ABOMINATED TEMPLE AND A HOLY COMMUNITY: THE FORMATION OF THE NOTIONS OF PURITY AND IMPURITY IN QUMRAN

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Taboos structure a cosmos out of the raw material of experience

Introduction

The Hebrew roots קב and מז (pure and impure) and their equivalents occur with great frequency in the vocabulary of the scrolls from Qumran. This is not merely a lexical observation. The importance of purity and the separation from defilement for the Qumran sectarians cannot be overemphasized. The evidence from other sources, however, viz. Apocrypha, New Testament, and especially rabbinic literature, testify to the special concern of purity among other circles in second temple Judaism, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees. In a way, it seems that during the Hasmonean and Herodian periods there was competition within Judean society for who was the most scrupulous observer of purity. Indeed, the purity boundaries in the Community Rule were stricter than those of any other Jewish group. Interestingly, they treated other scrupulous observers of purity as impure heretics who were indifferent to the purity laws.

Although the subject of purity has been discussed extensively in previous publications, there is no systematic analysis of its various theological components, implications for the sectarians’ social life, or

its historical development. These will be discussed in the following pages in order to demonstrate the procedure by which the Qumran sectarians gradually rejected the Jerusalem Temple cult and created a substituting system that produced features necessary for the worship of God: ritual purity and moral purity. I will try to show that: (1) The authors of 4QMiqṣat Maʿaše ha-Thora (henceforth, MMT) did not compose a random list of cultic regulations, but rather actually stressed that the Temple was defiled and desecrated with ritual impurity, hoping that this would lead the addressee of MMT to practice more scrupulous observance of the cultic laws. (2) They argued that the reason for their withdrawal from a group called “the multitude of the People” was due to the latter’s moral impurity. (3) The authors possibly hoped that if their halakhic claims were accepted, they would be able to rejoin the Temple cult. (4) The sectarians claimed that their final separation from the Temple cult and the rest of the Jewish society was not necessarily due to practical halakhic reasons (i.e., ritual purity, calendar, etc.) but instead, to the Wicked Priest’s and the Temple’s defilement through impurity of immorality. (5) The uniqueness of the Qumranic concept of moral impurity will be examined through a comparison to ancient Greek parallels of miasma, as well as insights from sociological theories of the function of moral codes (6–7). Finally, I will suggest how the rituals and regulations that are connected both to moral impurity, on the one hand, and ritual purity, on the other hand, made it possible for the sectarians to create a new type of sacred center, and how these rituals and regulations contributed to the preservation and social cohesion of the sect in a state of external and internal social pressures.

My interpretations of the Qumranic material will be based on a two-fold division of the notions of purity and impurity: (1) purity/impurity of the Temple in contrast to purity/impurity of the sect; (2) Ritual purity/impurity in comparison to moral purity/impurity. As J. Klawans has recently demonstrated, whereas the sources of ritual impurity are natural, bodily, or related to cultic acts, moral impurity results from heinous acts, particularly sins that pertain to social life. Moreover, while

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