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WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 1st June 2025: Seventh Sunday of Easter
Jewish Views of Gentiles at the Time of Jesus: (3) Gentile Impurity

At the time of Jesus did the Jewish people consider Gentiles to be impure? The answer to this question is not straightforward as Dr Ben Shahar (1) makes clear. This article will attempt to summarise his exploration of the matter.

The Torah (2) defines many states of impurity [e.g. contact with unclean objects, principally human corpses and animal carcasses] and how they are to be ritually cleansed. An impure person, unless and until cleansed, was forbidden from entering the Temple. In the books of the Torah and of some of the prophets, Gentiles are characterised by concepts of purity and impurity. So, in Leviticus (18: 6-28) the Lord lists a number of sexual practices which are unclean, saying "*by all these the nations I am casting out before you defiled themselves*". However, nowhere in the Torah does it say that ritual impurity can be contracted through contact with Gentiles. Dr Ben Shahar concludes: "*it is best to view these biblical passages as metaphorical, where immorality, especially sexual immorality is compared to 'impurity'*".

However, Rabbinic writings in the early centuries after Christ suggest that a Gentile who converts to Judaism must undergo ritual purification. This has led some scholars to suggest that those sources believed that Gentiles were inherently impure. Whether or not this is so, it is difficult to find any firm evidence for such a belief existing at the time of Jesus. It seems that one strict Jewish sect, the Essenes, stipulated ritual immersion for anyone who had touched a Gentile, though it is not clear whether this applied just to Gentiles or also to those Jews who did not adhere to the Essene sect. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which date from the 3rd century B.C. to 68 A.D., are mostly identified with the Essenes. In them there is confirmation that sect members regarded as unclean Gentile vessels, food and sacrifices. Yet the inferences from this evidence may not be generalised to Jewish people outside the Essene sect. Gentiles were permitted to enter the outer court of the Temple (known as the Court of the Gentiles) but were prohibited from going any further to the inner and even more holy areas. With the assent of the Romans, even a Roman citizen could be punished by death for transgression. St Paul, a Pharisee as well as a

Roman citizen, was attacked for bringing Greeks beyond the Outer Court - See Acts 21:27-32 where Paul was accused of defiling the holy Temple in this way.

The sources do not therefore prove that, at the time of Jesus, the Jewish people assessed Gentiles as impure per se, though their access to the holy of holies in the Temple was prohibited and there is evidence that Essene sect may well have regarded Gentiles as such. Dr Ben Shahar concludes: *“In sum, it is difficult to put together a clear picture of whether or not Gentiles were considered impure in the New Testament period, and if their status changed in the early rabbinic period, perhaps as a result of Jewish resentment of the Gentiles after the failures of the great Jewish revolts”* – [the first of these revolts against Rome is dated between 66-73 A.D. and includes the Roman destruction of the Temple].

Next week the final article in this series will examine what Dr Ben Shahar tells us about Gentile conversion to Judaism at and prior to the time of Christ.

- (1) *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* Second edition 2017, Levine & Brettler; (2) The first five books of the Old Testament

Stephen S.