

Contagious Holiness in the Priestly Tabernacle

Research Thesis

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## Chapter I: Introduction

The idea that holiness can be contagious, meaning that holiness is transmitted by physical contact between objects, is found in four passages in the Pentateuch; Exodus 29:37, 30:29; Leviticus 6:11, 6:20 (English 6:18, 6:27).<sup>1</sup> Objects described as possessing contagious holiness include the anointed Tabernacle furniture and three most holy offerings, with the formula “all that touches X will become holy.” However, none of these texts proceed to explain why the contagious holiness of these objects is mentioned, and so we are left to speculate as to why this fact was important to the writer(s) of these texts.

Each of the Pentateuchal passages that contain the formula for contagious holiness have traditionally been attributed to the Priestly strata, as opposed to the Holiness strata.<sup>2</sup> The historical context of the Priestly strata has been debated by scholars. In light of pre-exilic inscriptions from Ketef Hinnom containing the Priestly Blessing of Numbers 6:24,<sup>3</sup> as well as other evidence, it is generally accepted that P is at least based upon pre-exilic traditions.<sup>4</sup> The initiation of the Priestly traditions have been dated to some time between the 10<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.<sup>5</sup> While much more could be said about the dating and historical context of the Priestly

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth only the Hebrew numbering will be used to reference these passages.

<sup>2</sup> See Samuel R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1956), 32, 42-44.

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Barkay, Marilyn J. Lundberg, Andrew G. Vaughn, and Bruce Zuckerman. "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 334 (2004): 41-71.

<sup>4</sup> See Yitzhaq Feder, *Blood Expiation in Hittite and Biblical Ritual: Origins, Context, Meaning* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 35.

<sup>5</sup> See Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 112-148; Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 200-224; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 3-35.

texts, my analysis of the concept of contagious holiness does not hinge upon these considerations.

Before analyzing the concept of contagious holiness, we should consider the broader conceptions of holiness in the Hebrew Bible and the Priestly texts. The common understanding that the Hebrew root  $\text{שׁוֹדֵף}$  is connected to the generic idea of separation or apartness has very little etymological or textual support.<sup>6</sup> After looking at the usage of this root throughout the Hebrew Bible, David Clines concludes that  $\text{שׁוֹדֵף}$  is “a term for the deity’s status or quality (i.e. God is holy), and for what belongs to or is in the realm of the deity, whether persons or objects (e.g. holy priests, holy temple).”<sup>7</sup> William Propp similarly asserts that holiness is “Yahweh’s *prerogative*, that which properly belongs to him and sets him above creation,” and that God’s holiness is innate.<sup>8</sup> This idea is consistent with passages which say that God is the recipient of sanctification, although at first glance they appear to contradict the notion that God is innately holy. As Philip Brown notes:

“The phrase ‘in the sight of’ occurs in most of the texts which speak of God sanctifying himself or of God being sanctified, and it identifies the domain where the setting apart of God takes place: in the ‘eyes’ or minds of a watching world. When God sanctifies himself, He is not altering something about himself. He is altering people’s perception of him.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> David J.A. Clines, “Alleged Basic Meanings of the Hebrew Verb *qdš* ‘be holy’: An Exercise in Comparative Hebrew Lexicography.” Paper read at the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Stellenbosch, September 2016.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>8</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 683.

<sup>9</sup> A. Philip Brown II, “Divine Holiness and Sanctifying God: A Proposal.” Chamberlain Holiness Lectures, October 13, 2010: 8-9. Brown cites several passages which support this interpretation, including Num. 20:12 and Ezek. 38:23, as well as many others.

The antonym of קד"ש is usually חול, as seen in Leviticus 10:10, for example. חול can therefore be taken to refer to anything outside of God's special property, and thus "profane" or unfit for specific ritual uses.

It is also valuable to consider the relationship between the concepts of "holy" and "profane" against the parallel concepts of "pure" (טה"ר) and "impure" (טמ"א). The precise meaning of impurity in the Hebrew Bible has been a topic of controversy, with some asserting that it is merely a status which restricts one from certain cultic objects or places, while others argue that it represents demonic forces.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of whether or not there were believed to be demonic entities behind impurity, it is clear that impurity is something that changes the status of an object or person, and that purity is the absence of impurity. In like manner, holiness is something that changes the status of an object or person, and profanity is just the absence of holiness. Propp gives the following summary of these concepts:

"Holiness (*qōdeš*) seems to be an active substance with properties recalling electricity (e.g., it can be transmitted between bodies; it can create fire). Profanity (*hōl*), in contrast, is simply the absence of Holiness. For clean (*tāhōr*) and unclean (*tāmē'*), the situation is reversed: uncleanness spreads like disease, while cleanliness is just sterility."<sup>11</sup>

Thus we can view impurity and holiness as marking two extremes which fit into the broader categories of purity and profanity. The categories of purity and profanity refer to medial and overlapping stages between impurity and holiness; once an object leaves the domain of

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<sup>10</sup> See Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism: The Haskell Lectures, 1972-1973* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1973), 8-11.

<sup>11</sup> Propp, *Exodus*, 685.

impurity, it might be pure but still profane. Once the object enters into the domain of the holy, it is no longer profane but is still pure.<sup>12</sup>

According to Jacob Neusner, purity and holiness are treated as synonyms in the Priestly texts, a theme which is “virtually absent” from the other biblical writings.<sup>13</sup> However, the evidence for this is slim (primarily Leviticus 11:44), and considering the fact that there is considerable overlap between the concepts of purity and holiness in the scheme outlined above, it might be unnecessary to view the slight ambiguities between holiness and purity in the Priestly texts as evidence that the two terms had come to cover the same semantic range of meaning. Michael Hundley has argued that the situation is exactly opposite of what Neusner describes, saying that, “the Priestly texts consistently differentiate consecration from purification,” and “the non-Priestly texts use the term  $\Psi\tau\eta$  less carefully, at times referring to holiness and at other times to purity.”<sup>14</sup>

As my analysis up to this point indicates, I am primarily interested in the emic approach to the sacred, that is, how the Israelites who wrote the texts themselves conceptualized holiness. It is also valuable to consider the work of sociologists and anthropologists who, without neglecting the emic, often frame their discussions from more of an etic perspective.

Since the beginning of the sociological and anthropological study of religion in the late-1800s, the unique and universal importance of ritual purity and distinction between sacred and profane within religious systems was quickly recognized. For the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, the distinction between sacred and profane is the defining characteristic of religion, even more fundamental than belief in supernatural beings. Following Durkheim, many theorists

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<sup>12</sup> See Venn diagram on page 35 of this paper.

<sup>13</sup> Neusner, *The Idea of Purity*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Michael B. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth: Safeguarding the Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 77.

of religion asserted that all religious phenomena evolve from the experience of the holy or numinous.<sup>15</sup>

Durkheim began his academic studies at a time when theories of religion were becoming a major topic of interest. Much of the time, religion was viewed as a logical outgrowth of individual observations by primitive people, with the social aspect of religion often downplayed. Durkheim was critical of such views,<sup>16</sup> preferring the view that religion was primarily a social phenomenon, and insisting that the social element is not only of highest importance but also chronologically initial.<sup>17</sup> Thus, when Durkheim arrives at the following oft-quoted definition of religion, he intentionally specifies that there is a community aspect: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church all those who adhere to them.”<sup>18</sup>

In order to argue for the primarily social function of religion, Durkheim submits that the sacred and profane are a universal feature of religion, and that the sacred exists only as a social phenomenon. In order to make the sacred exist exclusive in the realm of the social, Durkheim posits that the sacred and profane are conceived of as substantive polar opposites, expressing the

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<sup>15</sup> Keith A. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Homewood, Ill: The Dorsey Press, 1984), 90.

<sup>16</sup> See Durkheim’s response to Herbert Spencer’s view that religion originates by extrapolation from the experience of dreaming; Émile Durkheim, “Review: ‘Herbert Spencer – *Ecclesiastical Institutions: being Part VI of the Principles of Sociology*,’” in *Durkheim on Religion* ed. by W. S. F. Pickering (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press), 13-23.

<sup>17</sup> This is clearly articulated in Durkheim’s review of Guyau; Émile Durkheim, “Review: ‘Guyau – *L’Irréligion de l’avenir, étude de sociologie*,’” in *Durkheim on Religion*, 24-38.

<sup>18</sup> Émile Durkheim, “The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: the Totemic System in Australia,” in *Durkheim on Religion*, 123.

separation between the individual (associated with the profane) and society (associated with the sacred).<sup>19</sup>

Arnold van Gennep was a contemporary of Durkheim who also saw the sacred and profane as fundamental to religion.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Durkheim, however, van Gennep does not see the sacred and profane as polar opposites, but rather as existing on a spectrum which allows for a gradual transition between the two states. Furthermore, van Gennep sees the sacred and profane as being relative rather than absolute, changing in various circumstance.<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith gives the following description of van Gennep's view: "... there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed. There is nothing sacred in itself, only things sacred in relation."<sup>22</sup> Van Gennep saw the transitions between places and statuses in one's life as inherently dangerous, bordering the sacred and profane, and thus needing to be aided by specified rites.<sup>23</sup>

In a somewhat similar way, Mary Douglas describes the concept of purity (or "clean") as the proper placement of matter within a symbolic system of relative ideas, and so the concept of impurity (or "unclean") is therefore matter which is not in its proper place.<sup>24</sup> Applied to the Hebrew Bible, Douglas argues that the dietary laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy are based on the symbolic system which assigns animals to one of three domains; earth, sky, or sea. Animals that do not fit well into their domain are unclean, thus sea creatures without scales are unclean,

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<sup>19</sup> See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), 26.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 55.

<sup>23</sup> Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 44.



since scales are a characteristic that places fish firmly in the realm of a sea dweller, and so forth.<sup>25</sup> However, Douglas also points out that “primitive cosmologies” are not themselves systematically developed, but are often created piecemeal in response to specific situations.<sup>26</sup>

I do not plan to rely heavily on the accuracy of any of the sociological or anthropological work that I have just summarized, for that would be not only beyond the scope of this paper, but also beyond my ability to adequately assess. I will however make a few observations which have helped guide me while analyzing biblical texts related to holiness. It seems that what is designated “the sacred” in general theories of religion encompasses both the negatively defined “purity” and positively defined “holiness” mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

As mentioned, Durkheim describes the sacred as an absolute and substantive category, while van Gennep describes the sacred as a relative status. To view the sacred as a substance implies that the sacred is a force that creates a substantive change in whatever it infects, even if the change cannot be detected by the senses. To view the sacred as a status is to understand the sacred as a mental categorization of an object relative to other objects, without the object having undergone an independent substantive change. We could use the difference between the Catholic Eucharist and many Protestant communion meals as a rough approximation of this distinction: in the Catholic Eucharist, the bread and wine undergo a substantive change, where the substance of these elements is transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ. In most Protestant versions, the bread and wine (or grape juice) are not sacred in the sense that their substances have changed, but rather are sacred in their status as symbols of the body and blood of Christ. The Catholic Eucharist approximates a substantive interpretation of the sacred, while the Protestant communion meal approximates an interpretation of the sacred as a relative status.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 51-71

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 112-115.

The conflict between Durkheim and van Gennep regarding the nature of the sacred is quite tricky. Both perspectives seem to be compatible with the ways various cultures discuss the sacred. It is possible that even a single individual within a given culture might find it useful to think about the sacred as a substantive state at certain times, and at other times find it more useful to think of the sacred as simply that which has a relatively elevated status. There is therefore no reason to force ourselves to choose between these two perspectives. If my analysis of the relationship between purity / impurity and holiness / profanity in the Hebrew Bible is accurate, we might say that holiness in the Bible is more often associated with substantive sacred than is purity. When looking at contagious holiness in particular, I would consider the substantive category most likely to represent the underlying conceptual framework, since acquisition by physical contact seems to imply a transfer of substance. But there are also places, such as God sanctifying himself, where holiness appears to be in the category of a relative status.

Therefore, we should not be too quick to perceive contradictions any time there is a difference in the ways holiness is described in the Hebrew Bible; we must allow for contradictions between and within the texts, but be careful not to see subtle variations in description as incompatible, or impose contradictions where they do not necessarily exist. Regarding Douglas' contributions to this topic, we can recognize that holiness, whether a status or substance, is often tied to the categories into which the cosmos is compartmentalized. The placement of an object or action into a given category is subject to change, as are the categories and cosmological frameworks themselves. We therefore must not insist on finding a single system that accounts for every categorization of things into realms of sacred or profane. For the purpose of this study, and to some extent generally, we can be content to accept the choices of

the biblical writers to put each thing into a given category of sacred or profane without pressing the question of how this choice fits into or shaped their cosmology.

Returning now to the four Priestly passages which indicate that holiness is contagious, there are several ways they can be interpreted. Menachem Haran associates the contagious holiness of the Tabernacle furniture with the lethal consequences ascribed to physical contact with the furniture by unqualified persons.<sup>27</sup> According to Haran, the anointing of the priests (who according to P must be Aaronites) puts the priests on an equal level of sanctity with the contagious sancta, protecting them from the lethal effects.<sup>28</sup>

Baruch Levine argues that contagious holiness is completely absent from the Priestly conception of holiness. To make this argument, Levine translates the formula as “all that touches X shall be in a holy state,” indicating that holiness is prerequisite for touching sancta rather than a consequence.<sup>29</sup> As support for this interpretation, Levine notes that the priests in Haggai 2:11-13 claim that profane food will not become holy by touching sacrificial meat.<sup>30</sup>

Jacob Milgrom comes to Haran’s defense, pointing out that Haggai 2:11-13 is describing contact *through a garment*, and therefore the priests might actually be asserting that while holiness is sometimes contagious, it is transmitted only through first remove, not second remove.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the verb  $\psi\eta\eta$  found in the formula for contagious holiness is in the Qal stem, which always has the sense of becoming holy rather than being in a state of holiness, and the formula is very similar to the formula for contagious impurity (which most would agree is

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<sup>27</sup> Haran, *Temples*, 175-177.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>29</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*  $\aleph\eta\eta$  (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 37-38.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 445.

indicating a kind of contagion).<sup>32</sup> But Milgrom is not in total agreement with Haran. While Milgrom agrees with Haran that contagious holiness is conceptualized as a lethal threat in the Priestly *narratives* (as well as other non-Priestly texts), Milgrom asserts that within the Priestly *legal* texts contagious holiness is only understood to be contracted by objects, and never by persons.

I do not find any one of these descriptions to be entirely satisfying, although there are elements of each view that I believe are correct. As I analyze the relevant passages, I will describe how the texts have been interpreted to support the views of Haran and Milgrom, and give my own interpretations. Considering that Levine's interpretation is based on a small number of passages, and his general thesis has been sufficiently countered by Milgrom, I will not spend much time responding to Levine. On the other hand, Haran and Milgrom invoke a wider range of passages from various biblical texts, and so I will dedicate more space to considering and responding to their interpretations.

I will argue that contagious holiness in the legal Priestly texts, and throughout the Hebrew Bible, can be contracted by both people and objects (contra Milgrom) and is not lethal (contra Haran, and to some extent Milgrom as well). I believe that contagious holiness is mentioned in the Priestly laws because, in the same way that it is important that impurity not accumulate where it does not belong (i.e. in close proximity to the sancta), it is likewise important that holiness not spread to places where it does not belong (i.e. outside the confines of the designated sancta). To make this argument, I will compare descriptions of contagious holiness from a variety of biblical sources which have been understood to be informative about the nature of contagious holiness, such as Ezekiel 44:19. Due to my lack of proficiency in the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 445-446.

languages of adjacent Near Eastern cultures, I do not explore the possibility of a conceptual link between the concept of contagious holiness and the views of holiness in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, although such an investigation would probably be worthwhile.<sup>33</sup>

Lastly, I should comment on the way in which I deal with the relationship between texts from various biblical sources. I will generally be indifferent to the variety of theories about the chronological relationship between biblical texts, whether the Priestly, Holiness, or Deuteronomic in the Pentateuch, or the Deuteronomistic History or classical prophets outside of the Pentateuch. Any connection between how these sources conceptualize holiness can be accepted as a result of the historically connected cultural milieus that produced these texts, rather than direct borrowing of a later writer from an earlier text. In this way, my analysis should be relevant regardless of how one understands the redaction of the Pentateuch or dating of biblical texts.

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<sup>33</sup> In all of my reading in preparation for this thesis, the only reference I found suggesting an ancient Near Eastern parallel to contagious holiness is in Michael B. Hundley, "Sacred Spaces, Objects, Offerings, and People in the Priestly Texts: A Reappraisal." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132, no. 4 (2013): 753, 762. Hundley notes that in ancient Mesopotamia "certain elements absorb some of the divine essence by contagion and become divinized."

## Chapter II: The Priestly Formula for Contagious Holiness

I will now briefly look at each of the four Priestly passages that contain the contagious holiness formula in the order that the passages appear in the Pentateuch. The first passage is in Exodus 29:36-37:

וּפָר חֲטָאת תַּעֲשֶׂה לַיּוֹם עַל־הַכֹּפְרִים וְחִטָּאתָ עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ בְּכַפֶּרֶךָ עָלָיו  
וּמִשְׁחָתָ אֹתוֹ לְקֹדֶשׁוֹ: שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּכַּפֵּר עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְקֹדֶשְׁתָּ אֹתוֹ וְהָיָה  
הַמִּזְבֵּחַ קֹדֶשׁ קֹדְשִׁים כָּל־הַנִּגַּע בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ יִקְדָּשׁ:

“And you will offer a bull sin-offering daily for the expiation, and you will perform purification upon the altar as you make expiation upon it, and you will anoint it to make it holy. Seven days you will make expiation upon the altar and make it holy, and the altar will be most holy; all that touch the altar will become holy.”<sup>34</sup>

This passage describes the consecration of the Tabernacle altar, the consequence of which is the status of the altar as “most holy” and possessing contagious holiness. The purification ritual involves the use of a bull as a sin-offering upon the altar and the anointing of the altar with oil. To understand the purpose of these rituals, we need to consider the specialized terminology being employed.

Exodus 29 uses two Piel verbs to describe the ritual actions being performed upon the altar during the consecration: *חָטָא* and *כָּפַר*. The Piel stem of the root *חָטָא* is unlikely to be a mere synonym of the Piel verb from the root *טָהַר*, meaning “to purify.” Rather, *חָטָא* is a technical term that designates a specific kind of purification ritual (generally involving the dabbing of blood and

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<sup>34</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

often associated with the sin-offering), and thus this verb focuses on the *means* rather than *result* of the purification.<sup>35</sup> Analysis of the various forms of the root כִּפֵּר outside of cultic contexts yields an original meaning of “appeasement / to appease” or “compensatory gift / to compensate,” which in the Israelite cult has come to refer to “compensation / expiation” to the deity.<sup>36</sup> Thus the verb הִטָּא in this passage references the ritual act performed upon the altar, while the verb כִּפֵּר references the expiatory result of this ritual action.<sup>37</sup>

The Hebrew term הִטָּא here refers to a “sin-offering,” a metonymy from a Hebrew noun meaning “sin.”<sup>38</sup> As such, the sin-offering is an offering that deals with sin or some type of impurity. Sin-offerings are used in rituals concerning inadvertent sins (Leviticus 4), cases of physical impurities such as leprosy and impurity from childbirth (Leviticus 12-15), and the rituals accompanying the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6), as well as other instances. The use of sin-offerings in cases of impurity might seem odd considering the offering’s name would indicate that sin is involved, but this is not a problem. As Levine notes, “Biblical terms for sacrifice usually designate rites which, in their realized forms and functions encompass more than the

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<sup>35</sup> Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 101-105.

<sup>36</sup> A detailed description of the development of the semantics of this root is presented in Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 167-196. Although it has been frequently assumed that the verb כִּפֵּר is directly related to the Akkadian term indicating rituals that “wipe away,” this view is challenged in the above reference. See also idem, “On *kuppuru*, *kippēr* and Etymological Sins that Cannot be Wiped Away.” *Vetus Testamentum* 60 (2010): 535-545.

<sup>37</sup> “The usage of the term הִטָּא is equally distinct from that of כִּפֵּר. The former is used to describe the physical action that is used to purify a house, altar or temple, while the latter generally describes the effects such actions have on their human beneficiaries.” Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 104.

<sup>38</sup> For the argument that הִטָּא should be rendered “purification offering” from the Piel verb stem of the root הִטָּא, see Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 253-254. However, I remain convinced that the traditional rendering of “sin-offering” is the best translation of this Hebrew term. See Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 99-108; Joseph Lam, “On the Etymology of Biblical Hebrew הִטָּא: A Contribution to the ‘Sin Offering’ vs. ‘Purification Offering’ Debate.” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 65, no. 2 (2020): 325-346.

term, itself, necessarily connotes.”<sup>39</sup> Regardless of whether the sin-offering is employed to rid sin or another kind of impurity, the manipulation of the sacrificial victim’s blood as a means of expiation appears to be a primary function of the sin-offering. In Exodus 29:36, the sin-offering does not appear to have any specific sin or impurity in view, but functions to consecrate the altar by moving it from the realm of the profane to the sacred.

Once the sin-offering has affected expiation upon the altar, the altar must be anointed “to make it holy.” This final act, which presumably depends on the proper execution of the sin-offering, creates the condition wherein the altar will communicate holiness to all that touches it. What is the purpose of making the altar most holy? In verses 43-46, we read that Yahweh will sanctify the Tabernacle and the altar when his glory fills the Tabernacle,<sup>40</sup> and that he will dwell among the children of Israel. The statements that Yahweh will dwell among the Israelites may be indicating the purpose of the previous rituals. That is to say, the Tabernacle must be sanctified according to certain prescriptions with the goal that Yahweh will find the abode to be an appropriate place to dwell, allowing the Israelites to reap the benefits of Yahweh’s presence.<sup>41</sup>

The next passage is Exodus 30:26-29:

וּמִשְׁחָתָּ בּוֹ אֶת־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת אֲרוֹן הָעֵדוּת: וְאֶת־הַשְּׁלֶחֶן וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו  
וְאֶת־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאֶת־כֵּלָיו וְאֶת־מִזְבַּח הַקְּטֹרֶת: וְאֶת־מִזְבַּח הָעֹלָה וְאֶת־כָּל־כֵּלָיו  
וְאֶת־הַכִּיֹּר וְאֶת־כַּנּוֹ: וְקִדְשָׁתָּ אֹתָם וְהָיוּ קֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים כָּל־הַנִּגַּע בָּהֶם יִקְדָּשׁ:

<sup>39</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1947), 5.

<sup>40</sup> The altar is therefore sanctified twice, when anointed by the priests and when encountered by the glory of Yahweh. It is not a problem that multiple actions are said to accomplish the same goal, since this is common in the consecration rituals in P; see Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*, 89-90. For information on the cumulative efficacy of multiple rituals in other ancient Near Eastern cults, see idem, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> This concept is thoroughly treated throughout Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*.



“And with [the oil] you will anoint the Tent of Appointment and the Ark of the Testimony and all of its vessels, and the lampstand and its vessels, and the altar of incense, and the altar of the ascent-offering, and all the vessels of the caldron and its stand. And you will make them holy, and they will be most holy; all that touch them will become holy.”

In this passage, the anointing extends beyond the altar to include the other pieces of Tabernacle furniture. As with the altar, everything that touches the anointed furniture will “become holy.” This passage is found within the larger pericope of Exodus 30:22-33 which deals with the anointing oil in general. We are not told whether these anointings take place only once or multiple times, but since they are only elsewhere described in connection with the consecration of the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:9-10) we may assume that these anointings took place only as frequently as the Tabernacle was consecrated. The anointing probably refers to a sprinkling of oil rather than smearing of the entirety of each piece of furniture, since it would be unlikely that the large Tabernacle curtains were entirely smeared.<sup>42</sup>

Regarding the relationship between contagious holiness in these passages in Exodus 29 and 30, William Propp remarks that “just as anything touching oil becomes oily, so the sacred anointing oil conveys contagious holiness.”<sup>43</sup> Since the idea of ritual purity is associated with luminosity in biblical Hebrew as well as other ancient Near Eastern languages,<sup>44</sup> it is possible that the relationship between anointing and purity might be related to the shiny quality that oil

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<sup>42</sup> Propp, *Exodus*, 483.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 471.

<sup>44</sup> Yitzhaq Feder, “The Semantics of Purity in the Ancient Near East: Lexical Meaning as Projection of Embodied Experience.” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 14 (2014): 87-113.

imparts when placed on things.<sup>45</sup> The communicable nature of oil might be related to the idea that certain anointed objects possessed communicable holiness. This is not to say that the transfer of oil from one object to another was always necessary for holiness to be transferred, but rather the concept of holiness might have sometimes taken on the contagious quality of oil by analogy. This also is not to say that the concept of contagious holiness originated from the analogy with oil, for it is possible that oil is simply used as an exemplification of the contagious quality of holiness which exists independent from the analogy with oil.

We turn now from the Tabernacle furniture to the most holy offerings. We read in Leviticus 6:9-11:

וְהַנּוֹתֵרֶת מִמֶּנָּה יֹאכְלוּ אֹהֲרֹן וּבָנָיו מִצֹּת תֹּאכֵל בְּמִקְוֹם קֹדֶשׁ בְּחֹצֵר אֹהֶל־מוֹעֵד  
 יֹאכְלוּהָ: לֹא תֵאֶפֶה חֲמִץ חֲלָקִים נָתַתִּי אֹתָהּ מֵאִשֵּׁי קֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים הִוא כַּחֲטָאֵת  
 וְכֹאשִׁם: כָּל־זָכָר בְּבָנֵי אֹהֲרֹן יֹאכְלֶנָּה חֶק־עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם מֵאִשֵּׁי יְהוָה כֹּל  
 אֲשֶׁר־יִגַּע בָּהֶם יִקְדָּשׁ:

“And Aaron and his sons will eat the remainder of (the tribute-offering), as unleavened bread it will be eaten in the holy place, in the enclosure of the Tent of Appointment they will eat it. It will not be baked with leaven. I have given it as their portion of my gift-offerings, it is most holy, like the sin-offering and the guilt-offering. Every male from the sons of Aaron will eat it, an eternal statute for your generations from the gift-offerings of Yahweh: all that touch them will become holy.”

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

While this passage is primarily interested in the tribute-offering (מנחה), it appears that the contagious holiness formula applies to all of the most holy offerings, since the plural pronoun “them” is used rather than the singular “it,” indicating a reference to the gift-offerings which include the sin-offering and the guilt-offering.<sup>46</sup> These three offerings are consistently referred to as “most holy.”

Regarding the sin-offering in particular, we read the following in Leviticus 6:19-22:

הַכֹּהֵן הַמְחַטֵּא אֹתָהּ יֹאכְלֶנָּה בְּמִקְוֵה קֹדֶשׁ תֹּאכַל בְּחֹצֵר אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: כָּל אֲשֶׁר-יִגַע  
 בְּבִשְׂרָהּ יִקְדָּשׁ וְאֲשֶׁר יִגַּח מִדָּמָהּ עַל-הַפְּגֹד אֲשֶׁר יִגַּח עָלֶיהָ תִכַּבֵּס בְּמִקְוֵה קֹדֶשׁ:  
 וְכֻלֵּי-תְרֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר תִּבְשַׁל-בּוֹ יִשְׂבֹּר וְאִם-בְּכֵלִי נִחֲשַׁת בְּשֵׁלָהּ וּמִרְק וְשֵׁטֶף בְּמַיִם:  
 כָּל-זָכָר בְּכֹהֲנִים יֹאכַל אֹתָהּ קֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים הוּא:

“The priest who performs the purification will eat it [i.e., the sin-offering] in the holy place, it will be eaten in the enclosure of the tent of appointment. All that touches the flesh of it will become holy, and that which is sprinkled of its blood upon the garment, you will wash that which is sprinkled upon it in the holy place. And the earthen vessel in which it is boiled will be broken, and if it was boiled in a vessel of bronze then it will be scoured and rinsed with water. Every male among the priests will eat it, it is most holy.”

In this passage we read about a series of actions that must be performed upon specific objects that come into contact with the sin-offering, such as washing, rinsing and scouring, or shattering, depending on the object. But the text does not explicitly give the reason for these actions. According to David Wright, these actions indicate that the sin-offering contaminates the

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<sup>46</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 444.

objects with which it comes into contact. In Wright's view, these rituals cannot be a response to the contagious holiness of the sin-offering because the other most holy offerings would then also require these decontamination rites, but the rites are never mentioned in association with the other most holy offerings.<sup>47</sup> However, one need not assume that the other most holy offerings would necessarily require the same rituals as the sin-offering simply because they also possess contagious holiness.<sup>48</sup> That is to say, the ritual response to holiness contracted from the sin-offering could be distinct from holiness contracted from the other most holy offerings and the Tabernacle furniture. Roy Gane agrees with Wright, arguing that objects which acquire holiness are not able to be desanctified, since the censers of Korah in Numbers 17:3 are hammered into plating for the altar rather than desanctified.<sup>49</sup> But considering that there are multiple treatments prescribed for the various items that touch the sin-offering in Leviticus 6 (including complete destruction of the earthen vessels), there is no necessary contradiction here. Furthermore, Feder argues that the multiple occurrences of the root שׁוֹטֵף preceding and following the description of these rituals is evidence that these rituals are for the desanctification of objects which have acquired holiness via physical contact with some aspect the sin-offering.<sup>50</sup> I find this argument persuasive, and so I take the goal of these rites to be for desanctification rather than purification.

While the furniture appears to acquire holiness from the anointing oil, the offerings are nowhere said to be anointed with oil. As Milgrom points out, the texts seem to indicate that the

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<sup>47</sup> David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1984), 96.

<sup>48</sup> Oddly enough, while the rabbis disagreed as to whether the rituals of rinsing and scouring apply only to vessels of most holy offerings or also to the vessels of minor holy offerings, there is to my knowledge no rabbinic opinion stating that these rituals apply only to the sin-offering, as the biblical text would appear to indicate. See *m. Zevachim* 11:7.

<sup>49</sup> Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 166.

<sup>50</sup> Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 71-73.

most holy offerings only acquire contagious holiness after they have been offered upon the altar.<sup>51</sup> We therefore see two different methods by which objects might acquire contagious holiness: 1) by anointing with oil in the case of Tabernacle furniture, and 2) by being offered upon the altar in the case of the most holy offerings. It is possible, though speculative, that these two methods are connected by the fact that the offerings must come into physical contact with the altar which itself has contagious holiness, and thus there could be a chain of holiness transmitted from the oil to the altar to the most holy offerings.<sup>52</sup>

I would like to conclude this chapter by considering the perspectives of contagious holiness presented by Haran and Milgrom in relation to these passages. Haran takes the anointing oil to be the cause of contagious holiness when applied to the Tabernacle furniture, a view that is consistent with my analysis above. However, according to Haran the anointing of the priests puts them on an equal level of sanctity with the contagious sancta, protecting them from the lethal effects.<sup>53</sup> This interpretation is questionable because not only do the Priestly texts never state that the anointing oil protects the priests from death, the Priestly texts specifically identify the ritual washing of hands and feet as the means of protection from death (Exodus 30:20-21).

Feder's interpretation that Leviticus 6:19-22 describes a desanctification of the garments and vessels that come into contact with the sin-offering is consistent with Milgrom's assertion

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<sup>51</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 443-444.

<sup>52</sup> Rabbinic sources seem to agree that the contagious holiness of the offerings refers to the absorption of taste from one offering to the other. See references in Martin I. Lockshin, "Is Holiness Contagious?" in *Purity, Holiness, and Identity Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Memory of Susan Haber*. Edited by Carl S. Ehrlich, Anders Runesson and Eileen Schuller (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 254-256. I do not find this interpretation persuasive, since it appears to require that the rabbis conceptualize contagious holiness differently depending on whether it concerns the Tabernacle furniture or most holy offerings. On the other hand, it could be that the fluid of the most holy offerings exemplifies the contagiousness of the holy offerings in a similar fashion to the way oil exemplifies the contagiousness of the oil on the Tabernacle furniture.

<sup>53</sup> Haran, *Temples*, 177.

that the contagious holiness formula only refers to objects acquiring holiness. Yet Milgrom himself admits that the formula, which says “*all* that touches X will become holy,” originally referred to both objects and people since there is no further specification.<sup>54</sup> Again, Milgrom is of the opinion that despite the original meaning of the formula, its placement within the Priestly legal texts reveals that the author only believed that objects could acquire contagious holiness. According to Milgrom, the view of contagious holiness held by the Priestly legal texts not only contradicts the Priestly narrative texts but also contradicts the original meaning of the formula it employs.

Neither Haran nor Milgrom sees a problem with the absence of direct evidence for their respective interpretations in these four Priestly passages because they are convinced that there are other texts, both in P and throughout the Hebrew Bible, which support their proposals. In the following chapter, I will briefly address several passages that Haran and Milgrom employ to support their interpretations.

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<sup>54</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 453.

### Chapter III: Various Interpretations of Contagious Holiness

Haran cites a few passages which to support the notion that contagious holiness makes the Tabernacle furniture lethal to any non-priest who touches them. Haran cites 1 Samuel 6:19-20 and 2 Samuel 6:6-9, where Yahweh is said to smite those who have looked upon or touched the Ark of the Covenant, as examples of non-Priestly passages that are aware of the notion of contagious holiness.<sup>55</sup> Yet neither of these passages gives any indication that the reason for this judgment was that the people had contracted holiness. One Priestly passage that talks about the possibility of people dying when they encounter the Tabernacle furniture is Numbers 4:15, 18-20, in which the Kohathites are warned that they will die if they touch or look at the Tabernacle furniture.<sup>56</sup> But once again, nowhere in Numbers 4 are we told that the lethal consequence would be the result of contracting holiness. Furthermore, in each of these cases we are told that it is not only touch, but also looking that can cause Yahweh's anger to be kindled against someone. Yet as we saw in the Priestly passages containing the contagious holiness formula, contagious holiness is only said to be contracted by anything / anyone that touches the holy objects, and there is no mention of contagious holiness being acquired by people who look upon holy objects.

There are two passages that Milgrom uses to support Haran's argument, insofar as it describes biblical texts outside of the Priestly laws: Exodus 19:13 and Leviticus 10:1-5. These passages are intriguing because they appear to describe death in close connection to the concept of contagious holiness, possibly suggesting an equation between the two. In Milgrom's words:

“The theophany at Sinai provides a particularly illuminating example. Whoever trespasses on the mountain must be slain, but his slayers must heed that ‘no hand shall

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<sup>55</sup> Haran, *Temples*, 176.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 176, 178.

touch him; he shall be either stoned or pierced through' (Exod 19:13). The implication is clear: the holiness communicated to the offender is of such power that it can be transmitted through a medium. Hence the instrument of death must not allow contact between the offender and his executioner. P also provides a telling example: the death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-5). The divine fire has executed them for their cultic offense, but their bodies may not be touched directly; they must be wrapped in other garments before being removed from the sanctuary 9 (v 5). Again, the holiness contracted by persons can be imparted to a third party with fatal results."<sup>57</sup>

Intriguing as these passages are, they still do not make a direct connection between contagious holiness and death. If we accept Milgrom's assertion that by touching the mountain of Sinai a person was believed to acquire holiness, this would not necessarily tell us the reason the person needed to be put to death.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, avoiding contagious holiness might be behind the need to wrap Nadab and Abihu in new garments before moving them, but again this does not mean that such contact would have been fatal to the one who did not follow the precaution not to touch the original garments.

Milgrom raises his own objection to Haran's description of contagious holiness: in Numbers 4:25 the Gershonites (who are not priests) are said to carry the Tabernacle curtains, which according to P possess contagious holiness (Exodus 30:26-29), without any layers of remove between the Gershonites and curtains.<sup>59</sup> This problem is easily solved by Milgrom's framing of contagious holiness, because if Exodus 30:26-29 only considers contagious holiness

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<sup>57</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 454.

<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, one might expect from Haran's perspective that God should be the one to kill the people, as we saw in the reference in 2 Samuel.

<sup>59</sup> See *Ibid.*, 450. Haran's solution is to view the lethal effect of contagious holiness as being temporarily suspended for the practical consideration that the Tabernacle needs to be transported; see Haran, *Temples*, 179.



to be absorbed by objects, there is no reason to think one would die from touching the curtains.<sup>60</sup> However, Milgrom's view is not necessary to resolve Haran's dilemma. We can solve the problem by separating the concept of contagious holiness and the lethal consequences of touching sancta from the outset, since nowhere does the Hebrew Bible explicitly make this connection.

Milgrom submits that there are four passages which, when taken together, strongly support the idea that P views contagious holiness as only affecting objects: Leviticus 5:14-16, Haggai 2:10-12, Exodus 30:26-29 and Numbers 4:15. I will now analyze Milgrom's arguments from these passages, excluding Numbers 4:15, since I have already addressed it.

Regarding Leviticus 5:14-16, Milgrom says:

“This text states only that the trespasser must restore the sanctum 20 percent beyond its original value and bring an *'āšām* offering to atone for his desecration. Nothing in the ritual procedure indicates that by desecrating a sanctum the trespasser has absorbed any of its sanctity; otherwise he would be required to undergo a purification ritual to desanctify himself. Therefore, the absence of any desanctification ritual for the trespasses on sancta points to the probability that, in P's system, sancta are not contagious to persons and the formula does not apply.”<sup>61</sup>

It isn't explicitly clear that Leviticus 5:14-16 is referring exclusively to an unqualified person coming into physical contact with Tabernacle furniture or most holy offerings which have been offered upon the altar. There are parts of sanctuary property that are not said to have contagious holiness in P, such as offerings of minor holiness, etc. Since this text is referring to a

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<sup>60</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 450.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

broader category than the objects which have contagious holiness, there is no reason to assume that a “desanctification ritual” should be described here.<sup>62</sup>

Concerning Haggai 2:10-12, Milgrom asserts that the question posed to the priests “takes for granted that the person handling the sacred meat is not infected with its holiness.”<sup>63</sup> Though not stated, Milgrom is presumably assuming that the person is not infected with contagious holiness because they would otherwise have died. As I have mentioned above, this assumption is unnecessary, and we can therefore accept that the question posed in Haggai 2 might merely be uninterested in the fact that the holiness of sacred food might also be contracted by a person.

With respect to Exodus 30:26-29, Milgrom says:

“If... the effect of touching not just the altar but also the inner sancta is to contract holiness, then it would clash with another basic formula in P’s system, *hazzār haqqārēb yūmāt*, that is, death is meted out to the unauthorized encroacher. We would do well to ask how encroachers on sancta can simultaneously become holy and incur death. The reconciliation of these two formulas is obvious: encroachers are indeed put to death, and sancta contagion does not apply to persons.”<sup>64</sup>

The phrase to which Milgrom is referring can be found in Numbers 3:10 and 18:7. Once again, there is no indication that the acquisition of contagious holiness is related to the need for the death penalty here. Also, it is not clear why Milgrom would suggest that it is not possible for someone to contract holiness before being killed, since this is precisely what he alleges regarding Exodus 19:13 and other passages.

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<sup>62</sup> Also, with the exception of Leviticus 6:19-23, desanctification rituals are never associated with the formula of contagious holiness in P.

<sup>63</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 449.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

As has now been shown, most of the contradictions Milgrom sees between texts we have just reviewed and the idea that contagious holiness can spread to people, rest upon Haran's assertion that where contagious holiness affects persons it must be equivalent to the concept of holiness as having lethal consequences. However, as I pointed when discussing Haran's view, this equation is not established in the biblical texts, and we therefore do not need to accept Milgrom's thesis in order to resolve this difficulty.

#### Chapter IV: Contagious Holiness of the Priestly Garments in Ezekiel

There is one final line of argumentation that Milgrom uses to establish his thesis: the absence of contagious holiness being attributed to the priestly garments in Exodus 30, in contradiction to the view of Ezekiel 44:19 which clearly describes the priestly garments as possessing contagious holiness. The omission of the garments from the formula of contagious holiness, Milgrom asserts, is meant to ensure that contagious holiness is not understood as something which is contracted by people. In Milgrom's words:

“... our formula comes not at its end but in its penultimate verse, after the roster of cult objects and before the anointing of the priests (v 29b). Thus the conclusion is unavoidable that the legislator intentionally excludes the priestly garments from the application of the formula because, in his system, the priestly garments do not communicate holiness. That the priestly garments are not subject to the law of sancta contagion is further underscored by a major omission. By itself, v 30 would lead to the deduction that only the persons of Aaron and his sons are anointed, despite the expressed inclusion of the priestly garments among the anointed articles in all other accounts (Exod 29:21; 40:13-15; Lev 8:30). Again, the reason for the omission here of the priestly garments must be attributed to an overt attempt to dissociate them from the notion of contagious holiness. This can mean only one thing: P is engaged in polemic; it is deliberately opposing a variant tradition such as is found in the book of Ezekiel.”<sup>65</sup>

While Milgrom's line of reasoning is intriguing, it is not the only reasonable interpretation of the variation between these passages. The fact that in Exodus 30 the anointing of the priests is excluded from the contagious holiness formula could simply be an indication that

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 447.

the author was uninterested in the contagious potential of the garments at this moment.

Concerning the omission of priestly the garments from the anointing of the priests mentioned in Exodus 30, it should be noted that Exodus 25-31, Exodus 35-40, and Leviticus 1-16, are separate pericopes that provide descriptions of the construction, consecration, and rituals to be performed in the Tabernacle. Exodus 29 and 30 are therefore part of the same pericope, distinct from Exodus 40 and Leviticus 8. The mention of the garments along with the anointing of the priests is present exactly one time in each of these pericopes, so it is possible that the author of Exodus 25-31 was simply avoiding redundancy when neglecting to mention the anointing of the garments in chapter 30, since they had already mentioned this ritual within the preceding paragraphs. When Exodus 30 mentions the anointing of Aaron and his sons, it could be referring not only the anointing of their bodies but also their garments. I therefore conclude that the absence of the anointing of the priestly garments in Exodus 30 cannot be taken as proof that P was against the notion that the garments were contagious, and therefore is not compelling evidence that P viewed contagious holiness as only affecting objects.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> It should be kept in mind that the Priestly texts do many things that violate the expectations of a modern reader, so we should be extra cautious of suggestions that the absence of a detail in a passage should be read as a polemic against the idea. As pointed out by Menachem Haran, "... the literary form in which P has come down to us does not satisfy the requirements of classical taste; its various sections are marred by frequent repetition, by discursive style, and by an excess of detail in one place and complete silence (even on apparently important matters) in another"; Haran, *Temples*, 228-229. Haran uses the example of the Tabernacle's lampstand, where one passage gives a detailed description of the form of the lampstand (Exodus 25:31-40), two others describe preparation of the oil (Exodus 27:20-1; Leviticus 24:1-4), and one which mentions that the lampstand is made of gold, with few other details (Numbers 8:1-4). Here we have something similar to the situation with the anointing of the priestly garments, yet it is clear that we should not attribute these variations to a polemic regarding the form or function of the lampstand.

I will now turn to the contagious holiness passages in Ezekiel, which I argue might help illuminate the Priestly passages, rather than contradicting them.<sup>67</sup> Ezekiel discusses the concept of contagious holiness with respect to the most holy sacrifices and priestly garments. These passages are found in the portion of Ezekiel known as the “Temple vision” (chapters 40-48), wherein the prophet Ezekiel is shown a future Temple.

In Ezekiel 46:20 we read:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי יְזֶה הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְשְׁלוּ-נֶשֶׁם הַכֹּהֲנִים אֶת-הָאֲשָׁם וְאֶת-הַחֲטָאֹת  
 אֲשֶׁר יֵאָפוּ אֶת-הַמִּנְחָה לְבִלְתִּי הוֹצִיא אֶל-הַחֲצָר הַקְּיֻצוּנָה לְקַדֵּשׁ אֶת-הָעָם:

“And he said to me, ‘this is the place where the priests boil the guilt-offering and the sin-offering, where they bake the tribute-offering, so as not to bring forth to the outer court, to sanctify the people.’”

Like we read Leviticus 6, so too Ezekiel appears to consider the three most holy offerings to have contagious holiness. As Milgrom observes, the structure of the court in Ezekiel’s temple is specially designed to draw a shaper distinction between the laity and priests than what we see in P.<sup>68</sup> This doesn’t necessarily mean that Ezekiel and P conceived of contagious holiness in completely different ways, but only that there were some differences in the systems used to distinguish the holy and profane.

In Ezekiel 44:19 we read:

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<sup>67</sup> While it is not necessary to assume that Ezekiel and P would agree on contagious holiness, it is at least possible that they share a similar perspective even if they were written many years apart. Milgrom’s own argument, for example, takes Ezekiel to be preserving a tradition that is even older than P, so we cannot rule out the possibility that Ezekiel might be preserving a tradition contemporaneous with P and perhaps consistent with P’s system.

<sup>68</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 451.

וּבְצֵאתָם אֶל-הַחֲצֵר הַחַיצוֹנָה אֶל-הַחֲצֵר הַחַיצוֹנָה אֶל-הָעָם יִפְשְׁטוּ  
 אֶת-בְּגָדֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר-הִמָּה מְשַׁרְתֵּם בָּם וְהִנִּיחוּ אוֹתָם בְּלִשְׁכַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְלִבְשׁוּ  
 בְּגָדִים אֲחֵרִים וְלֹא-יִקְדָּשׁוּ אֶת-הָעָם בְּבִגְדֵיהֶם:

“And when [the priests] go out to the outer court – to the outer court to the people – they will remove their garments with which they minister and put them in the holy chamber, and put on other garments, and not make the people holy with the garments.”

Here we see a concern not to let the garments transmit holiness to the laity, which fits well with Ezekiel’s interest in separating the laity from the priests. As mentioned above, Milgrom believes the fact that P does not reference the contagious holiness of the garments when discussing the anointing oil (Exodus 30:26-30) should be taken as an indication that P rejects the idea that the garments transmit holiness. But it is important to note that Ezekiel does not connect the contagiousness of the garments to the anointing of the garments with oil. Considering that the garments are specified by Ezekiel as the garments “in which [the priests] minister,” it might be that the garments were believed to acquire holiness not from having been anointed but from coming into contact with the contagiously holy furniture and offerings in the inner court.<sup>69</sup> As we saw when comparing the Tabernacle furniture and most holy offerings, contagious holiness can be acquired in multiple ways. It is therefore possible that Ezekiel and P agree that the priestly garments do possess contagious holiness, and also agree that the contagious holiness is not acquired by the anointing of the garments but by use of the garments within the inner court.

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<sup>69</sup> Ezekiel 42:13-14 likewise mentions the necessity of removing the priestly garments before approaching the outer court following a discussion of the priests working in proximity to the most holy offerings in the inner court, also with no immediate reference to the anointing of the garments.

There is an important detail in Ezekiel that might help elucidate the P passages. The reason Ezekiel mentions contagious holiness is out of concern that holiness might end up where it does not belong, and specifically, transmitted to the laity. The idea that the interest in contagious holiness is focused on concern that holiness does not get transmitted someplace that it does not belong fits nicely with Feder's view that Leviticus 6:19-20 describes desanctification rituals. As with P, Ezekiel makes no direct connection between contagious holiness and death.

Based on all of the data analyzed so far, I submit that the interest in contagious holiness articulated in P (as well as Ezekiel) is a concern with keeping people and objects within their appropriate domain of either holy or profane. In the same way that impurity threatens the continued presence of Yahweh among the Israelites if put where it doesn't belong (and not dealt with appropriately), so too holiness can threaten the legitimacy of the cult if it is transmitted to places where it does not belong.



## Chapter V: Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested an alternative to the variety of opinions concerning the concept of contagious holiness in four Pentateuchal passages. While others have argued that contagious holiness is lethal (Haran), restricted to objects (Milgrom), or not present in the texts at all (Levine), I submit that contagious holiness is a substantive force that can be transmitted to both objects and people, and that contagious holiness is mentioned in the Pentateuch so that people and objects that are not supposed to acquire holiness will avoid physical contact with these objects. To make this argument, I examined each of the Pentateuchal passages that contain the formula for contagious holiness, and showed that they are consistent with such an interpretation (chapter II). I then looked at the passages that Haran and Milgrom use to support their respective interpretations (chapter III) and attempted to show that the assumptions Haran and Milgrom make in order to support their views present difficulties and are not necessary, leaving the door open for my own interpretation. Finally, I looked at the passages which discuss contagious holiness in Ezekiel (chapter IV) and argued that, rather than contradicting P, Ezekiel actually provides a potential parallel to the notion of contagious holiness in P as a substantive force that can be transmitted to both objects and people.

If we accept the conclusion that contagious holiness in P is concerned with the fear that holiness spreading where it does not belong will jeopardize the assurance of Yahweh's presence among the Israelites, we could expect to find other examples of the concept that it is undesirable for holiness to accumulate to places where it does not belong. In Deuteronomy 22:9 we read that one must not sow a vineyard with diverse seeds lest it "becomes holy (שקדו)." There is no indication that the holiness created by mixed plants is lethal, but clearly it is not desirable that holiness is created in any person's property. A similar concern might also be behind the

command that no one duplicate the anointing oil described in Exodus 30:31-33, because this would allow people to sanctify people and objects that should not be made holy.<sup>70</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction, my argument stands independent of any particular view of the relative or absolute dating of the biblical texts involved. Nevertheless, my thesis could have implications for the ideological relationship between P, H, and Ezekiel, which is worth mentioning, if only briefly.

Israel Knohl has argued that H (what he terms “HS” for “Holiness School”) is chronologically later than P (what he calls “PT” for “Priestly Torah”). According to Knohl, one of the primary differences between these two strata is where holiness is believed to reside: according to PT, holiness is restricted to the Tabernacle, while in HS the entire nation of Israel is believed to occupy the realm of holiness.<sup>71</sup> (Knohl submits that the composition of HS roughly corresponds to the reforms of Hezekiah, indicating that PT is no later than, and HS is no earlier than, circa 743-701 BCE).<sup>72</sup> As mentioned in chapter IV of this paper, Ezekiel’s temple is more particular than P with regard to separating holiness and profanity. At the risk of oversimplifying, we can propose a spectrum where, regarding holiness, Ezekiel is the most restrictive, HS is the least restrictive, and P is somewhere in the middle. Interest in contagious holiness in each of these traditions corresponds to this spectrum, with Ezekiel giving the clearest description of the means by which contagious holiness can be restricted to the sanctuary, P describing several

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<sup>70</sup> It has also been suggested that this prohibition was polemic against anointing kings; see Propp, *Exodus*, 483.

<sup>71</sup> Knohl, *Sanctuary of Silence*, 152-157, 180-186.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 209. In a diachronic analysis of Numbers 5:11-31, Jaeyoung Jeon submits that linguistic evidence further supports Knohl’s dating (that PT is earlier, and HS was composed in the late pre-exilic / exilic period), focusing specifically on the ratios of nouns to verbs and nominal verbs to finite verbs. See Jaeyoung Jeon, “Two Laws in the Sotah Passage (Num 5:11-31).” *Vetus Testamentum* 57 (2007): 194-206.

objects that possess contagious holiness but not explaining how to safeguard this holiness,<sup>73</sup> and HS which has no clear mention of contagious holiness whatsoever.

Returning to the anthropological and sociological work outlined in the introduction to this paper (chapter I), the Priestly conception of holiness as a contagion is consistent with the Durkheimian view that holiness is a substantive state, especially where it might be exemplified by analogy with anointing oil which imparts a substantive quality to other objects. As I mentioned when discussing Douglas' work, the conceptualization of holiness in a given culture can have implications on the people's view of cosmology, without necessarily conforming to a systematically definable cosmology. Holiness in P can therefore at times be viewed as a substantive category without precluding the possibility that it is also sometimes viewed as a status that is relative to individual perspectives. However, in light of my analyses of biblical texts, the concept of holiness as a contagion appears to be internally consistent, not only within P but also between various biblical texts.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of my proposal is how it functions to solve the Gershonite problem. Hundley has identified this issue as the remaining problem for understanding contagious holiness in P, and suggests that, "It would thus seem that either the fatal consequences of contracting most holy sancta are not absolute, are not applied consistently, or are suspended for practical purposes."<sup>74</sup> The problem with these solutions is that they require one to propose a system based on the biblical texts (but not clearly outlined in the texts), and then propose caveats to the system based on contradictions between the biblical texts and the proposed system. The difficulty with Milgrom's solution (that contagious holiness only affects objects) is that the proposed system repeatedly requires the text to contradict its own formulas

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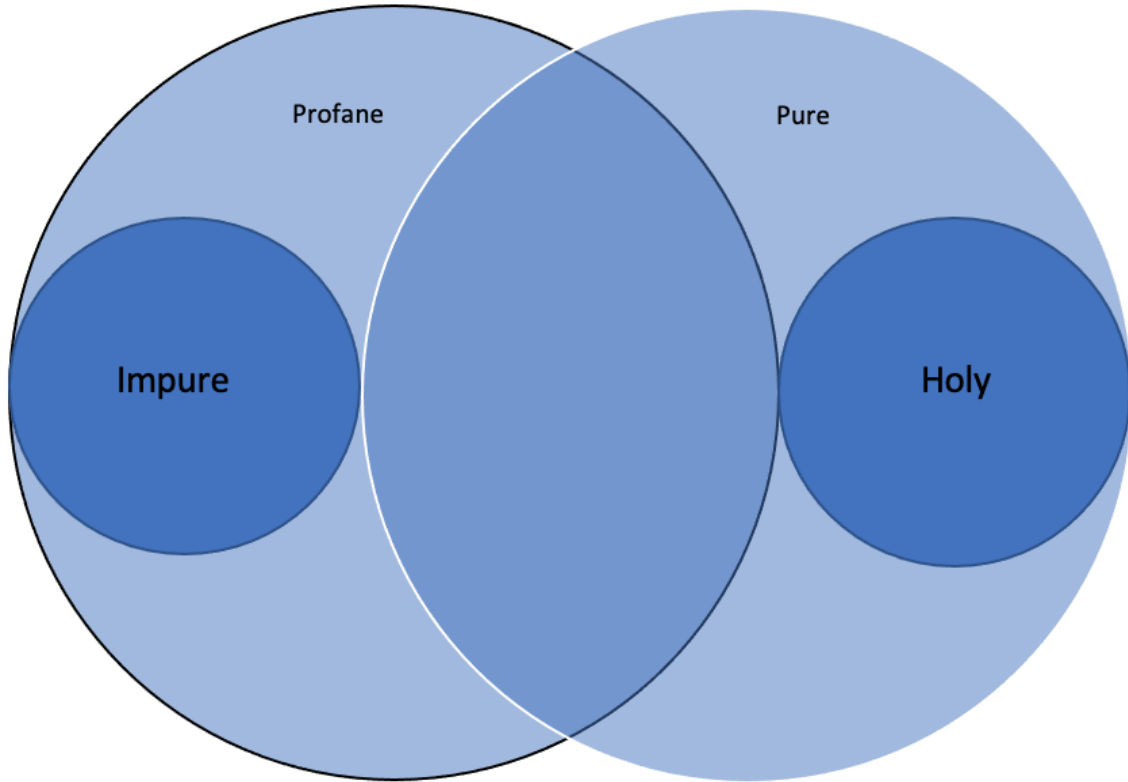
<sup>73</sup> With the exception of the desanctification ritual in Leviticus 6:19-22.

<sup>74</sup> Hundley, "Sacred Spaces," 763.

and narratives as a means of polemicizing, which, while fully accounting for the phenomenon, requires a large number of assumption which cannot be confidently derived from the textual witness. By analogy, consider the assertion that epicycles account for the motions of the heavenly bodies. The epicycles explain the movements with good accuracy, but when one adopts a heliocentric model, all of the unproven assumptions about stars orbiting around invisible orbiting points become unnecessary. Similarly, the problem with contagious holiness rests upon an unnecessary assumption, that contagious holiness is directly related to divine judgment upon those who touch sacred objects. Like switching from a geocentric to a heliocentric model of the cosmos, all of the complexity disappears when we recognize that the concept of contagious holiness is not concerned with the lethal consequences of touching these objects.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> I must acknowledge that my argument leaves open the question of why Yahweh sometimes chooses to kill people who touch or look upon sacred objects, if not because of contagious holiness. I cannot here explore the question in enough detail to attempt an answer, but I believe there are enough alternative possibilities that this gap does not raise a serious problem for accepting my argument.



Venn diagram showing the relationship between impurity, profanity, purity, and holiness, as described in pages 2-4. Impurity is always in the realm of profanity and holiness is always in the realm of purity, and there is a middle area where profanity and purity can overlap. I have not established the relative frequency of each category, so the sizes in the diagram should not be taken to indicate the prevalence of each state.

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