

## IMMUNITY TO IMPURITY AND THE MENORAH

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### I

After listing eight varieties of unclean “swarming” creatures, Lev 11:32 states that their impurity defiles by contact any wooden vessel or garment or article of leather or sackcloth, “any such article that can be used for work.” This implies that impurity is transferable to any article of natural materials for human use. However, primary materials of the earth are not susceptible to contamination. Regarding water it is specified, “a spring or cistern in which water is collected shall be clean” (11:36). Rashi comments that these waters are connected to the ground, which is not subject to impurity. In tannaitic Halakhah the immunity of ground waters was also extended to objects immersed in them (mMaksh. 4, 6)<sup>1</sup> and it appears that this principle was also accepted in Qumran law.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, structures built on the ground are considered as part of the earth. However, there were different views with regard to objects embedded in building walls. According to the *Damascus Document* 12:17–18 nails or pegs in the wall of a house containing a corpse become impure like working implements, while the Halakhah limits this to nails independently used as tools (mKelim 12, 3–4).

Utensils fashioned from stone, earth, and dung are immune to contamination in mishnaic Halakhah (mKelim 10, 1), presumably because they were viewed like the ground. According to R. Eliezer, the copper and golden altars of the Temple did not require purification after the festivals, מפני שהן כקרקע (“because they were like the ground”)

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<sup>1</sup> See there the comment of Obadiah of Bartenora that ground waters not detached from the ground do not make objects immersed in them susceptible. Cf. Sifra Shemini 8 (Weiss 54d).

<sup>2</sup> 4Q274 3 ii and my comments in DJD 35, pp. 108–109.

(mHagigah 3, 8). This represents a nominal extension from the biblical description of the ancient altar as made of earth, מזבה אדמה (Exod 20:21), which was then also extended to metallic altars.

## II

Tosefta Hagigah 3, 35 relates that the Pharisees once immersed the Menorah of the Temple on a pilgrimage festival. The Sadducees ridiculed this purification: מעשה והטבילו את המנורה ביום טוב והיו צדוקין אומ' בואו וראו בואו וראו פרושין שמטבילין מאור הלבנה ("It once happened that they immersed the candelabrum on a festival; and the Sadducees said: Come and observe the Pharisees who immerse the light of the moon").

Rabbinic scholars have offered various speculative theories concerning Sadducean leniency with regard to the purification of the Menorah. In an earlier paper we surveyed these theories from the perspective of the now available Qumran legal writings, but in view of the general Qumran rigor in matters of purity we could not find any ready explanation for the Sadducean leniency.<sup>3</sup>

Ya'akov Sussmann has more recently proposed that the Sadducean position should be viewed against the background of Pharisaic liberalism, which allowed the public free contact with the Temple and its holy articles. Rather than mocking the purification of the Menorah the Sadducees were expressing their critique of Pharisaic leniency. They blamed the shocking contamination of the Menorah on the excessive Pharisaic tolerance of pilgrims' contact with the sacred vessels.<sup>4</sup> This rather innovative interpretation is intended to harmonize with the Sadducean otherwise strict approach to the purity of the Temple, but it is hardly supported by the straightforward implication of the Tosefta as understood by earlier commentators. The Sadducean critique targets the superfluous immersion of the Menorah, not the circumstances that may have occasioned it.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Baumgarten, "The Pharisaic-Sadducean Controversies about Purity and the Qumran Texts, *JJS* 31(1980), pp. 157–170.

<sup>4</sup> Y. Sussmann, "The History of the Halakhah and the Dead Sea Scrolls," appendix to *DJD* 10, p. 199.

<sup>5</sup> Yalqut Pequdei 40, #419; cf. Midrash Tadshe 11, Bet ha-Midrash 3, p. 175; A. Epstein, "Le livre des Jubiles, Philon, et le Midrasch Tadsche," *REJ* (1890), p. 88.

In his commentary, *Tosefta Ki-fshutah* (V, p. 1336), Saul Lieberman accepted this general understanding. He cited the suggestion of R. David Pardo that the Sadducees viewed the immersion of the Menorah as unnecessary because it was supposedly only contaminated by contact with a liquid, which in their opinion was incapable of defiling vessels. The difficulty with this approach is the lack of any basis for attributing leniency to the Sadducees with regard to contamination from liquids. At Qumran liquids were held to be more potent transmitters of impurity than solids. Moreover, the Tosefta makes no mention of liquids as the source of the Menorah's contamination. The Yerushalmi (Hag 3, 5 79d) refers to the possibility of liquids having been involved in other incidents of contamination but not that of the Menorah. Thus, the Sadducean leniency regarding the Menorah indicates that they deemed it to be unsusceptible to contamination regardless of its source.

Another commentator on the Tosefta, R. Samuel Avigdor, also mentioned the questionable premise that the source of the Menorah's contamination was only a liquid, but he went on to supply a more general rationale for the Sadducees' deeming the Menorah immune to defilement: כלומר שמטבילין המנורה שלא נעשה אלא כדי להאיר ואינה מקבלת טומאה ("This is to say that they immerse the Menorah, which is made for illumination and is unsusceptible to defilement").

Again, the thesis that according to the Sadducees all lamps made for illumination were incapable of defilement lacks support. However, it may have validity with regard to the Temple Menorah, because of its symbolic nature.

We note that in their caustic critique of the Pharisaic cleansing of the Menorah the Sadducees refer to the Menorah as the "orb of the moon," or according to the Yerushalmi reading, "orb of the sun." This symbolic depiction of the Menorah is reflected in late rabbinic midrashim: מנורה כנגד חמה ולבנה שבעת נרותיה כנגד ז' כוכבים המשמשין את העולם<sup>5</sup> ("The Menorah represents the sun and the moon. Its seven lights represent the seven planets which serve the world").

Moreover, there is evidence that this symbolism was already current in the Second Temple period. The concept was first elaborated by Philo:

The master-craftsman, wishing that we should possess a copy of the archetypal celestial sphere with its seven lights, commanded

this splendid work, the candlestick, to be wrought. (*Quis rerum divinarum heres* 225)

The candlestick he placed at the south, figuring thereby the movements of the luminaries above; for the sun and the moon and the others run their courses in the south. (*De vita Mosis* 2, 102)<sup>6</sup>

Josephus, less given to allegorical interpretations than Philo, echoes the same idea. He relates the seven portions of the candelabrum to the planets with the sun (*Antiqu.* 3, 146).

It is very likely that the cosmological symbolism of the seven-branched Menorah in the Hellenistic period derives from Zechariah 4:10, where these branches are envisioned as “the eyes of the Lord ranging over the whole earth.” It is, moreover, noteworthy that Zechariah depicts the purification of Joshua, the High Priest, by placing a “pure diadem,” צניף טהור, on his head (3:5). In addition, an engraved stone “with seven eyes” serves to remove guilt (3:9). This suggests that the Menorah functioned somewhat similarly to the frontlet (צִיץ, מצנפת) of the High Priest to ward off any possible ritual contamination.<sup>7</sup>

We referred above to the mishnaic ruling that the altars did not require immersion after the festivals. R. Eliezer explained מפני שהן כקרקע (“because the altars were like the ground”). The biblical principle that the ground and water attached to it were not subject to defilement seems to have been followed in common by both the Qumranites and the Tannaim. By analogy, since the Menorah was symbolic of the heavens, which are beyond the reach of man, it might very well have been deemed by the Sadducees to be immune to any contamination. However, the Pharisees once opted to immerse the Menorah as a precaution.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that our knowledge of Sadducean Temple law is limited to the oblique references in rabbinic sources and we do not know whether the Sadducees were receptive to the allegorical interpretations current in the Hellenistic period. However, the Menorah was depicted as a source of celestial illumination both in the Tosefta and in contemporary

<sup>6</sup> Translated by F.H. Colson, Philo VI, Cambridge, 1959.

<sup>7</sup> Exod 28:38 and the dispute in the baraita in bYoma 7b whether the צִיץ is efficacious in atoning for ritual uncleanness even when the High Priest is not wearing it.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the reading “take care that you not touch the table and the Menorah and defile it” in mHag 3, 8, emended in the Bavli.

cosmological descriptions. This can hardly be regarded as a coincidental glorification of the focal light of the Temple.

In sum, we should like to propose for the consideration of scholars that in asserting the immunity of the Menorah to contamination the Sadducees were not negating their otherwise strict stance in matters of purity, but basing themselves on a priestly tradition concerning the purifying power of its radiance.