

Does Mark's Jesus Abrogate Torah? Jesus' Purity Logion and its Illustration in Mark 7:15–23

John van Maaren

McMaster University | vanmaajr@mcmaster.ca

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The consensus reading of the logion in Mark 7:15, traceable as far back as Origen,¹ is that Mark's Jesus contrasts ritual impurity with immorality, thereby rejecting the Levitical purity and dietary laws in favor of moral behavior.² The clear problem this reading creates is that Jesus does the very thing of which he accuses his interlocutors, "you reject the commandment of God."³ Nearly all treatments assume this reading of 7:15 and explain the overt contradiction by appeal to the complex tradition history of the passage (7:1–23; Matt 15:1–20), implicitly acknowledging the tension between Jesus' word and deed at the level of the Marcan narrative.

Recently, an alternative reading of the logion has provided a solution by observing that Mark 7:15 is fully intelligible as contrasting two different conceptions of *tohoroth*, or ritual purity, as outlined in Torah: "one concerned with 'that which enters the body', and another concerned with 'that which comes out of it'."⁴ According to this reading, Jesus does not reject the ritual purity laws, but engages in a halakhic dispute over their correct interpretation. This

¹ Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 11:8–13.

² The logion reads "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." οὐδέν ἐστιν ἔξωθεν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς αὐτὸν ὃ δύναται κοινῶσαι αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκπορευόμενά ἐστιν τὰ κοινούντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον. English translations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

³ My translation. ἀθετεῖτε τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ θεοῦ (7:9).

⁴ Yair Furstenberg, "Defilement Penetrating the Body: A New Understanding of Contamination in Mark 7:15," *NTS* 54 (2008): 176–200, esp. 186. A similar position was suggested, but not pursued, by Peter Zaas in 1994. Peter Zaas, "What Comes Out of a Person is What Makes a Person Impure: Jesus as Sadducee," in *Jewish Law Association Studies VIII* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 217–226, esp. 224.

alternative reading, however, simultaneously creates a disconnect between the logion in 7:15 and its explanation of the scene that immediately follows (7:17–23) in which Jesus explains the logion to his disciples by juxtaposing food (which does not defile) and immoral behavior (which does defile), ostensibly acknowledging a ritual/moral dichotomy and rubber stamping the consensus reading. Because of this unresolved tension, the alternative reading has not gained general acceptance.

This paper contributes to the discussion of the wider pericope (7:1–23) by providing the link between the alternative reading of the logion and Jesus’s private instruction to the disciples. Ritual impurity and moral impurity are interrelated and inseparable aspects of broader first-century Jewish purity concerns. The unfortunate consequence of limiting the scope to *ritual* impurity is that it creates an abrupt topical shift between the logion (7:15) and Jesus’s private instruction (7:17–23) in which Jesus *moralizes* a halakhic debate. However, when read with an awareness of the full spectrum of first-century purity concerns, Jesus’ contrast between food (which goes into the body) and immorality (which goes out from the body) most naturally *illustrates* the direction impurity moves. Accordingly, Mark’s Jesus is not disclosing a “higher” or “deeper” meaning to his inner circle of disciples, but is concerned that his closest followers correctly grasp principles of contamination that undergird all processes of defilement (whether ritual, moral, or otherwise). A corollary to this argument is that for Mark’s Jesus, and by implication Mark, purity matters. This seems only natural for a text written around the time of the first Jewish revolt and well before the emergence of any post-Jewish form of Christianity.

After outlining the problems with the traditional interpretation that call for a reappraisal, this article further defends the reading of Mark 7:15 in terms of two competing conceptions of impurity. It then addresses the defiling force of sin in Torah and second-temple texts before outlining the proposed reading of Mark 7:1–23 in light of wider purity concerns. The argument addresses Mark at the narrative level, without denying the clear composite nature of the pericope. The persuasiveness of this reading depends on the assumption that a coherent redactor is preferable to a confused one.

The Traditional Reading of Mark 7:1–23

According to the traditional reading of Mark 7:15, Mark’s Jesus contrasts ritual impurity (ἐξέωθεν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς αὐτόν) with immorality (τὰ ἐκ τοῦ

ἀνθρώπου ἐκπορευόμενά), rejecting the former in favor of the latter.⁵ This traditional reading enjoys a near consensus because of Jesus's private

⁵ The extent of the consensus is remarkable in light of the problems the traditional reading creates for the passage and the early Jesus movement. While most assume the statement meant something less radical in the mouth of Jesus or in the pre-Markan tradition, and some soften the statement's import by arguing for a relative reading, nearly all assume that at the narrative level of Mark (the focus of this study) the statement contrasts ritual purity and morality. This includes all major commentaries and most topical studies that address the passage. Commentaries: Adela Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Herm 55; Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2007), 355; Joel Marcus, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (AYBRL 8; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 453; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (CGTC 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 244; Élian Cuvillier, *L'Évangile de Marc* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2002), 140, 142; Camille Focant, *L'Évangile selon Marc* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2004), 272–273; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 276–278; Robert A. Geulich, *Mark 1:1–8:26* (WBC 34a; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 375; Joachim Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, 2 vols. (EKKNT 2; Zurich: Einsiedeln, 1978–9), 284; Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 354; Erich Klostermann, *Das Markusevangelium* (HNT 3, 5th ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1971), 67; Paul Lamarche, *Évangile de Marc: Commentaire* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1996), 185; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 142; Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, 2 Vols. (HThKNT 2; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1976), 379; Walter Schmithals, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, 2 Vols. (ÖTK 2; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1979), 345, 350; Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 342–343; Etienne Trocmé, *L'Évangile selon saint Marc* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2000), 201. Topical studies: Roger P. Booth, *Jesus and the Laws of Purity: Tradition History and Legal History in Mark 7* (JSNT 13; Sheffield: JSOT, 1986) 13, 214; Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931), 110. James Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 38; Tom Holmén, *Jesus and Jewish Covenantal Thinking* (BibInt 55; Boston: Brill, 2001), 239; Hans Hübner, *Das Gesetz in der synoptischen Tradition: Studien zur These einer progressive Qumranisierung und Judaisierung innerhalb der synoptischen Tradition* (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1973), 159; Thomas Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah: Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?* (ConBNT 38; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiskell, 2010), 66; William R. G. Loader, *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 76–77; Wilfried Paschen, *Rein und Unrein: Untersuchung zur Biblischen Wortgeschichte*

explanation to the disciples (7:17–23).⁶ Here food (understood to represent the ritual purity system), which enters the body from outside and does not defile, is contrasted with immoral actions, which go out from the heart and produce defilement. For most, this is a seemingly clear indication that the writer understood 7:15 to contrast ritual purity with morality.⁷

Most studies of the past century do not directly address whether the ritual/moral contrast is correct, but assume it while dealing with the problems it creates for understanding Mark 7.⁸ The most glaring problem is that Mark's

(Munich: Kosel, 1970), 200; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 36, 266; Heikki Sariola, *Markus und das Gesetz: Eine redaktionskritische Untersuchung*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Dissertationes Humanarum Litterarum* 56 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1990), 53; Jesper Svartlik, *Mark and Mission: Mk 7:1–23 in its Narrative and Historical Contexts* (ConBNT 32; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000), 2, 294, 403.

⁶ It is noteworthy that many scholars do not find it necessary to state explicitly that the logion contrasts ritual purity with morality, but assume its meaning is self-evident. For example, Dunn quotes the logion and writes “For if Jesus actually said, ‘There is nothing from outside a man entering into him which is able to defile him’ ... then the comment of 7:19b is sound ... and the conclusion is unavoidable that Jesus denied the necessity of treating some food as ‘unclean’ ...” *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 38. Likewise, Crossley provides parallel examples to argue that “statements such as Mk 7.15, 19 do not have to be taken literally.” He never explicitly states the “literal” reading of Mark 7:15, but his examples all involve contrasts between ritual concerns and ethical concerns. *The Date of Mark's Gospel*, 192–193.

⁷ Answers to the historical question (which is *not* the focus of this study) of whether 7:15 goes back to Jesus and if so what it meant, have usually assumed Jesus did not reject the purity system. The presence of the logion in *Gos. Thom.* 14, independent of the Marcan context, supports the independent circulation of the logion.

⁸ In my research, it was difficult to find anyone prior to 2001 who directly addresses whether this contrast was the correct reading of this verse. The earliest seems to be Menaham Kister who retains the contrast between ritual and moral purity, but notes that the first half of the logion can be read without any reference to *kashrut*, the biblical dietary laws. Menaham Kister, “Law, Morality and Rhetoric in Some Sayings of Jesus” in *Studies in Ancient Midrash*, ed. James L. Kugel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2001), 145–154, esp. 151. Typically, the traditional reading has been assumed while the author deals with the various problems imposed by this reading. For example, Claude Montefiore repeatedly praises the radical nature of the statement and its import for Judaism, but merely assumes the contrast: “It is one of the greatest sayings in the history of religion. Jesus ... lays down the principle that there is no such thing as religious impurity in a material sense.” Claude Montefiore *The Synoptic Gospels*,

Jesus accuses his interlocutors of rejecting the command of God (7:9) and then immediately rejects the biblical food and dietary commands (7:15).⁹ Accordingly, Mark either intentionally portrayed Jesus as inconsistent, or was himself unaware that purity commands are part of Torah.¹⁰ Commentators, unsurprisingly, prefer the latter alternative. The writer's supposed lack of familiarity with the Jewish Scriptural tradition, combined with a rejection of one of the most visible identity markers of first-century Jews, becomes a clear indicator that the writer and recipients are a significant distance removed from Judaism.¹¹

However, it is still conspicuous that, according to the traditional reading, Mark 7:1–23 represents the only instance among the four gospels where Jesus is portrayed rejecting Torah. No other passage in Mark, much less the other three gospels, demonstrates the same degree of ignorance of Torah. The traditional reading, then, makes Mark 7:1–23 an anomaly in the early Jesus tradition and raises the suspicion that a later ritual/moral dichotomy may be anachronistically retrojected onto Mark.¹²

There are, however, additional problems that contribute to the inadequacy of the current consensus. First, many have noted that 7:15 is an

2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1927), 1.153. Ernst Käsemann states, “but who denies that impurity from outside which invades people fits the presuppositions and the wording of the Torah, and the authority of Moses himself” (trans.), but never directly addresses the contrast. Ernst Käsemann “Das Problem des historischen Jesus,” *ZTK* 51.2 (1954): 125–153, esp. 146.

⁹ Noted by Jesper Svartvik, *Mark and Mission*, 6. Montefiore writes about the contrast: “What would appear to be in the mind of the speaker or writer is that the human commands or tradition are outward and ceremonial; the divine commands are inward and moral. The standpoint is the old prophetic one, but the argument ... does not work. For the commands of God ... contain a whole mass of ceremonial and outward commands.” *Synoptic Gospels*, 145–146.

¹⁰ More recent scholarship is in general agreement that, before the logion became part of Mark's gospel, it did not entail the rejection of *tohoroth* and *kashrut*.

¹¹ E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 130.

¹² Interestingly, the earliest writer to read 7:15 as rejecting purity and dietary laws was Origen. There is no evidence that the logion was used in the debates about food laws, either as a saying of Jesus, or in its Marcan/Matthean context. Peter J. Tomson, “Jewish Purity Laws as Viewed by the Church Fathers and by the Early Followers of Jesus” in *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus* (Boston: Brill, 2000), 73–91, esp. 74. Also noted by Wahlen, *Jesus and the Impurity of Spirits*, 73 n. 24.

unusually general answer to a very specific question. This is either attributed to Mark's generalizing tendency, or a different original setting.¹³ More significantly, the emphasis on the *direction* that impurity flows is extraneous for the ritual/moral dichotomy.¹⁴ A simple inner–outer contrast would make the same point.¹⁵ The directional elements would seem to point beyond the traditional reading toward a different contrast, one for which directional elements mattered. Most notably, however, the logion, as a response to the Pharisees and Scribes, *assumes the relevancy of purity laws*. Jesus's response is that impurity does not take place, not that it does not matter.¹⁶ It seems that, even at the narrative level, Mark's Jesus has a positive evaluation of the purity laws.

Stated most starkly, the traditional reading of 7:15 portrays Jesus (1) rejecting Torah while accusing the Pharisees and Scribes of doing the same, and (2) rejecting the laws of purity while assuming purity matters. These problems suggest the traditional ritual/moral reading of 7:15 may have its origin and enduring appeal in later developments and not in the Marcan narrative. A new reading must be sought.

Reading Mark 7:15 in light of First-Century Halakhah

Throughout the twentieth century, scholarship that situated Mark 7:1–23 in the context of first-century Jewish legal teaching assumed the traditional ritual/moral contrast and sought to explain a discrepancy between the Marcan narrative and rabbinic teaching on *tohoroth*. According to the Rabbis, unclean

¹³ For example, Hübner considers the general statement of 7:15 to have been given an ideal setting in Mark 7. *Das Gesetz*, 165, 169. Dunn understands 7:15 to have originated in an inner-Jewish debate that was then adopted for a Gentile audience. *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 45.

¹⁴ Yair Furstenberg notes this is an artificial distinction. “Defilement Penetrating the Body,” 181.

¹⁵ The attempt to attribute the directional elements of 7:15 to Mark's redactional activity and isolate a simple inner–outer contrast is evidence of its artificiality. Wilfried Paschen considers *εἰσπορευόμενον* and *ἐκπορευόμενά* redactional. *Rein und Unrein*, 174. Helmut Merkel removes *εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς αὐτὸν* from the first half of the logion which then reads: “There is nothing outside a man which is able to defile him.” “Markus 7:15: Das Jesuswort über die innere Verunreinigung,” *ZRG* 20.4 (1968): 340–363, esp. 354. See also Taylor, *St. Mark*, 343.

¹⁶ This important point is noted by Avemarie who concludes “This is what strikes about Jesus' reaction. Rather than indifference in matters of purity it displays a positive interest.” “Jesus and Purity,” 255–280 in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Reimund Bieringer et. al. (JSJ 136; Boston: Brill, 2010), 255–280, esp. 267.

hands are not able to transfer impurity to the body through the consumption of food and there are no indications of a competing halakhah.¹⁷ This precise process by which unwashed hands might defile the whole person through the ingestion of food remains unclear, but is not directly relevant to the question of what is contrasted in Mark 7:15.¹⁸

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of scholars have read the contrast in Mark 7:15 in light of rabbinic teaching.¹⁹ Most significantly for this essay, Yair Furstenberg pointed out that 7:15 can be read intelligibly to contrast two conceptions of *tohoroth*: “one concerned with ‘that which enters the body’, and another concerned with ‘that which comes out of it’.”²⁰ The first half

¹⁷ Adolf Büchler, in 1909, noted that this process of contamination is contrary to rabbinic law. According to rabbinic law, hands can only become “unfit” (פסול) and not “impure” (טמא). This light impurity could only be transferred once and could therefore contaminate *hullin* (ordinary foodstuff), but the *hullin* could not contaminate the eater. In addition, “unfit” hands could only contaminate priestly dues or *terumah* and therefore would have only been the concern of priests. “The Law of Purification in Mark 7.1–23,” *ExpTim* 21.1 (1909): 34–40, esp. 40. Hans Hübner sought to resolve this problem by noting that the eating of the food transfers impurity of the same degree as the food that is eaten. *Das Gesetz*, 162. Roger Booth considered the role of liquids in transmitting contamination from the hands to the *hullin* and noted that liquids become impure of the first degree when contaminated by something of the first or second degree. *Jesus and the Laws of Purity*, 173–187.

¹⁸ Kazen, as recently as 2010, is still able to refer to this problem as the “missing link.” *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 71.

¹⁹ Hyam Maccoby, in 1999, noted that ritual impurity was never understood to penetrate beyond the surface of the body. He concluded that issues of *tohoroth* are therefore irrelevant to Mark 7:15, as well as its interpretation in 7:17–23, because the logion emphasizes the “entering in” and “going out.” He concluded that the handwashing must be hygienic. Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 158–159. Alternatively, Menahem Kister noted that the logion makes perfect sense if it is restricted to *tohoroth* and says nothing about *kashrut*. He noted that nowhere in Torah is *kosher* food able to defile a person. Referring to the missing link, first noted by Büchler, that according to rabbinic Halakhah food cannot reach the degree of impurity necessary to defile the eater, Kister concluded that Jesus and the Pharisees agreed about the first limb of the logion. In the second limb Jesus shifts the emphasis from *tohoroth* to morality. The first limb is then a rhetorical device, appealing to “rabbinic niceties” to win over his opponents. “Law, Morality and Rhetoric,” 151, 154.

²⁰ Furstenberg, “Defilement Penetrating the Body,” 186. A similar position was suggested, but not pursued, by Peter Zaas in 1994. Peter Zaas, “What Comes Out of a Person is

of the logion, ἐξῶθεν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς αὐτόν, corresponds to the Pharisaic conception of *tohoroth*, which Furstenberg argues originated in a Greco-Roman hand washing custom.²¹ The second half of the logion, τὰ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκπορευόμενά, corresponds to Jesus's conception of *tohoroth*, which is conservative and faithful to the Levitical conception of ritual defilement (Lev 12–15; Num 19).²² According to this reading, the logion of 7:15 in the Marcan context has nothing to do with issues of *kashrut* or immorality. Furstenberg's reading was adopted by Daniel Boyarin in *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*.²³

Reading Mark 7:15 to contrast two conceptions of *tohoroth* avoids the problems of the traditional reading because Jesus does not *reject* the purity system in favor of morality, but *assumes* the purity system while contrasting his understanding of purity with that of the Pharisees and Scribes. This reading, which represents a plausible alternative, is adopted and developed in this paper, and so the reading must be considered more closely.

The crux of the argument is whether the second limb of the logion (τὰ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκπορευόμενά) is an accurate description of the biblical purity laws (Lev 12–15, Num 19). Furstenberg makes two points to support his reading. First, he notes that, according to biblical law, the primary way human beings are a source of contamination is through bodily discharges going out of the body.²⁴ Friedrich Avemarie objects that this summarizes the purity laws regarding

What Makes a Person Impure: Jesus as Sadducee" in *Jewish Law Association Studies VIII* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 217–226, esp. 224.

²¹ Furstenberg, "Defilement Penetrating the Body," 196.

²² Avemarie notes that according to this reading, 7:15 "would simply point to the biblical foundations of purity Halakhah, from which the notion of a defilement by eating, except in the rare case of the consumption of a carcass of a permitted animal, is absent." "Jesus and Purity," 269.

²³ Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 102–128. Boyarin follows Furstenberg both in his reading of 7:15, and in his understanding of 7:17–23 (discussed below). Boyarin, however, suggests that 7:19c (καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα) refers only to *kosher* food. *The Jewish Gospels*, 121. This reading of 7:19c is also adopted in this paper (discussed below) and was previously noted by James Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel*, 192; and Clinton Wahlen, *Jesus and the Impurity of Spirits*, 78. In contrast, Furstenberg understands 7:19c to indicate the Marcan redactor's (mis)understanding of the traditional material and to permit non-*kosher* food. "Defilement Penetrating the Body," 177.

²⁴ Furstenberg, "Defilement Penetrating the Body," 194–195. He mentions menstruation, seminal discharges, parturient blood discharge, and saliva.

bodily discharges (Lev 12) but not corpse impurity (Lev 21:1–4; Num 19) or “leprosy” (Lev 13–14), the other sources of impurity.²⁵ Kazen, however, finds it quite possible that “leprosy” and corpse impurity, in addition to bodily discharges, can be understood as bodily substances that transmit impurity: “Corpse impurity was understood as some kind of death ‘ooze,’ a quasi-physical miasma, coming out of dead bodies, with the ability to, among other things, fill enclosed spaces. ‘Leprosy,’ ... seems to have involved scales and cracking of the skin. Jesus’ statement would then have expressed the view that bodily substances transmit impurity, while food does not.”²⁶ It does, therefore, seem that the Levitical forms of impurity can be accurately described as going out from the body.

Second, Furstenberg argues that there is no biblical prescription for impurity occurring through ingestion.²⁷ While Avemarie notes the “rare case” of consuming the corpse of a *kosher* animal in Lev 17:15, Furstenberg notes that the parallel in Lev 11:39–40 assumes contamination to occur by touching the corpse (one of the three sources of impurity) and not because of the eating *per se*.²⁸ The only other example of impurity caused by ingestion is “swarming things.”²⁹ This

²⁵ Avemarie, “Jesus and Purity,” 269. Corpse impurity and leprosy are not discussed by Furstenberg, who limits his discussion to bodily discharges. “Defilement Penetrating the Body,” 194–195.

²⁶ Kazen, *Issues of Impurity in Early Judaism* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 130. See also Thomas Kazen, “Jesus, Scripture and *Paradosis*: Response to Friedrich Avemarie” in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. P. Tomson, et. al. (JSJ 136; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 281–288, esp. 285–286. He writes “I am challenged, however, by Avemarie’s thought experiment to take Mark 7:15 literally: discharges (from within) defile, but not food (from without). Maybe we should pursue this idea further before dismissing it.” See also Kazen’s discussion of the sources of impurity in *Scripture, Interpretation, or Authority? Motives and Arguments in Jesus’ Halakic Conflicts* (WUNT 320; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 141–162.

²⁷ Furstenberg, “Defilement Penetrating the Body,” 195.

²⁸ Lev 17:15: “All persons, citizens or aliens, who eat what dies of itself or what has been torn by wild animals, shall wash their clothes, and bathe themselves in water, and be unclean until the evening; then they shall be clean.” Lev 11:39–40: “If an animal of which you may eat dies, anyone who touches its carcass shall be unclean until the evening. Those who eat of its carcass shall wash their clothes and be unclean until the evening; and those who carry the carcass shall wash their clothes and be unclean until the evening.”

²⁹ Lev 11:41–44: “All creatures that swarm upon the earth are detestable; they shall not be eaten. Whatever moves on its belly, and whatever moves on all fours, or whatever has many feet, all the creatures that swarm upon the earth, you shall not eat; for they are

example, however, deals with *kashrut* which is in some way distinct from *tohoroth*.³⁰ It seems, therefore, allowing for a little fuzziness, that “the things that come out” can be meant as an “abstract of the biblical purity laws.”³¹

There is, however, a significant problem at the narrative level that Furstenberg’s reading does not explain and which has prevented its acceptance by more recent studies.³² When Jesus explains the logion to his disciples in private (7:17–23), he contrasts food, which after entering the body passes out into the latrine, with immorality, which starts from the heart and moves outward. Hence, Mark’s Jesus seems to provide an explicitly moral interpretation of the logion. In addition, the rejection of *kashrut* seems all but guaranteed by the narrative comment in 7:19c: “cleansing all food” (καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα).³³ Furstenberg explains Jesus’s private instruction as the

detestable. You shall not make yourselves detestable with any creature that swarms; you shall not defile yourselves with them, and so become unclean. For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming creature that moves on the earth.”

³⁰ Furstenberg notes that there is no purification procedure for this “impurity” and that the reason they convey “impurity” is that they are an “abomination.” “Defilement Penetrating the Body,” 195. Some of the dietary laws (Lev 11) share the language of pure/impure with the purity laws (Lev 12–15), but are distinct in a number of ways: 1.) Most of the dietary laws do not involve issues of purity/impurity; 2.) Eating non-*kosher* foods is prohibited, and not just defiling; 3.) As noted by Furstenberg, there are no purification procedures for this “impurity”; 4.) Eating non-*kosher* food is harmful to the person; 5.) The harmful effect is contrasted with holiness; 6.) Violation of the dietary laws is related to expulsion from the land. Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31–32.

³¹ The phrase is taken from Avemarie, “Jesus and Purity,” 269.

³² Avemarie, “Jesus and Purity,” 269; Kazen, “Jesus and the *Zavah*,” 136.

³³ Adela Collins writes: “The comment of v. 19c takes a giant step further and implies, at the very least, that the observance of the food laws for followers of Jesus is not obligatory.” *Mark*, 356. Joel Marcus calls 7:19c an “explicit revocation of the OT *kosher* laws ascribed to Jesus by Mark.” *Mark*, 458. Cohen notes that this reading of Mark 7:19c makes the whole passage “incoherent and illogical. Incoherent, because the first paragraph targets the washing of hands, but this subject is entirely forgotten in the third. Illogical, because in the opening paragraph Jesus attacks the Pharisees and scribes for setting aside the commandment of God, but in the closing paragraph it is Jesus who sets aside the commandment of God.” Shaye Cohen, “Antipodal Texts: B. Erubin 21b–22a and Mark 7:1–23 on the Tradition of the Elders and the Commandment of God.” in *Envisioning Judaism: Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ra’anana S. Boustani et. al., 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 965–983,

moralizing of a halakhic debate. He writes “the force of Jesus’s statement lies in its ability simultaneously to rise to a moral level.”³⁴ This explanation, however, results in a strained narrative where Jesus vehemently debates the Pharisees and Scribes about an intricate legal matter (the direction impurity moves) with serious consequences (Jesus had accused the Pharisees and Scribes of rejecting the command of God) and instructs the crowds about the same, and then, in private, denies the significance of the confrontation by teaching that what really matters is morality. For Furstenberg, then, as for the traditional interpretation, Mark 7:1–23 contrasts ritual purity with morality. This contrast is not stated explicitly in the pericope and it is the contention of this essay that there is no ritual/moral contrast in the Marcan narrative, as will be defended below.

The Defiling Force of Sin in the Biblical Purity System

The defiling force of sin in ancient Israelite religion has often been overlooked due to the assumption that purity language, when applied to morality, is metaphorical. Jacob Neusner, for example, stated “two important ideas about purity and impurity come down from ancient Israel: first, purity and impurity are cultic matters; second, they may serve as metaphors for moral and religious

esp. 969. The narrative comment in 7:19c is rightly considered redactional by nearly all commentators. Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 230. Some have suggested that it is a later gloss added to the text of Mark. Noted by Booth, *Jesus and the Laws of Purity*, 49; Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, trans. Donald H. Madvid (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1970), 150; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus: Übersetzt und erklärt* (KED; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), 142. This, however, is unlikely because of the unanimous manuscript attestation. The variant reading καθαρίζον, attested in later manuscripts, shows that the early Jesus followers also struggled with this comment. This variant creates a play on the excrement leaving the body and falling into the latrine. Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 1994), 81.

³⁴ Furstenberg, “Defilement Penetrating the Body,” 197–198. This same idea is reflected in Daniel Boyarin’s popular-level book, *The Jewish Gospels*. He writes, “When Jesus explains the parable to his uncomprehending disciples, he is showing how the literal force of the halakha itself should be read as indicating its spiritual or moral meaning.” *The Jewish Gospels*, 124.

behavior³⁵ This understanding of moral purity/impurity language as metaphorical and therefore not “real” finds no basis in biblical law.³⁶

A first problem, noted by anthropologist Mary Douglas, is that *all* purity language is, in fact, metaphorical; therefore, no distinctions can be made between metaphorical and literal purity laws.³⁷ Additionally, Jonathan Klawans pointed out the utter lack of indication in the Israelite scriptural tradition that moral purity is a metaphorical extension of ritual purity.³⁸ He argued that ritual and moral purity are equally real, though distinct, forms of purity. According to Klawans, ritual impurity concerns the status of the person in relation to the sacred while moral impurity concerns the status of the community and defilement of the land.³⁹ He lists the following distinct characteristics of each type of purity. Contact with ritual impurity (Lev 12–15; Num 19) is (1) unavoidable, (2) not sinful, and (3) impermanent. Moral impurity, on the other hand, is (1) the result of grave sin (sexual sins, Lev 18:24–30; idolatry, Lev 19:31,

³⁵ Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism: The Haskell Lectures, 1972–1973* (SJLA 1; Leiden, Brill, 1973), 108.

³⁶ Since at least as early as David Hoffmann’s *Das Buch Leviticus* in 1905, modern scholarship has been aware of two systems of purity in ancient Israel. David Zvi Hoffmann, *Das Buch Leviticus*, 2 vols. (Berlin: M. Poppelauer, 1905–1906), 1.309–322. Adolf Büchler, in 1928, distinguished between “Levitical” and “Spiritual” defilement. Adolf Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 228–229. From an anthropological perspective, Tikva Frymer-Kensky distinguished between “pollution beliefs” and “danger beliefs.” Pollution beliefs related to the defilement of the temple and were contagious but not dangerous. In contrast, danger beliefs related to the defilement of the person and the land. They were not contagious but led to expulsion from the land. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Pollution, Purification, and Purgation in Biblical Israel” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Carol L. Meyers and M. O’Connor (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 399–410, esp. 404–409.

³⁷ Douglas writes: “As an anthropologist I claim to find in the totality of the biblical purity rules a symbolic system.” *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism: The Haskell Lectures, 1972–1973* (SJLA 1; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 137–142, esp. 138–139. See also Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

³⁸ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 34. “I see no reason why moral impurity is any more, or less, figurative than ritual impurity. In fact, I see no reason why either type of impurity is any more, or less, real than the other.”

³⁹ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 25, 30.

20:1–3; and murder, Num 35:33–34), (2) not contagious, (3) long-lasting and sometimes permanent, (4) removed by punishment or atonement rather than ritual, (5) designated as an “abomination.”⁴⁰ Klawans rejects a metaphorical understanding of moral impurity primarily because “with both kinds of impurity, we are dealing with perceived effects that result from actual physical processes.”⁴¹

There are, however, indications that the two types of purity are more closely related than Klawans allowed. First, there are scattered hints in Levitical law that bodily impurity was regarded as sinful. Milgrom argued that the person who becomes impure with a major impurity defiles the temple even when they are not near the temple.⁴² The defilement of the temple is an especially serious sin (Lev 22:3, 9).⁴³ The designation “loathsome”, which is used explicitly only in the case of grave sins and dietary restrictions (Lev 11), is also implicit in bodily impurities which stem from decomposition, abnormal bodily discharges, and skin disease.⁴⁴ Bodily impurity is often a result of disease, and disease is often seen as divine punishment which is characteristic of moral impurity.⁴⁵ The *hattat* (חַטָּאת) sacrifice, which is part of the removal of ritual impurities, is prescribed when something is objectionable to God.⁴⁶ The “pollution beliefs” become dangerous (i.e. overlap with “danger beliefs”) when the polluted person comes in contact with the temple.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 22–31, esp. 22, 26.

⁴¹ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 34. He also notes that moral impurity appears in what are likely earlier strands of the Pentateuch tradition. This is unlikely if, as metaphor, it is secondary to ritual purity.

⁴² Jacob Milgrom, “Israel’s Sanctuary: The Priestly ‘Picture of Dorian Gray,’” *RB* 83.3 (1976): 390–399, esp. 391, 394.

⁴³ Jay Sklar, “Sin and Impurity: Atoned or Purified? Yes!” in *Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible*, ed. Baruch J. Schwartz et. al. (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 18–31, esp. 26–27.

⁴⁴ Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 207–214.

⁴⁵ Kazen refers especially to the story of Miriam’s leprosy which is understood as divine judgment (Num 12). *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 209.

⁴⁶ Jacob Milgrom’s argument that the *hattat* sacrifice should be translated as “purification offering” rather than “sin offering” has been generally accepted. He argues that it often occurs in contexts with no implication of sin. “Israel’s Sanctuary,” 390–399. Noted also by Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 23.

⁴⁷ Frymer-Kensky, “Pollution, Purification, and Purgation,” 403.

Second, the dietary laws (*kashrut*) seem to share characteristics of both bodily impurity and impurity resulting from grave sins. These laws provide a link between the two conceptions of purity and suggest that the whole system is interrelated. Klawans argues that these should be understood on their own terms rather than placed into the category “ritual” or “moral.”⁴⁸ The dietary laws (Lev 11) are juxtaposed with the ritual purity laws (Lev 12–15) but their effects are juxtaposed with expulsion from the land (Lev 2:22–26), a characteristic of moral impurity. Unlike ritual purity there are no ritual purifications for these and their consumption is prohibited, while only some prohibited animals are defiling.⁴⁹

The above considerations indicate that impurity resulting from grave sins was an important part of Israelite conceptions of contamination, and that the full spectrum of purity issues was more diverse and interconnected than is suggested by the model of two distinct impurities.⁵⁰ Moreover, purity conceptions in first-century Palestine were at least as interrelated as the biblical system. This is most clear among the Qumran sectarians who came close to

⁴⁸ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 31–32. Scholars working with a dichotomy of purity conceptions disagree about where to place the dietary laws. Hoffmann places the dietary restrictions in his category of defilement in terms of holiness (moral). Hoffmann, *Leviticus*, 1.303–304. David Wright places them in his category “permitted” (ritual). “The Spectrum of Priestly Impurity,” in *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 150–181, esp. 165–169.

⁴⁹ It is clear that τὰ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκπορευόμενά can be read as an accurate abstract summary of both *tohoroth* and of defiling sins. The above discussion of *tohoroth* concluded that these rules can be conceptualized as originating from the body and spreading contamination outward; the example of defiling sins adduced by Jesus in 7:20–23 assumes this understanding of defiling sins. While the *kosher* food laws have less of a directional element, these dietary prescriptions of Lev 11 also easily fit within the abstract summary of 7:15b. The direction impurity flows in relation to prohibited food would be accurately described by the directional principle Jesus attributes to the Pharisees if consuming non-*kosher* food contaminated the eater. However, consuming non-*kosher* food does not contaminate, but is simply prohibited (Lev 11:47). The person who touches the corpse of an impure animal becomes contaminated, but this is due to corpse impurity which also applies to permitted animals. Rather, it is the body of the animal itself that is unclean and as such it fits with the statement of Jesus which locates the origin of impurity in the body.

⁵⁰ Kazen argues for a “moral trajectory” within the purity system of ancient Israel which remained a ritual concept. He writes “This is not to be understood as ‘moral impurity.’ ... As far as I understand it, impurity is a ritual concept, and there is a ritual element in all types of impurity” Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 215.

conflating bodily impurity with impurity resulting from sin.⁵¹ Additional evidence comes from the LXX translator's choice of a specifically ethical term ἀμαρτία for the ἁσθη sacrifice which was part of purification rites for impurity resulting from sin and bodily impurity.⁵² Kazen summarizes first-century purity conceptions by stating, "If we want to reconstruct the situation during the first century CE, we must suppose that the relationship between bodily defilement and immoral actions was discussed between different groups, but that 'compartmentalization' or integration was not the dividing line. We rather must make room for ideas of *some* sort of interaction or link between sin and bodily impurity, both in popular belief and among Essenes as well as among Pharisees."⁵³

Mark 7:15–23 as Referring to Principles of Defilement

By taking seriously the full spectrum of variegated yet interconnected purity concerns that include bodily impurity, forbidden food, and grave sins, it becomes clear that the common theme uniting Jesus' logion before the crowds (7:15) and his private teaching to the disciples (7:17–23) is defilement. Two points are argued here. First, the list of immoralities in 7:21–22 is closely parallel to biblical and second-temple lists of sins that defile. This indicates that, in Jesus's private instruction, immorality is not *contrasted* with impurity, but is *representative* of impurity. Second, the scope of Jesus's logion in 7:15 should not be limited to a contrast between two conceptions of *tohoroth*, but is intended to apply more generally to the full spectrum of impurities that includes grave sins.

⁵¹ Gudrun Holtz, "Purity Conceptions in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism*, ed. Christian Fevel and Christophe Nihan (DHR 3; Boston: Brill, 2013), 519–536, esp. 522–524. Holtz responds to Klawans, who argued that ritual and moral purity were conflated among the Qumran sectarians. *Impurity and Sin*, 75–88, esp. 88. Kazen argues that the near identification of ritual and moral impurity evidenced in the Qumran sectarian texts likely exerted some influence outside of the Qumran community. *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 217.

⁵² Kazen notes "the use of identical terms for different things not only testifies to the conceptualization of the people using those terms, but also influenced subsequent development of thought." *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 218.

⁵³ Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 219. Cohen seems at least somewhat skeptical about the strict separation between ritual and moral purity when he writes, "when Jesus in the final paragraph talks about the impurity caused by fornication, theft, murder, etc. he is speaking about 'danger impurity,' which modern scholars, at least, distinguish from the ritual impurity that is the context for hand washing." "Antipodal Texts," 970.

This wider application of the logion enables the entire pericope to be bound together by purity concerns.

First, a comparison of the vice list of Mark 7:21–22 with biblical and second-temple conceptions of defiling sins shows substantial agreement. The three grave sins associated with moral impurity in Torah are sexual sin (Lev 18:24–30), idolatry (Lev 19:31; 20:1–3), and bloodshed (Num 35:33–34).⁵⁴ Jesus's list includes sexual sins, (πορνεΐαι, μοιχεΐαι, ἀσελγεία) and murder, (φόνοι), though not idolatry. He also lists sins of deceit (πλεονεξΐαι, δόλος, ἀφροσύνη), something associated with moral impurity by the Qumran sectarians and the Tannaitic Rabbis.⁵⁵ The strong conceptual correspondence between Mark's Jesus, the Torah, and other Second Temple developments shows that Mark's Jesus does not uphold morality over and against purity concerns, but rather assumes that morality is an important component of purity.

Mark's Jesus also lists two types of sins not elsewhere connected with the defiling force of sin: theft (κλοπαί) and evil thoughts (πονηρΐαι, ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρός, βλασφημία, ὑπερηφανΐα). Whether these additional sins represent a Marcan expansion of existing purity concerns or simply reflect common (though unattested) first-century conceptions of defilement is not clear. However, within the context of 7:1–23, these additional sins also recall Jesus's accusation against the Pharisees and Scribes whose arrogance (ὑπερηφανΐα) is

⁵⁴ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 148.

⁵⁵ Wright, "The Spectrum of Priestly Impurity," 158. 11QT 51:11–15 reads "You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. And they shall not show partiality in justice and shall not take a bribe, and shall not pervert justice, the bribe perverts justice, and subverts the cause of the righteous, and blinds the eyes of the wise, and causes great guilt and defiles the house because of the sin of iniquity."

שופטים ושוטרים תתן לכה בכל שעריכה ושפטו את העם משפט צדק ולוא יכירו פנים במשפט ולוא יקחו שוחד ולוא יטו משפט כי השוחד מטה משפט ומסלף דברי הצדק ומעור עיני חכמים ועושה אשמה גדולה ומטמא הבית ובעון החטאה Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll*, 3 vols. [Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1983], 392–393. Most clearly among the Tannaim is Sifra Kodashim, 41: "We learn from this verse that the judge who perverts justice is called unjust, hated, shunned, banned, and an abomination. And he causes five things: [he] defiles the land, profanes the Name, causes the withdrawal of the Divine Presence, brings the sword down upon Israel, and exiles them from their land." לא תעשו עול במשפט בדין. מלמד שהדיין המקלקל את הרין קרוי עול. שנוי משוקץ חרם. ותועבה. וגורם לחמשה דברים מטמא את. הארץ ומהלל את השם. ומטלק את השכינה. ומפיל את ישראל בהרב. ואתו. ומגלה אותו מארצו Isaac H. Weiss, ed., *Sifra D'Be Rab (Torat Kohanim)* (Vienna: Jacob Schlossberg, 1862).

their lip service,⁵⁶ whose blasphemy (βλασφημία) is neutralizing God's command,⁵⁷ and who validate covetousness (ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρός)⁵⁸ by permitting a son to keep what is rightly due to his parents (κλοπαί).⁵⁹ The list of defiling sins is tailored to the dispute so that Mark's Jesus turns the tables and accuses the Pharisees and Scribes of defilement.

Second, while Furstenberg is correct to note that 7:15 makes sense as contrasting two conceptions of *tohoroth*, there is no reason to limit it to *tohoroth*. It is noteworthy that the logion does not distinguish between types of impurity. The choice to limit the scope of 7:15 to *tohoroth* and *kashrut*, or just *tohoroth*, is likely due to the original question about hand washing and the unwarranted assumption these were clearly demarcated systems of impurity. The presence of moral impurity is not taken into account because it is considered part of Jesus's "radical" and ethical reinterpretation of purity laws. In the Marcan pericope, Jesus's private explanation in terms of defiling sins suggests the logion is meant to describe defilement more broadly.

When a reading of Jesus's logion (7:15) as contrasting two conceptions of defilement is combined with an awareness of the defiling force of sin, a new reading of Mark 7:1–23 becomes possible. The Pharisees and Scribes object to the disciples' eating with unwashed hands because by doing so they risk bodily defilement (7:5); Jesus responds by noting that the body is principally a source of defilement rather than an object susceptible to defilement from external sources; Jesus then *illustrates* the direction defilement moves in relation to the body by contrasting the ingestion of (*kosher*) food with the expression of defiling sins (7:17–23). The contrast between food and defiling sins recalls the original dispute and reinforces the rightness of the disciples' action, but also accuses the Pharisees and Scribes of defilement. In some sense, then, this proposed reading comes full circle to the traditional reading: Mark's Jesus responds to his interlocutor's by stating that they, and not his disciples, are the ones who are defiled. However, for the proposed reading, this rebuttal is not based on an abrogation of the ritual purity system in favor of morality, but on an appeal to a

⁵⁶ 7:6 "These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me."

⁵⁷ 7:8 "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

⁵⁸ ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρός can mean stinginess (Deut 15:9; ורעה ארץ) or covetousness (Prov 28:22; רע ארץ). Marcus, *Mark*, 456.

⁵⁹ 7:11–12 "But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban' (that is, an offering to God) — then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother."

correct understanding of processes of defilement that demonstrates an intricate knowledge and respect for “the commandment of God” (7:8–9).

Accordingly, for both Mark and Mark’s Jesus, the focus throughout the pericope remains the correct understanding of purity. For Mark’s Jesus, and therefore Mark, defilement, according to Torah, moves from bodily substances outward. Therefore, purity concerns should not be demoted to the status of a stale legal debate and thereby considered irrelevant for the Marcan community.⁶⁰ This is, perhaps, clearest when considering immorality as a defilement that pollutes the land.⁶¹ Additionally, bodily purity and its relation to the temple are by no means irrelevant for Mark’s Jewish-Gentile community, likely not far removed from the destruction of the temple and living during a period when the place of the developing Jesus movement within the diverse expressions of Judaism remained ambiguous.⁶²

The “Jewishness” of Mark’s gospel is also required for understanding the narrative comment in 7:19c, “cleansing all food” (*καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα*). It is hardly conceivable that the disciples were eating non-*kosher* meats and therefore, in the Marcan narrative, 7:19c must also refer to *kosher* food. The narrator does not mean to clarify that now all food is permitted, but that

⁶⁰ This is Kazen’s main objection to Furstenberg’s reading of 7:15. He is intrigued by Furstenberg’s argument, but finds it unconvincing because he finds it unlikely that Jesus’s main point is a halakhic. “Jesus and the Zavah,” 133–134, 136. See Anders Runesson’s discussion of these issues in relation to Matthew, “Purity, Holiness, and the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew’s Narrative World” in *Purity, Holiness, and Identity in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Memory of Susan Haber*, ed. Carl S. Ehrlich, Anders Runesson and Eileen Schuller (WUNT 305; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 144–180.

⁶¹ For the significance of the promises of land in the Marcan narrative see Sean Freyne, “Matthew and Mark: The Jewish Contexts,” in *Mark and Matthew I*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker and Anders Runesson (WUNT 271; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 179–204, esp. 187.

⁶² A handful of scholars have suggested that Mark should be read as a Jewish text. This is the focus of Daniel Boyarin’s *The Jewish Gospels*; he has continued to work on this theme in a number of articles. Also, John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), viii; Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “Markus-Evangelium.” *RAC* 24 (2010): 173–207; Solomon Hon-fai Wong, *The Temple Incident in Mark 11,15-19: The Disclosure of Jesus and the Marcan Faction*, New Testament studies in contextual exegesis (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2009); Dean W. Chapman, *The Orphan Gospel: Mark’s Perspective on Jesus* (BibSem 16; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

permitted food does not convey impurity.⁶³ Mark's intimate understanding of Jewish legal practices finds another confirmation within the same pericope. In the parenthetical comment in 7:3–4, Mark explains the hand washing custom as done “with a fist” (πυγμῆ), indicating first-hand knowledge of the Jewish custom.⁶⁴ This Jewish milieu of Mark's gospel should be taken seriously.

A common objection to situating Mark's gospel within Judaism is the parenthetical comments in the Marcan text. Most notably, within our passage, the writer explains the hand washing custom (7:3–4), something only necessary for someone unfamiliar with Jewish practice.⁶⁵ Some have suggested that the

⁶³ Advocated by Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels*, 121; Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel*, 192; and Wahlen, *Jesus and the Impurity of Spirits in the Synoptic Gospels*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 78.

⁶⁴ Stephen M. Reynolds, “Πυγμῆ (Mark 7:3) as ‘Cupped Hand,’” *JBL* 85.1 (March 1966): 87–88. Boyarin considers this reading “obviously correct” and notes that Saul Leiberman also supported it. *The Jewish Gospels*, 182.

⁶⁵ In Mark 7:3–4 the comment reads “For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; ...” (οἱ γὰρ φαρισαῖοι καὶ πάντες οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἐὰν μὴ πυγμῆ νίψωνται τὰς χεῖρας οὐκ ἐσθίουσιν, κρατοῦντες τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, καὶ ἀπ’ ἀγορᾶς ἐὰν μὴ βαπτίσωνται οὐκ ἐσθίουσιν, ...). This statement has important implications for the reader and writer profiles. “All the Jews” was once considered inaccurate, indicating that the writer was not familiar with Judaism. For example, B. Harvey Branscomb wrote, “either the parenthesis was a later explanatory addition to Mark's text, or else it would seem evident that the author did not have any first-hand knowledge of the conditions of Jewish life.” B. Harvey Branscomb, *The Gospel of Mark* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1950), 122. Benjamin Bacon considered the editor “either ill-informed or prejudiced, or both.” Benjamin Bacon, *The Beginnings of Gospel Story: A Historico-Critical Inquiry into the Sources and Structure of the Gospel according to Mark, with Expository Notes upon the Text, for English Readers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1901), 86. Similarly Kurt Neiderwimmer, “Johannes Markus und die Frage nach dem Verfasser des zweiten Evangeliums,” *ZNW* 58.3–4 (1967): 172–188, esp. 184; J. Vernon Bartlet, *St. Mark: Introduction Revised Version with Notes, Index and Map*, Rev. ed. (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1925), 212. More recently, John P. Meier, *Law and Love*, vol. 4 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 365. However, more recent scholarship has provided evidence that hand washing was quite common, indicating the writer was much more familiar with Jewish customs than previously thought. Susan Haber nicely summarizes the archaeological findings of *mikvot* and stone vessels relating to washing. *They Shall Purify Themselves: Essays on Purity in Early Judaism*, ed. Adele Reinhartz, *EJL* 24 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 161–206. James Crossley

parenthetical comments were later additions to Mark's gospel. This is certainly possible, but is not necessary for the proposed reading of Mark 7:1–23. The parenthetical comments are comprehensible simply on the assumption by the writer that new members were regularly added to the community, and some of these new members came from the Gentiles who would be at first unfamiliar with Jewish custom.

This proposed reading also allows Jesus's instruction to the disciples (7:17–23) to fit into the Marcan theme of private instruction to the disciples.⁶⁶ In none of the five other instances does Jesus *reinterpret* his public teaching in a radical new way, or make a moral or perhaps "spiritual" point from a legal debate. Instead, Jesus *clarifies* what had not been understood. Perhaps the closest parallel is Jesus's teaching on divorce. After responding to the Pharisees' question, Jesus explains that "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11–12). Jesus does not disclose a true or deeper meaning, but rather restates, in simple terms, his teaching on the legal issue of divorce.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the theme linking Mark 7:15 and Mark 7:17–23 is purity, understood broadly. The main point of Mark's Jesus, and therefore also the writer of Mark, is to defend one conception of purity, understood to be faithful to Torah, against a competing conception of purity. The advantage of this reading is that it enables a coherent reading of the pericope at the narrative level of Mark. Jesus is not portrayed rejecting commands of Torah while accusing his interlocutors of doing the same (traditional reading), nor does the writer make Jesus suddenly switch from a legal debate to make a moral point

is even able to appeal to the accuracy of this statement as evidence for an early dating of Mark. *The Date of Mark's Gospel*, 183–205, esp. 184. See also John C. Poirier, "Purity Beyond the Temple in the Second Temple Era," *JBL* 122.2 (2003): 247–265; Eyal Regev, "Pure Individualism: The Idea of Non-Priestly Purity in Ancient Judaism" *JSJ* 31 (2000): 176–202; Roland Deines, *Jüdische Steingefäße und pharisäische Frömmigkeit: Ein archäologisch-historischer Beitrag zum Verständnis von Joh 2,6 und der jüdischen Reinheitshalacha zur Zeit Jesu*, WUNT 52 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993); Peter Tomson, "Zavim 5:12 – Reflections on Dating Mishnaic Halakha" in *History and Form: Dutch Studies in the Mishnah: Papers Read at the Workshop "Mishnah"*, ed. A. Kuyt and N. A. van Uchelen (Amsterdam: J. Palache Instituut, 1988), 53–69.

⁶⁶ The six clear examples of this theme in Mark are 4:10–20, 34; 7:17–23; 9:28–29; 10:10–12, 23–27.

(Furstenberg, Boyarin). Rather, Jesus directly addresses the Pharisees' and Scribes' objection about purity, and later clarifies his teaching in private with the disciples, maintaining a consistent focus upon, and interest in, purity throughout Mark 7:1–23.