

What Does the Bible  
Teach About

# Clean and Unclean Meats?



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# Clean and Unclean Meats: What Does the Bible Teach?

*Many people have misconceptions about the biblical teaching on clean and unclean meats. What does Scripture really reveal on this subject?*

**G**od gave all of His laws for good reasons. They teach us His standards—how to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, beneficial from harmful. They teach us to distinguish the holy—that which God sets apart—from the common and ordinary. They define the way we, too, are to be holy, set apart for God’s purposes.

As we apply the biblical laws in our lives, they encourage us to think differently, to think more like God. They alter our perceptions. For example, keeping God’s Sabbaths changes the way we think about and use our time. His laws of tithing alter our perception and use of our physical resources. In the same way, God’s laws concerning meats that are appropriate or inappropriate for human consumption—referred to as “clean” and “unclean” in the Scriptures—change our perspective regarding many things we eat.

God expects spiritual leaders to teach His people to distinguish between biblically right and wrong behavior. He says, through the prophet Ezekiel: “. . . They shall teach My people the difference between the *holy* and the *unholy*, and cause them to discern between the *unclean* and the *clean*” (Ezekiel 44:23, emphasis added throughout).

Even though some of God’s laws may appear unusual on the surface, and we may not immediately grasp their full purpose, they help us to avoid physical troubles and, more important, moral and spiritual infection. The Word of God provides a pattern for physically, spiritually and morally healthy living. God gives His principles of health and cleanliness for our lasting good, in this life as well as the one to come (1 Timothy 4:8).

One reason for our existence is to learn to base our lives on the words of God (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). God’s Word—the Bible—encom-

passes all aspects of our lives, including what we eat. Often people don’t realize that God made distinctions that reveal which meats are appropriate for human beings to eat. Some believe these distinctions no longer apply. But, rather than relying on human opinion, let’s consider these matters in the light of the Bible.

## **Popular ideas about distinctions**

Since many people enjoy eating pork (ham, bacon, sausage, etc.) and experience no immediate adverse effects, some have looked for scientific reasons that God may have had in mind when He told the ancient Israelites not to eat pork. One theory is that God forbade the eating of pork because the Israelites might catch diseases, such as trichinosis, that pigs can carry. After all, the Israelites did not own refrigerators, and researchers had not yet warned people to thoroughly cook pork to kill any potential disease-carrying organisms.

Since modern research has apparently solved these problems, and we rarely hear of parasites passing to people through undercooked meat, many people assume eating pork is now acceptable to God (see “A Matter of Proper Cooking?,” page 14). Since many people eat pork all their lives and live to a ripe old age, the average person—if he thinks about it at all—assumes eating pork has little or no effect on health or longevity.

Research has convinced some doctors and nutritionists, however, to recommend that some of their patients avoid pork and shellfish (another category of biblically unclean food) in their diets; they understand that some people do not properly digest these meats. So some will acknowledge that avoidance of certain meats makes sense for people with particular health problems, but not as a rule for everyone.

Most religious teachers have adopted a perspective that parallels this scientific rea-

soning. Theologians have assumed that the laws of clean and unclean meats originated under the Old Covenant with ancient Israel and came to an end with the establishment of the New Covenant. Thus they believe many laws from the Old Testament are no longer applicable to Christians.

Many think Paul confirmed this approach when he said, “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (Romans 14:14). (See “Understanding ‘Unclean’ in Romans 14,” page 6.)

This reasoning places God in the role of master physician in the Old Testament and Jesus Christ in the role of liberator from God’s law in the New Testament. If we assume that God was simply looking out for the health of the ancient Israelites, the Bible’s lists of clean and unclean animals become only primitive health issues for which modern, enlightened, liberated mankind no longer has need. The popular reasoning is that Christ understood this and gave His followers the freedom to decide for themselves in such matters. Some believe God will honor any decision we make for ourselves regarding such things.

This popular view is taught by most churches. But the crucial question remains: Does it accurately reflect biblical teaching?

## **God’s view is different**

God made mankind in His own image (Genesis 1:26-27). In doing so God gave men and women the ability to reason. Though a wonderful gift, our thinking ability is not infallible. When ancient Israel’s reasoning went awry, God said, “Come now, and let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18).

But Scripture also records God telling us: “. . . My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are

higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

So God, not man, is the authority on our conduct (Proverbs 14:12), including deciding what foods we may or may not eat.

In addition, the great prophet Jeremiah candidly admits, “O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; *it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps*” (Jeremiah 10:23).

In light of these Bible verses, we need to carefully examine the matter of clean and unclean meats. We need to be sure we understand *God’s* perspective instead of relying exclusively on our own reasoning.

### The origin of the distinctions

The first biblical account noting distinctions between clean and unclean animals documents events that occurred long before the Exodus. Almost 1,000 years before God made a covenant with the nation of Israel, and long before that nation even existed, He told Noah to take into the ark unclean animals by twos and the clean ones by sevens (Genesis 6:19; 7:2).

God did not tell Noah in this account that He was, for the first time, making a distinction between clean and unclean animals. God simply said, “Of every clean animal you shall take seven pairs, males and their mates, and of every animal that is not clean, two, a male and its mate” (Genesis 7:2, New Jewish Publication Society).

God did not have to define for Noah the meaning of *clean* and *unclean*. Noah understood God’s instruction and what was required of him, and he obeyed. To comprehend what God meant by these terms, we must go to other chapters of the Bible—Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

The account in Genesis about Noah shows that the distinction between clean and unclean existed early in history, long before God ratified His covenant with Israel. Thus the Bible itself clearly shows that the popular idea that animals’ cleanness and uncleanness originated in the Old Covenant is incorrect. Since these distinctions existed long before the Israelite sacrificial system and Levitical priesthood, it does not follow that they would cease with a change in the sacrificial system or the priesthood. As we will see, the Bible teaches that the distinction between clean and unclean has never been rescinded and that the distinction continues to exist for a good reason.

Another flaw in some people’s understanding is that God’s law did not exist until

the specific time of its first mention in the Bible. This misconception leads to the equally flawed belief that the only laws applicable to New Covenant Christians are those restated in the New Testament after Christ’s crucifixion. Jesus Himself dismissed this reasoning as false (Matthew 5:17-19). Although such assumptions about when God’s law came into effect lack biblical proof, they do raise an important issue for us to consider—the continuity of God’s law.

### The nature of God’s law

Some people reason that God allowed Adam and Eve to eat any animal but changed the rules for Noah. Or they argue that Noah could eat any kind of animal flesh because God had revealed no specific instructions that expressly forbade him from doing so.

Such reasoning is inherently flawed. It overlooks the *permanent* nature of the *spiritual principles* that form the basis for the instruction God has given to mankind.

God bases His instructions to humans on spiritual principles that have always existed. Just as God is eternal (Deuteronomy 33:27; Psalm 90:2), so are the principles that reflect His eternal character and nature (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8). God’s law is based on His unchanging character, not dependent on events and attitudes prevalent in human history.

The Bible, from beginning to end, is a book about law. However, it is not written as a purely legal book. The word *law* (Hebrew *tora*) encompasses *direction* and *instruction*, concepts much broader than a mere legal code. God’s law existed before the Bible was written down. As Paul noted, “the law is spiritual” (Romans 7:14).

The Bible is a book about *relationships*—specifically how people in the past related to God and, based on their experiences, how we should relate to Him. God’s law—His direction and instruction for people—provides the guidelines for developing a relationship with Him that leads to eternal life (John 17:2-3).

Through time, as our relationship with God develops, we learn more about what He expects of us—the thoughts and actions acceptable under His law—and begin thinking and doing those things (Matthew 7:21; John 14:15; Revelation 14:12).

When we understand the spiritual principles that stand as the basis for God’s law, we don’t look for loopholes in His law to avoid doing what He commands. When we enjoy a loving relationship with Him, we keep His

commandments (1 John 5:2). As the apostle John tells us: “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (verse 3). All God’s commandments exist for our benefit.

### Did something in the law change?

Let’s note an additional consideration regarding the nature of God’s law. Some will argue that all of God’s law is temporary because of obvious changes since Old Testament times concerning the laws of sacrifice and circumcision. This argument is rooted in confusion over how these changes came about.

The Bible notes that some of this confusion stems from differences in *ministries* or *administrations*. Paul, who wrote of God’s “spiritual” law (Romans 7:14), also wrote of “differences of *administrations*, but the same Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:5, King James Version). Paul also wrote of the differences between the Old Covenant ministry, or administration, compared with that of the New (2 Corinthians 3).

Administrative changes, however, are not to be confused with God’s law itself, which Jesus clearly said continues to exist and apply today (Matthew 5:18). God has allowed and, in some cases, directed adjustments in administrative applications of God’s law. In every instance Scripture spells out such administrative changes. We find no administrative change in the New Testament regarding clean and unclean meats.

### Codifying previously revealed laws

God’s laws clearly existed long before Moses and the Israelites came on the scene. For example, God says of Abraham, who lived several centuries before the Israelites left Egypt, that he “obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws” (Genesis 26:5).

When God began to work with ancient Israel, He was not formulating and announcing His law for the first time; He was *restating* it for a group of people that had spent several generations as slaves in Egypt (Exodus 12:41). Under those circumstances these people probably had not remembered God’s law, much less obeyed it. Thus God spent ample time systematically revealing His laws for the new nation.

Before the Israelites left Egypt and arrived at Mount Sinai, God began instructing them about His festivals (Exodus 5:1; 12:1-51). As they journeyed to Sinai, God instructed them to rest on His weekly

Sabbath day (Exodus 16:23), reinforcing that command by miraculously sending a larger portion of manna on the sixth day and none at all on the seventh (verses 25-29). When some among the Israelites ignored God's instruction and looked for manna on the Sabbath, God rebuked them: "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?" (verse 28).

These events took place *before* God revealed the observance of His Sabbath as one of the Ten Commandments when the Israelites came to the Wilderness of Sinai (Exodus 19:1). There God spoke the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai (Exodus 20). Then God gave His judgments—rulings on practical ways for the Israelites to apply His law—and further instructions regarding the weekly Sabbath and His festivals (Exodus 21-23). If His people would obey, God promised to bless them physically by taking away sickness and providing them security within their new land (Exodus 23:25-33).

### The purpose of the distinction

In Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 we find lists of clean and unclean animals. The first listing was given for the benefit of the generation that had escaped from Egyptian slavery. In Deuteronomy God reemphasized this instruction for the next generation as it was about to claim its new territory in the Promised Land.

The two chapters give the same reason for God's instruction on clean and unclean

meats. In Leviticus 11 God says that to "be holy" one must avoid the unclean. In Deuteronomy 14 Israel was told not to eat "any detestable thing" (verse 3), "for you are a holy people to the LORD your God" (verses 2, 21). To be holy means to be *set apart* by God.

The specific purpose God gave for avoiding unclean meats is *holiness*. God wants us to be holy. Since we belong to Him and He purchased us with Christ's blood, He does not want us to contaminate ourselves through any kind of physical or spiritual defilement (1 Corinthians 6:15-20). In God's sight refraining from eating unclean animals is an identifying sign of the holiness of those God has set apart through a relationship with Him.

Those who honor God should reflect holiness in their thoughts and actions. God requires holy conduct, a way of life distinctly different from that of the rest of the world. Holiness in conduct is based in attitudes toward God, others and self that result in actions that avoid causing pain and build lasting beneficial relationships. Of course, being holy means much more than merely avoiding unclean meats. Christ spoke of the "weightier matters of the law" such as judgment, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23).

God gave His laws to physical people who suffer the consequences when they do not follow those laws. Breaking His law against adultery, for example, can destroy a marriage and family. Deuteronomy 28 records numerous calamities that befell the

Israelites when they failed to obey the laws of God. But He said he would establish them as a holy people if they would keep His commandments (verse 9).

God's continuing desire for His people to be holy has remained constant. As Paul said, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be *holy* and *without blame* before Him in love" (Ephesians 1:4).

The apostle Peter admonished Christians to live "as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is *holy*; you also be *holy* in all your *conduct*, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:14-16).

Of course, Peter had in mind a far wider range of godly behavior than merely refraining from unclean meats. So did Paul when he reminded the Corinthians of God's instruction: "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is *unclean*, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:17-18).

### Change in administration

When Jesus came to earth to die for mankind's sins and become our High Priest, His ministry replaced the Levitical priesthood, which had functioned from the time of Moses (Hebrews 7:11-14). Jesus is our "guarantee of a better covenant" (verse 22, New Revised Standard Version), called the

## How Should We Understand Scripture?

The apostle Paul wrote to a fellow elder, "All Scripture is given by *inspiration* of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). When Paul wrote these words, the Scriptures he referred to were those we now call the Old Testament. The writings that would eventually be known as the New Testament had not been accepted as Scripture; some of them had not even been written.

The Bible itself tells us we are to understand it as a unit; *all* Scripture is inspired and the divine guide for human conduct. By putting together all the scriptures on a given subject we allow the Bible to interpret itself and give us a complete and coherent view of God's instruction on specific areas of life.

Viewing every passage in a different context renders the Bible little more than a conflicting, contradictory collection of human writings rather than a divine revelation. Paul's instruction in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 shows us the foundational understanding through which we can begin to properly interpret the Bible: *All of it* is God's inspired revelation.

An opportunity to apply proper biblical interpretation can be found in Genesis 9:3: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs." Understanding this passage as part of a complete picture, we recognize it as a general statement about God providing animals for food, just as He has provided plants for human consumption.

Later scriptures show that mankind should not eat every animal, just as we should not eat every plant. Indeed, some species of animals and plants are highly poisonous and can be fatal if ingested. Still, the animal kingdom provides food for us—the essential point of Genesis 9:3.

Some who adopt an inconsistent, disconnected style of biblical interpretation believe this passage reverses the distinctions between clean and unclean animals spoken of in Genesis 7. This flawed method of biblical interpretation artificially inserts beginning and ending points for God's laws, in effect making them—and their Giver—inconsistent and arbitrary. God simply is not like that; He is both constant and consistent (Malachi 3:6; James 1:17).

God expects us to learn to properly understand and apply His Word (2 Timothy 2:15). The Bible interprets the Bible!

“new covenant” (Hebrews 8:8, 13).

Christ’s ministry does not void God’s law. Instead, God writes that law on the heart of those who accept this covenant so that it becomes a part of their mind and way of thinking (verse 10). Remember, Jesus said He didn’t come to abolish the law (Matthew 5:17-19). The New Covenant, of which Jesus is our High Priest, contains “better promises” (Hebrews 8:6), not better law. The better promises include eternal life as well as the promise of God’s Spirit, which empowers us to live according to God’s laws (Romans 8:4).

Notice Paul’s summing up of this principle: “But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, *everlasting life*. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is *eternal life* in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:22-23). A Christian will make every effort to adhere to all of God’s instruction and live a holy way of life.

When God made the administrative

change from the Levitical priesthood to the ministry of Jesus Christ, the laws and administrative principles that pertained only to the Levites no longer applied in the same way. As Hebrews 7:12 puts it: “For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law.” The law—specifically the law concerning who could be a priest (verses 13-14)—was changed, not rendered invalid. The change in the priesthood did not negate the laws and principles God gave for our spiritual and physical benefit.

The enduring practice of the apostles and early Church was to continue to follow the distinctions God gave regarding clean and unclean meats (Acts 10:14).

Some people suppose this was merely a case of culture or tradition. Yet, concerning prophetic fulfillments yet to occur, the Bible speaks of unclean animals (Revelation 18:2) and punishment of those who disobey Him in this matter (Isaiah 66:15-17). The Bible continues to show obedience to the

laws of clean and unclean food as an identifying characteristic of God’s people.

Being different from the rest of society by following God’s law is no cause for embarrassment. Peter writes of God’s called-out people that “you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). God describes His chosen people as *called to holiness*.

However, Christians should always use wisdom and discretion in how they reveal practices involving the avoiding of unclean meats to family and friends. They should not try to force God’s laws on adults who are responsible for making their own decisions in such matters. Paul advises: “Be wise in your dealings with outsiders, but use your opportunities to the full. Let your words always be gracious . . . Learn how best to respond to each person you meet” (Colossians 4:4-6, Revised English Bible).

## Understanding ‘Unclean’ in Romans 14

**D**oes Paul’s statement in Romans 14:14 that “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself” mean the early Church made no distinction between clean and unclean meats?

An understanding of Greek terminology can help us here.

It is important to realize that the New Testament writers referred to two concepts of unclean, using different Greek words used to convey the two ideas. *Unclean* could refer to animals God did not intend to be used as food (listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14). *Unclean* could also refer to ceremonial uncleanness.

In Romans 14 Paul uses the word *koinos*, which means “common” (W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, “Unclean,” p. 649). In addition to the meanings of “common” and “ordinary,” as used in English (Acts 2:44; 4:32; Titus 1:4; Hebrews 10:29; Jude 3), the word also applied to things considered *polluted or defiled*. This word, along with its verb form *koinoo*, is used in Mark 7:2, 15-23, where it obviously refers to ceremonial uncleanness in the incident when the disciples ate without having first washed their hands.

Through a concordance or similar Bible help you can verify that *koinos* and *koinoo* appear throughout the New Testament to refer to this kind of *ceremonial* uncleanness. Something could be “common”—ceremonially unclean—even though it was otherwise considered a clean meat.

An entirely different word, *akathartos*, is used in the New Testament for animals Scripture specifies as unclean. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament in wide use in Paul’s day), *akathartos* is used to designate the unclean meats listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

Both words, *koinos* and *akathartos*, are used in Acts 10 in describing Peter’s vision of the sheet filled with “all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds

of the air” (verse 12), both clean and unclean. Peter himself distinguished between the two concepts of uncleanness by using both words in verse 14. After a voice told Peter to “kill and eat,” he replied, “I have never eaten anything common [*koinos*] or unclean [*akathartos*].” Most Bible translations distinguish between the meanings of the two words used here. Peter used the same terminology in verse 28 and Acts 11:8 in discussing this vision.

When Paul said in Romans 14:14 that “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean [*koinos*, or ‘common’] of itself,” he was making the same point he had made earlier to the Corinthians: Just because meat that was otherwise lawful to eat may have been associated with idol worship does not mean it is no longer fit for human consumption. As seen from the context, Paul wasn’t discussing biblical dietary restrictions at all.

Paul goes on to state in Romans 14:20 that “all food is clean” (New International Version). The word translated “clean” is *katharos*, “free from impure admixture, without blemish, spotless” (Vine, “Clean, Cleanness, Cleanse, Cleansing,” p. 103). Clean meats as such aren’t addressed in the New Testament, so there isn’t a specific word to describe them. *Katharos* is used to describe all kinds of cleanliness and purity, including clean dishes (Matthew 23:26), people (John 13:10) and clothing (Revelation 15:6; 19:8, 14), “pure” religion (James 1:27), gold and glass (Revelation 21:18).

Realize also that, in both verses 14 and 20 of Romans 14, the word *food* or *meat* isn’t in the original wording. No specific object is mentioned relative to cleanness or uncleanness. The sense of these verses is merely that “nothing [is] unclean [*koinos*: common or ceremonially defiled] of itself,” and “all is clean [*katharos*: free from impure admixture, without blemish, spotless].”

Paul’s point is that any association of food with idolatrous activity had no bearing on whether the food was suitable for eating.

# Does the New Testament Abolish Meat Distinctions?

*Some people believe that certain New Testament scriptures remove all distinctions between clean and unclean meats. But what do these passages really say?*

**M**ost theologians assume that God's laws regarding clean and unclean meats ended at Christ's crucifixion. They suppose that the New Covenant removes the need for Christians to keep such laws. But is that what the Bible says?

The administrative change from the Levitical priesthood to the ministry of Jesus Christ did not void God's expectations that His people obey His law of clean and unclean meats (or any other law) as part of their sanctification, or separation, as people of God (see Leviticus 11:44-47; 19:2; 20:7, 22-26; 21:8). Peter and Paul both speak of the continuing need for God's people to be holy (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:14-16).

Some Bible scholars acknowledge that members of the early Church continued to observe the distinctions between clean and unclean meats. However, because of the common misconception that the New Covenant abolishes much of God's law, many assume these food requirements were simply Jewish cultural practices that continued until the Church became more gentile in composition and outlook. Such preconceived ideas have influenced interpretations of many New Testament passages. In theological circles this is known as *eisegesis*, or reading one's own ideas into Scripture.

Let's examine the New Testament passages dealing with food. As we do that let's practice *exegesis*—drawing meaning out of Scripture by seeking a thorough understanding of the background of a passage as we seek to apply it.

## **Peter's vision: Did God cleanse all meats?**

One often-misunderstood section of the Bible concerns Peter's vision in which he "saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners,

descending to him and let down to the earth." In this sheet "were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air." Peter heard a voice tell him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat" (Acts 10:11-13).

Assuming the vision meant he should eat unclean animals, Peter spontaneously responded: "Not so, Lord! For I have *never* eaten anything common or unclean" (verse 14). The same vision came to Peter three times (verse 16).

At this point many readers, without finishing the account, assume they know the meaning of the vision—that God told Peter we are now free to eat any kind of animal flesh we desire. In context, however, these scriptures show that this is not at all what Peter understood. On the contrary, even after seeing the vision three times he still "wondered within himself what this vision which he had seen meant" (verse 17).

Later Peter realized the significance of the revelation. It was that "God has shown me that I should not call *any man* common or unclean" (verse 28). Recognizing the real intent of the vision, Peter baptized the first gentiles (non-Israelites) God called into the Church (verses 45-48).

This divine disclosure, we see from reading further in the account, did not concern *food* at all. Rather, it concerned *people*. Because the Jewish religious leaders at the time of Christ had erroneously considered gentiles to be unclean, this dramatic vision righted a common misperception that had come to affect Peter and other members of the Church. It demonstrated that God was beginning to offer salvation to members of any race. Gentiles whom God was calling were now welcomed into the Church.

Far from abolishing God's instructions against eating unclean meats, these verses show that, about a decade after Christ's death, Peter had "*never eaten anything common or unclean.*"

Peter obviously had not assumed that God had annulled His own food laws or that Christ's death and resurrection rendered them obsolete. From Peter's own words we see that he continued to faithfully follow those laws.

Nor do we find any evidence that he ate unclean meats after this experience. He obviously continued to obey God's laws delineating meats that could and could not be eaten and saw no reason to change his practice. He realized that the puzzling vision could not be annulling God's instructions, which is why he "thought about the vision" until he understood its meaning (verses 17-19, 28)—that gentiles could become members of the Church, too (verses 34-35, 45-48).

## **Food controversy in the Church**

When reading through the New Testament, we do find references to a controversy in the early Church involving food. A careful examination of the Scriptures, however, reveals the issue to be different from what many assume.

In 1 Corinthians 8 the apostle Paul discussed "the eating of things offered to idols" (verse 4). Why was this an issue?

"Meat was often sacrificed on pagan altars and dedicated to pagan gods in Paul's day. Later this meat was offered for sale in the public meat markets. Some Christians wondered if it were morally right for Christians to eat such meat that had previously been sacrificed to pagan gods" (*Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1995, "Meat").

It is interesting, though not conclusive, to note that in Acts 14:13, the only passage in which the type of animal sacrificed to idols is mentioned, it was oxen—clean animals—that were about to be offered.

This controversy was not over the kinds of meat that should be eaten. Obedient Jews of the day, in accordance with God's instruction, did not consider unclean meat

even to be a possible source of food. Instead, the controversy dealt with the conscience of each believer.

Paul explained that “an idol is nothing” (1 Corinthians 8:4), clarifying that it was permissible to eat meats that had been sacrificed to an idol. That an animal had been sacrificed to a pagan god had no bearing on whether the meat was suitable for food.

Paul continued: “However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse” (verses 7-8).

When a believer bought meat in the market or was invited to a meal at which meat was served, it was not necessary to determine whether anyone had offered it to an idol, said Paul (1 Corinthians 10:25-27). His concern was that the brethren be considerate of others who believed differently. He taught that in such cases it was better for them not to eat meat than to risk causing offense (1 Corinthians 8:13; 10:28).

The question of meat sacrificed to idols was a considerable controversy in New Testament times. It is the foundation of many of Paul’s discussions of Christian liberty and conscience. Unlike God’s law of clean and unclean animals, which was straightforwardly recorded in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures do not discuss the matter of food offered to idols. But, in the first-century world of the New Testament, this issue varied in significance and importance to members according to their conscience and understanding.

### The timing of Paul’s letters

The chronological relationship between Paul’s letters to the members in Corinth and his correspondence with those in Rome is another important piece of background information people often overlook.

Many believe Romans 14 supports the idea that Christians are free from all former restrictions regarding the meats they may eat. Verse 14, in which Paul wrote, “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean,” is often cited as a proof text for this view (see “Understanding ‘Unclean’ in Romans 14,” page 6).

This approach, however, fails to consider Paul’s perspective and the context of his letter to the Roman church. Many Bible

resources agree that Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians around A.D. 55 and that he wrote his epistle to the Romans from Corinth in 56 or 57. As demonstrated above, the food controversy in Corinth was over meat sacrificed to idols. Since Paul was writing to the Romans from Corinth, where this had been a significant issue, the subject was fresh on Paul’s mind and is the logical, biblically supported basis for his comments in Romans 14.

### Understanding Paul’s intent

Those who assume the subject of Romans 14 is a retraction of God’s law regarding clean and unclean animals must force this interpretation into the text because it has no biblical foundation. The historical basis for the discussion appears, from evidence in the chapter itself, to have been meat sacrificed to idols.

Verse 2 contrasts the one who “eats only vegetables” with the one who believes “he may eat all things”—meat as well as vegetables. Verse 6 discusses eating vs. not eating and is variously interpreted as referring to fasting (not eating or drinking), vegetarianism (consuming only vegetables) or eating or not eating meat sacrificed to idols.

Verse 21 shows that meat offered to idols was the dominant issue of this chapter: “It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.” Romans of the day commonly offered both meat and wine to idols, with portions of the offerings later sold in the marketplace.

The Life Application Bible comments on verse 2: “The ancient system of sacrifice was at the center of the religious, social, and domestic life of the Roman world. After a sacrifice was presented to a god in a pagan temple, only part of it was burned. The remainder was often sent to the market to be sold. Thus a Christian might easily—even unknowingly—buy such meat in the marketplace or eat it at the home of a friend.

“Should a Christian question the source of his meat? Some thought there was nothing wrong with eating meat that had been offered to idols because idols were worthless and phony. Others carefully checked the source of their meat or gave up meat altogether, in order to avoid a guilty conscience. The problem was especially acute for Christians who had once been idol worshippers. For them, such a strong reminder of their pagan days might weaken their

newfound faith. Paul also deals with this problem in 1 Corinthians 8.”

What is the point of Paul’s instruction in Romans 14? Depending upon their consciences, early believers had several choices they could make while traveling or residing in their communities. If they did not want to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, they could choose to fast or eat only vegetables to make sure they did not consume any meat of suspicious background that might offend their consciences. If their consciences were not bothered by eating meat sacrificed to idols, they could choose that option, too. Within this context, said Paul, “let each be fully convinced in his own mind” (verse 5) because “whatever is not from faith is sin” (verse 23).

Romans 14 is, in part, a chapter on Christian liberty—acting according to one’s conscience within the framework of God’s laws as they pertained to meat sacrificed to idols. Understood in its context, Romans 14 does *not* convey permission to eat pork or any other unclean meat. When one understands that the food controversy of the New Testament era dealt with meat sacrificed to idols and not which meats were clean, other scriptures become clear.

### Debate over ceremonial cleansing

Another often-misunderstood passage is Mark 7:18-19. Here Jesus said: “Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?” The subject here—made obvious from verses 2-5—was *unwashed hands*, not which meats could be eaten. The purification of food referred to the way the body’s digestive process eliminates minor impurities such as those that might be present from eating with unwashed hands.

The Pharisees, like Jesus and His disciples, ate only meat the Scriptures specified as clean. They objected, however, when Jesus and His disciples did not go through the Pharisees’ customary ritual of meticulously washing their hands before eating.

Jesus, whose hands were sufficiently clean for eating, even if not clean enough to meet the Pharisees’ humanly devised standards—explained that the human body was designed to handle any small particles of dust or dirt that might enter it due to handling food with hands that hadn’t been ritually washed. He further suggested that, if the Pharisees were serious about wanting to obey God, they needed to revise their



priorities. Cleansing one's thoughts, He said, is eminently more spiritually important than washing one's hands (verses 20-23).

### Questionable interpretations

The New International Version of the Bible renders the latter part of verse 19: "(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean')." The New American Standard Bible similarly offers: "(Thus He declared all foods clean.)" These translations stand in stark contrast to the King James and New King James versions, which indicate that the bodily digestive process purifies food as opposed to Jesus making a pronouncement reversing God's laws on which meats to eat. Which interpretation is correct?

The King James and New King James renditions best fit the context, which concerns eating with ceremonially unwashed hands rather than deciding which kind of flesh is suitable to be eaten. They also best fit the New Testament culture wherein Jews and Christians ate only clean meats.

Notice that in both the NIV and NASB the latter part of verse 19 is in parentheses, as though Mark is explaining Christ's words. This is obviously an *interpretation* of the original wording of Mark's Gospel. In the original Greek the words "In saying this, Jesus declared" (NIV) and "Thus He declared" (NASB) are not present; translators have added them to explain what they think Mark intended and as a result have placed their own preconceived and mistaken interpretations on Jesus' words.

Putting together all the scriptures on the subject helps us properly understand the biblical perspective (See "How Should We

Understand Scripture?," page 5). When we see from passages such as Acts 10, discussed earlier, that Peter states he had eaten no unclean meat about a decade after Christ's death, it becomes obvious that the apostles did not believe He had abolished the commands against eating unclean meats. Such a view simply cannot be sustained in the light of plain scriptures to the contrary.

No New Testament passages describe Christians eating meats that had been considered unclean; such a view is glaringly absent in the Bible. On the contrary, we find many scriptures in which the apostle Paul vigorously and repeatedly upholds adherence to God's laws (Acts 24:14; 25:8; Romans 3:31; 7:12, 22), as did James, the half brother of Christ (James 2:8-12; 4:11), and John (1 John 3:4). Violating God's laws regarding clean and unclean would have been unthinkable to them.

### Colossian controversy clarified

When Paul wrote that Christians should "let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths" (Colossians 2:16), some assume the believers he was addressing were eating pork and other meats previously considered unclean. Again, the Bible nowhere supports this assumption.

In reality, the issue of clean and unclean meats is nowhere addressed in this passage. Paul doesn't discuss which foods the Colossians were consuming; the Greek word *broxis*, translated "food," refers not to food itself but rather to "the act of eating" (*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament*

*Words*, 1985, p. 245, emphasis added).

Some other translations make this clear. The Twentieth Century New Testament, for example, translates this as "Do not, then, allow any one to take you to task on questions of *eating and drinking . . .*"

Although many assume that Paul's criticism is directed at teachers who advocated Old Testament practices (such as following the law and practicing circumcision), no biblical evidence supports this view. However, we should recognize that perversions of proper biblical practice abounded at the time, both in Judaism and the emerging early Church. As the *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* explains: "There is more than Judaism in this false teaching. Its teachers look to intermediary spirits, angels whom they worship; and insist on a very strict asceticism" (1939 edition, "Epistle to the Colossians").

The false teaching Paul condemned contained many elements of asceticism—avoidance of anything enjoyable—which was intended to make its followers more spiritual. Notice his instructions to the Colossians: "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Colossians 2:20-23).

From this we see the ascetic nature of

## Not Only a Matter of Diet

**F**rom cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation, nowhere in the Bible do we find an example of a servant of God or follower of Jesus Christ eating the flesh of an unclean animal. If at any time the distinctions between clean and unclean meats had ceased to exist, shouldn't that have been made clear in the Bible through the example of God's servants?

On the contrary, well into the time of the early Church we find Christ's followers scrupulously avoiding eating animal flesh that God had revealed as being unclean (Acts 10:14; 11:8).

Prophecies of the time of the end make the same distinctions (Revelation 18:2; Isaiah 66:15-17).

But there's more to the matter than diet. A thorough study of the Bible helps us understand other dimensions to the significance of the distinctions between clean and unclean meats.

God's Word describes the flesh of unclean animals as an "abomination" (Leviticus 11:10-13, 20, 23, 41-42) and "detestable" (Deuteronomy 14:3)—and in that light we are warned against consuming such meat (Leviticus 11:43). Strong language, but the lesson is that we need to accept all aspects of the Bible, including the basic food laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

In instituting the sacrificial system for ancient Israel, God commanded many specific sacrifices involving animals. Nowhere, however, does He command or allow the sacrifice of an unclean animal, nor is there a record of any of God's servants ever sacrificing such an animal to Him. Such a sacrifice would have joined the holy with that which God had designated unclean and defiled. It would have been simply unthinkable to a true servant of God because it would have been an affront to the Creator Himself.

# Which Animals Does the Bible D

**G**od reveals which animals—including fish and birds—are suitable and unsuitable for human consumption in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Although the lists aren't exhaustive, He reveals guidelines for recognizing animals that are acceptable for food.

God states that cud-chewing animals with split hooves can be eaten (Leviticus 11:3; Deuteronomy 14:6). These specifically include the cattle, sheep, goat, deer and gazelle families (Deuteronomy 14:4-5). He also lists such animals as camels, rabbits and pigs as being unclean, or unfit to eat (Leviticus 11:4-8). He later lists such "creeping things" as moles, mice and lizards as unfit to eat (verses 29-31), as well as four-footed animals with paws (cats, dogs, bears, lions, tigers, etc.) as unclean (verse 27).

He tells us that salt- and freshwater fish with fins and scales may

be eaten (verses 9-12), but water creatures without those characteristics (catfish, lobsters, oysters, shrimp, crabs, clams, mussels, squid, frogs, octopi, etc.) should not be eaten.

God also lists birds and other flying creatures that are unclean for consumption (verses 13-19). He identifies carrion eaters and birds of prey as unclean, plus ostriches, storks, herons and bats.

Birds such as chickens, turkeys and pheasants are not on the unclean list and therefore can be eaten. Insects, with the exception of locusts, crickets and grasshoppers, are listed as unclean (verses 20-23).

Why does God identify some animals as suitable for human consumption and others as unsuitable? God didn't give laws to arbitrarily assert control over humans. He gave His laws (including those of which meats are clean or unclean) "that it might be well"

## Clean Animals

### *Animals That Chew the Cud and Part the Hoof*

Antelope  
Bison (buffalo)  
Caribou  
Cattle (beef, veal)  
Deer (venison)  
Elk  
Gazelle  
Giraffe  
Goat  
Hart  
Ibex  
Moose  
Ox  
Reindeer  
Sheep (lamb, mutton)

### *Fish With Fins and Scales*

Anchovy  
Barracuda  
Bass  
Black pomfret (or monchong)  
Bluefish  
Bluegill  
Carp  
Cod  
Crappie  
Drum  
Flounder  
Grouper  
Grunt  
Haddock  
Hake  
Halibut  
Hardhead  
Herring (or alewife)  
Kingfish

Mackerel (or cobia)  
Mahimahi (or dorado, dolphinfish  
[not to be confused with the  
mammal dolphin])  
Minnow  
Mullet  
Perch (or bream)  
Pike (or pickerel or jack)  
Pollack (or pollock or Boston bluefish)  
Rockfish  
Salmon  
Sardine (or pilchard)  
Shad  
Silver hake (or whiting)  
Smelt (or frost fish or ice fish)  
Snapper (or ebu, jobfish, lehi, onaga,  
opakapaka or uku)  
Sole  
Steelhead  
Sucker  
Sunfish  
Tarpon  
Trout (or weakfish)  
Tuna (or ahi, aku, albacore, bonito  
or tombo)  
Turbot (except European turbot)  
Whitefish

### *Birds With Clean Characteristics*

Chicken  
Dove  
Duck  
Goose  
Grouse  
Guinea fowl  
Partridge  
Peafowl  
Pheasant  
Pigeon  
Prairie chicken  
Ptarmigan

Quail  
Sagehen  
Sparrow (and other songbirds)  
Swan\*  
Teal  
Turkey

### *Insects*

Types of locusts that may include crickets and grasshoppers

## Unclean Animals

### *Animals With Unclean Characteristics*

**Swine**  
Boar  
Peccary  
Pig (hog, bacon, ham, lard, pork, most sausage and pepperoni)

**Canines**  
Coyote  
Dog  
Fox  
Hyena  
Jackal  
Wolf

**Felines**  
Cat  
Cheetah  
Leopard  
Lion  
Panther  
Tiger

**Equines**  
Ass  
Donkey  
Horse

\*In the King James Version, Leviticus 11:18 and Deuteronomy 14:16 list "swan" among unclean birds. However, this seems to be a mistranslation. The original word apparently refers to a kind of owl and is so translated in most modern Bible versions.

# esignate as 'Clean' and 'Unclean'?

with those who seek to obey Him (Deuteronomy 5:29).

Although God did not reveal the specific reasons some animals may be eaten and others must be avoided, we can make generalized conclusions based on the animals included in the two categories.

In listing the animals that should not be eaten, God forbids the consumption of scavengers and carrion eaters, which devour other animals for their food.

Animals such as pigs, bears, vultures and raptors can eat (and thrive) on decaying flesh. Predatory animals such as wolves, lions, leopards and cheetahs most often prey on the weakest (and at times the diseased) in animal herds.

When it comes to sea creatures, bottom dwellers such as lobsters and crabs scavenge for dead animals on the sea floor. Shellfish such as oysters, clams and mussels similarly consume decaying organic

matter that sinks to the sea floor, including sewage.

A common denominator of many of the animals God designates as unclean is that they routinely eat flesh that would sicken or kill humans. When we eat such animals we partake of a food chain that includes things harmful to humans.

As nutritionist David Meinz observes: "Could it be that God, in His wisdom, created certain creatures whose sole purpose is to clean up after the others? Their entire 'calling' may be to act exclusively as the sanitation workers of our ecology. God may simply be telling us that it's better for us believers not to consume the meat of these trash collectors" (*Eating by the Book*, 1999, p. 225).

The following list, based on Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, identifies many of the animals God designates as clean and unclean. The list uses their common names.

Mule  
Onager  
Zebra (quagga)

## Other

Armadillo  
Badger  
Bear  
Beaver  
Camel  
Elephant  
Gorilla  
Groundhog  
Hare  
Hippopotamus  
Kangaroo  
Llama (alpaca, vicuña)  
Mole  
Monkey  
Mouse  
Muskrat  
Opossum  
Porcupine  
Rabbit  
Raccoon  
Rat  
Rhinoceros  
Skunk  
Slug  
Snail (escargot)  
Squirrel  
Wallaby  
Weasel  
Wolverine  
Worm  
All insects except some in the locust family

## Marine Animals Without Scales and Fins

**Fish**  
Bullhead  
Catfish  
Eel  
European turbot

Marlin  
Paddlefish  
Shark  
Stickleback  
Squid  
Sturgeon (includes most caviar)  
Swordfish

## Shellfish

Abalone  
Clam  
Crab  
Crayfish  
Lobster  
Mussel  
Prawn  
Oyster  
Scallop  
Shrimp

## Soft body

Cuttlefish  
Jellyfish  
Limpet  
Octopus  
Squid (calamari)

## Sea mammals

Dolphin  
Otter  
Porpoise  
Seal  
Walrus  
Whale

## Birds of Prey, Scavengers and Others

Albatross  
Bat  
Bittern  
Buzzard  
Condor  
Coot  
Cormorant  
Crane  
Crow

Cuckoo  
Eagle  
Flamingo  
Grebe  
Grosbeak  
Gull  
Hawk  
Heron  
Kite  
Lapwing  
Loon  
Magpie  
Osprey  
Ostrich  
Owl  
Parrot  
Pelican  
Penguin  
Plover  
Rail  
Raven  
Roadrunner  
Sandpiper  
Seagull  
Stork  
Swallow  
Swift  
Vulture  
Water hen  
Woodpecker

## Reptiles

Alligator  
Caiman  
Crocodile  
Lizard  
Snake  
Turtle

## Amphibians

Blindworm  
Frog  
Newt  
Salamander  
Toad

the error Paul was combating. The false teachers' deluded attempt to attain greater spirituality included "neglect of the body" (verse 23). Paul characterized their misguided rules as "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle" (verse 21). Their efforts created only a "false humility" (verse 23) and were destined to fail because they were based on "the commandments and doctrines of men" (verse 22) rather than God's instruction.

Paul admonished the church at Colosse not to listen to the ascetics. Rather than abrogating God's laws concerning unclean meats—which some people incorrectly read into this passage—Paul is instructing the Colossian members not to concern themselves with ascetic teachers who criticized the manner in which the Colossians enjoyed God's festivals and Sabbaths. Such enjoyment, although condemned by these false teachers, is perfectly acceptable to God. (For further understanding, please request the two free booklets *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind* and *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest*.)

In this section of Colossians Paul encourages the Church to hold fast to its teachings and proper understanding; it is not a treatise on which foods to eat or on which days to worship God. We must be careful not to read preconceived notions into these or any other scriptures.

### **Misunderstood instructions to Timothy**

Still another part of Paul's writings that is often misunderstood is 1 Timothy 4:3-5, where he speaks of false teachers "forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer."

What was the motivation of these false teachers? Did Paul warn Timothy against teachers who would advocate keeping the biblical laws concerning clean and unclean meats? Or was something else at work?

We know Paul told Timothy that God inspired the Old Testament scriptures to be "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16), so the notion isn't credible that Paul would caution Timothy against adhering to instructions

found in those same scriptures.

On the other hand, Paul's words show us the real problem: These teachers were demanding that people follow commands not found in the Bible. They were "forbidding to marry," yet marriage is encouraged, not discouraged, in the Scriptures. They were also "commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth."

The Life Application Bible helps us understand the background of the problem Paul addressed here: "The danger that Timothy faced in Ephesus seems to have come from certain people in the church who were following some Greek philosophers who taught that the body was evil and that only the soul mattered. The false teachers refused to believe that the God of creation was good, because his very contact with the physical world would have soiled him . . . [They] gave stringent rules (such as forbidding people to marry or to eat certain foods). This made them appear self-disciplined and righteous."

Paul discusses the true source of these heretical teachings in 1 Timothy 4:1: Rather than being founded in the Bible, these teachings originated with "deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons." Thus we see the problem in 1 Timothy 4 was perverted worldly asceticism, not obedience to God's laws that define clean and unclean meats.

Paul's assumption was that "those who believe and know the truth" (verse 3) would be familiar with the scriptures that identify which meats were "sanctified [set apart] by the word of God" (verse 5) for our enjoyment. He encouraged Timothy to remind them to let the Scriptures be their guide instead of these ascetic teachers.

As in the situation Paul discussed in his letter to the Colossians, the problem Paul addressed with Timothy was asceticism, not adherence to God's dietary laws.

### **A broader view of history**

As we have seen, no scriptural evidence exists that indicates that members of the early Church ever changed their practice of following God's instructions regarding clean and unclean meats. Instead, we see the unambiguous words of one of the apostles that show that, some two decades after Christ's death and resurrection, he had "never eaten anything common or unclean."

Does the Bible give us any other

indication regarding when and for how long these laws were to remain in effect? Let's set the present aside and move forward in the history of humanity to the coming time of Christ's return to earth to establish the Kingdom of God. A sharply defined picture of His will for the future provides additional understanding to help guide us in the present.

The book of Revelation, in describing the end-time events leading up to the return of Christ, uses the expression "a haunt for every *unclean* and hated bird!" (Revelation 18:2). If clean and unclean designations no longer exist, why did Jesus inspire this picture for John? God is consistent and unchanging (James 1:17; Malachi 3:6; 4:4; Hebrews 13:8; Matthew 5:17-19). Animals He categorized as unclean thousands of years ago remain unclean in the future.

Another passage that refers to the time of Jesus' return to earth presents this picture: "For behold, the LORD will come with fire and with His chariots, . . . the LORD will judge all flesh; and the slain of the LORD shall be many. 'Those who sanctify themselves and purify themselves, to go to the gardens after an idol in the midst, eating *swine's flesh and the abomination and the mouse*, shall be consumed together,' says the LORD" (Isaiah 66:15-17). Here we see that, at Christ's return, eating unclean things is condemned and those who do so will be punished.

The biblical position is clear. Distinctions between clean and unclean meats existed long before the New Testament was written; they were followed by the leaders and other members of the early Church; and they are to be observed even by their successors in the modern Church, which "keeps the commandments of God and has the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 12:17).

As we have seen, they will continue in effect and will be enforced by Jesus Himself in the future. Even though first-century Christians struggled with their consciences over meat sacrificed to idols, the Bible indicates that they lived in harmony with God's instruction regarding clean and unclean meats. Shouldn't we also live in harmony with those laws?

God designed and gave His laws for our benefit. As the apostle Paul wrote, the "benefits of religion are without limit, since it holds out promise not only for this life but also for the life to come" (1 Timothy 4:8, Revised English Bible).

# Clean and Unclean Meats: A Matter of Health?

*Do science and medicine help us better understand why the Bible designates some animals as unfit for human consumption?*

**W**hy did God, in the Scriptures, distinguish between clean and unclean meats—the animals humans may or may not eat? Is there more to the story? Can we find a health connection?

The specific reason God gave the Israelites for forbidding them to eat any unclean animals or even touching their carcasses was to “be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44-45). Here God does not distinguish between clean and unclean animals specifically for health’s sake.

However, the larger context of Leviticus and Deuteronomy includes many issues of health and hygiene. The four chapters of Leviticus that follow the listing of clean and unclean meats deal with precautions after childbirth and the means to identify and eliminate the spread of communicable diseases. So the distinctions between clean and unclean meats appear in a context of health and well-being.

Are distinctions between clean and unclean meats a matter of health? Did God reveal them as health guidelines for the ancient Israelites and, by extension, for people today? Can consuming animals classified as unclean bring immediate or long-term harm to our health?

## **Scholars offer their view**

Many factors such as diet, genetic makeup, environment, exercise and good and bad habits affect our health. However, theological as well as medical researchers have recognized the benefits of following the health laws of Scripture.

Commenting on Leviticus 11-15, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states: “In general it can be said that the laws protected Israel from bad diet, dangerous vermin, and communicable diseases. Only in recent days have better laws of health been possible with the advance

of medicine. These were rule-of-thumb laws that God gave in his wisdom to a people who could not know the reason for the provision . . .

“The Hebrew was not only to avoid eating unclean animals; he was not to touch their dead carcasses. Thus the laws automatically helped control vermin.

Common unclean animals would be spiders, flies, bugs, rats, and mice. A dead rat in a Hebrew house was not overlooked. It was carefully taken out and buried. In an effort to avoid such problems, the Hebrew housewife would normally keep a clean house . . .

“It is, of course, true that some cultures have adopted similar rules out of sad experience. The [Old Testament] did not get its taboos from surrounding cultures, but some other cultures in later times adopted by experience some of these taboos . . . The laws were wonderfully fashioned by God for the general health of the nation” (R. Laird Harris, Vol. 2, 1990, p. 569).

Theology professor Roland K. Harrison writes: “The classification of animal species into clean and unclean categories (Lev. 11:1-47) is significant because, being part of the Pentateuchal medical code, it constituted the basis of dietary regulations that are still adhered to by orthodox Jews and by those Gentiles who are concerned with maintaining good physical health.

“This categorizing is also important in view of the fact that it is unique in the annals of Near Eastern literature because its emphasis is not so much upon the avoidance of magical practices associated with certain animal species as upon the positive delineation of dietary principles intended to insure the physical well-being of the individual and the nation alike through a consistent [preventative] approach” (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1999, p. 603).

## **Doctors offer their view**

Do the health laws of the Bible have a foundation in medical fact? S.I. McMillen, M.D., and David E. Stern, M.D., summarize their view of the laws God revealed to the Israelites:

“For centuries epidemics had killed thousands of Egyptians and Hebrews. Ancient treatments rarely helped. Often the ‘cure’ was worse than the diseases. Yet here [Exodus 15:26] God made a fantastic promise—freedom from diseases.

“God then gave Moses many health rules, filling a whole section of the Bible . . . Moses recorded hundreds of health regulations but not a single current medical misconception.

“Thousands have died through the centuries, however, because doctors ignored the biblical rules. Finally, when doctors read and tried these guidelines, they quickly discovered how to prevent the spread of epidemics. Thus Moses could be called the father of modern infection control. Even today we are still benefiting from God’s 3,500-year-old instructions” (*None of These Diseases: The Bible’s Health Secrets for the 21st Century*, 2000, p. 11).

Rex Russell, M.D., adds: “As we look at modern science and nutrition, we will find that . . . there is an amazing overlap between God’s original laws of clean and unclean and solid hygienic principles . . . Scripture and medical research agree that modern lifestyles lived without reference to God’s laws and design shorten life and hasten death” (*What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, 1999, pp. 14, 16).

Nutritionist David Meinz says that, even though we may not understand all aspects of the biblical dietary laws, we would be wise to follow them.

“Much of the wisdom revealed in the Bible now makes sense to us from our modern perspective,” he says, “but should

that mean we won't consider the areas that haven't yet been scientifically proven?

"We've only discovered that animal fat is bad for us in the last 50 years. To the Christian a century ago, the directive in Leviticus 3:17 to avoid animal fat made no sense at all. Yet it's clear to us today. What if there's something in lobster that's harmful to our health? What if we don't discover what it is until 50 years from now? Do we require scientific proof before we give the Bible the benefit of the doubt?" (*Eating by the Book*, 1999, p. 226).

Reginald Cherry, M.D., comments on why medical doctors and researchers have come to agree with the Bible's instruction not to eat fat.

"Why is this prohibition against fat so important for us?" he asks. "Over 53 percent of people in large industrialized countries die of heart disease. Heart disease is most commonly caused by fat deposits that build up in the arteries, often beginning in the teenage years" (*The Bible Cure*, 1998, p. 34, large-print edition).

### Cultural taboos or divine revelation?

If some of the Bible's dietary regulations have been shown to offer proven health benefits, what might that tell us about its other instructions? Dr. Cherry continues: "... The Old Testament ... overflows with many revelations from God about hygiene, healthy foods, and the ... prevention of diseases. As a medical doctor specializing in preventative medicine, I find the Old [Testament] fascinating and intriguing. Throughout its ancient Hebrew text, one finds many unveiled secrets and mysteries concerning what we should eat, how to avoid contaminated and diseased

objects, and what natural substances can be used to effect healing ...

"The Hebrews did not seek to know more about anatomy, science, or the natural order as did their counterparts in the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, or Greece. Quite the contrary. Anything that might be uncovered in the ancient Hebrew texts of the Bible had to come to them through divine, supernatural knowledge revealed by God. So what we shall unearth from the Old [Testament] does not arise from human speculations on health and medicine but rather from God's particular Word to us about his pathway of healing for us—His creation. As Creator, God knows more about our bodies, His creation, than we could ever discover either through philosophy or science ...

"The lists of clean and unclean animals in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 have a significance often ignored. Far from being a catalog of food taboos based on fad or fancy, these lists emphasize a fact not discovered until late in the last century [the 1800s] and still not generally known: Animals carry diseases dangerous to man" (Cherry, pp. 27, 30, 39).

### Health risk to humans?

Dr. Russell asks, "What is so good about 'clean' meats, and what is so bad about 'unclean' meats?" He explains that "the flesh of clean animals such as beef, and fish that have scales and fins, is ideal for the health of humans—just as we would expect from the hand of a loving Creator ... Many land animals God designed for food provide an additional benefit in that they generally eat grasses

and grains that were also designed for food" (Russell, pp. 73-74).

In contrast, David Meinz summarizes the potential health risk of eating creatures the Bible classifies as unclean. "Almost all of the creatures on the unclean list are scavengers," he notes. "In many cases they don't hunt for their own food; they eat the dead and decaying matter of our environment. A catfish does that at the bottom of a pond; lobsters and shrimp do it in the ocean. A pig will eat anything. Vultures, almost by definition, are known for their scavenger habits" (Meinz, p. 225).

Dr. Russell notes that "the differences between clean and unclean animals appear to be related to their primary food source and to their digestive systems. Scavengers that eat anything and everything are not suitable for food, according to the Bible. Animals described as clean, and therefore good for food, primarily eat grasses and grains.

"... [But] note that an animal doesn't have to be a scavenger to be unclean. Horses and rabbits, for example, are unclean because they do not have split hooves. Although they are considered to be good food in some countries, studies have shown that horse meat often contains viruses and parasites. Rabbits, as innocent as they appear, are the cause of tularemia (an infectious disease) in humans.

"One reason for God's rule forbidding pork is that the digestive system of a pig is completely different from that of a cow. It is similar to ours, in that the stomach is very acidic. Pigs are gluttonous, never knowing when to stop eating. Their stomach acids become diluted because of the volume of food, allowing all kinds of ver-

## A Matter of Proper Cooking?

**W**hat about the common view that God forbade the Israelites from eating pork so they wouldn't catch diseases, such as trichinosis, from undercooked meat? Does this view hold up under scrutiny?

Notice the conclusions of Rex Russell, M.D.:

"Some people tell me that unlike people in Bible times, we cook meat much better today, and that this renders even unclean meats harmless. One Bible commentary claimed that pork was forbidden in the Old Testament because it was eaten without being cooked, thus passing trichinosis to humans. The author thought that because we now cook meat, we no longer need to follow that law.

"In my opinion this statement is incorrect. Sophisticated ovens and cooking devices have been found in the most ancient

archaeological ruins, including most of the Israelites' ruins.

"They understood that cooking meat is certainly important. Can we safely assume that diseases caused by unclean animals have disappeared because we now cook things better? ...

"Even the microwave oven heats meat unevenly, allowing bacteria and parasites (such as trichinosis) to survive in meat. Many outbreaks of vicious infections have developed in so-called cooked food. If the food is unclean, don't count on cooking it to protect you. Some of the most toxic poisons are not destroyed by heat.

"A sobering report from Scotland revealed that food poisoning by toxins, virus or bacteria occurred in spite of thorough inspection at every stage of food preparation, including handling and cooking" (*What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, 1999, p. 80).

min to pass through this protective barrier. Parasites, bacteria, viruses and toxins can pass into the pig's flesh because of over-eating. These toxins and infectious agents can be passed on to humans when they eat a pig's flesh" (Russell, p. 76-77).

Don Colbert, M.D., adds: "Besides being gluttons, swine are also extremely filthy animals. They will eat garbage, feces, and even decaying flesh. All that is eaten usually becomes part of the pig's own flesh . . . Aside from the diseases routinely carried by swine, pork is also a very fatty meat. The toxins in pork are held especially in the fat, which is not isolated from the meat as can be the case in lean beef, but rather, it is dispersed throughout the meat" (*What Would Jesus Eat?*, 2002, pp. 49-50).

### Poison on a plate?

Dr. Russell's supporting evidence for his views isn't for the faint of heart. He writes: "In the United States, three of the six most common food-borne parasitic diseases of humans are associated with pork consumption. These include toxoplasmosis, taeniasis or cysticercosis (caused by the pork tapeworm *Taenia solium*) and trichinellosis . . .

"It has long been recognized that the meat of shellfish—shrimp, crabs, lobsters, etc.—is especially dangerous.

Many illnesses, including instant paralysis, devastate some people every day as a result of eating shellfish.

"The largest cholera outbreak in the United States occurred in Louisiana from August through October 1986. (The symptoms of cholera are explosive diarrhea, leading to rapid dehydration, unconsciousness, hypotension and death.) What did the stricken people eat? The incriminating meals were found to include rice noodles with shrimp, pork, vegetables, mussel soup, pig blood coagulated with vinegar, and salty brine shrimp with mixed vegetables.

"Shellfish can be placed in a body of water that is contaminated with cholera bacteria, and they will purify the water. Shrimp, oysters, crab, scallops and mussels are particularly efficient at this. They filter large volumes of water every day. Sewage laden with chemicals, toxins and harmful bacteria, parasites and viruses become concentrated in those shellfish. The cause of cholera outbreaks in several areas has been traced to contaminated shrimp, crab, oysters and clams.

". . . Reading all this, you might not be surprised to learn that the state Legislature of California proposed a law requiring the food industry to label shellfish with a message warning: 'This food may be dangerous to your health.' Why? In a

single year, 50 deaths and many hospitalizations were found to have been caused by eating shellfish" (Russell, pp. 78-79).

### What purpose do they serve?

If such creatures weren't designed to be eaten, why did God create them? Dr. Russell explains:

"For one thing, they serve a useful role just cleaning up the place. Many unclean animals, however, notably pigs and shellfish, are unhealthy because their diet consists of society's disease-laden refuse.

"As is well known, pigs will eat anything and everything. They were designed to clean up decaying flesh and pollution. Pigs have eaten Philadelphia's garbage and sewage for more than 100 years, saving the city \$3 million a year in landfill costs. This is a wise use of hogs. They are designed to clean our environment.

"Even when stacked in cages, piglets thrive on offal when only the pig in the top cage receives food. Farmers have increased their profits by feeding free raw sewage to pigs. Chicken farmers often keep a hog so they can dispose of dead chickens without having to bury them" (Russell, p. 81).

Some species of fish and shellfish perform a similar role in an aquatic environment. Dr. Russell notes that "among commonly eaten fish, catfish . . . always

## A Telling Event From Jesus' Ministry

**M**any people assume Jesus Christ abolished the distinctions between clean and unclean meats, even though, as we have seen, no evidence for this exists in the Scriptures. However, the Bible includes a report of a telling incident that shows whether Jesus viewed pigs as suitable for food.

Before we examine that account, let's understand a part of Christ's character—that He apparently was never wasteful.

On two occasions during His ministry Jesus miraculously multiplied a few fish and loaves of bread to feed large crowds that followed Him—on one occasion 4,000 and on the other 5,000 strong (Matthew 14:15-21; 15:32-38). But, in spite of an abundance of food, Christ did not allow any of it to go to waste. "So when they [the crowds] were filled, He said to His disciples, 'Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost'" (John 6:12).

The disciples gathered up 12 baskets of leftover food after the first of these miracles and seven after the second. He specifically told His disciples not to allow any of it to be thrown away.

With the understanding that Jesus was compassionate and not wasteful toward food, let's examine an incident involving Him and some unclean animals—a large herd of pigs.

Mark 5:1-13 records that Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee by boat to the region of Gadara, a gentile (non-Jewish) area on the

eastern shore. There He was met by a demon-possessed man from whom He would shortly cast many evil spirits.

In this remarkable encounter, the demons requested that Jesus send them into a herd of 2,000 swine feeding on a nearby hillside. Jesus granted their request, and, when the demons entered the swine, "the herd ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and drowned in the sea" (verse 13).

Many have puzzled over this astounding incident in which Jesus precipitated the destruction of a valuable herd of 2,000 pigs—enough to feed many thousands of people. Yet we should not be surprised when we understand the biblical instruction that these animals should never have been raised for food, and their owner was acting in defiance of God's laws.

Beyond question is that Jesus didn't consider the swine to be suitable for food. The compassionate Savior of mankind, the one who ordered scraps of bread and fish to be gathered up so none would go to waste, would never have wasted such a valuable resource had He considered the pigs to be an acceptable part of the human diet.

Jesus is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Animals He viewed as unfit for human consumption 2,000 years ago remain unfit for us to eat in our day.

show the highest levels of contamination in chemically polluted water. After chemical spills, local fishermen are warned not to eat catfish.

He cites the example of a peach farmer who sprayed his trees with pesticide, only to have a rainstorm quickly wash the chemicals off the trees.

“The rainwater containing the recently applied insecticide ran into his pond,” he writes. “The catfish did their job, cleaning the water by sucking up the pesticide; but because of their efficiency, most of them floated to the top of the pond dead. None of the fish that had fins and scales died” (ibid.).

Even commercially raised catfish are a potential health risk, he notes. “*Consumer Reports* tested fish bought in multiple markets in the United States. Fish are considered spoiled when bacteria counts are greater than 10 million per gram of flesh. Nearly all catfish had counts that went off the scale at 27 million per gram, even when properly prepared” (ibid.).

Dr. Russell’s conclusion? “. . . Although swine help clean the earth, and shellfish and catfish are ideally designed to purify the water, we don’t want to eat what they clean up!” (ibid.)

In light of such seldom-publicized

facts, we can better understand and appreciate God’s words through Moses: “Observe and obey all these words which I command you, *that it may go well with you and your children after you forever*, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God” (Deuteronomy 12:28).

#### **For further help**

If you have questions or comments about the application of biblical food laws to Christians, please write to our office nearest you listed on page 2 or [info@ucg.org](mailto:info@ucg.org). Our staff will be glad to assist you.