

Concerning Women's Ordination: A Presbyter is not a "Priestess" (Part 1: Old Testament Priesthood)

In Memory of Martha



In previous essays in this series on women's ordination, I have focused primarily on Protestant objections against the practice, dealing especially with issues of biblical exegesis. Beginning with this essay, I will be addressing Catholic objections, focusing primarily on issues dealing with sacramental integrity.

Strictly speaking, this first essay should not be necessary. As with a previous essay addressing non-theological objections to women's ordination,¹ I will be addressing an objection that is not actually a theological objection. Stated as succinctly as possible, the objection is that an ordained woman would be a "priestess," and the Christian church does not have "priestesses," but "priests." This is an objection that one does not hear among Protestants, since Protestant churches do not refer to their clergy as either "priests" or "priestesses," but as pastors. It is not an objection that is encountered in the theological literature, as, I think, most

theologians realize that the term "priestess" is offensive, and those who advocate women's ordination are not advocating the ordination of "priestesses," but the ordination of women who will fulfill the same roles as male clergy, who, in Protestant churches are referred to as "pastors," and in churches of Catholic tradition (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, many Anglicans) as "priests."

In personal experience, I have encountered the objection primarily in two venues: (1) on the bad-mannered no-holds-barred free-for-all of the internet, where the term is used regularly by those opposed to women's ordination, and (2) in private conversation, where those opposed to women's ordination are referring out of earshot to women clergy, for whom they use the term "priestess." In both cases, the term is used disparagingly, with the conscious realization that the women to whom reference is being made would not use the term to describe themselves, and would find the term offensive. It is significant that those who use the term "priestess" are assuming as valid assumptions about women's ordination that they know those who are in favor of women's ordination would reject, and are addressing arguments that they know that those in favor of women's ordination would not make. Since advocates of women's ordination do not believe that ordained women are "priestesses," to argue against "priestesses" is a classic example of a "red herring" argument. Nonetheless, since the argument does raise issues concerning the continuity between the Old Testament priesthood and New Testament church office, and the differences and similarities between Old Testament priesthood and pagan religions, it provides a helpful introduction to this next group of essays.

The first formal use of the argument of which I am aware is found in an essay by C.S. Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church?"² As an Anglican, Lewis was objecting in 1948 to the possible ordination of women in the Church of England. In a short six

pages, Lewis raises many of what will become the standard Catholic objections to women's ordination, particularly issues about language and imagery concerning God as male and the symbolic implications of female clergy, objections that will be addressed in later essays.³ Most significantly, Lewis uses the term "priestesses" and makes the argument I will be addressing in this essay. The single issue that is at the heart of his essay can be found in a succinct statement: "Goddesses have, of course, been worshipped; many religions have had priestesses. But they are religions quite different in character than Christianity." Lewis goes on to say that the ordination of women "is an argument not in favour of priestesses but against Christianity."⁴

Lewis makes two assumptions: (1) the ordination of women necessarily implies the worship of "goddesses," not of the biblical God; (2) the ordination of women would be equivalent to the ordination of pagan "priestesses," which would, in effect, be the replacement of Christianity with a different religion. I will not be addressing questions of religious imagery or "goddess worship" in this essay; that will come later.⁵

Lewis does not specify what practices he associates with "priestesses" in his essay. He assumes that his readers are familiar with them. However, many of those opposed to the ordination of women presume as self-evident that pagan "priestesses" engaged in "cult prostitution," so this is the first issue to be addressed. Briefly expressed, the argument assumes the following: There was in ancient Israel a "sex cult" which was a major focus of attack by the Old Testament Hebrew prophets. This cult included sacred prostitutes, sexual orgies, and initiation rites in which young women offered their sexual favors as part of a fertility ritual. This sex cult had its origins in Canaanite worship, was connected with the worship of Baal and Asherah, and was directly connected to

goddess worship. One of the main reasons – perhaps the single most important reason – that Israelite religion had only male priests, while pagan religions that worshiped goddesses had female priests as well, was that female priestesses were directly associated with cultic prostitution, a practice antithetical to Old Testament religion. To advocate the ordination of women as “priestesses” today is to turn Christianity into a fertility “goddess” religion, with all that implies, including, especially, sexual lasciviousness.⁶

The obvious response to this concern is to ask, “Is it true?” Did pagan priestess cult prostitutes exist? Did Canaanite religion include sexual rites? Is there any evidence for Canaanite initiations that included sexual activity? Is there any historical evidence for the existence of such cult prostitutes? Is there evidence that Canaanite religion included any sexual activity whatsoever? Recent more careful examination of the evidence indicates that the answer is “no.” As Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes in her definitive book on the Bible and goddesses, “the whole idea of a sex cult – in Israel or in Canaan – is a chimera, the product of ancient and modern sexual fantasies.”⁷

Frymer-Kensky provides an overview of the historical evidence. The assumption that Canaanite religion was sexual in nature and included sacred prostitutes was a major assumption of modern historical scholarship, appearing in William Robertson Smith’s *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889) and James Frazer’s *Adonis, Attis and Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religions* (1906). The assumption of sexual license continued with later twentieth century writers such as William F. Albright and Gerhard von Rad. Subsequent scholars simply assume the existence of such a sex cult, and, for evidence, cite the references in the earlier sources.⁸

The historical evidence for religious prostitution derives from a single reference in the classical Greek historian

Herodotus, who describes a Babylonian practice connected with the cult of Mylitta (Ishtar), in which young women supposedly “sit in the temple of Aphrodite,” and have intercourse with strangers.⁹ Scholars point out that Herodotus is talking about Babylon, not Syria or Israel, and that his observations about Babylon are often untrustworthy. As a Greek, he believed in the superiority of Greek culture over that of “barbarians,” whom he often accused of cannibalism and sexual license. There are no cuneiform texts that confirm the practice Herodotus describes, and, as Frymer-Kensky points out, “[a]ll the later Roman and Christian allegations of sexual initiation ultimately derive from this one passage in Herodotus.”¹⁰

All evidence for the existence of sacred prostitution in ancient Israel derives from the translation of the word *qedeshah*, which means literally “holy woman” or “tabooed woman.” The Old Testament prohibits both *qedeshot* (feminine plural) and *qedeshim* (masculine plural), and they are often associated with local shrines, pillars, and asherah, which were regarded as idolatrous, and foreign to Hebrew religion.¹¹

Modern English translations of the Bible often translate the terms as “female cult prostitute” and “male cult prostitute”; however, there is no historical evidence to indicate that there is anything sexual about their nature. In Ugaritic texts, the *qadesh* is a type of priest; the Babylonian *qadistu* is a kind of priestess. In neither case do the texts indicate any sexual activity in connection with their functions. There are two passages in the Old Testament that have been pointed to as indication of sexual prostitution in connection with the terms. In Genesis 38:16, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute (*zona*) so that Judah will impregnate her. When he returns to find her again, he asks “Where is the *qedeshah*?” (v. 22). Frymer-Kensky suggests that prostitutes and *qedeshah* were equally women outside the normal family structure, with no males to protect them, and were thus vulnerable to male

sexual approach, but there is no reason to believe based on this passage that sexual activity was an inherent part of the role of the *qedeshah*.¹²

In Hosea 4:14, the terms “prostitute” (*zona*) and *qedeshah* appear in tandem, and many translations translate the latter as “cult prostitute”: “[F]or the men themselves go aside with prostitutes, and sacrifice with cult prostitutes” (ESV). However, recent commentators recognize that without further evidence, “it is premature to assume that *qedeshah* is a woman involved in cultic sexual service.”¹³ There is nothing in the text itself that suggests that *qedeshah* should be translated as “cult prostitute.” Frymer-Kensky sums up the evidence succinctly: “There is no native evidence for sexual religious cult activity.”¹⁴

If the existence of “cult prostitutes” in ancient Israel is not based on solid evidence, the same conclusion is now being realized concerning cult prostitution in the New Testament world. The single source most cited as evidence is an ambiguous passage in Strabo (ca. 64 BC-AD 21), who refers to the temple of Aphrodite in Corinth as owning temple-slaves and “courtesans” (*hetairai*) dedicated to the goddess. Strabo refers to this not as something contemporary, but as existing long in the past. As with Herodotus, Strabo is regarded as a less than trustworthy source, and the meaning of the passage is unclear. Strabo states that the slaves and courtesans were owned by the temple, but says nothing about cult prostitution taking place on temple grounds. If Strabo was actually describing cult prostitution, he was describing something unique to Corinth in the distant past, something that no longer existed, and was certainly not characteristic of Greek culture in general. In another passage, Strabo refers to cult prostitution in Persia, and cites for his authority the problematic passage from Herodotus referred to above. The only other literary reference is from Athenaeus (AD 200), who

refers to *hetairai* in Corinth who participated in public sacrifices to Aphrodite, and to private citizens who vow to “render courtesans (*hetairai*)” to Aphrodite. Again, the passage is ambiguous. Nothing suggests that the “courtesans” were cult prostitutes. Finally, there are contemporary biblical scholars who suggest that cult prostitution in Ephesus lies behind Paul’s admonition against women teaching in 1 Timothy 2:11-15.¹⁵ However, there simply is no evidence for cult prostitution in ancient Ephesus. There were priestesses who served the goddess Artemis, but there is no evidence to suggest that there was anything sexual about their roles. The notion of cult prostitution in the pagan Greek culture of New Testament times seems to be as much a figment of modern imagination as the cult prostitution of Old Testament times.¹⁶

Since the evidence indicates that the orgiastic cult prostitution of ancient culture did not exist, it is necessary to find another explanation for the all-male priesthood of ancient Israel. Why did ancient Israel have only men priests? One suggested answer is that the practice had to do with preserving male authority. As noted in previous essays, this is an explanation endorsed by both radical feminists and by hierarchical complementarians, although with diametrically opposite evaluations. Previous essays in this series examining Protestant objections to women’s ordination have dealt with this issue of male authority at length and found it untenable.

Since Catholic objections to women’s ordination are no longer tied to issues of male hierarchy or authority, a different explanation is in order. I would suggest two plausible explanations. I have discussed the first in a previous essay “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Beginning with Genesis.”¹⁷ In this essay, I discussed differences between roles of men and women in the Old Testament period rooted in socioeconomic realities. Given that the household was the basic unit of

production in ancient societies, and only women gave birth and breastfed children, women's social and economic activities were necessarily limited to activities that kept them close to children. In ancient societies, biological necessity limited women's roles to the domestic sphere, while men worked in the public sphere outside the household because they were never pregnant and were not required to nurse children.

In what follows I am going to suggest an additional explanation, one largely overlooked by both Protestant complementarians and Catholic sacramentalists in the current discussion, but also connected to women's physical biology. One of the most obvious historical differences between Judaism and Christianity is the way that they deal with what have been called the "ceremonial" or "ritual purity" laws of the Old Testament. Both Jews and Christians endorse as authoritative what Jews call the "Hebrew Bible" and Christians the "Old Testament." However, Jews practice *kosher* and Christians do not. Ham sandwiches, shrimp and lobster, and cheeseburgers, are items that appear on Christian menus, but are not eaten by observant Jews.

Historically, Christians have accounted for this difference by distinguishing between the ritual, civil, and moral laws of the Old Testament. Those Old Testament laws whose subject matter is moral behavior are considered to be still binding and obligatory, for example, especially, the Ten Commandments. The ritual laws of the Old Testament (concerning such matters as temple sacrifice, the distinction between clean and unclean foods, male circumcision) are no longer binding because having been fulfilled by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Christians do not have a Jewish priesthood because Jesus is our High Priest (Hebrews 7-10). Christians do not have a temple because the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). The civil laws of the Old Testament (matters regulating such things as punishment for theft or murder and other kinds of wrong-doing) are not binding in

themselves, but the moral principles behind them are binding. This distinction between ritual, moral, and civil law appears as early as Irenaeus of Lyons (c.120/130-202/203) in his *Against Heresies* (4.14.3; 4.15.1). In the Medieval period, Thomas Aquinas developed the distinction systematically in his discussion of distinctions between different kinds of law in the *Summa Theologiae*. Reformation Christianity preserved the distinction where it appears in such places as the Anglican 39 *Articles*, the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*, and John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹⁸

In recent decades, the distinction has been challenged as providing too simple an explanation of how law functions in the Old Testament. More recent discussion has focused on the issue of "purity" influenced initially by sociological discussions such as Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*.¹⁹ Biblical scholars after Douglas have focused more narrowly on the way that "purity" functions in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, tending to distance Old Testament purity from general cultural notions such as "taboo."²⁰ Scholars sometimes claim that the Old Testament does not distinguish between moral and ritual laws in the manner of the later Christian distinction. On a surface level, this is correct in that both kinds of material appear in the legal material of the Pentateuch, and nowhere does the Biblical text explicitly identify some laws as moral and others as ritual. The distinction is clearly presumed, however, as discussions of "purity" in the Old Testament makes clear. What are the characteristics of Old Testament purity?

(1) Old Testament purity makes sense only in the context of holiness or its absence. Holiness belongs first to God, and, by extension, to people, places, and times associated with God.

(2) Ritual purity and moral purity are distinguished. A woman who has recently given birth to a child or who is having her

menstrual period is “unclean,” or ritually impure, but is not immoral. A man who has a bodily emission is, again, ritually impure, but not evil. A house that has certain kinds of growths (identified as “leprosy”) must be destroyed, but the house is not considered to be “evil” or occupied by evil spirits.

(3) Although distinct, similar language is used to describe ritual impurity and moral impurity. Both ritual impurity and moral impurity “defile” or cause “pollution.” However, they are dealt with in different ways. Ritual impurity causes “uncleanness” and cleansing takes place through a rite of purification. Moral impurity can only be resolved by repentance, punishment, and/or sacrifice.

(4) Ritual impurity originally seems to have arisen from association with repulsion or loathing: certain kinds of animals (reptiles; scavengers that eat dead bodies; insects); bodily emissions; dead bodies. However neutral things (such as bowls, clothing or houses) can also become unclean.

(5) The Old Testament law code associates purity and impurity chiefly with reference to the “cult,” or temple worship. This applies primarily to priests; a priest who has touched a corpse or who has had sexual relations or is a leper may not perform priestly functions. However, by extension the purity laws apply to non-priests as well. The ritually impure may not participate in temple worship, eat of sacrificial meals, or participate in Passover.

(6) By extension, language of purity and holiness is also transferred to moral behavior. Idolatry, murder, and sexual misdeeds, in particular, are said to defile or pollute the land itself. However, there is no ceremonial ritual that can purify the land from moral defilement or remove its pollution. Once the land has reached a certain level of moral pollution, God exercises judgment by expelling the inhabitants.²¹

The Book of Leviticus lists the primary categories of clean and unclean things and activities, and shows the close connection between purity and temple worship. Lev. 7:19-21 stipulates that sacrificial meat may not come into contact with impurity, and that unclean persons may not eat the sacrifice. Levitical 11 lists unclean animals, which may not be eaten: non-ruminant mammals without split hooves, any sea creature without scales (shellfish, etc.); predatory birds and scavengers; most insects. Childbirth results in uncleanness (Lev. 12:1-8), as do bodily discharges (semen and menstruation) (Lev. 12,15); finally, skin diseases (leprosy) and even certain "leprous diseases" associated with houses (mildew) are considered "unclean" (13-14). Again, while ritually defiling, none of these conditions is considered to be sinful. The solution for each condition is ritual purification, not repentance.²²

There is an inherent connection between ritual purity and moral holiness, but they are also clearly distinguished. On the one hand, Israel is called to be a holy people, separate from the nations. There is a link between worship and ethics in that those called to celebrate and participate in God's holiness in worship enter into a realm of sanctified space and time. Certainly this is one of the functions of the Old Testament purity laws and Israel's annual feasts. The purity laws distinguish that which is sacred from that which is profane. Unlike pagan fertility religions, Israel's feasts have nothing to do with guaranteeing the fertility of the annual crops. They are feasts of thanksgiving, and are associated with specific historic events in Israel's history, such as the Exodus from Egypt. At the same time, Israel's prophets make clear that ritual purity alone does not guarantee holiness or divine blessing. Sacrifices unaccompanied by moral holiness are worse than useless, and moral perversity will pollute the land, resulting in judgment. It is not fertility rituals or even ritual purity that brings

God's blessing or results in God's curse, but moral holiness.²³

Those opposed to women's ordination sometimes look to the Old Testament, point to the exclusively male Old Testament priesthood, and assume an intrinsic connection to male identity, either in terms of male authority (Protestant complementarians), or connected to the relationship between male symbolism and sacrifice (mentioned above, and to be discussed later), or to unfortunate associations connected with female "priestesses" (discussed above). Those who make the analogy ignore other more plausible reasons for an exclusively male priesthood. First, as noted already, socioeconomic factors in ancient culture existing up until the modern era largely restricted the work of women to the domestic sphere. Second, advocates of male-only ordination miss that the Old Testament priesthood was restrictive in many ways, not simply in reference to gender. Old Testament priests were not only exclusively male, but also exclusively members of the tribe of Levi who could trace their ancestry to Moses' brother Aaron.

Oddly, those who point to an exclusively male Old Testament priesthood ignore what is certainly the most significant and obvious factor excluding women from the priesthood. The Old Testament purity laws, which, again, were primarily connected with temple worship, would have prohibited women from performing priestly functions for several days at least once a month, and for a significant period after child birth. In addition, many Old Testament temple functions were periodically scheduled (feasts, periodic prayers), and women could not be depended on to be ritually pure on each occasion the function needed to be performed. Women did perform certain religious roles during the Old Testament period, but they were generally the kind of things that one could do at home.²⁴

Women were prohibited not only from priestly office, but even from getting too close to the area of sacrifice itself. The

Jerusalem temple at the time of Jesus included not only a Court of the Gentiles, beyond which non-Jews were prohibited to enter on threat of death, but also (just inside that) a Court of the Women, half-way between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of Israel (or court of the men) beyond which women could not enter. Certainly the most plausible reason for exclusion of women from the Old Testament priesthood, as well as excluding their presence even from too close proximity to the innermost regions of the temple itself, had to do with concerns about ritual purity, not about "goddess worship," or sexual license.

Purity and Holiness in the New Testament

New Testament Christianity was a form of Judaism. Christians affirmed their faith in the God of Israel who had created the world, had made a covenant with Abraham and his descendents, had rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and had given the people his law at Mount Sinai. New Testament Christians accepted as authoritative the same Hebrew Scriptures as did Pharisaic Judaism. What distinguished Christians from other Jews was their conviction that the God of Abraham was also the Father of Jesus of Nazareth; that Jesus had brought salvation by being crucified for the sins of the world; that God the Father had raised Jesus from the dead, declaring him to be both Messiah and Son of God; that the Christian church was the gathered community to whom the Father and the risen Son had given the Holy Spirit, who awaited Jesus' return in glory and judgment.

Much Christian biblical interpretation has been concerned to draw a radical distinction between the Old Testament and The New Testament, using such distinctions as those between law and gospel. Historically, there have been Christians who have ventured close to the heresy of Marcionism, denying that the Old Testament and Judaism have anything to do with Christianity, and vice versa. The earliest Christians did not understand Christianity and Judaism to be opposed, however,

but understood God's saving work in Jesus Christ to be the fulfillment of the hopes of the Jewish people. The earliest Christians continued to be concerned with both purity and holiness. (Richard Bauckham points out that ἅγιος (*hagios*) and cognate terms for holiness occur 275 times in the New Testament, that 96 of these references are in the Pauline epistles, and that Paul speaks of holiness twice as often as all four gospels put together.²⁵) One of the key distinctions between Judaism and Christianity, however, was that New Testament writers associated language of purity and holiness exclusively with the moral realm; Christians were not obligated to keep Old Testament purity laws.

There seem to have been two primary reasons for this. The first was the Gentile mission and the admission of Gentiles to the church. Perhaps the single most important issue of controversy in the New Testament church concerned whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and keep other Old Testament ritual purity laws. This is the presenting issue in Paul's letter to the Galatians, and led eventually to the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), in which it was decided that Gentiles needed to refrain from idol worship and sexual immorality, but did not need to abide by the Old Testament purity laws, including circumcision and dietary laws.²⁶ Paul's discussion of food in 1 Cor. 6:12-13; Gal. 2:11-12, and food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, makes clear that he did not think Old Testament dietary laws were any longer binding. His reference to "sabbaths" (Col. 2:16) indicates that he did not believe that Christians were bound to keep Old Testament feasts.

The second reason had to do with sacrifice and the temple. The book of Acts makes clear that early Jewish Christians continued to worship in the temple until they were expelled (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 8:1). At the same time, New Testament Christology made temple worship unnecessary if not problematic. The New Testament identifies Jesus as the high

priest who has succeeded the Old Testament priesthood, and his death on the cross as the single sacrifice making animal sacrifices no longer necessary (Hebrews 7-10). The New Testament identifies the temple no longer with the temple in Jerusalem, but with both Christ and the church (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:19-22). Given the inherent connection between Old Testament purity laws and temple worship, the christological transformation of sacrifice and temple makes the Old Testament purity laws superfluous.²⁷

Jesus and Purity

How did Jesus address issues of purity and holiness? Jesus was certainly concerned about the sanctity of Israel and the holiness of the temple. He participated in the temple festivals, and his controversies about the sabbath should not be understood to mean a rejection of the sabbath, but a concern for its purpose and sanctity (Mark 2:27; 3:4). At the same time, Jesus' interpretation, at the Last Supper, of his own death as a sacrifice and a new covenant both fulfills and surpasses the temple sacrificial system (Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20). Significantly, Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple (Matt. 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6), and at his trial was accused of having threatened to destroy the temple and restore it in three days (Matt. 26:61; Mark 14:58). John's gospel interprets this to be a reference to his own resurrection and the temple of his body (John 2:18-22).

Most significant for our discussion are those stories about Jesus in which he seems clearly to have contravened the purity codes.²⁸ The gospels contain numerous stories of Jesus' healing of lepers (Mark 1:40-44; Matt. 8:2-4; 10:1,8; 11:5; Luke 5:12-14; 17:11-19). By touching the lepers in order to cure them, Jesus should have been made ceremonially unclean. In Mark 14:3, Matt. 26:6, Jesus is said to have eaten at the house of Simon the leper. If Simon was still a leper, Jesus would have been ceremonially unclean. There are also incidents

in which Jesus raised the dead (Luke 7:11-17; John 11:1-44). Again, coming into contact with a corpse should have made Jesus ceremonially unclean. Concerning *kosher* food laws, in the story of a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees about whether his disciples ate with “defiled” hands because they did not follow the “tradition of the elders” about washing before eating, Jesus responded “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him . . . ? . . . What comes out a person is what defiles him. For from within out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts. . . . All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:14-23). Famously, Mark interpreted this to mean “Thus he declared all foods clean.” (v. 19). Finally, although it happened infrequently, some of Jesus’ healings involved Gentiles (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10; John 4:46-54). Though a matter of disagreement, some scholars believe that Jews of Jesus’ time would have regarded coming into immediate contact with Gentiles or entering their homes as creating ritual impurity.²⁹

Significantly, the gospels say nothing about Jesus having gone to the temple to purify himself after having engaged in behavior such as touching lepers or corpses that should have made him ceremonially unclean.³⁰ (He does instruct cured lepers to go to priests for purification (Mark 1:44)). The oddness of the gospels not even mentioning the issue of impurity would seem to imply that in Jesus’ healings, rather than himself being contaminated by ritual impurity, contact with Jesus rather brings about and expands the realm of holiness. Rather than the unclean making Jesus ceremonially impure, Jesus’ presence makes the unclean clean. As David deSilva notes:

The Gospels . . . present Jesus encountering a stream of ritually impure and potentially polluting people, but in encounter their contagion does not defile Jesus; rather his holiness purges their pollutions, renders them clean and integrates them again into the mainstream of Jewish society

*where they can reclaim their birthright, as it were, among the people of God.*³¹

In this light, there are three incidents involving women in Jesus' ministry that directly touch on the issue of ceremonial uncleanness. In the incident of the healing of the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:25-30; Matthew 15:21-28), Jesus came into contact not only with a non-Jew, but also with a Canaanite (Matt. 15:22). The Canaanites had been the historical enemies of Israel, dating from the time of the Exodus from Egypt and the conquest under Joshua. Rather than being defiled by the woman's presence, Jesus healed her daughter. In the double story of the raising of Jairus' daughter and the healing of a woman with a hemorrhage (Mark 5:21-43), Jesus twice came into contact with women in a manner that should have made him ceremonially impure – touching a corpse, and being touched by a menstruating woman. Rather than being made unclean, Jesus makes the unclean clean – raising the girl from the dead, and healing the woman with a twelve-year hemorrhage. Significantly, unlike the previous incident with the leper, whom Jesus had commanded to have his healing confirmed by a priest, Jesus does not even require the woman to undergo the usual seven-day purification period.³²

All three of these incidents are theologically significant in that they indicate that in his interaction with women, Jesus overrode the traditional Jewish purity laws concerning impurity; however, the story of the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage is especially significant because of its connection with the one significant reason that Jewish women would have been excluded from full participation in Jewish religious life. If the ordinary Jewish woman would have been ceremonially impure once a month and after child-birth, this woman had been ritually impure and excluded from full participation in Jewish religious life for twelve years. Again, rather than being made ritually impure by coming into

contact with this woman, Jesus rather healed the ritually impure woman and brought her back into the circle of participation in religious life. A central theme of the gospels is therefore that men and women could equally be Jesus' disciples because his presence overcame the distinction between ceremonially pure and impure.³³

The New Testament Churches and Ritual Purity

As noted above, issues of ritual purity were an area of contention in the admission of Gentiles into the Christian churches, particularly regarding circumcision and diet. Paul's letter to the Galatians and the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 made it clear that Gentile male converts did not have to become Jews by undergoing circumcision in order to become Christians, and Gentile Christians did not have to adapt a Jewish kosher diet. An obvious question to ask at this point would concern the status of Gentile women converts to Christian faith. Did the New Testament churches continue to uphold the Jewish purity laws regarding women? Surprisingly, the New Testament simply does not discuss this issue. However, it seems clear that the New Testament churches no longer followed Old Testament purity laws in reference to women, and the New Testament's silence is itself a confirmation. Given the specific discussions concerning food and circumcision, if female ritual purity were an issue, surely there would have been at least some mention of the problem. Female purity was not mentioned in the Jerusalem council of Acts 15; it is not mentioned in any of the epistles. The Book of Acts indicates that women such as Lydia were leaders in the Gentile churches, and that churches met in their homes (Acts 16:14 ff.). Paul's letters make clear that many of the leaders in the Pauline churches were women (Rom. 16:1-7).³⁴ If female ritual purity were an issue, women church leaders and worshiping in the homes of women would have created a problem.

It would seem that there is a logical parallel between the

issues of male circumcision and Old Testament purity laws regarding women. The presenting issue of Paul's letters to the Galatians was whether Gentile male converts needed to be circumcised – an issue of male ritual purity. Paul does not mention issues of women's ritual purity, but the logical principles should be the same. Paul's theological stance concerning both issues would be found in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ's Jesus." Those opposed to women's ordination often complain that appeals to Galatians 3:28 are illegitimate in this context because Paul is not discussing the "gender roles" of men and women, but rather their equal access to salvation. The passage has no bearing whatsoever on the issue of women's ordination, they claim.³⁵ This objection over-simplifies Paul's argument, however. The crucial issue in Galatians was not simply the equal access of men and women, slaves and free, to salvation, but also the cultural barriers between Jew and Gentile as expressed in the purity code boundary markers of male circumcision and the sharing of meals between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul's argument is that equal access to salvation through faith in Christ eliminates the necessity of the Jewish ritual purity boundary markers of circumcision or food purity. It follows of logical necessity that purity codes concerning female uncleanness would also have been one of the purity code boundaries removed by the gospel.

A key theme of this essay is that it was precisely purity codes concerning women's ritual impurity that prevented Jewish women from full participation in religious life. Women could not be priests because of ceremonial uncleanness. So Paul's argument in Galatians would indeed be relevant to the issue of women's ordination in the Christian churches. Appeals to Jewish temple practice concerning an exclusively male priesthood should have no relevance in the context of Christian worship since Jesus' transforming presence has overcome purity boundaries that separate not only Jews and

Gentiles, but also men and women. Jesus has made the unclean clean, and the impure pure.

Concluding Reflections

I suggested at the beginning of this essay that it should not strictly be necessary. Advocates of the ordination of women to church orders are not asking for the ordination of “priestesses”; opposition to women’s ordination because of concern about “priestesses” is a red herring. Nonetheless, given the frequent occurrence of the “priestess” objection, at least at a popular level, I have addressed it by looking at priesthood in the Old Testament, and addressing particularly the single issue of why the Old Testament priesthood was exclusively male. I have argued that the common presumption that this had something to do with the opposition to a pagan sex cult involving female “priestesses” is a modern myth fueled by overactive imaginations. There simply is no historical evidence that such a sex cult existed. There were no ancient women “sacred prostitute priestesses.”

I have also pointed to the only reason for the exclusion of women from Old Testament priesthood actually mentioned in the Old Testament – concerns about ritual purity connected with temple worship. Only men were priests in the Old Testament because Old Testament purity laws would have made it impossible for women to function as priests on a regular basis. Indeed, women were not only precluded from the priesthood, but also relegated to a completely separate area outside the main temple itself – the Court of the Women.

I concluded my argument by looking at the New Testament’s discussion of holiness and purity – in Paul’s writings, the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, and the ministry of Jesus. While the New Testament is concerned about moral holiness and purity, the New Testament is also clear that ritual purity is no longer an issue for New Testament Christians. The Old Testament’s primary reason for having an exclusively male

priesthood is irrelevant to the ordination of Christian women to ecclesial office in the church.

Before ending, I would like to address one final concern: the issue of “shaming” and social (rather than “ritual”) purity codes that is associated with shaming. In a previous essay,³⁶ I discussed the issues of honor and shame at length, specifically in the context of the New Testament. Following the lead of contemporary New Testament scholarship, I noted that the Mediterranean culture of New Testament times was an “honor/shame” culture, and that Jesus intentionally subverted this culture by redefining honor in terms of servanthood. This subversion of honor culture was picked up by Paul in his notion of cruciform discipleship.³⁷ For both Jesus and Paul, honor is not found in conventional notions of status, but in following the path of the cross by willingly submitting one’s own concerns to those of others.

Issues of honor and shame are not unique to ancient culture. Indeed, as post-modern culture moves more and more away from identifying behavior as “sinful” or “guilt-inducing,” it seems to have embraced in its place a stronger focus on shaming. (One of the ironies of post-modern culture is that those who continues to insist on using language of “sin” and “guilt” are shamed for being “intolerant.”) One of the particular ways in which women in particular are shamed has to do with behavior or clothing that contravenes acceptable sexual or gender or even fashion standards. The coarse expression used to describe this kind of disapproval is “slut-shaming.” I would suggest that the correlation between ordination of women to Christian ministry and “priestess” language is just such an example of cultural shaming behavior. Those opposed to women’s ordination know that ordained women do not think of themselves as “priestesses,” but using the term suggests that such women are engaging in sexually inappropriate behavior; for a woman to be ordained is the social equivalence of cult prostitution. “Priestess” language is a form of shaming by associating the

ordination of women with questionable sexual behavior.

Issues of ritual purity are also relevant to the historical reasons for opposition to women's ordination. "Purity codes" can function in a specifically religious conduct, as did the Old Testament purity codes, and I have suggested that it was these Old Testament purity codes that were the primary reason that women were not ordained as priests in the Old Testament. However, there can also be sociological purity codes, codes that have to do with the acceptability of certain behaviors within a given culture. In a previous essay, I have addressed the single most significant historical reason for opposition to women's ordination in the church, namely, that women are incapable of being ordained because they were considered to be less intelligent, more easily susceptible to temptation, and a sexual temptation for men.³⁸ Although not a ritual purity code, such attitudes toward women have functioned historically as a social purity code, excluding women from church office essentially because they were considered to be defiling.

As noted in the beginning of this essay, such reasons for opposition to women's ordination are not properly theological, yet they need to be addressed. (Later essays will address Catholic arguments against the ordination of women that are more properly theological.) From a theological perspective, the proper Christian response to such objections is to point once again to Jesus' own behavior toward those who were "impure" or "unclean" as well as to the New Testament church's early refusal to countenance purity distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, and, yes, men and women. As Paul wrote in response to those who demanded Gentile circumcision: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal. 5:1).

1 "Non-theological Arguments Against the Ordination of Women;" <http://willgwitt.org/theology/non-theological-arguments-against-the-ordination-of-women>.

[2](#) C.S. Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church?," *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Walter Hooper, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 234-239.

[3](#) "Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument From Symbolism Part 1 (God, Christ, Apostles)," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-symbolism-part-1>; "Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument From Symbolism (Part 2: Transcendence, Immanence and Sexual Typology)," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-symbolism-part-2>.

[4](#) Lewis, 237.

[5](#) I recognize that some Liberal Protestant and Catholic Modernist feminist theologians have advocated "goddess worship"; I discuss revisionist feminist theology in the essay on "Non-theological Objections to Women's Ordination," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/non-theological-arguments-against-the-ordination-of-women>. Revisionist feminist theologians should be distinguished from orthodox women clergy, whether Evangelical or Catholic, whose position is more properly identified as "Egalitarianism." To conflate the two groups is not only unjust, but "bearing false witness." Revisionist feminist theologians and egalitarians are no more equivalent than are male Liberal Protestant theologians such as Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, or Marcus Borg equivalent to critically orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth, Robert Jenson or N.T. Wright. See my essay, "Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument From Symbolism Part 1 (God, Christ, Apostles)," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-symbolism-part-1>.

[6](#) Although it does not use the disparaging word "priestess," this is a key argument in the Anglican *Forward in Faith* document *Consecrated Women?*: "The 'theology' of sacrifice in

the Old Testament is complex and many-layered. What is made emphatically clear in the texts is a rejection of the deification of sexual intercourse, as in the fertility cults of Canaan. Those cults had temple prostitution at their heart." Jonathan Baker, ed. *Consecrated Women? A Contribution fo the Women Bishops Debate* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2004), 49. Significantly, the document does not list any references to substantiate this claim.

[7](#) Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (NY: Macmillan, 1992), 199.

[8](#) William Robertson-Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (NY: Appleton & Co., 1889), 436; James George Frazer, *Adonis, Attis and Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906), 21-25; William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1946), 75-77; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (NY: Harper & Row, 1962-1965), 141-142.

[9](#) Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.199 (London, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), 87-88.

[10](#) Frymer-Kensky, 200.

[11](#) Deuteronomy 23: 17-18; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7.

[12](#) Frymer-Kensky, 201.

[13](#) Gale A. Yee, "The Book of Hosea," *The New Interpreter's Bible Volume VII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 241; 202-203.

[14](#) Frymer-Kensky, 200.

[15](#) On this passage, see my essay "Concerning Women's Ordination: Speaking and Teaching,"

<http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-speaking-and-teaching>.

[16](#) S. M. Baugh, "Cult Prostitution in New Testament Ephesus: A Reappraisal," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42.3 (1999): 443-460. Baugh states: "Hopefully Ephesian cult prostitutes will soon disappear from our literature and from our pulpits, for these chimera exist only in the minds of people today, not in the past." (460).

[17](#)

<http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-beginning-with-genesis>.

[18](#) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.99-105; 39 Articles, art. 7; *Augsburg Confession* 28.60; John Calvin, *Inst.* 4.20.15.

[19](#) Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

[20](#) Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000); "'Keeping It Holy': Old Testament Commandment and New Testament Faith," *I Am the Lord Your God: Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments*, Carl E. Braaten and Christopher R. Seitz, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 95-124; Brevard Childs, "The Role of the Ritual and Purity Laws," *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 84-91; David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 241-315; Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973).

[21](#) For the above several points, see Neusner, 7-31; Bockmuehl, "Keeping It Holy," 103-106.

[22](#) Neusner, 18-22.

[23](#) See especially, Fryer-Kensky, 100-107.

[24](#) Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 8.

[25](#) Bauckham, "Keeping It Holy," 107-108.

[26](#) The one anomaly in the list seems to be abstaining from blood consumption, a Jewish dietary distinctive. This is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament.

[27](#) On the New Testament modification of Old Testament purity laws, see deSilva, 279-304; Neusner, 59-60; On the significance of the temple as a dividing issue for Jews and Christians, see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 224-235, 365-366, 409-410, 459-460,

[28](#) "The Gospels contain a multitude of instances where Jesus 'crosses the line' intentionally with regard to the [purity] maps of persons, foods, times, and space . . ." deSilva, 280.

[29](#) deSilva, 280-285; Neusner, 60-62; Wright, 238-240.

[30](#) Neusner, 60.

[31](#) deSilva, 284-285; Bauckham, "Keeping It Holy," 115.

[32](#) Pheme Perkins, "The Gospel of Mark," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 587-588.

[33](#) deSilva, 284; Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 63-66, 71-75.

[34](#) Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 104-116; 128-157,

[35](#) John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 71-72.

[36](#) "Concerning Women's Ordination: Disciples of Jesus," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-dis>

ciples-of-jesus.

[37](#) See my essay “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Mutual Submission,”
<http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-mutual-submission>.

[38](#) “Concerning Women’s Ordination: The Argument “From Tradition” is not the “Traditional” Argument”;
<http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-the-argument-from-tradition-is-not-the-traditional-argument>.