

# Unclean Meats and the New Testament

Note from *Blow the Trumpet*

The article that follows was written by Dr. Robert J. Thiel, a longtime member of God's church and a well respected authority on a variety of issues effecting God's people today. Dr. Thiel attends the Living Church of God and is the architect of one of the most visited COG websites (COGwriter). Additionally, although Dr. Thiel is not affiliated with *Blow the Trumpet* we feel his writings with respect to Biblical subjects reflect a forceful yet mature perspective. This particular article was selected by *Blow the Trumpet* because of its thoughtful analysis and succinct approach to an issue that profoundly impacts the lives of God's people. The article has been formatted to be consistent with the design of our website. However, virtually no edits of the text were made.

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## THE NEW TESTAMENT AND UNCLEAN MEATS

By Dr. Robert J. Thiel

This article will briefly attempt to discuss unclean meats from a New Testament perspective. It will address 5 points which are falsely raised to justify consumption of unclean meats.

- 1) *It has been alleged that Jesus declared all animals to be clean.* The primary "proof" text is Mark 7:18-19 in which Jesus declares, "Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods". There are at least three problems using this as a "proof" text.

First of all, "thus purifying all foods" is not in all manuscripts, such as the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament Text and thus may have been improperly added to the Bible to justify a non-biblical position.

Secondly, the context of Mark 7 was the Pharisees complaint that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands in the tradition of the elders (Mark 7:1-3)--it had nothing to do with unclean meats. If it did, the Pharisees would have most likely raised this charge against Jesus when they brought Jesus before Pilate. In case Jesus' meaning was unclear, in Matthew's synoptic account he plainly taught what He meant: "to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man" (Matt 15:20).

Thirdly, Jesus did not consider all animals to be food. If Jesus declared all animals to be clean, would the Bible still use unclean animals as symbols of uncleanness? In Matt 13:47-48, Jesus tells a parable about fishing with a net and catching "every kind" and then separating the good from the bad; possibly meaning the clean from the unclean--there would be no "bad" if Jesus was declaring all meats as clean. In Luk 11:11-12, Jesus teaches that bread, fish, and eggs, but not stones, serpents (snakes, an unclean animal), or scorpions are good for food (see parallel account in Matt 7:9-11). Unclean animals are never mentioned as food anywhere in the New Testament--they are either mentioned as beasts of burden (Jn. 12:15) or mentioned in a negative fashion (Matt 7:9-11; Luk 11:11-12; Rev 16:13; 18:2).

Fourthly, after the incident in Mar 7 (and Mat 15) Jesus said, "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel" (Mat 23:24). Thus Jesus apparently still considered gnats and camels to be unclean, thus this verifies that He never declared all animals to be clean.

- 2) *It has been alleged that the Greek word koinos means unclean.* It is translated as "defiled" in Mark 7:2,20, "made common" is probably a better translation. It cannot mean unclean. Koinos is the same word translated as "common" in Titus 1:4 (our koinos faith) and Jude 3 (our koinos salvation), obviously faith and salvation are not unclean (though they are common in the sense they are available to Jews and Gentiles).
- 3) *It has been alleged that uncleanness is only an Old Testament concept which was not mentioned after Jesus died.* In Gal 5:19 we see that "uncleanness" is still a "work of the flesh". In Eph 5:5 it states that no "unclean person...has any inheritance in the Kingdom of God". Most forms of Old Testament uncleanness were not prohibited, but eating unclean meats was (Lev 11, Deut 14). Thus the scriptures seem to indicate that there is a difference in the uncleanness of animals compared to other forms of uncleanness. The book of Revelation was written thirty or more years after Jesus' death, yet Rev 16:13 states that unclean spirits resemble frogs (a biblically unclean animal) and Rev 18:2 states that Babylon was filled with every unclean and hateful bird. Unclean spirits are also mentioned in Acts (5:16; 8:7).

Rev 18:2 may be both literal and figurative. If it is intended to be literal, some birds still exist that the Bible considers to be unclean. If it is only intended to be figurative, there would be no reason to link the terms "unclean" and "bird" if all birds were now clean. Thus it appears that Rev 18:2 is telling us that not all animals are clean. It is also saying that Babylon the Great is Unclean. Thus there are parts that are in the world that we should avoid. This is consistent with 1 John 2:15-16, "Do not love the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world--the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life is not of the Father but is of the world". Could not consuming unclean meats be considered a "lust of the flesh"?

"Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lust of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie" (Rom 1:24-25; cf Eph 4:19). Paul urges such to change, "For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness" (Rom 6:19) and repent, "I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of their uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced" (II Cor 12:21). Paul also wrote, **"But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as fitting for saints"** (Eph 5:3), "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col 3:5), and "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you" (II Cor 6:17).

Although some feel that Christians can eat unclean meats, Paul wrote, "For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness" (I The 4:7). Peter added, "the Lord knows how...to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgement, and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority" (II Pet 2:9-10). Some, sadly, despise biblical authority to eat whatsoever they lust after.

- 4) *It has been alleged that the Apostles knew they could eat unclean meats.* However, no one in the New Testament (or Old Testament for that matter) called of God ever ate unclean meats. The vision to Peter in Acts 10 is usually cited as proof. Scripture, though, does not say that unclean animals were cleansed (nor did Peter believe he was supposed to eat unclean meat). In the vision (Acts 10:12) it does not say that all the animals shown were unclean, it

says there were all kinds of beast and birds (various beasts and most birds were clean--Lev 11, Deut 14). If there were only unclean animals, then Peter probably would not have included the term "koinos" in his response. Peter did not eat any unclean meat (Acts 10:14) nor did he understand that he was to (Acts 10:17). What Peter understood from the vision was that God did not want him to call Gentiles common or unclean (Acts 10:28).

- 5) *It has been alleged that Romans 14:14 states "no food is unclean in itself"*. This is the only place that the KJV/NKJV translates the word koinos as unclean. As mentioned earlier, koinos should be translated as common; if it truly means unclean then so is our faith (Tit 1:4) and salvation (Jud 3) since the word koinos describes each of those. In Romans 14:14 Paul states that nothing is common IN ITSELF, this is true and consistent with the rest of the Bible. Unclean animals are not food, clean animals are. The only animals ever shown to be eaten in the New Testament were clean ones (Matt 14:19-21; 26:19-21; Luk 24:41-43; Jn. 21:13-15).

The context of Romans 14 clearly shows that the subject is vegetarianism (Rom 14:2), not a discussion of whether or not unclean meats should be eaten. If this scripture (or any other) declares unclean meat fit for food, why doesn't it say so? Why do we never read of any Christian eating meats previously considered to be unclean in the New Testament? Romans 14:14 simply does not say that all unclean meats are clean food. Romans 14:20 says that all things are pure (or clean). It certainly is not trying to say sin is clean. It does not say all meats are clean. The context shows that Paul is discussing whether or not it is acceptable to eat animal flesh, and then he mentions alcoholic beverages, etc. (Rom 14:21). I agree that all food which is not diseased is clean. However, I am unaware of any scripture which states unclean animals are food.

In conclusion from the New Testament we learn that, 1) Jesus never declared all animals to be clean nor did He consider unclean animals to be food, 2) koinos does not mean unclean, 3) uncleanness is also a New Testament concept, 4) no one in the New Testament ever ate unclean animals 5) that no scriptures declare that unclean animals are food. Thus it is clear, that "unclean" is a concept that a New Testament church can properly teach about.

Bob Thiel, 1999, 2001

P.S. Many who argue against the Sabbath claim that it is not commanded in the New Testament as it is not in the so-called 'sin lists' (although it is enjoined in Heb 4:9), yet these same people believe in eating unclean meat even though uncleanness is in those same 'sin lists'.