Scholars are divided on the issue of outsider impurity in Qumran texts. Recently, Christine Hayes has claimed that “Many Second Temple sources continue the biblical association of Gentiles with moral impurity; but none unambiguously associates Gentiles with ritual impurity.”¹ She claims that, while ancient Jews were concerned about the idolatrous influence of pagans and the commingling of holy and profane seed, they probably did not consider Gentiles physically defiling. Even at Qumran, Hayes finds no “smoking gun” text which indicates that the sect ascribed ritual impurity to Gentiles.² The concern before the first century, she says, was for moral and genealogical purity; she concludes that Gentile ritual impurity is a legal creation of the Rabbis. This position stands in opposition to the more common view that Gentile impurity (both ritual and moral) does apply at Qumran.³

This paper will revisit the evidence for the ritual impurity of outsiders at Qumran and hopes to resolve this crux with recently transcribed fragments from Cave 4. Although the texts discussed in this paper may have various origins, they were adopted and preserved by the community at Qumran and collectively represent a certain general stance toward impurity. It will be maintained that the sect considered all outsiders both ritually and morally impure. First I will review the general impurity laws related to outsiders and then I will discuss the specific status vis-à-vis ritual purity of the non-sectarian Jew, the Gentile and the ger. Finally, I will offer a rationale as to why the sectarians regarded outsiders impure.

To begin, I would like to establish working distinctions between moral and ritual impurity in the Bible. Even though these categories

² Hayes, Gentile Impurities, 65.
somewhat oversimplify the matter, they are still helpful. Moral impurity comes by transgression of biblical commandments and carries strong penalties, often death or excommunication if not properly resolved by repentance and sacrifice. Ritual impurity comes by bodily processes and is contagious, especially to food and drink which then become forbidden. Ritually impure persons are easily purified, usually by immersion in water and other similar rites. Sin is not involved unless purification is not accomplished in which case it becomes a moral issue, especially if the offender handles sancta or enters sacred premises. While the notion of outsider impurity fits the biblical definition of moral impurity it is a stretch to include it in the definition of ritual impurity. Nevertheless, the Qumranites, as well as other Jews in antiquity, made this appropriation of the biblical concept of impurity.

Let us review the texts which reveal that outsiders were considered ritually impure at Qumran. First, several texts make it clear that sin generates both moral and ritual impurity. The Community Rule (1QS 5:4, 13–14) states that “impurity is inherent in all transgressors of His word” and requires both water ablutions and repentance for atonement. The author also denies ritual purity and access to pure food to those who were disobedient (1QS 7:2–21; 8:22–24; JW 2.143). The penitent of 4Q512 does not receive atonement for moral impurity until after immersion in water (4Q512 10–11 2–5; 29–32 5, 16).

Secondly, the process of initiating outsiders into the sect confirms their ritual impurity since they are required to perform water ablutions and are forbidden to eat the communal food until they are completely purified. 

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4 1QS 3:4–5 says of the non-repentant outsider: “Defiled, defiled shall he be.” The impurity here is not just moral for the language is taken from Leviticus’ laws of leprosy and represents a concern for the contagion of ritual impurity.


6 Baumgarten, “Purification Liturgies,” 205–6. Conversely, purifying persons were apparently not considered fit to offer a blessing to God until after ritual purification, for it is after they immerse, while still standing in the water, that they offer the blessing (4Q512 11; cf. also rabbinic practice b. Ber. 51a; b. Pesah. 7b; t. Yad. 2:20). E. Eshel, “4Q414 Fragment 2: Purification of a Corpse-Contaminated Person,” in Legal Texts and Legal Issues: Proceedings of the Second Meeting of the International Organization for Qumran Studies, Cambridge 1995 (eds. M. Bernstein, F. Garcia Martinez, and J. Kampen; STDJ 23; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 5–6, outlines three elements of the prayers: confession, forgiveness and thanksgiving, and notes the commingling of moral and ritual purification, foreign to later rabbinic writers.