means, as I shall show below, that the unclean person cannot eat any meat at all). In sum, contact with impurity is not a feature of all sins, but a specific type of offence in a bracket of its own.

Biblical silence about forensic impurity is a major deviation from taboo behaviour everywhere else. Initially I attributed its absence to some special hitherto unnoticed feature of the religion. In modern times we do not attribute calamities to our own sins, nor do our neighbours indulge in blaming our sinful past when we fall on hard times. But our culture is essentially secularist, so I looked for reasons to explain why the Bible would have been uniquely modern in this respect. In default of other explanation, I interpreted it as evidence of the priestly editors' desire to prevent the community being torn by malicious accusations.[13] However, I have recently had to change my

[11] The widow's worry hints at a background of divination, but Leviticus has outlawed divination.

[12] The repeated threat that the sinner will be 'cut off' may be a warning that evil will befall if he does not make the required sacrifice, but it is usually the failure to sacrifice and not the transgression in itself that attracts the 'cut off' punishment.

[13] M. Douglas, 'Sacred Contagion', in John F. A. Sawyer (ed.), *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas*, JSOTSup 227 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 86–106.

view. Rereading *Miasma* I take to heart Robert Parker's warning that Homer may have been silent on that score because purification rituals were inappropriate for the genre or irrelevant to the bard's agenda.[14] Only the author's agenda will explain the gaps and silences. This throws a light on Leviticus. Suppose its chs. 1–17 simply omitted the forensic aspects of pollution for lack of relevance? I have argued that they had a very clear agenda concerning the future of the temple and the priestly order, including the priests in Samaria as well as in Jerusalem. At the time of the editing the priests were selecting ancient sources to present a unified model of the religion.

Impurity in Leviticus

Over the last thirty years Jacob Milgrom, the leading scholar in Levitical studies, has developed a wide-sweeping, cosmological view of the religion. Its focus is on the Covenant and the Tabernacle. The first principle is that God loves his people and lives among them. Other gods dwell in remote high regions, well away from their worshippers: Zeus on Mount Olympus, the Canaanite gods on inaccessible mountain tops.[15] The God of Israel came down from Mount Sinai to journey with the children of Israel, dwelling in a transportable tabernacle. It is a blessing, but an awful responsibility to have God so near. The divine presence explains the scrupulous care that has to be taken to avoid impurity affecting a tabernacle which houses God. 'Why the urgency to purge the tabernacle? The answer lies in this postulate: the God of Israel will not abide in a polluted sanctuary. The merciful God will tolerate a modicum of pollution. But there is a point of no return. If the pollution continues to accumulate, the end is inexorable . . .'[16]

The end means that the divine presence will depart from the tabernacle. On sin and defilement the book teaches the difference between offences against God and offences against other people. Sins against God attract uncleanness, they are punishable by God and not by man, and need purification; sins against persons are not unclean,

[14] Parker, *Miasma*, 9, 66–70, 130–6.

[15] F. Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973).

[16] Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 258.

they are punishable at law. The two types of transgression call for two different kinds of sacrifice.

As to the word 'unclean', *tāmé*, Milgrom adopts the strictly technical meaning. Maccoby's definition is equally technical and very similar.[17] It is generally accepted that biblical uncleanness has nothing to do with the lay sense of dirt. Strictly, defilement entails pollution of the tabernacle, defiled means disqualified for approaching the tabernacle. Milgrom has noted that the deliberate sins of the people of Israel do not defile the sinner, but defile the tabernacle. This is drastic: how can God live among his people if his tabernacle is defiled? It will be all right, because the accumulated uncleanness of the congregation can be expunged by a major rite. Through the year the defilements mount up, but thanks to his goodness they can purify the tabernacle and the altar in a grand ceremony every year on the Day of Atonement.

The priestly writers' agenda would have made it irrelevant for them to be discussing sin as the cause of private misfortunes. Their silence about illness as punishments for individual sins was not, as I had worked out originally, from a direct concern to calm community strife. That would be a relatively trivial and mundane theme compared with the central agenda, the grand revelation about God's presence, the human power to defile the tabernacle, and the divine power to purify it. In effect it is a doctrine of collective responsibility, and as such it was a theodicy, a response to the question: 'Why does the way of the guilty prosper?' (Jer. 12. 1). The priestly theology answered that 'the sinner may be unscarred by his evil, but the sanctuary bears the scars, and, with its destruction, he too will meet his doom'.[18]

The rules of purification and avoiding uncleanness offer to the people of Israel a chance to live by the principles that undergird the cosmos; they uphold the action of the Creator by their own enactment of the law. It is not a condemnatory, punitive, or heroically ascetic religion. Its God is compassionate as well as just. Leviticus needs to be read cheerfully. The reader should be prepared for a variety of moods from admonishment to sheer joy. The Sabbaths are for gladness, the sacrifices are for forgiveness and thanks, the meat is for feasting. The uncleanness of a woman after giving birth announces her privilege of staying at home with her new baby (12. 2).

[17] Ibid. 254–61. For criticism of Milgrom's thesis see Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual & Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[18] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 260.

Clean and Unclean Animals

If the tabernacle is the central theme of the purity laws, we can well ask 'What have the unclean animals of ch. 11 got to do with the tabernacle?' The clue is in the first verses. The Lord said to Moses, 'When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the LORD, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock' (1. 2). 'Bring' means 'Bring near', near to where God is standing when he speaks to Moses, 'bring to the entrance of the tent of meeting' (17. 3), The very first chapter tells us that any animal that is offered as a sacrifice at the altar must come from their flocks and herds. When we reach ch. 11 we get the impression that the only meat that the Israelites are allowed to eat must come from their flocks or herds. As far as Leviticus is concerned it would seem that the only animals that they can take by the mouth are the species which are allowed to be offered on the altar. Likewise, the strong rule against eating blood (7. 26–7; 17. 10–13) is matched by the priest pouring out the blood around the altar (3. 2, 8, 13; 4. 7, 18, 25, 30, 34). Blood is not offered or burnt on the altar. Whatever the reason given for not eating blood (it is a doctrine of respect for life, 7. 26–7; 17. 14), the upshot of the law is that blood is not to be consumed (same word) either by the mouth or by flames on the altar. The dietary laws have the function of developing the analogy between the altar and the body.

Furthermore, the relation of the flocks and herds to their Israelite masters mirrors the relation of the people of Israel to God. The covenant, whose text is kept in the tabernacle, covers both humans and their livestock. The work animals must rest on the Sabbath (Exod. 20. 10; 23. 12, Deut. 5. 14), like their masters, and the firstborn of all the animals of the flocks and herds must be presented to the Lord, like the firstborn of their masters (Exod. 13. 2, 12; 22. 22.29; 34. 19). This endows the sheep, cattle, and goats with special ritual status, and entitles them to the dignity of a consecrated death. As we read further in ch. 11, the inference is that the only animals whose life the Israelite is entitled to use, that is the only animals whose dead carcasses can be prepared for the pot, are those included in the Covenant. All the other land animals are unclean, any one who touches an unclean carcass becomes unclean and is cut off from the ceremonies of the cult, which is a social hardship as well as a gustatory loss. Uncleanness means being excluded from religious feasts.

This is perfectly clear in the text of ch. 11, the chapter which solemnly announces all the dietary laws. The writing conveys the constraints of the priestly agenda, which is to unfold the microcosm of God's universe. However, another passage in Leviticus mentions an exception to the dietary laws, it indicates that wild game exist, and among them some that it is permitted to eat: 'And anyone of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside among them, who hunts down an animal or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth' (Lev. 17. 13). This verse is a challenge to the interpretation of Leviticus offered above. It would question the assertion that the only animals that the law allows to be eaten must be selected from the domestic herds and flocks, must be consecrated to the Lord, and must be sacrificed on the altar by a priest. For such a schematized vision of God's people as we get from ch. 11 on the dietary laws, this is Leviticus coming down to earth with a bump. The people of Israel did hunt, they did eat game meat, Deuteronomy identifies these permitted game animals as the wild counterparts of the cattle and sheep and goats: 'These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain-sheep' (Deut. 14. 3). These wild animals cleave the hoof and chew the cud, like their domestic counterparts; for those shared properties they may grace the table of the worshipper, but not the altar of God. Unlike the domestic herds they are not under the Covenant. Evidently there is no law against hunting or eating game meat. Nothing says that wild game has to be brought to the altar and consecrated, or that it cannot be eaten on the spot, without being presented to the Lord. Indeed, the inheritance of the line of Jacob begins with Jacob's love of game meat supplied by Esau (Gen. 27. 3).

The contrast between the priestly law book and the laws of Deuteronomy is very fascinating. This passage reinforces the idea that Leviticus comes first as Deuteronomy seems to be tidying up loose ends. Deuteronomy is a far more practical book, less visionary, not utopian in any sense. Largely in agreement with the Levitical law, it does not evade the practical issues. There are individual animals which comply with the levitical definition of a clean species, but which may not be sacrificed: what should be done with blemished animals? Obviously the farmers just eat them. Deuteronomy sees no harm in that. 'But if it has any defect—any serious defect such as, lameness or blindness—you shall not sacrifice it to the LORD your God; within your towns, you

may eat it the unclean and the clean alike, as you would a gazelle or deer.' (Deut. 15. 21). There is no difference of opinion between Deuteronomy and Leviticus on this issue, but a difference of agenda. Leviticus is writing about the animals that serve for the cult sacrifice, what may and may not be offered on the altar. It is not trying to write about animals in general, except in so far as they are involved in the cult. It is not interested in what happens to them. The animals classed as unclean concern the cult very directly because their contact is polluting to the tabernacle. Deuteronomy, on the other hand, always has concern for practical details. The cult is not one of its major preoccupations.

To conclude, the levitical food prohibitions have plenty to do with the tabernacle. They frame the analogy between tabernacle and body: what goes for one, goes for the other. This is why the pig and the camel, the hare and the rock badger, are picked out for special mention. If their carcasses were to be carved up for food along with beef and lamb, they would weaken a crucial analogy, the temple/body identity. They must be excluded from the diet to preserve the logic of the Covenant. Only consecrated bloodshed is allowed, and only the animals reared under the Covenant can be consecrated. It is a question of lexicographical purity, keeping control of thought. The editors' literary agenda prevails.

I argued (1998) that the law that forbids touching the dead carcasses of swarming creatures, fulfils God's Covenant with the animals after the flood (Gen. 9. 8–12). The link between the clean animals and the Covenant is enhanced by the power of the Covenant to permit bloodshed. Leviticus 17. 11 says, 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar.' Without that permission, what would the people of Israel eat? And why should they rear livestock?

Observe, incidentally, that the rule that restricts the meat diet of the people of Israel to clean animals is a benefit for all the unclean animals. They can flourish without fear of the hunter or trapper because their carcasses convey uncleanness on contact. Something important is being said about taking life. Anyone who has killed an animal without offering it at the altar has shed blood unlawfully: 'he shall be held guilty of a bloodshed; he has shed blood, and he shall be cut off from the people' (17. 3–4).

There is no need to discuss the swarming animals here. Those that swarm on the land are unclean like all the other animals that are not

reared as livestock, their carcasses convey uncleanness on contact. Leviticus does not count those that swarm in the waters and in the air as unclean, they are merely abominable.[19]

Chapters 12–15: Defiling Bodies

The analogy that brings the defiling animals of ch. 11 under the same rubric as the defiling human bodies listed in chs. 12–15 is not obvious. As such, the animals have nothing in common with the blood of childbirth (12. 2–5), leprosy, a fungus-stricken house, or a mouldy garment (ch. 13). The selection of animals indicates no connection with menstruation (15. 19–30) or genital excretions (ch. 15). The rabbis tried to make sense of the mixture of forbiddings by applying a literal idea of uncleanness to all, and so emphasized dirty or loathsome habits in the animal class. But the book says nothing to warrant this connection. True, it is absolutely forbidden to offer a blemished animal for sacrifice on the altar, but the animals that are forbidden are not blemished. The pig, the camel, the hare, and the hyrax are not forbidden because of any mutilation, skin disease, or physical impairment. I conclude that the uncleanness that they convey derives from the elaborated parallel between the living body and the altar.

The one thing they have in common is to be polluting. Human contacts with the corpses of forbidden animals, other corpses, and with human sexual excretions all require atonement to be made. Unless we know more about the editors' construction of analogies between the body and the tabernacle, we shall never have a full interpretation of uncleanness. The editors' literary agenda has prevailed again: the unclean things have been classed together because they demonstrate something about impurity and atonement.

The Tabernacle as the Microcosm

The Bible has little to say about biblical pollution as a forensic device. Its rules of uncleanness say a lot about meaningful distinctions. Here my arguments are based on perceived parallelisms. Inevitably they are in danger of incurring Goodman's strictures against basing an

[19] Ibid.

argument on similarity. Goodman concludes his treatise on similarity by saying: 'Clear enough when closely confirmed by context and circumstance in ordinary discourse, it is hopelessly ambiguous when torn loose. Where a frame of reference is tacitly or explicitly established, all is well...'[20] This is how it works in a taboo system. The rules get their backing from their own activity of entrenchment.

It so happened that the final editing of the priestly books started during the Babylonian exile, after the Jerusalem temple had been profaned and destroyed. With no temple there was no place to perform sacrifice or to purify the sanctuary. One could have expected that the absence of the temple, and the failure to make atonement by sacrifices, would entail the end of the religion. However, as we saw in the last chapter, the sacred book supplies its own structure as a parallel with the primitive desert tabernacle.

God designed the tabernacle and gave Moses instructions to build it (Exod. 25–7). It was on a tripartite pattern: a large court of sacrifice, a smaller sanctuary, and a minute Holy of Holies. Exodus projects the same tripartite pattern on Mount Sinai, and the book of Leviticus itself is organized in tripartite conformity. We have a mountain, a building, and a book projected on to each other. The proportions of the book project the proportions of the tabernacle. By reading it, the worshipper is able to take part in the cosmic cycle, mentally, though not bodily. This alone is a remarkable literary achievement, a book planned as a projection of a building.

Dietary Laws as Analogies

Once the frame of reference has been established, it is enough to show where the dietary laws fit into the grand Leviticus project. The frame of reference for everything is the relation of the people of Israel to their God, and his presence among them. Writing by analogy does not stop with one, two, or three analogies, it goes on and on. You know that the tabernacle is an analogy for Mount Sinai, you have seen that the body of the worshipper is an analogy for the altar, and so is the priest; the body of the animal victim is reconstructed on the altar in the same model.[21] What cannot be offered to God to be

[20] Goodman, 'Seven Strictures against Similarity', 20.
[21] M. Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 4.

consumed by flames on the altar may not be offered at the table to be consumed as food for the body; the forbidden animals are brought under the same rubric as the forbidden blood: the congregation may never eat it, nor is it ever burned on the altar but poured out or sprinkled around it.

Approaching God's ineffable creation can be done through a system of analogies. I claim that the laws of uncleanness are centrally necessary to the priestly editors' agenda. They designed the book of Leviticus to show forth the glory of the tabernacle, its protective power, and its guarantee of the promises of the Covenant. The tabernacle is designed on the pattern of the universe, it is the microcosm of God's mind, never wavering, comprehensive, always the same divine scheme. Every verse in Leviticus is another expert cut, each new facet of the diamond reflects the same crystalline structure. There is no way to understand the law of impurity without holding the whole priestly project in mind.

8

One God, No Ancestors, in a World Renewed

This last chapter focuses on the absence of ancestor cults in the Bible. Judaism has no cults of the dead. Other peoples can ask their ancestors for help or advice, persuade them to improve the weather, or ask the dead kinsman to save the life of a child, and they may receive suchlike benefactions from the departed. But in the Bible there are no transactions between the living and the dead. What we have said already about the two worlds of the editors, sixth and fifth centuries BCE, and about their interpretation of monotheism, makes it unlikely that the Pentateuch would have had room for an ancestor cult.

The Dead in Biblical Israel

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are remembered as patriarchal ancestors and as loyal servants of God. But even they, respected as they are, once dead, are completely dead. They do not rise up and intervene in the lives of their descendants. There is an idea about dying and descending into hell, and also an idea of being called to join the fathers, being gathered into the bosom of Abraham. Apart from this the Bible reveals nothing about what life is like in the hereafter; the living know nothing about it, the dead stay quiet.

If, elsewhere, the dead may be eternal co-partners of the living, we can ask how in Judaism, though respected, they get to be permanently excluded from the scene of action. Notice that ancestor cults normally get a lot of action because they can be used to explain personal and national tragedies. Explanation is one of the very important functions

The first version of this chapter was given in Harvard as the 'Ingersoll Lecture on Immortality', published in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 26/4 (1977), 20–3. I warmly thank the members of the Harvard Divinity School and of the Anthropology Department for their hospitality, and for enlightening discussion.

of religions through the world. Some peoples refer to capricious demons (not to ancestors) to explain why an innocent person died; the evil actions of witches and necromancers are a regular explanation of misfortune. Ancestors can take some of the weight of explaining pain and suffering. If they are cast as very moral, they want their descendants to be good to each other, and punish their sins with misfortune. Or if the ancestors are thought to be spiteful and jealous they may inflict suffering on the living. Either way, such motives for interfering make their active intervention in the lives of the living intelligible.

It would modify the doctrine of God's unique agency if the Bible were to credit ancestors with power to affect the affairs of the living. Catholicism is thought to be unsound on monotheism by Moslems, Jews, and Protestants, because of the cults of the Blessed Virgin and the saints. Though Judaism memorializes the dead, and remembers them piously, it gives no scope for saintly intercession. Apart from God, no supernatural powers whatever are tolerated. The dead can do nothing for the living, nor can the living for the dead. Their wishes cannot be the explanation of misfortunes, joys, or victories.

As the Bible defines monotheism, there is only one effective, all-powerful, agency. If something good has happened, God is to be thanked; if something bad has to be explained, God is angry, and the only thing that makes him angry is sin. To move from a world with many active ancestors to a world with only one God is a very major change. But it can happen quite easily. It is common for religions of renewal to repudiate former cults of the dead. If they want to make a fresh start, and to deal directly with God, it is one of the obvious things to do.

Utopian Religion?

Here I cannot avoid a very subversive question. Is the book of Leviticus about a real religion that was actually practised by a living people from cradle to grave in some real time in the past? Or is it a utopian vision, an ideal cult that never was put into practice? I am not sure that anthropology can say anything about it. My own judgement leans towards the side of the cult having been once practised as prescribed, though it is quite likely that the book of Leviticus gives a very idealized, intellectualized account of the religion, and that the practice was less logically consistent.

The clean sweep the Pentateuch makes in clearing everything out of the way of its uncompromising monotheism is astonishing. So is its intellectual consistency. I have suggested (in Ch. 3) that these books might have been composed in response to certain distortions of the Mosaic law. At the same time they could have been a supportive response to the 'Yahweh Alone' movement that swept Judah in the post-exilic period.[1] Amid the post-exilic fervour and proliferation of new cults, the editors would have tried to protect the perfect monotheism that was their ideal. The striking differences between biblical religion and other surrounding religious systems stem from this one central doctrine, monotheism. So logically consistent, so intellectually powerful, would such a religion be practicable? I think so and I will try to make the case by examining some general arguments about ancestor cults.

The dead are frequently considered to be very active. In Europe we talk about them turning in their graves, folklore has them walking the streets at night, haunting the spot where they died, upbraiding their people, demanding redress for injustice. Quite informally, they may be thought to give blessings and withhold them; they curse, and their curses are seen to take effect. Some ancestors are seen as punitive but just, and others may be thought to intervene quite viciously in the lives of the quick. These can be popular beliefs which do not lead to a formally instituted cult. Such spontaneous beliefs in the continuing life of the dead may remain undeveloped, or uninstitutionalized.

Once they are institutionalized they generally acquire an advice function. The head of a family needs to know what to do about a daughter's marriage, how to choose a burial site, or which political leader to follow. Mourners want to know why the beloved child or lover died so young. In other parts of the world communication with the dead relates to just this kind of question and may lead to punishment or vengeance. The ancestors not only know the answers, they themselves can often take the blame, they may have acted meanly, disappointed at being given too little honour, or determined to recuperate debts owing to them. Once the living have learned about a hidden dishonesty or cruelty, they can do something about correcting the record and preventing the ancestors afflicting them further on that score.

[1] Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1971).

The Bible prohibited all private consultations with diviners of any kind. Without an ancestor cult, and without demons in the universe, and without divination, it is difficult to see where the Bible religion made good the loss of information. If I have to name one practical difficulty in the way of a community trying to live by the Bible religion, I would pick the lack of explanation. This is one of the most important services supplied by any religion. But Leviticus outlaws private divination as well as cults of the dead. In so doing it is prevented from reaching into the hearts of the people on the matters that affect them most closely.

We should not belittle the stock of occult information that is a resource for divination. A baby dies, the explanation may be that its mother's dead father disapproves of her marriage. A widow dies, the explanation may be that her late husband misses her and has manœuvred to bring her over to his own side of the line. Whatever the sorrow, the ancestor's ill will or excessive affection is a possible cause. Some sacrifice or other restitution has to be made to the dead person, or his powers must somehow be ritually disabled, by an exorcism or a blessing, so that the matter can be closed.

The great benefit to the society at large is that the tragedies are not laid to the door of living persons; an ancestor cult allows amnesty for the living, the dead carry the blame. Belief in demons has the same blame-diverting, explanatory function. Ancestors and demons can make it a little easier for people to live together side by side in peace. If that were all, their record in the religions of the world would be exemplary. What could be the harm in making offerings to persuade the dead to assert their power by interfering with the weather or curing sickness?

Was There Once an Ancient Cult?

Would the reason for abolishing ancestor cults be intellectual, a theoretical clash at the level of doctrine? That sounds more like something that might happen in an invented religion, rather than in living practice. We shall look out for practical and political disadvantages of ancestor cults that might explain why they had to be forbidden.

First, we should ask whether Israel ever had an ancestor cult. If biblical Israelites never had any cult of the dead, they never lost one.

But it is unlikely, because the surrounding peoples in the Mediterranean and Aegean regions at the relevant time did pay cult to their ancestors. If early Israel is not a political fiction[2] the answer is resoundingly, Yes, there was once an Israelite cult of the dead; if all her neighbours did, why should Israel not pay cult to the ancestors? All of them, including Egypt,[3] and including the Ugaritic cults of the royal dead, and commoners,[4] and including Assyria and Babylonia,[5] and Canaan[6]—all the neighbouring kingdoms had cults of the dead. The only trouble is lack of evidence for the early period. Though it is not a watertight argument, there is a strong presumption in spite of lack of evidence, that pre-biblical Israel did also at one time pay cult to their ancestors. The Bible is acclaimed as the watershed, the definitive text which put an end to ancestor cults in Israel. If there is a dispute on the matter, the anthropologist can only contribute by indicating the huge variety of cults of the dead, and explaining why they sometimes emerge and sometimes vanish, as it were, of their own accord.

What makes a once flourishing cult disappear? Why do ancestral voices fade to a whisper and then lapse altogether into silence? Once so insistent, how do their demands come to be ignored, how are they driven away, made to disappear so completely that they are not even missed? Can ancestor cults be abolished by simple fiat? The answer is that they can disappear quite easily if no one wants them, but they may leave a serious gap in the religion which they formerly dominated.

Biblical Evidence

The prohibition against contact with dead bodies and spirits of the dead is fully documented. The Bible forbids the priests to officiate at funerals or even to go to them, or to mourn, except for their own close kin (Lev. 21. 1–5). The restrictions are more severe for the high priest (Lev. 21. 10–12). None were to shave their heads or gash their flesh (19.

[2] Philip R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel*, JSOTSup 148 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 44.

[3] A. Erman and H. Ranke, *La Civilisation Égyptienne* (Paris: Payot, 1963).

[4] B. A. Levine and J-M. de Tarragon, 'Dead Kings and Raphaim: The Patrons of the Ugaritic Dynasty', *JAOS 104* (1984), 649–59; Marvin Pope, 'Cult of the Dead at Ugarit', in Gordon Young (ed.), *Ugarit in Retrospect* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbraun, 1981), 159–79.

[5] M. Bayliss, 'The Cult of Dead Kin in Assyria and Babylonia', *Iraq*, 35 (1973), 115–25.

[6] George Heider, *The Cult of Molech, a Reassessment* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 383–400.

27–8), as did mourners in other religions (Lev. 10. 6; Ezek. 24. 15–18; Deut. 14. 1; Amos 8. 10; Isa. 22. 12; Jer. 16. 6; Mic. 1. 16). Any spiritualist consultation with the dead was to be punished by stoning (Lev. 19. 26, 31; 20. 6, 27). The dead could neither help nor be helped. Any form of spirit cult was rejected. Seers, sorcerors, witches, and diviners, any who cross the divide between the quick and the dead, were denounced as outright evildoers. The very idea of a cult of the dead was utterly repudiated.

Why would they be abolished? Because, perhaps, of their essential role in divination, which was also abolished. Perhaps because of their local graves. Their abolition would be a consistent step towards the centralization of worship.

Ancestors Take the Blame

Here follow some of the benefits which ancestors are seen as conferring both on their own descendants and on the wider community. The cult may not necessarily have a shrine, a place in the forest will do, or a simple hearthstone, or there may be no such special place or object acting as point of contact. The usual divinatory instruments for consulting oracles about the problems of daily life could suffice. There will be a store of popular theories about the powers of the ancestors and their personal proclivities: they may have caused sorrow because they are angry about how they died, or jealous of their widow's new spouse, and so on. So long as the ancestor takes the blame, well and good.

There are many different kinds of ancestors. Some merely maintain the political status quo. But other ancestors incite their descendants to fight invaders and promise to protect them, even from European bullets as in Central Africa. Ancestors in times of great distress can sometimes spur on a major revolt against conquerors. Others walk again as ghosts to inspire their descendants to resist invaders. It would be a mistake to think of all ancestor cults as conservative, or beneficial. Some ancestors do nothing at all, except to stand at the points of articulation of long and widely branching lineages, giving their name to the section of the tribe that descends from them. They often get involved in political disputes, one ancestor pitting his descendants against those of his brother.

Alas, ancestors do not always make it easier for the living to live together in trust and good fellowship. Sometimes the cult can

attribute to fellow members of the community power to control the offending spirits (ancestors or evil demons). Then all hell may be let loose in a storm of mutual accusations.

Since beliefs in the activities of the dead are so spontaneous and widespread, Bible scholars have focused on the more interesting question, how the dead are ever kept *out* of the affairs of their descendants. It is easy to understand how the dead are recruited to help the living. The difficult question is how they are stopped from intervening. We want to know not only why the Bible removed ancestor cults from the religion, but how it happened.

Horror of Dead Bodies

I will mention some alternative views. One is a psychological theory about the horror of death. To say that contact with dead corpses *naturally* inspires horror cannot withstand the fact that some peoples are quite prosaic about it. It is not much of an explanation for why corpse contamination should be important in Hebrew religion. If every human is naturally inspired by these feelings, why are there any ancestor cults at all? The local Israelite feelings of horror could be induced by the pulpit fulminations against contact with dead corpses. The doctrine of religious defilement from corpse contact could be the origin of the strong emotions instead of the result.

A sociological theory is that the local cults were such an impediment to centralization that they had to be quashed by legislation. A modernization theory is that the cults were already moribund when legislation was passed, and would have died out anyway. This is very similar to secularization theories. There is also the pendulum swing between the generations. Myself, I subscribe to the theory that cults of the dead were uncongenial to the call to religious renewal, and also to the theory that they imported an implicit threat to monotheism. And there is something more to be said about political aspects of ancestral cults. Biblical Israel did not just forget its ancestors, or ignore them, but it violently hated to be in communication with them.

An anthropological approach does not depend on deprivation theory, nor on crisis theory, nor on deviance theory, nor on psychology. For the fate of ancestor cults it focuses on the distribution of power between the living generations. The new religion, the religion of Leviticus, attacked communication with ancestors as it attacked

communication with other spiritual beings, in defence of its central principle, monotheism. The frenzied violence of its attack is part of its being a new religion, or a religion renewed.

A Centralizing Programme

One sociological explanation rests on the idea that the government forcibly suppressed ancestor cults as part of a programme to delegitimize the old land-holding lineages that would compete with the central government for authority and power.

Asking why ancestor cults are ruled out in Judaism, both in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, Joseph Blenkinsopp[7] answers by drawing on the great old classicist who influenced an early anthropological theory of ritual. According to Fustel de Coulanges a people organized by patrilineal inheritance and succession would be expected to pay respect to the points of articulation by which they themselves enter the lineage system. Their ancestor cults would reinforce hereditary principles and disperse centres of power over the territory.[8]

Applied to the history of Israel, Blenkinsopp's idea is that the existence of powerful autonomous lineages would have been a threat to a government trying to centralize. The cults of the dead would have been centres of political resistance to government. To wipe out rival centres of power it would be necessary to repudiate diviners, and deactivate the ancestors. Attacking cults of the dead would be, as Blenkinsopp says, 'part of a broader strategy of undermining the lineage system to which the individual household belonged'.[9] Deuteronomy, representing the religious institutions supporting the bureaucracy, was trying to concentrate in Jerusalem all access to spiritual power. The rejection of ancestors would belong to the same Deuteronomic movement which called for a central sanctuary, teaching that the temple at Jerusalem was the only place where sacrifice could be offered. True enough, spiritist cults can be very subversive, they would be a prime target. To centralize worship would entail centralizing divination and outlawing access to spirits of the dead. His legislative argument is surely sound. But his

[7] J. Blenkinsopp, 'Deuteronomy and the Politics of Post-mortem Existence', *Vetus Testamentum* (1995), 4–5.

[8] Fustel de Coulanges, *La Cité Antique, Étude sur le Culte, le Droit, les Institutions de la Grèce et de Rome* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1874).

[9] J. Blenkinsopp, 'Deuteronomy and the Politics of Post-mortem Existence', 4–5.

unspoken assumption that the cult would not disappear without being attacked is more dubious. Also the idea that hereditary principles were once strong in Judah is questionable.[10]

The old inheritance system does not show signs of having produced powerful lineages which would claim descent from common ancestors. It is not at all certain that the society of Israel was ever organized into strong lineages in the way that Fustel de Coulanges described.[11] And for that matter, we can raise sophisticated doubts about whether many so-called patrilineal societies are indeed 'patrilineal' in any important sense[12] or even whether their society has what is generally conceived of as a 'genealogical system'.[13] We may seriously doubt whether the people of biblical Israel were patrilineal enough for the cult of their ancestors to be worth attacking. It is true that many a European kingdom could not be established until it had broken the power of great baronies and princedoms. But the problem here is that we do not find in Israel the great baronies and princedoms that the centralizing administration would have had to break down.

An alternative view would suggest that in the aftermath of war and religious conflict the administration of Judah would have found the old pillars of society fallen into ruin. In the eighth century, as Jerusalem grew in size and amassed specialized central functions for the region, so the settlements around decreased, unable to compete with Jerusalem which was then rising to be the 'primate site' in the region. But by the end of the seventh century, when Israel had been overrun by Assyria, Jerusalem went into dramatic decline and in the sixth century was in a state of collapse, following the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar and the deportation of skilled and noble families to Babylon.[14]

[10] There is a contemporary consensus that the early work of Robertson Smith is still the soundest description of Semitic kinship systems: W. R. Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885), 55–6. See also R. Murphy and L. Kasdan, 'The Structure of Parallel Cousin Marriage', *The American Anthropologist* (1959), 17–29.

[11] K. C. Hanson, 'The Herodians and Mediterranean Kinship, Pt. I: Genealogy and Descent', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* (1990), 75–84.

[12] A. Kuper, 'Descent Theory, a Phoenix from the Ashes', ch. 10 of *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London: Routledge, 1988), 190–209.

[13] Adrian Edwards, 'On the Non-Existence of an Ancestor Cult among the Tiv', *Anthropos*, 78 (1984), 77–112.

[14] D. W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archeological Approach*, The Social World of Biblical Antiquity, series 9 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991).

Instead of needing to destroy the big families for the sake of a more effective central government, as Joseph Blenkinsopp supposes, the writers of the Pentateuch would have found a very decrepit old social framework. To restore the civil society, the boundaries of the community would have to be affirmed. Of the four books of the Pentateuch Deuteronomy is the one which envisages a restricted congregation of Israel, recruited by birth, a holy seed. The experience of dangerous agents of foreign powers would justify the beginning of what has become known as the inward-turned culture of Judaism.

My general idea is that the editors were inspired to write for the unification of Judah, and if possible, for the peaceful unification of all the sons of Jacob, that is of both Judah and Israel.[15] Blenkinsopp interprets the establishment of a state-appointed local and central judiciary (Deut. 16. 18–20; 17. 8–13) as intended to restrict the authority and jurisdiction of heads of households and tribal elders. He adds to the same interpretation, the appointment of officers with broad supervisory functions, and state-appointed magistrates to supervise the village elders in the investigation of a homicide (21. 1–9), who must be present when corporal punishment is inflicted (25. 1–3), and the referral of false witnessing to the central judiciary, all as instances of intrusive state bureaucracy. 'Intrusive' suggests intruding on institutions that were functioning effectively already. Other instances he cites of legislation with the effect of freeing individuals from the control of their family heads.[16]

All these are what colonial adminstrators tend to do when indirect rule proves impossible at local levels. This may happen either because the chiefs are feuding among themselves, or because their authority was already defunct. As for the central sanctuary, it might be necessary if local shrines were the focus of fierce doctrinal conflict. On the showing here proposed, Deuteronomy's prescriptions for official supervision would not have been intended to release individuals from a non-existent family control. Reminding individuals of their responsibilities would promote the restoration of peace and order when surrounding institutions had dissolved.

[15] I argued this in reference to the conciliatory mission of the book of Numbers in *In the Wilderness* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

[16] Blenkinsopp, 'Deuteronomy and the Politics of Post-mortem Existence', 4–5.

Purgatory

The other more general point raised by Joseph Blenkinsopp is whether a change from worshipping one way, say in ancestor cults, to worshipping without them, has to be explained by coercive action on the part of the authorities. Here again he may be right. We can learn from the same procedures which in English and German Protestantism suppressed the old cults of saints in heaven and souls in purgatory.

Abolishing cults of the dead in Tudor England had everything to do with modernization in a new nation state, and the launching of a new religion, or rather, I should say an old religion renewed. Outside the Catholic Church, purgatory disappeared for good and all.

In *The Stripping of the Altars*[17] Eamon Duffy has studied the forcible abolition of purgatory. Praying for the dead, asking favours of them, offering masses for their speedy translation from the pains of purgatory to the happiness of heaven, even remembering saints' days, all these cultic practices were abolished by edict backed with strong force. The cult of purgatory had nothing to do with any patrilineal descent or the political power of great dynasties. It had a lot to do with the solidarity of local communities.

In this historical case, as Duffy finds, there was plenty of popular resistance to the policy, though Tudor history does not give that impression and assumes rather that the populace was glad to be relieved of superstition. His unexpected and important lesson is that abolishing commerce with the dead broke down social ties among the living. The charge of idolatry empowered a social revolution. Legislating against the cult of the dead cut through a strong web of reciprocal transactions between priests and their congregations. It impoverished the churches because it ended bequests for masses for the dead. Also it broke ties between members of the laity. Individuals had been in the habit of rendering a form of condolence to their bereaved neighbours: they would offer a small sum to the priest asking him to say a mass for the deceased, now a suffering soul in purgatory. This is still the practice in Catholic countries. Masses for the dead and candles for the dead are a source of a small but regular income for the clergy. In England the official attacks on cults of the

[17] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

dead weakened local solidarities, and thereby made the rural people more vulnerable to the spoliation of the countryside carried out under Tudor governments.

The case against cults of the dead was exacerbated in England because there was a Catholic anti-government party, so the religious question was embroiled in politics. In the turmoil of international politics, masses for the dead in England became a symptom of treason; priests were seen, perhaps rightly, as secret agents for Spain and France; for anyone to cherish a religious icon was to show a sign of disaffection. It was not just the altars that were attacked—people were killed; hate, heroism, and violence characterized the religious scene in those days.

Catholic cults of saints and suffering souls in purgatory were certainly a target in the Tudor government's anti-idolatry campaign. Though begun with physical coercion, once purgatory was abolished, the English Protestants have been willing to do without it. It ceased to matter. The printing press, trade and industry, and pirating on the high seas revolutionized society by creating new wealth. Society changed, purgatory went underground and eventually hell would fade and disappear too, of its own accord, without any more coercion. Learned discussions in the seventeenth century began to discredit the concept of eternal torment.[18] There was also a series of shifts in discussing the idea of heaven. So the debate moved in the eighteenth century[19] from the original Christian concept of a communion of spiritualized bodies in a spiritualized afterlife, to an erotic paradise, and finally ended by discrediting saints in heaven as well as souls in purgatory.[20]

Our information about the parallel case in Bible history is too fragmented for a moral to be drawn. There certainly were political cross-pressures in Judah, but my impression is that the situations were fundamentally different. In the Reformation in England the big doctrinal issues concerned the eucharist, the sacraments and valid priestly orders. Purgatory was a relatively minor point. For biblical Israel, the cult of the dead threatened at least three centrally

[18] D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell, Seventeenth Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London: Routledge, 1964).

[19] Bernhard Lang, 'The Social Life of the Saints: Towards an Anthropology of the Christian Heaven', *Religion*, 17 (1987), 149–71.

[20] Colleen McDannell and B. Lang, *Heaven, a History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

important theological ideas for the movement of religious renewal, three doctrines implied in monotheism: no magic, no pictures, no minor spiritual beings.

Modernization

Modernization itself produces a secularizing effect. New sets of ties, which linked individuals with each other by contracts and money, displaced ties which had linked them to a restricted community based on locality and the local dead. As modernization progressed hereditary cults of the dead would find it difficult to survive under the pressure to modernize.

This Weberian understanding can be applied to Judaism's treatment of the dead. The prospect of wealth gained by extensive transactions in an international temple community became powerful in the eighth century BCE.[21] Ancestor cults tend to be divisive, so at that time it would have been sensible to sink differences between tribes so as better to exploit the new opportunities. After the trend to modernize has effectively broken up the old communities, we would not need to look for coercive repression of a cult of the dead, it could have died its own death, slain by indifference. There would have been no need to use force on institutions that were suffering already from inertia. A modernizing religion has no need of ancestors. However sentimental we outsiders may feel about them, powerful ancestors can be very disruptive because they back only their own descendants.

Doing without idolatry and superstition changes the flow of resources. To the extent that it rechannels wealth it loosens the grip of old institutions and allows individuals to follow their own choices. Modernization may well account for the decline of ancestor cults.[22]

Two quite different processes, one secular, inspired by economic opportunity, the other religious renewal, inspired by rejection of the contemporary civilization, may cause the ancestors to fade out. In the case of the Pentateuch I would favour the latter, religious renewal, as the explanation. This is partly because, by the time of the last

[21] Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah.*

[22] The importance of the wish for modernity as an explanation for religious change is being examined and illustrated with great effect from Cameroonian ethnographic materials; Michael Rowlands and Jean-Pierre Warnier, 'Sorcery, Power and the Modern State in Cameroon', *Man*, NS 3 (1988), 118–32.

redaction, restriction of opportunities and general devastation would be dominating the scene, not a growth of riches and new opportunities. Excluding the ancestors frees the living from their dead hand.

My conclusion also rests on the intellectual rigour and the huge scale of the religious synthesis. It is not just the dead who have been muted in the Pentateuch. We have already observed that kings have disappeared together with the whole ritual apparatus of monarchy. Magic is forbidden, images forbidden, divination outlawed. The changes are so enormous that to assess Israel's cult of the dead needs a huge canvas.

Intergenerational Tension

In real life there is a dynamic tension between people living together, at whatever level we care to take. They will not hold on stubbornly to an ancestor cult if it does not serve any purposes they cherish. The one principle which explains most of what we want to know about beliefs in immortality is that forms of religion differ according to attitudes to authority. At any one time, the living and the dead are part of one system. The more the living old can impose their authority on the living young, the more we should expect cults of the dead. Those in control use the idea of the interventionist dead to warn the young against insubordination. Conversely, the more that authority is under attack and the more the elderly living are suspected of abuse of power, the less we would expect a cult honouring the dead. If the young really dislike and mistrust the old men when alive, why should they revere them dead? The answer is they don't. The wheel of culture turns according to the swings in the relation between the generations. Its full orbit marks extremes of intergenerational trust and extremes of intergenerational hostility.

Between successive generations there is always the possibility of conflict. Any balance is likely to be precarious. Their strength, agility, and physical beauty always give the young men the advantage over the old. Polygamy of the old men would be untenable without strong political controls. Warfare enhances the status of young men. A permanent state of war, or a settled system of raiding and counter-raiding, common among cattle herding people, cancels any tendency of the young to show subserviance.

This typology of religions contrasts cults that favour the young and cults that favour the old. The former will include cults of election in which the adepts choose or are chosen by spiritual benefactors. The God of Israel chose his followers and fabricated a descent link, adopting Israel as his firstborn son (Num. 8. 17). He also chose his prophets and his hereditary line of priests. His power to choose dominated an elective religion, his chosen people also had a right to choose, they were not controlled by rigidly prescribed rules of succession.

Religious Dynamism in the Calabari Delta

Robin Horton's account of religion in the Calabari Delta of Nigeria makes the contrast between elective and prescriptive cults.[23] The Calabari seem to have a balanced set of religious institutions, able to adjust to the pressure of events. On the coast, where the big wealthy trading families built up their dynastic ambitions in every way they could, where matters were weightier, and histories of disputes went back further into history, they controlled sex by arranged marriages and had a prescriptive religion. The young were oppressed, they were expected to devote their lives to maintaining the system, young men, and all women, provided a workforce for the descent group, and the marriageable women were used as bait and rewards for loyalty. Strong channelling of wealth to old men further entrenched the subordination of the young. The more the young were exploited the more was intergenerational strife a threat. Accusations of disloyalty and disaffection were made by the old against the young and disasters were interpreted as supernatural retribution for youthful disobedience.

In the interior the scene was quite different. Members of the inland fishing villages lived free of such financial and dynastic constraints. They paid cult to water spirits and spirit heroes, who behaved more unrestrainedly than ancestors, and more erotically. The water spirits would be guests at their feasts, take possession of and have sexual intercourse with their favourite partners, and endow these lucky ones with success.[24] In this case the young were encouraged to work for their

[23] Robin Horton, 'Types of Spirit Possession in Kalabari Religion', in John Beattie and John Middleton (eds.), *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* (London: Routledge, 1969), 14–49.

[24] R. Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), 317.

own individual prosperity and prestige. They were not burdened with larger family responsibilities, they could go out and found their own lines. Relatively free to make their lives they did not define themselves as being in conflict with elders. Religion was more supportive than constraining, ecstatic cults enacted themes of joy and renewal. The potentially disruptive anger of the young was disarmed by the right to speak with its own voice in the councils of the community.

These social contrasts and their concomitants in religious practice and belief are particularly clear in the West African Cameroons, where the commercial opportunities and constraints of the grasslands contrast with those of the forest. The dwellers in the grasslands have the more heavily compartmented traditionalist type of society, with the more ritualistic religious practice, and a constraining cosmology; the forest dwellers are freer, less burdened by the generations that are past, and paying joyous and exuberant cult to the spirits.[25]

The examples lead us to look at the character of the resource base to understand the fate of ancestor cults. A resource base that favours youth would be one which offers the most glittering prizes to agility, muscular strength, and endurance. For example with endemic warfare and border-raiding in the foreground of the political scene, or hunting or herding as the mainstay of the economy, we would expect ancestor cults to fare badly. A shift to a monetized economy further favours the young who can learn new languages and go out and earn. In short, a change in external circumstances can shift the balance of the generations.

Balance Disturbed

Suppose a colonial regime is imposed. This might apply to the Assyrian control of Israel after the invasion of the eighth century or to the Persian control of Judah after the fifth. What happens when fighting is stopped in a society given to hunting and warfare, or to pastoralism and raiding? What is it like to live in a society where the young men, used to an honourable status, find themselves downgraded? If the balance swings away from the young, if the old men start to have it more their own way, they start to rebuild their base. Given time, and

[25] Peter Geschiere, *Sorcellerie et Politique en Afrique, La Viande des Autres* (Paris: editions Karthala, 1995).

other things being equal, we expect to see hereditary principles gain strength, and hereditary priesthoods establish themselves.

The two strands of religious institutions go on twisting in response to the twists of history. At one moment the ancestors are up on top, and then the ancestors are on the downside and the spirit heroes up. What happens also depends on what else is going on and how rapid the other changes are. Enduring the frustration, bewilderment, and humiliations of a colonial dependency, the old men find their power is broken, but the young men, freed from their yoke, are relatively short of honour. This can make the country ripe for religious change instigated by the young.

The Frustration Factor

If Judaism shunned commerce with the dead it might have been in a like case with other peoples who want no part of the things the old men represent. 'The sins of the fathers are visited on the heads of their children': is this the voice of youth reproaching the old? Should we be thinking of young rioters carrying banners against corruption and injustice? Youth longing for a just society? Youth arraigning formalism? It sounds like the scenario for students at the barricades in Paris in 1968. We remember non-violent but intransigent young Chinese demonstrators gunned down in Beijing in 1989. On television any week, in Ulster, or Israel, we have got used to seeing children throwing stones at police.

In sum intergenerational conflict makes the dead disappear. When politics and the economy favour the young, ancestor cults can dwindle to mere piety, or disappear, without any central force trying to drive them out.

In the eighth century Israel had everything that would favour a revolt of the young: a protracted, losing war against a major enemy, plenty to complain of from priests and elders, a boy king, Josiah, credited with radical religious reforms. Kings and Chronicles lay emphasis on his extreme youth.[26] Foreign manipulation could have been another factor. The text implies a team of zealots working with him, smashing the images, breaking down altars, and defiling the holy

[26] 2 Kgs. 23 ff. and 2 Chr. 34 ff.; perhaps they were exaggerating that he came to the throne at 8 years old, but he was definitely young.

places. He is like the founder of a nativistic cult, mustering his young followers against the evil empire, going back to the pure origins of the old religion, rejecting accretions and impurities. The trail for the ardent, young editors was laid centuries before their time.

Conclusion

I have argued that cults of the dead can fade out without being formally abolished by edict. They could be consigned to oblivion for several reasons. But we have still not explained the apocalyptic frenzy against diviners,[27] that aligns them with cosmic enemies. Why should there be so much anger against communication with the dead?

Judah's internal upheavals in the couple of centuries before the exile would have been fanned by foreign interested parties. Espionage (Neh. 4. 2–8, 6. 10–14), counter-espionage, heresy elided with treason, the resulting conflicts would have been so distressing as to make the survivors long for a new solidarity.[28] In such a context would the Pentateuch have been planned. Its objective would have been precisely this, a call to solidarity. For that to be achieved the Bible religion had to be radically reconstructed: kings not to be mentioned, dead ignored, and diviners and seers excoriated; no magic, no images; mutual accusations to be ended, all potentially divisive doctrines eliminated.

In this conciliatory perspective I would qualify the idea that Deuteronomy's bureaucratic legislation was intended to enhance the power of the state at the expense of family control. Rather the other way round, Deuteronomy would be seeking to infuse civic responsibility and hope into a despairing community. In a completely new kind of society individuals were to be responsible, each for himself. None will suffer for the sins of the fathers, but 'only for their own crimes may persons be put to death' (Deut. 24. 16). In

[27] This is what I found on returning to Zaire in 1987: in the general disarray of trying to live in a cash economy without any cash income, and trying to live rationally in an arbitrary world, the balance between old and young men had tilted further against the old. Fear was rife, trust absent. The young feared the sorcery of the old and the old were accused, tortured, and killed for sorcery. M. Douglas, 'Sorcery Accusations Unleashed: The Lele Revisited', *Africa*, 69/2 (1987), 176–93.

[28] The fratricidal war of the tribes against Benjamin at the end of the book of Judges would be warning against such a calamity (Judg. 20).

this spirit of reform, the cults of the dead never had a chance. The dead had been appropriated long ago by the pro-monarchists in their royalist cults. Furthermore, their mediums were very likely to have been fomenting political trouble. Their rejection has to be seen in a modernizing context of national rebuilding and reconciliation.

Pure Monotheism

In defining the central doctrine of monotheism, the priestly editors thought out all its implications. They had to exclude blasphemy and vain superstitions. The God of Israel was not one to be constrained by magic formulae. The laws against images spelled out the meaning of monotheism. Aniconism was not just to prevent insult to the infinite Godhead by reducing his majesty to an inert image,[29] but it was also a prohibition of magic statues and pictures which might receive cult and be credited with power to give material benefits. It was a clean sweep, a truly phenomenal revision of religious practice to accord with monotheistic belief.

This accounts for the strange behaviour of the patriarchs in Genesis. In the perspective of pure monotheism it would be necessary to prevent personality cults growing up around Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Other nations draw the line between divinity and humanity less strictly, there can be transformations of one into the other. Famous men, kings, great leaders may, even during their lifetime, be regarded as divine. But not so for the Bible. The patriarchs had to be shown as ordinary human beings, morally frail, sometimes downright dishonest. Jacob's reputation is sacrificed to this end, he is presented as a conspicuous cheat and a fraud, as we have recalled in the first chapter.

We should think of the priestly editors as men inspired with religious enthusiasm. Wars had been ravaging the land, the temple had been destroyed, and the congregation was picking up the bits of shattered lives. People were desperately trying to survive, trying to start again in every sphere of life. Many types of new religion were appearing and disappearing in Judah after the exile. The editors were sensitive to the all-pervading religious effervescence. Loyal and clever, and highly trained, they belonged to a close-knit and well-

[29] L. Kochan, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

ordered group. This would have meant that they could share and soften for each other the recurrent shocks and terrors. Religious renewal was in the air. Not many of them would have been interested in instituting a new cult. Having been born into a place of privilege in the old religion, their more compelling choice would have been to justify it. The religious practices they would need to attack most vigorously would be those that required the skilled services of individual specialists. Hence anything to do with divination was to be denounced, especially divination by approaching the spirits of the dead.

A clarifying, energizing task lay ahead, calling for the best minds and most ardent spirits to work together, in accord with the critical mood of the prophets. They would have felt it necessary to let go of the immediate past, to forget recent anger and strife, to reconcile the believers by retrieving from ancient times the original message of forgiveness and rebirth. In this spirit, excluding cults of the ancestors would be closely in tune with lack of popular interest in lineage. Other people's ancestor cults would give the priests another stick for beating backsliders and apostates. All that is left for us to observe in this systemic expunging of spirits and demons is the 'horror of death' shown in rules about how to treat corpses of humans and animals. In the prevailing mood of reform, the old religion was to be reverently restored, everything incompatible with the doctrine of the one, all-powerful, all-compassionate, all-knowing God to be excised.

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