The Leper in Leviticus:
A Model of Israelite Redemption and Transformation

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In Jacob Neusner's book, The Mishnah, An Introduction, he writes, "In the age beyond catastrophe...in the aftermath of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E...the authorship of the Mishnah built a world that defied defeat, and stands in contrast with the world to which it speaks."[1] In many ways, the P school, creators of large sections of the Torah, wrote at a time of similar challenge and similar destruction; they too developed a text that is an idealized portrait of a world in a period of immense transformation. Years of war, religious conflict, destruction and exile had taken a great toll. And yet, P school writings make no mention of this reality. What they do convey is a picture of a cult and ritual that is tantalizing and alive. Even though there was probably no longer a temple, the writing creates a spiritual topography, so that the rituals of the priests can be internalized and the temple brought forward as an idea to serve all time.

Norman Gottwald writes, "The mythically generated fascination with cosmos and chaos should be read as a stabilizing strategy in the struggle to preserve Jewish community in the midst of disorienting exilic and restoration conditions… A fusion of cosmic myth and cultic scrupulosity in these priestly scribal traditions. .. in which every object, person and activity has its meaningful place and its proper/improper function."[2] Gottwald's notion of the cult as a stabilizing strategy is important because we know that the differentiation of thought between Israelite practice and the practice of its neighbors protected the Israelite community from other religions that were in close proximity. We can sense how threatened Israel's identity was in this period of its history. Through the intermingling of trade routes and the exchange of ideas, Israelites would have been familiar with the beliefs of their neighbors. A religion that creates significant detail of its doctrines is very likely to be in confrontation with other religions.

The P text's purity rules lead us to the same conclusion. Herbert Levine quotes Mary Douglas when she says, "purity rules emerge to protect the social structure where it feels itself endangered. Such rules defend a hierarchical society against challenges to its stability."[3] Douglas stresses how much that society felt itself to be at risk as a small monotheist nation in a sea of polytheist neighbors.

Even within the Israelite population, it is most likely that many forms of belief existed side by side, and while the text gives us the sense of a homogeneous people, they may not have been so. In fact, there is a substantial literature that conveys that the P school might have been speaking to a small minority. Expanding on this idea, David Wright notes, "It should be kept in mind that the conceptual system inherent in the Priestly literature was not necessarily fully shared by the general populace of ancient Israel. For example, a belief in the existence and activity of demons seems to be suppressed in the priestly writings.

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[1] Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah An Introduction* (New York: Jason Aronson,1989*),* IX
[2] Norman K. Gottwald *The Hebrew Bible A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press,1985*),* 474
[3] Mary Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature* (London, Oxford University Press: 1999), 62

Lay Israelites, however, may not have shared such an attitude toward the demonic."[4]

As the P writers established their canon, there were clear exclusions of neighboring practice. Mary Douglas enumerates these. "To present an ancient religion as if in its original form, but actually purged of its central elements, calls for a great effort of rethinking. Cutting out polytheism, kingship, oracles, ancestors, demons, magic, most forms of divination, healers and images,"[5] all core to the belief systems of Israel's neighbors, meant that very little of the theology of ancient Israel's contemporaries was left intact. What specifically was removed from the text? Ancestor worship was eliminated. While reference in the text is made to Israel's patriarchs and matriarchs, they are not worshipped and have little power to act or intervene. They are not spiritual beings with powers in the world of the living. Consistently, Israel's religion rooted out cults of ancestors and ghosts.

Magicians were also eliminated. This does not mean that at a popular level magicians and oracles were not consulted. Evidence leaks through the text, such as the urim and thummim, to confirm that magic and oracular behavior was popular at some level, but officially they were banned. In addition, images were banned because of their association with idolatry.

Kings were not mentioned although they played a large role in Israelite history. Diviners and seers were outlawed. No magic was permitted, and therefore, no supernatural healing. Demons were also outlawed. Taking demons out of the religion, however, left a huge gap because demons were often perceived as both initiating impurity and curing it. To counter this, as we will see, the text disconnects impurity from a belief in demons, instead classifying impurity as an attack on God's honor and God's temple. P concentrates on rules for controlling ritual contagion, teaching not to blame non-existent demons for misfortunes, but rather addressing prayers and sacrifice to God, and even more importantly, to purifying the temple through atonement.

There are a number of narrative examples that show how the P school contrasts its structure for Israelite beliefs with those of surrounding cultures. A powerful example occurs in the literature of the first plague during the exodus story, which is a P school text. Here, Pharaoh's magicians are shown as less powerful than God's emissaries Moses and Aaron. In the scene of the snakes, it is clear that the God of Israel is more powerful than any magician. What are the messages? Magic is itself to be avoided, there is no power in it, while a belief in the one true God is exemplified.[6] Why was this P text inserted? What does it show? It

[4] David P Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity* (Atlanta Georgia, Scholars Press, 1987) 4
[5] Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 4
[6] John Van Seters "A contest of magicians? The plague story in P," in *Pomegranates & Golden Bells* (ed. D Wright, D Freedman, A Hurvitz; Eisenbrauns, 1995) 569-580

demonstrates the basic beliefs of the P writers: Not magicians, not tricks, but a monotheistic God alone is worthy of praise.

This paper expands on the discussion of text inclusion and exclusion by working with a specific text, the rites of the cured leper in Leviticus chapter 14. Here we have a text that has been included in the P canon although it clearly violates basic P school beliefs. The question that we will struggle with is why this text was included given that so much was excised by generations of writers, editors and redactors. We will approach this by looking for the text's origins in ancient Near East writings and beliefs where we know there are significant similarities in content, symbolism, motif and constructs to the cured leper rite. We will then work to understand why and how this rite was co-opted by the P writers for their own purposes, and then left in the text as a dramatic counterpoint, contrasting P beliefs with an ancient Near East belief system.

But the question remains: Why was this rite left in the text? We will look at three reasons. First, it was politically astute, given the minority position that the P writers held in the community, to leave the rite in the canon. There was probably a large belief structure for it and excising it could have been political suicide. Second, with some work, the materials used in the rite, as well as its basic processes, could be made more suitable to the P belief system. Third, and most interesting, the rite touches on messages and overarching themes of holiness, liminality, and transformation. While the rite speaks to the specific life-passages, purification and reintroduction of a cured leper to the holy community, we know that subliminally it also speaks to a nation in the midst of its own exile and return, purification, transformation, and homecoming to holiness. Through analogy, the P writers were speaking to these community and national issues, and used the rite of the cured leper for this larger purpose.

The text we will examine is contained in the first eight verses of Leviticus chapter 14.

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר: ב זֹאת תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת
הַמְּצֹרָע בְּיוֹם טָהֳרָתוֹ וְהוּבָא אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן: ג וְיָצָא הַכֹּהֵן אֶל־מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה
וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן וְהִנֵּה נִרְפָּא נֶגַע־הַצָּרַעַת מִן־הַצָּרוּעַ: ד וְצִוָּה הַכֹּהֵן וְלָקַח
לַמִּטַּהֵר שְׁתֵּי־צִפֳּרִים חַיּוֹת טְהֹרוֹת וְעֵץ אֶרֶז וּשְׁנִי תוֹלַעַת וְאֵזֹב: ה וְצִוָּה
הַכֹּהֵן וְשָׁחַט אֶת־הַצִּפּוֹר הָאֶחָת אֶל־כְּלִי־חֶרֶשׂ עַל־מַיִם חַיִּים: ו אֶת־הַצִּפֹּר
הַחַיָּה יִקַּח אֹתָהּ וְאֶת־עֵץ הָאֶרֶז וְאֶת־שְׁנִי הַתּוֹלַעַת וְאֶת־הָאֵזֹב וְטָבַל
אוֹתָם וְאֶת ׀ הַצִּפֹּר הַחַיָּה בְּדַם הַצִּפֹּר הַשְּׁחֻטָה עַל הַמַּיִם הַחַיִּים: ז וְהִזָּה
עַל הַמִּטַּהֵר מִן־הַצָּרַעַת שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים וְטִהֲרוֹ וְשִׁלַּח אֶת־הַצִּפֹּר הַחַיָּה:
עַל־פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה: ח וְכִבֶּס הַמִּטַּהֵר אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְגִלַּח אֶת־כָּל־שְׂעָרוֹ וְרָחַץ
בַּמַּיִם וְטָהֵר וְאַחַר יָבוֹא אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה וְיָשַׁב מִחוּץ לְאָהֳלוֹ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים:

1 And YHVH spoke unto Moses, saying:
2 This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing: he shall be brought unto the priest.
3 And the priest shall go forth out of the camp; and the priest shall look, and, behold, if the plague of leprosy be healed in the leper;
4 then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two living clean birds, and cedar-wood, and scarlet, and hyssop.
5 And the priest shall command to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water.
6 As for the living bird, he shall take it, and the cedar-wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water.
7 And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let go the living bird into the open field.
8. And he who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave all his hair, and wash himself in water, that he may be clean; and after that he shall come into the camp, and shall stay out of his tent seven days.[7]

This text describes the first of many rituals that occur on three days in an eight day cycle for the reintroduction of the cured leper into the community. While rituals are required for three separate days, the first day, the seventh and the eighth, this paper only examines in depth the beginning of the ritual sequence, the first of these for the first day. Other rites are specified in succeeding verses in chapter 14. It is important to note that the P school, in constructing these rituals meant to encapsulate the first rite with these other rituals. In doing so, the P writers could co-opt this first ritual into something closer in spirit to what they would find theologically acceptable. While the first day ritual is clearly of pagan origin, the seventh and eighth day rituals are more in keeping with P school theology, and the entirety of the set of rituals is a triumph of P engineering; moving the ritual base from a pagan to an Israelite tradition.

The first day ritual is performed by the Priest when visible signs of illness are gone. The ritual takes place outside of the camp where the stricken person has been banished. In this ritual, cedar wood, scarlet thread, hyssop, crimson yarn, and a live bird are dipped into an earthen vessel containing a mixture of spring water and the blood of a second bird. The cured person is sprinkled with this mixture seven times, after which the live bird is set free.

It is important to understand that this ritual is not curative. In fact, the text states clearly that the leper is already cured when the Priest sees him. The P writers are very careful to note this, and to state that there are no curative powers in the ritual. The Priest does create a vivid symbolic experience though by dipping the

[7] JPS 1917 text. I've modfied the translation by substituting YHVH for Adonai in verse 1.

live bird in a liquid made blood red by the ingredients and then setting the bird free as he sprinkles the mixture seven times on the one who is to be cleansed. After that, the one to be cleansed washes his clothes, shaves off all hair on his head and face, then bathes in water. Only then is he considered clean, (tahor).

We note the repetition of the phrase “to be cleansed,” or made clean. The last time the cured leper is referred to as either a mesora or sarua (a leper) is in verse 3. Afterward, he[8] will be called hammittaher, the one being purified. The shift in language from talking about the leper in the first verse, to talking about the one to be cleansed in subsequent verses emphasizes that this about holiness, not disease. The real issue here is the restoration of purity.

The symbolism of this ritual is clear. Blood is a common detergent in Priestly and other ancient Near East rituals, taken in this case from the slaughtered bird. It is used to remove the impurity from the healed person. The blood of the slain bird magically absorbs the disease from the patient and transfers it to the water. The live bird then reabsorbs the disease when it is dipped into the water and transports it away into the open country. The transfer of impurity to the live bird leaves the person pure. The dispatch of the bird into the open country completes the ritual sequence by removing the impurity from the community and its holy places. Other similar ancient Near East rituals link the open country with the demons who reside there and who are the causes of the impurities.

It is also probable that the pagan antecedents to this ritual accompanied it with incantations and other magical and oracular behaviors that were subsequently exorcised by the P writers. We will see this again when we look at the relationships between this ritual and the Azazel ritual of Yom Kippur.

What kind of disease is leprosy? The Hebrew biblical term for leprosy, zara'at,[9] is not limited to true leprosy, i.e., Hansen's disease. It is a generic disease, embracing a variety of skin ailments, including many noncontagious types[10]. The Bible writers used leprosy to represent a series of skin diseases, and there are many forms of the disease cataloged in the text. One form matures through a phase of drying and flaking of the skin, and, as in Miriam’s case, leaves the body covered in white scales.

Since leprosy was not especially contagious, why was it specifically called out in the text? At its core, leprosy is a breakdown of the body’s cover, changing the texture and content of the skin layer, exposing what is beneath the skin and

[8] Even though the male pronoun is used, we know that both males and females were susceptible to leprosy.

[9] Encyclopedia Judaica, like its Greek equivalent lepra (LXX and New Testament)

[10] Encyclopedia Judaica, Thus, the leprosy of Miriam was transient (Num. 12:10–15) and that of Naaman did not prevent him from mixing freely in society (II Kings 5). Probably only those actually banished from their fellowmen were true lepers, e.g., the four lepers forced to live outside Samaria (II Kings 7:3–10) and King Uzziah, who was permanently quarantined in separate quarters (II Chron. 26:19–21).

mixing the skin with layers underneath. The P writers emphasize separation at every opportunity, readily apparent in the Gen 1 story, and so leprosy, which violates conditions of separation, receives specific mention in the text.

But there is more. If we look at other highlighted impurity states in the same few chapters of the text, we see mentioned women who are pregnant and men and women with genital discharge. This list might be viewed as arbitrary and artificial. Milgrom says though, "The conclusion is inescapable that the impurities entered into this list have intrinsic meaning in themselves, and were selected because they serve a larger overarching purpose."[11]

What is this purpose? Milgrom continues, "The bodily impurities in the above list focus on four phenomena: death, blood, semen and skin disease. Their common denominator is death. Blood and semen represent the forces of life, their loss, therefore signifies death."[12] In the case of leprosy this symbolism is made explicit. This becomes obvious in Aaron's request to Moses to heal Miriam 'Don't let her be like a dead (fetus) which, when it comes out of its mother's womb, half of its flesh is consumed (Num 12:12)' Milgrom continues, "The wasting of the body, the common characteristic of all biblically impure skin diseases symbolizes the death process as much as does the loss of blood and semen."[13] This is the reason for these groupings of impurities. These criteria involve the dichotomy of life and death. Since God, for the P writers, represents the ultimate in life, anything that is akin to death is regarded as impurity. Illnesses such as leprosy produce decaying flesh that is most akin to corpses, and so those afflicted are regarded as extremely impure and all of these conditions drain life. So, viewed this way, leprosy ranks at the same level of seriousness as a woman's loss of blood after childbirth and as genital emissions. "In body logic terms they are equivalent threats to the integrity of the living being. The breakup of the skin ceases the mandated separation."[14]

There is a complementary viewpoint espoused by Mary Douglas "that the breach of the body's containing wall evidenced by the escape of vital fluids and the failure of its skin cover are vulnerable states which go counter to God's creative action when he set up separating boundaries in the beginning. The waters were contained and separated in Gen 1. Everything in creation is arranged in order, kept apart from things in a higher order."[15] When confronted with leprosy, the P writers experienced an acute separation problem and saw the disease as a breach of God's intention to create a pure world.

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[11] Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York, Doubleday, The Anchor Bible, 1991, 889
[12] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 890
[13] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 835
[14] Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature, 190*
[15] Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature, 190*

The sources and building blocks of the ritual for the cured leper have clear origins in Mesopotamian and Hittite practices. David Wright decomposed these ancient Near East rituals into their elements and developed 10 purification motifs, variations on a theme that appear in Hittite rituals[16]. While not all of these are evident in the leper ritual, seven are. These are transfer,[17] detergents,[18] substitution,[19] analogy,[20] concretizing,[21] disposal,[22] prevention,[23] and invigoration.[24] Together these form a large group of building blocks for the assembly of ritual.

Here is an example of a transfer motif from a Hittite ritual:

> I have waved over Telpinu this way and I have waved that way
> I have taken from Telpinu's body his evil.
> I have taken his malice. I have taken his fury. I have taken rage[25].

This example of concretizing in a Malli ritual uses threads, which survive as a motif in the ritual for the cured leper.

> The old woman places a thread on the man's knees.
> The old woman places it upon his head.

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[16] Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity*, also includes entreaty, appeasement, and annulment among the 10 motifs, even though these latter three are not included in the rite of the cured leper 45

[17] Transfer occurs when an evil is removed from a person and transferred to another object or living being that becomes the bearer of the impurity. This may be performed by waving or moving an object or animal over the person. In Akkadian, the word kuppuru means to purify by actual or symbolic wiping. (Wright, 292). Notice how close in origin the word kuppuru is to kipper in Hebrew.

[18] Detergents are liquid, paste-like, powdered, or other similar substances, for example water, wine, clay, plants, flours, salt, blood, fire, and various mixtures. Detergents remove impurities directly through direct application without an element of transfer. Wright, 34

[19] In Substitution, an evil is removed and put on another object or animate being. The evil is not just transferred for the purpose of disposal, but it is transferred so that the consequences of the evil will fall on the new bearer of the impurity. Wright, 37

[20] In the Analogy motif, purification occurs by metonomyically comparing the impure condition of the person with a character that symbolizes the desired state of purity. Analogy is most effective when it can be acted out through the ritual materials or environment. Wright, 39

[21] Concretizing is another motif where abstract intangible evils are made symbolically concrete. Certain materials that represent the evil are placed on the patient's body and then removed. Wright, page 41. Threads, often colored, are also used and then discarded freeing the person of the evil, Wright 40.

[22] The Disposal motif is manifested when evils or materials considered to be infected with evil or symbolizing evil are finally discarded. Wright, 43

[23] Prevention –This motif is evident in acts that seek to keep an evil from returning after it has been dispelled or to prevent it from having an effect in the first place. Wright, 44. In a Malli ritual, cathartic materials loaded with evil are buried and secured in the ground with pegs to prevent the escape of impurity. Note the similarity of this ritual with the burial of the earthenware vessel in the bird ritual used to hold the blood liquid.

[24] Invigoration so that after the evil has been removed, rites and prayers are performed to bring health and well-being to the patient. Wright, 45

[25] Telpinu Myth quoted by Wright, 33

She says: “Whoever keeps binding him and bewitching him, now,
I am taking the sorcery from him and giving back to its master.
She winds the thread around the figures.[26]

While these building blocks are powerful in their own right, they become even more powerful when used together in a single ritual. I have aligned the myth with the building blocks that Wright established earlier in this sequence by listing the building block in italics following the sentence.

From the Mesopotamiam Asakki Marsuti series:

He cannot sleep. He cannot rest.
He has caused his god concern.
Marduk noticed. “Whatever I know. Go my son!
Take a white goat of Dumuzi.
Lay it near the sick person.
Remove its heart.
Place it in the hand of the man *(Transfer)*
Recite the incantation of Eridu.
Wipe the man with the goat whose heart you removed and with bread and dough. *(Transfer)*
Pass censer and torch alongside of him.
Dump the materials out in the street.*(Disposal)*
Draw a flour circle around that man. *(Prevention)*[27]

These ancient Near East rites and motifs influenced not only the ritual of the cured leper, but a number of other important rituals that were incorporated in the P canon, as well. Here we look at two: The azazel rite, which is central to the content of the ritual of Yom Kippur, and the Parah Adumah, rite which purifies a person who has been in contact with a corpse. These are paradigmatic examples of other rituals that incorporate significant, ancient Near East content, and which were also included in the canon by the P school. We can draw several conclusions about the cured leper rite by closely examining these other two rites.

First, let us look at the close ties between the rites of the cured leper and the sacrificial rites of Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur two goats are used, just as two birds are used in the rite of the cured leper. The first goat supplies blood for sacrifice, as does the first bird. The second goat is pushed into the open field just as the second bird similarly escapes into the open field. There are other similarities as well, such as the daubing and sprinkling rituals in both the leper purification and the Yom Kippur sacrifice ritual.

These similarities lead us to a conclusion that the rites of the cured leper and this Day of Atonement ritual may have a common background and origin. However,

[26] Wright *The Disposal of Impurity*, 42
[27] Wright *The Disposal of Impurity*, 68

there is an important difference. In the Yom Kippur rituals, the surviving goat is released to a named place, to Azazel, while the live bird is just released to the open field. Wright discusses the likely origin of Azazel. “The evidence suggests that Azazel is the name of a god or demon. This is suggested first by the parallelism between the designation ‘for YHVH’ and ‘for Azazel’ (in the Yom Kippur ritual). Second, the goat is sent out to the wilderness, which is a place of habitation for demonic characters. Third, in postbiblical literature, Azazel appears as a full-fledged demonic being. Last, though the etymology of the name is not certain, it is best explained as a metathesized form of ‘zz-l’ meaning something like ‘fierce god’ or angry god.”[28]

At this point, we should stress that Azazel becomes, in P’s hand, a transitional element from the demonic to something more acceptable. It is likely that Azazel was transformed from a potent demon, as the etymology of the name suggests, to an inactive one with no real role to play, other than to be a general place to which sins can be dispatched. We can imagine that this transition, which keeps the name of Azazel, is an important part of this ancient ceremony of atonement. It was brought forward and transformed by the P writers, and the reason for keeping the name at all is because the Israelites demanded it. So while the name was kept, it was made into something much less powerful. In fact, the goat is not sacrificed to Azazel; it is merely sent to him.

Wright speculates further about Azazel, and its incorporation into the P literature. “That there was a preexistence to this rite is indicated by the figure Azazel. It makes little sense to suppose that a depersonalized demon with little functional purpose as a demon was cast in a rite that originated with the priestly legislators. We would expect that the P writers would have constructed the rite without such a figure. Azazel as presented by the text can only be part of the baggage of a rite already in existence, which was taken over by the Priestly writers and reformulated to accord with Priestly conceptions. The reformulation left the personality depersonalized. What was Azazel like in the earlier non-Priestly form of the rite? We can only speculate broadly from similar non-biblical rites. He could have been an angry deity causing havoc among people. If so, then the goat could have been an appeasement offering.”[29] While the rite of the cured leper does not have a specifically named demon as the target place of the live bird, we can speculate that the name of the demon was probably known in a more ancient time, and was dropped, perhaps as a compromise to the rite’s inclusion. Still the ties between these two rites are strong, and the rite of the cured leper most likely had demonic ties that were exorcised by the P writers.

There are also significant similarities with the Parah Adumah rites which purifies a person in contact with a corpse. This rite, and the rite of the cured leper, use the same materials and have the same exorcism qualities. Milgrom associates

[28] Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity*, 24
[29] Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity*, 6

the red cow rite with the leper rite and shows many similar attributes that are hallmarks of a demonic underpinning of the Parah Adumah ritual.[30]

It is important to understand that the rite of the cured leper was one of a series of rites of common origin that were included in the text. In the Azazel and Parah Adumah rites, the names of demons were left in, although they were depersonalized and made less potent. In the ritual of the cured leper, the P writers felt powerful enough to delete that name, although the power of the ritual is still anchored in an alien belief system.

Let us shift our attention now to the rite of the cured leper itself and look at each element of the rite in detail. The text tells us that the priest inspects the cured leper's skin, and it if has healed, he orders the ingredients needed for the ritual: two live clean birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop. The priest orders one of the birds slaughtered over fresh water in an earthen vessel, and the bird's blood mixed with the other ingredients. The blood mixture is then sprinkled on the cured leper. We can understand the ritual and the sprinkling as magic from the standpoint of transfer, the essence of the illness transferred from the person to the bird.

Each of the ingredients in this ritual can be viewed as a symbol in itself and through the force of its cumulative effect when used together with the other ingredients. In combination, these are also powerful universal symbols of life, death, and transition. The liquids, with the addition of the redness of both the cedar and the string, symbolize an intensified blood, "blood squared." Levine notes that when the liquid is sprinkled on the leper, "it functions metonymically to allow him or her to re-experience the discoloration of the scaly skin disease."[31] To redden the skin again is to reintroduce the cured leper to life, symbolically returning the cured leper from the dead.

> The birds are chosen because they represent both life and death, the two birds bringing the symbolism of the death and rebirth of the cured leper. The bird that flies away takes the disease far from the community.
>
> The overlapping of these meanings makes the bird a potent, complex symbol. As a living, organic entity, it can be linked with the human being. Its ability to soar links it with the divine. The bird is a metonymic substitution, through context and symbol, so that the bird's essence and blood work on behalf of the cured leper.

[30] Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary Numbers* (Philadelphia:The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 277

[31] Herbert J.Levine *Sing Unto God A New Song A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1995), 5

Cedar[32] brings strength and its red color and fragrance. Of all the woods with magical powers, cedar might have been selected because of the intensity of its red color. We also know that wood was frequently added to water in Mesopotamian purification rites.

Hyssop[33] is a small plant in contrast to the mighty cedar. While cedar represents haughtiness, hyssop is a symbol of lowliness. From this, the rabbis derived the lesson that man should ever humble himself. The hyssop also functions as a natural brush to distribute and sprinkle the blood mixture. The liquid into which it is dipped adheres to it in the form of droplets. In other biblical texts, hyssop also has purification value. From Psalms: “Also, purify me with hyssop, and I shall be pure.”[34] Hyssop, like cedar, also brings fragrance; both provide a pleasing aroma.

Crimson Yarn[35] brings its bright red color, and it also has precious value. In adding the crimson yarn, the color red is further intensified, countering and reversing the death process, which is so visually represented by the

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[32] Jehuda Feliks, *Encyclopedia Judaica,* Mentioned 70 times in the Bible, they are described, on account of their beauty, hardiness, and longevity, as "the cedars of God" (Ps. 80:11), and as "the trees of the Lord" (ibid., 104:16). The cedar is the symbol of the tallest tree in contrast to the hyssop, which typifies the lowest (I Kings 5:13), and the fact that the Lord's thunder splits cedar is a measure of its force (Ps. 29:5). The timber was used for the walls and ceilings of houses, for masts (Ezek. 27:5), and in the building of the First, as well as the Second Temple (Ezra 3:7). Several trees of Lebanon, foremost among them the cedar, are mentioned in the prophetic vision of the flowering of the wilderness (Isa. 41:19). It develops slowly but is longeval, the estimated age of some surviving cedars of Lebanon being more than 1,000 years. It is fragrant and yields cedar oil as well as an aromatic resin.

[33] Jehuda Feliks, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, small plant that grows in rocks and stone walls. In the Bible, it is contrasted with the lofty cedar of the Lebanon (I Kings 5:13). The two were used together for purposes of purification—in the preparation of the ashes of the red heifer (Num. 19:6), as well as in the water for the purification of the leper (Lev. 14:4) and of the house smitten with leprosy (ibid. 14:49). In Egypt a bunch of hyssop was used for sprinkling blood on the Israelites' doorposts (Ex. 12:22). It was also used for sprinkling the water of purification (Num. 19:18). Several reasons were given for the choice of hyssop for purposes of purification. A homiletic interpretation holds that this small plant symbolizes humility in contrast with the cedar, which typifies pride, their union demonstrating that man should humble himself before his Creator. Practical reasons for its choice are that "the ash of the hyssop is good and plentiful" (with reference to preparing the ashes of the red heifer, Tosef., Par. 4:10), and that "it is effective in counteracting an offensive odor" (R. Samuel Sarsa on Ibn Ezra's comment to Ex. 12:22). The tractate Parah, which deals with the laws of the ashes of the red heifer, contains morphological details about the structure of the hyssop plant: its lower part is woody (Par. 11:8), its stalks branch out sideways, and at the top of each are clusters of at least three buds (ibid. 11:9).

[34] Psalm 51:9

[35] Jehuda Feliks, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, biblical tola'at shani, which yields a dye, called in the Bible shani, tola, karmil, and in rabbinic literature zehorit, which was extracted from the body of the "crimson worm" (carmine), the Kermes biblicus. A brilliant, beautiful, and fast red dye, it was used for dyeing the curtains of the Tabernacle (Ex. 26:1) and the garments of the high priests (ibid., 39:2); in the purification rites of a leper (Lev. 14:4–6) and of a house affected by leprosy (ibid., 51–52); and it was added to the ashes of the red heifer (Num. 19:6). Crimson-dyed clothes were costly (Lam. 4:5).

deterioration of the person stricken with leprosy. Colored yarns were also decorative devices that made an animal, in a transfer motif, more attractive to a deity. However, for the writers of the text, its preciousness was also important in addition to its red color. It is a component in the curtains of the tabernacle and the priestly garments.

The water, mayim chayyim, living water, also adds life. The waters are called living because they must come from a flowing source. They do not cease, like the living person who never ceases. Living or spring water is also a common element in other ancient Near East purification rites. It is heavily used in pagan settings to exorcise impurities. Milgrom comments, "To avert evil, the intended victim or surrogate, in the case of the wife, is either aspersed with holy water or immerses himself in a river seven times facing upstream and also seven times facing downstream while releasing gifts to Ea the god of the river. The persons asperse and/or bathe (they also change their clothing), but the goal is to ward off evil."[36] In these ancient Near East rituals, rivers are also typical places for disposal of impurity, because they are the place where demons live. The evil of bad omens may be dispersed of by sweeping them into a river. Speaking of these waters, Wright says "rivers and other bodies of water are an accessible aspect of the larger cosmological world."[37]

For the P writers, though, mayim chayim is transformed from its early roots in ancient Near East rituals. It is not so much an appeal to a river deity from whom the impurity itself is generated and to which it returns, or an effort to ward off a specific evil of the river god, but mayim chayyim forms a key ingredient that shouts life. The waters are living, and they impart life. There is no demon involved. The goal is not to ward off evil, but to use water, already a strong ritual element in P literature to symbolize life.

Rites involving hair are also common in ancient Near East rituals. "To cut the hair is to separate oneself from the previous world. In the shorn hair, there resides a portion of the old personality ready to be transformed. In its form, color, length, and arrangement, it is a characteristic distinguishing an individual as much as a group, and it is easily recognized."[38]

The cured leper is then daubed with blood and oil on the extremities: the right ear, right thumb, and right toe. Levine brings the oil and the blood to their organic and magical essence when he says, "oil and blood are the life juices of the vegetable and animal realms, living matter reduced to its essential state[39]. By anointing the right side, the connection to life is symbolically strengthened. Protection is offered to whatever lies in wait on the left side of the body, the

[36] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 864
[37] Wright *The Disposal of Impurity,* 266
[38] Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), English Translation, *167*
[39] Levine *Sing Unto God a New Song*, 45

weaker side, and the side which, ”universally in traditional society symbolizes the profane, demonic or shadow side of consciousness, often connected to death.”[40] The purpose of the anointing rite is to both purify and ward off evil. And like the consecration of the priests, which uses the same anointing symbolism, it is a rite of passage. Moved to the stage of the reentry of the cured leper, the blood on the ear, thumb, and toe protects him as he moves through the liminal stages of his reentrance into the community.

Ancient Near East rituals also have strong rites of ritual daubing. As in the rite of the cured leper, it is always the vulnerable parts of bodies and structures, for example, the covers and entrances that are smeared with magical protective substances often derived from organic materials. We can see that the blood-daubing of the altar’s extremities, its horns for example, closely resembles the blood-daubing of the extremities of the priests (and the leper).

While there are similarities in the frameworks and building blocks, and in the way ritual materials are used, between ancient Near Eastern rites and the P school’s writing, there are also significant differences. These differences fall into four classes: assumptions about the causes of impurity, the goals and functions of the removal of impurity, the structure and process of impurity removal, and the result of impurity removal. The table below highlights these differences.

When these differences are examined, we can conclude that although many of the motifs were indeed borrowed from ancient Near Eastern cultures, the theology of the P writers makes itself apparent in the sometimes-subtle transformation of these rituals. Their structure would feel comfortable to an Israelite familiar with these rituals from neighboring belief systems, but still there is a sense of a unique approach, and a coherence within what is an overall, a radically different philosophical underpinning.

[40]Levine *Sing Unto God a New Song*, 45

Category	Ancient Near East	P school
Causes of impurity	Demonic influence, e.g., spell of a sorcerer, arbitrary attack by a demon on a specific person.	Cultic impurity, violation of sanctity, not moral impurity or disease. Not arbitrary. God's expectations are disclosed in the covenant relationship.
Goal of impurity removal	Exorcism of demons of the afflicted person, appeasement of angry deity.	Protection of sanctuary, restoration of sanctuary and camp's holiness. Patient does not come to Priest for therapy.
Structure of impurity removal	Focus on magic. Actual demon in its animal or spirit form sent back to place of origin, e.g., the river. Great emphasis on technical ability of healer and relationship of healer with healing deity.	Focus on purification. Impurity banished to open field or sky, to remove impurity from both person and community, but no demonically active force. No emphasis on technical ability of healer. Healing comes from God.
Result of impurity removal	Healing comes from healer. Person is cured.	Healing comes from God. Person already cured, Sanctuary made holy. Cultic impurity removed.

So, why was this rite kept, when similar rites were eliminated? We have to expand our notion that this rite was retained for the negative reason that the masses insisted, to include the idea that, as Milgrom notes, "because from the priestly point of view it presented vividly and forcefully the very battle and victory of life over death[41]" Every element represents life: the live birds, the living waters, the blood and reddening ingredients all shout "life." As the P writers conceptualized God, this was a God of life, and when afflicted with leprosy one would be as close to death as one could be, at the opposite end of the spectrum from life. Milgrom continues, "The entire purification process is nothing but a ritual, a rite of passage, marking the transition from death to life." These are liminal stages, stages of transformation, and of reabsorbtion by the community. As the cured leper reenters his community, his home, and his sanctuary, he passes from impurity to holiness and from death to life, and is reconciled with his God." [42]

In summary, the theme of this ritual, its leitwort, is life. Mayyim chaim is used, and the word "living" is repeated over again in the text. Every part of this ritual,

[41] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 889
[42] Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 889

every ingredient, screams life. The blood, the symbol of life, is added to the living waters; the red yarn and the red cedar add to the red quality. This rite restores the cured leper to life.

In addition to the frameworks and themes already outlined, we know that the P writers understood the powerful universal notions of liminality and rites of passage. We see these ideas throughout the text, and we know they are incorporated in the ritual of the cured leper. In early part of the 20th century, Belgian anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, showed that rituals are sacred passages, that explain how fragments of an individual's life cycle connect to each other, and how they relate to a community's experience of itself as a distinct people.

According to Van Gennep, all rituals share a basic three-part structure that includes separation, transition, and reincorporation. Separation rituals are essentially a reenactment of death. As Aaron says on seeing Miriam's leprosy, "let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away" (Numb 12:12). Van Gennep associates the middle moment, the moment of transition, with the crossing of an actual threshold, limen in Latin, to characterize this pivotal phase of ritual action. To cross a threshold is to position oneself in a new world.

Victor Turner,[43] who further developed Van Gennep's theories, believed that ritual liminality, the experience of being physically separated from the ordinary symbolism and flow of life, and brought into a ritual space highly charged with vivid symbols and strong and dramatic emotions, is fundamentally transformative and regenerative, not only for the individual, but also for the community. The liminal energy that such rituals unleash creates community and recycles spiritual energy. Rituals such as these have the power to shape both an individual's identity and society's experience of itself as a whole.

Van Gennep's three-part structure maps exactly to the ritual undergone by the cured leper. First the leper is separated from the community and sent out from the camp. The camp represents holiness and community. It is the place within the cultic topography where God and the people share holy space. Outside the camp, the leper is removed from holiness, ritually ostracized from the standpoint of the holy community. Then the cured leper undergoes a series of transformative experiences that link blood and life and death and rebirth as the bird soars toward the skies. Turner suggests that ritual symbols condense and unify a number of polarized meanings. An example of this is that the blood mixture is both a symbol of life and death. One bird must be killed in order to acquire new life, but that killing paradoxically marks the restoration of life to the recovered leper.

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[43] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975)

These rituals create a dramatic reenactment of the leper's own journey and mirrors the leper's return from death to life. The ritual process undergone by the leper is also a movement from alienation to communion. "When a man who has been thought dead returns home and wants to be reintegrated into his former position, he is required to pass through all rites pertaining to birth, childhood, and adolescence. He must again be initiated."[44]

This ritual is an elaborate dance involving separation from the camp, a place of divinity, created order and holiness, and once cured, he undergoes a waiting period, then exorcism, cleansing, sacrifices, and transformation. It is striking how many liminal elements are evoked in this extended ritual of separation, transitions and re-incorporation. Levine writes "liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to the wilderness. The Israelite leper, in going to the wilderness, and in coming back from it, participates in rituals of symbolic mourning and rebirth, and while there, is invisible to the community."[45]

Van Gennep continues with an essential concept. "For groups, as well as individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn."[46] By including the community in the notion of transformation, Van Gennep extends the concept, and I believe this is exactly what the P writers had in mind. In writing about the transformation of the cured leper, by analogy, the P writers were speaking to every Israelite, who walked in these same shoes in the wilderness. Each Israelite, and the community as a whole, was also being transformed from exile to holiness in a mirrored set of processes.

The specific actions that the P writers proscribe for the ritual of the cured leper unfold through analogy and metaphor to include both the physical objects used in the rite, and their meaning in a larger spiritual context. Mary Douglas says, "Meanings are not carried primarily along verbal channels, but conveyed obliquely by reference to established analogies."[47]

As we understand these rituals now as part of an unfolding narrative and a sequence of metaphors, we cannot help but realize that the mishkan, referenced so frequently as part of this extended ritual, is not just an elaborate setting for these rituals, but more crucially, it is a religious ideal. The mishkan is not a place in this world, but it is the world in essence. It is a bridge between two worlds, one of ordinary experience and one of transcendent experience, the theology of creation rendered in architecture. The Temple belongs neither to the visible nor to the invisible world completely, but with respect to the two, it is a liminal zone, partaking of the reality of each. "The temple can, therefore, best be seen as the

[44] Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 189
[45] Levine *Sing Unto God a New Song*
[46] Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*. P 189
[47] Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature*

threshold or margin where these two worlds of consciousness come into contact. Ritual activity takes place in this liminal zone. [48]

From the P writer's standpoint, the mishkan defines a place of holiness that connects heaven and earth and makes it the center of the spiritual world. The mishkan supports a cosmic drama. This drama is fully realized in the setting that the P writers create. The allusion begins in the creation story, and is extended in the Sinai episode, the building of the mishkan in the desert, the laws of animal sacrifice, and the rite of the cured leper. Through analogy, each of these builds on the next, and a framework is created on which the entire text stands.

Mary Douglas shows how the text is itself designed to be a replica of the proportions of the mishkan, with clear text divisions that replicate the three sections of the mishkan. Even without the physical mishkan, the reading or hearing of the text would bring to mind its former glory. Through analogy and constant reference, the mishkan is kept alive as a series of metaphors and concepts. These concepts carefully weave through the entire P text and have as their central idea that the parallels between bodies and the mishkan allow one to stand in for the other. So just as the body and the mishkan can be analogues for each other, the emphasis on contamination and uncleanness of the body spills over to the mishkan. Purifying the body replicates atonement and restores the sanctity of the tabernacle.

There are also extensive parallels between Creation, Sinai, animal sacrifices, and the mishkan. Each was divided into three zones, Sinai was revealed in three layers of holiness, each zone a further step toward approaching God. The creation story is also easily divided into two segments, each containing three days of creation. There are also strong parallels between Creation and the mishkan, which are revealed in midrashic commentary. Douglas adds further to this notion of three zones, when she elaborates on how animals are to be sacrificed on the altar.[49] The mishkan itself is divided into three zones, and the camp itself is similarly structured into places of holiness, purity, and impurity. David Wright calls this a "cultic topography,"[50] a graduated system of holiness.

These three zones also mirror the experience of the leper being readmitted to holiness, who also goes through three separate rituals of re-admittance to the community, each step restoring him closer to a relationship with God. Remember that the text only addresses the cured leper once as a mesora, a leper. Every other time, the text shifts focus to the notion of tahor, of purity: Then he shall be pure. The switch to the word vetaher in verses 8,9 and 20 occurs three times in three separate sections. Each "vetaher" indicates that another layer of impurity has been removed. In total, there are three stages of purification, matching to the three levels of sanctification of Sinai, the three sections of the mishkan, and the

[48] Levine, *Sing Unto God a New Song*, p43
[49] Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature* 54and 97
[50] Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity,* 231

three sections of the sacrificed animal. Further, this rite of purification matches the structure of the mishkan, which is also layered in this three-fold model. This ritual for the purification of the cured leper is also meant to evoke all of these other rituals powerfully and is integrated into the sweeping flow of the text.

This ritual also speaks powerfully to the community of Israel, which was itself in a state of liminality during the time of the creation of the P school literature; the same state of liminality as the leper. The condition of exile is fundamentally liminal. As this work was created, Israel itself stood on the threshold between its past and its future. Lying between two realities, Israel could be envisioned as essentially dead, a dry streambed, yet also something swarming with potential, a field ready to be nourished by winter rains. The leper, and Israel itself, were poised at this same gate of liminality, a time when both were most open to the paradoxical nature of existence. At that moment, Israel, and the leper, no longer had a sacred center in which to enact the cherished rituals so lovingly depicted.

Let us summarize and conclude. This paper addresses the question: Why was the rite of the cured leper left within the P literature? Clearly it was a pagan rite and it could have been excluded. While it is certainly likely that the community demanded that this older rite be included in a new theology, the reasons for including it go beyond this. First, its most potent magical and demonic aspects could be excised. Second, powerful new meanings could be associated with its basic components, and the rite could be expanded to include new elements that were more aligned with P theology. For example, the rite was changed from a healing process with demonic overtones to one of sanctifying a monotheistic God, and atoning for the defilement of the mishkan.

Most important though, the ritual was included because it lent additional support to the entire text, which by analogy shows that states of holiness are within reach. For this purpose, a roadmap is included. Through subtle symbolism, the cured leper, the community, and the mishkan are all one. Our role, according to P, and the role of Israel, is to aim toward holiness and re-sanctification.

We can understand this remarkable capacity of ritual by way of an analogous breakthrough moment in Shakespeare's The Tempest, quoted by Levine. "The drama is not staged simply so that we might marvel at the magic of Propsero and his servant Ariel, or laugh at the drunken antics of Stepahno and Trinculo. The play is staged because it is about us and for us: our humanness, our capacity for sin and error, but also for mercy, forgiveness, and new beginnings."[51] Something similar happens through this ritual. Both the leper and, by extension, the community of Israel, are made holy. Both sense the potential of emerging through a liminal time into a new relationship with God.

[51] Levine, *Sing Unto God a New Song*, 72

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