

Laws of Purification

Leviticus 11:1-15:33

I. Introduction

A. Literary Setting

1. The purity laws detailed in chs. 11-15 must be viewed within their larger literary framework. In other words, they are a random collection of laws.
 - a) Chs. 1-7 outline the various sacrifices that mark the cultic life of Israel. Knowledge of these sacrifices is assumed throughout chs. 11-15 and play an important role in ritual purification following certain conditions.
 - b) Chs. 8-10 introduced the centrality of the priesthood and its responsibility in relationship to Yahweh and the people. In particular, Lev 10:10 introduced to important role of the priest in distinguishing “the holy and the common and the clean and the unclean.”
 - c) Chs. 11-15 anticipate ch. 16 and the Day of Atonement ritual which deals with Israel’s national uncleanness and its effects on the tabernacle.
2. “Because the quantity of law so outweighs the history here and throughout Leviticus, we tend to forget that the narrative frames the law and not the reverse. The preponderance of law tends to give it the appearance of timelessness, whereas the context makes it plain that these laws were given in a specific situation to specific people. They are part of the blueprint for making the people of Israel holy. ‘I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God; you must therefore be holy, for I am holy’ (11:45). They are not necessarily to be taken as universal and eternal prescriptions. They express God’s will for his people at a particular time, but as the NT makes clear they were not intended to apply forever or to Gentiles (Mark 7:14ff; Acts 10:15; 1 Cor 10:23ff)” (Wenham, 161-2).

B. Purity and Holiness in OT theology and life

1. OT theology and thought presented life into two basic categories. Everything was either...
 - a) Clean or unclean
 - b) Holy or common
2. Clean and Unclean
 - a) This category refers to the **condition** of a person, place, or thing
 - (1) Clean (i.e., “pure”) was considered the default or baseline position between uncleanness and holiness. It is the “normal condition of most things and persons” (Wenham, 19).

- (2) Unclean refers to a derivation from the norm. It is the opposite of cleanness. Some things are intrinsically unclean (e.g., some animals) while others may only become unclean temporarily.
- b) A person or thing's condition was (for the most part) dynamic:
 - (1) Clean things could be defiled and become unclean.
 - (a) This could result from contact with a corpse, childbirth, infectious diseases, discharges, sexual immorality, idolatry, murder, etc. In other words, most unclean things are contagious.
 - (b) However, that which is intrinsically unclean (e.g., unclean animals) do not transmit uncleanness when touched, only when eaten. Likewise, no ritual and action can make them clean. Their condition is permanent.
 - (2) Unclean things could be purified and become clean (except intrinsically unclean things).
 - (a) The means by which something is purified depended on the item and the degree of uncleanness.
 - (b) Sometimes purification came at the passing of the day.
 - (c) Sometimes, washing with water was required.
 - (d) Other times, a sin offer was required to remove the uncleanness.

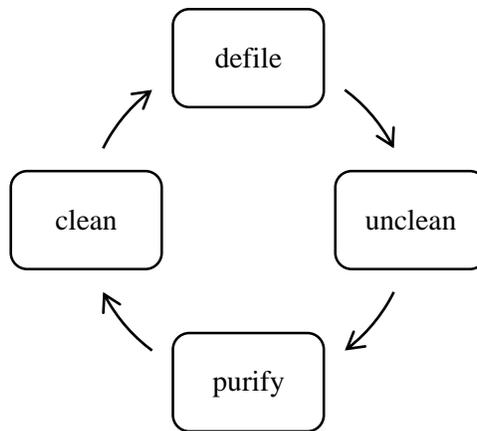


Figure 1: Relationship between clean and unclean

- c) Uncleanness is not necessarily a reflection of moral impurity or sin
 - (1) Uncleanness could result from sexual intercourse, childbirth, infectious diseases, or contact with a corpse. But the OT clearly does not present these things are inherently sinful.
 - (2) Rather, uncleanness was a condition relating to one's ability to access God and participate in the corporate life of the covenant people.
 - (a) Unclean person could not access the tabernacle in their condition

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(b) Unclean persons had to protect others from their condition, lest they spread their defilement.

3. Holy and Common

a) This category refers to the **status** of a person, place, thing, or time

(1) Holy (i.e., “sanctified”) refers to something which is separated from the common and dedicated to Yahweh’s service. It is anything or anyone given to God.

(2) Common refers to the default status of something or someone and corresponds to the idea of cleanness. In other words, cleanness and commonness constitute the ground state of most things. They can either be elevated to the status of holiness or degraded to the condition of uncleanness.

b) A person or thing’s status was (conditionally) dynamic:

(1) Something common (and clean) could be consecrated (i.e., “sanctified”) and become holy

(a) Divine action: Only God can designate something as holy. It is not something man initiates (Lev 20:8; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32; Num 16:7).

(b) Human action: sometimes no special ritual accompanied the sanctification process, as in making a contribution of animals or property to the tabernacle. In other cases (i.e., sanctification of a priest), rituals such as sacrifice and anointing were included (Exod 29:1-36; 40:9; Lev 8-9).

(c) Additionally, some holy objects made everything they touched holy (Exod 29:37; 30:29; Lev 6:18, 27).

(2) Something holy could be profaned and become common: When someone treated a holy person or item as if it were common, that act profaned it and lowered its status to common (Lev 19:29; 22:15).

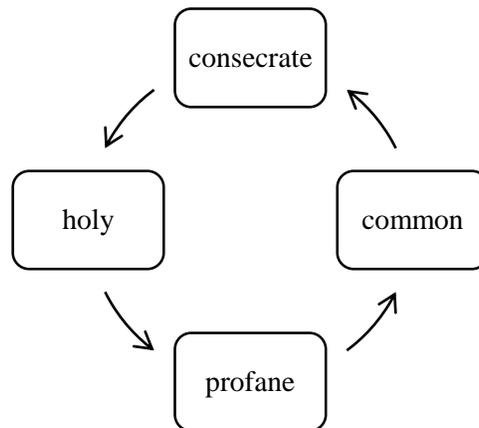


Figure 2: Relationship between holy and common

4. Overlap of condition and status

- a) Strictly speaking, the terms common and clean are distinct concepts. However, they both appear to express the same concept of a baseline status/condition for most people and things.
- b) Likewise, there is a relationship between cleanness and holiness in Leviticus. “You shall not defile yourselves with [any swarming thing], and become unclean through them. For I am Yahweh your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:43b-44a).
- c) This reveals why it was so important to separate that which was holy from that which was unclean. “The unclean and the holy are two states which must never come in contact with each other... Contact between uncleanness and holiness is disastrous. They are utterly distinct in theory, and must be kept equally distinct in practice, lest divine judgment fall” (Wenham, 22).

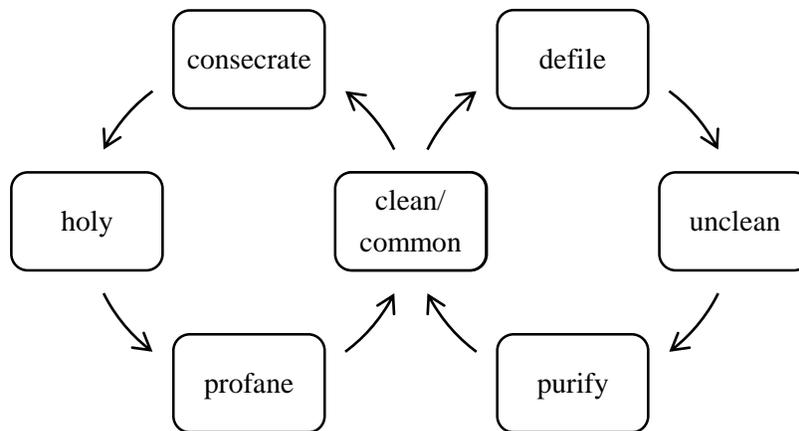


Figure 3: Relationship between status and condition

- d) Wenham’s summary: “Cleanness is the natural state of most creatures. Holiness is a state of grace to which men are called by God, and it is attained through obeying the law and carrying out rituals such as sacrifices. Uncleanness is a substandard condition to which men descend through bodily processes and sin. Every Israelite had a duty to seek release from uncleanness through washing and sacrifice, because uncleanness was quite incompatible with the holiness of the covenant people” (23).

II. Exposition

Chs. 11-15 are divided into four sections, and seem to be ordered according to the length of time involved in the uncleanness. Defilement from food or corpses lasts only until evening, childbirth results in defilement for months, infectious diseases defile potentially for years, while bodily discharges result in varying lengths of time.

A. Purity with regard to food (11:1-47)

“The dietary laws have taken a central place in the self-understanding of Judaism throughout its history. While Jews have expressed their faithfulness to their God by the observance of all the laws, it is these, along with those of circumcision and the Sabbath,

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that have most conspicuously enabled them to express their identity as Jews over against their neighbors, to resist assimilation, and thereby to be faithful to the God who has called them to be ‘his special possession among all the nations that are on the earth’ (Houston, *Purity and Monotheism*, 13).

Ch. 11 divides into two parts: laws distinguishing clean and unclean animals (11:1-23) and laws pertaining to how defilement occurs from animals and the process for purification (11:24-47).

1. Clean and Unclean animals (11:1-23)

a) Land creatures (11:1-8)

- (1) Clean animals were characterized by divided hooves and chewing cud (i.e., thoroughly chewing its food)
- (2) Both conditions were required to be considered a clean animal
- (3) The people were prohibited from eating the flesh of unclean animals or touching their carcasses (v. 8).
- (4) However, an unclean animal did not transmit its condition to others while it was alive. Thus, one could ride a horse or camel without restriction, but could not consume its flesh.

b) Water creatures (11:9-12)

- (1) Clean animals had to possess both scales and fins, whether they lived in fresh or sea water.
- (2) Unclean animals were considered “detestable” (used 4x in this section), a strong term equal to that of utter contempt or revulsion.

c) Flying creatures (11:13-19)

- (1) This section does not enumerate clean birds, but rather identifies 20 types of flying creatures which were prohibited from consumption (“detestable”).
- (2) The zoological taxonomy of these terms are highly debated, but most agree that they are birds of prey or scavengers.
- (3) It is supposed that these types of birds were excluded from Israel’s diet because their consumption of blood and carrion.
- (4) Bats are not zoologically classified as birds in modern taxonomy, but are included in this section because of the overall similarities in appearance and behavior.

d) Swarming creatures (11:20-23)

- (1) Insects considered unclean (i.e., “detestable”) were those which had wings and “walks on all fours,” an expression meaning “to dart about.”

- (2) Exception was made for insects whose back legs were jointed so that they hopped on the ground. Four types of insect are listed, although commentators debate whether the list is exhaustive or emblematic.

2. Defilement from animals and means of purification (11:24-42)

This section answers remaining questions pertaining to unclean animals, particularly regarding the means by which defilement occurs and the process by which one may become clean.

a) Defilement from land animals (11:24-28)

- (1) Defilement occurred through contact with the carcass of an animal. While alive, unclean animals did not transmit uncleanness (cf. 11:8). Once dead, however, their uncleanness was contagious.
- (2) Another facet of animal taxonomy that marks unclean includes animals that walk on paws (lit., “palms”). These would include dogs, cats, bears, etc.
- (3) Defilement from touching a carcass resulted in uncleanness until evening, while defilement for carrying a carcass required washing one’s clothes and waiting until evening to resume normal activities.

b) Defilement from swarming land creatures (11:29-38)

- (1) Swarming creatures also included small rodents, lizards and snakes—anything that travelled near the ground and whose patterns of movement were quick and erratic.
- (2) Defilement could occur from touching the carcass of any swarming thing, resulting in uncleanness until evening.
- (3) Additionally, vessels into which these creatures fell and died rendered the vessel and its contents unclean. Some items could be washed with water and purified, while others (earthenware) were destroyed.
- (4) The exception to this law concerned springs or cisterns into which an animal fell and drowned. In such circumstances, the water remained clean, but the individual who removed the carcass would be unclean until evening.
- (5) Likewise, seed which touches a carcass remained pure if it was dry. But if the seed had been watered, the carcass would make the seed unclean.

c) Defilement from clean animals (11:39-40)

- (1) Defilement could also occur if one touched the carcass of a clean animal or ate its flesh.
- (2) Only animals that were killed during ceremonial slaughter were considered clean even after death.

3. Summary (11:41-47)

- a) All swarming things defile (11:41-42).

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- b) Observance of the dietary laws marked Israel as a holy people which belonged to a holy God (11:43b-44).
 - c) Just as Israel distinguishing between clean and unclean animals, Yahweh has distinguished between Israel and the other nations (11:45).
 - d) “These laws, which may strike the modern reader as quaint and pedantic, had a very different import to ancient Israel. They were perpetual reminders of God’s grace to Israel. As the laws distinguished clean from unclean animals, so the people were reminded that God has distinguished them from all the other nations on earth to be his own possession. If the distinction between clean and unclean was sometimes obscured by Israel, the reason for God’s election was too. It rested in God’s inscrutable will, not on national merit (Deut 7:6-8)” (Wenham, 180).
4. Interpretive Issue: Rationale for clean and unclean categories

The criteria for distinguishing clean and unclean animals is clearly delineated in the text (e.g., divided hoof and chewing the cud, scales and fins, etc.). But the rationale behind these distinctions appear somewhat arbitrary and have garnered many different explanations for their rationale.

a) Symbolic View

- (1) This view is based on allegorical interpretation and dates as far back as Philo.
- (2) It suggests that the animals represent something else beyond the physical—something more practical or spiritual in nature.
 - (a) Chewing the cud represents the need for contemplation and reflection on the law
 - (b) Dividing the hoof suggests the idea of making distinctions between clean and unclean.
 - (c) Pigs are representative of the filth of iniquity
- (3) There is no textual basis for this view
 - (a) The criteria for determining the various spiritual meanings are completely subjective. No objective criteria exist determining the “correct” interpretation.
 - (b) “Interesting and imaginative as these older attempts at symbolic interpretation are, they are at best partial, covering only part of the data, and at worst whimsical and capricious. There seems to be no criteria for preferring one interpretation to any other. Biblical exegesis without controls is apt to run away into total subjectivity” (Wenham, 168-9).

b) Ethical View

- (1) This view rests upon the premise of the inviolability of life.

- (2) It suggests the criteria as intended to reduce the culinary options, which in turn reduced the number of slain animals.
 - (3) This view appears to be more philosophical and ideological than textual and theological. Its position hints at elements of environmentalism and animal rights philosophy. There is no textual indication that reverence for life is part of the rationale behind the distinction in clean and unclean animals.
- c) Aesthetic View
- (1) This view is based on the quality of the animals' appearance.
 - (2) Clean animals are identified as those which are aesthetically appealing
 - (3) Unclean animals, on the other hand, are chosen because they engender disgust and repulsion.
 - (4) Once again, the criteria for this view rests entirely upon the subjectivity of the interpreter.
- d) Hygienic View
- (1) This view suggests that the distinctions in animals were God's way of protecting Israel from diseases. Thus, unclean animals were prohibited because they carried diseases.
 - (2) Exodus 15:26 is sometimes used as a biblical basis for this view—"none of the diseases of Egypt" would come upon Israel.
 - (3) This view has been adopted by many evangelicals.
 - (4) There is no scientific basis for this view. No evidence exists that these unclean animals were less healthy, or carried more diseases than the clean animals allowed. On the contrary, the clean animals listed are common sources of various food-borne pathogens.
 - (5) Additionally, there is no indication that ANE peoples were unaware that cooking processes could be used to sterilize meat.
 - (6) Further, the NT change in dietary laws strike a major blow to this view. Was there some sudden physiological change in the health of animals following the inauguration of the new covenant? Or did God no longer have a concern for the health of NT believers as he did for those in the OT?
- e) Morphological View
- (1) This view is relatively new and proffered by M. Douglas.
 - (2) Clean animals exhibit behavior that correspond to "normal" modes of locomotion and digestive habits.
 - (3) Unclean animals, on the other hand, diverge from these normal modes and represent abnormal behavior. Thus, they correspond to those things which are contrary to the "normal" baseline characteristics of the created order.

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- (4) This view has some merits, and far and above exceed previous explanations.
 - (5) However, this view does raise certain theological questions. If God created clean and unclean animals, did he create certain creatures with “anomalies” which diverge from the created order?
 - (6) Thus, this view raises other theological issues even as it seems to answer the basic rationale behind the dietary distinctions.
- f) Polemical View
- (1) This view is based on the supposition that God’s purposes for Israel’s dietary laws were primarily concerned with guarding Israel from pagan cultic associations.
 - (2) Unclean animals were thus prohibited because they were associated with pagan religious practices.
 - (3) There is some merit to this view, as the OT text does employ polemics at times to battle contrary worldviews and religious practices which rivaled those of Israel.
 - (4) But there is plenty of evidence that clean animals were involved in pagan worship. Additionally, bulls in particular were central to pagan religious practices, as even other OT texts portray (cf. Exod 32).
- g) Theological View
- (1) This view is based on the theology expounded in Exod 19:5-6, where Israel’s national purposes identify it as priestly kingdom and holy nation.
 - (2) The dietary laws, while seemingly arbitrary, were intended to distinguish Israel from the surrounding nations.
 - (3) As Israel observed the various dietary laws, they showed themselves committed to Yahweh’s purposes for them, identified themselves with their covenant suzerain, and marked themselves as distinct from the nations surrounding them.
 - (4) “The separation of the animals into the pure and the impure is both a model and a lesson for Israel to separate itself from the nations” (Milgrom, 689).
 - (5) “With the present stage in our understanding the best explanation of the categorical distinction between clean and unclean is that these have been categories decreed by God to make Israel a holy nation. Not only would the observance of these laws demonstrate Israel’s distinctiveness from the other nations but it also would be an indication of their supreme commitment to their covenant God. When a Jew obeyed these laws, it would not be possible for him to share some kinds of food with his pagan neighbor, so food functioned as a barrier to their associations” (Rooker, 174).

B. Purity with regard to childbirth (12:1-8)

Chapter 12 is the only chapter in Leviticus which discusses uncleanness relating to childbirth. Its contents, however, share many similar concepts with other sections (e.g., ch. 15). Some of the contents in ch. 12 reference the laws concerning menstruation, which are detailed in 15:19-24.

1. Impurities from male offspring (12:1-4)
 - a) Upon the birth of a male child, a woman was unclean for 7 days.
 - (1) This period is likened to the uncleanness of a woman during his menstruation (12:2).
 - (2) During this period, her uncleanness was contagious. She would cause others to become unclean on contact, and rendered anything she laid on unclean and contagious.
 - b) On the 8th day after the birth, the male child was to be circumcised (12:3).
 - c) Following the circumcision, the woman remained in ritual uncleanness for another 33 days.
 - (1) This period is referred to as “the blood of her purifying” (12:4), during which time she was no longer contagious to others.
 - (2) However, she was restricted from access to the tabernacle so that she did not contact anything or anyone holy.
 - d) The total time of uncleanness for a woman after bearing a male child was 40 days.
2. Impurities from female offspring (12:5)
 - a) Upon the birth of a female child, a woman was unclean and contagious for 14 days (12:5a)
 - b) Following this period, she remained in “the blood of her purity” for another 66 days, no longer contagious, but restricted from tabernacle worship (12:5b).
 - c) The total time of uncleanness for a woman after bearing a female child was 80 days.
3. Procedures for purification after childbirth (12:6-8)
 - a) Following the end of a woman’s 40-day or 80-day period of uncleanness, she brought a burnt offering and a sin offering to the tabernacle. (12:6)
 - b) The offerings were the same regardless of the sex of the child. In either case, a lamb was brought for a burnt offering, and a turtledove or pigeon for a sin offering.
 - c) Concession was made for extremely poor individuals. If a woman could not bring a lamb for a burnt offering, a turtledove could be substituted as a burnt offering (12:8).

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- d) Though the burnt offering is listed first, the sin offering would have been offered first to cleanse from impurity, followed by the burnt offering for general acceptance before Yahweh.

4. Interpretive Issues

The laws relating to impurity and childbirth have unsettled some believers, and have been a common avenue for secular attacks on the Bible. Through a modernist western interpretive paradigm, these laws appear misogynistic, both because of the uncleanness caused by childbirth as well as the disparity of ritual purification between male and female childbirth. The analysis below presents some of the major explanations for these two issues.

a) Why does childbirth cause impurity?

- (1) On the surface, the uncleanness caused by childbirth is curious, given the divine mandate to procreate (Gen 1:28).
- (2) Some liberal scholars have suggested that this law reflects a pre-Israelite custom which was adopted and incorporated into the covenant framework of Israel (Heinisch, 59; Vos, 62ff; Harlley, 167). However, there seems to be little reason why this law would find acceptance while others were excluded.
- (3) Calvin suggested that the reason for the mother's uncleanness related to the existence of depraved offspring in her womb.
 - (a) "There is little difficulty in understanding why a woman who has conceived and given birth to a child, should be pronounced unclean; viz., because the whole race of Adam is polluted and defiled, so that the woman already contracts uncleanness from the offspring which she bears in the womb, and is further contaminated by giving it birth (Calvin, 2:499).
 - (b) This view relates to the concept of original sin and its effects on humanity—in this case, on the mother.
 - (c) The act of procreation was not inherently sinful. However, because procreation produced a child which inherited a sinful nature, Calvin surmised that this fact was behind the laws relating the uncleanness.
 - (d) Interestingly, Calvin's point is not that the uncleanness is a result of the woman or the procreative act. Instead, her uncleanness results from the depravity of the *child*.
 - (e) "Hence it appears how foul and disgusting in God's sight is our condition, since at our birth, and even before it, we infect our mothers. It has been almost universally, but very absurdly, considered that nothing is here condemned but libidinous intercourse between male a female; whereas the purification is not required except there be offspring" (Calvin, 2:499).
 - (f) The strength of this view is that it rightly identifies that the mother's status as a woman nor the activity of bearing children or sexual intercourse is the source of her uncleanness.

- (g) Its weakness is that it derives from his theological context rather than the immediate context. He even references this text as reinforcing his position in opposition to Pelagius, who denied inherited sin.
 - (h) Also, if Calvin's position were correct, we would expect the baby to need purification as well, yet the text doesn't indicate that the baby is unclean—only the mother. Why would the baby impart uncleanness to the mother and yet not itself be unclean?
- (4) In reality, the text itself provides sufficient information for explaining the reasoning behind uncleanness after childbirth.
- (a) "It is not the birth itself that makes the woman unclean. There is no mention of the baby being unclean, but it is the discharge (lochia) that follows childbirth that makes the woman unclean" (Wenham, 188).
 - (b) "The issue seems to be that of the issuance of blood. Because life is in the blood (17:11), the loss of blood required some purification to acknowledge the sanctity of life" (Rooker, 185).
 - (c) The text references the mother's blood three times (vv. 4, 5, 7), and connects the woman's uncleanness to her menstruation (vv. 2, 5), which involves the discharge of blood (cf. 15:19).
- b) Why is the length of impurity so much longer for bearing a female?

The disparity between the lengths of uncleanness after birthing female children compared with male children is a more difficult issue and one which has generated numerous views, not all of which are theologically plausible.

(1) Cultural

- (a) Some have contended that these differences between male and female offspring indicate an overall cultural perspective in OT Israel which viewed women as inherently inferior to males.
- (b) On the one hand, this view brings an unacceptable amount of skepticism to the text, and assumes the social morality of the OT is nothing but a product of ANE culture.
- (c) Gen 1-2 certainly establishes a complementary relationship between man and woman, but emphasize that both are image bearers of God (Gen 1:26-28).
- (d) Additionally, the offerings required for purification following childbirth are the same, regardless of the baby's sex.
- (e) At the same time, there is reason to suspect that cultural factors could be involved in this law, made by concession more than commendation. Just as slavery as an institution was regulated in ancient Israel rather than disbanded, so cultural concepts related to males and females may have

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been allowed, with theological influence flowing from a sanctified worldview.

(2) Medical

- (a) Some scholars argued for a medical explanation to the time difference, positing that women post-natal bleeding tends to last longer after giving birth to girls, or possesses greater toxicity (Macht, 253-60).
- (b) Evidentially, the figures produced to support this position hardly justify doubling the length of uncleanness (Wenham, 188).
- (c) As Jenson has argued, finding scientific and medical explanations for laws like these represents a modern imposition on the text (Jenson, 75-76).

(3) Theological

- (a) Several evangelical commentators connect the longer length of time for a female child with the stigma placed on women for Eve's part in the Fall (see notes for MacArthur Study Bible).
- (b) There is strength to this position, and theological and textual justification. After all, pain in childbirth was one of the pronounced punishments for Eve's part in the Fall.
- (c) However, there is no textual certainty that this is, indeed, the backdrop to this particular law.

(4) Anticipatory

- (a) This view suggests that the length of time for a female child anticipates the future flow of blood that will come when the child reaches maturity and begins her own menstruation and childbearing.
- (b) While the connection to blood is textually relevant, there is little other evidence to commend this view with any confidence.

(5) Polemical

- (a) Rooker suggests that perhaps the longer period of time for a female child reflects a polemical attempt to distance the Israelite cult from the pagan religions.
- (b) "By excluding the mother from the tabernacle for a longer period after the birth of a female, a distance is created between fertility and the worship of God. This would communicate in strong terms that God was not at all subject to the processes of procreation as were the deities in pagan beliefs, but he in fact is the one who blesses with new life" (Rooker, 184).

(6) Practical

- (a) There is a practical explanation for some of this disparity located in the text itself.

- (b) The woman's exclusion from all tabernacle activity lasts only 7 days for male child specifically because the child had to be circumcised on the 8th day. If the mother remained in ritual impurity past the 8th day, she would be unable to witness her son's circumcision (Luke 2:22 seems to suggest that both Mary and Joseph were involved in presenting Jesus for circumcision at the temple).
- (c) Continuing in this vein, some have suggested that the circumcision of the male child on day 8 had a purifying effect on the mother, limiting her impurity to a total of 40 days as opposed to the 80 days for a female child.

(7) Summary

- (a) In 1979, Wenham wrote, "No convincing explanation has been offered why the birth of a girl makes the mother unclean for twice as long as the birth of a boy" (188). That statement is just as true 40 years later.
- (b) No view has been able to offer a satisfactory, textually-based explanation for this law. To this end, Sklar has offered some helpful reminders:
 - (i) The text does not give a rationale for this law
 - (ii) Cultural traditions sometimes form from historical events (cf. Gen 32:32). "It is entirely possible that the same has happened here: an earlier circumstance—not recorded for us—stands behind the different lengths of time, a circumstance which is no longer recoverable (and which would be impossible to guess)" (Sklar, 178).
 - (iii) The Israelites themselves may have had no rationale, being that the law represents a custom far pre-dating them.
- (c) To this, Sklar makes the following statement: "It is impossible to prove which of the above explanations—if any!—would have resonated most with an Israelite. As a result, we simply do not know why the length of impurity differs between boys and girls. Whatever the case may be, the text now proceeds to the final purification rites, which, as mentioned above, makes no distinction at all between boys and girls (vv. 6-8)" (Sklar, 179).

C. Purity with regard to infectious diseases (13:1-14:57)

1. Regulations for infectious diseases (13:1-59)

a) Infectious skin diseases (13:1-46)

- (1) The general term used throughout chs. 13-14 for infectious disease is *tsara'at*, a term which the LXX translates as *lepros*, resulting in the almost universal association of these symptoms with the dermatological condition of leprosy (a.k.a. Hansen's Disease).
- (2) But leprosy is most certainly not the disease in consideration in this section for several reasons:

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- (a) The symptoms of leprosy do not fit those outlined in 13:1-46
 - (b) The term *tsara'at* is used not only of infectious skin diseases, but growths such as mildew or mold which grow on clothing (13:47-59) and infest structures (14:34-53).
- (3) “Most modern commentators and lexicographers have abandoned this translation, maintaining that the term refers to a number of infectious diseases. The term would include leprosy, but it should not be restricted to it” (Rooker, 187).
- (4) A variety of symptoms are discussed with details for the priests on how to identify which conditions were infectious and which were not:
- (a) Eruptions (13:1-8) pertained to sudden onset of symptoms manifesting as swelling, rash, or bright spots.
 - (b) Chronic skin disease (13:9-17) dealt with outbreaks of swellings that included ulcerations (lit., “living flesh”). Only when new skin (lit., “white”) formed over the ulceration would the individual be pronounced clean.
 - (c) Boils (13:18-23) and burns (13:24-28) were not by themselves unclean, but they could develop a secondary infection in the surrounding tissue marked by swelling and ulcerations.
 - (d) Sores (13:29-37) which develop on the scalp or chin followed similar procedures for the previous symptoms. In this instance, the text specifies that women were not exempt, a reasonable assumption given the discussion of beards.
 - (e) Rashes (13:38-39) which appeared as dull white were benign and did not affect the individual’s condition.
 - (f) Baldness (13:40-44) by itself was not an issue, but when it was caused by an underlying condition on the scalp, the situation required the discernment of a priest to determine if the individual was unclean.
- (5) It is important to remember that the priest’s role was not to diagnose and treat the infectious disease. The priest was responsible to discern whether a condition was infectious, render a verdict of either clean or unclean, and assure that the individual followed the necessary procedures.
- (6) In some cases, a quarantine period was required before the priest could confidently make a diagnosis. If the condition was unclear, the individual was required to wait a period of time (e.g., 7 days) and then return for reexamination. By that time, the condition would either worsen or improve, giving enough information for the priest to make a confident pronouncement.
- (7) For those unfortunate enough to be found unclean, they were relegated to isolation outside the camp. They were required to wear torn clothes, remain

disheveled in appearance, cover their face and warn others around them of their condition (13:45-46).

- (8) The isolation of infected individuals was a mournful yet necessary part of the covenant community. Isolation was for the benefit of the nation, and the individual's willingness to remain away from the camp signified his concern for the welfare of the entire community.

b) Mildew (13:47-59)

- (1) The same term used for skin diseases is used to describe infections of mildew appearing on articles of clothing (13:47).
- (2) Mildew which appeared was examined by a priest, after which the garment was isolated for 7 days and then reexamined (13:49-50)
- (3) If the mildew had spread, the article was unclean and was burned (13:51-52), but if it had not spread, the garment was washed and isolated for another 7 days (13:53-54).
- (4) Mildew which remained after washing, even if it had not spread, indicated a "destructive mildew" requiring the garment to be burned (13:55). But if the mildew had faded, then the affected section was torn out. Appearance of new mildew meant the garment was unclean and was destroyed. But if no reappearance occurred, the garment was washed and was then pronounced clean (13:55-58).

2. Purification for infectious diseases (14:1-53)

Chapter 14 contains "the most extensive purificatory instruction in the Old Testament" (Gerstenberger, 175), indicating how individuals whose infections had healed could undergo ritual purification and reenter the community.

a) Purification for infectious skin diseases (14:1-32)

- (1) If an individual had recovered from a skin disease, a priest was to go outside the camp to examine him.
- (2) After verifying his recovery, the priest would order a specific cleansing ritual:
 - (a) A bird was killed over fresh water in a clay pot.
 - (b) The remaining live bird was dipped in the blood of the killed bird, along with cedar wood, scarlet yarn, and hyssop.
 - (c) The blood was then sprinkled 7 times on the unclean man, and the live bird was released in an open field, picturing the removal of the person's uncleanness.
 - (d) The individual then washed his clothes, shaved off all his hair, and bathed in water, allowing him to reenter the camp.

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- (e) After 7 days in the camp, he shaved his head, beard, eyebrows, and the rest of his hair, washed his clothes and bathed again.
 - (f) At the end of this extended ritual, he was clean and could enter his own dwelling.
- (3) The individual was required to make a number of offerings on the 8th day after he had become clean:
- (a) A grain offering (14:10-11)
 - (b) A guilt offering (14:12-18) was offered as compensation for the debt imposed by the loss of service to God caused by the individual's uncleanness. The blood was applied to the right ear, thumb, and big toe of the person, and oil was sprinkled 7 times in the sanctuary, and applied to the same parts as the blood, as well as on the person's head.
 - (c) A sin offering (14:19a) was offered to purify the individual and the sanctuary.
 - (d) A burnt offering (14:19b) followed along with the grain offering (14:20).
- (4) In circumstances where poverty limited an individual's ability to provide the necessary animals for these offerings, a person could substitute two pigeons in place of the required lambs for the sin and burnt offerings, as well as reduce the amount of flour for the grain offering (14:21-32).
- b) Purification for structural mildew (14:33-53)
- (1) Mildew that appeared inside homes and dwellings had the potential to render person and items unclean. This regulation anticipated Israel's inhabitation of the land, when permanent structures
 - (2) After priestly examination, including any necessary periods of quarantine, any contaminated materials (e.g., stones) were torn out and disposed of in an unclean location and replaced with clean stones.
 - (3) If mildew reappeared, it indicated an infestation that rendered the structure unclean. Such buildings were torn down and the rubble removed from the camp and dumped at an unclean location.
 - (4) Anyone who had been in contact with the house was unclean until evening, and had to wash his clothes.
 - (5) But if no mildew reappeared, the house was pronounced clean, and a cleansing ritual was enacted nearly identical to the ritual for cleansing a diseased person. Only in this instance, the house is sprinkled with the bird's blood, and there are no required offerings

3. Summary (14:54-57)

- a) Skin diseases were, by and large, outside the control of an individual.
- b) There was certainly immense sorrow that accompanied such a discovery. Uncleanness because of infection resulted in a life of isolation.
- c) Priests could only examine and pronounce a judgment of clean or unclean. Ritual cleansing came only after the infection had subsided.
- d) The only hope the unclean person had was for divine healing, and throughout the OT recovery from skin diseases was recognized as the result of divine power (Exod 4:6; 2 Kgs 5:8).
- e) Thus in the NT, when Jesus healed lepers, he demonstrated himself as more than a priest. He had divine power to take away infection.
- f) In so doing, the purity laws had their intended effect—they reminded Israel of the fallen nature of the world and drove them to anticipate God's ultimate solution which would free them its tyranny.

D. Purity with regard to bodily discharges (15:1-33)

The final section of the purity laws deals with specific types of bodily discharges which render an individual unclean. The section is structured chiastically (AB-BA), with instances of abnormal discharge for men and women flanking discussion of normal discharges.

1. Abnormal male discharges (15:1-15)

- a) The most frequently suggested diagnosis of the discharge in vv. 1-15 is gonorrhea.
- b) Such discharge rendered the man unclean and highly contagious. Those who came in contact with him or anything he had touched were also unclean and had to bathe and remain unclean until evening.
- c) Likewise, whatever he touched became unclean, to the point that clay jars were broken and wooden items were washed with water.
- d) Once the discharge subsided, the man washed his clothes, bathed, and waited 7 days, and then offered a pair of birds for a sin and burnt offering.

2. Normal male discharges (15:16-18)

- a) Discharges which are associated with normal sexual function also rendered a man unclean until evening.
- b) Likewise, when sexual intercourse occurred, both the man and woman remained unclean until evening.
- c) Most likely, the reason that sexual intercourse rendered a couple unclean was more polemical than theological.

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- d) “In pagan religion sexual activity among worshipers was believed to activate the gods into fertilizing the soil with rain. This activity was often performed within the sacred precincts of the pagan god’s shrine (see. Hos 4:12-14). This practice and the mythological role of sex was shown to be ungodly by this legislation because sexual activity in fact placed one in the category of uncleanness. Thus it would be an abomination to engage in sexual activity in the tabernacle precinct (see 15:31). Thus demythologizing of sex thus has a polemical role; the legislation does not indicate that sex was sinful and without value” (Rooker, 203-4).
3. Normal female discharges (15:19-24)
 - a) Normal female discharge refers to a woman’s regular menstruation.
 - b) Uncleanness during this time lasted for 7 days, during which time her uncleanness was contagious to others. Even touching the bed on which she lay could impart uncleanness to others.
 - c) If a man engaged in sexual intercourse with her during this time, he became unclean for 7 days as well.
 - d) Interestingly, while offerings were required for cleansing a woman following childbirth, no such offerings are required here. This probably is because such discharges are natural and repetitive.
 4. Abnormal female discharges (15:25-30)
 - a) However, any discharge unrelated to a normal menstrual cycle was abnormal and rendered the woman unclean for however long the discharge lasted. During this time, her uncleanness was contagious.
 - b) When the discharge finally left, she waited 7 days and then presented an offering of two birds for sin and burnt offering (cf. 15:13-15).
 - c) In this context, we may understand the significance of the account of the woman in Mark 5:24-34. Her condition had left her unclean (and so, untouchable) for 12 years. Her boldness to touch Jesus in her condition emphasizes her confidence that Jesus was more than human. Her fear for touching him was overcome by a hope of healing.

III. Principles Undergirding the Purity Laws

A. Reminder of the effects of a fallen world

1. Uncleanness comes from the natural processes of life
2. Individuals don’t always have control over their condition. This pushes the believer to trust in the God who is the source of purification.
3. It also forces the individual to be aware of his surroundings. The world is fallen, and uncleanness inevitably results and pushes the individual to the God who has provided a way to be made clean again.

4. It also created a greater anticipation of a day when God would remove uncleanness permanently.

B. Expression of identification

1. Purity laws were a means of identifying with the God who gave the laws (11:45)
2. These laws were intended to reflect the holiness of Yahweh and set his people apart from the nations around them.
3. The faithful Israelite had covenanted with Yahweh to reflect his glory by obeying his ordinances.
4. By observing the purity laws, he was saying, "I belong to Yahweh. He is my God, and I am part of his people. And so I will do what he asks and follow his instructions, whether or not I fully understand his reasons."

C. Expression of consecration

1. Purity laws set Israelites apart to God and from sin and that which hinders service
2. Sometimes things which are not intrinsically sinful must be given up in order not to hinder service for God. While sexual intercourse between a husband and a wife is a thing to be celebrated (cf. Song of Sol.), it was not as important as the worship of Yahweh. Therefore, a couple had to prioritize their time and activities to ensure they were prepared for corporate worship.
3. It also forced people to place the overall good of the nation above their own personal interests. An individual with an infectious disease separated himself from the congregation to prevent the spread of disease and the resultant uncleanness that would cut others off from fellowship with God.

D. Expression of dedication

1. Keeping the minutiae of the law required personal dedication
2. They had to recognize God as the law-giver who has the right to place such demands upon his people
3. This involved trust in the overall goodness and sovereignty of God. Sometimes a law may *seem* arbitrary, but the faithful Israelite had to trust the wisdom of God. He had to remain dedicated despite feeling confused or in the dark.

IV. Purity and the Christian

A. The details of these laws are no longer binding as legislation

1. The purity laws are part of a legislative code which governed the corporate and individual lives of Israelites under the old covenant.
2. When the Mosaic Covenant was abrogated at the death of Christ, the laws dealing with ritual purification were taken away and are no longer operative.

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3. Numerous statements in the NT clarify that the stipulations governing things like food have been removed (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:15; Rom 14:14). That which once defiled under the old covenant have been made clean under the New Covenant.
 4. Similarly, the sexual act, though never intrinsically sinful, nevertheless caused uncleanness under the old covenant. But under the New Covenant, the author to the Hebrews can write, “Marriage must be honored among all and the marriage bed kept *undefiled*” (Heb 13:4). Apparently now, only the “sexually immoral people and adulterers” incur moral contamination from sex.
 5. Just as the blood of the sin offering purified the individual, taking away uncleanness, Christ has done the same thing permanently by shedding his own blood. His blood has made us clean and able to approach God (Heb 10:22; cf. John 13:10; Tit 2:14).
 6. Similarly, the abrogation of the law has also removed the demarcation between Jew and Gentile. Those laws which were intended to separate Israel from the world as a distinct people have been removed (Eph 2:11-22)
- B. The principle of separation from uncleanness is still effective (Rom 6:19; 2 Cor 6:17; 12:21; Eph 4:19; 5:3; 1 Thess 4:7)
1. Even in the OT, cleanness became metaphorical for righteousness. After his sin with Bathsheba, David asked God to “wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” (Ps 51:2). Later he writes, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (51:10a).
 2. The purity laws taught, among other things, that we can very easily become disqualified from approaching God in worship. The purity laws served as a daily reminder of the polluting effects of sin.
 3. Jesus’ words in Mark 7:18-19, “Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” explains that part of the intent of the food laws was to reveal the impurity of the heart. It was a daily object lesson for a greater spiritual principle.
 4. Even though our hearts have been cleansed (Heb 9:14; 10:22), we are still called as God’s people to be separate from that which can defile us.
 - a) Romans 6:19 – “For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”
 - b) 2 Corinthians 6:16-17 – “For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’ [Lev 26:11-12]. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them [Isa 52:11], says, the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you [Exek 20:41].”
 - c) 1 Thessalonians 4:7 – “For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.”
 5. “The church does the most for the world when the church is least like the world” (Rooker, 181).