



## Encounter

Reprinted items from earlier issues, chosen by  
the Publishing Editor

# The Law given through Moses\*

## 7. Cleanliness

Islip Collyer

**T**HE MEDICAL officer of a prosperous modern town once remarked to a fellow doctor, "Moses was the best officer of health the world has ever seen". The physician to whom he spoke fully agreed, and was able to mention many matters in which the Mosaic Law was not only far ahead of the days when it was given, but in some respects ahead of the pathologically enlightened twentieth century.

The Mosaic Law led the way in the recognition of contagious diseases, in sanitation, in general cleanliness and in the special washing and cleansing, not only of human beings, but of pots, pans and buildings. It led the way in the strict isolation of diseased people, in the use of fire for sterilisation, and in the repudiation of food that might be harmful to health. Some of these matters blended all three of the phases into which we divided the Law in our first article. They were idealistic, practical and prophetic. The most beneficial of rules for the national wellbeing were given a religious sanctity and force. We cannot resist the conclusion that some of the most practical of precepts were blended with an element of prophetic ritual.

IN the twenty-third chapter of Deuteronomy there is a rule regarding cleanliness in the camp which might well be enforced in our day when people live in country districts away from the devices of modern towns. Indeed, we might go much farther than this, and, at the risk of arousing a dangerous heat of resentment in the breasts of modernists, we might say that the Mosaic precept is superior to the latest developments of our civilisation. We may freely admit that it would be impossible to enforce the rules in our

day, for people will not take the necessary trouble, even when they are not too crowded together for such measures to be practicable. It is possible, however, that readers may be able to break away from their modern prejudices sufficiently to perceive the wisdom of the ancient law.

The children of Israel were placed under an individual responsibility to cover all refuse and uncleanness with soil (Deut. 23:12,13). It was to be done immediately, and it was to be a habit enforced by urgent religious conviction, as stated in the words which follow: "for the LORD thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee . . . therefore shall thy camp be holy: that He see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee" (v. 14).

The strict observance of this rule would make for a cleanliness and tidiness such as we fail to get in modern communities. The general tendency with mankind is to defer unpleasant work until it cannot be delayed any longer. Even in towns with civic pride and some reputation for cleanliness it was the custom in the writer's early days to build outhouses with every residence, and one of the essential things was a capacious dust or ash pit into which everything unwanted could be thrown, decaying vegetable matter mingled with paper, empty tins and bottles, and sometimes discarded utensils which still bore some value. At rare intervals the dust hole was cleared out—a most unpleasant job, not only for the unfortunate workers, but for all who happened to be near.

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Recently the small, covered bin has taken the place of the old ash pit. Through the urgent needs of war, a separation of refuse was demanded. Some people even with very small gardens discovered that it was easy to dispose of all corruptible refuse from the kitchen, and that the burial of such waste was good for the soil. There was nothing then offensive for scavengers to remove.

It is, of course, a tragic fact that many people in cities have not even the smallest of gardens. In some cities thousands of houses are built back to back, with no garden or even back yard for anyone. Clothes hang out to dry across the street, and presumably corruptible rubbish is at the front door. People would be better living in huts or tents with a little land around them. We have now reached a time when, in spite of increased population, more space is allowed for each dwelling, and the aim is that, where possible, each man should have a little piece of garden.

PERHAPS a modernist would agree that the separation of the different kinds of kitchen refuse forced upon us by war might with advantage be continued, if everybody could be induced to observe such a rule. But the modern man would stoutly maintain that in the larger problem of sanitation we have made great strides. Would such a defendant of latter-day civilisation have sufficient of reconstructive imagination to bring an ancient Israelite before his mind, and to understand his reactions? "We have made great progress", the modern man might say. "We have cities of a million souls or more and we wash away all the filth in great pipes, carrying the refuse to concentrated sewage farms, or, when it is near enough, into the sea". The follower of Moses would wonder that it had ever been possible for men to sink to such utter barbarism and crass stupidity, starving the land of essential elements and polluting the sea round their island home!

Men who study the land are just beginning to discover the mistakes they made in supposing that they could improve on Nature. Fifty years ago many people thought that chemical fertilisers could completely take the place of the old manures. So much cleaner to handle, it was supposed that they would produce better and healthier food.

It is now known that the reverse is the truth. The soil that is too dependent on 'artificial' produces crops which do not keep as well and are not as good for food as those grown in the old

way. At the worst, chemicals may turn a fertile soil into poisonous swamp, for the mysterious bacteria which effect such miracles of transformation may be destroyed. There is at least a *prima facie* case for the growing belief that some of the diseases which have developed so seriously in recent years are the direct result of the more artificial methods of farming. As for the finicky prejudices which have influenced so many people, it is doubtful whether even human beings have ever been more absurdly inconsistent than those who cheerfully bathe in the man-polluted waters round our coast but have doubts as to whether the yearly miracle of soil transformation and of vegetable growth can be as effective as the Creator designed!

FINALLY in connection with this matter, it is well for readers to have certain facts before them, on the basis of which they may be able to form a true mental picture quite revealing in the light it throws. There are thirty-two million acres in England. In the year 1901 there was rather more than one acre for every human being, man or woman or child. If the question is asked, What of animals?, the answer is that, taking horses, cattle, sheep and pigs together, there would not be quite one such creature for every human being. Does anyone imagine that the refuse from one human being and one animal would pollute an acre of ground if buried in it? A cubic yard of soil weighs rather more than a ton. We may conclude, therefore, that when we dig a square yard of our garden we turn about four hundred-weight of soil. There are 4,840 square yards of soil in each acre, so that we have something like eight hundred tons of soil in which to bury refuse—over two tons for every day of the year.

Beyond these mere figures we have to take notice of the fact that, in natural conditions, the bacteria in the soil effect a transformation so rapid and so complete that all decaying matter seems to disappear as if by magic. If it were possible to turn the whole country into a garden served in the manner suggested by our figures, gardeners would be calling for more manure before half of the year had passed. Yet British people, so far as they are able, turn the refuse into the sea, polluting the water round the coast. Then they cry aloud for chemicals to meet the urgent needs of the soil.

All thoughtful readers will see the bearing of these facts without the need for further argument. We may grant that industrial countries

cannot turn back to such primitive ways, but when we realise the natural capacity of the soil to deal with the problem, we may be able to understand and admire the Mosaic provisions. If the people lived up to the ideal of all uncleanness being covered from the sight of angelic visitors, the camp would be a model of cleanliness. We cannot judge whether it would make any difference to Elohim, but assuredly it was excellent for the health of human beings.

RULES regarding the clean and the unclean undoubtedly went beyond the needs of health. There was a blending of the ceremonial with the practical. There were some irksome rules which any nation would have found it hard to sustain, and it is certain that they were not fully observed for long in the land of Israel. For so many causes a man might be accounted unclean, unfit to partake of holy things or even to be in the camp of the congregation. These laws surely had a double object. By so enforcing the need for cleanliness they would be good for the health of the community; and by so stressing the holiness of God and the sanctity to which they were called, the minds of men capable of receiving such impressions would be humbled and prepared for a closer association with the Divine.

It might seem to us at first sight that little was accomplished in this direction, but if we remember the pit from which they were digged, and compare them with other nations, it is surely clear that something was effected. A stubborn

and recalcitrant nation, recently liberated from a degrading slavery, produced some servants of the Lord even in the first and second generations. Many others came later, with example and influence reaching even to the days in which we live. When we take note of the ugly side of Jewish history and observe the many tragic evils of the present day, it is well to remember that the best men who have ever lived came from the same race.

It is difficult to ascertain how fully and for how long the provisions of the Law were sustained, but there is good reason to believe that the rules regarding cleanliness were kept better than some others. These matters only come out incidentally. There is nothing especially recorded for the benefit of students who desire to inquire into the subject. We remember that, when David failed to appear at Saul's table, the king's first thought was, "Something hath befallen him, he is not clean" (1 Sam. 20:26). Normally such uncleanness would only last until the evening, so when David failed to appear on the second day Saul made inquiries.

We remember, too, the question put in the prophecy of Haggai regarding ceremonial holiness or uncleanness, and the answer of the priests in accordance with the Law (2:10-14). Best of all, we remember the scrupulous observances of scribes and Pharisees when the Lord Jesus was on earth (Lk. 11:37-42). In some ways they went beyond the Law in these matters, while neglecting far more important duties.