

Do You Really Want to Eat That?

Why did God prohibit eating certain foods?
Should you follow those same instructions today?

By Douglas S. Winnail

The dietary laws about “clean” and “unclean” meats are among the most unique yet puzzling instructions found in the Bible. For thousands of years these laws have been a striking mark of identity separating God’s people from the world (Leviticus 20:25–26). Consequently, for centuries, these same instructions have been a source of controversy and confusion among various religious groups who all claim to get their beliefs from the same book—the Bible.

Some have felt that “these laws express God’s will” and as such are wise, reasonable, and beneficial dietary regulations revealing “God’s care for the health of His people” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “Introduction To Leviticus,” 1990). This public health focus of those dietary laws was “espoused by Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages in Spain and other notable scholars” (*Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1980).

However, other theologians have openly referred to the Leviticus dietary guidelines as meaningless, repulsive, arbitrary and irrational ideas that originated in primitive superstitions—not in the mind of God. These theologians have confidently asserted: there are *no logical explanations* for many of the guidelines—that health was definitely *not* their purpose; that it is a waste of time for Christians to study this section of Scripture. They have asked, “What has all this [the dietary laws] to do with religion?” (*Interpreter’s Bible*, “Leviticus 11–15,” 1953). Some have even stated, “The texts [Scriptures] do not claim that health is a factor [in the dietary laws], though possibly hygiene was a by-product” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 1990, p. 526).

Yet God said His laws were for our good, prolonging our lives (Deuteronomy 5:29, 33; 10:13). His dietary ordinances were not arbitrary. Their purpose was to benefit us. That being so, why would God later inspire a New Testament that *supposedly* shows that “Christ repealed all the Leviticus regulations on unclean meats and practices” (*Illustrated Bible Dictionary*)? Why would

an all-wise Creator function in such a contradictory manner?

If you have ever pondered such questions, perhaps it’s time you really looked into the subject to determine for yourself what the *real truth* of the matter is. The God of the Bible challenges you to “prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21 KJV). The answers could change your life and positively impact your health!

The Scriptures reveal several important reasons for the dietary laws. In Exodus we learn that God chose the nation of Israel for a *special purpose* (Exodus 19:5–6). Interestingly, the dietary laws were designed to make the Israelites distinct from other nations. Why? God told Moses, “I am the LORD your God, who has *separated* you from the peoples. You shall therefore distinguish between clean beasts and unclean.... And you shall be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy, and have *separated* you from the peoples, that you should be Mine” (Leviticus 20:24–26).

God chose Israel for the purpose of becoming a *model nation*—a light and example to the world. “Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in *all this law* which I set before you this day?” (Deuteronomy 4:6–8).

God separated Israel from other nations so the results of His laws could be clearly seen by the other peoples who would be attracted to Him by the wonderful benefits provided by His righteous ways. “My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands; for *length* of days and *long life* and peace they will add to you” (Proverbs 3:1–2). God’s intention was that other nations would want to follow the example of the Israelites when they saw the wisdom and happiness of

living according to God's instructions—which would include *physical well-being* and *freedom from disease* (Deuteronomy 4:40; 7:12–15)!

The dietary laws were also designed to promote wise management and efficient utilization of the environmental resources that God entrusted to mankind. The instructions about “clean” and “unclean” foods are important in fulfilling the commission given in Genesis 1:28 and 2:15 to “tend and keep” the earth. To rightfully understand the dietary laws, they must be seen in the context of God's purpose for all humanity.

Stay ON the Grass!

Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are the primary passages in the Bible that discuss this subject. These chapters give very specific information summarized in simple, easy-to-understand principles. As one commentary observed, “These were rule-of-thumb laws that God gave in His wisdom to a people who could not know the reason for the provision” (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 569). Today, however, the discoveries of modern science are revealing just how practical and important these laws really are.

Beginning in Leviticus 11:1–3, we read that “the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying... ‘These are the animals which you may eat among all the beasts’ that are on the earth... whatever *divides the hoof* having cloven hooves and *chewing the cud*.” This describes plant-eating mammals (herbivores) classified as ruminants. A ruminant is “the name given to a *grazing* animal that has a highly specialized digestive system and splits the hoof” (*World Book Encyclopedia*, 1995).

These animals have four-chambered stomachs that convert grasses that are *inedible* to humans and other animals into nutritious, high quality protein products (meat and milk) that people can then use for food. Examples of such clean animals would be all cattle, sheep, goats, deer, bison, moose, antelope, gazelles, caribou and giraffes. They are all herbivores that obtain their food by grazing or browsing on grasses and other plants.

From the standpoint of wise environmental management, these guidelines make a lot of sense. Vast areas of the globe are covered by rangelands (savannas, veldts, pampas), which are often called marginal lands because they do not have enough rainfall to support the production of food crops like corn or wheat. “The only way millions of acres of rangeland can be used for human benefit is *via ruminants*” (*Dairy Council Digest*, Jan.–Feb. 1973). Grass-fed animals also produce meat that has a lower fat content than grain-fed animals—which we now realize is a health benefit. Raising meat animals on grass and other plants is also much more economical.

The clean animals that God permitted His model nation to eat—designated simply by split hooves and

cud-chewing—were *designed* to produce nutritious food in an economical and ecologically sound manner. These guidelines were given long before the sciences of ecology, economics and nutrition were ever heard of. This was one of the benefits that God wanted the world to see through the example of the nation of Israel.

Hold the Bacon

The dietary laws regarding cud-chewing beasts also *prohibit* the consumption of all carnivorous animals and omnivorous animals for very logical reasons. God created clean animals to provide food and by-products for human use. He created animals unsuitable for human consumption for *other purposes*. Carnivores, as beasts of prey, play an important role in controlling the populations of other animals. As an example, wolves and mountain lions, which feed on herds of deer, control not only numbers, but also help maintain the health of the herd by culling out older, sick or infirm animals. That's one reason we shouldn't eat carnivores. They may eat sick animals and transmit diseases to humans.

The pig or swine is specifically mentioned as being unclean and not permitted as human food (Leviticus 11:7–8; Deuteronomy 14:8). While some theologians have stated, “We do not know why the swine was forbidden” (*Interpreter's Bible*), other writers find numerous logical reasons related to ecology, economics, nutrition and public health.

In the wild, swine are often nocturnal animals that root for food. Their nighttime feeding habits should have kept their contact with humans at a minimum. Domesticated pigs, however, have been used for centuries as *scavengers* around human settlements. Having an omnivorous animal around that could put on weight rapidly by eating anything from garbage to dead animals and human wastes—and that could later be slaughtered and used for food—has seemed like a pretty good arrangement to many peoples. But is it?

Today, domesticated hogs “are fed a diet composed mainly of corn and grain” (*New Standard Encyclopedia*, 1993). However, as non-ruminants with digestive tracts similar to that of humans, pigs are unable to survive on grasses and thus have been *ecological competitors* with humans for the same types of food grains (such as wheat, corn and barley). In America about 20 percent of the corn harvested is fed to hogs.

Basically, pigs enjoy eating the same types of food that people eat. This is not a wise use of resources in a world where an exploding human population is outstripping our capacity to produce food. Probably this is another reason why God does not want us to eat pigs. He foresaw that great herds of hogs would take life-sustaining grain out of the mouths of poor people!

Jesus Christ Himself did not feel it inappropriate to allow an incident that caused the destruction of a commercially raised herd of pigs! “Now a herd of many swine was feeding there on the mountain. And they [demons] begged Him that He would permit them to enter them. And He *permitted* them. Then the demons went out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd ran violently down the steep place into the lake and drowned” (Luke 8:32–33). Would Jesus have allowed the destruction of someone’s valuable property, *without cause*, through carelessness or accident?

Let Us Not Eat Worms!

One of the major diseases transmitted by swine and other unclean animals is *trichinosis*. It is caused by a small parasitic roundworm that gets into the muscle tissue of animals and humans. The disease has a global distribution and affects about 1 percent of the world’s population—nearly 60 million people (Gerald Tortora, *Microbiology*, 5th ed., 1995). This is not surprising considering that “people throughout the world eat more pork than any other kind of meat” (*World Book Encyclopedia*, 1995). Americans consume about 60 pounds (30 kilograms) per person each year. It should be noted, however, that *many* carnivorous and omnivorous animals are infected with the parasite *Trichinella spiralis*. Bear meat, walrus and wild pigs have been significant sources of infections in humans Baron, *Medical Microbiology*, 1993). The list could also include squirrels, rats, cats, dogs, rab-

bits, foxes, horse meat and marine mammals (Nestor, *Microbiology* 1995; Benenson, *Control of Communicable Diseases in Man*, 12th ed., 1975). It is hardly an accident or coincidence that God prohibited the consumption of these animals by His divinely given dietary laws.

Tapeworms, which afflict about 3 percent of the world’s population (about 180 million), are another serious health problem encountered when pork is eaten (Tortora). While beef and fish can also contain tapeworms that will colonize the human digestive tract and cause discomfort, the pork tapeworm is much more dangerous. The larva of the pork parasite, once inside the human intestine, can migrate through the tissues to the heart, eyes and brain—and can eventually cause death (Morello, *Microbiology in Patient Care*, 5th ed., 1994). With reference to pork tapeworm disease, “the highest rates of infection are seen in countries with lower levels of hygiene and where pork is a major part of the diet, such as Mexico, Latin America, Spain, Portugal, Africa, India, southeast Asia, and China” (Baron, *Medical Microbiology*, 1994).

Although the general advice for avoiding parasitic infections from pork and other unclean animals is to adequately cook the meat, the *most effective* way to avoid these diseases is to *avoid eating unclean animals* that do not have cloven hooves and do not chew the cud—as God instructed Moses and the Israelites 3,500 years ago. If only this portion of the biblical dietary code were applied today, the *global burden of parasitic disease* could be dramatically reduced within a generation!

Don’t Eat the Cleanup Crew

By Douglas S. Winnail

Why did God prohibit eating certain foods? Was the Creator being capricious? Why should He be concerned? Is there a rational, logical basis for the Scriptures dealing with which foods are fit for human consumption?

After dealing with edible land animals, the second major set of divine dietary instructions concerned aquatic creatures. In Leviticus we are instructed: “These you may eat of all that are in the water: whatever in the water has *fins and scales*, whether in the seas or in the rivers—that you may eat.... Whatever in the water *does not have fins or scales—that shall be an abomination to you*” (11:9, 12).

Numerous and sometimes fanciful reasons have been proposed for these guidelines. While some Bible scholars recognize that the consumption of unclean organisms can be harmful (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 1990), others suggest that organisms without fins and scales resembled

snakes and thus are abhorrent to eat (*Interpreter’s Bible*, 1953). One source stated that scripturally “unclean,” bottom-dwelling organisms were symbolic of living in sin and pollution, and that fins were symbolic of prayers that could lift us out of such situations (*The Bible Commentary*, Scribner, 1871). The discoveries of science, however, reveal in greater detail the wisdom and benefits of God’s plain instructions about appropriate food.

Biblically “clean fish” are generally free swimming in bodies of water. Most “unclean” fish are either *bottom dwellers* or *predatory scavengers*. The prohibition against eating scaleless fish protects against the consumption of fish that produce poisonous substances in their bodies. A U.S. Navy manual comments, “All the important fish with poisonous flesh... *lack ordinary scales*.... Instead, these poisonous fish are covered with bristles or spiny scales, strong sharp thorns, or spines, or are encased in a bony box-like covering. Some have

naked skin, that is, no spines or scales” (*Survival on land and Sea*, 1944).

Many sea creatures listed as venomous (four sharks, 58 stingrays, 47 catfish, 57 scorpion fish, 15 toadfish, etc.) do not have true scales (Caras, *Venomous Animals of the World*, 1974). Eels—nocturnal predatory scavengers that eat “almost any kind of food, dead or alive”—would also be considered unclean (*International Wildlife Encyclopedia*, 1990). Eel blood contains a toxic substance “which can be dangerous if it comes “into contact with eyes or another mucous membrane” (*Encyclopedia of Aquatic Life*, 1988).

The biblical guidelines were designed to point people to the safest kinds of fish to eat. However, care must be taken—even clean fish should be adequately cooked before eaten. Raw fish (such as sushi or sashimi) or poorly cooked fish can transmit several kinds of parasitic tapeworms and flukes (Black, *Microbiology*, 1993).

A Different Purpose

Shellfish, lacking both fins and scales, are clearly excluded by the biblical dietary laws. But why would lobsters, crabs, crayfish and shrimp, which are considered delicacies in many parts of the world, be prohibited? The answer lies in understanding the role they were designed to play in nature.

Lobsters are “nocturnal” foragers (*Encyclopedia Americana*, 1993). They are “bottom walkers” and “predatory scavengers” (*Encyclopedia of Aquatic Life*) that “scavenge for dead animals” and other bottom-dwelling organisms and debris (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1995). They are usually caught in lobster pots “baited with dead fish.” Lobsters have long antennae and tiny hair-like sensors all over their bodies “that can detect specific chemical molecules in the environment (released by decaying organisms), which can help the lobster identify and locate food”—even in the dark (*New Standard Encyclopedia*, 1993)! Lobsters have been observed to bury a dead fish and then dig it up later, at intervals, to eat a bit more of it (*International Wildlife Encyclopedia*).

Crabs are referred to as “professional garbage hunters” and as “scavengers” that eat almost anything. The edible crab *prefers dead fish*, but will eat any carrion [dead, putrefying flesh” (*International Wildlife Encyclopedia*). Common shrimp, a small, delicate relative of crabs and lobsters, live by day in the mud or sandy bottoms of bays and estuaries all over the world. However, they become active at night as predatory scavengers and are “bottom dwelling detritus feeders [eating dead and decaying matter” (*Encyclopedia of Aquatic Life*).

These organisms were all created for a very important ecological purpose. They are, in essence, the “garbage collectors” or the “cleanup crew” for the bottoms of lakes, rivers, beaches, bays and oceans. They

were *not intended* to be food for human beings. That is also why the consumption of raw, pickled or undercooked crabs, crayfish, snails and shrimp carries a significant risk of parasitic infections like liver flukes, which infect up to 80 percent of some rural populations in Southeast Asia (Black).

Danger On the Half Shell

There are also important and logical reasons why God created and then clearly labeled clams, oysters, mussels and scallops as unclean and inappropriate for human consumption. These creatures are found in lakes, streams and coastal areas around the world where they perform specialized roles. As stationary filter-feeding mollusks, they pump large amounts of water over their mucus-covered gills, trapping tiny pieces of food (silt, plant debris, bacteria, viruses) which they then eat (*Encyclopedia Americana*, “Mollusks”). As a result, “mussels and other animals feeding on microscopic particles are the *ultimate scavengers* of the sea” (*International Wildlife Encyclopedia*). Filter-feeding organisms are the “vacuum cleaners” for aquatic environments. Their role is to purify the water.

Once you understand the purpose for which God created shellfish, the reason they are *unclean* should become obvious. Just as you would be reluctant to make a meal out of the contents of your vacuum cleaner bag or the material that collects on your furnace filter or in your septic tank, the decision to eat shellfish should also be considered carefully! Because their method of feeding is “*ideal* for concentrating bacteria in sewage,” in addition to collecting and concentrating pathogenic viruses, heavy metals and nerve toxins produced by plankton, these shellfish present a serious health hazard to consumers (*International Wildlife Encyclopedia*, Black).

How serious is the threat of disease? The American Food and Drug Administration has stated that “raw oysters, clams and mussels—so savored by gourmets—account for 85 percent of all the illnesses caused by eating seafood” (*FDA Consumer*, June 1991). Outbreaks of cholera, typhoid, hepatitis A, Norwalk virus, salmonella and paralytic shellfish poisoning are just some of the health problems frequently linked to the consumption of these mollusks (*U. C. Berkeley Wellness Letter* Feb. 1994).

Notices have been published that pregnant women, the elderly and “individuals with immune systems weakened by certain diseases (cancer, diabetes and AIDS) should... avoid eating or handling uncooked shellfish” (*Consumer Research*, July 1993). These dangerous and potentially life-threatening situations can be avoided by understanding and following the biblical dietary laws that prohibit eating marine organisms that lack fins and scales.

Birds to Bugs

The final groups of organisms covered by the biblical code are birds, insects and reptiles. Essentially all the excluded fowl are either *birds of prey* or *scavengers* like vultures and seagulls (Leviticus 11:13–19; *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, 1980). Carnivorous birds are important in controlling populations of other animals. Their dietary habits of eating the flesh and blood of their prey—carrion—make these birds potential agents for transmitting disease. Predatory fish-eating birds tend to accumulate high levels of toxic chemicals in their bodies. Most of these birds are not important food sources for humans.

Reptiles are also among the animals listed as unclean for human food (Leviticus 11:29–30; 42–43). Regarding Insects, only those from the locust/grasshopper family are permissible as food (vv. 21–23). These creatures are distinguished by having “strong hind legs for springing” (*Expositor’s Bible Dictionary*) and have been used, historically, as a food source in the Middle East.

Dietary Laws Abolished?

The biblical dietary laws are simple, rational, practical and profound. Long before human beings knew the details of disease-causing microorganisms, life cycles of parasites or global ecology, God revealed powerful principles that would protect the environment, provide safe, healthful food and prevent the spread of disease for anyone who would be willing to follow these instructions. The intent and benefits of these biblical guidelines have been acknowledged periodically in history. One scholar observed recently that “most of the laws can be clearly seen to tend toward public health... the laws were wonderfully fashioned by God for the general health of the nation” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 1990, pp. 529, 569).

But if these laws are so logical and beneficial to mankind, where did the idea come from that they have been abolished? Why do Bible-believing Christians seem to be in the forefront of promoting this notion? The answer is found in *interpretations* that are *read into* scriptures found in Mark 7 and Acts 10. Studying the “evidence” is instructive.

In Mark 7, Jesus addressed a question about why His disciples ate without washing their hands according to ceremonial traditions followed by the Pharisees. Some Bible translations add *words* to Jesus’ answer in verse 19, suggesting that He did away with the dietary laws. However, these added words *are not found* in the preserved Greek texts. The translators put words into Jesus’ mouth that He did not say. Christ’s point was that orally ingested dirt does not *spiritually* defile a person since it does not

enter the heart to influence attitudes (vv. 18–23). The dirt passes through the digestive tract and is eliminated. The subject of clean and unclean meats and the dietary laws are *not being discussed* in this chapter (or in Matthew 15:10–20, which discusses the same event. Read these events for yourself in several different translations).

In Acts 10, Peter is given a vision to help him understand God’s future plans for the growth of the Church. He was shown a group of unclean animals and told three times to eat. Each time he *adamantly declined* because he believed it was *wrong* (vv. 13–16). Now remember, this was the Peter who supposedly heard Jesus abolish the dietary laws in Mark 7 (notice v. 2) and who was trained by Christ for three-and-one-half years—and yet he was *still* under the clear impression that eating unclean meats was *wrong!* He puzzled over the meaning of the vision (Acts 10:17) until three Gentile men came knocking at his door with a request to hear the Gospel explained (vv. 21–27). Normally Peter would not have associated with these men who were outside of the covenant community, because the Jews considered the Gentiles to be “unclean.”

When Peter put the pieces of this little puzzle together *he concluded*: “God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean” (v. 28). He perceived that God intended the Gospel to go also to the Gentiles and that they were to come into the Church on equal footing with anyone coming from a Jewish background. Peter does not conclude in this chapter, or anywhere else in the New Testament, that the dietary laws were to be abolished. The so-called evidence is *simply not there!* Neither Jesus Christ nor Peter abolished these God-given guidelines.

Ulterior Motives?

If the evidence for Christ and the Apostles abolishing the dietary laws is so weak—in fact, is totally non-existent—where did this idea originate that has circulated so widely through the Christian community? The clues are to be found in the social, political and religious factors that influenced church doctrines of the second century AD (cf. Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 1977, chap. 2).

It is generally acknowledged that the early Christians continued to observe many of the so-called laws of Moses—actually the clear teachings of the Bible (cf. Luke 4:16; Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chap. 15). However, as more Gentiles came into the Church they had to contend with strong anti-Jewish feelings that surged through the Roman Empire at that time. As a result of the attacks and ridicule heaped on Jewish customs by Latin and Greek authors; “many Christians severed their ties with Judaism” (Bacchiocchi, p. 185).

Many Gentile Christians attempted to “radically differentiate” themselves from anything that appeared to be Jewish. They wanted to appear as distinct and separate from the Jews. In their attempts to create a new identity they began to substitute new customs (many borrowed from the surrounding pagan culture) for their original biblical (so-called Jewish) practices (Bacchiocchi, chap. 2; Durant, *Caesar and Christ*). This included replacing the Sabbath with Sunday, the Passover with Easter and, in all probability, abolishing the dietary laws. As Dr. Bacchiocchi points out, early “Christian” writers developed some very novel ways of interpreting Scripture in an attempt to establish a biblical foundation for their new practices. They also sought to undermine the value of the Jewish practices described in the Bible (p. 183).

From Here to Eternity

One of the unfortunate consequences of the aversion to the dietary laws, spawned in the turmoil of the second century AD, has been that millions of people have suffered and died of diseases they contracted by eating food that God never intended people to eat.

Somehow, the plain, simple statement in the Bible that Satan would deceive the whole world (Revelation 12:9) has been overlooked or conveniently forgotten. This deception has included the belief that theological, rational and beneficial instructions about diet, which

God gave to Israel so it could become a model nation for the rest of the world, have been abolished and are no longer valid.

This situation, however, is going to change. When Jesus Christ returns to this earth there is going to be a “restitution of all things” (Acts 3:20–21), including the dietary laws found in the Bible. Prophecies in Isaiah 65:1–10 and 66:15–20 reveal that the returning Savior of mankind is going to correct mistaken notions that He or anyone else has done away with these beneficial laws. People will be given an opportunity to learn why God established His laws and to experience the benefits of living in harmony with these divinely inspired principles (Isaiah 2:2–3). The Bible also indicates that when this restoration occurs it is going to last as long as physical beings need guidelines to regulate physical behavior (9:6–7)!

Fortunately, you do not have to wait for the Second Coming of Christ to begin following the instructions of your Creator. You can start today. Individuals whose minds have been opened to the real meaning of the Scriptures are going to have the opportunity to share these life-preserving principles with all humanity (Isaiah 30:20–21).

Those who develop a working knowledge of the applications and benefits of God’s way of life are going to reign with Jesus Christ in the Kingdom of God on this earth (Revelation 11:15; Daniel 2:44). The dietary laws are part of God’s plan for well being. They are still applicable today, and they will be fundamental instruction for healthy living in Tomorrow’s World.