Leviticus and Hebrews . . . and Leviticus

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Prologue

For a very long period of time Leviticus (and more broadly, the Priestly Code or P) languished for lack of interest and understanding.[1] In recent years, however, there has been an extraordinary surge of scholarly attention directed to Leviticus; one thinks in particular of the widely known work of Mary Douglas and Jacob Milgrom.[2] But there are other writers, perhaps not quite so well known, whose contributions deserve to be mentioned as well. Among these are Gary Anderson, Stephen Geller, Jonathan Klawans, Israel Knohl, Baruch Levine, and Rolf Rendtorff.[3]

1. See Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 3-13.

2. Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and bibliography cited there; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991-2001); Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990).

3. Gary Anderson, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offering," *ABD* 5: 870-86; Stephen A. Geller, "Blood Cult: Toward a Literary Theology of the Priestly Work of the Pentateuch," *Prooftexts* 12 (1992): 97-124 (reprinted in *Sacred Enigmas: Literary Religion in the Hebrew Bible* [London/New York: Routledge, 1996]); Klawans, *Purity;* Jonathan Klawans, "Pure Violence: Sacrifice and Defilement in Ancient Israel," *HTR* 94 (2001): 133-55; Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995); Baruch Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989); Baruch Levine, "On the Presence of God in Biblical Religion," in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Religions in Antiquity:*

The list could easily be extended. Indeed, instead of the old disinterest and marginalization, one could say that there is now a bounty of scholarly work on the priestly sections of the Pentateuch. In this context we might note that a very early exemplar of this positive engagement with the Priestly Code is the Epistle to the Hebrews. As Richard Hays observes in his essay, there is no anti-Judaism in Hebrews: "Israel's Scripture is read as a living and active word through which God continues to speak directly to his people" and the critique of the old covenant is restricted to "the ancient sacrificial cult as a means of atonement for sins."[4] Indeed, Hebrews does not engage in a polemic against Levitical sacrifice but a sober and insightful critique of it. We find in Hebrews a theological reflection on the Aaronide priesthood and its sacrifices as a ritual system with a logical structure accessible to comprehension and analysis. This reasoned approach to a central voice in the Pentateuch invites further reflection on how that voice might have apprehended the critique and how it might have dialogically responded to it.[5]

Richard Bauckham has observed that "Second Temple Jewish theology, including early Christian theology, was primarily a tradition of exegesis, not a tradition of ideas passed on independently of exegesis. . . ."[6] This suggests that one must view biblical prooftexts as something other than window-dressing, not as mere post-facto justification for concepts arrived at by other means, but as a genuine medium of serious engagement with interlocutors from the same or earlier historical periods.

Essays in Memory of E. R. Goodenough (Leiden: Brill, 1968), pp. 71-87; Baruch Levine, "The Language of Holiness: Perceptions of the Sacred in the Hebrew Bible," in Michael Patrick O'Connor and David Noel Freedman, eds., *Backgrounds for the Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), pp. 241-55; Baruch Levine, "Mythic and Ritual Projections of Sacred Space in Biblical Literature," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 6 (1997): 59-70; Rolf Rendtorff, "Is It Possible to Read Leviticus as a Separate Book?" in John F. A. Sawyer, ed., *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas*, JSOTSup 227 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 22-35; Rolf Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

4. Richard B. Hays, "'Here We Have No Lasting City': New Covenantalism in Hebrews."

5. Samuel E. Balentine has argued, from a Christian perspective, for the ongoing relevance of Leviticus in general and the Day of Atonement in particular (*Leviticus*, Interpretation [Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002], pp. 135-139; "An 'Everlasting Statute' . . . for Jews and Christians?" Cf. Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah's Vision of Worship*, Overtures to Biblical Theology [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999], pp. 252-54).

6. Richard Bauckham, "The Throne of God and the Worship of Jesus," in Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis, eds., *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), pp. 43-69, here p. 62.

In that spirit, this essay will take the view that Hebrews has much to teach us about Leviticus. Through the lens provided by Hebrews, we may observe that P contains a proleptic response to the concerns raised by Hebrews at its very core. If this suggestion is persuasive, it would not only serve to confirm the existence of a rigorous and consistent logic posited for P in recent scholarship;[7] it would emerge as a key to P's own generative self-understanding.

1

> For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever (Heb. 7:26-28, NRSV).

> Now this is what you shall offer upon the altar: two yearling lambs, day by day, continually. (Exod. 29:38, cf. Num. 28:3)

What is the main purpose of the Priestly tabernacle and system of sacrifices whose description occupies the core of the Pentateuch? It is often assumed to be the forgiveness of sin; and indeed, verse after verse in Leviticus speaks of purification of the sanctuary and atonement of sin. The sheer bulk of material devoted to these topics, the great variety of offerings, and the detailed exposition of their associated rites all tend to obscure the much shorter and simpler programmatic statement which appears twice, with minor variation, in Exodus and Numbers, whose opening is my second epigraph quoted just above. These passages present a very different perspective on the tabernacle and sacrifices. The essential purpose of the "offerings of food" which send a "pleasing odor" to God, along with bread and wine — all of which God adjures the Israelites to punctiliously supply in a timely fash-

7. Robert S. Kawashima has recently characterized P as a "rigorous, formalist thinker" ("The Priestly Tent of Meeting and the Problem of Divine Transcendence: An 'Archaeology' of the Sacred," *JR* 86 [2006]: 226-57, here p. 256).

ion — is to cultivate and maintain the relationship between God and Israel, to assure the continuity of the Divine Presence. "And there I will meet with the Israelites, and it [the tabernacle] shall be sanctified by My Presence. . . . I will abide among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I the Lord am their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might abide among them, I the Lord their God" (Exod. 29:43, 45-46).

That last verse is particularly striking: the purpose of the Exodus from Egypt is not so that the Israelites could enter into the Promised Land, as many other biblical passages have it. Rather it is theocentric: so that God might abide with (לְשָׁכְנִי) Israel, as if God had arranged the entire Exodus drama so that he might find a home among his people. This limns a narrative arc whose apogee is reached not in the entry into Canaan at the end of Deuteronomy and the beginning of Joshua, but in the dedication day of the tabernacle (Lev. 9–10) when God's Glory — manifest Presence — makes an eruptive appearance to the people (9:23-24).

These observations, combined with certain linguistic hints which scholars have long noted, suggest that the real aim of the tabernacle is a domestication of the Sinai theophany (Exod. 19–20) — that great foundational event in Israel's covenantal memory, as well as a symbolic return to Eden, indeed to the pristine state of the world at Creation. As Moshe Weinfeld once put it, the completion of the tabernacle is parallel to the completion of the universe in Genesis.[8] And, we might add, the dwelling of the Glory in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle is at least a partial reversal of the banishment of Adam from the Garden and the divorce of God from his human creation (Gen. 3:23-24).

So our first point is the basic simplicity of the Priestly religious worldview and ritual at its core. There are profundity and power in the notion of a single rite, performed every day, morning and evening, from Sinai until the end of time, testifying to, as well as nurturing, the ongoing relationship between the Creator and Israel ("A continual burnt-offering throughout your generations, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting before the Lord" [Exod. 29:42]).

Let us now turn to the first epigraph presented above, from Hebrews. Two features of P are singled out for particular scrutiny: the continual repetition of the sacrifices, "day after day"; and the mediation of the Aaronide

8. Moshe Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord," in A. Caquot and M. Delcor, eds., *Melanges Bibliques et Orientaux en l'honneur de M. Henri Cazelles* (Kevelaer: Butzon and Bercker, 1981), pp. 501-512, here p. 512.

priesthood, represented by flawed human beings who are "subject to weakness" and therefore themselves in need of atonement. The aspects of P highlighted here — the never-ending repetition of the core sacrifices, and the imperfection of the human priests[9] — are indeed basic to the priestly system as a whole. Hebrews evaluates these features negatively, but P enthusiastically affirms these aspects of its ritual system and the theology that hovers behind it. The repetition marks an endless chain of days, linking the singular awe of Sinai with the quotidian rhythms of time's unfolding: sunrise, sunset; breakfast, dinner. What could be simpler, what could more powerfully represent the security, the sense of natural inevitability, that bonds Israel and her God?

2

But if things are so simple, why are they so complicated? Where does the massively detailed sacrificial system of P fit in with this elegantly spare picture? The answer lies in the first word of the book of Leviticus (after the prefatory phrases): "*Adam*" — "When a man . . ." (Lev. 1:2) The complexity of the system is an effect of human participation, of human interaction with the clean lines, the purity of the divine plan. Much as the rest of Genesis after chap. 1 records the destructiveness and chaos that ensues when humans inhabit the neatly constructed world of Gen. 1, so does Leviticus establish provisions for handling the human traffic in the precincts of the idealized tabernacle/microcosm. But now, instead of leading to death and banishment from the Garden, the system anticipates the footprints that humans always leave, the inevitable entanglements, the inherent messiness and imperfection of the human condition which P calls טֻמְאָה (usually translated as "[ritual] impurity").[10] It is here that our discussion of the sacrifices must begin, especially the חַטָּאת.

9. As Harold W. Attridge notes, "Hebrews is not explicitly interested in the Herodian temple and contemporary high priests, but in the Torah and the cultic system of the desert tabernacle it portrays" (*Hebrews*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989], p. 8).

Other passages in Hebrews that underscore the imperfection of the human priests and their need to bring offerings for themselves, include Heb. 5:3; 9:7. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, p. 144.

10. I am here following up on the Mishnah's aphoristic rule that "as the love is, so is the טֻמְאָה" (m. Yadaim 4:6). The context is the Sadducean critique of the Pharisaic rule that Holy Scriptures render the hands ritually impure. The Mishnah's teaching is that the goal of Sacred Scripture is to draw the reader into a world of relationships and involvements, to implicate — in the older sense of "to entangle." It is the entanglements engendered by love that leave a residue of טֻמְאָה; thus, the Pharisees argue, it is precisely works of Sacred Scripture which "render the hands impure."

One of the great contemporary scholars of Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom, has set as a cornerstone of his research the result that the חַטָּאת, conventionally translated as the "sin-offering," must rather be understood as the purification offering. Related to this is Milgrom's view that sin and impurity contaminate the sanctuary from afar. As he puts it, impurity is "a dynamic force, magnetic and malefic to the sphere of the sacred, attacking it not just by direct contact but from a distance."[11] Milgrom's views have won wide but not universal assent. For our purposes we note that his presentation of the functioning of חַטָּאת is a bit too mechanical, too automatic, especially when he calls the blood of the חַטָּאת the "ritual detergent"[12] which cleanses the sanctuary of impurities. What this elides is the covenantal context that frames the sacrificial system in general, and the blood rites in particular.[13] Blood is efficacious because it is the sign of the bond between Israel and her God. Exod. 4:24-26 (the "Bridegroom of Blood" episode) establishes the link between Israelite identity, the blood of circumcision, and kinship with Israel's God.[14] Zipporah, the daughter of a priest, knows how to placate the offended deity who threatens her husband. She takes the bloody foreskin of her son and touches the deity's feet. Her daring act saves her husband and brings to physical expression the kinship between her family and God. (Recall in this context Gen. 17, the covenant of circumcision with Abraham.) This mythic encounter sets the stage for the subsequent, more structured, examples of sacrifice we find in Exodus: the paschal lamb (Exod. 12), and the covenant-ratification sacrifices at the foot of Sinai (Exod. 24:1-12). Blood is described as a "sign," as "blood of the covenant." All this is background for the yet more highly structured and regularized rites of Leviticus.

No doctrine of substitution is hinted at in P's sacrifices. The animal is not dying in place of, for the sins of, the human. Nor does P linger over the process of the animal's death: if there is any suffering, it plays no role in the

11. Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 446.

12. Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 444.

13. The covenantal context of P is emphasized by Gary Anderson. Drawing on the earlier work of A. Davidson, Anderson writes that sins forgiven in P are "acts of disobedience which are committed within the context of a larger covenantal bond." This explains the vehemence of the prophetic critique of sacrifice: the prophets are concerned with sins "that represent advertent, gross rebellion against the very fabric of the covenant charter." Gary Anderson, "Sacrifice," p. 882.

14. See David Gelernter, "Tsipporah's Bloodgroom," *ORIM: A Jewish Journal at Yale* 3 (1988): 46-57; Ilana Pardes, "Zipporah and the Struggle for Deliverance," in *Countertraditions in the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 79-97.

ritual per se. P's mental lens never focuses on the dying beast.[15] It is true that the animal is a creature with moral standing; in fact, if someone slaughters an animal away from the tabernacle, he has "shed blood" (Lev. 17:4), that is, committed murder. But P seems not to have qualms about the animal brought to the tabernacle as sacred offering — precisely because taking animal life for sacrifice (Heb. קָרְבָּן) is "making sacred," not murder.

So we are left with blood as covenantal sign, as reminder of the kinship between God and Israel. This is amplified by 17:11, which states that "the life of the flesh is in the blood," making it particularly appropriate for representing the human self in contact with the altar of God. Our understanding of the way blood works in P, then, is not as "ritual detergent," but as gift of the self, applied to the divine table, the altar. This physical application renews and restores the sacred bond between God and Israel, collectively and individually. This is what P means by כִּפֶּר, often translated "atonement," and by Milgrom as "purgation." As Frank Gorman has said, "*Kipper* involves not only purification or cleansing, but also a restructuring of the realm of holiness. . . . *Kipper* entails not only elimination of defilement, but also realignment and maintenance of the created cultic order."[16] Similarly, N. Kiuchi, following Z. Weinberg, has noted that at least for the חַטָּאת of the Nazirite, offered on the day of the completion of his vow (Num. 6:13-21), neither "purification" nor "forgiveness" is appropriate. Rather the חַטָּאת effects "renewal of right relationship" between God and the offerer.[17]

Perhaps the clearest indication that כִּפֶּר must entail more than purga-

15. Christian A. Eberhart, "A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Remarks on the Burning Rite on the Altar," *HTR* 97 (2004): 485-93, makes the point that most contemporary scholars of sacrifice agree "that the *killing of an animal or a human being* is the basis of the sacrificial ritual." But, as Eberhart observes, the grain offering, *minhah*, does not involve the slaughter of an animal and can in some instances be substituted for an animal sacrifice (pp. 488-89). Eberhart therefore concludes that the burning on the altar is the "constitutive element of a sacrifice" (p. 491). See also idem, "Characteristics of Sacrificial Metaphors in Hebrews," in Gabriella Gelardini, ed., *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods — New Insights* (Leiden/Boston: E. J. Brill, 2005), pp. 37-64. Cf. also Ina Willi-Plein, "Some Remarks on Hebrews from the Viewpoint of Old Testament Exegesis," in Gelardini, ed., *Hebrews*, pp. 25-35. Note esp.: "So a sin-offering is no act of violence, no expiatory killing, and probably even no gift to God, for life has always belonged to God. Rather, it is a presentation of life, an act which was authorized, according to the priestly writer (P), by God himself. . ." (p. 33).

16. Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology*, JSOTSup 91 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), p. 123.

17. N. Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature*, JSOTSup 56 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), p. 15.

tion is its occurrence in connection with the two עֹלָה ("burnt offering") sacrifices at Lev. 16:24. This is toward the very end of the Yom Kippur rites, after all the special sacrifices of the day have been offered, even after the live goat has been sent out to Azazel. What then remains to be purged or atoned for? It can only be the case that כִּפֶּר here signals a return to wholeness, harmony and covenantal love. It may be that the עֹלָה offerings at this point, after the unique activities of the day are concluded, are actually the capstone of Yom Kippur: atonement has been effected, harmony restored; now right relationship, in its quotidian form, may resume.[18] To sum up: P's ritual and the theology it enacts are all about fostering and maintaining relationship between Israel and her God, creator of heaven and earth.

3

The altar referred to here thus far is the large outer altar, that is, the altar in the tabernacle's courtyard. But there was a smaller, golden altar for incense in the tabernacle proper — in the Tent of Meeting, which also contained a table for bread and a lamp stand. Beyond that, of course, was the Holy of Holies, containing the Ark of the Covenant. While most of the blood rites were performed on the outer altar, there were times when blood was applied to the inner altar. And once a year the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to apply blood at the foot of the Ark of the Covenant itself. The details are complex, but for our purposes we may observe that more severe infractions — especially those involving the high priest himself — require ritual application in inner locations, either the Tent of Meeting (Lev. 4:1-12)[19] or on Yom Kippur, the Holy of Holies (Lev. 16). My suggestion is that this schema is designed at least in part to circumvent what can be called the *paradox of self-referentiality,* which can be posed as follows: If the priest's ministrations are needed to atone for the petitioner, how can the priest (especially the high priest) atone for his own shortcomings? How can he act as both subject and object of the ritual at the same time? This is one of the chief flaws that Hebrews finds in the Levitical priest-

18. Compare Philip Peter Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World,* JSOTSup 106 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), p. 204: "The ritual ends with the re-establishment of the normative world order and the resumption of the normal offerings, performed by the high priest in his normal clothes."

19. In Lev. 4:13-21, "if the whole congregation of Israel shall err," the same ritual pattern is mandated. But if the whole congregation errs, the high priest is surely implicated, so this case is a corollary to 4:1-12, the sin of the high priest.

hood and Temple, as noted above. It would seem that P is very much aware of this concern, and defeats this paradox of self-referentiality by making use of successive, graded areas of holiness.[20] It is helpful to think schematically of the entire Israelite encampment as a nested sequence of rectangles. Within the camp is a partitioned space defining the tabernacle's courtyard where the large bronze altar stood. Within that is the Tent of Meeting; then the innermost part of the Tent, the Holy of Holies; and finally the Ark of the Covenant with its cover, the *Kapporet* and Cherubim. Atonement or restoration is found by going to a location beyond one's normal domain. The Israelite's offering is brought to the outer altar in the courtyard, but the priest must go to a more inner domain — the Tent of Meeting, or on Yom Kippur, to the Holy of Holies. Here I differ with Jacob Milgrom who assumes that severe sins attack and render impure the inner domain, even the Ark itself.[21] To the contrary, that which is innermost always remains pure. At the very core of the system is the manifest divine Presence, the Glory, which hovers in a cloud on the Ark-cover. Ultimately, all rites are directed toward this Presence. The Presence assures their efficacy; the purity and atonement which they achieve are derived by proximity to/application to it. Stephen Geller has written, "the Day of Atonement restores the shrine to its original state of purity on the day of dedication, when it was a fit repository of the Glory of the Presence. . . . Owing to the connection of the shrine to creation, the Day of Atonement may be said to leap over all history and return the cult to a state of closeness with God mankind experienced only before the rebellion in Eden."[22] But this is ultimately effected not by mechanical rubbing of ritual detergent, rather by "[he who] abides with them in the midst of their uncleanness" (Lev. 16:16).[23]

A central feature of the ritual in the Holy of Holies is the sprinkling of the blood. Lev. 16:14 states: "The High Priest shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle with his forefinger upon the eastern front of the Ark-cover; and in front of the Ark-cover he shall sprinkle seven times from the blood with his forefinger." This contact of blood, the fluid of life itself, with the precise center point of the structure of sacred space erected within the Is-

20. The dimensional correspondences and logical structure of P are clearly set out by Jenson in *Graded Holiness,* but Jenson does not develop the idea that the nested rectangle structure serves to overcome what we are calling the "paradox of self-referentiality."

21. See Jacob Milgrom, "Israel's Sanctuary: The Priestly 'Picture of Dorian Gray,'" *RB* 83 (1976): 390-99. Milgrom's views are conveniently summarized in "The Effect of the Sinner upon the Sanctuary," in Milgrom, *Numbers,* pp. 444-47.

22. Geller, "Blood Cult," p. 109.

23. See David Pardo, *Maskil le-David* on Lev. 16:16.

raelite encampment, intimates contact with God Himself whose Presence hovers over the ark-cover and who alone can effect atonement and restore the tabernacle and the cosmos to their state of original purity.

The *paradox of self-referentiality* is defeated by entering, or at least gesturing toward, the Holy of Holies. Once the holiness and purity at the system's core have been touched, they can radiate outward to the priest himself, who is then restored to his role as human mediator between God and the rest of the people.[24]

A similar approach can be seen to be at work in the highly detailed rites of priestly investiture and consecration. These are described at length, once in Exod. 29 and again in Lev. 8. Many readers no doubt completely lose the thread of interlocking events which are so carefully set out and sequenced. But it should be helpful to realize that the rite as a whole is structured to address and overcome what can be called the *paradox of initiation:* briefly, if it takes a priest to effect sacred transformation and bonding with the divine, then how could the priests themselves be consecrated when there are no priests yet to do the consecration? Here the strategy is to tap Moses himself, who during the seven days of consecration acts as a priest pro-tem, a prototype or stand-in who serves to get the system up and running and then steps out of it forever. In this strategy of employing Moses as temporary priest we may discern a deep structural logic beneath the apparent welter of complex detail on the surface of ritual events.

While we are speaking of biblical personalities who make cameo appearances in a priestly role, let us now turn to Melchizedek, who in Gen. 14 greets Abram with bread and wine and blesses him, after the latter's victory and rescue of Lot. In the Epistle to the Hebrews he prefigures Jesus as non-Aaronide High Priest. As Harold Attridge notes in his commentary, the actual blessing uttered by Melchizedek is omitted by the author of Hebrews.[25]

24. John Dunnill approaches this recognition in his *Covenant and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 99: "The logic of the Day . . . provides a necessary admission that the priesthood, which dares to exercise God's expiatory prerogative, can do so only in dependence on the imparted holiness of God. But a rigorous examination of that logic might ask how even the high priest, who is also implicated in sin, can *begin* the reconsecration process: would it not require *God himself* to initiate the holy action?" It is clear that for P, the answer is, Yes indeed. The very center of tabernacle-geometry is the Ark-cover *(kapporet)* in the Holy of Holies; it is the ultimate reservoir of divine purity, and that is why the inner blood-rites on the Day of Atonement are directed to that spot — and the Glory that appears upon it.

25. Attridge, *Hebrews,* p. 188.

That is, Hebrews focuses on Gen. 14:18 and the second half of v. 20, but omits v. 19 and the first half of v. 20. These read: "Blessed be Abram to the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth. And blessed be the most high God, who has delivered your enemies into your hand. . . ." This brings to mind the opening verses of Gen. 12, which might be called the mission statement of Abrahamic religion: ". . . and you shall be a blessing. And I will bless those that bless you, and those that curse you, I will curse, and through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth."

What Melchizedek actually *does* is to bless Abram; in fact this may be the central feature of his priestly office; it should be noted that he offers no sacrifice. Blessing is also a key role of the later Aaronide priesthood (see Lev. 9; Num. 6:22-27; Deut. 10:8; 21:5).[26]

It is worth pausing to contrast the way Melchizedek and the king of Sodom meet Abram: the former brings out bread (linked to curse in Gen. 3:19) and wine (which provokes a curse in 9:25). Melchizedek blesses Abram — who transmits blessing (14:20, 22, 23). But the king of Sodom treats Abram lightly (קלל), dismissively, in 14:21 — "Give me the persons and take the goods to yourself." His statement is at once ungrateful, crass and impertinent. He is presumably destroyed in the destruction of Sodom which had previously been described as being like "God's Garden" (13:10). Melchizedek king of Salem takes foods which had been associated with curse and makes them into expressions of greeting, acknowledgment, thankfulness — in other words, blessing. But the king of Sodom takes a "Garden of Eden" and makes it into hell. So this episode is actually a "Tale of Two Cities" — Salem vs. Sodom. (In Ps. 76:2 Salem is synonymous with Zion, or Jerusalem.) The Sodomite king belittles Abram and is swept away. By contrast, the Canaanite priest and king Melchizedek blesses Abram and receives a tithe from him, thus confirming his own priestly office. In this way Gen. 12:1-4 *begins to be realized* in Salem.

26. On this, see Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of* BRK *"To Bless" in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 96-98. Mitchell observes that "The Priestly benediction shows more clearly than any other passage how God's blessing is intimately connected to his favorable attitude. The benediction asks for God to be favorably disposed toward his people" (p. 167). And along with other scholars, Mitchell assumes that Aaron's benediction at Lev. 9:22, followed by a benediction uttered by Moses and Aaron together at 9:23, was the Priestly benediction of Num. 6:24-26. This is highly significant as it took place on the inauguration day of Aaron and his sons. As Mitchell writes, "The following theophany is God's stamp of approval on the practice of pronouncing the benediction as well as on the entire cult just founded" (p. 97).

Blessing does not promise perfection, but possibility. It provides a seedbed for growth, a window for opportunities that may emerge in the womb of time, perhaps only in some distant future, without forcing or demanding immediate answers or solutions. Blessing is dialogical; it assumes partnership, listening, community. Blessing does not offer finality — its very essence is becoming, beckoning. Thus it flourishes, and is most needed, in the not-yet-perfected world.[27] It needs to be offered again and again.

If this analysis is correct, we can hear the dialogue between Leviticus's Priestly Code and the Epistle to the Hebrews with greater clarity. Hebrews argues for perfection: for the perfect priest offering the perfect sacrifice in the heavenly Temple, once and for all.[28] For its part, Leviticus glories in the

27. It may be that this sense of fragility and vulnerability which calls for blessing repeatedly and endlessly, is related to the Bible's insistence on Abraham's Mesopotamian origin. Biblical narrative makes no secret of the fact that Israelites are not the indigenous inhabitants of the Land. Passages dwelling on this theme may be laced with ambivalence or irony, but the assertion is sometimes made with evident pride; see Josh. 24 (to be contrasted with Ezek. 16). Israel's tenure is dependent on God, on fidelity to God, on remembering origins, in Mesopotamia and ultimately in God's promise. On this see Ilana Pardes: "If other nations rely on autochthonous myths, the Bible insists on Israel's position as outsider in relation to its land" (*The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], pp. 14-15, cf. 159). Worthiness for blessing calls for receptivity and openness to the indeterminate future while honoring and remaining faithful to the fixed points of life: parents, family and origins. In this way Abrahamic blessing involves both progeny and land together.

28. "Now since the Law has a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the realities, it is never able to perfect those who draw near with the same yearly sacrifices which they perpetually offer. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, on the grounds that the worshipers once cleansed had no longer any consciousness of sin?" (Heb. 10.1-2; cf. 5:9; 9:25-26; 10:14). Whatever moral or metaphysical meaning "perfection" has in *Hebrews* (see Attridge, "Excursus: The Language of 'Perfection,'" *Hebrews*, pp. 83-87), in practical terms it surely means the ending of the need for continual sacrifices. But for P, the endless repetition signals the delicacy of the divine Presence; God's dwelling in the earthy realm is not guaranteed, not to be taken for granted. The humble acceptance of this fact, which is so important for the Prophets, is a fundamental moral facet of Israel's relationship with the Divine.

The contrast between repetition and perfection discussed here finds a parallel with regard to ablution or baptism. As Joseph M. Baumgarten has noted: "The Epistle to the Hebrews as well as Tertullian polemically proclaimed the non-repeatability of Christian baptism" ("The Purification Liturgies," in Peter W. Flint and James C. VanderKam, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years* [Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1999], II, pp. 200-212). By contrast, "In Jewish thought repentance tends to be viewed, like cleansing, as a perennial process" (pp. 209-210). Bruce D. Chilton (quoted by Baumgarten) observes that a once for all baptism is

endless repetition, the day-by-day regularity of one lamb in the morning, one lamb in the evening. It may indeed be, as Hebrews asserts, that "the Law brought nothing to perfection" (7:19).[29] Precisely for that reason, blessings are always needed, always in order. Human imperfection is anticipated, accounted for, indeed greeted with joy rather than apprehension, for it is the occasion to go deeper, to penetrate to the inner precincts of the holy domain in search of renewal and restoration, in search of the One who dwells on the Ark-cover, whose Presence is the reminder of Creation and therefore assures an endless succession of new beginnings.

"portrayed in the Epistle to the Hebrews 6:1-8. . . . But ablutions in Judaism were characteristically repeatable, and Hebrews must argue against the proposition that one may be baptized afresh" (*Judaic Approaches to the Gospels*, USFFCJ 2 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994], pp. 26-27; cf. *Redeeming Time: The Wisdom of Ancient Jewish and Christian Festal Calendars* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002], pp. 89-110).

29. As Attridge observes (*Hebrews*, p. 84, n. 63), some verses use תְּמִים in the sense of wholehearted relationship to God; see e.g. Gen. 20:5; Deut. 18:13. The Song of Moses tells us that "He is the Rock, his work is perfect" (32:4), but that is a very different statement. Similarly, we find in Ps. 19:8 that "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul," but this is still not the same claim as Hebrews makes. Ps. 19:14 which expresses the as yet unrealized hope that "then I will be perfect . . ." looks forward prayerfully to a future time.

A related problematic is that of diversity versus univocality. The very first verse of Hebrews observes that in the past, God spoke "in multiple forms and multiple fashions to the fathers through the prophets" (Heb. 1:1). As Attridge comments, this "segmented diversity" of divine revelation comprises "commandments and exhortations, oracles and stories"; one might easily add other genres as well. Again Attridge: "Hebrews' basic affirmation is that such diversity contrasts with the singularity and finality of God's eschatological speech in the Son" (*Hebrews*, p. 37). Hebrews obviously prefers the latter, but for Judaism the fact that Tanakh comprises a wide variety of voices, genres, and theological perspectives is clearly a positive feature to be appreciated. This multivocality is the basis of the midrashic method, and it continues to nourish the development of Judaism through the centuries. On this see Nehemia Polen, "Dark Ladies and Redemptive Compassion: Ruth and the Messianic Lineage in Judaism," in Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, eds., *Scrolls of Love: Reading Ruth and the Song of Songs* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 59-74. The same essay explores Judaism's theology of unperfection and its implications for messianism.

The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology

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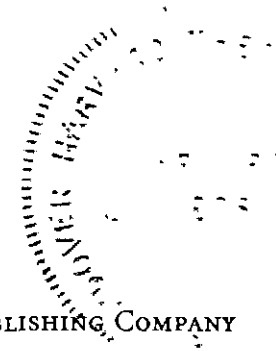

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