Reading the Ceremonial Laws With Jesus:   
Levitical Food Laws and World Mission

The ceremonial laws, and frankly most of Leviticus, are on any short-list for neglected passages in the Bible. Prohibitions of certain foods are stellar examples of why the Law has nothing to do with our ethics. We will attempt to read them within both the big sweep and the tiny details of how God revealed himself through Moses. We will find good reasons to believe Jesus when he said that the whole of the Law was about him, and that it predicted the spreading of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Luke 24:47).

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1. Leviticus in Context
   1. Why is Leviticus here?
      1. How does it advance the plot of the Pentateuch?
      2. Genesis 2 and holy ground
      3. Holiness in Leviticus
   2. How does *doing* ceremonies *teach* us?
2. Food Laws: What are They Doing?
   1. Are they about ethics?
      1. The problem
         1. Mark 7:18–19
         2. Isa 65:4–5
      2. How is that OK?
   2. Some explanations for the food laws
      1. Animal metaphors
      2. Canaanite religion[[1]](#footnote-1)
      3. Hygiene
   3. The common problem: what happened to the text?
3. Let’s Examine the Text
   1. Observation questions on Leviticus 11:2–47 (break-out groups)

Forgetting anything that isn’t in the text; forgetting anything you know about these animals; pretending that you didn’t even recognise the names, write down:

* + 1. What is said about those animals that are clean.
    2. What is said about those animals that are unclean.
    3. Any reasons given in each case.
    4. From v44 to the end of the chapter, summarise the big picture intention of the dietary laws.

1. Some Great Insights from an Anthropologist: Mary Douglas
   1. Holiness

“Since each of the injunctions is prefaced by the command to be holy, so they must be explained by that command.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

* 1. The Law as a teacher
  2. Genre of Levitical Laws: analogical[[3]](#footnote-3)
  3. Background structures: sets of three
     1. The world of Gen 2
        1. Sanctuary
        2. Land
        3. World
     2. The solution in Leviticus: God in our midst
        1. Holiness and danger
        2. Cleanness and safety
        3. The Levites as a buffer
     3. The Gen 2 structures repeated
        1. People
           1. Levites
           2. Israelites
           3. Nations
        2. Animals
           1. Sacrificial, holy for God to eat
           2. Clean, for Israel to eat
           3. Unclean, for the nations to eat
  4. What marks animals as unclean?
     1. Background
        1. 3-fold world of Gen 1
           1. Sky
           2. Land
           3. Water
        2. Populated by distinct creatures
           1. Birds etc
           2. Animals etc
           3. Fish etc
        3. Characterised by how they move
           1. Fly
           2. Walk
           3. Swim
     2. Lev 11 groups animals by which area they live in (Gen 1)
     3. Lev 11 describes how they move (Gen 1)
     4. Animals that blur boundaries are unclean

Why? Boundaries in the land are life and death, blessing and curse

“In the Old Testament we find blessing as the source of all good things and the withdrawal of blessing as the source of all dangers. The blessing of God makes the land possible for men to live in.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

“If the proposed interpretation of the forbidden animals is correct, the dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal. Observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. Building on Douglas: What About the Gentiles?
   1. Connect Gen 1 and Gen 2
   2. What about the outer region—gentiles?
      1. Deut 14:21
      2. Food laws were never inherently ethical
      3. Teaching tools—Gal 3
   3. What has changed with the coming of Jesus?
      1. Circumstances of mission
      2. “Children’s bread to the dogs”
   4. Peter’s mission
      1. Mark 7
      2. When did he understand?
      3. Acts 10:15–17
   5. This is not about practical convenience
      1. The very nature of Israel’s mission, Jesus’ mission, our mission
2. Conclusion: What does clam chowder have to do with God’s mission today?
   1. It used to be forbidden, to forbid the crossing of boundaries:
      1. Geographical boundaries
      2. Ethical boundaries
      3. Blessing and life
   2. It commands the crossing of geographical boundaries
      1. That they may have blessing and life
   3. It reminds us that we are commanded to keep ethical boundaries
      1. That they may have blessing and life

***Suggested Readings:***

A month of Quiet Times using **Wenham’s Commentary** on Leviticus is one you’ll never regret. (NICOT. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979.)

**Douglas, Mary. *Leviticus as Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.**

**———. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.**

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Poythress, Vern S. *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1991.

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Redditt, Paul. “Leviticus, Book Of.” Pages 447-50 in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Gen. ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, assoc. ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N.T. Wright. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

Wenham, Gordon J. “Law.” Pages 441-46 in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*. Gen. ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, assoc. ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N.T. Wright. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

1. Here, see the absence of evidence in Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions* (vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*; London: SCM, 1975), 27, 209, 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here, see Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Purity and Danger*, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Purity and Danger*, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)