

Purity and Pollution in the Hebrew Bible

In this book, Yitzhaq Feder presents a novel and compelling account of pollution in ancient Israel, from its emergence as an embodied concept, rooted in physiological experience, to its expression as a pervasive metaphor in social-moral discourse. Feder aims to bring the biblical and ancient Near Eastern evidence into a sustained conversation with anthropological and psychological research through comparison with notions of contagion in other ancient and modern cultural contexts. Showing how numerous interpretive difficulties are the result of imposing modern concepts on the ancient texts, he guides readers through wide-ranging parallels to biblical attitudes in ancient Near Eastern, ethnographic and modern cultures. Feder demonstrates how contemporary evolutionary and psychological research can be applied to ancient textual evidence. He also suggests a path of synthesis that can move beyond the polarized positions that currently characterize modern academic and popular debates bearing on the roles of biology and culture in shaping human behavior.

Yitzhaq Feder is a lecturer at the University of Haifa. His research integrates textual study with advances in psychological and anthropological research. He has received numerous prizes, including the 2012 SBL David Noel Freedman Award for Excellence and Innovation in Biblical Studies. His most recent research focuses on biblical and ancient Near Eastern notions of taboo and their implications for understanding the emergence and historical development of morality.

Purity and Pollution in the Hebrew Bible

From Embodied Experience to Moral Metaphor

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Preface

When I began to write this preface in January 2020, the coronavirus pandemic had just begun to capture the world’s news headlines, which reported China’s frantic efforts to control its spread by restricting the mobility of approximately 50 million citizens in the most affected cities. Within weeks, the virus was no longer “over there.” Suddenly, the populations of the world (myself included) were engulfed by the virus, under strict quarantine restrictions, put in place in a desperate effort to slow the pace of infection.

Approximately 4,000 years ago, similar quarantine attempts were instituted by the leaders of Mari in northern Syria, as reported from letters from times of epidemics. Consider the following letter from the eighteenth century BCE:

The god is striking in the upper district, so I without delay took a bypass. Furthermore, my lord should give orders that the residents of the cities that have been touched [*laptūtu*] not enter cities that are not touched, lest they touch [*ulappatū*] the whole land.¹

With minor changes, these words could have been written today. Even the apparently strange idiom “touched” (Akkadian *lapātu*) for infected cities is in fact an exact semantic parallel of the word “contagion,” from Latin *com-tangere* (“touched with”).² Aside from the historical significance of this being the earliest written evidence pertaining to infectious disease, there is a more fundamental point, which is, in fact, the *leitmotif* of this

¹ ARM 26/1 17 (my translation). See further the discussion below, p. 84.

² See Chapter 3.

book: our ability to understand these ancient texts (and any linguistic expression, for that matter) is defined by our ability to relate its content to our own personal experience. As a case in point, we can better understand the ancients' fear of impurity if we understand that it corresponds, in part, to today's fear of disease.

The fact that these preventative measures, including quarantine, were often expressed in the idiom of *purity* should alert us to the fact that the fear of pollution (i.e., defilement) was imminently real. Yet, scholars continue to write about “ritual” purity as if the cultures of the ancient world shared modern Western attitudes regarding the strict separation of science and religion. The point of this book is to argue that the idea of pollution in ancient Israel and as represented in the Hebrew Bible, like other ostensibly religious concepts, was firmly grounded in everyday experience.

The “contagion” described in this book is not limited to disease. It encompasses the transfer of *uncleanness* and, indeed, any invisible essence that has been transferred. It can also include the transfer of holiness and even the transfer of femininity. Even more interestingly, a key theme to be examined here is how the physiological sources of contagion are translated into an idiom of moral pollution in the Bible and beyond.

At the heart of this book is the challenge of describing a phenomenon that was perpetually just outside the threshold of language. Humans have always encountered contagion in its various forms and have struggled to understand it. Today we have an elaborate toolbox of concepts to describe both the physical processes underlying actual contagion (e.g., epidemiology in the case of infectious disease) as well as the psychological responses, particularly in the multidisciplinary study of human emotions. Yet, these concepts cannot be forcibly retrofitted onto the experience of previous generations, which need to be first understood in their own terms and historical contexts. Accordingly, the central task of this book is to mediate the experience of contagion in ancient Israel to the modern reader. This task requires that we acknowledge the fluidity of terms in ancient texts, but also that we recognize that our analytic discourse is also based on words. These terms are sometimes slippery and sometimes sticky; in any case, they cannot be viewed as products of *pure* reason.

The present study is devoted to understanding what the development of notions of pollution (which I will henceforth use interchangeably with “impurity”) in ancient Israel, the ancient Near East and other cultures can teach us about the evolution of human thought as a historical process. As with the study of any aspect of human behavior and psychology, a

comprehensive examination of pollution requires consideration of at least three key elements: (1) innate cognitive and emotional capacities and predispositions; (2) embodied experience; and (3) culture. Since experience is predicated on certain psychological capacities, the first two of these elements will be combined under the single term “experience,” which will serve as the key to understanding the universal aspects of pollution. In making sense of pollution, it will be helpful to view its experiential, embodied basis as the raw materials which are given a defined form by the linguistic constructions of a specific culture.

Different aspects of this dynamic relationship between experience and language will be highlighted in the chapters that follow. Part I of this study (“Setting the Stage”) will examine the embodied origins of purity and pollution. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of “contagion” from a psychological perspective and lays out some of the theoretical foundations for an embodied account of pollution in the Hebrew Bible. It will set forth a three-tier model for the analysis of pollution in ancient Israel, to be elaborated upon in the chapters that follow, based on a distinction between embodied images, normative codes and cultural discourse. The chapter provides a brief application of embodied cognition to the terminology of purity. Here the semantics of purity demonstrate how the structure of experience supplies the implicit rationale for otherwise unintelligible semantic relationships. The excursus that concludes this chapter presents a more detailed overview of the approach called “embodied cognition” as it is applied in this book.

Chapter 2 constitutes the DNA for the rest of the book, introducing its general approach to pollution and the various problems that will be examined in subsequent chapters. Contrary to accounts which have attempted to explain defilement as a system of abstract symbols, this chapter will argue that two basic types of pollution can be identified, a moderate form arousing disgust and conceptualized as uncleanness, and a more severe form arousing fear and associated with infectious disease, alongside a further extension of impurity into the domain of morality in the form of a “stain of transgression.”

Part II (“Embodying Pollution through the Life Cycle”) constitutes the core of the book. It examines the role of pollution as it bears on the life cycle, including disease, diet, death, birth and sexuality. Considerable attention is given to the role of pollution as a folk theory of infectious disease. Chapter 3 focuses on the biblical skin disease called *šara’at* and its conventional translation “leprosy” as a test case for probing the complex relationship between the experience of disease and language. Situated

within a cross-cultural history of medicine, this chapter highlights the fallacy of the commonplace scholarly distinction between “ritual” impurity and disease; indeed, they can be one and the same.

Chapter 4 examines in further detail the possibility, raised in previous chapters, that the depiction of disease in the Priestly source of the Torah has deliberately obscured the dangers associated with infectious disease. This suspicion is confirmed by means of comparisons with Mesopotamian ritual texts which serve to highlight the idiosyncrasies of the Priestly treatment of disease. These include an absence of healing rites, an apparent lack of concern for the infectiousness of disease as a threat to individuals and an attempt to obscure the once commonplace connection between sickness and sin (Chapter 5). This latter characteristic, which might suggest that disease is a physiological occurrence free of moral implications, is examined in Chapter 6, where these developments are compared to the stance of ancient Greek and medieval Islamic texts that deemphasize the threat of infection as a part of their polemics against popular beliefs and practices. This discussion provides an additional perspective on how cultural discourse can reconstrue the role of pollution as a causal theory of the infectiousness of disease.

Chapters 7 and 8 further develop the idea that pollution is directly related to folk biology, relating it to the biblical concept of the soul (*nepeš*) in the domains of diet and death. These chapters explore how Priestly rules of pollution relate to the partially dualistic concept of self reflected in these sources, specifically how the *nepeš* can be both defiled and defiling. Through the consumption of impure animal flesh and blood – essentially merging the person’s *nepeš* with that of the animal – the person’s spirit is defiled. In the context of death, contact with the spirit of the deceased constitutes a source of pollution, specifically in the transitional phase when the spirit separates from the body.

Chapters 9 through 11 engage the topic of sexual pollution, which provides the opportunity to examine the socio-moral implications of pollution. Chapter 9 evaluates the wide spectrum of sexual pollutions in the Hebrew Bible, distinguishing between physiological (genital emissions) and moral pollution; the latter category being associated with prohibited sexual behaviors such as adultery and incest. Of particular interest is the fact that the biblical evidence for “moral pollution” is disproportionately associated with the sexual domain. These observations will be examined in light of developments in moral psychology examining how the evolved physiological functions of emotions could give rise to their communicative role in the social and moral domains. Chapter 10

deals with the contagiousness of femininity, including the possible association of pollution with sexual antagonism. Chapter 11 tackles an ambiguity regarding the procedure for women's purification, probing the implications of the seeming absence of an obligation for female impurity-bearers to wash.

The final part of this book ("Images, Codes and Discourse") examines the broader ramifications of the previous chapters. Chapter 12 examines how the embodied approach can be applied to the notion of holiness. Due to its close association with divinity, this concept would appear to be completely detached from mundane experience and hence pose a challenge to an embodied approach. Yet, even the depictions of the sacred prove to be deeply rooted in embodied imagery. Moreover, this chapter explores how sacred objects may themselves exhibit the characteristics of contagion. Chapter 13 brings the conclusions of the present study to bear on some pressing issues in today's study of religions. In particular, it will deal with whether the role of embodied cognition in shaping ancient Israelite notions of pollution vindicates naturalistic accounts of religion.

Finally, a word to readers who are not native to the territory of biblical studies: shalom! Though the focus of this book is on the notion of pollution in ancient Israel, its aims are more expansive. A central goal has been to bring biblical materials into a dialogue with the numerous disciplines that have helped me to make sense of these ancient documents, most prominently anthropology and psychology, including the interdisciplinary field called the cognitive science of religions. This aim builds on the realization that the evidence of ancient civilizations (the ancient Near East, in this case) constitutes a largely unexploited resource for social scientific (not to mention life-science) investigation. There are numerous factors that have, in the past, stifled this conversation, which need not detain us here.³ For now, let it be stressed that I have sought to relegate the more technical philological and source-critical issues to the footnotes, leaving more detailed discussion to the original articles from which these chapters have developed. Hopefully, by foregrounding the issues of interdisciplinary interest, this book will serve as a platform for further debates, where the positions will not be predetermined by disciplinary boundaries.

So, with no further ado . . .

³ See Chapter 13.

Acknowledgments

As this book goes to press, my disbelief gives way to gratitude, in acknowledgment of all who have helped me bring this project to fruition.

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A sweet debt of gratitude belongs to my partner in life, Esty, who keeps me out of trouble and shares with me the challenges and wonders of embodiment. In raising our children together, she has helped me to appreciate that the foundations of knowledge and faith are one: to see behind what is immediately perceived.

Finally, by way of introducing the various unseemly topics that follow, it is an honor and privilege to dedicate this book to the outcasts:

“The slab despised by the builders has become the corner stone.”

Psalm 118:22

Several of the chapters that follow are revised and updated versions of published articles. I thank the publishers for permission to reuse these materials:

- Chapter 2: “Contagion and Cognition: Bodily Experience and the Conceptualization of Pollution (*tum'ah*) in the Hebrew Bible,” *JNES* 72 (2013): 151–168.
- Chapter 4: “Behind the Scenes of a Priestly Polemic: Leviticus 14 and its Extra-Biblical Parallels.” *JHS* 15.4 (2015): 1–26 (<https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2015.v15.a4>).
- Chapter 8: “Death, Afterlife and Corpse Pollution: The Meaning of the Expression *tāmē' la-nepeš*,” *VT* 69 (2019): 408–434.
- Chapter 9: “Defilement and Moral Discourse in the Hebrew Bible: An Evolutionary Framework” *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 3 (2016): 157–89.

Notes on Transcriptions and Translations

In transcriptions of Hebrew and Akkadian, the sign š designates the sound /sh/ as in “sheep.”

All translations of Hebrew, Akkadian and Hittite are my own, unless otherwise specified.

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>AfO</i>	<i>Archiv für Orientforschung</i>
<i>AHw</i>	Wolfram von Soden, <i>Akkadisches Handwörterbuch</i> , vols. 1–3, Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1965–1981
Akk	Akkadian
ALASP	Abhandlungen zur Literatur Alt-Syren-Palästinas und Mesopotamiens
Am	Amos
ANE	Ancient Near East
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
<i>AoF</i>	<i>Altorientalische Forschungen</i>
ANET ³	J. B. Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969
ARM	Archives royales de Mari
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BBSt	L. W. King, <i>Babylonian Boundary-Stones and Memorial Tablets in the British Museum</i> (London: Longmans & Co., 1912)
BF	Baghdader Forschungen
BiOr	Bibliotheca Orientalis
CAD	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i>

- CAT M. Dietrich et al., *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places*. Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2013
- CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
- CHD *The Hittite Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*
- Chr Chronicles
- CM Cuneiform Monographs
- CoS W. W. Hallo (ed.), *The Context of Scripture*, vols. 1–5. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2003
- CTH Catalogue des textes hittites
- Dan Daniel
- DDD K. van der Toorn, B. Becking and P. W. van der Horst (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 1999
- Deut Deuteronomy
- DULAT Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*. Leiden: Brill, 2003
- EA El-Amarna
- Esth Esther
- ESV English Standard Version
- Ex Exodus
- Ezek Ezekiel
- FAOS Freiburger Altorientalische Studien
- FAT Forschungen zum Alten Testament
- GBH P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2006
- Gen Genesis
- GKC *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, edited by W. Gesenius and E. Kautsch, translated by A. Cowley. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983
- H Holiness Legislation
- Hag Haggai
- HALOT W. Baumgartner et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Leiden: Brill, 1994
- HAT Handbuch zum Alten Testament
- HB Hebrew Bible
- Heb Hebrew
- HeBAI *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel*

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Hos	Hosea
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
Isa	Isaiah
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JAJ	<i>Journal of Ancient Judaism</i>
JANER	<i>Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religion</i>
JANES	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
Jer	Jeremiah
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
Josh	Joshua
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
Judg	Judges
KAI	<i>Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften</i> . Edited by Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig, 5th ed. Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1966–2002
KBo	<i>Keilschrifttexte aus Boghazköy</i>
Kgs	Kings
KHC	Kurzer Handkommentar zum Alten Testament
KJV	King James Version
KUB	<i>Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköy</i>
Lam	Lamentations
Lev	Leviticus
LKA	E. Ebeling, <i>Literarische Keilschrifttexte aus Assur</i> . Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1886–1955
LXX	Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible)
m	Mishna
Mic	Micah

MT	Masoretic Text
Msk	Tablet siglum of texts from Meskene (Emar)
NA	Neo-Assyrian
NABU	<i>Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires</i>
NB	Neo-Babylonian
NEB	New English Bible
Neh	Nehemia
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Translation
Num	Numbers
OB	Old Babylonian
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OrNS	<i>Orientalia New Series</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
P	Priestly source
PEQ	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
Prov	Proverbs
Ps	Psalms
RA	<i>Revue d'Assyriologie et Archéologie orientale</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RINAP	Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period
RIA	<i>Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie</i>
RS	Ras Shamra
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SAACT	State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts
Sam	Samuel
SANE	Sources of the Ancient Near East
SB	Standard Babylonian
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
SpTU	<i>Spätbabylonische Texte aus Uruk</i>
StBoT	<i>Studien zu den Boğazköy-Texten</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> , edited by G. J. Botterweck et al., translated by J. T. Wills and D. E. Green. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977–2006
THeth	<i>Texte der Hethiter</i>
TLOT	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , edited by E. Jenni and C. Westermann, translated by M. E. Biddle. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997

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<i>Tob</i>	<i>Tohorot</i>
TUAT	<i>Texte zur Umwelt des Alten Testaments</i> , edited by O. Kaiser. Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn: Gütersloh 1982–1997, Supplement 2001
UF	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
VAT	Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WAW	Writings from the Ancient World
WO	<i>Die Welt des Orients</i>
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</i>
ZAH	<i>Zeitschrift für Althebraistik</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
Zeb	<i>Zebahim</i>