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# Considering Levitical Food Laws

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## Considering Levitical Food Laws

***Scripture provides sound, specific counsel about what you should eat—and what you should not eat.***

Jiří Moskala

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The Apostle Paul boldly declares that God's kingdom does not consist of "eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).<sup>1</sup> Seventh-day Adventist doctrines center on God, the redemption in Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit. The person, deeds, and teachings of Jesus Christ lie at the heart of our faith. The proper lifestyle springs from this faith in Him. A true religion of love leads to right choices in the matter of eating and drinking, because we were not only created to enjoy food (Gen. 1:31) but also to reflect God's glory in our habits of eating (1 Cor. 10:31).

It is crucial to note that God's first commandments to humans were related to eating (Gen. 2:16, 17). The Hebrew word for "command" is used here for the first time. But unfortunately, the fall into sin was connected with food, too (3:6). One can observe how important food is by the fact that the first temptation of Jesus related to eating (Matt. 4:1-4). The way of eating and its choices bring consequences.

God's legislation of Pentateuchal dietary laws, however, where certain food is prohibited for human consumption, was not given for the purpose of gaining salvation. Eating or fasting does not convey anyone into heaven. These regulations God gave to holy people! They were already saved, liberated from the bondage of slavery, and should maintain their holiness. They received God's gift of food legislation because they were holy.

In Deuteronomy it is aptly explained: "You are the sons of the Lord your God. . . . You are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession" (14:1, 2, ESV) and only then God commands: "Do not eat any detestable thing. These are the animals you may eat . . ." (vss. 4, 5). This is the correct and the only proper sequence of things: First comes God's grace, and then He provides His instruction on how to live in holiness. People thus respond to this revelation in thankful recognition of His loving and unique leadership.

Response to questions about diet should be God-centered, not law-centered. Jesus did not eat any unclean food (Matt. 5:17-20; 15:16-20), and such an answer sets a Christocentric tone to discussions with those who question our food choice. This makes us known as people who follow Jesus and are in love with Him.

The Mosaic dietary laws as recorded in Leviticus 11 are unique. No such list of clean and unclean animals is known in the Bible outside of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, or in the Near Eastern ancient literature. This legislation is not only about eating or restraining from consuming pork. This list is broad and comprehensive and includes all categories of living creatures as it is seen in the detailed literary structure of Leviticus 11, in which sections A and A' deal with the universal division of animals for human consumption.

Leviticus 11 can be outlined in the following way:

Introduction, vss. 1, 2a

1. Formula of divine speech, vs. 1
2. Specific living creatures may be eaten, vs. 2a
- A. Edible and inedible living creatures, vss. 2b–23
  1. Land living creatures, vss. 2b–8
    - a. Edible land creatures, vss. 2b, 3
    - b. Inedible land creatures, vss. 4–8
  2. Water living creatures, vss. 9–12
    - a. Edible water animals, vs. 9
    - b. Inedible water animals, vss. 10–12
  3. Air living creatures, vss. 13–23
    - a. Inedible birds, vss. 13–19
    - b. Winged insects, vss. 20–23
      - i. Inedible winged insects, vs. 20
      - ii. Edible winged insects, vss. 21, 22
      - iii. Inedible winged insects, vs. 23
- B. Acquired uncleanness resulting from contact with carcasses, vss. 24–40
  1. Unclean dead land creatures, vss. 24–28
    - a. Introducing the principle, vss. 24, 25
    - b. Carcasses of land creatures, vss. 26–28
  2. Swarming dead creatures, vss. 29–38
  3. Clean dead land creatures, vss. 39, 40
- C. Inedible swarming living creatures, vss. 41–43
- Conclusion, vss. 44–47
  1. Basic rationale: Be holy for I am holy, vss. 44, 45
  2. Final summary, vss. 46, 47

Scholars usually treat the laws of clean/unclean animals/food in the narrow context of Leviticus 11–15. Jacob Milgrom, however, rightly claims that “the diet laws of Leviticus 11 cannot be comprehended in isolation” and that “they form part of a larger dietary system. . . . Only when the system is viewed in its totality does the significance of Leviticus 11 become clear.”<sup>2</sup> This is why he begins the exploration of the subject with Genesis 9:3 and 4.

This, however, is not sufficient. The starting point for the explanation of the dietary code regarding permitted and forbidden animals has to be put within an even larger context, namely Creation itself.

There have been many attempts to explain the rationale behind the distinction of clean and unclean animals/food. At least 14 theories/hypotheses have been suggested by scholars: the arbitrary command explanation; the cultic explanation; the sociological explanation; the symbolic explanation; the didactic explanation; the psychological/repulsiveness explanation; the taboo and totemism explanation; the death-life antithesis explanation; the anthropological explanation; the nature/culture boundary explanation; the ethical/moral explanation; the sacrificial paradigm explanation; the economic explanation; and the hygienic/health explanation. Unfortunately, there is still no consensus.

Two main objections are given against the observance of the Mosaic dietary laws regarding clean and

unclean food: (1) selectivity—choosing only one Pentateuchal uncleanness, namely uncleanness of animals, and neglecting others, is arbitrary; (2) the New Testament explicitly abolishes laws of clean and unclean dietary regulations. Thus, many Christians claim that they are under no obligation to observe these food regulations, which they consider obsolete. Are the laws regarding clean and unclean animals of Leviticus 11 still valid?

Response to these objections involves reasoning from different angles to demonstrate the validity of these dietary instructions. Here are the main arguments for maintaining their relevancy.

## 1. Respect for the Creator God

The principal rationale behind the distinction between clean and unclean food is respect for the Creator God. This theological concept of respecting the Creator is also strongly present in the New Testament (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16, 17; Rev. 14:7). There are at least 10 close connections between the first Creation Genesis story and Leviticus 11. The parallelism between Creation and the Mosaic dietary laws demonstrates a literary design and main rationale behind these laws.

*First link: key terminology.* Key lexicography occurs in both chapters in the forms of nouns (e.g., *earth, water, seas, animals, birds, kind*), demonstrative pronouns (e.g., *these, all*), Divine name (*God*) and verbs (e.g., *eat, separate, be holy*).

*Second link: universal taxonomy.* The universal taxonomy of the animal kingdom (Leviticus 11) is built on the universal view of Creation (Genesis 1). In Leviticus 11 the Hebrew word for “all,” “everything,” and “everyone” occurs 36 times. These occurrences testify to the universal view of the author of the chapter, who sees the animal kingdom as a whole and classifies it comprehensively. This points back to Creation where the same word is used 29 times. God’s whole creation is finished and classified as “very good” (Gen. 1:31).

*Third link: three habitats for the living creatures.* According to the first Creation story, God created three habitats for the living creatures: land (vss. 2, 9, 10), water (vss. 2, 6, 7, 9, 10), and air/sky/firmament (vss. 6–8). In Leviticus 11, the same three habitats are implemented for living creatures (land [vss. 1–8, 41–43]; water [vss. 9–12]; air [13–23]). This threefold division of the created world is the foundation of biblical cosmology, and it is significant that they are mentioned in the same sequence.

*Fourth link: four categories of living creatures.* Living creatures were created to fill space—the land, water, and air (Gen. 1:20, 21, 24, 25). Four categories of living creatures were made: animals, fish, birds, and “swarmers.” This Creation scheme is reflected in Leviticus 11 in its classification of the whole animal kingdom into four categories of living creatures, although with slightly different terminology. Careful comparative analysis of different categories of Leviticus 11 and Genesis 1 reveals that both chapters describe the same four categories of living creatures.

Carmichael acknowledges the connection between Leviticus 11 and the Creation story: “The clean and unclean water creatures and the birds of the sacrificial and dietary rules in Leviticus 11:9–19 and Deuteronomy 14:9–20 have a fundamental link to day five of creation.”<sup>3</sup>

*Fifth link: the same rules for reproduction.* According to the first Creation story, reproduction must be “according to its kind.” The Hebrew word for “kind,” with its various forms, is a keyword of Genesis 1 where it occurs 10 times out of the 31 times that it is used in the Hebrew Bible. The expression also occurs in Genesis 6 and 7 (seven times), Leviticus 11 (nine times) and Deuteronomy 14 (four times). Creation is about the

establishment of order. God sets boundaries, and living creatures of different species and of different kinds are expected to keep them. Leviticus 11 preserves that Creation order and respects these boundaries.

*Sixth link: the concept of separation.* Creation is a process of separation, division, and distinction. The word for "separation" is used five times in the Creation story itself (Gen. 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18; outside of Genesis 1 it is used 37 times in the Hebrew text). God separated light from darkness, day from night, the heavens from the waters (sea), land from water, the Sabbath from the other six days, etc.

The idea of separation or division explicitly connects the Creation account with the dietary laws. This term is also used in Leviticus 10:10 (once); 11:47 (once); and 20:24–26 (four times), thus occurring 11 times in the passages under study. This phenomenon is very important considering that in the Pentateuch itself it is used only 20 times. More than half of these occurrences are related to our key texts. It is crucial to notice that this word is not used elsewhere in Leviticus 11–15 or in the Holiness Code. This does not appear to be the result of chance; it reflects intentionality and design. This link shows that the same Creation activity (i.e., separation) must be involved in the decision-making process when God intervenes and separates/distinguishes between clean and unclean food. It is His ultimate decision. When humans distinguish between clean and unclean food, they are participating in God's creative activity. Thus the dietary laws teach their observers the ability to choose in everyday matters of life what is right, and to help them make right decisions.

*Seventh link: the concept of locomotion.* Created life is not stationary; motion is involved. Each species has its own sphere and can move in that realm. This is stressed in the second couplet of God's creative activity—on the fourth, fifth, and sixth days. God brings forth entities that have locomotion: first Sun and Moon, then birds, fish, animals, and finally humans. The feature of motion in the Creation story is stressed by the idea of separation (which is also a kind of motion). The element of locomotion is reflected in Leviticus 11.

This is a feature of the Creation account that Mary Douglas stresses in her interpretation of the Mosaic dietary laws. Her dictum that "any class of creatures which is not equipped for the right kind of locomotion in its element is contrary to holiness"<sup>4</sup> may go too far; nevertheless, it is important to observe that locomotion plays a role in the identification of clean living creatures according to Leviticus 11. Though motion may be a characteristic of unclean animals, dietary laws thus stress motion as essential in the enumeration of clean animals, such as split hoofs for quadrupeds, fins for fish, and hopping for edible locusts.

*Eighth link: the concept of eating.* God provides food for humans. Even though the diet was changed, the same principle remains—God as the Creator points out what is good and proper for human consumption (Gen. 1:29; Lev. 11:1–23, 41–47). God's given diet for the whole created primeval world was vegetarian. Humans and animals were given "herbage," "herb," and "plant" as food (Gen. 1:29, 30).

*Ninth link: God as the subject of Creation and of the dietary laws.* God is the subject of Creation; therefore, He determines what is clean and unclean (Gen. 1:1; Lev. 11:2). God is the Creator and the Giver of life. He is also the Giver of the dietary regulations. The goal for the act of eating is the sustaining of life. His Sovereignty is stressed by this observation.

*Tenth link: the concept of holiness and imitatio Dei.* The concept of holiness is at the conclusion of the first Creation account as well as at the conclusion of the dietary laws (Gen. 2:3; Lev. 11:44, 45), and functions as a climax to these two chapters. Humans were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27); and according to Leviticus 11:44, 45, they must imitate God, i.e., be holy, as He is holy. Milgrom aptly says:

“Holiness means *imitatio Dei*—the life of godliness.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, there are at least three important links between the dietary laws of Leviticus 11 and Genesis 2. Besides the key terminology used in these two chapters, there is a significant concept expressed in relation to eating in Genesis 2 that is later repeated in Leviticus 11. God’s first positive and negative commands are given in relationship to eating (Gen. 2:16, 17). In Leviticus 11 there is also first a positive command (vs. 3) and then a negative one (vs. 4). These commands have in both cases exactly the same idea: what you may and may not eat.

The third important issue in the second Creation story in connection with Leviticus 11 is the perspective of death or separation in relation to the forbidden. The transgression of the command “you may not eat” has as its ultimate end death: explicitly stated in Genesis 2:17 and implicitly included in connection with the dietary laws, separation from the holiness of God brings as a final result: death. God is life, and everything in relation to Him has life. Disobedience always brings complications and death (Lev. 7:26, 27; Deut. 7:12–15; 28:58–61).

Creation is the overall umbrella for discovering a rationale behind the biblical dietary laws, and the theme of Creation unites different factors of this rationale which may be discovered from the biblical text. Thus, behind the legislation of clean and unclean animals/food lies a deep theological reason, which is the respect for the Creator, the Holy One.

## 2. Two Categories of Uncleaness

The 11 kinds of Pentateuchal dietary uncleaness<sup>6</sup> can be classified into two basic categories: one type is temporary; the other, permanent. These two types can be differentiated in the following way:

A. Permanent uncleaness uniquely characterizes the dietary laws. The type of uncleaness of the unclean animals is permanent, and thus natural, hereditary, non-cultic, and universal, while the other kind is acquired, temporary, and ritual/ceremonial. An unclean animal is born unclean and dies unclean. This uncleaness means that an unclean animal is not fit for human consumption. This definition is evident in Leviticus 11:47, in which unclean equals uneatable; and clean, edible: ““You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten.””

B. Impurity of living unclean animals is not contagious. There are five sources of uncleaness: carcasses, corpses, various skin diseases, mildew, and sexual discharges—blood or semen. No living unclean animal, however, belongs to this category of the “fathers” of uncleaness because they cannot cause uncleaness, transmit its impurity, or pollute someone or something. The fact that natural uncleaness is nontransferable indicates that it is of a different nature from that of ritual/cultic impurity.

C. Touching or carrying a living unclean animal does not result in exclusion from social or religious activities such as visiting the temple or worshiping in the sanctuary. One could ride a donkey or caress a dog, and then enter the temple without any hindrance to worship God.

D. There is no provision for making unclean animals clean. It is impossible to cleanse or cure this uncleaness. There is no purification rite capable of making an unclean animal clean. Cooking, slaughtering, or even the time element cannot change it.

E. There is no punishment for disobedience against these food prescriptions, no penalty for the actual eating of the meat of an unclean animal. This does not mean, however, that these dietary laws are taken

lightly. They belong to the category of sins that were not atoned by rituals in the sanctuary, such as the moral offenses of murder, marital unfaithfulness, or idolatry.<sup>7</sup>

F. The dietary laws are not related to the Old Testament earthly sanctuary services or to the visible presence of the Lord (so-called resident Shekinah) among God's people. No cultic ceremony is prescribed when transgression of these dietary laws occurs, in contrast to other kinds of uncleanness.

G. A comparison between Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 demonstrates that the repetition and abbreviation of the dietary code in Deuteronomy 14 is free from ceremonial or ritual regulations connected with the sanctuary, i.e., holy space.

H. The origin of the dietary laws is presented in the Pentateuch as being much older than laws related to other kinds of uncleanness; they are pre-Mosaic. The distinction between clean and unclean animals was known in the antediluvian world in connection with Noah's flood (Gen. 7:2, 3) which is strong evidence that they form an integral part of universal law, and thus should form an integral part of the laws given to Adam in the Garden of Eden.

I. The Pentateuchal dietary regulations are applicable to the "sojourner/alien." From the whole corpus of uncleanness of Leviticus 11–15, only these laws are applicable to the "alien sojourner" via the law of hunting, which was binding on the Israelites as well as on aliens (Lev. 17:13). Thus the universality of the dietary code is stressed.

This comparison of different kinds of uncleanness in the Pentateuch clearly demonstrate that choosing the uncleanness of certain animals and rejecting that of others is not an arbitrary choice, because this impurity is of a different category.

### 3. Call to Holiness

The call to holiness, the dominant theme in the Book of Leviticus, contains a strong emphasis and admonition for Christians in the New Testament writings. The *imitatio Dei* is an ongoing demand. It is significant that Peter's reason for being holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16) is substantiated by the text derived from the passage dealing with the Mosaic dietary laws (Lev. 11:44–45).

### 4. Abomination Practices

The close connection between dietary prohibitions, warning against idolatry, and prohibition of all immoral sexual behavior (all three activities are called "abomination") is a strong indication that this triune ordinance has to find continuity in the New Testament era. The moral aspect of the dietary law plays a crucial role in the Old Testament (Lev. 11:44, 45; Deut. 14:3; Eze. 33:25, 26).

### 5. Prohibition of Blood Consumption

In our culture of consumerism, it is important to cultivate respect for life. The Pentateuchal dietary regulations include this ethical dimension by stressing the prohibition of blood consumption in seven passages in the Pentateuch: Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; 7:26, 27; 17:10–14; 19:26; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23–25; 15:23. The prohibition of blood is explicitly given as a command after the Flood (Gen. 9:4) when God gives a new creation order and for the first time allows humans to eat the flesh of living creatures.

The prohibition of eating blood in Leviticus 11 is further implied by two factors: (1) eating blood is

forbidden in the larger context (Lev. 7:26, 27; 17:10–14), where it is mentioned in connection to eating clean meat; and (2) clean animals that are permitted for human consumption are not primarily carnivorous, thus the command of not eating blood is applied to the eating behavior of animals as well. It is true that some unclean animals also do not eat blood. To identify an animal as clean solely because it is herbivorous is insufficient, even though this characteristic is significant. There are additional specific characteristics for recognizing clean animals and distinguishing them from the unclean ones.

Even though God permitted the eating of meat, humans were still to have reverence for the life which he would be required to take. This is the reason for the command to “pour out blood” and the prohibition against eating it. In addition to this, the manner in which living creatures were to be slaughtered was also referred to (Deut. 12:21), although the actual specifics of slaughtering were nowhere explained in the Torah. Later, in the Mosaic Law, a more detailed explanation of the prohibitions against the consumption of blood is given: The blood of animals and birds is prohibited (Lev. 7:26), but not that of fish or clean locusts.

The removal of blood is a significant lesson for humanity. Blood is a symbol of life (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:11, 14), which belongs to the Creator. Reverence for life is thus codified. Human beings must be constantly aware of the concession that God has made in allowing them to take the life of another creature for the sake of food. They were also to be reminded of this responsibility as beings created in the image of God. Their humanness and humaneness must be maintained even in the act of killing. They need to keep in mind that they are not God. They must be reminded that they are dependent on their Creator, who alone is the Giver of life.

From the fact that in the beginning a vegetarian diet is given to animals as well as to humans, and that in the future kingdom of God it will again be the same (Isa 11:7), it is plain that the eating of blood is also not natural for animals and is a trespass on God’s given order from Creation. This is why mammals and birds that are primarily carnivorous are excluded from the list of edible animals. It means that the preservation of the original sacred life (a main feature of creation) is envisaged by these dietary regulations. Firmage correctly observes: “Unlike the rest of the code of impurities, the dietary laws place a value on behavior and so belong in the category of moral imperatives.”<sup>8</sup>

## 6. Health

The aspect of health should not be overlooked. Even though the primary purpose of the dietary laws is not health, this dimension is one factor that must be taken seriously, because it is a quality of life valid at any time.

Holiness means wholeness and completeness. On that well-recognized basis, there is also a close relationship between holiness and health, that health is one important aspect of holiness. It is significant to note that there is no specific word in biblical Hebrew for the English equivalent of “health.” People usually understand health in the negative sense as the absence of sickness. Negatively stated, a healthy person is one who is not sick. The World Health Organization, however, defines health in a more profound way: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”<sup>9</sup>

When God or biblical writers speak about health, they use different language from what we would expect. In Hebrew thinking, health expresses the totality of wellness of the human being. The physical,



mental, spiritual, and social aspects are included. The psychosomatic approach can be discerned from the Hebrew Bible. In the words of Hasel: "Health in the biblical view is not one particular quality among many that pertain to the human being; it is the wholeness and completeness of being in itself, and in relation to God, to fellow humans, and to the world."<sup>10</sup> Biblically speaking, health is total well-being, a comprehensive wholeness.

Even though in biblical Hebrew there is no specific word for *health*, nevertheless the idea is expressed by words we in our culture do not expect. The concept of health can be expressed by Hebrew words for "wholeness, well-being, peace" (Gen. 37:14; 1 Sam. 25:6; Isa. 57:18, 19) and for "holy, complete, whole" (Lev. 11:44, 45; 21:23; Deut. 14:21), and for "clean, pure, genuine" (Lev. 13:17–20; 14:9; 2 Kings 5:14).

The Hebrew Bible has a concern for health. God promised: "If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, . . . I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, who heals you" (Ex. 15:26). God also stated that if the people would obey His laws, pay attention to His commandments, and keep covenant with Him, He would keep them "from every disease" (Deut. 7:15), but if they would not obey, He would bring upon them "all the diseases of Egypt that you dreaded" (28:60). God's blessing is described in such a way that it includes good health (often stated negatively), prosperity, and promise of long life (Gen. 15:15; Ex. 23:25, 26; Deut. 28:27, 35; Ps. 32:3–5; Prov. 3:8). God takes care of all our physical needs. It is God who heals (Gen. 20:17; Ps. 103:3).

Humankind was created as a unit. Biblical anthropology states that a human being is a living soul. According to the Creation story, humans have no soul—they *are* a soul (Gen. 2:7). This holistic view of humanity has something to do with holiness, because holiness also means wholeness. This fact emphasizes the unity of our nature. It follows that if we are to live to the glory of God, we must do so in all dimensions of life—physical, emotional, spiritual, and social (1 Thess. 5:23).

A result of respecting the Mosaic dietary laws appears in the realm of hygiene. Although "observing salutary results is not necessarily the same as discerning the intent for issuing these dietary restrictions,"<sup>11</sup> yet both aspects are here valid (health intent as well as health benefits). Some scientific studies suggest that eating meat from clean animals is healthier for human consumption than eating the flesh of unclean ones.<sup>12</sup>

## 7. Distinction Given for Food or Sacrifice?

The origin of the regulations regarding laws of clean and unclean animals is connected with the pre-Flood world. Noah had to make a distinction between clean and unclean animals (Gen. 7:2, 3), but for what reasons?

*Noah knew the distinction between clean and unclean animals.* The biblical text gives no indication whether Adam had such knowledge after the entrance of sin, because it is not known when exactly this distinction originated. One can assume that it was revealed sometime after the Fall, most probably in connection with the Flood when a new creation order was presented. It is highly significant that at the first mention of sacrifice in the Book of Genesis (chapter 4), there is no indication of the distinction between clean and unclean animals, but when permission to eat flesh is mentioned for the first time (chapter 9), the distinction between clean and unclean animals/food is understood.

*Offerings completely burnt till the time of Moses.* It seems that until the time of Moses (when the sacrificial system was fully developed) the meat of animal offerings was completely burnt (Gen. 8:20; Ps.

51:19). There is no case recorded in the Book of Genesis in which the meat of the offered animals was eaten (4:3–5; 8:20; 22:13). When Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob built their altars to worship God, there is no indication that they consumed the sacrifice (12:7, 8; 13:4, 18; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7). Nothing was left for food from a burnt offering. Only later, when the tabernacle was built in the wilderness, were meat portions of some sacrifices given as food to the priests (Lev. 6:26, 29; 7:6, 7, 31–34) and to the participants (7:15–17).

*Only a few clean animals sacrificed.* Only a few clean animals were used for sacrificial purposes: three species of animal (cattle, sheep, and goats), two species of bird (turtledoves and pigeons), and no fish.

It seems that the distinction between clean and unclean animals was not made primarily for the purpose of delineating animals that could be used for sacrifices. Sacrifices could be taken only from among the clean animals. However, not all clean animals could be used in the sacrificial services. The primary purpose of these laws was to regulate diet.

## 8. Unclean Food and the New Testament

A. Unclean food legislation is not abrogated in the New Testament. There is a basic continuity between the Old and New Covenants and this fundamental premise is supported by many scholars from a variety of interpretive approaches. It is true that the New Testament abolishes the ceremonial/sacrificial system of the Old Testament because it was typological and/or symbolic in nature. At the Cross Jesus brought to an end the whole sanctuary system, which pointed to Him as its ultimate fulfillment (Dan. 9:27; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14). There is nothing typological or symbolic, however, in the nature or rationale of the Mosaic dietary laws regarding clean and unclean animals/food that would point to the fulfillment in Christ, to the church, or to the last events.

B. In order to interpret correctly many New Testament passages dealing with this subject, one must consider the difference between two Greek words that represent two different concepts: one is translated “unclean,” which reflects the Old Testament teaching; the other is translated “common, polluted,” which on the other hand points to the special rabbinical concept adopted sometime in the intertestamental period (most probably in the second century B.C.) and known as defilement by association. It was believed that if something clean touched something unclean, it would become “defiled, polluted, common.”

C. Jesus’ statement in Mark 7:19b translated “cleansing all the food” can be understood as an irony. Christ is contrasting the tradition of the elders with the biblical law and demonstrates the difference between spiritual and physical defilement.

Many scholars recognize today that Jesus and the apostles were not against the dietary laws, but against their misuse. Since original intent of the dietary laws had been distorted, He had to restore their true meaning. Jesus’ teaching does not diminish the validity of the dietary regulations. Danger to the purity of the mind and the heart is more important than what goes into the stomach.

Modern translators often fail to reflect that Jesus is referring in Mark 7 to food that is desecrated/polluted by association—and not to food that is “unclean,” because the word translated as “unclean” does not appear in this pericope. The same can be said about Matthew 15:11, 17–20.

D. When asked what kind of animals were in the sheet Peter saw in his vision according to Acts 10, the typical answer is a “variety of different kinds of unclean animals.” However, this answer is wrong, because the biblical text shows that in the sheet were clean as well as unclean animals.

This observation leads to a crucial question: What was then the problem for Peter? He could pick up the clean animal and “kill and eat,” but he refused. Bruce is right when he asserts that Peter “was scandalized by the unholy mixture of clean animals with unclean; this is particularly important when we recall the practical way in which he had immediately to apply the lesson of the vision.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the real problem for Peter was the association of clean animals with unclean animals. Otherwise, he could select a cow, sheep, or goat from the shown creatures and prepare it for food. Peter felt he could not eat anything, because even the clean animals became unclean by association with the unclean animals, a concept that is *not* supported by the Hebrew Scriptures. (A living unclean animal is not a source for uncleanness!) This distinction derived only from rabbinic tradition.

God was instructing Peter to give up the idea that clean animals could be defiled by association with the unclean animals. This meant that he (a Jew) had to stop considering himself unclean by associating with Gentiles. This goes along with a different concept that was also developed during the intertestamental period: that clean animals represented the Jews and unclean animals symbolized the Gentiles/pagans. This had tremendous implications for their social life, because they needed to be constantly avoiding defilement by association with unclean pagans. If a Jew were in close contact with a pagan, he thus became polluted. In the time of Jesus and the apostles, there were huge social barriers between Jews and Gentiles. They could not eat together or visit each others' homes for a variety of reasons. Through the vision, Peter was taught that the social barriers between Jews and Gentiles had fallen down (he was now free to socialize with them and visit the house of a pagan Cornelius), and not that a biblical distinction between clean and unclean animals was no longer valid.

E. Another confirmation of the validity of the Mosaic dietary laws may be seen in Acts 15, in which the eating of blood is prohibited. This prohibition is included in the Levitical dietary legislation. Acts 15:29 affirms that the new non-Jewish believers should continue to “abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.” These four binding prohibitions of the so-called Apostolic Decree clearly reflect the universal laws of Leviticus 17–18.

It is highly significant that the four issues decided at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:20, 29) are found in the same sequence in Leviticus 17–18, and all of them are related to the “alien”: (1) food offered to idols (Lev. 17:3–9); (2) prohibition of blood (vss. 10–14); (3) abstaining from the meat of strangled animals (vss. 15, 16); and (4) abstaining from sexual immorality (18:1–30). In light of Leviticus 17:10–14, these apostolic prohibitions implicitly include the clean and unclean food distinctions. It is plainly stated: “When any man from the sons of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, in hunting catches a beast or a bird which may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth” (Lev. 17:13, NASB). It is important to observe that three of these four minimum requirements for the Gentile believers are related to food regulations.

F. In Romans 14, Paul is probably addressing problems relating to ascetics among the Essenes or is confronting the same issue as the Corinthian problem: meat offered to idols. In Romans 14:14–23, Paul explains that the most important law is the law of love. He declares that nothing is “common” or “polluted” in itself. He does not say that nothing is “unclean.” The concept behind this assertion is pollution by association. Nothing becomes polluted by association with idols.

G. In 1 Corinthians 8:1–13; 10:23–33, Paul explains the hot problem in the apostolic church: “Is it

permitted to eat meat offered to idols?" This question of conscience is dealing with an issue that has no clear-cut answer in Scripture. Paul holds that since idols are nothing more than human creations, one is free to eat meat that has been offered to them on condition that this is done apart from the cultic setting. His concern is very pastoral. He wants to stress that love must prevent the misuse of this knowledge for the sake of the weaker brother.

H. In 1 Timothy 4:1–5, it is stressed that food created for human consumption (reference to Genesis 1:31) and sanctified by prayer is suitable. The author of that epistle is not advocating eating anything! He is in disagreement with gnostic ascetics who despised God's good creation and had negative attitudes toward physical matter, under the influence of Greek thinking and culture.

There is nothing in the New Testament when taken in its context to suggest that the distinction between clean and unclean food has been abolished. Heiki Sariola explains that Mark 7:1–23 should not be understood in such a way that the author (Mark) "rejects the dietary laws."<sup>14</sup> The same is attested by David Rudolph: "It is 'historically unimaginable' to an increasing number of [New Testament] scholars that Jesus taught against the Torah's dietary laws."<sup>15</sup> Péter-Contesse correctly states: "As for the notion of cleanness and uncleanness, it seems at first glance that the perspective of the New Testament is diametrically opposed to that of the Old Testament. . . . These texts [Mark 7:19; Acts 10:12–15; Rom. 14:14; 1 Cor. 8; 2 Cor. 7:1; Phil. 1:10; 1 Thess. 4:7; Heb. 9:13–14; James 4:8] do not deal with the distinction between what is clean and what is unclean as in the case of the Old Testament ritual (cultic) texts. The notions are spiritualized and the stress lies no longer on ritual purity, but on moral purity. . . . The break which Jesus brings is not demonstrated in relationship to the fundamental Old Testament doctrine, but in contrast to the formalism of the scribes and Pharisees of his time."<sup>16</sup> Kleinig plainly argues when discussing Christ's teaching on purity (Matt. 15:1–20; Mark 7:1–23) that Jesus did not abolish dietary laws: "He [Jesus] did not ridicule their concern for purity and abolish the rules for purity in Leviticus. Instead, he reaffirmed them and deepened them. His teaching on purity presupposes that his disciples shared in his holiness with their hearts rather than just with their bodies."<sup>17</sup>

The Mosaic laws form a mosaic. It would do great damage if we threw away the Mosaic laws simply because they are present in the Pentateuch. There are many examples of laws that Christians accept even though they are included in the Mosaic legislation like laws against idolatry, prostitution, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest (Leviticus 18–19). The two greatest commandments are also taken from the Pentateuch: ""Love the Lord your God with all your heart"" (Deut. 6:5), and ""love your neighbor as yourself"" (Lev. 19:18).

By not eating things our Lord prohibited, humans exercise deep respect for their holy Creator, and thus our tables become silent witnesses for our allegiance to our Creator God. By not eating certain food, Christians do not earn salvation or gain God's favor, because the observation of these dietary principles is not a way to heaven, but an expression of faithfulness to God. In this way, we live to the glory of God in a more consistent way.

Moses actually assures that these laws are for the saved people, and that it is a lifestyle of the children of God: ""You are the children of the Lord your God. . . . You are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession. Do not eat any detestable thing"" (Deut. 14:1–3). Taking seriously His revelation is a celebration of God's gift of creation.

The best way to know the benefits of God's dietary instruction is to follow them.

Rabbi Kushner put it well: "We sanctify the act of eating with the dietary laws."<sup>18</sup> The Talmud says: "A man's table is like the altar."<sup>19</sup> It matters not only what but especially how we eat, as MacDonald expresses it appropriately in his outstanding study on food in the Old Testament: "You are how you eat."<sup>20</sup> Food is related to our identity. Food should be taken as an expression of gratitude and thankfulness, because it is God who provides everything that we need. Thus a common thing such as eating becomes something special. The ordinary is made extraordinary. Our tables should be unspoken silent witnesses of our respect for our holy Creator. "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

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