

2. Wash, Rinse, Repeat

Cleansing and Washing in the Old Testament

The Old Testament is maybe not the most obvious place to start looking to understand baptism.¹ If you search for the word ‘baptism’, you won’t find any Bible verses listed in the Old Testament. In fact, the first time baptism appears in the Bible is with John the Baptist at the beginning of the Gospels. But although baptism seems to have appeared almost out of the blue with John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan, it actually has a remarkable Old Testament pedigree.

Even though the word ‘baptism’ is never used in the Old Testament, the Old Testament is full of water and of concepts like cleansing and washing. The first Christians were Jews who were steeped in Old Testament practices. They performed those ceremonies day in and day out, and had done so for centuries. And while baptism is not identical to any of those Old Testament rituals, those rituals certainly laid the foundation for baptism.

In this chapter, we’ll dig into those Old Testament practices and try to understand what they were pointing to and how they

1. Some do begin by looking in the Old Testament, but they begin by looking at the sign of circumcision that God gave to Abraham. We’ll think more about the connection between circumcision and baptism in chapter 4. Others spend a fair amount of time considering first-century Jewish conversion rituals (see chap. 5, note 2). But the most obvious background to baptism is the one provided by the cleansing rituals in the Old Testament. If you’re not convinced by that idea yet, hopefully the next two chapters will help convince you.

announced the gospel beforehand. Then in the next chapter, we'll look at how Jesus and New Testament writers used the language of cleansing to describe the effects of the gospel and how it's connected with baptism.

The Purity Laws in the Old Testament

Call me strange, but if there is one thing I get excited about it's the cleansing rituals and purity laws in the Old Testament. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad I don't have to do them. But what I love about them is that they're so graphic, if not a little confronting. Leviticus, the book where most of those rituals are spelled out, is a kind of lost treasure. I often think of it as the picture book of the Old Testament. Though baffling at first, when you begin to understand it, it reveals itself not as a book of dry theology or weird ceremonies, but as one that puts deep truths in ordinary clothes. Leviticus and its ceremonies have a strange power to bring the truth to life in our imagination. In fact, few chapters in the Bible help us come to grips with God's view of the world and of our human predicament as visually as the chapters in Leviticus that deal with purity and with things being clean or unclean.

Living in a Divided World

The first regulations in Leviticus on cleanness are the regulations about clean and unclean foods in chapter 11. In those laws, God specified what the people were able to eat and what they couldn't eat, and what animals would make them unclean if they came into contact with their dead bodies. Here is a sample:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Say to the Israelites: "Of all the animals that live on land, these are the ones you may eat: You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud.

"There are some that only chew the cud or only have a divided hoof, but you must not eat them. The camel, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is ceremonially unclean for you. The hyrax, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is unclean for you. The rabbit, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is unclean for you. And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you.

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You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you” (Lev. 11:1-8).

God says in verse 3 they could eat land animals that had a completely split hoof and chewed vigorously.² In verse 9 He says they could eat sea creatures that had both scales and fins. Verse 13 specifies that there were birds they couldn’t eat, such as eagles, vultures and various owls. There were some insects that they couldn’t eat and some they could. And the list goes on. The chapter is summed up with these words:

These are the regulations concerning animals, birds, every living thing that moves about in the water and every creature that moves along the ground. You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten (Lev. 11:46-47).

Now people have suggested a variety of reasons why God considered some animals to be clean and others to be unclean. Some people say that it was a matter of hygiene. The suggestion is that the unclean animals were more likely to give the people diseases. Some people say that it was a matter of avoiding animals used in the rituals of other religions. But that doesn’t really work because a lot of the animals used for sacrifices by the Israelites were used by other nations in sacrifices too. Some people suggest that it’s a matter of an animal’s perfection or wholeness within its class. So, for instance, a winged insect that walks around on four legs is, in a way, mixed up: insects with wings should fly, not walk; fish should have fins and scales. Animals that don’t fit within the normal pattern of creation should be avoided. Or so the theory goes.

It’s hard to know which one is right. I think the last theory and the hygiene theory have the most going for them. But really, it doesn’t matter that much. Although it can be worth thinking through why one particular animal is clean and another isn’t, thinking about

2. The English expression ‘chew the cud’ is a technical description of animals that regurgitate food to chew it again more thoroughly. Cows, for instance, do this. But insisting that is what is meant here is probably demanding more than the phrase in the original language means. Neither rabbits nor camels, for instance, ‘chew the cud’ in this technical sense. The expression in Leviticus 11 simply refers to animals that chew their food thoroughly. (See Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 171-72).

the underlying reason for why a sheep is clean, but a camel isn't, risks missing the deeper significance of these commands. At one level, the point is relatively clear: **the world is made up of things which God views as clean and unclean, and unclean things are to be avoided.** What's more, coming into contact with unclean things means a person must be cleansed to be able to approach God.

But although Leviticus 11 is all about physical impurity, avoiding physical impurity was never the end game. Through this practice of distinguishing physical impurity, God was teaching the people about the importance of distinguishing moral and spiritual impurity. That can be seen in the rest of the Old Testament where the language of *ritual* cleanness and uncleanness is used to describe *moral* cleanness and uncleanness.³ For instance, David says in Psalm 24:

Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god (Ps. 24:3-4).

Similarly, through Isaiah God calls the people to:

Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow (Isa. 1:16-17).

Christopher Wright helpfully explains the significance of the Old Testament preoccupation with cleanness and purity when he writes:

ritual cleanness, from the kitchen to the sanctuary, was meant to symbolize God's greater requirement of moral integrity, social justice and covenant loyalty. In fact, as the prophets (and Jesus) vigorously pointed out, if these latter things were lacking, then ritual cleanness of the most scrupulous kind at every level was worthless.⁴

In fact, the symbolism is probably easier for us to get a hold of than we might realise. We still use language today that reflects the idea

3. For a helpful discussion, see Jay Sklar, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 3 (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 49, 173.

4. Christopher J. H. Wright, 'Leviticus,' in *New Bible Commentary*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 139.

here in these chapters. People talk about ‘moral filth’ or ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ motives. In the same way, the picture in Leviticus is of a world made up of pure, right and good things, and of a world that also contains impure, wrong and bad things. When God created the world, He created it good and clean. But when Adam and Eve sinned, the world became riddled with filth – it became polluted by sin. And so the world is now a mixed place. You don’t need to be a rocket scientist to work that out. There are some places where that’s exceptionally clear. For example, God’s words in the Bible are pure things in the world; Jesus was the only 100 per cent pure thing in the world; but the sex industry is an impure, unclean, wrong thing in the world. God wanted His people to avoid the unclean and impure and to pursue the pure. As Paul writes to the Philippians:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things (Phil. 4:8).

God was teaching the people through these regulations that He hated impurity, and that if they wanted to enjoy His presence they had to stay well away from impurity. There is a basic division in the world between what is pure and what is impure, between what is clean and what is unclean. But the kind of impurity that God really hates is not ritual impurity but moral impurity.⁵

The Threat of Contamination

So God wanted the people to avoid impurity. The problem, however, is that keeping away from impurity is very difficult because it spreads like wildfire. Ritual uncleanness is described almost like a contagion or a spreading disease. Uncleanness from animals could be ‘contracted’ just by coming into contact with their dead bodies or by eating them. Similarly, when unclean skin conditions are described in Leviticus 13, the problematic ones are those that keep spreading. Verse 7 says:

5. It’s important to grasp that uncleanness itself was not a sin, even though uncleanness not properly dealt with could become sinful and dangerous. That is, being unclean after childbirth was not a sin. Rather, uncleanness was a *symbol* of sin. It was a lived-out metaphor of the brokenness of the world in which we live. Yet, in Old Testament times, the failure to deal appropriately with that (symbolic) uncleanness constituted disobedience to what God had commanded.

But if the rash does spread in their skin after they have shown themselves to the priest to be pronounced clean, they must appear before the priest again. The priest is to examine that person, and if the rash has spread in the skin, he shall pronounce them unclean; it is a defiling skin disease (Lev. 13:7-8).

The same is true for the mould on the piece of clothing in verse 47 and following: if the mould spreads the clothing is unclean.

The threat of contamination also explains the strict quarantine restrictions for those who were infected:

Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp (Lev. 13:45-46).

This is not merely a matter of hygiene. It's a picture of the contagious nature of sin. It's not that having a skin condition was or is sinful. It's not that the person with a skin disorder had sinned in some way and God wanted everyone to see that. It wasn't that a person with a skin condition was more sinful than any other person. These laws about what is clean and unclean were broad pictures about the nature of sin – sin is like a spreading rash.

That's why it was so important for the Israelites to distinguish between what is pure and impure, because spending time with spiritual impurity would drag them into spiritual impurity as well. That is very much the repeated story of the Old Testament. The people compromised on God's instructions to remove sin from their environment and they ended up getting dragged into sin – bad company corrupts good character (1 Cor. 15:33).

Paul applies these truths to the Corinthian church when he says:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'

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Therefore, ‘Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. *Touch no unclean thing*, and I will receive you’ [emphasis added].

And, ‘I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.’ Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, *let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit*, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1) [emphasis added].

Most of us know the corrupting effects of sin from experience. If someone is spending time with the ‘wrong crowd’ we worry, because we know that attitudes and behaviour rub off on people. If you spend too much time around people who are sharply critical and complain about everything, you’ll end up becoming sharply critical and complaining about everything too. If you spend loads of time around people who talk about nothing else but their latest 2000-inch television or how their new smartphone has revolutionised their life, then you’ll end up with a heart which is shaped and framed by the desire for those things. And once things are in our heart, they’re very hard to get out.⁶ It might be scenes from movies that you can’t forget or conversations that you’ve been a part of that stay with you. They go in easily, but they don’t come out easily. Such is the infectious and corrupting nature of sin.

While we no longer practice any of these specific commands with respect to skin conditions, contagious diseases remain a powerful metaphor for the problem of sin. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us that viruses are silent but effective killers that spread frighteningly easily and which can bring a world to its knees. Like

6. But that raises the question: how does that fit with Jesus’ life in which he ate with the people that everyone else called ‘sinners’? From Paul’s perspective the issue is not spending time with people who don’t follow Jesus, but being bound to them in some way and getting involved in their style of life. A friend of mine used to be part of a footy team. He never went to the ‘mad Monday’ celebrations because he knew that everyone would just be getting smashed, and he never went to the stripper nights, for obvious reasons. But he still played footy with those guys and when one guy’s marriage failed, he was able to help. That is, he played for the team, but he was bound to Jesus. And his allegiance to Jesus trumped his allegiance to the team. Of course, it may come to the point where you can’t spend time with a person anymore because everything they do drags you in as well. The truth is that there are no easy answers and it takes immense wisdom and prayer in every circumstance. There are no hard and fast rules except that God calls us to both love sinners and be careful about the damaging and contagious effects of sin.

Covid-19, and the black plague and flu pandemics of past centuries, sin is a virulent and powerful killer. We're not remote islands, quarantined from the toxic effects of sin. We are deeply affected by the sin in our world. If we are to be cured of the deathly disease of rebellion against God, we need a medicine that can protect us. We need to be inoculated against sin by a strength more powerful than sin itself. But more than that, we need sin to be eradicated. God's plan is to do to sin what humanity has done to smallpox – get rid of it from the world. But as the next section of Leviticus shows, we need God not only to eradicate sin *out there* in the world, we need Him to eradicate it in us.

Overflowing with Filth

The Old Testament commands surrounding ritual cleanness and purity divided the world into the clean and the unclean and encouraged people to avoid the contagious effects of impurity. But the last chapter in Leviticus on purity introduces a much deeper problem. It turns out that the biggest problem is not the pollution from others but the pollution spilling out from ourselves.

Chapter 15 is all about discharges from the body. It ties in too with chapter 12, which speaks about the uncleanness that results from having a baby. In both chapters the thing that causes uncleanness is something from inside a person coming out. It might be a man with an unnamed discharge (15:4) or an emission of semen (15:16); it might be a woman with a period (15:19); it might even be an unclean person spitting (15:8).

The shocking and deeply troubling truth which comes into focus in this chapter is that even if a person kept away from the wrong animals, even if they miraculously avoided the skin problems that others faced, they still couldn't escape uncleanness because there was an unstoppable source of defilement coming from within every person. Even if you tried very hard to avoid uncleanness, you couldn't, because at least some of the causes were involuntary. They're part of our nature.⁷

And therein lies the shocking reality. The problem is not unpleasant discharges from people's bodies – that's just the picture.

7. Lesley DiFransico highlights the pervasive nature of impurity in the Old Testament writing, 'ritual impurity is a predominantly unavoidable and natural state of defilement that one would expect to undergo in the course of life.' (Lesley R. DiFransico, *Washing Away Sin: An Analysis of the Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and Its Influence*, Biblical Tools and Studies 23 (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 22).