

Food for Thought

Nothing separates or divides people like food – the opposite is also true; nothing unites people like food. Imagine organising a party at a restaurant where some of the guests have special food requirements, for example vegan (nothing against vegans just using them as a case study). Jewish food laws are even more onerous as they relate not only to the type of food allowed but even to how that food is prepared. So, even if offered the right kind of food (say a beef burger) it still does not meet dietary requirements as being “kosher” because it has not been prepared correctly. It still might be “unclean” because it was perhaps prepared with utensils that had been used for milk products. Let us say that cheese and burgers are grilled on the same grill plate. Perhaps the cheese is made from milk that belongs to the mother of the “beef” burger. In that case it breaks the prohibition: *“Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk”* (Exod 34:26). It is the one in a quadrillion chance that an animal might be accidentally cooked in its mothers’ milk that lies at the back of kosher food preparation. Of course, this is typical of following the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law. The prohibition in Exodus was against deliberate (not accidental) preparation and is obviously based on some sort of Canaanite fertility rite whereby a young animal is deliberately stewed in its own mothers’ milk. This was obviously an abomination to God.

However, the Talmud has weaponized this commandment not because they are afraid of displeasing God but because it reinforces Jewish exclusivity.¹ Nothing separates Jew and Gentile like the Jewish food laws. They are even more stringent than Muslim food laws. The reason that this article is written is because a recent reading of Acts 10 as the lesson at the Eucharist (breaking of bread) set me thinking and offered some wonderful insights that I believe most commentators have missed. This will take some explaining but bear with me as it clarifies the Jewish mindset towards gentiles.

Cornelius

Acts 10 is the story of faithful Cornelius and of Peter’s reluctance to mix with gentiles who although “God fearers” and “righteous” were uncircumcised and did not eat kosher food. The most important take away from Peter’s vision is the reference to “common and unclean” because this means that even the clean animals had become contaminated by their contact with the unclean animals. So, even if Peter had chosen, let’s say a lamb, he could not eat it because there were also swine on the same “sheet”, and they may have

¹ The first time the circumcision covenant was offered to Gentiles the priestly tribe (Levi) used it to murder them. Even Jacob was appalled by this behaviour (Gen 34:30). The point is that they were not prepared to admit a Gentile into their community and abused the covenant of circumcision to gain personal revenge for being dishonoured even though the prince of Shechem loved their sister and was willing to serve Yahweh.

come into contact. Of course, in the real-world lambs and swine do encounter each other and “clean” animals in the field do sometimes come into contact with “unclean” animals, whether that be through their droppings, or through a dead corpse (which contaminates everything) etc. The point is that God called his whole creation “very good” (Gen 1:31). God did not say.....this part is “very good” ...and this part is “dirty rubbish”.

Peter is told not to call anything God has made “common or unclean” (Acts 10:15,28). This seems to completely contradict the Law, after-all it was God himself in the holiness code that deliberated what should be considered clean and what unclean. The creative narrative is about **separating** (light from dark, waters below from waters above etc) and Exodus-Leviticus about “holiness” – don’t mix crops, don’t eat unclean food, don’t marry gentiles. The emphasis was on separation. The Jews were a chosen race destined to be kings and priests. God was holy therefore his servants must be holy and not partake of the evil practices of the gentile nations (child sacrifice etc). However, now God is telling Peter the opposite? It is OK to mix it up. Nothing unclean.... go eat with those gentiles. Huh?

The point is that the Jews misunderstood that the Laws of clean and unclean were not meant as a sign of their supremacy or their holiness but of **God’s holiness**. Peter is told that God had cleansed the Gentiles; “*What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common*” (Acts 10:15). The Gentiles needed to be made clean and God had done this, but the Jews also required cleansing. While outwardly pure they were (and are still) full of extortion and excess (Matt 23:25) everything they offered God was unclean (Hag 2:14) they were an unclean people (Isa 6:5). It was the suffering servant who would heal and cleanse them, in fact, he would “*sprinkle many nations*” (Isa 52:15).

It was not good enough for them to stand on their descent from Abraham or on their food Laws or on mutilating a piece of their flesh. **That did not make them a superior people.** Their religion **was not exclusive** for even Abraham had been told that all nations would be blessed through the Christ. And the priesthood by descent (inheritance) would also be replaced by the Melchizedekian priesthood and the temple would be replaced by Jesus Christ. This does not mean that the nation itself would be replaced or that the law or Covenants would disappear but that they would find their true home in Christ.

The Jerusalem Council

The disappointing thing is that the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was meant to resolve the problem of Jewish food laws and circumcision. According to the council those rites were no

longer necessary for gentiles and there was henceforth nothing preventing a Jew and a gentile from sharing a meal together. This was a very important decision because the breaking of bread or “Agape feast” was a joint meal shared by everyone. Can you imagine two separate meals? One “breaking of bread” for Jews and one for gentiles?

What amazes me is that after the “Cornelius vision” and after the “council of Jerusalem”, Peter was still persuaded to stop eating with gentiles. How is that possible? Peter had the holy spirit and he was not stupid. He only ceased from his hypocritical behaviour when Paul confronted him and challenged him to his face in front of everyone (Gal 2.14-16). Such was the humility of Peter that he accepted the reprimand. It is important to understand that this idea of Jewish superiority is so ingrained that even Peter could not resist.

What happened?

To a man all the commentators fail to make the connection with **John Mark** and the argument between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15. Why do all the commentators fail to make this important connection?

Acts 15:36-41 ³⁶ And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, *and see* how they do. ³⁷ And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. ³⁸ But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. ³⁹ And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; ⁴⁰ And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.

We shall shortly present the case that **John Mark** was the author of the **Gospel of Mark** (the first Gospel) and that John Mark was Peter’s biographer and knew Peter closely, and that he was initially opposed to fraternizing with the Gentiles. We will argue that the “certain from James” was a veiled reference to John Mark:

Galatians 2:12-13 ¹² For before that certain (John Mark) came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. ¹³ And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.

Before we progress let us state that later in his ministry Paul speaks fondly of Barnabas and John Mark. Also, and very importantly (to be examined anon) **the Gospel of Mark became the most Pro-Gentile**. So, apparently John-Mark saw the error of his ways and wrote the first inclusive Gospel. However, this demonstrates how difficult it was for the Jew to accept that God had turned his mercy towards gentile dogs. The world had truly gone mad! They were the chosen race. The Father slaughters the fatted calf for the prodigal son? How dare the Father extend mercy to those who had not earned it through onerous Law keeping. Had it all been for nothing? All this time I have refused cheeseburgers and bacon and self-mutilated and I am no better than them???

John Mark

Of course, the case is circumstantial, but all the pieces fall neatly into place. The commentators say that the big argument between Paul and Barnabas occurred because John Mark abandoned them at Pamphylia;

“Now when Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John departing from them returned to Jerusalem” (Acts 13:13).

That seems like a bit of an over-reaction. Perhaps John-Mark had a weak constitution, or the going was too tough. However, other considerations show that his leaving them **for Jerusalem** was much more serious. The theory that I am presenting is that it was John Mark who brought a bad report back to the elders (James et al) at Jerusalem; “That Paul... he shares meals with the uncircumcised. He doesn’t even wash his hands. I saw him eat a cheeseburger with bacon once. We Jews must do something about this. We will lose our place in the scheme of things. We are the teachers of the blind and the instructor of babes. We have the Law. Jesus is a Jewish Messiah. Jesus kept the whole Law. We can’t carry on like this. Call Paul to Jerusalem and do something about it now!”

Even HAW notices that something is wrong² although he does not put his finger on it; “The guesses of the commentators, that John Mark had feared persecution, or had taken a dislike to the work, or, unused to being a long time away from home, had been stricken with homesickness, are all disposed off by Luke’s distinctly censorious phrase; he apostalized from them (Paul and Barnabas)³. There can be no doubt that in this difference of opinion Paul was entirely in the right. This is plainly indicated by the fact that when these two fine

² H.A. Whittaker, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, (Biblia, 1985), 232-233

³ This word (apostilized) seems to be Harry’s own invention. The actual Greek root word in Acts 15:39 (and in 13:13) is apochorizo (ἀποχωρίζω) used twice translated as – “they departed asunder” this is followed by a double mention of apo (ἀπό) “one from the other”. Harry is correct in seeing this as the opposite of the apostolic mission (one who is sent): Apostolos (ἀπόστολος).

men dissolved the partnership and went each their own way, it was to Paul and Silas that the Spirit-guided elders of the Antioch ecclesia gave their blessing (compare 14:26); whereas there seems to be a hint of self-assertion about the way Barnabas took Mark, and sailed away to Cyprus. The narrative gives no hint of commendation to his project". Harry goes on to say that they should have managed to settle the problem. However, sometimes that is not possible, and Paul stood on principle (rightly so). It seems that, in time John Mark saw the error of his ways (no doubt due to Paul's prayers) and became the famous Gospel writer! This was a **full-blown quarrel**, the Greek uses the word **paroxysm**, which in English means a "sudden recurrence of a disease" or an "outburst of emotional activity" (we might say a tantrum or a fit). In any case Paul was not going to take someone along who would undermine his work, who was not prepared to eat with gentiles and who carried tales back to Jerusalem.

John Mark forgiven

There can be no doubt that John Mark repented and was forgiven (1 Cor 9:6, 2Tim 4:11, Col 4:10). He became a very important Gospel writer and a **champion of Jewish inclusiveness**. God does indeed work in mysterious ways and it seems that just as Saul of Tarsus required "conversion" so also John Mark required full conversion before he understood the **universal implications of the Gospel**.

Most scholars reject the tradition which ascribes the Gospel of Mark to John Mark, the companion of the apostle Peter, and regard it (and the other gospels) as anonymous, the work of an unknown author working with various sources including collections of miracle stories, controversy stories, parables, and a passion narrative. Then again, most scholars are usually wrong (LOL). So much for consensus opinion. Early church tradition has John Mark acting as "Peter's interpreter" (Eusebius *Hist.Eccl.*6.14; cf 2:15 citing Papias c. AD 120/30). John Mark was the son of Mary to whose house Peter went after the angel freed him from the prison in Jerusalem: "So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying" (Acts 12:12). Peter is mentioned frequently in Mark's gospel. For example, the story of Peter's sick mother being healed by Jesus (Mark 1:30) is only recorded by Mark and it is obviously based on Peter's personal memories. So, in modern parlance John-Mark and Peter were mates. John-Mark was also the cousin of Barnabas, so he was well connected. Barnabas himself was probably a priest (so HAW) with property holdings in Cyprus thus circumventing the letter of the Law regarding priests owning property in the land of Israel (HAW argues that Barnabas was the rich young man addressed by Jesus). We can see then that when John-Mark reports back from Jerusalem to his mate Peter he must have berated him for eating "cheeseburgers" with the uncircumcised. We can imagine that Peter must have replied that this was in accordance with his vision and with the council decision.

However, the serpent is nothing but subtle. John-Mark must have replied – yes, I agree with you, but you must know that the “meat” has been polluted by idols. The council said we must abstain from **meat polluted by idols**. Our gentile brethren buy meat at the shambles where it is dedicated to “foreign gods” before it is slaughtered. Its not that the meat itself is unclean but that it has been dedicated to another god. It is therefore an abomination. Better play safe and eat separately (although in principle we all agree with you).

You see, that is how it goes with laws that do not follow the spirit but follow the letter. There are always **loopholes**. John Mark’s arguments must have seemed persuasive. Peter stopped eating “cheeseburgers” with the Gentiles until Paul turned up. The policy of Paul became “don’t ask, don’t tell” -- I will not ask where you bought the meat for the cheeseburger and you will not tell me. In fact, we will both give thanks to God for providing us with delicious food. End of story. But if you tell me you bought the burger meat in Satan’s butcher shop, I will not eat it or share a meal with you.

The point of this story is that Jewish exclusivity is ingrained. It is and was an unconscious racial bias even for the apostles. Any and all reasons must be sought to hold onto the belief in Jewish superiority.

The Gentile Gospel

Now is not the time or place to argue the primacy of Mark’s Gospel, or the date, or the synoptic problem etc. Suffice to say that it is the first Gospel, that it is early and that is fundamental to how the other Gospel’s are composed. In other words, it was hugely influential. It is also very **pro-Gentile**. John -Mark has come full circle in his understanding.

Here follows an abstract from a recent book on the subject: ⁴

This ground-breaking study argues that, in the Gospel of Mark, Gentiles are recipients of Jesus' compassion and are typically depicted as desperate individuals who exhibit faith and understanding.

Mark's arrangement of the sequence of Gentile episodes is progressive and envisions a theological reversal in the kingdom of God, a re-prioritization in the proclamation of the gospel message that coincides with the death of Jesus. After receiving Gentiles in the Jewish homeland (3:7-12), the Markan Jesus initiates four excursions into Gentile territory. The first

⁴ Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark, 'Even the Dogs Under the Table Eat the Children's Crumbs'
By: Kelly Iverson, (T&T Clark, 2007)

journey (5:1-20) is preparatory and opens the door for future ministry in Gentile regions. Jesus symbolically cleanses the land and the healed demoniac becomes the first missionary to Gentiles. The second journey (6:45-52) ends prematurely when the disciples fail to understand the Gentile mission, leading inexorably to the third journey where the relationship between Jews, Gentiles, and the kingdom of God becomes the focal point of the narrative. Although the Jews are first, the Gentiles are not excluded from the kingdom. On the fourth journey the reader senses a subtle re-prioritization in the kingdom as an event on Gentile soil occurs before its parallel counterpart on Jewish soil, reversing an established narrative pattern in Jesus' ministry.

Iverson shows how the theological reversal gains clarity when the narrative shifts to Jerusalem. The tearing of the temple curtain marks the dawn of a new era and links the temple and Gentile themes. Through Jesus' obedient self-gift, he becomes the new temple providing universal access to God for all people's depiction of the centurion is a narrative signal that the kingdom has been passed to Gentiles according to the divine plan. The Jews have not been excluded; any more than the Gentiles were when Israel was first. Mark's theological reversal looks proleptically beyond the story line to the completion of the Gentile mission by the followers of Jesus.

Furthermore, much of the action in Mark happens in "Galilee of the Gentiles"⁵ as it was the Gentile region of great darkness that (according to the prophets) would see a "Great Light".

All foods are clean

So, in the end, John-Mark becomes the champion of the Gentiles and invents (under the guidance of the Spirit) the literary genre of the Gospel, a master piece and a template used by the synoptics. Remarkable.

"Thus, he declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19)⁶

⁵ *Galilee and Galileans in St Mark's Gospel*. Boobyer, G H. Bulletin of the John Rylands Library. 1953;35(2):334-348 <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c776/68e3c79360436e77fd9e6f4743f2b7179dbb.pdf>

⁶ The verb *katharizo* means both "to declare to be clean" and "to purify." The Scholars Version has: "This is how everything we eat is purified", Gaus' Unvarnished New Testament has: "purging all that is eaten."

This is not just about food, (cheeseburgers with bacon or otherwise) but about people. There are no “unclean” or “common” people –we are all made in the image of God. This is about the Jewish attitude of superiority. Paul declares they were privileged in every way but in the words of the (Spiderman movie?) with great power comes great responsibility.... or better still the apostle....” unto who much is given much is required”. So, the Jews are not superhuman (they created all the superhero cartoon characters), they may well be a privileged people and a chosen race with a special destiny, but they have also been very naughty. Unless they have a conversion like Saul of Tarsus or John-Mark there is big trouble ahead. And the millions of Christian-Zionists who sycophantically support Israel are as wrong as John-Mark was before his epiphany.