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Nephesh: An Ethnography of Israelite Purity Laws

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College Scholars Senior Project
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In the Classical Hebrew language, as with any other, certain terms can have a wide variety of meanings.¹ Consequently, Hebrew words can yield a rich and complicated nexus of both denotations and connotations. Much of the subtle understanding required by a native speaker of Classical Hebrew to unravel a given term has been lost to us today, as has the subconscious web of associations included therein. Accordingly, there are numerous semantic problems inherent in a transfer of religious tradition (in this case, that of the repository of the Hebrew Bible²) from one linguistic environment to another, such as our own, so removed in both linguistic and temporal terms. These problems are of great concern to those who seek to understand both the language and the context in which the text was composed, transmitted, and used.³

In the first part of this paper, I will focus on the root *nephesh* (hereafter N), to explore its range of translations and associations in the corpus of the Hebrew Bible and some of its translations. Of the seven hundred and fifty-five instances of this term, it is rendered six hundred times with the Greek *psyche*, or “soul,” in the Septuagint.⁴ A closer

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- 1 This is significant in terms of biblical translation, as we will see below. Classical Hebrew refers to the language of the Hebrew Bible; however, some portions, chiefly parts of the books of Daniel and Ezra, are in Aramaic. In this paper, we will be focusing on the Hebrew text only. I would like to acknowledge the substantial guidance and encouragement given to me by Dr. Johanna Stiebert of the University of Tennessee Religious Studies Department. Dr. Christina Shephardson of the Religious Studies Department also contributed a generous amount of help and assistance. Any mistakes in the paper are mine alone.
 - 2 For the purposes of this paper, “Hebrew Bible” signifies the corpus of texts referred to as the “Old Testament” in Christian traditions and the “Tanakh” in Judaic studies. I will give attention to the range of ancient Near Eastern religious traditions that can be inferred from the Hebrew Bible. According to conservative estimates, the texts of the Hebrew Bible were written over the span of at least one millennium. Given this expanse of time, what we call “Classical Hebrew” comprises a number of linguistic stages.
 - 3 James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 2.
 - 4 The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Bible by Jewish scholars into Koine Greek, between the 3rd and 1st centuries BCE. I believe that the English translation of N as “soul” (from Greek *psyche*) is

examination of the word, however, will reveal that its variation in meaning defies this broad translation: neither *psyche* nor our understanding of the English word “soul” can satisfy the scope of N's connotations. Sometimes the precise sense is difficult to determine, and meanings overlap.⁵ For example, N is also translated “neck”, “throat”, or “jaws”; “appetite,” “desire,” or “craving” (both of a physical and spiritual nature); and “food” or “sustenance.”⁶ Additionally, N sometimes indicates an organ of yearning or longing. The least straight-forward and, for this paper, most significant meaning, is one of “life-force” or life itself, perhaps best translated as “life-principle.”⁷

It is the instances where N most likely refers to this life-principle that make this term so problematic to translate. It is simply too difficult to encompass the slippery metonymy of “N = life” in a single word. The intricate knot of semantic and social affiliations is further complicated by N's location in the blood or *as* the blood.⁸

While semantic meaning is key to translation, it is critical to remember that texts emerge in social contexts. Therefore, I will examine the linguistic puzzle of N by using an anthropological approach to explore how the concept of N impacts the daily lives of

insufficient to convey N's the range of meanings. Because many English translations proceed from the Septuagint, I mention *psyche* in the Septuagint only as a way of tracing modern English translations to their source. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully examine the influence and structure of the Greek language in relation to *psyche*. Instead, I will focus on the nuances of N in the Hebrew language, and attempt to broaden our understanding of the term through anthropological approaches.

5 This is true for many terms found in biblical texts. In this sense, N is not uniquely problematic, but its problems hold unique particularities in terms of biblical purity laws, as we will see below.

6 Victor Avidgor Hurowitz, “A Forgotten Meaning of nepes in Isaiah LVIII 10,” *Vetus Testamentum*. 47, (1997): 43.

7 See Robert P. Teachout, “The Usages of Nephesh in the Old Testament” (Master's Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1972) 18-20, referenced in Richard Ngun, “Theological Implications of The Concept of *Nephesh* in the Pentateuch,” *Stulos Theological Journal* 1/2 (1999): 14 n. 9.

8 Compare Deuteronomy 12:23b: “But indeed do not eat the blood, for the blood is the N, and you will not eat the N with the flesh.” Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites are instructed not to consume the N-containing blood. See Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:20 and Deuteronomy 12:16.

the ancient Israelites. To do this, in the latter part of this paper I will investigate the meaning of N that refers to blood (or the life-force in blood) as it applies to biblical passages involving blood purity rituals.

These rituals⁹ ostensibly deal with the management of human and animal fluids, but can be viewed more perceptively as a tripartite praxis of Israelite culture. On the surface, the practical consequence of purity rituals involving bodily fluids can be readily understood as early methods of sanitation for a nomadic desert people.¹⁰ More broadly, the participation in worship so central to Israelite society necessitated ritual purification: to be polluted was to be barred from holy places, objects, and the presence of God. Because this pollution is transferable to others, the strict regulations governing an individual's purification can be further seen as preventative measures taken to decrease spiritual danger to the social community. And finally, hidden deep within this understanding of purity laws is the sacred power of the blood substance itself; in Hebrew texts, this power is expressed in a duality of purity and defilement that I believe was so internalized by the Israelites as to become nearly impossible to explain in our own English-speaking context without using apparently contradictory terms, such as purity *and* pollution. To appreciate how the power and taboo of blood had such an influential

9 Such passages are found almost exclusively in the Torah and particularly in Leviticus; for examples, see Leviticus 5:2 (touching of an unclean animal); Leviticus 11 and 17 (which animals are clean and how to slaughter them correctly); Leviticus 12 (purification after childbirth); Leviticus 13 and 15 (sickness and bodily discharges); and Leviticus 18 (sexual relations).

10 As Mary Douglas indicates, there is a distinction between purity and hygiene. In the case of the ancient Israelites, knowledge of germs was completely lacking. The rituals discussed below may serve a cleansing function in the sanitary sense, but what was far more important for the Israelites is that the completion of the rituals gained them re-admittance into the public and sacred sphere. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1966), 9.

effect on ancient Israelite society, I will examine the force within blood: the *nephesh*.¹¹

***Nephesh* in Translation**

Semantic Origins and Cognates

When studying an ancient language, a linguist may run into the difficulty of translating a word whose meaning in the text remains obscure due to the lack of native speakers, absence of dictionaries, and limited availability of extant texts. Therefore, a lexical item is often examined across a corpus in order to grasp the full range of its uses. In addition, a search for cognate words in other, related languages can also be helpful. To illustrate this, I have included a summary of one such examination to show how other related languages can be useful in the study of N.

Hans Walter Wolff proposes that the Proto-Semitic root of N may have originated as a biliteral form, *ps*, an onomatopoeic term closely related to the hiss of breathing.¹² Certainly, there is agreement that the word is etymologically linked with the Babylonian and Assyrian *napasu*, “to blow, breathe”;¹³ the Akkadian *napasu* “to blow, snort, or take breath” and *napistu*, which signifies the throat of men and animals and the basis of life; the Ugaritic *nps*, meaning “jaws,” “throat,” or “gullet,” but also “appetite, desire, feelings,” and “living being;” and the Canaanite and Aramaic *nps*, which also means

11 To explore this, I will focus in particular on the blood purity laws of Leviticus and their affect on Israelite social customs and practices.

12 Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 13-14.

13 Richard Ngun, “Theological Implications of the Concept of Nephesh in the Pentateuch,” *Stulos* 7 (1999): 14.

“breath,” “throat,” and “appetite,” as well as “soul, person,” and “life.”¹⁴ Compared with this can be the Arabic *naffasa*, “to breathe” and *nafsun*, “breath” or “appetite,” “the period of life,” “the feelings,” and “the person;”¹⁵ and *nafs*, used to signify “soul, spirit/the vital principle, a person, being, individual, life-blood, etc.”¹⁶

It is not analytically taxing to trace the development of N's meaning from breathing or the act of drawing breath, which living creatures must do, to the act of living or the principle behind life itself. From the state of a living being, N as the seat of understanding, intellect, or organ of emotions is just another semantic step away. Below are some examples of how English translators use an assortment of words for N. Examining the variety of words that English translators have used for N will demonstrate that an accurate understanding of many Hebrew Bible passages relies on understanding the original language and context of the texts. Because the terminology used to discuss blood taboos frequently includes words that are seemingly disjointed (such as life/death, pure/impure, purified/polluted, and clean/unclean), the fluidity of N is crucial in light of the implications of blood purity laws, as discussed below.

Mouth, Throat, and Appetite

N is used to refer to the internal neck, or throat, and is therefore understood as the

14 Ibid. See also Francis Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 659. The use of lexica such as Brown-Driver-Briggs is extremely helpful in establishing etymological links for those who (like myself) are not experts in Akkadian, Ugaritic, or other Semitic languages.

15 Wolff, *op. cit.*, 14.

16 Ngun, *op. cit.*, 14.

mouth or jaws (Isa 5:14, Hab 2:5) that take in food and satisfy hunger.¹⁷ In Psalm 107:5, a hungry or thirsty man is referred to as having a N which has fainted within him; he thanks YHWH¹⁸ for satisfying his thirsty N (Ps 107:9).¹⁹ Thirst and water are frequently combined with N.²⁰ Because this term also conveys the function of “the organ that feels hunger and thirst,”²¹ N may also refer to the part of the body with which one tastes (Prov 27:7).²²

The hunger or thirst of the N²³ may be determined by the extent of someone's righteousness, as in Proverbs 10:3: “YHWH does not let the righteous N go hungry, but he repulses the craving of the wicked.” If N as appetite is read as referring to a spiritual hunger, then it is vital that the N hungers only for YHWH: “The greedy N stirs up strife,

17 Wolff, op. cit., 11. It is not uncommon in Classical Hebrew for a term that describes an organ of the physical body to acquire an abstract meaning. For example, the nose (Hebrew *aph*) is frequently used to designate anger, (e.g. Gen 27:45, Ps 85:5, and Jer 49:37). Another example is the heart, (Hebrew *lev*) which is indicative of wisdom (see Prov 19:8a). Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the Hebrew Bible are my own from the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, 1977 edition.

18 The tetragrammaton YHWH corresponds to the four Hebrew letters of one prominent name of the Israelite god: Yod, He, Waw, He. For reasons of reverence, it is traditionally not pronounced and the word *Adonai* which is the Hebrew word for “lord” or “master,” is substituted.

19 Wolff, op. cit., 11. Psalm 107:9 reads, “For he satisfied the longing N, and filled the hungry N up with good things.” Compare Hurowitz, op. cit. 52, who translates, “(If) you extend your sustenance (*napseka*) to the hungry, and satisfy the starved throat (N), then your light will shine forth in the darkness, and your gloom shall be like the afternoon” (Isa 58:10).

20 “Like cold water to a thirsty N, so is good news from a far country” (Prov 25:25; also Jer 31:12, “Their N shall be as a watered garden”).

21 Wolff, op. cit., 12.

22 Proverbs 27:7 reads, “A full N loathes a honeycomb, but to an empty N every bitter thing is sweet.” While the Hebrew word for tongue is usually rendered *lashon*, in this instance it is the fullness or emptiness of the N that determines whether what the tongue tastes is sweet or bitter. Here, a “spiritually full” or “spiritually empty” N is parallel to a full or empty appetite. The N is therefore an instrument of taste as well as a measure for spiritual need, and in some translations (such as the Jewish Publication Society Version, the King James Version, and the English Standard Version) N is rendered “soul” here.

23 See Psalms 143:6, “I stretch out my hands for you; my N thirsts for you like a parched land” and Isaiah 29:8, “And it will be like when a hungry man dreams, and behold, he eats! But when he wakes up, his N is empty. Or, like when a thirsty man dreams and behold, he drinks! But he wakes up, and behold, he is weak and his N has appetite.”

but whoever trusts YHWH will be enriched” (Prov 28:25).²⁴ These organs of taste are further associated with behavior and righteousness, which can be satisfied by YHWH (Prov 16:24: “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the N and healing to the body”²⁵).

When the throat is understood as the organ of breathing, then the action of the N is breathing or panting (Jer 15:9, Job 41:21). N can be used verbally as “taking breath” (II Sam 16:14, Ex 23:12, Ex 31:17) and sometimes could be breath (“Lord my God, I pray, let this child's N come into him again,” I Kings 17:21f).²⁶

Neck and Peril to Life

The throat is the internal neck, and a use of N for the external neck, though rare, is also demonstrable. The N can be caught or constrained in the sense of being encircled with adornment²⁷ or being captured in a snare or trap.²⁸ In a parallel with fettered feet,

24 See also Ecclesiastes 6:9, “The sight of the eyes is better than the wandering of the N,” and Hosea 9:4, “They will not pour wine-offerings out to the Lord, nor will they be pleasing to him. Their sacrifices will be like the bread of mourners to them: anyone who eats it will be polluted. For their bread will be for their N, and it will not enter into the house of the Lord.”

25 Wolff, *op. cit.*, 15,12. The Israelites, not trusting God's faith in Moses, complain to their leader in the desert: “And the people spoke against God and Moses, saying ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread, and no water, and our N loathes this light bread’” (Num 21:5).

26 In another example of the dying being deprived of their N, or breath, Genesis 38:15 reads, “And it came to pass that as [Rachel's] N was departing, for she died, that she called his name Ben-oni. But his father called him Ben-jamin.” The matriarch Rachel plays a prominent role in biblical stories using N, as we will see below. However, note that in these instances, Genesis 38:15 and the I Kings 17:21, N could be translated “life-force.”

27 Proverbs 3:22 conveys the meaning of outer neck and also hints at N's yearning for wisdom and discretion, urging “Let them [wisdom and discretion] be life to your N, and adornment for your neck.” Isaiah 3:20 refers to “houses of the N,” which has been variously translated as “amulets” (JPS Tanakh), “charms” (World English Bible and God's Word Translation) and even “jewels with secret powers” (Basic English Bible). Since the phrase “houses of the N” comes at the end of a list of jewelry, it most probably has a connotation of “necklace” and therefore refers to the encircling of the external neck.

Psalm 105:18 speaks of the N as being put in iron. Psalm 44:25 describes a N which is “bowed down to the dust” while the “body cleaves to the ground”²⁹ The back of the N can be a place for the tormentors of Israel to step upon.³⁰

It can either be in the sense of “neck” or “breath” that N is substituted as the height of water in which it is dangerous to swim (“Waters enclosed about me, even to the N,” Jonah 2:5). In a handful of phrases, such as when there is immediate danger to the N, it is difficult to determine whether the sense meant is one of life-force, neck, or both³¹ since “striking the N” or having a “sword at our N” (Jer 4:10) imperils both life and the physical neck itself. For the ancient Hebrews, this may have been an irrelevant distinction.

Longing and Desire

Just as the N can “yearn . . . for food and the preservation of life”³² it can also be a substantive, or the yearning itself.³³ This meaning of N as desire is associated with the Hebrew *wh*, “wish, desire, craving for” in Piel (the Hebrew intensive active) and Hitpaël

28 See Psalm 124:7, which says, “Our N has escaped like a bird from a hunter's trap,” and I Sam 28:9, “Why do you lay a snare for my N, to cause me to die?”

29 Wolff, op. cit., 14. Compare Psalm 119:25, “My N cleaves to the dust.”

30 Isaiah 53:21 reads, “I will put [the cup of fury] into the hand of those who afflict you, those that have said to your N: ‘Bow down so that we may pass over,’ and you have laid your back like the ground, and like the street, for them that go over.”

31 See Genesis 37:21, “Let us not take his N [i.e., kill him].” Jeremiah 40:14 and Deuteronomy 19:6 also refer to killing as “danger to the N.”

32 Wolff, op. cit., 15.

33 See Ezekiel 24:21, “Say to the House of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord god: Behold, I will profane my holy place, the pride of your power, the desire of your eyes, the longing of your N . . .’” and 24:25, “On that day I will take their stronghold from them, the joy of their glory, the desire of their eyes, and the yearning of their N.”

(the Hebrew reflexive).³⁴ Many of these instances have a clear relationship to the understanding of N as throat: N may refer to the physical appetite for food (such as early figs in Micah 7:1, meat in Deut 12:15 and I Sam 21:16, or wine in Deut 14:26); or, it may simply mean hunger.³⁵

N may be an immoral or negative desire, such as the longing for someone else's death (Ps 35:25), for evil (Prov 21:10), for vanity (Ps 24:4), or for a kingdom (II Sam 3:21, I Kings 11:37). The desire for treachery can give one a N of violence.³⁶ N may signify the object of a malicious longing as well; hence, a man is the N of his enemy (Ps 35:25); or it may mean the longing for someone or something worthy and positive, whether for YHWH (Isa 26:9), for the love of a friend (I Sam 18:1), for sons and daughters (Jer 22:27) or for a loved one (Gen 34:2f).³⁷ This sort of yearning at times hearkens back to N's connotations as the organ of taste, as when “a N realized is sweet to the soul” (Prov 13:19), or the hunger for emotional satisfaction (Ps 42:1f, I Sam 1:15, Deut 6:5).

Another nuance of the term N, which will be discussed below, is that of the personal pronoun (*ani* or *anochi*) “I” (sometimes translated “myself”). In the Song of Songs, these words for “I” and the first-person singular pronominal suffix (') occur more

34 The Qal, or simple past, of the Hebrew root *'wh* can mean “bend,” “twist,” or “commit iniquity;” by comparison, in the Piel and in Hitpael, the root *'wh* is intensified to mean “wish” or “desire.”

35 Deuteronomy 23:24 reads, “If you come into your neighbor's vineyard, then eat grapes until you have satisfied your N; but you will not put any into your vessel.”

36 Wolff, op. cit., 15.

37 The Genesis 34:2 passage refers to Shechem's longing for Dinah and reads “his N clove to her.” I do not attempt to unpack Shechem's motivations for his later actions (which may or may not have included rape), but suffice it to say that N is, in this context, legitimately understood as sexual desire.

frequently than in any other book of the Hebrew Bible.³⁸ N also figures prominently in the Song of Songs, and in the following passage it is used so insistently as to strike the reader as deliberately repeated in order to evoke several of its meanings to the listener's ear: N's use as a personal pronoun, its connotations of physical desire and emotional longing, and its sense of being the object of another's longing.

By night on my bed I sought him whom my N loves: I sought him, but I did not find him. I will rise now and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my N loves: I sought him, but I did not find him. The watchmen that go about the city found me (and I said) 'Did you see him whom my N loves?' Shortly after I passed from them, I found him whom my N loves; I held him and did not let him go until I had brought him into my mother's house and into the chamber of the one who conceived me (Song of Songs 2:17-3:4).

Here, N's nuance of passion or desire is underscored by the image of a woman seeking “her N” on her bed at night. The context allows the Hebrew-speaking audience to understand that N here might refer to the object of her longing (i.e., her lover), but may also be alluding to her sexual appetite, a yearning, and occasionally to herself. In this way, the woman loving and yearning and the object of her love, the beloved, are associated. This association and the use of N possibly heighten the sexual allusions that are so prominent throughout this biblical book.³⁹

Soul and Self

It is this seeking of another's N, or of another N, that crucially narrows the search

³⁸ In Decker, M., “The Structure of the Song of Songs and the Centrality of *nepes* (6.12)” in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 187.

³⁹ The role of N in sexual relations becomes even more complex in terms of Levitical purity laws dealing with seminal emission and conception, as discussed below.

for a contextual understanding of this term. The instances of N used in the previous definitions have sometimes crossed over into other meanings. For example, when in reference to the eating of grapes in Deuteronomy 23:24 the text reads “eat . . . according to your N,” the sentence could easily be read “eat according to your sustenance [what food you yourself have],” or “eat according to your appetite [how much you personally need],” or even “eat according to your desire [as much as you want],” and still yet “eat according to your taste [what you prefer].” These disparate translations of N certainly have different implications in the passage in question, and lead to various interpretations of the text.

N is often translated “soul” in the sense that it is the “seat of action, of spiritual experiences and emotions,”⁴⁰ which is more complex. This inclination should be separated from the Septuagint's liberal use of *psyche*, which often conveys a heavy doctrinal undercurrent that the Hebrew N is unable to support and which would make matters even more complicated, semantically speaking. N as “soul” in the examples given below should be excluded from any speculation about an immortal soul that survives after death.⁴¹ To nuance N in the sense of “imperishable soul” here is to distort its meaning in the light of later concepts; M. Deckers has suggested “being” as a more fitting designation,⁴² and to avoid confusion this term will be employed.

N is used as “being” when expressing either needs and feelings or torment and

40 Wolff, op. cit.,17.

41 Wolff, op. cit., 20. Here, Wolff posits that such speculation is almost entirely lacking in the Hebrew Bible.

42 M. Deckers, op. cit. 189.

suffering.⁴³ When the female speaker in the Song of Songs declares “my N determines me, vehicle of my noble people” (6:12),⁴⁴ it is a vital emotional essence about which she speaks. The Hebrews are reminded in Exodus to show courtesy to strangers, for they “know the N of a stranger.”⁴⁵ It is this meaning of N that feels love⁴⁶ and rejoices.⁴⁷ Such a N is able to be restored (Ruth 4:15) or comforted (Lam 1:16), to feel pity or compassion (Ez 24:21), to be discouraged (Nu 21:4) or impatient.⁴⁸

It is worth noting that many of the usages of N in terms of “person” have to do with what we might call moral-consciousness. In other words, “the functional ability of N as person(s) having consciousness and determination is illustrated by their being able to sin.”⁴⁹ In these instances, translation is crucial. Very often, “soul” does not transfer the meaning of the Hebrew text into English. N implies a person with a moral sensibility, the “whole self,” the physical flesh together with individual will and divine animation. However, our understanding of “soul” stems from the Greek-derived *psyche*, which is indicative of dualism [in the sense of its being separate from the body] and is therefore an

43 In a variety of passages, the N is described as being frightened (Psalm 6:3), weak (Jonah 2:7), exhausted and defenseless (Jer 4:31), miserable (Isa 53:11), and embittered (I Sam 1:10, II Kings 4:27). N in this sense can experience grief and weeping (Jer 13:17). The N of YHWH can hate, as in Proverbs 6:16, “There are six things that YHWH hates, seven that are an abomination to his N.”

44 M. Deckers, op. cit., 194. Here, Deckers translates N as “being.”

45 Exodus 23:9 reads, “Do not oppress a stranger (or resident alien); you know the N of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

46 “I have given the dearly-beloved of my N into the hands of my enemies” (Jer 12:7).

47 See Psalm 35:9, “And my N will be joyful in YHWH,” and Psalm 86:4, “Rejoice the N of your servant, for to you, YHWH, do I lift up my N.”

48 In Judges 16:16, Samson’s N is referred to as being “vexed” when Delilah pesters him daily about the secret of his strength. As Barr, op. cit., 14, proposes, the vexation or impatience of the N may be etymologically related to an earlier meaning of N as breath (see page 5, above). In this sense, long breaths are representative of the patience of the soul, and short breaths indicate the impatience of the soul (see Num 21:16, Zech 11:8, and Job 6:11).

49 Ngun, Richard, op. cit., 17. Here, sin has a connotation of intentional wrong-doing. Moral-consciousness, in this line of thinking, would be the sense that one is intentionally committing a sin. The use of N as a pronoun is often translated “any of you,” as in “When any N touches any unclean thing” (Lev 5:2). For other examples, see Leviticus 5:1, 4, 15, and 17.

inherently inappropriate term with which to translate N, even in these circumstances. The Hebrew biblical texts give a “holistic” view of humans, not one divided between a corruptible, mortal body and an incorruptible, immortal soul.⁵⁰

Life-Principle and Person

As mentioned previously, there are instances where N is translated “soul” in English where a more appropriate rendering might be “life-principle” or “life-force.” The verses in which this occurs give us clear insight into the economy and complexity of this term. When N designates the organ of vital needs, it becomes life itself.

For example, N is often contrasted with death, indicating that it is synonymous with *hayyim*, or life.⁵¹ N is described in contrast with the underworld in Psalm 16:10: “Because you will not abandon my N to Sheol.”

The N of animals is also mentioned⁵² and it is the reverence for this vital life-principle in living creatures that explains the dietary laws which are expanded on in Leviticus 11. Because the slaughter of an animal involves the release of its N in blood,⁵³ purity laws were developed to govern the killing of animals that made them acceptable for consumption. Also detailed here is the purification that must follow contact with a polluted or unacceptable animal.

The N of humans is the sacred force that animates men and women. As a divine

50 To view N in the parameters of either dualism (Greek anthropology) or the trichotomy of body, soul, and mind (Greek philosophy) would be to retroactively apply later Christian/Greek distinctions to unrelated themes in the Hebrew Bible.

51 For example, Proverbs 8:35-36, “For he who finds me finds life, and acquires favor from YHWH. But he who misses me wrongs his N; all who hate me love death” (see also Prov 7:23 and I Sam 25:29).

52 For animals, see Deuteronomy 12:23, Genesis 9:4f, and Leviticus 24:17f.

53 See Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:11, and Deuteronomy 12:23.

gift, it is to be preserved if at all possible.⁵⁴ When N can be synonymous with life it can be used in the asking for life, as in II Kings 1:13, when a Samaritan captain beseeches Elijah to spare the lives of himself and his men: “Let my N . . . be precious in your eyes.”⁵⁵ In this way, when Jonah asks YHWH to take his N, he is asking for his life to be ended (Jonah 4:3).⁵⁶ Therefore, seeking another’s N can imply the intention to kill; it is this sense that is meant in Exodus 4:19, when YHWH orders Moses from Midian, saying: “Go, return to Egypt; because all the men who sought your N are dead.”⁵⁷ The Hebrew idiom that means “to put one’s life in danger” is more literally “to take his N in his own hand.”⁵⁸ Proverbs 19:8a may refer to such a meaning of life-force as well: “He that obtains wisdom (literally, heart) loves his N.” Therefore the recklessness of endangering one’s life and the meritorious acquisition of wisdom are both embodied in the N.

It follows that if N can suggest life itself, it may also become a substantive for individuals. *Nepasot*, the plural of N, refers to a number of persons, and can be found in many instances. For example, in Jeremiah 43:6 the people taken to Egypt by the Babylonians are described as “The men, and the women, and the children, and the daughters of the king, and all the N (i.e., every N) which Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left with Gedaliah.”⁵⁹ It may also substitute for person, and can be used for an

54 For saving the N of another, see II Samuel 19:6 and I Kings 1:12. Please note that if, in these passages, N were translated as “soul,” an entirely different connotation would arise. It is not the saving of the “soul” that is at stake here, but the preservation of life.

55 Similar usages are found in Esther 7:3 and I Kings 3:11.

56 Compare I Kings 19:4c, “Now it is enough, YHWH; take my N, since I am not better than my fathers.”

57 Examples of this usage abound. For more, see I Samuel 20:1, 22:23, and 25:29; II Samuel 4:8 and 16:11; I Kings 19:10 and 14; Jeremiah 4:30, 11:21, and 38:16; and Psalms 40;14.

58 Jephthah does so in Judges 12:3, and Jonathan speaks of David’s having done so in I Samuel 19:5. See also I Samuel 28:21 and Job 13:14. Compare Psalm 119:109, “My N is continually in my hand, but I have not forgotten [YHWH’s] law.”

59 Similar occurrences can be found in Leviticus 18:29; Numbers 19:18; Ezekiel 13:19; and Genesis 12:5,

“unclean person,”⁶⁰ or a person who “turns to the spirits of the dead”⁶¹ (in the practice of necromancy). Finally, N may be used to refer to animals⁶² or to men and animals living as creatures together.⁶³

N and Blood Purity Laws

Given the breadth and variety of nuanced meanings of N, it is impossible to confine the significance of N to “throat” or “desire;” nor can it be contained within the term “soul,” as is so often found in the King James Version of the Christian Bible. While the myriad depictions given above may sometimes come close to outlining what the Western understanding of “soul” is, one must remember that these meanings are plucked out from a diverse assortment of passages in the Hebrew Bible, ranging from prophetic and historical books to law and poetry. There is no one place in the Hebrew Bible wherein definition comparable to a dictionary entry can be found. Instead, meaning is gleaned from a diverse variety of literary contexts.

For this reason, it is important to develop the linguistic confines of “meaning” and “significance” as pertains to understanding N. According to James Barr, “An object or event may be signified by word *a* or word *b*. This does not mean that *a* means *b*.”⁶⁴ To further refine this, one might say that N is an object to which different designations are

46:15, and 9:5. Wolff, op. cit. 22, believes that this use is characteristic of later literature.

60 As in Leviticus 22:4, 19:8, and 22:3. Compare this usage in Numbers 5:6 and 9:13.

61 See Leviticus 20:6, which refers to the N that turns toward ghosts and spirits.

62 Such as in Genesis 1:20, 9:10, 12, and 15; Leviticus 11:10, 46; and Ezekiel 47:9.

63 Genesis 9:16 refers to the covenant between YHWH and “all living N of all flesh which is upon the earth,” in other words, all humans and animals.

64 Barr, James, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 217. As we have seen, Hebrew uses one and the same word where we need widely differing ones. N is not singular in this sense, but it is unique in that its location in blood is the basis for the blood taboo in the Hebrew Bible.

given: soul, life-force, blood, appetite, and so on. This does not imply that “appetite” has the same semantic value as N.⁶⁵ Only by a careful study of the various *meanings* of N can the reader begin to look past the *significance* of the words into which it has been translated.

Therefore it is not so much my goal to explore the semantic consequences of N’s varying translations, as to examine its meanings for on ancient Israelite society. For this purpose, I will examine the characteristic of N as blood (as in Deut. 12:23b), which is seen as “defiling.” Because of this defilement, the presence of blood necessitates laws and regulations that control the Israelites’ contact and involvement with blood. Keeping N’s broad range of connotations and denotations in mind, I will discuss these blood purity laws to further explore the social context in which they were set forth. In this way, N may assist in our understanding the cultural practices that distinguished the ancient Israelites from their contemporary neighbors. More importantly, investigating the way in which N was understood in these practices will further illustrate why “soul” is an insufficient translation of the term N.

The Ambiguity of Defilement

At its crux, N is a word which undeniably signifies human existence; a living man does not “*have* N, he *is* N, he lives as N.”⁶⁶ But while a human may be N, N is not a human. We find an example of N’s potency in the story of the creation of humankind.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 218.

⁶⁶ Wolff, *op. cit.*, 10.

The Hebrew Bible's first man, Adam, and his mate, Eve, were not “born” in the Hebrew sense; YHWH forms Adam from *adamah* (earth) just as the deity forms woman, *ishshah*, from man, *ish*. These two, of all the living forms created, receive the divine breath of life, or *ruach*.⁶⁷ Their ability to bear children is divinely guided and they are divinely commanded to do so.⁶⁸ But the process of procreation, whereby an *ish* and an *ishshah* become one flesh (Gen 2:24), involves two fluids that are decidedly taboo elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible: semen and blood.

How is it, then, that a holy mandate may only be accomplished through contact with “impure” substances? To explore this, the inherent dualities of meaning in several Hebrew terms must be considered. The Hebrew concept of “impurity” likely encompasses ideas of the sacred *and* the unclean, in the sense that something is so holy that it must be subjected to isolation.⁶⁹

Before exploring how the word N might have been understood in the daily lives of ancient Hebrew-speaking peoples, a word or two must be said about the difficulty of

67 Ibid. Wolff, 94. Literally translated, Genesis 2:7 reads, “And the Lord God made man the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living N.” The usual translation is “And the Lord God made man from the dust of the ground,” but there is no preposition in the Hebrew.

68 Ibid. Wolff, 95. Genesis 1:28 states, “And God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth.’” In this vein, when Eve conceives a son in Genesis 4:1 she declares, “I have acquired a man with [the help of] YHWH.”

69 Kathleen O’Grady, “The Semantics of Taboo: Menstrual Prohibitions in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Wholly Woman, Holy Blood: A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity*, eds. Kristin De Troyer et. al., (Harrisburg, London, and New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), 7. Such a duality is not at all uncommon in Hebrew. For example, the term *bwsh*, typically translated “shame,” can refer to both modesty and humiliation. The Hebrew culture was centered on shame, in that its members needed to display the “right” shame (i.e. humility) and avoid any action that would result in the “wrong” shame (i.e. humiliation). Bringing shame upon yourself and kinsmen through sin and public embarrassment could lead to being cut off from the community. The same is true for the Hebrew concept of impurity. However, unlike sin, impurity does not equate with immorality and can be remedied in prescribed ways, such as making a proper sacrifice. While the impure person might find him or herself excluded from the community for a number of days, or might have to carefully clean clothing or household objects, impurity does not impute a moral onus on the individual in question.

securing a straight-forward definition of “impure.” Just as N cannot be translated by a single English word, the Hebrew concept of impurity and defilement is complex and perplexing. First, impurity is not necessarily equated with wrong-doing (either inadvertent or deliberate): a person may exist in an impure status⁷⁰ for a few hours, a day, several days, a week, or several weeks without ever being considered to have committed a misdemeanor or inappropriate action. When we speak of “pollution” in these instances, it is not the sort that would cause a member of the community to be ostracized on the grounds of moral onus. Rather, with a prescribed waiting period and ritual purification (be it through bathing or sacrifice), the impure person is re-admitted back into the community with no burden of immorality or crime.

For example, the eating of blood results in one’s being cut off from the community only *until the evening*. Leviticus 17:11-16 describes a situation in which God forbids the Israelites and anyone living among them from consuming blood, “For the N of the flesh is in the blood; and I gave it to you to make atonement for your N upon the altar; for, because the blood is life, (and therefore) by N it makes atonement” (Leviticus 17:11). Those who hunt animals and birds must pour out the blood of their catch on the ground and cover it with dust (17:13). If blood has been consumed, then the transgressor shall “wash his clothes, bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening; then he shall be clean” (17:15). Even though YHWH has expressly stated that no person among the Israelites is to eat blood, and that such a person would be “cut off” from the people (17:10, 14), it is a simple act of ritual bathing and waiting that provides for re-entry into

⁷⁰ Such as, due to a skin affliction (inadvertent) or contact with a corpse, either by fulfilling the law and custom by attending a funeral, or by carrying a corpse in order to bury it (deliberate).

the social sphere. At no time is such a person instructed to leave the camp for the duration period of defilement. In this sense, the “cutting off” is not a literal separation, but a spiritual one. A person who has consumed blood will be unable to participate in cult activities until his or her ablutions are complete in the evening.

The powerful boundary between the “purity” and “impurity” of blood is also drawn in another way: between life and death.⁷¹ In Genesis 4:8-11, the story of Cain killing his brother Abel, it is the shed blood of Abel to which YHWH calls attention. In one of the most haunting passages in the Torah, the text reads, “Listen! The voice [or sound] of your brother’s blood is crying from the earth! And now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive the blood of your brother from your hand” (Gen 4:10-11). The taking of a life, the appearance of death, and God’s cursing of Cain have one thing as a common denominator: blood. And although the blood is the physical substance that was spilled, it is the loss of a precious N that is the cause of such retribution.⁷² We cannot use the term “defiled” here in the same sense in which we understood it in the Leviticus 17:11-16 passage. Cain cannot wash his clothes and body and return to normal life in the evening: instead, he is cast into exile, away from the face of YHWH (4:16).

In this instance, it is the sin of the murder and the deliberate commission of a crime that carries the moral onus for Cain. He chose to shed his brother’s blood and incurred a severe punishment. This is markedly different from the involuntary shedding

71 This is unsurprising, as we have seen examples of how N can refer to life-force departing from an individual who is dying. The loss of this N may arguably play a part in the Levitical purity laws involving corpses (see Lev 21 and 22).

72 In other words, it is not the sin that that YHWH recognizes and responds to, but the N of Able.

of blood such as during menstruation; although both convey a state of impurity, one includes a grave defilement due to its association with a deliberate wrong-doing.

In the above examples, blood can be viewed as drawing a distinction *within* the community (polluted members versus unpolluted members) and a boundary *around* it as well (those who abide by the purity laws are accepted into it, and those who violate them risk being banished). But impurity also has an intricate relationship with holiness as well. Something that contains a high level of holiness can pollute others in that it is *too holy* for them to interact with it. An illustration of this is found in the term “defiling the hands,” a Talmudic designation of biblical texts to signify their extreme status of ritual purity.⁷³ This does seem correct intuitively speaking: if pollution can be transferred from an impure person to an object or another person, why cannot holiness? And why would the profane not be tainted by holiness because it is unfit to receive it?

At the heart of this lies the ambiguity of Hebrew anthropology of holiness and defilement. Just as blood can cause impurity, it can also be used to sanctify. The re-consecration of the holy altar on Yom Kippur (the “Day of Atonement,” Lev 16:19) is a case in point. In Leviticus 16, the instructions for the Day of Atonement are laid out explicitly, and involve a level of ritualistic purification that I believe is unrivaled by many other passages in the Torah. The priest Aaron, brother of Moses, is to come before YHWH in the “holy place” (*hakodesh*), at a prescribed time and wearing certain holy garments (16:2-4). He must bring a young bull as a purification offering and a ram as a burnt offering (an *olah*, which is a sacrifice completely consumed by the fire) as well as

⁷³ For further explanation, see the Mishnah, Yadayim, 3:5.

two male goats for a purification offering and a ram for a burnt offering from the people of Israel (16:3 and 5), to purify them from their sins. After these animals are slaughtered in their prescribed ways (16:6-17), their blood is sprinkled on and before the “mercy seat” (*kaporet*) upon which YHWH resides. The altar that is before YHWH must undergo atonement as well (16:18); thus, Aaron applies the blood of a sacrificed ram and bull to the horns of the altar. Then, the blood is sprinkled on it seven times, with the express purpose of “cleans[ing] it and hallow[ing] it from the uncleanness of the sons of Israel” (16:19). In this rite, blood that was sacrificially spilled to make atonement for sin becomes ritually implemented to generate holiness, due to the powerful N within it. In other words, the application of blood on the horns of altar removes its impurity, while the sprinkling of it on the altar’s surface re-consecrates it for another year.⁷⁴

There are many other instances in the Hebrew text where such seeming dualities are implied. However, these are only inconsistencies when we try to understand them through the lens of the English antonyms “pure” or “polluted.” To unravel these intricacies better, I will examine the way in which some purity laws may have shaped the lives of the ancient Israelites. It is important to remember that in examining purity laws, we must remove our modern association between purity and hygiene, as such a distinction did not exist in the culture of the ancient Israelites. In the sense that *bwsh* (or shame, see footnote 69) can be a good or bad thing depending on the situation, so can “impurity” denote a state of extreme holiness or pollution.

⁷⁴ See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1039-40.

Purity Laws in Daily Life

As discussed above, the Hebrew Bible teems with ceremonial instructions for the practice of the Israelite religion. These laws, some of which we discuss below, are undoubtedly not always reflective of actual practices, but of a community ideal. For all Israelites to live according to such instructions at all times would have been immoderately obstructive and impractical. Nonetheless, the laws given in the text draw stark divisions between the Israelites and other societies; it is the appearance of the boundary, and its maintenance through ritual, that is essential to preserve the purity of YHWH's worshippers. The life-principle, or N, in blood is an example of such an ethnographic parameter. Since the presence of blood generates defilement within the community, purity laws are necessary for processes and activities that involve its presence, such as animal consumption, sin atonement through animal sacrifice, violence in warfare, and menstruation and childbirth. While we have seen previously that the term N can be translated in a variety of different ways into English, below I will illustrate how the concept of N can shape the cultural practices of the ancient Israelites.

Animal Consumption and Sacrificial Slaughter

As the killing of an animal involves the shedding of blood and therefore the presence of a taboo substance, the ancient Israelite community developed laws regulating slaughter. Deuteronomy 12:23 gives a specific injunction against the consumption of blood from animal sources, “for the blood is the N, and you shall not eat the N with the

flesh.”

In addition, only certain creatures may be eaten, and many are forbidden. These regulations are given in two portions of the Hebrew text, Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. In general, “any detestable thing” is forbidden (Deut 14:3), specifically any animal whose hoof is cloven (Deut 14:7-8, Lev 11:4-8) but who does not chew cud, or any sea creature that lacks fins and scales (Deut 14:10, Lev 11:10-12); also forbidden are “swarming” or “teeming” winged creatures (Deut 14:19, Lev 11:20-21) and any animal that dies of natural causes (or from being hunted down, as opposed to trapped), and not through ritual slaughter (Deut 14:21).

Interestingly, both passages (Leviticus 11 and Deut 14) contain similar phrases which shed light on the necessity of these laws and which strengthen the formation of a boundary between YHWH and Israel to the exclusion of others. Leviticus 11:44 reads, “For I am YHWH, your God. Sanctify yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.” Deuteronomy 14:2 echoes this: “For you are a holy people to YHWH your God.” Why are these phrases about holiness included in laws regarding the consumption of animals? Mary Douglas proposes that dietary laws inspire meditation on God⁷⁵ because their maintenance requires an active contemplation of the source of food and abundant harvests. For the Israelites, that source is YHWH.⁷⁶

To maintain this holiness, and thus be a people fit for the service of their god, the Hebrew text does not shy from providing details. When it comes to the slaughter of

⁷⁵ Mary Douglas, *op. cit.*, 66 and 71. Douglas rejects and refutes earlier theories explaining the dietary laws on the grounds of either hygiene or ethical allegories.

⁷⁶ See Genesis 1:29, in which YHWH gives humankind every plant on the face of the earth.

animals, all of the blood must be drained from the body. Deuteronomy 12:23 warns against the eating of N in the blood. But the text specifies that the blood must be poured out on the altar of YHWH for his consumption (Deut 12:27). This frames the N in blood in a different light: it does not render the Israelites unholy, or impure, if they eat it. Rather, the blood is such a powerful substance that it is meant only for God. The theme that blood is so potent (due to its consisting of life-force or N) that its appearance must be accompanied by ritual and regulation is echoed frequently in the purity laws.⁷⁷

This vital substance can also be used in sin atonement rituals as a means of ceremonially cleansing a person or people. A distinction can be made between the types of sin addressed in Leviticus. The modern English understanding of sin as synonymous with “wrong-doing” is best expressed by the Hebrew *chata*, literally “to miss the mark,” but also to err or do wrong, as in breaking a law. *Timeh*, on the other hand, involves some sort of defilement, whether through an unclean act or contact with a defiled person.⁷⁸ Similarly, there are different words to describe the correcting of transgressions. A priest may purify (*tahar*), make reparation (*asham*), or atone (*cphr*).⁷⁹

In this context, I find Douglas Davies’ approach to the atonement ritual the most perceptive in untangling the anthropological functions of animal sacrifice for the ancient Israelites. Below is a condensed version of his analysis to understand how the pouring out of blood (or N) from an animal serves to reinforce cultural boundaries between the

⁷⁷ Such as those regarding menstruation and childbirth, discussed below.

⁷⁸ I discuss some of these defilements below. It is important to remember that while an offering is required for a *timeh*, there is no immorality associated with it.

⁷⁹ See Mary Douglas, “Sacred Contagion” in *Reading Leviticus*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 89-90.

Israelites and other peoples.⁸⁰

Sacred-----	-----Profane
God	Priesthood
	People
	Gentiles
Temple	Wilderness
Life	Death
Order-----	-----RITUAL-----
	-----Chaos

This structure clarifies the role of priests in both linking the “people” (Israelites) to YHWH and separating them from non-believers (Gentiles) through animal sacrifice. The sacrifices, conducted as they are at consecrated places such as the Temple or Tent of Meeting, involve a spillage of life-force that reinforces YHWH’s ties to his people and shields them from the outside world, signified by the wilderness and death.⁸¹ These Levitical laws were given to Moses at a time when the Israelites were wandering in the desert (Lev 1:1), thereby uniting travelers against external influence in a time of uncertainty, where the lives and cultural fabric of Israelite society was very much at risk. Order is thereby established through the rituals, guarding YHWH’s people from the chaos of their situation. In time, when the Israelites settle in Canaan, the same laws serve to distinguish them from idolatrous, neighboring peoples.

The sin-offerings acceptable for the maintenance of this boundary are that of a

⁸⁰ See Douglas Davies, “An Interpretation of Sacrifice in Leviticus” in *Anthropological Approaches to the New Testament*, ed. Bernard Lang (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1985), 156. See also N. Kiuchi, *The Purification Offering in the Priestly Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 73 and 119.
⁸¹ Davies, *op. cit.*, 157.

lamb (Ex 12:3), a bull (Lev 4:3), or a goat (Lev 16:5) for *chatah* sins, as well as pigeons or turtle-doves for the cleansing of *timeh*. Those priests who take part in offering the animals for sacrifice may become contaminated, but this depends on the offering. Those sacrifices made for *timeh* sins are non-polluting and may be consumed by the officiating priest.⁸² However, sacrifices made for transgressions of the *chatah* sort must be burnt completely outside of the Tabernacle⁸³ and transfer impurity not to the officiating priest, but to the one who burns the sacrifice.⁸⁴

A person who comes into contact with a corpse must also be cleansed of their impurity through a blood sacrifice.⁸⁵ As will be discussed below in relation to childbirth, the presence of blood is emblematic of the life/death sphere that is under the command of YHWH, and any interaction within this sphere is seen as approaching the orbit of the deity and thus imparts a “sacred defilement.” A corpse, the ultimate symbol of YHWH’s power to take life as well as give it, is no different. People and objects who come within the realm of a dead body---either through directly touching the corpse or merely being in

82 As in Leviticus 4:12. See Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999), 82.
83 See Leviticus 4:12, 21, and 26.

84 Jacob Milgrom, *op. cit.*, 262-263, posits that such an impurity is derived first from the transfer of guilt from the human to the animal, and then from the animal to the one who handles it during sacrifice. However, this would seem to indicate that the sacrificing priest is the one who becomes secondarily contaminated. In fact, the text suggests that it is instead another individual who removes the animal from the Tabernacle to burn it and dispose of its ashes. It is to this second individual that the impurity is transferred. Perhaps the removal of the sacrificial remains from the Tabernacle proper is what results in this shift. This explanation is not completely without flaw, as the remains are deposited in a clean place (see Lev 4:12). Maccoby (*op. cit.*, 83) proposes that rites performed outside of the Tabernacle (such as the scapegoat on Yom Kippur in Lev 16 and the Red Cow ritual in Num 19) “have an anomalous, primitive air about them. We have to consider whether they are remnants of more primitive religious practice, and that is why they exhibit a mixture of the holy and the unclean.” I contend that when dealing with blood, our understanding of the terms “holy” and “unclean” must be set aside, or at least expanded to encompass a sense of “sacred defilement” or “taboo.”

85 This is an example of one defilement being substituted for another. The loss of N when a person dies renders the corpse (and any who have contact with it) impure. In order to regain entry into the public sphere, the pouring out of N in an animal sacrifice is necessary.

close proximity to it, as in Numbers 19:11 and 14---must be purified. This is done through a complicated ceremony referred to as the Red Cow (or Red Heifer) ritual. A brief discussion of this rite will illustrate the dualism inherent in discussions of Israelite purity/impurity.⁸⁶

Firstly, at the outset the text makes it clear that this ritual takes place outside the camp or Tabernacle (Num 19:3). Thus, unlike *timeh*-atonement sacrifices, which are done by a priest within the Tabernacle grounds, this ritual is seemingly conducted in a state of impurity. All those who participate are rendered impure, even to the fourth degree; but as we will see, the text asserts that, at each stage of the preparation of the red cow and its use in purification, the participants must be in a state of cleanliness.

A red cow that has never worked and is free of blemish must be selected (19:2) and brought from the camp before the priest, where she is slain in front of him (19:3). The priest sprinkles blood from his finger toward the Tent of Meeting seven times (19:4) and while the cow is being burnt he must add cedar-wood, hyssop, and scarlet to the fire (19:5-6). Now he is rendered impure; he must perform ablutions, wash his clothes, and remain unclean until evening.⁸⁷ Then a second officiate, a clean man, must gather the ashes of the sacrificed cow and take them to a clean place to be stored (19:9). This man is now impure as well, and must wash his clothing and remain unclean until evening (19:10).

Next the text explains that those who come into contact with a corpse are made

⁸⁶ For a fuller treatment, see Milgrom op. cit., 270-78.

⁸⁷ There is a specific rabbinic term that refers to the state of being when one has made ritual ablutions for purity, but evening has not yet come. The term is *tebul yom*, meaning “immersed that day.” This is a state of purity but uncleanness, in that the person is free to eat, mix with the population, and touch non-sacred objects. However, approaching the Tabernacle or touching holy items or food is prohibited.

unclean (19:11) and must purify themselves on the third and seventh days of their uncleanness (19:12), or risk being cut off from Israelite society (19:13). To be purified, the person who has been defiled by a corpse must be sprinkled with water mixed with the ashes of the red cow (19:17) by a clean person (19:18) who can sprinkle the mixture on any people or objects in need of purification. The dictum that this must be performed on the third as well as the seventh day is then repeated (19:19). After the purification on the seventh day, he or she who came into contact with the corpse may perform ablutions, wash clothing, and remain unclean until evening.

Now, however, the man who performed the sprinkling ritual is defiled (19:21) and must wash his clothes and remain unclean until evening. Anyone who touches this sprinkler during that time is rendered unclean as well, and remains so until evening (19:22).

The interesting part of this ritual is that it is not the blood, or N, of the cow that transfers so much impurity, but the water mixed with her ashes.⁸⁸ The water is the substance whose sprinkling bestows purification; yet the handling of it renders one unclean. The water is a form of sin-offering (19:9) but is also regarded as the purest of the pure, so much so that “extraordinary measures are taken to safeguard its purity by preventing it from coming into contact with even the slightest suspicion of impurity which might impair its efficacy as an agent of purification from corpse-impurity.”⁸⁹

If the purity of the water is such an important factor in the ritual, why not perform

⁸⁸ This water is referred to in the text as *mei niddah*, literally “the waters of menstruation.” Although the substance is recognized as water, its efficacy is linked to that of blood.

⁸⁹ Maccoby, op. cit., 96.

it within the Tabernacle, where purity is *sine qua non*? And, even more perplexing, why are the participants rendered unclean by a rite for which cleanliness is required?

In answer to this, Jacob Milgrom proposes⁹⁰ a parallel in the laws of *niddah*, or the impurity of menstruation, discussed below. He argues that the red cow is a *chatat* offering, in that it is completely burnt outside of the Tabernacle. In such sacrifices, the expiating agent “is blood, which is sprinkled on the altar to cleanse it from impurity caused by the sin.”⁹¹ However, in the case of the red cow the expiating agent is the mixture of ashes and water, *mei niddah*, sprinkled not on the altar but on the person to be cleansed. The individual who has touched a corpse thereby becomes the altar, and the water becomes the blood of the sacrificed animal. This makes the agent of purification none other than *menstrual blood* (at least symbolically). If the defilement of touching a corpse is considered the “most serious impurity of all,”⁹² then menstrual blood becomes both a major agent of impurity (as in Lev 15) and the primary purifying agent in ancient Israelite culture as well.⁹³

The Blood of Menstruation

Many of the laws relating to female purity may appear greatly restrictive to modern Western readers, in the sense that they impose great constraints on women. Without dismissing the reality of the patriarchal nature of ancient Hebrew society, the idea of an overtly repressive, misogynistic culture may not, however, necessarily be

90 Milgrom, op. cit., 438-444.

91 Maccoby, op. cit., 106.

92 Maccoby, op. cit., 104.

93 Ibid., 107.

supported by the purity regulations in the Torah.⁹⁴ To be sure, Israelite society as reflected in the Hebrew Bible includes a discernible gender prejudice, not unlike its contemporary ancient Near Eastern cultures;⁹⁵ but it would be a mistake to assume that the story ends here, without any trace of modification or subtler shades within the cultural fabric.

Examining these nuance will illustrate in detail the blood purity laws of Leviticus 15 using archaeological, ethnographic, and cultural anthropological approaches to see how N plays a part in menstrual taboo.⁹⁶

The entire chapter of Leviticus 15 deals with the subject of bodily emissions from the genitals. There are three general divisions of the chapter: the first is a male/female division. Men's emissions are addressed first, and then women's. The second is a division between normal and abnormal emissions, and the third is the subject of intercourse during both normal and abnormal emissions. These divisions do not line up neatly within the text, but are formed chiastically.⁹⁷ First, men's abnormal seminal emissions are examined, then the normal ones. Next, women's normal menstrual flows

94 Carol Meyers, *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 4. Meyers indicates that an automatic assumption that the laws dealing with childbirth and menstruation were compiled to be oppressive and restrictive to women is not supported by the text. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, there are clear instances of a misogynistic culture (as in Gen 19:8, when Lot offers his daughters to be raped by a mob). But, as I will show, characterizing the purity laws that apply to women as only burdensome and discriminatory fails to take into account the Hebrew cultural view of sacred purity.

95 While patriarchal and androcentric features are to be expected, other ancient Near Eastern cultures, proximate with the Hebrews, have priestesses, goddesses, and other female cultic objects, features, or officials.

96 Meyers, op. cit., 15.

97 Gordon Wenham states that "chiasmus is regularly used in Hebrew to bring out the unity of a double-sided event. It is a most appropriate device to employ in these particular laws, focusing as they do on the unity of mankind [sic] in two sexes." See Gordon Wenham, *Leviticus* (Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 1979), 217.

are examined, and then abnormal vaginal emissions.

(Men's emissions 15:2-18) (Women's emissions 15:19-27)
Abnormal 15:3-8 **Normal** 15:16-18 **Normal** 15:19-24 **Abnormal** 15:25-27

A more detailed version of the construction can be seen as follows:⁹⁸

- I. Men's seminal emissions** (“When any man has a discharge issuing from his member, he is unclean” Lev 15:2)
 - A. Abnormal emissions** (“ . . . whether his member runs with the discharge or is stopped up so that there is discharge . . .” Lev 15:3)
 - 1. Uncleanliness** (Lev 15:4-12 refers to any bedding, furniture, or clothing he uses, as well as specifications for saddles, pottery or wooden tools that he touches.)
 - 2. Ritual for purification**
 - a. Man with discharge** (“When [he] becomes clean of his discharge, he shall count off seven days, . . . wash his clothes, and bathe his body in fresh water; then he shall be clean” Lev 15:13)
 - i. Atonement necessary** (“On the eighth day he shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons . . . and give them to the priest. The priest shall offer them, one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering” Lev 15:14-15)
 - b. Others involved** (Lev 15:5-11 stipulates that anyone who has come into direct contact with the man with a discharge or his unclean belongings must wash their clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. However, the man with the discharge may touch someone after having rinsed his hands in water and *not* communicate his impurity to them.)
 - 3. Special case: spitting** (“If one with a discharge spits on one who is clean, the latter shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening” Lev 15:8)
 - B. Normal emissions**
 - 1. Seminal uncleanliness** (“When a man has an emission of semen . . .” Lev 15:16a; “All cloth or leather on which semen falls shall be washed in water and remain unclean until evening” Lev 15:17)
 - 2. Ritual for purification**

⁹⁸ The following outline is loosely based on Deborah Ellens' examination in “Menstrual Impurity and Innovation in Leviticus 15” De Troyer et. al., op. cit., 33-34.

a. Man with discharge (“ . . . he shall bathe his whole body in water and remain unclean until evening” Lev 15:16b)

1. Atonement necessary (none)

3. Issue of Intercourse (“And if a man has carnal relations with a woman, they shall bathe in water and remain unclean until evening” Lev 15:18)

II. Women's menstrual emissions (“When a woman has a discharge [of] blood from her body . . .” Lev 15:19a)

A. Normal flow

1. Menstrual uncleanliness (“ . . . she shall remain in her impurity seven days; whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening.” Lev 15:19b; “Anything she lies [or sits] on . . . shall be unclean” Lev 15:20)

2. Ritual for purification

a. Woman with discharge (none)

1. Atonement necessary (none)

b. Others involved (Lev 15:19-23 instructs anyone who touches the menstruant or any of the objects which she has made unclean, such as bedding or chairs, to wash their clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening.)

3. Issue of intercourse (“And if a man lies with her, her impurity is communicated to him; he shall be unclean seven days, and any bedding which he lies on shall become unclean” Lev 15:24)

B. Abnormal flow (“When a woman has had a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or when she has a discharge beyond her period of impurity . . .” Lev 15:25a)

1. Uncleanliness (“ . . . she shall be unclean, as though at the time of impurity, as long as her discharge lasts.” Lev 15:25b; Lev 15:26 describes the objects to which she can communicate her impurity, namely bedding or furniture upon which she sits.)

2. Ritual for purification

a. Woman with discharge (“when she becomes clean of her discharge, she shall count off seven days, and after that she shall be clean” Lev 15:28)

1. Atonement necessary (“On the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, and bring them to the priest . . . [He] shall offer the one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering . . .” Lev 15:29-30)

b. Others involved (“Whoever touches [the impure objects] shall be unclean; he shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening”

Lev 15:27).⁹⁹

This is a very abbreviated illustration focused above all on summarizing the salient points of the laws and providing a visual of the similarities and contrasts in the laws of men and women. To reduce matters yet further, the Leviticus 15 purity laws detail a) the types of discharge impurities (for example, menstrual or seminal/normal or abnormal); b) the nature of the impurities they impart; c) the methods by which impurity may be transmitted and the prevention of transmission; and d) the manner in which purity may be re-established, with attention to time passed and rituals conducted. Consequently, once these rituals have been completed, re-admission to the wider community and cultic sphere is made possible.

Before delving into an examination of the Leviticus passage itself, the inferred purpose and audience will be further explored. Examining who may have composed the text, and for whom it was composed, will shed further light on the issue of boundary maintenance through N and purity laws. David Clines approaches this problem by seeking the “*implied* author and the *implied* social setting of the text---to draw inferences from the text, that is, about the circumstances of its origin.”¹⁰⁰ This is exactly the tactic needed here to examine the text from an ethnographical, not a theological, standpoint. The text tells us very clearly that its version of authorship rests solely in the divine, mediated through the mortal mediums of Moses and Aaron (“YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them . . .’” Lev 15:1-2). But as

⁹⁹ The above translation of Leviticus 15:1-27 is from *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁰ David J. A. Clines, “Why is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do To You If You Read It?” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers in the Hebrew Bible*, eds. David J. A. Clines and R. Philip (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 95.

Clines argues, we cannot automatically “[believe] that such thing ever happened.”¹⁰¹

My interest in analyzing this text does not stem from any need to keep intact the notion that “God actually [spoke] audible words out of the sky;”¹⁰² in fact, this possibility will be dismissed outright to examine the purity laws from an ethnographical and cultural basis, although it can be allowed that YHWH is invoked in the text to lend authority and to stress enforcement of these laws. Therefore, what purpose did the *human authors* have in mind, and who might they have been? In what circumstances did they gather or invent decrees and impart them to the populations at large? Deborah Ellens proposes that the addressees are a “male collective in the midst of which stand women who are listening.”¹⁰³ And it would be fair to say that one primary reason for these laws is the containment and confinement of diseases¹⁰⁴ (above all sexually transmitted ones) to protect both those without ailment and the cultic sphere. Furthermore, because the manifestations of those diseases (such as abnormal penile discharge or uterine bleeding) mimic normal and healthy physiological processes (such as seminal emissions or menstruation), all four types of discharge are grouped together by the meticulous Hebrew text.¹⁰⁵ According to the text, even the healthy discharges, while necessary and

101 David J. A. Clines, “The Ten Commandments, Reading from Left to Right” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers in the Hebrew Bible*, in Clines and Philip, op. cit., 27. Clines indicates that many commentators note this divine voice but do not choose to examine it further. The presence of such a statement in the text should not be passed over in the least, because its implications are not insignificant. The text denies entirely that humans created these laws for their own purposes; instead, they have come straight from YHWH.

102 Ibid.

103 Deborah Ellens, op. cit., 31.

104 Kathleen O’Grady, op. cit., 4.

105 O’Grady, op. cit. 6, comments on the Levitical obsession with purity. The hyper-vigilance of these laws is typical of the P-source, or Priestly source. As a literary strand, these biblical texts are characterized by a focus on the preservation of holiness and separation of those persons or objects that may in some way diminish the community’s overall purity. The designation “P-source” stems from a

culminating in reproduction and blessing, render one impure.

Instead of focusing, as many feminist writers have done, on the restrictions put on women's natural physiological processes in Leviticus 15, I would like to compare the restrictions imposed by men's emissions with those of women's to clarify their similarities and differences. It is not my intention to demonstrate that one set of laws is more restrictive than the other; however, based on the text *alone*, an argument could be made that women are less limited in their actions compared to men. This may be a startling statement, given the centuries of negative bias that have developed toward women and menstruation based on interpretation of the biblical sources.¹⁰⁶ The text, however, does not necessarily support such a view. Unlike Ellens, who posits that the structural parallels give equality to men and women,¹⁰⁷ I believe it can be argued that the restrictions on women are more lenient, if only slightly.¹⁰⁸

According to the summary constructed above, during an abnormal discharge men

textual theory called the Documentary Hypothesis, which proposes that the Torah is not, as conservative traditional theology maintains, the product of one author, but a combination of four independent sources, of which the Priestly source is probably the latest.

106 Ibid. 5-9.

107 Deborah Ellens, op. cit., 32.

108 However, note that the text remains silent on many aspects of Israelite social structure, and the role of women in the family is not always clear. This is not to say that the biblical text lacks any example of cruelty towards women (as in Num 31:17-18, or Gen 19:8; cf. Ecc 7:26, where woman is found to be "more bitter than death"). In Genesis 2:18, YHWH makes woman for an 'ezer, a word commonly translated as "helpmeet" or "helper." This term is more correctly translated "servant," and is used to YHWH describe as well (Ps 33:20, 70:5, and 115:9-11). Exodus 20:12 cautions believers to honor both father and mother. In Proverbs 31:10-31, the mother of King Lemuel beseeches her son to find a "woman of valor," whom she describes as hardworking, trustworthy, clever, and dignified. Based on many positive representations of women in the text (such as the daring Jael in Judges 5:24-27, Ruth, the widowed heroine of the eponymous book, and the tenacious Tamar in Genesis 38:1-30), we cannot say outright that women are always treated like chattel (as in Ex 21:7-11, Deut 20:14, or Judges 5:30). More often than not, women remain nameless: the wives of Potiphar (Gen 29:1-6), Lot (Gen 19:26), and Ezekiel (Eze 24:15-27), are only known in relation to their husbands' names. Thus, in studying the role of biblical women we must bear in mind how much is unknown as regards freedoms and restrictions. In terms of purity laws, what might seem like latitude towards women (in favor of men, who were less restricted) may in fact just be reflective of the lessening of normative limitations.

impart impurity to bedding and furniture upon which they sit, and an object which is touched, such as a pottery vessel---which much be broken--- or a wooden tool--which must be washed off (Lev 15:4, 12). Compare these objects to those to which the woman imparts her abnormal discharge's impurity: *only bedding* (Lev 15:26). The inference can be drawn that, during an abnormal discharge, the man is unable to use his tools for work without considerable obstruction; whereas no stipulation has been made against a woman cooking or weaving. A man with an anomalous discharge must not be touched (Lev 15:7) but a similar woman has no such analogue.¹⁰⁹

Perhaps men are *more* circumscribed due to their ability to move more freely in the cultic sphere, from which women may have been excluded altogether. In both cases, impurity can be imparted to those who touch defiled objects (Lev 15:5-12, 27) but the list of objects that a woman can defile is considerably shorter. Whereas a man must wash his clothes and bathe before he can go to the priest for atonement (Lev 15:13), there is no such requirement for the woman. Instead, as with her normal monthly menstruation, she counts off seven days from the beginning of the abnormal flow, with no inclusion of ritual water purification. The atonement sacrifice for men and women is identical in this case. There is also the mention of saliva: a man with an unclean discharge can impart his impurity to one upon whom he spits (Lev 15:8). There is no similar parallel in the women's instructions: she is---quite possibly---free to spit on whomever she chooses without legal prohibition.

As regards normal flows (that is, seminal and menstrual discharges), the

¹⁰⁹ This is in complete contrast to later interpretation, such as that given in Niddah 11a-b, in the Mishnah. Here, women with anomalous discharge must also not be touched.

male/female distinctions lie almost entirely in differences of time. For example, a man's brief emission of semen earns him an entire day of uncleanness even after he bathes his body in water (Lev 15:16). A woman's menses earns her a seven-day period of impurity (Lev 15:19). There is no mention of a ritual cleansing being necessary, and despite innumerable commentary to the contrary,¹¹⁰ there is no Torah injunction of an additional seven-day impurity period required for this normal flow.

In consideration of sexual relations, the laws are predictable as regards timing. If a man has a seminal emission during carnal relations with a woman, they are both required to bathe and their impurity lasts until evening (Lev 15:18); if a man has intercourse with a menstruating woman, he is “infected” with her impurity for seven days and can, furthermore, contaminate any bedding upon which he lies (Lev 15:24). Therefore, according to the Levitical laws, a husband might have intercourse with his wife on the last day of her menses: she would remain “doubly unclean” until that evening, when she can bathe and wash her clothes to purify herself of the *seminal* contact, and then be considered clean until her next menses or intercourse. The husband, however, would be “doubly unclean” for one day and “secondarily unclean” for six more days from having contact with his menstruating wife. Following the pattern of time laid out, it is then reasonable to assume that men typically had a monthly “ejaculation period” of seven days parallel to women’s monthly menstrual period, then (apart from never getting any work

110 Rachel Biale, “Niddah” in *Women and Jewish Law: The Essential Texts, Their History, and Their Relevance for Today* (Shoken Books: New York, 1984), 64. Orthodox Jewish women regularly adhere to the midrashim (literally “studies,” a compilation of commentary and interpretations on biblical text, especially those sections dealing with laws and rituals, which comprises part of the Talmud) surrounding the laws for the menstruant, which include an extra seven “clean” days of impurity (i.e. without menstrual flow) and a ritual cleansing in a mikvah, or ritual bath, afterward before sexual relations can be resumed.

done) he would be subject to the same seven-day period of impurity as a woman is for her seven-day menses. Both men and women have periods of impurity for their emissions, but the text provides different restrictions on each gender during those impure periods.

Based on this assessment, the Levitical laws are at the very least equal for both men and women (relative to the length of their emissions) and at most they slightly favor the woman in terms of what she can touch, her exemption from washing, and the non-contagious properties of her saliva. It is in part *our* perception that chooses to see these laws as restrictive or unfair toward women in the first place. There is a tradition in Jewish sources that this period of separation may be “restful”¹¹¹ and that the ritual bathing in *mikvot*,¹¹² mandated by later rabbinical instruction, is a cherished reminder of women's sacred “otherness.”

Regarding the instructions for bathing in a *mikvah*, the Talmud pays careful attention to the specifications of Leviticus¹¹³ regarding the ritual cleanliness of the

111 The popular fiction novel *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant (New York: Saint Martin's Press), 1997, is one depiction of how women in ancient Israel may have taken advantage of their separation to relax in an environment where no work is expected of them and where they deepen their communal ties with each other through singing, storytelling, and conversation. In the Song of Songs 7:3, the male speaker describes the period of separation from his lover during her menses as a “heap of wheat in a hedge of roses.” In modern sources, this separation is sometimes framed in terms of encouraging romance and communication through non-sexual means, thus heightening the senses through fourteen days of sexual deprivation between a married couple. For another female perspective, see Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Jewish Publication Society of America: Philadelphia, 1998), 118-119. The Mishnah also stresses the romantic element, explaining that the menstruant is off limits so that she may be found “as beloved [to him afterwards] as on the day of her marriage” (Niddah 31b).

112 The *mikvot*, (from the word *mikvah*, “reservoir”) are places for immersion in which one may be ceremonially cleansed in running waters from a natural source (i.e. collected rain water, melted snow, a lake, pond, or river). A *mikvah* is not a place for bathing: one must be fully hygienically clean before entering the waters. This includes showering, the removal of bandages, make-up, jewelry, trimming of finger and toenails and removing dirt from underneath them, and combing of the hair (even pubic hair) so that no knot remains.

113 See Biale, *op. cit.*, 187.

menstruant. As such, the practice of visiting a *mikvah* has been instituted as a requirement for Orthodox Jewish women. Indeed it was required of Jewish women for much of later history based on Leviticus 15,¹¹⁴ beginning with the period of strong Hellenistic influence.¹¹⁵ To put it simply, the modern-day Orthodox Jewish women's practice of visiting a *mikvah* involves undergoing ceremonial cleansing for the purpose of post-menstrual purification.¹¹⁶ The *mikvah* must be visited no earlier than seven days after the end of the monthly menstruation;¹¹⁷ but as we have seen in the Levitical text, the additional seven-day period was only required for an *abnormal* flow of blood. A Rabbinic argument that is consistently made is as follows: it can be *assumed* that a woman would wait for seven days and bathe after a normal flow of blood, because it is written that she must do it for an *abnormal* flow of blood.¹¹⁸ Says Tirzah Meacham, “Sages certainly did read the texts as if the conditions, which were not always stated in full for each case, were indeed to be assumed and transferred from place to place.”¹¹⁹

There are three major complications with this argument. The first is that, as has

114 See Tirzah Meacham, “An Abbreviated History of the Development of the Jewish Menstrual Laws” in *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, ed. Rahel R. Wasserfall, (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 23. This excellent essay provides an in-depth look at the development of mikvah laws and the variations in length of purification for the menstruant.

115 This influence extended not only in terms of bathing practice, but also in a sort of “Hellenizing” of Jews and Jewish practices. See John J. Collins, *Seers, Sybils, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism* (Leiden and New York: Brill, 1997), 213-15 and 240-41.

116 In addition, mikvah immersion after conversion to Judaism (for both men and women), and before marriage and after childbirth is also common. Some men also choose to immerse before the Sabbath or High Holy Days.

117 Rachel R. Wasserfall, introduction to *Women and Water*, op. cit. 6.

118 Rachel Biale, op. cit., 150-152.

119 Tirzah Meacham, op. cit., 28. Meachem highlights the view of some biblical scholars that the Torah (as we have it transmitted in textual form) is a bare-bones outline of divine law, which is fully explained in the Oral Torah. In this comparison, scholars well versed in both traditions would use the Torah as one might use “lecture notes,” filling in the information not provided. In terms of separation days after menstruation, the rabbis reason that one can infer a mandated additional waiting period after the normative flow because it is required for its abnormal counterpart (Niddah 31a).

been shown, Leviticus, being “burdened with detail”¹²⁰ takes pains to spell out specifics and leaves nothing to the imagination: for example, the breaking of earthen vessels that have been touched by an impure man (Lev 15:12) is recognized by the rabbis as having no corresponding law for women¹²¹ and no assumptions are made that an impure woman's touch on a cooking vessel should be included in this prohibition.¹²² So it stands to reason that if an additional seven-day post-menses impurity and a ritual cleansing afterwards were indeed required, the requirement would be included after or near Leviticus 15:24. The way in which the rabbis extended the Levitical laws suggest the misogynistic tendency which has become attributed de facto to the biblical laws themselves. In other words, the negative spin on menstruation and its impurity is less a product of Torah than of later interpretation. The second complication is one of the logic of the assumption: if an extra seven-day waiting period and ritual cleansing had been mentioned for the non-anomalous blood flow, but *not* for the (more physiologically unexpected, therefore possibly dangerous) anomalous blood flow, then a plausible inference might be drawn that what works for the non-anomalous would be a condition of the anomalous. Not only is this not the case, but *nowhere in the Leviticus 15 laws is a woman instructed to bathe herself so that she might regain her purity.*¹²³ And thirdly, as

120 Rachel Biale, op. cit., 150.

121 Ibid. 160-161.

122 According to the “lecture notes” argument, the breaking of such cooking vessels could be inferred because it is stated for those that the man has touched. However, unlike the passage concerning an additional period of post-menstrual impurity and sexual abstinence, rabbinical scholarship has not interpreted that passage in this way.

123 However, this is required for men (see Lev15:13, 16b). See also Leviticus 16:4, 24, and 26, where the High Priest Aaron must bathe his body three times during the offering of the “scapegoat” as a vehicle to remove the iniquities of the Israelites from the community at *Yom Kippur*, the “Day of Atonement.” The sins of the people are literally transferred to the goat, which is sent into the wilderness, thus physically removing immorality and impurity from the communal presence. Because Aaron was in such

Meacham describes, societies that develop in climates without copious amounts of rainfall (such as the ancient Israelites) typically prescribe “a waiting period alone. Archaeologists have not found public bath houses or private *mikvot* in Israel earlier than the Hellenistic period, which had a bathhouse culture.”¹²⁴ This is yet another indicator that the idea of required bathing in *mikvot* was a later, rabbinical addition to the Leviticus 15 instruction. Again, the inference of misogyny is not in the Torah but in later interpretation.

Leaving the strict textual examination aside, let us now give special consideration to implementing the approaches mentioned previously, namely archaeology, ethnography, and cultural anthropology, to further examine how N and blood purity laws affected Israelite society. These methods are of particular help in reconstructing the world in which Hebrew women lived out their lives. By using pieces of information gathered from outside sources, one can begin to “read between the lines” of what is written in the Hebrew Bible to form a very different view of the woman's place in Hebrew society to that found in most Western cultures.¹²⁵ A typical concern of the Western feminist writer is

close contact with the sacrificial goat, now a carrier of a year's worth of the sins of an entire nation, he cannot be allowed back into the public sphere before a ritual cleansing.

124 Meacham, *Tirzah*, op. cit., 28. Interestingly, numerous stepped cisterns that might have been *mikvot* were discovered at Qumran, the site at which the Dead Sea Scrolls may have been composed. The longest of these documents, the “Temple Scroll,” describes a utopian Jewish community in Jerusalem with strict purity regulations required even to enter the city. Among other things, this work and the presence of *mikvot* at Qumran have led some scholars to propose that an order of religious men, similar to ascetics, lived and worked at the settlement. According to this theory, these men may have used the *mikvot* to maintain a ritual purity much like that which the Temple Scroll exhorts (see below). If this hypothesis is true, an even stronger connection between the maintenance of holiness in the public sphere and the use of *mikvot* by both men and women can be established.

125 See Meyers, op. cit., 4-11. Here, she gives an assessment of the weaknesses of modern feminist biblical scholarship regarding the view of women's experiences in the Hebrew Bible. In particular, Meyers finds fault with works that ignore the evidence (albeit subtle) of a strong tradition of women's religious practices from which men were completely excluded. While there is ample evidence of the mistreatment and debasement of women, Meyers seeks to discover what can be drawn out from the text

the “virtual silence of the Biblical record about the religious culture of Israelite women with respect to reproduction.”¹²⁶ This, so Carol Meyers suggests, “renders that culture similarly ahistoric and calls for . . . investigative strategies, which draw on multiple non-textual as well as textual sources.”¹²⁷ Factoring this into the consideration of the text reveals a number of very illuminating matters.

For example, the Hebrew Bible itself attests to a strong tradition of female cultic practices,¹²⁸ and tends to condemn or malign these (see the statements against witchcraft in Ex 22:17 and Nah 3:4). The numerous instances of small female statuary (“pillar figures”) in archaeological digs likely show the existence of some form of fertility cult.¹²⁹ This is entirely in keeping with other similar ancient Near Eastern societies;¹³⁰ additionally, the importance of procreation is reiterated throughout the Hebrew Bible¹³¹ and it would therefore be implausible to propose that *only* women were involved in fertility cults. To put it quite simply, many husbands (even those whose sole theological allegiance was to YHWH) were probably aware of their wives’ monthly cycles and the conception timing implied therein.¹³² Based on the text, it is not unreasonable to propose

without working within the confines of an apologia. These traditions and procedures, many of which are hinted at in the archaeological evidence but not mentioned in the biblical text, may have been maligned by the patriarchal writers and redactors and therefore edited severely or not included at all.

126 Carol Meyers, *op. cit.*, 19.

127 *Ibid.*

128 Carol Meyers, *op. cit.*, 27-35.

129 “Hundreds of these figurines appear in 10th-6th century BCE contexts from over one hundred sites west and east of the Jordan River, some forty to forty-five of those sites probably within the territory of the kingdom of Judah.” *Ibid.*, 30.

130 See Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 29-40.

131 For examples, see Genesis 1:28 and 9:7; see also Mary J. Evans, *Women in the Bible* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1983), 24-26.

132 Carol Meyers, *op. cit.* 6. Also see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: The Stanford University Press, 2000), 27-29.

that other family members would have marked the presence of a menstruating woman in the household. Since the menstruant can transfer her impurity to objects and family members (Lev 15:19-23), it is plausible that the household at large would have an awareness of her menstruation. It is the presence of menstrual blood, no matter how routine the physiological function, that identifies the woman as *niddah*: a female in a state of limbo where the division between the powerful force of N and the defiling nature of menstrual blood is highly ambiguous.

The Blood of Childbirth

The presence of blood through childbirth is another example of the holy and defiling nature of N. As stated above, bearing children is a divine command (Gen 1:28). The status of an Israelite woman is greatly increased by the birth of children, especially male children.¹³³ Indeed, the absence of offspring is akin to a “living death” for women in Israelite society.¹³⁴ Joyous the birth of a child may be, however, the issue of blood is as polluting as it is life-affirming. The new mother must therefore undergo a period of separation. For the birth of a male child, the woman is considered unclean for seven days, in the same way she is unclean during her normal menstrual flow (Lev 12:2). She may not have sexual relations, participate in public religious activities, or touch holy

133 The ideal mother is one of “seven sons,” as in Job 1:2, 1 Samuel 16:10 and 2:5. Ruth is depicted as an exemplary daughter to her mother-in-law, in that she is “better to you than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15).

134 Genesis 30:1 illustrates the desperate longing for a child by the matriarch Rachel, who tells her husband Jacob, “Give children to me, for without them I die.” 1 Samuel 1:20 also relates the story of the vexation of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, whose womb had been “shut up” by the Lord (1 Samuel 1:5). Barrenness can also be seen as indicative of punishment for disobedience as when Michal is punished by YHWH (II Sam 6:23; see also Deut 28:15-24, and Douglas op. cit. 50).

things.¹³⁵ On the eighth day, the circumcision of her son occurs (Lev 12:3) and although she continues to remain “in the blood of purification” for thirty-three more days and is not allowed to touch any sacred objects or approach the sanctuary (Lev 12:4), she is not considered unclean in the sense that the menstruant is. However, if the woman gives birth to a female child, she is unclean for two weeks and must remain “in the blood of purification” for sixty-six days.

There is an important distinction between the time that the woman is unclean (seven days or fourteen, depending on the sex of the child) and the additional period of separation (thirty-three and sixty-six days respectively). Leviticus 12:2 does not explicitly state that the parturient must bathe after this period, but given that this period of uncleanliness is “according to the days of her menstruation” it has been supposed that ablutions would naturally take place.¹³⁶ After the woman is ritually clean, she is able to resume sexual relations immediately with her husband,¹³⁷ to touch household object, and to resume contact with family members without conveying her impurity (Lev 12:4). Like the menstruant, however, who has to wait until evening to touch holy things, the new

135 Maccoby, *op. cit.*, 48.

136 *Ibid.* Notice, however, that Leviticus 15 does not explicitly state that the menstruant must bathe, either. This rule stems from a *fortiori* argument from the ritual bathing of a man who discharges semen, as in Leviticus 15:13. Following this argument, the pollution of seminal emission is mistakenly likened to the pollution of childbirth, in that both require ablutions. However, in light of N, childbirth is a far more serious impurity as the taboo presence of blood is coupled with a potentially life-threatening circumstance, i.e. childbirth. In this sense, the blood of childbirth “weakens” the boundary between life and death. The entire cycle of mortality, be it birth (Lev 12) or death (Num 19), must be quarantined from Israelite society to maintain the purity of the larger community (see footnote 124, above). Maccoby, *op. cit.*, 50, points out that a woman is “more involved in the birth-death cycle, and is therefore a greater focus of impurity.” Therefore what appears to be a discriminating separation may be viewed as a method of isolating pollution for the sake of the people. See also Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *op. cit.*, 44-46, for more on the male-female symmetry of emission laws.

137 Niddah 29b, in the Mishnah.

mother “must wait after ablution for ‘a long day’ of thirty-three or sixty-six days.”¹³⁸

After this period has elapsed, offerings are brought to the priest¹³⁹ and religious restrictions are removed, and the woman is free to be in contact with sacred objects and the Tabernacle.¹⁴⁰

As regards the reason why a sin-offering must be made, Niddah 31a in the Mishnah offers an amusing explanation. Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai suggests that, “In the hour of her suffering in labor, the mother is desperate and swears that she will not live in intimacy with her husband again. Therefore hath the Torah ordained the bringing of an offering on account of her hasty vow.” This line of reasoning is extended to explain the discrepancy between the additional separation of thirty-three or sixty-six days.

According to ben Jochai, the joyous birth of a boy encourages the mother to quickly repent of her vow. When a daughter is born, “all are gloomy, and it takes [the parturient] twice as long to regain her composure and repent her hasty vow.”¹⁴¹

Another theory posits that the circumcision of the male child on the eighth day,¹⁴²

138 Maccoby, op. cit., 49.

139 Leviticus 12:6 states that the required offerings are that of a lamb for a burnt offering and a dove or pigeon for a sin-offering. An exception is made in Leviticus 12:8 for those women who cannot afford a lamb, stating that she may offer two doves or pigeons instead, after which “The priest will make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.”

140 The notion that the Tabernacle must be free from impurity figures heavily into the boundaries drawn by N around the Israelites to separate them from outsiders. The Tent of Meeting in the wilderness and later the Temple in Jerusalem are identified as the location where YHWH descends to speak to the High Priest, and where burnt offerings are provided for the deity’s enjoyment (Num 29:36 speaks of the smoke of the offering as having a pleasant aroma for YHWH). It is essential to shield these sacred places from any polluting substance, such as might invalidate offerings or prohibit the Holy Presence. Any link with mortality, such as the birth-death cycle, is strictly forbidden contact with the Temple.

141 See David I. Macht, “A Scientific Appreciation of Leviticus 12:1-5,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 52 (1933): 253-254.

142 This command is given in Genesis 17:12. YHWH establishes a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:2, wherein Abraham is promised a multitude of descendants in exchange for his devotion. The outward symbol of this covenant is circumcision (Gen 17:11-12). The first circumcisions in the Hebrew text are performed on adults, however: those of Abraham, his son Ishmael, and the male members of

according to Torah tradition, a sacred act uniting Israelite men with YHWH from the time of the patriarch Abraham, puts an end to the pollution of childbirth.¹⁴³ The concept has its reverse, most notably in the idea that the parturient ceases to be impure so that her son may be circumcised in a state of purity. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz frames this in terms of a disassociation between “clean” blood (that of the circumcision) and “filthy” blood (that of childbirth). When the child, says Eilberg-Schwartz, “has recovered from the impurity of his mother’s blood, he is brought into the covenant [through circumcision]. His own blood is clean, unifying, and symbolic of God’s covenant. His mother’s is filthy, socially disruptive, and contaminating.”¹⁴⁴ This approach views the N that appears in the blood of childbirth as indicative of death and wholly polluting, and explains the significance of circumcision on the eighth day as having its parallel in animal sacrifice.¹⁴⁵ Because Torah mandates that an animal must be at least eight days old before it can be accepted as a sacrifice (Ex 22:28-29 and Lev 22:27), circumcision must wait until the eighth day so that a male child may be accepted into the community. In this way, the performance of a circumcision, as with sacrifice, “[created] and [demonstrated] patrilineal kinship ties

Abraham’s household (Gen 17:23-27). Abraham’s second son Isaac is circumcised at eight days (Gen 21:4).

143 In this line of reasoning, given that there exists a divine commandment for infant circumcision to be performed on the eighth day after birth (Gen 17:12), *a priori* there must also exist a removal of the mother’s impurity at that time. This is not because the mother’s touch imparts impurity to the infant. The notion of the touch of an impure woman (such as one who is in a state of defilement after menstruation or childbirth) does not stem from the text, but from later rabbinical interpretation. This may instead allude to a “bond” of impurity between the mother and child that must be removed on her part for circumcision to take place.

144 Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990), 174.

145 However, it explicitly ignores the concept that blood can impart a “sacred contagion,” i.e. a complex state of powerful defilement that affects people and objects in the secular and religious spheres. Jonathan Magonet, “‘But If It Is A Girl She Is Unclean For Twice Seven Days . . .’ The Riddle of Leviticus 12:5,” in *Reading Leviticus*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 145, points out that “the ability to pollute [is] a measure of one’s relatives power, at least in some kind of ritual context.”

among men.”¹⁴⁶ While this explanation throws light on the timing of the circumcision, it does not explain the reason for the mother’s additional thirty-three days of separation; nor does it reveal the rationale behind the doubling of that period for a baby girl.

A third theory reasons that a female child will, in turn, experience her own menses and give birth to more children, and is therefore born in a state of pre-menarche impurity. Thus, her mother is secluded twice as long in recognition of the continuation of menstrual impurity (as suggested in Niddah 30b). This interpretation seems to indicate that the “cultic inferiority of the female sex is expressed in giving the female birth a double uncleanness effect.”¹⁴⁷ This must be ultimately rejected, as we have seen that blood impurity does not always lend itself to a situation of disrespect, but of “otherness” and often of reverence, as when the sanctified blood of a sacrificial animal atones for sin (Lev 4:33-35 and 5:9-10).¹⁴⁸ John H. Otwell offers another interpretation of the double separation period, which proposes that the parturient may have been considered “unclean” because “she had been too closely involved with the work of the deity. She would need a period to be de-energized, so to speak; and that period would need to be twice as long for the birth of a child which might become capable in its turn of bearing children as for a male child.”¹⁴⁹

146 Eilberg-Schwartz, op. cit., 175.

147 Maccoby, op. cit., 49. Magonet, op. cit., 152, proposes that the mother, who can symbolically bear the uncleanness for her daughter, must deal ritually with the vaginal bleeding of the infant, caused by the maternal hormones. However, Magonet estimates that this occurs in one of ten female children, thereby making it an arena for Levitical concern but not common enough to warrant such a broad application.

148 See Leviticus 4:33-35 and 5:9-10.

149 John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Women in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 176-177.

Tokens of Virginit

Another example linking the association between blood, life, and death, as well as women's' dualistic holy/defiled role concerns the *betulim*. The *betulim*, or "tokens of virginit," can be used as a talisman against wrong-doing. In Deuteronomy 12:15-17, the parents of a girl who has been accused of not coming to the marriage bed as a virgin (*betulah*), are instructed to lay the *betulim* (in the form of blood-stained linens or clothes) before the elders of the city as proof of their daughter's innocence. In this case, while the presence of N may indicate an ambiguous state of defilement, it can literally save the life of a young bride. For, the text continues, if *betulim* cannot be found, then the community is instructed to stone the girl to death (Deut 12:21). Thus, while ritually defiling, the presence of blood from the breaking of the hymen can literally save a life, and its absence may be a death-sentence.

Blood as a Safeguard

Just as the presence of blood can protect someone from harm that comes from a human source (such as the accusing husband in Deut 12:14), so it can protect from supernatural danger as well. Two examples will suffice to demonstrate the powerful nature of N-containing blood. The first is the story of Moses and his wife Zipporah's stay at a lodging house, found in Exodus 4. This is one of the most bizarre passages in the Hebrew Bible, made particularly tricky by the ambiguous use of pronouns, so that it is often difficult to tell whether Zipporah is talking to or interacting with her husband, her infant son, or YHWH.

Of particular importance to the study of N in blood are verses 24-26, which read, And it came to pass on the road at the lodging-place, that YHWH met [Moses] and sought to kill him. And Zipporah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her son, and touched his feet with it, saying “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me.” And he left him alone; she said, “A bridegroom of blood for the circumcision.”

If we understand Exodus 4:26 as, “Then he (YHWH) left him (Moses) alone,” it appears that the smearing of blood, either on the feet of Moses or on those of YHWH,¹⁵⁰ had the apotropaic function of protecting Moses from harm and turning a murderous YHWH from his undertaking.¹⁵¹

Blood is used to symbolically distinguish the Israelites from their neighbors in Egypt (Ex 12:13) and to safeguard them from death. The blood of a slaughtered lamb or goat (Ex 12:5) was spread upon the lintels or doorframe of each Israelite’s home (Ex 12:7) before the departure from Egypt into the wilderness. Those whose houses displayed this blood would be “passed over” (Ex 12:13) that is, exempt from the plagues and death that would be visited upon the Egyptians. Only the firstborn in the houses without the blood token would be slain by *ha-mashechit*, the “destroyer” (Ex 12:23). Again, here we see blood, or N, serving as protection from death for the Israelites, in that “it metaphorically parallels the blood of the Israelite child which God has chosen not to shed.”¹⁵²

Conclusion

We have investigated *nephesh* to determine how this complex term relates to

¹⁵⁰ This would require an assumption that YHWH appears in the story in an anthropomorphized form, which is not necessarily supported by the Hebrew.

¹⁵¹ A counter-argument to this theory is that it was the circumcision, not the blood, which drove YHWH away (or appeased him). In this version, YHWH sought to kill Moses because the latter had failed to circumcise his son. Zipporah, perceiving this, does the job herself. For further explanation of this proposal, see Ronald B. Allen, “The Bloody Bridegroom” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996): 266.

¹⁵² Eilberg-Schwartz, op. cit., 147.

blood purity laws in the Hebrew texts. Because this life-force is found within blood, the Torah provides laws regulating the contact of persons and objects with the ambiguous power of this substance, which may be seen as alternately defiling and purifying, and sometimes both at once.

The purity laws of the Torah were structured, from an anthropological perspective, to maintain community holiness. Only when the purity of the community was assured could the presence of YHWH enter the realm of the Israelites in the Tabernacle or Temple setting. According to the text, the perpetuation of this holiness through public purity was commanded by the deity¹⁵³ and embraced by Israel.¹⁵⁴

In a society so concerned with maintaining purity, it is no wonder that the Temple Scroll, a document that presents a utopian view of a Temple in Jerusalem that was never constructed, is so consumed with the regulations found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.¹⁵⁵ The supreme holiness of this sacred building extends to the entire city, where sexual intercourse is prohibited and participants in the cultic sphere must maintain a high degree of purity. Although these standards go beyond those that are made explicit in the Torah, the Temple Scroll serves as an indication that an overwhelming concern for holiness (and therefore likeness to YHWH) is at the heart of the purity laws discussed above.

To this extent, N may be seen as the means by which a society defines itself. The lives of those within the society are sometimes termed *nepasot* (as in Prov 1:18 and

153 As in Leviticus 11:45, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

154 Psalm 16:10 declares, “For you [YHWH] will not abandon my N to Sheol (hell); and you will not suffer your holy one to see corruption.”

155 The Temple Scroll is the longest of the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran, and is presented as instructions given to Moses by YHWH.

14:25). They are rendered fit for service to YHWH by observance of purity laws. Those who behave impiously or are otherwise unbelieving, have a greedy N and are never satisfied (Prov 28:25; cf. 10:3). If these disobedient people ignore the laws, they become removed from the sphere of community purity and are placed outside the taboo boundary. They are cut off from Israelite society.¹⁵⁶

That society is circumscribed by the boundaries of N in blood. The presence of blood can signify life, as in childbirth, or death, as in the sacrifice of an animal. Any contact with the life/death cycle is viewed as contact with the domain of the divine; thus blood, as the symbol of this contact, becomes a symbol of the divine. In this reasoning, there exists an intangible power in blood against which mere mortals must regulate their contact so as not to appear too informally involved in the work of YHWH. And because YHWH is the ultimate embodiment of holiness, blood (and therefore N) contains a component of purity. Its powers are far too potent to be ignored. By careful attentiveness to the life-force in blood, by viewing oneself as defiled by the holy substance, can Israelite society strengthen ties within itself and maintain the proper reverence for its God.

¹⁵⁶ See Numbers 19:13, "He has defiled the tabernacle of YHWH; his N will be cut off from Israel."

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