

Did God Change His Mind About Food?

Understanding Mark 7:19 and Acts 10 (Peter's Vision)
from an Historical, Grammatical Interpretation

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For those of us who have come to the conclusion that the Torah has not been abolished, and that, in fact, the Torah is God's will for us as we strive to walk in the footsteps of the Messiah, a number of biblical texts pose very apparent problems. I am speaking of Mark 7:19, where it is alleged that Yeshua "declared all foods clean" and Acts 10, which contains Peter's vision. In this vision a sheet, suspended in the sky, is filled with all kinds of animals, clean and unclean. God commands Peter to "kill and eat." It would appear at first reading that God is commanding Peter to do something which is strictly forbidden in the Torah.

In this short study I want to examine both of these texts from a historical as well as a grammatical viewpoint.

Mark 7:19

The Context

<p>Mark 7:1 The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) 5 The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?"</p>	<p>1 Καὶ συνάγονται πρὸς αὐτὸν οἱ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ τινες τῶν γραμματέων ἑλθόντες ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων. 2 καὶ ἰδόντες τινὰς τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ ὅτι κοινὰς χερσίν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἀνίπτους, ἐσθίουσιν τοὺς ἄρτους 3 οἱ γὰρ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ πάντες οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἐὰν μὴ πυγμῇ νίψωνται τὰς χεῖρας οὐκ ἐσθίουσιν, κρατοῦντες τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, 4 καὶ ἀπ' ἀγορᾶς ἐὰν μὴ βαπτίσωνται οὐκ ἐσθίουσιν, καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ ἔστιν ἃ παρέλαβον κρατεῖν, βαπτισμοὺς ποτηρίων καὶ ξεστῶν καὶ χαλκίων [καὶ κλινῶν] 5 καὶ ἐπερωτῶσιν αὐτὸν οἱ Φαρισαῖοι καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς· διὰ τί οὐ περιπατοῦσιν οἱ μαθηταί σου κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, ἀλλὰ κοινὰς χερσίν ἐσθίουσιν τὸν ἄρτον;</p>
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The situation presented by Mark is an open confrontation of Yeshua by a group of Pharisees and some of the scribes. They are concerned that Yeshua's disciples are not following the *halachah* (legal rulings) of the Pharisees regarding food purities. These were not commandments found in the Torah itself, but additional laws and regulations by the prevailing authorities of the day, referred to as the *halachah* ("walking") or the "traditions of the elders."

The Torah prescribes that priests must eat the food of the sacrifices and offerings brought by the people in a state of purity.

"Tell Aaron and his sons to be careful with the holy gifts of the sons of Israel, which they dedicate to Me, so as not to profane My holy name; I am the LORD. "Say to them, 'If any man among all your descendants throughout your generations approaches the holy gifts which the sons of Israel dedicate to the LORD, while he has an uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from before Me; I am the LORD. (Leviticus 22:2-3)

The additional laws of the Sages had extended this ruling beyond the priesthood to all of the people. It was the perspective of the Pharisees that all people, not just the priests, were required to eat their food in a state of ritual purity.¹ Since lesser ritual impurity was easily contracted by touching unclean objects, a lesser immersion, i.e., washing the hands, was considered sufficient to make one ritually pure before eating a common meal. Apparently the disciples of Yeshua, and presumably Yeshua Himself, were not following this man-made *halachah*.

It will be worthwhile to notice several words that appear in these opening verses of Mark 7. First, the phrase “unclean hands” employs the word κοινός, *koinos*, “common.” When this word is used to refer to matters of ritual purity, it describes something that is “ritually unclean.” Mark defines what is meant by this phrase by adding “that is, unwashed.” The ritual impurity ascribed to the disciples of Yeshua was not something defined in the Torah, but related to the man-made rules requiring washing before eating a common meal. Secondly, in verse four Mark records the Pharisees as stating that when they come from the marketplace, they “cleanse themselves.” The Greek word is βαπτίζειν, *baptizein*, “to immerse,” “to baptize.” Thus, the Pharisees presumed that they had attracted a severe level of impurity by being in the market place, no doubt connected with things offered to idols, and thus underwent a *mikveh* (ritual bath) in order to assure ritual purity. From their perspective, they were taking the extra precautions in the event they had contracted severe ritual impurity. They thought that at least Yeshua’s disciples could cleanse themselves from minor impurities through the washing of their hands.

In the following context (vv. 6-13) Yeshua turns the discussion to the issue of soul purity, that to which bodily purity was intended to lead. In quoting Isaiah 29:13, He takes the discussion to the purity of heart, reminding everyone that ritual laws were given to remind one to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and might. The bodily purity laws were not unimportant. No, they were important because they were daily reminders of the necessity to have a pure heart. But His mentioning this shows that in His opinion the Pharisees were acting hypocritically because they were obviously concerned about bodily purity, but by their actions had shown they were not nearly as concerned about soul purity. Their willingness to find legal and even outwardly pious means of hiding their wealth from their aged parents who needed it was a sure indication that their hearts were not pure.

Then, in verses 14-15 Yeshua calls the crowd back to listen to him, making a further explanation of his former remarks.²

<p>14 After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, “Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.</p>	<p>14 Καὶ προσκαλεσάμενος πάλιν τὸν ὄχλον ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς· ἀκούσατέ μου πάντες καὶ σύνετε. 15 οὐδέν ἐστιν ἔξωθεν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἰσπορευόμενον εἰς αὐτὸν ὃ δύναται κοινῶσαι αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ τὰ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκπορευόμενά ἐστιν τὰ κοινῶντα τὸν ἄνθρωπον.</p>
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It seems at least possible that the crowd had misunderstood His initial words of rebuke to the

1. This point has been debated among the scholars, i.e., whether the Pharisees actually taught that the common person was to eat normal food (in addition to sacrificial meat) in a state of ritual purity. Sanders thinks this was not the case, but Harrington and others disagree. See Harrington’s responses to Sanders in Hannah K. Harrington, *The Impurity Systems of Qumran and the Rabbis* (SBL Dissertation Series 143, Scholars Press, 1993), 267-281. It would appear that Harrington has offered sufficient evidence to substantiate her viewpoint.

2. Verse 16 of Mark 7 is not found in any of the early Alexandrian texts and is omitted by the UBS text. It is most likely a scribal gloss felt to be a fitting close to the final dialog of Yeshua with the crowd. It was probably gleaned from Mark 4:3 or 4:9.

Pharisees. Is it possible that they thought He was dismissing the whole matter of ritual purity? Apparently so. In order to dispel this misunderstanding, He calls them back to hear Him once again. We may well imply this to be the scenario from the opening words, “listen . . . and understand” (v. 14).

In this further explanation, He makes clear His *midrash*, showing how the physical realities of food consumption and elimination give a fitting example of the non-physical reality. In other words, the laws of purity, attaching to the body, have a good lesson to teach us regarding keeping one’s soul pure as well.

What exactly did He mean by saying that “there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him?” The word “defile” is *κοινώω*, *koinow*, the verbal base for the noun *κοινός*, *koinos*, “common,” that which was not set apart for ritual purity. What Yeshua is indicating here is quite straightforward. Since all Jews would be very careful only to eat food that was clean, that food coming into their bodies did not defile them, that is, make them ritually unclean. But in the process of elimination, that which comes out, i.e., feces, do in fact convey ritual impurity.

The physical realities teach lessons for the non-physical. It was not the food that conveyed ritual impurity (that which comes into the body), but the feces that could make a person unclean (that which comes out of the body).

But it was not only that ritually pure food did not make one unclean when eating it, it was also recognized that unclean food did not make one ritually unclean! Literally nothing that one eats could technically make a person ritually unclean.

Here Yeshua makes a most important point, one with which these Pharisees would have to agree. The Torah only prohibits eating sacrificial meat that had contracted ritual impurity, and even then does not prescribe a penalty if one were to eat such meat. The fact that the Torah does prescribe a heavy penalty (*karet*, being cut off) for eating the meat of a sacrifice when one knows himself to be ritually unclean, shows that the matter of eating sacrificial meat that had become unclean was not considered on the same level (else the same severe penalty would have been attached).

<p>19 ‘Also the flesh that touches anything unclean shall not be eaten; it shall be burned with fire. As for other flesh, anyone who is clean may eat such flesh. 20 ‘But the person who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings which belong to the LORD, in his uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from his people. 21 ‘When anyone touches anything unclean, whether human uncleanness, or an unclean animal, or any unclean detestable thing, and eats of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings which belong to the LORD, that person shall be cut off from his people.’”</p>	<p>19 וְהַבֶּשֶׂר אֲשֶׁר יִגַע בְּכֹל-טָמֵא לֹא יֵאָכַל בְּאֵשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַבֶּשֶׂר כֹּל-טָהוֹר יֵאָכַל בֶּשֶׂר 20 וְהִנֵּפֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר-תֹּאכַל בֶּשֶׂר מִזֶּבַח הַשְּׁלָמִים אֲשֶׁר לַיהוָה וְטָמְאַתּוּ עָלָיו וְנִכְרְתָה הִנֵּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִעַמּוּתָא 21 וְנִפְשׁ כִּי-תִגַע בְּכֹל-טָמֵא בְטָמְאַת אָדָם אוֹ בְּבֵהֵמָה טָמְאָה אוֹ בְּכֹל-שֶׂקֶץ טָמֵא וְאָכַל מִבֶּשֶׂר-זֶבַח הַשְּׁלָמִים אֲשֶׁר לַיהוָה וְנִכְרְתָה הִנֵּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מִעַמּוּתָא פ</p>
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Note carefully that although sacrificial meat that has become ritually unclean is not to be eaten, there is no penalty ascribed to one who does eat it. Yet when it comes to an unclean person eating the sacrificial portions, this attracts the severe penalty of being cut off (*karet*). And then the text describes what is meant by someone who is unclean, that is, someone who touches the corpse³ of a human, or the carrion of an animal, whether four-legged or one of the creeping or swarming varieties of unclean animals. The

3. Though Leviticus 7 does not specifically use the term “corpse” or “carrion,” the designation “uncleanness of a human,” or “the uncleanness of a beast,” etc., this is referring to touching a corpse or carrion, i.e., an animal that has died or been killed (torn) in the field. Slaughtering an animal could not render a person unclean, else sacrifices (which must be offered and eaten only by those ritually clean) would be impossible. See the profitable comments of Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 3 vols. in *The Anchor Bible Commentary* (Doubleday, 1991), 1.425-26.

Torah indicates that one does not become unclean by touching a living unclean animal, but only by touching their carcasses. But the same is true of clean animals: one who touches the carcass of a clean animal that has died on its own or been torn by another animal, also makes a person ritually unclean (Leviticus 11:39-40).

But the point for our discussion is that there is no penalty for eating sacrificial meat that has become ritually impure. The person who does eat it is not stated to be ritually impure, nor is there any prescription for bathing or anything. Furthermore, there are no penalties prescribed. The only conclusion that one can reach is that though the impure meat is to be burned, if it is eaten, the person who consumes it does not become ritually unclean.

But this may be taken one step further. While the Torah prohibits eating meat from an unclean animal, it does not prescribe a penalty for doing so. The only penalty attached to unclean animals is touching their carcass (Leviticus 11). It is reasonable to conclude that if eating meat from an unclean animal rendered a person ritually impure, then the Torah would prescribe the necessary ritual bath in order to return to the state of ritual purity. But it does not. Neither touching an unclean animal, nor even eating the meat of an unclean animal (though this latter is strictly prohibited), causes the person to become ritually unclean. The Mishnah states this explicitly.⁴

How does all of this inform the words of Yeshua? His statement that “what enters a man does not make him unclean” is the clear understanding of Torah texts, and accords with the rulings of the Sages as well. He takes the legal ruling and turns it into a *midrash* on the spiritual significance of clean and unclean as it applies to one’s heart. There is little doubt that James has this very thing in mind when he writes:

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. (James 1:13-15)

Using the metaphor of conception, James makes it clear that the sin which defiles the soul does not come from outside, but is from one’s own soul given over to lust. Thus James emphasizes the exact same principle taught in Mark 7 by Yeshua. Sin comes from within, not from without.

Mark 7:19 The Core Verse

After explaining to the crowd exactly what He meant by His words, that it is not what comes into a man that defiles him (makes him ritually unclean) but what comes out of the man, Yeshua provides further explanation to His disciples when they are alone, and the disciples ask for further explanation. The typical English translation is represented by the NASB:

19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (Thus He declared all foods clean.)	19 ὅτι οὐκ εἰσπορεύεται αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἀλλ’ εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν, καὶ εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται, καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα;
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Here the Gospel writer, in verse 19, appears to add his own commentary: “Thus He (i.e., Yeshua) declared all foods clean. But this is not represented in the Greek original. A literal translation of v. 19 is:

4. m.*Zevachim* 7:6, cf. m.*Chullin* 4:4.

because it does not go into the heart, but into the colon, and into the latrine, purging all foods.

The literal rendering of the KJV has it right at this point: “Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats?” How then did all of the modern English translations come up with the rendering “Thus He declared all foods clean?” Because the Greek syntax is not real smooth,⁵ some of the manuscripts show attempts by scribes to smooth out the sentence, and one actually changed it to read “he purified all foods.” And since there is a general presupposition among Christian translators that the Torah categories of food have been abolished, the common English translation (“Thus He declared all foods clean”) became common. But the word “declared” is in none of the Greek texts, and is clearly supplied by the English translators.

The obvious point of Yeshua’s words, as they stand in the received Greek text, is that foods that are eliminated have the possibility of making a person ritually unclean in the form of feces. Thus, not the food that goes in, but that which comes out, has the ability to make a person unclean. This forms a perfect basis for Yeshua’s midrash on the whole matter, turning it to teach that sin, which renders the soul “unclean,” and defiles others as well, comes from within.

Once again, interpreting the text from an historical, grammatical viewpoint, upholds the Torah and in this case, even takes into consideration the Oral Torah of the Sages. Contrary to the common English translations, this verse does not have Yeshua “declaring all foods clean.” This is simply not what the Greek is indicating.

5. The difficulty in the syntax stems from the fact that the word “purging” (καθαρίζων) is a present active participle, masculine singular nominative and thus seeks a subject. Most take the subject to be the leading subject of the verse as noted at the beginning of v. 18, “He said to them . . .” The subject of the participle is thus taken to be Yeshua, since this is the only implied nominative subject. But Turner (*Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 3 vols. [T&T Clark, 1963], 3.316) notes that the nominative participle may not always follow a strict construction (i.e., a solecism), and he lists the participle of Mark 7:19 as an example of this. There is therefore no need to seek a subject in the nominative case to match the participle “purging,” and the most natural way to take the phrase is to connect the participle as indicating the action of the “man” who has eaten and is purging the food at the latrine. See my further comments in “Mark 7:19b - A Short Note,” available at www.torahresource.com.

Peter's vision, contained in Acts 10, is one of the key texts used to substantiate the abrogation of the Torah with its strict dietary regulations. In the flow of the story of Acts, Peter's vision is interpreted to mean that God intended him to forego the Torah standards of *kashrut* (kosher laws) and to begin eating what God, in the Torah, had prohibited. This is thought to be necessary in order to advance Peter's mission to the Gentiles. Since it was now the time for the Gentiles to be brought into the kingdom, the ceremonial regulations would need to be dropped in order to facilitate their inclusion.

A surface reading of the vision as described by Luke in Acts 10 seems to support this traditional interpretation. God plainly gives Peter a vision of a large sheet, draped from heaven and full of animals, both clean and unclean. He then commands Peter to take and eat. Peter, of course, balks at such a command and responds with a strong affirmation of his long-standing purity in matters of *kashrut*. The same sequence of events is repeated three times, and then Peter awakens from the vision, perplexed at its meaning.

For many interpreters, however, there is no confusion. They know full-well what the meaning of the Divine vision is: unclean animals are now permissible for food. Indeed, there are no more unclean animals, for "Jesus has made all things clean." In short, that is the "bottom-line" for the majority of Christian commentators. F. F. Bruce is representative:

These [food] laws, in their ceremonial application, were now abrogated explicitly as they had been implicitly in Jesus' teaching in Mark. 7:14ff.⁶

But a closer reading of the text raises a number of questions about this traditional interpretation. First, why is Peter perplexed after the vision if the meaning is so clear? Secondly, when he went to the house of Cornelius, did he eat non-kosher food? Thirdly, if the sheet in the vision contained all manner of four-legged creatures, this means some were of the clean variety. Why is it presumed that Peter would have taken the unclean animals for food? But then why does he respond to the Divine imperative as though he was being told to eat something unclean? And finally, when Peter recounts the vision later (Acts 11), he never brings up the issue of food but only interprets the vision as teaching him that he was to go to the house of Cornelius, a non-Jew. In fact, he explicitly states (Acts 10:28) that what he had "been shown" was that no man should be called unclean. The conclusion Peter reaches has nothing to do with food but everything to do with people.

Moreover, if we read the text carefully, other important questions arise. For instance, the wording used to command Peter "to kill and eat" is language usually reserved for slaughtering a sacrifice. If God is commanding Peter to take one of the animals in the sheet, sacrifice it as a peace-offering, meaning he would eat some of the meat, this casts a whole new light on the entire situation. Consequently, when Peter responds, he does not merely say he has never eating anything unclean, but he also adds the category "common" — "I have never eaten anything common [NASB has "unholy"] and unclean." We have already noted above that the use of this word (κοινός, *koinos*) in connection with issues of purity means "ritually unclean."

With these things in mind, it is apparent that we must look beyond the common reading of the text in our day and seek to understand it against its 1st Century background.

6. F. F. Bruce, "Acts" in Guthrie, et al, eds., *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (IVP, 1970), p. 985.

1. Was Peter's association with Simon the Tanner an indication that he was already turning from a strict, Torah life?

Some have suggested that Peter's association with Simon the Tanner (mentioned three times, Acts 9:43; 10:6, 32) might indicate he was already turning away from a life of Torah observance. That is because many hold the belief that tanners were considered continually unclean since their work necessarily involved dead animals.

. . . this man's trade is mentioned, not merely to distinguish him from Simon Peter, but perhaps also to point to another break with the restrictions of rigid Judaism: Peter lodges with a man who handled skins of animals which were technically unclean.⁷

First, that hides of animals were considered ritually unclean would have been news to Luke. In his Acts narrative, Luke constantly portrays Peter as someone who is very zealous for the Mosaic legislation, and is unflinching in his observance of the Torah. His repeated protest against eating anything he felt was "unclean" (Acts 10:14-16; 11:8-10) certainly does not fit with someone who has begun to leave the life of Torah obedience!

Furthermore, the notion that tanners would have been considered in a continual state of ritual impurity simply cannot be sustained from the Torah nor from the primary rabbinic sources. Leviticus 11:31-40 speaks of animals having died of natural causes, not of those slaughtered for food. Had animals slaughtered for food rendered a person unclean, then how would one offer a sacrifice, something that obviously required ritual purity? This is a *non-sequitur*. Rather, the Torah prohibition deals strictly with animals that have died from natural causes—from disease or by attack from a predator. Thus, the animals dealt with in the course of a tanner's occupation did not render him unclean nor did their hides.

The Mishnah teaches that parts of animals are considered unclean as far as food-stuff is concerned (meaning it cannot be eaten) but do not render a person unclean by way of carrion, that is, they do not convey uncleanness through contact.

In the case of cattle, the hide, grease, sediment, flayed-off flesh, bones, sinews, horns and hoofs combine [with the flesh] to convey food uncleanness but not to convey carrion uncleanness. Similarly, if a man slaughtered an unclean beast for an idolater and it was still jerking its limbs, it conveys food uncleanness, but it conveys no carrion uncleanness until it is dead or its head is chopped off [it conveys carrion uncleanness because it is presumed to be intended as an offering to an idol].⁸

In addition, throughout the Mishnah and Talmud (*Bavli*), the negative comments made about tanners is not because they are ritually unclean, but because their work produced such bad odor. It is for this reason that tanners and coppersmiths are linked together,⁹ and why tanners are contrasted to perfumers.¹⁰

Peter's association with Simon the tanner, then, could not have been construed by anyone living in his day as a compromise on Torah observance. If anything, it showed a willingness on Peter's part to associate with those who were generally degraded by the rest of their immediate society.

7. William Neil, *Acts: New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 136.

8. m.*Taharot* 1:3; cf. b.*Zevachim* 70a.

9. m.*Ketuvot* 7:10; cf. b.*Ketuvot* 77a; b.*Chagigah* 4a.

10. b.*Pesachim* 65a.

2. *Was Peter hesitant to go to Cornelius' house because he was afraid he would become ritually unclean?*

We may presume that Peter would have declined an invitation to Cornelius' house apart from the vision he had received. For upon arriving at Cornelius' residence, he makes it clear that previously he would have considered visiting a Gentile in his home a forbidden act.

And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. "That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me." Acts 10:28-29

In the popular understanding of this issue, many believe that a Jew's hesitation to go into the house of Gentile related to ritual purity as well as being put in the awkward position of being served unclean food.

But Luke's description of Cornelius should be given full consideration. He is described as

a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually. (Acts 10:1-2)

As a "God-fearer," Cornelius was a member of that "in-between" group, living according to some measure of Torah observance while not fully espousing Judaism as a proselyte. The fact that he was a Centurion may account for his need not to become a proselyte, since proselytes were degraded in the eyes of many Romans. Regardless, as a "God-fearer" and a "devout" man, it seems hardly possible that he would have been accustomed to eating non-kosher food, not to mention serving non-kosher food to his honored guest, Peter. After all, he had four days to prepare for his coming (Acts 10:30). Rather, by all accounts of the lives of God-fearers, Cornelius more than likely was quite strict in his observance of Torah, even including the *halachah* of the Sages.¹¹

Then why would Peter have hesitated to go? It may have been that Peter did not know Cornelius, and therefore did not realize that he was a God-fearer. He would have simply considered him to be a Gentile who, though perhaps seeking the God of Israel, was nonetheless suspect of idolatry and connection with paganism.¹²

But there is more to it than that. While Peter could surely have found sufficient reason to avoid idolators and any contact with idolatry, there was also the issue of ritual purity. There were a least some in the 1st Century who held the opinion that Gentiles could transmit ritual impurity.

It is the popular view of our day that in the 1st Century, Jews considered Gentiles unclean and able to transmit ritual impurity. But this popular notion does not find unanimous support in the rabbinic and historic literature. For instance, in a debate on the subject between Shammai and Hillel, the issue of Gentile impurity becomes a focal point:

A proselyte who converted on the eve of Passover—the House of Shammai say, "He immerses and eats his Passover offering in the evening." And the House of Hillel say, "He who separates himself from his uncircumcision is as if he separated himself from the grave [and must be sprinkled on the third and seventh

11. Max Wilcox, "The 'God-Fearers' in Acts—A Reconsideration," *JSNT* 13(1981), 118.

12. m.*Chullin* 2:7.

day after circumcision as if he had suffered corpse uncleanness].”¹³

The point of difference is obvious: Shammai considers the impurity of the Gentile to be light, like the impurity of a seminal emission which is cleansed after sunset by a ritual bathing (*mikveh*). Hillel, however, considers the ritual impurity of the Gentile to be on the scale of corpse impurity, meaning a full week was necessary for his purification, and thus he could not eat the Pesach sacrifice the day after his conversion.

Now ritual impurity on the level of seminal emission was not considered a major issue and clearly was a private one. On that basis, contact with a Gentile was no less restricted than contact with the majority of men within the Jewish community.

What is more, it appears that at least many Sages of the 1st Century did not hold that the laws of ritual impurity attached to Gentiles. In a discussion of proselytes, the Bavli records:

Furthermore, he [a candidate for becoming a proselyte] is addressed thus: ‘Be it known to you that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten suet you would not have been punishable with kareth, if you had profaned the Sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now were you to eat suet you would be punished with kareth; were you to profane the Sabbath you would be punished with stoning’. And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is told, ‘Be it known to you that the world-to-come was made only for the righteous, and that Israel at the present time are unable to bear either too much prosperity, or too much suffering’. He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much. If he accepted, he is circumcised forthwith. Should any shreds which render the circumcision invalid remain, he is to be circumcised a second time. As soon as he is healed arrangements are made for his immediate ablution, when two learned men must stand by his side and acquaint him with some of the minor commandments and with some of the major ones. When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects.¹⁴

If the Sages did not consider the Gentile under obligation for commandments that required *karet* (being “cut off”), it stands to reason that they were likewise exempt from lesser commandments such as the purity laws.

Of course, in the very strict sects, such as the Qumran sect, we would expect a more stringent position on contact with foreigners. According to Josephus’ account of the Essenes, contact with a foreigner required a *mikveh*:

Now after the time of their preparatory trial is over, they are parted into four classes; and so far are the juniors inferior to the seniors, that if the seniors should be touched by the juniors, they must wash themselves, as if they had intermixed themselves with the company of a foreigner.¹⁵

We may conclude from this notice that there may have been a general sense among those who were more strict in their *halachah*, that contact with Gentiles could render one ritually impure. We might consider the very real possibility that Peter was one of those who held to this strict *halachah*.

Yet in general, the inclusion of Gentiles in the proximity of the Temple, even giving them their own court, makes it clear that Gentiles could not have been considered to communicate severe levels of ritual impurity. Had that been the case, they certainly would have been kept further away from the

13. m.*Pesachim* 8:8.

14. b.*Yevamot* 47a. Note the comments of E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief* 63BCE – 66CE (Trinity Press International, 1992), p. 73.

15. *War*.2.8.10. (150).

sanctuary than the outer court.

If they could buy in the shops outside the Temple, walk up the steps, and stand in the Court of the Gentiles and gawk at the porticoes, they might touch a Jew on his or her way past the balustrade. A communicable impurity would have resulted in their being kept away from the temple mount and possibly barred from Jerusalem.

We see this clearly when we compare the treatment of Gentile with that of impure Jews. According to Josephus, Jewish ‘lepers’ (people with an abnormal skin condition) were expelled from the city; and Jewish menstruants, who passed on a low grade of impurity to other people (Lev. 15:19-23), were excluded from the entire temple complex. Whatever it was about Gentiles that had to be kept away from the holier areas, it threatened the temple’s sanctity, and the purity of worshippers, less than did Jewish menstrual blood.¹⁶

What may we conclude after looking briefly at these data? The whole issue of Gentile impurity was not universally agreed upon by the ruling Sages of the 1st Century. The fact that Shammai and Hillel disagreed on the matter is telling: things were not as “black and white” as many modern-day commentators may assert.

It is certainly possible that some Jews thought that they acquired a minor impurity if they touched a Gentile, but these same Jews thought that they acquired a minor impurity if they touched most other Jews and rather a lot of objects. Because impurity was so common, Jews in general were not afraid of it, and they did not behave in strange ways in order to avoid it. All impurities were taken care of by periodic immersions¹⁷

We may conclude, then, that Peter’s hesitation to go to Cornelius’ house was not primarily centered in his desire to avoid all contact with Gentiles. We may also presume that his hesitation was based more upon the issue of idolatry, and his desire to avoid it at all costs. Since Gentiles were presumed guilty of association with idolatry, they were avoided in order to assure no idolatrous connections. The vision that Peter received was apparently given to inform his thinking with regard to this issue, not to teach him about matters of what he could and could not eat (*kashrut*).

3. *What may we learn from the specific language used in the vision Peter was given?*

In the vision which God gave to Peter, repeated three times in order to stress its absolute veracity (thus aligning itself with the Torah requirement of two or three witnesses), the direct command of the vision, “kill and eat,” is cast in sacrificial language. The Greek phrase is: θύσον καὶ φάγε, *thuson kai fage*. The imperative θύσον is from the root θύω (*thuo*) which has as its primary meaning “to sacrifice.”¹⁸ While it can mean generally “to kill” (cf. John 10:10), the preponderance of uses in the Apostolic Scriptures denote “slaughtering for a sacrifice.”¹⁹ It is therefore more accurate to translate the phrase “sacrifice and eat.”

This adds additional nuances to the whole vision. For only one who is ritually pure is allowed to

16. Sanders, *Ibid.*, 75.

17. *Ibid.*, 76.

18. *BAG*, 367.

19. Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7; Acts 14:13,18; 1Corinthians 5:7; 10:20. The places where the word denotes killing for a festive occasion are Matthew 22:4 (parable of the wedding feast), Luke 15:23,27,30 (parable of the Prodigal Son). Only John 10:10 is used in the general sense of “kill.”

eat the peace offering. Moreover, one who contracts ritual impurity and, knowing his impurity, eats of the sacred offering, receives the penalty of *karet*, “being cut off,” which is a severe penalty.

The Torah text that speaks to this issue is Leviticus 7. Here the laws of the peace offering are delineated, including issues of clean and unclean persons and their ability to participate in eating the peace offering.

‘Also the flesh that touches anything unclean shall not be eaten; it shall be burned with fire. As for other flesh, anyone who is clean may eat such flesh. ‘But the person who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings which belong to the LORD, in his uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from his people. ‘When anyone touches anything unclean, whether human uncleanness, or an unclean animal, or any unclean detestable thing, and eats of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings which belong to the LORD, that person shall be cut off from his people.’” (Leviticus 7:19-21)

We may note several things from this passage:

1. Any of the sacrificial meat that is touched by an unclean animal, is rendered inedible and must be burned. This would be the case where meat that had been roasted on the altar later came in contact with an unclean animal (such as a rodent, insects, lizard, etc.)
2. Any one who is ritually clean may eat of the peace offering.
3. Any one who is ritually unclean may not eat of the peace offering, and doing such attracts the penalty of *karet*. (He must know he is unclean, meaning that if he ate the his portion of the sacrifice in ignorance of his unclean state, he does not incur guilt, cf. Lev 5).
 - a. an unclean person is one who comes in contact with an unclean person
 - b. an unclean person is one who comes in contact with an unclean animal of the type *בהמה*, *behemah* (meaning a four-legged animal that does not meet the qualification of clean, i.e., split hoof and chews the cud)
 - c. an unclean person is one who touches an unclean animal of the type *שקץ*, *sheketz* (translated “detestable thing” and referring to all animals, whether in the water, air, or that swarm on the land, which are not to be eaten).

Since the language of Acts 10 and Peter’s vision suggests that God was commanding Peter to sacrifice an animal and eat of the offered meat, nuances otherwise unnoticed come into play. First, Peter would have understood the command “sacrifice and eat” to be in respect of a clean animal. No unclean animal would have been considered fit for a peace offering. Secondly, since eating of the offered meat was part of the sacrificial ritual, slaughtering the animal would have had to occur in a ritually clean place. The fact that the sheet contained unclean animals, and specifically those defined as “creeping” or “swarming” meant that slaughtering the sacrificial animal could have rendered the meat to be consumed unclean if touched by one of the unclean animals. This may explain why Peter uses two terms when describing what he has never eaten.

13 A voice came to him, “Get up, Peter, kill [for a sacrifice] and eat!” 14 But Peter said, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy [ritually unclean] and unclean [forbidden animals].” [κοινὸν καὶ ἀκάθαρτον] 15 Again a voice came to him a second time, “What God has cleansed [declared ritually clean], no longer consider unholy [ritually unclean, κοίνου].” 16 This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky. (Acts 10:13-16)

Note carefully that Peter objects on two grounds: “I have never eaten anything (1) unholy and (2) unclean.” This last term would describe those animals prohibited for food in the Torah. Throughout the Lxx, the Hebrew word *טמא*, *tameih*, “unclean” which describes those animals prohibited for food, is

rendered by the same Greek word used here, ἀκάθαρτος, *akathartos*. The first word, however, translated by the NASB as “unholy” is the Greek κοινός, *koinos* meaning “common,” and in this context something that had not properly been sanctified for holy use or in some way had contracted ritual uncleanness. The word is found only once in the Lxx, but this singular use is instructive:

O priest, worthy of the priesthood, you neither defiled your sacred teeth nor profaned your stomach, which had room only for reverence and purity, by eating defiling foods. 4Maccabees 7:6

The word translated “defiling” is the same Greek word, κοινός, *koinos*. Meat that had been slaughtered for sacrifice but had subsequently come into contact with unclean animals would be rendered “defiled.” The concept of something clean becoming unclean through defilement is described by the same Hebrew word, נִמְטָ, “unclean.” For instance, if some one unclean enters the Sanctuary, he renders the Sanctuary “defiled,” that is, “unclean.”

‘But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself from uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, because he has defiled [נִמְטָ, piel verb] the sanctuary of the LORD; the water for impurity has not been sprinkled on him, he is unclean. Numbers. 19:20

But note carefully that in the language of the vision, it does not say, “What God has cleansed no longer consider unclean but rather it repeats the word unholy. “What God has declared clean, do not consider ritually unclean.” God has not changed unclean in to clean, but He has declared something to be ritually clean, i.e. holy, instead of common.

Moreover, the phrase translated in the NASB “what God has cleansed” may be misleading. The word “cleansed” (καθαρίζω, *katharizo*) can just as well mean “to declare holy” in the sense of a priest making a decision whether or not something is ritually acceptable or not. This is the exact terminology used in Leviticus 13 for the judgment of someone who has a skin disorder:

“The priest shall look at him again on the seventh day, and if the infection has faded and the mark has not spread on the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean [katharizei' aujto;n]; it is only a scab. And he shall wash his clothes and be clean. Leviticus 13:6

“But if the bright spot remains in its place and does not spread, it is only the scar of the boil; and the priest shall pronounce him clean [καθαριεῖ αὐτόν]. Leviticus 13:23

In both cases, the phrase “pronounce him clean” utilizes the same word used in the Peter vision, rendered “cleansed” by the NASB. The point is simply this: God instructs Peter that what He has pronounced to be ritually clean should be received as ritually clean. In the scenario of the vision, God is able to keep the ritually slaughtered meat clean from defilement. Peter should not worry about the presence of unclean animals. If God has declared the matter clean, he should receive it as such.

Furthermore, the addition of the word “longer” in the phrase “no longer consider unholy” is interpretive. The Greek does not give the sense of “no longer consider unholy” as though at one time you did consider it unholy. The point is that if God has pronounced something ritually pure, one should accept this pronouncement. The same is true of Peter’s retelling of the story (Acts 11:5). The NASB has added the word “longer,” “no longer consider unholy” but there is nothing in the original Greek to demand such a translation.

But what we do see in Peter’s retelling of the story in Acts 11 is that he did understand the point of the vision:

“I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and

the birds of the air. “I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ “But I said, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ “But a voice from heaven answered a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’ “This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky. “And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea. “The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man’s house. (Acts 11:5-12)

Given the way Peter’s vision is understood by the Christian Church, we would expect Peter to tell Cornelius: “The Spirit told me that it was okay to eat unclean animals now.” But of course, this is not what Peter learned from the vision. What Peter understood from the vision was not that unclean animals were now considered clean and thus edible but that he could be with Gentiles and not be rendered unclean. God’s pronouncement, like that of the High Priest, was to be received as valid. Even as the meat of the sacrifice commanded in the vision could remain ritually clean even in the presence of the unclean animals, so Peter could associate fully with Gentiles without become unclean. And the obvious reason for that was because God had declared the believing Gentiles “clean.” He was grafting them into the covenant of Israel by faith in Yeshua, and their status of clean was secured by the *mikveh* (baptism) of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit). As such they were to be received as clean—holy to the Lord.

This simply underscores the clear teaching of Yeshua as recorded in Mark 7. The matters of ritual purity were to teach us about purity of heart. Even as the Gentiles were given a new heart of faith, so they are “clean” from the inside out. Apparently the vision given to Peter was properly understood by him, for it was through this vision that he became the first apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Galatians 2:6-10). We must conclude, therefore, that Peter understood the meaning of the vision as God intended it. His clear statement that “the Spirit told me” shows that he properly interpreted the vision to be about people, not about food.