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Jesus and the Food Laws: A Reassessment of Mark 7:19b

A fresh interpretation of a difficult verse is proposed by Mr Rudolph, who is an educator in the Messianic Jewish community and is about to undertake post-graduate study at the University of Cambridge, after having completed studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Key words: Bible; New Testament; Mark 7; food; clean/unclean; Jewish Christians; Gentiles.

Jesus' *mashal* in Mark 7:14-19a and Mark's editorial comment in 7:19b are often taken together to indicate that Jesus terminated Israel's dietary laws. Booth (1986), Lindars (1988), Dunn (1990), Räisänen (1992), Svartvik (2000), Holmén (2001) and others have contributed critical reassessments of the traditional view but important areas remain unexamined. This essay aims to fill in the lacuna; it highlights the classic interpretation's deficiencies and suggests an alternative reading that is more in line with the historical-literary context of Mark 7.

Text of Mark 7:19b

The NA²⁷ Greek text of Mark 7:19b reads καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα (literally: "cleansing all the foods"). Most English translations turn this dangling participial clause into a Markan insertion by placing it within parentheses and adding the words at the beginning '(Thus he declared . . .)' (NRSV)¹ or '(In saying this, Jesus declared . . .)' (NIV). The reader is left with the impression that Mark is summarizing the significance of Jesus' teaching in the previous verses. In support of such a translation, it should be noted that καθαρίζων ('cleansing') is nominative masculine. Thus, Jesus is the one who is doing the cleans-

1 Unless otherwise noted, HB and NT quotations are from the NRSV.

ing and not the body as indicated by the textual variant καθαρίζον.² Furthermore, as Origen and Chrysostom have noted, καθαρίζων agrees grammatically with λέγει in verse 18, thus suggesting that both are comments by Mark.³

I. The Purpose of Jesus' Teaching

The Classic Reading

Commentators since the Patristic period have considered verse 19b to reflect the negative perspective Jesus held toward Jewish ceremonies in general. Jesus here abrogated the ritual purity and dietary laws of the Torah, a calculated step in the breaking away of Christianity from Judaism. This view, advocated by Bultmann, Käsemann, Schweizer, Merkel, Hübner, Haenchen, Kümmel, Lambrecht and Stauffer, continues to resonate in NT scholarship:⁴

- Robert Gundry writes: 'In vv 6-13 Jesus equated the Mosaic law with God's Word and scolded the Pharisees for nullifying God's Word with their tradition. Now Jesus himself is nullifying God's Word with regard to food. But it is the prerogative of Jesus as God's Son to change the Law.'⁵
- Larry Hurtado states that 'Jesus' teaching not only takes issue with a major feature of traditional Jewish religious practice but also rescinds a major body of OT material dealing with such ritual laws.'⁶

2 Based on the variant καθαρίζον (neuter), the KJV, NKJV, NEB and Phillips render verse 19b as a continuation of Jesus' words: '...because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?' (NKJ). καθαρίζον occurs in K, G, 33, 700, 2542 *pm*. However, Metzger notes that the 'overwhelming weight of manuscript evidence' supports the reading καθαρίζων (masculine). See B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart, 1994), 81. Malina has argued for the neuter variant on the grounds that it is the more difficult reading for Gentile Christians unfamiliar with Jewish halakhah. He suggests that a scribe changed the short 'o' (omicron) to long 'o' (omega) in order to 'harmonize New Testament references to food rules and contemporary Gentile Christian practice.' See B. J. Malina, 'A Conflict Approach to Mark 7', *Forum* 3 (1988), 22-3. The argument suffers from a lack of textual support; we have no early MSS with the neuter variant. The case also rests on fairly late Rabbinic texts. For a survey of alternative textual approaches to Mark 7:19b, see R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (WBC 34A; Dallas, 1989), 378.

3 Metzger, 81. See also C. H. Turner, 'Parenthetical Clauses in Mark', *JTS* 26 (1925), 149; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Cambridge, 1963), 241.

4 See H. Räisänen, *Jesus, Paul and Torah* (trans. David E. Orton; JSNTSS 43; Sheffield, 1992), 132 n. 1; J. Svartvik, *Mark and Mission: Mk 7:1-23 in its Narrative and Historical Contexts* (Stockholm, 2000), 21-5.

5 R. H. Gundry, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, 1993), 356.

6 L. W. Hurtado, *Mark* (NIBC; Peabody, 1989), 111-12.

- John Bowman concludes: 'Jesus is here not only annulling the Rabbinical development of Kashruth but is setting aside the Written Law.'⁷

A Modern Reassessment

Over the past twenty years, the classic interpretation of verse 19b has undergone reassessment. It is 'historically unimaginable'⁸ to an increasing number of NT scholars that Jesus taught against the Torah's dietary laws.⁹ Forbidden foods in Leviticus 11 were not merely *tame*' (unclean) but also *sheqets* (detestable) and linked to Israel's national holiness (Lv. 11:45; 20:24-6). *Sheqets* is used seven times in Leviticus 11 and expresses the mindset that Israel was called to have concerning particular animals. This helps to explain why Jews in the Hasmonean period surrendered their lives rather than eat unclean food:

But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die. (1 Macc 1:62-3)

A mother and her seven sons were executed because of their refusal to eat pork (2 Macc 7). The oldest son declared, 'For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors' (2 Macc 7:2). Another Jew, Eleazar, chose torture and death rather than eat pork as Antiochus IV decreed (4 Macc 5:1-6:30).¹⁰ The annual celebration of *Hanukah* in the first century (Jn. 10:22) no doubt recalled these martyrdoms, adding an emotional element to the observance of Israel's dietary laws. DSS literature confirms that purity laws related to food were integral to the sectarian lifestyle (1QS 5:12-16; 6:13-23; CD 10:10-13; 12:12-22).¹¹ In Jesus' day, then, the dietary laws were an important part of Jewish life. Sanders notes that in terms of 'day-in and day-out Jewish practice, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora, the food laws stood out, along with observance of the Sabbath, as

7 J. Bowman, *The Gospel of Mark: The New Christian Jewish Passover Haggadah* (Leiden, 1965), 168.

8 P. J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Minneapolis, 1990), 241. See also A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia, 1982), 39.

9 E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law From Jesus to the Mishnah* (London, 1990), 28.

10 See 3 Macc 4-7; Jdt 12:2, 9, 19; 13:8; Tob 1:10 and other texts surveyed by Sanders (1990), 274-77.

11 Cf. J.W. 2.129, 139; *Ant.* 18.22.

being a central and defining aspect of Judaism.¹² In light of this Late Second Temple Jewish *Sitz im Leben*, it is difficult to imagine Jesus so casually abandoning Israel's dietary laws as the classic interpretation holds. There are seven additional problems with the classic view:

1. *The center of the controversy (Mk. 7:1-5)*

The pericope opens with a description of the setting. Pharisees and scribes have gathered around Jesus, enquiring as to why his disciples eat with κοινᾶς χερσίν ('defiled hands' [v. 2, 5]):

The argument concerns the authoritative place of Pharisaic tradition in a matter of purity not explicitly legislated in the Torah, *viz.* that of ritual handwashing to cleanse any acquired contamination before each meal. Jesus' interlocutors appeal to a well-known Pharisaic principle of halakhah that is not based on the Torah (and is not apparently attested at Qumran): food is rendered unclean even at second remove, by *derived* impurity of the hands (cf. e.g. *m. Zab.* 5.12; *m. Yad.* 3.1-2; *m. Tohar.* 2.2; NB impurity of 'hands' as distinct from the body). Biblical law, by contrast, recognizes only *direct* sources of impurity, which affect the body as a whole (e.g. Lev 11:31-35).¹³

Mark is careful to point out that the disciples have not violated the Torah but the παραδόσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ('tradition of the elders' [v. 3, 5]). The Torah required priests to wash their hands upon entering the Tent of Meeting as well as prior to ministering at the altar (Ex. 30:17-21), and prescribed the washing of hands for an Israelite with a discharge so as not to convey uncleanness to others (Lv. 15:11). Furthermore, when a corpse was found in an open field, the elders of the nearest town were to wash their hands over the sacrifice of a heifer (Dt. 21:6). Ritual handwashing before regular meals was likely a post-biblical, *Haberim*/Pharisaic innovation.¹⁴ The pericope's introduction, then, offers no evidence that the Leviticus 11 dietary laws were at issue in the controversy between Jesus and his opponents. The dispute initially centered on ritual purity and the efficacy of handwashing.¹⁵

12 Sanders (1990), 27. See S. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, 1999), 54, 58-9, 149; P. Schafer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 1997), 69-77; B. Lindars, 'All Foods Clean: Thoughts on Jesus and the Law', in *Law and Religion: Essays on the Place of the Law in Israel and Early Christianity* (ed. B. Lindars; Cambridge, 1988), 67.

13 M. Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* (Edinburgh, 2000), 4. See Svartvik, 370-71.

14 R. P. Booth, *Jesus and the Laws of Purity: Tradition History and Legal History in Mark 7* (JSNTSS 13; Sheffield, 1986), 155-203; J. Neusner, *From Politics to Piety* (Prentice-Hall, 1973), 83-6. Sanders (1990), 30-1, 39-40, 160-63, 228-31, 258-71.

15 Tomson (1990), 241.

2. *Jesus, a prophet of Israel (Mk. 7:6-13)*

In the second section, Mark portrays Jesus as a prophet of Israel who calls Israel's leaders back to the Torah. This is supported by literary context. In Mark 6:4, Jesus states: 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' Additionally, εἷς τῶν προφητῶν ('one of the prophets') in 6:15 and 8:28 forms an inclusio that focuses on Jesus' prophetic ministry. As Isaiah ἐπροφήτευσεν ('prophesied'), Jesus also prophesies in Mark 7:6-7: '. . . in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines' (Is. 29:13 LXX). This prophetic indictment centers on a single point – the overarching priority of the Torah. The Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem placed the tradition of the elders on a higher pedestal than the Torah and circumvented weightier commandments by prioritizing lighter ones. As a result, they are said to 'abandon' (v. 8) God's precepts and are in a state of 'rejecting' (v. 9) and 'making void' (v. 13) divine Law. Jesus called them to return to 'Moses' (v. 10) and to the priority distinctions inherent in the Torah.¹⁶ It is unlikely that Jesus made this pronouncement on the inviolability of the Torah, rebuked others for neglecting God's commandments (vv. 6-13), and then immediately after declared prominent parts of the Torah abolished (v. 19b).¹⁷

3. *Ritual and moral impurity (Mk. 7:14-23)*

In the third section, Jesus takes up the issue of ritual and moral impurity. It is often suggested that the *principles* taught here by Jesus undermine the continuing validity of ritual purity laws. In particular, the wisdom saying in verse 15 ('. . . there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile') is said to dispense with the Torah's ritual purity system.¹⁸ The argument rests on the assumption that Jesus' view of ritual purity differed from the Torah's – the Torah taught that ritual impurity led to internal defilement; Jesus taught it did not. But is this an accurate representation of both positions? In the Torah, ritual impurity is generally distinguished from moral impurity and no causal relationship is noted.¹⁹ Ritual impurity was regarded as natural, unavoidable and even obligatory at times.²⁰ Menstruation, genital discharge, giving birth to a child, contracting a disease and burying one's dead all

16 Bockmuehl, 5-6.

17 Svartvik, 6.

18 J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (AB 27; New York, 2000), 453-54.

19 Svartvik, 354-75. Klawans makes a case for the dietary laws being *between* ritual and moral. See J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford, 2000), 31-2.

20 Klawans, 23-4.

resulted in ritual impurity, not moral impurity (Lv. 15:1-33; 12:1-8; 13:1-14:32; Nu. 19:10-22), suggesting that there is 'nothing inherently sinful about being ritually impure The ritual purity system concerns itself with the status of an individual vis-à-vis the sacred, and not with an individual's moral status.'²¹ This notwithstanding, *intentional* violation of ritual purity law was regarded as sin; it was a heart issue.²² All of this supports the view that Jesus' position on ritual impurity did not differ from the Torah.

In the Second Temple period, the distinction between ritual impurity and moral impurity was disputed. The DSS sectarian community represented one end of the spectrum and held that a 'complete identification' existed between ritual and moral impurity.²³ On the other end of the spectrum, the *Tannaim* 'compartmentalized' ritual and moral impurity, avoiding mention of the two in the same utterance; they placed a massive emphasis on ritual purity issues and shifted the focus from the Temple to the table.²⁴ In this historical milieu, the *Haberim* mentioned in Tannaitic literature²⁵ arose as an association of Pharisees devoted to eating meals in a state of ritual purity.²⁶ Philo of Alexandria (10 BCE – 45 CE) represented a middle of the road approach to purity. For the Jewish-Hellenistic philosopher, ritual impurity defiled the body and moral impurity defiled the soul. There was distinction *and* association. Philo stressed an analogous relationship between the two and emphasized the greater importance of moral purity.²⁷ His writings tended to focus on the individual's status rather than the land and sanctuary.²⁸

Jesus' antithetical parallelism in verses 14-23 is best understood in the context of this intra-Jewish debate over purity laws. Jesus was clearly opposed to the DSS sectarian view that ritual impurity reflected moral impurity (Mk. 7:18-19a). He was also opposed to prioritizing ritual purity over moral purity, a tendency he observed in

21 Klawans, 25.

22 Klawans, 25. Sanders contends, 'Not intending to be observant is precisely what makes one 'wicked'; but the wickedness comes not from impurity as such, but from the attitude that the commandments of the Bible need not be heeded' (E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia, 1985], 184-85). Neusner labels this view 'an intentionalist construal of Judaism.' He grants, however, that ritual impurity does not render one a sinner. See J. Neusner, *Judaic Law: From Jesus to the Mishnah* (Atlanta, 1993), 209-11, cf. 225-26.

23 Klawans, 75-91; Booth (1986), 88-9.

24 Klawans, 93-4.

25 See *t. Demai* 2, *m. Demai* 2:2-3; *y. Demai* 22d-23a; *b. Bek.* 30b-31a.

26 Klawans, 108-09; Booth (1986), 192-202.

27 *Spec.*, 3; *Migr.*, 89. See Booth (1986), 84-5; Klawans, 64-5.

28 Klawans, 64-5.

early Tannaitic-Pharisaism (Mk. 7:6-13; cf. Mt. 23:23-26; Lk. 11:37-41). No evidence exists, furthermore, that Jesus supported Philo's doctrine of analogous relationships between ritual and moral purity.²⁹ This notwithstanding, Jesus' approach to purity was well within the boundaries of first century Judaism.³⁰ Jesus distinguished between ritual and moral purity, affirmed the importance of both,³¹ prioritized the latter,³² spoke of the two together, and tended to focus on the status of the individual.³³ His view, rooted in the Torah, reflected aspects of Philo, the *Tannaim* and Qumran.

Jesus' position may be contrasted with his Pharisaic interlocutors, who prioritized ritual purity over moral purity. They were concerned with handwashing while indifferent to the needs of their parents (Mk. 7:10-12). Neusner contends that ritual handwashing before regular meals was normative for first century Pharisees.³⁴ Booth maintains that the practice was only normative among particular Pharisees, the *Haberim*.³⁵ The evidence would seem to favor Booth's position.³⁶

Jesus' point is that moral purity is more important than ritual purity and demands greater attention. Dunn suggests that, in the original Aramaic teaching, 'the "not . . . but . . ." antithesis need not be understood as an "either . . . or," but rather with the force of "more important than" . . . as in the other most closely related confrontation parallel (Mark 2.17 and parallels).'³⁷ In this light, Jesus'

29 Klawans, 149.

30 Klawans, 149.

31 Cf. Mark 1:44. See H. Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge, 1999), 161. Watson asserts that Jesus' willingness to touch the dead (Mk. 5:41; cf. Nu. 19:11) and a woman with a haemorrhaging problem (Mk. 5:27; cf. Lv. 15:25) is evidence enough of his disregard for ritual purity laws (A. Watson, 'Leviticus in Mark: Jesus' Attitude to the Law', in *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas* [ed. J. F. A. Sawyer; JSOTSS 227; Sheffield, 1996], 267-68). Bockmuehl, 11, however, explains that in 'each case the understanding seems to be that *toharot* concerns are suspended when it is *purity* rather than impurity that is transferred by touch, from the pure to the impure (note Mark 1.41; 5.30).' Cf. Ex. 29:37.

32 Klawans, 149.

33 Klawans, 149-50.

34 J. Neusner, 'Judaism after the Destruction of the Temple', in *Israelite and Judaeon History* (ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller; Philadelphia, 1977), 670; 'Scripture and Tradition in Judaism', in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, II (ed. W. S. Green; Michigan, 1980), 190.

35 Booth (1986), 202.

36 Sanders (1990), 228-36.

37 J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Westminster, 1990), 51. Klawans, 147, concurs, 'Mark 7:15 does not necessarily suggest an abrogation of ritual practice any more than 2:17 suggests an exclusion of righteous people from Jesus' following.' Cf. Mt. 8:21-2; 23:23; Phil. 3:8. See S. Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority* (Lund, 1978), 83.

logion may be understood in a relative sense:

There is nothing outside a man which *cultically* defiles him as much as the things coming from a man *ethically* defile him.³⁸

More simply put:

Nothing outside a man defiles him as much as the things coming from him.³⁹

This reading of Mark 7:15 is consistent with the 'Semitic idiom of dialectical negation'⁴⁰ that one encounters in passages like Jeremiah 7:22-3 and Hosea 6:6, a congruency apparent to Holmén:

Grammatically speaking, Mark 7.15 – as well as the Old Testament passages – may be understood as a "dialectic negation". As a Semitic idiom, the formula 'not A, but B' (οὐ . . . ἀλλὰ) can be rendered 'not so much A, but rather B'. Though one aspect is categorically rejected by the emphasis of the opposite, the purport of Mark 7:15 would in effect be: 'A man is not so much defiled by that which enters him from outside as he is by that which comes from within'. Thus it seems clear that no more than the quoted Old Testament passages aim at abolishing the sacrifice cult does Mark 7:15 intend to abrogate the food laws or the cultic laws on purity in general. It only relativizes them in stressing the importance of morality.⁴¹

Even apart from the Second Temple Jewish *Sitz im Leben* in which Jesus taught, the literary background of Mark 7 makes it untenable that Jesus trivialized the Torah's ritual purity and dietary laws. Jesus had just finished a prophetic indictment of Pharisees who circumvented and nullified the Torah. These he rebuked as 'hypocrites' (v. 6). It is hard to imagine that after this reprimand, Jesus went on to exempt his disciples from whole sections of the Torah. In addition, apart from Mark's editorial comment in verse 19b (which will be dis-

38 Booth (1986), 214-15, notes that this translation is 'particularly possible since the root *kou-* is probably translating an Aramaic *tm'* which, if Palestinian Jews of Jesus' day considered impurity in Biblical categories (as they probably did), had a similar meaning to the biblical *tm'*. The majority of uses of *tm'* as verb or adjective in the OT are in a cultic sense, but religious and ethical uses are also cited by BDB, and occasionally in the Priestly Code it is difficult to gauge which meaning is intended. Thus, the Aramaic *tm'* was probably used by Jesus in an over-riding sense of "corrupt" or "harm". See Booth (1986), 210-11, on the translation of the verb *koinou/nta* as 'cultically defile' and 'ethically defile.'

39 Booth (1986), 219.

40 Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 453, notes the similarity to Philo, 'This would be comparable to the way in which Philo says that the true defilement is injustice and impiety (*Special Laws* 3.208-9) yet still advocates literal observance of the ritual regulations of the Torah (*Migration of Abraham* 89-94). The spiritualization of the idea of ritual impurity, then, does not necessarily imply abrogation of the literal purity laws of the OT; in Judaism, rather, spiritualization and literal observance can go hand in hand. . .'

41 T. Holmén, *Jesus and Jewish Covenant Thinking* (Leiden, 2001), 240-41.

cussed later), there is no textual reason to believe that Jesus shifted the focus from the παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων to biblical law (cf. Mt. 15:20). Taken together, all the evidence suggests that Jesus' *mashal* in verses 14-23 was far from being a radical break with Judaism, and was wholly consistent with the principles underlying the Torah's ritual purity system.

4. Jesus, a Torah observant Jew (Mk. 6:56)

The literary placement of the Markan pericope is notable, occurring immediately after the statement, 'And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed' (6:56). Matthew retains the same order of events (cf. Mt. 14:36-15:1). Attention given to Jesus' κρασπέδον (fringe; LXX [Nu. 15:38] for *tsiytsit*) in both gospels is key. The κρασπέδον represented a Jew's commitment to live according to all the commandments of the Torah, including the dietary laws, 'You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them . . .' (Nu. 15:39; cf. Mt. 23:5). It is possible that Mark and Matthew are concerned to portray Jesus as a Torah observant Jew, even in matters of ritual such as the *tsiytsit*. It makes little sense to mention this detail before the Mark 7 pericope if the point of verse 19b is that Jesus has nullified the Leviticus 11 food laws. The literary placement would suggest that the classic interpretation is foreign to the pericope.⁴²

5. Peter's testimony (Acts 10:14)

According to Matthew's gospel, Peter was present on the occasion of Jesus' *mashal* in Mark 7:1-23 (Mt. 15:15). This is significant in light of Acts 10.⁴³ Here Luke writes that several years after the *mashal*, Peter saw a vision in which Jesus commanded him to eat unclean animals.⁴⁴ Peter replied, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean' (Acts 10:14). Peter's response is most revealing. If Jesus had taught the acceptability of eating unclean food, Peter would *not* have been shocked. 'The story presupposes that Peter is not aware of a previous ruling by the historical Jesus to

42 Booth (1986), 31.

43 On the historicity of Acts, see C. J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (ed. C. H. Gempf; Tübingen, 1989). A concise survey of the criticism of Acts can be found in R. N. Longenecker, *Acts* (EBC; Grand Rapids, 1995), 4-12. See also W. W. Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, 1975).

44 The vision's purpose is taken up later in this essay.

the same effect.⁴⁵ His shock indicates that he had never received such a teaching or example from Jesus over the three-year period that he was with him.⁴⁶ Peter was part of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. If Jesus had terminated the Torah's dietary laws, it is reasonable to assume that Peter would have known about it.⁴⁷

6. The Jerusalem Council and Paul

The Apostolic Decree assumes the continuing validity of the Torah's dietary laws for Jewish believers (Acts 15:1-30; cf. 21:20).⁴⁸ At the same time it affirms that Gentile believers are not under this obligation and that non-Jews need only abstain from τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας καὶ τοῦ πνικτοῦ καὶ τοῦ αἵματος (Acts 15:20).⁴⁹ Booth and Svartvik make a compelling case that the commonality between these four pollutions (ἀλισγήματα) is their conveyance of ritual defilement,⁵⁰ thus suggesting that the 'Lukan Decree not only acknowledges purity and impurity categories, but even affirms their remaining validity.'⁵¹

45 Räisänen, 144; Lindars, 67; Svartvik, 118.

46 If Jesus had taught contrary to Israel's dietary laws, it would have provoked a sustained response by his opponents. The absence of any response noted in the NT is consistent with the implications of Acts 10, that Jesus never gave such a teaching. See Räisänen, 136-37; Harvey, 40.

47 Svartvik, 115.

48 R. Bauckham, 'James and the Jerusalem Church', in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting* (ed. R. Bauckham; Grand Rapids, 1995), 475; J. Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge, 1996), 55-61; also Wyschogrod, '... it is clear that both parties agreed that circumcision and Torah obedience remained obligatory for Jewish Jesus believers since, if this were not the case, one could hardly debate whether circumcision and Torah obedience were obligatory for gentiles. Such a debate could only arise if both parties agreed on the lasting significance of the Mosaic Law for Jews' (M. Wyschogrod, 'Letter to a Friend', *Modern Theology* 11:2 [1995], 170).

49 Svartvik, 120-22, argues persuasively that the Alexandrian version of the Decree is the older text.

50 R. P. Booth, *Contrasts: Gospel Evidence and Christian Beliefs* (Bognor Regis, 1990), 83-6, 94, 106 n. 61; Svartvik, 122-26. Also, T. Callan, 'The Background of the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25)', *CBQ* 55 (1993), 284, 295.

51 Svartvik, 126; Bauckham, 459, links the Apostolic Decree to leitical law for the *ger*, ritual defilement is not the common denominator: 'In Leviticus 17-18 (MT) there are five occurrences of the phrase "the alien who sojourns in your/their midst" (Lv 17:8, 10, 12, 13; 18:26, all using *btokkem* or *btokem*). Since two of these occurrences (17:10, 12) refer to the same prohibition repeated, there are in fact four commandments in Leviticus 17-18 which not only the Israelite but also "the alien who sojourns in your/their midst" is obliged to keep. These correspond to the four prohibitions of the apostolic decree, in the order in which they occur in the apostolic letter (Acts 15:29; cf. 21:25).' Booth (1990), 86-7, responds to Bauckham's reading.

Finally, Luke's account of the Jerusalem Council decision implies that the leaders of the mother church and Paul were unaware of any pronouncement from Jesus that rendered all foods clean:

In fact, there is *no* evidence that *anybody*, conservative or radical, ever appealed to this saying in the course of the debates over Gentile mission and table fellowship during the first two decades or so in the early church. Paul never refers to it, although it could have aided him greatly in many of his arguments. How effective it would have been to quote such a saying to Peter (a person surely sensitive to words of the historical Jesus!) and others in the heat of the Antiochian conflict (Gal. 2:1ff.).⁵²

7. The Patristic period

It is of note that the Jerusalem Council exemption did not result in a complete abandonment of Israel's dietary laws by Gentile Christians. Evidence exists that during the Patristic period some Gentile Christians observed clean/unclean food distinctions. The Didache states, 'And as regards food, what thou art able, bear' (*Did.* 6:3).⁵³ It should not be forgotten that the Jerusalem Council Decree (Acts 15:20, 29) forbids Gentile Christians from αἵματος καὶ πνικτῶν as commanded in Leviticus 17:10-14.⁵⁴ To obey the Decree, the martyrs of Lyons (177 CE) ate kosher food bought at a Jewish meat market.⁵⁵ The Christians of Africa in the late second century took seriously the Decree; its requirements were viewed as 'law' in the Church of the East.⁵⁶ The prescriptions of the Apostolic Decree enjoyed almost universal assent in the Church until at least the sixth century.⁵⁷ Moreover, the Leviticus 11 dietary laws were observed as late as the fourth century in some Gentile Christian quarters. Aphraates wrote, '... the minds of ignorant and simple people are anxious about that which enters the mouth, and which cannot make a man impure. And those who torment themselves about such things speak thus: "God gave instructions and commandments to His servant Moses concerning clean

52 Räsänen, 142-43. See Dunn, 39; Harvey, 39. Westerholm, 81-2, suggests that Paul adopted Jesus' 'halakhic conclusion' in Rom. 14:14. Räsänen, 140-43, argues convincingly that Paul was 'not referring to a saying of the historical Jesus.'

53 'This refers obviously to the commandments and prohibitions regarding food in the Old Testament and Jewish tradition' (K. Niederwimmer, *The Didache* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis, 1998], 123). See P. J. Tomson, 'If this be from Heaven. . .': *Jesus and the New Testament Authors in their Relationship to Judaism* (Sheffield, 2001), 387. Bauckham, 464, views it as a reference to the Apostolic Decree.

54 Booth (1990), 86, 107 n. 67.

55 D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, 1999), 12, 142 n. 44.

56 Simon, 334-36.

57 Bockmuehl, 167 n. 94.

and unclean foods."⁵⁸

There also existed communities of Jewish Christians who remained faithful to the Mosaic Law.⁵⁹ From Eutychius, Bagatti notes that in the time of Constantine 'the faithful while they were leaving the church on Easter day, were forced to eat pork under pain of death . . . the Judaeo-Christians refused this in order not to transgress the Mosaic law to which they held they were bound.'⁶⁰

Incidental comments like these suggest that even after the Mark 7:19b text was well attested in the Church, enough ambiguity surrounded its meaning that many Christians, Gentile and Jewish, continued to abide by aspects of the biblical dietary laws. Svartvik's study of Patristic sources confirms that the early church fathers regarded Jesus' *mashal* as enigmatic:

Texts written by a dozen authors during a period of some 250 years have been analysed above. Considering the vastness of the *corpus patristicum* it is quite remarkable that it has been possible to discuss almost every quotation of Mk 7:15/Mt 15:11 in no more than some thirty pages. This fact in itself is an indication of the comparatively insignificant role the church fathers gave this saying . . . Another observation from the previous discussion is that the range of interpretations constitutes a striking reminder of the *enigmatic* character of the saying. The best example of its vagueness is, no doubt, the correspondence between Athanasius and Ammon as late as the fourth century . . . Chrysostom stated that the saying is put forth as a riddle (ὡς ἐν αἰνίγματι).⁶¹

II. The Purpose of Mark's Parenthesis

An Alternative Reading

The above observations point out the weakness of the classic reading of Mark 7:19b based on historical-literary context. What follows is an alternative reading of the passage that is more consistent with this background.

A key to understanding the intent of verse 19b is to identify Mark's audience. Most commentators agree that Mark had Gentile believers

58 M. Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire AD 135-425* (London, 1996), 326. See *Hom.*, 15, on the distinguishing of foods.

59 R. A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity: From the End of the New Testament Period Until Its Disappearance in the Fourth Century* (Leiden, 1988), 109.

60 B. Bagatti, *The Church from the Circumcision: History and Archaeology of the Judaeo-Christians* (Jerusalem, 1971), 14.

61 Svartvik, 201.

in mind.⁶² (a) Mark's editorial insertion in verse 3 is directed to Gentile believers who are unfamiliar with Jewish customs.⁶³ This anticipates the second and only other insertion in the pericope, verse 19b; (b) Immediately after the pericope, Jesus is portrayed as traveling throughout Gentile territory and ministering to Gentiles. Mark's 'Gentile mission motif'⁶⁴ is apparent;⁶⁵ (c) The gospel includes seven Aramaic names/expressions written in Greek that Mark translates for his non-Jewish audience (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36; 15:22, 34).⁶⁶ Dunn sums up the case for a Gentile mission reading of verse 19b:

It is also clear that this unit is directed towards a Gentile audience: verses 3-4 explain Jewish customs ('all the Jews!'); and most commentators agree that verse 19c ('cleansing all foods') is designed to point out or serve as a reassurance to Gentile believers that the Jewish food laws were not obligatory for them. This orientation of the pericope as a whole is confirmed by the fact that in Mark it leads into and obviously serves as introduction to a period of ministry by Jesus among the Gentiles (7.24 – 8.10).⁶⁷

The date of Mark's gospel is likewise an interpretive key, with most scholars placing it between 64-75 CE.⁶⁸ Assuming this is correct, Mark's gospel was written subsequent to two key events in early Church history: (a) The Jerusalem Council decision (49 CE);⁶⁹ and (b) The writing of Paul's epistle to the Romans (55-57 CE).⁷⁰

The Post-Acts 15 Context

Mark wrote his gospel 15-25 years after the Jerusalem Council deci-

62 Sanders (1990), 28; Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 458; Svartvik, 297-305. See M. A. Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, 1989), 36. Mark's audience must have included a large Jewish component given what the reader must know to understand the gospel as a whole. This notwithstanding, the context of the pericope suggests that Mark is writing to Gentile believers in particular (cf. Rom. 11:13).

63 Booth (1986), 35.

64 Svartvik, 301.

65 Matthew's parallel account preserves the Gentile mission context (15:21-39). Likewise, *Gosp. Thos.* 14 links Jesus' teaching on purity with mission: 'And if you go into any land and travel in the regions, if they receive you, eat what they set before you. Heal the sick who are among them. For what will go into your mouth will not defile you, but what comes out of your mouth, that is what will defile you.' See Lindars, 69.

66 R. Schneek, *Isaiah in the Gospel of Mark, I-VIII* (Vallejo, 1994), 6.

67 Dunn (1990), 45.

68 Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 37-9; Guelich, xxxi-ii; Schneek, 7-9. See also W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, 1999), 12-3; M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia, 1985), 1-30.

69 Hemer, 269.

70 J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC 38A; Dallas, 1988), xliii.

sion recorded in Acts 15. It was common knowledge by then that Gentile Christians were exempt from the Leviticus 11 dietary laws by Apostolic Decree. Mark knew this and his Gentile readers knew this. Nevertheless, questions remained and disputes arose (e.g. Rom. 14:13, 20-21). As Räsänen correctly points out, the Apostolic Decree was not based on Jesus' teachings; it was based largely on the Church's experience.⁷¹ Consequently, a theological vacuum existed:

According to Acts 15, sayings of Jesus played no part in the Jerusalem meeting. What counted was the appeal to experience – Gentiles had received the spirit without being circumcised It seems that the acceptance of Gentiles into Christian congregations without circumcision, as well as interaction with them without regard to food laws, began spontaneously, without a 'theological' decision. 'Action preceded theology.'⁷²

The motivation behind Mark's editorial comment in verse 19b is not stated. However, in light of the historical context and given the Gentile Christian audience of the gospel, the plausibility exists that Mark was attempting to construct a theological basis for the Acts 15 food law exemption in the teachings of Jesus. I would suggest that this is a reasonable explanation for Mark's parenthetical statement.

Pauline Influence

An additional consideration is that Mark wrote his gospel 10-20 years after Paul's epistle to the Romans had been circulated. Early Patristic sources suggest that he wrote it from Rome and that his audience was the same community that Paul addressed – the Roman church.⁷³ This presents the likelihood that Mark was familiar with Paul's epistle to the Romans and his halakhah on Gentiles and food.⁷⁴ It is possible that Mark was influenced by this epistle in the construction of his editorial comment in verse 19b.⁷⁵ Amid numerous Markan-Pauline parallels,⁷⁶ the similarity of Mark 7:19b and Romans 14:20 stands out:⁷⁷

71 J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, 1972), 135-36; S. G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge, 1973), 152; Svartvik, 127.

72 Räsänen, 143-44.

73 Guelich, xxix-xxx; Hengel, 1-30. Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 21-37, holds that Mark wrote from Syria. Hengel, 28-30, takes up the Syrian argument.

74 Lindars, 69; Harvey, 39-40; R. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge, 1975), 144-45.

75 Svartvik, 344-48, regards Mark as a 'Pauline Gospel.'

76 Räsänen, 145; Banks, 221; Dunn, 39; Telford, 164-69, notes the 'striking' parallels that exist between Mark's gospel and Paul's writings in general. See J. Marcus, 'Mark – Interpreter of Paul', *NTS* 46 (2000), 474 n. 5.

77 See Dunn (1990), 50.

καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα (Mark 7:19b)

Cleansing all the foods.

πάντα [βρώματα] μὲν καθάρᾳ (Rom 14:20)

All [foods] are clean.

Both pericopes also employ the use of the Greek term κοινός ('common, clean').⁷⁸ κοινός occurs three times in Romans 14:14 and seven times in Mark 7. While direct influence cannot be proven,⁷⁹ the textual affinity and Roman audience make it a reasonable hypothesis that Mark has taken Pauline halakhah (specifically for Gentile Christians) and rooted it in Jesus' teaching in Mark 7. Marcus concurs that 'there might be good reasons why a later Paulinist such as Mark might want to anchor Pauline theology in traditions about the earthly Jesus . . . Paul's theology was controversial; Mark, therefore, may have been trying to defend it against its detractors by demonstrating its conformity with the authoritative Jesus tradition.'⁸⁰

It has been demonstrated so far that Mark's parenthetical statement in verse 19b was directed at a Gentile Christian audience and may have served as a theological justification for the Jerusalem Council decision that exempted Gentile Christians from the Leviticus 11 dietary laws. Pauline halakhic influence is also plausible.⁸¹ All of this suggests that verse 19b is most accurately read: 'Thus he declared all foods clean [for Gentile believers].'

The Jewish Christian Context

Most critical reassessments of Mark 7:19b have rightly emphasized the redactional element in view of the Markan Gentile Christian audience. This notwithstanding, almost all major studies to date have

78 The only other place where κοινός and ἀκάθαρτος occur together in the NT are Matthew's parallel and Luke's account of Peter's vision (Acts 10:14-15, 28; 11:8-9). In Apocryphal literature, see 1 Macc 1:47-48. Both words can refer to ritual purity (Booth [1986], 120). Dunn (1988), 826, however, notes that in contrast to κοινός, the word ἀκάθαρτος had already developed a fuller moral significance (e.g. Job 4:7; Isa 1:16; Ezek 36:25-26; Hab. 1:13; *Ep. Arist.* 2,234; *T. Reub.* 4.8; *T. Ben.* 6.5; 8:2-3; Philo, *Immut.* 132; *Mos.* 2.24; *Legat.* 165). . .'

79 Dunn (1990), 51, rejects Markan dependence on Paul, arguing instead for a common 'line of theological reflection' which stemmed from Jesus' teaching on purity and food. Cf. Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 455.

80 Marcus, 'Mark – Interpreter of Paul', 477. Marcus, 486-87, applies this reasoning to Mk. 7:19b.

81 These two modes of influence should not be viewed as either/or (Acts 16:4). 'Each time the decree is mentioned it occurs in a discussion about Paul and his missionary journey' (Jervell [1972], 192). On the Apostolic Decree in Romans, see M. D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis, 1996), 201-22.

overlooked the Jewish Christian context, an important nuance for understanding the early Church's reading of Mark's editorial comment.

From the Jewish Christian perspective, as depicted in the Jerusalem Council decision of Acts 15, Gentile Christians were *exempt* from the Leviticus 11 dietary laws (Acts 15:19-29). This, however, was not because these portions of the Torah had been abolished but because their applicability was limited to Jews. The Mishnah similarly limits the applicability of certain laws in Scripture on the basis of gender (*Qidd.* 1:7; *Šebu.* 4:1). In this light, Mark 7:19b is most accurately understood as a halakhic comment by Mark and not an 'apocalyptic pronouncement that all foods are (now) clean.'⁸² What was effectually abolition from the Jewish Christian perspective was halakhic application from the Jewish Christian perspective. Given this wider picture of the early Church's ecclesiology, the use of abolition vocabulary (e.g. 'revoked,' 'abrogated,' 'invalidated') by modern commentators to explain the Markan parenthesis is certainly anachronistic, for it disregards the validity of these laws for Jewish Christians who were still well represented in the Church of Mark's day. One need only consider Matthew's Jewish Christian community or the myriads of Jewish Christians in the mother church who were ζῆλωται τοῦ νόμου (Acts 21:20). Abolition language also fails to account for widespread acceptance of the Apostolic Decree as a ruling that upheld two levels of obligation to the Torah. Bauckham is not without support in challenging the scholarly consensus:

Only if the decree had the supreme authority of the mother church in Jerusalem and were regarded, not as a pragmatic compromise, but as formulating in principle the extent of the authority of the Mosaic Law for Gentile Christians can the subsequent history of its observance be explained All the evidence suggests that the apostolic decree was generally accepted by Jewish Christians as authoritatively defining the relation of Gentile believers to the Law of Moses. *They did not think that meant abolishing the Law They understood it to be upholding the validity of the Law, which itself distinguished between Jews, who were to keep the whole Law, and Gentile members of the eschatological people of God, on whom it laid only the four obligations specified in the decree. [emphasis mine]*⁸³

82 Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 457.

83 Bauckham, 464, 475.

Jervell, Tomson and others arrive at a similar position.⁸⁴ Gentile Christians were 'exempted' from the Leviticus 11 dietary laws but *not* Jewish Christians. This is a nuance of Mark 7:19b often missed in contemporary scholarship. Consider the conclusions of several scholars:

- Morna Hooker states: 'For him [Mark], Jesus has not simply declared that morality is more important than ceremonial cleansing, but has swept the Mosaic regulations about what is clean and unclean aside.'⁸⁵
- Joel Marcus believes that the 'explicit revocation of the OT kosher laws ascribed to Jesus by Mark in 7:19b probably goes beyond what the historical Jesus actually did; it needs to be borne in mind that "declaring all foods clean" is *Mark's* interpretation of the dominical saying . . . Jesus' saying questioning the power of externals to defile, which was initially directed against the Pharisaic tradition of handwashing, was later expanded into a challenge to the dietary regulations of the written Law itself.'⁸⁶
- Heikki Räisänen writes: 'Mark or his predecessors then understand the saying in more radical terms than its original intention; Mk 7.19 leaves no doubt about the repudiation of all food laws on the *editorial* level.'⁸⁷
- Hugh Anderson regards the parenthesis as a 'Marcan "footnote" or a later marginal gloss, asserting that Jesus absolutely abolished all food laws.'⁸⁸

The abolition language apparent in these comments betrays a modern Gentile Christian reading of the Marcan parenthesis; the Jewish Christian perspective as portrayed in the Apostolic Decree is overlooked. Moreover, the 'Gentile mission motif' surrounding Mark 7 is disregarded. It would be more accurate to factor in the intertextual background: 'Mark finds in Jesus' teaching the basis for Gentile exemption from the Leviticus 11 dietary laws. The Law remains unchanged for Jewish Christians.' Dunn approximates such a statement in writing that 'verse 19c ("cleansing all foods") is designed to point out or serve as a reassurance to Gentile believers that the Jew-

84 Jervell (1972), 190-91, holds that the 'division of the church into two groups is the presupposition for the apostolic decree. . . It is presupposed that Jewish Christians keep the law. . . On the other hand, Gentile Christians need not keep the law in its entirety.' Tomson (2001), 234, concurs, '. . . non-Jewish followers of Jesus. . . are to keep a limited number of universal commandments, while their Jewish brothers and sisters must observe additionally the rest of the law.'

85 M. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark* (BNTC; Peabody, 1991), 179.

86 Marcus, *Mark 1-8*, 458.

87 Räisänen, 132.

88 H. Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (NCB; London, 1976), 188.

ish food laws were not obligatory for them.⁸⁹ The 'for them' qualifies Dunn's statement and takes into consideration the existence of Jewish Christians in the Church (such as James and Matthew)⁹⁰ who uphold the continuing validity of these laws. By taking this nuance into account, the commentator places Mark's statement in its proper ecclesiological context and avoids making a sweeping statement about the biblical dietary laws that was never intended by the editor.

Matthew's Reading Confirms

Evidence in support of the nuanced reading is found in Matthew's parallel account. It is increasingly held that Matthew wrote to a predominantly Jewish Christian audience.⁹¹ He therefore had no need for Mark's editorial insertion in verse 3 written to Gentile believers and leaves it out. Likewise, and most relevant to this study, Matthew drops verse 19b (καθαρίζω πάντα τὰ βρώματα). As an alternative summary, he makes the last verse of his pericope read: τὸ δὲ ἀνίπτους χερσὶν φαγεῖν οὐ κοινοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον ('but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile').⁹² In doing this, Matthew forms an inclusio between Matthew 15:1-2 and 15:20, and emphasizes that Jesus' teaching from beginning to end is focused on the postbiblical practice of ritual handwashing; the biblical dietary laws are not at issue.⁹³ By stripping the Markan account of all its explanatory insertions for Gentiles, Matthew restores an account of Jesus' teaching that is more in keeping with Jesus' original intent.

Implications

Matthew's account raises two fundamental questions posed by Dunn:

If Matthew's rendering of Jesus' saying on purity more accurately reflects Jesus' own teaching, can Mark's rendering properly claim the authority of Jesus? Was Christianity's subsequent break out from Judaism an inadmissible distortion of Jesus' own vision and intention?⁹⁴

In answer to the first question, Gentile exemption from the food laws was permitted ultimately because food does not render the heart impure (Mk. 7:18-19), a truism fully consistent with the Torah as previously noted. If unclean food could affect heart defilement, no

89 Dunn (1990), 45.

90 Jervell (1996), 59, describes James as 'the adherent of the law *par excellence*.'

91 A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago, 1994), 8; J. A. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism* (Minneapolis, 1990), 4; D. C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism* (Edinburgh, 1998), 162-63.

92 Banks, 145, concurs that the omission was due to Matthew's Jewish Christian audience.

93 Saldarini, 134-41; Klawans, 147; Sim, 133-35.

94 Dunn (1990), 51.

exemption would have been possible. Thus, Mark was able to link the dietary implications of the Apostolic Decree to a principle that Jesus clearly taught.

For the second question, there is no evidence to believe that Gentile exemption from the food laws was counter to Jesus' vision. Jesus is silent on the matter of Gentiles and Torah, and on the few occasions when he did minister to Gentiles, their lack of conformity to ritual purity law was never at issue. For Jews, however, Jesus had a different standard:

We must note that Jesus participated in the Temple cult apparently without questioning the need for ritual purity; he approved of the need for priestly purification after leprosy (Mark 1.42) par.; Luke 17.14) . . . it is also clear that Jesus does promote a significant spiritual (Hasidic) *reorientation* of the halakhic concept of purity, calling for a balance of moral and ceremonial responsibility (note Matt 23.25 par.). Ritual and moral purity must go in tandem, as Qumran and other Jewish renewal movements insisted at this time (e.g. 1QS 3.2-12; *As. Mos.* 7.7-9).⁹⁵

All the evidence indicates that the historical Jesus affirmed the importance of Jews living as Jews. He himself wore *tsiytsit* and cautioned against violating God's commandments (Mt. 14:36; Nu. 15:37-40; cf. Mt. 5:17-19; 23:23). In regard to the dietary laws, in particular, Luke records that Jesus' parents were pious Jews who sought to do "everything required by the Law of the Lord" (Lk. 2:21-24, 39, 41). We can presume, therefore, that Jesus was raised to observe these laws like other Galilean Jews of his time.⁹⁶

Luke suggests that Jewish Christians continued to abide by the Leviticus 11 food laws after Jesus' death. As previously noted, Peter was shocked at Jesus' instructions in Acts 10:14 to eat unclean food, proving that Peter had never received such a teaching or example from Jesus. To contend that Jesus' words in Acts 10:14 were to be taken literally and signaled an end to Jewish Christian dietary distinctions is to forget that unclean animals in the vision were symbolic of Gentiles with whom Peter avoided contact.⁹⁷ Peter interpreted the vision symbolically (Acts 10:28; cf. vv. 34-5). No indication exists that Peter or the other apostles took the vision literally (11:1-18). Such an interpretation would also run counter to Luke's portrayal of Jewish Christians (Paul included) as fully Torah observant.⁹⁸ Consistent with this view, Acts 15 assumes Jewish Christian Torah observance and Acts 21:20-26 confirms it.

95 Bockmuehl, 10.

96 B. J. Lee, *The Galilean Jewishness of Jesus* (New York, 1988), 126-27, 145.

97 Tomson (2001), 231-32, rejects a literal reading of Jesus' words. See also Lindars, 67; Svartvik, 128.

98 Jervell (1996), 58-61.

Finally, most commentators accept that Matthew's Jewish Christian community in the late first century was observing clean/unclean food distinctions.⁹⁹ For them, 'Jesus' teaching is an affirmation and fulfillment of the biblical purity and dietary laws.¹⁰⁰ The preponderance of evidence, therefore, suggests that the later Gentile Church teaching that Jewish Christians were 'freed' from these laws on the basis of Mark 7:19b (and that eating unclean food was even a test of their fidelity to Jesus!),¹⁰¹ is spurious. Such a break with Judaism – on the part of Jewish Christians – would have been a 'distortion of Jesus' own vision and intention.'¹⁰²

Conclusion

The classic reading of Mark 7:19b (Jesus' *mashal* terminated the food laws) suffers from a number of historical-literary context problems. The alternative reading (Mark found in Jesus' teaching a basis for *Gentile exemption* from the Leviticus 11 dietary laws) does not share these problems and is consistent with the available evidence, including Matthew's parallel account. Mark's parenthetical comment was specifically intended for Gentile Christians, not Jewish Christians (an important nuance), and may have served to establish theological justification for the Apostolic Decree that exempted Gentile Christians from the food laws. Pauline halakhic influence behind Mark's editorial insertion is plausible. The study further suggests that Jesus was a Torah faithful Jew who observed the biblical dietary laws and that his disciples (all Jews!) did the same as well. The continuing validity of Israel's dietary laws for Jewish Christians raises a number of compelling questions for modern Christian theology, which continues to associate clean/unclean food distinctions with legalism for Jewish Christians. This reassessment of Mark 7:19b helps to correct such a false association and offers a more balanced perspective on how Jesus' teaching and Mark's editorial comment were perceived in the early decades of the Church.

99 Mohrlang, Gnlika, Saldarini, Hagner, Overman, Davies and Allison hold that Matthew's community observed the biblical dietary laws. See Sim, 134 n. 72.

100 Saldarini, 134.

101 J. Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (New York, 1985), 397.

102 See Wyschogrod, 167-71; L. Dean, 'Jews and Jewish Christians Must Follow Torah', in *Bursting the Bonds?: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue on Jesus and Paul* (Maryknoll, 1990), 176-82.

Abstract

The article proposes that Jesus' parable in Mark 7:14-19a and Mark's editorial comment in 7:19b uphold the validity of the Torah's ritual purity system. Prioritization, not abrogation, is the aim of Jesus' teaching. The Markan insertion was likely intended as a historical-theological justification for the Jerusalem Council's exemption of Gentile Christians from the Leviticus 11 dietary laws; Pauline influence is also plausible. The article calls into question the use of revocation terminology by commentators to explicate the parenthesis. From the Jewish Christian perspective, as implied in the Apostolic Decree, the dietary laws remained incumbent on Jews. Against this Acts 15 backdrop, Mark 7:19b is best understood as a matter of Gentile halakhic application and not an apocalyptic pronouncement that all foods are now clean. Recognition of this Jew-Gentile ecclesiological variegation is essential to understanding the early Church's reading of Mark 7.

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ISBN: 1-84227-075-3 / 198x130 / p/b / 672pp / £17.99

Paternoster Press, PO Box 300, Carlisle, Cumbria CA3 0QS, UK