

Language of Ritual Purity in the Qur'ān and Old South Arabian

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is a comparative examination of Old South Arabian and qur'anic vocabulary concerning ritual and, to a more limited extent, substantive purity. Jacques Ryckmans already extensively studied the then-available Old South Arabian evidence pertaining to the subject in a 1972 article¹, and he clearly saw the potential for discussing the Islamic code of ritual purity in the context of Old South Arabian sources. He ended his article with the following remark:

“Quoi qu'il en soit, notre étude aura, nous l'espérons, contribué à attirer l'attention des islamisants sur l'intérêt que présentent certains textes épigraphiques de l'Arabie du Sud préislamique au point de vue de l'étude des origines de certaines pratiques de l'Islam.”²

Ryckmans' counsel resonates even more strongly today in the post-Hagarism³, post-Wansbrough⁴ paradigm of early Islamic historiography where pre-Islamic Arabian epigraphy provides one of the rare treasures of much-sought-after documentary evidence. Yet, there has also been a major methodological shift from Ryckmans' time to ours: unlike Ryckmans, scholars of the Qur'ān and early Islam today tend to separate the evidence of the qur'anic text from that of later Muslim sources in an attempt to underline the “demonstrably early”⁵ and fairly well-documented text of the Qur'ān as opposed to the corpus of later narrative, exegetical, and historical sources.

Ryckmans argued, among other things, that the Islamic code of ritual purity seems to have its origins in the pre-Islamic religious milieu of South Arabia, which may or may not have developed its legal and ritual content independently of Jewish influence. In this paper I plan to insert another column into this matrix by arguing that the strictly qur'anic version of injunctions concerning ritual and substantive purity has more parallels with what we find in Old South Arabian epigraphy than the later, more detailed versions in legal manuals, which were produced

¹ Jacques Ryckmans, “Les Confessions Publique Sabéennes: Le Code Sud-Arabe de Pureté Rituelle,” *Annali Del Istituto Orientale Di Napoli* 22 (1972): 1–15.

² Ibid., 15.

³ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge ;New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁴ The reference here is to John E. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, vol. v. 31, London Oriental Series v. 31 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). The reason I present the publication of Hagarism and Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies* as watershed events is not because of the validity of their claims but because of their paradigm shifting effect in the study of the Qur'ān and early Islam.

⁵ This phrase was poignantly used by Crone-Cook and Fred Donner to make two contrasting points. Crone and Cook said in Hagarism: “Virtually all accounts of the early development of Islam take it as axiomatic that it is possible to elicit at least the outlines of the process from the Islamic sources. It is however well-known that these sources are not demonstrably early. There is no hard evidence for the existence of the Koran in any form before the last decade of the seventh century...” Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 3. Fred Donner, on the other hand, some thirty years after the publication of Hagarism, would confidently say that “the Qur'ān text is demonstrably early.” Fred McGraw Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 56.

in “the sectarian milieu”⁶ of Islam’s formative period in the 8th and 9th centuries CE. I also hope to point out a few issues of philological interest that Ryckmans did not explore, especially regarding the relationship between Arabic and the Haramic dialect of Old South Arabian, in which many of the texts that Ryckmans analyzed were produced.

The Qur’an on Ritual Purity

Joseph Lowry, in his *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an* article on “Ritual Purity” provides a good summary of the qur’anic passages about ritual and substantial purity. He defines ritual purity as “a state of heightened cleanliness, symbolic or actual, associated with persons, activities and objects in the context of ritual worship.”⁷ Within the confines of this definition, as he rightly notes, there are only two verses in the Qur’an, Q 4:43 and 5:6, that directly deal with ritual purity. We can add to these a few other verses that mention purity stipulations about pilgrimage, fasting, and menstruation. As for substantive purity, i.e. actual or symbolic cleanliness of objects bearing on human utility, qur’anic evidence seems parsimonious and ambiguous, as I will discuss below.

Let us first look at the two closely parallel verses about ritual ablution in the Qur’an, which are both from chapters considered to be Medinan. Q 5:6 is more comprehensive and provides details about how ritual washing should be conducted:

O believers, when you stand up to pray wash (*fa-ḡsilū*) your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe (*wa-mṣahū*) your heads, and your feet up to the ankles. If you are defiled (*junuban*), purify yourselves (*fa-ṭṭahharū*); but if you are sick or on a journey, or if any of you comes from the privy, or you have touched women, and you can find no water, then have recourse to (*fa-tayammamū*) wholesome dust and wipe (*fa-mṣahū*) your faces and your hands with it. God does not desire to make any impediment for you; but He desires to purify you (*li-yuṭahhirakum*), and that He may complete His blessing upon you (*ni ‘matahū*); haply you will be thankful. (Arberry’s translation)

Q 4:43 prohibits praying while intoxicated and in the state of impurity and repeats the alternative to washing in the absence of water:

O believers, draw not near to prayer when you are drunken until you know what you are saying, or defiled (*junuban*)-- unless you are traversing a way (*‘ābirī sabīlan*)-- until you have washed yourselves (*ḥattā taghtasilū*); but if you are sick, or on a journey, or if any of you comes from the privy, or you have touched women, and you can find no water, then have recourse to wholesome dust and wipe your faces and your hands; God is All-pardoning, All-forgiving. (Arberry’s translation)

It is worth noting that the Qur’an does not mention the word *wuḍū’* or any other word related to it to denote the ritual washing even though it was later to become the technical term for minor ablution for ritual purposes in Islamic law.⁸ Also the neat distinction that legal manuals draw between minor and major impurity does not appear to be fully conceived in the Qur’an. According to the Qur’an, impurity, regardless of its degree, is removed by washing (ḡ-s-l) and

⁶ Borrowing from John Wansbrough’s *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁷ Joseph Lowry, “Ritual Purity”, *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, vol. 4, pp. 498.

⁸ Cf. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, ch. 2, *Kitāb al-Ṭahārah* & Sunan Abī Dāwūd, ch. 1. To give but one example from legal manuals, the *Mukhtaṣar* of al-Qudūrī (d. 1037), the influential work on Ḥanafī jurisprudence, opens with a chapter on purity in which the introduction of the verse Q 5:6 quickly gives way to details of minor and major ablution (*wuḍū’* and *ḡṣl*) and circumstances that lead to their nullification. Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Qudūrī, [*Mukhtaṣar*] *Al-Qudūrī*. (Bumbāy :, 1303), 2–6.

wiping (m-s-ḥ) with water or, in its absence, with clean dust. For men, having contact with women leads to impurity but it is not clear from the text of the Qur’ān whether the word *junub* refers to major impurity caused by sexual conduct as later legal reasoning determined.⁹

As it is clear from these two verses and other instances in the Qur’ān, words from the root *ṭ-h-r* denote purity, often ethical and symbolic but also sometimes substantive. Even though the nominal form *ṭahāra* (“purity”, corresponding to the Hebrew *ṭāhorāh*¹⁰) does not directly appear in the Qur’ān it became a central concept in Islamic law to the extent that legal manuals and ḥadīth collections often open with a section on *ṭahāra*. Its opposite in Muslim jurisprudence, *najāsa*, “impurity”, is derived from the single occurrence of the word *najas* in Q 9:28. Instead of being strictly a word for substantive impurity, however, *najas* in 9:28 appears as a characteristic of polytheists that bars them from entering *al-masjid al-harām*.¹¹ Lowry argues that the Qur’ān uses other words such as *rijs*, *rijz* and *rujz* to indicate the status of ritual and substantive purity for things like wine, games of chance, blood, carrion and pork.¹² However, as he notes, the qur’anic usage of the words *rijz* and *rujz* corresponds better to Aramaic *rugzā* denoting God’s wrath in the form of a pestilence instead of substantive impurity whereas *rijs* denotes all sorts of abominations, actual or symbolic, that “interfere with receptivity to Islam.”¹³ In any case, neither *rijs*, nor *rijz* or *rujz* came to mean the opposite of purity in later sources. *Najas*, albeit a *hapax legomenon* in the Qur’ān, became the basis of an important technical term as the semantic counterpart of words from the root *ṭ-h-r*. One might also note that the word *ṭum’āh*,¹⁴ the Hebrew antonym of *ṭāhorāh*, does not exist in Arabic; but as we will see it is attested in an Old South Arabian inscription.

The final point about the stipulations of ritual purity in the Qur’ān has to do with menstruation. In the Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 15 enumerates certain elements of *ṭum’ah* concerning bodily fluids and sexual conduct, including the status of menstrual blood. One reads there that not only is a menstruating woman considered impure for seven days, but also any contact with her and her blood deems other objects impure.¹⁵ Q 2:222 confirms that menstruating women (*al-nisā’ fī l-mahīd*) should not be approached sexually until they are clean (*ḥattā yaṭhurna*) but seems to reject the notion that their impurity is contagious. Lowry notes that some early Muslim scholars entertained the idea of considering the impurity of certain persons and objects contagious but it did not take root. As for Old South Arabian texts, we will see that evidence for the contagiousness of impurity is rather ambiguous.

⁹ *Janābah* being the technical term, see Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, ch. 5, Kitāb al-Ghusl, ḥadīth no. 248.

¹⁰ Lev. 12:4, Lev. 13:7, 35 etc.

¹¹ “O believers, the idolaters (*al-mushrikūn*) are indeed unclean (*najasun*); so let them not come near the Holy Mosque after this year of theirs. If you fear poverty, God shall surely enrich you of His bounty, if He will; God is All-knowing; All-wise.”

¹² Joseph Lowry, “Ritual Purity”, *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, vol. 4, pp. 503.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nu. 5:19, Lev. 5:3 etc.

¹⁵ Lev. 15:19-24: “And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be in her impurity seven days; and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even. And every thing that she lieth upon in her impurity shall be unclean; every thing also that she sitteth upon shall be unclean. And whosoever toucheth her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even. And whosoever toucheth any thing that she sitteth upon shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even. And if he be on the bed, or on any thing whereon she sitteth, when he toucheth it, he shall be unclean until the even. And if any man lie with her, and her impurity be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days; and every bed whereon he lieth shall be unclean.” (KJV)

Old South Arabian Sources on Ritual Purity: the Context of Penitential Inscriptions

There are two initial observations to be made about texts dealing with purity in Old South Arabian inscriptions, one already noticed and discussed by J. Ryckmans and the other as of yet not quite emphasized. As J. Ryckmans duly notes, almost all Old South Arabian inscriptions that touch upon issues of ritual and substantive purity are essentially confessional/penitential texts in which the commissioner publicly confesses a sin or a misdemeanor, often sexual, and seeks atonement. Jacques Ryckmans' uncle Gonzague closely studied ten such inscriptions, eight of which he identified as Sabaic (CIH 523, CIH 532, CIH 533, CIH 546, CIH 547, CIH 568, RES 3956, RES 3957), one Minaic (RES 2980) and one too fragmentary to identify (CIH 678).¹⁶ Dating from the pre-monotheistic phase of Old South Arabia and inscribed on bronze or copper (see Figures 1 to 6 at the end of this chapter), G. Ryckmans noted that these inscriptions were meant to be publicly viewed in temples for expiatory purposes and the provenance for the majority of them was the area of Madīnat Haram, near modern-day Kharibat Ḥamdān, where temples for deities *ḏ-S'mwy* and *Ḥlfn* were located. He also noted that these inscriptions had a very distinctive pattern where the name of the wrongdoer was often followed systematically by the deity addressed, the confession of the fault that was committed, the chastisement inflicted upon the wrongdoer for his/her act and, finally, the demand for the continuance of the deity's benevolence.¹⁷ J. Ryckmans later added a few other specimens to the list of penitential inscriptions and analyzed their content related to issues of ritual purity.

What Gonzague and Jacques Ryckmans did not emphasize, however, is that many of these Sabaic inscriptions from Madīnat Haram share morphological and syntactic parallels with Arabic. It is also worth mentioning that Madīnat Haram and other places such as Barāqish (ancient *Ytl*), where these penitential inscriptions are found, are located between Ṣan'ā' and Najrān and constitute roughly the northernmost tip of extensive Old South Arabian epigraphic activity in the region with the exception of some outlying examples. More recently Christian Robin¹⁸ noted the special case of penitential inscriptions from Haram, and Peter Stein meticulously studied the language of Haramic inscriptions and its relationship with Arabic and Minaic.¹⁹

In the meantime, new inscriptions with expiatory content, sometimes with possibly Haramic provenance, have been discovered since the time the Ryckmans duo produced their works on the inscriptions I just mentioned. With these additions the corpus in question is significantly enlarged. Recently Alexander Sima worked on these texts and suggested parallels to their confessional character in Greek inscriptions from Asia Minor.²⁰ In the early 2000s Manfred Kropp revisited the topic of confessional inscriptions and discussed their religious and legal

¹⁶ Gonzague Ryckmans, "La Confession Publique Des Péchés En Arabie Méridionale Préislamique," *Museon* 58 (1945): 1–14. G. Ryckmans says that these inscriptions were earlier studied in the second volume (1935) of Raffaele Pettazzoni, *La confessione dei peccati* (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1929-1936). However, I was unable to consult this text.

¹⁷ Ryckmans, "La Confession Publique Des Péchés En Arabie Méridionale Préislamique," 3.

¹⁸ Christian Robin, *Inabba', Haram, Al-Kafir, Kamna et Al-Harashif. Fascicule A-B: Les Documents-Les Planches* (ISIAO, 1992).

¹⁹ Peter Stein, "Materialien Zur Sabäischen Dialektologie: Das Problem Des Amiritischen ('haramitischen') Dialektes," *Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 157 (2007): 13–47.

²⁰ Alexander Sima, "Neuinterpretation Einer Jüngst Entdeckten Sabäischen Büß- Und Sühneinschrift Aus Dem Wādi Ṣūzayf," *Die Welt Des Orients* 29 (1998): 127–39. Also see Alexander Sima, "Kleinasiatische Parallelen Zu Den Altsüdarabischen Büß- Und Sühneinschriften," *Altorientalische Forschungen* 1 (1999): 140–53.

contexts.²¹ Most recently Alessio Agostini studied these texts systematically and made a comprehensive list of all expiatory inscriptions including those coming from the Haram region. Agostini identified around thirty properly expiatory/penitential texts in addition to a few dedicatory inscriptions addressed to a deity for forgiveness of a transgression but with a different “textual typology”.²² In this paper I am primarily concerned with purity-related penitential inscriptions in the Haramic dialect. Before discussing the content of these inscriptions in connection with ritual and substantial purity, an introductory overview of published Haramic inscriptions, expiatory or otherwise, in list form could prove useful. The table below contains an alphabetical list of them and their provenance with some preliminary notes on their content and key vocabulary pertaining to the topic of this paper.

	Dialect	Provenance	Content	Key Vocabulary
Bron 1999	Haramic	Unknown	Penitential?, for striking a servant	
FB-Wādī Šuḍayf 2	Haramic	Wādī Shuḍayf	Penitential, for polluting and sexual misconduct	<i>ḡsl</i> , “to wash”, <i>tmṭ</i> , “to deflower”, cf. Q 55:56, 74
FB-Wādī Šuḍayf 3	Haramic	Wādī Shuḍayf	Penitential, fragmentary	
Haram 8=CIH 546	Haramic	Jawf	Penitential, non-sexual collective confession	
Haram 10=CIH 547	Haramic	Jawf	Penitential, collective, for delaying the ritual hunt	<i>ns^l</i> , “to postpone”, cf. Q 9:37
Haram 13=CIH 548	Haramic	Jawf	Legal, about pilgrimage and access to a temple	<i>ngs^l</i> , “to defile”, cf. Q 9:28, <i>dmw</i> , “to defile with blood?”
Haram 33=CIH 532	Haramic	Jawf	Penitential, for appearing impure in public	<i>ḡyr ṭhrm</i> , “in an impure state”
Haram 34=CIH 533	Haramic	Jawf	Penitential, fragmentary, for sexual misconduct	<i>qrb</i> , “to approach (sexually)”, <i>hyd</i> , “to menstruate”, <i>lm yḡtsl</i> , “he did not wash himself”

²¹ Manfred Kropp, “Individual Public Confession and Pious Ex Voto, or Stereotypical and Stylized Trial Document and Stigmatizing Tablet for the Pillory? The Expiation Texts in Ancient South Arabian,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 32 (2002): 203–8.

²² Alessio Agostini, “New Perspectives on Minaean Expiatory Texts,” *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 42 (2012): 1–12. Agostini identifies following expiatory inscriptions (in the order that is listed in his article): YM 23643, Y.92.B.A.29, al-Jawf 04.9, GOAM 314, MAFRAY Darb al-Šabī 26, MAFRAY Darb al-Šabī 27, MAFRAY Darb al-Šabī 32, MAFRAY Darb al-Šabī 5, MAFRAY Darb al-Šabī 16, MAFRAY Darb al-Šabī 30, Haram 33, Haram 34, Haram 35, Haram 36, Haram 40, Haram 10, Haram 8, Haram 56, Fr-Šan‘ā’5, YM 10886, YM 26106, Shaqab 19, al-Šilwī 1 (referred in this paper as Šilwī Šuḍayf 1), FB-Wādī Šuḍayf 2, FB-Wādī Šuḍayf 3, München Inv. Nr 94-317 880, YM 10703, YM 24905, al-Šilwī 2005, CIH 678 and DhM 399. Other dedicatory inscriptions with contents related to transgressions are: CIAS 39.II/o3 n.6, CIAS 39.II/rI, Ja 702, Ja 720, Nami 74, Rb 1/84 no. 178 etc., Rb 1/84 Rb 1/89 no. 291 etc., Rb V/91 n. 61 1/89 n. 298, 300, Rb 1/88 n. 130, Rb 197, Rb 1/84.

Haram 35=RES 3956	Haramic	Jawf	Penitential, for substantive impurity	<i>ṭm'</i> , “impure” both as an adjective and a verb
Haram 36=RES 3957	Haramic	Jawf	Penitential, for ritual impurity	
Haram 40=CIH 523	Haramic	Jawf	Penitential, for sexual misconduct	<i>qrb</i> , “to approach (sexually)”, <i>hyd</i> , “to menstruate”, <i>ḡr-ṭhr</i> , “impure”, <i>lm yḡtsl</i> , “he did not wash himself”, <i>ndh</i> , “sprinkle (with semen), cf. Q 55:66?”
Haram 56=CIH 568	Haramic	Jawf	Penitential, reason not mentioned	
Ja 525	Haramic?	Unknown	Penitential, for ritual impurity	<i>ḡ-gwzt mḥrmhw ḡyr ṭhrm</i> , “that she traversed his temple in an impure state”
Ja 2147	Haramic?	Najrān	Non-penitential	
Kortler 4	Haramic	Jawf	Non-penitential	
MŞM 7250	Haramic?	Wādī Shuḡayf	Penitential, for entering temple with unclean clothes and sexual offense	<i>ḡ-l kyn ṭhrm</i> , “which was not clean”, <i>ms^l</i> , “to touch (a woman)”
München 94-317880	Haramic	Wādī Shuḡayf	Penitential, for sexual misconduct in the temple	
Şan‘ā’ 2004-1	Haramic?	Unknown	Penitential, reason unclear	<i>n(g)[s^l]w</i> , “they defiled”
Şilwī Şuḡayf 1	Haramic	Wādī Shuḡayf	Penitential, for polluting wells with semen	<i>mḥt^lm<m></i> , “person with nocturnal pollution”
YM 10703	Haramic	Wādī Shuḡayf	Penitential, misconduct in an offering	

All in all we are dealing here with twenty inscriptions, two of which, Ja 2147 and Kortler 4, are considered Haramic based upon linguistic evidence (see below) but have no penitential or legal content. A great majority of the remaining eighteen inscriptions include distinct formulae of penance for offenses committed in or about sacred places. Most, but not all, of these offenses have to do with sexual misconduct or ritual impropriety.

This fairly sizeable corpus gives us a fair idea about the rules and regulations of proper ritual conduct in public and sacred spaces and in the private lives of individuals in the Jawf valley. I argue that not only does the language of these inscriptions show a close linguistic affinity with the Arabic of the Qur’ān, as Stein argued, but also that there are lexical and doctrinal parallels between the Haramic and Qur’anic codes of ritual purity.

Before discussing these lexical and doctrinal parallels it might be useful to point out the morphological and syntactic idiosyncrasies of Haramic within Sabaic. Peter Stein²³ identifies five major points of convergence between Haramic and Arabic: i) the absence (with a few exceptions) of the third sibilant that exists in other Old South Arabian dialects ii) the presence, and comparable usage, of pre-verbal particle *f-*, iii) the use of the ablative preposition *mn* instead of the common Old South Arabian *bn* as well as the use of other particles such as *'d* for “as”, iv) the use of *lm* for the negation of the perfect tense and v) the use of final *-t* to indicate the 1st and 2nd person perfect tense conjugation instead of *-k* as in other Old South Arabian dialects. These similarities could be an indication as to why, as we shall see, we also observe lexical convergence between Haramic and Arabic formulations of ritual and substantive purity.

In Haramic inscriptions ritual purity is denoted by the word *thr*, and one needs to wash himself/herself (*gtsl*) in order to regain his/her purity after entering into any violating condition. Two similar and possibly related inscriptions provide good examples for studying the usage of these terms. Haram 40 (=CIH 523, see figure 5) is a short and complete inscription that expresses the confession and penance of a man who had sexual intercourse (*qrb mr'tm*)²⁴ with a menstruating woman (*hyd*, cognate with the term in Q:222) and another woman in childbed (*nfs'm*, compare with the Arabic *nafsā*, “woman in childbed”). The text indicates that these actions put the man in a state of ritual impurity (*gr thr*) and that his impure state continued as he did not wash himself (*lm ygts'l*), but rather stayed in his impure clothes (*y'b b-'ks'wthw gr-thr*) and sprinkled his clothes with semen (*ndh 'ks'wt-hw hmr*). He subsequently showed submission and regret and agreed to pay a fine (*f-hdr 'w-'nw w-yhl'n*).

Haram 34 (=CIH 533, see Figure 2), another Haramic inscription, has a similar content, but this time the dedicator of the inscription is a woman, perhaps the same woman that was mentioned in Haram 40. The text begins similarly with the confession of the dedicator and her willingness to do penance to the deity *d-S'mwy*. The reason of her confession is that a man approached her on the third day of the pilgrimage while she was on her period (*qrb-h mr' ywm tl't hgt'n w-h' hyd*). The man then walked away and did not wash himself (*w-ms'y w-lm ygts'l*). The inscription is broken after this point, and it is not entirely clear why the woman has to pay a fine for this action that seems to be primarily perpetrated by the man. In any case, the transgression here seems to be two-fold: sexual intercourse during pilgrimage while the woman involved was menstruating. It should be noted here that the Qur'ān also prohibits sexual intercourse during the period of pilgrimage.²⁵

If purity is denoted in Haramic with words from the root *thr*, what denotes words for impurity other than the phrase *gyr thr* (alternatively *gr thr*)? There is at least one example of the verbal root *ngs'* being used in the sense of defilement, and, just like in the Qur'ān, the context has to do with access to a sanctuary. In the Haramic case the sanctuary in question is that of *Hlfn* in Kharibat Ḥamdān in the northeast corner of Yemen and it is mentioned in the inscription Haram 13=CIH 548. The inscription is entirely legal in content and it stipulates that whoever comes to the sanctuary (*mhrmn*) with a weapon or clothes that are defiled by blood will pay a fine to the priests of the deity *'itr*: *hn l-yngs'n s'lh-hw w-dmwm b-s'y -hw l-yzl'n l-'lt 'itr w-'rs'wwn 's'r hy'lym*. That blood is a defiling agent and that its presence on one's clothes makes one impure are

²³ Peter Stein, “Ancient South Arabian,” in *The Semitic Languages. An International Handbook* (Berlin/Boston, 2011), 1047.

²⁴ Compare the usage of *qrb* with Q 2:222, “do not approach them (*lā taqrabūhunna*) until they are clean (*ḥattā yaṭḥurṇa*)”

²⁵ 2:197: *al-ḥajju ashhurun ma'lūmatun fa-man faraḍa fihinna l-ḥajja fa-lā rafatha wa-lā fusūqa wa-la jidāl fi l-ḥajj*: “The pilgrimage is during well-known months. So whoever obliged himself in these months to do the pilgrimage, there is no sexual relations, no disobedience and no dispute during the pilgrimage.”

instructed in later Muslim law but there is no indication of these stipulations in the Qur'ān other than the impermissibility of consuming blood.²⁶

Another attestation of the verb *ngs'*, “to defile,” appears in the recently discovered, possibly Haramic, inscription Šan'ā' 2004-1; however, the inscription is too damaged for one to properly read and understand the context of the impurity. One alternative to identifying *ngs'* as the antonym of *thr* is found in Haram 35 (=RES 3956, see Figure 3). In this inscription two words from the verbal root *tm'* denote substantial impurity for clothing mirroring the Hebrew (טמא) and Aramaic (ܬܡܐ, ܬܡܐ, n.b. Pa'al form in Syriac) usage of the word. Judging from the usage of the roots *ngs'* and *tm'* in the Qur'ān and Haramic inscriptions, it appears that the latter refers to simple substantial impurity, a category that is not quite emphasized in the Qur'ān, whereas the former indicates an ethical or ritual form of defilement confined strictly to the context of sanctuaries and other sacred spaces.

In fact, many Haramic inscriptions contain purity regulations about access to sanctuaries. An inscription (MŠM 7250) that was recently discovered in the temple of *Ġrw* dedicated to the deity *d-S'mwy* reflects a similar concern about entering a sanctuary with impure clothing albeit with a slightly different wording than in Haram 13. In MŠM 7250 the author confesses that he had entered the sanctuary (*mħrmn*) with an unclean belt (*dwl m d-'l kyn thrm*) and that he touched a woman while he was there (*w-b-dt bh' mħrm w-ms' 'ttm*).²⁷ Another Haramic inscription (Haram 33=CIH 532, see Figure 1) contains the confession of a woman who committed sins in her house and in the sanctuary and entered into the temple courtyard (*mwtn*²⁸) in an impure state (*wd't dy mwtnn gyr thrm*). This latter inscription can be compared with Ja 525, in which a woman seeks atonement for crossing the sanctuary in a state of impurity (*d-gwzt mħrmhw gyr thrm*).

In terms of substantial purity, Haramic inscriptions provide only a few examples. I have already mentioned Haram 13 in which “blood” is mentioned as an impure and defiling substance. In other inscriptions semen is also counted as an agent of impurity. In addition to Haram 40 that was referred to above, al-Šilwī 1 mentions a man who defiled two wells when he was still impure from his nocturnal pollution (*mħtlm<m>*, compare with Arabic *iḥtilām*, “experiencing an emission of the seminal fluid in dreaming”²⁹). Another Haramic inscription FB-Wādī Šudayf 2 mentions the polluting of wells by a man who filled them with filth but it is not clear what really caused the impropriety. The same man in this inscription confesses that he deflowered (*tm't*, cf. Q 55:56, 74) a female servant of his master, which may suggest that maybe the defiling agent in this case was blood.

Was ritual impurity considered to be contagious in Haramic inscriptions? The evidence on this point seems rather inconclusive but we can mention a few instances that might indicate that impurity could be spread to other people and objects. In at least two occasions (FB-Wādī Šudayf 2 and Šilwī Šudayf 1) confessors describe their transgressions as the pollution of wells, which might have been used for the purposes of ritual washing. More interestingly, we read in Haram 36 (=RES 3957, see Figure 4) about the confession of a woman who put her relatives in an impure state (*slht d' dnh*) but once again the details of what caused the impurity are missing.

²⁶ See 2:173 and 5:3.

²⁷ Ibrāhīm al-Šilwī and Fahmī al-Aghbarī, “Naqš Jadīd Min Nuqūš Al-I'tirāf Al 'alanī Min Ma'bad ĠRW,” *Adūmātū* 25 (2013): 51.

²⁸ The rendering of *mwtn* as temple courtyard is based on the context of the inscription but it is difficult to know what is really meant by this word. Others compared it with the Arabic *mawṭin*, used in the Qur'ān (9:25) with the meaning of “battlefield”.

²⁹ Lane 632.

Haramic and Qur'anic Codes of Ritual Purity: Change and Continuity

Haramic penitential inscriptions present a very unique socio-religious phenomenon: public penance for purity-related offenses in sacred spaces. Confessions are displayed in the temples with the names of the confessors and their transgressions for everyone to see, and in some cases a miniature version of such inscriptions is carried by the transgressor in the form of a pendant.³⁰ Hailing from the pre-monotheistic period of Ancient South Arabia, i.e. before the 4th c. CE, these Haramic inscriptions portray an interesting catalogue of ritual purity offenses, out of which we can glean a possibly autochthonous legal framework developed around sexuality, sanctuary etiquette, and substantial purity. In the absence of discursive legal or ethical texts from the area these inscriptions are our only guides to proper ritual conduct in pre-Islamic South Arabia.

Although centuries away from the composition and dissemination of the Qur'ān, the code of ritual purity found in Haramic inscriptions evidences intriguing parallels with its qur'anic counterpart, on the levels of both vocabulary and doctrine. Contrasted with the casuistry (in a legalistic, non-derogatory use of the term) of early Islamic legal corpora on ritual purity, according to which i) minor and major states of impurity are defined, ii) various agents of substantial impurity are strictly delineated, and iii) the focus is shifted from sacred spaces to individual and communal worship, the qur'anic stipulations of ritual purity seem to reflect the concerns of a simple ethical code within a covenantal structure built around a sanctuary. Both the Qur'ān and the Haramic sources indicate that the ultimate objective of maintaining ritual purity is to guarantee the continuation of the deity's benevolence. Qur'anic injunction on ritual purity ends with the remark that God does not wish any hardship on the believers but desires to purify them and complete his *ni'mah* for them (Q 5:6). Lowry summarizes the qur'anic notion of ritual purity similarly as follows: "...the Qur'ān's most basic rules governing ritual purity, at Q 5:6 and Q 4:43, are embedded in a context of covenantal themes, constituted in particular by references to God's bounty (*ni'ma*) and human obedience (*al-sam' wa-l-ṭā'a*)."³¹ Haramic penitential texts, too, often conclude with the confessor asking the deity for *n'mt*, showing submission, and admitting his/her sin while making a commitment, often monetary, to remain in God's good graces.³²

Because of this contextual continuity that, I believe, there is a strong parallel between the qur'anic and Haramic doctrine of ritual purity in addition to a remarkable commonality of vocabulary. The question of whether the Haramic dialect, and thereby the inscriptions in question, was heavily infused with Arabic loanwords and morphological features is still a valid one. However, for the purposes of this paper the argument that there was, indeed, a lexical and doctrinal continuity from Haramic texts to the Qur'ān with regards to ritual purity still seems to hold.

I want to end with a few remarks on J. Ryckmans' inquiry about whether the Jewish or Old South Arabian legal corpus has been more influential on the qur'anic code of ritual purity. First, I argued in this paper that when we talk about the Old South Arabian textual evidence on ritual purity we are, in fact, dealing with a small group of geographically confined and linguistically uniform inscriptions whereas earlier literature on penitential inscriptions tended to see them as part of a wider phenomenon. Secondly, these inscriptions, now subsumed under the category of Haramic or Northern Middle Sabaic, compare better with the qur'anic evidence rather

³⁰ See München 94-317880, a metal pendant with a short confessional inscription about sexual misconduct in a sanctuary accompanied with the stylized image of a couple having sex.

³¹ Joseph Lowry, "Ritual Purity", *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, vol. 4, pp. 506.

³² Cf. Haram 35, Haram 56, YM 10703, FB-wādī Shuḍayf 3, Ṣan'ā' 2004-1

than the larger and much more elaborate corpus of Islamic law produced at a temporal and spatial distance from the context of the Qur'ān in places of Judeo-Christian learning.³³ The fact that Haramic penitential inscriptions appear to date from before the clear appearance of Judaism and Christianity in South Arabia complicates the issue of outside influence while post-monotheistic era inscriptions do not provide clues as to whether there was any change in the perception, or practice, of ritual purity. Nevertheless, at least on the textual level, the study of the small but well-documented corpus of Haramic inscriptions proves to be useful to understand the context of the qur'anic injunctions about ritual purity.

³³ There has been attempts to study the legal and ritual culture of the Qur'ān with reference to Syriac sources, cf. Holger M. Zellentin, *The Qur'ān's Legal Culture: The Didascalia Apostolorum as a Point of Departure* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

Sigla of Inscriptions

Bron 1999– François Bron, “Une statuette en bronze à inscription en vieil-arabe”. *Semitica*, vol. 49 (1999), pp. 171-177.

CIH – *Corpus Inscriptionum Himyariticarum*, CIS pars IV

FB-Wādī Šuḍayf - François Bron, “Quatre inscriptions sabéennes provenant d'un temple de dhū-Samawī”, *Syria*, vol. 74 (1997), pp. 73-80.

Ja 525 – in A. Jamme, “Inscriptions Sud-Arabes de La Collection Ettore Rossi,” *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 30, no. Fasc. 1/2 (1955), pp 103–130.

Ja 2147 – in A. (Albert) Jamme, *Sabaeen Inscriptions from Maḥram Bilqīs (MāRib)*, vol. v. 3, Publications of the American Foundation for the Study of Man (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962).

Kortler 4 – in Walter W. Müller, “Sabäische Felsinschriften von der jemenitischen Grenze zur Rub‘ al-Ḥālī”, *Neue Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik*, vol. 3 (1978), pp. 113-136.

MŠM 7250 – in Ibrāhim al-Šilwī and Fahmī al-Aghbarī, “Naqš Jadīd Min Nuqūš Al-I‘tirāf Al‘alanī Min Ma‘bad ĠRW,” *Adūmātū* 25 (2013), pp. 51–58.

München 94-317880 – in Muḥammad ‘A. Bāfaqīh, “Dū Yaḡruw wa-Amīr wa-Ḥanān fī ḡaw‘ al-nuqūš”, pp. 21-38 in Norbert Nebes. *Arabia Felix. Beiträge zur Sprache und Kultur des vorislamischen Arabien. Festschrift Walter W. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag* (1994), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

RES – *Répertoire d’Epigraphie Sémitique*, Paris, 1900-

Šan‘ā’ 2004-1 – in Alessia Priolella, “Evidence from a new inscription regarding the goddess ‘t(t)rm and some remarks on the gender of deities in South Arabia”, *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, vol. 42 (2012), pp. 309-318.

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YM 10703 – in Muḥammad ‘A. Bāfaqīh, “Dū Yaḡruw wa-Amīr wa-Ḥanān fī ḡaw‘ al-nuqūš”, pp. 21-38 in Norbert Nebes. *Arabia Felix. Beiträge zur Sprache und Kultur des vorislamischen Arabien. Festschrift Walter W. Müller zum 60. Geburtstag* (1994), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Images of Some Haramic Inscriptions



Figure 1 - Haram 33



Figure 2 - Haram 34



Figure 3 - Haram 35



Figure 4 - Haram 36



Figure 5 - Haram 40



Figure 6 - Haram 56

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