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## Purity in the Synoptic Gospels

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### INTRODUCTION

The issue of purity in the Synoptic Gospels has been widely discussed in modern scholarship. It has become one of the key issues in the debate over the historical Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Scholars could not imagine Jesus the Jew ignoring or dismantling the purity system, an integral part of practice and belief in Second Temple Judaism. Since E. P. Sanders the issues of purity in the Gospels have been treated with a more positive attitude and received quite detailed treatment and a balanced assessment. Recent studies in Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic traditions, levitical laws, and Second Temple Judaism added tremendously to our understanding of the purity issues in the Synoptics. Apart from the obvious players in the current quest for the historical Jesus, the works of Roger Booth, Thomas Kazen, James Crossley, Bruce Chilton, Craig Evans and many others have significantly contributed to the issue of purity in the Gospels.

The intention of this paper is to take a different route: away from the debate on the historical Jesus and towards Synoptic Christology. It attempts to look at the issue of purity in its narrative and theological contexts against

1. See Dunn, "Jesus and Purity," 449–67.

the Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds. It explores how the issue of purity contributes to the understanding of Synoptic Christology. The paper will be looking at the Gospels' representation of both Jesus' practice of purity and his teaching on purity.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The authors of the Synoptic Gospels consistently frame the issues of purity using the term "*katharos*" and its counterparts. Though ancient Greek offers alternatives and synonyms,<sup>2</sup> the authors prefer to stick to this particular term, perhaps, reflecting Septuagint influence or common usage. Such consistency creates interpretative ambiguities as the authors use the same terminology in different contexts. Some modern biblical interpreters feeling uneasy with such a usage, on the one hand, tried to split *katharos* into "ritual" and "moral" purities. Often, superior, moral *katharos* of heart has been opposed to rigid, ritual *katharos* of hands. On the other hand, some have suggested the Gospels use purity in some contexts metaphorically. Jesus takes language of external cleansing and turns into a metaphor for internal attitude; purity becomes an idiom for righteousness.<sup>3</sup> One cannot but feel that *katharos* fell victim to wider modern theological discussions on external vs. internal, Gospel vs. Law, and ritual vs. morality. Contrary to this sharp distinction, the Gospels, on a terminological level, make the difference between (what we might call) "ritual" and "moral" purity quite subtle. Purity is often placed on *the map of the body*<sup>4</sup> rather than on the axes of cult and morality. The sources of impurity lay outside or within the human body; the body itself could become a source of impurity and different parts of the body could be contaminated. Mark 7 seems to suggest that the same impurity (*koinos*) that defiles a body comes from different sources: "from outside" and "from within." Sins coming "from the human heart" render a person unclean in a way similar to touching unclean things/people with one's hands. Such vague lines of demarcation suggest a close connection and force us to question the usage of modern classifications.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, it is better to put impurities on a scale of severity, effects, sources, and means of purgation/atonement rather than into defined binary categories of "cultic" and "moral" behavior.

2. E.g., *hagos* or *hagnos*.

3. Chilton, "Generative Exegesis of Mark 7:1–23," 297.

4. Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity," 102–3.

5. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 21–42, discusses the matter in more detail.

Recent studies of purity in the ancient world and the Bible make it quite obvious that *katharos* of heart and *katharos* of hands are more inter-related in the ancient religions and cultures than we allowed them to be in the past. They are not mutually excluding concepts as they share vocabulary and both play important roles in cultic worship. Examples could be found in both ancient Greco-Roman religions and Jewish traditions.<sup>6</sup> The worshippers of Asclepius at Epidaurus were instructed: “Pure (*hagnon*) must be the person who goes inside the sweet smelling temple; purity (*hagneia*) is to think holy thoughts (*hosia*).”<sup>7</sup> Similar inscriptions were found at Asclepian temples in Mytilene and Rhodes.<sup>8</sup> This maxim could give the impression that purity of hands has been replaced by purity of heart. In reality, the temple in Epidaurus was surrounded by basins for ritual purification and worshippers were required to wash their hands before entering.<sup>9</sup> In other places the supplicants were required to bathe in a sea, in a river, and ritual baths and abstain from sex and unclean food.<sup>10</sup> So, the requirement of a pure heart does not actually dispose of rites of purification but extends purity demands to the inner core of the human body and personality. Asclepius was not the only god who required both purity of hands and purity of heart for appropriate worship; Apollo, Zeus and the Great Mother were equally demanding.<sup>11</sup> Cicero’s take on the issue in *De legibus* 2.24 eloquently summarizes the ancient attitude:

The law orders people to approach the gods in purity—purity of mind, of course, in which everything else resides. It doesn’t exclude physical purity, but it should be understood how much the mind is superior to the body: purity of body should be respected in approaching the gods, but it is all the more important to preserve that of the mind. Physical impurity can be removed by a splash of water or the lapse of a fixed number of days, but a stain on the mind does not fade with time, nor can it be washed out by any river.<sup>12</sup>

6. See for example 4Q177; 1QS III:7; 1QS V.

7. Translation is taken from Bremmer, “How Old is the Ideal of Holiness,” 106.

8. Robertson, “The Concept of Purity,” 231; Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 274.

9. Chaniotis, “Greek Ritual Purity,” 135; Robertson, “The Concept of Purity,” 232.

10. Dauphin, “From Apollo and Asclepius to Christ,” 419.

11. Robertson, “The Concept of Purity,” 232; Kloppenborg and Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations*, 274; Chaniotis, “Greek Ritual Purity,” 126, 129–33.

12. Cicero, *On Commonwealth and on the Laws*, 139.

I would suspect that opposition of “moral” purity to “ritual” one would make no sense to an ancient reader. Prioritization? Balancing? Perhaps.

It is probably helpful for us as modern readers of the ancient texts to compartmentalize and categorize this phenomenon into “moral” and “ritual” in order to make sense of it. But one has to be cautious of taking a simplistic approach to purity. Recent studies have revealed a more complex picture. Jonathan Klawans provides a detailed analysis of “ritual” and “moral” impurities in Torah and traces their perception in the Second Temple literature, rabbinic traditions and the New Testament. For him, “ritual” impurity is not sinful; it is contagious, brings a temporary defilement, and can be dealt with by purification rituals.<sup>13</sup> “Moral” impurity comes from sinful actions, cannot be transmitted by physical contact, leads to “a long-lasting, if not permanent” defilement of the land, the sanctuary and the sinner, and requires rituals of atonement or punishment for cleansing.<sup>14</sup> However, such a sharp distinction between these two categories fails to explain why some severe “ritual” impurities (e.g., childbirth, genital discharges, and skin disorders) require sin offerings (Lev 12:6; 14:12–20; 15). Jay Sklar—recognizing that ritual and moral impurity are not the same—insists on their close relationship: inadvertent sins can contaminate and require purification; major impurities require atonement as well as cleansing.<sup>15</sup> The blood of an atonement sacrifice in the priestly tradition serves a dual purpose: it can both ransom and purify.<sup>16</sup> A similar relation between ritual and moral purity is evident in the theology and practice of the Qumran community: moral transgression renders the offender ritually unclean.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising then to discover that the Gospels—reflecting this ancient notion—constantly bring the issues of “ritual” and “moral” im/purity together.

Purity does not stand on its own in the conceptual universe of the ancient religions, including Second Temple Judaism: maintenance of purity *and* holiness was one of the important religious issues of the period.<sup>18</sup> The driving force behind this quest is deeply rooted in the Torah’s demands for purity and holiness. Leviticus calls Israel to maintain her holiness by separation from any kind of uncleanness in order to secure the life-giving presence of holy YHWH (Lev 11–15; 18–20). Impurity is perceived by Leviticus

13. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 22–26.

14. *Ibid.*, 26–31.

15. Sklar, “Sin and Impurity,” 23–28.

16. Sklar, *Sin*, 187.

17. For more details see, Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 87, 90; Neusner, *The Idea of Purity*, 54; Harrington, “Purity and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 409–10.

18. Harrington, *Holiness*, 6; Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics*, 71; Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 107–17.

as the main threat to the presence of the Holy God among his people. It comes from the circle of human life as well as from deliberate and unintentional actions of human beings. Impurity as miasma pollutes the people, the sanctuary, the land, and holy things.<sup>19</sup> Impurity of any kind should not be accumulated—especially in the sanctuary—it must be driven away and cleansed.

The priestly tradition makes a distinction between four states: “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean . . .” (Lev 10:10). Pure things may be holy or common, common things may be pure or impure.<sup>20</sup> However, holiness should never be in contact with impurity. They are mutually antagonistic categories. States of commonness and purity are not contagious but holiness and impurity will contaminate.<sup>21</sup> Jacob Milgrom notes that the whole purity system in Leviticus is based on the two concepts of *qdš* (holy) and *ṭmʿ* (impure) and their derivatives.<sup>22</sup> Within this dynamic system, human behavior can move the boundaries between holy and impure either way (sanctification or pollution). The main concern of purity regulations is how to achieve and maintain purity and holiness, and how to eliminate impurity.<sup>23</sup> The system presupposes purity as the normative state of the people of God.<sup>24</sup> The cultic system of sacrifices is set up to deal with the defilement that comes with impurities and maintain the purity of the holy people. Thus the concept of purity belongs to the wider conceptual framework that includes such categories as holiness, sin, abomination, iniquity, impurity, profanation, sanctification, repentance, atonement, cleansing, sacrifices, purification, and so on.

The Gospels often raise the issue of purity indirectly. They evoke the wider framework through references to impurity, sin, purification, holiness, and so on. Moreover, the issues of purity could be implied in descriptions of characters’ interactions and narrative settings.

19. Milgrom, “Impurity Is Miasma,” 729–33.

20. Milgrom, “Purity in the Priestly System,” 29.

21. This aspect is often overlooked by New Testament scholars who write on the issues of purity in the Gospels. There is “a consensus” that Jesus practised some sort of contagious purity (see for example, Holmen, “A Contagious Purity,” 199–229). However, ancient Judaism lacks the idea of contagious purity. Instead, the holiness of God is seen as a contagious power that could destroy or sanctify/cleanse a person.

22. Milgrom, “Purity in Priestly System,” 31; Milgrom, “Law and Narrative,” 547.

23. Regev, “Priestly Dynamic Holiness,” 260.

24. Neusner, *The Idea of Purity*, 2.

## NARRATIVE CONTEXT

*Katharos* and its counterparts (*akatharos/koinos*) are used in the Synoptics without any explanation. They assume the implied reader could understand the concept and how it works in its immediate context. This is not surprising since purity is a universal category across religions of the ancient world.<sup>25</sup> What is explained is the way the Pharisees (“according to the traditions of the elders,” Mark 7:5) and other Jewish characters (“according to the law of Moses,” Luke 2:22) deal with impurity. In the world where different religious groups (Pythagoreans, Qumran sectarians, Eleusinian Mysteries, et al.) and mainstream religions have similar views on the danger of uncleanness and the importance of purity, the Synoptics educate their readers on the Jewish purity practices of their main characters. I suspect that some issues of purity in the Synoptics—even if stripped of their Jewish context—would make sense to Gentile audience. For example, childbirth or death were treated as polluting in Greek religious traditions.<sup>26</sup> So such stories as Jesus touching a corpse (Mark 5:21–43/Matt 9:18–26/Luke 8:40–56; Luke 7:11–17) or the purification of Mary after childbirth (Luke 2:22–24) make perfect sense to a Greco-Roman reader. In spite of the fact that the Synoptic stories have an evidently Jewish background, the purity concern is the one that could be understood by both Jewish and Gentile readers.

There is a growing recognition among scholars that purity—though originating in Temple worship—permeates the everyday life of common people in the Second Temple Period.<sup>27</sup> This is true of the Gospels as well. The issue of purity appears explicitly and implicitly throughout the synoptic narratives but often outside the cultic context. The narrative worlds of the Synoptics are inhabited by unclean people (Luke 17:12), unclean animals (Mark 5:11–12; Luke 16:21), and unclean spirits (Mark 3:11). Characters encounter the sources of uncleanness in every-day life settings: corpses (Luke 7:11–17), genital discharges (Mark 5:25), leprosy (Mark 1:40), defiled food (Mark 5:14, 18–19), and unclean things (Mark 7:4). The story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20/Matt 8:29–9:1/Luke 8:26–39) provides an example of a defiled space. The land of Gentiles, tombs, pigs, and a Gentile male possessed with unclean spirits all denote uncleanness to the Jewish audience.<sup>28</sup> One could add to this list an implied issue of idol worship

25. For the comparative study of purity in the ancient Mediterranean religions see Reviel and Nihan, *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions*.

26. Parker, *Miasma*, 32–73.

27. See Regev, “Pure Individualism,” 176–202; Poirier, “Purity beyond the Temple,” 247–65; Kazen, *Issues of Impurity*, 114–15, 118.

28. Guelich, *Mark 1:1–8:2*, 283; Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, 285; Gnlika, *Das*

that was seen by Jews as a severe sin that generates impurity affecting both people and the land.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, idols themselves were treated as sources of “ritual” impurity.<sup>30</sup>

The Gospels demonstrate the ways the Pharisees and the wider society dealt with the contagiousness of impurity: exclusion of unclean people (Luke 17:11–13), abstention from sources of pollution (Mark 7:1–4), and purification rituals for both severe and minor impurities (Matt 15:2) set by Leviticus to “diminish the impure, thereby enlarging the realm of the pure.”<sup>31</sup> The Pharisees are depicted as the champions of employing the logic of abstention and exclusion in maintaining purity boundaries. The extreme concern for purity and separation from “sinners”—those who do not follow pharisaic purity *halakhah*—is evident in their attitude towards communal meals (Mark 2:16).

The concern for purity outside temple worship is puzzling but not incomprehensible. Ancient “purity societies” treated impurity or miasma as a dangerous and contagious force. It is not only incompatible with divine presence and favor, but also affects both personal and communal wellbeing. In the case of the Synoptics, uncleanliness gets connected—as we shall see below—with illnesses, sins, and demonic activities. Most importantly, the impurity of one person could bring divine wrath on the whole community. A. Chaniotis provides a vivid example: “the city of Dodona asked the oracle of Zeus whether the god had caused bad weather because of impurity (*akathartia*) of one of the citizens.”<sup>32</sup> So maintenance of purity (to a certain degree) outside of sacred precincts makes sense.

The Jerusalem Temple was perceived in ancient Judaism as the center of holiness and purity.<sup>33</sup> The holy place required a high level of purity from both priests and laity.<sup>34</sup> The Gospels have three stories that bring “ritual” purity and the sanctuary together: the purification of Mary after childbirth (Luke 2:21–24), the purification of the leper (Mark 1:40), and the cleansing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11–19). In all cases, though, the focus is not on the purity of the Temple or purity as a requirement to access the sanctuary. People come to the Temple in order to be examined by the priests and bring

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*Evangelium nach Markus*, 203; Collins, *Mark*, 267.

29. Pusey, “Jewish Proselyte Baptism,” 144.

30. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 120.

31. Milgrom, “Purity in the Priestly System,” 29.

32. Chaniotis, “Greek Ritual Purity,” 126.

33. Holmen, “A Contagious Purity,” 222–23.

34. See Haber, “Going Up to Jerusalem,” 193–201, for detailed information on Jerusalem Temple purification requirements.

the required sacrifices. The Jerusalem Temple is depicted as the place where purity is confirmed and purification finalized. However, as we shall see below, the Gospels offer alternatives: the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Moreover, none of the Gospel characters are depicted cleansing themselves before entering the sanctuary. The triumphal entrance to Jerusalem, the incident in the Temple and cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:1–25/Matt 21:1–22/Luke 19:28–48) demonstrate that in the eyes of Jesus the holiness and purity of the sanctuary were compromised.<sup>35</sup> Whatever was happening in the Temple under the control of the corrupted priesthood<sup>36</sup> made the Temple unfit for worship and kept it from serving its purpose—to be the house of prayer for all nations (Mark 11:17 ↔ Isa 56:7). The Synoptics have wrapped the event in intertextual references: the appearance of Jesus in the Temple brings a vision of the sudden coming of the LORD into the sanctuary from Malachi 3, and allusions to Jer 7:1–14 raise the issue of profanation of the holy place by people’s deeds and its consequential destruction. In the Gospels, Jesus, as the Lord of the Temple, has found it defiled and corrupted by the people. Jesus’ action in the Temple interpreted as judgment and prediction of its destruction (Mark 13:1–8; Matt 24:1–2; Luke 21:5–6) could be seen in the light of prophetic traditions that see how defilement of the sanctuary leads to God’s departure and eventual destruction of the holy place. For the Gospels, the Temple as the center of holiness, purity and the presence of God will be replaced by Jesus and his community, the new temple “not made with hands” (Mark 14:58).<sup>37</sup>

As we can see impurity is pervasive and could affect people, things and spaces. However, it has its limits in the narrative universe. It has been juxtaposed to holy people (Mark 6:20), holy spaces (Luke 2; Matt 26:64), holy angels (Luke 9:26), the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:15–16; 4:1, 18), and the Holy God (Mark 1:11). Jesus had been also identified as the Holy One of God in his struggle against unclean spirits (Mark 1:24). The stories of Jesus engaging with uncleanness show him as an extraordinary holy figure who does not get defiled and has no need of purification rituals.<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, Jesus restores other people’s purity and removes the sources of uncleanness. He opposes unclean spirits and shares the company of the holy angels (Mark 1:13) and the holy God (Mark 9:2–10; Matt 3:17–18). The imagery

35. See Ermakov, “Holy Community,” 125–130 and Runesson, “Purity, Holiness, and the Kingdom of Heaven,” 148–53, 174–77 for detailed analysis of defilement of the Temple in Mark and Matthew.

36. Evans, “Jesus and Action in the Temple,” 419–28.

37. See Barton, “Dislocating and Relocating Holiness,” 198–99.

38. The only fragment that mentions Jesus being purified before entering the Temple is Oxy 840.

of the Son of Man coming in glory with the holy angels (Mark 8:38; 13:26) or sitting at the right hand of God in the heavenly temple and performing judgment (Mark 14:62) denotes a supreme level of purity within the symbolic world of Jewish apocalypticism and early mysticism.<sup>39</sup> The Gospels often use conflicts with the Pharisees to demonstrate Jesus' theology and practice of purity. His attitude towards impurity is markedly different from the pharisaic approach. Jesus willingly engages with unclean people, crosses purity boundaries and confronts the sources of impurity in order to restore people to cleanliness. *Katharos* is treated as a positive concept within the narrative worlds of the Synoptics; it is a category of restoration.

The Gospels are not interested in purity *per se*, its politics and ideology. The concern for cleanliness is presented as a part of everyday life and most of the time not as a cultic issue. The issues of im/purity do not stand on their own in the story; they are always attached to activities and teachings of Jesus. Through them narrative Christology is being developed. The issue of purity is used by the Gospels to demonstrate Jesus' practice, teaching, and—most importantly—his identity.

## THEOLOGICAL SETTINGS

For the Synoptic Gospels, the issues of purity are set in the eschatological context of the coming of the kingdom of God. The proclamation of the kingdom starts with the ministry of John the Baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 3:2). The Synoptics note that the forgiveness of sins is achieved by confession of sins and water cleansing (*baptizō*) in the Jordan River (Mark 1:5/Matt 3:5/Luke 3:3, 7).<sup>40</sup>

John's repentance rite—which does not have straight parallels in Second Temple Judaism—has generated a wide range of explanations: proselyte baptism,<sup>41</sup> initiation immersion,<sup>42</sup> covenant renewal, repentance-baptism,<sup>43</sup> and so on.<sup>44</sup> Yet all interpretations have one aspect in common: recognition of the fact that this repentance rite comes from the cleansing rituals of

39. See for detailed study Eskola, *Messiah and the Throne*; Chester, *Messiah and Exaltation*. See for example 4Q400 fr. 1, I:2–4.

40. Mark also uses *baptizō* in description of purification rituals of the Pharisees (7:1–4).

41. Pusey, "Jewish Proselyte Baptism," 143.

42. Pfann, "The Essene Yearly Renewal Ceremony," 345–49.

43. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 215.

44. See Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet*, 95–213 and Taylor, *John the Baptist*, 49–100 for different interpretations of John's baptism.

Leviticus and is connected with purification. The practice of confession of sins and immersion in water is similar to that of the Qumran sect<sup>45</sup> and recalls the pattern from Isa 1:16–17: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good . . .” Moreover similar patterns could be found in *T. Levi* 2:3, *Sib. Or.* 4:165–67, and *Apoc. Mos.* 29:11–13. John the Baptist sees repentance and purification as the one act of eschatological cleansing of the people. This assumes a strong relationship between “moral” and “ritual” impurity that fits well into the logic of Jewish religion.<sup>46</sup>

The purification role of John’s baptism also becomes evident from the wider context of the Synoptic understanding of the Baptizer’s mission. It is described as preparation of the way of the Lord (Mark 1:2–3/Matt 3:2/Luke 3:3) and restoration of all things (Mark 9:12). The preparation of the way motif and recognition of John as Elijah *redivivus* or forerunner of the Coming One (1:7; 9:11–13) clearly point to Malachi 3–4. In Malachi YHWH’s forerunner prepares the way for the coming of God (Mal 3:1). His preaching is aimed at reconciliation of the people, restoring covenantal relationships<sup>47</sup> in order to avoid destruction on the day of the Lord (4:5). God himself calls people to repent (3:6–18). The coming of Yahweh is connected with the purification of the priesthood and the judgment of sinners (3:2–5).

The Synoptic reference to the way of the Lord from Isaiah (Isa 40:3) also has purity connotations. YHWH himself is coming from the wilderness to Zion in order to restore the people of God from the righteous remnant. Isaiah calls this “the Holy Way” and only God’s ransomed people can travel on it; no unclean ones are allowed (Isa 35:8, 10). In this light John’s mission of preparation of the way of the Lord means purifying the people of God before the coming of the Holy One.<sup>48</sup> John’s cleansing of the people of Israel has to be understood in this eschatological context; ‘the preparation of the way’ is the restoration of the people’s purity and holiness in the last days.

In the Synoptic tradition, John the Baptist is playing the role of Jesus’ forerunner.<sup>49</sup> There is continuity between Jesus’ and John’s ministries. John foreshadows Jesus’ activities and destiny. Jesus’ message sounds the same: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt 4:17/Mark 1:15);

45. Pfann, “The Essene Yearly Renewal Ceremony,” 347.

46. Taylor, *John the Baptist*, 100.

47. Hill, *Malachi*, 387.

48. See Hughes, “John the Baptist,” 191–218, for John’s self-understanding as a forerunner for YHWH.

49. Wink, *John the Baptist*, 2–4.

but one has to expect purification of a greater magnitude: “he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8/Matt 3:11/Luke 3:16).

Moreover, the Gospels redefine the motif of the way: it is seen as preparation for the coming of Jesus, the Holy One of God, who manifests of the presence of YHWH among his people. Jesus of the Synoptics is the one who finishes the restoration started by John by offering forgiveness of sins and purification. Jesus gathers, reconstitutes, and cleanses the people in the light of the coming kingdom. This strongly corresponds with the Isaianic images of YHWH who himself gathers and cleanses Israel. So, Jesus’ interaction with impurity in the Gospels has to be viewed in this eschatological framework of restoration and purification of the people in the last days.

## THE POWER OF TOUCH: JESUS PRACTISING PURITY

### Table fellowships

The issue of purity is undeniably behind most of the stories connected with table fellowship. Both Qumran and the Pharisees paid a lot of attention to the issues of purity surrounding communal meals.<sup>50</sup> Most of the legal material from the Mishnah attributed to the Pharisees contains regulations on purity of food.<sup>51</sup> Contagious impurity could affect vessels, food, and liquids (*b. Šabb. 14a–15a*); a person can defile or be contaminated by touching or eating. The Pharisees created sets of rules for particular situations in order to avoid such contaminations. Their purity practices are based on separation from and avoidance of contact with sources of impurity including common or non-observant people: “Whoever undertakes to be a *haver* sells to an ‘*am-ha’aretz* neither fresh fruit nor dried, buys from him no fresh fruit, does not enter his house as guest, and does not accept him as guest if he wears his own garments” (*m. Demai 2:3a–e*).<sup>52</sup> The tax-collectors and the Gentiles alongside with an ‘*am-ha’aretz* were also treated as unclean (*m. Teḥar. 7:6*). Pharisaic purity *halakhah* prevented them from eating with unclean people because of possible contamination. This is the point of disagreement between them and Jesus. Jesus’ meals with “the sinners” are against pharisaic purity practices. But it also goes against pharisaic understanding of communal meals. Jacob Neusner suggests that the rationale behind such intensified and extended purity practices concerning food (and beyond)

50. For more detailed information see Ermakov, “Holy Community”; Borg, *Conflict*.

51. Neusner, *Fifth series: Revisioning the Written Records*, 65.

52. In translation by Schürer, *The History of the Jewish people*, 2:386.

is in the pharisaic desire to “be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>53</sup> According to Marcus Borg, the pharisaic meals symbolically represent the holiness of Israel understood as separation.<sup>54</sup> For Jesus, table fellowship—evoking the Messianic banquet—represents the opposite: inclusive and transformative holiness.<sup>55</sup> Communal meals celebrate restoration of sinners (Mark 2:15–17) and inclusion of the marginalized into the coming kingdom of God (Luke 14:1–24). Jesus restores the people of God through breaking traditional purity boundaries surrounding eating. It is hard to disagree with James Dunn that Jesus practices an inclusive and not exclusive purity in his approach to table fellowship.<sup>56</sup>

### Exorcisms

The Synoptics use the term “unclean spirits” (*pneumata akatharta*) extensively to describe demons (e.g., Mark 1:23–28/Luke 4:33–37; Mark 3:11/Luke 4:40–41; Mark 9:14–29/Matt 17:14–21/Luke 9:37–43; Luke 11:24–26). Peter Pimentel argues that Mark uses a particular pattern in representation of the spirits. In all exorcism stories the evil spirits are firstly recognized as “unclean spirits,” and only then Mark makes use of the synonym “demons.”<sup>57</sup> In Pimentel’s view this indicates that matters of holiness/purity/uncleanness are involved.<sup>58</sup> The uncleanness of the spirits is evident in the Second Temple literature. *1 Enoch* 15:3–4 tells a story that angels came down to earth and defiled themselves by committing adultery with women: “you [used to be] holy, spiritual, the living ones, [possessing] eternal life; but (now) you have defiled yourselves with women . . .” (15:4). *1 Enoch* opposes the holiness of the spirits to uncleanness and makes a strong connection between sin and defilement. *Jubilees* 10 tells a story about unclean demons “leading astray and blinding and killing” Noah’s grandchildren. Noah prayed to God about protection and some of the spirits were bound (10:4–9). In *Jub.* 11:4–5 the evil spirits commit sins, pollution, error and transgressions and assist people to do the same; for this reason they are unclean. Sinfulness and the uncleanness of spirits are interconnected. The Testament of Benjamin assures the reader that the unclean spirits will fly from those who do good (5:2). The text from 11QPs<sup>a</sup> XIX:15 as part of “Plea for Deliverance” contains a request

53. Neusner, *The Idea of Purity*, 65.

54. Borg, *Conflict*, 96.

55. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, 167–68.

56. Dunn, “Jesus and Purity,” 465.

57. Pimentel, “The ‘Unclean Spirits,’” 174–75.

58. *Ibid.*, 174.

to God for protection from Satan and the unclean spirit (*rwḥ ṭm*).<sup>59</sup> The use of “unclean spirits” in Markan exorcism stories clearly indicates that casting out unclean spirits/demons is not only an act of releasing people from the bondage of Satan but also an act of purification of the people.

The exorcism stories in the Synoptics contribute significantly to the understanding of Christology and the issue of purity. Through them Jesus’ true identity is revealed by spiritual beings; the demons recognize that Jesus has a high position in the cosmic realm and is supremely holy (e.g., Luke 4:34; Mark 3:11). They cannot resist his power and have no choice but to obey him: “The holiness and divine power of Jesus drive the impure spirits away without a struggle.”<sup>60</sup> With the coming of Jesus, the Holy One of God, the kingdom of God is breaking into the dominion of Satan, the ruler of the demons (Mark 3:20–30). In exorcisms Jesus’ holiness is revealed as an active power that overcomes powers of cosmic evil and uncleanness. Both Mark and Luke (Mark 1:21–28/Luke 4:31–37) show that the Holy One of God is the victor over Beelzebul and his unclean spirits. Rikki Watts notes: “The presentation of the Holy One of God who drives out the ‘unclean spirits’ with a command is also consistent with those traditions where the Messiah is seen as purifying the land by the word of his mouth . . . .”<sup>61</sup>

## Cleansing

The story of the leper (Mark 1:40–45/Matt 8:1–4/Luke 5:12–16) stands out among other healing stories in the Synoptics. They are very consistent in describing the event as a cleansing. Mark, for example, does not use the language of healing, restoration or salvation in this account. A leper came to Jesus and asked if he could make him clean (*katharisai*, 1:40). Jesus stretched his hands, touched him and proclaimed: “Be made clean (*katharistḥēti*)” (1:41). Mark reports that after this action the leper became clean (*ekatharithē*, 1:42). Jesus also sent the man to make sacrifices according to the Law for cleansing (*peri tou katharismou*) from leprosy (Mark 1:44).<sup>62</sup>

59. On uncleanness of spirits in Qumran see Alexander, “The Demonology of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 331–53.

60. Wahlen, *Jesus and the Impurity of Spirits*, 107.

61. Watts, *Isaiah’s New Exodus*, 156.

62. With such prominent linguistic markers connected with cleansing, it is hard to agree with Collins, *Mark*, 179, that language of purification here “is used for the process of physical healing . . . .”

The event is clearly connected with the issue of "ritual" uncleanness. What we define as leprosy (*šr't*) in Leviticus 13–14 is a disorder that is connected with the appearance of spots (*nega'*) on human skin, fabric or house walls and treated as a source of impurity (*tm'*). *šr't* is part of the priestly impurity system, not of the medical code. There are no healing practices to deal with it. The priests' role is to examine lepers from time to time and make pronouncements about their cleanness or uncleanness (Lev 13). They do not cure or purify these spots. The main concern is not the disease *per se*, but the impurity that it generates. When the spots are gone, a person has to go through a three-stage purification ritual. This ritual indicates that leprosy was treated as a severe impurity (Lev 14:1–32). Milgrom explains such severity of *šr't* by its close connection with death; its bearers are even treated as corpses.<sup>63</sup>

The Qumran community also pays attention to the issue of leprosy. Its legislation following Leviticus sets rules for the diagnosis of leprosy and prescribes isolation of lepers from the community in order to protect it and the purity of its food (4QTohorot A fr. 1 I:1–2; 4Q266 fr. 6). Only after the leprosy is gone and a man is purified can he re-join the community and eat "sacred pure food of the house" (4QMMT 65–69). 11QT 46:16–18 in order to protect the purity of the holy city and the Temple, separates lepers in a special area to the east of the settlement. 11QT 48:14–49:4 prescribes separation of lepers to prevent spreading impurity in cities. Luke communicates well this sense of separation of lepers from the wider society; the ten lepers kept their distance while asking Jesus for cleansing (Luke 17:11–19).

It is arguable that in the Qumran scrolls there is more to leprosy than just a source of impurity: leprosy may be seen as punishment for sins (4Q270 2 II:11–18; 4Q274 1 I:1). The Hebrew Bible also connects the violation of God's commandments and the appearance of leprosy as God's punishment.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Leviticus prescribes sin offerings (*h't*), guilt offerings (*'šm*), and burnt offerings (*'ōlā*) for purification of a leper. This implies the sinfulness of a person affected by *šr't* (Lev 14:10–32).

The Damascus Document gives the impression that there is an evil spirit behind leprosy that is somehow involved in producing its symptoms (4Q266 6 1:5–7; 4QD<sup>d</sup> 7:1–3 and 4QD<sup>g</sup> 1 I:1–3). Maccoby also suggests that a leper was treated as a bearer of an evil spirit.<sup>65</sup> It seems that leprosy in the minds of Second Temple Jews unites in itself notions of impurity, sin

63. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 819.

64. *Ibid.*, 821–23.

65. Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 125, 128.

and demon-possession.<sup>66</sup> Such understanding could be behind the Markan cleansing story of the leper as well.<sup>67</sup>

After cleansing, Jesus commands the leper to show himself to a priest in accordance with the Torah (Mark 1:44/Matt 8:4/Luke 5:14). The ten lepers were asked to do the same (Luke 17:14). It is the role of a priest to pronounce a leper clean so that he will be able to integrate back into society and Temple worship. However, for the Synoptics, the purification was complete and the person needed to perform the rituals only as a testimony to Jesus' power to cleanse. In the narrative world of the Gospels, touching the leper does not defile Jesus, but his touch takes away severe impurity.

## Healings

The healing stories in the Synoptics are often connected with the issues of “moral” and “ritual” purity. The most striking example is the story of a paralyzed man and his friends (Mark 2:1–12/Matt 9:2–7/Luke 5:17–26) where the forgiveness of sins is entwined with healing. Moreover, healings in Mark 5:21–43 (Matt 9:18–26/Luke 8:40–56) clearly show purity concerns lying just beneath the surface. In these stories Jesus is in contact with sources of severe impurity—the body of a dead girl and a woman with menstrual disorder.<sup>68</sup> In Luke 7:11–17 Jesus touches the bier with the corpse of a young man. In these accounts, Jesus is pictured not as the one who is defiled by direct contact with severe impurity, but rather as the one who removes uncleanness.<sup>69</sup>

The Jesus of the Synoptics also heals people with such diseases as paralysis (Mark 2:1–12; 3:1–6/Matt 12:9–14/Luke 6:6–11), blindness (Mark

66. Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 117.

67. *Ibid.*, 304.

68. Description of the woman's disease follows a diagnosis from Lev 15:25–30. The woman had *rhyis haimatos* (5:25 ↔ Lev (LXX) 15:25) or a vaginal discharge of blood that in her case lasted for twelve years. Typically menstrual bleeding (Lev 15:19–24) and menstrual disorder (15:25–30) were treated as extremely polluting. With this impurity a woman after a seven-day purification period should bring to the priest two pigeons and he will make atonement and offer them as sin and burnt offerings (Lev 15:29–30). The Priestly Code demonstrates that the distinction between uncleanness and sin is blurred at this point. Mark also gives the impression that the woman's disorder is connected with sin. At the end of the story Jesus addresses the woman: “Daughter, your faith has saved you (*sesōken*); go in peace and be healed from your disease (*tēs mastigos*)” (5:34). The word ‘*mastix*’ (scourge, whip, flogging) has a strong connotation of punishment and could imply that used in description of disease it refers to an understanding of illness as divine punishment for sins.

69. Evans, “Who Touched Me?” 368.

8:22–26; Mark 10:46–52/Matt 9:27–31/Luke 18:35–43; Matt 20:29–34), deafness and dumbness (Mark 7:31–37; 9:25), and madness (Mark 7:15). All these illnesses fall into the priestly category of blemishes. Leviticus 21:16–24 states that a priest who has a blemish or physical defect such as blindness, paralysis, broken extremities, skin disorders and so on cannot discharge priestly obligations and approach the holy things because he could profane (*hll*) them (Lev 21:23).<sup>70</sup>

Blemishes receive attention in the Dead Sea Scrolls in relation to impurity. CD XV:15–17, 1QM VII:2–9 and 1Q28a II:3–9 state that the unclean and blemished men (blind, deaf, dumb, lame, fools, and so on) cannot be in the holy community because of the presence of the Angels of Holiness in their midst. MMT B 49–54 gives another *raison d'être* for the exclusion of blind and deaf from the sanctuary. The blind one cannot avoid impurity because he cannot see. The deaf one does not know ordinances and purity rules because he cannot hear. In both cases the blind and the deaf cannot practise *mishpatim* and purity rules and should not approach the purity of the sanctuary because they are actually unclean. In a similar way 11QT treats the blind: “No blind person shall enter it [the city of the sanctuary] all their days, and they shall not defile (*tm'*) the city in whose midst I dwell . . .” (XLV:18). The language of impurity of such people reflects an idea of their bodily imperfection as well as their inability to follow purity rules. In this state they are not acceptable for priestly service and cannot be in the presence of the Holy God.

Jesus restores these people to health as well as to purity and to participation in Temple worship. Moreover, the removal of blemishes from the people of God in prophetic literature and especially Isaiah indicates the restoration of the people (Isa 35) and is understood as establishing the priestly kingdom and the holy nation (Exod 19:6 ↔ Isa 61:6). In the Synoptics, removal of such imperfections is placed in the context of the coming kingdom of God and points to the restoration of the people as the holy and priestly nation through the actions of Jesus, the Holy One of God.

Jesus' practice of purity through fellowship with defiled people, touching impure persons, and expelling unclean spirits demonstrates the contagious power of Jesus' holiness. His dealing with impurity in everyday life contexts illustrates a complex picture of relations between sins, demon possessions, illnesses, and uncleanness.

70. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 1826, notes that the absence of deafness and dumbness in the list means that obvious defects are not listed.

## JESUS' TEACHING ON PURITY: KATHAROS OF HEART VS. KATHAROS OF HANDS?

The Synoptics contain only a couple of episodes of Jesus actually teaching on purity (Matt 15:1–20/Mark 7:1–21; Matt 23:25–26/Luke 11:37–41). All of these incidents are presented as Jesus' reaction to traditional pharisaic purity *halakhah* concerning eating. His attack on this particular purity practice coupled with his perceived ignorance of purity rules has traditionally been treated by scholars as a clear sign of rejection of the notion of “ritual” purity and even abolishment/replacement of the whole Jewish purity system. It is here that Jesus supposedly opposes purity of heart to purity of body. In the context of a positive outlook on purity in the Synoptics this looks like a contradiction in terms. Why would Jesus reject the notion of purity while restoring people to it? Perhaps Jesus' teaching on purity needs more careful assessment in its narrative context.

Mark 7:1–21/Matt 15:1–20 provide an example of Jesus' purity *halakhah*. The Gospels show a controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees on a very specific issue—washing hands before eating (Mark 7:2, 5; Matt 15:20). Mark carefully sets the context for Jesus' *halakhic* pronouncement. The Pharisees and Jerusalem scribes have seen that some of Jesus' disciples were eating bread or food (*artos*) with unclean hands (*koinais chersin*). Such behavior came into conflict with pharisaic practice. Mark presents to his readers quite a detailed description of their purity rules. The Pharisees purify themselves after visiting an agora,<sup>71</sup> immerse utensils and dining couches, and wash their hands (“up to elbow”—*pygmē*) before eating (Mark 7:3–4).<sup>72</sup> Matthew and Luke emphasize cleansing “the outside of the cup and the plate” (Matt 23:25; Luke 11:39).

Mark is very careful in setting up the context for Jesus' purity statement. First, it is clear that it was *ordinary food* the disciples were eating (7:2) and the Pharisees buy, cook, and eat in their homes (7:3–4). Torah envisions no purity regulations for ordinary food (*hullin*); extremely high level of purity is required only for the sacred foodstuff: sacrificial meat (*kedoshim*) and heave offerings (*terumah*).<sup>73</sup> The pharisaic practice of eating ordinary food in a state of purity seems to be rooted in the concern that unclean hands

71. Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel*, 197–200, on the basis of this passage claims that an issue of *tebul yom* is at the center of the discussion in Mark 7. According to Crossley, Jesus rules that washing hands is unnecessary if a person immersed himself before.

72. Collins, *Mark*, 347.

73. On different kinds of food in the Mishna see Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel*, 193–97.

might defile food and the food consumed could defile the whole body. It is not purity of ordinary food *per se* that is endangered but purity of a whole person is at stake.<sup>74</sup>

Second, Hyam Maccoby insists that the practice of washing is simply the matter of ancient table etiquette and hygiene and does not refer to ritual purity at all.<sup>75</sup> However, the text is clear that the Pharisees were immersing themselves and the things they use in water (*baptizō*, Mark 7:4) in order to remove uncleanness (*koinos*, Mark 7:2). The picture drawn by Mark and other Synoptics correlates with the description of the pharisaic *havurah*'s practices in the Mishna where the issues of separation from ritual uncleanness are evident. Though the origins of this practice are unclear,<sup>76</sup> in the context of what we know about the pharisaic expansionists' views on purity in general and cleanness of food in particular, it becomes evident that the issue here is directly concerned with purity and uncleanness.<sup>77</sup>

Third, the purity issue discussed is not connected to Temple worship. For Mark it is an issue of everyday life—eating food. He indicates that those purity practices were kept not only by the Pharisees but also by “all the Jews.” Though it seems that such a statement sounds like exaggeration, it becomes more evident that purification was widespread as a common practice outside of the pharisaic *havurah*. It is not only associates who practices purification outside of the Temple cult but other pious Jews including those of the Diaspora.<sup>78</sup> It is not surprising then to discover that the Pharisees expected Jesus' disciples to follow some sort of purity rules.

Fourth, the hand-washing practice belongs to “the tradition of the elders” or to the pharisaic traditional *halakhot*. Mark juxtaposes purification of hands before eating ordinary food to the commandments of the Law. For him, this pharisaic practice does not come from the Torah but from teaching formulated by previous generations of rabbis (7:3, 5). Levitical laws of purity lack the idea that eating unclean common food can bring defilement; although the idea of contamination by eating could probably come from Lev 11:39–45. This passage provides us with two cases of eating animal meat: (1) eating and touching the carcass of a clean animal defiles a person and makes him *tebul yom* or unclean until sunset (Lev 11:39–40); (2) eating

74. On defilement of food in rabbinic traditions see Booth, *Jesus and The Laws of Purity*, 155–86.

75. Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, 155–60.

76. Furstenberg, “Defilement Penetrating the Body,” 192–93. Poirier, “Why Did the Pharisees Wash Their Hands?” 227, suggests that the hand-washing custom was connected with practice of prayer and Torah-study in Diaspora.

77. See Ermakov, “Holy Community,” 68–76.

78. Poirier, “Purity beyond the Temple,” 249.

forbidden animals (*šeqeš*) brings uncleanness (*tāmē'*) (Lev 11:41–45). The first situation is very simple—any animal carcass not properly slaughtered or naturally expired brings defilement through contact; eating and touching at this point are indistinguishable. The second situation is quite interesting. Animals mentioned here are *šeqeš*-category or “animals whose ingestion is forbidden but which do not pollute (. . .) by contact.”<sup>79</sup> They are not unclean by themselves but eating them brings uncleanness. It is the act of transgressing the commandment “they shall not be eaten” that brings uncleanness. This kind of uncleanness can be avoided by not committing this sin: “sanctify yourself therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming creature that moves on the earth” (Lev 11:44). As we can see, according to Leviticus only eating ordinary food of the first degree of uncleanness, such as a carcass, or eating forbidden animals could contaminate. It seems that in other cases it is permitted. Eating ordinary food in the state of purity by lay people is also absent from the Torah. It is only holy foodstuff from the Temple that has been eaten in the state of purity by a priest and his family at home (Num 18:8–13). They shall not profane (*hālāl*) it under penalty of death (18:32). None of the pharisaic practices described by Mark could be found in the Torah. They all belong to the sphere of their *halakhah*.

It is pharisaic *halakha* that has been questioned by Jesus; his sayings in 7:14–23 should be understood in this particular framework. He is neither attacking the Jewish purity system in general,<sup>80</sup> nor challenging the notion of forbidden food from Leviticus 11. He is neither denying the idea of uncleanness of hands, nor criticizing pharisaic expansionist attitudes towards purity. The Markan Jesus in his response to the critique attacks a particular pharisaic practice and the logic behind such *halakhic* rule.

Jesus argues that pharisaic *halakhah* does not help in keeping the commandments of the Law and even makes them void (Mark 7:6–13). The hand-washing custom is one of these practices that go against “the commandment of God.” In Mark 7:15 Jesus makes his *halakhic* pronouncement on the issues of purity: “There is nothing outside a person that by *going in* (*eisporeumenon*) can defile (*koinōsai*), but the things that *come out* (*ekporeumena*) are what defile (*koinounta*).”<sup>81</sup>

79. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, 656. The other category of animals is *tame* which both cannot be eaten and pollute by contact.

80. Contra Slayer, “Rethoric, Purity, and Play,” 139, 146, who thinks that Jesus invalidates the cultic idea of purity and establishes new purity system.

81. See Booth, *Jesus and The Laws of Purity*, 214 and Crossley, “Mark 7.1–23,” 8–20 for alternative interpretation of the logion.

This statement rejects the pharisaic notion that polluted ordinary food can defile a person. In further explanation to the disciples in Mark 7:18–19 Jesus repeats this idea again backing it (surprisingly) by a physiological argument: food cannot defile because goes into stomach and then into sewer. He is actually saying that it cannot pollute and in this sense it is clean for eating: “Thus he declared all foods clean (*katharizōn panta ta brōmata*)” (Mark 7:19). Practically, it means it is possible to eat ordinary food (not forbidden by Torah) without washing hands or immersing utensils. Unclean ordinary food cannot transmit impurity further to the body. Matthew 15:20 clearly express this idea: “to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.” There is a limit to the spreading of impurity that comes from outside.

Jesus is not in complete denial of ritual impurity itself, or impurity of other objects and their ability to pollute. He only denies the pharisaic understanding of the way to maintain purity and tries to bring balance to their position. The New Testament in its critique of the Pharisees often mentions that their detailed keeping of the Law turns into hypocrisy since their theology lacks the notion of inner purity or ‘circumcision of heart’ (see Mark 7:21–23; Rom 2:11–29).<sup>82</sup> Qumran sectarians make a similar point in their critique of the Pharisees.<sup>83</sup>

There is more, however, to the issue of purity than simple formulation of a new *halakhic* rule concerning food consumption. Jesus gives less importance to impurity that comes from outside; uncleanness from within is treated as more dangerous. Jesus gives the list of sins that defile a person: “fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things (*ta ponēra*) come from within, and they defile a person” (7:21–23). Jonathan Klawans points out that most of the list overlaps with ancient Jewish understanding of “morally” polluting sins.<sup>84</sup> This prioritization of purity of heart over purity of hands resembles the prophetic tradition<sup>85</sup> and is not dissimilar to the wider religious context. However, purity of heart is not a “cultic” concern for Jesus; it is a matter of everyday living. The greater concern for purity of heart over purity of hands is evident in obvious lack of purification practices among the disciples and the repeated crossing of accepted purity boundaries by Jesus. Moreover, the Sermon on the Mount pronounces blessing on “the pure in heart” (Matt 5:8) and warns against committing sins in the heart (Matt

82. This issue could underline conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee, about a new birth (John 3:1–10).

83. See on Qumran’s critique of the Pharisees in Flusser and Notley, *The Sage from Galilee*, 46; Flusser, *Judaism of the Second Temple Period*, 58–100.

84. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 149.

85. *Ibid.*; Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah*, 231, 261.

5:21–30). However, in the context of the Gospel stories such prioritization of purity comes not from neglecting the issues of “ritual” uncleanness by Jesus but rather from the work of contagious holiness that purifies and restores people around him.

## CONCLUSION

The leper’s statement in Mark 1:40 (Matt 8:2/Luke 5:12) perfectly summarizes the relationship between Jesus, his mission and purity in the Gospels: “you [Jesus] can make me clean.” One of the facets of Synoptic Christology is the depiction of Jesus as the source of contagious holiness that restores the purity of the people of God in the last days. He opposes uncleanness in all its forms; neither defilement from within nor without the human body escape his attention. For Jesus, impurity—though still dangerous and pervasive— is not an all-penetrating force and has its limits. The kingdom of God is arriving through the contagious and transformative power of Jesus’ holiness that enlarges the realm of purity and reduces the dominion of uncleanness through inclusion into table fellowship, exorcisms, healings, and the forgiveness of sins. In the battle against cosmic powers and uncleanness he constantly crosses the established purity boundaries in a bid to release people from the bondage of evil, restore the holiness and purity of the nation and (re)create the new holy people of God.

This eschatological view of purity provides an alternative to traditional ways of dealing with impurity. The last days require an offensive attitude towards defilement rather than defensive one. Jesus rejects the pharisaic logic of withdrawal, abstention, exclusion, and separation. He deals with impurity through the engaging, inclusive, transformative and contagious power of holiness. Moreover, Jesus offers alternative purity practices and attitudes to his followers who are called to participate in his mission of proclamation of the kingdom of God.<sup>86</sup>

The Synoptic Gospels use the stories of Jesus dealing with im/purity to make a Christological statement. In the Hebrew Bible, the contagious power that could destroy or sanctify/cleanse a person is exclusively ascribed to the holiness of God. The concern for purity and holiness in Jesus’ ministry has to be understood in the eschatological context of the coming kingdom that reveals the powerful presence of the Holy God himself.<sup>87</sup> The Jesus of the Gospels is and does what Jewish prophets expected YHWH to be and to do in the last days. The appearance of the Christological title “the Holy One

86. See Ermakov, “Holy Community,” 112, 143–46.

87. Evans, “Who Touched Me?,” 376.

of God” (Mark 1:24/Luke 4:34) could point in that direction as well. The practice of contagious holiness attributed by the Gospels to Jesus raises a bigger question for understanding early Christian Christology: do the Synoptics point to the divine identity of the man Jesus?

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