



JOHN E. ANDERSON

Why Can't I Eat Rock Badger?

For years, if you had asked me the rationale behind clean and unclean foods in Leviticus 11, I would have responded that it didn't matter—that the concept was little more than an antiquated relic of Israelite legalism that failed to carry over into present times. Then I would have thrown in the trump card: Mark 7:19, where Jesus appears to declare all foods "clean," thus rendering Leviticus 11 extinct. But I would have been wrong—not because Leviticus 11 outlines the appropriate diet according to the divine will for all time, but because I was asking the wrong questions of the text. What animates Leviticus 11 is not historical questions, but theological ones.

What makes certain animals clean and others unclean for the ancient Israelites? Some chalk it up to little more than the “inscrutable will of God,” implying that there is no rational explanation and one should not be sought—the guidelines are to be followed simply because God decreed them so.¹ But these views stifle conversation and stand in tension with Jesus’ decree in Mark 7:19.

Another view anticipates the FDA by several hundred years. In the Middle Ages, famed Jewish interpreter Maimonides suggested that unclean animals were potential disease carriers. For example, people can contract trichinosis from pigs. This approach is not applicable to all animals deemed “unclean,” nor does Leviticus 11 mention such health concerns. Moreover, archaeology has shown that other ancient peoples, like the Philistines, considered pig a regular delicacy. Besides, if the foods were dangerous, why would Jesus have declared all foods clean?

What these explanations miss, and what the context of Leviticus clarifies, is that theological concerns drive these dietary restrictions.

Leviticus 11:44–45 echoes the refrain that could be called the theme of Leviticus: “For I am the LORD your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.” Leviticus is a theological treatise on holiness. What does Leviticus 11 look like if understood in this light?

The most compelling interpretation of this passage belongs not to a biblical scholar but to an anthropologist, Mary Douglas. Her seminal work, *Purity and Danger*, reads Leviticus 11 in concert with creation.² Genesis 1 sets up orderly classifications—creatures of the land, birds of the air, fish of the sea. Leviticus 11 parallels this as it envisions the distinct classifications of clean and unclean.

Thus, the problem with eating an animal like the rock badger is not that the badger is an abomination to creation or a potential health hazard; rather, it is that the animal chews the cud but lacks a cloven hoof (Lev 11:5). It is anomalous—it doesn’t easily fit into any category dictated by creation. The pig is similar: It has a cloven hoof but does not chew the cud, thus placing it outside priestly understandings of creation. In short,

according to Douglas, if an animal conforms to the natural order, it is considered clean; if it does not, it is unclean. Leviticus 11 is concerned with setting up boundaries—in the guise of clean or unclean—that focus on issues of “social order, wholeness, and community identity.”³ Clean and unclean in Leviticus 11 envisions holiness as wholeness, in accordance with God’s good creation.

It is easy to slip into the trap of seeing “unclean” and “sinful” as synonymous. But this is not the position of Leviticus 11. Pigs and rock badgers may be unclean, but they are not sinful. They are not “bad” or deviant creations. They simply fall outside the bounds of orderly classification. As Birch explains, “some impurities are associated with that which is natural and necessary (e.g., sex, death), others with sin and evil (e.g., idolatry, homicide, illicit sexual relations).”⁴ In short, while all sins do lead to uncleanness, not all uncleanness is a result of sin.

Leviticus 11 reminds us of deep-seated theological principles and truths. It articulates not the oddity or incomprehensibility of Israel’s religion or

its God, but rather affirms Israel’s unique calling to be set apart, classified and holy as God also is holy—to be representations of order in a world of chaos, illustrating God’s orderly work in the beginning. Leviticus is intended to ingrain that theological truth into every facet of life, from the mundane to the sublime, that has been sewn into the fabric of creation by the one holy God. **B**

Biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

¹ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 145.

² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002) [original 1966].

³ Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (2nd ed. Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 133–34.

⁴ Birch, 134.