

Andreas Weckwerth: *Casta placent superis: Konzeptionen kultischer Reinheit in der Spätantike*. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2022 (Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum. Ergänzungsband 42). X, 409 p. € 69.00. ISBN: 978-3-402-10809-3.

This book is a 2022 publication of a habilitation thesis in church history and Patristics from the University of Mainz, submitted in 2014. Its subject is the concept (and, to a lesser extent, practice) of purity in early and late ancient Christianity. To investigate this subject comparatively, the author summarizes at length the major purity concepts and practices of the Greco-Roman world and of Judaism, reading the major sources from these traditions. While relatively much work has been done on purity in early Christianity, especially in the first two centuries, purity in late ancient Christianity is less researched, and as such this book has a significant role.

The book opens with an important conceptual and lexical introduction. Here, the field of ritual-cultic im/purity is divided into physical purity, stemming mostly to bodily fluids, death, foods, etc.; and moral purity, stemming mostly from sinful action. (These definitions are generally used throughout the book, though in several places “ritual” is not used for all types of religious purity but rather only for the physical type, with the expression “rituell-physisch”; for simplicity’s sake, I will use “physical” vs. “moral” in this review as well). Then, the material is divided into two major but unequal sections: “purity and religious practice” (pp. 17–192) and “sexuality and religious practice” (pp. 193–289), with a short chapter on modern theories about ancient purity systems following (rather than introducing the theoretical framework of) these two (pp. 290–319). Each section is then divided into three traditions: “pagan antiquity”, “ancient Judaism”, and “ancient Christianity”. Both sections discuss the relationship between moral and physical purity across diverse contexts, but the first talks mostly about death impurity, dietary restrictions, and ascetic/philosophical purity, while the second focuses on impurity of menstruation, male genital emissions, and sexual relations, both in and out of wedlock. These are followed by 56 pages of bibliography and convenient indexes of terms, subjects, and passages.

A glance at the book’s detailed table of contents is enough to show its ambition and scope. The author is to be commended on the explication of such a large and diverse number of phenomena from across antiquity, in Greek, Latin, Syriac and Hebrew texts and in diverse traditions, integrating them

into a coherent structure. The book covers a large number of texts from different traditions and languages; and although its title focuses it on “Spätantike” and is most interested in early Christianity, in fact it attempts to cover a very broad chronological and geographical landscape, from classical antiquity (and earlier) to the fifth and sixth centuries CE. As such, the book is certainly a useful compendium and discussion of texts on various types of purity conceptions and purification rituals from across many ancient traditions, presenting a large amount of evidence under clear and detailed subject headings. The presentation of ancient texts with their translations side-by-side is also very helpful. However, such a wide scope also creates a significant challenge when attempting to form a valid historical argument, which will be both theoretically coherent and still suit the diverse cultures analyzed.

The main thrust of the book’s argument is a) that physical and moral purity are two distinct and clearly differentiated types of purity, though allowing for some overlaps and ambivalence; and b) that earlier Mediterranean religions (i. e., Greek, Roman, Jewish) practiced both physical and moral purity dimensions to various degrees, while late ancient Christianity continued with moral, but generally dispensed with physical purity, by adapting Platonic and biblical moral purity concepts and language. The picture which emerges is of a moralizing trend from ancient to late ancient, from pagan/Jewish to Christian, with some caveats. The most important exception – clearly analyzed in the second section – is sexual impurity, which for the author betrays a continuing belief in physical impurity since sexuality is seen as problematic or impure even in wedlock, i. e., without sin; but even here, it is emphasized that the impurity arises from sexual thoughts and passions, not from the material reality of sex. This argument is made explicitly, but also served implicitly by the selection of both primary and secondary sources. In this review, I will criticize this historical model, which I believe is misguided.

Even though the book discusses a large number of sources, these are still necessarily a selection, as the author explains (p. 15). This is legitimate, but the selection of the texts serves to direct the reader to the argument of the book. Chronologically, Jewish texts are mostly biblical or second temple, pagan ones mostly Platonic-philosophical or diverse *leges sacrae*, while many Christian texts are necessarily later. Thus, the question becomes not so much how Christian purity concepts related to contemporary pagan and Jewish concepts in the Roman Empire, but rather how they related to (mostly) earlier pagan and Jewish traditions. Moreover, the inclusion of Christian or

quasi-Christian texts with physical emphases would have changed the picture, but they are either missing or seen as outliers (on which more later). One example, not included in the discussion at all, is Origen's *Commentary on First Corinthians*, known in fragments; some of the fragments clearly discuss physical purity issues concerning the Eucharist and its temporal distancing from sexual intercourse; another is the Nag Hammadi writings, which have some very interesting ideas about the relationship between physical and moral purity; a third are Valentinian fragments and texts; a fourth is early monastic/ascetic literature, which is surprisingly not much considered despite its clear interest in both the moral and physical aspects of purity.

The bibliography, in German, French and English, is copious, but has some significant blindspots. Very few items postdate 2014 (and none postdate 2018 when the manuscript was submitted to the publisher). While this is perhaps to be expected, readers will not find engagement with literature on the subject from the past decade. Furthermore, some important scholarship antedating 2014, specifically on early Christian purity concepts and practices, is missing. A partial list includes Thomas Kazen's and Risto Uro's monographs and articles, which introduced perspectives from cognitive science to the field;¹ articles by Menahem Kister and Yair Furstenberg placing Jesus' purity sayings in their Jewish context;² Christine Hayes' book on genealogical purity in early Judaism;³ publications by Peter Tomson, Jonathan Lawrence and Martin Vahrenhorst on purity in Paul in Jewish context;⁴ and Roland

- 1 T. Kazen: *Jesus and Purity Halakhah. Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?* Stockholm 2002 (Coniectanea Biblica. New Testament Series 38); Id.: *Dirt and Disgust: Body and Morality in Biblical Purity Laws*. In: B. J. Schwartz (ed.): *Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible*. New York 2008 (Library of Hebrew Bible. Old Testament Studies 474), pp. 43–64; Id.: *Issues of Impurity in Early Judaism*. Winona Lake, IN 2010 (Coniectanea Biblica. New Testament Series 45); R. Uro: *From Corpse Impurity to Relic Veneration: New Light from Cognitive and Psychological Studies*. In: R. Uro/I. Czachesz (eds.): *Mind, Morality and Magic. Cognitive Science Approaches in Biblical Studies*. Durham 2013 (BibleWorld), pp. 180–196.
- 2 M. Kister: *Law, Morality, and Rhetoric in Some Sayings of Jesus*. In: J. L. Kugel (ed.): *Studies in Ancient Midrash*. Cambridge, MA 2001, pp. 145–154; Y. Furstenberg: *Defilement Penetrating the Body: A New Understanding of Contamination in Mark 7.15*. In: *NTS* 54 (2), 2008, pp. 176–200.
- 3 C. E. Hayes: *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud*. Oxford 2002.
- 4 P. J. Tomson: *Paul and the Jewish Law. Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*. Assen 1990 (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 3.1);

Deines' and Markus Bockmuehl's discussions of the Apostles' decree.⁵ Many of these publications problematize and complicate the easy distinction between "moral" and "physical", whether historically or methodologically. By doing so, they open the field to seeing moral and physical purity (or, in other words, inner and outer, purposeful and automatic, soul and body, spiritual and material) as either different dimensions of behavior which are typically concurrent and interrelated, or as discursive options, or even polemical talking points. Furthermore, this literature shows that binary distinctions between types of purity, rather than simply existing, are themselves continually constructed, debated and erased in the period under discussion. While engagement with all scholarship on the subject is of course impossible, the omission of whole scholarly perspectives necessarily slants the discussion.

As I summarized above, the author sees in the first Christian centuries a clear move from physical to moral purity. While the author acknowledges that in some areas of practice, or in some Christian communities physical purity still had a role, these are seen as exceptions rather than the rule. For example (p. 121, my translation and emphasis): "In Paul and in the post-Pauline epistolary literature of the New Testament, the replacement of ritual-physical purity categories with an **exclusive** focus on moral purity has already been **unequivocally** accomplished".

While the author acknowledges that the distinction between moral and physical may be sometimes blurred or unclear (e.g. death defilement, leprosy, washing), this does not lead to a reassessment of the binary differentiation which is still the main methodological tool of the book. This rigidity leads to the understanding that Christianity either continued Jewish/pagan physical purity concerns, or not: it is therefore assumed that physical purity concerns, if they exist in Christianity, must be a continuation – or a relic – of Jewish ones (e.g., p. 135: "the forms of material and physical purity characteristic of Judaism no longer play a role in the emerging Christian identity").

J. D. Lawrence: *Washing in Water. Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature*. Leiden/Boston 2006 (*Academia Biblica* 23);
M. Vahrenhorst: *Kultische Sprache in den Paulusbriefen*. Tübingen 2008.

- 5 R. Deines: *Das Aposteldekret – Halacha für Heidenchristen oder christliche Rücksichtnahme auf jüdische Tabus?* In: J. Frey (ed.): *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World*. Leiden/Boston 2007 (*Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* 71), pp. 323–395; M. N. A. Bockmuehl: *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches. Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics*. Edinburgh 2000.

The idea that Christians may have invented new purity rituals, with their own inner logic integrating both moral and physical dimensions in novel ritual and discursive configurations, is hardly entertained. Judaism is also treated with this either/or logic, but there “an abolition [of physical purity] cannot be attested” (p. 90–92).

The de facto definition of moral and physical purity in the book is that moral im/purity is caused by sin or its lack; physical im/purity by physical or biological processes. However, this definition is narrow and does not explain the frequent management of both moral and physical impurity through ritual means, on the one hand, or the social and therefore cultural and moral effects of biological processes such as menstruation, on the other. Thus, the singling out of a specific physical vs. moral dimension in ancient ritual and discourse, as performed by Christian authors of the first centuries when they highlight the moral aspects and occlude the physical ones, is a significant discursive stratagem vis-à-vis Judaism, which does not negate the physical/bodily aspects of these rituals. A clear example for this can be seen when late ancient Christian writers state that menstruating women should not enter churches or participate in the eucharist, but hasten to add that this is not because of their impurity but due to the honor of the eucharist (p. 259). There is no substantive difference between this and impurity, but writers felt that physical impurity is for Jews or pagans, not Christians, so they had to use different language. Perhaps unwittingly, the author is continuing these same discursive stratagems.

In fact, the definition of “moral” and “physical” in the book is tailored to ancient Christian understanding: For example, baptism is seen first and foremost as a matter of morality, and therefore the practice of baptism in Christianity is considered to be an instance of the shift to a focus on moral purity. To my mind, while baptism certainly has significant moral dimensions and aspects, it is impossible to deny that it is a ritual, performed with and on the human body, and therefore also “physical”.

Another area where the narrow lens of physical vs. moral is problematic is demonology. “Impure demons” feature in Christianity from its earliest stages and into Late Antiquity. As many have shown, demons were conceived in antiquity as real beings, with a certain kind of body. Are these an example of “moral” or “physical” impurity? While in many cases demons are a result of sin, in others the connection is more tenuous; but even when sin is in the background, the management of the resulting demonic impurity

is hardly limited to the moral realm – rather, rituals and social institutions, such as exorcists, were developed in order to manage it. Exorcists did not simply give sermons or persuade people to stop sinning; rather, they banished the demons through bodily purification rituals. Notably, exorcism as a social institution, though connected in various ways to Jewish or Greco-Roman rituals, is a Christian invention.

At the same time, Church Canons or other sources in which authority figures reject physical purity practices – such as Basil the Great on the rejection of pork meat (pp. 146–147) or the *Didascalia Apostolorum* on menstruation (p. 256) – are not taken by the author as significant evidence for physical purity practices in these communities but as unusual aberrations. In the latter case, for example, the author writes in a note (n. 133) that the discussion in the *Didascalia* indicates that idea that menstruation is defiling and leads the holy spirit to depart from the person must have been widespread, but this insight is not present or developed in the main text. The voice of the bishop or the authority figure in the text, rather than that of the community practice clearly reflected in it, is seen as much more significant.

Likewise, the multiplicity of Christian communities and currents is not given a role, with gnostic or Jewish-Christian communities not considered a significant part of Christianity. This seems to be at play also concerning ancient Judaism, with the claim that in Judaism “washing for purity [...] refers exclusively to physical, not moral, purity, for which there is no possibility of purification” (p. 133) disregarding John the Baptist as described by Josephus (*ant. Jud.* 18.117) or the washing described in the *Community Rule* (1QS 3). This too leads to a reproduction by the author of the perspectives made by Christian writers, rather than to their historical contextualization as one voice among several. Dynamics of polemic, censorship, canonization and selection of texts from antiquity are not taken into account.

Similarly, in some cases, when different opinions appear in the ancient texts, the author goes with the majority (moral) interpretation against the minority (physical) one. An example is the impurity caused by male seminal emissions for those administering the eucharist (pp. 250–256). Here, the opinions of Basil the Great and the *Testamentum Domini*, who do not mention sin as a significant dimension in this impurity but seem to tend to a physical-ritual interpretation, is considered relatively insignificant in light of other opinions for which sin is the main problem. In my opinion, such weighing of the number of opinions to arrive at an overall conception for late ancient Chris-

tianity as a whole is not a valid historical methodology: rather, diversity in the sources (whatever their relative number or social-cultural standing) should be seen as a hint for actual, and significant, historical diversity.

In conclusion, this book is a significant and wide-ranging attempt at outlining and analyzing the field of purity in early and late ancient Christianity, an important subject which deserves full treatment. However, its interpretative and theoretical perspective only partially correspond to the historical complexity of the phenomena discussed.

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