Acts 10 Is Not About Food! **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Monday, 23 July 2018 - 19:48



Read time: 9 minutes
A couple of months ago I was listening to a sermon by someone whom I respect and whose work I appreciate. He is faithful to the Bible and in building up the church. The sermon was on what it is that sets Christians apart from the rest of the world. He drew parallels with how the ancient nation of Israel was to be set apart (Deuteronomy 14:2). They were meant to live in a way which was distinct from their neighbours—metaphorically as well as spiritually—so that they could be a light to the other nations (Exodus 34:10). The laws given through Moses to ancient Israel was not a way to become holy, but to show their holiness (that is, that they are *set apart* by God to live according to His will). As such, we do not need to fret over individual laws and what they mean; indeed, as an example, in Acts 10 God abolished the dietary laws of the Old Testament!

Except, that He did not.

To be clear: this was a good sermon with an important fundamental message with which I agree. It is not the purpose of this article to summarise in full, comment on, or criticise that sermon. But this one point, about Acts 10 abolishing dietary laws, needs to be addressed. I feel compelled to do so, because this sermon was not the only place where I had encountered this claim.

Acts 10 really is a watershed moment in salvation history; the importance of it cannot be understated. As the apostles and disciples were working out the commission given by Jesus in Acts 1:8 to spread the gospel throughout Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, a question arose: is salvation only for God's chosen people—the Jews—or for all people? This was a massive question. It was so important, that it was not answered by an ecumenical council or apostolic authority, as many other important theological questions would be answered afterwards (see for example Acts 15). No, instead it was answered by God Himself, who gave Peter a vision:

> Peter went up on the housetop to pray at about noon. He became hungry and desired to eat, but while they were preparing, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and a certain container descending to him, like a great sheet let down by four corners on the earth, in which were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild animals, reptiles, and birds of the sky. A voice came to him, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat!" But Peter said, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." A voice came to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean." This was done three times, and immediately the vessel was received up into heaven.
>
> Acts 10:9b–16

Peter goes to pray at midday and, likely not having had lunch yet, became hungry. God then gave him a fantastical vision in which an enormous sheet is lowered from the sky with all manner of

animals inside. The command comes from heaven that he should kill the animals and eat them to satisfy his hunger. From the list of animals we know that it contained many types of animals which were unclean, and therefore not permissible for Jews to eat (see, for example, Deuteronomy 14:3–20). God's command to Peter was indiscriminate, however: kill any and all, and eat[1]! Peter, being a faithful Jew, objects (compare Ezekiel 4): he has never defiled himself in such a manner; he would rather continue going hungry than break God's commandment to Moses that Jews should not eat certain meats. This episode repeats three times for emphasis (compare Peter's denial of Jesus) before the sheet is retracted into heaven.

The interpretation of this vision is given by Peter himself in Acts 10:27–29 and Acts 10:34–35. He explains that what God declare to be clean, should not be considered unclean because of past prejudices. In this case, those people who believe and embrace the salvation offered by Jesus are to be accepted into the church family.

This might sound like common sense to us, but we should not underestimate the importance of what happened here. This really was an earth-shattering revelation. As mentioned earlier, the disciples were wondering about whether the gospel message had any relevance for people who were not Jews. Historically, Jews—as God's chosen people—kept themselves separate from non-Jews. Jews would barely associate with non-Jews, going as far as to not even going into the homes of non-Jews (see John 18:28–29[2] and Acts 10:28). Indeed, in Ezra 10, Jews were made to undergo mass divorce to get rid of their non-Jewish spouses so that the nation could be kept "pure"[3].

But, suddenly, through God's revelation, He—as the one true and living God—became accessible to non-Jews! Suddenly, the apostle's commission took on a whole new dimension, as they were not meant to cover only geography in spreading the gospel, but peoples and individuals as well! The implications were, and still are, staggering. Salvation truly is universal. God does not show favouritism.

This is the message of Acts 10. And every honestly Bible believing Christian will recognise and believe it.

But Christians have a love affair with bacon and shellfish, and seemingly grab every opportunity to affirm their prerogative to indulge in all kinds of foods. Therefore, it is only natural to assume that God, having a busy schedule, combined two great revelations into a single vision: salvation is for the gentiles, and Christians can feast on the buffet of all of God's good creation!

This is not so, however. Thinking about our stomachs when faced with such an amazing revelation such as Jesus's universally applicable salvation is an affront to this message. We need to take it for it's symbolic, and not literal, interpretation, because *that is how Peter himself interprets the vision*. Nowhere does Peter mention anything about food when explaining the vision to anyone.

We also do not *need* to shoehorn the literal interpretation into this text to justify eating whatever we want. Elsewhere, in Mark 7:19, it is *explicitly* stated that Jesus "declared all foods clean" (NIV and ESV); in other words, nothing which is eaten causes a person to become unclean or is a sin[4]. We do not need any further justification.

It can be tempting to insert our own desired outcomes into the Bible. But we need to let it speak for itself[5]. Acts 10 should not and cannot (by the explicit explanation of the text itself) be read to be about what kinds of meat may be eaten. That is offensive to the wonderful message which God was bringing by reading it as literal when there is no hint that this was God's intention that it should be read as such. Like Peter, let us rather forget our stomachs for just a bit, and instead of (metaphorically) gorging ourselves on invented interpretations, stand in awe and wonder and this truly awesome revelation, that many of us—as non-Jews—can have access to Jesus and His work of salvation!

- 1. This is not the first time God seemingly commanded Jews to act in way contrary to the laws and statutes which He gave to Israel, particularly regarding what may be eaten and what not. In Ezekiel 4, God commands the prophet Ezekiel to eat food which was prepared in

such a way to make it unclean. Ezekiel pleads with God for an alternative so that he would not need to defile himself. God makes a concession, although it is (at least for the modern reader) still an unsavoury one.

- 2. Notice here how the *Roman governor* would go out of his house to meet with the Jewish officials late at night. On the one hand, he understood that Jews would not enter his house. On the other hand, this is indicative of Pilate being in a precarious position politically and needing to curry favour with the Jewish authorities to maintain the peace in his province.
- 3. Jews living in isolation would sometimes benefit them, but mostly have a negative effect, particularly in foreign countries. People were always suspicious of the Jews, who kept to themselves and did not adopt local customs. If, for example, there was an outbreak of plague, Jewish communities often would not be affected as much, because they kept themselves separate from the affected population. On the other side, this made people even more suspicious of the Jews, accusing them of somehow starting the plague and persecuting the Jews.
- 4. It can be argued that Mark really was writing down the gospel as told by Peter, and that Peter perhaps had his vision in mind when he added the aside "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean". But this does not follow: the passages in Mark and Acts deal with fundamentally different subjects. In Mark 7, the issue at hand was food. Jesus spoke literally about what enters the mouth versus what metaphorically comes out of the heart (literally a person's intent). In Acts 10, the issue was the salvation of gentiles, and it was addressed through a metaphor; a fact which Peter himself explains.
- 5. In light of James 3:1, let us rather not put words into the mouth of God which He did not intend!

Categories:

- Bible Study [2]

Tags:

- exegesis [3]
- food laws [4]
- mosaic law [5]
- jewish law [6]
- clean [7]
- unclean [8]
- ritual purity [9]
- dietary laws [10]
- holy [11]
- set apart [12]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1190

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1190
[2] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/5
[3] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/841
[4] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/842
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/250
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/847
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/843
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/848
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/845

[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/846
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/705
[12] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/849