

The Life and Times of First-Century Palestine

Family

The family was the central social institution of biblical times. Family ties shaped economic relations: a son would typically take the trade of his father; a few wealthy families often owned the majority of land in a given society. Family ties were central to religion: priests could be drawn from Levitical families only, and high priests from certain elite families only. Families strongly influenced politics. Sons followed their fathers as kings, and the Roman Senate was open to a few powerful, aristocratic families only.

Loyalty to one's family was the essential value in biblical cultures. Ideally, even marriages took place within the same family (endogamous marriages). Unions between cousins were preferred: Jacob married the daughters of his uncle Laban (see Genesis 28:2; see also Genesis 24:4, Tobit 1:9). In this way, the values and loyalties of the family would remain intact.

The Extended Family

In modern Western society, we tend to think of the family as consisting of a father, mother, and their children. The biblical concept of family, however, generally envisioned an extended family. A few generations commonly lived together under one roof—the father, mother, and children were joined by grandparents and married children.

A man could have more than one wife. In addition, servants or slaves of the family, or even an unrelated person living with the family, were considered to be part of the household. This extended sense of family is apparent in one of the Ten Commandments: “No work may be done then either by you, or your son or daughter, or your male or female slave, or your beast, or by the alien who lives with you” (Exodus 20:10). When Jacob's family moved to Egypt, “his direct descendants, not counting the wives of Jacob's sons—numbered sixty-six persons in all” (Genesis 46:26).

The Patriarchal Family

Within the extended family, each person had a clearly defined social role within a hierarchical structure. The wife managed the household, and the husband earned a living for the family. The father was the head of the household: a wife was subordinate to her husband, children obeyed their parents, and slaves obeyed their masters (see Exodus 20:12, Ephesians 5:21—6:9). The husband protected the honor of his family by ensuring that each person properly fulfilled his or her social role.

A primary duty of the father was to pass down the teachings of the Torah to his children (see Exodus 12:26–27, Deuteronomy 6:7); he is to raise them “with the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). The mother, however, also has a significant role: “Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and reject not your mother's teaching” (Proverbs 1:8; see 6:20).

Sons often followed in the same trade as their fathers. James and John fished with their father, Zebedee (see Mark 1:19); Joseph the carpenter passed on this trade to Jesus (see Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3).

The father's role was to provide for and protect his family. Thus, widows and orphans were the two most vulnerable groups in ancient Israelite society, for they had no husband or father. Biblical law



and prophecy often stresses the need to protect them. Sirach says that God “is not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint” (35:14). This is also carried over in the New Testament: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction” (James 1:27).

Lines of descent are traced through the father, so generally only fathers and sons are listed in the genealogies (lists of ancestors) (see Matthew 1:1–17, Luke 3:23–38). After marriage the couple would typically move into the home or neighborhood of the husband’s family. Israelite society developed many different social customs to ensure that a man would produce offspring, including polygyny, keeping concubines, and the “Levirate marriage.”

A father’s sons would inherit his property, the eldest son inheriting a double portion (see Deuteronomy 21:17). Girls could inherit property if there were no sons (see Numbers 27:8).

Family and the Land

The identity of a family is closely identified with its ownership of land. When King Ahab wishes to buy Naboth’s vineyard, Naboth replies, “The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral heritage” (1 Kings 21:3). If a man has to sell his land because of financial need, his nearest relative is obligated to buy it back (see Leviticus 25:25, Ruth 4:1–6). The Jubilee laws mandated that every fifty years, “every one of you shall return to his own property, every one to his own family estate” (Leviticus 25:10).

Group and Individual Identity

As a general rule in biblical times, a person’s identity and worth was determined more by his or her contribution to the family or wider social group (clan, tribe) than by individual achievement. Thus, for instance, marriages were arranged according to the needs of the family, rather than individual preference or attraction. Abraham, for example, sends his servant to find a wife for his son, Isaac (see Genesis 24:2–4).

Members of a household were in some respects considered an extension of the head of the household. Thus, when Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, was converted by Paul to become a follower of Christ, “she and her household” were baptized (Acts of the Apostles 16:15). After the Philippian jailer converted, “he and all his family were baptized at once” (16:33). It’s clear that the family members (which may have included spouses, children, and servants) did not make individual decisions to follow Christ, but rather were baptized because of their social roles as part of the family.

This understanding of the individual as part of the family group helps to explain a passage found in the Ten Commandments: “For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, inflicting punishment for their fathers’ wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 20:5). In this passage, the children are understood as an extension of the family, thus naturally bearing the punishment of the fathers. We should note, however, that biblical passages written at a later date show an awareness of the independence of the individual. The prophet Ezekiel says explicitly, “The son shall not be charged with the guilt of his father, nor shall the father be charged with the guilt of his son” (Ezekiel 18:20).

The Family and the Kingdom of God

Although Jesus was a caring and obedient son (see Luke 2:51, John 19:26–27), his vision of the Kingdom of God was a challenge to first-century family-centered social values. Jesus insisted that loyalty to God and God’s Kingdom was the highest value: if there was a conflict between loyalty to God



and loyalty to the family, one's loyalty to God was more important (see Mark 3:20–35). Jesus taught, "If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Jesus' point was not that a person should actively hate his own family, but rather that not even family ties and obligations should prevent a person from doing God's will (see 9:59–62).

Jesus taught that his followers formed a new family, based not on blood and marriage relations, but on a common belief: "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34–35). Members of Christian churches thus referred to one another as "brothers" and "sisters" (see Romans 16:1, 1 Corinthians 15:1, James 1:2); forming what sociologists call a "fictive kin" group. In this new family, traditional hierarchical authority was redefined: "Whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all" (Mark 10:44).

Blending Patriarchal and Kingdom Values

Later New Testament writings show that Christian groups did accept the basic patriarchal hierarchical structure of the family. So-called "household codes" explain how order is to be maintained in the household by each person respecting hierarchical authority: the wife is to be subordinate to the husband, children should obey their parents, and slaves should obey their masters (see Ephesians 5:21–6:9, Colossians 3:18–4:1, 1 Peter 3:1–7). Nevertheless, these hierarchical relations are qualified by particularly Christian emphases: husbands should "love their wives as their own bodies" (Ephesians 5:28); fathers should not provoke their children to anger (see 6:4); masters should not bully their slaves (see 6:9).

Related Passages

- **Endogamous marriages:** Genesis 24:4, 28:2; Tobit 1:9
- **Extended family:** Exodus 20:10, Genesis 46:26
- **Patriarchal and hierarchical structure:** Exodus 20:12, Ephesians 5:21–6:9
- **Patriarchal descent:** Luke 3:23–38
- **Passing traditions on to children:** Exodus 12:26–27, Deuteronomy 6:7, Proverbs 1:8
- **Family and land:** 1 Kings, chapter 21; Leviticus 25:8–55
- **Group identity:** Exodus 20:5; Acts of the Apostles 16:15,33
- **Family and Kingdom values:** Mark 3:20–35, 10:42–45; Luke 9:59–62, 14:26; Ephesians 5:21–6:9; Colossians 3:18–4:1

Honor and Shame

If we are trying to encourage a certain behavior, we often praise a person: "Great job! You should be proud of yourself!" Conversely, if we are trying to discourage a certain behavior, we say things such as, "You know better than that! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

These examples show that honor and shame are important in our society. Social scientists who study biblical societies, however, find that these values were not just important but essential to the functioning of those ancient societies. Thus, they are called honor-shame societies. Gaining and maintaining honor is a central activity in such communities, and rules of honor and shame are essential in maintaining the society's social roles and values.



From this social science perspective, honor is defined as a claim to worth that is publicly recognized by one's social group. In other words, honor is a person's public reputation that in turn forms the person's own self-identity. Specifically, a person is honored if he or she follows the social expectations of his or her group.

Shame refers to the lack of honor—it means social humiliation and disgrace. For women, however, it also carries a positive connotation: shame can refer to a woman's ability to guard her honor.

The highly effective role of honor and shame in reinforcing acceptable social behavior is closely related to the group-oriented view of Mediterranean societies. In such communities, the self-identity of an individual is largely formed by the approval (honoring) or rejection (shaming) of the group to which the individual belonged.

Honor, Shame, and Gender Roles

Because honor is a public recognition of a person's claim to social status, it is closely associated with men, as men have the public social role in the patriarchal biblical societies. Women have a private social role: their realm is the home, where they raise the children and manage the household.

Shame has a positive connotation for a female: a woman's shame refers to her ability to protect her and her family's honor. She does this primarily through protecting her sexual status as a virgin before her marriage and as a faithful wife throughout her marriage. A woman who fails to protect her sexuality is therefore considered shameless—she brings shame on her family, especially on her father or husband.

Sirach notes that a father must worry constantly about his daughter while she is “unmarried, lest she be seduced, or, as a wife, lest she prove unfaithful” (42:10). A daughter's shameful behavior shames the father: “Keep a close watch on your daughter, lest she make you the sport of your enemies, a byword in the city, a reproach among the people, an object of derision in public gatherings” (42:11).

The image of the shameless, sexually unchaste woman appears often in the Bible. It is central to the Book of Proverbs, where the young man is warned to avoid the adulteress, who will lead him astray with her “smooth words” (see Proverbs 7:4–23, 9:13–18). This adulteress is contrasted with Wisdom, who is personified as an honorable woman (see 9:1–6, 11). When the people of Israel go astray from the Lord to worship other gods, they are symbolized as a shameless adulteress or prostitute (see Hosea, chapters 1–2; Ezekiel, chapter 16).

Ascribed and Achieved Honor

Social scientists distinguish between ascribed and achieved honor. Ascribed honor is given to a person simply because of his or her birth: a person born into a high priestly Israelite family or a Roman senatorial family had an honored position by default. Achieved honor, in contrast, is earned by one's own personal accomplishments.

Jesus' ascribed honor was low. He was a craftsman, and thus quite low on the social scale. In addition, he came from a common village family. It was for this reason that his fellow villagers “took offense” at him when he returned to the village of Nazareth as a publicly acclaimed teacher and healer (see Mark 6:1–3).

The Gospel writers, however, do try to ascribe family honor to Jesus by recording his genealogy: this shows that he is a descendant of an honorable line that could be traced back to King David (see Matthew 1:1–17, Luke 3:23–38). Genealogies are employed frequently in the Bible to illustrate the



ascribed honor of an individual or group. (1 Chronicles 3:1–24 lists descendants of King David; lists in Ezra, chapters 2 and 10, establish proper descent from priestly families.)

In an honor-shame society, honor is often acquired as a result of a conflict with another person who has a competing claim to honor. These conflicts often take the form of a challenge-and-response encounter. The Pharisees, an honored group of teachers who were among the ruling elite in Israel, often publicly challenge the authority and honor of Jesus. They challenge Jesus on his teaching regarding divorce: “They were testing him” (Mark 10:2). On his teaching regarding paying taxes, they were trying “to ensnare him in his speech” (12:13). The ruling elite of Jerusalem (chief priests, scribes, and elders) also challenge him: “By what authority are you doing these things?” (11:27). In each case, Jesus answers with a counter-question, challenging the honor of his questioners in return. In these exchanges, Jesus shows himself as the equal of these elite authorities, thus acquiring public honor among the people: “They were utterly amazed at him” (12:17).

Jesus’ Challenge to the Kinship System

The honor of the family (in social science terms, the “kinship group”) was the central concern in biblical societies. A person married, for example, not because he or she fell in love with someone, but because one family made a marriage arrangement with another family in order to maintain or enhance the family’s honor. Politics were dominated by the concern of the ruling elite families (such as the Hasmoneans or Herod’s family) to maintain or enhance their honor. A woman’s honor was to perform well her role in the family as mother, wife, and manager of the household, while the man’s honor was to publicly portray his family’s social status. The children’s honor was to revere their parents by accepting their authority. “Household codes” (such as the one in Ephesians 5:21—6:9) illustrate honorable family roles from a Christian perspective.

Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God was a radical challenge to this family-centered value system. When Jesus is told that his family is looking for him, he indicates his followers and says: “Here are my mother and my brothers. (For) whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:32–35). In other sayings, Jesus insists that his followers’ duty to the Kingdom of God is more important than their duty to their family (see Luke 9:59–62). To make his point absolutely clear, Jesus uses exaggerated language: “If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). The point is that one cannot hold on to the old values in the Kingdom.

Jesus thus pictured the Kingdom of God, which he and his followers were establishing, as a new family, with God as the father, and with new rules for ascribing and achieving honor. It is clear that the early Christian church communities thought of themselves as a new family, referring to fellow church members as brother or sister (see Romans 16:1,17). Even a Christian slave was to be considered a brother (see Philemon, verse 16). In social science terms, Jesus and his followers were establishing fictive kin communities.

Honor, Shame, and Social Hierarchies

The honor-shame system reinforced the carefully defined social hierarchy of biblical societies. One’s honor comes from knowing and accepting one’s place in that social hierarchy. At a banquet, for example, guests with the highest social status received the best seats. If a person sat at a higher level than warranted by his social status, the host might ask the person to move down, thus shaming him (see Luke 14:7–10).



Customs regarding invitations to meals also reflect the honor-shame system. A client might invite his patron to a banquet as a way of honoring him; a patron might invite a client as a way of recognizing the client's services to him. In all cases, an invitation to a banquet required some reciprocal action. If one invites friends, relatives, or wealthy neighbors, it is expected that they "invite you back and you have repayment" (Luke 14:12). In an honor-shame society, even a dinner invitation was a sort of challenge to honor. One had to respond in a socially appropriate way in order to maintain or enhance one's status and honor.

Again, however, Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God rejects the accepted rules of honor and shame. Jesus advised: "When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:13–14). Jesus here focuses attention on those with least honor and status in society—those who do not have the means to engage in contests of honor and prestige. The one who invites will not receive the customary honor from the guests, but he will receive honor (blessing) from God.

Related Passages

- **Honor and gender roles:** Ezekiel, chapter 16; Proverbs, chapters 7–9; Sirach 42:9–14; Hosea, chapters 1–2
- **Honor and family:** Matthew 1:1–17; Mark 3:31–35, 6:1–6; Luke 3:23–38, 9:59–62, 14:26
- **Honor and challenge and response:** Mark 10:1–12, 11:27–33, 12:13–17
- **Honor and meal customs:** Luke 14:7–24

Poverty and Wealth

In economic terms, we often think of modern American society as divided into the upper class (the wealthy), the middle class, and the poor, with the majority of Americans considering themselves as part of the middle class.

At the time of Jesus, however, it is more accurate to think of two main economic groups: the elites (those who possess wealth, social status, and / or political power) and the non-elites (the rest of society). In Jesus' time, the entire Mediterranean world was controlled by the Roman Empire, and power and wealth was held by the Roman elite and their supporters throughout the empire.

Elites

In Rome itself, the elites included the emperor and his household, as well as the politically powerful and wealthy orders of senators and equestrians. In Roman provinces such as Galilee and Judea, the elites included Roman rulers (such as Pontius Pilate) as well as native rulers, such as Herod the Great and his sons, who were clients of Rome. Jewish religious authorities such as priests, Sadducees, and some Pharisees also shared this elite status. These religious authorities were not independent of the Roman elite and their clients, however: Herod appointed the high priests and married into the high priestly family of the Hasmoneans.

Although the elites formed only a tiny percentage of the population, they had extraordinary economic and political power in the Roman Empire. Only the elite could hold political office, and thus only their interests were directly represented in the government. The main source of the elite's wealth



was their ownership of land—often vast tracts of land. Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) claimed that six men owned half of North Africa.

The lifestyle of the elite was one of leisure and plenty. One of Jesus' parables describes "a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day" (Luke 16:19). In Revelation, John describes the Roman elite (using the code name Babylon to refer to Rome) as "wearing fine linen, purple and scarlet, adorned [in] gold, precious stones, and pearls" (18:16).

The elite lived almost exclusively in the cities, renting out their rural land to tenant farmers, who paid substantial rents and taxes to the landowners. In Palestine in Jesus' time, more than 90 percent of the population lived in rural areas, and the vast majority of workers were engaged in agriculture.

The Roman economic system was set up to benefit these urban elites. Revenue from taxes was not used for the common good (to build schools or to improve roads); rather, it was used exclusively to further the interests of the elites. Herod the Great used the revenue for such projects as building the Caesaria, a city named in honor of his patron Augustus Caesar and containing a temple dedicated to Augustus.

International trade in Jesus' time also focused on the desires of the elites. The Book of Revelation has an extensive list of luxury items found in the merchant ships that traded with Rome: "gold, silver, precious stones, and pearls; fine linen, purple silk, and scarlet cloth; fragrant wood of every kind, all articles of ivory and all articles of the most expensive wood, bronze, iron, and marble; cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, and frankincense; wine, olive oil, fine flour, and wheat; cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human beings" (18:11–13).

Life of the Non-Elites

The non-elites were people who owned little or no land, and thus had to earn their living through their own labor, often working the land as tenants of the wealthy landowners (see Mark 12:1). There were no mechanisms, such as government representation or trade unions, to represent their political or economic interests. The landowners decided which crop to plant, often choosing to plant cash crops, such as vineyards, olives, or wheat, rather than subsistence crops, such as barley, beans, and figs.

The vast majority of rural people in ancient times lived at a subsistence level, constantly in danger of hunger or starvation if their crops failed. There was no "safety net" of Social Security or other government programs. Most farms were too small for farmers to make a comfortable living, and farmers were forced to pay high taxes on what they did earn. When Jesus tells his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat (or drink), or about your body, what you will wear" (Matthew 6:25), the worry about finding enough to eat was a very real one for many.

Some workers did not have steady work but hired themselves out as laborers for a daily wage. One of Jesus' parables tells of a vineyard owner who went down to the marketplace several times during the day to hire daily laborers. With every trip, he found groups in need of work, an indication of the great number of people looking for additional work to survive (see 20:1–16; see also the parable of the prodigal son, Luke 15:11–32).

The hired worker was not a slave, but at certain times his situation may have been worse than that of a slave. Even if he had no freedom and was treated harshly, the slave could usually depend on food and shelter; the day laborer was never assured of being hired on any particular day and getting the chance to earn his living.

Debts



With a relatively high rate of taxation, farmers and other workers often went into debt. One indication that this happened rather often is the number of times Jesus' parables refer to people who are in debt and are unable to repay their debts (see Matthew 18:21–35; Luke 7:41–43, 12:57–59, 16:1–8).

The Roman system of tax collection added to the burden. Taxes were not paid directly to the elite, but rather to brokers who competed for the privilege of collecting taxes in a certain area. The broker kept any profit that he made over and above his targeted amount, which gave him the incentive to collect as much as possible.

The penalties for failure to repay a debt were brutal. A debtor, along with his family, might be sold as a slave (see Matthew 18:25). Philo describes how tax collectors were not above using torture or imprisonment to force other members of a debtor's family to pay a debt. One of Jesus' parables refers to a debtor being "handed over to the torturers" until his debt is paid (Matthew 18:34).

Jesus' Criticism of the Elite and the Prophetic Tradition

Jesus was critical of the wealthy elite: "It is easier for a camel to pass through [the] eye of [a] needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25). "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Luke 6:24).

We can better understand Jesus' harsh attitude toward the wealthy if we keep in mind the social situation of Jesus' day: the wealth of the elite and their supporters was built on a system that squeezed out maximum taxes and rents from the non-elites. Thus, the prosperity of the rich tended to be built directly on the misery of the poor.

Jesus' criticism of the elite followed a long tradition of Old Testament teaching. The prophets criticized those who built up vast landholdings: "Woe to you who join house to house, who connect field with field, till no room remains" (Isaiah 5:8). "They trample the heads of the weak into the dust of the earth, and force the lowly out of the way" (Amos 2:7).

Many of the Torah commandments are also designed to avoid ownership by a few large landowners. Deuteronomy says that at the end of every seventh year, all debts owed to fellow Israelites are to be "relaxed" (15:2). Another law calls for a "Jubilee year" every fifty years in which each person would return to his own property, his family estate. The law is based on the premise that the land cannot be sold to another person permanently, because the real owner of the land is God, and therefore all people are really only tenants on the land (see Leviticus, chapter 25). Historically, however, it is unclear to what extent such commandments were enforced.

The economic ideal of the Old Testament was that each family should work its own land: "every man sat under his vine and his fig tree, with no one to disturb him" (1 Maccabees 14:12; see Micah 4:3–4, Zechariah 3:10).

Economic Status of Jesus and the Early Christians

Jesus is traditionally known as a "carpenter" (Mark 6:3) or the "son of a carpenter" (Matthew 13:55). Yet the Greek word used here, *tekton*, also has the broader meaning of a builder, including a mason, or a maker of tools for farmers, including plows and yokes. Such workers were paid a daily wage, and had a relatively low social status. Among Jesus' disciples were the very low status Matthew (a tax collector) and relatively low status fishermen. Wealthy women were among Jesus' followers (see Luke 8:1–3).

The economic system in the first church community in Jerusalem after Jesus' death was one of radical equality, a dramatic departure from the system of elite and non-elite. Each person would sell



his or her own property and bring the proceeds to the community leaders so that they could distribute them to the rest of the community members as they had need (see Acts of the Apostles 4:34–36).

Evidence from Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles itself, however, shows us that the economic system of the Jerusalem Church was not followed in other churches. At Corinth there is a clear division between wealthy and poor church members (see 1 Corinthians 1:26, 11:22). The same division is apparent among the churches to which James writes (see James 2:1–13). The Acts of the Apostles often refers to women followers who were wealthy (see 16:14; 17:4,12).

Related Passages

- **Wealth and lifestyle of the elite:** Luke 16:19, Revelation 18:11–20
- **Day laborers:** Matthew 20:1–16
- **Tenant farmers:** Mark 12:1–12
- **Inability to repay debt:** Matthew 18:21–35; Luke 7:41–43, 12:57–59
- **Prophetic critique of large landholders:** Isaiah 5:8, Amos 2:6–8
- **Old Testament laws against large landholders and debt:** Leviticus 25:8–22, Deuteronomy 15:1–11
- **Ideal of family ownership of land:** 1 Maccabees 14:12, Micah 4:3–4
- **Jesus' criticism of the elites:** Mark 10:17–31, Luke 6:20–26
- **Economic status of Jesus' followers:** Mark 1:16–20, Luke 8:1–3
- **Economy of the Jerusalem Church:** Acts of the Apostles 2:42–47, 4:34–5:16
- **Economic disparity in early churches:** 1 Corinthians 1:26, 11:22; James 2:1–13
- **Role of wealthy women:** Acts of the Apostles 16:14; 17:4,12

Purity

The concept of purity is central to the biblical way of thinking, especially to the Old Testament thought world. Essentially, it is a way of looking at the world that divides reality into pure and impure categories.

The Israelite viewpoint that distinguishes between pure and impure, however, cannot be summed up by those two words in English. We need to bring in several other pairs of words in order to grasp the wider meaning of the Israelite concept: *holy / ordinary (or profane)*, *life / death*, *clean / unclean*, and *order / disorder*.

The concept of purity is connected in an especially close way with the concept of holiness. Essentially, any person or object that comes into contact with the holy must be in a state of purity.

Uncleanness

As a noun, the Hebrew root word *tm'*, is translated as “uncleanness”; as a verb, it is translated as “to defile.” To get a better sense of this word's meaning, let's consider how it is used in a range of different situations:

- Uncleanness is identified with sores or blotches on the skin (see Leviticus, chapter 13).
- Certain animals are unclean (see Leviticus, chapter 11).
- Uncleanness is due to contact with a dead body (see Numbers 19:11, Ezekiel 44:25) or with the carcass of an unclean animal (see Leviticus 11:24).



- Females are unclean from menstruation or another flow of blood (see Leviticus 15:19–30), as well as after childbirth (see Leviticus, chapter 12).
- Males are unclean from any kind of unusual emission from the penis or emission of semen (see Leviticus 15:1–17).
- Uncleanliness is due to sexual intercourse (see Leviticus 15:18) and especially due to sexual relations outside of marriage (see Genesis 34:5, Leviticus 18:20).
- Uncleanliness is due to worshipping other gods or associating with other religions. This sense of uncleanliness seems to be connected with the concept that worshipping other gods was similar to committing adultery against the Lord (see Leviticus 19:31, Ezekiel 22:3, Hosea 5:3, Jeremiah 2:7).
- Uncleanliness is used as a metaphor for sin or wickedness in general (see Isaiah 6:5–7, Ecclesiastes 9:2).

Uncleanliness could be transmitted by touch. When an unclean person touched furniture or another object, that object would also become unclean (see Leviticus 15:4–12, 26–27). A person with an unclean skin disease was required to shout out, “Unclean! Unclean!” in order to warn other people of his approach (see 13:45).

Depending on the case, cleansing from impurity involved ritual bathing (see 15:21; Numbers, chapter 19) and offering sacrifices (see Leviticus, chapter 12).

The opposite of the concept of uncleanliness (*tm'*) is, of course, “cleanness” (*taher*, in Hebrew). When Naaman washes, he becomes “clean” (*taher*) from his skin ailment (see 2 Kings 5:10, Leviticus 14:1).

Purity, the Temple, and Symbolism

Uncleanliness could be associated with moral sinfulness (such as adultery), but its fundamental meaning is not moral. Notice that many of the restrictions are associated with conception and giving birth (childbirth, sexual fluids) or with death (impurity of corpses or of spilled blood).

Scholars such as E. P. Sanders point out that impurity is associated with the changeable realm of the ordinary (birth and death) in contrast to the unchangeable realm of the holy. An essential goal of the purity laws, therefore, is to draw clear boundaries between the realm of the ordinary and the realm of the holy (especially the most holy place on earth, the Temple). The “unclean” thus symbolizes not so much evil as it does the changeable and fleeting nature of ordinary life.

Anthropologists such as Mary Douglas see a related symbolism in the human body itself. In many cultures, the individual body of a community member symbolizes the religious community as a whole. (Paul uses this general concept when he describes individual members of the Corinthian Church as members of the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians, chapter 12.) The skin of the body, then, symbolizes the border between the sacred community and the ordinary, or profane, world outside of the community. Thus, a blemish on the skin, or the flow of a fluid (sexual fluid, blood) from the inside of the body to the outside symbolizes the danger of the “unclean” outside world’s “infecting” or “contaminating” the holy community.

The symbolism of impurity cannot be separated from the symbolism of the Temple. Most impurities restricted a person’s access to the Temple or the holy things associated with the Temple (such as meat that had been offered as a sacrifice). “Everyone who fails to purify himself after touching the body of any deceased person, defiles the Dwelling of the LORD and shall be cut off from Israel” (Numbers 19:13; see Leviticus 12:4, 15:31).

Purity is also closely connected with the concept of order. Cleanness is associated with the concern to keep all things in their proper places or categories: an unclean animal is one that blurs the



distinction between two distinct categories. In the Genesis Creation story, chaos is the result of blurring the distinctions between light and darkness, or between the waters and the dry land. This same concern to draw clear boundaries may also be symbolized in the bodily fluids that cross the boundaries of the skin, or the idea that periods of transition and change (especially birth and death) cross boundaries.

The seriousness of maintaining purity and thus protecting the holiness of the Temple and the proper worship of God is shown in the fact that certain violations of purity were punishable by a sentence of death (being “cut off from the people”). One who was unclean must be kept apart from the holy; serious uncleanness must be kept completely apart from the holy community.

Methods of Purification from Uncleanness

Water was the main means of purifying a person or object from uncleanness. Immersion pools were characteristic of Second Temple Palestine. They have been found in Herod’s palaces, the houses of ordinary people in Jerusalem, and at the Qumran community. They were usually 6 to 9 feet in width and length, and often 7 feet deep. The pools were cut into bedrock, and had to be filled naturally, either by rainwater or spring water. Steps led down to the bottom of the pool.

Other purification methods were used, however, especially in the Diaspora, where ritual hand washing was practiced. An Egyptian text refers to Jews’ washing their hands while praying. This may explain why Diaspora synagogues are often located by rivers or by the sea. Paul expects to find a Jewish “place of prayer” by a river in Philippi (see Acts of the Apostles 16:13).

Purity and Ordinary Life

Biblical commandments require ordinary people to be pure when going to the Temple or when eating food associated with the Temple sacrifices. But the location of immersion pools in remote areas show that people were concerned to be pure more often. It is probable, for example, that women commonly immersed after childbirth and menstruation. Men would also have to immerse themselves if they touched anything that the menstruating woman had touched.

Women, however, were not excluded from everyday life because of menstruation. A menstruating woman would continue her daily routine of cooking, household work, and caring for children. Jesus encounters a woman with a “flow of blood” in an ordinary crowd—there is no indication that she was socially isolated (see Mark 5:25–34).

Priests did follow special rules of purity. They most likely immersed themselves every day, as their food was food offered in sacrifice and they had to be in a state of purity to eat it.

Pharisees and Essenes also had their own special purity rules. Essenes, for example, immersed themselves before every evening meal. The Pharisees washed their hands frequently (see Matthew 15:1–2) before eating.

Early Christians and Purity Laws

In our discussion of the food laws, we saw that Jesus himself did not reject the validity of the food laws, nor did he reject the purity laws in general. When Jesus healed a man with leprosy, for example, he told him, “Go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them” (Mark 1:40–45).

When Gentiles began to join early Christian Churches (considered to be holy communities), the leaders of the Jerusalem Church made the following ruling regarding their level of purity: The Gentiles



should “abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage” (Acts of the Apostles 15:29; see also 21:25). All of these actions are associated with purity laws; a strangled animal was one that had not been slaughtered in a kosher manner.

Early Christianity and the Metaphorical Sense of Purity

Early Christians, because of their roots in Judaism, understood their church communities as holy places and, in fact, could describe themselves as God’s Temple: “Do you not know that you are the temple of God?” (1 Corinthians 3:16); “For we are the temple of the living God” (2 Corinthians 6:16; see also Ephesians 2:21–22). Supporting Mary Douglas’s insight that the individual body of the community member symbolizes the body of the whole community, Paul says, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

To live in the holy community, Christians needed to maintain a level of purity. Paul’s language, for example, often reflects the basic distinctions of clean and unclean: “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of the flesh and spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1). James says, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:27). Paul insists that the sin of incestuous behavior will infect the holiness of the whole Corinthian Church community if the sinner is allowed to remain in the community: “Purge the evil person from your midst” (1 Corinthians 5:13).

Christian Purity Today

Christians today of course do not follow the purity laws (with the exception of groups such as the Seventh-day Adventists). Yet the more metaphorical aspects of purity and holiness remain essential to the Christian view of the world. Christians are called to live a lifestyle that is distinct from the values of “the world” (mainstream society). This purity still includes watching what we eat (avoiding overeating or drinking too much), keeping sexually pure, and keeping our thoughts pure from the many temptations of modern life, including gossip, pornography, jealousy, and greed.

Related Passages

- **Purity laws:** Leviticus, chapters 11–15
- **Cleansing from impurity:** Leviticus, chapter 12, 15:21; Numbers, chapter 19
- **Jesus and purity:** Matthew 15:1–20; Mark 1:40–45, 5:25–34
- **Impurities’ effect on the Temple:** Numbers 19:13
- **Special purity rules of the Pharisees:** Mark 7:1–4
- **Early Church and purity:** Acts of the Apostles 15:1–35
- **Metaphorical purity of Christian communities:** 1 Corinthians 3:16, chapters 5–6; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18

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