

K. C. Hanson

# Blood and Purity in Leviticus and Revelation

(*Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture*,  
28 (1993) 215-30)

## I. Introduction

The symbol of blood is clearly important in the book of Revelation as demonstrated by the number of occurrences (nineteen) and its use throughout the book in a variety of contexts. And it is not a “static” or one-dimensional literary motif here either, like God’s throne. Rather it is a dynamic symbol of life and death which draws the reader’s attention to issues of sacred and profane, purity and pollution, deliverance and judgment.

Because of this referential complexity, I would argue that blood qualifies as an example of what anthropologist Victor Turner calls a “dominant ritual symbol.” Turner identifies three attributes of such symbols: condensation of meaning, unification of disparate significata, and polarization of meaning.<sup>1</sup> Blood (in both ancient Israelite and Christian usage) compresses multiple meanings in one referent, for example: murder, sacrifice, pollution. Context is everything in determining its significance and emotive power. It also unifies and focalizes a variety of phenomena, such as menstruation, animal slaughter, ritual purification, and legal culpability. The polarization of meaning to which Turner refers is between the principles of social organization and moral values (the ideological pole), and the natural and physical properties (the sensory pole).

Blood symbolizes the moral order in terms of cult (purity and pollution; Lev 16:18-19; 1 John 1:7), law (culpability, Exod 22:2-3; Acts 5:28), covenant/contract-making (participation, Exod 24:8; Matt 26:28), and power (God’s possession; Gen 9:6; Ezek 44:7). And its physical properties are manifested in terms of its liquid quality (Deut 12:16; Rev 16:3-4); its ability to stain (Isa 63:2-3); its color (2 Kgs 3:22; Rev 6:12); and its symbolism of life-force (Lev 17:11; Matt 16:17), birth (Sir 14:18; Heb 2:14), menstruation (Lev 20:18; Mark 5:25), wine (Deut 32:14; Mark 14:23-24), and cosmic food (Ezek 44:7).

Of itself, blood is neither a positive nor a negative substance in ancient Israelite and Christian usage. It depends on what sort of blood it is, where it is, who touches it, and how it is utilized. This is a clue that we are dealing with the abstract category of “purity.” Anthropologist Mary Douglas (following Lord Chesterfield’s dictum) speaks of dirt as “matter out of place”. This implies only two conditions, a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order.<sup>2</sup> Blood

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 27-29.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Douglas, “Pollution,” in *Implicit Meanings* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 50.

can therefore be described as either “in place” or “out of place,” pure or defiled. It is also an active substance— it has an effect on the things it touches: it can be either a pollutant or a detergent.

To speak of “purity” is to speak of order: where do things belong? Every society has systems or categories of purity, whether they articulate them explicitly or not. These purity codes provide the society with meaning, orientation, and maps of behavior and belonging.<sup>3</sup> An American adage which speaks to this is: “A place for everything, and everything in its place.” Furthermore, purity does not refer only to objects, but also plants, animals, people, spaces, and time. Humans seem to be fundamentally creatures of order.<sup>4</sup>

But the basis for order and purity is different from society to society. In Western societies one of the most obvious bases of purity is the medical model, what can be termed epidemiological (i.e. the analysis of how disease is spread and prevented). Our concern is that things be “clean” in terms of bacteria. Another basis of U.S. purity sensibilities has to do with attachment to certain animals. Cows, chickens, and pigs are dietary staples; but serious disgust is registered when the topic arises of the Europeans eating horsemeat or Southeast Asians eating dogmeat. Less discussed is the way race is understood as a purity category. It was only a generation ago that the American South had separate toilet facilities and drinking fountains for whites and blacks. But while these last two phenomena may be a part of the past, who “should” marry whom, or who are “preferable” immigrants, are still social issues. And certainly HIV/AIDS is currently the premier purity issue— both in terms of health organization concerns and public discussion.

*Degrees* of purity are also operant in all societies. Since epidemiology is at the base of Western purity systems, the most attention to purity is given to hospitals in general, and operating rooms in particular. Related, but secondary, to this would be purity in the food industry. The U.S. has the Federal Department of Agriculture to oversee the purity of the food chain from farms to distributors to markets, the Center for Disease Control to track and address the spread of disease, and county health departments to inspect restaurants and other public eating facilities.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 72-74.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, “The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts: ‘They Turn the World Upside Down,’” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (ed. J. H. Neyrey; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 276 (271-304). Other key works on purity and the Bible include: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, vol. 1; Leiden: Brill, 1973), which includes “Critique and Commentary” by Mary Douglas, pp. 137-42; Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights From Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), pp. 122-52; Jerome H. Neyrey, “Unclean, Common, Polluted, and Taboo: A Short Reading Guide,” *Forum* 4,4 (1988):72-82; Neyrey, “Symbolic Universe,” pp. 271-304; Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 177-216; David P. Wright and Hans Hübner, “Unclean and Clean,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 6, pp. 729-45.

In ancient Israel and Judah, as in other ancient Near Eastern societies, purity was always an important category. But evidently Judeans increased their concern for purity during and after the Babylonian Exile (598-539 BCE) when purity regulations were codified, seen especially in the book of Leviticus. While the section scholars refer to as the “Holiness Code” (Leviticus 17-26) is especially important here, chapters 11-16 also address purity issues.

This intense Judean interest in purity peaked again among the rabbis, so that a whole “order” (*sedar*) of the Mishnah (the so-called “Oral Law” which took written form c. 200 CE), composed of twelve tractates (*massektoth*) is called “Purities” (*Tohoroth*). Furthermore, the order “Set Feasts” (*Mo’ed*) deals with the purity issues of festivals; but purity issues come up throughout the Mishnah.

The primary reason for these two periods of increased concern over purity is evidently the loss of control over their political and religious life: the social body. During the Babylonian Exile thousands of Judeans (especially the elites) were deported to Babylon, and in 587 BC the Jerusalem temple was destroyed. And for several centuries following the Exile the Judeans were subject to one empire after another. The Mishnah took shape in the period of Roman domination, culminating in the destruction of the second Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, and the ban of Judeans from Jerusalem in 135 CE. The mixing with foreigners and the lack of external control heightened concern to control the social and physical boundaries. The loss of the Jerusalem sanctuary and the authority of priests also called for a systemic reorientation.

Since the purity regulations of Leviticus can be taken as operant in the first century A.D. among Judeans (at least as the official ideology), it will be useful to compare and contrast its categorization of blood with that of Revelation. Leviticus is of course a book of regulations covering a broad spectrum of issues relating to sacrifice, priesthood, and purity. Revelation, on the other hand, is a book of warning letters to churches followed by vision-reports. But, while Revelation is polemical rather than regulatory, it still operates with purity assumptions, and it should prove useful to compare these to the assumptions of Leviticus.

## II. Purity in Leviticus

Douglas has cogently argued that the purity of Leviticus is broadly based. Rather than being solely centered on the sanctuary, the whole of Israel’s life is organized in terms of purity rules. This means that the tabernacle’s purity is matched by that of the priesthood, but also by that of the field, household, and physical body. All of these fit together into a system of purity identified with Yahweh’s holiness/purity: “And you shall be holy to me, because I, Yahweh, am holy; and I have separated you from the peoples to belong to me” (Lev 20:26).

The purity issues addressed in Leviticus are many, but without attempting to be exhaustive, we can identify the following major categories: touching impure objects (ch. 5); eating fat and blood (7); food— acceptable/unacceptable species of animals to eat (ch. 11), skin diseases (13-14), genital discharges— normal/abnormal (12 and 15), the sanctuary (16), sacrificial animals (17),

sexual partners (18 and 20), everyday transactions (19), the priesthood (8 and 21-22), the calendar (23 and 25), profaning the divine name (24), and vows (27).

Jacob Milgrom has been the one to most clearly articulate the logic which underlies priestly regulations of purity/impurity. He has clarified that the priestly regulations identifies two separate distinctions: clean/unclean and holy/common (10:10). Both the holy and the common are understood to be clean unless otherwise designated; but while the holy has a “contagious” quality (like impurity), the common is inert. Furthermore, the holy is divided into holy and most-holy. The interactions of these various spheres (e.g., most-holy and unclean) have differing results with regard to contamination. I have summarized his references in the following chart:

**Figure 1: Consequences Of Contact**

	<i>Clean</i>	<i>Unclean</i>	<i>Common</i>
<i>Most Holy</i>	Clean	Death (Lv 10:1-7)	Death (Nm 1:51)
<i>Holy</i>	Clean	Excommunication (Lv 7:19-21)	Restitution & fine (Lv 5:14-26)
<i>Common</i>	Clean	Purification Rites (Lv 11-15)	Clean

Milgrom summarizes the calculus of this system of impurity (what he calls “the laws of sancta contamination”) as follows:

- The contamination of a sanctum varies directly with the intensity of the impurity source, directly with the holiness intensity of the sanctum and inversely with the distance between them. Also, contamination has a threshold, a fixed value, below which it cannot be activated.
- The sanctuary is a special case of the general law (1) whereby
- Contamination is a function of the intensity of the impurity source alone, i.e., impurities of a severe amount and from any distance (in the camp) will contaminate the sanctuary.
- Contamination takes place at three thresholds: the outer altar, the shrine, or the adytum.
- Contamination displaces an equal volume of the sanctuary holiness (the Archimedean principle) until a saturation point is reached.
- Sancta are related to common things in regard to their contamination and purification, as follows:
- Sancta are more vulnerable to contamination by one degree.

- Each purification stage reduces the communicability of the impurity source to both sancta and common things by one degree.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, we can conclude that status, distance, degree of impurity, and physical relationship to the sanctuary are the variables in relation to the purity of the sanctuary.

The fact that the Levitical purity system is not a series of *suggestions* but codified regulations is seen in the punishments attached to many of the offences. For some of the purity violations the offender is identified as “guilty” and requires purgation (e.g., 5:6). But for more serious offences one could be “cut off” (*karat*, viz. excommunicated, socially banned; e.g., 18:29) or executed (*mot yumat*; e.g., 20:9). Leviticus 26 lists a number of group punishments enacted by Yahweh for failing to maintain this system: disease, defeat in war, drought, fruitless land, plagues, wild beasts, famine, exile, and fear. Thus threats of social exclusion, death, and disaster provided the *negative* motivation for adhering strictly to the purity code. The code functions as a map of conformity/deviance, as well as identifying the danger points to the individual, the society, and the sanctuary.

But the recurring *positive* motivation to holiness and purity derives from Yahweh’s nature, and the conceptualization of the Israelites and Judeans as Yahweh’s people: “And consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am Yahweh, your God. And keep my statutes and perform them; I am Yahweh, who sanctifies you” (20:7-8). Thus purity consists of concrete actions performed by the people, but also entails Yahweh’s reciprocal action. It consequently has personal, social, and cosmic dimensions.<sup>6</sup>

Douglas is correct that wide-ranging issues of everyday life are addressed in the Israelite purity system in Leviticus, and many of these issues are dealt with in the context of the local village; the system is not solely about the sacrifice and the sanctuary. But one may still identify the pivotal roles of the priesthood and the sanctuary. Such things as skin diseases have to be judged by priests (13:1-59). The system assumes a society which has a permanent sacred space (“the sanctuary,” 19:30; 20:3) and a professional priesthood (“Aaron and his sons,” 21:1-24). The lines of purity are clearly demarcated (e.g., animals acceptable for eating, 11:1-47), rationales for the system are provided (20:22-26; 22:31-33), and the means for rectifying infractions are provided in the one, centralized cult (ch. 1-7).

### III. Blood in Leviticus

The Hebrew word for “blood” (*dam*) appears eighty-seven times in the book of Leviticus. Most of these occurrences, however, are in the same context: the use of animal blood in the sacrifices. It is utilized in many ritual actions; representative examples will make the point. Blood is: presented (*hiqrib* 1:5), put (*natan* 4:7), taken (*laqah* 4:5), brought (*hebi* 4:16), dipped in (*tabal*

<sup>5</sup> For the preceding discussion, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (Anchor Bible, 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 976-85; for “the laws of sancta contamination,” see p. 984.

<sup>6</sup> See John H. Elliott, “The Epistle of James in Rhetorical And Social Scientific Perspective: Holiness-Wholeness and Patterns of Replication,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23 (1993):71-81.

4:17), offered (*qarab* 7:33), sprinkled (*hizzah* 5:9), poured (*sapak* 4:7), cleansed with (*hitte'* 14:52), thrown (*zaraq* 1:5), delivered (*himsi'* 9:12), and drained out (*nimsah* 1:15). Thus the handling of the blood must be performed with precision because of its importance in the rituals and its potency.

Animal blood used in sacrifices is seen as a purifying agent, a detergent. The pollution of the priests, leadership, community as a whole, or sanctuary is symbolically cleansed by the right performance of the blood ritual. The correct blood (e.g., bull or goat) ritually manipulated in the prescribed manner and sequence (e.g., offered, sprinkled, dipped in) in the prescribed location (central sanctuary) by the correct person (Aaronide priest) effects purgation of pollution. Most of these issues are made explicit in 16:18-19:

Then he [Aaron] shall proceed to the altar which is before Yahweh and effect purgation upon it. And he shall take some blood from the bull and some blood from the goat and put it all around the horns of the altar. And he shall sprinkle on it some of the blood with his finger seven times. Thus he will purify it and consecrate it of the pollution of the children of Israel. (see also 14:52; 17:11)

But this raises the question: why *blood* and not hooves or meat or some other part of an animal? The answer Leviticus gives is: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have assigned it for you upon the altar to effect purgation for your lives; for it is the blood that effects purgation, because of the life" (17:11; see v14; Deut 12:23). The blood thus symbolizes life: the life of the animal for the life of the community. Blood, as the symbol of life, is the only part of the animal powerful enough to effect purgation, and Yahweh has assigned it. Ezekiel we see the additional notion of the blood and fat as Yahweh's food (44:7).

But even the correct animal blood may not effect purification. Lev 17:1-9 identifies a potential problem area: animals sacrificed, but not brought to the tabernacle, bring about bloodguilt. This danger, many have suggested, relates to the limitation of all animal slaughter to sacrifice.<sup>7</sup> But it is also possible that (at least at one stage in the tradition) this regulation functioned to disallow kinship-based Yahweh religion with local shrines, northern Israelite Yahweh-shrines, as well as shrines to other deities. Following the reforms of king Josiah of Judah (c. 621 BC), Yahweh worship in Judah was officially centralized in (and limited to) the Jerusalem cult (see Deuteronomy 12; 2 Kings 23); and this regulation disallows sacrifices outside of that central sanctuary. In other words, the ritual has to be performed by an authorized professional in an authorized location to be potent; otherwise it becomes a pollutant rather than a detergent. The ritual control of sacrificial blood, therefore, is tied to the symbolic control of the social body: the central state sanctuary (the politically-based Yahweh cult) was the only legitimate locus of sacrifice, and therefore purification. Anyone desiring an "authorized" form of purification had to come to the state-controlled sanctuary, run by the centrally-controlled Aaronide priests.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp. 112-13.

A further issue with regard to animal blood is that it is defiling when it is “eaten” (Lev 17:10-12; see also 3:17; 7:26-27; 19:26a; Deut 12:16, 23; 15:23; 1 Sam 14:32-34; Ezek 33:25). This does not refer to drinking blood (that would presumably be defiling too, but is not the issue), but failing to drain the blood from an animal before cooking and eating it.<sup>8</sup> No explicit explanation is provided in any of these texts other than the blood is assigned for purgation. But the assumption seems to be that the blood belongs to God for purgation, and not to humans (see Gen 9:6).

Animal blood is also defiling when it splashes on the priests’ garments, and it must be washed off in the sanctuary (Lev 6:27), having become a “used detergent” which was now itself contaminated.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere in the Old Testament, blood on garments is a symbol of contamination because of its symbolization of war or murder (e.g., 1 Kgs 2:5; Isa 9:5; Lam 4:14).

A point of blood-purity which comes up several times in Leviticus is vaginal blood: post-partum bleeding, menstruation, and irregular vaginal bleeding (see 12:1-5; 15:19-24; 18:19; 20:18). Some societies evaluate menstruation neutrally, as simply a matter of elimination (e.g., the Rungus of Borneo).<sup>10</sup> Others employ elaborate sets of taboos and regulations to control the negative effects of menstruation (e.g., Turkish village Muslims).<sup>11</sup> And still others value menstruation positively as contributing to the fecundity of the earth (e.g., the Beng of the Ivory Coast).<sup>12</sup>

Leviticus has several rules for the woman’s menstrual period: 1) she is unclean for seven days; 2) anything she lies upon or sits upon is unclean; 3) anyone who touches her, her bedding, or what she has sat upon is unclean until evening; and 4) anyone who has intercourse with her is unclean for seven days (15:19-24). Similar ordinances obtain for a woman with irregular vaginal bleeding (15:25-31). But this is paralleled for men with genital discharges (15:32-33). This is given sacral and cosmic scope (viz. a taboo) in that it relates to both Yahweh and Yahweh’s sanctuary (15:31).

These menstrual regulations and taboos are extremely close to those described by Delaney for the village Turkish Muslims. She concludes: “The fact that a woman is not self-contained and self-controlled but is instead open is interpreted as a sign that she must be socially controlled

---

<sup>8</sup> See Baruch J. Schwartz, “The Prohibition Concerning the ‘Eating’ of Blood in Leviticus 17,” in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (eds. G. A. Anderson and S. M. Olyan; JSOT Supplements, 125; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991) pp. 34-66; John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (Word Biblical Commentary, 4; Waco: Word, 1992), pp. 273-77.

<sup>9</sup> S. David Sperling, “Blood,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 1, p. 760.

<sup>10</sup> For a cross-cultural survey and analysis of attitudes to menstruation see Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, “Critical Appraisal of Theories of Menstrual Symbolism,” in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Ed. T. Buckley and A. Gottlieb; Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), pp. 3-50. For the Rungus, see Laura W. R. Appell, “Menstruation Among the Rungus of Borneo: An Unmarked Category,” in *Blood Magic*, pp. 95-115.

<sup>11</sup> Carol Delaney, “Mortal Flow: Menstruation in Turkish Village Life,” in *Blood Magic*, pp. 75-93.

<sup>12</sup> Alma Gottlieb, “Menstrual Cosmology Among the Beng of Ivory Coast,” in *Blood Magic*, pp. 54-74.

and closed, or covered.”<sup>13</sup> This alerts us that purity codes function as expressions of the overall cultural perspective. In this case, the gender-division of traditional Middle Eastern cultures is expressed in the fear and control of women’s bodies and sexuality. So the “order” for which purity codes strive sometimes results in the restraint, marginalization, or oppression of some of the society’s members; this, then, relates directly to social hierarchy and power. This may prompt a further reflection on how our own culture’s purity codes manifest our fears of and desire to control “the other,” whether the other is defined in terms of gender, sexual orientation, disease, religious affiliation, age, or even homelessness.

One of the interesting omissions from Leviticus is the mention of human life-blood as either polluting or purifying. It certainly addresses murder (Lev 24:17, 21), but the phrase “shedding blood” is not employed (see Deut 21:7). Numbers, on the other hand, describes a murder victim’s blood as polluting the land, and the murderer’s blood as the only means of purification (Numb 35:31-34; see Gen 4:10-11; 9:6; Deut 19:10; Isa 59:3; Ezek 22:3-4; Ps 106:38).

## IV. Purity in Revelation

A clear distinction is made between “clean” and “unclean” persons at both the cosmic and social levels; and many of them are clearly set as parallel formulations (e.g. apostles, false apostles; prophets, false prophets). Without providing all the variations on names for the same characters, the following division is manifested:

**Figure 2: POLAR OPPOSITIONS**

<i>Clean</i>	<i>Unclean</i>
God	Satan, the dragon, the deceiver
Jesus	Death, Hades
Michael	Abaddon, Apollyon
angels	demons
4 living creatures	beast with 10 horns, beast with 2 horns
7 spirits	unclean spirits
12 apostles	false apostles
24 elders	kings of the earth
prophets	false prophet, Jezebel
saints	Nicolaitans
woman & child	harlot

A person belongs to either one group or the other. Attempting to “straddle the fence” does not result in compromise or mediation, but confusion and ultimately banishment. In other words, anomalies are not tolerated:

---

<sup>13</sup> Delaney, “Mortal Flow,” p. 81.

I know you whose performance is neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! Therefore, because you are tepid, and neither cold nor hot, I will spit you from my mouth. (3:15-16)

One of the recurring symbols of purity in Revelation is clothing. "One like a son of man" is described with a long robe, golden belt, head and hair as white as wool and snow, eyes like flames, feet like burnished bronze refined in a furnace (1:13-15). There were people of Sardis who had not "defiled their clothing" and who will "walk in white" (3:4). The image of having robes washed or dipped in blood is employed to describe both the elect and Christ (7:14; 19:13; see also 22:14). The bride of Christ is described as "clothed with fine linen, bright and pure; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (19:8); and the armies of God are similarly arrayed in fine linen (19:14). Thus these visible garments symbolize group-membership, as well as status and honor: therefore, purity as "in-group" and social hierarchy.

Purity is also symbolized spatially. While the saints must live among the rest of society for the time being, they will eventually be separated from Babylon in order to prevent contamination (18:4-5). In the earthly temple, God's people are in the inner courtyards (11:1), while the "nations" are in the outer courtyards (11:2). Furthermore, in the new Jerusalem, only those who have washed their robes are allowed inside the "holy city" (22:14). Those left outside the city are the morally corrupt: the "dogs" (22:15), and nothing "accursed" is allowed inside (22:3).

A further major category of purity regards morality in the broadest sense: sorcery, sexual impurity, murder, idolatry, falsehood (e.g., 9:21; 21:8, 27; 22:15). Those who practice such things are part of the "out-group," and they are described as unrepentant. Thus, the community of the faithful is seen as distinct from all others who participate in these activities. The community is also seen as under attack by these polluting and demonic forces, addressed especially in Revelation 12-19:

And it [the dragon] was given a mouth speaking grandiose and blasphemous things; and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months . . . And it was permitted to make war on the saints and conquer them. (13:5,7)

So the social body is under attack from external forces, from which it cannot fully withstand. Ultimately, the Lamb has to deliver the community from these persecutions.

On the other hand, the community is also struggling with deviance within. This is addressed especially in the "letters to the churches" in Revelation 2-3. While praising most of the churches for their faithfulness in general, the prophet raises serious defects in the congregations. The Ephesians abandoned their first love (2:4). The churches at Pergamum and Thyatira have some who falsely teach the eating of meat offered to idols, practice immorality, and listen to a false prophetess (2:14, 20). The church at Sardis has the reputation of being "lively," but they are really at the point of death (3:1). The church at Laodicea thinks it is rich, prosperous, and lacking in nothing; but the prophet describes them as "miserable, and pitiable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (3:17). Only the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia escape the prophet's accusations. Thus the internal boundaries in most of these churches are confused, and the prophet has to expose their deviance.

The remedy for these churches is to repent and change their behavior (2:5, 16, 21; 3:3, 19). No special purificatory rite is directed, and presumably none is needed. For those already within the community, repentance and alteration is sufficient.

Like Leviticus, Revelation roots holiness or purity in God's nature:

“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true...” (6:10)

“Just and true are your ways...” (15:3)

“For you alone are holy” (15:4)

“. . . true and just are your judgments” (16:7; 19:2)

And this holiness is further attributed to Christ: “He who sat upon it [the white horse] is called ‘Faithful and True’; and in righteousness he judges and makes war” (19:11). Thus the purity of the community takes its cues from the purity of God and Christ. This exemplifies the fact that it was important in ancient societies to root purity codes (explicit or implicit) in a cosmic dimension.

## **V. Blood in Revelation**

Blood is a potent symbol in Revelation. It will be useful to begin by looking at the references to blood in the same three categories found in Leviticus and expand from those: animal blood, human life-blood, and vaginal blood.

Animal blood is never used literally, but only metaphorically in Revelation as “the blood of the Lamb,” referring to Christ's death (7:14; 12:11; see also 19:13). This demonstrates a real departure from the Jerusalem cult's use of blood from bulls, goats, lambs, and birds. No more sacrificial cult is envisioned in this nascent Christian community. Instead, Christ's blood is what is efficacious for redemption and freedom from sin:

You [the Lamb] are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; for you were violently slain, and you redeemed for God by your blood those from every tribe and language and people and nation. And you made them for God a kingdom and priests, and they shall reign on the earth. (5:9-10; see 1:5)

This provides an alternative ideology: instead of an Aaronide priesthood who must ritually manipulate animal blood in a sanctuary, the Lamb's blood accomplished redemption for all and created a new community in which all members are symbolically “priests.”

Several conclusions follow from this. Purity derives from what the Lamb has done, not what the community has done (see Lev 20:7-8). It also does not derive from membership in a politically defined cultic-group of Israelites, but is composed of people from all groups. The “in-group” is thus diverse and scattered; and one of the implications of this is that there is no central control mechanism. And since all are “priests,” no clear social hierarchy is in place within the group; no select group of official cultic personnel is required to perform the rituals.

This image of the “blood of the Lamb” also reverses the categorization of blood on garments as seen in Lev 6:27. Instead of polluting, the Lamb’s blood becomes a metaphor of purification when the saints and “the Word of God” wash their robes in it (Lev 7:14; 19:13). Rather than the used detergent that may splash the priest’s vestments, in Revelation’s description washing one’s garments in blood becomes a symbol of either purification and belonging (7:14) or empowerment (19:13; see also 12:11).

Human life-blood comes into play especially in the case of martyred “saints and prophets.” First of all, the community cries out to God for vengeance for the innocent deaths in the Christians (6:10). As in Numb 35:33-34, the shedding of innocent blood calls for the blood of the murderer (Rev 16:6; 17:6; 18:24). But unlike the regulation in Numbers, the vengeance is not executed by the legal community, but by God:

Halleluyah! Deliverance and honor and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments: for he has condemned the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her impurity; and he has avenged the blood of his servants upon her.  
(19:1-2)

One may conclude from this is that the community is in no position to exact its own vengeance; it must come from God, and that only when God is ready (6:11; see Lev 26:25). The purity of balanced bloodletting, like that of purifying the people, will happen only by God’s action and in God’s time.

As a further image of this purification balance, God gives the murderers blood to drink as a punishment: “it is appropriate” (16:6). As this last reference demonstrates, it plays on an Israelite sensibility of consumed blood as a contaminant, as well as the added element punishment (Lev 3:17; 19:26; Deut 12:23-25).

And finally, menstrual blood is not explicitly mentioned in Revelation. One text, however, refers to it obliquely. In the letter to Thyatira, Jezebel, the false prophetess, is thrown “on her sickbed” (2:22) and those who “commit adultery with her” are judged. The term “sick” is a euphemism for a woman in menstruation in Lev 15:33, and the image in Revelation seems to be of men who lie with Jezebel while she is impure because of menstruation. If this interpretation is correct, then the prophet/author of Revelation is clearly perpetuating the purity traditions of the Middle East in which women’s blood is seen as dangerous and contaminating. This continuity of tradition with regard to menstrual blood would have been easy to maintain for early Christians since it is not directly related to the Judean cult or the relationship between Israelite Yahwists and gentiles. Women were certainly leaders in some of the early Christian communities (e.g., Prisca and Junia). But one can only regret that fundamental issues of gender-division in relation to social

organization and hierarchy did not seem to receive the same challenge and cultural critique in the first century as the “gentile” issue.<sup>14</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

The texts from both Leviticus and Revelation demonstrate that blood is a focalizing, or dominant ritual symbol (as defined by Turner) in both Israelite Yahwism and nascent Christianity. The recurring issues of blood in both these texts cut to the core of values in ancient Mediterranean societies and highlight the potency of blood-symbolism: cult, life and death, and the control of women’s bodies. Blood-symbolism exemplifies the core of purity ideology, which depends upon clear lines of demarcation, not only of objects like blood, but of how people act. In order to be “pure,” the community has to respect and maintain the purity boundaries. Objects have to be handled in the proper way, and pollution follows the inappropriate use of them.

These texts do not represent the same purity standards of modern Western societies in certain respects. Sacrifice and blood-vengeance do not fit in modern Jewish or Christian sensibilities. But the on-going debate in the courts— and society as a whole— over the efficacy of capital punishment in the U.S. does highlight the diversity in our society. And the willingness to speak in public about anything genital has been breached only in recent years by advertisements for feminine hygiene products. Murder in our society is certainly a *crime*, but in U.S. law it does not include the cosmic dimension of impurity and the pollution of the land. The “blood of Christ” has been part of a long debate in Church history with regard to differing understandings of the Eucharist; and it remains a dividing point between official theologies in Eastern and Western communions, as well as Roman Catholics and Protestants. The power of this symbol in Christian ideology can hardly be underestimated. Perhaps systems of purity in different Christian traditions need to be examined alongside symbol, myth, and theologies of atonement. An old hymn proclaims “there is power in the blood”; but we must recognize that the understanding of that power depends heavily upon the purity system to which one is oriented. The following chart summarizes the discussion, and provides examples of the various ways blood is categorized as purifying or polluting in Leviticus and Revelation.

---

<sup>14</sup> See e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); and Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993).

**Figure 3: Blood as Detergent and Pollutant**

<i>Type of Blood</i>	<i>Purifies</i>	<i>Pollutes</i>
<b>animal blood</b>	<b>sacrifice</b> Lev 16:27; Rev 5:9 <b>on garments</b> Rev 7:14	<b>eating/drinking</b> Lev 17:10-12; Rev 16:6 <b>on garments</b> Lev 6:27
<b>human life-blood</b>	<b>vengeance</b> [Lev 26:25]; Rev 19:2	<b>murder</b> [Lev 24:17]; Rev 17:6
<b>vaginal blood</b>	—	<b>post-partum</b> Lev 12:1-5 <b>menstruation</b> Lev 15:19-24 [Rev 2:2] <b>irregular</b> Lev 15:25-31

If we are to understand the ancient texts which Jewish and Christian communities hold as scripture, we must pay close attention to how symbols such as blood bear deep emotive power, communicating anger, disgust, relief, and devotion. They are part of larger systems of meaning and self-understanding, and cannot be pulled out of context without loss. Understanding the purity systems of ancient Israelites and early Christians can also help us reflect on our own systems of meaning and the culturally-defined systems of purity in which we participate.