

Rogan, Wil, ed. *Purity in the Gospel of John: Early Jewish Tradition, Christology, and Ethics*. Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023. Pp. xiv + 185. Hardcover \$75.47, Paperback \$39.95, Kindle \$35.95.

Wil Rogan highlights an often overlooked yet essential aspect of purity in the Gospel of John, challenging the view that purity becomes irrelevant with faith in Jesus (p. 8). Instead, in his study, he shows that purity is central to Johannine Christology, salvation, and ethics (p. 4). The work is divided into four major chapters. The first chapter, "The Fourth Gospel and Early Jewish Purification," argues that purity and impurity language were deeply embedded in Jewish daily life and functioned as a key framework through which ancient Jews understood their existence before God (p. 16). *The Gospel of John* should therefore be read with attention to its explicit references to Jewish purification practices, such as: the purification of the *Ioudaioi* (2:6), the note that many went to Jerusalem to purify themselves before Passover (11:55), and the concern of the *Ioudaioi* not to enter Pilate's praetorium to avoid defilement during Passover (18:28). These examples illustrate that the Gospel's association of purity with the *Ioudaioi* is one aspect of its sustained engagement with themes central to ancient Jewish piety (p. 31).

From chapters two to four, the author builds cases that demonstrate *The Gospel of John* is written in the context of a purity motif with a Jewish background. In the second chapter, he argues that, just as in the Old Testament, Israel was required to undergo ablutions (a preferred word of Rogan) before hearing the voice of God at Sinai (Exod 19:10–11 LXX) (p. 35), so also the Fourth Gospel presents purification as a prerequisite for perceiving divine revelation. The author demonstrates that in early Jewish literature, ritual and moral purification were often viewed as necessary for acquiring knowledge of God, receiving divine wisdom, or beholding God's presence. Philo, for example, associates purity with the human capacity to perceive and receive divine revelation. Josephus also similarly links the Essenes' accurate knowledge of future events to their ritual purity and devotion to Scripture (p. 39). At Qumran, access to God's mysteries was safeguarded by the purity of the community, which was understood as a necessary condition for perceiving divine revelation (p. 40). One of the cases that the author spent ink on is the scenario of John the Baptist in 1:26. The Gospel's use of βαπτίζω to describe John's practice, along with its explicit association of his activity with purity, is notable. Its emphasis on water as the medium of purification, and its interpretation of John's ablutions as preparatory for the one to be revealed, all firmly situate the Gospel's depiction of John within early Jewish traditions in which purification precedes revelation. A typological parallel thus

emerges between Moses and John the Baptist (p. 51). Just as Moses was instructed to purify Israel three days before the giving of the Law at Sinai, so God commissions John to purify Israel across the Jordan in anticipation of the revelation of Jesus (1:28–29). John's witness functions analogously to Moses's preparatory ablutions, enabling the *Ioudaioi* to perceive the truth about Jesus so that they "may be saved" (5:34). Through John's ablutions, ritual purification becomes a locus of Christological disclosure and controversy, marking a significant development in how the Fourth Gospel integrates early Jewish purity discourse into its theological narrative (p. 54).

In the third chapter, the author argues that the Fourth Gospel locates Jesus within early Jewish expectations that God would purify Israel from sin as part of its eschatological restoration. This theme is already evident in the opening narrative (1:19–34), particularly in the interrogation of John the Baptist by a delegation sent from Jerusalem (1:19–28). After establishing that John is neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet (1:20–21), the delegation nevertheless remains unanswered, since John's practice of ablutions evokes figures traditionally associated with Israel's restoration (p. 61). These three eschatological figures represent the diversity of Jewish hopes for restoration; each is linked in distinct ways to God's anticipated work of purifying and restoring his people. The author argues that the Pharisees' inquiry into John's ablutions reflects their expectation of an eschatological agent of purification. When John identifies Jesus as "the one who abluates with the Holy Spirit" (1:33) (p. 63), the Gospel confirms the correctness, though not the object of their speculation: it is not John's ablutions but Jesus's purificatory work that bears eschatological significance. Through Jesus, God undertakes the long-awaited purification of Israel, enabling the people to dwell in God's presence once more. Building on Thompson's observation, the author of the book argues that Jesus embodies and fulfills what Israel's institutions and figures signify (p. 64). The author contends that the Gospel develops the prophetic promises of Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, for whom divine purification constitutes the basis of Israel's restoration. Early Jewish texts link the Messiah with Elijah and other prophets because restoration was expected to follow God's cleansing of Israel's sin. John's proclamations that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who removes sin" (1:29) and "the one who abluates with the Holy Spirit" (1:33, focus on Jesus, the very hopes articulated in prophetic and Second Temple texts. Works such as *2 Maccabees*, *1QS*, *Jubilees*, and the *Psalms of Solomon* likewise envision Israel's renewal as grounded in divine moral purification. Together, they provide the eschatological framework within which the Fourth Gospel situates its portrayal of Jesus. In conclusion, the author emphasizes that the theology, in which God is the one who purifies through the act of

being born again, as established in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, is not a Christian idea, but rather something that ancient Jews hoped for and waited for (p. 93).

The final chapter focuses on a critical passage in the Fourth Gospel in which Jesus declares to his disciples, “you are pure” (ὁμῆεις καθαροί ἐστέ) (p. 108). The author argues that in the early Jewish ethical discourse, purity language frequently denotes moral qualities: a pure life is one unsullied by bloodshed, sexual transgressions, idolatry, and theft, and is characterized by the love and worship of Israel’s God. As purity in Jewish and in the fourth gospel is connected to the human capacity to keep God’s commandments, this framework clarifies Jesus’ description of his disciples during the foot washing. It explains why Judas is not included among the pure. In the major Prophets, impurity in ethical contexts designates sins that rupture the covenant relationship between God and Israel, especially bloodshed, idolatry, sexual misdeeds, and theft. Philo similarly denounces those who purify only their bodies and not their souls as possessing an “impure purity.” In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus alone identifies his disciples as pure, and the narrative sets Judas apart as morally defiled. Judas is depicted as complicit with the devil in Jesus’ death (13:2, 27), so that even the intention of murder is sufficient to defile him (13:2; cf. T. Sim. 2.13–14; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 3.208–9) (p. 128). Bloodshed is the chief defiling sin, and Judas stands as foremost among those who delivered Jesus to death (6:64, 70–71; 12:4; 13:2, 21; 18:2). Given this background, the disciples’ purity appears as the moral quality that enables them to live as those who have seen and entered the life of God. This purity involves both absence and presence: an absence of defiling sins and the presence of a life aligned with God’s purposes. Ancient Jewish literature sometimes conceptualized moral purification as a divine transformation, making obedience to God’s commandments possible. Impurity was understood as a condition that rendered obedience impossible, “the impurity of the human being” (1QS 11.14) preventing the keeping of the Law. (p. 135) Fourth Ezra expresses this clearly: God gave the Law to Jacob yet did not remove Israel’s “evil heart,” so that the Law could not bear fruit in them (Ezra 4:19–20; cf. 7:48). Purity thus functioned as a way of describing moral capacity in Philo, Josephus, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. *The Fourth Gospel* draws on this broader discourse by attributing to the disciples the moral capacity to keep Jesus’ commandments because the Father has purified them through Jesus’ word. As the vine discourse shows, this purity is not the disciples’ achievement but the unilateral work of God in Jesus. Abiding in Jesus is the necessary condition for fruitfulness, and without him the disciples “can do nothing” (15:4–5) (p. 142). Their moral purity, therefore, serves the relational, responsive ethic of the Gospel: purity enables their response to God. The intimate union between

Jesus and his disciples, symbolized in the image of the messianic vine and its purified branches, enables them to bear much fruit. And because fruit-bearing is made possible, fruit will indeed be borne in them (p. 146).

The relevance of this book lies in its focus on a topic often neglected by scholars who assume that purity laws are no longer significant in the New Testament, as Jesus is believed to have abolished them. Through a thorough contextual analysis of *The Fourth Gospel*, Rogan demonstrates that purity laws stand at the core of its theological foundations. Moreover, I did not initially expect the author to address the relationship between one's state of purity and one's ability to keep God's commandments. The development of this theme in chapter three, as summarized, is particularly intriguing and could open the door for further research on how purity and obedience to God's commandments are interconnected in the life of the disciples.

On the other hand, while Chapter Four refers to Jonathan Klawans' framework on purity variations, the discussion would have been strengthened by a more sustained and explicit differentiation between moral purity and the observance of God's commandments. It appears to me that the author tackles this section with the assumption that the reader should be aware of the nuance that exists between the moral purity and the keeping of the commandments of God.

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