

HOLINESS IN THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD



1. HOLINESS IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

In the initial phases of Christian expansion into the Greco-Roman world, the followers of Jesus were predominantly Jews and the story of Jesus was first proclaimed in Jewish synagogues. Fierce debate, perhaps even leading to violence, may have taken place as the messianic Jews disputed with their fellows about Jesus the Messiah.²⁹ Of course Jesus and the first disciples lived within the confines of second Temple Judaism. But the world in which the gospel of the kingdom of God was proclaimed soon moved outside these boundaries. It is in this context that the gospel needed to take root and thrive.

Before the end of the first Christian century, it is likely that the Gospels themselves were being read widely across the Eastern Mediterranean.³⁰ “The Gospels have a historical context,” writes Bauckham, “but that context is not the evangelist’s community. It is the early Christian movement at the end of the first century.”³¹ The Gospels, then, have a setting that can be described in general terms as the Greco-Roman world. This is the cultural milieu in which any notion of holiness made its way and the context in which the first readers lived their lives. Although a full discussion of the Greco-Roman context would not advance our understanding of holiness in the Gospels very much, a few salient features are worth noting,³² if only to remind ourselves that the reception of the gospel always has a context that colors what is heard.

First, religion was everywhere and highly visible. Various religious practices dominated all aspects of life from civic and public office to private rites of passage like birth and death. Tem-

ples and shrines commanded public space. Images were prominent because divine figures needed an image. Many highly visible ceremonies took place. Indeed, probably an “overwhelming number of all public events were explicitly religious in character.”³³ Meals, for instance, had religious connotations because the general populace believed that the gods were active and devotion to them worked. So many social meals were held in honor of a god. The god in whose honor the meal was given was thought to be presiding and present. Meals were joyous social occasions with no tension between social and religious character, even in Christianity.

Second, people took a very open-minded approach to new religious traditions. Instead of competitors, these new religions were simply added to the portfolio of religions followed by the worshipers without any sense that the devotees were bringing dishonor to their own gods. Gentiles, therefore, would come to synagogue without sensing any need to give up other associations.

Jews, by contrast, faced the tension between their theological distinctives and their wider cultural context. These distinctives, based upon their key identity markers of circumcision, food rules, and Sabbath observance, tended to make them separate from their Gentile neighbors. They did not have images, and they were devoted exclusively to God. Hurtado comments, “Devout Jews saw their religious commitments and traditions as distinctive and characteristically held themselves aloof from much of the religious life of the larger Roman world.”³⁴ The same imageless monotheism was the pattern of the early Christians.

Third, the exercise of power was the closest Greco-Roman popular piety came to a notion of holiness. Power was seen in nature. Thus, the gods were feared and worshiped. But they had little if anything to do with ethical goodness.³⁵ They were almost never described as holy. At a philosophical level, by contrast, the divine sphere was an absolute, intellectual principle completely separate from the world. Similar concepts were used by the Hellenistic Jewish writer Philo, who described God as “pure being.” For Philo, there was also a divine principle or condition of “the

Good," a term used to characterize Israel's God.³⁶ Harrington notes that in Philo "God is perfect because he is transcendent and above human comprehension."³⁷ But holiness, *per se*, was not a major concern.

Fourth, temples were crucial. "People frequented them for a range of purposes and combined social and religious life and activities easily within their precincts."³⁸ Mount Olympus was thought to be the meeting place of the gods and the link between heaven and earth.³⁹ Priests as a class of people were generally highly regarded.⁴⁰ They were a sort of "walking temple" who took on the inviolability of the shrine.⁴¹ Because the Greco-Roman religions rarely had sacred texts, the idea of a divine law such as the Torah was quite alien. The laws of nature were supreme.⁴² There was little understanding of a concept of sacred books.⁴³ The priests, thus, assumed a pivotal role as ritual experts and mediators between humanity and the divine. Although temples were sacred sites, no one used the term "holy land" except Israel. The closest one comes to a link between holiness and the land in the Greco-Roman world was the importance of festivals tied to the agricultural cycle.⁴⁴ Nor did any people consider themselves to be a holy people outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁴⁵

Fifth, ritual rather than any belief or creed was the primary cultic focus. Interestingly enough, ritual purity was essential for participation in the rites of a god. Those who were defiled were prohibited from worship. Generally, impurity was connected in some way with bodily functions such as birth, intercourse, or death.⁴⁶ But ritual purification could be achieved usually through use of water or blood as part of some festivals.

This scarcely does justice to the wide variety of practices that face the Jesus movement in the Greco-Roman world. Suffice it to say that the notions of impurity and purification in Judaism had certain affinities with other practices. The differences are pronounced, however. A god who called his people to be a holy people living lives that reflect his holiness would not find a ready connection with the general views of this period. In contrast to the Jewish and early Christian notions, ethical holiness was rarely

an issue in Greco-Roman religion—the gods themselves were just not interested in ethical purity.

2. HOLINESS IN SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM

We can only really understand holiness in the Gospels if we take seriously the historical context in which the New Testament is given birth and in which the Old Testament functioned as the scripture of the people of God. It follows that there are aspects of the practices, beliefs, and hopes of second Temple Judaism⁴⁷ that are important for our understanding. This promises to be much more fruitful for our purposes.

Although there was a variety of Jewish beliefs in the period from 167 B.C. to A.D. 70, all strands of Judaism agreed on the fundamentals. Roughly speaking, the religious worldview of second Temple Judaism might be summarized something like this. First, *God was the holy, creator God*. Holiness was more than one of His attributes: it was His quintessential nature.⁴⁸ He alone was holy: humans, places, or objects were only holy insofar as they were related to the source of holiness.⁴⁹ Holiness, then, could not be divorced from relationship with the Holy One. To put it another way, *the holiness of places, things, and people was always a derived holiness*.

As a consequence of God's holiness, *the people were called to be holy*, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, God's own people in the world and in a special *relationship* with Him. He would be their God, the Holy One living in their midst. He himself would provide the means whereby He might safely dwell with them and make a way for them to keep in covenant relationship with Him. As the source of all holiness, being near God was an essential requirement for holiness. This might be understood in physical terms. Ancient Israel had structured its camp and tabernacle in such a way as to guard God's people from the danger of God's holiness.⁵⁰ The holy of holies in the Temple still retained that sanctity. The people, in turn, were to develop characteristics like God himself that would affect every dimension of

life.⁵¹ “Thus, a fundamental feature of the Judaism in which Jesus was nurtured was the option of a radical pursuit of holiness.”⁵²

The call to be a holy people required *separation*. The people were called out from the other nations and saw themselves as God’s own people. But this was not all. Some argue that, even in Israel, this was far more than mere separation from the nations. Rather, “faithfulness, love, justice, honesty, kindness and purity emerge as aspects of divine holiness that are to be replicated by the people of God.”⁵³ As soon as Israel began to see its separateness as an end in itself, the people’s holiness became a barrier rather than a means to God’s mission in the world.⁵⁴ This became the key issue for the holiness movements of the second Temple period and the essential point of divergence between Jesus and the other holiness movements, as will be shown later. But *separation was never intended to be an end in itself*.⁵⁵

Second, the concept of *election* was the foundation stone of their self-understanding. Israel believed that God had chosen them and they were His covenant people. This choice was completely unexpected and unmerited. God delivered them by His mighty hand from the oppression of Egypt and called them to enter into a gracious covenant with himself. The call of God was primarily *directed to a people, not to individuals*. They were to be His holy people as a holy people—together.⁵⁶ The notion of a holy people, a covenant community, is fundamental to understanding Israel. As a people, Israel was God’s chosen people to bring justice, wisdom, and peace to the whole created order. Sadly, this was not currently happening. Israel was a subjugated people.

Third, *God has always been faithful* to His covenant promises; alas, the same could not be said for the people. Their covenant unfaithfulness led ultimately to exile. But even while they were in exile, God was faithful and promised the people that if they returned to Him, He would restore them to be His holy people and would dwell in their midst again in the Holy Land. A remnant did indeed return, but the restoration had been neither as glorious nor as complete as the pictures painted by the prophets suggested it would be. Although they again lived in the

land, the covenant people of God were, in a spiritual sense, *still in exile*, still awaiting God's promised deliverance, still longing for the fullness of the return.⁵⁷ The present evil age, including subjugation to the Roman Empire, was a daily reality. The longed-for age to come had not arrived. But why?

This could not be a matter of God's unfaithfulness—rather, the people needed to repent, the nation needed to return to full covenant faithfulness, and the land needed to be cleansed. To be sure, on the one hand the people realized that their plight was not merely of human dimension. Supramundane forces of evil were aligned against their God. But that was only part of the answer. Their present condition could only be because Israel in some sense was still in its sin. That was why the future was yet to be realized. What was needed now was loyalty to the covenant, even in the face of opposition, whether human or spiritual. They needed to demonstrate membership in the true people of God through ever more faithful obedience to the covenant.⁵⁸ Then God would come, defeat His (and their) enemies, and establish His reign as promised. How this would be done was given a variety of answers: the sectarian community at Qumran and the Pharisees were only two of the holiness/renewal movements in the second Temple period.

Included in God's promises was *the hope of a new in-the-heart covenant* with His people. This would not be like the old covenant, which they had failed to keep. Rather, it would enable them to be a holy people in a new way.⁵⁹ He would also cleanse and renew the holy place. Then the holy God could again dwell in their midst, the nations would come to worship God in Jerusalem, the center of the Holy Land.⁶⁰

But that was all *in the future*. There was little sense that the current state of affairs was the complete fulfillment of the promises of God. How could they be when the Romans still ruled and when the Gentiles profaned God's name and despised His people? The land itself was impure, polluted by the presence of the Gentiles who did not follow the Torah.

Inextricably linked to this substructure of belief was the in-

stitutional framework of second Temple Judaism. At the center stood the Temple; its importance can hardly be exaggerated. It was the focal point of every aspect of Jewish life. Although some people rejected the Jerusalem Temple because of its corrupt current leadership, most thought of it as the dwelling place of God, with the holy of holies being the symbolic *locus of the presence of God*.

The Temple was also the *place for sacrifice* leading to forgiveness of sins and cleansing from defilement. Two daily offerings were offered to celebrate the presence of God: burnt offerings for the deity and peace offerings to be eaten by the people. Two different offerings were made to restore the worshiper to fellowship after sin or impurity: the sin offering [*hatta't*] both for sin and impurity (which were not the same thing) and the guilt offering—a kind of sin offering made as restitution to God for a specific wrong. The Temple was also the place for national or corporate atonement. Passover and the Day of Atonement were the main times of corporate repentance and renewal. Both were centered on the Temple.

Not only was it the center of the sacrificial system, but also it was the *national shrine*. The political significance of the Temple should not be underestimated. This was directly connected to the notion of it as the dwelling place of God. When Israel had a king, he was legitimized through the Temple.⁶¹ It was bound up inextricably with the royal house and with royal aspirations.⁶² For this reason, the high priest was a central political as well as religious figure. The fact that the high priest was under the direct authority of the Romans, who kept control of his vestments, only added to the tension within the late second Temple period. Jewish nationalism, the Temple, and Judaism were intertwined in the second Temple period in such a way that it is virtually impossible to discuss the Temple authorities without including the Temple itself. In fact, references in the Gospels to the Temple frequently are a cipher for the religious authorities.⁶³ In the expressive words of Wright, “The Temple was, in Jesus’ day, the central symbol of Judaism, the location of Israel’s most characteristic praxis, the topic

of some of her most vital stories, the answer to her deepest questions, the subject of some of her most beautiful songs."⁶⁴ It was also the center for potential political unrest and intrigue.⁶⁵ Judea was effectively a temple-state with Jerusalem at its center. Control of the Temple, therefore, was vital. The destruction of the Temple itself was directly related to the nationalistic direction of Judaism, which ended in the Jewish War of A.D. 66.

If the Temple was a pillar in second Temple Judaism, the Torah was the second.⁶⁶ The Torah was more than law. It was the covenant document and contained the *halakah*, the way of life. The life of God's holy people was defined by the Torah. The presence of the holy God could only be safe if His people lived lives that reflected His holiness. The Torah set out for them God's mission and their call to it. It also contained the Temple regulations. There was, therefore, a link between Torah and Temple.⁶⁷

The holiness of the land was a key concern in the second Temple period. The land was currently polluted because it was under the control of Gentiles. Both land and Temple were being defiled by the Romans despite any religious niceties they might have attempted to maintain. Alien cultures defiled as well—the memory of the Seleucids and their desecration of the Temple (see 1 Maccabees) as well as the martyrdom of the Maccabean brothers were etched in the national consciousness. The only hope for the people now was that Yahweh would cleanse the land to make it fit again for His people. Many longed for God to raise up a new David or a new Maccabean who would drive the Romans into the sea.

The importance of the Temple and its sanctity cannot, therefore, be exaggerated. Purity and holiness were far from peripheral issues. If the holy God were to dwell with His people again, they would need to be holy. "The political program of postexilic Judaism was the permeation of national life by holiness, a program undergirded by the twin institutions of Torah and Temple."⁶⁸ The result was "an ethos of resistance to external power and influence grounded in the quest for holiness."⁶⁹

A key aspect of this kind of holiness revolved around ethnic

purity: who was a Jew? This led to highlighting various aspects of praxis including food rules, Sabbath observance, and circumcision as key identity markers within both Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism. These became the boundary markers between God's covenant people and the Gentiles. The "works of the law"⁷⁰ were more likely to be identity markers rather than a series of steps by which one attained "people of God" status. Wright suggests that they functioned as "present signs of future vindication."⁷¹

N. T. Wright observes that these beliefs and structures informed and, in turn, were shaped by "the various different movements, political, social and particularly revolutionary, that characterised the period from 167 B.C. to A.D. 70."⁷² In particular, the people of Israel longed for a peaceful and settled existence in their land that would reflect God's presence and blessing. But despite the expectation of God's action to put things right, a gulf existed between expectation and reality. "The basis of the eager expectation that fomented discontent and fuelled revolution was not merely frustration with the inequalities of the Roman imperial system, but the fact that this frustration was set within the context of Jewish monotheism, election and eschatology."⁷³

Into this context, the message of John and Jesus came like a lightning strike on dry prairie wood. They announced that the day of God's activity had dawned. The exorcisms and healings, the welcoming of the marginalized, the announcement of the Kingdom, even the relentless progress to the Cross—all of these were like a dry wind fanning the small flames of the hopes of Israel. This restoration eschatology⁷⁴ with its promise of God's renewed redeeming action for Israel was the cradle of early Christianity. Without an awareness of this context, we will have great difficulty understanding Jesus and the Gospels, and the call to be a holy people will remain a doctrine divorced from its roots.

3. THE PHARISEES AND PURITY⁷⁵

The Pharisees were an important holiness movement within second Temple Judaism. For casual readers of the Gospels, they are by far the best-known Jewish group during the time of Jesus,

even if the picture that emerges only from the Gospels is inevitably truncated. Their origins are somewhat obscure, but they arose sometime during the Maccabean revolt and were very influential in the Hasmonean period (164-163 B.C.E.). Although after 63 B.C. they no longer exercised direct political power and they remained a relatively small portion of society, their influence was significant during the time of Jesus. Some of them seem to have moved in the direction of active violent revolutionary opposition to Roman rule;⁷⁶ others concentrated on the study of the Torah. Although it is impossible to show conclusively, it is possible that there was a degree of tension between the activists and passivists within the Pharisees themselves. After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in the Jewish War of A.D. 66-70, the Pharisaic emphasis on Torah study became the dominant theme of Judaism, and the Pharisaic tradition became essentially mainstream Judaism.

If intensification of holiness was the *goal* of the Pharisees, the *means* centered on Torah observance. In the Torah God set out for His people the way in which they might remain in covenant relationship with Him. Hence, obedience to the Torah was essential. Because God is holy, purity was especially important. Israel was called to be a holy people, and the Pharisees took this seriously. They lived according to the standards of purity required of priests: if God's people were called to be a kingdom of *priests*, then the purity rules for Temple service should be expanded to include the whole of Israel and the whole land. True allegiance to the covenant demanded this intensification of holiness. Only then would Israel be restored to its independent status as God's holy people dwelling in the Holy Land. Although it cannot be proven, their adherence to priestly purity may have been an implicit criticism of the corruption and secularity of the current Temple establishment.

Three areas in particular drew their attention. First, the food rules laid down for priests in Scripture were extended to the lay Pharisaic community. Mealtime became a crucial expression of their solidarity in strict obedience to the commands of God. The

preparation of the food, as well as their meal companions, were carefully controlled to avoid impurity through nonobservance of the food rules or contact with people who were likely to be impure. The Pharisees believed that those who were consciously seeking God's way of living should be similarly observant. Hence, they were highly critical of Jesus' own meal practices.

Strict Sabbath observance was another key point. The Sabbath was to be kept holy, free from work. But what was "work"? This question was one of those that generated a plethora of case law or traditions. The regulations governing what constituted work on the Sabbath developed into a series of prescripts and prohibitions. This was another area of controversy with Jesus, whose Sabbath observance, they thought, was at best lax and at worst blasphemous.

According to Marcus Borg, tithing was a third major issue for the Pharisees that brought them into conflict with ordinary people. If people were properly observant Jews, they were effectively subject to double "taxation"—the Jewish tithe and Roman taxes. "Hence the Pharisees advocated an intensification of holiness precisely in the area in which the temptation to be non-observant was the greatest."⁷⁷ This does not feature prominently in their conflict with Jesus, however.

If strict Torah observance was the means of holiness, the Pharisees' primary understanding of holiness was separation. The holiness of God was centered in separation from all that defiles—if they were to be holy as God is holy, they, too, must be separate. As noted earlier, they believed this applied for *all* of Israel, not just the priests. Therefore, they were to be clean and pure—mainly by careful observance of purity and tithing regulations.

The problem of the land itself remained. It was to be holy as well because it was God's. But the land could only be pure when the Gentile occupying forces were no longer polluting it by their mere presence. Hence, the concern for holiness was the ideological or religious motivation for the Jewish resistance to the Roman occupation.⁷⁸

Although some holiness groups separated from society, the

Pharisees advocated separation *within* society. The Pharisees maintained opposition to the ruling Temple elite, but they did not abandon the Temple as did the Qumran community. Increasingly they came to regard themselves as the alternative covenant community—the remnant.

Despite their efforts, the Pharisees knew that not all shared their intense commitment to purity. They acknowledged that such a state of purity did not exist in the land as a whole and among the people. They didn't disenfranchise their fellow Jews, however. They themselves lived according to that level of commitment and pointedly expected other holiness groups to do the same. According to Wright, in the face of social, political, and cultural pollution in society as a whole, they concentrated on personal purity and cleanness in such a way as to maintain an area of personal purity—an island of purity in a sea of pollution.

The primary motivation for the Pharisees was not political power. Their purity codes seem to be exclusively religious. Although they were “religious” in origin and intent, nevertheless it would be impossible to separate religion and politics. Their influence, then, was emphatically “political” in effect.⁷⁹ As Borg notes,

Thus a confluence of currents combined to constitute the ideology of holiness. Yahweh was holy and Yahweh's people, living by an *imitation dei*, were to be holy. The land itself was holy and was to be kept pure. The Temple and Torah were both essential to holiness; the Temple was the center of holiness, and the holiness of the Temple, land, and people depended upon the careful observance of Torah. Moreover, the two major renewal movements were both committed to an intensification of holiness. Hence, in the quest for holiness, we find the religious dynamic which was the ideological cause of Jewish resistance to Rome.⁸⁰

Jesus had His most sustained and serious clashes with the Pharisees. Some of these are reflected in the Gospels. But it is important to note that there was never any debate over whether holiness was essential: it was. The disagreements were over the means and the meaning of holiness.

The quest for holiness had a profound impact on all of second Temple Jewish society. Few groups in society, however, took the need for holiness to the extremes that our next group, the sectarian community at Qumran, did.

4. QUMRAN⁸¹

Qumran⁸² is a particularly interesting part of the background to the Gospels, not least because of their use of the term “perfection.” Qumran was clearly a holiness movement but unlike the Pharisees who saw themselves as being a holy remnant *within* society, Qumran saw itself as being the holy people *outside* society. In their view, separation from all possible contact with impurity was the only way to maintain the level of purity they thought essential to following God’s Law. They even maintained a separate calendar from others in Judaism in order to maintain God’s intention as they understood it from Scripture. They were, therefore, sectarian in outlook, probably closely linked to the Essenes. Significantly, they believed that a decisive turning point in history was arriving and that they were God’s instruments for fulfilling His saving purposes.⁸³

Scripture was central to their existence. It contained the mystery of God’s purposes set down beforehand. Now God had made His hidden purposes known to them. They were, in fact, the people of the new covenant. Their community life was the fulfillment of prophecy, and Israel’s story was now focused upon them alone. This sectarian perspective inevitably isolated them from society. So far as we can tell, they did not participate in the Jerusalem cult. As far as they were concerned, the Jerusalem Temple establishment was hopelessly corrupt, rendering the whole system ineffective. They may have seen themselves as “a kingdom of priests” performing the service of worship or atonement in place of the corrupt Jerusalem priesthood or perhaps even regarding themselves as the true temple. In either case, they saw themselves as the “spearhead of the divine purpose for the world” and therefore took themselves with utmost seriousness.⁸⁴

In short, God's "eschatological salvation had already entered the present age in the history and experience of the community."⁸⁵

Because Scripture was so central to their existence, they devoted themselves to the intense study of it and to rigorous application of the Torah. Their identity as the new people of God was articulated in the intensification of the rules of purity that were applied in the community.⁸⁶ They were the new covenant people, so the covenant law was kept. Although they were Jews by birth, they did not believe that made them automatically part of the new covenant community. Rather, they chose to leave the wider Jewish society and enter voluntarily into the community. They were accepted into it by the decision of existing members and then only on the basis of stringent qualifications that were followed during a probationary period.⁸⁷

Obedience to the Torah not only implied a whole pattern of behavior but also applied to attitudes as well. Every law was to be observed with the whole heart. Thus they intended to live in complete conformity to the Law with outward performance matched by inward obedience. They believed that this level of perfection was possible now.⁸⁸ So conscious were they of this reality that they called themselves the "House of Perfection."⁸⁹ Their exalted claim did not exclude the need for progress in perfection, however. Nor were they blinded to the possibility of failure. They knew that a gap existed between the character of God, on the one hand, and the powers of evil working in and through humanity, on the other, resulting in a trait that Deasley calls the "human proclivity towards sin."⁹⁰ This human sinfulness was "resistant to any purification available in the present."⁹¹ So they looked for a decisive work of the Spirit at the end of the days: "The Qumran expectation for the end-time was the abolition of innate sin and the recovery of the creation glory of Adam."⁹²

The way of perfection was not an end in itself. It had a soteriological goal.⁹³ They were atoning for their own sins; they also saw themselves as in some sense atoning for the land and the people as a whole. Indeed, "the most striking of all their beliefs [was] . . . the conception of their duty as the making of expiation

. . . for the sins of the nation which had gone so far astray from the path of His will."⁹⁴ Because Israel had failed to keep the covenant and since the Temple worship was currently irredeemable, only the obedience offered by the community could save Israel. Their perfect obedience would be the fulfillment of Israel's covenant obligations. If they walked in the ways of perfection, they could offer to God the perfect worship He demanded, a worship that was in communion with the angels.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, they did not see themselves acting solely or independently of God. They were the agents of God's atonement through their offering of perfect obedience.⁹⁶

A crucial aspect of Qumran theology was their emphasis upon the Spirit. Deasley comments: "The sect's emphasis on the spirit was a distinctive feature of its teaching; indeed, it is widely conceded that the Qumran community stands out as an exception in an era which confessed that, in general, the spirit was no longer at work. Not only did they believe that the spirit was actively at work in their community; they believed that through their community alone the spirit could be received."⁹⁷

This corporate dimension of the work of the Spirit was critical to their existence. The Spirit was the agent of God's work in the community, so "exclusion from the community [was] exclusion from the spirit and exclusion from the spirit [was] exclusion from cleansing."⁹⁸ Only through the Spirit could the community walk in the way of perfection.

The Qumran practice of holiness might appear to have been a matter of external conformity to the Torah. But that would be a misreading of their perspective. For them, perfection had to be a combination of the internal and the external. "Rote-performance would not suffice. . . . ritual observance was valueless unless accompanied by the spirit of penitence. But equally since the law must be kept, they must not only be punctilious 'doers of the law,' but to guarantee this, the law must be tightened up to insure that no demand was overlooked."⁹⁹ Deasley's summary highlights this combination.

Perfection is an achievable state in the present in re-

spect of compliance with sectarian law, a change of heart in regard to sin and God, and an anticipation of heaven itself by the assimilation of the worship of the earthly community into the worship of the holy ones who serve God face to face. This perfection is not merely desirable and attainable: it is indispensable if the sectarian community is to discharge its appointed function of atoning for the land. But it is also indispensable as the due fulfilment of the covenant obligation which the sectaries had freely undertaken: that is, of the responses of life and service which God requires. Therefore, perfection is both means and end—now.¹⁰⁰

This meant that the task for the present was “observing the law with an emphasis on the need for inward obedience and submissiveness.”¹⁰¹ They maintained their insistence upon perfection in the present. “But its complete attainment in the present seems [only] to have taken place in worship where heaven and earth, present and future were fused in a unity as they discharged their most solemn obligation: offering atonement for sin.”¹⁰²

In sum, Qumran theology placed soteriology at the center of their belief. The performance of covenant obligations, which was the role of the community, had soteriology as its goal—the salvation of Israel. Qumran was under no illusions about the direness of the human condition. They lived with an eschatological tension between the demands of perfection and the inability to be perfect. Deasley concludes that “they lived at a point of soteriological tension for which they found no theological resolution within the present.”¹⁰³

Several significant features of Qumran theology emerge for our study. First, “perfection” was a widely used term referring to both outward obedience and inward direction of heart. Jesus’ use of this language in Matthew has a clear second Temple context as well as an Old Testament background. Second, obedience could never be just outward conformity to the Law, but neither could it merely be inward assent without outward performance. Any critique of second Temple holiness movements that suggests they ignored the inner dimension of holy living is almost certain-

ly wide of the mark. Third, they believed themselves to be in the last days and therefore they were God's new covenant people who would be embodying in itself the purposes of God for Israel. They were to be a holy people living holy lives in obedience to God's holy law so that they might be an atonement for the whole people of Israel. Their holiness had a redemptive goal beyond their own salvation, even if it meant separation from their fellows. Fourth, they believed perfection was possible now while simultaneously maintaining a keen awareness that there was a future dimension to this. Qumran hopes for the future were tied to a time when God would act, in concert with themselves, "*within* history to redeem his people and re-establish them as his people, within his holy Land and worshipping in a new Temple."¹⁰⁴ But this resolution was in the future. Finally, they were conscious of the Spirit's presence in their community. The view that God's Spirit was thought to be absent in late second Temple Jewish thought needs to be revised. Some groups may have taken that view, but it was not the view at Qumran nor the people of piety reflected in Luke 1 and 2.

5. JESUS AND THE HOLINESS MOVEMENTS

This sketch of some of the beliefs and practices of other movements in Judaism has shown how widespread the concern for holiness was. The Pharisees and Qumran are prominent in the literature available to us. John the Baptist may also be treated as the leader of a reform movement within Judaism recalling the people of God to their intended purposes.

There are, of course, many similarities between the Jesus movement and others. They shared the same basic beliefs of all forms of Judaism. But more crucially, all the reform movements considered the condition of Israel to be dire and in need of rescue. The evidence was plain for them to see—the power of the Romans, the compromises made by the Temple authorities, the despair of the people. They all shared the desire for Israel to be rescued and to be what it should be. That made all of them "holiness" movements in some way or another. At several points, the

beliefs of the Jesus movement, the Pharisees, and Qumran overlap.

The eschatological tension observed in Qumran permeated other second Temple holiness movements as well. It is only resolved in the Jesus movement. Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom of God came in His person and work. That is not to say that the Jesus movement eliminated the future pole of the eschatological tension. On the contrary, a collapse of the future into the present was never part of Jesus' teaching. But the emphasis upon the arrival of the Kingdom gave Jesus' teaching an edge. God's good purposes were being accomplished now in and through His ministry even if their consummation would be in the future.

There were also serious disagreements over key points of the holiness agenda. The implications of these disagreements were huge. Not least was fundamental disagreement over the connection between holiness and ritual purity. This is the point at which Jesus' teaching shows its sharpest disagreement with most of the other holiness movements.

In an important study, Marcus Borg highlights Jesus' critique of the Pharisees implied by His table fellowship. Borg reminds us that meals were particularly highly regulated. In the later rabbinic texts that developed out of the Pharisaic movement of the late second Temple period, 229 of 341 regulations pertain to table fellowship. Pharisee piety centered around table fellowship. As Borg reminds us, "Disputes about table fellowship were not matters of genteel etiquette, but about the shape of the community whose life truly manifested loyalty to Yahweh. Thus the meals of those belonging to the Pharisaic fellowships symbolized what was expected of the nation Israel: holiness, understood as separation."¹⁰⁵

The importance of the meal as a marker of holiness helps to explain several Gospel conflict stories. In Mark 2:15-18,¹⁰⁶ for example, not only did Jesus call Levi, a tax collector, to follow Him but He went to dinner at Levi's house and is joined by "many tax collectors and sinners" (v. 15). The scribes of the Pharisees enter the story here and question His actions: "Why does he eat with

tax collectors and sinners?" (v. 16). Jesus' response was that He was calling sinners, not the righteous (v. 17).

Behind this concern for table fellowship lay the issue of purity and holiness.¹⁰⁷ Sitting at table together was an expression of intimacy and fellowship that is quite foreign to the fast-food 21st century. By eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus was thought to be endangering His character as a holy person through contact with the contagion of sin. Not only were His dinner companions by definition impure, but the Pharisaic food rules were probably also ignored. Second, "for the Pharisees the meal had become a microcosm of Israel's intended historic structure as well as a model of Israel's destiny."¹⁰⁸ According to Borg, "Jesus' association with sinners and tax collectors appeared to threaten both the internal reform of Judaism and its solidarity over against the Gentiles. Moreover his table fellowship with outcasts challenged the understanding of God upon which the reform and solitary were based."¹⁰⁹ Jesus was thought to be polluting the holy people by breaking down the walls of separation.

Clearly, Jesus also thought that table fellowship was crucial. But His message was different. For Jesus, the meals were a prophetic representative act in which Jesus sets about restoring the marginalized to the people of God. He was gathering around Him a representative collection of those who had been placed on the fringes of society. The climactic prophetic representative act at the Last Supper with the representative figures of the people of Israel, the Twelve, was the anticipated re-creation of the new covenant community through Jesus' death and resurrection. In anticipation of the new people, in His meals He was bringing healing to the broken people of God and re-creating the true people of God. For Jesus, the mission was to *all* of Israel—and no one should be excluded. In fact, His message was precisely to those who were excluded from the holy people of God. In this new community God was re-creating an inclusive new people. The objections raised by Jesus' opponents were centered on what Wright calls "the scandalous implied re-definition of the Kingdom itself."¹¹⁰

Closely connected to this was the ritual washing of hands (see Mark 7). Hand washing was probably linked with priestly requirements. For the Pharisees, essentially a lay movement, this was an intensification of holiness by extending priestly purity to nonpriestly followers in the entire land. Jesus shared the notion of intensification of holiness but thought of it as an inner matter. He contravened an extension of priestly regulation to ordinary life thereby directly opposing the Pharisees. He called into question the way holiness could be achieved: "The equation between holiness and separation was denied."¹¹¹ For Jesus, defilement was a matter of the heart, not primarily a matter of performance.¹¹²

On the critical matter of Sabbath observance, Jesus reinterpreted the Torah. For Jesus, compassion trumped strict observance. In fact, Sabbath was a particularly good day to work compassion in Israel since the Sabbath was made for Israel, that is, for human beings.¹¹³ Compassion was God's work. Thus, the sanctity of the Sabbath—its holiness—was best demonstrated by doing the merciful work of God. This penetrated to the inner meaning of Sabbath.

Jesus' understanding of holiness, then, involved a radical redefinition. Borg thinks of it as an alternative paradigm. Jesus, according to Borg, called into question the whole holiness-equals-separation motif. Instead, He focused upon a different aspect of God's holiness, His compassion, and that made a huge difference. The essence of holiness, then, was not separation but compassion, and this was the way in which God's people were to be imitators of Him—how they were to be His holy people. Borg notes, however, that this did not

point to an absolute difference between Jesus and his opponents. For first-century Judaism the claim that God was holy involved no denial that God was compassionate, loving, etc., though it did circumscribe the sphere within which people were to imitate the compassion and love of God. Similarly, for Jesus the claim that God was compassionate involved no denial that God was also holy.¹¹⁴

Although Borg may draw an overly sharp distinction between

holiness and compassion, the key point to note was that in Jesus' view holiness did not require protection and insulation from sources of defilement. Holiness was contagious and a transforming power, not a power that needed protection. It was "an active force which overcame uncleanness. The people of God had no need to worry about God's holiness being contaminated. In any confrontation it would triumph."¹¹⁵

6. THE EARLY CHURCH CONTEXT

If the context in which we must understand Jesus is second Temple Judaism, it is equally clear that the theology of the Gospels must be understood in the context of the Early Church. We cannot go into great detail here except to observe two critical points.

First, the specific Christian interpretation of Scripture and God's good purposes expressed in the life of Jesus arose out of the appearances of the risen Lord and the presence of the Spirit in the Early Church. In this light, Jesus was confirmed as the climax of Israel's story and the locus of God's good purposes. *Christian theology emerged out of the experience of the new covenant community interpreted according to the Scriptures.* Theological development in the Early Church moved in precisely this direction—from experience to theology—and not the other way round.¹¹⁶ According to Luke, the process of retelling the story of Israel in a new light was inaugurated by Jesus himself (see Luke 24:44-49). The continuation of the process of retelling and advancing the mission may be attributed to the empowering presence of the Spirit in their midst.

Second, the expansion of the Church beyond the bounds of Judaism, which began almost immediately, had to be explained as well.¹¹⁷ This, too, was understood as part of the ultimate good purposes of the creator God, although it required a genuine conversion experience of the apostle Peter for this to be accepted (see Acts 10:1—11:18). Here again, the Spirit's activity in the advance of the gospel beyond the bounds of Judaism was explicitly tied to Jesus and the Spirit (see Acts 1:8).

The message that God's good purposes have come to their focus in Christ and that He has called together disciples to be His holy people, the beginnings of the re-creation of a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, impels the mission of the Church into the world.