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Israelite Ritual Law Concerning the Menstruant in Context: Embodiment and Meaning in Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Israel

Laura Morrow

Several studies have stated that, across diverse religious traditions, concepts and practices related to the menstruant have engendered at the most, gender disparity and discrimination, and at the very least, a negative view of this common and healthy biological process.¹ Such religious concepts and practices found within the Judeo-Christian tradition invariably lead back to Leviticus 15 and the ritual purity laws of the menstruant. As a result, it has been suggested that these ritual purity laws intentionally promote gender disparity. Therefore, it would be helpful to ascertain the nature of these laws and to understand the rationale behind their inclusion in the biblical law taxonomy to determine whether such suggestions are warranted.

To this end, this study seeks to look at parallels within the ancient Near Eastern context. Specifically, this study will analyze the contemporaneous religious and cultural context in which similar customs were practiced. First, this paper will describe the background of these Biblical prescriptions by describing the Biblical law(s) regarding the menstruant, the arguments and conclusions surrounding the rationale behind it, and the general contemporaneous practices and/or laws of the ancient Near East. Then, the nature of impurity in the context of the religious structure found in ancient Mesopotamian society will be discussed. Next, this study will address a less commonly-approached subject with respect to ritual purity laws—the perception of the human body within this religious and cultural

1. M. Guterman, P. Mehta, M. Gibbs, “Menstrual Taboos Among Major Religions,” *IJWHSP* 5 (2007): 1-7, <http://ispub.com/IJWH/5/2/8213>; See also Anne Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 70; Kristin De Troyer, “Blood: A Threat to Holiness or Toward (Another) Holiness,” in *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood*, eds. Kristin De Troyer et al. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003); Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976); Kathleen O’Grady stated that “many biblical commentators throughout history have viewed the Levitical menstrual prohibitions as divine punishment for the sinful nature of woman, which, through the actions of Eve, effected the fall of humankind. Menstruation becomes the divine ‘curse’ of women.” Kathleen O’Grady, “The Semantics of Taboo: Menstrual Prohibitions in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood*, 5.

context. Finally, a contextual study comparing and contrasting these Mesopotamian concepts with Israelite practices and perceptions will be offered.²

Background to Old Testament Laws Regarding the Menstruant

Menstrual impurity is understood within the context of ritual impurity. Ritual impurity is defined as that “which is a threat to or opposes holiness, and hence must be kept separate from that sphere.”³ (Impurity in a general sense may be a result of naturally occurring physical conditions or from sinful actions.) It is also explained by at least four recognizable aspects:

[First] it is generated by a physical substance or condition, ... second, incurring it does not constitute a sin – that is, a violation of a divine command... third, its purpose is to avoid defilement of the holy sphere centered at the sanctuary, and fourth, it has a ritual remedy, such as ablutions and sacrifice.⁴

David P. Wright separates impurities into two categories, namely permitted and prohibited impurities. Leviticus 11-15 and Numbers 19 constitute Source P or the Priestly literature, wherein one finds lists of permitted impurities and prohibited impurities.⁵ Permitted impurities are “natural and necessary occurrences” that are allowed, but limited and restricted.⁶ The source of the impurity is usually human and includes occurrences such as death, sex, and disease. Wright categorizes permitted impurities into four classes related to (1) death, (2) sex, (3) disease, and (4) the cult. Within each class are main impurities that can propagate secondary and even tertiary impurity.⁷

The second category, prohibited impurities, refers to controllable occurrences that are not natural or necessary and may relate to sin or a failure to rectify an impure situation. This includes sexual transgression, idolatry, and murder. Punishments are appended to or replace sacrificial requirements and, while the locus of pollution may be the person, the sanctuary and the land may also be polluted as well.⁸

2. William Hallo suggested that the contextual method of comparing and contrasting the culture of Israel with its neighbors is more favorable than the comparative method, in which similarities between Israel and its neighbors are highlighted. William Hallo, “Biblical History in Its Near Eastern Context: The Contextual Approach,” in *Scripture in Context: Essays on the Comparative Method* eds. Carl D. Evans, William W. Hallo, and John B. White (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980).

3. David P. Wright, “Unclean and Clean,” *ABD* 6:729.

4. Roy Gane, “Prohibitions of Homosexual Practice in Leviticus 18 and 20: Moral or Ceremonial,” *Reflections* 47 (July 2014), 2.

5. Wright, “Unclean and Clean,” 6:731. Some authors do not include Lev 11 as part of the ritual purity laws. See Jiri Moskala, *The Laws of Clean and Unclean Animals in Leviticus 11: Their Nature, Theology, and Rationale – An Intertextual Study* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 2000); Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 1999), vii.

6. Wright, “Unclean and Clean,” 6:730.

7. Wright noted that the main impurities are known as “fathers of uncleanness” in rabbinic terminology. Wright, “Unclean and Clean,” 6:730.

8. Wright, “Unclean and Clean,” 6:730.

Description of Three Explanations for the Rationale Behind Old Testament Ritual Impurity Laws

Many explanations have been suggested to explicate the rationale for ritual impurity laws, but three authors have been most influential in the study of the topic.⁹ First, Mary Douglas' anthropological approach gives insight into how impurity is understood within cultural contexts and demonstrates the social and cultural connection between ritual impurity and the overarching social order of a society. She formulated her theory around the idea that pollution is synonymous with "dirt," which she defined as "disorder." Rituals of pollution or "dirt" avoidance are public symbols, which she stated represent the social and cosmological order of a primitive society.¹⁰

Second, Jacob Milgrom looked at ritual purity in the context of the distinctive beliefs found in the biblical and rabbinic texts, especially in contrast and comparison to the surrounding ancient Near Eastern context. He saw the use of ritual in the worship of Yahweh as an excising of demonic forces and magical practices. These rituals of avoidance concomitantly direct the worshippers toward life and away from death and decay.¹¹

Third, Hyam Maccoby's analysis of the Biblical and rabbinic texts with regard to the relationship of and distinction between ritual and morality concludes that the prohibition of ritual impurity is a factor of several related ideas. Essentially, the ritual purity system replaced the magical apotropaic practices used in polytheistic worship and was also understood to be a kind of protocol, explaining how one may approach the temple and its king (this system was exclusively for the Israelites, who had the privilege of living in proximity to the king). However, Maccoby suggested the overriding and overarching idea that such laws represented a prohibition of the cycle of generation and death from the divine sphere.¹²

The conclusions of Douglas and Milgrom have become standard interpretations in this area of study. In addition, Maccoby's explication of the rationale behind the ritual purity system, especially as it relates to impurity/mortality as a polar opposite to holiness/life, has its adherents as well.¹³ While each one of the three propositions adds to the overall picture regarding the rationale behind the inclusion of menstruation in the purity/impurity laws, none of them adequately addresses the physicality inherent within such laws. The relationship between the physical (embodiment) and the ritualistic has yet to be thoroughly approached within the context of purity and impurity by the previous explications. Therefore,

9. See Deborah Klee, "Menstruation in the Hebrew Bible," (PhD diss., Boston University, 1998) for a comprehensive study of menstruation in the Old Testament. Also see R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980) for an alternative view to the three mentioned above.

10. Mary Douglas, "Sacred Contagion" in *Reading Leviticus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 86-106; *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966); "Couvade and Menstruation: The Relevance of the Tribal Studies" in *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge, 2003), 170-179.

11. See Lev 17:10-14, Deut 12:23. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 767ff.

12. See Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, ix.

13. See Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers, NIVAC* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 227; Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 330-332.

further study on the contextual background of laws concerning the menstruant in the context of ancient perceptions of the body and its religious and societal meanings may enhance our understanding of this topic.¹⁴

Description of Similar Customs and Practices in the Ancient Near East

Although the Biblical taxonomy of ritual impurities is unique to the Hebrew Bible, it was common in ancient societies to observe rules regarding ritual impurity, with rules regarding the menstruant obtaining in a variety of ancient cultures. For example, the Babylonians believed the man who touched a menstruant or impure woman as he passed by her was impure for six days.¹⁵ In Mesopotamian texts, the words *musukkatu* and *haristu* are used interchangeably to refer to a parturient or menstruant.¹⁶ The Akkadian dictionary defines a *musukkatu* as “a woman in the period after she has given birth when she is in a tabooed state until she has taken a ritual bath; it may also refer to a menstruating woman.”¹⁷ A *haristu* is “a woman in confinement (mother)” or “a menstruating woman.”¹⁸

Similarly, during the Middle Assyrian period, an edict was promulgated that stated wives of the king were not to approach him while they were menstruating. The reason was that this contact would jeopardize his cultic purity and disqualify him from bringing offerings to the gods.¹⁹ The material evidence from ancient Egypt is inconclusive with respect to the impurity of the menstruant, yet,

14. Douglas’ analysis begins to address the issue of the meaning of the body in society, yet she primarily used “primitive” modern societies as the source of her data, rather than comparative ancient texts or iconography that are indicative of the ideologies and practices of chronologically ancient societies.

15. Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 487. See also Karel van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and Babylonian Woman* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994). For an opposing view see Tarja S. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible: Fertility and Impurity*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

16. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 951.

17. “musukkatu,” *CAD* 10 II: 239-240.

18. “haristu,” *CAD* 6: 104. Tarja Philip questioned the standard definitions for *haristu* and *musukkatu* and suggested that it is difficult to ascertain the context in which these words appear. She also proposed that the Assyrian Dictionary has made concrete decisions regarding these matters without definitive evidence from the respective texts. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth*, 5. Philip also questioned van der Toorn’s assessment of menstruation within the Babylonian context and concluded “that the use of these sources (Mesopotamian texts) for a better understanding of the biblical texts is very problematic. The sources are few, diverse, and broken, and one has to be very careful not to suppose that the better-known Israeli beliefs and practices have a lot in common with their ancient Near Eastern parallels, and thus enter into circular argument.” Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth*, 7. Yet, while Philip advised caution, she did not suggest what role these texts should play, if any, in the analysis of this issue.

19. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 487. Hennie J. Marsman noted that “those who were impure were not to appear before the gods, for this would offend them. The deities and their sanctuaries belonged to the realm of the pure and holy, which should not be polluted by substances or persons from the realm of the impure.” Marsman cited Karel van der Toorn and E. J. Wilson as sources for this conclusion. For a more comprehensive treatment of the separation between the earthly and the heavenly realm from a priestly and architectural perspective see Michael B. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth: Safeguarding the Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) and *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013).

menstruation was referred to as a “time of purification,” which may imply a state of impurity.²⁰

This data points to the idea that various ancient societies shared a common perspective regarding menstruation, and by extension, its role in ritual impurity. This shared common perspective is apparently a factor of two concurrent and commingling phenomena within these societies: (1) the nature of impurity in the context of the religious structure found in the society and (2) the perception of the human body within this religious and cultural context.

This study will next look at these two phenomena, the nature of holiness, purity/impurity, and the perception of the human body within Mesopotamian society. The treatment of the first topic will include a brief description of the religion of ancient Mesopotamia, attendant Mesopotamian terminology for “holiness” and “purity,” and finally ascertain the nature of the concept of holiness within this religious system. The treatment of the second topic will include discussions on the importance of the perception of the body in ancient society, significant terminology, the perception of the body and social position, and the perception of the body in religious practice.

The Nature of Holiness, Purity, and Impurity in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion

Ideas of holiness and purity were developed and understood within the matrix of ancient Mesopotamian religion. Leo Oppenheim’s caveat aside, a clear and organized structure can be deduced from the literary, iconographic, and epigraphic material that has been discovered over the centuries.²¹ Both Jean Bottero and Thorkild Jacobsen identified a distinct development over time that culminated in a parallel structure between the religious and socio-political spheres.²² Bottero stated, “Their religion only adapted their native habits of thinking, feeling, and living to the supernatural.”²³ This projection produced a religion that mimicked the civilization in its origin and development. In a similar vein, Jacobsen denoted a pattern of parallel projection in Mesopotamian religion and civilization, but expressed this idea as three metaphors: (1) gods as spiritual cores in phenomena, (2) gods as rulers, and (3) gods as parents.²⁴

20. See Barbara Watterson, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, (Stroud: UK: Sutton, 1991), 84.

21. Oppenheim was convinced that “a systematic presentation of Mesopotamian religion cannot and should not be written.” Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 72.

22. Jean Bottero, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, Translated by Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van De Mierop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 203; Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). For a succinct introduction to Mesopotamian religion see Tammi J. Schneider, *An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). Schneider concurred with Bottero and Jacobsen that Mesopotamian religion was intimately related to its political shifts since she noted, “Here, attention is focused not so much on the reasons for or background of historical shifts, but on the components that may have, in this author’s opinion, either heavily influenced why a religious change occurred or highlighted such things as influxes of new people to the area or language shifts that influenced religious practice as we understand it.” Schneider, *An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*, 17-18.

23. Bottero, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, 203.

24. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 20.

Bottero enhanced and extended Jacobsen's second metaphor—gods as rulers—and suggested that the “monarchical principle” is the framework for ancient Mesopotamian religion.²⁵ Specifically, the royal hierarchical political institution was an analogy for and a foundational or guiding principle of religious awareness and conception. In essence, the religion of ancient Mesopotamia can be viewed as an organized and comprehensive system through which religious sentiment was expressed and experienced. Thus, contact with this system mirrored the forms and protocols corresponding to the monarchical system.

Within this monarchically-defined system of the divine, purity and holiness are expressed using rites and conceptions that correspond to those practiced in the realm of the king. Therefore, conceptions of purity associated with an encounter with royalty were carried over to conceptions of purity associated with an encounter with the divine. Essentially, the god was treated as a king, but one who existed in a higher realm—that of the divine.

The Terms “Holiness” and “Purity” Within Ancient Mesopotamia

Terminological correspondences for holiness and purity give further clarity concerning these conceptions within the religious system of ancient Mesopotamia. Wilson proposed that the Sumerian term KU₃ should be translated as holiness and primarily defined as “pertaining to the realm of the divine.”²⁶ He identified at least four items or persons who are related to this realm: (1) the temple, (2) holy objects—temple utensils and accessories, (3) holy beings—Inanna and certain body parts of the gods, and (4) sacred acts and times—holy festivals.

The concept of purity (or impurity) in Sumerian is denoted by multiple words, which usually refer to the qualities of cleanness, brightness, or radiance. Words such as *shen*, *dadag*, *zalat* and *sikil* are used to represent the concept of purity, which is distinct from the concept of holiness or pertaining to the realm of the divine.

In Akkadian, the term *ellu* is used to translate KU₃ in various texts; however, it is used in contexts that suggest it should be defined as “purity” or “freedom from

25. Bottero, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, 212-215. Joan Oates stated, “Temple and court ritual were closely related. We read, for example, of the god Nabu going into the game park, like the king, to hunt... A ritual text from Uruk describes also a morning ceremonial reminiscent of the European *lever du roi*, perhaps equally a feature of the Babylonian court.” Joan Oates, *Babylon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 175. Amelie Kuhrt also noted, “The one aspect (of kingship) that stands out clearly is the kings’ close involvement in the cultic foundations of Babylonia and their frequent personal participation in the New Year Festival in Babylon.” She continued, “In cult, the king was central in all respects: he was the chief builder and provider of essential resources; he participated in rituals and authorized the offerings to be made.” Amelie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East, c. 3000-330*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1997), 2:604, 605.

26. E. Jan Wilson, “*Holiness*” and “*Purity*” in *Mesopotamia*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 237 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker, 1994), 65. See also Judith Roberts Paul, “Mesopotamian Ritual Texts and the Concept of the Sacred in Mesopotamia,” (PhD Diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1992).

pollutants.”²⁷ Its primary definition is purity, while it only secondarily refers to holiness. Wilson identified at least four contexts in which *ellu* is used: (1) places—purification of the temple (the New Year Festival); (2) objects—used frequently in relation to water; food, wood (cedar), and lapis lazuli; (3) beings—persons purified from magic spells; *baru*-priests purified before approaching Shamash; and (4) substances—water (most important), date palm, and salt.

The Sumerian word KU3 and the Akkadian word *ellu* enhance our understanding of the context for the concepts of holiness and purity. In particular, the Sumerian definition of holiness (pertaining to the realm of the divine) and the items associated with this concept (temple, temple appurtenances, Inanna, sacred festivals) suggest that the temple and its accompanying utensils and festivals were considered to be part of the realm of the divine, as opposed to the realm of mortals, and indicates a delineation and a demarcation between the two spheres. In addition, the definition of the Akkadian term *ellu* (purity—freedom from pollutants) and those things associated with it (purification of the temple, purifying substances, and purified persons) suggest that purity refers to the elimination of pollutants from cultic (or non-cultic) spheres.²⁸

Holiness and Impurity within the Religious System of Ancient Mesopotamia

The foregoing discussion points to the concept that within the religious system of ancient Mesopotamia, the realm of the divine was rigidly delineated from the realm of human society. Furthermore, the divine realm was restricted from coming in contact with substances that were considered not pure (impure) or not clean (unclean). Thus, the realm of the divine had to be assiduously protected from coming in contact with such substances because they were a threat to its integrity.²⁹ With an eye to maintaining this order, cultic rites were conscientiously followed. These rites enabled specially appointed persons to participate in an

27. Wilson, “Holiness” and “Purity” in Mesopotamia, 94. Judith Roberts Paul stated, “*Ellu*, ‘pure,’ is an epithet often applied to gods, the parts of their bodies, and their property. Indeed, this term is so closely associated with divinity that it is often translated as ‘sacred’ or ‘holy,’ although it never lost its primary meaning.” Paul, “Mesopotamian Ritual Texts,” 124.

28. Paul noted, “Impurity is perceived as a substance which can be transferred from one object to another and which can be removed by some of the same means which can be used to remove dirt. It is thus not surprising that water, with or without additives, is one of the most common ritual detergents.” Paul, “Mesopotamian Ritual Texts,” 143. This cleansing was part of a complex of ritual acts that signaled that the act was more than common washing or bathing.

29. The realm of the divine was also considered to be a threat to humans. It was a common understanding in the ancient Near East that “the sacred is dangerous. . . . One of the purposes of ritual is to provide a controlled environment in which human beings could approach the sacred in relative safety.” Paul, “Mesopotamian Ritual Texts,” 151.

encounter with the realm of the divine, which mainly included the temple complex and its appurtenances.³⁰

In this framework of maintaining the integrity of the realm of the divine, certain rules were created to fulfill this purpose. Van der Toorn called such regulations “rules of decency or etiquette,” which are “founded on the ethical command to worship the god in a proper manner.”³¹ This concept is similar to Maccoby’s rationale, which suggests that laws of ritual purity were equivalent to temple protocol. Van der Toorn distinguished these rules from ethical or moral rules of conduct, which he considered to be of a higher order, and identified them as “small ethics.”³² Such rules delineate what is “seemly and unseemly” and deal with matters of cultural “taste.”³³ He gave several examples of “rules of decency,” specifically, lists of sacred or tabooed animals and prohibitions against persons affected by tabooed states caused by physical occurrences such as skin disease, menstruation, or sexual activity.

Like both Bottero and Jacobsen, van der Toorn also concluded that such rules are similar to those followed when approaching the king and denote matters of courtesy or convention in relation to that sphere. Thus, since the monarchical sphere is an analogy for the divine sphere, such rules of etiquette or convention would naturally transfer over to conventions for the divine.

However, he further extended this analogy and suggested that such rules of behavior were built upon societal customs and principles. This analogy presupposes the importance of the ancient Mesopotamian worldview about the interaction between the spiritual and physical realms, which did not separate the material world from the spiritual. Essentially, religious experience was grasped phenomenologically, rather than through a dichotomous conception of the spiritual and the physical. This fact is best expressed by the visible and material presence of the deity, represented by a physical statue within the temple, and by the care and feeding of this physical representation of the god. The external was representative

30. Some scholars have concluded that the primary origin or source of ritual impurity in Mesopotamia was demonic in nature. See David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 248. Paul disagreed with this argument and suggested that sources of impurity were generally omitted from purification rituals. She stated, “Indeed, many of the references to sources of impurity appear in lexical lists or omen texts, with no indication of the ritual actions required for purification.” Paul, “Mesopotamian Ritual Texts,” 142. It appears that the sources of impurity were too numerous and the purification rite was a generic attempt to remove impurity in any form. This is in contrast to the laws found in Leviticus, which point to specific sources of ritual impurity (Leviticus 12-15). However, she did admit that Mesopotamians shared some sources of impurity with the Israelites, like bodily secretions (menstruation). Paul, “Mesopotamian Ritual Texts,” 139.

31. Karel van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia: A Comparative Study*. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1985), p. 21-23, 12; For a succinct discussion on proper temple protocol in the Ancient Near East see Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*, pp. 119-134. He suggested that “although the ANE gods possess great power and are shrouded in considerable mystery, they are part of the created world, and thus subject to its vicissitudes...In Mesopotamia, the rule of the gods is especially contested beyond the nation’s borders by such inimical forces as demons, monsters, rebellious mountains, dangerous seas, and barbarians...Humans...may influence the divine sphere primarily through the cult.” Hundley, p. 122. Hundley’s *Gods in Dwellings* gives a more comprehensive treatment of this subject.

32. Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia*, 21-23.

33. Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia*, 21-23.

of the inner spiritual reality, so great attention was given to its maintenance and estimation.

Moreover, ancient Mesopotamians believed the gods positively or negatively influenced the external, visible world in every aspect of life. Stefan Maul noted, "The theistic world view of the ancient Orient did not allow for chance or hazard...everything was an expression of the divine, creative will which manifested itself in the world again and again."³⁴ The physical world was a manifestation of the will of the gods and therefore, has to be understood within this context.

Summary

The ancient Mesopotamian religious system was a projection of the monarchical political system that predominated in that society. In this setting, ideas of holiness and purity were construed to delineate the realm of the divine and effect the removal of pollutants from this realm. Consequently, rules and regulations maintaining the integrity of this sphere were developed. These rules were predicated upon the beliefs and customs of a society that grasped religious experience through the external, visible world, which was inexorably influenced by the gods.

The Perception of the Human Body in Ancient Mesopotamia

For a variety of reasons, it is difficult to ascertain fully how Mesopotamians understood the human body within its society. Ancient texts rarely provide philosophical and sociological analyses of society and merely offer fragments of ritual practices and mythology. Nevertheless, according to Maria Wyke, "the body has become a central analytic tool in ancient Mediterranean studies."³⁵ It is a fruitful topic through which to investigate differences in society and to ascertain a society's structure and expressions of power.

Moreover, Julia Asher-Greve has noted that the body is essential in Mesopotamian thought, in which the duality of mind and body prevalent in Western thought is absent. These two entities make up one vital whole that is inseparable, forming a unity that expressed meaning and understanding or that "embodied" meaning and understanding.³⁶ This ideology was manifested, among other aspects of cultural life, in the areas of language, social position, and religious practice.³⁷

34. Stefan M. Maul, "Divination Culture and the Handling of the Future," in *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick (New York: Routledge, 2007), 362. For further information on the religious worldview in Babylon see Takayoshi Oshima, "The Babylonian god Marduk," 348-360 and Brigitte Gronenberg, "The Role and Function of Goddesses in Mesopotamia," 319-331 in *The Babylonian World* (Leick).

35. Maria Wyke, "Introduction," in *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Maria Wyke (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 2.

36. Julia M. Asher-Greve, "The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body," in *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Wyke), 8.

37. Christopher Hallpike noted that "external manifestations of inner states" were of particular interest to ancient societies. Therefore, the external, or the body, was able to reveal inner states of thinking or feeling thereby giving significance to the state of the physical body. Christopher R. Hallpike, *The Foundations of Primitive Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 390.

Terminology of the Body

Sumerian terminology communicates the significance of the human body in various ways. For example, there is no specific term for mind or the human brain, while there are several terms for the body, namely, *su* or *su-bar*, which refer to the body as a collective group or people; *sha* which refers to the external and internal body; and (*me-*) *dim₂*, which primarily means limbs and/or creation or creature. The Sumerian word for intelligence is *geshtu*, which is written using the sign for ear. This may indicate that intelligence was linked to the sense of listening, which is an idea common to several cultures in which “understanding, thinking and knowing (are) associated with hearing.”³⁸ *Sha* can mean body or heart and represents the same meaning for heart found in ancient Egyptian texts, where the heart is the seat of the will, thought, and feeling. Linguistically, ancient Near Eastern thought located psychological processes in physical organs, thereby manifesting a holistic concept of heart, body, and mind.

The Body and Social Position

This manner of thinking made the body important for the development of meaning within society. The social meaning that was invested in the physical body is indicative of this development. For example, physical perfection was related to royalty or kingship, while physical imperfection was an indication of a lower social status. Kings were depicted as heroic figures with strength and vigor comparable to that of the gods.³⁹ In a statue inscription for King Ishme-Dagan (1953-1955 BCE), he is described as, “Ishme-Dagan, the strong young man with muscles and the body of a lion, mighty youth, who possesses fearsome splendor.”⁴⁰

This concept of physical perfection and strength was expressed in the common motif of the “nude heroic man combating wild animals,” found in the Early Dynastic period (c. 2800-2350 BCE),⁴¹ which became one of the most popular motifs on cylinder seals in the Akkadian period (c. 2350-2150 BCE). This singular motif developed concomitantly with the advance of royal ideology and is mimicked in

38. Asher-Greve, “The Essential Body,” 10.

39. The image of the “strong man” is notably expressed on the stele of Naram-Sin. His form is powerful and imposing and he is depicted with muscular arms and legs. He is also wearing a helmet with horns that indicates divinity. See Marc Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 70.

40. “One of the most common royal epithets is ‘strong man’ (*nita kala-ga*).” Asher-Greve, “The Essential Body,” 20. For a discussion of the social constructions of power in Mesopotamia see Petr Charvát, “Social Configurations in Early Dynastic Babylonia (c. 2500-2334 BC.),” 251-264 in *The Babylonian World* (Leick). Some scholars suggest that city-states were once ruled by priest-kings who were supplanted by strong men who arose during threats from external forces. These strong men later became central political figures and dominated and centralized the government. Marc Van de Mieroop noted that “the head of the temple administration served as leader in the city...With the expansion of the city-states’ zones of influence, competition for the remaining open areas developed and soon led to intercity wars over agricultural land. A leader’s military rather than his cultic role became of primary importance in such situations.” Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East*, 45-47. In contrast, Nicole Brisch suggested that the evidence for the existence of a priest-king is unclear. Nicole Brisch, “History and Chronology,” in *The Sumerian World*, ed. Harriet Crawford (London: Routledge, 2013), 115.

41. Asher-Greve, “The Essential Body,” 19.

motifs depicting the gods fighting nude, which was the only context in which gods were represented as such. Possibly, the lack of clothing enhanced the physical feat of battle, since the god completely lacked external protection.

The Body and Religious Practice

The body was also significant in the religious sphere and was a locus of meaning and religious expression. Divination used the body as a text to be “read” using a complex system of observation and interpretation. The practice of divination in ancient Mesopotamia was the predominant form of communication with the divine realm that was based on the identification of omens. An omen can be defined as, “a clearly defined perception understood as a sign pointing to future events whenever it manifests itself under identical circumstances.”⁴² The most prominent forms of divination were extispicy and astrology, whereas other forms, such as signs of time, the earth, and the human form, were less common.

Physiognomic omens were ascertained on the basis of observations of the human body or of human behavior and shared common principles and practices with divination for the evaluation and treatment of physical diseases.⁴³ Texts were compiled that included examples of omina analyses, which may have served as textbooks for initiates. The corpus, entitled *Alandimmu* was “an amalgam of ideas, beliefs, and customs that, having received the sanction of tradition, was systematically established, documented and copied.”⁴⁴

Furthermore, physical perfection was commensurate with the priestly caste and any physical imperfection disqualified a potential candidate. The position of *baru*-priest, one of the primary actors in the rituals pertaining to an encounter with the divine, required physical perfection in his “appearance and his limbs.”⁴⁵ Van der Toorn also noted, “A person who is ‘cross-eyed’ or who has ‘chipped teeth’ was not allowed to approach ‘the place of the (divine) judgment.’”⁴⁶

Specific maladies such as severe skin diseases (possibly leprosy: Akkadian — *saharshubbu*) were listed as “defiling diseases” that would not only disqualify a person from the sacerdotal office, but also subject the person to divine rejection. Van der Toorn concluded that the reasons behind this extreme reaction to leprosy-like diseases may be its “conspicuousness” and its resistance to treatment.⁴⁷ Here again, one can recognize the importance of the external, physical attributes

42. Stefan M. Maul, “Divination Culture and the Handling of the Future,” in *The Babylonian World* (Leick) 361. Alen Lenzi stated, “Divination is...a point of contact for the two bodies (the royal secret council and the divine assembly) via the person of the diviner, for within the personnel of the royal council, only the diviner had the authority to set the king’s plans before the gods via an extispicy and to read the judgment of the gods...” Alen Lenzi, *Secrecy and the Gods: Secret Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia and Biblical Israel* (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2008), 55.

43. Frederick H. Cryer, *Divination in Ancient Israel and its Near Eastern Environment: A Socio-Historical Investigation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 163.

44. Barbara Bock, “Physiognomy in Ancient Mesopotamia and Beyond: From Practice to Handbook,” in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus (Chicago: Oriental Institute Seminars, 2010), 212.

45. Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 29.

46. Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 29.

47. Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 30.

of the human form and their influence upon ancient Mesopotamian society. He continued, "This instinctive emotional response of loathing and inordinate fear, shared by many other societies all over the world, is the soil in which the cultic rejection of the leper is rooted."⁴⁸

Finally, male and female bodies, as a unit and in each of their respective spheres, also had their own idiosyncratic forms of physical impurities at the nexus of this intersection between the realm of the divine and the human sphere. After physical disease and defectiveness, human sexuality posed a considerable threat to the divine sphere. This concept is somewhat puzzling, since ancient Mesopotamia viewed fertility and virility as conspicuously important within society. Mesopotamian society's apprehension of the sexual act even reached to the coupling of the gods, which is demonstrated in the Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal, where the latter had intercourse with Erra and stated, "I am sexually defiled, I am not pure, I cannot execute the judgment of the great gods."⁴⁹

Separately, male and female bodily functions could also cause apprehension within society and by extension, threaten the realm of the divine. The impurity of male genital discharges, whether healthy or pathological, while less commonly documented than that of female genital discharges, could be considered a threat to the purity of the divine sphere. Men who were found in this state could not participate in cultic rituals or battle and were even prohibited from entering the place of commerce.⁵⁰

Female genital discharges are more frequently characterized as impure, although the texts are fragmentary, diffuse, and difficult to translate. The parturient incurred a thirty-day period of impurity and was called *musukkatu*, an Akkadian term for a woman in the period after giving birth, after sexual intercourse (without bathing), and during menstruation (see footnote 17). Her impurity could be transmitted by touch, so in some texts she was thought to be unapproachable during these periods, especially by cultic officiators.⁵¹

Summary

The human form externalized ideas of intelligence, power, and religious perfection. Mesopotamian terminology vividly expressed the connection between the body and meaning and understanding. Furthermore, the perfect human form transmitted concepts of power and authority within the social hierarchy. Finally, in the religious realm, physical perfection and purity delineated carefully protect-

48. Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 31. Thomas Kazen posited the benefits of a psycho-biological approach in the study of ritual purity, which attends to the psychological bodily experience that is expressed through feelings of fear and disgust. In his analysis of impurity in relation to fear, he identified several rites within the Israelite ritual system that exhibit vestiges of apotropaic characteristics (which connote a fear of demonic forces), such as the purification rite in Lev. 14, the red heifer ritual, and the Day of Atonement ritual featuring the goat for Azazel. Thomas Kazen, *Issues of Impurity in Early Judaism*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 25-31.

49. Wilson, "Holiness" and "Purity" in Mesopotamia, 74.

50. Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 32. The Akkadian word *musukku* may also refer to male impurity in regards to male genital discharges.

51. Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 33. For a critique of Van der Toorn's analysis concerning menstruation and of the standard definition of the word *musukkatu* (noted above) see Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth*, 5-7.

ed and defined boundaries that maintained the integrity of the divine realm.

The previous study of the nature of holiness, purity/impurity, and the perception of the human body within Mesopotamian society demonstrates an integral and interrelated relationship between the two concepts. Furthermore, this relationship adds shape and meaning to specific ancient rituals and practices. Therefore, it may be helpful to compare and contrast these ideas and concepts with ancient Israel's religious ideology and ritual practice to ascertain whether a similar meaning could be discerned therein. Specifically, two topics will be addressed in this analysis: (1) Yahwism and concepts of holiness and purity and (2) the perception of the body within concepts of cultic perfection and purity.

A Contextual Look At Ancient Israel's Concepts Of Holiness And Purity In Relation To Its Perception Of The Human Body

The religious system in ancient Israel was distinct from that of Mesopotamia in that rather than being centered on the pantheon of gods and echoing the development of its civilization and political structure, it was completely centered and influenced by the person of Yahweh. Therefore, concepts of holiness and purity were understood in connection with the attributes and person of Yahweh. However, Wright's explication of the meaning of holiness in the Old Testament shares some commonalities with Wilson's definition of Sumerian and Akkadian concepts of holiness and purity.

Wright noted that the concept of holiness, based on the Hebrew term *qodesh* (apartness, sacredness, holiness), revolves around Yahweh who is considered the source of holiness and its "ideal manifestation."⁵² Comparably, the Sumerian term KU3 also relates to the divine, but is specifically defined as things pertaining to the divine realm. Both meanings denote concepts that specifically relate to deity, whether Yahweh or the pantheon of gods. Furthermore, Wright concluded that things, persons, or places characterized as holy are invariably connected to Yahweh. Humans considered holy include priests, Levites, Nazirites, prophets, and Israel as a nation. All of these groups are holy because of their connection to Yahweh and not as a result of inherent holiness. In addition, objects such as offerings, sanctuary furniture, and priestly clothing all receive their holiness from their association with the sanctuary, which is ultimately the sphere of Yahweh.

Places associated with the divine presence and times allocated to the worship

52. David P. Wright, "Holiness," ABD 3:237. *Qodesh* can refer to places set apart as sacred by God's presence, such as God's heavenly dwelling place or the tabernacle. It can also refer to things consecrated at sacred places, such as temple furniture. In addition, it can refer to people and sacred times. F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906; repr., 2010), 871. This discussion does not negate the multifaceted definition of "holiness" proposed by Richard Davidson, who suggested there are three facets to the "holiness rationale:" (1) separation, (2) wholeness, and (3) health. See Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 329-332. Davidson saw the rationale of separation in the context of sexuality and the temple. He stated, "God radically separates sexuality from any ritual activity in the cultus. As part of a polemic against the divinization of sex in fertility cults, God makes a clear and distinct separation between sex and the sanctuary." Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 329. This implies that menstruation was viewed as sex-related, possibly because blood flowed from the sex organ.

of Yahweh were deemed holy. Several prohibitions preventing access to Mt. Sinai were imposed upon the Israelites because of its association with the divine presence. On earth, the primary place associated with Yahweh's presence was the sanctuary and its environs, understood to be his dwelling. By extension, the city in which Yahweh's sanctuary was located—Jerusalem—was considered holy. In addition, the Sabbath and the cyclic festivals associated with Yahweh were also holy.

Wright stated that impurity (in Hebrew—*tame*) “is a state opposed and detrimental to holiness,” yet it is not the terminological antonym to holiness.⁵³ States of impurity are rectified by purgation offerings or ablutions and washing. These rituals denote that the concept of purity (in Hebrew—*taher*) in the Bible has some correspondence to the Akkadian word *ellu* and the concept of the removal of pollutants.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the idea of exorcism or the removal of evil spirits is absent.

The Perception of the Body and Ideas of Cultic Perfection and Purity

The religious practices of ancient Israel were intentionally distinct from those of Mesopotamia because of the nature of Yahweh's holiness. Thus, practices such as divination and polytheism were vehemently proscribed. Perceptions of the body in ancient Israel do, however, demonstrate some parallels with Mesopotamian thought.⁵⁵ Most notably, physical perfection was prescribed for priests and the animal sacrifices attached to the worship of Yahweh. To a lesser degree, the officials presenting an offering were expected to be in a state of physical purity.

Leviticus 21:16-20 enumerates regulations proscribing physical imperfections for priests.⁵⁶ No male with a defect was allowed to officiate as a priest. This included blindness, physical disability (lameness), and facial disfigurement, as well as deformed limbs. Males with broken hands or feet were also similarly disqualified. The list concludes with the inclusion of hunchbacks, dwarves, those suffering from skin disease (possibly eczema) or who have a defective eye, and

53. Wright, “Holiness,” ABD 3:246. Tame means unclean or impure, usually (1) sexually, (2) religiously with idols, and (3) ceremonially. Brown, Driver, and Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 379. Beyond matters of impurity, in the context of the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26), it has been observed that the concept of holiness “is first and foremost of the God of Israel.” In addition, holiness is defined as separation and as association with God and belonging to God. Joann M. Dupont, “Women and the Concept of Holiness in the ‘Holiness Code’ (Leviticus 17-26): Literary, Theological and Historical Context,” (PhD Diss., Marquette University, 1989), 87-88.

54. *Taher* – pure, clean. Brown, Driver, and Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 372.

55. Aubrey Johnson described ancient Israelite thinking about the individual as “synthetic.” Man is seen as a “psychical whole” in which his “soul-substance is perceived, not only in the various members and secretions of the body, but also in a more extended form in whatever bears traces of contact with him.” He continued: “This class may include former secretions such as blood, spittle, and sweat; the shadow, reflection, and similar reproductions.” Aubrey R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), 2-3. See also Thomas Staubli and Silvia Schroer, *Body Symbolism in the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001). For a discussion of how kingship is viewed through a bodily perspective see Mark W. Hamilton, *The Body Royal: The Social Poetics of Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

56. Roy Gane explained, “The priesthood constitutes the Lord’s corps of special servants, who must be in harmony with his holy, immortal, perfect sphere to the greatest extent possible. Only in this way can they properly represent the nature and character of God to the people.” Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 374. See also Kerry H. Wynn, “The Normative Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives in *The Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies*, eds. Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 91.

males with crushed testicles.⁵⁷ These regulations are similar to the Mesopotamian physical restrictions for priests, which also promote physical perfection.

Analogous to priestly physical perfection, the animal sacrifices were supposed to be free from physical defects. Any animal sacrifice that had a defect defiled the altar and in essence, Yahweh, according to Malachi 1:8. Defects found in animal sacrifices include blindness, lameness, and sickness, which are similar attributes found in relation to the priest.

Physical perfection was not imposed upon ordinary officiants, but ritual purity was a requirement. The laws of ritual purity in Leviticus 12-15 refer to physical states that are comparable to the laws of etiquette described by Van der Toorn. Ritual laws for the parturient (Lev 12), for scaly skin disease (Lev 13 [14]), and for male and female discharges (Lev 15) refer to physical states that apparently threaten the divine realm. Therefore, such laws in some ways exhibit similar (but distinct) underlying concepts as those found in Mesopotamia.⁵⁸

Conclusion

This study suggests that the ancient Mesopotamian religious and cultural context in which regulations of ritual purity were followed was constructed upon the understanding of holiness and purity. Moreover, this ancient society's perception of the human body in relation to their conception of holiness and purity in the context of their religious system also influenced their practice of ritual purity laws. In addition, this study found that ancient Israel's conception of ritual purity laws might also have been influenced by its conception of holiness and purity within the religious system of Yahweh and its perception of the body in relation to its religious system.

Thus, suggestions that Biblical ritual purity laws regarding the menstruant inherently promote gender disparity may not fully take into account the ancient context behind the generation of such laws. This study suggests that the Biblical laws regarding the menstruant are parallel to Mesopotamian practice and thought wherein existed a confluence of religious ideology and cultural perceptions. Therefore, a similar confluence of religious ideology (the religion of Yahweh) and cultural perceptions (the significance of the body within society) may have obtained also in ancient Israel. Consequently, the ritual laws of Leviticus 12-15

57. In the Ancient Near East, those who were disabled or infirmed were not to be abused (the blind, "the dwarf...the lame...") and were seen as an integral part of society, yet they were not seen as proper officiants in the divine sphere. See Neal H. Walls, "The Origins of the Disabled Body: Disability in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *This Abled Body*, (Avalos, Melcher, Schipper), 14, 29-30. For a discussion on the complexity of social status and disfigurement, see T. M. Lemos, "'Like the Eunuch Who Does Not Beget': Gender, Mutilation, and Negotiated Status in the Ancient Near East," in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature*, eds. Candida R. Moss and Jeremy Schipper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 47-66.

58. For an alternate view on the rationale behind ritual purity laws see Thomas Kazen, "Dirt and Disgust: Body and Morality in Biblical Purity Laws," in *Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible*, eds. Baruch J. Schwartz et al. (New York: T&T Clark, 2008).

may be better understood through the lens of religious and cultural perceptions within ancient society.⁵⁹

This study may also help us understand the nature of Biblical ritual law, especially within its ancient context. It points to the idea that Biblical ritual law was not isolated from the cultural practices of its time, but it may have been influenced by persistent ideologies and perceptions that were common across national, geographic, and ethnic boundaries.

59. The cultural perceptions of Ancient Israelite and Mesopotamian societies were based on a patriarchal paradigm and one cannot completely divorce these societies from this fact. Thus, it certainly would be possible to suggest that these ancient societies had a culture that engendered gender disparity. It would be difficult to do a comprehensive study on the status of women in each of these societies; however, some studies have approached this question. See Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*; Mark Chavalas, ed., *Women in the Ancient Near East: A Source Book* (London: Routledge, 2014). Bahrani, Zainab, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 2001). Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).