

Clean & Unclean Things

The idea of "clean and unclean" is not only a major concept in the levitical laws of the Old Testament, it also continues to define the lives of modern practicing Jews and Muslims, and to raise anxieties for many Christians. So, what exactly is meant by "clean" and "unclean" and are Christians bound by these regulations?

A Common Misconception of 'Clean' and 'Unclean'

Before we look at the meaning of these terms let us dispel with one of the commonest misconceptions about them: they have nothing to do with hygiene. This misconception is reflected in the often repeated assertion, e.g., that the pig is unclean because it harbours parasites which make their consumption a threat to health. Modern animal husbandry has rendered these health issues null-n-void. In fact, from the point of view of environmental concerns, the pig is one of the friendliest animals to rear for food, producing more meat for each unit weight of resources it consumes than many other animals. Nonetheless, the pig remains—from the point of view of the levitical laws—unclean, however hygienic it may be made by modern farming practices. These Old Testament terms are ritual/ceremonial terms; their meanings

are, therefore, to be found within the context of how ancient Israel understood her relationship with God and how to properly honour Him as God and Lord within that relationship in their daily lives.

The Meaning of 'Clean' and 'Unclean'

Most discussions about the 'clean' and 'unclean' things tend to get lost looking at all the trees, so to speak. What is needed in understanding them is rather to look at the forest. Let us, therefore, begin with the meaning of these two words. The English word 'clean' generally translates the Hebrew *tabor*, which in its various forms may be used as a verb, hence 'cleans', noun, 'cleanness,' or adjective, 'clean.' All told, *tabor* occurs 204 times in the OT, predominantly in Lev and Num (44%), and Exo (16%), Chron and Eze (14% each). 'Unclean,' on the other hand, translates *tame*; in its various forms, it occurs 279 times in the OT, the bulk of which is found in the books of Lev and Num (64%) and Eze (15%). (It may help to refer to the diagram "The World of the Clean and Unclean" at this point.)

Fundamentally, *tabor* speaks of purity. This sense of the word is clearly expressed in the many commands and references in OT on the use; *zāhav tabor*, th "pure gold" used in the construction of the ark of the covenant and the other paraphernalia of worship, as well as the later temple and Solomon's vessels. By implication, *tame* is that which is impure, tainted, contaminated, adulterated, corrupted. This may seem to suggest that an object is 'unclean' because it became unclean, and was in a prior state of cleanness to which it may return. According to the levitical instructions, this is the case with some objects. So, e.g., personal uncleanness is incurred through menstruation, bodily emissions, leprosy, and contact with death. The land and the temple become defiled by idolatry. Some objects, however,

are unclean of themselves. So, e.g., Noah was commanded to collect 'clean' (*tabor*) and 'not clean' (*lo' tabor*) animals for the ark (Gen 7:2, 8; 8:20), and no explanation is given regarding why the 'clean' animals are clean and the others not. There does not seem to be any rituals by which, or circumstances in the OT where, an 'unclean' animal can possibly be made 'clean'. They are and remain always 'unclean'.

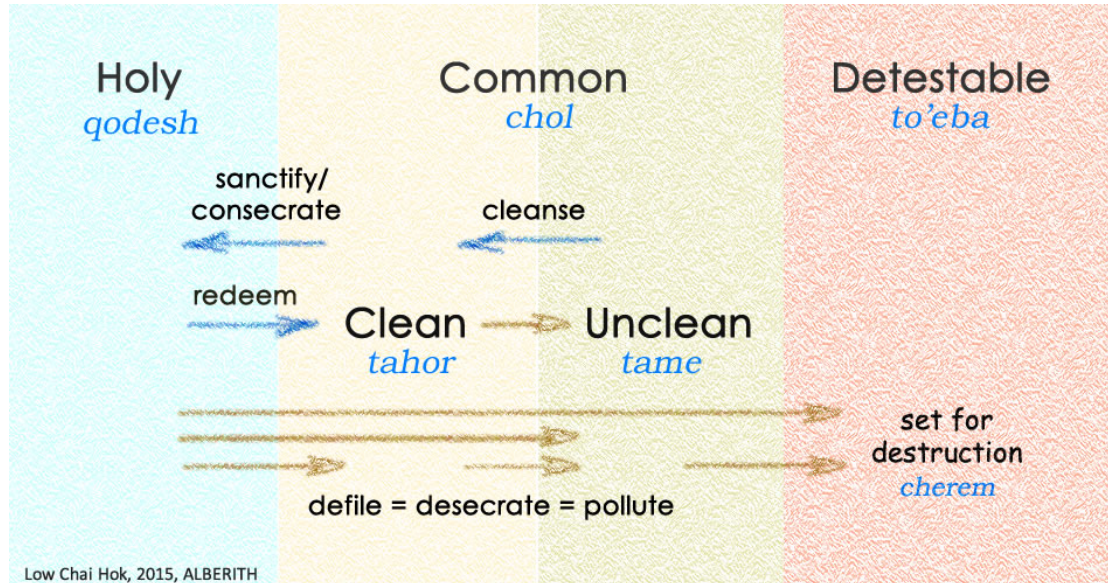
A number of theories have been postulated to explain how and on what basis such things are so classified. While some of them merit being interesting none have proven satisfactory, and all are speculative. Although it is probable that there was an existing scheme by which things, especially animals, were recognized as 'clean' or 'unclean'—notice that Noah understood the instruction without further explanation—the basis of such a scheme is now entirely lost to us. Moreover, this concept of clean and unclean also predates the revelation of the levitical laws at Sinai. After taking together all that Scriptures has to say, we are left with the inevitable conclusion that it is God's declaration that decides what is clean and what is unclean. We concur with Edwin Yamauchi, who says,

Whatever theories are adduced to explain the laws of uncleanness, the Scriptures themselves emphatically associate them with the holiness of God. The so-called Law of Purity (Lev 11-16) was placed side by side with the Law of Holiness (Lev 17-26). In the passages which list unclean foods, the holiness of Yahweh is emphasized as the reason for avoiding unclean foods."

"*tame*", TWOT, 350.

The key to understanding the idea of 'clean' and 'unclean', we believe, is to be found in the commandment given in Lev 10:10, "You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean." We propose

here a conceptual schema of how the OT views all things accessible to humans as falling along a ritual spectrum that integrates the ideas of what is holy (*qodesh*), common (*chol*), clean (*tahor*) and unclean (*tame*) expressed in Lev 10:10, together with other instructions about what is abominable (*to'eba*).



According to this conceptual schema, all things fall along a spectrum that ranges between the two extremes of holiness and abomination. Neither of these things are fit for human consumption. What is holy is 'set apart' for Yahweh, and can only be used by Yahweh and those specifically appointed to do so, such as the priests and the Levites. Even so, these appointed persons can handle what is holy only after they have been carefully prepared by the various prescribed rituals of "sanctification." The penalty for transgressing the boundaries of holiness is death.

What is abominable/detestable (*to'eba*) is repugnant to Yahweh and, therefore, should also be repugnant to any who worships Him. Often associated with abominations is the term *cherem*, a word with no English equivalent but is often translated "devoted things." The word denotes, essentially,

something so hateful to God that it deserves only irrevocable destruction, and where it cannot be destroyed it is to be appropriated into the cult of Yahweh and, therefore, taken out of circulation from the people. Examples of such objects include "whoever sacrifices to any god other than the Lord" (Exo 22:16), "the many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you— . . . you must destroy them totally" (Deut 7:1-2), "the images of their gods" (Deut 7:25-26), the spoils of the wars of conquest, such as Achan took for himself (Jos 7:1ff). As with things which are holy, so the penalty for transgressing the boundaries of the detestable is death.

Between these two extremes we find what is common *chol*. Again, the Hebrew word has no English equivalent, and the translation of it various forms by different English words, such as "profane," "defile," "pollute," "desecrate," have tended to cloud the meaning of the word. The word shares the same root as *halal*, the Arabic adjective used by Muslims to describe what is permitted for them, in contrast to *haram*, what is forbidden. It may be instructive to look at the seven occurrences of the Hebrew noun in the OT:

You must distinguish between the holy (*qodesh*) and the common (*chol*), between the unclean (*tame*) and the clean (*tahor*). (Lev 10:10)

But the priest answered David, "I don't have any ordinary (*chol*) bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated (*qodesh*) bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women." David replied, "Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out. The men's things are holy (*qodesh*) even on missions that are not holy (*chol*). How much more so today!" (1 Sam 21:4-5)

Her priests do violence to my law
and profane (root: *chol*) my holy things; they do not
distinguish between the holy (*qodesh*) and
the common (*chol*); they teach that there is no
difference between the unclean (*tame* and
the clean (*tabor*); and they shut their eyes to the
keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I
am profaned (root: *chol*) among them. (Eze 22:26)

So [the Lord] measured the area on all four sides. It
had a wall around it, five hundred cubits long and
five hundred cubits wide, to separate the holy (*qodesh*)
from the common (*chol*). (Eze 42:20)

The [priests] are to teach my people the difference
between the holy (*qodesh*) and the common (*chol*) and
show them how to distinguish between the unclean
and the clean. (Eze 44:23)

"The remaining area, 5,000 cubits wide and 25,000
cubits long, will be for the common (*chol*) use of the
city, for houses and for pastureland. The city will be
in the center of it . . . (Eze 48:15)

Rather than describing what is "defiled," "polluted," or
"desecrated," which in common parlance implies that the
object is 'unclean,' the references to *chol* cited above speaks
of what is not 'holy' but neither is it displeasing to God as to
be proscribed from proper use. What is *chol* is—when
properly managed—available for human consumption. We
may discern a number of elements associated with the realm
of the *chol*, "common."

1. When a object is "set apart," "sanctified," (*qadash*) it
becomes "holy" (*qodesh*) to Yahweh. When that object is
redeemed and taken out of such cultic dedication, it
becomes *chol*, "common," and may now be returned to

everyday use. (The verb 'desecrate,' understood as 'desecrate,' i.e., 'made not holy' may properly be used here; however, the use of the verb in our modern setting implies making the thing an abomination and is, therefore, best avoided.)

2. If a "holy" article comes into contact with what is 'unclean,' *tame*, that object itself becomes 'unclean'; it then has to be removed not only from cultic dedication but also from human consumption. Any person who comes into contact with such an object becomes 'unclean.'

3. Such an 'unclean' object, however, need not remain 'unclean' forever. There are a number of ritual or ceremonial provisions for such 'uncleaned' to be made 'clean,' and then with other sets of ritual provisions be made 'holy' again. This process is best and clearly seen in the sanctification of the priests. Properly 'sanctified,' i.e., made holy, he may enter and serve in the Temple. If he comes into contact with 'unclean' things, he becomes 'unclean,' or 'defiled.' But he is not killed, merely taken out of temporary circulation, until he is 'cleansed,' when he is ready once again to be 'sanctified' or "consecrated."

4. Some things, however, are designated 'unclean,' and no amount of cleansing will change the fact. Nonetheless, these things—such as the unclean animals, though forbidden as food or contact—*are not* of such a nature that they are hateful to God. They are part of the natural world He has created.

With these relationships between the various terms clearly in view, we can begin to understand the conceptual framework within which ancient Israelites went about their life. These concepts were intended to help Israel inculcate a spirituality of the presence of God and, therefore, of the need to 'grow' the space in which she dwells into one in which God would be pleased to share. Ultimately, what the

Israelite did in terms of obedience to these ritual requirements is a matter of their relationship with God, how they view Him and make space in their lives for Him.

But, like all things ritual and ceremonial, these instructions God has given to safeguard their holiness (i.e., suitability to share in God's presence) also sit on a knife's edge. It is easy to fall over to one side and, even through sheer habit, to turn them into mindless routines or a set of mechanical, almost magical, formulae through which we feel we have attained to right to be counted right with God. They then become not the weave and wove of a healthy relationship but the quid pro quo of a transaction. And the more punctiliously they are kept the more determined the keepers of these instructions would feel they have a right to be counted righteous before God; they had "worked hard" for it. If we read the Old Testament right, however, we see that, if anything, the system is meant to fall on the other side of the knife's edge. The instructions for clean and unclean living were meant to be taken seriously and conscientiously—they have to do with God, after all—but they were not intended to be obeyed so punctiliously that even the slightest lapse will be fatal to the relationship with God. Yahweh never had any trouble living with those who fail—and know that they had failed—because, like the tax collector who stood at a distance from the rest of people in the temple, who dared not look up to heaven, "but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner,'" (Lk 18:13), He knows they will seek His forgiveness and be grateful for His mercy. And He knows they will be the one who will keep their spiritual space 'clean' so that He may be glad to dwell with them. This is, in the end, what the 'laws' of clean and unclean things—in fact, all of the torah—are about.

Are Christians Bound by these Regulations?

The answer is 'Yes' and 'No.' Yes, because these are revelations, God's instructions and, therefore, His intention that we should be holy. At the same time, however, these regulations are expressed in terms meaningful to the particular historical and cultural contexts in which ancient Israel lived. Christians are, therefore, not bound to them as that divine intention is so expressed. Moreover, we live with the radically new context inaugurated by what Jesus has taught and accomplished on the Cross on our behalf and His resurrection. Take, e.g.,

"Are you so dull?" he [Jesus] asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him `unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean".) He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him `unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man `unclean'" (Mk 7:18-23).

God affirmed this new understanding in the paradigm-transforming vision He gave to Peter when He summoned Peter to go minister to Cornelius:

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter.

Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. (Acts 10:9-16)

Christians are bound, therefore, in as far as they are called and commanded to "be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Pet 1:15). "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:1-2). To make space in our life so that God may be pleased to dwell therein with us is both a Christian privilege and a joy as it was for the elect of ancient Israel. We keep that intention but we now express it differently.

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