

## CLEAN AND UNCLEAN

To the modern Western mind, the instructions found in Leviticus 11-15 and Deuteronomy 14 sound strange if not downright bizarre. Why is it wrong to eat rabbits but acceptable to munch on grasshoppers? Why is a woman declared unclean after giving birth to a child?

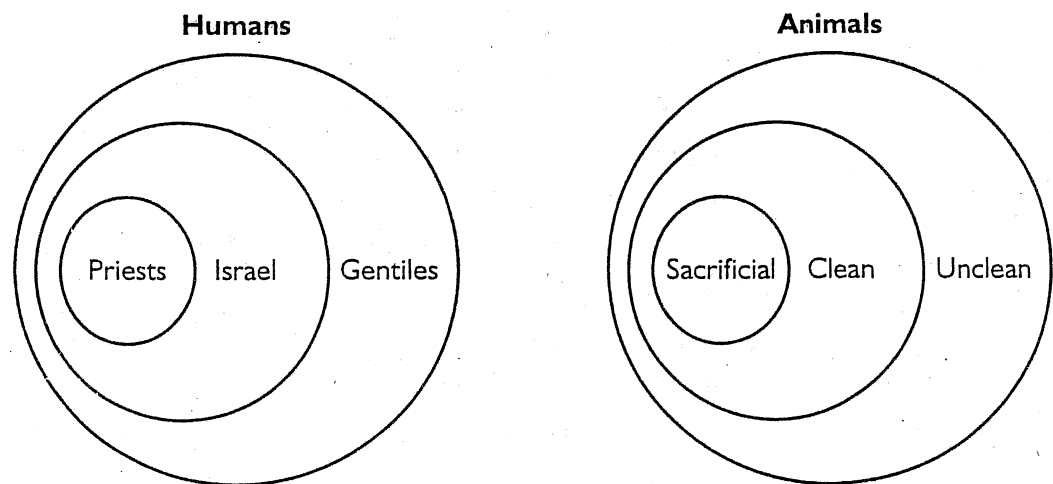
With commandments like those it is tempting to jump to conclusions about the Old Testament being hopelessly unscientific and discriminatory. But due to our chronological and cultural distance from the giving of those laws, we must approach them with humility and caution. Ideas contrary to our cultural assumptions may lie behind these commands. Therefore, we should seek to understand them on their terms before coming to any conclusion about their contemporary message and application. The considerations stated below may point us in the proper direction even if they do not answer all of our questions.

### Food Laws

Five explanations on the laws concerning the eating of animals have been suggested. Each deserves careful consideration.

1. *The arbitrary explanation.* The distinctions made between the animals were entirely arbitrary. God gave the commands simply to see if the Israelites would obey him.
2. *The pagan explanation.* The unclean animals that the Israelites were not to eat were those animals that were used in pagan worship.
  - a. In favor of this explanation is the stated design to make Israel into a holy nation (Exod. 19:5-6; Lev. 11:44-45).
  - b. Opposed to this explanation is the fact that the Canaanites sacrificed the same general range of animals as the Israelites did.
3. *The hygienic explanation.* The unclean animals were unfit to eat because they carried disease.
  - a. In favor of this explanation is the fact that some of the unclean animals can carry diseases: pork can be a source of trichinosis; the coney and hare can be carriers of tularemia; and fish without fins and scales and birds of prey can become sources of dangerous bacteria.
  - b. While this explanation may be a part of God's providential care for his people, does it explain all of the laws?
    - i. Hygiene can only account for some of the prohibitions. Some of the clean animals could also carry disease.
    - ii. The Old Testament gives no hint that the unclean animals were a danger to health.
    - iii. If hygiene is the motive, why are poisonous plants not classified as unclean?

- iv. If health reasons stand behind the commandments, why does Jesus pronounce all food clean (Mark 7:19)?
4. *The symbolic explanation.* The behavior and habits of the clean animals were living illustrations of how the righteous Israelite ought to behave, and the unclean animals represented the behavior of sinful people. For example, chewing the cud made an animal clean because it reminded the Israelites to meditate on God's law.
- This explanation goes back to pre-Christian Jewish writers.
  - Such interpretations do not explain all of the laws, and they can degenerate into the whimsical and ridiculous.
5. *The covenantal explanation.* The threefold division of animals represented people in terms of the covenant that God made with Israel.
- The distinction between clean and unclean foods corresponds to the division between holy Israel and the Gentile world. Within the clean foods there is the subcategory of sacrificial foods. This distinction separates the majority of ordinary Israelites from the priests, who could alone offer sacrifices.



- The purpose of the food laws is to remind the Israelites every day of the loving covenant that God has made with them and how he has set them apart from all the other nations.
- In favor of this view:
  - Its comprehensiveness and coherence.
  - The symbolism of the food laws is most clearly seen in Acts 10:9-35 where God uses those laws to teach Peter that the gospel is to be preached to the Gentiles. Three times he gives a vision to Peter ordering him to eat unclean foods. Later at Cornelius's house, Peter realizes that meaning of the vision. "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is

right” (Acts 10:34-35). Through the vision Peter learns that the division between Jew and Gentile has been overcome through Christ.

### Diseases

In a Western cultural setting the instructions about clean and unclean animals may seem strangely arbitrary, but the instructions in Leviticus 13-14 come across as immediately discriminatory. Why should physical infirmities make someone unclean in the sight of God? Several considerations may help us grasp the significance of these regulations.

1. The “leprosy” of these chapters was definitely not Hansen’s disease or what is known as leprosy today.
  - a. Archaeological evidence from Egypt provides no sign of people suffering from Hansen’s disease prior to the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
  - b. The symptoms of the “leprosy” of Leviticus do not match the symptoms of Hansen’s disease.
  - c. Levitical “leprosy” could appear on clothes and in houses.
  - d. What was the “leprosy” of Leviticus? No one is sure, but the Hebrew word *tsāra’at* may refer to something scaly. If so, then the disease being described here may be psoriasis, favus, or leucoderma.
2. There is no indication in Leviticus that these skin diseases were the result of any particular sin.
3. It is important to note that it was not the sickness itself that made the person unclean. The issue appears to be wholeness, not sickness. Leviticus 13:12-13 teaches that “if the disease breaks out *all* over their skin and, so far as the priest can see it covers *all* the skin of the affected person *from head to foot*, the priest . . . shall pronounce them clean” (emphasis added).
4. As in the case of clean and unclean food, these skin diseases may have been designed as a daily reminder of the covenant that God had established with Israel.
  - a. Mixtures are symbolic of uncleanness. Even in matters of agriculture and clothing, mixtures are forbidden (Lev. 19:19).
  - b. These laws are probably reminders of how God’s people are to avoid contact and defilement with the pagan Gentile nations.
5. In the New Testament Jesus seeks out “lepers” and heals them (Matt. 8:2-4; 11:5). The Old Testament approach to separation had been transformed through Christ. The distinction between Jew and Gentile is no longer applicable.

### Uncleanness after Childbirth and Bodily Discharges

How can we explain the instructions in Leviticus 12 about a woman’s uncleanness after giving birth and the commandments in Leviticus 15 about men’s and women’s uncleanness

after a bodily discharge?

1. The reasons behind the instructions seem to be that a discharge of body fluids indicated a loss of holiness. That would be particularly true with the loss of blood at childbirth. Blood was a symbol of life (Lev. 17:11-12), and loss of blood represented death. Because death was not part of God's original plan for creation, anything representing death rendered a person unclean.
2. These laws should not be understood as statements about childbirth or women. Rather, God is speaking to a culture vastly different from our contemporary setting and providing instructions to communicate to his people the danger of sin and where it leads.
3. Jesus shows no hesitancy in expressing compassion toward a woman who has been subject to bleeding for twelve years (Mark 5:25-34). His healing of the woman demonstrates his spiritual authority in forgiving sin and overcoming its tragic consequences.

### The Reality Found in Christ

If the considerations outlined in this paper point us in the right direction, then they should teach us two important lessons. First, they warn us against about jumping to conclusions about things in the Bible that we do not immediately understand. The problem may well be in the unspoken cultural assumptions that we bring to the Scriptures rather than in the Bible itself.

Second, the ultimate revelation of God is found in Jesus Christ. While the Old Testament commandments were divinely inspired and authoritative for the people to whom they were given, they were not intended to be the final statement on God's will or work. The final revelation comes in God's Son (Heb. 1:1-3). The food laws and the commandments based on separation are declared unnecessary due to the surpassing work of Christ in his death and resurrection. "These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however is found in Christ" (Col. 2:17).

### Recommended for Further Study

Wenham, Gordon J. 1979. *The Book of Leviticus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 166-171, 181-185, 192-197, 202-203, 212-214.

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