

PART THREE
THE IMPURITY SYSTEM
LEVITICUS 11-16

Introduction to Part Three (11:1 – 16:34)

In the understanding of the people of Israel, the tabernacle, God's holy dwelling, was contaminated by failure to keep the covenant, especially by deliberate rebellion ('transgression', *peša'*), but also by inadvertent 'sin' (*ḥaṭṭā't*), and by contact with anything that belonged to the sphere of death. Death and life, 'impurity' and 'holiness', cannot co-exist. The key demand, of course, was for obedience to the covenant and repentance where the covenant had been broken. In the all-important symbolic world of the cult, however, sorrow for sin and repentance were to be expressed in sacrificial rites, which also had an educative role. The cult was a constant reminder that, thanks to the Presence of God among them, and to the extent that they obeyed God's will, the forces of evil, of impurity and death, would be overcome by the power of life issuing from the divine presence. But the divine presence could not be taken for granted. If God was going to remain dwelling among them, the sanctuary must be decontaminated, purged of the negative forces of sin and death that oppose communion with YHWH.

In Part One the Priestly School recorded YHWH's instructions to Moses concerning the sacrifices to be offered in the tabernacle. The sacrifices that are pertinent to Part Three are those for purging God's dwelling: the purification offerings (see 4:1 – 5:13 and 6:24-30). Of paramount significance in these sacrifices is the dashing of the sacrificed animal's blood against the altar. It is the giving of the life of the offered animal back to God that purges the sanctuary of the negative pollution that human behaviour causes to adhere to it. It nullifies these forces, thereby making it possible for the presence of the all-holy God to dwell there, and so to bless and protect his people.

Here in Part Three the Priestly School give YHWH's instructions for the yearly rite of purification that gives ritual expression to the sorrow and repentance of the community for deliberate transgressions. This is the rite of *Yôm Kippûr*, and it is the climax of this Part (chapter sixteen).

There were other less dangerous, but still serious, ways of threatening the sacred, and so risking losing God's presence. The common factor is that they all bespeak death. Obviously contact between a corpse or carcass and the holy had to be managed with the greatest care, for death and life are in constant tension. Diet, too, was important, especially where blood was involved, but any contact with food that had links with dust and so with death had to be avoided. Sometimes failure to observe these diet laws made a person 'unclean'. This required a sacrificial offering of purification (chapter eleven).

Childbirth had to be treated with care, for blood was prominently involved. A purification offering is required (chapter twelve).

Care had to be taken also in regard to a skin disease that caused scaling: it has the appearance of death, which gives it a special 'power' to pollute. It, too, must be tightly controlled and contact between it and the sanctuary must be strictly avoided (chapter thirteen). The required purification offering is described in chapter fourteen.

Finally, genital discharge, the loss of life-giving blood or semen in a non-life-giving way, was fraught with meaning in this highly symbolic world. Here, too, contact with the sacred had to be managed, and in certain circumstances a purification offering was required (chapter fifteen).

Introduction to the Dietary System (11:1-47)

Two basic principles appear to account for the dietary regulations of chapter eleven. Both take us into the symbolic world that finds its most profound expression in the cult. The very fact that they must continually select between what they can and what they cannot eat is a daily reminder to the people of Israel that they have been selected, chosen, set apart from other nations, by the Holy One, to be 'holy'. This 'holiness' is to be demonstrated in every aspect of their way of living; significantly in their moral behaviour:

Who shall ascend the hill of YHWH? Who shall stand in his holy place?
The person who has clean hands and a pure heart.

– Psalm 24:3-4

The second principle takes us back to the violence that brought about the Flood, and, were it not for Noah, would have meant the end of the human race. Ideally human beings would be vegetarian, inflicting no violence on each other or on the animal world (Genesis 1:29-30). After the Flood, God decided, as it were, to live with this imperfect human being, even with the evil inclinations of his heart (Genesis 8:21). However violence against another human being would not be tolerated:

Each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.

– Genesis 9:5-6

As the story is told, God allowed him to eat 'every moving thing that lives' (Genesis 9:3). However, a strict condition was put in place:

Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

– Genesis 9:4

Our study of the sacrificial system has shown that people were allowed to eat three species of domestic animal: cattle, sheep and goats. However, this was on condition that they were brought to the sanctuary and offered in sacrifice. The animal had to be killed as painlessly as possible (its throat cut and its blood immediately drained), and the priest had to dash the blood against the altar. In this way the sense of reverence for life would constantly be reinforced. People could eat the flesh of the sacrificed animals, but they could not take their life. Their life, present in the blood, had to be first given back to God.

The following dietary regulations limit the kind of wild life that could be hunted as game, and absolutely forbid eating blood. It had to be drained into the earth. The pig is singled out for special prohibition because of its association with pagan worship of the gods of death and the underworld. Varieties of animals, birds, fish and reptiles are prohibited because, for a variety of reasons, something about them associated them in a symbolic way with death.

The very fact of having to distinguish was a constant reminder to separate themselves from the surrounding peoples by being faithful to the covenant with YHWH. Having to shy away from food that is linked to death was a constant reminder to choose life.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them: ²Speak to the people of Israel, saying:

1. Quadrupeds that can/cannot be eaten and are ‘unclean’ (11:2-8)

‘Chewing the cud’ has been introduced in order to exclude the pig (11:7).

From among all the land quadrupeds, these are the creatures that you may eat. ³Any quadruped that has hoofs and is cleft-footed and chews the cud—such you may eat. ⁴But among those that chew the cud or have hoofs, you shall not eat the following: the camel, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have hoofs; it is unclean for you. ⁵The rock badger, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have hoofs; it is unclean for you. ⁶The hare, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have hoofs; it is unclean for you. ⁷The pig, for even though it has hoofs and is cleft-footed, it does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. ⁸Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch; they are unclean for you.

Verse eight may explain the origin of the practice of removing sandals (made for animal skins) when entering the sanctuary.

2. Fish that can/cannot be eaten (11:9-12)

Certain fish, birds and insects are defined as ‘detestable’ (šeqeš): they cannot be eaten. They are not, however, like the forbidden quadrupeds, ‘unclean’ (tāmē’).

⁹These you may eat, of all that are in the waters. Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the streams—such you may eat. ¹⁰But anything in the seas or the streams that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and among all the other living creatures that are in the waters—they are detestable to you ¹¹and detestable they shall remain. Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall regard as detestable. ¹²Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you.

3. Birds that can/cannot be eaten (11:13-19)

¹³These you shall regard as detestable among the birds. They shall not be eaten; they are an abomination: the eagle, the vulture, the osprey, ¹⁴the buzzard, the kite of any kind; ¹⁵every raven of any kind; ¹⁶the ostrich, the night-hawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind; ¹⁷the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, ¹⁸the water hen, the desert owl, the carrion vulture, ¹⁹the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat.

4. Insects that can/cannot be eaten (11:20-23)

²⁰All winged insects that walk upon all fours are detestable to you. ²¹But among the winged insects that walk on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to leap on the ground. ²²Of them you may eat: the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, the cricket according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind. ²³But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you.

What to do when someone touches something unclean (11:24-40)

Washing is all that is required, and the state of being unclean (tāmē') lasts only till the evening.

²⁴By these you shall become unclean; whoever touches the carcass of any of them shall be unclean until the evening, ²⁵and whoever carries any part of the carcass of any of them shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening. ²⁶Every quadruped that has hoofs but is not cleft-footed or does not chew the cud is unclean for you; everyone who touches one of them shall be unclean. ²⁷All that walk on their paws, among the animals that walk on all fours, are unclean for you; whoever touches the carcass of any of them shall be unclean until the evening, ²⁸and the one who carries the carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening; they are unclean for you.

²⁹These are unclean for you among the creatures that swarm upon the earth: the weasel, the mouse, the great lizard according to its kind, ³⁰the gecko, the land crocodile, the lizard, the sand lizard, and the chameleon. ³¹These are unclean for you among all that swarm; whoever touches one of them when they are dead shall be unclean until the evening. ³²And anything upon which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean, whether an article of wood or cloth or skin or sacking, any article that is used for any purpose; it shall be dipped into water, and it shall be unclean until the evening, and then it shall be clean. ³³And if any of them falls into any earthen vessel, all that is in it shall be unclean, and you shall break the vessel.

³⁴Any food that could be eaten shall be unclean if water from any such vessel comes upon it; and any liquid that could be drunk shall be unclean if it was in any such vessel. ³⁵Everything on which any part of the carcass falls shall be unclean; whether an oven or stove, it shall be broken in pieces; they are unclean, and shall remain unclean for you.

³⁶But a spring or a cistern holding water shall be clean, while whatever touches the carcass in it shall be unclean. ³⁷If any part of their carcass falls upon any seed set aside for sowing, it is clean; ³⁸but if water is put on the seed and any part of their carcass falls on it, it is unclean for you.

³⁹If an animal of which you may eat dies, anyone who touches its carcass shall be unclean until the evening. ⁴⁰Those who eat of its carcass shall wash their clothes and be unclean until the evening; and those who carry the carcass shall wash their clothes and be unclean until the evening.

5. Creatures that crawl on the earth cannot be eaten and are 'unclean' (11:41-43)

These are not only 'detestable' (šeqeš), they also make a person 'unclean' (tāmē'). This is because of their association with dust, and so with death and the underworld.

⁴¹All creatures that swarm upon the earth are detestable; they shall not be eaten. ⁴²Whatever moves on its belly, and whatever moves on all fours, or whatever has many feet, all the creatures that swarm upon the earth, you shall not eat; for they are detestable. ⁴³You shall not make yourselves detestable with any creature that swarms; you shall not defile yourselves with them, and so become unclean.

⁴⁴For I am YHWH your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming creature that moves on the earth. ⁴⁵For I am YHWH who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy.

⁴⁶This is the law pertaining to land animal and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms upon the earth, ⁴⁷to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.

Verse forty-four links directly with the last mentioned category, the ‘swarming creature that moves on the earth’ (see 11:41-43), but the principle applies to this whole section.

The people must obey this diet ‘law’ (tôrâ, 11:46), because it is commanded by YHWH, their God, ‘who brought you up from the land of Egypt’ (11:45).

Furthermore, they must obey this law because YHWH is ‘holy’ (qādôš), separated from what is impure. The holy and the impure cannot co-exist. Therefore, since they are God’s ‘holy nation’ (Exodus 19:6), they, too, must be separated from the other nations. They, too, must be ‘holy’.

As noted in the Introduction to this section (see page 217), and as clearly stated here in verse forty-seven, the reason for making ‘a distinction between the unclean and the clean’ is to remind the people that they have been set apart. We will read later:

You shall be holy to me; for I YHWH am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.

– Leviticus 20:26

In the previous section we noted this as central to the ministry of the priests:

You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean; and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that YHWH has spoken to them through Moses.

– Leviticus 10:10-11

Childbirth

Rituals of separation of women after childbirth are found throughout the ancient (and not only the ancient) world. The loss of blood at menstruation (12:2), and even more so at childbirth (12:2), was felt as a loss of 'life' at the very fount of life. The obvious link with the sacred, with life and death, made contact with the woman taboo.

If the child is a girl, any contact with the woman is forbidden for fourteen days (12:5). After that the mother could mix in ordinary circles, including having sexual relations, but she could not 'touch any holy thing' (food from the sacrifice of well-being is an example) or 'come into the sanctuary' for a further sixty-six days (12:4-5). Separation from anything 'holy' was forbidden, therefore, for a total of eighty days.

In the case of a boy child, it was perhaps the rite of circumcision on the eighth day that caused the time to be halved. Perhaps the rite of circumcision was thought to have a purifying effect. In any case, the initial period of complete separation is reduced to seven days (12:2), and the overall period of separation from the holy is also halved to forty days (12:4).

As in all purification rites, 'atonement' (kipper, 12:7, 8) is necessary (see 4:35). The connection with death that the loss of life-blood entails, affects the sanctuary and must be purged. Since there is no sin involved, there is no need for 'forgiveness' (contrast 4:35). Just the simple statement that she is clean (12:7, 8), that is to say, she is now able to touch anything that has been dedicated to God.

The concession to the poor (12:8) is to ensure that the rite is available to everyone.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying:

²Speak to the people of Israel, saying:

When a woman at childbirth bears a male child, she shall be unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstrual infirmity, she shall be unclean.

³On the eighth day the foreskin of his flesh shall be circumcised.

⁴Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed.

⁵If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days.

⁶When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a *purification* offering. ⁷He shall offer it before YHWH, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female.

⁸If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a *purification* offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean.

Scaly Skin Disease (13:1-59)

A number of points need to be made before reading the text. The first is that, in spite of a long history of mistranslation, what is being described is certainly not leprosy (Hansen's disease). This was unknown in the Near East till the hellenistic period (late fourth century BC). It may have been introduced from India by the army of Alexander. Though the description of symptoms is not clear enough for modern medical science to give an accurate name to the various conditions described, most of them seem to point to forms of psoriasis or fungal infection. Furthermore, it is clear that chapters thirteen and fourteen are concerned with ritual, not medicine. The verb *tâhēr* (to be pure) occurs thirty-six times, and the verb *tāmē'* (to be impure) occurs thirty times; whereas the verb *nirpā'* (to heal) occurs only four times. Though quarantine is insisted on, the conditions described are, for the most part, not contagious, which leads to the conclusion that those affected are isolated for ritual, not hygienic, reasons. The various skin conditions listed here have in common a scaling of the skin. It would seem that this renders a person 'impure' because it has the *appearance of death*. It is the link with death that is the problem, even apart from the fact that the condition was commonly thought of as divine punishment for sin.

The following terms are used in this and the following section: discoloration (*š'ēt*); scab (*sappaḥat* or *mispaḥat*); shiny mark (*baheret*); scaly skin disease (*šāra'at*); disease (*neg'a*); scabby condition (*neteq*).

1. Shiny Marks (13:1-8)

¹YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ²When a person has on the skin of his body a discoloration, scab or shiny mark, and it turns into a scaly disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. ³The priest shall examine the diseased area on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the diseased area appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a scaly disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him unclean. ⁴But if the spot is white in the skin of his body, and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall confine the diseased person for seven days. ⁵The priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if he sees that the diseased area has retained its colour, but the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall confine him seven days more. ⁶The priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the discoloration has gone and the disease has not spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only a scab; and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean. ⁷But if the scab spreads in the skin after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest. ⁸The priest shall make an examination, and if the scab has spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is scaly skin disease.

2. Discoloration (13:9-17)

⁹When a person has scaly skin disease, he shall be brought to the priest.

¹⁰The priest shall make an examination, and if there is a white discoloration in the skin that has turned the hair white, and there is a patch of raw flesh in the discolored area, ¹¹it is a chronic scaly disease in the skin of his body. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; he shall not confine him, for he is unclean. ¹²But if the scales break out all over the skin of the diseased person so that he is covered from head to foot, so far as the priest can see, ¹³then the priest shall make an examination, and if he sees that the scales have covered the whole body, he shall pronounce him clean of the disease; since it has all turned white, he is clean.

The scaly crust will peel off leaving the skin clean (a form of exfoliative dermatitis).

¹⁴But if raw flesh ever appears on him, he shall be unclean; ¹⁵the priest shall examine the raw flesh and pronounce him unclean. Raw flesh is unclean, for it is scaly skin disease. ¹⁶But if the raw flesh again turns white, he shall come to the priest; ¹⁷the priest shall examine him, and if the disease has turned white, the priest shall pronounce the diseased person clean. He is clean.

3. Boils (š^cḥîṅ, 13:18-23)

The situation is less serious. The person is quarantined for one week only, not two.

¹⁸When there is on the skin of one's body a boil that has healed, ¹⁹and in the place of the boil there appears a white discoloration or a reddish-white spot, it shall be shown to the priest. ²⁰The priest shall make an examination, and if it appears deeper than the skin and its hair has turned white, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; this is a scaly skin disease, broken out in the boil. ²¹But if the priest examines it and the hair on it is not white, nor is it deeper than the skin but has faded, the priest shall confine him seven days. ²²If it spreads in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is diseased. ²³But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread, it is the scar of the boil; the priest shall pronounce him clean.

4. Burns (mikwat, 13:24-28)

²⁴Or, when the body has a burn on the skin and the raw flesh of the burn becomes a spot, reddish-white or white, ²⁵the priest shall examine it. If the hair in the spot has turned white and it appears deeper than the skin, it is a scaly skin disease; it has broken out in the burn, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean. This is scaly skin disease. ²⁶But if the priest examines it and the hair in the spot is not white, and it is no deeper than the skin but has faded, the priest shall confine him seven days. ²⁷The priest shall examine him the seventh day; if it is spreading in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean. This is scaly skin disease. ²⁸But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread in the skin but has faded, it is a discoloration from the burn, and the priest shall pronounce him clean; for it is the scar of the burn.

4. Fungal Infection (13:29-39)

²⁹When a man or woman has a disease on the head or in the beard, ³⁰the priest shall examine the disease. If it appears deeper than the skin and the hair in it is yellow and thin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a scabby condition, a scaly skin disease of the head or the jaw. ³¹If the priest examines the diseased area, and it appears no deeper than the skin and there is no black hair in it, the priest shall confine the person with the scabby condition for seven days. ³²On the seventh day the priest shall examine the disease; if the disease has not spread, and there is no yellow hair in it, and the rash appears to be no deeper than the skin, ³³he shall shave, but the diseased area he shall not shave. The priest shall confine him for seven days more. ³⁴On the seventh day the priest shall examine the diseased area; if it has not spread in the skin and it appears to be no deeper than the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean. He shall wash his clothes and be clean. ³⁵But if the diseased area spreads in the skin after he was pronounced clean, ³⁶the priest shall examine him. If the diseased area has spread in the skin, the priest need not seek for the yellow hair; he is unclean. ³⁷But if in his eyes the scabby condition is checked, and black hair has grown in it, the scabby condition is healed, he is clean; and the priest shall pronounce him clean.

³⁸When a man or a woman has spots on the skin of the body, white spots, ³⁹the priest shall make an examination, and if the spots on the skin of the body are of a dull white, it is a rash that has broken out on the skin; he is clean.

5. Loss of Hair (13:40-44)

⁴⁰If anyone loses the hair from his head, he is bald but he is clean. ⁴¹If he loses the hair from his forehead and temples, he has baldness of the forehead but he is clean. ⁴²But if there is on the bald head or the bald forehead a reddish-white diseased spot, it is scaly skin disease breaking out on his bald head or his bald forehead. ⁴³The priest shall examine him; if the diseased discoloration is reddish-white on his bald head or on his bald forehead, which resembles scaly skin disease in the skin of the body, ⁴⁴he has scaly skin disease, he is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; the disease is on his head.

6. How the diseased Person is to Behave (13:45-46)

⁴⁵The person who has the scaly skin disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." ⁴⁶He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

6. Fabrics affected by Mould or Fungus (13:47-59)

The problem here is that the discoloration in the affected cloth looks like the discoloration in a person's skin. In their symbolic world, both signify the corrupting power of death. Since this affects the sanctuary, a rite of purifying is required.

⁴⁷Concerning clothing: when a scaly skin disease appears in it, in woolen or linen cloth, ⁴⁸in warp or woof of linen or wool, or in a skin or in anything made of skin, ⁴⁹if the disease shows greenish or reddish in the garment, whether in warp or woof or in skin or in anything made of skin, it is scaly skin disease and shall be shown to the priest. ⁵⁰The priest shall examine the disease, and put the diseased article aside for seven days. ⁵¹He shall examine the disease on the seventh day. If the disease has spread in the cloth, in warp or woof, or in the skin, whatever be the use of the skin, this is a spreading scaly skin disease; it is unclean. ⁵²He shall burn the clothing, whether diseased in warp or woof, woolen or linen, or anything of skin, for it is a spreading scaly skin disease; it shall be burned in fire.

⁵³If the priest makes an examination, and the disease has not spread in the clothing, in warp or woof or in anything of skin, ⁵⁴the priest shall command them to wash the article in which the disease appears, and he shall put it aside seven days more. ⁵⁵The priest shall examine the diseased article after it has been washed. If the diseased spot has not changed colour, though the disease has not spread, it is unclean; you shall burn it in fire, whether the scale spot is on the inside or on the outside.

⁵⁶If the priest makes an examination, and the disease has abated after it is washed, he shall tear the spot out of the cloth, in warp or woof, or out of skin. ⁵⁷If it appears again in the garment, in warp or woof, or in anything of skin, it is spreading; you shall burn with fire that in which the disease appears. ⁵⁸But the cloth, warp or woof, or anything of skin from which the disease disappears when you have washed it, shall then be washed a second time, and it shall be clean.

⁵⁹This is the ritual for scaly skin disease in a cloth of wool or linen, either in warp or woof, or in anything of skin, to decide whether it is clean or unclean.

'Ritual' (13:59) translates *tôrâ*.

Purification after Scaly Skin Disease (14:1-57)

1. Non-sacrificial rites supervised by a priest outside the camp (14:1-9)

The origin of these rites is in pre-Israelite pagan exorcism, freed, however, of demonic and magical elements. 'Ritual' (14:2) translates *tôrâ*. The birds chosen are not birds used in sacrifice (turtledove and pigeon), but birds that are 'from the wild'. The idea is that the first bird is slaughtered. Its blood absorbs impurity from the person who is now judged to be ritually clean but who was previously unclean, and transfers this impurity to the water. The live bird reabsorbs it from the water (which, being spring water, cannot be made impure), and then the bird flies off into the wild, taking the impurity out of the camp.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: ²This shall be the ritual for the person with scaly skin disease at the time of his cleansing: He shall be brought to the priest; ³the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall make an examination. If the disease is healed in the person with scaly skin disease, ⁴the priest shall command that two clean birds *from the wild* and cedarwood and crimson yarn and hyssop be brought for the one who is to be cleansed. ⁵The priest shall command that one of the birds be slaughtered over *spring* water in an earthen vessel. ⁶He shall take the bird *from the wild* with the cedarwood and the crimson yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the bird *from the wild* in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the *spring* water. ⁷He shall sprinkle it seven times upon the one who is to be cleansed of the scaly skin disease; then he shall pronounce him clean, and he shall let the living bird go into the open field. ⁸The one who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean. After that he shall come into the camp, but shall live outside his tent seven days.

⁹On the seventh day he shall shave all his hair: of head, beard, eyebrows; he shall shave all his hair. Then he shall wash his clothes, and bathe his body in water, and he shall be clean.

2. Sacrificial rites in the sanctuary (14:10-32)

¹⁰On the eighth day he shall take two male lambs without blemish, and one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish, and a grain offering of three-tenths of an ephah of choice flour mixed with oil, and one log of oil. ¹¹The priest who cleanses shall set the person to be cleansed, along with these things, before YHWH, at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

¹²The priest shall take one of the lambs, and offer it as a *reparation* offering, along with the log of oil, and raise them as an elevation offering before YHWH. ¹³He shall slaughter the lamb in the place where the *reparation* offering and the burnt offering are slaughtered in the holy place; for the guilt offering, like the sin offering, belongs to the priest: it is most holy. ¹⁴The priest shall take some of the blood of the reparation offering and put it on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, and on the thumb of the right hand, and on the big toe of the right foot.

¹⁵The priest shall take some of the log of oil and pour it into the palm of his own left hand, ¹⁶and dip his right finger in the oil that is in his left hand and sprinkle some oil with his finger seven times before YHWH. ¹⁷Some of the oil that remains in his hand the priest shall put on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, and on the thumb of the right hand, and on the big toe of the right foot, on top of the blood of the *reparation* offering.

¹⁸The rest of the oil that is in the priest's hand he shall put on the head of the one to be cleansed. Then the priest shall make atonement on his behalf before YHWH:

¹⁹the priest shall offer the *purification* offering, to make atonement for the one to be cleansed from his uncleanness. Afterward he shall slaughter the burnt offering; ²⁰and the priest shall offer the burnt offering and the grain offering on the altar. Thus the priest shall make atonement on his behalf and he shall be clean.

²¹But if he is poor and cannot afford so much, he shall take one male lamb for a *reparation* offering to be elevated, to make atonement on his behalf, and one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour mixed with oil for a grain offering and a log of oil; ²²also two turtledoves or two pigeons, such as he can afford, one for a *purification* offering and the other for a burnt offering.

²³On the eighth day he shall bring them for his cleansing to the priest, to the entrance of the tent of meeting, before YHWH; ²⁴and the priest shall take the lamb of the *reparation* offering and the log of oil, and the priest shall raise them as an elevation offering before YHWH. ²⁵The priest shall slaughter the lamb of the *reparation* offering and shall take some of the blood of the *reparation* offering, and put it on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, and on the thumb of the right hand, and on the big toe of the right foot. ²⁶The priest shall pour some of the oil into the palm of his own left hand, ²⁷and shall sprinkle with his right finger some of the oil that is in his left hand seven times before YHWH.

²⁸The priest shall put some of the oil that is in his hand on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, and on the thumb of the right hand, and the big toe of the right foot, where the blood of the *reparation* offering was placed. ²⁹The rest of the oil that is in the priest's hand he shall put on the head of the one to be cleansed, to make atonement on his behalf before YHWH. ³⁰And he shall offer, of the turtledoves or pigeons such as he can afford, ³¹one for a *purification* offering and the other for a burnt offering, along with a grain offering; and the priest shall make atonement before YHWH on behalf of the one being cleansed. ³²This is the ritual for the one who has a scaly skin disease, who cannot afford the offerings for his cleansing.

3. Insert: Purification of an Infected House, supervised by a priest (14:33-53)

³³YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ³⁴When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give you for a possession, and I put a leprous disease in a house in the land of your possession, ³⁵the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, "There seems to me to be some sort of disease in my house." ³⁶The priest shall command that they empty the house before the priest goes to examine the disease, or all that is in the house will become unclean; and afterward the priest shall go in to inspect the house. ³⁷He shall examine the disease; if the disease is in the walls of the house with greenish or reddish spots, and if it appears to be deeper than the surface, ³⁸the priest shall go outside to the door of the house and shut up the house seven days. ³⁹The priest shall come again on the seventh day and make an inspection; if the disease has spread in the walls of the house, ⁴⁰the priest shall command that the stones in which the disease appears be taken out and thrown into an unclean place outside the city. ⁴¹He shall have the inside of the house scraped thoroughly, and the plaster that is scraped off shall be dumped in an unclean place outside the city. ⁴²They shall take other stones and put them in the place of those stones, and take other plaster and plaster the house. ⁴³If the disease breaks out again in the house, after he has taken out the stones and scraped the house and plastered it, ⁴⁴the priest shall go and make inspection; if the disease has spread in the house, it is a spreading scaly skin disease in the house; it is unclean.

⁴⁵He shall have the house torn down, its stones and timber and all the plaster of the house, and taken outside the city to an unclean place. ⁴⁶All who enter the house while it is shut up shall be unclean until the evening; ⁴⁷and all who sleep in the house shall wash their clothes; and all who eat in the house shall wash their clothes. ⁴⁸If the priest comes and makes an inspection, and the disease has not spread in the house after the house was plastered, the priest shall pronounce the house clean; the disease is healed.

⁴⁹For the cleansing of the house he shall take two birds, with cedarwood and crimson yarn and hyssop, ⁵⁰and shall slaughter one of the birds over fresh water in an earthen vessel, ⁵¹and shall take the cedarwood and the hyssop and the crimson yarn, along with the bird of the wild, and dip them in the blood of the slaughtered bird and the spring water, and sprinkle the house seven times. ⁵²Thus he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird, and with the spring water, and with the bird of the wild, and with the cedarwood and hyssop and crimson yarn; ⁵³and he shall let the bird of the wild go out of the city into the open field; so he shall make atonement for the house, and it shall be clean.

Conclusion

⁵⁴This is the ritual for any scaly skin disease: for a scabby condition, ⁵⁵for scabby skin disease in clothing and houses, ⁵⁶and for discolorations, for scabs, or for shiny marks, ⁵⁷to determine when it is unclean and when it is clean. This is the ritual for scaly skin disease.

Various Genital Discharges (15:1-33)

In the ancient world, there is ample evidence of fear in the face of the loss of genital blood in menstruation, and, to a lesser extent, the loss of life-giving semen. Both evoke images of death in the very places from which life comes. Israel shared this fear. However, as the following regulations show, there are important differences. Absent from Israel's religious rituals is any fear of the demonic or attempt to manipulate super-human powers by magic incantations or actions.

Israel's concern was with the forces of life and death let loose by human behaviour through obedience or defiance of God's commandments. In the symbolic system of their cult they were constantly reminded of the imperative to cling to life and to reject death. We have already seen this in the sacrifices covering the slaughter of domestic animals. The dashing of the blood of the sacrificed animal against the altar was a constant reminder that, while they were eating flesh for sustenance, they were forbidden to take life. The life, in the blood, had to be given back to God, before any eating could take place.

We have seen it, too, in the treatment of scaly skin disease, perceived as a sign of decaying, and so of death. As such it had power to pollute the sanctuary, making it a dangerous place and threatening the continued presence of God there. The sanctuary had to be decontaminated. So it is with genital discharges. They, too, were perceived as signs of death. The following regulations kept people aware in their day to day living of the need to discern between what gives life and what gives death, and to choose life.

1. Abnormal Male (Gonorrhea-like) Discharges (15:1-15)

Washing is all that is required except for the diseased man. Once the disease is cured he must make a purification offering and a burnt offering (see 15:14-15)

¹YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ²Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any man has a discharge from his member, his discharge makes him unclean. ³The uncleanness of his discharge is this: whether his member flows with his discharge, or his member is blocked with his discharge, it is uncleanness for him. ⁴Every bed on which the one with the discharge lies shall be unclean; and everything on which he sits shall be unclean.

⁵Anyone who touches his bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ⁶All who sit on anything on which the one with the discharge has sat shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ⁷All who touch the body of the one with the discharge shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ⁸If the one with the discharge spits on persons who are clean, then they shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ⁹Any saddle on which the one with the discharge rides shall be unclean. ¹⁰All who touch anything that was under him shall be unclean until the evening, and all who carry such a thing shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening.

Genital Discharge

¹¹All those whom the one with the discharge touches without his having rinsed his hands in water shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ¹²Any earthen vessel that the one with the discharge touches shall be broken; and every vessel of wood shall be rinsed in water.

¹³When the one with a discharge is cleansed of his discharge, he shall count seven days for his cleansing; he shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in fresh water, and he shall be clean. ¹⁴On the eighth day he shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and come before YHWH to the entrance of the tent of meeting and give them to the priest. ¹⁵The priest shall offer them, one for a *purification* offering and the other for a burnt offering; and the priest shall make atonement on his behalf before YHWH for his discharge.

2. Normal Male Seminal Discharge (15:16-17)

Washing is all that is required

¹⁶If a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water, and be unclean until the evening. ¹⁷Everything made of cloth or of skin on which the semen falls shall be washed with water, and be unclean until the evening.

3. Sexual Intercourse (15:18)

In all cultures of the ancient world sexual intercourse disqualified people from participating in the cult, until they had bathed. Israel adds that, even after bathing, they must not come in contact with anything holy 'until evening'.

¹⁸If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening.

4. Normal Female Menstrual Discharge (15:19-24)

Washing is all that is required

¹⁹When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. ²⁰Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean. ²¹Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ²²Whoever touches anything upon which she sits shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening; ²³whether it is the bed or anything upon which she sits, when he touches it he shall be unclean until the evening. ²⁴If any man lies with her, and her impurity falls on him, he shall be unclean seven days; and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean.

5. Abnormal Female Discharges (15:25-30)

Washing is all that is required except for the diseased woman. Once the disease is cured she must make a purification offering and a burnt offering (see 15:28-30)

²⁵If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean. ²⁶Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of her impurity; and everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her impurity. ²⁷Whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening.

²⁸If she is cleansed of her discharge, she shall count seven days, and after that she shall be clean. ²⁹On the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and bring them to the priest to the entrance of the tent of meeting. ³⁰The priest shall offer one for a *purification* offering and the other for a burnt offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf before YHWH for her discharge.

Conclusion (15:31-33)

As noted in the short introduction to this chapter, non life-giving discharge from the male and female places from which life is conveyed was imagined as having power to pollute the sanctuary, making it a dangerous place and threatening the continued presence of God there. The sanctuary had to be decontaminated.

³¹Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.

³²This is the ritual for those who have a discharge: for him who has an emission of semen, becoming unclean thereby, ³³for her who is in the infirmity of her period, for anyone, male or female, who has a discharge, and for the man who lies with a woman who is unclean.

‘Ritual’ translates *tôrâ*.

¹YHWH spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before YHWH and died.

²YHWH said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. ³Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a *purification* offering and a ram for a burnt offering. ⁴He shall put on the holy linen tunic, and shall have the linen undergarments next to his body, fasten the linen sash, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy vestments. He shall bathe his body in water, and then put them on. ⁵He shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a *purification* offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.

⁶Aaron shall offer the bull as a *purification* offering for himself, and shall *effect purgation* for himself and for his house. ⁷He shall take the two goats and set them before YHWH at the entrance of the tent of meeting; ⁸and Aaron shall cast lots on the two goats, one lot for YHWH and the other lot for Azazel. ⁹Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for YHWH, and offer it as a *purification* offering; ¹⁰but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before YHWH to *perform expiation upon it*, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

The link back to chapter ten in verse one is only one of a number of indications in the text that chapter sixteen was originally intended for an emergency, and was only subsequently used for a regular yearly ritual (see the appendix, 16:29-34).

‘Sanctuary’ (qōdeš) in this text refers to the inner sanctuary (normally called the qōdeš haqq^odāšīm). This is the only time the ‘mercy seat’ (kappōret) is mentioned in Leviticus (see Exodus 25:17ff). It probably gets its name kappōret from this purgation (kippēr) rite.

The ‘cloud’ (16:2) is necessary, for humans cannot look on God (see 16:13).

The high priest is to vest in simple linen clothing (16:4). The contact with the inner shrine will make them unusable, and he needs his special high priestly vestments for the purgation rites which are to follow (16:23). Rabbinic tradition tells us that, prior to this rite, he has to spend seven days separated from ordinary life. Then, as noted here (16:4), he must bathe before vesting.

The high priest must first make a purification offering of a bull for himself and the other priests (his ‘house’, 16:6). Only then is he ready to accept the two he-goats from the people. One is to be sacrificed to purge the sanctuary of the pollution brought upon it; the other is to atone for the people’s sins. Drawing lots is their way of leaving the selection of the goats to God.

Azazel (‘^azā’zēl) is probably an ancient name for a demon. Here only the name remains, for there is no sacrifice to, or calling upon, Azazel in this rite.

The goat selected by YHWH is to be offered as a purification offering (16:9, to purge the sanctuary). Only when this purging is complete can the second live goat, the one for Azazel, be sent away into the wilderness, carrying with it the forgiven sins of the people.

Purging the Sanctuary

The sacrilege committed by Nadab and Abihu (16:1) required that the inner sanctuary be purged. This became a yearly rite to purge the tent of meeting, including the inner shrine, of the pollution built up throughout the year – pollution which threatened God’s dwelling among them (see 16:29-34).

Verses eleven to sixteen describe the rite for the purgation of the inner shrine. The high priest enters the shrine three times. The first time he ignites a smoke raising substance to form a cloud so that he will not look on YHWH, who is present over the mercy seat which is on the ark (the witness to the covenant, ‘ēdūt, 16:13). This is the cloud mentioned in verse two. Then he enters and ignites the incense (16:12-13). He enters a second time to sprinkle the blood of the bull as a purification offering (16:14). He enters a third time to sprinkle the blood of the goat as a purification offering (16:15).

The sanctuary of God’s dwelling is purged (kippēr) of pollution (16:16). This includes the ritual pollution described in chapters eleven to fifteen. More significantly it covers the worst pollution: that caused by ‘transgressions’ (peša‘), the rebellion against God by deliberate sin that excludes a person from the tabernacle. The pollution caused by transgressions cannot be purged by any other sacrificial rite. Covered as well are ‘their sins’ (ḥaṭṭā‘t), the inadvertent violation of God’s commands described in chapters four and five.

Having purged the inner shrine, the high priest purges the rest of the ‘tent of meeting’ (’ōhel mō‘ēd, 16:16). In other places this refers to the whole tabernacle. Here it refers to the outer sanctuary. This is normally called the qōdeš, but in this chapter qōdeš has already been used for the inner shrine (16:2). Priests are always excluded from the inner shrine. For this unique rite they are excluded also from the outer shrine (16:17).

¹¹Aaron shall present the bull as a *purification* offering to effect purgation for himself and for his house; he shall slaughter the bull as a *purification* offering for himself. ¹²He shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before YHWH, and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense, and he shall bring it inside the curtain ¹³and put the incense on the fire before YHWH, that the cloud from the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the covenant, or he will die. ¹⁴He shall take some of the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it with his finger on the *east side* of the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times.

¹⁵He shall slaughter the goat of the *purification* offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy seat and before the mercy seat. ¹⁶Thus he shall *purge the sanctuary of the pollution and transgressions of the people of Israel, including all their sins;*

and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their *pollution*. ¹⁷No one shall be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to *effect purgation* in the sanctuary until he comes out. Thus he shall *effect purgation* for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel.

¹⁸Then he shall go out to the altar that is before YHWH and *effect purgation upon it*, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat, and put it on each of the horns of the altar. ¹⁹He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and purify it from the pollution of the people of Israel, and consecrate it.

²⁰When he has finished *purging* the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. ²¹Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. ²²The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

²³Then Aaron shall enter the tent of meeting, and shall take off the linen vestments that he put on when he went into the holy place, and shall leave them there. ²⁴He shall bathe his body in water in a holy place, and put on his vestments; then he shall come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people, making atonement for himself and for the people. ²⁵The fat of the *purification* offering he shall turn into smoke on the altar.

²⁶The one who sets the goat free for Azazel shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward may come into the camp. ²⁷The bull of the *purification* offering and the goat of the *purification* offering, whose blood was brought in to *effect purgation* in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp; their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be consumed in fire. ²⁸The one who burns them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward may come into the camp.

Purging the Altar for Sacrifice
(16:18-19)

The altar in the courtyard is first purged and then re-consecrated.

Banishing Iniquities
(16:20-22)

The fact that *both* hands are pressed down on the goat's head indicates that this is not a sacrificial rite (contrast 4:24). The high priest is transferring onto the goat the 'iniquities' ('*awôn*, 16:21, including deliberate transgressions and inadvertent sins) that he confesses on behalf of the people. The goat is then banished from the camp, taking the iniquities with it into the wilderness. Sorrow and repentance are assumed.

Sacrifices of Purification
(16:23-25)

Having purged the sanctuary and the sacrificial altar, and having banished sin from the camp, the high priest offers sacrifices of purification. He must first bathe to wash off the exceptional holiness that he has been exposed to in the inner shrine, and then put on the high priestly vestments.

Purification of the assistants
(16:26-28)

Bathing is sufficient to allow the assistants to re-enter the camp.

Appendix: Yôm Kippûr

What appears to be originally an emergency rite for the purification of the inner shrine is here extended by 'statute' (huqqâ, 16:29) to be a yearly rite on the tenth day of the month of Tishri. It became the climax of ten days of self-denial (16:29), which included fasting, but more importantly repentance from sin, repaying debts, and attempting to restore broken relationships; anything that was needed to provide the circumstances for God to forgive and to restore complete communion.

The rite can be carried out only by the high priest. His ministry is handed down from father to son (16:32).

²⁹This shall be a statute to you forever: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves, and shall do no work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you.

³⁰For on this day *purgation* shall be effected for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before YHWH.

³¹It is a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves; it is a statute forever.

³²The priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall *effect purgation*, wearing the linen vestments, the holy vestments.

³³He shall *purge the holiest part* of the sanctuary, and he shall purge the tent of meeting and the altar, and he shall *effect purgation* for the priests and for all the people of the assembly.

³⁴This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to *effect purgation* for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins. And Moses did as YHWH had commanded him.