

Moral Purity and Impurity in the Old Testament

THE ANALYSIS will begin with an interpretive survey of moral purity and impurity among the ancient Hebrews as revealed by the admonitions and prohibitions in the Old Testament. The reasons for choosing the Old Testament are obvious. It is no exaggeration to call it the moral template of Western civilization, even if departures from its moral code were numerous during the time it received written form and subsequently.

Wherever the notion of moral purity occurs—in Robespierre, the Hindu caste system, or the Old Testament—it is defined in the Hegelian manner by what purity is not, namely, impurity or pollution. Thus a morally pure person is free from moral pollution. The nature and sources of pollution vary a great deal in time and place.¹ Because pollution is the variable that defines purity, it becomes unavoidably the central subject of this study as a whole, not just the Old Testament.

The abundant sources of pollution reported in the Old Testament fall naturally into four distinguishable, if at some points overlapping, categories: (1) sexual prohibitions, (2) idolatry, (3) dietary restrictions, and (4) unclean objects, such as blood and corpses. Insofar as the violation of any prohibition in this series appears as a violation of the will of God (God's will being the only justification for the prohibition), it appears that for the ancient Hebrew religious authorities such acts were very serious moral failures. When one gets down to cases, this conclusion seems rather odd. Hence this aspect will require fuller discussion after examining the details. We shall take up each of the four forms of pollution, which frequently intertwine, in turn.

SEXUAL PROHIBITIONS AND IDOLATRY

Beginning with sex, the first point worth noticing is its connection with apparently attractive foreign practices and with idolatry, which is, if anything, even more seductive. The religious authorities made strenuous, though hardly successful, efforts to prohibit these presumably attractive sexual practices as foreign, polluting, and idolatrous. These prohibitions in turn sought to prevent the ancient Hebrews from being culturally absorbed by the peoples they had conquered and thereby in danger of losing their religious identity. Although if the religious authorities lost many moral skirmishes over sexual behavior, they did win the big battle for a separate identity.

At the beginning of a long list of sexual prohibitions in Leviticus 18, God in verse 3 enjoins the children of Israel to avoid the “doings of the land of Egypt, wherein ye dwelt” and “the doings of the land of Canaan, whither I bring you.” This prohibition brings to mind the widespread human (or merely male?) tendency to attribute forbidden yet tempting sexual practices to neighboring foreigners. Following the list of sexual practices, God makes it clear that these acts are forms of pollution engaged in by foreigners. Lev. 18:24 tells the children of Israel not to “defile” themselves in these ways, “for in all these the nations are defiled which I cast out before you.”

The connection between sexual attraction and idolatry appears in a brief and obscure passage, Lev. 20:1–5, recounting the death penalty for either Israelite or stranger who gives “any of his seed unto Molech.” Molech was a Canaanite god of fire to whom children were sacrificed. Mention of his worship by the children of Israel recurs in other parts of the Bible. In the Pentateuch I have found only one other explicit reference to the attractiveness of idolatry. It is a powerful and dramatic passage (Deut. 13:6–12), though with no more than the faintest hint of sexuality. If, among other relatives, “the wife of thy bosom or thy friend . . . of thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other

gods,” the child of Israel was of course expected to refuse. That was the least of his obligations. “Thou shalt surely kill him [the tempter]; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death. . . . thou shalt stone him with stones that he die”: the horrible severity of the punishment testifies to the presumed strength of the temptation. Throughout the discussion of the penalty the tempter is assumed to be a male friend, even though the introduction raises the possibility of a wife and other female relatives. In the writings of the prophets, to which we now turn briefly, the temptation of idolatry comes from a sexually attractive woman whose morals could stand improvement.

Immediately after his famous objection to grinding the faces of the poor (Is. 3:15), the prophet Isaiah lets off a blast against Jerusalem’s attractive women of loose morals (Is. 3:16–24). This extended fulmination must be close to the acme of antisexual oratory in world literature. After describing the women’s attractions in loving detail, Isaiah threatens that their “sweet smell” would turn to “stink,” and their beauty to burning, as desolation overcame the city. However, this text contains no specific mention of pollution. Pollution is there only to the extent of a general belief among religious authorities that forbidden sexual behavior is polluting. Isaiah does emphasize that such acts are a mortal threat to Jerusalem, but no more.

In Jeremiah, pollution is explicitly linked with sexual misbehavior. As in the passage just cited from Isaiah, Jeremiah uses the device of treating Jerusalem as an attractive woman. Early on in the text (Jer. 2:23), God addresses her thus: “How canst thou say I am not polluted, I have not gone after Baalim [deities of Canaan].” Again, at Jer. 3:1–2, she is accused of playing the harlot with many lovers and polluting the land with her whoredoms and wickedness. A list of sins occurs at Jer. 7:9 that presumably summarizes contemporary religious beliefs about the worst forms of evil behavior. The list is brief: theft, murder, adultery, false swearing, and idolatry. In light of the many forms of sexual behavior prohibited elsewhere in the Old Testament, to be discussed shortly, the limitation here to adultery is striking.

Toward the close of Jeremiah there is a revealing passage (Jer. 44:15–19) on the practice of idolatry that suggests what God’s advocates were up against. Too long for quotation or even as a satisfactory *précis*, here are the main points. Jeremiah addressed a huge crowd of idolators, both men and women. But only the women burned incense to other gods, though the men knew about it. The crowd supposedly told Jeremiah that they would continue to burn incense to the queen of heaven and pour drink offerings to her as their fathers, kings, and princes had done: “For then we had plenty of victuals, and were well and saw no evil.” But after the idolators had ceased burning incense and pouring drink offerings for the queen, they suffered want of all things and were consumed by the sword and by famine. Jeremiah’s reply was (1) to blame the idolatry for their current misfortune and (2) to threaten more thorough destruction (Jer. 44:20–29). That was consistent with Jeremiah’s general remedy for or reaction to idolatry: nearly total slaughter and destruction (Jer. 46:10, 48:10).

The connections among sexual attractiveness, idolatry, and general wickedness receive even more emphasis in Ezekiel. Chapter 23 is an extended allegory of the doings of two women representing Samaria and Jerusalem. Their “whoredoms” receive detailed attention that includes the pressing of their breasts and bruising the teats of their virginity (Ezek. 23:3, 21). One of them took as lovers Assyrians “clothed with blue, . . . all of them desirable young men, horsemen riding upon horses” (Ezek. 23:5–6). God threatens to destroy them because they are “polluted with [heathen] idols” (Ezek. 23:30). The allegory closes, not surprisingly, with God’s order to have them stoned to death. “Thus I will cause lewdness to cease out of the land,” God declares, “that all women may be taught not to do after your lewdness” (Ezek. 23:47–48). Ezekiel 16 is a very similar sexual metaphor for religious and political issues. Once again the severity of the threatened penalties strongly suggests an anticipation that lewdness would not be easy to eradicate.

Fantasies about the sexual attractiveness of idolatry occupied much of the imagination of religiously active ancient Hebrews.

For them it was a major form of moral impurity. However, idolatry was not the only aspect of sexual immorality that concerned them. Before turning to a consideration of the other aspects, it will be well to consider two major sexual prohibitions that do not have any apparent connection with conceptions of impurity or pollution.

Both of these occur in the Ten Commandments (Ezek. 20:2–17; Deut. 5:6–21). One is the prohibition on adultery. The other is the prohibition on coveting one’s neighbor’s wife. For none of the Ten Commandments is any special sanction or penalty for disobedience mentioned.² That is true of other prohibitions to be discussed shortly. That God decreed them is presumably enough. In the case of the Ten Commandments the awe surrounding their transmission to Moses (Ezek. 31:18; 32:15–19; 34:1–28) could be taken to preclude any discussion on this occasion of penalties including pollution. Yet the absence of any notion of pollution connected with these prohibitions I find quite puzzling. Perhaps the explanation lies in the shock of the occasion together with the probability that penalties were taken for granted. Think of the example of murder, also of course prohibited here. When it occurs it usually produces a shock as the crime becomes known. In ancient societies generally, the person who sheds blood is polluted. But it would be somewhat ridiculous to have a special decree announcing that murder leads to moral impurity. People know that anyway. From that point of view violation of *any* of the Ten Commandments is a serious moral evil, because it is a direct flouting of God’s will about a major issue. That simple statement, I suspect, accounts for the absence of explicit mention of pollution in connection with the Ten Commandments.

The ancient Hebrews had a long, complex series of ordinances against “uncovering the nakedness” of specific categories of women. Each category specifies one or more women who were in a potentially incestuous relationship with the male onlooker. To be more precise, the existence of a rule against seeing a certain woman naked indicates that the ancient Hebrews

believed there was a potentially incestuous hazard. Characteristically the ancient Hebrews tried to build moral ramparts or outworks against serious temptation by prohibiting not only the tempting act but even awareness of the temptation.

There are two similar but not identical lists of these prohibitions, Lev. 18:6–20 and 20:17–21, which require no summary here. The first list contains no penalties that would throw light on ancient Hebrew moral feelings, except for the crucial one that these acts were “abominations” (Lev. 18:29), the standard epithet for any act felt to be both disgusting and morally repulsive. The second list has a graded list of penalties, starting with execution, which applied to most examples, passing through “cutting off from among the people,” to rather light penalties. If a man lies with his uncle’s wife, both will have sinned and die childless. If a man takes his brother’s wife, it is an unclean act and both of them will be childless (Lev. 20:20–21). Is it out of the question that in both cases the partners in a morally impure act of passion would prefer to be childless?

Mixed in with the rules about nakedness are two prohibitions on perversions. One prohibits homosexuality in the strict sense of the word: sexual relations between males. This is an abomination (Lev. 18:22). There is no mention of lesbianism. Two possible explanations for this odd omission come to mind. Conceivably the male religious authorities who created this legislation didn’t even know about its existence. Or else they were so terrified at the prospect of female joys without the male contribution that they did not even call attention to lesbianism by passing an ordinance against it. Some variant of the first explanation seems more likely. If the authorities had spoken about it, we can be sure they would have called it an abomination.

The second prohibition is against intercourse with a beast (Lev. 18:23).³ It applies to both men and women and is characterized as “confusion,” a form of ignoring proper boundaries and mixing things that ought not to be mixed, which received astonishing emphasis in ancient Hebrew dietary restrictions. To a modern it may seem odd that sexual intercourse with an ani-

mal is equated with a dietary rule. But for the ancient Hebrews, as well as some of their successors, both prohibitions carried and still carry a high moral charge.

We may close this limited survey of sex and moral impurity with a brief review of the varying penalties and conceptions of impurity connected with fornication. Marital sex for the sake of procreation, be it noted at the start, received from God frequent and strong endorsement in the repeated injunction to be fruitful and multiply. I have not noticed in the Old Testament, with the curious exception of the Song of Solomon, any endorsement of what we now call recreational sex. Explicit doubts and reservations about such pleasures evidently had to await the coming of Christianity. The same is true for masturbation. The one example mentioned in the Old Testament, that of Omar, who refused intercourse with his brother's wife (Gen. 38:8–10), is too special to permit any general inferences. The most one can guess is that the silence of the Old Testament about masturbation does not imply consent.

According to Lev. 19:20–22 fornication with a bondmaid betrothed to a husband was a sin. However, as might be expected in an ancient patriarchal society, the penalty was vastly lighter than the death penalty for ordinary adultery. The bondmaid was not to be given her freedom. Instead of being put to death she was to be scourged: "because she was not free." As for the man, he was required to bring a ram to the door of the tabernacle as a trespass offering for God. The priest would then make atonement for him before God for his sin, and the sin would be forgiven. In other words, if the man had enough property to spare a ram, for him there was nothing to the whole business. The poor girl at least got off with her life, though she was severely punished and probably lost her husband-to-be.

The famous episode of Joseph refusing an invitation to a sexual encounter issued by the wife of his Egyptian master, Potiphar, is not very enlightening for the purpose at hand. Nevertheless, it requires mention because it is so famous. Joseph bases his refusal on loyalty to a master who has trusted him and gives

him much responsibility and authority. “How then,” said Joseph to the seducing wife, “can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9). Joseph’s objection states a straightforward moral position. Its stress on disloyalty resonates beyond his own age and culture to make the tale so famous. For the effect, God is hardly necessary.

The last episode to be discussed here is the “defilement” of Dinah (Gen. 34). The story indicates that if a presentable young man had intercourse with a presentable young Hebrew woman and, falling in love, asked the woman’s father for her hand in marriage, the request might be happily granted. All that would be quite ordinary if the young man were another Hebrew. If he were a foreigner, even of high status, as is the case in this episode here, matters could turn out very differently. As strangers with a strange religion and conquerors in a new land, the Hebrews were fiercely endogamous, or at least tried to be.

Dinah was the daughter of Jacob, the famous Hebrew patriarch. When Shechem, son of a prince of the country, “saw her, he took her, and lay with her and defiled her.” Then Shechem asked his father to “get the damsel to wife.” The father took counsel with Jacob, who kept quiet until his sons came in from the fields. When they arrived, they were very angry at Shechem. To abbreviate the rest of the story, Jacob’s son deceived Shechem and his father by pretending to agree to their generous offer of a dowry and future intermarriage on condition that all males in Shechem’s city be circumcised. Shechem and his father agreed to the condition, whereat two of Dinah’s brothers took their swords and killed all the males in Shechem’s city. At this point the tale becomes quite hard to believe, though the attitudes it reveals remain very credible. After the slaughter the two brothers despoiled the city, taking all the sheep, oxen, asses, and other property, even the wives, whom they took captive. Then the story becomes very believable once more. Jacob angrily told the two murderous brothers of Dinah that they had made him “stink among the inhabitants of the land” (pollution again), who greatly outnumbered him and would slay him and destroy his

house. To this outburst the two brothers responded with a reference to their sister's honor: "And they said, should he deal with our sister as with a harlot?" This obligation to avenge defilement here overrides ordinary prudence. Furthermore, vengeance as legitimate aggression can yield tremendous pleasure, especially if it takes the form of a defense of moral purity.

We turn now to idolatry as impurity. Since we have already had occasion to discuss idolatry at some length in connection with its erotic attractiveness, its other features need not detain us long. The classic statement about the dangers of idolatry for religious and hence moral purity occurs in Deut. 13:13–18. According to God's ordinances as reported here, if there is a rumor about idolatry in a city given by God to the Hebrews, and upon diligent inquiry the rumor turns out to be true, then "Thou shalt surely smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly. . . . And thou shalt gather all the spoils of it unto the midst of the street thereof, and shall burn with fire the city, and all the spoil thereof every whit." An earlier passage, Deut. 12:31, refers to idolatry as an abomination, the epithet commonly applied to polluted or polluting objects. Thus this text is a sinister justification of slaughter for the sake of moral purity.

The best-known episode of idolatry is that of the golden calf (Exod. 32). Actually there are two more episodes (I Kings 12:26–32; Hos. 8:5–6). Since the latter two add nothing from the point of view of this inquiry, a brief comment on the first one will suffice. When Moses disappeared for a time to consult with God, the people of Israel "gathered themselves together" to request Aaron, Moses' brother and right-hand man, "to make us gods, which shall go before us," because they did not know what had become of Moses (Exod. 32:1). In other words, the demand for idols similar to those used by neighboring peoples surfaced as soon as Moses disappeared. Evidently Moses—or the Hebrew religious authorities generally—did not enjoy the confidence of the people, who were drawn to the indigenous deities and tried to imitate them. Naturally God became furious. We can

pass over Moses' limited success in placating his anger (Exod. 32:7–14) to note God's punishment: the sons of Levi put to the sword some three thousand men, after which God sent a plague on the people of Israel (Exod. 32:28–35). In the whole episode there is only a hint of pollution, when God says that the people "have corrupted themselves." For the rest the emphasis is on the "great sin" (Exod. 32:31) that the people have committed. As in the preceding case, the stress here is on slaughter in defense of religious purity. A monotheistic invention that has been with us for centuries.

DIETARY RESTRICTIONS AND UNCLEAN OBJECTS

We may turn now to the numerous and much discussed notions of pollution from a variety of objects that may enter the human body, be excreted by the body, or otherwise come in contact with it. Very many human societies, literate and nonliterate, have had numerous rules about pollution and the human body.⁴

However, so far as I am aware, no other society has elaborated the ideas and practices connected with pollution to anything like the extent found amongst the ancient Hebrews. The explanation may lie in the struggle to establish monotheism in a sea of hostile pagan societies. As Mary Douglas has pointed out in *Purity and Danger*, elaborate rules, especially dietary rules, helped the ancient Hebrews preserve their distinctive identity, the justification for their existence.⁵ Recently a distinguished Biblical scholar, Jacob Milgrom, has pointed out that the advent of monotheism meant the end of all the little gods and near gods that occasionally helped but more often hurt the ordinary mortals in the surrounding pagan societies.⁶ In such societies petty gods often have specific functions, both damaging and helpful, much like an array of over-the-counter remedies. In comparison with highly accessible pagan threats and remedies, the new monotheistic God was not only unapproachable. He was terrifying. Though Milgrom might vehemently reject this inference, the

situation makes it seem highly likely that the ancient Hebrew rules about pollution were in many cases taken over from pagan practices, especially forms of propitiation. Doing that would have enabled Hebrew priestly authorities to deflect the competitive threat of paganism, a device standard for conquering rulers. Meanwhile the pagan deity disappeared in the transfer as it became a practice sanctioned by an ordinance of the new God.

The Book of Leviticus presents a long series of divine ordinances about what is unclean. Their violation is clearly a moral lapse that requires expiation. If a person touches the “carcass of an unclean beast . . . or unclean creeping things,” even unintentionally, “he shall also be unclean and *guilty*” (Lev. 5:2, emphasis added). There follows his “trespass offering unto the Lord for his sin” in the form of a choice of animals for sacrifice (Lev. 5:6–7). The priest then makes an atonement for him, which results in forgiveness (Lev. 5:13).⁷ According to a later passage, Lev. 7:21, there is no forgiveness for slightly different violations: touching “the uncleanness of man” and eating “of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings which pertain unto the Lord.” The person who does that “shall be cut off from his people.” Presumably this frequently mentioned penalty amounts to internal ostracism. It apparently means that no one may have any contact with such a guilty person, a very severe penalty in a society heavily dependent on mutual cooperation.

Chapter 10 of Leviticus presents rules about sacrifice and the tabernacle. It begins with a brief tale about the sons of Aaron, who offered a sacrifice to God with a strange fire and incense, which God had not commanded. For this pagan-seeming sacrifice God killed them with fire. (Lev. 10:1–2). There follow certain actions that have to do with the sanctity of the tabernacle. Mourners for the dead sons of Aaron were not to go out of the tabernacle, because the anointing oil of the Lord was upon them and they would die (Lev. 10:7). As indicated here and in numerous other passages, direct contact with God could be lethal, and the tabernacle had to be kept pure at all costs. The people obeyed this instruction. The passage continues with a

series of instructions and miscellaneous ordinances issued directly by God to Aaron for the children of Israel. The most general and the most striking is “that ye may put difference between holy and unholy and between unclean and clean” (Lev. 10:10).

The meaning of this famous passage is far from obvious. At first glance it appears that ancient Hebrew religious authorities were working their way towards a distinction between pollution and the unholy. Unholy things might be profane in the sense of everyday, unconsecrated, essentially neutral morally, but very much out of place in a sanctified area. There is some evidence in support of this interpretation. Thus no stranger could “eat of the holy thing.” The same rule applied to the daughter of a priest if she were married to a stranger (Lev. 22:10–12). Strangers had a special and respected status in ancient Israel. There was nothing polluting about them, at least not in religious theory. Popular attitudes may have differed.

If there was a movement towards developing a concept of the profane yet morally neutral, it did not get far. The main concern about holiness was fear lest it be contaminated by impure and disgusting objects.⁸ Elsewhere Milgrom notes more specifically that “Israel must not contaminate itself by ingesting land swarms because holiness, the goal it must seek, cannot coexist with impurity.”⁹

Thus impurity remains the decisive threat, and certainly a moral one, because it is a threat to holiness. Holiness may not have been even remotely the dominant social objective of all the children of Israel. But the clearly dominant priests of that time saw it as a divine objective.

Returning to this rich chapter 10 of Leviticus, a key source on holiness and contamination, we learn in verses 12–13 that Moses instructed Aaron and his two remaining sons to eat the meat offering of the sacrifices to the Lord and “eat it without leaven beside the altar: for it is most holy.” They were to eat “in the holy place.” This concrete example shows that holy can mean sanctified to God, therefore having special qualities, including dangerous ones, and requiring special treatment. Since religion *was*

morality for the ancient Hebrews, unlike the ancient Greeks and other ancient peoples, the special treatment was a moral obligation. As we have seen, there was a great deal of popular resistance to the acceptance of the new moral obligations. The discussion of the rules governing the sacrifice continues with the report that Moses “diligently sought the goat of the sin offering,” only to discover that it was burnt. Thereupon Moses became angry with the sons of Aaron in charge of the sacrifice, scolding them by asking why they had not eaten the sin offering in the holy place after “God hath given it to you to bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord” (Lev. 10: 16–17). The failure to carry out the sacrifice properly is less important for present purposes than the purpose of the sacrifice. The sacrificed goat that was to bear the iniquity of the congregation is, of course, a device for making guilt bearable. Just about every human society has such devices, reflecting a very widespread human necessity. The ancient Hebrew goat sacrifice, about which there is more detail in Leviticus 16, has entered the English language as “scapegoat,” presumably because two goats were chosen, according to Lev. 16:8–10, one sacrificed and one allowed to escape into the wilderness to make atonement with God. Though mechanisms like this to make morality tolerable are common ones in human societies, efforts to create and intensify guilt feelings also occur. Religion can create guilt and then “cure” it. There is a good deal of evidence that this process was taking place among the ancient Hebrews. When we come to the Calvinists, who modeled themselves on the ancient Hebrews, the process of creating or at least recreating guilt will become obvious. Whether the Calvinists had a cure is less clear.

Following the rules about sacrifices and sin offerings come the famous and still puzzling—and still widely observed—rules about what one may eat, and more important, what one may not eat because it is unclean (Lev. 11; also Deut. 14). For a long time scholars have debated whether the prohibitions are essentially arbitrary or display some underlying order and rationality.¹⁰ For the purpose of this inquiry it is unnecessary to solve this puzzle. We

are merely interested in whether the prohibitions as they stand constituted a set of divine commands and therefore moral ordinances for the children of Israel. It is plain that in the course of time they became moral ordinances, if they were not such at the start. The prophet Ezekiel (fl. 600 B.C.) told God that his soul was “not polluted” because he had adhered to the dietary restrictions.

To probe a trifle further, the dietary restrictions resemble a set of avoidance rules that at one time or another have made their appearance in different societies all over the world.¹¹ Societies make avoidance rules in order to keep people away from something thought to be dangerous, such as incest, disease, or many other threats. In nonliterate societies, and by no means only those, the threat is perceived as the result of having offended a ghost, failed to propitiate an evil spirit, or still some other malevolent aspect of the environment. The remedy then is to prohibit contact with what appears to be the source of danger. From graduate-school days the writer still recalls the case of an isolated society where a plague broke out shortly after a camel appeared there for the very first time. The society responded by prohibiting any more visits by camels. Justification for avoidance rules thus frequently displays *post hoc ergo propter hoc* logic along with a strong emphasis on propitiation. In the case of the ancient Hebrew dietary rules, under the influence of time and monotheism, the logic has vanished to become God’s will. The element of propitiation remains and is indeed overriding. Demons and ghosts have disappeared. Hence God is responsible—though not completely—for disaster as well as good fortune. These changes intensify the need to propitiate God. Despite a visible tendency towards making divine ordinances ethical and moral in the sense of promoting social welfare, the line between magic and morality is at times very hard to discern.

Mixed in with divine ordinances about forbidden and acceptable foods and the proper treatment of skin disease are some ordinances against mingling or the disregard for supposedly natural boundaries, natural in this case meaning created by God. Thus, according to Lev. 19:19, the Israelites were forbidden to let

diverse kinds of cattle interbreed, to sow their fields with mixed seeds, or to wear a garment made of mixed linen and wool. The prohibitions are preceded by God's statement "Ye shall keep my statutes," indicating that their violation was a serious sin.

A similar divine ordinance against mingling occurs in Lev. 18:23, which prohibits both men and women from having sexual intercourse with a beast. For a man it is called a defilement, for a woman a perversion. Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, reports that the word "perversion" is a mistranslation of *tebhel*, which means mixing or confusion.

Nearly all moderns would draw a sharp moral distinction between bestiality and, say, wearing a sweater made half of wool and half of polyester. (The grounds for a moral revulsion against bestiality present a separate issue. Here it is enough to claim the revulsion exists.) But the apparent absence of any distinction is the important point for our purposes. Leviticus and Deuteronomy are mainly compilations of divine ordinances, presented as coming directly from God. All sorts of prohibitions reflecting what are for us wildly different moral concerns are jumbled together. Following the prohibition on mixing linen and wool come in the same chapter (1) a prohibition on rounding the corners of their heads and marring the corners of their beards (Lev. 19:27) and next (2) a prohibition on prostituting one's daughter (Lev. 19:29).

Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, tries to make sense of the dietary restrictions and the prohibitions on mingling through the ancient Hebrew concept of holiness. Milgrom's thesis in *Leviticus 1–16* is similar. As I read them, Douglas and Milgrom are telling us that the priests of those days purported to be moral perfectionists engaged in the effort to make of Israel a morally and religiously perfect world, that is, a holy one. Hence the attention to matters that seem so utterly trivial today. Hence the demand that apparent divisions in God's creation—between humans and beasts, those affected by incest and adultery, as well as those between different kinds of cattle, seed, and cloth—must at all costs remain firm and unbreached.

So far as I can see, the concept of holiness does help to bring out an intelligible order in these divine ordinances. With respect and admiration for these scholars I will, however, offer what may be a much shorter and less perilous route to a similar conclusion. The attempt to find some sort of order or rationale to these ordinances may be a waste of time, a rather ethnocentric one at that. By that reasoning it may be worse than a waste of time, it may be a serious mistake. Instead, we might do better by taking the utter arbitrariness and lack of apparent reason for these ordinances as a major ethnographic fact about ancient Hebrew society. Doing that avoids straining the evidence with numerous questionable inferences. It also enables us to see that the first monotheistic God was at least as arbitrary as some of his polytheistic predecessors, and rather more so than many. Why the arbitrariness? The answer is rather simple. Power that is not used ceases to be recognized as power. As the Old Testament shows repeatedly, the ancient Hebrews had a siege mentality. They needed a God who could get results, even if they were often far from contented with the results. To the priests, presumably, that didn't matter. They wanted a frightened, obedient population. This combination of circumstances pushed in the direction of making all areas of life, from sex to sowing the fields, subject to divine ordinance. Every act was being made a matter of religious concern. The line between sacred and profane was becoming blurred, if indeed the priests had ever recognized one. In this sense there truly was pressure to become a godly or holy society, whose transgressors were religiously and morally impure.

Having discussed what may not go into the human body in the form of food and not go on it in the form of mixed fabrics, we can pass rapidly over what comes out of it in sickness and in health. Since most of these rules have parallels in numerous other societies, we shall linger only over those relevant to the central theme of this inquiry.

The end of life is, of course, death. The uncleanness of corpses and necessary purification rites appear in Num. 19: 11–22. The impurities of childbirth are recounted in Lev. 12.

Hebrew religious authorities displayed intense interest in the impurities of bodily secretions, especially the normal and pathological ones of males. They are described and analyzed in Lev. 15 with extended commentary in Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*, 763–768, 902–1009), which also treats childbirth and menstruation. I have come upon no references to feces, for which there is no reference in Milgrom’s index of subjects. This apparent absence is rather curious, since just about every known human society has a system of toilet training that reveals adult feelings about the impurity of feces. Human blood, on the other hand, was the object of special attention when it had been shed by violent means. According to Num. 35:33, blood defiled the land. Further: “the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it.” Here we encounter the ethic of the traditional blood feud. In the case of coming upon the body of a man lying in the field and the murderer unknown, there was a special ritual to drive away “the guilt of innocent blood from among you” (Deut. 21:1–9, quotation from verse 9). The elders of the city nearest the dead body were to wash their hands over a beheaded heifer and say, “Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it” (verse 8). Then came an appeal to God to “lay not innocent blood” to the charge of the people of Israel. Then they were to forgive the blood (verse 8), and, as mentioned at the start, the guilt of innocent blood would depart. The message of this tale appears to be thus: there has been a murder and therefore blood-guilt-threatening pollution. Since it is impossible to find the murderer, only God, properly approached, can remove the blood. The magical element is evident and powerful throughout the tale. But the element of divine approval and potential disapproval, which human specialists must seek, makes the tale a moral one.¹²

We may now turn to the treatment of leprosy, reported in detail in Lev. 14–15. For this inquiry the account is important for what it reveals about conceptions of moral responsibilities. The first problem, however, is one of identification. According to

Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*, 816–817), the disease called leprosy in Leviticus and other passages in the Old Testament is not leprosy at all. Instead, it is some strange skin disease that modern medicine is unable to identify completely. Milgrom calls it scale disease, after some of the symptoms. For the sake of accuracy I will adopt his terms. For our purposes precise identification is of small moment. We need to know how it was treated and especially if the treatment had a moral component.

The priest was responsible for determining whether or not a person showing suspicious symptoms actually had the scale disease. His diagnosis was elaborate and interesting but cannot detain us here. Two possible outcomes appear in the text.

One is that the patient's affliction turns out to be incurable, according to the priest's diagnosis. In that case the victim of scale was treated quite literally like an outcaste, in a way that recalls the treatment of the leper for many centuries. He—only a man is mentioned at this point—had to rend his clothes, bare his head, cover his upper lip, and cry, "Unclean, unclean." As long as he had the plague he would be defiled and must dwell alone outside the camp (Lev. 13:45–46). This penalty is not to be taken as mainly a primitive form of quarantine before the advent of the germ theory of disease. The most one can claim on these lines is that the penalty might be based on an avoidance rule similar to those discussed above. Both explanations miss the main point. Scale disease is a moral defect, indeed, moral pollution (as the expressions unclean and defilement show). The plague comes from God (Lev. 14:33). A moral failing requires a moral penalty. To judge from these books of the Old Testament, the ancient Hebrews at this time lacked any other way of thinking about these matters. With the end of polytheistic demons as causes of sickness and misfortunes, the only possible explanation became a moral one: failure to obey God's will. To label a person as unclean for an indefinite future and expel such a person from the community, cutting the individual off from most if not all social supports, was about as severe a moral penalty as possible under the con-

ditions of those days. Only execution would have been more severe, and might have seemed preferable to some long-term victims.

The second outcome of scale disease appears to be some sort of spontaneous cure or at least well-established remission. It does not appear that the priest played any role in the cure. According to the text, the man (again only males) is to be brought to the priest, whereas the priest is expected to go out of the camp and make sure the man is really healed of the plague (Lev. 14:2–4). The task of the priest is to make the man clean and present him before God (Lev. 14:11). As I understand the passage, the priest is not to clean him in the sense of cure him, because that has already happened. Instead the priest is expected to take charge of a ceremony that will be a rite of passage to certify that the man has passed from the stage of being unclean and defiled to the stage of being clean and acceptable to God. Hence the ceremony includes the usual trespass offering and sin offering, and atonement (Lev. 14:11–19).

To sum up provisionally, there was a heavy moral penalty for coming down with scale disease and a correspondingly great reward for getting cured. In these divine ordinances there is no sign that the human individual played any role in getting sick or well. There were powerful moral imperatives and incentives to recover.¹³ But there was no such thing as individual moral responsibility: God made one sick. Getting well was just mysterious. God does not appear to have any connection with remission or recovery.

The absence of moral responsibility, combined with a strong sense of moral failure curable by religious sacrifice, may seem inconsistent to at least some late-twentieth-century ways of thinking. But it is quite consistent with the concept of an omnipotent God. It also renders comprehensible the most curious items in the long discussion of scale disease: what to do about a house that comes down with this malady (Lev. 14:33–57).

Most modern householders would probably recognize both what the King James Bible (Lev. 14:44) calls “fretting leprosy”

CHAPTER 1

and Milgrom (*Leviticus 1–16*, 829) translates as “malignant fungus” as plain, ordinary mildew, a familiar result of warmth, dampness, and inadequate ventilation. The ancient treatment of a home with scale is similar to that for humans. As with humans, the priest is in charge of the whole operation. First there is an attempt to get rid of the plague by getting rid of infected parts, scraping, and replastering. If that does not work, the house has to be destroyed. If, on the other hand, the priest finds that the plague has not spread, he undertakes a sacrifice, as in the case of a human who appears cured. However, the sacrifice in the case of the house is different. The essential elements in this sacrifice are these. The priest takes two birds. He kills one and uses its blood in a ceremonial cleansing of the house, sprinkling it seven times. The living bird, on the other hand, he lets go “out of the city into the open fields, and makes an atonement for the house: and it shall be clean” (Lev. 14:53). The offering of an atonement indicates that a house, like a human, could be unclean in a sinful sense. Four verses later the discussion of scale disease comes to an end: “To teach when it is unclean and when it is clean: this is the law of leprosy [scale disease].” It is the uncleanness that matters and that is sent by God.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this chapter it is appropriate to raise once more the vexing question of whether or not the very miscellaneous collection of divine ordinances in Leviticus and Deuteronomy really have anything to do with moral purity and impurity. *Pace* Milgrom, did the ancient Hebrews really think in terms of morality and immorality? It is obvious that they did think in terms of ritual and religious impurity as well as ritual and religious techniques of purification. But that is not quite the same thing as morality. Unless I have missed something, the word “moral” or an equivalent expression does not occur in the Pentateuch, the prophetic books, or indeed anywhere in the Old

Testament.¹⁴ Instead we find for violations of divine commands and ordinances the expressions “sin,” “trespass,” and “sacrilege,” depending on the specific episode and the translator. All these terms clearly imply moral condemnation. But the element of divine condemnation appears to be more important than the moral aspect.

The situation becomes clearer if we look again at the word “moral.” Throughout this study I have tried to use it in the same sense as the *mores* of William Graham Sumner. For Sumner both folkways and mores were a society’s deeply ingrained popular modes of thinking and acting. They are forms of mass behavior. But mores differ from folkways in that mores carry a notion of social welfare. Thus a violation of one or more of its mores is a serious matter in any society. All sorts of sanctions will be brought to bear in a collective effort to punish a violation of mores. Such a violation is definitely an immoral act. A violation of folkways is much less serious, and generally results in nothing more serious than embarrassment. The person who violates folkways intermittently is treated as a clumsy oaf or an oddball, not a social menace.

With these considerations in mind, it becomes clear that most of the divine ordinances discussed above had little or nothing to do with ancient Hebrew popular morality as expressed in its folkways and mores. A few, such as the Ten Commandments, do look like divinely sanctioned and somewhat severe versions of patriarchal morality in a seminomadic society. But most of the divine commands and ordinances were attempts to establish new mores and to prevent the ancient Hebrews from accepting the mores of the peoples whom they had conquered and among whom they had settled. Ancient Hebrew religion was in large measure innovative and antitraditional. Hence an appeal to traditional morality in support of divine command would make no sense. Through divine ordinances the priests of the new sole God were trying to determine the character of the Hebrew community down to the pettiest details on a day-to-day basis. For that purpose dietary restrictions were useful and important.

Human beings could be made to avoid eating specified things without enormous difficulty. The results were also a matter of public knowledge in a small community. Dietary restrictions enabled the priests to demonstrate their authority over the Hebrew people and the people to demonstrate their distinctiveness from Canaanites, Philistines, *et id omne genus*.

Once we realize that most of the divine ordinances were issued *against* prevailing Hebrew custom, the issues of moral responsibility and guilt become clearer. Prohibitions on theft, murder, and adultery, which are to be found in a large majority of human societies, are highly probable and significant exceptions that did correspond with ancient Hebrew mores. If we knew more, we might find others. But it is reasonably clear that very many divine orders were innovations. Over and over again God appears as angry at the Hebrews for violations of the Covenant and specific divine injunctions. These violations show that some Hebrews believed in the ability of ordinary human beings to choose whether or not to obey. In this sense they did have a concept of moral responsibility.

Ethical responsibility, however, is a more accurate term. Moral responsibility refers to norms prevalent in the society. Ethical responsibility can refer to these but also refers to violations of transcendent standards. Still, there is a problem. The opportunity and ability to choose is plain enough in the case of dietary restrictions. But how about the case of a mildewed house?

To emphasize this distinction is, I suggest, to fall into the trap of anachronism by imposing modern forms of reasoning on the ancient Hebrews. For them, ethical behavior meant complete obedience to divine ordinances. Scale disease for humans and houses came from disobedience to God and was therefore an ethical fault. At this early stage when the priests were still struggling to establish monotheism, they ran the risk of overmoralizing human behavior. Everything from murder to eating pork became a moral failure, as monotheism was used to judge so many aspects of human existence. Furthermore, all moral failings took on roughly the same degree of emotional intensity. Even

when the scripture reports a method of purification or atonement, terror forms a steady backdrop. And only a Moses can make a deal with God for leniency. Today the Hebrew universe looks like a terribly unlivable one, with pollution and death lurking behind every corner. I suspect that to many ordinary Hebrews at the time it looked the same way: “Such evil deeds could religion prompt,” as Lucretius remarked about a half century before the beginning of our era.

In closing, it is appropriate to place the ancient Hebrews in a wider historical setting. They lived under a terroristic theocracy supported and justified by monotheism. The Hebrews, of course, did not invent monotheism. Their religious authorities forced it on them. Those who doubt this assertion would do well to read Isaiah and other prophets. The struggle to impose monotheism permeates the Old Testament, not just the Pentateuch. One cannot make the struggle disappear by labelling it as an essentially ancient myth only dimly related to human behavior, though mythical elements are clearly present. As a major part of the struggle, the advocates of monotheism took up widespread beliefs in pollution that had their threatening aspects, but were trivial in comparison with what happened after their absorption into monotheism.

Monotheism itself did not spring up out of nowhere. The belief in a supreme god ruling over minor deities long preceded monotheism. Nor was monotheism by any means the only legacy of Hebrew culture. The ideal of justice independent of social and economic status—that rich and poor alike should be punished for their crimes instead of the noble and well-to-do being legally entitled to milder penalties—is a major Hebrew theme. Once again it appears most clearly in Isaiah.

Finally, to paraphrase a famous English remark about democracy, Hebrew monotheism displayed no nonsense about monogamy or sex in general. The Song of Solomon is one of the loveliest examples of erotic literature in any culture. The huge number of Solomon’s wives may well be legendary, but it is one of those legends that epitomizes the longings of a culture.

Despite all the exceptions and contrary trends just mentioned, the invention of monotheism by ancient Hebrew religious authorities was a cruel, world-shaking event. It had to be cruel in the general sense that any group identity is liable to be formed in hostile competition with other groups. It was world-shaking in the sense that Christianity, despite the astonishing and dramatic tolerance of Jesus towards fallen women, took over ancient Hebrew vindictive intolerance, amplified it, and institutionalized it. In the eighteenth century, as we shall see, vindictive and persecuting intolerance became secularized. For the Western world, and only the Western world, we can discern a line of historical causation that begins with the monotheism of the ancient Hebrews; runs through the heresies of early Christianity, the slaughters of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Reformation; turns secular in the French Revolution; and culminates in what the great nineteenth-century Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt presciently termed “the terrible simplifiers”—Nazism and Leninism-Stalinism. The long long route from the ancient Hebrews to Stalinism was a river of social causation fed by many different streams and dropping floating debris all along the way.

Yet despite all the twisting and turning and historical debris, the river has a clear identity and an obvious ending point (or way station?) in twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. Without this long line of causation providing a readily available model of vicious behavior, it is very hard to see how these regimes could have come about. The monotheistic tradition by this time was hardly the most important cause of Nazism and Stalinism. But it was, I suggest, an indispensable one.

It is, of course, out of the question to treat all aspects of the historical fate of monotheism in a single book. The next chapter shows monotheism’s fate at a crucial point in French history. We shall see how gentle people can become bloodthirsty and how mass anger can, with religious sanction, kill large numbers of people—without resort to gas ovens and other technological attainments of the twentieth century.