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**The Acceptance and Rejection of Pagan Magic and Divination
in Biblical Religion**

Thesis by Nadia E. Gold

Certain scholars such as Jacob Milgrom and Yehezkel Kaufmann have argued that the bible is essentially and fundamentally opposed to magic and paganism. Central to their view is the assertion that biblical religion, in contrast to other religions of the Ancient Near East, is opposed to the use of magic and divination. Other scholars including, Baruch Levine disagree. The present thesis will examine selected biblical texts to determine which group of scholars has best interpreted the evidence. In this paper, we will first examine the roots of magic in the ancient Near East and then reexamine the biblical sources: the cases of the scapegoat, the copper serpent, the Red heifer and the "witch" of En Dor.

**THE ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION
OF PAGAN MAGIC AND DIVINATION IN BIBLICAL RELIGION**

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**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination**

**Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York**

2000

Advisor: Dr. David S. Sperling

For my father,
Rabbi Manuel Gold,
who taught me the power of asking questions.

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Chapter I

Introduction: Scholarly Opinion

Certain scholars such as Jacob Milgrom and Yehezkel Kaufmann have argued that the bible is essentially and fundamentally opposed to magic and paganism. Central to their view is the assertion that biblical religion, in contrast to other religions of the Ancient Near East, is opposed to the use of magic and divination. Other scholars including, Baruch Levine disagree. The present thesis will examine selected biblical texts to determine which group of scholars has best interpreted the evidence. In this paper, we will first examine the roots of magic in the ancient Near East and then reexamine the biblical sources: the cases of the scapegoat, the copper serpent, the Red heifer and the "witch" of En Dor.

Definitions of Magic

Much of the conflict among scholars lies in the way that they have defined the term, "magic". In the Webster Dictionary, magic is defined as "1. the art or pretence of seeking to control events by the use of spells, charms, etc; sorcery; witchcraft. 2. an unexplainable influence; enchantment." A preferable definition is given by the Encyclopedia Judaica saying that magic is "the actions taken by man to influence the

mysterious forces of the world."¹ In the modern world, the term "magic" has negative connotations. Even Webster's "objective" definition of sorcery and witchcraft reflects a negative attitude.

"Magic" attained its negative reputation through manipulations of the word throughout history. "Magic" comes from the word, "Magi".² According to the Webster Dictionary, the Magi were "the priestly and learned caste in ancient Persia and Media." By the 3rd century BCE, however, the Greek term, *mageia* had attained a negative connotation. In Roman society the cognate Latin of *mageia* also underwent the same demonization as the Greek term had.³ Robert Ritner suggests that our modern western definition of magic has also been corrupted. He proposes a new definition of magic as "the practices of one group viewed with disdain by another."⁴

For the purpose of this thesis, I will accept the Encyclopedia Judaica's definition of magic. It is my assertion that the Israelites practiced rituals in which they controlled influenced the mysterious forces of the world. These rituals, which we will describe as magic, often had pagan roots. While the official Israelite cult accepted many of these practices, they rejected others on the basis that the non-Israelites practiced them.

¹ Joseph Dan, "Magic," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 11:703.

² Robert Ritner, "Traditional Egyptian Religion," in M. Meyer and P. Mirecki, eds., *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), p. 45

³ Ritner, p. 45.

Kaufmann vs. Levine: Definitions of Biblical Magic

The question for scholars remains: is there something that is essential that is magic or is it used to define things that one doesn't like? Kaufmann appears to have fallen into the trap of the modern, corrupted definition of magic, criticized by Ritner. For Kaufmann, the pagans practiced "magic," because they were "the other," but the Israelites only practiced Yahwism. On the other hand, Baruch Levine, in his book, *In the Presence of the Lord*, understood that even for the Yahwistic Israelite cult, certain practices remained magical.

In his book, *The Religion of Israel*, Kaufmann claims that magic is not separate from religion because "The magician usually acts in the name of gods and spirits..."⁵ He adds that the pagan religions were particularly amenable to magic because of their polytheistic beliefs.⁶ These polytheistic religions accepted magic because they believed in many divine and spiritual powers.

Kaufmann begins to prove his point by illustrating the organic nature of magic to religions through a discussion of Babylonian, Egyptian and Greek religion.⁷ In these religions the gods not only teach

⁴ Ibid. p. 44.

⁵ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, Translated by Moshe Greenberg, (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p.40.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. p. 41.

magic to man but also practice magic themselves. Divination was often used in these cultures in order to determine, the gods' knowledge. The diviner could divine either by calling upon the gods themselves or through omens.⁸ Divination could not ever determine the nature of the will of the gods because some events and conditions had little to do with the gods.⁹ In fact Kaufmann goes so far to say that the gods themselves do not always determine their own fates. Often either the gods or forces outside the realm of the gods would reveal omens. This implies that the pagans believed that the gods did not necessarily know everything.

Magic also played an important role in the rites of the cult. The cult differs from divination in that the cult served the gods whereas divination serves the curiosity of man. According to Kaufmann, "Since the gods are bound to an eternal order of life, procreation, suffering, death, need of food and shelter...the cult is viewed as man's service to the gods in their crises and needs."¹⁰ Thus, the gods were believed to be susceptible to death and danger from evil forces outside their control, and it is man that must aid them in this battle.¹¹

Another aspect of the pagan cult was sacrifice. Sacrifice was thought to be an expression of homage and thanks and capable of influencing the life of the god or the cosmos.¹² The central idea

⁸ Ibid. p. 44. Omens are coded phenomena that occur in nature.

⁹ Kaufmann, p. 42.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 53.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. p. 54.

surrounding sacrifice is that the gods, like humans, require food and drink, and such sacrifices are often viewed as banquets for the gods.¹³ Some cultures believe that when men partake of the same sacrificial animal intended for a god, a bond is created between man and deity.¹⁴

Purificatory rites also were important to the pagan cult. The pagans also believed that death, disease and darkness were caused by demonic forces that sought to destroy both gods and men.¹⁵ Temple purification rites were therefore intended to ward off such evil forces.¹⁶

After introducing us to pagan religion, Kaufmann points out what he believes the essential differences are between the pagan and Israelite cult. Unfortunately for Kaufmann, his theories often contradict each other and he continues to make sweeping general statements about the fundamental nature of biblical religion.

The most important of these differences is the idea that Israelite religion is a monotheistic system lacking in pagan mythology. For Kaufmann the biblical god is "...an omnipotent, supreme deity, holy, awful and jealous, whose will was the highest law."¹⁷ This statement is problematic because it assumes that there is one consistent view of God in the Bible. Sometimes God is not omnipotent. For example, in the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 55.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 60.

Garden of Eden, God asks Adam, "Where are you?"¹⁸ Sometimes, man questions God's will. For example, in the story of the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27:1-11, God's law is changed by man to suit the human need. It is also impossible to say that the Israelite view of God hadn't changed from the pre-exilic texts to the exilic texts. For the prophets, God changes from a vengeful God to a forgiving God.

The image of a supreme God, Kaufmann asserts, replaced a structured a mythological system. In addition, every single aspect of Israelite religion revolved around the idea of one supreme god.¹⁹ Yahweh has neither consort, nor entourage nor companions²⁰ and thus cannot be said to have a mythology. On this statement, Kaufmann contradicts himself. He states:

...the ancient population of the desert was by no means monotheistic, nor was Israel exposed only to this environment. For centuries, Israel's ancestors lived among peoples...whose religion was an advanced polytheism; the cultures of Canaan, Babylonia and Egypt colored Israelite thought profoundly. The Semites of Palestine and Babylonia possess rich mythologies; why did Israel not learn from them?...of course, the biblical narrative...is full of legends about God...²¹

How can Kaufmann say that, on the one hand, there is no Yahwist mythology and, on the other hand, also say that Israelite culture could not help but be influenced by other cultures? In various places in the

¹⁸ Gen. 3:9

¹⁹ Kaufmann, p. 60.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 61-62.

bible we can see this influence. For example, other creation accounts in which Yahweh fights a sea monster²² bear resemblance to the Marduk and Tiamat myths. In addition mentions in the book of Prophets are made to Asherah whom scholars have thought to be a consort of Yahweh.

At this point in Kaufmann's book, he begins to talk about demons and magic and their relation to what he views as the monotheistic Israelite religion. He contends that "the religion of Yahweh left no room for the pagan fear of magical-demonic powers that attack God and man."²³ Thus Belief in the gods ended and all divinity became concentrated in the domain of Yahweh."

The pagan polytheistic pantheon failed to become demons in the Israelite religion. Evil only comes from Yahweh or his angels.²⁴ Even the phenomena of angels have no connection to ancient Israel's pagan past.²⁵ This is evident from their non-pagan names such as "Gabri-el" and "Micha-el", each of which contain the Hebrew word for God, *el*.²⁶

While some words like, *mashhith* (destroyer) and *reshef* (fiery bolt) may imply proper nouns standing for certain demons, they still belong to Yahweh's entourage and are his agents.²⁷ Here Kaufmann contradicts

²¹ Ibid. p. 61.

²² Psalm 74:13, 14

²³ Kaufmann, p. 86

²⁴ Ibid. p. 64.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 63.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 64.

²⁷ Ibid.

himself on two accounts. He had already said that Yahweh had no entourage because He, alone, was supreme. If Yahweh had a heavenly court, he could not be the only divine or supernatural being. In addition, these "demons" are most certainly are a source of evil. Kaufmann had just stated that evil only came from Yahweh Himself and his angels.²⁸

When faced with the fact that certain beings in Leviticus and Isaiah are explicitly stated to be demons, it is impossible for even Kaufmann to escape the notion that certain pagan demons were assimilated into the Israelite cult. However, in order to support his earlier statement against such an assimilation, he responds, saying, that the behavior of these demons was different than that of their counterparts in the pagan world. Among these demons are *shedim* (demons) and the *seirim* (satyrs, goats), Lillith and Azazel.²⁹ The *shedim* and *seirim* haunt the open country (Lev. 17:5,7), ruins (Isa. 13:21; 34:14), or the desert (Lev. 16:22). While Lillith (Isa. 34:14) and Azazel (Lev. 16:8ff.) are mentioned only by name.³⁰ Kaufmann claims that "All decisive power, divine and even demonic, has been taken from them and given to the messengers of Yahweh."³¹ While once active and powerful in a realm of their own beside the pagan gods, in the Bible they are reduced to living among the animals and dancing in the desert.³² If these beings were

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

harmless spirits dancing with animals why were they mentioned in the text? And why are they are mentioned as something to be feared?

While Kaufmann believes that these demons were inactive forces, and therefore cannot be said to be demonic, Baruch Levine believes that these were indeed active forces.³³ Levine's proof comes primarily from the Yom Kippur expiation ritual of the scapegoat. In his book, *In the Presence of the Lord*, he writes that while Azazel was not worshipped in the same way as Yahweh, he was indeed an active force.³⁴ In the third chapter we will discuss more on Azazel and the ritual of the Scapegoat.

Kaufmann believes that while pagan cultures believed that evil came from the primordial realm of certain gods and sea creatures, the Israelite religion believed that evil stemmed from the human realm. It is people who sin. It seems as though Kaufmann is overlooking an important aspect of ancient cultures. As Levine points out, "impurity is the actualized form of evil forces operative in the human environment."³⁵ For most ancient peoples, impurity was sin. If one became defiled, the community would also be at risk. He says, "One becoming impure as the result of an offense against the deity, introduced a kind of demonic contagion into the community."³⁶ Furthermore, Levine argues that

³³ Baruch Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), p. 79

³⁴ Ibid. p. 82.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 77-78.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 75.

demons can be sent by Yahweh Himself.³⁷ Once God has sent out these demons, he cannot control them again.

In the following chapters we will see more of how, for Kaufmann, the ancient Israelites believed that magic is human wisdom that posed a conflict within the cult to the belief in Yahweh's divine wisdom. He says, "Magic was idolatrous because it was godless"³⁸. And therefore could not possible be accepted within the ancient Israelite cult. We will also see that Levine is correct in arguing that certain magical practices did not create a conflict for the Yahwist cult .

³⁷ Ibid. p. 86.

Chapter II

The Roots of Magic in the Ancient Near East

For many ancient people's magic was science. Belief in magic and demons enabled them to have some control over forces in nature that were beyond their control. It was a method of dealing with and understanding how things worked in the world.

There were many different reasons why one would use a type of magic. Apotropaic magic the ancients believed, warded off evil forces or demons.³⁹ Sympathetic magic would seek to attract good forces and protective gods⁴⁰ and would control an adversary through the manipulation of a replication. Homeopathic magic makes use of the belief that like produces like or that an effect resembles its cause.⁴¹

Methods of magical practice by which one could achieve the desired effects described above included: analogic magic, rites of contact, rites of identification and substitution and rites of elimination.

Analogic magic involved taking previously prepared materials, like jars, which would represent the evil to be removed. These objects were

³⁸ Kaufmann, p. 79.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Robert Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1993), P. 9

then destroyed either by crushing, burning or melting.⁴² Rites of contact and transference involved the purification of an object. The object was touched, lifted up, or waved. One could also wipe a person or the defiled object with a concoction in which magical power was inherent.⁴³ Rites of contact usually preceded rites of identification and substitution. The object to be purified was touched, thereby transferring the evil to the person initiating the contact. Then, the person, touches another object, person or animal and thus transfers the evil to them. ⁴⁴ Most of these types of magic can be seen in ancient Egyptian, Hittite, and Mesopotamian cultures.

Egyptian Magic

In ancient Egypt, magical practices were part of the official cult. Thus magic was not seen as an illegal practice. In fact, were no magicians in Egypt who practiced outside of the traditional cult.⁴⁵

According to Egyptian mythology, the gods created magic themselves. In his book on Egyptian magic, Robert Ritner explains, "At the beginning of time, before the creation of the world, the creator

⁴² Gabriella Frantz-Szabo, "Hittite Witchcraft, Magic and Divination", *Civilizations of The Ancient Near East*. in Jack M. Sasson ed., 1995, p. 2011.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 2012.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 2013

⁴⁵ Ritner, "Traditional Egyptian Religion." p. 52

conceived in his heart, the force of Heka."⁴⁶ This "force" became the divinity, Heka. Heka had the power to control the other gods through magic.

The Egyptian vocabulary of magic also shows the accepted nature of magical practice in the official cult. For example, Heka is described as "swallowing spells". The Egyptian word for "to swallow" also means "to know". Magic, for the ancient Egyptians was simply a form of knowledge. Even the word, "magician" in Egyptian had a morally neutral status equally applied to foreigners, heroes and villains alike.⁴⁷

The Egyptians also had rituals within the official cult in which humans used power to manipulate the turn of events. In these rituals, the priest "became" a god in order to exploit their power.⁴⁸ In addition, it was believed that the gods themselves created magic so that humans could change the course of nature.

There are several elements of Egyptian magic that are similar to Israelite ritual cultic practice. Certain colors, like red, for example, played important roles in the practices of both cultures because the color red often indicated danger.⁴⁹ Within Egyptian magical practices red pots

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 48-49

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 50.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 51.

⁴⁹ J.F. Borghouts, "Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Ancient Egypt", *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, in Jack M. Sasson ed., 1995, p. 1780

were often broken, demons names were written with red ink, and red was often the color of the demons themselves.⁵⁰

Another symbol in Egyptian magic is the serpent. Snakes were both respected and feared because of the fear of their poisonous bites.⁵¹ This fear led some to worship snakes, while others saw them as protectors and companions.⁵² John Currid writes, "Thus they regarded the snake as friend and fiend, protector and enemy,...the personification of the sacred and the profane."⁵³ Cobras were even seen to represent the sovereignty of Pharaoh. The Uraeus, the winged, enraged female cobra on Pharaoh's crown, represented the goddesses, Wedjet and Nekhbet, the goddesses who symbolized Lower Egypt and Upper Egypt.⁵⁴ The Egyptians believed that Pharaoh's crown was symbolic of his power and the source of his divine potency and strength.⁵⁵ The purpose of the crown was to instill fear into Pharaoh's enemies just as a real cobra would.⁵⁶

To protect themselves from dangerous animals like snakes, scorpions and crocodiles, the Egyptians would manipulate images of the

⁵⁰ Ritner, *The Mechanics of...* p. 147

⁵¹ John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 87-88

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 89

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

animals they feared.⁵⁷ For example, the image of a snake would protect against snakebites.

Sometimes the images of animals, representing gods would sit atop standards. These images were not just symbols. The Egyptians believed that they actually contained the power of the gods. These poles could have the power to both bless and curse depending on their purpose.⁵⁸

Hittite Magic

From approximately 1800 to 1175 BCE, the Hittites were one of the great kingdoms of the ancient Near East, ruling much of Anatolia and sometimes Syria.⁵⁹ Despite numerous references to the Hittites in the Bible, some scholars deny any influence of Hittite culture onto ancient Israelite culture.⁶⁰ In his article on the Hittites, M.C. Astour says, "The Hittite conquests never reached Palestine, and no ethnic Hittite elements ever settled there. In the historical books of the Old Testament, 'Hittites' always designate the Neo-Hittites of northern Syria."⁶¹ It seems as though Astour is contradicting himself. He himself explains that the Neo-Hittites of Northern Syria, preserved the traditions of the Hittites.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 148

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 151

⁵⁹ Richard Beal, "Hittite Military Rituals," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, p. 53.

⁶⁰ M.C. Astour, "Hittites", *The Interpreters Dictionary To The Bible*, supplementary volume, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), p. 411-413

⁶¹ Ibid.

The Israelites would most definitely have come into contact with Hittites and Neo-Hittites through dealings with travelling merchants as they did with most of the cultures of the ancient Near East.

Like many of the surrounding ancient Near Eastern Cultures, the Hittites strongly believed in the powers of magic and employed a wide variety of magical practices. While Ritner believed that in Egypt harmful magic was not a problem, "black magic" or harmful magic, was a problem within Hittite society. In the Old Hittite period, King Telipinu (ca. 1500 B.C.E) issued a ban on witchcraft. Illegal magic was also subject to Hittite laws:⁶²

If someone within a family knows about magic, you shall remove him from his family and bring him to the palace gate. Whoever does not bring him in – it will come about that things will go badly for that person.
(Telipinu Proclamation, section 50)⁶³

The reasons for performing a Hittite magical ritual were many and encompassed all aspects of life. These often included life cycle rituals such as a birth, a coronation, a military excursion, and illness.⁶⁴ As stated before, these magical rituals could involve rites of contact, identification and substitution, apotropaic magic, attraction magic, sympathetic magic, and several types of divination.

⁶² Frantz-Szabo, p. 2008.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 2013.

Often, rites of substitution also involved rites of contact. One such ritual was the substitute-king ritual. One kind of substitute king ritual was performed when a king returned from battle. Perhaps the Hittites feared the evil that surrounded the battlefield in the form of illness and death. The king, therefore had to rid himself of any residual evil. In the ritual, a human prisoner of war dressed like the king in order to attract any evil forces or demons that might have attached themselves to the king.⁶⁵ Other substitute king rituals often involved animals such as oxen. In the Aphasia of King Murshili II (14th century BCE) the ox is dressed like the king and then the king lays his hands on it.⁶⁶

Another similar ritual was a Hittite military ritual to rid the camp of disease. On the fourth day of the ritual, various colors of wool string, including red threads, transferred evil from the officers to rams. Each ram was paired with an officer, perhaps to substitute for the officers. The rams spent the night in the camp to absorb more evil and when the officers laid their hands on the rams, they absorbed even more. The rams together with a woman were then paraded through the camp to absorb any evil within the ranks of the army. Finally, the rams and the woman were sent across the border to the enemy and the evil commanded to leave the Hittites and go to the enemy. The rams and the woman were intended as sacrifices (even though they were not sacrificed) to the deity who had caused the plague. Sacrifices to the other gods of

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 2012.

the pantheon accompanied this "scapegoat" ritual with the hope that they would put pressure on the god who caused the plague.⁶⁷

Other rituals for the elimination of sin involved objects instead of animals. In one such ritual to purify a temple, a boat is lined with silver and gold and sent off in a canal. The action is then followed by the following incantation:

As the river has carried off this boat
and no further trace of it remains, whoever
has done evil word, oath, curse and impurity
before the god, let it (the boat) carry forth
these (evils) to the river in the same way!
And as no trace of this boat remains, let there
furthermore not (be) evil word before god,
nor let it (remain) for the offerer's person
- let god and offerer be clean from that word!⁶⁸

The metals represent the impurities, "oath" and "curse", which are to be dispatched to a place that is nondetrimental.⁶⁹ It is interesting to note that the god is just as much in danger from impurities as the offerer is.

Canaanite Magic at Ugarit

The excavations at Ugarit have revealed many striking cultural,

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 2010.

⁶⁷ Beal, p. 70.

⁶⁸ David Wright, "Deuteronomy 21:1-19", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 49, (1987), p. 402.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

religious and lingual similarities with ancient Israel. It is no coincidence that both the head of the Canaanite pantheon and Yahweh of the Israelites are called, El.⁷⁰ Certain magical practices discovered at Ugarit bear striking resemblances to certain practices in the Hebrew Bible. As in Egypt, snakes also played an important role in Canaanite magic. Two tablets found at Ugarit describe a therapeutic magical ritual for healing snakebites⁷¹:

The Mare, daughter of the spring...
called out to Shapshu her mother,
"Shapshu, my mother! Bring
a message to El...Here is my incantation
against the bite of the snake that is venomous...
From the snake, let the charmer remove from it -
let him cast off venom."⁷²

The text continues to relate how a human snake charmer calls to a series of divinities for help. Finally, Shapshu, the sun goddess, calls upon the god, Horon, to remove the venom.⁷³ Jean Michel de Tarragon notes that this text illustrates an intermingling of mythology, religion and magic with a lack of well-defined boundaries.⁷⁴ This intermingling was not only characteristic of the Canaanite religion but of almost all ancient Near Eastern religions.

⁷⁰ Patrick Miller, "Ugarit and The History of Religions", *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*, 9, (1981), p. 122.

⁷¹ J.M. de Tarragon, "Witchcraft, Magic and Divination in Canaan and Ancient Israel", *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, in Jack M. Sasson ed., 1995, p. 2077

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Mesopotamian Magic

Similar to the afore mentioned Hittite rituals, many Mesopotamian rituals also involved of contact and elimination. In these rituals, the evil was literally wiped off of the afflicted object or person and transmitted onto another object, person or animal. Then the object that had been defiled was sent away to the wilderness or sometimes killed. As we have seen before, these rituals were often described in terms of the gods teaching humans the arts of magic. In the Shurpu ritual, the god, Marduk is instructed by the god, Ea to wipe bread on the afflicted person, thereby transferring the evil to the bread. The bread was then taken out to the open wilderness and placed at the base of an *asagu*-bush.⁷⁵ During the Akitu festival, a ram was slaughtered and the priest wiped the room with its carcass and recited incantations of exorcism.⁷⁶ Here again, the carcass was thought to absorb the impurities of the room. It was then disposed of in a flowing body of water that took the impurities away from the temple.⁷⁷

Aside from the many incantations of exorcism that have been found from Mesopotamia, we also have textual evidence of rites for

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Wright, p. 402

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 403

⁷⁷ Ibid.

communication with the dead. Often these were private rituals⁷⁸ in which the living made funerary offerings to their dead relatives and recited incantations. The Mesopotamians believed that the dead returned from the netherworld for a brief stay in the form of a ghost. Usually these ghosts would serve as protectors to the living by warding off evil spirits. Ghosts would also be summoned for the purpose of divining the future.⁷⁹ Such procedures were called, "Incantation (to be used when you wish) to see a ghost in order to make a decision."⁸⁰

⁷⁸ J.A. Scurlock, "Magical Uses of Ancient Mesopotamian Festivals of the Dead", *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, p. 93-107

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 106.

Chapter III

Four Texts in Light of the Evidence

In this chapter we will examine four biblical texts in light of the evidence already presented. The first two examples we will look at are the cases of the scapegoat and the red heifer. Despite the fact that these two rituals are clearly condoned by the official Israelite cult, it is difficult to ignore their pagan magical counterparts.

The "Scapegoat" Ritual: Leviticus 16:20 - 22

20) When he has finished cleaning the Shrine, the Tent of Meeting, and the altar, the live goat shall be brought forward. 21) And Aaron will lay his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the inequities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man. 22) Thus the goat shall carry on it all their inequities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.⁸¹

Despite the fact that he admits the pagan influences on the practice of the scapegoat, Kaufmann, refuses to see the scapegoat as a magical practice. He says:

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Baruch Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 106-107

The case of the biblical scapegoat is entirely different.

To begin with...the scapegoat is not seen as an offering to Azazel.

The scapegoat is placed "before YHWH" (vs.7), and atonement is made by it "before YHWH" (vs. 10)...Nor is the rite representative as the expulsion of demonic evil. The sins are merely viewed as religious and moral (i.e. sins before God)...the Azazel of Leviticus 16 is not conceived as...the source of danger or harm; he plays no active role at all...He is merely the passive symbol of impurity - sin returns to its like.⁸²

Kaufmann believes that magic is a purely pagan belief without a place within the Israelite official cult. He claims that because ritual of the Scapegoat was dedicated to and done in the name of Yahweh, it eliminated all possibility that this rite was magical. Therefore the goat ritual bore no relation to any other power, divine or demonic.⁸³

The ritual of the scapegoat clearly falls into the magical category of a rite of contact and elimination. The similarities to the Hittite and Mesopotamian examples of the same genre are striking. In the Hittite military ritual cited in chapter two, the officers transferred their impurities to the rams just as the Israelite priest transferred the sins of the people onto the head of the goat.

The underlying idea of how impurity is transferred to the animal is also similar despite the fact that, on the surface, both rituals appear to be very different. For the Hittites, the plague that had besieged the

⁸² Kaufmann, p. 114

⁸³ Levine, *In the Presence of The Lord*, p. 80

military camp was thought to have been caused by a demonic substance that had attached itself to all the members of the camp. The only way to rid the camp of such a substance was to wipe it off onto another substance using an agent. This agent would act as a detergent, in the same way that soap is used to clean dirt. Sometimes the agent would be a physical substance. For example, in the Hittite ritual the strings of wool acted as the agent through which the impurity was transferred.⁸⁴ Any residual evil is transferred to the rams via the officers placing their hands on the rams.⁸⁵

The agents used in such magical rites were not always physical. Sometimes an incantation served as an agent. While the priest did not use any wool strands used in the Israelite ritual, he vocally confessed the Israelite's sins over the head of the goat. According to Levine, through this act, the sinful forces that had clung to the Israelites were trapped.

He says:

The pronouncement of the confessional also gives some evidence of conflict with evil forces, actualized in the sins of the Israelites. The purpose of the confessional was to trap the sins by exposing them, by calling them by name, thus preventing their escape or concealment. In biblical Hebrew, *hitwaddah* connotes the revealing of sins. Once exposed and trapped, the sins could be loaded onto the scapegoat and dispatched.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Beal, p. 70

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Levine, *In the Presence of The Lord*, p. 82.

The idea of trapping demons was not an unusual one in the Near East. The purpose of magic bowls from the Talmudic period, was to "trap" the demons. The bowls, decorated with incantations and figures of demons, were buried under the dirt floors of houses with their concave sides facing down towards the earth. The image of the demon was sometimes shown bound in chains and the word for "bind" was often used repeatedly in the incantations.⁸⁷ The idea was that when the demons came into a house from under the earth, they were attracted to, and then trapped inside the bowls.

In both rituals, once the sins/demonic forces were transferred onto the animals through the rite of contact, the animals were sent away as a rite of elimination. A person is also sent to accompany them. It is unclear why the woman in the Hittite ritual and the man in the Israelite ritual accompanied the animals. In his article on Hittite military rituals, Richard Beal seems to suggest that the woman may also have been used as a scapegoat. He says:

Was the woman a scapegoat for the army as a whole, and did the rams take the evils of each individual regiment...? ...While serving as scapegoats, the same rams (and woman) simultaneously served to propitiate the god who had caused the plague in the first place.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Joseph Naveh and Saul Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1993), p. 118. In this incantation of Bowl 16, the demon is described as bound by the lion, dragon and other demons.

⁸⁸ Beal, p. 70.

There is nothing, however, in Beal's own description of the rite that would support the idea that the woman also served as a vessel for the return of the evil. The impurity of the officers was only transferred to the rams, and not to the woman. Perhaps the answer lies in the Israelite Scapegoat ritual.

In his commentary on the book of Leviticus, Baruch Levine noted that while the exact meaning of *ish itti* is uncertain, the noun *et* means, "time, appointed time."⁸⁹ Thus the text may imply that *ish itti* means a "man who is available at a certain time."⁹⁰ He also noted that according to Mishnah Yoma 6:3, this task was given to a priest to make certain that the defiled goat would not return.⁹¹ However, the verb, *shilah*, when used with reference to animals, it means "to drive."⁹² Thus the man may have driven the animal away. Perhaps this was also the purpose of the woman in the Hittite ritual.

But where were the animals in both rituals going? Were they simply vehicles used to take the evil forces away? Was there a particular destination for either of these animals? Later in Leviticus 16:26 we discover that the term for the goat that is dispatched is "the Azazel-goat". This verse has disturbed many biblical scholars for a number of years because of their assumption that the Israelites at this point in time were monotheists. Azazel appears to be another demonic or divine power

⁸⁹ Levine, *Leviticus*. p. 106.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

aside from Yahweh. If the Israelites were, in fact, monotheists, it would have been impossible that this being was another god or divine force. According to Levine, Azazel was most likely the name of a goat demon, possibly related to the goat-demons (*se'irim*) in 17:7.⁹³ He notes that Azazel contains the word, *ez*, (goat). The commentator Ibn Ezra also noted a similar connection.⁹⁴

Levine further notes that in late antiquity Azazel was specifically identified with a demon.⁹⁵ In the apocryphal book of I Enoch 6-13, *Aza-el* was a deposed angel. In addition, many of the offerings that people gave for sacrifice on Yom Kippur were goats. The goat was a symbol of the wilderness and the wilderness was associated with impurity and evil. Thus the goats themselves were also associated with evil.⁹⁶

Kaufmann claims, however, that Azazel was a passive recipient of the sins of the Israelites and a non-entity.⁹⁷ As we have shown, Azazel was, and continued to be, an active force from biblical through talmudic times.

Thus, the entire scapegoat ritual is an example of sympathetic magic. Sympathetic magic being the practice of using "like forces to combat other "like forces."⁹⁸ The priest is fully aware that when he sends

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Levine, *Leviticus*, p. 102.

⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 252.

⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 251.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, p. 83.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 252.

the scapegoat out into the wilderness, he is sending the evil forces associated with the goat back to where they originated, to the goat-demon, Azazel. Thus the goat is being sent to combat the evil forces of the goat-demon.

The Red Heifer: Numbers 19:2-10

2) Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid. 3) You shall give it to Eleazar, the priest. It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. 4) Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. 5) The cow shall be burned in his sight - its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included - 6) and the priest shall take cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff, and throw them into the fire consuming the cow. 7) The priest shall wash his garments and bathe his body in water; after that the priest may reenter the camp, but he shall be unclean until evening. 8) He who performed the burning shall also wash his garments in water, bathe his body in water, and be unclean until evening. 9) A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the cow and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, to be kept for water of lustration for the Israelite community. It is for cleansing. 10) He who gathers up the ashes of the cow shall also wash his clothes and be unclean until evening.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 159-60.

The ritual of the Red Heifer is another official cultic rite that also finds its roots in pagan magical practice. As in the ritual of the scapegoat, the priestly participants were well aware of, and accepted the magical power of this ritual. Again, according to Kaufmann, the ritual is not magical because it is solely directed to Yahweh and no other divine or demonic power.¹⁰⁰ Jacob Milgrom also ignores the fact that this remained as a magical rite for the Israelite priests. He writes,

In sum, the lustral ashes of the Red Cow are the only vestige of a pre-Israelite rite of exorcism for the corpse contaminated. Otherwise, the rite has been totally transformed by the Israelite values inherent in its sacrificial procedures.¹⁰¹

It is ironic, however, that Milgrom should come to the above conclusion after devoting most of his article, "The Paradox of the Red Cow", to showing how similar the Red Heifer is to pagan magical practice. It is clear, therefore, that both Milgrom and Kaufmann, choose to ignore several key magical elements of this ritual.

Firstly, the purpose of the ritual had magical intent. Once the ash-mixture is made, it is used to purify those who have been defiled by a corpse. Why would a corpse be a source of defilement? Death and illness were, and still are, frightening concepts to most peoples. These were frightening states of being because they were seen as "abnormal" states that were far from what was conceived to be "normal". Not only

¹⁰⁰ Kaufmann, p. 314.

were they seen as abnormal, they were also states that bordered the world of the unknown. Regarding the ancient Babylonians, Walter Farber says:

It has been said that the ancient Babylonians lived in a world full of supernatural forces constantly threatening their lives and well-being, and that their philosophy of life was thus determined by the permanent fear of something negative lurking in the dark, unknown and ready at any time to afflict and destroy the individual.¹⁰²

There cannot be any reason to think that the above statement was not true for all ancient peoples including the Israelites. Thus, most ancient peoples including the Israelites believed in the threatening presence of demons around anyone not in a normal state of being, like death. These demons or evil forces had to be expiated from anyone who came into contact with them by touching a corpse.

Two of the key ingredients in the mixture outlined in Numbers are a red cow and red dyed wool. Obviously there is an intended significance to the color, red. In ancient times, red often represented blood. Indeed, blood plays a vital role at the beginning of the ritual when it is dashed seven times toward the Tent of Meeting. For the ancient Israelites, blood and fat were the essences of life.¹⁰³ This connection is made explicit in

¹⁰¹ Jacob Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), p. 95.

¹⁰² Walter Farber, "Witchcraft, Magic and Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia." *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, p. 1896

¹⁰³ David Sperling, "Blood", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* I, p. 761

Deuteronomy 12:23: "For the blood is the life and you must not consume the life along with the flesh."¹⁰⁴ Because they embodied life, blood and fat were reserved for God alone. It was thought that God would actually consume the blood and fat of an animal that had been sacrificed.¹⁰⁵ However, blood was often seen as more significant to life than fat.¹⁰⁶ David Sperling points out that "blood" and "life" are attested as lexical pairs in Hebrew, Ugaritic and Akkadian poetry."¹⁰⁷

Levine takes the idea of blood further. He says that blood is protective because it satiates the divine wrath of both gods and demons who desire blood.¹⁰⁸ At times, Yahweh is portrayed much like demons were portrayed.¹⁰⁹ He resides in his sanctuary and requires that his worshippers defend themselves from his wrath.¹¹⁰ This, therefore is the reason for the inclusion of blood in a sacrifice: when angered, instead of taking a human life, Yahweh is satisfied with the blood from a burnt sacrifice because blood is a substitute for life.¹¹¹

However, the ritual of the Red Heifer is not a sacrifice to satisfy Yahweh but a sacrifice to satiate demons who might harm Yahweh.¹¹² The blood that the priest uses to splash the Tent of Meeting in verse 4 is

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, p. 68-69.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 69.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 68.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 75.

a cleansing agent.¹¹³ The blood appeases any demonic forces that have attached themselves to the Tent. It is God's sanctuary and therefore God must be protected from any demonic powers that could harm him.¹¹⁴ Therefore, according to this priestly author, God is not all-powerful and can be subject to harm from demons.

In fact Levine points out that the purpose of the whole ritual is not only to decontaminate anyone who has come into contact with a dead body, but also to prevent that person from contaminating God's sanctuary. He says:

In Numbers 19:3 it is explicitly stated that one who had become impure as a result of contact with a dead, human body and had not... purified himself in the proper manner had actually caused the contamination of the sanctuary, itself...The purificatory rites of those impure as a result of the direct contact with a dead, human body had a two-fold purpose: to purify the persons directly contaminated and at the same time, to protect the abode of the resident deity from contamination.¹¹⁵

He continues to note that in his heavenly abode, God was well protected from impurity.¹¹⁶ From time to time the Israelites believed that Yahweh graced them with his presence in the sanctuary.¹¹⁷ However, the

¹¹³ Farber, p, 1896. The blood is dashed seven times towards the Tent of Meeting. In his article, "Witchcraft, Divination and Magic in Ancient Mesopotamia", Walter Farber gives an example of a Babylonian incantation that repeats the number seven throughout the text.

¹¹⁴ Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord*, p. 74

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 75.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

human realm was full of dangerous impurities and evil demonic forces that threatened Him.¹¹⁸ Thus if Yahweh was to continue to be a presence among the Israelite people, He required an extreme degree of purity in the places he inhabited.¹¹⁹

Perhaps the red ingredients used to make the ashes, were believed to imbue the concoction itself with the magical, cleansing power of blood. The mixture itself presents a paradox: it cleanses the impure but also contaminates the pure.¹²⁰ Milgrom suggests that the mixture is some sort of detergent that becomes contaminated itself when applied to the defiled person.¹²¹ Albert Baumgarten notes that Milgrom's interpretation is flawed. The text explicitly states that even *before* the ashes have been used, they defile the pure.¹²²

Baumgarten believes that the key to understanding purity and impurity lies in the idea that our "pure" existence is based on our environment being in a certain balanced order.¹²³ He says, "holiness and purity imply completeness and order: everything being in its proper place at the proper time. Anomaly leads to confusion, the very opposite of holiness or purity."¹²⁴ He continues to point out that if one is closer to or

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Albert Baumgarten, "The Paradox of the Red Heifer", *Vetus Testamentum* XLIII, 4, (1993), p. 443.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 444-45.

farther from the sacred than one ought to be, one is rendered impure.¹²⁵

All who prepare the ashes have begun at a level of "normalcy". The ashes, however, are in the category of "extreme". Once the normal priest has touched the "extreme" ashes, his "normal" state of being is thrown off and he has contracted impurity.

The ashes were holy because of their "special" ingredients. Red cows are quite rare and thus special. The cow is even more special because it can neither have had a blemish nor could it have been yoked. Therefore, because the ashes are holy, they are in an "extreme" state. The ashes are holy because their ingredients are special.

The Copper Serpent: Numbers 21:4-9

4) They set out from Mount Hor by way of the sea of reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, 5) and the people spoke out against God and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food." 6) The Lord sent *seraph* serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died. 7) The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Intercede with the Lord to take away the Serpents from us!" And Moses interceded for the people. 8) Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a *seraph* figure and mount it on a standard. And if anyone who is bitten looks at it, he shall recover." 9) Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent,

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 445.

he would look at the copper serpent and recover.¹²⁶

In the incident of the Copper Serpent, the evil, demonic forces in the form of *seraphim* are sent out by Yahweh. The Israelites knew that, Yahweh, alone could not control these forces once released. The only way to control the snakes is human intervention. Moses therefore intervenes with the magical help of a fetish.

Like the Scapegoat the Copper Serpent is an example of sympathetic magic. The snake bites are combated by the image of a snake, just as the goat-demon, Azazel is confronted by the scapegoat. Kaufmann again would like us to believe that this has nothing to do with magic because the staff only works through Yahweh.¹²⁷ Even though he points out magical parallels between the account in Numbers and ancient Near Eastern archeological evidence, Milgrom also believes that the Copper Serpent of the Israelites cannot be magic. He states that the magical rite always had two parts: an oral rite and a manual rite.¹²⁸ Because the Israelite ritual did not have an oral rite, it cannot be said to be magic.

We recall from chapter two, the various Canaanite and Egyptian parallels to the Copper Serpent to show how, even though the standard in Numbers is said to work through Yahweh, the practice is still a

¹²⁶ Milgrom, *JPS Translation*, p. 173-4.

¹²⁷ Kaufmann, p. 83.

¹²⁸ Jacob Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism, and the Sin of Moses", *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), p. 259

magical one. We also recall that snakes were greatly feared in the ancient Near East. For example, the Canaanite incantation for the healing of snakebites shows that magic and religion were in harmony with each other. De Tarragon points out similarities in the characters of both the Numbers narrative and the characters in the incantation. He says:

We may notice the same dialectic between the world of man (the charmer/Moses) and that of the gods (Shapshu/Horon/YHWH) where these last allow or facilitate the prevention or healing, but without intervening with a miracle. This type of therapeutic magic remains in harmony with the ambient religion; the two are not in conflict.¹²⁹

Moses, therefore represents the human who implores the gods for help, and Yahweh is the deity who instructs him.

The magical power of the Copper Serpent is made even stronger when the Egyptian evidence is examined. According to Isaiah 14:29, the *seraph* is a winged serpent.¹³⁰ The Egyptians believed that the Uraeus on Pharaoh's crown, also a winged serpent, had certain magical powers that instilled fear into his enemies.¹³¹ The Egyptians also believed in the power of sympathetic magic and often mounted images of the threatening animal on standards.¹³² These poles appear to be strikingly similar to the pole in Numbers 21:9.

¹²⁹ de Tarragon, p. 2077.

¹³⁰ Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 459

¹³¹ Currid, p. 89

¹³² *Ibid.* p. 151.

Even though Milgrom may agree with Kaufmann on the non-magical nature of the serpent, he also points out all the magical symbolism related to the winged serpent in Egypt. Milgrom points out that a winged serpent in a bronze bowl was found in an excavation of the royal palace at Nineveh dating to end of eighth century.¹³³ Furthermore, the word play in Hebrew of *nehash nehoshet* (copper serpent) in verse 9, might have strengthened its homeopathic powers.¹³⁴

The biblical authors must have been well aware of many of the aforementioned Near Eastern parallels. It is possible that the serpent incident was included in the text as a polemic against Egypt. Thus Yahweh reasserts his magical power over the Egyptians. On the other hand, the narrative could have simply added to the literary flavor of the text. By using a common Egyptian motif, the author wants to assure the reader of the tradition that the Israelites had come from of Egypt.

The Copper Snake appears again in II Kings 18:4 as one of the objects destroyed during King Hezekiah's reforms. While the Serpent was in the Temple, the people had begun to make offerings to it and calling it, Nehushtan. Because his practice was not sanctioned by the official cult, the priesthood believed it to be a dangerous practice. They believed that it could have caused the Israelites to cross boundaries in their religious practice. Crossing boundaries, as we have said before, could potentially lead to the defilement of the sanctuary and subsequent

¹³³ Milgrom, Numbers, p. 174.

danger to Yahweh. Thus the popular worship of the people was out of control and had to be stopped before the sanctuary could be defiled.

The "Witch" of En-Dor: I Samuel 28:8-14

8) Saul disguised himself; he put on different clothes and set out with two men. They came to the woman by night, and he said, "Please divine for me a ghost. Bring up for me the one I shall name to you." 9) But the woman answered him, "You know what Saul has done, how he has banned (the use of) ghosts and familiar spirits in the land. So why are you laying a trap for me, to get me killed?" 10) Saul swore to her by the Lord: "As the Lord lives you won't get into trouble over this." 11) At that, the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He answered, "Bring up Samuel for me." 12) Then the woman recognized Samuel, and she shrieked loudly, and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" 13) The king answered her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" And the woman said to Saul, "I see a divine being coming up from the Earth." 14) "What does he look like?" he asked her. "It is an old man coming up and he is wrapped in a robe."¹³⁵

While the rituals of the Scapegoat, Copper Serpent, and Red Heifer were all accepted magical practices by the biblical authors, The "witch" of En-Dor incident in I Samuel gives us an idea of why the practice of necromancy was not acceptable to the biblical authors.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ The Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh, A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*, New York: JPS, 1985

In the list of prohibited practices in Deuteronomy 18:10-12, necromancy is one of the prohibited practices on the list and In verse 9, the woman also notes that necromancy is illegal. Why were certain divinatory rites acceptable to the official Israelite cultic authors while others are not?

Richard Henshaw states that necromancy, as a method of divination, was a practice that one finds in all "primitive" religions and just below the surface of modern ones.¹³⁶ We have already noted the necromantic tradition for divination among the Mesopotamians in chapter one. Henshaw also points out that in Isaiah 19:3, the Egyptians seek the 'obot.¹³⁷

It is important to remember that the woman in I Samuel 28 is a *baalat ob*, a necromancer, not a witch. This is a significant distinction because the term, "witch" is weighted with negative implications. The biblical author does not suggest that necromancy does not work even though it was illegal. The writer of this passage wants us to believe that, Saul, after exhausting all other methods of divination, Saul did not receive any answer. He chose to go to the necromancer, because he knew that it would work.

Again, as in the case of the Red Heifer, the idea of boundaries is very important to the biblical author. In Mesopotamian necromantic

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Richard Henshaw, *Female and Male: The Cultic Personnel*, (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1994), p. 174.

rites, various deities are called upon to insure the appearance of the ghosts.¹³⁸ Brian Schmidt notes the similarities between both the ritual in I Samuel and the Mesopotamian traditions. In I Samuel 28:13, the woman says that she sees, *elohim*. It seems improbable that the woman is referring to Samuel as a god, because according to the Biblical author, there is only one *elohim*, and that is Yahweh. Schmidt comes to the conclusion that, as in the Mesopotamian tradition, the necromancer called upon God or gods, to aid in seeing the ghost of Samuel.

Necromancy is therefore illegal because it is the quintessence of liminality.¹³⁹ It confuses the boundaries of three worlds: the world of the gods, the world of the dead and the world of the living.¹⁴⁰ We recall again that the Israelites believed that the confusion of these worlds caused strange supernatural forces to unleash themselves against the community and ultimately to Yahweh.

The practice of necromancy threatened the priestly institution because those who practiced it were beyond their scope of control. Because it could not be controlled, the priests believed that it could pose a threat to Yahweh. If they could not control it, they attempted to make it illegal.

¹³⁸ Brian B. Schmidt, "The 'Witch' of En-Dor, I Samuel 28, and Ancient Near Eastern Necromancy", *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, p. 125

¹³⁹ Schmidt, p. 128.

Chapter IV

Concluding Thoughts

Yehezkel Kaufmann and Jacob Milgrom have claimed that the Israelite religion had abandoned paganism after the introduction of Yahwism. They conclude that any vestige of pagan practice was retained in form alone. These rituals were not only dedicated to Yahweh but only Yahweh could imbue the rituals with working power. They therefore conclude that what the ancient Israelites practiced was not magic but pure Yahwism.

I have attempted to demonstrate that in the cases of the Scapegoat, Red Heifer, the Copper Serpent and the Necromancer of Endor, the Israelites actually believed in their intrinsic magical powers. They also believed in the existence of demons and other supernatural forces that functioned independently of Yahweh and caused impurity. These demonic forces needed to be expiated. In this way, the Israelite beliefs were similar their pagan neighbors'.

While the Israelite people shared these beliefs in common with the other people's of the ancient Near East, the Yahwistic priestly cult adopted some magical practices and rejected others. One of the criteria for the rejection of certain pagan magical practices appears to be whether they cross certain boundaries. Crossing boundaries in the Israelite cult

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

could cause contamination and endanger the deity. Other criteria appear to be based on politics. How much control the priests themselves had over the rite often determined whether the rite was accepted as part of the cult.

The magical rituals of the Scapegoat and the Red Heifer were accepted primarily because they were controlled completely by the priests. The priests could therefore ensure that no boundaries were crossed during the ritual and thus ensure God's safety.

In the case of the Necromancer at En-Dor, the biblical author does not accept necromancy as a legal practice because it involved the crossing multiple boundaries and confusion between the world of the divine, the world of the dead and the world of the living. The practice was also illegal because it took place beyond the realm of the Temple and therefore could not be controlled by the priestly caste.

The case of the Copper Serpent, however, is different. In the book of Numbers, the serpent is accepted by the Yahwist cult as an effective magical ritual. By Hezekiah's time, however, the Copper Snake was being worshipped in a manner beyond the priestly cult in a manner that crossed boundaries and was therefore declared illegal.

It is important for us to realize that the Israelites did not live in a vacuum among their pagan neighbors. The cultures of the ancient Near East constantly exchanged ideas and beliefs with one another. Once we

rethink the nature of magic in the ancient world, we will be more able to understand the complexity and diversity of ancient Israelite religion.

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