

Purity Viewed through the Eschatological Framework of Qumran

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Modern notions of Judaism generally stem from the Hebrew Bible and the various literary and historical contributions of Jewish sects from the first century C.E. onward. Despite a plethora of insightful historical and literary accounts, a pervasive discontinuity in time exists between the later texts of the Hebrew Bible (c. 250 B.C.E.) and the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism at the turn of the first century C.E. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls near Qumran, reflect the religious and social sentiments of a Jewish community, possibly the Essenes, that serves as a developmental link between the later Biblical texts and Rabbinic Judaism. Consequently, the previously accepted notion that Rabbinic Judaism is an authoritative indicator of Jewish sentiment prior to the first century has been seriously challenged.

This paper addresses a specific issue of purity laws viewed in light of the community's preoccupation with the final events in the history of humankind and the world. By analyzing the content of specific texts, this paper will demonstrate that the purity laws found at Qumran deviate from the purity laws of the Torah, from which they were derived. Additionally, this paper addresses the reasons for this community's re-interpretation of such laws. In a more general context, this paper will also argue that such re-interpretation and amplification of Biblical laws depend on the circumstances of specific communities.

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While many details about the community at Qumran remain shrouded in mystery, the literature associated with the sectarian group has allowed researchers to come to some consensus about the nature of their beliefs and practices. For instance, researchers have never questioned the prominence of the community's eschatological¹ beliefs or the emphasis of those beliefs on the observance of purity laws. The variety and richness of the literature discovered at Qumran, which includes biblical sources, apocrypha, and documents written by members of the sectarian group, provide researchers with a unique opportunity to trace the evolution of Jewish beliefs and practices. Containing at least one copy of every biblical book, with the exception of Esther,² it is clear that the religious sentiments of this group are grounded in the Hebrew Bible.³ Consequently, the community's eschatological beliefs

and ritual practices suggest that many of their references were to biblical sources. However, the eschatological beliefs and adherence to purity laws projected by the community do not parallel biblical accounts precisely. Instead, the presentation of such beliefs represents an amplification of the textual sources from which they were derived. In many instances, the purity laws recorded in the sectarian literature, such as the Manual of Discipline,⁴ are much more stringent than those found in the Torah. Additionally, the community's documented records show that some purity laws instituted at Qumran did not originate from biblical sources. Such amplification and alteration of biblical sources evolved in tandem with the community's eschatological beliefs. An analysis of the content of the Manual of Discipline, a primary document that reflects the fundamental beliefs of the Dead Sea sectarians, will show that the altered

status of purity laws within the Qumran community were conditioned by the community's eschatological beliefs.

The Manual of Discipline (1QS), also referred to as the Rule of the Community, contains two other documents that outline the rules for the community and serve as the core text in scholarly understanding of the sectarian group at Qumran. The Rule of the Community establishes the rules, regulations and theological basis for a community living in anticipation of the eschaton, or End Time, an event that would herald the coming of the Messiah. The Rule of the Congregation (1QSa),⁵ another part of the larger body of the Manual of Discipline found in cave one, reflects the nature of the community at the final period of the End time. A second text included in the body of cave one's Manual of Discipline scroll, The Rule of the Blessings (1QSB),⁶ provides blessings that are reserved for the final session of the eschatological age when the "Sons of Darkness" no longer represent a threat to the "Sons of Light" who will receive "all of the everlasting blessings."⁷ In addition to the nearly complete Manual of Discipline Scroll found in cave 1, at least ten other fragmented copies have been discovered in other caves near Qumran.⁸ The abundant copies of this scroll suggest that this document was pivotal in establishing the communal codes. James Charlesworth, a prominent Dead Sea Scroll scholar, notes that the terms and phrases characteristic of the Manual of Discipline influenced many documents composed at Qumran.⁹ Consequently, the references to the eschaton, purity laws, and observances constitute pervasive themes throughout the literature at Qumran. An analysis of the relational dynamic between these

two themes, namely the extent to which eschatological anxiety conditions and dictates purity laws, should be indicative of the sentiments of other sectarian documents found near Qumran.

The Rule of the Community is intended to be a guide for the community present in an eschatological age, living in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah.¹⁰ As a result, the laws and regulations within the document were conceived as a means for ushering in the eschaton. Furthermore, the document itself states that the only way to "cross over into the covenant before God" (1QS 1.16) is "by the Rule of the Community" (1QS 1.16), which emphasizes the importance of this document as the essential guide to live appropriately. Allusions to biblical sources within the Rule of the Community also establish the eschatological framework to examine purity laws. The text tells the community to "depart into the wilderness to prepare there the Way of the Lord" (1QS 8.13-14). This allusion to Isaiah 40:3 is decisive and purposeful. This passage, along with others from the later prophets, is utilized by the New Testament evangelists to heighten eschatological expectations. John the Baptist, the referent in this case, heralds the coming of the Messiah. Similarly, the earlier use of this phrase in the Rule of the Community is intended to arouse a sense of awareness about the motives for the community's separation from the Temple cult, replacing it with a more stringent adherence to purity laws. Living in exile from the Temple, the members of the community experienced the call to "depart into the wilderness," an exile that projected the imminence of the eschaton. Additionally, the Rule of the Community provides further evidence that the members'

strict adherence to the laws were oriented towards the eschaton: "He shall be a man zealous for the statute"¹¹ and prepared for the day of vengeance"¹² (1QS 9.23). This verse explicitly states that the stringent adherence to the laws and rules of the community is a means of preparation for the End time. Additionally, this verse suggests that the time the community spends preparing for the "day of vengeance" is also preparation for an age of absolute purity and perfection. Thus, the eschatological expectations of the community reflect a simultaneous effort towards absolute purity through a "zealous" adherence to purity laws. Consequently, the eschatological framework established in this document is pivotal in understanding the nature of purity laws within The Rule of the Community.

In contrast with the biblical texts from which they were derived, the purity laws and ordinances at Qumran assume both ritual and moral implications. Jonathan Klawans, a scholar of Judaism, notes that while ritual and moral impurity were once considered distinctive conditions, the two have merged and are completely identified as one in the Qumran texts.¹³ The resolution for moral impurity – atonement – is equated with the resolution for ritual impurity – purification.¹⁴ Similarly, the defilement resulting from moral impurity is often associated with the contagious aspects of ritual impurity. The Rule of the Community states that "no man among the members of the Covenant of the Community who deliberately, on any point whatever, turns aside from all that is commended, shall touch the pure Meal of the men of holiness or know anything of their counsel until his deeds are purified from all falsehood and he walks in perfection of way" (1QS 8.16-18).

The deeds, or moral actions, that need to be purified from falsehood suggest that this is a case of moral impurity. The consequences of these deeds, however, reflect the consequences of both moral and ritual impurity. The text states that the individual whose “deeds” must be “purified” will not “know anything of the counsel,” suggesting that he will in some way be set apart or excommunicated. This is a consequence commonly associated with moral impurity in biblical sources. The text, however, also states that he shall not “touch the pure Meal,” suggesting that his “touch” would render the pure Meal impure. Here, for what is commonly characterized as moral impurity stemming from the deeds or moral actions of an individual, the resulting consequence is both moral and ritual impurity.

The sharp dichotomy between members of the community and outsiders further stresses that moral and ritual impurities are closely united in Qumran literature. The text states that, “all [the outsiders’] deeds are defilement before Him, and all their possessions are unclean” (1QS 5.19-20). Here, the text suggests that outsiders are both morally and ritually impure. “Defilement” resulting from deeds implies moral impurity, and the “unclean” possessions reflect that the outsider has transferred impurity to personal property. Thus, ritual impurities are also implied. The text states that the community members’ property “shall not be merged with the men of falsehood who have not purified their life by separating themselves from iniquity and walking in the ways of perfection” (1QS 7). Again, the concern here is both moral and ritual impurity. Biblically, contracting impurity is usually associated with ritual

impurity. However, this textual amalgamation of both ritual and moral impurity within The Rule of the Community extends the contagious consequences to moral purity as well. Consequently, the text conveys the importance of maintaining both ritual and moral purity. As the text shows, being in a state of either impurity will bear the effects and consequences of both forms of impurities. In Leviticus, ritual impurity is characterized as contagious, but temporal.¹⁵ In contrast, moral impurity is not considered contagious, though it can result in the permanent ruin of the sinner, and even the sanctuary of God and the land of Israel.¹⁶ Thus, because ritual impurity is equated with moral impurity in the texts of Qumran, the purity laws appear more stringent than those found in earlier biblical sources. Additionally, when viewed through an eschatological framework, one can understand the possible reasons for the unification of ritual and moral impurity. However, this will become more evident following an analysis of the Rule of the Congregation.

Although only fragments of the text have survived, the Rule of the Congregation¹⁷ provides insight into the unification of ritual and moral impurity. The text presents a scenario in which the community is present in the final session of the End time.¹⁸ Both the invitation to the Council and the Messianic banquet represent the culmination of the strict purity laws conveyed in the Rule of the Community. In the Rule of the Community, the appeal to walk in the “way of perfection” represents the ultimate goal of moral and ritual purity.¹⁹ Accordingly, the Rule of the Congregation provides the present community with a written record of the age to come. Although the community’s

eschatology was pre-messianic, James Charlesworth notes that, “[the community’s] liturgy and concept of time allowed them to live proleptically as if the Messiah had already come.”²⁰ This insistence on the community’s presence at the End time explains their adherence to such strict purity laws. Although the consequences of ritual impurity are made more severe when unified with moral impurity, these consequences serve as a protective measure ensuring the purity of all members within the community during the crucial days before the eschaton.

Purity laws and ordinances at Qumran differ in severity and content from biblical sources on purity laws. Because several copies of the Books of Moses have been found in the Qumran library, suggesting their importance within the community, one may be driven to understand more clearly why these differences in purity laws exist. After all, the Rule of the Community explicitly emphasizes the importance of adhering to the laws of the Torah. It advises to “seek with all heart and soul doing what is good and right before him, as he commanded through Moses...” (1QS 1.2-3). Why, then, would the laws need to be any different? The answer lies in the fact that the sectarian group at Qumran is addressing a different situation. Living in exile from the Temple, the imminent coming of the eschaton is a very present reality for the community. As a result, the authors of documents such as the Rule of the Community and the Rule of the Congregation feel compelled to address this present reality while still maintaining continuity with Jewish tradition. Accordingly, biblical sources are re-interpreted and amplified in various ways to reflect the needs and circumstances of this

community.²¹ In an age where the eschaton is imminent, amplification and re-interpretation of biblical sources concerned with purity laws are responsible for the variant forms of laws present in the community's literature. The unification of the concepts of moral and ritual purity within the Rule of the Community is shown to be heavily conditioned by the eschatology of the community, and justified through the eschatological framework of the Rule of the Congregation.

Works Cited

- 1 Derived from the Greek *eschatos* ("last things") and *logos* ("knowledge of"), eschatology refers to knowledge of the last days, or final events of history and mankind. Doctrines of eschatology find prominence within late Jewish and early Christian literature. Some typical elements of these doctrines include a divine judgment and the establishment of a new divine order.
- 2 James VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1994) 21.
- 3 Numbers in parenthesis indicate copies of each text found near Qumran: Genesis (15); Exodus (17); Leviticus (13); Numbers (8); Deuteronomy (29); Joshua (2); Judges (3); 1-2 Samuel (4); 1-2 Kings (3); Isaiah (21); Jeremiah (6); Ezekiel (6); Twelve Prophets (8); Psalms (36); Proverbs (2); Job (4); Song of Solomon (4); Ruth (4); Lamentations (4); Ecclesiastes (3); Daniel (8); Ezra (1); 1-2 Chronicles (1)
- 4 Manual of Discipline (1QS) discovered in Cave 1, 1947. Translated by Barthelemy and Milik (1955).
- 5 James Charlesworth, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Texts with English Translations*, vol. 1,4 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991) .
- 6 Charlesworth, vol 1,4.
- 7 The titles "Sons of Darkness" and "Sons of Light" refer to the two opposing that will ultimately clash in the final battle of the eschaton. This confrontation is fully outlined in the War Scroll, an eschatological document central to the community. The "Sons of Light" refer to members within the Qumran community, while the "Sons of Darkness" refer to every member of the human race outside of the sectarian group. For more information see Schiffman's *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls: The History of Judaism, The Background of Christianity, the Lost Library of Qumran*.
- 8 VanderKam 22.
- 9 Charlesworth 4.
- 10 Charlesworth, vol.1, 2.
- 11 Geza Vermes' translation for "statute" reads "Precept"; his usage of "Precept" connotes, along with the physical action associated with "statute", a law that prescribes moral guidance. This will bear on the following discussion of both moral and ritual implications of purity laws in the Rule of the Community.
- 12 Geza Vermes' translation for "day of vengeance" reads "Day of Revenge"; Vermes' more emphatic translation asserts more clearly the emphasis on the ushering in of the eschaton.
- 13 Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991) 75. While Klawans does a survey of the notions of ritual and moral impurity within several Qumran texts, my examples will be specific to the texts addressed in this paper.
- 14 Klawans, 87.
- 15 Klawans, 27.
- 16 Klawans, all.
- 17 Translated by James Charlesworth
- 18 Charlesworth 108.
- 19 Lawrence Schiffman, *The Eschatological Community of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 52.
- 20 Charlesworth 108.
- 21 James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). *Sanders might refer to this re-interpretation of the sectarian community as an eschatological hermeneutic.