

Does Romans 14 Abolish Torahs on Unclean Meats?

M

any believe Romans 14 says that Christians are free from all former restrictions regarding the meats they may eat. They cite as proof verse 14, in which Paul wrote, "know — that is, I have been persuaded by the Lord Yeshua the Messiah — that nothing is unclean in itself. But if a person considers something unclean, then for him it is unclean."

This approach, however, fails to consider the context of Paul's letter as well as the specific Greek words he used.

Many Bible resources agree that Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians around C.E. 55 and that he wrote his epistle to the Romans *from* Corinth in 56 or 57. The food controversy in Corinth (reflected in chapters 8 and 10) 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 Torah regarding clean and unclean animals must force this interpretation into the text because it has no biblical foundation. The chapter itself shows that the discussion concerned meat sacrificed to idols.

Verse 2 contrasts the person 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 underlying 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." The 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."

Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 8 that the main concern for a Christian is to not defile his own conscience or the conscience of other Christians. Jewish Believers in Messiah Yeshua especially might have been inclined to feel contaminated by anything related to idolatry. But because an idol cannot, by itself, render anything pure or defiled, a person's conscience, not the idol, is the real issue.

So what is the point of Paul's instruction about eating or not eating in Romans 14? Depending on their consciences, early believers had several choices. Those wishing to be sure of avoiding meat sacrificed to idols could choose to eat only vegetables or fast—avoid food altogether—when faced with the prospect of consuming foods of suspicious background.

For those whose consciences were not troubled by eating meat purchased in local markets just because it might have been ceremonially offered to idols, that option was open to them *with one important restriction*. They were (especially at group meals where offenses were more likely to occur) to consider first the conscience of others who were present, to be careful to give no offense.

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).

[Greek words clarify Paul's meaning](#)

An understanding of the Greek words Paul used can also help us understand Paul's meaning.

The New Covenant writers referred to two concepts of unclean, using different Greek words to convey the two meanings. *Unclean* could refer to animals God did not intend to be consumed 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 Covenant Words*, 1985, "Unclean," p. 649). In addition to the meanings of "common" and "ordinary" (see [Acts 2:44](#); [4:32](#); [Titus 1:4](#); [Hebrews 10:29](#)), 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.

Koinos and *koinoo* appear throughout the New Covenant to refer to this kind of ceremonial uncleanness. Something could be "common"—ceremonially unclean—even though it was otherwise considered a scripturally clean meat.

An entirely different word, *akathartos*, is used in the New Covenant for those animals Scripture specifies as unclean. Both words, *koinos* and *akathartos*, are used in Acts 10, where Peter distinguished between the two concepts of uncleanness by using both words in verse 14.

When Paul said in [Romans 14:14](#) that "I know and am convinced by the Lord Yeshua the Messiah 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 Torahful 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" (NIV). The word translated "clean" is *katharos*, meaning "free from impure admixture, without blemish, spotless" (Vine, "Clean, Cleanness, Cleanse, Cleansing," p. 103).

"Clean" meats as such aren't addressed in the New Covenant, 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* doesn't appear in the original Greek, but was inserted by later translators. 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 association of food with idolatrous activity had no bearing on whether the food was inherently suitable or unsuitable for eating. Understood in its context, Romans 14 does *not* convey permission to ignore the biblical Torah as to which meats are clean or unclean.