

Jesus Christ and Trajectories of Purity: A Response to Thiessen's *Jesus and the Forces of Death*

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Abstract

Matthew's Thiessen's recent book *Jesus and the Forces of Death* aims to distinguish the domains of ritual and moral purity as part of a project to demonstrate the Jesus adhered to most Jewish ritual purity norms. However, Thiessen's work has theoretical, contextual, and exegetical issues that weaken his argument. This essay examines those weaknesses and proposes a different way to frame the analysis of ritual and moral purity within a diverse array of trajectories in a priestly cultural frame.

Most contemporary readers of the New Testament, despite their cultural distance, would recognize that Jesus and the early Christian movement lived within a Mediterranean world that was deeply shaped and informed by principles of ritual purity. At this point, cultural and theological evaluations tend to emerge. Popularly, such purity concerns are often construed as naively premodern. More dangerously, scholars and others can portray Jesus and the early Christians as opposed to first century Jewish purity practices because they are misguided, exclusionary, and oppressive.¹ Many argue that Jesus rejected such harmful purity systems and reframed "true" purity as moral and internal.² Such a move casts all external purity awareness in a negative light that can spill over into anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Matthew Thiessen, in his recent book *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First Century Judaism*, offers a

1 While acknowledging the debates regarding the terminology of "Jewish" (vs. "Judean"), I find the language of "Jew/Jewish" the most suitable for designating the diversity of ethnic-geographical-religious identities of this people group for this essay.

2 See the review of works by Wright, Crossan, and Borg that have this tendency in Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 2–4. See also Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4–10. Particular examples abound, but one could cite Maloney's description of Jesus's rejection of purity codes in Elliot C. Maloney, *Jesus's Urgent Message for Today* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 17–22.

much-needed correction to this tendency. However, his arguments in the book have critical gaps and swing the pendulum too far in the other direction in the attempt to offset a long tradition that sets Jesus against all forms of ritual or cultic purity. The following paper takes up some of these weaknesses in Thiessen's book in order to further the goal of better understanding the purity frameworks of the Mediterranean world in which Jesus and the emerging Christian movement lived and worked. We will examine problems with Thiessen's theories of purity, issues of historical contexts and trajectories, and challenges to his exegesis. The paper will close with a brief recommendation of a better way forward for recognizing, appreciating, and assessing the role purity issues played in emerging Christianity and Judaism in the first century Mediterranean context.³

Theoretical Problems

Thiessen establishes two theoretical pillars for his study. First, ritual and moral purity, while obviously related in some way, can and should mostly be distinguished from one another. Second, the fundamental concern of purity is with death and all of its associated harmful forces. We consider these in turn. Thiessen begins by laying out a framework that distinguishes between the antinomies of holy::profane and pure::impure. He asserts that profane is not the opposite of pure and impure is not the opposite of holy, citing the pairing found in Lev 10:10 (pp. 9–12). While there may be times where this distinction plays a role, he fails to note multiple places in the Hebrew Scriptures that compare, align, or conflate these categories such as Lev 20:25 where impure items cause profanation, Lev 24:4–6 where the holy lampstand is made of pure gold, or 2 Chron 30:17 where the unclean is unconsecrated. Lev 10:10 itself can be read this way. The holy is pure and the profane impure—a synonymous parallelism rather than two separate domains (cf. Ezek 22:26 and 44:23).

This basic, but not fully sound, distinction leads Thiessen to distinguish sharply between ritual and moral impurity (pp. 12–14), drawing on the work of Jonathan Klawans.⁴ Klawans's conclusion about the distinctness of the two domains primarily fits the construal of ritual and moral purity in rabbinic Judaism as expressed in the Mishnah; he acknowledges that the sectarian group at Qumran regularly combined or conflated the two domains and that early Christianity moved toward

3 The use of the singular designations for “Christianity” and “Judaism” does not imply fully formed institutional religions, monolithic movements, or clearly separated religions. As the following investigation shows, a variety of streams and forms existed and overlapped in both. These terms are used as flexible umbrella labels that are linguistically convenient.

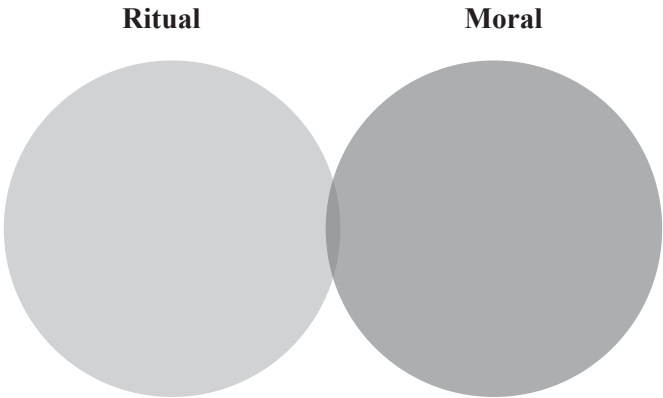
4 Klawans argues for a clear compartmentalization of bodily/ritual and moral impurity, arguing primarily from the Mishnah for rabbinic Judaism. See Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67–117. However, the Qumran community seems to have collapsed the two into one unit, so Thomas Kazen, *Jesus and Purity* (Halakakah: *Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?* ConBNT 38 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 200–201.

an emphasis on moral purity.⁵ Thiessen briefly notes that the categories of “ritual and moral impurity, bleed into each other” (p. 13) and devotes a footnote to how various scholars have problematized the distinction between ritual and moral purity (including Klawans; p. 13 n. 6). However, he states “this book will focus almost exclusively on what Klawans calls ritual impurity” (p. 13). Thiessen presents the following chart (derived from Klawans) to illustrate the differences:

Ritual	Moral
unavoidable	avoidable
from a natural substance	from an action
communicable	noncommunicable
bathed away	atonement/punishment
not an abomination	an abomination
not sinful	sinful

Again, as above, the distinctions in these categories regularly do not obtain, at least not so neatly. For example, ritual impurity is clearly avoidable in some cases, or else instructions to priests on how to avoid it (Lev 21) would be pointless. Similarly, at least parts of the early Christian movement viewed all humans as cosmically bound to commit moral impurities (e.g., Rom 3:9; 1 John 1:8–10). The Hebrew term for “abomination” (תועבה) can be applied to both ritual (Exod 8:26, Deut 14:3) and moral (Lev 18:26, Deut 13:14) matters. John the Baptist employed ritual bathing as part of his proffered means to deal with sin (Matt 3:5–6).

Thiessen closes his discussion with the following graphic, where the ritual and moral domains of purity barely overlap.



5 Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 75–88, 136–57.

While the two domains can be distinguished, this illustration is misrepresentative. First, different Jewish groups had differing views on the relationship of ritual and moral purity in this era (see further below).⁶ Second, the Gospels in particular, and the Jewish context more broadly, often display a significant overlap of ritual and moral purity. For example, take the recurring accusation against Jesus in the Gospels regarding his table practices with “toll collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:16, Matt 11:19, Luke 15:1–2). Certain foods were ritually classified as “unclean” (Lev 11), but then the eating of such foods was viewed as not merely “defiling” (Lev 11:40) but “sinful” (4 Macc 5:19–21) because the willful disobedience of ritual guidelines in the Law is a direct affront to God (Ps 89:31–32; 1QS 8:15–17; m. Hor. 2:6). Knowingly eating unclean food or with unclean people was simultaneously defiling and sinful. Toll collectors themselves fell into a similar combination. They were morally culpable for their regular habits of dishonesty (b. Sanh. 25b), thievery (b. Šebu. 39a), and extortion (t. B. Meš 8:26). At the same time, toll collectors were ritually impure because they regularly dealt with Gentiles and had to enter unclean domains as part of their profession (m. Tehar. 7:6; y. Hag. 21a). The etiology of the different types of impurity may vary, but the domains overlapped for toll collectors. They were both ritually and morally impure; the two categories made sense together and reinforced one another. These examples demonstrate that Thiessen’s division of ritual and moral impurity and an exclusive focus on ritual impurity may lead to a skewed or incomplete analysis.

The second theoretical pillar of Thiessen’s study is the work of Jacob Milgrom. The title of Thiessen’s study is drawn from Milgrom’s insight that impurity is primarily associated with death.⁷ While there is not time for a full critique of Milgrom’s work and its application to first century Jewish faith and practice, two pertinent issues are relevant. The first is a categorical one: how analytically helpful is the category of “death” for impurity? As it turns out almost any aspect of human experience, negative or positive, can be associated with death: various animals, nonfatal skin disease, childbirth, demons, genital discharge, and so on. If anything can be associated with death, then it loses a significant amount of its explanatory power. Second, if impurity, especially the Jewish conception of impurity, is about death, then one must wonder at the narrow and peculiar concerns of a Jewish purity system that pays attention to nonlethal foods that are defiling (Lev 11), nonlethal aspects of childbirth (Lev 12), nonlethal skin and wall growths (Lev 13–14), and nonlethal bodily discharges (Lev 15) while almost no attention is given to lethal disease or injury as impure. Furthermore, while corpse

6 This is also noted by David J. Rudolph, “Jesus and the Food Laws: A Reassessment of Mark 7:19b,” *EQ* 74 (2002): 291–311, 296.

7 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 12–13, 121–24. See the connection of death and impurity also in Kazen, *Jesus and Purity*, 5–7.

impurity is assumed in Leviticus (e.g., 22:4; cf. Num 5:2), it is never dealt with at length. One does not learn how to address corpse impurity until Num 19, where water sanctified by a sacrificed red heifer is required. Thus, death may form a distant symbolic substratum for Jewish (and broader Mediterranean) conceptions of impurity, but one must deal with a Jewish purity system in the time of Jesus that does not systematically address death or fatal realities and has a particular set of very specific concerns about ongoing life.

Historical Contexts and Trajectories

Thiessen has made a titular claim to explore the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus in light of first century Judaism. This is a laudable goal as the rich body of material that he draws from the Qumran documents and rabbinic literature can often be underplayed in Christian interpretations of the Gospels. Thiessen illustrates how Jesus's practices, stances, and claims often fit into the range of debate about purity across the breadth of first century Jewish views. This situating provides helpful context for better interpreting the Gospels' portrayals of Jesus on these matters. It is also reasonable that Jesus, as a first century Jew, probably abided by the daily customs and purity practices of his surrounding community.⁸ But again, Thiessen's approach entails unaddressed, problems: the caricaturing of Jewish purity concerns in the Gospels and the Gospels as part of emerging Christian views of purity.

Thiessen's situating of Jesus in the midst of first century Jewish debates about legal matters and purity is often helpful. Jesus's attack upon *unclean* spirits across the Gospels fits well within various other contemporaneous views of the death-dealing demonic (pp. 123–28 and 132–39). Jesus's perspective on the Sabbath as a time to heal and his insistence that caring for others trumps ritual purity rules were similar to other contemporaneous Jewish teachers (pp. 151–55, 162–71). However, this begs the question as to why the Gospel writers *would* and how the Gospel writers *could* consistently caricature the Jewish opponents of Jesus as so one-sidedly obsessed with the unimportant minutiae of Jewish purity codes. The question of why is perhaps simpler: casting a heroic and compassionate Jesus in contrast to his mean-spirited and small-minded opponents makes for effective storytelling and rhetoric. In light of this, we must beware of allowing the Gospels' rhetoric to slide into anti-Semitism. The how is more complicated. If Thiessen is right, and Jesus held positions that were at least known and perhaps common among his Jewish contemporaries, then would not the Gospels' portrayal ring hollow to anyone familiar with these traditions? The literary-rhetorical punch is lost if the audience can discredit the caricature and recognize that Jesus is merely repeating positions held by other Jewish teachers.

8 Such as wearing fringes on his cloak in Mark 6:56 (Rudolph, "Jesus and the Food Laws," 299).

The Gospels' portrayal of narrow-minded, purity-obsessed Jewish teachers probably worked well because it fit into a stereotype of Jews found across the Mediterranean world (a fact unmentioned by Thiessen). The most common trope in this vein was Jewish abstention from pork. While this fact of Jewish dietary practice could be noted neutrally in ethnographic description (Pliny, Strabo), many authors used it to satirize or denigrate Jews.⁹ Epictetus (*Diatr.* 1.22.4) noted that different cultures, particularly Jews, had different views of whether eating swine was holy or unholy in order to highlight that concerns about such matters were petty in contrast to the more significant role of virtue.¹⁰ One of Plutarch's dinner conversations turns to why the Jews avoid pork, noting that the Jews themselves can offer no good reason for this peculiarity (*Quae. conv.* 4.5). Circumcision was noted as an oddity of the Jews (Petronius, *Sat.* 102), and Plutarch calls Sabbath observance a foolish superstition (*Super.* 8). Juvenal combines all of these and others (Sabbath, sky worship, pork abstention, circumcision), attributing them to a "mystic scroll of Moses" that the Jews jealously keep to themselves and share with no outsiders (*Sat.* 14.100–106). This characterization of Jews as secretive and superstitious went as far as many Hellenistic-Roman authors describing the Jews as hostile to outsiders and generally misanthropic (Diodorus Siculus 40.3.4; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.309 and 2.258).¹¹ Thus, the Gospels' caricature of the Pharisees, scribes, and other Jewish leaders would have worked well with any audience moderately conversant with these stereotypes. Contrasting Jesus with these "legalistic" Jewish teachers would have been an effective rhetorical move. In a way, this could buttress Thiessen's argument, for even in this rhetorical context we still see Jesus paying some heed to Jewish purity guidelines. However, it seriously complicates the matter of discerning the attitude and practice of Jesus through the refracted accounts of the Gospels (see further below).¹²

Alongside this stereotyped perspective of Jews as legalistic and misanthropic, we find at least some Jewish movements increasing their observance of ritual purity practices as part of their response to being a subjugated people within the

9 Jordan D. Rosenblum, *The Jewish Dietary Laws in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 30–31. See further examples cited by Rosenblum, 32–37.

10 Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 70 (and more broadly 77–81).

11 For further examples and discussion see Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 125–30. Such stereotypes may have informed other public reactions against Jews like the attack on the Jewish community in Alexandria in 38 CE and Claudius's expulsion of Jews from Rome.

12 Thiessen denies that this is a book about the historical Jesus, instead framing his work on how the Gospel authors portrayed Jesus (*Jesus*, xi). However, his consideration of historical context is limited to the time and place of the historical Jesus and rarely considers the time, place, and purpose of the Gospel authors. Thus, when speaking of the context of first-century Judaism, we must consider how this was known and understood by the Gospel authors as much as by Jesus himself.

Roman empire. Purity rules for most peoples of the Mediterranean basin focused on sanctuaries and other clearly sacral times and people (see the surveys by Thiessen on pp. 76–78, 100–104). However, some Jews of the Second Temple era exhibited “expansionist” tendencies with regard to purity rules and practices (a fact never noted by Thiessen). This is reflected in the extended application of handwashing from very specific circumstances (Exod 30:17–21; Lev 15:11; Deut 21:6) to always washing before any eating.¹³ Purity regulations were required for the Jerusalem Temple and its functioning, but the same ritual purity was encouraged (at least by some groups) for regular Jews in a way not characteristic of Gentile cultures.¹⁴ For example, Josephus notes that Egyptian priests were circumcised and abstained from pork (*Ag. Ap.* 2.141) as a way to defend the fact that *all* Jews avoid pork and *all* Jewish men are circumcised (*Ag. Ap.* 2.137). Purity around table and food practices became a key way in which Jews distinguished themselves from Gentiles in the Hellenistic era (e.g., 3 Macc 3:4; Let. Aris. 139–142).¹⁵ Sawicki has described the burgeoning of domestic *miqvoth* (ritual baths) during the Hasmonean and following eras as a tool of symbolic resistance against Roman cultural and military occupation.¹⁶ The Pharisees were a broadly popular reform group that sought to promote communal Jewish life through stricter adherence to the covenant laws, including purity laws.¹⁷ This response also characterizes the Qumran sectarians, who distinguished themselves from their Jewish kin by more meticulous observance of the Law, especially its purity regulations.¹⁸ In a context where many Jews were amplifying their adherence to covenantal purity regulations as a way to shore up threatened Jewish identity, Jesus’s moderate (merely following the basic requirement for a “leper’s” cleansing) and potentially disruptive (eating with “sinners”) practices with regard to purity would have put

13 Rudolph, “Jesus and Food Laws,” 294.

14 Kazen, *Jesus and Purity*, 72–78; Roger P. Booth, *Jesus and the Laws of Purity: Tradition and Legal History in Mark 7*, JSNTSup 13 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1986), 200–202; and James D. G. Dunn, “Jesus and Purity: An Ongoing Debate,” *NTS* 48 (2002): 449–67.

15 For a survey of this “othering” function of food rules in the Hellenistic era, see David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 31–46.

16 Marianne Sawicki, *Crossing Galilee: Architectures of Contact in the Occupied Land of Jesus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 99–101.

17 Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 280–87; and Kathy Ehrensperger, “Der Pharissäer Paulus under der nomos,” in *Die Pharissäer: Geschichte und Bedeutung*, ed. Joseph Sievers, Amy-Jill Levine, and Jens Schröter (Freiburg: Herder, 2024), 146–67. On the increase of purity practices across the population of Judea (beyond a limited set of *havurim*), see Kazen, *Jesus and Purity*, 75 and 85–86.

18 Werrett says, “As the Qumran community evolved over time it appears to have become more and more stringent in its approach to ritual purity.” See Ian Werrett, *Ritual Purity and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, STDJ 72 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 303. Klawans (*Sin and Impurity*, 90–91) also advocates for a diachronic approach to Qumran that reveals movement toward stricter ritual purity regulations over time.

him out of step with the trends of his religious compatriots and could have easily been construed as being on a different trajectory with regard to purity.¹⁹

The final issue concerning historical context is to attend to the fact that the Gospels are products of emerging Christianity, which as a whole presents a different perspective on purity than is found in contemporaneously developing early Judaism. While rabbinic Judaism differentiated ritual and moral purity, emerging Christianity linked the notions of uncleanness and sin, purity and righteousness.²⁰ Luke's understanding of the Law is complex, but it is often acknowledged as one of the most conservative views of the Law in the New Testament.²¹ Yet, even Luke portrays God declaring animals and people "clean" by fiat (Acts 10:15, 28) and cleansing/forgiveness coming by means other than the Law (Acts 13:19, 15:8–9). The trajectory of Luke's narrative arc is mostly away from ritual purity observance and toward salvation through Christ.²² While Jesus is portrayed as faithfully attending Jewish festivals in John's Gospel, none of the standard ritual purity concerns from Leviticus (food, childbirth, "leprosy," bodily discharges, or corpses) play any significant role (e.g., there is no mention of any impurity surrounding Lazarus's death). When ritual purity concerns appear in the Pauline corpus, it is usually either to reject or spiritualize them (e.g., Gal 5:2–6, Col 2:8–19; 1 Tim 4:1–5) or to find a delicate way to allow those with "weaker" convictions to maintain their purity practices within a community that does not require them as part of following Christ (Rom 14; 1 Cor 8).²³

This brings us to the context and implications of the editorial parenthesis in Mark 7:19 that Jesus's previous statement effectively indicated that all foods were clean. Thiessen devotes an appendix to Mark 7 where he argues that even if Jesus contests the Pharisees' definition of ritual purity around handwashing, he still maintains ritual purity around food. He has to resort to describing Mark as mistakenly "exaggerating" the claim to all food laws beyond the specific issue of

19 See also Kazen, *Jesus and Purity*, 197–98 and Klawans, *Sin and Impurity*, 149.

20 Jacob Neusner, *Purity in Rabbinic Judaism: A Systematic Account*, SFSHJ 95 (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1994), 56–58. However, Neusner has also said that concepts of purity and uncleanness were employed in prophetic and wisdom writings as metaphors for ethics and sin (e.g., Prov 15:26 and 20:11; Isa 1:16; Jer 4:14). See Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 24–25. Additionally, the Qumran communities appear to have strongly linked and overlapped ritual and moral purity: cleansing comes by repentance and ablution (1QS 3.6–9), and those who break the community's rules become impure (1QS 5.14). See J. M. Baumgarten, "The Purification Rituals of DJD 7," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research*, ed. D. Dimant and U. Rappaport (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 199–209, here 208–209.

21 Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1972), 136–47; and S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, SNTSMS 50 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 59–61.

22 Craig L. Bloomberg, "The Law in Luke-Acts," *JSNT* 22 (1984): 53–80, 69–71; and Sigurd Grindheim, "Luke, Paul, and the Law," *NovT* 56 (2014): 335–58.

23 Klawans (*Sin and Impurity*, 152–54) says that Paul was not concerned with ritual purity at all and only uses purity language in moral contexts.

handwashing in a way that makes him a “bumbling” narrator who must be corrected by Matthew and Luke.²⁴ He effectively dismisses Mark’s statement as an anomaly, erasing his statement from the diversity of early Christianity. Thiessen goes on to say that Peter never eats non-kosher food.²⁵ However, this ignores the logic of Acts 10 where Gentiles are not unclean just as foods are not unclean (vv. 15, 28) and the implication that Peter probably ate unclean food during his stay in Cornelius’s Gentile household (v. 48). Even more directly, Paul says that Peter, at least for some time, was eating (unclean food) with Gentiles (Gal 2:12). Rudolph offers another approach where the parenthesis in Mark 7:19 was applicable only to Gentile Christians, who were exempt from the Lev 11 dietary laws according to Acts 15, while Jewish Christians still kept them as part of their loyalty to Torah.²⁶ However, this too is not accurate. First, as just noted, Peter appears to have disregarded Jewish food laws, at least occasionally. Second, Acts 15:29 prohibits Gentile believers from eating food sacrificed to idols, meat still retaining blood, and meat from animals that have been strangled. While this is not a list of certain animals being identified as clean or unclean as in Lev 11, it still represents concerns about food purity regulations that echo Lev 3:17 and 17:10, regulations that are applied to Gentile Christians. Finally, Strahan has argued that the “parenthetical” statement should be more integrated into its literary and social context, where it would mean that “Jesus made all [kosher] foods clean.”²⁷ This means that Jesus would be making the point to a Jewish audience that eating with unclean hands does not defile food. This reads the statement as if it occurs within the context of Mark 7:1–13 in Jesus’s debate with the Pharisees. However, Mark notes a change of audience and context in both v. 14 and even more in v. 17, where Jesus enters his house and addresses only his disciples. With this focus on the disciples, Mark turns the words of Jesus to his primarily Gentile audience, who would not assume all the Jewish context that Strahan notes from the original historical setting. We also see a generalization of the topic from eating practices in vv. 1–13 to “everything from the outside” (vv. 15, 18), which mitigates against Strahan’s more restricted meaning. What we see across the diversity of emerging early Christianity is a variety of still developing postures regarding the ongoing applicability of food purity norms. Given the fact that the editor’s statement goes unqualified in Mark 7:19—He does not say that all foods were declared clean “for Gentiles”—it seems best to take this blanket statement at face value. This conclusion is

24 Thiessen, *Jesus*, 194–95. Matthew most likely removed this statement as part of his appeal to Jewish Christians who still honored the Law, but again that stance need not be the only, or even central one, that defined early Christianity. It is one among many.

25 *Jesus*, 195.

26 Rudolph, “Jesus and the Food Laws,” 305–308.

27 Joshua Strahan, “Did Jesus Nullify the Torah and Declare all Nonkosher Foods Clean? Toward a Better Reading of Mark 7:19b,” *BBR* 33 (2023): 259–80, 274–80.

supported by the fact that this is applicable to “*all* foods,” which are a subset of “*all* things outside” (v. 18).²⁸ The editor of Mark concludes (even if mistakenly) that Jesus’s statements mean that all foods are now clean for all people, imputing this stance to Jesus himself.²⁹ This radical change regarding food and purity is part of the diversity of early Christianity, one that is supported by other similar statements about the acceptability of all foods (e.g., Rom 14:20 and Heb 13:9). Matthew has probably edited the tradition to make Jesus more appealing to a particular Jewish audience that still had high regard for the Law (15:17).³⁰ The historical Jesus was at a very early point where these trajectories had not yet diverged; however, the remembrances of the Gospels are written from a perspective where streams of the emerging Christian movement downplayed or even sought to eschew ritual purity observance in contrast to a more expansionist and intensive focus with regard to ritual purity in developing Judaism.

Exegetical Issues

Time and space do not allow for extensive engagement with every passage Thiessen exegetes, so it will have to suffice to highlight some key issues. We address more fully the case of Jesus healing the man with the impure skin affliction in Mark 1:40–45.³¹ The reading of Jesus being “angry [ὀργισθεῖς]” (rather than “moved with compassion [σπλαγχνισθεῖς]”) is contested.³² Even if it is authentic, Thiessen’s reading fails to attend to the predominant theme of Mark 1. Thiessen claims that Jesus is angry because the man questions Jesus’s *willingness* to cleanse/heal him (“If you choose, you can cleanse me” in v. 40).³³ However, if this is the case, and Matthew (8:3) and Luke (5:13) have edited out Jesus’s emotion (they mention

28 While it is true that “all $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ ” can have somewhat circumscribed meanings (e.g., Mark 4:1, 6:30), the generalizing movement of Jesus’s discourse in 7:14–23 pushes the language toward a broader rather than more limited sense.

29 As both Rudolph (“Jesus and Food Laws,” 292–93) and Strahan (“Did Jesus Nullify,” 261–63) note, this (traditional) reading is the position of most interpreters.

30 Dunn, “Jesus and Purity,” 463 and much more extensively John Kampen, *Matthew within Sectarian Judaism*, ABRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

31 As noted by Thiessen (*Jesus*, 43–49) and many others, this man does not have “leprosy,” known today as Hansen’s disease. See Annette Weissenrieder, *Images of Illness in the Gospel of Luke*, WUNT 2.64 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 177–78, 222–25 and T. Omiya, “Leprosy,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 517–18. Rather, it is probably a mild medical condition with serious purity dynamics. I lean in the direction of Pilch, who associates it with what we know as psoriasis. See John Pilch, “Biblical Leprosy and Body Symbolism,” *BTB* 11 (1981): 108–113.

32 There is only one Greek manuscript that supports this reading, the late 4th/early 5th century Bezae text. The Latin witnesses may reflect a particular family of readings and not an original, so Peter E. Lorenz, “Counting Witnesses for the Angry Jesus in Mark 1:41: Interdependence and Insularity in the Latin Tradition,” *TynBul* 26 (2016): 183–216.

33 This position is largely supported by F. Scott Spencer, “Why did the ‘Leper’ Get Under Jesus’ Skin? Emotion Theory and Angry Reaction in Mark 1:40–45,” *HBT* 36 (2014): 107–128, 118–24.

neither anger nor compassion), why would they retain the insulting question “If you so desire . . .”? Furthermore, this question does not imply a lack of willingness in Greek usage. The third class condition (ἐάν with the subjunctive) presents a situation that is “uncertain of fulfillment, but still likely.”³⁴ Thus, the grammar of the man’s question presumes the likelihood of Jesus’s willingness. Would Jesus be enraged by the slightest hint of doubt from a man who has probably only heard of such a cleansing miracle among the prophets of old (Elisha and Naaman in 2 Kgs 5)? One searches in vain for a parallel where such a formulation is taken as an affront against someone’s willingness (contrast the neutral-positive senses of this phrase in Dan 1:13; Sir 6:32, 15:15, 15:16; Plutarch, *Demetr.* 27.4; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 14.84; et al.). Rather, Jesus’s anger appears to be aroused by the public display (begging and bowing in v. 40) and the corresponding premonition that this man’s healing will serve to amplify unwanted notoriety and prevent him from preaching in the other towns as he had intended (cf. 1:38).³⁵ This is the drumbeat of the previous three stories in Mark 1: Jesus’s fame spreads through Galilee (1:28), the whole city clamors around Simon’s house (1:33), everyone is looking for Jesus so he leaves (1:37–38).³⁶ Climactically, after this man disobeyed Jesus and spread the news of his cleansing, Jesus could not even enter a town because of the mobs that thronged around him (1:45). It is this anticipated frustration of his mission that probably prompts Jesus’s anger.

This explanation of Jesus’s anger incorporates the rest of the details of this passage as well. Spencer reads Jesus “sternly ordering [ἐμβριμησάμενος]” (v. 43) as a continuation of his anger at the man’s skepticism (cf. Dan 11:30 and John 14:4–5).³⁷ However, a better parallel is Matthew 9:30 where Jesus also “orders”

34 Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 696. The precise labelling and semantics of different grammatical constructions of conditional sentences has been the matter of some debate (See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 701–712). Boyer argues for a much broader range (8 categories) of potentiality in the third class construction from “fulfillment certain” through “fulfillment doubtful” to “no indication of probability.” See James L. Boyer, “Third (and Fourth) Class Conditions,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982): 163–75, 169–70. This case falls into the slightly less common category of a “particular” condition dealing with a specific person and action rather than a more general or gnomic category. The range of possible meaning of the third class condition makes context important, and there are no indicators in the immediate or larger context of Mark (or the other Gospels) that persons are doubting the *willingness* of Jesus to do good. Rather, they tend to question his “authority” to do so (cf. Mark 1:27, 2:7).

35 This option is not considered by Thiessen (*Jesus*, 57), but it is suggested by Stephen Voorwinde, *Jesus’s Emotions in the Gospels* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 72–74. Spencer dismisses this reading as reasonable (of course someone just healed of a serious impurity/illness will shout it to the world) but as making Jesus too petty to be upset at such a normal response. He fails to note how the crowds interfere with Jesus’s mission to proclaim his message in other towns—no minor matter. See F. Scott Spencer, *Passions of the Christ: The Emotional Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 50.

36 See similar comments on this chain of pericopes and the similar command to silence in 7:36–37 in Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC 34a (Waco, TX: Word, 1989), 76.

37 Spencer, *Passions*, 58–59.

two recently healed men to say nothing of the event, though they too disobey and spread the news widely (v. 31). The anger/emotion associated with the verb centers on the importance of obedience in light of some anticipation that it will not be obeyed. The rest of the passage continues to display Jesus trying to avoid the spotlight. While ἐκβάλλω (v. 43) commonly refers to casting out demons (e.g., 1:34, 39; Thiessen, 57), Mark also uses it for other forced departures with no anger or demons involved (1:12; 5:40). Jesus's command to go to the priest for an official declaration of cleansing does abide by some of Leviticus's guidelines, but it only seems to suggest one visit/sacrifice and nothing else.³⁸ Leviticus portrays a certification process of two different sacrifices separated by seven days during which the cleansed person is to twice wash their clothes, shave their hair, and bathe (Lev 14:1–32).³⁹ Jesus makes no mention of these stipulations, which is quite odd, if Jesus is in fact concerned about abiding by the Jewish scriptural purity regulations. Sending the man away combined with the command to “say nothing to anyone” and concluding with the instruction to go to the priest (v. 44) all serve the same end—to take attention off Jesus.⁴⁰ The man should go (far away!) to the Temple in Jerusalem and follow through on a typical cultural practice of marking his cleansing. Nothing to see here with Jesus. However, Jesus's anticipatory anger turns out to be justified, for the man appears to disobey Jesus at every point.⁴¹ As Jesus dreaded, the public acclamation prevents him from carrying out his mission to preach in the other towns (1:38, 45).⁴² Thus, Jesus's anger is aroused by the growing notoriety that ends up hindering his mission, his instructions to the man to go to the priests and offer sacrifices seem unconversant with the detailed process in Leviticus, and this may have been a tactic to simply remove the man from the scenario and further prevent his troublesome declaration.

After this more detailed engagement with this first passage considered by Thiessen, a few briefer comments on other passages will suffice. The next passage Thiessen considers is Jesus's healing of the woman with the 12-year flow of

38 In an account of the cleansing of ten “lepers” in Luke 17:11–19, Jesus only tells them to “go show yourselves to the priests” with no mention of sacrifice or any of the other required rituals. This is the only other independent tradition where Jesus orders such reporting to the cultic establishment. Perhaps this implies local priests rather than priests and accompanying sacrifices in Jerusalem.

39 Schnabel also notes the demanding nature of the entire cleansing ritual, including a three-day trip to Jerusalem and an eight-day process to confirm the cleansing. See Eckhard Schnabel, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 63.

40 The command to “say nothing to anyone” is a strong double negative (μηδενί μηδέν εἶπης).

41 In order to follow Jesus's command, the man would have had to travel to Jerusalem from Galilee to offer sacrifices and visit the priests in the Temple—not a simple journey. Thiessen (*Jesus*, 61) brushes this aside as disobedience prompted by “(perhaps justifiable) exuberance.” The fact of the matter is that the narrative reports the man doing what Jesus tells him *not* to do but does *not* mention him doing what Jesus tells him to do.

42 However, Marcus thinks that this outcome is a good one since it promotes the spread of the gospel (cf. Mark 13:10). See Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, AB 27 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 210.

blood (Mark 5:25–34). The woman’s condition is described primarily in terms of her medical state: she had seen doctors (v. 26, not priests); she is restored (σώζω in vv. 28, 34); she senses healing in her body (v. 29); and she is made well from her illness (v. 34).⁴³ Thiessen rightly notes connections to language in Lev 12 and 15, mostly around the language of blood (ῥύσις αἵματος in v. 25 cf. Lev 15:19 and πηγή τοῦ αἵματος v. 29 cf. Lev 12:7; to also repeated references to “touching” in both texts);⁴⁴ the woman’s medical condition would have been understood to make her impure (pp. 83–84). Thus, while Mark’s audience might have construed the woman’s impurity, it is the healing of her body from the illness that is featured in the explicit narrative.⁴⁵ Thiessen downplays the woman’s touching of Jesus (vv. 27–28), saying “To contract ritual impurity is not sin within Jewish thinking. The woman herself is neither guilty for being ritually impure nor guilty for touching a ritually pure person” (pp. 86–87). This overlooks the fact that a woman with such a flow of blood would impurify anything she touched (Lev 15:19) and that the Levitical purity system aims to stem the spread of impurities among God’s holy people. While *unintentionally* touching others would perhaps be practically unavoidable, *intentionally* touching Jesus and therefore knowingly spreading her impurity to him would put her in violation of Lev 15:31 (cf. Lev 13:45–46, 18:19; Num 19:13, 20).⁴⁶ Such a premeditated violation of God’s commands and prescriptions around purity would be a sinful act, and yet she proceeds with no indication that she has contemplated this.⁴⁷ Thiessen briefly notes that Jesus does not instruct this woman to visit the priests and offer the appropriate sacrifices (Lev 15:28–30) as he does for the man with the skin disease (p. 93). He brushes this aside with the suggestion that Mark’s audience would remember the instructions from 1:44 and assume that the woman would follow the Levitical guidelines, but these are unlikely assumptions. Luke feels the need to repeat the instructions for other “lepers” to visit the priests rather than allowing the audience to carry it over

43 Loader notes that there is no explicit mention of legal or purity issues in this text. See William Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*, WUNT 2.97 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 60.

44 Recognized also by Kazen, *Jesus and Purity*, 133–34.

45 So also Brigitte Kahl, “Jairus und die verlorenen Töchter Israels. Sozioliterarische Überlegungen zum Problem der Grenzüberschreitung in Mk 5, 21–43,” in *Von der Wurzel getragen: Christliche-feministische Exegese in Auseinandersetzung mit Antijudaismus*, ed. L. Schottroff and M.-T. Wacker, BibInt 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 61–78, here 66 and Amy-Jill Levine, “Discharging Responsibility: Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and Hemorrhaging Woman,” in *Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004), 70–87, here 75.

46 See the similar comment in Loader, *Jesus’ Attitude*, 61.

47 Conjecturing about her reasoning around potentially defiling Jesus is called “too speculative” by Kazen (*Jesus and Purity*, 135). Thiessen (*Jesus*, 91) briefly imagines that she might have contemplated the risk of transferring impurity to Jesus, following a lead from Marcus (*Mark 1–8*, 366). However, no such line of thought is reported in her internal monologue in Mark 5 or its parallels. Recall the discussion above about the sinfulness of deliberate violation of ritual laws (cf. Ps 89:31–32, 1QS 8:15–17; m. Hor. 2:6).

(Luke 5:14 and 17:14), and Mark must explain Jewish language and customs to an audience that seems unfamiliar with them (Mark 5:41 and 7:3–4).⁴⁸ The medical emphasis in the description of this woman's plight, the brushing aside of the sinful nature of impurity transfer through touch, and the absence of any reference to the cleansing sacrifices of Leviticus portrays Mark's Jesus as indifferent to the purity dynamics in this encounter.⁴⁹

Surrounding this story is the account of the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:21–24 and 35–43) and the topic of corpse impurity. A key point in this story is how seriously to take Jesus's statement that the girl is not dead but sleeping (v. 39).⁵⁰ The mourners mock Jesus for this, but he does not back away from his statement. It is critical that the girl is actually dead to incur corpse impurity, but Thiessen never engages this question. As with the woman with the flow of blood, no mention of ritual impurity is made in the story.⁵¹ Jesus does not instruct the family to undertake the ritual prescriptions for the corpse impurity that they would have contracted if the girl was truly dead.⁵² If Jesus's raising of the girl would somehow eradicate any preceding ritual corpse impurity, then Jesus's cleansing of the man with the skin disease would have done the same, making a visit to the priests superfluous.

Finally, Thiessen treats the topic of healing and the Sabbath, noting that his argument regarding Jesus's stance on ritual impurity has larger implications for Jesus's view of the entire Jewish law. Thiessen is right to situate Jesus's claims within Jewish debates about what constitutes work on the Sabbath, showing that Jesus's aim to preserve life on the Sabbath was held by other Jewish teachers (pp. 153–55). However, in his analysis of Mark 2:23–28, Thiessen claims that Mark has botched the presentation of Jesus's legal argument. He has to end up asserting both that Mark (accidentally? ignorantly?) weakens Jesus's argument (p. 156) and that Mark's audience knows enough about Jewish practice to reconstruct the argument (p. 159). Thiessen also repeatedly refers to Jesus's response as "legal" in nature. However, he fails to note that Jesus's argument looks very different from debates about the Sabbath found either at Qumran or in rabbinic sources. Qumran

48 There are longstanding debates about the makeup and location of a possible Markan community (and even if it is correct to speak of a Markan community). For a survey see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 96–102. Marcus's (*Mark 1–8*, 33–36) description of a mostly Gentile community in the region of Syria is adopted here. Such persons would have had some contact and awareness of Jewish faith and practice but still required the kind of explanations we see in Mark.

49 This is the conclusion also reached by Kazen, *Jesus and Purity*, 161–64.

50 Loader (*Jesus and the Law*, 61) entertains the notion that the girl is merely sleeping and not dead.

51 Beavis argues that ritual impurity is not an issue in either story (while citing others who do see ritual impurity here). See Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 97–98.

52 This is despite the fact that the impurity issues associated with a corpse would have been natural in a first century Jewish context (Kazen, *Jesus and Purity*, 173–74).

documents contain a detailed delineation of activities to be avoided on the Sabbath (CD 10.14–11.20). Similarly, in rabbinic literature we see careful specification of what sacrifices atone for Sabbath violation (m. Šabb. 7.1), precise identifications of what work incurs guilt on a Sabbath (m. Šabb. 12.1, 17.5), and which other commands in the law override Sabbath commands (m. Pesah. 6.2).⁵³ Jesus, in defense of his actions, recalls a (slightly incorrect) story, drawing on narrative rather than legal material (Mark 2:25–26). Then, he closes with two maxims (vv. 27–28).⁵⁴ Jesus’s conclusion is not an official declaration of concrete rules of behavior derived from covenant law (that is, halakha) but a theological declaration about the nature and origins of the Sabbath and his own identity (more haggadic in nature).⁵⁵ This is not typical legal deliberation. Jesus is not citing the Law and extrapolating permitted behavior. Rather, he quotes stories and maxims to change the conception of the Sabbath—moves that fit better in a wisdom frame rather than a legal or purity frame.

Conclusion and Reframing

Thiessen’s laser focus on a distinct domain of ritual purity set primarily in the context of emerging Judaism leads to some problematic exegetical conclusions. It has been argued above that ritual and moral purity overlap more than Thiessen allows, that death is an insufficient principle for fully understanding Jewish purity codes, that a significant number of Jews were on an expansionistic trend with regard to purity in contrast to other Mediterranean cultures, and that any analysis of purity in the Gospels should consider emerging Christian views of purity that probably took advantage of stereotypes about Jews and moved away from ritual purity toward moral purity. Finally, Thiessen argues a dichotomized thesis: against those who claim that Jesus rejected purity systems entirely, he presents an argument that Jesus embraced them fully but as one sent by God to destroy all impurity and its harmful effects (pp. 2–5, 177–84).

I suggest three ways to reframe the issue in order to formulate a better way to approach it: considering purity as a cultural framework, removing the dichotomization, and Jesus’s principled relativization of purity concerns. First, given the fact that we see a diverse array of trajectories, ideologies, and practices around ritual and moral impurity in first century Jewish culture and religion in its

53 On the development of these kinds of regulations about the Sabbath by the Pharisees, see Asher Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth*, AGJU 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 75–78.

54 Even Thiessen recognizes these as maxims (*Jesus*, 158).

55 On this distinction of halakha (broadly, rules of behavior) and haggadah (broadly, theological/paranetic reflection), see John C. Reeves, “Scriptural Authority in Early Judaism,” 63–84 in *Living Traditions of the Bible: Scripture in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Practice*, ed. James E. Bowley (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 80–82; and Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Literature: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 121–27.

Mediterranean context, ritual purity should be viewed as one domain within the larger cultural framework of purity in general. Cognitive linguists and others have drawn attention to how broad cultural frameworks (called image schemas, idealized cognitive models, or rhetorolects) serve as organizing frames for actions, thoughts, images, and rhetoric.⁵⁶ Embodied actions, rituals, and performances are part and parcel of such frameworks as well.⁵⁷ In particular, sociorhetorical interpretation considers ritual and moral purity (alongside other related concepts like sacred space, priest, and sacrifice) as part of the priestly rhetorolect.⁵⁸ While careful delineation and distinguishing can play a role in some investigations, the preceding analysis displays that the domains of ritual and moral impurity were more fluid and interactive than allowed for by Thiessen and that they tended to be linked into a range of concerns about sacred time, space, persons, and actions. Analyzing ritual purity concerns from a priestly cultural frame would provide broader context for the diverse handling of the subject we see within the Gospels, within first century Jewish faith, and within the broader Mediterranean.

Next, rather than a dichotomy, the Gospels portray Jesus at times affirming, at times modifying, and at times ignoring purity concerns.⁵⁹ Wholesale rejections of purity as defined by Jewish religious law are not found, though the parenthetical statement in Mark 7:19 leans in this direction.⁶⁰ Luke's portrayal of the parents of Jesus offering sacrifices for Mariam's maternal cleansing (Luke 2:22–24) and Jesus's command that the man with the skin disease (Mark 1:40–45) follow through on (some of) the Levitical purification rituals are affirmations of the

56 On "frames," Seana Coulson, *Semantic Leaps: Frame-Shifting and Conceptual Blending in Meaning Construction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17–20. On "idealized cognitive models," George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 61–68. On "input spaces," see Giles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 40, 102; and Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 363–97. On "rhetorolects" and their role in interpreting Jewish and Christian Scripture, see Vernon K. Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse: Volume 1, Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity Series 1* (Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing, 2009), 9–11, 60–71.

57 Eve Sweetser, "Blended Spaces and Performativity," *Cognitive Linguistics* 11 (2000): 305–333; and Piotr Winkielman, Paula Niedenthal, Joseph Wielgosz, Jiska Eelen, and Liam C. Kavanagh, "Embodiment of Cognition and Emotion," in *APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 1 of *Attitudes and Social Cognition* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2015), 151–75.

58 See Vernon K. Robbins, "Conceptual Blending and Early Christian Imagination," in *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism: Contributions from Cognitive and Social Science*, ed. Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro, Biblical Interpretation Series 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 161–95; and Vernon K. Robbins, "Priestly Discourse in Luke and Acts," in *Jesus and Mary Reimagined in Early Christian Literature*, ed. Vernon K. Robbins and Jonathan M. Potter, WGRWSup 6 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 13–40.

59 Klawans (*Purity and Sin*, 144) says, "The nature of Jesus's relationship to Jewish law is a hotly debated issue, since the Gospels leave us with a varied picture."

60 Booth (*Jesus and the Laws*, 69, 99–102) also speaks of the "relative" (not "absolute") denial of external purity in Mark 7:14–15.

purity system of the Jewish faith. The discussion in Mark 7:1–13 is a substantive modification of prevailing purity norms. The Pharisees believed that their practices were better and fuller observances of God’s commands regarding ritual purity, but Jesus disagrees. Jesus’s healing on the Sabbath operates in a similar way. His approach may have fallen within a range of Jewish views, but the Gospels portray his stance as rejected by contemporaneous (stereotyped) Jewish leaders. In both cases, Jesus disagrees and offers a different set of practices and views around purity. Perhaps most frequently, we find no mention of purity concerns.⁶¹ In a high context society like the ancient Mediterranean, an audience could fill in the purity issues around both the woman with the bleeding and the dead girl of Mark 5:21–39. However, the text barely alludes to these purity issues and focuses our attention elsewhere. The great epitomes of Jesus’s teaching in Matt 5–7 and Luke 6 do not mention any of the classic issues of ritual purity/impurity in a Jewish context (e.g., death, eating food, ablutions, etc.). In these examples (and many others), such purity issues go unmentioned or are ignored. Multiple streams of tradition have Jesus associating with (and even touching) “lepers,” who were regarded as carrying one of worst forms of impurity in Jewish society (Mark 1:40–45; Luke 17:11–19; Mark 14:3; Matt 26:6).⁶² Finally, we find a range of stances across the Synoptic Gospels. The differing versions of the controversy over the washing of hands in Mark 7:1–13, Matt 15:1–14, and Luke 11:37–41 illustrate this. Mark emphasizes Jesus’s break with the “traditional” (again stereotyped) Pharisaic purity practices (e.g., 7:9).⁶³ Matthew emphasizes that the Pharisees are *transgressing* God’s Law by their practice (e.g., 15:3, 6).⁶⁴ Luke leaves out any mention of the law or tradition and adduces the moral principles of generosity and internal purity (11:41).⁶⁵ All of these factors urge us to take a nuanced approach to Jesus’s and emerging Christianity’s approach to and views about ritual purity.

Finally, if there is a consistent approach to be found in the range of the canonical Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus’s responses to ritual purity, it would be that Jesus typically relativizes ritual purity in light of other principles and commitments,

61 Along this same line, Broadhead says, “In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus appears indifferent to the cultic piety of Israel.” See Edwin Keith Broadhead, “Mk 1,44: The Witness of the Leper,” *ZNW* 83 (1992): 257–65, here 263.

62 Kazen, *Jesus and Impurity*, 117–18.

63 Studies on Mark 7 have concluded that the crux of the issue is not food but the communication of impurity through eating with impure *hands*. See Kazen, *Jesus and Purity*, 22–23; Booth, *Jesus and the Laws*, 62–67; and Jesper Svartvik, *Mark and Mission: Mk 7:1–23 in its Narrative and Historical Contexts*, ConBNT 32 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2000), 370–75.

64 On Matthew’s tendency to redact Mark in a “Judaizing” manner, see Anne M. O’Leary, *Matthew’s Judaizing of Mark: Examined in the Context of the Use of Sources in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, LNTS (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 136–51, 169–70.

65 On Luke’s notion of almsgiving as generating moral cleansing in the context of similar Jewish views, see Timothy W. Reardon, “Cleansing through Almsgiving in Luke-Acts: Purity, Cornelius, and the Translation of Acts 15:9,” *CBQ* 78 (2016): 463–82.

especially in contrast to the emerging intensification of such practices among various Jewish groups in first century Judea. As noted above, in Mark 7:14–15 and Luke 11:42, Jesus relativizes the importance of external handwashing in light of the critical nature of moral purity.⁶⁶ Jesus eschews concerns about ritual (and moral) impurity in his quest to reach “sinners” who are “lost” (Matthew 9:11–13; Luke 15:1–2). Jesus relativizes the real and good response of fasting in light of the fact of his apocalyptic presence as the bridegroom (Mark 2:14–20; Luke 5:29–33). Jesus’s position on the Sabbath is driven by a principle to promote any degree of life and wholeness (not just in life or death scenarios). We see him arguing this in Matt 12:9–14 where it seems that any good, no matter how small, that one can do on the Sabbath is permissible, because it is good. Internal purity has the ability to produce external purity (Luke 11:41), and internal impurity spills over to broader impurity (Mark 7:20–21). The principle of mercy trumps all other commands in the Law, including commands regarding ritual purity (Matt 12:7). Luke 11:42 summarizes this position well: It is not that one should stop tithing mint, rue, and other herbs as commanded in the Law; it is that justice and the love of God are much more important than these minor commands. Recall that Jesus is making these kinds of arguments that downplay and deprioritize ritual purity during the development of Jewish teaching that exhibits expansionist tendencies with regard to ritual purity that come to be encoded in the Mishnah. Thus, Jesus does not wholly reject ritual purity in particular or broader purity concerns, but we see a consistent deprioritizing of ritual purity and related commands beneath key characteristics of moral purity (e.g., love, mercy, and justice). Such a position fits well with the trajectories expressed across other documents of early Christianity discussed above but stands in contrast to the trajectories seen in the Mishnah where ritual and moral purity are both maintained as distinct and important domains.

66 Booth, *Jesus and the Laws*, 219; and Klawans, *Sin and Impurity*, 149