

Among Our Contributors

ROSEL G. BROWN —

one of the most interesting newcomers in the field, has appeared in this magazine previously and had a story in Fredrik Pohl's STAR SCIENCE FICTION NO. 5.

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equally prominent in the mystery field as the creator of the inimitable Solar Pons pastiches, is of course the author of some superb material in the Lovecraft tradition.

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appears only once in Don Day's monumental Index to the SF magazines 1926-'50. Since then, he has appeared in every magazine in the field and is the author of several novels.

JOHN BRUNNER —

prominent British SF and fantasy writer and novelist, makes one of his rare appearances in this haunting story about the adventures of Gerald Howson, Psi.D., Curative Telepath First Class, W.H.O. The sequel will appear next month.

LESTER DEL REY —

needs no introduction to any reader of SF and fantasy.

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author of more than twenty novels about contemporary matters makes, we believe, a first appearance in the field with this article.

Dr. LESLIE R. SHEPHERD —

distinguished British physicist and space-travel authority, writes on SPACE PHYSICS in an article published here through the courtesy of Mr. Sam Moskowitz, former editor of SCIENCE FICTION PLUS.

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the sinister flame

by Y. IBN AHARON

THE IDEA that the technological orientation of the ancient Near East, demonstrably superior to that of the atrophied Dark Ages, could be described by the vocabulary of a Vulgate divine should forever be dispelled by the controversy which has been raging for a century over many words of indisputable meaning.¹

Equally confusing has been the disunited front of religion on the question of Darwinian evolution. Most clergymen consign the whole Old Testament to the outer reaches of allegory and metaphor. They have been driven to this extreme by the simple fact that they *never* were committed to the defense of the Old Testament, to begin with. In other words, the Old Testament has been forsaken by both protagonists. The religionist pays heed only to its 'great moral teachings', because its Writ and Letter are in bad odour with scientists; the scientific mind, on the other hand, will have nothing

to do with the Old Testament, because it is considered to be the private domain of the reverend clergy. This last attitude is the more unfortunate in that the only final comprehension of the Semitic terms with which the Old Testament is littered from one end to the other must come

1. I have reference to the well-known fracas over the word *bethulah*, as it occurs in the Prophets. The word in Hebrew does not mean virgin (that would be *gnulemeth*), but "the young married girl". Other such words are *leviathan*, which doesn't mean whale as it occurs in the Book of Jonah, or in any other place; *sh'ot*, which doesn't mean Hell, — and *anaqim* which doesn't mean giants.

Particularly barbarous is the translation of *lo tirtsakh* as "thou shalt not kill" in Exodus 21, which would be correct if the Hebrew read *lo t'hargu*, from the infinitive *hargog*; and the failure to strengthen the phrase "thou shalt not worship other gods before me" to the point where it is understood that Jews were *clearly* permitted to participate in other ceremonies so long as they were mindful of the precedence of Y'hova and the incumbency of his worship. See the Prophet Samuel's tirade on the subject.

from the natural scientist (whether physicist, chemist or biologist) who is willing to approach Semitic literature on its own terms, and thus to gain the familiarity required to correlate his findings therein with contemporary usage.

Our purpose here is to consider one small group of associated terms, occurring in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. These words will be considered both in their context within the Bible, and the peculiar nuances which they assume in the light of comparative philology.³

Most of the world's religious and philosophical systems can be classified in terms of their attitude towards fire and light. The most common equation is the familiar one, wherein light represents Good and darkness Evil. The notion that some form of *light* might be associated with Evil strikes us as unfamiliar, even though we may have heard talk of hell-fire from earliest childhood.

The history of the Near East, perhaps surprisingly, provides a multitude of doctrines wherein the common conception of light as Good is reversed. Some of these doctrines are sufficiently important to stand independently as religions in their own right.³

Others are to be found deeply embedded within a complex religious system of hybrid origins. In such cases, the doctrine of light as Good will be taught exoterically, while that of Light as Evil will be classified as a Mystery, and reserved for those of the priestly classes. Thus the holy men of Israel, the Kohanim, Sons of Aaron, were initiated into the study of what we may term *The Sinister Flame*.

The most important Biblical mention of the *Flame* occurs in Leviticus 10:1. Where it is recorded that Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aaron, "took either of them his censer, and kindled fire therein, and burnt incense thereon. Then offered they *Sinister*

Flame before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them."⁴

Anyone familiar with my past writings would think me guilty of a grave inconsistency were I to disagree with the *Onkelos*, as Yonathan's Version is called; but it is not with him that I disagree, but only with the abuse of the cognitive principle involved in the process of misinterpretation. Ugarit, Babylonian and Assyrian reference prove that NKR had dire implications for the Mesopotamian mind of that day. To give *esh* as "flame", instead of "fire", should not excite any witch-hunting tendencies, either, inasmuch as all Versions since

2. Comparative philology in the Semitic languages is peculiarly complex. For example, cognate words in each of the sixteen North Semitic languages may have different meanings. This situation is unparalleled in any other family of human languages. The verbal root ALH is a good example of what I mean, and is pertinent to the discussion. It can mean anything from deep-breathing or "propulsion" in Majian to "hitting," as with a stick, in Arabic. (See note 4, below)

3. The best example of a Religion of Light is, of course, the Ghatas of Zoroastrianism. Sun-worship in Egypt is hardly matched with the literal interpretation of the Brighter Parsas, as the Avestic priests were ambiguously dubbed by their descendants. The ambiguity lies in the interchangeability of PRS, which means Persia, with PRSh, which denotes "explication" in general Semitic usage. This is not an illiterate pun, because great confusion existed as to the use of sibilant letters at the end of words, especially in the Aramaic of Persia. Jastrow lists PRS as an alternative for PRSh.

4. The Hebrew reads:
 ויקחו בני אהרן אש מחמתו וישריפו לפני יהוה אש זרה אשר לא צוה אותם

It is at this point that the difficulties mentioned in Note 2, above, come into play. My rendering of *esh zarah* as Sinister Flame does not need to be argued with those familiar with the Jewish term for idol-worship, *avodah-zarah*. The Aramaic version of Yonathan, however, does not seem to be in line with the more serious meaning of the word, for it goes along with King James Versions, and gives *nakhreih* (spelt נַחְרֵי) for *zarah*. Those who read Hebrew will think immediately of the root NKR (spelt נָכַר), and of such words as Nakhri (נַכְרִי), which means "foreigner", and thus contrive to evade the real implications of the word.

Ezra have translated this word variously as it might suit their purpose.

On first reading, and by itself, this passage looks harmless. The consequences of their act were soon made clear, however, when "a fire went out from the Lord which consumed them in his sight."

The orthodox of all Judaeo-Christian religions will take care to hurry by this passage. To it, and to those like it, they will apply two time-worn axioms. "It is forbidden to ask such questions."⁵ Or, this matter cannot be settled until the coming of Elija."⁶ I don't think such fatalism is really necessary. There *is* evidence that can be brought to bear upon the clarification of this particular subject without waiting quite so long as it may take for Elija to get here.

The Sinister Flame that Nadav and Avihu offered up unto Y'hova is, unfortunately, not described in detail. According to Ibrahim ibn Ezra (1092-1167 A. D.) the sacrilegious character of the flame was established by the fact that they kindled their censers in such manner as to produce a controlled flame, instead of the free-burning light which was one of the specifically commanded requirements of the sacrificial pyre. In other words, Nadav and Avihu had produced an *implosive* flame, which produced more heat than did the explosive, quick burning variety appropriate to the Sanctuary.⁷

All through the books of Leviticus and Numbers it is inferred that the fires of the sacrifice contained certain unknown (and presumably unknowable) additives that caused the altar-fire to flare up of a sudden, and burn with unnatural brightness. The altar-fire was, indeed, counted among the Miracles of the Temple ritual.

The reason for the indictment against Nadav and Avihu was that they had got hold of small quantities of these substances (probably from the stores of their father, Aaron), but made the mistake of trying to ig-

nite them in the closed flame of the censer. The phenomenon would, therefore, be explained by a mineral substance which would merely evince many candle-power of light if burnt in the open air, but which would, at the same time, wreak holy havoc if heated within the confined space of a candelabrum.

Although the mechanism by which the Lord caused their demise is not revealed, it is very well within the bounds of grammatical propriety to assert that the phrase "fire came forth from the Lord" is a theatrical way of saying that they died as a result of their experiment. In the eyes of the believing Jew, the mere fact that they had broken God's command was sufficient reason for their death. This thesis of self-destruction is borne out by the fact that their bodies were not consumed into dust, as was the case with all other malefactors who received the personal attentions of Y'hova. In point of fact, this is

5. Liberal theologians will be shocked by the declaration of Rashi, the supreme arbiter of such matters for the orthodox Jews of Europe, that the *ruakh adonai* (KJV: "spirit of the Lord") should not even be discussed in the context in which it is mentioned in the early chapters of the Book of Ezekiel.

6. This is the meaning of TYQW at the end of many a heated debate in the Talmud. It is most frequently resorted to on juridical questions, because the most profound theological disputes, in which it might occur, were *verboten* to public discussion, under pain of trial before an ecclesiastical court. This practice rested on the unfortunate dicta of the 13th Chapter of Deuteronomy, and was confirmed by all the leading patristics from Joshua ben Nun to Eliyahu of Vilna.

7. Three distinctive kinds of fire were recognized by the priestly authorities. The first was the closed fire we are talking about here; the second was the open fire, which was unfit because of the fuel consumed. The third was an open fire, fed with sacred wood, and therefore known as the Holy Fire. This was the only kind fit for the altar. A review of the physical efficiency of the sacrificial practices outlined in the Old Testament, by a person properly qualified in thermal chemistry, would yield significant results bearing on our estimate of the scientific knowledge of the ancients.

the only case on record in which there was enough of the body left to make burial worthwhile.⁸

An alternative to death by the *Sinister Flame* is the possibility that they were "touched by the *Finger of the Lord*", Y'hova's equivalent to Zeus' thunderbolt. The Holy Flame, as the Finger of the Lord was called in its passive role, came into play largely in two ways. The first was the pillar of fire which went before the Children of Israel by night, so that they would not lose their way in the wilderness of Sin and Moab. The second was the Holy Flame which provided illumination at the time of Y'hova's descensions on Mount Sinai.

This event is often repeated in the Books of Moses, and always with the same trappings. At the outset of the tableau, we find the pillar of fire skimming smoothly along at the front of the camp. The murmurings of the people are overheard by the ever-sensitive deity, and he gets in touch with Moses, his contact-man among the people. Moses would then summon the Congregation and announce the great day. At the pre-arranged moment, a tumultuous rumbling is heard, with much the same effect as an earth-quake. The great mountain is starkly outlined against the Plain, and a great mass is seen slowly to lower itself against the twin peaks which are the dwelling-place of the Lord.

The potential dangers of the situation, and the perilous toxicity of the Holy Fire are most explicitly outlined in the Twentieth Chapter of Exodus. The entire affair is somewhat reminiscent of a launching at one of the larger rocket testing sites.

"And the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their clothes. And be ready against the third day, for the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon Mount Sinai. And thou shalt set bounds unto the people

round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves that ye go not up into the mount or touch the border of it. Whosoever toucheth the mount shall surely be put to death. And Moses said unto the people, Be ready against the third day: come not at your wives.

"And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trump exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. And Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. And the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long and waxed louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered by a voice.

"And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai on the top of the Mount, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the Mount; and Moses went up. And the Lord said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through to gaze upon the Lord and many of them perish. And let the priests also, who may come near to the Lord, sanctify themselves, lest the Lord break forth upon them."

A careful reading of this passage bears an interesting resemblance in its "sanctifying" to the precautionary measures and instructions distributed by the Office of the Director of Civil Defense Mobilization to meet the contingency of an atomic attack.

Attention may also be called to Exodus 25:17, which reads in Hebrew:

וַיִּרְאֵה בְּבוֹר יְהוָה בָּשָׂר אֲכֹלָה עַל רֵאשֵׁי הָהָר

"And the Glory of the Lord was a

8. Leviticus 10, verse 4. The injunction against mourning which follows is directed to Aaron and his surviving sons, and is often taken to mean that the bodies were exposed without benefit of burial, but the text says nothing of the sort.

consuming fire at the peak of the mount, etc." Our Nineteenth Century friends, including some who were not so Victorian, notably Sigmund Freud,⁹ drew the inference from this description that the God of Israel was a volcano. This demotion was too much for the Ruler of the Universe to take sitting down, albeit incorporeally. The faithful soon rose in the defense of their God; they explained that Y'hova was an "independent force," whose apparently irrational conduct, jealousy, bellicosity and bloodthirstiness were sometimes misinterpreted, even by Moses as evidence of divine ill-nature. What they meant by "independent force" was never really made clear, but the tendency of such teachers is in the direction of the Religion of Love. They were encouraged in their speculations and apologetics by the very non-Hebraic and distinctly irrelevant doctrine of reincarnation, and the notion of communication with the dead which it entails.¹⁰

This interpretation was better than the one about the volcano, but the seeming agreement between the Medieval nomenclature of religious spiritualism and the Hebrew Bible is superficial, and was made possible only because of the gross inconsistencies of the traditional European translations.

Each age must re-evaluate the past in its own terms. It is time that we realized that the Medieval interpretation of the Biblical Mysteries was as inaccurate and unreasonable as planetocentric cosmology. Semitic concepts of natural history must not suffer at the hands of those who think Europe uppermost in terms of cultural accomplishment. The re-birth of learning in Europe was not a phenomenon of Graeco-Roman civilization, but of the Judaeo-Arabic. The great Christian theologians of Europe burnt many a Jewish doctor for practicing sterile antisepsis. The knowledge that heat could kill disease and make pure

the contaminated wounds of the battle-fallen is historically traceable to *The Sinister Flame* of Y'hova Elohim (KJV: "The Lord God".) which caused mountains to quake and a people to become pure in the light of his boding pillar.¹¹

9. See his *Moses and Monotheism*.

10. The most elaborate development of this approach is J. Newberry's Oahspe Bible, which neophytes are apt to confuse with the doctrine of extraterrestrialism. Newberry paints a vivid picture of the Kingdom of Heaven, which he proceeds to decorate with a Buck Rogers terminology, highly congenial to the castles-in-the-air approach of religious spiritualism. The motives which led him to the implementation of this device were moralistic: he sought to gain acceptance for his mistaken ideas about the cosmology of Genesis (as gained from the KJV) by trying to make them more attractive to a misdoubting Huxley-ridden generation. Extraterrestrialism leads instead to an open-minded re-evaluation of the Hebrew Bible in the light of Semitic philology. This process tends to remove these books from the area of myth and airy legend, and secure for them a lasting place among the truly important works of our early history. The authors intended their work to be so taken, as is repeatedly made clear; the stigma of moralism and allegory has been imposed on their work only with the rise of official religion in the West, and is not to be found among the early attitudes of any Judaeo-Christian religion.

11. So many Jews were burnt as witches throughout Europe that, such is the mass of data, no work on the subject as a whole has ever been compiled from original sources. There is, however, a study of the situation in Spain by an 18th Century Judaeo-Spanish author, Rav Yosef Al-Moghribi. The Spanish government has published Castillian versions of the famous litanies composed in memory of the martyrs by members of the Spanish Chief Rabbinate.

Readers of this literature will find that esotericism in Jewish theology is hardly an invention of the Medieval rabbis. Indeed, Deuteronomy 29:29 would be discreditable nonsense if this preconception were valid. The verse reads, "The secret things (*nis-taroth*) belong unto the Lord Our God; but those things which are revealed belong unto us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this Law."

The last phrase elucidates the Mosaic attitude towards technology and the higher forms of philosophy: that nothing is of itself irrelevant or anti-religious so long as it is handled with the discretion and social responsibility required by Biblical injunction.