Jesus’ practice of commensality is still commonly treated as equivalent to “cleansing all foods” (Mark 7:19)—as if that uniquely Markan construct held for Jesus’ whole program, and as if food were the beginning and end of the issue of purity.

Neither proposal has much to offer any more, but a liberal consensus, usually speaking in a Pauline idiom, makes Jesus into a cipher for grace and purity into a cipher for law. In that way, the Gospels support the argument that the Torah and anything like it have been relativized by the revelation of Christ. In its present form, the consensus appears to stretch back to Adolf von Harnack.1 Many “conservative” scholars attribute such a transcendence of purity to “the historical Jesus” they believe the Gospels attest. In a different idiom, some scholars who proudly insist there is not much at all to be said about the figure of Jesus nonetheless find a way to have him make all foods clean: they make the Hellenistic matrix of the Gospels into an alternative to Judaic conceptions of purity.2

Why contest such a powerful consensus? The liberal paradigm encounters and creates more and more anomalies, the greater our

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1 See W. Pauck, Harnack and Troeltsch. Two Historical Theologians (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). He aptly and approvingly cites (pp. 31–2) Harnack’s formulation in his Wesen des Christentums, “The Christian religion is something lofty and simple and is concerned only about one point: Eternal life in the midst of time through God’s power and in his presence. It is not an ethical or social arcanum for the purpose of preserving all sorts of things or of improving them.” It is the burden of Pauck’s study that Harnack’s liberal historical approach was consciously framed to challenge ecclesiasticism, a program which is easily instanced in the literature today.

knowledge of the New Testament’s development and the better our familiarity with the anthropology of purity.

“Cleansing all foods” has the sheen of a general principle, until you see it demolished as such in Acts 15:13–21. Not even the liberal Jesus is up to denying the laws of kashrut, only to have his own brother invoke them afresh. That we are dealing with a gloss in Mark is commonly agreed (although who did the glossing is a perennial debate). Had anything like the Markan policy been widely accepted as the dominical position, the early Christian centuries would have seen much less controversy regarding what might be eaten, and with whom.

A closer look at Mark 7 reveals a variety of policies about purity, all of which are attributed to Jesus. An aphorism (7:14–15) speaks of the direction in which impurity flows. The assertion is easily construed in Aramaic attested from Jesus’ period and place, and is attractive when it is so rendered:

\[
\text{la’ demin bar bar-enasha’ / da’teh bey demtamey} \\
\text{bera’ min da’tan min / bar-enasha’ ’elen demtamyey.}
\]

Representation in English can preserve its structure:

nothing that is outside a person / entering one defiles one,  
except that things coming from / a person, these defile one.

To this teaching there are attached distinct instructions about different kinds of purity: not to make the vow of qorban to protect one’s wealth from one’s parents (7:6–13), not to engage in impure thoughts (7:17–23), not to insist upon hand-washing (7:1–5), and—as we have seen—a bold gloss about the significance of the teaching as a whole in regard to foods (7:19c).

The dispute described in Mark 7:6–13 insists that what is owed to one’s parents cannot be sheltered by declaring it dedicated to the Temple. The crucial point of such a gambit of sheltering is that one might continue to use the property after its dedication, while what

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