



'You Shall Be Clean'

New Studies in **NSBT** Biblical Theology

A biblical theology
of defilement
and cleansing

G. GEOFFREY HARPER

Series editors: D. A. Carson and Benjamin J. Gladd

NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 65

‘YOU SHALL BE CLEAN’

‘When the psalmist declares that only those who have “clean hands and a pure heart” can ascend into God’s presence (Psalm 24:4), he highlights the significance of the concepts of defilement and cleansing. Addressing this much-neglected topic, Dr Harper skilfully engages with its ubiquitous presence throughout the Bible. By offering new perspectives on the biblical text, this careful study enriches our understanding of the Bible. Importantly, it sheds fresh light on the scope and impact of Christ’s atoning ministry, reminding readers of the necessity of engaging with the whole canon of Scripture.’

T. Desmond Alexander, Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies and Director of Postgraduate Studies, Union Theological College, Belfast

‘The biblical laws and language about purity and impurity are so utterly foreign to us and we struggle to know what to do with them. But Geoff Harper’s study of the relevant materials provides insight and clarity on the subject and helps us to understand what it means to have hearts cleansed by faith and to be white as snow before God. A book that will open up vistas of study for understanding a confusing topic.’

Michael F. Bird, Deputy Principal, Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia

‘With clarity, insight and humility, Geoff Harper demonstrates that the theme of defilement and cleansing is woven into the whole of Scripture. Far from being an obscure part of the Old Testament, it has vital connections to Christian theology, discipleship and witness. This is a study that deserves to be widely read for both the challenges and encouragement it provides.’

David G. Firth, Tutor in Old Testament, Trinity College Bristol

‘Geoffrey Harper has written a robust and readable study on Israel’s purity system, filling the scholarly gap on a vital and yet heretofore neglected topic. Without equal in its breadth, *You Shall Be Clean* will surely become a frequently consulted standard on purity. More than this, Harper’s fine treatment will open up significant, canon-wide avenues of meaning in Scripture, as well as a greater view of the wondrous incarnation of God’s Son and the marvel of his cleansing work.’

L. Michael Morales, Professor of Biblical Studies, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

‘Geoffrey Harper skilfully draws the reader into an often neglected, yet vital aspect of the Bible’s redemptive narrative. In insightful exposition, he demonstrates how the dynamic categories of defilement and cleansing shape the biblical world and frame the theological vision of its eschatological hope. As a result, the person and work of Christ emerge in clearer relief, as does the Lord’s unwavering commitment to make his people fit for his holy presence. This significant contribution to biblical theology will inspire faithful preaching and discipleship in the church and open productive pathways to present the gospel to a world longing to be made clean.’

Christine Palmer, Faculty in Old Testament, Gordon-Conwell
Theological Seminary

‘Issues of defilement, cleansing and purity were central to the daily lives of the ancient Israelites. Yet today, these themes are often overlooked and misunderstood by readers of the Bible. In this insightful and timely study, Geoff Harper builds on his important work on Leviticus to skilfully trace the themes of defilement and cleansing across both the Old and New Testaments. The result is a deeper understanding of these themes across the Bible, a richer appreciation for the person and work of Jesus, and fresh insights for Christian life and mission.’

Anthony R. Petterson, Morling College, Australian University of
Theology

‘As one of the leading scholars on Leviticus today, Geoff Harper is well positioned to write a biblical theology of purity and impurity. With tremendous clarity, he shows us what the concepts of purity and impurity mean and how they play out, not just in the Old Testament, but in the entire biblical story. In doing so, he helps us to understand that story better – and does so in a way that is academically strong, theologically rich and pastorally warm. Even in places where I came to different conclusions, Harper still challenged me to see just how pervasive the themes of purity and impurity are – and how important it is to understand them if we are to understand the text. Harper’s book will help you to gain that understanding.’

Jay Sklar, Professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

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In memory of Richard Hibbert (1963–2020)
Encourager, friend and collaborator

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Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: (1) the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); (2) the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and (3) the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

As of late, scholars have increasingly become interested in ritual purity, and the time is ripe for a biblical-theological presentation. Dr Harper wisely guides the reader through the maze of biblical passages that speak to this issue. The result is a greater appreciation of Christ, his work and our identity.

D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Benjamin L. Gladd
The Carson Center for Theological Renewal

Author's preface

While writing this book many people asked what I was researching. Replying 'Impurity' sent the conversation in one of two directions. For some, glazed eyes signalled the need to shift to a more germane topic. Yet, for those who deigned to hear me ramble about Egypt and defilement, or about Jesus and a haemorrhaging woman, something interesting happened: a dawning sense of wonder and curiosity. Those interactions became needed encouragements to persist, especially when daydreams increasingly fixated on setting the project aside. I hope that those conversations might prefigure the experience of readers who decide to give this book a try: initial scepticism, perhaps, giving way to a sense of discovery as one of the Bible's core themes becomes a little clearer. I am grateful to Don Carson and Philip Duce for initially accepting my proposal and for their early input. Benjamin Gladd and Tom Creedy have admirably continued that trend, and the book has benefited much from the editorial skills of Rima Devereaux and Amanda Kay.

As the years go by, I become increasingly thankful to have colleagues and friends who are willing to engage in robust conversation. Several – Kit Barker, Janson Condren, Katy Davis, Karl Deenick, Ed Grudier, Jay Sklar, Mark Stephens and Alan Thompson – sacrificed time and energy to discuss ideas and read early drafts. Their probing has prevented many an error. I am also grateful to the board of Sydney Missionary & Bible College (an affiliated college of the Australian University of Theology) for study leave granted in the first half of 2024, which allowed me to finish the project.

This book cannot be and is not intended to be a definitive statement on defilement and cleansing, neatly summing up all that can and has been said. Instead, I offer it in the spirit of the great Medieval exegete Maimonides as a guide for the perplexed. Like all guidebooks, it points out the main features and attractions – things a traveller ought not to miss. Beyond that remit, however, exploration is left to the curiosity and energy of those who opt to journey further through this fascinating terrain. In the end, I hope readers better understand the intricacies of these themes

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and, through them, gain a clearer vision of the God who makes his people clean. The ready applicability of that truth to global mission is a topic I miss ruminating upon with my former colleague, Richard Hibbert. This book is dedicated to his memory.

G. Geoffrey Harper

Abbreviations

[]	Denotes English versification where different to MT
1 En.	1 Enoch
AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ABS	Archaeology and Biblical Studies
AcBib	Academia Biblica
ACTMS	Australian College of Theology Monograph Series
AD	Anno Domini
<i>Ag. Ap.</i>	Josephus, <i>Against Apion</i>
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AIL	Ancient Israel and Its Literature
<i>AJSR</i>	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
ANE	Ancient Near East(ern)
<i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ATSDS	Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin of Biblical Research</i>
BBRSup	Bulletin of Biblical Research Supplement
BC	Before Christ
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
<i>BDAG</i>	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
<i>BI</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibSem	The Biblical Seminar
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series

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BR	<i>Biblical Research</i>
BTS	Biblical Tools and Studies
BZABR	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAT	Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ConBNT	Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series
CR:BS	<i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i>
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
DHR	Dynamics in the History of Religions
DRCS	Daniel and Revelation Committee Series
<i>Dreams</i>	Philo, <i>On Dreams</i>
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
EBT	Explorations in Biblical Theology
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
EDIS	Edition Israelogic
EJL	Early Judaism and Its Literature
EMQ	<i>Evangelical Missions Quarterly</i>
Ep. Bar.	Epistle of Barnabas
Ep. Jer.	Epistle of Jeremiah
EQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
EV(V)	English version(s)
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
<i>Flight</i>	Philo, <i>On Flight and Finding</i>
GFS	GlossaHouse Festschrift Series
Gk.	Greek
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.</i> L. Koehler, J. J. Stamm, B. Hartmann, M. E. J. Richardson and W. Baumgartner. 3rd ed. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994.
HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs
HBS	Herders Biblische Studien
HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
Hebr.	Hebrew
<i>HipNov</i>	<i>Hiphil Novum</i>

Abbreviations

HTKAT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia</i> . Edited by George Arthur Buttrick. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
IVP	Inter-Varsity Press
JAJ	<i>Journal of Ancient Judaism</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
Jdt.	Judith
JESOT	<i>Journal for the Evangelical Study of the Old Testament</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JHS	<i>Journal of the Hebrew Scriptures</i>
JJMJS	<i>Journal of the Jesus Movement in Its Jewish Setting</i>
JLRS	<i>Journal of Law, Religion and State</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JPSTC	JPS Torah Commentary
JRDH	<i>Journal of Religion, Disability and Health</i>
JSHJ	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
JNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JTISup	Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement Series
Jub.	Jubilees
J.W.	Josephus, <i>Jewish Wars</i>
KJV	King James Version
LAE	The Life of Adam and Eve
Let. Aris.	Letter of Aristeas
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
lit.	literally
LNTS	The Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	Liddell, Henry G., Robert Scott, Henry S. Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. With revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968.
LXX	The Septuagint
Macc.	Maccabees

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<i>Mos.</i>	Philo, <i>De vita Mosis</i>
MS(S)	Manuscript(s)
MT	Masoretic Text
NA ²⁸	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , Nestle-Aland, 28 th ed.
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NETS	New English Translation of the Septuagint
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT	The New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	The New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> . Edited by Colin Brown. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–1978.
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by W. VanGemeren. 5 Vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NIV84	New International Version (1984 edition)
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
NLT	New Living Translation
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
<i>NPNF</i> ²	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2</i> . Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Peabody: Hendrickson: 1979.
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTC	New Testament Commentary
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OSAR	Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions
OTL	Old Testament Library
par(s).	parallel(s)
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>RBL</i>	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
<i>REJ</i>	<i>Revue des études juives</i>
<i>RQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SANT	Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testaments

Abbreviations

SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SFSHJ	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
SGBC	Story of God Bible Commentary
SHJ	Studying the Historical Jesus
<i>SIDA</i>	<i>Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis</i>
Siph.	Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures
Sir.	Sirach
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
<i>Spec.</i>	Philo, <i>On the Special Laws</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
StBibLit	Studies in Biblical Literature (Lang)
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
<i>STR</i>	<i>Southeastern Theological Review</i>
Syr.	Syriac
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
T. Iss.	Testament of Issachar
T. Levi	Testament of Levi
<i>TLZ</i>	<i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>
Tob.	Tobit
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
<i>TrinJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
UBS ⁵	<i>The Greek New Testament</i> , United Bible Societies, 5th ed.
<i>Unchange.</i>	Philo, <i>That God is Unchangeable</i>
Vg.	Latin Vulgate
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
WWS	<i>When Women Speak</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

Introduction

Was Jesus ever impure? Did he ever require cleansing? How one responds is telling. Reticence to reply ‘yes’ raises concerns about what exactly it meant for the second person of the Trinity to be incarnated as a *Jewish* man living in the first century. Indeed, one might recall the early church’s rejection of Docetism with its declaration that Jesus only *seemed* human. Yet, the alternative also raises questions. If Jesus was, at times, impure, what implications did that have for accessing the temple he termed ‘my Father’s house’ (John 2:16)? And what about Jesus’ moral perfection and sinlessness, or his portrayal as high priest who enters heaven to make atonement (Heb. 9 – 10)? Would these virtues and roles, essential to Christology, thereby be compromised? After thirteen years teaching Old Testament studies at undergraduate and graduate levels, it strikes me that Western Christians are often ill-equipped to engage with such Christological queries.

The larger issues raised by pondering Jesus’ susceptibility to defilement are determining what impurity is and whether the concept still applies. It is immediately apparent that purity language pervades the canon; frequency alone signals the importance of the theme. Less immediately clear, however, is what the category entails. The point is accentuated by considering countermeasures. In biblical texts, impurity – or uncleanness (the terms are synonymous) – is not remedied by better sanitation. Nor is it resolved (straightforwardly, at any rate) by repentance and forgiveness. Instead, a complex suite of alternate remedial measures indicates that this category remains conceptually distinct from hygiene and sin. What, then, is impurity and how can it be resolved? These are the central questions this book explores.

Recovering a crucial theme

Why write (or read, for that matter) a book on impurity? In short, because defilement and cleansing are essential aspects of the biblical authors’

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worldviews. Moreover, correctly understanding these concepts directly impacts overlapping areas of theology: sacrifice, atonement and the ritual use of blood; relationship with God, oneself, the community and the earth; the task of world evangelism and testifying to all that God has accomplished; and, as above, one's conception of Jesus. Impurity and its amelioration directly impinge upon vital areas of Christian thought and practice.

However, importance does not always match depth of reflection. Impurity – especially when one removes any hygienic or moral connotations – remains, at best, of marginal Christian interest.¹ Indeed, deliberate neglect has an established pedigree.² For example, because Leviticus 11 (par. Deut. 14:1–21) designates certain animals like pigs 'impure', eating kosher became (and remains) culturally formative for Jewish communities (see 1 Macc. 1:62–63; cf. Tob. 1:10–11; 2 Macc. 6:18–31; 4 Macc. 5:16–27; m. Hul. 3–10). However, and perhaps even because of their importance to Judaism, Christian rejection of dietary limitations has been equally determined.³ The early Christian Epistle of Barnabas (c. AD 100) even asserts Israel erred in understanding Leviticus 11 as prohibiting literal meats. Instead, Christians should rightly comprehend that God intended only a *symbolic* proscription of *moral* vices (v. 10). Jiří Moskala charts a wider trend among the early Church Fathers to de-judaize Old Testament passages such as Leviticus 11 to free Christians from observing their demands.⁴ Likewise, he finds that none of the major Protestant confessions contain any discussion of pure and impure animals.⁵

Notwithstanding the Jewish-Christian polemics that increasingly marked the early decades of the church (or nineteenth- and early twentieth-century biblical studies, for that matter⁶), it is at least worth pondering what potential gap might be left by failing to adequately grapple

¹ That some dissident Christian communities in the Middle Ages observed Jewish rituals is noted by Watts 2017: 206.

² See Harper 2020.

³ For a contrary position, see McDonald 2013. Some understand Lev. 11 as banning *harmful* foods, with implications for ancient and contemporary diet (e.g. Kellogg 1891: 290–94; Craigie 1976: 230–31; Harrison 1980: 124–29). The problems facing a hygiene/health reading of Lev. 11 are outlined by Moskala 2001: 31–37.

⁴ Moskala 2000: 51.

⁵ Moskala 2000: 68–69.

⁶ A sense of this period and its enduring legacy can be gained from Brueggemann and Hankins 2013; Strawn 2017: 103–29; Edwards 2019; Bergen 1996; Robinson 1944.

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with the concepts of defilement and cleansing. To begin answering that question, I focus the results of this study onto three representative areas of Christian thinking in which there are demonstrable gains and losses (see chapter 9).

The first concerns the incarnation. What was Jesus' relationship to impurity? While Christians rightly maintain Jesus' sinlessness, that is not a sufficient response. Impurity is conceptually distinct from sin; one could be impure and innocent at the same time. With that in mind, should Jesus be understood within the Jewish purity system or separate from it? What is at stake either way? These are important questions to ponder. Matthew Thiessen's comment serves as both caution and invitation:

I am persuaded that we often misunderstand the Gospel writers' depictions of Jesus because we naturally and unthinkingly transfer him and the people of the literary world of the Gospels into our own conceptual world. ... But modern readers of the Gospels will not rightly understand Jesus apart from a more thorough comprehension of ancient Jewish (and non-Jewish) ritual purity concerns, precisely because these purity concerns map out the reality of the world as the Gospel writers conceived it.⁷

The second area is atonement. The intensity which attends discussions of atonement is proportional to the doctrine's importance. Much hangs on decisions made here. Yet, as Scot McKnight rightly recognizes, 'We cannot discuss atonement until we define the problem that atonement remedies.'⁸ However, the category of defilement is frequently missing, despite the vital connection between impurity and atonement in the biblical texts. While Graham Cole, for instance, identifies the detrimental impact of sin, wrath, judgment, broken relationships, evil powers and cosmic decay upon the experience of *shalom*, impurity does not feature.⁹ Moreover, while Cole recognizes a connection between atonement and cleansing, cleansing is understood only as the removal of sin.¹⁰ More needs to be said.

A robust understanding of defilement and cleansing also proves beneficial for global mission, especially evangelism to non-Western peoples

⁷Thiessen 2020: 3.

⁸McKnight 2007: 23.

⁹Cole 2009: 67–84.

¹⁰Cole 2009: 164–66; likewise, Craig 2020: 2–3.

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whose felt needs may not be addressed by typical gospel explanations. Indeed, a former colleague, Richard Hibbert, suggests a better approach for engaging Muslim people is to frame the gospel in terms of pollution and purity.¹¹ If Hibbert is on to something (and I think he is), then Western Christians may have some catching up to do to enable more faithful witness to Christ in our multicultural global village.

For all these reasons and more, grappling with defilement and cleansing is crucial. Thankfully, since the publication of Wilfried Paschen's seminal *Rein und Unrein* in 1970, the volume of literature devoted to exploring biblical (and extra-biblical) conceptions of purity has markedly increased.¹² That is good news. Nevertheless, very few studies consider how the themes of defilement and cleansing play out across the canon. This is the gap the current volume addresses.

The task of biblical theology

To undertake a canonical-level survey is to embark on a biblical-theological reading of Scripture. However, biblical theology is an elastic label that has been appropriated by several distinct, even mutually exclusive, approaches. For this reason, it is better to speak of possible biblical *theologies*. Outlining and evaluating these differing conceptions has been done elsewhere.¹³ As expected, understanding what biblical theology is and how to do it are shaped by prior commitments regarding the provenance of texts, the supervening effects of canonical order, one's systematic framework, and so on. It is naïve to imagine stepping outside such influences, let alone coming to the biblical texts objectively. In lieu of that potential, what remains is to clarify one's own approach and assumptions while being cognisant of inherent weaknesses and limitations. At least then neither author nor reader is left wondering.

First, while this study recognizes historical development it is not diachronic in a strict sense. There is simply too much uncertainty when it comes to the absolute or even relative dating of biblical texts, especially

¹¹ Hibbert 2008: 352.

¹² Paschen 1970. Introductory surveys are provided by Wright 1992: 6:729–41; Averbeck 1997: 4:477–86; Klawans 2010: 377–402; Kazen 2018b: 220–44; deSilva 2013. Competing methodological approaches are evaluated by Kazen 2018a; Watts 2023.

¹³ See Frei 1974: 165–82; Reid 2011; Klink and Lockett 2012; cf. Bruno, Compton, and McFadden 2020.

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those of the Old Testament. The reasons for lack of clarity are threefold: (1) ancient writing conventions did not require the clear demarcation of author and date that modern copyright demands;¹⁴ (2) the relationship between oral and written traditions is complex and non-linear; both media may co-exist, mutually influencing one another; and (3) there is an unavoidable paucity of data: the earliest extant, and often fragmentary, Old Testament manuscripts date to the third century BC.¹⁵ Hence, while representing impressive archaeological discoveries, there is still up to a millennium (depending on one's final dating decisions) between textual composition and the earliest surviving copies. In light of these realities, Benjamin Sommer wisely cautions against what he terms 'pseudo-historicism', that is, the tendency to emphasize certain aspects of a text to corroborate presuppositions regarding dating.¹⁶ Instead, Sommer advises interpreters to be content with less precise provenances, perhaps utilizing 'pre-exilic' rather than 'seventh-century', for example.¹⁷ Thus, I remain content to follow a broad movement from pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic texts, to Second Temple and New Testament documents.

Second, for reasons that become clear below, I begin with Leviticus and Numbers. From there, I loosely follow the trifold division of the Hebrew canon (Torah, Prophets and Writings) before moving on to consider Second Temple texts, the Gospels and Acts, and the New Testament epistles. Privileging literary placement over date of composition in this manner acknowledges the foundational importance of the Pentateuch for the Old Testament and of the Gospels for the New.¹⁸ It also recognizes that for those reading Scripture sequentially, material following the Torah (the Prophets and Writings) and Gospels (the New Testament letters) is encountered as elaboration on these foundational corpora.¹⁹

Third, as an evangelical Christian interpreter, I affirm the dual authorship of the Bible. Thus, I assume there are always two levels of intent in play. Hence, while human authors and redactors influence meaning at

¹⁴ See Carr 2005; Walton and Sandy 2013.

¹⁵ Inscriptions push the date back further, but the evidence is disputed. Regarding whether the Keteif Hinnom amulets (c. 600 BC), for instance, reflect Num. 6:24–26, see Smoak 2015.

¹⁶ Sommer 2011: 85–108; also, Sommer 2001: 57.

¹⁷ Sommer 2011: 106.

¹⁸ See Watts 2017: 95–99; cf. Kruger 2012: 202–32.

¹⁹ Contra Kazen 2015b: 443 who argues that Leviticus and Numbers (which he dates to the Persian period) cannot inform pre-exilic notions of impurity.

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the level of book or collection of books (e.g. the Book of the Twelve), and even deliberately develop or add to prior revelation, God alone controls meaning at the level of canon. Accordingly, 'coherence' became a vital criterion for determining canonicity.²⁰ This has a direct bearing on any analysis of defilement and cleansing across texts that display significant diversity of language, culture, style, idiom and theology. There are twin dangers to navigate: the Scylla of collapsing differing usages into one homogenous and undifferentiated whole, and the Charybdis of viewing Scripture as a discordant collection of competing truth claims. While Scripture may be multi-hued and polyphonic, it is not (in my estimation, at least) a cacophony. Symphony is my preferred metaphor. This does not presume the biblical presentation of purity is monochrome or resistant to development. It does, however, require one to assume and look for coherence even if not always neat, complete or fitting easily with pre-existing expectations.

Considering these commitments, my approach in this study takes seriously the third form of biblical theology outlined in the Series Preface; that is, 'the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.'

The language of defilement and cleansing

The dangers inherent to word study analyses of biblical themes have been well rehearsed.²¹ Any comprehensive grasp of defilement and cleansing in the biblical canon cannot simply be derived by surveying the key lexemes. Contextual use is crucial. Additionally, the wider semantic fields reveal associated terminology, which evinces change over time. Moreover, as defilement and cleansing may feature even in the absence of specific vocabulary, other textual features must also be considered: images, metaphors, allusions, and so forth. Nevertheless, defilement and cleansing are often signalled by technical terms. Hence, an initial survey of the lexical landscape of both Old and New Testaments provides a working vocabulary that subsequent chapters will elaborate. At the same time, some readers may prefer to skip this section and the next, referring back as needed.

²⁰ Kruger 2012: 133–58.

²¹ See, seminally, Barr 1961.

Defilement

Table 0.1 Terms for defilement, listed by verbal root, adjective and noun

Terms for defilement			
	Verbal root	Adjective	Noun
Hebrew	<i>ṭm</i> ('to be impure, to defile, to defile oneself')	<i>ṭāmē</i> ('impure')	<i>ṭum'â</i> ('impurity')
	<i>ḥnp</i> ('to pollute')	<i>ḥānēp</i> ('godless')	<i>ḥōnep</i> ('perversity') <i>ḥānuppâ</i> ('perversity')
	<i>ḥll</i> ('to profane, desecrate')		<i>ḥōl</i> ('common, profane')
	<i>g'l</i> ('to consider as filth')		<i>gō'al</i> ('loathing')
			<i>niddâ</i> ('impurity')
			<i>piggûl</i> ('tainted [food]')
Greek	<i>miaiñō</i> ('to stain, defile')		<i>miasmos</i> ('pollution') <i>miasma</i> ('defilement')
	<i>bebēloō</i> ('to profane')		
	<i>koinoō</i> ('to make common, defile')	<i>koinos</i> ('impure')	
	<i>molynō</i> ('to stain, defile')		<i>molysmos</i> ('defilement')
		<i>akathartos</i> ('impure')	<i>akatharsia</i> ('impurity')

In the Old Testament, impurity is most commonly indicated by the verb *ṭm*'. Together with its related noun (*ṭum'â*) and adjective (*ṭāmē*'), *ṭm*' occurs almost 300 times, with Leviticus and Numbers accounting for two-thirds of the total. The qal verb indicates a status or state: to be, or to become, impure. Both animate and inanimate entities could be(come) impure, including men (Lev. 15:16), women (Lev. 12:2), priests (Ezek. 44:25), Gentiles (Lev. 17:15), furniture (Lev. 15:4), garments (Lev. 15:17), objects (Num. 19:22), food (Hag. 2:12), cities (Ezek. 22:3), land (Lev. 18:25) and time periods (Num. 6:12). Piel forms of *ṭm*' often indicate the act of defiling persons,²² places,²³ or objects,²⁴ or pronounce someone or something

²² E.g. Gen. 34:5; Lev. 11:44; Ezek. 18:6, 11; 20:26; 22:11. The defiling of Yahweh's 'holy name' in Ezek. 43:7–8 may function as a synecdoche for Yahweh's person.

²³ E.g. Lev. 15:31; 18:28; 20:3; Num. 5:3; 19:13; 35:34; Deut. 21:23; Jer. 2:7; Ezek. 5:11; 9:7; 23:38; 36:17; Ps. 79:1; 2 Chr. 36:14.

²⁴ E.g. 2 Kgs 23:8, 13, 16; Isa. 30:22.

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impure.²⁵ One could also 'be defiled'²⁶ or could, reflexively, 'defile oneself'.²⁷ The adjective *tāmē* ('impure') has a similar range to the verb, describing both animate²⁸ and inanimate referents.²⁹ The noun *ṭum'ā* ('impurity' or 'uncleanness') occurs thirty-six times. The Greek Old Testament (LXX) often translates *tm*' and its derivatives (especially qal and niph'al forms, the noun, and adjective) with nouns from the *akathar*-word-group used in conjunction with the verb 'to be' (approx. 150x). Alternatively, on more than sixty occasions, the verb *miainō* ('to stain, defile') is used (primarily for niph'al, piel, pual and hithpael).³⁰ Notable exceptions include the use of *hamartia* ('sin') to translate *ṭum'ā* in Leviticus 14:19.

Several other terms are also important. The verb *hnp* (11x), as well as its related adjective (*hānēp*, 13x) and nouns (*hōnep* [only Jer. 32:16] and *hānuppā* [only Jer. 23:15]), can denote 'godlessness' (Dan. 11:32) or 'defilement'. The verb often depicts land pollution (Num. 35:33; Isa. 24:5; Jer. 3:1, 2, 9), but also defilement of 'prophet and priest' (Jer. 23:11) and 'Zion' (Mic. 4:11). The adjective appears in parallel with the unrighteous (Isa. 10:6; Job 20:5; 34:30), or in contrast to the righteous (Ps. 35:16; Job 17:8; Prov. 11:9), and thus often demarcates persons in danger with respect to God (Isa. 9:16; 33:14; Job 8:13; 13:16; 15:34; 27:8; 36:13). The LXX translates *hnp* and its derivatives with a variety of terms, most frequently 'ungodly' (*asebēs*) or 'lawless' (*anomos* and *paranomos*).³¹

The verb *hll*, which can mean 'to begin' (e.g. Gen. 4:26; 6:1), more often indicates 'to profane' or 'desecrate' (75x), predominantly in Leviticus and Ezekiel. Yahweh (Ezek. 13:19) and his holy name can be 'profaned' (Lev. 20:3; Ezek. 20:39), as can temple (Ezek. 7:22), sanctuary (Lev. 21:12), Sabbath (Ezek. 20:13), priests (Lev. 21:4) and offerings (Lev. 19:8). With this sense, *hll* and its related noun (*hōl*) serve as antonyms to holiness.

²⁵ E.g. Lev. 13:3, 8, 11, 15, 20, 22, 25, 27, 30, 44, 59.

²⁶ Passive defilement is conveyed by the pual (Ezek. 4:14) and hithpael (Deut. 24:4).

²⁷ Reflexive action is conveyed by the niph'al (Lev. 11:43; 18:24; Num. 5:13, 14, 20, 27–29; Jer. 2:23; Ezek. 20:30, 31, 43; 23:7, 13, 30; Hos. 5:3; 6:10) and hithpael (Lev. 11:24, 43; 18:24, 30; 21:1, 3, 4, 11; Num. 6:7; Ezek. 14:11; 20:7, 18; 37:23; 44:25; Hos. 9:4).

²⁸ For example, men (Num. 9:6), women (Lev. 15:25), animals (Lev. 7:21), birds (20:25), fish (Deut. 14:10), and insects (Deut. 14:19).

²⁹ Objects include garments (Lev. 13:51), ovens (Lev. 11:35), furniture (Lev. 15:26), containers (Num. 19:15), seed (Lev. 11:38), foodstuffs (Judg. 13:4), offerings (Hag. 2:14), houses (Lev. 14:44), places (Lev. 14:40), and land (Josh. 22:19). Impure lips (Isa. 6:5) and names (Ezek. 22:5) function synecdochally for persons.

³⁰ NIDOTTE 2:374.

³¹ NIDOTTE 2:209.

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Profanation indicates a loss of holy status.³² Leviticus 10:10 (cf. Ezek. 22:26; 44:23) articulates the resulting double binary between ‘holy’ (*qōdeš*) and ‘profane’ (*hōl*) and between ‘impure’ (*ṭāmē*) and ‘pure’ (*ṭāhōr*). Nevertheless, the holy-profane and pure-impure binaries are not always neatly distinguishable. In many instances, there is a close correspondence between defilement (*ṭm*) and profanation (*ḥll*). Molech worship, for example, means a person has simultaneously ‘defiled’ (*ṭammē*) the sanctuary ‘and profaned’ (*ūlēḥallēl*) Yahweh’s name (Lev. 20:3). Jeremiah 16:18 employs *ḥll* to describe the desecration of land through idolatry, paralleling the use of *ḥnp* (‘to defile’) in 3:1, 2, 9. The LXX generally employs *bebēloō* (‘to violate sanctity, desecrate, profane’) to render *ḥll*.³³

Other, less common, terms also appear. The verb *gʿl* (10x)³⁴ denotes disgust: to consider something as ‘dung and filth’³⁵ or as ‘covered with impurity’.³⁶ The related noun, *gōʿal*, is attested only in Ezekiel 16:5 where it means ‘loathing’. The noun *piggūl* is reserved for food deemed ‘foul’ or ‘tainted’ (Lev. 7:18; 19:7; Isa. 65:4; Ezek. 4:14). Although *niddā* concretely denotes ‘menstruation’ (e.g. Lev. 12:2; 15:19; 18:19; Ezek. 18:6),³⁷ its extended meaning ‘impurity’ is applied to gold (Ezek. 7:19), idols (Ezek. 7:20; cf. 2 Chr. 29:5), Jerusalem (Lam. 1:17; cf. the use of *dāweh* [‘menstruating’] in 1:13; 5:17) and land (Ezra 9:11). Although *niddā* remains distinct from sin in Zechariah 13:1, it can designate moral corruption: ‘like the impurity of menstruation (*kēṭumʿat hannīdā*) was their way before me’ (Ezek. 36:17; my tr.; cf. Isa. 64:6[5]).

The New Testament, in large part, adopts the terms used in the LXX and deuterocanonical works. The adjective *akathartos* corresponds to the Hebrew *ṭāmē* (‘impure’). In the Gospels, *akathartos* is used only for ‘impure’ spirits (e.g. Matt. 10:1; Luke 11:24; cf. LXX Zech. 13:2). Elsewhere, the adjective modifies food (Acts 10:14), Gentiles (Acts 10:28) and children (1 Cor. 7:14), in addition to immoral actions (Eph. 5:5; Rev. 17:4). *Akatharsia* (‘impurity’; cf. Hebr. *ṭumʿā*), however, only designates proscribed behaviours (e.g. Matt. 23:27; Rom. 1:24; 2 Cor. 12:21). The verb *miainō* (‘to stain, defile’) is used for

³² Reeve 2018: 245–52 argues that *ḥll* signals a public loss of reputation.

³³ BDAG 173.

³⁴ Lev. 26:11, 15, 30, 43, 44; 2 Sam. 1:21; Jer. 14:19; Ezek. 16:45(2x). In Job 21:10, *gʿl* is parallel to ‘miscarry’.

³⁵ TDOT 3:47.

³⁶ NIDOTTE 1:883.

³⁷ The variant form *ʿiddā* appears in Isa. 64:6[5] and Ezek. 16:7.

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both ritual (e.g. John 18:28) and moral (e.g. Tit. 1:15) impurity. The cognate forms *miasmos* (‘pollution’) and *miasma* (‘defilement’) occur only in 2 Peter 2:10, 20 respectively, in relation to moral failings (cf. Jdt. 9:2, 4; 13:16; Wis. 14:26; 1 Macc. 4:43; 13:50). *Koinoō* (‘to make common or impure, defile’³⁸) is applied to people (Matt. 15:11; Acts 11:9; Heb. 9:13) and places (Acts 21:28). The related adjective *koinos* (‘impure’) describes unwashed hands (Mark 7:2, 5), non-kosher food (Acts 10:14; 11:8), foodstuffs considered off-limits (Rom. 14:14), Gentiles (Acts 10:28) and mishandling the blood of the covenant (Heb. 10:29).³⁹ The verb *molynō* (‘to stain, defile’) and noun *molysmos* (‘defilement’) appear four times (1 Cor. 8:7; Rev. 3:4; 14:4; and 2 Cor. 7:1 respectively).⁴⁰

Cleansing

Table 0.2 Terms for cleansing, listed by verbal root, adjective and noun

Terms for cleansing			
	Verbal root	Adjective	Noun
Hebrew	<i>ṭhr</i> (‘to be pure, to purify, to purify oneself’)	<i>tāhōr</i> (‘pure’) <i>ṭāhōr</i> (‘pure’)	<i>ṭōhar</i> (‘purity’) <i>tāhōrā</i> (‘purification’) <i>ṭēhar</i> (‘cleanness’)
	<i>ḥṭ</i> (‘to purify’)		
	<i>qdš</i> (‘to consecrate’)		
	<i>brr</i> (‘to purify, purge’)	<i>bōr</i> (‘pure’) <i>bar</i> (‘pure’)	<i>bārūr</i> (‘purity’)
	<i>zkh/zkk</i> (‘to be clean’)	<i>zak</i> (‘pure, clear’)	
		<i>ḥap</i> (‘clean’)	
Greek	<i>katharizō</i> (‘to cleanse, purify’)	<i>katharos</i> (‘pure’)	<i>katharismos</i> (‘cleansing’)
	<i>hagnizō</i> (‘to cleanse, purify’)	<i>hagnos</i> (‘pure’)	<i>hagnismos</i> (‘purification’) <i>hagnotēs</i> (‘purity’) <i>hagneia</i> (‘purity’)
	<i>aphagnizō</i> (‘to purify oneself by offerings’)		
	<i>exilaskomai</i> (‘to propitiate’)		
		<i>amiantos</i> (‘undefiled’)	

³⁸ NIDNTT 1:448.

³⁹ Paschen 1970: 165 suggests collocation with *akathartos* in Acts 10:14, 28; 11:8 explains the less familiar *koinos*.

⁴⁰ BDAG 657.

The Old Testament employs numerous terms for cleansing. Foremost, is *ṭhr* (qal), which signifies be(com)ing ‘pure’ or ‘clean’ and functions as the antonym of *ṭm* ‘(to be impure’; esp. Lev. 10:10; Deut. 12:15; Ezek. 22:26; 44:23). To purify or declare pure is typically conveyed by *ṭhr* (piel) with the hithpael conveying reflexive action (‘purifying oneself’). As with *ṭm*, a wide range of animate and inanimate objects can be, or be made, ‘pure’: men (Lev. 15:13), women (Lev. 15:28), priests (Lev. 22:7), Gentiles (2 Kgs 5:10), animals (Gen. 7:2), clothing (Lev. 11:32), precious metals (Num. 31:21–22), wooden articles (Lev. 11:32), rooms (Neh. 13:9), houses (Lev. 14:48), city gates (Neh. 12:30), temple (2 Chr. 29:18), altar (Ezek. 43:26), Jerusalem (2 Chr. 34:5) and even the land itself (Ezek. 39:12). The associated adjective *ṭāhōr/ṭāhōr* (‘pure, clean’), together with nouns *ṭōhar* (‘purity’), *ṭāhōrâ* (‘purity, purification’) and *ṭēhar* (‘cleanness’), occur over one hundred times. The terms concretely describe the ‘pure’ gold of the tabernacle (26x in Exod.) and the clarity of the sky (Exod. 24:10; cf. Job 37:21), as well as ritual (e.g. Lev. 12:4; Num. 6:9) and, occasionally, moral (Hab. 1:13; Prov. 15:26) purity.⁴¹ The LXX utilizes two main roots to translate *ṭhr*: (1) the *kathar-* word-group (esp. *katharizō* [‘to cleanse, purify’], *katharos* [‘pure’] and *katharismos* [‘cleansing’]); and, less frequently, (2) the *hagn-* word-group (esp. *hagnizō* [‘to cleanse, purify’] and *hagnos* [‘pure, holy’]).

Also important is the widely attested Semitic root *ḥṭ*, which has primarily religious overtones. Although the qal verb means ‘to commit a sin’, piel and hithpael forms can mean ‘to purify’ or ‘to purify oneself’ respectively.⁴² The altar (Exod. 29:36; Lev. 8:15; Ezek. 43:20, 22–23) and sanctuary (Ezek. 45:18) could be ‘purified’ (*ḥṭ* piel), as could infected houses (Lev. 14:49, 52) and corpse-defiled persons (Num. 19:19). Levites (Num. 8:21) and corpse-contaminated people (Num. 19:12, 13, 20; 31:19) also purify themselves (*ḥṭ* hithpael) or other objects (Num. 31:20, 23). Psalm 51:7[9] envisions purification from sin as the psalmist petitions ‘Cleanse me’ (*tēḥattē’ēni*).⁴³ The LXX utilizes a range of terms to render piel and hithpael forms of *ḥṭ*: *katharizō* (‘to cleanse’), *hagnizō* (‘to purify’),

⁴¹ Regarding ritual and moral uses of the *ṭhr* word group, as well as ‘transitional’ forms, see *NIDOTTE* 2:345–46. I justify ‘ritual’ and ‘moral’ as heuristic categories in chapter 2.

⁴² There is significant debate regarding how best to understand the piel and hithpael of *ḥṭ*. In Job 41:17, the hithpael means ‘to withdraw’. See chapter 1 for further discussion.

⁴³ The parallel language of washing away sin (Ps. 51:7b[9b]) is rare in the Old Testament. See chapter 5.

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aphagnizō (‘to purify oneself by offerings’) and *exilaskomai* (‘to appease’⁴⁴ or ‘propitiate’⁴⁵).

Several other terms are noteworthy. *Qdš* (piel) means ‘to consecrate’ (i.e. to make holy) and functions as antonym to *ḥll*, ‘to profane’ (e.g. Lev. 10:10; 21:15; 22:32; Ezek. 36:23). In several occurrences, *qdš* (piel) works in parallel with verbs of purification. In Leviticus 8:15, blood ‘purifies’ (*ḥṭ*’ piel) and ‘consecrates’ (*qdš* piel) the altar. Similarly, on the Day of Atonement, sprinkled blood ‘cleanses’ (*ṭhr* piel) and ‘consecrates’ (*qdš* piel) the altar from ‘the impurities of the Israelites’ (Lev. 16:19 my tr.). In 2 Chronicles 29:5, Yahweh’s house is ‘consecrated’ (*qdš* piel) by bringing out ‘impurity’ (*niddā*) from the sanctuary. The verb *brr* (18x⁴⁶) means to purify, cleanse, purge. With associated adjectives (*bōr* [5x], *bar* [6x]) and noun (*bārūr*), the root has both concrete and figurative senses, describing ‘pure’ arrows (Isa. 49:2; NIV ‘polished’) as well as those ‘pure’ in hands (2 Sam. 22:21) or heart (Pss. 24:4; 73:1).⁴⁷ The verb *zkh* (8x; also attested 4x as *zkk*), ‘to be clean’ (qal) or ‘to cleanse’ (piel, hithpael), generally denotes moral purity, appearing in parallel with righteous conduct (Ps. 51:4[6]; 73:13; 119:9; Job 15:14; 25:4) or contrasted with wickedness (Isa. 1:16; Mic. 6:11;⁴⁸ Prov. 20:9). The related adjective, *zak* (11x), ‘pure, clear’, can describe oil (Exod. 27:20; Lev. 24:2), but also actions (Prov. 20:11) or a general demeanour (Job 8:6; 33:9).⁴⁹ The adjective *ḥap* (‘clean’) occurs only in Job 33:9 in parallel with *zak*, ‘pure’.

The New Testament also adopts Old Testament cleansing terminology. The most widespread term is *katharos* (‘pure’) and derivatives, used to render eighteen different Hebrew lexemes in the LXX, most commonly *ṭāhōr*.⁵⁰ Cognates appear in almost all the New Testament documents and relate to the full spectrum of physical (e.g. Matt. 27:59; Rev. 15:6; 21:18), ritual (e.g. Matt. 8:2–4; Rom. 14:20) and moral (e.g. John 13:11; Acts 20:26) purity. Hence, there is considerable variety in how Old Testament language is used. The *hagn-* word-group is also important. *Hagnizō* (‘to

⁴⁴ BDAG 350.

⁴⁵ LSJ 594. Ezek. 43:23 uses the cognate noun *exilasmōs* (‘propitiation’).

⁴⁶ The exact number of occurrences is difficult to ascertain (cf. *NIDOTTE* 1:772–73).

⁴⁷ *NIDOTTE* 1:772–73.

⁴⁸ Reading as qal with MT.

⁴⁹ The cognate Aramaic adjective *zākū* (‘pure’) appears only in Dan. 6:22[23] to describe Daniel’s innocence before God and king.

⁵⁰ *NIDNTT* 3:103.

purify'; e.g. John 11:55; Acts 21:24) and *hagnismos* ('purification'; only Acts 21:26) are used in connection with ritual cleansing. Additionally, *hagnizō* can also refer to moral purification (e.g. Jas. 4:8; 1 Pet. 1:22). The same ethical dimension is also apparent in cognate forms: *hagnos* ('pure'; e.g. 1 Pet. 3:2), *hagnōs* ('purely'; only Phil. 1:17), *hagnotēs* ('purity'; e.g. 2 Cor. 11:3) and *hagneia* ('purity'; e.g. 1 Tim. 4:12). *Amiantos* functions as antonym to *miasmos* and means 'undefiled, pure' (Heb. 7:26; 13:4; Jas. 1:27; 1 Pet. 1:4).

Holiness is closely related to the concept of purity. In Greek, three main word-groups convey the idea.⁵¹ *Hieros*, and derivatives, is reserved for what is intrinsically holy (i.e. God/the gods) or for what has been consecrated to, or sanctified by, God/the gods. Although commonplace in Classical Greek literature, most of this word-group occurs rarely in the New Testament.⁵² Also uncommon (although frequent in the LXX) is the *hosios* group, used to define that which accords with the transcendent.⁵³ The *hagios* word-group appears much more frequently in the New Testament. In the LXX, *hagios* occurs extensively in cultic and ritual contexts where it functions spatially (defining what belongs to Yahweh's realm), rather than ethically. New Testament usage includes this sense as God's people are indwelt and made holy by the Holy Spirit (*to pneuma to hagion*).

What to expect from this book

Although the foregoing survey of terminology is provisional and remains to be tested against the biblical texts, it sets helpful parameters and expectations. First, the concepts of defilement and cleansing employ a diversity of language, which appears throughout the canon from Genesis to Revelation. Second, the biblical (and Second Temple) material evinces many close affinities with, as well as significant divergence from, both ANE and Greco-Roman concepts.⁵⁴ Due care is required to hear the biblical authors clearly. Third, there are intersecting concepts, which

⁵¹ For discussion, see *NIDNTT* 2:224–38.

⁵² The exceptions are *hieron* ('the temple') and *hiereus/archiereus* ('priest'/high priest').

⁵³ *Hosios* ('holy, devout') appears in Acts 2:27; 13:34–35; 1 Tim. 2:8; Tit. 1:8; Heb. 7:26; Rev. 15:4; 16:5; *hosiotēs* ('holiness, devoutness') in Luke 1:75; Eph. 4:24; and *hosios* ('devoutly') in 1 Thess. 2:10.

⁵⁴ Appropriation of purity in post-biblical rabbinic and Christian traditions is beyond the scope of this investigation. Readers can consult Klawans 2000; Hayes 2002; Latz and Ermakov 2014: 177–271; Furstenberg 2023.

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interpreters must be careful not to conflate. Impurity is not synonymous with sin, or vice versa, and holiness is not identical to purity. There is overlap, but also distinction. Fourth, in relation to the language of purity and impurity (or holiness for that matter), a moral connotation is possible, but cannot simply be assumed. The range of possible options, from concrete to figurative, necessitates careful exegesis.

The remainder of this volume considers how the themes of defilement and cleansing operate and develop across the Scriptures. Although each biblical book is unique, a discernible canonical logic emerges. While a full articulation must await the retrospection possible in the final chapter, it is useful at this point to outline how the following chapters contribute to that end.

Chapter 1 begins with Leviticus and Numbers. And for good reason. Although often neglected, these books contain the most concentrated explanation of the causes, objects, scope and implications of defilement, as well as the various means God allocates for cleansing. Chapter 2 synthesizes these initial soundings to construct a provisional conceptualization of purity. Doing so is essential. Readers unfamiliar with the dynamics of defilement and cleansing will not fully appreciate how the concepts are utilized by the biblical authors. In the Pentateuch and Former Prophets (chapter 3), purity, or lack of, becomes a key characterization technique. In often subtle ways, narrative portrayal shapes perceptions of God, Israel and the nations. Moral and ritual faithfulness mark one as belonging to Yahweh. Accordingly, the Latter Prophets (chapter 4) foreground the moral defilement produced by bloodshed, idolatry and sexual immorality to warn about, and explain, the necessity of exile. But they also provide important indicators that Yahweh will one day conclusively purify his people. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the mainly post-exilic collection of books known as the Writings (chapter 5) continues to wrestle with issues of defilement and cleansing. There is greater definition and reframing of concepts as various communities work out the purity implications of being God's holy people. This diversity is also a hallmark of the Second Temple literature (chapter 6). While some forms and causes of impurity are simply assumed, there is also significant expansion. The immediate context of the New Testament, therefore, is one of increasing interest in defilement and cleansing. Thus, the Gospels and Acts (chapter 7) repeatedly employ purity dynamics as they present their respective portraits of Jesus and the nascent church. Jesus is the supreme purifier who readies

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people for the arrival of God's kingdom. In him, and through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, prophetic hope is realized. Accordingly, the New Testament epistles (chapter 8) appropriate defilement and cleansing for Christological and eschatological ends. Purity informs social and ethical boundaries and drives exhortation for transformation. The purity of God must be reflected in the purity of his people. Finally, with the benefit of canonical hindsight, chapter 9 articulates a biblical theology of defilement and cleansing and grounds this in three representative areas of Christian thought and practice. Far from being superseded or laid aside, purity of body and spirit remains essential in the Christian age. Why that is the case, and what it might entail, become clearer as we work through the biblical material.

1

Defilement and cleansing in Leviticus and Numbers

For many readers of the Old Testament, Leviticus and Numbers remain obscure. After all, these books have a long history of, sometimes wilful, neglect.¹ Yet, when constructing a biblical theology of defilement and cleansing, Leviticus and Numbers prove crucial. Although purity lexemes are distributed across the canon, there are notable concentrations – pre-eminently Leviticus and Numbers, which account for up to two-thirds of key terms. Moreover, large blocks of material are devoted to purity (Lev. 11 – 16; 18; 20 – 22; Num. 5 – 6; 19). For this reason, any canonical investigation must grapple with the priestly texts.² At the same time, unfamiliarity with both texts and concepts can make this a daunting task. The reward, however, is a better foundational grasp of a crucial biblical theme.

In Leviticus and Numbers purity, pollution and purification are fundamental aspects of life in biblical Israel.³ Various sources of defilement could negatively affect individuals, the sanctuary, the entire community, and even the land itself. While some forms of pollution could be eradicated by ritual measures, others could not. Purity, therefore, had significant social entailments. Accordingly, priests were tasked with establishing and

¹ Strawn 2017 provides a sobering analysis of the contemporary North American church in this regard.

² In this volume I use ‘priestly’ in a non-technical sense as an umbrella term for Leviticus and Numbers (rather than to differentiate P and/or H from non-P).

³ Frymer-Kensky 1983: 399. The extent to which textual presentation matches ancient social reality is contested. The phrase ‘biblical Israel’ is my attempt to distinguish between ‘history’ (a sequence of space-time events) and ‘historiography’ (the written accounts of those events). Determining the rhetorical purposes of the biblical presentation is crucial. This has come sharply to the fore in recent years in relation to ritual texts. Watts’s statement has become axiomatic: ‘Texts are not rituals and rituals are not texts’ (Watts 2007: 29; italics removed). The implications are explored in Nihan and Rhyder 2021.

maintaining strict boundaries and performing purification where possible. The impetus for this concern is the immanent presence of Yahweh that had come to reside in the tabernacle at the heart of the Israelite camp. Purity and presence are inseparably intertwined.

Defilement and cleansing in Leviticus

Presence, priests and purity

Themes of presence and purity dominate the opening sections of Leviticus. Chapters 1 – 9 portray the inception of a cultic system replete with offerings and priests. A repeated speech formula (e.g. 1:1; 4:1; 5:14) works rhetorically to emphasize the divine origin of the institutions.⁴ A sevenfold occurrence of ‘as Yahweh commanded’ throughout the priests’ ordination rite works similarly (8:4, 9, 13, 17, 21, 29, 34 my tr.; cf. Exod. 29). Yahweh desires both sacrifice and priesthood.⁵ These exist so ‘Yahweh’s glory might appear’ (9:6 my tr.), a potential realized as the gathered community beholds the divine radiance (9:23). Moreover, cultic purification rituals performed by the newly inaugurated priests (9:8–21) enable Moses and Aaron to *enter* the tabernacle and survive the encounter with Yahweh’s presence within (9:23). This begins to resolve the narrative dilemma posed by Exodus 40:34–35, which records the exclusion of everyone from Yahweh’s glory when it fills the newly erected tabernacle.⁶ In this way, Yahweh’s ‘dwelling’ (*miškān*) starts to function as a ‘tent of meeting’ (‘*ōhel mō ‘ēd*).⁷ Increasing proximity to the divine presence characterizes the new reality that Leviticus describes.⁸

Proximity, however, quickly proves catastrophic. In a stunning reversal, Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, did ‘what [Yahweh] had *not* commanded

⁴Whether Leviticus has thirty-six (Luciani 2005: 12–13) or thirty-seven (Warning 1999: 39) instances depends on how 16:1–2 is categorized.

⁵The legitimation of an Aaronic priesthood in Lev. 8 – 10 is widely recognized, even if opinions regarding historical setting and textual function differ. Such legitimation is made necessary in view of vying claims regarding priestly authority, lineage, and capability (e.g. Num. 16 – 17; 1 Kgs 12; Mal. 1:6 – 2:9; Ezra 2:61–63). For representative reconstructions, see Ulrich et al. 1992; Watts 2001; Tiemeyer 2006; Malone 2017.

⁶Contra Bolt 2004: 127 who supposes Old Testament rituals *created* distance between God and humanity.

⁷Regarding terminological use in Exodus–Leviticus, see Morales 2015: 195–97.

⁸The trajectory is traced by Nihan 2007: 46–47, 99–105 and Morales 2024: 15–18.