

# Ceremonial Uncleanness and Contemporary Application

By Elias Brasil de Souza

## Introduction

God gave laws for His people to express and exemplify in their lives commitment to a relationship with Him. Thus, it should not be surprising that the interpretation and application of biblical laws are often a matter of discussion among believers. And to make the subject even more complex, the Bible contains a variety of laws—some of which may require careful study and thoughtful reflection in order to be properly understood and applied. The first explicit mention of laws in the Bible occurs in Genesis 26:5. There the LORD declared, “Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws” (Gen 26:5, NKJV). The array of terms used here indicates the diversity of laws contained in Scripture. Looking back to the Old Testament laws from the perspective of the cross, one can categorize—although in a very simplified manner—the laws revealed in the Old Testament as moral laws, civil laws, and ritual laws. The Ten Commandments represent a foundational expression of the moral law, which, by definition, conveys instructions that remain binding upon believers throughout human history. Moral laws transcend the particularities of a specific people, culture, or phase in the history of salvation because they are grounded in the order of creation and reflect God’s character.<sup>1</sup> Civil laws were intended to help Israel function as a nation among other nations and were binding for the Israelites while that civil system remained in place. Ritual laws, in turn, dealt with sacrifices, impurities, and other ceremonial matters that concerned the worship system of the tabernacle/temple given to Israel as a prefiguration of Christ’s work on the cross and in the heavenly sanctuary.<sup>2</sup>

This short study does not delve into the complexities of the interpretation of the various types of Old Testament law. Rather, it addresses only some aspects of the ritual laws that are related to impurities contracted either through contact with a corpse or through involuntary emission of body fluids. Questions sent to BRI and our personal interactions with church members around the world show that this topic is a matter of concern in some areas of the world. Admittedly, many people may deem this issue irrelevant. However, some Pentateuchal texts dealing with certain kinds of impurity apparently pose a challenge to sincere church members who endeavor to apply the biblical text to contemporary life in a rather straightforward manner.

We will briefly look at two main issues that have been raised. One relates to women who, during their menstrual period, are deemed unfit to participate on the platform during the worship service or are even denied participation in the Lord’s Supper by some. Such a condition, it is claimed, makes women unclean for certain church activities.

The other issue relates to the custom of bringing a casket into the church for a funeral service. In countries strongly influenced by Roman Catholicism, this practice seems common and is taken for granted by most church members. However, some dissenting voices have questioned this custom on the basis of a few biblical passages about impurity—especially with regard to the biblical injunction against bringing impurity to the sanctuary/temple (e.g., Lev 5:2; 15:11; Num 5:1–4; 19:13; Isa 52:11–15). The passages that deal with contamination affected by touching a corpse show that such impurity was most serious and the contaminated individual who neglected to undergo the proper purification rites would be “cut off” from the congregation of Israel (Num 19:11–12). So at first glance those who object to bringing a corpse in a casket to the church for a funeral service appear to do so with the backing of some biblical verses.

Furthermore, the fact that we consider the dietary laws recorded in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 as still binding upon Christians today also raises the question as to why the laws about clean/unclean meat are to be obeyed whereas the laws about bodily impurities are to be disregarded. The following exposition offers some considerations that may help us understand and explain these issues from a biblical perspective.

## Considerations

### Consideration 1

We should bear in mind that the Bible should be studied with a proper hermeneutic—that is, a hermeneutic that emerges from the Bible itself. So in dealing with difficult passages the following important principles should be kept in mind: First, the Bible is its own interpreter. Second, unclear or difficult passages should be understood in light of clear ones. Third, as we read the Bible we should take into consideration the history of salvation and the fact that God spoke in different ways to different people. Of course, God does not change the way He saves us, which is by faith in His provision for our salvation.<sup>3</sup> A biblically based hermeneutic will help us understand that God spoke the eternal truths of the gospel to ancient Israel through the typology of the sanctuary system, while after the cross God speaks to us through its fulfilled reality by what Christ accomplished on Calvary and His ongoing ministry for us in the heavenly sanctuary.

### Consideration 2

The Hebrew ceremonial system provides the larger framework for defining bodily impurities and consequently excluding those affected by them from the tabernacle system. However, the ritual laws of the Levitical system have been fulfilled by Christ on the cross (cf. Heb 9:11–28). Such ritual laws are no longer binding upon us because they have been rendered obsolete by Christ's sacrifice. It is important to note that the presence of God's earthly dwelling in the tabernacle required that Israel abide by certain ritual protocols in order to honor and respect God's presence among them. Having said this we will now turn to some other considerations that will make things even clearer.

### Consideration 3

It has been shown that the Levitical system deals with two kinds of impurity. One type consists of an “acquired” uncleanness. These impurities could be removed by a ritual action or simply by the passage of time. The other kind of impurity is understood to be “permanent”—that is, it could never be removed, because such impurity was grounded in the order of creation.<sup>4</sup> This distinction is crucial for the issue under consideration and its implications will be shown below.

### Consideration 4

The impurities derived from bodily discharges and corpses clearly belong to the category of acquired impurities. As the biblical text shows, impurities from bodily discharges were removed by the passage of time (cf. Lev 15:1–33; 12:1–8) or by means of some purification ritual. Even the impurity contracted by contact with a corpse could be removed by a ritual involving the ashes of a red heifer (Num 19). It seems clear, then, that these impurities were ceremonial or ritual in nature. That being the case, they have been cancelled by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Indeed, the entire ritual system performed in connection with the tabernacle found its fulfillment in Christ and is no longer binding upon God's children (Eph 2:15; Col 2:13–14).<sup>5</sup>

### Consideration 5

The unclean animals mentioned in Leviticus 11 as noted above belong to a different category of impurity. The latter has been appropriately designated “permanent” impurity. A permanent impurity is grounded in the order of creation.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, unclean animals remain so perpetually and are therefore unfit for human consumption even after the cross. They are unclean because of the way they were created. It is important to note that no purification rites are prescribed to purify an unclean animal. It has been demonstrated that the terminology and conceptual framework of Leviticus 11 come from creation as indicated by a number of conceptual and verbal parallels with the Genesis creation account.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we conclude that this kind of impurity is not ceremonial but is grounded in the order of creation. Indeed, the distinction between clean and unclean animals was already in place in the time of Noah (Gen 7:2–3). And this obviously was long before the establishment of the Hebrew ritual system centering on the tabernacle. In addition, unclean food legislation was not abrogated in the New Testament. Indeed,

Acts 15 confirms the validity of the dietary laws through the prohibition of eating blood.<sup>8</sup> The vision given to Peter in Acts 10 by no means indicates the abrogation of the dietary laws. Rather, the purpose of the vision was to teach Peter that association with Gentiles would not render him unclean (see Acts 10:28; 11:12).<sup>9</sup>

### **Consideration 6**

We should not confuse the church building with the tabernacle (or temple, for that matter) of the Israelite worship system. The tabernacle was the locus of God's presence by means of the *Shekinah*, the glory of God. There God manifested His presence in a special way, and because of that fact, a number of ceremonial instructions were to be followed to keep the purity of the tabernacle.<sup>10</sup> The church building, however, should not be placed in the same category. God's *Shekinah* is no longer restricted to a building, but manifests itself among the believers through the Holy Spirit (John 1:14; Eph 2:21).<sup>11</sup> The church does not function like the tabernacle, as a locus of sacrifices and other offerings. The church building is the place where God's people gather to worship Him and learn from Him. Church premises and church buildings, therefore, are not holy places in the same way the tabernacle/temple was. If it were, people with physical defects, for example, could not serve or worship in the church (see, e.g., Lev 21:16–24).

### **Conclusion**

In light of the above considerations we can now address the issues mentioned at the beginning of this short essay. The first was related to the alleged unfitness of women during their menstruation to assist on the platform and during the Lord's Supper. The second was the objection to funerals on church premises on the basis of the concept of corpse contamination. Although on the surface both concerns appear to take the Bible seriously, they fail to understand that Christ has fulfilled the ritual system. They also do not adequately understand that church buildings do not function like the tabernacle, which was the locus of sacrifices and other rituals related to the old covenant.

The presence of a casket in the church does not contaminate the church building for two main reasons: First, the church premises do not function as the tabernacle did. Second, acquired impurities have been cancelled by Christ because the Hebrew ritual system found its fulfillment in the cross.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the matter of bringing a casket to the church premises must be evaluated on other bases. If it were mandated by Scripture we should not follow such a practice. But, as we have seen, even though Jesus touched a dead person He did not become ceremonially unclean. Hence, in cultures where caskets are brought to church for the funeral service, there is no biblical reason not to do so. In fact, refusal to have a funeral service in the church may offend the family members of the deceased person. On the other hand, a funeral service in the church can be an opportunity to reach people who otherwise would never attend a church service. On such an occasion the pastor or elder can present a message of hope and consolation about the blessed hope, pointing out that one day death will be no more. The main concern should not be whether or not caskets should be brought into the church, but rather how to utilize the occasion to better comfort the loved ones with the blessed hope that Jesus will soon return. In this matter it is instructive to learn that when Ellen G. White died her body was brought to the Battle Creek church for the funeral service. Although this does not make such a procedure normative, it shows that, at least to that generation of Seventh-day Adventists, this was not an issue.

In short, from a theological and a sound, balanced hermeneutical perspective, there should be no restriction against women taking an active part in church services during menstruation, nor against pastors or elders conducting funeral services on church premises. Presumed impurities deriving from these situations or conditions no longer apply because of the cross of Calvary. The dietary laws, however, remain binding. The reason is that the uncleanness of animals unsuitable for human consumption is not grounded in the ceremonial system but is based on creation.

**Elias Brasil de Souza** is Director of the Biblical Research Institute

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Veloso, “The Law of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 457–492.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Averbeck, “Law,” in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. Sandy D. Brent and Ronald L. Giese (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 113–138; Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 85–86.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 58–104.

<sup>4</sup> The definitive work on this is Jiří Moskala, *The Laws of Clean and Unclean Animals in Leviticus 11: Their Nature, Theology, & Rationale*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series 4 (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society), 1998.

<sup>5</sup> At this point we should briefly note that the prohibition of sexual relations with a woman during menstruation seems to be moral rather than ceremonial in nature (Lev. 20:18; cf. 18:19, 29). As has been noted, Leviticus 18 and 20 place this prohibition among moral laws (cf. Ezek 18:5–6; 22:10). It has been aptly suggested that the rationale for the prohibition is found in Leviticus 20:18, which describes a menstruant as *dawah* (“weak” or in a state of discomfort; see also Lev 12:2). This seems to indicate that “the law protects the woman from unwanted advances by her husband during her period of weakness” (Roy Gane, Leviticus, Numbers, *The NIV Application Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004], 325).

<sup>6</sup> Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Distinction Between Clean and Unclean Animals in Lev 11: Is It Still Relevant?,” in *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 2 (1991): 91–125; Jiří Moskala, “Are the Laws Regarding Clean and Unclean Animals Still Relevant?,” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl, vol. 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 157–161. See also Hasel, 91–121, esp. 93–96 and Jiří Moskala, “The Validity of the Levitical Food Laws of Clean and Unclean Animals: A Case Study of Biblical Hermeneutics” in *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, vol. 22/2 (2011): 3–31.

<sup>7</sup> See Jiří Moskala, *The Laws of Clean and Unclean Animals in Leviticus 11: Their Nature, Theology, & Rationale*, 228–233; idem., “The Validity of the Levitical Food Laws”, esp. 8–18.

<sup>8</sup> Moskala, “Are the Laws Regarding Clean and Unclean Animals,” 159.

<sup>9</sup> Clinton Wahlen, “Peter’s Vision and Conflicting Definitions of Purity,” *New Testament Studies*, vol. 51 (2005): 503–18. See also Clinton Wahlen, “Mark 7:19. Did Jesus Make All Foods Clean?” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl, vol. 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 301–304; Colin House, “Defilement by Association: Some Insights from the Usage of *Koinós/Koinów* in Acts 10 and 11,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 21, no. 2 (1983): 143–53.

<sup>10</sup> See Roy E. Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 144–161.

<sup>11</sup> Russell P. Shedd, “Worship in the New Testament Church,” in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 132–133.

<sup>12</sup> Jesus obviously had no difficulty touching a dead body or a woman suffering from a hemorrhage, although this would have made him unclean according to the ceremonial law (cf. Matt 9:20–26; Mark 5:22–42; Luke 8:40–56). This is another indicator that, with Jesus Christ, those laws are no longer applicable and have come to an end.

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