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The Theology of Unclean Food

by Gordon J. Wenham

This paper by Dr. Gordon Wenham, Lecturer in Semitic Studies in the Queen's University of Belfast, is a by-product of his commentary on Leviticus which is reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

The problem of unclean foods was at the heart of the first great controversy in the early church (Acts 15). Did Gentile believers have to be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses about food? The conclusions of the council of Jerusalem are recorded in Acts, but there is little explanation of the theological reasoning behind the decisions. Commentators therefore tend to regard the decree (Acts 15:19-20) as little more than a pragmatic compromise between Judaizers and Hellenists.¹

Since the theological principles determining the division of animals into clean and unclean are so obscure in the OT, it is not surprising that NT scholars have only been able to discern pragmatic reasons for the abolition of the distinction. Recent discussion of the OT material has at last brought some semblance of order into the apparent chaos of the food laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. These insights, it will be suggested, may also provide a clue to the thinking of the primitive church on these controversial issues.

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I. TRADITIONAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE FOOD LAWS

1. *Hygiene*

Probably the most popular explanation of the food laws is hygiene. The unclean animals were recognized by the ancients as a danger to health, and were therefore pronounced unclean. This explanation is a very old one, but enjoyed its greatest vogue at the beginning of this century, with the great advances in medical knowledge. Moses was hailed as anticipating the findings of modern science. It still has its advocates today. R. E. Clements writes: "What we have here is a simple and comprehensive guidebook to food and personal hygiene."²

Despite its inherent attractiveness the hygienic explanation faces four grave difficulties.³ First, other peoples have held and hold certain animals to be unclean, yet their demarcations seldom coincide with the biblical. Second, it is far from clear that all unclean animals mentioned in Leviticus are harmful to health. For example, the Arabs have long enjoyed the camel and its products. As for pork, if it is supposed that

¹ Cf. E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 449; W. Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Oliphants, 1973), 174.

² R. E. Clements, *Leviticus* (Broadman Bible Commentary II; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1971), 34; cf. W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 177-180; G. Cansdale, *Animals of Bible Lands* (Exeter: Pater-noster, 1970), 14.

³ F. J. Simoons, *Eat Not This Flesh* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1961), 37-42.

ancient Israel had discovered the risks in eating it, they could also have learnt that these risks could be avoided by cooking it thoroughly. Third, though motive clauses justifying particular rules are frequent in biblical law, there is no appeal to health in connection with the food rules. Yet this would surely have constituted an excellent reason for keeping them had it been recognized. Instead the motive clauses explain that certain animals may not be eaten, because of the way they travel or their eating habits (Lev. 11:3-12, 20-23, 26-31, etc.). Finally, if hygiene was the motive underlying the OT regulations, why did the early church allow their abolition in the first century AD? What was harmful when Leviticus 11 was drafted, would have been just as dangerous in the days of the early church.

2. *Religious Associations*

The second kind of explanation of the food laws is that the unclean animals were closely associated with non-Israelite religion.⁴ They were either used in sacrifice or the deities were supposed to manifest themselves in animal form. Israel was called to be the holy people of God and had therefore to disassociate itself from these pagan practices. For example, Isa. 65:4 speaks of people “who sit in tombs . . . who eat swine’s flesh”. And at various sites collections of pig bones have been found, which lends support to the notion that the pig was eaten in Canaanite rituals.⁵ Other animals banned as unclean by Leviticus were worshipped by the Egyptians.

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This explanation of the distinction between clean and unclean animals has the merit of noting the biblical writers’ insistence that these regulations are designed to further the ideal of creating a holy nation (Lev. 11:44-5; Deut. 14:2). But its major weakness is that it can only explain a few of the regulations. In general, Israel used much the same animals for sacrifice as her neighbours. If use in contemporary religions were ground for making animals unclean, the bull should have been an abomination in Israel in view of its rôle in Canaanite and Egyptian culture. Yet in Israel the bull was the best and most valued of the sacrificial animals.

3. *Carnivores*

A third view is that the unclean animals are the carnivorous animals and

⁴ M. Noth, *Leviticus* (London: SCM, 1965), 92, favoured this explanation.

⁵ R. de Vaux, *BZAW* 77 (1958), 250-265.

the carrion-eating birds.⁶ This view finds support from the Mishnah,⁷ which suggests that the birds listed in Lev. 11:13-19 and Deut. 14:12-18 are birds of prey. The identification of some of these birds is still a matter of some doubt. But most commentators accept the Mishnah as basis for more precise identification. It is attractive to try and extend this logic to cover other branches of the animal kingdom. Obviously cloven-hoofed ruminants do not live on meat, whereas animals with paws (Lev. 11:27) such as cats and dogs are carnivorous.

This theory has greater merits than the first two, in that it covers more of the cases listed than they do. But it is noteworthy that in the lists of unclean animals it is never mentioned that they eat meat. Nor can some of the distinctions be explained on these grounds. Why should goats be clean, but pigs not? Why should locusts be thought edible, but no other insects? What is the thinking behind the division among water creatures?

8 Though inadequate as a total explanation of the uncleanness rules, G. R. Driver has drawn attention to an important aspect of biblical theology: the connection between man and the animal kingdom. Some of the animals are unclean because they do what is forbidden to man: they eat flesh with blood in it (Gen. 9:4-5; cf. Lev. 11:39). In the principle that the divisions among the animals and the way in which they behave mirror, at least to some extent, mankind's divisions and behaviour, M. Douglas⁸ has found the key to these laws.

4. *Symbolic Interpretations*

The idea that different animals somehow symbolize men and their behaviour was a commonplace among older commentators. However, there is little agreement about what was symbolized. For example, one commentator⁹ suggests that chewing the cud makes an animal clean, because it reminded men to meditate on the law. Another¹⁰ suggested that the sheep is clean because it reminded the ancient Israelite that the LORD was his shepherd. But the dirty habits of the pig speak of the "filth

⁶ G. R. Driver, "Birds in the OT", *PEQ* 87 (1955), 7. J. Milgrom, "The Biblical Diet Laws as an Ethical System", *Interpretation* 17 (1963), 288-301, also emphasizes the importance of avoiding blood, but thinks hesitations about idolatry were also involved.

⁷ Hullin 3.6.

⁸ See below and footnotes 12-15.

⁹ So Kurtz quoted by C. F. Keil, *Manual of Biblical Archaeology*, II (Edinburgh: Clark, 1888), 121-2.

¹⁰ A. A. Bonar, *A Commentary on Leviticus* (London: Banner of Truth, 1846 reprinted 1972), 214-215.

of iniquity". Other commentators¹¹ have supposed that some animals are accounted unclean because of their associations with death or sin.

This approach to the problem is intriguing and even entertaining, but it is little better than intuitive guesswork. The symbolism discovered depends largely on the commentator's imagination, and there is no attempt to prove that the alleged symbolism really underlies the legal definitions. Unless greater discipline can be introduced into symbolist interpretation, it will always be more liable to represent the whims of the commentator than the purpose of the law.

II. AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

The most recent attempt to interpret these laws is indeed symbolist, but it is based on a wide-ranging and empirical approach to the laws of Leviticus. In her book *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas¹² drew attention to the fact that in Leviticus holiness is not merely defined negatively as separation from evil, but positively as purity and wholeness and integrity. Holiness means purity in both the physical and moral sphere. Mixtures are abominated, whether they are mixed crops, mixed materials or mixed marriages (Lev. 18:23; 19:19; Deut. 7:3-6; 22:9-11). Holiness also means physical wholeness. The priests must not cut themselves, but "shall be holy to their God" (Lev. 21:5-6). They must be physically unblemished; those who are lame, blind, or in any way deformed, may not officiate as priests (Lev. 21:5-6). Similar, though less stringent, regulations apply to laymen (Deut. 23:1-2 — Heb. 2-3). Holiness also concerns the moral sphere. Wholeness, or integrity, is again of fundamental importance. Honesty and consistency in all one's dealings are emphasized. Injunctions to this effect are found alongside those about purity and wholeness in Leviticus 19.

Douglas argues that the same insistence on wholeness underlies the uncleanness laws in Lev. 11/Deut. 14. The animal world is divided into three spheres: those that fly in the air, those that walk on the land, and those that swim in the seas (*cf.* Gen. 1:20-30). Each sphere has a particular mode of motion associated with it. Birds have two wings to fly with, and two feet for walking; fish have fins and scales to swim with; land animals have hooves to run with. The clean animals are those that conform to these standard pure types. Those creatures which in some way transgress the boundaries are unclean. Thus fish without fins and scales are unclean (Lev. 11:10; Deut. 14:10). Insects which fly but which have

¹¹ E.g. D. Hoffmann, *Das Buch Leviticus* (Berlin: Poppelauer, 1905), 315-322.

¹² M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 41-57.

many legs are unclean, whereas locusts which have wings and only two hopping legs are clean (Lev. 11:20-23). Animals with an indeterminate form of motion, i.e., which "swarm", are unclean (Lev. 11:41-44). "Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong."¹³ In so far as some animals do not conform, they are unclean.

This analysis explains the main divisions between clean and unclean, but it does not explain why pigs are unclean, but sheep and goats are reckoned to be clean. Douglas thinks a rationale for this differentiation may be discerned if the social background to the laws is borne in mind. Sheep and goats would have been the standard meat of pastoralists, so it was natural for them to be regarded as clean. But pigs and camels did not conform exactly to the norms of behaviour defined by sheep and goats and were therefore unclean. They transgress the boundaries of clean animals in not chewing the cud or in lacking cloven feet. In other words, there is a parallel between the holiness looked for in man and the cleanness of animals: man must conform to the norms of moral and physical perfection, and animals must conform to the standards of the animal group to which they belong.¹⁴

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But this is far from establishing a close tie-up between the animal and human world. In an article published in 1972, Douglas attempted this.¹⁵ In a series of diagrams she demonstrates that each sphere of the animal world is structured in a very similar fashion to the human world. The divisions between different groups of animals parallel the divisions between different human groups. There is such a degree of isomorphism between these different spheres that it is likely that, in the Israelite mind at least, a connection was seen between one sphere and the other. The patterns repeat so clearly that someone living in that culture would probably have sensed the analogy and appreciated the symbolism.

Various texts in the OT explicitly express the notion that there is a close relationship between man and the animals. According to Gen. 1:29-30 man and the animals were both expected to be vegetarian. In 2:18-20 the animals were formed as man's companions. According to the decalogue, domestic animals were expected to keep the sabbath along with their masters (Exod. 20:10; Deut. 5:14). If Israel kept the covenant law, both man and beast were to be blessed with offspring

¹³ Douglas, *Purity*, 53.

¹⁴ Douglas, *Purity*, 54-5.

¹⁵ "Deciphering a Meal", *Daedalus* 101 (1972), 61-81, reprinted in *Natural Symbols* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 249-275.

(Deut. 28:4); but if the nation proved faithless, both children and animals were to be destroyed (Lev. 26:22; Deut. 28:18, 50-57).

Very striking are the close analogies between the rôle of the first-born among men and the first-born among animals. Both are dedicated to God (Exod. 13:2; 22:29-30 (Heb. 28-29); 34:19). Both have to be redeemed (Exod. 13:13, 15; 34:20). The first-born of non-sacrificial animals like asses must be redeemed by sacrificial animals, such as lambs (Exod. 13:13). Ordinary first-born Israelites are redeemed by Levites (Num. 8:16-18). Another point of similarity is that no animal may be offered to God in sacrifice until it is seven days old (Exod. 22:30 (Heb. 29); Lev. 22:27), which parallels the rule that circumcision is not to be performed until the eighth day after birth (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3). Finally, it may be noted that only perfect unblemished animals may be offered in sacrifice (Lev. 1-4); so too only unblemished priests may officiate in worship (Lev. 21:17-21; cf. 22:19-25).

These examples appear to substantiate Douglas's contention that this symbolism was consciously felt in ancient Israel, that there was a system underlying the uncleanness regulations. They expressed an understanding of holiness, and of Israel's special status as the holy people of God. The division into clean (edible) foods and unclean (inedible) foods corresponded to the division between holy Israel and the Gentile world. Among those animals that were clean there were a few types that could be offered in sacrifice. Similarly there was a group of men within Israel who could offer sacrifice, the priests. Through this system of symbolic laws Israelites were reminded at every meal of their redemption to be God's people. Their diet was limited to certain meats in imitation of their God, who had restricted his choice among the nations to Israel. It served, too, to bring to mind Israel's responsibilities to be a holy nation. As they distinguished between clean and unclean foods, they were reminded that holiness was more than a matter of meat and drink but a way of life characterized by purity and integrity.

III. THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE FOOD LAWS

In the OT the food laws symbolized and embodied Israel's status as a covenant people. No doubt their consciousness of this symbolism waxed and waned in different periods, but during the exile and afterwards the ordinary Israelite must have been constantly reminded of his position as a stranger among the nations by these food laws, which made it difficult for him to eat with Gentile neighbours. It is therefore not surprising that in the NT era there was such controversy about the abolition of these rules. Circumcision was a private matter, but the food laws made one's

Jewish faith a public affair. Observance of the food laws was one of the outward marks of a practising Jew, and this in turn enhanced Jewish attachment to them as a reminder of their special status.

With Christianity OT Judaism was universalized to embrace all mankind. It is of a piece with this transformation that the food laws were dropped by the Christian church. With the incorporation of the Gentiles into the church, Israel was no longer regarded as the unique covenant people (Gal. 3:6-29; Eph. 2:11-16). To drop the laws that symbolized the peculiar status of Israel was not merely convenient if Gentiles were to be converted, it was also a step of theological logic. If the wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles was broken down, the distinction between clean and unclean food should also have been abolished. But was this theological logic apparent to the NT writers, or did the early church discard the food laws merely for pragmatic reasons to facilitate the conversion of the Gentiles? Were the early Christians really conscious of the symbolism of the levitical law? There are indications that they were.

1. The Synoptic Gospels

In the synoptic gospels one section deals with the question of unclean foods (Matt. 15:1-20/Mark 7:1-23). Jesus attacks the Pharisees for being so punctilious about washing their hands and vessels before meals while neglecting the more important aspects of the law. He insists that what a man eats does not defile him, but only what comes out of him; evil thoughts, murder, etc. In the Matthaean version this is merely a criticism of the Pharisaic concern with ritual washing. But Mark adds as comment in 7:19: "Thus he declared all meats clean". In other words, if the principle just enunciated by Jesus is taken to its logical conclusion, it not only undermines the Pharisaic concern with clean hands but also the Levitical distinction between clean and unclean animals. But it is noteworthy that the evangelist does not explicitly attribute this conclusion to Jesus. This is of a piece with the synoptic writers' presentation of Jesus' mission as a mission to the Jews rather than to the Gentiles. If there was felt to be a connection between the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church and the end of the distinction of foods, we could expect neither or both to figure in the teaching of Jesus, but not one without the other. It seems that neither figures at least at all prominently in his preaching.

Nevertheless it is noteworthy that in both Matthew and Mark the section on uncleanness is immediately followed by the episode of the Syro-Phoenician woman. Jesus reluctantly heals the Greek woman's daughter, though protesting that he was really sent to the lost sheep of

the house of Israel. This suggests that at least in the mind of the evangelists there was a link between Jesus' remarks on uncleanness and the extension of divine grace to the Gentiles.

2. John

John's gospel seems to allude to the connection between unclean foods and the Gentiles. In this case, however, Jesus' attitude to the question of uncleanness is implicit in his actions rather than in his words. He asks a drink of a Samaritan woman, which surprised her, for "Jews and Samaritans . . . do not use vessels in common" (John 4:9 NEB). By his request Jesus demonstrated his indifference to the uncleanness rules that were accepted by stricter Jews. The story goes on to tell how many Samaritans believed on Jesus. This tale seems to hint that in Christ both the laws on uncleanness and the dispute between Jews and Samaritans are superseded.

3. Acts

Acts 10 explicitly connects the incorporation of the Gentiles with the abolition of the food laws. In his vision Peter sees "all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air" (v.12). He is told to "rise, kill and eat" (v.13). But he refuses saying "'No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' And the voice came to him again a second time, 'What God has cleansed, you must not call common' " (vv.14-15).

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Mystified by the dream, he is told by the Spirit to go to the house of Cornelius (vv.19-20). Once there he realizes the significance of the vision: "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (v.28). In other words the vision commanding Peter to eat unclean animals announces that God has now opened the way to intercourse between Jew and Gentile. Peter goes on to expound more fully the further theological implications of his vision. "God shows no partiality" (v.34); no longer is Israel the unique covenant people. In immediate demonstration of their new standing these Gentiles receive the Spirit like the Jews, and are then baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (vv.44-48). Luke underlines the significance of this episode by mentioning it twice more in Acts 11 and 15. Again Peter justifies his new attitude to the Gentiles by referring to the vision of unclean animals (11:5-9; cf. 15:7-9).

Acts 15 tells how the apostles met in Jerusalem to discuss whether Gentile converts should be circumcised and keep the law of Moses; the account makes it plain that it is the food laws that are the controversial element in the law. Both unclean foods and circumcision were marks of

distinction between Jew and Gentile. There were strong pragmatic reasons for not imposing circumcision and uncleanness rules on Gentile believers, and it is sometimes suggested that the decision of the council was dictated more by convenience than by theology. But as Luke presents the debate, the decision was the outcome of the Cornelius episode. For a third time we are reminded of what happened on that occasion (vv.7-11). Then James argues that if the Gentiles are to be admitted to the church, it is logical to drop those laws which symbolized their exclusion. The only demands made of them are that they should abstain from idolatry, immorality, from eating blood and strangled animals. This last regulation was one that was traced back to Noah (Gen. 9:4). Antedating the election of Israel it could not be held to symbolize Israel's unique status; as presented in Genesis it appears as a moral law binding on all mankind.

4. Paul

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Paul discusses at some length which foods a Christian may eat (see Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8; 10). He never suggests that any particular foods are prohibited. The OT distinctions between clean and unclean are never discussed. This is of course parallel to his attitude to the Gentiles; for him they are an integral part of the church (Rom. 11:17-19; Gal. 3:28). For Paul the only reason for abstaining from certain foods is love of one's neighbour. In Romans 14 he has the plight of Jewish Christians in mind, who may be offended if Gentile Christians do not respect their scruples on food when they eat together. In 1 Cor. 8 love is again the motive for abstinence. But this time it is love for pagans who may be misled into supposing that there is no difference between following Christ and paganism if Christians eat food offered to idols.

SUMMARY

Running through the biblical laws on clean and unclean foods there is a coherent and consistent theology. In Leviticus the divisions within the animal kingdom express in elaborate symbolism the divisions among men, the most important of these being that between Israel and the Gentiles. The laws reminded Israel what sort of behaviour was expected of her, that she had been chosen to be holy in an unclean world. The reality behind this symbolism was reinforced in the national consciousness by its experience among the nations. With the incorporation of Gentiles on an equal footing with Jews in the Christian church, the food laws and circumcision lost their symbolic significance and were therefore dropped within the church. It would be too much to claim that every Jew in biblical times fully understood the symbolism expressed in the food

laws, but it is suggested that wherever the Bible discusses unclean foods it is related to the uncleanness of the Gentiles under the old covenant.
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