

THE GOSPELS'
PORTRAYAL OF
RITUAL IMPURITY
WITHIN
FIRST-CENTURY
JUDAISM

JESUS AND THE FORCES OF DEATH



MATTHEW THIESSEN

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A Clarification

This book is *not* about the historical Jesus. That is to say, I am *not* here seeking to sift through the historical evidence in order to discover what Jesus really said and what Jesus really did. I am *not* trying to get behind the Gospels to uncover the real Jesus—either to prove that the Gospels accurately portray him or to demonstrate that they have re-created him for purposes of their own. My objective is *not* to weigh the literary evidence in order to discover data of historical value in order to write an account of the historical Jesus.

For such a treatment, one must begin with John P. Meier’s 3,500-page *A Marginal Jew*.¹ Nonetheless, I harbor two reservations about any such project. First, the only way back to the historical Jesus is through literary sources: the four Gospels of what we call the New Testament, the works of Josephus, and the Gospels that did not make it into the New Testament. The question of historicity can be asked (and at best, partially answered) only after one has determined more accurately what the Gospel writers actually say about Jesus. Yet our efforts to interpret these texts are themselves contested. Read two or three commentaries on Mark or Matthew, and you will frequently find two or three competing interpretations of a passage. If we can’t agree on the literary evidence we do have, I think it unlikely that we could ever come to a consensus about something we can never have: unmediated access to the historical Jesus.

1. On the question of the historical Jesus’s views on ritual impurity, see Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhab*; Kazen, *Scripture, Interpretation, or Authority*; Wassen, “Jesus’ Table Fellowship”; Wassen, “Use of the Dead Sea Scrolls”; Wassen, “Jewishness of Jesus and Ritual Purity”; and Wassen, “Jesus’ Work as a Healer.”

Second, and more fundamentally, I find the methodology of most historical Jesus research to be too blunt to do what historical Jesus scholars require of it. The criteria of authenticity, as scholars call them, can do very little in separating the authentic from the inauthentic. In what follows, I will not argue for the authenticity of this or that saying or deed. Instead, I will show the ways in which the Gospel writers depict Jesus. Such depictions, of course, relate in some way to history—that is, they must fall somewhere along a spectrum from being entirely historically accurate to being entirely historically inaccurate. That these believers in Jesus repeatedly remember him in a certain way must shed some light on the historical realities that occasioned the composing of such stories.² What does it say about the historical Jesus that some of the earliest stories about him repeatedly place him in contact with people who have abnormal conditions that make them ritually impure?

When it comes to the question of Jesus and the Jewish law, particularly aspects of it such as ritual purity, commentators through the centuries have almost universally misconstrued the Gospel writers' portrayals.³ Frequently, such misconstruals arise out of Christian presuppositions regarding the Jewish law—especially those assumptions that are indebted to certain understandings of the apostle Paul's thinking about the Jewish law.⁴ Given later Christian rejection of and contempt for the Jewish ritual purity system, the logic seems to go, surely Jesus himself must have abandoned this external system in favor of interior spiritual realities. But, as I will show in the following chapters, the Jesus that the Synoptic Gospel writers depict is a Jesus genuinely concerned with matters of law observance. Concerning the historical value of the literary evidence we have, Paula Fredriksen puts it well: “Perhaps . . . Jesus did think that God's Torah (that is, Leviticus and Deuteronomy) was an outdated set of taboos, but we have no evidence that he did, and, in the behavior of the later church, we actually have counterevidence. . . . On the evidence of Paul's letters, the Gospels, and Acts, these apostles chose to live in Jerusalem, worship in the Temple, and keep the festivals, the Sabbath, and the food laws. Could they really have understood nothing?”⁵

2. Here see Allison, *Constructing Jesus*; Rodríguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory*; Keith and Le Donne, *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*; and Bernier, *Quest for the Historical Jesus*.

3. For example, Lambrecht, “Jesus and the Law”; Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*; Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics*; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; and Dunn, “Jesus and Purity.”

4. Even here, I think most scholarship understands Paul wrongly. See my own account of this in *Paul and the Gentile Problem*.

5. Fredriksen, “What You See,” 89.

Introduction

In a 2018 sermon, American megachurch pastor Andy Stanley stirred up controversy when he suggested that leaders in the early Jesus movement sought “to unhitch the Christian faith from their Jewish scriptures.” He then asserted to his congregation that “we must as well.”¹ Responses to Stanley’s remarks went viral as numerous Christians accused him of imitating the ancient arch-heretic Marcion, who sought to disconnect Christianity from the Old Testament.² And in an academic context, Notger Slenczka, a systematic theologian at the University of Berlin, has recently argued that the Old Testament should not have canonical authority; rather, it should function more like the Apocrypha does for Protestants.³ Again, theologians have responded with charges that Slenczka is guilty of both heresy and anti-Jewish thinking.

But most Christians find their Old Testament to be troublesome. For instance, I have heard from numerous Christians that, despite their best and most pious intentions to read through the Bible (whether in a year or a lifetime), they have found their efforts stymied once they hit Leviticus and Numbers. These Christians usually are committed to the belief that the Bible in its entirety is the inspired word of God and that by reading it they are drawing closer to God. Yet the realities of the text seem to undermine and unsettle this theological conviction. For instance, how many pastors or priests willingly *choose* to preach from texts like Leviticus or Numbers? Many Christian

1. For the full sermon, see Stanley, “Aftermath, Part 3.”

2. Contrary to my usual practice, I have chosen to use the Christian term *Old Testament* at the outset of this chapter because of the way it functions precisely as the *Old Testament* for the people under discussion.

3. The debate that has ensued has occurred almost exclusively in German and so is not well-known to English speakers outside of academic circles. See, for instance, Slenczka, “Die Kirche,” 83–119.

leaders and thinkers seek to fight this reluctance toward the Old Testament, but even these efforts hint at their own discomfort. I noticed this hesitance the first time I was tasked with preaching from the *Revised Common Lectionary*, a series of scripture readings that usually contains an Old Testament text, a psalm, a New Testament text, and a Gospel text. The Old Testament text for that Sunday (the second Sunday of Lent in Year B) was from Genesis 17. Genesis 17 is *the* chapter on circumcision in the Bible, yet the editors of the *Revised Common Lectionary* had cut out all the portions of the chapter that actually talk about circumcision. Those people who came to church thinking that they would hear a sermon on Genesis 17 actually heard a very carefully edited, essentially Christianized (or de-Judaized) version of Genesis 17.⁴

Since the Holocaust, many Christians have been made aware of the always-present danger of anti-Judaism in Christian thinking. In at least some Christian circles, accusations of anti-Judaism hold considerable power and can function as an effective way to dismiss the claims or arguments of another person. And ever since the pioneering work of Geza Vermes in his 1973 book titled *Jesus the Jew*,⁵ it has been common for people to emphasize that Jesus was, in fact, a Jew. These developments should be very welcome to all, yet the same people who speak most about Jesus's Jewishness often go on to argue that Jesus was not very Jewish in certain ways. My belief is that such people, whether preachers, writers, or scholars, are guilty of the same error committed by the editors of the *Revised Common Lectionary* in their carefully curated version of Genesis 17.

For instance, N. T. Wright, a prolific Christian scholar who wields immense influence inside and outside of academic circles, speaks of "a very Jewish Jesus who was nevertheless opposed to some high-profile features of first-century Judaism."⁶ Such arguments, as James Crossley notes, boil down to the claim that Jesus was "Jewish . . . but not that Jewish."⁷ One of my central aims in writing this book is to show that the Gospel writers portray a Jesus who really was *that* Jewish. I will do this by focusing on one area where scholars almost always conclude that Jesus really wasn't that Jewish after all: his interactions with those who were ritually impure. Matthew, Mark, and Luke repeatedly depict Jesus as the one who rescues people from the forces of impurity that

4. This treatment of Gen. 17 fits a larger trend of omitting from the lectionary Old Testament passages that deal with practices that Christians do not generally observe. For instance, the three-year lectionary cycle contains only two readings from all of Leviticus (both from Lev. 19), neither of which pertains to issues of sacrifice or ritual impurity. More broadly, see Strawn, *Old Testament Is Dying*.

5. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*. See now Moller, *Vermes Quest*.

6. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 93.

7. Crossley, "Multicultural Christ," 8–16. See also Arnal, *Symbolic Jesus*.

exist within the world.⁸ In all three of these Gospels, Jesus encounters people who are ritually impure due to *untreatable* conditions: “leprosy” (*lepra*),⁹ an abnormal genital discharge, and death.

Having just referred to ritual impurity, I know that I am in danger of turning many readers off, but bear with me a bit longer! My conviction is that we cannot fully appreciate how the Gospel writers communicate Jesus’s significance apart from an accurate understanding of the ways in which first-century Jews constructed their world. I am persuaded that we often misunderstand the Gospel writers’ depictions of Jesus because we naturally and unthinkingly transfer him and the people of the literary world of the Gospels into our own conceptual world. When coming across something foreign or different, it is natural to translate (often unconsciously) whatever is foreign into something understandable. But modern readers of the Gospels will not rightly understand Jesus apart from a more thorough comprehension of ancient Jewish (and non-Jewish) ritual purity concerns, precisely because these purity concerns map out the reality of the world as the Gospel writers conceived it.

Many modern readers of the New Testament find the Jewish ritual purity system to be alien at best and irrational at worst. Surely, such thinking goes, it is an embarrassment to modern religious adherents that their sacred texts refer to natural bodily processes as impure. How can any enlightened person consider someone who experiences natural bodily processes, such as sex, childbirth, or menstruation, to be impure? For Christian readers, the embarrassment or discomfort created by these passages is often ameliorated only by the supposed fact that Jesus and Paul rejected ritual purity concerns because such laws were focused on trivial, external issues, when God cares about interior dispositions and attitudes. Consider the words of the early twentieth-century German theologian Adolf von Harnack: “[Jews] thought of God as of a despot guarding the ceremonial observances in His household; [Jesus] breathed in the presence of God. [The Jews] saw Him only in His law, which they had converted into a labyrinth of dark defiles, blind alleys and secret passages; [Jesus] saw and felt Him everywhere.”¹⁰ Harnack’s words describe Judaism as dead legalism focused on external ceremonies and then contrast this negative portrayal of Jewish religiosity to Jesus’s free spirituality.

8. See the related argument of Bolt, *Jesus’ Defeat of Death*.

9. Throughout this book, I will avoid the term *leprosy*, preferring instead *lepra*, the transliteration of the Greek word that Septuagint translators used to render the Hebrew word *šāra’at*. It is an unfortunate reality that almost all modern Bibles translate this word as “leprosy,” something it was almost assuredly not. See chap. 3 for a detailed discussion.

10. Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, 50–51.

One can see in Harnack’s claims the belief that Judaism is a religion, while Christianity is a relationship with God.

The claim that Jesus opposes the ritual purity system is all too common within theology, biblical interpretation, sermons, and the everyday thinking and language of many Christians. It is a claim that transcends internal Christian divisions between liberals and conservatives, between Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants. For instance, John Dominic Crossan argues that Jesus saw himself as the “functional opponent, alternative, and substitute” to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.¹¹ For Crossan, this opposition to the ritual purity system and the Jerusalem temple was connected to economic, class, and gender inequities. In other words, at least one central aspect of Jewish life—ritual purity and the temple cult—perpetuated an unjust social system that Jesus sought to overcome. In this light, Jesus stands for equality while Judaism stands for inequality.¹²

Likewise, Marcus Borg has argued that Jesus envisaged “a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion.”¹³ And Richard Beck makes a similar contrast: “Sacrifice—the purity impulse—marks off a zone of holiness, admitting the ‘clean’ and expelling the ‘unclean.’ Mercy, by contrast, crosses those purity boundaries. Mercy blurs the distinction, bringing clean and unclean into contact. Thus the tension. One impulse—holiness and purity—erects boundaries, while the other impulse—mercy and hospitality—crosses and ignores those boundaries.”¹⁴ One can see a dramatic presentation of this purported contrast between the Jewish elite and Jesus in Stuart L. Love’s chart:

| | Elite | Jesus |
|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Core Value | God’s holiness | God’s mercy |
| Mission | Maintain political control | Inaugurate Israel’s theocracy |
| Structural Implications | Strong boundaries Exclusive strategy | Weak boundaries Inclusive strategy |
| Scriptural Support | Law, except Genesis | Genesis and prophets |

Adapted from Love, “Jesus Heals the Hemorrhaging Woman,” 93.

Such arguments are indebted to a larger theological agenda that equates Jesus and Christianity with compassionate love on the one hand, and Judaism

11. Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 355.

12. One can see the popularity of this reading in the attempts of some scholars who apply social-scientific criticism to the New Testament. For instance, Neyrey, “Idea of Purity in Mark’s Gospel”; Rhoads, “Social Criticism”; and Malina, *New Testament World*, 161–97.

13. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again*, 49. Cf. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, and Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics*.

14. Beck, *Unclean*, 2–3.

with sterile, heartless law observance on the other. As such, they are religious apologetics masquerading as historical research. “This is not history,” Paula Fredriksen argues, “nor is it realistic description. It is caricature generated by abstractions, whereby a set of politically and ethically pleasant attributes define both Jesus (egalitarian, caring, other-directed, and so on) and, negatively, the majority of his Jewish contemporaries.”¹⁵

What I advocate in this book is that readers, whatever their modern religious, theological, or ideological convictions, work sympathetically to understand ancient Jewish thinking about ritual purity on its own terms. Whatever *we* might think about systems of ritual purity, such systems were integral to the thinking of *all* ancient people, Jesus and the Gospel writers included. In this book, then, I focus on how an early reader who was knowledgeable of the Jewish purity laws (and ancient Mediterranean purity laws more generally)¹⁶ might have interpreted the Synoptic Gospels’ portrayals of Jesus.

Outline of Jesus and the Forces of Death

In chapter 1, I outline how ancient Jews mapped their world in relation to two different binaries: holy/profane and pure/impure. I discuss what these four categories mean and distinguish between different types of impurity. I also outline the role of Israel’s priests in relation to these four categories.

In chapter 2, I begin by examining the ways that the Gospel writers situate Jesus’s early life and public mission. I will begin with the initiatory role that John and his immersion of Jesus play in Jesus’s mission, moving to a detailed examination of Luke’s account of Jesus’s family’s law observance, in particular their adherence to ritual purity rites after Jesus’s birth (Luke 2:21–23). Each Gospel writer connects the inauguration of Jesus’s mission to John the Immerser’s work of water purifications. These materials demonstrate that the Gospel writers emphasize immersion practices that would have been familiar to most Jews in Jesus’s day. Luke’s Gospel furthers this emphasis by showing how committed Jesus’s family was to temple and Torah piety. Within the Gospel narratives, then, nothing prior to the inception of Jesus’s work suggests that he would later go on to reject the ritual purity thinking that was common to his fellow Jews.

15. Fredriksen, “What You See Is What You Get,” 96.

16. Although my primary focus is on the Jewish ritual purity system, in chaps. 3–5 I will also discuss non-Jewish purity thinking because modern readers are generally unaware of how ubiquitous such thinking was in the ancient Mediterranean world. See Frevel and Nihan, *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions*; Parker, *Miasma*; and Lennon, *Pollution and Religion*.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine stories of Jesus's interactions with those suffering from the three general sources of impurity: *lepra*, genital discharges, and corpses. Each chapter will demonstrate Jesus's efforts to destroy the *source* of these ritual impurities. Together these chapters show that, according to the Gospel writers, when Jesus meets someone having a ritual impurity, he removes the source of that impurity from that person's body. In other words, Jesus does not abolish the ritual purity system;¹⁷ rather, he abolishes the force that creates the ritual impurity in the person he meets. Jesus is, as Mark puts it, the holy one of God (Mark 1:24; cf. Luke 4:34; John 6:69), embodying a contagious power of holiness that overwhelms the forces of impurity.¹⁸ Since, like most modern interpreters of the Gospels, I believe that the Gospel of Mark was written first, I place primary emphasis on Mark's account of Jesus's life. But I will also supplement the evidence of Mark with accounts from Matthew and Luke to show that in no way was Mark's treatment of Jesus an outlier in terms of early accounts of Jesus's mission. If any of the Gospels is unique, it is the Gospel of John, which does not generally deal with matters of ritual purity. Nonetheless, I will discuss pertinent aspects of John's Gospel briefly in chapter 4.

On the question of the synoptic problem (that is, the literary relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke), I believe that Mark's Gospel was written first and that both Matthew and Luke knew and used Mark. Further, I have become convinced that Luke knew and used Matthew's Gospel. This places me among a growing number of scholars who believe that Luke knew Matthew (the Farrer hypothesis), even as the majority of scholars still posit that Luke did not know Matthew but that both Luke and Matthew independently made use of the Gospel of Mark and another Gospel referred to as Q (the two-source hypothesis). For the latter scholars, I acknowledge that this book will contain an unsatisfying gap in that it does not examine the place of ritual impurity in Q's portrayal of Jesus.¹⁹ Alas, I refuse to write about something that I do not believe existed.

In chapter 3, I will examine stories of Jesus's encounters with those suffering from *lepra*. I will devote particular attention to Mark 1:40–45 since it is the first and fullest story of Jesus's interactions with someone suffering from

17. See here Fredriksen, "Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws?"

18. Tom Holmén ("Jesus' Inverse Strategy," 25) argues that Jesus's purity is contagious, but this is inaccurate since purity is not a *force* but a *state* of being (and really a negative state, denoting the *absence* of impurity, not the actual presence of something). Instead, it is Jesus's *holiness* that functions as a force that can overpower impurity. Blood dedicated to God, for instance, is (implicitly) holy in priestly thought since it removes impurities (Lev. 17:11).

19. On the Farrer hypothesis, see Goodacre, *Case against Q*, and Poirier and Peterson, *Markan Priority without Q*.

the condition. One of the chief intentions of Mark's telling of this story, I will argue, is to convey to his readers that Jesus is opposed to the existence of ritual impurity. Jesus *wants* to heal those suffering from a condition that results in ritual impurity. To be clear, opposition to ritual impurity is not opposition to the ritual purity system itself. Fundamental to Mark's (and Matthew's and Luke's) portrayal of Jesus is the belief that Jesus desires to rid people of the conditions that create ritual impurity. This very desire indicates Jesus's belief that ritual impurity exists and that he needs to deal with it.

In chapter 4, I will discuss Jesus's healing of a woman who has suffered from a twelve-year genital discharge (Mark 5:25–34; Matt. 9:20–22; Luke 8:42b–48). Where doctors failed, Jesus succeeds. The story shows that the woman's confidence that Jesus is able to destroy the source of ritual impurity is accurately rooted in the nature of Jesus. Even though Jesus does not intend or choose to heal the woman, his body cannot help but emit a power that destroys her impurity. The story implies that Jesus's body can function like an unthinking force of contagion that inevitably destroys impurity.

In chapter 5, I will treat Jesus's interactions with corpses. I will show how the Gospel writers emphasize Jesus's power over death. In fact, we will see that the trend over time was for these early Christ followers to depict Jesus's raising of the dead at greater distance from both the time of death and the body of the dead person.

For the Gospel writers, the removal of the sources of ritual impurity was fundamental to Jesus's work. In chapter 6, I will turn to a different form of impurity—pneumatic or demonic impurity. The Gospel writers portray Jesus's expulsions of demons from people, frequently referring to these demons as impure spirits (Greek: *pneumata*).

These purifying aspects of Jesus's mission illuminate yet another aspect of Jesus's understanding and observance of the Jewish law: the Sabbath. Thus, in chapter 7, I will provide a coherent explanation for Jesus's purported disregard for holy time. Do the Gospel writers think Jesus disregards sacred time, even as they consistently demonstrate his commitment to the realm of the holy and his opposition to the impure? The answer, I contend, is that they depict Jesus using sacred time to extend the dominion of the holy God, who is the source of life, over the forces of impurity and death. In other words, they do not believe his Sabbath healings profane the Sabbath; instead, they portray his Sabbath actions as bringing about the wholeness of life that God intended the Sabbath to engender.

Finally, I will briefly summarize the preceding chapters and connect them to the Gospel portrayals of Jesus's own death and resurrection. Here, I think, is where we encounter both a literary and a theological payoff to highlighting

the Gospel writers' portrayal of Jesus's interaction with ritual impurities. This particular understanding of Jesus's destruction of the sources of ritual impurity helps connect Jesus's mission to his death and resurrection. Jesus's skirmishes with these various ritual impurities—all forces of death, as I shall argue—foreshadow his crucifixion, in which death takes over Jesus's body. At the very point where death seems to have overwhelmed Jesus, Israel's God raises him from the dead, setting him eternally triumphant over even death itself.

What I intend to provide in the following pages, then, is a foundation for Christians seeking to retain their theological conviction in the importance of the Old Testament, including texts that deal with laws related to ritual impurity. The Jesus of the Gospels only makes sense in light of, in the context of, and in agreement with priestly concerns about purity and impurity documented in Leviticus and other Old Testament texts. I also hope to provide all readers with a better sense of the way in which the Gospel writers depict Jesus in relation to the Jewish law: not in opposition to it but in concert with it. I hope this depiction of a law-observant Jesus is not only of antiquarian interest but also a stimulant for Jewish-Christian dialogue, redirecting these conversations from erroneous and malignant understandings of the Jewish law and Jesus's purported rejection of it to the Gospel writers' conviction that in Jesus, the God of Israel was addressing the fundamental problem of human nature: human mortality.

Mapping Jesus's World

Let us try to imaginatively step into the world of ancient Jewish purity thinking. First, God has structured the world in a variety of ways, but perhaps most fundamental for Israel's existence is its structure around two binaries: the holy and the profane, and the pure and the impure. The central text for this map came when God consecrated Israel's priests—setting them apart from other Israelites. At that time, God informed the priests of their essential role in Israelite society: “You are to distinguish between the holy and the profane, and between the impure and the pure” (Lev. 10:10). While the majority of the writings within what Christians now call the Old Testament and what Jews call the Bible or Tanakh are not explicitly concerned with these four categories, by the time of Jesus, many extant writings were in some way indebted to this mapping of the world, as shown by their use of this language.

These categories should not be equated one with the other, as many readers of these texts have assumed.¹ The word *holy* is not synonymous with the word *pure*. Neither is the word *profane* synonymous with the word *impure*. The category of the holy pertains to that which is for special use—in this sense, related to Israel's cult and therefore to Israel's God (Lev. 11:44; 20:7, 26; 22:32). For example, the Sabbath is holy (Exod. 31:14), as is the temple (Ps. 11:4). On the other hand, the category of the profane, a word that comes from the Latin *profanus* (“outside the temple”), refers to that which is secular or for common use. Here the English use of the word *profane* to refer to bad

1. For examples of this common misunderstanding in New Testament scholarship, see Neyrey, “Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts”; Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics*, 8; D. Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 107; and Grappe, “Jesus et l'impureté.”

language might unfortunately lead to confusion. There is nothing dirty or impure or sinful about something being profane.

This first binary provides one map of the entire world—*all* things are either holy or profane. And most things within the world belong within the category of the profane. For example, six days of the week are profane, as are noncultic Israelite buildings. An object or a person cannot be both holy and profane at the same time. In itself, there is nothing wrong with or sinful about being profane. As we will see, though, it is dangerous and possibly sinful when something holy, such as the temple or the Sabbath, is profaned or when something profane encroaches upon something holy.

The second map of the world is constructed by the categories of the pure and the impure. Once again, all things in the world fit into one of these two categories: something is either impure or pure. And again, no thing or person can be both pure and impure at the same time. A profane object, such as someone's house, can be either pure or impure. The same applies to holy objects—they can be either pure or impure. Israelite priests, who are consecrated (= holy), can be either pure or impure. To reiterate, the category of the holy is not synonymous with the category of the pure; neither is the category of the profane synonymous with the category of the impure. These are four *distinct* categories. And an Israelite person will always be characterized by two of these adjectives, existing in one of four possible states:

| | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Holy and pure | Holy and impure |
| Profane and pure | Profane and impure |

In priestly thought, the tent in the wilderness or the temple in Jerusalem is holy space inasmuch as God, who is holy and the source of all holiness, dwells there. The tent or temple is, in essence, a cordoned-off area that has a series of boundaries around it: the outer courtyard provides a protective barrier around the tent or temple, and the walls of the temple provide an additional barrier, permitting only priests to enter into the holy place. Even within the temple itself, an internal curtain protects the most holy place, into which only the high priest may enter and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16).

What necessitates these barriers and what requires that God's presence, his *kavod* or glory,² be protected by a tent or temple is the existence of impurity

2. On God's *kavod* as the priestly language for God's earthly presence, see Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 73–74.

in the world. In the realm of the profane, impurities can exist. There they can affect people without having immediate consequences. But Israel's priests, at the instruction of their God, set up barriers to keep these impurities from entering where they must not—the Jerusalem temple, where Israel's God dwells among humans. The various boundaries to the temple and the prohibitions regarding which people could not enter into sacred space were established in order to preserve God's holy presence on earth, a presence threatened by impurities, to which Israel's God was opposed. Were people to enter into sacred space with their impurities, they would be cut off from the people of Israel (Lev. 22:3). These boundaries, then, were meant not only to safeguard God's presence but also to protect God's people from the consequences of wrongly approaching God.

Because of this dual protective function, I would qualify Paula Fredriksen's claim that compassion and purity have as much to do with each other as a fish and a bicycle.³ Fredriksen rightly aims to dismantle Christian scholarship that seeks to contrast Jesus's compassion with the requirements of the ritual purity system. I would suggest, though, that compassion animates the Jewish purity system; it was a protective and benevolent system intended to preserve God's presence among his people, a presence that could be of considerable danger to humans if they approached God wrongly.

For examples of how hazardous God's presence could be (unrelated to ritual impurity *per se*), one need only consider two priests, Nadab and Abihu, who approached this God with strange fire and died as a result (Lev. 10). Or recall Uzzah, who wrongfully touched the ark of the covenant and died (2 Sam. 6). Access to sacred space was heavily restricted, not out of a lack of compassion but out of the belief that this holy God not only was merciful and loving but also was a powerful force that could be dangerous. The fact that Nadab and Abihu were priests and sons of Aaron matters not at all, nor does it matter that Uzzah piously meant to keep the ark of the covenant from falling to the ground. How much more would the unwitting or witting introduction of impurity into the realm of the holy endanger people? This depiction of God makes sense of the Israelites' request that Moses speak to them on God's behalf so that they would not have to endure the fear-inducing experience of encountering God directly (Exod. 20:18–21). Leviticus 15:31 nicely encapsulates the priestly concern over people coming too close to the tabernacle or temple while in a state of impurity: "Therefore, you shall separate the people of Israel from their impurity, so that they do not die by their impurity by defiling my tent which is in their midst" (cf. Num. 19:13, 20).

3. Fredriksen, "Compassion Is to Purity."

Contemporary Christians might compare this thinking to the way C. S. Lewis portrays Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Upon finding out that Aslan is a lion, not a man, Susan asks, “Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” To which Mrs. Beaver responds, “If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.” A young Lucy reiterates Susan’s question: “Then he isn’t safe?” Mr. Beaver then answers, “Safe? . . . Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”⁴ Israel’s priests did not believe that their God was some domesticated deity. Contrary to numerous modern caricatures, this depiction of God is not something unique to the Christian Old Testament—the God of the New Testament isn’t meek and mild either. Luke, for instance, relates the fatal consequences that Ananias and Sapphira experienced for lying to the early leaders of the Jesus movement: without warning, God killed them (Acts 5). Simply put, approaching the God of Israel in the wrong way is dangerous. It is no wonder then that the Gospel writers depict Jesus exercising a fierceness in relation to the Jerusalem temple and to what he perceives to be an impious use of the sacred space associated with God’s earthly presence (Mark 11:15–17; cf. Matt. 21:12–17; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–17).

Although humane, these ritual requirements meant that humans would need to keep their distance from God as long as they found themselves in a state of impurity. If impurities were to accumulate in God’s dwelling, God would be forced to abandon it. When Israelites allowed impurities to build up in the tent or temple, they suffered the consequences. The boundaries around the tent or temple functioned to protect both the inside (God’s presence) and the outside (any Israelite in a state of impurity) from the results of impure forces. Such thinking was commonplace in the ancient Mediterranean world. As Fredriksen puts it, ancient “gods tended to be emotionally invested in the precincts of their habitation, and they usually had distinct ideas about the etiquette they wanted observed when humans approached them there.”⁵

The Multiple Forces of Impurity

Within this map, which divides the world into realms of holy and profane and pure and impure, it is necessary to focus on one particular category more closely—the category of the impure. Numerous scholars have argued that there

4. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 80.

5. Fredriksen, “Compassion Is to Purity,” 56. See also Milgrom, “Israel’s Sanctuary.”

are two types of impurity in Leviticus: ritual and moral.⁶ Unfortunately, here too people frequently confuse these two forms of impurity, leading to numerous interpretive or mapping errors. Jonathan Klawans provides a helpful comparison of these two forms of impurity that can be charted in the following way:

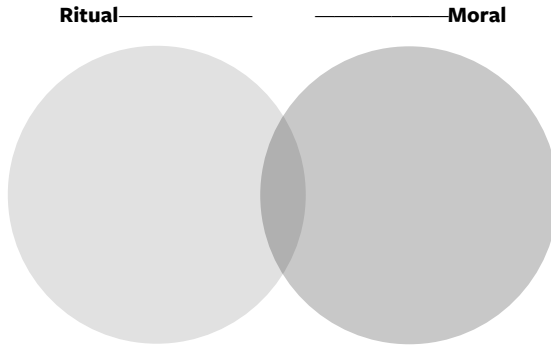
| Ritual | Moral |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| unavoidable | avoidable |
| from a natural substance | from an action |
| communicable | noncommunicable |
| bathed away | atonement/punishment |
| not an abomination | an abomination |
| not sinful | sinful |

This comparison highlights key differences between moral impurity, which is sinful, and ritual impurity, which is not inherently sinful. Conflating moral impurity with ritual impurity—something that New Testament scholars, theologians, clergy, and laypeople have frequently been guilty of doing—impinges upon our understanding of the Gospel narratives. As I noted above, there are times when these two categories, ritual and moral impurity, bleed into each other. When a person does not remove a ritual impurity using the prescribed method at the prescribed time, it can lead to moral impurity—sin. Consequently, I think it helpful to map these two categories in a way that reflects that these impurities form a spectrum and are not always mutually exclusive (see fig. 1 below).

Although the Gospel writers portray Jesus's interactions with and forgiveness of the morally impure (e.g., Mark 2:5), this book will focus almost exclusively on what Klawans calls ritual impurity. It does so precisely because interpretations of the Gospels frequently focus on Jesus's dealings with

6. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, and Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities*, 19–24. Klawans elsewhere acknowledges that “the adjectives ‘ritual’ and ‘moral’ are problematic: The terms do not appear in the texts, and neither one is a category as such in biblical or postbiblical Jewish literature” (*Impurity and Sin*, 22). Christophe Nihan prefers to call ritual impurity “physical impurity” because a physical substance causes this sort of impurity (“Forms and Functions of Purity,” 311–67). Nonetheless, while not all impurities arise out of physical substances, all impurities do result in physical consequences: they may pollute bodies, land, or sacred space. David P. Wright favors the terminology of permitted and prohibited impurities (“Unclean and Clean [OT]”). And Yitzhak Feder prefers to speak of three types of impurity: uncleanness (from regular genital discharges), infection (from abnormal discharges, *lepra*, and corpses), and stains of transgression (from actions such as murder and sexual misconduct; “Contagion and Cognition”). Additionally, Thomas Kazen rightly notes that to speak of moral and ritual purity as two distinct things is problematic inasmuch as it suggests that “purity ceases to be a ritual category when applied to moral matters” (*Emotions in Biblical Law*, 27). While I appreciate these various concerns, no alternative terminology improves upon this standard nomenclature.

Figure 1



moral impurities (sins) but not (or not correctly) on his dealings with ritual impurities.⁷

In addition to these two forms of impurity, Leviticus contains one additional type of impurity—what I would call genealogical impurity—which I treat briefly in this book’s appendix. Another form of impurity—one that the priestly writings do not envisage but that the Gospel writers do—is demonic (or pneumatic) impurity. Jewish scriptures refer only once to an impure spirit,⁸ when the prophet Zechariah foretells the day that God will purify the land of Israel: “And on that day, says YHWH Sabaoth, I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, so that they will not be remembered again; and the prophets and the impure *ruah/pneuma* I will remove from the land” (Zech. 13:2). Whether Zechariah, himself of priestly descent (1:1; cf. Ezra 5:1), refers here to some sort of demonic presence is uncertain, but some later Jews (see chap. 6) did use this and other similar phrases to refer to demons.⁹

Making Sense of Ritual Impurity

To prepare the way for the Jesus of the Gospels, we must consider some components of Jewish ritual purity. We are fortunate, therefore, to have the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, who has greatly stimulated the study

7. There is no shortage of secondary literature on the topic of forgiveness of sins. See, for instance, Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins*.

8. I will always render *spirit* as *ruah* (or *ruhot* when referring to the plural) when discussing Hebrew texts, and *pneuma* (or *pneumata* when referring to the plural) when discussing Greek texts because the word *spirit* or *spiritual* often wrongly suggests something nonmaterial to modern readers. See the helpful discussion of P. Robertson, “De-spiritualizing *Pneuma*.”

9. See Lange, “Considerations concerning the ‘Spirit of Impurity,’” and the discussion in chap. 6.

of ritual purity. Both in her own writings on Leviticus and Numbers and in appropriations and criticisms of her work, ritual purity has become a focus in scholarship on Jewish scriptures and early Judaism and, to a lesser degree, on the New Testament.¹⁰ We also have the extensive writings of Jacob Milgrom, whose research on Leviticus and Numbers, culminating in his magisterial three-volume commentary on Leviticus, spans decades.¹¹

As we saw above, the three major *sources* of ritual impurity according to the priestly literature of Jewish scriptures are genital discharges of blood or semen, *lepra*, and corpses (cf. Lev. 12–15; Num. 19). In the following chapters, I shall examine more fully the symptoms of and legislation pertaining to these three physical sources of ritual impurity. Here I restrict myself to a few overarching observations.

When the profane comes into contact with something ritually impure, the profane becomes ritually impure. The legislation of Leviticus 12–15 and Numbers 19 deals with some of these ritual impurities. Such combinations of the profane and the impure were natural and generally inevitable. For instance, childbirth, menstruation, and sexual intercourse result in ritual impurity. These are natural human functions. The majority of Israelites would have at one time or another experienced such ritual impurities. Priestly legislation does not prohibit Israelites from contracting such impurities, nor does it punish them for doing so. Priestly law assumes that people will endure such impurities and provides them with the ritual means to remove those impurities. Only in the event that people do not properly dispose of their impurities does the issue become one of wrongdoing. When a person who has a ritual impurity comes into sacred space, he or she sins. This person should have used the divinely appointed ritual means to remove the impurity before coming into contact with the sphere of holiness. Thus, Leviticus 7:20 stipulates that a person who eats the meat of a sacrifice while in a state of impurity should be cut off from Israel (cf. Lev. 22:3, 9). It is at points such as these that the ritual impurity of the profane person transforms into some form of moral impurity. By not remedying their ritual impurity before contacting the holy, such people display irreverence toward Israel's holy God.

Once holy space reaches its impurity threshold, God must abandon the polluted sacred space. The consequence of polluting holy space is that, if

10. See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; Douglas, *In the Wilderness*; Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*; and Douglas, *Jacob's Tears*. For a series of essays interacting with her arguments, see Sawyer, *Reading Leviticus*, as well as the important qualifications of Lemos, "Universal and the Particular," and Lemos, "Where There Is Dirt."

11. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*; Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*; and Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*. For readers looking for a condensed treatment of Leviticus, see Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, which distills many of the insights of his three-volume work.

left unaddressed, the impurity will cause the holy God who dwells in the temple to forsake it. And when the holy God abandons the temple, this holy space becomes profane because its own holiness derives from God. Impurity and holiness are, in the words of Milgrom, “semantic opposites, and as the quintessence and source of [holiness] resides with God, it is imperative for Israel to control the occurrence of impurity lest it impinge on the realm of the holy God. The forces pitted against each other in the cosmic struggle are no longer the benevolent and demonic deities that populate the mythologies of Israel’s neighbors but the forces of life and death set loose by humans themselves through their obedience to or defiance of God’s commandments.”¹²

On the basis of ancient portrayals of those suffering from *lepra*, Milgrom argues that what these three sources of ritual impurity share in common is that they represent death: the corpse, obviously, is a dead body; the *lepros*—that is, the one suffering from *lepra*—looks corpse-like; and those who experience a genital discharge suffer the loss of life force contained in genital blood or semen. From this observation, he concludes that in Jewish thinking ritual impurities represent the forces of death.¹³ To be sure, extrapolating from *priestly* texts to make broader claims about *Jewish* thinking is problematic. Even if this was the priestly understanding of impurity, we simply cannot conclude that all ancient Jews shared this understanding. It is also dangerous to suppose that an entire symbolic and theological system motivated and gave shape to the priestly ritual purity system.¹⁴ Notwithstanding these criticisms, Milgrom is right to note that a number of ancient Jewish texts connect two sources of impurity explicitly with death: the corpse, obviously, but also *lepra* (see Num. 12:12; 2 Kings 5:7; and probably Job 18:13). It is not, then, unreasonable to conclude that the loss of genital fluids likely also represented the loss of life force and thus simulated death.

Nonetheless, some scholars have argued that this association of impurity with death is not entirely convincing. How can something like sexual intercourse or birth, events connected to genital emissions, represent death?¹⁵ And

12. Milgrom, “Dynamics of Purity,” 32. In chap. 6, I shall address Milgrom’s claim that these forces are devoid of demonic meaning.

13. See Milgrom, “Rationale for Biblical Impurity.” Milgrom is followed by many interpreters, including Frank H. Gorman Jr. in *Ideology of Ritual*.

14. See the criticisms of Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus*.

15. For instance, Frymer-Kensky, “Pollution, Purification and Purgation,” and Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*. That ancient Jews could connect birth to death can be seen in a hymn from Qumran, which states, “I was in distress like a woman giving birth the first time when her labor-pains came over her and a pang racks the opening of her womb to begin the birth in the crucible of the pregnant woman. For children come through the waves of death and the woman expectant with a boy is racked by her pangs, for through the waves of death she gives

if the emission of genital blood and semen signifies the loss of life force, which thereby explains its impurity, then shouldn't any loss of blood, not only genital blood, be defiling?¹⁶ Consequently, they argue that ritual impurity stands for mortality in general—the fact that humans are born and die. In this sense, they are distinct from the realm of the holy—from God, who is immortal, without beginning or end, birth or death. A saying preserved in a fifth-century CE Jewish commentary on Genesis nicely captures this distinction between God and humanity, connecting birth to death: “It was taught: Whatever has offspring dies, decays, is created, but cannot create; but what has no offspring neither dies nor decays, creates but is not created. R. ‘Azariah said in the name of Rabbi: This was said in reference to the One above.”¹⁷ If this saying does go back to Rabbi ‘Azariah of the first century CE, it shows that some Jews at the time perceived childbirth (and implicitly sexual intercourse) to be connected to death. This gap between humans (as well as the rest of creation) and Israel's God is what necessitates the tabernacle and temple cult apparatus.¹⁸ What is holy must be the antithesis of death and mortality: life.

Consequently, ancient Jews envisaged the protocols pertaining to access to the temple cult as necessary requirements for proximity to God, who had decided to camp among his mortal people. Only by following these regulations could Israel maintain God's presence in its midst. As Benjamin Sommer observes, “A central theme of priestly tradition—perhaps, the central theme of priestly tradition—is the desire of the transcendent God to become immanent on the earth this God had created.”¹⁹ Sommer's insights repay further reproduction: “The goal of the events at Sinai as P [= a strand of priestly writing] describes them is divine immanence, and the laws are but the

birth to a male” (*IQHodayot* XI, 7–10). Ancient Near Eastern cultures, such as the Assyrians and Babylonians, also associated birth with death, as I show in chap. 4. (Ultimately, in an age when pregnant women experienced high mortality rates, it would be unsurprising for most people to associate childbirth and death!)

With regard to sexual intercourse, in the thirteenth century, Nachmanides states, “The reason for the defilement of seminal emissions, even though it is part of the process of procreation, is like the reason for the defilement of death. . . . The individual does not know if his seed will be wasted, or if a child will result” (as cited in Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 934).

16. Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 49.

17. *Genesis Rabbah* 12.7.

18. I would stress, in agreement with Lemos, that such rituals likely did not arise out of theological reflection; rather, the rituals gave rise to theological reflection that connected corpses, *lepra*, and genital emissions with death or mortality. She rightly cautions that “the type of analysis that seeks ever to schematize almost always sees ritual as secondary to belief and the body as secondary to the mind” (“Where There Is Dirt,” 294). Or, as Walter Burkert puts it, “Ideas do not produce ritual: rather, ritual itself produces and shapes ideas, or even experience and emotions” (*Homo Necans*, 28).

19. Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 74.

means to that end. It follows that the many modern scholars who speak of P as essentially legalistic or as glorifying the law misrepresent this document. P's main concern is not law but the divine presence that observance of the law makes possible."²⁰ All the regulations about ritual purity and offerings, then, actually purport to maintain what modern religious people might call Israel's "relationship with God." In other words, the ritual purity system was, within the world that Israel's priests inhabited, foremost about life with God and was therefore a matter of life and death.

The Priests' Protective Role

God had tasked Israel's priests with policing these boundaries. First, the priests distinguished between the holy or sacred and the profane or common. Similarly, they were to distinguish between the clean or pure and the unclean or impure. As Milgrom puts it, "The making of distinctions is the essence of the priestly function."²¹ They were divinely tasked with the central job of creating and maintaining boundaries to keep the forces of impurity contained so that they imperiled neither God's presence nor Israel's coexistence with God.

Yet Jewish scriptures contain accusations that Israel's priestly caste had at times been derelict in its duties, confusing holy and profane, pure and impure. Consequently, one of the later prophets, himself a priest, condemns the priesthood for failing to enforce these separations: "[Israel's] priests have violated my law. They have profaned my holy things, between holy and profane they have not distinguished, nor between impure and pure. And from my Sabbaths they have hidden their eyes. I am profaned in their midst" (Ezek. 22:26; cf. 44:23). Israel's actions profaned holy space (the holy things of the Jerusalem temple), holy time (the Sabbath), and the source of holiness (Israel's God). With similar words, Zephaniah says that Jerusalem's "priests profane what is holy, they do violence to the law" (Zeph. 3:4). The prophet Malachi also accuses the priests of having failed in their responsibility to teach the nation to distinguish between the categories of holy and profane and impure and pure: "But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble in the law; you have destroyed the covenant of Levi" (Mal. 2:8). Again, the prophet Hosea protests priestly teaching: "My people are destroyed due to lack of knowledge. Since you have rejected knowledge, O priest, I will reject you as priest before me" (Hosea 4:6). Ezekiel portrays this breakdown of

20. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority*, 57.

21. Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 95. See also Olyan, *Rites and Rank*, 15–27.

boundaries when he accuses Israel of permitting foreigners to keep watch over YHWH's sanctuary (Ezek. 44:8). And, according to Numbers, God had demanded that the Levites guard the boundary between the holy and the profane. The Levites alone were to minister before the tent of meeting; anyone else who drew near to the tabernacle was to receive the death penalty (Num. 1:51; 3:10, 38; 18:7).²² According to these prophets, then, on a number of occasions Israel's priests neglected their God-given duty to instruct Israel in the law: "The law perishes from the priest" (Ezek. 7:26). This dereliction of priestly duty profanes God himself, according to Ezekiel 22:26.

Modern readers should not understand such accusations against the priests to be a rejection of the purity system or the priestly authority over the realm of the sacred. Rather, these polemics indicate that many Jews were convinced of the importance of the purity system and believed it paramount that the priests guide Israel in distinguishing correctly between the holy and the profane and the pure and the impure. For the prophets, the proposed solution to failure within the ritual purity system was not the abandonment of the system but a more accurate delineation and maintenance of boundaries.

According to Israel's priests, God had provided Israel with a series of simple ritual actions that were designed to remove impurities and thus to allow limited access to the temple. God had given them the means to counter some of the forces of impurity. In effect, God had armed Israel with ritual practices that were efficacious in removing those impurities; these practices were basically a combination of time and water (and, in special instances, blood or ashes). But these ritual detergents were limited in their ability to remove impurity. They essentially removed the lingering effects of whatever condition made the person impure, but they did not, could not, and never were intended to remove the physical conditions that caused impurity. They did not, for instance, heal abnormal genital discharges, cure *lepra*, or turn corpses back into living beings. Proper maintenance, not transformation, of the current conditions of the world was their sole, divinely ordained goal.

The Apocalyptic Transformation of the Jewish World

Did Israel's priests long for a time when such rituals would be unnecessary? The prophet Ezekiel, himself a priest, envisages better, bigger, and stronger barriers and not some cosmic transformation in which impurities cease to exist entirely (Ezek. 40–48). One might point to Ezekiel 37 and the valley of

22. See here Milgrom, *Studies in Levitical Terminology*.

dry bones, in which God's *ruah* transforms impure corpse remains into living, and therefore pure (or purifiable), humans again. Yet even this remarkable transformation does not appear to portend some new reality where impurity ceases to exist.

Further, while the priestly writer does not dwell on the topic of the demonic, many later Jews certainly did and connected demons to the realm of the impure. So too some hoped for anti-impurity forces to enter into the world. In fact, we see an explosion of apocalyptic expectations that foresaw a new world where the current state of things would undergo radical transformation.²³ At times, such apocalyptic fervor was connected to a hope in a messianic figure who would deliver Israel (and the whole world) from its present state.²⁴

It is within this world of apocalyptic hope that one must situate the Gospel writers and their portrayals of Jesus.²⁵ The Gospel writers depict Jesus as being divinely equipped to deal with the actual sources of impurity. Once the underlying conditions that create ritual impurity are removed, people are free to follow the simple steps that will remove the lingering ritual impurity. We see this explicitly, as I will discuss in chapter 3, in Jesus's treatment of the man with *lepra* (Mark 1:44). The Jesus of the Gospels is the holy one of God, a man who embodies a contagious power or force that is opposed to and ultimately destroys the powers that create impurity and death.

23. See here J. Collins, "Apocalyptic Eschatology."

24. On messianic thinking in early Judaism, see Novenson, *Grammar of Messianism*.

25. Some trace this apocalyptic thinking back to the historical Jesus. See Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, and J. Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation*.