

A Hebraic Perspective on Peter's Vision (Acts 10)

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Acts 10:

9 The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 11 and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 And there came a voice to him: Rise, Peter; kill and eat. 14 But Peter said, By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common. 16 This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. 17 Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made enquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate

Open up most Christian commentaries on the book of Acts and you'll see that most commentators interpret God's words in verse 13 as a command for Peter to eat unclean animals, and verse 15 as a declaration that all foods are now clean. Thus, in this passage, God is hereby overturning all of the OT dietary laws, essentially nullifying two whole chapters of the bible (Leviticus chapter 11 and Deuteronomy chapter 14), and calling into question a great many passages in the NT, in which believers are told to avoid 'uncleanness' ([Rom 6:19](#), [2 Cor 12:21](#), [Gal 5:19](#)).

The traditional interpretation of Peter's Vision however, leaves a great many questions unanswered. For example:

Why does Peter refer to what is on the sheet with the words 'common' [*koinos*] and 'unclean' [*akathartos*] in verses 14 & 15, and what's the difference between these words? Why does God only correct Peter's use of the word 'common,' and not his use of the word 'unclean' in verse 15? When God tells Peter to kill and eat, why doesn't Peter just obey God, take a clean animal from the sheet (like a cow or a chicken), kill it, and eat it? After all, the sheet contained "all kinds" of animals. And why, after walking with Jesus all that time, was Peter still under the impression that he could not eat anything unclean? And why does Peter still not understand his own, even after having the sheet lowered three times? And lastly, why doesn't Peter ever interpret his own dream as having anything to do with food?

The traditional interpretation of Peter's Vision also raises many important hermeneutical questions. For example, one of God's most important attributes is the fact that he does not change and always stays the same ([Psalm 102:27](#), [Malachi 3:6](#)), and God does not change his mind, as a man would change his mind ([Numbers 23:19](#), [Psalm 110:4](#)). So it seems to be a very important hermeneutical principle that in interpreting scripture and dealing with seemingly ambiguous passages, one errs on the side of maintaining God's unchanging nature, rather than being quick to point out a fundamental change in God's nature or his dealings with humans. A good example of this principle is found in Hebrews 7, where the author argues in a sustained way, that there is a logical necessity for a change in the priesthood (vv.11-14), and that there is a strong scriptural basis in the OT for such a change ([Psalm 110:4](#)), which the author quotes three times in the book of Hebrews (5:6, 6:20, & 7:17), going out of his way to defend the fact that "God does not change." Now compare that careful analysis in Hebrews to Peter's dream in Acts 10, where apparently, two whole chapters of the OT are nullified, yet nobody seems to mind. Luke doesn't even mention this as being a challenge to the OT law, and Peter even retells his dream – to the circumcision party of all people. These were the ultra-conservative pharisaic believers in Jesus. And rather than question any change in the Torah, they heard about Peter's vision and:

"they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life" ([Acts 11:18](#)).

So what is the difference between common [*koinos*] and unclean [*akathartos*]?

*14 But Peter said, By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common [*koinos*] or unclean [*akathartos*]. 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common [*koinos*].*

The Greek words ἀκάθαρτος [*akathartos* / unclean] and καθαρσία [*akatharsia* / uncleanness] occur around 200 times in the Septuagint (the first century Greek bible, aka. LXX), and around 40 times in the New Testament. In the LXX they refer to all manner of uncleanness, including the unclean meats in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Almost any time the word 'unclean' is used anywhere in the Septuagint, the Greek words *akathartos* or *akatharsia* are being used.

The Greek words κοινός [*koinos*, “common”] and κοινῶω [*koinoō*, “to make common”] are used only 4 times in the canonized books of the LXX, each time referring to things “shared in common” (in the LXX, see for example, [Proverbs 1:14](#), [21:9](#)). So in the LXX, the Greek words *koinos* and *koinoō* are never used to refer to “uncleanness” or to something as “unclean.” Thus, it can be inferred that Luke would not have used these words interchangeably. They would have represented distinct concepts in his mind and in the minds of his Greek speaking audience.

This is strong evidence for the fact that referring to things as “common” (*koinos*) was a later pharisaic development (i.e. a manmade tradition), not found in the Law of God (Torah). A tradition which served to differentiate 1st century Jews from the surrounding gentile culture. If you’ve studied the history leading up to the first century, this might make more sense because it’s not until the book of Maccabees that we see *koinos/koinoō* start to gain the connotation of ‘defilement’ or ‘unacceptableness’ that we see in Acts 10 — but this would be a separate study in itself.

So if “common” isn’t used in the LXX to refer to defilement or uncleanness, what did Jews in the first century understand this word to mean? Well in the NT, “common” [*koinos / koinoō*] is used around 25 times, but carries two different meanings. The first meaning is the same one used in the LXX, referring to things “shared in common” (see for example [Acts 2:44](#), [4:32](#), and [Titus 1:4](#)). The second meaning of *koinos*, however, is more difficult to pinpoint. If you look up all the instances of the words *koinos* and *koinoō* in the NT, and compare them to the passages that use *akathartos/akatharsia*, you should get a pretty good sense of how the NT writers understood these terms. Here’s a rough definition of *koinos/koinoō* based on the verses they appear in:

Koinos refers to situations not covered in the Law of God (Torah), in which something clean (a pot, a utensil, a clean animal, or even a person) comes into contact with something unclean (an unclean animal, dirt, etc), rendering the clean thing defiled or unacceptable. The Pharisees viewed these previously clean things as now being “common” [*koinos*].

So in a sentence, the difference between *koinos* and *akathartos* (common and unclean), is that *koinos* (common) connotes the pharisaic belief (based in tradition) that a clean thing can be made ‘common’ through contact – whereas *akathartos* (unclean) connotes that which God has declared to be unclean.

Even though [Mark 7](#) isn’t a part of this study, it deals with this exact problem (for a full explanation of Mark 7, read the article [here](#)). Remember this is where the disciples were eating with ‘common’ [*koinos*] hands, and the Pharisees reprimand them for not abiding by their traditions. [Mark 7](#) isn’t about food – rather, it’s about Pharisaic traditions that were being put on par with the Law of God (the Torah). Thus, Jesus reprimands the Pharisees right back, telling them what *really* makes a person common. But I digress.

A better understanding of Acts 10

When the sheet comes down in front of Peter, on it are, “all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air” ([Acts 10:12](#)). In other words, clean and unclean animals, all writhing and tossing and turning over one another. This is the purpose of the image of a sheet coming down, held up by its four corners. It emphasizes that these animals aren’t just close to each other – they are squirming all over one another.

So even though there are clean animals on the sheet, Peter refuses to eat any of them because some were unclean, and the rest were clean, but they had been made common [*koinos*] according to the Pharisees, because they were in direct contact with unclean animals on the sheet. Keep in mind, there is no mention in Leviticus or Deuteronomy that an unclean animal can touch a clean animal and make that clean animal unclean, which makes this a Pharisaic prohibition very similar to the washing of hands in [Mark 7](#), where it was taught by the Pharisees that all Jews must wash their hands before eating (and wash various vessels and utensils before ordinary use). In fact, you will notice that the term “common” [*koinos*] is also used in [Mark 7:1](#), referring to the disciples’ dirty hands, because it was believed that dirt defiled their hands, and that this defilement would transfer to the individual if a person ate or

drank with dirty (common) hands. This, in their eyes, would make the person common [*koinos*] or defiled – but please note that this is nowhere found in God’s Law (Torah).

Note that the image of a sheet being brought down by its four corners is crucial to understanding this passage because it emphasizes the fact that the animals were forced towards the center of the sheet, touching one another, crawling all over each other, etc. To a Jew who kept both the Torah *and* the traditions of the Pharisees, this would have made for a very disturbing presentation – thus Peter’s strong denial when God commands him to ‘take and eat.’

So this explains why Peter would not grab a clean animal from the sheet and eat it, and why God corrects this inclination in verse 15: “And the voice came to him again a second time, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common [*koinos*].” Notice that God doesn’t correct Peter’s use of the word ‘unclean’ [*akathartos*] in verse 15. He doesn’t tell Peter “what God has made clean do not call *unclean*.” This is because God would be contradicting himself when he gave the food laws back in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. So in effect, Peter did not obey God because he was following the traditions of men – thus the rebuke.

It also explains why Peter, after walking with Jesus all that time, never understood him to have overturned God’s instructions on eating a holy (set apart) diet. Surely Peter would have realized at some point, “oh yea, God did away with all that food stuff.” And yet Peter’s interpretation of his own dream has nothing to do with food.

It also explains the connection Peter draws between his dream and his meeting with Cornelius. According to the Jewish traditions of the day, many products and practices of Gentiles were regarded as being “common” or conveying “commonness” to Jews. This is why Peter was not going to enter the house of Cornelius up until this point. Just like Pharisaic traditions prevented Peter from eating common [*koinos*] food, they also prevented him from meeting with common [*koinos*] people (i.e. Gentiles), shaking their common hands, entering their common home, sitting in their common chairs, eating at their common table, etc. But God used this dream to show Peter that he should not call any person common or unclean (verse 29) — effectively breaking down a large dividing wall that these manmade traditions had erected.

To quote Jesus, the Pharisees once again make void the word of God by the tradition that they have handed down ([Mark 7:13](#)), because God has always intended Israel to be a light to the nations (gentiles), so that salvation may reach the end of the earth, yet Israel’s own traditions kept her from doing just this. So God, then, used Peter’s Vision to break down a barrier (a dividing wall) that the Jewish traditions of the day had erected – a barrier that severely hindered the spread of the gospel to the nations.

This interpretation brings to light the fact that it was not God himself who was hindering Peter’s meeting with Cornelius and the spread of the gospel to the gentiles. God’s call for Israel to be holy (set apart) was never intended to negate her call to be a light to the nations (gentiles!):

Isaiah 42:6 “I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations,

Isaiah 49:6 “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

The food laws as they are given in the Torah were never intended to impede this. The Torah is intended to point out how God’s people might live holy (set apart) lives, by the power of the holy spirit. God’s intent was that by her light, Israel might draw the surrounding nations to herself. However, according to Acts 10 it was the manmade traditions of the day (many of which carried the force of law, cf. [Acts 10:28](#)) that kept Jews from associating with gentiles, and kept the gospel from traveling out into the nations.

As members of the Household of God then, let us be wise in the traditions we choose to keep and not keep. Traditions can be good if they enrich our lives and serve the will of God as it is revealed in scripture. But they can be a burden and a hindrance when they conflict with God's greater purposes.

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