

## THE RATIONALE OF THE LAWS OF CLEAN AND UNCLEAN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

JOE M. SPRINKLE\*

Ritual cleanness and uncleanness (associated with the Heb. roots *tāhēr* and *tāmē'*) represents a major theme of the Pentateuch. Purity rules describe the rituals, varying according to the “severity” of the impurity contracted, for ceremonial uncleanness due to skin disease, bodily discharges, touching unclean things, and eating unclean foods. The rationale for these laws is never clearly spelled out, but several explanations probably have some validity, including hygiene, the need to dissociate oneself from disgusting or pagan things, various other ethical lessons, the association of Yahweh with life and wholeness rather than death or disorder, the separation of worship from expressions of sexuality, and the need for Israel to be separated from the Gentiles. However, this paper argues that the most important message conveyed by these laws is that God is holy, and man, conversely, is contaminated and unfit, in and of himself, to approach a holy God. All this, in turn, served to inculcate in the mind of the ancient Israelite the sacredness of the tabernacle/temple space within the conceptual “cultic topography” produced by the clean and unclean system.

### I. HOW UNCLEANNESS WAS CONTRACTED

According to the laws of the Pentateuch, the Israelite was to regard most things as “clean,” but a person or thing could contract uncleanness in a variety of ways. Several broad categories are found in Num 5:2: Anyone with a skin disease, or having a discharge of bodily fluids, or touching something unclean such as a dead body was unclean. The other broad category has to do with unclean animals and foods. These categories will now be discussed in greater detail.

1. *Skin disease.* Anyone with a scale-like skin disease (*šārû'*) was regarded as unclean (cf. Leviticus 13–14). The term *šāra'at* has been traditionally translated “leprosy,” but the consensus of scholars is that the term is not limited to modern clinical leprosy (Hansen’s disease); instead, this term covers a variety of skin diseases.<sup>1</sup> A garment or leather object in a household

\* Joe Sprinkle is associate professor of Old Testament/Semitic Languages at Toccoa Falls College, Toccoa Falls, GA 30598-0236.

<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 195; R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980) 136–139; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas: Word: 1992) 187–189; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 816–826.

or the house itself that contracts mold or fungus that looks like scale disease were likewise deemed unclean (Lev 13:47–59; 14:33–57).

2. *Discharge of bodily fluids.* Bodily discharge refers primarily to natural and unnatural genital flows, but not to open wounds from accidents.<sup>2</sup> Childbirth, via its association with the discharge of the bloody placenta from the vagina, rendered a woman unclean for forty days for a male child, eighty days for a female child (Lev 12:1–8). Onset of menstruation rendered a woman unclean for seven days (15:19–24; cf. Ezek 36:17) and any unnatural genital flow of blood rendered her unclean until seven days after that flow of blood ceases (15:25–30). Ordinary marital intercourse rendered the couple unclean until evening (15:18; cf. Exod 19:15), while inadvertent intercourse with a menstruating woman rendered the man unclean for seven days (Lev 15:24), and deliberate intercourse with such a woman, a practice Ezekiel lists as a sin (Ezek 18:6; 22:10), made both subject to divine “cutting off” (Lev 20:18).

Given that a case of intercourse with a menstruating woman is difficult to detect and prosecute in a human court, “cutting off from their people” in Lev 20:18 likely denotes neither banishment nor human execution but death and extirpation of descendants by divine intervention. Milgrom believes “cutting off from one’s people” may also involve separation from the relatives in the afterlife, a view that explains why some cases involved both “execution” and divine “cutting off” (Lev 20:2–3; Exod 31:14).<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, Levine understands such verses to imply that “if the community failed to punish the offender or failed to uncover the offense, God would mete out punishment in his own way and in his own good time.”<sup>4</sup> In any case “cutting off” reflects punishments at the hand of God.

Ejaculation of sperm outside of intercourse (wet dreams, etc.) rendered a man and his bedding unclean until evening (Lev 15:16), and other flow from his genital (15:2–3), such as from gonorrhea or urinary infection, rendered him unclean until seven days after the flow ceased (15:13).

Discharge from the “flesh” (*bāsār*) in Lev 15:2–3 is to be understood as synecdoche for the sexual organ as in 15:19 rather than more generally for the body (cf. NIV “bodily discharge”) since the other cases contextually refer to sexual emissions. R. L. Harris,<sup>5</sup> in contrast, argues from Deut 23:10–11 [Heb. 11–12] that abnormal bodily discharges such as diarrhea are also included here, and ties this to a hygienic explanation of these laws as a whole. While it is true that Deuteronomy requires soldiers at war to defecate outside the camp because “YHWH your God goes in the midst of your camp,” thereby implying defecation could ceremonially defile (Deut 23:12–14 [Heb. 13–15]; cf.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Whitekettle, “Levitical Thought and the Female Reproductive Cycle: Wombs, Well-springs, and the Primeval World,” *VT* 46 (1996) 377.

<sup>3</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* 457–460.

<sup>4</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 242.

<sup>5</sup> R. L. Harris, “Leviticus,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (ed. F. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 586.

Ezek 4:12–13), both Deut 23:10–11 and Leviticus 15 seem to refer specifically to genital discharges. Perhaps the close proximity of the organs of excrement and the organs of reproduction make Deuteronomy's extension possible.

Priests were required to marry virgins, since any women previously sexually active (the immoral, divorced, for the high priests even a widow) brought with them elevated levels of sexual impurity (Lev 21:7, 14). Whereas elsewhere the penalty for non-adulterous sexual immorality was (possible) marriage (Exod 22:16–17 [Heb. 15–16]), a priest's daughter who brought elevated sexual impurity into her father's house through sexual immorality was subject to being "burned" (Lev 21:9).<sup>6</sup>

3. *Touching unclean things.* Uncleanness conveyed by touch usually lasted until evening, though touching a human corpse made one unclean for seven days (Num 19:11). Touching the carcasses of unclean animals (Lev 5:1–3; 7:19, 21; 11:24–28, 44), or the unwashed person, contaminated chair, or bedding of a menstruating woman or of a man with an unnatural genital flow conveyed uncleanness until evening (Lev 15:4–11, 19–24). An unclean man could transfer uncleanness onto a clay pot by touch (15:12) and onto a person by spitting (15:7). Objects touching a carcass became impure (15:32), though certain objects—springs, cisterns, plant seeds—were immune from impurity by touch (11:36–38). The contents of an unclean vessel and anything touched by water from an unclean vessel were rendered ritually unclean (11:33–34). Hosea states that "mourner's bread," that is, food contaminated by being in the house with a corpse, defiles (Hos 9:4), and Haggai affirms that man contaminated by a corpse transmits uncleanness via touch (Hag 2:13).

A priest was not to be involved in the burial of any corpse except that of an immediate relative (mother, father, son, daughter, brother; Lev 21:10–12), since touching the corpse would lead to defilement and exclusion from his duties in the sanctuary. Some close relatives were excluded: he could not bury in-laws nor a non-virgin sister, since in both cases others could take that responsibility, and in the case of a non-virgin sister her sexual impurity heightened her corpse contamination (Lev 21:3–4), and the High Priest was not to be in the same room as a corpse even for a close relative (Lev 21:11–12). Isaiah reminds priests and Levites not to touch what is "unclean" (Isa 52:11). Nazirites, who like priests were holy, were to avoid corpse contamination, not even being allowed to bury a parent (Num 6:6–7).

The purification (sin) offering (*ḥattā't*), itself used as a purifying agent, ironically could also convey impurity by touch.<sup>7</sup> The carcass of the Day of Atonement *ḥattā't* had to be burned, and its handler evidently became ceremonially unclean since he had to wash his clothes and body before returning to the camp (Lev 16:27–28). Similarly, vessels in which the *ḥattā't* was cooked evidently also became unclean since they must be broken if

<sup>6</sup> "Burned" is ordinarily taken to mean cremated after execution, though I wonder if the penalty is not "branding" instead.

<sup>7</sup> David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity* (SBLDS 101; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987) 129–146.

earthenware and scoured if copper (Lev 6:21 [Eng. 28]). The ashes of the red heifer *ḥaṭṭā't*-offering<sup>8</sup> also conveyed uncleanness on its handlers, so that it had to be taken outside the camp, and both the priest conducting the sacrifice and the one who burned it into ashes were unclean, as was the one who applied the ashes, and hence all these had to bathe and wait until evening to return to a state of purity (Num 19:3, 7–8, 10, 21). Leviticus 7:7 suggests that the guilt/reparation (*ʿāšām*) offering was disposed of in the same way as the *ḥaṭṭā't* offering, and so probably likewise conveyed uncleanness. The bodies of clean animals properly slaughtered for the well-being (peace) offering (*zebah šēlāmīm*) and other offerings did not convey uncleanness at first, though it was best to eat the sacrifice on the day of the sacrifice, and by the third day any sacrificial carcass must be burned (Exod 12:10; 29:34; Lev 7:17, 31–32; 19:6), perhaps related to carcass uncleanness.

4. *Unclean animals and food.* Animals were either “clean” or “unclean,” a distinction first made in the account of Noah’s flood (Gen 7:2), but elaborated in detail in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.<sup>9</sup> Some among the unclean animals are designated *šeqeš* “cultic abomination,” or *tôʿēbā* “abomination, abhorrence.” These transmitted an especially loathsome form of uncleanness (Lev 11:10, 11, 12, 13, 20, 23, 41; Deut 14:3). Eating an unclean animal rendered a person unclean, in this case till evening, whether it be flesh from an inherently unclean animal, flesh of a clean animal rendered unclean by death from natural causes (Lev 11:39–40; 17:15), or any food rendered unclean by contact with something else unclean (cf. Hag 2:10–13). Nazirites like Samson were to take special care to avoid eating anything unclean (Judg 13:4, 7, 13; compare Num 6:5–8). Pious Israelites such as Daniel would refuse to defile (*gāʿal*) themselves by eating non-“kosher” foods (Dan 1:8), whereas eating unclean food such as swine and mice was an act of impiety condemned by Isaiah (Isa 65:4; 66:17).

It was only the *dead* unclean animals that polluted by touch (Lev 5:1–3; 7:19, 21; 11:24–28, 44), perhaps for the practical reason that otherwise one would be unclean every time one rode a donkey or a camel.<sup>10</sup> As discussed above, touching or eating a clean animal properly slaughtered as a peace offering did not convey uncleanness on the day it was slaughtered, but even a clean animal that died of natural causes conveyed uncleanness by touch (Ezek 44:31).

An animal which was lame, blind or with other defect was not unclean, hence both the clean and the unclean may eat of it, but it could not be ren-

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Milgrom (*Numbers* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989] 160, 438–443) argues convincingly that Num 19:9 should be rendered, “It is a *ḥaṭṭā't* [i.e. a purification offering]” (cf. NRSV, REB). Many EVV regularly render misleadingly “for removal of sin” or the like (e.g. RSV, NIV, NASB), but rendering the word “sin” is unacceptable since contamination by removing a corpse from a tent (Num 19:14) involves no “sin.” Rather, this is a purification offering for ceremonial uncleanness.

<sup>9</sup> A monograph on this topic is: Walter Houston, *Purity and Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 140; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Houston, *Purity and Monotheism* 51.

dered "holy" so as to offer it and/or partake of it in the central sanctuary (Deut 15:19–23). It is thus rendered no more than "common." However, to offer a "common" blemished animal to God is to offer what Malachi terms "defiled" (*gā'al*) food, and such an act did ritually defile (*gā'al*) the table of the LORD (Mal 1:7–8, 12).<sup>11</sup>

These regulations imply that one should avoid ceremonial impurity, but the nature of the rules given above shows that this, even by natural biological processes, was not always possible. Everyone became unclean from time to time. Periodic states of uncleanness were unavoidable.

## II. WHAT WAS DONE ABOUT UNCLEANNESS

Where contraction of impurity occurred, it was obligatory that the unclean person avoid that which is holy and take steps, involving the rituals for disposal of impurity, to return to a state of cleanness. Uncleanness placed a person in a "dangerous" condition under threat of divine retribution, even death (Lev 15:31), especially if the person were to approach the sanctuary. Indeed, the largest body of laws of clean and unclean, Leviticus 11–15, is bracketed (forming an *inclusio*)<sup>12</sup> first by the account of the death of the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, for improperly approaching the sanctuary (Leviticus 10), and second by the Day of Atonement ritual (Leviticus 16) where reference to the death of Aaron's two sons (v. 1) is part of a warning against arbitrary entrance into the sanctuary (v. 2). That in turn leads to a prescription to conduct an elaborate sacrificial ritual to cleanse the priest first, and then to remove sin and uncleanness from both sanctuary and people (vv. 3–19). The community's uncleanness imperiled the whole nation, because uncleanness defiles the Lord's tabernacle, God's dwelling place in their midst (Lev 16:16; Num 19:13, 20) as well as the land itself (Lev 18:27) and could make God's continued dwelling in their midst impossible (Ezek 43:7–9; cf. 9:7). If unpurged, uncleanness could lead to a general outbreak of divine wrath and ultimately the expulsion of the land's inhabitants (Lev 18:25), as did in fact happen in the Babylonian exile. Consequently, there must be through the various sacrifices a purging of uncleanness from the

<sup>11</sup> In addition to these "unclean foods," consumption of fat and blood were prohibited (Lev 7:22–27), violation of which put a person under threat of being "cut off." In the ritual of sacrifice, all the fat was burnt in offering to God even when (as in "peace" or "well-being" offerings) most of the animal was eaten by the worshiper. Suet for animals permitted for the altar (cattle, sheep, goats) was not to be used at all when the animal was sacrificed to God (that is, none was to be saved for private use), and the fat was not to be eaten even if the animal became ineligible for the altar by dying of itself or being killed by predators, though (in an economic concession) the fat in the latter case could be used for other purposes (lamp, etc.). Though it is less clear, the fat of wild game (i.e. clean animals ineligible for the altar) probably could be eaten (cf. Lev 17:13–14 where the blood requirement is repeated for wild game, but not the fat; so Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* 427). The prohibition against eating the fat of sheep, goats, and cattle reminded Israel that certain clean animals were set apart to God for sacrificial worship and for making blood atonement.

<sup>12</sup> Richard E. Averbeck, "Clean and Unclean," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Vol. 4 (ed. Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 480.

altar and the sanctuary (Ezek 43:19–27; 45:19) to remove the contamination of both sin and ceremonial impurity. Uncleanness and the danger entailed by it lingered upon those who did not take the necessary steps to be purified (Num 19:12–13; Lev 17:16).

Priests, as ministers in the sanctuary, were to take special care to avoid becoming ritually defiled, and if defiled (as everyone from time to time must be), the priest was to abstain from his sacred duties. Failure to do so could result in the priest's being "cut off from [God's] presence" (Lev 22:3–9) by divine punishment (e.g. Nadab and Abihu, Leviticus 10). Priests and Levites would purify themselves with a ritual sprinkling of water and washing of their clothes in preparation for service in the sanctuary to remove any vestige of uncleanness, as well as by a purification offering (Lev 16:3–4; Num 8:7–8).

For ordinary laymen, an unclean person was not to eat consecrated meat sacrificed to God in the sanctuary (Lev 7:20–21; so Saul supposed of David in 1 Sam 20:26; compare 1 Sam 21:4) nor even tithe consecrated food to the Levites while unclean (Deut 26:14), though wild game and meat slaughtered outside of the central sanctuary could be eaten even by one ceremonially unclean (Deut 12:15, 22). An unclean person could not celebrate the Passover while unclean (Num 9:6–13), though provision was made for celebrating Passover after a month's delay. In the context of the sojourn in the wilderness, an Israelite who became unclean was to go "outside the camp," that is, away from the tabernacle where the LORD dwelt among them (Num 5:3).

The way in which a ceremonially unclean person became clean varied in accord with the severity of the uncleanness. Judging from the purification procedure, Milgrom<sup>13</sup> has categorized types of impurity from the most serious to least serious cases as follows: skin disease (Leviticus 13–14), childbirth (Leviticus 12), genital discharges (Lev 15:3–15, 28–30), the corpse contaminated priest (Ezek 44:26–27); the corpse contaminated Nazirite (Num 6:9–12), one whose impurity is prolonged (Lev 5:1–13); the corpse contaminated lay person (Num 5:2–4; 19:1–20); the menstruating woman (Lev 15:19–24); the handling of the ashes of the red cow or the Day of Atonement offerings including the scapegoat and the purification [sin] offering which was burnt to ashes (Num 19:7–10; Lev 16:26, 28), emission of semen (Lev 15:16–18), contamination by a carcass (Lev 11:24–40; 22:5); and secondary contamination (Leviticus 15; 22:4–7; Num 19:21–22).

The most serious case of uncleanness was the person with a skin disease (Leviticus 13), since such a one remained permanently unclean unless healed. One with a skin disease was to wear rent clothes, have disheveled hair, call out "unclean, unclean" as a warning to others, and live apart from others outside the camp (Lev 13:45–46). If the skin disease healed, the person could undergo a purification ritual over eight days to return to full cleanness (Lev 14:1–32).<sup>14</sup> On day one he was to meet a priest outside the camp who

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Milgrom, "Rationale for Cultic Law: The Case of Impurity," *Semeia* 45 (1989) 104.

<sup>14</sup> Although it does not precisely follow the prescribed procedure for Israelites healed from scale disease, Naaman the Syrian was told by Elisha to follow a ritual reminiscent of it: washing

performs a ritual involving two birds, cedar wood, crimson yarn, hyssop, and spring (or “river”; literally “living”) water. The priest was to sacrifice one bird and dip the live bird in the blood mixed with the other items, and then release the live bird. This ritual, by analogy with the Day of Atonement sacrifice (Leviticus 16), probably symbolizes purification via sacrifice (the killed bird whose purifying blood is sprinkled by hyssop seven times onto the man designates the man as “clean”) and removal of uncleanness (the live bird having symbolically absorbed uncleanness flying to an open country). The man then washes his clothes, shaves all his hair, and bathes his body and may enter the camp but may not sleep in his tent until the ritual of the seventh day, for he is only partially purified. On the seventh day he again shaves his hair and washes his clothes and bathes his body to remove symbolically another level of impurity and is now considered sufficiently clean to enter his tent. On the eighth day he brings to the sanctuary oil and offers a reparation (guilt) offering, a purification (sin) offering, and a whole burnt offering in which blood from the reparation offering and some of the oil is placed on the right ear, right thumb, and right big toe of the man. The man is then anointed with the remainder of the oil, symbolizing that the whole person has been cleansed and elevated to the status of fully “clean,” restored to the community, and free to approach the sanctuary. In the NT, Jesus required the lepers he had cleansed to show themselves to the priest in accord with this Mosaic law (Luke 17:11–17).

For childbirth (Lev 12:1–8) a woman who bore a son was highly unclean (as with menstruation) for seven days. On the eighth day the son was to be circumcised. Afterwards the mother remained somewhat “unclean” and unable to touch (i.e. “eat”) that which is holy for another 33 days after which her purification is completed (total of 40 days). In the case of a daughter the numbers double: she is most unclean for two weeks and somewhat unclean for 66 days beyond that (total of 80 days). The reason for the numbers 7 and 40 is not explained in the text, though a case can be made for them being numbers symbolizing “wholeness, completeness,”<sup>15</sup> seven representing completion of the period of greatest impurity, and forty representing completion of all impurity. Moreover, it is about that period of time necessary for the womb to undergo the process of devolution and destruction followed by regeneration during which it goes from being uninhabitable/dysfunctional (for reproduction), to being once again restored to “wholeness” and full sexual function.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of her impurity, the post-partum woman is to bring a lamb (a bird will do if she is poor) for a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtledove for a purification offering to be offered by the priest. Mary, the mother of Jesus, underwent this ritual after the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:22–27).

---

seven times in the Jordan, after which his flesh was restored and he became ritually “clean” (2 Kgs 5:10–14). In poetic justice, Gehazi the servant of Elisha contracted Naaman’s leprosy as punishment for his greed, showing again the close relationship between sin and uncleanness, and that impurity could be transferred (5:15–27).

<sup>15</sup> Whitekettle, “Levitical Thought and the Female Reproductive Cycle” 381.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 390.

The reason for the distinction between the sexes in post-partum uncleanness is not stated. Among the speculations (listed more or less in the order of least to most likely in my judgment) are: that women are supposedly subject to stronger attacks by demons;<sup>17</sup> that it reflects the female's role as first in transgression in the garden of Eden;<sup>18</sup> that it is a provision for the care of baby girls who being less desired than boys might otherwise receive inferior care from thoughtless husbands;<sup>19</sup> that circumcising the boy baby on the eighth day somehow reduces the attendant uncleanness;<sup>20</sup> that the distinction reflects the lower social status of women in ancient Israel;<sup>21</sup> that girls are destined to become a source of menstrual and maternal uncleanness in the future;<sup>22</sup> and that the longer maternal discharges after the birth of a girl as compared with that of a boy and the periodic vaginal bleeding of baby girls demands a longer period of uncleanness.<sup>23</sup> More than one of these explanations may be true.

Abnormal genital discharge (Lev 15:3–15, 25–30) is the next most serious "uncleanness." A man or a woman who had an abnormal genital discharge, which might be due to a venereal disease or a urinary tract infection, was to wait seven days after healing, launder his or her clothes, and bathe the body in spring ("living") water to obtain one degree of purification. On the eighth day he or she was to take two turtledoves or pigeons and offer up one as a purification offering and one as a burnt offering to effect full purgation of uncleanness.

The next most serious case is the corpse contaminated Nazirite (Num 6:9–12). This Nazirite, when he became unclean, violated his Nazirite vow which prohibited contact with corpses (6:6). The remedy for the contaminated Nazirite was to shave his head on the first and seventh day after the period of uncleanness had passed, and offer two turtledoves or pigeons, one as a purification offering, one as a burnt offering (these were required to end his vow anyway; 6:13–16), as well as a lamb for a reparation (guilt) offering for his violated vow (Lev 5:14–6:7).

<sup>17</sup> A. Noordtzi, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 131.

<sup>18</sup> A. A. Bonar, *A Commentary on Leviticus* (London: Banner of Truth, 1966 [1852]) 229; Samuel Kellogg, *The Book of Leviticus* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978 [1899]) 229.

<sup>19</sup> Harris, "Leviticus" 574.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 254; Bonar, *Leviticus* 229.

<sup>21</sup> Hartley, *Leviticus* 168.

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, *Leviticus* 135; Levine, *Leviticus* 250.

<sup>23</sup> Ramban cited by Levine, *Leviticus* 250; C. F. Keil, *The Pentateuch* (Commentary on the Old Testament by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 376 with citations affirming that the ancients believed a mother's discharge to be greater after the birth of a girl; D. I. Macht, "A Scientific Appreciation of Leviticus 12:1–15," *JBL* 52 (1933) 253–260, a physician, shows that a somewhat longer discharge (not double) after the birth of a girl is a scientifically confirmed phenomenon. Jonathan Magonet, "But if it is a Girl She is Unclean for Twice Seven Days . . ." *The Riddle of Leviticus 12.5*, *Reading Leviticus* (JSOTSup 227; ed. J. F. A. Sawyer; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 144–152, points out that the withdrawal of maternal hormones at birth causes roughly one in ten female babies to experience vaginal bleeding, a fact that is regularly communicated to beginning midwives so they would not be overly concerned. Hence, a double period of purification could be a result of not infrequently having two females (mother and baby) producing impurity through vaginal discharges, with the baby's impurity being reckoned to the mother with whom she had been united.

Anyone whose impurity is prolonged by failing to go through the proper purification rite within prescribed time limits was to offer a reparation/guilt offering (Lev 5:1–13).

Any layman unclean due to touching a human corpse (Num 5:2–4; 19:1–20) was unclean for seven days and had to go through a ritual involving the ashes of a red heifer (Num 19:1–22). A red heifer (red a symbol of blood and life) was burned to ashes which could be mixed with water whenever needed. The corpse contaminated layman was then sprinkled with water mixed with these ashes on the third and seventh day, and on the seventh day he laundered his clothes and bathed himself to become clean. Numbers 31:19–24 elaborates on the regulation: In war, soldiers involved in killing and who touched corpses as well as the captives returning from war were unclean for seven days. On the third and seventh days they themselves, their captives, their garments, and whatever was made of leather, goat hair or wood were to be purified with water and items of metal purified with fire.

Normal genital discharge (Lev 15:16–24) only required waiting a certain period of time and ritual bath: Seven days are prescribed for a menstruating woman (or a man having intercourse with such a woman) with ritual washing not stated but probably implied, and waiting till evening is prescribed for an ejaculating man (and his inseminated wife) with ritual washing of his body (and his wife's) specified. Bathsheba in her bathing within eyeshot of the palace rooftop (2 Sam 11:2–4) was probably undergoing some sort of ritual purification, perhaps for menstrual uncleanness, in which case this would prove that the child she conceived after adultery with David could not have been fathered by her husband Uriah. If so, by David's day, it was assumed that Leviticus 15 required a bath for the menstruating woman. Then after having sex with David, Bathsheba left, but only after "having purified herself from her uncleanness" (2 Sam 11:4). This expression (*mitqaddešet miṭṭum'ātāh*) is probably a reference to ritual washing after sexual intercourse.

In other minor cases such as secondary contamination by touch (Leviticus 15; 22:4–7; Num 19:21–22), or touching a carcass (Lev 11:24–40; 22:5), or the handling of the ashes of the red cow or handling a purification offering or handling the Day of Atonement (sin) offerings (Lev 6:27–28; 16:26, 28; Num 19:7–10), a person simply washed his person and clothes (in some cases washing is not stated but is probably implied) and waited until evening to be considered clean.

Objects that became unclean either had to be washed in water (wood, cloth, hide, sackcloth), or purified by fire (metals), or destroyed (clay pots, earthen oven, or clay cooking pot), depending on the material (Lev 11:32–35; Num 31:21–23).

### III. THE RATIONALE OF THE PURITY LAWS

Complex religious and theological symbolism is conveyed by the system of purity and impurity, though unfortunately in most cases the symbolism is implicit rather than explicit. The interpreter must take the details and what

interpretation the text provides in order to reconstruct the conceptual world of the purity/impurity system.<sup>24</sup>

The following discussion surveys explanations of these laws from the least to the most important, though in my view several categories are simultaneously applicable.

1. *Hygiene.* The explanation that I heard as a new Christian for the laws of clean and unclean was that they had to do with health and hygiene.<sup>25</sup> There is, to be sure, an incidental contribution made by the laws of purity/impurity to hygiene. Certainly the exclusion from the camp of those with possible symptoms of leprosy and gonorrhea (Leviticus 13–14; 15:2–15) in effect quarantined these dangerous diseases and contributed to public health. The avoiding of carcasses, or eating animals which died of natural causes, or contacting human sputum and discharges would do the same. The ritual baths associated with returning to cleanness would also contribute to hygiene. Certain unclean animals are known to transfer diseases to humans: the pig bears trichinosis (tapeworm), the hare tularemia; carrion eating birds harbor disease, and fish without fins and scales attract disease because they are mud burrowers. Eating animal suet is now known to lead to heart disease.

Hygiene, however, is at most a secondary explanation. Some animals which are excluded have no association with disease: the camel, for example, is a delicacy for Arabs to this day, and there is no evidence that the camel passes disease to humans.<sup>26</sup> Wild boars rarely have trichinosis, and proper cooking of pork, in any case, generally makes its transmission to humans rare.<sup>27</sup> Pork was a staple of Israel's neighbors, so evidently they had learned to prepare the meat in such a way as to avoid most ill effects. Poisonous plants are not mentioned, though inclusion of "clean and unclean" plants would be expected were hygiene the purpose of these laws. Furthermore, some of the clean animals present health hazards: the ruminants of "clean" cud-chewing animals are host for a number of parasitic organisms.<sup>28</sup> Although "leprosy" is treated, other infectious diseases well known in antiquity are ignored in the Biblical regulations, a fact inexplicable if hygiene were the primarily motive. Moreover, absolutions through ritual baths for one with a skin disease occurred after his healing, whereas for purpose of hygiene it should occur before healing.<sup>29</sup> Finally, and especially important for the Christian, it is inconceivable that Christ would have abolished the distinction between clean and unclean foods (Mark 7:19) if hygiene were the purpose of this

<sup>24</sup> The following analysis leans heavily on works of Jewish scholar Jacob Milgrom who has spent a lifetime of research in the area of cultic law. I have also found the works of evangelical scholar Gordon Wenham of help in this area. Milgrom has provided the most satisfactory reconstruction of the symbolism to date.

<sup>25</sup> A popular version of the theory is found in S. I. McMillen, *None of these Diseases* (Westwood: Revell, 1963).

<sup>26</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* 719.

<sup>27</sup> Hartley, *Leviticus* 142.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* 963.

distinction.<sup>30</sup> These data lead to the conclusion that ritual symbolism is more central to the purpose of these laws than hygiene.

2. *Association with disgusting or pagan or demonic things.* Perhaps some unclean things were condemned because of an association with disgusting things and/or paganism. For example, snakes (Lev 11:42) and camels (Lev 11:4; Deut 14:7) and certain predatory or slimy or creeping animals may have been declared unclean because they awaken a natural aversion in the minds of people.<sup>31</sup> With snakes, this aversion may go back to the curse of the fall (Gen 3:14–15). The pig (Lev 11:7; Deut 14:8) and dog (cf. Lev 11:24), whose disgusting behavior became proverbial,<sup>32</sup> may have been unclean because they are scavengers that feed on refuse (including corpses).<sup>33</sup> Rodents such as the mouse (Lev 11:29) invoke disgust as they infest and destroy human stockpiles of grain.

However, certain observations argue against this theory. Although it explains why certain animals might be clean or unclean, it does not adequately explain all animals. There seems no natural aversion to the hyrax or hare, whereas the goat, an animal declared “clean,” can be disgusting in its omnivorousness.<sup>34</sup> Some animals, perhaps even the camel, may have been excluded to keep the classification system simple and without too many exceptions (e.g. hoofs having clefts and which chew the cud), rather than because of disgust.

Association with pagan religious practices could be a rationale for declaring certain animals unclean, and yet against this notion is that the animals commonly used by Israel’s pagan neighbors for sacrifice and worship (e.g. the bull) were the very same animals commonly used by Israel itself.<sup>35</sup> It is often supposed that “cooking a kid in its mother’s milk” was condemned because it was a pagan practice; however, there is no evidence of such a pagan practice.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, if God wished for Israel to avoid the appearance of pagan practices, he should have condemned the use of the bull for sacrifices since the bull was a favorite sacrificial animal among Canaanites, and gods in the form of bulls were worshiped in both Egypt and Canaan.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> G. J. Wenham, “Christ’s Healing Ministry and His Attitude to the Law,” *Christ the Lord* (ed. H. H. Rowdon; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1982) 117; idem, “The Theology of Unclean Food,” *EvQ* 53 (1981) 7.

<sup>31</sup> J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 370.

<sup>32</sup> Matt 7:6: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces” (NASB).

<sup>33</sup> Houston, *Purity and Monotheism* 189–191. He notes that the LXX of 1 Kgs 21:19 and 22:38 reads “pigs and dogs licked the blood of Naboth” and “pigs and dogs licked up the blood, and the prostitutes will wash in your blood.” The MT lacks “pigs” in both cases, but the LXX *Vorlage*’s reading may well be original.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 76–78.

<sup>35</sup> Wenham, “The Theology of Unclean Food” 7.

<sup>36</sup> R. Ratner and B. Zuckerman, “‘A Kid in Milk’: New Photographs of KTU 1.23, line 14,” *HUCA* 57 (1986) 15–16; Peter C. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 74–76. Ratner and Zuckerman show that a text from Ugarit once used as evidence of such a practice (CTA 23.14) is now to be interpreted otherwise.

<sup>37</sup> Wenham, “Christ’s Healing Ministry” 118.

Since it is clear that Israel's sacrificial worship shared much in common with her pagan neighbors, this line of interpretation seems doubtful. However, cooking a kid goat in its own mother's milk might be considered a disgusting, unbecoming thing to do, even if it were not specifically pagan.

3. *Ethical lessons.* More plausible than the first two categories is that some laws of purity are meant to promote ethical behavior. All the laws of purity, even where arbitrary, cultivated in the Israelite the virtue of self-control, an indispensable first step in the attainment of holiness.<sup>38</sup> Other regulations seem to have more specific ethical concerns. Eating meat torn by wild beasts not only defiles ritually, but is contrary to ethical holiness by its dehumanizing effect, reducing human beings to the level of a scavenger dog (Exod 22:31 [Heb. 30]).<sup>39</sup> It is possible, though no text explicitly states this, that predatory animals (most unclean animals are predatory) are regularly unclean because humans are not to be like them morally, that is, destructive and murderous.<sup>40</sup> A similar moral explanation could apply to some specific, repulsive species (pigs, snakes). Some rabbinic interpreters (Philo, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam) understood cooking a kid goat in its mother's milk (Exod 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21) to be a perverse, savage act on the part of those who take delight in creating such an ironic circumstance.<sup>41</sup> Leaving a corpse of an executed man exposed on a tree overnight defiles the land (Deut 21:23), perhaps because it represents an attitude of excessive vindictiveness and barbarism. That those involved in the slaughter of war (Num 31:19–24), even for legitimate reasons (in this case at the command of God), nonetheless became unclean hints at the moral defilement of war. Laws concerning sexual emissions encouraged restraint and sexual self-control (e.g. avoiding sex during menstruation) and would rightly stigmatize violators such as prostitutes as social outcasts.<sup>42</sup>

The command not to eat the flesh with the blood not only reminded the Israelite of God's use of blood for atoning sacrifice but also inculcated respect for animal life.<sup>43</sup> The blood, symbolic of the life, had to be poured back to God even for non-atoning slaughter to symbolize that only by divine permission could even animal life be taken; hence, the blood prohibition (Gen 9:3–6) taught the Israelite respect for animal life and for the Author of life whose permission was required to shed any blood, whether animal or human. This leads to a further moral implication: if taking mere animal life is not trivial, how much more serious is shedding human blood.

<sup>38</sup> Epstein, cited by Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) 44.

<sup>39</sup> Joe M. Sprinkle, *"The Book of the Covenant": A Literary Approach* (JSOTSup 174; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 176.

<sup>40</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus* 184.

<sup>41</sup> Sprinkle, *"The Book of the Covenant"* 195.

<sup>42</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus* 222–225.

<sup>43</sup> Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16* 154–155) argues that concern for humane treatment of animals is found even in the way an animal was to be dispatched. An Israelite was to slaughter an animal in the most painless of ways: slitting the throat. "Slaughter" (Hebrew *šāḥaṭ*) arguably means specifically "to slit the throat" as in 2 Kgs 10:7.

Milgrom adds that the food laws, in accord with the ethical purpose of inculcation of reverence for animal life, limited the slaughtering of animals: only for food, only certain species, only if certain procedures were followed.<sup>44</sup> The practical effect of the kosher laws (which are even more complex than the Biblical injunctions) has indeed been that many modern observant Jews become vegetarians due to the complications of obtaining kosher meat.

Wright criticizes Milgrom's view, noting that it is doubtful that these laws actually reduced the quantity of meat consumed by ancient Israel since one may compensate for the limitations by breeding more animals.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as Houston observes, designating certain species as "unclean, abhorrent, or abominable" rather than "holy" seems an odd way of inculcating "reverence for life."<sup>46</sup> The laws do nonetheless discourage indiscriminate killing of animals, such as recreational hunting that leaves the flesh to rot.

4. *Association of Yahweh with life and wholeness rather than death and disorder.* The purity system arguably conveys in a symbolic way that Yahweh is the God of life (order) and is separated from that which has to do with death (disorder). Corpses and carcasses rendered a person unclean because they obviously have to do with death. Most (though not all) of the unclean animals are somehow associated with death, either being predators/scavengers (animals with paws rather than hoofs) or living in tomb-like caves (rock badgers). The pig in particular, in addition to being a scavenger, was associated with the worship of chthonic or underworld deities and/or demons among the Hittites, Egyptians, and Mesopotamians.<sup>47</sup> The scale disease rendered a person unclean, because it made a person waste away like a corpse (cf. Num 12:12: "Let her not be like a corpse," referring to Miriam's skin disease).<sup>48</sup>

Bodily discharges (blood for women, semen for men—blood and semen both being symbols of life) may represent a temporary loss of strength and life and movement towards death. Whitekettle advocates an alternative view that bodily discharges represent lack of wholeness and sexual dysfunction, a womb undergoing self destruction during menstruation or the post-partum period during which conception is unlikely.<sup>49</sup> Similarly men, after ejaculation, typically need some time to regenerate before being fully sexually functional as well. Because decaying corpses discharge, natural bodily discharges are reminders of sin and death.<sup>50</sup> Purification rituals symbolize

<sup>44</sup> Jacob Milgrom, "Ethics and Ritual: The Biblical Foundations of the Dietary Laws," *Religion and Law: Biblical, Jewish and Islamic Perspectives* (ed. E. Firmage et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989) 159–191.

<sup>45</sup> David P. Wright, "Observations on the Ethical Foundations of the Biblical Dietary Laws," *Religion and Law: Biblical, Jewish and Islamic Perspectives* (ed. E. Firmage et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1989) 197.

<sup>46</sup> Houston, *Purity and Monotheism* 77.

<sup>47</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* 651.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 819.

<sup>49</sup> Whitekettle, "Levitical Thought and the Female Reproductive Cycle" 376–391. He observes against Milgrom's view that menstruation represents movement towards death that "no woman has ever menstruated to death" (p. 377), a generality that, though it no doubt has exceptions, is nonetheless well taken.

<sup>50</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus* 188.

movement from death towards life and accordingly involved blood, the color red, and spring (literal "living") water, all of which are symbols of life (Lev 17:11; 14:5, 50; Num 19:2, 17, etc.).

Even some food laws can be explained on this basis. Why was Israel not to cook a kid in its mother's milk (Exod 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21)? Perhaps it was because it was inappropriate to combine that which is a symbol of life (mother's milk) with the death of that for which it was meant to give life,<sup>51</sup> especially in the context of the festival of Tabernacles (so the context of Exod 23:19) celebrating the life-giving power of Yahweh.<sup>52</sup>

Mary Douglas has shown the connection between cleanness/holiness and such concepts as "wholeness," "physical perfection," and "completeness."<sup>53</sup> Hence, priests and animals with the same physical imperfections were ineligible for the sanctuary (Lev 21:17–21; 22:20–24). Physical imperfections, representing a movement from "life" towards "death," moved a person ritually away from God, who is to be associated with life.

This symbolic system served to separate Yahweh worship from necromancy, spiritualism, and ancestor veneration, since dealings with the dead rendered a person unclean (cf. Lev 19:31 where consulting spiritualists renders one "unclean" morally). Even sitting among the graves (Isa 65:4) is condemned.

5. *Separation of holiness from expressions of sexuality.* In certain pagan cults, sexual acts were sometimes performed as part of the worshiper's devotion to a deity. For example, there was in Corinth the famous brothel of Aphrodite, and according to Herodotus (1.199), though perhaps significantly not confirmed by cuneiform sources, every woman in Babylon (and similarly at Cyprus) was obligated to prostitute herself once at the temple of a goddess (Ishtar?). A once common but more recently challenged scholarly reconstruction is the hypothesized pagan practice of sacred prostitution in which fertility was conveyed to the land through ritualized sexual intercourse at the cultus in a form of sympathetic magic.<sup>54</sup> For Israel, in contrast, all expressions of sexuality rendered a person unclean, and hence unfit to approach a sanctuary. Priests were to wear breeches and altars were to be made without stairs to avoid even the hint of sexual impropriety in worship (Exod 28:42; 20:26). Since sexual acts rendered a person "unclean," sacred prostitution for the observant Israelite would have been unthinkable.

Designating sexual activity as "unclean" does not mean that sex is inherently evil. However, it does clearly separate sexuality from the holy, relegating it to the sphere of the common, the earthly.<sup>55</sup> It is therefore probably

<sup>51</sup> O. Keel, cited by E. A. Knauf, "Zur Herkunft und Sozialgeschichte Israels," *Bib* 69 (1988) 153–154.

<sup>52</sup> Sprinkle, "Book of the Covenant" 194–195.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Praeger, 1966) 51–57.

<sup>54</sup> Among those questioning whether "sacred prostitution" in the sense of ritualized sexual intercourse to give fertility to the land ever really existed in the Ancient Near East are Jeffrey Tigay (*Deuteronomy* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996] 480–481), and K. van der Toorn (*ABD* V:510–512).

<sup>55</sup> Hartley, *Leviticus* 214.

no coincidence that in the resurrection there is no marriage (Matt 22:30). Moreover, making all sexual acts “unclean” may relate to the Fall which resulted in the perversion of human sexuality: sexual shame (fig leaves), multiplied pain in childbirth, and the man’s lust for and domination of the woman (Gen 3:7, 10–11, 16, 19).<sup>56</sup>

6. *Separation from the Gentiles.* One clear purpose of the laws of purity was to separate Israel from the Gentiles. The separation of sexuality from any form of worship just mentioned would have the effect of separating Israel from at least some of her pagan neighbors. More directly, the clean/unclean system divided animals, people, and land into three categories. In the animal realm there are clean animals that could be sacrificed on an altar, clean animals (wild game, fish) that could be eaten but not sacrificed on an altar, and unclean animals that ritually defiled the eater and could not be sacrificed (and some among the unclean animals are further called *šeqeš* “cultic abomination” or *tô’ēbâ* “abomination, abhorrence”: Lev 11:10–13, 20, 23, 41; Deut 14:3). This separation among animals parallels that of people.<sup>57</sup> Priests were “holy” and separated from other Israelites for service in the sanctuary, ordinary Israelites are “clean” and separated from non-Israelites, leaving non-Israelites as “unclean” (and some, such as Canaanites, with especially wicked idolatrous practices are an abomination: Lev 18:26–30; Deut 7:1–5, 25–26; 20:17–18). There is a similar system of separation of space: the tabernacle (associated with priests) is holy, the land (associated with the Israelites) is clean, and the rest of the world (associated with Gentiles) is unclean.<sup>58</sup> Thus the purity system symbolically reinforced teaching elsewhere that Israel was a “holy nation” (Exod 19:6) set apart from all others.<sup>59</sup> In keeping the food laws, the Israelite was thus acknowledging that God had chosen and saved them from the nations.

Moreover, the food laws discouraged table fellowship with the Canaanites whose diet would ordinarily include the pig and other items condemned as “unclean.” These laws were thus a practical means of maintaining Israel as a holy people. This connection with the food laws and separation from the nations is stated explicitly:

You must therefore make a distinction between the clean and the unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourself by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground—those which I have set apart as unclean for you. You are to be holy to me because I the LORD am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own (Lev 20:25–26 NIV, italics mine).

<sup>56</sup> Payne, *Theology of the Older Testament* 371.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Lev 21:18–21 and 22:20–24 where the symbolic parallelism is seen in the fact that defects which bar a priest from service are the same defects which keep an animal from being offered to God.

<sup>58</sup> The idea that the nations are unclean, not only ritually but also morally, finds expression in the historical books (Josh 22:19; Ezra 6:19–22; 9:11; 2 Chr 36:14; Neh 13:30). Likewise, the prophets imply that foreign lands and foreign peoples are associated with “uncleanness” (Isa 52:1, 11; Amos 1:17; Hos 9:3–4; Ezek 4:9–17; 22:15; 24:11, 13; 36:25, 29).

<sup>59</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* 720–726.

Thus these laws, like kosher laws for modern Jews, helped maintain the Israelites as a separate and distinct people. The other laws, by creating distinctive customs, even where such customs were arbitrary and without any inherent moral value (e.g. Lev 18:19, not wearing garment made of two types of material) nonetheless inculcated Israel with the concept of “holiness” and served as “object lessons” creating in Israel a sense of identity as a “separated” people.

The abolition of the food laws in the NT (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:15 with 11:9; Rom 14:14) conveys deep theological significance. As argued above, the division of animals into clean and unclean symbolized the separation between Israelites and Gentiles. Accordingly, the abolition of the kosher laws must symbolize a breaking down of the barrier between Jews and Gentiles.<sup>60</sup> That this is the correct understanding of the symbolism is seen in God’s lesson to Peter in Acts 10–11: God now declares the Gentiles “clean,” and Peter is not to continue to think of them as inherently unclean. In the new messianic age, the principle that God’s people are to be separate (holy) from the world remains, but the lines drawn are no longer ethnic in character.

*7. Holiness of God/contamination of man.* The most important explanation of the rules of purity is that they teach the concept of the holiness of God. The account that forms the preface to the laws of purity in Leviticus 11–15 is that of the death of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron who were struck dead for improperly approaching the sanctuary (Leviticus 10). God explains that through this incident “I will show myself holy among those who are near me, and before all the people I will be glorified” (10:3, RSV). Likewise at the end of the food laws, God comments that the Israelites were to be holy and show that holiness by not eating unclean “swarming things” (11:44). God had brought them out of Egypt, so that “[y]ou shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (11:45). At the end of the purity laws comes the Day of Atonement ritual. In reference to the death of the two sons of Aaron, God warns against coming into the “most holy place” (Lev 16:1–2). This bracketing of the laws of clean and unclean with the death of Aaron’s two sons and the idea of the sanctuary’s holiness suggests that the most important lesson conveyed by this system is that God is holy (i.e. “set apart”).

Conversely, these laws suggest that people, in contrast with the holiness of God, are contaminated and corrupt. Those who approach God must therefore be sanctified or purified. The unclean are excluded from the tabernacle, the symbolic dwelling place of God (Num 5:3; Lev 15:31), and everyone by biology inevitably contracts uncleanness from time to time. Although the texts are notoriously sparse in explanations, when taken in conjunction with Biblical teaching as a whole this might be taken to imply that human beings, by virtue of being part of this sin-cursed, fallen world, are “unclean” or “contaminated” and are not automatically eligible to approach God. In

<sup>60</sup> Wenham, “Christ’s Healing Ministry” 122; Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* 726.

any case, the purity system, emphasizing the holiness of God and the impurity of man, teaches that humans must prepare themselves both ritually and morally before approaching a holy God.

Now ceremonial “uncleanness/impurity” cannot be equated with “sin,” since natural bodily functions and other factors beyond human control could (and periodically did) cause a person to be unclean. Nonetheless, there is a strong analogy between “uncleanness” and “sin.” Hence the “sin” or “purification” offering (*hattā't*), including the special “sin offering” on the Day of Atonement, served to cleanse both sin and ritual impurity (Lev 5:1–5; 16:16–22). That uncleanness is also used metaphorically of deviations of morality hints at this symbolic connection. In the Pentateuch, rape (Gen 34:5, 13, 27), adultery (Lev 18:20; Num 5:19), bestiality (Lev 18:23), all the various “sins” which led God to remove the Canaanites (Lev 18:24–26), remarriage to a first husband after divorce and remarriage to a second husband (Deut 24:4), consultation with mediums (19:31), sacrificing one’s children to Molech (20:3), and murder (Num 35:33–34) are all described using the language of “uncleanness” (*tāmē'*), showing the symbolic link between moral and ethical uncleanness.

Poetical and prophetic writers also use the language of ritual purity for ethical purity, showing that they too recognized the symbolic connection. That a person with a skin disease is analogous to a sinner was evident in Psalm 51 that applied the imagery associated with the purification of lepers to cleansing from sins such as David’s sin of murder and adultery (Ps 51:7 [cf. superscript]; similarly Lam 4:13, 15). Such examples from the poetic books can be multiplied.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, various prophets (especially the priest Ezekiel) use the language of “clean” and “unclean” metaphorically in the ethical sense. Isaiah states that he and his people have “unclean lips,” that is, they are morally impure and unfit to speak for God or to be in his presence (Isa 6:5). However, in the messianic age no one (morally) unclean will travel on God’s highway of holiness (Isa 35:8). Ezekiel states that transgressions defiled Israel (14:11), so that Israel is “unclean of name,” that is, has a reputation for (ethical) impurity (22:5). Moreover, Ezekiel compares Israel’s wicked deeds with that of the uncleanness of a menstruating woman (36:17) and adds that the exile was due to Israel’s (moral) uncleanness and transgressions (Ezek 39:24). Again, examples in the prophets of using the

<sup>61</sup> “Clean” and “unclean” can be used in the sense of “righteous” and “wicked” as shown by the parallelism (Eccl 9:2; Job 17:11). Several acts are cited as producing ethical “impurity”: repudiation of parents (Prov 30:11–12), shedding the blood of the righteous (Lam 4:13–15), idolatry and child sacrifice (Ps 106:36–39), as well as murder and adultery (Ps 51:2, 7, 10; cf. superscript and 2 Samuel 11). The destruction of (or perhaps plundering of) the temple by the nations defiled it both ethically and ritually (Ps 79:1). The poetical books, moreover, affirm the doctrine of the sinful nature of man, that is, that human beings are (ethically) “unclean” by nature and cannot stand “pure” before a holy God (Prov 20:9; Job 4:17; 14:4). Since only one “who has (ethically) clean (*nāqī*) hands and a pure (*bar*) heart” (i.e. the “mind, inward self”; *lēb*) was eligible to ascend the temple mount to be in God’s presence (Ps 24:3–4), moral cleansing of the heart like unto outward ritual purification was required for the sinner (Ps 51:10–11a). The attitude of heart required to produce such “clean” or righteous acts is “the fear of the LORD” (Ps 19:9).

language of ceremonial impurity as metaphors for ethical impurity can be multiplied.<sup>62</sup>

In sum, just as physical uncleanness can come from within (natural bodily functions) and from without (contaminating things), in an analogous way sin comes both from perverse human nature within and temptations without.

#### IV. THE PURITY SYSTEM AND SACRED SPACE

From the foregoing, it may be deduced that the purity system is central to creating a sense of sacred space for ancient Israel. Houston<sup>63</sup> points out that the whole system of purity is concerned with protection of the sanctuary, even where it is not immediately apparent (Lev 12:4; 15:31; Num 19:13, 20), for the sanctuary as God's residence was the source of holiness, blessing, and order, and it was threatened on every side by the pollution that surrounded it. The special holiness of the tabernacle being incompatible with the condition of uncleanness and with idolatry was a reminder of the sacredness of tabernacle space, setting it apart from Canaanite sanctuaries that were instead to be profaned. Hence the rules of clean and unclean impressed in the mind of every Israelite that a special holiness was associated with Yahweh's sanctuaries and no other. As Wright<sup>64</sup> points out, the object of ritual cleansing with the purification offering's blood is primarily the sanctuary and not so much the worshiper. That the sanctuary needs this constant cleansing from human impurities and sins shows the sanctuary to be set apart, sacred. Thus the holiness and sacredness of that sacred space is emphasized.

It was the sense of the sacredness of the tabernacle and temple space that made purification from moral and ritual impurity essential. Nehemiah showed the sense of sacred space when he evicted wicked Tobiah's possessions from his chamber in the temple precincts that had been allowed by the priest Eliashib. He then ordered ritual purification (Piel of *tāhēr*) of both the room and the priesthood which had been defiled (*g'āl*) by the association of temple with "things foreign" (Neh 13:7-9, 29-30). It was to protect the sacredness of tabernacle space that laymen and laymen-slaves of a priest and daughters of priests married to laymen could not eat of the sacred donations to the sanctuary (Lev 22:10-13).<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Isaiah states that all of his people have become "like one who is unclean," that their righteous deeds were like a filthy garment (*begeḏ 'iddim*, literally "a menstrual cloth"; Isa 64:6 [Heb. 5]; cf. Isa 59:2-3; Zeph 3:1-4). Various sins are said by various prophets to "defile" morally: adultery (Ezek 18:6, 11, 15; 33:26), incest (Ezek 22:11), idolatry [often under the metaphor of harlotry] (Isa 30:22; Jer 2:23; 7:30; 32:34; Ezek 5:11; 20:7, 8, 18; 22:3-4, 23:7, 13, 30; 36:18, 25; 37:23; 43:8; Hos 5:3; 6:10), child sacrifice (Ezek 20:26, 31), bloodshed (Ezek 22:3-4), political intrigues with foreign nations (Ezek 23:17), working on the sabbath (Ezek 20:12-13, 21; 22:26), violations of laws and covenants (Isa 24:5), and miscellaneous evil deeds (Jer 2:7; Ezek 20:43). The post-exilic prophets use ritual purity to illustrate moral and religious points (Hag 2:10-11; Zech 3:1-5; 13:1-2; Mal 1:7-8, 12-14).

<sup>63</sup> Houston, *Purity and Monotheism* 245.

<sup>64</sup> Wright, *Disposal of Impurity* 18, 130.

<sup>65</sup> Layman is the rendering of *gēr*, usually of foreign sojourners, but contextually here of those not of priestly descent dwelling among the priests. See NRSV, NASB.

Wright observes,

... the Priestly writings' concern [was] to put impurity in its proper place. When this corpus is studied further, one finds that there is a similar concern about the proper place for holiness and purity. The information about places of holiness, purity, and impurity, as a whole, reveals a larger system of what may be called "cultic topography."<sup>66</sup>

This "cultic topography" serves to distinguish "sacred space" from non-sacred "common space" and defiled "unclean" space. It was because the tabernacle (and later temple) was the "Holy Place" that one needed to be careful not to approach in a condition of ceremonial impurity. The various rules of holy and clean and unclean raised in the consciousness of the Israelite worshiper the sense that the sanctuary was "sacred space." Some activities must occur only in "a holy place" within the sanctuary precincts, including the consumption of the most holy purification and guilt/reparation, and the cereal offerings (Lev 6:9, 19, 20 [Heb.]; 7:6; 10:12–14, 17; 14:13; 16:24; 24:9; Exod 29:31), whereas the well-being (peace) offerings (*zebah šělāmîm*), though they could be eaten in the sanctuary, could also be consumed in a "pure place" outside the sanctuary (Lev 10:14).<sup>67</sup> The carcass of the purification offering also had to be burned and disposed in a "pure place" (Lev 4:11–12, 21; 6:4, 23 [Heb.]; 8:17; 9:11; 16:27; Exod 29:14; Num 19:9), whereas the fungus infected building materials that resembles scale disease were to be deposited in an "impure place" (Lev 14:40f, 45).<sup>68</sup> Thus these rules underscore three kinds of space: sacred, pure, and impure.

In contrast with the sacredness of the tabernacle, Biblical law demanded the desecration of pagan "sacred spaces." Israel was commanded to destroy Canaanite sacred objects and places, placing them under the ban (*ḥērem*; Exod 23:24; 34:13; Deut 7:5). This represented a desacralization of the Canaanite cultic spaces. Idolatrous practices and objects are never labeled "unclean," and no impurity ritual is prescribed even in places where foreign cult practices are mentioned and where one might expect prescription of such rituals (e.g. Lev 19:4; 26:1–2). Nonetheless, idolatrous things "defile" in the moral (rather than ritual) sense both Israelites and their sanctuary (Lev 18:24, 30; 20:3), implying idolatry is akin to uncleanness. Moreover, like the transmission of impurity, the status of being *ḥērem* [dedicated to destruction] was transferable from the idol to the idolater (Deut 7:25–26).<sup>69</sup> For this reason Josiah "defiled" (Piel of *ṭāmē'*), that is, "destroyed," the ritually impure high places and altars of pagan gods which Manasseh his father had allowed to flourish in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 23:8–16; cf. Jer 19:13 where "to defile" houses polluted by idolatry also means "to destroy" them).

In a sense, the whole land of Israel was somewhat sacred space, in contrast with the defiled space of Gentile lands. Nonetheless, Gentile sojourners (*gērîm*) are allowed to share the semi-sacred space of land, even partaking

<sup>66</sup> Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity* 231.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 232–236.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 243.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 283–285.

holy things, such as the Passover meal (provided that they followed the law of circumcision) and the Feast of Weeks (Exod 12:48; Deut 16:14). Like Israelites, they had to undergo ritual purification when they contracted carcass impurity (Lev 17:15).

All this is done because the sanctuary, Israel's sacred space, was holy.

#### V. NEW TESTAMENT IMPLICATIONS

As one approaches the new covenant, in one sense the idea of sacred space has been abolished along with the purity laws. The temple, though still utilized in the book of Acts by the early Christians (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:21, etc.), was doomed to destruction (Matt 24:2), a fact that anticipates a new day in which emphasis on that sacred space would by necessity be abolished. Similarly, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that what is essential for worship will henceforth not be a particular sacred space, but sacred heart attitude, worshiping God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21–24). Instead of a tabernacle in the wilderness symbolizing God's dwelling among his people, in the new covenant Christ tabernacles among us (John 1:14), so wherever two or three gather in his name, there he is in our midst (Matt 18:20). Whereas the purity/impurity laws symbolized both sacred space (land, temple) and sacred community (Israelites, priests), under the new covenant sacred space has been supplanted by sacred community.<sup>70</sup> The sharp division between "clean" Israelites and "unclean" Gentiles has broken down as indicated by the breakdown, under the new covenant, of the clean/unclean system for food, persons, and space that these laws had symbolized.

Nevertheless, arguably some principles of the purity laws and sacred space are still applicable. Even in the OT cleanness and uncleanness metaphorically symbolized moral purity and impurity, and moral purity is still a Christian ideal. Moreover, the "place" where two or more gather in Christ's name becomes, by that fact, "holy ground," and as holy ground can be defiled, not by ceremonial, but by ethical impurity. It remains true that those who would metaphorically ascend the hill of the LORD at the sacred places where believers gather, must have (ethically) "clean hands and a pure heart" (Ps 24:3–4) lest that sacred time and place be defiled.

The evangelical Church would benefit if it devoted more attention to themes underscored in the laws of clean and unclean. Christians should still disassociate themselves from that which is disgusting, deadly, or dehumanizing. Instead they should affirm self-control, especially sexual self-control, and that which is wholesome and life-promoting. Though separation from Gentiles is obsolete for Christians, separation from the world is not. Though the sacred space of the temple is no more, the very fact that we build churches with "sanctuaries" is an indication that we sense the need psychologically of having sacred spaces even today. But if, by analogy, we, like

<sup>70</sup> Richard Averbeck, "Sacred Space and Sacred Community in the Old Testament and the New Testament," paper read at the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, Danvers, MA, November 18, 1999.

Israel of old, produce sacred spaces for our sacred communities to gather, ought we not, by that same analogy, guard the sacredness of such spaces from all defilements or improprieties that could profane that place for worship? Perhaps the low level of “sacredness” associated with evangelical sanctuaries comes not so much from Christian liberty as from our failure to reflect in our worship truths found in the laws of clean and unclean: the great holiness of God and its incompatibility with the defilement of man.