

Reformed Theological Seminary- Charlotte

Birds of a Feather Flock Together- Unless They Are Slaughtered During the Ritual
Cleansing Rite for Those Healed of a Skin Disease:
an Expository Discourse on
Leviticus 14:1-7

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Leviticus 14:1-7

¹The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“This shall be the law of the leprous person for the day of his cleansing. He shall be brought to the priest, ³and the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall look. Then, if the case of leprous disease is healed in the leprous person, ⁴the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop. ⁵And the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. ⁶He shall take the live bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water. ⁷And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease. Then he shall pronounce him clean and shall let the living bird go into the open field.”

Introduction

Leviticus is, or at least seems to be, one of the least studied books of the Bible.¹ Many find it a complicated, confusing, and outdated book that is neither helpful for Christian living nor beneficial for study.² Passages in Leviticus are often taken out of context and used to show the absurdness of the Bible, which generally demonstrates the misunderstandings of the reader instead. However, every law in Leviticus is included in scripture for a reason and is profitable for teaching.³ Leviticus plays an important role in the understanding of redemption, especially concerning the holiness of God, and subsequently the holiness required of those who come to worship him. This paper shows, by looking at Leviticus 14:1-7, how even something as inconsequential as skin disease requires cleansing in order to be brought back into communion with the people of Israel and the congregation of worshipers of Yahweh, and how this physical, ritual cleansing is reminiscent of the cleansing required for all sinful people to be reconciled to a Holy God.

¹ Philip H. Eveson, *The Beauty of Holiness* (Darlington: Evangelical, 2007), 13.

² And possibly gross.

³ Also breathed out by God etc. 2 Timothy 3:16.

Context

The book of Leviticus is the direct continuation of the book of Exodus and continues with the giving of the law by God at Sinai.⁴ This episode at Sinai was “primarily the establishment of the relationship of God and Israel.”⁵ The function of these laws was to “spell out in detail the means by which the relationship is to be maintained.”⁶ Leviticus contained different categories of laws, including the purity laws revealed in chapters 11-16.

Leviticus 14:1-7 contains laws regarding the first portion of the cleansing ritual for those who have been healed of a skin disease. This ritual contains many interesting elements that are reminiscent of the ritual for those having touched a corpse, and the Day of Atonement scapegoat ritual; identifying the healed person as one who was once dead, but now healed, and brought back into life and communion with the nation and Yahweh.

These purity laws were intended to express what was considered clean and unclean, holy and ordinary. One of the major themes of Leviticus is the holiness of God. The Hebrew root for the word holiness is *קדש*; this word conveys the idea of being set apart or pure.⁷ Because the God of the Israelites is holy, pure, and set apart he requires the holiness of his people.⁸ The Israelites are to be set apart from the surrounding nations in their worship of Yahweh. Yahweh was also present in the camp with his people; because of His presence the purity of the camp had to be

⁴ Michael G. McKelvey, “Leviticus” in *A Biblical- Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed., Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 291. The waw consecutive used here indicates that it is grammatically connected to something, most likely the previous section (the giving of the Law at Sinai).

⁵ David. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Great Britain: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 53.

⁶ Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 54.

⁷ “קדש”, Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, trans. and ed., M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1073.

⁸ McKelvey, “Leviticus”, 94. The people of Israel were commanded to “be holy, for I am holy”. These commands are given in order for the people to know how to be a holy people in communion with a holy God.

properly upheld.⁹ Thusly, the laws found in Leviticus are laws concerning how Israel is “to live and worship as his chosen people.”¹⁰ Some have argued that the law shown in this passage is a pagan ritual used by the Israelites, however, it is more likely that the similarities are a result of polemics used by Yahweh to show his true power.¹¹

The ritual law shown in Leviticus 14 is therefore not an arbitrary rule, but one of the necessary components for living near a holy God; it is an “implication of belonging to God”.¹² Since all of Leviticus is focused on the holiness of God and the ramifications that has for the people of Israel it should not be shocking that there are laws and rituals concerning all aspects of life, even skin diseases.

Translating צָרַע

The word צָרַע is often translated as leprous or leper, but does not necessarily refer to the leprous disease known today as Hansen’s Disease.¹³ Though this disease could have been included in the scope of the cleansing laws, the laws more accurately refer to and describe a number of diseases that produce malformations of the skin.¹⁴ There are those who attempt to discern what specific disease this law refers to, but they are misguided in their search and often misunderstand the

⁹ Richard S. Hess, “Leviticus” in *Genesis-Leviticus*, EBC 1, rev. ed., ed., Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 574.

¹⁰ McKelvey, “Leviticus”, 91.

¹¹ Yitzhaq Feder, “Behind the Scenes of a Priestly Polemic: Leviticus 14 and its Extra-Biblical Parallels”, *JHebS* 15: 4, 1-27.

¹² McKelvey, “Leviticus”, 92.

¹³ Hess, “Leviticus”, 691.

¹⁴ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus, A Book of Ritual and Ethics: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 127. Milgrom tells how he invited a dermatologist to present on the topic. The dermatologist could not identify the disease but said that producing scales was the commonality between all of the afflictions described. This does not prove what the disease is but it can help us understand that the afflictions spoken of were varied and we not Hansen’s Disease. Also, Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 816.

objective of this law.¹⁵ The skin diseases listed primarily bring about ritual impurity, not a medical impurity.¹⁶ It is more likely and consistent with the purpose of the law that the quarantine was for ritual purposes, as ritual uncleanness was contagious to others, and not for hygienic reasons.¹⁷ The laws in Leviticus do not attempt to diagnose, heal, or cure this disease for medicinal purposes, but to inform the priests how they are to know what to declare clean and unclean.¹⁸ Again, this law, like all of Leviticus, functions in terms of holiness and cleanness; its purpose is not to function as a hygienic model, but to show how a person can be “fit for worship.”¹⁹

Cleansing as a Process

This particular ritual described in Leviticus 14 is actually a multi-step process that enables the person healed from a skin disease to fully re-enter their life among the Israelites and Yahweh. Some have divided the process into two parts: verses 2-8 as the rite for readmission to the community and verses 9-31 as the rite for readmission to the congregation.²⁰ Others, such as Erhard Gerstenberger see the ritual as three distinct parts, dividing it by the proclamation that the person is clean, made at the end of each section (verses 8, 9, 20).²¹ Gerstenberger assumes this is clear evidence for there once being three distinct rituals that were combined over time.²² Yet the idea of this process having two distinct functions, readmission into

¹⁵ Lloyd R. Bailey, *Leviticus-Numbers* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 167. Bailey does this very thing in his commentary on Leviticus.

¹⁶ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 127.

¹⁷ Some of these sicknesses may have been contagious but others that would have been including under the heading of צִדְיָעַ would not have been contagious (like skin cancer or psoriasis).

¹⁸ Hess, “Leviticus”, 691. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 817.

¹⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: a Guide to the Pentateuch*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 91. Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 207.

²⁰ John. W. Kleinig, *Leviticus*, ConcC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2003), 294.

²¹ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: a Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 175.

²² Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 175.

the community and into the congregation is more likely. The person being cleansed is brought first, back inside the camp, then back inside his tent, and then back to the tabernacle. It should not be assumed that this ritual was once three separate rituals later combined but that there are “degrees of cleanness.”²³ As a person moved closer and closer to the place where Yahweh was to be found he/she was required to be more pure and fit for worship.²⁴

Content

For the day of his cleansing

Leviticus 14:2 describes this law as being “for the day of his cleansing”, this is significant in that it does not describe the law for the day of the person’s healing. Jacob Milgrom, a Leviticus scholar, describes how the connotation of healing is deliberately avoided in these writings “in order to divorce ritual purification from theurgic rites.”²⁵ In the text it is clear that there was no sense that this ritual was enacted in order to cure; the priest was not doing anything to heal the diseased person.²⁶ These rituals are clearly to be done after the diseased person is healed.²⁷ It was assumed that when the priest goes outside the camp that the person’s skin has been changed.²⁸ It is also important to note that though the person is healed at this

²³ Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, AOTC 3 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 251.

²⁴ Richard S. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 91. Hess discusses the idea from moving from holy to profane and how the presence of Yahweh in a space affected what was used and who was allowed in the space.

²⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 831.

²⁶ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 207.

²⁷ Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus*, NAC 3A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 194. Also, John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC 4 (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 194.

²⁸ It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss exactly how diseased persons were healed but we will assume that some of these healings were miraculous. There are those who argue that the disease was a minor skin condition (possibly), and others discuss whether the diseased person was able to be cleansed because the disease had simply stopped spreading (Andrew Bonar, *A Commentary on Leviticus* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 265.

time that does not indicate that the person is clean, one can only be considered clean after the ritual purification and declaration of the priest.²⁹

Outside of the Camp

In order to declare the person clean the priest must physically see the person, requiring that the priest go outside of the camp, since that is where the he/she has been living in seclusion from the community.³⁰

There are those who do not make allowance for the priest to go outside of the camp. Those, such as Gerstenberger, propose that the language “is brought” (referring to the healed person) and “goes out” (referring to the priest) are incompatible phrases, suggesting that the original ritual was “independent of the people’s actual campsite and God’s dwelling place.”³¹ However, it is not so inconceivable that after the priest went out of the camp that the healed person would then meet him there, requiring both the priest to go out and the patient to be brought.³² After the priest meets the healed person outside of the camp he is to check to see if healing has taken place. If yes, then the first part of the ritual begins requiring two birds, water, cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet.

Required Elements

Cedar Wood

The first of the items required for the cleansing ritual is that of cedar wood. Since there is no explicit explanation for these particular items much speculation has surrounded them. Cedar wood, for example was used in the building of Solomon’s temple; some believe that this use suggests that cedar represents beauty

²⁹ Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, 251.

³⁰ Yitzhaq Feder, “The Polemic Regarding Skin Diseases in 4QMMT”, DSD 19 (2012), 55-70. Apparently these laws were not always held to as Feder discusses the implications, which incited polemics towards those who were lenient on these laws, allowing diseased persons to stay within the camp.

³¹ Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, 175.

³² Gerstengeber assumes this could not have been the case though almost every other commentator assumes that the priest is meeting the healed person outside of the camp.

and majesty, something that the person being cleansed lacked at the time of his/her cleansing.³³ Others believe there is a connection between cedar and the Promised Land, since the wood would have been found there, as opposed to the desert.³⁴ Still others believe the red color of cedar wood is important as it symbolizes life for the healed person.³⁵ What is known is that cedar wood was incorporated in other rituals, such as purification after touching a corpse (Numbers 19). It is still uncertain why cedar was incorporated but was likely due to its speculated cleansing properties,³⁶ and may also be due to it having a pleasant scent.³⁷

Scarlet and Hyssop

Scarlet yarn³⁸ is another mystery, as it is not used often in cleansing rituals or sacrifices.³⁹ The color is again believed to be significant, as the scarlet color of the yarn would also have symbolized life.⁴⁰ Hyssop is primarily known and understood for its cleansing properties since the other times it is mentioned in Biblical texts it is used for cleansing.⁴¹

These three separate items are then combined, most likely as the hyssop and cedar are bound together by the scarlet yarn, and used to sprinkle blood and water on to the healed person seven times. The idea of being sprinkled seven times may

³³ Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, 252.

³⁴ Bonar, *Leviticus*, 268.

³⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 135.

³⁶ John D. Currid, *Leviticus*, EP (Darlington: Evangelical, 2004), 190.

³⁷ Hess, "Leviticus", 702.

³⁸ My translation of this is "scarlet of the worm". Scarlet being in a construct state with worm as the absolute. Milgrom confirms this in *Leviticus*, 835.

³⁹Hess, "Leviticus", 702.

⁴⁰ Bonar, *Leviticus*, 268. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 135. Milgrom argues that this is a vivid demonstrate of the deteriorating body.

⁴¹ Hess, "Leviticus", 702.

indicate consecration as this is how many times the altar is sprinkled.⁴² Seven may also signify a complete healing, which is further indicated in other parts of the cleansing process.⁴³

Water

The water necessary for this ritual is that of running water, or more literally, living water.⁴⁴ Running water, as opposed to stagnant water, symbolized life.⁴⁵ This “living” water is called for in cases of severe cleansing, as in the case of touching a corpse.⁴⁶ Though the water may have been required to increase the volume of liquid in order to be enough to sprinkle⁴⁷ is often used as a cleansing agent, especially for ritual uncleanness, and is more likely that the water symbolizes cleansing.⁴⁸

Birds

The birds used in the ritual are to be a clean variety of bird, though the specific type is not named, which would be expected if they were typical sacrificial birds.⁴⁹ The word often translated as “living” or “live” has been debated. Some propose that the birds are to merely be alive instead of dead, but others assume that since one of them is to be killed for the ritual that is an unnecessary clarification.⁵⁰

⁴² Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 233. The sprinkling seven times is also found in the Lev. 16 within the scapegoat ritual.

⁴³ Completeness is later emphasized as the person is touched with blood and oil on the right ear lobe, right thumb, and right toe: a merism identifying the whole person as being cleansed.

⁴⁴ Jay Sklar, *Leviticus*, TOTC, vol. 3 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 191.

⁴⁵ Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, 252. Hartley, *Leviticus*, 195.

⁴⁶ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 195.

⁴⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 837.

⁴⁸ Gerstenbeger asserts in *Leviticus*, 175 that it was originally, probably “magic water”; he gives no argument for this assertion. On equal grounds, I assert that it was probably not “magic water” or even believed to be “magic water”.

⁴⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 832-833.

⁵⁰ Sklar, *Leviticus*, 191.

Others offer the idea that the word תִּיּוֹת should convey that they are to be wild birds, so that the living bird will not return once released, assuming that other common birds may return home after being let go.⁵¹ Still others have alluded to the fact that the word may contain the idea of whole or healthy since the person being cleansed is neither whole nor healthy.⁵² Even without full assurance of the meaning of this word it is certain that one of these birds is to be killed and one is to live. Another unknown aspect of this ritual is why the animals called for must be birds. There is no certain answer to this question, though practically it makes sense for it to be a small animal, birds were easily accessible, and the symbolism of the impurity being carried away is well maintained through the bird flying.⁵³

The priest would then command one of the birds to be killed over the earthenware vessel of fresh water so that its blood will mingle with the water. This is then to be sprinkled on the healed person. Before the healed person is sprinkled the living bird is dipped into the blood and water mixture along with the cedar, scarlet, and hyssop. The bird is then released after the healed person has been sprinkled with the mixture and pronounced clean.

Consequence

The Skin Diseased Person as One Dead

This particular ritual harkens back to a few others that are seen in the Law. The water, cedar, scarlet, and hyssop are all elements used in the ritual cleansing listed in Numbers 19, the purification rites used after a person has touched a corpse.⁵⁴ Other scripture passages also make an interesting link between skin diseases and

⁵¹ Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus*, (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 109. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 135.

⁵² Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 832. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concept Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002). Douglas also fleshes out this idea that holiness is wholeness a great deal in her book.

⁵³ The idea of the bird carrying away the impurity is relatively agreed upon. These other ideas are my own developed by reading a number of commentaries on the subject with little conclusive evidence; my ideas seemed just as likely.

⁵⁴ *The Torah: a Women's Commentary*, ed., Tamara Cohn Eskenazi (New York: URJ and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 660.

death. Besides the corresponding elements in Numbers 19, Aaron's cry when Miriam was stricken with a skin disease was that she "not be as one dead" (Numbers 12:12). These verses subtly communicate that a person with a skin disease was seen as dead.⁵⁵

Samuel E. Balentine described the type of lifestyle lived by a skin diseased outcast as one similar to the "primordial chaos" of the darkness found before creation.⁵⁶ This idea maybe strongly stated, but there is a sense that the person outside of the camp would have felt a lonely darkness, since the diseased person was also kept outside of the covenant people, and the house of the Lord; however when the person is declared clean and can move back into the camp he/she moves back into the land of life from the land of death.⁵⁷ This may speak to why many of the elements included in this ritual symbolize life. As someone who has been considered dead is effectively coming back to life, returning to one community and congregation.

Day of Atonement

Another ritual reminiscent of the cleansing, found in Leviticus 14, is the scapegoat ritual used during the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement was the day in "which the sins of Israel were dealt with."⁵⁸ On this day the sins of all of Israel were forgiven and the Holy Place atoned for. Part of this ritual required two goats, one of which would be a sin offering, while the other was to be a scapegoat. This scapegoat would have hands laid on it and all of Israel's sins confessed over it. The goat would then be lead into the wilderness, where it would not return.

It is obvious that there are clear similarities between the two rituals. Both have animals that are to go away from the people. There are two distinctions between the two rituals: the bird is dipped into the blood and water mixture, while

⁵⁵ Eveson, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 172.

⁵⁶ Balentine, *Leviticus*, 109.

⁵⁷ Hess, "Leviticus", 701. J. H. Kurtz, *Offerings, Sacrifices, and Worship in the Old Testament*, trans., James Martin (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 432.

⁵⁸ Currid, *Leviticus*, 212.

the goat has hands laid on it (though it might be argued that Aaron’s hands would have been bloody after the sacrifices of the other animals); and the goat is killed as an offering while the bird is not.

Table A identifies similarities and differences between the two rituals

Cleansing for Person Healed of Skin Disease	Day of Atonement Scapegoat
2 birds	2 goats
1 bird is killed (not as a sacrifice)	1 goat is killed (for sin offering)
Live bird is dipped in blood of dead bird	Live goat has hands laid on it and sins confessed over it
Bird is released to fly away	Goat is released to live in the wilderness

While the circumstances of these rituals might be different the substance may in fact be the same: imbuing the uncleanness to the animals. One is done through dipping the animal into the mixture that has also been sprinkled on the healed person, and the other is done by confessing the sins of the people over the animal. Both of these rituals transfer the uncleanness from the people to the animals.⁵⁹ However, it is to be noted that the type of uncleanness is different in these two cases, one being ritual uncleanness and the other being moral uncleanness. Skin diseases would not necessarily have been identified as an outcome of sin in a person’s life, while the sins atoned for were actual sins committed by the people.⁶⁰

The killing of the bird in the cleansing ritual would not have been a sacrifice for atonement.⁶¹ The bird that was killed was not done in the manner of sacrifices, nor was it specified as a species of bird that would have been an acceptable

⁵⁹ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 209.

⁶⁰ This could sometimes be the case, take for instance Miriam. However, some of these cases would have been brought on just by living in a fallen world.

⁶¹ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 195.

sacrifice.⁶² It is important to note that while the diseased person was kept from the camp he/she would not have been able to make sin offerings, since the tabernacle was the only acceptable place of worship, therefore this would not have been a sacrifice to Yahweh. Later the healed person is called to make a sin sacrifice once he/she has been readmitted into the camp and House of the Lord, but this is not the appropriate time.

In both cases these animals then go out into the wilderness, where it is assumed they are taking the impurity with them.⁶³ Vasholz identifies that “when two animals were sacrificed for the same purpose, the second illustrated the meaning of the ritual. Both the live bird and the scapegoat...demonstrate the release that came with the shedding of the blood.”⁶⁴ As previously stated, the healing of the skin diseased person did not take place because of this ritual. The healing would have already occurred before the priest came out of the camp.⁶⁵ This ritual would have only made the healed person ritually clean again. However, with that in view it would be accurate to say that the live bird demonstrated and symbolized the cleansing and releasing from the impurity that the healed person had, as well as, the life that the person would now return to, once the cleansing ritual was complete.⁶⁶

Conclusion

This ritual, though shrouded in mystery, symbolizes how a sick person, once considered dead, has been healed, made clean, and is now able to return to his/her previous life in union with his/her kinsmen and God. Once there was a person who was ostracized from the world, but through this purification ritual he/she has been brought back in. There is no other way for him/her to be readmitted into the camp

⁶² Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 833.

⁶³ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 834. Eveson, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 209. Says the Scapegoat “provided the people with a powerful visual aid”. Kiuchi, *Leviticus*, 298. Kiuchi assumes this about the scapegoat since that is one of the primary purposes of the Day of Atonement. Much of this assumption comes from the use of birds as the animals used. Since the rituals are so closely paralleled it is often thought that they have the same purpose.

⁶⁴ Robert I. Vasholz, *Leviticus* (Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2007), 162.

⁶⁶ Hurtz, *Offerings*, 434-435. Hurtz discusses the symbolism of the bird and how it related to the healed person.

because a holy God was present; there is no other way to participate in tabernacle worship where a holy God has chosen to reside with his people. He/She must be cleansed; it is the same even today, as Ephesians 2 describes by calling the people “dead in... trespasses”.⁶⁷ However, the people of God are no longer required to slay animals or partake in ritual cleansing rites for Jesus Christ “appeared as a high priest...he entered once and for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”⁶⁸ Still, we must each be brought back from the dead, and cleansed of our defiling sin. There is no other way to be brought into communion with a holy God. Let us turn from our sinfulness to our Lord and give thanks and praise our Christ for his sacrifice that brings to us eternal redemption.

⁶⁷ Ephesians 2:1, ESV.

⁶⁸ Hebrews 9:11-12, ESV.

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