

# Rationales Are Theology in the Holiness Code

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H and P are two priestly sources. H stands for the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17–27) and P for the Priestly Code (Leviticus 1–16). H is a supplement to and the editor of P. Both P and H are also distributed in large portions of Exodus and Numbers, but this essay will focus only on the rationales of H in Leviticus 17–27.

From the Holiness Code, I shall select one example: Leviticus 20:24–25. This selection is especially important because it fuses two major theological planks in H's program—separation and holiness—and anchors their foundation in the basic themes of creation and life. Separation (*hivdil*; Leviticus 20:24–26) is the leitmotif of the creation story (see Genesis 1:4, 7, 14, 18) as embodied in the Priestly Code. Separation of the elements and species produces order out of chaos<sup>1</sup> and allows for life to multiply and fill the earth (see Genesis 1:22–28). Similarly, Israel's dietary code (Leviticus 11), which declares most of the meat in the animal kingdom off limits (*sheqets*, “abomination,” or *tāmē*’, “impure”), is based on a reverence-for-life principle, an aspect of P's life-versus-death theme<sup>2</sup> throughout all of its impurity laws (Leviticus 11–15).

As shown recently by Jan Baersema,<sup>3</sup> P does not limit this principle to forbidden flesh. It states that a carcass (of the eight impure *sherets*; Leviticus 11:29–30) falling on moist seed (but not on dry seed) renders the seed impure (Leviticus 37–38), probably because the moist seed has germinated; it has produced life, and life must not come into contact with death (the carcass). Thus the life-death antipodes are the basis of all the dietary laws. H propels it one giant step forward in declaring *tāmē*’, “impure,” to be the incompatible antithesis of a quality of YHWH expressed by the term *qādōsh*, “holy,” a quality that should be emulated by all of Israel (see Leviticus 11:44; 19:2; 20:26). Thus adherence to the dietary laws—namely, eschewing contact with the world of impurity—forms an indispensable step in Israel's ascent on the ladder of holiness.

Israel's separation from the nations is the continuation (and climax) of the cosmic creation process. Just as YHWH has separated the mineral, vegetable, and animal species to create order in the *natural* world, so Israel must separate from the nations to be a model people, thereby creating order in the *human* world. Israel is thus charged with a universal goal.

It should not be forgotten that H was well aware (at least by oral transmission) of the antediluvian legends. The creation of the first human pair ends in failure: the violence of Cain and his descendant Lamech, miscegenation (intermarriage) with celestial beings (see Genesis 6:1–4), and *hāmas*, or universal “violence” (Genesis 6:13). The polluted earth is cleansed by a flood; God tries again with the righteous survivor Noah, hoping to avert failure by imposing law (see Genesis 9:1–6).<sup>4</sup> This experiment also fails with Noah himself (see Genesis 9:21) and with his descendants, who defy God in Babylon by building up instead of spreading out (see Genesis 11:1–9; contra 1:28). Furthermore, H (or its redactor) is fully cognizant of the patriarchal narrative of the epic tradition of the Jahwist and Elohist traditions. Thus, God decides on an individual who willingly “spreads out” from his sinful society and builds a family obedient to God (see Genesis 18:19). P's Abraham is commanded: “Walk in my ways and be blameless (*mm*)” (Genesis 17:1). Just as the life of Abraham will become a standard for blessing throughout the nations (see Genesis 12:3), so too will the exemplary lives of his progeny (see Genesis 26:4).

Israel, following YHWH's commandments, will evoke admiration and emulation throughout the world, indicated by the *nif'al* and *hitpa'el* of \*BRK followed by the preposition *b* (in Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; cf.

Genesis 48:20; Psalm 72:17; Isaiah 65:16; Jeremiah 4:2). The *nif'al* bears a reflexive connotation equivalent to the *hitpa'el*, both meaning “bless themselves by.”<sup>5</sup> Abraham, Jacob, and their progeny will be a standard for blessing chiefly because they represent *ṣedāqāh umišpāt*, “righteousness and justice” (Genesis 18:18–19; 22:18).

I presume that H was fully aware of the Genesis narratives if for no other reason than being heir to P's narrative strand, which by the time of H had become integrated with the Jahwist/Elohist editor (JE).<sup>6</sup> Even if the cosmogonic and patriarchal legends were known to H's tradents only by oral transmission, they would have recognized that the patriarchs, in spite of (or through) their faults, were credible models of behavior. Thus when H demands that Israel separate from the nations, it has in mind that Israel's *imitatio dei* will generate a universal *imitatio israeli*.

It does not happen. In the time of Hezekiah<sup>7</sup> and the author of Leviticus 17–27 (with few exceptions), social injustice and individual criminality are rampant. H thereupon devises a plan whereby Israel's purpose on earth can be achieved. To P's life-death principle, which governs its impurity laws, H attaches prescriptions for attaining holiness.<sup>8</sup> The separation from all things impure is the first rung on the ladder of holiness. H's rungs are specified in Leviticus 19.

When H prescribes separation from Egypt and Canaan (see Leviticus 18:3) because of their sexual mores (see 18:6–23), it should be borne in mind that they serve as mere illustrations of all the improper practices (*ma'aseh*) and laws (*ḥuqqôt*) that Israel should avoid. Instead, Israel should follow the life-giving laws of YHWH (see 18:5). In truth, nowhere does H state explicitly that the purpose of Israel's separation is to create a model people for nations to emulate. But H did inherit the tradition that the moral behavior of the patriarchs, the model for their descendants, was intended to influence the behavior of their neighbors (see Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 26:4).

Separation does not mean isolation. Israel is completely integrated into its surroundings commercially and culturally. If, in H's view, non-Israelites will witness how Israel treats the *gēr*, “alien” (Leviticus 24:22),<sup>9</sup> and the poor (see Leviticus 19:9–10); abolishes slavery (see Leviticus 25:39–43);<sup>10</sup> and cancels debts and restores confiscated land (see Leviticus 25:8–17)<sup>11</sup>—for which God will reward Israel with prosperity and security (see Leviticus 26:3–13)—how could they (the non-Israelites) not be induced to behave similarly (see also Deuteronomy 4:8)? How far, indeed, is the incipient transnational role from the servant poems of the exilic Isaiah, which predict that Israel will be *le'ôr gôyim*, “a light of the nations” (Isaiah 42:6–7; 49:6; 51:4; cf. 61:1)?

After all, the divine promise to the patriarchs and H's concrete plan for achieving holiness by separation from the ways of others and obedience to YHWH's commandments—all these lie before exilic Isaiah. Is he not standing on the shoulders of the patriarchal traditions and H's legislation?

It is a special pleasure to dedicate this brief essay to my longtime friends Truman (Amittai) and Ann (Hannah) Madsen, who stand firmly and devoutly on the “shoulders” of the Hebrew language and scripture.

## Notes

1. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1996), 55–57.

2. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 732–35; see the correction in Jacob Milgrom, “Does H Advocate the Centralization of Worship?” *JOT* 88 (2000): 59–76.

3. Jan J. Baersema, *Thora nen stoa over nens en natur: En bijdraga aan het milieu bebat over duurzaamheid en kwalitit* (Nijkerk, Netherlands: Callenbach, 1999).
4. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1–9," *Biblical Archaeologist* 40 (1977): 147–55.
5. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo bar Yitzhaq, 1040–1105), *Torat Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1986), 151 (in Hebrew); and Shadal (Samuel David Luzzato, 1800–1865), *Commentary on the Pentateuch* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965), 61, on Genesis 12:3. Compare also Arnold Ehrlich, *Hamiqra Kiphshuto*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1901), 1:32; Samuel R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 5th ed. (London: Methuen, 1906), 145; Benno Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Torah: Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934), 337–39; Harry M. Orlinsky, *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), 85; Moshe Weinfeld, *Genesis* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Gorden, 1975), 61.
6. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1439–43.
7. *Ibid.*, 1382–93.
8. *Ibid.*, 1397–1400; 1711–26; compare David P. Wright, "Holiness in Leviticus and Beyond," *Interpretation* 53/4 (1999): 351–64.
9. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1416–20.
10. *Ibid.*, 1400–1404; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2212–28.
11. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1407–9 n. 6.