

Just Scales

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Deut 14:10

(BHS)

וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר אֵין־לוֹ סְנַפִּיר וְקַשְׂקֶשֶׁת
לֹא תֹאכְלוּ
טָמֵא הוּא לָכֶם:

(NIV)

But anything that does not have **fins** and **scales**
you may not eat;
for you it is **unclean**.

The Israelites could only eat marine life with *senappir* and *qasqeset*, just **fins** and **scales**. Any other sort was *tamē'* (unclean) to them. No shellfish allowed. This is part of a larger piece of legislation that forbids eating creatures like pigs, which have split hooves but don't chew cud. Clean animals that have split hooves *do* chew cud. Winged insects like grasshoppers are clean, all others are inedible. And only clean things can be made holy, that is, used symbolically to point away from themselves to a contemplation of the eternal God.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas gave an [explanation](#) for the clean/unclean distinction that has become the consensus view. The idea is that something is wrong with unclean beasts. They are kludges not put together properly and so are unsuitable for a holy people. Thus, many animals in God's creation (like those walking on their hands, Lev 11:27) are misassembled. They can never be made holy; they can never be ritually part of the worship of Yahweh. Mere contact with them is creepy.

But ... isn't this contrary to the biblical doctrine of creation? Genesis says that everything in creation was good. How can some species be wrong?

Hmmm. Perhaps we should ask what "good" means. Unclean animals weren't good for eating. I think "good" means that everything functions as

intended, without implying that they are all paragons of beauty or equally graceful or lovely. You believe that God's creation is good? Well then, how do you feel about eating earthworms? Yuk, right? But is there anything wrong with them? No? Then why you repulsed at the thought of putting them in your mouth? It is because of your own cultivated taste and sensitivity. You are disgusted at the prospect of eating some good creatures that God made, and so was ancient Israel. And this served a moral purpose.

The legislation concerning unclean things is interwoven with laws regulating other behaviors. Eating or touching various things makes you "unclean" (like being diseased) in chapter 11 of Leviticus—but so does incest and homosexuality and idolatry in chapter 18. Think of your revulsion at the thought of crunching a spider between your teeth. That should be your feeling toward adultery or divination. How you feel about swallowing slugs should be how you feel about witchcraft and bestiality.

I could take this further and point out that this images how God feels about us when we sin. Leviticus is clear that a holy God does not want to be around people who are unclean. When you behave abominably, God is revolted by you. In fact, Jesus said that real uncleanness was always about character (Mark 7:19). This should give you pause. What characterizes you? Lustful thoughts? Covetousness? Prideful anger? Folly? Has your thought-life been unclean today? God doesn't like being around people like that any more than you like sucking on a millipede.

But there is more! Paul says that the laws about animals are really about people. Not muzzling oxen while they work (Deut 25:4) is about paying pastors (1 Cor 9:9). Not yoking ox and ass together (Deut 22:10) is about marriage (2 Cor 6:14). So I think these purity laws are designed to reinforce how we are supposed to treat each other. Israel was forbidden to boil a kid in its mother's milk. I suspect that law is really about incest, as if Israel's whole dietary program was designed to infuse their thinking with symbolism that reinforced moral distinctions: abhorring some actions and promoting others. They looked at the natural world through the prism of moral distinctions.

But there is more! In Acts 10, God communicated to Peter that he should regard Gentiles as clean and equal partners with God's holy people. God did this by presenting Peter with a menagerie of unclean animals and commanding him to eat them. God declared reptiles clean when Gentiles could enter the church. Thus the abrogation of the food laws in the new covenant means that you, if you are a non-Jew, may enter the kingdom of God. Hallelujah!

But there is more! The Bible says that someday, everything will not only be clean (with potential for holy use), but actually holy. The last verse of Zechariah points to this. Revelation also gives a picture of heavenly Jerusalem devoid of anything unclean (21:27). This is the future that we prepare for today, by following Jesus as his disciples. Let us live inwardly and outwardly holy lives now, pointing away from ourselves to Christ, as we await the sanctification of the universe. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!