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The Stomach Purifies All Foods: Jesus' Anatomical Argument in Mark 7.18–19

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Abstract

This article offers a new interpretation of καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα in Mark 7.19c. After reviewing and offering some nuance to an emerging non-antinomian interpretation of 7.15a/18b, I turn to Mark 7.19c and argue that the phrase καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα should be understood as a part of Jesus' speech in 7.18–19. Jesus' argument, I suggest, is that ritually defiled food cannot defile humans through ingestion because humans purify all foods from ritual impurity through digestion. This reasoning depends on a widespread Jewish view that excrement is impervious to ritual impurity: because all excrement is pure, the stomach acts as a purifying agent that purifies all food from ritual impurity. I proffer that the common translation of Mark 7.19c – 'Thus he declared all foods clean' (NRSV) – should therefore be abandoned.

Keywords: Torah; law; gospels; halakhah; food; purity; impurity; defilement; purification; digestion; kosher

1. Introduction

Do the canonical gospels portray Jesus as opposed to key commandments of the Torah, such as the prohibitions against eating certain animals outlined in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14? Though modern New Testament scholars have often insisted that Jesus disregarded such regulations, the past few decades have witnessed a steady shift in this consensus, with many scholars arguing that in the gospels Jesus does not undermine crucial aspects of Jewish Torah-observance in the late Second Temple period.¹ For

¹ For example, James G. Crossley, 'Matthew and the Torah: Jesus as Legal Interpreter', in *Matthew within Judaism: Israel and the Nations in the First Gospel* (ed. Anders Runesson and Daniel M. Gurtner; Early Christianity and its Literature 27; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2020) 29–52; Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020); Yair Furstenberg, *Purity and Community in Antiquity: Traditions of Halakhah between the Second Temple and the Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2016) 106–19 [in Hebrew]; idem, 'Defilement Penetrating the Body: A New Understanding of Contamination in Mark 7.15', *New Testament Studies* 54 (2008) 176–200; Paula Fredriksen,

the latter set of scholars, Mark 7.18–19 has remained a thorny and tricky text. In the context of this passage, Jesus responds to the scribes' and Pharisees' inquiry regarding why some of Jesus' disciples do not wash their hands before eating bread and thus do not follow the 'tradition of the elders' (7.1–5). Jesus' primary response to this inquiry appears in 7.15: 'there is nothing from outside a person going into them which can defile them (οὐδέν ἐστιν ἔξωθεν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς αὐτὸν ὃ δύναται κοινῶσαι αὐτόν), but the things that come out from a person are the things that defile a person (ἀλλὰ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκπορευόμενά ἐστιν τὰ κοινῶντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον)'.² In 7.18–19, Jesus elaborates on the first half of this assertion:³

^{18a} καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀσύνητοί ^b ἐστε οὐ νοεῖτε ὅτι πᾶν τὸ ἔξωθεν εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς τὸν ἄνθρωπον οὐ δύναται αὐτὸν κοινῶσαι ^{19a} ὅτι οὐκ εἰσπορεύεται αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἀλλ' εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν ^b καὶ εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται ^c καθαρῶν πάντα τὰ βρώματα

The NRSV renders this passage as follows:

¹⁸ He said to them, 'Then do you also fail to understand?' ^b Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹ since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, ^b and goes out into the sewer?' ^c (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

Two aspects of this passage have suggested to interpreters that Mark's Jesus rejects the Torah's prohibitions against eating certain animals (I will call these regulations *kashrut*). First, the claim in Mark 7.18b that 'whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile' (as well as the parallel in Mark 7.15a) may appear to undermine the commands not to eat animals classified as impure (טמא) (Lev 11.1–23, 26–30, 41–4, 46–7; Deut 14.3–21). In scholarship on Mark 7.15a/18b, we thus find the claim that 'Jesus was assailing the very citadel of the Judaism of his time.'⁴ And again: this statement 'lays down the principle that there is no such thing as religious impurity in a material sense'.⁵ And again: 'Es gehört zum Wesen der n[eu]t[estament]lichen Religion, daß der alte rituelle Reinheitsgedanke hier nicht nur überwunden, sondern auch als nicht mehr bindend wirklich abgestoßen wird.'⁶ And again: 'Aber wer bestreitet, daß die Unreinheit von außen auf den Menschen eindringt, trifft die Voraussetzungen und den Wortlaut der Tora und die Autorität des Moses selbst.'⁷ And again: 'Jesus is here not only annulling the Rabbinical

¹ 'Compassion is to Purity as Fish is to Bicycle and Other Reflections on Constructions of "Judaism" in Current Work on the Historical Jesus' in *Apocalypticism, Anti-Semitism and the Historical Jesus: Subtexts in Criticism* (ed. John Kloppenborg and J. W. Marshall; Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 275; London: T&T Clark International, 2005) 55–67; eadem, 'Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Laws?', *Bible Review* 11 (1995) 20–5, 42–7; Cecilia Wassen, 'The Jewishness of Jesus and Ritual Purity', *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 27 (2016) 11–36; John Van Maaren, 'Does Mark's Jesus Abrogate Torah? Jesus' Purity Logion and its Illustration in Mark 7:15–23', *Journal of the Jesus Movement in Its Jewish Setting* 4 (2017) 21–41; Thomas Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah: Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?* (Itero 2; Stockholm: Enskilda Höskolan, rev. edn. 2021 (2010)).

² Unless otherwise specified, translations are my own.

³ I omit punctuation here since a key issue in this article is to address how this passage should be punctuated. The subdivisions of the verses are my own.

⁴ E. P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896) 126.

⁵ Claude Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels* (2 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1927²) 1.153 (emphasis removed).

⁶ Friedrich Hauck, 'καθαρός κτλ.' in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, Band 3: Θ bis Κ* (ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1938) 416–34, at 427.

⁷ Ernst Käsemann, 'Das Problem des historischen Jesus', *ZTK* 51 (1954) 125–53, at 146.

development of Kashruth but is setting aside the Written Law.⁸ And again: ‘If nothing that enters into a man from outside can defile him, then the Biblical food laws are actually set aside.’⁹ And again: ‘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.’¹⁰ And again: ‘If Jesus taught that there is nothing taken into the mouth that can defile, he was undermining a whole way of life.’¹¹ And again: in this claim ‘unmißverständlich die Speisegesetze als gültiges Gebot Gottes in Frage gestellt werden’.¹² And again: this statement ‘is a cryptic invitation to abandon one of the most cherished cultural boundary-markers of Israel [i.e. *kashrut*].’¹³ And again: here ‘Jesus dismissed the value of the Mosaic food laws.’¹⁴ The list could go on.

Second, many have taken the final phrase *καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα* in 7.19c – often translated, like in the NRSV, as something to the effect of ‘Thus he declared all foods clean’ – as an authorial comment by Mark or a later redactor which (correctly or incorrectly) interprets the statements in 7.18b–19b as undermining *kashrut*. In scholarship on Mark 7.19c, we thus find the claim that ‘Mark 7.19[c] leaves no doubt about the repudiation of all food laws on the editorial level.’¹⁵ And again: Jesus ‘nullified the Mosaic laws on clean and unclean foods (Deut. 14:3–20; Lev. 11), most explicitly in v. 19[c]: “Thus he declared all foods clean”’.¹⁶ And again: ‘the argument of the context implies that they [laws of *kashrut*] never could have validity ... That is the import of the comment in 7:19c’.¹⁷ And again: 7.19c constitutes ‘The single NT verse which adopts the most negative attitude towards Jewish dietary regulations’.¹⁸ And again: 7.19c offers an ‘explicit revocation of the OT kosher laws ascribed to Jesus by Mark’.¹⁹ And again: 7.19c may be paraphrased as ‘Thus he declared the end of the law distinguishing unclean from clean foods.’²⁰ And again: ‘in Mark’s redactional understanding ... Jesus effectively revokes the food laws of the Pentateuch by declaring all foods clean’.²¹ And again: in Mark 7.19c ‘Jesus overrode essential features of the Torah to the extent that he permitted the consumption of unclean animals.’²² And again: ‘The editorial conclusion of Mark ... declares all foods clean, eliminating the important barrier that separated Jews and Gentiles.’²³ And again: ‘Moses gave a long list of animals that were unclean and that could not be

⁸ J. Bowman, *The Gospel of Mark: The New Christian Jewish Passover Haggadah* (Studia Post-Biblica 8; Leiden: Brill, 1965) 168.

⁹ Heikki Räisänen, ‘Jesus and the Food Laws: Reflections on Mark 7.15’, *JSNT* 16 (1982) 79–100, at 82.

¹⁰ Larry Hurtado, *Mark* (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989) 111.

¹¹ Robert Funk, *The Gospel of Mark: Red Letter Edition* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1991) 126.

¹² Rainer Kampling, ‘Das Gesetz im Markusevangelium’ in *Der Evangelist als Theologe: Studien zum Markusevangelium* (ed. Thomas Söding; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1995) 119–50, at 134 n64.

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 179.

¹⁴ Sigurd Grindheim, ‘Jesus and the Food Laws Revisited’, *JSHJ* 18 (2020): 61–76, at 62.

¹⁵ Räisänen, ‘Jesus’, 82 (emphasis removed).

¹⁶ Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 5; New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984) 97.

¹⁷ William Loader, ‘Mark 7:1–23 and the Historical Jesus’, *Colloquium* 30 (1998) 123–51, at 126.

¹⁸ Jesper Svartvik, *Mark and Mission: Mk 7:1–23 in its Narrative and Historical Contexts* (Coniectanea Biblica New Testament Series 32; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000) 2; cf. 302.

¹⁹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 458.

²⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Christianity in the Making 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 574.

²¹ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume 4: Law and Love* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 19 n7.

²² Furstenberg, *Purity*, 110–111; cf. idem, ‘Defilement’, 179.

²³ Mar Pérez i Díaz, *Mark, a Pauline Theologian: A Re-reading of the Traditions of Jesus in the Light of Paul’s Theology* (WUNT II/521; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020) 111.

eaten (Lev. 11; Deut. 14). According to Mark, Jesus says the exact opposite. He declares all foods clean.²⁴ Again, the list could go on.

The forceful momentum of this interpretative trend in New Testament scholarship may seem impossible to countermand, but I am convinced that this antinomian interpretation of Mark 7.18–19 is, to put it simply, flatly incorrect. To that end, this article does two things. First, I review and nuance the arguments of a few scholars who have offered a revisionist and non-antinomian reading of the assertions in Mark 7.15a and 7.18b (§2). Second, I offer a new proposal for the meaning of the phrase *καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα* in 7.19c, arguing that Jesus constructs an anatomical argument to argue that ritually defiled foods cannot defile a person through ingestion (§3–§5).²⁵

2. An Emerging Revisionist Reading of Mark 7.15a/18b

A key contention undergirding the emerging revisionist reading of 7.15a/18b – most clearly articulated by Yair Furstenberg – is that many ancient Jews did not think that ingesting non-kosher animals could transmit *ritual* impurity.²⁶ ‘Ritual impurity’ refers to the kind of impurity that is occasional, temporary, transferrable (in some cases) and can be ameliorated by the passing of time combined with certain rites.²⁷ This may seem confusing, given that impurity language (טמא) is used in conjunction with prohibitions against eating certain animals, as in Leviticus 11.43: ‘You shall not make yourselves detestable with any creature that swarms; you shall not defile yourselves with them, and so become impure (ולא תטמאו בהם ונטמתם בהם).’ However, Furstenberg argues that since these kinds of animals do not in other circumstances transmit impurity (while alive), and since there are no purifying regulations attached to this commandment, the verse ‘refers not to ritual impurity with its principles of contamination and purification, but rather to a different kind of impurity which is caused by sin’.²⁸ While such an interpretation of Leviticus 11.43 is not necessary or inevitable, the evidence indicates that many ancient Jews distinguished between the domains of *tohorah* (ritual purity) and *kashrut* from very early on; as Klawans points out, the early distinction between *kashrut* and ritual impurity is indicated by the fact that the topic of prohibited animals – let alone any ostensible capacity to contract impurity from prohibited animals – does not appear at all in Seder Tohorot, the order of the Mishnah that deals with ritual impurity.²⁹ This suggests that the prohibition against eating certain animals was understood not to be based on a putative capacity to transmit ritual impurity. Rather, ingesting non-kosher animals is prohibited, and eating them makes people *morally* impure because in so doing they have transgressed. What one needs when they ingest a non-kosher animal, then, is not immersion to ameliorate ritual impurity but rather forgiveness for transgression.

²⁴ Grindheim, ‘Jesus’, 63–64.

²⁵ I cannot offer a full treatment of 7.15b and 7.20–3 here. However, I generally align with Furstenberg’s and Daniel Boyarin’s view that the phrase ‘the things that come out from a person are the things that defile a person’ in 7.15b (elaborated in 7.20–3) refers to both discharge impurity (seminal emissions, menstrual blood, postpartum discharge) and the moral evils described in 7.21–3 (Furstenberg, ‘Defilement’, 197–8; Daniel Boyarin, ‘Mark 7:1–23 – Finally’, in *Re-Making the World: Christianity and Categories* (ed. Taylor G. Petrey et al.; WUNT 434; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019) 19–34, at 23–8; idem, ‘Jesus, the Pharisees, and the Oral Torah’, *Te‘udah* 31 (2021) 229–48 [in Hebrew], at 244).

²⁶ Furstenberg, ‘Defilement’; cf. Boyarin, ‘Mark 7:1–23’, 23–26; Thiessen, *Jesus*, 188–9; Van Maaren, ‘Does Mark’s Jesus Abrogate Torah’, 26–31.

²⁷ See Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 22–6.

²⁸ Furstenberg, ‘Defilement’, 195; cf. Klawans, *Impurity*, 32; D. Z. Hoffman, *Das Buch Leviticus* (2 vols.; Berlin: M. Poppelauer, 1905–1906) 1.303–304.

²⁹ Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 32. See further below.

Although this distinction between the domains of *tohorah* and *kashrut* has been long noted by scholars, it, unfortunately, has been and continues to be disregarded by interpreters of Mark 7.1–23. As Daniel Boyarin puts it, ‘It is this confusion between the laws of [ritual] defilement (*tum’ah*) and the laws of *kashrut* that has generated the persistent misreading of the pericope.’³⁰ The context of this passage makes abundantly clear that what is at stake is specifically ritual impurity: the comments about immersion, cleansing cups and washing hands in 7.2–5 are practices related to the domain of *tohorah*, not *kashrut*. The issue is not that some of Jesus’ disciples are eating non-kosher animals; rather, by not washing their hands they put themselves in danger of eating *permitted* food that had become ritually defiled by hands that may have already contracted impurity from another source.³¹

Perhaps the clearest articulation of the distinction between *tohorah* and *kashrut* emerges in the following statement from Rashi’s commentary on b. Shabbat 13b: ‘According to the Torah there is no food that defiles a human who eats it (מן התורה אין אוכל מטמא אדם האוכל) except the carrion of a pure bird ... and even less so food defiled by touching a primary source of impurity (וכל שכן אוכל ראשון) ... but they [the rabbis] decreed this rule.’ While I will deal with the carrion passages below, it is important to note that Rashi claims that only the ingestion of *pure* (that is, kosher/permitted) bird carrion defiles one who eats it. This entails that *the Torah does not rule that eating prohibited animals ritually defiles*. And, as Rashi further indicates here, *the notion that ingesting ritually defiled permitted food can defile a person is a decree not from the Torah but from the rabbis*.

Though the origin of the practice of handwashing before eating ordinary permitted food (*hullin*/הולין) is elusive (and space does not permit an exploration of this topic here),³² what is clear is that (1) handwashing was practised in part to avoid defiled hands transmitting ritual impurity to *hullin* and then being ritually defiled by ingesting it, and (2) acquiring impurity by ingesting ritually defiled *hullin* was understood *not* to be a possibility outlined in, let alone prohibited by the Torah. This second point comes to clear expression not only in the rabbinic tradition (which persistently articulates that handwashing prior to eating and defilement through ingesting defiled *hullin* are not derived from the Torah),³³ but also in the Mark passage: the Pharisees and scribes ask not ‘Why are they doing what is *not lawful* (ὁ οὐκ ἔξεστιν)?’ (Mark 2.24, where the disciples are accused of breaking sabbath law) but rather ‘Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων)’ (7.5). Nobody is accusing Jesus’ disciples of sinning. The Pharisees and scribes inquire why some of the disciples have not adopted an *extra-biblical* conception of impurity and the corresponding practice of handwashing. Mark’s account evinces an awareness that he and his Jewish contemporaries understood that the practice of handwashing prior to meals, as well as the notion that ingesting ritually defiled food could defile humans, was rooted not in Torah but in a different legal source – the tradition of the elders. Thus, Jesus’ response in Mark 7.15a/18b – that ingestion cannot make a person ritually impure – does not oppose any purity regulation in the Torah but rather contests the basis for extra-biblical purity practice of handwashing decreed by the ‘elders’. As

³⁰ Boyarin, ‘Mark 7:1–23’, 24 n19.

³¹ Κοινῶς χερσίν in 7.2 probably means something like ‘with hands that have been shared with the ritual impurity of another entity’. This use of κοινός (and κοινῶω in 7.15–23, for that matter) aligns with the use of חִבֵּר (‘to share’) in the Mishnah to describe a mechanism by which ritual impurity transfers between objects (e.g. m. Kilayim 9.10; m. Kelim 3.6; 5.2; 20.3); cf. Mira Balberg, *Purity, Body, and the Self in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014) 52–8.

³² For a recent overview of various theories and some new proposals, see Furstenberg, *Purity*, 85–119.

³³ m. Tohorot 4.11; b. Shabbat 14a; b. Yoma 80b; b. Eruvin 21b; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Tohorah, Tum’at Okhlin* 12.1; 16.12; Seder Eliyahu Rabba 15.1; cf. m. Ma’aser Sheni 3.9, where eating defiled food is permitted. See also the discussion in Boyarin, ‘Jesus’, 247–8.

Furstenberg argues, Jesus' conviction that it is impossible for impurity to transfer to humans by ingestion exhibits not an opposition but a conservative commitment to Torah, since 'no biblical source actually suggests that contamination can spread through ingestion'.³⁴

One may object to Furstenberg's contention, however, by appealing to the passages about ingesting carrion mentioned by Rashi above.³⁵ There are three relevant texts here:

Leviticus 11.39–40: If an animal of which you may eat dies, anyone who touches its carcass shall be impure until the evening. Those who eat of its carcass shall wash their clothes and be impure until the evening; and those who carry the carcass shall wash their clothes and be impure until the evening.

Leviticus 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 impure until the evening; then they shall be pure.

Leviticus 22.8: That which died or was torn by wild animals he shall not eat, becoming impure by it: I am the LORD.

Given that Leviticus 11.39–40 and 17.15 prescribe washings to ameliorate the contraction of impurity after ingesting carrion, these texts could easily be understood as communicating that ingesting the carrion is what makes a person ritually impure. Furstenberg resolves this issue by arguing regarding Leviticus 17.15 that since 'the parallel verses in Lev 11.39–40 do not distinguish between eating a carcass and touching it', the carcass must defile in Leviticus 17.15 by touching (which occurred during the eating process), and not by ingestion.³⁶ The same would presumably apply to Leviticus 22.8.

Furstenberg makes a good point here, but I think it needs further nuance. We must be attentive here to how 'scriptural exegesis does not necessarily unfold in inevitable ways'.³⁷ It may seem straightforward to some readers that the ingestion of the carcass in Leviticus 17.15 causes defilement. But the text does not explicate precisely how and when impurity is transmitted in the process of eating, and it is unclear why clothes must be washed in this instance. How would ingestion cause something adorning the body to require washing? The extensive discussion of this text in *Sifra*, *Acharei Mot Parashah 7 Perek 12* seems to show that some early Jewish interpreters struggled with this point. Here is one section therefrom:

Perhaps it defiles clothes when in the stomach; it is taught: 'he shall launder his clothes, wash in water, and he shall be impure until the evening, and then he shall be pure'. It does not defile clothes while in the stomach. Perhaps it does not defile clothes while in the intestines but defiles clothes when in the mouth; it is taught: 'nefesh'; the *nefesh* is what defiles and not in the intestines and not in the mouth.³⁸

The conclusion here amounts to 'a precise physiological rendering of *nepes*', according to which the location of defilement is the oesophagus (בית הבליעה) (*Acharei Mot Parashah 7*

³⁴ Furstenberg, 'Defilement', 195.

³⁵ For Rashi, only Leviticus 17.15 and 22.8 communicate that ingesting a pure (i.e., permitted) bird carrion can ritually defile a person. Rashi takes the term בהמה in Leviticus 11.39 to limit the referent to bovine (or quadruped) carrion, which he concludes ritually defiles only by touch and not ingestion. This ruling aligns with the Tannaitic sources as well (*Sifra*, *Shemini Parashah 11 Perek 10.7*).

³⁶ Furstenberg, 'Defilement', 195.

³⁷ Klawans, *Impurity*, 94.

³⁸ *Sifra*, *Acharei Mot Parashah 7 Perek 12.3*. Translation adapted from Yitzhaq Feder, *Purity and Pollution in the Hebrew Bible: From Embodied Experience to Moral Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) 143.

Pereq 12.6). The fact that *Sifra* cycles through numerous interpretative possibilities signals that the precise mechanism of defilement in Leviticus 17.15 was not immediately clear to early readers. We could imagine, therefore, that it was not impossible that someone held the view that Furstenberg proffers: in light of the parallel passage in Leviticus 11.39–40, and in light of how specifically the clothes required washing as the amelioration for impurity, it is possible that some Jews could have understood Leviticus 11.39–40, 17.15, and 22.8 as signalling that one was defiled by *touching* the carcass, not by ingesting it. I will argue below that this is how (Mark's) Jesus likely understood these passages. But we should note that this is not a necessary way of reading this text. Thus, instead of saying 'no biblical source actually suggests that contamination can spread through ingestion', it is perhaps better to say that these Pentateuchal texts afford differential conclusions regarding the relationship between ingestion and defilement, and one available view – one which was probably held by Mark (and perhaps Jesus) – aligns with what Furstenberg outlines.

Thus, if we recognise (1) that many ancient Jews believed that eating non-kosher animals did not transmit ritual impurity to humans, (2) that the Torah never articulates that eating ritually defiled *hullin* can defile a person, and (3) that one could read the carrion passages in Leviticus 11.39–40, 17.15, and 22.8 as articulating that touching rather than ingesting carrion causes one to be defiled, then Jesus's claim in 7.15a/18b – that nothing ingested by a person can ritually defile them – does not oppose any regulations in the Torah. The revisionist reading of Mark 7.15a/18b outlined here, therefore, resists the anti-nomian interpretation so prevalent among New Testament scholars. But this still leaves us with the problem of Mark 7.19c – καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα – to which I now turn.

3. Mark 7.19c: Problems with Previous Proposals

As noted above – and as seen in most English translations of the New Testament – nearly all contemporary scholars presume that Jesus is the grammatical subject of the phrase καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα in Mark 7.19c, and they take it as an authorial or redactional comment which interprets the force of Jesus' statement in Mark 7.18b–19b.³⁹ Indeed, this assumption is so ingrained, that in 1970 Wilfried Paschen spoke of 'die ziemlich einhellige Auffassung, daß 7,19c trotz der einwandfreien handschriftlichen Bezeugung eine frühe Glosse sei',⁴⁰ and more recently in 2010, Thomas Kazen speaks of Mark 7.19c as 'obviously a redactor's comment'.⁴¹ I want to challenge the widespread notion that Jesus is the subject of καθαρίζων and propose a new understanding of Jesus' anatomical argument in 7.18–19. First, however, it is worth reviewing the problems with other interpretative suggestions.

Among those who take Mark 7.19c as an authorial comment and consider Jesus to be the subject of καθαρίζων, we may isolate three views: (1) Mark 7.19c *correctly* interprets Mark 7.18b–19b as undermining *kashrut*; (2) Mark 7.19c *incorrectly* interprets Mark 7.18b–19b as undermining *kashrut*; and (3) the phrase 'all foods' (πάντα τὰ βρώματα) in Mark 7.19c only refers to food that is permitted according to *kashrut*. I respond to each of these in turn.

View 1: Mark 7.19c correctly interprets Mark 7.18b–19b as undermining kashrut. If the phrase 'purifying all foods' – assuming for the moment that Jesus is the subject of καθαρίζων – constitutes a contradiction of the entire system of *kashrut*, two interpretative options present themselves, depending on how one construes καθαρίζων. The first possibility is that καθαρίζων has a factitive meaning – that Jesus is, in that very moment, causing all foods to be pure by his statement. In this reading, by speaking this very sentence (7.18a: λέγει),

³⁹ There are some exceptions, which I deal with below.

⁴⁰ Wilfried Paschen, *Rein und Unrein: Untersuchung zur biblischen Wortgeschichte* (Studien zum alten und neuen Testament 24; Munich: Kösel, 1970) 169.

⁴¹ Kazen, *Jesus*, 61 (emphasis mine).

Jesus caused all previously prohibited foods to be permitted to be eaten. But the description of the digestive system in 7.19 functions as an explanation for the reason why nothing that goes into a person has the capacity to defile: 'Everything from outside going into a person is not able to defile them, because (ὅτι) it enters not into the heart but into the stomach'. If it were the assertion itself that causally nullified *kashrut*, then the explanatory clause about the digestive system would not only be superfluous but also self-contradictory: the reason that food is unable to defile a person is, supposedly, because Jesus just said so, not because of anything pertaining to digestion. If Jesus himself provides a mechanistic explanation for why ingestion does not defile, then it is wrong to claim that the reason is simply by Jesus' fiat. Moreover, if Jesus were causing all foods to be clean at that moment by speaking this sentence, how could he criticise the disciples for not understanding this principle? Jesus' dissatisfaction with the disciples on this point implies that he takes this to be a universal truth about ritual purity that they should understand already, not something that becomes true at that very moment.

The second interpretative possibility is that Jesus is asserting that no food has ever been prohibited in the first place. Although the word καθαρίζω usually means 'to make pure' and thus 'to purify', it can be used to mean 'to state that something is pure'.⁴² But if this sense is operative in Mark 7.19c, it brings a deep incoherence to the passage. In this section of Mark, Jesus' accusation against the Pharisees is that they excel at rejecting the commandment of God (καλῶς ἀθετεῖτε τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ θεοῦ) by holding fast to their tradition (7.9). He then goes on to list ways that certain traditions keep them from obeying explicit commands articulated by Moses, leading them to 'invalidate the word of God (ἀκυροῦντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ)' (7.10–13). If Jesus were denying that any foods were ever prohibited, it would surely amount to invalidating the word of God, thereby rendering his accusation against the Pharisees obviously hypocritical. As Matthew Thiessen puts it, 'How likely is it that Mark would stress obeying God's commandments in a story in which Jesus rejects God's commandments as they pertain to the consumption of impure animals?'⁴³ Other scholars note this internal contradiction and yet still accept the traditional reading of Mark 7.19c,⁴⁴ but the glaring inconsistency generated by this reading should make us wonder if the problem actually lies less in the text and more in the minds of interpreters.

View 2: Mark 7.19c incorrectly interprets Mark 7.18b–19b as undermining kashrut. Virtually all who hold to the 'relative' interpretation of Mark 7.15 and/or 7.18b (namely that the contrastive statement in 7.15, or at least in its 'original' form, utilises a 'semitic' idiom which communicates that the things going into the body do not defile *as much as* the things that come out of the body) believe that Mark or a later redactor misunderstood this idiom in and wrongly construed a relative contrast to be absolute.⁴⁵ Though taking a different view

⁴² E.g., LXX Lev. 13.6, 13, 17, 23, 34, 37, 59; 14.48, 57.

⁴³ Thiessen, *Jesus*, 189; cf. Boyarin, 'Jesus', 245.

⁴⁴ For example, Shaye J. D. Cohen, 'Antipodal Texts: B. Eruvin 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.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 965–83, at 969; Morna D. Hooker, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (Black's New Testament Commentaries; London: Continuum, 2001) 173; Marcus, *Mark* 1–8, 450.

⁴⁵ For those who favour the relative interpretation of Mark 7.15/18b (or a pre-Markan version thereof) see Stephen Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority* (Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series 10; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1978) 83–4; Roger P. Booth, *Jesus and the Laws of Purity: Tradition History and Legal History in Mark 7* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 13; Sheffield: JSOT, 1986) 69–71; E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1990) 28; Svartvik, *Mark*, 406; Tom Holmén, *Jesus and Jewish Covenant Thinking* (Biblical Interpretation Series 55; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 241–2; Kazen, *Jesus*, 65–7; Michelle Fletcher, 'What Comes into a Woman and What Comes out of a Woman: Feminist Textual Intervention and Mark 7:14–23', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30 (2014) 25–41, at 31, 35). However, the

on Mark 7.15, Furstenberg understands Mark 7.19c similarly.⁴⁶ The main problem with this hypothesis is that it requires conjecture about various redactional stages of Mark 7.18–19 for which we have no direct evidence. If a plausible interpretation of 7.19c can be proposed that does not require such conjecture, it should be preferred.

View 3: The phrase ‘all foods’ (πάντα τὰ βρώματα) in Mark 7.19c is limited and only refers to permitted food. A growing number of interpreters have argued that, since Mark 7.1–23 focuses on the question of whether kosher food can be eaten with unwashed hands, the phrase ‘all foods’ in 7.19c must only refer to kosher food: Jesus declares that all permitted foods are clean.⁴⁷ While I agree that this passage concerns ritual impurity rather than *kashrut*, this interpretation is difficult to square with the word καθαρίζω. If Jesus’ statement in 7.18b–19b declares all permitted food to be clean, this requires the conclusion that permitted food cannot contract ritual impurity at all. But why would the fact that ritually defiled food cannot defile humans entail that there is no such thing as ritually contaminated food? Jesus specifically claims that, even if an object has contracted ritual impurity, it cannot defile humans. He does not claim that foods before they go into the body cannot contract impurity in the first place. And it would be a non-sequitur to draw this conclusion from any of the statements in Mark 7.18b–19b.⁴⁸

In light of these objections, it is worth considering other interpretative possibilities. I suggest that the main issue that has plagued the above interpretations is that they presume that the phrase καθαρίζω πάντα τὰ βρώματα is a narrator’s comment and that Jesus is the subject of the participle καθαρίζω. In what follows, I will argue that the phrase καθαρίζω πάντα τὰ βρώματα constitutes a part of Jesus’ speech and that the argument in Mark 7.18b–19c is that food ritually defiled by unwashed hands is unable to defile a person because the stomach is an agent of purification which renders all defiled foods pure.

4. Ἄνθρωπος as the Grammatical Subject of καθαρίζω in Mark 7.19c

Though many modern interpreters take Jesus to be the implied subject of καθαρίζω in Mark 7.19c, there are reasons to doubt this conviction. The standard interpretation requires the participle καθαρίζω to modify a verb that has thirty-six words intervening between the participle and the main verb (λέγει): ‘He said to them ... thus purifying all foods’. Καθαρίζω would have to break from the quotation of Jesus’ words to resume the clause that stands before the long quotation of his speech.⁴⁹ This would be the

claim that what goes in defiles less than what comes out would not provide a sufficient answer to why the disciples do not wash their hands before eating. Speculative redactional theories have been mounted to resolve this problem (e.g., Booth, *Jesus*, 46–53; Svartvik, *Mark*, 403; cf. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 28), but they are exactly that: speculative. See further the criticisms in Furstenberg, ‘Defilement’, 180–1.

⁴⁶ Furstenberg, *Purity*, 110–11; Furstenberg, ‘Defilement’, 179.

⁴⁷ See Clinton Wahlen, *Jesus and the Impurity of Spirits in the Synoptic Gospels* (WUNT II/185; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 78–9; James G. Crossley, ‘Mark 7.1–23: Revisiting the Question of “All Foods Clean” in Torah in the New Testament: Papers Delivered at The Manchester-Lausanne Seminar of June 2008’ (ed. Michael Tait and Peter Oakes; Library of New Testament Studies 401; London: T&T Clark, 2009) 8–20; Friedrich Avemarie, ‘Jesus and Purity’ in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature* (ed. Reimund Bieringer et al.; Supplements to Journal for the Study of Judaism 136; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 255–79, at 273; Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012) 121; idem, ‘Jesus’, 245–6; Van Maaren, ‘Does Mark’s Jesus Abrogate Torah’, 38–9; Thiessen, *Jesus*, 194; Christina Eschner, *Essen im antiken Judentum und Urchristentum: Diskurse zur sozialen Bedeutung von Tischgemeinschaft, Speiseverboten und Reinheitsvorschriften* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 108; Leiden: Brill, 2019) 619.

⁴⁸ This point is not often considered by the interpreters in the previous note. Avemarie (‘Jesus and Purity’, 272) rightly noted this implication, though he did not on these grounds reconsider his interpretation of the passage.

⁴⁹ Admittedly, some early interpreters considered καθαρίζω in Mark 7.19 to modify λέγει and therefore took Jesus as its subject (Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 11.12; Gregory Thaumaturgus, Canonical Epistle 1.12; Chrysostom, *Hom. Matt.* 51.4).

only instance in Mark's gospel in which a participle follows direct discourse while also modifying the main verb of the clause which came prior to that discourse (though this is not impossible, of course).⁵⁰ In light of how awkward this participle would be in this reading, we should be open to exploring the possibility that καθαρίζων is not a narratological aside that modifies λέγει but rather constitutes a part of Jesus' speech in 7.18–19. This is how it is understood according to the punctuation of NA²⁸ and UBS⁵, which place the question mark *after* καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα.

A handful of interpreters have taken 7.19c as a part of Jesus' speech. The majority of these interpretations are based on the manuscripts which utilise the neuter participle καθαρίζων⁵¹ instead of καθαρίζων, the latter of which modern text critics prefer since it has more reliable manuscript attestation and early attestation in Origen.⁵² Reading the text with καθαρίζων brings the participle in apposition to the phrase 'it goes out into the sewer (εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται)' and would communicate that 'purifying all foods' is a result of the process of digestion and/or the result of foods being expelled from the body.⁵³ Most interpretations from across the centuries based on the reading καθαρίζων understand the word to mean 'purge' or 'expel'. So the KJV translators, utilising a text with καθαρίζων, rendered 7.19 as follows: 'Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats'. A passage from Novatian (third century), apparently using a text reading καθαρίζων, reads similarly: 'God is worshipped by neither belly nor foods, which the Lord says perish and are purged in the privy by natural law (*perire et in secessu naturali lege purgari*).⁵⁴ Exhibiting a slightly different reading, Euthymius Zigabenus, in his twelfth-century commentary on the canonical gospels, wrote that the phrase καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα means 'leaving behind clean [food] (καθαρὰ ἀπολιμπάνων). For when the visible filth (ῥύπος) has gone out to the sewer, it leaves all the pure food inside (καθαρὰ ἀφιεῖς ἔνδον πάντα τὰ βρώματα), which nature evidently retains [inside the body]'.⁵⁵ While I prefer the reading καθαρίζων and take the participle to mean 'purifying' rather than 'purging', it is instructive that these interpretations take the final phrase as a part of Jesus' speech.

Representing a similar line of thinking, Joseph Knabenbaur and shortly after him Bernhard Weiss preferred the masculine reading καθαρίζων but proposed that the participle modifies the word ἀφένδρον, arguing that it means that the latrine purges all excreted impure food.⁵⁶ Building on Weiss' syntactical proposal, Julius Wellhausen

⁵⁰ In Mark 10.2, a participle follows *indirect* discourse and modifies the main verb of the clause prior to that indirect discourse.

⁵¹ Attested by e.g., K, Γ, 33, 700, and 2542.

⁵² Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 11.12 and notably κ and B. The manuscript variation between καθαρίζων and καθαρίζων is likely a result of the emergence of isochrony between ο and ω in the early centuries of the Roman period (see Benjamin Kantor, *The Pronunciation of New Testament Greek: Judeo-Palestinian Greek Phonology and Orthography from Alexander to Islam* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023) 677–9). Kantor shows that the change ω → ο is more frequent than the change ο → ω from the Roman period onwards, which strengthens the hypothesis that the variant καθαρίζων is secondary (Kantor, *Pronunciation*, 644–5, 678–9). Codex Bezae (D) has καθαρίζει, which probably derives from a scribe trying to smooth out the grammar. Though I assume the primacy of καθαρίζων throughout, it is important to note that my proposal for the meaning of Mark 7.19c could work with any of these variants.

⁵³ On the neuter in apposition to an entire clause, see Evert van Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 326–7, 366–7; Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, rev. edn 1956) 268–9.

⁵⁴ *De cibis Jud.* 5.9. See the discussion in Svartvik, *Mark*, 180–1.

⁵⁵ PG 129.448; cf. J. Duncan Derrett, 'Marco VII 15–23: il vero significato di "purificare"', *Conoscenza Religiosa* (1975) 125–30 for a slightly similar view.

⁵⁶ Joseph Knabenbauer, *Commentarius in Evangelium Secundum Marcum* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1894) 192; Bernhard Weiss, *Die Evangelien des Markus und Lukas* (9th ed.; Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue

καθαρίζων circumstantially modifies εισπορεύεται and ἐκπορεύεται and that the implied subject of καθαρίζων is not Jesus but rather a far more proximate masculine singular noun: the general ἄνθρωπος whom Jesus describes in 7.18b–19b. The *prima facie* evidence in favour of this reading of the participle is that ἄνθρωπος and the pronoun αὐτός are used three times in the preceding clauses, and this provides a masculine referent which is proximate to καθαρίζων and could function as its subject. We could therefore translate Mark 7.18b–19 in the following way: ‘Do you not understand that everything from outside going into a person is not able to defile them, because it enters not into the heart but into the stomach and goes out into the latrine, (the person) thus purifying all foods?’ In this reading, the clause communicates not that Jesus purifies all foods through his speech but rather that a person purifies all foods through digestion.

This syntax may appear strange, but in support of this rendering, we may observe a few texts in the Septuagint that have similar uses of the nominative absolute participle. In Isaiah 28.5–6 LXX, we find:

τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ ἔσται κύριος σαβαωθ ὁ στέφανος τῆς ἐλπίδος ὁ πλακεῖς τῆς δόξης τῷ καταλειφθέντι μου λαῷ· καταλειφθήσονται ἐπὶ πνεύματι κρίσεως ἐπὶ κρίσιν καὶ ἰσχὺν κωλύων ἀνελεῖν.

In that day the Lord Sabaoth will be the garland of hope, which is woven of glory, to what is left of my people. They will be left with a spirit of judgment, justice, and strength, (*the Lord*) preventing destruction.

In this text, κύριος is not even a constituent of the matrix clause but is the implied agent of the verb καταλειφθήσονται. But the subject of the nominative participle κωλύων, which is circumstantial to καταλειφθήσονται, can be gathered from context to be κύριος.

In Psalm 103.13–14 LXX, a similar turn of phrase appears:

ἀπὸ καρποῦ τῶν ἔργων σου χορτασθήσεται ἡ γῆ, ἐξανατέλλων χόρτον τοῖς κτήνεσιν.

From the fruit of your works the earth will be fed, (*you/the fruit*) causing grass to grow for the cattle.

The participle ἐξανατέλλων is circumstantial to the passive verb χορτασθήσεται, but again the subject of the participle – whether ‘you’ or ‘the fruit’ (both masculine nouns) – is not identical to the main verb but rather is the implied agent of the passive verb.⁶⁷

I suggest that a similar construction is happening in Mark 7.19. Mark uses καθαρίζων as a nominative absolute circumstantial participle to modify εισπορεύεται and ἐκπορεύεται, but the subject of that participle is not the subject of those main verbs (τὸ ἐξῶθεν εισπορευόμενον) but rather the implied actor depicted by this scene: the ἄνθρωπος who puts food in their mouth and then excretes it. Table 1 below illustrates this syntactical proposal in comparison to the two texts from the Septuagint.

In this interpretation of Mark 7.18b–19, food that has been ritually contaminated is not able to defile a person because each person, through the operations of their digestive

least, dependent-verbal’ (*Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 654 (emphasis original). Contra Wallace, I am arguing that καθαρίζων in Mark 7.19c is, in fact, an example of a nominative absolute circumstantial (i.e., adverbial) participle.

⁶⁷ So Muraoka, *A Syntax of Septuagint Greek*, 776.

Table 1.

	Main verb (subjects in bold)	Implied actor	Participial clause	Implied subject of participle
Isaiah 28.5–6 LXX	καταλειφθήσονται they will be left	Κύριος the Lord	κωλύων ἀνελεῖν preventing destruction	Κύριος the Lord
Psalms 103.13–14 LXX	χορτασθήσεται ἡ γῆ the earth will be fed	σύ/καρπός you/the fruit	ἐξανατέλλων χόρτον causing grass to grow	σύ/καρπός you/the fruit
Mark 7.18b–19	τὸ ἔξωθεν εἰσπορευόμενον ... εἰσπορεύεται ... καὶ ... ἐκπορεύεται something from outside going in ... enters ... and ... goes out	ἄνθρωπος a person	καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα thus purifying all foods	ἄνθρωπος a person

system, purifies any food entering the body from ritual defilement.⁶⁸ To put it simply, ritually defiled food cannot defile humans through ingestion because humans purify all foods from ritual impurity through digestion. In the next section, I show that this makes sense of the argument in Mark 7.18–19 and that it is historically plausible for Mark – or Jesus, for that matter – to believe that humans can purify foods of ritual impurity through their digestive system. A key to this reading is, I argue, that Jesus assumes that human excrement is impervious to impurity.

5. The Purifying Power of the Stomach

The only Pentateuchal regulations dealing with human faeces emerge in Deuteronomy 23.12–14: ‘You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. With your utensils you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement (צואה). Because the Lord your God travels along with your camp, to save you and to hand over your enemies to you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you (ולא יראה בך ערות דבר) and turn away from you’. Despite identifying excrement as an indecent thing and regulating its disposal, the passage never classifies excrement as ritually impure or states that it can transmit impurity. While it is the case that, for example, those with *lepra* must be kept out of the camp (Lev 13.46) likely because they may ritually defile those around them, here the rationale for keeping excrement outside the camp is not the danger of ritual defilement. As Hyam Maccoby noted, ‘It is clear that excretion, unlike emission of semen, is not defiling in the ritual purity sense, for no ritual washing, or waiting until the evening, is prescribed for it. Nor is it said anywhere in the Torah that either excrement or urine themselves cause ritual impurity by contact or any other means. Nevertheless, excretion

⁶⁸ Some have offered a similar interpretation of Mark 7.19c based on the reading καθαρίζων, although their arguments are somewhat truncated. See B. J. Malina, ‘A Conflict Approach to Mark 7’, *Forum* 4 (1988) 3–30, at 23; David E. Garland, *Mark* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 275–6; Malina and Garland contend that Jesus undermines *kashrut*. Shlomo Naeh in Boyarin, ‘Jesus’, 245–6 n21 offers an interpretation along the lines I argue here, though he does not explore the syntax of the participle.

must take place outside the “camp”, and this appears to be a matter of seemliness, rather than ritual purity.⁶⁹

At least from the late Second Temple period onward, most ancient Jews did not consider excrement to be ritually impure. In his comments about the Essenes in *Jewish War* 2.148–9, Josephus reports on their (in his view) peculiar defaecation habits: ‘although the secretion of excrement is certainly natural (καίπερ δὴ φυσικῆς οὐσίας τῆς τῶν λυμάτων ἐκκρίσεως), yet it is a rule with them to wash themselves after it, as is customary for those who are defiled (καθάπερ μεμιασμένοις ἔθιμον)’. Josephus’ comment implies that defaecation and excrement do not have the capacity to make one ritually defiled, such that one should not have to perform washings after defaecation. While it is not clear that Josephus thinks that the Essenes view excrement as ritually impure, Josephus’ comments make it sound as though this practice of washing after defaecation is odd and unfounded, and he thereby betrays the assumption that he, and likely most other Jews he knew, agreed that excrement was not ritually impure.⁷⁰

This view comes to clearer articulation in rabbinic literature. M. Makhshirin 6.7 rules that ‘The following neither defile nor impart susceptibility to impurity (אלו לא מטמאין ולא מכשירין): sweat, odorous pus, and excrement (הראי), and blood issuing from them’. M. Ohlot 5.5 rules that vessels made of excrement (כלי גללים) cannot contract impurity (cf. m. Yad. 1.2; m. Uqtz. 2.10). *Sifra, Metzora Parashat Zavim* Perek 1.13 states that ‘Sweat, pus, and excrement (הראי) are not susceptible to all kinds of impurity (טהורים מכלום)’. *Sifrei Numbers* 126 asserts that ‘vessels made of excrement (כלי גללים) are ‘not susceptible to impurity (אינן עוללים לקבל טומאה)’. In a discussion about the presence and use of a toilet in the Jerusalem temple, y. Pesachim 56a attributes the following assertion to R. Yose: ‘And is excrement (a matter of) impurity? Is

⁶⁹ Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 64–5; cf. 206–8; cf. Feder, *Purity*, 200, 207; Christine Hayes, *The Emergence of Judaism: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011) 36.

⁷⁰ Jodi Magness takes Josephus’ comment as an indication that the Essenes considered excrement to be impure (‘What’s the Poop on Ancient Toilets and Toilet Habits?’, *Near Eastern Archaeology* 75 (2012) 80–7, at 84–5; eadem, ‘Toilet Practices, Purity Concerns, and Sectarianism in the Late Second Temple Period’ in *Jewish Identity and Politics between the Maccabees and Bar Kokhba: Groups, Normativity, and Rituals* (ed. B. Eckhardt; Supplements to Journal for the Study of Judaism 155; Leiden: Brill, 2012) 51–70). Magness hypothesises that this view arose from Ezekiel 4.12–15, which appears to identify excrement as impure (I deal with this passage below). Magness finds corroborating evidence for this in the Qumran texts that prescribe regulations on defaecation (e.g. 11QT XLVI 13–16) and points to Loci 48, 49 and 51 at Khirbet Qumran, where a toilet is adjacent to a ritual immersion pool (‘Integrating Archaeology and Texts: The Example of the Qumran Toilet’ in *Historical Biblical Archaeology and the Future: The New Pragmatism* (ed. T. E. Levy; London: Routledge, 2014) 285–92). For a similar view on the Scrolls, see Hannah K. Harrington, *The Purity Texts* (Companion to the Qumran Scrolls 5; London: T&T Clark International, 2004) 106–8; Magen Broshi, ‘Qumran and the Essenes: Six Categories of Purity and Impurity’, *Meghillot* 2 (2004) 9–20 [in Hebrew]. There are reasons to doubt this conclusion. First, Josephus notes that the Essene practice of washing after defaecating is similar to (καθάπερ) how other Jews wash themselves to ameliorate defilement. But Josephus never directly reports that the Essenes think excrement is impure. Second, the texts from Qumran which place regulations on defaecation and dealing with excrement cannot be taken as straightforward evidence that they considered excrement ritually impure, especially since the rabbis also prescribe regulations about proximity and contact with excrement and yet also hold excrement to be impervious to impurity (m. Berakhot 3.5; m. Shabbat 16.7). Third, and most crucially, it is revealing that, among all the regulations in the Dead Sea Scrolls regarding toilet habits and handling human excrement, not a single text calls excrement impure (טמא). If the Essenes did think excrement was impure, why do the numerous scrolls dealing with such issues not actually say so? As Mira Balberg rightly observes about the evidence from the Scrolls, ‘it is not entirely clear whether excrement was considered as an actual source of ritual impurity or just as deeply profane and incommensurate with the holy’ (*Purity*, 195). In any event, it does not jeopardise my argument if group(s) connected to the Dead Sea Scrolls and/or the Essenes considered excrement impure, since I am only arguing here that the view that excrement was unable to contract or transmit impurity was an available Jewish view in the first century CE, which is clear from Josephus.

it not rather only (a matter of) cleanliness (ויכי צואה טומאה והלא אינה אלא נקיות)? Maimonides states that ‘Utensils made from excrement, stone, or earth are always pure (כלי גללים וכלי אבנים וכלי אדמה לעולם טהורין)’.⁷¹ Thus, the evidence from Josephus and many Jewish texts across the ensuing centuries indicates that it was certainly an available and not uncommon view for Jews in the first century CE, and well afterwards, to believe that excrement could neither contract nor transmit ritual impurity.⁷²

I proffer, then, that Jesus assumes this widespread Jewish view of excrement and that this conviction provides a key to his argument in Mark 7.18–19: the assumption that excrement cannot contract or transmit impurity entails that the human digestive system – specifically the stomach – acts as a purifying agent which purifies any defiled food from ritual impurity.⁷³

The belief that the stomach functions to alter the qualities of food is not uncommon in ancient theories of anatomy. Whereas some argued that food was simply broken down into small parts, others stated that food also underwent a qualitative change during the processes of digestion. The former view seems to be the view of Erasistratus and Plato.⁷⁴ Galen, by contrast, insists that food undergoes transformation (μεταβολή) in

⁷¹ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Tohorah, Hilkhot Kelim* 1.6.

⁷² This conviction may seem surprising considering Ezekiel 4.12–15, in which God commands Ezekiel to cook his food over human excrement (גללי צאת האדם) as a symbol of how ‘the people of Israel will eat their food impure (טמא) among the nations where I will drive them’ (4.12–13). In response to this, Ezekiel exclaims ‘I have never defiled my gullet (נפשי לא טמאתי). From my youth until now I have never eaten anything found dead or torn by wild animals. No foul meat (בשר פגול) has ever entered my mouth’ (4.14). It is important to note that the passage only compares the ingestion of food cooked over excrement with the impure food which Israel will eat. Nevertheless, one could conclude from this passage that human excrement is an object that can defile food. Why, then, did so many Jews not come to this conclusion? We may answer this question from a different vantage point. We know from the use of chalk vessels that Jews held that stone is impervious to impurity – a principle they derived from the fact that, among the various prescriptions about the impurity of various vessels in the Torah, nothing is stated about the impurity of stone vessels (see Yonatan Adler, *The Origins of Judaism: A Historical-Archaeological Reappraisal* (The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022) 69). This suggests that early interpreters of the Torah were drawing conclusions not only from what the Torah does say but also from what it does not say. A similar form of textual reasoning likely undergirds the conviction that excrement is impervious to impurity: Jews probably concluded that human excrement is impervious to impurity on the basis of the absence of any im/purity language in the Pentateuchal passage where it would have appeared (Deut. 23.12–14), and this led interpreters to avoid the possible conclusion from Ezekiel 4.12–14 that excrement is ritually defiling (see Magness, ‘What’s the Poop’, 85; Harrington, *The Purity Texts*, 19). This form of reasoning about purity appears in m. Sotah 5.2: ‘Another generation will come to declare that the loaf of bread with third-degree impurity is insusceptible to impurity (עתיד דור אחר לטהר את [שאין לו מקרא מן התורה שהוא טמא]’, since nothing in the Torah indicates that it is impure (הכיר השלישי

⁷³ Jodi Magness has also suggested that ‘like the rabbis ... Jesus did not consider excrement – that is, what passes through the stomach and into the sewer – to be impure’ (Magness, ‘Integrating Archaeology and Texts’, 291). Magness nonetheless considers Mark 7.19c as a narrator’s comment.

⁷⁴ According to Galen, Erasistratus asserted that it was the ‘contractions of the stomach which are the cause of everything’ in the process of digestion (*Nat. Fac.* 3.4 = K 2, 157). According to Plato’s *Timaeus*, when through the respiratory system the body’s internal fire flows through the stomach (διὰ τῆς κοιλίας) and ‘lays hold on the meats and drinks, it dissolves them, and dividing them into small particles it disperses them through the outlets by which it passes and draws them off into the veins’ (*Tim.* 78e–79a). Later, Plato summarises the movement from food to the circulation system, saying that the body’s internal ‘fire divides the foods (τέμνοντος μὲν τὰ σίτια τοῦ πυρός), and rises through the body following after the breath; and as it rises, with the breath it fills the veins from the belly by drawing into them from thence the divided particles (τὰ τεταμημένα)’ (*Tim.* 80d). Plato concludes that blood is a mixture of dissolved food particles (*Tim.* 80e). On these passages in Plato see A. Pelavski, ‘Physiology in Plato’s *Timaeus*: Irrigation, Digestion, and Respiration’, *The Cambridge Classical Journal* 60 (2014) 61–74.

the digestive system.⁷⁵ For evidence of the stomach's transformative function, Galen points to the existence of excrement in the intestine: 'And how could the faeces be generated right away in the small intestine (πῶς δ' ἡ κόπρος εὐθὺς ἐν τοῖς λεπτοῖς ἐντέροις ἀθρόως γεννηθήσεται)? For what is there in this organ more potent in producing alteration than the factors in the stomach (τί γὰρ ἐν τούτοις σφοδρότερον εἰς ἀλλοίωσίν ἐστι τῶν κατὰ τὴν γαστέρα)?'⁷⁶

Aristotle proposed a similar model.⁷⁷ Aristotle summarises the digestive system in three major parts: the part that intakes food (οἰσοφάγος), the part that expels food (ἔντερον), and the part that enacts an alteration in the food (κοιλία).⁷⁸ He calls the κοιλία the 'location of transformation (τόπος ἐν ᾧ μεταβάλλει)' (*Par. An.* 674a16). The breaking down of food, then, does not constitute the entirety of the digestion process but rather prepares food for the stomach (κοιλία), where food undergoes concoction (πέψις) through heat – a process which turns food into new materials (*Par. An.* 650a 8–14).⁷⁹ Like Galen, Aristotle concludes that the stomach must be an agent of transformation on the grounds that what goes into the body is obviously different from what comes out of it: 'Since the food in the upper gut (ἐν τῇ ἄνω μὲν κοιλίᾳ), when it has just entered, must of necessity be fresh, and when it has proceeded further downwards must have lost its juices and be practically dung, the organ which lies between the two must of necessity be something definite, in which the change is effected (ἐν ᾧ μεταβάλλει)' (*Par. An.* 675b28–32).

The reasoning of Galen and Aristotle, I think, is similar to the implicit reasoning of Mark's Jesus in Mark 7.18–19. For Galen and Aristotle, the fact that food entering the body is qualitatively different from excrement that comes out of the body entails that the stomach enacts a qualitative change. For Mark's Jesus, the fact that food entering the body – even if ritually contaminated by defiled hands – comes out of the body as ritually undefilable excrement entails that the stomach has a purifying effect on anything that enters it.

We see precisely this kind of reasoning about purity, excrement, and the stomach in texts from the Tosefta.⁸⁰ T. Miqva'ot 7.8–9 provides the following ruling:

⁷⁵ Gal. *Nat. Fac.* 3.4 = K 2, 155–6: 'For, just as it has been shown that these two processes depend upon a change of qualities (ποιότητων μεταβολῆ γιγνόμενα), similarly also the digestion of food in the stomach (ἢ ἐν τῇ γαστρὶ πέψις τῶν σιτίων) involves a transmutation (μεταβολή) of it into the quality proper to that which is receiving nourishment. Then, when it is completely digested (ὅταν γε πεφθῇ τελέως), the lower outlet opens, and the food is quickly ejected through it (διεκπίπτει δι' αὐτοῦ τὰ σίτια ῥαδίως)'. See further D. A. Balalykin, 'Galen's Understanding of the Digestive System in the Context of the Commensurability of Medical Knowledge in Different Periods', *History of Medicine* 6 (2019) 98–110.

⁷⁶ Galen, *Nat. Fac.* 3.7 = K 2, 164.

⁷⁷ See further M. Boylan, 'The Digestive and "Circulatory" Systems in Aristotle's Biology', *Journal of the History of Biology* 15 (1982) 89–118.

⁷⁸ Arist. *Par. An.* 674a9–16: 'Below the diaphragm is the stomach (κοιλία), which is placed where the oesophagus (οἰσοφάγος) ends (if there is an oesophagus; if not, immediately next to the mouth). Next after the stomach and continuous with it is what is called the gut (ἔντερον) ... It is a necessity for them [animals] to have some receptacle for the food they take in, and to expel it (ἐκπέμψαι) again when its moisture has been extracted from it; and there must be two different places for these two things – the unconcocted food and the residue; there must also be another place in which the change from one to the other is effected (εἶναι τὲ τινα δεῖ τόπον ἐν ᾧ μεταβάλλει)'.

⁷⁹ The invocation of heat reflects the view that the digestive process cooks (πέσσειν) food (Arist. *Mete.* 381b6–9; *Gen. An.* 718b21; *Par. An.* 677b31; Hippocrates VM 11.1; Galen, *On Medical Experience* 12). For these and other examples, see M. J. Schiefsky, *Hippocrates: On Ancient Medicine* (Studies in Ancient Medicine 28; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 216–17; cf. Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.217–18.

⁸⁰ I owe the following references to Naeh in Boyarin, 'Jesus', 245–6 n21.

בלע כזית מן המת ונכנס לבית הבית טהור שכל הבלועין באדם ובהמה ובחיה ובעופות טהורין מסרה או שיצא מלמטה טהור שמה מים טמאים והקיאן טמאין מפני שנטמאו בו ביציאתן טבל או שנסרחו או שיצא מלמטה טהורין שמה שאר המשקין אע"פ שטבל והקיאן טמאין לפי שאינן טהורין בגוף נסרחו או שיצאו מלמטה טהורין פרה ששתת מים טמאין והקיאן טמאין מפני שאין טהורין בגוף נסרחו או שיצאו מלמטן טהורין

If someone swallowed an olive's bulk of a corpse and entered a house, the house is pure, for everything that is swallowed by a human or cattle or a wild animal or birds is pure. If it decomposed or came out below [as excrement], it is pure. If someone drank impure water and vomited it up, it is impure, because it was defiled when it came out. If one immersed, or if it decomposed, or if it came out below, it is pure. If one drank other [impure] liquids, if he immersed and vomited them out, they are impure, because they were not purified in the body. If they decomposed or went out below [as urine], they are pure. If a cow which drank impure water vomited it up, it is impure, because it was not purified in the body. If it decomposed or came out below [as urine], it is pure.⁸¹

A similar pattern of reasoning emerges in t. Oholot 12.3:

כלב שאכל בשר המת ונכנס לבית הבית טהור שכל הבלועין באדם ובבהמה בחיה ובעופות טהורין הקיאן הבית טמא

If a dog which ate flesh of a corpse entered a house, the house is pure, for everything that is swallowed by a human or cattle or a wild animal or birds is pure. If he vomited it up, the house is impure.

In the first passage, the corpse and impure liquids are made pure because, unlike something vomited up, that which is digested is 'purified in the body'. Like Jesus' argument, this view of the stomach arises from the assumption that excrement is impervious to impurity. Note also how the claim (appearing in both passages) that 'everything that is swallowed by a human ... is pure' bears a striking resemblance to my proposed interpretation of καθαρῶν πάντα τὰ βρώματα – the human body purifies any ingested food from ritual impurity.⁸² From these passages, Shlomo Naeh concludes that among the rabbis 'a view emerges regarding the place of the digestive system – of humans and of animals – with respect to impurity and purity: that which is digested is "purified in the body". The digestive system is a sort of "purification machine", which purifies all foods that enter it from the outside'.⁸³

The rabbis do not conclude from this conception of the stomach that ritually defiled food is unable to defile a person through ingestion. On the contrary, the rabbis ruled that one can be defiled by ingesting carrion (as per their reading of the Torah) and by ingesting ritually defiled food (as per rabbinic decree),⁸⁴ but they asserted that these defile by ingestion only in the oesophagus (בית הבליעה).⁸⁵ This ruling is likely constructed to resolve two positions that were seen as standing in tension: the stomach purifies any ingested objects, but one can be defiled by eating carrion and defiled food. Based on the

⁸¹ cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Tohorah, Tum'at Okhlin* 10.8.

⁸² Similarly, b. Menachot 69a reads: 'In the case of an elephant that swallowed an Egyptian wicker basket and excreted it intact along with its waste, what is the halakha?' The assumption embedded in the question is that the wicker basket was ritually defiled prior to being eaten by the elephant. The Gemara claims that any of its acquired impurity is cancelled (למבטל טומאתה).

⁸³ Naeh in Boyarin, 'Jesus', 245–6 n21.

⁸⁴ See m. Tohorot 2.2; m. Miqva'ot 2.2; m. Zavim 5.12.

⁸⁵ m. Tohorot 1.1; m. Zevachim 7.3, 5–6; m. Parah 8.4.

former position, the rabbis concluded that defiled objects cannot defile a person in the stomach (so *Sifra* above) and, therefore, proposed that defilement by ingestion happened in the oesophagus. Unlike the rabbis, Mark's Jesus does not halakhically distinguish between these sections of the digestive tract and deploys this conception of the stomach to proffer that nothing can defile a person through ingestion at all.⁸⁶ As Naeh puts it, 'In order to prove his claim that unclean food is unable to defile a person, Jesus utilises a halakhic concept and makes an argument of the *qal wahomer* kind: if it is in the body's power to purify food, how would it be possible for food to defile the body?'⁸⁷ Instead of reconciling the two positions held by the rabbis with the concept of the oesophagus, Mark's Jesus entirely denied the possibility of defilement by ingestion. He thus rejected the ruling of the 'elders' that ingesting defiled food can defile a person and would likely have been pressured to interpret the carrion passages in the Torah as depicting defilement not by ingestion but by touch, as in Furstenberg's reading described above.

In light of all this, I argue that Jesus' argument in Mark 7.18–19 runs in the following way: (1) some foods that go into the body are actually contaminated with ritual impurity; but (2) no excrement made from food can be ritually impure; therefore (3) the person – specifically their stomach, which produces excrement – purifies everything that enters it from ritual defilement; and therefore (4) nothing that enters a person and goes into the stomach is able to defile the person. To restate Jesus' words with these explanations: 'Everything from outside going into a person (even if it has contracted ritual impurity) is unable to defile a person, because it enters not into the heart but into the stomach (which acts as a purifying agent), and goes out (as excrement, which is incapable of being ritually impure) into the sewer, thus (the person, specifically their stomach) purifying all foods'.

6. Conclusion: Undoing a Longstanding Interpretative Tradition

The interpretation proposed in this article has the following advantages over other interpretations: (1) it does not require conjectural theories of redaction or hypotheses about scribal additions to make sense of the passage; (2) it does not require positing an awkward construction in which Mark or a later scribe used a participle after direct discourse to modify λέγει; (3) it is grammatically plausible in light of other uses of the nominative absolute circumstantial participle; (4) it is historically plausible, given that Mark's Jesus seems to assume the not uncommon ancient Jewish view that excrement cannot become ritually impure and engages in a particular kind of anatomical reasoning that we see in

⁸⁶ Leviticus 10.17 may have played a role in the emergence of this view about the stomach: 'Why did you not eat the purification offering in the holy place? ... [H]e has assigned it to you [to eat] to bear the iniquity of the congregation, to make expiation for them before the LORD'. Jacob Milgrom argues that eating enacts a purifying effect on the offering (Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 623, 636–8; but see Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005) 91–105). The notion of swallowing up something is elsewhere associated with disempowering or nullifying it: God exterminates death by swallowing it in Isaiah 25.7.

⁸⁷ Naeh in Boyarin, 'Jesus', 245–6 n21. Potentially similar reasoning may emerge in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (discussed by Furstenberg, 'Defilement', 194 n51; Boyarin, 'Jesus', 245 n21). Diogenes Laertius relays a story in which Diogenes the Cynic is picking figs when someone tells him not long ago a man had hanged himself on the fig tree. Diogenes responds with a cryptic saying: "'Then," said he, "I will purify (καθαρῶ) it"' (6.61). Alexander Murray suggests that the comment about purification implies that Diogenes believes that eating the fig (which has become impure through the suicide) will purify it, and for this reason he may disregard the caution regarding its impurity (Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages, Volume 2: The Curse on Self-Murder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 512; cf. Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983) 42 n37).

ancient medical texts; and finally (5) it aligns with a view of the stomach attested in later Jewish texts – namely that the stomach has a purifying effect on anything ingested by humans.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of this proposal is that it brings coherence to the context of Mark 7.1–23. On my reading, Jesus does not accuse the Pharisees of undermining Torah while himself doing the very same thing. This reading also entails neither that Jesus denies the existence of ritual impurity nor that he denies that ritual impurity can be transferred to foods. Rather, he agrees that food can become ritually defiled through contact with defiled hands; how, otherwise, could he say that the person *purifies* all foods? The point of the argument in 7.18–19 is that, *even if food is ritually defiled by unwashed hands*, the person will in any event purify the food entering the body through their stomach, and therefore, one need not be concerned about handwashing before eating.

It is crucial to emphasise that this reading does not entail that Jesus undermines *kashrut*. Even though, according to Jesus' view, non-kosher animals (even ones that had contracted ritual impurity somehow) ingested by humans would become ritually pure excrement, this would not mean that ingesting non-kosher animals is permitted: again, the evidence from the late Second Temple onward suggests that non-kosher animals were understood to be prohibited not due to a putative capacity to ritually defile but simply by divine command. The interpretative mistake of early Christian interpreters of Mark 7.15, 18–19 was that, unlike their Jewish contemporaries, Christian interpreters did not recognise a difference between contracting ritual impurity and the moral defilement caused by ingesting non-kosher animals. Being ignorant of this distinction – which is absolutely necessary for rightly understanding Mark 7.1–23 and many other ancient Jewish legal texts – they concluded that Mark 7.15a/18b undermines *kashrut*.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, this same mistake has been perpetuated by modern interpreters of Mark 7.1–23 who often fail to recognise the distinction between the domains of ritual impurity and *kashrut* and thereby betray a fundamental ignorance of rather basic matters of Jewish law. If we New Testament scholars are committed to understanding the literature of an early Jewish messianic sect, we cannot afford to continue to perpetuate these kinds of mistakes.

If my proposed interpretation is correct, then, at least two important implications follow. First, this text can no longer be wielded as *prima facie* evidence that the Markan Jesus opposes the regulations of the Torah. In fact, it provides evidence that Jesus assumes the validity of the Torah and participates in ongoing intramural Jewish debates over its interpretation. Second, the translation 'Thus he declared all foods clean' (NRSV) espouses a misleading reading of the passage that wrongly implies that Jesus denies the existence of ritual impurity and/or denies that non-kosher animals are prohibited to eat. This translation should be abandoned. Given how interpreters use Mark 7.19c as a *crux interpretum* for Jesus' understanding of the Torah, the interpretative stakes here are rather high. If Bible translators find the interpretation outlined in this article convincing, they must consider an alternative translation of 7.19c so that they do not mistakenly communicate that Mark's Jesus opposes the Torah.

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⁸⁸ So Peter Tomson, 'Jewish Food Laws in Early Christian Community Discourse', *Semeia* 86 (1999): 193–211, at 202: 'the way food laws appear in the New Testament must primarily be judged by the categories of ancient Jewish law. For one thing this means the various halakic areas must be distinguished. This is not customary since as we saw New Testament exegetes like the Church Fathers tend to lump food laws together into one category labelled "Jewish".'

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