

Beyond Prestige and Magnificence: The Theological Significance of Gold in the Israelite Tabernacle*

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■ Abstract

Examination of Exodus 25–31 and 35–40 shows that preciousness and aesthetic considerations were not the main precipitants of the use of gold in the tabernacle. Rather, the distribution of this metal in both the tabernacle and the priestly garments reveals a theological criterion for its use and distribution. It is suggested here that this criterion is rooted in pre-Israelite Yahwism, and that it emanates from the parallel of gold, approached as the metal produced by YHWH, and copper, its human-made counterpart. Accordingly, YHWH's residence within the tabernacle is associated with pure gold, whereas the function of communion with the Israelites in this facility is attached to a gold-copper alloy (ordinary gold). It is shown that the theological significance of gold related in Exodus contrasts with the considerations of prestige and magnificence associated in Kings with the use of gold in the Jerusalem temple. These observations reveal a divergence between the Priestly and the Deuteronomistic sources in regard to the status of gold and, by extension, of the pre-Israelite background of Yahwism. It is concluded that the description of the tabernacle in Exodus challenges the abandonment of the theological dimension of gold and metallurgy in the Jerusalem temple in the late monarchic period or, alternately, serves as fundament for a theodicy that justifies the fall of the city.

* The anonymous reviewers are warmly acknowledged here for their precious advice, recommendations, and criticisms, which substantially contributed to the maturation of this study and enhanced the scientific quality of this paper.

■ Keywords

Tabernacle, Jerusalem temple, cultic metallurgy, theology of gold, pre-Israelite Yahwism, Priestly source, Deuteronomistic source

■ Introduction

Gold was used extensively in cultic contexts in antiquity. It added prestige to sanctuaries and augmented the magnificence of representations of deities. Furthermore, the inalterability and brilliance of gold spontaneously evoked timelessness and luminosity, two of the most essential characteristics of divine beings.¹

It is not surprising, therefore, to see the accumulation of gold in the tabernacle (Exod 25–31 and 35–40) and the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs 6:20–35; 7:48–50) generally explained through the classical symbolic dimension of this metal: aesthetic considerations,² brilliance and inalterability expressing the divine,³ and, mainly, the impression of prestige, power, wealth, and opulence that emanates from its presence.⁴ Philip Jenson, for example, states that in ancient Israel,

The predominance of gold in the Tabernacle can be related to its valued physical properties and great social significance. This is the basis for the analogies which are made between the human and the divine spheres, and a close connection between gold, divinity and holiness is evident throughout the ancient Near East. Gold is rare, desirable, and very costly, and fittingly represents the dignity and power of those who are able to possess it, to a pre-eminent degree, God.⁵

In this perspective, the abundance of gold is supposed to reflect the Israelites' devotion to their national deity and the latter's reciprocal blessing.

¹ David Carpenter, "Gold and Silver," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade; 16 vols.; New York: MacMillan, 1987) 6:67–69. For a recent view on the use of gold in ancient Near East sanctuaries, see Martin J. Palmer, "Expressions of Sacred Space: Temple Architecture in the Ancient Near East" (PhD Diss.; University of South Africa, 2012) 44, 98, 136, 142–45, 240, 300.

² Craig Keener, "The Tabernacle and Contextual Worship," *The Asbury Journal* 67 (2012) 127–38, 131; Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (HCOT; 3 volumes, Leuven: Peeters, 1993–1999) 3:335.

³ For example, William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40—A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) 380. See also Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, "Zahav," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren; 15 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006) 4:32–40, at 35. Alan R. Buescher, "Gold," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. David N. Freedman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 518; Robin Wakely, "zahab," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (ed. Willem A. van Gemeren; 5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 1:1075–84, at 1078, 1080.

⁴ For example, Evelyn J. van der Steen, "Gold," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld; 5 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–2007) 2:622–23; Keener, "Contextual Worship," 130; Houtman, *Exodus*, 335, 337; Karl H. Singer, *Die Metalle Gold, Silber, Bronze, Kupfer und Eisen im Alten Testament und ihre Symbolik* (Würzburg: Echter, 1980) 158–61.

⁵ Philip P. Jenson, *Graded Holiness: A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) 103.

Besides such extrinsic holiness, however, the accumulation of gold in sanctuaries may express an essential association of this metal with the holy sphere independently of any social, mercantile, or aesthetic consideration. The possibility of intrinsic holiness of gold is generally discarded in modern research focusing on the cult of YHWH in ancient Israel. An examination of the use of gold in antiquity, however, reveals that the presence of the metal in shrines was hardly restricted to functions of prestige and magnificence.⁶ In ancient Egypt, for example, gold was the metal that typically conferred holiness on sanctuaries.⁷ It was even regarded as the material specifically constituting the skin and flesh of the gods.⁸ This explains why essential attributes of the gods, such as luminosity and timelessness, were consubstantial to specific properties of gold.⁹ A similar intrinsic holiness of gold is identified in Mycenaean Greece, where the golden funerary mask was not simply a mark of the deceased's social status but rather the symbol and/or marker of his transition from mortality to immortality.¹⁰ In Bronze Age Europe, too, patterns of gold burial seem to reflect the belief that gold was a metal of divine origin offered to mortals and not the other way around.¹¹

These examples confirm that an intrinsic holiness was sometimes attached to gold in antiquity, as gold was regarded as especially appropriate for expressing the divine. They also indicate that gold acquired its holiness in two different ways: as the most appropriate material with which to symbolize the divine, and as a material of literal divine provenance. In the latter case, gold came to be considered an integral part of the divine realm, its properties revealing aspects of the divine nature and universe. The treatment of gold as a metal of divine origin introduces a theological dimension that is absent from its use in sanctuaries for aesthetic purposes, as a marker of opulence and blessing, and even as a symbol of the divine.

⁶ "For many in the history of religions," writes Carpenter ("Gold and Silver," 68), "gold has not merely symbolized the imperishable but embodied it."

⁷ Sidney Aufrère, *L'univers minéral dans la pensée égyptienne* (Le Caire: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1991) 379.

⁸ Kedar-Kopfstein, "Zahav," 35; Sidney H. Aufrère, "L'univers minéral dans la pensée égyptienne: essai de synthèse et perspectives," *Archéo-Nil* 7 (1997) 113–44, at 122, 127.

⁹ As stressed by Helen Whittaker ("Religious Symbolism and the Use of Gold in Burial Contexts in the Late Middle Helladic and Early Mycenaean Periods," *Studi Miceni ed Egeo-Anatolici* 48 [2006] 283–89, at 285), "The quality of luminosity is universally or near-universally perceived to be associated with the materialisation of the supernatural. Shiny metals, in particular gold, are therefore imbued with religious meaning signifying divine presence."

¹⁰ Concerning the significance of golden funerary masks among the Mycenaeans, Whittaker ("Religious Symbolism," 283) concludes: "The indestructibility and immutability of gold in contrast to the impermanence of human flesh serve to make it particularly appropriate as a symbol of immortality." A similar importance of gold in the transition from death to immortality is observed in ancient Egypt. See Aufrère, *L'univers minéral*, 375–76, 390.

¹¹ Christoph Huth, "Gifts from the Gods: A New Look at some Weapons and Vessels from the Metal Ages," in *Diversity of Sacrifices: Form and Function of Sacrificial Practices in the Ancient World and Beyond* (ed. Carrie A. Murray; Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016) 49–64.

It is the aim of the present study to examine whether intrinsic holiness was assigned to gold in ancient Israel, and to determine whether gold had a theological dimension derived from a status of metal specifically produced by YHWH. For this purpose, the use of gold in the tabernacle, as it is related in Exodus 25–40, will be investigated, since it is the most detailed source about the distribution of metals in YHWH's sanctuaries and its significance. Finally, the conclusions of this analysis will be examined in light of the other biblical sources that involve a ritual use of gold.

■ Current Approaches to Gold in the Tabernacle

Since the theological dimension of gold is currently either ignored or denied, this investigation is justified if the accepted explanations for the presence of gold in the tabernacle are insufficient. They should therefore be examined first.

A. *The Gradation of Preciousness*

Gold, practically the only visible metal in the innermost part of the tabernacle, is absent from the courtyard, in which copper is extensively used.¹² For this reason, many scholars assume a parallel between the ascending gradation of holiness from the courtyard to the holy of holies and a gradation of preciousness of the metals encountered in the tabernacle, from copper to gold.¹³ Such a gradation is justified, for example, by the use of pure gold for the interior furniture of the tabernacle as against an overlay of ordinary gold on the tabernacle's planks and pillars.¹⁴ According to this premise, one expects to find silver in an intermediate location in the tabernacle due to its intermediate preciousness between gold and copper. Indeed, silver is encountered in the boundaries of the sacral domain (outside/courtyard, courtyard/tabernacle, holy place/holy of holies).¹⁵ An examination of the distribution of metals in the tabernacle, however, reveals a different motivation for their use.

Choice of metal: In Exod 36:5–7, we read that Moses asked the Israelites to stop donating raw materials to the construction of the tabernacle after more than enough materials were accumulated. This request is unexpected if the surfeit of precious materials occasioned by the Israelites' generosity made it possible to upgrade the

¹² Jenson, *Graded Holiness*, 108.

¹³ Among the many scholars who defend this opinion see, for example, Menahem Haran, "The Priestly Image of the Tabernacle," *HUCA* 36 (1965) 191–226, at 201, 206; Joe O. Lewis, "The Ark and the Tent," *Review and Expositor* 74 (1977) 537–48, at 543; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Shoken, 1986) 205; Houtman, *Exodus*, 337; Waldemar Janzen, "Tabernacle," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5:447–58, at 449; Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 421; Keener, "Contextual worship," 130. This opinion is resumed by Jenson (*Graded Holiness*, 101) as follows: "The costliness of an item is proportional to its closeness to God."

¹⁴ Menahem Haran, *Temple Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into the Character of Cult-Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) 158.

¹⁵ In Exod 25–31, silver is used in fabricating the pedestals/sockets (פְּדִיּוֹת) of the planks and pillars of the structure (פְּרִיכָה) that separates the holy place from the holy of holies (Exod 26:19, 21, 25, 32). It is also used to join the pillars/posts (עַמֻּדִים) that delimit the tabernacle courtyard (Exod 27:10–11, 17).

prestige and magnificence of the shrine and, for example, to replace copper with gold in producing the artifacts used in the courtyard. Rather, these verses reveal that the nexus of preciousness and availability is not the main criterion for the distribution of metals in the tabernacle.

Cultic implements: Unlike what one would expect from the parallel of holiness and preciousness, no cultic implement used in the tabernacle is made of silver. Artifacts within the tabernacle are made of gold, while those in the courtyard are of copper.

The copper–gold duality: The assumption of an intermediate status of silver between gold and copper is challenged by the use of the gold/copper pairing in the production of the structure that supports the veil at the tabernacle entrance (posts overlaid with gold standing on sockets made of copper, Exod 26:37). Similarly, the metallic clips that adjoin the pieces of which the curtains covering the tabernacle are constituted are made of gold for the inner layer (Exod 26:6) and of copper for the subsequent layer (Exod 26:11).

Copper altar: The premise of a parallel between holiness and the costliness of a metal is justified by the presence of copper artifacts in the courtyard as against implements of gold in the inner sanctuary.¹⁶ The idea of a gradation in holiness, however, is itself challenged by the appellation of the copper altar in the courtyard as “most holy” (קדש קדשים, Exod 29:37; 30:28–29; 40:10), the same term used for the inner sanctuary and its implements (Exod 26:33–34). Such a designation for the copper altar discredits the idea of a gradation of holiness between the courtyard and the sanctuary as well as the subsequent premise of its parallel with the gradation of metal costliness.¹⁷

B. The Different Grades of Gold

Both ordinary gold (זהב) and pure gold (זהב טהור) are mentioned in the tabernacle account. Some scholars deny the importance of the lexical distinction, assuming that both terms refer to the same reality, so that the adjective “pure” is sometimes removed to avoid redundancy and stylistic heaviness.¹⁸

Gold and pure gold, however, are associated with exactly the same implements in Exodus 25–31 (the section detailing the plan of the tabernacle) and in Exodus 35–40 (the section relating its construction).¹⁹ This evidences that the differences

¹⁶ Haran, *Temple Service*, 159.

¹⁷ Michael B. Hundley (“Sacred Spaces, Objects, Offerings, and People in the Priestly Texts: A Reappraisal,” *JBL* 132 (2013) 749–67, at 750) even observes that “In [Ex] 40:10, the bronze altar is even referred to as most holy in (deliberate) contrast to the tabernacle and all that is in it, including the inner sanctuary, which is simply labeled ‘holy’ in the preceding verse (40:9).”

¹⁸ See Haran, *Temple Service*, 163 (for the tabernacle) and 169 (for the priest’s garments). This view contradicts the difference stressed by Haran between pure and ordinary gold concerning the parallel gradient of holiness and costliness. See Haran, *Temple Service*, 158; Wood, *Wings and Wheels*, 24.

¹⁹ The only exception is the golden bells on the priest’s robe, made of ordinary gold in Exod 28:33 and of pure gold in Exod 39:25. See note 46.

between the terms are consistent not with literary and stylistic constraints but with the implements evoked. Therefore, we should treat pure and ordinary gold as two distinct metals in the tabernacle.²⁰

Unlike pure gold, ordinary gold is an alloy in which gold is mixed with a metal of lesser value.²¹ Accordingly, a criterion of preciousness may guide the distribution of pure and alloyed gold in the tabernacle, independently of any consideration of silver and copper.²² This premise, however, is challenged by evidence that the cherubim, positioned in the holy of holies, were made of ordinary gold (Exod 25:17–18) whereas pure gold was used for the table and its cultic vessel (Exod 25:24, 29), the menorah (Exod 25:31), and the censer (Exod 30:3), all positioned outside the holy of holies. Practical considerations introduce no further constraints in the distribution of pure and ordinary gold because alloyed gold, by its mechanical properties, is more appropriate than pure gold for making the menorah. Consequently, the distribution of pure and alloyed gold in the tabernacle is guided neither by considerations of preciousness nor by the encounter of the two metals with mechanical constraints.

C. Aesthetic Considerations

The tabernacle has an undeniable aesthetic dimension. This is reflected, for example, in the specification that the cherubim on the inner curtain of the tabernacle should be skillfully represented (מעשה השב, Exod 26:1). The rich mixing of colors (blue, purple, and scarlet) in the inner curtains undoubtedly contributed to enhance the beauty of this sanctuary. Similar motivations may have informed the distribution of metals in the tabernacle.²³

Gradation of colors: Among the four curtains of the tabernacle, the innermost is multicolored (blue-purple-scarlet, Exod 26:1), the next one probably pale grey (goat's hair, Exod 26:7), the third layer red-dyed (Exod 26:14), and the outermost curtain (porpoise's leather, Exod 26:14) most likely brown. If a parallel gradation of colors conditioned the distribution of metals, we would expect the innermost layer to include yellow elements, which are lacking. The colors of the second and the third layers, in turn, should correspond to those of silver and copper, respectively. The elements of this second curtain, however, are attached by means of copper clasps (Exod 26:11), whereas one would expect to find the choice of silver if a corresponding gradation of colors between curtains and metals existed.

²⁰ Distinguishing between gold and pure gold, Benno Jacob (*Exodus* [New York: Ktav, 1992] 869) concludes that four, rather than three, metals are present in the tabernacle.

²¹ The nature of ordinary gold in use in antiquity and its relationship with pure gold in the tabernacle are detailed in the following section, "Relation between Pure Gold and Alloyed Gold in the Tabernacle."

²² Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 205; Wood, *Wings and Wheels*, 24; Keener, "Contextual worship," 129.

²³ Abigail S. Limmer, "The Social Functions and Ritual Significance of Jewelry in the Iron Age II Southern Levant" (PhD Diss., Department of Near Eastern Studies, The University of Arizona, 2007) 160–62.

Gold frame: The ark, the table, and the incense altar are overlaid with pure gold, to which a surrounding frame of ordinary gold is added (Exod 25:11, 24, and 30:3, respectively). The appellation of this element as a frame/border (רַז) may refer to a decorative function. If so, then the subtle difference between pure and ordinary gold in color and/or brilliance may be exploited to emphasize the shape and aesthetic value of such an ornament. This explanation, however, is challenged by two observations. The first is the absence of alloyed gold in the many ornaments of the menorah, all of which are made of pure gold. The second is the absence of a frame around the copper altar that stands in the courtyard, despite the homology of this item with the incense altar in both shape and function. Consequently, aesthetic considerations are probably not the primary explanation of the use of alloyed gold in the frame that characterizes the inner furnishings of the tabernacle.

This overview indicates that criteria of preciousness and/or magnificence are insufficient to explain the distribution of gold and other metals in the tabernacle and the choice of pure or alloyed gold. Rather, it is likely that the terms “pure menorah” (Exod 31:8; 39:37; Lev 24:4) and “pure table” (Lev 24:6), used for the two cultic elements in the tabernacle that were made of pure gold (Exod 25:24, 31), allude to a theological dimension of this metal. Another criterion, probably theological in nature, apparently conditions the distribution of metals in general and of gold in particular.

■ The Theological Significance of Gold: Evidence from Exodus 33:1–6

Gold is also mentioned in Exodus 32–34, the chapters inserted between the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle (Exod 25–35) and their execution (Exod 35–40).²⁴ In Exodus 32, this precious metal is quoted in seven of the thirty-five verses that recount the golden calf incident.²⁵ In Exod 33:1–6, gold even interferes specifically with the alliance concluded between YHWH and the Israelites.²⁶ If a theological dimension of gold truly existed in ancient Israel, one expects it to be expressed in these chapters.

Given that jewelry in antiquity was made of ordinary gold, this metal, and not pure gold, is the raw material for the fabrication of the golden calf (Exod 32:2–4). It is also the metal for making the jewelry in the subsequent chapter (Exod 33:4–6),

²⁴ Though Exod 32–34 is not identified today with a priestly source, the coherence of their message with that of the surrounding chapters may be deduced from the priestly editing of Exodus 25–40 (and even of Exodus as a whole). See Mark S. Smith, “The Literary Arrangement of the Priestly Redaction of Exodus: A Preliminary Investigation,” *CBQ* 58 (1996) 25–50.

²⁵ This includes details about the origin of this gold, its casting, its treatment by burning and grinding, and even special emphasis on the use of this metal for the forbidden worship: “This people has sinned a great sin, they have made for themselves a god of gold (אֱלֹהֵי זָהָב)” (Exod 32:31b).

²⁶ The importance of this claim is confirmed by its central position, together with the subsequent mention of the tent of meeting (vv. 7–11), in the chiasmic superstructure generated by Exod 32–34. See Mark A. O’Brien, “The Dynamics of the Golden Calf Story,” *ABR* 60 (2012) 18–31, at 20.

evoked in the context of the relationship between the Israelites and YHWH after the sin of the golden calf. This latter circumstance is potentially instructive concerning the nature of the relationship between YHWH and ordinary gold, and, by extension, concerning the significance of this alloy in the Israelite tabernacle.²⁷

Exodus 33 opens with an exposition on the consequences of the sin of the golden calf.²⁸ In the three first verses, YHWH announces the renunciation of his undertaking to dwell among the Israelites and to lead them by himself to the Promised Land. This decision not only suspends, but even cancels the construction of the tabernacle, YHWH's divine residence among the Israelites, the plans for which are extensively detailed in Exodus 25–31.²⁹ Being advised of the decision, the Israelites mourn and strip their jewels off: "When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his jewels" (Exod 33:4, ESV modified). Although the removal of ornaments is a predictable consequence of the act of mourning, the mention of it is neither trivial nor required here for understanding the Israelites' reaction. This specific mention of the jewels has been explained as an echo of the Israelites' stripping of jewels for the manufacture of the golden calf (Exod 32:2–4).³⁰ In this context, scholars even interpret such a recollection as an act of renunciation of idolatry by the Israelites.³¹ If so, however, one may wonder why YHWH then demands in the two subsequent verses that this be done:

⁵For YHWH had said to Moses: Say to the people of Israel, "You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your jewels, that I may know what to do with you." ⁶Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their jewels, from Mount Horeb onward." (Exod 33:5–6, ESV modified)

The simplest explanation for this intriguing repetition is that it results from the mixing, in the editing of Exodus 33, of two distinct sources, each one mentioning jewelry concisely.³² Alternately, scholars have suggested that verse 4 accounts for a partial removal, completed only after the divine request.³³ Verses 5 and 6 have also

²⁷ This premise is supported by the opinion of most scholars, who treat Exod 33 as a chapter devoted to the question of divine presence among the Israelites, e.g., Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (trans. J. S. Bowden; OTL; London: SCM, 1965) 253; Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1974) 558, 562; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 717–18. R. Walter L. Moberly (*At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32–34* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983] 62) assumes that "Ex. 33 is the most extended treatment of the issue of God's presence in the OT."

²⁸ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 427; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 719; James W. Watts, "Aaron and the Golden Calf in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch," *JBL* 130 (2011) 417–30, at 426.

²⁹ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 425–26; Daniel Timmer, "Small Lexemes, Large Semantics: Prepositions and Theology in the Golden Calf Episode (Exodus 32–34)," *Biblica* 88 (2007) 92–99, at 93.

³⁰ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 427.

³¹ Moberly, *Mountain of God*, 60.

³² Childs, *Exodus*, 489 and ref. therein.

³³ Propp, *Exodus*, 598. According to Moberly (*Mountain of God*, 61), such an oddity is justified

been treated as a gloss,³⁴ as a symbolic act of divorce/abrogation of the covenant,³⁵ or even as a metaphor reminding Israel that it remains under judgment even after it repented and mourned (verse 4).³⁶

A comparison of verses 4 and 5 reveals two distinct realities. Mourning, evoked in verse 4, is a temporary and therefore circumstantial motivation, whereas the removal of jewelry in verse 5 betrays an essential motivation: YHWH's inability to dwell among the Israelites without destroying them due to their stiff-necked characteristic. It is through the last-mentioned motive that setting aside of jewels reflects YHWH's closeness to the Israelites. The mention in verse 6 of Mount Horeb, the site of YHWH's revelation, together with jewelry confirms that gold in verses 5–6 is associated not with sin, mourning, idolatry, and their consequences but rather with the terrestrial presence of YHWH. This is confirmed by the subsequent verse, which reports the installation of the tent of meeting far from the Israelites' camp (v. 7) immediately after the removal of the jewels establishes a distance between the jewels and their owners' bodies.

Therefore, the dual motivation for removing the jewels, expressed in Exod 33:4–6, reflects the overlapping of two distinct attitudes toward ordinary gold in ancient Israel. In the first, this metal is seen as a symbol of beauty, wealth, prosperity, and joy, for which reason jewels should be removed during mourning. The second considers ordinary gold to be attached to YHWH, so that wearing jewels is conditioned by proximity between YHWH and the Israelites. The first approach fits the interpretation of gold in the tabernacle as a symbol of prestige and magnificence. The second, however, aims for a theological justification for the presence of ordinary gold in a cultic context in general and in the tabernacle in particular.

■ Relation Between Pure Gold and Alloyed Gold in the Tabernacle

At least two functions of the tabernacle may be identified in Exodus.³⁷ The first, a terrestrial residence (משכן) for the deity, is set forth in Exod 25:8. The second function, communion with the deity, may be deduced from the other designation of the tabernacle: אהל מועד, literally a “tent of meeting.” If, as suggested from analysis of Exodus 33, gold is essentially associated with YHWH, we may examine to what extent the dual functions of the tabernacle may be related to the duality of gold, pure and alloyed, present in it.

as alluding to an incomplete repentance by the Israelites in v. 4b. Joel S. Baden (“On Exodus 33, 1–11,” *ZAW* 124 [2012] 329–40, at 333–35) ranges even farther, suggesting that the meaning of v. 4, “none took off his finery,” should be inverted and understood as consecutive to mourning, thereby explaining the subsequent divine request (vv. 5–6).

³⁴ Houtman, *Exodus*, 692.

³⁵ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 723.

³⁶ Herbert C. Brichto, “The Worship of the Golden Calf: A Literary Analysis of a Fable on Idolatry,” *HUCA* 54 (1983) 1–44, at 22.

³⁷ Houtman, *Exodus*, 320–21.

Two types of gold alloys were used in antiquity. The first, of native origin, is a solid solution of gold and silver (from 5 to 50 percent of silver, depending on the origin of gold) in which traces of other elements (less than 1 percent each) are present.³⁸ The second, artificial, is obtained by adding copper, normally rare (less than 2 percent in native gold).³⁹ The discovery of substantial amounts of copper in most gold implements from antiquity (5–75 percent) reveals that copper was generally added to gold before its use. Beyond diluting gold with a cheaper metal, the addition of copper gives to pale gold-silver alloys an intense yellow appearance and improves casting by substantially lowering the melting point. It also facilitates hammer working of gold by improving the mechanical properties of the metal (hardness, ductility, tensile strength) and by preventing undesirable deformations inherent to the softness of pure or silver-alloyed gold.⁴⁰ This is why almost all the ordinary gold used in antiquity was a natural silver-gold alloy to which substantial amounts of copper were intentionally added.⁴¹ For this reason, ordinary gold should be approached first of all as a gold-copper alloy.

Ordinary gold is extensively represented in the holy area (the outer part of the sanctuary) that is reserved for the priests, whereas the courtyard, the area accessed by undistinguished Israelites, is characterized by an abundance of copper artifacts. This simple observation invites us to associate pure gold, the dominant metal in

³⁸ Thomas G. H. James, "Gold Technology in Ancient Egypt: Mastery of Metal Working Methods," *Gold Bulletin* 5 (1972) 38–42, at 39; Ch. J. Raub, "The Metallurgy of Gold and Silver in Prehistoric Times," in *Prehistoric Gold in Europe: Mines, Metallurgy and Manufacture* (ed. Giulio Morteani and Jeremy P. Northover; Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995) 243–59, at 245. This natural variance in silver content explains the importance, in the Bible, of the mention of the provenance of gold (Hawilah, Gen 2:11; Ophir, Isa 13:12; Ps 45:10; Job 22:24; 28:16) and the specific mention of the quality of gold that originates in a given mining area (e.g., Gen 2:12).

³⁹ Volker Pingel, "Technical Aspects of Prehistoric Gold Objects on the Basis of Metal Analysis," in *Prehistoric Gold in Europe: Mines, Metallurgy and Manufacture* (ed. Giulio Morteani and Jeremy P. Northover; Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995) 385–98, at 388–89; Thilo Rehren, Karsten Hess and Graham Philip, "Auriferous Silver in Western Asia: Ore or Alloy?" *JHMS* 30 (1996) 1–10, at 7.

⁴⁰ Pingel, "Technical Aspects," 394–95.

⁴¹ In ancient Egypt, the concentration of copper in gold (especially in jewelry) generally ranged from 5 percent to 50 percent, aiming for intentional addition of copper. See Jack Ogden, "Metals," in *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (ed. Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Shaw; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 148–75, at 164; Lore G. Trolen, Maria F. Guerra, Jim Tate and Bill Manley, "Technological Study of Gold Jewelry Pieces Dating from the Middle Kingdom to the New Kingdom in Egypt," *ArcheoSciences* 33 (2009) 111–19. An examination of ancient Egyptian documents shows recipes for the preparation of low-grade gold with a gold/copper ratio of 37.5/62.5 percent (9 carat gold). See Leslie B. Hunt, "The Oldest Metallurgical Handbook: Recipes of a Fourth Century Goldsmith," *Gold Bulletin* 9 (1976) 24–31, at 28. Analysis of Mesopotamian gold from the fourth millennium BCE reveals a similar practice of copper alloying (again between 5 percent and 70 percent of copper added), and Mesopotamian texts from the second millennium BCE refer to a general addition of 25–45 percent copper to native gold for use of the latter metal in jewelry. See Martin Levey, "The Refining of Gold in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Chymia* 5 (1959) 31–36. The presence of copper (5–25 percent, but sometimes up to 50 percent) in Phoenician gold jewelry from Spain indicates that similar practices existed in the Iron Age Levant (Pingel, "Technical Aspects," 386, 393).

the interior of the tabernacle, with the function of the divine residence of YHWH and to link gold-copper alloy (ordinary gold) with the function of communion with the divine, reserved to the priests. This premise is examined here by analyzing the comparative use of pure and alloyed gold in the tabernacle and in the priestly raiment.

A. The Tabernacle

Cherubim: In the holy of holies, the two cherubim positioned on the pure-gold *kapporet* are made of ordinary gold (Exod 25:17–18). Their function of interface is revealed in Exod 25:22: “There I will meet with you, and from above the *kapporet*, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel” (Exod 25:22, ESV). The status of cherubim-as-intermediaries is confirmed by their use as a protective screen for the *kapporet* and the ark within the holy of holies.⁴²

Boundaries: If pure gold and copper are the metals associated with the interior and the courtyard of the tabernacle, respectively, and if the gold-copper alloy symbolizes their encounter, we would expect to find specific use of the gold-copper alloy along the boundaries between the tent and its courtyard. This premise is confirmed by evidence that the planks separating the tabernacle from the outside are covered with the gold-copper alloy, mentioned as overlaid with ordinary gold in Exod 26:29, 37.

Poles: Whereas the ark, table, and censer are overlaid with pure gold, ordinary gold is used to make their poles and the elements attaching them (see Exod 25:13, 28; 30:5). These artifacts represent an interface between this holy furniture and the mortals who handle them.

Moldings: Although the ark, the table, and the censer are overlaid with pure gold, the frames/moldings that circumscribe them are made of gold-copper alloy (זר זהב סביב, Exod 25:11–13, 24–26, 28; 30:3–5). Due to their prominent position on the edge of this holy furniture, these rims establish a boundary between the holy furniture and the priest who serves in the sanctuary.⁴³

These four points concur in linking gold-copper alloy with the function of interface between YHWH and the Israelites. This conclusion is supported by an interpretation of the menorah as a symbolic representation of the Tree of Life: the denial of all access to the Tree of Life for humankind (Gen 3:24) corresponds to a total absence of alloyed gold in this implement.⁴⁴

⁴² Houtman, *Exodus*, 384; Wood, *Wings and Wheels*, 29. The same protective function of the cherubim is mentioned in Ezek 28:14.

⁴³ Jacob, *Exodus*, 683–90.

⁴⁴ Carol L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah: A Synthetic Study of a Symbol from the Biblical Cult* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976) 174–81. See also Gordon J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” in *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division A* (1985) 19–25, at 21; Lifsa Schachter, “The Garden of Eden as God’s First Sanctuary,” *JBQ* 41 (2013) 73–77, at 76.

B. The Priestly Raiment

Gold is the only metal found on the priest's raiment. The magnificence and prestige attending to this use, together with that of other precious materials, is emphasized first: "And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty (לכבוד ולתפארת)" (Exod 28:2 ESV). The next verse, however, superimposes another motivation atop the first one: "You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill, that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood" (Exod 28:3 ESV). This instruction indicates, aesthetic considerations aside, that the priest must wear this specific set of garments to penetrate the gold-made domain of YHWH's abode and to fulfill his function of ritual mediator between YHWH and the Israelites.⁴⁵ In this context, it is noteworthy that gold-copper alloy is the dominant metal in the priest's clothing and on his person. It is used in the manufacture of the fabric, the ephod, the band (חשב), and the breastplate (Exod 28: 5, 6, 8, 15). It is also the metal in which the precious stones are set (Exod 28:11, 13, 20) and by which the various pieces of clothing are joined (Exod 28:23, 24, 26, 27). This extensive use of gold-copper alloy fits the appellation of the High Priest as an emissary of YHWH *Šeba'ot* (Mal 2:7) and his function of interface between YHWH and the Israelites.⁴⁶

The priestly apparel also includes three items made of pure gold, whose position and function support the interpretation here proposed:

Chains on the band: Chains of pure gold are attached to the settings of the two stones positioned on the band, on which the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are engraved (Exod 28:14). By virtue of their position, these two artifacts of pure gold are indirectly connected to the priest's band through the settings, which are made of gold-copper alloy: "And two chains of pure gold at the borders (מגבלת); you shall braid these like corded work, and fasten the wreathen chains to the settings" (Exod 28:14 KJV, modified [2x]). The meaning of מגבלת (a *hapax legomenon*) remains discussed, but the choice of this term, derived from the root *gbl* (= *border, limit*), emphasizes its status as an interface between the priest's clothing and the interior of the tabernacle, the domain of pure gold.⁴⁷

Chain on the breastplate: Another chain of pure gold is positioned on the breastplate (חשן): "And you shall make upon the breastplate chains at the border (גבלת) of wreathen work of pure gold" (Exod 28:22 KJV modified). The root *gbl* of the enigmatic term גבלת (another *hapax legomenon*) also invests this chain with the character of a border or a frame for the breastplate, a feature confirmed by the subsequent verses, which describe this chain as being attached to the breastplate

⁴⁵ This conclusion is supported by the similarity in the colors (blue, purple, and scarlet) used for the inner curtain of the tabernacle (Exod 26:1) and for the priestly garments (Exod 28:5, 6, 8).

⁴⁶ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 635; Propp, *Exodus*, 525.

⁴⁷ These chains of pure gold are not mentioned in Exod 39, but their absence is apparently compensated for by the use of pure gold (instead of ordinary gold) for the bells that lay at the extremities of the priest's robe (compare Exod 28:33 with Exod 39:25).

by rings positioned at its extremities (Exod 28:23–25). This again supports the idea that pure gold serves as an interface between the priest's garments (the domain of alloyed gold) and YHWH's holy dwelling-place (the domain of pure gold).

Plate on the turban: The third implement made of pure gold is a small plate: "You shall make a plate (צִיץ) of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, 'Holy to YHWH'" (Exod 28:36, ESV modified). Here again, the choice of the uncommon term צִיץ to designate this small plate emphasizes its protuberant position relative to the priestly garment. Being attached to the turban by a small blue cord (Exod 28:37) and positioned in front of the priest's face (Lev 8:9), this modestly sized artifact was probably not in direct contact with the priest's skin or vestments; instead, it protruded in front of his head. Its intermediate position, between the priest and the tabernacle, corroborates its mediating function relative to the deity: "It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before YHWH" (Exod 28:38 ESV modified). Here again, pure gold in the priest's garments is not associated with man-to-God communication; instead, it is an interface between this communion and YHWH himself.

These observations reveal a high level of homology and complementarity between the interior furnishings of the tabernacle and the priest's paraphernalia.⁴⁸ In the tabernacle, pure gold is the dominant metal and alloyed gold is used in the periphery and plays an intermediating role. In the High Priest's vestments, in contrast, alloyed gold is dominant and the few items of pure gold ensure an interface between the priest's emissary role and YHWH himself.

■ Complementarity of Gold and Copper

The coherency observed in the use of gold in the tabernacle and in the priestly raiment indicates that gold-copper alloy was not approached simply as low-grade gold. Rather, its theological importance prompts us to explore the relationship between its two constituent metals.

A. The Special Status of Gold and Copper in the Tabernacle

The offering of gold by the Israelites for the construction of the tabernacle is accompanied by a ritual of תְּנוּפָה, a process involving elevating and brandishing the offering before YHWH: "The gold swung and brandished (זָהַב הַתְּנוּפָה) was twenty-nine talents and 730 shekels, by the shekel of the sanctuary" (Exod 38:24b ESV, modified).⁴⁹ A similar תְּנוּפָה ritual is performed for the copper devoted to the construction of the tabernacle (Exod 38:29). The תְּנוּפָה ritual is frequently identified as one of dedication, promoting the transfer of an offering from the owner's domain

⁴⁸ See Haran, "Priestly Image," 211.

⁴⁹ The same ritual is mentioned in Exod 35:22.

to that of the god.⁵⁰ However, this approach cannot explain why a similar תנופה ritual is not performed for silver, precious stones, and all other materials that the Israelites offered for the construction of the tabernacle.⁵¹ Rather, restriction of this תנופה ritual to gold and copper underscores their special status, and it may be related to the fact that all ritual artifacts in the tabernacle are made of these two metals. The parallel between them is revealed by the homology in shape and function between the courtyard altar, overlaid with copper and used for burning and smoking the sacrifices outside the tabernacle, and the altar in the tabernacle, overlaid with gold, used for burning and smoking incense within the tabernacle. These interactive and symmetrical uses of gold and copper suggest that these two metals were considered homologous if not interrelated. Identifying the origin of this affinity may help us to clarify the theological significance of gold in ancient Yahwism.

B. The Possible Theological Significance of the Gold-Copper Parallel

In the theological dimension of metals, their mode of production, alloying, recycling, and physical properties are sources of knowledge about the divine. If so, their examination may be of importance for understanding the theological motivation for the pairing of gold with copper rather than silver in the tabernacle.

Gold and copper have similar properties. As pure metals, gold and copper have almost the same melting point (1063°C and 1083°C, respectively). They also have similar color and brilliance, especially when gold is compared with some copper alloys. In both, the introduction of small quantities of an additive (silver or copper for gold, tin or arsenic for copper) lowers the melting point substantially and improves strength and mechanical properties considerably.

One finds, however, two essential differences between the metals. The first concerns the inalterability of gold, a feature that associates this metal with eternity and perfection. It contrasts with the oxidation processes that affect copper and set this metal in the realm of temporality. The second concerns the origin of these metals. Copper was produced in the southern Levant by smelting a green sandstone (malachite) in which no ostensible traces of metal are visible. Before the rise of modern chemistry, the smelting process was considered a genuine act of creation in a furnace. In contrast, gold was never produced in a furnace; it was only extracted in a native state.

These parallels and differences had implications in antiquity. If the two properties typically associated with the divine (timelessness and luminosity) characterize gold, and if this metal cannot be produced by humankind, it would not be surprising for people to approach it as being produced in the divine sphere, in parallel with the way

⁵⁰ See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 462.

⁵¹ Jacob Milgrom (“Hattēnūpā,” in *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* [Leiden: Brill, 1983] 139–58, at 148) also identifies a type of תנופה ritual especially performed in unusual circumstances. Here again, however, this justification cannot explain why such a ritual is not performed for other materials, even silver, that were donated for the construction of the tabernacle.

copper was produced by humankind. This conclusion may be strengthened by the mere evidence that the presence of malachite (copper ore) near quartz veins was an essential criterion for gold prospecting in ancient Egypt and Nubia from the fourth millennium BCE onward.⁵² Consequently, gold mining and copper metallurgy often appeared in parallel and, in turn, as interrelated. This means that malachite may have been understood as being involved in the metallurgical process that led to the (divine) production of gold, exactly as it was involved in the production of copper.

This conclusion is supported by further considerations about silver. This precious metal is frequently bundled with gold as belonging to YHWH (e.g., Ezek 16:17; Hos 2:10; Joel 4:5; Hag 2:8), whereas a similar association between gold and copper is not found. If so, both gold and silver were regarded as metals of specifically divine origin, a prestigious status that was apparently withheld from copper.⁵³ Nevertheless, silver was of relatively minor theological significance in the tabernacle, especially relative to copper. This contrasting situation is clarified by metallurgical considerations. All native gold imported to the Levant in antiquity was a natural gold-silver alloy almost devoid of copper.⁵⁴ Accounting to the status of gold, it is likely that the silver present in native gold was interpreted as a byproduct of the divine metallurgy of gold, exactly as iron (a silver-like metal) was at this time a byproduct of copper smelting.⁵⁵

All these observations promote a homology between copper, the metal smelted in a (human) furnace, and gold, its counterpart, issued from a similar process of divine metallurgy. This perspective may explain why, in the tabernacle, gold was associated with the divine abode, whereas copper, its terrestrial counterpart, was symmetrically found in the courtyard. This also elucidates why silver, once approached as the byproduct of the (divine) metallurgy of gold, had no special theological function

⁵² Dietrich Klemm, Rosemarie Klemm, and Andreas Murr (“Gold of the Pharaohs: 6000 Years of Gold Mining in Egypt and Nubia,” *African Earth Sciences* 33 [2001] 643–59, at 648) specify that “During the Old (2700–2160 BC) and Middle Kingdom (2119–1794 BC), the previously described prospecting method of searching for malachite staining in the host rocks continued in general, but in addition hematite enriched quartz veins (in place with barite) became important for exploitation and, in case of gold discovery, for subsequent mining targets.”

⁵³ The similar interdiction of using gold and silver to represent deities, extensively mentioned in the Bible (e.g., Exod 20:23; Deut 7:25; 29:17), also supports the hypothesis of belief in a common divine property/origin of these two metals.

⁵⁴ See note 38.

⁵⁵ This iron byproduct comes from the traditional addition, in the Levant, of iron ores as fluxes to furnaces in order to improve the smelting of copper ore. See Noel H. Gale et al., “The Adventitious Production of Iron in the Smelting of Copper,” in *The Ancient Metallurgy of Copper: Archaeology-Experiment-Theory* (ed. Beno Rothenberg; London: The Institute for Archaeo-Metallurgical Studies, 1990) 182–91. This double parallel—between copper and gold and between iron (as a byproduct of copper smelting in human furnaces) and silver (as a byproduct of gold smelting in a divine furnace)—is supported by an oracle found in Isa 60:17a: “Instead of copper I will bring gold, and instead of iron I will bring silver.”

despite its prestigious origin. This may also clarify the theological importance of the gold-copper alloy in the communion between YHWH and the Israelites.⁵⁶

■ Discussion

A. The Theological Dimension of Gold in Ancient Yahwism

A theological motive for the distribution of metals in the Israelite tabernacle emerges from the present study. It is founded on a gold-copper duality, in which gold is interpreted as a divine-made metal and copper its terrestrial counterpart. This view, and especially the intrinsic holiness of gold, is revealed in Exodus through the detailed instructions for the plan of the tabernacle (Exod 25–31). It is confirmed by the repetition of all these instructions in the chapters that report its construction (Exod 35–40). The insertion of the account of the golden calf and its consequences (Exod 32–34) between the plan and the construction of the tabernacle is another means by which the theological dimension of gold and its misunderstanding by the Israelites are emphasized. All these observations indicate that the author(s) of these chapters devote special attention to instructing us about the uses (and misuses) of precious metals in YHWH's sanctuary.

This theological dimension is not surprising. Both in Gen 2:12 and Ezek 28:13, the presence of gold is mentioned in Eden, the divine domain. This signifies the existence of a relationship between YHWH and gold before the worship of YHWH by the Israelites, independent of it, and emancipated from any consideration of prestige and magnificence of his cult. This situation, combined with the evidence that gold was not produced from ore in antiquity, even suggests that gold was approached as a metal of divine origin, a product of the celestial/Eden workshop. In such a case, it becomes a material originating from the divine domain, an ostensible marker of divine activity introduced in the shrine. Even more, in light of the symbolic homology between the divine residence in Eden and the Israelite shrine,⁵⁷ filling the latter with gold becomes the ultimate expression of such a correspondence.

⁵⁶ The addition of copper to gold, even in a low concentration, considerably improves the latter metal's mechanical properties. This human contribution to the divine metal enables not only its contemplation, but also its use it for producing a multiplicity of items of prestige. This beneficent addition of copper to the divine metal was probably invested with theological significance, introducing a dimension of collaboration between YHWH and humankind.

⁵⁷ This homology is reflected in the common mention of cherubim (Gen 3:24; Exod 25:18; Ezek 28:14) and the similar association between gold and precious stones (Exod 28:17–20; Ezek 28:13). See Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism"; Michael L. Morales, *The Tabernacle Pre-Figured: Cosmic Mountain Ideology in Genesis and Exodus* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012) 245–77; Schachter, "Garden of Eden." According to Lawrence E. Stager ("Jerusalem and the Garden of Eden," *Eretz-Israel* 26 [1999] 183*–99*, at 187*), a similar homology apparently existed with the Jerusalem temple. Wenham ("Sanctuary Symbolism," 22) noticed that "if Eden is seen as a super sanctuary, this reference to gold can hardly be accidental for the most sacred items of tabernacle furniture were made of gold or covered with 'pure gold.'"

B. The Pre-Israelite Theological Background

Metallurgy in antiquity was apparently practiced by highly specialized craftsmen whose knowledge was generally of a secret nature.⁵⁸ And unlike the Phoenicians and the Edomites, in the Iron Age most Israelites were not directly involved in prospecting, producing, and trading in metals. For these reasons, the identification of a theological dimension of metallurgy in ancient Israel may appear astounding at first sight. Previous research, however, has identified a metallurgical background for pre-Israelite Yahwism. It is revealed by the special affinity between YHWH and the Canaanite metalworkers (Qenites), prior to the Israelites.⁵⁹ It is also supported by biblical indications of deep knowledge of YHWH and his worship in Edom, a nation known in the Iron Age for its important metallurgical activity.⁶⁰ YHWH's origin in Seir (Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4), a region identified with the mining area of the Arabah Valley, confirms this affinity of YHWH with metallurgy and metalworkers before his transformation into the national deity of Israel.

The vision in Ezekiel 1 of the celestial universe as a giant furnace suggests that metallurgy remained a theological fundament for the Israelites.⁶¹ This is confirmed by the biblical representation of YHWH's theophany through volcanic

⁵⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977) 45–53; Kristian Kristiansen and Thomas L. Larsson, *The Rise of the Bronze Age Society: Travels, Transmissions and Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 49–55; Sandra Blakely, *Myth, Ritual, and Metallurgy in Ancient Greece and Recent Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 25, 152–57.

⁵⁹ Concerning recent developments about the Qenite hypothesis, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah,” *JSOT* 33 (2008) 131–53; Marlene E. Mondriaan, “The Rise of Yahwism: The Role of Marginalized Groups” (PhD Diss., The University of Pretoria, South Africa, 2010) 307–70. For considerations about the way of life, ethnicity, and metallurgical activity of this congregation, see Paula M. McNutt, *The Forging of Israel: Iron Technology, Symbolism, and Tradition in Ancient Society* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990) 237–46; Thomas E. Levy, Russel B. Adams, and Adolfo Muniz, “Archaeology and the Shasu Nomads: Recent Excavations in the Jabal Hamrat Fidan, Jordan,” in *Le-David Maskil: A Birthday Tribute for David Noel Freedman* (ed. William H. C. Propp and Richard E. Friedman; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004) 63–89.

⁶⁰ Concerning the metallurgical activity in Iron Age Edom, see Thomas E. Levy, “You Shall Make for Yourself No Molten Gods: Some Thoughts on Archaeology and Edomite Ethnic Identity,” in *Sacred History, Sacred Literature: Essays on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion in Honor of R. E. Friedman* (ed. Shawna Dolansky; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008) 239–55. The ethnic continuity between the Edomites and the Bronze Age Shassu populations is suggested by Thomas E. Levy, “Pastoral Nomads and Iron Age Metal Production in Ancient Edom,” in *Nomads, Tribes and the State in the Ancient Near East: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* (ed. Jeffrey Szychman; Chicago: The Oriental Institute Press, 2009) 147–77. About the probable worship of YHWH in Edom, in parallel with Israel, see Linda Haney, “YHWH, the God of Israel . . . and of Edom? The Relationships in the Oracle to Edom in Jeremiah 49:7–22,” in *Uprooting and Planting: Essays on Jeremiah for Leslie Allen* (ed. John Goldingay; New York: T&T Clark, 2007) 78–115; Blenkinsopp, “Midianite-Kenite hypothesis,” 149–51; Nissim Amzallag, *Esau in Jerusalem: The Rise of a Seirite Religious Elite in Zion at the Persian Period* (Pendé: Gabalda, 2015) 39–41.

⁶¹ Godfrey R. Driver, “Ezekiel's Inaugural Vision,” *VT* 1 (1951) 60–62; Nissim Amzallag, “Copper Metallurgy: A Hidden Fundament of the Theology of Ancient Israel?” *SJOT* 27 (2013) 155–80, at 164–66.

activity,⁶² a feature specifically attached in antiquity to the gods who patronized metallurgy. The identification of *keḥod-YHWH* (often rendered “the glory of the LORD”) with molten metal and the metallurgical mode of action of YHWH concur.⁶³ Consequently, the identification in the Israelite tabernacle of a theological dimension of gold, and especially of its metallurgical nature, is not as surprising as it may appear.

C. *The Status of Metals in the Jerusalem Temple*

The pattern of distribution of metals in the Solomonic temple and the tabernacle is globally similar. In both shrines, copper artifacts are positioned in the courtyard and gold is used in making the furniture, cultic utensils, and vessels inside. In contrast to the description of the tabernacle in Exodus, however, the use and distribution of metals in the temple is not conditioned in Kings by any divine instruction. Furthermore, the distinction between the use of pure and alloyed gold remains imprecise in this book.⁶⁴ These simple observations suggest that the book of Kings attributes a limited theological dimension to metals and to the choices guiding their distribution in the temple.

The emphasis on the preciousness of gold is confirmed by the parallel, advanced in Kings, between the use of this metal in Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs 6:21–22, 32–35; 7:48–50) and in Solomon’s palace (1 Kgs 10:16–22). In both cases, the abundance of gold is related as a sign of wealth, opulence, and YHWH’s blessing of Solomon and his kingdom (e.g., 1 Kgs 10:10–11, 14, 22).⁶⁵ The presence of silver cultic utensils in the Jerusalem temple (2 Kgs 12:14; 25:15) also integrates the idea of a gradient of preciousness in the distribution and use of metals in the Jerusalem Temple defended in Kings.⁶⁶

⁶² For example, the Sinai theophany in Exod 19:18; 20:18; 24:17; Deut 4:15. For further examples of volcanic theophany of YHWH in the Bible, see Jean Koenig, “Aux origines des théophanies iahvistes,” *RHR* 169 (1966) 1–36; Jacob E. Dunn, “A God of Volcanoes: Did Yahwism Take Root in Volcanic Ashes?” *JSOT* 38 (2014) 387–424; Nissim Amzallag, “Some Implication of the Volcanic Theophany of YHWH on his Primeval Identity,” *AntOr* 12 (2014) 11–38.

⁶³ Amzallag, “Copper metallurgy,” 158–62; Nissim Amzallag, “Furnace Re-melting as Expression of YHWH’s Holiness: Evidence from the Meaning of *qanna* in Divine Context,” *JBL* 134 (2015) 233–52.

⁶⁴ For example, compare 1 Kgs 6:21a with 1 Kgs 6:22a.

⁶⁵ The explicit nexus of Solomon’s wealth and his use of gold for the temple and his palace is reflected in 1 Kgs 10:21: “All King Solomon’s drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold. None were of silver; silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon.”

⁶⁶ The parallel between costliness and holiness in the book of Kings is confirmed by the specific use of different woods (oil-wood, cedar, and cypress) in the temple, whereas the most precious one is found in the inner sanctum. See Menahem Haran, “Shiloh and Jerusalem: The Origin of the Priestly Tradition in the Pentateuch,” *JBL* 81 (1962) 11–24, at 15; Victor A. Hurowitz, “YHWH’s Exalted House: Aspects of the Design and Symbolism of Solomon’s Temple,” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel* (ed. John Day; London: T&T Clark, 2005) 63–110, at 88–89.

However, the secularized status of metals in Kings does not necessarily reflect the original situation in the Jerusalem temple. At a time when altars were made of stone, the copper-coated altar at the Jerusalem temple is a singularity that probably denotes a theological function of metals. The loss of a theological dimension of metals in the course of the First Temple Period is suggested by the replacement of the original copper altar with a stone altar during the reign of Ahaz (2 Kgs 16:15), followed by the removal of other cultic copper elements from the temple courtyard (2 Kgs 16:17). Such a trend is confirmed later by the exclusion of the copper serpent (נחשתן) from the temple during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4). The strong metallurgical connotation of this cultic artifact is revealed both by its appellation and by the circumstances of its fabrication.⁶⁷ These changes were later preserved by the promoters of the Josiah reform, a feature indicating that the latter extended the trend of secularizing the relation to metals in the worship of YHWH.

In the book of Kings, the replacement of the copper altar with a stone-made one is mentioned in a very neutral fashion, and the removal and destruction of the copper serpent (נחשתן) is even explicitly approved. This links the author(s) of Kings to the trend of rejecting the theological dimension of gold and its implications for the Israelite worship of YHWH. This observation is especially interesting in light of the affiliation of Kings with the Deuteronomistic school, itself apparently rooted in the Josiah reform.⁶⁸

Kings is not the only Deuteronomistic text that distances itself from the theological dimension of gold. For example, the manufacture by Gideon of a golden ritual artifact (אפוד) from the jewels plundered from the Ishmaelites is considered a snare for him and his house (Judg 8:25–27), even though no idolatry is here explicitly associated with this cultic implement. A similar danger of perdition originating in cultic uses of gold is exposed in Deut 7:25 (ESV): “The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to YHWH your God.” The nature of such jeopardy is silenced in both sources, but, in light of the theological dimension of gold identified here, one might well reason that the snare pertains to the divine origin of gold, the magic powers attached to such a supernatural origin, and the consecutive danger associated with venerating this metal.⁶⁹ This peril of “divinization” of gold and/or exploitation of

⁶⁷ Nissim Amzallag, “The Serpent as a Symbol of Primeval Yahwism,” *Semitica* 58 (2016) 208–39.

⁶⁸ For review of recent research about the relationship between Kings and the Deuteronomistic school, see Gary N. Knoppers, “Rethinking the Relationship between Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History: The Case of Kings,” *CBQ* 63 (2001) 393–415 and Michael Avioz, “The Book of Kings in Recent Research (Part I),” *CBR* 4 (2005) 11–55, at 14–16. Concerning the affinities of the Deuteronomistic school with the Josiah reform, see Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 9, 65, 161–66; Erik Eynikel, *The Reform of King Josiah and the Composition of the Deuteronomistic History* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 7–31.

⁶⁹ In the context of magical properties of gold, Propp (*Exodus 19–40*, 432) suggests, “Some biblical authors may have considered divining by an ephod tantamount to idolatry.”

its magical powers may have stimulated its secularization by the reformers of the Deuteronomistic school and, in turn, the promotion of considerations of prestige and magnificence at the expense of the theological dimension assigned to this metal.

D. The Hidden Message of Exodus 25–40

The present study suggests an opposition in regard to the status of gold in YHWH's sanctuary between the author of Kings (and, more generally, the Deuteronomistic school) and the author of the tabernacle instructions in Exodus 25–40, apparently belonging to the Priestly school. Three possibilities emerge from such a duality, concerning the date and circumstances of the composition of these chapters.

(i) Exodus 25–40 was composed prior to Ahaz's reform, which promoted the secularization of metals. In this case, these chapters were written to preserve the memory of the early Yahwistic traditions that preceded the cult of YHWH in the Jerusalem temple.⁷⁰

(ii) Exodus 25–40 emerged between the reign of Ahaz and the destruction of the Temple.⁷¹ It was therefore composed by an author who opposed the cultic reforms (including Josiah's) and the religious elite that supported them. If so, we may assume that this opus lost its dissident nature after the fall of the Jerusalem temple and was gradually integrated into the corpus of texts that serves as a background for the theologies elaborated after the cataclysm.⁷²

(iii) Exodus 25–40 was composed after the fall of Jerusalem.⁷³ In this case, the amplification of the theological dimension of gold in the worship of YHWH, through the detailed description of its presence in the tabernacle, decies the possibility of no divine presence in the Jerusalem temple after the secularization of metals, a situation that would endorse the violation of the

⁷⁰ Menahem Haran, "Shiloh and Jerusalem: The Origin of the Priestly Tradition in the Pentateuch," *JBL* 81 (1962) 14–24; Richard J. Clifford, "The Tent of El and the Israelite Tent of Meeting," *CBQ* 33 (1971) 221–27, at 226; Friedman, "Tabernacle," and ref. therein. The mention of acacia wood being used in the tabernacle, instead of cypress, olive, or cedar, even suggests a reference to non-Israelites tent-sanctuaries used in southeastern Canaan in the Iron Age and even before, as suggested by Craig R. Koester, "Tabernacle," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. David N. Freedman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 1269–70; and Kitchen, "Tabernacle."

⁷¹ Menahem Haran, "The Divine Presence in the Israelite Cult and the Cultic Institutions," *Biblica* 50 (1969) 251–67, at 262–63; Avi Hurvitz, "Dating the Priestly Source in Light of the Historical Study of Biblical Hebrew a Century after Wellhausen," *ZAW* 100 (1988) 88–100, at 99; Friedman, "Tabernacle," 300; Milgrom, "Hattēnûpâ," 454, 458; Ralph W. Klein, "Back to the Future. The Tabernacle in the Book of Exodus," *Interpretation* 50 (1996) 264–76.

⁷² Haran (*Temple Service*, 12) assumes that "even those who consider P a pre-exilic work must concede that before Ezra it led only a quasi-sectarian existence and could hardly be discerned against the visible course of history."

⁷³ This classical position is reviewed and discussed by Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 96, and Janzen, "Tabernacle," 451–52. It is supported by authors dating the P-source from the exilic/post-exilic period; e.g., R. E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 113–22; William H. C. Propp, "The Priestly Source Recovered Intact?" *VT* 46 (1996) 458–78, at 472–76; Esias E. Meyer, "Dating the Priestly Source in the Pre-Exilic Period: Some Remarks about Anachronistic Slips and Other Obstacles," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 31 (2010) 1–6.

sanctuary by foreigners and even its destruction. More generally, it carries the message that the Israelites cannot consider the fundamentals of pre-Israelite Yahwism obsolete without dissociating themselves from their national deity.

Today, the divergence of opinions concerning the dating of the P-source renders these three opinions defensible. However, the insertion of chapters 32–34 betrays a situation of general misunderstanding of the theological dimension of gold, including by the religious elite. Such a claim is more compatible with the treatment of Exodus 25–40—and even the redacted book of Exodus as a whole—as a dissident opus or as a fundament for a theodicy concerning the Jerusalem destruction, rather than a serene retrospective concerning the pre-temple cult of YHWH.⁷⁴

Also the antagonism identified by some scholars between the Deuteronomistic and the Priestly texts concerning the cult of YHWH⁷⁵ supports the second or the third eventualities. In both cases, we may conclude that the tabernacle is not simply a retrojection of the Jerusalem temple advanced to promote its legitimacy.⁷⁶ Rather, it expresses a theological dimension of gold ignored in other biblical sources.⁷⁷ In such a perspective, the insistence in Exodus 25–40 on the theological dimension of metals probably reflects, above all, virulent criticism of the way YHWH was worshiped in the Jerusalem temple.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ The question of the authorship of the different parts of Exodus and their gathering into a coherent opus is beyond the scope of this study. However, the metallurgical dimension of YHWH's volcanic theophany at Sinai, the presence of Jethro (a member of the Qenite congregation of metalworkers) in crucial phases of the birth of Israel (Exod 3–4, 18), and the metallurgical wonders associated with YHWH's revelation in Exod 4:3; 7:9–12, 15 (see Nissim Amzallag, "YHWH, The Canaanite God of Metallurgy?" *JSOT* 33 [2009] 387–404, at 394–96) reveal that the emphasis on the metallurgical dimension of ancient Yahwism is not restricted to considerations relative to the tabernacle. Together, these observations reveal a high level of homogeneity in Exodus in regard to the importance of the metallurgical background of ancient Yahwism, a feature that singularizes this opus among all other books of the Bible.

⁷⁵ Menahem Haran, "Behind the Scenes of History: Determining the Date of the Priestly Source," *JBL* 100 (1981) 321–33, at 332; Stephen A. Geller, "Blood Cult: Toward a Literary Theology of the Priestly Work of the Pentateuch," *Prooftexts* 12 (1992) 97–124, at 120.

⁷⁶ Many scholars assume that the tabernacle is a retrojection of the Jerusalem temple in which archaic features were introduced (e.g., Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 196; Houtman, *Exodus*, 325–26; Alice Wood, *Of Wings and Wheels: A Synthetic Study of the Biblical Cherubim* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008] 28–29; Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009] 90–93). Others trace the inspiration to tent-shrines from the pre-monarchic period. See Frank M. Cross, "The Priestly Tabernacle," in *The Biblical Archaeologist's Reader* (ed. David N. Freedman and Ernest Wright; New York: Doubleday, 1961) 201–27; Haran, "Priestly Image"; Richard E. Friedman, "Tabernacle," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. David N. Freedman; 6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 6:292–300, at 294–95; Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Tabernacle: A Bronze Age Artefact," *Eretz-Israel* 24 (1993) 119*–29*, at 126*–27*. These divergences aside, all authors agree that the text in Exodus should be treated as an idealized description.

⁷⁷ The idealization of the tabernacle allows the author to emancipate the mention of metals from all practical constraints. Consequently, one would expect this description to over-emphasize the theological dimension of gold, if such a dimension truly exists in the Israelite religion.

⁷⁸ For Terence E. Freitheim ("The Priestly Document: Anti-Temple?") *VT* 18 [1968] 313–29, at 318), "It is clear, however, that there was some anti-temple feeling prior to the building of the

The mention of the returnees building an altar in Jerusalem and setting it on its bases (Ezra 3:2–3) suggests that they reconstructed the Ahaz altar rather than its copper antecedent. Such an absence of the theological dimension of gold and metallurgy is confirmed by an oracle from Zechariah that mentions the use of both silver and gold for making a crown to be set on the head of the High Priest (Zech 6:11). Also, the book of Ezra relates that the metallic implements brought from Babylonia to reinstate the cult in Jerusalem were all made of gold or silver. The systematic mention of their weight (Ezra 1:1; 2:69; 8:25–26, 28, 30, 33) emphasizes their preciousness before any theological significance is imparted to them.⁷⁹ These indications suggest that the returnees were more receptive to the secular approach toward metals professed by the Deuteronomistic school than to the contrasting position defended by the group to which the author(s) of Exodus belonged. These observations favor the assumption of a pre-exilic composition of Exodus as dissident opus (second hypothesis) rather than its approach as post-exilic composition expressing both theodicy and hope for reconstruction (third hypothesis).

■ Conclusion

The hypothesis of intrinsic holiness and even of a theological dimension of gold in ancient Israel is ostensibly challenged by the simple evidence that the Israelites used gold artifacts as ornaments (Exod 32:2) and anointed gold artifacts with holy oil, exactly as they did other implements, materials, and garments, before integrating them into the divine service in the tabernacle (Exod 30:25–31). The present study, however, reveals a more complex situation. First, it appears from Exod 33:1–6 that golden jewelry also had an apotropaic function attached to YHWH's presence. Furthermore, the singular status of gold, and especially the dyad of gold and copper (from which silver is excluded), reveals that gold was approached in early Yahwism as the outcome of divine metallurgical activity, the counterpart of the (terrestrial) metallurgy of copper. These elements confer a theological dimension on gold and even on its alloys with copper, which finds expression in the distribution of metals in the tabernacle.

This theological dimension of gold, promoted in Exodus, seems to be anchored in the pre-Israelite Yahwistic background that itself is characterized by strong metallurgical affinities. This view contrasts with the secularized approach to gold in Kings, where this metal is appreciated mainly for its preciousness and prestige.

post-exilic sanctuary whose representatives would have welcomed the Priestly program or perhaps were involved in its promulgation.”

⁷⁹ The only exception is the mention of two copper vases among the gifts donated by the exilic community for the temple. Their transport to Jerusalem, however, is again conditioned not by theological considerations but by the high commercial value of their alloy, reported as being “as precious as gold” (Ezra 8:27). Concerning the identification of this alloy as Corinthian bronze, see David M. Jacobson and Michael P. Weitzman, “What Was Corinthian Bronze?” *AJA* 96 (1992) 237–47, at 240–241; Dan Levene and Beno Rothenberg, *A Metallurgical Gemara: Metals in the Jewish Sources* (London: The Institute of Archaeo-Metallurgical Studies, 2007) 70–73.

The present considerations suggest that the demise of the theological dimension of gold attested in Kings results not from the gradual erosion of ancient beliefs but from an intentional reformation of the cult of YHWH that was advanced during the late monarchic period and reflected in the Bible by writings affiliated with the Deuteronomistic school. The success of this reform of the Israelite religion is probably one of the main sources of ignorance, from late antiquity to our days, of the theological dimension of gold in ancient Yahwism.