

LEVITICAL DIETARY RESTRICTIONS
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT:
HASSEL ON MARK 7:1-22 AND ACTS 10-11

Hugo Mendez

Gerhard F. Hasel, late Dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, MI, submitted a study of the Mosaic dietary restrictions entitled “Is the Distinction between Clean and Unclean Animals in Leviticus 11 Still Relevant Today?”¹ In it, he reviews Mark 7 || Mt. 15 and Acts 10-11, combating the thesis that Christ therein abolishes the distinction between “clean” and “unclean” meats.

Mark 7:1-22

Hasel’s discussion centers on Mark 7:19, which the NASB renders, “(Thus [Christ] declared all foods clean).” Reviewing the critical issues attending this translation, he rightly notes that other alternative readings are admissible (18-19). He then suggests two further reasons why Christ could not have excluded the regulations of Leviticus 11.

First, he notes that the discussion in Mark 7 treats matters of “foods.” He continues, “within this context the idea of unclean animals would not even enter the idea of ‘foods,’ because unclean animals were not considered to belong to ‘foods’ for a faithful Jew in Jesus’ day.”² In addition, the word ‘food’ “is never used to distinguish food derived from clean/unclean animals as compared to other kinds of food.”³ Secondly, Hasel observes that the controversy described in Mark 7:1-22 || Mt. 15:1-20 primarily concerns the oral laws (*halacha*) of ritual washing, which Christ condemns as “traditions of men” (Mark 7:7-9). Therefore, Christ’s words do not properly extend to the divinely instituted prescriptions laid

1. Hasel, Gerhard F., “Is the Distinction between Clean and Unclean Animals in Leviticus 11 Still Relevant Today?” *Endtime Issues* 100 (June 2003), 7-29.

2. *Ibid.*, 19.

3. *Ibid.*

down in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14; they apply only to later, rabbinical strictures.⁴

Hasel's objections fail to note the progression of Christ's response in Mark 7 and Mt. 15. Each chapter begins by recording the initial pharisaical objection, raised against Christ's disciples: namely, that they eat with "unclean" (that is, ritually impure) hands (Mark 7:1-5 || Mt. 15:1-2). Christ first undermines the obligatory character of this practice by dismissing it as a "tradition of men" (Mark 7:8 || Mt. 15:3). Inasmuch as the rite is not of divine origin, it bears no authority.

Christ then attacks the entire rabbinical establishment, referencing Isaiah's reproof of those who worship God "in vain" by "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Mark 7:6-7 || Mt. 15:8-9; cf. Is 29:13). To illustrate this point, He cites the rabbinical rules of Corban (Mark 7:10:13 || Mt. 15:4-6). He submits that they can be used to contradict the command to honor one's father and mother, thereby "invalidating the word of God" (Mark 7:13 || Mt. 15:6).

At this point, both gospels record that "Jesus called the crowd to Him again" (Mark 7:14 || Mt. 15:10), marking the beginning of a new textual pericope. Now, Christ moves from the particular controversy (the obligation of rabbinical purity rituals) to the broader topic of "uncleaness:" the earlier objection provoking a study of a larger issue.

Jesus provides a general rule: "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" (Mark 7:15 || Mt. 15:10-11). Moral character in the internal dimension of the person ("the heart"; Mark 7:21 || Mt. 15:19) proves the true measure of "purity." External elements—including food—cannot render a man "unclean." They remain external: eliminated from the body after digestion (Mark 7:19 || Mt. 15:17). Mark illustrates each by their relation to the being entire, while Mt. 15:11,17-18 illustrates each according to the mouth: entering (external: foods) and exiting (internal: words reflecting thought).

The general character of this second discussion distinguishes it from the particular controversy earlier in the chapter (following the contextual division observed earlier). Christ's contrast between "externals" and "internals" (delineated according to the boundaries of the being entire) reflects a universal categorization, transcending individual examples of each. Attempts to narrow the object of the pericope to include only that objection raised by the Pharisees (eating without ritually washing, as in Hasel's final objection) ignore the scope of Christ's words. They apply to all external elements consumed by the human subject, broadly classified under the word "foods."

Hasel's objection related to the use of the term "foods" relies upon narrow definitions for the term he himself provides. In the first, he identifies "foods" as those dietary articles acceptable for a Jew; in the second, he

4. *Ibid.*

defines “foods” as “clean/unclean meats” vis-à-vis all other foods. His subsequent refutation of either definition is meaningless (straw-man). The term “foods,” unique to Mark 7:19, appears to substitute for the phrases “whatever goes into the man from the outside” (Mark 7:15,18), or “that which enters the mouth” (Mt. 15:11,17)—two all-inclusive terms for “externals” consumed by a human agent.

Notably, the only Mosaic injunction against ritual defilement (uncleanness) by consumption appears in Leviticus 11:43-44, where it applies to the eating of unclean meats. Christ apparently alludes to this passage, or necessarily subsumes these articles within the “externals” category—“that which enters the mouth.”

A final contextual indication also endorses the application of Christ’s statement to the Levitical dietary laws. In both gospels (Mark 7:24-30 || Mt. 15:21-28), a third pericope follows, describing Christ’s journey into a gentile country: Tyre. There, he meets “a Gentile, of the Syrophenician race” (Mark 7:26), whose daughter is demon-possessed. The woman begs his assistance, but Christ refuses as one “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24). He reinforces this national distinction by an extended metaphor of dietary discrimination: “for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27 || Mt. 15:26).

The regular proximity of this pericope to the discussion of “clean” and “unclean” foods in Mark 7 and Mt. 15 suggests that the two episodes inform one another. As in Acts 10-11, the “cleansing” of foods signals the “cleansing” of the gentiles, who now receive of divine blessings. Christ abolishes the “dietary discrimination” segregating Jew and Gentile (which symbolically includes the distinction between clean and unclean meats, especially beside the previous pericope), as the Syrophenician woman requests.

Hasel’s criticisms of the NASB rendering of Mark 7:19b ignore these larger observations. Whatever the proper translation of the latter part of the verse (if not the “cleansing” of previously unclean foods), Christ does abolish the distinction between “clean” and “unclean” meats, at least in their ability to “defile” the human person (contra Lev. 11:43-44). (The NASB reading suggests that Christ abrogates the intrinsic, ceremonial impurity of foods, beyond simply dismissing the communicable character of that ritual impurity; cf. Rom. 14:14.)

Acts 10-11

Hasel’s then turns his attention to Acts 10-11, another passage used to justify the abolition of clean/unclean distinctions in meats. In a vision, Peter is told to “kill and eat” a representation of “all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air,” including unclean animals (Acts 10:13). This passage alludes to the universal platter of Noah (cf. Gen 9:2-3), later rescinded in Leviticus 11. Peter responds

negatively three times, having never eaten that which is “common” and “unclean” (Acts 10:14). Hasel, following several modern scholars, defines the former adjective as referring to the “the traditions of Judaism, not of the Old Testament” which “made the ‘clean’ into something ‘common’ or ‘defiled’ through contact with the ‘unclean.’ Thus the ‘clean’ creatures were now made ‘common’ by contact in the sheet with the unclean creatures.”⁵

Therefore, the declaration, “What God has cleansed [*katharízo*], you must not call common [*koinós*]” (vs. 15, RSV), indicates that “you,” Peter, as a man, must not designate something “common” that God has declared to be otherwise. What God has declared clean, must not be made into something that is “common” by man.⁶

Having limited the text’s significance only to false manmade distinctions, Hasel concludes,

The whole issue in Acts 10-11 is not the matter of clean/unclean food but the problem of the association with Gentiles. They were not to be considered “unclean” or “common” and thus unworthy of being a member of the worshiping community of God. This unwarranted Rabbinic distinction as applied to human association was shown to be against God’s declaration and Peter and other Christians were not bound by such Jewish traditions of associations between Jews and Gentiles. Here too the issue is not one of foods to be eaten, but it is a case of social association and fellowship between Jew and Gentile.⁷

Whatever the meaning of the adjective “common,” Peter is called upon to eat the “unclean” beasts as well, which scholars (including Hasel) agree are so designated according to the divine mandate in Lev. 11 (*akartho* is used in the LXX throughout Lev. 11). Therefore, the text does not dismiss “unwarranted Rabbinic distinctions” alone, if this is indeed how the reader should interpret the word “common”; it includes those animals that even God once labeled “unclean.”

Furthermore, Hasel’s attack on the (allegedly) rabbinic designation of gentiles as “unclean” ignores the Pentateuchal origins of that discrimination. Gentiles are “unclean” in view of their detestable practices (Lev. 18:24; Ezra 6:21); only the Israelites, in the preservation of their state of

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 20.

7. *Ibid.*

ceremonial purity (including dietary restrictions: cf. Lev. 11:43), constitute “a holy nation,” set apart from all others (Ex. 19:5-6; Lev. 20:26; Deut 26:19). Therefore, the Mosaic assignment of “clean” and “unclean” properly extends to the distinction between Jew and gentile—a divine boundary.

This is especially clear in God’s reply to Peter (Acts 10:15). The command “what God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” refers to a completed action: a cleansing. Thus, Acts 10 cannot refer to a false application of the term “unclean” as Hasel contends; rather, it refers to a true state of impurity (proper to gentiles and grounded in Levitical law), which God later rescinds.

That this rescinding includes the abolition of ceremonial restrictions is certain in that those very ordinances established the inter-human distinctions (“unclean” peoples are so designated because they are contaminated with that which is “unclean”). This is apparent in Ephesians 2, where the gentiles’ invitation to the covenant community requires the abolition of the Mosaic laws and ordinances:

For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints... (Eph. 2:14-15, 18-19)

Thus, God’s command to Peter, a Jew, (“kill and eat” the unclean animal) aptly symbolizes the inclusion of all nations in His salvific plan. All former ceremonial restrictions (and consequently, distinctions) are abolished; no man is “unclean” where no external measures of ritual purity exist (Acts 10:28; cf. 15:8-9). If a Jew may eat pork, a gentile may receive the blessings of Israel (Rom. 10:12-13).

Adventists object to the abolition of the dietary restriction, noting that Peter never does partake of the unclean meat, which he persistently refuses (Acts 10:16). Hasel’s final objection against the application of Mark 7 || Mt. 15 to Levitical dietary laws also cites this persistent refusal: “evidently Peter did not understand the saying of Jesus in Mark 7:19 in the sense of removing the distinction of clean and unclean animals of the Law.”

However, it is also true that Peter remains “greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision meant” at the end of the passage (Acts 10:17). The full implications of the vision, as also certain words of Jesus, including Mark 7 || Mt. 15 (e.g., Luke 18:34; John 12:16), eluded him for a time.⁸ At last however, Peter eats with gentiles (Acts 11:3; 10:48; Gal. 2:12,14),

and the Church gradually begins to accept the equality of gentiles in Christ (Acts 11:1-18; 15:1-31). The entire New Testament, and Acts in particular, narrates that progressive digestion of Christ's teaching.

This progressive understanding is also evident in the fact that the observation "Jesus declared all foods clean" is a gloss, added by the evangelist. As C. S. Mann notes:

. . . . the explanatory glosses make [the abolition of the legal prescriptions about kosher and nonkosher food {cf. Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14} evident, for if Jesus had clearly signified the abolition of the food laws, it is not easy to imagine the controversies between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the early community, to which Acts, Galatians, Romans, and Colossians bear witness.

. . . .

. . . . Mark here reflects a later stage, of more burning concern to non-Jewish Christians. . . .⁹

Thus, Mark's gospel interprets Jesus' words from a later period, after their significance had been fully synthesized.

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that Adventists condemn the Catholic Church for (among many things) its non-observance of the Mosaic dietary restrictions. Scripture presents the divine revocation of these laws as a move towards the full unity of all men in Christ; their reapplication in this age only serves to perpetuate Christian division. It remains our prayer that a careful reconsideration of the scriptural evidence will restore all to communion in the Church.

© 2009, Hugo Mendez
DiesDomini.com
Second Draft.

9. Mann, C. S. *Mark*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), 316.