

This is fairly close to the translation of the KJV –

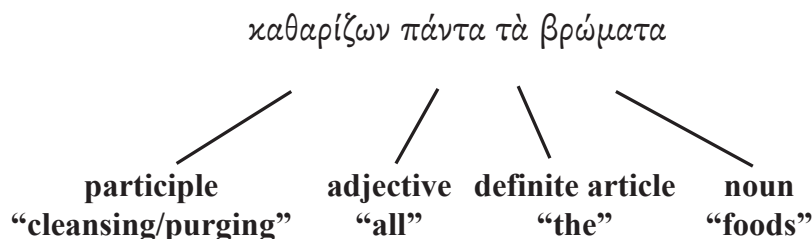
Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats?

So how did our modern English translations come up with the phrase “He (Yeshua) declared all foods clean,” especially noting the following:

1. The word “declared” (or any equivalent) is not found in the verse in any of the Greek manuscripts. It is added by the translators. It is not a variant (as though some manuscripts have the word “declared” and others do not).
2. The addition of the proper name “Jesus” in the final clause by the NIV is also an addition of the translators. It is not found in any of the manuscripts in this final clause of v. 19.
3. The word translated “clean” (*καθαρίζω*, *katharizo*) can just as accurately be translated “purge” in the sense of taking away that which is unclean.

So once again we must ask, “How did our modern English translations come up with their translations of this final phrase?” We might be tempted to accuse them of a prejudiced translation since the vast majority of modern Christian scholars come to the Gospels with a preconceived conclusion that Yeshua did away with the Torah. And there is no doubt that this starting point may affect the choices that a translator has when attempting to render the original Greek into a modern language. But there is actually more to the issue than this. The issue, however, can only be understood when one looks at the Greek grammar itself, and thus it becomes fairly technical. I will attempt to summarize the issue, and then I will give a more detailed explanation for those of you who have some working knowledge of the Greek.

Here is the issue: the final phrase of v. 19 begins with a participle, and the question that confronts the translator and the biblical interpreter is to which noun in the immediately previous context does the participle attach. Or to put it in grammatical terms: what is the antecedent of the opening participle in the final clause of v. 19? Here is what it looks like in the Greek:



However, as in most inflected languages, the antecedent noun that attaches to a participle must agree in number, case, and gender. The opening participle in our clause is singular, nominative, masculine. That means that the subject of the participle, or the antecedent noun to which it attaches must also be singular, nominative, masculine.¹⁰ The translators of our modern English bibles have almost universally decided that the antecedent noun to which the participle attaches is the singular, nominative, masculine pronoun “He” (referring to Yeshua) at the opening of v. 18: “And He said to them. . . .” This would make the clause to read, “He is cleansing all foods.” But what would this mean? How could Yeshua be “cleansing all foods?” The point is made that in the Lxx, the same verb (καθαρίζω, *katharizo*) is used in Lev 13:6, 23 of the High Priest “pronouncing” someone with a skin defect to be clean. This is how the translators settled on “He declared all foods clean” or something equivalent.

At first, this may seem to be the most obvious solution, given the grammatical constraints of the Greek. But there is another alternative. Sometimes a nominative masculine participle is used when the subject of the participle (its antecedent) is unspoken or not mentioned in the previous context.¹¹ This fits our context perfectly because, admittedly, Yeshua is using the latrine and the bodily function of elimination as the illustration for His teaching. Simply for the sake of propriety, one would expect that certain things might be left unmentioned. In fact, the most natural reading of vv. 18–19 is that the food goes into the stomach and then out into the latrine, and it is the whole process of bodily elimination that purges all the food. Not wanting to mention in specific the process of elimination, Yeshua simply uses a masculine participle (no doubt He was speaking Hebrew or Aramaic) to speak generally of the process. Mark reproduces the language Yeshua used in his Greek translation expecting that his readers would understand. And most likely they did. It was the later generations of the emerging Christian Church, which, wanting to distance themselves from the synagogue and thus from Torah observance, found in Yeshua’s words an interpretation that fit their current needs, even if it did go contrary to the larger context of Mark 7 as well as Yeshua’s explicit teaching in Matthew 5:17f, about His view of the Torah.

Summary

Let us summarize what we have found about Mark 7 –

1. The issue at hand related to “the traditions of the elders” vis-a-vis the

10 For comments on the textual variant in v. 19 that reads καθαρίζων (*katharizon*), singular nominative neuter, see below.

11 See below for examples and for further explanation of this grammatical principle in koine Greek.

commandments of God. The Pharisees were accusing Yeshua's disciples of acting unrighteously because they were not adhering to these traditions.

2. Yeshua takes them to task on this perspective. In elevating their traditions above the commandments of God, they had acted unrighteously. They were fulfilling the very prophecy of Isaiah (Is 29:13).
3. Yeshua's manner of argumentation makes it clear that His high priority was obedience to God's commands. He judges the Pharisees as erring because they had set aside the commandments. For Yeshua, the commandments of God stand above the traditions of men, and when one must choose between them, the commandments of God should always take precedence.
4. Yeshua was teaching that idolatry begins in the heart or soul. It is not conveyed or contracted through ritual impurity. Eating proper food with ritually unwashed hands did not bring defilement. Rather, a person is defiled with the sinful lusts of the heart and soul take fruit in unrighteous actions.
5. Yeshua uses the latrine as an illustration. The disciples had eaten their food without first ritually washing their hands. That food had not defiled them. But when they visited the latrine, and the food was purged out of their body, the feces could make a person ritually defiled. The principle is clear in the illustration: it is not the food that goes into a person that defiles, but the excrement that comes out which is unclean. This gives way to illustrate the broader principle: it is not what comes into a person that defiles the heart or soul, but what comes forth from a heart given over to sin and lust. This produces "evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness."
6. The final clause of v. 19, rendered by some of the modern English translations as "Thus He declared all foods clean," is product of the translators and is not founded upon the Greek itself, nor does such a translation fit the wider context. If, in the early part of the chapter, Yeshua is making a strong appeal to keep the commandments of God and not to set them aside in favor of man-made traditions, it is incongruous to conclude that Yeshua Himself set aside the commandments of the Torah in "declaring all foods clean." Rather, in the final clause of v. 19 Yeshua simply states the obvious: foods that are eaten are purged into the latrine. It is what comes out of the person that defiles, not what goes in.
7. Far from dismissing the commandments of the Torah, Yeshua in Mark 7 upholds the Torah and the commandments of God. But as always,

He calls His followers to obey the commandments from a heart of love to God and love to one's neighbor. He urges obedience to the Torah from a proper motivation, not as a matter of mere tradition or religious obligation.

The Grammatical Aspects of Mark 7:19

The crux of Mark 7:19 revolves around the last phrase of that verse, and particularly the word meaning “to make clean,” καθαρίζω, *katharizo*. First, the fact that there is a textual variant relating to this word has given rise to different translations. The Textus Receptus, following the later manuscripts, has καθαρίζον πάντα τὰ βρώματα.¹² The verb, καθαρίζον, *katharizon*, is parsed as a neuter participle. But the older and more reliable manuscripts have καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα, where the verb is a masculine participle. From a text critical standpoint, we should reckon that the original reading is καθαρίζων (masculine singular nominative participle) rather than καθαρίζον (neuter singular nominative participle) on the obvious weight of the textual evidence.

We may ask what would have prompted some scribes to change the masculine to the neuter form of the participle? Apparently, the scribes had difficulty understanding what stood as the subject of the participle. Since the obvious meaning seems to be that the elimination of excrement is the subject, the neuter gender for the participle seemed the correct reading (corresponding to the unspecified noun σῶμα, “body” or to the process of elimination itself). Thus, the preceding phrase, εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται, “it goes out into the latrine,” has the bodily process of elimination in view, and thus the subject of the following participle would be the unnamed “it” of the verb ἐκπορεύεται. In this way, the final phrase means “it (i.e., body or the excrement itself) purges all foods,” and is reflected in the KJV, “...and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats.” The Greek nouns utilized to describe human excrement are

12 The UBS³ lists the following data: καθαρίζων **✱** A B L W X D Q f¹ f³ 28 565 892 1009 1071 1216 1241 1242 1253 1546 1646 Byz^{pt} 149, 184, 211, 299, 950, 1761 syr^p, h cop^{sa}, bo eth Origen Gregory-Nyssa Chrysostom // καθαρίζον K P 33 700 1010 1079 1195 1230 1344 1365 2148 2174 Byz^{pt} Lect Diatessaron^a // καθαρίζων or καθαρίζον it^a, aur, b,c,d,f, ff2, l,n,q vg // καὶ καθαρίζεται (1047 omit καὶ) syr^a // καθαρίζων τε l⁷⁰ // καθαρίζει (D l⁸⁵ omit καὶ) itⁱ, r¹ (goth omit καὶ) arm geo

κόπριον (neuter), κόπρον or κόπρος ~ (either neuter or masculine),¹³ and σκύβαλον (neuter), meaning “garbage, refuse,” but which can also refer to human excrement (cp. Sirach 27:4). Thus, the impetus for changing the masculine form to read as a neuter would have been to clear up any ambiguity as to the subject of the participle. It is the body itself or the process of elimination (or the excrement) that brings about the purging or cleansing the body of that which is unclean.¹⁴

The earlier manuscripts, however, almost universally have καθαρίζων, which is masculine singular. In this case, the closest antecedent masculine singular noun is ἀφεδρῶνα, “latrine.” However, there is a grammatical problem. Participles generally must agree in gender, number, and case with the noun to which they attach. In the phrase ἐκπορεύεται εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα, the word ἀφεδρῶνα is in the accusative case, while the following participle, καθαρίζων, is in the nominative case. When one first reads the sentence, it would appear that the latrine (ἀφεδρῶνα) is the logical antecedent of the nominative singular masculine καθαρίζων, giving the meaning “it goes out into the latrine, and thus the latrine purges all foods.” But the fact that the participle does not agree in case with the word ἀφεδρῶνα seems to render this reading impossible, since ἀφεδρῶνα, the object of preposition εἰς, is necessarily in the accusative case.

Seeking for the subject of the participle καθαρίζων becomes, therefore, the *crux interpretum* for the passage. What or who “cleanses all foods?” Most modern translations add the words “thus He declared” to the dangling participle phrase “cleansing all foods,” in order to inform the readers that the subject of the participle, as far as the translators are concerned, is Yeshua. This interpretation goes back as far as Origen,¹⁵ where the subject of the nominative masculine participle is traced in the context to v. 18 and the implied subject of λέγει, “He said,” i.e., Yeshua said. It is therefore suggested that Yeshua is likewise the subject of the masculine participle, and the final participial clause is therefore understood to mean “He (Yeshua) is cleansing all foods.” But how

13 The ambiguity of κόπρον/κόπρος is noted by *BDAG* (ad loc.). Since κόπρον may be parsed as either feminine or neuter (where no other gender indicators are present), in some texts it may function as a neuter noun, like its corresponding noun, κπριον, as in Lk 13:8, though *BDAG* would favor the masculine parsing.

14 Note the comments of Henrich Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospels of Mark and Luke* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), p. 89–90 [Reprinted by Hendrickson Pub., 1983].

15 Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, Book 12, section 11.

would Yeshua cleanse all foods? The answer is that He cleansed all foods by declaring all foods clean, and thus the added “He declared all foods clean.”

Rudolph, in his article “Yeshua and the Dietary Laws: A Reassessment of Mark 7:19b,”¹⁶ concludes that this is the only possible explanation for the nominative singular participle:

The NA27 Greek text of Mark 7:19b reads καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα (literally: “cleansing all the foods”). Most English translations turn this dangling participial clause into a Markan insertion by placing it within parentheses and adding the words at the beginning “(thus he declared...)” (NRSV) or “(In saying this, Yeshua declared...)” (NIV Prophecy Edition). The reader is left with the impression that Mark is summarizing the significance of Yeshua’s teaching in the previous verses. In support of such a translation, it should be noted that καθαρίζων (“cleansing”) is nominative masculine. Thus, Yeshua is the one who is doing the cleansing and not the body as indicated by the textual variant καθαρίζον.¹⁷

Is this true? Does the fact that the participle καθαρίζων is nominative masculine mean that its only possible subject within the immediate context is Yeshua? Actually, there is another alternative. It is well known in Greek grammar that the nominative singular participle may sometimes refer to something within the previous context or to something implied in the context not explicitly mentioned, even though it may not be in the same grammatical case.¹⁸ Note the following examples:

Luke 24:47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (καὶ κηρυχθῆναι ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ μετάνοιαν εἰς ἅφεςιν ἁμαρτιῶν εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη. ἀρξάμενοι ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ). The participle in the clause “beginning from Jerusalem” is nominative masculine plural, but there is no nominative masculine plural noun in the preceding

16 David J. Rudolph, “Jesus and the Food Laws: A Reassessment of Mark 7:19b,” *EQ* 74:4 (2002), 291–311; updated and revised in “Yeshua and the Dietary Laws: A Reassessment of Mark 7:19b,” *Kesher* 16 (Fall, 2003), 97–119.

17 *Ibid.*, *Kesher* 16 (Fall, 2003), 97–8.

18 See F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Univ. of Chicago, 1961), p. 76, §137(3); James Hope Moulton and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 3 vols. (T&T Clark, 1963), 3.316; Maximilian Zerwick S. J., *Biblical Greek* (Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), pp. 5–6.

context to act as its antecedent. It presumes an understood subject in the infinitival clause κρυχθῆναι... μετάνοιαν, “to preach...repentance,” something like αὐτοὶ κηρύξοθιν... μετάνοιαν... ἀρχάμενοι ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ, “they preach...repentance...beginning from Jerusalem.” A similar construction is found in Acts 10:37 (where some manuscripts attempt to smooth out the incongruence).

2Thess 1:8 dealing out retribution to those who do not know God (ἐν πυρὶ φλογός, διδόντος ἐκδίκησιν τοῖς μὴ εἰδόσιν θεόν), where διδόντος, “dealing out” is masculine singular genitive, but refers to the previous angels (v. 7, ἀγγέλων), which is masculine plural genitive.

James 3:8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. (τὴν δὲ γλῶσσαν οὐδεὶς δαμάσαι δύναται ἄνθρωπον, ἀκατάστατον κακόν, μεστή ἰοῦ θανατηφόρου). Here, the adjectival phrase, “restless evil” (ἀκατάστατον κακόν) is nominative masculine singular, but it modifies τὴν γλῶσσαν, which is accusative feminine singular.

Interestingly, the Greek Grammars (see footnote 18 above) also reference Mark 7:19b as an example of a nominative masculine participle that does not agree in case with its apparent antecedent.

For those who take λέγει, “He (Yeshua) said” as the antecedent for the participle καθαρίζων, (thus, “He (Yeshua) declared ...”), appeal is made to the Lxx of Leviticus 13, where the priest pronounces a person clean or unclean, depending upon the various attendant circumstances. Here are two examples:

Lev. 13:6 “The priest shall look at him again on the seventh day, and if the infection has faded and the mark has not spread on the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean (καθαριεῖ αὐτὸν ὁ ἱερεὺς); it is only a scab. And he shall wash his clothes and be clean.

Lev. 13:23 “But if the bright spot remains in its place and does not spread, it is only the scar of the boil; and the priest shall pronounce him clean (καθαριεῖ αὐτὸν ὁ ἱερεὺς).

In these instances, the verb καθαρίζω means “to declare someone clean,” and it is reasoned therefore that the same verb in Mark 7:19 could bear a similar meaning. But this could only be the case if the final clause is understood as the Evangelist’s own editorial comment.

Those who take the final phrase of our text as an editorial comment by Mark do so primarily on two grounds: 1) that καθαρίζων requires a masculine noun for its antecedent, and the closest such antecedent is the masculine singular subject of λέγει in v. 18, and 2) that Mark is known to interject his own

explanatory comments, an example of which is the lengthy editorial comment at the beginning of this same chapter (7:3–4). Since Mark finds it necessary to explain the general *halalchah* of the Pharisees and Judeans, it is reasoned that he must be addressing a Gentile audience, and this gives cause for his parenthetical comment at the end of v. 19: Yeshua is reassuring the Gentile believers “that the Jewish food laws were not obligatory for them.”¹⁹ This, in a nutshell, is the conclusion of Rudolph’s article.

But paralleling the final clause of Mark 7:19 with the previous editorial comments (7:3–4) is a bit tenuous. In the first place, the explanatory insertion in vv. 3–4 is lengthy, and is clearly part of the narrative exposition, necessary for setting up the narrative scene to follow. But if v. 19b is also an editorial addition by Mark, it is unclear how it functions in light of the pericope as a whole. The issue at hand was the accusation against Yeshua’s disciples, that they fail to follow the *halalchah* of the elders, because they do not wash their hands before they eat. Yeshua’s response is not to negate all of the traditions of the elders, but to put them in their proper place, that is, subordinate to God’s commandments. His emphasis is upon the weightier matters of the Torah that are being neglected in favor of the traditions of the elders. So, as usual, He goes to the heart of the issue: loving God and loving one’s neighbor. He uses the fifth Word (honoring father and mother) as His primary example because it bridges these two aspects of the Ten Words.²⁰ Yeshua also notes what an evil heart brings forth: “evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness” (vv. 21–22). These are things that ultimately defile, not eating food with unwashed hands (cp. the parallel account in Matthew 15). That is because what comes into the heart is not so easily purged, and also because that which defiles the heart also causes others to be defiled, for it is duplicated through one’s actions and speech. In contrast, that which enters the bowel is quickly purged, and if done so in the proper place, does not defile others.

19 James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (John Knox, 1990), p. 45.

20 What I mean by this is that the Ten Words may be grouped as those directed primarily to God (Words 1-4) and those pertaining primarily to one’s neighbor (Words 6-10). Thus, the Ten Words encompass “loving God” and “loving one’s neighbor.” The 5th Word, the command to honor one’s parents, is the “bridge” between the two halves of the Ten Words, for loving God as Father is first understood by a recognition of one’s earthly father. Or to put it another way, honoring and submitting to the authority of one’s parents is the first step in understanding what it means to honor and submit to God as one’s Father.

So one wonders how, from this emphasis of Yeshua, Mark could come to the honest conclusion that He was suspending the Torah laws of clean and unclean foods for the Gentiles? To put it simply: if Mark has interjected v. 19b as his *halachic* deduction from Yeshua's teachings, it seems as though he missed the point. Moreover, Yeshua's words take on a more universal aspect, for Mark construes His teaching using *ἄνθρωπος*: "there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him" (Mark 7:15). This appears as a universal axiom, not something that is constrained by Jewish vs. Gentile boundaries.²¹ For Mark to have derived *halalchah* specific to Gentile believers from this saying of Yeshua appears to have missed the heart of Yeshua's teaching in this instance.

Secondly, in describing the particular action of the Pharisees and Judeans (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) in the opening narrative exposition (vv. 3–4), Mark uses indicative verbs (οὐκ ἐσθίουσιν, "they do not eat," used twice, v. 3 and 4). He uses the participle (κρατοῦντες τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, "holding to the traditions of the elders") to indicate normative or characteristic action of the Pharisees and Judeans. In the supposed parallel to v. 19b, the participle *καθαρίζων* should thus bespeak normative or characteristic action on the part of Yeshua (at least from Mark's perspective). Thus, the meaning would be "He (Yeshua) regularly declared all foods clean." If in fact this final clause of v. 19 is the Evangelist's own declarative statement regarding *halalchah* for Gentile believers, we would have expected Him to use the indicative rather than a participial form (and most likely an aorist indicative). In fact, the modern English translations, in order to cast the final phrase of our text as an editorial affirmation on the part of Mark, construe the participle in precisely this manner: "(Thus He declared all foods clean)," (NASB, NRSV, ESV,); "(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean')," NIV.

Therefore, to interpret Mark 7:19b as the *halachic* conclusion of the Evangelist himself, directed to the Gentiles but not to the Jewish people, seems to raise more difficulties than it solves.

But the need to understand the final clause of v. 19 as Mark's editorial conclusion is removed if, in fact, *καθαρίζων* can have an antecedent with which it does not share grammatical concord (as noted above). In this case, the antecedent of *καθαρίζων* could be either *ἀφεδρῶνα* ("latrine") or the excrement itself (which is spoken of only euphemistically as that which goes out into the latrine). This allows the final clause of v. 19 to function normally as the con-

21 This use of *ἄνθρωπος* may be understood as universal (=mankind) all the more because of Mark's repeated use of "son(s) of man" terminology, cf. Mark 2:10, 28; 3:28; 8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21, 41, 62; 15:39.

clusion of Yeshua's argument, namely, that as it pertains to food, what comes forth from the bowel does not defile, because it goes out into the latrine and is properly purged. In contrast, what comes out of the heart does defile, both the one from whom it proceeds as well as others. Therefore, Yeshua's teaching is that one should be more concerned about what goes into and comes forth from the heart, rather than whether one eats food with hands that have not been washed.

In the final analysis, even though the best reading of the text is *καθαρίζων* (masculine singular nominative), it can be understood as essentially the same in meaning as the inferior reading *καθαρίζον*. Grammatically, it is perfectly warranted to translate Mark 7:18–19 as follows:

18 And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and goes out into the latrine, cleansing all foods (from the body)?"