The theme of Jesus and purity presents one of the most entangled problems of current research into the historical Jesus. To begin with, it has proven genuinely difficult for modern minds to approach and appreciate purity as a religious notion. Religious purity or impurity (henceforth “(im)purity”) keeps resisting definitions and explications that could be found uncontroversial and that would translate to our modern comprehension.¹ Further, (im)purity was an intricate and controversial question within first-century Judaism, too, with a rich Old Testament tradition of rules and regulations as well as a competitively ample repertoire of interpretations and explications in later Jewish literature. Spirited discussions and disputes about how to understand and fulfill the purity laws kept surfacing, attesting to the both problematic and central role of purity matters in people’s lives.²

On the other hand, as regards (im)purity in the Jesus tradition we are faced with a relative scarcity of material that directly addresses purity questions. Compared with Jewish writings from and before Jesus’ time where disputes about various purity issues regularly abound, explicit purity language and dwelling on the subject are conspicuously absent.³ Mark 7:1–23 par. Matt 15:1–20 and P. Oxy. 840 form exceptions


² See below.

³ Accordingly, some scholars have suggested that there emerged between Jesus and the major religious phalanges no serious debate or altercation that would have been based on purity disputes. See E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 174–211; similarly P. Fredriksen, “Did Jesus Oppose the Purity Law?”, *BRev* 11 (1995): 18–25, 42–47. There is, however, a difference between saying that disputes arose solely or even mainly on the basis of purity issues and saying that purity was one contributing factor among others in the disputes.
here but, obviously, more material needs to be included if one wanted to say anything meaningful about Jesus and purity. Part of the problem of addressing the theme of Jesus and purity has therefore been the question about the material that could and should be taken into account.

The basic importance of the issue of purity to the mission and message of Jesus should not be doubted. Because of the central role that purity played in the Judaism of Jesus time—and that it had played in the history of Jewish sectarianism—stances taken on it were considered highly revealing. Different Jewish groupings and even individual religious figures defined themselves to a significant degree through their expositions of the purity regulations. The impression Jesus left by his attitude to and understanding of the purity matters—whatever they were—would have been recognized by the contemporaries in many ways as characterizing what Jesus’ proclamation was about. Indeed, purity questions do loom behind some important scenes and forms of Jesus’ activity. For instance, Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners and outcasts is clearly relevant here even though purity may not have been the sole focus of these gatherings or the main reason why they prompted controversies. Further, in Jesus’ Jewish world, purity was integrally related to the temple, and we should be able to assume that even in Jesus’ message the issues of purity and temple reflected each other. The temple, again, was something of a black spot for Jesus; this in turn adds to the weight of the temple question within Jesus’ message in general and with respect to his views on purity in particular.

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6 It is therefore interesting that the few explicit discussions on (im)purity presenting Jesus as one party that we have, namely Mark 7:1–23 par. Matt 15:1–20 and P. Oxy. 840, feature cases of using purity vs. impurity as a means of criticism and branding.

7 For these aspects, inter alia, see sections 4 and 5 below.