CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Biblical Priestly Tradition as Material Religion: A Comparative Ancient Mediterranean Approach

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THE SANCTUARY OF SILENCE

The corpus of ritual within the Hebrew Bible exemplifies how the study of ancient "religions of the book" may be hampered by an antimaterialist bias—but also can be used to lead beyond it. Whether in Judaism, Christianity, or Buddhism, when a religious culture produces canonical scriptures, scholarship often amplifies the scripture's own ideological self-presentation, behaving as if the heart of the religion lies in the espoused beliefs and narratives of its texts. In this view the study of material culture serves as a "handmaiden," providing background to the teachings of the texts by either confirming or undermining them.[1]

Yet in fact, the most central element of the Hebrew Bible's scriptural corpus itself constitutes a sweeping program for a material religion, one that nearly excludes speech and elevates nonverbal behavior to its most ritually significant element. This literary building block, called the Priestly source or work (P), lays out a set of clearly demarcated traditions about ritual behavior that constitute the single most extended ritual document preserved from the ancient Near East.[2] This set of texts is so much more coherent than the rest of the Pentateuch that it was originally termed the *Grundschrift* ("founding document") of the Torah by nineteenth-century scholarship. And the content of its rituals is almost exclusively focused on physical actions on objects and bodies, up to and including that of God himself (the *kavod*).[3]

This chapter will lay out how the Priestly corpus represents a distinctive form of material religion within the ancient Near East. Both its ideology and practice, on the one hand, and its physical shape as a composition, on the other, are distinctive and have had distinctive impacts on the history of religion. While the acts that the Priestly corpus

9781350280816_pi-504.indd 261 15-Mar-23 12:44:31

prescribes, including the sanctification of ritual sites, offerings of animal and vegetable sacrifice, and the purification of bodies and objects are common across the ancient Mediterranean, its attitude toward language and action is not. In contrast to its best-documented neighbors from Syria and Mesopotamia, it represents a largely different attitude toward the possibilities of human ritual activity and its relationship to the divine. Indeed, P is itself a distinctive embodiment of language about action, one that as a result has acted differently in comparison to comparable works from the ancient Mediterranean and throws them into an illuminating contrast.

Scholars have long noted that the Priestly source of the Torah alone among major biblical texts contains no prayer. This led Yehezkel Kaufmann (1960) to name the temple that is envisioned in Priestly literature the "Sanctuary of Silence."[4] Because P is an extensive and carefully edited literary document that deliberately coordinates narrative with ritual, its choice to never represent regular ritual speech in any of its thousands of lines of ritual description is striking.

How can we investigate P's theory of language? Here we can apply substantial though rarely explored data to this problem. We first examine internal data, exploring P's attitude toward ritual language in the extensive Priestly narratives that talk explicitly about right and wrong ways to use language, typifying successful and failed speech. The second section applies a largely unused treasure trove of ancient archival data on ritual. Neither Kaufmann nor his successors drew on more than a smattering of ancient Near Eastern material, and no study of this topic has applied the full range of carefully analyzed and historically contextualized texts in Ugaritic and Babylonian. Remarkably, these archives suggest that no other temple rituals were silent.

Comparing the patterns found in Priestly literature and Near Eastern temple archives reveals the very different ways ancient ritual experts created cultures out of religious practices and text-building techniques. What genres of ritual are standardized: edited, copied, and studied versus unstandardized, merely used as "to-do lists"? The privileged, standardized ritual texts in the Mesopotamian "stream of tradition" are speech based, mainly consisting of words to say. By contrast, P's ritual texts are almost entirely action based. The Priestly corpus is distinctive because it presents physical ritual actions as the main content of divine speech, turning them into a newly transmittable form of reified culture.

WHAT DID THE PRIESTLY TRADITION WANT OF RITUAL LANGUAGE?

A long-recognized pattern in Priestly biblical texts is the idea that you should not pray to God, or even address him at all, and that the Jerusalem Temple is therefore ideally a sanctuary of silence. We start with three things we know about the Priestly corpus: It is (1) a literary work that (2) coordinates narrative with ritual, and (3) this is part of the work's goal—to draw deliberate connections between speech and action.

The first—obvious but crucial—point is that in its current form, the Priestly thread is not a ritual archive but an extensive literary work based on ritual archives. That is, while its sacrificial and other ritual elements are in some ways closely related to everyday practice from the Iron Age (Greer 2019; Smoak 2016), it is an elaborately composed set of writings. This may seem obvious, but it sets P apart from all other known ancient Near Eastern ritual documents. At least in Sumerian, Babylonian, Ugaritic, and Phoenician, there are no other extended works that frame such a wide variety of ritual documents within a set of stories thousands of lines long.

Second, P integrates ritual into a special kind of ritually oriented narrative (Damrosch 1987; Watts 1999; Feldman 2020). So, for example, the Priestly creation story, Gen. 1–2:4a, is organized by divine speeches. Each day begins with a verbal command by God that separates the world into the binary pairs of day and night, land and sea, male and female. And this creative separation happens over the course of seven days, with the seventh, the sabbath, being the capstone of creation, sanctified by God himself.

Example 1: God's Use of Language in the Priestly Creation Myth, Gen. 1–2:4

Jussive of "to Be"

1:1 When God began to create heaven and earth—2 the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—3 God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light (וַיֹּ֥אמֶר אֱלֹהִ֖ים יְהִ֣י א֑וֹר וַֽיְהִי־אֽוֹר) … .

Verb of Naming

this word has been garbled since the first proof; the correct form is לָאוֹר֙

5 God called the light Day (וַיִּקְרָ֨א אֱלֹהִ֤ים רוֹ֙אלָ֙ י֔וֹם וְלַחֹ֖שֶׁךְ קָ֣רָא לָ֑יְלָה) and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day … .

Jussive of Action

9 God said, "Let the water below the sky be gathered (וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֱלֹהִ֗ים יִקָּו֨וּ הַמַּ֜יִם…) into one area, that the dry land may appear." And it was so. …

Imperative; Verb of Ritual Action: "Bless"

22 God blessed them, saying, "Be fertile and increase (וַיְבָ֧רֶךְ אֹתָ֛ם אֱלֹהִ֖ים לֵאמֹ֑ר פְּר֣וּ וּרְב֗וּ וּמִלְא֤וּ אֶת־הַמַּ֙יִם֙), fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." … .

Cohortative

26 And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. (וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֱלֹהִ֔ים נַֽעֲשֶׂ֥ה אָדָ֛ם בְּצַלְמֵ֖נוּ כִּדְמוּתֵ֑נוּ) … .

Performative ("I Hereby Give")

29 God said, "I hereby give you every seed-bearing plant (וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֱלֹהִ֗ים הִנֵּה֩ נָתַ֨תִּי לָכֶ֜ם אֶת־כָּל־עֵ֣שֶׂב) that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. … .

Verbs of Ritual Action: "Bless," "Declare Holy"

2:3 And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy (וַיְבָ֤רֶךְ אֱלֹהִים֙ אֶת־י֣וֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִ֔י וַיְקַדֵּ֖שׁ אֹת֑וֹ), because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done.

The grammar of Priestly creation in Gen. 1–2:4a is a comprehensive presentation of pragmatically marked Hebrew verb forms. Specifically, God is shown as using all the pragmatic forms that come from a superior power position. The only forms missing are the ones that involve dialogue or the possibility of opposition (i.e., polite requests, vetitives, or prohibitives).

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We then find that in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, God gives verbal commands to the Priests to separate the world as well. As scholars have noted, these divine commands order humans, especially priests, to divide certain classes of things into pure and impure, and he commands the Israelites to observe the Sabbath just as he did. So, there is a parallel structure between the Priestly narratives and the Priestly laws. The pattern of both is depicted as being organized by divine verbal command, and the events of each are triggered by divine words.

Third and finally, P deliberately correlates ritual and narrative. This is a corollary of the first two points, but it has long been recognized as reflecting a profound aspect of the Priestly tradition. So, the narrative of Genesis 1 provides a charter with extensive verbal parallels for both the dietary laws, for example, of Leviticus 11, and the Sabbath laws in Exodus 20 and Leviticus 23.

These points about Priestly narrative are widely agreed on by scholars and directly relevant to Priestly ritual, in particular the fact that P has no prayer. That is, in none of the regular rituals is there any praise of or direct address to God. When a sacrifice has a definite function such as to atone for a transgression or to help make a leper clean, no words to that effect are given, nor is God requested to do it. By contrast, the only time we get direct discourse, *quoted speeches* is in irregular or nonsacrificial situations.[5]

The Need for Further Explanation of P's Pragmatics and Impact

But there is a continuing tension that suggests the need for another approach to explaining P's use of ritual. This idea of a sanctuary of silence has been debated back and forth since Yehezkel Kaufmann proposed it—some scholars such as Menahem Haran (1996) and Israel Knohl (1995, 1996) have accepted it, while others such as Michael Fishbane (1974) and Jacob Milgrom (1991: 19, 60–1) have criticized it. But absent a theological dissertation by P, how can we decide?

correcting missing bibliographical reference, read: Michael Fishbane (1974), Jacob Milgrom (1991: 19, 60–1), and Ed Greenstein (2011:513 and n112)

Knohl argued that the absence of prayer is part of a Priestly conceptualization of humans as radically separate from God that "leaves no room for petitional prayer, in which humans request fulfillment of their needs from God; nor does it allow a role for songs of praise in which humans thank God and recount God's wonders and mercies. The structural model of prayer, a direct address by humans to their God … is at odds with P's aim in emphasizing God's loftiness" (1995: 148).

His characterization of a lack of second-person address is an important key, though we should not exaggerate this impersonal dimension. After all the Priestly texts depict God who loves the smell of roasting meat and leaves His dwelling if it becomes dirty. Indeed, Baruch Schwartz describes P's "unique anthropomorphism" as one that "attributes to God the sensual, carnal pleasure derived from inhaling the fragrant odor of roasting meat while at the same time denying that He actually consumes it as food" (Schwartz 2004:208).

PRIESTLY "SPEECH ABOUT SPEECH IN SPEECH ABOUT ACTION"

We can gain a fresh view of the bigger picture by looking at Priestly narratives through the lens of attitudes toward language: myths and rituals that exemplify what words are for, what human speech should and should not do in contrast with divine speech. These are what anthropologists refer to as language ideologies (Urban 1984; Sanders 2004). A particularly valuable insight into these ideals, which are not universal but vary

significantly by time and place, can be found in a culture's prestigious stories about the consequences of language use, what Urban (1984) refers to as "speech about speech in speech about action."

P ritual is rarely considered alongside Priestly depictions of language use in narrative, apart from Knohl's crucial point that Moses does not address God directly. In fact, the Priestly corpus contains three strikingly paradigmatic stories of language use. From the clear and certain example with which we began, in Genesis 1, we now move to two more complex examples—Numbers 20, and P's version of the Sinai revelation.

Example 2: Moses's Failed Language Use in the "Water in the Wilderness" Story, Num. 20:1-13

In the fateful story that foreshadows the death of the Priestly Torah's main human speaker, Moses, the Israelites migrating from the wilderness of Zin encounter a waterless place.[6] The people rebel against Moses and his brother Aaron, saying "Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here?" (20:4). God instructs Moses and Aaron to take a staff, gather the congregation and speak (*dibbartem*, in the second-person plural) to the rock, in the sight of the entire congregation, to yield water. Moses's and Aaron's actions are then narrated, repeating the same verbal roots as in God's commandment.

italicize these two Hebrew roots

But here a fateful ritual failure occurs. They gather the congregation; Moses speaks (using the root ˀmr rather than dbr, and in the singular—Moses alone) to them, rather than the rock. His speech, rod in hand, is not a command but a rhetorical question: "Listen, you rebels, is it from this rock that we shall bring forth water for you?" He then strikes the rock twice. Water comes forth and the people, not to mention their cattle, drink. Suddenly, God pronounces a verdict: "Because you did not trust me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them."

What went wrong? Moses was commanded to speak (*dbr*). And when God instructs Moses to *dbr*, it is typically an exercise of direct authority: Moses was commanded to command the rock. Linguistically, when God instructs Moses to *dbr*, it is always elsewhere an exercise of direct authority, using high-profile pragmatics. There is no explanation in the text of why Moses refused a command and asked a question instead. Was it mockery of the Israelites' own doubt, or, as the Lord's speech suggests, proof of Moses's own doubt about his, and God's, ability to perform the miracle? Regardless, the failure is clear on a linguistic level: Moses cannot speak as God commanded him to.

By contrast with Moses, the only P character who has performed miracles by speaking before is God himself. Recall that all of the language used in God's speeches in Genesis 1 is grammatically marked as pragmatic, and successful. By contrast, in the one line of narrative framing Moses's speech, we see every major type of pragmatic failure: while the Lord's command implies authoritative speech, Moses asks a question; while Moses is commanded to speak to the rock, he speaks to Israel, and instead of speaking to the rock he hits it. In one stroke, the speaker, audience, type of discourse, and physical actions have gone wrong.

Prior to this, every one of Moses's ritual performances has succeeded perfectly.[7] But this time Moses is supposed to speak alone with divine authority. Asked to not merely transmit a command on God's behalf but perform a miracle by his own word, Moses fails and is humiliated.[8]

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As speech about speech, what separates this fateful instance is that God has asked Moses to do the one thing he has never done: a *verbal* miracle. Famously Moses is depicted as having a problem speaking in P because he is עֲרַל שְׂפָתָיִם ("of impeded speech" Exod. 6:12, again in 6:29) as well as other sources (Exod. 4:10). All of Moses's other miracles are enacted silently, with physical actions not speech. In P myth, divine language is perfect and innately effective when spoken by God, as it succeeds in the Genesis creation account, but ambivalent from human lips, when transmitted by his proxies. And if Moses is either literally or metaphorically of impeded speech, then the power of the words he speaks must be entirely God's. Here P narrates the limits of the human use of ritual language.

Example 3: The Priestly Revelation at Sinai

Finally, the Priestly Mount Sinai revelation contains no commands for regular worship or sacrifice, let alone prayer. In the widely agreed-on Priestly Sinai passages spanning Exodus 25–31[9], the only contents are building instructions for the Tabernacle and costume design to consecrate the Priests. Baruch Schwartz emphasizes Moses's passivity:

> In P Moses merely receives the divine commands and conveys them to the people. No initiative, no prophetic intercession, and no impulsiveness are attributed to him. He is the spokesman for the strict letter of the law in Leviticus 10, and when, later on in the Priestly narrative (Num 20:1–13) he strays (slightly, momentarily, and only once) from his instructions, he is severely punished. (Schwartz 1996: 123)

At Sinai, Moses sees a heavenly visual model (*tabnît*, from the *B-N-Y* root for "build"). It is only after the Israelites build a concrete physical version of that *tabnît* that they receive the main verbal revelation of God. Indeed, Schwartz even argues that at the mountaintop, the mythical pinnacle of revelation, no voice of law is heard. In the P account of the Sinai event, "no Decalogue or other such sample of divine law is proclaimed. Further, nature does not participate: no thunder, lightning, horns, fire, or smoke are present" (Schwartz 1996:125). Instead, God's fiery body (*kābōd*) descends from the heavens to the mountaintop and, in turn, descends into the Tabernacle after it is built. For the Priestly tradition, the most essential communion with God happens in silence, and its narrative is one of how God's material presence comes to dwell on earth (Sommer 2015: 53–7).

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN PRIESTLY APPROACHES

Is the religion of the P more material than that of other Near Eastern ritual texts? It has never been tested against the rich spectrum of well-documented ancient Near Eastern temple rituals. There has been relatively little work done on the nature of language use in Babylonian or Ugaritic ritual. Did Babylonian priests of the first millennium, or Ugaritic priests of the late second, actually serve their gods in silence? How was language used to talk to gods and mediate between heaven and earth?

The advantage of the ancient cuneiform ritual corpus is that it provides enough evidence to let us compare ideology and practice on the ground. Babylonian temple rituals can often be squared with administrative and prescriptive documents to gain a credible picture of ritual practice, as in Linssen's study of "Temple Ritual Texts as Evidence for Hellenistic Cult Practice" in Uruk and Babylon (2004). And as Pardee (2002: 221) notes, the prescriptive sacrificial ritual texts from Late Bronze Age Ugarit are important because

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"their quasi-administrative nature" indicates "that the sacrifices and offerings named were in fact presented as prescribed."

Ritual Language at Ugarit

Most scribal production at Ugarit seems to have taken place over the course of about a century, so we are well informed about a specific time and place. Moreover, this time and place represents an early instance of a West Semitic cultural stream that later emerges in the Priestly corpus. For example, in addition to a set of cognate ritual terms such as *ʿlh* ("burnt offering" in Ugaritic and Hebrew; see Pardee 2002), there is a shared emphasis on the ritual use of blood and the burning of offerings, neither of which played any meaningful role in Mesopotamian offerings (Lambert 1993).

While the precise proportion of verbal and silent ritual at Ugarit is disputed, there is a consensus that language accompanied most cases of ritual action. The two poles are represented by Pardee and Del Olmo Lete, who in a reliably energetic polemic lay out contesting positions—though they end up not terribly far apart. Olmo Lete claims, in his survey of Ugaritic ritual texts, that "ritual was never movement without speech" (del Olmo Lete 1999: 352), to which Pardee retorts that "the author would have to have been there to know that" (Pardee 2000: 72). But he agrees that prayer was often an important part of sacrificial ritual—including in the most popular and widely copied rituals.

In his study of ritual at Ugarit, Pardee concludes that the ritual texts preserved to us were not records of past events but scripts for performance. It is important to note here that speech is especially prominent in the only ritual texts that we know to have been repeatedly *reused*. Here is the end of RS 1.002, which takes the form of a speech that the ritual expert gives alongside the physical actions of sacrificing. A set of formal features make clear that this is ritual speech. These include second-person address, the narration of the actions (perhaps with performative force as in the below line 40'–41', "the sacrifice, it is sacrificed!" (*ndbḥ*, a verb in the N stem suffix form, standard for explicit primary performatives in Ugaritic as shown in Sanders 2004), and the deictics (line 42' "here is the donkey").

> (39') whether (!) your "beauty" be altered: be it in yo[ur] anger,
>
> [be it in] your [impa]tience,
>
> be it in some turpitude (40') that you should commit; whether [your] "beauty" be altered:
>
> [as concerns regular sacrifices]
>
> or as concerns the *t̠ʿ*-sacrifice. The sacrifice, (41') it is sacrificed, the *t̠ʿ*-sacrifice, it is [offered,
>
> the slaughtering] is done.
>
> (42') May it be borne to the father of the sons of *ʾIlu* …
>
> here is the donkey.

A striking ritual for the month of the first wine (RS 1.003 with parallel in RS 18.056) involves the king not only reciting a scripted liturgy but also making an improvised speech in ritual context. This incorporation of "whatever is in his mind (lit. heart)" suggests that this ritual gave a prominent role to impromptu verbal performance (with stipulated speeches *underlined*):

cut the word 'underlined' and replace with the words 'in italics' (but please do not put these words in actual italic font!)

> 45. On the sixth day (of the festival of the full moon): two [rams] for Šamnu; in the upper room, a cow. [*The king], still pure, will repeat the recitation*. On the seventh day, when the sun rises, the day will be free (of cultic obligations); when the sun sets, the king will [be free (of cultic obligation)] And on the day of the new moon (of the following month): two rams … .
>
> 50. At that time, the king [will offer a sac]rifice to DN on the roof … A bull and a ram as a peace-offering, to be repeated seven times.
>
> *According to what is in his heart the king will sp[eak]* (*k lbh yr*[*gm*] *mlk*). When the sun rises, the king will be free (of cultic obligations). [broken line] You will take him back to [the palace]. *And when he is there he will [raise] his hands to the heavens.*

A clear majority of preserved Ugaritic rituals either stipulate a ritual use of language or clearly entail it. In the first category, a range of Ugaritic rituals either contain such designated speech sections or consist entirely of verbal scripts. Among many others there are the royal funeral ritual RS 34.126, the incantations RS 92.2014 (against snakes): RIH 78/20 (against impotence), RS 22.225 (against the evil eye), the historiolae RS 24.258 (Ilu's drunkenness and a hangover cure), RS 24.272 (the visit to Ditanu) and the snake incantations RS 24.244 (Horanu and the Mare), and RS 24.251 (Horanu and the sun goddess).

But more broadly, it is clear that most known Ugaritic rituals, even ones that do not designate prayer, entail ritual speech. This is because sacrifices are typically designated for multiple divine beings or dead kings, and there is no evidence of any mechanism for marking a sacrifice as for one god or another other than speech. Hence even Pardee, representing the more conservative approach to the use of language in Ugaritic ritual, designates the frequent textual heading *dbḥ* (cognate with Hebrew *zbḥ* "to slaughter for sacrifice") as "sacrificial liturgy," rather than sacrificial ritual, protocol, and so on in texts like RS 34.126.[10] The designation of each sacrifice to a specific god must have been accomplished verbally since there is no reason to believe there were dozens of individually designated divine altars or other nonverbal markers.

Ritual Language in Mesopotamia

While the Ugaritic ritual corpus illuminates a single time and place, the Mesopotamian corpus provides remarkable breadth, depicting over 2,000 years of ritual practice across a wide range of places and scribal traditions. There are two very different types of ritual texts in the Mesopotamian Sumero-Akkadian written tradition. As we shall see, they concur in providing a picture parallel to that of Ugarit: most preserved ritual entailed speech.

On the one hand, there was the wide-ranging corpus of classical texts that were standardized and transmitted over a long time period. This corpus, once termed "the stream of tradition," was used in the training of scribes and helped form various forms of official written culture. They were intensively edited and reedited, copied and modified across time and space and used in the training of scribes. This category is more shifting and uneven than formerly thought, since new traditions developed, old ones died, and many "canonical" texts are not actually attested across all known major Mesopotamian libraries and collections at any given time period (Robson 2013).

As varied as cuneiform classics could be, they still stand in clear contrast to a second pole. These are the disparate set of more ad hoc ritual documents that were not

9781350280816_pi-504.indd 268 15-Mar-23 12:44:31

standardized or taught to younger scribes. These texts, whether ritual or administrative, were never edited into any sort of "canonical" form and did not form part of any curriculum; their lives were sometimes only as long as the life of the individual tablet on which they were written. As rituals, they sometimes belonged to a single temple and so did not usually travel far, thus not requiring titles that would help scribes identify them outside of their home contexts. As an analogy from later bibliography, their textual content often did not outlast the individual manuscript on which they were written. However, sometimes the nonclassical texts were still seen as interesting and important by later scribes, who proudly report on how they rescued them from wax tablets. By contrast with the cuneiform classics, these nonstandardized texts were used as records of temple activities or performance notes.

Mesopotamian ritual texts from the "Stream of tradition" consist mostly of verbal scripts. They constitute hymns, prayers, incantations, and—most prominently—extended exorcistic rituals such as the extended multitablet works *Utukkū Lemnūtu* ("Evil Demons"), *Maqlû* ("Incineration [of a witch]"), *Šurpu* ("Burning [also of a witch]"), and *Namburbû* ("Dispelling" [of bad omens]). While texts like *Maqlû* contain some brief rubrics—tersely worded sections marked off from the main text with horizontal lines—and sometimes include a tablet focused on physical ritual instructions, they are overwhelmingly instructions for what words to speak. Typical is *Utukkū Lemnūtu*, the longest-running ritual tradition in cuneiform, documented from the Old Babylonian through the Hellenistic periods.

Our first Mesopotamian example is from an early, Old Babylonian stage of the *Utukkū Lemnūtu*/Evil Demons tradition when it existed only in Sumerian (under the equivalent title udug.hul). Here the whole text is an incantation to be ritually recited. The spell itself takes the form of a story, a form known as a *historiola*:

> *(The Sumerian god of exorcism, Asalluhi, later connected to the Babylonian Marduk, speaks to his mentor Enki, the god of magic, secret knowledge, and subterranean water:)*
>
> 710. [The evil demon] followed behind as the man approached his house, and then destroyed his limbs. Though his eyes are open, the man cannot see anybody, and though his ears are open he hears no one. That man suffers horribly from fate, the Asag-demon overwhelms him.
>
> Asalluhi spoke a second time: "I do not know what I should do about it; what [can relieve him]?"
>
> Enki answers his son Asalluhi: "My [son], what do you not know and what could I add to it?" …
>
> 721. Asalluhi took note. "*Whatever I know, you also know*. Go, my son, Asalluhi, fill a vessel, bring the holy water of Enki, and recite the Eridu incantation.
>
> As for the man, son of his god, sprinkle water on his bed. And as for the copper drum, the 'hero of heaven,' with the *manu*-wood, the powerful instrument, may you increase its fearsome noise." (UHF VII 710–722)

Here the ritual instructions themselves occur as a quotation to be spoken, within the divine dialogue itself. Note especially the equation between the giver of secret knowledge Enki and his son or student Asalluhi, a transfer of power via speech that forms the model for the exorcist's claim that they too are speaking the words of the divine master of magic, *verbatim*.

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Within the Evil Demons tradition, the human use of divine language we already see in the Old Babylonian period is extensively developed in later bilingual texts. Rather than the Biblical Priestly tradition's separation between creative divine language and limited human language, this tradition works by bringing the two together and equating them. In this first-millennium Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual text, the incantation priest says that his spell *is* that of Ea, the god of magic and secret knowledge:

From the later Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual version of udug-hul (Tablet III, Neo-Assyrian to Hellenistic periods):

147. I belong to Ea, I belong to Damkina, and I am Marduk's messenger.

My incantation is actually Ea's, my spell is actually Marduk's, with Ea's master-plans in my possession.

I am holding Anu's exalted *e'ru*-wood scepter in my hand; I am holding the date-palm frond of the major rituals in my hand.

Presentation of ritual language in the ad hoc, nonclassical corpus of temple records is far more limited and circumspect. As texts that never entered the stream of any tradition, they typically do not persist from site to site. As texts that were not explicitly designed to be taught and copied, they almost never appear in duplicate. In contrast to the classical texts that are sometimes said to come from gods or sages, these texts are at most traced back to "an old(er) writing-tablet."[11]

From the Daily Offering Ritual for the Anu-temple at Uruk TU 6, 38:

44. The miller, during the grinding at the mill-stone, says the blessing "Plough-star, they have hitched up the seeder plough in the open country," and the cook, during the kneading of the lump (of dough) and the presenting of the hot loaves, says the blessing "Nisaba, abundant plenty, pure food" ….

r' 8–10. During the slaughtering of the cattle and sheep the butcher says the blessing:

"The son of Šamaš, the lord of livestock, has created pasture for me in the open country."

It appears that in the first millennium all preserved rituals include a verbal component. As at Ugarit, these nonclassical practical instructions are valuable because of their everyday character, which can be taken as an index of normal activity. As Marc Linssen's study of Babylonian temple ritual concludes, "every divine meal included recitations along with the feeding of the god" (Linssen 2004:130).

When it comes to ancient Syrian and Mesopotamian ritual practice, the current evidence supports a simple conclusion: Kaufmann was right to claim that ancient Near Eastern rituals normally included prayer. While our survey has covered a wide range of times and places and noted some strongly divergent patterns in textual genres, we have found no evidence of any site where nonverbal ritual dominated. This includes practical genres that served as performance notes, as well as the more classical genres by which the scribes and ritualists trained. Kaufmann, despite his xenophobic dismissal of ancient Near Eastern ritual as "mythic" and "pagan," was correct to describe it as pervasively verbal. In neither official ideology nor everyday practice do we find any cases where worship is represented as predominantly silent.

In representing regular temple practice as entirely silent, the Priestly source diverges from other known Syrian and Near Eastern ritual traditions. On the one hand, in terms

9781350280816_pi-504.indd 270 15-Mar-23 12:44:31

of the social rules of speech, it implies distinctively asymmetrical power relations: human speakers cannot directly address God in these rituals, implying a distance and level of superiority so great as to prevent any verbal interaction at all. Yet at the same time the pervasiveness of nonverbal ritual actions including offerings of food creates a level of regular exchange, a form of physical closeness, or even intimacy with him.

CONCLUSION: SEEING THE PRIESTLY CORPUS AS A RITUAL ARTIFACT

In terms of the well-documented circumstances of ritual text production and transmission known from cuneiform, the Priestly corpus shows contrasting features that help explain its distinctiveness as a document of material religion. The content of the Mesopotamian “classics” that were standardized, reproduced, and taught was mainly verbal. They consist either of referential statements such as diagnoses or predictions, or direct discourse in the form of the words of hymns or incantations. Classic Mesopotamian written ritual consists mostly of things to say.

By contrast, the Priestly writers working in Judah standardized and transmitted a corpus of mainly nonverbal actions in writing. P’s rituals have essentially no verbal content: in all regular cases there is nothing for humans to say. Their extensive verbal content is not a part of the ritual, but instead works to elaborately frame the ritual itself, serving as a model of that ritual’s transmission. Thus, P created and transmitted a model that turns scribal ritual inside out.

Alone among ancient Near Eastern ritual corpora, P turned nonverbal ritual acts into the core of a set of standardized texts, placing them at the center of a religious tradition. In doing this P created a new type of written cultural artifact, one that embodies behavior. The anchoring of the ritual texts in mythic narrative and the removal of references to any present temple, time, or place shapes them into a format specially suited for replication.[12]

Asking about our evidence as material religion can return us to the data with useful new questions, to a new dialogue with ancient evidence and cultural history. In the context of ancient Near Eastern writing, the Torah’s founding document (*Grundschrift*) attributed to the Priestly tradition serves as a striking example. In the concrete perspective of textual production during the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods, it is most distinctive in how it encoded the actions of ritual law as culture, while contemporary and earlier ancient Near Eastern scribal cultures instead encoded the mainly verbal texts of divination or incantation or prayer. It was this new foundational process that permitted turning religious directives—*Torah* or ritual “law”—into the tradition that generates Judaism through its transmission.

In terms of how ancient Near Eastern religions represented materiality—the relationship between signs and things—Priestly literature has an interesting role. It is focused on simple and powerful metaphors for the performative: having the content of its words be physical action. As narrative, it diagrams the possibilities and nature of ritual and language. It begins by arguing that only God’s language can be enacted; proceeds to present a language composed mainly of instructions to act on physical objects rather than instructions to speak, framed in imperatives and jussives; and concludes the career of its human speaker, Moses, by arguing that in contrast to God a human speaker’s own language to the extent that it has a human source cannot be enacted. Thus, the P as a linguistic artifact is designed as a container for a material religion, a realm of physical

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action designed to be constantly unpacked from its text in new contexts.[13] As the Rabbinic saying goes, “since the day the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One blessed be he has nothing in his world but the four cubits of *halacha* (ritual law)” (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 8a).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

after Sommer add: Ed Greenstein,

I thank Simeon Chavel, Jeffrey Stackert, Benjamin Sommer, and my mother Jacquelyn Seevak Sanders ז״ל for insightful comments on earlier versions, and I am grateful to the editors of this volume for the invitation to revive and develop them.

NOTES

1 This antinomy between lofty words and lowly things in Western European-based scholarly traditions is intertwined with intellectualist approaches to culture on the one hand, and the specific theological legacy of Christianity on the other. Both the intellectual, idea-oriented approach and classic Christian theology tend to elevate the word, as a supposedly lofty and true spiritual thing, over the material, as a supposedly debased and false, or at least mute, bodily thing. For this critique see Schopen (1997), for theoretical background in Near Eastern archaeology Smith (2007), and for its specific role in the study of ancient Near Eastern religions Sanders (2019).

2 The outlines and contents of the Priestly corpus are among the most consistently and widely agreed-on results of biblical scholarship. Compare the detailed picture of the Sinai revelation shared between Nöldeke (1869), Carpenter and Harford-Battersby (1900), Blum (1990), Schwartz (1996), and Sommer (2015), where the maximal version (Schwartz) contains about forty-nine chapters’ worth of material, the minimal (Blum) forty-seven, and from earlier to more recent treatments—Nöldeke and Carpenter and Harford-Battersby on the one hand and Sommer on the other—forty-eight. The main disagreements today are not about the basic outlines of the Priestly corpus per se but over the nature of its internal layers and whether any of them affected non-Priestly material. Contrast Knohl (1995) with Feldman (2020). This excludes the less plausible hypothesis of a narrative or poetic Priestly source, for example, Pola (1995), Gaines (2015), effectively critiqued by Feldman (2020).

3 I have created the first annotated English edition of the most widely agreed on elements of this corpus at pentateuch.digital, which will be expanded by the end of 2024 to Hebrew and English versions of all the main compositional elements of the Pentateuch. A full critical Hebrew edition of the Priestly work is planned by Liane Feldman for 2024.

4 While Kaufmann interpreted the Priestly literature as a historical description of practice, I join most later scholars in taking it as an ideal rather than a historical claim: because we have no direct documentary data on ritual activities in the pre-exilic Jerusalem temple, we are exclusively talking about why P’s sanctuary is *represented as* silent in the Pentateuch. For archaeolzoological evidence in the case of herd and flock animals (sheep, goats, cattle) on how the Priestly texts systematized competing pictures based on Iron Age practice, see Greer (2019).

5 Kaufmann was aware that there are a few passages within the widely agreed-on parameters of the Priestly tradition that do stipulate ritual language use. But he noted that they were framed as exceptions—nontemple or special occasion rituals, writing that “Priestly speech is found only outside the temple or apart from the essential cultic act.” A resurvey of

the evidence suggests he was correct. The few generally recognized instances of ritually effective language use within P seem to be incorporated into it because of their distinctive and exceptional nature. They are for special occasions or crises outside of regular daily or weekly worship, and formally and ideologically glaringly different from the rest of the Priestly corpus. These three rituals are (1) the Day of Atonement ritual, Lev. 16:22 (for its divergences and references to the scholarship see Sanders 2009: 62–63 with n. 111–117; 2), (2) the Priestly curse on the woman accused of adultery in Num. 5:19-22 (for its magical operations with writing otherwise unattested in the Priestly corpus see Frymer-Kensky 1984), and (3) Num. 6:23-27, the "Priestly blessing." As Smoak (2016) shows, it shares its main patterns with a wide spectrum of Northwest Semitic amulets and not coincidentally represents the only piece of language in the Hebrew Bible documented in an Iron Age ritual artifact, the Ketef Hinnom amulets. In the other places that the Priestly tradition stipulates the use of language, it is purely communicative rather than ritually effective, not affecting the ritual status of the object in question since it can turn out to be false (contrast Lev. 13:6 with 13:7).

6 A parallel non-Priestly version of the "rebellion in the wilderness" story appears in the canonical version of the Pentateuch at Exodus 17.

7 According to Psalm 106 these pragmatic failings constitute the act of baṭṭe', a misuse of words or pragmatic failure, but even in the Psalm's account, the motivation is still lacking.

8 It is also significant that in a number of P scenes God has made a point of speaking with Moses in the sight of all Israel; it is only here that Moses's own linguistic performance is commanded and judged.

9 For the strong scholarly agreement here see the sources in n. 2, and for a convenient English presentation of the entire episode see our pentateuch.digital presentation, s.v. "At Sinai."

10 For example, "And as a peace-offering:
(5) two bulls and two (6) rams for *lu'ibi* (7) for '*Iilu* a ram;
(8) for *Ba'lu* a ram;
(9) for *Dagan* a ram;
(10) for *Yariḫu* a ram;
(11) for *Yammu* a ram."

11 For example, our text TU 6 38 has an original colophon dating its original writing on a wax tablet for an Uruk temple archive that was plundered during the Neo-Babylonian period, then narrates its recovery for the Uruk archives:

> Wax-table (containing) the rites for the Anu-worship, … the ritual regulations of kingship … the purification rites of the Reš̆-temple [and other temples of Uruk … which Nabopolassar, king of the Sealand, carried off from Uruk. [Later,] Kidin-Anu from Uruk, Kidin-Anu from Uruk … the high priest of the Reš̆-temp1e, saw these tablets in the land of Elam and during the reign of Seleucus and Antiochus, the kings, he copied and brought (them) to Uruk. (r 44–50; Linssen 2004:179)

12 On the phenomenology of texts that make for "better" (more easily replicated and more effectively controllable or ownable) culture, see Greg Urban, "Entextualization, Replication, and Power" (1996).

13 This issue is connected to the fact, pointed out by Mira Balberg (2017), that without any interest in or knowledge of modern scholarly theories of Pentateuchal composition the Rabbis so frequently gravitate toward Priestly passages and ritual. For further comment on this pattern see Sanders (2019).

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CHAPTER 19: THE BIBLICAL PRIESTLY TRADITION AS MATERIAL RELIGION: A COMPARATIVE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN APPROACH

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