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Leviticus 11

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Clean and unclean animals.

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Transcript

Leviticus chapter 11. I'm going to read this to you. I'm going to read this to you.

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For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy. This is the law about beast and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms on the ground,

to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.

It is a lot easier to understand the logic of Leviticus chapter 11 and what follows if we recognise that a creation and fall pattern is playing out in the book. The establishment of the tabernacle worship was like a new creation event but the sin of Nadab and Abihu was a new fall. After the original fall the Lord addressed the serpent, the woman and then the man and declared judgment.

A similar pattern can be observed here. After the fall and the new Eden of the tabernacle we have first a passage dealing with the uncleanness of animals corresponding with the judgment upon the serpent. In chapter 12 we deal with the uncleanness of women in the context of childbirth corresponding with the judgment upon the woman in Genesis chapter 3. In chapters 13 to 14 there are laws concerning those struck with and exiled on account of a skin disease corresponding to the judgment upon the man and his exile from the garden.

Chapter 15 deals with the corruption of the flesh through death and then in chapter 16 as the Lord covered Adam and Eve with skins after the fall the Lord provides for the covering of his fallen people through the day of atonement. With this pattern in mind, even beyond understanding why it is placed where it is within the book certain aspects of the logic of chapter 11 will become slightly less opaque. The criteria for determining which animals are clean and unclean at many points suggest that unclean animals are those with similar features to the serpent as Nobayashi Kiyuchi argues.

They are for instance associated with the unclean dust or have an affinity to death as carnivores or carrion creatures. There are similar instructions concerning dietary laws in Deuteronomy chapter 14 where it is connected with the third commandment Israel is a holy people to the Lord their God and they should not bear the name of the Lord in vain. Even though there is a similar rationale for the commandments here there is a significant difference between Deuteronomy chapter 14 and Leviticus chapter 11.

Leviticus chapter 11 is not narrowly focused upon dietary requirements as is Deuteronomy chapter 14. Much of this chapter concerns broader forms of defilement that can come about from handling or contact with unclean animals and their bodies. Both originally in the garden and then also after the flood in Genesis chapter 9 new food commandments were given to the people.

The Lord permitted Adam and Eve to eat of any of the trees of the garden. Only one tree was forbidden them, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil at the centre of the garden. In Genesis chapter 9 Noah and his sons are permitted to eat of all the different animals.

The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon

every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you.

And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Along with this gift of food in verses 2 to 3 there is a restriction upon what can be eaten in verses 4 and 5. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning from every beast I will require it, and from man, from his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

Prior to the flood there is already some sort of distinction between clean and unclean animals that is operative. But man is able to eat of all of the animals, not just the clean ones. The food restrictions that are given to Israel seem to relate to its set apart status.

They are connected with its holiness, a point that is underlined at the end. They should be holy as the Lord their God is holy. A connection between the dietary laws and holiness is found elsewhere, in places like Leviticus chapter 20 verses 24 to 26.

But I have said to you, you shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the Lord your God who has separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean.

You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird, or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine. The class of sacrificial animals does not exactly coincide with the class of clean animals.

The class of sacrificial animals comprises oxen, goats, sheep, doves and pigeons. But there are other clean animals that could be eaten, but could not be sacrificed, such as deer. There are other animals that were unclean, that were important parts of Israel's life, such as the donkey.

The principal sacrificial animals, apart perhaps from the pigeons, were all domesticated animals. But not all domesticated animals were clean or sacrificial. Fish are another example of animals that could be clean, but not sacrificial.

Various theories have been advanced to try to understand the rationale between what is clean and unclean. Some have argued that being unclean is connected with being unnatural or abnormal, but this theory seems to be a weaker one. Others think that the animals that are unclean are dirty animals, or perhaps the Lord made these restrictions for health reasons.

There are various detailed criteria according to which animals can be discerned to be

either clean or unclean. Chewing the cud, having a cloven hoof, hopping on the ground rather than crawling on it, having scales as a fish. These criteria don't seem to be arbitrary, so we ought to consider what holds them all together.

Many have maintained that the forbidden creatures are typically carnivores, predators and carrion creatures. Animals that chew the cud and have split hooves are herbivores. Indeed, Jewish oral law argued that, apart from the criteria that we have here, you could tell the difference between clean and unclean animals by unclean animals' possession of canine teeth.

Kaiichi points out the similarity of the unclean animals with the serpent. The serpent is directly connected with the dust. The reference to creatures that go on their belly in verse 42 of this chapter is only the second time in the Bible after Genesis chapter 3 that moving on the belly is mentioned.

The suggestion then would be that unclean animals have characteristics of the cursed serpent. They have the same connection with the curse-bearing earth that the serpent does. Clean animals have cloven hooves.

They have, as it were, shoes that divide them from the earth. The divide in their hooves, Kaiichi argues, might also be a suggestion of a differentiation between clean and unclean. Clean animals are ruminants.

They thoroughly digest their food. This is in contrast to the serpent who swallows it whole, not engaging in the sort of chewing over that is characteristic of righteous meditation upon the world. Unclean birds are birds of prey and carrion birds.

Clean fish also have scales that serve as a sort of armour against the uncleanness that surrounds them. We might also consider that sea creatures without scales are most similar to the serpent, things like eels. These dietary requirements seem to have been exclusive to Israel.

It's a sign of Israel's holy status, marking Israel out, but also teaching Israel to be a people who make distinctions concerning what they take in to their life. Like the clean animals, they need to be separated from defilement. They need to be discriminating like those animals with cloven hooves and the animals that ruminate rather than just swallowing their food whole.

We should also consider the fact that even if Israel did not have these commandments, very few of these animals would have been on the menu. These commandments then seem to serve a symbolic purpose beyond the merely practical one. In contrast to Deuteronomy chapter 14, Leviticus chapter 11 gives a lot of attention to forms of defilement by means of these unclean animals beyond merely eating them.

Touching the carcasses of unclean animals was also defiling, not merely eating their

flesh. Becoming unclean was not in itself a sin, and most of the forms of defilement mentioned here were fairly minor. The uncleanness only attached to the person for the rest of the day.

When the evening came, they were no longer considered unclean. Nevertheless, for the duration of their uncleanness, they were exiled from the presence of God. Lee Travaskas has argued that this served an educational function for Israel.

They were supposed to avoid the underlying reality of uncleanness and be holy to the Lord. And every single time they were unclean through contact with an unclean animal's carcass, they were frustrated in their enjoyment of fellowship with God. Such commandments could make them very fastidious about avoiding becoming unclean, and increasingly alert to the reality of holiness and the importance of being set apart to the Lord.

Becoming unclean oneself, or having some object in one's possession become unclean, could prove greatly frustrating and inconveniencing. Swarming things in particular, because of their close proximity with the curse-bearing dust, are bearers of uncleanness. The underlying rationale for all of these laws concerning cleanness in relationship to animals eating them and touching their carcasses is given in the conclusion of the chapter.

It is to teach Israel about holiness. They are to learn to make distinctions, to distinguish between clean and unclean, and to learn from the clean animals about the sorts of people that they ought to be. In their concern about being defiled by unclean animals, they should learn something about the danger of being defiled by sin.

Practically speaking, Israel could only enjoy close fellowship with God as they kept clean, and could go to the Lord's presence at the tabernacle. Not to take cleanness seriously was not to take Israel's status as a people holy to the Lord seriously. And so, being scrupulous about these commandments was an important manifestation of Israel's commitment to the covenant.

A question to consider, why does the church not observe such dietary requirements in the new covenant?