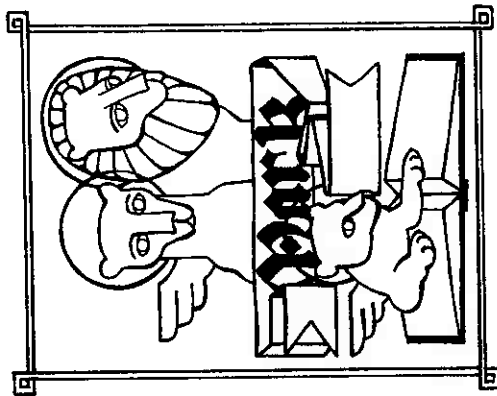


Social Criticism: Crossing Boundaries

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The New Testament is a profoundly social document. Each writing in the New Testament emerged from a community. Each writing addressed specific people with a unique message for a given time, place, and circumstance. Each writing was deeply embedded in a particular culture and history. Each writer shared a common social system with readers that enabled communication to take place. The writings of the New Testament were social acts.

Our reading of the New Testament is also a social act. For us, however, reading the New Testament is a cross-cultural experience. The writers of the New Testament were first-century people; we are from the late twentieth century in the West. Our language, customs, economy, political order, social system, values, cultural knowledge, and ethos are very different from the cultures of the first-century. We tend to project our urban industrial society back onto writings that are from a preindustrial peasant society. We read into the writings our modern Western cultural assumptions about life—our notions of individualism, progress, freedom, class structure, time, mobility, and so on. We have

CANNON, Katie Geneva, and Elizabeth Schlüssler Fiorenza, eds. *Interpretation for Liberation*. *Semeia* 47 (1989). Six of the seven essays in this collection are by women of color. They all comment in one way or another on the way race, class, and gender shape interpretation. Clarice J. Martin's essay offers a history and critique of scholarship on Acts 8:26-40.

COLLINS, Adela Yarbro, ed. *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985. The essays in this volume focus on the tensions between historical criticism and feminist scholarship. One describes nineteenth-century feminist interpretation. Some focus on hermeneutics or the theory of interpretation, and others are examples of feminist exegesis.

EXUM, J. Cheryl, Johanna W. H. Bos, and Adela Yarbro Collins, eds. *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power*. *Semeia* 42 (1988). Contains essays on woman as trickster in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Ancient Near East.

FIORENZA, Elisabeth Schlüssler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1983. The major work of the best-known feminist New Testament critic. The first part of the book focuses on hermeneutics or theory of interpretation; the second offers a feminist reconstruction of early Christian history.

RUSSELL, Letty M., ed. *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985. This collection of essays has three sections: Feminist Critical Consciousness, Feminists at Work, and Feminist Critical Principles. Only three of the essays are exegeses.

TOLBERT, Mary Ann, ed. *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*. *Semeia* 28 (1983). Contains four exegetical essays on New Testament texts and two on texts from the Hebrew Scriptures. A concluding essay sharply outlines types of feminist criticism and future challenges.

TRIBLE, Phyllis. *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978.

———. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Reading of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984. These two books are by a mother of recent feminist criticism of the Hebrew Scriptures. They involve literary methods. The second is especially accessible to students and others with little familiarity with biblical scholarship. It confronts texts that are very troubling for religious feminists, texts in which women are victims of male violence.

WEEMS, Renita J. *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*. San Diego: Luramedia, 1988. Very accessible to beginning students because it was written for use in home or church group Bible study. Weems approaches a number of biblical passages from a womanist perspective.

our twentieth-century "cognitive maps" by which we select, sort, and comprehend the material we read in the New Testament. In so doing, however, we misunderstand writings addressed to first-century people.

A text from the first-century is like a keyhole, an opening through which to look into another culture, a different world. However, if we look at the keyhole without looking through it, we see only how the space fits into the decor on our side of the door. We see it only in the context of the world we inhabit. Instead, we need to look through the opening into the world on the other side of the door, into the very different cultures of first-century Palestine and the Roman Empire. The question is, How can we understand the New Testament as a collection of writings from the eastern Mediterranean world of the first-century rather than impose the meanings we bring to the text from our time and place? The social study of the New Testament addresses this question.

In recent years, there has been an explosion of social studies of the New Testament. During the last fifteen years, seminars in scholarly societies have appeared under such titles as *The Social Description of Early Christianity*, *Social Sciences and the New Testament*, *The Social Facets Seminar*, and *The Context Group*. All these groups are devoted to sharing and promoting scholarship on the social study of the New Testament. Biblical scholars are eager to understand the society, the culture, and the communities in and behind the New Testament writings.

As a way to describe this emerging social study of the New Testament, we identify four approaches that have emerged: (1) social description, (2) social history, (3) the sociology of knowledge, and (4) the use of models from the social sciences, particularly cultural anthropology. These approaches overlap and depend upon each other.

Social Description

Social description draws upon all the information we have from the ancient world: literature, archeological excavations, art, coins, inscriptions, and so on. Scholars gather, analyze, and organize this information to describe every aspect of the social environment of the New Testament in its original setting: occupations, tools, houses, roads, means of travel, money, economic realities, architecture, villages and cities, laws, social classes, markets, clothes, foodstuffs, cooking practices, and so on. Such social description enhances our understanding of the daily cultures and customs in Palestine and in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus and the early Christian movement.

One way to think about social description is to imagine you are the director of a film portraying scenes from the life of Jesus. For example, take the story about Jesus healing the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-6). What information do you need in order to make this scene authentic? For example, what did a synagogue look like? Was it a stoa (porch) in a market area, a free-standing building, or a room in another structure? Who went there? What did they do? Did they read from the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew

Bible)? Was it a papyrus book or a parchment roll? How did they dress? What was the Sabbath? What were the practices and the prohibitions related to the Sabbath at that time? How did people treat a man with a "withered hand" in that culture? What Sabbath laws were at stake? How serious were penalties for violation of the Sabbath? Who were the Pharisees? How would they bring charges against Jesus? Why in the end did they not indict him? Why did they seek to meet with the Herodians? If you were a director staging such a drama, you would develop a passion for such questions as a means to comprehend fully this scene.

Understanding such a story is like understanding a joke from another culture. You have to know what ideas and information are being assumed before you can "get" the meaning. For example, the Pharisees were watching to indict Jesus because it was illegal to work on the Sabbath, and healing was considered to be work. Such a situation was serious because observing the Sabbath was a solemn religious obligation and because penalties for flagrant offenses could be severe. Synagogues likely also functioned as courts of law, which is why this setting was so threatening to Jesus. And the key question is, Why did the Pharisees not indict Jesus when he healed the man? The reason is that Jesus cleverly evaded indictment by avoiding any real "work." He does not touch the man or command him to "be healed" but only tells him to "stretch out the hand!" No wonder the Pharisees went off in frustration to plot with Herod to destroy Jesus. They went to Herod because Herod alone had the right to carry out capital punishment in Galilee under the Romans. Such information is essential for readers to "get" the story.

Many fine studies describe daily life in the social worlds of the first-century. In New Testament studies, Abraham Malherbe, John Stambaugh, David Balch, Eric Meyers, James Strange, and many others describe the material and social life of the first-century. In so doing, they provide vital means for us to understand people, events, and stories from that time.

Social History

Social historians seek to understand the broad sweep of change in history. This approach applies a comprehensive knowledge of social description through time to produce a social history of the period. Scholars such as Gerd Theissen, Wayne Meeks, and Martin Hengel have sought to answer critical questions of social history. For example, How did Christianity develop in the rural areas of Palestine? How did Christianity develop in the urban areas of the ancient world? How did the Greek culture and the Jewish culture interrelate in the period of Roman domination? What were the social causes and dynamics of the Roman-Jewish war of 66 to 70 C.E., and how did this war affect the early Christian movement? Then the question becomes, How do these developments fit into the social movements of the larger Greco-Roman world of that time? Regarding the study of biblical literature, those who take this approach might ask how the Gospel of Mark fits into the social and political history of the times, much as we might ask the place of Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* in preindustrial

America or the relation of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* to the Great Depression.

To deal with social history in relation to Mark, we might pose the following questions: What were the social forces behind the writing of the Gospel of Mark? What political conditions prevailed in that time and place? How did the Roman-Jewish war of 66 to 70 C.E. affect the writing of the Gospel? What was Mark's community like, and how did they spread the good news? How much did the expectation of an imminent end to the world impel the writing of this Gospel? Did the Gospel serve lower classes, upper classes, or both? Were the readers Jewish? If not, how much did they know of or identify with the Jewish people? What groups persecuted Mark's community? What was the fate of Mark's community in the context of the Roman Empire? Although one cannot do a broad social history based on one writing, nevertheless social historians can seek to explain the appearance of Mark's Gospel in the sweep of the social history of the time. Unfortunately, the task is difficult because Mark refers to his own time only indirectly in the story.

As an illustration, we might ask how the Roman-Jewish War of 66 to 70 C.E. affected the writing of Mark's Gospel. In 66 C.E., the Jews expelled the Roman troops from Palestine and rallied for independence. Diverse groups from all over Israel joined the war movement—lower class groups resisting economic oppression, sectarian groups fighting for the first commandment prohibition against any lord but God, and high-priestly groups seeking better terms in the Roman relationship. The war ended in disaster for the Jews. The Romans returned, defeated the nation, destroyed Jerusalem, and razed the Temple in 70 C.E.. Writing his Gospel during or just after the war, Mark told a story about events preceding the war. The Jewish Messiah had already come in the person of Jesus, who preached to his disciples that they should be like servants and not like the leaders of the gentile nations who lord over people (10:42-45). The leaders of Israel rejected Jesus. Jesus in turn predicted their downfall and that of the Temple (12:9; 13:2; 14:62). At the trial scenes, the high priests stirred up the crowd to call for Jesus' execution and to choose freedom for Barabbas, a prisoner who had committed murder in an insurrection (15:6-15). When Jesus died, God split the curtain and left the Temple and Israel to destruction (15:38). We can see how Mark wrote this story in part to reveal what he considered to be the destructive attitudes in Israel that led to the Roman-Jewish war. He also showed how Jesus' point of view differed from those of other Jewish groups.

With this approach, we can see how the sociopolitical history of the time shaped the Gospel of Mark. In turn, we can also see how this early Christian writing fit into the broader social history of the Roman period. Recently, some social historians have reconstructed the past from the perspective of the oppressed, seeking to unmask the dynamics of oppression and to recover the lives of the poor, outcasts, slaves, and women from all social strata of ancient cultures. The Gospels are prime sources for such social histories, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Ched Myers have shown in their studies of Mark.

Sociology of Knowledge

This approach offers the insight that different worldviews support different social orders. The first aspect of this approach is to reconstruct the worldview, the everyday assumptions, of a given culture or group. The second aspect is to see how this worldview gave legitimacy to and maintained the particular social order of the group or society from which it emerged.

First, sociology of knowledge deals with what people in a particular culture take for granted in their understanding of the world, their "social construction of reality."¹ Whereas social description focuses on the material realities of a society, sociology of knowledge deals with how that society organizes and interprets those realities. Each society interprets, organizes, and experiences life in its own way. Each society has sets of common values and customary ways in which people interact. Each society has shared beliefs about time, space, and the meaning of life. All these facets make up the common sense of a given culture. Such beliefs and understandings constitute the fabric of meaning without which a society does not exist. People seldom question these assumptions. People simply grow up taking the world of shared meanings for granted.

If we are to understand the first-century cultures and subcultures, we should be aware of the assumptions we make from our own cultures and subcultures. Otherwise, we will unconsciously project them onto our reading of a writing such as Mark's Gospel. To see and judge other societies by our own assumptions is cultural ethnocentrism. The first-century Mediterranean cultures would consider "the way things are" to be quite different from the dominant United States culture. For example, many people in the United States may assume that it is good for an individual to "get ahead," but some cultures, including the peasant cultures of the first-century, view "getting ahead" as dishonorable and destructive of the social order. Thus, the sociology of knowledge is about the everyday understandings of the world that people in a culture take for granted, what everyone in that culture "knows" to be true. If we are to understand the cultures of the first century, we need to appreciate how their cultures are different from our own.

When children grow up enculturated into a particular society, sociologists refer to this process as "primary socialization." When people enter another society and take on the basic assumptions of this other culture, sociologists refer to this process as "resocialization at the primary level." Such resocialization in primary assumptions is also a way to understand conversion. The Christian movement arose in particular cultures and led people to change the way they thought about some assumptions of those cultures and to abandon other assumptions. It called them to inhabit the world in a different way, to convert.²

1. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963). On worldviews, see Michael Kearney, *World View* (Novato, Calif.: Chandler & Sharp, 1984).
2. Beverly Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

Thus, from the perspective of sociology of knowledge, early Christianity offered an alternate world of meaning for those who chose to inhabit it. Reading or hearing a narrative like Mark can be a way to enter such a new symbolic universe. We might ask, What assumptions about life does the author of Mark take for granted with the readers? What assumptions does the author lead the readers to abandon? What new views does the author want the readers to adopt?

Consider, for example, the strange world of space and time in the narrative world of Mark's Gospel. Early in the story, the narrator tells us that Jesus saw "the heavens being torn open" and "the Spirit of God coming upon him" (1:9-11).³ After this, "a voice from the heavens" addressed Jesus. Immediately, the Spirit drove Jesus to the desert to be "tested by Satan," and "angels" served him (1:12-13). Subsequently, Jesus appeared in Galilee where he "drove out many demons" (1:39). When we combine these and other clues, we see that the author holds a Hebrew conception of the cosmos. There is no notion of a universe infinite in time and space, but a limited and flat earth with a canopy over it, heavens reaching from earth up to where God dwells, and Satan dominating an earth populated by angels and demons. Many other elements of the story fill out this spatial picture of the cosmos, such as Jesus going "up onto a mountain to pray" (6:46), the promise to gather disciples "from the four winds" (13:27), and the prophecy that Jesus would "come on the clouds of heaven" (14:62). The author does not argue for this view of the cosmos but simply assumes that the audience shares the same worldview. At the same time, Mark wants to change the reader's temporal view of the cosmos. Mark wants to convince readers that God's kingdom began with the baptism of Jesus (1:14-15) and that the fulfillment of that kingdom would come before the end of Jesus' generation (9:1; 13:30).

To ferret out a comprehensive picture of how Mark imagines the world, we might consider his views about nature and history, past and future, laws and customs, the human condition, sin and illness, purity and pollution, death and the afterlife, and so on. By culling details from the narrative, we can put together cultural assumptions the author makes about the world. In this way, we can sort out which primary cultural assumptions the author takes for granted and which primary assumptions the author wishes to challenge and change—such as purity rules, ethical values, and attitudes toward death.

The second facet of the sociology of knowledge correlates such worldviews with particular social organizations. Here sociologists make the argument that a mutual relationship exists between the assumptions of a given culture or group and the social organization of that group. How does the worldview of a group generate, legitimate, and maintain the particular social order of the group? In turn, how does the social order of a group influence the worldview of that group? There is no "necessary" correlation between worldview and social order, but efforts to make correlations are illuminating.⁴

3. All translations from Mark in this chapter are the author's.

4. Richard Rohrbaugh, "'Social Location of Thought' as a Heuristic Construct in New Testament Studies," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30 (1987): 103–19.

For example, Wayne Meeks argues that the symbolic universe expressed in the Gospel of John supports a certain kind of social group.⁵ The Gospel of John portrays Jesus as "the man from heaven" who brings knowledge of God to the world, yet only some people understand him while most people do not grasp him at all. Such a belief system about Jesus, Meeks argues, supports a small, tight-knit group of people who understand Jesus, but who are isolated and alienated from the general society of people who do not understand. As such, the belief system in the Gospel of John gave religious legitimacy to the group's isolation from the world.

Similarly, in the narrative world of Mark's Gospel, there is a correlation between the worldview held by the characters in Mark's story and the social organization of the Jesus movement depicted there. The worldview Jesus teaches his followers involves these assumptions: God's kingdom has begun (1:15); followers are to cross boundaries to proclaim the good news to the ends of the earth (13:10, 27); and the mission is urgent because the end of history will come soon (13:5-37). This missionary commitment to spread the good news to all nations before the world ends supports a social organization very different from that of John's Gospel. Instead of fostering a tight-knit group isolated from the world, Mark depicts a loose-knit social network based on hospitality as disciples go from place to place proclaiming the Gospel (1:17; 6:7-13; 10:29-30).⁶ Thus, the sociology of knowledge helps one to see how the group's "knowledge" relates to the social order of that group.

Models from Cultural Anthropology

A fourth area of social study of the New Testament involves the use of models from cultural anthropology. From the study of many cultures, anthropologists formulate models to map the dynamics of a culture and to describe certain phenomena that occur in many cultures. Models deal with such matters as kinship systems, power relations, rituals, purity-pollution rules, economies, and so on.

A model is a simplified description of like events or interactions drawn from the study of many cultures or groups. Models are not a tool to research historical information. Rather, they aid in the process of interpretation. Models help to overcome ethnocentrism by providing a framework different from our own cultural maps with which to organize and assess information. The point of using a model is not to fit facts into an abstract paradigm. Rather, a model serves as a heuristic device to probe and to question, to notice details we might have ignored, and to see connections that explain dynamics and relationships. For example, if we understand the characteristic features of demonic possession from the study of many cultures, we will know better how to investigate and

5. Wayne Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 44–72.

6. Howard Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

understand demonic possession in first-century Israel. Biblical scholars draw upon the models of anthropologists whose work is especially helpful in the study of early Christianity. They change and adapt the models to the specific historical situations in New Testament times.

For example, Robin Scroggs drew a model from the work of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch on the characteristics of religious sects.⁷ Scroggs applied the model to the early Christian church to show in what ways it was indeed a typical religious sect. John Gager drew upon the work of anthropologist Leon Festinger about religious sects that expected the end of the world.⁸ Gager applied the model to the earliest Christians because they expected that Jesus would return within their own generation. Gager argued that when this did not happen the early Christians responded like other such sects: they intensified their missionary activities rather than give up their beliefs.

Bruce Malina has made the most comprehensive effort to map the framework of first-century culture by using models drawn from the study of modern Mediterranean society.⁹ As such, he interprets the New Testament with models drawn from societies that are in historical continuity with those of the first-century Mediterranean region. He provides the following models. In contrast to our social preference for economic gain, first-century Mediterranean people sought above all else to gain honor. In contrast to our quest for individual freedom, people got their identity from group participation and conformity. In contrast to our assumption that economic acquisition can be unlimited, people held to the peasant notion that all goods are limited and in short supply. Also, they had a patrilinear kinship system in which people married within their own group. Finally, society was organized according to rules for purity and pollution. Malina's work lays out the dynamics of each of these models and applies them to the New Testament writings. Other scholars have developed cross-cultural models for the study of healing, demonology, deviance, and so on. Cultural anthropologists may take one of three approaches to analyze a society or group:¹⁰

1. Models may come from a structural-functionalist approach, which assumes that social forces work together to create a balance. Here the problem is to see how different parts of a society work together. This approach tends to see society in terms of how it preserves the status quo.
2. Models may come from a conflict framework of analysis, which assumes that different parts of society are in conflict with each other. Here the

7. Robin Scroggs, "The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movement," in *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, Part 2: *Early Christianity*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1975), 1-23.

8. J. G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1975).

9. Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World, Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

10. Bruce Malina, "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 37 (1982): 229-42.

problem is how the conflicting dynamics will be worked out. This approach tends to see society in terms of changes that take place in struggles over power and oppression.

3. Models may come from a symbolic framework of understanding, which focuses on the meanings people assign to social interactions. Here the problem is to discern the symbolic meanings that members of the society share and to determine how those symbols change.

Several scholars have applied models from cultural anthropology to the Gospel of Mark. Vernon Robbins analyzed the social roles of the teacher Jesus and his disciples.¹¹ John Pilch has studied Markan assumptions about the nature of illness, healing, and exorcism.¹² Herman Waetjen employed a model about millenarian sects to highlight the new social order that Jesus announces in his establishment of the kingdom.¹³ Jerome Neyrey applied a model from the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas to display the dimensions of purity and pollution in Mark's narrative.¹⁴ I will elaborate this last example here in my case study of Mark.

The four approaches to the social study of the New Testament outlined above interrelate with and depend upon one another. They may be used together with great profit. In fact, John Elliott has developed a method that combines several social approaches in the service of interpreting a New Testament text, a method he calls Social-Scientific Criticism.¹⁵ Such an approach draws upon social description and models from cultural anthropology to reconstruct the sociopolitical situation of the audience and the author's strategy for dealing with it. Elliott analyzes The First Epistle of Peter as a letter written to Christians who were displaced aliens in Asia Minor. This approach works especially well with letters in which the author, readers, and social situation are identified directly in the letter. There are, however, many ways to combine these methods with benefit. In the case study that follows, I will draw upon social description, worldview, and models from cultural anthropology to study one facet of the narrative world of the Gospel of Mark.

A Case Study: Purity and Boundaries

In order to illustrate the social study of the New Testament, I will analyze the dynamics of clean and unclean in the Gospel of Mark. In this study, I am

11. Vernon Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

12. John Pilch, "Healing in Mark: A Social Science Analysis," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15 (1985): 142-50.

13. Herman Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989).

14. Jerome Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," *Semeia* 35 (1986): 91-128.

15. John Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

assuming that Mark was written in Galilee or rural Syria around 70 C.E. and that his audience shared a social world similar to that of Jesus' time depicted in the narrative.¹⁶ After briefly introducing the case of Mark, I will describe the social phenomenon of purity and pollution in first-century Israel and then show its relevance to the narrative world of Mark. In order to clarify the issues at stake, I will then apply models from the symbolic approach to cultural anthropology.

It is easy to see how this case study relates to several other disciplines we have been presenting in this book. First, the analysis will focus on the narrative world of Mark's Gospel. Thus, it will not deal with the historical Jesus or with Mark's community, but with the society and the Jesus movement portrayed in Mark's narrative. Second, the description of purity and pollution in the social context of the first-century is the kind of information that enabled first-century readers to make an informed response to the Gospel. Finally, it will be clear from the subject matter itself how relevant the study of purity is for feminist concerns.

When we read Mark, we come across phenomena that are strange to us. Jesus drives out "unclean spirits" (1:23; 5:2); he "cleanses a leper" (1:40-45). Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of eating bread with "defiled hands" (7:1-23). These notions of clean and defiled have nothing to do with our modern ideas of sanitation. Rather, they are forces capable of making things pure or polluted, holy or defiled, clean or unclean. When we investigate the Jewish society of Palestine in the first-century, we realize that issues of purity and pollution pervaded the whole culture. When we come to understand Mark, we see that the forces of purity and defilement relate to many aspects of the story: holiness, graves, corpses, Gentiles, Sabbath, foods, hearts, and so on. The issues of purity are writ large across the pages of Mark's story.

Social Description and Worldview in First-Century Palestine

In the first century, the Jewish nation was a temple state under the control of the Roman Empire.¹⁷ For Jews living there, religious, political, and economic

16. There is disagreement about the location and date of Mark's Gospel. For the view expressed here, see Kee, *Community of the New Age*. For the traditional view, which places the Gospel in Rome during the 60s, see Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

17. In addition to Neyrey's work, I am especially indebted in this section to the following works: Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Israel* (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1973); Jacob Milgrom, "Purity and Impurity," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 1405-14; idem, "Israel's Sanctuary: The Priestly Picture of Dorian Grey," *Revue Biblique* 93 (1976): 370-99; Baruch Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord* (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1974); Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellon, 1984). For further bibliography, see Jerome Neyrey, "Unclean, Common, Polluted, and Taboo: A Short Reading Guide," *Foundation and Facets Forum* 4 (1988): 72-82.

life centered around the Temple in Jerusalem. This Temple was a huge complex that dominated the city. It housed more than two thousand priests at a time. During religious festivals, the Temple teemed with tens of thousands of Jews from all over the known world. The Jewish people believed that God dwelt on earth in the inner sanctuary of the Temple. God's presence there and proper worship in the Temple would guarantee the prosperity of the nation, the productivity of the land, and the security of the nation from foreign domination. Israel was a theocracy, a form of government in which God is considered to be the origin and head of state. Within the nation, the high priests had the actual task of leading the nation (within Roman parameters) and providing proper worship in the Temple, the Sanhedrin was the administrative and judicial council, and the Pharisees and scribes were experts in the interpretation of the law or Torah, the five books of Moses. As the people of God, the Jews believed they were set apart to be holy, dedicated to the Lord, to worship God faithfully, and to follow God's laws.

What gave this whole system coherence was the concept of holiness. Holiness was a core value of the Jews, as stated (by God) in the law: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2). God was holy and the people were to be holy. Because God was holy, God would not tolerate immorality. And God wanted people to worship rightly. The law of Israel therefore dealt with holiness. The law contained the moral codes for holy behavior among people in the nation. The law contained the regulations for the observance of holy times and holy festivals to guarantee prosperous life on the land. The law contained the regulations for proper worship in the Temple. The law contained the holiness codes about those animals people were permitted to eat and those animals that would defile them, the definitions of leprosy, the rituals for cleansing, and so on. Moreover, the law prescribed rituals and sacrifices as means to purge any defilement from the land, the Temple, and the people. Hence, Jews in Palestine were devoted to preserving God's holiness and to preserving their own holiness.

First, most Jews were devoted to preserving God's holiness. They protected God's dwelling in the Temple from unclean people and defiled things. For example, only priests in a state of purity could enter the Temple court to offer sacrifices, and they offered there only animals classified as pure and without blemish. All Israelites were to be in a state of purity when they came to worship in the Temple. Otherwise, they would defile the Temple. In turn, God might destroy the unclean person who came into God's presence in the Temple. If people defiled the sanctuary in a flagrant way, God might withdraw from the sanctuary, thereby removing the protection and the benefits that God's presence there secured. Also, the effects of flagrant immorality committed outside the Temple could reach into the Temple and violate God's presence.

Second, Jews in Palestine were concerned to preserve the holiness of God's people. For example, Jews avoided contact with unclean people and things—lepers, menstruating women, corpses, and Gentiles, among others. Such contact defiled a person for a period lasting from one to seven days. Such a state of defilement prohibited people from participation in festivals, certain meals, and Temple functions. To become pure again, the defiled person was required by

the law to do ritual washings, endure a waiting period, and/or make an offering to God. In addition to ritual purity, Jews were to avoid immorality and idolatry.

We can see how Jews in Palestine organized their world to preserve their holiness. Jerome Neyrey has demonstrated the structures of holiness by reference to "cultural maps" of places, people, things, and times that served to organize Jewish life.¹⁸ Although these maps of holiness come from later writings, they nevertheless reflect an earlier time and are helpful in understanding the mentality of holiness that prevailed in the first century.

Take first the map of places from the Mishnah, the early third-century collection of oral commentary on the Torah. It offers a geographical listing (*Kelim* 1.6-9) cited in ascending order of holiness:

1. The land of Israel is holier than any other land. . . .
2. The walled cities of Israel are still more holy. . . .
3. Within the walls of Jerusalem is still more holy. . . .
4. The Temple Mount is still more holy. . . .
5. The rampart is still more holy. . . .
6. The Court of Women is still more holy. . . .
7. The Court of the Israelites is still more holy. . . .
8. The Court of Priests is still more holy. . . .
9. Between the porch and altar is still more holy. . . .
10. The sanctuary is still more holy. . . .
11. The Holy of Holies is still more holy. . . .

Notice that the Holy of Holies, where God resides on earth, is the holiest place. At all costs, the Jews must protect this inner sanctuary of the Temple from defilement. The degree of holiness outward from the sanctuary corresponds directly with the nearness to or distance from this sanctuary. In this listing, certain people belong in certain spaces. Each group is holy enough to attain their proper place, but not pure enough to penetrate closer to the sanctuary without bringing defilement. Notice that the territory of gentile (non-Jewish) nations is outside the map and is not holy at all. In general, the Jews avoided contact with Gentiles because they represented immorality, idolatry, and ritual impurity.

Neyrey also presents the purity map of people from the later Jewish Tosefta (*t. Meg.*), cited in descending order of holiness:

1. High priest

18. Jerome Neyrey, "The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel," *Semeia* 35 (1986): 91-128. See also idem, "A Symbolic Approach to Mark 7," *Foundations and Facets Forum* 4 (1988): 63-91; John Pilch, "Biblical Leprosy and Body Symbolism," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11 (1981): 102-6.

2. Priests
3. Levites
4. Israelites
5. Converts
6. Freed slaves
7. Disqualified priests
8. Temple slaves
9. Bastards
10. Eunuchs
11. Others with physical deformities

Note how some of these people correlate with places on the geographical map. Only the high priest can enter the Holy of Holies. Only priests and levites can enter the Court of the Priests. Only male members of groups 5 through 7 can enter the Court of the Israelites, and so on. Again, the map does not include Gentiles, because they are not holy. Also, the map excludes women from the scheme of holiness. As we shall see, women bear a perpetual threat of defilement and are therefore treated as unclean.

Neyrey presents other maps. One such list specifies who can marry whom. Another map lists the degrees of defilement attached to people and to things that will defile by contact, such as a leper, the corpse of an animal or a human, body fluids out of place, or persons considered defiled. Another map lists the hierarchy of holy times not to be defiled by certain prohibited behavior, such as the Sabbath days and the Passover festival.

Holiness was a core value of the society. It was the major concept by which the nation-culture structured and classified everything in its world—people, places, objects, and times. All groups and sects agreed on the importance of purity. However, various Jewish sects in Palestine understood purity in different ways and applied the regulations about it in different ways.

1. The sect of the Sadducees included mainly chief priests and other aristocrats. They believed that proper worship in the Temple was essential to the holiness that preserved the life of the nation. As such, they applied the strict purity regulations only to life at the Temple. Lower priests and levites needed to be pure only when they took their annual two-week stint of service in the Temple. Ordinary Israelites needed to preserve their purity only when they entered the Court of the Israelites to offer sacrifices. Jews were to offer at the sanctuary only pure, unblemished animals. As Sadducees, the high priests guarded everything and everyone who entered the Temple in order to ensure the purity of this holy place.

2. The Pharisees were a group of Jews who studied the written law and also passed down oral traditions of their interpretation and application of the

law. Like the Sadducees, they applied purity regulations to the Temple. However, they went further and applied the purity regulations to all Israelites and to all times, not just when people were at the Temple. Pharisees believed that all Israel was a kingdom of priests. Just as priests kept themselves pure while doing service in the Temple, so all Jews should at all times observe the purity regulations. Just as the priests performed ritual washings before meals as a removal of defilement from contact with that which was unclean, so all Jews should wash hands and food and utensils before eating. They should do this in order to cleanse themselves from direct and indirect contact they may have deliberately or inadvertently had with unclean things or people. The Pharisees promoted these measures as a "fence" or margin to protect people from defilement due to contact with Gentiles.

3. The sect of Essenes had the strictest purity regulations.¹⁹ The Essenes had withdrawn from the life of the nation and the Temple in the second century B.C.E. and established a monastic community at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea. They believed that the Maccabean high priests of that time were not legitimate and as such had defiled the Temple and the whole land by their presence there. In their view, God had withdrawn from the Temple because of these violations. So, too, the Essenes withdrew. At Qumran, the Essenes carried out the strictest holiness codes as if for the Temple. They did so on the conviction that their community was now the Temple, the only place holy enough for God to dwell on earth. The Essenes offered no sacrifices, but they preserved holiness for the presence of God on earth in the hope that God would soon inaugurate a new order in Israel and the world.

4. Most Jews in Palestine were peasants who followed the regulations when they went to the Temple for festivals. Few of them, however, had the time or the resources to carry out the ritual prescriptions the Pharisees advocated. Furthermore, many Jews ignored other laws as well, such as the regulations of the Sabbath and the requirements for tithes due the Temple. Many Jews had direct contact with Gentiles in the marketplaces of the cities and indirect contact through Jewish tax collectors. The Pharisees looked upon ordinary Jews who disregarded the law as "sinners."

This system of holiness served Israel well throughout its history, preserving a minority culture from absorption into dominant cultures. At the time of Jesus, the culture and religion of the Jews were threatened with absorption into the dominant Greek culture and the imperialism of the Roman Empire. The Jewish structures of purity protected the people from these threats of cultural domination. By keeping themselves separate from Gentiles, the Jews maintained their beliefs and practices. At the same time, they sought to be an example of

19. Michael Newton, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

purity for the nations. The Jewish nation hoped that eventually the gentile nations would be drawn to Jerusalem as the place of justice and true worship.

When we turn to the depiction of the Jewish nation in the Gospel of Mark, we see issues of purity and defilement throughout: the Holy Spirit, lepers, work on the Sabbath, corpses, unclean spirits, Gentiles, sinners, unclean foods, and so on. As portrayed in Mark's story, the leaders of the nation uphold the laws of ritual purity as we have outlined them. By contrast, Jesus makes an onslaught against these purity rules and regulations. In Mark's view, Jesus is indeed holy, for the "Holy Spirit" comes upon Jesus at his baptism (1:10) and he is called "the Holy One of God" (1:24). Nevertheless, Jesus counters the purity rules that preserved the holiness of the nation.

- He encounters "unclean spirits" (1:21-28).
- He touches a leper (1:40-45).
- He heals Simon's mother-in-law on the Sabbath (1:29-31).
- He pardons sinners (2:1-12).
- He calls a tax collector to follow him (2:13-14).
- He eats with tax collectors and sinners (2:15-17).
- His disciples pluck grain on the holy Sabbath (2:23-28).
- He heals an impaired man on the Sabbath (3:1-6).
- He drives unclean spirits from a man at a graveyard in gentile territory, and they go into a herd of swine (5:1-20).
- He heals a woman with a flow of blood (5:25-34).
- He touches the corpse of a little girl (5:35-43).
- His disciples eat bread with defiled hands (7:1-15).
- He declares that all foods are clean (7:17-23).
- He heals a gentile woman in Tyre whom he calls a "dog" (7:24-30).
- He uses spittle in the act of healing (7:31-36; 8:22-26).
- He feeds and eats with Gentiles in a desert (8:1-10).

Instead of using purity regulations to protect, the Markan Jesus transgresses the boundaries of purity. Through the agency of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, God enters the arena of impurity without regard to the risk of defilement.

In Mark's portrayal, the leaders of the nation protect the boundaries of ritual purity that Jesus violates.

- They accuse Jesus of blasphemy for claiming the right to pardon sins (2:1-12).
- They challenge his eating with tax collectors and sinners (2:15-17).

- They challenge the disciples' plucking grain on the Sabbath (2:23-28).
- They seek charges against Jesus for healing on the Sabbath and they plot to destroy him (3:1-6).
- They say Jesus is possessed by Satan, not the Holy Spirit (3:22-30).
- They accuse Jesus because his disciples violate the traditions of the elders by eating bread with unwashed (defiled) hands (7:1-15).
- They condemn him to death for blasphemy against God (14:53-65).

Cultural Anthropology: Models, Explanations, and Insights

What is going on here? How can we make sense of the issues of purity? How do the notions of purity and pollution work? What is the difference in the two approaches to purity between Jesus and the Jewish leaders? How can we unpack the dynamics of Mark's story? To deal with these questions, we can turn to explanations, insights, and models from cultural anthropology.

For example, we can understand better the concepts of purity and pollution by making use of a model from the British cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas.²⁰ In her view, purity represents the notion that there are places for things and things are in their place. By contrast, pollution represents the notion that some things have no place or that things are out of their place. Purity and pollution imply, therefore, an ordered classification of things and people with corresponding boundaries. Thus, if we observe what a culture considers to be pure and polluted, we can see how that culture gives order to the world.

As Douglas points out, dirt or that which pollutes is "matter out of place." Soil belongs in a garden, but soil does not belong in a house. When soil is in a house, we consider it to be "dirty" because it is out of place. This is an analogy for the whole purity-pollution system. The assumption is that there are "places" for things and people and animals and behaviors—a place for everything and everything in its place. We have already seen how thoroughly Israel had classified people, places, objects, and times in terms of holiness. Purity occurs when something or someone has a place and is properly in place. Pollution occurs when something or someone is out of place or when something or someone has no place in the system. Purity rules of avoidance and cleansing are ways of dealing with things and people that are out of place or do not belong. Such regulations serve to make the world conform with the structure of ideas. By keeping the purity rules, people impose order on experience and achieve harmony or consonance between worldview and behavior.

Douglas's analysis of the ancient Hebrew system of purity-pollution illustrates the model clearly. The ancient Hebrew culture as reflected in Leviticus is a

purity-pollution system based on "holiness." The notion of holiness is rooted in two concepts: wholeness and set-apartness. First, holiness has to do with what is whole. That which is pure and holy is that which conforms wholly to its classification. Now we can see why human beings with "deformities" were considered marginal and unclean and why animals with blemishes were considered unclean and were not to be offered at the Temple. They were not considered to be whole and therefore did not fit wholly within their class. Also, we can see why fish and cattle and doves are clean animals and do not defile people who eat them. These animals fit the Israelite classification of "normal" animals. Conversely, eels and pigs and ostriches do not fit the Hebrew classification of normal or whole animals. These animals are therefore not clean and will defile those who eat them. In light of these explanations, we can now understand the list of holy places cited previously and the list of those people who belong in each place. We can see also that Gentiles are unclean because there is no place for them in the system.

Second, holiness has to do with things and people that are set apart, things which by virtue of being in their place are kept away from certain other things; that is, things are holy when they are in their place, when they are not where they do not belong. Now we can understand why blood, spit, or semen are unclean. They belong inside the body. When they come out of their place, such as in a menstrual flow, they are unclean and will defile people. Lepers are unclean because they have boils or breaks in the skin where pus or fluid comes out. Also, we can see how important it was for certain people to stay apart from certain places. No one can enter the Holy of Holies except the high priest. Women who go beyond their place into the Court of the Priests will defile it. Gentiles were prohibited from entering the Temple on penalty of death. Thus, in the Hebrew culture, there was an ordered classification of the world with proper places for people and things. Things or people that did not fit the classification or that were out of place were considered to be unclean and capable of making other things unclean.

In Mark's depiction of the Jewish nation, the authorities support this system. But in Mark's portrayal Jesus has a very different Jewish approach. Jesus does not reinforce the purity system of the authorities. He crosses boundaries, redraws them, or eliminates them. As a result, he has contact with all types of unclean people and objects. He goes to places that are out of bounds. He violates holy times. What is the key to this clash between the authorities and Jesus? How can we explain these two very different approaches to purity?

We can get insight into the different approaches of the leaders and Jesus by delineating their differing attitudes toward boundaries. We have already seen the connection between purity and boundaries. In his work on boundaries, Jonathan Smith helps us see the fundamental difference between these two approaches to purity depicted in Mark's Gospel.²¹ Smith would argue that the

20. See especially Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); idem, "Pollution," *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 12, ed. David Sills (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 336-42; idem, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); idem, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

21. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Animals and Plants," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., vol. 1, 911-18; "The Influence of Symbols upon Social Change: A Place on which to Stand," *Worship* 44 (1970): 457-74; "The Wobbling Point," *Journal of Religion* 52 (1972): 134-49.

difference between the authorities and Jesus is so dramatic as to represent polar opposites. One approach erects boundaries and preserves holiness by guarding against that which would defile. The other approach crosses boundaries and risks defilement to make what is unclean pure.

The one choice is "the affirmation of one's place" within the order of certain boundaries. Here, "each person is called to dwell in a limited world in which everything has its given place and role to fulfill. To be sacred is to remain in place. To break out, to cross boundaries, is to open the world to the threat of chaos, to commit transgression."²² In this approach, the hero is one who discerns order and helps people fulfill their roles within that order. We can see that the leaders of Israel in Mark embrace this stance.

The other choice expresses a desire "to be unbounded, to be liberated." In this view, boundaries have become oppressive and restrictive or are simply limiting. Here people do not define themselves "by the degree to which they harmonize themselves and their society to the cosmic patterns of order, but rather to the degree to which they can escape that order."²³ Here, "positive sacred power [is] to be gained from the violation of the given boundaries of the world, from the transcendence of the way things ordinarily are."²⁴ In this approach, the heroic figure is the one who enables people to escape the bounds. We can see that Jesus and his followers in Mark embrace this stance, not so much to attain liberty as to bring to outcasts the reign of God.

These stances, Smith argues, are "the two basic existential options" open to human beings. A total worldview is implied in each of these stances. Smith resists giving a higher value to one stance or the other. Order can be creative or oppressive. The transgression of order can be creative or destructive. Yet the two options represent such fundamentally different worldviews that "to change a stance is to totally alter one's symbols and to inhabit a different world."²⁵

How then can we bring these two different worldviews into sharper focus? To help us, we can now turn to another model from the work of Mary Douglas. She argues that a given culture or group tends to have a uniform approach toward all boundaries. She shows how people in the same culture have a similar attitude toward boundaries at several levels of experience. One can see this "unity of experience" in the attitude toward boundaries at three levels:

1. The social boundaries of the group or culture.
2. The bodily boundaries of individuals within the culture.
3. The cosmological boundaries that the people project through their belief systems about God and the world.

Douglas argues that the attitude toward boundaries tends to be the same at each of these levels. For example, if a society is anxious about what goes in

22. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Animals and Plants," 914.

23. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Influence of Symbols," 467.

24. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Animals and Plants," 914.

25. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Influence of Symbols," 467.

and out of the offices of the bodily boundary, then this society will probably also guard the social boundary carefully to protect who goes in and who goes out of their social group. Regarding the cosmological level of beliefs in such a society, one would expect to find a dualism with a distinct boundary separating the good from the evil, the holy from the unclean. "Conversely," Douglas says, "if [in another culture] there is no concern to preserve social boundaries, I would not expect to find concern with bodily boundaries."²⁶ And in a culture with little concern to guard social boundaries, the beliefs about God and the world will show ambiguity and interaction around the boundary between good and evil.

We can see how the system works when we notice how the view of boundaries in the Jewish culture of the first-century is the same at the cosmological, bodily, and social levels.

1. *Cosmological boundaries.* At the cosmological level, the dominant motif is the pursuit of holiness by separation from what is unclean. There is a boundary around God to protect God's holiness and to separate God from all that would defile. People are to guard this boundary in order to keep God from withdrawing. On earth, God is located in the holiest place in the Temple. As we have seen, many boundaries surround this place. The cosmic order also includes boundaries for people and animals. Cosmological lines separate Israel from the Gentile nations. Other lines separate animals into clean and unclean. Thus the boundaries in the cosmology separate the clean from the unclean. As we have seen, people are to guard these boundaries in order to keep what is holy separated from that which defiles.

2. *Bodily boundaries.* Similarly, the skin of the body is a boundary to be guarded. The skin makes a person a bounded system. The skin keeps certain things in place inside the body, such as spit, blood, or semen. When out of place, these things will make a person unclean. Similarly, people can guard the skin from unclean things going in from outside the body, for example, by refusing to eat the meat of an unclean animal. Such unclean food taken in from the outside will defile a person. Hence, people guard the boundary of the body to avoid contact with what is unclean, because what comes out and certain things that go in will pollute people.

3. *Social boundaries.* The boundary of Israel distinguishes Jew from Gentile. Only male Jews who are circumcised and without blemish are considered pure. Jews who have contact with Gentiles become unclean, and intermarriage is strictly prohibited. At the same time, Gentiles who come among Jews are "out of place" in the Jewish community and, as we have seen, are prohibited from entering the sanctuary on penalty of death. Generally speaking, Jews guard the social boundary to keep Jews in and Gentiles out.

26. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 70.

In this scheme, the most important level is that of the social group. The bodily boundaries and the cosmological order protect and maintain the social boundaries of the group or society. Thus, Douglas notes, "Israel is the boundary that all other boundaries celebrate and that gives them their historic load of meaning."²⁷ The whole classification system existed in order to protect and sustain the group. The avoidance of unclean food and of marginal people within the nation was a hedge against the outer boundary that separated Jew from Gentile. Thus, according to Douglas's model, there was a coherence of attitudes toward boundaries at several levels, and the coherence served to reinforce the group's experience of its social boundary.

As we have seen, this system is reflected in the depiction of the authorities in Mark's story. They separate from the unclean in Israel (2:15-17), guard the holy Sabbath from defilement (2:23-3:6), guard God from blasphemy (2:1-12; 14:53-65), guard the Temple from unclean people (11:15-18) and blemished sacrifices (12:32-33), and guard the body from impure food (7:1-23).

By contrast, the Jewish movement of Jesus in Mark illustrates a contrasting attitude toward boundaries, the effort to be "unbounded" in order to overcome obstacles in the service of the kingdom of God. Here we see what happens when people abrogate purity rules, cross boundaries, or redraw them. Whereas the authorities in Mark's story guarded boundaries, Jesus and his followers transgressed boundaries. Whereas the leaders saw boundaries as means of protection, the Jesus movement saw boundaries as oppressive and limiting. Whereas the leaders withdrew from uncleanness, the Jesus movement attacked boundaries as lines to cross, redraw, or eliminate.

In Mark's depiction of the Jesus movement, we see again a consonance, albeit of a very different character, in the attitude toward boundaries at the cosmological, the social, and the bodily levels.

Cosmological Boundaries

Mark's narrative shares the core value of the Jewish society in depicting God as holy. The empowering force behind the activity in the kingdom of God is the "Holy Spirit" (1:8-10), and Jesus is the "Holy One of God" (1:24). However, in contrast to the view that people are to attain holiness by separation from the threatening force of impurity, Mark presents the view that people are to overcome uncleanness by spreading wholeness. Here God does not withdraw because of the threat of defilement by contact with the unclean. Rather, God's holiness is an active force that expands and invades in order to remove and to overcome uncleanness. Thus, in contrast to the view that God is to be protected within the confines of the Temple, the Markan God spreads the life-giving

power of the kingdom through Jesus and his followers into the world wherever people are receptive to it.

In Mark, God's holiness spreads even into the territory of Satan. Satan is the adversary of God, and Mark refers to the demons under Satan's authority as "unclean spirits." Before the kingdom arrived, the world was Satan's house (3:23-29). Now, however, God breaks out of the confines of heaven, rips apart the boundary between heaven and earth, and invades Satan's territory (1:9-13). To establish rulership over the world, God crosses into Satan's arena. God sends down the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism (1:10-11). Immediately, the Spirit drives Jesus to confront Satan in the desert. Through the agency of Jesus, God binds Satan and plunders Satan's house (3:22-30). As such, God reclaims people from the destructiveness of the "unclean spirits" (1:12-13; 5:1-20; 9:14-19). The "holy" work of God is that which brings life and overcomes the destructive work of Satan (3:4; 9:42-49).

Also, in Mark, God breaks out of the confines of the Temple to be available everywhere. The Jewish leaders know that God resides on earth in the Temple, and they protect God from what is unclean. Jesus condemns the Temple as holy space because the leaders use it to set boundaries and prohibit the Gentile nations from worshipping there (11:17). God therefore leaves the Temple in order to spread out over the earth. At the death of Jesus, God rips apart the curtain of the sanctuary and breaks out of the confines of the sanctuary (15:38). God leaves the Temple and becomes available anywhere on earth to grant blessings and to pardon sins. The Temple is no longer needed for rituals and sacrifices because God is now accessible wherever people offer prayers of faith and forgiveness (11:20-25).

Furthermore, Mark eliminates the cosmological boundaries that would identify people or things as unclean in and of themselves. For example, Mark eliminates the notion that animals might be unclean in and of themselves, for the Markan Jesus declares all foods clean (7:19). Also, Mark eliminates the notion that Gentiles are unclean in and of themselves. Mark rejects the boundary line distinguishing pure Jews from impure Gentiles. In Mark's view, any Jew or Gentile may be on God's side or against God based on faith and moral behavior rather than on ritual purity (3:29; 7:29). Also, gentile territory is not unclean in and of itself (4:1-20; 7:24-8:10).

Mark's Jesus does not eliminate the line distinguishing God's people from others. He redraws the boundary line in terms of moral behavior rather than ritual impurity.²⁸ He eliminates dietary boundaries and "ritual defilements" that come by external contact with unclean things, but he does not abrogate purity notions altogether. Rather, he redefines purity of people and times in terms of faith and moral behavior enjoined by the Law and the Prophets (7:14-23; 12:28-34). Those who respond favorably to Jesus and his teaching are on the inside; those who reject him and his teaching are on the outside (3:31-35; 4:10-13). Those who do the will of God are Jesus' "brother and sister and mother," whereas those who do not do the will of God are in opposition to Jesus and are on the outside (3:31-35). In order to give all people an opportunity

²⁷ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, 269.

²⁸ See Neyrey, "Idea of Purity," 15.

to be on the inside, the followers of Jesus are to proclaim to all people, Jew and Gentile alike, without respect to ritual purity or impurity (13:10, 27). Thus, Jesus redraws the line distinguishing God's people without respect to "ritual" purity or impurity.

As portrayed in the narrative, God is spreading holiness throughout the earth. Followers are also to spread out in order to tell others the good news. They are not to avoid people or animals or things that are considered unclean by society.

Social Boundaries

The attitude toward social boundaries in Mark's narrative world reveals the same expansiveness. The Jesus movement described in the narrative of Mark is not a stationary community that seeks to protect its boundaries but a network going out from Jesus like branches on a tree: first Jesus, then the disciples he sends out (6:7-13), and then those who receive the disciples by hospitality (9:37) and pass the word on (1:28, 45; 5:20). The people in the network expand in outreach and influence.

Relationships in the network are based on reciprocity between those who proclaim and heal and those who give them hospitality. Jesus offers no provisions for establishing stationary communities—no ongoing rituals such as baptism or Eucharist and no directions for communal organization or discipline. Jesus tells disciples to leave their families and property and to receive new familial relations in the hospitality offered them from one village to the next. The person who is at the extremity of the network—one who simply offers a cup of water to someone who bears the name of Christ—is fully part of the network and will receive a reward (9:41). Solidarity in this network is based, therefore, not on relationships in a stationary community, but on the hospitality that followers receive from sympathizers as they move from place to place—"houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields" (10:28-30). In contrast to a stationary and protectionist culture, the Jesus movement in Mark is a loose-knit network comprised of people who are reaching out.

Like God, Jesus and his followers are "boundary-crossing" figures. They cross the boundaries established by the culture that protect people from ritual uncleanness. Instead of preserving holiness by avoiding contact, the Markan movement spreads holiness by making contact. Instead of avoiding contact with all people outside the group, Jesus' followers give all people the chance to experience the good news of the reign of God (13:10). In every case, instead of Jesus being defiled by the contact, Jesus makes clean that which was unclean by spreading purity, forgiveness, and wholeness.

Nor does the Jesus network depicted in Mark guard boundaries to protect those who are inside from those who are outside. The people in the network sow the seeds of the good news everywhere (4:13-20) and exclude no one from the network or from its benefits. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus heals all who request healing, including a gentle woman in Tyre (7:24-30). He feeds four thousand people in gentle territory who have followed him into the desert (7:31-8:10). The narrative explicitly rejects exclusion. At one

point, the disciples prevent a man from exorcising a demon in Jesus' name because he "was not following us." In response, Jesus tells them, "Do not stop him . . . for whoever is not against us is for us" (9:38-40). As such, those inside the network are to do nothing to set the limits of the community. Rather, they simply spread the influence of the network. Those outside the network who reject the followers of Jesus are the ones who set the limits of the network by their acts of rejection. Jesus tells the disciples that if others do not welcome them they are to leave that locale and shake the dust off their feet as a witness to the rejection (6:11). However, they do so only to confirm a decision already made by the outsiders rejecting them.

Furthermore, Jesus gives no directions for expulsion from the network. In fact, he strictly prohibits any attempt to dominate or exclude "the little ones who have faith" (9:42). Jesus himself, knowing that one of the Twelve is about to betray him, nevertheless offers the cup at the last communal meal, and they all drink from it—including Judas (14:23). The Markan Jesus sets the boundary lines, but he prohibits the people in the network from guarding these lines. And because followers do not guard or protect the boundary lines, there is no margin to the boundary. People can get in easily, and once inside they can be at various levels of commitment or betrayal. This prohibition against guarding boundaries serves to prevent anything or anyone from inhibiting the expansion of the network. It is also in conformity with Jesus' moral injunction not to lord over anyone (10:41-45).

Bodily Boundaries

Similarly, the followers of Jesus do not guard the body against things going in from the outside. Jesus says, "There is nothing from outside that by entering people is able to defile them, because it does not enter into the heart, but goes into the stomach and on out into the latrine"—thus he declared all foods clean" (7:17-19). Therefore, there is no need to wash the hands before eating or to protect the body from taking in certain foods or to be concerned about the waste that goes out into the latrine, because Jesus declared all foods to be clean (7:1-23). This attitude toward the bodily boundary replicates the attitude toward the social boundary. As anyone may enter the network without making the group unclean, so anything may go into the body without making it unclean. There is no need to guard the boundaries from what is outside the person or the group.

There are two exceptions to the prohibition against guarding the boundary of the body. In Mark, demons are "unclean spirits" who enter and possess people. Unlike foods, they do not enter the stomach and go on out. Rather, they affect the whole person, including the heart, making faith impossible. To drive out an unclean spirit by the power of the "Holy" Spirit is thereby to render a person clean. Also, people are to guard the bodily boundary against fornication and adultery. Here the focus is not so much on guarding physical boundaries. Rather, the focus is on guarding to ensure that immoral and destructive behavior will not come out from the heart (10:1-12).

In Mark, what renders one clean or unclean is the behavior that comes out from the heart. As God spreads the kingdom and as the Jesus movement spreads holiness, so the individual spreads love for God and neighbor outward from the whole heart (12:29-31). However, immoral behavior that goes out from the heart can make that person unclean (7:20-23). Jesus says, "For from inside, from the hearts of people come the evil designs: fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, acts of greed, acts of malice, deceit, licentiousness, envious eye, blasphemy, arrogance, reckless folly. All these wicked things come out from within and defile the person" (7:21-23). Thus, Mark eliminates ritual purity-defilement as a demarcation and draws a line between moral and immoral behavior as that which determines purity or pollution. Mark honors moral behavior coming from the inside rather than guarding against unclean things from the outside.

In the same way, the Markan Jesus gives place to moral behavior over against physical wholeness. Mark shows through the many healings that it is God's will to make people whole. Yet, rather than cause someone else to sin, it is better to cut off one's own hand and to enter the rule of God maimed than to have two hands and be thrown into Gehenna (9:42-49). Thus, physical wholeness is not a criterion for being acceptable to God; it is what comes out of the heart. This concern for morality over ritual purity and physical wholeness is evident in the "wise" statement of the scribe that loving God and the neighbor with the "whole" heart is more important than all the "whole" burnt offerings and sacrifices (pure animals without blemish, 12:32-33).

As such, the only maintenance Jesus recommends for the bodily boundary is for followers to do whatever they must do in order not to let harmful actions come out from the heart. One guards not the body but the heart so that what comes out of the heart is life-giving for others rather than destructive.

In summary, in Mark's narrative, the Jewish leaders erected and maintained boundaries to preserve holiness, and the Jewish followers of Jesus spread holiness outwardly—the good news of the kingdom, the power of the Spirit, and the loving deeds that come from within. In Mark's narrative, the leaders guarded the boundaries to prevent what was unholy from coming in, and the followers of Jesus overcame boundaries until they should reach the ends of the earth, a goal that Mark considered to be attainable within a generation after the death of Jesus (13:26-31).

We do not know how much Mark's portrayal accurately depicts the historical Jesus. Nor do we know if Mark's approach to boundaries reflects the realities of his own community. The approach to boundaries in Mark is somewhat unusual, even in early Christianity. Just as there were differing approaches to purity among groups in Judaism, so the early expressions of Christianity differed. For example, many early Christian communities considered baptism to be an important ritual of entrance. Also, both Paul (1 Cor 5:3-5) and Matthew (18:15-18) have procedures for expelling people from a Christian community. Thus, even if Christianity did begin as a movement of Jews who were boundary-crossing figures, the early churches soon consolidated and organized in order to survive as they spread into the larger Greco-Roman world. Nevertheless,

Mark offers the vision of a radical attitude toward boundaries inspired by the mission to bring the good news of healing and wholeness to all.

Conclusion

The extended example given here illustrates the various approaches presented at the beginning of this chapter.

1. *Social description.* We identified many customs, laws, and practices related to pollution and purity in first-century Palestine.
2. *Social history.* We saw to some extent how the approach to purity in Mark related to the social history of the times. We might also have shown how the conceptions of purity developed in the course of Israel's history and how they related to the social history of the larger Roman world.
3. *Worldview and social structure.* We showed "maps" that reveal how the ancient Jews organized their life together in terms of holiness and defilement. Also, we saw how the Markan Jesus sought to "convert" followers from their primary socialization regarding purity, defilement, and boundaries. Furthermore, we saw how the Markan attitude toward boundaries supported a social network oriented to mission.
4. *Cultural anthropology.* We employed models to help us interpret the social phenomena and to clarify the different attitudes to purity and boundaries evident in the narrative of Mark's Gospel.

The social study of the first-century seems like an overwhelming task. If you wish to pursue it, begin with one event or a single text, such as the Gospel of Mark. Find something there that puzzles and fascinates you—demons, tax collectors, the Temple, fasting, marriage and divorce, leprosy, attitudes to Gentiles, and so on. Then begin to explore this problem with the methods presented here. Many books available on daily life in the first-century give extensive social description. Many of the books cited here bring insights from cultural anthropology to bear upon the dynamics of first-century culture. You will discover other resources. Soon you find yourself unraveling a mystery or putting the pieces of a puzzle in place. Then you can go on to the next problem. Soon you find how pieces of the puzzle fit together into a larger picture. You are doing detective work on the first century. Although the task may seem endless, the delight comes from the process of exploration into another world and from the illumination of the biblical stories that results along the way.²⁹

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