

WAS YESHUA EVER RITUALLY UNCLEAN?

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I. WHAT DOES “CLEAN” AND “UNCLEAN” MEAN?

To do a careful analysis of clean and unclean, we need consistently look at the Hebrew terms, rather than the various translations which can sometimes translate them inconsistently.

Leviticus 10:10 (ESV)

You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean.

In Lev 10:10, God instructs his people to distinguish between two different pairs of contrastive terms: “Holy” vs. “Common” and “Clean” vs. “Unclean”. In Hebrew these key terms are:

קֹדֶשׁ **qodesh** – holy, set apart, often with the meaning of being “set apart” for YHWH.

חֹל **khol** – common, ordinary

טָמֵא **tamei** – unclean, sometimes translated defiled, or impure, but the meaning is to taken as ceremonially or ritually unclean

טָהוֹר **tahor** – clean, sometimes translated pure, flawless, or perfect

These are two opposite pairs. Just as we are to be mindful of the differences between “set apart” (**qodesh**) and it’s opposite “common” (**khol**), so also we are to be mindful of the differences between “clean” (**tamei**) and it’s opposite “unclean” (**tahor**).

Dwelling places can become unclean (Lev 14:33ff). Cooking pots, water, wood, clothing and utensils can all become unclean (Lev 11:32ff). Typically items that have become unclean must be cleansed in a specific way in order to be returned to their clean state. In some case, when that is not possible, the item must be destroyed when directed to do so in Scripture.

It is a bit different with animals. As specified in Lev 11, animals are divided into two categories – those that are clean and those that are unclean. Only clean animals could be sacrificed to YHWH. Only clean animals may be eaten. God commands his people to not to eat animals that are classified as unclean. To do so is to break the command of God, which is by definition sin.

People can also become unclean. This is the main topic under consideration here. Many things in daily life cause a person to become unclean. Being unclean need not imply sin, nor separation from God. It simply means that once unclean a person must take certain steps to again become clean. And while in that state of being unclean there are restrictions in place in relation to their participation in community worship. For example, sacrifices cannot be made nor eaten by someone who is unclean. Some relevant Scriptures are examined below.

II. WHAT MAKES A PERSON UNCLEAR?

Being ritually unclean can arise from life circumstances that are not related to sin. Consider the following examples.

Touching a dead body makes someone unclean. Torah prescribes what that person must do to cleanse himself:

Numbers 19:11–12 (ESV)

¹¹ “Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. ¹² He shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean. But if he does not cleanse himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not become clean.

If that person does not cleanse himself, he is disobedient to Torah, and “defiles the tabernacle of YHWH”, since YHWH was dwelling in their midst:

Numbers 19:13 (ESV)

¹³ Whoever touches a dead person, the body of anyone who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the tabernacle of the YHWH, and that person shall be cut off from Israel;

Just entering a dwelling place where someone has died automatically causes the person to be unclean:

Numbers 19:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ “This is the law when someone dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent and everyone who is in the tent shall be unclean seven days.

Touching a human bone or a grave causes one to become unclean:

Numbers 19:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ Whoever in the open field touches someone who was killed with a sword or who died naturally, or touches a human bone or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.

Touching or carrying any part of a carcass of an **unclean animal** makes one unclean:

Leviticus 11:24–25 (ESV)

²⁴ “And by these you shall become unclean. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening,
²⁵ and whoever carries any part of their carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening.

Likewise, even touching or carrying any part of a carcass of a **clean animal** makes one unclean:

Leviticus 11:39–40 (ESV)

³⁹ “And if any animal which you may eat dies, whoever touches its carcass shall be unclean until the evening,
⁴⁰ and whoever eats of its carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening. And whoever carries the carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening.

A person with any of numerous skin diseases is unclean, as specified in Lev 13. For example:

Leviticus 13:3 (ESV)

³ and the priest shall examine the diseased area on the skin of his body. And if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a case of leprous disease. When the priest has examined him, he shall pronounce him unclean.

Any person who enters a house that has been quarantined because of mold or mildew is unclean:

Leviticus 14:46 (ESV)

⁴⁶ Moreover, whoever enters the house while it is shut up shall be unclean until the evening.

A person with a bodily discharge is unclean, as is any one touching him or even touching something that he sat on or laid on:

Leviticus 15:2–11 (ESV)

² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any man has a discharge from his body, his discharge is unclean. ³ And this is the law of his uncleanness for a discharge: whether his body runs with his discharge, or his body is blocked up by his discharge, it is his uncleanness. ⁴ Every bed on which the one with the discharge lies shall be unclean, and everything on which he sits shall be unclean. ⁵ And anyone who touches his bed shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ⁶ And whoever sits on anything on which the one with the discharge has sat shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ⁷ And whoever touches the body of the one with the discharge shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ⁸ And if the one with the discharge spits on someone who is clean, then he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ⁹ And any saddle on which the one with the discharge rides shall be unclean. ¹⁰ And whoever touches anything that was under him shall be unclean until the evening. And whoever carries such things shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ¹¹ Anyone whom the one with the discharge touches without having rinsed his hands in water shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening.

Also, a man who any emission of semen is unclean, and in the case of intercourse both man and woman are made unclean.

Leviticus 15:16–18 (ESV)

¹⁶ “If a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water and be unclean until the evening. ¹⁷ And every garment and every skin on which the semen comes shall be washed with water and be unclean until the evening. ¹⁸ If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe themselves in water and be unclean until the evening.

A woman is unclean during her time of menstruation, as well as anyone who touches anything she sat on or laid on:

Leviticus 15:19–24 (ESV)

¹⁹ “When a woman has a discharge, and the discharge in her body is blood, she shall be in her menstrual impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. ²⁰ And everything on which she lies during her menstrual impurity shall be unclean. Everything also on which she sits shall be unclean. ²¹ And whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ²² And whoever touches anything on which she sits shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. ²³ Whether it is the bed or anything on which she sits, when he touches it he shall be unclean until the evening. ²⁴ And if any man lies with her and her menstrual impurity comes upon him, he shall be unclean seven days, and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean.

A woman is also made unclean as a result of giving birth:

Leviticus 12:2–5 (ESV)

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. ³ And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. ⁴ Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. ⁵ But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation. And she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days.

Numbers 19 prescribes how to cleanse a person by sprinkling a mixture of water and ash from a sacrificed red heifer. This passage states that the person who touches the water, presumably in the sprinkling process, will be unclean until evening. It also seems to state that whatever and whoever the unclean person touches will become unclean and remain so until evening:

Numbers 19:20–22 (ESV)

²⁰ “If the man who is unclean does not cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of the Lord. Because the water for impurity has not been thrown on him, he is unclean. ²¹ And it shall be a statute forever for them. The one who sprinkles the water for impurity shall wash his clothes, and the one who touches the water for impurity shall be unclean until evening. ²² And whatever the unclean person touches shall be unclean, and anyone who touches it shall be unclean until evening.”

Note that the ESV translates the last part of Num 19:22 as “anyone who touches **it** shall be unclean until evening.” The “it” is implied. One could just as easily translate that as “anyone who touches **him** shall be unclean until evening”, as does the Jewish Publication Society’s Tanach.

III. DOES BEING UNCLEAN IMPLY SIN OR SEPARATION FROM GOD?

Nowhere does Scripture state or imply that being ritually unclean is sin. Sin is a result of not keeping the commands of Torah. In fact, Torah even requires the priest to be unclean in order to fulfill some of his responsibilities as priest. For example, when a priest examines a house that has a problem with mold or mildew:

Leviticus 14:36–47 (ESV)

³⁶ Then the priest shall command that they empty the house before the priest goes to examine the disease, lest all that is in the house be declared unclean. And afterward **the priest shall go in to see the house.** ³⁷ And he shall examine the disease. And if the disease is in the walls of the house with greenish or reddish spots, and if it appears to be deeper than the surface, ³⁸ then **the priest shall go out of the house to the door of the house and shut up the house seven days.** ³⁹ And **the priest shall come again on the seventh day,** and look. If the disease has spread in the walls of the house, ⁴⁰ then the priest shall command that they take out the stones in which is the disease and throw them into an unclean place outside the city. ⁴¹ And he shall have the inside of the house scraped all around, and the plaster that they scrape off they shall pour out in an unclean place outside the city. ⁴² Then they shall take other stones and put them in the place of those stones, and he shall take other plaster and plaster the house. ⁴³ “If the disease breaks out again in the house, after he has taken out the stones and scraped the house and plastered it, ⁴⁴ **then the priest shall go and look.** And if the disease has spread in the house, it is a persistent leprous disease in the house; it is unclean. ⁴⁵ And he shall break down the house, its stones and timber and all the plaster of the house, and he shall carry them out of the city to an unclean place. ⁴⁶ Moreover, **whoever enters the house while it is shut up shall be unclean until the evening,** ⁴⁷ and whoever sleeps in the house shall wash his clothes, and whoever eats in the house shall wash his clothes.

The priest is required to enter the house that he has quarantined in order to examine it. When he does so, he becomes unclean until evening. So the priest can become unclean simply by following the Torah, as he is commanded to do. Since following the commands of God cannot result in sin, it is clear that being unclean does not in itself equate with sin. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine that God would command any of his people to undertake an action that would cause their separation from Him.

Similarly, in Num 19, the priest becomes unclean in fulfilling his responsibility with the sacrifice of the red heifer:

Numbers 19:2–7 (ESV)

² “This is the statute of the law that the YHWH has commanded: Tell the people of Israel to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish, and on which a yoke has never come. ³ And you shall give it to Eleazar the priest, and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered before him. ⁴ And Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood toward the front of the tent of meeting seven times. ⁵ And the heifer shall be burned in his sight. Its skin, its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, shall be burned. ⁶ And the priest shall take cedarwood and hyssop and scarlet yarn, and throw them into the fire burning the heifer. ⁷ Then the priest shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. But the priest shall be unclean until evening.

So the priest in following one of his assigned duties, is required by Torah to be unclean until evening. So again, if being unclean meant a person was sinning, or that he was to be separated from God, then God would be commanding the priest to sin or to be separated from Him!

Although being unclean does not equate to sin, when Torah requires that a person cleanse himself from being unclean, and he does not do so, then that is sin. For example:

Numbers 19:20 (ESV)

²⁰ “If the man who is unclean does not cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of the YHWH.

Likewise in Numbers 5, if a person is unclean and doesn’t realize it until later, so that he has not followed Torah to cleanse himself, then he has sinned. His sin was not in being unclean, but rather in not taking the required action to cleanse himself:

Leviticus 5:2–6 (ESV)

² or if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether a carcass of an unclean wild animal or a carcass of unclean livestock or a carcass of unclean swarming things, and it is hidden from him and he has become unclean, and he realizes his guilt; ³ or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort the uncleanness may be with which one becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and realizes his guilt... when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, ⁶ he shall bring to the Lord as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.

Consider also the command God gave man in the garden of Eden:

Genesis 1:28 (ESV)

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.”

God specifically instructed man to “multiply”. However, in order to multiply, man and woman are necessarily made unclean. First, with the act of intercourse:

Leviticus 15:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe themselves in water and be unclean until the evening.

And then with the act of birth:

Leviticus 12:2–5 (ESV)

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days... But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks.

Since God commanded people to multiply, and God would not command His people to sin or to be separate from Him, and since the act of multiplying must result in the state of being unclean, then we must conclude that being unclean does not necessarily imply sin or separation from God.

There are, however, times when it is clear that disobedience to God's commands will put one in an unclean state. For example, a priest that eats something that died on its own is acting in disobedience to God and, as a result, is made unclean:

Leviticus 22:8–9 (ESV)

⁸ He shall not eat what dies of itself or is torn by beasts, and so make himself unclean by it: I am the Lord.' ⁹ They shall therefore keep my charge, lest they bear sin for it and die thereby when they profane it: I am the Lord who sanctifies them.

Thus, the result of this act of disobedience is that he is unclean and must bear the consequences of his sin. So there are times when acts of sin also result in a person being unclean. Perhaps one could even argue that any sin results in a person being unclean, since according to Torah, any sin requires a sacrifice for atonement of that sin. However, as a result of Messiah's atoning sacrifice, our sins have been paid for in full. Sin, with confession and repentance, can no longer render us unclean.

Nevertheless, many aspects of ordinary life will continue to put people in a ritually unclean state. However, since we have no temple and sacrifices are not able to be offered, the restrictions in Torah as a consequence of being ritually unclean are not applicable. We live much like Daniel and the believers in YHWH during the Babylonian exile. They could not sacrifice, so they were basically in a state of continual ritual uncleanness. Yet they worshipped God as they were able, and were clearly not separated from God.

IV. WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING UNCLEAN

When in an unclean state, there were certain things a person could not do. If a person, while unclean, did what was prohibited, it was sin. For example, no one who was unclean could eat of a sacrifice:

Leviticus 7:19–21 (ESV)

¹⁹ "Flesh that touches any unclean thing shall not be eaten. It shall be burned up with fire. All who are clean may eat flesh, ²⁰ but the person who eats of the flesh of the sacrifice of the YHWH's peace offerings while an uncleanness is on him, that person shall be cut off from his people. ²¹ And if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether human uncleanness or an unclean beast or any unclean detestable creature, and then eats some flesh from the sacrifice of the YHWH's peace offerings, that person shall be cut off from his people."

An interesting situation is documented in Numbers 9, when some of the people were not able to participate in Passover because they were unclean, and brought their concern before Moses:

Numbers 9:6–13 (ESV)

⁶ And there were certain men who were unclean through touching a dead body, so that they could not keep the Passover on that day, and they came before Moses and Aaron on that day. ⁷ And those men said to him, "We are unclean through touching a dead body. Why are we kept from bringing the Lord's offering at its appointed time among the people of Israel?" ⁸ And Moses said to them, "Wait, that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you." ⁹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁰ "Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If any one of you or of your descendants is unclean through touching a dead body, or is on a long journey, he shall still keep the Passover to the Lord. ¹¹ In the second month on the fourteenth day at twilight they shall keep it. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ¹² They shall leave none of it until the morning, nor break any of its bones; according to all the statute for the Passover they shall keep it. ¹³ But if anyone who is clean and is not on a journey fails to keep the Passover, that person shall be cut off from his people because he did not bring the Lord's offering at its appointed time; that man shall bear his sin.

So God made allowance that in these specific situations people could partake in Passover a month later, but otherwise, they were required to keep it at the original designated time.

It is also interesting to note that in certain situations, such as when someone was continually unclean, for example, due to a skin disease or continual bodily discharge, they had to live outside the camp:

Numbers 5:1–4 (ESV)

¹ YHWH spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead. ³ You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell." ⁴ And the people of Israel did so, and put them outside the camp; as YHWH said to Moses, so the people of Israel did.

Notice that the reason given is that in their state of uncleanness they would defile the camp in the midst of which YHWH dwells.

V. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE CLEAN / UNCLEAN DISTINCTION?

It seems that we can identify most things that are unclean or result in one becoming unclean as having to do with being in contact with death, loss of life (loss of blood, semen), or decay (skin disease, mold, mildew). And unclean animals for the most part are scavengers, bottom feeders, and things that land on or even eat feces or garbage or other waste materials.

One can conjecture that we are being given a picture that of God who is the ultimate source and giver of life. As such, death, loss of life and decay cannot exist in His presence.

The fact that people were regularly in a state of being unclean, and as we have seen, are sometimes required by God to be unclean, forced people to be continually reminded of that all-powerful, life-giving character of God.

VI. WHAT WOULD HAVE MADE YESHUA UNCLEAN?

We know that Yeshua never sinned, so clearly he was never rendered unclean as a result of breaking Torah in any way. But Scriptures do record instances where Yeshua's actions show that he would have been unclean, according to the Torah. Consider the following:

Yeshua Touches A Leper

Mark 1:40–42 (ESV)

⁴⁰ And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean."

⁴¹ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." ⁴² And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

Yeshua Contacts A Woman With Discharge

Matthew 9:20–22 (ESV)

²⁰ And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, ²¹ for she said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I will be made well." ²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well.

Yeshua Touches A Dead Girl

Mark 5:35–42 (ESV)

³⁵ While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?" ³⁶ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." ³⁷ And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. ³⁸ They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹ And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping." ⁴⁰ And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." ⁴² And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement.

All three of the events above rendered Yeshua unclean, according to Torah. It's true that in each case, the unclean person was healed (or raised from the dead). Yeshua had the power to heal. But that power to heal did not negate that fact that he was rendered ritually unclean in the process. It was a regular consequence of life that certain normal events would render any person unclean.

The above three events are clear examples from Scripture, but we can be fairly certain that many other events throughout Yeshua's life would have rendered him ritually unclean as well. For example:

1. Did Miriam, Yeshua's mother, ever touch her child when she was having her monthly period? As a baby would she have continued to nurse him during this time of the month? Most certainly, the answer is "yes" to both questions. This would have rendered Yeshua unclean.
2. Would Yeshua ever have had an discharge of semen? It's a bit uncomfortable to pose this question, but since he was fully human we can at least say it's probable that at some point in his life he would have had a nocturnal emission. And this, too, would have rendered Yeshua unclean.

The point is that ritual uncleanness was a natural, normal consequence of daily life. It happened to everyone. It happened to Yeshua. This state of ritual uncleanness had consequences in terms of one's ability to participate in temple worship, but it is of absolutely no consequence in terms of sin or separation from God.

VII. CONCLUSION

Many argue that Yeshua transcended the commands of Torah because he was fully God, and could never be rendered unclean. However, this view seems to lack the understanding that uncleanness is often the result of daily life as a human, and in such cases has nothing to do with sin. Our perspective is further confused because common Christian teaching is that "we are cleansed from our sin". While this is absolutely true, the use of the word "cleansed" makes it hard to think that we (much less, Yeshua) can ever be "unclean". This is why it is so important to understand the meaning, causes and consequences of being "unclean". If we correctly understand what Scriptures actually teach about this, we should have no problem understanding that we (and Yeshua) will at times be rendered unclean due to events in daily life, knowing that this has nothing to do with the fact that we have been once and for all totally "cleansed of our sin".

Yeshua was fully human. God incarnate. The Word become flesh. And as a human, daily life did in fact cause him to be unclean. Yet he was fully obedient to the Father. He was without sin, never having broken Torah. He was never separated from Father. In fact, he and the Father are One.