

Mark 7:2-23

From the book "Take Hold" by Ariel Berkowitz

This story in the life of Yeshua is often cited as a passage in which He declared the kosher laws invalid. The key verse is 7:19 where the one who was recording this episode inserts in to the text the following: "Thus, He declared all foods clean".

As with all of the rest of the passages with which we will deal, the context is the critical factor in interpreting the passages in question. In this case there is a broad context and an immediate context that must be considered.

The broad context is Yeshua's attitude toward the Torah as a whole. We have already examined the crucial section in Matthew 5:17-19 in which Yeshua taught about His view concerning the Torah. Here we found that Yeshua emphatically endorsed the Torah as a whole, pronounced a reward for those who taught the Torah and practiced it, as well as a curse to those who did not do either.

If we keep Matthew 5:17-19 in mind we find that there is no logical reason to assume that the "foods" mentioned in Mark 7 are the forbidden foods described in the Torah. It would be totally inconsistent of the Messiah to annul that section of the Torah. Moreover, we are not told that there is something exceptional about food that would warrant the Messiah changing those teachings.

The second context is the immediate context. The story is one where Yeshua's students are rebuked by a group of Pharisees because they did not wash their hands in the ritual prescribed by that particular Pharisaical group. The real issue at hand is not the teaching of the Torah, but rather, "the traditions of the elders." That phrase is somewhat of a catch phrase in the Gospels referring to the accepted oral tradition, passed down by word of mouth. It is because the students of Yeshua did not utilize the same ritual hand-washing as this particular group of religious leaders that their hands were said to be "unclean" and, consequently, the food eaten from those same hands was declared to be "unclean".

Yeshua used this incident as an opportunity to express some of His estimation of the oral law or "tradition of the elders." Part of His conclusion is that whenever the oral tradition is used to negate or supercede the written Torah, it is wrong. God's Word is perfect. The oral tradition is not God's word, but man's traditions.

In the end, Yeshua taught that the food eaten by His students whose hands were not washed according to a certain oral tradition was food that was permitted to be eaten. His opponents, of course disagreed with that conclusion and would have insisted that such foods were unfit to eat. Yeshua countered that the foods in question were biblically permitted foods. The hand washing ritual did not make them suitable or unsuitable for eating because these foods are already suitable to eat according to God's decree.

Now comes the most important part. When the writer of Mark expresses in 7:19, "Thus He declared all foods clean", he would not have been referring to the forbidden foods found in the Torah. Those foods were not the ones in question. The foods in the context were the ones that Yeshua's followers were eating (which would have been kosher foods) without having performed the handwashing ritual that this particular group of Pharisees

were insisting upon. Thus, all of the food that Yeshua's disciples were eating was declared "clean", in the sense that foregoing a man-made ritual such as handwashing did not make it unclean. His message was that no one should be in bondage to a ritual created by man, yet propagated as God's law.

There might be a simpler way to interpret this passage. All we have to do is simply understand that the items forbidden in Leviticus for people to eat are even foods at all! It might even be a mistake for us to refer to them as "forbidden foods". To the Jewish mind, the word "food" is something that is permitted to be eaten according to Leviticus chapter 11. Other things are simply not foods. We may also want to take this understanding to our study of Acts 10.