


# A ritualistic reading of Mark 7:1–23



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This article examines the ritual dynamics and identity negotiation in Mark 7:1–23, aiming to unpack the complex interaction between ritual practices and social identity in early Christian communities. Drawing on ritual theory from anthropology and sociology, this research analyses the significance of ritual purity and its implications for group identity formation and maintenance. Mark 7:1–23 presents a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees about the observance of the handwashing ritual before meals, highlighting opposing understandings of purity and religious tradition between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus's critique of an external ritual of handwashing as an identity marker emphasises the purity of the heart as a valid identity marker for all children of God. Through a ritualistic reading of Mark 7:1–23, this article seeks to explore the role played by rituals in identity formation in antiquity. By engaging with ritual theory as a lens to unpack the Pharisees' perspective and that of Jesus on what identifies a true child of God, this article aims to offer insights into the complexities of identity as understood by both Jesus's early movement and the Pharisees.

**Contribution:** This interdisciplinary study of Mark 7:1–23 utilises ritual theory to expose the interaction between ritual practices and identity negotiation within early Christian communities, revealing how Jesus's critique of external rituals facilitated the formation of a distinctively Christian identity centred on inner transformation and ethical conduct.

**Keywords:** ritual; Mark 7:1–23; handwashing; ritual purity; ritualistic reading; social identity formation; group identity; social identity complexity.

## Introduction

Rituals in African societies serve many-sided functions, encompassing social, spiritual, and cultural dimensions (Mbiti 1989:76). They are integral to community cohesion, identity formation, and the transmission of traditional knowledge across generations. Through rituals, Africans express their beliefs, values, and worldviews, reinforcing collective solidarity and shared experiences. Furthermore, Mbiti posits that these practices often involve music, dance, and symbolism, fostering a deep sense of belonging and connection to ancestral heritage. In scholarly discourse, African rituals continue to be studied for their resilience, adaptability, and enduring significance within contemporary contexts (Coetzee 2016:42; Mbiti 1989). Mark 7:1–23 presents a narrative in which Jesus dialogues with the Pharisees and scribes regarding the practice of ritual purity and the nature of defilement. The passage begins with the Pharisees and scribes observing that some of Jesus's disciples eat with unwashed hands, contrary to the elders' tradition (Mk 7:1–5). They question Jesus about this, seeking clarification on why his disciples do not adhere to the handwashing ritual before meals. In response, Jesus criticises the Pharisees and scribes for prioritising human traditions over the commandments of God (Mk 7:6–8). He accuses them of setting aside God's commandments in favour of their traditions, quoting Isaiah to illustrate their hypocrisy. Jesus then proceeds to address the crowd and offers a teaching on the nature of defilement (Mk 7:14–23). He explains that defilement does not come from external sources, such as food that enters the body, but rather from within, from the heart. Jesus lists various evil thoughts and actions that originate from the heart and defile a person, emphasising the importance of inner purity and righteousness. Throughout the passage, Jesus challenges traditional understandings of purity and defilement, advocating for a deeper, inward transformation rather than mere adherence to external rituals. His teachings provoke reflection on the nature of true righteousness and identity as followers of God, initiating a process of identity negotiation within the early Christian community (Mueller 2015:1–4).

Understanding ritual dynamics and identity negotiation in the early Christian community is crucial for comprehending the social and religious context in which the movement emerged and flourished. Rituals played a central role in shaping group identities, defining boundaries between insiders and outsiders within the community, and examining how early Christians engaged with

ritual practices, such as baptism, Eucharist, and communal meals. Such rituals can help a reader gain insight into forming and maintaining Christian identity and how individuals negotiate their belonging to the faith. Again, understanding how rituals functioned within early Christian communities provides valuable context for interpreting biblical texts and discerning the theological and ethical concerns of the early followers of Jesus (Groenewald 2005:137–140).

## Ritual theory

Developed within the fields of Anthropology, Sociology, and Religious Studies, ritual theory examines the role of rituals in shaping individual and collective behaviour, beliefs, and identities. Ritual theory encompasses various theoretical perspectives and approaches, including functionalist, structuralist, and interpretive theories (Bell 1991:30–32). At its core, ritual theory seeks to understand rituals' symbolic meanings and social functions within specific cultural contexts. Rituals are structured performances that communicate and reinforce shared values, beliefs, and identities within a community. By participating in rituals, individuals affirm their membership in the group and contribute to maintaining social cohesion and solidarity. Furthermore, Islam and Zyphur (2009:116) define *ritual* as a 'form of social action in which a group's values and identity are publicly demonstrated or enacted in a stylised manner, within the context of a specific occasion or event'.

## The function of rituals in social identity formation

As pointed out by Watson-Jones and Legare (2017:43), rituals represent pervasive yet understudied phenomena in human social group behaviour, receiving limited empirical attention from psychologists due to historical disciplinary divisions between Psychology and Anthropology. The complicated and varied nature of rituals further complicates understanding (Rossano 2012), hindering generalisations about their causes and effects on social cognition and behaviour. While religious beliefs often underpin group rituals, it is essential to note that ritual action is the foundation from which religious concepts emerge (Rappaport 1999:3). Rituals serve as powerful mechanisms for shaping social identities by providing community members with a shared framework of meaning and behaviour (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Hence, one may argue that, in the context of Mark 7:1–23, handwashing before meals represented a key marker of Jewish identity and adherence to religious tradition. The Pharisees and scribes, as assumed guardians of religious orthodoxy, placed great emphasis on the observance of this ritual as a symbol of purity and piety that identifies one as a conservative Jew.

## Structuralist perspective

Applying ritual theory to the passage in Mark 7:1–23, allows us to explore the symbolic and social dimensions of the handwashing ritual and its implications for religious identity and community boundaries. From a functionalist perspective, the handwashing ritual served as a symbolic marker of

Jewish identity and adherence to religious tradition. By adhering to this ritual practice, individuals affirmed their membership in the Jewish community and signalled their commitment to upholding religious norms and values (Malina & Neyrey 1996). From a structuralist perspective, the handwashing ritual can be analysed in terms of its underlying symbolic structures and binary oppositions (Douglas 1966). The distinction between clean and unclean, pure, and impure, served as a fundamental organising principle within ancient Jewish society as posited in Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* (3.7.4 [115]). By ritually cleansing themselves through handwashing, individuals sought to maintain their purity and avoid contamination from external sources. However, Jesus's critique of the handwashing ritual in Mark 7:1–23 challenges these binary categories and calls into question their significance for religious identity and moral purity.

## Ritual dynamics and group identity

According to Esler (1994:2), for anyone to understand early Christianity it is important to recognise that the New Testament documents emerge from specific social contexts. To fully comprehend these texts, employing disciplines tailored to understand the social dimension of human experience is essential. Without such an approach, our understanding of the New Testament will be limited. Understanding the cultural context of the 1st-century eastern Mediterranean, from which the early Christians emerged, is crucial for interpreting the New Testament texts. These communities were deeply influenced by social values like honour vs. shame, relational structures such as patronage and kinship, and concepts of purity and pollution. Recognising these cultural cues within the text enables a closer analysis of its persuasive power and contributions to shaping Christian culture (De Silva 2018:83–86). Each Gospel can be viewed through the lens of one of these cultural aspects – purity in Mark, honour in Matthew, patronage and reciprocity in Luke, and kinship in John. Purity and pollution, prevalent themes in ancient Jewish and early Christian literature, may seem foreign to modern Western Christians due to theological convictions that downplay the relevance of ritual purity laws. However, grasping the significance of purity in approaching God and community life, is essential for understanding Jesus's interactions with purity codes and the New Testament authors' use of these concepts. Integrating this understanding into discipleship and ministry allows for a fuller engagement with these texts and their cultural implications (Douglas 1966:35; Neyrey 1986:93).

The introduction to this passage (Mk 7:1–2a) recounts an incident in which Jesus's disciples are observed eating without following the traditional ritual cleansing prescribed by the elders. This is followed by a Markan explanation of this Jewish tradition to his gentile readers (7:2b included). The narrative then shifts to a question posed to Jesus by the Pharisees and scribes regarding his disciples' lack of adherence to tradition (7:5). Jesus responds in two parts: firstly (7:6–13), he critiques the tradition of the elders by referencing Old Testament passages and contrasting them

with Pharisaic tradition, highlighting the contrast between human tradition and God's commandments. Secondly (7:14–23), Jesus teaches purity, explaining to the crowds through a parable and privately to his disciples, the true source of defilement. Stein (2008:335) notes that Mark proceeds to elucidate this unfamiliar Jewish custom by explaining the meaning of *unclean* or *defiled* hands using the phrase, *that is* [τοῦτ' ἔστιν], as is typical in his writing. Here, it refers to hands that are ceremonially unwashed and thus ritually impure, rather than being unclean for hygienic reasons (cf. Lv 11:32; 15:11–12). Mark clarifies that the issue at hand is one of ritual cleanliness, not hygiene. A more detailed explanation of this practice ensues in verses 7:3–4, introduced by a characteristic Markan *for* [γάρ], clause. In Mark 7:1–23, Jesus confronts the Pharisees and scribes about their adherence to ritual purity laws, offering a profound critique of traditional religious practices and their implications for social identity within the Jewish community. This passage provides valuable insights into the role of rituals in shaping social identities and highlights the tension between external observance and inner transformation.

## Ritual practices as markers of group and religious identity

Rituals are crucial in forming and maintaining social identity within various cultural contexts. Social identity refers to the sense of belonging and attachment that individuals feel toward their social groups, which could be based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, or other shared characteristics. Rituals are powerful mechanisms for expressing, reinforcing, and transmitting social identity, embodying, and enacting a particular group's values, beliefs, and norms. One way in which rituals contribute to social identity formation is by creating a sense of belonging and solidarity among group members. Through participation in shared rituals, individuals reaffirm their connection to the group and experience a sense of collective identity. For example, religious rituals such as prayer, worship services, or religious festivals unite adherents in communion and reinforce their shared beliefs and practices (Tajfel & Turner 1979).

Moreover, rituals often serve as symbolic expressions of group membership and differentiation from outsiders. By engaging in distinctive rituals, group members signal their allegiance to their social group and distinguish themselves from others who do not share the same cultural practices. This boundary maintenance process helps reinforce group cohesion and identity (see Durkheim 1912; Jones 1986:115–155). Furthermore, rituals can transmit cultural values, norms, and traditions from one generation to the next. Through participation in rituals, individuals learn about their cultural heritage and internalise the shared meanings and symbols that define their group identity. For example, coming-of-age rituals or initiation ceremonies often mark significant transitions in the life course and serve as rites of passage that instil cultural values and expectations

(Van Gennep 1909). In addition, rituals can foster a sense of emotional connection and solidarity among group members, by providing opportunities for collective celebration, mourning, or solidarity. Shared emotional experiences during rituals, strengthen social bonds and reinforce the sense of community within the group (Collins 2004).

According to Strauss (2014:897–902), the accusation against the disciples is not of hygiene but of ceremonial impurity. The word translated *defiled* [κοινός], can mean simply *common*, but it came to be used in Judaism for anything that was ritually impure or unworthy of God's presence. Mark explains to his gentile readers, that this means *unwashed* [ἀνίπτοις] hands. The OT law did not require washing hands before meals, although priests were required to wash their hands before entering the Tent of Meeting and offering sacrifices (Ex 30:20–21; 40:12, 30–32). The scribes and Pharisees understood these priestly ordinances to apply to all of Israel since all of God's people were meant to be holy. Whether or not this was their motivation by Jesus's time, the Jews widely practised hand washing. Groenewald (2006:137) posits that the inhabitants of the 1st-century Mediterranean region resided in a society characterised by advanced agrarian practices. Scholars such as Lenski (1991), Malina (1993a), Van Aarde (1994b) and Van Eck (1995) have extensively argued for the positions of this societal structure as a context in which the Gospels were written. Within this context, there was a prevailing belief that significant transformations in individuals' lives occurred through the performance of rituals. Rituals held immense cultural and social significance as pivotal moments for communal cohesion, religious observance, and personal transition. Ritual practices have long been robust markers of group belonging and religious identity within human societies. In the context of ancient Judaism, ritual purity laws and practices played a central role in defining the boundaries of the community and signalling adherence to religious tradition. The handwashing ritual, as depicted in Mark 7:1–23, provides a compelling example of how rituals functioned as symbols of group identity and markers of religious observance within the Jewish community.

## The significance of ritual purity in ancient Judaism

In ancient Judaism, ritual purity laws governed daily life, including dietary practices, bodily functions, and social interactions (Lv 11–15). These laws were rooted in the belief that maintaining ritual purity was essential for approaching God and participating in religious worship. For instance, sources like the Mishnah and Talmud provide detailed discussions and interpretations of these laws, highlighting their significance in Jewish religious practice (Neusner 1975–1976:486–495; 1988). Additionally, archaeological findings such as ritual baths [*miqvaot*], further illustrate the practical implementation of purity rituals in ancient Jewish communities (Booth 1986; Levine 2005).



Ritual purity practices such as handwashing before meals, were tangible expressions of one's commitment to upholding religious traditions and maintaining communal identity (Uro 2011:159–182). These practices reinforced social cohesion and contributed to forming a distinct Jewish identity within the broader cultural landscape of the ancient Near East (Boccaccini 1998). Moreover, scholarly works analysing ancient Jewish texts and inscriptions, shed light on how purity laws were interpreted and applied in different historical contexts (Stemberger 1996).

### The handwashing ritual in Jewish religious tradition

The handwashing ritual, known as *netilat yadayim*, holds significant importance in Jewish religious tradition, particularly in mealtime observance. This ceremonial act involves washing hands before meals, as a symbolic gesture to remove ritual impurity and ensure spiritual cleanliness. While the practice is not explicitly mandated in the Hebrew Scriptures, its origins can be traced back to the Second Temple period, when it gained widespread adoption among Jews. *Netilat yadayim* is deeply rooted in Jewish religious ethos, reflecting a broader concern with ritual purity and the meticulous observance of religious traditions (Gordon-Bennett 2019). The ritual underscores the Jewish emphasis on sanctity in everyday activities, elevating mundane tasks such as eating into spiritual acts. By cleansing their hands before partaking in meals, individuals symbolically purify themselves physically and spiritually before engaging in nourishment. In contemporary Jewish practice, the handwashing ritual remains integral to mealtime observance, with variations in customs and interpretations across different Jewish communities. While the core practice of washing hands before meals persists additional nuances and customs have emerged over time, influenced by diverse cultural and theological factors (Hezser 2023:1–22).

Recent scholarship has extensively contributed to the historical development and theological significance of *netilat yadayim* within Jewish tradition. Studies like Schiffman (2014) and Neusner (2004), amongst others, explore the origin and development of Jewish rituals and their interpretations, providing valuable perceptions of the enduring relevance of practices like handwashing in modern Jewish life. Moreover, contemporary Jewish theologians and scholars continue to explore the deeper meanings and implications of *netilat yadayim* in the context of Jewish ethics and spirituality. Works of Soloveitchik (2005) and Berkovits (2019), amongst others, offer theological reflections on the significance of ritual purity and cleanliness in Jewish religious thought, enriching our understanding of the handwashing rituals' spiritual dimensions. In addition to its religious significance, the handwashing ritual in Jewish tradition also holds practical implications for maintaining hygiene and promoting communal well-being. Especially in light of public health concerns, the emphasis on cleanliness and purification inherent in *netilat yadayim* resonates with contemporary values of sanitation and hygiene practices. The handwashing

ritual, known as *netilat yadayim*, involved the ceremonial washing of hands before meals to remove ritual impurity and ensure spiritual cleanliness. While not explicitly mandated in the Hebrew Scriptures, handwashing became a widespread custom among Jews during the Second Temple period, reflecting a broader concern with ritual purity and observance of religious traditions (Haran 1989a).

### Contextualising Mark 7:1–23 within Jewish religious practice

Mark's Gospel emerges within a socio-historical and cultural context characterised by diverse influences, including Roman occupation, Hellenistic culture, and Jewish religious traditions (Brown 1970). Against this backdrop, Mark 7:1–23 reflects the tensions and dynamics prevalent within 1st-century Judaism, particularly concerning ritual purity and religious observance (Marcus 2000a:97). The confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees regarding handwashing rituals before meals, exemplifies broader debates surrounding Jewish identity and interpreting Mosaic law (see Guelich 1989:360; Haran 1989b). Mark's audience, likely composed of both Jewish and gentile Christians, would have been familiar with these cultural and religious tensions, influencing their understanding of Jesus's teachings and their Christian identity formation (Witherington 2001). Moreover, the socio-historical context of Roman rule and Hellenistic influence underscores the broader implications of Jesus's critique of external rituals, signalling a call to a transformative faith transcending cultural and religious boundaries (Hurtado 2003:87ff.)

Mark 7:1–23 encapsulates a pivotal encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees, delineating the underlying tensions between adherence to established religious tradition and the transformative teachings brought forth by Jesus. This passage probes into the complicated dynamics, shaping Jewish religious practices during the 1st-century, shedding light on the interpretive frameworks and doctrinal debates prevalent within the religious milieu of that era. The Pharisees, renowned for their scrupulous adherence to Mosaic law and traditions handed down by their elders, emerge as protagonists in this narrative, critiquing Jesus's disciples for their apparent disregard of ceremonial handwashing rituals, which held paramount significance in Jewish ritualistic purity (Guelich 1989:366–367). This critique stresses the Pharisees' commitment to upholding religious orthodoxy and preserving ancestral customs, emblematic of their broader mission to safeguard Jewish identity amidst prevailing socio-religious influences. Conversely, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' admonitions with a trenchant critique of their legalistic interpretation of religious observance. He challenges the notion that ritual purity can be attained solely through adherence to external rites, contending that true purity emanates from the inner disposition of the heart. In invoking the prophetic words of Isaiah, Jesus accentuates the primacy of inner righteousness over outward conformity, advocating for a paradigm shift from ritualistic formalism to moral authenticity in religious practice.

This exegetical engagement with Mark 7:1–23 clarifies Jesus's theological stance on ritual purity. It underlines his broader message of spiritual renewal and the forthcoming advent of the kingdom of God (Ehrman & Méndez 2023). By prioritising the cultivation of inner purity and righteousness, Jesus advocates for a holistic understanding of religious devotion, which transcends mere adherence to external rituals; thereby challenging conventional paradigms and prompting a re-evaluation of entrenched religious traditions. Recent scholarship has contributed nuanced intuitions into the socio-religious context underpinning Mark 7:1–23, situating it within the broader landscape of 1st-century Judaism. Works by esteemed scholars such as Witherington (2001) and Levine (2018), delve into the complexities of Jewish purity laws and their implications for understanding Jesus's teachings, enriching our comprehension of the socio-cultural milieu in which these theological debates unfolded.

Furthermore, contemporary theologians continue to grapple with the theological themes articulated in Mark 7:1–23, probing the nuances of ritual purity, legalism, and authentic faith considering contemporary contexts. France (2002) and Guelich (1989; 2017) offer exegetical analyses of this present text that deepen our understanding of Jesus's critique of religious formalism, and his summons to discipleship, resonating with contemporary readers seeking to navigate the interplay between tradition and innovation in matters of faith. Mark 7:1–23 is a poignant testament to the enduring tensions between tradition and innovation within religious discourse. Through his confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus beckons believers across temporal and cultural divides to reflect upon the essence of true devotion, and the transformative potency of inner purity in fostering an authentic relationship with the divine.

### Jesus's challenge to ritual norms

In Mark 7:1–23, we witness a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees on the observance of ritual purity laws, particularly the practice of handwashing before meals. The Pharisees, as representatives of religious orthodoxy, question Jesus about why his disciples do not follow the tradition of the elders regarding handwashing (Stein 2008). This confrontation sets the stage for Jesus's critique of external rituals, and his emphasis on the importance of inner purity. The Pharisees and some scribes observe that Jesus's disciples are eating with unwashed hands, contrary to the tradition of the elders (Mk 7:1–5). They question Jesus about this apparent violation of religious custom, seeking clarification on why his disciples do not adhere to the prescribed ritual of handwashing before meals (Evans 2001). Jesus responds to the Pharisees' criticism, by challenging their understanding of ritual purity and religious observance (Mk 7:6–13). He accuses them of prioritising human traditions over the commandments of God and setting aside God's commandments in favour of their traditions. Jesus quotes Isaiah to illustrate their hypocrisy and emphasises the importance of honouring God with one's heart rather than mere lip service (Guelich 1989).

In his response to the Pharisees, Jesus profoundly critiques external rituals and their significance for religious identity (Marcus 2000b). He challenges the pharisaic emphasis on outward observance and ritual purity, arguing that true defilement does not come from external sources but from within, from the heart's intentions. By prioritising inner purity over external rituals, Jesus calls into question the efficacy of traditional religious practices as markers of righteousness and faithfulness to God. Jesus's emphasis on inner purity represents a radical departure from conventional religious piety and observance understandings. He teaches that defilement originates from evil thoughts and intentions within the human heart, rather than from external sources such as food or unwashed hands (Mk 7:14–23). By focusing on the internal disposition of the heart, Jesus invites his followers to re-evaluate their understanding of purity and righteousness and to prioritise inner transformation over outward conformity to religious norms.

### Ritual theoretical reading of Mark 7:1–23 to social identity complexity

This section explores how a ritualistic interpretation of Mark 7:1–23 explicates the complexities inherent in social identity complexity. This is by no means another study of Mark 7:1–23 through the lenses of social identity complexity, but rather a reflection that the current study relates or contributes to social identity complexity.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, reading Mark 7:1–23 through a ritual theoretical lens may offer profound insights into the complexities of social identity, particularly regarding the intersectionality inherent in Jewish purity rituals. According to Marcus (2000b), this passage depicts a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees on adherence to ritual purity laws. Jesus challenges the Pharisees' emphasis on external cleanliness, arguing that true defilement arises from within, from the intentions and attitudes of the heart. In this context, Jewish purity rituals serve as markers of social identity, delineating boundaries between insiders and outsiders, pure and impure. These rituals create a framework for understanding oneself and others within the community, reinforcing a sense of collective identity. However, Jesus's critique disrupts this binary understanding of purity, highlighting the internal dimensions of righteousness, and challenging the Pharisees' exclusive interpretation of purity.

The concept of social identity complexity emerges in considering the implications of Jesus's teachings on ritual purity. Social identity complexity refers to recognising multiple, overlapping identities that individuals possess,

1. Recently, this approach has been enhanced through the incorporation of the social identity complexity theory (*sic.*) This theory aims to explain the intricacies of identities, that naturally arise when individuals belong to multiple groups, sometimes with conflicting affiliations and identities (Kok 2014; Kok & Swart 2021:1). In the same vein, Marevesa and Mavengano-Marevesa (Roccas & Brewer 2002) beautifully outlined the inroads of this theory into the New Testament in Roccas and Brewer (2002), in pioneering the concept of social identity complexity as a framework for understanding social identity within groups. This approach is subsequently applied by scholars such as Kok (2014) and Dube (2009) in the study of New Testament texts. Drawing from Tajfel's Social identity theory (1982) and Turner et al.'s Self-categorisation theory (1987), the Social identity complexity theory was developed to explore intergroup behaviour and the construction of social identity within groups.

which may intersect and influence one another in complex ways (Kok & Swart 2021). In Mark 7, Jesus's redefinition of purity extends beyond ritual observance, to encompass moral and ethical dimensions, thereby complicating the construction of social identity based solely on adherence to external rituals. Moreover, the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees foreshadows tensions within early Christianity regarding the inclusion of Gentiles. In demonstrating such complexities, Kok (2014:6–9) focuses on the episode that involves the conflict between Peter and Paul (Gl 2:1–14), reflecting this struggle for social identity complexity within the emerging Christian community. Peter's actions demonstrate a compartmentalisation of identity, prioritising adherence to Jewish customs in specific contexts, while neglecting the inclusive message of the gospel. On the other hand, Paul advocates for a merger or dominance model of social identity, emphasising the unity of believers across ethnic and cultural boundaries. This resonates with Jesus's critique of ritual purity in Mark 7, as both challenge rigid distinctions and promote a more inclusive understanding of identity based on internal transformation and relationality. In other words, this ritual theoretical reading of Mark 7:1–23 illuminates the complexities of social identity, highlighting the interplay between ritual practices, internal attitudes, and communal belonging. Surely, one may argue that this ritualistic reading of Mark 7:1–23 may have a significant effect on the understanding of Mark 7:24–30, as both passages deal with the concept of impurity. The earlier verses lay the groundwork for Jesus's teachings on purity and defilement, providing the context for his interactions in the following section of the pericope. Understanding the cultural and religious context surrounding purity in Mark 7:1–23 may aid to cabin light on the significance of Jesus's encounter with the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24–30. It allows for a deeper appreciation of how Jesus challenged traditional notions of purity and expanded his ministry beyond ethnic boundaries. Perhaps this approach enriches our understanding of Jesus's teachings and actions regarding purity and inclusivity. According to Hurtado (1989:117), if the logical effect of Jesus's teaching is to legitimise those who do not adhere to pharisaic ritual customs, such as gentile believers, this incident establishes an actual precedent for addressing Gentiles and including them in the circle of those to whom the benefits of God's kingdom can come. The early gentile Christians who knew they were not part of Israel's chosen nation, would have recognised themselves in the woman, and found great encouragement in her story, as Mark intended.

Furthermore, the focus of Kock (2014) on the intersectionality of identities is particularly relevant for understanding the complexity of identity dynamics in biblical narratives. Kok (2014; 2021) highlights how individuals inhabit multiple social categories simultaneously, each influencing the other in complex ways. This intersectional perspective may enrich our interpretation of characters in biblical texts, revealing the multifaceted nature of their identities and the intersecting social forces at play. Kok's relational and intersectional approaches offer complementary insights in advancing the argument on social identity complexity. His relational

perspective provides a more detailed analysis of identity dynamics within specific social contexts. By integrating these perspectives, one is deepening their understanding of how social identities are constructed, negotiated, and transformed in biblical narratives and contemporary contexts.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the ritual theory provides a fruitful framework for a fresh look at the passage in Mark 7:1–23 and for understanding the symbolic and social dimensions of the handwashing ritual within Jewish religious tradition. Through this approach, we have seen the significance of rituals in antiquity as one of the societal identity markers in religious groups like the Jewish religious tradition, exemplified by the Pharisees. Jesus boldly confronts the pharisaic perception of God's children in this passage. Indeed, this article shows how difficult it is to claim one's true identity in absolute terms. Thus, rather consider identities than a single identity. Finally, utilising ritual theory in a biblical text to consider the practices and their implications for religious identity and community boundaries, is a valuable tool for investigating one's identity. The ritual theory offers a valuable lens through which to interpret biblical texts and uncover the underlying meanings and functions of ritual practices within specific cultural contexts. In the context of biblical studies, ritual theory provides a valuable framework for exploring the dynamics of ritual innovation and the reinterpretation within ancient religious traditions. Specifically, it may offer an analysis of how rituals delineate or create the boundaries of the Christian community and negotiate relationships with the broader Jewish and Greco-Roman society.

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