THE EVOLUTION OF PURITY AT QUMRAN

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ABSTRACT

From the earliest days of Qumran scholarship down to the present, it has been repeatedly observed that the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit an intense interest in the concept of purity and the religious laws of Second Temple Judaism. This preoccupation with purity and the Jewish temple cult has been understood by modern scholars as one of the defining features of the scrolls and as a possible key to unlocking the identity of those who may have been responsible for their authorship. As one might expect, the task of transcribing and translating the nine hundred or so documents that were recovered from the region in and around the ancient site of Khirbet Qumran has been a slow and laborious project, but with the publication of each new document the portrait of the community behind the scrolls has come into sharper relief. Now that the entire corpus of texts has been published and is available for inspection, it is possible to chart both the evolution of scholarly thought on the concept of purity at Qumran and the evolving perspectives on purity that are exhibited by the scrolls themselves.

INTRODUCTION

If Second Temple Judaism can be described as a system of myths, rituals and sacrifices that enabled the Jewish people to understand and maintain a relationship with their God, then purity is the state of being that made that relationship possible. According to the Torah, God’s continued presence among the Israelites was contingent upon his people maintaining a level of purity that was proportional to his holiness (Lev 19:2; Deut 23:14). Although Jews were expected to maintain a moderate level of purity wherever they resided, the purity rulings that were incumbent upon all Jews during the Second Temple period became more rigorous the closer they were to the Jerusalem temple—an enormous complex of buildings and precincts that were sanctified by God’s indwelling presence (Lev 21:23). The purity of this temple was safeguarded by massive walls of stone and gates that divided the complex into a series of increasingly stringent zones of purity. The outermost of these zones, commonly known as the Court of the Gentiles, was open to Jew and non-Jew alike. By contrast, the inner precincts of the complex (i.e., the Court of the Women, the
Court of the Israelites and the Court of the Priests) were restricted to clean Jewish women, clean Jewish men and priests who were free from impurity (Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 5). Entry into the temple’s inner sanctum, or Holy of Holies, was limited to the High Priest and only then on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). By enclosing the sanctuary within these increasingly circumscribed zones of purity, the theological architects of the Second Temple period (read ‘priests and scribes’) were attempting to create a ritually pure space in which to perform the sacrifices and rites that were deemed vital to maintaining the Jewish people’s relationship with God.

Generally speaking, the concept of impurity in the Hebrew Bible can be divided into two subcategories: moral and ritual. Although these terms are problematic and do not explicitly appear in the Scriptures, they nevertheless describe two distinct states of existence. On the one hand, moral impurity is a lengthy if not permanent condition that is the consequence of avoidable or sinful acts, such as illicit sexual behavior (Lev 18; 20:10–26), murder (Num 35:33–34) and idolatry (Lev 19:4; 20:1–5). Moral impurity cannot be transmitted through direct contact and it can only be expunged by engaging in acts of atonement or by punishing the offending individual. Ritual impurity, on the other hand, is the temporary consequence of largely unavoidable or non-sinful conditions, such as menstruation (Lev 15:19–24), lawful sexual activity (Lev 15:16–18) and the burial of corpses (Num 19). Unlike moral impurity, ritual impurity is primarily transmitted through direct contact and those who have been rendered ritually impure are to be cleansed through a variety of lustrations, probationary periods and/or sacrifices. For the purposes of our discussion below, it is important to note that both of these forms of impurity, if left unchecked, had the potential to defile the temple and damage the relationship between God and his people, albeit in different ways.

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1 For a detailed discussion on the biblical distinction between ritual and moral impurity, see Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 21–42.

2 Whereas ritual impurity temporarily defiles people, objects and the temple through direct contact, moral impurity defiles the land, the non-repentant, and renders the Sanctuary impure from afar. Despite these differences, however, it must be said that the categories of ritual and moral impurity, as defined by Jonathan Klawans and others, are not as distinct as they would have us believe. For example, in contrast to ritual purity, which results in temporary defilement and can be expiated through various acts such as bathing and sacrifices, Klawans argues that moral impurity results in a “long-standing, if not permanent, degradation of the sinner” that is without a rite of purification. But this is not entirely accurate. As Milgrom has rightly noted, the scapegoat rite on the Day of Atonement