

HOLINESS

Rabbinic Judaism and the
Graeco-Roman world

Hannah K. Harrington



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HOLINESS

Scholars have defined holiness in many ways. These range from the vague and ethereal adjective 'numinous' to practical matters of ritual purity. When both a sheaf of grain and God can be called 'holy', how should we understand the elusive meaning of this word?

Hannah K. Harrington presents an in-depth exploration of holiness in the context of rabbinic Judaism, based on a holistic yet detailed understanding of the relevant texts and Scripture. The rabbinic concept of holiness is placed alongside other notions of the sacred in the Graeco-Roman world, providing a much-needed comparative view of this core subject during a key period in the development of the Jewish religion.

Holiness will be of interest to students and scholars of biblical studies, Graeco-Roman religions and Jewish studies.

Hannah K. Harrington is Professor of Old Testament at Patten College, Oakland, California. She received her Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, and has written numerous articles on the Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic Judaism.

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This book is dedicated to my dear mother,
Constance M. Karajian, and to the memory
of my loving father, Dr Samuel L. Karajian.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| 1 En. | 1 Enoch |
| 1QH | Qumran, <i>Thanksgiving Psalms</i> , Cave 1 |
| 1QM | Qumran, <i>War Scroll</i> , Cave 1 |
| 1QS | Qumran, <i>Manual of Discipline</i> , Cave 1 |
| 2 Bar. | 2 Baruch |
| 2 Macc. | 2 Maccabees |
| 4 Ezra | 4 Ezra |
| 4 Macc. | 4 Maccabees |
| 4Q274 | Qumran, <i>Toborot</i> , Cave 4 |
| 4Q284a | Qumran, <i>Purification Rule</i> , Cave 4 |
| 4QFlor | Qumran, <i>Florilegium</i> , Cave 4 |
| 4QMMT | Qumran, <i>Miksat Ma-aseh ha-Torah</i> , Cave 4 |
| 11Q13 | Qumran, <i>Melchizedek</i> , Cave 11 |
| 11Q19 | Qumran, <i>Temple Scroll</i> , Cave 11 |
| Aesch., <i>Eur.</i> | Aeschylus, <i>Euripides</i> |
| Ar., <i>Lys.</i> | Aristides, <i>Lysistratus</i> |
| ARNa | <i>Abot de-Rabbi Nathan - first version</i> |
| ARNb | <i>Abot de-Rabbi Nathan - second version</i> |
| Arist. | <i>Letter of Aristeas</i> |
| b. | Babylonian Talmud |
| Barn. | <i>Epistle of Barnabas</i> |
| Cant. R. | <i>Canticles Rabbah</i> |
| CD | Cairo (Genizah text of the) Damascus (Document) |
| <i>Civ. Dei.</i> | <i>De Civitas Dei (City of God)</i> |
| <i>Cyr. Cat. Myst.</i> | Cyril of Jerusalem, <i>Catechesis Mystagogica</i> |
| <i>Ench.</i> | <i>Encheiridion</i> |
| <i>Eur., El.</i> | Euripides, <i>Electra</i> |
| <i>Eur., Hipp.</i> | Euripides, <i>Hippolytus</i> |
| Eus. | Eusebius |
| <i>Hist.</i> | <i>Church History</i> |
| <i>Vit. Const.</i> | <i>Vita Constantini</i> |
| <i>Exod. R.</i> | <i>Exodus Rabbah</i> |

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>Gen. R.</i> | <i>Genesis Rabbah</i> |
| Gk. | Greek |
| Heb. | Hebrew |
| <i>Hekh. Rab.</i> | <i>Hekhalot Rabbati</i> |
| Heracl., <i>Fr.</i> | Heraclitus in <i>Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiken</i> (Diels) |
| <i>Herm. Sim.</i> | <i>Hermas Similitude(s)</i> |
| <i>Herm. Vis.</i> | <i>Hermas, Vision(s)</i> |
| Ign., <i>Rom.</i> | Ignatius, <i>Letter to the Romans</i> |
| Jos. | Josephus |
| <i>Ag. Ap.</i> | <i>Against Apion</i> |
| <i>Ant.</i> | <i>Antiquities</i> |
| <i>Wars</i> | <i>The Jewish Wars</i> |
| Jub. | Jubilees |
| Just., <i>Dial.</i> | Justin Martyr, <i>Dialogues with Trypho</i> |
| Lat. | Latin |
| <i>Lev. R.</i> | <i>Leviticus Rabbah</i> |
| LAB | <i>Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum</i> |
| Lact., <i>Div. Inst.</i> | Lactantius, <i>Divinae Institutiones</i> |
| Luc., <i>De Syria Dea</i> | Lucianus, <i>De Syria Dea</i> |
| m. | Mishnah |
| <i>Mart. Pol.</i> | <i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i> |
| <i>Mek.</i> | <i>Mekilta</i> |
| <i>Mid. ha-Gadol</i> | <i>Midrash ha-Gadol</i> |
| <i>Mid. Teb.</i> | <i>Midrash Tebilim</i> |
| <i>Num. R.</i> | <i>Numbers Rabbah</i> |
| Orig., <i>Ag. Cels.</i> | Origen, <i>Against Celsus</i> |
| Philo | |
| <i>Flacc.</i> | <i>In Flaccum</i> |
| <i>Fug.</i> | <i>De fuga et inventione</i> |
| <i>Heres</i> | <i>Quis rerum divinarum Heres</i> |
| <i>Sp. Laws</i> | <i>Special Laws</i> |
| <i>Vit. Mos.</i> | <i>De Vitae Mose</i> |
| Pesikta R | Pesikta Rabbati |
| PRE | Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer |
| Pl. | Plato |
| <i>Crit.</i> | <i>Crito</i> |
| <i>Resp.</i> | <i>Respublica</i> |
| <i>Soph.</i> | <i>Sophista</i> |
| Plut. | Plutarch |
| <i>Phoc.</i> | <i>De Phocione</i> |
| <i>Tranq. An.</i> | <i>De Tranquillitate Animi</i> |
| PRK | <i>Pesikta de-Rab Kabana</i> |
| Pss. Sol. | Psalms of Solomon |
| Ro. | Roman |
| Sen., <i>Moral Essays</i> | Seneca, <i>Moral Essays</i> |

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Sen., <i>Moral Epist.</i> | Seneca, <i>Moral Epistles</i> |
| <i>Sh. Ar.</i> | <i>Shulkhan Arukh</i> |
| <i>Sif. Deut.</i> | <i>Sifrei Deuteronomy</i> |
| <i>Sif. Num.</i> | <i>Sifrei Numbers</i> |
| <i>Sif. Zuta</i> | <i>Sifrei Zuta</i> |
| Sir. | Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) |
| Soph., <i>Ant</i> | Sophocles, <i>Antigone</i> |
| t. | Tosefta |
| <i>Tanb.</i> | <i>Tanbuma</i> |
| <i>Targ. Jon.</i> | <i>Targum Jonathan</i> |
| Test. Benj. | Testament of Benjamin |
| Test. Job | Testament of Job |
| Thuc. | Thucydides |
| Xen., <i>Hell.</i> | Xenophon, <i>Historia Graeca</i> |
| Wis. Sol. | Wisdom of Solomon |
| y. | Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi) |
| <i>Yalk.</i> | <i>Yalkut</i> |

Tractates of the Mishnah, Tosefta, Jerusalem (Yerushalmi) or Babylonian (Bavli) Talmuds

| | |
|------------|---------------|
| Ab. | Abot |
| Arak. | Arakin |
| AZ | Aboda Zara |
| BB | Baba Batra |
| Ber. | Berakot |
| Bets. | Betsah |
| BQ | Baba Qamma |
| Dem. | Demai |
| Ed. | Eduyot |
| Erub. | Erubin |
| Git. | Gittin |
| Hag. | Hagigah |
| Hal. | Hallah |
| Hor. | Horayot |
| Hul. | Hullin |
| Kel. | Kelim |
| Ker. | Keritot |
| Ket. | Ketubot |
| MQ | Mo'ed Qatan |
| Ma'as. Sh. | Ma'aser Sheni |
| Mak. | Makkot |
| Meg. | Megillah |
| Men. | Menahot |

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------|--------------|
| Naz. | Nazir |
| Ned. | Nedarim |
| Neg. | Nega'im |
| Nid. | Niddah |
| Oh. | Ohalot |
| Or. | Orlah |
| Par. | Parah |
| Pe'ah | Pe'ah |
| Pes. | Pesahim |
| Qid. | Qiddushin |
| RH | Rosh Hashana |
| San. | Sanhedrin |
| Shab. | Shabbat |
| Sheb. | Shebi'it |
| Shebu. | Shebu'ot |
| Sheq. | Sheqalim |
| Sot. | Sota |
| Suk. | Sukkah |
| Ta'an. | Ta'anit |
| Tam. | Tamid |
| Ter. | Terumot |
| Toh. | Tohorot |
| Yad. | Yadayim |
| Yeb. | Yebamot |
| Yoma | Yoma |
| Zeb. | Zebahim |

INTRODUCTION

What did it mean to be holy in the first Christian centuries? Many people have mixed views on the concept of holiness. Some see it as a Judeo-Christian phenomenon. Others regard the sacred realm as a universal construct. The definition of holiness too is variously understood. Some see it as a moral category, others as a social classification. Some regard it equivalent to religious experience, while others regard it as simply a state of being outside of the norm. What is needed is a systematic presentation of the matter, and nowhere is the topic so integral to religion as in the rabbinic Judaism of the early centuries of the common era. This period provides rich soil for explaining the concept both in the broad, pagan domain of Graeco-Roman culture as well as in the more narrow but extremely fertile valley of rabbinic Judaism. In the latter we find the components of a complete system of holiness compiled from the prolific teachings of the rabbinic sages. It is this material upon which the following study is based. The rabbinic concept of holiness provides a detailed model for comparison and contrast with the notion of the sacred in both paganism and Christianity.

SCHOLARSHIP ON HOLINESS

General scholarship

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have been intrigued with the notions of holiness and purity. Each has contributed a special dimension to the present state of research. Anthropologists from Emile Durkheim to Mary Douglas have demonstrated that the realm of the holy, or the sacred (I use these words synonymously), is a cross-cultural phenomenon. It seems that universally, human beings mark out certain areas, persons, times, and rituals as sacred and fear them

INTRODUCTION

as extraordinary, powerful, and/or mystical. Graeco-Roman historians and religionists have unearthed numerous sacred temples and statues across the Roman empire which reveal the concern for the holy throughout the Roman empire. Greek and Latin texts and inscriptions confirm the regard for the sacred with numerous restrictions on holy personnel and sites.

Biblical scholars have advanced the understanding of holiness to a great degree by insisting that universal models alone do not get at the heart of what it means to be holy in a given culture. Here one must delve into the language of the particular texts which a group preserved. The most standard text on biblical holiness in the early part of this century was written by Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.¹ Otto regards holiness as sort of a *mysterium tremendum*, an awe-inspiring energy which brings people to God. In a probing analysis of Scripture, Otto presents holiness as a divine power, which he calls the “numinous,” which awes and overwhelms human beings. However, Otto sidesteps the aspect of holiness so prevalent in Leviticus and Numbers which is based upon the Temple cult. The fact that animal sacrifices are labeled holy, and some even “holy of holies,” by the biblical priests is not explained.

Probably the most productive and integrative of Bible scholars on our topic has been Jacob Milgrom. In an extensive commentary on Leviticus, Milgrom analyzes the biblical data to uncover a system of holiness and purity which resonates within its ancient near eastern context but has a unique ring of its own as well. He explains the system of the biblical priests in a systematic manner, filling in gaps of the text by means of the Bible’s own inner logic as well as its ancient near eastern context. Milgrom brings into relief the classifications inherent in the system and the way in which they are maintained. Milgrom is nevertheless keenly aware of the ethical undergirding of the biblical system and constantly seeks to uncover the ethical in the ritual. Rationales and motives of the priests are examined, providing an outstanding model for any other scholarship on holiness in any context.

Other biblical scholars who have contributed to the clarification of the data on holiness include Baruch Levine, who has done major linguistic work on holiness, Philip P. Jenson, with regard to classifications in the priestly system, and John Gammie, who has compiled a broader study of holiness by examining it in the different genres of biblical literature.²

The matter of holiness in the New Testament has traditionally been considered a topic of proper social and sexual conduct. With

INTRODUCTION

the demise of cultic ritual in Christianity, early interpreters began to regard holiness as a matter of ethics having nothing to do with ritual sanctification by means of sacrifices or purity rituals. The latter categories were reinterpreted in light of the person and ministry of Jesus Christ with the end result being that they were rendered out-of-date and superseded by the atoning death and resurrection of Christ. Matters of Israelite cult and ritual were often used as effective teaching tools to illuminate theological aspects of Christianity even though they were considered obsolete in actual practice. In modern times, New Testament scholars have become increasingly interested in early Christianity's own holy rituals and the way in which they contributed to the social stratification of nascent Christian communities.³ As this book hopes to prove, rabbinic scholars too can contribute to this endeavor. Much of the early Christian teaching on holiness shows an affinity with its rabbinic Jewish counterpart and some ideas are clarified by comparison with similar notions in rabbinic Judaism.

Rabbinic scholarship

As far back in time as the New Testament itself, the Pharisaic tradition, which gave rise to Rabbinic Judaism as it is known from the Mishnah, Talmudim and other sources (see below), has been criticized for its emphasis on cultic ritual over matters of ethical goodness. In response to this critique and continuing criticism from Christians of Jewish rituals, noted rabbinic scholars at the turn of the century, such as Solomon Schechter, wrote essays and handbooks on Judaism which emphasized the ethical dimension of holiness in Judaism. George Foot Moore's two-volume work entitled *Judaism* as well as Ephraim Urbach's work, *The Sages*, are both invaluable reference sources for those wishing to know the principles and even details of rabbinic Judaism, but neither focuses on the ritual nature of sanctification in much detail.

However, when one examines the Mishnah, the primary source of rabbinic Judaism and the earliest redacted rabbinic document (ca. 200 CE), issues of holiness take up over one third of the material, and sanctification is clearly by ritual means, i.e. sacrifices, purity rules, cultic festivals, agricultural offerings, etc. Thus, it appears that the traditional Christian critique is correct. Judaism's road to holiness is by ritual means. Indeed this seems to be the attitude of Jacob Neusner, who has done the majority of recent work on holiness in rabbinic Judaism. Neusner has written the most

extensive modern commentary on the Mishnah in addition to translations of and commentaries on other rabbinic sources, including the two Talmuds. One of his major contributions has been to bring into relief the ritual character of sanctification in rabbinic Judaism in a positive, healthy light without apology. Another benefit is his analysis of each aspect of holiness and purity as part of a coherent, rabbinic system rather than a collection of random laws.

One of Neusner's main themes is that the Mishnah authors tried to help the Jewish people deal with the calamities of 70 and 135 CE in which so many lives were lost, the Temple was destroyed, and Jews were banned from Jerusalem. The Mishnah's main focus, according to Neusner, is filling in the religious vacuum of the loss of the Temple. The Mishnah's solution to the problem is to ignore the vacuum and insist that holiness continues within the daily private life of Israel. It is not dependent on the cultic structure:

That sanctification, as a matter of fact, from the viewpoint of the system now endured and transcended the physical destruction of the building and the cessation of sacrifices. For Israel the people was holy, enduring as the medium and the instrument of God's sanctification.⁴

Unfortunately, in his successful effort to show that the Mishnah is preoccupied with the sanctification of Israel, that this holiness is maintained by means of purity and the cult, and that the presence of impurity does not automatically indicate the presence of sin, Neusner makes the untenable conclusion that holiness by rabbinic definition is not a moral category at all. He refers to it as simply a means to social classification via public and private rituals: "Virtue and holiness constitute distinct classifications, the one having to do with morality, the other with ontology. . . . [R]epresenting uncleanness as part of a hierarchical classification of social entities constitutes the correct systemic reading of the matter."⁵ In fact, Neusner regards the moral dimension of holiness in the popular mind to be a Christian construction.⁶

Neusner's work on holiness suffers because he insists on treating rabbinic sources in isolation from each other. While his translations of many rabbinic sources are a valuable aid to scholars, he reconstructs the rabbinic concept of holiness primarily from the data provided in the Mishnah. While I agree with him that every document, indeed every writer, will have some agenda or motive, the rabbinic texts of the early centuries CE must be taken together

INTRODUCTION

in order to portray, as accurately as possible, “the rabbinic” concept on any major issue. In this case, the early rabbinic commentaries on the Pentateuch, namely, the *Mekbilta* (on Exodus), the *Sifra* (on Leviticus), *Sifrei Numbers* (on Numbers), and *Sifrei Deuteronomy* (on Deuteronomy), contain material of the same provenance and time period as the Mishnah (indeed a fair amount is identical to the Mishnah), quote many of the same sages, and are interested in many of the same matters. Although all of these sources are usually attributed to early third century redactors, the material is largely the work of generations of sages spanning the first two centuries of the common era.

The *Sifra* is interested in many of the same matters of sanctification as the Mishnah, but focuses as well on the ethical dimension to holiness found in Leviticus 18–20. Nevertheless, Neusner does not include this moral aspect in his definition of holiness because he derives his definition almost exclusively from the Mishnah, which does not explore that avenue in terms of holiness. While the Mishnah is the core document of rabbinic literature, its agenda is limited. To truly arrive at a balanced picture of sanctification in rabbinic Judaism, the array of literary evidence must be broadened.

My work fits into this picture of scholarship as an attempt to provide a balanced view of holiness in rabbinic Judaism as it fits into its larger Graeco-Roman context. Many basic components of holiness in rabbinic Judaism are also present in cultures throughout the Roman empire. Notions of separateness, power, and perfection marking off sacred areas and persons are not unusual in the early Christian centuries. Nevertheless, there are certain particulars in the rabbinic presentation of holiness which make it distinctive and even peculiar when placed alongside its pagan neighbors. Other distinctives appear when the rabbinic model is compared with its Christian counterpart. This book aims to present, as accurately and systematically as possible, the concept of holiness as it was understood by the Rabbis. For this I will draw on as many rabbinic sources as prove helpful.

The book is arranged in categories which, although they have many overlapping concerns in the pagan as well as Christian worlds, are truly rabbinic. These categories are upheld in rabbinic literature as, what could be called, pillars of holiness. First, holiness is inherent in and emanates from the Holy One, i.e. God himself. Second, the holy house is central to rabbinic thinking on holiness even though it was only in actual existence until 70 CE. Physical destruction could