The Problem of Magic and Monotheism in the Book of Leviticus

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Abstract

The article deals with some of the theses advanced in Mary Douglas's later works (In the Wilderness, Leviticus as Literature, and Jacob's Tears), and in particular with her claim that magic and divination were outlawed in the priestly conceptions of the reformed religion of Israel. Her position here relates to her basic thesis that the priestly writings promoted a renewed religion more abstract, more orderly, and more fully theorized than the religions in the Israelite ancient Near Eastern environment. I show that the transformation of Israelite religion in the exilic-post-exilic period was less radical and that the concept of monotheism had no effect on certain ritual practices that could be considered magic, because their concept was in essence theistic.
To study the book of Leviticus as an anthropologist has been a project very dear to my heart. It seemed far beyond my reach. Gross superstitions, naïve magic, and immoral gods, were explained by reference to moral evolutionism. The mind of the primitive in aeons past had been hampered by illogical mental habits and proneness to letting emotions govern reason, and the same handicaps were thought to afflict present-day backward peoples. For some time I had realized that Leviticus was not as much in the forefront of current biblical research as it deserved, and had been longing for a seminar that I could attend in which the hoary old problems could be discussed anew. In 1995 John Sawyer and Paul Morris organized a conference on Leviticus at Lancaster University. Purity and Monotheism (JSOTSup. 106. NY: Doubleday. 4. This is merely a minor ritual disability. The book of Leviticus is an example. it gives the priest instructions for how to prepare an animal for sacrifice. The technique is to match everything that has been said in the first round by a second round which enriches. The twice repeated lists of prohibited sexual relations (chs. Leviticus. to the largest animals. and with one of the significant perorations of this book: the invocation of a perpetual statute. a covenant for ever. to be burnt. salt.10 is that the first lists deal with the individual's duties. and the second with the public obligations of the community. Holy Things'.1-25. and the rules for cereal offerings. Another problem is the lack of clarity regarding the question, what exactly is meant by les espèces naturelles, regarding the question of the so-called totemism. Although the term is not explicitly mentioned in the sacrificial instructions in Leviticus 4–5, Leviticus 16 explicitly states that the blood sprinkled “inside the veil” (v. 15) and elsewhere in the Tent of Meeting (16b) is used to purge ( ) the adytum and the Tent “of the pollutions ( ) and transgressions of the Israelites, including all of their sins” (v. 16). For a comprehensive summary, see Walter Houston, Purity and Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law (JSOTSup 140; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 124–80. 25 This piece of evidence deserves a separate study.