

The Priestly Legacy: Cult and Sacrifice, Purity and Holiness in Leviticus and Numbers

Lecture 9 Transcript

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Overview

In this lecture, the Priestly source (P) found primarily in Leviticus and Numbers is introduced. The symbolism of the sacrificial cult and purity system, the differences between moral and ritual impurity, as well as holiness and purity are explained within the Priestly context. The concept of holiness and *imitatio dei*, or human imitation of God, is explained.

1. Introduction to the Israelite Sanctuary

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* Today we're going to be turning to Leviticus. And Leviticus is a primary document of the Priestly School. And we identify this work as Priestly because it deals with matters that were of special concern to and under the jurisdiction of priests: the sanctuary, its cultic rituals, the system of sacrifices, the distinction between the holy and the profane and the pure and the impure. So the Priestly materials are found as a block in Leviticus, a large part of Numbers, and then they're scattered throughout Genesis and Exodus. And because of these common themes, we say that they were produced by a Priestly School: we hypothesize a Priestly School. We don't quite clearly understand exactly what that means and who and exactly when. These materials emerged over a period of centuries; that's clear. They reached their final form in the exilic or post-exilic period. But they certainly often preserve older cultic traditions and priestly traditions as well.

[2] We can break the book of Leviticus down into the units that are listed on that side of the board. You have in Chapters 1 through 7 the sacrificial system. Chapters 8 through 10 recount the installation of Aaron as high priest and the Aaronides then as the priestly clan within Israel. Chapters 11 through 15 cover the dietary system, the dietary laws as well as the ritual purity laws. Chapter 16 describes the procedure to be followed on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur. Chapters 17 through 26 then are a block of material that's referred to as the "Holiness code" because of its special emphasis on holiness. So most scholars think that that

block of material comes from a different priestly school, and so we designate that H: holiness. The relative dates of P and H, P now meaning the non-H parts of the Priestly materials, they're much debated; but I think increasingly, the consensus is that H — the block of material in Leviticus 17 through 26 and then also its got passages scattered around other parts of the Bible — but the consensus increasingly is that H is later. It's a redactor or editor of the other priestly materials. So P is a difficult term of reference, because P can refer to the entirety of Priestly writings altogether. But when we think about H and talk about H then P in contrast to H means the Priestly writings that are not H: so maybe a small P and a capital P, I don't know.

[3] Now, the Priestly materials have for a long time been I think a devalued part of the Hebrew Bible. And scholarship of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century is generally characterized by a deep-seated bias that views impurity rules as primitive and irrational taboos, and sacrifice as controlled savagery that's empty of any spiritual meaning. Religion without such rites is evolutionarily superior or higher; more spiritually meaningful. And with those kinds of attitudes, it's not difficult to understand why scholarship on Leviticus and those parts of the Bible tend to be rather dismissive. In the later part of the twentieth century, the situation began to change. As anthropologists and ethnographers began to study the danger avoidance practices of many cultures, the taboos and rituals of many cultures, including modern Western culture, new avenues for understanding the danger

avoidance practices of the Bible began to emerge.

[4] Anthropologist Mary Douglas changed forever the way scholars would approach the impurity rules of the Bible, because she insisted on their interpretation as symbols, symbols that conveyed something meaningful to those who followed them. Biblical scholars like Jacob Milgrom and more recently Jonathan Klawans, attuned to developments in the social sciences, have made very great advances in our understanding of Israelite purity practices. They've tended to view the elaborate and carefully constructed texts of P as part of a system whose meaning derives from the larger cultural matrix or grid in which those materials are embedded. How much the system laid down by P represents what ordinary Israelite Judeans thought and did; how much these rules were actually enacted and followed; how much they drew upon older random practices, brought them together, modified them, imposed some semblance of order upon them; how much they represent just the ideal construction or blueprint of an elite group: these are all unanswerable questions. The fact is, no one really knows. But we do know from living cultures that people do engage in all kinds of ritual and symbolic actions because of genuine beliefs about the importance of those actions, because those rituals and symbols are extraordinarily meaningful to them. And in any event, our primary concern is with the program of the texts as they stand before us: is there a symbolism operating here? What are the key ideas and the key themes of the Priestly material? How do these ideas or how does this material jive with other aspects of Israelite religion that we've talked about so far? What ultimately is the purpose toward which these materials are aiming?

[5] Well, like the rest of the ancient world, Israel had a cultic system, and that cultic system featured a sanctuary: a sacred space with holy objects; sacred objects, where priests performed a variety of ritual acts. So Israelite-Judean religion on the ground shared many cultic forms and practices and rituals with Canaanite and Ancient Near Eastern culture generally. Sanctuaries in the ancient world were understood to be the dwelling place of the deity. Sacrifices were offered to the deity in his or her sanctuary. P describes a portable sanctuary, a *mishkan*, that's used in the

wilderness period. Now, if you look on your handout, there's a reconstruction of this tent-like sanctuary at the top as well as a schematization of its contents below. So woven curtains hung from wooden frames that could easily be assembled and disassembled. And these curtains surround the sacred precincts. You see that in the top picture. And within those precincts, within that enclosure, there's a large, open courtyard. That was accessible to all Israelites. The main sacrificial altar with a large ramp stood in that courtyard as well as a basin that was there for ablutions. And then halfway across the courtyard, there was a screen that marked the entrance to another little enclosure, which is the shrine proper, the sanctuary proper; and only priests have access to that area. The shrine or sanctuary housed an incense altar. And then on one side a seven-branched lampstand or menorah. And on the other, a table, which held loaves of bread that were changed on a weekly basis.

[6] The backmost square-shaped chamber of that inner shrine was the inner sanctum or the holy of holies. And that was accessible only to the high priest and only on the Day of Atonement following a series of heightened purity observances. Inside that holy of holies was the ark. It was about four feet by two-and-a-half feet. It was a wooden ark covered in gold. On top was a kind of covering. It's referred to as a *kapporeth*: we don't really know what this word means, it's traditionally translated "mercy seat," I think that's how the JPS [Jewish Publication Society] might translate it. But it's some kind of gold cover and then there were two cherubim, these enormous winged lions that flanked the ark. Likely they were connected to that mercy seat cover. If so, then what they were was a throne. And we have in Ancient Near Eastern iconography thrones of this type. We have pictures of gods and kings seated on these seats, the sides of which are these giant winged cherubim, and then their feet rest on a footstool. Likewise, in some biblical verses, God or Yahweh is described as enthroned upon the cherubim. The ark then is said to serve as his footstool. So that's sort of the box that he would have rested his feet on. The ark itself contained the tablets of the covenant. And so it was a testament to the covenant between God and Israel.

[7] Interestingly, unlike most ancient sanctuaries, the Israelite sanctuary did not contain a statue

of the deity. And that's I think evidence of the very strong aniconic tendency of Israelite religion. Nevertheless, God was believed to be present in the sanctuary. Often in the form of a cloud that will fill, that will descend to fill the tabernacle, particularly as it's assembled in a new encampment, and then God will descend down and the cloud will fill the tabernacle. So it is God's presence there that sanctifies, which simply means "makes holy, makes sacred," to sanctify, to make holy, the tabernacle. And to understand this, we need to understand the Priestly conception of holiness.

2. The Priestly Conceptions of Holiness and Time

[8] And the Hebrew word "holy" has a root meaning of separate. Separate. That which is holy is separate. It's withdrawn from common, everyday use. In the Priestly view, only God is intrinsically holy; intrinsically holy. God can impart holiness to, he can sanctify, persons and places and things when they're brought into a specific kind of relationship with him, a relationship that's best described as a relationship of ownership. What is holy is what is in God's realm, something that's separated to him. That which is outside God's realm is common. The Hebrew word for "common" is sometimes translated by the English word "profane." That has a negative connotation in English, but in fact it really doesn't bear that negative connotation. Profane simply means not holy; not sacred. We use it differently now. But the fact is that the common or profane state is the natural default state of most objects and things. This table is just profane. It's common. It's available for everyday use. It's not separated or marked off for special kind of treatment because it's holy. For a common object to become holy, you need a special act of dedication to God, an act of sanctification to transfer the thing to God or God's realm or God's service.

[9] So holiness entails necessarily separation in both its positive and negative aspects. It entails separation of an object to that which sanctifies it, which is God; and it involves separation from, in the form of safeguards against, anything that would threaten to remove its sanctity. So separation from that which threatens its sanctity. Holy things are holy because they are removed from the realm of the

common by means of rules or safeguards that demarcate them as different and separate and determine that we use them differently. The preservation of holy status therefore depends on those rules and safeguards. Their observance protects the holy object from profanation, from being profaned, reverting from holy status back to common status.

[10] Now, it's evident from the schematic representation or the way I've described the sanctuary that holiness increases as you move deeper into the sanctuary. And the principle here that holiness increases as proximity to God increases. The principle is graphically demonstrated in spatial terms. So in the biblical view, the area or the land outside the Israelite camp is just common, profane land. The Israelite camp bears a certain degree of holiness. Then as you move in, the outer courtyard, the outer enclosure of the sanctuary, bears a slightly higher degree of holiness. It's accessible to Israelites who are pure. The sanctuary proper, which is in closer proximity to God, bears a still higher degree of holiness: it's accessible only to the priests, who are said to be the holy ones within Israel. And then the inner shrine is the holiest area: it's accessible only to the holiest member of the nation, the high priest.

[11] You have similar concentric circles of holiness characterizing the priestly conception of time. There are ordinary, common, profane days, work days. Then there are certain holy days: for example, the New Year or the Passover holidays — that's where our word "holiday" comes from, holy day — and they are separated and demarcated from common time by special rules that mark them as different. Holier than these days is the Sabbath, which is demarcated by even further rules and observances. And the holiest day is Yom Kippur, known as the Sabbath of Sabbaths. This day is separated from all other days by additional rules and observances in keeping with its profound holiness. The holiness of persons, of objects, of time and of space all converge on Yom Kippur, because it's only on this most holy day that the most holy person, high priest, enters the most holy of holies, the innermost shrine, and performs a ritual upon the most holy of objects, the mercy seat and ark itself once a year.

3. Holiness, Purity, Moral and Ritual Impurity

[12] Well, now we need to consider the deep connection that exists between holiness and purity. Because the two are not identical despite massive amounts of scholarship that confuses this issue: thinks holy means pure, thinks common means impure, and it just doesn't: these are different binary oppositions. The two are not identical. To be holy means to belong to or to be in the realm of God. Things can't become holy and can't come into contact with the holy or the sacred if they are not first pure. Purity, which is the absence of impurity, is a prerequisite for access to the holy or for holy status. To be in a state of purity simply means that one is qualified to contact the sacred: to enter the sacred precincts, to handle sacred objects, and so on. To be in a state of impurity simply means that one is not qualified to contact the sacred. So if you're impure at home and just minding your own business, it's no big deal. It's only a problem if you decide you want to go to the sanctuary. So purity and impurity are states of qualification or disqualification for contact with sancta. The holy is by definition pure: by definition. Only that which is free of impurity can contact the holy. If an impure object — and you will see here these overlapping pairs, which were also in your handout — if you can imagine the lower pair sort of being plunked down on top of this pair, that will give you an idea of what we're trying to convey with this image. Okay? Things are either holy or common. But if they're holy, they must be pure. Common objects can be pure or impure; it just depends whether or not they've been in contact with a source of impurity or not. Alright? If — but notice that the holy and the impure are never conjoined — if an impure object comes in contact with a holy object, then the holy object is immediately defiled; it's immediately rendered impure. The word "defiled" means to take on some form of ritual impurity. And it loses its holy status automatically. So it becomes both impure and profane.

[13] To be restored, then, you're going to have to have two things happening. First of all, it's got to be purified — you've got to get rid of the ritual impurity, so there'll have to be some ritual procedure that purges the impurity. So once you've done that, you've made it pure; but it's still common, profane. So it has to, if it's to

be made holy again, it has to be rededicated or given over to God again, re-sanctified: maybe a little holy anointing oil poured on it, that's one means of sanctification; simply handing it over to God, elevating it towards God is another way of re-sanctifying something. But there has to be two steps: a purification and then a sanctification to make it holy again. Increased access to the holy requires increased, an increased degree of purity. That's the connection between holiness and purity. So the purity that's required of a priest, who has access to the sanctuary proper, is higher than that of an Israelite, who has access to the outer courtyard only. The purity required of the high priest is even greater.

[14] So to be pure, one must separate oneself from sources of impurity. What are these sources of impurity? And I hope you've had a chance to look at the reading material, because I'm going to go through this relatively quickly. Jonathan Klawans has been the most vocal proponent of the claim that biblical texts speak of two distinct types of impurity: ritual impurity and moral impurity, which I have up here [on the board]. You've read the short article he has in the Jewish Study Bible, but he's also written about this at great length in other places. And according to Klawans and others, ritual impurity arises from physical substances and states which are not in themselves sinful. There's no intimate connection with sin when we're talking about ritual impurity. In fact, a lot of ritual impurity is unavoidable and sometimes even obligatory, right? Sexual contact makes one ritually impure, and yet God commands humans to be fruitful and multiply. Burying the dead makes one ritually impure, but God commands proper care of the dead. So there's nothing inherently sinful about contracting ritual impurity.

[15] Ritual impurity, which is generally permitted, is distinguished by the characteristics I've quickly jotted down here. It's contagious, that is, it's transferred to other persons or objects, depending on how receptive they are — perhaps by physical touch, perhaps in the case of severe impurity by sharing an enclosed space, by being together under an overhanging roof, tent. Ritual impurity is also impermanent. It can be removed or reduced through rituals of ablutions or just the passage of time or other sorts of ritual observances. Ritual impurity also defiles or renders impure sancta, and so it has

to be kept separate from sancta. In very severe cases, it can even defile some common objects, and in those cases, the source of impurity might have to be isolated or excluded if necessary.

[16] Now, the concept of ritual impurity was a central and integral feature of most, if not all, ancient religions. And the biblical laws of purity and impurity strongly resemble those of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures: Egyptian, Mesopotamian, even Hittite culture. And certainly, there are Ancient Near Eastern and Canaanite roots for Israelite purity practices. But the system of ritual purity and impurity that is crafted in the Priestly writings of the Hebrew Bible represents an attempt to monotheize, to monotheize Israelite purity practices and to create a system that differentiated Israel from her close neighbors. So, for example, impurity was often connected with belief in evil spirits and impure demons. It's quite possible that Israel's purification rituals may have originated and even long endured as rituals of exorcism that expelled a demon who was believed to be causing the affliction in question. That may be their origin and source; but in the Priestly writings, impurity is generally divorced from any association with evil spirits.

[17] Some scholars theorize that the ritual purity system reflects an original concern with health or hygiene. But this isn't very convincing. Only one set of diseases is said to generate ritual impurity, and many substances that are widely considered unhygienic by most cultures — for example, human and animal excrement — these are not sources of ritual impurity to Israel's priests. So Klawans is among those who insist that any effort to understand the purpose and the meaning of Israelite purity practices as schematized by the monotheizing Priestly writers in Leviticus 12 through 16 — and again whether actual Israelite Judeans did this or understood things this way, we'll never know — but to understand the schematization of, the monotheizing schematization of Israel's purity practices, we would do better to ignore questions of origins and to attend to the larger symbolism of impurity and holiness in these writings: in particular, we need to try to understand the antithetical relationship between impurity and holiness. The two are opposites. They are opposed and antagonistic towards one another.

[18] So Klawans points out, as you know, that there are three main sources of impurity in P. First of all, corpses and certain carcasses are a source of ritual impurity: *sara'at*, which is this — we translate it “scale disease,” it's been called leprosy. It's definitely not leprosy. People who know such things have read the details in the biblical texts and it's not what is truly known as leprosy. But it's some sort of skin disease, flaking skin disease or other sorts of boils and skin states that seem to be associated, at least in the Israelite mind, with decomposition and death. We have a couple of passages, one in the book of Numbers, one in the book of Job, which describe this condition in a way that identifies it with death. An aborted fetus is often described as looking like it has this condition, for example — not often, it happens once in the book of Job. But the point is there's a connection between this condition, this skin condition, and its decomposition and death. The third source of ritual impurity would be genital discharges, both normal and diseased. So Klawans notes in the article you read that the physical substances and states that are labeled impure and are therefore designated as antithetical to the realm of holiness are states that are associated with death on the one hand, and procreation on the other. Why should this be?

[19] The Priestly conception of god, you will recall, is of an immortal and asexual being. Think back to the first creation story, which is the Priestly creation story. To enter the realm of the holy, in which there is neither death nor procreation, requires a separation from death and procreation. It is association with death and sexuality that renders one impure and disqualifies one from entering the holy sanctuary. That is not to say that one shouldn't deal with death or sexuality in the ordinary course of life. On the contrary, God explicitly commands humans to be fruitful and multiply, and he does that in the P-source, right? In Genesis 1. He commands proper care of the dead, and he also does that in the P-source. It simply means that one cannot enter the holy sanctuary, God's realm, when impure through contact with death or sexuality.

4. Ritual Purification, Sacrifices and Offerings, and Imitatio Dei

[20] So according to Klawans, ritual purification involved separation from those aspects of humanity, death and sex, that are least God-like. To enter God's realm requires imitation of God or *imitatio dei*, right, an idea that I put up here, *imitatio dei*: imitation of god. And Klawans further argues that the concept of *imitatio dei* also explains the practice of sacrifice which, on the face of it, contradicts the idea that you must avoid death in connection with the holy, right? Because sacrifice entails killing right in the sanctuary, killing of animals right in the sanctuary. So Klawans argues, and I quote, that "sacrifice involves in part the controlled exercise of complete power over an animal's life and death." Which is, he says "...precisely one of the powers that Israel's God exercises over human beings. As God is to humanity, humans in imitation of God are towards their domesticated animals." So the process of sacrifice, I won't go into his argument here, but Klawans develops a strong argument that the process of sacrifice can be understood itself as an act of *imitatio dei*, because sacrifice involves a variety of behaviors in the biblical text that are analogous to behaviors attributed elsewhere in the biblical texts to God: the care and feeding and raising of domestic animals, the selection of one that is deemed perfect, control over its life and death and so on. And these are all spoken of in terms that are analogous to terms used to describe God as the shepherd of his flock of Israel and in control of life and death and so on. So Klawans argues that the process of sacrifice, which grants the offerer complete control over life and death, is a kind of *imitatio dei*.

[21] But Klawans also asserts, and I quote, that "*Imitatio dei* does not exhaustively explain sacrifice in ancient Israel," and in fact, we should be surprised if any one single theory would indeed explain sacrifice. So he just says that there are really two organizing principles or overriding concerns in the Priestly traditions and the Priestly materials regarding sacrifice. The first, as we've seen, is *imitatio dei*. But the second is a desire to attract and maintain the divine presence, the continued presence of God in the sanctuary. The majority of the sacrifices that are described in the opening chapters of Leviticus, in Leviticus 1 through 7, are

voluntary sacrifices. These are sacrifices that are offered as gifts or in times of celebration. I put a little list of them up here, but the first three are the ones that will concern us now.

[22] We have first of all, the whole offering or "burnt offering," it's sometimes called. This is when an animal is entirely burned to create, as the text says, a pleasant-smelling odor or pleasant-smelling smoke that ascends to God. So according to P, the priests are to offer two such burnt offerings with pleasing-smelling odors to the Lord every day: one in the morning and one in the evening on a regular basis from the community. The second kind of offering that's described is the grain offering. This is a gift of flour and oil and incense, which is burned after a portion is removed for the priests as dues to the priests, the rest is burned on the altar again with a sweet smell from the incense. Third, we have a set of offerings known as well-being offerings, "peace offerings" it's sometimes translated. These offerings are generally consumed by the offerer and his family, very often in a festive situation, as a big feast, after certain portions are donated to the priests, again. Well-being offerings are of three main types. You have the thanksgiving offering. You have a freewill offering — just because someone wants to do this, a freewill offering. And you have a vow offering that would be offered on the successful completion of a vow, for example. And these sacrifices are all entirely optional. They were offered in celebration. They were offered in thanksgiving or upon the successful completion of a vow. In other words, the sacrificial cult was primarily a vehicle for worshipers' expression of a wide range of emotions: joy over the birth of a child, thankfulness for a good harvest and so on.

[23] Now, texts from Ancient Near Eastern cultures suggest that a central function of the rituals that were performed in sanctuaries was to secure the perpetual aid and blessing of a well-disposed deity. And in important ways, the Israelite cult is strikingly similar, particularly in the sacrifices I've just described. The Israelites certainly hoped to secure the perpetual aid and blessing and protection of a well-disposed deity. Blessing and benefaction flow from God's presence in the midst of the community in his sanctuary: when he is there, there is blessing. So Klawans follows earlier scholars in suggesting that the rituals and sacrifices performed in this sanctuary were designed to

ensure God's continued residence within and blessing of the community. In particular, the daily burnt offerings sacrificed by the priests twice each day, and emitting this pleasing odor: these were an effort to attract the deity. Likewise, the gifts — the other foods and pleasing odors of the sacrifices brought by individual worshipers — attracted and maintained the continued presence of God in the sanctuary. So this is the second overriding concern or organizing principle of the sacrifice: not simply that there should be *imitatio dei* within God's realm, but also that the activities there should attract and maintain the presence of the deity for the well-being of the community.

5. Moral Impurity, Defiling the Land and Purification

[24] But just as God is attracted by certain kinds of behaviors, so he is repelled by others. And in the Priestly system, grave sins generate an impurity, now a moral impurity, so now we're coming to the second kind of impurity, moral impurity that repels the divine presence. Okay? So moral impurity is the second kind of impurity that's described by Klawans and others. In contrast to ritual impurity, moral impurity does arise from the commission of sins. Ritual impurity does not: there's nothing that's prohibitive about — you're never told not to become ritually impure, okay? There's nothing sinful about it, inherently. But moral impurity arises specifically from the commission of certain heinous sins specifically. The three that I've listed here are the biggies: idolatry, homicide and sexual transgressions. These are spelled out in Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20, those two chapters. Besides defiling the sinner, moral impurity symbolically defiles various sancta, especially the sanctuary, but also God's name and also the Holy Land itself.

[25] Moral impurity differs from ritual impurity not simply because of its origin in sin, but also in the fact that it's not contagious, alright? You don't contract impurity by touching a murderer, the way that you contract ritual impurity by touching somebody with gonorrhea. Also, moral impurity is not removed or reducible through rituals, through washings and launderings, ritual ablutions and the like. That does not touch moral impurity in a person.

Moral purity of persons can be achieved only by punishment for heinous sins: for example, the punishment of *chirate*, or cutting off, is a divine punishment of being extirpated from the House of Israel; death, alright, that's one way to be rid of moral impurity. Also it can be achieved by simply avoiding or abstaining from defiling, immoral acts in the first place: that's another way to achieve moral purity. Also, if you atone for unwitting sins that you perhaps later realize and regret; acknowledge and confess, then that can also have a reduced moral impurity.

[26] Very severe moral impurity defiles the innermost areas of the sanctuary as well as the land. Now, the sanctuary can be purified of moral impurity, and I'll come back and talk about that in a second; but the land really cannot. Land that is repeatedly defiled, or the holy land of God that is repeatedly defiled by sexual transgressions, for example, cannot be purified. Eventually it will simply "vomit out," the biblical text says, it will simply vomit out those who dwell on it. This is a reference to exile. This is consistent with the representation of the expulsion of the Canaanites from God's land. Remember when God said, "The sin of the Amorites is not yet complete, when they have sinned so much and to such a degree, they will be vomited out and then your tenancy can begin"? The land will purge itself of the impurity by vomiting them out. And this is consistent then with the repeated warnings in Leviticus to the Israelites not to engage in similar abominable and sinful practices — the sexual transgressions, the bloodshed, the idolatry — because they too will pollute the land until it vomits them out. They will be expelled.

[27] The land is also defiled by illicit homicide. There is legal homicide, of course, judicial death and so on in the Bible, but illicit homicide, whether intentional or unintentional, murder or accidental homicide. The manslayer bears blood guilt, what is referred to as "blood guilt." That's a kind of moral impurity, and his life is forfeit because of that. In cases of deliberate murder, blood guilt and impurity are removed only by the death of the murderer himself: only blood atones for blood. In cases of accidental homicide, the perpetrator can take refuge in one of five cities that are designated for this purpose: the five cities of refuge. They can live there until the death of the high priest,

and the death of the high priest symbolically serves to purge or remove the blood guilt or impurity of the accidental homicide. Idolatry also defiles the land. Offenders are subject to stoning and the divine penalty of *chirate*, of cutting off. The Bible repeatedly warns that idols and their cultic appurtenances must be completely destroyed from the Holy Land, right? The Israelites have to eradicate that, they're polluting the land.

[28] Now, in contrast to the land, God's sanctuary can be purified for moral impurity by means of a special sacrifice. And this is the fourth sacrifice listed here, the *hatta't*, which is the purification sacrifice. It's often erroneously translated as a "sin offering." It's better translated as a purification offering. How does it operate? The blood of the animal, the blood of the sacrifice is the key to the whole ritual. Remember that impurity and sin are often associated with death. Holiness, that which is holy, is often associated with life. And if the two are antithetical then it makes sense. If impurity is associated with death, it makes sense that its antithesis, holiness, would be associated with life. According to the Priestly source, blood, the blood that courses through one's veins, represents the life force. Remember in the Noahide covenant, in Genesis 9, which is a Priestly passage, the Priestly blood prohibition: You may not spill human blood. And you may not eat animal flesh that has the lifeblood in it because the blood is the life and that belongs to God, that's holy, right? So the life force is holy and the life force is in the blood. Leviticus 17:11 says this; it repeats the blood prohibition, and then it offers a rationale. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar." I've assigned it to you to use in sacrificial practices. It is the blood as life that effects expiation, purging and atonement.

[29] So the Priestly texts couldn't be clearer: blood represents life. The blood of sacrificial animals is assigned by God as a detergent, if you will, to cleanse the sanctuary of the impurities that are caused by the sinful deeds of the Israelites. Sacrifices that purge the sanctuary of ritual impurity, primarily the *hatta't*, always involve the manipulation of the animal's blood, daubing it on the altar and on Yom Kippur, actually entering the innermost shrine and sprinkling it on the throne of God and the

footstool, the ark itself. It symbolizes the victory of the forces of life, oath and holiness over death and impurity. Other purificatory rights that are listed in the Bible will sometimes involve the use of reddish substances as a kind of surrogate of blood.

[30] It's a widely — it is widely and mistakenly thought that the purification offering purifies the sinner or the impurity bearer or the offerer. This can't be true. The *hatta't*, the purification offering, doesn't rid a ritually impure person of their ritual impurity. You can't even offer a sacrifice unless you're already ritually pure, because you couldn't get into the sanctuary to offer your sacrifice if you weren't ritually pure. You can't approach to offer a sacrifice if you're not in a state of ritual purity already. So purification offerings are brought after the genital discharge has healed and passed; after the scale disease has healed and passed; after the appropriate ablutions have been observed and the person is essentially pure. But there's one more step they have to take before they're integrated back into the community. The *hatta't* also does not rid a sinner of their moral impurity, because the offering is brought after the sinner has confessed, after the sinner has repented. The purification offering acts on the sanctuary, not on the offerer. It purges the sanctuary of the defilement that is symbolically — it has symbolically suffered from the offerer's state of ritual impurity or sinfulness. Once the sanctuary is purged, the offerer has settled his debt, he's repaired the damage he caused. He's fully atoned, "at one" again with God. And God is no longer repelled by the impurity that marred his sanctuary.

[31] The defiling effect of lesser transgressions is calibrated to the sinner's intentionality and the presence or absence of repentance. So inadvertent sins can be purged, the sanctuary defilement that they cause can be purged by bringing a purification sacrifice. What about deliberate sins? As long as there is repentance, the biblical text says, then they are converted into inadvertent sins, and they also can be purged, or the impurity they cause can be purged with a purification sacrifice. But brazen, unrepentant sins, unrepented sins, or unintentional sins that are never realized...these stand unremedied, and they defile the sanctuary. So for this reason, the sanctuary has to be regularly purged of the accumulated defilements accruing to it as a

result of such sins. Leviticus 16 describes the annual ritual which is carried out on the day of atonement or day of purgation, it can be called, Yom Kippur, when a hatta't sacrifice, a purification sacrifice is brought on behalf of the community to purify the sanctuary of the impurities that have been caused by Israel's sin. And the high priest loads all of the sins and impurities of the Israelites on the head of a goat, which then carries them off into the wilderness away from the sanctuary.

[32] Purification of the sanctuary was believed to be critical to the health and the well-being of the community. If the sanctuary is not purged of impurity, it can become polluted to the point when God is driven out entirely. Jacob Milgrom has argued that there's a kind of Archimedean principle at work here: every sin creates an impurity that encroaches upon the realm of holiness and displaces a certain amount of holiness. And eventually, God will be completely displaced and the community will be left in a godless state, without blessing or protection. So Milgrom sees the symbolic function of the purity system this way: if the sanctuary symbolizes the presence of God, and if impurity represents the wrongdoing of persons, then by saying that impurity is anathema to God and pollutes his temple, the priests are able to graphically convey the idea that sin forces God out of his sanctuary and out of the community. Jacob Milgrom sees a moral message at the base of this complex, symbolic picture. And that is that humans and humans alone are responsible for the rein of wickedness and death or the rein of righteousness and life. Human actions determine the degree to which God can dwell on earth among his people. So the goal or the objective of the Priestly construction or representation of Israel's impurity laws was, in Milgrom's view, to sever impurity from the demonic and to reinterpret it as a symbolic system reminding Israel of the divine imperative to reject sin, to behave in ways that attract the presence of God and do not repel him.

[33] You also read an article by Milgrom where Milgrom talks about Priestly cultic imagery serving as a kind of theodicy. A theodicy of course is a response to the problem of evil. How can an all-powerful, good God allow so much evil to exist and even go unpunished? And according to Milgrom, this is the priestly answer: every sin pollutes the sanctuary. It may

not mark the sinner, but it does mark the sanctuary. It scars the face of the sanctuary. You may think you've gotten away with something, but every act of social exploitation, every act of moral corruption, pollutes the sanctuary more and more until such time as God is driven out entirely and human society is devoured by its own viciousness and death-dealing. So again, the ethical message here is that humans are in control of their destiny and the action of every individual affects and influences the fate of society. This is really the Priestly version of an old biblical doctrine, a doctrine of collective responsibility. Sin affects...individual sin affects the entire fabric of society. There's no such thing as an isolated evil; our deeds affect one another. And when evildoers are finally punished, they bring down others with them. Those others, however, aren't so blameless, Milgrom says, because they allowed the wicked to flourish and contribute to the pollution of the sanctuary, the corruption of society. So P's cultic imagery is informed, according to Milgrom, by the same communal ethic that we will see running through the Bible, much of the Bible, until a later period. It's simply conveying that ethic in its own modality through the symbolism of the sanctuary and the cult.

6. Dietary Law and the Holiness Code

[34] The 11th chapter of Leviticus deals with the dietary laws. We don't have time to go into them at any great length. I will say that Milgrom has also argued that the dietary laws of Leviticus are similarly part of a symbol system that emphasizes life over death. This is the following evidence that he cites; the mainstays of the dietary laws are these: first, the prohibition against eating animal blood from Genesis 9, which symbolizes the life. We also, in Leviticus 11, meat dietary laws that are governed by criteria such as cud chewing and having a split hoof; you can only eat animals that chew the cud and have a split hoof. And those criteria seem arbitrary and meaningless in and of themselves, and he says they are. But look at their practical effect: that limits the number of animals that one can eat to a mere handful out of the hundreds upon hundreds of creatures on the earth, that basically leaves you with — my animal husbandry is not good here — but it leaves you with the bovine and the ovine classes — I guess ovine are goats and

some such — so it leaves you basically with goats and sheep and cattle. Some have hypothesized that whatever the origin of various food taboos in Israel, the Priestly texts have tried to create a dietary discipline that drives home the point that all life shared also by animals is inviolable, except in the case of meat, which has been conceded by God, and provided that the animals are slaughtered properly, painlessly, and that their blood, which is symbolic of the life, is not appropriated but returned to God, its sacred source.

[35] So perhaps as it stands, the system of dietary laws does in fact emphasize reverence for life. But they also serve another very important function, and that was the formation and maintenance of a differentiated ethnic identity or in Priestly parlance, the formation and maintenance of a holy peoples separated out from other nations by rules that mark her as God's people. It's surely significant that the dietary laws are followed by a powerful exhortation to be holy in imitation of God, Leviticus 11:43-45. So we've just had the prohibition of not eating certain kinds of small animals, designated as anything that swarms. And the text says,

[36] You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through anything that swarms; you shall not make yourselves unclean therewith and thus become unclean. For I the Lord am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not make yourselves unclean through any swarming thing that moves upon the earth. For I the Lord am He who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God: you shall be holy, for I am holy.

[37] Look at how much this is emphasized. The dietary laws are presented by the priests not as a hygienic regimen — who knows if that's how they started — not as a sensible way to avoid various diseases that are caused by the lack of refrigeration in the desert. Whatever the actual origin of these various dietary taboos, they are here embedded in a larger ideological framework concerning the need for the Israelites to separate themselves and to be holy like their god. The dietary laws are connected then with this theme of *imitatio dei*, of imitation of God. As God is holy, separate and distinct, so you shall be holy.

[38] I just want to take two last minutes to quickly point to this theme of holiness that continues in the section referred to as the Holiness Code. This theme, and the exhortation, "you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy," they find their fullest expression in the block of text; Leviticus 17 through 26 that's referred to as the Holiness Code. There's an important difference between Leviticus 1 through 16 and the Holiness Code. According to Leviticus 1 through 16, Israel's priests are designated as holy: a holy class within Israel, singled out, dedicated to the service of God and demarcated by rules that apply only to them. Israelites may aspire to holiness, but it's not assumed. However, in the Holiness Code, we have texts that come closer to the idea that Israel itself is holy by virtue of the fact that God has set Israel apart from the nations to himself, to belong to him, just as he set apart the seventh day to himself to belong with him.

[39] Holy things only exist because of safeguards, rules that keep them separate, that demarcate them. And these safeguards and rules are naturally addressed to human beings. They are the ones charged with the task of preserving the holy in its residence on earth. So although holiness derives from god, humans have a crucial role to play in sanctification, in sanctifying the world. That's illustrated in the case of the Sabbath. God sanctified the Sabbath at creation; he demarcated it as holy. But Israel is the one to affirm its holiness by observing the rules that make it different, that mark it off as holy. So Israel doesn't just in fact affirm the holy status of the Sabbath, they actualize the holy status of the Sabbath. If Israel doesn't observe the prohibitions that distinguish the Sabbath as sacred, it's automatically desecrated. "You shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy for you. He who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does work on it, that person is cut off from among his kin." You automatically, it is automatically desecrated and profaned if you don't observe its rules. So there are two components integral and inseparable in the concept of holiness: initial assignment of holy status by God and establishment of rules to preserve that holy status, and secondly, actualization of that holiness by humans through the observance of the commandments and rules that mark that thing off as holy. That's going to lead us very nicely into an understanding of the laws that

mark off Israel's status and keep Israel distinct among the nations, which we'll be looking at on Wednesday. So please take a look at the materials that were sent out: the Ancient Near Eastern collection and some of the questions to guide you through this material.

[40] [end of transcript]

[41] References

[42] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from "Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.