THE PROFOUND MERCY OF GOD
A NEW READING OF MATTHEW 9:18-31

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Introduction

In Matthew 9:18-31 Jesus performs two miraculous healings: He heals the hemorrhaging woman and He raises the synagogue official’s daughter from the dead. Both miracles are a testament to the divine power of Jesus but in general, more attention has been paid to the former rather than the latter. This is curious given the fact that Jesus raises the girl from the dead through touch, an act which would have rendered Him ritually impure according to Jewish laws regarding corpses. It is even more curious that the evangelist seems to gloss over this fact whereas all three synoptic evangelists, as well as St. Paul, take care to address other infractions of Jewish law regarding the Sabbath, circumcision, and unclean foods. The evangelist offers no indication that Jesus underwent the purification rituals prescribed by Numbers 19, nor does the evangelist offer any critique of Jesus’ actions through antagonists such as the scribes and Pharisees.

Continuing with the list of curiosities regarding this pericope, the author of the Gospel of Matthew, who is writing for perhaps the most Jewish community among all four of the Gospel communities, appears to have taken the Markan account of this miracle and modified in ways to emphasize that Jesus has in fact touched a dead body yet he offers no explanation or justification for the acceptability of this action.

Corpse impurity was classified as a form of ritual impurity as opposed to moral impurity or impurity due to the consumption of unclean foods. It was also referred to as the “father of fathers of impurity.” Why would the evangelist take such care in emphasizing that Jesus had touched a dead body while remaining silent on the fact that He had incurred ritual impurity?

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1 T. Kazen, Jesus and Purity Halakhah: Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity? (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002), 164.
There are a number of plausible explanations for this. First, it is commonly accepted that the Gospel of Matthew was written approximately 40 to 50 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus and after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70. This being the case, ritual purity laws may have had little importance to Jew or Christian since these laws were primarily applied to one’s ability to participate in Temple worship which was no longer possible. Another possibility is that corpse purity laws, while explicitly mentioned in the Torah, no longer played an important role in Judaism in the first century unlike other laws regarding the Sabbath or food cleanliness. Still another possibility is that the Gospel of Matthew was recorded at a time when such legal issues had already been settled by the apostolic community like questions regarding circumcision mentioned in Acts 15.

An interesting possible explanation derives from the evangelist’s silence on the issue, whether that silence was intentional or not. It is possible that by the time the Gospel of Matthew was recorded, the Christian understanding of death had developed to the point where Christians had re-appropriated a reverence for the body after death similar to that of the original intent of the Mosaic Law but certainly less legalistic than the Pharisaical interpretation of the law in the first century. This, along with the growing tension between the evangelist’s community and what would develop into Rabbinic Judaism, as well as the evangelist’s apparent reason for including this pericope in the Gospel, at the very least explain the evangelist’s silence on the issue. However, a closer examination of each of these areas will show that the evangelist may have intended more meaning to be transmitted through his silence. Namely, his silence reflects the nature and primacy of Jesus’ mission to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven through His victory
over death, even at the cost of breaking cultural and religious taboos. Secondarily, the evangelist’s silence is indicative of an attitude toward death which is more in keeping with the original spirit of these taboos; the body of a deceased person is a sacred thing.

In order to demonstrate this, pertinent literature regarding Matthew 9 and Numbers 19 will be reviewed as well as literature regarding Jesus’ attitudes toward ritual impurity. Following this review, the texts of Numbers 19 and Matthew 9 will be analyzed with a particular interest in their interpretation and practice by the Matthean community and their Jewish contemporaries. This analysis and review should provide adequate evidence to support the conclusions concerning the evangelist’s silence regarding corpse impurity and Jesus’ actions in raising the synagogue official’s daughter.

**Literature Review**

On first inspection most of the work on this section of Matthew’s Gospel concentrates on the miracle of the hemorrhaging woman while treating the miracle of the synagogue official’s daughter as secondary or dependent on the former. Little research can be found which directly addresses the fact that Jesus touched a dead body while performing the latter miracle. However, slightly more research can be found regarding the broader topic of Jesus’ attitudes towards the Mosaic Law and its interpretation and practice by His contemporary Jewish brethren. For example, John P. Meier has devoted a considerable section of his four volume work, *A Marginal Jew, Rethinking the Historical Jesus*[^2], to examining the purity laws as they were understood and practiced in the first century AD as well as Jesus’ attitude toward them. Meier is careful to distinguish between Pharisaical practices which Jesus might have encountered in His lifetime versus

the emerging rabbinic practices of the late first century which are more likely reflected in the Gospels. His general conclusion is that there is strong evidence for Jesus’ concern regarding moral impurity but there is little evidence to show His concern for ritual impurity issues such as corpse defilement. Despite his painstaking efforts leading up to these conclusions, Meier offers no solid explanation for Jesus’ silence on ritual purity: “Whatever his position on the Mosaic Law, it was neither total rejection nor blithe ignoring of the Law as a whole… it is a basic mistake to try to find one coherent line of thought or systematic approach to the Mosaic Law on the part of Jesus.”

In his article, “Moral Impurity and the Temple in Early Christianity in Light of Ancient Greek Practice and Qumranic Ideology,” Eyal Regev agrees with the general conclusion that Jesus emphasized moral purity over and above ritual purity but that this should not be taken as an outright rejection of ritual purity on the part of Jesus. He adds that ritual purity remained an important concept in early Christianity; however, he references Acts and the apostles’ practice of praying in the Temple as an indication that the Temple cult and ritual purity were an important element in early Christian worship. Regev does not address Christian sentiments toward these practices after the destruction of the Temple which would coincide more with Christian practices at the time the Gospel was recorded.

Jonathan Klawans also agrees with the emphasis on moral purity over ritual purity presented in the Synoptic Gospels adding that there is a relationship between ritual and moral purity which can be traced back to Philo: “According to Philo, the ritual impurity

3 Meier, 414.

that results naturally and affects our bodies should teach us to direct our attention to the moral impurity that afflicts our souls.”\(^5\) Despite this relationship which would indicate some sort of concern over ritual purity on the part of Jesus, Klawans notes that “Jesus nowhere defends ritual purity as a symbol of moral purity.”\(^6\)

In several of his works Jacob Neusner provides useful insights in the development of Rabbinic Judaism and the Mishnah from its roots in the Pharisaical Judaism of the first century AD. He is careful to distinguish the schools of thought between pivotal events such as the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the Bar Kokhba Rebellion in AD 135 which resulted in the almost complete dispersal of Jews from Jerusalem. Neusner notes that despite the destruction of the Temple, ritual purity remained an important concept in Rabbinic Judaism but the theological bases for these traditions were overshadowed by extreme legalism. In his discussion regarding Numbers 19 and the development of the Mishnah, Neusner points out that “The principal source of the uncleanness, of course, is the corpse. What is important in regard to the corpse is the capacity to impart uncleanness under a tent or roof.”\(^7\) In spite of this legalism, it is important to note that the concept of ritual purity was not destroyed along with the Temple.

T. Kazen also takes up the topic of the historic Jesus and His attitudes toward ritual purity however he fails to make any strong conclusions regarding the issue. He builds a case for a strong tradition of ritual purity concerns in the Second Temple period


\(^6\) Ibid., 15.

up to the first century AD, a tradition to which Jesus did not conform, especially in the case of corpse impurity: “Narrative traditions retain a memory of Jesus coming into contact with corpses in a way which would have rendered him corpse-impure, with no hint of subsequent purification.” Kazan seems hesitant to fully endorse the conclusion that Jesus was indifferent to ritual impurity in favor of making the case that Jesus’ true concern regarding the issue was the expansion of Mosaic Law by the Pharisees.

Overall one can see from the review of literature that a few scholars have attempted to address problems similar to the question at hand regarding Matthew 9. Those who have, for the most part, have approached the question from the perspective of the historical Jesus rather than looking at it from the perspective of the gospel community whose record of thought remains readily available through Scripture. By approaching the question from the historical Jesus perspective, their conclusions do not directly address the curiosity regarding a Jewish-Christian community’s silence on the issue when there is reason to believe that concerns over corpse impurity were alive and well when the evangelist was at work.

**Analysis of the Text**

**Numbers 19**

Before continuing to the text of Matthew 9 it will be important to examine the Mosaic Law regarding corpses as well as the Pharisaical and rabbinic interpretations of corpse impurity in the first century. The primary source of regulation regarding corpse impurity comes from Numbers 19 and the red heifer ritual for purification from corpse defilement:

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8 Kazen, 198.
11 Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days. 12 They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean; but if they do not purify themselves on the third day and on the seventh day, they will not become clean. 13 All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and do not purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the LORD; such persons shall be cut off from Israel. Since water for cleansing was not dashed on them, they remain unclean; their uncleanness is still on them.

Numbers 19:11–22 (NRSV)

From the start, it is interesting that the prescriptions for such a grave source of impurity are not recorded in a purely apodictic form like most moral and cultic laws. Rather, the concept of corpse impurity is first introduced through the prescriptions for the preparation of the cleansing ritual including the preparation of ashes from a red heifer. Lacking the tell-tale “if-then” structure, it appears that there was a general assumption that sooner or later a person would incur ritual impurity in their lifetime due to proximity or contact with a corpse. This assumption is congruent with Jewish sensitivities toward properly burying the dead: “The commands of Scripture, taken with traditions regarding piety (as especially exemplified in Tobit), corpse impurity, and avoidance of the defilement of the land, strongly suggest that under normal circumstances (i.e. peacetime) no corpse would remain unburied.”9 Since the sick and the dying would have been cared for in the family’s dwelling and since the responsibility for burial of the dead most likely remained with the family, most people would likely have incurred this form of ritual impurity at some point in their lives.

This form of impurity was considered to be the most severe of all ritual impurities: “It was regarded as the ‘father of fathers of impurity’ in the rabbinic system,

since it contaminated persons and vessels with a seven-day impurity.” In one sense it was the father of impurity due to the severity of the cleansing ritual and the consequences of failing to follow them. Failure to follow the prescriptions would result in expulsion from the community as well as defilement of the sanctuary: “Any who are unclean but do not purify themselves, those persons shall be cut off from the assembly, for they have defiled the sanctuary of the LORD. Since the water for cleansing has not been dashed on them, they are unclean.” (Num 19:20 NRSV)

Corpse impurity was considered the father of fathers due to its severe contagion: “Whatever the unclean person touches shall be unclean, and anyone who touches it shall be unclean until evening.” (Num 10:22 NRSV) This contagion went far beyond physical contact with a person who had touched a dead body to include spacial concerns: “This is the law when someone dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent, and everyone who is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days. And every open vessel with no cover fastened on it is unclean.” (Num 19:14-15 NRSV) The impurity itself takes on a physical dimension as if it were an odorless, colorless gas that permeates the atmosphere in concentrations sufficient to contaminate everything that it contacts unless it is somehow sealed against it.

Before examining corpse impurity further it would be helpful to distinguish it from other forms of impurity. According to Meier’s scheme, Mosaic Law addressed three primary categories of impurity: moral impurity, impurity associated with the dietary laws, and ritual impurity. A fourth category, genealogical impurity, developed in the

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10 Kazan, 164-165.
11 Meier, 344-348.
6th century BC following the Babylonian exile, prohibiting Israelites from entering into marriage with Gentiles.\textsuperscript{12}

Moral impurity arose, as its name would suggest, from violations of moral code such as the Decalogue. This type of impurity resulted from personal sin similar to what is described in Catholic doctrine as mortal sin. There was generally no sense of contagion associated with this form of impurity but there were serious ramifications. In addition to rendering the guilty party unclean, the sinful act which brought about the impurity also rendered the land unclean and in some cases, the Temple as well.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, moral impurity also had a dimension similar to contemporary notions of social sin. In this respect, moral impurity acted similar to corpse impurity in that it could contaminate locales not in physical contact much like a plume of invisible gas spreading across the land. Nevertheless, an important distinction remains; moral impurity resulted from a personal choice whereas ritual impurity generally resulted from natural and unavoidable processes. Prescriptions for cleansing a person of such impurity would have included atoning sacrifices but may have resulted in the person’s expulsion from the community, depending on the severity of the sin. Cleansing the land and the Temple of such impurity would have occurred through the atoning sacrifice of \textit{Yom Kippur}.

Ritual purity laws differed significantly from moral purity laws. One such difference stemmed from causality; moral impurity generally resulted from a personal choice or decision while the ritual impurity laws generally addressed natural occurrences an individual would inevitably encounter in life such as birth, death, menstruation, and

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 347.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
disease. Therefore, care should be taken to separate the concept of ritual impurity from concepts of personal sin associated with moral impurity. Ritual impurity was also often associated with contagion; a person could be rendered unclean through contact with another unclean person even though the former had suffered nothing contrary to the purity laws.

The third type of impurity associated with the dietary laws is sometimes categorized with ritual purity laws but maintains its differences. More similar to moral impurity, the dietary laws are concerned with a personal decision whether or not to eat a specific, unclean food unlike the ritual impurity laws which concern themselves mainly with natural processes in life. Different too are the prescriptions. Ritual impurity laws recognized that certain conditions are unavoidable and thus have to be dealt with while the dietary laws assumed that the prohibited food would be avoided in all cases, negating the need for cleansing rituals.

Since corpse impurity is the primary concern a few more words must be said of this type of ritual impurity. Once again, it is important to separate this type of impurity from any notion of sin or evil. It is also important to distinguish between the ancient Jewish sense of impurity and the modern concept of “dirty” since the two share a common vocabulary. The modern reader may be tempted to dismiss the prescriptions of Numbers 19 as an intuitive or experientially derived attempt of an ancient people to avoid infectious diseases which could result in death by avoiding contact with the corpse of a person who may have died from the disease. There is a natural human repulsion to certain sensory stimuli, such as the smell of rotted food, which is associated with objects
that could be dangerous but this is not the source of the prescriptions in Numbers 19. Ritual purity did not concern modern ideas regarding hygiene.

Rather than viewing ritual purity through modern eyes which focus on hygiene, it must be viewed from the perspective of ancient Israel which was concerned with maintaining separation between the sacred and profane in order to prevent transgressions on the holiness of God. With this viewpoint, the opposite of impure is not hygienic but rather holy.14 There are many analogues which illustrate the separation between the sacred and profane – the arrangement and construction of the wilderness sanctuary with areas of progressively increasing holiness until one reaches the Holy of Holies (Ex 25-27), Moses’ encounter with God on Mt. Sinai and the warning to the people against setting foot on the mountain (Ex 19), and the arrangement of the animal sacrifices with its reservation of the inner organs and fat for God (Ex 29). Most of these analogues function on the principle that certain things belong to God and the realm of His holiness and are to be considered sacred. Life and death fall into this category which explains the purity concerns regarding things such as natural procreative functions (menstruation, seminal secretions, and childbirth) and corpses.

In order to shed light on the evangelist’s silence regarding ritual impurity and Jesus’ actions in Matthew 9 an account must be made for the first century understanding and practice of the prescriptions in Numbers 19. In accomplishing this task consideration has to be made for the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and the subsequent development of Rabbinic Judaism. While this form of Judaism does find its roots in Pharisaical Judaism, the portrayal of the latter in the Gospel of Matthew is more likely a

reflection of Rabbinic Judaism rather than the actual Pharisaical practices during the earthly ministry of Jesus. However, since the primary concern here is the Matthean community’s attitude toward ritual purity, the portrayal of Rabbinic Judaism as Pharisaical Judaism in the Gospel can more or less be taken at face value with one additional precaution: Rabbinic Judaism remained in a state of flux following the destruction of the Temple and the Mishnah would continue in its development for several more centuries.

With these precautions in mind “The chief interests of the Pharisees before A.D. 70 were eating food in a state of ritual purity… underlying the Pharisaic program was a cult-centered piety that imposed the Temple’s purity laws on the table of the ordinary Jews, thus replicating the Temple in the home.”15 At least some of these concerns for ritual impurity, including the prescriptions of Numbers 19 regarding human bones, were carried forward in the Mishnah:

The Sadducees said, "We blame [object to] you Pharisees, because you say, 'Sacred Scriptures make the hands unclean, but the books Hameram do not make the hands unclean.'" Rabbon Jochan ben Zachai replied [ironically], "And have we nothing else to object to the Pharisees but this? They also assert that the bones of an ass are clean, but the bones of Jochanan the high priest are unclean." They [the Sadducees] replied, "According to their love [the estimation in which the bones are held] is their uncleanness, so that no one may turn the bones of his father and mother into spoons." He answered them, "In like manner [are] the sacred Scriptures; according to their love [the high estimation in which they are held] is their uncleanness; whereas the books Hameram, which are not beloved [held in no esteem], do not make the hands unclean."16

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16 m.Yad.4:6 (Blackman, third edition)
While this particular passage of the Mishnah is more concerned with the apparent proportional relationship between an object’s uncleanness and the esteem in which it is held, it does demonstrate that corpse impurity was carried forward into the early rabbinic era.

From this analysis of Numbers 19 it can be seen that corpse impurity is appropriately considered a type of ritual impurity stemming from the fact that it involved a natural process which an individual was likely to encounter at some point during his lifetime rather than resulting from any type of moral decision. The rationale behind this system of purity is debated but can generally be viewed as maintaining separation between what is holy, namely God and His power over life and death, and what is profane. This concern over ritual impurity likely existed in the first century AD before and after the destruction of the Temple. Despite the cautions against a wholesale acceptance of late first century Rabbinic Judaism as being representative of early first century Pharisaical Judaism, this investigation is primarily concerned with late first century Jewish attitudes; therefore, those presented in the Gospel text may be taken at face value.

**Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26**

With sufficient background established it is time to examine the text of Matthew including its parallels, its genre, and its context.

18 While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” 19 And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples...

23 When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, 24 he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. 25 But when the crowd had been put outside, he
went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26 (NRSV)

Parallel Passages and Redaction

This passage of Matthew parallels Mark 5:21-43 and Luke 8:40-56 and is generally taken to be of Markan origin. Like many other passages, Matthew has significantly redacted Mark’s version, shortening its length considerably while still adding some important details. An obvious and immediate difference is the omission of the official’s name by Matthew; both Mark and Luke identify him as Jairus. This may have been an attempt by the evangelist to downplay the connection to a Jewish institution “because of his own community’s strained relationship with ‘their synagogues.’” Furthermore, Mark and Luke describe the man’s action as begging while Matthew uses a more powerful image: he “came in and knelt before him” (Mt 5:18). The action of kneeling could indicate an acknowledgement of Jesus’ true identity as the Messiah on the part of the official or at least in the eyes of the Matthean community.

Additionally, Matthew adds a number of details which make it clear that the young girl is in fact dead. In Matthew 9:18 the NRSV states that the daughter “has just died” whereas Mark states she “is at the point of death” (Mk 5:23). Luke closely maintains Mark’s description by stating that she “was dying.” (Lk 8:42) Looking at the Greek, all three evangelists chose different verbs:

Matthew τελεύταω die; be at the point of death

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17 Harrington, 131.

Mark ἐσχάτως ἔχει is at an end; is at the point of death
Luke ἀποθνῄσκω die; face death, be at death’s door; be mortal

Even though the aggregate force of these verbs is ambiguous regarding the vitality of the daughter, Matthew makes it clear that the girl is dead with the addition of other details such as the flute players and “the crowd making a commotion” in verse 23 which recall Jewish funerary traditions. Mark and Luke both add the report of the girl’s death before Jesus is able to reach her (Mk 5:35 – ἀπέθανεν – she died; Lk 8:49 – τέθνηκεν – she has died) but Matthew emphasizes this fact from the beginning. Despite these assurances that the girl is dead, Matthew along with his synoptic counterparts quotes Jesus as stating that the girl is only asleep. All three evangelists use the verb καθεύδω which can be translated as either to sleep or to be dead. Since the verb is used in opposition to ἀποθνῄσκω and μηκέτι, it is appropriately translated as sleep. Nevertheless most scholars agree that the term sleep was a common euphemism for death. The overall conclusion from this analysis is that the girl was in fact dead and it appears that the author of Matthew wanted to make sure his community understood this fact.

20 Newman, 21.
21 Harrington, 131-132.
23 Ibid., 89.
Mark and Luke mention the witnesses to this miracle by name: Peter, James, and John (Mk 5:37, Lk 8:51). Matthew omits any mention of witness which may indicate the intended purpose for including this account in the Gospel. This aspect will be explored further in this section.

The final difference between the parallel accounts of significance is the girl’s age, 12 years, which is stated in Mark 5:42 and Luke 8:42. This detail parallels the length of time which the hemorrhaging woman had suffered from her affliction which is also stated by all three synoptic evangelists. Aside from the fact that one story is embedded in the other, this detail seems to be responsible for many to concentrate on the meaning of the overall story rather than examining the individual details of the story of the official’s daughter. Matthew omits the girl’s age and significantly reduces the details regarding the hemorrhaging woman which seems to shift the emphasis back to the story of the daughter.

Genre

Matthew 9:18-26 is a miracle story - two miracle stories to be precise - but only the miracle of the raising of the synagogue official’s daughter is of interest here. What kind of miracle was it and why did the evangelist consider it important to include in his version of the Gospel? R. Brown considers three basic types of miracles to be presented in the Gospels:\(^{25}\)

Those which were performed by Jesus to bring about the Kingdom by overcoming Satan’s dominion over man including death

Those performed as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy

Those performed as a symbolic action such as the restoration of sight or hearing which often symbolized opening the eyes and ears of disciples to the truth that Jesus preached.

This passage from Matthew contains elements which fall under each of these categories. However, in order to show the first category as the most prevalent theme, the second and third categories will be examined first.

Fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies is a major theme in the Gospel of Matthew; this passage could be seen as the fulfillment of a number of Old Testament passage such as Dn 12:2, Ez 37 and Is 26:19. The evangelist also seems to portray Jesus as a second Elijah\(^\text{26}\) and this miracle resembles one performed by Elisha in 2 Kngs 4:18-37.

The passage contains symbolic elements as well. The entire pericope, including the hemorrhaging woman with her loss of blood, could be seen as a prefiguration of the Passion and Jesus’ loss of blood. Obviously, the daughter being raised from the dead could be seen as symbolic of Jesus’ own resurrection.\(^\text{27}\) In addition, Jesus’ action (raising the dead) is listed among the signs of “the one who is to come” when John the Baptist’s disciples are sent to question Jesus in Matthew 11:2-6.\(^\text{28}\)

While all these elements belonging to the second and third categories are important to the understanding of the story, its location in the Gospel, the lack of witnesses, and the very nature of the miracle (raising the dead) present a strong

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\(^\text{26}\) Ibid., 221.


\(^\text{28}\) Albright, 113.
case for Brown’s first category of miracles: those performed by Jesus in order to bring about the Kingdom. This miracle follows a series of three other miracle stories which share the same theme: “The Calming of the Storm at Sea,” “The Healing of the Gadarene Demoniacs,” and “The Healing of the Paralytic.” By calming the sea, Jesus is seen as having power over primordial and evil powers which were embodied by the sea and the storm. In the episode of the demoniacs, Jesus directly confronts evil powers and expels them. In the case of the paralytic, Jesus frees a man from sin and the dominion of Satan which has literally bound his legs and kept him captive.

The failure to explicitly mention witnesses to this miracle is an uncharacteristic redaction by the evangelists and points toward Brown’s first category of miracles as well. In several other cases, Matthew actually adds more people to the scene than mentioned by Mark or Luke so as to ensure that the Jewish requirement for two witnesses has been satisfied in order to demonstrate the validity of the story. This can be seen in the healing of Mark’s blind man, Bartimaeus (Mk 10:46-52). Luke omits the man’s name (Lk 18:35-43) but maintains that there was only one person healed whereas Matthew has increased the number of those healed to two men (Mt 20:29-34) in order to satisfy the Jewish custom of two witnesses. The lack of adequate witnesses to the healing of the synagogue official’s daughter seems to detract from the story’s function as a symbolic act or the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy since credible witnesses to both of these types of miracles would be desirable.
Finally, the story of the synagogue official’s daughter represents “the ultimate expression of the miracle as the triumph of God’s kingdom over Satan… in Jesus’ restoration of life to the dead.”

Therefore, it seems reasonable to treat this miracle story as one which was seen as bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven.

**Context**

Current scholarship is in general agreement about many details regarding the Matthean community. The Gospel was likely composed between AD 80 and AD 90 by and for Jewish-Christian converts in or around Palestine. Antioch is often named as a plausible location for this community. This period followed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and coincided with the rabbinic academy at Jamnia which was seated around AD 75 to AD 90. It was also a period when many, especially Jewish-Christians, would likely have considered themselves a sect within Judaism rather than a new and separate faith. The evidence presented regarding ritual purity beliefs in the first century AD support that the Jewish-Christians of this community would have been mindful of the ritual purity traditions and would have shown some deference toward these traditions.

There were also apparent tensions between this community and what would later become Rabbinic Judaism. Many suggest that this tension is one of the keys to understanding Matthew’s Gospel as a whole. “After A.D. 70 Judaism was very much in transition. Several movements arose that claimed to provide the authentic means of continuing the Jewish tradition… early rabbis… and early

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29 Brown, 225.
Christian communities (such as Matthew’s community).”30 Others have posited that this tension resulted in the schism between early Christian communities and their Jewish neighbors: “[It] seems likely, that Matthew’s community had recently been placed outside Judaism by the rabbis of Jamnia through a ban called the birkat hamminim (ca. AD 80), it is still possible that many leading members of the community felt themselves to be Jewish.”31 Thus, a picture emerges of a community who wishes to continue practicing their Jewish traditions but has been effectively ostracized from mainstream Judaism for their faith in Christ.

**Methodological Conclusions**

With all of the ground work laid, perhaps some meaning can be coaxed from the evangelist’s silence regarding Jesus’ apparent defilement through contact with a corpse without any mention of subsequent purification or commentary on purity rules seen elsewhere in the New Testament. In the final analysis, logic dictates that this silence on the subject either has meaning, or it does not. Given the findings from the literature review, the analysis of Numbers 19 and the various issues surrounding impurity, and the analysis of Matthew 9, its synoptic parallels, genre, and context, there is every indication that Matthew’s silence holds meaning.

The analysis of Numbers 19 showed that corpse impurity is appropriately considered a type of ritual impurity stemming from the fact that it involved a natural process which an individual was likely to encounter at some point during his lifetime.

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30 Harrington, 16.

rather than resulting from any type of moral decision. The rationale behind this system of purity is generally viewed as a means of maintaining separation between what is holy, namely God and His power over life and death, and what is profane. This concern over ritual impurity likely existed in the first century AD before and after the destruction of the Temple. In this regard and for the purposes of this thesis, the late first century Rabbinic Judaism presented in the text of Matthew is representative of early first century Pharisaical Judaism likely encountered by the historic Jesus.

In the text of Matthew 9:18-19 Jesus, who would likely have been sensitive to the cultural and religious taboos regarding corpses, consents to enter a house containing a corpse and ultimately to touching the corpse. On the surface it is the story of Jesus’ mercy, love, and compassion for a grieving father which trump social conventions. Also, given the tensions between the Matthean community and the rabbinic movement of their day, represented through the tensions between Jesus and His contemporaries in the Jewish leadership, it is a story which embodies many basic Christian beliefs including the need to love one’s enemies. However, there is more to the story than what lies on the surface.

It is interesting that an official from the synagogue has initiated this action. It is generally accepted that Jewish officials such as this one, as well as the Scribes and Pharisees portrayed in the Gospel are representative of the Jewish contemporaries of the Matthean community, perhaps even the rabbis of the Jamnia School who had expelled these early Christians from their local synagogues. A Jewish official has asked Jesus to render himself ritually unclean and Jesus consents. There is every reason to believe that Jesus and the Matthean
community would have been mindful of the significance of this request.
Moreover, this would have been an unnecessary action on the part of Jesus in the eyes of His contemporaries – He was not a member of the family and He had no social obligation which would compel Him to enter this house. Furthermore, He had no need to touch the girl in order to heal her.

The act of touching the girl’s lifeless body is a climactic moment, perhaps even more so in the eyes of the Matthean community than the girl rising from the dead. How would the community have interpreted this act? One possible interpretation is that Jesus is the Christ – He is God so He would have had every right to touch the dead body of the official’s daughter. Life and death belong to God alone and Jesus, the Son of God, would not have transgressed any boundaries between the sacred and profane. However, it cannot be assumed that the Matthean community had a highly developed Christology which would have recognized that Jesus is God. In order to answer the question it would be more fruitful to return to the evangelist’s intent for including this event in the narrative.

There are aspects of this miracle story which are symbolic and which point to a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies according to Brown’s schema. However, the sheer magnitude of the action (raising the dead) and the story’s position in the Gospel indicate that it was seen as an event which was to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus, Jesus has chosen to break a cultural and religious taboo in order to bring about the kingdom by defeating Satan and death. Moreover, He was asked to do this by an individual who the Matthean community may have seen as opposing the kingdom in their own time. The fact that the
official kneels and asks this of Jesus, as opposed to simply begging Him as described in Mark and Luke, may have served to rebuke their Jewish contemporaries who opposed them.

Jesus’ mission is to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a mission that reflects God’s mercy and love for all of humanity. Matthew’s silence on the fact that Jesus has rendered himself ritually impure with no apparent concern for subsequent purification does not show indifference to the tradition or a gloss on the part of the evangelist. Nor is it indicative of a lax attitude toward ritual purity following the destruction of the Temple. Rather, it serves to highlight Jesus’ priorities in His mission in the eyes of the Matthean community. The advent of the kingdom and the defeat of Satan is the priority. Ultimately, this story remains a reflection of God’s mercy, love, and compassion but in a more profound way than just the consolation of a single man who has lost his daughter. Jesus seeks not to console one grieving father but to console all of humanity.

Finally, all three Synoptic Gospels remain silent on the rest of the story – what happened to the little girl after she was raised from the dead? Was she considered ritually impure? These questions are beyond the scope of this investigation but they highlight an interesting fact: the old Mosaic Law was inadequate to address the new reality that was ushered in by Christ. Ritual impurity laws never considered the possibility of resurrection. The new reality of eternal life, symbolized by a young girl who is brought back from the dead, supersedes the old reality which sought only to maintain separation between the sacred and the profane.
Conclusion

What at first seems a paradox in the Gospel of Matthew is actually congruent with the entire Gospel message. Ritual purity remained an important cultural and religious tradition to the contemporaries of the historic Jesus as well as to the community which produced the Gospel of Matthew. Therefore, for Jesus to enter a house containing a corpse and for Him to touch the corpse without explicitly undergoing the purification rituals prescribed in the Book of Numbers would have been culturally and religiously significant and necessitates commentary from the evangelist. Some have taken Matthew’s silence on the issue as an indication that the historic Jesus and/or the Matthean community were indifferent to this tradition but a closer examination of the tradition itself, the text, and the community from which the text emerged demonstrates a deeper meaning in the evangelist’s silence. When Jesus breaks this cultural and religious taboo, He does so not out of indifference but out of love for all humanity and His desire to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven through the defeat of evil and death.

The Matthean community and early Christians in general also seem to have re-appropriated the rationale originally behind the tradition of ritual impurity and corpses; life and death belong to God. Those who have been close to death or who have witnessed the passing of a loved one from this life into the next recognize the sacredness of the moment and the sacredness of the body that is left behind. The moment of death is one through which heaven and earth are joined. This fact even serves to sanctify the very place where the body lies. Ancient Judaism recognized this not only in its treatment of the body as a sacred thing but
in its prescriptions regarding the tent or the house in which the body lay. The Christian recognition of its Jewish roots established the foundation for a rich heritage not only of Christian funeral rites but in other traditions such as veneration of the saints and martyrs.
Bibliography

Works Cited


General References


