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Week 12: Sin/Righteousness of God

This week we examine the relationship between Sin found in Qumranic literature and that of Paul found in the New Testament. The distinctively early sectarian composition of the 4QMMT, median composition of Damascus Document and the late formulated Community Rule (1QS) will all provide insight into the subject matter. These will be compared and contrasted with Pauline literature that discuss the same subject.

At Qumran, there seems to be a clear association between sin and ritual purity. Sin, in general, is considered “missing the mark” in Jewish thought. Sin is when one fails to follow the commandments of God. While certain sins, murder, idolatry and sexual immorality (Interestingly these are also the 3 commandments that the Jerusalem council advised the Gentile Church to abstain from, Acts 15:20), can lead to ritual impurity, one can also become ritually impure by other means such as contact with a corpse or menstruation. The Qumran sectarians expand the causes of ritual impurity to all sins, especially paying strong attention to deceit, which they believe causes one to become both morally and ritually impure (1QS IV:10-11).

As many others have noted, the halachic letter of 4QMMT was sent at the early stages of the formation of the sect at Qumran, Jonathan Klawans further describes a clear development of concept within the Qumran corpus. He stresses in both 4QMMT and the Damascus Document

(and other documents as well), the association between sin and ritual impurity is not as strong as one would find in the Community rule(90). The tolerance level for both moral and ritual impurity seems to have strengthened with the days leading up to the composition of the Community Rule. This might partially be the reason for having multiple ritual immersion pools (Mikvaot) at the site of Qumran as Jodi Magness has noted(168).

Moral impurity that led to ritual impurity did not stop at the individual level, the deceitful wicked Priest extends the defilement upon the Temple which he is serving. Klawans asserts in Peshar Habakkuk (1QpHab XII 6-9), the so-called abominable acts (AKA, arrogance) of the Priest, could also render himself ritually impure and in turn render the Temple and the Land impure (70). This might be the cause of the sect's rejection of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.

Seems likely that the early Church was aware of the ritually defiling nature of certain abominable sins, i.e. murder, idolatry and sexual immorality. Yet Klawans notes there is no indication that early Christianity shared the view of the Qumran Sect (156). Neither Jesus nor Paul share this strong view of sin and ritual impurity. On the other hand, they show a high degree of association between sin and moral impurity.

Jesus is clearly seen associated with impure “sinners” and Tax collectors (Luke 5:30). On one occasion, a woman with the highest degree of ritual impurity even touched Jesus’ garments (Luke 8:44), not only was Jesus not defiled, but the woman was healed in that instance. If Jesus had the high concern of sin and ritual impurity, he probably would not have acted accordingly.

While ritual purity was not of high concern of Jesus, moral impurity was dealt with much more seriously. In the pericope of Matt 5, Jesus takes cultural-religious norms of his time and “rose the bar”, so to speak.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matt. 5:21-22)

Although Jesus doesn’t expand sin towards ritually impurity, he clearly believes that the moral defiling nature of sin and warned strongly against sin.

According to Paul, sin has many dire consequences that just render one ritually impure. In Romans 5, Paul attests that sin is the cause of death:

Therefore, as sin entered into the world through one man, and death through sin; and so death passed to all men, because all sinned. For until the law, sin was in the world; but sin is not charged when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those whose sins weren’t like Adam’s disobedience, who is a foreshadowing of him who was to come. (Rom 5:12-14)

In conclusion of this short survey, Qumran and early Christianity do share a common degree of association between sin and impurity, albeit their emphasis is drastically different, with the former focusing on the ritual and the latter the moral.

Works Cited

Klawans, Jonathan. *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism*. New York City, Oxford UP, 2000.

Magness, Jodi. *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. 2nd ed., Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021.