

## What Does the Bible Teach About The Clean and Unclean Foods?

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**M**any people have misconceptions about the biblical teaching on clean and unclean meats. What does Scripture really reveal on this subject, and what principles lie behind its teaching?

When I was a child my parents taught me and my brother and sister the distinction God made between clean and unclean animals. I still recall their saying the names of animals and asking whether God said we could eat them or not. Beginning with the most common creatures people eat, we learned that cows, sheep, deer, chickens and turkeys were on the allowable list, while pigs, rabbits, squirrels, horses, shrimp and lobster were not.

Once we learned the basics, our childhood curiosity led us to consider exotic animals like tigers, elephants and giraffes. Since these animals were not specifically mentioned in Leviticus 11 or Deuteronomy 14, we learned to look for the identifying characteristics that showed which animals were acceptable for human consumption.

[Leviticus 11:3](#) says, "Among the animals, whatever divides the hoof, having cloven hooves and chewing the cud-that you may eat." This verse taught us that tigers and elephants are unclean because they do not have a divided hoof. The giraffe, however, does have a split hoof, and it chews the cud, so it is clean. Similarly, the characteristics that make fowl, fish and insects clean or unclean are also derived from these chapters.

I admit that my childhood curiosity about eating giraffes persisted. I thought of more questions: Since giraffes are clean, why don't we hear of people eating them? Did God make a mistake when He created them? Don't they taste good? Surely they would make great neck soup! And why do so many people disregard what God said?

Since childhood I have learned that few people are willing to follow Messiah Yeshua's command to conduct our lives "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" ([Matthew 4:4](#)). The reasons vary. Many people don't realize that God made the distinctions that reveal which meats should be eaten by humans. Some others, even many who are aware of these characteristics, believe they no longer apply. Let's consider some of these ideas.

## Popular ideas about distinctions

Since many people enjoy eating pork products (ham, bacon, sausage) and experience no immediate adverse effects, some have looked for scientific reasons that God may have had in mind when He told the ancient Israelites not to eat pork. One theory is that God forbade pork because the Israelites might catch diseases, such as trichinosis, that pigs can carry. After all, the Israelites did not own refrigerators, and researchers had not yet warned people to thoroughly cook pork to kill any potential disease-carrying organisms.

Since modern research has apparently solved these problems, and since most meat is cooked thoroughly enough to kill parasites, many people assume that eating pork is acceptable to God. Since many people eat pork all their lives and live to a ripe old age, the average person-if he thinks about it at all-assumes that pork has little or no effect on health or longevity.

Research has convinced some doctors, however, to recommend that some of their patients avoid pork or shellfish in their diets; they have observed that some people do not properly digest these meats. So some will acknowledge that avoidance of certain meats makes sense for people with particular health problems, but not as a rule for everyone.

A religious perspective that parallels this scientific reasoning has developed. Theologians have assumed that the laws of clean and unclean meats originated under the Old Covenant with ancient Israel and came to an end with the establishment of the New Covenant. Numerous laws from the Old Testament are thus seen as no longer applicable to "Christians."

Many believe that Paul confirmed this approach when he said, "I know and am convinced by the Adonai Yeshua that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean" ([Romans 14:14](#)).

This reasoning places God in the role of master physician in the Old Covenant Scriptures and Yeshua in the role of liberator from God's law in the New Covenant Scriptures. If we assume that God was simply looking out for the health of the ancient Israelites, the Bible lists of clean and unclean animals become only primitive health issues for which modern, enlightened, liberated mankind no longer has need. Reasoning that Messiah understood this and gave His followers the freedom to decide for themselves in such matters, some believe God will honor any decision we make for ourselves in these matters.

This popular view is taught by most churches, but does it accurately reflect biblical teaching?

### God's view is different

God made mankind in His own image ([Genesis 1:26-27](#)). In doing so God gave men and women the ability to reason. What a wonderful gift that is! But our thinking ability is not infallible. When ancient Israel's reasoning went awry, God said, "Come now, and let us reason together" ([Isaiah 1:18](#)).

But Scripture also records God telling us: " 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts'" ([Isaiah 55:8-9](#)). So God, not man, should be the authority on our conduct ([Proverbs 14:12](#)), including what foods may or may not be eaten.

In addition, the great prophet Jeremiah candidly admits, "O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; *it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps*" ([Jeremiah 10:23](#), emphasis added throughout).

In light of these verses from the Bible, we need to carefully examine the matter of clean and unclean meats. We need to be sure we understand God's perspective instead of relying exclusively on human reasoning.

### The origin of the distinctions

The first biblical account noting distinctions between clean and unclean animals occurs long before the Exodus. Almost a thousand years before there was a covenant with the nation of Israel, God told Noah to take two pairs of unclean animals and seven pairs of clean animals into the ark ([Genesis 6:19-7:2](#)). God does not tell Noah in this account that He was, for the first time, making a distinction between animals. God simply says, " You shall take with you seven each of every *clean* animal . . .; two each of animals that are *unclean* . . ." ([Genesis 7:2](#)).

God did not have to define for Noah the meaning of "clean" and "unclean"; Noah understood God's instruction and what was required of him, and obeyed. To understand what God meant by these terms, we must go to other chapters of the Bible such as Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

The account about Noah shows that the distinction between clean and unclean existed early in human history, long before God ratified His covenant with Israel. Thus the popular idea that animals' cleanness and uncleanness originated with the Old Covenant is shown from the Bible to be untrue. Since these distinctions existed before the Israelite sacrificial system and Levitical priesthood, it does not follow that these distinctions would cease with a change in the sacrificial system or the priesthood. As we will see, the Bible teaches that the distinction between clean and unclean has never been rescinded.

Another flaw associated with this understanding is that God's law did not exist until the *time* described when we first read about it. This misconception leads to the equally flawed belief that the only laws applicable to New Covenant Believers are those restated in the New Covenant after Messiah's crucifixion. Yeshua Himself dismissed this reasoning ([Matthew 5:17-19](#)). Although such assumptions about when God's Torah came into effect lack biblical proof, they do raise an important issue for us to consider: the continuity of God's Torah.

### The nature of God's Torah

The way God's fundamental Torah regulating human relationships is treated in Genesis remains consistent with the apostle Paul's statement that "the Torah is spiritual" ([Romans 7:14](#)). The spiritual principles upon which all God's instructions are based have always existed. Just as God is eternal ([Deuteronomy 33:27](#); [Malachi 3:6](#); [Hebrews 13:8](#)), so are the principles that reflect His character and nature. God's Torah is based on His unchanging character, not dependent on events and attitudes prevalent in human history.

Of course, at some point we *learn* of God's Torah, but that does not mean God's Torah *did not exist* before we understood it. Some reason that Adam and Eve could eat any animal, although Noah couldn't, or that it was acceptable to eat unclean animals up until the time of Noah or that Noah, in spite of the distinctions made by God, was free to eat whatever he wanted because God had revealed no specific instructions that expressly forbade him from doing so.

Such reasoning is flawed. It overlooks the permanent nature of the spiritual principles that form the basis for the instruction God has given mankind.

The Bible, from beginning to end, is a book about Torah. However, it is not written as a purely legal book. The word *law* (Hebrew *torah*) encompasses "direction" and "instruction"-a concept much broader than merely a legal code. God's laws existed before the Bible.

The Bible is largely a book about relationships, specifically how people in the past related to God and how we should relate to Him. God's Torah-His direction and instruction for people-provides the guidelines for developing a relationship with Him that leads to eternal life ([John 17:2-3](#)).

However, keeping the Torah doesn't save us; our faith-which God gives us and which enables our relationship with Him-does ([Luke 7:50](#); [Ephesians 2:8](#); [Romans 12:3](#)). Through time, as our relationship with God develops, we learn more about what He expects of us-the thoughts and actions acceptable under His Torah-and begin doing those things ([Matthew 7:21](#); [John 14:15](#); [Revelation 14:12](#)).

When we understand the spiritual principles that are the basis for God's Torah, we don't look for loopholes in His law to avoid doing what He commands. When we enjoy a loving relationship with Him, we keep His commandments ([1 John 5:2](#)). As the apostle John makes clear: "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (verse 3). These commandments-including the food laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14-exist for our benefit.

Abraham, called the friend of God ([James 2:23](#)) and the father of all those who believe ([Romans 4:11](#)), was one who understood and kept God's Torah. God described him as a person who "obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws" ([Genesis 26:5](#)). His attitude was one of trustful faith coupled with sincere obedience. Consequently, Abraham, who lived long before the Old Covenant with Israel was established, will receive salvation, the reward "of those who diligently seek Him" ([Hebrews 11:6, 8-16](#)).

### [Did something in the Torah change?](#)

Let's note one additional consideration regarding the nature of God's Torah. Some will argue that all of God's Torah is temporary because of obvious changes from Old Covenant times concerning the laws of sacrifice and circumcision. This argument is rooted in confusion over the use of the word *law*.

The Bible clarifies this confusion as an issue of *ministries* or *administrations*. Paul, who wrote of God's "spiritual" law ([Romans 7:14](#)), also wrote of "differences of *ministries* [*administrations*, King James Version] but the same Lord" ([1 Corinthians 12:5](#)) and of the "*administrations*" God has appointed

(verse 28). Paul also wrote of the differences between the Old Covenant ministry or administration compared to that of the New (2 Corinthians 3).

These administrative changes, however, are not to be confused with God's Torah itself, which Yeshua said would not cease to exist "till heaven and earth pass away" ([Matthew 5:18](#)).

### Codifying previously revealed Torah

When God began working with ancient Israel, He was not formulating and announcing His Torah for the first time; He was restating it for a group of people who had spent several generations as slaves in Egypt ([Exodus 12:41](#)). Under those circumstances they probably had not remembered God's Torah, much less obeyed it. Thus, much time was spent codifying God's Torah for the new nation.

As the Israelites left Egypt, God began instructing them about His Holy Days ([Exodus 5:1](#); [12:1-51](#)). As they journeyed to Sinai, God instructed them to rest on His weekly Sabbath day ([Exodus 16:23](#)), reinforcing that lesson by miraculously sending a larger portion of manna on the sixth day and none at all on the seventh (verses 25-29). When some among the Israelites ignored God's instruction and looked for manna on the Sabbath, God rebuked them: "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?" (verse 28).

This was before God revealed observing His Sabbath as one of the Ten Commandments, which was some time after the Israelites left Egypt, when they came to the Wilderness of Sinai ([Exodus 19:1](#)). There God spoke the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai ([Exodus 20](#)). After this God gave His judgments-rulings on practical ways for the Israelites to apply His law-and further instructions on the weekly Sabbath and Holy Days ([Exodus 21-23](#)). If His people would obey, God promised to bless them physically by taking away sickness and providing them security within their new land ([Exodus 23:25-33](#)).

### The purpose of the distinction

In Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 we find lists of clean and unclean animals. Both chapters give the same reason for God's instruction on clean and unclean meats. In Leviticus 11 God says not to eat of the unclean things to "**be holy**" (verses 44-45). In Deuteronomy 14 Israel was told not to eat "any detestable thing" (verse 3), "for you are a holy people to the LORD your God" (verses 2, 21). To be holy means to be set apart.

An examination of these chapters reveals no mention of distinguishing between clean and unclean animals specifically for health's sake. Although the larger context of Leviticus and Deuteronomy includes issues of health and hygiene, the specific purpose God gave for avoiding unclean meats is *holiness*. He wants us to be holy. In God's sight, refraining from eating unclean animals is an identifying sign of the holiness of those who have been set apart through a relationship with Him.

Holiness is reflected in the thoughts and actions of those set apart through a relationship with God. God requires holy conduct—a way of life distinctly different from that of the rest of the world. Holiness in conduct concerns attitudes toward God, others and self resulting in actions that avoid causing pain and suffering and build lasting beneficial relationships. Of course, being holy means much more than merely avoiding unclean meats. Messiah spoke of the "weightier matters of the law" such as judgment, mercy and faith ([Matthew 23:23](#)).

God gave His Torah to physical people who are cursed when they do not follow those laws. Breaking the Torah against adultery, for example, can destroy a marriage and family. Deuteronomy 28 records numerous calamities that befell the Israelites when they failed to obey the Torah of God. But He said he would establish them as a holy people if they would keep His commandments (verse 9).

God's continuing desire for His people to be holy has remained constant. As Paul said, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be *holy* and *without blame* before Him in love" ([Ephesians 1:4](#)).

Heeding to God's instruction in Leviticus 11 on unclean meats, the apostle Peter admonished Messianic Believers, under the New Covenant, to live "as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is *holy*, you also be *holy* in all your *conduct*, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy' " ([1 Peter 1:14-16](#)).

Of course, Peter had in mind a far wider range of godly behavior than just refraining from unclean meat. So did Paul when he reminded the Corinthians of God's instruction: "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty" ([2 Corinthians 6:17-18](#)).

[Change in administration](#)

When Yeshua came to earth to die for mankind's sins and become our High Priest, His *ministry* replaced the Levitical *priesthood*, which had functioned from the time of Moses ([Hebrews 7:11-14](#)). Yeshua is our "surety of a better covenant" (verse 22), called the New Covenant ([Hebrews 8:8, 13](#)), which is "established on better promises" (verse 6).

Here God's Torah is not voided. Instead, it becomes part of the mind and is written on the heart of those who accept this covenant (verse 10). Again, Yeshua said He didn't come to abolish the Torah ([Matthew 5:17-19](#)). The New Covenant, of which Jesus is our High Priest, contains "better promises" ([Hebrews 8:6](#)), not better Torah. The better promises include eternal life as well as the promise of God's Spirit, which empowers us to uphold God's Torah ([Romans 8:4](#)).

Notice Paul's summing up of this principle: "But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to *holiness*, and the end, *everlasting life*. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is *eternal life* in Messiah Yeshua our Lord" ([Romans 6:22-23](#)). Living a righteous life now means that the Messianic Believer adheres to all of God's instruction about what makes us holy.

When an administrative change was made from the Levitical priesthood to the ministry of Messiah Yeshua, the Torah or administrative principles unique to the Levites no longer applied in the same way. As [Hebrews 7:12](#) puts it: "For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the Torah." The law—specifically the law concerning who could be a priest (verses 13-14)—was changed, not rendered invalid. God's Torah—which existed before the Levitical priesthood—continues.

The enduring practice of the apostles and early Messianic Believers was to continue to follow the distinctions God gave regarding clean and unclean meats ([Acts 10:14](#)).

Some people suppose this was merely a case of culture or tradition. Yet, of prophetic fulfillments yet to come, the Bible speaks of unclean animals ([Revelation 18:2](#)) and punishment of those who disobey Him in this matter ([Isaiah 66:15-17](#)). The Bible continues to identify obedience to the Torah of clean and unclean food as an identifying sign of God's people.

Being different from the rest of society by following God's Torah is no cause for embarrassment. Of God's called-out people, Peter writes that "you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people,

that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). God describes His chosen people as being called to holiness!

### Underlying purpose of God's Torah

God's Torah is given to us for our good. It defines the way to be holy, set apart to and by God. It teaches us God's standards, how to distinguish right from wrong, the holy from the common and ordinary. It defines our consecration, separation and devotion to God. It helps us remain separate, not from the world but from the world's wickedness.

As we apply God's Torah, it encourages us to think differently, to think like God thinks. It alters our perceptions. For example, keeping God's Sabbaths alters our understanding and use of time. Faithfully following God's Torah of tithing alters our perception and use of other physical resources. In the same way, obedience to God's Torah of clean and unclean meats alters our view and value of everything we allow into our bodies.

Even though some of God's Torah may seem unusual, and we may not always fully grasp it's purpose, it helps us avoid physical, moral and spiritual contamination. The Word of God provides a pattern for physically, spiritually and morally healthy living. God's principles of health and cleanliness are for our lasting good, in this life as well as the life to come.

Following God's Torah defining clean and unclean remains an identifying sign of holiness for His people.