

Yeshua, Purity, and the Torah

By E. A. Knapp

The past few decades have witnessed a renewed awareness among modern Christians to the fact that Yeshua and his early followers observed the commandments of the Torah and maintained a wide variety of other Hebrew traditions. This is something that it has taken time for the modern Christian community to digest. Indeed I daresay it is still being digested. Part of this digestion process has involved taking a fresh look at Yeshua's and even Paul's relationship with the Mosaic Law. The Law has a number of components, ranging from the Ten Commandments, to rules about sacrifice, to ethical and moral laws etc. One of the great, exciting discoveries for many Christians during this process has been the realization of the extent to which the Law informs and enriches virtually all of our gospel stories about Yeshua.

One group of Torah rules – to my mind the most overlooked and least understood – relate to ritual purity. These purity laws and the post-Biblical expansion of them by the Pharisees and Sadducees are in many ways at the very heart of Yeshua's clashes with the 'scribes and teachers of the law' in the New Testament. Now, lest anyone doubt that Yeshua still observed these Biblical purity rules, they need simply revisit a passage like Mark 1:40-44 (emphases mine):

40 A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me *clean*." **41** Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and *touched* him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made *clean*!" **42** Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made *clean*. **43** After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, **44** saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your *cleansing* what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Clearly the healing in this story had a purity element to it and

Yeshua considered these purity rules, like the other rules in the Torah, to be fully in effect. It is significant to note as well that Mark says he was made “clean” rather than saying he was “healed” or using a similar term as a typical modern Christian reader might expect. While the leper clearly was healed, this passage reveals to us what was important in the eyes of the author, namely that the former leper was now qualified to become ritually pure, and thus could once again go into the Temple to worship. This purification in order to return to proper worship in the temple was the point of the story. Among Christian readers the ritual purity aspects of stories such as this are frequently overlooked and in English Bibles they are regularly mistranslated to the point that the distinction between something that is “unclean” (ritually impure) and something that is “forbidden” (unkosher/not permitted) is not even discernible.

As a side note, it is important to recognize that impurity was not sin. There was nothing wrong with being in a state of impurity. In the Biblical world impurity was strictly related to participation in the Temple practices (and presentability for worship prior to the existence of the Temple, in the days of the wilderness Tabernacle). Over the centuries the rules related to purity showed a tendency to expand to the point that point that in the Talmud we are told in several places that back in the days of the Second Temple “purity broke out in Israel”, meaning that during this period the Pharisees and other groups radically expanded the notion of living in purity and it came to be considered desirable to remain in a state of ritual purity as much as possible, even when outside of Jerusalem and going about everyday life. It was against this trend that Yeshua responds in the vast majority of his conflicts with the Pharisees. Acknowledgement of this crucial point can help us paint the corners of the gospel stories and draw them into much sharper relief.

Take for example the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 (*emphases mine*):

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said,

“what must I do to inherit eternal life?” **26** He said to him, “*What is written in the law? What do you read there?*” **27** He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” **28** And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” **30** Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, *leaving him half dead.* **31** Now by chance a *priest* was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by *on the other side.* **32** So likewise a *Levite*, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by *on the other side.* **33** But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ **36** Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” **37** He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Most of us already know this story very well, and the main thrust of it is hard to miss, although an entire article could be written on “who is our neighbor?” because that is a topic that has been explored extensively in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. But the angle of the Hebrew law is an important background here, and it is no accident that a ‘lawyer’ – an expert in the Hebrew law – is the one Yeshua is responding to.

First of all, it is interesting to note that the characters in the parable all seem to be going down to Jericho from Jerusalem, so there was no obvious ‘need’ for them to be overly concerned about ritual purity since ritual purity pertained primarily to Jerusalem and the

Temple according to the Biblical mandates. Yet as we have noted, Jewish tradition had been gradually expanding the role of ritual purity in daily life, even outside of Jerusalem. Secondly, note that the man was “half-dead” (ημιθανη), a word which appears only here in the New Testament. Based on the evidence of another text from this period, Joseph and Aseneth, the word seems to mean not merely “half-dead”, but more precisely “seeming or appearing dead”. Why is this significant? In Hebrew religion a corpse is the ultimate source of ritual impurity causing a seven day impurity. Even touching a person who had touched a corpse conferred seven day impurity by extension. Priests, along with Nazirites were subject to the most stringent rules regarding purity. According to Lev. 21:11 and Numbers 6:6-7 the high priest and a Nazirite could not even bury their own parents because of purity considerations! As such it is no accident that in the parable Yeshua has a priest to be the first one to come down the road. Likewise a Levite, who also would be qualified to serve in the Temple (priests were a subset of Levites), naturally came next in Yeshua’s story. It is also not an accident that they didn’t merely ignore the man, but rather passed by “on the other side”. That is to say they went out of their way to carefully avoid him.

Why did these men fail to help the seemingly dead man? Were they merely haughty or heartless? Perhaps. But it seems that the primary source of their aversion was simply that the man seemed possibly dead, and a corpse was the ultimate source of impurity. As such, the Priest and Levite were striving to observe their expanded understanding of the rules in the Torah and to save themselves the hassle that came with being defiled and having to undergo a week of purification. Yeshua’s critique centered not on their consideration of the Torah rules, but rather on their exaggeration of purity rules in a manner that was self-serving at the expense of their neighbor, and which directly contradicted the two central commandments of the Torah. There is a hierarchy of commandments and love and mercy trump ritual purity considerations.

Interestingly, a century or two later in its section discussing

Nazirites the Mishnah records a lengthy debate among several rabbis regarding a scenario not unlike the one in Yeshua's parable. By the second century CE it was considered in some rabbinic circles to be a commandment to bury a dead body. As such, in the Mishnah they considered this hypothetical scenario: If the high priest and a Nazirite are walking down the road and come upon an abandoned corpse, which of the two should bury it and contract ritual impurity? Interestingly, a number of contradictory opinions are offered by these rabbis. This shows that the situation was a familiar one at that time, and furthermore, there was no consensus on precisely what halakhah (rules for living) one should follow. It is intriguing to note, as an aside, that either option, having the Nazirite or the priest bury the body, was a direct contravention of Biblical law.

In the time of Yeshua the Pharisees and the Sadducees were two of the largest religious/political parties. The Sadducees tended to be of priestly origin, and we know that the Sadducees and the residents of Qumran (if they weren't Sadducees) were strict Biblical literalists. The Pharisees, on the other hand, allowed considerable leeway for interpretation on many issues. In light of this it seems likely that the scholar Jacob Mann may have been correct nearly 100 years ago when he suggested that the parable of the Good Samaritan may in fact have been originally intended as a not-so-subtle critique of Sadducean "literalist" halakhah. The Sadducees presumably would have aligned themselves with the behavior of the priest and Levite in the story. In contrast, the Pharisaic halakhah was probably much more flexible and lenient as it appears to be a couple centuries later on in the story in the Mishnah.

In short, in Yeshua's day ritual purity mattered. And in the eyes of the Gospel writers Yeshua's facilitation of ritual purification was far more noteworthy than his acts of healing (!!!) And yet, ritual purity meant nothing if it involved the neglect of the far weightier commandments to love and be merciful to those around us.

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