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16. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
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19. Oliver Goldsmith, *Collected Works*. Quoted in Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 163.
20. Frances Moore Lappé, *Diet For a Small Planet*, new rev. ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), p. 7.
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23. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 170.
24. Lappé, *Diet*, p. 382.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 14.
30. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 174.
31. Lappé, *Diet*, p. 17.
32. Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), p. 44.
33. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 171.
34. Sider, *Rich Christians*, p. 153.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 157, 158.
36. Lappé, *Diet*, p. 40.
37. Sider, *Rich Christians*, p. 159.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

# Unclean or Unhealthful? An Adventist Perspective

by John Brunt

Many Seventh-day Adventists typically emphasize two distinct ways one may err with regard to diet. On the one hand, to eat meat, excessive sugar, or a generally unbalanced diet is seen as a violation of health principles. On the other hand, to eat pork, shellfish, or other foods specified as “unclean” in Leviticus 11 is seen as a violation of God’s law and is “sinful” in a way that mere lack of regard for health is not. This paper calls such a qualitative distinction into question.

There are two major problems with the way many Adventists use Leviticus 11 with respect to clean and unclean foods. First, Adventists are inconsistent. While parts of

Levitical rules concerning what is clean and unclean are accepted, other parts are rejected or ignored, and there is no valid basis for this selective acceptance. For example, while most Adventists would have no difficulty agreeing with the teaching of Leviticus 11:20 that insects which crawl should not be eaten, few would heed the teaching of Leviticus 11:24-25 and wash all their clothes and consider themselves unclean until evening because they touched the carcass of such an insect; yet both teachings are part of the same body of instruction. Nor do we consider new mothers unclean and exclude them from the sanctuary for forty days after the birth of a male and eighty days after the birth of a female (Lev. 12:1-5), yet this, too, is part of the same body of instruction.

Second, in their use of Leviticus 11, many Adventists are not biblical, for the New Testament explicitly abolishes distinctions be-

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tween clean and unclean. This second aspect of the problem is the major concern of the present paper. We will examine the New Testament teaching, look at certain historical observations that help to explain the New Testament position, and study the significance of these findings for an Adventist presentation of diet and health.

There are several passages in the New Testament which speak of the distinction between clean and unclean — passages that Adventists too often ignore.

Mark 7 records a controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees. While the specific

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issue is the ritual washing of hands before meals (the Pharisees are upset because Jesus’ disciples do not wash their hands in the proper manner), it is clear that Mark understands Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees in a broader way. Jesus teaches that one is not defiled by what goes into the mouth; rather, defilement is an inner matter. Mark adds his own parenthesis to show how far-reaching he considers Jesus’ advice to be:

And he called the people to him again, and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him.” And when he had entered the house, and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from the outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on? (*Thus he declared all foods clean.*). And he

said, “What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man” (Mark 7:14-23).<sup>1</sup>

On another occasion, the Pharisees express unhappiness with Jesus Himself over His failure to wash in the proper manner. Again, Jesus stresses that true spirituality is an inner concern, not a matter of outward ritual:

While he was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him; so he went in and sat at the table. The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. And the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of extortion and wickedness. You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give for alms those things which are within; and behold, everything is clean for you (Luke 11:37-41).

Notice here that Jesus Himself declares everything clean.

Paul also emphasizes the cleanness of all things. In Romans 14:1 - 15:13, he addresses a situation in the Roman community where believers are divided over dietary practice. The “weak” eat only vegetables, whereas the “strong” believe they may eat anything. Paul does not try to bring about unity of practice, but rather tries to bring about a unity of fellowship that transcends the difference in specific practice. He affirms the freedom of both weak and strong to act according to their convictions. For the strong, regarding all foods as clean is right, but for those who do believe in distinctions between clean and unclean, going ahead and eating in violation of their convictions is wrong. Thus Paul can say:

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. (Rom. 14:14).

In addition, even though Paul identifies with the strong (Rom. 15:1), he also hopes that they will be so free that they will be able to adjust their practices (even where legiti-

mate) for the sake of the weak and unity with them. Thus he says:

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for any one to make others fall by what he eats; it is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble (Rom. 14:20-21).

While it is impossible to identify the weak and to discover the origin of, or reasons for, their vegetarianism, it is clear that Paul, within the context of a debate over food, teaches that all things are clean.

Adventist expositors have often sought to explain these statements in Mark 7 and Romans 14 by emphasizing that in neither case is the specific topic under discussion Jewish food laws as such. It is not Leviticus 11 that is under discussion, they have said. Rather, the issue in Mark 7 is eating with unwashed hands, whereas the issue in Romans 14 is some kind of vegetarianism. According to this interpretation, the New Testament allows the distinction between clean and unclean foods in Leviticus 11 to remain binding.

While it is true that Jewish food laws are not the primary topic of discussion in either of these cases, it is also apparent that in both cases the focus of the statements regarding clean and unclean is much broader than the specific contexts in which they occur. 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. Likewise, Paul declares the cleanness of *all* things, and in no way implies that certain foods are to be excepted from this declaration. Readers in Rome could hardly be expected to conclude other than that all distinctions between clean and unclean were now abolished. Thus, even though both Mark and Paul raise the same issue of the cleanness of all foods within the context of more specific discussions, the broad, general nature of their conclusions cannot be ignored.

There are also other passages that could be included here, such as Titus 1:15 and Colossians 2:8-23, but the passages above are suffi-

cient to show that the New Testament explicitly rejects the distinction between clean and unclean foods. Before moving, however, to what significance this has for the Adventist prohibition of unclean meats, we must illuminate the cultural context of the New Testament teaching.

First, it should be noted that in the first century, no one considered Jewish food laws to have anything to do with health, nor is health an issue in any of the New Testament passages surveyed above.<sup>2</sup> The relationship of diet to health was simply not an issue in first-century Judaism or Christianity. In Judaism, rules regarding clean and unclean were understood in terms of ritual purity which directly affected one's relationship to God. God was not to be offended by that which was unclean; thus, one who was unclean was excluded from the temple. It made no difference whether the impurity resulted from eating forbidden foods, giving birth to a child, menstruating, touching a corpse, or failing to wash in the prescribed manner. While some of these rules concerning clean and unclean were originally intended to set forth conditions for worship in the temple, by the first century, groups such as the Pharisees probably attempted to be in a perpetual state of ritual purity, especially at mealtimes.<sup>3</sup>

There were, of course, Jews who tried to explain these rules on a rationalistic basis. They wanted to show that the rules were not arbitrary, but had a specific purpose. For instance, Philo, the first-century Alexandrian Jewish philosopher who attempted to wed Judaism with Hellenistic philosophy, explains Jewish food laws in the following manner:

All the animals of land, sea or air whose flesh is the finest and fattest, thus titillating and exciting the malignant foe pleasure, he (God) sternly forbade them to eat, knowing that they set a trap for the most slavish of the senses, the taste, and produce gluttony, and evil very dangerous both to soul and body. For gluttony begets indigestion which is the source origin of all distempers

and infirmities. Now among the different kinds of land animals there is none whose flesh is so delicious as the pig's, as all who eat it agree, and among the aquatic animals the same may be said of such species as are scaleless.<sup>4</sup>

According to Philo, God prohibited pork and shellfish because they tasted the best of all foods, and God wanted to curb pleasure and desire in His people. Philo shows a concern for health,<sup>5</sup> but he nowhere intimates that pork itself is unhealthy. Rather, gluttony is unhealthy, and pork tastes so good that it leads to gluttony. In this respect, Philo is not alone; no extant Jewish writing from this period directly connects Jewish food laws and health.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus and Paul must be understood within the context of the issues of their time. The issue Jesus addresses is not health but a ritualistic understanding of the nature of religion, according to which food, corpses, unwashed hands, etc., cause spiritual defilement. Jesus and Paul are not saying that all food is healthful, but that all food is clean — i.e., it is not able to bring ritual defilement which cuts one off from the presence of God.

It is also important to recognize that Philo's rationalization for Jewish food laws was by no means the most common one. Most Jews of the New Testament period who sought a rationalistic explanation for their food laws saw these laws in allegorical terms (without denying their literal validity) and connected them with the issue of fellowship with Gentiles. *What* and *with whom* one ate were integrally related. God restricted what one ate to symbolize the kind of people with whom one should not eat. For example, one Hellenistic Jewish work from Egypt teaches the following:

When therefore our lawgiver, equipped by God for insight into all things, had surveyed each particular, he fenced us about with impregnable palisades and with walls of iron, to the end that we should mingle in no way with any of the other nations, remaining pure in body and in spirit, emancipated from vain opinions, revering the one and mighty God above the whole of creation. . . . And therefore, so that we should be polluted by none nor be infected with

perversions by associating with worthless persons, he has hedged us about on all sides with prescribed purifications in matters of food and drink and touch and hearing and sight.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the Jews refrain from eating unclean food to remind them that they are not to eat with unclean people.

This Jewish reluctance to eat with other nations is noted by Gentile authors, although it is always difficult to know where truth stops and exaggeration begins in such propaganda. Diodorus, writing in the first cen-

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tury B.C., says that the Jews “made their hatred of mankind into a tradition, and on this account had introduced utterly outlandish laws: not to break bread with any other race, nor to show them any good will at all.”<sup>8</sup>

This connection in Jewish thought between unclean food and unclean people helps to explain the symbolism in Peter's vision and subsequent encounter with Cornelius recorded in Acts 10 and 11. As Acts 10:28 clearly shows, the point of that narrative is not food but *people*. The bottom line is that all people are to be considered “clean” and worthy of the gospel. But while *we* might wonder why unclean animals would be used in this vision that teaches the cleanness of all people, to the first-century Jew the connection would have been obvious. The uncleanness of pigs was understood as God's way of teaching Israel about the uncleanness of Gentiles, and thus a vision about eating unclean foods would naturally have to do with unclean people.

When we realize that one of the most crucial and hard-fought issues in the early church was the inclusion of Gentiles in salva-

tion (and the related issue of table-fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians), it is easy to see how Jewish food laws as they were generally understood in first-century Judaism could only be inimical to the gospel that Paul taught. This is probably another reason for Paul's emphasis that all foods are clean. In order to break down the imposing barriers that separated Jew and Gentile, the entire distinction between clean and unclean, which was so basic to Jewish thought, had to go. For this distinction, with its volumes of rules, could only contribute to a ritualistic understanding of the nature of religion and to an exclusivism that separated the pious from both things and people that were considered unclean.

Thus, while the New Testament rejects the distinction between clean and unclean, it is not speaking to the issue of health. It is rather addressing problems that were live issues in the first century, problems of ritualism and exclusivism, both of which had to be overcome if the true meaning of the gospel was to be grasped. As long as the traditional Jewish distinctions between clean and unclean were preserved, the overcoming of these problems was virtually impossible, for the clean-unclean distinction was understood in a ritualistic way, and the belief that certain people were unclean was part and parcel of that distinction.

**I**n light of the New Testament teaching, should Adventists use Leviticus 11 to support the prohibition of pork and other foods listed there as "unclean"? Should a qualitative distinction be made between eating such foods and other unhealthful dietary practices?

The answer should be "no" to both of these questions. The use often made of Leviticus 11 can only be successful when two important factors are ignored: 1) the context of the passage — i.e., the rest of the instructions concerning clean and unclean presented in the same place — and 2) the rejection of the clean-unclean distinction in the New Testament.

There are two major (and closely related) reasons, however, why we have often continued this line of interpretation in spite of its

inconsistencies. First, we have been unwilling to acknowledge Ellen White's contribution to our health practice and have maintained instead that every facet of our practice is biblical, not only in principle, but in specific detail. Second, we have wanted to have specific biblical proof-texts to support each point of practice, whereas in reality it is not always so simple a matter that one can point to a specific proof-text for support of every belief and practice. Sometimes, in order to support a belief or practice which is valid biblically, one must carry out a more complex theological task by showing the implications of underlying principles in Scripture. But the penchant for proof-texting often mitigates against this theological task.<sup>9</sup> It is precisely this theological task that is needed if Adventists are to give a consistent presentation of dietary practice and health reform.

What then are we to do in light of the difficulties which our traditional use of Leviticus 11 presents? Three specific suggestions follow.

First, we should accept without embarrassment the teaching of the New Testament that nothing is unclean, recognizing that the issue of health was not a factor in the New Testament discussions. The issues that concern us today must not be read back into the New Testament, and the New Testament must not be made to address questions with which it was not concerned. The time was not yet right for God to reveal the principles of health reform to His people in the first century; instead, other issues such as the internal nature of true spirituality and the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ first had to be settled, and, as we have seen, the clean-unclean distinction, as commonly understood in the first century, confused both these issues.

That the time was not yet right for a presentation of health reform in the first century should hardly surprise Adventists, for even in 1858 Ellen White could say that the time for this truth had not yet come. She writes to one who is advocating the prohibition of swine's flesh in the diet of Adventists and says:

I saw that your views concerning swine's flesh would prove no injury if you

have them to yourselves; but in your judgment and opinion you have made this question a test, and your actions have plainly shown your faith in this matter. If God requires His people to abstain from swine's flesh, He will convict them on the matter. He is just as willing to show His honest children their duty, as to show their duty to individuals upon whom He has not laid the burden of His work. If it is the duty of the church to abstain from swine's flesh, God will discover it to more than two or three. He will teach His *church* their duty.

God is leading out a people, not a few separate individuals here and there, one believing this thing, another that. Angels of God are doing the work committed to their trust. The third angel is leading out and purifying a people, and they should move with him unitedly. Some run ahead of the angels that are leading this people; but they have to retrace every step, and meekly follow no faster than the angels lead. I saw that the angels of God would lead His people no faster than they could receive and act upon the important truths that are communicated to them.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the difficulties connected with our use of Leviticus 11 suggest that we must do our theological homework and firmly establish the importance of health reform on the biblical teaching of the wholeness of man and the value of physical life. This will give the whole matter of health reform a much firmer biblical foundation than could ever be provided by proof-texting from Leviticus 11. It is not within the scope of this paper to carry out this theological and interpretive task, but the paper is a plea for such work. It could make use of Paul's anti-Gnostic teachings about the importance of the body, the doctrines of the resurrection, creation, the non-immortality of the soul, and others.

The New Testament rejection of distinctions between clean and unclean would not in any way speak against this emphasis, for since health is not an issue in these passages, they in no way affirm that all foods are healthful (one who drinks arsenic still dies), but only that all foods are *clean* within the context of the ritualistic understanding of clean-unclean at that time.

Some will be disappointed that no one proof-text will support our understanding of health reform. However, in the long run, performing the theological task will yield results that are much more biblical. The result of such work should be *greater* rather than less *responsibility* with regard to health reform, for the emphasis will be on the responsibility to do *always* that which is *most* healthful, not merely on avoiding certain foods.

**“For the Christian, all things are clean; true spirituality is a matter of the heart, not of ritualistic externals.”**

Thus, the need is not for a change in our *practice* (the bottom line is *not* that ham sandwiches should take their place on Adventist tables, nor that the church should abolish its prohibition of pork), but for a clearer grounding of our concern for health in scriptural principles, not in dubious proof-texts.

Third, the difficulties attending the traditional view underscore our need to recognize our indebtedness to Ellen White and her health reform vision of 1863, and to admit that she is the vehicle through whom God has given light about the unhealthfulness of pork and other foods which God prohibited to Israel. What Ellen White affirms is that *in these particular laws* God's original purpose was health, that these foods are especially unhealthful, and thus that they should not be eaten.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, our rejection of these meats for food does not come directly from Leviticus 11 (or else we would be bound by all the other laws concerning clean and unclean, and this the New Testament explicitly rejects), but from Leviticus 11 as viewed and interpreted through the light which Ellen White received from God.<sup>12</sup>

It also follows from Ellen White's discussions of swine's flesh that the purpose of the prohibition for us today is health and health only. Pork is forbidden only because it is unhealthful. Thus there is not a *qualitative* distinction between eating pork and eating other unhealthful foods. Violation of health reform is

not one kind of sin, and violation of God's direct command in Leviticus 11 quite another. Rather, the difference is *quantitative*; pork is simply more unhealthful. Thus Ellen White says:

The tissues of swine swarm with parasites. Of swine God said, "It is unclean unto you: ye shall not eat of their flesh, nor touch their dead carcass." Deuteronomy 14:8. The command was given because swine's flesh is unfit for food. Swine are scavengers, and this is the only use they were intended to serve. Never, under any circumstances, was their flesh to be eaten by human beings. It is impossible for the flesh of any living creature to be wholesome when filth is its natu-

ral element and when it feeds upon every detestable thing.<sup>13</sup>

Seventh-day Adventists believe that physical existence is a gift of God, and therefore that care for the body is an important concern. The scriptural emphasis on the wholeness of human beings mandates health reform. They also believe (in accordance both with light given to Ellen White and with scientific evidence) that pork is especially unhealthful. It ought to be for these reasons that Adventists refrain from eating pork, not because the laws concerning clean and unclean in Leviticus are still binding upon Christians. For the Christian, all things are clean; true spirituality is a matter of the heart, not of ritualistic externals.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Revised Standard Version* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946, 1952).

2. The question of the extent to which Jewish dietary restrictions were originally understood as relating to health is a matter that falls outside the scope of this investigation.

3. See Jacob Neusner, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1973) *passim*, especially pp. 80, 90.

4. Philo, "The Special Laws," 4:100, in *Philo*, vol. 8, trans. F. H. Colson, Loeb Classics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), p. 69.

5. It is interesting that while Philo never directly connects health and food laws, he does give health as a reason for circumcision. See *Ibid.*, 1:4ff, in *Philo*, vol. 7, trans. F. H. Colson, Loeb Classics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), pp. 103-105.

6. Some writers outside Judaism and Christianity emphasized health and related it directly to dietary concerns. For instance, Plutarch, the first-century Hellenistic philosopher, wrote an essay titled "Advice About Keeping Well." (In *Moralia*, vol. 2, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, Loeb Classics [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928], pp. 216-293.) Here he advises that light foods such as vegetables, birds, and fishes that do not have much fat are to be preferred over meat and cheese. While Prodicus had said that fire is the best of the sauces, Plutarch counters: ". . . but one might more truly speak of health as being the most divine and agreeable sauce. For boiled, baked, or fried foods afford no proper pleasure or even gratification to those who are suffering from disease, debauch, or nausea, while a clean and unspoiled appetite makes everything, to a sound

body, pleasant and 'eagerly craved,' as Homer has said, — that is agreeable."

7. Moses Hadas, ed., *Aristeas to Philocrates* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), #169, p. 165.

8. Diodorus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 34:1:1-5, quoted in Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976), p. 182.

9. I recently saw an extreme example of this tendency to demand a proof-text for each point, rather than basing practice on a more principled biblical-theological foundation. An evangelist was speaking on the need to give up cigarettes. He used the following proof-text to make his point:

"Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations; lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit" (Deut. 29:18).

He theorized that the root bearing poisonous fruit (which, according to its context, is obviously a figurative reference) was tobacco, and that in this passage God was forbidding the use of tobacco by the Israelites!

10. *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, pp. 206-207.

11. *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 311-17; and *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, pp. 292-93.

12. This recognition of our indebtedness to Ellen White is not a violation of the principle of *sola scriptura* or an example of a doctrine based on Ellen White rather than the Bible, for the basic principle of the importance of the body and thus of health is scriptural. But Ellen White does give quite specific information about the application of that principle, i.e., that certain foods are particularly unhealthful and should be avoided.

13. *The Ministry of Healing*, pp. 313-14.