

THE PURITY LAWS OF GOD, DID JESUS ABOLISH THEM?

LAWS ABOUT RELIGIOUS CLEANNESS

The Old Testament contains rules that claim to be from God and which are about hygiene as well as about right and wrong. Some think that as the gospels only explicitly abolish such laws in relation to food and washing that the other impurity rules remain. So sex is dirty!

In the sight of the God of Law, certain actions and people and things were declared to be dirty or unclean. Women who had given and lepers were considered unclean and to be avoided for that reason. Certain foods were regarded as unclean. The Lord said it was dirty to eat pigs and hares (Leviticus 11). Sex was considered unclean. Touching a chair that an unclean person had touched was supposed to be unclean.

Are these rules abolished according to the New Testament?

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has retained the Old Testament food laws. It recognises the fact that the Bible gives no authorisation for scrapping them. The other Churches have done away with them.

Before we can ask if they were dropped we have to ask if they could have been dropped.

Some think that many or all of the forbidden foods and actions were honoured by the pagan neighbours of ancient Israel and they are forbidden with a view to creating a barrier between Israel and its neighbours so that Israel wouldn't be seduced by error. The animals that Israel could not eat were held sacred by the pagan neighbours and considered to be emblems of the gods. The problem with this is that the Hebrews didn't get rid of the Canaanites and the two races mixed so that explanation doesn't hold water.

But if what these people thought was right, this could mean that the uncleanness laws only apply where there is a danger of being led into unlawful religious practices. It might be thought, "When the Law declares that the laws are abolished that is in the context it means it in. It is not saying that the laws are wrong or are abrogated. The rule that what attracts one to indulgence in sinful religious practices remains. Today, the food made by an enemy of Jesus is unclean for eating it puts one at risk of apostasy."

This view is silly because the pagans had liturgical worship, had images, had holy books, had miracles, had priests, had sacrifices and had public prayer just like the Hebrews. If a Christian keeps a cow in India that does not prove that he or she will end up worshipping it or want to worship it as a god like people there would do. If a person wants to forsake God, having zero cows will be no barrier.

The purity laws were only concerned about avoiding infection. That was why they enacted that lepers and women who had given birth recently must not be touched. Obviously, the rules were based on morality and not on custom or on the need to make Israel different. It is a sin to be dirty without need. Leviticus 12:37,38 says that if a carcass falls on seed to be sown the seed is clean but if the carcass falls in the water for watering the seed the seed is unclean. It is plain that this material is about avoidance of what may spread illness.

God thought that certain foods make a person more prone to disease. The pig being a dirty animal was banned from the dinner plate because it was disgusting. Pagans were portrayed as evil so naturally their food would have been thought to be mostly evil.

Scholars would object that the laws were not about hygiene but about superstition because nobody knew in those days that being dirty could spread bacteria, many would have seen that there was a connection between dirt and sickness. In Egypt, the doctors used dung to cure septic wounds which made things worse. Those who went untreated would have been better off. Just like many things can't be said or promoted today so in those days you would have been considered mad for saying that dirt caused disease. The world did not see germs and so it would have been against anybody saying infection can be spread by it. Deep down it knew for it is obvious that when something spreads over the body it can go on to someone else's body too.

Israel was controlled by prophets who were able to make them mature and honest about infection coming from dirt. And Israel did not care what other nations thought for it became aloof and distant so it was able to shed the prejudices against hygiene.

Some would argue that the laws could not be about hygiene when a dirty animal's meat would be clean if it was boiled and yet their meat was banned. God could have said eat them but cook them right first. But the Bible has made an understandable mistake here. It proves that the Christian claim that it seems to know about bacteria is false for if it had it would have urged the boiling of unclean materials instead of avoiding them and instead of washing them. It was seen that infection and dirt had a connection but it was not known what the connection was. The poor needed bad meat to live and it was still banned so let nobody say that God never mentioned boiling for there was no need to be using bad meat in the first place.

The Bible condemns some food and actions as unclean not just because they really spread infection but because it was thought there was magic power in them that would harm you. Magic not germs was believed to be behind disease.

These laws could not be done away. If Jesus made all food clean he was counteracting the magic. He was not doing away with the law but doing away with the need for the law. The law still exists. The law that the ancients should not blow up an airplane existed even though there were no planes to explode. By the way, by making food clean Jesus could have been saying that germs do not cause infection.

Christians believe that when Jesus touched unclean people he gave them his cleanness so the rule about avoiding the unclean did not apply to him. He gave that cleanness to us. So Christians not keeping the purity laws does not mean they object to them. Quite the contrary.

RELIGIOUS PURITY NOT DROPPED, GOSPELS AND ACTS

Nowhere in the Bible is it stated that the religious hygiene laws of the Law are no longer obligatory. Out of anti-Semitism and the desire to make religion easier for converts the Christian Church says they are dead and manufactures evidence.

Ezekiel 4:12-15 seems to say that the purity laws are not absolutely binding because Ezekiel was instructed by God to cook food in a dirty way using human excrement and to eat it. There is no reason to suppose that the episode was a parable – it does not purport to be fictitious. Ezekiel protests and reminds God of the purity laws and God tells him to use cow dung instead. But God explained that the laws were not applicable in this case for doing what he asked was essential for bringing down vengeance on the people (v16, 17). The Jews became unclean by touching dead bodies but it had to be done and God wanted the dead buried. The notion that exceptions prove the rule is applied by many in this case.

The bread did not come into contact with the dung and nothing you put on a fire is clean anyway. Ezekiel did not have to touch anything dirty to make the fire. It seems that Ezekiel was not told to break the purity laws but Ezekiel only thought he was. God was in a hurry and did not enlighten him and told him to get cow dung for continuing to insist on human dung would have caused an argument or a great hesitation. God does not give in when a person won't do what he is told unless it is urgent.

In Mark 7, Christ claims that what goes into you cannot make you unclean. Only what is inside your heart can make you unclean. This does not attack the Jewish purity laws that are based on the Torah but the ones based on tradition for it was the Jews complaining that the disciples of Jesus did not obey the rules they added to those of the Torah that started him off saying all that. So, the invented purity laws are the context for what he is on about. Jesus said that disobedience defiles you and makes you unclean so he is not talking about the dirtiness that comes from dirty food but moral dirties. He is saying that even unclean food can't make you morally dirty.

Disobeying God to eat it would make you morally dirty. The choice not the food makes you impure. Jesus however was certainly not advocating that we eat dirty food.

Mark says that Jesus declared all foods morally clean because Jesus said that food can't go into the heart to make it sinful. Maybe, the Jews had come to believe that this was what the purity laws were about avoiding. It is evidence that he could not have declared them all the other kind of clean because not all of them are. It is ridiculous to say that Jesus abrogated the laws about food in Leviticus 11 for that would mean that its law banning people from eating certain disgusting insects is cancelled as well. If Jesus abrogated that then he was insane or evil or dead stupid.

Jesus did not breach the purity laws by touching lepers (Matthew 8:3) and other unclean souls and things though the Old Testament laid it down that it was dirty to do so. If he was the Son of God he was holy and could not contract impurity. He had miraculous powers to avoid the dangers of catching something from ignoring the purity laws or the protection of God.

Jews did not go into Gentile houses for they were thought to be unclean. Jesus said he would go to the Centurion's house (Matthew 8). But he did not say he would go in. If he had went in Jesus might have thrown a cloth on the floor and touched nothing to avoid contamination.

“In Acts 15, the Holy Spirit though the apostles told the Gentile Christians to keep just four rules, avoid idolatry, eating blood, meat of strangled things, fornication, from the Law. Just four. The apostles agreed that they did not want to put the burden of the Law on the Gentile Christians. This proves that the other laws of the Old Testament were abolished.”

It only proves that the apostles needed to be gentle on them and get them into the habit of adhering to the Law bit by bit.

Christians say that the apostles' decision was temporary. In other words, they only wanted the believers to keep these laws for a while. If they had they would have said so. Nobody give a temporary decrees without saying so for that is misleading and leaves them open to the charge of caprice. A decree that does not say what it means is no good and not worth considering.

The only temporary thing about the rules is their number for the rest of them were to be enforced later when the time was right. When a food law about blood was put in with a command against sex outside marriage that suggests that the two were considered to be equally valid and important.

RELIGIOUS PURITY NOT DROPPED - THE EPISTLES

In Romans 14, Paul declares that there is nothing unclean in itself and that something only becomes unclean if you believe that it is wrong to come into contact with it. This is supposed to refute the view that the food laws are still binding. The context does not mention the Jewish food regulations at all but people who think that wine or meat is unclean. The Law never commanded total abstinence or vegetarianism so Paul is not criticising the Law. What Paul is on about is not ritual or religious uncleanness but moral uncleanness – making yourself unclean morally by doing what you think is wrong even if it is not wrong.

Some might argue that when Paul said that something is only dirty if you believe that it is then the purity laws are not about hygiene but are just rules (Romans 14). Paul said that a person who eats meat and vegetables should not ridicule the convert who is a vegetarian. He is not talking about Jewish scruples about food but about pagan ones for he mentions people who wouldn't take wine for they thought it was unclean (v21). Judaism was fond of its tipples. So, he is saying that the food is clean but it makes you dirty if you believe that it is dirty – meaning morally dirty for what is clean does not become unhygienic just because it is believed to be bad. Paul did not believe in pushing new converts too far too fast. He tolerated their scruples as long as they tried to get away from them. The old homophobe wasn't so understanding with homosexuals.

When Paul said that the kingdom of Heaven is not a matter of eating and drinking in Romans 14:17 but doing good he was not saying that it is right to eat and drink what you like be it bad or good. He was only saying it was silly to have more interest in your diet than in holiness, and holiness includes avoiding whatever food and drink God says is bad for you. The Jewish laws forbade certain kinds of flesh. But Paul is speaking about disputes between people who believed in vegetarianism and that only fruit and vegetables were clean and holy and those did not. Romans 14 is not related to the food laws of the Jews that were in the Bible at all.

When we have no Pauline verse telling us out straight that the supernatural food regulations are now out of date we can't take Paul to be saying that there is no harm in breaking them.

In Galatians, Paul condemned Peter for refusing to sit with the Gentile Christians in case they were unclean. This is not an indication of the abolition of the cleanness laws simply because there was no such law among them forbidding contact with non-Jews. The Law permitted the Hebrews to keep slaves of another race. The only Gentiles they had to keep away from were those who were suspected of being unclean.

Paul, or his disciple, said that nobody may judge you over what you eat and drink for food laws have only a symbolic value (Colossians 2:17). Paul was speaking to heretics and those influenced by them. He may have meant the food laws that they made up.

Does Paul say in his 1 Corinthians that we can and may eat meat offered to idols when it does no harm proving that the uncleanness rules are a thing of the past? The Torah never said that such meat was unclean and forbidden but by implication it condemns eating if it becomes a source of scandal or bad example. Paul agreed that it was bad to eat it if it leads to the downfall of others. Paul never said that we can eat such meat when it does nobody else any harm. He is just talking about when it does do harm and forbidding it.

Christians object that he wrote that you can eat it in an unbeliever's house (10:27). But he made it clear that that is only when nobody tells you what it is. When you don't know it is not your fault.

It is argued that when Paul wrote that all things are lawful he meant that it is fine to eat idolatrous communion sacrifices

When it harms or misleads no one (10:23). But before Paul said this he claimed that you could not lawfully partake of the sacrificial cup of the Lord and that of demons disproving this interpretation (10:21). He said that because eating a Jewish sacrifice was a sign of sharing in the altar – of offering yourself to God – it was wrong to eat a pagan one for it is offering devotion to non-existent gods or demons (demons are not gods, you see). He does not forbid the cup of the demons here because of it giving evil example for he does not mention that ramification here.

After Paul said about all things lawful – meaning that all harmless things are lawful - he said that not all these are an advantage and that this indicates that your neighbour's good comes first. He is just saying that Christians do not scandalise others by doing good and then he goes on past this instruction to discuss the problem of eating sacrificed meat and the harm it does to those who see you doing it - a different issue.

The Bible has been wrested by Christians to make it say that the ritual purity laws are old hat.

Tertullian, the important third century Christian author, said, “Blush for your vile ways before the Christians, who have not even the blood of animals at their meals of simple and natural foods; who abstain from things strangled and that die a natural death... To clench the matter with a single example, you tempt the Christians with sausages of blood, just because you are perfectly aware that the thing by which you thus try to get them to transgress they hold unlawful” (page 167, *The Truth that Leads to Eternal Life*).

PETER'S VISION

Peter's vision seems to be an obstacle to those who believe in clean and unclean food.

In Peter's vision of being told to eat unclean animals for they were made clean (Acts 11) we find no proof that the laws about eating are a thing of the past. Peter never said that the dream was divinely inspired but only that the realisation that nobody was dirty just because of their race was caused by it. The reason he talked about it and considered it important was simply because it convinced him to evangelise the Gentiles instead of considering them too dirty to even think about. Peter misinterpreted the Law which did not tell him to go that far in concern about purity. The dream somehow made him learn through making him think.

Suppose Peter had been told by God that what is unclean in the Law is now clean seeming to mean that the purity laws and food laws are cancelled (Acts 10:28). Could Jews be opposed to them and be loyal to the Law? Yes! Peter could have been told that the laws were rendered obsolete, not rescinded for God had purified the dirty things for a greater purpose. God has promised to miraculously prevent the foods infecting people from now on. Making a law no longer applicable is not revoking it. If Peter did declare the law revoked then he was a heretic for the Law of Moses made it clear that distinctions between clean and unclean animals had to be made (Leviticus 10:10;11; Deuteronomy 14:3-20).

When the dream showed Peter that no Gentile was dirty just because he was not a Jew it could be that Peter saw animals in his dream that he thought were dirty but which were not dirty at all according to the Law. Perhaps they were animals that did not even exist. He must have thought that the animals represented the Gentiles when he was able to discover that Gentiles were clean in themselves by God chastising him for saying they were dirty. Otherwise, there would be no comparison and no lesson. You can't work out that Gentiles are clean if God tells you that animals are clean for the two could be different.

It will be objected that in the dream God said he was making what was unclean clean so Gentiles were dirty. But God could have made them clean by inspiring the prospective convert Gentiles to keep within the purity laws. That was why Jews thought they were filthy for they did not keep those laws.

In 2 Peter, Peter or his disciple says that though Peter had a vision of Jesus transfigured the Law of Moses and the Prophets, in other words the Old Testament, is even more certainly from God than this vision. This tells us that Jesus had no authority and did not claim any to do away with the civil or the religious laws of the Torah. You can't do away with what is superior to you and which you have set up to give you your authority provided you stand by it.

The dream was about people in themselves. The Law never said that anybody was dirty in themselves as persons.

Conclusion: The purity laws are still in force and true Christians will abide by them. Even if Christians do not have to keep them the reason is not that the laws are abandoned but that Christians are put beyond them. The Christian is still to regard them as true and correct and valid.

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