

Deuteronomy 14:1-21

Dr. Steven R. Cook

You are the sons of the LORD your God [i.e., their identity was based on their relationship with the Lord]; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead [i.e., don't engage in pagan practices contrary to their identity].² “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God [שִׁדְדָּה *qadosh* – holy, set apart by God for special service], and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth [Israel had a unique relationship with God; cf. Deut 7:6; 26:18].³ “You shall not eat any detestable thing.⁴ “These are the animals which you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat,⁵ the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope and the mountain sheep.⁶ “Any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof split in two and chews the cud, among the animals, that you may eat [declared clean by the Lord].⁷ “Nevertheless, you are not to eat of these among those which chew the cud, or among those that divide the hoof in two: the camel and the rabbit and the shaphan, for though they chew the cud, they do not divide the hoof; they are unclean for you.⁸ “The pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, it is unclean for you. You shall not eat any of their flesh nor touch their carcasses [declared unclean by the Lord].⁹ “These you may eat of all that are in water: anything that has fins and scales you may eat [declared clean by the Lord],¹⁰ but anything that does not have fins and scales you shall not eat; it is unclean for you [declared unclean by the Lord].¹¹ “You may eat any clean bird.¹² “But these are the ones which you shall not eat: the eagle and the vulture and the buzzard,¹³ and the red kite, the falcon, and the kite in their kinds,¹⁴ and every raven in its kind,¹⁵ and the ostrich, the owl, the sea gull, and the hawk in their kinds,¹⁶ the little owl, the great owl, the white owl,¹⁷ the pelican, the carrion vulture, the cormorant,¹⁸ the stork, and the heron in their kinds, and the hoopoe and the bat.¹⁹ “And all the teeming life with wings are unclean to you; they shall not be eaten.²⁰ “You may eat any clean bird.²¹ “You shall not eat anything which dies of itself [because its blood could not be drained]. You may give it to the alien who is in your town, so that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner [because they are not in a covenant relationship with God nor bound by His laws], for you are a holy people to the LORD your God [set apart by God for special service]. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk. [a pagan practice]

Observations:

In chapter fourteen, Moses shifts away from the danger of accepting pagan idols to adopting pagan practices that were part of the surrounding cultures. Moses addresses pagan rites concerning mourning for the dead (Deut 14:1), as well as distinctions between animals the Lord declares to be clean or unclean (Deut 14:3-21a). These dietary laws are sandwiched between commands to be holy to the Lord (Deut 14:2, 21b). Finally, Moses concludes this pericope with a comment concerning boiling a young goat in its mother's

milk (Deut 14:21c). These directives would help Israel know what God expected of them and secured blessing if obeyed and cursing if not obeyed (Lev 18:26-30; Deut 11:26-28).

Moses opens with a command, saying, “You are the sons of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead” (Deut 14:1). This appears to refer to a mourning rite associated with the cult of the dead. Non-Israelites held to the notion that the deceased spirits of dead family members continued to exist and to wield influence over the living. Some practiced ancestor-worship. Jack Deere writes:

The precise significance of the rituals mentioned here (Deut. 14:1)—laceration and shaving the head for the dead—is unknown today. But cutting oneself was a sign of mourning (cf. Jer 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; 48:37). However, it is clear that these practices reflected beliefs about the dead that conflicted with faith in the Lord, the ultimate Source of life. Therefore, when a loved one died, the Israelites were to demonstrate their faith in the Lord by refraining from these pagan practices.¹

Israel’s relationship with God required them to walk in conformity with His character. God is holy, which means He is upright and set apart from all that is fallen. God called His people be to be holy, which meant their behavior was to conform to His expectations, and they were not to act like the pagan nations around them. Moses wrote, “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” (Deut 14:2). All of Israel was holy in the sense that they were set apart by the Lord and in a special covenantal relationship with Him. But God expected His people to behave in a holy manner, saying, “you are to be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine” (Lev 20:26). Warren Wiersbe states:

As a holy people, the Jews were set apart from all the other nations because the holy presence of the Lord was with them and they had received God’s holy law (Deut 23:14; Rom 9:4). Because they were a holy people, they were not to imitate the wicked practices of their neighbors, such as cutting their bodies or shaving their foreheads in mourning (1 Ki 18:28; Jer 16:6; 41:5).²

Continuing with the subject of holy living, Moses addressed the subject of eating, saying, “You shall not eat any detestable thing” (Deut 14:3). The detestable thing (Heb. תועבה *toebah*) here refers to animals God declared as unclean for consumption (Deut 14:4-20).

¹ Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 287.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 98.

What Moses presents is a list of animals into three classes: 1) animals that roam on land (Deut 14:4-8), 2) animals that swim in water (Deut 14:9-10), and 3) animals that fly in the air (including insects, Deut 14:11-20). It's likely this list is not exhaustive, but representative of each group. Jack Deere states "It has been suggested that certain animals in each group provide the standard for that class; any deviation from that standard renders the animal unclean. For example, the unclean birds are birds of prey that eat flesh without draining the blood and/or are carrion eaters, whereas clean birds are presumably those that eat grain."³ This distinction was not new, for Noah had known about clean and unclean animals at the time he constructed the ark (Gen 7:1-10). And this distinction was not based on any quality intrinsic to the animal, but was a designation set forth by the Lord; a designation we don't fully understand. Some have thought these dietary restrictions were for hygienic purposes, and that's possible. Peter Craigie states:

Regarding this section...there has been debate over the principle underlying the regulations on permitted and prohibited foods. There are those who adopt the position that the underlying principle has to do with hygiene. Thus, an American doctor conducted a series of experiments to determine the levels of toxicity in the meats of the animals, aquatic creatures, and birds mentioned in Deuteronomy 14; he discovered that the various types of prohibited meats contained a higher percentage of toxic substances than those which were permitted.⁴

However, because this pericope opens with a prohibition against pagan cultic practices associated with the cult of the dead, it seems likely that the dietary laws concerning clean and unclean foods were associated—in some way—with the pagan practices in Canaan. Perhaps the laws served both purposes. And we're not even sure about the identity of all these animals. Warren Wiersbe states:

We must admit that we don't know what some of these creatures were and can't identify them with creatures we know today. For example, the hare (Deut 14:7) certainly isn't the same as our "rabbit" even though the NIV gives that translation. The rabbit doesn't chew the cud, although the movements of his jaw and nostrils may look like that's what he's doing.⁵

Though we cannot identify every animal, nor understand with absolute clarity all the reasons why some are declared clean and others unclean, we assume the Israelite to whom

³ Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 288.

⁴ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 230.

⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, "Be" Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 100.

Moses spoke understood. Whatever we make of the dietary laws, they were pedagogical in nature and connected with God’s expectation of His people to be holy, and this was to distinguish them from the practices of surrounding cultures.

Apart from the list of clean and unclean animals, Moses also said, “You shall not eat anything which dies of itself. You may give it to the alien who is in your town, so that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner, for you are a holy people to the LORD your God” (Deut 14:21a). It’s possible this prohibition was given because an animal that died of itself has not had the blood drained from it, which would make it prohibited for consumption (cf., Deut 12:16, 23, 27; 15:23). However, the dead animal—assuming its death was recent and its carcass suitable for healthy consumption—could be given as an act of charity for the benefit of the alien (Heb. גֵּר *ger*) who resided within the covenant community. Or, the dead animal could be sold to the foreigner (Heb. נֹכְרִי *nokri*) who lived in the region, perhaps for business purposes. In both instances, the alien and foreigner were not under the requirements of the Mosaic Law, so they could eat the dead animal.

Lastly, Moses closes this pericope with the statement, “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk” (Deut 14:21b). It’s likely this practice was tied to the pagan Canaanite culture and represented something detestable. On the surface, it seems unnatural to take what is meant to promote life (milk) and use it to destroy life. In closing, these dietary laws were to be a part of Israel’s everyday activities and serve as a constant reminder of their relationship with the Lord and that they were to be set apart from the pagan practices that surrounded them.

Christians and Food:

Christians living in the dispensation of the church age are also called to “be holy and blameless” before the Lord (Eph 1:4; cf. 1 Pet 1:15-16). Paul wrote to Christians, saying, “I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:1-2a). Such holy living also pertains to everyday activities such as eating.

In our current dispensation, all foods are cleared for consumption. Jesus, when discussing things that defile a person, “declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19). God gave Peter a vision of all kinds of animals (Acts 10:10-12) and told him to “kill and eat” (Acts 10:13). But Peter refused the Lord’s directive, saying, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean” (Acts 10:14). But the divine reply came to Peter, saying, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” (Acts 10:15). The primary reason for the vision was to teach Peter that he was now to accept the Gentiles as equal in the body of Christ, and that he “should not call any man unholy or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

However, the Lord was simultaneously declaring all foods clean and Gentiles acceptable under His new program for the Church. The apostle Paul further revealed that foods are no longer an issue, saying, “Food will not commend us to God; [for] we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat” (1 Cor 8:8). And to the Christians living in Colossae, Paul stated, “Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day” (Col 2:16). Though Christians are not under dietary restrictions (except for the consumption of blood; see Acts 15:20); we should be mindful that our behavior—even concerning food—reveals something about our walk with God. For this reason, Paul instructed the Christian at Corinth, saying, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Those who seek to live holy lives will do it to the glory of God.