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## Review of the doctoral dissertation

Naanlong Bruno Yenkwō, *Jesus' Attitude Towards the Tradition of the Elders Concerning Purity and Impurity According to the Gospel of Mark 7:1-23*, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Faculty of Theology, Warsaw 2022, pp. 307.

The review is an implementation of the decision of the Council of Discipline of Theological Sciences at the Faculty of Theology of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. The doctoral dissertation was written under the supervision of Rev. Prof. Dr. Hab. Janusz Kręcidło MS at the Chair of the New Testament Exegesis at the Faculty of Theology of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. The dissertation consists of five chapters with a general introduction and a general conclusion. The dissertation is provided with a list of abbreviations at the beginning and a bibliography at the end. The bibliographic list is divided into six parts: sources (Biblical and other ancient Jewish sources); commentaries on the Gospel of Mark; other Biblical commentaries; primary works and articles; secondary works and aids; Internet sources.

### 1. Research subject and purpose

The title precisely captures the formal and material object of the dissertation: the concept of ritual purity and its ethical implication on the attitude of Jesus towards the tradition of the elders, found in Mark 7:1-23. The introduction to the dissertation gives reasons for choosing the theme of ritual purity and its importance for New Testament studies. A review of the state of research carried out by the Author of the dissertation revealed gaps in the approach to the pericope mentioned in the title. He formulates several working research questions: "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? Thus, 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” (p. 10).

The first part of the dissertation contains a brief overview of thirteen papers examining the pericope of chapter seven in Mark and the related question of ritual purity. Most scholars studying Mark 7:1-23 paid more attention to the theoretical explanation and analysis of the text than to the ritualistic and ethical dimensions of the Gospel texts. The scholars who tackled aspects of ritual purity and impurity neglected the question of the identity of the community behind this text. The research state suggested filling the gaps by concentrating on the ritual and ethical implication of Mark 7:1-23 and examining this identity.

The methodology applied in the dissertation combines various approaches to the Gospel text: social scientific approach, narrative analysis, and those based on tradition (Canonical approach, Jewish tradition of interpretation, and the influence of the text on individuals and the community). The introduction describes some aspects of the first approach: the social scientific approach. This kind of study corresponds to the dissertation’s aims: to define the relationship between the question of ritual purity and the community behind the text. Its broader framework is the relationships between the New Testament texts and life as lived by the early Church. The presentation of the methodology also refers to the limitations caused by the Covid-19 pandemic: the scientific literature, which was only available through direct consultation at some research centers abroad, could not be taken into account.

The introduction summarizes the research by outlining its main stages in five chapters. Chapter one describes the ancient Mediterranean culture’s anthropological understanding of ritual purity and impurity. It also defines key concepts in this milieu: ritual, purity, impurity, pollution, taboo, and purification rite. Chapter two focuses on the questions of purity and impurity in the Old Testament with references to unclean animals, childbirth, skin disease, touching of unclean things, discharge of bodily fluids, and marital intercourse, with particular emphasis on the instructions of Leviticus. Chapter three tackles the development of these laws and traditions concerning purity and impurity in the intertestamental literature. Chapter four intends to examine these motifs in the New Testament books besides Mark’s Gospel. Based on the scientific consensus, the first four chapters have descriptive characters rather than analytical functions. Lastly, chapter five contains the proper explanation of the passages in Mark 7:1-23. Each of the chapters ends with a conclusion. The general conclusion of the dissertation comprises a synthesis of the research results carried out in five chapters.

## 2. Completion of the research objective

How does each research objective in five chapters achieve the main research aim? The answer to this question has two different parts. The first evaluates the first four chapters, primarily because of their value for the analyzes carried out in the last chapter. The second part, on the other hand, assesses chapter five as a solution to the main research problem.

The scope of chapter one is broad, even too comprehensive (Mesopotamia, Assyria, Sumeria, Akkadia, Hittite, Greece, Egypt, and Rome) to provide a helpful background against which to discern common and different elements of the ancient Mediterranean world, ancient Judaism and the Bible in its two parts: the Old and the New Testaments. It would be a better

choice to focus still more on the topic of the dissertation, i.e., the rules for sharing meals, which promoted eating as a privilege for the chosen ones. Although in Mark's Gospel, the issue of purity does not concern meals of a liturgical nature, as in Paul's letters, the conclusions on this issue provide a sound basis for reflection in the following chapters.

Chapter two begins with a presentation of the fundamental distinction between purity and uncleanness in some texts of the Old Testament (Hebrew and Greek versions). The Hebrew and usually Greek texts are not completely identical, even if the lexical discrepancies are slight and the Greek forms differ in nuances. However, it would be necessary to indicate which text is translated into English: the Masoretic text or the LXX version. The chapter presents the cases of how impurity is contracted in the Old Testament: various contacts with unclean animals and food; childbirth; skin disease and touching unclean things; discharge of bodily fluids and marital intercourse. Then it discusses impurity's effects and studies the food laws' social function. The main part of the chapter asserts that the theological symbolism, more implicit than explicit, with this kind of system, conveys the rationale behind ritual purity and impurity and the interpretation of clean and unclean animals in the Old Testament. In addition, important questions are discussed but less pertinent directly to the distinction between the clean and the unclean: priestly role and the restoration of ritual purity in the community and the role of atonement in the Old Covenant. However, the so-called conclusion repeats some of the observations of this chapter, so it does not make an actual argumentation conclusion.

Chapter three investigates the motifs of purity and impurity in Jewish literature of the intertestamental period. The principles, previously only applied to priests, during this period were extended to all Israelites. The Author of the dissertation pays sufficient attention to this change. At this point, one can make a critical assessment concerning the insufficient use of many of the sources cited and explained in the first chapters of the dissertation but neglected in the following chapters. The Mishnah tractate, which is in the Tohorot order, called Kelim, distinguishes between ten degrees of holiness. The dissertation quotes the correct fragment (p. 160-161) but ignores its importance for interpreting the texts studied in the following two chapters. In them, we find echoes of this distinction between degrees of holiness. Jesus' public career in the synoptic Gospels, and especially in Mark, is presented in three stages, which develop on these ten steps: open activity in the land of Israel and its borders, the way to Jerusalem with teachings directed mainly to His disciples, and again open activity in the Temple. In the following stages, Jesus frees people affected by ritual impurities (He touches lepers and the dead, and He is touched by a woman suffering from bleeding). His public activity ends in the Temple, and its culmination is His passion, death, and resurrection, which fulfill the purpose of the rite in the Most Holy: the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; 2:10; 10:45). Chapter three examines the background of the New Testament and has an entire section dedicated to the issue of ritual purity according to the traditions of the elders about keeping the hands clean during meals (par. 3.6).

Chapter four is a concise review of New Testament texts referring to ritual purity and impurity. It reveals „a different approach to the understanding of the concept of purity and impurity with a complete turnaround in the treatment of those who are considered impure according to the laws of the Jews” (p. 216). The theme of purity and uncleanness runs through many New Testament texts. The review of these texts in a non-exhaustive chapter requires a justified selection. Therefore, one could add many other texts. However, one pericope does not

fit the concept of purity: the so-called temple cleansing (John 2:13-16). Interpretations of Jesus' deeds and words in the temple as a protest against trade corruption deprive this event of its deeper meanings, which it has in John's Gospel and even in the synoptic Gospels.

Chapter five is the climax of the doctoral research because it focuses on Mark's text indicated in the title of the dissertation. This chapter first examines the place of Mark 7: 1-23 in the structure of the Gospel, discussed and seen differently by the commentaries. Although "Mark's Gospel resists a neat and clear-cut outline" (as argued by S. Hahn and Curtis Mitch, quoted on p. 233), by comparing various proposals of its structure, the links of the examined pericope with its context become clearer. Then he discusses the broader and immediate context of the pericope. He also does not omit some issues of textual criticism (e.g. pp. 250, 260). These preliminary analyses help determine the purpose of teaching Jesus about purity and impurity. The middle paragraph of chapter five (entitled „The structure and development of Mark 7:1-23") contains the lexical-grammatical and narrative analysis of the pericope. Concepts of honor and shame play a vital role in the approach to Mark 7:1-23. Likewise, the perspective in which Jesus is a broker in His rejection of the traditions of the elders. Jesus acts as a social and divine broker who challenges those who try to keep people from coming closer to God. Jesus' negative judgment about purity in the traditions of the elders has its counterpart in His positive teaching about the purity of heart.

### 3. General evaluation

The doctoral Candidate gives a detailed and clear description of the research procedure in the general introduction. All chapters of the thesis demonstrate a good understanding of the discussed topic and knowledge of the important studies on purity in antiquity and on Mark's Gospel. He does not impose a reading of the sources radically different from the interpretation offered by good commentaries on the Gospels and by properly selected advanced studies on the topics discussed in the following parts of the thesis. Interpreting the dispute between Jesus and his opponents, he does not present them as standing at quite the opposite poles. Accurately grasping what they have in common and aptly distinguishing between their positions, he draws the conclusions from his detailed analysis: "Jesus and Mark, like the Pharisees, are concerned about the purity of the body's interior but differ in their assessment of what constitutes the greatest threat to that long-lasting internal purity. The danger lies within the body itself, and the Pharisees and Scribes' perspective of attempting to construct a fence to protect it from external pollution are misguided. These evil intentions coming from the heart can make a person unclean (Mark 7:20-23)" (p. 275). However, the final parts of the dissertation did not highlight enough conclusions regarding the identity of the community behind Mark's text.

### 4. Points for the discussion and corrections

I propose two related points for the discussion in the public defense:

1) In the opinion of Jan Lambrecht, twice quoted in the dissertation (p. 13-14, 242-243), the pericope on defilement can be studied without context and Mark places it at this point in his

Gospel, to introduce the section about Jesus' activity among the Gentiles for whom the Jewish ritual purity is not relevant (7:24-37 and 8:1-26). Is the preceding text about Jesus' activity in the land of Gennesaret (6:53-56) also unrelated to the pericope about purity and impurity?

2) In my opinion, one correct observation in the dissertation is worth developing and explaining its meaning: How does "the healing of the sick in Gennesaret (6:53-56) prepare[s] the way for understanding Jesus' teaching in Mark 7:1-23" (p. 238)?

Before disseminating the results by publishing all or part of the dissertation, some minor errors and typos should be corrected: p. 24: "quaetionis" should be "quaestionis"; p. 219: "and (c) Curtis" should be "and (d) Curtis"; p. 257: "discussion between Jesus and the Scribes" should be "discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees and Scribes"; p. 263: "διαλογισμοὶ οἱ κακοί" should be "διαλογισμοὶ οἱ κακοί"; p. 289: "Bartosz A." should be "Adamczewski, B."; p. 290: "Dahl N. A. and Donald H., Juel" should be "Dahl, N. A. and Juel, D. H."; p. 298: "Rudolp, D. J." should be "Rudolph, D. J."; passim: not "etal/Etal" but "et al.". A grave accent can never occur at the end of a word unless another Greek word immediately succeeds it (without even a punctuation mark intervening). When e.g. a word is cited out of context, then the grave must always be changed to an acute accent (examples of this error on p. 254: "ἐντολήν (commandment)"; p. 263: "διαλογισμοὶ οἱ κακοὶ might take"). The rules of capitalization of nouns are not observed strictly.

Attention should also be paid to the correctness of the language of dissertations regarding the original words in Hebrew and Greek and of the logical consistency:

1) A statement that suggests the same meaning and form of Hebrew and Greek terms needs to be corrected: "One common term is the word *חַרְסָה* or *λεπράω* which has been traditionally translated 'leprosy'," (p. 99). The Hebrew word is a noun and means „leprosy”, and the Greek word is a verb rarely found in the LXX (Kpl 22,4; Lb 12,10) and means „to have leper”.

2) Five dimensions should be better distinguished in the conclusions of chapter one: "the concepts of purity and impurity are mostly discussed in the light of five dimensions such as the action or techniques of purity, the concept of purity, the visual and verbal representations, the experiences or emotions connected with these concepts and, the daily routine or internalization of them as seen in the practice of banquet and boundary, entry and exit rites, the rite of passage and in the aspect of collectivism of the Mediterranean cultures" (p. 85). It isn't easy to distinguish these five meant here.

3) The order „the Scribes and Pharisees" is from the Gospel of Matthew (as in Matt 23:1ff and correctly on p. 189), not Mark (so on pp. 220, 243, 276, 279, 286, 287), which has the reverse sequence (in Mark 7:1.5). This difference seems subtle but is significant, and its meaning merits an explanation.

4) Jesus is not touching a woman suffering from hemorrhages (as explained on p. 273) but he (or better his robe) is touched by her.

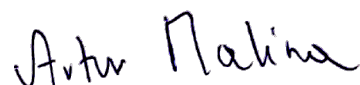
## 5. Final conclusion

The assessed work meets the formal and substantive requirements for doctoral dissertations set out in the applicable laws. I hereby apply to the High Council of Discipline of

Theological Sciences at the Faculty of Theology of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw to admit Rev. M. Lic. Naanlong Bruno Yenkwó to further stages of the doctoral procedure.

#### 5. Końcowy wniosek

Oceniana praca spełnia wymagania formalne i merytoryczne stawiane rozprawom doktorskim określone w obowiązujących przepisach prawa. Niniejszym zwracam się do Wysokiej Rady Dyscypliny Nauk Teologicznych Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie o dopuszczenie ks. mgr. lic. Naanlong Bruno Yenkwó do dalszych etapów postępowania doktorskiego.



Katowice, 12 września 2022 r.

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