

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 1/31/21

We have been looking at the kosher laws in Torah and I have argued that they have something important to teach us, that they are part of a larger concern in Torah about the relationship between humans and the rest of creation, both with animals and with the earth itself. Humans were given authority over the earth but also responsibility for its cultivation and care. Christians have largely ignored this theme in Torah because we have seen the kosher laws as part of the oppressive Jewish legalism that has nothing to do with us. I want now to look at how that misunderstanding of the kosher laws in the OT has led to a misreading of the New Testament as well.

2. In the New Testament

In a previous course, I argued that our anti-Jewish tradition has understood several New Testament passages as overturning or cancelling the kosher laws when in fact they do no such thing. In specific, I pointed to a questionable interpretation of Mark 7:19 found in most translations that sees Jesus as doing just that. I argued against this interpretation on several grounds, and I want to review those arguments.

First, in the discussion in Mark 7:1-23, the real issue of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees in this passage is not what foods you eat but eating those foods with ritually unwashed hands (vv. 3-5), as the parallel passage in Matthew makes clear (Matt. 15:20). Washing your hands here has nothing to do with personal hygiene. It indicates being in a state of ritual purity. There is no commandment in Torah to wash your hands before a meal. Priests are instructed to wash their hands (and feet) before ministering at the altar (Exodus 30:17-21; AME ministers still do this before communion). The Pharisees, who were a lay movement within Judaism, wanted all Jews to adopt this practice as a sign that they were “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). In fact this was a radically egalitarian idea that sought to blur the distinction we have seen between the different levels of holiness ascribed to priests and to ordinary Israelites. The Pharisees’ hand washing was part of the “traditions of the elders” (Mark 7:5), not the Law of Moses, which wanted to extend the holiness of the Temple into people’s daily lives, into their very homes. The hearth was to be an altar and daily food an offering to God. Washing your hands before eating like the priests was a sign of this. Not a bad idea, just not one practiced by Jesus and his disciples, or by most Jews at that time.

So the dispute in this passage has nothing to do with the kosher laws. If Jesus and his disciples were actually ignoring the kosher laws, the Pharisees would have done more than complain about them not washing their hands before eating their ham sandwiches. Throughout this whole passage, both the Pharisees and Jesus are talking about the same food, the kosher food that they all eat (the Pharisees literally say “bread” in v. 5). Jesus says that eating kosher food with unwashed, ritually unpurified hands does not make a person common, that is, not holy. But typically for Jesus he takes the discussion in a

different direction. Speaking with the voice of a Hebrew prophet, Jesus calls his audience to focus on the weightier matters of the Law that are the heart of what it means to be a holy people.

Second, to get the anti-Jewish interpretation, translators have had to add words to the text in v. 19 that aren't there and then punctuate it such a way that the dependent participial clause becomes an independent parenthetical aside. So compare a more literal translation like the King James Version with a modern one like the NIV:

“Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught [sewer], purging all meats [food].” (KJV)

“For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body. (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)” (NIV)

The literal reading seems a bit odd, suggesting that the digestive process itself somehow purifies the food. Or perhaps, more to the point, in bypassing the heart, food eaten with unsanctified hands does not affect a person's holiness. But even if Jesus is to be understood here as in fact declaring all foods ritually clean (in Mark, but not Matthew), in context he is talking about kosher food, the kind of food he and the disciples and the Pharisees are eating. As I have said, that interpretation makes little sense in the context of this passage.

Third, the traditional interpretation of this verse ignores the fundamental fact that nowhere in the rest of the NT is there any indication that Jesus taught his disciples that the kosher laws were no longer in effect. If he had done so, Peter would not have reacted so strongly to the angelic vision in Acts 10:14— “I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” Peter has continued to keep kosher long after the resurrection. That vision itself is often interpreted as meaning that God has overturned the kosher laws. But Peter doesn't understand it that way. It takes him a few tries but he comes to understand that what God is showing him in the vision has to do with people, not food. “God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

There is a fascinating parallel between this story and the story of Jonah. Peter, you remember, is called Simon bar Jonah, son of Jonah, in Matthew 16:17. This may not refer to his father's actual name (which the gospel of John records as “John”) but to a personal characteristic. Simon is Jonah-like, a connection underscored by the fact that he is staying in the city of Joppa. Indeed, Peter's reluctance to visit the gentile Cornelius who lives in the very gentile city of Caesarea evokes Jonah's reluctance to visit the gentile city of Nineveh. Jonah runs away; Peter invents an excuse. “It is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile” (Acts 10:28). There is no such law in Torah. You cannot take Peter's statement in the first part of this verse as factual. He either made it up or is living under a false understanding of the Law, which is hard to imagine since Jesus himself associated with Gentiles and shows no hesitation about going to a Roman centurion's house when invited (Matt. 8:5-7; Mark 7:25-29; Luke 7:1-9).

We see in the gospels as well as in non-biblical sources from the time that Jews and Gentiles had regular dealings with each other. The book of Ruth is about a Gentile woman who marries an Israelite and becomes an ancestor to David. In the NT, Timothy's mother was a Jew married to a Gentile (Acts 16:1). Gentiles were welcomed in the synagogues and a Roman centurion even built a synagogue for the Jews (Luke 7:5). The Jerusalem Temple had a large courtyard area specifically for Gentiles. Paul engages in discussion with Gentiles in the Athens marketplace (Acts 17:17ff.). Peter, like Jonah, has to learn a lesson about God's love and grace and forgiveness extended even to Gentiles. This is not a new teaching in the New Testament. It is one that, as we have seen, is there even in Torah, and certainly appears in many other places in the OT.

So Peter's revelation is about human relationships, not the kosher laws. We see as late as the book of Revelation that Christians continue to view some animals as unclean (Rev. 18:2). Again it is only the anti-Judaism of our tradition that has taught us to read the NT differently, and only later in a largely Gentile church with its growing hostility to Judaism could these passages be understood as abolishing the Law of Moses.

Ironically enough, then, in interpreting the passage in Mark 7 where Jesus strongly rejects human traditions that have been unloving to others, Christians have imposed their own unloving human tradition. And a passage in which Jesus strongly condemns the Pharisees for setting aside God's commandments has been used to show that Jesus did just that!

The early church continued to wrestle with the obligations Gentile believers had towards the Law of Moses precisely because they had no clear teaching from Jesus on that issue. One early decision by a council of church leaders in Jerusalem did not impose all of the kosher laws on Gentile Christians, but did insist that they observe the blood prohibition as well as the related Jewish practice of kosher slaughtering (Acts 15:20, 29). We have seen that this was a universal law, not one given specifically to Israel. Again, if Jesus had overturned the kosher laws, this debate would not have been necessary.

Finally, some people point to Paul's discussion of conflicting dietary practices in the church (Romans 14; 1 Cor. 10:23 ff.; Col 2:16 ff.). None of these passages has anything to do specifically with the kosher laws. All of them are written to Gentiles, who as we have seen, are probably not bound by those laws. But Paul here is addressing other issues. Romans 14 clearly has to do with eating meat in general versus vegetarianism (v. 2). 1 Cor. 10 has to do with an issue not clearly addressed in Torah: eating meat that had first been offered to idols in pagan temples. (This may be part of the issue in Romans as well.) In Greco-Roman cities, that was the main source of meat in the markets, and Christians rightly had reservations about it, since Torah so clearly warns against anything connected with idolatry, and in Acts 15 the council commands Gentile Christians to keep away from "the pollution of idols." In Colossians, Paul is speaking in very vague, general terms about those who are restricting their diets based on "human commandments and teachings" (v. 22), a phrase which as we have seen makes no sense if applied to the laws in Torah. Even Paul is not that much of a Protestant! Paul may not think that Gentiles are required to keep

the whole Law but he still holds the Law in high respect as God's word. And as a Jew trained by rabbis he has no problem with imposing rules restricting what a Christian can eat.

Paul's strong language in these passages about not judging others for what they eat, and not offending others by what you eat, cuts both ways. If the freedom not to keep a kosher diet must be respected, it must also not be insisted upon, and a fellow Christian's freedom to keep kosher must be respected as well. Nothing in the New Testament suggests that it is wrong to keep kosher or that the Mosaic Law has been overturned.