

Response to the Traditional Christian Reading of Peter's Vision

1. I have shared elsewhere how Jesus' parable in Mark 7:14-19a, and Mark's editorial comment in 7:19b, uphold the validity of the Torah's ritual purity system. Prioritization, not abrogation, is the aim of Jesus' teaching. Mark 7:19b is best understood as a matter of Gentile halakhic application and not an apocalyptic pronouncement that all foods are now clean (see Rudolph 2002:291-311).
2. Three times Peter rejects Jesus' instruction to kill and eat impure (κοινὸν) and unclean (ἄκάθαρτον) animals (Acts 10:14-16). This implies that Peter had never received such a teaching or example from Jesus (Räsänen 1992:144).¹
3. The meaning of the vision was not immediately clear to Peter. He was 'greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision' (Acts 10:17). When Peter saw the vision, he did not understand it to mean that Israel's dietary laws had been abolished.
4. What was the meaning of the vision? The vision concerned men, not the menu (Zetterholm 2005:8; Kinzer 2005:68-71; Miller 2002:317; 1994:92).² When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, he interpreted the meaning of the vision: The impure (κοινὸν) and unclean (ἄκάθαρτον) animals symbolized impure (κοινὸν) and unclean (ἄκάθαρτον) people (a likely reference to God-fearers and pagans respectively).³ In keeping with Jewish 'taboo' (ἄθέμιτος [Acts 10:28], not νόμος),⁴ Peter had considered non-Jews impure and unclean and avoided contact with them. But through the vision, God informed Peter that he was no longer to view Gentiles in this way, 'God has shown me that *I should not call anyone impure (κοινὸν) or unclean (ἄκάθαρτον)*. So when I was sent for, I came without objection . . . I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10:28-29, 34-35). It is important to note that Peter's decision to associate with Gentiles

¹ Matthew 15:15 describes Peter as present on the occasion of Jesus' *mashal* (cf. Mark 7:1-23).

² Also Zaas 1997:296; Tyson 1987:628; Dibelius 1956:118.

³ Wahlen 2005:515; House 1983:149.

⁴ Bruce 1988:209 n. 34. Zaas 1997:300. *Pace* Bauckham (2005:107-109) who prefers the translation 'unlawful'.

did not overturn biblical law. Mosaic law does not prohibit Jews from associating with Gentiles. Peter's perspective that Jews should not visit or eat with Gentiles because they are impure (κοινὸν) or unclean (ἄκάθαρτον) is a traditional expansion of the law (Harrington 2004:112; Hayes 2002:19-44).

5. Peter reiterated the symbolic meaning of the vision to the 'circumcised believers' in Jerusalem. After he recounted the vision, his response to it, and the Lord's admonition – 'What God has made clean (ἐκαθάρισεν), you must not call profane (κοίνου)' (Acts 11:9) – Peter explains that the vision concerned men, 'The Spirit told me to go with them and *not to make a distinction between them and us*' (Acts 11:12). At the Jerusalem Council, Peter once again alludes to the symbolic meaning of the vision. The Gentile-believers are clean, for 'in cleansing [καθαρίσας] their hearts by faith *he has made no distinction between them and us*' (Acts 15:9). The vision concerned men, not the menu.
6. No indication exists in Acts that Peter understood the vision literally (Tomson 2001b:231-32; Lindars 1988:67). There is no example of him eating unclean food or encouraging other Jesus-believing Jews to eat unclean food.
7. The Jerusalem Council decision in Acts 15 centred on the question of whether *Jesus-believing Gentiles* were exempt from Mosaic law. If the Torah's dietary laws had been abrogated as early as Acts 10, and Jesus-believing Jews were now exempt from the requirements of Mosaic law, there would be no reason to debate whether the law was binding on Jesus-believing Gentiles. Acts 15 implies that Peter's vision in Acts 10 concerned men, not the menu (cf. Acts 15:9). The apostolic decree was only addressed to 'Gentile believers' and clarified the 'requirements' (including certain minimal food restrictions) that were incumbent upon the 'Gentile believers' (Acts 15:19-20, 23). The assumption throughout Acts 15 is that Jesus-believing Jews like Peter (who was present at the Jerusalem council) continue to observe Mosaic law.