

## **"Go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded" (Mk 1:44): Jesus, Purity, and the Christian Study of Judaism**

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In the last century, and especially in the last few decades, historians of Christianity have increasingly understood Jesus of Nazareth as a participant in the Judaism of his day. Many scholars, however, even when emphasizing Jesus' Jewish ethics, or his Jewish scriptural sensibility, or even the apocalyptic convictions which he shared with so many of his contemporaries, nevertheless draw the line at the biblical laws of purity. These laws rarely appear realistically integrated into an historical reconstruction of Jesus. Allied as they are with the ancient system of sacrifices, they seem obscure to modern religious sensibility; and with the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70, they soon became irrelevant to the later, largely Gentile church. Perhaps, too, such purity codes -- a hallmark of virtually all ancient religions -- are too disturbingly archaic to fit comfortably with modern constructions of Jesus and his message.

Very recently, a handful of prominent New Testament historians and theologians have even argued that Jesus taught and acted specifically against the purity codes of his native Judaism. The repudiation of the biblical rules of purity, "the taboos of Torah," stood, they say, at the very heart of Jesus' ministry. Marcus Borg, for example, has urged that Jesus fought the "politics of purity," motivated as he was by a vision of a more compassionate society. Similarly, John Dominic Crossan portrays Jesus as a radical social egalitarian for whom the purity codes of the Temple system were morally and socially anathema. N.T. Wright's Jesus opposed Judaism's "violent nationalism"; as part of his struggle, he fought as well the purity codes and the Temple.

These reconstructions in which Jesus opposes the laws of purity depend, as they must, on the evangelists' depictions of Jesus' activity. What, during his mission, did Jesus actually do? He traveled, eating with the people he encountered and sharing their table ("practicing commensality"); he healed the sick, frequently through touch; and he called women as well as men to receive his message of the Kingdom of God. His audiences in the main were other Galilean peasants. But at the end of his mission he left Galilee and journeyed to Jerusalem at Passover. There, in the final week of his life, he caused a scene on the Temple mount. The chief priests, in concert with the Romans, then moved against him. Arrested around Passover (Mark says on Passover itself; John, the night before), tried before a full meeting of the Sanhedrin (Mark and Matthew describe two meetings; Luke, only one), or perhaps only stopped for an interrogation by the high priest (John), Jesus was handed over to Pilate, who crucified him for sedition.

Imbedded in this activity, these scholars maintain, lie the outlines of Jesus' vision: He fought against the social, economic and gender stratifications of his society, and this means that he fought against Judaism's purity codes. How so? Jesus proclaimed and lived out a vision of radical egalitarianism, a new, social vision of the Kingdom of God; but purity codes are about distinctions, divisions, and separation. Eating with the poor, with outcasts and sinners, meant that Jesus did not attend to the niceties of purity; touching and healing the sick -- the leper, the demoniac, the hemmorrhaging woman -- "shattered" and "subverted" ritual law. Disregarding taboo, Jesus approached both women and Gentiles, thereby demonstrating his contempt for the prejudices of purity. Outside the system of atoning sacrifices, he independently proclaimed the forgiveness of sin.

Finally, inevitably, Jesus went to Jerusalem to confront the dark heart of the purity system itself: the Temple. More than just the privileged location of the "purity elite" (that is, the priests), the Temple embodied and propagated the economically and socially oppressive system that Jesus fought to undermine. Enraged at its splendor, disgusted by its economy, repulsed by the monopoly on forgiveness exploited by its sacrificial cult, Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers. He thereby symbolically repudiated and indicted everything that the Temple and its purity system stood for; and he thereby courted his own death.

One immediate virtue of this reading of the gospels is the way that it closes the gap between Jesus' day and our own. This Jesus battles those same social ills that bedevil thoughtful people in the modern West: economic inequality, racial prejudice, even sexism. And he does so by energetically repudiating something that has been irrelevant to the practice of Christianity at least since 70 CE -- namely, the rules concerning purity and the approach to the sacrificial altar.

This is a passionate and appealing interpretation. To work, it requires only two things: (1) a systematic misconstrual of the meaning and application of the purity codes; and (2) an equally systematic censoring of the evidence, imbedded in these same gospel narratives, that Jesus was a Jew of his own time rather than a left-leaning liberal of ours.

To understand purity, we must of course begin with the Bible. The great stories that open the Bible -- God's creation of the universe, and of humanity; the saga of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Joseph and his brothers; Israel's bondage and freedom -- transmute, half-way through Exodus, to odd, non-narrative directives and descriptions. Story gives way to different types of civic and social legislation, torts and criminal law, rules for the adornment of the tabernacle and its priests. By Leviticus and Numbers, we stand in a thick forest of rules for distinguishing between holy and common, between *tahor* ("clean") and *tameh* ("unclean").

Anthropologists call such rules "purity codes." Such codes are a ubiquitous feature of ancient religions, as are the sacrificial systems usually linked to them. Their presence in the Pentateuch simply attests to the antiquity of biblical tradition. The Bible presents the purity codes in the narrative context of Israel's wandering in the wilderness. But these rules continued to structure ancient Jewish society and worship -- from the sexual intimacy of marriage partners to the great communal celebrations of the annual pilgrimage festivals -- in the post-Biblical period, until the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70.

Purity concerned not just the priests (though they did have additional rules peculiar to their station), but in principle the entire people of Israel. Some rules prohibit contact with or consumption of certain unclean animals, or eating the fat or the blood of permitted ones: Willful, deliberate transgression of these rules would be sin. Other purity rules focus particularly on the human body. Discharge from the genital area -- menstruation, miscarriage, or childbirth; seminal emissions of various kinds -- resulted in impurity, as did contact with (or even proximity to) a corpse. "Leprosy" (which could afflict houses as well as persons) also conveyed impurity.\* For all these conditions, the Bible prescribed various periods of separation, lustrations, and offerings, after which, in the language of Leviticus, the person could again "approach the tent of meeting" - that is, enter the zone of holiness surrounding the altar -- and sacrifice to God. Purity enables proximity to holiness.

Scripture assumes, in other words, that people would contract impurity in the normal course of events. Impurity is not prohibited, and the status of

impurity implies no moral censure. The system cannot be transposed tout court to a moral key except as metaphor (i.e., having an "impure heart"). But an "impure" person -- a menstruant, a leper, a mourner -- is not thereby a "sinner," nor is a "pure" person "righteous." The priest whom God mandates to burn the red heifer in Numbers 19 was rendered unclean by the procedure itself -- which, paradoxically, produced the ritual detergent necessary for removing the most serious form of impurity, corpse-contact (Numbers 19:7-13). Impurity was likewise incurred in the course of fulfilling the more routine mitzvot (commandments) of the Torah: having marital intercourse, giving birth, burying the dead. The "remedy" was not "forgiveness," but purification.

.....(*eight paragraphs deleted from the original*)...

First, impurity is not sin. No one errs, as we have seen, in contracting impurity, nor does the Torah prohibit it. In some cases, impurity inevitably resulted from fulfilling some of the mitzvot. One may or may not contract impurity from tending the sick, depending on the category of the sickness; but in any case an impurity could always be removed. The Torah defined what impurity is, how it is contracted, and how to remove it—again, through various ablutions, waiting periods and, depending on the case, offerings. Thus the remedy for impurity is not forgiveness, but purification.

Second, in Jewish tradition, purity does not correspond to social class. Impurity was a fact of life, but not of class. The lowliest peasant who had just completed the ritual of the red heifer was pure, whereas the most aristocratic priest, having just buried a parent, was not. The fussiest Pharisee, the highest high priest were neither less nor more tameh after marital intercourse than the scruffiest Galilean fisherman. Only the priest had to refrain from his normal activity, because his workplace was the Temple. To see impurity as a quasi-permanent state, and then to confuse or conflate such a state with social class, is simply wrong.

Third, impurity is gender-blind. A healthy adult Jewish woman would incur impurity on a regular basis, through menses; but she would be no more impure than her husband after intercourse. During pregnancy, all other things being equal, she would be pure when her husband, after a nocturnal emission, was not. Some impurities are specific to only one gender, while others -- leprosy and corpse-impurity, for example -- apply equally to both. To erect on a foundation of Leviticus and Numbers a superstructure of supposed Jewish sexism is one way to enable Jesus to exorcise this modern demon; but it tendentiously misreads these texts. We might as well, in search of the ancient roots of radical Jewish feminism, laud the far-sighted Levitical author for deeming only male orgasm ritually sully, while leaving the post-climax female pure.

These ancient religious categories are not readily squeezed into our modern political-cultural ones. If gender were the fundamental category for determining purity status, for example, all women, not just Jewish ones, would impart impurity. A passage in the Mishnah discussing the pollution of menstrual fluid, however, states: "All blood-stains that come from Reqem [= "Gentiles"] are clean...Those that come from Gentiles are clean" (Niddah 7.3). This is because Leviticus 15 refers only to Jews. Gentile menstrual fluid thus does not impart menstrual-impurity, and the operative category for determining impurity is not, therefore, gender.

Marcus Borg offers a recent and prominent example of a thorough misunderstanding of the purity laws. The confusion of impurity with social distinctions contours his work on Jesus: from 1984 (Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus) to 1994 (Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time), and frequently in between, Borg has reiterated and elaborated on this error. Thus, he says, the first-century peasants to

whom Jesus preached -- "the unclean and degraded classes" -- were "not only impoverished but also impure." Conflating the purity code with morality, Borg writes: "The pure were the righteous, the radically impure were the sinners." He also conflates purity, morality, class, and gender: "Pure and impure got attached to other primary social polarities...[to] the chronically ill and the maimed, Jew and Gentile; and associationally to the contrasts between rich and poor, male and female." He cites no primary evidence in support of these statements; nor could he.

In his most recent work, Borg acknowledges in a footnote that, so far as he knows, "there are no purity sayings that explicitly associate wealth with purity and poverty with impurity." In the absence of supporting facts, Borg invokes a generalization about the behavior of purity codes themselves: "A purity system," he writes, "is more than the sum of a culture's explicit purity laws. Purity systems have a logic and structure that cause notions of pure and impure to become associated with other central contrasts in the society." The passive voice obscures the agent who makes this association: not the "purity system" (much less Jesus' contemporaries), but Borg himself.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas reads more carefully. "These books [Leviticus and Numbers] never use the principle of ritual purity to separate classes or races, foreigners or natives....This should be totally unexpected to the anthropologist used to purity codes in other religions." As Douglas notes in her study, biblical purity is concerned to articulate conditions under which people may approach what is holy, most particularly the Divine presence; it does not aim to delineate class or race. That Jews held Gentiles to be "impure" is another truism of New Testament scholarship. The idea does double-duty, burnishing Jesus' image as a social radical (or at least a liberal) and also accounting for later difficulties between Jerusalem and Antioch once the Christian mission moved out of home territory and began to address significant numbers of Gentiles. True, Jews in general did not generally think highly of Gentiles in general, as a quick perusal of Paul's letters in the New Testament reveals: even when addressing Gentiles and in some sense acting as their advocate, Paul refers to them, quite unselfconsciously, as "sinners" (Galatians 2:15). Their characteristic social and sexual sins -- slander, insolence, deceit, malicious gossip, envy, heartlessness, disrespect of parents, homosexual and heterosexual fornication -- were the varied expression of their fundamental spiritual error: They worshiped idols. Gentile culture, and the sort of people it produced, were not topics of Jewish enthusiasm.

But were Gentiles "impure" in general? To wax rabbinical: yes and no. Jews concerned about kashrut (dietary laws) avoided Gentile foodstuffs. Gentiles converting to Judaism underwent rituals of purification. And Gentiles themselves in this period had only limited access to the Temple. But they had more access than a Jew who was leprous, or menstruating: These last were excluded from the entire Temple complex. And as the example discussed above indicates, being a Gentile per se (as contact with menstrual blood per se) did not entail impurity. Rabbinical authorities opined that Gentiles, their garments and their houses were not subject to leprosy-impurity, nor could they contract corpse-impurity. Their idol-worship, however, was polluting -- as Paul reminded his Gentiles-in-Christ. In conclusion, both the issue and the sources are extremely complex, and shed virtually no light on Jesus' attitudes toward purity -- nor, probably, toward Gentiles.

What about data in the Gospel narratives indicating that Jesus kept the laws of biblical purity, data that these scholarly reconstructions, conflating impurity with sin and social class, either ignore or misconstrue? Here we have two different types of evidence. Let's distinguish them as manifest and latent.

The manifest evidence directly addresses purity issues. In one instance, Mark 1:40-44, Jesus cures a leper by touching him. He then orders the man whom he has just "cleansed" (that is, cured) to show himself to the priest and offer the requisite sacrifices as "Moses commanded." This episode stands as an uncomplicated affirmation of Leviticus 14:1-32: "This shall be the ritual for the leprous person at the time of his cleansing" (NRSV).

Mark 7:1-23, a second case, is longer and more complicated. The Pharisees and scribes query Jesus about some of his disciples who eat without first washing their hands (verses 1-5: the issue is purity, not hygiene). Jesus, quoting Isaiah 29:13 ("This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me") accuses them of hypocrisy: They abandon God's precepts for those of their own devising (verses 6-8). Jesus concludes by teaching a crowd he summons that people are defiled not by taking in something that is outside, but by letting out something that is inside (verse 14). The disciples, puzzled, ask for clarification, whereupon Jesus explains that "whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer" (v. 19a). He then expands his point: what defiles is what comes out of an evil heart --fornication, theft, murder, and so on (vv. 20-23). In between 19a and 20, the evangelist inserts an interpretive gloss: "Thus he declared all foods clean."

This passage has been the object of much scholarly analysis for many reasons, not least of all its presentation of a clear violation of biblical Law, the repudiation of the dietary laws (kashrut). The parallel passage at Mt 15:1-20 drops the reference to "cleansing all food," which Mark introduced very artificially. Further, and finally, we have the simple conflict of this passage with the earlier primary material preserved in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where Peter and Paul argue seriously about whether Jewish Christians should eat non-kosher food. If Jesus, even implicitly, had abrogated the food laws during his ministry, apparently neither his own disciples nor Paul himself knew. (No one invoked such a teaching to settle the argument.) I conclude that this passage reflects the controversies over Jewish practice in Mark's post-70 Gentile community much more clearly than any issues we can plausibly situate in Jesus' own mission to fellow Jews c. 30 C.E.

What about "latent" evidence? By this term I mean incidents in the Gospel narratives obliquely touching on or presupposing a purity issue that does not in itself figure prominently, but which unobtrusively shapes the story. The most straightforward occurs in the course of the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus instructs his followers on how they should offer at the Temple. "So when you offer your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). This hypothetical worshiper would first need be in a state of purity in order to enter the Temple and approach the altar. Might this worshiper have disregarded the biblical laws of purity, while observing the biblical laws of sacrifice? Theoretically, yes: Many of the purity rules depended on self-regulation and could not be publicly enforced. Our Matthean worshiper could deliberately bring his offering while remaining (secretly) impure. But this is much less plausible and more complicated (why then go to the Temple at all?) than to assume that he observed the purity requirements in the first place, or that Matthew's original ancient audience would suppose him to have done so.

Second, we have the report in both evangelical traditions, Synoptic and Johannine, that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals. John

gives five journeys: twice for Passover (2:13; 11:55), once for Sukkot (7:10), once for an unspecified feast (5:1), and once for the non-biblical "festival of Dedication" (this last actually in celebration of the Temple's purification by the Maccabees, 10:22). Entry at Passover required special purification; entry at other times, at least immersion in one of the many pools provided for this reason and located next to the Temple compound. Thus, in John 5:1-2, we find Jesus conversing with a sick man by the pool of Bethzaida: evidently they are both waiting to immerse. Again, theoretically, Jesus could have entered the city, remained in a state of impurity, and thus not entered the Temple area (but then why go to Jerusalem, especially during the festivals?); or he could have entered the Temple area while deliberately disregarding the purity requirements. Without an a priori assumption that he repudiated purity laws, however, we would have no reason to think so.

In the Passion narratives, we have two more instances where Jesus' purity-observance accounts for the shape and even the details of the story.

The Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus entering the city with other pilgrims: this accounts for the crowds who usher Jesus into Jerusalem in the so-called "Triumphal Entry." He then proceeds to the Temple area and overturns the tables of "those who sold" (Mk 11:15ff.; Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-48; cf. John 2:13-17). He remains in and around the Temple, teaching publicly to the others gathered there in the days before the feast (Mark 14:1; Luke 21:37-38; John 13:1). What are he and they all doing there?

The Paschal meal had to be eaten in a state of purity, including and especially purity from corpse-contact (Numbers 9:6). Those rendered corpse-impure any time during the week preceding Passover had to wait until the following month to observe Pesach sheini, the "second Passover," established specifically by God for people in this situation (Numbers 9:6-12). But those who were corpse-impure sufficiently in advance of 14 Nissan, the date beginning the feast, entered Jerusalem at least a week before the holiday -- no later, that is, than 8 Nissan. Most pilgrims, assumed to be corpse-impure, had to then undergo a special week-long rite of purification.

Numbers 19 describes this ritual. "Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days. They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean" (Numbers 19:11-12). "The water" in question was made from the ashes of an entirely immolated red heifer (verse 9). Those in Jerusalem for Pesach would undergo this ceremony, punctuated by the sprinkling of this special water on the correct days. If Jesus entered the city with the other pilgrims, and if he taught for days in the Temple area to holiday crowds, he was there, as were they, to be purified through this special rite.

Finally, the seder celebrated in the Synoptic Gospels by Jesus and his disciples presupposes that they were all purified, in order to eat the meal. And at least some one among them would have sacrificed a lamb at the Temple earlier that day, so that they could eat the Paschal offering at the meal (Mark 14:12-16; I assume that they did not violate Ex. 12:3 and simply order the lamb from the *hôte*lier [see Mark 14:15]).

Again, we can imagine otherwise: Jesus deliberately refused purification, and he directed his disciples to refuse also; the disciple who sacrificed the paschal lamb deliberately did so in a state of impurity, and that is how they all ate their meal. One wonders, of course, why they then would not just have spent their holiday in Capernaum. The response might be: Because the point was to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem precisely in defiance of the Law. But if that were the case -- which certainly Mark and John, with their

prominent anti-Temple themes, would have been happy to exploit-- no trace of such a protest remains in any evangelical text.

But weren't the priests involved in Jesus' death? And wasn't their motivation that he had publicly denounced them, the Temple, and all it and they stood for -- including and especially the purity rules -- when he overturned the tables in the Temple court?

Although the traditions behind the Passion narratives are notoriously difficult to sort out, two facts seem fairly clear: Some priests had something to do with Jesus' arrest; and Pilate crucified him for sedition. We have seen how a principled antagonism to biblical purity laws is unlikely as a motive for Jesus' mission. For the sake of argument, though, let's grant that, from the action in the Temple court to his crucifixion, Jesus really did denounce the purity code. How does such a hypothesis clarify the Passion accounts?

The priests, on this construction, were insulted and offended by Jesus' publicly-proclaimed view, and so turned him over to Pilate. But the priests had many more substantial disagreements with other figures within their society -- the Pharisees (who also disagreed among each other), the Essenes (so put off by the current priesthood that they eschewed going to the Temple altogether). Why bother with the relatively powerless Jesus? I suppose an answer might be: The priests were concerned that Jesus' action would turn "the people" against them. But really, how likely is this? The priests had God's own instructions in the Torah, and centuries of tradition and practice on their side: How credible a threat to this could Jesus be? All right, he publicly embarrassed them; they needed him offstage, at once. So why not simply incarcerate him until after the holiday? And if they feared popular outrage were Jesus known to be arrested (as the gospels suggest, e.g., Mark 11:18, 32), why suddenly make a big public production of it by starting with Pilate (where the crowds, unexplained, suddenly show up as hostile, Mark 15:6-15)?

What else might account for the disparate facts of Jesus' pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his arrest by the priestly authorities, and his crucifixion? His belief in the approaching Kingdom of God. We should construe "Kingdom", further, in light of ancient religious hopes, not modern political ones. Jesus went up to Jerusalem for Passover, the archtypical festival of liberation, to announce the impending Kingdom. His gesture with the tables, if historical, would have announced the same message: The overturned tables symbolized the approaching destruction of the earthly Temple, which would cede place to the final Temple, one not made by the hand of man. The High Priest, aware of the crowd's restive energy, apprehensive about Pilate and anxious to minimize bloodshed, acted quickly to arrest Jesus and turn him over to the prefect, after questioning "Jesus about his disciples and his teaching" (John 18:19). Pilate killed him. Rome disliked proclamations of other kingdoms.

The next information we have about Jesus -- the disciples' experience of his resurrection - also points to the Christian movement's origins in the eschatological traditions of first-century Judaism. Apocalyptic is the matrix of the hope of resurrection and of the vindication of the righteous.

Apocalyptic hope also provides the explanation for the most striking feature of earliest Christianity as a Jewish movement: its readiness to accept Gentiles without demanding circumcision. Only Christianity's conviction that God's kingdom really was at hand accounts for this inclusiveness. In a trajectory of hope that we can trace from the classical prophets through the pseudepigrapha to the writings in the New Testament canon and on through to rabbinic opinions and synagogue prayers, Gentiles at the end of days were expected to join with Israel in

order to enter the Kingdom. Jews anticipated, not Gentile conversion, but Gentile inclusion: *It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say, "Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob...."* (Isaiah 2:2ff.)

Jewish hope thus anticipated a double redemption once the Kingdom came: Israel would be redeemed from Exile, and Gentiles from their idolatry. Both peoples would ascend to worship God in his Temple; on God's mountain, they would feast together at the meal that God will have prepared from them (Isaiah 25:6). And why not? The whole city would be pure (Zechariah 14:20-21), Israel would be restored, and the Gentiles, finally, would have forsaken their idols: "'Therefore I will praise thee among the Gentiles, and sing to thy name';... 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people,'" (Romans 15:9-10; Psalm 18:49; Deuteronomy 32:43). The nations would be cleansed of the pollution of false gods. And purity, as we have noted, enables proximity to holiness.

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In all previous civilizations, comments Mary Douglas, religion has shaped reality and purity codes have shaped the world. We in the modern West stand in a different situation. "For us," Douglas observes, "a long scientific liberal tradition has made our culture secular and pluralist. The effort of tolerance so needful for living in a plural society leads us to repudiate the drawing of moral lines and social boundaries; but it is the essence of impurity to draw sharp lines. This may be why comparative religion starts with a prejudice against impurity and finds defilement difficult to understand."

This may be, as well, why some New Testament scholars recoil from a Jesus at home in the world of his contemporaries, a world where leprosy and death defile, where ash and water make clean, where one approaches the altar of God with purifications, offerings, and awe. Unlike Philo, or Josephus, or Hillel, or Shammai, Jesus bears the burden of being required to make immediate sense to us. It's a lot to demand someone living in the first century; too much, in fact. A Jesus who rejects his own religious culture turns out to be a twentieth-century person costumed in ancient garb --a modern secular liberal offended by impurity's sharp lines.

A Jesus who lives coherently within late Second Temple Judaism is worse than too Jewish: He is too different. Perhaps here, then, on this point, at century's end, we can see the beginning of yet another phase in the quest for the historical Jesus: one seeking to grasp how he understood his own culture, rather than using him as a reflecting surface for understanding our own.