

Leviticus 14

Aaron Eime, Christ Church Jerusalem, 2022

One of the important functions of the Levitical priesthood was to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, the holy and the common. To distinguish also meant to maintain boundaries and in some cases, separation. In the case of skin diseases of humans, garments, and dwellings, the affected person or object was quarantined until the skin disease had vanished. The priests had the knowledge and the power to determine someone's ritual purity. As we commented in the previous chapter, the literal text describes the skin disease as a purely physical ailment. However, all Jewish commentaries examine the spiritual reasons that may have induced the disease. The affliction of *tzarat* is linked with the spiritual welfare of the individual.

Following a cleansing from *tzarat* (skin disease), Moses dictates some elaborate rituals for purification, similar to the purification of priests. Moses also dictates a strange collection of material for use in the ritual. Living sacrifices of birds, scarlet yarn, cedarwood, and hyssop. We noted that the ritual itself is not the process through which cleansing occurs. The person affected by *tzarat* first becomes clean in some unexplained way, and then the rituals are performed. But why? Why is the ritual required if the person is now already cleansed? This begs the question: what is the purpose and function of ritual? It should be noted that ritual is not created by Moses but is the intention of the divine. If you strongly object to ritual then please take it up with God. Simply relying on the Holy Spirit all by yourself has no historical precedence for success. Ritual is a practical expression of gratitude and plays a role in memory. Without ritual how would a cleansed person reflect on their past and present state? How would they return thanks and praise? Ritual is *not* required in *any* circumstance as a *prerequisite* to worship the Lord. However, without ritual, descent into cheap grace can be a quick one. There would then be no reminder, no visible witness, and little assurance that purity had been achieved.

Examination of the cleansed person is conducted outside the camp. This reflects the physical-biological concern for infection and contamination. Spiritually, sin is likewise infectious. Many of our communities today do not restrain sinful activity. Rather its presence is tolerated if not condoned. A little leaven will leaven the whole lump! Part of the ritual that celebrates becoming clean involves the release of a live bird. It is very rare in the sacrificial system of the Torah to release a living sacrifice. The other instance is during Yom Kippur. No obvious connection to Yom Kippur is found in the literal reading of the physical ailment in this chapter. Spiritually the connection could be raised between the atonement of a terrible sin and the delight of someone completing repentance and returning to spiritual purity. The ritual is performed outside the camp, and the Epistle of Hebrews spiritually connects this with the crucifixion of Jesus outside Jerusalem.

What do we make of the elements of cedarwood, scarlet yarn, and hyssop? No literal meaning is given in the text, other than to being washed in 'living water'. Thinking spiritually and allegorically about these elements we noted that cedar is a very hard wood and resistant to disease and rot, perhaps it is included here for this reason. Wood was used by Moses and Elijah to make bitter and poisonous waters pure. Perhaps that purity is the connection here? Scarlet yarn is found in the story of Rahab and Jericho, in which a Gentile woman of impurity joins the Jewish people in redemption. Scarlet wool was also tied around the horns of the Yom

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Kippur sacrifices and changed colour to white to signify the acceptance of atonement. Hyssop was used by the Jewish people to cover the houses with the Passover blood in Egypt. David uses the plant in his confessional psalm of repentance, urging the Lord to purge his sin away with hyssop. In this way, David was comparing his spiritual poverty to that of a cleansed leper. We also see it used at the crucifixion of Jesus to provide the Messiah with a drink. Blood is deposited on the cleansed one in a similar ceremony to priests. Yet the person afflicted is most likely not from the tribe of Levi. Theologically, we see all tribes as now a 'kingdom of priests' through being made pure by repentance and restoration.

Those suffering from *tzarat* were excluded from the community. This would result in a loss of family, access to worship, business and employment opportunities. How then would the poor who had become cleansed be able to afford the sacrificial requirements? The obvious answer is that they most likely couldn't. Thus redeemers, wealthy families or the Temple took responsibility to cover the costs of the ritual. Someone else paid the price of the sacrifice.

Moses then moves to the laws regarding moulds and rots of physical structures and buildings. Buildings were treated in much the same way as human purity, even requiring the use of blood for the purification ritual. Interestingly the blame for the appearance of a physical mould is God Himself. The Lord is delivering Canaan into the hands of His people. The Israelites will now dwell in buildings they did not fashion and construct. These buildings are part of the gifts of God and they are good. Now, something bad was happening to the good gift. It is God who gives the land, the property and the plague. God is the source of both good and evil and He is in control of both good and evil. The evil was not in the control of Satan. This theological paradigm is reflected in the prophets as it is also mentioned here in the Torah. The Spiritual injunction is a moral warning to keep our own house clean. The gifts we have been given by the Lord need to be guarded, preserved as well as used for the body of the Messiah and His glory. And this includes the Temple of the Holy Spirit, our very bodies.