

-Save This Page as a PDF-

Gentiles during the Second Temple Period

During the Second Temple period, **Gentiles** were characterized in general not only as idolaters but also - and consequently - as violent, dirty, immoral, and impure. **Cattle may not be left in the inns of the Gentiles since they are suspected of bestiality; nor may a woman remain alone with them since they are suspected of lewdness; nor may a man remain alone with them since they are suspected of shedding blood. The daughter of an Israelite may not assist a Gentile woman in childbirth since she would be assisting to bring to birth a child for idolatry (Abodah Zarah 2:1, also see Matthew 15:26ff; Mark 7:27ff; Romans 1:18ff; Ephesians 4:19; Colossians 1:21-22).**

Eating with an uncircumcised person was regarded as the same as eating with a “dog” or consuming the “flesh of abomination.” **Why did he [Abraham] circumcise them [the men of his household]? Because of purity, so that they should not defile their masters with their food and with their drink, for whosoever eats with an uncircumcised person is as though he were eating flesh as though he were eating with a dog. All who bathe with the uncircumcised are as though they bathed with a leper, and all who touch an uncircumcised person are as though they touched the dead, for in their lifetime they are like the dead; and in their death they are like the meat of the beast, and their prayer does not come before the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said: The dead do not praise ADONAI (Psalm 115:17) (PRE - Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer 29).**

The question of precisely when **the Gentiles** first began to be regarded as Levitically unclean is frequently explained in reference to the Eighteen Decrees enacted by the Shammaites just prior to the outbreak of the War in 66. On this reading, the decrees constituted a political act designed to prevent contact between Jews and their Roman adversaries. **The acknowledgment of impurity to the Gentiles nevertheless more accurately seems to represent an extension of the Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click [Ei - The Oral Law](#)**) **concerning the uncleanness of idols to include those who worshiped them - a tradition that arose much earlier than the Eighteen**

Decrees and which the latter reinforced (TBE - Tanna debe Eliyahu page 105).

The strongest proof of the ritual impurity of **Gentiles** is perhaps reflected in the demand for a **proselyte** to be immersed upon conversion (see the commentary on **Acts Bb - An Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah 53**), together with the prohibition against **Gentiles** entering beyond **the middle wall of separation** within the courts of the Temple (see the commentary on **Acts Cn - Paul's Advice from Jacob and the Elders at Jerusalem**). **The Oral Law included doing business with Gentiles for three days preceding their festivals in order to prevent the smallest risk of being involved with their idolatrous practices (Abodah Zarah 1:1f). It was also argued that bathing in a public bathhouse could bring impurity, in other words, putting a Jew in a state of uncleanness because the bathhouse contained a statue of a goddess and a Jew who entered was at risk of participating in idol worship (Abodah Zarah 1:7, 3:4). Gentile land (its earth and air together) and Gentile houses were both regarded as primary sources of impurity.**

Food was obviously a central issue of discussion with respect to ritual purity (**Acts 11:3**), not only because of the danger of idolatry but also because of the independent food and ritual impurity laws. It appears that the peculiar nature of **Gentile** impurity led to the removal of foods that Jews could eat. **The Eighteen Decrees included a list of items prohibited because of their association with Gentiles. "On the very day they prohibited eating Gentiles' bread, their cheese, wine, vinegar, brine, muries, pickles, stews, salted foods, fish-brine, pounded spices, barley, language, testimony, offerings, sons, daughters, and first-fruits (J Shabat 1, 4, 3c-d).**

Peter's reservations in **Acts 10** include both hosting **Gentiles** and visiting **them** in **their** own homes. The issues involved in doing so included the Levitical dietary commandments founded on the distinction between clean and unclean animals, the prohibition against eating meat and milk together, slaughtering regulations, benedictions, and purity commandments - the latter only being applicable in the Land of Isra'el.

The severity of food restrictions can be seen in numerous early texts. **Judith refrained from partaking of Holofernes' food, living instead on the oil, bread, and wine which she brought from her own house (Judith 10:5, 12:1-4), while Tobit kept himself from eating the "food of the Gentiles**

(Tobit 1:11). Josephus relates that the priests sent by Felix to Rome to plead their cause before Nero subsisted on a diet of nuts and figs in their refusal to compromise Jewish dietary regulations” (Josephus *Life* 13f). Not only was much of a **Gentile’s food prohibited but his/her utensils were also considered to be ritually impure: **If a man brought utensils from a Gentile, those [of metal or glass and others used for uncooked foods] which it is the custom to immerse [in order to free them from uncleanness before use] he must immerse, those which it is the custom to scald be must scald; those which it is the custom to make white-hot in the fire he must make white-hot in the fire. A spit must be made white-hot in the fire; but a knife needs to be polished and it is then clean (Abodah Zarah 5:12).****

In addition to the restrictions regulating what food was permitted, it was also forbidden to say a blessing over food dedicated to idols. Eating food which a pagan considered to be sanctified to his god was equivalent to co-operating in the deification of created things and hence a blasphemy to **the Creator** – who would be blessed over the same food. The benediction would consequently become a curse. **Rabbi Simon said, “If three have eaten at one table and have not spoken threat words of the Torah [it is] as if they had eaten sacrifices [offered] to the dead, for [of such persons] it is said, ‘For all tables are full of filthy vomit, [they are] without the All-Present (Isaiah 28:8). But, if three have eaten at the table of the All-Present, blessed be He, as it is said: This is the table of the Presence of ADONAI (Ezeki’el 41:22) (Pirkei Avot/Sayings of the Fathers 3:3).**

Those who partake of idolatry cannot bless **the Creator** for their food and therefore are also unworthy to host the presence of **the Ruach ha-Kodesh**. This attitude is found in several rabbinic sayings, sometimes based on the example of Hezekiah. **Among the things a man should keep in mind is taking care not to sit at the table of a heathen Gentile. For [we find], as set forth concerning Hezekiah, king of Judah, that he sat at a table with a heathen Gentile, and because he did, consequently had great punishment imposed on him . . . Hence, we conclude, he who sits at a table with a heathen is on his way to heathen worship and to eat sacrifices to lifeless idols. If such a man is a disciple of the wise, he belittles his learning in the Torah, blasphemes the name of his Father [in heaven], wastes his possessions, turns his sons over to his enemies - indeed, kills them with the sword or causes them to be exiled from their Land (TBE - Tanna debe Eliyyahu pages 46 and 48).⁵⁷**