

## Creatures clean & unclean

### or, How often must God remind us of the reality of sin?

... You are to make a distinction between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean. You are to teach the children of Israel all the statutes which Yahweh has spoken to them by Moses. — LEVITICUS 10:10,11 (WEB)

#### Analysis

##### A. (11:1-47) What is the reason for these sometimes seemingly arbitrary distinctions?

Christian and Jewish commentators divide over the significance of many of these restrictions. Some see their hygienic benefits, some see the rationale behind them as primarily cultic; ie, to separate Israel from pagan rites and usages. Some, especially older commentators, tend to see their primary meaning as symbolic.



GORDON WENHAM  
3 categories for ritual or moral analysis

learn to take more diligent heed, and to withdraw themselves far from all the pollutions of the Gentiles. He had before recommended purity by various symbols, and now extends it even to the very animals. And this reason must be carefully marked, that the distinction between meats is propounded to them in order that they may study purity. [Calvin ii 58]

[11:2ff] The regulation of the sacrifices and institution of the priesthood, by which Jehovah opened up to His people the way of access to His grace and the way to sanctification of life in fellowship with Him, were followed by instructions concerning the various things which hindered and disturbed this living fellowship with God the Holy One, as being manifestations and results of sin, and by certain rules for

avoiding and removing these obstructions. For example, although sin has its origin and proper seat in the soul, it pervades the whole body as the organ of the soul, and shatters the life of the body, even to its complete dissolution in death and decomposition; whilst its effects have spread from man to the whole of the earthly creation, inasmuch as not only did man draw nature with him into the service of sin, in consequence of the dominion over it which was given him by God, but God Himself, according to a holy law of His wise and equitable government, made the irrational creature subject to "vanity" and "corruption" on account of the sin of man (Romans 8:20-21), so that not only did the field bring forth thorns and thistles, and the earth produce injurious and poisonous plants (see at Genesis 3:18), but the animal kingdom in many of its forms and creatures bears the image of sin and death, and is constantly reminding man of the evil fruit of his fall from God. It is in this penetration of sin into the material creation that we may find the explanation of the fact, that from the very earliest times men have neither used every kind of herb nor every kind of animal as food; but that, whilst they have, as it were, instinctively avoided certain plants as injurious to health or destructive to life, they have also had a horror naturalis, i.e., an inexplicable disgust, at many of the animals, and have avoided their flesh as unclean. A similar horror must have been produced upon man from the very first, before his heart was altogether hardened, by death as the wages of sin, or rather by the effects of death, viz., the decomposition of the body; and different diseases and states of the body, that were connected with symptoms of corruption and decomposition, may also have been regarded as rendering unclean. Hence in all the nations and all the religions of antiquity we find that contrast between clean and unclean, which was developed in a dualistic form, it is true, in many of the religious systems, but had its primary root in the corruption that had entered the world through sin. This contrast was limited in the Mosaic law to the animal food of the Israelites, to contact with dead animals and human corpses, and to certain bodily conditions and diseases that are associated with the decomposition, pointing out most minutely the unclean objects and various defilements within these spheres, and prescribing the means for avoiding or removing them. [Keil ii 357]

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##### B. Hygiene, healthy diet – or ?

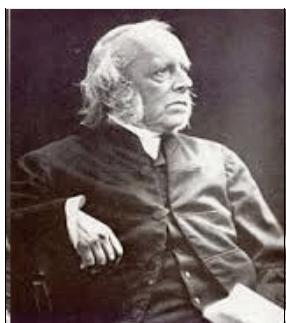
[11:2] It is not always easy to see the reason for the prohibitions, but it would seem that the primary principle was sanitary, and one proof of this is the greater immunity from ill-health and disease found among the Jews. [Thomas 120]

[11:2-12] William Foxwell Albright, dean of American biblical archaeologists, defends the view that these prohibitions had a hygienic basis. Albright calls the view that religious reasons are behind the ban on pork "sheer nonsense". He also remarks that the Hebrew Old Testament is "the greatest existing monument of empirical logic", enabling the Jews, like the Chinese and Egyptians, to have a "tremendous advantage in this respect ... over all comparable ethnic and religious groups." For example, the ban on water creatures without fins, Albright says, would have protected them from the parasites common to burrowing water dwellers such as eels. [See Albright *Yahweh and the gods of Canaan* 176-181]

[11:3,4] No carnivorous animal was clean; they had qualities that made them unfit to be acknowledged as proper for God's people to touch. But some of those not carnivorous were also unfit to be taken as food, possessing some peculiarity that fitted them to be types of things which the holy should avoid. [Bonar 212]

[11:4] But the prohibition was most onerous to the Jews with respect to swine's flesh, because it is very well adapted for food, not only as being a pleasant accompaniment of other meats, but because the working-classes are fed upon it at a smaller cost. In this point, therefore, the religion of the Jewish people was especially proved. For, when the soldiers of Antiochus desired to force the people to an entire renunciation of the Law, they only urged them to eat swine's flesh. And hence the famous witticism of Augustus, "I would rather be Herod's pig than his son;" because, whilst he abstained from pork, he was the murderer of his children. But, in order that the Jews might observe this prohibition more strictly, the very touch was also forbidden them; so that it was not only wicked to taste swine's flesh, but even to touch it with their hands after the animal was killed. The same rule did not apply to beef or mutton; for it is necessary to handle the meat which is appointed for our food. [Calvin ii 64]

#### C. 'Memorials of sin' – on land, in water and air



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"Memorials of sin" in the  
book of the Law – and in  
the book of creation

constantly recall the same distinctions; while their loathsome qualities would serve to make the feeling of uncleanness more and more detestable to the men of Israel. [Bonar 221]

[11:20-23] No retirement into quiet seats and bowers could give freedom from the presence of what was unclean. The dragon-fly that wafted itself past their eye, and the many magnificent insects, though fed amid the fragrance of Lebanon, and the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, were all made to speak of God having set a mark on this earth as no longer a Paradise. These creatures on the wing were like messengers sent to admonish the saints of God that the sweetest spots of earth were polluted, and, therefore, they must watch and keep their garments. The only clean insects were the locusts – the insects so often used by God to punish a guilty land and an unclean people. [Bonar 224]

#### D. (11:44,45) The principle of separation taught in an unavoidable, unforgettable way

It is no coincidence, **Wenham** suggests [181-183], that the conversion of the first Gentile, Cornelius, is bound up with a vision of clean and unclean animals. Nothing marked the separation of Jew and Gentile more dramatically than the adherence of faithful Jews to the dietary laws. The early controversies in Paul's work among the Gentiles, therefore, more often involve food than any other issue, save perhaps circumcision, another mark of separation. – see Romans 14 & I Corinthians 8, among many NT examples

[11:44-45] For whatever tends to weakness or disease, by that fact tends to death – to that death which, according to the Scriptures, is, for man, the penal consequence of sin. But Israel was called to be a people redeemed from the power of death to life, a life of full consecration to God. Hence, because redeemed from death, it was evidently fitting that the Israelite should, so far as possible in the flesh, keep apart from death, and all that in its nature tended, or might specially tend, to disease and death. It is very strange that

it should have been objected to this view, that since the law declares the reason for these regulations to have been religious, therefore any supposed reference herein to the principles of hygiene is by that fact excluded. For surely the obligation so to live as to conserve and promote the highest bodily health must be regarded, both from a natural, and a Biblical and Christian point of view, as being no less really a religious obligation than truthfulness or honesty. If there appear sufficient reason for believing that the details of these laws are to be explained by reference to hygienic considerations, surely this, so far from contradicting the reason which is given for their observance, helps us rather the more clearly to see how, just because Israel was called to be the holy people of a holy God, they must needs keep this law.

For the central idea of the Levitical holiness was consecration unto God, as the Creator and Redeemer of Israel – consecration in the most unreserved, fullest possible sense, for the most perfect possible service. But the obligation to such a consecration, as the essence of a holy character, surely carried with it, by necessary consequence, then, as now, the obligation to maintain all the powers of mind and body also in the highest possible perfection. That, as regards the body, and, in no small degree, the mind as well, this involves the duty of the preservation of health, so far as in our power; and that this, again, is conditioned by the use of a proper diet, as one factor of prime importance, will be denied by no one. ... There is, therefore, no religion in neglecting the body, and ignoring the requirements for its health, as ascetics have in all ages imagined. Neither is there religion in pampering, and thus abusing, the body, after the manner of the sensual in all ages. The principle which inspires this chapter is that which is expressed in the New Testament by the words: "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. x. 31). If, therefore, a man needlessly eats such things, or in such a manner, as may be injurious to health, he sins, and has come short of the law of perfect holiness. It is therefore not merely a matter of earthly prudence to observe the laws of health in food and drink and recreation, in a word, in all that has to do with

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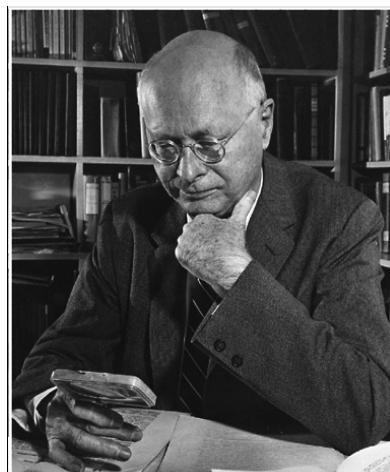
the appetite and desires of the body, but it is essential to holiness. We are in all these things to seek to glorify God, not only in our souls, but also in our bodies. [Kellogg 295-296,300-301]

[11:44-45] [Writing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century] Professor Hosmer says: "Throughout the entire history of Israel, the wisdom of the ancient lawgivers in these respects has been remarkably shown. In times of pestilence the Jews have suffered far less than others; as regards longevity and general health, they have in every age been noteworthy, and, at the present day, in the life-insurance offices, the life of a Jew is said to be worth much more than that of men of other stock." Of the facts in the modern world which sustain these statements, Dr. Behrends gives abundant illustration in the article referred to, such as the following: "In Prussia, the mean duration of Jewish life averages five years more than that of the general population. In Furth, the average duration of Jewish life is 37, and of Christians 26 years. In Hungary, an exhaustive study of the facts shows that the average duration of life with the Croats is 20.2, of the Germans 26.7, but of the Jews 46.5 years, and that although the latter generally are poor, and live under much more unfavourable sanitary conditions than their Gentile neighbours." [Kellogg 294]

[11:45-47] The prophylactic character of the hygienic enactments is unique in the ancient world, and the underlying principles form an important part of modern preventive medical practice. [Harrison 133]

[11:46,47] If we take a survey, in closing, of the animals that are enumerated as unclean and not suitable for food, we shall find that among the larger land animals they were chiefly beasts of prey, that seize upon other living creatures and devour them in their blood; among the water animals, all snake-like fishes and slimy shell-fish; among birds, the birds of prey, which watch for the life of other animals and kill them, the marsh-birds, which live on worms, carrion, and all kinds of impurities, and such mongrel creatures as the ostrich, which lives in the desert, and the bat, which flies about in the dark; and lastly, all the smaller animals, with the exception of a few graminivorous locusts, but more especially the snake-like lizards, – partly because they called to mind the old serpent, partly because they crawled in the dust, seeking their food in mire and filth, and

suggested the thought of corruption by the slimy nature of their bodies. They comprised, in fact, all such animals as exhibited more or less the darker type of sin, death, and corruption; and it was on this ethical ground alone, and not for all kinds of sanitary reasons, or even from political motives, that the nation of Israel, which was called to sanctification, was forbidden to eat them. It is true there are several animals mentioned as unclean, e.g., the ass, the camel, and others, in which we can no longer recognise this type. But we must bear in mind, that the distinction between



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clean animals and unclean goes back to the very earliest times (Genesis 7:2-3), and that in relation to the large land animals, as well as to the fishes, the Mosaic law followed the marks laid down by tradition, which took its rise in the primeval age, whose childlike mind, acute perception, and deep intuitive insight into nature generally, discerned more truly and essentially the real nature of the animal creation than we shall ever be able to do, with thoughts and perceptions disturbed as ours are by the influences of unnatural and ungodly culture. [Keil ii 371]

[11:46,47] Another question remains, how God should pronounce anything which He has created to be unclean; for, if an animal be rejected on account of its uncleanness, part of the reproach redounds to the Author Himself. Besides, this rejection seems also to be opposed to the first declaration of God, when, considering all things which He had made, He acknowledged them to be "very good." The solution is, that no animal was ever unclean in itself; but that this merely refers to its use. Thus in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil there was naturally neither fault nor harm, so that it should infect man by its pollution, yet he contracted death from it on account of God's prohibition. [Calvin ii63]

[11:46-47] Where so much learning and profound thought has been expended in vain, one might well hesitate to venture anything in exposition of so difficult a subject, and rest content, as some have, with declaring that the whole subject is utterly inexplicable. And yet the world advances in knowledge, and we are therefore able to approach the subject with some advantage in this respect over earlier generations. And in the light of the most recent investigations, we believe it highly probable that the chief principle determining the laws of this chapter will be found in the region of hygiene and sanitation, as relating, in this instance, to diet, and to the treatment of that which is dead. And this in view of the following considerations. It is of much significance to note, in the first place, that a large part of the animals which are forbidden as food are unclean feeders. It is a well-ascertained fact that even the cleanest animal, if its food be unclean, becomes dangerous to health if its flesh be eaten. The flesh of a cow which has drunk water contaminated with typhoid germs, if eaten, especially if insufficiently cooked, may communicate typhoid fever to him who eats it. It is true, indeed, that not all animals that are prohibited are unclean in their food; but the fact remains that, on the other hand, among those which are allowed is to be found no animal whose ordinary habits of life, especially in respect of food, are unclean. [Kellogg 290]

[11:46-47] Kidner opines [118] that there may be aesthetic as well as hygienic and cultic reasons for dietary distinctions. Creatures which are "repulsive-looking" may be "demeaning to the eater". But, Kidner adds, the main consideration seems more to do with the unclean animals' proximity to the earth, which would remind the Israelite worshipper, as it does the Christian, of the curse upon the serpent (Gen. 3:14).

**"Proximity to the earth" – a constant reminder to look heavenward for salvation from sin and death**