

Did Jesus Declare All Foods Clean? A Hebraic Perspective on Mark 7:19

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This is the first part in a two-part series on food in the New Testament. The second part, which addresses Peter's vision in Acts chapter 10, can be found [HERE](#). This article was first published June 18, 2013, and last updated Feb. 16, 2014. For permission to reprint, see below.

Introduction



The context of Mark 7 is dealing with bread (a clean food) being eaten with unwashed (common hands).

The topic of whether Christians should follow God's instructions regarding food is a sensitive topic for many people. To be clear, in discussing what God does or does not permit us to eat, this article is not talking about eternal salvation. Eternal salvation was purchased on our behalf by the blood of [Yeshua ha'Mashiach \[1\]](#) (Jesus Christ), and we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in His finished work on the cross. This is the glorious truth of the Gospel that Christianity has preached for centuries, and it is as true today as it was over 2000 years ago when Yeshua walked with his disciples. So rather than justification before God, this article addresses *sanctification* – a theological term which, according to [Easton's Bible Dictionary](#), is defined as follows:

***Sanctification** involves more than a mere moral reformation of character, brought about by the power of the truth: it is the work of the Holy Spirit bringing the whole nature more and more under the influences of the new gracious principles implanted in the soul in regeneration. In other words, sanctification is the carrying on to perfection the work begun in regeneration, and it extends to the whole man ([Rom. 6:13](#) ; [2 co 4:6](#) ; [Col. 3:10](#) ; [1 John 4:7](#) ; [1 Cor. 6:19](#)). It is the special office of the Holy Spirit in the plan of redemption to carry on this work ([1 Cor. 6:11](#) ; [2 th. 2:13](#)). Faith is instrumental in securing sanctification, inasmuch as it (1) secures union to Christ ([Gal. 2:20](#)), and (2) brings the believer into living contact with the truth, whereby he is led to yield obedience "to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come."^[2]*

Thus, this article is simply addressing that function of faith in which we are "led to yield obedience to the

commands...of God.”

Now, while most Christians seek to live their lives in accordance with the teachings of the Bible, it is no secret that the Bible says a great deal about food. It should be noted from the outset that the majority of Christians would never consider eating a great number of creatures that God labeled as “unclean” and “detestable” in the Bible. For example, many Christians would not dream of eating vultures, rats, poisonous frogs, cats, dogs, snakes, lizards, etc. And yet, there are a select few animals that Christianity historically has had little problem with, but which God says were to be “detestable” to his people: creatures like pigs, shrimp, lobsters, etc.[3]



To be fair, many believers do earnestly seek God’s counsel on this subject. And when they do, many flip open their Bibles to the “difficult” passages on food in the New Testament[4] – like [Peter’s vision in Acts 10](#) or [Mark 7:18-19](#) [L], which in some English translations reads:

18 Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? 19 For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Yeshua declared all foods clean.) [NIV]

For many believers this settles the issue. Apparently, in one verse, Yeshua – the perfect, spotless Lamb of God – abrogates his Father’s instructions regarding food found in [Leviticus 11](#), and [Deuteronomy 14:1-21](#) [L], and seems to even contradict his own words, as recorded in [John 6:38](#) [L] and [Matthew 5:17-19](#) [L]. But does this interpretation of [Mark 7:18-19](#) [L] make sense within the context of Mark chapter 7 as a whole? Is this even a proper translation of the original Greek text? And importantly, can this interpretation be reconciled with the Tanakh[5], which points towards a Messiah who would not go against even the least of his Father’s commands?[6]

To bring some clarification to these questions then, I would like to put forward three reasons why Yeshua did not – indeed *could not* – abrogate God’s instructions regarding food in [Mark 7:19](#) [L] :

Reason #1: Interpreting [Mark 7:19](#) [L] to mean that Yeshua abrogated the food laws would disqualify Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel.

Reason #2: Mark 7 deals with what makes a person *common*, a distinction that finds its origins in manmade tradition, and is not based on the Law of God.

Reason #3: A better translation of [Mark 7:19](#) [L] shows that Yeshua was not abrogating the food laws.

Reason #1: Interpreting Mark 7:19 to mean that Yeshua abrogated the food laws would disqualify Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel

Before delving into Mark 7, it is important to highlight an oft forgotten hermeneutic principle that is established very early in the Bible – a principle with which Yeshua and his disciples would have been very familiar. Specifically, in order to approach the New Testament and attempt to understand what Yeshua would or would not do, it is important to understand the qualifications for a true prophet of God from the Hebrew Scriptures, and thus

the qualifications for the Messiah of Israel.

That Yeshua was a prophet of God is a fact well attested to in both the Hebrew and Apostolic Scriptures, as well as Christian theology itself.^[7] For the purposes of this article, we are going to focus on the qualification of a prophet of God found in Deuteronomy 13, in which God says to the children of Israel:

*1 "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other Gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 **You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk.***

Note in the above passage that one of the marks of a false prophet is that he/she would teach God's people to depart from the way in which God commanded them to walk (verse 5); that is, to go against God's teachings/instructions/laws. From this we can understand that any prophet that teaches God's people to go against God's instructions/commandments is a false prophet, by definition. And this is a rule – a test, if you will – that we must apply to the teachings of Yeshua, in order to determine whether he is a true prophet/spokesperson of God, and thus qualified to be the Messiah of Israel. Because based on Deuteronomy 13, if Yeshua taught his disciples to go against God's instructions, this would nullify/disqualify Him as being the Messiah of Israel.

So did Yeshua teach God's people to go against God's instructions? There are many passages we could look at in the New Testament to examine this question. One of the best passages, though, is found in [Matthew 5:17-19](#) ^[L], because these verses are some of the clearest statements of Yeshua's stated relationship between Himself and the Law of God:

*17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly, I say to you, **until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.** 19 Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

From this, we may conclude that if Yeshua was relaxing one of his Father's commandments in [Mark 7:19](#) ^[L], he would not only be contradicting himself ([Matt. 5:17-19](#) ^[L]), but he would also be contradicting his Father's own instructions (cf. [Lev. 11](#) ^[L], [Deut. 14:1-21](#) ^[L]), thereby making himself a false prophet, and thus nullifying his qualifications as Messiah of Israel.

This is strong evidence, therefore, that Yeshua was not nullifying/canceling God's commandments regarding food in [Mark 7:19](#) ^[L]. The above is also a warning to those who would rush to the conclusion that Yeshua broke, or taught others to break, God's commandments during his ministry. The credibility and trustworthiness of the New Testament itself hinges on how we answer this question.

Reason #2: Mark 7 deals with what makes a person *common*, a distinction that finds its origins in manmade tradition, and is not found in the Law of God

A mistake people often make when looking at the topic of food in the New Testament, is that they jump straight to [Mark 7:19](#) without first attempting to understand the context preceding this verse. [Mark 7:19](#) is actually part of a larger teaching that begins in [Mark 7:1](#) and continues all the way to [Mark 7:23](#). Mark 7 begins:

*1 Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, 2 they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were **common [κοινός / koinos]**, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, 4 and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) 5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with **common [κοινὰς / koinais]** hands?” [[Mark 7:1-5](#)]*

In these first five verses we see that the Pharisees took issue with Yeshua’s disciples because they ate bread (a clean food) with “common” hands – a manmade tradition of the elders that went far beyond what the Law of God required. The Pharisees believed that hands, bowls, plates, utensils, and even dining couches, could become “common” through ordinary use, and thus had to be washed (presumably because it could make a person “common” if he/she ate with them, cf. [Acts 10:28](#)). Thus, we can think of “commonness” as a tertiary or higher level of defilement that went beyond what God had instructed in the Law. So in effect, the pharisees were blurring the line between that which God commands, and that which is commanded by men – thus elevating their traditions to the status of God-given commandments, and using those traditions as a basis upon which to judge Yeshua’s disciples.[8]

Some Bible translations will translate the Greek word *koinais* as “unclean” or “defiled,” but these are misleading translations of the Greek. The noun form of this word, *κοινή (koinē)*, is the same word used in the phrase “[Koine Greek](#)” (*Common Greek*) – thus the most literal English translation of *koinais* would be “common.”

Importantly, the Greek word *koinais* (*common*) does not connote the same thing as the Greek word for “unclean,” and misunderstanding these two terms has caused a great deal of confusion amongst interpreters of this verse. There is a completely different Greek word used in both the New Testament as well as the Septuagint (the first-century Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) to refer to “uncleanness” and “defilement,”[9] but Yeshua does not use this word anywhere in Mark 7, nor in its synoptic parallel Matthew 15.[10] In the Septuagint, the word for “unclean” is always *ἀκαθάρσια (akatharsia / unclean)*, not *κοινὰς (koinais / common)*.

Continuing in Mark 7, Yeshua leaves little doubt that the “commonness” he is referring to is a manmade concept in his subsequent rebuke:

6 “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” 9 And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” [[Mark 7:6-9](#)]

The Pharisees, by putting manmade traditions on par with the word of God, were sinning according to the scriptures (see [Deut. 4:2](#), [12:32](#)). Just imagine for a second how hypocritical it would be for Yeshua to then turn around and nullify God’s commandments regarding clean/unclean animals, *in the very same chapter* where he condemns the hypocrisy of the Pharisees for nullifying God’s commandments.

It’s important to point out here that after His rebuke, the narrative does not shift to a new topic or teaching. Rather, Yeshua *continues* his teaching on what makes a person “common” in the following verses saying:

14 And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand:
15 There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can **make him common** [κοινῶσαι / *koinōsai*], but the things that come out of a person are what **make him common**. [κοινοῦντα / *koinounta*]” [Mark 7:14-15]

Note that the same Greek word that was used in Mark 7:2 and 7:5 (*koinos* / common) is also used in Mark 7:14-15 (*koinōsai* / *koinounta* / to make common). This makes sense because Yeshua is simply continuing the teaching that he had already begun in verses 1-13. This is critical to understand because in verses 1-13 he is dealing with this concept of “commonness,” which was a tradition of the Pharisees, and in verses 14-23 he is dealing with this exact same concept – essentially explaining to the people what *really* makes a person common.

Most Bible translations do not read this way. Many translations will either insert “defiled” or “unclean” for the bolded terms above. Nevertheless, as mentioned regarding Mark 7:2 and 7:5, these words are poor translations of the Greek word *koinos/koinoo*, which is closest to our English word “common.”

So in verses 14-15 Yeshua directly contradicts this particular tradition of the Pharisees, saying that there is *nothing* outside of a person that can go into him and make him common – after all, “commonness” is *not* the same thing as unclean, because it is based in human tradition. And Yeshua does not stop here: he actually uses this category of “commonness” in order to make his own ruling on this matter, stating that it is not what goes *into* a person that makes him common, but what comes *out* of a person that makes him common:

21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they are what **make a person common**. “[11]

Here is the main point of Yeshua’s teaching: an evil heart brings forth evil: evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting, wickedness, deceit, etc. *These* are the things that ultimately make a person common – not eating bread (a clean food) with unwashed hands.

Reason #3: A better translation of Mark 7:19 shows that Yeshua was not abrogating the food laws


As mentioned in the introduction, many modern Bible translations render Mark 7:18-19 as follows:

18 Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can **defile them** [κοινῶσαι / **make him common**]? 19 For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Yeshua declared all foods clean.) [NIV]

Note that Yeshua’s focus here is still on what makes a person *common* [κοινῶσαι], and not what makes a person unclean. Remember, the subject of Mark 7 is bread – a clean food that had become “common” in the eyes of certain Pharisees. But if this is the case, then how does Yeshua arrive at the conclusion that all foods are now clean (verse 19)?


The short answer is: he doesn’t. Unfortunately, many modern translations insert a parenthetical into verse 19: “(Thus he declared all foods clean)”[12] – but, as Bible scholar J.K. McKee points out in his commentary on this verse:[13]

“Thus He declared” is an addition by Bible translators that is not in the Greek text. On the contrary, the text speaks of a person’s bodily elimination of food by excretion. This is confirmed by

the parallel passage in [Matthew 15:17](#) : “Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated?”

A literal word-for-word breakdown of the Greek text with no words omitted shows that the phrase “thus he declared” is in fact absent from verse 19:[\[14\]](#)


Strong's	Greek	English
3754	□ΤΙ	because
3756	ο□Κ	not
1531	ε□ΣΠΟΡΕΥΕΤΑΙ	enter
846	α□ΤΟ□	him
1519	ε□Σ	into
3588	Τ□Ν	the
2588	καρδίαν	heart,
235	□ΛΛ'	but
1519	ε□Σ	into
3588	Τ□Ν	the
2836	Κοιλίαν	belly,
2532	κα□	and
1519	ε□Σ	into
3588	Τ□Ν	the
856	□φεδρ□να	latrine
1607	□κπορεύεται	goes out
2511	καθαρίζων	purging
3956	Πάντα	all
3588	Τ□	the
1033	βρώματα	food


So a more literal translation of [Mark 7:18-19](#)  might read:



18 And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot make him common **19** since it enters not his heart but his belly, and goes into the latrine, purging all foods?[\[15\]](#)

By now the meaning of these verses should be very clear. Contrary to the tradition of the Pharisees, Yeshua teaches his disciples that the dirt on their hands (or plates, utensils, etc.) could not make them common because their stomach eliminates the impurities, and they are purged as waste.



Summary and Conclusion





We have seen that in [Mark 7:1-13](#) , Yeshua's disciples are reprimanded by the Pharisees for eating with *common* hands, and thus were not abiding by the "traditions of the elders." We also noted that commonness is *not* the same thing as uncleanness, because the notion of commonness originated in manmade tradition, while uncleanness originates in God's law. Thus, the English word "defiled" is a misleading substitution for the Greek word "common" (*koinos*) which is used throughout this passage. We also noted that Mark 7 is about this concept of *commonness* from beginning (verse 1) to end (verse 23) – the entire passage is Yeshua's teaching regarding manmade traditions of his day, and thus not an abrogation of God's law.


Yeshua then rebukes the Pharisees for teaching as doctrines the commandments of men, and in [Mark 7:14-23](#)  Yeshua goes on to instruct His followers what *really* makes a person common – not that which goes into the mouth, but rather, that which comes out of the heart: sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. As Yeshua states: these are the things come from within a person, and they are what make a person common (verse 23).

The conclusion for Christianity is that [Mark 7:19](#)  has been mistranslated and misunderstood: Yeshua was not abrogating God's instructions regarding food because to do so would have been to go against His Father's instructions – thus disqualifying Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel. This is why the interpretation laid out above is actually *good news* for all who believe in Yeshua, as it upholds the fact that he was indeed the spotless lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world ([John 1:29](#) ).

For those who might be leaning towards agreeing with the analysis above, but have questions about other passages in the New Testament dealing with food, my article on [Peter's vision \(Acts 10\)](#) lays out a better understanding of this oft misunderstood chapter that does not contradict previous revelation.

The conclusion for those in the Messianic/Jewish/Hebrew-Roots movement (i.e. those who understand and affirm [Matthew 5:17-19](#) , and that God's instructions regarding food are still for today), is that [Mark 7:19](#)  is not in fact evidence that Yeshua abrogated any of God's instructions regarding food. Rather, based on the authority that he asserts over the parties of the Pharisees and Sadducees that approach him (verse 1), Mark chapter 7 is actually evidence *in favor* of Yeshua being the Messiah and King of Israel.

Mark 7 also represents a strong cautionary warning against uncritically accepting manmade traditions from religious groups – be they Jewish or Christian traditions. Traditions can be good when they build, strengthen, and encourage God's people to live holy (set-apart lives). The Bible itself speaks of God's people engaging in many traditions not found in the Torah, like Hanukkah ([John 10:22](#) ), Purim ([Esther 9:31](#) ), the Fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months ([Zech. 8:19](#) , etc.). etc. Make no mistake: traditions are not bad in and of themselves. But Yeshua's warning in [Mark 7:7-9](#)  should also ring true:

7 In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." 9 And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!" [[Mark 7:7-9](#) ]

Let us be watchful then that we are not letting our traditions crowd out the keeping of God's commandments. Let us also be careful that we not let the pendulum swing too far in the other direction, and cut ourselves off from the joy and blessings that can be found in many traditions that have been handed down, and that are currently being developed.

Errors or omissions: If you find any errors or omissions in the above article, please send me an email at rjroy613@gmail.com. I will do my best to correct any errors that are brought to my attention.
















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References

- [1] Though there's nothing wrong with the name "Jesus" (a transliteration of the Greek Ἰησοῦς) my preference is to use Jesus' Hebrew name "Yeshua," or "Yehoshua," for two main reasons. First, in Hebrew/Aramaic, these words literally mean "to rescue" or "to deliver" or "to save," and secondly, because these titles emphasize Yeshua's Hebraic/Jewish background and identity.
- [2] Easton, Matthew George. "Entry for Sanctification." *Easton's Bible Dictionary*. Accessed online May 14, 2013: www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/eastons-bible-dictionary/sanctification.html
- [3] Lev. 11:1-47 , 20:25-26 , Deut. 14:1-21 , etc.
- [4] Though I generally prefer not to use the "Old" vs. "New Testament" designations (which color the Hebrew Bible in a pejorative light), and prefer instead to use the designation "Apostolic Scriptures" (or similar), since this article is for a general audience I have opted to use these designations as they are familiar to most readers.
- [5] I generally prefer to use the term *Tanakh* or "Hebrew Bible" rather than the pejorative "Old Testament." The word *Tanakh* is an acronym formed from the initial Hebrew letters of the Hebrew Bible's three traditional subdivisions: The **T**orah (God's Law), **N**evi'im (Prophets) and **K**etuvim (Writings)—hence **TaNaKh**.
- [6] Ex. [Isaiah 53:9](#) 
- [7] [Deuteronomy 18:15](#)  is quoted in [Acts 3:22-23](#) . Also note that the "Threefold Office" of Yeshua (His roles as prophet, priest, and king) is a concept well attested to in Christian theology.
- [8] We must be careful here, however, not to take this further than Yeshua takes it in this passage. Yeshua is clearly not saying that all traditions are bad. Heaven forbid! Traditions can enrich our lives and our walk with God. The Pharisees were in error, not because they had developed certain traditions, but because they elevated those traditions to an extent that blurred the line between that which God had given, and that which they had created.
- [9] The Greek word for "unclean" is *ἀκάθαρτος* (*akathartos*, adjective form) and *ἀκαθάρσια* (*akatharsia*, noun form), as can be seen throughout the Septuagint, where it is used to translate the Hebrew word for unclean ([אָמֵץ](#) / *tame*). The reason the Septuagint is helpful here is because even though Yeshua and His disciples would have been familiar with Hebrew, the *lingua franca* of the day was Greek – this would have been the language read in the Synagogues, and thus would have informed the vocabulary of those speaking and writing about biblical topics.
- [10] Yeshua does use the actual Greek word for unclean (*akathartos* / *akatharsia*) many times in the Gospel accounts ([Matt. 10:1](#) , [12:43](#) , [23:27](#) ; [Mark 1:23](#) , [1:26](#) , [1:27](#) , [3:11](#) , etc.), but never uses these in Mark 7 or Matthew 15.
- [11] I've taken as my base the ESV translation of the Bible, but changed the emphasized sections (where the Greek word *koinos* is used) in order to make them truer to the original Greek text.
- [12] See the NASB and ESV. The NIV inserts "(In saying this, Yeshua declared all foods clean.)"
- [13] J.K. McKee, "Frequently Asked Questions: [Mark 7:19](#) ," originally posted 13 November, 2006, and as of April 2013 could be downloaded here: http://tnnonline.net/faq/M/Mark_7_19.pdf
- [14] Messianic Bible scholar Tim Hegg has written a very helpful (albeit technical) article on [Mark 7:19](#)  titled

“[Mark 7:19b](#)  – A Short Technical Note” which as of April 2013 could be found here: <http://www.torahresource.com/EnglishArticles/Mark7.19ShortNote.pdf>. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this kind of detail, but any readers seeking a more in-depth look at the Greek grammar and textual variants of this verse are encouraged to read his article.

[15] Bibles that translate this verse more literally include the KJV, ISV, The Aramaic Bible in Plain English, et al.

[16] Vulture image by Frank Derks. Taken on August 22, 2006. Accessed on Jun. 20, 2013
<<http://www.flickr.com/photos/frankderks/4098297695/>>

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