

Blidstein, Moshe. *Purity, Community, and Ritual in Early Christian Literature*. Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 294 pp. Hardcover. USD 100.00.

Blidstein traces how early Christian interpreters of Scriptures, represented by the Greek literature up to the third century, used the language of purity to articulate their identity. This is the third book, out of four so far published, of the Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions edited by Guy Stroumsa. The series promises to publish monographs on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam from a comparative approach. This particular volume on Christianity is on purity, and there might be a reason for that, other than the fact that Stroumsa (editor of the series) was the advisor of this PhD dissertation turned into a book. Since Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), the interest of biblical scholars and historians of Judaism and Christianity in purity has increased greatly. Prior to the recent and more nuanced studies on purity that take into account anthropology and socio-linguistics, the dominant view was that purity categories were obsolete remnants of a past of religious superstition. In the specific case of the relation between Christianity and Hebrew religiosity, the latter was a religious system of ritualism and physical relation with the divine that used purity as an important religious category, while the former was one of morality and interior spirituality in which purity was irrelevant. This idea, though still advocated today by some, has been challenged by studies like this one. By tracing the development of purity language in the first three centuries of Christianity in the East, Blidstein has aptly demonstrated that this simplification does not represent well the many complex and nuanced views about purity in early Christianity. One thing is clear from this study, Christianity was as much a religion of rituals and physical contact with the holy as Judaism was a religion of morality and interior spirituality. Hence, the dichotomy between physical and ethical, ritual and moral, should not be used as a general description that separates the religious expression of Christians and Jews and how they used purity language, at least not in these formative years.

The work selects four themes prominent in Christian purity discourse: sexuality, corpse defilement, diet, and baptism. Blidstein shows that, in some cases, many Christians would be polemical against Jewish and pagan practices regarding corpse defilement, while in others they would uphold notions of sexual purity and impurity articulated in the Hebrew Bible and adopted by many Greco-Roman groups. Thus, the book is divided into four parts: First, "Purity in Its Context," with two chapters on the present scholarly context and the cultural background (Hebrew and Greco-Roman) on purity; second, "Breaking with the Past," where he shows two major themes where one can see a clear departure in Christian discourse on purity from Judaism, diet, and corpse pollution; third, "Roots of a New Paradigm," with three chapters discussing baptism as purification, sacrifice and defilement of sin, and sexual impurity where one can see both similarities and different approaches to purity in comparison with Ancient Judaism; and fourth, "New Configurations," closing the book with an analysis of how Jewish-Christian communities

handled purity, how Origen tried a synthesis on purity, and Blidstein's summary reflections on the whole work.

The major contribution of this study is to propose that “bodily and moral purity are two sides of the same coin” (31). Therefore, purity and impurity should be understood as a cultural language that is multivalent and applicable to different situations. Behaviors, as well as artifacts, described as pure/impure, were understood and handled differently by Christians with the same goal in mind, to distinguish the holy from the not holy. This goes beyond issues of morality and physicality, but also includes them. In the first chapter, entitled “Introducing Purity Discourses,” Blidstein explains that he will not adopt Klawans's popular division of sin and impurity, set forth in *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). The main reason for such rejection is that Blidstein does not always see this dichotomy clearly set by early Christian texts, and, I would add, in the Hebrew Bible itself. Surely most examples portray a clear differentiation between impurity and sin, but not in all cases (e.g., idolatry in Lev 20, where the language of impurity describes a non-bodily moral behavior). Blidstein seems to see purity as a language game that is malleable and can be applied to different contexts with the same goal in mind, to create categories of separation.

Although Wittgenstein is not used by Blidstein, such use could have fit his purpose and conclusions well in terms of his nuanced view of purity as a cultural language. Blidstein does suggest the ideological framework of *truce* and *battle* as more descriptive of what the purity language is doing in particular cases. In a truce discourse, purity/impurity are “statuses, rather than forces . . . considered as normal” and only problematic in particular circumstances (11). Meanwhile, in a battle framework, purity/impurity “are seen as two opposing, active forces” personified by holy and unholy (demonic) beings, and therefore mutually exclusive. In this latter case, impurity is evil. This is why he is more sympathetic to the language of David P. Wright's *The Disposal of Impurity* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) of allowed and prohibited impurities, than to Klawans's dichotomy between morality and impurity. I think he has made a good case for identifying purity/impurity as a language game, which is already hinted by Klawans in his introduction and conclusion (viii–ix, 162). From a historical perspective, Blidstein's categories of battle and truce accounts for more nuances than Klawans's categories of sin and impurity since different early Christian authors used the terminology related to purity differently. But there is still more to be done in the discussion on purity/impurity from a philosophy of language perspective.

The delimitation and purpose of the work are clear: to work with Greek and Syriac Christian authors up to Origen in the third century. However, he does include some Latin and Greek sources up to the fourth century (e.g., 108), which I do not see as a problem if he would have done more of this kind of footnote reference in all cases. Connected to this, I think Blidstein should have given at least a list with references to the primary texts dealing with purity discourse delimited by period and geography (East, up to the third century), so the reader could have a way to evaluate his historical

analysis. He does explain that he decided to leave out many texts that contain words such as ἀγνεία, καθαρός, μιάρς, or ἀκάθαρτος because they are of no “religious motivation or significance” (9). He might be right, but there is no way to evaluate this claim from his work. Without the references, the impression is that he might have left something out that might be pertinent to the discussion. Beside the point that it would be nice to have more primary texts quoted and cited, Blidstein did a good synthesis of the issues. His summary statements at the end of each section are clear and very helpful and his conclusions are perceptive of the nuances of historical and linguistic forces playing in each text analyzed. He is very judicious in his conclusions, being careful not to state more than the evidence seems to indicate. However, I think that he should have expressed more of his opinion in some cases, giving suggestions about some debated matters.

Overall, Blidstein’s *oeuvre* synthesizes ideas clearly and is a helpful work in the continuous debate about purity in Christianity. Regarding style, I think he occasionally could have improved the transition from one section to another. The highlight of the book is the notion that purity and impurity need to be understood as a discourse shaped by cultural assumptions. In the case of the early Christian usage of purity ideas, this language needs to be understood in its own right, taking into account the presupposition each author had about holiness, artifacts, and body (anthropology). Consequently, Christianity should not be understood as going against purity or in favor of adopting wholesale the purity system articulated in the Hebrew Bible. But, particular authors adapted it to their own purpose and shaped it according to their anthropological, ritual, and eschatological frame of reference. This nuanced view of purity as a language adapted to historical realities and closely tied to primordial definitions about body, self, and the sacred is also in operation in Rabbinic Judaism, as Mira Balberg’s study demonstrates (*Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014]). Balberg has taken the contributions of cultural studies on the body more seriously than Blidstein, but both works are part of a recent trend of reflection on purity that is much more nuanced and perceptive about cultural dimensions than previous studies.

Despite the noticeable improvement in studies on purity in early Christianity, more still needs to be done on understanding purity in relation to differing definitions of sacred space. As studies such as Blidstein’s have pointed out, as the notion of *loca sancta* shifts, the impurity system also transforms because impurity is related to holiness. Thus, since Christians identified the body as a possible dwelling of God (sacred), anthropological ideas play a major role in understanding particular discourses of impurity.

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