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Fighting Mortality: Acts of Performance in the Communal Meal and War Scroll

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Since their initial discovery in the late 1940s, the Dead Sea Scrolls continue to ignite the imaginations of scholars and generate an extensive, and ever growing, amount of scholarship. Numerous scholars have studied the notions of impurity, purity, and sin in relation to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Broadly, certain Dead Sea Scrolls, like contemporary texts from the Second Temple period, are concerned with notions of defilement, purity, and impurity and the laws that attempt to separate the impure from the pure. Texts like the Rule of the Community deal extensively with the rules governing purity regulations. Notions of purity are important for understanding texts like the Rule of the Community and the sect as a whole. It is the textual references to purity in the Dead Sea Scrolls that aid scholars' understanding about both the sect's strictness and their contemporaries.

While scholars have examined different components of both the site of Qumran and the scrolls in reference to purity, it is on the communal meal and the War Scroll that this article will focus. Scholars like Lawrence Schiffman, Philip Davies, and Andrea Lieber have all written about the communal meal in reference to the eschatology of the sect.¹ These scholars, and others, address a diversity of hypotheses concerning the communal meal and sectarian eschatology in their work. By continuing to address those two topics, I will argue for a connection between the communal meal and eschatology not previously examined.

Schiffman argues in his book *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* that, "the sect's communal meals, conducted regularly as part of its everyday life, were preenactments of the final messianic banquet [discussed in the Rule of the Congregation] at the End of Days."² Davies argues from a similar perspective in his article "Food, drink, and sects: the question of ingestion

¹ Schiffman, Lawrence. *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls*. New York: Doubleday, 1994. 329-339; Davies, Philip R. "Food, Drink, and Sects: the Question of Ingestion in the Qumran Texts." *Semeia-Missoula*. 86, (1999): 151-164; Lieber, Andrea. *God Incorporated: feasting on the divine presence in Ancient Judaism*. Religion. Thesis (Ph.D.)—Columbia University, 1998.

² Schiffman, 338.

in the Qumran texts,” describing the sect’s communal meal as an enactment of the messianic banquet. Davies argues in his article that, “each member at the table was made conscious of the fact that he was a small part of a whole, but nevertheless a potentially vulnerable part. His body was part of a larger body.”³ This quote highlights Davies’ argument, which seeks to connect the communal meal and the messianic banquet through a sense of community. That community, Davies maintains, was generated both during the communal meal as sect members ate together, and through their theology, which predicted a future messianic shared meal that would mirror the experience of the daily communal meal. Both Schiffman and Davies draw a connection between the communal meal and the eschatological messianic banquet through the use of strict ritual purity laws that surrounded food. Schiffman writes, “The ultimate perfection of the messianic era would fulfill the sect’s ambition to achieve total ritual purity. Indeed, such total purity might be regarded as a catalyst that could turn the ordinary communal meal into a foretaste of the great messianic banquet at the End of Days.”⁴ Schiffman and Davies draw connections between the two meals, one repeated everyday and the other existing sometime in the messianic future, based upon parallels of ritual purity laws.

Essential to the argument presented in this article, however, is the use of Hannah Harrington’s work *The Purity Texts* and her discussion of bodily discharges in relation to purity laws and human mortality. I propose a connection between the sectarian communal meal and their eschatology, basing this connection not upon similar purity laws, but rather the parallel desire to combat mortality evident in the purity laws of the communal meal and the End of Days narrative in the War Scroll. Using the work of Harrington, who quotes several scholars whose work deals with theories of purity, I will treat appropriate passages in the Rule of Community

³ Davies, 151-164.

⁴ Schiffman, 334.

and the War Scroll. It is through the lens of performance and the performative that I locate the desire to combat mortality in both the communal meal and the War Scroll.

Before addressing the primary thesis of this article, it is important to establish a basic understanding of purity in the context of the sectarian community at Qumran.⁵ Jonathan Klawans argues in his work *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* “while the sources of ritual impurity convey to persons an impermanent contagion, the sources of moral impurity convey a long-lasting, if not permanent, defilement to sinners and to the land upon which their sins have been committed. Because of these differences, it is imperative to distinguish between moral and ritual impurity.”⁶ For both Klawans and Harrington, the sectarians differed from their Second Temple contemporaries by maintaining a much more rigorous concern with and maintenance of purity laws.⁷ When one thinks of the sectarians as representing a community who broke away from majority Jewish groups, and chose to live in, what in many ways could be termed an ascetic community, the sect’s fascination with purity makes sense. They sought separation from the majority of the Jewish population, because, as texts like the Halakhic Letter make clear, they believed the Temple cult of Jerusalem to be corrupt. While the sectarians appear to be much more concerned with purity than their contemporaries—largely *because* of their contemporaries differing, and to the sect’s mind incorrect, interpretation and observance of purity laws—both Klawans and Harrington agree that the sectarians differed in another key way from other Second Temple groups. Klawans conflates the careful distinction between ritual and moral impurity to describe the sectarians at Qumran, a distinction, which he established in previous chapters to discuss second temple Judaism in general. The sectarians at Qumran he argues melded these two

⁵ The scope of fully understanding purity in the context of the sectarian community at Qumran is far too large to adequately address within the context of this article. I will merely address those aspects of sectarian purity relevant to understanding the argument proposed in this article.

⁶ Klawans, Jonathan. *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 41.

⁷ Harrington, H. K. *The Purity Texts*. London: T&T Clark International, 2004. 1; Klawans, 68.

categories “into a single conception of defilement which had both ritual and moral ramifications.”⁸

Important to tracing a parallel between the communal meal and the End of Days eschatology is an understanding of the evidence supporting the sect’s purity laws concerning eating. The Rule of the Community offers the most concrete evidence for examining how the sect treated food and eating. Column six of the Rule of the Community reads, “They shall eat together, together they shall bless and together they shall take counsel...And when they prepare the table to dine or the new wine for drinking, the priest shall stretch out his hand as the first to bless the first fruits of the bread and of the new wine.” (IQS 6. 4-5)⁹ Scholars have interpreted this passage to indicate either that the sectarians were reinterpreting Temple cult practices in their communal meals, or that the priest’s blessing mirrors the priestly blessing at the messianic banquet discussed in the Rule of the Congregation.¹⁰ Important for this paper is merely that fact that there *were* embodied and performed laws meant to bless and purify the food and drink consumed by the sectarians.

The Rule of the Community, again in column six, goes on to detail more rules concerning the purity laws that address food and liquids. The passage presented below discusses the process by which initiates into the community slowly gain admittance and subsequently access to the pure food and drink of the sect:

⁸ Klawans, 90; Klawans makes clear in his analysis of purity at Qumran that the corpus of Dead Sea Scroll texts do not all meld ritual and moral impurity “into a single conception defilement”. Rather the canon of texts needs to be divided into texts that are protosectarian (such as the Temple Scroll and 4QMMT) and thus follow ideas about purity that are similar to Scripture, and fully sectarian texts (like 1QS, 1QM, and 1QH), which do combine ritual and moral impurity. This paper will address two texts—Rule of the Community and the War Scroll—that are firmly sectarian in origin.

⁹ García Martínez, Florentino. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translates: the Qumran texts in English*. Trans. Wilfred G.E. Watson. New York: E.J. Brill, 1994. 9. All subsequent quotes from the Dead Sea Scrolls are from García’s translation, and will not be footnoted.

¹⁰ Schiffman, 329-339; Magness, J. *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002. 113-126.

If he [the initiate] is included in the Community council, he must not touch the pure food of the Many while they test him about his spirit and about his deeds until he has completed a full year; neither should he share in the possessions of the Many. When he has completed a year within the Community, the Many will be questioned about his duties, concerning his insight and his deeds in connection with the law...He must not touch the drink of the Many until he completes a second year among the men of the Community. And when this second year is complete he will be examined by command of the Many...If one is found among them who has lied knowingly concerning goods, he shall be excluded from the pure food for the Many for a year and shall be sentenced to a quarter of his bread. (IQS 6. 16-25)

While the Rule of the Community does not extensively address the purity laws concerning eating, it is clear that those laws existed. This is not a surprising conclusion in any way; as Schiffman writes “the rules of purity and benedictions had a character and importance all their own...they were now part of the daily life of many pious Palestinian Jews, whether Essene, Pharisee, Sadducee, or sectarian at Qumran.”¹¹ From an understanding of the existence, and to some extent the nature of the purity laws regarding eating and drinking for the sectarians, this article will now move to Harrington’s analysis of the motivating force behind purity laws.

Harrington’s book *The Purity Texts* explores and investigates the Dead Sea Scrolls as the texts relate to issues of ritual and moral purity and impurity. Like Klawans, she reaches a similar conclusion about the sectarian texts melding ritual and moral defilement into a single conception of impurity. With her work she seeks to create a coherent ideology of purity in which to analyze the sectarian texts. In her chapter on bodily discharges, Harrington outlines the evidence for purity laws regarding bodily discharges, such as menstrual flow, childbirth, semen, and excrement. She offers her analysis on the significance of purity laws that specifically address bodily discharges. It is on this section of her work that I will focus most extensively. As such I

¹¹ Schiffman, 337.

will quote her at length, and then offer the connection between her scholarship and my own work. Harrington writes:

It has been said that death and sexual processes are what make human beings mortal (Wright 1992: 729-41). In ancient Judaism it is precisely the life-death cycle, from conception and birth to death, which generates impurity. As Leslie Cook says, ritual purity ‘centers around sexual differentiation, involuntary seminal emissions, disease, and death because it is these issues of corporeality that, in the Bible, symbolize the difference between human beings and God’ (Cook 1999: 49). Acknowledging this difference between humanity and the deity by keeping mortality and its impurity away from the sacred realm is essential for the continued welfare of Israel. As Jacob Milgrom says: ‘Because the quintessential source of holiness resides with God, Israel is enjoined to control the occurrence of impurity lest it impinge on his realm’ (Milgrom 1991: 47)...Sexual flows, menstruation and seminal discharges are all either life-giving or life-diminishing bodily fluids. They not only give human beings life but remind them of the certainty of death...in the discharge of sexual fluids individuals are reminded of their physical mortality as they lose life-giving forces (Milgrom 1989b: 103-109).¹²

Harrington elegantly argues that purity laws concerning bodily discharges evolved because of people’s concern with differentiating between their own physical and earthly mortality and the divine’s immortality. As Schiffman writes, “purification was a deep spiritual process of self-improvement, not a mere cultic rite.”¹³ This is a self-improvement that, when combined with Harrington’s argument, implies not only a personal self-improvement on the level of individuals, but also a self-improvement on the level of humanity. During sacred times or in sacred spaces this manifests in an urge for self-improvement to become *less* physically mortal, *less* physically human, to become closer to a divine state, and thus *closer* to the divine.

While Harrington’s discussion deals with bodily discharges as representing mortality, I argue that bodily ‘in-charges’ function in the same way. By ‘in-charges’ I mean the ingestion of food or liquid. Like blood, sexual fluids, or excrement, the need to eat, is both a fact, and a

¹² Harrington, 108.

¹³ Schiffman, 299.

necessity, of mortal life. Thus, similar to the manner in which discharge of sexual fluids reminds individuals of “their physical mortality as they lose life-giving forces,” so also does eating reminds individuals of their physical mortality as they eat and drink to stave off death.¹⁴ To apply Harrington’s theories on purity regulations to the purity laws surrounding the communal meal, and communal food and liquids in the sectarian literature, is to explore the communal meal in relation to a sense of combating mortality. Davies argues in his article “Food, drink and sects: the question of ingestion in the Qumran texts” that during communal meals “each member at the table was made conscious of the fact that he was a small part of a whole, but nevertheless a potentially vulnerable part. His body was part of a larger body.”¹⁵ Combining Harrington’s theories with Schiffman and Davies’ work, it is possible to argue that the performance of purity laws’ during the communal meal functioned as a collective attempt to combat physical mortality through rituals meant to capture a “deep process of spiritual self-improvement” that would lessen ones connection to profane mortality and bring one closer to sacred immortality.¹⁶

A similar impulse similar to perform the combating of physical mortality in the communal meal can be traced in the narrative of the End of Days in the War Scroll. Before outlining the textual evidence for my claim, it is important to define how I am engaging with the War Scroll. I propose a connection between the *performance* of purity laws during the communal meal and the *performance* of the sectarians reading the War Scroll.¹⁷ To further articulate the two modes of performance: the purity laws are the sectarians’ embodiment of the performance of combating mortality during the communal meal, while reading the War Scroll performatively embodies their textual eschatology. The act of reading the War Scrolls’ eschatology is a

¹⁴ Harrington, 108.

¹⁵ Davies, 162.

¹⁶ Schiffman, 299.

¹⁷ Iser, W. *The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978.

performative action in the pure Austinian sense.¹⁸ The classic phrase used to define a performative utterance—to say something is to do something—can be used to think about the performance of reading the sects’ eschatology in the War Scroll. In the case of reading the War Scroll, to *read* it is to *enact* the messianic future in the presence, and thus the necessary steps needed to ensure the coming of the messiah. Each performative speech act, whether voiced in speech or simply silently read, functions as “a deep spiritual process of self-improvement” bringing the sect farther from their own mortality and closer to divine immortality.¹⁹

The War Scroll begins with a description of the final violent confrontation between the sons of light (the sectarians) and the sons of darkness (all of the enemies of the sectarians):

And on the day on which Kittim fall, there will be the day determined by him since ancient times for the war of extermination against the sons of darkness. The first attack by the sons of light will be launched against the lot of the sons of darkness, against the army of Belial...On this (day), the assembly of the gods and the congregation of men shall confront each other for great destruction. The sons of light and the lot of darkness shall battle together for God’s might, between the roar of a huge multitude and the shout of gods and of men, on the day of the calamity. It will be a time of suffering fo[r a]ll the people redeemed by God...(IQM 1. 9-12)

The text emphasizes that the harbinger of the End of Days is a violent war. The sons of light, or sectarians, engaged in this struggle are physically fighting. Perhaps no other human action so greatly and continually reaffirms a sense of physical mortality. Throughout the duration of a battle, the participants are actively engaged in reaffirming (as they are injured and bleed) and gambling with (the ever present danger of being killed) their physical mortality. To read the War Scroll, is to be actively confronted with a narrative of ones’ imminent death.

The War Scroll goes on to elaborate the other combatants participating in the End of Days struggle:

¹⁸ Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things With Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

¹⁹ Schiffman, 299.

There will be infantry battalions to melt the heart, but God's might will strengthen the heart of the sons of light.] And in the seventh lot, God's great hand will subdue [Belial, and all the angels of his dominion and all the men of [his lot]. ...the holy ones, he will shine out to assist the [...] truth, for the destruction of the sons of darkness [...] great [...] they shall stretch out the hand for [...] (IQM 1. 14-16)

The War Scroll explains that in the seventh lot “God’s great hand will subdue [Belial]” thus ensuring victory of the sons of light over the sons of darkness. It is implied throughout the War Scroll that God will support, ensure the victory of, and thus protect, the sons of light, or the sectarians. God supports the sons of light in the War Scroll because of the sectarian’s covenant with God, which is affirmed through their observance of purity laws and regulations. God’s support in the narrative of the War Scroll ensures the victory of the sectarians; the fighters of the sons of light are in some way immortal: the sons of darkness cannot defeat them once God is on their side. The increased chance of victory in combat *increases* the combatants’ immortality during battle and *decreases* their mortality. This brings the sectarians closer to the divine due to a decreased concern with their mortality. As a sectarian continued to read the War Scroll, they would have undergone a narrative journey. Their journey began with the textual specter of the potential of their imminent death, to, due to God’s protection, their invincibility and immortality. For the sectarians, to continue to read the War Scroll was to performatively combat their mortality in the textual eschatological imaginary, mirroring the way in which, the purity laws in the communal meal functioned.

The communal meal’s purity laws were a collective attempt to combat physical mortality through rituals meant to lessen one’s connection to profane mortality and bring one closer to sacred immortality. The act of reading the eschatological narrative described in the War Scroll can be interpreted using Harrington’s purity theories to draw a parallel construction between it and the sect’s communal meals. To read *about* God’s support and protection for the sons of light

in the War Scroll, I argue, functions like the purity laws in the communal meal. The performative act of reading the War Scroll transforms the reader, through the course of the narrative, into an invincible, immortal. Just as the purity laws can be thought of as a way to lessen or regulate the markers of a body's mortality. The End of Days battle, like the process of eating, reaffirms the sectarians' sense of mortality, and only with God's support is the sectarians' close connection to their mortality lessened. Purity laws concerning bodily discharges—or 'in-charges', i.e. eating—according to Harrington's work, can be interpreted as an attempt to lessen one's mortality and bring one closer to the divine. God, in the War Scroll, literally offers his support, allowing the sons of light to survive the End of Days battle.

By observing purity laws, the sectarians' performed an embodied ritual. When reading the War Scroll, however, a sectarian did not engage in a similar performative embodiment; the act of reading is physically passive, though mentally rich. It is intriguing that the embodied performance of purity laws can be viewed as metaphorically important, representing the sect's concern with reproducing divine purity, while the passive act of reading constructed a very real vision of the future. The End of Days narrative moves the symbolic import of the communal meals purity laws out of a metaphoric realm and into the concrete reality of an imagined narrative future.

Scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls have firmly argued for and established a connection between the sectarians' communal meal and the eschatological banquet discussed in the Rule of the Congregation. Scholars, like Lawrence Schiffman, propose a connection between the two based upon the similarities between the purity laws discussed in the Rule of the Community and those described in the Rule of the Congregation describing the messianic banquet. My argument for a connection between the communal meal and the sect's eschatology is based not upon

parallels between purity laws, but rather draws a connection between the two based upon theories of purity outlined by Harrington as well as speech act theory. The purpose of this article was not to investigate whether a connection exists between the sectarians' communal meals and their eschatology; that connection has been established. Rather this article explored whether that connection could be deepened and expanded by drawing upon a different criteria of analysis, namely the rich literature of purity and speech act theory. My intent with this article is to foreground performance in the discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a foregrounding that allows for new connections to be forged between the texts and for the theoretical chance to textually imagine the different embodiments of the sectarian community.

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