

Leviticus 11-16: Holiness, Purity, and Purification

1. Documentary Hypothesis Review #2: J, E, and P in the history of Israelite religion

Continuities with early Israelite religion and ancient Near Eastern culture:

- J and E both seem to date from the monarchic period. As such, they reflect Israelite religion prior to the Babylonian Exile. Moreover, they seem to preserve even earlier Israelite ideas about God, which are more consonant with ancient Near Eastern views of divinity (e.g., as tribal divinity [YHWH as “God of Israel” and “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”], as warrior [esp. Exodus narrative and songs of celebration after Israel’s Exodus from Egypt], as mountain-god and storm-god [esp. Sinai narrative]).
- The earliest, J, depicts God as human-like in form and personality; this is true also for E, but E stresses as well that a human being cannot look at God and live.
- By contrast, P is penned later (at the very end of the monarchic period in Judah [so Friedman] and likely during exilic times as well [so Blenkinsopp]), and P possibly developed in an institutionalized setting of a priestly school (so Blenkinsopp). Consistent with P’s theological concerns, its view of God is more heightened, abstract, and elevated, with a stress on His cosmic significance and His importance, not only to Israel, but to all people.

Centralized worship:

- Even as J and E stress the importance of the specific locales from which they sprung (w/J stressing the South and E the North), these early sources depict holiness as potentially localized in a variety of places within the Promised Land. This is especially true of J, who traces the worship of YHWH as God to the time of Seth and who depicts a number of pre-Mosaic figures offering sacrifices to YHWH.
- The time of P, however, was after the reforms by King Hezekiah (715-687 BCE) and later King Josiah (ca. 620 BCE), which involved the centralization of worship to one locale: the Temple at Jerusalem. P consistently depicts only a single possible center of worship (Sinai → Tabernacle → Temple), which serves as the central locus of all holiness and the single place where God dwells on earth.

Relationship between God and Israel:

- Covenantal fidelity is the keynote of E, whereas P stresses the importance of the priesthood. Although ethical, legal, social, familial, and ritual/religious commandments are intertwined in both sources (consistent with the Israelite concept of divine law as applying to all facets of human life), E tends to stress ethics, P focuses on the ritual/religious, by virtue of its concern with the proper functioning of the priesthood as a means continually to connect Israel with God and daily to affirm their relationship. In E, the covenant—and thus Israel’s relationship with God—is conditional, tied to their fulfillment of God’s commandments. In P, the priesthood—and thus Israel’s relationship with God—is eternal.

2. Conceptual basis of P’s purity laws: Sacred/Common, Pure/Impure

- In P, sacrifice is predicated on a notion of the infinite and qualitative difference between divine and human. How can humankind, inherently imperfect and thus often rebellious, exist in God’s presence? Sacrifice is P’s answer to this question. God’s establishment of a special relationship with Israel is tied to the responsibility of becoming a holy people (as per Leviticus’ repeated refrain, placed in the mouth of God: “You must be holy, for I am holy”). To mediate the holiness of a wholly other God, priests serve on behalf of Israel, which in turn serves on behalf of the rest of humankind and God’s Creation.
- Just as P described Creation as a progressive act of separation whereby God imposed order of primordial chaos, so P’s description of the purity laws are predicated on classification of all things based on their relationship, actual and potential, to God. Central are two dichotomous pairs: sacred/common and pure/impure. According to Lev 10:10, one of the main roles of the priesthood is to distinguish between them.
- Why classify things as pure/impure? P’s purification laws and purificatory rituals are founded on a worldview whereby everything in the world can be categorized since God’s cosmos is orderly. Everything has a set place in the divine order, and everything derives its meaning from its relationship to God. In practice, this means that everything in the world is graded in holiness in relation to God.

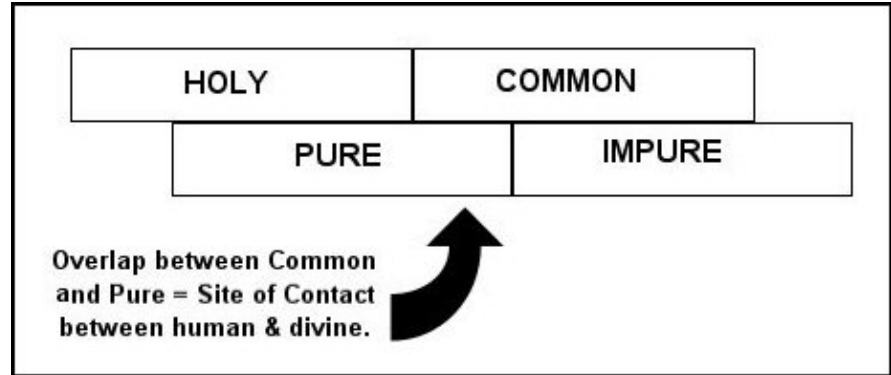
Chart 1: Major episodes in each source, according to the Documentary Hypothesis
(see http://www.hope.edu/academic/religion/bandstra/RTOT/PART1/PT1_TC.HTM)

J Source		
Primeval Story	Creation	Gen 2:4b-25
	Garden of Eden	Gen 3:1-24
	Cain and Abel	Gen 4:1-16
	Sons of God	Gen 6:1-4
	Flood	Gen 6-9 (with P)
	Tower of Babel	Gen 11:1-9
Ancestral Story	Abraham: Ur to Canaan	Gen 12:1-13:18
	Hagar and Ishmael	Gen 16
	Sodom and Gomorrah	Gen 18-19
	Wife for Isaac	Gen 24
	Sarah as Sister	Gen 26
	Jacob, Leah and Rachel	Gen 29
	Dinah and Shechem	Gen 34
Exodus and Sinai	Joseph Story	Gen 37-50 (with E and P)
	Plagues and Exodus	Ex 1-17 (with E and P)
	Ritual Decalogue	Ex 34 (with E)
Wilderness Experiences	Spies	Num 13-14 (with P)
	Rebellion of Korah	Num 16 (with P)

E Source		
Ancestral Story	Sarah as Sister	Gen 20:1-18
	Sacrifice of Isaac	Gen 22:1-10, 16b-19
	Jacob wrestles with God	Gen 32:22-32
	Joseph Short Story	Gen 37-50 (with J and P)
Exodus and Sinai	Midwives	Ex 1:15-21
	Burning Bush	Ex 3:1-15 (with J)
	Ex from Egypt	Ex 13
	Wilderness Incidents	Ex 17-18
	Theophany	Ex 19:1-9
	Ten Commandments	Ex 20:1-17 (with P)
	Book of the Covenant	Ex 20:18-23:33
Wilderness Experiences	Covenant Ceremony	Ex 24:1-18 (with P)
	Golden Calf	Ex 32-33
	Complaints and Disputes	Num 11-12
	Balaam and the Moabites	Num 22-24

P Source		
Primeval Story	Creation	Gen 1:1-2:4
	Geneology of Seth	Gen 5:1-28, 30-32
	Flood	Gen 6-9 (with J)
	Table of Nations	Gen 10
	Geneology of Shem	Gen 11:10-27
Ancestral Story	Covenant of Circumcision	Gen 17
	Abraham buys Machpelah	Gen 23
Exodus and Sinai	Joseph Story	Gen 37-50 (with J and E)
	Call of Moses	Ex 6-7 (with J)
	Ex	Ex 12-14 (with J and E)
	Tabernacle design	Ex 25-31
	Tabernacle construction	Ex 35-40
	Cultic regulations	Lev 1-27
	Sinai wrapup, departure	Num 1-10
Wilderness Experiences	Spies	Num 13-14 (with J)
	Rebellion of Korah	Num 16 (with J)
	Levites	Num 17-18
	Red Heifer	Num 19
	Baal Peor sin	Num 25 (with J)

What is pure is not necessary sacred, and what is common is not necessarily impure. Rather, these dichotomous pairs with certain overlaps. People and things can be [1] Common + Impure, [2] Common + Pure, and [3] Sacred + Pure, but never [4] Sacred and Impure. Purity/impurity is also relative: “impure for you”



The one exception to this schema may be blood. This is a special case, as per its association with both life and death: blood (= life) belongs to God alone (Lev 7:26-27: “Moreover you shall eat no blood whatever, whether of fowl or of animal, in any of your dwellings; whoever eats any blood, that person shall be cut off from his people.”) and cannot be consumed by humans for that reason. Blood is also the main material of sacrifice (Lev 17:11: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement”).

Sacred/Holy (*qodesh*) = Inherent to God as “wholly Other” from His creatures—the source of all life and the One to whom all life belongs, but also so potent in His power that those who approach Him without proper preparation risk death. When applied to people and things, holiness denotes a special state marked by separation: people and things are “holy” in the sense that they are set aside for God. E.g., the people Israel is holy inasmuch as it was chosen by God and was given special responsibilities; Israel’s priests are holy inasmuch as they take on even more responsibilities in order to maintain a state that permits them to mediate between God and the rest of Israel; the Tabernacle is holy inasmuch as it was set aside as a special place for God’s dwelling in the midst of His people.

Common (*hol*) = The opposite of “sacred” (better translated “common” or “ordinary” rather than “profane,” since the Hebrew term doesn’t carry the negative connotations of “profane”). This is the normal state of the world and humankind. Hence, in order to approach God, one must first be sanctified/consecrated (i.e, made sacred) through a process; examples include the consecration of the Tabernacle prior to its use (Lev 8) and the consecration of the priests prior to their practice of sacrifice (Lev 9).

Pure (*tahor*) = state in which one is fit to approach sacred space or objects

Impure (*tame*) = state in which one is not fit to approach sacred space or objects. There are two types of impurity in Leviticus, ritual and moral:

	Ritual Impurity	Moral Impurity
Character	Unavoidable, a natural part of the cycles of human life. Not sinful, esp. as some kinds of impurity result from the performance of divine commandments (most notably: “be fruitful and multiply”; Gen 1:22; 1:28; 8:17; 9:1; 9:7; also Gen 17:6; 17:20 [all P])	Avoidable and linked to human sin and breaking of commandments.
Causes	Causes of ritual impurity are related to the two ways in which humankind inherently differs from God: reproduction and mortality. Ritual impurity is thus associated with sex (childbirth; menstruation; seminal emissions) and death (contact with corpses; skin diseases associated at the time with decaying flesh).	Causes of moral impurity are sins against certain, central commandments, namely, idolatry, certain sexual transgressions (e.g., incest), and bloodshed.
Ramifications	Ritual impurity is contagious in the sense that it can be spread through touch to persons and objects. No one can avoid being impure. Rather, what is incumbent on Israelites is to be aware of their state of purity/impurity, lest their impurity leads to the defilement of the Tabernacle/Temple. Those who are ritually impure are excluded from the sanctuary,	No contagiousness by touch. Moral impurity, however, defiles the sinner, the Promised Land, and the sanctuary (i.e., Tabernacle and later Temple), thus threatening God’s continued dwelling amongst His people. Those who are morally impure are, interestingly, not excluded from the sanctuary because of their lack of contagion.
Duration	Temporary and short-term	Temporary but long-lasting
Reversal	Bathing, waiting	Atonement, punishment, and/or exile

3. Laws of purity and purification in Leviticus 11-15

Lev 11: Food: Dietary laws, framed in terms of certain food are “impure for you.”

- 11:1-2a: Introduction
- 11:2b-8: Quadropeds
- 11:9-12: Fish
- 11:13-19: Birds
- 11:20-23: Flying insects
- 11:24-40: Purification procedures
- 11:41-45: Land swarmers
- 11:46-47: Summary

Lev 12: Reproduction #1: Childbirth

Lev 13-14: Skin Diseases (associated with decaying flesh and hence defiling like corpse-contact is defiling)

Lev 15: Reproduction #2: Genital emissions

4. Lev 16: Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)

CHART 2: Line of Priesthood

