

# THE IDEA OF SIN-IMPURITY

## THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS IN THE LIGHT OF LEVITICUS<sup>1</sup>

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My doctoral dissertation explores the connection between sin and impurity in the Old Testament and early Judaism. Although in the last twenty years this topic has provoked an increasing amount of academic interest, there is no agreement among scholars about the definition of the concept of sin-impurity and the scope of its application. In my work I delineate criteria for identifying sin-impurity in Leviticus, re-evaluating and integrating the work of those scholars, who have written specifically about the defiling force of sin (e.g., Klawans and Frymer-Kensky), and those, whose discussion is centred on sacrificial atonement (e.g., Milgrom, Sklar, Gane). With insights gained from the analysis of the biblical texts (particularly Leviticus) I then examine the Dead Sea Scrolls and explore how the redefined perception of sin-impurity in biblical texts can reshape our understanding of that concept at Qumran.

I challenge the traditional view that the first half of Leviticus (attributed to a so-called ‘Priestly Source’, P) is concerned solely with the issues of cult and physical purity, while the second half (the ‘Holiness Code’, H), allegedly written/edited in different social circles and at a different stage, brings in the dimension of ethics. I argue that cult and ethics in biblical texts are closely intertwined and that the perceived division between P and H has arisen from the biblical editor’s strategic decision in organising the material. Such an understanding significantly expands the scope of sin-impurity in Leviticus, encompassing not only the grave unforgivable sins discussed in H, but also sins that can be remedied by means of atoning sacrifice, as discussed in P.

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<sup>1</sup> Mila Ginsburskaya, *The Idea of Sin-Impurity: The Dead Sea Scrolls in the Light of Leviticus* (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2008); supervisor: Dr James K.

One of the main issues which my work has sought to tackle has been the question of the interrelationship between the concepts of purification and atonement. Re-evaluating and integrating the work of Milgrom, Wright, Kiuchi and other scholars I have suggested that the sacrificial offering חטאת (usually translated as ‘sin offering’ and sometimes as ‘purification offering’) had a double function: it served to remove impurity (either physical or resulting from sin) from *both* the individual and the sanctuary, which reflected the measure of defilement of the people of Israel, being defiled and purified concomitantly with them. I have therefore proposed that sacrificial atonement should be regarded as a *means* of purification, which should be understood as a process whereby an individual is restored to a state which enables him/her to resume the proper relationship with God, who, ultimately, is the real agent of purification. Certainly, humans are supposed to fulfil their own part by carrying out the assigned rituals, but the result is in no case automatic. Understanding this conceptual theological framework helps to resolve the perceived tension between cultic texts and non-cultic texts in their treatment of impurity. In cultic texts, God remains behind the scenes, while the main actors are the people performing the rituals. Non-cultic texts, by contrast, explicitly portray God as the Purifier. Thus we need not assume together with Klawans<sup>2</sup> that wherever in Psalms and Prophets (e.g., Ps. 51) God is presented as an agent of purification it should be understood as a metaphor.

This analysis throws light on some features characteristic of the Qumran writings, such as the alternation between atonement and purification terminology; the alternation in the role of the divine and human agents in these actions; the fact that physical impurity and sin-impurity sometimes are mentioned alongside one another within the same sentence. I have argued that the Dead Sea Scrolls do not offer a dramatically different idea of purity, but illuminate and perpetuate certain literary and conceptual traits already discernible in the Hebrew Bible, spelling out what remained implicit or understated there. For example, interrelatedness between the notions of atonement, forgiveness and purification comes to the fore in the Scrolls, where we often encounter interchangeable terminological pairs of טָהַר + כָּפַר (‘purify’ + ‘atone’), סָלַח + כָּפַר (‘forgive’ + ‘atone’), טָהַר + סָלַח (‘forgive’ +

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Aitken.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36.

‘purify’). I also demonstrate that a close analysis of the Qumran writings in the light of biblical evidence does not support the widespread view that the Qumran sectaries have conflated ideas of physical impurity and impurity resulting from sin. The main innovation at Qumran is the *subordination* of purification of the body to purification from sin, achievable only within the community, which regarded itself as providing the correct interpretation of the divine laws and the way of atonement for sins.

Furthermore, the testimony of the Scrolls supports my hypothesis, developed on the basis of the textual and conceptual analysis of biblical texts, that in ancient Judaism the concept of impurity served to demarcate the boundaries between humans (specifically, the people of Israel) and God. In accord with this conceptual logic, the movement towards a total eradication of the source of impurity in humans would mean the blurring of the boundaries between humans and the divine. In biblical texts this is intimated by the Edenic motifs, which accompany the theme of recreation, conveyed by such metaphors as circumcision of the heart; or endowment with a new heart or spirit. At Qumran, where some texts imply an angelification of human beings at the eschaton, this dynamic becomes more explicit.

*The Community Rule* (1QS), one of the main texts for the study of sin-impurity at Qumran, is a special focus of my discussion. I reconsider the long-standing proposition that the community behind this document was conceived as a replacement for the Temple cult. I suggest instead that the main purpose of the communal enterprise was to provide an alternative for ensuring purification and maintaining a right relationship with God in the age of impurity, when both the Temple and the Land were perceived as defiled and divine punishment is imminent. This alternative, regarded as a provisional measure only, was devised through and substantiated by the exegesis of biblical writings, both cultic and non-cultic. The cultic language and the notions employed in 1QS serve to promote the legitimacy and efficacy of non-sacrificial forms of worship, with particular emphasis on atonement. Sacrificial atoning offerings **חטאת** (‘sin offering’) and **אשם** (‘guilt offering’) are substituted by the very lives of the community members dedicated to God. This arrangement can be perceived as a *continuous* sacrifice, which distinguishes dramatically the ‘cultic’ enterprise of the 1QS community from the sacrifices of the temple that were performed on a specific occasion. The eschatological expectation

that all impure things and persons will be totally destroyed, may have been an additional reason for continuous atonement, as the community strove to maintain itself in a state of permanent purity, in preparation for the eschaton.

The particular emphasis on atonement is a feature peculiar to 1QS. Nowhere in other sectarian texts (e.g., the *Damascus Document*) is atonement presented as a main function of the community. This new interpretation provides additional material for considering the different identities of the communities behind the different scrolls, their evolution and their relationship to each other—the subjects I plan to investigate in my future work.

With due caution I propose that in certain cases the Scrolls can be an important witness to biblical thought, which may throw new light on our understanding of biblical writings. Thus, for example, the combination of cultic and non-cultic features in the Scrolls, sometimes coexisting within the same document (e.g., the *Damascus Document*), bears on the question of the relationship between cultic and non-cultic traditions within the Hebrew Bible. If priests were the leaders of the Qumran community/communities and also in charge of the scribal activities, they apparently perceived no conflict between these streams of thought. This encourages us to look beyond the disparities of the formal features in the different genres of the biblical writings themselves, which may not necessarily indicate any *conceptual* difference.

Although in my work I could only cover a limited number of texts, I believe I have succeeded in advancing scholarly discussion of sin-impurity in the Hebrew Bible and have been able to demonstrate the implications it has for the interpretation of the purity ideas in the Qumran texts.