

Chapter Six

In Peter’s vision (Acts 10), didn’t God make it clear that there was no longer any need to keep the food laws of the Torah?

¹The beginning of the sect called The Way is chronicled in the book of Acts. Obviously there had been many Gentiles who had joined the people of Israel throughout her history, beginning with the exodus from Egypt. But the coming of Yeshua, the promised Messiah, had initiated the era promised by the prophets in which all the nations of the earth would be blessed. In fact, the book of Acts is the history of how Yeshua’s command to make disciples of all the nations was actually carried out.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:19-20)

He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (Acts 1:7-8)

The Shavuot which immediately followed the ascension of Yeshua brought the promised outpouring of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit). This was not the beginning of the Ruach’s work, for He had always been active in the life of the nation of Israel as well as in the lives of individual believers. But He now empowered the disciples to do the work Yeshua had commissioned them to do—to be His witnesses.

The early chapters fulfill the commission to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Thousands were added to the followers of Yeshua, and Jews from all over the region were coming to faith in Him. The Shavuot experience of all those Jews and proselytes who had come from the regions of the Diaspora was the inaugural event in which the work of spreading the gospel of Yeshua was realized: each heard in their own language, indicating that the harvest had begun, just as Yeshua had promised.

But that the Jewish people should be drawn to the truth of Yeshua as Messiah was not a major shock to anyone. After all, the nation of Israel had carried with her since ancient times the revelation of the Torah and the Prophets, and the promise that God would be faithful to her, drawing her back from her waywardness. The Gentiles, however, were a different issue. How would the promise made to the fathers, that all of the nations would be blessed in the seed of Abraham—be fulfilled? The answer came in a kind of “second Shavuot” at the house of Cornelius.

¹ This chapter is taken from my book, *FellowHeirs: Jews and Gentiles Together in the Family of God* (FFOZ, 2003), pp. 65–72.

Peter's Vision and the Inclusion of the Gentiles

The calling of Peter to go to the house of Cornelius sets the stage for the fulfillment of the final element of Yeshua's promise: the witness would go to the Gentiles through the empowered lives of the Apostles, and the Gentiles would be gathered into the blessing of Abraham, fulfilling the ancient, covenant promise.

The story is well known. Developed against the background of 1st Century Judaism in which Gentiles were considered unclean (in one respect or another), Peter is commissioned to go to the Gentiles gathered in Cornelius' house. Though Cornelius is characterized as righteous, a God-fearer, and one whose prayers God accepted (Acts 10:1-2), Peter is hesitant to go to his house—this was clearly against the prevailing *halachah* of his day. “Dwelling places of Gentiles [*goim*] are unclean.”² Peter is therefore left with a dilemma: would he follow the words of Yeshua, to be a witness to the nations, or maintain his allegiance to the prevailing *halachah* that rendered the homes of Gentiles off-limits.

The dilemma is solved by a vision given to Peter by God. The suspended sheet, filled with animals, is presented to him, and the command given to “kill and eat.”

Interpreting the Vision

The meaning of the vision is no matter of speculation, for Peter gives it explicitly:

“And he said to them, ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me’” (Acts 10:28-29).

In relating the events to the other Apostles, Peter notes:

“And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea. The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man's house” (Acts 11:11-12).

We may presume that by the words “the Spirit told me,” Peter was referring to the vision. So the meaning of the vision is clear: the Gentiles were not to be considered unclean, and Peter was not to hesitate to go to the house of Cornelius, despite the current *halachah* that forbade him to do so.

The dilemma, of course, is how the vision of the sheet could be so interpreted. What was it about the vision itself that would have made the message regarding Gentiles so clear in Peter's mind? The traditional notion that the vision was teaching the abolition of the Torah does not fit, because the Torah never taught that the Gentiles were unclean. More to the point, the teachings of Yeshua and His Apostles support the value and holiness of the Torah, and flatly deny that it was or could be abolished.³

It would appear rather that in the vision, Peter was put to a test. This test was whether or not he would make his life decisions based upon the eternal

² m. *Oholot* 18.7.

³ E.g., Matt 5:17ff, Rom 7:7ff.

teachings of the Torah. Specifically, in this case, would he follow the teaching of the Written Torah or would he allow the teachings of men to be the deciding factor?

The Command to “Kill and Eat”

The Greek phrase “kill and eat” in 10:13 is *θύσον καὶ φάγε* (*thuson kai fage*). The imperative *thuson* is from the root *thuō*, which has as its primary meaning “to sacrifice.”⁴ While it can mean generally “to kill” (cf. John 10:10), the preponderance of uses in the Apostolic Scriptures denotes “slaughtering for a sacrifice.”⁵ The use of this word, then, raises the level of purity in the command to “kill and eat.” Though any meat for consumption was to be from clean animals, to put it in the context of slaughtering for a sacrifice raises the level of ritual purity to its highest. Not only did the animal need to be of those designated clean, but it also had to be without defect. In other words, the language of the command to “kill and eat” emphasizes that it must be carried out to the strict letter of the Torah, as though it would qualify even for a sacrifice.

The description of the animals in the suspended sheet would tend to indicate that the animals contained therein were of the unclean sort: “. . .and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air” (Acts 10:12).

Though “four-footed” could surely include clean animals, the Greek *τετράποδα* (*tetrapoda*, “four-footed”) is often used in the Lxx for wild animals rather than domesticated flocks.⁶ Though some wild animals, such as the hart, were designated clean, no wild animal was fit for a sacrifice. And the designation “crawling creatures” (*ἑρπετά*, *herpeta*) is the word used in the Lxx of reptiles which, in terms of food, were considered utterly detestable (*שֶׁקֶץ*, *sheqetz*) and strictly forbidden.⁷ “Birds of the air” could include those which are clean, but when listed with the other categories may likely have been those which were scavengers and were also unclean. Given these facts, it is most likely that the animals Peter saw in the vision were entirely unfit for consumption as far as the Torah was concerned. In light of the fact that the command to “kill and eat” was set in the context of the highest standards (that of sacrifice), Peter’s response is perfectly understandable: “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.”

Several things should be noted in Peter’s response. First, he includes two terms: “I have never eaten anything unholy,” (*κοινός*, *koinos*, literally “common”) and unclean,” (*ἀκάθαρτος*, *akathartos*, “ritually unclean”). We should understand the word “common” (translated “unholy”) to refer to sacrificial meat that has been rendered unfit for eating (because it remained beyond the prescribed period of time). What Peter is saying is that not only has he never eaten meat from an unclean animal, he has been careful not even to eat meat that was at one time permitted but had been rendered unfit by the passage of time.

So, rightly adhering to the commands of Torah, Peter refuses the divine command to “kill and eat.” He passed the test with flying colors! He is never

4 *BDAG*, “θύω”.

5 Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7; Acts 14:13,18; 1 Cor 5:7; 10:20. The places where the word denotes killing for a festive occasion are Matt 22:4 (parable of the wedding feast), Luke 15:23, 27, 30 (parable of the Prodigal Son). Only in John 10:10 is *thuson* used in the general sense of “kill.”

6 Ex 8:12-14; 9:9-10; Lev 18:23; 20:15; Num 35:3; Job 40:20; 41:17; Is 30:6.

7 Lev 11:41, 43; 20:25.

rebuked for his refusal, nor does he ever eat in the context of the vision. God had put him to the test: would he follow the strict letter of the Torah in regard to the food laws? The manner in which the test is given would indicate that God fully expected Peter to make the right decision. After all, he had lived according to Torah in matters of proper food his entire life.

In fact, Peter's refusal to eat what the Torah forbids is a very close parallel to the response of Ezekiel in a similar situation. In chapter four of Ezekiel, in a visual aid to the prophetic message of woe against Israel, the prophet is instructed to make bread, cook it, and eat. The problem is that the bread is to be cooked over a fire whose fuel is human dung, and therefore unclean.

“You shall eat it as a barley cake, having baked it in their sight over human dung.” Then the LORD said, “Thus will the sons of Israel eat their bread unclean among the nations where I will banish them.” But I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I have never been defiled; for from my youth until now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has any unclean meat (בֶּשָׂר פְּגוּלָה, *b'sar pigul*) ever entered my mouth.” Then He said to me, “See, I will give you cow's dung in place of human dung over which you will prepare your bread.” (Ezek 4: 12–15)

Here, clean food prepared over unclean fire renders it unclean. This is because it was common to cook bread by laying it directly upon the coals of a fire, and thus its contact with the human waste would render it unclean. This may have derived from the Torah commandment regarding latrines, which is found in the context of things that render a person unclean:

“You shall also have a place outside the camp and go out there, and you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement. Since the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything indecent among you or He will turn away from you” (Deut 23:12-14).

It would appear, then, that human excrement renders anyone who comes in contact with it “unholy.”

In the Ezekiel text under consideration, the term “unclean meat” is *b'sar pigul* in the Hebrew. This is interesting because *pigul* is not the normal word for “unclean” (we would expect תְּמֵאָה, *tamei*). *Pigul* is found only in three other places (Lev 7:18; 19:7; Is 65:4). In the Leviticus texts, *pigul* describes sacrificial meat that is left over beyond the prescribed number of days, and thus becomes unclean.

The parallels to Peter's vision are striking. Both are presented with something unclean and told to eat. Both give claim to a life untarnished by avoiding anything unclean, and thus both protest the direct command of God because they believe the command “to eat” is contrary to established Torah commandments. The difference, however, is also important. In Ezekiel, God responds to the prophet's protest by changing His initial command, allowing the prophet to use normal cow dung (often used for fires) in the place of human excrement. Since the Torah forbade human excrement to exist inside the camp (city), its presence was unclean. In the prophetic “visual aid,” of course, it would have highlighted the fact that the city was under siege and thus the people could not go outside of

its boundaries to deposit sewage as the Torah demands.

In Peter's vision, he, like Ezekiel, assesses the Torah commandments correctly, and refuses to transgress them. Furthermore, as noted above, he is never rebuked for his refusal, and in the vision, he never eats from the sheet full of animals. But here is where Peter's vision and Ezekiel's visual aid differ. Peter rightly determined that the sheet full of unclean animals presented an unfit situation for food, but he had also concluded that Gentiles presented an unfit scenario for fellowship. Yet this latter presumption was not based upon Torah, but upon rabbinic ruling. Therefore, Peter is corrected by the Divine voice. God was teaching Peter that in precisely the same manner in which he determined what was fit to eat and what was not (by applying the words of God's Torah), so he should determine whether or not to fellowship with the Gentiles. He had used the word of God to determine what was fit to eat. Would he also use the word of God to determine his relationship with the Gentiles?

But could a voice from heaven overturn the established *halachah* of the day? The rabbinic literature speaks to the issue of a *bat kol*, or a heavenly voice. An interesting Talmudic citation deals with this very issue:

It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted. Again he said to them: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — 'No proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined. Again he urged: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a *halachic* dispute, what have you to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honor of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honor of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: 'If the *halachah* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halachah* agrees with him!' But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven.' What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: 'That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline.'⁸

In light of this, we may better understand Peter's protest. The heavenly voice, in this case, was not asking Peter to walk contrary to Torah, but rather to *apply* the Torah in this particular situation. Where in the Written Torah did it prohibit him from entering the house of a Gentile? Where in the Written Torah could he find solid grounds for denying the request of Cornelius? Peter realized there were none. God had not created the Gentile "unclean." That was a rabbinic fabrication. Peter had reasoned correctly, corroborated by the Written Torah, that eating something unclean was wrong. Would he likewise reason, on the basis of Written Torah, that it was proper to fellowship with Gentiles?

Thus, Peter understood the purpose of the vision through the test of authority it required of him. God's Torah stood above that of the Sages. When it came to the Gentiles, Peter was to follow God's Written Torah, not the *halachah* of the

8 b.*BavaMetzia* 59b.

rabbis. As noted above, Peter got the message! He passed this test as well. He did not hesitate to go to the house of Cornelius, and he knew that he was free to eat with these covenant members without thinking that he would be engaging in ritual impurity. For surely Cornelius and the other believing Gentiles would have been eating foods that aligned with the biblical commandments. The real difficulty for Peter were the man-made laws that had erected a wall between Jew and Gentile. What Peter had come to understand through the vision of the suspended sheet was that this rabbinic wall of separation had been forever abolished by the death of Messiah, uniting all who confessed Him as Messiah, whether Jew or Gentile.⁹

Summary and Conclusion

The vision given to Peter in Acts 10 was not about abolishing the commandments regarding clean and unclean food but about the separation between Jews and Gentiles that had been enacted by the rabbis. The reason that God used the issue of clean and unclean foods was to demonstrate to Peter that the Torah itself, not man-made laws, should function as the authority upon which he made *halachic* decisions regarding association with believing Gentiles. Given the decision whether or not to eat unclean meat, Peter applied the commandments of the Torah and refused to eat that which God forbids. In doing so, he demonstrated a correct appeal to the Torah as foundational for life's decisions. What God was teaching Peter through the vision was that he should base his decision regarding the Gentiles upon the same authoritative word of God as he did in regard to food. Nowhere in the Torah is there a commandment to separate from Gentiles who have attached themselves to the God of Israel. Quite the contrary: the Torah regularly commands the native born Israelites to accept and welcome foreigners who desire to worship the One true God, and to treat them with equality as having the same covenant privileges and responsibilities as the native born Israelite (e.g., Ex 12:19; Lev 18:26; 24:16; Num 9:14; 15:15, 16, 29; 19:10; Deut 31:12).¹⁰

What is clear from the Acts narrative is that Peter got the message! He realized that the vision related to people, not to food, and that he should not consider unclean what God had declared to be clean. He had realized that he should judge his association with believing Gentiles on precisely the same authoritative basis as he had determined what food was allowed and what was prohibited. He had passed the test about food with flying colors because he had held tenaciously to what God had commanded in the Torah. What he came to realize was that God required exactly the same tenacious adherence to the Torah in regard to receiving believing Gentiles as his covenant brothers and sisters.

Understood in the context of Acts, and made clear through Peter's own explanation of the vision (Acts 10:28–29; 11:11–12), the vision given to Peter in Acts 10 in no way negates the Torah laws regarding clean and unclean food. On the contrary, the proper interpretation of the vision rests upon the fact that the Torah remains authoritative both in regard to food and in regard to believing Gentiles. And the vision was successful in correcting Peter's *halachah* so that he willingly went to the house of Cornelius even though this contradicted the prevailing teaching of the rabbis. He willingly subordinated the commandments of men to the eternal, unchanging commandments of God.

⁹ Eph 2:11f.

¹⁰ For a more in-depth study on the equality of native born and foreigner within the life of Torah, see my book *FellowHeirs: Jews & Gentiles Together in the Family of God* (FFOZ, 2003) available at www.torahresoure.com.