

Think Like an Israelite

Impurity and Sin

Impurity (“uncleanness”)

Two distinct but related categories:

- Ritual
- Moral

Concepts of **clean** / **unclean** related to
holy / **common** (sacred space)

Ritual Impurity

Physical defilement that bars one from sacred space or participation in sacred rituals.

Causes / Examples:

“Direct or indirect contact with any one of a number of natural processes and substances.”

J. Klawans, “Idolatry, Incest, and Impurity: Moral Defilement in Ancient Judaism,”
Journal for the Study of Judaism 29:4 (1998): 392

Ritual Impurity

- childbirth (Lev. 12:1-8)
 - skin / scale disease (Lev. 13:1-14:32)
 - genital discharges (Lev. 15:1-33)
 - carcasses of certain animals (Lev. 11:1-47)
 - human corpses (Num. 19:10-22)
- *Duration of impurity varies*
 - *Cleansing process varies*

Ritual Impurity

NOTE: ritual impurity is natural—unavoidable for humans and human circumstances.

Therefore usually **doesn't** arise from moral violation.

- “it is not sinful to be ritually impure, and ritual impurity does not result directly from sin.”

Ritual Impurity

“It is true that the refusal to purify oneself would constitute a transgression, as would coming into contact with the sacred while in a state of ritual impurity. But this does not make being ritually impure sinful in and of itself.”

Klawans, 393.

Moral Impurity

Results from committing certain prohibited behaviors:

- sexual transgressions (e.g. Lev. 18:24-29)
- idolatry (e.g., Lev 19:31, 29:1-3)
- bloodshed (e.g., Num 35:33-34)

Frequently described as “**abominations**” (other terms differentiate as well)

Moral Impurity

Results in following defilements:

- **Person** who does such things (Lev 18:24)
- The **Land** itself (Lev 18:25; Ezek 36:17)
- God's **sanctuary** (Lev 20:3; Ezek 5:11)

Leads to (corporate) expulsion from the land (Lev 18:28) if prevalent.

Impurity Type	Source	Effect	Resolution
Ritual	Bodily flows, corpses, etc.	Temporary, contagious impurity	Bathing, waiting
Moral	Sins: idolatry, incest, murder	Desecration of sinners, land, and sanctuary	Atonement or punishment, and ultimately, exile

Other Differences

Moral defilement (sin) defiles the sinner, land, and sanctuary, but not anyone with which he comes into contact.

- Ritual impurity is like a contagion
- Moral impurity is not
 - e.g., no ritual bathing or quarantine for certain number of days with respect to an idolater, a murderer, or sexual violator

Other Differences

“Solutions” for moral impurity (what are called “abominations” that defile sinner, land, sanctuary):

- Punishment (death, exile)
- Restitution
- abstinence

Summary of Two Types

“Since moral impurity does not produce ritual defilement, sinners—in contrast to those who are ritually impure—are not excluded from the sanctuary.”

(Klawans, 395)

- **Num 5:11-31** (suspected adulteress brought into the sanctuary)
- Murderers seeking refuge in *in the sanctuary* (**Exod 21:14**).

Other Differences

On those occasions where moral impurity does defile the sanctuary, it is not because the sinner enters the sanctuary – it's because of what happens in there – idolatry (Lev. 20:3).

Other Differences

“... we are dealing with perceived effects that result from actual physical processes. In the case of ritual impurity, a real, physical process or event (e.g., death or menstruation) has a perceived effect: impermanent contagion that affects people and certain objects within their reach. In the case of moral impurity, a real, physical process or event (e.g., child sacrifice or adultery) has a different perceived effect: a noncontagious defilement that affects persons, the land, and the sanctuary. . .

Other Differences

. . . In both cases, the impurity can be conveyed. Ritual impurity is conveyed by direct and indirect human contact. Moral impurity is conveyed to the land by sins that take place upon it, and through the land, the impurity is conveyed to the sanctuary. In both cases, moreover, there are practical legal ramifications that result from the impurity. The ritually impure person must keep away from sacred things, and in some cases be barred from certain precincts. . .

Other Differences

. . . The morally impure person may be subject to capital punishment or, in the case of unwitting female partners to sexual misconduct, permanent degradation and fewer options for marriage. And when the land has been defiled to a great extent, then its people are exiled.”

Rationale

What is the logic behind ritual impurity / uncleanness? (relates to moral impurity)

- Bodily flows (menstrual blood, semen)
- Contact with dead / death
- childbirth

1) Life vs. death

- Binary opposition
- Life associated with God; death is not
- Blood, semen, skin diseases

Life vs. death

The common denominator here is death. Vaginal blood and semen represent the forces of life; their loss—death. . . . In the case of scale disease [i.e., “leprosy”], this symbolism is made explicitly: Aaron prays for his stricken sister, “Let her not be like a corpse” (Num 12:12). Furthermore, scale disease is powerful enough to contaminate by overhang, and it is no accident that it shares this feature with the corpse (Num 19:14). The wasting of the body, the common characteristic of all biblically impure skin diseases, symbolizes the death process as much as the loss of blood and semen.²⁸

#2 imitation of God's nature

Sex makes us unfit because it is being unlike God

“Because God is eternal, God does not die. . . . Because God has no consort, God cannot have sex. Therefore, as Frymer-Kensky puts it, ‘in order to approach God, one has to leave the sexual realm.’ By separating sex from death

Rationale

(by following the ritual purity regulations) ancient Israelites (and especially ancient Israelite priests and Levites) separated themselves from what made them the least God-like. In other words, the point of following these regulations is nothing other than the theological underpinning of the entire Holiness Code: *imitatio Dei*."

Klawans, "Sacrifice and Defilement" HTR

Rationale

Eligibility to enter the sanctuary (God's abode) requires a "God-like" state.

God does not die; in his presence is life; God does not have sex; he is eternal.

#3 controllable vs uncontrollable

It is precisely with regard to this point that the work of Eilberg-Schwartz is so important. Noting the conundrum that routine seminal discharge (Lev 15:16–18) is less problematized than genital discharges of blood (15:19–29) or flux (15:1–15), Eilberg-Schwartz introduces the criterion of controllability into the discussion of the meaning of ritual purity in ancient Israel.⁴⁷ Without denying the importance of the notions of sex and death, Eilberg-Schwartz suggests that controllability may play a role in determining both which substances defile and how severely they defile. Briefly stated, he argues that the less a process or event can be controlled,

Klawans quote of Eilberg-Schwartz

#3 controllable vs uncontrollable

the more likely it is to defile. Thus excrement, which is highly controllable, is not ritually defiling at all. The same is true of the substances which exude from the upper parts of the body, like tears and saliva. Because their excretion is subject to human control, these substances were not considered defiling in ancient Israel. On the other hand, menstrual blood and nonseminal genital discharge are among the most defiling of substances, since they are least subject to human control.

Klawans quote of Eilberg-Schwartz

#4-Comparison

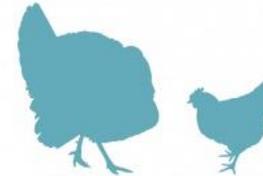
Food / dietary laws?

PRESENTED BY **BEYOND TODAY** UCC.ORG/BT

CLEAN vs UNCLEAN MEATS

You shall therefore distinguish between clean animals and unclean, between unclean birds and clean, and you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird, or by any kind of living thing that creeps on the ground, which I have separated from you as unclean. And you shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine (Leviticus 20:25-26).

CLEAN FLYING ANIMALS LEVITICUS 11:13-19 UNCLEAN FLYING ANIMALS



Chicken, Dove, Duck, Goose, Grouse, Guinea fowl, Partridge, Peafowl, Pheasant, Pigeon, Prairie chicken, Ptarmigan, Quail, Sagehen, Sparrow (and other songbirds), Swan*, Teal, Turkey

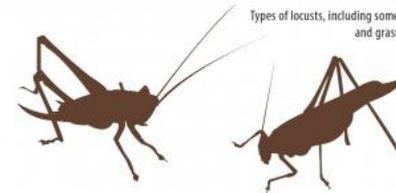
* In the King James Version, Leviticus 11:18 and Deuteronomy 14:16 list "swan" among unclean birds. However, this seems to be a mistranslation. The original word apparently refers to a kind of owl and is so translated in most modern Bible versions.



Albatross, Bat, Bittern, Buzzard, Condor, Coot, Cormorant, Crane, Crow, Cuckoo, Eagle, Flamingo, Grebe, Grosbeak, Gull, Hawk, Heron, Kite, Lapwing, Loon, Magpie, Osprey, Ostrich, Owl, Parrot, Pelican, Penguin, Plover, Rail, Raven, Roadrunner, Sandpiper, Seagull, Stork, Swallow, Swift, Vulture, Water hen, Woodpecker

CLEAN INSECTS LEVITICUS 11:20-23 UNCLEAN INSECTS

Insects with jointed, jumping legs
Types of locusts, including some crickets and grasshoppers

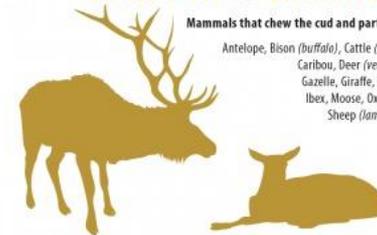


Insects without jointed, jumping legs
All insects except some in the locust family



CLEAN LAND ANIMALS LEVITICUS 11:3-8 UNCLEAN LAND ANIMALS

Mammals that chew the cud and part the hoof



Antelope, Bison (buffalo), Cattle (beef, veal), Caribou, Deer (venison), Elk, Gazelle, Giraffe, Goat, Hart, Ibex, Moose, Ox, Reindeer, Sheep (lamb, mutton)

Land animals that do not chew the cud and part the hoof



Canines: Coyote, Dog, Fox, Hyena, Jackal, Wolf
Felines: Cat, Cheetah, Leopard, Lion, Panther, Tiger
Equines: Donkey, Horse, Mule, Onager, Zebra
Other: Armadillo, Badger, Bear, Beaver, Camel, Elephant, Gorilla, Groundhog, Hippopotamus, Kangaroo, Llama (alpaca, vicuña), Mole, Monkey, Mouse, Muskrat, Opossum, Porcupine, Rabbit (hare), Raccoon, Rat, Rhinoceros, Skunk, Slug, Snail (escargot), Squirrel, Wallaby, Weasel, Wolverine, Worm
Swine: Boar, Peccary, Pig (bacon, ham, lard, pork)

CLEAN WATER ANIMALS LEVITICUS 11:9-12 UNCLEAN WATER ANIMALS

Fish with fins and scales



Anchovy, Barracuda, Bass, Black pomfret (or monchong), Bluefish, Bluegill, Carp, Cod, Crappie, Drum, Flounder, Grouper, Grunt, Haddock, Hake, Halibut, Hardhead, Herring (or alewife), Kingfish, Mackerel (or corbina), Mahimahi (or dorado, dolphinfish (not to be confused with the mammal dolphin)), Minnow, Mullet, Perch (or bream), Pike (or pickerel or jack), Pollack (or pollack or boston bluefish), Rockfish, Salmon, Sardine (or pilchard), Shad, Silver hake (or whiting), Smelt (or frost fish or ice fish), Snapper (or ebu, jobfish, lehi, onaga, opakapaka or uku), Sole, Steelhead, Sucker, Sunfish, Tarpon, Trout (or weakfish), Tuna (or ahi, aku, albacore, bonito, or tamba), Turbot (except european turbot), Whitefish

Marine animals without fins and scales



Fish: Bullhead, Catfish, Eel, European Turbot, Marlin, Paddlefish, Shark, Stickleback, Squid, Sturgeon (includes most caviar), Swordfish
Shellfish: Abalone, Clam, Conch, Crab, Crayfish (crawfish, craydad), Lobster, Mussel, Oyster, Scallop, Shrimp (prawn)
Soft body: Cuttlefish, Jellyfish, Limpet, Octopus, Squid (calamari)
Sea mammals: Dolphin, Otter, Porpoise, Seal, Walrus, Whale

CLEAN FLYING ANIMALS LEVITICUS 11:13-19

UNCLEAN FLYING ANIMALS



Chicken, Dove, Duck, Goose, Grouse, Guinea fowl, Partridge, Peafowl, Pheasant, Pigeon, Prairie chicken, Ptarmigan, Quail, Sagehen, Sparrow (*and other songbirds*), Swan*, Teal, Turkey

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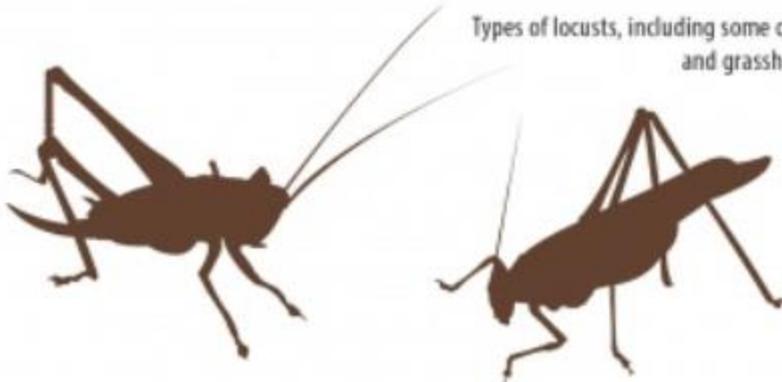


CLEAN INSECTS LEVITICUS 11:20-23

UNCLEAN INSECTS

Insects with jointed, jumping legs

Types of locusts, including some crickets and grasshoppers



Insects without jointed, jumping legs

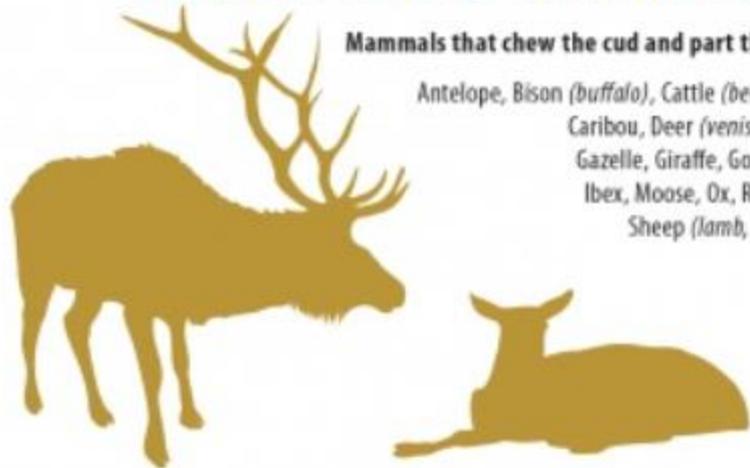
All insects except some in the locust family



CLEAN LAND ANIMALS LEVITICUS 11:3-8

Mammals that chew the cud and part the hoof

Antelope, Bison (*buffalo*), Cattle (*beef, veal*), Caribou, Deer (*venison*), Elk, Gazelle, Giraffe, Goat, Hart, Ibex, Moose, Ox, Reindeer, Sheep (*lamb, mutton*)



UNCLEAN LAND ANIMALS

Land animals that *do not* chew the cud and part the hoof

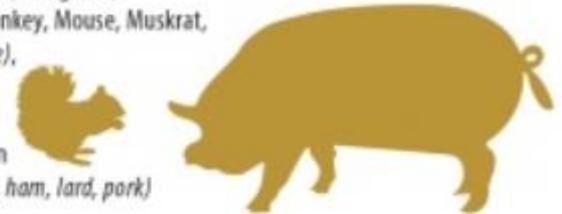
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Swine: Boar, Peccary, Pig (*bacon, ham, lard, pork*)



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Fish with fins and scales

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UNCLEAN WATER ANIMALS

Marine animals *without* fins and scales

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Shellfish: Abalone, Clam, Conch, Crab, Crayfish (*crawfish, crawdad*), Lobster, Mussel, Oyster, Scallop, Shrimp (*prawn*)

Soft body: Cuttlefish, Jellyfish, Limpet, Octopus, Squid (*calamari*)

Sea mammals: Dolphin, Otter, Porpoise, Seal, Walrus, Whale



Oppositional Rationale

Food / dietary laws?

- **Traditional Explanations**
 - Hygienic
 - Cult-Polemic
 - Moral / ethical
- **Comparative – Oppositional**
 - (Mary Douglas): "... the patterns of opposition, especially of inclusion and exclusion—seen in the social structures of a society, its cult, its view of the body and its classification of animals—may be expected to correspond to and confirm one another." (DOTP, W. Houston)

Oppositional Rationale

- **What is the basis for distinguishing permitted (clean) vs. forbidden (unclean)?**
- **Nothing to consistently mark abhorrence**
- **Outliers in every system**

- May be arbitrary in criterion, but intentional in its result (God vs. non-God)

Life and Death Rationale

- What about parts of **clean** animals being forbidden?
- **Blood** (Gen 9:4; Lev 17:11)
- **Fat** (Lev 3:17; 7:22-26)
 - **Leviticus 7:23–25** limits this prohibition to the fat of **cattle, sheep and goats (animals for sacrifice), not wild game animals or birds.**
- **Sciatic Nerve** (cf. Gen 32:32; not “thigh muscle”)
- **Carrion** (general)

Life and Death Rationale

Kid boiled in its mother's milk (Exod 23:19b; 34:26b and Deut 14:21b)

- **Explanations?**
 - **Humanitarian / Moral**
 - **Cult-Polemic (dubious assumption from Ugarit)?**
- **ANE idolatrous context:** O. Keel (iconography); ANE motif = mother animal (cow or goat) with suckling calf.

Next Time

Sacred Space (wk 2)

Sacrifice (wk 3)

Chaos and Calendar (wk4)

Some of these opposition rationales help us understand these other topics.

Sacred space will also help there.