The Semantics of Purity in the Ancient Near East:

Lexical Meaning as a Projection of Embodied Experience*

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Abstract

This article analyzes the primary terms for purity in Biblical Hebrew, Ugaritic, Sumerian, Akkadian and Hittite. Building on insights from cognitive linguistics and embodiment theory, this study develops the premise that semantic structure – even of seemingly abstract concepts – is grounded in real-world bodily experience. An examination of purity terms reveals that all of them can be related to a concrete sense pertaining to radiance (brilliance, brightness, shininess). The article traces the semantic development of purity terms in distinct experiential contexts and shows how semantic analysis can elucidate the inner logic of fundamental religious concepts.

What is purity? An attempt to compare the lexicalization of a concept such as this in different languages must begin from what appears to be a shaky premise: a singular concept that is expressed cross-linguistically.1 As a point of departure, let us clarify how “purity” is understood in English. The American Heritage Dictionary offers the following definitions for “pure”:

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1. Having a uniform composition; not mixed 
2. Free of adulterants or impurities 
3. Free of dirt, defilement or pollution 
4. Complete; utter 
5. Having no faults; perfect 
6. Chaste; virgin

An inspection of these senses offers some important insights into the semantics of purity. First of all, the constellation of senses for “pure” in English is remarkably similar to those of the various ancient Near Eastern terms to be analyzed below, providing an immediate confirmation of the utility of the comparative enterprise. Second, despite the common tendency – even in scholarship – to employ the idiom of “cleanness” as synonymous with “purity,” a perusal of these usages indicates that this semantic overlap is limited. If we try to substitute “clean” for “pure” in everyday expressions such as “pure gold” or “pure-blooded Irishman,” it is clear that the two terms are not interchangeable. These points warn us that the common translation “ritual cleanness” is misleading. So we return to our original question, and with greater force: What is purity and how did this cross-cultural concept originate?

**Meaning and Experience**

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2 The dictionary also includes: “of unmixed blood or ancestry” and “theoretical” (e.g. ‘pure science’), but these are clearly derivative of senses 1–2 and 4, respectively.
In attempting to reconstruct the conceptual prehistory of “purity,” it will be necessary to move beyond the standard structuralist definition of purity as the opposite of impurity. The latter approach (still influential in modern lexicographical works) is based on Ferdinand de Saussure’s programmatic attempt to distinguish language as an object of analysis from extralinguistic experience. First, Saussure offered a mentalistic definition of the linguistic sign as a relation between a concept (e.g. dog) and an acoustic image (the sound /d-o-g/), leaving aside the dimension of reference (i.e. to an actual dog in a particular speech context). Second, and more importantly, he defined meaning as value, such that the sense of a term is solely determined by its relationship with the other terms in the linguistic system. Stated in his words: “The conceptual side of value is made up solely of relations and differences with respect to the other terms in language.”

In this vein, one might be led, as was even the great lexicographer James Barr, to define the meaning of Hebrew תָּהוֹר as “(ritually) clean” as opposed to צָמֶא “unclean.” As indicated above, such an understanding of “purity” is superficial and, in fact, imprecise.

The alternative approach is to view language as inextricably connected with extralinguistic experience. One of the major contributions of cognitive linguistics has been to illuminate the relationship between human experience and semantic structure. This connection is commonly formulated in the assertion that word meaning is encyclopedic. William Croft summarizes this view as the recognition that “everything you know about the concept is part of its meaning.”


Taking consideration of the communicative context of language, one might state that the exchange of linguistic meanings by communicating parties is dependent on their shared world knowledge.

In her book *Meaning and Experience*, Patrizia Violi offers a systematic program for relating lexical semantics to experience. The scope of this approach is represented in the following statement:

One could say that all language taken as a whole is a complex deictic instrument. Deixis, as a function of reference to an extralinguistic context, is generally considered to be limited to a small, circumscribed number of linguistic elements, typically first- and second-person pronouns and spatial-temporal indicators like *here* and *now*. However, these deictics are just the visible part of an invisible iceberg – all language is intrinsically indexical, referring to the extralinguistic dimension of our experience.\(^6\)

In contrast with analytic philosophical approaches to semantics, this view argues that linguistic expressions do not correspond to objective states of the world but rather to human experience in all its subjectivity, filtered through the prism of culturally determined social realities and the individual’s psychological states. For this reason, lexical meaning contains an affective element. Violi writes, “Lexical meaning can be seen as the site where salient points of experience are manifested, and, because of their importance, are expressed in language. In this respect, lexicalization is never arbitrary, but is motivated by the saliency of certain experiences compared to others.”\(^7\)

It is due to this fundamental substrate of experience which underlies language that we can expect similar semantic structures in genetically unrelated languages. In this paper, we will examine the terms for purity in Biblical Hebrew (BH), Akkadian, Hittite, Sumerian and Ugaritic


\(^7\) Ibid., p. 46.
(with emphasis on the first three). More precisely, we will address a striking phenomenon: **The primary terms for purity in all of these languages are etymologically related to radiance.** As we shall see, the strikingly high degree of parallelism in the patterns of semantic development between these languages reveals commonalities in the modes of conceptualizing these notions, reflecting their shared grounding in human experience. Despite the fact that purity is an ostensibly metaphysical (i.e. not directly perceptible) force or quality and hence might be thought to be privy to a particular culture’s idiosyncratic “religious” imagination, this commonality shows, on the contrary, that the conceptual processes by which these cultures made sense of their experience were highly similar.

Surveying the Evidence: The Concrete Origins of Purity Terminology

Starting with BH, the primary term for purity in the Hebrew Bible is טהרה. Taking a synchronic approach to the lexical data for BH, the vast majority of the occurrences of the adjective טהרה appear in cultic contexts serving as an antonym to טמא (“defiled”). In these contexts, purity is not a state that can be transmitted, it is simply the absence of impurity. Hence, the term takes its

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8 I have not included terms for washing, such as Sum. luḫ or Akk. mesû (see CAD M/2 29–33). While similar to the terms surveyed here in many respects, they do not exhibit the same semantic range, especially as designations for a state of cultic purity/ eligibility for cultic use. Likewise, I have excluded derivatives of Heb. נקי, which are employed almost exclusively in relation to innocence from moral and legal culpability, though the expression נקיון כפי (“cleanness of hands”) hints at an original concrete usage related to washing (e.g. Ps 73:13).
semantic value in opposition to “impure.” At first glance, this point appears to validate the structuralist view of semantics presented above.

However, from an etymological standpoint, it is clear that the original sense of this term is related to radiance. This derivation can be demonstrated through comparison with its Ugaritic cognate ṭhr. Ugaritic ṭhr is used exclusively to describe the lustrousness of lapis lazuli (iqnū, spr) and is semantically equivalent to ib, cognate to Akkadian ebbu (for this term, see below). For example, in the Baal epic, the future palace of Baal is described in the following terms:

\[ wbn.bht.ksp \text{whrs/bht.ṭhrm iqnim} \]

And build the house with silver and gold, the house with lustrous lapis lazuli (stones). In the letter KTU² 1.24, we find this root with the variant ṣ: “And I shall give her father a dowry of a thousand (shekels) of silver and ten thousand (shekels) of gold. I shall send lustrous lapis lazuli (stones) (ṭhrmʾiqnʾlm)” As we shall see below, these references to “lustrous lapis lazuli” are paralleled by the usage of Akkadian ellu in descriptions of divine thrones and royal building projects.

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11 Note the regular correspondence between Syriac ṭ and Arabic ṣ.
This original concrete sense of the Ugaritic root *ṭhr* is attested also for its Hebrew cognate *

Particularly striking is the usage of this root to describe the revelation of the divine throne in Ex 24:10:

They saw the God of Israel and beneath his feet was like a brick-work of lapis lazuli and like the very heavens in its brilliance.

As rightly emphasized by Ford, the expression לָטֹהַר serves simultaneously to characterize both the radiance of the blue sky and that of the lapis lazuli brick-work. Not only does this usage appear in a comparable sense and context to the Akkadian and Ugaritic expressions mentioned above, but it shares their underlying perspective whereby earthly materials are associated with divine attributes due to their radiant qualities (see below).

Furthermore, it seems clear that BH י"ה is etymologically related to י"ה. For example, the divine throne in Ezek 8:2 is described as כמראה זֹהַר כעין החשמל (“with a radiant appearance, like amber”). The term י"ה appears also in Dan 12:3: “and the knowledgeable will glow like the radiance of the sky,” in which the expression י"ה הקיע parallels נַעַם השמים לָטֹהַר in Ex 24:10. These roots are also related to י"ה, whose most

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12 The identification of חשמל (which appears also in Ezek 1:4) is uncertain. It may be cognate with Akkad. elmēšu, described by CAD E 108 as “a quasi-mythical precious stone of great brilliancy.” Cf. HALOT 362.
unambiguous use is the term for mid-day צהרים, which parallels טיהר in Jewish Aramaic. Though the phonetic interchange between ū, z, and ṣ is relatively rare, it finds corroboration both intra-linguistically and inter-linguistically, and the fact that the derivatives of each root refer to the radiance of the sky leaves little doubt that they are cognates.

Whereas the cultic usages of טיהר would give the impression that this term has no meaning whatsoever except in relation to טמא, its use to describe the “lustrous” quality of lapis lazuli and the sky offers a more positive profile for this term. Moreover, the connection between a concrete phenomenon and the divine attributes associated with it provides a plausible account for how this term could take on a more metaphysical sense in serving as an antonym to טמא.

This process of semantic development reveals a transition from an original concrete sense to a more lexicalized formulaic usage. In the latter phase, טיהר has become a value which is determined in counter-distinction to its opposite, טמא. This last observation, taken by itself, is consistent with the emphasis in structuralist linguistics on the role of the semantic system in

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13 E.g. Gen 43:16; Deut 28:2; Ps 55:18.

14 See M. Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1992), 221; idem, A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2002), 501.

15 Other intra-linguistic examples may include צ"צ (Gen 45:17)/צ"צ (Isa 33:20; see HALOT 1041–42) and צ"ץ (Gen 27:46)/ץ"ץ (Ps 95:10; see HALOT 1083). I thank Yigal Bloch and Baruch Schwartz for these refs.. Inter-linguistically, note the regular correspondence between BH ṭ and Aramaic ṣ, and the variation ṭ/ẓ in the Ugaritic evidence noted above, as in the correspondence between Syriac ṭ and Arabic ẓ
determining the value of each of its components. However, such a synchronic view does not preclude a diachronic awareness that “purity” was originally an independent concept, associated with radiance.

Another semantically related root attested in both BH and Ugaritic is brr.\(^\text{16}\) However, in this case, it is Ugaritic which attests to its ritual usage. For example, the festival text KTU 1.119:5 reads: \textit{yrṭš mlk b’rr} (“The king will wash himself pure”).\(^\text{17}\) But this root is also employed in a legal context in the sense “free of obligations.” For example, the text KTU\(^2\) 2.19:2–5 uses a simile comparing the person freed of debt to the sun in its clarity: \textit{km špš d brt kmt br PN b ūnt ‘d ‘lm} (“like the sun that is clear, so too PN remains free of debt in perpetuity”). The concrete usage of this root is also implicit in the designation \textit{brr (/bərûru/)} for “tin,” a substantivized form of the adjective “(the) shiny.”\(^\text{18}\)

Though the Hebrew Bible does not use ר"בר in cultic contexts, it does contain ample attestation to the concrete senses “bright” and “clear.” For example, Song of Songs 6:10, like the Ugaritic text cited above, employs this root in relation to the sun: “Who is she that shines through

\(^{16}\)For an extended etymological analysis of this root, see P. Fronzaroli, “Problems of a Semitic Dictionary,” in \textit{Studies on Semitic Lexicography} (ed. P. Fronzaroli; Firenze: Università di Firenze, 1973), 9–21, though the present analysis raises further problems for Fronzaroli’s reconstruction. See also V. Hamp, \textit{TDOT} 2:308–12.

\(^{17}\) See D. Pardee, \textit{Ritual and Cult at Ugarit} (WAW 10; Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 50, 52.

\(^{18}\) See DULAT 239–40.
like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, radiant as the sun (ברם כחמה)?”

Especially notable is the following passage from Psalm 19:

The precepts of the LORD are just, rejoicing the heart;
The instruction of the LORD is lucid, making the eyes light up.
The fear of the LORD is pure, abiding forever…
The judgments of the LORD are true, righteous altogether,
more desirable than gold, than much fine gold…

Aside from the fact that this passage uses ברם together with טהרה, it is noteworthy that ברם (“lucid”) appears here in apposition to the expression “making the eyes light up” (מאירת עינים). This parallelism hints at the relationship between both טהרה and ברם and radiance. Furthermore, as we shall see, it is not coincidental that the passage continues with the imagery of fine gold, itself distinctive by its radiant appearance.

Turning to Mesopotamia, the terminological overlap between purity and radiance is attested also in Sumerian and Akkadian. The widely-attested term kug/kù, generally glossed

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19 Note also the rabbinic expression ברם כשמש, e.g. b. Sanhedrin 72a.

20 NJPS translation.
“pure” or “holy” in cultic contexts, originally designated the quality of shininess, serving also as a substantive designating “(the) shiny” > “metal.” Indeed, it serves as the etymological basis for the logogram for gold (kug-sig₁₇ = “yellow metal”) and silver (kug-babbar = “white metal”). The expression “bright lapis lazuli” cited above in Ugaritic and BH appears already as a common formula in Sumerian literature (kug-za-gin). A similar account can be made for another common term for “pure,” dadag. This term is written by doubling the UD sign (“day”/ “sun”), which can also be read as the verb zalag (“to shine”). Once again, it is the concrete phenomenon of radiance which lies at the roots of the Sumerian terms for “purity” and “holiness.”

The key Akkadian terms for purity are the adjectives ellu and ebbu and cognate verbs elēlu and ebēbu. These two roots were virtually interchangeable already from the late 3rd mil. B.C.E.,

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so it is not easy to determine the underlying semantic distinction between them. These terms and their Sumerian equivalents appear as a fixed hendiadys in incantations already in this period, showing that they were taken to be essentially synonymous, at least in ritual contexts.\footnote{See the comment in CAD E 83, which cites the stereotyped usage of sikil and dadag already in Gudea Cylinder B (iv 12) and the incantation VAS 10 190 from the Old Akkadian period, recently edited and published in the appendix of J.J.A van Dijk and M.J. Geller, \textit{Ur III Incantations} (TMH 6; Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2003) 76–77. Though the comment in CAD E 4 correctly emphasizes the relationship between \textit{ebbu} and brightness, its assertion that \textit{ellu} is never employed in reference to physical cleanliness is questionable. See Wilson, \textit{“Purity” and “Holiness,”} 81–82.} Furthermore, lexical lists and bilinguals often blur any distinction, consistently placing both terms as possible translations for kug, sikil and dadag. Nevertheless, one notes a general tendency to correlate kug and sikil with \textit{ellu}, and dadag with \textit{ebbu}.\footnote{See the lexicographic summaries in CAD E 2, 80–81, also the editorial comment on 83, corroborated with queries using DCCLT: (http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/dcclt/). Note the use of the EL sign (from \textit{ellu}) to designate sikil already in the OB period (MSL 14, 121-122; see Marti and Guichard, \textit{“Purity,”} 63).} In the following discussion, each term will be treated separately, though any semantic distinctions must be treated with caution.

Beginning with \textit{ellu}, this term is somewhat misleadingly glossed by CAD as follows:


These general translations provide little indication for the usage of \textit{ellu} in the sense of radiance. However, by paying closer attention to the group of distinct substances that this adjective modifies, we can achieve a more precise appreciation for its range of meanings. Specifically, it appears as a term for a class of high quality gold and silver, attested in OA documents as well as in later examples, such as archival texts from Nuzi and Qatna. It also appears as a modifier of
precious stones, especially lapis lazuli. In these contexts, it would seem to provide a generic expression for “high quality,” rather than a precise indication of purity or authenticity.27 It also appears in reference to light and the radiant face of the god Aššur.28

In addition, numerous texts (already in OB) use ellu to designate the radiance of the sky.29 Paralleling the description of the divine throne in Ex 24:10, numerous building inscriptions attribute a similar radiance to lapis lazuli or blue-glazed bricks employed in royal projects. An inscription of Marduk-apla-iddina II (late 8th cent. B.C.E.) emphasizes the brightness of the blue-glazed bricks with which the Eanna temple was restored:

\[
\text{ina limnäti (SIG₄.HI.A) ellēti r[e]šišu ullimā uʾnamʾmera kīma (GIM) ūmi}
\]

He raised its top with shining bricks and made (it) as bright as sunlight.30

These sources demonstrate that ellu is semantically parallel to BH טהר and its cognates discussed above. The implicit association between radiance and divinity will be discussed further below.

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29 E.g. the Nanna hymn W 17259: A. Cavigneaux, Uruk: Altbabylonische Texte aus dem Planquadrat Pe XVI-4/5 (Mainz: von Zabern, 1996), 59–60, # 113, ll. 9, 11, corresponding to kug; the Šamaš hymn CT 58, 28 (SEAL 2.1.16.2), Rev. 4’: an za-gin corresponding to šamû ellūtum. Note also the use of ebbu in l. 8’ corresponding to dadag and referring to Šamaš.

A further point of correspondence between *ellu* and מַטָּר can be found in reference to fresh oil. *ellu* appears repeatedly in reference to high quality sesame and olive oils, apparently those derived from ripe fruit. These high quality oils were distinguishable by their bright golden color, further demonstrating the use of *ellu* to designate radiance. Thirty-One Strikingly, this usage parallels the BH expression מַטָּר, in which the high quality of the oil is described in terms of its glowing appearance.32

The other major term used to designate cultic purity is *ebbu*. Like *ellu*, its concrete usage is related to radiance, designating the “shininess” or “brightness” of various substances. It is glossed in CAD as follows:

*ebbu*: 1. “polished, shining, lustrous, clean, pure (in a cultic sense), holy,” 2. “trustworthy, proper.”

This term is employed to describe the polished, shining and lustrous qualities of metals (silver, gold and bronze), wood, and precious stones (especially lapis lazuli). Unlike *ellu* and its derivatives, the verbal form *ubbubu* is employed in reference to mundane cleaning and laudering.35


32 E.g. Deut 28:51; 2 Kgs 18:32. For the transference of this radiance by means of anointment rites, see p. 27 below.

33 CAD E 1.

34 CAD E 2.

A final Akkadian term related to the domain of purity is zakû, which is found in ritual but generally not cultic contexts.\(^{36}\) CAD glosses this term as follows:


The primary sense “clear” is validated by a survey of the concrete contexts in which this term is cited. In particular, we find zakû employed to describe “clear” as opposed to “polluted”/“cloudy” (dalḫu) liquids, particularly water and beer. In an OA letter from Kaneš, we find a particularly revealing attestation in reference to lapis lazuli:

Regarding the lapis lazuli of Aššur-bēl-awātim, inspect the lapis lazuli. If it is pure (zakû) and there is no white or discoloring, then pay its full price.\(^{38}\)

It is attested in OA and OB documents to describe “refined” copper, tin and amûtum,\(^{39}\) as well as in the Amarna letters in reference to gold and silver.\(^{40}\) These usages of zakû stress that the materials are free of adulterating elements; hence, they are of uniform composition. In an extended legal usage, it is also employed to describe objects and persons “free” of claims. Along these lines, the

\(^{36}\) For this distinction between genres, see below.

\(^{37}\) CAD Z 23. See also CAD Z 25 for comparable uses of the stative verbal form.


\(^{39}\) J.G. Dercksen, \textit{The Old Assyrian Copper Trade in Anatolia} (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul, 1996), 36, 213.

\(^{40}\) EA 14 II 57, 63; 27:25, 27; see CAD Z 24, 31.
D verbal form *zukkû* can be used to signify the “release” of persons and birds.\(^{41}\) Comparable meanings are also attested for *ellu* and *ebbu*, as we will see below.

This range of meanings is very closely paralleled by cognates in BH and Aramaic. The BH adjectival form זך is employed to describe “pure olive oil” (Ex 27:20) and “pure frankincense” (Lev 24:7). However, it appears more frequently in legal / moral contexts to designate innocence or “purity from guilt.”\(^{42}\) Notably, this root was not employed in reference to cultic purity, similar to the extreme rarity of this usage in Akkadian.

Turning to Hittite, the stem *parkui*- serves as the base for the most frequently attested terms pertaining to purity.\(^{43}\) The evidence for this stem indicates a semantic structure similar to that of the corresponding terms in BH, Ugaritic, Sumerian and Akkadian. Like these terms, it appears that

\(^{41}\) CAD Z 29–30.

\(^{42}\) E.g. Mic 6:11; Job 8:6; 32:9. In the Jewish dialects of Aramaic, only the legal senses are attested. See Sokoloff, *Palestinian Aramaic*, 176-77; idem, *Babylonian Aramaic*, 412–13. Verbal derivatives from זך are used to designate washing but generally in metaphoric contexts (e.g. Isa 1:16; Job 9:30).

the primary concrete sense of parkui- is associated with radiance, including translations such as “bright” or “shiny.”

Like other terms discussed above, a substantivized form of this adjective was used as a designation for bronze or brass, attested in the lexical list KBo 13.1. A similar usage is reflected in the stative verbal form parkue- (“to become bright”) as expressed in the protasis of the following moon omen: takku 4SIN-aš...parkuš (“If the moon...becomes bright”).

When applied to other concrete referents, the usage of parkui- is more closely related to the semantic field of purity. For example, it is employed in reference to silver, gold, wool and even porridge to express that these substances are unadulterated, that is, free of extraneous elements. It is also used to designate cleanness, usually with the causative verbal form parkunu- “to make clean,” which is employed to describe laundering of clothing and persons. Nevertheless, even some ritual and cultic references to parkui- attest to its concrete usage. For example, Ammiḫatna’s Ritual concludes with the following declaration: “Just like silver, may you be pure (parkuš) before

Another related term is šuppi-, which can be rendered “pure” or “sacred,” depending on the context. I have not included this term since a concrete usage in Hittite is difficult to establish (for discussion, see Wilhelm, “Reinheit,” 203–5; Hutter, “Concepts of Purity,” 164–66). Nevertheless, a likely etymology relates it to Sanskrit śubhā (HEG 14: 1192): “radiant, pure,” fitting well with the findings of the present study. For the semantic similarities with Akk. ellu, see n. 89 below.

I 52; see HED 8: 146–7. Cf. CHD P 167.

KUB 8.9 Vs. 9–10; see K.K. Riemschneider, Die akkadischen und hethitischen Omentexte aus Bogazkoy (DBH 12; Dresden: TU Dresden, 2004), 76. See also 251 and HED 8:134–35 for further examples. For the verbal infix –e-, see GHL §10.11. Cf. CHD P 163, which also raises the possibility of deriving these forms from park-, yielding “to become high,” though this suggestion seems doubtful.

CHD P 170.
the deities, male and female!” Similarly, the Antaḫšum Festival includes the following simile: “The chief cook speaks the words of consecration: ‘Just as the sky is clear (parkui), may the sacrifice, [bread, and li]bation vessels also be pure (parkuiš)! ’” Though the usage of parkui- in ritual contexts should be distinguished from its concrete sense (see further below), it is noteworthy that these sources refer to concrete referents as prototypical images of this quality. In sum, the stem parkui- and its derivatives can refer to brightness as well as various states related to purity, such as freedom from adulterated substances and cleanness.

Having surveyed the primary terms for “purity” in BH, Ugaritic, Sumerian, Akkadian and Hittite, we are now in a position to draw some general conclusions. In all of the languages surveyed, we have observed that the primary terms for cultic purity can be traced back to an original concrete sense related to the experiential domain of radiance. This finding is in itself significant, since one might have assumed that the semantics of purity would be based primarily on the terminology of mundane cleanness, but this is not the case. Strikingly, of the terms surveyed, Akkadian zakû and its cognates are the closest to that sense, namely to be “clear” of adulterating substances.

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49 KUB 25.20++ iv 16-17// KUB 11.23 VI 1–3; see CHD P 164 and HED 8: 135. Other rituals use the whiteness of processed wool as the paradigmatic image of purity; see B. Christiansen, *Die Ritualtradition der Ambazzi: Eine philologische Bearbeitung und entstehungsgeschichtliche Analyse der Ritualtexte CTH 391, CTH 429 und CTH 463* (StBoT 48; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 143–46.
elements, yet surprisingly this term was not adopted as a primary designation for cultic purity (see below). The following sections will attempt to explain these unexpected findings.

The Move Towards Abstraction: From Radiance to Purity

The previous discussion has traced the primary terms for purity back to an original concrete sense pertaining to radiance. Before examining the semantic transition from radiance to purity in more detail, it is important to recognize that nearly all of these terms are employed in several abstract (i.e. non-material) usages in literary genres pertaining to legal, cultic and ritual social contexts. Interestingly, there is a remarkable degree of cross-linguistic correspondence in the adaptation of each of the purity terms to these experiential domains. In particular, it is possible to define three distinct characterizations of purity as functions of sociolinguistic context as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociolinguistic Context</th>
<th>Characterization of Purity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Legal (ordeal(s))</td>
<td>Free of guilt (detectable by divine judgment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ritual</td>
<td>Free of pollution and similar metaphysical threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cult/ sacrificial offerings</td>
<td>Free of pollution, holy, eligible for participation in the divine sphere</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

50 In this regard, it is similar in its contexts of usage to mesû (v.) “wash” (CAD M/30–33) and (adj.) “washed” (ibid. 29).
51 These three characterizations of purity largely correspond with the distinct schemes of pollution which I have found in the biblical evidence. The correspondence is as follows: 1) legal → stain of transgression; 2) ritual → infection; 3) cult → uncleanness. See Y. Feder, “Contagion and Cognition: Bodily Experience and the Conceptualization of Pollution (tum’ah) in the Hebrew Bible,” JNES 72 (2013): 165. Another biblical source of pollution which is not included here is that attributed to idolatry (see D. P. Wright, “Clean and Unclean [OT],” ABD 6: 734). I view this latter category as a type of “social contagion,” which I plan to examine in a separate study.
I will now briefly examine these different contexts and the use of purity terminology as determined by them.

The first context where purity (and pollution) terminology regularly appears is in the ordeal – a test of guilt involving divine intervention. Several ordeals appear in the Hittite Instructions for Temple Officials (CTH 264). For example, persons who bring inappropriate first-fruit offerings must undergo the following:\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{verbatim}
52 ...našta BIBRU DINGIR-LIM
53 ZI-aš arha ekutteni nu=za mān parkuwaeš
54 šumel PLAMMA-KUNU takku=za papranteš=ma našta QADU
55 DAMMES-KUNU DUMEMES-KUNU harakteni
\end{verbatim}

Then you (pl.) shall drink from the rhyton of the will of god. If you are pure, it is your protective deity. But if you are defiled, you shall perish together with your wives and children (IV, 52–5).

In these contexts, the terminology of purity and impurity designates the innocence or guilt of the accused party.\textsuperscript{53} Although from an analytical perspective we may be tempted to view this usage as ‘metaphorical,’ it is clear that these sources – no less than the cultic and ritual ones cited below – conceptualize this guilt as a metaphysical force, an unseen reality that will surface by means of the ordeal.


\textsuperscript{53} In particular, note the usage of \textit{papre-} / \textit{parkuešš} for “proven guilty/ innocent by ordeal” (CHD P 106, 166, 169).
A similar use of ebēbu can be found in the Laws of Hammurabi §2 in the case of a river ordeal for a person accused of witchcraft:\textsuperscript{54}

\[
\text{šumma awilam šuāṭi nāru (tÍD) ūtebbibaššūma išītamam ša elišu kišpī iddū iddāk}
\]

If the River clears that man and he survives, the man who accused him of witchcraft shall be killed. Note also that the Laws of Ur-Namma §§13–4 use Sumerian dadag to denote “clearing” of guilt through a river ordeal.\textsuperscript{55} More generally, both elēlu and ebēbu were employed already in OB sources to describe the status of people and real estate in the sense “free of (legal) claims.”\textsuperscript{56}

A parallel usage appears in the Hebrew Bible in the drinking ordeal for the suspected adulteress, the soṭah (Num 5:11–31). In this rite, the soṭah is forced to drink a potion containing the following conditional curse (vv. 19–20, 22):\textsuperscript{57}

\[
\text{והשביע אתה הכהן ואמר אל האשה אם לא שכב איש אתך ואם לא שטיית אתך ימי אל שיחתה תאני נמי}
\]

\[
\text{ומרים הממוררים האלה}
\]

\[
\text{אנת ימי שיחתה ימי אשר בך או ששבתה ממלודי יראך}
\]

\[
\text{ובאו המים הממוררים האלהrito בטוב ביצת ירך ואמרה האשה אמן Аман}
\]

The priest shall make her swear, saying to the woman: ‘If a man did not lie with you and you did not stray impurely from your husband, you shall be absolved by these cursing waters. (But) if you did stray from your husband and have been polluted, and a man aside

\textsuperscript{54} Text: M. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Second Edition; Atlanta: SBL, 1997), 81 (with slight adaptation). For a comparable use of zakû, see CAD Z 26.


\textsuperscript{56} CAD E 6–7 (ebēbu); 81 (elēlu); 105–6 (ellu).

\textsuperscript{57} I have omitted v. 21, as it is not immediately relevant to the discussion. Some scholars suspect, in fact, that this verse is a later addition, see J. Jeon, “Two Laws in the Sotah Passage (Num. v 11–31),” *VT* 57 (2007): 189.
from your husband put his laying inside you, these cursing waters will enter your abdomen, causing your belly to swell and your hip to fall.’ And the woman shall answer, ‘Amen, amen.’

The references to pollution in this rite do not involve ritual impurity, but rather the culpability of committing a sexual misdeed. As we will see below, this distinction is necessary and significant.

The second context in which the pure/ impure dichotomy appears is in ritual texts of a therapeutic or prophylactic function. For example, the Hittite term for pollution papratar appears frequently in lists of metaphysical threats which threaten the ritual patrons such as curse (lingāi-), slander (lala-), bloodguilt (ešhar) and especially sorcery (alwanzar). In the Šamuša Ritual (CTH 480), these forces are imagined as surrounding the temple like the layers of skin of an onion. Similar uses can be found for ellu and ebbu, as attested, for example, in the Šurpu and

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59 Several scholars have correctly recognized that Num 5 does not refer to “ritual” impurity, e.g.: B.A. Levine, Numbers 1–20 (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 207; Wright, “Unclean and Clean,” 734. Elsewhere I have shown how the usage of pollution terminology in relation to sexual transgressions and bloodshed is modeled after a “stain of transgression” scheme: “Contagion and Cognition,” 164–65.

60 For examples, see CHD P 105–6; HED 8:101–4.

Maqlû incantation series in reference to purification from the dangerous influence of curses, witchcraft and transgressions.62

The depiction of pollution as it is found in the Hebrew Bible lacks the threatening quality of Hittite papratar. Indeed, the priestly instructions seem to relegate all forms of pollution to the status of cultic impurity, innocuous as long as it is distanced from the sacred precinct. However, I have shown elsewhere that several types of severe impurity—specifically leprosy, gonorrhoea and corpses—seem to have been originally the source of intense fear of contagion. This view can account for: 1) David’s curse in 2 Sam 2:29 which explicitly portrays leprosy and gonorrhoea as divine punishments (cf. Lev 13–15); 2) the requirement to banish these forms of defilement from the camp/city; and 3) the more elaborate ritual process—invoking expiatory offerings—needed to remove the pollution.63 These types of pollution which were originally associated with the perceived danger of infectious disease can be compared to the role of papratar in ritual contexts, since they involve a threatening force which must be removed by the requisite ritual.

The usage of pollution terminology in ritual contexts which imply a metaphysical danger is similar to that found in the ordeals mentioned above, where being impure designates culpability before the gods, entailing divine punishment. This similarity has led some scholars to assume that ordeals are referring to the same type of pollution as that found in ritual contexts. Closer


examination, however, reveals that the sense of pollution in these distinct contexts should be distinguished.\footnote{See above, n. 59.}

The potential for confusion is apparent in discussions of the biblical soṭah ritual (Num 5), mentioned above. In the ritual instructions of Lev 12 and 15, it is clear that the person experiencing genital discharges defiles his/ her partner. On this basis, some scholars have understood Num 5 as implying that the adulterous wife is defiled (טמא) by her liaison’s seed (vv. 13–14). Ellen van Wolde formulates this view explicitly:

The trajectory followed is that of a man who is not her husband, who inserted his penis into her and discharged his seed. Only the effect of his path on her state is regarded as defiling. However, more attention is paid to the consequence of her impure vagina for her husband. When he has sex with her, he will be contaminated by her impurity.\footnote{See E. van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition and Context (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 260; see also 216 for a similar interpretation of Lev 18:20, 23 and 261–62 for the defilement of the land. For a comparable view of Deut 24:1–4, see S.M. Olyan, Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult (Princeton: Princeton University, 2000), 59. For a critique of the latter, see C.E. Hayes, Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), 22–24.}

This understanding stems from the assumption that the sense of טמא here is essentially the same as that found in Lev 12 and 15. However, it is clear that the verb takes on a different nuance in light of the legal context. Namely, “defilement” in this context refers to guilt, which stems from the woman’s moral responsibility towards her husband. Contrary to van Wolde’s statement, the
text pays no attention whatsoever to “the consequence of her impure vagina for her husband,” and with good reason: this “pollution” is not transmitted by contact.66

The third context for purity terms pertains to the cult. These texts focus on acceptable offerings to the gods, which must be free of pollution.67 For example, the Hittite Instructions for Temple Personnel warn against defiling the gods’ offerings. Participation in the cult requires bathing, laundering, avoidance of sexual relations and unclean animals. In the following passage, the kitchen personnel are warned in vivid language.68

64 mān UNUTEMES GİŞ UNUTEMES GIR4 kue harteni
65 n=ašta mān ŠAH-aš UR.GI-aš kuwapikki anda šāliqa
66 EN.UTUL=ma=at arha UL peššiyazi nu apāš DINGIRMES-aš paprandaza
67 adanna pāi apēdani=ma DINGIRMES-eš zakkar //dūr
68 adanna akuwanna pianzi

If a pig or a dog ever touches the wood or clay utensils that you (pl.) have, but the ‘pot-bearer’ does not throw them away, and he gives to the gods to eat from defiled (vessels), the gods will give that one excrement and urine to eat and drink.

This passage captures the role of human disgust in determining what is inappropriate as a sacrificial offering. In fact, in an earlier warning against allowing dogs and pigs into the kitchen, this attitude

67 For this category, see especially de Martino, Purità, 348–61.
68 III, 64–8; Text edition: Taggar-Cohen, Hittite Priesthood, 61–2. The transcription here is based on KUB 13.4, with minor reconstructions based on parallel copies, and the translation is mine.
is presented as a self-evident truth (I, 21–22): “Is the will of humans at all different from the will of the gods? No! Regarding this matter, it is not. Their will is the very same.”

The priestly instructions of the Hebrew Bible also employ aesthetic criteria to restrict potential officiants and offerings. Bodily perfection is required of both, and a nearly identical list of disqualifying blemishes is presented in Lev 21 and 22. Since both offerings and cult personnel are dedicated to God, these blemishes are viewed as desecrating (טתי) them. Regarding pollution, Lev 22 makes brief allusion to sources of bodily pollution and unclean animals (vv. 4–5). These references should be taken as inclusive of all of the sources of bodily impurity listed in Lev 12–15 and Num 19, as well as the various types of unclean creatures listed in Lev 11. Only after purifying from these impurities may the priest partake in the offerings. Like the Hittite instructions, these rules governing the necessary purity for the cult are based on an intuitive sense of cleanness which serves as the required etiquette for persons and offerings before they can approach the divine precinct. In these contexts, *parkui*– and *טהר* refer to freedom from defilement and eligibility to participate in the divine sphere, mediated by the cult.

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Similar usages are attested for *ellu* and *ebbu*, but *zakû* is only rarely used as a term for cultic purity. The latter appears occasionally in the sense of “pure” in ritual contexts (e.g. anti-witchcraft incantations – though even these tend to evoke legal connotations), but it is generally not employed to designate personnel or objects designated for sacred use. An explanation for the distinction between *zakû* and the other terms will be suggested below.

Remarkably, a comparison of the usage of terms for pure and impure in these three non-material domains reveals a striking cross-linguistic correspondence. In each of these three domains, purity terminology is used to describe an entity that is free of “pollution,” whereby the sense of pollution varies according to context. In legal, ritual and cultic domains, pollution can refer to culpability, metaphysical threats or sacrificial defilement, respectively. Despite the ubiquity of this semantic transition, one is at an initial loss to explain the associative connection between the various experiential images linked to radiance (brightness, shininess, clarity) and the senses related to innocence and purity found in legal, ritual and cultic domains. How do we explain this ubiquitous transition? And why is purity terminology not based on the imagery of mundane cleaning, as we might have expected, especially in light of the role of washing and sprinkling in purification rituals?

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72 See Wilson, *“Holiness” and “Purity,”* 68–82, though some examples should be viewed as ritualistic (in Wilson’s terms: “free of demonic influence”) as opposed to cultic.

73 CAD Z 32 cites a single source from Mari employing the Š form šuzku to describe the purification of Ištar’s temple.

74 For a straightforward example of ritually pure, see Šurpu VIII 83. Regarding the legal connotations of *zakû*, see Abusch’s comments on Maqlû I 26: *Babylonian Witchcraft Literature: Case Studies* (BJS 132; Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1987), 96–97. Other examples: T. Abusch and D. Schwemer, *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Rituals* (vol. 1; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 120, l. 42; 141, l. 22. I thank Avigail Wagschal for these references.
Situating the Semantic Transition

In order to address these questions, we make take advantage of two contributions of embodiment theory presented above: 1) the role of experiential context and 2) the influence of subjective factors such as culture-specific notions and affective response in determining lexical meaning. Beginning with experiential context, a first step is to recognize that while the terms surveyed designate radiance in the material domain, their application to the legal, ritual and cultic domains involve a negative sense of being “free of guilt/ claims/ pollution.” Such a transition between radiance and being free of a negative quality or element can be situated in a well-defined context of extra-linguistic experience, namely that of metallurgy.\(^{75}\) In the domain of metals, one finds a clear correlation between the brightness or shininess of the substance and its degree of purity. Moreover, the degree of purity was an important – if not the important – determinant of the quality and hence commercial value of these substances. In the case of gold, for instance, the value of gold was a function of its purity, which was assessed (in many cases, at least) by its radiant hue.\(^ {76}\) Aside from its appearance, pure gold is desirable also for its higher ductility. Regarding

\(^{75}\) Astutely noted by M. Malul, *Knowledge, Control and Sex. Studies in Biblical Thought, Culture and Worldview* (Tel-Aviv-Jaffa: Archaeological Center), 2002, 106--7, n. 28. Sallaberger (“Reinheit,” 296) has suggested an alternative explanation, that the images of brightness and shininess served as a contrast from the dusty Mesopotamian environment, but this conjecture fails to account for the broad scope of this semantic phenomenon.

silver, purity distinctions are already attested from the middle of the third millennium.\textsuperscript{77} A particularly interesting source in this respect is the Sumerian Nungal A hymn:

106 šag₄ diĝir-ra-na u₃-mu-un-na-an-ḫuḡ

107 kug sag₉-ga-gin₇ šu u₃-mu-ni-in-su-ub saḥar u₃-mu-un-ta-zalag

108 kug saḡ bar kug-ge KA šu-a gub-ba-gin₇ saḥar u₃-mu-un-ta-luḫ-luḫ

109 šu sag₉-ga diĝir-ra-na-še₃ im-ši-in-gi₄-gi₄

When [the prison?\textsuperscript{78}] has appeased the heart of his god for him; when it has polished him clean like silver of good quality, when it has made him shine forth through the dust; when


\textsuperscript{77} See H. Limet, \textit{Le travail du metal au pays de Sumer au temps de la IIIe dynastie d’Ur} (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1960), 46–47; Moorey, ibid., 233, 237. See also Th. Sturm, “kaspum ammuru₇m: ein Begriff der Silbermeallurgie in den Kültepe-Texten,” \textit{UF} 27 (1995): 487–504. For a general survey, see X. Ouyang, \textit{Monetary Role of Silver and its Administration in the Ur III Period (c. 2112–2004 BCE): A Case Study of the Umma Province} (BPOA 11; Madrid: CSIC 2013), 17–21. Even though silver was used generically as a means of exchange and payment (without explicit differentiation between different levels of purity), it is probable that only relatively pure silver could serve as a medium of exchange (Powell, “Price Fluctuations,” 79–80). The question of whether the process of cupellation for separating silver from base metals was known in Mesopotamia before the Persian period remains a point of contention (see King and Stager, \textit{Life in Biblical Israel}, 173–74), but it is clear that technical processes existed for refining silver at the turn of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} mil. B.C.E., if not earlier. For example, the OA Kaneš letters document the loss of weight due to the refinement of silver; see K.R. Veenhof, \textit{Aspects of Old Assyrian Trade and its Terminology} (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 46–51. For comparable examples with gold, see EA 7:71–72; 10:16–24.

it has cleansed him of dirt, like silver of best quality ……, he will be entrusted again into the propitious hands of his god.\textsuperscript{79}

Here the image of polishing silver is used to describe the prison’s effect of rehabilitating a criminal, enabling reconciliation with his god by exposing his pure inner qualities. The associations underlying this simile corroborate the hypothesis that the transition between radiance and purity is best situated in the context of metallurgy.

This conclusion finds further support in the lexical evidence for BH בֹּר. As noted above, the concrete sense for this root is “bright” or “clear.” The relationship between this sense and purity is readily apparent in the Book of Daniel’s use of metallurgical terminology to describe the fate of the wicked (12:10): “Many will be purified, purged and refined” (יתבררו ויתלבנו ויצרפו רבים). This verse employs three distinct roots בֹּר, לֶבֶן and צָרָף which designate the process of separating the dross from refined metals. On this background, it is not surprising to find בֹּר in the sense “to separate,” as in Ezek 20:38: “I will remove from you (וּבָרוֹתִי) those who rebel and transgress against me.” In this light, we can also explain derivatives related to purity, such as the nominal form בֹּר in Ps 18:25 “May the LORD repay according to my righteousness, like the cleanness of my hands (כָּבֵר יָד) before his eyes” and the adjectival form בָּר in expressions like “pure of heart”

\textsuperscript{79} ETCSL 4.28.1.
The metallurgic context is supported also by the widespread use of purity terms in designations for metals (Ug. brr; Sum. kug; Hittite parkui-).

Though less widely attested, these observations can also be applied to other concrete usages of purity terms—to describe the radiance of precious stones, the bright white appearance of processed wool and the clarity of liquids such as oil, water and beer. Here we find a vivid example of the explanatory potential of embodiment theory. By recognizing the primary concrete contexts in which these terms were applied, one comes to appreciate that in all of these cases we find a common situation whereby the high status of the commodity (its affective and economic value) was determined by its degree of purity, that is its refined uncorrupted state. It is this latter aspect which was then transferred to the legal, ritual and cultic spheres.

But this is only part of the story. In order to appreciate the relationship between radiance and purity, one must recognize the affective power of radiant substances (metals, precious stones and even fresh oil) in these cultures. In particular, one must recognize that throughout the ancient world these shining materials were taken as revealing an otherworldly, or “numinous”, aspect. Comparing the Mesopotamian evidence with Vedic literature, Irene Winter suggests that radiance was taken as an external expression of an inner divine force: “[R]adiant light was a positively

80 The nouns בר (Job 9:30) and בּוּרִית (Jer 2:22; Mal 3:2) seem to be alternative designations for lye, used in washing and laundering. An exceptional case is כַּבֹר in Isa 1:25 which tantalizingly appears in a metallurgic context. Since lye was not generally used in refining metals, one wonders if the term may designate a different substance here. However, it is also possible that the text should be emended to בַכֹר (“in the furnace”), as assumed by many commentators.

affective visual attribute – one of the primary means by which the sacred was made manifest.”  

Regarding the Vedic sources, Gonda observes that “gold is a form, manifestation or ‘symbol’ (rūpa) of the gods,” whose possessions are made of gold. In ancient Egypt, gold was employed in cult statues and designated “the flesh of the gods.” In Mesopotamian mythological and ritual texts, we find descriptions of the heavenly dwellings of the gods as made of gold and precious stones, and some texts even deify precious metals. In Hurrian mythology, silver was very explicitly deified. In short, one cannot fully appreciate the relationship between radiance, purity and holiness without understanding the awe evoked by these lustrous substances in the ancient world.

Such an attitude is particularly evident in the ancient building accounts which stress the lustrous characteristics of the materials, especially gold, silver and lapis lazuli. A similar power

82 “Radiance as an Aesthetic Value in the Art of Mesopotamia (with Some Indian Parallels),” in Art: The Integral Vision (eds. B.N. Saraswati et al.; New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1994), 129.

83 J. Gonda, The Functions and Significance of Gold in the Veda (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 47, who also cites Greek parallels.

84 S. Schott, Kanais: Der Tempel Sethos (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), 150, 169–70.

85 See, e.g., A. Livingstone, Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars (Oxford: Oxford University, 1986), 182; W. Horowitz, Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 12, 66. Interestingly, these works describe different types of wood (tamarisk, mēsu) as the “flesh of the gods” (Livingstone, ibid., 106), not gold (cf. the Egyptian texts in the previous note), but this difference may stem from economic rather than cosmological reasons.

was attributed to fine oil, particularly due to the fact that its glowing quality could be transferred to the skin through anointment. Although this point cannot be elaborated upon in the present context, the relationship between oil and radiance can explain the use of anointment as a rite of purification and sanctification of people and objects as well as its role in rites of passage for emancipated slaves, brides and kings. This point is expressed vividly in a prophetic message to Zimri Lim, king of Mari, which relates anointment to the transfer of divine radiance: “I anointed you with the oil of my luminosity, nobody will offer resist[ance] to you” (šammam ša namrīrūtiya apšuškāma mamman ana pānīka ul izz[i]). The numinous quality attributed to luminous substances can explain their centrality in ritual and especially cultic contexts.

The following diagram represents the semantic transitions described above, using the Akkadian purity terminology as an example:

[Insert graphic here]

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88 See H. Nissinen, Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East (WAW 12; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2003), 22.
The diagram above depicts the semantic development of Akkadian terms for purity. The rectangular frames represent experiential domains, both material and non-material (legal, ritual and cultic). The circles represent particular terms, which in the material domain correspond to experiential images pertaining to radiance (ellu), lustrousness (ebbu) or clarity (zakû).

Using this diagram, we can return to the questions raised before. Here we see how the terminology for radiance in the material domain served as a resource for describing more abstract situations of being “pure” in the legal, ritual and cultic domains. As noted, the dominant image is not cleanness, but rather radiance and the state of purity implied. This distinction can explain why zakû could serve as a term for being “clear” of legal responsibility, but it did not serve as a productive image for the cultic domain. The imagery of radiance (ellu) and lustrousness (ebbu), perceived as manifestations of a numinous quality, was much more appropriate for cultic purity, which involves the possibility of interacting with the world of the gods.  

89 A similar nuance may characterize Hittite šuppi-, and this point may help clarify the disputed distinction between it and parkui- (see n. 44 above). It is remarkable that the Proto-Semitic root ḫll from which Akkadian ellu is derived underwent a diametrically-opposed semantic development in BH. In contrast to ellu in the sense of “holy,” biblical ḫn designates something profane, or more precisely “free of holiness/ cultic restrictions” (e.g. Lev 10:10; 1 Sam 21:5), and the piel verbal form of ḫn can even designate the desecration of sacred entities (e.g. Lev 20:3; Ezek 22:26). The Ugaritic root ḫll may attest to an intermediate stage of semantic development, with forms signifying “purify” (like ellu) and others signifying “desacralized” or “free” (as in BH), although the evidence remains ambiguous. See DULAT 359–60 and D. Pardee, Les textes rituels (Ras Shamra-Ougarit 12; Paris: Editions recherche sur les civilisations, 2000), 678–79 on RS 24.266 ll. 22’–24’ where both senses (ostensibly) appear.
Implications

A traditional premise in Semitic lexicography is that the abstract uses of a term can often be traced back to an original concrete sense. Ludwig Kohler expresses this assumption in the English preface to the Kohler-Baumgartner Lexicon:

[I]t may be readily understood that the theological rendering of Hebrew words and phrases received the greatest amount of attention, and were given pride of place...But the theological, and also the more far reaching religious, world of ideas grew out of the non-theological, the common, world of ideas; whatever one wished to say theologically was expressed in language drawn from the common world of ideas.90

The present investigation corroborates this basic approach while offering a more precise formulation of the implications for understanding the foundations of abstract conceptualization.

In particular, we have traced the origin of purity terminology back to its concrete origins in reference to perceptually concrete phenomena pertaining to radiance. These terms received an abstract or metaphysical sense when imported into social contexts such as ordeals, rituals and cultic sacrifice. However, in these latter contexts, we find purity terminology operating in binary opposition with terms for pollution. In effect, the distinction between concrete and metaphysical usage reflects distinct stages in the development of language: 1) the origin of concepts as rooted in experiential images, and 2) the appropriation of these basic concepts into the linguistic system, in which the value of each term is (partially) determined by others in its semantic field.

Interestingly, even in this latter phase, we find that the root images may continue to exert limitations on the polyvalent semantic potentiality of these terms when exported into non-material contexts (e.g. the use of ellu and ebbu to designate “holy,” but not zakû). This inner logic (in

semiotic terms: motivation) explains the parallel semantic development of these etymologically distinct terms across the ancient Near East.

Thus, even an ostensibly metaphysical concept such as purity can be traced back to its origins in a world of embodied meanings. These images provide the raw materials – the repertoire of signs – which serve as the basis for linguistic codes, which in turn provide the substance for cultural discourse and practice.91 The invisible hand guiding this process of cultural cognitive development is the necessity to establish a collectively recognizable currency for the articulation of religious intuitions, based in its initial stages upon mutually-perceptible concrete symbols. Already Durkheim offered a general sketch of this phenomenon: “Logical thought is possible only when man has managed to go beyond the fleeting representations he owes to sense experience and in the end to construct a whole world of stable ideals, the common ground of intelligences.”92 As we have seen, lexicographical excavation of ancient Near Eastern texts enables a glimpse of these codes in their making. As it turns out, the religious imagination was not a creation ex nihilo; it was shaped necessarily from the bones and sinews of embodied experience.


Diagram 1: Akkadian Purity Terminology: Semantic Relations

- **Legal**: free of claims/innocent
- **Ritual**: free of pollution (threatening force)
- **Material**: radiant (ellu), polished/lustrous (ebbu), clear (zakû)
- **Cultic**: free of pollution (uncleanness)/sacred