

To Eat or Not To Eat

Deuteronomy 14:3–21

by Felton Spraggins

“You shall not eat any detestable thing. These are the animals which you may eat: . . .” (14:3–21).

While we were traveling in Israel, many times our guide had to stop and think before he would eat certain foods. He would look at the food, smile, and then say, “To eat or not to eat, that is the question.” He was referring to the dietary laws for Jews given under the law of Moses in 14:3–21.

Who gave the dietary laws to Israel? Was the list of clean and unclean foods a catalogue of food taboos based on fad or fancy? Why were the dietary laws given? Are the food laws binding on Christians today?

The list of clean and unclean foods found in our text has a significance often ignored.

DIETARY DISTINCTIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Regulations were given to make a distinction as a basis for food laws in chapter 14 and Leviticus 11:

This is the law regarding the animal, and the bird, and every living thing that moves in the waters, and everything that swarms on the earth, to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the edible creature and the creature which is not to be eaten (Leviticus 11:46, 47).

The law of Moses made clear distinctions between clean and unholy food (Leviticus 10:10). These dietary laws were only given to the Israelites and were not perpetual in nature, for the Mosaic covenant did not require that the Gentiles keep the dietary laws. The word “unclean” in 14:8 suggests sin and defilement rather than

mere unhealthiness. Touching blood, dead bodies, and bodily discharge produced a temporary uncleanness that kept a person away from society and sacrifice, but eating unclean food was detestable or abominable. “You shall not eat any detestable thing” (14:3).

The animals were divided into three classes: those that lived on the land (14:3–8), those that lived in the water (14:9, 10), and those that lived in the air (14:11–20). The land animals that could be eaten included those which chewed the cud and had the hoof divided or cloven in two. Unless the animals satisfied these two conditions, they were unclean. For example, the camel was declared to be unclean because even though it chews the cud, its foot, though divided above, is united beneath into a broad sole. The cleanness of water animals had only one general rule given: Whatever did not have fins and scales was unclean and could not be eaten.

Israel was also forbidden to eat the corpses of animals that had died naturally (14:21). It seems that this was solely for hygienic reasons and because their blood had not been released and was, therefore, still in the body.

The final prohibition was given: They could not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk (14:21; Exodus 23:19; 34:26). The ceremonial custom of boiling a kid in its mother’s milk is known from the ancient Canaanite tablets found in Ugarit. Such rites were superstitiously observed by the Canaanites. They hoped that through magical acts they could increase the fertility and productivity of their crops.

The first time the distinction was given by God between clean and unclean animals was as Noah entered the ark:

“You shall take with you of every clean animal by sevens, a male and his female; and of the animals that are not clean two, a male and his female; also of the birds of the sky, by sevens, male and female, to keep offspring alive on the face of all the earth” (Genesis 7:2, 3).

The distinction concerned the animals that were used in sacrifice to God while in the ark. After Noah and his family left the ark, he “built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (Genesis 8:20). However, he was given no restrictions concerning clean and unclean foods. Noah could have used any of the animals he chose for food (Genesis 9:3).

DISTINCTIONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus announced the principle that it is not what goes into a man that defiles him, but what comes out of him:

“Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (Thus He declared all foods clean.) (Mark 7:18, 19).

In the New Testament the Jews were still under the law of Moses until the church was established on the Day of Pentecost. With the coming of Christianity, the law of Moses was abolished along with the dietary requirements specifying foods that were clean and unclean. With the advent of Christ’s perfect law of liberty, all food was to be considered clean. This was confirmed in a heavenly vision to Peter as recorded in Acts 10:9–16: “. . . And a voice came to him, ‘Arise, Peter, kill and eat!’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.’ And again a voice came to him a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’”

The Jewish Christians were free to keep the food laws if they liked (Acts 10:9–15; 11:2–9; Romans 14:1–4, 14). Paul said, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4, 5).

As far as the true religion of God is concerned, there are no prohibitions upon eating

flesh, provided it is not harmful to the body, the temple of God and the temple of the Holy Spirit. It would then be forbidden by the principle in 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20.

WHY DISTINCTIONS WERE DECLARED

Various theories have been proposed for God’s permitting certain animals to be eaten while disallowing others. Four possible explanations are usually given.

The most popular interpretation of this law is that *certain animals were prohibited for sanitary or hygienic purposes*. Some forbidden animals, such as pigs and fowl, often carry diseases.

In the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, published in 1953, an American doctor who had conducted a series of experiments determined the levels of toxicity in the unrefrigerated meat in the animals, aquatic creatures, and birds mentioned in Deuteronomy 14. He discovered that the various types of prohibited meats contained a higher percentage of toxic substances than those which were permitted.¹ This led to the conclusion by many and seemed to confirm the idea that the main purpose of the dietary restrictions was in order to protect the health of the Israelites. Hygienic explanations are possible in cases such as swine and predatory birds that feast on the flesh.

Several problems exist with the position that the laws defining clean and unclean animals were only given for sanitary or dietary purposes. It would be difficult to believe that God was concerned about the health of His people in the Old Testament under the law of Moses but abandoned that concern in the New Testament. Why would God protect only the health of the Jews? Verse 21 states that they were not to eat anything that died of itself but could give it to the aliens who were at their gates, or sell it to a foreigner.

Also, no hygienic reasons are given in the Old Testament text as motives for observing these laws. Nowhere does the Old Testament say that the Israelites considered the unclean food dangerous to their health; it was only dangerous to their relationship with God. The eating of some of the clean animals seemed to represent a greater danger than the eating of some of the unclean ones.

A second explanation is that *the unclean animals were linked with the pagan cultural practices of*

that day. For instance, the serpent was sacred to the fertility goddesses throughout the ancient Near East. The wild boar and the pig were sacred animals of those who lived in and around Syria.

The Hebrew word used in verse 3, which is translated as “detestable,” is the same word used in 7:25 and 13:31 where it has been translated “abomination.” In both these instances, the word indicates an association with foreign religions. Unclean animals are said to be detestable in that sense.

This thought does not hold true when considering all the animals listed in Deuteronomy 14. For example, the bull was a commonly used symbol in the religions of the ancient Near East, and especially in Canaan and Egypt, yet it was permitted as food for the Israelites.

A third explanation is that *certain animals in each class provide a standard for that class and any deviation from that standard renders the animal unclean.* This division was to be constant symbolism of good and evil in the world and in the human realm. This system divided itself into two sections: those that were unclean representing the Gentiles and those that were clean representing Judaism. They were to be illustrations to Israel of her relationship to God and the nations round about her. This symbolic interpretation seems to be impossible to validate with other passages in the Old Testament.

A fourth and strongest reason in the law of Moses is that *these laws were for the purpose of teaching obedience and for showing that Israel was a separate people* (14:2). The food laws reminded Israel of her unique status before God. No Israelite could eat without realizing that in every area of his life he was to be consecrated to God. In the presence of the Gentiles, the diet served as a testimony of his special relationship to the Lord.

This would explain why Israel could give or sell meat that they personally were forbidden to eat, such as verse 21 shows.

Apart from God’s command, Israel could have chosen to eat or not to eat without any violation of conscience. From a human standpoint, God’s rules made no sense. The regulations meant no sacrifice or hunger since many good meats were allowed. The true test was whether or not Israel would comply with God’s word. It was not the observance of the food laws that distinguished Israel as holy, but an attitude of total allegiance to God in loving obedience.

CONCLUSION

The faith of Israel had to be maintained and displayed, and the food laws provided the opportunity for Israel to exercise faith and obedience. God had assured them that it was His will for them to follow his dietary laws, and they were expected to obey whether or not the regulations seemed reasonable. Such a test is similar to the one given to Adam and Eve concerning the forbidden fruit. The prohibitions and distinctions outlined in the text were for the purpose of teaching obedience or building faith and to show the holiness of Israel as a separate people (14:2).

Holiness is to be carried into every sphere and act of the life of a child of God. Paul’s words to the Christians at Colossae should be the cornerstone for every Christian today: “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17).

Endnote

¹D. I. Macht, “An Experimental Pharmacological Appreciation of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 27 (1953): 444–50.