



## Leviticus - Chapter Eleven

### Summary of Chapter Eleven

This chapter explains which creatures were considered clean and which were considered unclean. The rationale of why a creature is placed in one category vs. the other has puzzled commentators throughout the ages, and there is still no consensus of opinion. Typical explanations include a concern for hygiene; a death motif, i.e. unclean animals were somehow more associated with death in the Israelite mind; and polemics against Canaanite customs. More recently, it has been argued that a creature is unclean when it does not conform to established norms, e.g. an Israelite's established norm for a four-legged creature would be a cow or a goat, since these were their herd and flock animals; a pig is thus unclean because, even though it has four legs, it is unlike the norm in that it does not chew the cud.

In evaluating the above approaches, it is probably fair to say that no single one of them can provide a rationale that works for all the animals in this chapter. As a result, there might be a number of different reasons why an animal was considered clean or unclean. While the rationale of the classifications is still debated, the purpose of these laws is clear. In brief, they were to help Israel, as the Lord's holy people, to make distinctions between ritual cleanness and ritual uncleanness. Significantly, making these distinctions in the ritual realm would no doubt serve as a constant reminder to the people of their need for making the parallel distinctions in the moral realm as well. Further, adherence to these food laws expresses Israel's devotion to the Lord: just as he separated the Israelites from the other nations, so they must separate clean from unclean foods (20:24-26). This is why the restrictions can be removed in Acts 10:9-28, when the Jew vs. Gentile distinction is no longer relevant in defining the people of God, as confirmed by also Mark 7:19, Colossians 2:16-23, Hebrews 9:1-14, and 10:1-18.

For Israel to obey these dietary restrictions also shows that the people honour their creator, who has the right to decide how his creatures may be used. A clean animal is one permitted for food. It is clear that classifying an animal as

unclean is not the same as declaring that animal as evil: God cares for all beasts, clean and unclean alike, as confirmed by Psalm 104:17-18 and 147:9.

Leviticus employs a simple and practical classification system for edible animals, based on readily observable features. It is geared to the kind of life that Israel will live in the land of Canaan, and it is not always easy to apply it to animals that Israelites did not normally encounter; for instance, the sturgeon, which modern rabbis consider to have the wrong kind of scales, is not included here. This system is good for its purpose, a purpose that is different from that of the modern zoologist's taxonomy.

#### **IV Leviticus 11:1-15:33 - The Laws on Cleanness and Uncleanness**

Leviticus 10:10-11 defines the principal duties of the Israelite priesthood. One of these tasks is 'to distinguish between the unclean and the clean.' Chapters 11-15 apply this principle to a variety of areas of Israelite life and culture.

Chapter 11 deals with the matter of foods that are clean and may be eaten, and foods that are unclean and may not be eaten. Chapter 12 treats the issue of cleanliness and purification after childbirth. The following two chapters (Chapters 13-14) provide regulations concerning cleanliness in matters of fungi, skin diseases, and infections. Chapter 15 considers human bodily discharges that may cause a person to become unclean. These five chapters constitute a codified directory for Israel, and in particular for the priests, that defines what is clean and unclean in God's sight.

##### **IV.a Leviticus 11:1-23 - Clean and Unclean Foods**

The first section describes the animals, seafood, birds and insects that God permits the people to eat and those that are forbidden to them.

<sup>1</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them: <sup>2</sup> Speak to the people of Israel, saying: From among all the land animals, these are the creatures that you may eat. <sup>3</sup> Any animal that has divided hoofs and is cloven-footed and chews the cud – such you may eat. <sup>4</sup> But among those that chew the cud or have divided hoofs, you shall not eat the following: the camel, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. <sup>5</sup> The rock-badger, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. <sup>6</sup> The hare, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. <sup>7</sup> The pig, for even though it has divided hoofs and is cloven-footed, it does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. <sup>8</sup> Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch; they are unclean for you.

## Leviticus 11:1-8

The first paragraph deals with land-dwelling animals. In order for a land animal to be considered clean, it must meet two conditions: chewing the cud and being cloven-footed. In practical terms, these criteria permit Israel to eat hoofed mammals with two functional toes, including domestic beasts such as sheep, goats, and cattle, and wild ones such as antelopes, as confirmed by: <<***These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain-sheep***>> (Deuteronomy 14:4-5). A horse, on the other hand, which has only one toe, is not clean.

The diet of these animals is apparently not the basis of their cleanness or uncleanness. The passage itself says nothing about what the animals eat, and the camel, the rock-badger or hyrax, and the hare are exclusively vegetarian but unclean. The pig is the only animal in this list that is not strictly vegetarian. Indeed, many of the clean aquatic creatures of vv.9-12 are carnivorous.

It is now known that the pig is the intermediate host for several parasitic organisms, some of which can result in tapeworm infestation. One of these worms, the *Taenia solium*, grows to about 2.5m in length, and is found in poorly cooked pork. They are particularly prevalent in hotter climates such as the Middle East and Africa, and are still excluded from the diet of many religious groups in those regions. The rules that God gives are as much for good health and hygiene as they are for any religious purpose.

The expression translated chews the cud can be applied to camels, rock-badgers, and hares; based on the observable features of the animal, the thorough chewing of these animals looks like the cud-chewing of, say, cattle.

Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch; they are unclean for you. If an animal was considered unclean, one obviously could not eat it. Yet additionally, one could not touch an unclean animal, whether living or dead. God was not making up new rules for Israel. Noah knew about clean and unclean animals: <<***Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate***>> (Genesis 7:2), and: <<***Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar***>> (Genesis 8:20). God simply codified what was already in the traditions of Israel.

<sup>9</sup> These you may eat, of all that are in the waters. Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the streams – such you may eat. <sup>10</sup> But anything in the seas or the streams that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and among all the other living creatures that are in the waters – they are

detestable to you <sup>11</sup> and detestable they shall remain. Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall regard as detestable. <sup>12</sup> Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you.

### Leviticus 11:9-12

The presence of fins and scales is the mark for distinguishing between clean and unclean water-dwelling creatures. In practical terms, this limits the clean aquatic animals to what modern zoologists would call true fish; anything aquatic that does not have fins and scales, e.g. catfish, squid and shellfish, is unclean. Again, it is now known that, at certain times or under certain conditions, such seafood can make people quite ill.

<sup>13</sup> These you shall regard as detestable among the birds. They shall not be eaten; they are an abomination: the eagle, the vulture, the osprey, <sup>14</sup> the buzzard, the kite of any kind; <sup>15</sup> every raven of any kind; <sup>16</sup> the ostrich, the nighthawk, the seagull, the hawk of any kind; <sup>17</sup> the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, <sup>18</sup> the water-hen, the desert-owl, the carrion vulture, <sup>19</sup> the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat.

### Leviticus 11:13-19

These you shall regard as detestable among the birds. There is no rule given to determine if a bird is clean or unclean; only specific birds, twenty in all listed here, are mentioned as being unclean. Almost all the unclean birds are predators and carrion-eaters, i.e. ones contacting death and consuming blood. The term translated bird, Hebrew 'op, covers a variety of creatures that fly, and thus can include the bat.

<sup>20</sup> All winged insects that walk upon all fours are detestable to you. <sup>21</sup> But among the winged insects that walk on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to leap on the ground. <sup>22</sup> Of them you may eat: the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, the cricket according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind. <sup>23</sup> But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you.

### Leviticus 11:20-23

Insofar as the winged insects have an ability to leave the ground, they are clean. The locust and the grasshopper are allowable foods, as confirmed by the diet of John the Baptist: <<Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey>> (Matthew 3:4).

But among the winged insects that walk on all fours. This does not mean that God was describing four-legged insects as the majority of insects in this class have six legs and some eight. It seems most likely to describe the way they moved, i.e. in a similar fashion to a four-legged creature.

**Eight-legged insects are not strictly classed as insects but as arachnids. They are a different type of arthropod and include spiders, mites, ticks and scorpions.**

#### IV.b Leviticus 11:24-47 - Unclean Animals

This second section goes on to describe how the people can become unclean by coming into contact with both clean and unclean creatures.

<sup>24</sup> By these you shall become unclean; whoever touches the carcass of any of them shall be unclean until the evening, <sup>25</sup> and whoever carries any part of the carcass of any of them shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening. <sup>26</sup> Every animal that has divided hoofs but is not cloven-footed or does not chew the cud is unclean for you; everyone who touches one of them shall be unclean. <sup>27</sup> All that walk on their paws, among the animals that walk on all fours, are unclean for you; whoever touches the carcass of any of them shall be unclean until the evening, <sup>28</sup> and the one who carries the carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening; they are unclean for you.

#### Leviticus 11:24-28

The law gradually introduces the theme of death as a defiling force. The carcass of any unclean animal is defiling, i.e. it makes the person who touches it unclean for a period of time, that is, until the evening. The carcasses of dead animals could not simply be left to rot but had to be disposed of. Those tasked with this work would be considered ceremonially unclean for a while, as would other people coming into contact with dead animals, whether deliberately or accidentally.

This practice means that, for example, if a dead rat was found in an Israelite village, it would be carefully and promptly disposed of and the one disposing of it would wash thoroughly afterwards. This would help prevent disease in a significant way; after all, the Black Death or bubonic plague killed one quarter of Europe's population around AD1350, but Jewish communities were largely spared because they followed these hygienic regulations. Sadly, because they were often largely preserved, they were often accused and punished for being the masterminds behind the plague.

The one who carries the carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening. This shows that ceremonial uncleanness was not the same as being in a

state of sin. No sacrifice was required to remedy the condition of ceremonial uncleanness. It was a state of ceremonial impurity that needed to be addressed.

**Ceremonial uncleanness meant a person could not participate in any public gatherings and, indeed, needed to remain isolated from others to prevent them becoming unclean also. Their impurity lasted until evening as that marked the start of the new day by Hebrew tradition.**

<sup>29</sup> These are unclean for you among the creatures that swarm upon the earth: the weasel, the mouse, the great lizard according to its kind, <sup>30</sup> the gecko, the land-crocodile, the lizard, the sand-lizard, and the chameleon. <sup>31</sup> These are unclean for you among all that swarm; whoever touches one of them when they are dead shall be unclean until the evening. <sup>32</sup> And anything upon which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean, whether an article of wood or cloth or skin or sacking, any article that is used for any purpose; it shall be dipped into water, and it shall be unclean until the evening, and then it shall be clean. <sup>33</sup> And if any of them falls into any earthen vessel, all that is in it shall be unclean, and you shall break the vessel. <sup>34</sup> Any food that could be eaten shall be unclean if water from any such vessel comes upon it; and any liquid that could be drunk shall be unclean if it was in any such vessel. <sup>35</sup> Everything on which any part of the carcass falls shall be unclean; whether an oven or stove, it shall be broken in pieces; they are unclean, and shall remain unclean for you.

### Leviticus 11:29-35

Not only are these creatures unclean for food, but touching them when they are dead will also make a person defiled.

And anything upon which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean. From a hygienic standpoint, these laws were very important. They required, for example, that if a rodent crawled inside a bowl, the bowl had to be broken. Therefore, any disease the rodent carried, such as bubonic plague, could not be passed on to the one who would use the bowl. These laws also promoted a general state of cleanliness inside the Hebrew home. This certainly promoted the health and the welfare of the family.

<sup>36</sup> But a spring or a cistern holding water shall be clean, while whatever touches the carcass in it shall be unclean. <sup>37</sup> If any part of their carcass falls upon any seed set aside for sowing, it is clean; <sup>38</sup> but if water is put on the seed and any part of their carcass falls on it, it is unclean for you.

### Leviticus 11:36-38

It is uncertain why the water in a spring or a cistern is not contaminated by an unclean creature that falls into it. Perhaps it is because water in them is naturally flowing and is continuously refreshed and renewed. It may also be an exception because water was in such short supply in the region.

<sup>39</sup> If an animal of which you may eat dies, anyone who touches its carcass shall be unclean until the evening. <sup>40</sup> Those who eat of its carcass shall wash their clothes and be unclean until the evening; and those who carry the carcass shall wash their clothes and be unclean until the evening.

### Leviticus 11:39-40

If an animal of which you may eat dies, anyone who touches its carcass shall be unclean until the evening. Seemingly, these laws apply to the natural death of clean animals, not to their butchering for food or death for sacrifice. Those handling such carcasses were ceremonially unclean and needed to be cleansed by washing and a brief period of quarantine.

**However, animals found dead could be put to good use:** <<*You shall not eat anything that dies of itself; you may give it to aliens residing in your towns for them to eat, or you may sell it to a foreigner. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God*>> (Deuteronomy 14:21a).

<sup>41</sup> All creatures that swarm upon the earth are detestable; they shall not be eaten. <sup>42</sup> Whatever moves on its belly, and whatever moves on all fours, or whatever has many feet, all the creatures that swarm upon the earth, you shall not eat; for they are detestable. <sup>43</sup> You shall not make yourselves detestable with any creature that swarms; you shall not defile yourselves with them, and so become unclean. <sup>44</sup> For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming creature that moves on the earth. <sup>45</sup> For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy. <sup>46</sup> This is the law pertaining to land animal and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms upon the earth, <sup>47</sup> to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.

## Leviticus 11:41-47

For I am the Lord your God. This self-identification is used here for the first time in the book; it occurs frequently from Chapter 18 on.

Sanctify yourselves therefore. One great purpose of the dietary laws of Israel was to sanctify, i.e. to set them apart, from other nations. It made fellowship with those who did not serve God far more difficult. This sanctifying effect is seen in Daniel Chapter 1, where Daniel and his friends refuse to eat the un-kosher food at the king of Babylon's table and God blesses them for being set apart for his righteousness. Peter's vision in Joppa shows that such separation between Jew and Gentile or believers and non-believers is not required; refer to Acts Chapter 10.

For I am holy. The Lord, who is himself holy, calls his people to consecrate themselves, i.e. dedicate themselves to holiness, Hebrew *hitqaddesh*, and to be holy, that is, to practice a holy lifestyle. This is confirmed by 20:7-8 and the comments made there.

Who brought you up from the land of Egypt. Personal consecration, in which a person imitates God's own character, is a response to God's gracious initiative, as confirmed by Exodus 20:2. First Peter 1:16 applies the same principle to Christian readers, portraying them as the heirs of this special status: *<<for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'>>*.

Some Christians believe they are still under obligation to observe a kosher diet today. Yet this issue was settled once and for all at the Jerusalem Council in circa AD48-52 and detailed in Acts Chapter 15, where it was determined that obedience to Mosaic rituals was not required of the followers of Jesus. Paul pointed out that they have the full liberty to eat whatever they want to: *<<Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer>>* (1 Timothy 4:1-5). Some are under subjugation to food, or to certain foods, and that is sin under the principle of: *<<All things are lawful for me', but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me', but I will not be dominated by anything>>* (1 Corinthians 6:12). Certainly, many would benefit from the attitude of self-denial and bodily discipline Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. Yet, apart from these considerations, Christians are free to eat or not eat whatever they please, and no one should think themselves more right with God because they eat or do not eat certain things.