Leviticus 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Leviticus chapter 11. And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth. Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud among the animals, you may eat. Nevertheless, among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, you shall not eat these. The camel, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the rock badger, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the hare, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. You shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall not touch their carcasses. They are unclean to you. These you may eat, of all that are in the waters. Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers, you may eat. But anything in the seas or the rivers that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters, and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is detestable to you. You shall regard them as detestable. You shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall detest their carcasses. Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you, and these you shall detest among the birds. They shall not be eaten. They are detestable. The eagle, the bearded vulture, the black vulture, the kite, the falcon of any kind, every raven of any kind, the ostrich, the nighthawk, the seagull, the hawk of any kind, the little owl, the cormorant, the short-eared owl, the barn owl, the tawny owl, the carrion vulture, the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe and the bat, all winged insects that go on all fours are detestable to you. Yet among the winged insects that go on all fours, you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to hop on the ground. Of them you may eat the locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any kind, and the grasshopper of any kind. But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you, and by these you shall become unclean. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening, and whoever carries any part of their carcass shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the evening. Every animal that parts the hoof, but is not cloven-footed, or does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. Everyone who touches them shall be unclean.

And all that walk in their paws, among the animals that go on all fours, are unclean to you. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening. And he who carries their carcass shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the evening. They are unclean to you. And these are unclean to you among the swarming things that swarm on the ground. The mole-rat, the mouse, the great lizard of any kind, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the lizard, the sand lizard, and the chameleon. These are unclean to you among all that swarm. Whoever touches them when they are dead shall be unclean until the evening. And anything on which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean, whether it is an article of wood, or a garment, or a skin, or a sack, any article that is used for any purpose. It must be put into water, and it shall be unclean until the evening. Then it shall be clean. And if any of them falls into any earthenware vessel, all that is in it shall be unclean, and you shall break it. Any food in it that could be eaten, on which water comes, shall be unclean. And all drink that could be drunk from every such vessel shall be unclean.
And everything on which any part of their carcass falls shall be unclean. Whether oven or stove, it shall be broken in pieces. They are unclean, and shall remain unclean for you. Nevertheless, a spring or a cistern holding water shall be clean, but whoever touches a carcass in them shall be unclean. And if any part of their carcass falls upon any seed grain that is to be sown, it is clean. But if water is put on the seed, and any part of their carcass falls on it, it is unclean to you. And if any animal which you may eat dies, whoever touches its carcass shall be unclean until the evening. And whoever eats of its carcass shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the evening. And whoever

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carries the carcass shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until the evening. Every swarming thing that swarms on the ground is detestable. It shall not be eaten.
Whatever goes on its belly, and whatever goes on all fours, or whatever has many feet, any swarming thing that swarms on the ground, you shall not eat, for they are detestable. You shall not make yourselves detestable with any swarming thing that swarms, and you shall not defile yourselves with them, and become unclean through them. For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy. This is the law about beast and bird, and every living creature that moves through the waters, and every creature that swarms on the ground, to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the living creature that may be eaten, and the living creature that may not be eaten. It is a lot easier to understand the logic of Leviticus chapter 11, and what follows, if we recognise that a creation and fall pattern is playing out in the book. The establishment of the tabernacle worship was like a new creation event, but the sin of Nadab and Abihu was a new fall. After the original fall, the Lord addressed the serpent, the woman, and then the man, and declared judgement. A similar pattern can be observed here. After the fall in the new Eden of the tabernacle, we have first a passage dealing with the uncleanness of animals, corresponding with the judgment upon the serpent. In chapter 12, we deal with the uncleanness of women in the context of childbirth, corresponding with the judgment upon the woman in Genesis chapter 3. In chapters 13 to 14, there are laws concerning those struck with and exiled on account of a skin disease, corresponding to the judgment upon the man and his exile from the garden. Chapter 15 deals with the corruption of the flesh through death, and then in chapter 16, as the Lord covered Adam and Eve with skins after the fall, the Lord provides for the covering of his fallen people through the day of atonement. With this pattern in mind, even beyond understanding why it is placed where it is within the book, certain aspects of the logic of chapter 11 will become slightly less opaque.
The criteria for determining which animals are clean and unclean at many points suggest that unclean animals are those with similar features to the serpent. As Nobuyashi Kiyuchi argues, they are, for instance, associated with the unclean dust or have an affinity to death as carnivores or carrion creatures. There are similar instructions concerning dietary laws in Deuteronomy chapter 14, where it is connected with the third commandment. Israel is a holy people to the Lord their God, and they should not bear the name of the Lord in vain. Even though there is a similar rationale for the commandments here, there is a significant difference between Deuteronomy chapter 14 and Leviticus chapter 11. Leviticus chapter 11 is not narrowly focused upon dietary requirements, as is Deuteronomy chapter 14. Much of this chapter concerns broader forms of defilement that can come about from handling or contact with unclean animals and their bodies. Both originally in the garden, and then also after the flood in Genesis chapter 9, new food commandments were given to the people.
[7:43] The Lord permitted Adam and Eve to eat of any of the trees of the garden. Only one tree was forbidden them, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil at the center of the garden. In Genesis chapter 9, Noah and his sons are permitted to eat of all the different animals. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.

Along with this gift of food in verses 2 to 3, there is a restriction upon what can be eaten. In verses 4 and 5, But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning from every beast I will require it, and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Prior to the flood there is already some sort of distinction between clean and unclean animals that is operative. But man is able to eat of all of the animals, not just the clean ones. The food restrictions that are given to Israel seem to relate to its set-apart status. They are connected with its holiness, a point that is underlined at the end.
They should be holy as the Lord their God is holy. A connection between the dietary laws and holiness is found elsewhere, in places like Leviticus chapter 20 verses 24 to 26.
But I have said to you, You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the Lord your God who has separated you from the peoples.

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You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird, or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine. The class of sacrificial animals does not exactly coincide with the class of clean animals. The class of sacrificial animals comprises oxen, goats, sheep, doves and pigeons. But there are other clean animals that could be eaten, but could not be sacrificed, such as deer. There are other animals that were unclean, that were important parts of Israel's life, such as the donkey. The principal sacrificial animals, apart perhaps from the pigeons, were all domesticated animals. But not all domesticated animals were clean or sacrificial. Fish are another example of animals that could be clean, but not sacrificial. Various theories have been advanced to try to understand the rationale between what is clean and unclean. Some have argued that being unclean is connected with being unnatural or abnormal, but this theory seems to be a weaker one. Others think that the animals that are unclean are dirty animals, or perhaps the Lord made these restrictions for health reasons.
[10:31] There are various detailed criteria according to which animals can be discerned to be either clean or unclean. Chewing the cud, having a cloven hoof, hopping on the ground rather than crawling on it, having scales as a fish. These criteria don't seem to be arbitrary, so we ought to consider what holds them all together. Many have maintained that the forbidden creatures are typically carnivores, predators, and carrion creatures. Animals that chew the cud and have split hooves are herbivores.

Indeed, Jewish oral law argued that, apart from the criteria that we have here, you could tell the difference between clean and unclean animals by unclean animals' possession of canine teeth. Kaiju points out the similarity of the unclean animals with the serpent. The serpent is directly connected with the dust. The reference to creatures that go on their belly in verse 42 of this chapter is only the second time in the Bible, after Genesis chapter 3, that moving on the belly is mentioned. The suggestion then would be that unclean animals have characteristics of the cursed serpent. They have the same connection with the curse-bearing earth that the serpent does. Clean animals have cloven hooves. They have, as it were, shoes that divide them from the earth. The divide in their hooves, Kaiju argues, might also be a suggestion of a differentiation between clean and unclean.
Clean animals are ruminants. They thoroughly digest their food. This is in contrast to the serpent who swallows it whole, not engaging in the sort of chewing over that is characteristic of righteous meditation upon the world. Unclean birds are birds of prey and carrion birds. Clean fish also have scales that serve as a sort of armour against the uncleanness that surrounds them. We might also consider that sea creatures without scales are most similar to the serpent, things like eels. These dietary requirements seem to have been exclusive to Israel. It's a sign of Israel's holy status, marking Israel out, but also teaching Israel to be a people who make distinctions concerning what they take into their life. Like the clean animals, they need to be separated from defilement. They need to be discriminating, like those animals with cloven hooves, and the animals that ruminate rather than just swallowing their food whole. We should also consider the fact that even if Israel did not have these commandments, very few of these animals would have been on the menu. These commandments then seem to serve a symbolic purpose beyond the merely practical one. In contrast to Deuteronomy chapter 14,
[12:58] Leviticus chapter 11 gives a lot of attention to forms of defilement by means of these unclean animals beyond merely eating them. Touching the carcasses of unclean animals was also defiling, not merely eating their flesh. Becoming unclean was not in itself a sin, and most of the forms of defilement mentioned here were fairly minor. The uncleanness only attached to the person for the rest of the day. When the evening came, they were no longer considered unclean. Nevertheless, for the duration of their uncleanness, they were exiled from the presence of God. Lee Travascus has argued that this served an educational function for Israel. They were supposed to avoid the underlying reality of uncleanness and be holy to the Lord, and every single time they were unclean through contact with an unclean animal's carcass. They were frustrated in their enjoyment of fellowship with God. Such commandments could make them very fastidious about avoiding becoming unclean, and increasingly alert to the reality of holiness and the importance of being set apart to the Lord. Becoming unclean oneself, or having some object in one's possession become unclean, could prove greatly frustrating and inconveniencing.

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Swarming things in particular, because of their close proximity with the curse-bearing dust, are bearers of uncleanness. The underlying rationale for all of these laws concerning cleanness in relationship to animals, eating them, and touching their carcasses, is given in the conclusion of the chapter. It's to teach Israel about holiness. They are to learn to make distinctions, to distinguish between clean and unclean, and to learn from the clean animals about the sorts of people that they ought to be. In their concern about being defiled by unclean animals, they should learn something about the danger of being defiled by sin. Practically speaking, Israel could only enjoy close fellowship with God as they kept clean, and could go to the Lord's presence at the tabernacle. Not to take cleanness seriously was not to take Israel's status as a people holy to the Lord seriously, and so being scrupulous about these commandments was an important manifestation of Israel's commitment to the covenant.

A question to consider, why does the church not observe such dietary requirements in the new covenant?

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