



*Biblical purity and worldview:
Understanding and living our story*

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Distinguishing between purity and impurity is part of everyday life for the Muslim and the Christian; the outworking of this though could not be more different. When menstruating, for example, a Christian woman can read her Bible and take part in worship gatherings, yet a Muslim woman cannot even touch her Qur'an or pray. This disparity is a practical outworking of divergent beliefs about purity and impurity. If, as Christian women, we wish to build relationships with Muslim women for whom remaining clean and pure is an everyday challenge, then understanding biblical purity and how this is part of our story is critical, since purity is part of their story too. To this end, the majority of this article will explore purity and impurity in Islam and then within the biblical story. We will focus on the purity law codes of Leviticus and how this continues into the New Testament. However, it is necessary first to talk about how ritual relates to belief and worldview, since ritual is central to both a Muslim and Christian view of purity.

1. Ritual, worldview and story

Western Christians, especially those who align themselves to a 'low church' tradition, often perceive ritual to be a series of empty, barren, actions that have little bearing or relevance to ordinary life. However, ritual is not at all lifeless. Ritual, by its very nature, is a means of communication. While ritual anthropologists from both Western and Islamic cultures may disagree about how ritual communicates, there is consensus that ritual conveys the worldview of the culture

and/or religion in which it is embedded.³⁵ For example, while anthropologists such as Catherine Bell, Clifford Geertz, and Roy Rappaport, disagree about the purpose and meaning of the symbolic in the ritual process, each affirms that ritual conveys information about universal order. Turner and Geertz agree that ritual communicates a particular understanding of 'the general order of existence'.³⁶

Similarly, Bell argues that ritual articulates the 'socio-cosmic order', which is 'the way things really are and ought to be'.³⁷ While Rappaport differentiates between the self-referential and canonical messages of ritual, he establishes that the canonical message transcends the participants' immediate context and represents the general, enduring, or even eternal aspects of universal orders'.³⁸ Moreover, Bell, Rappaport, and Geertz, observe that ritual does not merely communicate a culture's understanding of universal order; ritual may also shape a society's view of the world, as well.³⁹ Ritual communicates beliefs about how the world is ordered and so conveys the worldview of the culture and/or religion.

If ritual is embedded in a particular worldview, and so communicates particular beliefs about universal order, then the scriptures that are normative for that worldview are significant also. For the Muslim, the Qur'an is the record of the

³⁵ N.B. Worldview in this paper will refer to 'The way a people interpret reality and events, including how they see themselves in relation to the world around them.' G. Bailey and J. Peoples, *Essentials of Cultural Anthropology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2013), 34.

³⁶ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 90. Turner argues that ritual describes the order of existence, while Geertz argues for a dynamic process where ritual does not merely communicate where society and ritual shape the other. See Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 119, 146; V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1974), 51- 58.

³⁷ C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford, 2010), 137, 141.

³⁸ R. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1999), 53.

³⁹ Bell, *Ritual*, 138, 153-155; Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 113-119.

revelation of Allah to Mohammed and its purpose is to guide 'those who are mindful of God' in the way of the five pillars of Islam (Qur'an 2:2-5, 121; 10:37). For the Christian, the Bible is our story that begins with a sovereign creator who, by his command, causes the heavens and the earth to come into being. Bartholomew and Goheen state about the Bible, 'It functions as the authoritative Word of God for us when it becomes the one *basic* story through which we understand our own experience and thought, and the foundation upon which we base our decisions and our actions.'⁴⁰ Herein lies a significant difference between the Muslim and the Christian. Whereas the Qur'an for the Muslim is as a guidebook, the purpose of the Bible for the Christian is for the believer to be so entrenched in their story that their view of the world is shaped and formed by it. It is true though that the scriptures of both Christianity and Islam articulate beliefs that form and shape their worldviews; in turn, their rituals communicate and articulate these beliefs and so emerge as expressions of their stories.

So ritual, worldview, and story, are intrinsically bound. As we seek to understand both Islamic and biblical purity laws, we do so with the understanding that each set of purity laws are an expression of a worldview that is shaped by the scriptures and core texts of each faith community. Purity laws entail ritual and thus communicate an aspect of the worldview to which the purity laws belong.

⁴⁰ C. G. Bartholomew and M. W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: finding our place in the biblical story* (Grand Rapids, MI., Baker, 2004), 21.

2. Purity and the Islamic worldview

Human cleanliness and purity in Islam reflects the nature of the world as created by Allah and the character of God who is pure. How the Qur'an begins is indicative of the Islamic worldview (Qur'an 1:1-7),

*In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! Praise belongs to God Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgment. It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.*⁴¹

In the above, the repetition of 'the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy' emphasises the fundamental belief that Allah is merciful, but only towards those who submit to his will. Moreover, the orientation of the Muslim is towards the 'Day of Judgment'. The Qur'an begins not with the beginning of world order, but proclaims God as the 'Master of the Day of Judgment' where human history will culminate and God will call all to account who have done good and bad. The good is characteristic of those who are on the blessed path, which is the 'straight path'. Only those who are pure can be part of the straight path and, if God chooses to be merciful, will be rewarded with eternity in Paradise (Qur'an 2:25, 19:96 3:15-17; 9:71-72; 30:30; 53:32). However, those who have not submitted to the will of God will suffer God's anger on the Day of Judgment (Qur'an 2:8-19, 39; 7:40-41; 53:30-31).

⁴¹ All references to the Qur'an in this paper are from *The Qur'an*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, Oxford: Oxford, 2005.

Although the Qur'an begins with an orientation towards the Day of Judgment, as noted above, they view the world as created by God who is sovereign over all domains (worlds) of creation (Qur'an 2:29, 163-164; 7:54; 10:3-4; 30:8, 27). Islam understands the world as created both good and pure and world order still reflects this original state of creation. So humans are born with the innate disposition of the 'straight' path of religion (Qur'an 30:30). This disposition has the capacity to believe that God is the one true Lord of all being (Qur'an 2:222). The goal of a human is to keep their heart in this original state of purity so that the heart is receptive to belief and be prepared for God's blessing. Within Islam, being deceived by the present life leading to unbelief is the most heinous offence to God (Qur'an 35:36-37, 39:71-72, 40:10). 'Filth' that causes the heart to be impure is a result of evil actions and bad speech (Qur'an 39:51).

However, spiritual purity is not the only condition for blessing, but cleanliness as well. The Qur'an 2:222 states unambiguously, 'God loves those who turn to Him, and He loves those who keep themselves clean'.⁴² For Islam, cleanliness is the most fundamental principle of creation. Physical dirt and grime is in opposition to this state and so humans must strive to be physically clean so that in turn they can pursue spiritual purity (Qur'an 74:3-7; Sahih Muslim 2:436). Physical cleanliness and spiritual purity are not separate endeavours, but rather physical cleanliness is the first step to being spiritually pure (Qur'an 5:6; Sahih Muslim 2:475). For this reason, a central teaching of Islam is that 'cleanliness is half of faith' (Sahih Muslim 2:432). Faith is belief, internalised in the heart and confessed verbally, and good works where a Muslim hopes to receive God's grace by obedience to God's

⁴² This statement is made in Qur'an 2:222 in the context of how a man can approach his wife after she is cleansed from her menstruation.

commands (Qur'an 2:177, 207-208; 5:8-9). A significant part of these good works, therefore, are the two rituals of purification: the *wudu'* and the *ghusl*. The *wudu'* is for minor impurity and involves eight stages of washing (Sahih Muslim 2:436). Performing *wudu'* in mindful devotion will expiate sin done between prayers (Sahih Muslim 2:437, 438, 444). Unless a Muslim mindfully performs the *wudu'*, she cannot pray or touch the Qur'an. The *ghusl* is then a complete bath, which is required for major defilement, and recommended for every Muslim at least once a week to maintain a state of cleanliness and purity, and so be in a state to gain God's pleasure (Qur'an 9:108; Sahih al-Bukhari 5:289, 11:6). The goal of purification, both for the *wudu'* and the *ghusl*, is to remove all impurity (both physical and spiritual), so that the heart can absorb belief. For this reason, purification is necessary before prayer because prayer is for the favour and pleasure of God and is the physical sign of the believer's submission to God's will (Qur'an 5:6-7; Sahih Muslim 2:433, 435). Although the human pursuing cleanliness and purity does so for God's favour, God is not compelled to act in grace or mercy. However, a condition of being a recipient of God's mercy is belief and purity (Qur'an 3:31; 28:67; 35:18; 42:26). Only those who exemplify these characteristics will be in paradise and live in the garden eternally (Qur'an 2:82; 3:15-17; 7:42; 53:39-41; Sahih Muslim 2:451). Thus, for the Muslim, to be in a state of uncleanness and impurity is to be in a state opposed to God, and thus separated from the means to gain his favour, since she is unable to participate in works that outwardly demonstrate her submission. Therefore, the Muslim woman must make the distinction between what is clean-pure and unclean-impure in everyday life, so that she can protect her disposition of purity and participate in works of submission because the 'Lord is the final goal.' (Qur'an 53:42; see also 2:46, 31:22, 53:42). There are, however, some causes of uncleanness outside of a woman's

control, such as menstruation and childbirth. The purification rituals, in these two instances the *ghusl*, must be performed so that she is restored to a state of purity.

As we progress to the next section exploring purity and impurity within the Christian worldview, worth keeping in mind is a point of similarity, which is that the everyday task of the Muslim or the Christian is making distinctions between what is pure and impure because to be in a state of impurity is to be separated from God or the path of his favour and pleasure. However, a key difference will also be noticeable. Where the physically clean and the spiritually pure are the one and the same in Islam, the physically (ritually) pure is analogous for ethical purity in the worldview of the Torah.

3. Ritual purity and the Torah's worldview

Purity within the Hebrew worldview represents wholeness of relationship with their God, YHWH. Fundamental to this understanding of ritual purity is the identity of YHWH. The Torah's narrative identifies YHWH as the all-sovereign creator whose creative purpose is establishing universal order, whether that be order that binds the domain and function of the various spheres of creation or whether it be relational order between God and humanity, God and creation, creation and humanity, and within humanity (Gen. 1:1-2:3, 2:4-25). The reason why the world is not the way it ought to be is due to humanity desiring and attempting to grasp wisdom that belongs to the domain of God (Gen. 3:1-8).⁴³ This act of humanity fractured created relational order and God's response of curse strengthened the consequences of this disorder (Gen. 3:8-19). Thus, not wishing for his creation to

⁴³ See also V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1990), 165; B. K. Waltke, *Genesis: a Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2001), 86.

continue in a corrupted state, YHWH chooses and redeems a nation to belong solely to him in a covenant relationship where he will begin restoring relational order (Ex. 19-24). Israel understood itself to be a covenant community whose suzerain is the creator-redeemer, YHWH.⁴⁴ While Israel believed that YHWH bound himself in covenant relationship with them, he is not constrained to a place or to a particular people. As sovereign creator, he has a heavenly sanctuary, but this sanctuary is to have a physical representation in the midst of his people (Ex. 25:8-9, 35-40), which is purposefully mobile (Ex. 40:36-38). This physical representation of the heavenly sanctuary, the tabernacle, is to be in the midst of Israel as a declaration that he is their God-king and they are his people under a theocracy (Ex. 20-24, 25:8-9, 40:34-38).

A critical dimension of this worldview is the holiness of YHWH in that he is utterly complete and whole in his being and so is set apart in this utter completeness. Thus, the place that represents the presence of this holy God within his people must also be holy, in that the place needs to be set apart for a purpose, namely for God's self-revelation (e.g. Ex. 3-4, 19:1-24, 40:34-38; Lev. 1:1-2). For this reason, there is a requirement for an individual or nation to acknowledge in action, and thus in ritual, that they are approaching a holy place where God is present. For example, Moses had to take off his sandals as an acknowledgment that he has stepped onto holy land (Ex. 3:5-6), or boundaries being established between Israel and God's presence on Sinai with the people washing and abstaining from sexual activity (Ex. 19:10-24). Every action in these instructions is for the purpose of setting apart the people to meet with a holy God in a holy place. Moreover, only

⁴⁴ For a good overview explaining YHWH as Israel's covenant king, please see J. Sklar, *Leviticus: an introduction and commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 2014), 37-44.

those God invites into his presence can approach him since God's holiness is dangerous. This is evident by the fact that the people need to be warned not to break through the barriers in Exodus 19:20-23 otherwise the people will perish. When the elders of Israel feast in God's presence in 24:11, God restrains his hand from acting against them. Thus, the danger of proximity to God's holiness can be restrained when there is obedience; or, to express this negatively, when there is disobedience and rebellion, God no longer restrains his hand, and death ensues (Ex. 32:1-10, 26-29). A question this raises is how a holy God can be present in his tabernacle in the midst of a rebellious nation.

The purpose of the tabernacle was made possible by the institution of a purity system, which is set out in Leviticus (see 10:10, 11:1-15:33). This system has two binary pairs: first, the holy and the common and second, the impure and the pure (Lev. 10:10). The first binary pair, the holy and the common, are states of being. The 'common' describes the normal state from which a person or people, an animal, or an object, can be set apart as 'holy' for a particular purpose.⁴⁵ The second binary pair, the impure and pure, are conditions that can affect the two states (i.e. the first binary pair).⁴⁶ A purpose of ritual in Leviticus is to teach the Israelites how to navigate the distinction within the binary pair of impurity and purity so that they can maintain their status as a holy people (e.g. 11:47, 14:57). Moreover, how a particular state comes into contact with one of the two conditions affects the status of the individual and the nation in the land. If the common is pure or the holy

⁴⁵ See also J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1-10* (HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 540; G. W. Wenham, *Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1979), 19. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 19, also notes that if something is not holy, then it is common. That is, the state of being common is a neutral term.

⁴⁶ For the idea that the holy and common are two states, while the impure and pure are two conditions, see Trevaskis, *Holiness*, 68-70.

is pure, then there is completeness and life. However, if impurity defiles the pure, there is a consequence of disorder. More dramatically though, if impurity defiles and profanes the holy, then the consequence is death and exile. If we understand the tabernacle in the camp to be a microcosm of the temple in the land, then where YHWH is present among his people is to be both holy and pure, while the rest of the land can be common and pure, and God's people are to be pure in their holy state. If the holy and the common are in a pure condition, then there is order and life in the land, but if impurity defiles the land or YHWH's presence, then death and exile is the consequence. Therefore, for an Israelite, being in a condition of ritual impurity represents disorder and separates the Israelite from approaching God. The purpose of ritual is to restore the Israelite or the nation to a condition of purity and thus wholeness of relationship, so that there is access to God's presence and thus life.

4. Ritual purity and Leviticus 11-15

This view of purity and impurity is implied within the whole of Leviticus, however the most explicit instruction about ritual purity is in Leviticus 11-15. The intent underlying the purity codes in Leviticus 11-15 is to teach the Israelites about the distinction between the pure and the impure in everyday life with the sanctuary of their holy God in their midst (11:47, 14:57, 15:31).

Leviticus 11 focuses upon this distinction based on what the Israelite can, or cannot, eat. The living creatures that are permissible to eat are those that exemplify all the characteristics, that is, they are complete.⁴⁷ For example, in v3, the Israelite is given permission to eat animals that have a divided hoof *and* chews the cud; any

⁴⁷ For a similar view, please see M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 53. See also Wenham, *Leviticus*, 168-171.

animal that has one, or none, of these characteristics cannot be eaten (vv4-8). Similarly, only creatures that have both fins *and* scales are to be eaten from the sea (v9). Any other sea creature that has one or none of these attributes cannot be eaten (vv10-12). Thus, the living creatures that can be eaten because they are classified as pure are those that are 'complete', while those with one or no characteristics are impure and should not be eaten. Moreover, those that are not to be eaten may have associations with disorder. For example, most birds classified as impure are ones that ingest carrion (vv13-19). All creatures that move about on their belly are also considered impure (v42) due to their association with the rebellion of Genesis 3.⁴⁸ Thus, the impure status of the living things, which are not to be eaten, is derived from an association with incompleteness, death, and rebellion. The pure status of living creatures that can therefore be eaten is derived from an association with completeness. Intriguingly, v44 is the first time within the Torah that explicitly relates the imperative for the Israelite to make the distinction between what is impure and pure as the means of setting themselves apart as holy in imitation of YHWH.⁴⁹ Keeping themselves ritually pure is the means by which they are distinctive in their status as a holy people.

Leviticus 13-14 then applies this principle of distinguishing between the impure and pure not on the basis of what is incomplete or complete, but rather between what represents disorder and what represents order. These instructions

⁴⁸ See Trevaskis, *Holiness*, 98-99.

⁴⁹ While Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 687, also understands v44 as a principle of the imitation of God, yet our understanding above differs fundamentally. We have noted above that Israel is to imitate God in being set apart in their ritual purity; that is, they are to be set apart to God by being in a condition that represents completeness and wholeness. This is different from Milgrom's understanding that 'Israel can become holy... by obedience to God's moral and ritual commandments' and the reason why Israel 'must aspire to holiness is *imitatio dei*' (Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 686-687).

pertain particularly to a *s āra'at* of skin (13:1-46, 14:1-32) or material, leather, or a house (13:47-59, 14:33-57). If it is a *s āra'at* of skin then the idea is 'disease' or if in relation to fabric, leather, or in a house, then the term refers to mould.⁵⁰ The common idea though is that a *s āra'at* is a change in appearance that represents disorder since the disease or mould is not how the skin, material, leather, or house, ought to be.⁵¹ Thus, Leviticus 13-14 adds further to the Israelite understanding of ritual impurity and purity as distinguishing between what represents disorder and order.

There are purification rituals associated with each kind of *s āra'at* in the situation that the disease has been healed or the mould has not spread (14:1-57). What is notable about the final offerings in the case of skin disease is that each of the three animals for the three offerings must be without blemish (*tāmîm*; 14:10). The goal of the ritual process is both purification (*t āhēr*) and atonement (*kipper*). This is true too of mould in fabric or in a house where the ritual purification involves the sprinkling of mingled blood and water seven times (seven representing completion) on the defiled areas for atonement (14:48-53). Remarkably, purification and atonement cannot be effected without the shedding and the complete splattering of blood.⁵²

Leviticus 15 develops the logic of the purity laws significantly. No longer is the focus upon making a distinction between the impure and the pure, but rather

⁵⁰ Please see J. E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1992), 187-190, for a discussion on the English translation of the Hebrew *s āra'at*.

⁵¹ See also Wenham, *Leviticus*, 192, 'These symptoms are clearly abnormal, and by disfiguring the appearance of man and his works, destroy the wholeness that ought to characterize the creation.'

⁵² Hartley, *Leviticus*, 198, states, 'The repetition of "expiate" stresses that the person is thoroughly forgiven and fully cleansed. From now on he may enter God's presence with confidence.'

unfolds the consequence of remaining in impurity. The instructions address situations where a man or a woman experience genital discharge, such as when a man has an unusual discharge (vv2-15),⁵³ an emission of semen (vv16-18), a woman's menstruation (vv19-24), and if a woman experiences an irregular loss of blood (vv25-30). There are two observations about the nature of ritual impurity that Leviticus 15 accentuates. The first is that ritual impurity is contagious.⁵⁴ For example, anything a person, man or woman, with an impure discharge lies or sits on will become impure (15:4, 9, 20, 26); similarly, a person who touches the person, the bed, or the couch, will also be impure (15:5-8, 10-11, 18, 22-24, 27). Second, the text is unambiguous about the need for purification. The person who becomes impure by contact with impurity by virtue of genital discharge is required to bathe in water and to also wash their clothes (15:10, 11, 18, 22, 27). Moreover, each situation of genital discharge concludes with a purification ritual. Depending upon the situation, the purification rite involves either an offering of two gifts, purification and whole offerings, for atonement before YHWH (15:13-15; 15:28-30) or washing with water and waiting until evening (15:18).⁵⁵ Thus, the focus is not necessarily why genital discharge makes a person impure, but rather the need for purification when a man or a woman has become impure by genital discharge or by contact with contagion. Verse 31 conveys the intent of this focus in Leviticus 15. Namely, the purpose of the purity

⁵³ N.B. While the NIV renders the Hebrew of 15:2 as 'When any man has an unusual bodily discharge...', yet the Hebrew does contain the idea of 'unusual'. The Hebrew could be rendered more literally as, 'When a man has a discharge from his flesh' (see also ESV).

⁵⁴ See also Wenham, *Leviticus*, 218-219. Technically, however, there is a difference between 'contagious' (as above) and 'infectious' (as per Wenham, *Leviticus*, 218). 'Contagious' is much more accurate since the condition of impurity is passed from one to another by the contagion touching the other, whereas 'infectious' refers to contagion that is transmitted by air or liquid.

⁵⁵ See Sklar, *Leviticus*, 45-46, 199, for an explanation of the differences between the purification rituals.

laws in 15:2-30 is so that the Israelites are kept separate from what makes them impure, otherwise the consequence of remaining in impurity is death since they have defiled God's tabernacle, which is in their midst. This is true not only of the instructions pertaining to genital discharge, but also for any cause of ritual impurity. Impurity acts to separate the people from God and thus represents relational disorder and death. Thus, the function of Leviticus 15 in the succession of purity instruction is to stress the need for Israelites to separate themselves from what is impure. In doing so, Leviticus 15 demonstrates the need for purification so that there is life with their God-king in their midst, and not death.

Noticeably, we have not yet explored the purity laws in Leviticus 12. The reason for this is that these instructions are closer in principle to Leviticus 15 than Leviticus 11 or 13-14. A woman becomes ritually impure by the birth of a son or a daughter and the text in v2 makes the correlation between impurity as a consequence of childbirth and impurity as a consequence of menstruation.⁵⁶ Again, two observations are noteworthy. First, again her impurity is contagious. In contrast to Leviticus 15, the text chooses not to address the contagious nature of her impurity with anyone or anything that comes in contact with her, but rather chooses to remark that she is not able to touch anything holy or approach the sanctuary until she is in a state of purity (v4). Once more, her impurity separates her from approaching God's presence and thus she remains in a state of relational disorder until she is able to submit to ritual purification. Second, it is necessary for her to offer both a whole and purification offering so that the priest can make atonement for her. While the mother is banned from the sanctuary for either thirty-three (for a son) or sixty-six days (for a daughter), purification is only complete when

⁵⁶ See also Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 744.

the priest makes atonement by the sacrifice of her gifts (v7). Like Leviticus 15, the emphasis in Leviticus 12 is not upon why childbirth is a cause of impurity, but rather chooses to focus upon impurity as contagion and the consequence of separation from God's presence.

Thus, the purity laws in Leviticus 11-15 instruct the Israelite about the distinction between the ritually pure and the ritually impure and the consequence of remaining in ritual impurity. The state of ritual purity represents completeness and order, while the state of ritual impurity represents incompleteness and disorder.⁵⁷ There is a strong relationship between God being holy, that is utterly complete in and of himself, and the Levitical understanding of purity as completeness. Israel is to imitate YHWH's holiness by being set apart in ritual purity, that is, by being in a state of being that represents completeness. Thus, being in a state of ritual impurity is contrary to what represents YHWH's character. The consequence of remaining in ritual impurity is that an Israelite is separated from approaching God's presence and thus in a state of relational disorder. For this reason, the Israelites are to separate themselves from ritual impurity. Positively though, the consequence of being pure is life in the presence of God. What is noticeable about this system of purity and impurity is that its meaning relies upon the symbolic and what the contagion represents. The cause of ritual impurity is not the living creature, skin disease, mould, or discharge inherently, but rather what an impure living creature, skin disease, mould, or discharge symbolises. In the Hebrew worldview, being separate from what represents incompleteness and disorder and, in this separation, being in a state that represents completeness and order, is imitating the holy God to whom they belong.

⁵⁷ See also Hartley, *Leviticus*, 163, 199.

5. Ritual purity and Ethical purity in Leviticus

Intriguingly, Leviticus 20:25-26 relates making the distinction between pure and impure birds and animals with the imperative to avoid the behaviour of the nations who previously possessed the land. Verse 25 also clearly expresses that the impure birds and animals are assigned their condition because YHWH has set them apart as so. That is, the animals and birds that are deemed to be in an impure condition are set apart with this purpose; they are not inherently impure as part of creation order.⁵⁸ They are impure because of what impurity represents. Verse 26 then repeats YHWH's desire for Israel to be holy in imitation of his holiness (cf. Lev. 11:45-47). The motivation given in v26b for this act of imitation is that YHWH has set apart Israel from the nations to belong to him. The connection between making the distinction between what is ritually impure and pure and Israel being distinct from the nations is significant.⁵⁹ Leviticus 20:2-21 is a list of penalties for behaviour that Israel is not to replicate when they are in the land since the previous inhabitants of the land exemplified this behaviour and were 'vomited' from the land. Thus, by making the distinction between ritual impurity and purity in relation to what the Israelites are and are not to eat is so that Israel will embody these distinctions when making the distinction between pure behaviour and the impure behaviour of

⁵⁸ Contrary to Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1764.

⁵⁹ N.B. The distinction between pure and impure animals and birds is not analogous for holy Israel and the unholy nations (contrary to Trevaskis, *Holiness*, 104 n. 237 who follows Wenham, *Leviticus*, 170). The distinction in the animal realm is analogous of the distinction between the two conditions of purity and impurity in the realm of behaviour that represents relational order with YHWH and impure behaviour representative of the nations. The distinction is not merely Israel-nations, but rather the impure practices of the nations that caused the land to be defiled. Participation in the impure practices of the nations would lead to exclusion from God's presence in that they will be exiled from the land (contrary to Trevaskis, *Holiness*, 105).

the nations.⁶⁰ The motivation in 20:22 is negative; if Israel repeats the defiling behaviours, then YHWH will abhor them and they too will be vomited from the land.

Leviticus 18 explains why this is so. Bearing similarities with Leviticus 20, the main concern of Leviticus 18 is that Israel will not adopt the behaviour of the nations who lived in the land before Israel. Verses 6-23 lists these behaviours and so prohibits Israel from participating in these defiling practices. Verse 24 then provides the reason. Israel is not to become impure by these actions because this is how the previous nations also became impure. This impurity affected the land with the consequence that the land 'vomited out' the previous nations (v25). In contrast to the end of these nations, v26 instructs Israel to keep YHWH's instructions, not becoming impure (vv26-27), so that they too will not cause the land to become impure. If they do cause the land to be impure, then Israel too will be 'vomited out' from the land (v28). There are a couple of vital observations. First, the verb meaning 'to become impure' is *t āmē*, which is the same verb used in Leviticus 11-15 for the Israelites becoming ritually impure (e.g. 11:24-44, 12:2, 5, 13:3, 8, 14:36, 15:4-11).⁶¹ This suggests a relationship between ritual and ethical impurity since both kinds can make the people and the land impure (*t āmē*).⁶² The second observation then is that the prohibited practices are contagion in that if this behaviour is replicated by Israel in the land, both people and the land will become impure. Thus, ethical impurity is contagious also.

This raises the question of how ritual purity and impurity relates to ethical purity and impurity. Worth noting is that the meaning of purity and impurity remains

⁶⁰ See also Sklar, *Leviticus*, 260. Contrary to Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1763-164; Wenham, *Leviticus*, 280.

⁶¹ See also 11:24-44, 12:2, 5, 13:3, 8, 11, 14-15, 20-30, 44-46, 59, 14:36, 15:4-11, 16-27, 31-32.

⁶² See also Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1578.

consistent irrespective of whether the kind is ritual or ethical. Purity is completeness and reflects order, while impurity is incompleteness and reflects disorder. For ritual impurity, the cause is what God has set apart as contagion to help the Israelite make the distinction between what is pure and impure. As we have noted above, by making the distinction, the Israelite learns that purity is about completeness and is the means by which God desires his people to imitate his character as one that is utterly complete. When an Israelite becomes ritually impure, they also learn that impurity separates from the presence of God and represents death. However, ethical purity and impurity is not what God has set apart as ethically pure and impure for the Israelites to learn the distinction; rather, the behaviour and attitudes that are pure are inherently an outworking of relational order, while impure behaviour inherently breaks relationship and thus is a cause of disorder. Ethical purity is an outworking of completeness in relationship with YHWH, while ethical impurity fractures relationship and is therefore contrary to relational wholeness. However, where ritual impurity can be atoned for by surrendering of a gift to YHWH and the Israelite restored to a pure condition, ethical impurity is caused by doing what is prohibited and there is no means by which an Israelite or the nation can be purified, if the prohibition is done intentionally. The offender, who has become impure by his actions, bears his own guilt and the penalty in either death or exile.

Therefore, Ritual impurity teaches the Israelite to separate him or her self from impurity and to not remain in that state when they become impure. It is a matter of life and death. The goal of learning to separate the ritually impure from the pure is so that the nation embodies this distinction and separates itself from ethical impurity. While the consequence of ritual impurity is a temporary separation from the tabernacle in Israel's midst, the consequence of ethical impurity is

separation by exile from the land or death. However, the goal of Israel being ritually pure and ethically pure is the same, which is life and flourishing. By being pure, both ritually and ethically, they are holy in imitation of YHWH's character. Purity is to be the means by which Israel sets itself apart from the nations to belong to YHWH.

6. Ritual purity, ethical purity, and a New Covenant worldview

The biblical view of purity and impurity develops significantly with the incarnation of Jesus and the completion of his work. The temple, as a physical building in Jerusalem, becomes redundant with Jesus who, as God with his people, tabernacles among the nation (Jn. 1:1-14, 2:18-22). He is now the centre of worship as the crucified and risen lamb who has purified a people for God through his blood (Jn. 4:21-26; Rev. 5:1-14). Through Jesus, his people can now approach the throne of God since his blood has purified the heavenly holy place and no longer will impurity cause separation between God and his people (Heb. 4:14-9:28). Furthermore, with Jesus' ascension, he has purposefully sent his Spirit to indwell believers (1 Cor. 6:19-20; Gal. 4:6-7, 5:16-6:10). There is no longer separation (Eph. 2:12-18; Rev. 21-22). If we are to understand the place of ritual purity and ethical purity in a new covenant worldview, we need to understand these developments from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament more fully.

The extraordinary claim of the New Testament is that by tabernacling among Israel in flesh and blood (Jn. 1:1-14), Jesus chose to expose himself to both ritual and ethical impurity. In doing so, he came into contact with contagion and yet death did not follow for those who were impure and neither was Jesus' purity defiled; instead, there was healing and life.⁶³ For example, Mark 1:40-45 recalls a man with a skin

⁶³ See also R. H. Stein, *Mark* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 2008), 106.

disease asking Jesus to make him pure (v40). Jesus touches the man and commands him to become pure (v41). This is a scenario addressed by Leviticus 13 where the man should have separated himself from the people because his impurity is contagion for anyone who touches him (Lev. 13:45-46). Remarkably though, the consequence of Jesus' command is the leprous man being purified (Mk. 1:42).⁶⁴ Jesus, by his command, restores the man to a condition that represents order and wholeness. Similarly, Mark 5:21-43 addresses two situations where Jesus comes into contact with contagion (5:24-34, 40-43). In the first instance, a woman who is losing blood, as per the situation of Leviticus 15:25-27, touches Jesus' clothes (5:27-28).⁶⁵ When aware that someone has touched him, Jesus' response was not in accord with Leviticus 15:27, which is to wash his clothes and separate himself until evening. Instead, power went from him and the woman was made whole (5:29, 33-34). The second situation is where Jesus takes the dead girl's hand in 5:41. Instead of Jesus becoming impure by contact with the dead (Num. 19:11-13), the girl was brought to life by his command.⁶⁶ Significantly, each example involves touching to prove that

⁶⁴ See also R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 118, 'It is, of course, a nice point whether to touch the leper did in fact render Jesus unclean when the touch was itself the means of his cure. The touch which should have made Jesus unclean in fact worked in the opposite direction.'

⁶⁵ See also France, *Mark*, 236-237; M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark* (BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1991), 148-149. N.B. Stein, *Mark*, 267, quite astonishingly suggests that the issue of the woman's impurity 'plays no part in the miracle story. The woman's plight is highlighted by the length of her suffering'. If the Markan audience was well acquainted with Israelite legal tradition, then there is no need for the text to highlight the state of her impurity, since this information would be supplied by their knowledge. The audience would know the implications and, furthermore, the length of times does indeed heighten the sense of her suffering, but more so in the context of her impurity. Twelve years is a long time to not only be suffering, but not being able to enter a place of worship. Contrary to Stein, the woman's condition of impurity has everything to do with the miracle.

⁶⁶ Hooker, *Mark*, 151, notes, 'Another link between the two stories is that both victims are ceremonially unclean. In both cases, Jesus comes into contact with defiling forces, but his own power is demonstrably greater.'

Jesus can touch those who are ritually impure and neither death or separation from God ensues or that ritual impurity is contagious. No longer are the things God has set apart as ritually impure deemed impure.

This change implied in Jesus' actions of touching those who are ritually impure before restoring each to wholeness and life is made explicit in Jesus' teaching in Mark 7:14-23. Jesus first states the principle publicly (7:16) and repeats it privately for his disciples (7:18-21). The principle is unambiguous; nothing entering into a person from the outside can make a person impure, but what comes out of a person can make them impure.⁶⁷ In v21, Jesus clarifies that the contagion is from a person's heart. In the Hebrew worldview, heart is the centre of moral response.⁶⁸ Jesus' point is that the origin of contagion is the moral response of a person's heart whether that response is action, attitude, spoken, or unspoken. After this clarification in v21, Jesus then lists examples of ethical impurity after which he states, 'All these evils come from inside and make a person impure' (vv21-23). Thus, by Jesus declaring the principle of 7:19, he acknowledges that ritual impurity is no longer contagion, but contagion by ethical impurity still remains.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ See also France, *Mark*, 291.

⁶⁸ See P. A. Barker, *The Triumph of Grace in Deuteronomy: Faithless Israel, Faithful Yahweh in Deuteronomy* (PBM; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 158.

⁶⁹ The requirement of the law has always had an ethical dimension, as argued above. Just as God declared that unclean foods are to be unclean, so now Jesus declares with the same authority that those foods no longer represent this condition, but rather that ethical contagion still remains. W. L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 258, similarly notes, 'The requirement of cultic purity possessed an inner value and justification as a symbol pointing beyond itself to God's demand for spiritual and moral purity. The capacity for fellowship with God is not destroyed by material uncleanness of food or hands; it is destroyed by personal sin. With this fundamentally biblical insight the older ritual concept of purity is transcended.'

The problem, according to the biblical worldview, is that no one is ethically pure; all are morally impure (e.g. Gen. 6:5, Ecc. 7:20, Rom. 1:18-32, 3:9-20). The reason for the impure condition of humanity, and therefore the cause of relational disorder, is sin. Foundational to the biblical worldview is that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23). Sin is contagion because it causes incompleteness and fractures order. The consequence is that all are separated from God's presence (Gen. 3:21-24, Isa. 59:2, Rom. 6:23, Eph. 2:1-3). This worldview is consistent with the Hebrew worldview in Torah, but instead of limited to Israel in the land, we see the worldview being applied universally. Thus, by establishing the distinction between impurity and purity within Israel in the land, God establishes a microcosm within Israel of what is true universally. The purpose of ritual impurity and purity was to accentuate the need for purification when in a state of impurity. This was possible by ritual purification, but these means only atoned for impurity temporarily since the Israelite could become ritually impure once more and be separated from God's presence again. This system of ritual impurity and purity therefore pointed to the universal problem. To remain in a state of impurity is to remain separated from God and be in a state of death. In the biblical worldview, humanity in their corrupt and impure state cannot solve this problem. God, however, has provided the means of purification in the crucified Christ. Romans 3:25, for instance, teaches how God offered Christ as the sacrifice of atonement that effects purification. Jesus has atoned for our impurity, bearing the penalty of our impurity upon himself, through the shedding of his blood. Hebrews 9 adds to this understanding that the blood of Christ purifies not only our consciences from acts that lead to death (v14), but also the heavenly tabernacle so that believers can approach God's throne of grace (9:11-15, 23-28). The only condition is belief and repentance that turns to serve the living God (Jn. 3:15-16; Heb. 6:12).

However, Jesus' person and work does not just shape a biblical worldview of the present, but also of the future. The biblical worldview views the present order of the world as passing away and that, at a point in the future, God will create a new heavens and a new earth (Rev. 21-22). In this new order of creation, there will be no separation between a heavenly and earthly sanctuary of God, but rather God will dwell among his people (Rev. 21:1-4). This is made possible because God's people are all purified through the blood of Christ and the crucified and risen lamb is present (21:22-27). God can be present and there be life because nothing impure will be part of the new order (21:27). In the new covenant worldview, this future has present consequences for God's people. Although Jesus has purified those who believe in him, and we belong to the new order (2. Cor. 5:21:16-21), we are still part of the old order where sin is present (Rom. 6:1-14). Thus, a tension exists for God's people while remaining part of the old order and yet belonging to the new order; while we are purified by the blood of Christ, we still sin. Thus, in the present, believers are to put off acts and attitudes of ethical impurity (Rom. 6:1-22, Gal. 5:13-26, Col. 3:1-14, Heb. 10:26-31) and seek to be distinctive from the world by being ethically pure (1 Peter 1:13-2:3). Baptism, therefore, is a ritual of purification. The purpose of baptism is not to effect a believer's purification because that is already completed by Jesus' sacrifice of atonement, but rather to represent that a believer's impurity has been atoned for in Jesus and, as part of the new order, they are committed to desisting from acts of impurity (Rom. 6:1-14).

A question still remains as to why Jesus is the only way for purification to be effected. The answer has two dimensions. First, he is the only human who is ethically pure; that is, he is the only complete human whose heart before God remains whole (1 Peter 1:17-21; Heb. 4:14-16). His blood is therefore an effective purifier and he is able to make atonement for our impurity (Heb. 9:14). Second, Jesus

was able to effectively act on our behalf because he shares our humanity. In becoming human, Jesus became one of us, so that as our representative he could bear our penalty of guilt (Heb. 2:14-18). In turn, by believing in his work of purification on our behalf, we are able to participate in his death and resurrection and so his life.

Thus, the distinction between purity and impurity is central to a new covenant worldview. Those who identify themselves in Christ, as belonging to the new order, assent to viewing the world, as it is and as it ought to be, through a new covenant lens. The principles of the purity system still stand. God desires his people to be complete and in whole relationship with him. While this wholeness is derived through the blood of Christ, we are called to live distinctively, which is in ethical purity. This requires believers to desist purposefully from unwhole actions and attitudes and, instead, pursue actions and attitudes that reflect relational wholeness with God. The motivation for desisting in sin and living in ethical purity is that the command to imitate God's holiness has not changed. We imitate God's holiness by being complete, living in ethical purity. In this way, God's people are distinctive from the world to belong solely to God.

7. Living our story

When talking about Leviticus' purity laws with other Christian women, I'm often met with the response 'Thank God for Jesus so that I don't have to do all those rules'. Yet that is to miss the point entirely. By understanding the purity laws, we understand what purity is, the consequences of impurity, and how purity and holiness relate. Also, we miss that this is part of our story. The biblical story is our story, from the Old to the New, and shapes the way we view the world and so how we live and interact with the world. Placing ourselves within the biblical story, and

allowing a new covenant worldview colour the way we experience the world, we make distinctions every day between what is impure and pure. We make the distinction between the thoughts, desires, choices, emotions, and actions that reflect the wholeness of our relationship with God in Christ and those that do not. Making the decision each day to put off our sinfulness and to pursue purity is not so that we can strive to be on the 'straight path' in the hope that God will be merciful. We can't. That's the point. We make the decision each day to desist from idolatry and we look to Jesus for living water because, while we were separated from God, Jesus acted to purify us by his blood to be a people belonging to God. For us, the desire to live our identity in Christ, to live our story, is the reason why every day we choose to pursue purity. When seeking to build deep relationships with Muslim Women, the desire to live our story should engender within us humility and a quickness to listen, especially to why they struggle to strive for cleanliness and purity every day. By listening to their story, we may be able to give a reason for why we do not strive for purity but seek to live in purity because we already belong to God in Christ.

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