

one who was permitted a limited status in the Jerusalem center of worship.

Returning home, by divine appointment he encountered Philip as he puzzled over one of the prophecies of Isaiah. Philip interpreted the prophecy for him, after which he became the first non-Jewish person whose baptism is recorded in the inspired history of the Church (though there's no record of when he received the laying on of hands and the Holy Spirit).

This went very much against the grain for the Jews of the first century, who thought of themselves as the only

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nation God was working with. So, prior to the conversion of the entire household of the Roman centurion Cornelius in Acts 10:17-48, the apostle Peter had to receive a lesson about God's purpose in calling gentiles. The purpose of Peter's vision is clear in this context.

### **Peter's vision**

In Acts 10:9-16, Peter received a vision from God in which he saw a sheet coming down out of heaven that contained "all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air" (verse 12). Note that it was a mixture, with probably some clean animals and some unclean.

A voice from God then exhorted Peter to "kill and eat" (verse 13), to which Peter objected that he had never eaten anything "common" (*koinos* in Greek) or "unclean" (*akathartos* in Greek). The first word refers to animals that had not been bled appropriately or had died of themselves. The second is the

word used to refer to the unclean animals in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

The voice then told him, "What God has cleansed you must not call common" (verse 15). But what was it that God had cleansed: meats hitherto unacceptable for human consumption? Or human beings hitherto unacceptable by the Jews for fellowship?

The key to understanding this event is in verse 28, where Peter explains: "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I *should not call any man common or unclean*" (verse 28, emphasis added). This was unlawful according to Jewish tradition, not Scripture.

Note the next events after Peter's vision were his encounter with the three men whom the gentile Cornelius had sent to Peter, followed by his visit with Cornelius and his household and their conversion and baptism.

In Acts 11 Peter was called into question by "those of the circumcision" (verse 2), that is, circumcised Jewish Christians, because of his table fellowship with gentiles. In his defense he rehearsed the story of the vision and the gentiles receiving God's Spirit (verses 4-17). Notice their surprised reaction in verse 18: "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life."

One can almost hear the astonishment in that declaration. The unthinkable had happened: non-Jews were now being incorporated into the plan of God. But this, of course, was precisely the message of Peter's vision, which had nothing to do with eating food, and everything to do with acceptance of people who, according to Jewish scruples, had been regarded as unclean.

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# *Life Hope & Truth*

## **Did Jesus Purify Unclean Meats in Mark 7?**

*What was Jesus talking about when He said nothing from outside a man can defile him? What about some translations of this passage that say Jesus declared all foods clean?*

A controversy took place between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning defilement and purity. This is recorded in Mark 7:1-23 and Matthew 15:1-20. In writing about this controversy, Mark recorded a statement some claim gives permission for New Testament Christians to eat foods labeled "unclean" in the Old Testament. Is this true?

### **The context: ritual hand washing**

Let's note the context. Mark 7:1-4 tells us about the customs of the Pharisees concerning hand washing. Verses 3 and 4 state that "the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash."

Later in the same chapter, Jesus indicts them for adopting traditions that violate the intent of commandments of God (verses 9-13). Note that the subject is the *traditions* of the religious leaders, not the validity of the commandments of God or of laws given in the Old Testament. By the time of Christ, the religious leaders had accumulated a huge body of

traditions that went beyond the requirements of the Bible. In addition to only eating foods considered “clean” in God’s law (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14), these leaders were insisting that a special method of washing one’s hands prior to eating was also required.

In verse 15, Jesus declared, “There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man.” A list of these things is in verses 21-22, including adultery, murder, covetousness, deceit, blasphemy, pride and foolishness. These things defile us, Jesus said, but eating with unwashed hands does not defile us spiritually (Matthew 15:20).

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*The overall teaching here is to beware of what comes out of the mind.*

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The point here is that what goes through the mind defiles, not what goes through the stomach. Mind dirt is worse than stomach dirt.

### **Alternate translations**

In that context, what is being said in Mark 7:18-19? Jesus asked, “Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?”

The New King James Version has a footnote noting that a different type of Greek text “ends quotation with *eliminated*, setting off the final clause as Mark’s comment that Jesus has declared all foods clean.”

The New International Version follows this alternate reading for verse 19: “For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean.’)” Most of the modern translations read similarly.

So which is it? Does this scripture declare that the action of the digestive system cleanses physical impuri-

ties? Or does it tell us that Jesus here cleansed hitherto unclean foods, and that we may eat pork, shellfish and other meats labeled unclean in the Old Testament?

The key is in the Greek text of this passage, where there is a variant reading. The word translated “purifying” is a participle. A participle in Greek has gender and number. In one Greek text the gender of this participle is neuter, indicating that it is the action of the stomach that cleanses all foods. In another Greek text the participle is masculine, suggesting that Jesus cleansed all foods. The difference is small in the Greek, involving just one vowel, but the doctrinal impact is great.

### **The context clarifies**

Again, let’s go back to the context. Jesus is discussing Pharisaic traditions, not Old Testament laws (Mark 7:4, 8-9, 13). Further, the overall teaching here is to beware of what comes out of the mind, since that really can cause troubles and defile us (verses 20-23), while what enters the stomach is insignificant by comparison. Should a small speck of dirt enter the body because of unwashed hands, it is eliminated through the digestive tract.

Further evidence that this is about mental impurity contrasted with digestive impurity is found in the parallel passage in Matthew 15:16-20, which reads: “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

So we see that Mark 7:19 is not about Jesus cleansing all foods, but about the action of the digestive system cleansing physical impurities. The mind is defiled by impurity, while the digestive tract can easily eliminate a small speck of dirt. The main point is that we must cleanse our hearts and minds of impure thoughts.

# **Did Peter’s Vision in Acts 10 Abolish the Clean and Unclean Laws?**

*In a vision Peter was told, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” But what did God cleanse?*

The Old Testament provides listings of animals designated as “clean” and animals designated as “unclean” and therefore unfit for human consumption. These passages, in Leviticus 11:1-47 and Deuteronomy 14:3-20, give the criteria for clean quadrupeds and marine life, as well as lists of birds designated clean and unclean. These laws prohibit the consumption of pork, as well as mollusks and crustaceans, commonly called “shellfish.”

Some claim that Peter’s vision in Acts 10 abolishes this law. Is this claim true?

### **The context of Acts 10**

Before examining the specifics of Peter’s vision, let’s note the context surrounding it. Let’s look in the book of Acts at the development of the Church as it began to shift from a body of exclusively Jewish believers to a body that included non-Jews as well as Jews.

It seems the first instance of the calling of a non-Jew was that of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-39. This prominent man from the royal court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, traveled some distance to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. He was likely not Jewish, but rather a God-fearing gentile,