



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2014.08.12

Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan, eds. *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism. Dynamics in the History of Religion 3.* Leiden: Brill, 2012. Pp. xv + 601. ISBN 9789004232105. Hardcover. €192.00/\$267.00.

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This edited volume is based upon a 2008-2009 workshop entitled “Purity in Processes of Social, Cultural and Religious Differentiation,” which took place at the University of Bochum, Germany. It consists of an introduction, eighteen essays surveying purity ideologies in numerous ancient Mediterranean cultures, and three indices.

The introduction states the purpose of the editors: the book “aims at offering a comprehensive discussion of the development, transformation and mutual influence of concepts of purity in major ancient Mediterranean cultures and religions from a comparative perspective, with a specific focus on ancient Judaism” (2). The majority of the introduction examines ritual theory, especially the work of Mary Douglas and Catherine Bell. Its broader statements about purity and ritual are then put to the test in the individual essays. The introduction ends with a helpful bibliography focusing on ritual purity systems.

The first nine essays focus on conceptions of purity/impurity in non-Jewish cultures and contexts. Michaël Guichard and Lionel Marti survey the concept of purity in ancient Mesopotamia, a difficult task in light of both the wealth of material and the absence of a more systematic account of impurity such as can be found in the book of Leviticus. Their essay discusses evidence from two periods: Sumerian literature dating to 2150-1600 BCE and Neo-Assyrian literature dating to the 9th-6th centuries BCE. They organize Mesopotamian purity concerns into two categories: quotidian impurities and impurities related to order, the latter of which requires the intervention of ritual specialists.

Joachim Friedrich Quack examines purity beliefs in ancient Egypt. He divides his treatment between purity requirements necessary for temples and priests, palaces and kings, the elite and commoners, and finally tombs. Quack’s essay therefore highlights the significance of both sacred space and social hierarchy for Egyptian thinking regarding purity.

Manfred Hutter focuses on purity in Anatolian religions, noting that his discussion is greatly complicated by having to compare Hittite, Luwian, and Hurrian texts. He, too, highlights the role that purity thinking plays in social order: “Someone who is ‘polluted’ is ineligible for certain functions within society and/or would overstep a boundary, whereby harm would be done to the social order (and ultimately also to oneself)” (161). Maintaining social order within Hittite culture required the maintenance of purity.

Hans-Peter Mathys begins his brief treatment of purity in ancient Phoenician and Punic sources by noting the scarcity of evidence about purity concerns in these texts. He discusses three fragmentary inscriptions. Two of them stress the purity of heart in bringing votive gifts to the deity, paralleling themes found, for instance, in the Psalms. He then turns to the material culture, highlighting the evidence for water usage in cultic settings—which he tentatively suggests may indicate purity concerns.

Albert F. de Fong reexamines purity conceptions in ancient Zoroastrianism. His essay rightly stresses the difference between legal injunctions and lived experience—strict observance of Zoroastrian purity legislation would have prohibited all contact between Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians, something that would have been impossible to observe in real life. He concludes that the greatest evolution in Zoroastrian purity ideology occurred in the late Sasanian Empire, which limits the value of his findings for those who study the Hebrew Bible or early Judaism.

Four essays deal with Greek and Roman conceptions of purity. Noel Robertson surveys stone inscriptions that were posted outside of sanctuaries to determine what purity requirements existed in the Greek world. He argues that early Iron Age inscriptions and literature attest what Robertson calls a *ἄγνός* purity—used in relation to the cults of Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Artemis, Athena, and Demeter. With the advent of the Greek *polis*, though, *ἄγνός* become synonymous with *καθαρός*.

Linda-Marie Günther also focuses on purity regulations as they pertain to Greek sacred sites, stressing the way in which observance of purity rules constructed one’s identity as a member of a *polis*.

Philippe Borgeaud surveys food prohibitions in Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish texts. He argues that these texts indicate that people were already comparing and contrasting their own food prohibitions to those of other cultures.

Bernhard Linke examines the connection between purity and social order, juxtaposing purity systems in Greece with those in Rome. He concludes that the Roman Republic demonstrates a strong conviction that the gods were present and located at the center of Roman life—thus leading to what Linke calls a “sacral densification” within the city of Rome. The Romans were certain of the gods’ presence in the city. Such a conviction contrasts with the concerns of ancient Greece, as evidenced in Greek purity practices, to maintain the presence of the gods.

The final nine essays discuss purity legislation in ancient Judaism, the first five of which deal with specific books of the Hebrew Bible—Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, and Ezra-Nehemiah. Christophe Nihan’s wide-ranging essay on Leviticus argues against Jonathan

Klawans and others that ritual (or “physical” in Nihan’s words) impurity and moral impurity are two distinct systems of impurity. Instead, Nihan suggests that while they are two distinct *forms* of impurity, Leviticus demonstrates the attempt to bring the two together into one coherent *system*. He concludes: “Temple and Torah, in this conception, are no longer two distinct institutions but are *organically* related: if Israelites must keep the Torah, it is in order to avoid defilement of the sanctuary. In a sense, one could say that the temple, in this conception, has become the *raison d’être* of the Torah itself, as the main social and legal norm for ‘Israel’” (356, emphasis original). As Nihan notes, this alignment of Torah and Temple is central to the establishment of power among priests and non-priests.

Christian Frevel discusses the way in which purity conceptions in Numbers inform us about the composition and structure of the book. While readers might find it odd that Nihan and Frevel discuss Leviticus and Numbers separately instead of as evidence of priestly thought, this division of labor allows Frevel to highlight the importance of space for understanding the shape of Numbers: the tabernacle camp functions as the center where life flourishes, whereas the further one goes from this center, the closer one gets to the realm of death. The narrative of the wilderness camp reinforces the priestly belief that humans need to emphasize purity in order to dwell with Israel’s holy God.

Udo Rüterswörden treats Deuteronomy, noting that the book uses purity language rarely and with little discussion. He argues that holiness language is only ever used of the people of Israel, never the land or even the temple. He thus concludes that “Deuteronomy abolishes the distinction between priestly purity and the purity that every Israelite must observe” (419). Following the work of Moshe Weinfeld, he argues that Deuteronomy demythologizes purity language—which, unlike in P, is no longer a substance but a quality or property.

Michael Konkel examines Ezekiel, arguing that the book is evidence of purity conceptions in the exilic and post-exilic period. He suggests that the architecture of the temple in Ezekiel 40-48 “serves to guard the temple building, especially the holy of holies” (435). The entire point of this blueprint is to emphasize the distinction between the holy and the profane. Konkel proceeds to compare the purity legislation of Ezekiel to the priestly source, concluding that while Ezekiel differs from the legislation of P, it does not necessarily conflict with it: “Ezek 40-48 can work as a critique of the cultic practice at the Second Temple in Jerusalem not by opposing the Pentateuch but rather by interpreting and extending its legal traditions” (452).

Benedikt Rausche surveys the evidence of Ezra-Nehemiah, noting that purity language is limited only to certain sections of the work: Ezra 2/Neh 7; Ezra 6:19-22; Ezra 9-10; and Neh 12-13. He argues that Ezra 6:19-22 envisages an inclusivist construction of purity, in which people within the land can join the returnees in the refounded Jerusalem cult, while the other passages advocate an exclusivist approach to purity, in which people are categorized on the basis of genealogy.

The final four essays examine purity ideologies in early Judaism. Beate Ego looks at a number of non-Qumranic Jewish texts in the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha of the Hellenistic Period. As he notes, these texts are often overlooked in discussions of purity because any comments they make about purity are frequently made in passing. He examines the Fall of the Angels in *1 En.* 6-16, the laws of parturient impurity in *Jub.* 3, and Eleazar’s refusal to eat pork in 2 Macc 6. In all

of these works, he detects the creativity of authors who “go beyond the Hebrew Bible’s concepts of purity” (489). Ego’s essay rightly argues that scholars often neglect the evidence of individual Jewish works in favor of the corpus at Qumran or in rabbinic literature. One can think of works, such as Judith, the *Animal Apocalypse*, and the *Testament of Levi*, which would have strengthened Ego’s argument and shown even greater diversity and development within the purity thinking of early Judaism.

Ian Werrett provides an overview of scholarship on purity concerns at Qumran. He highlights the diachronic models of scholars such as Jonathan Klawans, and concludes that, while not without their problems, these theories remain the best approach to the evidence.

On the other hand, Gudrun Holtz disagrees with Klawans’s diachronic argument that one can see development in Qumran purity practices from an initial sharp distinction between ritual and moral impurity (in such texts as 11QT and 4QMMT) to an identification of ritual and moral impurity (1QS, 1QM, 1QH), with such texts as CD being situated in a medial position. He reexamines the relevant texts from 1QS, 1QM, and 1QH to show that, while both ritual and moral impurity are in mind, these texts persist in distinguishing these two types of impurity. At the same time Holtz argues that the category of “moral impurity” is deficient, suggesting that we should talk about a “constitutional impurity” instead (524). This category, which is the root of moral impurity, suggests that all humans—Jews and non-Jews—are constitutionally impure as humans. Such an impurity can only be overcome by an act of God.

Finally, Jürgen K. Zangenberg reassesses the material culture which might pertain to Jewish purity practices. Zangenberg’s primary interests in this article surround the function(s) of and ideology surrounding the use of both *miqwa’ot* and stone vessels.

Edited volumes provide quite the challenge to reviewers and this particular volume is no exception. How can one review hope to adequately summarize and interact with the various arguments of the nineteen essays of this book? Above I have tried to summarize each essay. I would like to conclude with a few statements about the value of the book as a whole. In brief, this volume is unparalleled in terms of the scope of its treatment of purity systems in the ancient Mediterranean basin. While most readers of this review will likely be interested in purity ideologies in the Hebrew Bible and early Judaism, the first nine essays dealing with other cultural contexts provide essential reading to help situate and then compare Jewish purity conceptions. The frequent parallels between Egyptian, Mesopotamian, or Greek purity systems and Jewish purity systems are an important reminder that while many modern people find Jewish purity codes to be foreign and absurd, people in antiquity would not have found this to be the case. Far from being esoteric, purity legislation was ubiquitous in antiquity and was believed to be necessary to approach properly the divine—something upon which both Jews and non-Jews agreed.

As I read this volume I could not help but lament one important lacuna: the book contains no essay treating New Testament and Christian authors. While the contents of the volume were no doubt limited by who participated in the workshop, this absence might reinforce the incorrect belief that from its inception early Christianity was unconcerned with purity and was in this way distinct from all other cultures in the ancient Mediterranean. Here one would need to begin by

turning, for instance, to the work of Thomas Kazen on purity concerns in the gospels or David Moffitt's work on atonement in Hebrews.

This one gap notwithstanding, *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions* is must reading for anyone who works on ritual purity and the tabernacle/temple apparatus in ancient Judaism. Unfortunately, the price of this volume, nearing \$300, precludes all but the most well-funded libraries from purchasing it.