**ממולח טוהר: A Comparison between the Exegetical Approach of the Qumran Sect and the Medieval Commentators**

# Introduction

The enigmatic phrase ממולח טוהר survived four times in the fragments of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice.[[1]](#footnote-1)\* The phrase originates in the description of the making of incense in the Book of Exodus but appears to have a different meaning in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, with scholars prevaricating concerning how it was interpreted by the members of the Qumran sect. This article will examine the views presented in the literature to date in light of the context and semantic field of each of the components of the phrase in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls. I will also relate to the discussion of the semantic field of the word ממולח by the medieval grammatists, which contributes to our understanding of the language of the Scrolls.

# The Phrase ממולח טהור / ממולח טוהר in the Bible, Ben Sira, and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice

Exodus states regarding the incense:

וְעָשִׂיתָ אֹתָהּ קְטֹרֶת רֹקַח מַעֲשֵׂה רוֹקֵחַ מְמֻלָּח טָהוֹר קֹדֶשׁ

Make them into incense, a compound expertly blended, salted, pure, sacred.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Exod 30:35

Several interpretations have been offered for the verb מְמֻלָּח. The Sages understood the form as meaning that salt was added to the various fragrant spices in the incense.[[3]](#footnote-3) Drawing on analogous practice in the ancient Near East, Victor A. Hurowitz showed that this is indeed the simple meaning of the biblical phrase.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, according to an ancient translation tradition dating back to the Second Temple period, the verb מְמֻלָּח means “mixed.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The verb ממלח also appears in the description of King Josiah in the Ben Sira Scroll:

שם יאשיהו כקטרת סמים הממלח מעשה רוקח

 The name of Josiah is like aromatic incense, *mmlḥ* through the labor of a perfumer.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Sir 49:1, Ms. B 18v:3

Assuming that the phrase הַמְּמֻלָּח מַעֲשֵׂה רוֹקֵחַ refers to the original קְטֹרֶת סַמִּים as described in Exodus, it is difficult to establish from the context how the author understood the verb מְמֻלָּח.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice from Qumran that have been preserved, the expression ממולח טוהר appears four times, as noted. In the first instance it seems to describe the firmament, while in the remaining three it describes the angels’ clothes:

1. The Eleventh Song of the Sabbath 3-4 19 (4QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrificef) 4Q405:

מעשי רוׄ[חות] – רקיע פלא 4 ממולח טוהר[[8]](#footnote-8)3

3 [The] works of [the] spirits [are like] a wonderous firmament 4 *mmwlḥ ṭwhr.*

1. The Twelfth Song of the Sabbath 20ii-22 8-12 (4QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrificef) 4Q405:

8 קולׄ [רוחו]תׄ[[9]](#footnote-9) אלוהים תבנית כסא מרכבה מברכים ממעל לרקיע הכרוביםׄ 9 [בע]דׄ[[10]](#footnote-10) רקיע האור יׄרׄננו {{מ}}מתחׄת מושב כׄבודו ובלכת האופנים ישובׄו מלאכי קודש יצא ומבין[[11]](#footnote-11) 10 [ג]לגלי כבודו כמראׄי אש רוחות קודש קדשים ס֯ב֯יב מראי שבולי אש בדמות חשמל ומעשי 11 [נ]וגה ברוקמׄת כבׄוׄד צבעי פלא **ממולח טוה**[[12]](#footnote-12) רוחות [א]לוהים חיים מתהלכים תמיד עם כבוד מרכבות 12 [ה]פלא.

8 A sound of gods spirits blessing the image of the throne-chariot (which is) above the vault of the cherubs, 9 [and] they sing [throu]gh the shining vault (which is) beneath the seat of his glory. And when the *ophanim* move forward, the holy angels return; ‹they emerge from between› 10 its glorious [wh]eels with the likeness of fire, the spirits of the holy of holies. Around them is the likeness of streams of fire like electrum, and a [lum]inous substance 11 gloriously multi-coloured, wonderful colours, *mmwlḥ ṭwhr*. The spirits of living [g]ods move constantly with the glory of [the] wonderful chariots. [[13]](#footnote-13)

1. The Thirteenth Song of the Sabbath 21-22 [ix] (11QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrifice) 11Q17 7-8:[[14]](#footnote-14)

7 [ -מ]עׄילי[[15]](#footnote-15) תפׄאׄרת[ ----- ]רוקמה כמׄ[------- ]מׄמולח טוהר צבעי

8 [ה]וד

 [--- ו]הדר

[…] beautiful [r]obes […] multicoloured like […] w[ork …] *mmwlḥ ṭwhr*, the colours of 8 [… /splen]dour/ [and] majesty. [[16]](#footnote-16)

1. The Thirteenth Song of the Sabbath 10 23 (4QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrificef) 4Q405:

 וכול מחשבׄיׄהם **ממוׄלחׄ טוהר** חשב כ֯מׄעשי אורגׄ

And all their decorations are *mmwlḥ ṭwhr*, artful like woven material.[[17]](#footnote-17)

According to the reading tradition reflected in the scroll, the second word in the phrase is not the adjective טָהוֹר “pure” as in MT, but rather the noun טֹהַר “purity/brightness.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The phrase *mmwlḥ ṭwhr* can be read as a compound adjective, i.e. “a firmament with a *mmwlḥ* brightness,”[[19]](#footnote-19) a possibility I will support below. Carol A. Newsom noted that there is a disagreement in the grammatical number between the verb ממולח and the noun it describes, and argues that this suggests that the phrase is a fossilized one.[[20]](#footnote-20)

# Interpretations Proposed in Previous Studies

Following the original publication of the Twelfth Song of the Sabbath, John Strugnell noted the semantic difficulty in interpreting the verb ממולח. Applying salt is pertinent to the sacrifices and incense, but what does it have to do with the angels’ garments?

In Ex. XXX 35, Lev. ii 13, sacrifices and incense have to be *mmwlḥ*:but it is hard to see why garments should be.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The Qumran Scrolls indeed include several independent exegetical traditions relating to certain biblical lexemes (pseudo-classicism).[[22]](#footnote-22) It is thus appropriate to seek to identify a distinct exegetical tradition regarding ממולח, too.

Strugnell (ibid.) offered two possible interpretations of the adjective ממולח – “blended” or “worn-out,” though he was inclined to conclude that the text here lacks real meaning:

At this period perhaps *mmwlḥ* no longer means “salted”, as in Sir. xlix 1 where it seems to mean “blended” or “mixed”; so here perhaps we should see nothing but a pleonasm for *rwqmh*. Has *mlḥ*, “a patched, worn-out garment” any connection with this?

Newsom accepted the meaning of “mixed,” which she supported by reference to Onkelos.[[23]](#footnote-23) Drawing on both Strugnell and Newsom, Noam Mizrahi cautiously proposed the following exegetical path:

1. According to the exegetical tradition of the Second Temple period (as familiar from previous translations), ממולח has the sense of “mixed.”
2. The act of admixture recalls the prohibition of hybrids. The creation of hybrids is regarded as sacred, and accordingly, mixed garments are prohibited in everyday use and confined solely to the priestly garments in the Temple.
3. Just as it is prohibited to wear mixed garments outside the Temple, so it is prohibited to prepare incense outside the Temple. The prohibition on the preparation of incense outside the Temple may also be because it entails the admixture of different types of fragrances.
4. The concept of the sanctity of mixtures was expanded to the admixture of different types in other spheres, such as the admixture of different dyes. The word סמים “aromas” in the phrase קטורת סמים “aromatic incense” may have been understood in its sense in Talmudic Hebrew – “dyes.”

Based on this exegetical path, Mizrahi suggests that the expression ממולח טוהר means “a mixture of colors, the quality of being multicolored.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

This proposal has clear merit in that it is based on an ancient exegetical tradition documented in all the ancient translations. However, the above exegetical path raises two difficulties:

1. The hypothesis that admixture is regarded as a characteristic of sanctity has no support elsewhere in the Scrolls. As Mizrahi himself notes, the question as to whether the creation of hybrids is regarded as sacred in the Torah is controversial. It is also worth noting that the other two types of hybrids – of plants and animals – were also prohibited in the Temple.[[25]](#footnote-25) Moreover, the prohibition of the preparation of incense in the Torah has nothing to do with the admixture of types of fragrances. The prohibition relates solely to the preparation of an admixture with an identical format. It is permissible to prepare incense for profane use if the proportion or types of the ingredients are changed. The use of hybrid garments in the Temple similarly has nothing to do with the admixture of colors, and relates solely to the fabrics used – an admixture of wool and linen.[[26]](#footnote-26)
2. Conversely, there is firm documentation showing that admixture was regarded as a clear characteristic of impurity among the members of the Qumran sect. One of the commonest senses of the root ער"ב in the Scrolls is impurity. For example, the expression [ת]ערובת המת in the Scroll of the Temple 50:2 11QTa means “impurity of the dead,” and the verb התערב means “became impure through sexual intercourse.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The Qumran sect adopted an extremely negative attitude toward admixture and hybrids.[[28]](#footnote-28) Thus even if we accept the assumption that the prohibition against hybrids was originally associated with sanctity, it is difficult to assume that the members of the Qumran sect maintained this approach, and we could not find any suggestion of this elsewhere.

In light of these difficulties, I will seek to examine an alternative interpretation of the word ממולח based on the contexts and semantic fields in which it appears, both in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and in the commandment to prepare incense in Exodus.

# The Context in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and the Development of the Phrase רקיע טוהר

The phrase ממולח טוהר appears in the Eleventh Song of the Sabbath, apparently as a description of the firmament,[[29]](#footnote-29) and appears three times regarding the angels’ garments. The use of the same expression to describe both the firmament and the angels’ garments is unsurprising since we have already seen in the Eleventh Song of the Sabbath 19 3-4 (4QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrificef) 4Q405 that the angels’ spirits are formed like the firmament. Although three of the four surviving occurrences of the phrase ממולח טוהר describe the angels’ garb, I believe that it is easier to regard the firmament as the original context of the phrase. The firmament appears frequently in the Scrolls in construct phrases with the noun טוהר “brightness,” as I will show in this section, while the root מל"ח describes the sky in Isa 51:6, as I will show in detail in the next section. I propose that the phrase was taken from the Bible as a description of the firmament, and the author later also used it to describe the angels’ garments. To substantiate this claim, I will seek to examine the development of this expression from the Bible through to the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice.

The concise description of the vision of God in Exod 24:10 states:

וַיִּרְאוּ אֵת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְתַחַת רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לִבְנַת הַסַּפִּיר וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לָטֹהַר

Drawing on parallels in Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Egyptian, James Nathan Ford proposed the following translation of this verse:

And they saw the God of Israel: (what was) under His feet was as lustrously clear (lit. “with respect to purity”) as blue-glazed brickwork (lit. “work of brick of lapis lazuli”) and as the very sky.

Ford argues that in light of the parallels in these languages, טֹהַר in this verse is to be interpreted as referring to a glow or shine, and not the literal sense of cleanliness and purity.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The verse in Exodus is interpreted in the story of the chariot in the opening vision of the Book of Ezekiel. However, the word שָׁמַיִם in Exodus was replaced in Ezek 1:26 by רָקִיעַ “firmament” (the word לְבֵנָה in Exodus was similarly changed to אֶבֶן “stone”):

וּמִמַּעַל לָרָקִיעַ אֲשֶׁר עַל רֹאשָׁם כְּמַרְאֵה אֶבֶן סַפִּיר דְּמוּת כִּסֵּא

Above the expanse over their heads was the semblance of a throne, in appearance like sapphire.

A clear combination in the Second Temple literature of עֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם from Exodus and הָרָקִיעַ from Ezekiel can be found in the Ben Sira Scroll, in a section that was also preserved at Massada:

תאר מרום ורקיע לטהר עצם שמים מ֯[בי]ע֯ נ֯הׄרׄוׄ

Sir 43:1, Mas h1 V:17

The meaning of the verse seems to be: “The image of the heaven and the bright firmament, the appearance of the heavens manifests His glory (literally: light) [i.e. God’s].”[[31]](#footnote-31)

The replacement of the noun שָׁמַיִם by רָקִיעַ and the sense of טֹהַר as “bright” are apparently reflected in Dan 12:3:

וְהַמַּשְׂכִּלִים יַזְהִרוּ כְּזֹהַר הָרָקִיעַ

And the knowledgeable will be radiant like the bright expanse of sky.

In two scrolls we found the phrase **שמי טוהר:**

4 [ -- ]דׄ שבעה בזוהרוׄ [ -- ] 5 [ -- ]שׄמיׄ טוהר

4 […] seven, in its splendor […] 5 […] clear heavens.[[32]](#footnote-32)

4Q262B 1 4-5

[ --]לׄאׄור עולם, ושמי טוה[ר]

for eternal light and the heaven of bright[ness].[[33]](#footnote-33)

4Q303 1 4

It is worth noting that although these scrolls are fragmentary and their meaning is uncertain, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the phrase **שמי טוהר** appears in the context of brightness and light.

The phrase רקיע טוהר, without the adjective ממולח, appears twice in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice:

לׄ[מש]א יחד רקיע {{זו}} טוהרׄ טהורים

to [exa]lt together the splendidly shining firmament.[[34]](#footnote-34)

4Q403 (4QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrificed) 1 i 42

6 ו֯כ֯ו֯ל ר֯[וחי] רׄקׄי[ע]יׄ הׄטׄוׄהרׄ 7 יׄגילו בׄכבודו

6 and all the s[pirits] of the bright firmaments 7 rejoice in His glory.[[35]](#footnote-35)

4Q405 (4QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrificef) 23 i 6-7

Newsom suggests that the author of 4Q403 prevaricated between the nouns זוהר and טוהר. He began to write רקיע זוהר, but after writing the first two letters changed his mind and instead wrote רקיע טוהר טהורים.[[36]](#footnote-36) An additional phrase in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice expressing the idea that the firmament is luminous and bright is רקיע האור “the shining firmament” 4Q405 (4QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrificef) 20ii-22 9, in the text from the Twelfth Song of the Sabbath mentioned above.

In light of all these occurrences, it seems to me that the short expression רקיע טוהר, created in the Second Temple period under the influence of Exod 24:10 and Ezek 1:26, was expanded in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice to produce רקיע (פלא) ממולח טוהר, which also integrates the expression ממולח טוהר found in Exod 30:35.[[37]](#footnote-37) In the combined phrase, the principal meaning of טוהר would seem to be “bright,” while the sense of “pure” in the original phrase in Exodus plays only a secondary function.

Mizrahi suggested that the author of the Songs identified the expression ממולח טוהר with what Ezekiel referred to as נֹגַהּ – "the brightness that surrounds the sublime Temple.”[[38]](#footnote-38) According to his plausible proposal, it would then not be surprising that the author of the Songs also regarded the expression ממולח טוהר as an appropriate description of the angels’ garments. According to Ezekiel 1:13, the angels also have *nōg̲ah* (like the firmament – ibid. 1:26–28), and accordingly, the description of the heavenly *nōg̲ah* is also appropriate in describing the angels’ garb. Moreover, according to the author of the Songs (drawing on Ps 19:2), the firmament praises God just as the angels do:

7 וקול בׄרך מכול מפלגיו מׄספרׄה רקיעיֿ[[39]](#footnote-39) כבודׄוׄ ו֯מהללים שׄעׄריו 8 בקול רנה.‎

7 And there is a sound of blessing from all its divisions. The firmament declares his glory and its gates praise 8 with jubilant voice.

4Q405 (4QSongs of the Sabbath Sacrificef) 23 i 7-8

Thus the description of the angels in terms relating to the firmament in the Eleventh Song of the Sabbath has a foundation even in the Bible. Accordingly, it is unremarkable that the term ממולח טוהר is also employed to describe the garments of the angels as they give praise.

# The Common Semantic Field of the Roots מל"ח, שח"ק, דק"ק, and רק"ע in Descriptions of Garments, the Firmament, and the Incense

In light of our examination of the context of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice that reveals the connection between the use of the expression ממולח טוהר to both the firmament and the angels’ garments, we can now examine whether there is also a connection between the description of the preparation of the incense and the firmament and garments.

The verse following Exod 30:35, with its commandment to prepare the incense מְמֻלָּח טָהוֹר קֹדֶשׁ, further instructs:

וְשָׁחַקְתָּ מִמֶּנָּה הָדֵק

Beat some of it into powder.

Exod 30:36

In the eleventh century, Rabbi Jonah ibn Ǧanāḥ offered three interpretations of the verb מְמֻלָּח in his dictionary Kitāb al-Uṣūl. The second of these reads:

والمعنى الثاني ان يراد به المبالغة في دقّها كما قال ושחקת ממנה הדק ويكون مشتقّا من כעשן נמלחו الذي معناه الاضمحلال.[[40]](#footnote-40)

And the second intended meaning is extreme fineness, as it is said וְשָׁחַקְתָּ מִמֶּנָּה הָדֵק (Exod 30:36), and this is derived from כֶּעָשָׁן נִמְלָחוּ (Isa 51:6), which has the sense of dissipation.

In the thirteenth century, Rabbi Tanḥūm ben Joseph ha-Yerushalmi felt that this was the most apposite interpretation:

**מלח** קיל פי אלקטורת **ממולח טהור**. וראי אהל אלפקה פיה אן יוצ'ע מעה מלח ואלתרגום קאל **מערב**. אי מכ'תלט. ואלצ'אהר פי אללפט' אנה מהבא אי נאעם פי אלגאיה ואלנהאיה כמא יפעל פי אלד'רירה ואלד'רוראת ואלאכחאל. וישתק מן **בלויי מלחים ובלויי סחבות** אלד'י קיל מנה **כי שמים כעשן נמלחו**. אנדקת ותהבת ועדמת כעדם אלד'כאן ותחללה פי אלהוי פהד'א אחסן מא קיל פי **ממולח** והו מטאבק לקולה **ושחקת ממנה הדק**. **קטורת סמים דקה** והד'א ג'מיעה תכריר פי אלמעני ללתאכיד פי אלמבאלגה פי תנעימהא.

מלח. It is said of the incense that it was מְמֻלָּח טָהוֹר (Exod 30:35). The Sages opined that this meant that salt was added to it. The Targum had מְעָרַב, that is to say mixed. The term would seem to imply that it [the incense] is ground into a powder, that is – exceedingly soft, in the manner that sundry smelling powders and sundry eye cosmetics. This usage is derived from the terms בְּלוֹיֵי מְלָחִים and בְּלוֹיֵי סְחָבוֹת (see Jer 38:11), which as it was said כִּי שָׁמַיִם כֶּעָשָׁן נִמְלָחוּ (Isa 51:6) – were eroded and ground into a powder and dissipated like smoke, vanishing in the wind. This is the best commentary on מְמֻלָּח and is consistent with the text וְשָׁחַקְתָּ מִמֶּנָּה הָדֵק (Exod 30:36). קְטֹרֶת סַמִּים דַּקָּה (Lev 126:11). And all this here is by way of repetition in order to emphasize the extreme softness [of the incense].[[41]](#footnote-41)

As early as the twelfth century, the renowned biblical commentator Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, in his exegesis of Job 37:17, noted the common semantic field of several nouns relating to the firmament, and their relationship to the description of the preparation of the incense:

וה**שְׁחָקִים** – הם על ה**עָבִים**, ונקראו כן בעבור היותם אויר דק, והוא מן **וְשָׁחַקְתָּ מִמֶּנָּה הָדֵק** (שמות ל 36). וכן נקראו **דֹּק** ו**רָקִיעַ**.

And the שְׁחָקִים are above the עָבִים, and are called thus because they consist of thin air, and this comes from וְשָׁחַקְתָּ מִמֶּנָּה הָדֵק (Exod 30:36). And they were also called דֹּק and רָקִיעַ.

The verb וְשָׁחַקְתָּ is indeed firmly associated with the noun שחקים, which according to Ibn Ezra means “thin air,” and according to other commentaries is explained as “a cloud with the appearance of ground dust.”[[42]](#footnote-42) The infinitive form הָדֵק “very small” in the description of the preparation of the incense is reminiscent of the verse הַנּוֹטֶה **כַדֹּק** שָׁמַיִם “Who spread out the skies like gauze” Isa 40:22. Ibn Ezra also associates the noun רקיע with this same semantic field, suggesting that it conveys the sense of rolling thin or grinding small.[[43]](#footnote-43) In his second interpretation of Gen 1:6, Ibn Ezra noted that the three roots שח"ק, דק"ק, and רק"ע all occur in a single verse in the Song of David:

**וְאֶשְׁחָקֵם** כַּעֲפַר אָרֶץ כְּטִיט חוּצוֹת **אֲדִקֵּם אֶרְקָעֵם**

I pounded them like dust of the earth, Stamped, crushed them like dirt of the streets.

2Sam 22:43

He clarified:

והנה כלם קרובים בטעם... בעבור היותם גופות דקות

Thus all these [the nouns רקיע, דוק, and שחק] are close in meaning… since they refer to fine objects.

The connection between the root מל"ח and the roots שח"ק and רק"ע is strengthened in light of the translation in Jonathan of Jer 38:11 וּבְלוֹיֵ מְלָחִים – וּבְלָאֵי שַׁחְקָן “worn rags,” as well as that of Josh 9:5 בָּלוֹת וּמְטֻלָּאוֹת – בְּלַן וּמרֻקְעִין “worn-out, patched.” In Talmudic Hebrew, the noun שְׁחָקִים (Mishna Ketubot 5:8) has the sense of “worn-out clothes.”

The grammarians’ interpretations underscore the presence of a close semantic connection between the preparation of the fine, delicate incense, the thin firmament, and the worn-out garments. The connection rests on a broad semantic field encompassing four roots: דק"ק, מל"ח, רק"ע, and שח"ק.

# Discussion and Conclusions

As noted above, Strugnell was uncertain whether the verb ממולח in the Scrolls should be connected to the rare meaning of “eroded and worn-out” in the Bible. Jean Carmignac supported this understanding, suggesting that the adjective ממולח should be associated with the description of the firmament in Isa 51:6, where the verb נִמְלָחוּ “melt away” appears in apposition to the verb תִּבְלֶה “should wear out.” A paraphrase on this collocation appears in the War Scroll: וגבורתם כעשן נמלח “like smoke [that] disappears” [1QM 15:10). Carmignac also referred to Jer 38:11, which was discussed above. Based on the sources he quoted, he proposed that ממולח should be interpreted as “extremely eroded,” “fine as smoke:”

En ce cas, MM(W)LḤ désignerait une chose spécialement dissociée et désagrégée, subtile comme la fumée. Approximativement on pourrait peut-être proposer en français la traduction: exhalaison. [[44]](#footnote-44)

The proposal to interpret ממולח as “eroded” (literally), i.e. “thin and fine,” is highly suited to the context in the Scrolls and in Exodus. As discussed above, this proposed interpretation can be based on a broad semantic field including four roots that are common to the contexts of the incense, the firmament, and the garments. Carmignac’s argument puts him in agreement with prominent medieval scholars and with the author of Ms E in the Samaritan translation of the Pentateuch.[[45]](#footnote-45) If Rabbi Tanchum in the thirteenth century felt that this was the “best” interpretation, it is not unlikely that the Qumranian author shared his opinion. After all, the vision of the rainbow that originally invited the description ממולח טוהר is indeed an extremely thin and fine appearance caused by the collation of tiny drops of water.

The expression ממולח טוהר may also carry a theological meaning. Mizrahi noted the difficulty of the author of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice in describing beings that, on the one hand, are spiritual and abstract, yet visible.[[46]](#footnote-46) It would also seem that the phrase ממולח טוהר was intended to emphasize the spiritual character both of the firmament and of the garments of the angels who serve in this domain. The author of the Songs sought to describe a quasi-spiritual, thin, and extremely delicate sight.

In light of our study, it is proposed that the phrase רקיע פלא ממולח טוהר should be interpreted as “a wonderous firmament, thin and fine.” The same interpretation is to be applied to the description of the angels’ garments as ממולח טוהר – a garb of light of incomparable thinness and finery. In the Qumranian context, both components of the phrase have a meaning that differs from the original sense. ממולח no longer refers to the application of salt, but to fineness; while the meaning (or at least the primary meaning) of טוהר is brightness, rather than purity.

# Abstract

The phrase ממולח טוהר appears four times in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, describing the firmament and the angels’ garments. John Strugnell, followed by most scholars, proposed that the phrase be understood as “purely blended.” An examination of the context in which the phrase appears in the Songs supports the possibility that its use began as a reference to the brightness of the firmament, and was then extended to apply to the angels’ garments. Our review of the semantic field of the four roots common to the descriptions of the preparation of the incense, the garments, and the firmament – דק"ק, מל"ח, רק"ע, and שח"ק – (a semantic field that was already recognized by the medieval Hebrew grammarians) strengthens the claim of Jean Carmignac, rejected by most scholars, that ממולח means “thin and fine.” In my opinion, the phrase ממולח טוהר is to be understood as “characterized by a thin, fine brightness.” In addition to the linguistic discussion, the article also discusses the interpretations proposed by the scholars in terms of their correlation to Qumranian theology.

1. \* The quotes from the Scrolls follow Qimron, *The Qumran Texts*, unless otherwise noted. The translation of the biblical quotes follows JPS. Quotes from Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan, as well as from the traditional biblical commentators, follow the website Mikra’ot Gedolot ‘Haketer’: /https://www.mgketer.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Following JPS; however, I replaced *refined* in the translation with *salted*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. JT Yoma 4:4 (41d); BT Keritot 6a. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Hurowitz, “Salted Incense.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This translation appears in the Septuagint, the Vulgate, Onkelos, Peshitta, Neophyte, and Pseudo-Jonathan versions. See Hurowitz, “Salted Incense,” 179-180. Hurowitz (ibid., 183) also noted that descriptions of the preparation of incense from the Second Temple period (Philo, Jubilees, Flavius Josephus) do not mention the act of salting. The principle manuscripts of the Samaritan translation (A, B, J) translate the word ממלחת (as it appears in the Samaritan version) as a noun: מדוכה “mortar.” Manuscript E of the Samaritan translation prefers מתלחסה “ground, eroded;” see Tal, *A Dictionary of Samaritan Aramaic*, 172 (דוך), 433 (לחס). This interpretation will be discussed below in detail in section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Translation based on Benjamin H. Parker and Martin G. Abegg, <https://www.bensira.org/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Syriac translation here has דחליט “that is mixed.” Three scholars suggest that this interpretation is consistent with the context in the verse: see Strugnell, “Angelic Liturgy,” 341; Newsom, “Shirot ‛Olat HaShabbat,” 342; Mizrahi, “Comparison,” 52. As I noted above, however, I find it difficult to reach a firm conclusion from the context of the verse. Mizrahi, “Comparison,” 72, note 52, remarked that the verb ממלח appears in the masculine and agrees with the phrase שם יאשיהו, and not with כקטרת סמים as the context might suggest. The text here may reflect a fossilized biblical expression. However, the grammatical incongruity is already apparent in Exodus, where the words מְמֻלָּח טָהוֹר in the masculine agree with the phrase מַעֲשֵׂה רוֹקֵחַ and not with the feminine noun קְטֹרֶת. The Samaritan form ממלחת in the feminine would appear to reflect an attempt to harmonize the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Qimron, *The Qumran Texts* II, 375. Qimron suggests restoring רו[קמות], but the addition barely fits the missing space. Newsom, “Shirot ‛Olat HaShabbat,” 342, restored רו[וחות], but noted that רו[קמת] is also possible. The punctuation here follows Mizrahi, “The Eleventh Songs,” 24-25; however, Mizrahi argues that the firmament here is “like the works of the spirits,” whereas I preferred to interpret the verse as stating that the works of the spirit are like the firmament. See below. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A new restoration I propose based on the similar context in lines 11-12 רוחות [א]לוהים חיים מתהלכים תמיד עם כבוד מרכבות [ה]פלא. The conventional restoration is [דממ]ת. The new restoration proposed here also influences the punctuation of the text. Cf. Newsom, “Shirot ‛Olat HaShabbat,” 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Following the restoration proposed by Qimron, *The Qumran Texts* II, 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Although an identical version is documented in Ms. 11Q17, it would seem that the division of the words has been corrupted and the text should read יצאו מבין. See Newsom, “Shirot ‘Olat HaShabbat,” 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is probably a phonetic spelling reflecting the omission of the consonant /r/, unless there is haplography here. See: Qimron, *Grammar of HDSS*, 110 §B 3.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Based on Garcia Martínez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 833–835, amended according to the reading corrections in the Hebrew text. I have left the Hebrew *mmwlḥ ṭwhr* (here and below) where the translation has “purely blended” and such like. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The text is presented without restorations. The spaces and hyphens represent the estimated number of letters in the sections that were not preserved. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. According to the reading in Qimron, *The Qumran Texts*, II, 379. Martínez et al. read [פ]תׄילי: García Martínez et al., *Qumran Cave 11*, 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Based on the translation in García Martínez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls,* 1219, following the amended reading [מ]עׄילי. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Following García Martínez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 837. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In section 4 below I will discuss the meaning of this word. Mizrahi, “Comparison,” 50, n. 65, suggests that in the Qumran dialect that was probably no distinction in pronunciation between טהור and טוהר, and that these were merely orthographical variants. Regarding pronunciation, in the Samaritan tradition, in which the consonant /h/ was also not pronounced, there is a clear distinction in pronunciation between the two forms: ṭā̊ʾor / ṭā̊r; see Ben Ḥayyim, *Samaritan Hebrew*, IV, 110. It may be assumed that the two words also had distinct pronunciations in the Qumran dialect. As for the orthography, it seems likely to me that the form טוהר \*ṭôr, which is monosyllabic and has a long vowel, may sometimes have been written טהור (see Qimron, *Grammar of HDS*, 105 §B 1.2.3), with the diagraph representing the extended vowel. Conversely, the adjectival form טהור \*ṭāʾor, which comprises two syllables with a transitional phone, will not be written טוהר with marking of the vowel before the transitional phone. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The interpretation of טוהר as “brightness” will be discussed in depth in section 4. Regarding the syntactical structure, cf. various phrases in biblical Hebrew, such as: מוּסַבֹּת שֵׁם “some names being changed” Num 32:38; חֲמוּץ בְּגָדִים “In crimsoned garments” Isa 63:1; מְגֻלְּחֵי זָקָן וּקְרֻעֵי בְגָדִים “their beards shaved, their garments torn” Jer 41:5; שְׁבוּרֵי לֵב “broken hearts” Ps 147:3; and in the Scrolls: מגולי אוזן “those whose ears are open” IQM 10:11; נמוגי ברכים “those whose knees tremble” IQM 14:6. Concerning such construct forms, see: Gai, *Adnominal Attributes*, 67–74 especially p. 69; Cohen, “Compound Adjective,” especially p. 330, n. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Newsom, “Shirot ‘Olat HaShabbat,” 342, and in detail Mizrahi, “Comparison,” 49, n. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Strugnell, “Angelic Liturgy,” 340. Strugnell’s discussion is confined to this instance and does not address the other three occurrences, which had not yet been published at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For example, see the discussion of the phrase חדודי השמש “the rays of the sun” in Kister, “Vocabulary and Style,” 147–149, which provides an example of an innovative interpretation that emerged during the Second Temple period and later resurfaced independently in the medieval commentaries. See also Joosten, “Sectarian Terminology: Classicisms;” Nocik, “’wṭ.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Newsom, “Shirot ‘Olat HaShabbat,” 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Mizrahi, “Comparison,” 52–56. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See the references in Mizrahi, “Comparison,” 53, n. 77. It is true, as noted in Schwartz, *The Holiness Legislation*, 327, n. 13, that as early as the twelfth century Rabbi Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor of Orléans suggested in his interpretation of Lev 19:19 that the use of wool and linen together was prohibited just as the eating of milk and blood is, and just as the anointing oil and fragrant incense were prohibited for profane use. Similarly, the Sages prohibited the construction of a building identical to the Temple or the use of a tool identical to those of the Temple for profane use (BT Rish Hashanah 24a), in order not to be “as one who uses the King’s scepter.” However, it should be noted that Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor did not claim that the admixture per se is sacred, but rather that the Torah did not want items used in the Temple to be used for profane purposes. Thus the eating of animal fat or the making of the Menorah, neither of which entails admixture, were also prohibited for profane use, while animal and plant hybrids that entail prohibited admixture are also prohibited for use in the Temple. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Linen was not dyed in the ancient world because its capacity to absorb dye is poor. Conversely, wool was dyed in various colors for profane purposes (Sukenik, “Dyes in Eretz Israel,” 11–12 and n. 24). Accordingly, only whitened and fine-quality linen garments were found at the Qumran site (see Shamir and Sukenik, “Qumran Textiles.”) Shamir and Sukenik explain the customs of the members of the Qumran sect (distinguishing the members of the sect from Hellenistic culture and from other Jews; refraining from using animal products; fear of hybrids). I will add the hypothesis that the members of the cult sought to wear what might be termed “lay priest” garments, made from linen only and without wool (see, for example, Ezek 44:17-18). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Qimron, “The Halacha of DC”; Qimron and Strugnell, *Miqṣat Ma‘aśe ha-Torah,* 139–140. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See for example Shemesh, “Sectarian Matrimonial Law,” 261–263. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See n. 7 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Ford, “The Term *spr*,” 302–310; the translation of the verse appears on page 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Regarding the idea expressed in the verse in the Ben Sira Scroll, cf. Ps 19:2. Regarding the connection between glory and the roots או"ר and נה"ר, see Ezek 1:28 and the parallels in Isa 60:1 and Ps 34:6. For a discussion of the reading of the text in the Genizah manuscripts, the Greek and Syriac translations, and the commentary, see: Yadin, “The Ben Sira Scroll,” 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. García Martínez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 543*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. García Martínez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 669*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Newsom, “Shirot ‘Olat HaShabbat,” 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Newsom, “Shirot ‘Olat HaShabbat,” 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Newsome, “Shirot ‘Olat HaShabbat,” 271. Newsom also noted the affinity to Ezek 8.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The merger of different verses is a familiar method for creating phrases in the Scrolls in general, and in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice in particular. I will illustrate this by way of two expressions from the above-mentioned Twelfth Song of the Shabbat. The expression תבנית כסא מרכבה (4Q405 20ii-22 8) in all probability constitutes a merger of the phrase וּלְתַבְנִית הַמֶּרְכָּבָה “the figure of the chariot” I Chron 28:18 and the phrase דְּמוּת כִּסֵּא “the semblance of a throne” Ezek 1:26. The phrase ומעשי נוגה ברוקמת כבוד צבעי פלא (4Q405 20ii-22 10-11) would seem to echo no fewer than four fragments of verses: נֹגַהּ כְּבוֹד “the radiance of the Presence (lit. glory)” Ezek 10.4 and compare ibid. 1:28; מַעֲשֵׂה רֹקֵם “embroidered work” Exod 28:39 and elsewhere; בִגְדֵי קֹדֶשׁ [...] לְכָבוֹד “sacral vestments […] for dignity” ibid. 28:2; צֶבַע רִקְמָתַיִם “embroidered cloths” Judg 5:30. For an additional example from the text, see the detailed commentary in Newsom, “Shirot ‘Olat HaShabbat,” 351–352 at lines 9–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Mizrahi, “The Eleventh Song,” 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. It appears that one should emend \*מספר הרקיעי (=הרקיע) following Ps 19:2. The influence of the the verse in Psalms explains why the

נראה שיש להגיה \*מספר הרקיעי (=הרקיע) לפי תהלים יט 2. התלות בפסוק בתהלים מסבירה מדוע צורת הבינוני קודמת לנושא המשפט. ראו Qimron, *The Qumran Texts* II, 378. בשיחה בעל־פה הציע לי פרופ' קימרון שהתנועה האחרונה במילה hārāqî (העיצור /ʿ/לא נהגה ומומש כתנועה ארוכה) נכתבה בטריגרף. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Neubauer, *The Book of Hebrew Roots*, 377. This meaning proposed by Ibn Ǧanāḥ is mentioned in the review of interpretations in Hurowitz, “Salted Incense,” 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Shy, *Al-Muršīd Al-Kāfī*, 304–305. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For a review of the dictionaries, see Blau, “Arabic Equivalents,” 76–77. Blau supports the possibility that biblical Hebrew maintains two homonymous roots, one with the sense “crumble” and the other with the sense “to be elevated” (as in Arabic). Thus the original meaning of שחקים is “heaven.” However, the pertinent question for our discussion is how the word was understood in the Second Temple period. Regarding the interpretation of שחקים as “thin clouds,” cf. the comparison of fog to dust in Nah 1:3, and the description of the incense as a cloud in Lev 16:13 and as powder in Cant 3:6. This interpretation is reflected in two Qumranian texts. In 1QM 10:11, the word שחקים, together with מפרש שחקים “expanse of *šəḥāqîm*,” is placed in apposition to the word עב in the biblical phrase מִפְרְשֵׂי עָב “expanse of clouds” (Job 36:29), while in Job 37:18 = 11QtgJob 29:8, the word ערפלא “cloud, fog” is used to translate the word שחקים. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Tur-Sinai, *Beliefs and Doctrines*, 195–205 supported the interpretation of רקיע as meaning “patch.” Both senses of רקיע – fineness and patch – seem to be applied in the Jerusalem Talmud (Ber 1:1 (2c)). Rabbi Judah Ben Pazzi, commenting on יֵעָשֶׂה כמין מטלית הרקיע “let the firmament be made like a patch,” suggested that the firmament can be regarded as a “patch” applied to the sky created on the first day. He interpreted רקיע on the basis of the Aramaic root רק"ע, one of whose meanings is “patch,” as in the Jonathan translation of Josh 9:5 מְטֻלָּאוֹת – מְרַקְעִין “patched” (see Mirkin, *mid̲rāš rabbāh* I, 26 and Tur-Sinai, *Beliefs And Doctrines*, 196). Conversely, Rabbi Hanina the firmament is exceedingly thin – עשויין כטס “made like a [beaten out] plate. He interpreted תַּרְקִיעַ as referring to flattening or beating out, as Onkelos translated Exod 39:3 – וַיְרַקְּעוּ – וְרַדִידוּ “And they beat out” (see the commentary of Rabbi Elazar Azikri regarding the same verse, and cf. the remark by R. Saul Lieberman that the exegesis is based on the similarity to the Greek noun θωράκια “armor;” see Assis, *Lieberman’s Marginalia* and the parallels he mentions). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Carmignac, “MLḤ Il,” 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See n. 4 above. Tal, *The Samaritan Targum*, 102–103 suggested that this was a later translation influenced by the Arabic. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See Mizrahi, “The Thirteenth Song,” 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)