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BEYOND PURITY AND DANGER: MARY DOUGLAS AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

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The brilliant anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921-2007) has left an enduring mark on biblical scholarship. Although she had no formal training as a biblical scholar and knew only a little Biblical Hebrew, her forays into the Hebrew Bible were path breaking. She began her biblical adventures in 1966 with “The Abominations of Leviticus,”¹ which remains her best-known and most frequently anthologized essay. In it she recast the study of biblical ritual into a new key – focusing on the anomalies (“dirt is matter out of place”) that illuminate the conceptual categories at the heart of ancient Israel’s religious and cosmological vision. In a subsequent study, “Deciphering a Meal,”² she related these conceptual categories to the structure and boundaries of Israel’s social order, in line with the anthropological imperative to investigate the correlations between social institutions and religious practices.

She returned to the Hebrew Bible in her later years with a complex biblical trilogy, *In the Wilderness* (1993), *Leviticus as Literature* (1999), and *Jacob’s Tears* (2004).³ In these books she engaged in a sustained reading of the literary structures of the biblical books of Numbers and Leviticus. Most important, she brought to bear her mature theory of cultural analysis (first conceived in *Natural Symbols*, 1970),⁴ in which she worked out a correlation between types of societies (and institutions) and the types of religious and cosmological systems that these social structures support. For example, the contrasting cosmologies and ritual systems of P versus D can be explained in relation to the differing social institutions and commitments of the two sources. P’s social world and cosmology are hierarchical, and P’s discourse is correspondingly terse and analogically ordered. D’s social world is more individualist, and D’s cosmology is correspondingly focused on individual responsibility and interior dispositions. D’s discourse is more rhetorical, based on exhortation rather than densely nested system.⁵

Although the study of biblical ritual has been profoundly affected by Douglas’s work (see, e.g., the many references to Douglas in Jacob Milgrom’s magisterial Leviticus commentary in the Anchor Bible series), her legacy is still under construction. The current collection of essays illustrates this situation, as five scholars of biblical ritual refine, critique, and extend her theories in new directions. This is a generation of scholars for whom *Purity and Danger* has always been a classic – a source of inspiration (and occasional irritation) and a necessary point of departure for the scholarly study of biblical ritual.

The five articles that follow in the journal engage Douglas's studies of the Hebrew Bible from a variety of perspectives and on a variety of topics. Each contributor provides theoretical elaboration and critique of Douglas's ideas. Several essays expand upon Douglas's efforts to uncover the larger native structures of meaning underlying ritual or textual details and patterns, concluding that Douglas's insights are applicable to data that she did not consider herself. Some of the papers focus on Douglas's early work; others on her later ideas. Several of the authors specifically address Douglas's influence on their own work.

Hendel's essay places Douglas in the larger intellectual contexts of modernism in general and anthropological modernism in particular. In contrast to its evolutionary-oriented predecessors, anthropological modernism "turned away from great meta-narratives of cultural ascent and turned to micro-narratives of everyday events and cultural habits, yet always with an eye to reveal[ing] the fundamental and the universal in human culture." Understanding Douglas as an heir of Radcliffe Brown, Malinowski, and Durkheim, Hendel shows how Douglas explores seemingly arbitrary ritual details such as the avoidance of pork with the goal of uncovering the larger, implicit native structures of meaning that constitute society, its elites, and its practices. For Douglas, the individual details reveal the larger reality.

Marx elaborates upon Douglas's argument in her most recent work that Leviticus as a literary work reproduces sacred geography in its structure. He applies this tack to two sacrificial laws in Leviticus 19 that have been interpreted as anomalous and intrusive in their literary context, concluding that "just as the structure of the tabernacle illuminates the structure of Leviticus, these two laws serve also to illuminate the following non-sacrificial laws," revealing the principles that govern ritual and ethical relationships.

Olyan's focus is an assessment of what he calls Douglas's holiness/wholeness paradigm. Introduced in the essay "The Abominations of Leviticus," physical wholeness exemplifies holiness according to Douglas's paradigm. Olyan begins by outlining several examples of the paradigm's fruitful elaboration, and goes on to assess its strengths and weaknesses. Though the paradigm has been and continues to be influential and productive of insight, Olyan suggests that it has the potential to account for more phenomena if wholeness, rather than holiness, were to become its focus, given the demonstrated relationship of beauty to wholeness apart from considerations of holiness.

Schmitt, who begins by acknowledging his intellectual debt to Douglas, provides a critique of Douglas's construction of magic in her later works, which he finds less insightful than the views she expressed in earlier works such as *Purity and Danger*. Rejecting distinctions such as that between miracle and magic, Schmitt argues that biblical magic, in its various manifestations, is treated in diverse ways by the text, and not in a single, negative way as Douglas claimed in her late works. Against Douglas, Schmitt finds that magic is not in itself incompatible with monotheism.

Wright's essay argues that Douglas's method of ritual analysis demonstrated in "Deciphering a Meal"—that the particular detail is illuminated by its larger context—has great potential for insight through extension into new areas beyond culinary custom. It "even gets to the heart of the definition of what ritual is" according to Wright, who compares Catherine Bell's theory of ritualization to Douglas's syntagmatic analysis, and also considers whether such analysis can help us to understand ritual infelicity in contexts such as feasts and sacrifices with greater insight. Like Marx's and Olyan's contributions, Wright demonstrates how Douglas's theorizing can be fruitfully elaborated and extended to materials she did not consider.

The essays in this collection were originally presented at a special session of the International SBL meeting in Vienna in July 2007. Mary Douglas was eagerly looking forward to this session, where she was to be the respondent. Sadly, her plan was interrupted due to ill-health and mortality. She wrote in an e-mail in early May, "It breaks my heart that I cannot come to this lovely programme you have organized for me in Vienna. I am only just back from University College Hospital, and I cannot expect to be well enough to travel by July." The following day she was knighted as Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire at a ceremony in Buckingham Palace. She passed away a week later, on May 16, 2007, at the age of 86. These essays are dedicated to her memory.

¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 41–57.

² Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 249–75.

³ Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); idem, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); idem, *Jacob's Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (2nd ed.; New York: Random House, 1973).

⁵ The implications of Douglas's cultural theory for the relationship between D and P had already been outlined by Ernest Nicholson, "Deuteronomy's Vision of Israel," *Storia e tradizioni di Israele: Scritti in onore di J. Alberto Soggin*, ed. D. Garrone and F. Israel (Brescia: Paideia, 1991), 191–203.