

Leviticus Chapter 11

The Clean And The Unclean Food



Chapter 11 represents a major division in the book. The subject of what is clean and unclean runs from chapter 11 through chapter 15. Ryrie begins this section with this comment:

In this section (through chap. 15), the word “unclean” occurs more than 100 times. Even though the emphasis is on ceremonial, rather than ethical, uncleanness, failure to obey these regulations was sin. Those laws served

(1) to reflect the holiness of God,

(2) to keep Israel distinct from the idolatrous practices of the nations around them, and

(3) to help maintain physical health.

The distinction between clean and unclean food goes back to the time of Noah (Gen. 7:2).

[Picture from picasaweb.google.com]

Although these three reasons for the clean/unclean distinction are probably correct, only the first is actually stated in the text. The second is certainly a reasonable deduction, and third is probable, since God would not prescribe unhealthy food for His people. Most of the unclean animals are prone to disease, their meat spoils easily, or they are bottom feeders that basically live off the garbage of the food chain. But the health thing has to be applied cautiously. Notice:

- Health is never given as a reason or consequence for eating clean and avoiding unclean food.
- Clean/unclean does not have to do with being physically clean or physically dirty.
- The prohibitions on food changed through history – Adam and Eve were vegetarians, after the Flood, Noah could eat any meat without the blood (Genesis 9), Moses was given the regulations we are now studying (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14), and Peter was told to eat all this unclean food (Acts 11), which lifted all food regulations for the church except the eating of blood (Acts 15).
- The reason stated repeatedly in the text for regulating clean and unclean food was ... *thus you shall be holy, for I am holy* (Leviticus 11:45).



There are three major unclean animal restrictions in this chapter:

1. Unclean animals were not to be eaten.
2. The carcasses of all dead animals not sacrificed were not to be touched.
3. The carcasses of certain dead animals were not to touch household articles.

Leviticus 11:1-8 The Basic Characteristic of Unclean Animals



The basic command in this first section is *Whatever divides a hoof, thus making split hoofs, and chews the cud, among the animals, that you may eat* (11:3). This is, then, illustrated with four animals they were not to eat: the camel, the coney (a rock badger/rodent), the rabbit, and the pig. These animals were not to be eaten, although no punishment was stated for violating this command.

The chewing of the cud refers not to the regurgitation/chewing process of the cow but the constant ongoing mouth chewing motion. The rabbit and the rock badger do not chew cud like the cow, nonetheless they are constantly chewing. The words: *Chew the cud* is like *leprosy*, and *stars*. The ancient writers were not trying to use our scientific terminology.



Again notice, verse 8 says nothing about these animals being unhealthy or that they are connected to idolatry. It simply says: *You shall not eat of their flesh nor touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you.*

Leviticus 11: 9-12 The Unclean Animals Who Live In the Water

Actually, there was only one category of water life which could be eaten – fish with scales. This ruled out lobster, eels, crabs, oysters, etc. But it also ruled out smooth-skinned fish like catfish and salmon. The word used here is not actually unclean but the stronger word שֶׁקֶץ (*sheqetz*), usually translated *detestable* or *abhorrent*. This word is used seven times in this chapter. It is the strong word used repeatedly of idolatry (for example 1 Kings 11:5-7; Ezekiel 5:11).



Leviticus 11:13-19 The Unclean Birds

Twenty unclean birds are listed, including the bats. Bats are not birds according to our scientific classification. But, once again, we cannot read our definitions into the text. Birds for the Israelites were simply animals who could fly. The clean birds not named would include the doves, pigeons, quail, and sparrows.



Leviticus 11:20-23 The Unclean Insects

The only edible flying insects were four from the locust family: *the locust in its kinds, and the devastating locust in its kinds, and the cricket in its kinds, and the grasshopper in its kinds* (11:22).



Leviticus 11:24-28 The Defilement From Dead Land Animals

This defilement included the carcasses of dead animals that walk on paws, like cats and dogs, and wild animals, like bears and lions. The violator, whether purposeful or accidental, shall: *wash his clothes and be unclean until evening*. Being unclean would prohibit participation in worship but also social functions, probably including family meals.



For example, when David did not show up for the evening meal at Saul's table we read:

The king sat on his seat as usual, the seat by the wall; then Jonathan rose up and Abner sat down by Saul's side, but David's place was empty. Nevertheless Saul did not speak anything that day, for he thought, "It is an accident, he is not clean, surely he is not clean." (1 Samuel 20:25-26).

So, apparently, being unclean for any ceremonial reason would include not joining the family meal.

Leviticus 11:29-38 The Unclean Animals Who Move in an Irregular Fashion

This category includes animals *who swarm on the earth*. As with *cud chewers* and *birds*, the word *swarm* (a word used for land, water, and air animals) must be defined contextually. Here they are animals which move about in a seemingly haphazard fashion, like the mouse, the gecko, and reptiles.



If such an animal was found dead inside a house, touching a household vessel, or if their carcass touched any article, the article was unclean and must be destroyed or purified. An exception was made in the case of a spring or a cistern of water.



Leviticus 11:39-40 The Uncleaness of Clean Animals Who Die

Even the carcasses of clean animals who died made a person who touched them and their garments unclean. Ritual bathing and waiting until evening were required.

Leviticus 11:41-47 The Reason for the Clean/Unclean Regulations

First, this paragraph summarizes the whole set of food laws by the repetition of selected examples. Then the purpose for all this is given. It is given twice:

1. In verse 44, *For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.*
2. In verse 45, *For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy.*

THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

- It is interesting to note that God commanded the Israelites to see certain animals and insects as detestable. At least in the context of food. For example, God said: *All the winged insects that walk on all fours are detestable to you* (11:20). I want to say: “Yeah, no problem. I hate those bugs anyway.” Of course, there are some things I don’t naturally find detestable to eat – like the pig, and some I would add to the detestable list – like the locust. But I would say, in general, the things God does not want me to eat are pretty *detestable* looking or acting, even to me. But the point is, God ruled out some of the creatures He created. If He created them, what’s the matter with them? Or for that matter, why can’t we eat them? Maybe because they have been cursed from the Fall. Maybe because they are just necessary for the balance of nature after the Fall. Anyway, we can’t simply say that if it is part of God’s creation it’s good.
- There are several descriptions in this chapter which remind us that the text (any text) must be interpreted according to the author’s intended meaning. A scientist today could argue that insects do not *walk on all fours*, bats aren’t *birds*, lizards don’t *swarm* and rabbits don’t *chew the cud*. But the meaning of a word or a phrase ultimately comes from the author. There is no error being made by the biblical author. The error is to impose a meaning on the text that the biblical author did not intend. So how do we know when to use a dictionary definition of a word or give it an alternative definition? Context!
- If we have to touch a dead animal, which was not prepared as food, we should wear disposable gloves or wrap the carcass in a plastic bag or use some means of disposing of it so we don’t have to touch it. For example, if I trap mice in my house, I use disposable rubber gloves to take the dead mouse out of the trap and dispose of it. Then I make sure to dispose of the gloves. The reason we should not touch these dead animals is because they are dirty but, more importantly it seems, they offend the holiness of God. If you have to deal with a dead animal with your bare hands, then wash yourself thoroughly before eating a meal with your family.