

The Gospel of Mark and the Controversy of Jewish Traditions

or

A Gentile Oriented Gospel Eschews Mosaic Law and Jewish Tradition

One of the rare texts that is longer in Mark than either Matthew or Luke is the account of the Pharisees and scribes taking issue with Jesus concerning His compliance with the tradition of ritually washing hands before eating (Mt. 15:1–20; Mk. 7:1–23; Lk. 11:37–41).

Such Pharisaic tradition had a controversial status before A.D. 70, but it was a significant emphasis with 67% of the discussion between Hillel and Shammai consisting in such ritual purity concerns.¹ The pre-Pharisaic “washing of hands” was necessary before handling holy objects,² but it was being extended to the handling of food. Shammai insisted on washing the hands before filling the cup.³ However, the view of Hillel won out, “Washing hands before a meal is a matter of choice, abolution after a meal is obligatory.”⁴ The politically connected Sadducees repudiated all this washing before meals and saw that these purity laws applied only to those who were entering Temple.⁵ Likewise, the sectarian Qumran community also repudiated them, but with regard to washing before meals, they required total immersion before meals.⁶ With the destruction of the Jewish Temple and the success of the Pharisaic synagogue movement, these Pharisaic traditions became codified in the Mishnah.

Within this context, Matthew presents this text as a matter of fact to an informed Jewish reader, whereas, Mark adds explanation for a Gentile reader who is not so well informed. This is an important distinction because it shows that Mark is presenting Jesus for a Gentile audience and thus shows the applicability of Jesus’ teachings for that audience. This is especially apparent by comparing the additions that Mark includes over Matthew’s parallel account. Additionally, the Gentile agenda of Mark is also enabled by the immediately following account of the healing faith of the Canaanite woman, specifically designated by Mark as a Gentile (Mk. 7:26). On this issue of Pharisaic washing tradition, Luke does not have a parallel but he raises the issue in another setting.

¹ This tradition was widespread during 2nd–4th century A.D. (*m. Hag.* 2.5–6; *b. Šabb.* 13b–14a; 62b; *y. Šabb.* 1.3d; *b. Yoma* 87b; *TB Berakot* 8.2; 60b; *TB Sotah* 4b). Especially *m. ‘Ed.* 5.6 places hand washing in the category of heresy. R. P. Booth argues that the practice was not widespread before 70 A.D. (*Jdt.* 12.7; *Ep. Arist.* 305–306; *Sib. Orac.* 3.591–593; R. P. Booth, *Jesus and the Laws of Purity*, JSNTS 13 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986], pp. 159–160; James Dunn, “Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus” in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 61–88; Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000] as a whole for background and pp. 146–150 and W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991], vol. 2, pp. 521–522; Robert Gundry *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], pp. 358–371).

² *Šabb.* 14b.

³ Asher Finkel, *The Pharisees & the Teacher of Nazareth* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), pp. 140–141, 152–156.

⁴ *T. Berak.* 5.13.

⁵ Josephus, *Ant.* 13.297; 17.41.

⁶ *IQH* 4.14–15 identifies their rejection of the traditions. Immersion before meals is supported by: Josephus, *Bell.* 2.129, 138; *IQS* 3.8–9; 5:13; *CD* 10.10–13; cf. M. Newton, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 26–40.

The Pharisees and scribes raised the issue with Jesus, “why do your disciples eat with unwashed hands?”⁷ Mark points out an explanation (from this Jewish traditional perspective) that meant the disciples were rendering themselves impure by eating with impure hands (Mk. 7:2). That is, the washing concerning ceremonial defilement and ritual impurity (e.g., Ex. 30:17–21; Lev. 15:11). Mark also points out a parenthetical comment about the Jewish tradition.

For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots *after their use* (Mk. 7:3–4).

This Markan explanation helps the Gentile readership to enter into this Jewish traditional issue. I even add a little more explanation to help the contemporary reader understand that while the washing at issue was that of hands before eating, part of the tradition included the washing of pots after use. The tradition permits a pot to be externally unclean without defiling the inside of the pot, but if it is defiled on the inside then the whole pot is unclean.⁸ When the question is asked a second time in Mark, Jesus responds that Isaiah rightly prophesied that these Jewish hypocrites will be condemned to captivity and dispersion, which Israel continues to suffer.

This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.
But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men (Isa. 29:13 quoted in Mk. 7:6–7; Mt. 15:8–9).⁹

In Mark, Jesus summarizes the Jews problem twice as “neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men” (Mk. 7:8–9).¹⁰ After summary, then Mark quotes from the Decalogue concerning honor due parents (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16; Mk. 7:10; Mt. 15:4). In Matthew when the question is asked, Jesus responds with this summary in question form and then addresses the Mosaic Law concern first, and then only after that addresses the Isaiah quote (Mt. 15:3–10). So for Mark the issue is that the Jews prefer their tradition over the Mosaic Law, in contrast to the Matthew development, which by order could be summarized that the Jews are violators of the Mosaic Law for tradition. So perhaps Matthew is showing the Law’s binding nature more than Mark presents it. Furthermore, Matthew prefaces this quote of the honor due parents by “for God said” still giving some credence for its applicability to his Jewish-Christian readership, while Mark

⁷ Luke records a parallel account in which the Pharisees take issue with Jesus for not washing before He ate a meal (Lk. 11:37–41). Jesus responded to this critic by calling him a fool for emphasizing external cleansing while they neglected internal robbery and wickedness. Jesus’ solution was to call him to internal “charity, and then all things are clean for you” (Lk. 11:41).

⁸ *m. Kelim* 25.6; however, utensils used as holy things in the temple have no division between inside or outside, for if one is unclean then the whole vessel is unclean (*Tosefta Kelim Baba Batra* 3.12; *Sifra* 114.1.6; Mt. 23:25–26).

⁹ This is similar to the description of the Jews in the *Assumption of Moses* 7.9–10, “their hands and hearts are all corrupt, and their mouths are full of boasting.”

¹⁰ Also an accusation echoed by: *T. Levi* 16.2.

phrases the applicability to the Jewish leaders as “for Moses said,” thus potentially distancing his Gentile readership from implications of the Mosaic Law. However, both agree that the main issue being worked here is an unrighteous illustration of how Jewish leadership permit Jews to not honor their parents by rendering their material goods inaccessible for meeting family needs (Mt. 15:6; Mk. 7:9, 12–13). Mark names the process as “*corban*” and then explains for his Gentile readers that this means “given to God” (Mk. 7:11).¹¹

Jesus then taught the multitude that what defiles a person, is not something that goes into him but that which comes from out of the person’s heart (Mt. 15:11–20; Mk. 7:15–23).¹² That is, things from outside do not defile a person because it passes through them and then out as waste.¹³ Whereas, what proceeds out from a person’s heart is what defiles them: “evil thoughts and fornication, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man” (Mk. 7:21–23). Matthew reduces the vice list to those that concentrate on the Noahic commandments (Mt. 15:19).¹⁴ Both of these lists reflect Jesus’ New Covenant internalizing obedience and an internalized uncleanness.

Mark adds a comment, which Matthew does not include, that Jesus “declared all foods clean” (Mk. 7:19). This comment is at least identifying that kosher law is not applicable to his Gentile readership, though this may go further and identify that the whole Law concerning clean and unclean may not be applicable to Mark’s Gentile readership. It is important to remember that the food Law was bound upon only the Jews of the covenant and the Gentiles within the land (Lev. 11; Deut. 14:3–20; Dan. 1:5, 8–16).¹⁵ Those¹⁶ who are inclined to disband the Mosaic Law altogether on the basis of this comment must remember, that in the previous chapter, “Mosaic Teacher of the Law,” Mark recorded that Jesus said to the Jewish ruler that everlasting life and Kingdom is obtained by complying with the Mosaic Law with a generosity that meets the needs of the poor, and follows Christ (Mk. 10:17–24).

So while Mark sees a freedom for his Gentile readership, he also appreciates that the historical Jesus was more committed to the Law for His Jewish audience. The story continues in the next chapter titled, “Luke and John: Spirit Extended Salvation to the Gentiles.”

¹¹ Throughout the LXX, קָרְבָּנוֹ is rendered by δῶρον, or “given.” cf. Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.167; and in *m. Ned.* 3.11; 4.7–8; 5.6; 9.1 it means sacrifice and vow. The particular issue of depriving relatives by a vow is acknowledged in *m. Ned.* 5.6 and Philo, *Spec. leg.* 2.16–17.

¹² Mark 7:16 is not the earliest and best manuscripts, so I do not consider it Scripture.

¹³ This elimination picks up the idea of the latrine drain that carries away the portion of food that does not provide nourishment.

¹⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:536.

¹⁵ *Esth.* 14.17; *Tob* 1.10–12; *Jdt.* 10.5; 11.12; 12. 1–2; *1 Macc.* 1.62–63; *2 Macc.* 6.5–7, 18–28; 7:1–2, 42).

¹⁶ E.g., some Lutherans and dispensationalists.