Notions related to purity and pollution play a major role in Leviticus, probably more so than in any other book of the Hebrew Bible, if we except the case of Numbers.¹ The following essay is a general survey of notions of purity and pollution found in Leviticus, using an approach that combines philological, historical and social-scientific insights. It discusses the various forms and representations of pollution in Leviticus and seeks to explain them in terms of their social and ideological function in the context of the ancient society that produced this writing. Contrary to other studies, which have usually treated Leviticus as part of a broader tradition within the Pentateuch (the so-called ‘Priestly source’, or P), this analysis will focus on the final form Leviticus as a separate ‘book’ within the Pentateuch.²

Discussing concepts of purity and pollution in Leviticus raises the central question of the genre and nature of the material preserved in that book. As with many other aspects of the religion of ancient Israel, the Hebrew Bible represents virtually our only source of information about concepts of purity and impurity before the Hellenistic period.³ However, contrary

¹ This is already shown by the occurrence of the main terms for ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ in the Hebrew Bible, ṭḥr and ṭmʾ; almost half of the occurrences of these two roots can be found in Leviticus alone. The verb ṭmʾ occurs 162 times in the Hebrew Bible, 85 of which are in Leviticus; the corresponding term ṭāmēʾ ‘unclean’ occurs 88 times overall, 47 in Leviticus alone. Likewise, the verb ṭḥr occurs 94 times in the Hebrew Bible, 43 in Leviticus; only the term ṭāhôr ‘clean’ does not entirely follow this general rule (96 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, of which 21 are in Leviticus). On purity and pollution in Numbers, see the essay by C. Frevel in this volume.

² Compare, e.g., Wright, “Spectrum”; Jenson, Graded Holiness, esp. 40–55. This is also true of studies that have focused on concepts of purity and pollution in a portion of Leviticus, such as chs. 11–15, rather than on the book as a whole; compare, e.g., Milgrom, “Rationale”; Marx, “L’impureté”.

³ In other words, if it were not for the biblical texts, we would simply have no idea of the role played by the distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ in the social and religious life of ancient Israel. This assertion may be slightly qualified if we take into account the possibility that some of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic traditions, in which purity concepts sometimes also play a major role, may actually go back to the Persian period. I am thinking, in particular, of the core traditions constituting the “Book of the Watchers”
to other sources in Antiquity, such as, for instance, public inscriptions or archaeological remains, Leviticus cannot be used as primary evidence for popular beliefs pertaining to purity and pollution. Although it is likely to contain earlier instructional material, the book as such is a literary composition that was produced by a group of scribes closely associated with the temple in Jerusalem and that probably served first and foremost for the education of elites. Thus, from a social-scientific perspective, it would be naïve to read issues of pollution and purification in Leviticus as if that book were a mere report of contemporary practices, without taking into account the book’s literary and ideological character.

For this reason, this study will begin with a brief assessment of the origins of the book of Leviticus and its intended audience, in order to define a general framework for understanding the possible functions of the instructions about pollution and purification that are laid out in that book (§ 2). The discussion will then address the two main forms of pollution defined in Leviticus, namely, physical (§ 3) and moral (§ 4) impurities. Basically, it will be argued that these two forms of pollution are complementary in that they represent an attempt to establish a form of social control over phenomena perceived either as external or internal threats against the integrity of the social group (‘Israel’) to which Leviticus is addressed. Furthermore, whereas these two forms of pollution have distinct origins and distinct effects, they are partly unified into a comprehensive system of purification, which is itself centered on the temple and its sacrificial rituals. Finally, in a further section (§ 5), we will try to see how it is possible to correlate this interpretation of pollution in Leviticus with the social milieu that produced this book during the Persian period.

2. The Composition of Leviticus in the Persian Period

Like the other books of the Pentateuch, Leviticus is a composite writing. There are many indications that the rules for sacrifices in Lev 1–7 and for

in 1 Enoch (1 En. 1–36), especially the story of the angelic watchers’ descent to engage in sexual intercourse with human women and the ensuing contamination of the earth in 1 En. 6–11, which is usually regarded as the oldest section in the Book of the Watchers. While I am quite ready to accept the view that some portions of the Book of the Watchers may go back to the fifth or fourth century BCE, this material has been so heavily reworked during the Hellenistic period that it is not easy to isolate that pre-Hellenistic layer. Otherwise, the evidence brought by archeological and epigraphic data is usually limited and mostly negative (e.g., the absence of pig bones in Israelite settlements during the Iron Age).