Title
Water, Word and Name: The Shifting Pragmatics of the Sotah/Suspected Adulteress Ritual

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Forthcoming in *Literature or Liturgy? Early Christian Hymns and Prayers in their Literary and Liturgical Context in Antiquity*

Liturgy is a special kind of conversation, words sometimes addressed to the gods and sometimes about them. These conversations are part of complex performances that combine words with the use of all sorts of objects. While, as we will discuss below, some ritual acts do not include the use of any words at all, this paper examines the Sotah/Suspected Adulteress Rite where liturgy is of central importance. Liturgy is a compelling example of the multi-functionality of language because words are spoken to bring about concrete results. That is, participating in liturgy is a direct mode of social action (blessing, marrying, etc.). These modes of action overlap with but are distinct from that of other types of texts (novels) because of the many different ways what-is-said maps onto what-is-done . Liturgical formulas are highly context-creating, for example, invoking the presence of a deity or transforming a place from profane to sacred. Because it so obviously attributes power to words, liturgy is a vivid example of "the central place it [language] occupies in the social construction of reality" . Certainly we could analyze liturgy from many angles, seeking, for example, an historical kernel in vivid imagery[1] or a

[1] See for example the case made by Philip Alexander that the imagery of the celestial court in hekhalot texts is closest to that of the court at the time of Diocletian .

presumed theological adversary encoded in the terminology.[2] But we cannot avoid asking the central question: What is a particular liturgical composition trying to bring about and how does it achieve the goal?

Scholars of religion, recognizing that liturgical formulas are not primarily referential (propositional), readily adopted Austin's theory of performatives .[3] "Performativity" seemed to characterize more precisely the role of linguistic forms that in previous scholarship might have been called the "magical" aspects of words or even "magic" per se. The full scope of the multi-functionality of language, however, can be explained fully by neither Austin's focus on first-person verbs nor Tambiah's general description of the "magical" power of words.[4] The theory of performativity characterized in this way, Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs explain, "has rested on a 'literal force hypothesis' that posits a one-to-one correlation between performative utterances and illocutionary forces, even if most theorists admit that surface forms frequently do not directly signal illocutionary force" . The same is true of all the speech acts theories that derive from Austin's work including Searle's ; the theories are themselves evidence of the partially opaque nature of how words "do things." As Michelle Rosaldo explained,

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[2] Leicht argues that some of the phrases in *The Prayer of Jacob* are "anti-gnostic" polemics .

[3] For an early example see .

[4] For an extended discussion and critique of Austin's performativity see . Tambiah's groundbreaking analysis has been extensively supplemented and refined. See Elizabeth Mertz on the development of semiotic anthropology .

Searle's analysis is "an ethnography--however partial--of contemporary views of human personhood and action as these are linked to culturally particular modes of speaking" .[5] Numerous other linguistic forms can encode Austin's "illocutionary" force, even turn-taking . We can only find out how effective speech and acts are conceptualized and enacted by casting a net both much broader and finer than Austin envisioned. Therefore the present study places Austin's "performativity" in the broader semiotic conceptions of the multi-functionality of signs forged by Jakobson , Peirce[6] and Silverstein.[7]

To bring greater precision to discussions of language, Jakobson outlined six distinct functions (emotive, conative, metalinguistic, poetic, referential, phatic). Of significance to us is the poetic function, that is, where "the dominant function is the orientation towards the message ." Although it is found elsewhere, the poetic function is particularly central to poetry since there is a "radical parallelistic reorientation of all the verbal material as it relates to the building of a sequence ." Ritual language emphasizes the poetic function of language since liturgy includes internal structures of all types (patterns of words, etc.). The poetic function sets up new comparisons between words that expand, rewrite, reshape or in some way alter meanings. In

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[5] See also .
[6] Introductions to Peirce include and .
[7] In addition to , see . For a model using Silverstein to rework Austin see Sanders' study of performative in Ugaritic .

Roman Jacobson's definition "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination ."

Liturgy is a thus not only a conversation, but a poetic conversation. While any text can theoretically be read as part of a ritual, liturgical texts are built specially in this way, emphasizing the poetic function of language.[8] The poetic function of language operates in a hierarchical system with other functions. The Longfellow poem "Hiawatha" when read as part of a filibuster in the United States Senate is not functioning primarily as poetry .[9] So too, liturgies fulfill referential and emotive functions in addition to poetic. In the case of the Sotah [Suspected Adulteress] ritual, we will see that liturgy and literature are not oppositional but like the functions of language operate simultaneously with slight shifts in hierarchical priority.

Every effective use of language and signs is dependent on socially-constructed rules of use. "The illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects of courtroom testimony" as Bauman and Briggs explain, "are highly dependent, for example, on evidentiary rules and broader semiotic frames that specify admissible types of relations to other bodies of written and oral discourse" . Linguistic functions include not only semantics (reference), and meta-semantics (words

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[8] Segert demonstrates very concisely the transformation of prose into poetry, as Ezekiel 1:26 is recast into poetry in 4Q405 20 ii-21-22 with the increased emphasis on meter and structure (1988:222).

[9] A filibuster is a parliamentary procedure by which a single individual extends debate in order to delay or prevent a vote.

about words) but also pragmatics (contextual implications) and meta-pragmatics (words about contextual implications).[10] While the semantic/metasemantic nexus is familiar, as for example, from the case of a dictionary definition (metasemantic) of a word (semantic), the pragmatic/metapragmatic functions are less familiar. Cale Johnson offers a concise formulation of metapragmatic function:

> In an event of metapragmatic semiosis, the object (language) consists of a snippet of language in use and the metalinguistic comment describes the degree to which this use of language is effective, felicitous, powerful and so forth, rather that then describing its semantic value .

Happily for scholars, liturgy includes the high degree of self-reflexivity connected to performance . Performance provides a frame that invites critical reflection on communicative processes . This self-reflexivity gives us a vital window on perceived-efficacy since it includes comments on how the liturgy achieves its goals.

While modern prayer books present prayers with fixed forms, manuscripts reveal much more fluid traditions. Like conversations, liturgy includes both fixed formulas and more improvisational sections. Establishing one main version may not be either possible or historically accurate. As one example, Raymond Leicht's meticulous study of two manuscript versions of *The Prayer of Jacob*, shows that neither is "complete" or "original" . Not surprisingly, the "request" sections of liturgy, such as the Amidah, are expanded with everything from

[10] See in addition to , and .

requests for direct help to more esoteric appeals for special knowledge.[11] The Sotah rite, re-imagined differently in different historical periods, is an excellent example of yet another type of fluidity. Two ingredients, words and water with dust in it, are given new semiotic meanings when an ancient text (Num 5:11-17) is reworked into a new version of the ritual that creates in turn a new text. The various versions constitute a case of what we might call “re-pragmatization,” as the basis for the efficacy of a ritual rite is re-imagined in a later period.

The Biblical Version of The Suspected Adulteress Rite

The Sotah ritual in Numbers 5:11-31, part of the Deuteronomic source, is enigmatic and puzzling. Jacob Milgrom cites Ramban’s statement that “this is the only case in biblical law where the outcome depends on a miracle .” In bare outline the rite is as follows: a sacrificial offering of barley flour (not mixed with oil) is presented to the deity, the woman’s hair is uncovered, holy water is mixed with dust from the floor of the sanctuary, the priest recites an oath, the woman repeats the word “Amen” twice, the priest dissolves written curses in the water and the woman drinks the “bitter” water. The priest reports that the “water and curses” will cause her “belly to distend” and “thigh to sag” if she is guilty.

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[11] and describe additions to the Amidah found in a genizah manuscript. See also

This presentation of the ritual is part of a complex interweaving of narrative and laws, as is true of the entire Hebrew Scriptures. The Sotah ritual presentation is not of a specific instance of a rite being performed but like the 'legal collections' is best understood as "rather artful literary representations of what the authors believed to have been the commanding voice of the divine lawgiver ." We have no evidence of whether this rite was carried out, both no narrative presentations of enacting such rites and no references to their result. The rite is in effect a story about a ritual mixed in a liturgical presentation per se.[12]

The rite is replete with anomalous actions found nowhere else in Hebrew Scriptures. The structure looks like an "ordeal," that is, a rite of judgment left up to the deity due to lack of evidence. This single instance of an ordeal comes without any explanation of this type of rite or the theological motivation for it. Components of the rite are mysterious. The term "holy water," unique to this ritual, replaces the more common references to "living" (Num 19:17 and Lev 14:5f) or "pure" (Ezekiel 36:25) water.[13] The specific content of the verbal formula is ambiguous; Philo *Laws* 3.60 and Mishnah Sotah 2:3 present

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[12] See Baruch Levine's distinction between proscriptive and descriptive rituals and .

[13] Some commentators connect this term with the basin of water described in Ex. 30:17-21 but the phrase "holy water" does not appear in that context.

different formulas. The “drinking” of curses does not appear elsewhere, nor does the use of sanctuary dust.[14]

It is no surprise that interpretations of the rite vary widely. Rabbinic commentators put their special stamp on the ritual. [15] Among other points they assumed that the woman was pregnant; the purpose of the bitter water was then to induce a miscarriage. Modern interpreters turn to similar rites in Ancient Near Eastern texts for guidance. The Code of Hammurabi includes two, LH 131, a husband accuses his wife of adultery and she takes an oath (structure: oath, no drink) and LH 132, someone other than the husband accuses a woman of adultery and she leaps into a river (structure: ordeal without oath or drink). Neither of these ways of dealing with charges of adultery encodes anything specifically about adultery. Oaths are part of many rites, as is jumping into a river. These rituals are thematically similar to Sotah, addressing adultery, but their structures are dissimilar.

Michael Fishbane locates the closest formal parallel in Ancient Near Eastern rituals that involve not adultery but conflicting testimony by witnesses. In order to support their claims, each witness takes a special drink and swears an oath. This rite has a structure nearly identical to Sotah (“oath plus drink”). Each witness states, “Everything (?); I have drawn (water), drunk, sworn and am pure” (VAT 9962) . The

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[14] The special powers of dirt are mentioned in though in this ritual it is not dirt in general but dirt from the Tabernacle.
[15] For discussions of the rabbinic interpretations see and .

purpose of this rite is completely disconnected from adultery but it does tie the drink and oath to purification.

Sotah and these Ancient Near Eastern rites combine, in Michael Fishbane's terminology, a "sacred act" (use of an object) with a "sacred word" (verbal formula) .[16] Not all Biblical rituals are constructed this way. The sacrificial system as presented in the Priestly source includes only actions and no words. Fishbane is correct that some of the explanations for this presumed silence are weak, such as Kaufman's theory of silence as "anti-magical" . The lack of liturgy is still striking. Israel Knohl argues that the Priestly Torah's silent cult emphasizes the deity's loftiness and the "spirit of the divine elements abstracted from its practical functions in the world ." Knohl's theory repeats an aesthetic judgment found in some ancient texts that cultic silence is more imposing and austere then spoken forms of worship (cf. *The Letter of Aristeas* 95). This idealized picture of the cult suits a text far removed from actual practice. Another possible explanation is the desire by the priests to assert control over the seeming automatic efficacy of verbal formulas derived from divine speech, as discussed below.

When Fishbane combs the Biblical texts for rituals that include verbal formulas he locates two types. The first is the very limited ritual of singing before the Ark as described in Numbers 10:35-36 and

[16] In his footnotes Fishbane refers to these two different modes of action as "praxis" and "incantation" .

1Chronicles 15:26-16:36. A second set includes a small group of “acts plus words” rituals such as the oath over an unsolved homicide (Deuteronomy 21:1-9), the offering of first fruits (Deuteronomy 26:1-15) and the Sotah rite.[17] The rites can be summarized as follows:

Sacred Acts only	P-Source sacrifices.
Sacred Acts and Words	Sotah ritual; unsolved homicide; first fruits
Sacred Words in Sacred Space	Hymn-singing before the Ark.

In the rite about an unsolved homicide (Deuteronomy 21:1-9), when a corpse is found near a town, the city elders break the neck of a heifer, wash their hands and recite a negative confession:

> Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Absolve, O Lord, your people Israel whom you redeemed and do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among your people Israel.

The sacred words spoken by the elders are addressed to the deity. The priest is entirely superfluous to the rite, included in an awkward intrusion (metapragmatic statement) stating, “The priests, sons of Levi, shall come forward; for the Lord your God has chosen them to minister to Him and to pronounce blessing in the name of the Lord, and every lawsuit and case of assault.” This interpolation contradicts the rite itself, which includes no such blessing. The Elders

[17] Another possible inclusion in this category is the recitation of the Israelites’ sins over the scapegoat in Lev 16, a rare occurrence of a verbal component in the Priestly source. The recitation of sins, however, is distinct from the formulas discussed here. On this rite see .

speak directly to the deity while the priest speaks to the “you” of the Israelites and the general audience beyond that includes the reader/hearer of the text.

The priest’s comment presents a theory of ritual. This interpretation shifts the emphasis of the text section from the poetic to the referential, that is, the text tells us something *about* ritual as much as other lines enact it. The ritual presentation is subordinated to a series of theological points much as legal texts are inextricably bound with and shaped by narrative material.

The elders make their negative confession and the killing of the heifer serves as the source of blood that can then activate the purification.[18] In this case the words and the deeds work in close collaboration. The ritual is then re-interpreted as working via the priest’s blessing. This blessing indexes the speaker (priest) as representing the divine presence. The specific language of the blessing is missing but it must repeat the implicit theory of ritual language found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that the deity’s blessing and curses are automatically effective. Whoever recites the formula is the conduit of divine speech.

The first fruits ceremony (Deut 26:1-15) combines a short liturgy said to the priest (“I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to

[18]It may also serve in a secondary manner as a reverse or mirror image of the unsolved killing since this one is manifest.

assign us” verses 1-4), and one said directly to the deity (“My father was a wandering Aramean…”verses 5-10), followed by the leaving of a basket before the Lord. The initial formula said to the priest interrupts the sequence of the rite and thus probably is a priestly addition. The short historical recitation spoken before the altar (verses 5-10) presumes an individual speaker (“My father was”), a national group for whom the deity has done miracles (“we cried to the Lord” verse 7) and addresses the deity in the second person as listener (“You”).

The rite is put under the control of the priest by his interruption into the conversation with the deity and his taking of the basket, despite the later instruction that the original speaker places the offering before the deity. The priest remains without a speaking role; his only action is the placing of the basket. A third, this time negative, confession (verses 13-15, “I have not eaten..) appears to have lost its connection to a holy site (sanctuary) and is now spoken in a non-specified site after having given the tithe to a Levite, stranger, etc. The table below summarizes the rituals we had discussed so far.

	Sacred Acts	Sacred Words	Metapragmatic interpretations
Homi-cide	Heifer killed and washing of hands over its blood	Confession: 'Our hands have not shed blood, Lord.'	Explicit addition: The priest's recitation of the blessing makes it effective
First fruits	1.Leaving of basket before deity 2. Handing of basket to priest	1. Spoken to deity: My father was….first fruits you gave me 2. Spoken to priest: I recognize… before your deity	Level 2 implicates priest in efficacy
SotahBiblical	Drink water with dust and words Woman brings grain sacrifice	Priest recites curses twice Woman recites 'Amen' twice	Explicit added reference to deity

The very fact that these formulas can be said by any male descendant of an "Aramean," and that they directly address the deity in a cultic setting, points to one of the potential problems with liturgy for priests: the lack of any need for priestly mediation. Verbal formulas spoken directly to the deity deny priests any specific role in invoking the divine presence. One might think that the conversation was being held directly between the individual and the deity with no mediating role for a priest. In distinction, the "sacred acts" of priestly sacrifice can by definition only be carried out by a priest. Verbal formulas, modeled on divine speech and including second person invoking of divine presence, may appear, at least from the priests' point of view, to imply too much access to divine power on the part of the speaker.

In the case of the Sotah rite, we find an interpolated commentary on the rite and its efficacy. An awkward addition (verse 21) states, “here the priest shall administer the curse of adjuration to the woman, as the priest goes on to say to the woman ‘May the Lord make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, as the Lord causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend.’” This metapragmatic interpretation explains how the rite works. The reference to the deity’s role, as noted above, stresses the “deity-invoking” power of the priest, who as the ritual authority can explain what is happening. Efficacy is dependent on the priest’s presence since it is turn instantiates the deity’s presence as well.

Milgrom argued that the interruption is needed to stress that the deity makes the curse efficacious, not the water itself . It is more accurate to state that who

ever added it had this theory, an implicit misunderstanding of a prior version of the ritual. In no setting was the water thought to work by itself: it was understood to have a semiotic (symbolic) function, even if that function were already lost or misunderstood in the ancient world. The holy water contains both dust from the sanctuary and the dissolved curse, meaning that it might be understood to represent divinity as an indexical icon (a formal representation with spatio-temporal contiguity), even twice over.

Much as the written Torah gives a new form of materiality to divine speech, in the Sotah rite the written words are dissolved, exchanging one type of materiality for another. In this action the linguistic ideology of the Biblical text is worked in reverse. The Torah is a collection of spoken words, uttered by the deity to Moses and thus to the Israelites. The entire text is reported speech, as the deity repeatedly says, “Say unto the people …” The text represents divinity in written form because it is literally the deity’s words. Some of the words may best be understood as spoken by the deity to Moses alone, but all are divine. The woman will now be able to take divine presence in its new materiality directly into her body, making her entire body into a “golden indexical” [19] of divine power. This power will either purify or deform her.

Why does the suspected adulteress have to drink the water in the first place? Parallel Ancient Near Eastern ordeals of oath+drink for witnesses have disappeared. In the case of the oath taken over the unsolved homicide, the core of the rite is the purification (washing hands and confession) and no threat is made against the elders if they lie under oath (for example, their tongues will fall out). But the Sotah rite as both purification and punishment is insisted upon, leaving everyone to wonder how exactly the punishment part of the rite works (Does she die? Lose a pregnancy? Lose future fertility?) Here the basic

[19] For the term, see

question of the role of the ordeal looms large. This question cannot be answered in the abstract since ordeals are interpreted in numerous ways in different settings. As Peter Brown writes about the 12th century community use of ordeals, “it found in this particular form of the mingling of sacred and profane an elegant and appropriate solution to some of its problems .” Each iteration of ordeal rituals reflects a distinct theological stance that must be reconstructed based on the specific historical settings and guidelines.

The Sotah ritual, as with all ordeals, is not best understood as a quasi-medical procedure despite the tempting reference to a sagging thigh and distended belly.[20] The suspected adulteress rite appears after a discussion of rules for the removal and readmission of people who became impure from the cult and the Tabernacle. Its does not appear in the midst of other family laws.[21] Concerns of purity outweigh family matters. Some modern commentators argue that the purpose of the ordeal is to save the woman from sure death; they ignore the husband’s right in the parallel Ancient Near Eastern rituals to waive his claim entirely. In the Biblical setting this possibility is eliminated since the dramatic struggle over the woman’s body is only tangentially related to the husband’s concerns. He has no role in deciding whether or not she should undergo the priest’s rite of purification and therefore

[20] For a medicalized interpretation of the ritual see .
[21] Injunctions and laws of marriage appear in Deut 22:13-29 and Lev 20:10-21.

the husband cannot waive his claim. This ordeal is theological, not practical.

Purification is obligatory since otherwise contamination may spread from the woman's body into the entire Israelite "body," including the priests'. If she is guilty of that contamination, the entire balance is off between the Israelites and their deity. The ritual serves as a warning story about the threat of female sexuality and the power of the deity, and only the deity, to contain it. The ordeal is a divine solution to a problem that transcends the husband and demands the preist.

In the dramatic struggle over the woman, who stands metaphorically for all the "adultery" of the Israelites, only the deity can quash suspicion. The woman's body must be brought in contiguity with divine forces because purification entails direct contact. The purification of the woman's body has to be specified formally and the specification, the holy water passing through her body, is the core of the entire rite. The movement of the water through her body assigns her to either sacred or cursed status. The water re-claims the woman's body for the deity since sacred and profane cannot inhabit the same body. Just as ceramic utensils are used in cases of corpse contamination (Num 19:17ff)[22], here too the ceramic vessels signify that purification is taking place. In other cases blood can be the

[22] See .

cleansing agent (Lev 14:5), but not when the contamination of a woman's body is at issue. The theological weight of these concerns shifts the texts from the poetic function to the referential that tells a story of the full power the rite employs.

The Suspected Adulteress Revisited: A Medieval Version

A fascinating medieval version of the ritual found in Genizah fragments is precious evidence of how the metapragmatic basis shifted when someone tried to enact the ritual in a new setting.[23] The text includes an explicit commentary and meditation on the Biblical version. The new version moves away from issues of purification and towards a new mapping of divine power on earth. Since the officiant is not a priest, his authority and credentials must be established.

In basic outline, the text includes 1) a history of the divine Names (used in creation, passed down by angels to humans, 2) an explanation of the Names' roles (how they function in the Sotah rite), 3) a presentation of the Names (technical verb for their use "abjure," letters that make up the Names) and 4) explanation of current form of the rite (what we do now and why it works) and an appended comment on the elevated status of the officiant (like an angel, a High Priest).

[23] The fragments are Jewish Theological Seminary JTSL ENA 3635.17 and Cambridge University Library K 1.56. According to Schäfer, they were probably written in the 11-12th centuries . See also .

Here we see a dramatic instance of “the interpenetrations of textual with extratextual factors” . It is nearly impossible to separate out the rite from the metapragmatic commentary mixed in with it. Presumably, just as earlier versions of ordeals looked “magical” to the priestly editors, the redactors of this version had questions about causation. In order to make the ritual work, an alternative to priestly status must be presented and the liturgy is “re-pragmatized.”

The Genizah text opens with the formula “Blessed is the name of glory of his kingdom forever and ever.”[24] This blessing formula is a clear example of the way certain linguistic forms “laminate all four areas [linguistic, metalinguistic, pragmatic and metapragmatic] on top of one another” . This act of blessing is based on a passive participle instead of on a first-person verb. The speaker is informing everyone of the blessed status of the divine Name. This form may have something to do with the shift whereby the form of the perfect tense becomes marked for past tense, and the imperfect for future, as Sanders explains, with the result that the participial form becomes the unmarked form, suitable for constructing performatives .[25]

Even with this insight, the question still remains as to why “declaring the name blessed” is a liturgical fulcrum. We saw that the Biblical texts confine automatic efficacy to divine blessings and curses. Sanders’ point about Ugaritic texts also applies to Biblical texts: “divine

[24] On the historical emergence of this formula in rabbinic circles see .
[25] See the discussions in and .

language is self-enacting…Human language…does not work the same way…it must work through modeling" (181). In the Ugaritic example divine language is condensed in the act of divine naming, that is, "proclaiming." When, in a Ugaritic narrative presentation, the deity gives names to weapons, the act of naming has metapragmatic force. The weapons subsequently function as divine names since "[t]he self-activating verbs stored in the weapons' names are thus icons of self-performing actions ."

The Jewish divine Name ideology is distinct but related; the divine name functions as the central "self-performing" linguistic form and thus as the basis of the ritual efficacy. This rite has a very particular notion of "calling upon the deity's name." In the most basic Jewish prayer formulas the "blessedness" of the name is invoked, instantiating the blessedness of the one whose name it is. Invoking the blessed Name is a human appropriation of a divine prerogative by the sleight-of-hand of reported speech. Like forms of politeness that imply obligations of those towards whom the words are directed, each declaration of the blessedness of the name presupposes that the source of blessings (the deity) has already done the blessing. The human speaker is simply pointing this out, but the act of pointing it out is a form of "received performativity."

The text follows this usage with another linguistic form that operates from a modified metapragmatic stance: the direct uttering of

divine Names. Here the “you” whose name is blessed is invoked in the third person. This might seem to be a less direct invocation than “you,” but due to the encoding of divine power in the divine Name, it is a parallel mode of pointing to and putting into action of divine power. It is misguided to say that only a certain type of person, let alone a disparaged “magician” adopts this type of metapragmatics, since the power of the divine Name is so central to Jewish theology. What separates this text from other liturgical forms is that this text has obsessive concerns about efficacy of a different sort than we saw with the priests. This is a moment requiring explication and elaboration. Names are fussed with as if to say: The power of the divine Names is not a simple issue of one or two letters, but instead is so mystifying and so complicated it is almost beyond even us (and is surely beyond you). The story of the passing down of the name is a narrative presentation of efficacy that encodes the secrecy, raising the fascinating issue of the role of secrecy in religion much beyond the scope of this paper.[26] The claim to secrecy is itself part of the metapragmatics.

The use of the written curses dissolved in water has also been reinterpreted, since they too have been subordinated not to the priest, but to the divine Name. All “self-enacting” power is now the power of the divine Name, both written and spoken. While Biblical texts seemed

[26] Some of the central themes are outlined in .

to have limited theories of effective human speech, this interpretation of the rite seems to have a very limited theory of effective “sacred acts.” That is, the divine Name threatens to displace all sacred acts, leading to ritual where the “actions” (adding dust, drinking water) are subordinated to the “words” (and specifically, the divine Name).

The theory of divine language in the revised Sotah rite meshes closely with the transformational possibility inherent in this version of Jewish theology. The Biblical idea of hereditary priestly identity contrasts with the reformulated, and now distinctly fluid, categories of identity. As noted by recent scholars, in Late Antiquity gender was an achieved status and thus had to be repeatedly performed to be confirmed.[27] Men could potentially degrade themselves into women, and so too, women could achieve male status even if this did not occur on a regular basis. So too the human–divine continuum marked out many stages of human into divine status (and the reverse) as outlined in Table 1.

[27] See and .

Material world	Intelligible world	Cosmos beyond language
fleshly bodies	less fleshly bodies	no bodies
human sphere humans (most men, all women)	more divine/less human sphere gods special men heavenly bodies angels (male) divine powers	divine sphere Deity
Human by nature	Immortal by Gift from Deity	Divine by nature

Aristotle's schema from combined with Philo's terminology taken from .

Table 1

Transformations along this human-divine spectrum are presented in numerous ancient texts beginning in the first century B.C.E., effected after death via burial and even while still alive.[28] Moving towards the divine end was achieved by "sacred acts," "sacred words" and by combinations of these. The striking story of the daughters of Job transforming into divine beings by their use of a divine belt (*Testament of Job* 38:3) is an example employing only a sacred "act." Other ritual strategies include purifications via water or blood, visualizations, divine inspiration, recitation of key liturgical texts (Isaiah 6.3), recitation of divine names and breathing techniques. Liturgy,

[28] The secondary literature on this is immense, though much of it mislabels these transformations as either heretical or magical. Discussions run from to .

where the poetic function of language is put in the service of transformation of the speaker, is by far the most common. Singing heavenly songs and speaking the divine name in any form indexed the changed status of the speaker: the more powerful and secret the Name, the more heightened the status of the speaker.

In the later Sotah rite the power of the entire priestly system accrues to the person doing the rite who is now able, as a divine figure himself, to carry it out. Without this status, the rite cannot be efficacious. The ordeal depends not only on the deity but also on the divine status of the officiant. This claim does not of course mean that every person thought he was a deity, or even that practitioners did not reserve some dimension of difference between their status and that of the deity.[29] It does mean, however, that the priestly caste has been replaced by individuals who earn their special status.

We have seen how dependent we are on interpretations that are included within the presentation of rituals since these are moments where semiotic meaning is fixed, at least temporarily. The Sotah rite shifts back and forth between the “liturgy” of prayers and the “literature” of commentary. Distinguishing liturgy from literature is a question of hierarchy not absolute difference.

[29] On the etiquette that demands keeping some hierarchical distinction between various types of divine figures and the deity, see .

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