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Ritually Clean and Unclean Animals

11: 1-47

The whole of **Leviticus 11** is dedicated to the subject of **ritually clean** and **ritually unclean animals**. Sometimes different translations are made such as **pure** or **impure**. **The ArtScroll Chumash uses the words pure and contaminated**. I will be using the words **ritually clean** or **ritually unclean**, which, in my opinion, come closer to the Hebrew. It is the first discussion in a series of chapters relating to the **purity codes**. **ADONAI** declared that **the priests** were to **distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the ritually clean and ritually unclean; so that you will teach the people of Isra'el all the mitzvot God had told them through Moshe (10:10-11)**. But before we can begin to learn about the dietary mitzvot we must first learn the basic distinction between **ritually clean and ritually unclean**. Next, with regard to food, if **God** declared something to be **holy**, then to be able to identify **it**, there would naturally have to be something that was **common** or **unholy**. Everything couldn't be **holy**.

Ritual impurity is the biblical concept that a person can be in a state which, according to the Torah, prevents the person from having any contact with the Tabernacle or Temple and its sacrifices. God was in the process of teaching His people a critical spiritual reality.

This reality is that **life** does not mix with **death**; sin does not mix with **righteousness**; **sacred** does not mix with **profane**; and **idolatry** does not mix with **Ha'Shem!** In other words, the declaration of being **ritually clean** or **unclean** teaches mankind about the issues of **life** and **death**. By declaring **a person ritually unclean**, **ADONAI** was saying, in effect, "You are in a state where you have either sinned yourself or have come into contact with the realm of **sin and death**. I want you to know that **My Kingdom** is totally different from that realm. Thus, **I** must prohibit you from drawing near to **Me** in a **ritually unclean** state. The lesson was this: just as there were only two conditions, **ritually clean** or **unclean**, regarding offering sacrifices and drawing near to **YHVH**, so there are only two realms or kingdoms. One can be called **the kingdom of this world, the kingdom of darkness, Satan's kingdom, the kingdom of Adam, or the kingdom of sin and death**. **The second kingdom** can be called **the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Messiah, the kingdom of light, or the kingdom of life and**

righteousness.¹⁵⁸

Concepts of **ritual purity** and **impurity** are some of the most difficult of all biblical concepts to grasp. The ideas of **ritual cleanliness** and **uncleanliness** are completely removed from our Western context. **They** are also misleading because it seems as if **ritually clean and unclean** are talking about hygiene, as if a **ritually unclean** person is actually dirty or soiled. The terms **pure and impure** can be misleading because **they** might imply a moral state as if an **impure** person was less morally upright than a **pure** person. **Ritual impurity** is quite independent of physical **cleanliness**. It certainly does not imply sinfulness.



The Hebrew word *tamei* is variously translated as *ritual impurity, uncleanness, defilement, and the like*. Its antithesis, *tahor*, is translated as *ritual purity or cleanliness*. In an attempt to come to a definitive understanding of these terms, it is easier to say what **they** are not than it is to say what **they** are. **Ritual impurity** is not a physical condition in-and-of itself, but a defiling disease like leprosy could render that person **ritually unclean**. When discussing **ritual cleanness** and **uncleanness**, we are not speaking about dirt, grime or germs. It is not at all biological. It has nothing to do with bacterial infections or communicable diseases. **Ritually clean** and **unclean** are not health issues. **The Torah** didn't quarantine lepers because they were contagious; it quarantined them because they were **ritually unclean**. In the same way, **the Torah** doesn't forbid pork because of the threat of trichinosis or for any other health issue. If so, it should have forbidden chicken because of the threat of salmonella. **The Torah** forbids pork because **God** says it is **ritually unclean**. To be sure, there are real and positive health benefits for us if we follow **the Torah's** dietary mitzvot. **The Father** has our physical bodies in mind; and modern medical science continues to validate the medical wisdom of **the Torah's** dietary mitzvot. Yet the mitzvot of **ritual cleanliness** and **uncleanliness** are larger in scope than good health advice.

In short, being **ritually unclean** is not a physical condition; on the other hand, **it** is not purely a spiritual condition either. It is not sin or transgression. It is not guilt or punishment. It is in no way to be considered bad, sinful or evil. For example, a menstruating woman is considered **ritually unclean**. However, menstruation cannot be understood to be a sin. Crossing through a cemetery renders a person **ritually unclean**, yet it is regarded as a good deed to accompany the **dead** to burial. **A ritually unclean animal** such as a camel is no more shamefully or morally bankrupt than **a ritually clean animal** like a giraffe. **Clean (*tahor*) and unclean (*tamei*) must then be understood as purely ritual states as related to the Tabernacle.**

In practical terms, **Leviticus 11** refers to **dead** things: **dead animals and dead people**. So, a live, **ritually unclean animal**, does not render it **ritually unclean** while alive. Thus, it is not **contaminating** to own a cat - at least not in Levitical terms. Only when it is **dead** does its carcass render a person or substance **ritually unclean** through physical contact. **A ritually clean animal** is designated as **ritually clean** because after it is butchered and the blood removed, contact with its carcass does not render a person **ritually unclean**. On the other hand, the **dead** body of **a ritually clean animal** will render a person **ritually unclean** if it has **died** for some reason other than being butchered by ritual slaughter. Thus, a cow that dies as road kill is just as **ritually contaminating** as pig's flesh.

The distinction between **ritually clean** and **unclean animals** did not originate in **Leviticus** or the Sinai covenant. There is evidence that pigs were regarded as **ritually unclean** by the Babylonians. Noah knew the difference between **ritually clean** and **unclean animals** even before the Flood. The distinction was most probably decided upon the basis of eligibility for sacrifice. Of those **animals** that were suitable for sacrifice, seven pairs were taken into the ark. Of those that were not, only one pair was taken.

Yet, we might wonder, if the distinction between **ritually clean and unclean animals** existed in the days of Noah, why is there no mention of dietary mitzvot pertaining to **ritual cleanness** and **uncleanness** until **Leviticus 11**? We might ask the same question in regard to the mitzvot of emissions and leprosy. These mitzvot come immediately after the story of the **death of Nadab and Abihu**. The **death of the two sons of Aaron** has sufficiently impressed us with the hazards involved in approaching **Ha'Shem** in **the Tabernacle** (see [Bh - The Death of Nadab and Abihu](#)). The mitzvot of being **ritually clean** and **unclean** were all Tabernacle related. Entering into the presence of **God** in **His Tabernacle** while in the state of **ritual impurity** was not only a sin, it was dangerous, just as **Nadab** and **Abihu** found out. **Thus, you will separate the people of Isra'el from their ritual uncleanness, so that they will not die in a state of ritual uncleanness for defiling**

My Tabernacle which is there with them (Leviticus 15:31).¹⁵⁹

Freedom in Messiah: The Bible tells us specifically why these mitzvot were given . . . **do not make yourselves ritually unclean, do not defile yourselves with them . . . for you are to be holy, because I am holy (11:43-45).** Thus, the purpose of eating kosher was/is to set **Isra'el** aside as a separate **holy** nation. Not for salvation. According to **Paul** when a person does any part of **Torah** to earn merit or keep any part of his atonement, his justification received by grace through faith and accomplished in total by the **death** and resurrection of **Yeshua Messiah**, then that becomes legalism! But, on the other hand, because **the Lord** has written **Torah** on our hearts as a new creation (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Eo - I Will Make a New Covenant with the People of Isra'el**), it has now become part of our basic identity. We can then join with Paul, as well as **tens-of-thousands** of other **Jewish** believers about whom it is said: **You see, brother, how many tens-of-thousands** (or a minimum of twenty-thousand **Jewish** believers in **Jerusalem** alone not counting the rest of the country) **there are among the Jewish people who have believed - and they are zealous for the Torah. They** saw no contradiction in **their** faith in **Yeshua** and **their** zealousness for the **Torah (21:17-20).**

If **Paul** wanted to teach against a believer, especially a **Jewish** believer, living according to **the Torah** (which would include dietary mitzvot), that would have been a good time to do so. But, in fact, **he** teaches the exact opposite and confirms that not only is it permissible but **he himself** lived that way also! Thus, if **Isra'el**, especially remnant **Isra'el** - and those who are grafted into **Isra'el** - see the importance of maintaining **their** identity as a holy nation, then why should anyone be discouraged from it?¹⁶⁰

In the final analysis, today Messianic Jews and Gentiles have the freedom in Messiah to choose whether they want to eat kosher or not (see the commentary on **First Corinthians Bm - The Weaker Brother or Sister**).