

The Rationale for Biblical Impurity

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A spate of reasons offered to explain the bodily impurities in Leviticus 12–15, conveniently collected and rejected by Dillmann,¹ are as follows: sin, esthetics, fear of demons, holiness of the sanctuary, separation of Israel, health, enhancing priestly power. Other rationales have also been proposed. Henninger, citing Falaize, ties the causes of impurity to moments of crisis such as birth, initiation, puberty, marriage, and death.² Israel, it would seem, was highly selective of this scheme since it imputed no impurity to initiation, puberty, and marriage and restricted the impurity of birth to the mother while exempting the child. A more recent theory argues the notion of wholeness as the solution: “A bleeding or discharging body lacks wholeness.”³ However, physical perfection is required only for sacrifices and priests but not for edible animals or the laity, even when the latter enter the sacred compound. More to the mark, I submit, is Dillmann’s own suggestion that bodily discharges result in the weakening of one’s strength and that the scale-diseased person, in particular, exhibits a polarity between life and death. It is this insight which I now wish to explore.

Members of primitive societies have testified to their researchers that menstrual and lochial blood is dangerous to persons.⁴ Written sources give testimony that this view was also held by the ancients, e.g., the Romans and the pre-Islamic Arabs.⁵ It is also recorded as a folk belief in the Talmud: “If a menstruant woman passes between two [men], if it is at the beginning of her menses, she will slay one of them, and if it is at the end of her menses, she will cause strife between them” (TB *Pes.* 111a). Moreover, menstrual blood was regarded as a powerful charm among the Arabs,⁶ and here too we find an echo in rabbinic writings: “If a woman sees a snake . . . she should take some of her hair and fingernails and throw them at it and say, ‘I am menstrous’” (TB *Shab.* 110a).⁷ Thus it was the worldwide fear of menstrual blood as the repository of demonic forces that, most likely, is the cause for the isolation of the menstruant.

1. A. Dillmann and V. Ryssel, *Die Bücher Exodus und Leviticus*, 3d ed. (Leipzig, 1897), 520–22.

2. J. Henninger, “Pureté et impureté. L’histoire des religions; peuple sémitiques; animaux impurs; le sang,” *SDB* 9:399–430.

3. M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966), 51.

4. Henninger, “Pureté et impureté.”

5. W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 3d ed. (New York, 1927), 448.

6. Loc. cit.

7. Cf. further examples in Y. Dinary, “The Impurity Customs of the Menstruant Woman: Sources and Development,” *Tarbiz* 49 (1979/80), 302–24 [in Hebrew].

Studies in the concept of impurity have indeed generally identified its underlying cause as the fear of the unknown or of demonic possession.⁸ Aside from the total inapplicability of this definition to biblical impurity, it has been challenged on its own grounds by Douglas,⁹ who points out that from earliest times human beings reacted to the mysteries of nature as much out of awe as of fear.

Douglas' own theory is also not without defects. She has equated impurity with what we call dirt, which she defines as matter out of place. Applying this definition to Leviticus 11, she declares that the forbidden animals are "out of place" in their media as determined by their means of locomotion. This insight is helpful but inadequate to explain why only certain animals are permitted and not others.¹⁰ More valuable is her utilization of the Durkheimian hypothesis that the animal world is a mirror of human society.¹¹

The opposite of "dirt out of place" is, of course, order, which in the Bible would correspond to the sphere of the holy. This accounts for Douglas' definition of the holy as "wholeness and completeness,"¹² and she correctly points to the biblical injunctions that priests and sacrificial animals must be unblemished. That wholeness, indicated by the Hebrew modifier *tāmîm*, is a significant ingredient of holiness cannot be gainsaid. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that the Qumran sectaries ban blemished persons from residing in the Temple-city (11QT 45:12-14).

This definition, however, falls short because it fails to take into account the two pairs of antonyms laid down by the priestly legislators: holy-common and impure-pure (Lev. 10:10). A blemished animal or priest is not impure but common (*hōl*). As for the prohibition against the blemished in the sanctuary, it only applies to priests officiating in the sanctuary and to animals offered on the altar. However, any blemished Israelite—priest and lay person alike—may enter the sacred precincts and offer one's sacrifices. If the holy and the impure are lethal antagonists, and they certainly are, then they clash not in the matter of "wholeness" but on an entirely different plane.

It is best to begin again with some comparative data. A. S. Meigs comes close to the mark in defining impurity as "(1) substances which are perceived as decaying, carriers of such substances and symbols of them; (2) in those contexts in which the substances, their carriers, or symbols are threatening to gain access to the body; (3) where that access is not desired."¹³ Meigs' conclusions are founded on her investigations of the Hua of New Guinea, and they are congruent with those reached in Culpepper's study of Zoroastrian practices: "all sickness

8. E.g., L. Levy-Bruhl, *Primitives and the Supernatural* (New York, 1935); W. Kornfeld, "Die unreinen Tiere im Alten Testament," *Kairos* 7 (1965), 134-47; K. Elliger, *Leviticus*, HAT 4 (Tübingen, 1966).

9. *Purity and Danger*, 1, and by others, e.g., W. Paschen, *Rein und Unrein, Untersuchung zur biblischen Wortgeschichte*, SANT 24 (München, 1970), 62.

10. Cf. J. Milgrom, "Ethics and Ritual: The Foundation of the Biblical Dietary Laws," in E. G. Firmage et al., eds., *Religion and Law* (Winona Lake, IN, 1989), 159-91.

11. *Purity and Danger*, 1.

12. *Ibid.*, 51.

13. A. S. Meigs, "A Papuan Perspective on Pollution," *Man* 13 (1978), 313.

and body excretions were understood to participate in death-impurity";¹⁴ and Burton's evaluation of Nuer impurity: "The necessity of maintaining the distance between bleeding youth (undergoing initiation) and pregnant women, and between bleeding women (menstruants) and potential life (intercourse) is thus a symbolic statement of the necessity for keeping life-creating processes from potentially life-destructive forces."¹⁵ The common denominator of these conclusions is that impurity is associated with the sphere of death. This line of approach has been taken by some biblical researchers.¹⁶ Their suggestion merits consideration.

A mere glance at the list of impurity bearers in the Torah suffices to reveal that this list is arbitrary and artificial. It does not focus on disease or even on disorders, if by that is meant unnatural disruptions of bodily functions; the inclusion of the parturient, menstruant, and emitter of semen contravenes such a notion. Furthermore, to judge by the high percentage of medical texts in the cuneiform documents of ancient Mesopotamia,¹⁷ there can be no doubt that many diseases were also diagnosed, catalogued, and treated in ancient Israel. Thus, the conclusion is inescapable that the impurities entered into this list have no intrinsic meaning in themselves but were selected because they serve a larger, overarching purpose. It is of no small significance that the diet laws of the priestly system (Leviticus 11), which are contiguous to and inseparable from the bodily impurities in this list (Leviticus 12–15), are also governed by criteria, such as cud chewing and hoof splitting, which are equally arbitrary and meaningless in themselves but serve a larger, extrinsic purpose. This purpose can be deduced both from the explicit rationale of holiness (Lev. 11:43–45) and the implications of relevant texts (e.g., Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:3–5, 10–14), to wit: to treat animal life as inviolable except for a few animals that may be eaten provided they are slaughtered properly and their blood is drained.¹⁸

I submit that the same rationale or, more precisely, its complement obtains here. The bodily impurities enumerated in the Torah focus on four phenomena: death, blood, semen, and scale-disease.¹⁹ Their common denominator is death. Vaginal blood and semen represent the forces of life; their loss—death. In the case of scale-disease, this symbolism is made explicit: Aaron prays for his stricken sister, "Let her not be like a corpse" (Num. 12:12). Furthermore, scale-disease is powerful enough to contaminate by overhang, and it is no accident that

14. E. Culpepper, "Zoroastrian Menstrual Taboos," in J. Plaskow, ed., *Women and Religion* (Miskoul, 1974), 205.

15. J. W. Burton, "Some Nuer Notions of Purity and Danger," *Anthropos* 69 (1974), 530.

16. E.g., Dillmann, *Exodus und Leviticus*, 523; G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York, 1962), 1:272; Kornfeld, "Die unreinen Tiere im Alten Testament"; Paschen, *Rein und Unrein*, 63; E. Feldman, *Biblical and Post-Biblical Defilement and Mourning* (New York, 1977), 35–37; N. Füglistner, "Sühne durch Blut. Zur Bedeutung von Leviticus 17:11," in G. Braulik, ed., *Studien zum Pentateuch* (W. Kornfeld Festschrift; Salzburg, 1977).

17. A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, 1964), 288–305.

18. Milgrom, "Ethics and Ritual: The Foundation of the Biblical Diet Laws."

19. See now E. L. Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (Atlanta, 1989), 49; J. Milgrom, "Rationale for Cultic Law: The Case of Impurity," *Semeia* 45 (1989), 103–9; idem, *Leviticus 1–16*, AB 3 (Garden City, NY, 1991), 766–67, 1000–1003.

it shares this feature with the corpse (Num. 19:14). The wasting of the body, the common characteristic of all biblically impure skin diseases, symbolizes the death process as much as the loss of blood and semen.

Some of Israel's neighbors also associated impurities with the forces of death. Mary Boyce is probably right when she deduces from her study of Zoroastrianism that "apart from the corpse, the chief cause of pollution is all that leaves the living body, whether in sickness or in health, the bodily functions and malfunctions being alike regarded, it seems, as *daevic* (demonic) in origin, perhaps since they are associated with change and mortality rather than with the static state of perfection."²⁰ Of course, as she acknowledges, this sweeping generalization would also include excrement, dead skin, cut nails, and hair among the polluting substances, which Israel categorically denied. Egypt too regarded all forms of decay as falling into the category of impurity, with one notable exception—the corpse. Quite the contrary, tombs enjoyed essentially the same holy status as the cult centers; in fact, the tombs were themselves centers of cultic activity.²¹

Finally, it should be recorded that the equation of bodily discharges with death in the Bible did not escape the notice of some recent observers. Its most precise formulation is by Adler: "Begetting and birth are the nexus points at which life and death are coupled . . . The nexus points are those in which there appears to be a departure or a transfer of vital force."²² Kornfeld has also recognized that the rationale for impurity in Leviticus 11–15 is its threat to life.²³ The explicit sources of impurity detailed in Leviticus 11–15: carcasses, scale-disease, genital discharges, together with corpses (Numbers 19), are all founded on this postulate, i.e., they symbolize the forces of death.

The terms *ṭum'â* and *qēdūšâ*, biblical impurity and holiness, are semantic opposites. And since the quintessence and source of *qēdūšâ* resides with God, it is imperative for Israel to control the occurrence of impurity lest it impinge upon the realm of the holy God. The forces pitted against each other in the cosmic struggle are no longer the benevolent and demonic deities who populate the mythologies of Israel's neighbors but the forces of life and death set loose by human beings through obedience to or defiance of God's commandments. Of all the diachronic changes that occur in the development of Israel's impurity laws,²⁴ this clearly is the most significant: the total severance of impurity from the demonic and its re-interpretation as a symbolic system reminding Israel of its imperative to cleave to life and reject death.

Recently, Eilberg-Schwartz²⁵ has raised three objections. The first is: "If the distinction between life and death was so crucial for the biblical writers, why did

20. M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden, 1975), 1:306–7.

21. D. Meeks, "Pureté et purification en Égypte," *SDB* (1979), 9:430–52.

22. R. Adler, "Tumah and Taharah. Ends and Beginnings," in E. Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (New York, 1976), 63–71.

23. W. Kornfeld, "Die unreinen Tiere im Alten Testament," in J. Kisser et al., eds., *Wissenschaft im Dienste des Glaubens* (Vienna, 1969).

24. Cf. J. Milgrom, "The Graduated Purification Offering (Leviticus 5:1–13)," *JAOS* 103 (1983 = S. N. Kramer Festschrift), 249–54.

25. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, "Israel in the Mirror of Nature. Animal Metaphors in the Ritual and Narratives of Ancient Israel," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 2/1 (1988), 26, n. 21.

they continue the institution of sacrifice, which requires the slaughter of animals?" The obvious retort is: What choice did they have? As perceptively observed by Maimonides, "man, according to his nature, is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which he was accustomed" and Israel's God, therefore, "suffered the above-mentioned kinds of (sacrificial) worship to remain, but transferred them from created or imaginary and unreal things to His own name."²⁶ Besides, this alleged discrepancy would have been categorically dismissed by the priestly legists. Sacrifice, in their view, means returning life to its creator. This is the underlying postulate of the blood prohibition as well.²⁷

His second objection states that "one would expect purification (from corpse contamination) to occur via a substance that symbolizes life" rather than with the ashes of a cow. The answer is equally obvious: In keeping with Maimonides' dictum (above), Israel adopted an exorcistic rite and eviscerated it of its pagan content.²⁸ Moreover, the purificatory waters do in fact symbolize life: the cow is *red*, *red* substances are included, and so the association with the blood, i.e., life, is clear!

As for the final objection that on the basis of the life-death opposition Israel should have been forbidden to cook a kid in the milk of any animal, not just that of its mother, I need only cite my conclusions reached in previous research that the prohibition originally was directed against a specific cultic act (Exod. 23:19; 34:26) before it was incorporated as a dietary law (Deut. 14:21), that iconography emphasizes the mother suckling its young, and the rabbis indeed draw the logical inference that all milk (and all animals) is (are) intended.²⁹

26. M. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago, 1963), 3:332.

27. J. Milgrom, "Ethics and Ritual. The Foundation of the Biblical Dietary Laws."

28. Idem, "The Paradox of the Red Cow," *VT* 31 (1981), 85-95.

29. Idem, "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk," *Bible Review* 1/3 (1985), 48-55.