

# TABOO IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

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## INTRODUCTION

FROM Polynesia has come a word which applies to phenomena found in many parts of the world. Certain objects or acts or words connected with spirits are said to possess a dangerous power or influence. To safeguard man from these malevolent powers, a number of prohibitions are found in groups dominated by these demonistic notions which serve an alleged prophylactic or protective purpose in society. To trace fully the alleged reasons for certain interdictions or "taboos," one must study the quaint logic of the savage mind, insofar at least as social anthropology reveals that "mind" by giving us the types of thought, belief and action of social groups found in isolated parts of the globe. The "taboos" of Polynesia show the least influence of sophistication, and their unrationalized account supply the needed clues for discovering the origin and growth of many juridical, ethical and religious ideas found in civilized life.

The Polynesian word "taboo" (or "tabu" and "tapu") comes from a verb meaning "to prohibit"; and in its adjectival form means "prohibited, sacred, dangerous, unclean." Another etymology traces the word to the verb "ta" meaning "to mark" and "pu"—an adverb of intensity.

The fundamental ideas underlying all "taboo" are the notions of sacredness and impurity as conceived in primitive society where animistic notions prevail. From these conceptions follow (1) the sacredness (or uncleanness) of persons or things; (2) the prohibitions emanating from the same; and (3) the sacredness (or uncleanness) which results from a violation of the prohibition. The converse of "taboo" in Polynesia is "noa" which means "general or common." Out of these fundamental animistic beliefs have come a system of "taboos" which aims to protect the important personages such as the chiefs, and priests; to afford protection of the weak, women, children and common people generally—from the "mana"

(the magical influence) of chiefs and priests. For like reason, it is necessary to devise means of safety for those who come in contact with corpses and unclean foods and objects which are supposed to be charged with the "mana" or "spiritual electricity." This inherent malevolent force in persons and things must be curbed in order that chief acts of life, such as birth, initiation, marriage and sexual functions may go undeterred. The taboos are further designed to protect human beings from the wrath or power of the gods or spirits. The notion of wrath or other emotional state of the deity belongs to a higher range of culture. The primitive belief is a mechanistic one. A violated taboo brings dire consequences to friend and foe, to saint and sinner, alike.

Investigators have stressed various aspects in their attempt to find the root idea of the taboo system in cults and social institutions of antiquity. Frazer finds taboos as the ground of the religious consciousness with its primitive beliefs in spiritism and animism.<sup>1</sup> For Durkheim taboos rest in the conception of magic revealed by the mechanistic consequences of their violation. It is only secondarily ethical and religious.<sup>2</sup> Marett sees in taboo the "automatic power of self-maintenance and self-vindication." The primitive man thinks of "taboo" as something "unlucky to meddle with."<sup>3</sup> Jevons characterizes taboo as "dangerous and infectious."<sup>4</sup> VanGennep connects taboo with "mana" or the "spiritual electricity" which resides in holy and in unclean things. It is a "half-devil and half-god." To safeguard the unprotected the taboo has been established and out of this system has come the inherent feeling that certain things must not be done.<sup>5</sup>

The study of avoidances and interdictions reveals the complex of ideas and emotions which dominate uncivilized life and these are rooted in the primitive conception of man's relation to the unseen forces which control the universe. Animism is an attempt to explain natural phenomena on a spiritistic basis.<sup>6</sup> The roots of such avoidances through a sense of fear lie deeper in the remote period of a pre-logical age. Just what the nature of these beliefs was in the pre-animistic age is a matter of conjecture. We know, however, that animism alone will not furnish a complete explanation for these primitive taboos. The biblical taboos have come down to us under

<sup>1</sup> Frazer: *En. Brit.*, "taboo," 9th ed

<sup>2</sup> Durkheim: *Les Formes elementaire religieuses.*

<sup>3</sup> Jevons: *Intr. Hist. Rel.*, p. 61ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Hastings: *En. Rel. Eth.*, 1:535.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, "animism."

various guises of rationalization, but enough remain in the survivals to reveal their primitive nature. The historical records show more archaic beliefs than the codes or prophetic writings. The system of taboo shows traces of the magician's technique, since ritualistic safety devices afford to the priest at least a measure of control over these "dangerous" holy objects. On the other hand a system of prohibitions shows the waning of magic and the growth of humility and a sense of feebleness which gives rise to the sentiments of moral scruples and religious piety. The crudest notion of taboo is the naive belief that contact with objects both sacred and unclean leads to physical consequences both evil (disease) and fatal (death). On a higher level of culture the crude belief has been modified by the conception of wrath or anger of the deity who may or may not punish the sinner. The risk of physical punishment is incurred by violating a taboo. On a more rational level the avoidances are religious or ritualistic conventions interpreted as part of a religious discipline or as symbolic of moral and spiritual values.

Wundt thinks of the taboo as the oldest unwritten code.<sup>7</sup> Such a juridical conception leaves out the mental and emotional life of primitive society which form the motivation for the taboo as a system of social control. The psychology of taboo is more fully considered in Crawley's emotional theory. It is "fear and loathing" which underlies the avoidances practiced by uncivilized man. The objection of Jevons is valid, since the gods are not loathed and many taboos emanate from the relation of persons and objects with them. The distinction between the natural and the supernatural is the product of later sophistication. For the savage both realms merge, so that "taboo" will touch many phases of individual conduct, social custom and religious practice.

The system of taboos includes all places, objects and names related to sacred persons and things. In the double aspect of taboo as "holy" and "unclean" we have the elaborate ordering of practices concerning the "corpse"; a new born child; blood and the shedder of blood; the divine being, the criminal, the sick, the outcasts and foreigners, animals and men, women especially, the married as well as the sacred virgin; food, clothes, vessels, property, houses, beds, canoes, threshing-floor, winnowing fan, a name; word or a day—all these may be "taboo" or a source of danger to the community. These ideas are found in various part of the globe showing that such animistic notions represent a common level of culture. The similarity

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Freud: "*Totem and Taboo*," p. 31.

is due less to direct borrowing or suggestion, than to the uniformity of the mental processes and emotional experiences of man. In Greece, Eurypluss was stricken with madness when he opened the *larnax* or 'tabernacle, and in Israel Uzza is slain by the Lord for his attempt to support the ark. Similar examples are found in Peru where "none may come within where the idol was, save the principal chiefs who entered with much reverence and veneration, having removed their sandals,"<sup>8</sup> doubtless because the sandals by contact with the sacred soil would become taboo and unfit thereafter for daily use.<sup>9</sup> In Madagascar work is taboo to relatives for certain periods in accord with the rank of each. In Polynesia, not only on the death of "Tuitonga," or a time of general mourning or of sickness in the royal family, but before war or before a great feast, a taboo day or days is proclaimed; no one may go outside of his house, no domestic animal may utter a sound, dogs are muzzled, cocks are put under a calabash. Work is taboo on holy days because anything done then belongs to the god and becomes unfit for common use. To protect others, mourners adopt a particular dress.

As a regulative principle in primitive society, taboo is all important. "The only offence known is taboo-breaking and the only punishment is excommunication." Jevons draws a distinction between taboo and tabooed, holding that supernatural beings are inherently "taboo" or dangerous, while natural beings and objects become "taboo" through the contagion derived by contact or association with the spirits. Occasionally property is made "taboo" by the king or priest, e. g., in Polynesia the catch in fishing is taboo until it is divided. The same is true of the spoil hidden by Achan. (Josh. xvii. 25.) Blood likewise is taboo, especially if it is connected with death. Blood was not to be shed on the ground in ancient Egypt or in ancient India. Amongst the Yomos of Colorado the manslayer is taboo for a month, during which time he must fast and the Kaffir is "unclean" after a battle.<sup>10</sup> In West Africa, after childbirth, the mother is considered unclean for seven days and on the Loango coast the mother is taboo for six months. Abstaining from food for mourners is also a derivative of the taboo idea. Amongst the negroes of the Gold Coast the relatives may not wash themselves or comb their hair during the funeral ceremonies. Among the Fijians, "many make themselves bald for the dead."

Taboos in Polynesia resemble the social and legal codes of civili-

<sup>8</sup> Jevons: *Intr. Hist. Rel.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>10</sup> Jevons: *Hist. Rel. Intr.*, p. 74.

zation. The assumption that these were devised by crafty priests and politicians is no longer held by scholars; for "they are most at home in communities which have no state-organization, and no priesthood. The belief is not artificial and imposed, but spontaneous and universal."<sup>11</sup>

Taboo as a religious observance is equally untenable. Everything sacred is taboo but not vice versa. "It is impossible to make out that all things "unclean" were originally sacred or that the carcasses of vermin ever belonged "to any god." According to Crawley, "the principle of Social Taboo is an idea . . . that the attributes assigned to the individual who is feared, loathed or despised are materially transmissible by contact of any sort."<sup>12</sup> But, argues Jevons, the gods are neither loathed nor despised. The origin of taboo, according to Jevons, is "an inherent quality in the minds of men that certain things must not be done." There are many dangerous things that are not taboo, e. g., to eat poisonous plants. It is rather the things that experience could never teach to be dangerous that are taboo, e. g., touching a new-born child. The pure taboo sentiment is neither exclusively moral, religious nor social; it is purely formal and without content. Still Jevons admits that "the taboo was never grossly material. It marked the awe of man in the presence of what he conceived—often mistakenly—to be the supernatural. This feeling is spiritual in the sense that sense-experience is not the sole source of final test of truth; and that the things which are seen bring man daily into relation with things unseen. This irrational fear lies at the bottom of our morality.

In the confused reasoning of the primitive man, many evils followed from the idea of taboo and the belief in its transmissibility. In Polynesia, the sick were often abandoned. Likewise the same superstitious fear of "taboo" hindered man's conquest of nature and the utility of natural gifts. "With its arbitrary and senseless restrictions it over-grows healthy social tendencies and kills them, as moss kills off grass or ivy strangles the tree." It further isolated and degraded woman and destroyed natural affection. The same baneful effects are to be noted in religion. "The irrational restrictions, touch not, taste not, handle not, which constitute formalism, are essentially taboos—indispensable to the education of man at one period of his development, but a bar to his progress later." A certain selective process appears, which eliminates the baneful and

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> *Folk-Lore*, June, 1895: VI., 2, 130.

retains the helpful restrictions. This theory has been called "the Unconscious Utilitarianism of Common Sense." Such a theory is difficult to verify and it deals more particularly with rational strata which cover the older and the more irrational modes of behavior. Human progress appears in the "rationalization of taboo."<sup>13</sup> Religion gives a particular sanction to taboos, thereby affording the opportunity for rationalization. Jevons here does not specify what state of religious development he has in mind. In a low level of culture, the distinction between magic and religion does not exist.

"It seems, then, that individual religious reformers have carried out the selective process by which the innumerable taboos of savage life have been reduced to the reasonable restrictions which are essential to the well-being of mankind. And the prophets and religious teachers who have selected this and rejected that restriction have usually considered themselves in so doing to be speaking, not their own words or thoughts, but in those of their God. This belief has been shared by the community they addressed, otherwise the common man would not have gained the courage to break an ancient taboo. Certainly no mere appeal to reason would counterbalance that inveterate terror, just as it was no mere consideration of utility or of purely human interests which supplied the religious reformer with his zeal, or that prompted the denunciations of the prophets. Their message was a supernatural message; and in the same way the process by which mischievous taboos were weeded out may be termed a process not of Natural but of Supernatural Selection.<sup>14</sup> This generalization is particularly significant in the attitude of the prophets towards the priestly legislation.<sup>15</sup>

R. R. Marett finds the taboo the "cornerstone of the class-system, ensuring the subjection of women to men, of the lower orders to the chief, and of all to the king, whose very name was 'tabu' on penalty of death." R. Taylor holds that taboo is "religious observance established for political purposes," while W. H. R. Rivers is of the opinion that taboo is "the prestige of an immigrant folk ('kwa people') in its dealing with an indigenous population of markedly inferior culture." In Timor, the custom of taboo ("pomali") is very common, and it applies to all forms of property, serving as the guardian of proprietary rights. "A palm branch stuck across an open door, showing that the house is tabooed is a more effectual guard against robbery than any amount of locks and bars."

<sup>13</sup> Jevons: *Intr. Hist. Rel.*, p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>15</sup> *Jer.* vii. 22.