

Q 3.3 What was the purpose of distinguishing between clean and unclean animals?

Some say it had to do with hygiene, or to draw us away from animal consumption altogether. Others suggest it was a later invention retroactively injected into the story anachronistically to justify priestly bloodshed rituals in the temple period. Another is that it was God showing us which “pure” animals to emulate and which not to emulate. The Bible does not explicitly say the reason. Regardless of which view is the correct one, God never changes and His perfect will has always been the same from the beginning, and that is to eat fruit and vegetation and leave all animals off our plates—clean or unclean.

The Common Contention

A commonly held position is that the distinction between clean and unclean animals made in Leviticus 11 informed the Israelites which animals could be eaten¹ and which animals could not be eaten.² But if God did not intend for humans to eat animals at all, then why did He distinguish between clean and unclean animals? In other words, if God did not want any animals to be eaten,

¹ “This is the law regarding animals, birds, all living creatures that move in the water, and all creatures that crawl along the ground. You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between animals that may be eaten and those that may not” (Leviticus 11:46-47, BSB)

² “Every creature that moves along the ground is to be regarded as unclean; it is not to be eaten” (Leviticus 11:41, NIV).

then why would He declare some animals clean instead of declaring all animals unclean? This would suggest to some that God made the distinction because He had no problem with people eating animals that He deemed clean to eat.

Study Outline

This is a complicated topic with a lot to unpack, so for the sake of adequately addressing all the necessary points, we will first examine this common view of the clean/unclean distinction as well as two other historically prominent views on the subject (Tertullian and Maimonides). Then we will look closely at the various ways and contexts with which this term טָהוֹר (tahor) (often translated ‘clean’) is used throughout the Torah. Lastly, we will offer a pair of competing views on the origin of the clean/unclean distinction and what overarching message we should take away from the discussion regardless of which view is correct.

Part I: Considering Three Views on the Clean/Unclean Distinction

Is God a Cruel Hypocrite?

Holding the position that God has no problem with bludgeoning animals to death to eat their corpses would make God cruel; He would be mercilessly endorsing senseless bloodshed of the creatures He created and endowed with the abilities to feel pain and to suffer. It would also make Him hypocritical because He first designed us in His image and likeness and told us to eat a cruelty-free diet that entirely consists of fruits and vegetation. He even called this arrangement “*very good*.”³ Giving a conflicting instruction for us to act contrary to this very good instruction would make Him hypocritical—something Jesus warned against, “*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy*” (Luke 12:1, BSB).

A Test and First Step (Tertullian’s View)

³ See Genesis 1:26-31.

Two potential reasons have been proposed by prominent figures, within both Christianity and Judaism, for distinguishing between clean and unclean animals. The first, by second century Christian writer Tertullian, is that it was a kind of test⁴ and first step for God's often stubborn people⁵ to return to His original instructions.⁶ This is like telling someone who refuses to be vegan to start by cutting out pig flesh from their diet. If they do that, then they have shown an inkling of willingness to change, and have also proven to themselves that they are capable of changing their ways, *"Say to them: 'As surely as I live, declares the Lord GOD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked should turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?'"* (Ezekiel 33:11, BSB). Tertullian held that the distinction was due to unquenchable appetite and that it served as a means toward a greater end of not eating animals at all. He says,

"At length, when a familiar people began to be chosen by God to Himself, and the restoration of man was able to be essayed, then all the laws and disciplines were imposed, even such as curtailed food; certain things being prohibited as unclean, in order that man, by observing a perpetual abstinence in certain particulars, might at last the more easily tolerate absolute fasts. For the first People had withal reproduced the first man's

⁴ "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands" (Deuteronomy 8:2, NIV).

⁵ "'I have seen these people,' the LORD said to Moses, 'and they are a stiff-necked people.'" (Exodus 32:9, NIV); "yet the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, since they are not willing to listen to Me. The entire house of Israel certainly is stubborn and obstinate" (Ezekiel 3:7, NASB).

⁶ "Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.'" (Genesis 1:29, NIV).

crime, being found more prone to their belly than to God, when, plucked out from the harshness of Egyptian servitude”⁷.

An Issue of Hygiene (Maimonides’ View)

Medieval Jewish Philosopher Maimonides held that this distinction had to do primarily with hygiene. For instance, people may have been more prone to getting a deadly disease from eating pig flesh than they would have from eating fish flesh. Maimonides held that the prohibition of eating the flesh of unclean animals was rooted in hygiene, *“I maintain that the food which is forbidden by the Law is unwholesome.”*⁸ According to this view, the distinction therefore would not have been a moral one but rather one having to do with health risk, similar to other hygiene requirements mentioned elsewhere in the Levitical code.⁹ There were further hygiene requirements associated with touching, let alone ingesting, the dead body of any animal, clean or unclean, since doing so makes a person temporarily unclean.¹⁰ God warns about the dangers of ignoring His instruction to abstain from eating the flesh of pigs and other unclean animals, *“Those who consecrate and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one who is among those who eat the flesh of pigs, rats and other unclean things--they will*

⁷ Tertullian. *On Fasting*. T.r. by S. Thelwall. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 4. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885, Chapter 5.

⁸ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 3.48.

⁹ “Also you shall have a place outside the camp, where you may go out; and you shall have an implement among your equipment, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and turn and cover your refuse. For the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and give your enemies over to you; therefore your camp shall be holy, that He may see no unclean thing among you, and turn away from you” (Deuteronomy 23:12-14, NKJV).

¹⁰ “If an animal that you are allowed to eat dies, anyone who touches its carcass will be unclean till evening. Anyone who eats some of its carcass must wash their clothes, and they will be unclean till evening. Anyone who picks up the carcass must wash their clothes, and they will be unclean till evening” (Leviticus 11:39-40, NIV).

meet their end together with the one they follow,' declares the LORD" (Isaiah 66:17, NIV).

Following the Instruction

Whether it was permission, a test and first step, or a hygienic requirement, the practicality of following the instruction needs to be mentioned. Upon close examination, the requirement for eating even the clean animals is physically impossible to follow, specifically the requirement of draining every drop of blood from the carcass: *"But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood"* (Genesis 9:4, NKJV). So even when a person attempts to obey the instruction, they necessarily fall short every time. But their willingness to drain most of the blood out is motivated by their faith, which is at least one small step toward obedience to God's instructions.¹¹ And all other things being equal, one who at least halfway follows God's instructions will be closer to God's ideal than someone who completely disregards them and eats the flesh of unclean animals. But as illustrated by Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,¹² the diet that is by far the best¹³ is the one that doesn't merely follow God's instructions halfway but

¹¹ "And Samuel said, 'Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.'" (1 Samuel 15:22, ESV).

¹² These four characters are also referred as Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: "The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego" (Daniel 1:7, NIV).

¹³ Dr. Dean Ornish, M.D. claims: "There is more scientific evidence than ever that switching from a high-fat diet rich in animal protein and simple carbohydrates such as sugar to a whole foods, plant-based diet high in complex carbohydrates provides a double benefit: You significantly reduce your intake of disease-promoting substances such as cholesterol, saturated fat, and oxidants, and increase your intake of protective food substances" (Robbins, John. *The Food Revolution: How Your Diet Can Help Save Your Life and Our World*. San Francisco, CA: Conari Press, 2011, xv).

instead follows them wholeheartedly by abstaining altogether from animal flesh.¹⁴ Following this diet out of faith will also lead to unsurpassed wisdom,¹⁵ since there is immeasurable wisdom in following God's very good instruction.¹⁶

Are Today's Animal Products Kosher?

In addition to the question of possibility is the reality of modern animal agriculture. Many self-described 'torah observant' circles, whether Jewish or Christian, claim to follow the kosher laws of Leviticus, but they fail to realize (or intentionally ignore) the fact that in the world today no animal products are kosher. Animals are pumped full of antibiotics, kept in inhumane conditions that cause all kinds of defects and blemishes. They are beaten, strangled, suffocated in gas chambers and garbage bags (eggs), genetically modified in every way imaginable, sacrificed to mammon, and their products are mixed with blood. Biometric analysis shows that there are millions of blood cells per liter of cow's milk, and this number can reach over a billion in cows that have mastitis, a common occurrence in the dairy industry.¹⁷ And truckloads of animals are

¹⁴ "Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël and Azariah, 'Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.' So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food" (Daniel 1:11-15, NIV).

¹⁵ "And in all matters of wisdom and understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm" (Daniel 1:20, NKJV).

¹⁶ "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7, NIV). "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!" (Psalm 111:10, ESV).

¹⁷See Paape, M. J., W. D. Schultze, A. J. Guidry, R. H. Miller, and J. W. Smith, "Relationship of Somatic Cell Count to Milk Production and Composition," *Journal of Dairy Science* 64, no. 4 (1981): 597-604; Sharma, N., N. K. Singh, and M. S. Bhadwal, "Relationship of Somatic Cell Count and Mastitis: An Overview," *Asian-Australasian Journal of Animal Sciences* 24, no. 3 (2011): 429-438; Schalm, O. W., and D. O. Nisbet, "Experiments and Observations Leading to Development of the California

processed so quickly in slaughterhouses that their flesh is packaged while still dripping with blood. In order to keep the dietary instructions required in Leviticus, especially in today's world, we would have to follow Daniel's example of refraining entirely from the king's delicacies and to eat only vegetables.

Part II: Where Did the Clean/Unclean Distinction Originate?

The Historical Critical Perspective

According to the Two-Torahs perspective that is best supported by the totality of the literary and historical evidence, the original Torah (known as the Elohist (E) source) had God (Elohim) instruct Noah to bring a male and female of each animal so they can survive and procreate after the flood, *“And you are to bring two of every living creature into the ark—male and female—to keep them alive with you”* (Genesis 6:19, BSB). No mention was made anywhere about clean and unclean. The later second Torah (known as the Yahwist (J) source) replaced this instruction with YHWH instructing Noah to bring one pair of the unclean animals but seven of the clean, presumably so Noah could sacrifice the clean animals upon exiting the ark, *“You are to take with you seven pairs of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate; a pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate”* (Genesis 7:2, BSB). The J-source is the one that glorifies the priestly temple sacrificial system, the very system Jesus and Jeremiah vehemently opposed, calling it a den of bloodshedders (פְּרִיץ [parits]).¹⁸ Ezra during the Babylonian exile then wove both Torahs together into the form we have in our Bibles today. Thus in our Bibles we have Elohim commanding Noah to bring a

Mastitis Test,” *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 130, no. 5 (1957): 199–204; Rainard, P., and C. Riollet, “Innate Immunity of the Bovine Mammary Gland,” *Veterinary Research* 37, no. 3 (2006): 369–400.

¹⁸ “Has this house, which bears My Name, become a den of [bloodshedders (פְּרִיץ parits)] in your sight?” (Jeremiah 7:11, BSB). See Strong's Hebrew: 6530. See also Mark 11:17, Luke 19:46, and Matthew 21:13 where Jesus quotes this passage when disrupting the passover blood sacrifice ritual at the temple.

pair of each animal to keep them alive and YHWH commanding seven of the clean animals—presumably for sacrifice—the very thing Jeremiah said God Most High never commanded, *“For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices”* (Jeremiah 7:22, NKJV).¹⁹ Under this view, the entire clean/unclean distinction, at least as it pertains to eating animals, would have been invented by the lying Yahwist scribes to promote their wicked bloodshed ritual-for-profit.

The Origin and Purpose of the Distinction is Unspecified

If we set aside the history and instead look at the text at face value, the first time the clean and unclean distinction is made in Scripture is this instance we just mentioned where God instructed Noah about which animals to bring onto the ark, *“You shall take with you seven each of every clean animal, a male and his female; two each of animals that are unclean, a male and his female”* (Genesis 7:2, NKJV). It is not specified in the text whether this was the origin of the distinction or if the distinction already existed and God was merely referencing it. Nor does it say whether God or man invented it. Given that Noah evidently knew what God was talking about,²⁰ it seems most plausible that the distinction was something that had already existed.²¹ And since no such distinction was mentioned at the beginning of creation, it likely arose at some point after the world fell into a state of sin and became filled with violence.²² Regardless of its

¹⁹ “How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the Law of the LORD is with us,’ when in fact the lying pen of the scribes has produced a deception?” (Jeremiah 8:8, BSB). Note that ‘the Law of the LORD’ in Hebrew is ‘the Torah of YHWH.’ Jeremiah is claiming the Torah of YHWH (i.e. the J-source) was invented by lying scribes.

²⁰ “And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him” (Genesis 7:5, NIV).

²¹ It is possible that at this moment God detailed to Noah for the first time exactly which animals were clean and which were unclean and that this long conversation was omitted from the story. While acknowledging this as a possibility, the hermeneutic approach I default to is to minimize the amount of extraneous assumptions made about the text and instead to let the text itself tell the story.

²² “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence” (Genesis 6:11, NIV).

origin, the distinction was not mentioned in God's very good account of creation²³ where we were instructed to be faithful stewards over the created world.²⁴

God's Instruction to Noah (to keep them alive)

A common assumption is that the reason God instructed Noah to bring seven of the clean animals and two of the unclean animals is because God wanted Noah to sacrifice some of the clean ones. If we assume that YHWH and Elohim are the same God, then this reading that God wanted animal sacrifices is unlikely true because it runs contrary to the stated reason God gave for the instruction, which was to keep the animals alive: *"You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you"* (Genesis 6:19, NIV). The same reason was given for bringing seven of the clean animals: *"You shall take with you seven each of every clean animal, a male and his female; two each of animals that are unclean, a male and his female; also seven each of birds of the air, male and female, to keep the species alive on the face of all the earth"* (Genesis 7:2-3, NKJV). In both cases the stated reason was to keep the animals alive. Killing them would run directly contrary to this instruction.

Possible Reasons for the Seven Clean Animals

We are left to conjecture as to why God instructed this particular ratio of seven-to-two,²⁵ which could be for a myriad of possible reasons. What we know for certain, however, is that the reason would not have run contrary to the stated

²³ "Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day" (Genesis 1:31, NKJV).

²⁴ "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:26, NKJV).

²⁵ Or fourteen-to-two according to some translations: *"and also seven pairs of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth"* (Genesis 7:3, NIV).

purpose of keeping them alive.²⁶ Tertullian suggested that it was a test to see if humanity would follow their own will or God's will: *"Test me, LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind"* (Psalm 26:2, NIV). In other words, in the post-flood world, God was testing to see if humanity would follow God or if they would instead revert back to their evil, violent ways that led up to the flood. Another possible explanation is that the number seven could have simply been used as a sign of rest and completion, which the number seven represents throughout Scripture,²⁷ and from which Noah's name is derived.²⁸ Or perhaps it was for the clean animals to multiply at a faster rate for ecological reasons since many of the unclean animals are scavengers. Or it could have even been something as simple as the clean animals were better for cuddling and therefore more of them would be needed to stay warm in the new world.²⁹ The bottom line is that the text never says what the reason was.

Anachronistic First Mention in the Bible (Genesis)

The clean/unclean distinction is not explained until Leviticus 11, so there is no way Noah would have known the distinction in his time—long before the advent of the Levitical priesthood. Nor was there any altar ever mentioned until the end of Genesis 8. This is what scholars call an anachronism (ana- "wrong", chron-"time"), meaning something is presented as known at a time prior to the thing being knowable. It is a telltale sign of a later addition to the story (in this case by the lying J-source scribes). The clean/unclean distinction is never again mentioned in Genesis.

²⁶ "In the way of righteousness is life, And in its pathway there is no death" (Proverbs 12:28, NKJV).

²⁷ "And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done" (Genesis 2:2, NKJV).

²⁸ "He named him Noah [נֹחַ meaning 'rest'] and said, 'He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.'" (Genesis 5:29, NIV).

²⁹ "Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?" (Ecclesiastes 4:11, NIV).

Second Mention in the Bible (Exodus)

After this first mention in Genesis 7-8, the term טָהוֹר (tahor)³⁰ is mentioned a second time in Exodus (chapters 25, 28, 30, 31, 37, and 39). Each mention in Exodus is in reference to the gold associated with the tabernacle, and nearly every English Bible translates it as “pure” gold, *“You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two and a half cubits shall be its length and a cubit and a half its width”* (Exodus 25:17, NKJV). If we are to understand the instruction to Noah as genuinely coming from God, it would have likely carried this Exodus meaning rather than the later Leviticus meaning. So the pure animals would have been the ones that were not *“corrupt in the sight of God, and full of violence ”* (Genesis 6:11, BSB). What difference does this make?

Mentions in Numbers

In Numbers טָהוֹר (tahor) is mentioned eight times across four chapters (5, 9, 18, and 19). All eight times refer to humans, as a term contrasted with that of being defiled. The first mention in Numbers refers to a woman who has defiled herself through infidelity to her husband, *“But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, she will be unaffected and able to conceive children”* (Numbers 5:28, BSB). This use of the term fits much closer to “pure” than “clean,” as in being pure and undefiled. Given that these earlier uses of טָהוֹר (tahor) indicate someone’s purity (human or animal), the connection to food may not have been God telling people which animals to eat but rather which animals to eat *like*. In other words, the “clean” animals are actually the “pure” ones, who should be learned from, who follow the very good will of God—uncorrupted by the violence that led up to the flood. This would explain why the overwhelming majority of ‘clean’ animals are herbivorous while the overwhelming amount of ‘unclean’

³⁰ Strong's Hebrew: 2889

animals eat flesh.³¹ As it says in Job, “*But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you*” (Job 12:7, NIV). The unclean are those who are defiled and who do not follow the very good will in their violent diets. Later this would have gotten distorted (either intentionally or unintentionally) to mean we can eat the clean animals, rather than we should learn from the clean animals about *how to eat*. In short, we should not *eat* clean animals—we should *eat like* them.

The Takeaway

Regardless of whether the distinction originated with man or with God, and whether it had to do with concession, permission, or hygiene, and whether it meant to eat the clean animals or to eat *like* them, God has used this distinction to lead often stubborn humanity closer to obedience to His original instructions. The ‘*permission*’ to eat clean animals came with a restriction that was physically impossible to follow, namely abstinence from blood,³² since flesh at its most basic level is composed of blood vessels and tissue. Someone genuinely attempting to follow this instruction would realize that the only way to fully keep it is by abstaining from eating animal flesh altogether and instead eating only vegetation, especially in today’s world. And that is exactly the instruction God gave humanity from the beginning,³³ and the one God has been calling us back to ever since we first fell into disobedience. So the distinction between clean and unclean animals, regardless of its origin and purpose, was used by God to persuade disobedient³⁴

³¹ Birds of prey are the most commonly cited ‘unclean’ animals whereas domesticated herbivores are the most commonly cited ‘clean’ animals.

³² “Only be sure that you do not eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh” (Deuteronomy 12:23, ESV).

³³ “Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.’” (Genesis 1:29, NIV).

³⁴ “Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are now far from my righteousness” (Isaiah 46:12, NIV).

humanity into faithfully drawing closer³⁵ to God's pure and very good way of life instituted at the beginning of creation. In short, the aim was to draw us away from our own evil desires and closer to *"the stewardship of God's work, which is by faith. The goal of our instruction is the love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a sincere faith"* (1 Timothy 1:4-5, BSB).

³⁵ "Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8).