

DAVID BIALE

BLOOD AND BELIEF



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THE CIRCULATION OF A SYMBOL
BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS

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Pollution and Power

Blood in the Hebrew Bible

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you to ransom your lives on the altar; it is the blood, in exchange for life, that ransoms. Therefore I say to the Israelites: No person among you shall eat blood, nor shall the alien who resides among you eat blood.” So states Leviticus 17:11–12 in one of the central texts in the priestly literature of ancient Israel. Blood is not to be eaten, because it is reserved for a cultic ritual of expiation. In an article published in the early 1990s, Stephen Geller pointed out the critical importance of blood in the priestly documents of the Bible.¹ The priests, he argued, authored what might be considered the first mystery religion, in which blood serves as the powerful physical substance that restores the sacrificial shrine and, indeed, the cosmos as a whole, to its original state of purity. Through blood, human beings can commune with God. Against the transcendent theology of the Deuteronomic author (D), the priestly documents argue for God’s immanence, a presence that can be effected through the agency of blood. In protest, as it were, against D’s transformation of biblical religion into an abstract religion of words, the Bible’s priestly religion was physical and immanent. Ultimately, the rabbis adopted D’s verbal religion, while Christianity adapted the priestly religion of blood, making Christ’s blood a substance of redemption.

In chapter 2, I take issue with Geller’s trajectory, according to which the priestly religion culminates in Christianity and the Deuteronomic in rabbinic Judaism, arguing instead that elements of each can be found in

both religions. Deuteronomy itself is hardly opposed to sacrifices. I am also not certain that blood brings God's presence down to earth, since no biblical text actually states this. But these reservations notwithstanding, Geller's overall insight into the central role of blood in the priestly religion of ancient Israel remains highly persuasive and forms my starting point here.²

This role is additionally remarkable because blood was evidently less important in other ancient Near Eastern religions. As Dennis McCarthy has noted, the ancient Israelites were the only Near Easterners to make blood a central element in their religious rituals.³ There were, to be sure, magical and medical rituals mentioned in Akkadian, Sumerian, and Hittite texts that used blood to feed bloodthirsty demons,⁴ and one Hittite text mentions the use of blood as a ritual detergent (similar to its use in the Bible),⁵ but blood played no other significant role in the sacrificial offerings of the ancient Near East. Those offerings were intended to feed the gods, and blood was not usually the main course on the divine menu: although the Canaanite goddess Anat is said to have drunk the blood of her brother, Baal, this was probably not her everyday diet.⁶ With two possible exceptions,⁷ no biblical text states explicitly that the Israelite God drinks or eats blood ("eating" blood in the biblical context evidently meant eating meat with its blood still in it), but the prohibition on his people's doing so undoubtedly stems from the centrality of blood in the Israelite cult.

In his authoritative work on priestly religion, culminating in the magisterial *Anchor Bible* commentary on Leviticus, Jacob Milgrom has offered one of the most comprehensive surveys of biblical blood.⁸ Blood is a ritual detergent when used by the priests in the temple in order to purify the sancta after they have been contaminated. Such contamination can even come in the form of a "miasma" from outside the temple precincts. The blood from different expiatory sacrifices is also used as part of a process of atonement for inadvertent sins. For Milgrom, since blood is equated with life, the killing of an animal for nourishment, which he identifies with the *shelamim* (well-being) sacrifices, involves a capital crime that can be expiated only by the blood of the animal itself (Lev. 17:11). Therefore, any animal killed for the purpose of consumption must have its blood poured out on the altar or, if it is a wild game animal, covered with earth. Ingestion of the blood is strictly prohibited (Lev. 3:17, 17:10–16, 19:26). Deuteronomy accepts this prohibition on eating blood (Deut. 12:23) but allows for secular slaughter of domesticated animals that previously could be killed only as sacrifices.

Since blood stands for life, Milgrom reasons that menstrual blood and semen are defiling because they are out of place: “their common denominator is death.”⁹ Death is the archetypical impurity, and anything associated with it—such as menstrual blood, a human corpse, and scale disease—is polluting, albeit to differing degrees. The holy (*qadosh*) and the impure (*tamei*) do not represent benevolent versus demonic forces, for Israel had banished the autonomous demons, but the holy and the impure remained the “forces of life and death set loose by man himself through his obedience to or defiance of God’s commandments.”¹⁰ Human deeds can cause the pollution of God’s sanctuary or God’s land, although Milgrom’s tendency to attribute an ethical dimension to the purity laws is tempered by his admission that impurity can be caused by inadvertent actions that are a part of normal life processes. Note that in all of Milgrom’s propositions, blood serves as a medium for purification or atonement, but not, as Geller would have it, primarily as a mode of communication.

What I propose to do in the pages that follow is offer a new analysis of the different forms of blood in the Bible, one that departs from Milgrom on some crucial particulars. As a number of recent commentators have pointed out, two types of defilement can be identified in the priestly documents. These documents are referred to as the Priestly Code (P), which comprises the first sixteen chapters of the book of Leviticus (as well as parts of Exodus and Numbers), and the Holiness Code (H), Leviticus 17–26 (plus some other sections of Exodus and Numbers). There is much scholarly debate on the chronological relationship of these two documents, with the most recent arguments holding that P preceded H.¹¹ If we follow this scholarship, both documents predated the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E., although there were certainly passages added after the return from Babylonia. In the discussion that follows, I will make no assumptions about relative dating but will instead treat the two documents as reflecting different schools of thought that a later redactor brought together. Since the priests were the dominant leadership in the Second Temple Period (fifth century B.C.E.–70 C.E.), the ideas uncovered here reflect their political power in that period as well as in the one that preceded it.

Let us then look at these two types of pollution. On the one hand, the Priestly Code—especially Leviticus 11–15 and Numbers 19—knows of the defilement of persons who are prohibited from entering sacred precincts as a result of contact with a variety of contagions related to sexual intercourse, menstruation, childbirth, pathological genital

discharges, scale disease, the carcasses of certain impure animals, and human corpses. Such impurity—variously called by scholars “ritual impurity” or “levitical impurity”—is often unavoidable and can be cleansed by rituals of purification. Inadvertent and intentional sins can also pollute the sanctuary, even from a distance, requiring other means of purification.¹² On the other hand, certain transgressions—sexual violations, idolatry, and murder—described by the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18 and 20 and Numbers 35:30–34, as well as by Jeremiah and Ezekiel, defile the land, rather than just the temple. No ritual process can atone for these “moral impurities”; instead the guilty individual may be “cut off” (*karet*). If these sins become too widespread, the land will “vomit” out its inhabitants.¹³

If we follow a number of recent scholars—notably Jonathan Klawans—in regarding these two types of defilement as literal, rather than metaphorical, how do we explain the seeming contradiction between them? Why can certain sins be expiated while others cannot? Why, for example, does animal blood serve as “ransom for your lives” in Leviticus 17, whereas Numbers 35 holds that nothing short of capital punishment can purify the land from the defilement of murder? And why is it that in Leviticus 15:19–24, sexual relations with a menstruating woman confer only ritual uncleanness, which can be purified, whereas Leviticus 18:19 and 20:18 threaten the most severe individual and collective retribution for those who engage in intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period?

These contradictions can be—and have been—solved by the argument that the texts in question reflect the different schools of priestly legislators (P and H) from different epochs in Israel’s ancient history. But the redactors who wove them together into the canonical Bible must have had a vision of how the texts might be harmonized without recourse to the modern documentary hypothesis. I will argue that a correct understanding of the Bible’s blood discourse provides a key to unraveling these riddles. To state the argument succinctly before we turn to its respective parts: while animal and human blood, properly spilled, do not create ritual pollution—and, indeed, animal blood is the most powerful ritual detergent for decontaminating such pollution—blood improperly spilled is associated with the three cardinal, “moral” sins that defile the land. The one exception is menstrual blood, which creates both ritual and moral pollution.¹⁴ Against Milgrom, I will argue that menstrual blood, as opposed to all other blood outside the body, is a force of life rather than of death and that this

exception is the one that proves the rule. My argument is therefore organized around the three sins that create moral pollution: murder, idolatry, and sexual violations. After discussing these three transgressions, I will conclude with the way blood constructed the covenant of biblical Israel.

Before we turn to these matters, I wish to address what might be called the theological black hole that surrounds blood. Put simply, the Bible offers very little in the way of theological rationale for the surprising centrality of blood in its cult.¹⁵ One might expect, given the relative lack of blood rituals in other ancient Near Eastern religions, that the biblical authors would have propounded a clear rationale for the use of blood as a fluid for purification and expiation. To be sure, we are told in a number of places that “blood is the life” or that “the life-force is in the blood,” but this undoubtedly universal perception does not seem sufficient to explain the specific religious meaning of blood in the Israelite cult.¹⁶

Instead of following the dozens of interpreters who have trod this well-worn path by venturing yet another speculation, I will argue that the very lack of an explicit theology of blood is itself a key piece of evidence. The purpose of the priestly discourse of blood—that is, the prescriptions we find in the written text—was political rather than theological: to create a priestly monopoly on sacrifice (and, indeed, on all slaughter of animals for meat) while simultaneously declaring other ritual uses of blood, Israelite or foreign, as abominations. These “abominable” rituals may well have been the inventions of the priestly authors themselves as rhetorical devices to distinguish Israel from its neighbors. This was what concerned the priests much more than developing a theological theory to rationalize their practices. These texts were performative; that is, they not only prescribed rituals but also enacted a cultural and religious code for their readers. In fact, by stating their position apodictically rather than in the form of an argument, the priestly authors ascribed much greater rhetorical force to their discourse.

This argument is similar to that of William Gilders, who, following Nancy Jay, holds that the blood manipulations were ways of “indexing” priestly status.¹⁷ Indexing in this sense means a gesture that points (as in “index finger”) toward what is being communicated. Thus, by restricting blood to cultic sites and giving the priests exclusive right to manipulate it, the authors of these texts were either reinforcing or actually enacting priestly status. The blood, according to this argument, carries no meaning in itself but, like a pointing finger, establishes a connection

between the priests and their prerogatives. We are dealing, then, with a discourse of priestly *power*.

If the priestly documents used blood to distinguish Israel from its neighbors, they did not do so in a total vacuum. In the argument that follows, I will make extensive use of Greek analogues to illuminate Israelite practices. Especially around issues of blood, Greek religion was significantly closer to that of the Israelites than were the rituals of more proximate Near Eastern cultures. In some cases there may have been indirect cultural interchange between Israel and Greece. But even where there was not, the role of blood in Greek religion suggests that its rituals are much more likely than those of Israel's immediate neighbors to shed light on the discourses of blood in biblical literature. Thus, the substance that was supposed to differentiate Israel from its neighbors unexpectedly points to cross-cultural comparisons elsewhere.

DIVINE FURY: BLOOD AND VENGEANCE

You shall not pollute [*tahanifu*] the Land in which you live; for blood pollutes the Land and the Land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. You shall not defile the Land in which you live, in which I myself abide, for I the Lord abide among the Israelite people.

Numbers 35:33-34

The archetype of blood pollution is homicide. In this theology, quite probably a product of the Holiness school, blood spilled by deliberate violence pollutes the land and can be expiated only by the blood of the murderer. God does not dwell only in the tabernacle or the temple, but throughout the land, and although the land is not specifically designated as "holy,"¹⁸ human blood can defile it.¹⁹ The consequence of unavenged blood is captured in God's dramatic response to Cain's murder of Abel: "Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground. Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (Gen. 4:10-11). Here it is the ground itself that is said to have a mouth that drinks Abel's blood, which then cries out to God through this mouth; it is this very crying out that is the expression of the blood pollution's curse. Not only the victim is offended, but so is the earth. While in the law of secular slaughter in Deuteronomy, pouring the blood of an animal

onto the ground is an adequate means of disposal, here the blood of the murdered victim becomes the mechanism for polluting the earth and calling out for revenge.

The law in Numbers 35 makes it clear that the spilling of blood occasions bloodguilt (*damo bo* or *damo be-rosho*, “his blood is in him” or “his blood is on his head”), which is avenged by a blood-avenger (more precisely: a blood-redeemer, *goel ha-dam*). Deuteronomy 19:13 reads: “You must show him [the murderer] no pity. Thus you will purge [literally “burn out,” *u-viarta*] the innocent blood [*dam ha-naki*] from Israel and it will go well with you.” The act of murder involves the shedding of innocent blood that must be expiated by means of shedding “guilty” blood in order to absolve the land of pollution: the blood of the guilty decontaminates (“burns out”) the spilled blood of the innocent. As Ezekiel says in cursing the Edomites: “Assuredly, as I live, declares the Lord God, I will doom you with blood; blood shall pursue you; I swear that, for your bloodthirsty hatred, blood shall pursue you” (Ezek. 35:6). In this way, the innocent blood is “redeemed,” which we may understand as “returned to its proper place.” In Deuteronomy 32:42–43, God promises “to make my arrows drunk with blood” in order to “avenge the blood of his servants.” Unredeemed blood attaches to the slayer and his family for generations (see 2 Sam. 3:28–30 and 2 Kings 9:26).

In the case of a corpse whose slayer is not known, the bloodguilt may pollute the whole nation (Deut. 21:8) unless the ritual of the heifer whose neck is broken (*egla arufa*) is performed (Deut. 21:1–9).²⁰ This ritual involves substituting a heifer that has never been yoked (a kind of substitute “virgin” sacrifice) for the unknown murderer. The elders of the nearest town wash their hands over the heifer’s corpse and proclaim: “Our hands did not shed this blood.” Once again, only shedding blood can adequately atone for murder.

Given this draconian rhetoric regarding the spilling of human blood, it makes sense that biblical law would not allow any remission of capital punishment, a unique stringency in ancient Near Eastern law.²¹ As Genesis 9:6 states the law: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in His image did God make man.” But what is the “image of God” in which human beings are created? Is it somehow connected to blood? No definite answers to these questions can be given, since, as I have already observed, the Bible is quite taciturn in explaining the rationale behind the prohibition on spilling human blood. All we know is that only the spilling of the blood of the guilty

can compensate for the blood of the innocent and, in the process, wipe out the land's blood-defilement: "I will demand your blood in payment for your souls [*le-nafshotekhem*]" (Gen. 9:5).²²

There are some tantalizing hints that animal blood may also, in certain circumstances, deflect God's avenging violence. A good example is the puzzling ritual in Exodus 12 in which the Israelites take the blood from the Paschal offering and smear it on the doorposts and lintels of their houses, as a sign to God not to destroy the Israelites when he comes to kill the Egyptian firstborn. As William Propp has argued, the blood seems to have been intended to ward off a demon, now conflated with God, but it does so by *purifying* the doorway: "God . . . protects [*psh*] the household from his own demonic side. Thus the doorway functions as an altar."²³ Purification neutralizes divine violence. The Israelite house in the Passover ritual functions much in the same way as the temple, with blood serving to mark its boundaries.²⁴ In a similar way, Propp suggests that the blood of the circumcision of Moses's son, when applied to Moses's genitals (Ex. 4:25), atones for his earlier slaying of the Egyptian (Ex. 2:12); here, too, divine wrath for blood spilled is assuaged by blood, but in this case by the blood of circumcision.²⁵ As interesting as these two examples are, neither found its way into Israel's codes of laws. Instead, it is the blood of the guilty that must, in all cases, atone for the blood of the innocent.

Although the Bible's severity is not to be found elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern law, it was certainly the rule in ancient Greece, or, at least in the classical age's reconstruction of Greece's mythic past. In *The Choephoroi*, written by Aeschylus in the mid-fifth century B.C.E., the Chorus, speaking of the murder of Clytemnestra, proclaims, in a virtual echo of the Cain and Abel story:

The gods ordain
That blood by murder shed
Cries from the ground for blood to flow again.²⁶

The Furies, whose job it is to enforce this law, drink the blood of vengeance, as they declare in *The Eumenides*, now against Orestes for killing his mother:

You shall, for your soul's guilt,
Give us your blood to drink
Red from the living limb
Our dear and deadly food.²⁷

The problem in Aeschylus is, of course, how to break the cycle of blood vengeance and institute courts of law, which happens at the end of *The Eumenides* when the Furies are turned into the patron gods of Athens.

The biblical text seems less diachronic. Biblical law contains stipulations that courts are to hand down and execute capital sentences, but at the same time, the blood-avenger is clearly recognized as a legal entity; the two forms of justice seem to coexist in partial contradiction to each other. But the failure of human beings to effect justice will provoke God to take his own revenge, in a manner reminiscent of the Greek Furies. And it is the blood of the murdered that serves as the provocation.

BLOODY GOATS: IDOLATRY AND THE PROHIBITION ON EATING BLOOD

Idolatry, like homicide, is quintessentially a blood crime. As Ezekiel puts it: “You eat on the blood, you cast your eyes upon your idols and spill blood, and still you expect to inherit the Land?” (Ezek. 33:25). In Ezekiel, the defilement of the land that comes from idolatrous practices is the same “moral impurity” wrought by violence, and both are intimately linked to the spilling and improper disposal of blood.²⁸ Since Ezekiel includes “eating on the blood” in this rhetorical field, we shall need to investigate how the consumption of blood might have been seen as idolatrous. In order to do so, we must first delve more deeply into the prohibition on eating blood. Only after what might seem like a long detour will we be able to return to the association between blood and idolatry.

Leviticus 17, as we have seen, is the central text that proscribes the consumption of blood. It equates the failure to slaughter meat in the form of a temple sacrifice with the shedding of human blood. Both incur “bloodguilt” (*dam yihashév*):

If anyone of the house of Israel slaughters an ox or sheep or goat in the camp, or does so outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to present it as an offering to the Lord before the Lord's Tabernacle, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man: he has shed blood; that man shall be cut off from among his people. This is in order that the Israelites may bring the sacrifices which they have been making in the open—that they may bring them before the Lord, to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and offer them as sacrifices of well-being [*shelamim*] to the Lord; that the priest may dash the blood against the altar of the Lord. (Lev. 17: 3–6)

The Lord's tabernacle is the only appropriate place to shed animal blood without incurring bloodguilt. Later, the book of Deuteronomy, which

centralized the cult in Jerusalem, permitted secular slaughter, provided that one pour the blood of the animal onto the ground.

But is the shedding of animal blood the same as the shedding of human blood? A passage from Ezekiel suggests that it is. Ezekiel prophesies to Judah: “Woe to the city of blood . . . for the blood she shed is still in her; she set it upon a bare rock; she did not pour it out on the ground to cover it with earth. She set her blood upon a bare rock, so that it was not covered, so that it may stir up [my] fury to take vengeance” (Ezek. 24:6–8).²⁹ The very visibility of the blood on the bare rock provokes God’s vengeance, which comes in the form of more spilled blood, and only when he is satiated will his fury lapse. The context here is not homicide but improper disposal of the blood of a slaughtered animal. Ezekiel combines two laws (Lev. 17:13 and Deut. 12:24) and concludes that if one kills an animal for food outside of the temple and does not pour its blood out, covering the blood with earth, he has committed the equivalent of murder. The implication is that the uncovered blood will cry out just as the blood of Abel did.

Jacob Milgrom builds upon this evident equivalence between homicide and animal slaughter. He notes that the law against homicide proclaimed after the flood in Genesis 9 is accompanied by the prohibition on eating blood. Leviticus 17 expands on Genesis 9 by requiring that all domestic animals intended for food (the *shelamim* sacrifices) must be slaughtered on the sanctioned altar and their blood must be poured onto it: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives on the altar; it is the blood, in exchange for life, that ransoms” (17:11). Milgrom understands this verse not as a general statement of the use of blood for purposes of expiation, but as specifically about the disposal of the blood as atonement for the death of the sacrifice itself, for otherwise, killing animals would be a capital offense. For Milgrom, such atonement by blood reflects an ethical sensitivity toward animals not found elsewhere in the Near East (an ironic sensitivity since the animal ends up dead in any case).³⁰ The vegetarianism of the period from the Garden of Eden to the Flood was the Bible’s dietary utopia; the sacrificial laws reflect the values grounded in this ambivalence toward the eating of meat.

As Baruch Schwartz has indicated, though, this extension of the strict laws of homicide to the killing of animals seems highly doubtful.³¹ The analogy between homicide and killing animals is imperfect because, if the killing of a sacrificial animal had been a capital crime, then only the death of the sacrificer would have atoned for it—clearly

an absurdity in any sacrificial religion. Or, conversely, if the blood of the victim could atone for its death, why couldn't some ritual of purification using the blood of the victim suffice for homicide? Since both of these suggestions are patently absurd, it is hard to imagine that biblical culture really thought that the killing of animals for food or sacrifice was a form of murder.

Greek religion also had a myth of primordial vegetarianism and, additionally, required a kind of symbolic assent by the sacrificial animal, yet there is no evidence that the ancient Greeks really felt ambivalent about eating meat. Indeed, it seems unlikely that any religion based on sacrifice—and that of ancient Israel was certainly a prime example—would have a guilty conscience about killing animals or, as Milgrom holds, would have developed such guilt into an ethics of animal rights.

How, then, should we understand the prohibition on eating blood, a prohibition that appears to be unique to Israel? It certainly makes sense that if blood is used for specific rituals within the temple, it should not be consumed or otherwise disposed of improperly. But, as Schwartz notices, Leviticus 17 deals with killing animals for nourishment, the *shelamim* sacrifices, and not with the sacrificial rituals for purification or atonement. The association in Leviticus 17 of the *shelamim* sacrifice with atonement disrupts the careful categorization of the priestly system. Why does the text say that *this* blood needs to be reserved for expiation or ransom? If it is not for killing the animal itself, what is being expiated or ransomed?

The attempts to solve this problem are almost as numerous as the scholars who have put their minds to it.³² The explanations can be grouped roughly into two categories: internalist and externalist. The internalists argue that not eating blood is linked to some fundamental principle of Israelite theology, that is, it is prohibited for reasons internal to the religion, while the externalists believe that the motivation is a response to an external factor.

One internalist argument holds that the blood belongs to God, so it must be returned to him when life is taken. But the fact that blood is the essence of life does not automatically mean that it belongs to God. And even if it does, how is this connected with expiation? A better argument, which I discuss further at the end of this chapter, is that the act of bringing any sacrifice involves exposing oneself to God's wrath, which must be appeased by blood.³³ But that function, even if the reasoning is generally true, is not specified by Leviticus 17. Moreover, as Schwartz notes, if this doctrine were automatically true, then Nadav and Avihu, who brought

“strange fire” and were struck dead (Num. 3:4), could have averted their punishment by a blood ritual, an evident absurdity since they were punished at the moment of their infraction. Blood certainly had a protective function, but this could not be the only argument for why *all* blood had to be disposed of ritually.

Another internalist argument has been offered by Schwartz.³⁴ The earlier priestly law held that the blood from purification or atonement sacrifices had to be reserved for cultic disposal and could not be consumed with the meat of the sacrificed animal. Schwartz argues that Leviticus 17:10–12 generalizes this law to include *all* meat, even when the animal was killed only for food and its blood had no cultic function. The text then holds that the blood of *all* animals was given as “ransom” for the lives of the sacrificers, based on the wordplay between expiate (*kipper*) and ransom (*kofer*). This text is unique, but it bases its innovation on already existing prohibitions against eating the blood of atonement and purification sacrifices. Schwartz’s is a reasonably plausible solution, but it leaves open the question of why the legislator would have constructed a law so unprecedented and so unexplained that it has left generations of scholars completely stumped. Why did the lives of the sacrificers need to be ransomed?

Schwartz does not answer the question of motivation; but in a sense, the answer is right at hand. As he himself demonstrates so effectively, Leviticus 17 is about outlawing all secular slaughter: “This [law] is in order that the Israelites may bring the sacrifices which they have been making in the open—that they may bring them before the Lord, to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and offer them as sacrifices of well-being [*shelamim*] to the Lord; that the priest may dash the blood against the altar of the Lord” (vv. 3–6). By making the blood of *all* domesticated animals the “property” of the cult, the priests guaranteed their monopoly. And what better way to do so than by threatening the direst consequences for those who did not surrender the animal—and its blood—to the priestly slaughterhouse? The life that the blood ransomed was none other than that of the Israelite who wanted to eat meat but did not avail himself of the priests’ services. This is, admittedly, a circular argument: the blood is needed to ransom the life of the person who does not use the blood as ransom. But the very paradoxical nature of this commandment, its legal incomprehensibility, is precisely what gives it its rhetorical power. By disseminating an almost consciously cryptic blood theology, the legislator turned blood into the vehicle for control of an agrarian society’s richest resource.

This internalist argument does not, however, entirely suffice, since the text suggests that an *external* impetus is also at work: “and that they may offer their sacrifices no more to the goats [*seirim*] after whom they whore [*zonim*]” (Lev. 17:7). The externalists therefore argue that the prohibition is a response to some religious practices that the biblical authors want to denounce. The granddaddy of this type of explanation is Moses Maimonides, who, in the twelfth century, explained the prohibition on eating blood as a response to the religion of the Sabians, a group of dubious historicity whom he conflated with all ancient pagans:

Know that the Sabians held that blood was most unclean, but in spite of this used to eat of it, deeming that it was the food of the devils and that, consequently, whoever ate it fraternized with the *jinn* so that they came to him and let him know future events—according to what the multitude imagine concerning the *jinn*. There were, however, people there who considered it a hard thing to eat of blood, this being a thing abhorrent to the nature of man. Accordingly, they used to slaughter an animal, collect its blood in a vessel or in a ditch and eat the flesh of this slaughtered animal close by its blood. In doing this they imagined that the *jinn* partook of this blood, this being their food, whereas they themselves ate the flesh.³⁵

In this passage, Maimonides searches for what we would call a historical explanation for the prohibition on eating blood. Following the overall method of part 3 of his *Guide of the Perplexed*, one can explain many commandments as responses to specific idolatrous practices of the Sabians. Their “reasons” (*taamim*) are not to be sought in the internal logic of the culture but in reaction to external influences: these laws were means of marking the borders between Israel and its neighbors, rather than arising indigenously as expressions of Israel’s essential identity.³⁶

There were two kinds of Sabians, holds Maimonides: those who ate blood because they believed that it put them into direct contact with the mantic *jinn* (i.e., prophesying demons) and those who were repulsed by blood, poured it into a ditch, and then ate the sacrificial meat nearby in order to achieve the same communion with the *jinn* as those who actually ate the blood. Having given the *jinn* their food, these latter Sabians would then be visited by the demons in dreams and would learn “secret things.” In order to wean the people from the idolatry of the *jinn*, the law revealed at Sinai specifically prohibited not only eating blood but also coming together and eating in its vicinity: “[The] blood should be covered up with dust so that the people should not gather to eat around it.”³⁷ Maimonides refers here to the peculiar phrase, found in three places in the Bible (Lev. 19:26, 1 Sam. 14:32–33, and Ezek. 33:25), that

forbids eating “on the blood” (*alha-dam*).³⁸ Understanding “on” the blood as “around” the blood, Maimonides interprets this prohibition as linked to the ostensible custom of those Sabians who poured the blood for the *jinn* into a ditch and ate the animal’s flesh nearby.

In 1966 Joshua Grintz took up Maimonides’ interpretation and argued that the prohibition of “eating on the blood” must be understood as a response to a set of practices found in early Greek religion.³⁹ Rituals to propitiate the demons of the underworld (*chthonioi*) or to nourish the souls of the dead required the sacrifice of an animal with its throat pointed down, so that the blood would flow into a pit (*bothros*) and from there into the ground. These sacrifices often took place at night and in a hidden place, such as a cavern. The blood would call forth the dead, who would then make prophecies. Such practices were the diametric opposite of sacrifice to the gods of Olympus, in which the animal’s throat was pointed toward the heavens, the ritual site was a raised platform (*bamos*), and the sacrifice took place during the day. Milgrom has recently expanded on Grintz by showing how various ancient Near Eastern religions—from Mesopotamia to Egypt—held that certain gods, usually of the underworld, were bloodthirsty and required nourishment in the form of blood from animal sacrifices.⁴⁰

Grintz analyzes the passage in 1 Samuel 14 where Saul’s troops, after defeating the Philistines, kill the animals taken as booty “towards the earth” (*artza*) and “eat on the blood.” Saul chastises them, rolls a large stone to be used as an altar, and performs the slaughter (not specifically referred to here as a sacrifice) on the stone so that the blood flows onto the stone. Grintz holds that Saul feared that his troops were imitating the Greek practice of worshipping demons of the underworld; he also believes that the Israelite custom of slaughtering animals on stones was already well known. So, too, were the Levitical laws prohibiting the eating of blood, which Saul implicitly invokes. The prohibitions linked in the same verse (Lev. 19:26) between eating “on the blood” and practicing “divination and sooth-saying” (*lo tenashu ve-lo teonenu*) Grintz understands by reference to the Greek practices. Since Leviticus 17 commands that animals that one wishes to eat be brought to the “Tent of Meeting” to be killed and prohibits sacrificing to the *seirim* (which Grintz understands—following Maimonides—as “goat-demons of the desert”), Grintz believes that the law prohibiting the eating “on” the blood goes back to the desert period itself.

Part of Grintz's argument, now largely adopted by Milgrom, is convincing, but much is not. There is a variety of evidence having to do with pits (*ob*) and with divination through the dead that suggests the presence of chthonic worship in ancient Israel. However, with the exception of the law in Leviticus 19:26, these texts have nothing to do with blood. Moreover, nowhere in either the Greek or the ancient Near Eastern texts on chthonic worship do we find the *worshippers* eating blood; instead, they feed it to the ancestral gods from the underworld. The only way to harmonize the biblical sources with the known descriptions of chthonic rites is Maimonides' quite forced interpretation of "on the blood" as meaning "around the blood," that is, that the worshippers poured the blood in a pit and ate the meat nearby. But here, too, the chthonic cults we know of say nothing about eating a sacrifice near the *bothros*. Indeed, those offerings were typically burnt rather than whole.⁴¹ Despite Grintz's and Milgrom's best efforts, the meaning of this strange locution seems to be simply the same as eating *with* (*al = im*) the blood still in the meat.⁴² And Grintz's analysis of the incident in Samuel of eating "on the blood" is a classic example of pushing the evidence further than is warranted; what is at stake there is simply whether a stone altar is needed for the slaughter of animals, with the blood allowed to run off, or whether the killing can be done directly on the ground.⁴³

Grintz claims that the prohibition against "eating on the blood" is from the desert period. His main proof is that the *seirim* mentioned in Leviticus 17 are demons of the desert and play no role in the "later" prophetic denunciations of Baal worship on the *bamot*. But while several texts refer to wild goats or goat demons invading the ruins of Judah (Isa. 13:21-22 and 34:14),⁴⁴ *seirim* appear twice in connection with prohibited worship in the land itself. King Josiah, in 2 Kings 23:8, "demolished the *bamot* of the 'gates' at the gate of Joshua." While this reading is not impossible, it seems more plausible to emend the word *gates* (*shaarim*) to *seirim*.⁴⁵ Thus, Josiah abolished the "altars of the goats" which stood at the city's gate. In 2 Chronicles 11:15, we learn that Jeroboam had "appointed priests for the altars [*bamot*] and for the goats and calves which he had made" (referring evidently to statues of goats and calves that were part of the northern Israelite rite). These last two texts suggest, against Grintz, that goat worship of some kind was associated with the *bamot* in the land and not only with a desert cult. Moreover, since the Chronicler added the goats to the parallel story in Kings, which has only calves, there is reason to suppose that

goat worship—if it actually existed—was a relatively late cult in First Temple history.

Psalms 50:12–13 reinforces the supposition that the blood of goats might have been a part of unorthodox Israelite or non-Israelite sacrifices:

Were I hungry, I would not tell you
for Mine is the world and all it holds
Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of he-goats [*atudim*]?⁴⁵

There is no specific Semitic cult in which the flesh of bulls and the blood of goats were offered to a god, but the passage in Psalms does give us evidence that at least some in ancient Israel believed that there was. Yet there is no connection here or elsewhere between the blood of goats and chthonic worship, however it may have existed in biblical culture.

Who were these goats, and why are they connected to the prohibition on consumption of blood in Leviticus 17? On the one hand, Stephen Geller suggests the association of the goat divinities mentioned in chapter 17 with the Yom Kippur ritual of the two goats in Leviticus 16. He believes that the scapegoat is sent out to Azazel to be reunited with the goat-demon of the desert (“send the goat to the Goat”). This is an inventive possibility, but it remains speculative since we have so little evidence of a goat cult associated specifically with the desert. Milgrom, on the other hand, holds that the prohibition on sacrificing to goats in Leviticus 17 is actually an argument by H against P: where P makes goats central to its ritual of atonement (Lev. 16), H outlaws them.⁴⁶ But this is a problematic reading, since Leviticus 16 is about the use of goats to perform an atonement ritual, while Leviticus 17 prohibits sacrificing *to* goats. Even if sending the goat to Azazel involves belief in some goat deity, as Geller would have it, Leviticus 17 would seem to be a very oblique attack on it, so oblique, in fact, that no later Jewish memory ever questioned the Yom Kippur ritual as somehow idolatrous.

Another possibility of an external influence, following Grintz’s suggestion of a Greek parallel, might be the cult of Dionysos, which Michael Astour has argued originated in the Near East.⁴⁷ Dionysos was often accompanied by satyrs in the form of half-goat, half-human images, and he was frequently worshipped with goat sacrifices.⁴⁸ Dionysian rites were also associated with blood, both literally and figuratively. According to Euripides’ *Bacchae* (408–407 B.C.E.), the Dionysian rites involved an ecstatic frenzy during which a sacrificial victim was torn

limb from limb and eaten raw (*omophagia*), thus consuming the flesh with its blood:

Joyful on the mountain
 When from the rushing, dancing throng
 Sinks he to the ground
 With his holy fawn skin round him,
 Pursuing blood, slaughter of goats,
 Joy of raw flesh devoured,
 Pressing on to the mountains of Phrygia, Lydia.⁴⁹

This consumption of blood reminds us of the Furies in the *Oresteia*, who thirst for the blood of murderers.

Dionysos was also, of course, the god of what the Bible calls the “blood of the vine,” and in the *Bacchae*, wine and blood become mixed sacrificial metaphors:

He (Dionysos) found the liquid shower
 Hid in the grape. He rests man’s spirit dim
 From grieving, when the vine exalteth him. . . .
 Yea, being god, the blood of him is set
 Before the gods in sacrifice, that we
 For his sake may be blest.⁵⁰

The consumption of wine as part of the Bacchic rites might be understood as the metaphoric consumption of blood. But the text also cryptically suggests that Dionysos’s own blood is offered up to the (other?) gods.

The temptation is great to connect the Hebrew *seirim* with the Greek *satyroi* (satyrs), the goatlike male participants in the Dionysian orgies, although the etymology may be spurious.⁵¹ And the implication in Leviticus 17:7 that the sacrifices to the goat-demons involved something sexual—“after whom they whore”—hints at similarities to the orgiastic overtones associated with the female maenads of Dionysos.⁵² Moreover, the biblical “eating on the blood” may be identical to the Dionysian *omophagia*, since only when eating meat raw would the presence of the blood really be noticeable.

However, as A. Henrichs has demonstrated conclusively, the evidence that the worshippers of Dionysos actually consumed bloody meat is scant at best.⁵³ In the famous passage quoted above, which has frequently been used as the basis for making this claim, it is apparently only the god who practices *omophagia*, just as in the chthonic rites it is the gods and not the worshippers who consume blood. Moreover, known Dionysian ritual texts do not corroborate literary representations like

the *Bacchae*. The way Euripides imagined the rites was not, evidently, the way they were actually practiced: myth and ritual are not necessarily identical. In short, the initial attractiveness of some kind of West Semitic Dionysian cult as the target of Leviticus 17's wrath fades as the evidence comes into sharper focus.

But the overall similarities between Greek and Israelite blood rituals may yet yield fruit. Greek and Israelite sacrificial customs turn out to have been more similar to each other than the Israelite was to other ancient Near Eastern cults.⁵⁴ And it was these similarities that might have drawn the attention of the priestly writers. The word for *altar* in Greek (*bamos*) is virtually identical to the Hebrew (*bamah*). Biblical and Greek sacrifices involved both burning and eating, as opposed to Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Minoan-Mycenaean offerings, which do not appear to have been burned at all. As we have seen, blood played only a minor role in Near Eastern sacrifices, but, like the Israelites, the Greeks required the splashing of blood on the altar and its proper disposal. As Walter Burkert summarizes: "The blood flowing out [of a sacrificial animal] is treated with special care. It may not spill on the ground; rather, it must hit the altar, the hearth, or the sacrificial pit. If the animal is small it is raised over the altar; otherwise the blood is caught in a bowl and sprinkled on the altar-stone. This object alone may, and must again and again, drip blood."⁵⁵ One of the few pictorial representations of Greek sacrifice is on a vase painting. It shows a Dionysian rite in which a satyr wields a knife with a maenad assisting as the blood pours down into the *sphageion* or bowl for catching sacrificial blood, perhaps similar to the bowls (*aganot*—see Ex. 24:6) used in biblical sacrifice.⁵⁶

As in Israel, blood was used by the Greeks as an agent of purification (*apomattein*, to wipe clean). Indeed, the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus made fun of this practice: "They vainly purify themselves of blood-guilt [*haimati mianomenoi*] by defiling themselves with blood, as though one who had stepped into mud were to wash with mud; he would seem to be mad, if any of men noticed him doing this. Further, they pray to these statues, as if one were to carry on a conversation with houses, not recognizing the true nature of gods or demi-gods."⁵⁷ Heraclitus regards the use of blood, which he evidently sees as a source of contamination, to purify as an example of self-contradictory magic. But while the first part of his statement could just as well describe the use of blood in Leviticus 17 as the agent that purifies or atones for bloodguilt, the second part, attacking idol worship, sounds as if it comes from a biblical prophet.

Greek philosophers like Empedocles and Critias regarded blood as the soul and the principle of life, quite reminiscent of the biblical “the blood is the life” and “the blood is in the soul” (*nefesh*, “life-force” in the biblical lexicon).⁵⁸ For the Greeks, only mortal beings have blood; the gods, being immortal, do not, possessing instead the mysterious *ichor*. The Bible’s theological reticence makes it difficult to know what runs through the Israelite God’s veins, but the biblical authors may have agreed with the Greeks’ divine hematology. For the Greeks, the splashing of the blood on the altar does not seem to “return” the blood to the gods as their rightful possession. Similarly, the Bible does not really specify why God needs the blood of sacrificial animals or animals killed for consumption, except to insist that he does not need it as food. Blood contained or was equivalent to the life/soul and therefore had to be disposed of properly, but whether it was in any sense a “divine” substance remains unclear.

Does all this mean that Leviticus 17 was a polemic against—or an imitation of—a Greek or quasi-Greek cult of goat worship in which bloody meat was consumed? The evidence is insufficient, especially since no Greek practices, chthonic or Dionysian, quite fit. But it may be possible that just as modern scholars have been mistaken in seeing close similarities and ignoring differences, the priestly authors constructed a vague countercult out of what may have been fragmentary rumors of certain Greek sacrificial rituals, perhaps specifically Dionysian. Why do so? Because, as I have already argued, the primary function of our text was not so much to outlaw the consumption of blood as to cement the priests’ monopoly on sacrifice. As Schwartz points out, Leviticus 17 turns all killing of meat for food into sacrifice, either permitted or prohibited. The prohibited, which was any slaughter outside of the tabernacle, it attributes to an idolatrous worship of goat-demons: everything outside the cultic site is the realm of these putative demons.⁵⁹

There was, however, no attested goat-demon worship among Western Semitic religions. It may well have been instead Greek religion—or, better, secondhand, confused images of Greek religion—that was particularly threatening to the priests, since Greek sacrifice looked in so many ways closer to that of the Israelites than did that of their closer neighbors. What seemed closest was precisely what had to be most violently rejected, a case of Freud’s “narcissism of small differences.” Thus, the monopoly the priests sought over the lucrative slaughter of animals for food was dressed up as a full-blown polemic against a form of idolatry that may never have existed: the worship of goat deities through

the consumption of blood sacrifices. Just as the Dionysian myth of eating raw meat was understood as a wild rebellion against the civilized order of cooked or roasted sacrifices,⁶⁰ so the biblical rejection of eating blood fashioned a powerful contrast between orthodox Israelite religion and imagined idolatry. It was not the blood itself that contained specific meaning, beyond the generality that “blood is life,” but rather its very fluidity as a medium of exchange, offered to the priests as payment (“ransom”) for the right to eat meat.

WHORING AFTER GOATS:
BLOOD AND THE SEXUAL PROHIBITIONS

The third major transgression that pollutes the land, after murder and idolatry, is violation of the sexual laws. In fact, the prohibition on eating blood in Leviticus 17 has distinctly sexual overtones. It explicitly enjoins slaughter on an altar in front of the Tent of Meeting in place of “sacrifices to the *seirim* after whom they whore [*zonim*]” (17:7). If this goat cult bore any resemblance to Dionysian rites, then the sexual innuendo is apposite, since the Bacchae were often associated both with women and with unbridled eroticism. Ezekiel also connects the idolatrous eating of blood with sexual transgression. The full passage whose beginning I quoted above reads: “You eat on the blood, you cast your eyes upon your idols and spill blood, and still you expect to inherit the Land? You have relied on your sword, you have committed abominations and you have defiled other men’s wives, and still you expect to inherit the Land?” (33:25–26) Homicide, idolatry, and sexual sins are all of a piece.

As is well known, the literary prophets typically associated adultery and other sexual transgressions with idolatry because they represented the relationship between God and Israel as that of husband and wife.⁶¹ Ezekiel, for example, repeatedly and explicitly describes the idolatrous practices of Israel in terms of cultic sex: “you made yourself phallic images and fornicated with them” (16:17). Idolatry is not just metaphoric adultery for Ezekiel: he seems to have imagined ritual practices that involved sexual acts.⁶² The same point might be made more generally for the biblical polemic against pagan rites. Whether or not the Canaanites or reprobate Israelites actually carried out cultic orgies or indulged in ritual prostitution—and the evidence is less than scant for such practices—the authors of various biblical documents believed that they did.⁶³

The Levitical sexual prohibitions, usually attributed to the Holiness school, appear in Leviticus 18 and 20. These prohibitions include incest, adultery, and bestiality, but also offering up children to Moloch (18:21 and 20:2–5) and sexual relations with a menstruating woman (18:18 and 20:18). Milgrom has argued that Moloch was an underground deity, like the chthonic gods, who was worshipped together with YHWH. Whether or not this is true, it is clear that Leviticus 20 is driven by the polemic against Moloch worship since the verses containing this polemic (vv. 2–5) form the prologue to the chapter. Why the denunciation of Moloch worship appears together with the sexual prohibitions in both of these chapters is hard to determine. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has offered the intriguing suggestion that since the priestly writers in general wanted to promote procreation, they brought together and prohibited all practices that might dilute the proper patriarchal lines.⁶⁴ On the one hand, sacrificing children to Moloch would certainly not be in the interest of a procreative theology. On the other hand, since child sacrifice could actually be a way of thanking the deity for fertility, and since the very existence of child sacrifice in the Bible remains disputed, we should refrain from overreaching conclusions.⁶⁵ What is clear, though, is that the author or authors of Leviticus 18 and 20, for whatever reason, associated some kind of bloody sacrificial rites involving children—real or imagined—with the sexual prohibitions. Incest and adultery, like idolatry, were inseparable from the illegitimate spilling of blood.

Both chapters understand the sexual prohibitions in the context of the practices of the Canaanite nations. They defiled the land by their transgressions of these laws and lost their claim to it; so, too, would the Israelites be “vomited out” of the land should they imitate their predecessors. While this is not precisely equivalent to idolatry, it is obviously to be understood as inhabiting the same universe. Just as the Canaanites defiled their cultic sites with sexual rites, so they defiled the land with sexual transgressions. As with cultic sex, we are in the dark about whether the Canaanites really practiced incest and adultery. It may well be that the very exclusivist nature of Israel’s religion required the argument that those Israel displaced did the opposite. Whereas they consumed blood, slept with their sisters (as well as with their goats), offered their children up to Moloch, and had wild orgies in their temples, Israelites did not.

Sex therefore had no place in the Israelite cult. This we learn not only from the denunciations of the Canaanites but also from Moses’s

admonition to the people to refrain from sexual relations for three days before the revelation at Sinai (Ex. 19:15) and avoid violating the proper boundaries between the sacred and the profane.⁶⁶ If this distinction for P was between cultic sites and the rest of the world, for H it was between the land as a whole and that which lay outside it. But to prohibit sex in the land was obviously absurd, so H insisted instead on a list of sexual practices that were proscribed anywhere in the land.

The lists of sexual prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 include bans on sex with a menstruating woman, an action now considered to result in moral impurity. How are we to understand this particular prohibition, especially in light of the fact that in Leviticus 15:19–24, relations with a woman during her menstrual period confer only ritual impurity? Here, as I have said, is the one action that falls under *both* the laws of ritual and of moral impurity, but in a way that is mutually contradictory: according to Leviticus 15, sexual relations with a woman during her menstrual period create an impurity that can be purified, but according to Leviticus 18:19 and 20:18, this act is *also* one of those irreparable transgressions, which merit either expulsion of the transgressor (*karet*) or expulsion of the people.

H's horror at sexual relations during menstruation is reflected in other biblical expressions in which menstruation becomes a synecdoche for violent and idolatrous behavior. Thus, Isaiah 30:22: "You will treat as unclean the silver overlay of your images and the golden painting of your idols. You will cast them away like a menstruous woman [*dawa*]." Or Ezekiel 36:17–18: "O mortal, when the House of Israel dwelt on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their ways were in My sight like the impurity of a menstruous woman [*be-tumat ha-niddah*]. So, I poured out my wrath on them for the blood which they shed upon their land, and for the fetishes with which they defiled it." Or, most dramatically, when Ezra discovers that the returnees from Babylonia have been intermarrying with the "peoples of the land," he proclaims: "the land that you are about to possess is a menstruous land [*eretz niddah*], unclean through the menstruousness of the peoples of the land [*be-niddat amei ha-aratzot*], through their abhorrent practices with which they, in their impurity, have filled it from one end to the other" (Ezra 9:11). Ezra then bans marriages with these "foreigners" (who may actually have been Israelites who did not go into exile) on essentially "racial" grounds: "The holy seed [*zera kodesh*] has become intermingled with the peoples of the land" (9:2).⁶⁷ The holy seed must be protected from contact with the impurity of menstruation, invoked

here as a metaphor for impurity in general, but an apt metaphor since it is precisely the kind of impurity that might be acquired during sexual relations.

I shall return shortly to the question of why menstruation came to acquire such lethal metaphoric significance, standing, as it did, for the worst forms of defilement. But first, let us look at why it was ritually defiling. As mentioned earlier, Jacob Milgrom has argued that since blood stands for life, menstrual blood and semen are defiling because their loss is associated with death, the archetypal impurity. There is a significant problem with this argument. Notice that only blood from the *genitals*, menstrual blood, is polluting, as are other genital fluids, such as semen and pathological discharges.⁶⁸ All other blood, including human blood, does not pollute in the ritual sense. Even though human blood spilled through violence can defile the land (Num. 35:33) and animal blood improperly disposed of creates bloodguilt, neither of these falls directly under the laws of cultic purity and impurity: a murderer may receive the death penalty, and someone who slaughters an animal without proper blood rituals may be “cut off” (*karet*), but he or she is not prohibited from entering a cultic site to bring a sacrifice (not that it will do them much good, since bringing an atonement sacrifice for these intentional crimes will not expiate them). So, if impurity is associated with death, it would be hard to explain why only menstrual blood, and not any other kind of blood, creates impurity. On the contrary, simple observation would show that women do not die from menstrual bleeding, while blood from a wound, if severe enough, may well turn its owner into a corpse.⁶⁹

Menstrual blood should not, therefore, be considered either in the same category as other kinds of blood or as necessarily connected to death. Neither should it be considered, as Mary Douglas terms it, a form of dirt, that is, “matter out of place.”⁷⁰ As Milgrom points out, Douglas is wrong in arguing that impurity in the Bible is “dirt out of place,” since many substances that would be considered dirty—such as urine, feces, or spit—do not create impurity. And in fact, Douglas’s whole hypothesis becomes problematic when considering semen that is ejaculated by the male into the female: according to Leviticus 15:18, both parties must bathe and are rendered impure until evening, even though the semen is anything but “out of place.”

An important contribution to thinking about the relationship of genital discharges, whether male or female, to blood as a whole has been made by Leslie A. Cook in an essay on women’s rituals of purification in the Bible and in the Mishna.⁷¹ Cook correctly notes that

“both men’s and women’s discharges can generate impurity in certain contexts. The defining factor seems to be not whose blood—not even blood—but rather the context of the discharges.”⁷² As opposed to those who have argued that there is a gender hierarchy when it comes to blood,⁷³ Cook holds that women’s blood is not valued differently from men’s blood or from animal blood. Blood can be used to purify in the right context, or can create impurity in the wrong context. But blood itself is neither pure nor impure. The role of blood, Cook argues, is to *distinguish* human beings from God (an interesting alternative to Geller’s thesis that blood serves as the medium of communication *between* humans and God).

This is, on the whole, very persuasive. However, Cook’s claim that “blood out of context” causes impurity,” borrowed, it seems, from Mary Douglas, fails for the same reason: semen pollutes when it is “in context,” that is, ejaculated into the vagina. Since *only* genital discharges pollute, while all other types of blood, in and out of context, do not, perhaps menstrual blood should not be properly called blood, as if it were the same substance as arterial blood, only emitted from the genitals. Like semen, it inhabits a different universe. It needs to be considered a procreative fluid, female seed, as it were.⁷⁴

The problem, stated simply, is this: how is it that the priests, obsessed with lineage and fertility and the presumed authors of the repeated biblical blessing “be fruitful and multiply” (*pru u-revu*), would consider a normal act of intercourse to cause pollution? For if the loss of seed through menstruation or nocturnal emission caused defilement because the seed was wasted, surely one could not argue the same for intercourse. In response to this difficulty, Milgrom quotes the thirteenth-century Spanish exegete Moses Nachmanides: “The reason for the defilement of seminal emissions, even though it is part of the process of procreation, is like the reason for the defilement of death. . . . The individual does not know if his seed will be wasted, or if a child will result.”⁷⁵ But this sounds too much like a postfactum rationalization on the parts of both the medieval and the modern commentators. One might quote the rabbis against this interpretation: “No man intends his intercourse to be that of mere promiscuity [*beilat zenut*].”⁷⁶ A procreative theology, such as that of the priestly school, would want to encourage sexual relations as potentially fertile, not discourage them as potentially sterile.

I would like to suggest an alternative to Milgrom’s assumption that any emission of semen or menstrual blood is defiling because of its

associations with death. Let us try a thought experiment: what would it look like if nonpathological genital fluids—menstrual blood and semen—were viewed not as inherently negative, but rather as forces of life?⁷⁷ Here, Greek sources may once again provide a helpful interpretation. Hippocrates compared menstruation with sacrifice, arguing that “the blood [of menstruation] flows like that of a sacrificed victim” (*choreei de haima hoion apo hieraiou*).⁷⁸ The medical logic behind his comparison is that menstrual blood is humorally hot, like the blood that spurts from the throat of a sacrificed animal. In Aristotle, the *psyche* or spirit of life is contained in this hot blood.⁷⁹ Helen King has suggested that, for the Greeks, a woman (*gyne*), as opposed to a prepubescent girl (*parthenos*), was defined by bleeding; a mature woman who did not bleed regularly was considered ill. Men, in contrast, were defined by the opposite: shedding blood in war or in sacrifices.⁸⁰ The alignment of mature women with sacrificial victims in Hippocratic body symbolism presents “their bleeding as an essential part of the life of the city.”⁸¹ For, just as men sustain the city by their bloodletting activities, so women contribute to the city’s fertility by their own form of bleeding. The gods, however, fall outside of this political hematology, for they have no blood and therefore do not bleed. Artemis, the goddess of the hunt and of fertility, is a particular example of this divine difference: she does not bleed, but she sheds the blood of others, both as huntress and as director of the process by which a *parthenos* becomes a *gyne*.

Until the Hellenistic period, Greek sources did not treat menstrual bleeding as ritually polluting, as opposed to the blood of childbirth, which did prevent one from entering a sacred precinct.⁸² It would be a mistake, though, to associate either the blood of childbirth or menstruation with death, which also caused ritual defilement in Greek religion. Quite on the contrary: again following King, both of these forms of female bleeding are necessary elements of fertility, which Greek religion regarded as inherent to the human, or profane, world and therefore segregated from the realm of the gods. The nonprocreating gods assure fertility: Artemis remains a virgin, as do her devotees, but by doing so they guarantee that profane sexuality will be fertile. For the same reason, sexual intercourse may not take place within a Greek temple (Herodotus claimed that only the Greeks and the Egyptians refrain from sex within their temples;⁸³ he left out the Israelites). That which is part of the natural order belongs in the profane world; the realm of the sacred, where humans commune with the gods, must be free of such activities, not because they are inherently devalued, but because they are quintessentially *human*.

Let us see how this interpretation of female blood in Greek religion might apply to the Bible. Given the priests' particular concern with fertility, it is hard to understand how they would view negatively a normal act of intercourse, although it is certainly possible that they might have considered aspects of sexuality or of the body—male or female—negatively (this common assumption remains, however, in need of proof). Far from a sign of death, in any case, menstruation was more likely a sign of life and fertility, since only when a woman begins to menstruate is she ready to conceive. And given that married women in biblical times spent most of their adult years either pregnant or lactating, the return of menstruation would signal, once again, their fertility: the ability to become impure on a regular basis is necessary for conception, just as abnormal bleeding indicates a pathology in the reproductive system. Conversely, the end of menstruation with menopause was a clear sign that a woman was no longer fertile. So the blood of childbirth should also be associated with the creation of new life, rather than with death. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky puts it: “The person who has experienced birth has been at the boundaries of life/non-life.”⁸⁴ This same logic applies to men as well, since only when a man can ejaculate semen is he fertile, as the Bible proudly proclaims of Moses, who died at 120 and “his wetness had not abandoned him” (Deut. 34:7). Semen and menstrual and parturient blood all ought to be understood as part of the natural order created by God.

The suggestion that genital fluids ought to be associated with life rather than death finds support from the metaphoric prophecy in Ezekiel 16:6: “When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: ‘Live in your blood,’ yea, I said to you: ‘Live in your blood.’” The prophet here sees the female child Israel lying abandoned in the blood of childbirth (referring to it as “your” blood is therefore misleading, since it is really the blood of the mother). The Jewish Publication Society translators of the Bible, perplexed by the meaning of the original, render the doubled blessing “live *in spite of* your blood.” But this forced reading of the letter *bet* is unnecessary. Rather, it should be understood as an instrumental *bet*: “live *by means of* your blood.” Female blood—the blood of menstruation and childbirth—is a vital fluid.

So is semen, which pollutes both partners in an act of intercourse. To be sure, the pollution of intercourse is the least defiling of all those listed in Leviticus 15: it only lasts until evening, requires no sacrifice, and affects only the two partners. But the act of intercourse still causes defilement, a puzzle until we recall that sexual relations may not take

place in God's sanctuary. Sexuality and everything connected to it belong to the profane world, as they do in Greek religion.⁸⁵ Given this view, it is no surprise that the prophetic literature denounces so vociferously those practices (real or imaginary) that involve sexual relations in cultic sites.

How might this thinking apply to the ban on sex with a menstruating woman? The following argument is necessarily speculative. If menstrual blood, like semen, was thought of as a procreative fluid, then it too had to be separated from cultic activity. And intercourse during a woman's menstrual period might produce a *double* impurity: the impurity of normal intercourse plus the impurity of contact with menstrual blood. This appears to be the reasoning behind the most stringent form of the prohibition in Leviticus 20:18: "If a man lies with a woman in her infirmity [*davah*] and uncovers her nakedness, he has uncovered her source [*mekorah*] and she has uncovered the source of her blood; both of them shall be cut off [*ve-nikhretu*] from among their people." The "source" of the blood is what must remain hidden, as it apparently is when she is not menstruating, even during intercourse. Menstrual bleeding by itself indicates that the source has been breeched, but it takes an act of intercourse to fully "reveal" it. This "revealing" (*gilui*) is therefore at once related to and different from the other sexual prohibitions, in which *gilui* means simply sexual relations. What is clear is that intercourse during the menses causes both partners to "reveal" (or "come into contact with") the source of female fertility. As one interpreter has argued, the punishment of *karet* (being "cut off from their people") for this infraction may be infertility.⁸⁶

As in Greek religion, so in ancient Israel, fertility is assured by segregating the holy from the profane: no sex is allowed in sacred sites. God may be the source of fertility, but he does not engage in sexual relations, as do the gods of the Canaanites, and therefore one must not have sex in the divine precinct, as the prophets thought that the Canaanites did. Would it be too speculative to suggest that the same logic applies to sexual contact with the female source of fertility? Following Mary Douglas, female genital blood is a site of danger and impurity but also of power. If the body mirrors society (again according to Douglas), then the female body contains a sacred site. Like the profane "encroacher" who enters a cultic site and must be killed (Num. 1:51), those who engage in sex during menstruation encroach on sacred terrain and must suffer the appropriate punishment.

This theory of the meaning of the female body has an analogy in the beliefs of the Hua of the New Guinean highlands, as described by Anna Meigs: “The site of the body is the temple, the place where the awesome powers reside.”⁸⁷ This is because the Hua do not have any particular theology: with no gods to be worshipped, the spiritual forces in the world are to be found in the body. It is a view that resonates with rabbinic Judaism, for whom the destruction of the temple meant the end of God’s direct connection to the world, thus leaving the body as the temple’s remnant.⁸⁸ For the Hua, the blood of menstruation and childbirth are viewed as at once the most polluting and the most creative bodily substances.⁸⁹ The argument I am proposing here suggests a similar dynamic in biblical religion: the polluting character of menstrual blood is a result of its procreative power, which comes from a sacred site within the female body.

Kathleen O’Grady has made an argument about the *niddah* (menstruating woman) in the Bible that offers support for this theory.⁹⁰ She shows that both the laws and the language pertaining to the *niddah* are remarkably similar to those concerning the *nazir* (Num. 6:1–21), the man or the woman who takes vows to abstain from grape products, to leave his or her hair unshorn, and to avoid contact with corpses. The roots *n-d-d* (which many assume is the underlying root of *n-d-h*) and *n-z-r* look strikingly alike and, in any case, have the same lexical meaning: to set aside or segregate. A *nazir* who has become defiled by a corpse (Num. 6:9 says that it is his hair that becomes defiled) must wait seven days and, on the eighth, bring two turtledoves or two pigeons to be sacrificed, one as a sin offering and one as a burnt offering. A woman who has abnormal bleeding must also wait seven days and then bring the same sacrifices (the language in Lev. 15:29–30 and Num. 6:10–11 is virtually identical). Drawing from James Frazer and Mary Douglas, O’Grady argues that the *nazir* and the *niddah* are not polar opposites (the one pure, the other polluted), but rather both are *taboos*, meaning persons who present a danger because they are consecrated or set apart.⁹¹ O’Grady’s equivalence between the *nazir* and the *niddah* needs qualification, however, since the first was clearly positive and the second, as we have seen, was negative. But seeing the menstruating woman as taboo in the sense of *powerful* because she is *polluted* opens up an entirely fresh way of attacking our problem.

If menstrual blood, like semen, was seen as a powerful fluid of procreation, then it constituted a danger to the sacred, but a danger that defined the boundary of the sacred. These fluids belonged to the profane realm, not because they represented the forces of death, but because they

were the forces of *human* life. O'Grady's conclusion puts it somewhat differently, perhaps better: "Menstrual blood, more clearly than any other taboo substance or state, is situated at an ambiguous semantic crossroads, expressing both the blood of life itself, the most sacred of substances, with the shedding of blood, in a 'sacrificial' gesture. Not surprisingly, this shifting valence between life and death requires ritual attention. Menstruation, in all its ambiguity, becomes the epitome or the ambivalent resonance (purity-impurity; sacred-unclean) imprinted in the linguistic container 'taboo.'"⁹² Menstruation is its own form of bloody sacrifice, but a sacrifice that has to be kept out of the sacred sites, even as its very exclusion marks the boundary of the sacred.

We can now return to the question of why the authors of the Holiness Code made sex during menstruation a crime on the level of the sexual transgressions. One theory holds that H was simply uninterested in the ritual pollution issues that motivated P. But this explanation, even if true, still begs the question. A possible clue comes from Leviticus 15:31: "You shall set apart the Israelites from their impurity, lest they die through their impurity by polluting my Tabernacle which is among them."⁹³ This verse is understood by some to be an interpolation by H.⁹⁴ Either way, it constitutes a bridge between the ritual impurity of genital discharges and the moral defilement of the sexual prohibitions. Entering the tabernacle in a state of impurity leads to death at the hand of God. So, even though quite normal processes, such as sexual relations, create temporary impurity, the consequences of trespassing into a sacred site in such a state could be catastrophic. By extending the concept of purity beyond the tabernacle to include the land, H created a much larger circle of danger. Given this school's particular obsession with sexual ethics, it is not surprising that a sexual act might turn into the model for transmuting ritual pollution of the sanctuary into moral pollution of the land. Since it would be impossible, not to say self-contradictory, for a theology preoccupied with procreation to outlaw sexual relations *tout court*, H took the one act that was most like violation of a sacred site—sex during a woman's menstrual period—and used it as the basis for extending the purity laws throughout the land. For H, a woman's inner source is not only a bodily sanctuary; it is also a synecdoche for the land itself. And he who violates this temple necessarily defiles the land.

I do not wish for this interpretation to be misunderstood, for it to imply that the priests were somehow profeminists. On the contrary, lacking a female priesthood, the male priests authored laws in both the

ritual and the moral codes that gave them the sole authority over female bleeding. If it is correct that the priests saw the female body as a temple in miniature, that view resulted in a dramatic loss of female autonomy: sacred sites were, after all, the dominion of priests. The menstrual laws must be seen, therefore, as part and parcel of the priests' demand for a monopoly on blood, a monopoly that indexed their political power in ancient Israel. If the menstruating woman possessed a certain inherent power through her pollution, the priests were intent on controlling that power themselves.

Thus, while the blood of all slaughtered domesticated animals must be properly disposed of inside God's temple, genital blood and semen belong outside. It is precisely the failure to maintain this division that characterizes idolatry in the biblical imagination: the idolaters consume the blood of animals as part of their rituals, just as they engage in sex within their cultic sites. For these reasons, their temples are defiled sites of abomination, sites of "menstrual impurity," and warnings of what the Israelites must avoid at all costs. And from idolatry it is but a short step to the shedding of human blood, as the psalmist charges Israel:

They did not destroy the nations as the Lord had commanded them, but mingled with the nations and learned their ways.
They worshiped their idols which became a snare for them.
Their own sons and daughters they sacrificed to demons
They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; So the land was polluted with bloodguilt. (Ps. 106: 34-38)

Thus, one form of ritual pollution, sex with a menstruating woman, became the synecdoche for all forbidden sex, which in turn came to stand for idolatry and murder. Taken together, all these sins, bound up as they were with various forms of bloodguilt, constituted cardinal violations of Israel's bond with God. And the covenant itself was effected by and maintained by blood.

COMMUNITY OF BLOOD

Chris Knight has suggested that in many hunter-gatherer cultures, as well as their successors, menstrual blood is linked to the blood spilled in the hunt. When women start bleeding, they go on a "sex strike" and send the men out to hunt. In his argument, women's menstrual practices are at the origins of culture, and the taboo on contact with a menstruating woman, so common in many cultures, stems originally

from an act of female rebellion.⁹⁵ Whatever the truth of this account, none of it remained, at least visibly, in Israelite culture. But one insight in Knight's account may be useful in connecting the different types of blood practices we have discussed: female bleeding and blood shed by men in sacrifice and in homicide (with the assumption that these are male domains) have a kind of equivalence. Menstruation, as we have seen, is both a source of pollution and a sign of fertility. Similarly, blood shed in animal sacrifice at the appropriate cultic site and with the proper disposal has enormous power to promote fertility of both land and people, as well as to atone for sins. In contrast, human blood spilled in acts of violence can pollute the land and bring down God's almost automatic vengeance. Blood connected to women and men, although different in nature, shares this dialectic in biblical culture.

All these forms of blood are essential to the relationship between Israel and God, a relationship sanctified by a covenant that is itself instituted by sacrifice. The first covenant between Abram and God (Gen. 15) is enacted by the "covenant of the pieces" (*berit ben ha-betarim*), in which Abram cuts a number of animals and birds in half. Perhaps significantly, the term here (and elsewhere) is to "cut" a covenant (*karat berit*—similar to the English expression "to cut a deal"); the same word is used for the punishment of "cutting-off" (*karet*). The meaning of this punishment is unclear in the Bible but is usually thought to refer to death at the hand of God. At least in the case of Leviticus 20, however, "cutting-off" may also mean "to be rendered infertile." The covenant that God "cuts" with Abram in Genesis 15 promises fertility; violating the covenant brings its opposite—both signified by the same word. In fact, it may be that the "covenant of the pieces" constitutes a warning: the violence done to the cut animals awaits those who would violate their pact with God. If so, then both covenant and its abrogation are bound up with bloodshed.

There are a variety of different signifiers of covenant in the Bible, such as circumcision (Gen. 17:11) and salt (Lev. 2:13). But in one curious passage, Exodus 24:6–8, covenant is signified—and perhaps also effected—by blood. Just before ascending Mount Sinai, Moses sacrifices bulls as offerings of well-being to the Lord: "Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins [*agganot*]. He threw half of the blood on the altar. And he took the book of the covenant and read it to the people and they said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey.' Moses took the [other half of the] blood and threw it on the people, saying, 'Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made [*karat*] with

you concerning all these words [*devarim*—i.e., commandments].”⁹⁶ This is the only place in the Bible where Moses functions as a priest, and it is, significantly, a text that critics do not attribute to a priestly source. It is also the only sacrificial ritual where some of the blood is thrown on the people; in all others, it is disposed of on altars.⁹⁷ Clearly, this blood is meant to effect an initiation, an anointing of the people who are entering into covenant with God. In the priestly texts, we find blood used for purposes of anointment (together with oil), but limited to the anointing of Aaron and his sons (e.g., Ex. 29:19–21). In this case, the blood is mysteriously smeared on the right earlobe, the right thumb, and the right big toe of each priest (the same anointment is performed as part of the purification of the leper—see Lev. 14:25). Then blood and oil are sprinkled on them and their garments.

What might these strange rituals signify, and what can we learn from them about the singular act of enacting a covenant with the people by throwing blood on them? Part of the answer will come in chapter 2 in an exploration of the exegetical career of the verse in Exodus 24, but I will offer here some provisional suggestions about how blood functions in biblical covenant and anointment. Although the covenant of blood in Exodus 24 does not involve anointment in the priestly sense, the use of blood in the anointment of priests suggests asking what anointment meant generally in the biblical lexicon.⁹⁸ Anointment clearly sanctifies the person or the thing anointed, making the person or the thing capable of contact with the divine.

One way it does so is by providing protection against God’s overwhelming power. In David’s lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, he speaks of “the shield of Saul no longer anointed with oil” (2 Sam 1:21). The clear implication is that an anointed shield conveys protection; Saul’s shield, the shield of “the Lord’s anointed” no longer possesses this magical power. We may surmise that the anointment of priests serves a similar purpose. Entering the holy precinct exposes them to danger. If they are not properly purified, they may die: “When they [Aaron and his sons] enter the Tent of Meeting they shall wash with water, that they may not die; or when they approach the altar to serve, to turn into smoke an offering by fire to the Lord, they shall wash their hands and feet, that they may not die” (Ex. 30:20–21). What is true for purification by water must be even more true for anointment by the more precious blood and oil: they must convey protection against the divine power resident in the sanctuary. If this analysis is correct, then throwing blood on the altar, like the other uses of blood in the sacrificial

order, must be a means not only of purification and consecration but also of protection: that which is purified is protected against the divine wrath that operates almost mechanically against the encroachment of impurity into a sacred site.⁹⁹

If throwing blood on the altar conveys protection, then so does throwing blood on the people. The covenant between God and Israel turns the people into “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6), although this specific language does not appear in Exodus 24. In other respects, however, the language of Exodus 19 is similar to that of Exodus 24: covenant is invoked and the people swear, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (19:8 and 24:7). Consecrated to God, the people, if they keep the laws and maintain their purity, can bring sacrifices with impunity to the cult, sacrifices that ensure their well-being and fertility. The covenant of blood, itself the product of a sacrifice, is therefore the necessary precondition for offering blood sacrifices. And although the covenant conveys divine protection and beneficence, murder, idolatry, and sexual violations all can shatter this promise.

The covenant of blood involves the drenching of the people in the blood of bulls, a ritual eerily reminiscent of the *taurobolium*, the cult of Attis and of the Magna Mater in which a bull would be slaughtered, its blood showering down onto an initiate crouched in a pit below.¹⁰⁰ We shall return to this ceremony in chapter 2. But because the ritual involves throwing half of the blood on the altar (that is, on God) and half on the people, it also suggests a “blood brotherhood” between God and his people. Such a blood brotherhood effected by the mixing of blood between members of the covenant is widely attested in the ancient Near East. Herodotus describes such a ritual among the Arabs: “A man stands between the two parties that would give security . . . and cuts with a sharp stone the palms of the hands of the parties; then he takes a piece of wool from the cloak of each and smears with the blood seven stones that lie between them, calling the while on Dionysos and the Heavenly Aphrodite.”¹⁰¹ In the second century C.E., the church father Tertullian elaborated on Herodotus: “Concerning the eating of blood and other such tragic dishes, you read (I do not know where—it is in Herodotus, I think) that blood drawn from the arms and tasted by one another was the method of making covenant among certain nations.”¹⁰²

That Herodotus may not have been inventing such blood covenants is attested by a wide variety of evidence from many cultures in which blood is mingled or even drunk as a sign of brotherhood.¹⁰³ It has even

been suggested that the rare Latin word *assiratum*, which signified a drink of blood and wine, may have its origin in the Semitic root *a-s-r*, which stands for *bond* or *covenant* in a number of languages, including Hebrew.¹⁰⁴ Finally, in an uncanny foreshadowing of the medieval blood libel, covenants sometimes even involved mixing bread with blood. An Egyptian ostrakon of the Ramesside period reads: “You mingled with ‘Amu having eaten bread [mixed] with your blood.”¹⁰⁵ This practice is attested in at least one other source: the weddings of gypsies in Great Britain in which “the bride and groom mixed blood from their wrists in flour which was baked into a cake and eaten by the two.”¹⁰⁶ Although most wedding cakes are made of less gruesome ingredients, it may well be that the ritual drinking of wine at weddings represents a substitute for blood in the sealing of a compact between the marital partners.

The Israelite covenant of blood involved neither the drinking of blood nor the baking of bread made with blood.¹⁰⁷ Human blood played no role in it whatsoever. But if there were ancient Near Eastern rituals of blood brotherhood in which blood might be mingled or consumed, this would perhaps explain the vehemence with which our priestly texts reject the consumption of blood: blood was the covenantal solution, but, as Maimonides intuited, it must not be used after the fashion of the idolaters. That which they eat, Israel must not. The protective power of blood is anointed on the bodies of Israel and its priests, but its consecrating power works on the *outside* of their bodies. In contrast to the later Christian doctrine of the Eucharist, it is not what enters the body that makes it holy, but what is kept outside of it.

Following Ronald Hendel, just as in the Passover sacrifice, where the blood on the doorposts was a sign of God’s protective covenant (Ex. 12:21–23), so the blood thrown on the people may have functioned, together with the sacrificial system as a whole, as “a reminder of the bond that links the Israelites with their God.”¹⁰⁸ Like Geller, Hendel understands the priestly use of blood as a kind of performance in which communication with God is enacted. The blood on the altar is a visible reminder of the ongoing covenantal relationship with God. But the communicative function of blood does not, as Hendel admits, exhaust its meanings. The throwing of blood on both the Israelites and the altar is not only a *sign* of the covenant, but, as Martin Noth has argued, actually *creates* the covenant.¹⁰⁹

By the proper use of blood, Israel becomes a “blood community,” that is, a community constituted through its sacrificial relationship to its God. Here, the meaning of “blood community” is very far from

what it was to become in the age of modern nationalism, namely, a nation based on common racial origins. To be sure, ancient Israel also had its myth of a common tribal identity, going back to the patriarchs and their sons. But the covenant of blood suggests that the nation was based on ritual actions at least as much as on ancestry. By properly disposing of blood in all its guises and avoiding the blood transgressions that polluted the land, the members of the nation were bound to each other, as well as to their land and to their God.

Despite the centrality of blood in this national culture, biblical religion contained the seeds of its own negation. The prophet Isaiah, in his critique of the sacrificial system, suggested that the “blood of bulls” is not necessary to atone for sin. If one acts justly, “be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow-white; be they red as dyed wool, they can become like fleece” (Isa. 1:18). Sin may be the same color as blood, but not only blood can turn it “snow-white.” Without exaggerating the dichotomy between priests and prophets, here was a challenge to the monopoly of the sacrificial system that the priestly schools had articulated in their legal texts. And once the temple sacrifices ended and the people were exiled from the land, the red symbol that glued the system together also dissolved, leaving its practitioners in search of new interpretations of their covenant of blood.