

SACRED AND PROFANE IN CLOTHING: SHA'ATNEZ

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Dyed wool garments and linen garments often appeared together in the Bible, especially Exodus 25–39, as they did also in texts of conquerors of northern Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine. For instance, Ashurnasirpal II reports that his expedition to Carchemish and the Lebanon in 879 BCE yielded “also 200 young females (clad in) linen garments with multi-colored trimmings made of dark and reddish purple (dyed) wool...”¹ The Annals of Tiglath-Pileser III report about his army’s tribute in 738 BCE: “gold, silver, tin, iron, elephant hides, ivory, multicolored garments, linen garments, blue-purple and red-purple wool, ebony, boxwood, etc.”² A number of texts from Nebuchadnezzar’s reign (605–562 BCE) have been transcribed and translated. They list wool and linen garments as precious items that were used for special cultic occasions, for instance to dress statues of the gods.³ They were acquired in the West and entrusted by temples to specialists for cleaning and repair.⁴ References to mixed fabrics of wool and linen “for the garments of gods and goddesses are not lacking.”⁵ In ancient Israel, however, several texts that may date to the seventh or sixth centuries BCE give us more clues to the complex rules that guided the use of these fabrics.

The standard prohibition concerning the wearing of Mixed Kinds in daily life was in contradiction with the requirement that priests wear wool

1. J. B. PRITCHARD, *Ancient Near Eastern texts relating to the Old Testament; third edition with supplement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 275.

2. M. D. COOGAN, *A reader of ancient Near Eastern texts. Sources for the study of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 78, No. 31. See also p. 78, No. 30, and p. 81, No. 34.

3. Cf. Jeremiah 10:9: statues of wood, silver, and gold, dressed with purple, תכלת וארגמן, לבושם מעשה חכמים כלם: “their clothing is blue and purple; they are all the product of skilled workers” (NRSV).

4. See D. B. WEISBERG, “Wool and linen material in texts from the time of Nebuchadnezzar”, in *Leaders and legacies in assyriology and Bible. The collected essays of David B. Weisberg* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 202–16.

5. *Ibid.*, 210.

and linen when they ministered in the Temple. It also conflicted with the command to wear fringes, since these contained Mixed Kinds or constituted Mixed Kinds with the garment to which they were attached. This paradox has exercised the sagacity of ancient and medieval commentators. Modern interpreters and exegetes, however, with a few notable exceptions, have either not seen the contradiction or reduced its importance. This paper suggests that the paradox can be illuminated in such a way that a new perspective on the role of the Temple becomes possible and a less theological understanding of the words “sacred” and “profane” opens up.

The law concerning *sha’atnez* is spelled out in Lev 19:19:

You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals [RSV cattle] breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment of cloth made of two different materials [RSV kinds of stuff].⁶

Deut 22:11 specifies as follows: “you shall not wear clothes [RSV: a mingled stuff] made of wool and linen woven together.”⁷ The tradition as we shall see below, interpreted further how the rule was to apply. The prohibition concerned only sheep wool and linen, and exclusively in regard to clothes. This law, framed as bearing no exception, posed a problem for

6. Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. A. B. EHRLICH, *Der Pentateuch*, vol. 1 of *Mikrâ ki-Pheschutô. Die Schrift nach ihrem Wortlaut* (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1899), 232, following the traditional commentators (for instance Rashi and Maimonides), thought that “all of these were forbidden lest Israelites become used to mixtures and their seed become mixed with Gentiles.” The same explanation, albeit with quite different intentions, is given by C. M. CARMICHAEL, “Forbidden Mixtures”, *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982): 394–415 (394–415). In CARMICHAEL, “Forbidden Mixtures in Deuteronomy XXII 9–11 and Leviticus XIX 19”, *Vetus Testamentum* 45 (1995): 433–48, the same interpretation is expanded. See, however, the apposite criticisms by J. MILGROM, “Law and narrative and the exegesis of Leviticus XIX 19”, *VT* 46 (1996): 544–48; and MILGROM, *Leviticus 17–22: a new translation with introduction and commentary*, The Anchor Bible 3A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1656–65, esp. 1662.

7. EHRLICH, *Der Pentateuch*, 350, comments: “additional explanation on *sha’atnez*, added after some time, since *sha’atnez* is mentioned elsewhere without comment (Lev 19:19)...” The word שַׂטְנֵי appears only in Deut 22:11 and Lev 19:19. It is defined as wool and linen here, though the NRSV loses this nuance, while in Lev 19:19 it is called *Kilayim*, double, or composed of two species. LXX uses *κίβδηλον*, “adulterated, spurious,” in both places: see J. W. WEVERS, *Notes on the Greek text of Deuteronomy* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 353–54. Carmichael assumes priority of Deut 22:9–11 over P (Lev 19:19) and does not accept that Deut is glossing Lev.: C. M. CARMICHAEL, *Law, legend, and incest in the Bible: Leviticus 18–20* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 103–4, 88, note 2, 91. This notion of the reception of the Covenant Code by Deuteronomy, and of the latter by P’s Law of Holiness is defended by K. SCHMID, *A historical theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 375.

subsequent tradition because the high priest's vestments—and to a minor degree the other priests' vestments (girdle)—were made with “stuffs” that constituted a mixture made precisely of woven linen and wool. Technical words pointing to the sophistication of this cultic clothing, however, were used in the book of Exodus for this combination. It was not שַׁעֲטָנִי (*shaat-nez* or Mixed Kinds), but מעשה חשב or מעשה רקם, that is, “skilfully worked” and “embroidered with needlework,” as the NRSV translates Exod 28:4–6, regarding the high-priest:

⁴These are the vestments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a chequered tunic, a turban, and a sash. When they make these sacred vestments for your brother Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests, ⁵they shall use gold, blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen. ⁶They shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, skilfully worked.⁸

The two veils inside the Temple also contained this sophisticated blend expected from the High-Priest's clothing.⁹ This mixture had its own purpose, though different from the High-Priest's dress, since they were not clothes.¹⁰ The laws in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus were clearly structured in such a way that it is wrong to think of the clothing of priests as *exempt* from the general prohibition.¹¹ Rather, the priests were required to obey cultic rules that precisely included this blend.

Josephus, in his account of the Mosaic law in the *Jewish Antiquities*, adds a reason not given in Scripture for the prohibition: “Let none of you wear raiment woven of wool and linen; for that is reserved (ἀποδεδειχθαι) for the priests alone.” (A.J. 4.208) In comparison, *Mishnah Kil'aim* 9:1 only states that the priests wore such woven mixtures.

As demonstrated by M. Haran, the strict correspondance between the various kinds of priestly garments and the various kinds of decorations inside the Temple was another way of demonstrating the unity signified by the

8. See 28:40–43 concerning other priests; and 39:27–29.

9. M. BARKER, “Beyond the veil of the temple: The high priestly origins of the apocalypses”, *SJT* 51 (1998): 1–21.

10. Unless they originally were conceived of as clothes of the deity, as in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian texts. It would be interesting to know if Deuteronomy law was narrower than previous formulations and especially if the core of the book of Leviticus was actually a further interpretation of Deuteronomy rather than its predecessor. See Friedman's article “Tabernacle” in *ABD*.

11. A. ROTHKOFF, “Sha'atnez”, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. M. BERENBAUM and F. SKOLNIK, vol. 18, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 336–37.

rituals themselves.¹² M. Haran's research makes it obvious that the closer one was to the inner sanctuary, the more thoroughly the blending rule applied, except that the technical word of "Mixed Kinds" was not used, but rather a specialized vocabulary of embroidery as seen *supra*.¹³ The mixing rule applied most strictly to the high-priest, but perhaps also to other priests, to a minor degree. M. Haran thinks that only the high-priest wore wool and linen.¹⁴ Indeed, Exod 39:29 may have only applied originally to Aaron and his sons, i.e., the successive high-priests. But there are some grounds to believe that other priests as well blended wool and linen, namely a girdle of wool, in the Temple precincts. This was at least true in the Second Temple period and believed to be so afterwards, when the Jewish understanding was that priests wore this special clothing mix of linen and dyed wool.¹⁵ The difficulty in describing the historical and liturgical development should not mask the real issue, which is that priests were to wear mixed stuff while the general population was not. M. Haran did not dwell on the contradiction inherent to the wearing of the blend, except to say that "this mixture of stuff is actually an ancient mark of the holiness of these accessories, as is precisely shown by the prohibitions in Lev. xix, 19 and Deut. xxii, 9, 11."¹⁶ That contradiction is precisely what needs to be addressed. How were holiness and "profane state" constructed out of essential materials? Did this particular mixture derive its holiness "naturally," say by virtue of its proximity to the empty cella of the temple (the holy of holies), and did it permeate (clothe even) priests and those near them? Or was holiness a product of the dialectics entailed by the restricted command to the priests and the general prohibition for everyone else?

The command that males were to wear fringes or *tzitzit*, traditionally

12. M. HARAN, "The complex of ritual acts performed inside the tabernacle", *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 8 (1961): 272–302 (272). More recently, M. HARAN, *Temples and temple-service in ancient Israel: an inquiry into biblical cult phenomena and the historical setting of the priestly school* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 165–74, 211–12, and *passim*, reprinted with minor corrections from the 1978 original (Oxford: Clarendon).

13. *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, p. 211. CARMICHAEL, *Law, legend, and incest in the Bible*, 101–2, n. 36, notes this too but misses the point that the refined or embroidered blend of fibers had to be worn by priests at the temple.

14. He is followed by L. OPPENHEIM, "Essay on overland trade in the first millenium B.C.", *JCS* 21 (1967): 236–54 (247, note 59).

15. In his description of priestly robes, Josephus speaks of pure linen for the warp, and of flowers of diverse hues in the weft: *A.J.* 3.154. In *A.J.* 4.208, he simply states that Mixed Kinds were reserved to priests. See also *mKil.* 9:1, quoted below; *bYoma* 69a. There are also interesting later traditions, for instance the hymn attributed to Rabbi Yonai in the Palestinian Talmud.

16. HARAN, "The complex of ritual acts performed inside the tabernacle", 281.

regarded as summarizing the whole Law, was also contradictory with the prohibition of Mixed Kinds, as practiced until the so-called talmudic period. This is clear enough from the biblical texts alone, Num 15:38 and Deut 22:12.¹⁷ It is confirmed by some of the traditional Jewish interpretation, which was that a blue or violet woolen *tzitzit* was attached to a linen thread, or to a linen garment.¹⁸ The discovery of tassels among the textiles found in the Bar Kokhba's caves has allowed a more assured reading of the sages' discussions on the subject.¹⁹ There were found wool tassels dyed with indigo and carminic acid—which was cheaper of course than true Syrian purple. These tassels were destined to be tied with linen threads to

17. Deut 22:12 is placed after 22:11 for a good reason that is not always perceived by commentators. The underlying principle for both verses is that of *sha'atnez*: "You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of your cloak with which you cover yourself." The word *yourself* apparently was interpreted *stricto sensu* by Bar Kokhba's followers: see Y. YADIN, *The Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1963), 186. The *tzitzit* command can be seen as a "conscious attempt to encourage all Israel to aspire to a degree of holiness comparable to that of the priests" (J. MILGROM, *Numbers במדבר: the traditional Hebrew text with the new JPS translation, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 414), though the political significance is debatable: "democratic thrust?" (Milgrom, 414), or marker of both one's male belonging and social class? Note that Milgrom explains the *tzitzit*'s relation to holiness as follows: "Thus *sha'atnez* is forbidden because it is a holy mixture, reserved exclusively for the priests and forbidden to nonpriests." The thrust of the argument should rather be that it is the conjugation of the prohibition and cultic requirement that creates "holiness" by modulating restrictions of access to something after all very common (wool and linen).

18. See *mEduyyoth* 4:10: "The School of Shammai declare a linen garment exempt from the law of the Fringe; and the School of Hillel declare it subject to the law" (ET from H. DANBY, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1933), 430. The commentary on this passage by H. ALBECK, *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah. Seder Nezikin* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute / Dvir, 1959), 481 obscures the question. See also *bMenahoth* 40a. This *tzitzit* was attached to the outer cloak at all times: see MILGROM, *Numbers*, 410. One must bear in mind that the outer cloak reflected the social significance of males. See for instance the petition by a harvester from Mesad Hashavyahu, on which see S. AḤITUV, *אסופת כתובות, הכתב והמכתב: מארץ-ישראל וממלכות עבר הירדן מימי בית-ראשון* 21 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2012), 149–54; M. WEIPPERT, *Historisches Textbuch zum Alten Testament*, *Grundrisse zum Alten Testament* 10 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), #225, pp. 370–72; or, more easily available, COOGAN, *A reader of ancient Near Eastern texts*, #90, p. 122.

19. A large section of *bMenahoth* is devoted to this subject: 38–52. See also the later so-called Minor Tractate, *tzitzith*. It is specified in *bMen.* 43a that priests did not wear *tzitzith* when ministering in the Temple, but that they were to do so when outside of the precinct. This view of the rabbis makes perfect sense—regardless of actual practice, which was impossible in their time—when one realizes that priests fulfilled their obligation to wear Mixed Kinds in another way. Urbach skirts around this very issue: E. E. URBACH, *The sages, their concepts and beliefs*, Publications of the Perry Foundation in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1975).

woolen mantles.²⁰

The use of a blue/purple woolen thread was discontinued early in Jewish history, perhaps already in the Tannaitic period.²¹ The reasons sometimes given for this, namely that the method of dyeing the threads blue had become forgotten, or that the community was poor,²² are not very compelling, since many Jews continued to be known as a people of dyers, well into the medieval period.²³ What is more likely and comparable to what happened to ossuaries, Herodian lamps, and stone cups or jars, is that the destruction of the Second Temple, making it impossible for priests to wear their special vestments, also led to the discontinuation of this particular aspect of the fringes. In consequence, the *tzitzit* finds associated with the brief Bar Kokhba movement in 132–35 CE follow from this attempt to renew the temple cult, when fringes were to be worn again, outside of the temple's precincts.

As already indicated, the redactors of the Mishnah and its commentators were well aware of the paradox and *mKil*. 9:1 is explicit about it:

Wool and linen alone are forbidden under the law of Diverse Kinds; wool and linen alone become unclean by leprosy-signs; and when the priests minister in the Temple they wear wool and linen alone...²⁴

They simply did not see a solution to the enigma, although they implied that one existed.²⁵ One instance of this attitude is the statement found in *Sifre on Deuteronomy* 22:11, as well as in several other passages of the exegetic literature, that lists five contradictions found in the Torah, but ends by simply saying that the aporias exist only in human perception:

You shall not wear a mingled stuff. You shall make yourself tassels (Dt 22:11-12). Both were spoken at one utterance. *Remember and Observe.* (Ex

20. Y. YADIN, *The Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters*, 182–87, esp. 186–87.

21. See *mMen* 4.1; *NumR* 17.5.

22. MILGROM, *Numbers*, 412.

23. The Geniza archives make it clear that there were Jewish purple makers at work in the Mediaeval period: see S. D. GOITEIN, *Daily Life*, vol. 4, *A Mediterranean society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 172; GOITEIN, *Economic foundations*, vol. 1, *A Mediterranean society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 51, 85–86, and index, p. 544, s.v. Purple Cloth.

24. Cf. already Josephus, *A.J.* 4.208.

25. On the availability of reasons for divine precepts and statutes, see the discussion in URBACH, *The sages, their concepts and beliefs*, 365–99, esp. 377–82. Urbach himself obscures the issue which we are discussing, and which was not his main concern: p.379, he speaks of “The law of mingled stuff *per se*” as requiring “no explanation [from the Rabbinic standpoint], except for enigmatic particulars of their detailed regulations.”

20:8; Dt 5.12). Both were spoken at one utterance. *Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death* (Ex 31:14). *On the sabbath day two male lambs a year old* (Num 29:9). Both were spoken at one utterance. *You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife* (Lev 18:16). *Her husband's brother shall go in to her* (Dt 25:5). Both were spoken at one utterance. *And every daughter who possesses an inheritance* (Num 36:8). *So no inheritance shall be transferred from one tribe to another* (Num 36:9). Both were spoken at one utterance. It is impossible for creatures of flesh and blood to say two things as one. For it is said: God has spoken one utterance which we have heard as two (Ps 62:12).²⁶

As noted above, the Bible and traditional commentaries did not consider that the embroidered priestly vestments or the fringes constituted *sha'atnez*. But already in the Second Temple period, or at least at its end, and ever since, attempts were made to provide a common interpretation for the existence of the blue thread, or at least the combination of colors and materials in the Tabernacle's screen (פרכת) and in the vestments of the high-priest. Philo and Josephus, especially saw these vestments in cosmic terms, as a summary of the cosmos.²⁷ This is an interpretation worth keeping in mind, because it provides some of the ground for an explanation. Maimonides proposed that "the prohibition of mingled stuff" came about on account of its use by idolatrous priests. "as they put together in their garments vegetal and animal substances bearing at the same time a seal made out of some mineral;²⁸" David Weisberg writes that this view "seems both correct and surprisingly modern."²⁹ Note that Cook, in his contribution to the rich article "costume" for the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, already gave such an explanation. But Weisberg admits that Maimonides did

26. L. FINKELSTEIN, *Sifre on Deuteronomy* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969 (reprint of 1939 ed.)), paragraph 233, pp. 265–66. I adopt the translation of Psalm 62:12 by J. Z. LAUTERBACH, *Mekhila de-Rabbi Ishmael*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 252. The RSV has: "Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this" (Psalm 62:11). See the notes in the Finkelstein-Horowitz's ed. for the various textual problems. The parallel passages are *Mekh. Ex* 20:8; *pShev.* 3.10.34d; *pNed.* 3.2.37d.

27. See BARKER, "Beyond the veil of the temple". Cf. Josephus, *A.J.* 3.151–187, a general description of priestly vestments; 3.180–87, interpretation in cosmic terms: "everyone of these objects is intended to recall and represent the universe" (LCL translation). Cf. 3.123; *B.J.* 5.212f. The same theme exists in Philo, for instance in the *Mos.* 2.88; 2.117. It was a broadly shared interpretation, see the *Wisdom of Solomon* 18:24. The subject is briefly developed in E. STEIN, ed., *The relationship between Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures* [in Hebrew] (Ramat-Gan: Masada, 1970), 214–16.

28. *The Guide of the perplexed* 3:37 (translation by S. Pines, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963). Maimonides' representation of idolatrous priests comes very close to Josephus' and Philo's interpretations of priestly vestments at the temple.

29. WEISBERG, "Wool and linen material in texts from the time of Nebuchadnezzar", 211.

not explain “why mingled stuff would be *permitted* in the sanctuary” (my emphasis). The choice of words is revealing and typical of most modern commentaries.³⁰ For elaborate, mingled stuff was in fact required in the Temple, not “permitted.” The traditional view, echoed for instance by Josephus, is that it was permitted, on the contrary, outside of the Temple, i.e., it was a concession.

With noteworthy exceptions, modern commentators have adopted three attitudes regarding this paradox. Some do not see a problem.³¹ Others think that it was a constant reminder against foreign contamination.³² Still others address each term of the contradiction separately. Leo Oppenheim, for instance, writes that the prohibition of *sha’atnez* “might conceivably go back to a taboo connected with a technology reserved for textiles destined for contact with the sacred, and therefore inadmissible for profane use.”³³ This opinion appears to follow the Mishnah, Josephus, and the targums.³⁴ It makes sense, especially when we consider the Neo-Babylonian texts in which the special mixture is put to the service of politics.

Although such an explanation has the merit of returning to the ancient tradition, momentarily lost among modern scholars, it has the disadvantage of taking the terms “holy” and “profane” as firm data, or pre-existing notions. A different instance, which shows an author completely unaware of any contradiction, comes from *The Interpreter’s Bible*, on Deut 22:11:

The prohibition....represents an ancient and widespread semitic taboo. Possibly the taboo itself arose from the obscure feeling that what God made distinct should remain distinct. The Deuteronomist was unready to throw off this primitive concept. But unless religion does cast off such encumbrances from the dead past, progress is stifled.³⁵

This precisely should be the question. How could Israelites come to know “what God has made distinct,” and establish whether it should remain distinct? A major function of the temple, I venture, was structured to answer

30. See for instance ROTHKOFF, “*Sha’atnez*”, quoted above in note 11.

31. E.g., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1968) 115, at Deut 22:12.

32. For instance CARMICHAEL, *Law, legend, and incest in the Bible*, 103–4. The explanation is in the Bible: Num 15. Carmichael asks why some combinations were ruled out while others got no mention. The answer, I suggest, is that the practicality of what one can afford to separate, restrict, and re-mix drives the articulation of such markers.

33. OPPENHEIM, “*Essay on overland trade in the first millenium B.C.*”, 247, note 60.

34. *AJ* 4:208, on Deut 22:11: “Let none of you wear raiment woven of wool and linen; for that is reserved for the priest alone” (my emphasis). Cf. *mKil.* 9:1; *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, at Deut 22:12 and Num 15:38.

35. Vol.2, p.465.

this question, in an elaborate manner. It can actually be shown that the temple and such rules as those concerning elaborate mixtures were a factor of development rather than “encumbrances from the dead past.”

To do this, one needs to consider the rules of purity and impurity in a systematic way. It would seem especially important to consider how this particular practice restructured the world, given the technological capacities of the time. At the same time, certain aspects of those rules could be used to separate oneself from others, both inside and outside the society. These two aspects were important in the exilic and post-exilic period.

Statements from the traditional Jewish exegetic literature, keenly aware of the contradiction, provide insights. *Mekhilta Exodus* 20:8, for instance, after giving the list quoted above of seemingly contradictory divine statutes, makes a puzzling statement: “Hence they said: *We should always increase what is holy by adding to it some of the non-holy.*”³⁶ The same line of thought is already in Job 14:4: “Who can bring the clean out of the unclean?”³⁷ The traditional answer to this question was that only the divinity could accomplish such feats.

These traditional statements do not and cannot give any indication, however, of what makes a thing clean or unclean and sacred or profane. They presuppose the categories clean/unclean and pure/impure as given classes. Our problem, on the contrary, is to explain the development of these categories. For this purpose, the view of the rules of purity/impurity developed by M. Douglas and P. Soler are an excellent starting point.³⁸

They have indicated something fundamental in the Biblical view of the world, throughout its known development—i.e. in the eighth to fourth centuries BCE—. In their view, the biblical notion of the world was that of presumed categories neatly delimited by simple criteria. Things found to belong to each of these categories by virtue of these criteria were deemed pure. Things found to be on the margins, or even worse, straddling limits between categories were deemed impure, liquids being eminently prone to transgress limits and therefore bring, as well as carry away, impurities.

36. J.Z. Lauterbach’s translation, *Mekhilta Exodus*, vol.2, p.252. Cf. *bYoma* 81b.

37. Cf. Eccl 7:23. For similar texts in Jewish homiletic literature, see URBACH, *The sages, their concepts and beliefs*, 380, quoting *bNid* 9a; *Pesiqta de-R. Kahana, Para ‘adumma*, Mandelbaum ed., pp. 54-55; cf. *Midrash ha-Gadol, Numbers*, Rabinowitz ed., Jerusalem (1967) 323, in which the *bNidda* and *Pesiqta* texts are conflated.

38. M. DOUGLAS, *Purity and danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1966), 41–57; J. SOLER, “The semiotics of food in the Bible”, in *Food and Drink in History*, ed. O. RANUM and R. FORSTER, Selections from the Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations 5 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 126–38, translation of: “Sémiotique de la nourriture dans la Bible,” *Annales, E.S.C.* 28 (1973) 944-48.

The framework makes sense. But the difficulty, especially for modern commentators who assume an innate solidity of the categories, is that such a framework was necessarily incorrect to some degree, because one could not know in advance all that it was going to bring to consciousness.³⁹ The problem with this view of the world, therefore, was that limits were to be constantly defined, redefined, adjusted or abandoned, all the while preserving at all costs the general logic, i.e., the possibility to design categories and limits.

A community encounters necessarily this problem of redefinition of categories. How to be systematic—which is necessary for educational simplicity and reasons of identity—and yet accommodate new things which may be good, but without allowing the community to question the solidity of the system. Any innovation may be perceived as threatening the whole fabric.

So, the temple may be conceived of as the place where elements of the world were brought together, isolated and combined in special conditions. Now, how does one think of the word pair *pure/impure* and the word pair *sacred/profane*? For the moment, my definition of the sacred is the following: are sacred an object or person in which the passage from pure to impure (and vice-versa) is fraught, risky (because “membrane” thin?).⁴⁰ This can be tested in the case of the temple, priests, sabbath, community (marriage rules), food, as suggested by the talmudic list of five paradoxes seen above. One may therefore conceive of the Temple as a delimited place where otherwise prohibited actions or words were to be performed in purity, such as wearing an embroidered blend, pronouncing the name of God, working (or “serving”)⁴¹ even on Sabbath, killing animals and spilling blood. It is perhaps significant also that the temple itself was believed to have been built on a territory located between clearly delineated tribal units.⁴² At the Tem-

39. This is how I understand the reference to purity in B. MALINA, *Christian origins and cultural anthropology: practical models for biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 21, as a “system of space and time lines... to create and discover meaning.”

40. See É. DURKHEIM, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie*, 3rd ed. (Paris: F. Alcan, 1937). I am thinking of the high-priest’s vestments, described as fantastically transparent, in many passages of the talmudic literature. My definition accounts for the use of sacred as applied to prostitutes (see lexic for some strange uses of sacred).

41. On this verb and its meaning of “work” when applied to Levites, see J. Milgrom’s article, “The Levitical ABODA,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 61 (1970-71) 132-54. See also his *Studies in Levitical Terminology*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1970). For a striking description of the physical work done around the altar, see *Letter of Aristeas* 92-95.

42. Jos 15:8, 63 (Jud 1.21); 18:16, 28. Cf. R. de VAUX, *Histoire ancienne d’Israël, des origines à l’installation en Canaan* (Paris, Gabalda, 1971), 502-503; M. Avi-Yonah, art. “Jerusalem,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 9 (1972) 1381: Jerusalem was enclaved and practically outside of all

ple, the community could both internalize a systematic view of the universe and its partial, cautious overthrow. What constituted its sacredness was the degree of risk involved in the operation and the self-imposed restrictions in language, tools, social groupings, and behaviors. Away from it, the community could enjoy a comfortably regular view of the world as well as limited breaches of its regularity. This is how, I imagine, both the “sacred” and the “profane” created each other.

It is in this dialectical context that the role of the Temple must be understood. It was the place where transformations such as that from the unclean to the clean could be contemplated. Mary Douglas compares the activities taking place at the Temple to a kind of composting, which is an essential component of good gardening. But this metaphor may be too static, since the perennial problem is to decide what are the weeds, before proceeding to destroy them or re-use them for future benefits. The Temple maintained alive the difference between the useful and the useless, the pure and the impure, the good and the bad, but also served to elaborate these contrasts (or create them).⁴³ Another possible metaphor is that of the modern scientific procedures followed in laboratories. In a certain sense, temples were laboratories.

At the Jerusalem temple, the high priest was to be clothed with a sophisticated mixture of materials taken by authors like Josephus or Philo to symbolize the different parts of the universe.⁴⁴ The closer he was to the inner sanctum, the more sophisticated the mixture of vegetal, animal, metallic, and mineral elements in his vestments.⁴⁵ However sophisticated, though, any *mixing* had to be accepted, because it was still short of the posited nature complexity.⁴⁶ In fact, there existed an old interpretation that the high priest’s vestments had been directly given by God. The targums, especially Palestinian, seem inordinately preoccupied with tracing back this diffusion:

tribal claims. Ezechiel kept memory of Jerusalem’s dubious origins: Ez 16:1-14.

43. DOUGLAS, *Purity and danger*, 159-79.

44. BARKER, “*Beyond the veil of the temple*”.

45. As extensively shown by M. Haran (cf. note 12 above).

46. An additional complexity existed, namely that the high priest, as prescribed in Lev 16:4, was to wear only linen (tunic, underpants, belt, and headdress) on Yom Kippur, each time (4 in toto) that he entered the Holy of Holies. No one else was authorized to go beyond the embroidered curtain. On this curtain, see Josephus, *B.J.* 1.7. The people fretted over it, says the tradition. Note on another topic that is related to the discussion: after the fall of the kingdoms and the temple, the idea of management of divine presence and absence, done initially by or under kings, took another meaning. After 586 BCE, the divine presence needed to be structured on another basis, even if temporary, since there was no temple for a while, and eventually no images in the rebuilt temple. The management of access to the divinity was now done by priests and prophets.

from God's gift of proper clothes to Adam, to the coat "of many colors" given to Joseph, to Aaron's vestments, and on to the actual high priest's vestments that the Romans tried to keep under their direct supervision.⁴⁷

The religious laws concerning clothing could not be separated from their social aspect. A progressive separation of elements had been worked out, going from the complete mixture of elements within the Tabernacle and on the high priest, down to the strict separation of "profane" life: high priest, priests, Levites, Israelite men, women, proselytes, others. The *shaatnez* and *tzitzit* rules that we study here pointed to a social organization that was enforced by temple rules. It was very much alive in Josephus' days, as his account of the Levites' demand for linen clothes makes clear:

Those of the Levites—this is one of our tribes—who were singers of hymns urged the king to convene the Sanhedrin and get them permission to wear linen robes on equal terms with the priests, maintaining that it was fitting that he should introduce, to mark his reign, some innovation by which he would be remembered. Nor did they fail to obtain their request; for the king, with the consent of those who attended the Sanhedrin, allowed the singers of hymns to discard their former robes and to wear linen ones such as they wished. [...] All this was contrary to the ancestral laws, and such transgression was bound to make us liable to punishment.⁴⁸

As the text above makes fairly clear, and as we have suggested before, the concept of purity worked in everyday life. The concept of purity and

47. Some of the passages of the targumic literature are: Gen 3:7 (Jo); 3:21 (*Neofiti* and Jo; *Onkelos*; Heb. 110 of Biblioth. Nat., Paris); 27:15 (Jo); 48:22 (*Neofiti*). R. Le Déaut, *Le Targum du Pentateuque*, 1.1978.97, note 15, refers to I *Henoch* 62:15; II *Henoch* 22:8. See L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, Vol. 5, pp. 103, 283. On Roman attempts to secure the vestments, see account in Josephus, *A.J.* 18.90–95. John Hyrcanus I had deposited the vestments in the citadel of the Temple, where they remained until A.D. 36, when Vitellius, pressed by the people, wrote to Tiberius who granted the request made by the Judaeans: cf. *A.J.* 15.405. After Agrippa's death, C. Longinus and C. Fadus tried to return to the previous situation, *A.J.* 15.406–408. But the Jewish authorities were able to retain their control over clothing, *A.J.* 20.6–14. The extreme devotion surrounding these vestments made it dangerous for the Romans to change anything and give the impression that the temple functioned solely to their own advantage. Note that the practice of anointing high priests, which may have existed already from the end of the Persian period, acc. to R. de VAUX, *Ancient Israel: its life and institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 400, may have lasted until the end of the Hasmonean dynasty but was not practiced under the Herodians or the Romans. It is arguable then that the messianic significance of the clothing of the high priest would only have increased. It would have been symbolic of a struggle for political control. On the connection to Ezekiel of these vestments in the *Letter of Aristeas*, see M. HIMMELFARB, *Ascent to heaven in Jewish and Christian apocalypses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19.

48. *A.J.* 20.216 (in L.H. Feldman's translation).

impurity did not have an ideal existence, but was used for social classification. Purity and impurity were two sides of a vision of the world extending to all aspects of life. Practically speaking, however, purity could not be seen directly, but only inferred as an absence of impurity.⁴⁹ Purity could not be claimed openly as a personal quality, but only inferred as a thought or a comment on the part of another party.⁵⁰

Consequently, claims to purity could only be established by, or rather about, someone laying himself (in a different way herself) open to impurity, i.e., whose life, customs, clothing, food, were such that any impurity could be noticed at once. In Judaism, such a way of life was required of everyone but could be *fulfilled* by some better than by others, given the materiality of the signs used.

At the top of the hierarchy, the high priest was the most exposed to impurities, given the exacting number of rules that shaped his life. The possibility of failure to observe these rules was at the highest degree in his case. In fact, he was on the brink of the abyss, where impurity and purity turn into each other, where limits are blurred: this was symbolized in his clothing.

The possibility of failure was still high in the case of those people whose position demanded linen clothing (the priests), or simply in the case of those people who could afford linen. In this regard, it should be kept in mind that linen was not the common fabric in Israel. Most people were clothed in wool. To wear linen was therefore to be in constant risk of wearing forbidden kinds, since threads of wool could easily come onto the linen. One must also remember that the ancient world was a world of intimate contacts, in villages and cities. Consequently, claims of purity could be made by being very strict in one's social contacts. Expensive, brightly bleached, linen clothing gave a rich man the possibility to invite comments of praise on his purity, and therefore his righteousness, since any blemish or pollution was immediately perceptible to the eye.⁵¹

How did this refined vision of the world spread to the community at large? For Judaeans, Galileans, and other Jews, the temple served to awaken, focus, and reinforce desire. Those desires would occasionally be satisfied, sometimes thanks to various states of emergency or social upheaval. Things forbidden in the profane sphere (*ḥul*), but which were accomplished by

49. Called "clarity" (*ṭahor*). Conversely, impurity was perceived as an absence of purity, called "muddle" (*ṭame*).

50. Cf. V. JANKÉLÉVITCH, *Le pur et l'impur* (Paris: Flammarion, 1960), 5–48.

51. On the detail of these questions, see G. HAMEL, "Poverty and charity", in *The Oxford handbook of Jewish daily life in Roman Palestine*, ed. C. HEZSER, Oxford handbooks in classics and ancient history (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 308–24.

some in the sacred domain (*miqdash*), were desired by others at other times, for instance by some of the Levites in Josephus' story quoted above. The forbidden things done in sacred conditions spread slowly among the people, but only through a number of crises. Jewish history had its share of such chaotic restructuring of what soon hardened as sacred and profane spheres. At its center was the temple and its on-going debate regarding the origin, distribution, and use of power.

ABBREVIATIONS

SJT *Scottish Journal of Theology*

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