

## DEFILEMENT BY ASSOCIATION: SOME INSIGHTS FROM THE USAGE OF ΚΟΙΝΌΣ/ΚΟΙΝΌΩ IN ACTS 10 AND 11

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Peter's vision of the sheet from heaven containing a variety of creatures (Acts 10:10-16) has engendered considerable scholarly debate, most of which misses the real point of the vision by failing to distinguish between the terms "common" and "unclean." Even modern English translations tend to obscure the sense of the text by treating the two Greek terms as synonymous and interchangeable. Consideration of the context, attention to the Greek terminology used, and recognition of the historical development leading up to the category of "common" (as distinguished from "unclean") will, I believe, inevitably lead to conclusions quite different from those usually set forth by commentators.

### 1. *The Contextual Setting*

The account of Peter's vision is initially set forth in the context of his visit to Cornelius, a Roman centurion residing in Caesarea (Acts 10:1-24). Then, a further reference to it is made as Peter later explains the incident to the church leaders in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-18).

#### *The Vision and Its Setting*

Luke's account of the occurrence begins by noting that in response to an angelic visitation, Cornelius sent three of his household to Joppa to ask for Simon Peter. The next day, as the Caesarean emissaries were still on their journey, Peter went up to the roof of the Tanner's house to pray. While the mid-day meal was being prepared downstairs, he was taken in a prophetic trance and saw descending from heaven a sheet-like object filled with all sorts of quadrupeds, reptiles, and birds. A voice commanded, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."<sup>1</sup> To this he answered that he had never

<sup>1</sup>The RSV is used for all Bible quotations, unless otherwise noted. In this text, Augustine unfortunately inserts πάν, "all," after θύσον, "slay," making it appear

eaten anything that was "common or unclean,"<sup>2</sup> and the voice then responded, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." After three occurrences, the vision receded.

Manifestly, Peter did not immediately understand what he had seen.<sup>3</sup> While he pondered, three travelers arrived, stood before the gate outside the house, and called out to the residents to see if Simon Peter was there.<sup>4</sup> Following the Spirit's direct command to go down and accompany the men without hesitation,<sup>5</sup> Peter descended, invited the Gentiles into the house, and the next day returned with them to Caesarea.

Before instructing Cornelius in the gospel, Peter made it quite clear that he understood it to be unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another race; however, since God had shown him that he should not call any person "common" or "unclean," he had come without objection. When the Spirit fell on the assembled Gentiles as he talked, Peter felt compelled to admit into fellowship people who had received the same sign of acceptance as the apostles themselves.

### *The Jerusalem Defense*

When Peter went to Jerusalem (or as one early manuscript puts it, was summoned to Jerusalem<sup>6</sup>), he was asked to give an

that Peter was to slay and eat all the creatures in the sheet. See Richard Belward Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Westminster Commentaries, 12th ed., 41 (London, 1939): 150, n. 9.

<sup>2</sup>The answer implies that Peter recognized the voice immediately as that of his Lord, his answer being in his customary fashion.

<sup>3</sup>The word used to describe his turmoil (διεσθουμένου) makes use of two prefixes to illustrate the inner anguish; διὰ, "through," and ἐν, "in." The suggestion is both penetration ("through and through") and upheaval ("in and out") of his mind. See A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 3 (Nashville, Tenn., 1930): 138.

<sup>4</sup>All three closely followed the demands of the Jewish concept of defilement which, among other things, prohibited unauthorized Gentile entry into Jewish homes; they stayed outside until invited within.

<sup>5</sup>The force of the second aorist imperative should not be overlooked. As the men had been explicitly directed to look for him, he was now to accompany them, without doubting.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament* (London, 1971), pp. 382-384.

account of his behavior. Clearly, the question raised by the circumcision party<sup>7</sup> was not whether Peter should have instructed Gentiles in the gospel, but whether he should have eaten with uncircumcised men.<sup>8</sup> Peter thoroughly silenced his opposition by reciting, not what he had said to Cornelius, but what God had done.

In his Jerusalem defense, Peter pointed out that he perceived differences in the creatures only when he looked closer at the sheet. The nuance of the original is graphic: ἀτενίζω, "to stretch out the eyes." It was as a result of careful perception that he "saw in a flash" that the "unclean" creature was also present in the sheet, thus defiling the "clean."<sup>9</sup> F. F. Bruce, in portraying Peter's dilemma, aptly observes: "It has been asked at times whether Peter could not have killed and eaten one of the clean animals. But he was scandalized by the unholy mixture of clean animals with unclean; this is particularly important when we recall the practical way in which he had immediately to apply the lesson of the vision."<sup>10</sup>

It is important here to note also that although Peter used the terminology of "common or unclean," the voice itself referred only to the first of these two terms. Both in Luke's initial report of the vision and in Peter's later reference to it at the Jerusalem defense, the voice is said to have declared that what God had cleansed Peter

<sup>7</sup>As true as it is that Luke's term of ἐκ περιτομῆς, "they of the circumcision" (KJV), could be merely a synonym for the early Jerusalem church (all male members were former Jews and therefore circumcised), it must nevertheless be acknowledged that devout diversity of opinion flourished as passionately then as it does now. If in Acts 10:45 Luke can openly refer to "faithful" components from within this group (ἐκ, "from out of"), then surely he can record that a faction also existed within the larger fellowship, opposed to Peter on the basis of his association with Gentiles. Paul, in writing to the Galatians, leaves us with no reasonable doubt as to the later existence of this political power block (see Gal 2:12, where the same term is used).

<sup>8</sup>As stated by William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, New Century Bible (London, 1973), p. 142: "Luke is drawing attention for the fourth time to the human frailty that has always marred the Church, even in these early days; the hypocrisy of Ananias (5:2), the resentment of the Hellenists (6:1), the attempted bribery of Simon (8:18), and now partisanship."

<sup>9</sup>Robertson, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1956), p. 218, n. 15. See also the text comment on that page.

should not call “common”—with no mention of the “unclean” (Acts 10:15 and 11:9). This is a point to which we will return later.

## 2. *The Terminology Used*

Even though Peter consistently differentiated between “common” and “unclean,” it seems reasonable to assume that the various translators of the English Scriptures believed this distinction to be defunct. Cognizance of their unstated bias aids in understanding why no modern attempt has been made to distinguish between the words twice recorded as Peter’s response to the Voice’s promptings, that is to say, κοινός/κοινῶ, “common”/“to render common,” has been taken as synonymous with ἀκάθαρτος, “unclean.”<sup>11</sup>

However, not only is the repetition in Acts 11 of key thoughts and phrases from Acts 10 highly significant,<sup>12</sup> but Peter’s use of the disjunctive conjunctive ἢ (κοινὸν ἢ ἀκάθαρτον)<sup>13</sup> demonstrates his understanding of them as separate, albeit related, concepts. Rather than being synonymous, the relationship is processional or filial, for the Jewish idea of “commonality”—defilment by association—proceeded or grew from the concept of “unclean.”

The LXX never uses κοινῶ, as expressed here in Acts 10:15 and 11:9 for “to make/declare common,” but consistently employs

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Richard J. Dillon and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Jerome Bible Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), 2: 188.

<sup>12</sup>The laborious method of production precluded straying too far on any given subject, so when Luke chooses to repeat the vision in two different settings, it is as important to note the material that is reproduced without change, as it is to recognize that which is embellished and/or given greater emphasis. See especially Gerhard Delling, “τρεις, τρις, τρίτος,” *TDNT* 8: 222.

<sup>13</sup>Although Robertson (p. 136) believes that the invitation to slay included the “unclean” animals, examination of the text reveals that no absolute case can be established for such, unless one accepts the Augustinian πᾶν (cf. n. 1, above). Likewise for his attempt (p. 137) to combine the concepts of “common” and “unclean” in chap. 10, for although the copulative conjunctive καὶ is employed in some older texts (see F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago, 1961], p. 231, for a listing of variant renderings and the disjunctive conjunction), the sense is established by parallelism. In his apologetic defense of chap. 11, Peter employs the disjunctive conjunctive ἢ, demonstrating their usage as distinct entities. Despite these quibbles, Robertson’s grammatical observations on vs. 15 appear to be especially significant.

βεβηλοῦν, “to profane.” The single usage of κοινῶ in Jewish religious/historical literature of pre-NT times occurs in the apocryphal 4 Macc 7:6, where it conveys the meaning of cultic profanation.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, the adjective κοινός, “common/profane,” is likewise absent from the LXX, which uses βέβηλος to translate the Hebrew לֶחֶם. As noted by Friedrich Hauck: “In Rabbinic literature, too, לֶחֶם denotes what is profane in contrast to what is holy, to things devoted to God . . . [but it] is never used of men.”<sup>15</sup>

Of basic significance, then, are these further observations by Hauck:

Only in the apocr. is κοινός used for לֶחֶם instead of βέβηλος, e.g., 1 Macc. 1:47: θύειν ὕεια καὶ κτήνη κοινά; 1:62: φαγεῖν κοινά. We find the same usage in Jos. Ant., 11, 346: αἰτία κοινοφαγίας (cf. Gl. 2:12ff.); 3, 181: βέβηλον καὶ κοινόν τινα τόπον; 12,320 (desecration of the temple); 13, 4: κοινός βίος (of apostate Jews). In general κοινός, like לֶחֶם, is used only of things like these, but in Ep. Ar., 315 it is also used of men: τὰ θεῖα . . . εἰς ἀνθρώπους κοινούς (non-Jews) ἐκφέρειν. Philo does not have κοινός in the sense of “profane.” This sense seems to have developed on Jewish soil. At any rate, there are no instances in non-Jewish secular Greek.<sup>16</sup>

It is recognition of the fact that the NT incorporates and reflects this exclusive Jewish sense of κοινός that illuminates why Peter should argue with his Lord over whether he should eat the “clean” creature. In his mind, the “clean” creatures in the sheet of the vision had now been rendered “common” through being defiled by the presence of the “unclean.” As F. F. Bruce points out, in a statement noted earlier, Peter “was scandalized by the unholy mixture of clean animals with unclean.”<sup>17</sup> According to traditional Jewish law, therefore, he could eat neither.

<sup>14</sup>Fr. Hauck, “κοινῶ,” *TDNT* 3:809.

<sup>15</sup>Idem, “κοινός,” *TDNT* 3:791. The fact that forms of κοινός may be translated from Hebrew terms other than לֶחֶם (e.g., οἶκος κοινῶ and οἰκία κοινῆ from לֶחֶם תְּהִי in Prov 21:9 and 25:24 [“common house”]) is, of course, taken for granted. See *ibid.*, p. 790. This has no bearing, however, on our present discussion.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 791.

<sup>17</sup>Bruce, p. 218, n. 15.

Furthermore, as also noted earlier, the voice itself never mentioned "unclean." It invariably reprimanded Peter for declaring creatures to be "common."<sup>18</sup> He was never directed to consume the "unclean" creature, but rather immediately to desist from describing as "common" the creatures that God had declared "cleansed."<sup>19</sup>

It has been argued that this "cleansed" was either the sweeping removal of all distinctions by the Cross-event<sup>20</sup> or a special, extraordinary event here at the descent of the sheet<sup>21</sup>—an event demonstrating that Peter may now associate with Gentiles because God had either symbolically or actually "cleansed" the unclean creatures. However, if Peter was to disregard the distinctions of people on the

<sup>18</sup>In comparing Acts 10 and 11, the longest identical sentence is the reply of the voice to Peter's categorization of the creatures. Luke went to great pains to record Peter's exact defense.

<sup>19</sup>Hauck, "κοινόω," p. 809, notes that the imperative (κοίνου) in Acts 10:15 and 11:9 is best explained in the declarative sense: "to declare unclean or profane."

<sup>20</sup>See, e.g., Chr. Wordsworth, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the Original Greek: With Introductions and Notes* (London, 1872), section on "Acts of the Apostles," 2: 90: "God *cleansed* all Nations by *one* single act. He cleansed the Gentiles who were unclean according to the Law, by the Blood of His Dear Son, shed once for all on the cross." Others holding this view include Charles W. Carter (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Wesleyan Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1964], 4: 546: "By His [Christ's] sacrificial death, these distinctions have been forever abolished"); F. W. Stelhorn (*Annotations on the Acts of the Apostles*, The Lutheran Commentary, 6 [New York, 1896]: 139: "Actually by the death of Christ, which did away with all the types of the Old Testament, fulfilling the very last of them; *formally* by this command given to Peter"); and R. J. Knowling, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 2 [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1956]: 254-255). Also noteworthy is Rackham, p. 152: "His [Christ's] body was the true *vessel* which 'sealed up the sum of' created life, and so his incarnation had *cleansed* creation. And now he, by whom all things were made, pronounces all things clean. Henceforth nothing is unclean of itself. To make this declaration most emphatic, it is repeated *three times*."

<sup>21</sup>E.g., Neil, p. 139: "He had been rebuked by the divine 'voice' (verse 13), whose command to 'kill and eat' had pronounced all things clean . . ."; and Robertson, p. 137: ". . . this new proposal even from the Lord runs against all his [Peter's] previous training." See also J. W. Packer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge, Eng., 1975), p. 83 (" . . . God's command to eat cleansed all the animals in the sail-cloth"); G. H. C. Macgregor, "Acts: Text, Exegesis, and Exposition," *IB* 9:136 ("What God has cleansed: Presumably by the command to eat. Or have we an echo of Mark 7:14-23, where Mark's comment on Jesus' teaching is that 'thus he declared all foods clean' [RSV]"); and William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 80-81.

basis that the command of the voice had just at that time removed the distinctions of creatures, a difficulty arises in that the verb used is in the aorist indicative active—ἐκαθάρισε(ν), derived from καθαρίζω, “to cleanse.” This verb form reveals that God’s act of “cleansing” was punctiliar, historical, and declarative.<sup>22</sup>

By grammatical definition, ἐκαθάρισε(ν) precludes the present. It must refer either to the Cross-Event or to an event during the OT era. The latter is not an acceptable alternative, due to the voice’s consistent reference to Peter’s category of “common.”

What was it that Peter declared to be “common”? The answer is clearly: The “clean” creature associating with the “unclean” in the sheet. Only the “clean” could be rendered “common,” and then only by the “unclean,” for these “unclean” creatures were the very agents of defilement. The voice pointedly ignored Peter’s category of “unclean” and categorically denied that the “clean” creature was here defiled by contact with the “unclean.”

### 3. *The “Common” Classification in Its Historical Perspective*

For the vision and divine instruction to be sensible to Peter, the concepts of “clean” and “unclean” must exist in the NT era. Rather than whether Gentiles were to be accepted into the Church, the point for pondering was how *he*, Peter, could associate with Gentiles and not be defiled. The vision definitively demonstrated to him that just as creatures could co-exist within the sheet and not defile or be defiled, so he too could associate with Gentiles without fear of contamination or pollution.

If the Cross had removed the distinctions between “clean” and “unclean” animals, the text should be expected to read differently. The voice should have ignored Peter’s category of “common” and displayed annoyance at his continuing to regard creatures as “unclean.” It should have said, “What God has cleansed, you must not call *unclean*.”

This is, of course, contrary to the data. Peter saw “all” creatures and categorized them into two classes. The voice responded in

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3d ed. (Oxford, 1957; reprint ed., 1978), p. 282; and H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto, 1927, 1955, 1957), pp. 193-194.

language of distinction—language that Peter should readily understand. It stated what the Cross-Event had really done: removed the “wall of separation,” thus allowing the “clean” and the “unclean” creatures to associate freely again. Clearly, the Jew was to remain ethnically a Jew, the Roman a Roman, the Greek a Greek, etc., but now the divine command illustrates that free social interaction cannot defile.

The Jewish concept of defilement by association probably grew from God’s principle of separation wherein he had warned the Israelites that they were not to follow the polluted example of the previous inhabitants of Canaan:

I am the LORD your God, who have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction [“separate them,” LXX; “put difference,” KJV] between the clean beast and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean [“separated from you as unclean,” KJV]. You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and have separated [“severed,” KJV] you from the peoples, that you should be mine (Lev 20:24b-26).

Symbolic of the Israelites’ separation of themselves from the surrounding nations was the separation—the physical partition—of the “clean” creature from the “unclean.” It should be carefully noted that the subject of discussion in the foregoing passage is not the definition of a “clean” or “unclean” creature, but rather the *separation* of creatures that already were classified and known by these categories, symbolic of God’s separating out the Jewish people from well-established national groups.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>The root of the word used to describe this idea of separation was that which was used to describe the separation of light from darkness, the waters, and day from night in the creation narrative (Gen 1:4, 6, 14, etc.). In this passage it is clear that God was not defining the distinction of “clean” and “unclean,” but rather he was adding the concept of symbolic separation to the established fact of the two categories of creatures. It is likewise interesting that ἀφορίζω, employed by the LXX to translate the Hebrew כָּרַל (not διαστέλλω as in Lev 11:47), is also used by Paul to describe Peter’s action after the arrival of the “circumcision party” from Jerusalem (Gal 2:12). He “separated” himself from the Gentile brethren even after God had singularly blessed him with this vision of the distinct lack of any “wall of



It is possible that this passage in Leviticus was uppermost in Peter's mind at the time of his vision. In any event, the sentiments he expresses are the very ideas enunciated there.<sup>24</sup> However, nothing is mentioned in the passage itself about defilement by association with Gentiles; rather, what is in view is defilement by association with the *symbols*.

Prior to the time of Christ, an extension of this directive had developed. In order to avoid inevitable contact with the symbol, Jewish tradition added to the OT stipulation by eventually regarding association with Gentile human beings themselves as a source of defilement. It is in this context that Peter's understanding of the term "common" is intelligible.

As pointed out by T. C. Smith, "The Gentiles who ate some of the unclean animals listed in Leviticus 11 were unfit for social intercourse with the Jews. The separatist policy in Judaism became so strict that oil, bread, milk, and meat could not be purchased from Gentiles. To eat pagan food was an abomination, but to dine in the house of a pagan was much worse."<sup>25</sup>

Now, just as Peter was no longer to insist upon the "clean" creature's being separated from the "unclean" creature, the voice to him indicated that he should no longer regard either himself or his people as continuing to be especially separated out from the nations. That Peter understood the message in this manner is clear from his subsequent association with Cornelius and other Gentiles.

#### 4. *Implications of NT Usage of the Term "Common"*

Clarification of the usage of κοινός/κοινῶν in Acts 10 and 11 provides, first of all, concrete evidence for the continuity of OT distinctions between "clean" and "unclean" flesh foods into the NT era; otherwise, the vision would have had no meaning to Peter.

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separation." Given Peter's apparent understanding of the freedom of association without fear of defilement (for he had eaten with Gentiles both openly and consistently), Paul's agitation at Peter's failure to withstand the intense political pressure appears altogether understandable.

<sup>24</sup>Another text that may have influenced Peter is, "Flesh that touches any unclean thing shall not be eaten; it shall be burned with fire" (Lev 7:19), even though the literal understanding of the passage is in reference to "peace offerings."

<sup>25</sup>T. C. Smith, "Acts," *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville, Tenn., 1970), 10:67.

Clarification of this terminology also strikes a direct, mortal attack upon the concepts of (a) the defilement (or making “common”) of “clean” creatures by association with “unclean” creatures; and (b) a continuing exclusiveness of the Jews and their supposed defilement (being rendered “common”) by association with “unclean” Gentiles.

It is obviously of utmost importance to keep in mind Hauck’s analysis of the development of the designation “common”;<sup>26</sup> in short, what this term meant in the NT era. It is possible (though not within the scope of this article to examine the evidence) that not only are the conclusions stated above relevant to the material in Acts treated in this article, but that they may also have implications with respect to other NT passages in which the term “common” is used.

For instance, when in Mark 7 the Pharisees urged that handling food with ceremonially unwashed hands rendered it inedible through defilement (“common,” Mark 7:2, 5, 15, 18, 20, etc.), Christ rejoined that true defilement sprang from within rather than without. Mark concludes, “Thus he declared all foods clean” (vs. 19), deducing from the illustration of the eating of “clean” bread with “common” hands that in daily association the believer need not consider that “clean” foods would thus be rendered “common.”

Whether Mark or a later editor is responsible for the parenthetical comment would appear to be immaterial. Surely, no one would seriously insist that Christ was advocating the inclusion of “unclean” foods within the parameters of a pre-Cross debate with Pharisees, who would hardly have allowed “unclean” creatures

<sup>26</sup>John Brunt, “Unclean or Unhealthy? An Adventist Perspective,” *Spectrum*, February 1981, p. 19, demonstrates one of the more logical conclusions an interpreter is forced to consider when κοινός/κοινώω is either ignored or misunderstood. He states that “Mark’s comment transcends the question of unwashed hands and declares that *all* foods are clean (Mark 7:19). It is hard to imagine that first-century Gentile Christians would have taken that to mean all foods except those declared unclean in Leviticus 11.”

However, as documented by both Hauck and Robertson (see p. 147, above; and Hauck, “κοινός,” p. 791; Robertson, p. 137), the aspects of defilement and pollution involved here were peculiar to *Palestinian Judaism*. This development, as well as the fact that Christ’s pre-Cross debate was within this Jewish-Palestinian context, renders it difficult to imagine why Brunt calls upon first-century Gentile-Christian opinion as the norm.

into their definition of food, let alone have considered them capable of being defiled! After all, as stated earlier, the "unclean" articles were the very instruments of defilement. By definition, they could never be the recipients of defilement. Thus, the argument that Christ declared "all" creatures to be acceptable as food would appear to be void.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Paul was "firmly persuaded" that flesh meats offered to idols were rendered "common" only in the mind of the "weak" individual (Rom 14:1, 14). Such a person would consume only vegetables because these were not offered to idols before being sold in the market-place, and therefore would not be defiled. Paul stated that "everything is indeed clean . . ." (Rom 14:20) because, as with the parenthetical comment of Mark 7:19, nothing within the parameters of "clean" food should be thought of as being made "common."

In retrospect, the polemic indicated in these passages is directed, not against the OT distinction between "clean" and "unclean" animals, but at the concepts and practices developed in later Judaism that the "clean" would become "common" or "defiled" by contact with "unclean" (or with other "common" or "defiled") objects.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the basic thrust of the account in Acts 10 and 11 extends this concept to the sphere of human association. Palestinian Judaism applied the idea of "defilement" or "commonality" to the Jew who associated with Gentiles. This was an unwarranted distinction on the basis of the OT itself, but all the more so in the light of the Cross-Event, which had broken down the "wall of separation."

<sup>27</sup>See above, pp. 147-149 and the references in nn. 14 and 15.

<sup>28</sup>It is interesting to note that Lev 11:34 indicates that "food . . . which may be eaten" (אֲכָלָה; see also Gen 6:21) is not "defiled" or "made common" by contact with the "unclean," but is in fact to be regarded as if it too were "unclean."