

Paul's Teaching on Unclean Food in Romans 14:14

In the fourteenth chapter of Romans, Paul focuses on food as a context that was apparently causing disputes among the believing community of Rome, that consisted of both Jews and Gentiles. In verse 14, he addresses a particular issue that is often misunderstood by modern readers. The verse reads in the NASB:

“I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”

The way this verse is worded in English has led some people to conclude that God's establishment of clean and unclean animals in the Torah has been annulled. That conclusion is in error for a number of reasons, beginning with Yeshua's declaration in Matthew 5:17 that He “did not come to abolish the Law.” And it is a conclusion based on the use of a word that is very misleading. So, what is the text actually saying?

Paul uses the Greek word *koinos*, which is translated as “unclean,” but literally means “common.” In fact, this verse is the only place in the writings of Paul that *koinos* is translated as “unclean.” *Koinos* is the root of the noun, *koinonia*, which is typically translated as “fellowship” and refers to having experiences in common with other people.

When the Septuagint was written about two centuries before Yeshua, *koinos* was exclusively used to translate into Greek a variety of Hebrew terms that express commonness or unity, but never in reference to things that are ritually unclean, in the manner that it is expressed in Romans 14:14.

The Hebrew word for “unclean” טָמֵא (*tamei*). In the Septuagint, that word is translated as *akathartos*, which bears the literal meaning of uncleanness. So, if Paul was saying that there are no longer any unclean or non-kosher animals, he would have needed to use *akathartos* instead of *koinos* in verse 14. Why, then, do English translations render *koinos* as “unclean” here?

During the late second temple period, after the writing of the Septuagint, the oral tradition, or the tradition of the elders as it is called in the New Testament, was formulated in Judaism. It was marked by an expansion of the Law of Moses into many more requirements and prohibitions that were considered equally binding to the written commandments. That included the handling of food, as Mark 7:5 makes very clear.

It was determined that any item that is biblically clean, including kosher animals, but has become profaned or ritually contaminated through outside contact, it would become unclean. For example, a clean animal would become unclean if it was processed by Gentiles, or associated with pagan idol worship, or eaten with unwashed hands, as we also see in Mark 7:5 when the Pharisees confronted Yeshua.

In other words, in the Judaism of the days of Yeshua and Paul,¹ there were two ways that meat could be considered as unclean:

- Forbidden animals according to God's instructions in the Torah (Lev. 11), expressed in the New Testament as *akathartos*.
- Permitted animals, according to the Torah that had become defiled by the way that they were handled, expressed as *koinos*.

¹ The timing of this semantic shift from “common” to “unclean” can be narrowed to the period between the conclusion of the translation of the Torah portion of the Septuagint, circa 250 B.C., and the writing of the apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees around the year 100 B.C. (cf. 1 Mac 1:47,62).

We see that distinction in Peter's words in Acts 11:8, when he describes his reaction to the vision he had received in Acts 10, by saying: "But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy (KJV – common) [*koinos*] or unclean [*akathartos*] has ever entered my mouth.'" Clearly, Peter acknowledged that there were two distinct issues when it came to ritual purity of food.

Understanding this distinction enables us to see exactly what Paul is communicating in Romans 14:14, but is not readily apparent in the English. By using *koinos*, Paul is not talking about unclean or prohibited animals (*akathartos*) that he is now declaring to be clean. This is about things that are biblically "clean," but have become ritually "common" (*koinos*) through human contact or practice. That, then, relates to the handling of food, such as whether it had been slaughtered by a Gentile or offered to idols.

Apparently, by employing the term "unclean," the English translators wanted to express the sense of defilement that had been promoted by the Pharisees and had become standardized across all communities where Jews now dwelled, including Rome. But the problem with that approach is that it conflates two distinct concepts, and it leaves the false impression among those who are unfamiliar with these things, that Paul suddenly and uncontextually declared that pigs and shellfish and other prohibited animals in the Torah are now ritually clean for all to eat. That misunderstanding has influenced much of Christian commentary, with this verse being used as a cornerstone proof-text to argue that the Old Testament dietary laws have been entirely annulled.²

Paul's point is not about the abolishment of dietary laws, but about applying the same principle of tolerance in disputes over the handling of food. So, if the same meat was considered to have become unclean by someone because of the way it was handled, but another person didn't care about the handling, both conclusions were to be respected.

² A case in point is John Calvin, who argued that Paul is not offering a personal opinion, but is invoking the supreme authority initially granted to Jesus. In his way of thinking, Paul is confirming that Jesus legally revoked the Levitical dietary restrictions, and that this reality was progressively revealed to the early Church.

Calvin, however, did not address the linguistic distinction between *koinos* and *akathartos* and he never interacted with second temple literature like 1 Maccabees to separate "common" from "unclean." Writing in his Commentary on Romans in the 16th century, Calvin operated entirely within the standard text-critical consensus of the Reformation era, viewing the two words as virtually synonymous. So, instead of using *koinos* to limit Paul's argument to Roman marketplace practices, Calvin uses it as a broad brush to argue that the entire Mosaic system of animal categorization has been abolished.

Motivations here are an important consideration. Calvin and his contemporary Reformers were focused on a different battle: combating the Catholic Church's enforcement of dietary fasts and Lent. Consequently, Calvin viewed Romans 14 as a blanket declaration of Christian liberty over all food regulations—whether Mosaic or Papal—and saw no reason to parse the Greek vocabulary any further.