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

Suleyman Dost

Introduction

The aim of this paper is a comparative examination of Old South Arabian and Qur’ānic 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’ānic 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’ānic 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

---

² Ibid., 15.
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”\textsuperscript{6} of Islam’s formative period in the 8\textsuperscript{th} and 9\textsuperscript{th} 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’ān 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.”\textsuperscript{7} Within the confines of this definition, as he rightly notes, there are only two verses in the Qur’ān, 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’ān, 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-ğsılı) your faces, and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe (wa-msaḥū) 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-tayammamamū) wholesome dust and wipe (fa-msaḥū) 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 (niʿmatahū); 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 (ʿābirī sabīlan)-- until you have washed yourselves (hattā 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’ān does not mention the word wuḍūʾ 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 in Islamic law.\textsuperscript{8} Also the neat distinction that legal manuals draw between minor and major impurity does not appear to be fully conceived in the Qur’ān. According to the Qur’ān, impurity, regardless of its degree, is removed by washing (ğ-s-l) and

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


\textsuperscript{8} Cf. Şaфи 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 Hanafi 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 (wuḍūʾ and ġusl) and circumstances that lead to their nullification. Aḥmad ibn Mūhammad Qudūrī, [Mukhtaṣar] Al-Qudūrī. (Bumbāy: , 1303), 2–6.
wiping (m-s-h) 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 Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān, words from the root t-h-r denote purity, often ethical and symbolic but also sometimes substantive. Even though the nominal form ṭahāra (“purity”, corresponding to the Hebrew ṭāhorāh10) does not directly appear in the Qurʾān 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-ḥarām.11 Lowry argues that the Qurʾān uses other words such as rijs, riž 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 Qurʾānic usage of the words riž 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 riž or rujz came to mean the opposite of purity in later sources. Najas, albeit a hapax legomenon in the Qurʾān, became the basis of an important technical term as the semantic counterpart of words from the root t-h-r. One might also note that the word ṭumʿāh,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 Qurʾān has to do with menstruation. In the Hebrew Bible, Leviticus 15 enumerates certain elements of ṭumʿāh 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-nisāʾ fī l-maḥīḍ) should not be approached sexually until they are clean (ḥattā yathurna) 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 Šaḥīḥ 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.”
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 whatsoever 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 confessionary/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). 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 ḍ-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. 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 Yṯl), where these penitential inscriptions are found, are located between Ṣanʿāʾ 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 Robin 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.

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 confessionary character in Greek inscriptions from Asia Minor. In the early 2000s Manfred Kropp revisited the topic of confessionary inscriptions and discussed their religious and legal

---


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". 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialect</th>
<th>Provenance</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Key Vocabulary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bron 1999</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Penitential?, for striking a servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB-Wādī Šuḍayf 2</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Wādī Šuḍayf</td>
<td>Penitential, for polluting and sexual misconduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB-Wādī Šuḍayf 3</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Wādī Šuḍayf</td>
<td>Penitential, fragmentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haram 8=CIH 546</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Jawf</td>
<td>Penitential, non-sexual collective confession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haram 10=CIH 547</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Jawf</td>
<td>Penitential, collective, for delaying the ritual hunt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haram 13=CIH 548</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Jawf</td>
<td>Legal, about pilgrimage and access to a temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haram 33=CIH 532</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Jawf</td>
<td>Penitential, for appearing impure in public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haram 34=CIH 533</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Jawf</td>
<td>Penitential, fragmentary, for sexual misconduct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inscription</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haram 35=RES 3956</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Jawf</td>
<td>Penitential, for substantive impurity</td>
<td>ʾtm‘, “impure” both as an adjective and a verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haram 36=RES 3957</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Jawf</td>
<td>Penitential, for ritual impurity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haram 56=CIH 568</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Jawf</td>
<td>Penitential, reason not mentioned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ja 525</td>
<td>Haramic?</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Penitential, for ritual impurity</td>
<td>ʾd·gwzt ṣḥrmhw ṣyr ḏhrm, “that she traversed his temple in an impure state”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ja 2147</td>
<td>Haramic?</td>
<td>Najrān</td>
<td>Non-penitential</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kortler 4</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Jawf</td>
<td>Non-penitential</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MṢM 7250</td>
<td>Haramic?</td>
<td>Wādī Shuḍayf</td>
<td>Penitential, for entering temple with unclean clothes and sexual offense</td>
<td>ʾd·ʾl kyn ṣḥrm, “which was not clean”; ms‘, “to touch (a woman)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>München 94-317880</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Wādī Shuḍayf</td>
<td>Penitential, for sexual misconduct in the temple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Şan‘ā’ 2004-1</td>
<td>Haramic?</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Penitential, reason unclear</td>
<td>n(g)[s]lw, “they defiled”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Şilwī Šudayf 1</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Wādī Shuḍayf</td>
<td>Penitential, for polluting wells with semen</td>
<td>mḥtlm&lt;ṃ&gt;, “person with nocturnal pollution”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YMMMM 10703</td>
<td>Haramic</td>
<td>Wādī Shuḍayf</td>
<td>Penitential, misconduct in an offering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Stein\textsuperscript{23} 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 \textit{f-}, iii) the use of the ablative preposition \textit{mn} instead of the common Old South Arabian \textit{bn} as well as the use of other particles such as \textit{ḏ} for “as”, iv) the use of \textit{lm} for the negation of the perfect tense and v) the use of final -\textit{t} to indicate the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} person perfect tense conjugation instead of \textit{t-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 \textit{ḥr}, and one needs to wash himself/herself (\textit{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 (\textit{=CIH 523}, see figure 5) is a short and complete inscription that expresses the confession and penance of a man who had sexual intercourse (\textit{qr b m’tm})\textsuperscript{24} with a menstruating woman (\textit{ḥyd}, cognate in the term in Q:222) and another woman in childbirth (\textit{nfs’m}, compare with the Arabic \textit{nafsā}, “woman in childbed”). The text indicates that these actions put the man in a state of ritual impurity (\textit{ḥr ṭhr}) and that his impure state continued as he did not wash himself (\textit{lm yḥts‘f}), but rather stayed in his impure clothes (\textit{y ‘b b- ks’wthw ḡr-ḥr}) and sprinkled his clothes with semen (\textit{ndḥ ‘ks’wth-w ḥmr}). He subsequently showed submission and regret and agreed to pay a fine (\textit{f-hdr w- ‘nw w-yhl’}).

Haram 34 (\textit{=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 \textit{g-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 (\textit{qr b-h m’t ywm ṭlt ḡtn w-h ‘ḥyd}). The man then walked away and did not wash himself (\textit{w-mṣy w-lm yḥts‘f}). 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.\textsuperscript{25}

If purity is denoted in Haramic with words from the root \textit{ḥr}, what denotes words for impurity other than the phrase \textit{ḥr ṭhr} (alternatively \textit{ḥr ṭhr})? There is at least one example of the verbal root \textit{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 \textit{Ḥlfn} in Kharibat Hamdān 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 (\textit{mhrmn}) with a weapon or clothes that are defiled by blood will pay a fine to the priests of the deity \textit{ḥtr: hn l-yngs’n s’lḥ-hw w-dmwm b-s‘y-hw l-yzl’n l-ḥt ṭtr w- rs‘wwn ‘s²r ḥy’lwm}. That blood is a defiling agent and that its presence on one’s clothes makes one impure are


\textsuperscript{24} Compare the usage of \textit{qr b} with Q 2:222, “do not approach them (lā taqribūhunna) until they are clean (ḥattā yafkhurna)”

\textsuperscript{25} 2:197: \textit{al-ḥajju asshurun ma’lūmatun fa-man farada fihinna l-hajja fa-lā rajatha wa-lā jislaq wa-la jidal fi l-hāj: “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 ngsʿ1, “to defile,” appears in the recently discovered, possibly Haramic, inscription Ṣanʿāʾ 2004-1; however, the inscription is too damaged for one to properly read and understand the context of the impurity. One alternative to identifying ngsʿ1 as the antonym of ṭhr is found in Haram 35 (=RES 3956, see Figure 3). In this inscription two words from the verbal root ṭmʿ denote substantial impurity for clothing mirroring the Hebrew (טָמֵא) and Aramaic ( getContentPane(0,966,999,999) ) usage of the word. Judging from the usage of the roots ngsʿ1 and ṭmʿ 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 (MṢM 7250) that was recently discovered in the temple of Ġrw dedicated to the deity d-Sʾmwy reflects a similar concern about entering a sanctuary with impure clothing albeit with a slightly different wording than in Haram 13. In MṢM 7250 the author confesses that he had entered the sanctuary (mḥrmn) with an unclean belt (ḏwlm ḏʾl kyn ṭhrm) and that he touched a woman while he was there (w-b-dt bhʾ mḥrm w-msʿṯtm).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 (mwṭn)28 in an impure state (wḍʾ tʿdy mwṭnm ḡyr ṭhrm). This latter inscription can be compared with Ja 525, in which a woman seeks atonement for crossing the sanctuary in a state of impurity (ḏ-gwzt mḥrmhw ḡyr ṭhrm).

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-Ṣīlvi 1 mentions a man who defiled two wells when he was still impure from his nocturnal pollution (mḥltlm<m>, compare with Arabic ihtilām, “experiencing an emission of the seminal fluid in dreaming”29). Another Haramic inscription FB-Wādī Šuḍayf 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 (ṭmṯ, 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 Šuḍayf 2 and Šīlvi Šuḍayf 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 (slḥt ḏʾḏmh) but once again the details of what caused the impurity are missing.

26See 2:173 and 5:3.


28The rendering of mwṭn 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 mawṭīn, used in the Qurʾān (9:25) with the meaning of “battlefield”.

29Lane 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 niʿmah 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 (niʿma) and human obedience (al-samʿ wa-l-ṭā’a).”31 Haramic penitential texts, too, often conclude with the confessor asking the deity for n’am, 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 confessionary inscription about sexual misconduct in a sanctuary accompanied with the stylized image of a couple having sex.
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. 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


**CIH** – *Corpus Inscriptionum Himyariticarum*, CIS pars IV


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


Images of Some Haramic Inscriptions

Figure 1 - Haram 33
Bibliography


