

**THE SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION ON JESUS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS  
THE TRADITION OF THE ELDERS CONCERNING PURITY AND IMPURITY IN  
THE GOSPEL OF MARK 7:1-23**

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The discussion on ritual purity in the New Testament is beginning to take a central stage after a very long period of inattention by New Testament scholars. Based on this premise, we have examined in this dissertation the concept of ritual purity and its ethical implication on the attitude of Jesus towards the tradition of the elders according to the Gospel of Mark 7:1-23. And to get to comprehend this topic better, we divided this work into five different chapters which cut across the ancient Mediterranean cultures, the Old Testament, the intertestamental period, and the New Testament understanding of purity and impurity.

As indicated in the statement of the problem that the issue currently existing in our observation on Mark 7:1-23 was on the few numbers of New Testament scholars who have contributed to the ritualistic and ethical dimension of purity and impurity in Mark 7:1-23. However, this discussion on ritual purity in the New Testament is beginning to take a central stage after a very long period of inattention by New Testament scholars. And what we have done in this dissertation is to contribute our quarter by adding on the existing few materials which are out in the scholarly world concerning the topic in question.

By means of the approach used here, we connected certain ancient Mediterranean culture with the Jewish understanding of the concept of ritual purity and impurity. This process had in turn availed us with a deeper and a comprehensive understanding of the teaching of Jesus on Mark 7:1-23 regarding ritual purity and impurity and its eventual inclusiveness of Gentiles as members of the new group of the believing community founded by Jesus.

This pericope on Mark 7:1–23 has been dealt with by different scholars and has been regarded in the past as providing an example of Jesus' radical attitude to the Torah. Contextually, this pericope is placed between the story of the feeding of the 5000 (Mark 6:30-44), with its many Israel motifs and images and with its mission to Gentile territories (Mark 7:24-37). In this research we illustrated the attitude of Jesus to the issues of ritual purity and

the ethical norms behind the issue of ritualistic handwashing and the declaration of all food clean by Jesus which seem to provide an occasion for legal tradition in general.

The Social Scientific Approach used in this research on Mark 7:1-23, has also given us a strong foundation by getting to know some ancient Mediterranean practices on ritual purity regarding banquet and boundary rite and many other elements as reflected in this research. We looked into purity and impurity in the Old Testament with keen attention on the Book of Leviticus and examined the role of the priest in the restoration of ritual purity in the society.

This research has been able to look into certain fundamental questions such as: where does this idea of ritual hand washing by the people emanated from? Or put in another way, how can we really get to understand the directive for all Jews to wash their hands as against the priestly requirement in Exodus 30:17-20? These questions invite us to look at the motifs of purity and impurity in the intertestamental literature with its various occasions for hand washing in Judaism.

Thus, Mark 7:1-23 offers us as biblical scholars to ask some critical questions such as: Who has the authority to define or apply purity rules, and to sanction abnormal behavior? How was this done, and in which contexts? What was the understanding of the tradition of the elders regarding ritual purity? How do we understand the concept of honor and shame in this text of Mark 7? Should Jesus be considered as a broker in the context? What was Jesus pointing to when he engaged the Pharisees and Scribes? Did handwashing before ordinary meals belong to the “the tradition of the elders” and was it practiced by the people generally or at least by some Pharisees at the time of Jesus? And did the Jews of that time generally immerse themselves and their utensils to the extent that Mark claims? These salient questions as well as the overarching similarities in terminology and concepts on ritual purity give room for a social scientific approach (SSA) that connects the different cultural, social and religious traditions of the first century Mediterranean believers.

The Social Scientific Approach (SSA) which comprises of sociology, cultural anthropology and psychology, has assisted us greatly to understand some aspects of the community behind this text and her perception on ritual purity. Since purity regulations are not simply taboos, but a means of preserving religious and ethnic identity in a hostile world. This dispute deals also with whether the community is to be exclusivist or open to “unclean” elements e.g., Gentiles. All these are triggered by the initial observation raised by the Pharisees and Scribes on why Jesus’ disciples eat with unwashed hands (Mark 7:1-5). The ‘washing’ of

hands here refers to ritual purity, and not to simply hygiene. The use of SSA has helped us to understand the first century individuals, religion, their collective behavior, within their social environment and their understanding of ritual purity and its ethical.

Inputs from anthropologist such as Thomas Kazen, Mary Douglas, Catherine Bell, Richard DeMaris and other scholars who have written on ritual and other practices that have to do with different cultures are looked into. Their contributions on ritual purity provided us with a solid theoretical basis for our examination by analyzing what it might mean to ‘explain’ such cultural features as a system of food prohibitions. To make this research achieve its purpose we deployed the use of sources such as the Sacred Scriptures, documents on ancient Mediterranean culture, articles regarding ritual purity, literatures and other Ancient documents such as the Talmud, Mishnah, Midrash, and the Dead Sea Scrolls as reference points.

It is quite interesting to note that what warranted this teaching of Jesus regarding the tradition of the elders was prompted because of the question the Pharisees and Scribes asked Jesus about the inability of his disciples to wash their hands before eating bread. This question widened the scope of this research to many elements regarding ritual purity that are not mentioned in this pericope such as banquet and boundary, rite of passage, collectivism of the Mediterranean culture, corpse impurity, skin disease, bodily discharge, unclean animals, and the grades of uncleanness to mention just a few. It is interesting to note that in one of our findings based on the Jewish culture, the act of washing hands before meals has nothing much to do with hygiene but has a lot to do with Jewish cultic practice seen as a defense against impurities of any kind getting closer to the Temple. And having realized that relying on this text on Mark 7:1-23 would not give us the required information and facts that we need in order to work on this pericope (Mark 7:1-23), we decided to use a method known as the ‘Social Scientific Approach’ (SSA) which enabled us to arrive at some positive findings regarding the perceptions of the world, cultural and social characteristics of few ancient communities and connecting these to Mark 7. Thus, our findings are contained in the five chapters of this dissertation and summarized as we have them below.

In chapter one, we looked at the anthropological understanding of ritual purity and impurity in the ancient Mediterranean cultures. Contributions of scholars such as Thomas Karen, Mary Douglas, Emile Durkheim, Catherine M. Bell, Sophie Miller, and Victor G. Popow just to mention a few have helped in our research. These scholars acknowledged that ritual purity has to do with culturally strategic ways of acting in the world and prescribed order

of performing religious services. Each culture defines what is pure and impure and the consequences vary from culture to culture. Although there is considerable cross-cultural overlapping on certain beliefs. We are aware that ritual purity and impurity is still presently an on-going discussion in many cultures of the world and this discussion is not new in the field of biblical theology either. We see those impurities in some ancient Mediterranean cultures such as Mesopotamia, Assyria, Sumeria, Akkadia, Hittite, Greece, Egypt and Rome could come from bodily fluids, disease, corpse, bloodshed, objects, buildings and grounds. Interestingly, their understanding of ritual purity and impurity in these cultures were amazing and serves as a starting point for a better understanding of this adventure. We have seen from Durkheim, a French sociologist, ritual is more than mere performance and symbol but a universe of meaning that is completely external and independent from symbolic action.

Our research shows that ritual purity and impurity also determine the mode of actions as in ceremonies. These ceremonies are the expression of belief or aspects of religion and a sequence of repeatable acts called “rite”, which are performed by way of specific methodology adhering to certain occasions such as banquets, marriage ceremonies, to political traditions which involves the execution of conscious and deliberate actions. All these consisted of a simple routine which an individual submits on a daily basis to ceremonies such as: banquets and boundary, marriage, graduation from a civil organization and a rite of passage, the aspect of collectivism of the Mediterranean cultures.

We realized that, while certain behaviors governed the acts of food sharing such as the ethics of passage which serves as a sign of change in collective or individual life; the ethics of communion creates a sphere of shared values, achievements, ideals, care, favoring someone or a people, aiming at political end; engenders relations agreement. This thought on food involves not just focusing on nutritional component but thinking of symbols, collective imagination, sociability, and issues pervading humanity. Participation in communal meals is seen as a privilege for the elect and brings about order and respect because almost every society has ceremonies and festivals that have retained a ritualistic character over the centuries. And meals have always been a focal point for forging a close friendship in different ways according to Cecilia Wassén. Eventually, moral philosophers used these occasions as opportunities to instruct and to explore questions regarding character formation.

It is quite clear that the practice of ritual purity is well understood within the culture of collectivism whereby people belong to a larger in-group with an exchange for loyalty and care

for the wellbeing of the individual with certain rules and regulations that pertain to ritual purity and impurity. To keep the relationship between the divine and human, all lovers of purity in the ancient Mediterranean cultures must shun impurity, ambiguity, multiplicity of beliefs as these threaten the society directly or indirectly, which eventually will need the help of an exorcist, or a process of atonement as contain in chapter two of this research.

In chapter two we shifted our attention to the Old Testament Bible with reference to the Book of Leviticus and other biblical passages, where we looked at Purity and impurity with references to the various ways an Israelite could contact impurity from eating unclean animals, through childbirth, skin disease, touching of things discharge of bodily fluids and marital intercourse. These impurities could be ceremonially passed to others who meet someone who is unclean. As a result of these, an unclean person spends some time in a state of ceremonial impurity. He or she was not allowed to worship in the temple, they were separated from the community and in some cases, expelled from the camp. This was an acknowledgment of God's word in Leviticus 19:2, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God am holy". The word קָדוֹשׁ or ἅγιος (holy), which is an attribute of God shows that the Israelites were called to be holy by striving to imitate God in their day to day activities through ritual ceremonies and purity. And the temple where sacrifices were offered was central and considered as the holy and the dwelling place of God, served as the holiest place in the Jewish land and all efforts were made to safeguard its purity. Because of this, we discussed the effect of impurity in the Old Testament, with various rationale of purity laws and the interpretation of clean and unclean animals in the Old Testament.

All hope for the unclean person is not lost because God's Law provided a path to restore purity depending on the degree of impurity which ranged from physical washing to offering of animal sacrifices for atonement. These atonement rites were officiated by the כֹּהֵן (priest) who was seen as a purity specialist and the rightful person to pronounce someone unclean. The priest confirms and welcomes those who were formally unclean back to the society after their quarantine. He gives instructions on how the process of purification would take place because God expected holiness from His people and this rite of atonement eventually restores and allows a person access to God.

In chapter, three we looked at the motifs of purity and impurity in the intertestamental literature with keen interest on the main characteristics of the intertestamental Jewish period. It is true that religion had played a significant role in the intertestamental period and the motifs

of purity and impurity in some of the intertestamental Jewish literature such as the Dead Sea Scrolls found in the Qumran community, the Talmud, Mishnah and even some documents considered as Pseudepigraphy works, Apocrypha, the works of Philo and Josephus the Jewish writer and historian have provided us with relevant and valuable sources which serve as link between the Old and New Testaments with significant influences on religion, politics, culture and civil environment. The period of the second temple gave birth to groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots and the synagogue as a place for moral instruction and worship. The motif on ritual purity and impurity in this second temple period showed the concern of the Jewish people to maintain their religion, culture, and tradition irrespective of the painful situation at that time.

Interestingly, the idea and practice of some of the temple cults which worshippers had to appear pure before God with the temple protected from pollution of any kind (Exodus 30:17-20) before the exile was adhered to. During the exile, there was the need to keep this tradition alive with the introduction of certain acts of ritual purity such as handwashing by the common people, atonement, and interior conversion, the use of the Mikveh for cleansing. All these were done with the sole aim of keeping the Land and the people of the land holy and worthy to approach God. Several times, Jewish law requires purity by means of washing the hand after sleeping, before and after eating bread, after going to the bathroom, before worship, after visiting a cemetery and after having a seminal emission and touching objects and animals which could convey impurity. A look at the degree of holiness and the grades of uncleanness and how certain vigorous debates and enactments were done by the schools of Shammai and Hillel on this matter of ritual practices. Studying this period is handy if we wish to understand and appreciate ritual purity and impurity in the New Testament with reference to the concept of handwashing and other forms of ritual purification.

Chapter four which is on the New Testament insights to ritual purity and impurity presents before us a different approach to the understanding of the concept of purity and impurity with a complete turnaround from the external to the internal in the treatment of those who were considered impure according to the tradition of the elders. For the Jews, this approach was achieved “in the Law” and for Christians it was done “in Christ”. Jesus and his early disciples associated with people who were considered unclean and had no respectable place in the society according to the Jewish norms and values. In fact, these unclean people have no place when it comes to worship considering the strictness of the Jewish Laws and customs in dealing with Gentiles or pagans.

We see Jesus in the New Testament showing his authority through the power of his touch in cleansing the leper and the temple in Matthew 8:1-4 and John 2:13-16 respectively. He also denounces the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Luke 11:38-39) who tried sticking to the old ways of doing things and forcing it on others. In the New Testament, Jesus' disciples continue with this approach by dismantling other cultural boundaries that could serve as a setback to others particularly regarding the dietary laws (Acts 10:1-11). This act of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles who before now were considered strangers and foreigners to be fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, was such a mystery to the apostles themselves. It is not unlikely that some Gentiles might before now have stepped into a synagogue of the Jews, and heard the gospel preached; but the gospel was never yet designedly preached to the Gentiles, nor any of them. Peter's conversation with Cornelius, a Gentile, led to the baptism of Cornelius' entire household and served as an invitation to the Gentiles.

In this research, we noted a paradigm shift from the physical temple to the human person as the new temple and dwelling place of God (1 Cor 3:16-17) which must be kept clean from sin and against any form of impurity (1 Peter 1:22). All these were possible through the blood of Christ that was poured out for the atonement of sins (Heb 9:11-22). These few events out of the many we have in the New Testament proved that purity as required of the New Testament community is moral, personal, and above all connected with the purity of the heart. But we must be quick here to say that Jesus in the New Testament does not in any way invalidate the Jewish teaching but presents an improvement and brighter understanding which incorporates both the Jews and the Gentiles to worship and serve God as seen in Mark 7:1-23.

Lastly, in chapter five, we looked at purity and impurity in Mark 7:1-23 which is the climax of this dissertation. As we have seen in the Gospel of Mark, that the function and centre of the story of Mark is the person of Jesus, and essentially for Mark, the question of Christology is necessary in this Gospel. We have seen that Jesus' attitude towards purity in this chapter is one of the most fascinating and difficult issues in understanding his attitude towards Judaism. It is quite interesting to notice that this dispute was not caused by Jesus himself, but rather, it was the inability of his disciples to wash their hands before eating bread as we have in the accusation of the scribes and Pharisees in Mark 7:5: *διὰ τί οὐ περιπατοῦσιν οἱ μαθηταί σου κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, ἀλλὰ κοινᾶς χερσὶν ἐσθίουσιν τὸν ἄρτον;* ("Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?").

And this act of eating ordinary food with washed hands was seen as a matter of scribal development and an extension of this principle to the Jews other than the priests. Proposals on

the Structure of the Gospel of Mark as we have seen from some scholars such as David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, Mary Healy, Scott Hahn, Curtis Mitch, and James R. Edwards have further help us to understand the position and place of Mark 7:1-23 in the entire Gospel of Mark. By analyzing Mark 7:1-23 in three different sections such as 7:1-5 as the center of the controversy, vv. 6-13 shows Jesus' analysis with the prophet of Israel while vv. 14-23 talk on ritual and moral impurities. These three sections helped us to understand that Mark 7:1-23 is deliberately and strategically fixed by Mark for the sole purpose of dismantling certain barriers caused by human traditions which were aimed at preventing any contact with the Gentiles. This enables Jesus to carry his mission to Pagan world by bringing about a change in approach which focuses on the purity of the heart rather than the external cultic rite.

Jesus as a true broker and teacher denounced the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Scribes who considered themselves as spokespersons for God's people. He defended his disciples' action by discrediting this group. In the same line of thought, common people in Palestine as noted by Brett Young had little access to clean water and as such, it would have been difficult for them to go through this ceremony three times a day. As such, going through the motions to appear religious is more dangerous than it first appears. Jesus here tries to make it clear: "It is not what can be seen that matters, but what is in your heart."

Jesus in this text is concerned with the evil that emanates from the very core and centre of the physical and social body which is the heart. These sins are violations of God's commandments, and they defile the very core of the person by posing a greater danger to the wholeness and integrity of the body. This text when keenly observed, we see that Jesus and Mark, like the Pharisees, are concerned about the purity of the body's interior, but differ in their evaluation of what constitutes the greatest threat to that long-lasting internal purity. Since for Jesus (and Mark) the greater danger lies within the body itself, while for the Scribes and Pharisees the perspective attempts to construct a fence to protect it from external pollution are misguided.

Finally, on a moral and ethical dimension, Jesus reveals those evil acts which originate from the heart and could make one impure such as: evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. Calling on his disciples who were already inside, to do everything possible to safeguard the heart from the evil thoughts as against the external ritualistic practice of handwashing. This principle serves to shift the focal point from the problem of ritual purity to the problem of moral impurity and the internal sources of contamination. This is because ritual



impurity defiles the body while moral impurity defiles the soul as observed by Philo of Alexandria. Jesus here did not abolish the Torah, but rather, relativized it in favor of what really counts within religion.

All these have open us to a deeper, insightful, and positive understanding of the topic in question. We are convinced that this scholarly pursuit has helped us appreciate even better some biblical events (Exodus 30:17-21; Lev 15:1-33; Isa 29:13; Matt 15:1-3, 7-9; Mark 7:1-23; Luke 11:39-41; Heb 9:10) regarding pure and impure, holy, and profane, clean and unclean in the entire Bible.

Accordingly, Jesus invites us to understand that purity and impurity do not depend on any external ritualistic observances nor come from outside but from within the heart of a person. We must be quick to acknowledge that this research has attempted to bring to our awareness the riches that are found in the Gospel of Mark 7:1-23. We admit that rather than seeing this research as a problem solving, it has in a way, opened for a more sincere and deeper scholarly approach to the understanding of the various contributions and the richness that are contain in this Gospel.