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Paul on Food Rendered Common by Idols
First Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14

Paul on food rendered common by idols DIG: Why is it particularly difficult for the modern-day reader to identify with the problem of food sacrificed to idols? What does the Bible have to say about eating food sacrificed to idols or participating in an idolatrous feast?

REFLECT: What taboos do you have regarding eating? Where did they come from? What are they based on? What problems have they caused you? Your health? Your friends? Your relationship with ADONAI? How can you change? Who can you help with food this week?

Paul's attitude toward meat sacrificed to idols was one of caution.



Whether or not it was possible to **eat meat** that had been **sacrificed to idols** was a divisive issue among believers in the First Century. There is a considerable amount of debate committed to the issue with the letters of **Paul**. The question is less straightforward than we might imagine. A closer examination of the First

Century situation and a comparison of the ***halachah*** reveals layers of complexity that the modern reader could scarcely guess. It is an issue that is not well understood. Nor is it often discussed, because it is largely a moot question in today's world.

When we buy **meat** from the modern supermarket, we never concern ourselves with whether or not it has been **sacrificed to an idol**. Yet, in the days of the apostles, this was a real concern. **Meat** bought in the marketplace of **Corinth** or **Ephesus** or any diaspora city was very likely the prime cuts from a temple sacrifice earlier that morning or leftovers from an **idolatrous** ritual-feast enjoyed the previous night. The first drawing of each vat of wine made by Gentile wine makers was almost certainly poured out to the Greek god of wine. **In the opinion of the Sages, that rendered the rest of the wine in the vat as "sacrificed to an idol" and unfit for consumption.**

In the halachah of the First Century, there was a deep concern with food sacrificed to idols. Partaking of **food** or drink which had been offered to a pagan god was expressly forbidden. Even among the believers, this was never allowed. **Acts 15:20** clearly forbids even the Gentile believers from **eating** things offered to **idols**. And as late as the writing of the book of **Revelation**, **the Master** rebuked the church at **Pergamum** for holding to the doctrine of Balaam, that is, **eating food that had been sacrificed to idols (Revelation 2:14)**. **Messiah** also rebuked the church at **Thyatira** for **eating food sacrificed to idols (Revelation 2:20).**

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for being an Awesome and Holy **God**! Heaven will be wonderful because we will live with **You** where there is no sin. **Your** love and holiness work together when **You** give **Your** righteousness to those who love **You** as their **Lord (Romans 10:9-10)** and **Savior. He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21,** also see **Isaiah 53:4-6,11).** In **Your** Holy **Son's Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*

Kosher **food** which had been offered in part to **an idol** or as part of **an idolatrous** feast was regarded as "common" (Greek: *koinos*). This is not the same thing as saying it was unclean (Hebrew: *tamei*). The Greek word for ritually unclean is *akathartos*. The LXX translates *tamei* as *akathartos. Koinos*, therefore, does not refer to impurity as defined by the Torah.

Though some among the **Corinthian** believers thought **the meat sacrificed to idols** should be permissible to them (see the commentary on **First Corinthians, to see link click Bt – Using Freedom for God's Glory**), **Paul** sternly warned them against knowingly **eating food sacrificed to idols. He** warned them that to do so would create a stumbling block for weaker believers (see the commentary on **First Corinthians Bm – The Weaker Brother or Sister**). Thus, he warned them to **flee from idolatry (First Corinthians 10:14)**, and refuse to **eat** any **food** which was known with certainty to have been offered to **an idol (First Corinthians 10:27-28)**.

On the other hand, **Paul** concedes that one need not be concerned regarding whether **food** in the **meat** market was **sacrificed to idols** or not. **He** said: **Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; "for the Earth is ADONAI's, and all that is in it" (First Corinthians 10:25-26** quoting **Psalm 24:1). Paul's** point is that **he ate** unto **ADONAI,** not unto **an idol**. **If I participate with thankfulness, why am I criticized over something for which I myself bless God?" Well, whatever you do, whether it's eating or drinking or anything else, do it all so as to bring glory to God (First Corinthians 10:30-31).** Therefore, as long as **he** didn't know **it** was offered to **an idol**, **he** assumed it wasn't. Instead, **he ate it** unto **ADONAI**. It was something of a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, quite the opposite of the stringent, rigidity that Pharisaic Judaism was prescribing for the matter.

Yet, **Paul** did not go so far as to sanction intentional **eating** of **meat sacrificed to idols**. **He** warned **the Corinthians** not to **eat** with **an idolater, "No, what I wrote you was not to associate with anyone who is supposedly a brother but who also engages in sexual immorality, is greedy, worships idols, is abusive, gets drunk or steals. With such a person you shouldn't even eat (First Corinthians 5:11)!** So too, **he** warned **the Ephesians** not to **partake with idolaters (Ephesians 5:5-7),** and he reminded **the Corinthians that the table** (that is, the altar) **of idols is the table of demons (First Corinthians 10:20-21).**

In the final analysis, **Paul's** attitude toward **meat sacrificed to idols** was one of caution. **He** forbid believers from intentionally **eating food sacrificed to idols**, but **he** steered them away from banning them from **eating meat** from the market, or in the homes of unbelievers, for even suspecting **it** might have been **sacrificed** earlier. **He** reminded them **the Corinthians** that **food would not improve your relationship with God – they would neither be poorer if they abstained nor**

richer if ate (First Corinthians 8:8).[188]

Paul does not take a hard stand on the issue of **foods** that have only potentially been offered to **an idol**. The conservatives in **Rome** certainly considered **foods** prepared by **Gentiles** as *koinos* (common) because **they** were potentially defiled by **idolatry**. Rather than **eat meat** or **drink wine** which might have been associated with **idolatry** and thereby rendered *koinos*, those conservatives choose to refrain from **meat** and **wine** and **eat only vegetables** as **Dani'el** did in Babylon. **Paul** regards this as a debatable matter and leaves it to one's own conscience. **One person has the trust that will allow him to eat anything, while another whose trust is weak eats only vegetables. The one who eats anything must not look down on the one who abstains; and the abstainer must not pass judgment on the one who eats anything, because God has accepted him – who are you to pass judgment on someone else's servant? It is before his own master that he will stand or fall; and the fact is that he will stand, because the Lord is able to make him stand (Romans 14:2-4).**

Though **Paul** advocates tolerance of those who insist on regarding **meat** and **drink** potentially defiled by **idolatry** as *koinos*, **he himself** is convinced that no **food** is koinos. **He** said as much to **the** congregation in **Rome**. **I know – that is, I have been persuaded by the Lord – that nothing is unclean** (*koinos*) **in itself. But if a person considers something unclean** (*koinos*)**, then for him it is unclean** (*koinos*) **(Romans 14:14).**

Unfortunately, this passage is almost universally misapplied to mitzvot of **clean and unclean animals** (see **Bk – Ritually Clean and Unclean Animals**) as if **Paul** said that **nothing is unclean** (*akathartos*) **in itself. He** did not use the Greek equivalent for **unclean**, **he** used the equivalent word for common. There is a huge difference between the two. **His** statement that **nothing is unclean in itself** is completely unrelated to the mitzvot of **clean and unclean animals.** It is a question of whether or not **food** is permissible when **it** has been potentially offered to **an idol**. As in **Corinthians**, **he** warns **his** readers not to let their liberal interpretation of **food sacrificed to idols** become a **stumbling** block to others. **Don't tear down God's work for the sake of food. True enough, all things are clean; but it is wrong for anybody by his eating to cause someone to fall away. What is good is not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble (Romans 14:20-21).**

Notice that in this passage **Paul** mentions **wine** as one of the questionable **foods**.

The Torah never speaks of **ritually unclean wine**. Wine is a *koinos* issue, not a **clean/unclean** issue. Clearly, **Paul** is speaking about the issue of **food** potentially being rendered *koinos* by contact with **Gentiles** and/or **idolatry**. Unfortunately, when passages like **First Corinthians 8-10** and **Romans 14** are taken out of their First Century Jewish background, far too often, people completely misunderstand them. Those who do not understand the Jewish perspective imagine that **Paul** is sanctioning the consumption of unclean meats forbidden by the Torah. Nothing could be further from the truth.[189]