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Jesus Kept Kosher

MOST (IF NOT ALL) OF the ideas and practices of the Jesus movement of the first century and the beginning of the second century—and even later—can be safely understood as part of the ideas and practices that we understand to be the Judaism of this period. The ideas of Trinity and incarnation, or certainly the germs of those ideas, were already present among Jewish believers well before Jesus came on the scene to incarnate in himself, as it were, those theological notions and take up his messianic calling.

However, the Jewish background of the ideas of the Jesus movement is only one piece of the new picture I'm sketching here. Much of the most compelling evidence for the Jewishness of the early Jesus communities comes from the Gospels themselves. The Gospels, of course, are almost always understood as the marker of a very great break from Judaism. Over and over, we find within

interpretations of them (whether pious or scholarly) statements of what a radical break is constituted by Jesus' teaching with respect to the "Judaism" of his day. The notions of Judaism as legalistic and rule-bound, as a grim realm of religious anxiety versus Jesus' completely new teaching of love and faith, die very hard.

Even among those who recognize that Jesus himself may very well have been a pious Jew—a special teacher, to be sure, but not one instituting a consequential break with Judaism—the Gospels, and especially Mark, are taken as the sign of the rupture of Christianity, of its near-total overturn, of the forms of traditional piety. One of the most radical of these displacements is, according to nearly all views, the total rejection by Mark's Jesus of Jewish dietary practices, the kosher rules.

Counter to most views of the matter, according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus kept kosher, which is to say that he saw himself not as abrogating the Torah but as defending it. There was controversy with some other Jewish leaders as to how best to observe the Law, but none, I will argue, about *whether* to observe it. According to Mark (and Matthew even more so), far from abandoning the laws and practices of the Torah, Jesus was a staunch defender of the Torah against what he perceived to be threats to it from the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were a kind of reform movement within the Jewish people that was centered on Jerusalem and

Judaea. The Pharisees sought to convert other Jews to their way of thinking about God and the Torah, a way of thinking that incorporated seeming changes in the written Torah's practices that were mandated by what the Pharisees called "the tradition of the Elders." The justification of these reforms in the name of an oral Torah, a tradition passed down by the Elders from Sinai on, would have been experienced by many traditional Jews as a radical change, especially when it involved changing the traditional ways that they and their ancestors had kept the Torah for generations immemorial. At least some of these pharisaic innovations may very well have represented changes in religious practice that took place during the Babylonian Exile, while the Jews who remained "in the land" continued their ancient practices. It is quite plausible, therefore, that other Jews, such as the Galilean Jesus, would reject angrily such ideas as an affront to the Torah and as sacrilege.

Jesus' Judaism was a conservative reaction against some radical innovations in the Law stemming from the Pharisees and Scribes of Jerusalem.

The Gospel of Mark provides the bedrock for this new understanding of Jesus, one with consequences not only for how we understand that Gospel but also for our reading of the Gospels more generally. In the twentieth century a new historical notion of the relations of the Gospels to one another began to form and is now held in most

(but not all) scholarly quarters. Mark is now considered the earliest of the Gospels by most scholars today, who date it to some time right after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. Matthew and Luke are taken to have used Mark and modified him for their purposes as well as adding other sources for the Gospel, notably a source that communicated many sayings of Jesus.

This new and compelling explanation of how the Synoptic Gospels relate to each other has the perhaps unintended consequence of making the idea of Jesus' near-total abrogation of the Law the very founding moment of the Christian movement. If, as most scholars have opined, the author of Mark was a Gentile and one rather ignorant of Jewish ways at that, then the very beginnings of the Jesus movement are already implicated in a rejection of the Jewish way of life. On the other hand, if Mark was himself a member of a Jewish community and so was his Jesus, then the beginnings of Christianity can be considered in a very different light, as a version, perhaps a radical one, of the religion of the Jews. Jesus, in this view, was fighting not against Judaism but within it—an entirely different matter. Far from being a marginal Jew, Jesus was a leader of one type of Judaism that was being marginalized by another group, the Pharisees, and he was fighting against them as dangerous innovators. This view of Christianity as but a variation within Judaism, and even a highly conservative and traditionalist one, goes to the heart of our description

of the relations in the second, third, and fourth centuries between so-called Jewish Christianity and its early rival, the so-called Gentile Christianity that was eventually (after some centuries) to win the day.

Mark 7 and the Non-Parting of the Ways

In conventional readings of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' relationship to the Jewish dietary laws is taken as a watershed moment in religious history, when one set of fundamental beliefs is cast out in favor of a new worldview. For centuries, Christian preachers, scholars, and lay readers of Mark have read the Gospel as teaching us not only that Jesus did not keep kosher but also that he permitted all foods that the Torah had forbidden Jews to eat.¹ This would be a shift of no small moment, as indeed the dietary laws were then and remain today one of the very hallmarks of Jewish religious practice. If Mark has been misread, however, and his Jesus did not abandon or abrogate such basic Jewish practices as keeping kosher, then our entire sense of where the Jesus movement stands in relation to the Judaism of its time is quite changed. In short, if the earliest of Christians believed that Jesus kept kosher, then we have good reason to view that Christianity as another contending branch of Judaism.

The question of the "Jewishness" of Mark lies at the very heart of our understanding of the historical meaning

of the Jesus movement in its earliest period. Jesus was, according to the view I defend here, not fighting against the Jews or Judaism but with some Jews for what he considered to be the right kind of Judaism. As we have seen in the past two chapters, this kind of Judaism included the idea of a second divine person who would be found on earth in human form as the Messiah (and in the person of that Jesus). The only controversy surrounding Jesus was whether this son of the carpenter of Nazareth truly was the one for whom the Jews were waiting. Taking himself to be that very Jewish Messiah, Son of Man, however, Jesus surely would not have spoken contemptuously of the Torah but would have upheld it.

As read by most commentators, Mark 7 establishes the beginning of the so-called parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity. This is because, according to the traditional interpretation and virtually all modern scholarly ones, in this chapter Jesus declares a major aspect of the Torah's laws, the laws of kashrut (keeping kosher), no longer valid, thus representing a major rupture with the beliefs and practices of virtually all other Jews, pharisaic or not. The representatives of what are arguably the three most central and important scholarly biblical commentary series in the United States, ranging from the Word series for evangelical scholars to the Anchor Bible for the non-confessional and more general (but advanced) audience and then to the very scholarly and

secular Hermeneia—which, taken together, represent the closest thing we have to an authoritative modern reading of the passage—all agree on this in their commentaries on Mark 7, even while disagreeing on much else. Thus Adela Yarbro Collins, in her Hermeneia commentary, writes of verse 19 (“and thus he purified all foods”), “The comment of v. 19c [third clause of v. 19] takes a giant step further and implies, at the very least, that the observance of the food laws for followers of Jesus is not obligatory.”² In the evangelical scholarly Word commentary, Robert A. Guelich too writes, “Jesus’ saying in 7:15 explained with reference to what one eats by 7:18b–19 means that no foods, even those forbidden by the Levitical law (Lev 11–15), could defile a person before God. In essence, Jesus ‘makes all foods clean.’”³ In his commentary in the time-honored Anchor Bible, Joel Marcus writes that “anyone who did what the Markan Jesus does in our passage, denying this dietary distinction and declaring all food to be permissible (7:19), would immediately be identified as a seducer who led the people’s heart astray from God (cf. 7:6) and from the holy commandment he had given to Moses (cf. 7:8, 9, 13).”⁴ This view is the commonly held interpretation of the passage in both the pious and scholarly traditions.⁵

But did the Markan Jesus do this sacrilegious thing, and is this passage truly a parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity? Reading the text backward from

later Christian practices and beliefs about the written Torah and its abrogations, interpreters and scholars have found a point of origin, even a legend of origin, for their version of Christianity in this chapter. In contrast, reading the text through lenses colored by years of immersion in the Jewish religious literature of the times around Jesus and the evangelists produces a very different perspective on the chapter from the one that has come to be so dominant. Anchoring Mark in its proper historical and cultural context, we find a very different text indeed, one that reveals an inner Jewish controversy, rather than an abrogation of the Torah and denial of Judaism.

It will be well to have the entire narrative in mind for this discussion, so let me begin by citing the text from the NRSV translation:

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly⁶ wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him,

“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”⁶ He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ ⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” ⁹Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever curses of father or mother must surely die.’ ⁷ ¹¹But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— ¹²then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.” ¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” ^{16, 17}When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹since it enters, not the heart but

the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

There is such a long history of interpreting this passage that it alone would fill a book. The demons that beset the “tradition history” of this passage are legion; some scholars consider some verses original and others later additions, while others argue just the opposite as to which verses were original and which added later. I am going to cast the demons out by ignoring them and trying to read the text as it is. My goal is to get closer to a sense of what the canonical Gospel of Mark might have meant in its original cultural, religious context, a context that has to be thoroughly known and clearly articulated to do its interpretative work.

The first thing that must be acknowledged is that while the *readers* of Mark are clearly expected to be far away from traditional Jewish practice as well as from the Aramaic and Hebrew languages, the *writer* of Mark is anything but distant from and ignorant of these matters. He demonstrates, in fact, a fine and clear understanding of

Jewish practice and the Jewish languages, as does his Jesus. This distinction has been missed in much of the earlier work on Mark and especially on this chapter.

In contrast to virtually all Christian commentators, I propose that whatever Jesus is portrayed as doing in the above text from Mark—including “and thus he purified all foods”—it is not permitting the eating of all foods, even if we accept every word of the passage as it is before us in the text.

In order to make this proposition stick, it's very important that we make some distinctions between different domains of the Torah's law and especially the dietary laws, for there has been much confusion on this score. To call food kosher refers to its permissibility or impermissibility for eating by Jews as defined in the Bible and the later rabbinic literature. Among the foods forbidden are non-ruminants such as pigs and rabbits, birds of prey, and sea creatures that have no fins or scales. Meat, to be kosher, has also to be slaughtered in a special way deemed painless to the animal, and milk and meat foods must be kept separate from each other. These laws are observed to the letter by pious Jews even today. Although, somewhat confusingly, animals that are not kosher are referred to as “impure” animals, these kashrut (kosher) laws have nothing to do with purity and impurity of the body or other items. There is a separate set of rules that define when any food—kosher or not—is pure or impure, depending

on how that food was handled and what other things it may have come into contact with. Indeed, there are kosher foods that in *some* circumstances and for *some* Jews were forbidden to be eaten, despite the fact that they are in themselves made of entirely kosher ingredients, cooked in kosher pots, and not incorporating milk with meat. Such foods have become impure through some mishap, such as being touched by a person with a flux from his or her body. While all Jews are forbidden always to eat pork, lobster, milk and meat together, and meat that has not been properly slaughtered, only some Jews, some of the time, are forbidden to eat kosher food that has become contaminated with ritual impurity. While in English they are sometimes confused, the system of purity and impurity laws and the system of dietary laws are two different systems within the Torah's rules for eating, and Mark and Jesus knew the difference. One of the biggest obstacles to this understanding has been in the use of the English words "clean" and "unclean" to refer both to the laws of permitted and forbidden foods and to the laws of pollution or impurity and purity. These translate two entirely different sets of Hebrew words, *muttar* and *tahor*. It would be better to translate the first set by "permitted" and "forbidden" and use "clean" and "unclean," or "pure" and "impure," only for the latter set.

On one hand, the Torah lists various species of birds, fish and other sea creatures, and land animals that may

never be eaten. It also forbids the eating of the sciatic nerve, the consumption of certain kinds of fat on otherwise kosher animals, the consumption of blood, and cooking a kid in its mother's milk (taken early on by most Jews, apparently, to mean not to cook meat and milk together). Together these rules make up what is called the Jewish dietary laws or kosher rules. As I have mentioned, they apply to all Jews everywhere and always.

Purity and impurity, or pollution (*tuma'h vetaharah*), is an entirely separate system of rules and regulations that apply to a different sphere of life, namely, the laws having to do with the touching of various objects, such as dead humans or humans who have touched dead humans and not washed properly, as well as with other causes of impurity such as skin diseases or fluxes from the body, including menstrual blood and semen (but not excreta), which render a person "impure" according to the Torah but carry no moral opprobrium. People may become impure without any deed on their parts at all. In fact, most Israelites were impure most of the time (and today we all are all the time), since it requires a trip to the Temple to be purified from some kinds of ubiquitous impurities. The touch of such "impure" persons renders certain perfectly kosher foods forbidden to be eaten by Priests or by Israelites who are entering the Temple. During Second Temple times, there is much evidence that many Jews sought to avoid such impurity and to purify themselves as quickly as they

could according to the rules from the Torah even if they were not planning to go to the Temple. The Pharisees extended these practices, even legislating that eating kosher food that has been in contact with impurities renders one impure.

According to the biblical system (to which, apparently, the Galilean practice might very well have corresponded), the two sets of rules are kept quite strictly apart. A Jew did not eat non-kosher food, but rules around defiled kosher food depended on various circumstances of the eater's life and certainly did not render the body of the eater impure. The pharisaic tradition seems to have extended that prohibition against eating defiled kosher food and also rendered the eater him- or herself impure through this eating. The Pharisees sought to convince other Jews to adhere to their new standards of strictness (this is apparently the meaning of them going over land and sea to convert—they were attempting to “convert” other Jews, not Gentiles).⁸ They therefore instituted a practice of ritual hand purification by pouring water over the hands before eating bread, so that the hands would not make the bread impure.

Thus, in order to understand what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel, we must have a clearer sense of what his terminology might have meant in his cultural world, not ours.⁹ In the Gospel, we are told that Pharisees have come from Jerusalem, apparently to proselytize for their understanding of the Torah and its rules, including these

extensions of the purity regulations, such as the washing of the hands. Jesus protests, asserting that foods that go into the body don't make the body impure; only things that come out of the body have that power to contaminate. So really what the Gospel describes is a Jesus who rejects the pharisaic extension of these purity laws beyond their original specific biblical foundations. He is not rejecting the Torah's rules and practices but upholding them.

In contrast to many earlier views, it's clear that Mark knew very well what he was talking about when he discussed the pharisaic ritual practices and purity rules. The clearest demonstration of this involves a word in the Greek that is usually obscured in English translations of Mark 7:3: “

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[For the Pharisees

and all of the Judaeans do not eat unless they wash the hands *with a fist*,¹⁰ according to the tradition of the Elders].” Scholarship has only recently adopted the translation “with a fist” after centuries of emendation of the text against the dominant textual tradition.¹¹ The usage “with a fist,” albeit for fighting or hitting, is attested in the ancient Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, more than once (Exodus 21:8; Isaiah 58:4). As anyone who has seen Jews actually performing the ritual of hand washing would guess immediately, Mark is referring to the process of forming a loose fist with one hand and pouring water

over that fist with the other.¹² I would suggest, moreover, that Mark's emphasis on "with a fist" might well be a description of the practice itself but also an allusive, almost punning reference to the pugnaciousness of these Pharisees.¹³ But regardless of that last point, when the Gospel is understood in this manner it provides incredibly precious evidence, available nowhere else, of the great antiquity of a Jewish practice otherwise attested only later. If Mark was such a close observer and manifests such intimate knowledge of pharisaic practice, then my assumption as I read the passage is that he knew of what he spoke all the way down. This suggests strongly that his perspective (as well as that of his Jesus) is firmly from within the Jewish world—nearly the opposite of what has been usually said of Mark.

Yair Furstenberg, a young Talmud scholar at the Hebrew University, has recently provided a convincing explanation of the basic controversy between Jesus and those Pharisees. Furstenberg writes that Jesus' statement needs to be read literally to mean that the body is made impure not through ingesting impure foods but only through various substances that come out from the body. As noted, according to the Torah it is not what goes into the body that makes one impure but only things that come out of the body: fluxes of blood, semen, and gonorrhoea. The only food, according to the Torah, that renders a body impure is carrion—certainly not the eating of permitted food

that has become impure, or of forbidden foods generally. According to the Talmud itself, it was the Rabbis (or the legendary Pharisees) who innovated the washing of the hands before meals—which implies that the ingesting of defiled or polluted foods renders one impure. It was thus against those pharisaic innovations, which they are trying to foist on his disciples, that Jesus railed, and not against the keeping of kosher at all.¹⁴ This is a debate between Jews about the correct way to keep the Torah, not an attack on the Torah. Furstenberg has brilliantly argued that in its original sense, Jesus' attack on the Pharisees here is literal: they *have* changed the rules of the Torah. This is made clear in a key rabbinic text, which, while much later than the Gospel, ascribes a change in the halakha to the time of Mark:

These categories render the priestly offering unfit [to be eaten by the Priests]: He who eats directly impure food; . . . and he who drinks impure fluids; . . . and the hands. (Zabim 5:12)

If someone eats or drinks impure food, then his touch renders the priestly portion impure and unfit for the priests.¹⁵ This innovative ruling is, moreover, explicitly connected in the list with the hands as well, just as the Markan Jesus associates them. Now, these rulings are explicitly marked within the talmudic tradition as being of

rabbinic origin and not as rulings of the Torah. That is to say, the classical Rabbis themselves maintained a distinction between what was written in the Torah and what had been added by them or by their pharisaic forebears. They explicitly remark that here we have a pharisaic extension of the Torah, thus confirming what Jesus said. According to the Torah, only that which comes out of the body (fluxes of various types) can contaminate, not foods that go in.¹⁶ Thus, if the Pharisees argue that food itself contaminates, that is a change in the law.

The attack on hand washing in the story is, moreover, consistent with Jesus' subsequent attack on the vow that releases one from supporting ones' parents:

¹¹But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban" (that is, an offering to God) ¹²then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.

Jesus here accuses the Pharisees of having abandoned the plain sense of the Torah, which requires that Jews support their elderly parents. They have allegedly done this sacrilege by asserting that one who takes a vow not to allow his parents to have use of anything he has as if it were

a sacrifice dedicated to God has effectively prohibited himself from providing such support.* This represents another instance in which the Pharisees apparently supplant the Torah with their “tradition of the Elders.” Once again, Jesus and Mark have got it exactly right in terms of the Torah and the oral traditions exemplified by the Pharisees and other innovators. For Jesus (Mark) the “tradition of the elders” is a *human* creation, as opposed to the written Torah, which is divine. Hence the force of the citation from Isaiah, in which Jesus says to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ ⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

From Jesus’ point of view, the “tradition of the elders”—later called the oral Torah—is exactly “human precepts” being taught as doctrines, as in the prophetic formulation. For the Pharisees, and later for the Rabbis, the “tradition of the elders” is divine word and not human precepts (though they were transmitted orally rather than

* The later Rabbis, at least from the second century on, developed a method for invalidating such a vow, which indeed goes against the Torah. It is hard to assess the historical validity of the Markan Jesus’ claim against the Pharisees, but it cannot be denied that it might very well have been the case, especially given his accuracy in other matters of Jewish, and especially pharisaic, practices.

scripturally).¹⁷ In this case, moreover, we have an admittedly pharisaic innovation, contested even by some other Pharisees. No wonder that Jesus would balk and protest. What I hope to have shown till now in this section is that when Mark wrote the words

μ “purifying all foods,” there is little reason to believe that it meant “thus he permitted all foods,” but rather, “thus he purified all foods,” meaning that he rejected the extra-stringent laws of defiled foods to which the Pharisees were so devoted—not the kosher rules.¹⁸ Jesus was certainly not sanctioning here the eating of bacon and eggs; rather, exactly as the text says, he was permitting the eating of bread without ritual washing of the hands, quite a different matter. The controversy ends where it began, in a contest over the question of bodily impurity caused by the ingestion of impure foods. It is highly unlikely that in its original context Mark was read as meaning that Jesus had abrogated the rules of forbidden and permitted animals.

What makes this not merely “a halakhic [legalistic] squabble between first-century Jews” (to echo a colorful bon mot of John Paul Meier’s) is Jesus’ use of the controversy to make a strong theological claim in the form of the parable. Whether or not the Pharisees were hypocrites (I would imagine that some were and some were not), it is certainly the case that to concern oneself with extraordinary performances of external piety while ignoring (or

worse) the ethical and spiritual requirements of the Torah is poor religion, on the order perhaps of preaching that Jesus is love but hates homosexuals. We should remember, however, that “in general, in ancient Jewish and Christian contexts a ‘hypocrite’ is a person whose interpretation of the Law differs from one’s own,” as Joel Marcus has so sharply put it.¹⁹ There is a story of the nineteenth-century Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk (the famous Kotzker Rebbe) who said that many Jews concern themselves more with a blood spot on an egg than a blood spot on a ruble, but surely he himself remained just as careful about blood spots on eggs and expected no less from his followers “and all the Jews.” (Recently Marcus has re-cited the Kotzker’s apophthegm in precisely this Markan context.) Jesus’ homily is indeed in this radically critical Jewish tradition that began with the great prophets and continued for millennia.

Let me repeat some verses from the text:

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”
^{16, 17}When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.
¹⁸He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹since it enters,

not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)²⁰ And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles.²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder,²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Attentive readers will have noticed that verse 16 has been left out of my translation of the text, as it is in many standard versions. It is usually considered a later addition to the text, but actually it is original and the key to understanding the passage. It reads: “Let those who have ears, hear!” thus signaling that Jesus’ statement about the law of purity is a parable, that the law itself has a deeper meaning. But the disciples could not understand the deeper meaning that Jesus’ words were meant to convey. And so they asked him to explain. What, teacher, did you mean to teach us with this parable? And Jesus answered them: “Why does the Torah only render impure that which comes out and not that which goes in, if not to teach us something, namely, that morality is more important than the purity rules—and especially allegedly Pharisaic extensions of them?” This has absolutely nothing to do with abrogating the Law; it is just putting it in its place. The explanation that Jesus gives is to interpret the deep meaning

of the Torah's rules, not to set them aside. And it is this deep interpretation of the Law that constitutes Jesus' great contribution—not an alleged rejection of the Law at all. Not an exhortation, then, to abandon the Torah, but a call to deepen our genuine commitment both to practicing it and to incorporating its meanings, Jesus' famous saying can be seen as entirely within a Jewish spiritual world.

When Jesus explains the parable to his uncomprehending disciples, he is showing how the literal force of the halakha itself should be read as indicating its spiritual or moral meaning.²⁰ Indeed, it is not what goes into the mouth that renders one impure but the impure intentions of a heart, as signified by the halakhic fact that things that go out of the body cause impurity. As I have mentioned above, all of the practices to which Jesus refers as pharisaic—the hand washing, the washing of vessels—are closely connected with the particular traditions of the Pharisees regarding the encroachment of impure foods on the purity of the body. Those Pharisees who believe that impurity (literal, halakhic impurity) comes from without miss entirely the spiritual import of the Torah's rule about impurity coming from within. In other words, Jesus' complaint against them is not a trivial point about unnecessary stringencies (whatever some think, he was not a liberal preacher-teacher) but a vitally important point about the interpretation of the halakha, which in his view the Pharisees have completely distorted, abandoning the Torah

here as well as in the other example given (the support of parents). What Jesus argues is that when the Pharisees misunderstand the law and change it to allow impurity from outside in accord with their tradition, they are also revealing that they don't hear the law at all. They only read from outside and ignore the inner meaning, just as they add external impurity. The halakhic issue is thus a perfect little parable. When Jesus speaks of the purity or impurity of foods, he is not speaking about the kosher system at all, but about the pharisaic understanding of purity practices. Neither Jesus nor the evangelist held, suggested, or implied that the new Jesus movement constituted a step out to form a new religion.

Jesus as a thinker and teacher was, like all thinkers and teachers, part and parcel of a particular historical and cultural context, within which he did his creative religious work and intervened his interventions. His context was the Palestinian Judaism of the north of Palestine (Galilee) in the first century and its religious practices, ideas, and controversies, including controversies with Jewish teachers from other places, such as Jerusalem. Reading the Gospel of Mark in its fullest context suggests that here Jesus speaks from the position of a traditional Galilean Jew, one whose community and traditional practices are being criticized and interfered with from outside, that is, from Jerusalem, by the Judaeans (as is emphasized in the opening sentence of the story itself).²¹ Jesus accuses these

Pharisees of introducing practices that are beyond what is written in the Torah, or even against what is written in the Torah, and fights against their so-called tradition of the elders (), which they take to be as important as the Torah, or sometimes, in the eyes of their opponents such as Jesus, as uprooting or superseding the Torah.²² I would assert, moreover, that Jesus' Galilean disciples were following their own accepted traditional practice in their refusal of the (nonbiblical) notion that impure foods could render the body impure and hence their refusal to wash their hands before eating. Jesus' disciples are upbraided by these upstarts from Jerusalem for not observing the purity strictures that they had introduced and demanded on the basis of the "traditions of the elders." Jesus responds vigorously, accusing them of hypocrisy and of ascribing to their own rulings and practices an importance greater than that of the Torah. There is thus nothing in Mark's version of this passage, let alone Matthew's, that suggests that Jesus is calling for abandoning the Torah at all. The Galileans were antipathetic to the urban Judaeen/Jerusalemite pharisaic innovations.²³

When put into its historical context, the chapter is perfectly clear. Mark was a Jew and his Jesus kept kosher. At least in its attitude toward the embodied practices of the Torah, Mark's Gospel does not in any way constitute even a baby step in the direction of the invention of

Christianity as a new religion or as a departure from Judaism at all.²⁴

Mark is best read as a Jewish text, even in its most radical Christological moments. Nothing that Mark's Jesus proposes or argues for or enacts would have been inappropriate for a thoroughly Jewish Messiah, the Son of Man, and what would later be called Christianity is a brilliantly successful—the most brilliantly successful—Jewish apocalyptic and messianic movement. In his now-classic book *The Ghost Dance: The Origins of Religion*, Weston La Barre has the following to say about Christianity: “Indeed, to take a firmly secular view of it, Christianity itself was a crisis cult. Initially it was an ordinary politico-military revolt in the traditional Hebrew mold of secular messiahs, one of whom the Roman governor Pilate straightforwardly regarded as a rebellious would-be King of the Jews of the Davidic line, and executed in a usual fashion.”²⁵ He follows this “firmly secular” account with a further story about how the Jews never would have thought of a “supernatural Hellenistic Messiah,” and that the idea of the dying and resurrected Jesus could only have come in via “a Neolithic vegetation spirit, the ‘dying god’ of the Near East.” Even from a purely historical point of view, this account, cited here as typical of so many, can have no purchase, as it totally ignores the *Jewish* history of the divine, “supernatural” Redeemer that we have been

exploring throughout this book so far. La Barre, oddly enough, writes about Daniel 7 as also being the record of a “crisis cult” but then seems to totally ignore or deny the connections of that ancient text with any later development within Judaism. In the next and final chapter of this book, I’m going to make a case that even the suffering and death of the Messiah can plausibly be traced to the Jewish environment of Mark and his Jesus and, I suggest, to their own further reading of Daniel 7, and that in any case such an idea was hardly foreign to the Jewish imagination.