YOM KIPPUR IN MISHNAH YOMA

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Tractates of the Mishnah that describe the Temple cult are traditionally understood as depiction of the cult as it was actually performed in the time of the Second Temple. The texts are supposed to preserve the memory of the former cult; after the expected rebuilding of the Temple these texts should enable the priests to resume the cult in the same way as it had been before. An alternative understanding regards the descriptions of the Mishnah as an idealized, purified form of the cult, based on biblical texts. They adapt the cult as it once had been, to more ideal norms of the Bible: thus the texts would once again, at least to a large extent, be descriptions of the historical reality although here and there corrected according to the authors’ interpretation of biblical passages related to the cult. A more radical solution understands the Mishnaic descriptions as ideal forms of the cult, based exclusively on the biblical text and not at all reflecting the reality of the Second Temple period. Intermediate positions are, of course, also possible; it frequently is impossible to clearly distinguish between the different approaches.

An analysis of tractate Yoma in the Mishnah must therefore read it on the background of the biblical text, mainly Lev 16, but also has to take into account all relevant information in the literature of the Second Temple period. All this has already been done succinctly in an excellent way by Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra on whose work I can base myself time and again. The largest part of tractate Yoma is dedicated to the Temple service; only chapter eight, the last chapter of the tractate, norms and describes the Day of Atonement in the religious life of the individual. Therefore the public cult takes pride of place in our essay, as well.

1. Seven Days of Preparation for the High Priest

The description of the preparation of the high priest for his service on Yom Kippur in mYom 1 has no basis in the biblical text. Seven days before the day of Atonement the high priest is removed from his house and set apart in the councilors’ chamber (לֵשָׁת הַפֵּרָהדוּרִים) of the Temple
(tYom 1:1 mentions that R. Judah calls it “the senators’ chamber” דלתה העביר. Abba Saul in mM 5:4 identifies the wood chamber with the chamber of the high priest, thus most probably with the chamber of the הרהרה). The purpose of this separation of the high priest is to guarantee his cultic purity when he has to perform his service; for the case that in spite of all precautions he becomes unfit to serve, a substitute for him is determined already in advance. R. Judah proposes that even a substitute for his wife is appointed since Lev 16:11 states that he “shall make atonement for himself and for his house”; but the other rabbis are against such a provision since taking precautions against all eventualities would be without limits. The understanding of ‘house’ as ‘wife’ is typically rabbinic: no other text demands that the high priest must be married at the time of the ritual of Yom Kippur. The strict precautions regarding the ritual purity of the high priest in this rite (according to tYom 1:1 they should prevent that he has sexual relations with his wife in case she turns out to be in doubt as to whether she is menstruating) is clearly in line with biblical ideas—although this is not explicitly stated; only the methods how to guarantee his purity are derived from the Bible, if at all, only indirectly (even Israel on Mount Sinai did not require a purification of seven days, only Moses did: for six days the cloud covered the mountain; on the seventh day Moses was called by the Lord [Exod 24:16 f.]).

The training of the high priest in the various cultic duties during the seven days also calls attention. “All seven days he tosses the blood, offers up the incense, trims the lamps, and offers up the head and the hind leg [of the daily whole offering]” (mYom 1:2; cf. mTam 7:3). It makes sense that the high priest has to practice these rites since in the Second Temple period the high priest only rarely actively participated in the sacrificial cult. He thus needed some practice in order to guarantee an absolutely correct performance of the rites on Yom Kippur. The frequent change of high priests in the last decades of the Second Temple would have rendered such training even more necessary.

Lev 16 does not say that the high priest has to take care of the lamps; that this belongs to the duties of the high priest on Yom Kippur, is apparently derived from Exod 27:21 that “Aaron and his sons shall tend [the lamp] from evening to morning before the Lord”; it might also be based on Num 8:2 where Moses is commanded to say to Aaron: “When you set up the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light in front of the lampstand.” SifBem 60 (Horovitz 58) on Num 8:3 at least indirectly connects this passage with the service on Yom Kippur.