Be Holy: The Dietary Laws of Leviticus 11 and the Holiness of God

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I have long wondered why the LORD prohibited the Israelites from eating the camel, the rabbit, and the pig; while allowing them to eat the sheep, the goat, and the cow (Lev. 11:1-8). I was also unsure why God allowed the eating of fish with fins and scales, while disallowing those without fins and scales. That automatically excludes some of my favorite foods—prawns, crabs, squids, and shellfish (Lev. 11:9-12). What has the daily diet of the Israelites got to do with the holiness of God? Why did he declare certain foods clean and unclean? Why was God so concerned with it that he laid down these laws in Leviticus?

In that holiness is the key theme of Leviticus, it is conspicuous that the command, “be holy, for I am holy,” is set against the background of the ritual purity laws of Leviticus 11-15 and the holiness laws of Leviticus 18-26 (Lev. 11:44; cf. 19:2). These laws detail to the people of Israel the right way of worshiping God, in their covenant role as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6, ESV). The dietary laws are located in these laws, being the first of several purity laws required by Yahweh. Yahweh ordained that the fundamental role of the Aaronic priests of Israel is to maintain purity by distinguishing what is holy and common and clean and unclean, and to teach the divine statutes to the people of Israel (Lev. 10:9-10). Leviticus 11 then states the regulations for how to distinguish between clean and unclean animals.

Thus, the holy and common and clean and unclean categories in Leviticus 11-15 are pivotal to understanding the whole Levitical ritual system. The purity laws in Leviticus 11-15 tackle the distinction between the clean and unclean; while the holiness laws, the so-called holiness code of Leviticus 17-26, deal with the differences between holy and common. It is in this literary context where the dietary laws of Leviticus 11 play out its purpose—to delineate the clean and unclean animals for Israel. Yet its larger theological intention has to do with the holiness of God as seen in the concern for sacred space, with the Tabernacle right in the midst of the people of Israel, as part of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. That intent is for all Israel to move towards reflecting the holiness of God by following the purity and holiness laws, thereby meeting the standards of sacred space in the sanctuary in the presence of Yahweh. In this paper, I attempt to define what is holy and common and distinguish between clean and unclean foods according to the Levitical system. I then lay down the reasons for the dietary laws and link them with the reality of divine presence; and then survey theological implications in the NT and for Asian believers today.

Defining Holy and Common

“You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses” (Lev. 10:10-11, ESV). There are two categories here—the holy and common and the clean and unclean. In the first category, the adjective, “holy,” שַׁדֵּד, is from שֲדֵד, which denotes, “apartness, holiness, sacredness, separateness;” or “the essential nature of that which belongs to the sphere of the sacred and which is thus distinct from the common or profane . . . the antithesis of hol (‘profane,’ ‘common’).” Holiness in Leviticus is anchored in Yahweh, in

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that holiness defines him. He is holy by nature. Based on his holiness, he makes holy the people of Israel vis-à-vis the unholy nations, and the Tabernacle of his presence in contrast to the rest of the camp (Lev. 20:8, 21:8; 22:9, 16, 32). In that the divine presence of Yahweh is located in the Tabernacle, the thing that is closest to that presence, the ark of the covenant, may be considered the most holy item over all other items; and by implication, the holy of holies over the holy place, the Tabernacle over the camp, and Israel over all other nations. David P. Wright rightly defines holiness in Leviticus “as a state of being—in places, objects, persons, and time—that is commensurate with the divine presence.”

The categories of holy and common relate to the status of persons (e.g., priests), places (e.g., sanctuary), things (e.g., sacrifices), and times (e.g., Sabbath). The noun, “common,” is from הָרָע, which means, “profaneness, commonness, unholy, profane, common.” Commonness is anything that is opposite to holiness. It refers to the status of people, places, things, and time that is unconsecrated by Yahweh and to him for his service and purpose. If holiness is defined as the sacred space of divine presence, commonness is all other unsacred, earthly space. Since holiness refers to all persons, places, and things that belong to the sphere of the holy, commonness indicates such entities that belong to the sphere of the common. What is significant is that the categories of holy and common are opposite categories or polarities—what Jacob Milgrom calls, “binary opposites of qodes ‘holy’ and hol ‘common’.”

Holy persons, animals, things, or times are dedicated or consecrated by divine decree. They are holy in that they belong to the sphere of the holy as opposed to the sphere of the common. Since they are designated as holy, having been dedicated to and by God, the Levitical system cannot treat them as common (Lev. 5:15-16; 19:8, 24; 27:28). A good example would be the Levitical priest who has the status of a holy or consecrated person (Lev. 8). The man or woman in Israel, however, in contrast with the consecrated priest, is classified as common, in that he or she is not consecrated.

Mary Douglas defines the holy as “wholeness” and “completeness,” which distinguishes “the categories of creation,” noting that much of Leviticus uses the physical body as a metaphor of completeness of the individual. However, in the Levitical system, the holy is restricted to the sacrifice, the priest, and the sanctuary, as Milgrom points out. Though an impure Israelite may enter the Tabernacle, only the consecrated priest and sacrifice can be served on the altar (Lev. 21:16-23; 22:17-25). There is the degree of holiness between the High Priest and the priests, priests and the rest of the Israelites, and Israel and other nations.

In the second category, the second adjective, “clean,” is from נָעָם, which denotes in this context, “ceremonially clean, of animals; places; things; persons.” The third adjective, “unclean” נָעְמָן, is from נָעָם, which means, “ritually: a. of persons, unclean for a (dead) person . . . b. of animals. c. of things in gen.; food; houses; leprosy; offering. d. persons

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4 T. Desmond Alexander, From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Pentateuch (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 117.
6 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, “רוּמ,” BDB 8:258.
7 Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16 (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 721.
9 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 721.
and things.”

While the holy and common categories have to do with the status of persons, places, or things, the clean and unclean categories relate to their condition.

This brings us to the subject of movement—whether one can move from the status of holiness to commonness. Will uncleanness change the status of someone or something from holy to common? The answer would be no, in that impurity does not change the status of a priest from holy to common. After a ritual of cleansing from his uncleanness, the priest does not need to go through another process of re-consecration just so he can function as a priest. However, if he entered the Tabernacle in an unclean condition, he would pollute the sanctuary. Doing so requires him to bring a sin offering because he polluted the Tabernacle presence of God (Lev. 4:3-12; 16:11-14; 22:4-7). His uncleanness will not affect his status as a holy priest. But his uncleanness could spread impurities by mere contact to holy or common persons, places, or things. Thus, one’s uncleanness is transferable, but not one’s holy status. The holy status of the priest was non-transferable by mere contact to common persons, places or things (Hag. 2:12-13).

Can the holy person or thing move towards commonness or be treated as common? The answer is no, in that to do so would be to defile the person or thing. “Nor shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the LORD” (Lev. 21:12, NKJV). The verb, “profane,” קָפָה, is the piel imperfect of קָפַה, which means—“to profane, make common, defile, pollute.”

The priest is not to put the sanctuary in the condition of commonness by going out of it intentionally; or for that matter, by marrying a widow, a divorcee, a defiled woman or a prostitute. The reason is “that he may not profane his offspring among his people: for I am the Lord who sanctifies him” (Lev. 21:15, NASB). Thus, Milgrom asserts that while the common can be either clean or unclean, the holy cannot become impure, citing the sanctuary as an example, which must remain pure at all times; otherwise, any uncleanness that pollutes it must be purged. The reason is that the holy is the opposite of the common; and the clean is the antonym of the unclean. The holy is the absence of uncleanness; conversely therefore, the common is the absence of holiness.

The impure basically “poses a threat to holiness.” Thus, the holy cannot move towards the common.

Yet the system allows for the possibility of overlap. The holy can still move, not into commonness, but into uncleanness. The priest who has the status of a holy person, could still enter into a condition of uncleanness, when he marries and has children, for sexual intercourse makes people unclean (Lev. 15:16-18). Thus, a priest who does that is conditionally unclean. It violates the standards of holiness if an unclean thing gets into contact with the holy. Thus, what is holy is not always clean. Being clean does not make something holy.

Conversely, it is equally possible for someone or something to move from the category of common to holy. To do so means to consecrate the person or thing, as in the consecration of priests (Lev. 8:30; Lev. 10:10) The process of moving someone or something back and forth between the conditions of clean and unclean is by cleansing or purification (Lev. 16:30).
It must be noted that the dietary laws and the rest of the purity and holiness laws are meant to move all Israel in one direction—for the holy to enlarge its sphere in the realm of the common; and equally, for the clean to extend into the realm of the unclean, thereby diminishing it. This is the divine direction of holiness and cleanliness in the covenant nation of Israel.

**Distinguishing Between Clean and Unclean Foods**

“You are to distinguish between . . . the unclean and the clean” (Lev. 10:10, ESV). Leviticus 11 distinguishes between the clean animals that can be eaten and the unclean animals that cannot be consumed (Lev. 11:2-23, 41-45); as well as which animals can make one unclean through contact with its carcasses (Lev. 11:24-40). The chapter lists land animals, water animals, air animals, and winged insects.

Under land animals, verses 2-8 are one unit describing animals that are edible and four animals that are inedible. It closes with a prohibition against the eating of their flesh and touching of their carcasses. An animal is clean if it “divides a hoof, thus making split hoofs, and chews the cud” (Lev. 11:2, NASB). Tame, domesticated, and herbivorous animals would fall under this category. This means that the Israelites may eat sheep, goats, and cattle. The horse, having one toe, is unclean however.

The phrase, “making split hoofs,” translates the hiphil participle, מָגַרְמֶה, from מִגָּרֵם, which means, “have divided hoof.” However, later in the chapter, it says, “Concerning all the animals which divide the hoof, but do not make a split hoof, or which do not chew cud, they are unclean to you” (Lev. 11:26, NASB). What seems to contradict the “split hoofs” criterion is clarified by noting that the clean animal must have hoofs having middle clefts or splits.

The other criterion is that these animals must “chew the cud.” The verb, “chews,” מִלְתָּל, is the hiphil participle of מָלַל, which means, “bring up” in the hiphil stem; or “to draw to and fro; hence to bring up the food again, to ruminate.” The “cud” here is from רְכַם, which refers to the food that is brought up into the mouth from the rumen or stomach of these animals. The animal chews the food and then sends it down into the stomach. They are “true ruminants,” in that they chew the cud “thoroughly.” These animals are clean and may thus be eaten.

Based on the two-fold criteria of chewing the cud and having divided hoofs, the following “non-split hoof ruminants” are thus forbidden—(1) “the camel, because it chews the cud but does not have cloven hooves,” (2) the rock hyrax (badger) or coney, “because it chews the cud but does not have cloven hooves,” (3) the hare or rabbit, “because it chews the cud but does not have cloven hooves,” and (4) the pig or swine, “though it divides the hoof, having cloven hooves, yet does not chew the cud” (Lev. 11:4-7, NKJV). The text later states that animals walking “on their paws, among the animals that go on all fours, are unclean to you” (Lev. 11:27, ESV). This makes cats and dogs, lions and tigers, and bears and rabbits unclean.

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22 Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 646-647.
Concerning water animals, only one key criterion is stated. “These you may eat of all that are in the waters: whatever has fins and scales in the waters, in the seas, and in the rivers, that you may eat” (Lev. 11:9, WEB). Clean water animals must have “both fins and scales,” whether they are fresh water or salt water fish. Conversely, the unclean water animals are anything “in the seas or the rivers that has not fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is an abomination to you” (Lev. 10:10, RSV). The unit closes with a summary statement—“Everything in the waters that has not fins and scales is detestable to you” (Lev. 11:12, ESV). This includes every water creature that roams the bottom of the sea or river. Asian favorites such as crabs, shellfish, prawns, and squids are therefore unclean and detestable. There is no specific list of clean or unclean water animals in this unit.

The noun, “detestable” דְּטֶסְט, is rightly described as “detestation, detestable thing of the ceremonially unclean; creatures forbidden as food.” An “unclean” animal may be “detestable,” but a detestable animal may not make a person unclean. According to Milgrom, a person can become unclean by eating or touching the carcass of an unclean animal; but a person may not become unclean by touching an unclean, detestable animal.

Under detestable air animals, the list is more specific, including the eagle, vulture, buzzard, kite, falcon, raven, ostrich, owl, sea gull, hawk, the little owl, cormorant, great owl, white owl, pelican, carrion vulture, stork, heron, hoopoe, and bat (Lev. 11:13-19, NASB). Scholars offer various ways of identifying these birds, but Frank H. Gorman argues that “the precise identification of every bird in the list is uncertain.” Nonetheless, Gordon J. Wenham notes that most commentators agree that these birds are “birds of prey or eaters of carrion.”

Where there are the usual introductory and summary statements for land and water animals, there is no closing reiterated command in the unit for the air animals.

The term, “winged” in “winged insects” translates כַּנָּפִים, which collectively refers to “swarmers, swarming things.” For these swarming creatures, there is the opening norm—“All winged insects that go on all fours are detestable to you” (Lev. 11:20, ESV). The primary qualification for eatable insects that go on all fours is that they should have “jointed legs above their feet, with which to hop on the ground” (Lev. 11:21, ESV). Thus, flying, swarming insects could not be consumed, but hopping insects are allowable. Wenham refers to swarmers on land, sea, and air, noting that the number of legs is “irrelevant.” Yet the contextual reference to “joint legs” for hopping “on the ground” makes “winged insects” the correct translation. The list includes “the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, the cricket according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind” (Lev. 11:22, RSV). Like the closing prohibition for land animals, this unit closes similarly with the statement—“But all other flying insects which have four feet shall be an abomination to you” (Lev. 11:23, NKJV).

Also considered unclean are animals “among the swarming things that swarm on the earth” (Lev. 11:29, NASB). They include “the mole rat, the mouse, the great lizard of any kind, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the lizard, the sand lizard, and the chameleon” (Lev. 11:29-30, ESV). Anything on which they may fall into when they are dead, such as wood, garment, skin, sack, or earthenware vessel and the food or water that is in it, becomes unclean (Lev. 11:32-34).

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28 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 656-658.
29 Gorman Jr., Divine, 72.
30 Wenham, Leviticus, 174.
32 Wenham, Leviticus, 175.
It is interesting to note that clean animals that have died of natural causes become unclean and thus inedible for the Israelites. Whether the animals are clean or unclean or edible or inedible, any person who eats or touches the carcasses of these animals becomes unclean for the day until evening. “And if any animal which you may eat dies, whoever touches its carcass shall be unclean until the evening” (Lev. 11:39, ESV). The ban on eating and touching dead animals is repeated throughout the chapter. Hence, the dead remains of both eatable and uneatable animals can make a person unclean through contact.

**Laying the Rationale for the Dietary Laws**

The rationale for the dietary laws is not specified in the text, but several explanations require serious attention, including cultic, hygienic, moral wholeness, societal, reverence of life, creation and fall theology, separation, and sacred space reasons. The cultic theory avers that the unclean animals were used in pagan worship, representing deities. Israel must reject these animals as a mark of a faithful covenant nation. However, the Canaanites and Egyptians also sacrificed the same animals used by Israel, such as the bull. They should have been forbidden also, if only to evade the facade of paganism.

A more common view is the hygienic hypothesis, because the unclean animals carry diseases. Eating pigs certainly increases cholesterol and consequently, blood pressure, as verified by recent science. The pig carries trichinosis; the hare, tularemia; and carrion-eating birds harbor disease. Fish without fins and scales such as prawns, crabs, and shellfish are said to do the same, because they burrow in mud. However, as Milgrom argues, there is no evidence that the Arabs suffer from disease by eating camels. Why were the dietary laws restricted to animals only, but not to poisonous plants? If Christ eliminated the distinction between clean and unclean foods, then health would have been cited as the reason for it. If Christ declared all foods clean, including previously unclean foods in the OT, then hygiene would be a non-issue. The silence of the OT on this health concern is deafening.

The ethical-moral wholeness reason stems from a symbolism between the mostly predatory and destructive, unclean animals and moral order. The clean animals represent the biblical concept of holiness as wholeness and integrity, in that they remind the Israelites to seek moral perfection. Unclean animals such as carrion-eating birds and carnivorous animals however, typify humankind’s sinful, destructive, and vicious instincts. In this sense, then, as Wenham argues, “Jesus was drawing out the meaning of the symbolism of the Levitical laws in insisting that it was what comes out of man that defiles him, ‘evil thoughts, murder, adultery, etc.’” This view is commendable, in that it connects biblical holiness with wholeness and completeness and with Christ’s reference to the sinful condition of the hearts of humankind. Yet it fails to account for the Levitical view of holiness, which is limited to the sanctuary, the priest, and the sacrifice. It also interprets it by selective evidence, falling short of explaining the other unclean animals that are otherwise non-predatory, “peace-loving,” and lacking ferocious

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34 Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 718.
tendencies, such as the camel, rabbit, and pig. Besides, as Milgrom asserts, “no independent verification is possible.”

An interesting view is that the distinction of animals reflects societal values. Douglas proffers that the classification of animals mirrors a society’s value system, which in the case of Leviticus 11, reflects the creation order of water, air, and earth. Thus, fins and scales make fish swim. Four legs and hoofs make land animals walk. Two wings make birds fly and two legs make them walk. Animals that are not in this category are “anomalies.” Hence, for example, flying insects that have four or more legs are detestable, but hopping insects with two legs are eatable. Carnivorous birds are an abomination because they eat carrion which contains blood. However, it must be noted that God created both clean and unclean animals. It is difficult therefore to posit that He created them with “anomalies.”

Milgrom builds on Douglas’ concept by depicting the human and animal worlds in three concentric spheres in corresponding fashion. The outer sphere for humankind contains all persons or “mankind;” the second sphere of Israel; and the third, innermost circle of priests. This corresponds to the outer sphere of the animal world which contains all animals; the second sphere of a few animals; and the inner circle of sacrifices. “Just as not all edible animals but only domesticated ones qualify for the altar,” Milgrom explains, “so not all Israelites but only descendents of Aaron qualify for the priesthood.” Essentially, the core idea is that the distinction between clean and unclean animals is patterned after the distinction between consecrated priests and unconsecrated non-priests. Just as Israel is set apart from all nations, a few clean animals are also separated from the unclean. Similarly, just as the priests were consecrated for holy service in the holy place, only clean animals shall be offered as sacrifices on the altar.

Milgrom also submits that the “undergirding rationale” for the dietary system is “reverence for life.” The ritual uncleanness system comes from carcasses or corpses (Lev. 11; Num. 19), genital discharges (Lev. 12, 15) and scale disease (Lev. 13-14). They depict death. The release of blood or semen signifies the loss of life. Scaly disease such as leprosy is comparable to a wasting away of the corpse (Num. 12:12). If ζητητείν signifies death, then ונא means life. If this is the case, then the delineation between clean and unclean animals is meant “to limit the Israelite’s access to the animal kingdom,” so Milgrom argues. Hence, the edible animals are those four-legged creatures which were domesticated—cattle, sheep, and goats. When the criterion of split hoofs admitted these clean animals, but also the unclean pig, which is a detestable creature, the second criterion of chewing the cud was added. Leviticus 17 proves the theory of limiting access to animal life. Leviticus 11 therefore lays down “the life-death principle in the laws dealing with animal impurities.” However, this view is difficult to sustain, as Mark F. Rooker points out, in that the textual data in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy

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39 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 719.
40 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 721.
41 Douglas, Purity and Danger, 56; Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 720.
42 Rooker, Leviticus, 173.
43 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 722.
44 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 723-724.
45 Alexander, From Paradise, 137.
46 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 733.
47 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 742.
The basis for the dietary laws may also be found in the devastating consequences of the Fall (Gen. 3). The fall of the human world into sin affected the animal world. In that sin separated humankind from God, certain animals declared as clean are also separated from all other unclean animals. Just as humankind cannot enter into the realm of the heavenly because of sin, unclean animals also cannot be eaten, symbolizing this separation. If uncleanness in Leviticus 11 is based on the fall as the root cause of it, then it bolsters Nobuyoshi Kiuchi’s argument, “that uncleanness means the state of being under the influence of a curse as a consequence of sin.” In this sense, uncleanness is not merely physical, but moral and ethical. The unclean state is caused by humans, not by other creatures. Creatures became unclean because of human sin. Thus, the list of unclean animals in Leviticus 11 may reflect sin and the spiritual effects of this sin on humans. Consequently, the clean and unclean dietary laws and their inadequacy to comply with it strictly meant to make the people of Israel see their inherent incapacity to fulfill the law, and hence, the sinful condition of their own hearts.

The internal textual evidence also strongly supports the view that the dietary laws were meant to highlight the separation of Israel from Gentile nations. “You are therefore to make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean . . . Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine” (Lev. 20:25-26, NASB). In this paradigm, there is the element of election. God’s choice of Israel of all nations pictures Israel’s choice of only the edible animals as sanctioned by God. The dietary laws thus reflect and reinforce the divine election of Israel. The separation of clean and unclean animals parallels the separation of covenant and non-covenant peoples.

Another facet is that animals declared as unclean are usually the animals offered in sacrifice to God. Hence, the distinction between clean and unclean animals is also the division between sacrificial and non-sacrificial animals. Since the Israelites would also eat of the same clean animals in the sacrificial meal, what is offered to God is also eaten by them. The Israelites would then be imitating God’s separateness when they eat the same separated clean food.

Thus, the divinely prescribed daily diet for the Israelites reminds and confronts them of the fact that Yahweh has called and sanctified them. It therefore sets them apart from the nations. In this context, the dietary laws define holiness as separation. It is not merely a negative separation from the unclean foods, but also the positive separation unto God, towards the goal of reflecting the holy nature of God, as God himself commands it. That this separatist principle is deeply ingrained in Hebraic thought is seen in Acts, where Luke presents the apostles as still holding to the clean and unclean food distinction between Jew and Gentile, until God erased that distinction in Peter’s mind (Acts 10-11). The larger issue of following the Mosaic law, including the Levitical dietary laws, was eventually resolved by divine revelation and

48 Rooker, Leviticus, 171.
52 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 724-725.
53 Sprinkle, “Rationale,” JETS, 651.
54 Walter Houston, “Purity and Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law,” JSOT Sup 106 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 117, 123; Rooker, Leviticus, 175.
55 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 730.
apostolic doctrine at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1-29). That the dietary laws were abolished by the apostles in the NT proves that it was the distinguishing criteria between Israel and the rest of the Gentile nations.56

This brings us to the most significant rationale of the dietary laws—to stress and signify both the inherent holiness of God and the sense of sacred space, and to draw the Israelites toward the direction of imitating that holiness. Prior to the introduction of the purity laws of Leviticus 11-15, there is the incident of the fiery death of the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, because they “offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them” (Lev. 10:1, RSV). Yahweh then declares his holy nature and presence in the holy sanctuary of the Tabernacle, saying, “‘By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified’” (Lev. 10:3, NKJV).57 Their offering of unholy fire violated the holiness of God in the tent of meeting. It is also possible that they tried to enter the Most Holy Place after drinking wine or strong drink (Lev. 10:8-11; 16:1-2). After the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Yahweh told Aaron and his sons to “drink no wine or strong drink . . . when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die” (Lev. 10:8, ESV). He consecrated the Aaronic priests, declaring that their main task was “to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” (Lev. 10:10, ESV). What follows are the dietary laws for all Israel (Lev. 11).

After giving the clean and unclean food laws, Yahweh says that the Israelites are to live by them, not allowing themselves to become unclean by eating unclean foods. “‘For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy’” (Lev. 11:44, NASB). There is an important triple motivational reason in this command to be holy. The first two motivational reasons for purity are tied with the self-identity and holy nature of Yahweh as the God who is present in the midst of Israel. In the next breath, the third motivation to be holy is the exodus. “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” (Lev. 11:45, NASB). The command, then, is for the Israelites to strive for holiness because of divine identity and initiative in their redemption, and in so doing, to imitate Yahweh’s holy nature.

Right after giving the purity laws (Lev. 11-15), Yahweh then institutes the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). It is interesting to note that Yahweh introduced the atonement rituals right after the death of Nadab and Abihu, warning Aaron “‘not to come at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the mercy seat which is upon the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat’” (Lev. 16:2, RSV). Again, the emphasis here is on the holy character and presence of God in the sanctuary (Lev. 10:3; 16:2). The parenthetical inclusion of the dietary laws (Lev. 11-15) and the command to be holy (Lev. 11:44)—historically located between the holy fire causing the deaths of Aaron’s sons (Lev. 10:3) and the institution of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:2)—strongly suggests an emphasis on the holiness and presence of God occupying the sanctuary. The purity and holiness laws, then, stress the sacred space of Yahweh in the midst of Israel that demonstrates Yahweh as the covenant God and defines Israel as a covenant nation.

**Linking the Dietary Laws and the Sense of Sacred Space**

In this light, the dietary laws contained in the purity laws, the prescribed rituals on the Day of Atonement, as well as the holiness laws for all Israel reveal one key element—a divine concern for sacred space and for holy living by all Israelites in the living presence of Yahweh.

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56 Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 726.
The priestly responsibility to distinguish holy and common and pure and impure ensures that sacred space is maintained and protected from uncleanness. In fact, the whole Levitical system of purity serves to protect the holiness of the sanctuary. With the inadequacy of the Israelites to maintain purity due to the sinful condition of their hearts, the divine purpose of the ritual laws on the Day of Atonement, then, is to restore them back to ritual cleanness, thereby sustaining the integrity of sacred space in the midst of the covenental camp.

The core theme of Leviticus is the holy character and presence of God in Israel, which are reflected in his laws for the corresponding holiness of Israel, in their calling as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Key related sub-themes are: (1) Tabernacle holiness (holy and common) and purity (clean and unclean); (2) atonement; and (3) national holiness and purity. The purity and holiness laws and the annual day of purification on the Day of Atonement in the Levitical system altogether revolves around the Tabernacle and its rules for worship—the center of both personal and national holiness and purity. The Tabernacle is the dwelling place of God, where his presence resides in the midst of Israel. The central concern of the Levitical system, therefore, is the holy presence of God in Israel. More precisely, the central focus of Leviticus is the holy presence of God as the center of life in Israel as the covenant nation of priests. Thus, the presence of God in the holy sanctuary in the midst of Israel requires physical purity on the part of the people of Israel (See Ex. 25:8; Lev. 15:31).

Leviticus 9:23 mentions the glory of the Lord in the cloud and fire in “the tent of meeting.” Later, Leviticus 16:2 picks the same subject of the glory of the Lord, this time over the atonement cover, “the mercy seat” in the Tabernacle. On the same day that Nadab and Abihu were consumed with the fire of the Lord, the glory of the Lord was manifested to the people of Israel (Lev. 10:2). Leviticus 16:1-2 looks back to their deaths, highlighting the presence of the Lord in the Tabernacle through the manifestations of cloud and fire. It is striking that the dietary and purity laws of Leviticus 11-15 are contained within the envelope of God’s holy presence in the midst of Israel. Thus, the whole Levitical ritual system of purity and holiness is built on this focal point—the presence of God in the midst of Israel. The overriding theme of the holy presence and nature of God therefore binds the related themes of purity as demonstrated by the need to obey the purity laws; holiness, resulting from consecration in relation to the Tabernacle; and atonement, ensuring cleansing from sin and impurities.

At the center of the twin emphases of Tabernacle holiness and purity is the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). On the Day of Atonement, the laws for the holiness and purity of both the Tabernacle and the people were outlined. Because of the expected impurities of the people due to their inability to ensure a totally holy life because of the condition of their hearts, Yahweh enacted the Day of Atonement. It ensured the cleansing of the people through the blood ritual offerings, and the maintenance of the purity of the Tabernacle. Thus, the annual ritual purifications on the Day of Atonement connect the matter of clean and unclean regulations for animals and people to the concern of maintaining the holiness of the Tabernacle and the cleansing of the congregation of Israel from their sins and states of uncleanness.

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58 Gorman Jr., Divine, 68.
60 Gorman Jr., Divine, 68.
64 Milgrom, Leviticus 1-16, 51.
This puts the pericope of Leviticus 11-15 into perspective. Various states of uncleanness that can defile the sanctuary of God are specified (Lev. 15:31). It constitutes a core unit of purity laws which are connected with the threefold sub-themes of holiness (holy and common), purity (clean and unclean), and atonement (Lev. 10:10, 17); and their significance for the people of Israel—all because of and for the sake of the Tabernacle presence of God in Israel (See Lev. 15:31). The connection between the holy nature of Jehovah and the requirement of holiness from the people of Israel now becomes apparent, in view of his presence among them, through the clean and unclean dietary laws. It is at this point that the command, “Be holy, for I am holy,” was first enunciated, and then repeated in the holiness laws (Lev. 11:44; 19:2).

“You shall not make yourselves detestable with any swarming thing that swarms, and you shall not defile yourselves with them, and become unclean through them” (Lev. 11:44, ESV). In introducing this command to avoid unclean animals so that they will not become unclean, Yahweh gives a triple theological motivation for obeying it. The first is the divine self-identification of Yahweh in relation to his covenant people—“For I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 11:44, NASB). Thus, the people of Israel are to avoid the unclean because Yahweh is their God. The second motivating reason is that Yahweh is holy by nature. Because Yahweh is the Holy One of Israel, they are to consecrate themselves therefore, and be holy because God is holy (Lev. 11:44). The third compelling cause for obeying the dietary and purity laws is the exodus—Yahweh brought them out of Egyptian bondage (Lev. 11:45). The redemption that they owe to Yahweh should thus move them to obey his purity and holiness laws. While they obey the purity laws, the Israelites align themselves with the divine concern for sacred space. Living holy lives by obeying the purity laws, they actually retain, reflect, and realize the triple rationale for holiness. They recognize Yahweh’s divine identity, in that He is the LORD. They realize his divine participation and presence in the life of Israel, in that He is the God of Israel. They remember his divine redemption, in that He purposely delivered them from bondage to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation solely consecrated unto Yahweh. Thus, the purity and holiness laws serve to sustain holiness in the life of Israel, and in doing so, all Israel maintains the sense of sacred space in the land.

**Implications in the NT and for Asian Believers**

The dietary laws of Leviticus 11 are an essential identifying mark of second temple Judaism, being a contentious issue that Christ and the apostles had to address, occupying a central place in Hebraic thought then (Acts 10:28). The NT is replete with references to clean and unclean foods and by extension, holy and profane lifestyles. Yet the NT writers present a reappraisal and consequent revision of the question of whether believers should continue to practice it; or whether to require it as a sign of salvation in Christ and holy living. In what follows, a survey of several critical NT passages that deal with the dietary laws will show that Christ and the apostles have abolished the letter of these food laws as a mark of justification; but not the spirit of it, in that they still affirmed the imperative of holiness behind it.

Jesus declared that all foods are clean. “Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?”

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65 Milgrom, _Leviticus 1-16_, 1011.
68 Gorman Jr., _Divine_, 75.
69 Gorman Jr., _Divine_, 75.
(Thus he declared all foods clean.)” (Mark 7:18-19, RSV). With one stroke of divine revelation, Christ in effect abolished the clean and unclean food laws. Mark makes the same conclusion. What Christ eradicated was the ritual distinction between clean and unclean foods (Lev. 11). The issue is no longer whether the kind of food that goes into the man can defile him. Rather, the concern now is the kind of character that comes out of the man that makes him unclean, because his heart is sinful (Mark 7:20-23). Thus, the sharp distinction between clean and unclean and between Jew and Gentile has broken down under the new covenant introduced by Christ.  

This brings us to the divine concern for sacred space in the Levitical ritual system. In the old covenant, Yahweh lived in the Most Holy Place, in the Tabernacle in the midst of his covenant nation, Israel. In the new covenant, the Word became flesh and “tabernacled” among humankind (John 1:14). The church is “the temple of the living God,” who makes his dwelling among them (2 Cor. 6:16, ESV). The Israelites beheld the glory of the cloud and fire of Yahweh in the Tabernacle in the old covenant; but the believers “beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NKJV). It is no longer Yahweh’s presence in the sanctuary, which maintains sacred space in the land, but “Christ in you”—the believers, the body of Christ—where the Word sustains sacred space (Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27). Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that what is important is no longer the place of worship—the Temple, with all its rituals, but the attitude of worship, in spirit and in truth, which can only happen within the hearts and minds of believers (John 4:21-24). Thus, it is no longer the Tabernacle and Israel, the kingdom of priests and a holy nation, but the church—the sacred community of Christ-followers—which is now the sacred space of God.

Peter maintained the general Jewish notion of clean and unclean foods which demarcated Jew from Gentile, until God told him three times in a dream that “what God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15, ESV). Later during the Jerusalem council, some Judaizers wanted Gentile believers “to observe the law of Moses” in order to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5, NASB). In response, Peter stood up and affirmed that God “made no distinction between us and them,” echoing the distinction that God had abolished in Peter’s dream (Acts 15:9, RSV). On this note, the Jerusalem council sent a letter to the Gentile believers in Antioch, exhorting them to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29, ESV). Yet notable is the absence of any command in the letter for the Gentile believers to be circumcised and to observe the dietary laws anymore. Christ’s decisive teaching which nullified the clean and unclean dietary categories thus became the bedrock basis for the apostolic decision to eliminate it as a sign of salvation and conversion to Christianity. Most likely, their decision was shaped also by divine revelation to Peter, which in effect confirmed the word of Christ, while abolishing the dietary laws as a distinguishing mark of holy living.

Paul treated the matter of clean and unclean foods, not as a concern for ritual obligation, but as an issue of conscience and love for the weaker brother or sister. “Eat whatever is sold in the meat market . . . for ‘the earth is the LORD’S, and all its fullness’” (1 Cor. 10:25-26, NKJV). But if the other weaker brother is bothered by your eating of such food, which may be offered to idols, and thus be unclean to him, then better not eat it, Paul says, for the sake of that person, and for conscience’ sake (1 Cor. 10:28). For Paul, no food is unclean of itself (Rom. 14:14). Yet out of love for the weaker brother, better not eat that food, so that he or she will not stumble (Rom. 14:15). Then he declares that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of

Sprinkle, “Rationale,” JETS, 656.
righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17, ESV). He asserts that NT believers are no longer compelled to follow dietary laws, or matters of “food and drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day,” for Christ has fulfilled the requirements of the law (Col. 2:16-17, NASB). Against false teachers who measured holiness by abstinence from certain foods, Paul affirms that all food is good; nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanks, having been made holy by God’s Word and prayer (1 Tim. 4:2-4). Thus Paul brought new covenant meaning into the question of clean and unclean foods, in that it is no longer according to the obligatory ritual dietary laws of the kingdom nation of Israel, but according to the principles of a new inaugurated spiritual kingdom, the kingdom of God.

Thus, the NT has abolished the ceremonial distinction between clean and unclean foods; yet it has also affirmed the moral reason behind it. Just as Israel was a holy nation and a kingdom of priests by divine election, so is the NT church in Asia and around the world. The church is “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet. 2:9, RSV). In Christ, there is nothing unclean by itself (Rom. 14:14). But the NT transfers the concept of clean and unclean from the ritual of the law to the spirit of the law—the higher law of spiritual holiness. The NT applies the language of clean and unclean to moral living, as Rooker points out. Thus, the principle of separating from what is unclean—in word, thought, or lifestyle—still applies. For example, Paul called the immorality of the Gentiles, “impurity” or “uncleanness” (Rom. 6:19; 2 Cor. 12:21; Eph. 4:19; 5:3; 1 Thess. 4:7). Paul tells the Corinthians to separate from unbelievers in their idolatry; in so doing, they will touch no unclean thing (2 Cor. 6:17). Then he adds, “let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1, NASB). Thus, the NT principle is for believers to reflect the holiness of God in their lives—whether they eat or drink, or whatever they do—their very lifestyle. If the Israelites are to manifest Yahweh’s holiness in their daily diet, NT believers are also to reflect his holy nature in everything (Matt. 5:20, 48; Heb. 12:14). We are to live blameless lives before a holy God and before a corrupt world. We are to separate ourselves from anything that opposes the holiness of God in our lives.

The basis of holiness therefore is no longer to be found in complying with the purity laws, but in maintaining the moral motion behind it. Believers are to separate themselves from anything that will make them unclean in their hearts. They are to cleanse themselves, not through ritual laws, but physically, through how they treat their physical bodies (2 Cor. 7:1) and spiritually, through repentance and confession of sin (1 John 1:9). They should separate themselves unto God—to be holy because they are related to God who is inherently holy, and who has called them to a holy calling by the sanctification of the Spirit, through the redemption of Christ (1 Pet. 1:1-2, 3-23; 1 John 1:7).

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