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Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible

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Journal

Theology and Sexuality, 21(3)

ISSN

1355-8358

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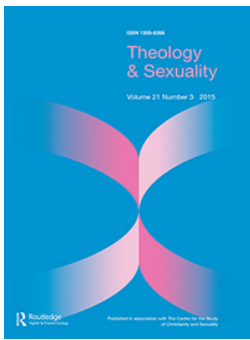
Publication Date

2015-09-02

DOI

10.1080/13558358.2015.1228226

Peer reviewed



Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible

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To cite this article: Mira Balberg (2015) Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible, *Theology & Sexuality*, 21:3, 216-217, DOI: [10.1080/13558358.2015.1228226](https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2015.1228226)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2015.1228226>



Published online: 11 Nov 2016.



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Reviews

Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible. By EVE LEVAVI FEINSTEIN (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 293, \$74/£47.99 hbk, ISBN 978-0-19-939554-5.

The biblical concept of pollution (*tum'ah*, often translated as “impurity” or “uncleanness”) is one of the most complex, diverse, and heavily theorized aspects of the religious world of ancient Israel. In this book, based on her doctoral dissertation, Eve Levavi Feinstein sets out to explore a particular facet of biblical usages of “pollution” vocabulary and rhetoric: the demarcation of certain sexual unions as polluting. Through this exploration the author aims to disentangle the notion of sexual pollution from other types of pollution invoked in biblical texts, and to offer a genealogy of the ways in which the theme of sexual pollution evolves and develops from the earlier strata of the biblical corpus to its later components. The result of this exploration is an interesting and cogent analysis of key biblical passages that introduce the notion of polluting sexual relations, an analysis that judiciously avoids generalizations and oversimplifications and demonstrates heightened sensitivity to processes of change, transformation, and adaptation.

In the brief Introduction, Levavi Feinstein presents the book’s project as seeking to nuance and refine previous and existing trends in scholarship. First, she points to certain biases and misconceptions of scholars who approached the topic of sexual pollution, which derive either from anachronistic views or from certain moral or theological convictions (for example, the notion that virginity is tantamount to purity, and thus that the loss of virginity is “impurity”). Second and more important, she rightfully points to the shortcomings of previous attempts to categorize and comprehend all usages and manifestations of the term “pollution” as amounting to one cohesive system. Recognizing that this evocative word and its cognates are used in a variety of ways and in many different contexts in the Hebrew Bible, Levavi Feinstein warns against confining the concept to a strict technical sense while ignoring the wide range of its emotive and rhetorical effects. Thus she rejects the assumption that the particular type of sexual pollution that stands at the center of the book — that is, pollution caused by specific types of sanctioned sexual unions — can be subsumed under other overarching categories of “pollution.”

Following on the Introduction, the second chapter can be described as “untying the knot” of pollution and purity terminology in the Hebrew Bible, and unraveling the different (and often incommensurate) premises and implications of the usage of this terminology (as well as related terminologies such as “abomination” and “abhorrence”) in different religious and social contexts. In the footsteps of Thomas Kazen, Levavi Feinstein suggests that we view the biblical usages of pollution language not as amounting to a tight system governed by clear-cut principles, but rather as divulging one loosely defined affect or sensation: disgust. At times, pollution language pertains to natural substances that generate a sense of revulsion (e.g. corpses, genital discharges, menstrual blood, dead rodents and insects) and are thus to be distanced from sacred precincts; at other times, it is used to denote actions and entities that are considered morally reprehensible (e.g. murder, idolatry). Pollution language is used both descriptively (to refer to things commonly seen as off-putting) and prescriptively (to instruct the audience that they *ought* to be disgusted by certain things), but its different usages do not necessarily have anything in common except for this shared affective substrate. Thus, Levavi

Feinstein argues for the need to identify distinct subcategories of “pollution” in the Bible and to target how and why these categories map onto the general sentiment of disgust.

The three chapters that follow chart out a genealogy of the use of pollution terminology to proscribe certain sexual unions (Levavi Feinstein insists on distinguishing such sexual pollution from the generic ritual impurity caused by contact with semen mentioned in Leviticus 15:16, which is not framed by moral condemnation). Chapter Three explores what Levavi Feinstein identifies as the primary usage of pollution terminology in the context of sex: the result of a sexual union of a woman with a person other than her husband. Through the examination of three main case studies (the suspected adulteress in Numbers 5:11–31, the divorce law of Deuteronomy 24:1–4, and the tale of Dinah in Genesis 34) along with multiple other intertexts, Levavi Feinstein convincingly shows that a woman is regarded as “polluted” vis-à-vis her husband if she had intercourse with another man (whether before or after the marriage). The emphasis here is on the subjective experience of the husband: this term expresses the view of the husband as the owner of his wife’s sexuality, and correspondingly his experience of revulsion once his “property” was damaged or dirtied when used by another.

In Chapters Four and Five, Levavi Feinstein turns to a foundational biblical text that diverges from the otherwise overarching use of pollution terminology in sexual contexts: Leviticus 18, which is commonly attributed to the biblical Holiness Code (H). This text presents a list of illicit sexual unions, incestuous and others (e.g. sex between two men, sex with a menstruant, sex with an animal, etc.), and regards those unions as polluting. Leviticus 18 is analyzed in Chapter Four, in which Levavi Feinstein argues that the Holiness Code is unique in the biblical landscape in three respects: first, it does not limit sexual pollution to cases of misuse of women as sexual property but rather applies this term to various forms of sexual misconduct; second, it considers men and not only women as capable of being polluted; and third, it establishes a connection between the sexual pollution of individuals and the pollution of the land, thus infusing the topic of sexual behavior with national and theological dimensions. Chapter Five is dedicated to two texts that clearly make use of Leviticus 18 in reflecting on the relation between sexuality, inhabitation of the land, and national identity: Ezekiel 22 (and related passages in Ezekiel) and Ezra 9. The latter is particularly interesting in presenting the notion that any sexual union with foreigners generates pollution in the people and in the land, thus turning sexual pollution from an individual phenomenon to a collective phenomenon — an idea that had massive impact on Jewish literature in the Second Temple Period. Finally, the Conclusion charts out various directions for further study of the genealogy of sexual pollution in post-biblical literature, pointing toward Qumran Scrolls and Enochic texts, early Christian writings, and rabbinic literature.

The book’s arguments and conclusions are cogent and convincing, and the genealogical project it takes on is intriguing and worthwhile. The book’s main flaw, in my view, is the multiple tangents on which it goes instead of remaining focused on unfolding the argument: secondary scholarship is discussed in great detail, for the most part unnecessarily, and there are multiple excursions and appendices on issues of marginal importance where footnotes would easily do. Levavi Feinstein’s perceptive treatment of texts and meticulous analyses made me wish she would extend her explorations somewhat beyond the biblical texts and take on some of the directions toward which she gestures in the Conclusion. Currently, the book reads more like an extended article, and the genealogical project it pursues strikes one as incomplete without consideration of additional texts. But this does not detract from the book’s achievement in helpfully and judiciously setting forth the foundation for further discussions of this fascinating topic.

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DOI 10.1080/13558358.2015.1228226