

# FACT SHEET ON DIETARY LAWS

Jesus and his disciples were observant Jews who adhered to Jewish dietary laws (Lev 11: 1-23; Deut 14:1–21). These dietary laws continued to be observed by the earliest messianic (“Christian”) communities since their membership was comprised exclusively of Jews and table fellowship was central to their communal life. After ca., 40 CE, some communities began accepting gentiles with a conviction that the God of Israel would ultimately embrace all nations. These gentiles had attended synagogues but now committed to worshipping the God of Israel exclusively by renouncing all allegiances to pagan deities and practices (1 Thess 1:9b–10). Since pagan temples were centers of dining and meat processing, Jewish food laws sharpened their consciousness of what abandoning paganism entailed.

MISREPRESENTATIONS	CORRECTIONS
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 1:</b> Jesus did not strictly adhere to the Jewish dietary laws.	<b>CORRECTION:</b> Jesus and his circle of disciples observed the Jewish dietary laws. Nowhere in the gospels do his critics accuse him or his followers of eating food that these laws prohibit (Lev 11:1–23; Deut 14:1–21). The disciples, but not Jesus himself, were criticized for not fasting (as did the disciples of John the Baptizer). Jesus dined in the homes of Pharisees but did not enter the homes of gentiles, let alone share a meal with them.
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 2:</b> Once gentiles were recognized as members of a community, Jews welcomed them to community meals.	<b>CORRECTION:</b> In Antioch, Paul admonished Peter when, in deference to James, he and Barnabas no longer took their meals with gentile community members (Gal 2:11–13). Paul’s reaction implies that James viewed Jews and gentiles as two distinct units within one community. Paul, for his part, portrays gentiles in Christ as now belonging to the Israel of God. Israel is God’s son and Jews have known God as “Father” by election (Exod 4:22). Gentiles endowed with the Spirit are joining this family as derivative “children of God,” with the capacity to address God as “Abba.” This is the effect of a cosmic transformation in its initial stages (Gal 3:26, 28; 4:6–7; 6:16).
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 3:</b> When, under the direction of James, the Council in Jerusalem (50 CE) authorized the messianic communities to accept gentile members, there was universal agreement on the dietary laws that gentiles had to observe.	<b>CORRECTION:</b> The Council decreed that gentile community members had to adhere to four laws: by avoiding foods contaminated by idolatry, fornication, animals that were improperly butchered, and anything containing blood (Acts 15:19–21; cf. 15: 28–29). Apparently, Paul was not apprised of this decision as he invited gentiles to follow their consciences in dietary matters, including eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, as long they did not scandalize others in the community (1 Cor 8:1–12; 10:23–11:1; Rom 14:1–23).
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 4:</b> At the time of Jesus’s mission (28–30 CE), all Jews practiced handwashing, the cleansing of food purchased in the markets, and the washing of cookware, cups, and tableware according to Pharisaic traditions (Mark 7:1-5).	<b>CORRECTION:</b> There is no evidence that “all Jews” practiced ritual handwashing before meals in the first century CE. The accusation by the scribes and Pharisees that some of Jesus’s disciples eat with defiled hands sets the stage for Jesus’s assertions that defilement originates not in the externals of food handling and ingestion but in hostile dispositions that are internal to a person (Mark 7:2, 3, 5; cf. 7:15, 18, 20, 23).
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 5:</b> Jesus negated the dietary laws in principle because he viewed them as pertaining to externals and distracted Jews from looking inside themselves (Mark 7:14–15).	<b>CORRECTION:</b> Actually, Leviticus 11:1–23 speaks of food that is unclean but does not describe it as defiling a person. Defilement derives from the unclean condition of appropriate food as in the case of eating a dead animal (Lev 17:14–16). Jesus is reflecting the Torah when he indicates that food cannot defile a person. Pharisees went beyond the requirements of the Torah in prescribing the washing of food to remove impurities that would otherwise defile a person (Mark 7:6–13).
<b>MISREPRESENTATION 6:</b> The way Jesus gives priority to the interior dispositions of the heart demonstrates that he relativizes the importance of the OT laws.	<b>CORRECTION:</b> Food does not defile a person, but bodily discharges do. According to the Torah, emissions from within the body such as semen and menstrual fluids make a person unclean (Lev 15:2, 16–24). It is in view of these purity laws that Jesus formulates his “parable” that defilement comes from within a person (Mark 7:17–23). “He made all food clean” does not mean, for instance, that food associated with pagan temples would be acceptable for gentiles in the messianic communities (Mark 7:19c).

### MISREPRESENTATION 1 NOTES:

- Note these references to the behaviors of Jesus and his disciples: eating with a diversity of Jews but not fasting (Matt 9:9–17; Mark 2:13–22; Luke 5:27–39); partaking of food (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34); dining with Pharisees (Luke 7:36; 14:1); and making preparations for “the Passover meal” which includes obtaining a lamb sacrificed that afternoon in the Jerusalem Temple (Matt 26:17–19; Mark 14:12–16; Luke 22:7–13).

### MISREPRESENTATION 2: NOTES

- These gentiles converted to the God of Israel but not to Judaism. They were pagans who renounced all other gods and devoted themselves exclusively to the Jewish God. This might explain James’s decision to maintain a separation between Jews and gentiles in the community. Paul encouraged these gentiles to become ever more schooled in Jewish ways by living in the Spirit, which is God’s endowment to them.
- The promise of the gentile nations coming under the regency of the God of Israel is evident in Isa 66:18–20 (cf. Genesis 10; Deut 32:7–8).
- Paula Fredriksen, “How Jewish is God? Divine Ethnicity in Paul’s Theology.” *JBL* 137 (2018): 193–212.

### MISREPRESENTATION 3: NOTES:

- No other source aside from Acts mentions the four points, so their historicity is debated. The laws are not designed to abrogate Jewish dietary practices, but likely to keep gentiles away from pagan temples and meals associated with them.
- Of the four laws, three are dietary proscriptions which had applied to both Israelites and resident aliens: meat that was associated with idolatry, or improperly slaughtered, and blood products, as well as fornication (Lev 17:7–9, 10–12, 14–15; Gen 9:4; Lev 18:6–18, 26).

### MISREPRESENTATION 4 NOTES:

- Mark 7:1–5 is vulnerable to an anti-Jewish misreading. A person might interpret “all Jews” here as adversaries of Jesus. They might view Mark as profiling Jews as “the other” who are synonymous with the subject of the quotation, “*This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me*” (Mark 7:6; Isa 29:13).
- When interpreting Mark 7:1–23, homilists and catechists are charged not to make scribes, Pharisees, and all Jews foils for their depictions of Christian integrity as the fruit of Jesus-inspired disciplines of mind and heart that liberate his followers from legalism and transforms them into premier agents of civility and benevolence.

### MISREPRESENTATION 5 NOTES:

- Daniel Boyarin, “Mark 7: 1–23 – Finally.” Pages 13–34 in *Re-Making the World: Christianity and Categories: Essays in Honor of Karen L. King*. Edited by Taylor G. Petrie. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019. Especially pp. 24–28.
- Boyarin (p. 24) states, “To be sure we do find the terms ‘pure’ and ‘impure animals’ both in the Torah and in the rabbinic literature and even in Rashi but nowhere in any of these texts does the term ‘impure food’ appear in the meaning of non-kosher.”

### MISREPRESENTATION 6 NOTES:

- Boyarin (p.31) states, “In requiring washing of hands before eating, the Pharisees are declaring that eating foods with unwashed hands renders the food impure, which seemingly renders the body impure which is, as Jesus says, a violation of the Torah’s own rules and Jesus declares as we shall see all foods pure, that is, not contaminated and not contaminating the body; he does not declare all foods permitted.”
- On the same page, Boyarin goes on to state, “Nowhere in the LXX do we find that [καθαρίζειν: “to cleanse”] means or suggests declaring something kosher.”
- For lists of vices comparable to Mark 7:20–23, see; 1 QS 4:9–11. See also lists of vices in the NT (Mark 7:20–23; cf. Rom 1:29–31; 1 Cor 5:10–11; 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:3–5; 1 Pet 4:15).