

Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible: A New Perspective

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1 Introduction

The subject of purity and pollution in biblical Israel has been widely studied, particularly in recent decades, and numerous schemata have been proposed for understanding the biblical purity “system.” Surprisingly little, however, has been written on the relationship between sex and pollution in the Hebrew Bible. More specifically, there has yet to be a sustained examination of what I here refer to as “sexual pollution,” a type of pollution attributed to individuals (particularly women) who have had specific kinds of sexual relationships.

My argument will consist of three major points: First, that while sexual pollution shares a basic conceptual framework with other pollution ideas in the Hebrew Bible, it is best understood as a concept unto itself with its own distinct characteristics, and that scholars who have subsumed it into a broader category of “moral,” “spiritual,” “metaphorical,” or “prohibited” pollution have generally failed to fully appreciate its character. Second, I argue that throughout most of the Hebrew Bible, pollution is understood as a condition affecting females alone, resulting from any sexual union that departs from the ideal that every Israelite woman remain faithful to one male throughout her life in the context of a sanctioned marriage. Sexual pollution is not to be understood as a legal category, but rather as a metaphysical condition. While there is certainly a relationship between sexual pollution and biblical law, a sexual relationship can be legal yet polluting, and vice versa. Finally, I argue that given these observations on the character of sexual pollution, Leviticus 18 (which belongs to the H source) represents a significant departure from the usual understanding of sexual pollution found throughout the Hebrew Bible. I will discuss the implications of this final point at the end of my paper.

Before moving on, a few words in the way of methodology. In this paper, I will be focusing exclusively on texts that use the roots **טמא** and **טהר**, which

I translate “polluted” and “pure,” respectively. This is not to deny that there are numerous relevant texts that do not use this terminology. I have limited myself in this way in part simply to narrow the scope of the paper. However, I also believe that there is a methodological advantage to at least beginning a study of this sort with texts that share a common terminology. As Jonathan Z. Smith wrote, “[A]nthropological thought begins with thinking about language itself, for it is in the linguistic project that we see most clearly the creation of a distinctively human world, our ‘second environment.’ In crude terms, language ‘creates’ the world; it does not merely ‘reflect’ it.”¹ The fundamental importance of language is perhaps most apparent in the study of a society such as ancient Israel, to which we have access primarily through texts. Like any common terms, טמא and טהר can have different connotations in different contexts, but they have a limited semantic range, one that I hope to shed some light on today.

2 Sexual Pollution as an Independent Category

The terms טמא and טהר are used in a variety of different ways in the Hebrew Bible. It is only in the past few decades that the subtle differences between these uses have begun to get the scholarly attention they deserve.

The one type of pollution that is fairly well understood at this point is what is commonly called “ritual” pollution or impurity, a contagious miasma arising from particular persons, objects, and substances (namely, dead human bodies, the carcasses of certain animals, genital discharges including semen and menstrual blood, and individuals with צרעת, a skin ailment usually translated “leprosy”). There are also other pollution ideas in the Hebrew Bible, which can be termed “non-ritual,” since they cannot be removed by means of purificatory rituals. These include, for example, the idea that the blood of slain innocents pollutes the earth, and the idea that idols or other forbidden cultic objects pollute the temple. Also outside the category of ritual pollution is the use of the terms טמא and טהור describe animals that are unfit or fit for consumption, respectively.

Scholars have described the relationship between the various uses of purity language in a variety of ways. I will only mention two major approaches now, but I trust that my comments will be found equally applicable to all attempts to subsume the types of pollution in the Hebrew Bible into two or three broad categories.

¹“When the Chips are Down,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, pp. 1--60, at 4.

One common way of classifying the various uses of pollution language (at least before the publication of Jonathan Klawans' influential book, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism*²), was to refer to "literal" and "metaphorical" pollution or impurity. Notwithstanding Klawans' argument that biblical scholars tend to use the term "metaphorical" somewhat simplistically, I don't think this is an incorrect way of looking at many of these usages. However, classifying a particular usage as metaphorical doesn't actually explain very much. What does it mean to say that the land is "metaphorically" polluted by the blood of slain innocents, or that a man has "metaphorically" polluted his neighbor's wife? The two metaphors belong to different metaphorical constructs, and each is worth exploring in its own right.

Klawans, as I've already mentioned, eschews the "literal"/"metaphorical" dichotomy, referring instead to "two analogous perceptions of contagion," which he designates "ritual" and "moral" impurity," respectively. This is how Klawans distinguishes "moral impurity" from "ritual impurity":³

1. While ritual impurity is generally not sinful, moral impurity is a direct consequence of grave sin.
2. A characteristic feature of moral impurity is its deleterious effect on the land of Israel. Ritual impurity, in contrast, may threaten the sanctity of the Temple, but poses no threat to the land.
3. While ritual impurity often results in a contagious defilement, there is no personal contact-contagion associated with moral impurity. (Klawans states, however, that "moral impurity does defile the sinners themselves.")
4. Ritual impurity is impermanent, while moral impurity is permanent, or at least long-lasting.
5. Ritual impurity can be dispelled by means of purification rituals, while moral impurity cannot.
6. Ritual impurity results in exclusion from the sanctuary; moral impurity does not.

²Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

³The specific formulation here comes from Klawans' essay, "Concepts of Purity in the Bible," published in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 2041--47, at 2045.

7. There are terminological distinctions between the two categories: Although the term **טמא** is used for both, moral impurity is also described using the terms **תועבה** and **חנף**.

Klawans' description of ritual impurity is beyond reasonable dispute, and this list is useful insofar as it distinguishes ritual pollution from other uses of pollution terminology. However, when the so-called moral impurities are examined individually, it becomes clear that they do not properly constitute a single category along the lines proposed by Klawans. The blood of slain innocents, for example, is sometimes said to pollute a land or city, but never a person, object, or the sanctuary. Prohibited meats pollute the **נפש** (either "throat" or "life-force") but do not pollute the sanctuary or the land. Wanton, unrepented sins have a contaminating effect on the sanctuary similar to pollution (at least according to the Priestly tradition), but they do not contaminate persons, objects, or the sanctuary by direct contact, and are never said to pollute the land. Sexual pollution is primarily attributed to persons and sometimes to the land, but is not said to pollute the sanctuary, and, as I will argue, is not necessarily a result of sin in the sense of transgression against divine law. Moreover, when there is a sin involved, pollution does not necessarily affect each "sinner" involved in the act; often, it is attributed to the female partner alone, even if she is assumed to be passive, or if the context is one of castigating the male. (The best example of the latter is Ezekiel's denunciation of a man who "pollutes his neighbor's wife.")

3 The Nature of Sexual Pollution

Given that sexual pollution is distinct from other pollution ideas in the Hebrew Bible, how can it best be characterized? On your handout, you will find a list of the major biblical sources on sexual pollution, which should enable us to answer this question.

3.1 Biblical Sources

3.1.1 Numbers 5:12--31

Numbers 5:12–31 deals with the case of a suspected adulteress against whom there are no witnesses. Her husband brings her to the sanctuary, where a priest administers a potion designed to determine whether she has, in fact, committed adultery. The root **טמא** is used here repeatedly to describe the woman's state in the event

that she *has* committed adultery, while טָהַר is used to describe her state if she *has not* committed adultery. A number of points are worth noting here: First, the text is clearly *not* using this terminology to describe ritual pollution. The woman could have become ritually polluted even by having sex with her husband, and such pollution would have barred her from entering the sanctuary until she became pure again. In contrast, this type of pollution, although it seems to be more serious than ritual pollution, does not bar her from the sanctuary. Second, the verb נִטְמָאָה she has been polluted,” is *niph'al*, which is a passive stem. The understanding is that someone has polluted her.

3.1.2 Ezekiel 18:6, 10, 15; 33:26; 22:11

The next three sources on the handout come from Ezekiel. The first source is part of a famous homily on the subject of individual responsibility. A wicked man is described as one who has “polluted his neighbor’s wife” among other things; a righteous man is one who has not “polluted his neighbor’s wife.” 33:26 is similar: here the prophet castigates the inhabitants of Jerusalem for their sinful behavior, stating, among other things, that “each man has polluted his neighbor’s wife.” The verb used in each of these cases is the *pi'el* נִטְמָא, used in its factitive sense. As in Numbers 5, the polluting act is adultery, and while the focus here is on the male rather than the female partner, the “mechanics” of sexual pollution are understood the same way: the male is the polluter and the female is the “pollutee.” Ezekiel 22:11 differs from the previous two sources only in that the polluting act is not adultery but incest. The verse mentions two relationships that are considered incestuous in the H tradition, but which were probably not universally perceived as incestuous in ancient Israel: namely, sex between half-siblings, and sex between a man and his daughter-in-law (assuming, presumably, that the latter’s husband is deceased, so that the relationship is not also considered adulterous). I think it’s significant that the verb נִטְמָא is used here only with the daughter-in-law, who has been previously married. The reason for this should become clear shortly.

3.1.3 Deuteronomy 24:1-4

The next source on the handout, Deuteronomy 24, describes a case in which a woman is divorced and then remarries. Verse 4 states that “her first husband, who divorced her, may not take her back again as his wife after she has been polluted (אֲחֵרֵי אִשְׁרָהּ הִטְמָאָה), for it is an abomination before the Lord.” הִטְמָאָה is a mixed form, combining features of the *niph'al* and *hoph'al*; the important gram-

matical point for our purposes is that it is passive. An interesting feature of this case is that the woman seems to have become polluted through her remarriage to the second man, which is perfectly licit, and not by returning to her first husband, which, according to this text, is illicit. The text prohibits introducing the pollution from the second marriage into the first marriage, but the pollution is there as soon she marries the second man, whether or not she violates the law. This text seems to me to be an indication that a woman becomes polluted any time she has sex with more than one man, regardless of the legality of the act.

This text also invokes the idea that the sexual behavior of people has a corresponding effect on the land, which is personified as female; thus: “do not cause the land . . . to sin.”

3.1.4 Genesis 34

The next source on the handout comes from Genesis 34, the story commonly known as the “rape of Dinah.” Whether Dinah is actually raped according to this narrative, or whether she was a willing partner, as some have suggested, probably does not matter for our purposes.) What matters is that Dinah has had a non-marital sexual relationship with the Canaanite nobleman Shechem, after which her brothers, Simeon and Levi, kill Shechem and massacre the city in retribution for Shechem’s having “polluted” their sister. Again, the verb describing the male’s act is the *pi’el* טָמֵא. The polluting offense, as Simeon and Levi describe it, is “treating their sister as a whore (זוֹנֶה),” meaning (presumably) that she has had sex outside marriage, which is degrading to her and to her family.

3.2 Observations

Taken together, these texts suggest that (as I mentioned at the start of my paper) sexual pollution is a condition that affects a female who engages in any sort of relationship that departs from the ideal of lifelong marital fidelity to one male. Some departures from this ideal are legal and some are illegal, but all are polluting. The idea behind this, I believe, is that semen, which is regarded as a potential pollutant, becomes *sexually* polluting when it ends up outside what Israelite society understood to be its “proper place.”

4 The Innovations of Leviticus 18

Finally, we come to Leviticus 18. This chapter consists of an introduction, a list of sexual prohibitions, and a concluding section, probably added by a later hand, which lays out the consequences of violating these prohibitions.

The list itself uses the root **טמא** a number of times. The first instance, in verse 19, refers to the state of ritual pollution that accompanies a woman's menstrual period, during which sex is prohibited. The other two instances describe sexual pollution proper. Verse 20 states: "Do not put your carnal seed (**לֹא תתן שכבתך**) (**לְזָרַע**) into your neighbor's wife with the result that you become polluted by her." We've seen adultery described as polluting a number of times already, but this is the first time that it's been described as polluting the male partner. Verse 23 uses essentially the same construction, but the reference is to bestiality (sex between a human male and a female animal). Again, it is the male who is polluted by the female, not the other way around.

The conclusion to the chapter (verses 23–27) expands the idea of sexual pollution further, stating that all the sexual prohibitions mentioned in the list pollute those who engage in them (presumably meaning males, since, like most of H, this chapter is phrased in the second person masculine plural): "Do not allow yourselves to be polluted by any of these" — meaning, the prohibited sexual acts — "for by all of these the nation that I am sending out before you became polluted." It adds: "The land became polluted, and I visited her sin upon her" — that is, the land's sin — "and the land vomited out its inhabitants." The text continues in this vein.

5 Conclusions

To sum up: I hope I've been persuasive in arguing that sexual pollution in the Hebrew Bible is a worthy subject of study in its own right; that sexual pollution is understood in a relatively consistent manner throughout the Hebrew Bible; and that Leviticus 18 departs from this understanding in significant ways, first (in the "list" portion of the chapter) by attributing sexual pollution to males rather than to females, and second (in the conclusion) by describing it as a consequence of any prohibited sexual act, rather than merely those that involve departures from a particular ideal of female fidelity. In my view, these transformations of the idea of sexual pollution are very much in keeping with the theology of the H source. As numerous scholars have recognized, H is characterized by an understanding of

holiness as something that ordinary Israelites (that is, ordinary Israelite males) can and must achieve on their own. Failure to be holy, according to H, is a transgression of divine law with dire consequences. Leviticus 18 makes this very point, but its focus is on a type of purity rather than holiness — a purity which, in the authors' view, is the responsibility of each and every Israelite male to maintain for himself.