DID THE PHARISEES EAT ORDINARY FOOD IN A STATE OF RITUAL PURITY?

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In the recent debates over the identification of the Pharisees and their major concerns, an important issue has been put up for question: were the Pharisees concerned only about the purity of priests' food or were they also trying to eat their own food in a state of purity?

G. Alon has stated that the Pharisees of the first century did eat ordinary food in a state of purity:

There is nothing to prevent the assumption that in the day of the writer [i.e. Mark] (and also of Jesus) the Associates and many of the people were accustomed to eating their ordinary food in levitical purity.1

Also, J. Neusner has said:

But, the Pharisees held that even outside of the Temple, in one's own home, the laws of ritual purity were to be followed in the only circumstance in which they might apply, namely, at the table. Therefore, one must eat secular food (ordinary, everyday meals) in a state of ritual purity as if one were a Temple priest.2

Recently E.P. Sanders has challenged the above view in his book, Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah. Sanders opposes the notion that Pharisees were trying to live like priests and extend their purity laws to themselves. Rather, he argues that the concern for purity of food was about ensuring the purity of holy food (second tithe, sacrifices, and heave offering) not about ordinary food.

A careful re-examination of the issue suggests that Sanders’ challenge is not as decisive as it would first appear. Although there is some evidence for his view, the majority of the evidence supports the original view of Alon and Neusner. I will proceed in two ways. First, I will present the evidence of the Mishna and Tosefta to show that there was a strong concern for eating ordinary food in purity in addition to maintaining the purity of priestly food, and second, I will attempt to prove the first century date of this concern.

In reviewing the rabbinic material let us first see whether or not Sanders’ claims from the text are valid. Perhaps his strongest argument is from m. Nidda 10:6-7:

At first did they say, “She who is sitting out the blood of purifying did pour water out for washing the Passover offering.” They reverted to rule, “Lo, she is like one who has touched one who is unclean by reason of corpse uncleanness, so far as Holy Things are concerned,” in accord with the words of the House of Hillel. The House of Shammai say, “Also: she is like one who is unclean by reason of corpse uncleanness.” And they agree that she eats tithe and sets apart dough offering and brings near [to the other dough the vessel in which she has put the portion set apart as dough offering] to designate it as dough offering, and of some of her spit and blood of purifying fell on a loaf of heave offering, that it is clean. The House of Shammai say, “She requires immersion at the end.” And the House of Hillel say, “She does not require immersion at the end.”

In this passage, a woman in Stage 2 of childbirth impurity (after the initial 7 or 14 day first stage) is allowed to eat second tithe and set apart dough offering. Also, her saliva will not contaminate heave offering. Sanders argues that if a Pharisee would allow such an impure person to touch these holy things he could not regard as necessary eating ordinary food in purity.\(^3\)

This argument supports Sanders’ view well, but it is important to point out that the principle of \(\text{titul yôm}\) is in operation here. The concept of \(\text{titul yôm}\) allowed an unclean person who has immersed and is only waiting for the prescribed time period to expire to participate in religious life. The second stage parturient is precisely in this situation. The Talmud refers to her as \(\text{titulat yôm ʿarok}\), “immersed for a long day.” Although her fluids will not defile heave offering, the \(\text{titulat yôm}\) may not touch priestly food after she

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\(^3\) E.P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah*, 197, 209.