

The Summer 2022 Mediterranean Seminar Workshop:
“Purity, Pollution, Purification and Defilement
in the Premodern Mediterranean”
University of Haifa

A position paper on the prompt (Round-table 3, June 29):
“Purity and practice: How do discourses of purity intersect with economic and social realities?”

Purity vs. Reality: Two Adjustment Technics from the Second Temple Period

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Following are alternative solutions, from Second Temple times, to a single kind of need, namely: the reduction of an overly demanding burden placed on daily life by restrictions relating to purity/holiness. As may be inferred from these examples, when strongly challenged by economic and social realities, it might be expected that some rational limitation would be placed on the practice of purity laws.¹

1. Limiting the geographical scope of the restriction

In an article published two years ago, I examined an early 2nd century BCE Greek directive, issued after the Seleucid takeover of Judea by King Antiochus III, in evident fulfilment of a request from the Jerusalem priesthood.² The king excluded from the city all animals

¹ Otherwise, the practice becomes absurd. Note, in that vein, the mockery of the Pythagorean ban on eating beans, expressed in the ancient Greek tale (here following "Life of Pythagoras" by Diogenes Laertius, circa 180 AD), which recounts that Pythagoras' enemies managed to capture and kill him after he fled from them because he halted at a field of beans, asserting that it was better to be caught than to trample on the beans.

² Matan Orian, “The programma of Antiochus III and the Sanctity of Jerusalem,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 11 (2020): 200-232.

“forbidden to the Jews” – note the use of a language that bypasses the need to explain the Jewish concept of animal impurity to the non-Jewish recipients of the king’s injunction. That being said, it must be stressed that this decree was not based on Jewish dietary laws because it also excluded from the city all *pure animals* (for instance, chicken), other than those which could and must be slaughtered in the temple. Rather, in compliance with Leviticus 17, the decree aspired to safeguard the sanctity of Jerusalem, the city of the temple, as a parallel to Israel’s wilderness camp.

Ostensibly, this was the first time that this taboo was implemented in Jerusalem. We can assume it was maintained at the expense of various commercial interests and other practical, everyday concerns. Firstly, sacrifices offered in the temple became the sole source of meat and hides. This inevitably complicated the consumption of meat, as well as affected the price of eggs, meat and hides, assuming that the selling of sacred meat and hides was even feasible since it may also be argued that following the offering the meat and hides belonged to God. Furthermore, as the meat had to be consumed in ritual purity within two nights of slaughter, this ruled out any options to conserve it. Finally, non-Jews were not allowed to keep impure animals in Jerusalem (so that they might not be tempted to slaughter them for meat). This included most of the contemporary transport and load-bearing animals – which must have proved highly inconvenient for traders and the military.

One generation later, in 175 BCE, when King Antiochus IV rose to power and Jason usurped the high priesthood, these stringent restrictions were abolished (if that did not happen even prior to this date). However, after the Hasmoneans became high priests in 152 BCE – and certainly once they had conquered the Akra, the final Seleucid stronghold in Jerusalem in 141 BCE – they could have re-applied this law had they so desired. Instead, 4QMMT, a scroll from Qumran, protests a narrower conceptual and geographical interpretation of the relevant biblical terms, whereby the temple alone, and not the entire city of Jerusalem, was viewed as analogous to the wilderness camp. Indeed, an interpretation of this kind appears in rabbinic literature. Josephus too (*Ant.* 12.145) does not seem to be aware of any alternative interpretation, other than that suggested in rabbinic literature.

2. Circumscribing the time frame for the observance of restrictions

In striking contrast to non-Israeli scholars,³ and in similarity to many Israeli scholars,⁴ I find that textual evidence exists supporting the conclusion that from the Hasmonean period onward non-Jews were deemed ritually impure and defiling. This reality would have raised major practical concerns, in view of the unavoidable daily contact between Jews and non-Jews. Each ritual impurity, however, had a prescribed purification process, which may have required several days, at most. Hence, if these purification processes were followed, there was no actual harm in the defiling contact of Gentiles. Indeed, both Josephus (*JW* 1:229, *Ant.* 14:285) and *John's Gospel*, 18:28, mention the precautions taken by Jews in Jerusalem not to associate with non-Jews against the backdrop of a forthcoming feast – in other words, when those Jews were planning to participate in an actual ritual in the temple.

On the other hand, according to Luke, in *Acts of the Apostles* 10:28, Peter employs an unequivocal language in his proclamation (just before he baptized Cornelius, the Roman centurion) that, while it is *unlawful* for a Jew to associate with, or to approach a foreigner, God has shown him – in an earlier vision – that no man should be said to be impure or unclean. Yet, according to Paul in his *Epistle to the Galatians* 2:12, when in Antioch this same Peter noticed men sent by James (Jesus' brother), he himself withdrew from the company of Gentile Christians. This might suggest that Luke or James represent a position not too far removed from certain Jewish circles in the Second Temple period in terms of the strict observance of purity laws in everyday life, i.e., not just in the context of an actual ritual in the temple.⁵

³ For example, Wil Rogan, "Purity in Early Judaism: Current Issues and Questions," *Currents in Biblical Research* 16 (2018): 309-339.

⁴ From recent time, see Eyal Regev, "Purity, Pottery, and Judaeon Ethnicity in the Hasmonean Period," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 12 (2021): 391-432.

⁵ Vered Noam, "The Bonds of Non-Priestly Purity: A Reassessment," *Zion* 72 (2007): 127-160 (Hebrew).