CHAPTER
23

Purity Laws

You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them, so that the land to which I bring you to settle in may not vomit you out. . . . You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not bring abomination on yourselves by animal or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD *am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.* (Leviticus 20:22, 25-26)

The LORD *spoke to Moses, saying: When any of you commit a trespass and sin unintentionally in any of the holy things of the* LORD*, you shall bring, as your guilt offering to the* LORD*, a ram without blemish from the flock, convertible into silver by the sanctuary shekel; it is a guilt offering. And you shall make restitution for the holy thing in which you were remiss, and shall add one-fifth to it and give it to the priest. The priest shall make atonement on your behalf with the ram of the guilt offering, and you shall be forgiven.* (Leviticus 5:14-16)

Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days. They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean; but if they do not purify themselves on the third day and on the seventh day, they will not become clean. All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and do not purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the LORD*; such persons shall be cut off from Israel.* (Numbers 19:11-13)

People who know nothing about the laws of Torah often feel overwhelmed upon their first exposure to these texts. Some of the laws sound vaguely familiar due to their influence on the sacred texts of Christianity and Islam, while others have parallels in the legal systems followed by most Western societies. Many, however, seem utterly foreign to contemporary readers who are unfamiliar with the vision of reality and the religious sensibility presupposed in these texts. The fact that the laws are not organized into any obvious pattern only adds to the impression that the texts are hard to understand. The present chapter aims to counter that impression by highlighting some of the patterns and principles that underlie the individual laws of Torah and examining one major category of laws within the Torah, the purity laws.

TORAH AND LAW

Before we move into a closer examination of the laws of Torah, we would do well to pause for a moment and reflect on the nature of the collection as a whole. The term *laws*, though steeped in tradition, is less than adequate as a description of the hundreds of guidelines for individual and social conduct that fill the Torah. The term has its roots in the biblical image of Yahweh as a mighty king who reigns unchallenged over his people and issues decrees that must be obeyed. But the actual content of the Torah is more complex and diverse than this image suggests. The Torah does contain many laws that identify certain behaviors as wrong and prescribe severe penalties for violations. Most of these verses are related to

the Torah's vision for creating a society that reflects the character and will of Yahweh. But the Torah also includes instructions for the performance of rituals and guidelines for the ethical and religious conduct of individuals. Neither of these types of material can be described as laws in the strict sense, since there is no apparent mechanism for enforcement and most carry no penalties other than those that might be imposed by Yahweh himself.

Labeling all of these materials as laws can be misleading unless we realize that the term is being used figuratively in conjunction with the image of Yahweh as the king of Israel. Failure to acknowledge this point can lead to serious misunderstandings. For example, Christians have a long history of deriding Judaism as a "works religion" (that is, a religion that claims people can earn their way to heaven by their good deeds) that was superseded by the "faith religion" that was introduced by Jesus and embodied in the Christian church. This negative evaluation of Judaism and the Torah was one of several arguments used by Christians to justify centuries of anti-Semitism that led finally to the Holocaust. Such mistaken interpretations can only occur when people read the laws of Torah in isolation from their broader context as the terms of the covenant between Yahweh and his chosen people. Within the covenant, there is no distinction between faith and works—obeying Yahweh's decrees is the primary means of expressing one's faith in Yahweh.

Unfortunately, there is no single English word that encompasses the legal and relational imagery that lies behind and gives meaning to the individual rules for living that are contained in the Torah. Since the Torah itself uses legal terminology when referring to its provisions (laws, commandments, regulations, and the like), we will continue to use such language in our analysis of the material, but with the understanding that these terms must be understood within the context of Yahweh's covenant with Israel.

CATEGORIZING THE LAWS

The people who compiled the Torah into its present form did not organize the laws into any overall pattern. In some passages the laws are grouped according to a common theme (Exodus 21:12-27; 22:1-15; Leviticus 1:1—7:38; 23:1-44; Numbers 28:1—29:4; Deuteronomy 12:1—13:18), while in others the order seems entirely random, with little or no continuity or link between the verses (Exodus 22:16-31; 34:10-28; Leviticus 19:1-37; Deuteronomy 23:15—25:16). Additionally, not all issues are treated equally—some are addressed in a verse or less, while others fill a chapter or more of text (Exodus 25:1—30:38; Leviticus 13:1—14:57; 16:1-34; Numbers 30:1-16; Deuteronomy 20:1-20). Some subjects are mentioned only once, while other topics (the Sabbath, the festivals, the rituals for animal sacrifice) are addressed repeatedly. Clearly the people who compiled these materials did not share our modern concerns for topical arrangement or balanced treatment.

Some scholars have claimed to discern a literary purpose behind the distribution and arrangement of the laws, but most believe that the haphazard and uneven nature of the collection points to the use of earlier collections. Instead of reorganizing the laws into a more usable format, the editors felt compelled, presumably out of respect for their sources, to preserve the earlier materials in their original order. This does not explain why the laws were arranged in a particular order in the first place, but it does help us to understand the nature of the finished product.

Scholars who study the rules and regulations of the Torah have developed their own systems of categorization to reduce the complexity of the materials and make them easier to analyze. Most of these systems reflect the common scholarly desire to identify earlier sources within the Torah or to trace the historical development of the collection.

One way of categorizing the laws is by their linguistic features. For instance, some of the laws are framed in an "if-then" case format, while others (the majority) are presented as direct commands of the deity ("do this" or "don't do that"). The case law format resembles the law codes of Mesopotamia, while the command form is relatively uncommon outside the Torah. Some scholars have suggested that the case laws might have been created or edited by a group of legal scholars (priests?) as in Mesopotamia, while the direct commands might have originated with the same class of teachers that produced

the wisdom literature, where similar modes of expression can be seen (see chapter 37). This kind of analysis, while helpful for historical purposes, does not take us very far toward understanding either the content of the laws or the ideology that lies behind them.

Other scholars have catalogued the materials according to the types of problems that they address. Some divide the laws into broad categories like public offenses and private offenses, while others choose a recurring theme like property damage, sexuality, or the worship of other gods, then investigate how the issue is treated in different passages. Where comparative materials are available, scholars also look at how the subject was handled in the law codes of Mesopotamia in order to determine which of the biblical laws represent common approaches to problems and which are distinctive. In most cases the goal is to retrace the development of the legal materials contained in the Torah. Studies such as these are helpful for highlighting the many inconsistencies in the Torah that point to a complicated history for the collection. But the piecemeal nature of their approach does not shed much light on the nature of the collection as it now stands.

` A more fruitful and less technical way of analyzing the materials for beginning students is to divide them into two broad categories, purity laws and social laws. In shorthand form, purity laws aim to regulate and channel the people's interactions with the supernatural realm (that is, their "vertical" relationships with the deity), while social laws define how people should relate to one another both individually and as a society (that is, their "horizontal" relationships). Purity laws pertain primarily to issues that were identified as part of the ritual dimension in the previous chapter, while social laws relate to the social and ethical dimensions of Yahwistic religion. Not all of the laws of Torah fit easily into one of these two categories, and some could be fruitfully analyzed under either heading. But organizing the laws in this way does have the advantage of exposing many of the central ideas that lie behind the collection as it now stands. Most of these concepts are older than the present collection, though purity concerns clearly became more important during the era of the Exile and beyond.

EXERCISE 58

Read the following passages and make note of any words or phrases that appear repeatedly in different passages or that seem to play a central role within a particular passage. What do these words tell you about the belief system that lies behind the texts?

- Leviticus 11:41-45
- Leviticus 12:1-7
- Leviticus 16:29-33
- Leviticus 18:24-30
- Leviticus 21:16-23
- Numbers 19:11-13
- Deuteronomy 23:9-14

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Many of the laws of Torah reflect a strong interest in the subject of ritual purity. Pairs of adjectives like clean/unclean, pure/impure, and holy/profane dominate these passages. Some passages are preoccupied with identifying actions that defile a person, while others focus on ways to be purified from defilement. **Impurity** is not limited to people; animals, crops, buildings, household utensils, even a piece of ground can be classified as clean or unclean. Most forms of impurity can be cleansed by following certain rituals, but some can only be removed by executing the offender.

The worldview presupposed in these passages is foreign to most contemporary readers. Centuries of Christian influence have led religious people in the West to view reality through a moral lens. Sin, not impurity, is the term that is commonly used to describe deviations from the will of the deity. Sin is viewed as a conscious choice; there is no such thing as unintentional sin. Such a view of reality has no place for a belief that one's relations with the deity might be affected by physical contact with an unclean person or object. In fact, many people today would regard such beliefs as a form of superstition.

Nevertheless, there are millions of people in the world today who view reality through the same kind of lens that we see in the Torah. Native Americans and African tribal

groups in particular have many ideas and practices that resemble the biblical purity laws. People outside these groups are often unfamiliar with their views because many of their beliefs and practices are passed on orally rather than in written form and they tend to live apart from other groups. Other religions that take ritual purity seriously include Shinto (Japan), Zoroastrianism (Iran), and some forms of Hinduism (India). Islam, too, requires the avoidance of certain types of impurity and the use of ritual cleansings before prayer.

Fig. 23.2. (top) Native Americans often use smoke for ritual purification; (bottom) Muslims wash in a prescribed manner to purify themselves before praying.

At the heart of all purity systems lies a belief that the universe is permeated by supernatural forces that are not always friendly or accessible to humans. Interactions with these forces must be handled with care if one is to avoid being harmed by them. Rituals play a central role in the maintenance of such a system. Certain kinds of actions (commonly called taboos) are thought to offend or interfere with the workings of the supernatural and must therefore be avoided in order to maintain positive relations with the divine realm. Various forms of ritual purification are provided for individuals who violate these taboos. Purification is also required in the case of natural occurrences that are viewed as either out of the ordinary or mysterious, such as menstruation, childbirth, disease, and death. People who have physical contact with impure people or objects are also deemed impure and in need of cleansing under most purity systems. If impurities are not properly handled (and removed), the rituals that open up channels of communication with the divine realm will eventually become ineffectual. Some groups even believe that untreated impurities can result in physical harm to the affected individuals or the community.

Many ideas about what makes a person pure or impure are consistent from culture to culture. Virtually all purity systems hold that physical contact with blood, bodily fluids, or corpses makes a person impure. Many also use ritualized forms of washing and periods of isolation to cleanse people from impurity. Yet no two groups have exactly the same beliefs about purity issues. Eating pork is viewed as impure in Judaism and Islam, while pork is acceptable and beef is unclean for Hindus. Similarly, fire is used as a form of purification in Zoroastrianism but not in Judaism. Most of the agreements among different groups involve universal human experiences, while the differences usually reflect local customs or adaptive responses to diverse environments.

Contemporary anthropologists have identified several purposes that purity systems serve for the people who follow them. First, they help to make sense of the world

and bring it under control. Humans everywhere have an innate longing for a sense of meaning, order, and safety in the face of a universe that frequently appears inexplicable and threatening. Purity systems are basically a prescientific way of organizing the bewildering variety of the universe into a limited set of manageable categories. Familiar objects, people, and experiences are considered pure (that is, normal) and associated with the hidden order that lies behind the visible universe. Things that are unfamiliar or strange are deemed impure (that is, abnormal) and linked to the forces of chaos and evil. The same is true for people and objects that do not fit the culture's mental map of the universe, whether because they are in some sense out of place (by being located in a place where they do not ordinarily belong) or out of the ordinary (lacking some of the characteristics commonly associated with a particular category of reality). Of course, few people in antiquity actually thought about the laws in this way; most simply accepted them as divine commands. Nonetheless, we can see in hindsight that many purity rules are rooted in astute observations about the nature of humans and their physical environment.

Second, purity systems reinforce societal norms and institutions. The claim that a particular type of action will elicit the favor or disfavor of the gods by influencing the balance between purity and impurity in a society is a more effective motivator than the command of a fallible human authority. This is especially true when people have been taught to believe that the actions of each individual affect the group's relations with the supernatural realm. In these cases peer pressure becomes a powerful tool for persuading people to conform to the rules of the system and accept the judgments of its leaders. Those who control the definitions of purity and the means of purification (usually a small priestly class) invariably wield substantial power in a society framed around purity concerns.

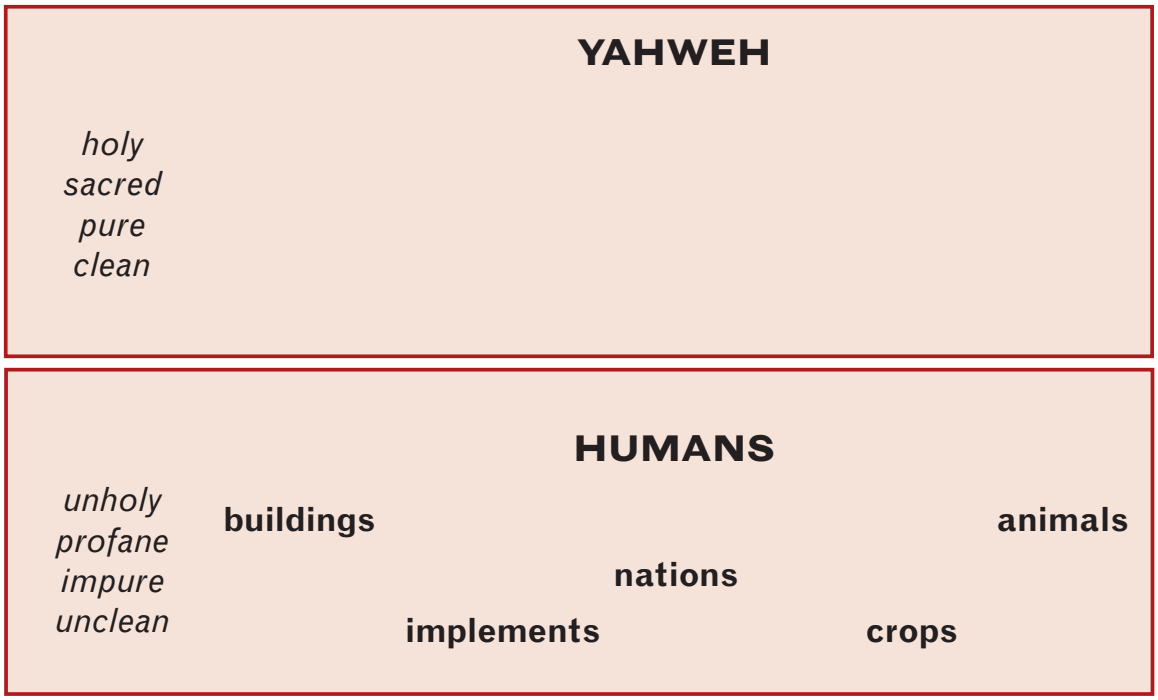
Finally, purity rules can help a group of people to maintain their identity in the presence of cultural diversity. Most purity systems require their followers to distance themselves to some degree from people outside the group, since outsiders do not follow the group's purity rules and are therefore potential sources of contamination. This pattern of thinking can produce strong psychological and social barriers against close contact (especially sexual contact) with outsiders. In some cases, purity rules are defined in explicit opposition to the practices of another group in order to diminish the possibility that the members of the two groups might mix. By associating purity with "us" and impurity with "them," purity systems reinforce the pride and cohesiveness of group members while making it harder for them to consider defecting to another group or adopting their practices.

PURITY AND THE TORAH

The purity system of the Torah is most visible in the book of Leviticus, though examples can be found in other books as well. The biblical system is similar to what we see in other religions. The similarities can be difficult to discern, however, because the Torah contains only the rules by which the system operates; almost nothing is said about the broader rationale behind those rules. Clearly the editors assumed that their ancient audience already understood why the system was needed.

At the heart of the Torah's purity system lies a single defining concept: Yahweh is a holy god who requires a holy people to serve as his covenant partners. As we saw in chapter 12, the word *holy* refers to something that has been "set apart" from other people, places, times, or objects of a similar type. To call Yahweh holy is to say that he is fundamentally unlike any other living being, whether divine (the gods honored by other peoples), human, or animal. Yahweh is the only being in the universe who is inherently holy; everything else is by nature unholy or **profane**. (The heavenly council that appears in some other biblical texts is not present in the purity system of the Torah.) By definition, that which is holy must be set apart from that which is unholy in order to preserve its holiness. The diagram on page 308 illustrates the key elements of this worldview using adjective pairs that the Torah employs to describe each sphere.

Out of the category of profane humanity, Yahweh has graciously chosen one group of people, the descendants of Abraham (later narrowed to the descendants of the people whom he led out of Egypt), to be his covenant partners. This choice makes them holy, since by it they are set apart from other nations for a unique relationship with Yahweh.

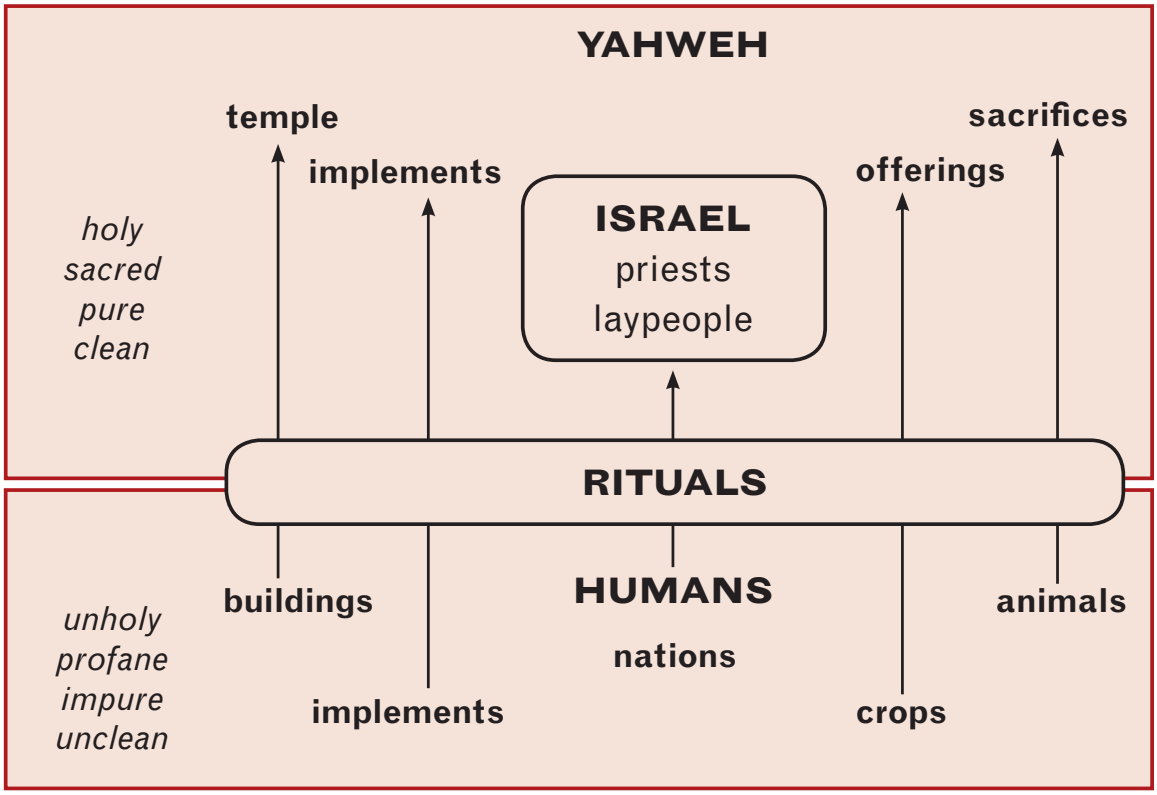


In the worldview of the Torah, Yahweh is the only being in the universe who is inherently "pure" or "holy."

Out of all the people of Israel, Yahweh has chosen certain families to serve as his priests. This divine choice elevates these families to a position of holiness above other Israelites, since they will interact directly with the deity and manage the rituals by which people and objects are made holy to Yahweh. Yahweh has also selected a special building where he will reside in the midst of his people. This building (in the Exodus narrative, the tabernacle; in later texts, the Jerusalem temple) is to be set apart for the service of Yahweh alone. Other sites can be made holy by the temporary presence of the deity, but the holiness of this building exceeds that of any other spot on earth. The innermost part of the building, called the Holy of Holies, is the most sacred place of all, since it is the dwelling place of a holy god. Nothing impure is to enter Yahweh's house; people and objects must be purified before they can come near to the holy presence of Yahweh. Those who violate this requirement are subject to death.

People and objects can be made holy and thus suitable for association with Yahweh by the performance of certain rituals. Priests who serve in the temple must undergo special purification ceremonies when they are installed into office and must follow stricter purity rules than ordinary Israelites. When performing their duties, they must wear special clothing that can be worn on no other occasion and eat only food that has been dedicated to the deity in sacrifice. Animals that are sacrificed to Yahweh must be physically flawless and must be slaughtered and cooked according to special rules. Other food products that are used in temple ceremonies (oil, incense, bread) must be made from a special formula that is reserved exclusively for the temple. Even the tools and implements used by the priests must be purified by special rituals and used nowhere else. Everything associated with the temple must be protected from contact with any form of impurity. The diagram on page 309 shows these additional elements of the Torah's purity system.

If Israel is to have a holy god living in its midst, the people and the land must be kept holy as well. The way to do this is spelled out in Yahweh's laws. Following these laws will set Israel apart from the sinful and impure ways of the people around them, as Yahweh intended when he chose their ancestors to be his holy nation. Some of the laws provide guidelines for moral or ethical conduct,

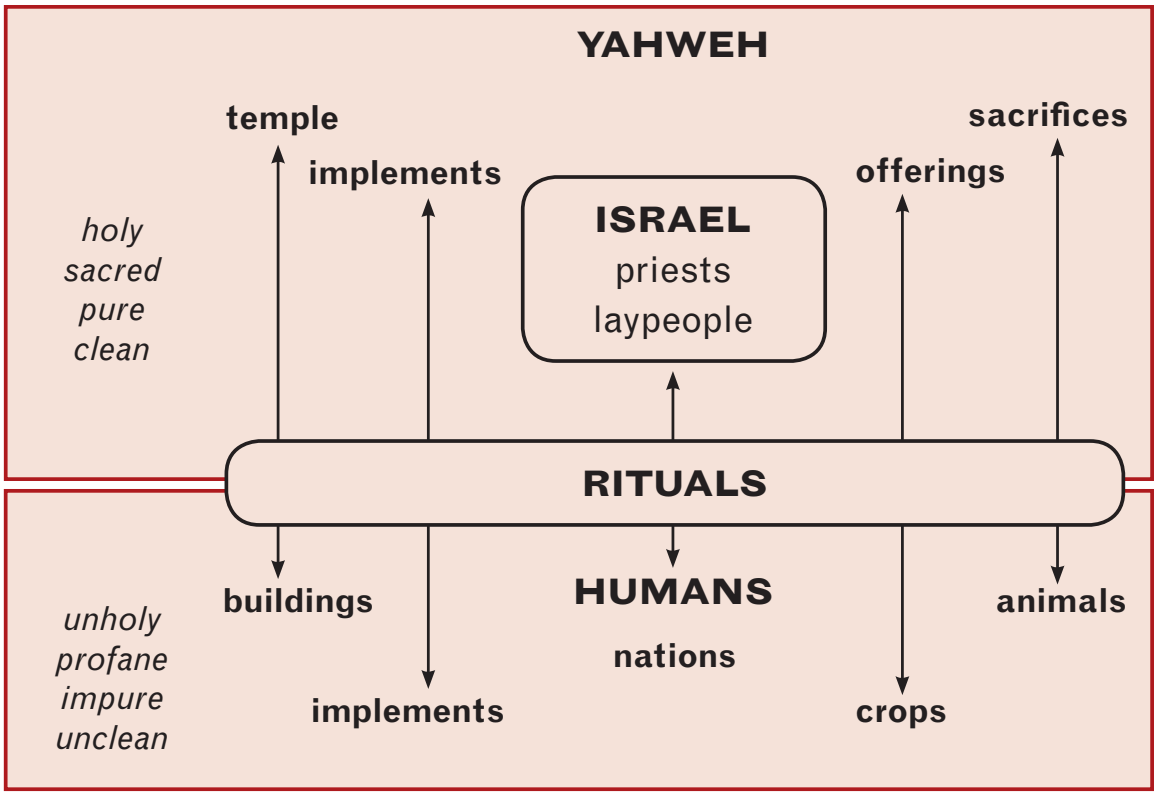


People and objects that are inherently "impure" or "unholy" can be set apart as holy through the use of rituals.

while others identify impure acts that should be avoided. Still others seek to prevent the mixing of things that Yahweh designed to remain separate. Obedience to these laws will ensure that the physical and moral order that Yahweh embedded in the universe is preserved intact. Disobedience, by contrast, threatens the people and the world with chaos and dissolution.

Fortunately, Yahweh does not require perfect obedience. His laws include a variety of rituals designed to cleanse his people from their sins and restore them to a state of holiness when they violate any of his commandments. Rituals are also crucial for removing other forms of impurity that people contract in the ordinary course of living, such as the touching of a corpse, which brings people into contact with the fearsome powers of death; menstruation, an inexplicable occurrence associated with the power of blood; and skin diseases, which threaten not only the person who is afflicted but also others whom they happen to touch. The precise ritual to be followed in each case varies with the nature and cause of the impurity. Options include immersion in water, isolation, animal sacrifices, prayers, and the passage of time. Not all impurities can be cleansed by rituals. Some acts are so dreadful that the offender must be removed from the land, whether by exile or death.

Holy objects that become impure (for example, through contact with an impure person or object) can be purified in most cases by rituals, though there are some cases in which the object must be destroyed. The temple and its altar must be cleansed of impurities once a year through the performance of special sacrifices and the application of sacred blood to the temple precincts. Even the land can become impure and require cleansing if the people's sins and impurities are allowed to accumulate without purification. To be accurate, then, the diagram that we have been using to illustrate the purity system of the Torah should include arrows that point in *both* directions between the sphere of the pure and the impure as,



Holy people and objects that become "unclean" can often be restored to a state of purity through rituals.

as indicated above, since anything in the pure category (apart from Yahweh) can be rendered impure under certain circumstances and can be made pure again through the proper performance of rituals.

As long as the people of Yahweh make a serious effort to follow his laws and perform the proper rituals when needed to cleanse them from impurity, Yahweh will remain with Israel and continue to provide for their needs. If his people persist in disobeying his laws, however, or if they fail to follow the proper cleansing rituals, then impurity can spread to the entire land, including the temple, making it unsuitable for a holy god. Eventually Yahweh will remove his protective presence and abandon his people, leaving them to be overcome by disease, famine, and foreign invaders. The desire to retain Yahweh's presence among his people appears to have been one of the central motivations for obeying the purity laws.

Two other points are worth noting about the Torah's purity system. The first concerns the power of blood. Blood was a potent substance in the eyes of the people who created the purity laws. As far as they were concerned, blood carried the power of life for people and animals alike, since they could see that the uncontrolled emission of blood invariably led to death. Thus the purity laws include special provisions for the handling of blood. Blood must be drained from all meat before it is eaten, and special rituals must be used whenever blood is spilled, including childbirth and menstruation. On the positive side, the blood of an animal that has been ritually dedicated to Yahweh can be sprinkled upon people and objects to cleanse them from impurity. In fact, the blood of a sacrificed animal is the most potent of all cleansing forces, since it is both powerful and holy.

The final point that should be noted is that the purity system described in the Torah operates under the oversight of the priests. Ordinary Israelites are not allowed to enter Yahweh's holy temple. They can bring animals and crops to the temple precincts to be offered to Yahweh,

Fig. 23.3. (top) Members of a Ugandan tribe collect blood from a bull for ritual use; (bottom) a Hindu priest in Bali offers incense to the gods.

but the priests, aided by their assistants, the Levites, perform the sacrifices and direct the prayers and songs that are offered in conjunction with the sacrifices (see chapter 30). The priests also receive a portion of most of the sacrifices and offerings as their food. In addition to overseeing the offerings of individuals, the priests offer daily sacrifices on behalf of the entire nation and special sacrifices at festival times and other sacred occasions.

The priests also supervise the practical implementation of some of the laws. For example, it is the duty of the priests to decide when a person with a skin disease should be considered impure and segregated from the community. If the disease goes away, a priest is supposed to perform special cleansing rituals to remove any lingering impurity from the person's house and possessions (Leviticus 13–14). Priests also oversee a ritual that is used to determine whether a wife has been unfaithful to her husband (Numbers 5:11-31). According to the book of Deuteronomy, difficult cases of legal interpretation are to be brought to the priests for resolution, and their rulings are to be accepted as final (Deuteronomy 17:8-12). In summary, the purity laws envision a society in which priests play a key role in managing the social and religious lives of the people.

EXERCISE 59

Read Leviticus 12:1-8; 16:1-34; 22:1-16; and Numbers 6:1-21. Then write a paragraph explaining how the ideas and practices described in one of these passages relate to the purity system that we have been studying in this chapter.

WHY PURITY?

As we saw earlier in the chapter, purity systems represent an effort to establish and maintain a sense of psychological and social order in the midst of the confusion and dangers of everyday life in a prescientific society. In this sense, the purity system of the Torah is simply a localized expression of a broader cross-cultural phenomenon. Thus the many biblical laws that prohibit the mixing of dissimilar substances (for example, no sowing of two types of seed in a field, no wearing of garments made of two types of material) can be understood as a symbolic means of reinforcing the importance of maintaining purity (understood here as avoiding mixtures) in every area of life. Concerns about mixing also lie behind some of the food laws, which forbid the eating of animals that violate the Torah's mental map of the animal world by having qualities commonly associated with different groups of animals. Thus the eating of pork is disallowed on the grounds that pigs have split hooves like cattle but do not chew cud like other split-hooved animals, while

the eating of rabbits is prohibited for the opposite reason (that is, they chew cud but do not have a split hoof; see Leviticus 11:6-7). The eating of shellfish is likewise banned because shellfish do not have fins and tails as fish do (Leviticus 11:9-12). Similar concerns lie behind many other biblical laws. Anything that does not fit the societal understanding of normality can potentially be declared unclean.

Cross-cultural parallels are also evident in the concern for bodily integrity that appears in many of the purity laws. For example, illnesses or other conditions that result in the emission of fluids from the body (blood, pus, semen, and so forth) render a person unclean in a way that sicknesses affecting only the inner parts of the body do not. Even such natural occurrences as menstruation and childbirth fit into this category, since they result in the emission of blood (Leviticus 12:1-8). These and similar laws appear to reflect a cross-cultural concern for protecting the wholeness of the body, a concern that some anthropologists see as a symbolic representation at the microlevel of a broader concern for preserving the integrity of the social group. Just as the boundaries of the group must be rigidly defined and protected in order to preserve it from dissolution by the chaotic forces that surround it, so also the integrity of the physical body must be guarded against similar threats. Similar reasoning probably lies behind the biblical prohibitions against bringing physically defective people or animals into Yahweh's presence (Leviticus 21:16-23; 22:17-25): either their bodily integrity has been compromised, or else they lack characteristics that would qualify them as normal or whole.

Cross-cultural comparisons such as these are helpful for understanding the logic behind the biblical purity system, but they do not explain why a purity system emerged among some of the followers of Yahweh, nor why it took the particular form that it did. Unfortunately, the texts give us few direct answers to these questions. Hardly any of the purity rules are accompanied by an explanation or rationale; most are simply presented as the commands of Yahweh, the holy god of Israel, whose words must be obeyed without question. A few exceptions can be observed: the care required in the handling of blood is justified by the assertion that "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:11); sacrifices are to be performed in order to atone for the people's sins (though the manner in which they operate is never specified) and to offer a "pleasing odor to the Lord" (Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9, 16); and the fatty portions of a sacrificial animal are to be burned on the altar and not eaten because "all fat is the LORD's" (Leviticus 3:16). Yet statements such as these tell us little about how the various practices originated. The Exodus narrative claims that the entire collection of laws goes back to the earliest days of the nation. But only conservative scholars would accept this account as a historical record, as we noted in the previous chapter.

One possible clue to the historical origins of the purity system can be found in several passages that contrast the behaviors required by the Torah with the customs of the surrounding peoples. For example, Leviticus 17 requires the people to bring their sacrifices "to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting" (that is, the tabernacle, later replaced by the Jerusalem temple) "so that they may no longer offer their sacrifices for goat-demons, to whom they prostitute themselves" (17:5, 7). In other words, animal sacrifices are restricted to a specific site so that the priests can make sure that the people are offering them to Yahweh and not to other gods. The same idea is expressed more explicitly in texts like Leviticus 18:24-30:

> Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you (for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled); otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people. So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am the LORD your God.

According to this passage, the prior inhabitants of Palestine (the Canaanites) who worshipped gods other than Yahweh had defiled the land (that is, rendered it impure)

by their practices, and Yahweh had removed them from his territory as a result (an act of purification). Now Yahweh is warning his people to obey his laws and avoid Canaanite religious practices in order to avoid a similar fate. The passage presupposes a situation in which the target audience is familiar with non-Yahwistic religious practices and at least some of them have found these practices attractive.

A careful study of the purity laws reveals that many of them require conduct that is the direct opposite of the social and religious practices of the non-Yahwistic residents of Palestine. This suggests that the purity laws were designed to create a psychological and social barrier between the people of Yahweh and the followers of other gods. From a psychological standpoint, the purity laws promote a feeling of disgust at the practices of people outside the group and encourage the audience to take pride in the beliefs and practices of their own group. From a social standpoint, the laws challenge the audience to stay away from people outside the group in order to avoid the temptation to follow their religious beliefs and practices. This segregationist agenda is especially prominent in the book of Deuteronomy.

> When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. *(Deuteronomy 7:1-6)*

Fig. 23.4. Both the Amish people (top) and the Hare Krishnas (bottom) follow distinctive social and religious practices that set them apart from other Americans; the biblical purity laws would have done the same for their followers.

> When the LORD your God has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them, when you have dispossessed them and live in their land, take care that you are not snared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you: do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, "How did these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same." You must not do the same for the LORD your God, because every abhorrent thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. You must diligently observe everything that I command you; do not add to it or take anything from it. *(Deuteronomy 12:29-32)*

When we ask what this segregationist impulse might tell us about when and where the purity laws originated, the answers are less than clear. Most scholars believe that the purity laws originated in priestly circles, since they represent the concerns and viewpoints of the priestly class and depict the priests as the leading authorities within Israelite society. The earliest collections were probably oral and might even have been limited to the priests. If this is correct, then the question arises as to when and why the collection was first written down and expanded for use by non-priests. Scholars have been unable to reach agreement on this question. Some believe that an earlier version was available in the preexilic period, while others attribute the initial collection to the Exile or the postexilic era (see chapter 22). Whenever it originated, it seems clear that the development and circulation of such a collection would have served to enhance the social status of the priests and elicit support for their religious agenda.

Scholars also disagree about whether the purity laws represent a new vision for the relationship between Yahweh and his people or whether they reflect long-standing beliefs and practices that were only later compiled into a written collection. The social and religious turbulence of the exilic and postexilic eras provided a natural climate for the production of such a collection, but so did the eighth century B.C.E., when the kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians and the kingdom of Judah was threatened with a similar fate. The presence of purity laws in the book of Deuteronomy, a book whose roots go back to at least the seventh century B.C.E., has led many scholars to associate purity concerns with the kingdom of Israel, where the legal sections of Deuteronomy are believed to have originated (see chapter 19). But the presence of a powerful priestly class at the Jerusalem temple suggests that an ideology framed around ritual purity might have developed within the kingdom of Judah as well.

Behind these diverse historical reconstructions lies a broad scholarly consensus that the purity system depicted in the Torah represents a vision for the way in which a Yahwistic society ought to work rather than a picture of the way people actually lived in ancient Palestine. Even conservative scholars agree that the people of Israel did not follow these laws during the preexilic period, since the prophets repeatedly condemn them for following the religious practices of their Canaanite neighbors. During this era, most people probably encountered purity concerns only when they made a trip to one of the shrines of Yahweh, where the priests told them what they needed to do to purify themselves before approaching the deity. The idea of an entire society organized around purity concerns probably originated with a group of devout Yahwists, led by priests, who wanted to uphold a strict version of Yahwism in the face of the persistent religious diversity of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. This would explain why the purity laws place so much emphasis on avoiding practices associated with Canaanite religions, as well as other preexilic features that scholars have noted in the collection. It also fits well with the presumed preexilic date of Deuteronomy.

As far as we know, however, it was not until the Babylonian exile or later that these ideas began to gain broad support within the broader Yahwistic community. The Babylonians made no effort to convert their conquered subjects to their religious beliefs, but the experience of living in a foreign culture would have caused the exiles to feel a persistent internal pressure to adopt the social and religious practices of their Babylonian neighbors. No doubt many were worried about how they were going to preserve their culture and identity in the midst of such an alien environment. It is thus no wonder that many of the exiles would have been attracted to a plan that called for the people of Yahweh to organize themselves as a separatist religious community under the guidance of a set of purity rules that embodied the will of Yahweh. This is especially true if the plan was reinforced by a claim that faithful obedience to Yahweh's laws would cause Yahweh to renew his concern for his people and restore them to their land. Tying the purity system to the emerging Exodus narrative would have added yet more weight to this claim, since the Exodus story likewise insisted that Yahweh cared for his people and would in due time rescue them from foreign domination.

In the long run, this concern for ritual purity helped to secure the survival of the people of Judah in Babylonia by giving them a social and ideological alternative to assimilation. But the idea was slower to take root in Palestine. During the decades of the Exile, the residents of Judah

who had not been deported to Babylonia continued to follow the religious practices of their ancestors. The differences between these people and the Babylonian community became apparent when the exiles began returning to Palestine. Some of the returning exiles married people who had remained in the land and adopted their religion, while others followed the Babylonian purity model and set themselves apart from the people of the land, whom they regarded as a threat to the true religion of Yahweh. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah hint at the tensions that existed between the two communities (see Ezra 9:1-2; Nehemiah 13:23-31).

Eventually the purity system became the dominant form of religion among the followers of Yahweh in Palestine, whether through the influence of leaders like Ezra (as depicted in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah) or through other processes that have been lost to history. The fact that the purity laws were linked to the Exodus story, which held a key position in the increasingly influential grand narrative of Israel's past, no doubt helped to reinforce their validity. By the time the canon of the Torah was closed around the third century B.C.E., the purity laws had become such an integral part of Yahwism that few would have questioned their authority.

CONCLUSION

The concern for ritual purity that we find in certain portions of the Torah has parallels in many other religions. But the Torah model also contains many distinctive elements that reflect the cultural environment in which it arose.

The Torah's purity system is based on the belief that Yahweh is a holy god who requires a holy people to serve as his covenant partners. Yahweh has chosen Israel for this purpose and has given them a series of laws that defines what it means to be holy, or set apart for the deity. Included in these laws are provisions relating to their social, ethical, and ritual conduct. Violations of these laws render the people unclean. If they do not make use of the purification rituals described in the Torah, Yahweh will eventually leave them, since a holy god cannot live among an unholy people.

The idea of ritual purity is rooted in the thought-world of priests whose power derives from their position as mediators between the impure world of humans and the holy and awesome presence of the deity. The Torah's vision of a society framed around a system of purity laws probably originated with a group of priests and lay supporters who wished to strengthen their people's devotion to Yahweh at a time when religious diversity was the norm in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The separatist orientation of this system made it popular with the Babylonian exiles who faced daily pressures to conform to the social and religious systems of their Babylonian neighbors. With their support, it became the standard for proper religious behavior among the followers of Yahweh during the postexilic period.

EXERCISE 60

Read the following passages from the narrative books of the Hebrew Bible and explain how each passage relates to the purity issues discussed in this chapter.

- Joshua 7:1-26
- 2 Samuel 6:1-19
- 2 Chronicles 29:1-36
- Nehemiah 13:1-31

Fig. 24.1. To be poor, elderly, and alone is to live a very vulnerable life. The Qur'an, like the Bible, tells its followers to give generously to the poor.