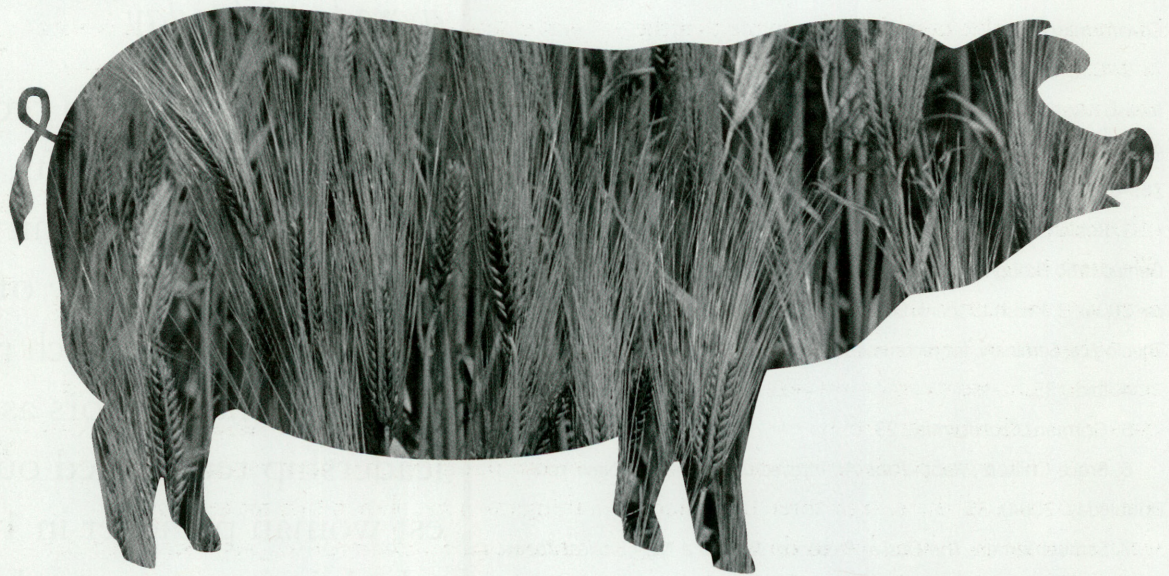


# HEALTH AND FITNESS





# Pork

*Hogmeat revisited* | BY LOREN SEIBOLD

Given that much of Adventist theology is orthodox evangelical theology, why is it that we are so separated from all other Christians, even those whose theological foundations and practices resemble ours? It seems to me that the answer is twofold: food and time. We eat different things from other people, and must constantly declare that; and we do important things (or refuse to do other things) at times different from other people, and must constantly declare that. We don't have discussions with our neighbors over, say, the nature of Christ; it doesn't come up. What we believe is less important than the actions we choose to do or not do. These things mark us as different from others.

One of our most persistently practiced doctrines, and one of the two or three by which we are known to others, has to do with unclean meats. Before I got on the bus for my very first day in first grade of public school, my mother instructed me how to ask the cooks if there was pork in the cafeteria food. It was one of my earliest marks of identity: Loren is the boy who won't eat pork, and I had to ask about it even in front of schoolmates I wanted to impress. I've been left with a strong sense of the identifying power of this belief.

## History

Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 discuss which animals are edible and which are not. In mammals, the two-toed ruminant ungulates (grazing, cud-chewing animals with split hooves) are singled out; among water creatures, those with

scales; among fowl there is no simple distinction, but a list, many of the Hebrew names of which we can't identify.

James and Ellen White initially had little interest in these rules. Ellen White wrote, "If it is the duty of the church to abstain from swine's flesh, God will discover it to more than two or three." James was similarly stubborn: "We do not, by any means, believe that the Bible teaches that its [pork's] proper use, in the gospel dispensation, is sinful."<sup>1</sup>

The founders eventually became interested in the teachings of Victorian health reformers, among whom pork was an unpopular meat. The pig was a scavenger, its meat considered unwholesome. When Ellen White had her first health reform vision, pork was among the things she was shown that make people unhealthy. Soon thereafter, her visions led her to promote an all-vegetarian diet.

Here is a quick summary of the history, as taken from Ron Graybill in an article from the Ellen G. White Estate:<sup>2</sup>

1. When church leaders talked about pork as unhealthful, they did not include the rest of the unclean meats.<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century, they never mentioned Leviticus 11 as a biblical diet guideline.
2. All of the food guidelines of the early church leaders appear to be based on health considerations.
3. As far as Ellen White was concerned, she moved from food not being a relevant issue, to pork being unhealthy, to vegetarianism.

**What we believe is less important than the actions we choose to do or not to do.**



Says Graybill, "Mrs. White never explicitly declared that the general distinction between clean and unclean meats was one which Seventh-day Adventists were still bound to observe."

4. The first serious assertion in church writings of the distinction between clean and unclean meats based on Leviticus 11 comes not from Ellen White, but from S. N. Haskell, writing in 1903. "In His infinite plan [God] appointed a part of the animal kingdom to act as scavengers... In order that we might know those which feed upon clean food, He placed a mark or brand upon them." Haskell then quoted Leviticus 11:1-8, and concluded, "The eating of these things which God has forbidden is very grievous in His sight."<sup>4</sup>
5. It wasn't until the Church's 1931 Yearbook that a statement of twenty-two fundamental beliefs was published, and in this statement, the clean-unclean meat distinction was first given officially.

So it is incorrect to say that this is part of historical Adventism. In fact, it is a later development, and less a part of Ellen White's theology than is vegetarianism.

## Biblical Background

In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas notes that some of the ancient commentators, like Maimonides, as well as some modern commentators, have tried to ascribe the Torah's dietary laws to God's concern about health and hygiene.<sup>5</sup> But she insists that nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures are the laws said to be for these practical reasons. According to the Torah,

*You are the children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead, for you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession. (Deut. 14:1-2)*

*Do not defile yourselves by any of these creatures. Do not make yourselves unclean by means of them or be made unclean by them. I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. (Lev. 11:43-44)*

The rules may have contributed marginally to health, but the reason presented for avoiding some meats is that they insult the Hebrews' distinct identity as God's holy

people. These are sacred categories—not practical ones—to the writers. The evidence for food's role in a sort of sacramental holiness is too clear to suppose that God was saying, "Hey, I just want you guys to stay well." If he wanted them well, why did he send them through a desert, allow polygamy and slavery, and give them the bizarre test for an unfaithful wife? (Num. 5:11-29). No, this body of rules is not practical, but religious.

Jesus, too, does not mention health in connection with the dietary rules. But he appears critical of the Torah's assumption that obedience can create holiness.

*So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"...*

*Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'..."*

*After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.") (Mark 7:5, 14-15, 17-19 NIV)*

The one item in the text that we today might consider healthful and hygienic—washing your hands—Jesus regards with disinterest.<sup>6</sup> He's very clear that outward actions can't create inward holiness. Only spiritual, moral choices can make one good. Food doesn't make one spiritually unclean; to the contrary, verse 19 concludes, "Thus he declared all foods clean."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus does not say that all foods are good for you. It would be silly to suppose that nothing you ingest can hurt you. Health, and even taste, are good reasons for not making dietary choices. The error is supposing your choice of food substitutes for a spiritual heart and godly life.

Paul appears to regard the food laws as Jesus did.

*As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died... For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and*



*drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit...* (Rom. 14:14-15, 17)

Again, health isn't the topic, but the inability of diet to accomplish spiritual work. Paul, like Jesus, opposed those who would say that one's choice of food has any direct spiritual consequences one way or the other. No food is spiritually unclean, says Paul.

Paul makes it clear that there is a point of spiritual value here, however: although you cannot add spiritual value by what you eat, you can subtract it from someone else by what you eat; for if a believer who does have a hang-up about food is hurt by your freedom, then you damage that person's faith, and presumably, your fellowship in the body of Christ. The spiritual significance of food in this passage hasn't to do with obedience to the Torah, but with maintaining good relationships with one another.<sup>8</sup>

### **Practical Implications**

If I asked a group of Adventists what these rules are for, most would answer "health." I would not disagree that eating, say, deep-fried rats may be less healthy than a beefsteak. Yet my experiences with Adventists have convinced me that no matter what we say, health isn't the real reason we eat as we do.

Years ago, I took an evangelism class from a well-known Adventist evangelist. In one class, he taught us how to convince evangelistic interests to give up unclean meats by explaining that God gave his people only the very best food to eat because he wanted them to be healthy. One student asked, "What if someone should have no clean food available?"

"It is unlikely that people would have nothing to eat but pork," the evangelist answered. "God will provide for the faithful. But," he added, "if I were on a desert island and had nothing but a ham, I would starve to death before I would eat it."

I wanted to reply (but didn't), "Wouldn't your death thwart God's plan for your good health?" I don't at all mean to criticize him; he's a good man who has won many to Christ. But he showed that his conformity wasn't about health, but about following the rules under God's judgmental gaze.

Were we only concerned about health, we Adventists would be more consistent across a wider range of issues. In

diet, we would follow Ellen White to full vegetarianism, and the clean-unclean distinction would never come up.<sup>9</sup> Exercise and sleep would be as important in evaluating one's orthodoxy as diet is. Ethically, the clean-unclean meat distinction does not save animals' suffering or conserve the world's food resources.<sup>10</sup> By itself, it doesn't contribute substantially to health. And, according to Jesus, we run a grave spiritual danger of thinking that we are good because of what we eat, rather than by the gift of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

I am convinced that, for Adventists, this is not a matter of health, but of something else entirely.

When Mary Douglas strips away all the other reasons for the Levitical health and purity laws, she comes down to this: life is ambiguous, and human beings find comfort in drawing lines. These rules, for Douglas, are a sort of symbolic boundary maintenance. What we eat marks us as being in a particular group, and those who don't eat as we do are outside of our group. Food, then, becomes a symbolic boundary marker.

I remember my grandmother trying to overhear in the restaurant whether someone she suspected of being an Adventist (usually because they wore no jewelry) had asked that the bacon be left off their breakfast special so she could introduce herself as a fellow church member. Similarly, a church leader's position could survive not exercising and overwork, but could never survive being seen enjoying a ham sandwich. Food is the marker of who's in and who's out.

Food rules, these among them, are, it seems to me, about identity and belonging. And that's how Paul treated them. "If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:15). This would have been the ideal time for Paul to restate the Levitical distinctions had he wanted to. But he only asks that his readers not do anything to drive a wedge between believers. Of course, in Paul's model, if no one else objects, the spiritual implications of what you eat become nonexistent (though other consequences, like health, may remain).

Every group has something that symbolizes belonging. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, for at least a century, belonging has been marked by eating the right foods. So in this community it remains that the person who in his Christian freedom munches his BLT in the face of his weaker brother is violating a much more



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important principle of Christian behavior than dietary laws could ever be. "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food," says Paul. "All food is clean but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble" (Rom. 14:20). ■

### Notes and References

1. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 1:207; and James White, "Swine's Flesh," *Present Truth*, Nov. 1850, 87.

2. "The Development of Adventist Thinking on Clean and Unclean Meat," <[www.whiteestate.org/issues/Clean-Uncl.html](http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/Clean-Uncl.html)>.

3. That is why it is false to chastise Ellen White for continuing to eat oysters; she didn't think oysters unhealthful—only pork. It is a stronger argument to criticize her for continuing to eat meat after endorsing vegetarianism, and some early church leaders did.

4. S. N. Haskell, *The Bible Training School* (South Lancaster, Mass.: S. N. Haskell, 1903), 1:186.

5. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966. Philo, in contrast, said that God had prohibited only those foods that were the most delicious, in order not to tempt people to excess of appetite!

6. In reality, their handwashing was more ceremonial than cleansing.

7. Some cling to the King James Version, which retains some ambiguity about what exactly is cleansed: "Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him. Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats?" Interpretation rests upon the meaning of the Greek word *katharizo*, translated here "purging," which in Greek means purifying, not emptying out. Modern translations are correct in saying it is the foods that are purified, not the body emptied.

8. The Adventist position about these passages has always been that they don't apply to clean and unclean foods because each addresses rabbinic rules, not biblical ones. But though Jesus and Paul began with a specific prohibition in mind, both ended up making very broad statements about the inability of diet to produce godliness.

9. Of course, the same thing Jesus said to the Pharisees should be made clear to Adventist vegetarians: there is no automatic salvation in it.

10. Ironically, it saves the unclean animals from suffering, but not the clean ones!

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### For further reading

*The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times*, by Tristram Stuart (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).