

**CLEANSING THE COMMON: A NARRATIVE-INTERTEXTUAL
STUDY OF MARK 7:1–23**

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Purpose

The conflict story of Mark 7:1–23 between Jesus and the religious leaders over the issue of defilement is the meeting point of a variety of disciplines: purity studies, Jewish studies, exegetical studies, Historical Jesus studies, and studies on Jesus and the law. The crux of the passage, the meaning of the parable in v. 15 and the ensuing “cleansing” in v. 19, has been interpreted very differently. Scholars doing exegetical studies and studies on the relationship between Jesus and the law have maintained that the Gospel writer correctly reflects in 7:19 the meaning of Jesus’ parable (7:15), abrogating the clean/unclean categories of Lev 11. Scholars doing purity, Jewish, and recent Historical Jesus studies have generally argued that Jesus could not have abrogated these food laws in the social and religious setting of his day. The controversial remark in a narrative aside must be Mark’s comment on Jesus’ saying to accommodate the Christian community in the later part of the first century.

Chapter 1 introduces the narrative-intertextual methodology used in the subsequent chapters. This methodology allows a careful examination of the literary material in Mark’s Gospel in the first part of the dissertation and a careful examination of purity issues arising out of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Second Temple period in the later part.

The narrative analysis in chapters 2–3 reveals that Mark uses space, time, props, movement, prefixes, verb tenses, and technical terminology meticulously and astutely to develop the themes in the pericope and build a cohesive literary unit. The central theme of the entire pericope is “touch defilement,” which is first introduced in the observation that the disciples eat with defiled (unwashed) hands. It is augmented with a conflict over authority.

Chapter 4 examines the interrelationship of purity terms in biblical literature of the later Second Temple period. In the major reference works predating the 1970’s, the purity terms *κοινός*; (“defiled”), *ἀκάθαρτος* (“unclean”), and *βέβηλος* (“profane”) were more or less used interchangeably. Since the 1970’s though, studies examining the topic of purity have differentiated these terms. An assessment of 1 Macc 1:47, 62; Mark 7:1–23; Acts 10–11; and the parallel passages of Acts 21:28 and 24:6 leads to the conclusion that *κοινός/κοινώω*. is a term unique to the Second Temple period and distinct from other purity terminology. It is best defined as an intermediary defilement that a clean person/object acquires by coming in contact with an unclean person/object. Since *κοινός* impurity is unknown in the Hebrew Scriptures, Mark is correct in attributing it to the “tradition of the elders.”

Scholarship has generally connected allusions in Mark 7:1–23 to the clean/unclean animals of Lev 11. Chapter 5 assesses the intertextual allusions based on literary, thematic, and logical parallels. In each category Mark indeed refers to Lev 11, but not to the section on clean/unclean animals (Lev 11:1–23, 41–43). Instead, the allusions always point to the section on touch contamination by a carcass (Lev 11:24–40) or the section containing holiness language (Lev 11:44–45). Mark underlines the topic of touch defilement and ethical purity by means of these allusions to Lev 11.

Conclusion

A concluding chapter summarizes the findings. In Mark 7:1–23 neither Mark nor Jesus abrogates the clean/unclean distinction of Leviticus. Instead, Mark in v. 19 correctly summarizes Jesus' position that new "traditions," established during the Second Temple period, overextended God's requirements and are hence invalid. In the larger context (Mark 6–8 and particularly Mark 7:24–30), *κουῶς* defilement from Gentiles is therefore an invalid expansion of God's law and, instead, mission to all people is a divine imperative (Gen 12:1–3; Mark 7:24–30; Acts 10–11).

Mark 7:1–23 is shown to be a coherent whole illustrated in four steps. The narrative data demonstrate the unity of the pericope. Jesus' support of the law against Second Temple period additions is found in both vv. 1–13 and 14–23. The passage's marked parallelism to the defilement and holiness theology of Lev 11 exhibits the Evangelist's sensitivity to purity issues. And the congruence of the passage's teaching with the trajectory of mission in Acts 10 demonstrates the heuristic power of this explanation of Mark 7.