

“Unclean Hands”

[N.B. These texts were obtained from: <https://www.sefaria.org>] Here is part of chapter 4, of the tractate *Yadaim* from the *Mishnah*.

The [Aramaic] translations which are in [the books of] Ezra and Daniel render the hands impure. [Aramaic] translations written in Hebrew, and Hebrew written in translation or in [ancient] Hebrew characters, do not render the hands impure. They [i.e. sacred Scriptures] never render impurity, unless they are written in Assyrian [i.e. square] characters, on parchment, and with ink.

The following is taken from the tractate *Sanhedrin* (21b-22a) of the the *Talmud*.

Mar Zutra says, and some say that it is Mar Ukva who says: Initially, the Torah was given to the Jewish people in Ivrit script, the original form of the written language, and the sacred tongue, Hebrew. It was given to them again in the days of Ezra in Ashurit script and the Aramaic tongue. The Jewish people selected *Ashurit* [Assyrian] *script and the sacred tongue for the Torah scroll and left Ivrit script and the Aramaic tongue for the commoners*.

The Gemara asks: *Who are these commoners?* Rav Ḥisda said: *The Samaritans [Kutim]*. The Gemara asks: What is Ivrit script? Rav Ḥisda says: Libona’a script.

It is taught in a baraita (Tosefta 4:5): Rabbi Yosei says: Ezra was suitable, given his greatness, for the Torah to be given by him to the Jewish people, had Moses not come first and received the Torah already. With regard to Moses the verse states: “And Moses went up to God” (Exodus 19:3), and with regard to Ezra the verse states: “This Ezra went up from Babylon and he was a ready scribe in the Torah of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given” (Ezra 7:6). Just as the going up stated here, with regard to Moses, is for the Torah, which he received from God and transmitted to the Jewish people, so too, the going up stated there, with regard to Ezra, is for the Torah, as he taught Torah to the Jewish people and was suitable to have originally merited to give it.

The baraita continues: With regard to Moses the verse states: “And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances” (Deuteronomy 4:14), and with regard to Ezra the verse states: “For Ezra had set his heart to seek the Torah of the Lord his God and to do it and to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances” (Ezra 7:10). And even though the Torah was not given literally by him, the script of the Torah was changed by him, as it is stated:

“And the writing of the letter [hannishtevan] was written in the Aramaic script, and set forth in the Aramaic tongue” (Ezra 4:7). The term “hannishtevan” is similar to the word nishtana, meaning changed, alluding to the fact that the script had been changed. And it is written with regard to

the writing on the wall of Belshazzar's palace: "Then came in all the king's wise men. But they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation" (Daniel 5:8), and the reason they could not read it is that it was written in the new script that Ezra would transmit. And it is written: "That he shall write for himself a second [mishne] Torah" (Deuteronomy 17:18), where "second [mishne]" teaches that it is written in a script that is apt to be changed [lehishtannot].

The baraita continues: *Why is this script called Ashurit? Because it ascended with the Jewish people from Ashur when they returned from their exile in Babylonia.*

It is taught in a baraita (Tosefta 4:5): Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi says: *Initially, the Torah was given to the Jewish people in this script, Ashurit, which is in use today. Once the Jewish people sinned, it turned into an impairment for them and they began writing with a different script, Libona'a. Once they repented, the first script was returned to them, and they resumed writing with Ashurit script,* as it is stated: "Return to the stronghold, you prisoners of hope; even today do I declare that I will render double [mishne] unto you" (Zechariah 9:12), meaning that God restored to the Jewish people this script that had been changed [nishtanna].

The baraita continues: If this script predates the exile to Babylonia, why is it called Ashurit? Because it is meuseret, beautiful and straight, in script.

The baraita continues: Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says in the name of Rabbi Eliezer ben Perata, who said in the name of Rabbi Elazar HaModa'i: This script did not change at all, as it is stated with regard to the construction of the Tabernacle: "The hooks of [vavei] the poles" (Exodus 27:10). This teaches that just as the poles were not changed, so too, the hooks [vavim] were not changed. The letter vav in Ashurit script has the shape of a hook. Evidently, this is why the term for hook in the Torah is vav. And the verse states: "And to the Jews according to their script and according to their language" (Esther 8:9). This teaches that just as their language was not changed over the generations but remained Hebrew, so too, their script was not changed.

Additional texts are given in S. Birnbaum, *The Hebrew Scripts*, Leiden: Brill, 1971, p. 70 ff. [An incredible work of scholarship].

A recent study of "unclean hands", is: Lim, T. 2010. "The Defilement of the Hands as a Principle Determining the Holiness of Scriptures". *Journal of Theological Studies*, (61) pp. 501 - 515.

As Lim writes, "The principle articulated in *Mishnah Yadayim* 3:5 that 'all holy scriptures defile the hands'... is one of the most perplexing in rabbinic literature, for how

can something that is holy impart uncleanness to the hands?”

Other examples of the tetragrammaton in proto-Hebrew can be found in a text of *Psalms* 119:82-120 (Davies, P. *Qumran*). See also Yadin, Y. *The Temple Scrolls*, p.67.