

TWO BY TWO, SEVEN BY SEVEN:
NOAH AND THE LEVITICAL
DIETARY RESTRICTIONS:

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Adventists note that Noah himself distinguishes between “clean” and “unclean” animals in Gen 7:2-3,7-9. Consequently, they reason that the dietary restrictions outlined in Lev 11 were also in effect at the time of the patriarchs. However, Gen 9:1-3 excludes this assumption:

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered [given]. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.

God delivers “every animal of the earth... every bird of the air... everything that creeps on the ground, and... all the fish of the sea” into the power of Noah and his sons so that “every moving thing that lives shall be food for you” (9:2-3). This universal dominion over animal life is a dietary one; the Hebrew verb translated “delivered” in 9:2 (נָתַן; “given”), appears again in 9:3 (נָתַן; “gave”), where it particularly describes the donation of both plants and animals *for human consumption*.¹ (The same verb form is also used in the dietary grant of 1:29, to which 9:3b explicitly alludes.) Thus, the fear resting upon all the animals of the earth is, precisely, that which exists within prey and is directed towards a predator.

The universality of the dietary grant in 9:2-3 transcends the limits added in Lev 11. The latter passage discriminates *within* the four classes of animals mentioned in 9:2; conversely, Gen 9 grants Noah predatorial

1. Only two restrictions are enjoined in the passage. First, Gen 9:4 excludes the consumption of animal blood. Second, the occurrence of the qualification “that lives” (9:3) excludes the consumption of animals that died of natural causes, as in Lev 11:40; Deut 14:21. (Mulzac, Kenneth, “Genesis 9:1-7: Its Theological Connections with the Creation Motif,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 12:1, 2001, 65-77, 72.)

dominion over “every” animal in each class. Therefore, the restrictions outlined in Lev 11 are later, that is, Mosaic in origin.

However, the issue of the “clean” and “unclean” discrimination in Gen 7 remains. In the light of the above evidence, this distinction does not reflect a dietary restriction placed upon Noah; rather, it represents a cultic distinction, as demonstrated by 8:20: “then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar.” In this context, “clean” animals are those approved for use in ritual sacrifice; God instructs Noah to take extra representatives of such animals (7:2-3) specifically for use in sacrifice (as in 8:20).

This observation allows us to understand the reasons behind the dietary restrictions imposed in Lev 11. As God reserved certain animals for His cult, so He also reserved Israel for His cult. The Mosaic application of the former distinction into the dietary habits of the Israelites therefore emblemizes their cultic identity. The holy people of God must eat only the holy things of God.

Adventist attempts to defend the Levitical dietary restrictions as universally-binding health laws are eisegetical; Scripture nowhere excludes “unclean” meats in view of their insalubrity. Instead, Lev 11 introduces its dietary laws as a corollary of Israel’s cultic identity:

You shall not make yourselves detestable with any [unclean] creature... you shall not defile yourselves with them, and so become unclean. For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves... For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy. (11:43-45; cf. Deut 14:2,21)

The Mosaic dietary restrictions forbade the partaking of “unclean” animals, lest the consumer himself be “defiled... and so become unclean” (Lev 11:43,45; cf. Lev 20:25)—matters of ceremonial purity. Against these very words, Christ affirmed:

Nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’... In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean.’... What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’ (Mark 7:18-19)

Mosaic ceremonial distinctions—especially in matters of “food and drink”—were but “shadows”; “external regulations applying until the time of the new order” (Heb 9:10, NIV). Moral realities transcend them. The author of Mark, grasping the significance of Christ’s words (vis-à-vis Lev

11), editorializes in 7:19: “in saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean’” (cf. Rom 14:14,20; Tit 1:14-15).

Therefore, after the dissolution of the Israelite ceremonial laws, Jewish Christians abandoned the observation of cultic dietary restrictions, however gradually: cf. Acts 10:14; 11:3; Gal; 2:11-14. The Church restored the universal platter of Noah, with the qualification that although “‘everything is permissible’—not everything is beneficial” (1 Cor 11:23).

At its heart, this freedom manifests the universal embrace of the Christian gospel, which transcends all former division between peoples. The cultic distinction between Israel and its neighbors—preserved in dietary laws—is broken; the Mosaic Law abolished. Christ sanctifies men of all nations, so that all are “clean” through Him (Acts 10:15,28), irrespective of their ceremonial diet. As Paul joyfully proclaims:

For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two... So he came and proclaimed peace to you [gentiles] who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundations of the apostles... (Ephesians 2:14-15,17-19).

Accordingly, “built upon the foundations of the apostles,” the Catholic Church acknowledges the end of the Mosaic dietary restrictions.