Three Early Christian Views on Ritual Purity
A Historical Note Contributing to an Understanding of Paul’s Position

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Despite all that has been written lately concerning the panreligious notion of ritual impurity in late antiquity, many scholars are still too quick to explain all early Christian purity concerns as a result of judaizing tendencies. Coming to terms with early Christian texts that discuss purity actually requires the use of a threefold classification: (1) some texts enjoin ritual purity gestures on the authority of the Mosaic law (e.g., the Kerygmata Petrou)\(^1\), (2) other texts evidence ritual purity concerns that are not distinctively Jewish (e.g., Dionysius of Alexandria [3rd c. CE], Timothy of Alexandria [4th c. CE]; “The Questions and Answers” 7)\(^2\), and (3) still other texts view ritual purity concerns as altogether invalid (e.g., Didascalia Apostolorum [3rd c. CE]; Athanasius, Ep. 48 [4th c. CE]; Chrysostom, Hom. in Titus 3 [4th-5th c. CE]; idem, Hom. in Matt. 51)\(^3\). There has been a manifest failure among many to recognize the existence of the second category: when an early Christian text seeks to maintain ritual purity, readers too often assume the author of that text to have been influenced by Jewish halakha\(^4\).

1. G. LUEDEMANN, Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity, Minneapolis, 1989, pp. 182-183 claims that the Jewish Christian source lying behind the Pseudo-Clementine Recognitiones rejects “purification rites”, but J.T. SANDERS, Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First One Hundred Years of Jewish-Christian Relations, Valley Forge, PA, 1993, p. 56 [verbatim again on 162] correctly notes that “[t]he evidence for these conclusions … is not forthcoming”.


3. On the Didascalia, see WENDEBOURG, Reinheitsgesetze (n. 2), pp. 164-165. Many church fathers understand the purity injunctions as having been fulfilled through Christ’s death and through baptism (see ibid., p. 153). METHODIUS OF OLYMPUS also lists the Lord’s Supper as having this effect (On Discernment 13.3; cf. 7.6). See also ORIGEN, Con. Cels. 8.29; NOVATIAN, De cibis 5.2-4. Many of the more strongly gnosticizing soteriologies also propounded the general obsolescence of purity laws for the believer, in keeping with the classic Manichaean position that gnosis renders the believer clean (see Cologne Mani Codex 80.20-85.12).

While many elements within Jewish Christianity (however one defines the term) observed ritual purity for no other reason than that “Moses” decreed it, the Great Church left Moses behind, and constructed its own system of ritual purity gestures. The essential non-Jewishness of the Church’s ritual purity gestures is brilliantly illustrated by the fact that being sprinkled with holy water eventually (viz. by the late 7th century) became a required gesture of approach for praying or worshipping in a building proudly displaying the bodily remains of a deceased martyr. The Great Church enjoined the use of purifying water before worship, but knew nothing of corpse impurity (at least for celebrated saints), a category of the utmost gravity in the rabbinic system. Of course, even when the specifics of how Leviticus handles impurity are not directly reflected in the Church’s handling of impurity, some similarity in the typology of impurities and remedies is inevitable. It is therefore incumbent upon scholarship to take the panreligious nature of purity concerns seriously, and to realize that the existence of such concerns in a Christian writer does not necessarily mean that he or she is indebted to Jewish (or Jewish-Christian) halakha.

Another way of approaching this issue is by attending to the veneer-like nature of some efforts to ground Christian purity concerns in the Old Testament. The question of whether a particular appeal to purity concerns is based on the OT purity laws sometimes cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”, because it is often difficult to tell whether the purity concern stems purely from a reading of the Old Testament, or whether the laws of the Old Testament were fitted onto a purity concern that was felt independently of the Old Testament. This after-the-fact use of the Old Testament could function in two different ways, as both justifying the need for a purity law and providing the specific shape for that law. For example, when Pope Siricius (383-399) and the Synod of Carthage appealed to the Old Testament (Exod 19,15; 1 Sam 21,5-7; Lev Old Testament corresponding to the menstrual purifications prescribed by Dionysius and Timothy of Alexandria, and wrongly concludes that the purification in question had nothing to do with ritual purity.

5. The matter of the impurity of bone relics is intriguing. F.R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c. 370-529* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 115), Leiden, 1993, p. 156, relates that Christian monks, when converting a pagan temple into a church, “deliberately effected the ritual pollution of the temenos by depositing the relics of Christian dead within the enclosures”. The bones of martyrs seem to have been regarded as threatening, in a real metaphysical way, to residual pagan powers, but not to the Christians who took over the building.

6. It would be a mistake to assume that the approach most widely accepted today (viz. that all ritual concerns are invalid) was dominant in Christian antiquity. As H. Hübner, *Unclean and Clean: New Testament*, in D.N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York, 1992, Vol. 6, 741-745, esp. 744-745, points out, a number of important figures apparently retained purity concerns out of deference to the Old Testament. See Tertullian, *De exhort. cast.* 10,2-4 (invoking Lev 19,2); Origen, *In Lev.* 8.3 (invoking Leviticus 12); see also the sources listed in E. Schillebeeckx, *Celibacy*, New York, 1968, pp. 58 n. 7 (cf. the comment there: “It is noteworthy how all of these authors follow each other with almost the same words”), 59 nn. 8-9.
in order to force bishops, priests, and deacons to restrain from sexual intercourse, and to force communicants to avoid sexual intercourse on the night before receiving the Eucharist, they appealed primarily to the force rather than the particularities of Scripture. (That similar requirements had earlier been instated at the Council of Elvira [ca. 306] or were nearly accepted at the first Nicene Council [cf. Socr. Hist. eccl. 1.11] has now come to be doubted.) Recognizing that even those Christian writers who refer to the OT laws in this connection are not doing so primarily from a perceived obligation to those laws, it only makes sense that we should also find some discussions of purity laws having little connection with the Old Testament at all.

One particularly telling revival of purity concerns within the church was the practice of “churching” parturients after a waiting period, a practice beginning in the late Middle Ages. It is instructive to note that the various penitentials governing the churching of women show that the effort to adopt biblical lengths for the waiting periods was on again, off again: Lee writes, “More than half of the penitentials studied by Flandrin fix this period at forty days. Of those I surveyed, the Excarius of Cummena, the Canons of Theodore, and the Penitential of Egbert prescribe a 40-day period, whereas the Penitential of Cummean prescribes thirty-three days abstinence after the birth of a boy, sixty-six for a girl; the Penitential of Bede thirty and forty respectively.” The important thing to note is that the need for purificatory gestures of approach was more ingredient to Christian piety than the effort to follow the Bible. Those who felt the need for purification most keenly did not do so from their reflection on the Old Testament laws, but rather used those laws as templates for addressing their felt need.

Despite the relative lateness of all this material, it is all, on an anthropological level, supremely relevant to the question of the Apostle Paul’s view of ritual purity. For understanding Paul, we will not be misled if we consider his usual reaction to Jewish particularizations of generally valid religious principles. He rejected the distinctively Jewish components of religiosity (e.g., circumcision), but kept the principle that corresponded to


9. Lee, Purification (n. 8), p. 50 n. 5.
a common pattern of religion (e.g., an initiation rite). Maintaining the general principle was not so much a matter of consciously trying to find continuity with a particular scheme, but rather a matter of subconsciously landing on one’s feet in a religious conceptual world. Although Paul may have rejected the continuing validity of the Jewish purity rituals for the Corinthians, this hardly inveighs against the view that he recognized the threat of miasma, especially in connection with prayer and worship.

HYAM MACCOBY ON PAUL AND RITUAL IMPURITY

I offer the above observations primarily in defense of my own views, as I laid them out in an essay that I co-wrote with Joseph Frankovic. In that article, we argued that Paul’s remarks in 1 Cor 7,5 were motivated by a concern for ritual purity. (This interpretation of 1 Cor 7,5 had earlier been endorsed by Schillebeeckx: “in 1 Cor 7:5 [Paul] connects prayer – contact with the ‘good spirit’, God – with continence.”) In a brief response to the possibility of Paul’s observance of purity concerns, the late Hyam Maccoby failed not only to consider the availability of non-Jewish models of ritual purity, but he did not even consider non-rabbinic models. In the process, he misrepresented our own argument, which was by no means predicated upon rabbinic notions. He made the following remarks:

[Poirier and Frankovic’s] article attempts to establish a ritual purity context for Paul’s recommendation (1 Cor. 7:5-7) to spouses to refrain from sexual intercourse “for a season” for purposes of prayer. The authors relate this to the Jewish requirement (in the rabbinic period) for ritual washing after intercourse before engaging in study or prayer. The authors also find relevance in the rabbinic view that Moses, after fulfilling the duty of propagation, abstained from intercourse altogether because his constant dialogue with God necessitated continual ritual purity. Nothing in the article, however, establishes that Paul had ritual purity considerations in mind. His recommendation was on grounds of mental and spiritual concentration, not purity. The rabbinic washing before study or prayer did not involve any cessation of sexual intercourse, since morning washing could be followed immediately by study or prayer. Paul does not adduce the example of Moses for his own celibacy, which he regards as a “gift” and as spiritually valuable in itself; whereas Moses, in the rabbinic theory, did not value celibacy in itself, but regarded it as a necessity in a situation similar to continual attendance in the Temple.

11. SCHILLEBEECKX, Celibacy (n. 6), p. 53.
12. H. MACCOBY, Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and Its Place in Judaism, Cambridge, 1999, p. 161 n. 9. Maccoby’s larger argument is that purity concerns figure very little in the New Testament: he writes, “There are a few overt references to ritual purity in the New Testament, but most of the ritual purity aspects which scholars have read into the text are non-existent” (ibid., p. 149), that there is a “tendency of New Testament scholars to import ritual purity considerations where the text is much better un-
In point of fact, none of Maccoby’s complaints registers against what Frankovic and I really wrote. In response, two points are especially worth making.

First, Maccoby wrote that we “relate” 1 Cor 7,5 to “the Jewish requirement (in the rabbinic period) for ritual washing after intercourse before engaging in study or prayer”. It is not clear why Maccoby associates our interpretation of Paul with “the rabbinic period”, especially since our examples relating purity requirements to prayer and Torah study came from Josephus and Philo. While the argument in our earlier article is strengthened (I believe) by the use of rabbinic sources, it does not depend on them. Admittedly, we did refer to Paul’s Pharisaism on the first page of the article in question, and this may have lead readers to expect our argument to be predicated upon rabbinic halakha, but our actual argument included plenty of references to early Christian literature, Josephus, Philo, rabbinic literature, and Greco-Roman sources.

Maccoby appeals to the general view that adducing rabbinic parallels is risky (a moot point for what Frankovic and I really wrote), and adds: “The rabbinic washing before study or prayer did not involve any cessation of sexual intercourse, since morning washing could be followed immediately by study or prayer”. In this, he continues the fiction that our argument concerning 1 Cor 7,5 appeals to rabbinic halakha by seeking to undo our argument on grounds specific to that halakha. My thinking was, and still is, that Paul’s general understanding of purity was part of a debt he owed to first-century religiosity in general. As Hübner writes, “It would be very one sided to see the determination of unclean and clean only in terms of the OT and surrounding Judaism. The NT must be understood as a Hellenistic writing, therefore one must not overlook the Greek conception of unclean and clean, both philosophical and religious (Pl. Phd. 113d)”.

Paul’s understanding of purity is driven by a worldview, and the halakhic aspect is not really the “stuff” comprising that worldview, but rather is part of an ad hoc response to that worldview. We should also accept that whatever was thought to be unclean about Gentiles in general was also somehow alleviated or transcended by the transethnic gospel. But these considerations do not add up to the view understood without them”.

13. It should be pointed out that Maccoby’s dismissal of purity concerns in the New Testament is necessitated by his erroneous understanding of Jewish ritual purity as purely Temple-oriented: since Pauline Christianity is not Temple-centered, it does not make sense (on Maccoby’s understanding) to speak of purity concerns in Paul. See J.C. POIRIER, Purity beyond the Temple in the Second Temple Era, in JBL 122 (2003) 247-265.


15. It should be noted that his declaration that all things are clean (Rom 14,14; cf. Tit 1,15) concerns the laws of kashrut rather than of ritual purity: contra HÜBNER (Unclean [n. 6], p. 743) and WENDEBOURG (Reinheitsgesetze [n. 2], p. 150), Rom 14,14 does not deal with “the cultic laws of purity”.
that Paul had freed himself from purity concerns altogether. Although Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215) and Methodius of Olympus (ca. 260-311) take the cleansing of baptism to imply the impossibility of further ritual impurity resulting from sexual intercourse or eating unclean foods\(^{16}\), the implication is not logically straightforward (although it might ultimately be workable) and there is no reason to assume that it represents Paul’s thinking on the subject.

As a Jew, Paul would have understood the basic role of ritual purity, and as inhabitants of the Mediterranean world\(^{17}\), the Corinthians would have understood him perfectly. As Schillebeeckx notes, the earliest Christians “were … already confronted with reasoned motives for continence, even before they accepted the faith,” so that “the specifically Christian motives can be intelligible only against the background of these ancient reasons”\(^{18}\). Not assuming Paul’s scheme to be that of the Rabbis, Frankovic and I explicitly denied knowing what sort of remedy for impurity he may have imagined\(^{19}\). However, as the author of the Testament of Naphtali knows, the fact that remedies exist hardly detracts from the force of an injunction to refrain temporarily from impure activities for the sake of prayer\(^{20}\). Paul’s injunction would have retained some force even if the remedy were as simple as washing one’s hands, but, because hand-washing may have been intended as a general halakhic safeguard for the sanctum of prayer, rather than as the prescribed remedy for impurity resulting from sexual intercourse, there is nothing to suggest that the typical remedy for the dilemma that Paul addresses in 1 Cor 7,5 is as simple as Maccoby makes it appear. Indeed, like many Greek religionists, Paul may have envisioned a requisite waiting period. The fact is that we do not know what Paul prescribed for ritual purification, but the models most ready-to-hand are not always as convenient or time-redeeming as hand-washing or *tebul yom*. Nothing within Paul’s theology comes even close

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19. Apart from the usual warnings about using Acts to fill out details of Paul’s thinking, it is not clear whether Paul’s use of Jewish purity laws in Acts is a direct support for his prescriptions in 1 Corinthians. While Luke gives the appearance that Paul follows these laws as a matter of course, it cannot be ruled out that this behavior stems from the policy of bearing a Jewish face before Jews. There are suggestions in Acts that Paul was under a Nazirite vow while at Corinth (see Acts 18,18; B.J. Koet, Why Did Paul Shave His Hair [Acts 18,18]?., in M. Poorthuis – C. Safrai [eds.], The Centrality of Jerusalem. Historical Perspectives, Kampen, 1996, 128-142; F.W. Horn, Paulus, das Nasarait und die Nasi räer, in NovT 39 [1997] 117-137), and it is possible that his haircut at Cenchreae was connected with his contraction of corpse impurity. In Acts 21,26-27, Paul fulfills the seven-day purification period (cf. 24,18; M.N.A. Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics*, Edinburgh, 2000, pp. 42-43).
to explaining why Christianity would have suddenly dispensed with the notions of ritual purity that were universal within the religious realm of the first century. Given this fact, we should expect Paul to give some place to purity logic, and, as it happens, this supposition forms a good fit with 1 Cor 7.5. Frankovic and I did not argue that the non-purity way of reading 1 Cor 7.5-7 is impossible, but rather tried to show that a purity context makes better sense, because it is efficient on both grammatical and historical grounds.

Secondly, concerning our discussion of 1 Cor 7.7, Maccoby writes that “Paul does not adduce the example of Moses for his own celibacy, which he regards as a ‘gift’ and as spiritually valuable in itself; whereas Moses, in the rabbinic theory, did not value celibacy in itself, but regarded it as a necessity in a situation similar to continual attendance in the Temple”21. Again, he reads us incorrectly. Following an argument from Geza Vermes regarding Jesus’ celibacy, we appealed to Philo’s discussion in De vita mosis, where he invokes a tradition also preserved in a couple of rabbinic midrashim. We tried to show that, if Moses’ “situation similar to continual attendance in the Temple” required celibacy, then it stands to reason that a calling that Paul related to that of Moses might also require celibacy, and that, given this fact, we should reconsider the referent of “gift” in 1 Cor 7.7. Maccoby writes that, “Paul does not adduce the example of Moses for his own celibacy”, but our pointing out that Paul sometimes invoked a Mosaic paradigm for his own ministry was not foundational to our thesis. Our argument works whether Paul thought of his ministry in specific terms of Moses or not: the ritual logic behind Moses’ celibacy was applied to many religious offices in the Mediterranean world, from the Delphic oracle, to wood gatherers for sacred altars, to beekeepers22. Our point in discussing 1 Cor 7.7 was to suggest that “gift” refers not to celibacy, but rather to the apostolate23.

21. I argue against Maccoby’s Temple-oriented view of ritual purity in POIRIER, Purity (n. 13). There I wrote that Second Temple Jews pursued purity “for its own sake”, for which C.E. Hayes and J. Klawans both took me to task in their respective panel remarks at the Association for Jewish Studies Annual Meeting in Boston, MA (December 21, 2003). They understood my use of this phrase, in sequence with the assertion that “purity is connected to holiness”, to imply that I had confused “purity” with “holiness”. I wish to disown that view, as my wording at other points should have made clear my awareness of the difference between the concepts of purity and holiness: e.g., “the warnings against bringing impurity into the temple make the point that the temple is a very holy place, and tell Israel how it must respect that holiness” (Purity [n. 13], p. 255).

22. It may be that Maccoby is here importing his own view of Paul. In The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity, San Francisco, 1986, he argues that Paul saw himself as the fountain of Christian revelation, in a way analogous to Moses’ role in Jewish origins. This is not my view. The intertextual associations are there, but the interpretation Maccoby gives them is too extreme.

23. We wrote, “One who reads closely enough might … legitimately ask whether Paul in fact refers to celibacy as a χάρισμα or if perhaps he subsumes celibacy under the obligations attending his own χάρισμα… The most obvious point in favor of the latter interpretation is that nowhere else does Paul call celibacy a charism, whereas he calls prophecy a charism in several places” (POIRIER – FRANKOVIC, Celibacy [n. 10], p. 16).
In this connection, it is worth pointing out that some sort of purity concern seems to be at work in 1 Cor 11:10, “because of the angels”. Why Paul mentions the angels in this context is much less of a puzzle than scholars have tended to think: he refers to them specifically in connection with women praying or prophesying, and the belief that angels mediated prayer and prophecy was nearly universal in late antiquity. It would appear that the necessity for women to cover their heads had something to do with the ritual requirements of communing with angels. The suggestion that it had to do with a matter of purity rather than some other form of propriety may actually line up with the way in which Hippolytus’ Apostolic Tradition orders female baptizands to loose their hair and lay their jewelry aside before going down into the water. W. C. van Unnik argues that the Canons of Hippolytus holds the correct interpretation of this practice: loosing the hair and doffing jewelry are apotropaic gestures, symbolizing the rejection of the realm of demonic influence, as well as demonic artifice. The loosing of hair identifies the baptizand’s pagan (and thus demon-influenced) status prior to being baptized, while the doffing of jewelry recalls the tradition preserved in 1 Enoch, Tertullian, etc., that the fallen angels introduced cosmetology. The connection that Hippolytus makes between loosed hair and impure status is directly relevant to the issues framing the first half of 1 Corinthians 11: “La définition, donnée dans le Talmud au sujet des préceptes dans Num. 5:18 nous le montre clairement ainsi que le contraste: une tête couverte = une tête dont les cheveux étaient relevés [b. Sota 8b-9a]. Les cheveux flottants indiquaient donc que la femme était impure”25. Van Unnik shows that loosed hair signified any sort of halakhically required separation from the community, e.g., of leprosy, menstruation, Nazirite vows, etc. This brings us back to 1 Corinthians: if uncovering one’s head (= loosing one’s hair)
represents the impure state of the baptismal candidate in the *Apostolic Tradition*, would not the resumption of this symbol of impurity in a postbaptismal context (e.g., 1 Cor 11,10) also signify impurity? It is of course risky to infer the motivation for an earlier practice from that given for a later practice, but Paul’s further comments suggest the correctness of this line of interpretation: he compares loose hair with a shaved head, which symbolizes another category of unclean woman (the prostitute). It appears safe to say, therefore, that it is as a symbol of impurity that loose hair offends the angels.

**IMPURITY AS AN INCONVENIENCE**

I have argued that ritual concerns among Christians should not always be explained in terms of halakhic influences. Peter J. Tomson has made the same argument in connection with the views countermanded in Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition* and in the writings of John Chrysostom. Both of these writings indicate the existence of Christians who would not pray after sexual intercourse without first washing their hands. Chrysostom writes, “You do not dare to pray after having had intercourse with your wife, although this is no transgression; but having reviled someone or having been naughty, you do stretch out your hands without purifying yourself decently” (*Hom. in Matt.* 51). The *Apostolic Tradition* contains the following: “[A]t midnight rise and wash thy hands with water and the Bible and Early Christianity, 36), Lewiston, NY, 1997; Y. KHOK-KHONG, Differentiation and Mutuality of Male-Female Relations in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, in Biblical Research 43 (1998) 7-21.

27. On the antiquity of the baptismal rite related in the *Apostolic Tradition*, Dix notes that the outlines of Hippolytus’ baptismal rite are already found in the Valentinian Gnostics whose writings are excerpted by Clement of Alexandria, and that this state of affairs is best explained by remembering Valentinus’ earlier career as a teacher within the Roman Church, during which time he would have become familiar with the Church’s liturgical traditions (DIX [ed.] and CHADWICK [trans.], *Treatise* [n. 24], p. XXXIX).


29. This understanding of 1 Cor 11,10 as invoking a purity concern is supported by the way in which the Qumran scrolls appeal to the angelic presence at Qumran as requiring a certain level of purity. J.A. FITZMYER is credited with pointing out the similarity between 1 Cor 11,10 and the views of Qumran concerning purity and angels (*A Feature of Qumran Angelology and the Angels of 1 Cor 11:10*, in *NTS* 4 [1957-58] 48-58; see M. NEWTON, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul* [SNTSMS, 53], Cambridge, 1985, pp. 106-109). On the necessity of avoiding uncleanness in the presence of angels, see M.D. SWARTZ, “Like the Ministering Angels”: Ritual and Purity in Early Jewish Mysticism and Magic, in *AJS Review* 19 (1994) 135-167.

pray. And if thou hast a wife, pray ye both together... He who has used marriage is not defiled; for those who are washed have no need to wash again, for they are pure” (36,8-10). The last sentence in this quotation is apparently directed at a concern, felt among Christians of the third century, that sexual intercourse renders one ritually impure, and thus incapable of pronouncing the regular prayers. As Tomson writes, “This last clause reminds us of Chrysostom and even justifies the suspicion that he was referring to a similar code. Apparently, purification before prayer was specifically indicated after intercourse.” Tomson notes that the practice of washing the hands before prayer not only recalls a similar practice among contemporary Jews, but also agrees with pagan practices “from Homer onwards.”

Tomson’s observations appear to strike against Maccoby’s assumption that, if Paul had a ritual purity concern in mind when writing 1 Cor 7,5, then the remedy would have been immediately and conveniently satisfiable. Maccoby’s assumption does not fit with the early Christian practice that Hippolytus confronts in the text quoted above: he instructs the couple to pray after washing hands at midnight, but tells them that they should not scruple about ritual impurity caused by sexual intercourse. This can only mean that those believers whose views he seeks to overturn think that the remedy for this type of ritual impurity is something more than simply washing the hands (i.e., it probably included a waiting period). This yields the exact scenario that Frankovic and I used for interpreting 1 Cor 7,5: ritual purification before prayer, which was required by both Jewish and pagan religious rules, became a widespread practice in the early Church. The suggestion that Paul had already adopted this rule at the time of writing 1 Corinthians helps to make sense of that letter.

**CONCLUSION**

Maccoby is correct to emphasize that issues of ritual impurity have often been read into passages where they do not belong, but the studies that he protests against (excluding our own) have all assumed that Paul’s concerns about miasma are motivated by his view of the Law. It is time for NT scholars to realize that most religionists in late antiquity were concerned with ritual impurity. What Jacob Neusner writes of Judaism is true of most ancient religions: “purity is one of the givens of the world;
where it is not mentioned, it is still a consideration. Talk a Jew out of allegiance to the Mosaic Law, and one is still left with a ritual worldview.

ABSTRACT. — There are three distinct approaches to ritual purity within early Christian texts: (1) purity laws are binding because the Mosaic law retains their authority for Christians, (2) they are binding as a purely religious reflex (regardless of one’s position on the Mosaic law), and (3) they are not binding on Christians at all. Scholars today too often pass over the second position in silence, as though any positive concern for ritual purity counts as evidence for a judaizing influence. Despite objections recently voiced by Hyam Maccoby, the second position provides the best interpretation of the Apostle Paul’s approach to ritual purity. His position on the avoidance of sexual relations for the sake of prayer (1 Cor 7,5), as well as what he says about women covering their heads in the company of angels (1 Cor 11,10), is best understood in light of what his Jewish and Greek contemporaries relate about purity in general.