Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan, eds.

Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism

Dynamics in the History of Religions 3


Jason M. Silverman
Leiden University
Leiden, The Netherlands

This book has its origins in a workshop series on purity held in Bochum in 2008–2009, augmented by additional contributions. It comprises an introduction, eighteen essays, and indices.

The volume begins with a valuable and informative introduction that places the volume in a disciplinary and theoretic framework—largely in dialogue with the work of Mary Douglas—and attempts to relate the various contributions. The editors explicitly describe the approach as “developing a systematic approach towards a theory of religious transfer” (1). The editors’ goal for the volume is to move beyond description to comparative analysis (2). The volume is structured with essays on the Mediterranean and Near East, moving to the Hebrew Bible, and ending with Second Temple Judaism.

The first nine essays cover issues from Iran to Rome. Michaël Guichard and Lionel Marti’s “Purity in Ancient Mesopotamia” explore the ways purity appeared in the Ur III and Neo-Assyrian periods. Despite differences in surviving genres, they find a core system where impurity was an unavoidable aspect of life but required removal to maintain divine participation within society. Joachim Friedrich Quack, in “Conceptions of Purity in Egyptian Religion,” surveys purity in Egyptian texts under the rubrics of
temple, priests, king, elites, laypersons, tombs, and rituals for the dead. He concludes that purity was delimiting, not differentiated between moral and physical aspects, and restricted to specific periods of time and situations. Manfred Hutter’s “Concepts of Purity in Anatolian Religions” views purity in Hittite Anatolia as an explanatory model for society, one that made a distinction between everyday purity and its restoration and a more rarified type needed within the cult. In “Aspects of Purity in the Phoenician World,” Hans-Peter Mathys claims that the limited available Phoenician evidence does not allow for broad conclusions, although he suggests that purity, not just attached to the cult, may have gained importance in the Achaemenid period. In “Purity and Pollution in Ancient Zoroastrianism,” Albert F. de Jong argues that a reified view of Zoroastrianism has obscured its historical development and excommunicated Zoroastrian communities, distorting the import of its purity laws for comparative purposes. Noel Robertson’s “The Concept of Purity in Greek Sacred Laws” describes a particular form of purity that was required in a subset of cults, pastoral and agricultural cults of Early Iron Age Greece, and from their worshipers. The restrictions reflect the cultural and climatic conditions of that time and were retained in rural areas for many centuries. Linda-Marie Günther, in “Concepts of Purity in Ancient Greece,” argues for little differentiation over time in the basic understanding of purity, which served to delimit the sacred and was based on custom more than purity-in-itself. Philippe Borgeaud’s “Greek Comparatist Reflexions” explores the ways Greek comparisons of purity regulations in Egypt and Judaism played a role in Greek discourse on Greek ritual and “sectarian” practices. Berhard Linke, in “Sacral Purity and Social Order,” proceeds from the idea that “sacral purity” involves ability to access the gods. He contrasts a Greek use of purity to delimit the endangered presence of the divine with the Roman use of purity only on occasions that threatened the otherwise secure presence of the divine with the community.

The next five essays deal with purity in the Hebrew Bible. Christophe Nihan’s “Forms and Functions of Purity in Leviticus” sees a coherent system of social control within the physical and moral laws of Leviticus, which makes sense as part of a priestly attempt to establish (secular and religious) authority over Yehud. In “Purity Conceptions in the Book of Numbers,” Christian Frevel argues that a spatial conception of purity, in which Israel must protect the purity of the sanctuary in its midst, informs the structure and perspective of Numbers. Udo Rüterswörden, in “Purity Conceptions in Deuteronomy,” defends Weinfeld’s thesis that Deuteronomy has a distinct vision of purity from the remainder of the Pentateuch, one that views purity as a property of people and related to the covenant rather than a physical substance related to the land. Michael Konkel’s “The System of Holiness” analyzes Ezek 40–48 as “Zadokite halakha” that constructs holiness purely spatially and is organized around a principle of avoiding mixture. Defilement must merely be kept away from the holy to maintain the presence of YHWH, and purity itself
is not the central concern. Benedikt Rausche, in “The Relevance of Purity,” argues that Ezra-Nehemiah evinces a variety of perspectives on purity, though all of them are united by a defense of the temple’s holiness and the expansion of it beyond the temple’s confines.

The remainder of the volume treats Second Temple Judaism. In “Purity Concepts in Jewish Traditions,” Beate Ego discusses passages from the Book of Watchers, Jubilees, and 2 Maccabees, arguing that each goes beyond Hebrew Bible antecedents to deal with purity in creative ways. Ian Werrett’s “The Evolution of Purity at Qumran” is largely a review of Qumran purity research that concludes that at Qumran an increasingly stringent understanding of purity gradually combined moral and ritual understandings in support of a growing belief that the community replaced the temple. On the other hand, Gudrun Holtz, in “Purity Conceptions in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” argues that ritual and moral forms of purity coexisted and that some Qumran texts evidence an additional “constitutional” or deterministic concept of purity tied to eschatology. Thus a diachronic model of purity on its own is an insufficient lens. The last essay treats material culture. Jürgen K. Zangenberg, in “Pure Stone,” discusses the phenomena of stepped pools and stone vessels in the late Second Temple Period, cautioning against seeing either one as merely related to common purity concerns. The essay includes twenty-six figures. The volume closes with indices of modern authors, sources, and subjects and terms.

As a collection, Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions raises a number of important methodological issues related to the study of ancient religion from a comparative perspective. A variety of regions, eras, methodologies, and source materials are included, and the issue of purity itself is one that touches on most relevant subjects within religion (i.e., cult, ritual, belief, social implications, etc). The vast amount of material offered here will require time for proper engagement with all of the issues raised.

Each contributor was asked five questions related to his or her particular subject (the role of purity and the issue of liminality, ritual organization, semantics, the relation of purity to holiness, and diachronic development [21]), and the majority of the essays do deal with these topics in various ways, lending the volume a nice coherence. Two additional issues come to the fore in all of the contributions: the close connection between purity and the presence of the divine and conceptualizations of space (noted by the editors [37]). It seems in many of these instances a key element is delimiting the supernatural from the natural, something that also has sociological implications. In line with the editors’ definition of cultic activity as “the performative and pragmatic exterior of religion” (15), it is the social aspect that receives the most treatment within the volume.

Although in the introduction the editors see a close correlation between perceived foreign influences and purity concerns (41–42), this is not a prominent theme within the volume
beyond a few of the essays on Judaism, as far as I can see. The complexity and variety of intercultural/interreligious interactions, however, is demonstrated in a number of the case studies. Room remains for articulating how such interactions were or were not perceived as being foreign, as well as the relevance of the perception for purity concerns.

The volume leaves open a number of issues for further consideration. One aspect I felt was lacking from the volume was much conscious reflection on the meaning of such key concepts as “purity,” “holiness,” and “sacredness” per se, beyond their lexical and semantic considerations within each tradition. Similarly, while the book contains much discussion of the implications of purity for access to the divine, there is little discussion of the implications this has for comparative conceptions of the divine itself (or of humanity itself). Lastly, the final essay raised important questions concerning nontextual evidence for ancient religion, an aspect that future studies should consider more seriously. As the essay by de Jong highlights, theory and praxis do not always match, and studies of material culture are essential for evaluating such issues.

Overall, *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions* contains a number of useful contributions combined in a stimulating volume that will be of value to students of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds in general and of particular use to those of religion and of comparative methodology.