

Clean and Unclean Leviticus 11-15

In the midst of chapter 10 we were informed that one of the functions of the priest is “to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean and ...to teach...all the statutes which the Lord has spoken” (10:10-11). The priest, then, is both celebrant and educator, both liturgist and instructor.

Even here the subordinate role of Aaron to Moses is clear. The distinctions between holy and common and clean and unclean that follow in these three chapters are not Aaron’s ideas. Nor were the distinctions hammered out in committee by the priests and Aaron. They are to teach what the Lord has spoken to Moses (10:11). This chapter beginnings are either “the Lord said to Moses and Aaron” (11 and 13) or “the Lord said to Moses” (12 and 14). Moses may be addressed alone. Aaron is spoken to only with Moses.

Four key Hebrew words appear in Lev. 10:10 that will dominate in these five chapters: (1) “holy” (qodes); (2) “common” (hol); (3) “unclean/impure” (tame); and (4) “clean/pure” (tahor), especially the latter two. Two speak of the desirable (holy and clean/pure), two of the undesirable (common and unclean). “Holy” and “clean/pure,” the two positive words are not exactly synonyms, any more than “common” and “unclean/impure” are. We can know that the first two are not interchangeable because although the Bible calls God “holy” (qodes), it never calls him “pure” (tahor). These are verses in which God says, “Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” There is no verse that says, “Be pure, for I, the Lord your God, am pure.” To be sure, nothing or nobody is holy that is not also clean and pure. Nothing or nobody can be holy and impure simultaneously. By contrast, something or somebody that is “common” can be either pure or impure.

It is debatable whether the better opposite of “holy” is “common” or “unclean.” Some argue for “common” as the better antonym (see Lev. 10:10), while others argue for “unclean/impure.” I do believe there is an appealing middle ground: “while holiness had its opposite in the common or profane (hol), it encountered its opposition in the presence of impurity (tame).”

One needs to keep in mind that impurity is not synonymous with sinfulness, although sinfulness can produce impurity. This distinction can be observed by contrasting the use of the verb kapar (“make atonement for”) in the sacrificial section (chs. 1-7) and in the purity-impurity section (chs. 11-15), and especially by what other phrase follows it. In the sacrificial section, where the phrase “the priest shall make atonement for them/him” occurs, it is always followed by the phrase “and they/he shall be forgiven” (4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:6, 10, 13, 16, 18, 26 with the exception of 5:6). By contrast, in the purity-impurity section, where the phrase “the priest shall make atonement for her/him/it” occurs (12:7, 8; 14:18, 19, 20, 21, 29, 31, 53; 15:30), when it is followed immediately by another verb, the verb is “be clean” (12:7, 8; 14:20, 53). Those with sin need forgiveness (always in the passive voice); those with impurity who, along with their clergy,

engage in appropriate ritual procedures are declared clean (always in the active voice; they are not said to be “cleansed”).

The overwhelming number of situations or actions that engender impurity are perfectly natural and normal ones: eating, birth of a child, ailments and infections, dying and death, sexual intimacy with one’s spouse, bodily discharges. This group are permitted impurities, which are distinguished from the prohibited impurities. In the case of the permitted impurities the effects are minimal, the duration short-lived, and bathing and/or laundering one’s clothes suffice.

Clean and Unclean Animals (11)

The entire eleventh chapter is consumed with one issue: the Israelites’ diet-what they may and may not eat. It is immediately clear that nowhere are any fruits or vegetables listed as unacceptable food-only certain types of meat. God’s first dietary directive to humankind supplies the reason: “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food” (Gen. 1:29). The same hold true for creatures on the land and of the air (Gen. 1:30).

Several suggestions have been made to justify the list of clean and unclean animals, suggestions that, by and large, are not in the biblical text itself. At least four rationales have been offered repeatedly. One is the ethical explanation. This approach is reflected in a quotation from Aristeas, a first-century B.C. Egyptian Jew: “The dietary laws are ethical, since abstention from the consumption of blood tames man’s instinct for violence by installing in him a horror of bloodshed.” It is interesting to observe that Noah, at God’s command, took aboard the ark both clean and unclean animals (Gen. 7:2). The unclean animals are also objects of God’s mercy.

A second is the aesthetic. Animals whose very appearance is repulsive are unlikely to find themselves on the dinner table. A third reason is the theological. Animals associated with pagan religions were taboo for Israel, just as were, for example, pagan mourning customs.

Perhaps the most frequently cited rationale is the hygienic. As more likely carriers of disease, some animals are automatically eliminated. However, there is another option. Each of these forbidden-for-eating creatures “moves on its belly Lev. 11:42, just as the serpent was condemned by God to “crawl on its belly” all the days of its life for its part in seducing humankind into disobedience and away from God (Gen. 3:14).

Uncleanness from Childbirth (12)

This chapter deals with the procedures mandated for a mother after the delivery of a child. First, she must remain in seclusion for a week (v.2); after the child’s circumcision she remains in seclusion for another month (v.4). Her first trip out of the home is to the tent of meeting (v.6). Feminists who decry the patriarchal imbalance of much of the Old Testament cite the fact that in the case of the birth of a girl, the mother’s length of seclusion is doubled. It is not clear why a daughter’s birth doubles the purification period of the new mother. It does not seem to be an

affront against anything female. More than likely the doubling represents a concern to safeguard the new daughter and her potential fertility, given the fact that quite likely she will one day be a new mother herself.

It is only after, not before or during, these forty to eighty days of purification have passed that the mother brings a burnt offering and a sin offering to the Lord. The purpose of the offering is not due to a sinful act, but due to bodily discharge (Lev. 15:13-15, 29-30).

Leprosy (13-14)

Two full chapters are devoted to the discussion of this disease. Chapter 13 deals with the disease's diagnosis, while chapter 14 deals with the disease's cleansing.

There is a threefold ritual in which the leper must be involved in order to remove the "uncleanness" and be reintroduced into the community. There is a ceremony for the first day (14:2-8). It is important to observe that the purpose of this ritual is not to cleanse the disease, but rather to witness to the fact that the disease is already healed. This is the plain intent in 14:3. Thus the ritual is symbolic and religious, not therapeutic. Nor does the priest ever function as healer or physician. If anything, he is an ecclesiastical public health official.

There is also a second ceremony for the seventh day (14:9) and a third ceremony for the eighth day (14:10-32), with the focus here on the offering of the appropriate sacrifices. As in Leviticus 1-7, revisions occur in the sacrificial requirements if the leper is poor.

Uncleanness and Bodily Discharges (15)

Specifically, emissions from the genital area of the body are the concern in this section of Leviticus.

1. Abnormal emissions from men (15:1-15)
2. Normal emissions from men (15:16-18)
3. Normal emissions from women (15:19-24)
4. Abnormal emissions from women (15:25-33)

Note that for the second and the third emissions bathing is sufficient to remove the impurity (15:18,21). In the case of the first and the fourth emissions the offering of sacrifices is required (15:14-15, 29-30).