

Are the Biblical Food Laws Valid Under the New Covenant?

In respect to changing the Old Covenant food laws regarding what are clean and unclean foods for the Israelites, the question is: “Did Jesus cancel those food laws, and therefore, are New Covenant Christians exempt from those laws prohibiting foods such as pork or certain kinds of fish?”, for example. Is that what Jesus said and meant in the parallel Gospel texts of Matthew 15:15-20 and Mark 7:18-23 and in respect to the specific verse in question: Mark 7:19? Did Jesus change the food laws by the statement, “Thus He declared all foods clean” (v. 19)?

Mark 7:19 above is translated by the New American Standard Bible (NASB). The New International Version (NIV) says this: “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.” The New Living Translation (NLT) says: “By saying this, He declared that every kind of food is acceptable in God’s sight.” The English Standard Version (ESV) says: “Thus He declared all foods clean.”

Interestingly, the original King James Version (KJV) does not include any such declaration by Jesus (because the translators used different Greek manuscripts).

But notice the Amplified Bible (AMP) says this: “By this, He declared all foods ceremonially clean.” I will return to this later.

The literal Greek translation of Mark 7:19 is: “... cleansing all the foods.”

Mark 7:19 in Context

Let’s examine what Mark 7:19 says and means by understanding the context. In both Matthew 15 and Mark 7, the context reveals Jesus’ rebuke of the Pharisees and other religious leaders for condemning His disciples for **eating with unwashed hands**, thus defiling themselves according to Pharisaic law (Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:1-5). It was a ceremonial cleaning ritual prescribed by “the tradition of the elders.”

Jesus rebuked the religious authorities of His day for being “hypocrites” (Mat. 15:3- 9; Mk. 7:6-13). Jesus, therefore, clarified that foods which are eaten apart from ceremonial cleansing (washing hands) are not prohibited by God’s Law and cannot defile or make a person unclean. Thus, the Amplified Bible correctly translates Mark 7:16, taking the ceremonial context into account. Whether or not the ceremonial ritual is performed makes no difference. That is, all foods eaten with or without unclean hands go into the stomach and eventually are eliminated. Foods eaten with unclean hands, therefore, have nothing to do with defiling a person. What does defile is that which proceeds out of the mouth and out of the heart such as “evil thoughts, murders, adulteries” and so forth (see also Mark 7:20-23).

The context of both Gospel passages is specific and confined to a particular context which does not address the clean and unclean food laws laid out in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. To assume that Jesus declared all unclean foods to be permitted to eat is only to assume He actually said that. However, this assumption has no support in the immediate context of Matthew 15 and Mark 7. Indeed, such an assumption is taken out of context.

Let the Bible Interpret Itself

In addition to interpreting the Bible in its context, the second principle of interpretation is to let the Bible interpret itself. Is the prevailing assumption that all the Old Covenant food laws are now invalid consistent with other New Covenant Scripture passages?

Consider the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 14 about clean or unclean food coupled with I Corinthians 8 and 10. The historical issue of the first century church was whether or not a professing Christian should eat “things sacrificed to idols” (I Cor. 8:1).

There were pagan temples in which food (particularly meat) was dedicated to idols. The question Paul was addressing was whether it was permitted for a Christian to eat meat sacrificed to idols. On the one hand, it would not be a problem because, in reality, there “is no such thing as an idol.” More

mature Christians understood this. So, if a person's conscience was not deemed guilty because he had this knowledge, he could eat meat in a pagan temple. But for those whose weak consciences were guilty, he should not eat.

The context of Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 and 10 dealt with food sacrificed to idols and how we should be sensitive toward a weaker brother who would be offended if another Christian believer were to partake of that food.

There is also the context of Acts 10, dealing with clean and unclean food. Here Peter was given a vision (10:9-18) and commanded to eat "unholy and unclean" food described as "all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures..." which presumably referred to unlawful and forbidden animals. Notice Peter's objection: "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean" (v. 14).

Either Peter didn't remember the Lord's previous teaching that all food, clean and unclean, was now permitted (as is the common assumption today), or he understood that Jesus meant something else as previously discussed. Apparently, Peter still considered the original food laws valid.

The point of Acts 10 was not about unclean and clean foods, but an illustration that God had now declared the so-called "Gentiles" as clean. Once considered unholy and unclean by the Judeans, they were now, in Christ Jesus, declared as accepted and not to be excluded (Acts 10:28). Thus, this symbolic vision was not about God declaring unclean animals as now acceptable food. Unclean foods are still unclean.

Conclusion

There is nothing in the New Testament that changed the Old Testament food laws. They are still valid and to be observed. God did not create every animal for the purpose of food for us. Some were created as scavengers to clean up the planet.

In this regard, consider the distinction between clean and unclean animals from a good health practice perspective. Pork products contain parasites

and all kinds of toxins. Pigs don't sweat, so all the toxins end up in the meat. How about scavenger birds and water bottom-feeders who eat dead and decaying animals and toxic matter on the ocean and lake floors?

Food laws are a practical matter that our God ordained for our benefit. Eat clean food God created and avoid the unclean. We will be healthier for it.

I trust this helps you consider another biblical viewpoint.

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PS: I have written a book entitled [*Discover the Story of Your Biblical Heritage*](#) that discusses the meaning of "Jew" and "Gentile." Module One of my video teaching and training series called the [Bible Mastery Boot Camp](#), follows this book. I commend them to you.