

Course Reading

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ISRAEL'S SANCTUARY : THE PRIESTLY « PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY »

In his recently published book,¹ B. A. Levine accepts my thesis that biblical impurity was a dynamic and malefic force² and that the *ḥattā't* is a purification-offering, not a sin-offering.³ However, he modifies it, claiming that there are two types of *ḥattā't* only one of which is purificatory,⁴ and that impurity is not merely dynamic but demonic⁵ and hence the biblical God is not omnipotent.⁶ Leaving the *ḥattā't* typology for another essay,⁷ I shall focus here on the more basic issue, the nature of biblical impurity as it relates to the *ḥattā't*.

The rendering of *ḥattā't* as a purification (or purgation)-offering leads automatically to the question: whom or what does it purge? Herein lies the first surprise: it is not the offerer of the sacrifice. It must be remembered that the *ḥattā't* is brought by an individual under two circumstances: severe physical impurity as that of the parturient, leper, or gonorrhoeic (*Lev.*, XII-XV), or because of the commission of certain inadvertent sins (e. g. *Lev.*, IV). Clearly, physical impurity is removed by ablution: "he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water" (*Lev.*, XV, 8 inter alia). Spiritual impurity, on the other hand, caused by inadvertent violation of prohibitive commandments (*Lev.*, IV, 2 ff.), requires no purificatory rite. The fact that his sin is inadvertent (*bišegāgāh*)⁸ and that he feels guilty (*we'āšēm*)⁹ means that he has undergone inner purification.

¹ *In the Presence of the Lord*, Brill : Leiden, 1974, cf. my review in *JBL* 95 (1976) 291-293, hereafter cited as *Presence*.

² *The Function of the ḥattā't Sacrifice*, *Tarbiz*, XL, 1970 71, 1-8 (Heb); *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1971, s.v. Day of Atonement, Kipper.

³ « Sin-offering, or Purification-offering? », *VT*, XXI, 1971, pp. 237-239; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1972, s.v. Leviticus.

⁴ *Presence*, pp. 101-108.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79, esp. n. 65.

⁷ *VT* XXVI (1976) 333-337.

⁸ J. MILGROM, *The Cultic šegāgāh and its Influence in Psalms and Job*, *JQR*, LVIII, 1967, pp. 115-125.

⁹ *Idem*, *Cult and Conscience*, Brill, Leiden, 1976, pp. 3-12.

The contention that the *ḥattā't* never purifies its offerer is supported by the use of its blood: « Moses took the *ḥattā't* blood and with his fingers put some on each of the horns of the altar, thereby decontaminating (*wayḥattē'*) the altar » (*Lev.*, VIII, 15). The *ḥattā't* blood, then, is the purging element, the ritual detergent. Its use is confined to the sanctuary, but it is *never applied to a person*. For example, the rites for the healed leper and the priests' consecration call for both the *ḥattā't* and the blood-daubing, but the latter ritual stems from other sacrificial animals and not the *ḥattā't* (*Lev.*, XIV, 14,25; *Ex.* XXIX, 20; *Lev.*, VIII, 22-24).

Finally, a study of the *kippēr* prepositions is decisive. In the context of the *ḥattā't*, *kippēr* means « purge » and nothing else, as indicated by its synonyms *ḥittē'* and *tihar* (e.g., *Lev.*, XIV, 51 f.; *Ez.*, XLIII, 20, 26). When the object is non-human, *kippēr* takes the preposition 'al or be or a direct object. For example, all three usages are attested in the purging of the adytum on the Day of Atonement (*Lev.*, XVI, 16 f., 20) and they must be understood literally, since the *kippēr* rite takes place *on* ('al) the *kappōret* and on the floor before it, *in* (be) the adytum, or it can be said that the entire room ('et) is *kippēr*-ed (cf. also *Ex.*, XXX, 10; *Lev.*, VI, 23; XVI, 33).¹⁰ However, when the object of *kippēr* is a person, it is never expressed as a direct object but requires the prepositions 'al or be'ad, both signifying « on behalf of » (e.g., *Lev.*, XVI, 6, 24, 30, 33; *Numb.*, VIII, 12, 21).¹¹ This means the purgation rite of *ḥattā't* is not carried out on the offerer but only on his behalf.

If not the offerer, what then is the object of the *ḥattā't* purgation? The above considerations lead but to one answer: that which receives the purgative blood, i.e., the sanctuary and its sancta. By daubing the altar with the *ḥattā't* blood or by bringing it inside the sanctuary (e.g., *Lev.*, XVI, 14-19), the priest purges the most sacred objects and areas of the sanctuary on behalf of the person who caused their contamination by his physical impurity or inadvertent offense.

This conclusion enables us to understand the distinction between the *ḥattā't* for impurities and inadvertencies. The inadvertent offender is never called « impure » and hence requires no ablutions. In his case the concluding formula reads, *wekippēr hakkōhēn... wēnislāh lō*, « the

¹⁰ *Lekappēr 'ālā(y)w* (*Lev.*, XVI, 10) cannot be rendered « to perform rites of expiation beside it », (*Presence*, pp. 65, 80). Moreover, the rites performed beside it, i.e., the hand-laying on and the slaughtering of the sacrificial goat, are not expiatory, cf. below. Rather, in keeping with the rule of *kippēr* with a non-human object, 'al means literally « on, over » referring to the transfer of sins/impurity to the scapegoat.

¹¹ See J. MILGROM, *kippēr 'al/b'ad, Leshonenu*, XXV, 1970, pp. 16-17 (Heb).

priest shall perform the purgation rite... that he may be forgiven » (e.g., *Lev.*, iv, 20, 26, 31, 25) whereas for the impure person the formula reads: *w^ekippēr hakkōhēn... w^etāhēr(āh)*, “the priest shall perform the purgation rite... and he (she) shall be clean” (e.g., *Lev.*, xii, 6, 8; xiv, 9, 20). Thus the impure person needs purification and the sinner needs forgiveness.

The inadvertent offender needs forgiveness not because of his act per se — as indicated above, his act is forgiven because of the offenders’s inadvertence and remorse — but because of the *consequence* of his act. His inadvertence has contaminated the sanctuary and it is his responsibility to purge it with a *hattā’t*. Confirmation of this thesis is provided by the Tannaim: “All the (*hattā’t* goats) make atonement for the impurity of the Temple and its sancta ” (Mishna, *Shebuoth*, i, 4 f.). This rabbinic tradition has preserved the postulate that the *hattā’t* blood is the ritual detergent employed by the priest to purge the sanctuary of the impurities inflicted upon it by the offerer of the sacrifice.

The *hattā’t* as the authorized purgative of the sanctuary echoes with a familiar ring for students of ancient Near Eastern cults in which temple purifications play so dominant a role. Impurity was feared because it was considered demonic. It was an unending threat to the gods themselves and especially to their temples, as exemplified by the images of protector gods set before temple entrances (e.g., the *šēdu* and *lamassu* in Mesopotamia and the lion-gargoyles in Egypt) and, above, all, by the elaborate cathartic and apotropaic rites to rid buildings of demons and prevent their return.¹² Thus for both Israel and her neighbors impurity was a physical substance, an aerial miasma which possessed magnetic attraction for the realm of the sacred. As will be shown below, Israel thoroughly overhauled this concept of impurity in adapting it to its monotheistic system, but the notion of its dynamic and malefic power, especially in regard to the sancta, was not completely expunged from the Priestly Code. Thus Molech worship is forbidden because it contaminates “my sanctuary” (*Lev.*, xx, 3). Whoever is contaminated by a corpse and fails to purify himself “has contaminated the Lord’s sanctuary” (*Numb.*, xix, 20, 13). Those afflicted with pelvic discharges also need purification “lest they die through their impurity by contaminating my tabernacle which is among them” (*Lev.*, xv, 31). The two latter offenders are banished with the leper “that they do not contaminate

¹² Let examples from ANET suffice: Egypt, pp. 325, 329-330; Hattia, pp. 346, 351-353, 357, 358; Mesopotamia, pp. 331-334, 334-338, 338-339.

the camp in whose midst I dwell” (*Numb.*, v, 2b). True, the rabbis interpreted each these passages on the assumption that impurity came into direct contact with the holy, specifically that the offender while in an impure state entered the sanctuary or ate of sacred food³¹. However, it is patently clear that these texts are grounded in the axiom, common to all ancient Near Eastern cultures, that impurity is the implacable foe of holiness wherever it exists; it assaults the sacred realm even from afar.

The dynamic, aerial quality of biblical impurity is best attested by its *graded power*. Impurity pollutes the sanctuary in three stages:

1. The individual’s inadvertent misdemeanor or severe physical impurity pollutes the courtyard altar which is purged by daubing its horns with the *hattā’t* blood (*Lev.*, iv, 25, 30; ix, 9 ff.)

2. The inadvertent misdemeanor of the high priest or the entire community pollutes the shrine which is purged by the high priest by placing the *hattā’t* blood on the inner altar and before the *pārōket*-veil (*Lev.*, iv, 5-7, 16-18).

3. The wanton, unrepented sin not only pollutes the outer altar and penetrates into the shrine but it pierces the veil to the holy ark and *kappōret*, the very throne of God (cf., *Is.*, xxxvii, 16). Since the wanton sinner is barred from bringing his *hattā’t* (*Num.*, xv, 27-31), the pollution wrought by his offense must await the annual purgation of the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement¹⁴, and it consists of two steps: the purging of the Tent and the purging of the outer altar (*Lev.*, xvi, 16-19).¹⁵ Thus the entire sacred area, or more precisely, all that is most sacred¹⁶ is purged on Purgation Day (*Yom hakkippūrîm*) with the *hattā’t* blood.

Thus the graded purgations of the sanctuary lead to the conclusion that the severity of the sin/impurity varies in direct relation to the depth of its penetration into the sanctuary. This mathematical relationship between sin and sanctuary is best understood by the following diagram:

¹³ Tosefta, *Shebuoth*, i, 8; Sifra, *Hobah*, xiii, 10.

¹⁴ The purgation rites prescribed for the Day of Atonement originally may have been used in emergencies the year around, as indicated by the text of *Lev.*, xvi, 1 f. and as reflected in the rabbinic tradition of *Ezodus Rabbah*, xxxviii, 10.

¹⁵ According to the rabbis, the altar purged on the Day of Atonement is the inner altar of incense, cf. Sifra, *Ahare*, iv, 8 (based on *Ex.*, xxx, 8). That this was not the plain meaning of the text was first recognized by Ibn Ezra (on *Lev.*, xvi, 18).

¹⁶ Cf. J. MILGROM, *Studies in Levitical Terminology*, University of California, Berkeley, 1970, pp. 54, f., n. 211, and cf. below.

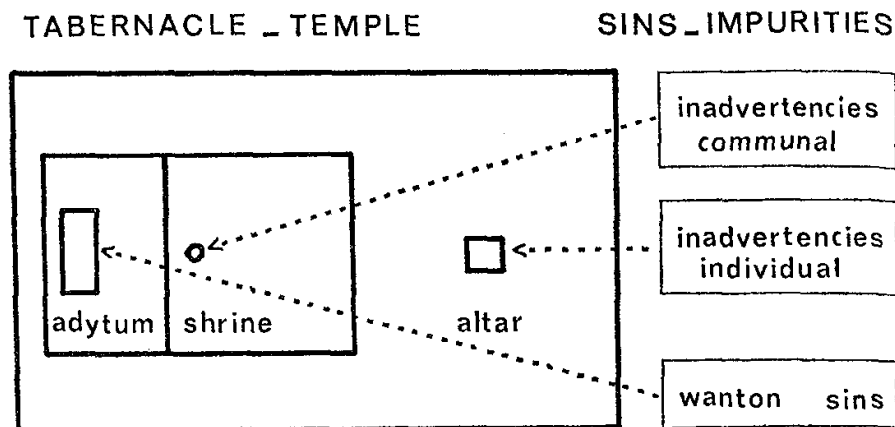


DIAGRAM OF SANCTUARY CONTAMINATION

Moreover, this diagram provides graphic confirmation that the Priestly source propounds a notion of impurity as a dynamic force, magnetic and malefic to the sphere of the sacred, attacking it not just by direct contact but from a distance. For behold, the outer altar is polluted though the non-priest may not even enter it and finally, the adytum is polluted though no man, not even the priest, may enter¹⁷. Yet despite the fact that Israelites have had no access, the sancta must be purged "of the impurities of the Israelites" (*Lev.*, xvi, 16).

Levine maintains that the blood manipulations of the Day of Atonement are apotropaic, « to protect the deity and his immediate surroundings from the incursions of impurity which would penetrate the sanctuary through a route leading from the courtyard, outside the tent, through the entrance if the tent, past the altar of incense, and through the *pārōket*, opened to let the priest in, and into the very spot where the deity sat, astride the cherubin... what we observe here is the protection of a route or channel from contamination...¹⁸ First a logical consideration: if the *hattā't* blood only protects the adytum, how is it purged? Surely, since it is entered only on the Day of Atonement, the accompanying ritual must have a purgative purpose. Secondly, an apotropaic interpretation should lead us to expect that pains would be taken to scrape, anoint, or asperse the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-43.

¹⁸ *Presence*, p. 74.

sanctuary thresholds and entrances, the most vulnerable areas to demonic incursions, precisely as we find in Mesopotamian purification rituals.¹⁹ But this is not the case. The *hattā't* blood is not sprinkled at the entrances and, for that matter, nowhere along the alleged route of the demons. It is aspersed on the two altars, before the veil and before the ark. All the recipients of the blood share a "most sacred" status in contrast to the enclosure floor and curtains which are of lesser sanctity.²⁰ Thus the confinement of the *hattā't* blood to the adytum, shrine, and outer altar, would indicate that purgation and not prophylaxis is at work.²¹ Impurity will be drawn to the higher magnetic field of the most sacred and the latter will always need to be purified.²² Finally, the notion of apotropaism is incompatible with the priestly system; nothing, but nothing, can prevent the sanctuary from being polluted by man. This point will be developed below.

The Azazel rite, according to Levine, epitomizes the demonic character of the Day of Atonement. The high priest compels the demon Azazel to admit the goat into his domain by entering the adytum to be « invested with its numinous power" and infusing the goat with it by laying his hands on it. The purpose of the confessional is "to trap the sins by exposing them, by calling them by their name, thus preventing their escape or concealment".²³ Three comments are in order:

1. Confession would release sins, not entrap them, to judge by the operation of any utterance containing the divine name, be it a vow, blessing, or curse. Its function, moreover, is judicial not magical: to reduce the gravity of a non-expiable wanton sin to an inadvertency expiable by sacrifice.²⁴

¹⁹ Eg., private homes: Namburbi, R. I. CAPLICE, *Or*, xxxix, 1970, pp. 130, 138 f., 144, 150; *bît mēšeri*, G. MEIER, *AFO*, xiv, 1942, pp. 150 s; O. R. GURNEY, *Babylonian Prophylactic Figures and their Rituals, Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*, lxxii, 1935, pp. 66-75; temples: F. THUREAU-DANGIN, *Rituels Accadiens*, Paris, 1921, pp. 68, 140; 140, 1350 (= *ANET*, pp. 338, 333).

²⁰ Cf. J. MILGROM, *Studies*, pp. 54 f., n. 211.

²¹ The *hattā't* blood also sanctifies newly ordained priests (*Ex.*, xxix, 21; *Lev.*, viii, 30) and the outer altar (*Lev.*, xvi, 19) but only after it itself has been sanctified either by its contact with the altar (the priestly consecration) or with the holy ark (the Day of Atonement).

²² Levine's claim that the veil was "opened to let the priest in" (p. 74) is doubtful. The veil was one piece (*Ex.*, xxvi, 31). In the second temple, the high priest entered the adytum by going around the veil (*Mishna, Yoma*, v, 1) and there is no reason why it should not be a continuation of hallowed praxis. Besides, opening it in the center would have allowed the ark to be visible, a violation bearing fatal consequences (cf., *Numb.*, iv, 20).

²³ *Presence*, p. 82.

²⁴ J. MILGROM, *Cult and Conscience*, pp. 104-123.

2. Rather than fulfilling the magical objective of propelling the scapegoat, the laying of the hands simply transfers the sins of the people onto the goat, as expressly indicated by the text (*Lev.*, xvi, 21 f.).²⁵

3. More significantly, the requirement of two *ḥattā't* goats for the people reveals how Israel transformed an ancient exorcism. Demonic impurity was exorcised in three ways: curse, destruction, or banishment. The last was often used; rather than evil being annihilated by curse of fire, it was banished to its place of origin (e.g., nether-world, wilderness) or to some other place where its malefic powers could either work in the interests of the sender (e.g., enemy territory) or do no harm at all (e.g., mountains, wilderness). Thus the scapegoat was sent to the wilderness which was considered uninhabited except by the satyr-demon Azazel.²⁶ The best known example of this type of temple purgation is the Babylonian New Year festival when the Urigallu (high priest) literally wipes the sanctuary walls with the carcass of a ram and then throws it in the river. Thus the same animal which purges the temple impurities carries them off.

Why then are two goats required in Israel? The text itself provides the answer. The sacrificed goat purges the sanctuary *mittum'ot benē yisrā'el* "of Israel's impurities" (*Lev.*, xvi, 16) whereas the scapegoat carries off *kol wōnōt benē yisrā'el* "all of Israel's transgressions" (*Lev.*, xvi, 21). The discrete function of the goats is supported by rabbinic tradition: "For impurity that befalls the temple and its sancta through wantonness, atonement is made by the goat whose blood is sprinkled within (the shrine) and by the Day of Atonement. For all other transgressions in the Torah — minor or grave, wanton or inadvertent, conscious or unconscious, of commission or omission — the scapegoat makes atonement" (Mishna, *Shebuoth*, 1, 6). Thus the slain *ḥattā't* purges the sanctuary but the live *ḥattā't* purges the people. The reason for this variance from ancient Near Eastern praxis is clear: Israel the holy people (*Lev.*, xi, 44; xix, 2; xx, 26) needs the same purification as the holy place.

Finally, why the urgency to purge the sanctuary? The answer lies in the postulate: the God to 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: "The cherubim lifted their wings" (*Ez.*, xi, 22). The divine chariot flies heavenward and the sanctuary is left to its doom.²⁷

On this point, Israel is in full accord with its neighbors' obsessive compulsion to purify their temples. However, this common ground is split by an unbridgeable chasm. One of Y. Kaufmann's keenest observations²⁸ is that the ancients feared impurity because it was demonic, even meta-divine, capable of attacking the gods. Hence men were summoned, indeed created, for the purpose of purifying temples to aid the benevolent resident gods in their battles with cosmic evil. In Israel, however, there are no traces of demonic impurity. Kaufmann would have us believe that biblical impurity has been completely devitalized. Here Levine is correct in criticizing Kaufmann,²⁹ but he errs in claiming that impurity retains its demonic nature. "Anti-God forces" do not inhere in nature. Not even the animal world can contaminate the sanctuary. For their carcasses, though impure, are no threat either to God or man. The demons have been expunged from the world but man has taken their place. This is one of the major contributions of the priestly theology: man is demonized. True, man falls short of being a demon, but he is capable of the demonic. He alone is the cause of the world's ills. He alone can contaminate the sanctuary and force God out.

If this reconstruction of the priestly theology of the *ḥattā't* is correct then we have succeeded in uncovering one of the ethical supports upon which the sacrificial system was reared. It constitutes the priestly theodicy. No intellectual circle of ancient Israel evaded the challenge of theodicy: the prophets agonized over it but came up with no solutions; Wisdom gave its superficial answer and its refutation motivated the writing of Job. Thus we should be led to expect a priestly answer, but we search for it in vain. Is it possible that Israel's priests, who had as their prime function "to teach the Israelites" (*Lev.*, x, 10) had nothing to say concerning God's providence?

Now we know what the priestly theodicy is. It is found not in utterances but in rituals, not in legal statutes but in cultic procedures

²⁵ Laying of the hands is also attested in Hittite rituals with the same transfer function, cf. L. Rost, *Ein hethitisches Ritual gegen Familienzwist, Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientalforschung*, 1, 1953, pp. 349, 1.19; 363, ll.51, 57.

²⁶ The rabbinic description of the practice of killing the Azazel goat may not reflect biblical praxis. It is neither stipulated by the text of *Lev.* xvi nor demanded by ancient Near Eastern praxis in which the return of impurity to its source frequently required a live agent.

²⁷ The first eleven chapters of the prophet-priest Ezekiel are constructed on the priestly axiom that God's departure from his sanctuary is tantamount to Israel's doom.

²⁸ *Tōledōt hā'mūnāh hayyisrē'elit*, I, Dvir: Tel Aviv, 1938, pp. 350-416, 458-573; II, 1946, pp. 111-137, 404-503; cf. *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, abridgement-translation by M. GREENBERG, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1960, pp. 21-121, 301-316.

²⁹ *Presence*, pp. 79-91; cf. my critique of KAUFMANN in my *ḥattā't* article in *Tarbiz*, p. 7, n. 19.

— specifically, in the rite with the *hattā't* blood. I would call their response: the priestly “Picture of Dorian Gray”. On the analogy of Oscar Wilde’s novel, the priestly writers would claim: sin may not leave its mark on the face of the sinner, but it is certain to mark the face of the sanctuary, and unless it is quickly expunged, God’s presence will depart. In truth, this teaching is not a startling innovation; it is only an extension of the doctrine of collective responsibility, a doctrine which, all concur, is basic to the priestly theology. It is only natural that they would regard the sanctuary of which they were the stewards as the spiritual barometer to measure and explain God’s behavior to his people. They knew full well that the prophet was justified in protesting “why does the way of the wicked prosper” (*Jer*, XII, 1), and they provided their answer: the sinner may be unscarred by his evil, but the sanctuary bears the scars, and with its destruction, he too will meet his doom.

Levine’s claim that Yahweh is not omnipotent in the Bible³⁰ must therefore be rejected, the existence of the destroyer, *māšhit*, to the contrary and notwithstanding. All the sources make it emphatically clear that the destroyer acts only according to Yahweh’s will (*Ex.*, XI, 4(J); XII, 12 f. (P); XII, 23, 29(J)³¹). The rabbis’ dictum: “Once leave has been granted to the *māšhit* to do injury, it no longer discriminates between the righteous and the wicked” (Mechilta on *Ex.*, XII, 22*b*), adduced by Levine,³² is only a reaffirmation of the biblical postulate that God punishes collectively and even indiscriminately. That the righteous were engulfed in disaster (i.e., God’s retribution) may have been protested by a few biblical voices (E.g., *Gen.*, XVIII, 23 ff; *Ez.*, XVIII, 1 ff., but existential reality and the monotheistic premise made it impossible to conceive God otherwise. Perhaps for this reason some biblical and rabbinic theologians preferred to assign this disturbing attribute to God’s agent rather than to God himself. But the priests of ancient Israel had no such qualms; they championed unqualifiedly the rule of collective retribution as epitomized by their conception of the sanctuary as “The Picture of Dorian Gray”.

To summarize: the *hattā't* is a vantage point from which to view Israel’s cultic ties with its neighbors as well as the gulf that separates them. They hold in common that the impure and the holy are mutually antagonistic and irreconcilable. Thus the sanctuary needs constant purification lest the resident god abandons it together with his devo-

tees. On one basic issue they differ: the pagan world is suffused with demonic impurity whereas Israel has eviscerated impurity of its magical power. Only in its nexus with the sancta does it spring to life. However, this malefic impurity does not inhere in nature; it is the creation of man. Only man can evict God from his earthly abode and destroy himself.

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³⁰ *Presence*, p. 79, n. 65.

³¹ Noted by KAUFMANN, *Tōledōt*, I, p. 544.

³² *Presence*, p. 86.