

Think Like an Israelite

Sacrificial System

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.

Usually **doesn't** arise from moral violation (sin).

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

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

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.

Rationale of Sacrifice (best guesses)

Binary choices make us like God, fit to occupy sacred space (imitatio Dei = grand metaphor)

- **Life vs. death**
- **No voluntary sexual activity; procreation (“to approach God you must leave sexual realm”)**
- **Controllable vs. uncontrollable (latter defiles)**

What about the sacrifices?

- 1. Shouldn't they take care of both types of impurity?**
- 2. If ritual purity requires keeping death out of the sanctuary, why does the sacrificial system require the opposite (animals are sacrificed within sacred space)?**
- 3. How does process "imitate God"?**

Observations on sacrifices

Steps:

- 1. Ritual purification of priests (made fit for sacred space – space God occupies)**
- 2. Selection of ritually clean animal (it will occupy sacred space)**
- 3. Animal is killed / sacrificed**

Observations on sacrifices

Klawans: "Sacrifice is frequently described (or derided) as "violent," and it certainly is deadly and bloody. But the violence of sacrifice is not random or indiscriminate. Animal sacrifice in ancient Israel proceeds only in a very orderly and controlled way. . . . in ancient Israel, sacrifice is very little like the hunt."

Observations on sacrifices

Klawans: "In ancient Israel, sacrifice involved the controlled exercise of complete power over an animal's life and death. This is precisely one of the powers that Israel's God exercises over human beings: 'The Lord kills and brings to life' (1 Sam 2:6; cf. Deut 32:39). Yet exercising control over the death of a subordinate being is not the only aspect of sacrificial ritual that can be understood in light of *imitatio Dei*."

Observations on sacrifices

4. **Animal is dismembered**
 - The priest “de-creates” it
5. **Blood applied to the altar or sanctuary**
6. **Parts of animal are consumed in flames of altar; others are eaten**
 - God is a “consuming fire” (Sinai); meal with God on his property / in his house

Observations on sacrifices

Klawans: “God, too, selects, kills, and appears on earth as a consuming fire. Sacrifice, then, ought to be understood metaphorically . . . The offerer and priest play the part of God, and the domesticated animals from the herd and the flock play the part of the people (and particularly Israel). . . . as God is to people, so too, during the process of sacrifice, are the people of Israel to the sacrificial animals.”

Points

- The “imitation” recognizes God’s lordship over creation (and Israel) and his presence.
- Rituals reinforce principle of sacred space.
- The blood is never applied to the people who bring the sacrifices
 - Covenant ceremony (Exod 24) and consecration of priests (Exod 25), Aaron (Lev 8), and cleansing of lepers (Lev 14)
 - None of the above about sin; it’s purgation and “blood ties” (connection)

Points

- **Even Day of Atonement not applied to people, but sanctuary**
 - **Reset button; removal of sin via (living) goat for Azazel**

So, what is *achieved* by sacrifice?

Points

Ritual defilement (unavoidable) and certain “minor” (non-abominable) sins (Lev 5) can be rectified by sacrifice

- **Goal is to protect sacred space from being infected by your defilement**

Points

Lev 4 “sin offering” (better, “decontamination offering”) = unintentional impurity (Lev 4:1)

- **decontamination to protect sacred space (blood applied to sacred space)**
- **Correct procedure made certain offerer would not contaminate sacred space**

Points

Lev 5 “guilt offering” (= restitution offering)

- Ritual plus restitution
- Functions to restore the loss. This is why many scholars refer to this offering as the “reparation offering” or the “restitution offering.” Once restitution is made, the guilty party is purged (*kipper*); i.e., the Lord is satisfied.
 - Doesn't mean “cover” (it's purging)

Points

What about moral defilement (committing “abominations”)?

- **No sacrifice for those things; no solution for moral defilement of this type.**
- **Punished by death, exile**

Points

(Klawans): “The problem with these three sins—idolatry, sexual transgression, and murder—and the reason that they bring about exile, is that God so abhors them that God cannot and will not abide in a land saturated with the residue left by their performance.” Num 35:30-34

- **When land is defiled**, God will not want to be in it; he'll move.

Points

(Klawans): “Ritual defilement concerns those things which threaten the status of the defiled individuals vis-à-vis the sacred. Those who are ritually defiled, those whom they ritually defile, and those animals which, when dead, are considered ritually defiling, are banned from the sanctuary.”

Points

(Klawans): “The moral defilements, however, work very differently. They threaten not only the status of the individuals in question, but also the very fabric of Israelite society. Unlike the ritual impurities, the moral impurities bring with them not only the danger that sacred precincts might be violated, but the threat that God will depart from the sacred precincts altogether.”

Points

(Klawans): “. . . the typical understanding of the relationship between daily sacrifice and grave sin is, I believe, backwards. It is not that the daily sacrifice undoes the damage done by a grave transgression. Quite the contrary—a grave transgression undoes what the daily sacrifice accomplishes.”