

Approaching the New Testament as Source of Faith and Witness to Faith¹

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Hermeneutics is about more than homosexuality. But for many members of the Christian community the issue of biblical interpretation is defined in recent experience by such issues as whether to ordain people in an active homosexual relationship and, just slightly less recently, whether to ordain women as bishops or women at all. The list could be extended with the ever present caveat that such issues of dispute have a way of making themselves more central than they should be, creating not only problems of hermeneutics but also crises of identity. This is nothing new. Arguably early Christians' disputes over circumcision redefined the heart of Judaism for some then and since into unrecognisability.

I want to approach the theme of the conference: *The Task of Theology Today, Hermeneutics and the Authority of Scripture* by looking at *yesterday*, more particularly, by considering issues over hermeneutics back in New Testament times inasmuch as these can be gleaned with some degree of probability from its writings. I do so, nevertheless, as a task of theology *today*, hence my subtitle, which speaks of "the New Testament as a source of faith and Witness to Faith" because I am aware that such differences have sometimes been other than a celebration of diversity and instead been a site of pain and disease within the body. I do so as a white middle class reasonably well off western heterosexual male who therefore needs conversation with others.

Let me begin with Mark's retelling of the encounter between Jesus and some Pharisees who had come down from Jerusalem and were complaining that his disciples had eaten bread with unwashed hands (7:1-23). In a bald generalisation, which should not be statistically pressed, Mark explains that "all Jews" practice such lustrations, including immersing themselves after returning from the market, and ritually washing cups, pots, kettles, and possibly beds. Mark's locality may be the diaspora, but the narrative's locality, Galilee, coheres well with what we otherwise know of the scene, where holiness movements apparently had sufficiently broad influence to leave traces in archaeology of immersion pools and stone jars for purification. Mark has such strictures identified as the tradition of the elders. If the description of the practices itself does not already indicate some disparagement, the subsequent engagement is certainly confronting. It shows Jesus using Isa 29:13 to expose the disparity between such strictures and attitudes of the heart and in the same vein, and perhaps consequentially, identifies that such disparity leads also to injustice, as in the misuse of corban.

The challenge reaches its climax, marked by a special summoning of the hearers, in the declaration that nothing entering a person from outside can make them unclean, but only what comes from within. It effectively dismisses the presuppositions upon which the complaint and the various practices are based. Not only do such things not have this effect; they are also not able to have this effect. This is stating the obvious and perhaps with literal pungency, if what the disciples then call a parable can be reduced to: what stinks is not what enters but what comes out. It is not stating the

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obvious in all settings, including, apparently for the disciples who seek further clarification in a sequence of public statement and private elaboration typical of Mark's anecdotes and perhaps reflecting prior didactic use of the stories. As elsewhere in Mark the disciples are shown as not seeing the obvious before the explanation follows which now returns the focus to food, the stomach and the toilet. The climax declares that real impurity is what comes from the heart or mind: attitudes which produce immoral and unethical behaviour, matching the emphasis of the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount.

In the midst of this explanation Mark seemingly appends a parenthesis: καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα, which means literally: "cleansing all foods". Some manuscripts read καθαρίζον a neuter participle which would then be describing what happens when food goes through us and into the toilet. The far better attested reading refers to what Jesus was doing. In the broader context of Mark it is a typical reference to Jesus' authority. As elsewhere, in the immediate context we see that it is more than an authoritative assertion. It summarises the import of an argument. This scarcely means that Jesus was literally at that point cleansing foods or that Jesus was initiating a change of rules. In its context it might be paraphrased as saying: Jesus showed that all foods are clean. No foods are unclean. Why? Because, it should be obvious, foods cannot make people unclean; they simply enter the stomach and then go out into the toilet.

Mark's hearers might have seen the implications as relating to a range of issues. The immediate context assumes some kind of contamination of foods from unwashed hands and other unclean items. The saying which speaks of nothing external suggests the range of broader concerns with impurity, including food. For some, the issues of categories of clean and unclean animals may have sprung to mind or meat bought at the market which more than likely derived from pagan temples. In the broader context of Mark 6 – 8, where food features as a common motif and the focus is on Jews and non-Jews, dealing with issues of external purity especially in relation to foods was highly relevant. It removed potential barriers between Jews and non-Jews. Mark and his predecessors were probably aware of the problems which such barriers caused. We are fortunate to have Paul's account of the division over common meals at Antioch. As it stands Mark's narrative employs the feeding of the 5000, replete with symbolism of Israel, and the feeding of 4000 non-Jews in non-Jewish land as a celebration of the food of the gospel reaching both.

When at its conclusion Mark has Jesus test the disciples' perception of the obvious again, having recalled the numbers of baskets of left-overs, 12 and 7, they fail (8:14-21), but Mark's hearers surely do see and appreciate the irony of Mark's sequel to that episode which reports Jesus healing a man who was blind and dumb (8:22-26). Mark had done something similar earlier when he immediately followed our anecdote about clean and unclean with the risqué account of Jesus' meeting with a Syro-Phoenician woman, a non-Jew, his voicing the traditional demarcation, and then his crossing the boundary in responding to her cry (7:24-30). Mark's narrative celebrates what Ephesians describes as the breaking down of the barrier between Jew and Gentile: "For he is our peace, who in his flesh has made both one and broken down the dividing wall, the enmity, having abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace" (2:14-15).

This sounds all very straightforward, but it is far from being so. The quotation from Ephesians might alert us to the fact that we are dealing here with more than Jewish scruples. We are dealing with scripture. That is certainly the implication in Mark. In

Mark's depiction Jesus is declaring clean what the scriptures declare unclean and doing so because the notion that external foods can make a person unclean simply doesn't make sense. A combination of rational argument, reflecting popular critique of religious scruples, and Jesus' authority warrants calling into question biblical law about external impurity. But biblical law about purity and impurity related to externals is extensive and foundational to the temple cult but also much else. Space forbids me here to show how this coheres with Mark's approach elsewhere. For him the temple is a place of prayer. Gentile land is not unclean. It is important to be clear: Mark is not saying that Jesus declares that these laws were once valid and have now been superseded, but rather that they never were valid in the first place, as allegedly something which should be "obvious"

An approach that combined popular rational argument about "the obvious" and Jesus' authority to set aside large sections of scripture was just as much likely to evoke controversy then as it does now. The refrains, "The Bible is the Word of God: How can you set aside Scripture? You are watering down Scripture to placate people", have a long history, reaching far back into the early days of the church. Not everyone then or now would want to go along with Mark.

Matthew didn't, but Matthew loved Mark's portrait of Jesus otherwise, making it, as I still assume as the most viable explanation, the grid for his own expanded presentation. On the one hand, his own orientation, perhaps reflecting a predominantly Jewish setting where Christian Jews had sought unsuccessfully to establish a Jesus scribal tradition as the norm for the synagogue, did not sit comfortably with the idea that anything should be set aside. On the other hand, he also employed traditions, commonly identified as Q, which plainly declared that not a stroke of the law was to fall and that any who taught as much – as some obviously did – would be called least in the kingdom (5:17-19). Matthew's and Q's perspective is well represented in the saying about tithes: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others" (23:23; Luke 11:42)). In Matthew's hermeneutical stance nothing is set aside, not even tithing herbs, which takes biblical law to the extreme, but priorities are set and, if need be, some may override others.

Accordingly, Matthew's version of the encounter between Jesus and the critics over his disciples' eating with unwashed hands deletes Mark's global explanation at the beginning, deletes Mark's summary of the import of the conversation (15:1-20), and in the wider context unravels Mark's celebration of Jews and Gentiles receiving the food of the gospel; the 4000 now seem to be Jews in Jewish land; and Jesus no longer asks the disciples about the number of baskets, but focuses instead on the impact of the miracles. Matthew has the controversy now end with the conclusion that there is no need to eat with unwashed hands (16:5-12). The effect is to produce a reading of the story according to which it remains a dispute about Jewish scruples and is not about biblical law. Accordingly, while Matthew still had a version of the saying about food entering the body and retains the explanations which depict its destiny, the contrast is now not an absolute one, but a relative one. It might be paraphrased: not so much what enters a person's mouth makes them unclean as what comes out of it. You still attend to biblical laws about clean and unclean just as you do to tithing, but you need to see where the priority lies. The contrast matches Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy not sacrifice", understood not as meaning: I do not want sacrifice, but as: I desire mercy and compassion more than sacrifice, a common theme and common meaning of such contrasts in Jewish tradition. Matthew's hermeneutical move – or if you

favour Matthew's independence, Matthew's distinctive stance – represents a model which affirms scripture without exception but differentiates within it. The focus is attitude rather than just behaviours and that attitude is characterised by compassion and righteousness (meaning something close to compassion in Matthew). It is on not imposing unduly heavy burdens in applying scripture to life and bearing the yoke (cf. 11:28-30; 23:2-4). Thus, according to Matthew, in a nice twist of Mark's saying, Jesus taught with authority and not as *their* scribes (7:29; cf. Mark 1:22). Jesus is the scribe par excellence (cf. 13:52).

It is perhaps not surprising that Luke, who, I assume, also inherits Q, must have also encountered Mark 7 with hesitation. In Acts his Paul is Torah observant to the end despite rumours asserting the opposite (Acts 20:20-22). Luke's comment that the law and the prophets were under assault and now the same is happening to the kingdom of God (Luke 16:16) does not in my view dismiss the former, as some have thought. Rather it finds its explanation in his version of the saying about the Law's sanctity, losing not a stroke of its validity (16:17), and a severe exposition of the divorce law to reinforce the point (16:18). His setting seems other than Matthew's and he is probably writing as a Gentile in a predominantly Gentile context but also with a keen awareness of Jewish Christianity and mixed groups. Issues of continuity both ways – with Israel and with his church – and unity are paramount. What does Luke do with Mark 7 and its context?

Either he had a copy in which these sections were happily lost or, more likely, he chose to omit them. The silent treatment does not last because in Acts he revisits the issues. He cannot help but acknowledge that some elements of scripture's abiding demands were set aside – notably circumcision – yet by special divine intervention for a significantly changed situation, but the rest remained. Luke depicts the early Christians' links with the temple as very positive and accusations to the contrary as quite wrong. Peter's vision sounds like the setting aside of food laws, at least pertaining to clean and unclean animals, and perhaps it did mean that in earlier retellings (Acts 10:9-16). In Luke's retelling the point appears to be not food at all but people: no person is unclean; therefore it is acceptable to enter Gentile homes and eat with them (10:17, 28, 34). Unfortunately, the extent of Luke's meaning, whether he affirms Mark's point or avoids it, is, to me, at this stage unclear. I am inclined on balance to align Luke with Matthew's hermeneutics. The alternative is to posit a degree of inconsistency in Luke-Acts which I think less likely.

I find what the Q tradition preserves of Jesus' stance towards the Law to be coherent with what I find elsewhere in widely recognised early material. In other words, if the anecdote which has come into Mark 7 has its origins in an encounter during Jesus' ministry, as, I think, is the case with many of his anecdotes, even if in a less elaborated form, then its chief saying on the lips of Jesus would have meant: not so much what enters a person makes them unclean as what exits them. It has the twofold playful structure characteristic of so many such sayings attributed to Jesus and like many of them probably intended the humour which some will have sniffed. Beside the argument from coherence within the early sayings attributed to Jesus is also an argument from coherence within his and subsequent history. Had Jesus advocated setting scripture aside absolutely in this way, with or without the supplementary arguments, which may be secondary, that would have been extremely unusual within the diverse Judaism of the time and highly offensive, such that one would have expected it among charges levelled against him, not least in his trial. Despite arguments to the contrary, it is also hard to understand the heat of such

controversy in the early church among believers, including Peter and James, had Jesus ruled so clearly on such matters.

Without being able to rehearse what requires an examination of a wide range of evidence, I conclude in summary that Jesus was Torah-observant, and that controversies arose over interpretation, including under what circumstances one priority might override another. In that sense the tradition of Matthew and Luke (and Q) accurately depict a hermeneutical stance which was affirming scripture, but differentiated within it. The impression one has from Mark and Mark's anecdotes, which may also be accurate, is that issues of conflict over Law arose mainly incidentally, while Jesus was doing something else. Jesus' announcement of God's coming reign and his claim to bring its reality already to some extent into his world through his exorcisms, healing, and engagement with people, were his focal point, not interpretation of biblical law. He stood in a prophetic and wisdom tradition which will have shaped both what he said about hope and its present reality and what he said when challenged about his behaviour. His cryptic quips, which represent that tradition, were, like his parables, universal enough to evoke parallels, indeed until quite recently for some to allege Cynic links, and to enable people then and now to find a hermeneutical core set of values with which to face new situations.

The stance of Jesus (and Matthew, Luke, and Q) had a long history in Hebrew thought, including not only its prophetic and wisdom but also its legal heritage. It was and is good Judaism. Circumcise your hearts not just your genitals – is a strong tradition. This was, however, for some rather problematic. We may recognise this if we consider the question about the greatest commandment and what comes second (cf. Mark 12:29-30). A very natural reading of the commandment to love God is that you keep God's commandments. God's commandments are to be kept. It is not for us to differentiate among them, which amounts to us standing at a distance and imposing our value system on God. Some might describe this as fundamentalism, but, even if we tolerate the loose anachronism and recognise the similarities, we are probably identifying a more complex phenomenon. According to this way of thinking there is an established system, a divine order. Some, indeed, reinforced it with their primitive science: as the heavenly bodies move in order, so God provides order for all of life. Stoic notions of order would also lend support. Such systems of thinking are complex and meet us in many forms. They may survive among many indigenous cultures where we notice that our distinctions between ethical and ritual or ceremonial law are not recognised. The harmony of these ordered worlds is sacrosanct. It remains intact. To violate it at any point is to violate the whole. Such systems often survive best in isolation without the relativising effects of colliding with other such systems.

It would be reductionist and inaccurate to suggest that Galilean Judaism was like this. It may, however, enable us to enter more empathetically into its world and into our own where such phenomena occur. It is also doubtful that there are any purely closed systems. Nevertheless, one could see that any fracturing of the system would create crises of identity and accompanying anxiety, fear or rage. Within the Judaism of the time of Jesus we have diverse phenomena. We may assume that for many the differentiation between ethical and ritual or ceremonial law would not have been meaningful. Some holiness movements appear to have sought to bring greater refinement to the system in the name of keeping God's order. Our controversy about washing hands reflects these developments in Galilee. In a diaspora environment such thinking would operate in a strongly defensive mode, especially where Jewish identity was under threat. It is, to my mind, a mistake to focus only on a few identity markers,

like circumcision, sabbath, and food. Something much larger was at stake and it expressed itself above all as commitment to Torah observance.

Yet alongside this response were others which embodied very different perspectives. At the simplest level, seeing that other systems exist beside my own and are espoused just as firmly as I espouse mine, can send me into defensive retreat. Or it can make me ask questions. We still see the benefits of people's exposure to other cultures today. One of the main effects can be to begin to differentiate within my tradition, between what I see as perhaps just our way of doing things and what I see as of fundamental value. The latter may represent common values I find in other cultures, but need not. Much has been written about these processes and their manifestation in many parts of the ancient world when cultural interchange became more intense, from China to India, Israel to Greece, especially from the sixth century BCE on. The hierarchies of value celebrated in the prophets stem in part from such encounters. They help us make sense of seemingly irreverent questions like: what is the greatest commandment?

Jesus stands within such emerging traditions, probably as a result of exposure to turbulence and hope within his own Jewish traditions, rather than through contact with foreign cultures towards which his responses are mostly rather conservative. While I think there are signs that his vision included Gentiles, his primary focus was hope for his own people and engaging them now with the promise of the future and its forms of realisation in the present. This set his priorities, which inevitably clashed with those who took the total divine system approach, or who espoused other priorities. His priorities he claimed directly and indirectly were God's priorities. So the sabbath was made for people not people for the sabbath (Mark 2:27) and in most of his responses we see a theology at work, in the strictest sense, which portrayed God not as primarily concerned with the sanctity of the divine system of laws, but as concerned with bringing men and women back to a relationship with each other and with God which created a community of compassion and caring, a foretaste of future hope. While his images and sayings reflect biblical tradition, many of his responses in quip and parable stand more in the wisdom tradition of appealing to the obvious of human experience, including about human incomings and outgoings. The theological common sense of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan is like much in the wisdom tradition, universal.

So where did Mark go wrong? Or did he? While some think Mark depends on Paul, I see only an indirect connection, if there is one at all. I don't think Paul would have answered the rich man's inquiry about eternal life by pointing to the commandments (cf. Mark 10:17-22). Paul, however, meets us from the early days of the movement when Christianity was confronted with a transposing of Jesus' hermeneutical issues into a new key and a more acute problem. They had to face some issues which apparently Jesus never faced. Do we proclaim the good news of the kingdom, and now Jesus' involvement in it as the Messiah, to Gentiles? Addressing Gentile sympathisers attending synagogues was unavoidable. But do we go to them directly? In any case, what do we do with them? The answer here was obvious because Israel had long experience in dealing with foreigners, especially when they joined their communities. You circumcise them and require them to observe all biblical laws pertaining to Gentiles (Gen 17:10-14).

That, all, should have been straightforward. But it wasn't. Both Luke's later account and Paul's first hand account enable us to see that this was far from a peaceful symposium on hermeneutics. Those who held consistently to the biblical position mounted their missions, invaded places where Paul had been active and

dogged him for the rest of his letter life. The others agreed to waive circumcision, leaving themselves open to the charge that this was a cheap ploy to win converts and a betrayal of scripture. The rationale appears to have been a combination of claiming divine guidance and seeing this as compassionate. In many places and times such argumentation has wobbled considerably. But even those who agreed on this could not agree on other matters. It is a wonder that the movement survived. Some took the stance that all of scripture's demand remained intact with only certain exceptions. Defining the exceptions was problematic. We can see at least a more conservative James, brother of Jesus, in itself an interesting reflection on the movement's starting point; Peter, who seems more open, but under pressure bows to James; Paul; and, beyond him: some who seemed to have abandoned scripture altogether.

We are so fortunate to have the letters of Paul, which enable us to see elements of his stance. The occasional nature of his correspondence is a blessing: we can see theology in practice; and a challenge: he sometimes appears to make conflicting statements which have generated diverse reconstructions of his stance, no less today than earlier. My reading is that Paul saw himself standing firmly within the tradition of his people. He was sensitive to the charge that he had abandoned them and defended himself with passion and a range of arguments culminating in the assertion of faith that all Israel would be saved, but that how was a mystery in God's hands. I think he sustains his stance consistently that Christians, Jews and Gentiles, are not under the Law, but defends that stance against the view he is thereby doing away with the Law, that is, the scripture, a charge doubtless laid against him along with others that his stance encouraged lawlessness. People could easily have cited Corinth as a case in point.

In Romans in particular Paul claims that Christians uphold the law. They do so however as a result of walking in the Spirit, which produces love in them, which more than fulfils the demands of the law since it is, indeed, how one might summarise the law. Paul can only do so by affirming some things but denying others. Thus he employs what in biblical and Jewish tradition were relative contrasts, about circumcision of the heart mattering more than literal circumcision, and true inward Judaism as opposed to outward Judaism, and turns them into absolute contrasts. Now we leave the outward Judaism behind. Jews (and many Christian Jews) would have seen this as a long way from upholding the Law. Paul argues in his own way from scripture to justify his case, partly to cite the example of Abraham, who became for him a model of faith without the law, and partly by arguing that God has initiated a change in covenant history, so that whereas the Law applied until Christ, after Christ it no longer does so.

This, we should note, is different from Mark's argumentation that external purity laws never made sense anyway. Paul's arguments are complex and at times he appears to come close to disparaging the external, but stops short. We find a similar tension in Hebrews, which similarly espouses a change in covenant history, but can also describe the old as useless with its external focus. While the fourth gospel also has Jesus declare that the flesh does not profit and deems the old order given through Moses to have been God's gift at the level of flesh only until Christ, it never disparages the old in itself. It disparages those who continue with it and fail to see that its only role now is to be a body of witness to Christ.

So, back to Paul and Paul's hermeneutics, what accounts for the shift? Was it that his christology alone dictated it? But then others who proclaimed Christ saw no need to set scripture aside. I suspect that the issues are much wider than Paul and belong to some crucial theologising done when the new movement encountered Gentile

followers. Unlike the toll collectors and sinners, who were children of Abraham, these were Gentiles. I suspect nevertheless that the same priority given to compassion which overrode other concerns about impurity and immoral company during the ministry of Jesus, now overrode similar concerns about Gentiles. The key shift came when incidental overriding became permanent, effectively setting aside certain biblical commandments. In some ways the less defined laws about unholy company were much more problematic than circumcision, but arguably compassion motivated the change. Beside this, other factors were doubtless at work, including a relativising of particularisms of the Jewish system: special days, special places, special foods. None of it would have happened without a christology which saw God in Christ and a theology which saw God as compassionate and reconciling with firms roots in scripture. Once the move was made, secondary rationalisation and reflection promoted larger solutions and for Paul led to a radically new basis for ethics and for law now thoroughly christocentric. Driving it ultimately, as with Jesus, was not scribal tradition but prophetic hope and a theology informed by the theology of Jesus.

Let me briefly draw some conclusions and ask some questions. The New Testament collection embraces a diversity of approaches to scripture, but not a wild one. Informing both the relativising approach of Matthew, Luke, Q, and ultimately Jesus, and the adaptive and selective approach of Paul and Mark and related traditions is a theology of grace. Both stand in conflict with a tradition of intricate divine order based on a theology of sustaining a system, applied now to the New Testament or to the whole Bible. All live on today, in their own way. One might argue that if our collected New Testament writings can embrace the diversity between the first two, it can do so today, but both need to engage the dangers of the third approach, addressing its fears and opening alternative ways. The age old effects of exposure to other systems which creatively relativises one's own and sends one seeking what matters most and seeing the wood for the trees can still be realised – and needs to be, even more urgently today among the macro-systems of major religions and cultures.

As for the other two models of hermeneutics, both function best when as with Jesus their task becomes incidental to the larger vision of the breaking in of the kingdom, including its good news for the poor, compassion for all people, reconciliation of all with God and with one another in peace. For people have a way of finding in these scriptures a source for their faith and hope or missing it despite the best efforts of those seeking to employ hermeneutics to determine ethics. That vision, represented in the eucharistic feast, and ultimately in the being of God, needs to be the starting point of every hermeneutical enterprise, to which we come as women, as men, as rich, as poor, as culturally diverse, as experientially distinct, seeking hope and peace. For me that means critical engagement with the witnesses of faith in the scriptures informed by what I seek to identify as its core and doing so in the confidence that these continue to bear life and hope in our world.