

## Is It a Sin to Eat Unclean Meats?

by Rod Reynolds

Is it a sin to eat unclean meats, as designated in Scripture? Many who think of themselves as Christians think not, while presumably those practicing Judaism would disagree.

Consider God's laws, his commands, for a moment. Why were they given? Was it to deprive humans of things that are good for them, that contribute to joy, peace, happiness, good health? No, quite the contrary. God said to the people of Israel through Moses: "You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess" (Deuteronomy 5:33).

In paraphrasing portions of the above verse, *Adam Clarke's Commentary* puts the wording as follows: "that you may enjoy life"; "good shall be to you—God will prosper you in all things essential to the welfare of your bodies, and the salvation of your souls" (cf. Exodus 15:26; Deuteronomy 4:40; 6:17-18; 12:25, 28; 30:15-16; Psalms 16:11; 19:7-11; John 15:11).

God gave the following conditional promise to the people of Israel after he had freed them from slavery in Egypt: "If you diligently heed the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in His sight, give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you" (Exodus 15:26). While not commenting specifically on food laws, as such, the book *None of These Diseases*, by S. I. McMillen, M.D., explains how many of the laws and admonitions given in Scripture relate to health, and how obedience to them promotes health.

God gave instructions to Adam and Eve concerning certain foods they were permitted to eat, and certain food that was forbidden to them (Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-3, 11, 17). There is symbolic significance in these instructions that go beyond mere physical food, nevertheless, in disobeying God's instructions regarding food, Adam (and Eve) sinned (Romans 5:12). Thus, yes, it's a sin to eat what God forbids to be eaten. "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4, KJV).

But, one who considers himself a Christian might argue, "I'm not under the law, but under grace." The "grace," the granting of forgiveness from past sins (Romans 3:25, KJV), offered through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, is not a license to sin with impunity, but an opportunity to be empowered to overcome sin with the help of the Holy Spirit. For additional comments regarding "the law" and God's commandments see our articles "Applying God's Law under the New Covenant," and "Free To Be Lawless?", along with our series on the two covenants and other material we have published.

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” (Romans 6:1-2). Breaking God’s laws, refusing to keep his commandments, produces death (Romans 6:21-23). Such also results in disease (Exodus 15:26; Deuteronomy 28:58-61).

While not entirely unrelated, the laws regarding clean and unclean meats are statutes separate from the laws of sacrifice and purification ritual for the temple. They were applicable long before the Tabernacle and Levitical priesthood existed, and are valid independently of such (Genesis 7:2; Leviticus 20:22-26; Deuteronomy 14:1-21; Acts 10:14; Revelation 18:2).

They are given to tell us what animal foods God created to be eaten, and are hence acceptable as food for humans (Leviticus 11:47). Many commentators, though they may make excuses for ignoring these laws, recognize them as identifying animals that are not fit to be used as food for humans. For example, Matthew Henry’s Commentary (MHCC) states in commenting on Leviticus 11, “Most of the meats forbidden as unclean are such as were really unwholesome, and not fit to be eaten....” Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown in their commentary state on Leviticus 11, “...there is no doubt that the flesh of many of the animals here ranked as unclean... is less wholesome and adapted for food than those which were allowed to be eaten.” John Gill in his commentary points out in commenting on Leviticus 11:2, that a reason the laws were given was “for the sake of their health, and to preserve them from diseases.” The *Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge* states on Leviticus 11:46 as a reason for the giving of these laws, “Because those [animals] prohibited were innutritive and unwholesome; as the swine, the flesh of which being strong and difficult to digest, affords a very gross aliment, and produces, especially in hot climates, cutaneous, scrophulous, and scorbutic disorders, as the itch, leprosy, etc.”

In its article on food laws of the Jews founded on Scripture, the *Encyclopedia Americana* states: “Nearly all the food laws have their hygienic [health promoting] aspect” (“Jews and Judaism — Food and Health Laws,” *Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 16, 1949, p. 123). It goes on to explain in more detail how various unclean animals, such as swine, unclean birds, unclean water dwelling creatures, insects, and others are often associated with diseases and epidemics . With regard to insects, only certain grass eating “locusts,” i.e., grasshoppers, are permitted as food (Leviticus 11:22), although there is controversy about to which specific creatures this verse is referring. “Beetle” (as in KJV) is certainly a mistranslation. “The *beetle* never can be intended here, as that insect never was eaten by man, perhaps, in any country of the universe” (*Adam Clarke’s Commentary*). “...in Lev. 11:22, ...it is obvious the word cannot mean properly the beetle” (*Easton’s Bible Dictionary*). There are hundreds of thousands of species of beetles, which may feed on both animal and plant matter, as well as decaying matter. “Some... spread parasitic worms and diseases” (*Britannica Concise Dictionary*). Likely it is referring to various kinds of grasshoppers as “clean,” all other insects, including beetles and crickets, forbidden.

The nature of these animals did not change with the introduction of the New Covenant, nor the destruction of the Temple and the suspension of the Levitical system. Today, as in ancient times, eating unclean animals is a frequent cause of disease and death.

“Scripture and medical research agree that modern lifestyles lived without reference to God’s laws and design shorten life and hasten death” (Rex Russell, M.D., *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, p. 31). In discussing various technical details about the health qualities of clean animals for human consumption, Dr. Russell states, “The flesh of clean animals such as beef, and fish that have fins and scales, is ideal for the health of humans — just as we would expect from the hand of a loving Creator” (p. 145). In commenting on a study done at Johns Hopkins University on the toxic effects of various kinds of animal flesh, Dr. Russell summarizes, “Note that the flesh of animals and fish given to us by God for food are all nontoxic, but all forbidden animals lie in the toxic range” (p. 150). Dr. Russell comments further on the many diseases associated with the consumption of unclean animals, as well as the breeding of such animals for food. In commenting on swine for example, he says, “The 1942 Yearbook of Agriculture reported that 50 diseases were found in pigs, and many of these diseases were passed on to humans by eating the pig’s flesh” (p. 155).

Another animal that does not meet the test of what is fit to eat by Scriptural standards is the horse, or similar animals. “And you may eat every animal with cloven hooves, having the hoof split into two parts, and that chews the cud, among the animals” (Deuteronomy 14:6). Horses do not have cloven hooves, and are not ruminants, as are cows, sheep and goats, which do hence “chew the cud,” and have cloven hooves, and thus are “clean” animals, i.e., designated as fit for human consumption as food. “Disease is commonly associated with the consumption of horse meat in lands where it is consumed” (*What Would Jesus Eat?*, Don Colbert, M.D., p. 13).

Fish with fins and scales God declared to be fit for humans to eat (Leviticus 11:9). “...clean fish with fins and scales are extremely beneficial for human consumption” (Colbert, p. 39). He warns, however, that even “clean” fish should be harvested from waters free of pollution, and cautions that eating fish raised in “fish farms” may not be as nutritious as fish taken in the wild from clean water. Fish should also not be eaten raw, as even clean fish may harbor parasites such as tapeworms, which will be killed by thorough cooking (pp. 44-45; cf. Luke 24:42; John 21:9).

“But all in the seas or in the rivers that do not have fins and scales, all that move in the water or any living thing which is in the water, they are an abomination to you” (Leviticus 11:10). Shellfish do not have fins and scales. “Shellfish have unique ability to purify waters of pathogenic bacteria,” and other toxins. “The toxins, however, remain in the flesh of the shellfish.” Eating shellfish exposes one to potential sickness or even death. “Raw shellfish is a major source of food poisoning in our nation” (Colbert, p. 38). Dr. Colbert further comments, “I

personally regard shellfish as the ‘cockroaches of the sea’ — they are miniature waste collectors for viruses, bacteria, parasites, and toxic waste products” (*ibid.*, p. 39).

“Like shrimp, lobsters, and all other shellfish, catfish [which has fins, but not scales, and is hence “unclean”] were initially created by God to act as cleansing agents for natural water sources. These creatures have a great ability to absorb pollutants but not become sick by them. They can and do, however, pass on those pollutants to human beings who eat their flesh” (*ibid.*, p. 39).

As far as beef is concerned, as with any food, plant or animal, the conditions under which the food is grown will affect its nutritional value and potential for affecting one’s health. Cattle fed on grass free of pesticides and other harmful chemicals, produce beef that is lower in fat and has a healthier balance between omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids than grain fed cattle confined to crowded feedlots, and whose feed may contain residues of pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics and possibly harmful hormones. The same goes for poultry or other food choices. Dr. Colbert recommends that meat be thoroughly cooked to an internal temperature of 160 degrees Fahrenheit, to destroy any bacteria that may have contaminated the meat during processing (cf. Exodus 12:8-9; 2 Chronicles 35:13). This especially applies to ground meat, such as hamburger. He also recommends Kosher meat because the manner in which the animals are killed and processed is more in keeping with the biblical model than the slaughterhouse method.

An illustration of how foolish and unsound practices can have dire consequences when it comes to food: “Mad cow disease is primarily the result of poor feeding practices for the cattle. As cattle have been slaughtered, part of the remains were used to make cattle feed” (*What Would Jesus Eat*, pp. 55-56). “The dietary laws given by God thousands of years ago are diametrically opposed to feeding animal parts and blood to cattle. Deadly diseases such as mad cow disease never occurred in animals in Bible times! Diseased animals would have been identified and removed from a flock or herd very quickly. This disease has been produced by man’s tampering with the natural feeding practices of animals” (*ibid.*, pp. 57-58).

Moses grew up in Egypt, and later had to flee for his life after an altercation led to the death of an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew (Exodus 2:11-15). He spent forty years in Midian, and at age eighty he was sent back to Egypt on a mission to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to freedom (Acts 7:20-30). Moses, though he had been educated in the “wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22), did not have the technical knowledge concerning the pathogens that cause infectious diseases which has come to light only in the recent past.

In several essays in the book *Evidence For Faith* biologist William J. Cairney discusses the “biomedical prescience” revealed in Scripture. That is, “accurate statements reflecting an in-depth knowledge of scientific concepts far before mankind had laid the technological base for

such things to be known” (“Biomedical Prescience 1,” *Evidence For Faith*, ed., John Warwick Montgomery, p. 128). One of the essays focuses on the dietary laws found in Scripture.

He points out that, “...the entire technological base for knowledge of the microbial basis for disease, including transmissibility factors, insect vectors, and host-pathogen relationships is barely one hundred years old” (*ibid.*, p. 130). The soundness of the food laws, cleanliness laws, agricultural laws, etc., are backed up by historical experience, and modern research. When these laws are violated, the result is sickness, disease epidemics, and premature death. How did Moses know these things? According to Moses, he was given the laws by God, the God of the Bible, who, it is claimed, created the living things of the earth, and the earth itself, and the universe of which it is a part (Leviticus 11:1 ff; Psalms 104:24-31; Isaiah 42:5; 45:12).

“Moses claimed no credit for having originated any of this material. Rather, he gave complete credit to the God of the Hebrews, who, as Moses claimed, had told him to write all this down. It is also not accidental or coincidental that these laws prevented disease. They were specifically designed to do that. The evidence for that is internal to the narrative” (“Biomedical Prescience 2,” *ibid.*, p. 142). Does not the evidence support the notion that, although men were used to transmit Scripture, it’s ultimate author is God? (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21).

Despite the fact that modern scientific research has confirmed the soundness of the laws concerning food and similar laws given by God through his word for our good, most people, including most who profess to be Christians, continue to ignore these laws, to their own hurt. Yet, as Christians we are to separate ourselves from unclean practices (2 Corinthians 7:1; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:17-20; 5:3-5; Colossians 3:5). We are to take care of our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:17). We are to be holy as God is holy (Leviticus 11:45; 20:25-26; 1 Peter 1:15-16).

The flesh of animals that had died of themselves, or were not bled properly, was also forbidden. Eating such animal flesh could easily result in sickness and death (cf our article “Dies of Itself”). Hence, the prohibition against eating the blood and hard fat (marbled fat in lean tissue is of a different composition and is not forbidden) of even clean animals also remains in force for Christians, as do similar laws (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 7:23-27; 17:10-14; 19:26; Acts 15:20, 29). If you cook ground beef, it would be wise to drain the pan of residual liquid while still hot, to avoid consuming fat that would otherwise very likely be harmful to your health. Dr. Russell and other health researchers have explained very clearly the health implications behind these laws.

The *Encyclopedia Americana* volume referenced above mentions how following the Bible’s food and health laws have positive practical results. “Certainly the health laws of the Bible give eloquent testimony to the advanced condition of social hygiene. Certain biotic

advantages have been claimed for the Jew. Greater longevity, greater fecundity, greater exemption from tuberculosis and syphilis, special capacity for acclimatization, are among these. But the advantages do not appear to be racial and seem to be entirely dependent upon the degree of observance of the special laws, and to be forfeited with the non-observance of these" (p. 123). It should be remembered that the laws we're discussing are not "Jewish" laws, they are God's laws. They promise to be a blessing to anyone or any people who observe them, and failing to observe them will have negative consequences without regard to ethnicity.

Some have been confused by false teachings concerning certain New Testament scriptures. One of these is Romans 14:6. "He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks." As Dr. Russell correctly explains, however, this Scripture has nothing to do with the subject of clean and unclean meats as discussed in Leviticus 11 and other passages of Scripture defining which animals were created to be eaten. "The argument in Romans 14 was about 'clean' meats some Christians considered to be defiled because it had been offered to idols. The fact is, early Christians observed the biblical distinctions between clean and unclean meats at least until A.D. 70" (pp. 144-145; cf our article "May Christians Eat Food Offered to Idols?"). Christians faithfully following God's commandments as applicable under the New Covenant continue observing these distinctions to this day.

Another misused Scripture is found in the context of a vision given to Peter wherein he saw descending from heaven (in vision) a variety of creatures including unclean animals. (Acts 10:10-12). He heard a voice, saying, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." To which he responded, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean" (Acts 10:13-14). Then, "... a voice spoke to him again the second time, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common'" (Acts 10:15).

It is commonly alleged by various commentators that the message is that the laws distinguishing between "clean" animals (those fit for human consumption) and "unclean" (not fit for food for humans) are abrogated by this vision. Yet, what animal declared unfit for food at the time of Moses and before is somehow more fit for food now? Nothing has changed concerning the inherent nature of any animal since the time of Moses that would make it any less nor any more fit for food. Thus, God has not "cleansed" any of the animals that were previously unclean.

What, then, is the point of the vision? Peter himself did not understand what the intent of the message was (Acts 10:17). He also refused to follow the literal meaning of what he was told to do in this vision, that is, eat as food the flesh of animals he knew is forbidden by God's word. However, God had arranged for Peter to meet in Caesarea with a group of Gentiles who were prepared to hear and believe the gospel. It then became apparent what lesson

Peter was to learn from the vision and the circumstances surrounding it. It had become a common belief among many of the Jews that the unclean animals forbidden by the law were somehow symbolic of Gentiles (cf. *Adam Clarke's Commentary*). However, the Scriptures are clear that God is no respecter of persons. Upon meeting and listening to the aforementioned Gentiles Peter understood the message, and it was not that the food laws had been abrogated. Peter said to those assembled to meet him, "God has shown me that **I should not call any man common or unclean**" (Acts 10:28). Shortly he added, "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (Acts 10:34-35).

Another Scripture sometimes used to circumvent God's food laws is found in Paul's first letter to Timothy. "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, 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" (1 Timothy 4:1-5). Note carefully, however, that the foods sometimes forbidden among those influenced by "deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons," are foods, such as animal flesh, that God "created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." God's word clearly specifies in Leviticus 11, Deuteronomy 14, and other Scriptures which animal flesh was created to be received by those who "believe and know the truth." Jesus said in a prayer to God, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). The "word" spoken of is preserved in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as they are commonly called (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). Such foods as mentioned above are "sanctified" (1 Timothy 4:5), that is, set apart as "clean" and fit for food by the word of God; and thus are separate from forbidden flesh (Leviticus 11:47). Just as prophesied, not only do the doctrines of some religions, including various sects calling themselves "Christian," forbid eating meat, either at certain times or altogether, but there is currently a powerful secular movement of worldwide influence to ban the consumption of meat (cf our article, "Can Anything Be Done About the Weather?). Truly this is a doctrine of demons.

Scripture admonishes us to pay heed to God's words of wisdom, "For they are life to those who find them, And health to all their flesh" (Proverbs 4:22).

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