THE BIBLICAL DIETARY LAWS
AND THE CONCEPT OF HOLINESS

by

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When Mary Douglas's interpretation of the biblical dietary law was published, it appeared to many, and when I read it years later I too felt, that at last we had received a convincing explanation of the criteria distinguishing clean and unclean animals. Prior to the appearance of her seminal studies in *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966) and *Implicit Meanings* (London, 1975) these criteria had remained without any systematic interpretation. Indeed, although any number of reasons had been suggested for the exclusion of the unclean species named in Lev. xi, almost everyone agreed in principle that no single reason could be operative, that the real reasons were no longer understood when the law in its present form was written, and that the present criteria are secondary (see appendix 1). If it has done nothing more than to shake our confidence in these assumptions, Douglas's work merits recognition.

While one should not deny in principle that the present dietary law may be the product of a long evolution, one should also not begin by assuming that it is. In order to decide that issue, we must discover whether in fact the present criteria can be explained as indicating a coherent purpose behind the definitions of animal purity. Only having done that is it admissible to speculate about the prehistory of the present law. The text before us must be the starting point for any discussion of the issue. This would be true even if we were to suppose, for example, with scholarship prior to Douglas, that the animal tabus of Lev. xi are in fact not the creation of the priests, and that they were motivated by reasons that have nothing to do with the present

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1 I wish to thank those who have offered criticisms of various drafts of this article: Professors M. Weinfeld, Jacob Milgrom, David Wright and Shalom Paul, and fellow student Roy Gane.
criteria, or conceivably even with problems of interest to the priests. In that case, we should still have to ask why the priests chose to formulate these tabus by means of the present criteria. That is, whatever the original motivation was, are the priests perhaps reinterpreting old tabus according to a system of their own? There is an instructive example in our own system of table manners that will illustrate what I mean. Most people today probably assume that the practice of eating with one's own utensils is a product of rational considerations of hygiene. But in fact it is not. Nevertheless, when, toward the end of the 18th century, concern for hygiene began to take on increasing importance, people also began to suppose that that was in fact what had motivated the use of utensils all along. For us today of course, hygiene is what justifies their use. It is conceivable, then, that Israel's dietary code underwent such reinterpretation over the years. It may be that the priests in particular reinterpreted old tabus, and justified them in the terms which we now have in Lev. xi. What is more, if there were dietary tabus before the present law came into being, then it cannot be taken for granted that all these popular tabus were taken over by the priests, and we should then have to ask what guidelines the priests used in selecting those animals which the present law regards as unclean. In sum, whatever version of the prehistory of the dietary law we accept, there remain a number of important questions whose answers must largely come from the present text, the organizing principles of which are precisely those neglected criteria, for which modern scholarship has had no use. With Mary Douglas, these found an interpreter who was alert to their significance. She has drawn our attention to the fact that such codes of behavior are inseparable from the larger social system of their creators, whose values they embody. It is now with Mary Douglas that any further discussion of the dietary law must begin. Before turning to my own analysis of the animal categories, I should like, then, to highlight some weaknesses in Mary Douglas's approach, as the issues raised will enable us to ask more probing questions of our text.

Douglas believed that she had discovered in the biblical criteria of selection an essential unity of motivation: animals were expected to have those essential physical features proper to their respective habitats. Douglas identified the means of locomotion as the most crucial of these features. Thus, cattle were expected to go on four

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