Pigs, Purity, and Patrilineality: The Multiparity of Swine and Its Problems for Biblical Ritual and Gender Construction

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The biblical characterization of pigs as impure has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Most have focused on the anomalies of the pig compared with other domesticated animals, especially with regard to their alimentary processes. All interpretations, however, have neglected a primary feature of pigs that makes them radically different from all other clean land animals, namely, that they are multiparous, giving birth in litters. This article argues that the multiparity of pigs makes them incompatible with other ritually clean land animals in four ways: (1) All clean land animals are uniparous. (2) As multiparous animals, pigs do not bear a true firstborn male, which would make them different from all clean domesticated animals. This feature is most important because the sanctity of the domesticated firstling is recognized by all pentateuchal sources, and, furthermore, the ideology of the firstborn male is integrally related to the human practices of inheritance, lineage, and wealth management. (3) The multiparity of pigs highlights abundant female fertility in comparison with the more controlled and managed fertility seen in the biblical purity systems. (4) Multiparous animals are capable of bearing the offspring of multiple sires simultaneously, a phenomenon that conflicts with the biblical focus on paternity.

The cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously stated that animals used in specific rituals are often chosen not because they are good to eat but because they are “good to think.”¹ By this he meant that many cultures use animals to act

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out concepts fundamental to their particular view of the world, especially various aspects of their social structure. Following him, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz argues that this is especially true for rituals involving animals in the Hebrew Bible. In his view, animals, as well as other aspects of the natural world, become material on which the ancient Israelites and Jews played out fundamental “social metaphors.” Vital concerns about the social world were acted out not only in society itself but also on the materials that intersected with it; the natural world in general was a mirror that “both reflected Israelite experience of life and served as a model for what Israelite communal and individual life should and could be.”

According to Eilberg-Schwartz,

A number of [biblical] rituals can be interpreted as acting out or living out the implications of those metaphors which dominate Israelite thought. This process … is most obvious in the correspondence that one finds between some of the rules regulating the social life of Israel and the rules governing the treatment of livestock and agricultural activity. If the flocks, herds and fields are metaphors for Israelites, then it follows that one should act towards the former in the same way that one acts towards the latter.

Eilberg-Schwartz shows, for instance, that the laws of the Torah specify that not only should the Israelites observe the Sabbath, but their animals should do the same (Exod 20:9, 23:12, Deut 5:14). Including animals in this scheme illustrates the fundamental nature of the Sabbath and the concept that the Sabbath is built into the very structure of the natural world. Other examples include the symmetry of the prohibition on trimming the edges of one’s facial hair with the ban on reaping the edges of a field (Lev 19:9, 27), or the parallelism between keeping an infant animal with its mother for seven days before slaughtering it (Exod 22:29, Lev 22:27) and keeping an infant boy with its mother for seven days before his circumcision (Lev 12:3).

In a similar vein, this study questions whether the biblical writers considered the pig to be impure because it is an unfit model for human societal behavior. Unfortunately, it is unclear which aspect of the pig makes it unfit. As is well known, the rationale for the prohibition of pork is enigmatic and unclear. The text's explanation for the ban is that pigs have only one of the two features of clean land animals: although pigs have split hooves, they do not chew cud (Lev 11:7, Deut 14:8). Yet this explanation (like much biblical explanation of ritual) remains unsatisfying since it does not answer the question of why split hooves and cud chewing are what makes a land animal an acceptable food source. Scholarly and traditional interpretations of the ban tend to focus on the problem of what pigs eat. For example, Marvin Harris argues that pigs were prohibited in ancient Israel as well as in other

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3 Ibid., 122.
parts of the ancient Near East because they are in competition with humans for foodstuffs since they do not graze on grass. The traditional Jewish interpretation is that they are unclean because of their eating and wallowing habits; pigs will eat unpalatable foods such as garbage, feces, and, in extreme situations, each other. They will also wallow in urine and feces if they do not have mud or water. To be sure, these aspects of pigs’ behavior can easily be seen as problematic and unappealing (though other clean animals will also eat dung and garbage) and may indeed be the origin of the ban. There is another aspect of pigs, however—though not stated clearly in the texts of Deut 14 or Lev 11—that makes them problematic in the context of biblical ritual systems: while pigs do not eat in the same way as clean land animals, they also do not reproduce in the same way. Unlike cows, sheep, goats, and deer, the only clean land animals, pigs give birth in litters, that is, they are multiparous. In the modern world, the average pig gives birth to twelve piglets at one time; the record, apparently, is thirty-seven piglets. Moreover, unlike cows, deer, sheep, goats, and humans, pigs gestate extremely quickly, in less than four months. The abundant nature of pigs’ reproduction, radically different from the way humans produce offspring, makes pigs inappropriate models for human reproduction. Thus, ritual law “thinks” with pigs by excluding them and what they represent from the repertoire of acceptable foods.

One reason that rituals so often include animals is that animals are excellent “goods for thinking” about gender and other related concerns such as reproduction, lineage, and hierarchical status. Animals, unlike many other aspects of the natural world but very much like humans, are usually sexed creatures. I have shown elsewhere that a number of laws about the ritual use of animals in sacrificial offerings indicate that these practices were in some ways a “means of thinking” about gender. For example, the scheme of the חטאת offering in Lev 4–5 clearly indicates that females are associated with lesser social status; or, in the ritual of the red cow or red heifer in Num 19, the female is associated with blood, impurity, and death. Moreover, domesticated animals are especially helpful for “thinking” about reproduction and lineage because the essence of domestication is controlled reproduction. Just as societies are concerned with the proper control of human reproduction, so also those who practice animal husbandry are concerned with the controlled breeding of their livestock. Biblical law therefore legislates both cross-breeding of domesticated animals (Lev 19:19) and the intermarriage of Israelites with foreigners (Deut 7:3). Indeed, one of the main concerns of the Hebrew Bible overall is

5 See, e.g., Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 3.48; and b. Ber. 25a, which Harris cites.
6 Born in the UK in 1993, according to Guinness World Records.
lineage, which is primarily, though not exclusively, reckoned through paternity and patrilines.

These concerns of reproduction, gender, and lineage also contribute to the Bible’s portrayal of pigs as impure and forbidden. Although it is not overtly discussed in the primary texts on forbidden animals (Lev 11, Deut 14), the multiparity of pigs makes them problematic for other features of the ritual systems outlined in the Torah. Were pigs clean animals, they would require some dramatic ritual accommodations if they were allowed to be raised for food: they would be the only clean multiparous land animals, and, as such, they would be the only clean animals who do not produce a clear firstborn. More importantly, their manner of reproduction poses a problem not only in terms of biblical ritual; by extension, it also works against some of the most fundamental biblical understandings of social structure. In particular, ritual laws of firstborn male animals support and maintain social ideologies of gender, reproduction, lineage, and inheritance, as these animals correspond to human firstborn males. Further, the multiparity of swine emphasizes abundant female fertility—a feature of the ritual use of pigs in other ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean religions. In contrast, biblical rituals of the firstborn, as well as rituals of purity, do not highlight plentiful female fertility but instead attempt to regulate and control female fertility by monitoring the womb through laws pertaining to childbirth and menstruation and what comes from the womb, namely, the firstborn—the firstborn male or “womb opening” or “womb opener.”

The multiparous nature of swine thus makes them incompatible with larger biblical thought in at least four ways: (1) all other clean land animals are uniparous; (2) the lack of a true firstborn excludes pigs from the firstborn rites required of all other domesticated land animals; (3) pigs’ manner of birthing portrays an image of superabundant and uncontrolled female fertility; and (4) the ability of multiparous animals to bear the offspring of multiple sires at one time potentially confuses the nature of paternity altogether. By focusing here on reproduction, I do not mean to suggest that other aspects of pigs did not contribute to or were not the impetus for their exclusion as food. Their reproductive behavior is but yet another fundamental way in which pigs are unusual and objectionable. As Mary Douglas stated, the pig, “carries the odium of multiple pollution. First it pollutes because it defies the classification of ungulates. Second, it pollutes because it eats carrion. Third, it pollutes because it is reared by non-Israelites.”

8Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” in Douglas, Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 272, cited in Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AB 3 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 649. Interestingly, Douglas adds that the fact that pigs are raised by non-Israelites could pose a problem in the context of marriage: an Israelite who marries a foreigner might be expected to eat pork and this leads to an “utterly disapproved form of sexual mating and [carries] all the odium that this implies.” I agree with her ultimate point, that eating pigs is related to kinship problems, not
biblical society and thought. This emphasis on reproduction may seem disjunctive from other aspects of the purity and sacrificial system. It is important to remember, however, that the purity laws are largely concerned with human reproduction and sexuality (Lev 12 and 15). Indeed, viewing the laws on unclean animals from the perspective of reproduction shows that the laws of human impurity in Lev 12–15 and those of impure animals particularly in Lev 11 are less disjointed than they may initially appear. Reproductive concerns may be a matter for both forms of impurity.

I. Unclean Animals and Proliferate Reproduction

Although the principle is never clearly stated, a close reading of Lev 11 and Deut 14 shows that all clean land animals give birth as do humans, that is, singly or in twins. Deuteronomy 14:4–6 lists the land animals that are clean:

These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain-sheep.9 Any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof cloven in two, and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. (NRSV)

Again, all forms of sheep, cattle, goats, deer, and antelope give birth to one or two offspring at a time. Although the criteria of cud chewing and cloven hooves are the stated rationale for the cleanliness of land animals, it is also the case that almost all types of unclean land animals such as rodents, dogs, cats, rabbits, reptiles, and amphibians, bear in multiples. Thus, though the text does not state a reproductive principle for the distinction of clean and unclean animals, the fact remains that clean animals are uniparous while most unclean animals are multiparous.

Deuteronomy 14:7–8 (and Lev 11:4–8) goes on to list borderline cases where animals have one criterion but not the other:

Yet these you will not eat, of those that chew cud or part the hoof: the camel, the hare, and the שפן, because they chew cud but do not part the hoof; they are unclean10 for you. And the pig, because it parts the hoof but does not chew cud,

because of the potential for eating a meal of pork but because of the symbolism of the animal itself.

9 The species identified here are not entirely certain. For discussion of the problems for translation, see, e.g., the commentaries and Walter Houston, Purity and Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law, JSOTSup 140 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 61–62. I have used the NRSV translation here because it represents the most common understanding of these terms. Nevertheless, all alternative translations include animals that bear in the same way as these.

10 As Milgrom observed, Lev 11 uses the term “unclean” (ָטמא) differently from Deut 14. Deuteronomy refers to all inedible animals as “unclean” (טמא). In contrast, Leviticus uses the term “forbidden, detestable” (طحنב) for air and water animals that may not be eaten and the term “unclean” (טמא) for land animals that not only may not be eaten but also contaminate when their carcasses are touched (Leviticus 1–16, 656–59).
is unclean for you. You will not eat their meat, and you will not touch their carcasses.

The animals thus described are borderline also in terms of their reproductive behavior. The שפן, which is either a hyrax or a badger,11 and the hare, give birth in very small litters, one to four offspring at a time, which makes their birthing at times like and at times unlike human birthing. They are thus arguably borderline cases by the criterion of parturition. Similarly, the camel, which is explicitly unclean based on its feet, is anomalous for an unclean animal in that it gives birth singly; in this respect it is like an equid, the only other kind of uniparous animal that appears to be considered unclean (though equids are not mentioned in Lev 11 or Deut 14).12 The camel (like the equid) has an inverse relationship to the pig: the pig resembles clean animals with its feet, but it is uncommon in both its birthing and its food; camels and equids, though resembling clean animals in their food and their birthing, are unclean by their feet. These borderline cases of domesticated animals are unusual also in their reproduction, since the unclean camel (and the equid) bears like a clean animal and the שפן and hare vacillate between clean and unclean modes of reproduction. Similarly, pigs have a radically anomalous manner of reproduction for an animal that could be raised for food. As Seth Kunin has argued, animals such as these that are mediating cases challenge the structure of the system, and they are therefore deemed unclean.13 Though he argues this point with regard to the criteria of hooves and cud, it is also the case that these animals threaten the general uniparous/clean, multiparous/unclean system for land animals.

Both Leviticus and Deuteronomy classify animals in three categories: land animals, flying animals (birds and insects), and sea creatures.14 There are different

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11 See the commentaries for discussion.
12 Equids are not explicitly mentioned in either Deut 14 or Lev 11; however, Exod 13:13 and 34:19–20 describe them as unclean.
14 This distinction was most famously pointed out by Mary Douglas in Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (New York: Praeger, 1966). The division into these three categories is more distinct in Deut 14 than in Lev 11. Some scholars have seen a fourfold division into land animals, birds, insects, and sea creatures. For example, Houston sees a fourfold division into בהמה (“beasts”), עוף (“winged creatures”), “all life that moves on the water,” and “teeming things that teem on the earth” (Purity and Monotheism, 34–35). This structure would support a fundamental division between abundant reproducers and domesticated animals. Michael P. Carroll finds a fivefold division: “fish, birds, cattle, beasts of the earth and creeping things” (“One More Time: Leviticus Revisited,” in Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament, ed. Bernhard Lang, IRT 8 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 118.

The relationship between Deut 14 and Lev 11 is debated; scholars have viewed Leviticus as
standards of impurity for birds and sea creatures than for land animals. The texts offer no rationale for the uncleanness of certain birds. While many of the birds listed in Lev 11 and Deut 14 cannot be certainly identified, the unclean birds that can be discerned are carnivores, being either birds of prey or scavengers (Lev 11:13–19, Deut 14:14–20). Thus, the Mishnah argues that it is the predatory nature of these birds, which grasp their prey with their talons, that makes them unclean (m. Ḥul. 3:6). According to Deut 14:19, all flying insects are unclean, yet Leviticus declares insects forbidden except for four (the cricket, the grasshopper, and two types of locusts), which are said to “hop” on four legs (Lev 11:20–23). Although the text bases their cleanness on their mode of movement, scholars have argued that locusts especially have such a long history of being eaten for food that they had to become an exception to the ban.¹⁵ Sea animals must have fins and scales to be clean (Lev 11:9–12, Deut 14:9–10). In terms of reproduction, almost all insects, birds, and sea animals reproduce through externally expelled eggs, making their manner of reproduction radically different from that of humans.¹⁶ Sea and air animals, then, do not generally reflect human reproduction, nor would it appear that their reproductive manner is a criterion for the cleanness of these animals in their respective domains.¹⁷

In Lev 11, however, certain land animals that are deemed unclean are said to “swarm” (שרץ) upon the earth, including specifically weasels, mice, crocodiles, and lizards of various kinds (Lev 11:29–30; cf. 11:41–43). Although the term שָרֵץ is usually taken to mean a form of locomotion, in its biblical presentation it is primarily a reproductive term that indicates reproducing abundantly and quickly.¹⁸ The

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¹⁵ See, e.g., Kunin, who sees this example as one of bricolage, in which a necessary requirement that does not fit into the conceptual structure must be incorporated into it (We Think What We Eat, 88).

¹⁶ Some exceptions are “livebearing” fish such as those in the family Poeciliidae (including guppies) and certain species of sharks; the “common lizard,” which is the only lizard that bears live young; some snakes, including tree boas; a few species of frogs; the “fire salamander”; and certain caecilians, such as the Mexican caecilian.

¹⁷ Note, though, that rabbinic law considers livebearing fish to be unclean and egg-layers to be clean (b. Bek. 7b).

¹⁸ Cf. the Ethiopic cognate šaraṣa/saraṣa, meaning “germinate, blossom, shoot forth, sprout, burgeon, bud, proceed (Holy Ghost from the Father), arise conceive, think out” (Wolf Leslau, Comparative Dictionary of Ge‘ez [Classical Ethiopic]: Ge‘ez–English, English–Ge‘ez with an Index of the Semitic Roots [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006], 535). So, similarly, modern Syriac ʾšarīš, meaning “issue, descent” (as cited in ibid.). The Akkadian cognate, however, may mean “grasp” or “claw,” but this translation, according to CAD, is in doubt.
reproductive aspect of the term is most clear in Exod 1:7, where, as part of their proliferation in Egypt, the Israelites “were fruitful [פרר] and ‘swarmed’ [שרץ] and became very very strong, so that the land was filled with them.” Moreover, ורבד appears parallel to the two terms פרר and רבב also in two of the Priestly writings of Genesis. In Gen 8:17 Noah and his family are to take all of the animals out of the ark with them so that the animals can “‘swarm’ in the earth and be fruitful and multiply on the earth” (והשכמו הארץ והרב עלי הארץ). In 9:7 the people themselves are told to “be fruitful and multiply; ‘swarm’ in the earth and multiply in it” (ipur הרבדشرح הארץ ופרו). Thus, while the term includes the notion of spatial growth—the group becoming larger and thereby spreading out—it would seem that this growth is a by-product of plentiful reproducing. As Douglas also stated, “‘swarmer’ means an abundantly fertile creature,” and further, “the word which is commonly translated as ‘swarming’ is closely associated in Hebrew with breeding, bringing forth, and fertility in general. But in translations of Leviticus 11 its relationship to fertility is ignored.” Indeed, as she points out, in some English translations the term becomes interchangeable with the term רמש, which more clearly refers to locomotion.

In addition, animals that שרץ are also said to move in various ways, as in Lev 11:41–42: “All creatures that swarm [שרץ] upon the earth are forbidden [שקץ]; they shall not be eaten. Whatever walks on its belly, and whatever walks on all fours, or whatever has many feet, all the creatures that swarm [שרץ] upon the earth, you shall not eat; for they are forbidden.” Thus, the larger category of animals that swarm (שרץ) is broken down into smaller groups specified by the ways in which they move. Therefore, the term שרץ here cannot refer solely to their locomotion. Although they are said to “swarm upon the earth” the phrase “on the earth” may indicate not only where they are moving but also where in the three realms of air, sea, and land they are reproducing abundantly, as in Gen 8:17 and 9:7.

19 Mary Douglas, Leviticus as Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 166, 159. In this work, Douglas maintains that the swarming animals may not be eaten because they already belong to YHWH and they manifest the divine command to be fruitful and multiply; YHWH thus protects the unclean animals from human predation. She also finds a tension between abundant fertility and the concept of covenant, yet she sees this tension as a positive one for the unclean, in which the “teeming” animals illustrate plentiful fertility that is YHWH’s prerogative. For Douglas, the fertility aspect of the “swarming” animals is a positive feature, yet the text clearly implies that “swarming” is a negative aspect of these animals. In my opinion, the abundant reproduction of the swarming animals is negative because it is unregulated and uncontrolled. As I have stated elsewhere, the Bible’s ideal view of fertility is not necessarily one of volume but one of quality—a select form of controlled and intentional reproduction (Sacrifice and Gender in Biblical Law, 226). Nevertheless, while I disagree with much of Douglas’s interpretation in Leviticus as Literature, especially the idea of unclean animals as protected, her emphasis on the relation between the covenant community and the copious reproduction of the unclean is an important one and, as far as I am aware, a novel one.
We can therefore conclude that, aside from the camel (and assuming equids) and perhaps the שפן and the hare, according to biblical law all unclean land animals reproduce abundantly, either through litters or through “swarming.” From the data in the Torah, only clean animals, equids, and camels reproduce singly. In essence, then, the pig appears to do a form of שרץ since it reproduces abundantly. Pigs therefore do not reproduce like clean land animals or like people; rather, their birthing in multiples and with a comparatively short gestation period resembles the impure and the forbidden.

II. Pigs and the Firstborn

A second and perhaps more important effect of pigs’ multiparous nature is that an animal that gives birth in litters does not produce a clear firstborn. Firstborn male animals are the most sacred animals in the biblical worldview. In biblical law, the firstborn male of clean domesticated animals must always be offered to YHWH; the firstborn of cows, sheep, and goats is either slaughtered or given to the sanctuary (Exod 13:12, 22:29–30 [28–29], 34:19, Deut 15:19–20) or to the Levites (Num 18:15–17). Indeed, in Deuteronomy the only animal offerings that must be made aside from those at the three Haggim (with Pesach) are the firstborn male animals (Deut 15:19–21). All of the major pentateuchal sources recognize the sanctity of the firstling in some form; it is fundamental to biblical ritual thought. Yet these laws primarily understand firstling animals to be clean (and thus uniparous) animals. Biblical law does recognize a special ritual status for unclean firstlings, though it calls for either their redemption or for their profane slaughter; they are not given directly to the sanctuary or the altar (Exod 13:13, 34:20, Lev 27:27, Num 18:15–16). The only unclean animals specifically mentioned with regard to the firstborn, however, are donkeys (Exod 13:13, 34:20), which are uniparous. (It may be that Lev 27:27 envisions other unclean firstlings, but these are not described.) It is possible therefore that laws of the firstborn that mention unclean animals intend to specify that only uniparous unclean animals require redemption. The laws appear to assume a single firstling, and therefore only uniparous animals, whether clean or unclean, would be subject to firstborn laws.20 In that case, the extended firstborn ritual system could accommodate only uniparous animals. Moreover, many other biblical texts imply that the only land animals that would be domesticated, and thus owned, are uniparous. To my knowledge, among the land animals, the Hebrew

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20 This point coheres largely with the rabbinic conclusion, which is that the laws of the unclean firstborn apply only to the donkey or ass (Jacob Milgrom, Numbers במדבר: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation, JPS Torah Commentary [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990], 152). Rabbinic law restricts the scope of the law to the ass on the basis of Exod 13:13 (Sipre Num. 128). Yet see the debate about extension to horses and camels in b. Bek. 5b–6a, and note that b. Bek. 3b emphasizes that not all animals have a sanctified firstling.
Bible portrays only cows, sheep, goats, donkeys, camels, and horses as possessions. Furthermore, the parallel laws of firstfruits are applicable only to crops that are owned and managed, and thus “domesticated,” while the first of wild vegetation does not need to be offered.\(^{21}\) Thus, the entire notion of the firstborn/firstling/firstfruit that is sacred and belongs to YHWH is inherently related to the system of domestication and therefore to the control of reproduction and breeding that comes with it.\(^{22}\)

If the biblical system had allowed the pig to be clean—and thus able to be domesticated—it could not fit the schema of the firstborn domesticated animal that belongs to YHWH. A firstborn pig could be distinguished from its siblings only if someone witnessed the birth.\(^{23}\) Moreover, the stories of Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:19–34; 27) and of Perez and Zerah (Gen 38:27–30) illustrate problems of determining the firstborn of twin sons. Imagine if there were twenty “siblings” or more! In addition, being the first of up to thirty-seven births at one time does not have quite the same impact as the firstborn, the פטר רחם, or “womb opener,” of an animal or human that bears singly. Indeed, were one to need to determine the “firstborn” in such a situation, the whole first litter might need to be seen as the פטר רחם.\(^{24}\) Yet, according to the talmudic tractate Bekorot, the simultaneous twin human birth of a male and a female disqualifies the male as the firstling (b. Bek. 17b; cf. 48a–b). Similarly, a litter of male and female animals could disqualify all of the male animals in the litter as the firstborn. The fact, however, that no clean animals give birth in litters avoids this ritual problem of the firstborn. We are then left with the question of which came first, the prohibition on pigs (and other multiparous animals) or rituals of the firstborn/firstling/firstfruit; regardless of the answer, it remains clear that these two aspects of the ritual use of animals are incompatible.

\(^{21}\) An exception is the laws of Sukkot (Lev 23:39–43; Neh 8:14–15), but in that case the wild nature of the offerings is the special ritual feature that sets the wilderness and the wild in opposition to the settled and the domesticated.


\(^{23}\) Throughout the talmudic tractate Bekorot, the rabbis struggled with the question of determining the firstborn of animals in various situations. See esp. b. Bek. 9a, 17a, b, 18a, b, 19a, b, 20a, b, 21b, 24a.

\(^{24}\) See b. Bek. 17a, where Jose the Galilean argues that in the case of clean male twin firstlings born simultaneously both are considered firstborn and must be offered to the priest. Yet it is doubtful that two animals could be born completely simultaneously, and therefore a compromise ruling requires that only one must be given to the priest, the other being kept by the owner. The latter animal, however, should be kept apart from other animals in case the priest should make a claim. In 9a, in the case of unclean simultaneous male firstlings, the final ruling is that the same holds for an unclean animal (an ass)—that is, only one counts as firstborn, though R. Jose’s position is also considered in this text.
More importantly for the issue of “thinking” with animals about society and status, firstborn clean animals are ideologically related to firstborn sons. This relationship is clear in the laws of the firstborn in Exod 22, in which firstborn sons are equated with firstborn animals and with firstfruits:

You will not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you will give to me. You will do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: for seven days it will remain with its mother; on the eighth day you will give it to me. (Exod 22:29–30 [28–29])

This law is striking not only because it treats animals (and plants) and humans in precisely the same way, but also because it appears to command the sacrifice, or at least the donation, of firstborn sons to YHWH. The firstborn human is intrinsically related to the firstborn domesticated animal, and vice versa. A similar law also equates humans with animals, but with the added aspect of the redemption of the child:

All that first opens the womb is mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep. The firstborn of a donkey you will redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you will break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you will redeem. (Exod 34:19–20)

Indeed, the example of the firstborn may be the clearest circumstance of “thinking with” animals in the Hebrew Bible about social and religious concerns. Both the firstling and the first son are inherently sacred; the divine claim on them as sacrificial victims gives them a sacred status. Luckily for the human, this claim can be undone through redemption. Exactly why firstborn sons and animals are characterized as sacrificial victims is not clear, but it seems likely that firstborn indicates fertility, and the dedication of the firstborn to the deity generally enacts the control that YHWH has over fertility. Yet the concept of the human firstborn son goes far beyond fertility. The firstborn son is the customary heir to the father, who offers him to the deity. A number of biblical texts show that, at least ideally, the firstborn son would be the primary heir to his father, though other means can achieve the feat of making a non-firstborn into the heir (usually a selection by YHWH, as in the story of Isaac). The firstborn son will inherit his father’s land and property and will be responsible for carrying on his father’s name (Deut 21:15–17; cf. 25:5–10). Many biblical texts indicate that there is only one primary heir and that he will

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25 For criticisms of this idea, see Ruane, *Sacrifice and Gender in Biblical Law*, 226.

26 Note that in the Akedah (Gen 22), the son, who is not technically his father’s firstborn, becomes his heir and is also a sacrificial victim who is redeemed. Thus, the act of sacrifice and redemption ritually creates his status as heir. It may be for this reason that some Islamic traditions have insisted that Ishmael, not Isaac, was the son who was threatened; he then becomes Abraham’s religious heir. Note as well that rabbinic law distinguishes the biological (and ritual) firstborn from the legal firstborn (for purposes of inheritance and status). See, e.g., b. Bek. 46a–47b.
have power over his brothers, who will be dependent on him. The sanctity of the firstborn and firstling is a means not only of showing fertility and its control but also of creating the special status of the firstborn son, who is redeemed so that he can become the heir. Therefore, the offering of the firstling animal is intrinsically related to the process of lineage and inheritance that is vital in biblical thought and is indeed a primary means of reckoning social status and of distributing wealth. In addition, the system of firstling offerings imagined in Numbers, in which the Levites are taken in lieu of the firstborn son, directly relates firstborn ideology to the construction of the priesthood; in fact, the basic concept of the sacred firstling is a staple of the priests’ system of economic support. Moreover, the ideology of the firstborn son carries over into national identity via the Passover story, the “charter myth” of Israel, in which the firstborn Israelites survive while firstborn Egyptians are killed—and indeed where Israel itself is called YHWH’s “firstborn son” (Exod 4:22–23). The fact, then, that pigs bear in litters makes them very poor animals with which to “think” positively about lineage, social organization, and wealth management in the same way that one can with cows, sheep, goats, and donkeys since there cannot be a direct correspondence between their offspring and human offspring. Pigs cannot create the image of paternity and the patrilineal line inherent in firstborn ideology, or if they could, they would require an adjustment of the firstborn ritual. Rabbinic discussions of the practicalities of firstling laws indicate that their implementation is already extremely complicated, even without the problems of litters.

### III. Pigs and Paternity

A third problematic aspect of multiparity is that the process of bearing in litters may threaten paternity, which is foundational in biblical thought. Because a female pig bears so many offspring at once, she becomes a clear and stark image of abundant female fertility. Biblical ritual law, however, is greatly concerned with controlling and quarantining female—and male—fertility. The laws of childbirth, genital disease, menstruation, and intercourse in Lev 12 and 15 monitor both sexuality and childbirth. That the laws characterize a woman as unclean for forty or eighty days after parturition shows a preoccupation with this process and an effort to circumscribe, contain, and define the fertile woman. The image of a female bearing many offspring at one time, in contrast, would represent not a controlled form of female sexuality and birthing but an uncontrolled, wild, and unmonitored one.

In fact, since the length of a parturient’s period of impurity is dependent on the sex of her child (Lev 12:2–5), her ritual state would be confused were she to bear offspring of both sexes at once, as in a litter. In rabbinic law, in the context of multiple births of both sexes, this problem is resolved by having the woman take on the longer period of impurity for a daughter. Here, therefore, reproductive abundance is problematic and can increase impurity.

The superabundance of female fertility witnessed in pigs has been recognized by other ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean religions. For example, the Hittite ritual text “The Benedictions for Labarna” states, “Just as a single pig gives birth to many piglets, let every single branch of this vineyard, like the pig, bear many grape clusters.” Another ritual for the fertility of land (KUB 12.44 iii 16–19) involves throwing a sow’s genitals into a ritual pit. Pigs were used in other Hittite rituals clearly to ensure the fertility of women, as in a rite in which it is said, “let her give birth often like the pig” (Bo 3617 i 4’–17`). Similarly, the relationship between the fertility of female pigs and human women appears in the Greek and Anatolian rite of the Thesmophoria, in which the fertility of both women and fields is reinstated and enacted. This event required all married women to bring a piglet, which would be thrown into a ritual pit (μέγαρον); at the end of the ceremony the previous year’s piglets were dug up and spread onto the fields as a kind of fertilizer. This ritual was performed in honor of Demeter, who preferred pigs in most rites, especially in this one and in the Elusinian mysteries. The example of Demeter is

28 The basic halakah is in Maimonides’s Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Issurei Bi’ah 10:18: “One who gives birth to male/female twins ‘sits’ for the female.” See also Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 194:13, where the period of impurity when one twin is male and the other female is as for the birth of a baby girl. As Joseph Caro states in Beit Yosef on the Tur, “the days of impurity and purification of the male are included within the days of the female.” See also b. Ker. 10a; b. Nid. 28a. These citations and translations are provided by Alan M. Cooper.


31 Ibid., 231–32; Collins, “Pigs at the Gate,” 170.

32 Also discussed in Collins, “Pigs at the Gate,” 169; see pp. 169–70 for additional examples of the relationship between pigs and women in Greece and Rome.

33 Many other ancient goddesses connected with fertility were associated with pigs. For example, pigs were frequently offered to the Egyptian goddess Nut, known as the “Great Sow,” whose piglets are the many stars. Many Anatolian goddesses were worshiped with pigs, for example, the Hurrian mother goddess Hannannah, as well as the Hittite goddess Tetewatti and other goddesses related to female fertility (see Collins, “Pigs at the Gate,” 162, 165, 166, 170). Because biblical religion does not officially recognize a female deity, and because those religions that do often emphasize the fertility of the pig as related to female deities who bring the fertility of humans and of the land, a rejection of one may entail the rejection of the other. Interestingly,
especially notable because Demeter’s primary myth is one that concerns the relationship of mothers to their daughters. The story of Demeter and her daughter Kore or Persephone is one of the very few in the ancient world that address this relationship, and, moreover, it is one that illustrates a mother’s anguish when the daughter is given away by her father and taken over by her husband. 34 Thus, this story highlights a matrilineal relationship that is inverse to the patrilineal one, which is primarily about fathers and sons. Why exactly Demeter preferred pigs is unclear: it may be due to the practical facts that piglets are relatively inexpensive animals and therefore more affordable for women,35 or that in most cultures pigs were kept by women in styes near the home, thus relating them more to the domestic and the feminine, while cows, sheep, and goats were usually grazed by men and boys far from the home.36 Regardless of the origin, however, in the cult and ideology of Demeter, women’s fertility, the fertility of pigs, and the fertility of the fields all become intertwined. In contrast, in the biblical mindset, in which ideal fertility is monitored by ritual (of the firstborn and also through purity laws), and in which single or twin births are generally clean while births in litters are unclean, the image of the female pig may be an almost grotesque image of this female fertility. Indeed, the concept of a woman bearing in litters might seem to us disgusting and wrong.37 Thus, the image of the pig challenges the form of controlled and restrained fertility imagined in the Bible.38

the male deities that are most famously associated with pigs are somewhat effeminate and are the weaker consorts of female deities. Indeed one, Adonis, was bisexual and able to become both male and female for his various lovers. Adonis and Attis, both beautiful males who were worshiped primarily by women and whose male cultic functionaries were castrated, were associated with wild boars. In many versions of their myths they are killed or castrated by boars on the orders of various gods or goddesses (e.g., Apollo, Artemis, Zeus). Some practitioners in both cults abstained from pork. In Mediterranean myths at least, therefore, pigs are often associated with female mother deities and with effeminate or castrated males.

35 In the ancient world, pigs were often thought of as food for the lower classes, particularly in Egypt (Brian Hesse, “Pig Lovers and Pig Haters: Patterns of Palestinian Pork Production,” Ethnobiology 10 [1990]: 212).
36 Pigs are kept by women in many cultures, as in the well-known example from New Guinea given by Roy A. Rappaport in Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969). For this practice in the Levant and the Hebrew Bible, see Houston, Purity and Monotheism, 209–12; and among the Hittites, see Collins, “Pigs at the Gate,” 157, 168, 170.
37 Witness the national fascination with the TV series John and Kate Plus 8, in which a woman who had in vitro fertilization bore six children at once.
38 My point here is not that the pig prohibition is a direct polemic against these cults, but simply that the fertility of pigs was known as one of their primary features by other ancient peoples, and that this feature was used in rituals of fertility.
Furthermore, another feature of pigs and other multiparous animals that makes them different from cows, sheep, and goats is that the female pig is able to bear the offspring of multiple sires in one litter. When multiparous animals are in estrous, they release many eggs that are capable of being fertilized on separate occasions for multiple days. The female can then bear several “half-siblings” at once. Moreover, the paternity of these offspring might not be discernible. In this context paternity becomes almost completely irrelevant; the animals’ identities must primarily be reckoned in terms of their female parent, not their male parent. In terms of “thinking with” animals, this feature of pigs, in which the construct of fatherhood can become relatively meaningless, makes them something of a genealogical horror for a society structured around paternity and patrilineage. The continuous biblical emphasis on patrilineage, as represented especially in genealogies but elsewhere as well, indicates that male fertility and paternal recognition are far more important than maternal identity. The pig challenges this assumption that paternity is primary.

The combination of a lack of clear paternal identity and a pronounced emphasis on female fertility runs counter to the biblical image of a fertility that is not only controlled and paternally defined, but in which female fertility belongs to the biblical deity. In the Bible, the male deity controls the womb and what comes from it: as the deity says in Exod 34:19, “every womb opener is mine” (לְכלָּמָּה רָחִים פַּרְעָה). Numerous biblical texts emphasize that YHWH alone has the power to open and close the womb and to create its contents (e.g., Gen 20:18; 29:31; 30:2, 22; Deut 28:11; 1 Sam 1:1–11; Ps 139:13; Isa 44:2, 24; cf. Num 5:21–27). Moreover, the process of redeeming the firstborn son, and indeed of making firstfruit offerings of any kind, establishes the ownership of the firstborn or firstling by the father or farmer—he can offer it because it is his to give over to YHWH.39 In the process of redeeming the son, the son is essentially transferred from the womb to God and then to the father. This process is the fundamental ritual way of creating patrilineality, in which the child, who might naturally “belong” to its mother, concretely comes to “belong” to the father and his line.40 The devoted status of the firstborn enables its transfer away from its mother. To eat pigs or other multiparous animals in a ritual way, or even in a secular one, could be thought to invoke a principle of uncontrolled fertility or even the female power of fertility in contradiction to male power over it. It would simultaneously offend the biblical deity as well as the patrilineal system

39 A challenge to this image of paternal offering of the firstborn, though, is offered by Hannah, who makes the choice to hand over her firstborn on her own, though her husband does assent to the offering (1 Sam 1:11, 22–28).

illustrated in the firstborn ritual. In that case, to shun the pig is to reject the construction of female-centered fertility as seen in multiparous animals and to embrace the biblical construction of fertility, which is controlled by males in both theology and social structure.

V. Conclusion

The twenty-five-hundred-year-old prohibition against eating pigs is not easily explained. As other observers have noted, the prohibition may be due to many practical causes: that pigs cannot graze, and so the Middle East in the Iron Age was inhospitable to swine—perhaps because of erosion (Harris); that they represent a confrontation between pastoralists and sedentary farmers (F. J. Simoons, Houston);41 that they do not produce milk fit for humans or that their skin must remain covered in the strong Middle Eastern sun (Harris); that refraining from eating and herding pigs distinguished the Israelites from their neighbors (so already Let. Aris. 151–52); or that pigs are just rather disgusting because of their general eating and other behavior (Maimonides). It is possible that all of these factors contributed to the status of the pig in Judaism, and eventually in Islam. Yet, regardless of the origin of the prohibition, the result is the same: there are no multiparous domesticated land animals in the official biblical diet. In turn, there are no regularly domesticated animals that produce a litter of firstborns or that can potentially bear the offspring of multiple sires at once, both of which factors minimize male fertility and highlight female fertility. Whether by design or happenstance, this animal, which other cultures saw as an image and promoter of female fertility and a representative of the world of women, was shunned.

Moreover, regardless of any intent, the exclusion of the pig from the Israelite ritual diet prevents its conflict with the fundamental and important ritual of the firstborn male animal. The incongruity of swine with this ritual, which more clearly focuses on reproduction and gender, shows that the anomalous or problematic nature of pigs exists not only in biblical views of eating and food but also in a particular view of proper reproduction and gender roles. To return to Lévi-Strauss, it was his view that both food avoidances and the stressing of important cultic animals were primarily associated with social organization along kinship lines. From this perspective, the problematic reproductive aspects of pigs might be most important. Yet, while it is unknowable which was primary—a materialist problem with the tending of pigs or the symbolic social aspects of it—these two concerns reinforce each other, and, perhaps for that reason, pigs have come to represent the ultimate unclean food.