

'CLEAN' AND 'UNCLEAN' IN LEVITICUS: A THEOLOGICAL SUMMARY

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1. Of all the problems that give Leviticus such unfavorable ratings in popular reading programs, none is more off-putting than the so-called purity laws—the prescriptions of cleanness and uncleanness that comprise a large section deep in the heart of the book (chs. 11-15). And within these chapters, none is more disturbing, if not downright offensive, to present-day readers and their sensitivities than the slapping of an 'unclean' tag on new mothers in chapter 12, for doing nothing other than having a baby. Then adding insult to injury, the duration of the mother's uncleanness is differentiated along lines of the baby's gender—double the required purification period if she gives birth to a girl as compared to that of a boy. If these do not constitute grounds for questioning the Bible's relevance, at least they justify dismissing *Leviticus*—or the *Law* or perhaps even the entire *Old Testament*—as having any important word to say to Church and world today, where we simply know better than to take these remnants of a primitive-thinking people very seriously.

I have selected chapter 12 as a test case for a fresh consideration of the clean/unclean purity laws for three specific reasons, precisely because of: (a) its difficulty—giving us occasion to acknowledge humbly that sometimes God speaks in ways that are not immediately obvious and that demand more of the reader than instant comprehension; (b) its sensitivity—affording an opportunity to navigate our way through dangerous waters stirred by widespread gender-consciousness in the current social-political climate, including present worries about distinctions of any kind, or at least those perceived to privilege men over women or to preserve any certain and necessary boundaries for gender-defined roles, both anathema today; and (c) its brevity—contained in the manageable space of just eight verses.

Preparatory to that in-class study, I offer the following reflections of a more far-reaching nature, in an attempt to grapple with the question of what lies at the heart of these perplexing laws which occupy so much space in the middle of Leviticus and elsewhere in the Old Testament.

2. One of the most present themes in the book ('clean' c. 74x, and 'unclean' c. 145x) is also one of its most puzzling. There is a near consensus among interpreters that Leviticus envisions two broad ritual states in which everything is either *holy* or *common*, with the second subdivided into *clean* and *unclean*. Whatever is unclean is incompatible with whatever is holy, and any contact between the two will result in disaster for the unclean (i.e., it will be either cut off or burned up; cf. 7:20-21; 10:1-3; 22:3). Anything or anyone declared unclean must first be cleansed before it comes into contact with the holy.

Further in this connection, holiness and cleanliness are related and complementary but distinct categories in Israel's religious life, each with a spectrum of evaluation along the following lines¹:

- The holiness spectrum evaluates people, places, and things on the range from holy to common, with gradations, as a measure of conformity to the likeness of God.
- The cleanliness spectrum evaluates people, places, and things on the range from clean to unclean, with gradations, as a measure of fitness or suitability to be in God's presence.

¹ Adapted from John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, vol 1: *The Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2018), 210-11.

These distinctions are especially clear in Leviticus 10:8-11, where priests are given the mandate to make the necessary differentiations:

And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, “. . . You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses.” (ESVCE)

Certain rules follow on from here; but “In short, the ritual system of Leviticus emphasizes the need to keep the holy apart from the unclean. Since God has come to dwell with Israel in the Tabernacle, all the people of Israel must maintain themselves and their camp in a state of cleanliness—that is, suitability to be in the divine presence, the presence of holiness.”² In terms of gradations, the closer someone or something gets to God’s very dwelling, i.e., the Tabernacle, the cleaner and holier that person or object must be.

3. The more difficult question focuses on what determines one state or the other, which question is complicated by the fact that Leviticus does not explicate the underlying ideology, leaving readers to draw their conclusions from how the book renders its message, that is, from the narrative details themselves. Several points are clear.

3.1. Clean and unclean are divinely prescribed or designated states intended to ensure that no one or thing unclean enters the courtyard of the sanctuary, where strict regulations apply.

3.2. ‘Clean’ in Leviticus does not mean spic and span or ‘unclean’ gross and dirty; nor does ‘clean’ refer necessarily to what is righteous and good, ‘unclean’ to what is sinful and bad.³ The situation is more complex than this, and the complexity is important to understand, since:

- a. some things are designated permanently clean or unclean by God’s creative plan (e.g., certain animals, although created “good,” are pronounced “unclean”; Gen 7; Lev 11);
- b. some things become temporarily and unavoidably unclean by natural causes (e.g., accident, illness, certain body functions; Lev 12-15), which things are not sinful or dangerous per se so long as prescribed boundaries are not violated (e.g., by failing to wait a designated period of time before returning to the sanctuary⁴ or touching anything designated holy or consecrated) and the Lord’s provisions and prescriptions are followed (e.g., washing, waiting, offering appropriate sacrifices); and
- c. some things become unclean through stain or defilement caused by sin (Lev 18).

3.3. There appears to be a continuum according to “the severity of their effects,” affecting also the measures of treatability, from natural uncleanness (no cleansing needed), to uncleanness dealt with by

² Ibid., 211.

³ It is probably in this light that we are to understand a passage like Isaiah 6:5: “I am doomed, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” It is not that the prophet and his countrymen were telling dirty stories or lying or swearing, but he and they were unfit/unqualified to be in such a place as the holy throne room of YHWH or to participate in the activities that go on there.

⁴ Being cut off from the Tabernacle and so forbidden from worshiping God with the covenant community is definitive of uncleanness. “Impurity is not defined in terms of a vague notion of taboo but in terms of acceptance or restriction from worship. The sense of impurity is thus defined with respect to the goal of the covenant and the goal of Creation. . . , that is, the worship of God. Being in a state of impurity meant not being allowed to worship God in the community assembly. . . . Uncleanness meant separation from the sacred and the tabernacle” (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* [Grand Raids: Zondervan, 1992], 334-35).

washing, to uncleanness requiring sacrifices, to uncleanness countered only by the death of the offender and the day of atonement ceremonies (e.g., idolatry, murder, illicit sex).⁵

4. Most discussions bog down in efforts to define the rationale for or principle behind the designations ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’; and, in biblical studies as in many other areas, the degree of speculation tends to correspond somewhat to a book’s silence.⁶ Broadly, there are two approaches to this issue.

4.1. One approach to these prescriptions looks *outside* or *behind* the biblical text at various features of the animals, diseases, discharges, and conditions that might earn for them the designation ‘clean’ or ‘unclean’. What does God have against pigs or bacon, or what did porky do to earn such a bad reputation? Why are ostrich burgers or camel stew off limits? And from here various proposals have emerged along the following lines:

- a. symbolic-ethical—reflective of certain habits and behaviors; chewing the cud, for example, as a symbol of meditating on Torah, or the filth of pigs associated with sin;⁷
- b. hygienic—associated with disease or contamination; pork, for example, as a possible carrier of trichinosis;
- c. natural/anatomical—based on what is ‘normal’ vs. ‘abnormal’, and protecting against abnormal conditions, especially those associated with death;⁸ and
- d. liturgical/cultic—ensuring abstention from things associated with Gentile pagan culture and idolatrous religion.

Adopting a version of the last-mentioned, Bergsma & Pitre suggest that “the cultic prohibition of certain animals serves the social function of separating the people of Israel from the Gentile nations, so that they might be ‘holy’ (set apart) and not fall back into the idolatry of the culture from which they came (Egypt) or into which the idolatry of the cultures among which they will settle (Canaan).” This view, according to the authors, is forwarded by Thomas Aquinas and is consistent with the New

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (OTS; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 136-37.

⁶ “The rationale behind the various categories of clean and unclean is elusive, and numerous efforts to discern the foundational principles have met with little or no success” (Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah’s Vision of Worship* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 159).

⁷ In the *Letter of Aristeas* (c. 3rd century B.C.-1st century A.D.), for example, forbidden birds are those which “dominate by their own strength, and who find their food at the expense of [the permitted] birds—which is an injustice,” symbolizing that “it is the solemn binding duty of those for whom the legislation has been established to practice righteousness and not to lord it over anyone in reliance upon their own strength, nor to deprive him of anything, but to govern their lives righteously, in the manner of the gentle creatures among the [clean] birds which feed on plants which grow on the ground and do not exercise a domination leading to the destruction of their fellow creatures.” Again, “Everything pertaining to conduct permitted us toward these creatures and toward beasts has been set out symbolically. Thus the cloven hoof, that is the separation of the claws of the hoof, is a sign of setting apart each of our actions for good. . . . The symbolism conveyed by these things compels us to make a distinction in the performance of all of our acts, with righteousness as our aim.” And again, “all cloven-footed creatures and ruminants quite clearly express, to those who perceive it, the phenomenon of memory. Rumination is nothing but the recalling of (the creature’s) life and constitution, life being usually constituted by nourishment. So we are exhorted through scripture also by the one who says thus, ‘Thou shalt remember the Lord, who did great and wonderful deeds for thee’” (§§146-155) (James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1985], 2:22-23).

⁸ This view is advanced especially by Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), and is followed by many commentaries.

Testament, the latter of which “treats the unclean animals as symbols of the Gentile nations from which Israel was separated for a time” (cf. Acts 10). Further support derives from Jewish, Christian, and pagan authors in antiquity, “which identifies the animals selected for Israelite sacrifice as those sacred to various Egyptian gods” (e.g., the ram as sacred to the sun-god Amon-Rē, the bull to Apis, the cow to Hathor, etc.). “Therefore, God was commanding Israel to sacrifice to him the animals sacred to, and representative of, the Egyptian gods, as a process of religious de-Egyptizing of the people of Israel. . . . By taking the animals sacred to the Egyptian gods and killing them in worship to the Lord, an effective religious inversion of Egyptian religion was created.”⁹

While there are elements of truth in each of these proposals, none offers a comprehensive rationale or commands a consensus for the clean/unclean regulations broadly conceived. Some are limited by fixating on selected areas (dietary rules, for example) without offering an explanation, say, for why childbirth renders a mother unclean, or why a mother’s period of uncleanness and purification is doubly long if she delivers a girl instead of a boy (Lev 12). Again, concern over idolatrous associations does not explain why bulls, with deep connections to Egyptian worship, are ‘clean’ and highly regarded in Israel’s worship rituals; or more generally, why edible land animals are expressly limited to those which part the hoof and chew the cud. In short, however meaningful all of the above proposals might be at one level (e.g., the obvious metaphorical resemblance between ruminating and meditating, or mud and sin, or the association of certain animals with pagan religions), it is not clear how they provide a satisfactory rationale, nor is it apparent how these notions advance the main concerns of Leviticus or serve its ongoing function as Christian Scripture.

4.2. A second approach attempts to look *within* the biblical text, not in order to determine the rationale for the specific clean/unclean designations or regulatory manifestations, but in order to discern the revelatory message Leviticus seeks to communicate *by means of* these regulations. It is clear that, with the possible exception of pagan associations, the former suggestions are of little if any concern to the author of the book. What seems rather to be at issue is how the clean/unclean laws function *analogically*, with a this-corresponds-to-that significance these differentiations are meant to convey in the life of God’s people.

Whatever the reasons God might have had in mind for such regulations as they were first given to ancient Israel, in *the canonical book of Leviticus itself*, which the Sinai generation never actually read,¹⁰ the designations ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ function representatively, as conceptualizing larger thematic/theological concerns. Readers who begin in Genesis 1 will have an advantage here, since differentiations and separations of various kinds are radically ingrained in the created order by the Creator God (e.g., heaven/earth, light/darkness, waters above/waters below, land/sea, animals/humans, male/female, good/evil, trees permitted/trees prohibited, offerings accepted/offerings rejected). So also the Covenant LORD makes separations of various kinds as part of his Covenant plan, which come to be represented in various every day and household routines with a kind of “this-do-in-remembrance-of-that” significance. In this way, clean and unclean distinctions signify “active participation in ‘embodied’

⁹ Bergsma & Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, vol 1: *The Old Testament*, 212-13.

¹⁰ This differentiation is crucial to the interpretive task. It signals the difference between *world* and *word*, between an *event* and the *textual depiction* of an event—between, in our case, the meaning and significance of God’s commands first proclaimed by Moses to the Israelites at Sinai and their meaning and significance as a function of the biblical text written *about* those events for later generations of readers. All history writing is perspectival or depictional; it offers more than mere factual *reportage*. *Biblical* interpretation is, as the word implies, *biblical*. It focuses on the meaning construed in the biblical narrative, not merely on the event *qua* event. And since the Pentateuch arrives in its biblical shape through a long compositional history, beginning with Moses’ initial writing and arriving in its final canonical form many centuries later, it would not have been possible for the ancient Israelites to read Leviticus as it now appears in the biblical canon. Therefore, the meaning and significance of the clean and unclean regulations in *the canonical Leviticus* must be derived from the actual narrative construal itself, not from hypothetical and speculated reconstructions of how the first recipients of those laws would have understood them.

theological reflection.”¹¹ It is not important to the *biblical* message that we the readers understand *why* God made the specific differentiations in the first place, or at least that is not the point Leviticus is making. We simply are not told why certain classifications were made relative to the things/ conditions themselves. Not even such details as cloven hooves, chewing the cud, or scaled and finned fish explain the rationale *behind* different classes; they serve only to *identify* the classes. And as for birds, about twenty hard-to-identify varieties are simply declared unclean and the others clean, without comment (cf. 11:1-19).¹²

What is important *to Leviticus* is that God’s people learn to live in respect *of* these regulations, thereby participating in their theological imaging potential—as representative and analogical. Specifically, by such means “Leviticus sustains the liturgy of covenant”¹³ around certain themes that are clearly prominent and on display in the book:

- a. the *holiness of YHWH*—a reminder that YHWH sets apart such people, places, times, and things as he chooses, defining who/what is fit for worship and fellowship and participation in the sanctuary (cf. 15:31);
- b. the *chosenness (election) of Israel*—a reminder that YHWH has chosen Israel from among the nations as the elect agency of blessing to the nations (cf. 11:44-45 in context; 20:25-26), a “kingdom of priests” fitted for service according to the ideal paradigm of Israel’s own priesthood (Exod 19:6);¹⁴
- c. the *sacredness of life*—a reminder of the means (life, blood) through which God’s blessing-plan would be fulfilled (Lev 12; 16-17);
- d. the *orderliness of Creation and community*—a reminder of certain differentiations built into the Creator’s “good” Creation, which are to be respected and preserved in the covenant life of God’s people, such that the cultic/ritual/liturgical order celebrates, sustains, and restores the cosmic order of God’s creational design;¹⁵ and
- e. the *completeness of YHWH’s rule*—a reminder that all of life is defined by the Creator God and Covenant LORD, and that even apparently arbitrary differentiations in mundane matters are tests of submission to YHWH’s lordship (all of chs. 11-27).¹⁶

I am suggesting that these are the kinds of things imaged in the clean/unclean classifications as they are presented *in the book of Leviticus*, and further, that holiness refers to the intended ideal relative to each. For example, it is not simply a matter of Israel’s having been chosen by YHWH, but of Israel’s living in a manner consistent with that election, embodying YHWH’s life and mission. To put this differently, the function of the clean/unclean regulations *in Leviticus* is to produce and to preserve holiness or God-likeness. To ask the question, “*Why* did God pronounce this clean and that unclean?” is to ask the wrong question, or at least one the author has no interest in answering. The appropriate question is rather: “What are the clean and unclean regulations driving at relative to the concerns of the book and

¹¹ Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 5. For discussions on specific connections between the Genesis Creation account and Leviticus, see Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 332-41; and Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (IBT; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 125-27.

¹² Wenham, *Torah as Story*, 139.

¹³ Balentine, *Leviticus*, 4; idem, Balentine, *The Torah’s Vision of Worship*, 148ff., 159ff.; and Frank H. Gorman, Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time, and Status in the Priestly Ritual* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

¹⁴ Cf. the proximity of chs. 8-10/11 (priests to discern clean/unclean); chs. 13-14 (69 of the 196 occurrences of ‘priest’ in Lev); chs. 21-22.

¹⁵ See, in addition to the works cited in n. 13 above, Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus* (BTCB; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 120-34.

¹⁶ For an intriguing proposal that regards all the clean/unclean regulations as symbolic reflections of the fall of Genesis 3, see Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *Leviticus* (AOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 37-40.

the larger interests of the scriptural message? What do these regulations represent in their message-bearing analogical or symbolic significance?"

Among others, the clean/unclean regulations in their unique way bring all of life under radical submission to YHWH's lordship. In a world created by God, whose prerogative alone it is to define the boundaries within which his creatures live and move and have their being, God's people are not free to do or offer whatever generally seems fitting by their own criteria (which is the essence of the test in the Garden and the subsequent Fall). Every time God's people under the Old Covenant sat down at the dinner table on which certain foods were present and others noticeably absent, or whenever they followed prescriptions relative to childbirth and diseases and discharges, they were reminded of both the awesome privileges and the enormous responsibilities of being the people of God.¹⁷ Life wasn't all about them; it was about living in God's world on God's terms. "By regulating a myriad of daily matters, these laws on ritual purity sought to ingrain the concept of the holy into the social consciousness of the people."¹⁸ So all of chapters 11-15, and generally the entire book.

[In response to the popular objection of apparent arbitrariness, injustice, and nitpickiness on God's part, I offer three reminders. First, as already noted, it is entirely possible that God had other reasons relative to the original "event world" (such as health/hygiene), but those are not the point of the rendering of these laws in Leviticus as a biblical book. Second, as God can create two animals, pronouncing both "good" but declaring one clean and the other unclean, so God can create all nations, declaring one chosen and the others not—election always being a matter of grace and always for the blessing and benefit of the "universal" through the "particular," that is, the "chosen" being the agency or vehicle through which God's blessings are meant to flow to the initially "unchosen."¹⁹ Third, there is nothing more fundamental to biblical faith than to acknowledge that God is God and we are not, and to be okay with that reality. And, we should add, there is nothing more defining of sin than having a problem with the same!]

Returning to Bergsma & Pitre for a technical clarification, these respected authors approximate in part the conclusion I am advancing: "Thus, the laws of Leviticus taught certain spiritual principles in a symbolic fashion, encouraged the separation of Israel from surrounding cultures, fostered the health and flourishing of the Israelite community, and frustrated the practice of pagan religion."²⁰ So far, so good. Where our views begin to diverge is in their further proposal that such regulations are consequent on Israel's continued sinning and so "were not strictly necessary for a covenant relationship between God and man," and so "one could reasonably expect that at some point these laws would have served their purpose and that the covenant relationship between God and his people would be rearranged more closely to resemble one of the earlier covenant forms."²¹

To begin, clean and unclean differentiations were in place long before Israel "continued sinning"; in fact, God had classified animals as clean and unclean as early as Noah and the flood (Gen 7:2, 8; 8:20). More importantly, delimiting the clean/unclean regulations in terms of their significance in ancient Israel when these words were first uttered from the Tabernacle at Sinai leaves unexplained their function *in the biblical book of Leviticus* and its ongoing significance *as Christian Scripture*. This is an important reminder that, interpreting the Bible is not like visiting a museum or analyzing fossils and trying to find something there that has ongoing significance for today. It is to discern what the ever-living, presently-speaking God is saying in his holy word. That is the meaning of "All Scripture is *inspired by God*" (2 Tim

¹⁷ For a discussion on how election is as much about responsibility and cost as about privilege and blessing, see Gary A. Anderson, "Joseph and the Passion of Our Lord," pp. 198-215 in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (ed. E. F. Davis & R. B. Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹⁸ John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC, 4; Dallas: Word, 1992), lx.

¹⁹ A theme marvelously developed in Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

²⁰ Bergsma & Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, vol 1: *The Old Testament*, 214.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

3:16)—not that Scripture merely tells the truth and sets the record straight about ancient peoples, places, and events (so we can know history), but that God’s breath continues to speak afresh from its pages (so that we can hear and know God).

4.3. In drawing this to a conclusion, I would propose the following. According to the New Testament, Jesus abolished the particulars of clean/unclean laws (the regulatory manifestations) and did things like breaking down the wall between Jew and Gentile (Acts 10-11; 15; Gal 2; Eph 2) and declaring all foods “clean” (Mk 7). But Jesus did not abrogate the Law (the revelatory meaning) behind these laws. In other words, the essential theology (the actual *message* of Leviticus to its readers) concerns YHWH’s holiness, Israel’s election, the sanctity of life, community orderliness, and YHWH’s lordship. This is the underlying *meaning* of the clean/unclean laws, and this meaning abides forever. Jesus’ coming and the enacting of a New Covenant arrangement in the Spirit have effected a suspending of the particular clean/unclean laws, but not a rescinding of the Law instantiated in those laws.

My point is this: The Law (Torah as revelatory meaning or theological message) which Leviticus actually *teaches* remains relevant to Christians today, even if the specific laws (as regulatory manifestations of that revelatory meaning) are superseded in Christ and are abrogated in the New Covenant. Again, according to the New Testament, the laws of Leviticus 11-15 are abrogated in Christ, who transforms and elevates the underlying Law in many ways. In his life, teaching, and redemptive accomplishment, our Lord clarifies that uncleanness does not consist in what goes in, but in what comes out, of how one lives (Matt 15; Mk 7); the intent of Torah is godliness from the heart, not minute aspects of ritual purity (a point the Pharisees and teachers of the Law found confusing; Matt 23; Lk 11); it is the comprehensive work of God in salvation through Jesus to make a people who are pure and holy (Eph 1; 1 Pet 1); Jesus has all power over everything unclean (disease, death, demons; Matt 8; 9; 18; Mk 1; 5; Lk 5; 7; 8); “nothing is unclean in itself,” and “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:14, 17); and perhaps most striking of all, through the Cross of Jesus, God reconciles the previous factions that divided Creation, that separated ‘clean’ from ‘unclean’, and that alienated Jew from Gentile by taking up the distinctions in his own flesh and, in a marvelous act of the radically ‘clean’ dying for the profoundly ‘unclean’, making them one (Acts 10-11; Eph 2).²²

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Revised 2/2021

²² He did this, albeit and importantly, without obliterating *every* property or particularity that differentiates one from the other. For example, “there is neither . . . nor . . .” in Gal 3:28 does not imply that distinction itself has been removed, resulting in a state of undifferentiated identity (men and women in Christ do not now bear children equally, nor do Christian slaves enjoy the same freedom as those who are not slaves), but that unity has been calibrated to the criterion of Christ (“for you are all one in Christ Jesus”). “It cannot be distinction itself that is removed in human redemption; rather such distinction is part of what is redeemed. . . . [M]ale and female—as do all distinct peoples and nations—maintain their particularity even as [Jesus’] possession” (Radner, *Leviticus*, 130-31).