

Semen Impurity in Ancient Judaism: A Jungian Approach

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A Thesis in the Field of Religion

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

June 2000

Dedicated to Patricia Berry,
in gratitude for her encouragement.

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Abstract

This study investigates the plausibility of three current theories of semen impurity in ancient Judaism and asks whether an equally good theory can be developed using a Jungian psychological approach. Purity beliefs in ancient societies specify dangerous or anomalous substances or activities that require ritual purification. The ancient Hebrews considered semen to be impure, even when it was discharged in licit, marital sex. Semen impurity has been explained as a symbol of Hebrew anxiety over their vulnerable political boundaries, as the result of monotheism's conflicting demands concerning the body, and as a recognition of the sacred, but dangerous, power of a life-fluid. For my own theory, I used a Jungian model of Judaism that posited Yahweh as the archetype of the mental ego. According to this model, Hebrew culture developed the mental ego through differentiation of the logos masculine and the (recessive) logos feminine. But ego-building also required suppression of the chthonic feminine and (recessive) chthonic masculine, modalities of consciousness that could dissolve the developing ego. This suggested to me that semen might symbolize the dangerous energies of the chthonic masculine. I evaluated these theories by checking their internal consistency, their consistency with other Hebrew beliefs and with Biblical language concerning the body, and their consistency with ancient psychology. Although no theory is perfect, the proposed Jungian interpretation works as well or better than the others, and it could accommodate some symbols and ideas used by other theorists. Jungian psychology has proved itself a useful tool in the study of purity beliefs.

Chapter I

Introduction

Purity and impurity are common concepts among the world's religions. Mere hygiene cannot explain religious pollution, since it is not always contracted like a disease, and since purification rites may or may not involve washing. Religious pollution can arise from bodily functions, social contacts, or violations of sacred space. All kinds of activities and substances can be polluting; and while sometimes pollution is the result of deliberate misbehavior, at other times it is unavoidable. The consequences of impurity range from serious to light. Purity systems vary so widely that deciphering the symbolism of purity beliefs can be challenging.¹

Ancient Judaism recognized states of impurity that disqualified the impure person or object from contact with the temple or its cult. Impurity was not a sin--many types were unavoidable--but the pursuit of purity was a religious ideal. Sources of impurity included human corpses, certain animal corpses, "leprosy" (a skin disease or mold on clothes or buildings), childbirth, and discharges from human genitals. Impurity was communicated in a variety of ways such as physical contact or being under the same roof. Purification rituals usually stipulated a waiting period and bathing.² Purity was of primary importance to the priests, who, if in a state of impurity, could neither touch holy

¹ James J. Preston, "Purification," The Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 12 (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

² "Purity and Impurity." Encyclopaedia Judaica, ed. Cecil Roth, vol.13 (Jerusalem: Encyclopaedia Judaica; New York: Macmillan, 1972).

objects nor eat the consecrated food that was their due.³ Since semen was among the sources of impurity, even a licit sexual encounter between husband and wife rendered them impure.⁴

Although semen impurity lasted only a day—menstruation, in contrast, required seven days for the impurity to lift—it still must have been enormously inconvenient. In wartime the army camp had to be kept holy, like the temple.⁵ A soldier who had a seminal emission had to leave the camp, wash himself, and not return until sundown.⁶ Special precautions were taken to protect the High Priest from semen impurity before the Day of Atonement, so that he would be able to perform the rites: he was separated from his wife a week ahead of time, he was not allowed to sleep the night before, and he did not eat certain foods that were thought to be aphrodisiacs.⁷ It is tempting to suspect that convenience motivated the Priestly writer to fix a relatively short term for semen impurity. Most impurities require at least seven days wait; if this had been the case for semen impurity, most adult males would have been almost perpetually impure. However, the Mishnah states that while dried menstrual blood can still convey impurity, dried semen cannot.⁸ That suggests that semen really was less “dangerous.” The Talmud adds

³ Lev. 22:3-6.

⁴ Lev. 15:18.

⁵ Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966; New York: Routledge, 1994) 52.

⁶ Deut. 23:10-11.

⁷ Julius Preuss, Biblical and Talmudic Medicine, trans. and ed. Fred Rosner (New York: Sanhedrin, 1978) 112-113.

⁸ M. Niddah 7.1.

that the semen of gentiles is also impure; thus, something in the essence of semen suggested defilement.⁹

Any study of ritual purity should start with Mary Douglas's thesis: "Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained."¹⁰ In other words, dirt is "matter out of place."¹¹ Ritual purity beliefs make order out of the chaotic environment by projecting cultural ideas onto suitable objects. But no such system can embrace all of creation. There will always be "in-between" things, anomalous or ambiguous things, as well as points of tension where cultural impulses conflict with each other. These are the places where concepts of impurities occur. Impurity represents that portion of reality unarticulated in the particular religion's worldview; it is the chaotic material between social categories. So the key to understanding a religion's concepts of impurity is the discovery of its social categories.¹² Each primitive or ancient culture has its particular set of powers and dangers:

Each Primitive culture is a universe to itself...Everything that can happen to a man in the way of disaster should be catalogued according to the active principles involved in the universe of his particular culture...We cannot start to compare primitive religions until we know the range of powers and dangers they recognise. Primitive society is an energised structure in the centre of its universe. Powers shoot out from its strong points, powers to prosper and dangerous powers to retaliate against attack. But the society does not exist in a neutral, uncharged vacuum. It is subject to external pressures; that which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it. . . . For I believe that ideas about separating,

⁹ T. Abodah Zarah 36b-37a.

¹⁰ Douglas 41.

¹¹ Douglas 36.

¹² James J. Preston, "Purification," The Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 13 (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 92.

purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience.¹³

Chaos is a threat to order, but also provides the material from which patterns are made; thus it represents a potent power and danger.¹⁴ In primitive societies with well-defined social structures, it is possible to recognize as dangerous the symbolic breaking of appropriate patterns. Pollution dangers point to chaos in the structure of ideas.¹⁵

Hebrew purity rules' stated motive is holiness. As Yahweh says in the words of the Revised Standard Version: "For I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy...For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."¹⁶ So how is semen unholy? Why, in a patriarchal culture, should semen suggest chaos instead of the ruling principle? Why should a Hebrew couple be rendered impure while fulfilling Yahweh's command to "Be fruitful and multiply"?¹⁷ A few modern scholars have tried to answer this question.

The Group-Boundary Theory

Mary Douglas explicates semen impurity in terms of anxiety over group boundaries. She believes that the body can symbolize society or a segment of society in purity systems:

¹³ Douglas 4.

¹⁴ Douglas 95.

¹⁵ Douglas 114.

¹⁶ Lev. 11:44-45.

¹⁷ Gen. 1:28.

Here I am suggesting that when rituals express anxiety about the body's orifices the sociological counterpart of this anxiety is a care to protect the political and cultural unity of a minority group. The Israelites were always in their history a hard-pressed minority. In their beliefs all the bodily issues were polluting, the idea of holiness was given an external, physical expression in the wholeness of the body seen as a perfect container.¹⁸

Douglas uses the Old Testament conception of holiness to illustrate the idea of impurity as anomaly. Since holiness is the reason for the purity laws, "holiness" is the opposite of "impure." Douglas finds that "holiness" includes the idea of separateness, completeness, order, and conforming to the proper category.¹⁹ A priest's body had to conform to an ideal of wholeness; he could not make offerings in the Temple if he were blind, lame, mutilated, or hunchbacked, for instance.²⁰ Douglas believes that bodily emissions violate the idea of wholeness.

When Douglas says that all bodily discharges were impure to the Hebrews, she is going beyond the Priestly writings, in which only genital discharges defile. But there are indications that other bodily discharges conflicted with proper worship of Yahweh.

Yahweh ruled that there be no excrement in the Hebrews' army camp:

You shall have a place outside the camp and you shall go out to it; and you shall have a stick with your weapons; and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it, and turn back and cover up your excrement. Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to save you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, that he may not see anything indecent among you, and turn away from you.²¹

¹⁸ Douglas 52-53.

¹⁹ Douglas 51-58.

²⁰ Lev. 21:17-21.

²¹ Deut. 23:12-14.

Yahweh also ruled that priests performing rituals should not wear clothes that made them sweat.²² There are rabbinical discussions of excrement, urine, pus, and other secretions. Some rabbis believed, for instance, that a man should not pray within four cubits of excrement or urine.²³ So there are reasons to treat these excretions as impure, even though they are not specifically dealt with in the Priestly writings. However, the other scholars' explanations assume these discharges are not impure.

The Contradictions-of-Monotheism Theory

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, who finds Douglas's idea unsatisfying, offers an alternate explanation: the belief that human beings were created in the image of Yahweh produced a conflict over the body. He has two objections to Douglas's argument. First, he says Douglas does not explain why wholeness was defined in this particular way. Second, he says her argument does not account for the body being such a preoccupation of the Priestly community: why the body is prominent in the Priestly writings but not in other Israelite literature.²⁴ But he credits Douglas for the idea that impurity can arise at

²² Ezek. 44:18.

²³ T. Berakoth 22b.

²⁴ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book," People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990) 22.

points of cultural contradiction.²⁵ In this case he posits a conflict in the Priestly community between the importance of procreation (both to Yahweh and themselves) and the belief that human beings are created in the image of Yahweh. This conflict manifested itself in anxiety over the body and sexuality:

To oversimplify for a moment, God has “no-body,” neither others with whom to interact nor a body, or at least a fully conceptualized body, with which to do it. Thus the dual expectations of being like God and being obliged to reproduce pulled in opposite directions. There was no escape for the body.²⁶

Eilberg-Schwartz establishes that procreation was especially important to the Priestly community. In the Priestly version of creation, Yahweh creates man and woman at the same moment and immediately tells the couple to “Be fruitful and multiply.”²⁷ Eilberg-Schwartz believes it was important for the priests to show marriage and sex as part of Yahweh’s original intention. The Genesis 2 version, in which Eve is extracted from Adam, might suggest that sexuality was Yahweh’s afterthought and not part of the ideal, original plan.²⁸ Furthermore, the priesthood was inherited patrilineally, so that a priest’s claim to his status rested on his being directly descended from Levi or from one of his descendents. Like other groups that define themselves through a kinship idiom, the priests would be preoccupied with the human fertility that would assure the continuance of their line.²⁹

²⁵ Eilberg-Schwartz, “Problem” 18.

²⁶ Eilberg-Schwartz, “Problem” 22.

²⁷ Gen. 1:28-29.

²⁸ Eilberg-Schwartz, “Problem” 25-26.

²⁹ Eilberg-Schwartz, “Problem” 25.

It is not clear how ancient Jews understood what being created in Yahweh's image meant, but all interpretations, according to Eilberg-Schwartz, lead to a conflict with sexuality. The prohibition against making graven images of Yahweh prompted some interpreters to assume that humanity and Yahweh are alike in spiritual, invisible aspects only. In this case, embodiment and sexuality are alien to Yahweh, so that obeying Yahweh's command to procreate separates human beings from Yahweh.³⁰ If Yahweh has a human form, even an embodied human form, then there is the problem of figuring out how men and women are both created in Yahweh's image. Assuming Yahweh is male--Yahweh is most frequently described in masculine terms--his penis is unused, since he has no consort. Sex is still alien to Yahweh and alienates humanity from him.³¹

Eilberg-Schwartz suggests that the elaborate purity rules involving the body helped deflect attention from the conflict centered there. Otherwise, the desire to be nearer to Yahweh could have led to renunciation of the body in general or sex in particular. He calls this situation the "contradictions of monotheism."³²

Eilberg-Schwartz's argument treats purity rules for the genital discharges separately from the numerous other rules; in this he differs from Douglas, who attempts to unify all the rules under the concept of holiness. He does not believe that Judaism should be treated as a coherent system or series of systems. He believes this distorts reality by overemphasizing one aspect of the culture at the expense of others.³³ He also

³⁰ Eilberg-Schwartz, "Problem" 28-30.

³¹ Eilberg-Schwartz, "Problem" 32.

³² Eilberg-Schwartz, "Problem" 27.

³³ Eilberg-Schwartz, "Problem" 17.

differs from Douglas in that, for him, the body does not symbolize something else, like the body politic; the body itself is the problem.

The Life-Force Theory

Jacob Milgrom links the impurity of semen to the forces of death; that is, the loss of semen was a loss of life force. Menstrual blood and semen were associated with the creation of life, so their loss occasioned impurity. Other bodily discharges, such as urine and excrement, did not cause impurity, because their elimination was necessary for life.³⁴ Milgrom points out that rabbinic law goes beyond Leviticus in declaring blood from any part of the body defiling if a large enough quantity is lost. Thus it could be menstrual blood's connection with life rather than with sex that causes defilement: a person who loses these life fluids is nearer death, and thus something of a danger.³⁵ G. J. Wenham supports this theory and even goes so far to suggest that the life-death polarity is the ruling principle in the dietary laws. He believes the animals fit for eating were believed

³⁴ Jacob Milgrom, "The Impurity of Bodily Discharges: A Rationale," The Anchor Bible, v. 3, trans. Jacob Milgrom (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 767.

³⁵ Milgrom 767.

to be healthier, more full of life.³⁶

Jungian Concepts Applied to Purity Beliefs

Douglas's observations about purity beliefs can be rephrased using the Jungian concepts of the collective unconscious (or "objective psyche") and archetypes. In Jungian psychology the psyche includes the personal unconscious (repressed material from the individual's life), and the collective unconscious, the repository of the archetypes. Archetypes are inherited patterns of behavior related to instinct. Unknowable in their essence, archetypes can only be detected through their manifestations: behaviors (especially those associated with basic human experiences such as birth, marriage, and death), affects, and images. Archetypes express themselves metaphorically through god and goddess images and through mythology.³⁷ Jung called the archetypal image of the psyche's central organizing principle the "Self." The Self is similar to a god-image.³⁸ Symbols also partake of the archetypal, which accounts for their power and mystery.³⁹ Archetypes are at the core of "complexes," autonomous collections of feeling-toned images and ideas. Thus, the psyche is manifold. The ego is only one of many complexes.⁴⁰ Cultures favor certain archetypes; these should shape the culture's values, symbolism, and social categories. Archetypes not favored should be

³⁶ G. J. Wenham, "Why Does Sexual Intercourse Defile (Lev 15:18)?" *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95.3 (1983): 432-434.

³⁷ Andrew Samuels, Bani Shorter, and Fred Plaut. *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Psychology* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986) 26-27.

³⁸ Samuels 135.

³⁹ Samuels 26-27.

⁴⁰ Samuels 34.

behind impurity symbolism, since their energy has not been culturally articulated and suggests chaos. They are the stuff in between social categories, as Douglas describes it.

The Jungian theory of the symbol is particularly important. Jung believed that symbols point to things partly beyond rational understanding. Effective symbols cannot be consciously chosen or constructed; they have to arise spontaneously from the unconscious.⁴¹ Because they express things that cannot be described discursively, symbols evoke meaning on both cognitive and visceral levels.⁴² Symbols are psychic energy transformers. That is, they allow people to access archetypal energies which, in turn, can effect changes in consciousness.⁴³ Thus, as a culture changes over long periods of time, its symbols may lose their effectiveness. New symbols to match the new state of collective consciousness would then arise.⁴⁴

A Jungian Approach to Judaism

I have not discovered any Jungian works that deal with purity beliefs. However, Phyllis Boswell Moore's "No Other Gods": An Interpretation of the Biblical Myth for a Transbiblical Age provides a Jungian approach to Judaism that suggests a meaning for the purity laws. Moore uses Jungian ideas about the evolution of consciousness to argue that monotheism was essential for the development of the modern, western ego. Yahweh, according to Moore, provided the model for this modern sense of an immaterial, head-

⁴¹ Anthony Stevens, Ariadne's Clue: A Guide to the Symbols of Humankind (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999) 12.

⁴² Stevens 30.

⁴³ Stevens 81.

⁴⁴ Stevens 80.

based, transcendent-to-nature identity. There are three important ideas in her book. First, the biblical myth represents the second stage of a three-stage evolution of consciousness. Second, Yahweh mythology is analogous to ego psychology. Third, the archetypal masculine is the force behind modern ego development in the psyches of both men and women.

In Moore's theory the biblical myth represents the move from "prepersonal" to "personal mode consciousness." Myth does not just tell a story. These symbolic narratives are vital for mediating archetypal energies that can shape and change consciousness:

From the Jungian transpersonal point of view, myth guides the development of human consciousness and possesses an essential integrity which, in the long run, does not permit misrepresentation. Myth delineates and instills in human consciousness that which Jung called the a priori archetypal essentials of human existence, the primal energies (imaged in human consciousness as goddesses and gods) which motivate and guide evolution.⁴⁵

The biblical myth presents Yahweh as the creator of the world. He is actually the creator of egoic humanity.⁴⁶ Yahweh is not an image of the Self, the central organizing archetype, but the god driving one phase in the evolution of consciousness.

According to Moore's hypothesis, Yahweh (Ego) operates mythologically as ego operates psychologically:

Two structural characteristics of Ego/ego stand out. First of all, Ego/ego stands alone, in the archetypal heights and in the human milieu. Thus, the second characteristic of Ego/ego is that it is separate from the chthonic energies. It separates out from the realm of nature and from the chthonic energies of that realm. It moves in a different dimension of time and

⁴⁵ Moore 7.

⁴⁶ Moore 186.

space, a paradigm of history as opposed to nature. It is separate from the body, which retains the chthonic energies of the natural realm and maintains the biorhythms of the natural realm.⁴⁷

The structure of ego dictates the way ego-centered beings relate to each other: as an “I” to a “Thou.” “In such a relationship, each person (including the personal god) remains centered in ego. Relatedness is from an exclusive center to an exclusive center, not from a joining within the encompassing center of the Self.”⁴⁸ Even in connecting with others, a sense of separateness is maintained. The worship of Yahweh allowed the gradual development of a new kind of individuality: personal mode consciousness.

The qualities of rational discrimination needed for the formation of the mental ego are contained in the archetypal masculine. In Jungian psychology, feminine and masculine are archetypes or modalities of being. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford explain them:

. . . it needs to be continually restated that “feminine” and “masculine” are not things in themselves, not archetypal figures of an absolute differentiation with fixed and predetermined fields of application. They are terms in continual relationship, which take their meaning from each other: for example, containing and emerging, receptive and active, conserving and dynamic; the ground and its differentiation, the whole and the part. . . . The terms may perhaps best be understood as different modes of consciousness, or different ways of experiencing and expressing life at any moment, available to any human being of whatever gender.⁴⁹

A man’s unconscious femininity and a woman’s unconscious masculinity form

⁴⁷ Phyllis Boswell Moore, “No Other Gods”: An Interpretation of the Biblical Myth for a Transbiblical Age (Wilmette: Chiron, 1992) 31.

⁴⁸ Moore 31.

⁴⁹ Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image (New York: Viking Arkana, 1991) 672.

complexes called the anima and animus respectively.⁵⁰ In Moore's theory she recognizes two kinds of feminine and two kinds of masculine. Yahweh is a god of the word; he represents the logos masculine. Moore illustrates the concept by using the taichitu (the yin-yang symbol ☯). The yang side contains a germ of yin, in Yahweh's case the logos feminine, his wisdom, Sophia. Both of this pair are noncarnal. Sophia might be regarded as Yahweh's anima. The emerging ego represses the archetypal feminine with its associated chthonic masculine. "The outcome of this archetypal situation (in which we now exist) is the creation of a patriarchal society dominated by a masculine deity, with a secondary positioning of the feminine and a repressed contrasexuality residing in each sex."⁵¹

As the archetype of the ego, Yahweh is a phase in the evolution of consciousness. When Yahweh first appeared, humanity was dominated by the archetypal feminine. Consciousness was chthonic: imbedded in nature. In these cultures, which Moore calls "mythic membership cultures," individuality was not highly developed. Nature and culture were intertwined.⁵² Yahwistic energy slowly thrust human consciousness out from this matrix. The work of ego-building required turning away from other gods (archetypes), keeping the nascent ego safe from the chthonic energies. The myth of the eschaton refers to a time when ego consciousness will be strong enough to revive consciousness of the archetypal feminine.⁵³

⁵⁰ Elie G. Humbert, C.G. Jung: The Fundamentals of Theory and Practice, trans. Ronald G. Jalbert (Wilmette: Chiron, 1988) 55-56.

⁵¹ Moore 35.

⁵² Moore 32-33.

⁵³ Moore 183-187.

The story of Yahweh is one of conflict and repression. Yahweh suppresses the chthonic gods and goddesses and supplants their cyclic experience of time. “The god who calls himself Yahweh (the great ‘I AM’) draws human existence into linear time and into differentiated space, or into historical time/space.”⁵⁴ In the process nature is objectified and drained of its spirituality. The human personality that emerges from this process is one inherently in conflict.⁵⁵

Jung believed that Hebrew and Christian texts contain remnants of pagan consciousness that affect the newer culture unconsciously.⁵⁶ I will argue that, to the ancient Hebrews, semen represented the chthonic masculine (phallos), the seed of yang in yin. Both chthonic feminine and masculine had to be repressed for the logos masculine and feminine to emerge and endure. The purity beliefs unconsciously recognized the power and danger of the chthonic consciousness that could dissolve the developing ego.

⁵⁴ Moore 8.

⁵⁵ Moore 184.

⁵⁶ Wayne G. Rollins, “Psychology, Hermeneutics, and the Bible,” Jung and the Interpretation of the Bible, ed. David L. Miller (New York: Continuum, 1995) 27-28.

Chapter II

The Psychology of Pollution-Prone Peoples

Societies in which pollution beliefs flourish have a characteristic psychology. For this reason Mary Douglas warns against explaining pollution beliefs in terms of modern ideas about dirt. For us dirt is a matter of hygiene, aesthetics, or manners; but in primitive and ancient societies serious pollution is an offense of a cosmic order.¹ Moore, following Ken Wilbur, describes these societies' consciousness as prepersonal. The earliest humans would have had little or no sense of individuality; in Jungian terms, consciousness was dominated by the archetypal feminine. With the introduction of chthonic masculinity into human consciousness came a sense of bodily individuality.² To get a clearer idea of how this state of consciousness affected human beings' use of symbols, I will introduce several scholars' ideas about ancient psychology.

The work of Julian Jaynes provides an explicit, non-Jungian description of what human beings were like before they developed the mental ego. Jaynes believes that ancient human beings had a split nature: one part human and one part divine, neither of which was conscious in our modern sense. When ancient humans found themselves in unfamiliar situations, they had to wait for a "god" to tell them what to do.³ That is, the

¹ Douglas 74-75.

² Moore 81.

³ Julian Jaynes, The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind (Boston: Houghton, 1976) 84-85.

left side of the brain received instructions in the form of auditory hallucinations from the right side of the brain.⁴ Jaynes finds this state of mind illustrated in Homer:

Iliadic man did not have subjectivity as do we; he had no awareness of his awareness of the world, no internal mind-space to introspect upon. In distinction to our own subjective conscious minds, we can call the mentality of the Myceneans a *bicameral mind*. Volition, planning, initiative is organized with no consciousness whatever and then “told” to the individual in his familiar language, sometimes with the visual aura of a familiar friend or authority figure or “god,” or sometimes as a voice alone. The individual obeyed these hallucinated voices because he could not “see” what to do by himself.⁵

In order to be conscious, to have an ego, we need some abilities ancient peoples did not have. We have to be able to picture things spatially that, in reality, have no spatial dimension.⁶ In order to understand “history,” human beings had to learn to spatialize time.⁷ We need to be able to excerpt things from our sensory awareness and imagine them isolated in our minds.⁸ We need an analog “I,” an ego, that we can imagine doing things we are not actually doing.⁹ Whenever we are using our modern consciousness, we are narratizing; we are aware of ourselves doing things and are making a story out of it. We are picking out the important points of our story and giving the events a meaning.¹⁰ This list of modern mental abilities makes it easier to understand what Moore means

⁴ Jaynes 100-125.

⁵ Jaynes 75.

⁶ Jaynes 60.

⁷ Jaynes 251.

⁸ Jaynes 61.

⁹ Jaynes 62-63.

¹⁰ Jaynes 63-64.

when she describes ancient humans as “embedded in the forces of nature.”¹¹ The embeddedness results from the inability to detach self or idea from its environment at the moment.

The primitive universe is centered on human beings and human culture. Events are explained in the subjective terms of good and bad fortune. Human beings are closely linked with natural forces, which respond to individuals and their activities in a discerning way.¹² There are no clear boundaries between things and persons and between persons and their environment.¹³ The universe also responds to symbolic acts, as in sorcery.¹⁴

The Hebrew universe was certainly centered on them. One example of such human-nature links is Jonah’s admitting responsibility for a storm. Yahweh had directed Jonah to become his prophet, but Jonah tried to escape this responsibility by fleeing Yahweh in a ship. Yahweh raised a storm that did not abate until the sailors threw Jonah into the sea.¹⁵ Hebrew defilement knows the difference between a finished, useable utensil and one that is unfinished or broken; only the former is susceptible to impurity.¹⁶ Objects can become impure only when they are being used in the normal way. For instance, a menstruating woman who sits on a chair transmits impurity to the chair; but if she sits on a jar--or anything else not intended for sitting--she does not transmit

¹¹ Moore 107.

¹² Douglas 82.

¹³ Douglas 89.

¹⁴ Douglas 87.

¹⁵ Jon. 1:1-15.

¹⁶ Neusner 42-43.

impurity.¹⁷

Douglas also notes that the boundaries of self in primitive societies are not clearly defined. There are West African tribes in which the individual personality is manifold, the various parts acting as separate persons.¹⁸ They experience the structure of the psyche as Jung described it. The Dinka in the Sudan experience the self as a passive victim of emotions, which they portray as harmful spiritual beings.¹⁹ R. B. Onians points out that the ancient Greeks, as portrayed in Homer, felt that they could not help their own actions:

An idea, an emotion, an impulse came to him; he acted and presently rejoiced or lamented. Some god had inspired or blinded him. He prospered, then was poor, perhaps enslaved; he wasted away with disease, or died in battle. It was divinely ordained.²⁰

This description squares with Jayne's ideas about ancient psychology:

They could not narratize and had no analog selves to "see" themselves in relation to others. They were what we would call signal-bound, that is, responding each minute to cues in a stimulus-response manner, and controlled by those cues.²¹

In these cultures, the ego is not well established and is easily swayed by the other complexes.

¹⁷ Neusner 84.

¹⁸ Douglas 84.

¹⁹ Douglas 84-85.

²⁰ R. B. Onians, The Origins of European Thought About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1951) 303.

²¹ Jaynes 140.

The ancient Hebrew personality was a bit more unified, probably owing to the monotheistic orientation. Pedersen explains that the Hebrew idea of soul was different from our concept. A human being did not *have* a soul; he or she *was* a soul.²² The soul was “a totality with a peculiar stamp.” It included personal qualities such as appearance, voice, smell, as well as typical behaviors and all past deeds.²³ Soul and will were inseparable:

The soul is thus an entirety with a definite stamp, and this stamp is transmuted into a definite will. The Israelite has no independent term for will as we understand the word. He does not recognize the will as an independent feature or force of the soul. The soul is a totality; its sensations penetrate it entirely and determine its direction; the will is the whole of the tendency of the soul.²⁴

Thought was not abstract. Any clear, strong idea that arose in the soul acted immediately on the will. Action followed idea without reflection.²⁵ Memories also led directly to an impulse to act.²⁶ Modern people can reflect on and test feelings about an action before carrying it out. Good intentions can backfire. But for the ancient Hebrew, there is no distinction between intention and result:

For the Israelite--as for primitive peoples generally--the mental processes are not successive, but united in one. But no more are the action and its result to be distinguished from each other or from the mental activities; they are implied in the actual mental process. This is to be attributed to the fact that the soul is wholly present in all its works. The actions are not sent away from the soul, they are the outer manifestations of the whole of the soul, the traces of its movements; its “ways” the Hebrew calls them.²⁷

²² Johannes Pedersen, Israel, Its Life and Culture, vol.1, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 29 (Atlanta: Scholars P, 1991) 99.

²³ Pedersen 100-101.

²⁴ Pedersen 103.

²⁵ Pedersen 106

²⁶ Pedersen 107

²⁷ Pedersen 128.

Although the Hebrews were not plagued by various gods or spirits, they were still at the mercy of ideas, memories, and feelings.

In the primitive universe things are not completely separate from persons: natural forces, animals, and inanimate objects have human qualities. The universe is aware of and responds to social relationships and secret acts. For example, the medicine a Lele diviner dispenses “knows” if the diviner has sex with the patient’s wife, and in that case will kill instead of heal the patient.²⁸ The universe responds to symbolic acts and communication. For example, the pygmies of the Ituri forest sing to the forest to cheer it up when it is in a bad mood.²⁹ The universe can make moral judgements. For example, a member of the Plateau Tonga in Northern Rhodesia who commits certain unpunishable crimes will nonetheless suffer misfortune from a force called *Malweza*.

The ancient Hebrew, according to Pedersen, also lived in an ensouled universe in which everything was alive:

All is living which has its peculiarity and so also its faculties. A stone is not merely a lump of material substance. It is, like all living things, an organism with peculiar forces of a certain mysterious capacity, only known to him who is familiar with it. Thus, like all other beings of the earth, the stone has the quality of a soul, and so also can be made familiar with other psychical forces and filled with soul-substance. The earth is a living thing. It has its nature, with which man must make himself familiar when he wants to use it; he must respect its soul as it is, and not do violence to it while appropriating it.³⁰

The Hebrew’s soul was not completely separate from other souls. The senses did not merely provide information about the environment; the perceiver also partook of the

²⁸ Douglas 88.

²⁹ Douglas 87.

³⁰ Pedersen 155.

perceived. “The soul is wholly in everything belonging to it or emanating from it; therefore it must also be wholly in the impress which it leaves on another’s soul.”³¹

How, then, are modern ideas about dirt connected with primitive pollution beliefs? According to Mary Douglas, primitive peoples’ purity systems are more unified than ours:

We moderns operate in many different fields of symbolic action. For the Bushman, Dinka and many primitive cultures the field of symbolic action is one. The unity which they create by their separating and tidying is not just a little home, but a total universe in which all experience is ordered. Both we and the Bushmen justify our pollution avoidances by fear of danger. They believe that if a man sits on the female side his male virility will be weakened. We fear pathogenicity transmitted through micro-organisms. Often our justification of our own avoidances through hygiene is sheer fantasy. The difference between us is not that our behaviour is grounded on science and theirs on symbolism. Our behaviour also carries symbolic meaning. The real difference is that we do not bring forward from one context to the next the same set of ever more powerful symbols: our experience is fragmented. Our rituals create a lot of little sub-worlds, unrelated. Their rituals create one single, symbolically consistent universe.³²

In Jungian terms, primitive cultures are ruled by the archetypal feminine. The dominant experience is one of connection. Baring and Cashford describe how early myths of creator goddesses mirror this psychological situation:

In the goddess culture the conception and relation between creator and creation was expressed in the image of the Mother as zoe, the eternal source, giving birth to the son as bios, the created life in time which lives and dies back into the source. The son was the part that emerged from the

³¹ Pedersen 132.

³² Douglas 70.

whole, through which the whole might come to know itself.³³

As Baring and Cashford point out, the creator in this case is not transcendent to the created: the image of a mother giving birth implies that mother and son are of the same substance. The goddess does not *make* the universe; the universe *emerges* from her. Of course, in the Hebrew myth a god makes the universe. In such myths the substance of the creation may be different from and inferior to that of the creator.³⁴ However, the Hebrew myth represents what the ancient Hebrews were moving toward, not where they actually were. Monotheism was a difficult path, and there was much backsliding. Asherah, for instance, was a Canaanite goddess popular with the Hebrews and worshipped by them as Yahweh's consort. Her image, carved in wood, stood for centuries in Solomon's Temple.³⁵

Douglas's observations about their universal symbolic systems are not surprising, given their psychology. When a culture cannot make firm boundaries between persons, between persons and their environment, or between thought and action, it is difficult to imagine how they could maintain boundaries between different symbolic systems. Symbols must have had an intense effect on ancient humans, since they could not detach themselves from the emotions and ideas aroused by the symbolic object.

³³ Baring 274.

³⁴ Baring 274.

³⁵ Baring 454.

Chapter III

Strengths and Drawbacks of Semen-Impurity Theories

No explanation proposed for semen impurity satisfies everybody, and, because of the paucity of historical evidence, no explanation can be proved right. I believe the model I am proposing fits the known facts, and, if one accepts Jungian theory, ties up some loose ends left by other theories.

The Group-Boundary Theory

Mary Douglas makes a good case for her theory. I have already noted her contention that “holiness” and “impurity” are used as opposites in the Old Testament and that “holiness” includes the ideas of separateness, completeness, order, and conforming to the proper category. Eilberg-Schwartz complains that Douglas does not explain why wholeness should be defined as the intact body. This is a legitimate complaint, but Douglas’s idea is not farfetched. According to The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols, in Israelite literature the body has been used as a symbol for Yahweh, the Torah, and the world.¹ It is not too far from these to the body as a symbol of the body politic. And, as Douglas points out, matter issuing from the body is seen in many cultures as powerful or dangerous. Bodily discharges are marginal material:

¹ Ellen Frankel and Betsy Platkin Teutsch, The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1992) 23.

Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. . . . Each culture has its own special risks and problems. To which particular bodily margins its beliefs attribute power depends on what situation the body is mirroring. It seems that our deepest fears and desires take expression with a kind of witty aptness. To understand bodily pollution we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes and try to recognise what appositeness is there.²

Douglas also notes that cultures with food pollution beliefs are the ones that suffer pressures on their external boundaries.³ (Although Israelites were not rendered impure by eating forbidden animals, the dietary laws use the language of the purity laws.)

Eilberg-Schwartz questions whether Douglas's theory makes sense unless all bodily discharges defile.⁴ As I have pointed out, there are both biblical and rabbinical examples of Yahweh's discomfort with various bodily discharges. However, Eilberg-Schwartz believes that rabbinical concern over urine, tears, saliva, phlegm, mucus, etc. in the Mishnah is symbolically inconsistent with the Priestly writings. Rather, he claims that rabbinical writings reversed the symbolism of the Priestly system by introducing an emphasis on human intention and human control.⁵ He ascribes this change to a shift from the inherited status of the priesthood to status partly affected by achievement in the rabbinical community:

The social experiences linked to the forms of status determination can be particularly powerful in shaping the symbolism of impurity. When status

² Douglas 122-123.

³ Douglas 128.

⁴ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990) 179.

⁵ Eilberg-Schwartz, Savage 214.

depends primarily upon ascription, the idea of contamination takes a corresponding form in the religious system. Just as an ascribed status is something over which one has little or no say and which is experienced as imposed from the outside, impurity is something which is “out there,” an intrinsic property of objects. . . . If the body is a source of contamination, pollution associated with body functions that are largely uncontrollable, such as the discharge of bodily fluids from the genitals and the appearance of skin disease. Individuals are thus powerless to avoid impurity, and becoming contaminated is an inevitable consequence of living. In short, impurity has the same “objective” quality that status does. It is beyond a person’s power to control and therefore experienced as coming from outside. Furthermore, an individual’s actions or intentions will have virtually no impact on the functioning of the system.⁶

Eilberg-Schwartz compares the way status was assigned and purity law was interpreted in the Priestly, Qumran, early rabbinic, and Christian communities. Ascription defined the Priestly community; priests had to be born into a Priestly family, be male, and have no blemishes or physical defects.⁷ So, Eilberg-Schwartz concludes, priests treated impurity as an intrinsic property of things, as their own identity as priests had nothing to do with their own efforts. The only human act that matters in the purity law is sexual intercourse. Eilberg-Schwartz believes this is the exception that proves the rule, because this is the only act that determines genealogy and, thus, status.⁸ The Qumran community rewarded performance more than the priests. They allowed knowledge and adherence to rules to influence rank. Although priests retained their special privileges, a knowledgeable Levite could lead a group in study, prayer, or debate if the presiding priest did not have the necessary training.⁹ The Qumran community also added to the purity

⁶ Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage* 197.

⁷ Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage* 199-200.

⁸ Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage* 203-204.

⁹ Eilberg-Schwartz, *Savage* 206-207.

laws. Evil acts could defile. Bathing would not purify without a submissive attitude.¹⁰ Human acts made more of a difference as regards status and purity. The early rabbis went beyond the Qumran community in lessening the importance of birth. Unlike the previous two groups, the rabbis welcomed converts. The status of a sage depended more on his knowledge than on his pedigree. In some cases, a student's obligations to his teacher were heavier than those to his father.¹¹ Eilberg-Schwartz believes that rabbinical rulings stressed human intention and control as a subtle rebellion against the Priestly mindset. As an example he cites the rabbinical discussion of the definition of "food," something not made clear in the Bible. (Since "food" is susceptible to defilement, it is important to define it.) The rabbis were not satisfied with the inherent edibility of a substance; the intention to eat something or the custom of eating something decided its status as food.¹² The Christians went the furthest in rejecting ascription and embracing achievement. Paul denied descent any importance in the Christian "family." Faith in Christ was the only membership requirement. Ideally Christians' ties to one another would supersede actual family ties.¹³ Paul also rejected impurity as an intrinsic property of certain things. Only a person's actions or conscience can cause impurity.¹⁴

This theory has problems. For instance, in the example of the definition of food, Eilberg-Schwartz is claiming that the rabbi's stress on human intention flouted Priestly philosophy. But we do not know for sure what the priests meant by "food." They may

¹⁰ Eilberg-Schwartz, Savage 211.

¹¹ Eilberg-Schwartz, Savage 209-210.

¹² Eilberg-Schwartz, Savage 212.

¹³ Eilberg-Schwartz, Savage 200.

¹⁴ Eilberg-Schwartz, Savage 204-205.

have been thinking along the same line as the rabbis. It is impossible to know to what extent the rabbis modified or maintained the symbolism of the Priestly writings. Another problem is that Eilberg-Schwartz's model does not work cross culturally. For instance, the Hindu person's status is determined by the caste he or she is born into, yet saliva, a relatively controllable bodily discharge, is polluting to the Hindus.¹⁵ In contrast, Lele society is very competitive. A man attains status by acquiring wives and sons-in-law. A man must be attentive to his wives and their mothers to keep the wives from straying. The men have only limited control over the women who, though treated like a kind of currency, are able to exploit the men's competitiveness for their own ends. Status is "earned" in this society, yet menstrual blood, a completely uncontrollable bodily discharge, pollutes. A menstruating woman cannot cook for her husband without endangering his health and cannot enter the forest without sabotaging any work or hunting the tribe might undertake there.¹⁶ Douglas does explain the purity system of the Yurok Indians in terms of status assignment. The Yurok are careful not to mix incompatible liquids: they will not mix good with bad water, mix sea with fresh water, or urinate into rivers. Douglas sees this as mirroring the fluid nature of their highly competitive society. This does not square with Eilberg-Schwartz's model. Controlled status does not lead to pollution from controlled fluids; instead, anxiety over changeable

¹⁵ Douglas 124.

¹⁶ Douglas 150-153

status prompts scrupulous care of liquids, controllable and otherwise.¹⁷ Still, his model could be relevant, if applied only to Judaism, and Douglas's theory does not explain why genital discharges are particularly important.

The different purity beliefs in the Jewish and Christian groups can also be explained by the evolution of consciousness. In Moore's theory Christ represents a fully mature and stable ego in human consciousness.¹⁸ As discussed in Chapter II, pollution prone cultures do not have this modern sense of self. When the mental ego becomes the usual form of identity in a group, pollution beliefs are going to be much less important. Jaynes also believes that Christ's attempt to reform Judaism represented the need for a

¹⁷ Douglas 128-129

¹⁸ Moore 52.

new kind of religion for the newly-conscious human being.¹⁹ What Eilberg-Schwartz calls Christian purity beliefs are really more a rejection of primitive purity concepts.

The Contradictions-of-Monotheism Theory

I find Eilberg-Schwartz's ideas to be fruitful and compelling, but not entirely convincing. Eilberg-Schwartz says the Israelites were trapped by the "contradictions of monotheism." But again consider Hinduism. The Hindus are encouraged to make graven images of their gods, in whose image they are not created since some of these gods have many arms or blue skin. All the gods and goddesses have consorts. Hindus suffer none of the "contradictions" Eilberg-Schwartz blames for semen impurity. Yet the Hindus have a complex set of purity rules in which the body is central and a longstanding admiration for asceticism. The admiration for renunciates was so great that the idea of the Four Stages of Life arose to counter asceticism's bad effects on human fertility. Renunciation was supposed to be appropriate only for the last stage of life after one had raised a family.²⁰ This comparison does not disprove Eilberg-Schwartz's argument, but it does suggest that there are many reasons for a culture to be conflicted over the body.

The most serious problem I have with Eilberg-Schwartz is his treatment of Judaism as a collection of unconnected symbolic systems: "Culture is an order constructed out of many symbolic domains that play off and struggle against one another."²¹ This is true for modern cultures. But, as discussed in Chapter II, primitive

¹⁹ Jaynes 318

²⁰ Charles Hallisey, Introduction to Hinduism, Harvard Extension School, Cambridge, MA, fall 1993.

²¹ Eilberg-Schwartz, Savage 186.

cultures have a more unified experience and a symbolically consistent universe. I concede that even primitive cultures are not completely homogenous. Different groups within a culture process the dominant archetypes differently. Mystical groups take up rejected elements. Cultures constantly evolve. Also, it is valid to approach a symbol from many angles, since they are not merely allegorical but represent psychological situations that can only be apprehended metaphorically. Symbols are inexhaustible.²² However, the fact that the Hebrews particularly focussed on Yahweh should make for more symbolic unity. Douglas makes a relevant point in her discussion of theories that credit foreign influence for Israelite purity beliefs. She complains that scholars use the argument inconsistently. In some cases the Israelites are supposed to have absorbed influences and in other cases reacted against influences. There must have been principles of selection:

Of course no culture is created out of nothing. The Israelites absorbed freely from their neighbors, but not quite freely. Some elements of foreign culture were incompatible with the principles of patterning on which they

²² Samuels 144-146.

were constructing their universe; others were compatible.²³

In the interpretation I am proposing the body is both a symbol (of pagan deities) and a center of conflict itself. Douglas's idea of impurity as chaotic material between social categories fits in with my idea of genital discharges representing destabilizing chthonic energies. Yahweh as archetypal ego is pushing toward a disembodied identity. Ideally the ego should rule over the body as Yahweh rules over creation. Both men and women are created in Yahweh's image in the sense that Yahwistic energy creates the mental ego. Yahweh is cut off from the carnal and so is his hidden consort Sophia: "nothing defiled gains entrance into her."²⁴ But the body and the old deities still make their claims. This causes the conflict and creates the need for purity rituals.

The Life-Force Theory

The life-force theory of semen impurity has many problems. Eilberg-Schwartz points out two: that a nonseminal discharge is more polluting than a seminal one, even though the nonseminal discharge is not associated with a loss of life force; and skin disease is polluting only if there is "living" flesh.²⁵ I would add that if association with death is the ruling metaphor, it is not clear why all diseases are not polluting. According to this theory, pollution occurs because loss of semen means loss of life force for the man. Yet the Mishnah states that semen that leaks out of a woman within three days of

²³ Douglas 50.

²⁴ Wisd. Sol. 7:25.

²⁵ Eilberg-Schwartz, Savage 186.

intercourse also pollutes.²⁶ Surely the woman is not losing life force. Pollution occurs because the semen is outside of the body. Inside either a man's or woman's body, semen is clean. The validity of Milgrom's theory depends on genital discharges being the only polluting bodily fluids. As I pointed out in Chapter I, while other bodily discharges are not officially labeled polluting, many are offensive to Yahweh or interfere with proper worship. Most of the material dealing with non-genital discharges is in the rabbinical literature, but Milgrom cannot have meant to limit his interpretation to the Priestly writings, since he used a rabbinical ruling on large amounts of blood from wounds to support his theory. Some rabbinical writings seem to support the life-force theory, others seem to contradict it. Julius Preuss found some material claiming excessive sex could weaken or kill a man²⁷; this would seem to support Milgrom. On the other hand, there is no indication that a man can lengthen his life through abstaining from sex and, thus, retaining his semen. Preuss notes that one account of King Hezekiah's life claims that the prophet Isaiah warned him that he would die if he did not fulfill his duty to have children.²⁸ Also, semen itself can pollute cloth or leather without any contact with the man who loses it.²⁹ If semen pollution results from a man's losing some of his holy life-fluid, why does this same fluid by itself defile objects?

Actually, the holy can be dangerous. Yahweh says "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live."³⁰ The Ark of the Covenant, which contained the tablets

²⁶ M. Shabbath 9.3.

²⁷ Preuss 460-461.

²⁸ Preuss 459.

²⁹ Lev. 15:17.

³⁰ Exod. 33:20.

Moses received from Yahweh, was so holy that touching it could be fatal. Uzzah was killed when he touched the Ark, even though he acted from the innocent desire to prevent its tipping over.³¹ Too close contact with an archetype can shatter the personality unless religious symbols and rituals are used to contain and organize the individual's experience.³² As Anthony Stevens explains:

To open oneself to the sacred is to mobilize the powerful energy of the objective psyche and to throw oneself on its mercy. As a result, the sacred is something that human beings have always approached in fear and trembling, surrounding it with taboos and prohibitions, and occasionally treating it with humour.³³

The life-force theory could be the basis of an alternative Jungian interpretation in which semen represents Yahweh's dangerous power.

Could semen represent Yahweh's power instead of the chthonic masculine, as I have posited? Could semen's connection with logos have made it less polluting than menstrual blood? Joseph Cambray's study of ancient attitudes toward semen offers some insight:

In pre-scientific cultures the physiology of the testicles is relatively unknown. However, once a culture attains any awareness of the role of the father in procreation, semen tends to become a highly valued substance. It is usually analogized with the seeds of vegetation. As semen takes on a central role in the theories of conception, cultural notions of masculinity are projected onto it. Historically, along with increased valuing of semen there has been a tendency to displace the origin of the "precious" fluid away from the testicles and towards the head.³⁴

³¹ 2 Sam. 6:1-8.

³² Ann Ulanov, "Jung and Religion: The Opposing Self," The Cambridge Companion to Jung eds. Polly Young-Eisendrath and Terence Dawson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 301.

³³ Stevens 63.

³⁴ Joseph Cambray, "Fear of Semen," Spring 51 (1991): 39.

Semen originating in the head travels down the spinal cord to the genitals. This physiological belief takes shape in the Greek herm, a boundary marker, depicting the head, testicles, and erect penis of the god Hermes.³⁵ Semen progressively gained spirit and lost materiality. Aristotle believed that semen was mostly water and pneuma, a cosmic vital principle. In his model of human reproduction, semen provided the dynamism, while the female provided the matrix.³⁶ In some cultures the loss of semen meant a depletion of vital spirit. Contact with women weakened men.³⁷ Was this belief at work in Hebrew semen impurity? Ancient Hebrews believed the head was the major source of semen, but they did not completely discount the role of the testes.³⁸ We need to look at Hebrew beliefs about the head and genitals.

Nowadays the head is associated with rationality, but the Hebrew associations were different. Like other ancient peoples, the Hebrews located both thinking and feeling in the heart instead of the head. Sometimes the conscience was located in the head as in the expression, “blood will be on your head”: “And David said to him, ‘Your blood be upon your head; for your own mouth has testified against you. . . .’”³⁹ Leaders were called “heads.”⁴⁰ But the most spiritual association was with ruah, “breath” or “wind.” Ruah had a number of meanings; most often it meant either Yahweh’s mighty wind or the

³⁵ Cambray 40.

³⁶ Cambray 44-45.

³⁷ Cambray 41.

³⁸ Cambray 41.

³⁹ 2 Sam. 1:16.

⁴⁰ Frankel 74.

vital principle he breathed into human beings.⁴¹ “And God made a wind [r.] blow over the earth, and the waters subsided. . . .”⁴² “And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath [r.] in you, and you shall live. . . .”⁴³ When ruah refers to human breath it is often inseparable from divine ruah.⁴⁴ “When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; when thou takest away their breath [r.], they die and return to their dust.”⁴⁵ Yahweh’s ruah can be a gift to humans of powers that may translate into wisdom, strength, or the ability to prophecy.⁴⁶ When Pharaoh needed a man with managerial abilities, he asked, “Can we find such a man as this, in whom is the Spirit [r.] of God?”⁴⁷ Yahweh’s ruah strengthened Samson: “and the Spirit [r.] of the LORD came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion asunder as one tears a kid . . .”⁴⁸ Yahweh’s ruah allowed Ezekiel to prophecy: “And the Spirit [r.] of the LORD fell upon me, and he said to me, ‘Say, Thus says the LORD . . .’”⁴⁹ Ruah also refers to invisible spirits under Yahweh’s control.⁵⁰ Yahweh used such a spirit to pass a false rumor to the king of Assyria: “Behold, I will put a spirit [r.] in him, so that he shall hear a

⁴¹ Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Mifflintown: Sigler, 1996) 32-33.

⁴² Gen. 8:1.

⁴³ Ezek. 37:6.

⁴⁴ Wolff 34.

⁴⁵ Ps. 104:29.

⁴⁶ Wolff 35.

⁴⁷ Gen. 41:38.

⁴⁸ Judg. 14:6.

⁴⁹ Ezek. 11:5.

⁵⁰ Wolff 36.

rumor and return to his own land . . .”⁵¹ Onians points out that dreams (which were used to prophecy and were therefore of divine origin) were often called “visions of the head” in the Bible (in Daniel 2:30 for instance).⁵² Hair sometimes had holy associations, as when somebody consecrated him or herself to Yahweh by taking the vows of a Nazirite. The Nazirite vowed not to cut his or her hair.⁵³ Onians believes it was the holy life substance in the head that made the hair numinous and gave the most famous Nazirite, Samson, his strength.⁵⁴

While Yahweh was closely associated with the head, he had a conflicted relationship with the genitals. When the penis with testicles is used as a symbol of generative power, it is called a “phallus.” Phallic worship was common in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. The golden calf worshipped by the straying Israelites while Moses was on Mount Sinai was a phallic god.⁵⁵ These phallic, chthonic gods were Yahweh’s bitter enemies. Thorkil Vanggaard contrasts Greek and Hebrew attitudes toward exposure of the genitals. Sometimes it was undignified for a Greek to appear naked; this is why Odysseus, when caught naked on the shores of Phaeacia, covered himself with a leafy branch. But even in this case, the word used for “genitals” was medea, which had no shameful associations. But the corresponding Hebrew word erva connoted “shameful, hideous flesh, flesh which has to be covered.”⁵⁶ Another Hebrew

⁵¹ 2 Kings 19:7.

⁵² Onians 103.

⁵³ Num. 6:2-5.

⁵⁴ Onians 234-235.

⁵⁵ Thorkil Vanggaard, Phallos: A Symbol and its History in the Male World, trans. Thorkil Vanggaard (New York: Intl UP, 1972) 135.

⁵⁶ Vanggaard 135-136.

word sometimes used for “penis” is basar. Basar is more often used for “flesh” and is applied to human beings and animals but never to Yahweh.⁵⁷ So, even though basar is not inherently shameful, like erva, it is something alien to Yahweh. Yahweh expressed a horror of indecent exposure at two points in Exodus. At Exodus 20:26 he gave instructions for building an altar. No steps may lead up to the altar, for the priests who, at this point, only wore a loincloth for the sacrifice⁵⁸ might accidentally expose their genitals. Then at Exodus 28:42 Yahweh stipulated that priests performing their services must cover their private parts with linen breeches. Still, there are some indications that the Israelites may have regarded male genitals as numinous. As Cambray pointed out, when semen takes on such divine qualities that ejaculation equals depletion, a fear of the feminine results. Hebrew men must have feared female power over their genitals; the Bible ruled that the woman who touched a man’s genitals, even if she were protecting him from an enemy, must have her hand cut off.⁵⁹ And, of course, there was circumcision: the sign of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel.⁶⁰

In the ancient Hebrew mind, whatever divine qualities semen acquired in the head may have been compromised in the descent to the genitals. Unlike many cultures that came to value semen highly, the Hebrews were not phallus-worshippers. The Hebrews did not try to retain semen in order to have a mystical experience or to lengthen their lives. In fact, semen impurity eventually disappeared, though menstrual impurity did not. I think that, like the Greek herm, the head and male genitals were a kind of boundary

⁵⁷ Wolff 26-27.

⁵⁸ Henry Wainsbrough, ed. , The New Jerusalem Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985) 1071.

⁵⁹ Deut. 25:11-12.

⁶⁰ Gen. 17:10-14.

marker. The Hebrews were in the process of creating a boundary between body and mind. Originally they were a part of the phallus-worshipping cultures they eventually separated from. This cannot have been a smooth transition. Yahweh needed to usurp the functions of the other gods without becoming like them. Even if the head produced divine, immaterial semen, it still had to issue from an organ with dangerous religious connotations. Semen impurity probably ceased when this boundary became stable. Then religious acknowledgement of the chthonic gods' power would no longer be needed.

An ancient Hebrew legend explains how soul and body are joined. All human souls were created at the same time as Adam. Unembodied souls reside in the seventh heaven. When a woman conceives, an angel collects the sperm and carries it to Yahweh, who decides which soul must enter it. The selected soul always resists leaving heaven. Two angels must guard the soul to make sure it does not leave the sperm on the way back to the womb.⁶¹ Yahweh is not in the sperm; the sperm must come to Yahweh. Transference of the divine power requires angels as intermediaries. Semen must have belonged to Satan at first. Then Yahweh claimed its power bit by bit. However, as he was claiming that power, he was also moving farther out into the transcendent realm. In time, semen had no power, either Satanic or Yahwistic.

⁶¹ Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Soc Am, 1937) 56-57.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

My explanation of semen impurity differs from others in that it shifts the emphasis from conscious to unconscious processes. In Jung's view, the unconscious has an orientation, a direction, a "teleos." This orientation drives both individual development and the evolution of consciousness in humanity as a whole:

Basic to Jungian psychology is the idea of process. In his clinical endeavors, Jung discovered a developmental process inherent in the personality system and discovered that there are certain stages, or phases, of development that are organically and psychically obligatory to the growing personality—obligatory because they are archetypal. The archetypes, each in its differentiated essence, or aseity, are the organizing principles of the process of human development, describing the larger schema of an overall evolutionary process containing an innate teleological imperative (a teleos). In their undifferentiated, latent (and sometimes repressed) form, they compose a layer of the psyche which Jung referred to as the collective unconscious, belonging impartially to the human whole. The unfolding of the archetypal energies out of the collective unconscious, their ordered differentiation in human consciousness, is basic to the developmental process.¹

Conscious efforts to manipulate religious practices will be limited by the unconscious situation. Political manipulation of symbols must resonate with the archetypes most active in a group's unconscious in order to succeed in the long run. I believe that the other theories explaining semen impurity can be useful models if they are revised to take the Hebrew unconscious into account.

The main problem with Douglas's group-boundary theory is that it does not explain the special importance of the genital discharges, the only bodily discharges for

¹ Moore 13.

which specific purification rites were recorded. In Moore's theory, Yahweh's call for monotheism was meant to protect the developing personal conscious from the dissolving effects of chthonic energies. It is possible to access such energies through the religious use of sex. The genitals are divine symbols, and sexual intercourse is one way to experience the archetype of the sacred marriage. Archetypes embrace both mind and body. Jung compared the structure of the archetype to a light spectrum: the ultra-violet end was the spiritual, imagistic pole, and the infra-red end was the physiological, instinctual pole. An archetype can be experienced at either end of the spectrum.² Many of the Israelites' neighbors used sex in religious rites. There are records of Sumerian and Egyptian sacred marriage rituals uniting a virgin mother goddess with her son-lover. Baring and Cashford speculate that, though no records survive, there were Canaanite versions of the sacred marriage ritual as well.³ In such a ritual a high priest or king would enact the son-lover and a high priestess or queen the goddess.⁴ Cultic prostitution was another way to access archetypal energy. The Sumerian Inanna and the Babylonian Ishtar were goddesses of sexual love and fertility. A title applied to both of them was "Hierodule of Heaven." Baring and Cashford explain how prostitution could be a holy act:

Hierodule is a Greek word that means "sacred work" or "servant of the holy." The word "harlot" or "prostitute," which is often used to describe the the priestesses of Inanna and Ishtar, no longer conveys the original sacredness of their service to the goddess, although the original meaning of the word "prostitute" was "to stand on behalf of." The priestesses who served in the temples of Inanna and Ishtar were the vehicles of her creative life in their sexual union with the men who came there to perform a sacred

² Samuels 122.

³ Baring 479.

⁴ Baring 211.

ritual. . . . Sexuality was the vehicle of bringing life into the world and was a sacred act. It was also sacred because the ecstasy that accompanied it was the nearest experience to the state of bliss associated with the divine existence of the goddesses and gods. For this reason, sexual intercourse in early cultures was a ritual of participation, a magical act of fertility. It was an expression of the divine because, in their total abandonment to the sexual instinct inspired by the goddess, men and women offered themselves as the vehicle of her generative power.⁵

The Hebrews' religion required them to have children without experiencing their sexuality as divine. As I explained in Chapter II, ancient Hebrews experienced themselves as coextensive with their environment; objects and acts with symbolic associations must have had an overwhelming and immediate effect on them. The Hebrews had to secularize sex. The archetype of the sacred marriage could only be safely experienced by the Hebrews from the ultra-violet, spiritual pole. Some prophets supplied a suitable image when they portrayed the Hebrew people as the bride of Yahweh: "your Maker is your husband,"⁶ "you will call me, 'My husband,'"⁷ "And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness,"⁸ and "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride."⁹ Another Hebrew image of the sacred marriage was the carved pair of cherubim, winged human creatures, on the cover of the Ark. The original Ark had two cherubim facing each other. But at some point, probably in the first half of the 3rd century B.C.E., the cherubim were replaced with a pair, male

⁵ Baring 197.

⁶ Isa. 54:5.

⁷ Hos. 2:16.

⁸ Hos. 2:19-20.

⁹ Jer. 2:2.

and female, embracing.¹⁰ However, as Raphael Patai explains, this image could have had the wrong effect on the ancient Hebrews:

As to the time when the Cherubim were shown to the people filling the courts of the Jerusalem Temple, the only statement we have is that of Rabh Qetina: the showing, and the accompanying explanation, were made “when Israel made the pilgrimage” to the Temple. According to Biblical command, every male Israelite was duty-bound to make the pilgrimage to the Temple three times a year: on Passover in the spring; on the Feast of Weeks, seven weeks later; and on the Feast of Booths (Sukkoth) which fell in autumn, two weeks after New Year. Of the three, the greatest and most enthusiastically celebrated was the last one, on which, more than on any other Hebrew holiday, the populace was commanded to rejoice. From descriptions contained in the Mishna and in Talmudic sources we know not only the ritual details of this joyous feast, but also the fact that both men and women participated in it, and that on the seventh day of the festival the two sexes used to mingle and commit what is euphemistically referred to as “lightheadedness.” We can only surmise that the showing of the Cherubim representing a male and a female figure in marital embrace, may have preceded, and, indeed, incited the crowds to, the commission of this “lightheadedness,” which could have been nothing but an orgiastic outburst of sexual license.¹¹

These outbursts were finally repressed when the Sages had special galleries built in the Temple that kept the women separated from the men.¹² As Patai points out, it is remarkable that the cherubim, which clearly transgressed the prohibition of graven

¹⁰ Raphael Patai, The Hebrew Goddess, 3rd enl. ed. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1990) 89.

¹¹ Patai 85.

¹² Patai 86.

images, were never condemned by Jewish writers as idolatrous.¹³ Apparently the Hebrews could not do without a sacred-marriage image.

Douglas's boundary symbolism works if we allow that political boundaries and religious boundaries were the same for the Hebrews and that the Hebrew religious identity required a boundary between body and mind. The Hebrews were called on to follow Yahweh in dividing spirit and matter. In the formation of a boundary between body and mind, the genitals represented a particularly weak point. The sacred energy in sexuality had to be drained into a spiritualized image of the sacred marriage. The early rabbis enjoined men to repress their lust. Masturbation and even accidental arousal were to be vigilantly guarded against. Thus, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi condemned the practice of sleeping on one's back; Rabbi Tarfon warned against touching oneself near the genitals, even if there was a thorn in the abdomen; some rabbis discussed the propriety of a man's holding his penis while urinating.¹⁴ All this points to the incredible difficulty Hebrew men had controlling their sexual urges. Joseph the patriarch illustrated ideal masculine self-control in his misadventure with Potiphar's wife. Potiphar was an Egyptian who bought Joseph as a slave. Joseph was eventually put in charge of the household. Since he was handsome, Joseph caught the eye of Potiphar's wife, who repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, tried to seduce him.¹⁵ A rabbinical commentary on this story credits Joseph's self-control to a vision he had of his father's face. The vision cooled Joseph's blood and stopped the descent of semen from his head. The semen came out from under

¹³ Patai 67.

¹⁴ Preuss 489.

¹⁵ Gen.39:1-12.

his fingernails.¹⁶ Perhaps it is significant that the semen emerged from the hand, the appendage over which humans have the most control.

The contradictions-of-monotheism theory turns on the ideas of paradox and of clashing cultural expectations. Eilberg-Schwartz believes that semen impurity was part of a Priestly attempt to deflect attention from the paradoxical doctrine that humans were created in Yahweh's image. The Hebrews were stuck, presumably by accident, with a problematic belief that might lead them into an undesirable asceticism. As I explained in Chapter III, Moore's model of Yahweh as the archetypal ego explains this belief: humans were developing a new consciousness in which the individual was separate from the environment. Humans had to disidentify from their instinctual urges. They were to dominate their own nature the way Yahweh dominated Mother Nature. But the idea of paradox is still useful. The ancient Hebrews could not have understood what the mental ego was. Yahweh mythology had to express what was, to them, paradoxical in metaphorical language. Moore's theory also explains that Hebrew anxiety over the body stemmed from conflicts inherent in forming ego consciousness. The Hebrews did not accidentally knock together conflicting values; the body retained the chthonic energies and had to be treated with vigilance.

The life-death polarity theory has fewer problems if, instead of organic life, the life of the mental ego is meant. Then it would be semen's associations with chthonic male deities that make it dangerous to "life." Moore does specify as one of the aims of Yahwistic energy "to preserve the phenomenon of ego consciousness against physical

¹⁶ Preuss 451.

death.”¹⁷ Furthermore, the idea of life as the opposite of death only arose as personal consciousness developed. That is, the change taking place in Hebrew culture was an extreme form of a general differentiation of the archetypal masculine. Among the Hebrews’ neighbors, sky gods were conquering goddesses. Baring and Cashford explain that the ancient experience of life and death as complementary part of nature’s cycle changed as sky gods took over:

A new attitude to death appeared about 2500 BC: death came to be regarded as the absolute end and opposite of life. The old lunar concept of death and rebirth no longer prevailed in Sumerian consciousness, although it did in Egypt to some extent. Darkness was now associated with what was *not* light or life, rather than, as in the lunar mythology, with the disappearance of manifestation and the place from which new life was born. Death became something final, terrifying, remorseless and without

¹⁷ Moore 11.

the promise of rebirth.¹⁸

The association of this new view of death with the growing influence of the archetypal masculine suggests that humans were identifying less and less with nature, which went through cycles of birth, death, and regeneration. On the other hand, the mental ego required effort against nature to stay in existence. It was a tiny light struggling against chthonic darkness.

I have argued that semen impurity was, for the ancient Hebrews, an acknowledgement of the dangerous, ego-dissolving powers of the chthonic masculine. My explication avoids some shortfalls of earlier theories. Unlike Douglas, I have explained the special significance of genital discharges. Unlike Eilberg-Schwartz, I have taken ancient psychology into account and preserved symbolic unity. Unlike Milgrom, I have explained not only semen impurity, but also Hebrew anxiety over the body in general. Finally, unlike the other theories, mine suggests a reason for the end of the observance of semen impurity: as the mental ego stabilized, the Hebrew people were no longer threatened by the power of the chthonic masculine.

¹⁸ Baring 159.

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