

**The Semantics of Purity in the Ancient Near East:
Lexical Meaning as a Projection of Embodied Experience***

Yitzhaq Feder

University of Haifa

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”:

* It is a pleasure to thank James Nathan Ford, Wayne Horowitz, Xiaoli Ouyang, Graciela Gestoso Singer and Avigail Wagschal for generously sharing their time and insight with me during the preparation of this article.

¹ For a lucid presentation of the onomasiological approach utilized here (as opposed to semiological) and its relationship to the universality or culture-specificity of concepts, see A. Blank, “Words and Concepts in Time: Towards Diachronic Cognitive Onomasiology,” in *Words in Time. Diachronic Semantics from Different Points of View* (eds. R. Eckardt et al.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 37–65.

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; virgin²

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

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.”³ In this vein, one might be led, as was even the great lexicographer James Barr, to define the meaning of Hebrew *ṭahor* as “(ritually) clean” as opposed to *ṭame*’ “unclean.”⁴ 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.”⁵

³ F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. W. Baskin; London: Peter Owen Limited, 1959), 117.

⁴ “Semantics and Biblical Theology – A Contribution to the Discussion,” in *Congress Volume: Uppsala 1971* (VTSupp 22; Leiden: Brill, 1972), 15.

⁵ W. Croft, “The Role of Domains in the Interpretation of Metaphors and Metonymies,” in *Metaphor and Metonymy in Comparison and Contrast* (eds. R. Dirven and R. Pörings; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), p. 163.

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

⁶ *Meaning and Experience* (trans. J. Carden; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 45–46.

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.**⁸ 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 טהר. Taking a synchronic approach to the lexical data for BH, the vast majority of the occurrences of the adjective טהר 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

⁸ I have not included terms for washing, such as Sum. luḥ 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. נק"י, which are employed almost exclusively in relation to innocence from moral and legal culpability, though the expression נקיין 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 *thr*. Ugaritic *thr* is used exclusively to describe the lustrousness of lapis lazuli (*iqnũ*, *spr*) and is semantically equivalent to *ib*, cognate to Akkadian *ebbu* (for this term, see below).⁹ For example, in the Baal epic, the future palace of Baal is described in the following terms:

wbn.bht.ksp whrs/bht.thrm iqnim

And build the house with silver and gold, the house with lustrous lapis lazuli (stones).¹⁰

In the letter KTU² 1.24, we find this root with the variant *z*: “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) (*zhrm i`qn i`m*).”¹¹ 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.

⁹ See the detailed analysis of J.N. Ford, “The Ugaritic Letter RS 18.038 (KTU² 2.39) and the Meaning of the Term *spr* ‘lapis lazuli’ (= BH sappir ‘lapis lazuli’),” *UF* 40 (2008): 302–4.

¹⁰ KTU² 1.4 V 18 – 19// 33–35; M.S. Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (WAW 9; ed. S.B. Parker; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 130–31 (with slight adaptation).

¹¹ Note the regular correspondence between Syriac *ṭ* and Arabic *z*.

This original concrete sense of the Ugaritic root *thr* is attested also for its Hebrew cognate **טהר**. Particularly striking is the usage of this root to describe the revelation of the divine throne in

Ex 24:10:

ויראו את אלהי ישראל ותחת רגליו כמעשה לבנת הספיר וכעצם השמים לטהר

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 **לטהר** 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 **טה"ר** is etymologically related to **זה"ר**. For example, the divine throne in Ezek 8:2 is described as **כמראה זהר כעין החשמלה** (“with a radiant appearance, like *amber*”).¹² The term **זהר** appears also in Dan 12:3: **והמשכלים יזהרו כזהר הרקיע**: “and the knowledgeable will glow like the radiance of the sky,” in which the expression **זהר הרקיע** parallels **לטהר השמים כעצם** in Ex 24:10. These roots are also related to **צה"ר**, whose most

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**,¹³ which parallels **טיהרא** in Jewish Aramaic.¹⁴

Though the phonetic interchange between *t*, *z*, and *ṣ* is relatively rare, it finds corroboration both intra-linguistically and inter-linguistically,¹⁵ 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 **טהר** 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, **טהר** 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

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 **טע"ן** (Gen 45:17)/ **צע"ן** (Isa 33:20; see HALOT 1041–42) and **קו"ץ** (Gen 27:46)/ **קו"ט** (Ps 95:10; see HALOT 1083). I thank Yigal Bloch and Baruch Schwartz for these refs.. Inter-linguistically, note the regular correspondence between BH *t* and Aramaic *ṣ*, and the variation *t* / *z* in the Ugaritic evidence noted above, as in the correspondence between Syriac *t* and Arabic *z*

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*.¹⁶ However, in this case, it is Ugaritic which attests to its ritual usage. For example, the festival text KTU 1.119:5 reads: *yrthš mlk b`rr`* (“The king will wash himself pure”).¹⁷ But this root is also employed in a legal context in the sense “free of obligations.” For example, the text KTU² 2.19:2–5 uses a simile comparing the person freed of debt to the sun in its clarity: *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 *brr* (*/barūru/*) for “tin,” a substantivized form of the adjective “(the) shiny.”¹⁸

Though the Hebrew Bible does not use בר"ר 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

¹⁶For an extended etymological analysis of this root, see P. Fronzaroli, “Problems of a Semitic Dictionary,” in *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, *TDOT* 2:308–12.

¹⁷ See D. Pardee, *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 (ברה כחמה)?”¹⁹ Especially notable is the following passage from Psalm 19:

⁹פקודי ה' ישרים משמחי לב מצות ה' ברה מאירת עינים
¹⁰יראת ה' טהורה עומדת לעד משפטי ה' אמת צדקו יחדו
¹¹הנחמדים מזהב ומפז רב...

⁹The precepts of the LORD are just, rejoicing the heart;
 The instruction of the LORD is lucid, making the eyes light up.
¹⁰The fear of the LORD is pure, abiding forever...
 The judgments of the LORD are true, righteous altogether,
¹¹more desirable than gold, than much fine gold...²⁰

Aside from the fact that this passage uses ברר together with טהר, it is noteworthy that ברה (“lucid”) appears here in apposition to the expression “making the eyes light up” (מאירת עינים). This parallelism hints at the relationship between both טהר and ברר 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

¹⁹ Note also the rabbinic expression ברור 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.”²¹ Indeed, it serves as the etymological basis for the logogram for gold (kug-sig₁₇ = “yellow metal”) and silver (kug-babbar = “white metal”).²² The expression “bright lapis lazuli” cited above in Ugaritic and BH appears already as a common formula in Sumerian literature (kug-za-gìn).²³ 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.,

²¹ B. Pongratz-Leisten, “Reflections on the Translatability of the Notion of Holiness,” in *Of God(s), Kings, Trees, and Scholars: Neo-Assyrian and Related Studies in Honour of Simo Parpola* (Studia Orientalia 106; eds. M. Luukko et al.; Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2009), 422; M. Guichard and L. Marti, “Purity in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Paleo-Babylonian and Neo Assyrian Periods” in *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean and Ancient Judaism* (eds. C. Frevel and C. Nihan; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 51, 62; W. Sallaberger, “Reinheit. A. Mesopotamien,” *RIA* 11: 295. Contra E. Jan Wilson, “Holiness” and “Purity” in *Mesopotamia* (AOAT 237; Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon & Bercker, 1994), 80, who argues that kug “is never demonstrably devoid of its religious sense” (his emphasis).

²² Cf. H.L.J. Vanstiphout, “Sanctus Lugalbanda,” in T. Abusch (ed.), *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 259 w/ n. 2. Just as the element KUG in the logograms for gold and silver refers to their shiny quality, zalag (UD) in the orthography of bronze: zabar (written UD.KA.BAR; Akk. *siparru*) refers to this metal’s bright appearance.

²³ E.g. Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta 481–8 2; Šulgi D 348; for discussion, see S. Cohen, *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1973, 286; J. Klein, *Three Šulgi Hymns* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1981), 117.

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.²⁴ 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 *ellu*, and *dadag* with *ebbu*.²⁵ In the following discussion, each term will be treated separately, though any semantic distinctions must be treated with caution.

Beginning with *ellu*, this term is somewhat misleadingly glossed by CAD as follows:

ellu: 1. “clean, pure,” 2. “holy, sacred,” 3. “free, noble.”²⁶

These general translations provide little indication for the usage of *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

²⁴ 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, *Ur III Incantations* (TMH 6; Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2003) 76–77. Though the comment in CAD E 4 correctly emphasizes the relationship between *ebbu* and brightness, its assertion that *ellu* is never employed in reference to physical cleanliness is questionable. See Wilson, “Purity” and “Holiness,” 81–82.

²⁵ 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 *ellu*) to designate *sikil* already in the OB period (MSL 14, 121-122; see Marti and Guichard, “Purity,” 63).

²⁶ CAD E 102.

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:

ina libnāti (SIG4.HI.A) ellēti r[e]šišu ullīma u' nam`mera 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.

²⁷ See the incisive discussion in Ford, “Ugaritic Letter RS 18.038,” 316–17, n. 144.

²⁸ Attestations in CAD E 104, glossed “shining purity.” Cf. K. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia: A Comparative Study* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1985), 27.

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.

³⁰ Transcription and translation adapted from RIMB 2 B.6.21.1, l. 28. See Ford, “Ugaritic Letter RS 18.038,” 305–6; Pongratz-Leisten, “Notion of Holiness,” 425.

A further point of correspondence between *ellu* and טהר 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.³¹ Strikingly, this usage parallels the BH expression יצהר, 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.”³³

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).³⁴ Unlike *ellu* and its derivatives, the verbal form *ubbubu* is employed in reference to mundane cleaning and laundering.³⁵

³¹ See R. Frankel, *Wine and Oil Production in Antiquity in Israel and Other Mediterranean Countries* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 47–48; P.J King and L.E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville; Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 96.

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.

³⁵ *CAD* E 5; van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 27. Cf. Wilson, “Holiness” and “Purity,” 81–82 for possible exceptions.

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:

1. “clear,”
2. “clean, cleansed, in good order,”
3. “plain,”
4. “refined, pure,”
5. “free of claims,”³⁷

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” (*dalhu*) 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-awātīm, 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 *amūtum*,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.

³⁸ Kt 87/k 38, 3–9. Cited from C. Michel, “Le lapis-lazuli des Assyriens au début du IIe Millénaire av. J.-C.,” in: W.H. van Soldt et al (eds.), *Veenhof Anniversary Volume: Studies Presented to Klaas R. Veenhof on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2001), 349, n. 70, with earlier refs..

³⁹ J.G. Dercksen, *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” (שמן זית זך; Ex 27:20) and “pure frankincense” (לבנה זכה; 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 זכ"ך are used to designate washing but generally in metaphoric contexts (e.g. Isa 1:16; Job 9:30).

⁴³ For recent discussions of the notion of purity in Hittite culture, see G. Wilhelm, “Reinheit und Heiligkeit,” in *Levitikus als Buch* (eds. H.J. Fabry and H.W. Jüngling; Berlin: Philo, 1999), 197–217; S. de Martino, “Purità dei sacerdoti e dei luoghi di culti nell’Anatolia ittita,” *Orientalia* 73 (2004), 348–61; A. Mouton, “Reinheit (Pureté). B. Bei den Hethitern,” *RIA* 11: 299–300; idem, “Le concept de pureté/ impureté en Anatolie hittite,” in *How Purity is Made* (eds. P. Rösch and U. Simon; Harrasowitz: Wiesbaden, 2012), 69–87; M. Hutter, “Concepts of Purity in Anatolian Religions,” in Frevel and Nihan, *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions* 159–74.

the primary concrete sense of *parkui-* is associated with radiance, including translations such as “bright” or “shiny.”⁴⁴ 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 13.1.⁴⁵ 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* ^dSIN-*aš*...*parkuiš* (“If the moon... becomes bright”).⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ 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 (*parkuiš*) before

⁴⁴ 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 *śubhrá* (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.

⁴⁵ I 52; see HED 8: 146–7. Cf. CHD P 167.

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ CHD P 170.

the deities, male and female!”⁴⁸ Similarly, the Antahšum 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*)!’”⁴⁹ 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

⁴⁸ CTH 471; IV, 61–62; text: R. Strauß, *Reinigungsrituale aus Kizzuwatna* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 232.

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).⁵⁰ 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:

Sociolinguistic Context	Characterization of Purity
1. Legal (ordeals)	Free of guilt (detectable by divine judgment)
2. Ritual	Free of pollution and similar metaphysical threats
3. Cult/ sacrificial offerings	Free of pollution, holy, eligible for participation in the divine sphere ⁵¹

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:⁵²

52 ...*našta BIBRU DINGIR-LIM*

53 *ZI-aš arha ekutteni nu=za mān parkuwaeš*

54 *šumel* ^DLAMMA-KUNU *takku=za papranteš=ma našta QADU*

55 DAM^{MEŠ}-KUNU DUMU^{MEŠ}-KUNU *harakteni*

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.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.

⁵² Text: Ada Taggar-Cohen, *Hittite Priesthood* (Texte der Hethiter 26; Heidelberg: Winter, 2006), 67–8 (my translation). For similar passages, see IV, 32–3 and 69–77.

⁵³In particular, note the usage of *papre-* / *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:⁵⁴

šumma awīlam šuāti nāru (dÍD) ūtebbibaššūma ištalmam 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.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.”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):⁵⁷

והשביע אתה הכהן ואמר אל האשה אם לא שכב איש אתך ואם לא שטית טמאה תחת אישך הנקי ממי
המרים המאררים האלה

ואת כי שטית תחת אישך וכי נטמאת ויתן איש בך את שכבתו מבלעדי אישך

ובאו המים המאררים האלה במעיך לצבות בטן ולנפל ירך ואמרה האשה אמן אמן

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

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.

⁵⁵ Roth, *ibid.*, 18. See also T. Frymer-Kensky, *The Judicial Ordeal in the Ancient Near East* (dis. Yale University, 1977), 493.

⁵⁶ CAD E 6–7 (*ebēbu*); 81 (*elēlu*); 105–6 (*ellu*).

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,⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ 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 (*lingai-*), slander (*lala-*), bloodguilt (*ešhar*) and especially sorcery (*alwanzatar*).⁶⁰ In the Šamuḫa Ritual (CTH 480), these forces are imagined as surrounding the temple like the layers of skin of an onion.⁶¹ Similar uses can be found for *ellu* and *ebbu*, as attested, for example, in the Šurpu and

⁵⁸ For the sense of this expression (also in Lev 18:20, 23; 20:15) and its relation to the common idiom שכבת זרע (Lev 15:16, 17, 18, 32; 19:20; 22:4; Num 5:13), see D. Hoffmann, *Das Buch Leviticus* (vol. 2; Berlin: Poppelauer, 1906), 21–22. Cf. H. Orlinsky, “The Hebrew Root *škb*,” *JBL* 63 (1944): 37–40. Unlike Orlinsky who takes שכבת* as an expression for “penis,” I view it as metonymically referring to the man’s semen (so explicitly in Lev 18:20).

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.

⁶¹ KUB 29.7+; Text: R. Lebrun, *Šamuḫa. Foyer Religieux de l’Empire Hittites* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 1976), 123–4; English translation: ANET 46.

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, gonorrhea 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 gonorrhea 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 – involving 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

⁶² E.g. Šurpu V–VI 169; VIII 83 and passim. Text edition: E. Reiner, *Šurpu. A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations* (AoF Beiheft 11; Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1970). The use of Hittite and Akkadian terms for pollution in relation to disease will be treated in more detail in an upcoming study.

⁶³ “Contagion and Cognition,” 151–67.

examination, however, reveals that the sense of pollution in these distinct contexts should be distinguished.⁶⁴

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 (נטמאה) 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.⁶⁵

This understanding stems from the assumption that the sense of נטמ 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

⁶⁴ See above, n. 59.

⁶⁵ 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.

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 UNUTE^{MEŠ} GIŠ UNUTE^{MEŠ} GIR₄ kue harteni*

65 *n=ašta mān ŠAH-aš UR.GI₇-aš kuwapikki anda šāliqa*

66 *EN.UTÚL=ma=at arha UL peššiyazi nu apāš DINGIR^{MEŠ}-aš paprandaza*

67 *adanna pāi apēdani=ma DINGIR^{MEŠ}-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

⁶⁶ In modern research, this category of pollution has been labeled “moral impurity.” See A. Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (New York, 1967), 212–69; J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* [New York, 2000], 21–42. For a discussion of this terminology and its shortcomings, see T.M. Lemos, “Where There Is Dirt, Is There System? Revisiting Biblical Purity Constructions,” *JSOT* 37 (2013): 265–94.

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.”⁶⁹

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 (חל"ל) them.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ In these contexts, *parkui*- and טהר refer to freedom from defilement and eligibility to participate in the divine sphere, mediated by the cult.

⁶⁹ Text: Taggar-Cohen, *Hittite Priesthood*, 41; translation mine.

⁷⁰ J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–20* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1839. Regarding the etymological relationship between חל"ל and *elēlu*, see below, n. 89.

⁷¹ See van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 21–36; Feder, “Contagion and Cognition,” 165.

Similar usages are attested for *ellu* and *ebbu*,⁷² but *zakû* is only rarely used as a term for cultic purity.⁷³ 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),⁷⁴ 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?

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.

⁷⁶ For discussion of this still obscure topic, see H. Waetzoldt, “Rotes Gold,” *Oriens Antiquus* 24 (1985): 1–16; M.A. Powell, “Identification and Interpretation of Long Term Price Fluctuations in Babylonia: More on the History of Money in Mesopotamia,” *AoF* 17 (1990): 80–81 (who suggests that purity was not the exclusive determinant of value); P.R.S. Moorey, *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 217–19; K. Reiter,

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

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

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

108 kug saĝ bar kug-ge KA šu-a gub-ba-gin₇ saĥar u₃-mu-un-ta-luĥ-luĥ

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

When [the prison⁷⁸] 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

Die Metalle im Alten Orient (AOAT 249; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1997), 36–70. Particularly relevant is the discussion in R. Klemm and D. Klemm, *Gold and Gold Mining in Ancient Egypt and Nubia* (Berlin: Springer, 2013), 43–45.

⁷⁷ See H. Limet, *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 ammurum: ein Begriff der Silbermeallurgie in den Kültepe-Texten*,” *UF* 27 (1995): 487–504. For a general survey, see X. Ouyang, *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, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 173–74), but it is clear that technical processes existed for refining silver at the turn of the 2nd 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, *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.

⁷⁸ For é-kur as “prison” in this text, see M. Civil, “On Mesopotamian Jails and Their Lady Warden,” in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of W.W. Hallo* (eds. M.E. Cohen et al.; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993), 72–78.

it has cleansed him of dirt, like silver of best quality, he will be entrusted again into the propitious hands of his god.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 ברר. 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 בר"ר, לב"ן and צר"ף which designate the process of separating the dross from refined metals. On this background, it is not surprising to find בר"ר in the sense “to separate,” as in Ezek 20:38: “I will remove from you (ויברותי) those who rebel and transgress against me.” In this light, we can also explain derivatives related to purity, such as the nominal form בַּר in Ps 18:25 “May the LORD repay according to my righteousness, like the cleanness of my hands (כבבר ידי) before his eyes” and the adjectival form בַּר in expressions like “pure of heart”

⁷⁹ ETCSL 4.28.1.

(בר לבב; Ps 24:4).⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ 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 בַּר (Job 9:30) and בְּרִית (Jer 2:22; Mal 3:2) seem to be alternative designations for lye, used in washing and laundering. An exceptional case is כַּבֵּר 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 כַּבֵּר (“in the furnace”), as assumed by many commentators.

⁸¹ See S.Z. Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and its Biblical Parallels* (Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2012).

affective visual attribute – one of the primary means by which the sacred was made manifest.”⁸² Regarding the Vedic sources, Gonda observes that “gold is a form, manifestation or ‘symbol’ (*rūpa*) of the gods,” whose possessions are made of gold.⁸³ In ancient Egypt, gold was employed in cult statues and designated “the flesh of the gods.”⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ In Hurrian mythology, silver was very explicitly deified.⁸⁶ 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.

⁸⁶ See P. James and M.A. van der Sluijs, “‘Silver’: A Hurrian Phaethon,” *JANER* 12 (2012): 237–51, who note the etymological connections between silver designations and (white) radiance in Sumerian, Hittite and probably Hurrian (243–44).

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.⁸⁷ 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” (*šamnam ša namrīrūtīya apšuškāma mamman ana pānīka ul izz[iz]*).⁸⁸ 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]

⁸⁷ See M. Malul, *Studies in Mesopotamian Legal Symbolism* (AOAT 221; Kevelaer: Butzon & Becker, 1988), 40–51; I. Yakubovich, “Were Hittite Kings Divinely Anointed? A Palaic Invocation to the Sun-God and its Significance for Hittite Religion,” *JANER* 5 (2005): 122–35; A. Gilan and A. Mouton, “The Enthronement of the Hittite King as a Royal Rite of Passage,” in *Life, Death, and Coming of Age in Antiquity: Individual Rites of Passage in the Ancient Near East and its Surroundings* (eds. A. Mouton and J. Patrier; Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming).

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

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 *hll* from which Akkadian *ellu* is derived underwent a diametrically-opposed semantic development in BH. In contrast to *ellu* in the sense of “holy,” biblical חלל 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 חלל can even designate the desecration of sacred entities (e.g. Lev 20:3; Ezek 22:26). The Ugaritic root *hll* 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

⁹⁰ L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testament Libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1958), xiv.

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.

⁹¹ This complex topic requires fuller treatment elsewhere. See provisionally, J. Zlatev, “Embodiment, Language and Mimeses,” in *Body, Language and Mind. Volume 1: Embodiment* (eds. T. Ziemke et al.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 297–337.

⁹² See E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (trans. K.E. Fields; New York: Free Press, 1995 [1912]), 437.

Diagram 1: Akkadian Purity Terminology: Semantic Relations

