IMPURITY AND SIN IN 4QD, 1QS, AND 4Q512*

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In the conclusion to his discussion of the purification rituals of 4Q512, J.M. Baumgarten writes,

Rabbinic tradition . . . tended by and large to treat ritual impurity as a morally neutral phenomenon. . . . In this respect the penitential tone of the Qumran blessings after any kind of immersion seems to reflect another facet of the specifically sectarian view on uncleanness. For if “impurity is inherent in all transgressors of divine law” (1QS V 4), might one not suppose conversely that all who are impure are in need of atonement for their trespasses? The dividing line between uncleanness and sin at Qumran is thus not sharply drawn. . . .

The view that the Qumran community conflated the categories of impurity and sin is widespread.2 It has recently been placed in a larger context by J. Klawans in his study of the relationship between impurity and sin in ancient Judaism.3 Although neither Baumgarten nor Klawans defines the corpus of texts he regards as sectarian, each draws in his discussion on texts widely regarded as products of the sect. The passage just quoted comes from Baumgarten’s discussion of 4Q512; he has recently suggested that several passages in the 4QD fragments also reflect the sectarian conflation of impurity and sin.4 Klawans

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2 See J. Klawans, “The Impurity of Immorality in Ancient Judaism,” JJS 48 (1997) 8 n. 40, for a partial listing of scholarship that holds this view.

3 “Impurity of Immorality,” 7-10. For this article, completed in early September 2000, I was not able to see Klawans’ book, Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism (New York: Oxford University Press), which appeared later in 2000.

4 J.M. Baumgarten (ed.), with J.T. Milik, S. Pfann, and A. Yardeni, Qumran Cave 4.XIII: The Damascus Document (4Q266-273) (DJD 18; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 56 (comment to 4Q266 6 ii 2) and 146 (comment to 4Q270 2 ii 12); “Zab Impurity in Qumran and Rabbinic Law,” JJS 45 (1994) 275. Baumgarten’s work makes it clear that he views all of the halakhic texts found among the scrolls as sectarian, including the Temple Scroll, and he treats all of them as part of a single halakhic system.
bases his argument on the sectarian document par excellence, 1QS, with parallels from other texts that can plausibly be viewed as sectarian.

Because he is a leading expert on the halakhah of the Scrolls, Baumgarten’s opinion carries particular weight. Still, I hope to show that a careful examination of 4QD’s laws of eruptions of the skin and genital impurity and the relevant material in 1QS and 4Q512 calls into question generalizations about a sectarian association of impurity and sin. I shall argue that the purity laws of 4QD do not conflate impurity and sin, indeed that there is nothing distinctively sectarian about these laws at all. While 1QS and 4Q512 use the language of impurity in ways that go beyond its meaning in the priestly corpus of the Torah, there are significant differences between them that make it difficult to see the association of impurity and sin as characteristic of the Qumran sectarians.

The background to the relationship between impurity and sin at Qumran is of course the relationship between impurity and sin in the Torah. The priestly material of the Torah offers a system of purity rules that treat food, childbirth, skin eruptions, eruptions in houses and fabrics, genital flow, and contact with corpses (Leviticus 11-15, Numbers 19). In these laws, which come from P, impurity is understood as a natural and unavoidable state, sometimes even a desirable one, as, for example, the impurity accompanying menstruation and sexual relations, which make child bearing possible, and childbirth itself. Nor are the consequences of most types of impurity dire: the impure person is barred from the sanctuary and from contact with holy things (Lev. 12:4). The consequences of skin affictions are somewhat more severe: the afflicted person must be quarantined away from home during his period of impurity (Lev. 13:46). The rituals of purification and the duration of the process of purification appear to be related to the severity of the impurity. Thus, for example, the impurity of a woman after childbirth, skin eruptions, and abnormal genital flow require sacrifice in addition to the bathing and laundering required for normal genital flow (Lev. 12:6-7; 14:1-32; 15:14-15, 29-30).

J. Milgrom has argued that the impurities that require sacrifice as part of the process of purification were understood to pollute the sanctuary even from afar. He deduces this from the fact that these

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