

# Interpreting Peter's Vision in Acts 10:9–16

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## Abstract

The paper challenges the traditional Christian interpretation of Peter's vision in Acts 10:9–16. The text, in its biblical context, and together with related developments in early church history, point conclusively to a single interpretation: that the Gentiles have been cleansed by God. The vision does not nullify Jewish dietary laws or the Mosaic Law in general, since there is no support for the interpretation that the vision also pertains to the cleansing of unclean food. This conclusion contradicts the traditional Christian interpretation that the vision has a two-fold meaning, though it is not unique in the literature. The main implication is that Christians need to reassess their reading of the New Testament, and especially Paul, on the Law, in the light of recent literature which challenges traditional interpretations and posits various solutions to age-old disputes.

## Introduction

Acts 10:1–11:18, or 'the Cornelius incident', presents the circumstances, content, and meaning of Peter's vision of the 'sheet' full of animals and, therefore, forms the key text of this study. This paper examines the meaning of the vision to determine whether it pertains to

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

Gentiles—that they are not to be regarded as unclean by Jewish believers—or to do with unclean foods specified in the Mosaic Law. The traditional Christian interpretation is that the vision refers to both Gentiles and unclean food; by implication, the Law as a whole is taken to be annulled, for which the selected passage is commonly used as a proof text. In fact, the two are often regarded as inextricably connected. There are various problems with this dual interpretation, however, and the text itself testifies that only the first interpretation is true: the vision pertains to the cleansing of Gentiles, not unclean food. Supporting this conclusion is a wealth of contextual evidence in the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament, as well as post-canonical history. Ultimately, however, the strongest support for this interpretation is within the text itself, Acts 10:1–11:18.

Scriptural quotes are taken from the Lexham English Bible (LEB) unless otherwise indicated, and footnotes in quoted texts have been omitted or given separately. Much of the ancient literature is freely available online at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, including that used herein (by 'Barnabas', Irenaeus, and Augustine).

A synchronic exegetical approach is taken, meaning that the Greek text is taken 'as-is', without regard for how it developed. My hermeneutic is literal for the narrative and symbolic for the vision, as I will justify, and I have adopted a simple grammatico-historical method of exegesis. I seek to establish the meaning of the text in its own right, principally in the context of the book of Acts—as the original audience would have—and to test this against other contextual evidence in the New Testament and early church history.

## 1. Literary Elements

The genre of Acts is historical narrative. This is surely the easiest genre to interpret, and the reason I believe a simple, literal reading of the text—in its historical and literary context—is sufficient to interpret it correctly. The vision Peter saw in Acts 10 was a type of prophetic revelation, exposing God's will for the body of Christ from that time onward. It was not a prophecy in the form of an utterance, like those of Israel's prophets. In addition to hearing a voice from heaven, Peter 'saw' strange and supernatural things whilst in a trance. Elements of the vision are symbolic of real-world entities, not a literal presentation of the entities themselves. Also, the events of the vision were not real (i.e. they were not acted out as prophetic actions [compare with Ezek 5:1–4]). Though the implication of the vision continues even today, the vision itself was not future orientated; rather, it contained a commandment to Peter for that present moment, inducing a critical and permanent change in the constituency of church membership. In Ramm's terminology, the prophecy was essentially didactic, not predictive (1970:250, cited in Osborne 2006:272). That is, it was a 'forthtelling' or proclamation of God's will, as opposed to a foretelling or prediction of the future. Biblical visions are generally not polyvalent; each one has a specific meaning and is not overloaded with additional meanings for the reader to determine. This is especially pertinent because the vision was prescriptive, not descriptive; the revelation of a foundational principle of the New Covenant ought not to be ambiguous.

Acts 10:1–11:18 describes five closely bound primary events:

1. An angelic appearance to Cornelius in Caesarea, instructing him to send for Peter;

2. Peter's visions of the 'sheet' during his stay with Simon, the tanner, in Joppa;
3. Peter's visit and preaching to Gentiles (Cornelius and his household) in Caesarea;
4. The Gentiles' reception of the gospel and baptism in the Holy Spirit and in water under Peter's supervision;
5. Peter's defence of his actions to Jewish believers in Jerusalem, resulting in their acceptance of the revelation that God calls even Gentiles into his kingdom.

Thus, Peter is the central figure and the Gentiles' entry into the kingdom is the primary outcome. Each of the points above indicates a surprising event, three of which involved divine intervention. Taken together, these events indicate a radical change in the New Covenant order from the prevailing *status quo* of the Mosaic Covenant. Also, at the time of Peter's arrival in Caesarea, neither he nor Cornelius nor any of their companions knew what God was about to do—in spite of the angelic appearance and the vision. The familiarity of the story amongst Christians detracts from the element of surprise that it would convey at the time, and the infusion of meaning by Christians using other New Testament texts anachronously (since most of them were still unwritten) has obscured its simplicity.

## 2. Historical and Literary Context

The events narrated in Acts 10:1–11:18 took place at a crucial time in the spread of the gospel to every nation. Carson and Moo (2005:323) point out that one of Luke's primary concerns in writing Acts was to tell of God's plan to include Gentiles among his people. The divide between Jews and Gentiles was very marked, as indicated in both extra-biblical and biblical texts of the period, including Acts itself (*J.W.*

*passim*; Matthew 15:22-26; Acts 15:1-31). The Roman occupation of Israel and the oppression of Jews at times throughout the Empire during the period covered by Acts (c.30-62 AD) exacerbated tensions between Jews and Gentiles.

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' disciples in Acts 2, the new-born church was fervently evangelising its native people, the Jews. Later, in Acts 8, Philip presented the gospel to the people of Samaria who received it, believed in the name of Jesus and were baptised in water. This is significant in that, though Samaritans were partly Jewish and had a very similar faith, the Jews did not accept them as true Jews. Shortly after this, they were baptised in the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Peter and John. These apostles returned to Jerusalem proclaiming the gospel among other Samaritans as they went. Philip, meanwhile, evangelised and baptised the Ethiopian eunuch and then spread the gospel from town to town, all the way up the coast from Azotus in the south to Caesarea in the north (also Acts 8). Acts 9 describes Paul's coming to faith in Jesus, allowing 'the church throughout all of Judea and Galilee and Samaria' to have peace, be built up, and multiply (9:31); note that 'and Samaria' suggests the church's growth amongst semi-Jews. Peter undertook an itinerant ministry among these churches, which brought him to Joppa where he stayed for some time with Simon, the tanner, after his prayer for the resurrection of Tabitha was answered (9:32-43).

The narrative under investigation, Acts 10:1-11:18, is immediately followed by Luke's account of the spread of the gospel to Jews in Cypress and Cyrene, and then to Antioch, resulting in Barnabas moving there. Paul, who had been ministering in Tarsus, presumably to both Jews and Gentiles (according to his calling, Acts 9:15), then joined Barnabas in Antioch, which became known for the establishment of a

predominantly Gentile community of believers. Acts 12 moves on to describe Herod's persecution of the church in Jerusalem and his death, leading to Paul's mission to the Gentiles described in the remainder of the book. The ruling of the apostolic council in Acts 15:1–31 concerning Gentiles' obligation to the Law is particularly significant.

It is no exaggeration, therefore, that Acts 10:1–11:18 is embedded in a matrix of events telling of the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles.

### 3. Interpretations in the Literature

Historically, Christians have usually interpreted Peter's vision to mean that both unclean food and Gentiles have been pronounced clean by God. From at least the time of the Reformation this dual interpretation was well established. Calvin's commentary on Acts 10:15 (1585:322) makes this clear:

He speaketh of meats; but this sentence must be extended unto all parts of the life. It is word for word, *That which God hath made clean, do not thou make profane*; but the sense is, it is not for us to allow or condemn any thing; but as we stand and fall by the judgment of God alone, so is he judge of all things (Romans 14:4). As touching meats, after the abrogating of the law, God pronounceth that they are all pure and clean.

Later influential Christian writers such as Matthew Henry continued in this vein (Henry 1994, originally 1706) as have many modern scholars, including FF Bruce (1988:206), Darrell Bock (2007:390, 394) and Robert Stein (2011:106). Furthermore, this view is often published in marginal notes of study Bibles commenting on Acts 10:15, such as the NIV (1985) and the *ESV study Bible*. Also common is the argument that the issues of food and the Gentiles are inextricably related (see Bruce

and Bock, for example). Rudolph Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* summarized in Zetterholm (2009:74), presents the traditional Christian interpretation of Paul's writings in general, in which 'Paul makes no distinction between Jews and non-Jews', and contrasts law and works with grace and faith—the law now leading to death (p. 75), and hence, no longer applicable to anyone. Evidently, Bultmann could not reconcile texts like Romans 10:12, in which Paul says there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, from those where Paul explicitly differentiated between Jews and Gentiles (such as Rom 9–11 and, speaking of believers in both groups, 1 Cor 1:23), so he ignored the latter. The antinomian tradition which Bultmann reinforced is so deeply entrenched in Christian theology that some Bibles (HCSB; LEB; NRSV) are careful to use an alternate interpretation of *torah*, 'instruction', rather than the usual 'law' in Isaiah's eschatological prophecy, 'out of Zion will go forth the law' (Isa 2:3, KJV). The NET goes so far as to supply 'moral': 'For Zion will be the centre for moral instruction...'

In *An introduction to the New Testament*, however, Carson and Moo (2005:287) are silent on the interpretation of unclean food, preferring simply to state that it was about Gentiles. It is difficult to imagine that this silence is unintentional, given the gravity of the vision. Some other biblical scholars such as Jacob Jervell (cited in Bock 2007:390) limit the vision's interpretation to Gentiles and deny that food is in view (Jervell uses food distinctions in Acts 15 to support his case). John Moxton's (2011) doctoral thesis on Peter's vision focuses not so much on the meaning of the vision as on the dilemma it placed Peter in—at least at that point in time—referring to it as a nightmare. He does however conclude, that 'its target was certainly Peter's misconceptions about Jew-Gentile contact' (p. 209). The NET Bible's study note on Acts 10:28 states, 'Peter sees the significance of his vision as not about

food, but about open fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentiles.' Notably, the commentators refrain from 'correcting' Peter.

It is not surprising that Messianic Jews—many of whom observe laws that distinguish Jews from Gentiles (especially circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws)—commonly argue that the vision is not about food, only about Gentiles. Michael Brown (2011:206), David Stern (1992:257–261), and Mark Kinzer (2005:68–71), for example, are all in agreement about this.

The literature reveals only two principal interpretations of Peter's vision; there is universal consensus that it pertains to the cleansing of Gentiles, but disagreement over whether it also pertains to cleansing of unclean food. The following section examines what the text itself says regarding the interpretation.

## 4. Textual Analysis: Acts 10:1–11:18

### 4.1. The key question: what was cleansed?

Peter's repeated vision ended each time with a voice from heaven saying, '*The things* which God has made clean, you must not consider unclean!' (Acts 10:15–16). It is important to note that the voice did not specify explicitly what God cleansed; the LEB supplies '*the things*' (hence the italics) whilst most translations supply 'what'. For example, the NET says, 'What God has made clean...' The key question is obvious: *what did God make clean?* Was it unclean food, or was it the Gentiles, or was it both? Christian tradition answers 'both', and uses this text to argue that Jewish dietary laws—and the whole Law in general—were abrogated by God at that point in time. The events that followed, however, indicate that Peter came to a different conclusion.



## 4.2. Vision genre

The scripture tells us that even 'Peter was doubting within himself what the vision which he saw might be...' (Acts 10:17) and pondering its meaning (Acts 10:19) when he was instructed by the Spirit to go with the messengers from Cornelius. Unlike many readers of Acts, Peter did not automatically assume the vision was about food laws. Rather, he reflected on its meaning, which immediately suggests he sought to interpret it figuratively. 'Like the seer of the book of Daniel, Peter realizes he has received a symbolic vision that requires interpretation. As a practicing Jew and a knowledgeable reader of scripture, Peter presumes that the vision is not to be taken at face value' (Kinzer 2005:69).

Each biblical genre has its own interpretive hermeneutic; parables, poetry, and prophecy are all interpreted differently. Unlike historical narrative, visions are interpreted symbolically, not literally. Jeremiah's vision of the boiling cauldron (Jer 1:13) had nothing to do with food. Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek 37:1–14) had nothing to do with bones. Zechariah's vision of the woman in the basket (Zech 5:5–11) had nothing to do with women or baskets. Amos' vision of summer fruit (Amos 8) concerned neither summer nor fruit. And Peter's vision had nothing to do with unclean food any more than it did with sheets. The unclean food in the vision was a metaphor. I demonstrate, repeatedly below, that it was a metaphor for the Gentiles. Jews, on moral grounds, regarded Gentiles as unclean, whilst the uncleanness of certain animal species was a ritual uncleanness as defined by the Torah (Deut 14:3–19; Lev 11:1–23). The claim that Acts 10:1–11:18 abrogates the Mosaic Law is based on an allusion that is nowhere made explicit in the text, and originates in a visionary symbol being interpreted literally in spite

of Peter explicitly interpreting it differently (10:28), with demonstrable divine endorsement (10:44).

Bock (2007:389) argues that the Old Testament gives precedents for offensive divine commandments to be taken literally, citing Genesis 22:1–2, Hosea 1:2–3, and Isaiah 20:2–3, and therefore that Peter's vision is to have literal application to the cleansing of unclean food (Bock could have added Ezek 4:12; note the similarity between Ezekiel's protest in Ezek 4:12 and that of Peter in Acts 10:14). His case is undermined in several ways. Firstly, these examples are descriptive not prescriptive, exceptional cases for the purpose of illustration, not normative. There is no suggestion that they received their revelation in bizarre visions, unlike Peter. Hosea's and Isaiah's actions were *intended to offend* in order to shock Israel into repentance to *conform* their conduct to the Law (thus affirming it), not to *change or nullify* the Torah—not a *yod* nor a *kots* of a *yod*!<sup>2</sup> They were action parables (i.e. literally acted out), and that only by the prophet himself. Peter's revelation, on the other hand, was in a trance and had an element of mystery. Also, unlike Bock's examples, its meaning was unclear to the recipient afterwards (10:17). Moreover, Peter did not get up, slaughter and eat as commanded, unlike the obedience shown in Bock's three proof texts. Clearly, Peter did not take this as a positive command<sup>3</sup> to be literally obeyed, but rather, he understood that the negative command ('*The things* which God has made clean, you must not consider unclean!') conveyed the message. Finally, while the positive command to Peter was clearly illegal, none of the Old Testament examples given contained such a command: Abraham was not under Mosaic Law;

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<sup>2</sup> Better known as 'not a jot or a tittle', this well-known Hebraic expression was used by Jesus to stress *the same point*, possibly in Hebrew (Matt 5:18; Bivin 2007:94–96).

<sup>3</sup> One of Kinzer's (2005:69) key questions on this text is, 'Does the vision entail a positive command that Jews now eat nonkosher meat?'

although prostitution is contrary to the Law, marrying a prostitute is not; neither is going about in one's undergarments.<sup>4</sup>

Peter saw the vision three times over. Repetition in the Bible is a technique to emphasise something. Thus, Peter was assured that his vision bore a message of great importance and one might expect it to relate to the Gentiles, because of the hints Luke inserted in leading up to the Cornelius incident (see 5.1.1 below).

### 4.3. Breaking the Law?

Peter was a devout, Law-abiding Jew who, by his own words, had 'never eaten anything common and unclean' (Acts 10:14). Yet, Acts 10:28–29 tells us,

And [Peter] said to [Cornelius' household], 'You know that it is forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or to approach a foreigner. And to me God has shown *that* I should call no man common or unclean. Therefore—and without raising any objection—I came *when I* was sent for. So I ask for what reason you sent for me.'

Furthermore, Peter was the head apostle. His ritual purity and leadership role were critical elements of his selection by God to be the witness of the vision and the first bearer of the gospel to the Gentiles (see Stern 1992:261). The testimony of a Jewish believer who was defiled or had no position of authority would not have carried the weight of someone with Peter's qualities and position.

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<sup>4</sup> Probably not literally 'naked' as many translations say (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown 1997; Smith 1992).

Peter claimed that it is unlawful (10:28 in many English translations including the NIV, NASB, ESV, and NET<sup>5</sup>) for Jews to associate with Gentiles—yet, there is nothing written in the Law of Moses against it. Could Peter be referring to the Oral Law, regarded as authoritative even by Jesus (Matt 23:3)? Jewish association with Gentiles was not contrary to the Oral Law either, but rather, to strongly-held social customs enforced as *halakha*. Luke's choice of words implicitly supports this contention: it is ἀθέμιτος (*athemitos*) 'forbidden', as per the Holman Christian Standard Bible and LEB, not ἄνομος (*anomos*), 'unlawful'.<sup>6</sup> Tannaic *halakha* concerning Jew-Gentile fellowship was complicated by differences between Jewish sects following conflicting halakhot: some condemned it whilst others condoned it under certain conditions. Tomson (1990:230–236) gives examples of both sides, explaining that the rabbis, who ruled against Jews having fellowship with Gentiles, were a minority, even within the Land. It would appear from Acts 10:28 that Peter held to this more conservative view, as did the circumcision party (11:2–3), and probably James (Gal 2:12–13) prior to the apostolic council in Acts 15. Thus, Jew-Gentile association could be regarded as 'unlawful', but only concerning a disputed *halakha* held by minority sects, not covenant law.

Stern (1992:258) goes further by saying even that 'forbidden' is too strong: 'the word "*athemitos*", used only twice in the New Testament, does not mean 'unlawful, forbidden, against Jewish law', ... but rather

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<sup>5</sup> The ESV Study Bible comments on the word 'unlawful', 'Not in terms of violating OT commands but in the sense of not following the later customs of strict Jewish traditions about uncleanness. The Jewish traditions of purity made it virtually impossible for them to associate with Gentiles without becoming ritually unclean.'

<sup>6</sup> William Tyndale's Worms octavo edition of 1526 was probably the first English Bible to use the word 'unlawful' in Acts 10:28: 'an unlawfull thinge', followed similarly by the Matthew's (1537) Bishops (1568), Geneva (1587) and KJV (1611)

“taboo, out of the question, not considered right, against standard practice, contrary to cultural norms.” Bruce (1988:209), Witherington (1998:353), and Stott (1990:189) all agree that ‘taboo’ is preferred. Judaism has never formally classified Gentiles as ontologically unclean; rather, the prevalence of idolatry and sexual immorality in Gentile society—especially the pagan Greco-Roman society of the time—resulted in their uncleanness. For these reasons, Jewish rules were introduced to dissociate from Gentiles, reflected anachronistically in Jubilees 22:16, for example. Although such regulations did not carry scriptural authority, they did become engrained in Jewish thinking (see John 18:28). As Stern explains (1992:259), the classification of Gentile products and practices as unclean for Jews was probably extended to include Gentiles themselves, resulting in pervasive negative attitudes toward Gentiles. But contamination through Gentile-association was not automatic. Trade between Jews and Gentiles was common. Table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles is even mentioned in the Mishnah (Avodah Zarah 5:5) since ‘the coexistence with gentiles was accepted as a fact of life’ (Tomson 1990:158). The point here is that it was not, in fact, *unlawful* for Peter ‘to associate with or to approach a foreigner’, nor was Peter pronouncing the Law null and void by doing so. Instead, God had revealed to him that Gentiles are not intrinsically unclean and thus, the taboo of associating with them was invalidated.

Bock (2007:389–390) mentions the Jewish tradition in Midrash Psalms 146:4 that God would one day (alluding to the days of the Messiah) declare all animals clean. This is not convincing evidence for his interpretation of Peter’s vision. Firstly, the reference is to ‘Yahweh sets prisoners free’ in Psalm 146:7; clearly, the link to cleansing of unclean

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Bibles. Other early translations including the 14<sup>th</sup> century Wycliffe follow the Vulgate (‘abominatum’) to render ‘abhominable’ (abominable).

food is tenuous at best. Moreover, the midrash is not decisive on this; it says '*Some say* that every creature that is considered unclean in the present world, the Holy One blessed be He will declare clean in the age to come' (cited in Brown 2007:282, emphasis added). *Aggadic* material is not authoritative, at least not in the evangelical tradition. The midrash is arguably contrary to Jeremiah 31:33; moreover, we are not living in 'the age to come', under the Messiah's reign over the nations from Jerusalem, as the tradition anticipated. Brown (2007:277) similarly objects to this application of the midrash to Mark 7:19 because, first of all, 'the disciples, for many years after this teaching, continued to follow the Torah, and second, that changing the law would contradict Yeshua's rebuke of the Pharisees', referring to Matthew 15:3–9.<sup>7</sup>

Returning to the point that Jew-Gentile relations were not truly unlawful, it is important to note that Cornelius and almost certainly 'his relatives and close friends' who had come to hear Peter were God-fearers.<sup>8</sup> They were thus respectful of Jewish Law, likely keeping the food laws themselves (Bruce 1952:215; NET Study Note on Acts 10:2 quoted in fn. 8 above). They certainly were not rank, immoral, pagan idolaters. Peter indicated that they were acceptable to God because they feared him and did what was right (10:35).<sup>9</sup> This being the case, it is

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<sup>7</sup> *Yeshua* is the Hebrew name for Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> The NET study note on Acts 10:2 explains: 'The description of Cornelius as a *devout, God-fearing man* probably means that he belonged to the category called "God-fearers", Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel and in many cases kept the Mosaic law, but did not take the final step of circumcision necessary to become a proselyte to Judaism'. Contrary to other authors (Skarsaune 2002:82; Dunn 2006:166), Bock (2007:386) argues that Luke is probably not using 'God-fearer' as a technical term and that Cornelius may not have been a regular worshipper in the local synagogue. In light of the usual use of the word, this seems unlikely. Either way, Luke records that Cornelius feared, honoured, and prayed to the God of Israel.

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Paul's hearers in Acts 13:46–49, 18:6 and 28:28 were 'not just any Gentiles, but "God-fearers"' (Skarsaune 2002:171). Skarsaune (p. 172) justifies this claim by observing that 'Only twice in the whole of Acts does Paul address Gentiles

unlikely that there was any unclean food in Cornelius' house at all (Kinzer 2005:70). He used to do many charitable deeds for 'the people', almost certainly meaning the Jewish people (Bruce 1952:215; Stern 1992:257).<sup>10</sup> He also prayed 'continually' (LEB; ESV) or 'regularly' (NET), literally, 'through everything' (διὰ παντός, *dia pantos*). He probably even prayed in accordance with the regular Jewish prayer times, since the angel appeared to him while he was praying at three o'clock in the afternoon (Acts 10:3, 30)—the hour for daily Jewish prayer. His piety was noted by God himself (10:4). At the time of the angelic encounter (Acts 10:3), Cornelius had no reason to believe that the Law was nullified though he must have realized that obeying God's instruction ran contrary to Jewish social mores. To him, as a Law-respecting God-fearer and one who esteemed Peter supremely (Acts 10:25), it would have been unthinkable to insult his Jewish guests by offering them unclean food. On three occasions, Luke mentioned the story of the Gentile, Cornelius, and his household believing the gospel and receiving the Holy Spirit (10:1–48; 11:1–18; 15:7–7). This triplet calls attention to the Gentile-cleansing theme, whilst ignoring food completely.

Taken together, these facts refute the traditional Christian claim that Peter broke the law by eating with Cornelius, and further, that this proves he ate unclean food. 'The vision concerned men, not the menu' (Rudolph 2011:48). Dietary laws are not in scope in these events at all;

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who do not belong to the God-fearers'; on the first occasion (Acts 14:8) he was forced to, and the second occasion (Acts 17:16–34) was not his initiative either.

<sup>10</sup> In Acts 10:35, Cornelius together with his family and close friends are described by Peter as those who did what was right. As noted by Bruce (1952:224), this may be an allusion to almsgiving since the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word δικαιοσύνη (*dikaïosunē*: righteousness) is נְדָבָה (*ṣēdāqāh*), which was (and still is) commonly used in Jewish parlance to denote acts of charity.

the focus is entirely on a change in Jewish-Gentile relations, not being a change in the Law but in cultural tradition.

#### 4.4. Events resulting from the vision

Acts 10:20 provides a clue to the meaning of the vision; the Spirit said to Peter, 'go down, and go with them—not hesitating at all, because I have sent them.' Peter was explicitly instructed by the Holy Spirit to go with the messengers from Cornelius, 'not hesitating', 'without doubting', 'not discriminating', as various translations say. Why would he have hesitated or doubted whether he should go with them, or discriminated against them? Because they were Gentiles: Cornelius was a Roman centurion (Acts 10:1), and his messengers were 'two of the household slaves and a devout soldier' (Acts 10:7). So, from the outset, we have a strong indication that the vision was about Gentiles.

FF Bruce (1988:206) appears to contradict himself in some measure: 'The divine cleansing of food in the vision is a parable of the divine cleansing of human beings in the incident to which the vision leads up. It did not take Peter long to understand this: "God has taught me", he says later in the present narrative, "to call *no human being* profane or unclean" (v. 30).'<sup>11</sup> Why does Bruce write that the events of the vision were a parable and then take them literally? Bruce himself applied the italics to emphasize that the vision's message is about people, yet, he unquestioningly assumes it *also* to be about animals. He does, however, explain that there is a link between the two: consumption of unclean food by Gentiles makes them unclean, so the supposed cleansing of unclean animals thus also cleanses Gentiles. This intertwined relationship is certainly of concern, but does not justify his conclusion. As already discussed, Gentiles are not defiled by eating unclean food

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<sup>11</sup> The reference to Acts 10:30 should be 10:28.



because it is not unclean for them, and social relations between them and Jews do not defile the latter. The uncleanness of the Gentiles derived from immorality and idolatry, so the supposed cleansing of unclean animals would not have the effect that Bruce claims.

Stern (1992:258) notes on Acts 10:28 that Peter sought to avoid offending his Gentile hearers by referring to them not by the usual term, ἔθνος (*ethnos*: nation—typically used by Jews of any nation except Israel), which 'could be interpreted as having a deprecatory nuance' (citing Matthew 5:47) but rather by ἀλλόφυλος (*alloghulos*), 'someone who belongs to another tribe'. As a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament this is particularly notable, and it hints that Peter has grasped the meaning of the vision. His comment, 'God has shown *that* I should call no man common or unclean' in 10:28 makes it explicit. This cannot be overemphasized, and Luke here used direct speech to stress the point. Peter explained that God showed him, through the vision, that Gentiles are not to be regarded as unclean. *The text interprets itself* without relying on other books of the New Testament, as the traditional Christian interpretation does—at risk. There is no indication whatsoever that the vision pertains to cleansing of unclean food. Thus, Peter's own uncertainty on the meaning of the vision (Acts 10:17, 19) was resolved by Acts 10:20 (discussed above) and 10:28. This is greatly reinforced by Acts 10:34–36:

So Peter opened *his* mouth *and* said, 'In truth I understand that God is not one who shows partiality, but in every nation the one who fears him and who does what is right is acceptable to him. *As for* the message that he sent to the sons of Israel, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ—this one is Lord of all ...'

Often overlooked is the fact that the 'sheet' Peter saw also contained clean animals; this is implicit in the reference to 'all the four-footed

animals ... of the earth'. Why would God pronounce clean animals which were never unclean to begin with? It is far more persuasive to interpret the mix of clean and unclean animals contained together in the 'sheet' as an image of the mixture of Jews and Gentiles, respectively, together in the Body of Christ—especially considering that Jews who believe in Christ are cleansed from sin in the same manner as Gentiles.

#### 4.5. God's confirmation of Peter's interpretation

Acts 10:34–35 makes it clear, yet again, that the vision had taught Peter that God is not partial to Jews, but accepts anyone from any nation who 'fears him and does what is right.' It is worth noting that God's cleansing was not a universal cleansing of all people regardless of their behaviour; those who did not fear God or do what was right were not automatically cleansed.<sup>12</sup> In Luke's wording, Peter 'opened *his* mouth', which indicates 'a solemn expression' (Bock 2007:295) or something of importance; Matthew used the same expression to introduce Jesus' benediction in Matthew 5:2. In addition, Peter's opening words 'in truth' (effectively a translation of 'amen') are used in scripture to convey importance. This is a meta-comment which serves 'to alert the reader that what follows the meta-comment is especially important' (Runge 2008a). Peter was not still pondering what the vision meant; he had fully grasped the meaning and presented it in the same sentence. His choice of words, whether in Greek or else in Aramaic (or even Hebrew) via an interpreter,<sup>13</sup> suggests that such people are not in any way inferior to the people of God; the Greek *προσωπολήπτῆς*

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<sup>12</sup> In this regard, I have already presented the godly lifestyle of Cornelius, who clearly harboured no anti-Semitic sentiment. Similarly, those Gentiles who first heard the gospel in Antioch were probably God-fearers who heard it being preached when they went to worship in the local synagogue (Skarsaune 2002:167).

<sup>13</sup> Bruce (1988:213) mentions there are a number of 'Aramaisms' in Peter's speech, suggesting that it may have originally been given in Aramaic.

(*prosōpolēemptēs*, literally *lifter of faces*) in verse 34 alludes to the priestly blessing in which God is called upon to lift up his face on, or show favour to, the Israelites (Num 6:26; Bruce 1988:210). This emphasizes that God does not favour Israel over the Gentiles in charging sin (Bock 2007:396) and 'why judgment and accountability before God are keys to Peter's speech' (p. 402). Acts 10:36 carries this through: Jesus Christ is Lord of all—that is, *all nations*, not only Israel. God's *international* reign was anticipated by Israel's prophets (Isa 2:2–4; 25:6; 60:1–3; 66:18–20 and Zech 14:9; also see Bruce 1988:211–212) and commonly in the Psalms (22:27–28, 46:10 for example); a widely-held Jewish belief was that the Messiah would bring the nations under the reign of the one true God. Luke's description of the vision and subsequent events portrays God's kingdom as universal and non-discriminatory toward different *ethnos*, not that dietary laws are cancelled.

Peter went on immediately to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles (10:37–43), upon which the Holy Spirit fell upon Peter's Gentile hearers (Acts 10:44), resulting in them speaking in tongues and praising God. By contrast, although the Samaritans and Ethiopian eunuch described in Acts 8 had believed the gospel and been baptised in water, they had not yet been given the Holy Spirit. Thus, God confirmed that Peter's interpretation of the vision was correct: the Gentiles were not to be regarded as unclean or common. This astonished the circumcised believers who accompanied Peter. They discussed the matter and concluded immediately that the believing Gentiles must be baptised. Yet again, the discourse is about Gentiles. Not a word has been spoken about cleansing of unclean food since the vision itself, nor have any events alluded to it.

#### 4.6. Peter's defence and the church leaders' conclusion

Chapter 11 opens with news of a scandal: 'that the Gentiles too had accepted the word of God'—not that the Law had come to an end. Acts 11:3 appears to raise both concerns—that Peter associated with uncircumcised men and ate with them, therefore, possibly eating unclean food. Yet, there is no explicit accusation that Peter broke the dietary regulations, only that he ate with uncircumcised men. Even if Cornelius and his household had eaten unclean food (most unlikely, as demonstrated earlier), this does not prove that Peter himself ate unclean food any more than a vegetarian sharing a meal with non-vegetarians proves that he ate meat. Note that Peter's defence (11:4-17) does not include any defence for eating unclean food; rather, he explains why he had gone to the Gentiles, preached to them, and baptised them. Peter's explanation in 11:12, that 'the Spirit told me to accompany them, not hesitating *at all*', or perhaps, 'making no distinction' (ESV) brings Jew-Gentile relations into focus. The silence on food speaks too loudly to be ignored. Indeed, one can infer that Peter did not, in fact, eat non-kosher food at Cornelius' home. He produced six witnesses in his defence<sup>14</sup> (11:12): 'three times more than what would normally be required' by Jewish Law (NET study notes, alluding to Deut 19:15). This suggests that he had, by no means, broken or disregarded any of the written Law.

Luke created a tension for the reader in Acts 11:17 by describing how the former opponents of the Gentile mission first 'became silent' and then 'praised God', before the climax and conclusion of the entire pericope in verse 18: 'God has granted the repentance *leading* to life to the Gentiles also!' The Gentiles, though grammatically the indirect object, are brought to the front of the sentence (not counting the

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<sup>14</sup> Or seven by Jewish reckoning (that is, including Peter's own testimony); see Bruce 1952:232.

conjunctions)—before the subject 'God', verb ('has granted') and object ('repentance *leading* to life'). Such fronting is typical in Koinē Greek as a means of stressing a term, in this case, *the Gentiles*. Further, Luke uses direct speech to emphasize this conclusion. All these literary devices convey the profundity of the conclusion. The final verse contains no hint whatsoever that those charging Peter concluded that their dietary laws had been rescinded, only that God has granted repentance unto life to Gentiles 'also'. The 'also' that Luke uses is καί (*kai*), which when used adverbially (as here) indicates that additional information is provided (Runge 2008b), the content of which is explicitly stated. To add matters of food laws to it is simply eisegesis.

#### 4.7. Conclusion of the textual analysis

The information that can be derived directly from the text, Acts 10:1–11:18, points clearly to a single meaning of Peter's vision, namely, that Gentiles are no longer to be regarded as unclean. Contrary to the traditional Christian interpretation, the meaning is not obviously that unclean foods have been cleansed, as revealed in the fact that Peter was puzzled about the meaning of the vision, and the fact that visions are symbolically interpreted, and that they generally have one primary meaning. That primary meaning has to be that the vision pertains to Gentiles, since it is the only undisputed meaning. The derivation of the traditional interpretation leans heavily on the misunderstanding that it was 'unlawful' for Jews to associate with Gentiles, which was neither according to Mosaic Law nor according to Oral Law. The events which followed the vision also confirm the 'Gentile' interpretation by virtue of the gift of the Spirit to them and by Peter's own confession in 10:28, 34–35. The assumption that Peter ate unclean food with Cornelius has been shown to be very unlikely, Cornelius being a God-fearer who had the greatest respect for Peter. The accusation against Peter by the

church leaders and 'those of the circumcision' (11:2–3) in Jerusalem did not explicitly state that he ate unclean food, but rather, that he had table fellowship with them. Neither did his defence (11:4–17) contain any justification for his supposed eating of unclean food, thus undermining the abovementioned assumption. Finally, I noted that Luke used several literary devices to emphasize the one and only conclusion reached by all his hearers, that 'God has granted the repentance *leading* to life to the Gentiles also' (11:18).

## 5. Analysis of the Contextual Evidence

### 5.1. Contextual evidence in Acts

#### 5.1.1. *Preceding context*

There is little contention that the Jewish believers in Jesus remained Torah-observant, at least until the events of Acts 10. The great Pharisee, who formerly had discipled Paul, Gamaliel the Elder, bravely protected the apostles from execution, suggesting that the Jesus-movement might even be 'of God' (Acts 5:27–40). This would be most unlikely if they were living contrary to Jewish law. Skarsaune (2002:154–155) explains the reasons for the two waves of persecution of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 5:17–41; 7:54–8:3), neither of which had anything to do with abandoning the Law. In fact, Acts 6:8–15 describes how Diaspora Jews residing in Jerusalem *falsely* accused Steven of speaking against the law and the temple. Skarsaune (2002:160–162) further presents a case for the early Jewish believers continuing in Torah-observance except for the cult—at least *atonement* sacrifices which were 'superfluous' (p. 161)—long after Peter's vision. For example, Paul's sacrifice in Acts 21:23–26 was 'votive'—a type of thanksgiving offering—not atoning (p. 157, fn. 22).

The historical context reveals an ever-widening circle of peoples to whom the gospel was proclaimed, from Jews in Jerusalem to Samaritans (semi-Jewish but widely regarded by Jews as outcasts) in Acts 8 and then, in the same chapter, to the Ethiopian eunuch. His pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost indicates that he was either a proselyte to Judaism or a God-fearer (though in either case he was unable to enter the Temple due to his emasculation, Deut 23:1). In Acts 10, the gospel was preached more widely to a select group of God-fearers and by the time of Acts 18:6–11, Paul was ministering freely to Gentiles in Corinth. Peter's vision of the 'sheet' was pivotal to this development which changed the course of history forever. On the other hand, the presumed abrogation of Jewish dietary laws by means of Peter's vision is not even mentioned within the broader historical context of events described in Acts,<sup>15</sup> nor is the Law as a whole abolished.

While in Joppa, Peter was hosted by Simon the tanner. Luke mentioned Simon's occupation three times (Acts 9:43, 10:6 and 10:32) which hints at something significant. 'Some degree of uncleanness was reckoned to attach to a tanner's work, because it involved regular contact with the skins of dead animals' (Bruce 1988:200). 'Tanning was an unpleasant and despised trade, regarded as a defect and ground for divorce, or to be kept at a distance, like corpses and graves (*m. Ketuboth* 7.10; *Baba Bathra* 2.9)' (Dunn 2006:97 fn. 70). Simon's potential uncleanness derived from his trade; there is no suggestion that he ate anything unclean—given Peter's convictions (Acts 10:14); he would not have stayed with Simon if that were the case. The issue Luke was preparing his readers for was that those regarded as unclean were, in fact, not.

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<sup>15</sup> Acts 15:1-31 is discussed under the next section below.

Luke provides another clue as to the meaning of Peter's vision by way of parallel in the story of Paul's encounter with the Lord, resulting in his coming to faith (Acts 9:1-20). The Lord told Ananias to seek Paul 'because this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel' (9:15). The surprise is not only in the fact that the very man who hated Jesus' disciples would be chosen, but also, in the fact that he is chosen to testify of Jesus to *Gentiles* and their kings (since Israel had no king). Luke was careful to emphasize this in his ordering of those who would hear Paul: first Gentiles, then Gentile kings, and lastly the sons of Israel. Again, the focus is on Gentiles, not food.

The story immediately confirms this with the account of an angelic appearance (Acts 10:3) to Cornelius, who was not only Gentile but also a centurion of the Roman army occupying the Jewish homeland. However, Luke is careful to qualify Cornelius as 'devout and fearing God together with all his household, doing many charitable deeds for the people and praying to God [continually]' (Acts 10:1). Though Luke is simply following chronological order, in the stories of Paul's divine encounter, the mention of Simon's tanning business, and the angelic appearance to Cornelius, the reader is being prepared for a significant shift in the Gentiles' relation to God. None of these incidents allude to a change in Jewish dietary law, or the Law in general.

The events described in Acts 11:19-26 may have occurred after those of 10:1-11:18, but it would appear that they took place earlier, and that Luke deliberately told the story of Peter's vision first so that the reader was prepared for 11:20, in which the gospel was proclaimed to Gentiles in Antioch.

Luke certainly highlights the significance of the Cornelius episode with the benefit of hindsight: he has inserted it (Acts 9.32-11.18)



together with the account of Paul's conversion (Acts 9.1–31) into the otherwise unbroken sequence of Hellenist history (Acts 6.1–8.40; 11.19–30) so that in his narrative at least it clearly precedes the breakthrough at Antioch (Dunn 2006:165).

Two hints that the evangelising of Hellenists<sup>16</sup> in Antioch in Acts 11:20 took place before the Cornelius incident are given. Firstly, the evangelists from Cyprus and Cyrene are described as moving to Antioch right after the scattering of believers from Jerusalem 'because of the persecution that took place over Stephen' (11:19, see 8:1). This was before Peter and John's trip to Samaria, the time of peace in the region (9:31) and Peter's work in the coastal areas (9:32–43), and it triggered the Jerusalem church to send Barnabas to Antioch to inspect the matter, who evidently approved (11:22–24). Secondly, there is no indication that the Spirit was given to the Hellenists in Antioch at that time. If the Hellenists were indeed Gentiles, it implies their acceptance by those who formerly considered them unclean, which may have motivated Luke to delay the narration till after the Cornelius incident. This would support the interpretation of the unclean animals in Peter's vision as representing Gentiles, being an example of their acceptance by Jews, whilst adding nothing to the claim that the animals also represented unclean food.

### *5.1.2. Post-vision evidence*

Interpreting Peter's vision as an abolition of the food laws runs contrary to the whole of Luke's writings, the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the*

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<sup>16</sup> The interpretation of Hellenists as 'Greeks', that is, Gentiles, is not certain because the word Ἑλληνιστῆς (*Hellēnistēs*) could refer to Greek-speaking Jews (as in Acts 6:1), according to the LEB study notes. Other study Bibles such as the ESV and NET disregard this possibility. Given the placement of this passage relative to the Cornelius

*Apostles*, which constitute one quarter of the New Testament. Luke and the apostles, whose story he narrates, uphold the Law at every point. James especially was known for his Torah-observance (James 2:8–12 [see Bauckham 1999:142 on this]; Painter 2001:54–57; *Ant. 20.200–201*<sup>17</sup>). Hegesippus, cited in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.2–18, indicates that James was highly regarded by devout Jewish leaders. As for Paul, Carson and Moo (2005:293) state, 'the Paul of Acts is utterly loyal to the law ...' The central question of the 'Jerusalem council', or 'apostolic council', described in Acts 15:1–31 is whether or not the *Gentile* believers in Jesus are to be subjected to the Law. This would make no sense if the Jewish believers had concluded from Peter's vision that the Law was abrogated for themselves; in that case the group of Pharisees mentioned in 15:5 would have criticised the apostles for forsaking the Law. Rather, 'the Jewish obligation to maintain Jewish identity was universally presupposed' (Soulen 1996:171). Kinzer (2005:67) argues, 'If one was a Jew, one was not just free to live as a Jew, one was obligated to do so. Otherwise, the issue of Gentile obligation to live as a Jew would have been nonsensical.' Moreover, Peter's address to the council in 15:7–11 refers to God's acceptance of Cornelius' household without coming under the Law, yet Peter retained a crisp distinction between 'we' (Jewish believers) and 'they' (Gentile believers). This too would be meaningless if the Law had been abolished. God made 'no distinction' (15:9) in terms of how Jews and Gentiles are saved, yet Peter, in his speech to the council in Jerusalem, made a distinction between Israel and the nations, consistent with the rest of scripture (discussed below).

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incident, and the fact that the disciples in Antioch were called Christians (11:26) instead of Nazarenes or Jews, I submit that the Hellenists were, in fact, Gentiles.

Skarsaune is most helpful in showing that the aim is to remove any remaining cause for offence prohibiting table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. A lengthy quote from Skarsaune (2002:170) concerning the stipulations imposed by the Jerusalem council upon Gentile believers is warranted:

Gentile believers are told to make a concession to their Jewish brethren: they should not eat meat sacrificed to idols, or meat from strangled animals, that is, meat with blood in it (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25). In the Torah the stranger living among Israelites, the 'resident alien,' was told to observe these commandments: 'If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens that reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood' (Lev 17:10; cf. further Lev 18:26; 20:2).

In the light of this, the meaning of the 'apostolic decree' becomes clear: the Gentiles need not become circumcised Jews in order to be fully accepted into the people of God, but they are requested to keep those commandments of the Torah which are obligatory for Gentiles living among Jews. Among these commands, special emphasis is laid on those related to *table fellowship*—*in other words, the decree is specifically aimed at the unity of mixed congregations* [emphasis added]. The Jewish believers are asked to recognize their uncircumcised brethren as belonging fully to the new people of the Messiah, while the Gentiles are asked to respect the sensitivities of their Jewish brethren and not to violate the Torah commandments valid for Gentiles living among Israelites.

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<sup>17</sup> Here, James is falsely accused of breaking the law, but later (too late to spare his life), he was defended by those most committed to the Law—probably the Pharisees (see Skarsaune 2002:160).

It is important to note that James' implicit appeal to the Torah validates its continuing authority over Jews, rather than disregarding it. It would be incongruent for James to use the Torah as a basis for a commandment to Gentile believers if the Torah itself had been abrogated. Moreover, we see once again that the context is about Jew-Gentile relations, which were ultimately made possible because of the message of Peter's vision in which the unclean animals clearly portray Gentiles. Indeed, it is in this context that Peter's interpretation of his vision (10:28) is implicitly referred to; apparently, he had explained it to James (15:14), who further validated it from the prophets Amos (9:11–12) and Isaiah (45:21). The NET study note on Acts 15:17 points out that James 'demonstrated a high degree of cultural sensitivity when he cited a version of the text (the Septuagint) that Gentiles would use'. Clearly, James understood Peter's vision to pertain to the cleansing of Gentiles, not unclean food.

In Acts 18:7–11, Luke records that Paul lived for a year and a half with Titius Justus, 'a worshiper of God', or 'a God-fearer', as the LEB footnote to verse 7 explains. Acts 21:17–26 further refutes the theory that the apostles deduced from Peter's vision that the Law was nullified. In 21:20, 'James, and all the elders' listened gladly to the success of Paul's Gentile mission before proudly telling him how their Jewish mission was prospering. In it, they boasted that many myriads of Jews had come to faith in Jesus, 'and they are all zealous adherents of the law.' Stern (1992:300) points out that *πόσαι μυριάδες* literally means 'many tens of thousands', not just 'many thousands' as English Bibles usually say. Instead of despairing of such fanaticism for the Law, they raised a concern to the contrary: that Paul was *falsely accused* of 'teaching all the Jews *who are* among the Gentiles *the* abandonment of Moses, telling them not to circumcise *their* children or to live according to *our* customs' (10:21). The remainder of the passage describes steps

taken to prove just the opposite; these were proposed by James and the elders, and willingly accepted by Paul. Later, in Acts 28:17–18, Paul adamantly denied doing anything contrary to Judaism; how could he do so if he had abandoned the Law? On the other hand, the joyous reception of news about Paul's Gentile mission shows that the elders acknowledged that Gentiles had been cleansed by their faith. Often overlooked is the fact that the Jewish mission would have been hindered by abrogation of the Law, since Jews would be offended by it. If Jew-Gentile table fellowship was not prohibited by Mosaic Law in the first place, as I have already shown, then, the net effect of repealing food laws would be detrimental to the growth of the church.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that Luke portrays the apostles, elders, and myriads of other Jewish believers as continuing in a strictly Torah-observant lifestyle, whilst accepting on equal terms Gentiles who had come to faith even without taking on the Law—except the few regulations specified in Acts 15:20 which enabled table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

## 5.2. Contextual evidence in the New Testament

The New Testament contains a number of references to the eating of unclean—or potentially unclean—food (e.g. Mark 7:19; Rom 14:14–15; 1 Cor 8–10), and the traditional Christian interpretation is that all foods have been cleansed for all believers. This has been challenged by a number of scholars (among others, Brown 2007; Lemans 2005; Kinzer 2005; Nanos 1996; Rudolph 2011; Stern 2007; Zetterholm 2009). They argue that these verses indicate that all foods (except strangled animals; see Acts 15:20<sup>18</sup>) are clean for Gentiles—as they always have been.

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<sup>18</sup> Strangled animals might be forbidden because they are not drained of their blood, the drinking of which appears to be precluded in this verse (for reasons discussed

This does not imply they are *ritually* clean for Jews—even Jewish believers in Jesus. The uncleanness of these animals stems not from some quality they possess, but from God's intention to separate a people, Israel, unto himself. Animals cannot be intrinsically unclean because God made them (see Mark 7:18–19 and Rom 14:14; Brown 2011:205–206). 'The Hebrew expressions *tohoRAH* (cleanness, purity) and *tumAH* (uncleanness, impurity) are technical terms that have no positive or negative connotations' (Safrai 2012).

The fact that Peter and other Jewish believers withdrew from eating with the Gentiles in Galatians 2:12–13 does not prove that they ate the same food; the issue at hand was table fellowship, not food laws (see Lancaster 2011:82–83; Rudolph 2011:47–48; Tomson 1990:221–281; Zetterholm 2005); the same argument is used of Peter eating with Gentiles in Acts 10, as discussed below. Referring to the Paul-Peter conflict in Galatians 2:11–14, Rudolph (2011:49) says the assumption 'that Paul consistently lived as a Gentile and expected Peter to do the same is contradicted by the standard interpretation of 1 Cor 9:19–23 that Paul sometimes lived like a Jew. But, if Paul 'occasionally conformed to Jewish law' to win others, how could he correct Peter for doing what appears to be the same thing?' Thus, the cause for the conflict was indeed close association with Gentiles, not the eating of unclean food.

Table fellowship was a major cultural issue in the Middle East; it was something Jesus' atonement addressed (Eph 2:14–16) but the unity he created does not necessarily imply homogeneity. R Kendall Soulen

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above), though 'blood' may also refer to bloodshed (Stern 1992:277–279; Bivin 2007:141–144). Food sacrificed to idols may also be forbidden in this verse—as the NIV translates it—but the argument for this is not conclusive.

explains, 'the gospel and the table fellowship it founds *confirms* rather than *annuls* the different and mutual dependence of Israel and the nations' (1996:169). Indeed, Paul's allusions to the *Shema* (Deut 6:4) in 1 Corinthians 8:6, Ephesians 4:6, and 1 Timothy 2:5 implicitly require an on-going differentiation between Israel and the nations: if Gentiles have to become Jewish to follow Jesus, then God is not the God of the nations, but only of Israel; if Jews have to lose their Jewish identity to follow Jesus, then God is no longer the God of Israel (Rom 3:3; 11:1, 29).<sup>19</sup> Jewish believers, who forsake the Law, neglect Paul's 'rule in all the churches' (1 Cor 7:17–24) in which he instructed Jewish believers to remain Jewish. His comment in verse 18 is often misinterpreted to mean the Law is annulled, whereas he was really proclaiming equality of circumcised and uncircumcised. 7:18b actually emphasizes the importance of keeping the commandments of God, that is, the Torah.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus neither broke the food laws nor taught that they would be rescinded (Matt 5:18). Following a discussion on Mark 7:19b, in which he argues that it is written for Gentiles, Kinzer (2005:57) writes, 'the Gospel of Mark as a whole presents Yeshua as an observant Jew who never undercuts accepted Jewish practice.' Further, 'Matthew and Luke give no support to the view that Yeshua abolished the Jewish food laws' (p. 58). As for Acts and the Pauline writings, Kinzer continues, they 'show that eating with Gentiles was a major hurdle for Jewish Yeshua-believers—even apart from the issue of nonkosher food. If Yeshua abolished the Jewish dietary laws, then why did his Jewish followers (such as Peter in Acts 10) require special divine intervention before they would even sit at table with non-Jews?' Rudolph (2011:48) concurs: 'Three times Peter rejects Jesus' instruction to kill and eat

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<sup>19</sup> For further discussion on the oneness of God in relation to his reign over all nations, see Nanos 1996:184 and Bauckham 2008:94–106. Also refer to Zechariah 14:9.

<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive study on this text, refer to Rudolph 2010.

impure (κοινόν) and unclean (ἀκάθαρτον) animals (Acts 10:14-16). This implies that Peter had never received such a teaching or example from Jesus.' Validating or disproving whether these New Testament verses abrogate the Jewish food laws is not my concern here; my point is that there is a strong case against the traditional view that requires consideration. More importantly, none of the food-related texts outside of Acts refer to Peter's vision. Even if it were conclusively shown that dietary laws have been rescinded in other books of the New Testament, they do not derive from Peter's vision.

God's purpose in the cleansing proclaimed in the vision also needs serious consideration. Few would argue with Bock (2007:390) that it was 'to expand the gospel'. However, the object of cleansing dictates how one understands this. Bock follows the traditional Christian interpretation that the vision pertains to both food and Gentiles; he believes table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus was impossible if they were subject to different dietary regulations. Cleansing of unclean animals would not affect Gentiles, so the purpose would be to release Jews from their kosher diet, thereby allowing them to eat with Gentiles. As discussed above, however, the Mosaic Law does not prohibit Jew-Gentile table fellowship, on condition that those Gentiles keep to basic morals that Jews believed God required of all humanity. These minimal moral regulations 'are simply an early version of the so-called Noahide commandments, described in later rabbinic literature (first in *t. 'Abod. Zar.* 8.4), defining who could be considered a righteous non-Jew' (Zetterholm 2009:151, summarizing Nanos 1996).

Judaism has never required Gentiles to observe what have been called 'identity markers' or 'boundary markers' (Dunn 1990:196, 2006:139 respectively), 'border lines' (Boyarin 2006) or 'sign laws' (meaning laws identifying members of the Mosaic Covenant) that distinguish



Jews from Gentiles: primarily circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws. Instead, as the apostle James later formalized, it was enough for Gentiles to 'abstain from the pollution of idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood' (Acts 15:20). The issue that the Jerusalem council sought to address was how unity (particularly as exhibited in table fellowship) between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus may be achieved; the decree it issued did not indicate that all foods have been cleansed, and therefore, Gentiles who eat unclean foods. Rather, it stated that Jews and Gentiles are saved by the same grace (Acts 15:11), that 'God first concerned himself to take from among the Gentiles a people for his name' (15:14), alluding to Peter's vision and interpreting it as pertaining to Gentiles, not foods. This implied that Gentiles are acceptable (not unclean) if only they observe the very minimum of moral laws.

It is difficult to comprehend why God would annul the very laws he had recently affirmed in Matthew 5:17–19,<sup>21</sup> and which he uses to distinguish Israel from the nations for his purposes, regardless of its spiritual condition (Rom 11:28–29). Indeed, 'the author of Romans 9:4–5 and 11:1–6 ... could not possibly have told believing Jews to stop being Jews' (Skarsaune 2002:173). 'Tomson argues that all of Paul's letters were exclusively directed to non-Jewish Jesus believers and concerned problems pertaining to their specific situation' (Zetterholm 2009:1535, referring to Tomson [1990]). By retaining a distinction between Jews and Gentiles within the body of Christ, there is no contradiction between the enduring validity of the Law (for Jews) and

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<sup>21</sup> I find the traditional Christian interpretation—that the Law is annulled by Christ's fulfillment of it—unconvincing; fulfillment does not mean nullification. Matthew 5:18 clearly states that the Law will prevail 'until heaven and earth pass away'. Christians wrongly nullify this strong statement of Jesus by arguing that the Law remains but is no longer applicable. If Jesus berated the Pharisees and the scribes for nullifying the word of God for the sake of their tradition, what would he say to the church?

New Testament scriptures which give instructions (to Gentiles) not to take on the Law. The apostles also retained Jew-Gentile distinction after Peter's vision *even amongst believers* in Acts 21:18–25. Such distinction is entirely consistent with God's promises in Jeremiah 31:35–37 and 33:25–26, and since it is precisely observance of the Law which creates that distinction—outwardly, at least—one has to question whether God would cancel the sign laws. Exodus 31:12–17 provides a good example of a 'sign' that God commanded Israel to keep 'forever'. The setting apart of Israel from the nations and the question of on-going Torah-observance for Jewish believers in Jesus are beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>22</sup> but, were nevertheless taken for granted by Peter and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

### 5.3. Conclusion of the contextual evidence

There is no biblical evidence outside of the Acts 10:1–11:18 pericope that Peter's vision was to have a double interpretation (relating both to Gentiles and to food), neither elsewhere in Acts nor in the rest of the New Testament. To the contrary, Jewish believers described in the New Testament—and *especially* in Acts—sought to keep the Mosaic Law, indicating that they understood Peter's vision to mean that Gentiles had been cleansed, not unclean food. The contextual evidence presented provides supporting evidence for the conclusion reached in the textual analysis of the pericope itself. What remains is to examine the history of the early church for any further evidence to support or contradict this outcome.

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<sup>22</sup> I intend to examine these matters in later papers. Suffice it to say the 'unity' texts (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:14–16; Col 3:9–11) do not speak of Jew-Gentile homogenisation, and the 'no distinction' texts (Acts 15:9; Rom 3:22–23; 10:12) relate to common human sinfulness and means of salvation, not dissolution of Jew-Gentile boundaries.

## 6. Historical Analysis

### 6.1. The testimony of history as a hermeneutic

If the interpretation derived above is correct, one would expect it to be supported by subsequent church history. In the introduction to *Evasive Israel*, Charles Cosgrove (1997:xi) asks, 'What ought Christians do when faced with conflicting interpretations of scripture?' He explains that the 'plain grammatical sense' of a text—as sought after by the Reformers—is not always adequate to determine its meaning. Thus, theologians turned to 'historical biblical theology' late in the eighteenth century, hoping that 'sound and honest exegesis could provide clarity and certainty about obscure texts.' This, too, was inadequate in some cases, leaving the church to rely on earlier scholarship, which itself was not always in consensus (xii); 'many questions of exegesis cannot be historically resolved, because the texts themselves are irreducibly ambiguous.' A solution Cosgrove offers is that 'canonical interpretation requires, by its very nature, a hermeneutic of use' to adjudicate between 'competing plausible interpretations' (xiii). He proposes that Christians should consider the *purpose* of scripture as expressed in Matthew 22:37-40; that is, 'interpretive judgments should be guided by the command 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Using this, Kinzer (2005:33-38) develops 'hermeneutics of ethical accountability' in which 'we must not only employ abstract and theoretical criteria for evaluating theological claims; we must also have recourse to practical or functional criteria for determining theological truth' (p. 33). In short, bad hermeneutics results in bad ethics and a failure to fulfil what Jesus called the second greatest commandment, referring to Leviticus 19:18. Given the textual and contextual evidence already presented in this paper, I do not believe there remains any ambiguity in the meaning of

Peter's vision. Nevertheless, if my case is sound then Cosgrove's 'hermeneutic of use' should confirm it.

## 6.2. Historical evidence

Historical evidence shows conclusively that many Jewish believers continued to observe the law for several centuries after the canon was closed, or at least as much of it as possible after the razing of the temple in 70 AD. These included the Nazarenes who, unlike the Ebionites, held to a high christology (Juster 1995:135-140). Kinzer (2005:181-209) describes on-going difficulties within the *ekklesia* to resolve this matter as late as Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. Obviously, Jewish believers did not believe that the Law was abrogated, nor had they been taught that through the apostolic tradition. Rather, they believed that they were to continue to live as Jews in unity with Gentile believers who observed at least the four commandments of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:20). They clearly did not take Peter's vision to mean that food laws were abrogated. Applying Cosgrove's hermeneutic of use; one would conclude that the Law is still binding on Jewish believers.

After the first century, the Jewish believers suffered a great loss in numbers (Juster 1995:139-140), whereas the Gentile mission prospered in spite of numerous Roman persecutions. Once the church came to be dominated and led by Gentiles, scriptures, warning Gentiles against becoming Jewish to be better or 'more complete' Christians (that is, Judaising, as in Galatians) were applied to Jewish believers; they were sometimes forced to abandon the sign laws, including kosher diets. The anti-Jewish polemics of some of the Church Fathers (particularly Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr) show that they wished that Jewish believers would cut all ties with Judaism. Kinzer (2005:187-197) presents a synopsis of anti-Jewish and antinomian writings in five ante-Nicene fathers, who were all seeking to oppose the 'Judaising' of

believers, namely, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and the authors of the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Epistle to Diognetus*. As far as I can ascertain, their writings do not contain any reference to the abolition of food laws in connection with Peter's vision, in spite of their beliefs. The writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* (Barnabas 10) validated the Mosaic Law as eternally binding, but then allegorized it altogether. Skarsaune (2002:221) suggests that whoever wrote *Barnabas* was unable to reconcile his own life outside the Law with his belief in its eternal validity; thus, he spiritualised all the purity laws. Irenaeus (*A.H. III* 12.7) was the only one who commented on Peter's vision, interpreting the unclean animals as a reference to Gentiles. He gave no hint that it should be taken also as a literal reference to the cleansing of unclean food. His main concern at that point was to demonstrate that the God of the Mosaic Covenant is the same God as that of the New Covenant, stating that the vision was to teach Peter that the same God who distinguished between clean and unclean through the Law was the God who had cleansed Gentiles by the blood of Jesus.

Kinzer (2005:201–205) refers to an exchange of letters between Augustine and Jerome around the start of the fifth century concerning the permissibility, even appropriateness, of Jewish 'Yeshua-believers' observing the Law. In the 426 AD, Augustine completed the fourth book of *On Christian Doctrine*. In 20.39, where he argued against Christian subjection to the Law, he quoted from Galatians 4, but did not mention Acts 10. Similarly, in his writings against the Manichaeans (14.35), he referred to both Paul's comments on unclean food in 1 Corinthians 8:7–13, but did not mention Peter's vision. From this we can assume that although he took the Law to be annulled, he did not reach that conclusion from Peter's vision. Kinzer (2005:206) argues that 'like Irenaeus and Augustine ... Aquinas seeks to combine reverence for the ceremonies of the Mosaic law with the firm conviction that their

observance is no longer valid.' This is similar to the explanation Skarsaune posits about the dilemma that led to the author of *Barnabas* allegorizing Jewish ceremonial laws, though Aquinas apparently used a different approach, comparing Jewish observance with fulfilled prophecy. Paraphrasing Michael Wyschogrod, Kinzer (2005:207) demonstrates that 'both Thomas [Aquinas] and Augustine ... begin with their conclusion, which is for them an incontrovertible article of ecclesiastical tradition, and then work backward. They struggle to find theological justification for an established teaching that is difficult to defend.'

### **6.3. Conclusion of the historical evidence**

There seems to be no historical evidence from the patristic period that Peter's vision was used to justify the requirement for Jewish believers to forsake the sign laws. Not even the Apostolic Fathers, let alone the later Church Fathers, appealed to Acts 10:9–16 in arguing against Christian Torah-observance. Moreover, the fact that Jewish believers continued for centuries to keep the sign laws, including food laws, testifies against the dual interpretation of Peter's vision. Cosgrove's test of love for one's neighbour, and Kinzer's hermeneutic of ethical accountability, applied to the church's efforts to 'Gentilize' its Jewish members—sometimes forcibly—agree with this conclusion. Bad attitudes and ethical behaviour towards Jews, including Messianic Jews, exposes bad exegesis concerning the validity of the Torah for them. This, in turn, undermines the interpretation that the cleansing of unclean animals in Peter's vision literally meant that unclean foods have been cleansed for Jews.

## Conclusion and Implications

The long-term and widespread propagation of the traditional dual interpretation of Peter's vision has become so deeply ingrained in collective Christian psyche that it is difficult to challenge, regardless of the evidence. Yet, there is nothing in this passage (Acts 10:1–11:18) to support the argument that the Law is done away with, nor that Peter's vision was an injunction by God to forsake the food commandments. On the contrary, the text repeatedly affirms that the vision was about God's cleansing of the Gentiles. This passage, and specifically the vision it describes, does not address the Law at all. As I have sought to show, the narrative itself contains the interpretation of the vision, as indeed confirmed by God himself. Moreover, the study of the context of the passage within Acts strongly supports the contention that Gentile inclusion is the vision's theme, and that the Law was assumed to remain in force for Jewish believers in Jesus. I also showed the same is true in the broader context of the New Testament, and that this understanding did not simply disappear after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, but continued amongst Jewish believers throughout the patristic period. Even movements to 'de-Judaize' Jewish believers did not use that text to justify their intentions. Modern Gentile readers have difficulty in grasping the enormity that termination of the Mosaic Law would have meant for the Jewish believers. Such a dramatic change would certainly have had to be made by the apostles in an *explicit* proclamation to all Jewry, yet, the book of Acts nowhere mentions any such announcement.

In the light of all the evidence presented, I submit that readers who insist that the vision annulled food laws are 'shoe-horning' the text onto their belief system, projecting it onto their predetermined theological grid. I would also call for serious review of food- and law-related

passages in the New Testament in the light of work done by modern scholars<sup>23</sup> who challenge the notion that the Mosaic Law is abrogated for Jews, particularly those in the New Covenant. Their work deserves a hearing in mainstream Christian theology, particularly since they have responded thoroughly and respectfully to this aspect of traditional Christian theology.

Many Christians are troubled by the suggestion that certain aspects of the Law are still binding on Jews, especially Jews who believe in Jesus. Paul wrote that 'Christ *is the* end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes' (Rom 10:4), yet, he also argued that our faith upholds the law (Rom 3:28). In my estimation, the church's traditional explanation of the apparent contradictions so common in Paul (both his life as recorded in Acts, and his writings) and the Torah-faithfulness of the other apostles is inadequate. It is based largely on an antinomian reading of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Rudolph (2011) attacks the use of 1 Corinthians 9:19-24 to explain Paul as a so-called 'chameleon' evangelist who only pretended to be Jewish when evangelising Jews. Plausible alternative interpretations of Paul's understanding and application of the Law *are* found in the literature, sometimes referred to as the 'radical new perspective on Paul', conveniently summarized in Zetterholm (2009). I would call upon troubled readers to seriously examine these alternatives without pre-commitment to a particular faith tradition.

The Holocaust triggered a marked change in Christian theology, particularly Replacement Theology, and initiated a renewal of the Jewish mission, which has been particularly fruitful over the past four

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<sup>23</sup> To name a few: Mark Kinzer, Joseph Shulam, Hilary Le Cornu, David Rudolph, Mark Nanos, Peter Tomson, Michael Wyschogrod, Jacob Jervell, Daniel Thomas Lancaster, Derek Leman, Markus Bockmuehl, Daniel Juster, and David Stern.



decades (Harvey 2009:2). The hermeneutic of ethical accountability (Kinzer 2005) and test of love (Cosgrove 1997) should be applied by the church to its doctrines pertaining to Israel and the Law. I submit that this would engender a restoration of Jewish-Christian relations in which the church not only abandons the triumphalist attitude that emerged in the time of Constantine, but also adopts the humble attitude of indebtedness and gratitude to the Jewish people that Paul promoted (Rom 9:1–5; 11:17–18; 15:25–27). To some extent, this has already begun, but there are deeper dimensions to explore, including the nature and composition of the *ekklesia* (e.g. Kinzer 2005). Further to this, I would call on Christian theologians to review the doctrines which they have inherited from tradition after serious study of first-century *halakha*; the lack of understanding of *halakha* played a very significant role in the church's (mis-)interpretation of what was 'unlawful' about Peter's visit to Cornelius (Acts 10:28), resulting in an uncritical reinforcement of the very texts used to sustain this misinterpretation.

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