

The aim of this paper is to examine the role of disgust and notions of pollution in shaping the moral discourse of the Hebrew Bible. Modern psychological research has devoted considerable attention to both “physical”/“bodily” disgust and “moral” disgust, finding both similarities and significant differences between them. Of particular interest is the plausible evolutionary hypothesis that physiological disgust provides the phylogenetic basis for social or moral disgust. To a considerable extent, these distinctions are comparable to the different categories of pollution which have been identified in the Hebrew Bible, specifically the distinction between so-called “ritual” and “moral” impurities. It will be argued that the evolutionary framework employed for the study of disgust can shed light on the role of pollution beliefs in shaping moral discourse in ancient Israel. Some key questions to be addressed include: Is moral disgust/pollution “metaphorical” (and what are the implications of such a designation)? How do biological constraints serve as motivating forces governing this role of pollution beliefs in moral discourse? In other words, how are we to explain the phenomenon characterized by Louis Dumont as “the eruption of the biological into social life”? Finally, what are the limitations of the evolutionary framework? These considerations will then be applied to a test-case: the narrative describing the “defilement” of Dinah (Genesis 34) and the violent response of her brothers in decimating the village of Shechem. In previous research, the different views of intermarriage reflected in the text have been interpreted as reflecting an ambivalent author or multiple literary sources or layers. In many cases, these interpretations are more indicative of the moral and political biases of the reader than the ideology reflected by the text. These issues can be elucidated by the Moral Foundations Theory of Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues. As will be shown, this theory can clarify the divergent moral voices expressed in the story as well as the correlation between pollution, ethnicity and violence reflected in it. It can also shed light on the moral dispositions of modern readers of this disputed text.