

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 23, Chapter 10

Acts chapter 10 is one I have been looking forward to teaching for some time. It gets into an important subject that causes significant tension between Christians and Jews, and within Christianity and Messianic Judaism; it is the issue of whether the Torah food laws are still binding. Yet, on the other hand, today I will show you that while Acts 10 is used in mainstream Christianity to teach that the Levitical food laws have been abolished, in fact this is a red herring. That is, this chapter actually has nothing to do with kosher eating whatsoever. And the reason for this misconstruing of the meaning of this chapter is that Christian commentators (all gentile) usually don't have an inkling of what Judaism was about, nor what an important role **Halakhah** continued to play in the lives of New Testament Jews as it had for at least the 2 centuries leading up to the birth of Christ.

We've been discussing the term **Halakhah** for several weeks and I hope by now you all understand what **Halakhah** means and what **Halakhah** is: it is the overall body of Jewish laws that controlled every aspect of Jewish life and behavior. It consisted then, and continues to consist to this day of a fusion of 3 sources: the Torah of Moses, ancient Jewish customs, and most importantly it was dominated by rabbinic interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. Bible interpretations within the institutional Church go by the name of doctrines. But within Judaism they are known as Oral Torah or as Traditions.

Just as Christian doctrines form the subject and apology for virtually every sermon given in a Church each week, so does **Halakhah** form the subject and apology for everything that is taught and practiced within the Synagogue. And in the New Testament era nearly every Jew, whether living in the Holy Land or out in the Diaspora (except for Sadducees and the priesthood), was connected to the Synagogue system in the same way that nearly every Christian in modern times is connected (whether loosely or firmly) to the Church. I draw this Church and Synagogue parallel for the express purpose of creating a familiar mental image for you to give you a meaningful idea of how the Jews, Believers or otherwise, practiced their faith and formed their theology in the time of the Apostles.

While Acts chapter 9 was mostly about the making of the new Believer **Sha'ul** (Paul), about two-thirds of the way through the chapter we saw a transition to **Kefa** (Peter); Acts chapter 10 remains with Peter. When last we saw Peter he was staying in the home of **Shimon** a leather tanner, following two recorded miracles he performed. The first miracle involved a Believer named Aeneas who had been paralyzed for 8 years, and thus was a bedridden invalid; likely due to Stroke. The second involved a much beloved female Believer named **Tavita** who had caught ill and died suddenly. Let's be clear that what we have in the Book of Acts is Luke weaving together a history of the disciples of Christ following His resurrection. But the history is not exhaustive and it is not meant to record every act of every disciple; nor is it a daily journal of their lives. It is a Reader's Digest style summary using certain highlights that Luke chose to present an early history of Christian origins that particularly pointed out the powerful workings

of the Holy Spirit within the Believing Community. The point being that many more miracles would have occurred than the few that Luke speaks about; and Peter no doubt healed more people than what we find only in the Book of Acts. So Luke, being a scholar and an accomplished writer and story teller, and under the spiritual control of the Lord, has selected certain events for us to know about and there is a purpose behind them.

Therefore it should not go unnoticed that of the two miracles recorded in Acts chapter 9, one was a male, the other a female. And as big a miracle as it was for the Lord to restore movement for the paralyzed man, I think we can all agree that it is (at least from the human standpoint) an even more startling miracle to bring a dead woman back to life! And in a culture and era of male domination, God has made it a point in the Bible since the Book of Genesis to show us that he values men and women equally, even if He assigns different roles to each.

It is also interesting that in both miracles the action took place with the subjects lying in their beds. In fact we noticed that earlier prophets who brought the dead back to life used a similar pattern whereby the subject was laid on their bed. And in both cases in Acts 9 the healer insisted that the room was emptied of bystanders. This was not to be a spectacular public display that put the focus on the human agent of healing; this was to be a quiet private moment that rightfully gave the true Heavenly healer the glory.

These 2 miracles took place in Yafo, also known as Joppa, and Peter was still there as Acts chapter 10 opens.

Let's read Acts chapter 10 together.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 10 all

Peter has been reacting to God's direction by travelling around the countryside of Judea and apparently by plan arrived in Lud. But unexpectedly he had been called from Lud to Yafo. Now, equally unexpectedly, he is about to be called from Yafo to Caesarea Maritima, in earlier times known as Strato's Tower.

Here we witness a sea change occur in the history of the Bible, and in the history of redemption, as gentiles are suddenly no longer only pictured as the antithesis and opponents of the Hebrews, but suddenly gentiles are the targets of God's mercy. He wants them fully included in His Kingdom that will be ruled by a Jewish Messiah and King, Yeshua. Although in chapter 8 we saw the disciple Philip bring Christ to the Ethiopian gentile, here we have a most unlikely candidate who has opened his heart to the God of Israel; Cornelius a Roman army officer. What is so fascinating is that a Roman soldier was emblematic of the oppression the Jews were suffering under. It was Roman soldiers that the Roman government counted on to bring the Roman ways to the many foreign nations that formed the Roman Empire. Thus every Roman controlled nation had garrisons of Roman soldiers stationed there, especially if there was resistance to Roman occupation (as there was by the Jews). So if you were a Jew hearing about what Peter did in going to Cornelius you would have been even more astounded and angrier than when these same Jews learned of the Believers' outreach to those filthy half-breed Samaritans.

Can you imagine what the other Jews would think if a Jew in the Nazi death camps went to a Nazi guard, showing him kindness and sharing with him that righteousness could be his, and he could become part of the community of God, if he trusted the God of the Jews? That is a reasonable analogy of what is happening here with Peter and Cornelius and why it was controversial.

Cornelius was a Centurion; a commander of a hundred. Centurions were the glue that held the Roman military together. Six of these units of a hundred formed what was called a cohort. And 10 cohorts typically formed a legion of 6000 fighting men. Luke in fact tells us of the specific cohort that Cornelius belonged: the Italian Regiment. A Centurion usually received 10 times the pay of a common soldier. But even more Centurions had a seniority system so they weren't all of equal rank even though they held the same title. When we see here that Cornelius had a couple of slaves it meant that he was probably one of the more senior Centurions and so had more wealth.

It is logical that this military unit was stationed in Caesarea Maritima as it was the Roman center of government for ruling the province of Judea. At this time Caesarea was majority gentile Roman, although it had a sizeable Jewish population as well. Cornelius is given a glowing portrayal using 4 descriptive characteristics. First, he was devout. This means that he was faithful to God and he led his household in the same way. Second he feared God; this is an expression that most scholars today have turned into the familiar label "God-fearer" to indicate a gentile who followed the God of Israel. However there is no evidence that God-fearer was any kind of a formal or technical term or title in that era, or a named group that someone belonged to. It is just an informal description. Third he is described as a giver of alms; charity. Cornelius was a generous giver and charity was seen as one of the highest principles of Godliness by Judaism. That it is specifically stated that his alms were given to Jewish people endeared Cornelius to the local Jews. And fourth he is said to have prayed to God continually. That a person prays often was, especially in that era, an indication of great personal piety.

One of the things for us to notice here is that Cornelius was not hiding his devotion to the Jewish God. He was open because he was not in any danger for his beliefs. Rome was quite tolerant of all the religions in the empire, and Roman soldiers were permitted to adopt the local religion if they so chose. Naturally the element of Caesar worship had to be retained, and of course full loyalty to the Roman government was expected. But outside of that Roman soldiers could worship any gods they chose to including the Jewish God.

Verse 3 says it was the 9th hour, meaning 3 in the afternoon, that Cornelius had a vision. This was a standard Jewish prayer hour because this was a standard time for afternoon sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. The vision was of an angel who spoke to him. Cornelius is said to have stared at the angel and said, "What is it Lord"? Most Bibles will use the word Lord with a capital "L" here, which is reserved for a theophany; that is an appearance of God. Thus some claim that this is Yeshua speaking to Cornelius. I don't think that is correct, since this being is referred to as an angel. Thus I don't believe that the term lord was referring to God. Little "L" lord, used commonly, is just another way of saying "sir". It is sign of respect; not an indication that it is God. And that is what we have here. So the CJB has it right.

It is clear that this vision occurred while Cornelius was praying because the angel says that God has heard his prayers. The statement that “Your prayers and alms have **ascended** as a memorial before God” is telling, especially when we think back to Leviticus and we hear of the smoke of the burnt offerings wafting up to the heavens as a sweet aroma to Yehoveh. The thought behind what the angel told Cornelius is probably best expressed by a passage from the Book of Hebrews.

^{CJB} **Hebrews 13:15** *Through him(Christ), therefore, let us offer God a sacrifice of praise continually. For this is the natural product of lips that acknowledge his name.* So the concept is that while this gentile God-fearer Cornelius is not permitted to offer sacrifices of atonement at the Temple altar, his prayers and his deeds of kindness have ascended to the God of Israel much like the smoke of the burnt offerings. Even more it is a fulfillment of a profound statement that the great Prophet Samuel had made 1000 years earlier as regards the Lord's attitude about sacrifices.

^{CJB} **1 Samuel 15:22** *Sh'mu'el said, "Does ADONAI take as much pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying what ADONAI says? Surely obeying is better than sacrifice, and heeding orders than the fat of rams.*

While it might not be entirely accurate to portray Samuel's statement as prophetic, we certainly see with Cornelius, and in the angel's message to him, a fulfillment of the principle that the only purpose for sacrifice was to atone due to a human failure to be obedient to God in the first place. Obedience negates the need for a sacrifice. The Essenes at Qumran in their Dead Sea Scrolls Community Document said essentially the same thing:

1QS 9:4-5 *".....the offering of the lips in compliance with the (Law) will be like the pleasant aroma of justice; and the perfectness of behavior will be acceptable as a freewill sacrifice....."*

The Essenes were looking **through** the Law and seeing the **spirit** of the Law. They were forced to contemplate the sacrificial system deeply, at least in their eyes, because they considered the Temple and its Priesthood so corrupt and worthless (which indeed it was at this time) that they abandoned it and so believed something had to exist beyond the sheer mechanics of sacrificial ritual. Thus Cornelius's pious attitude of constant prayer and his action of generous charity to God's people was, in God's eyes, better than the animal sacrifices that he was prohibited from making because he was a gentile. So what is happening is that before the Apostle Peter gets the divine message that barriers between Hebrews and gentiles are falling, Cornelius is given the hint that a relationship with Yehoveh that had been reserved only for Hebrews is now being offered to gentiles. Peter would be the bearer of the Good News to Cornelius of the conditions that had to be met in order for that relationship to happen.

So in verse 5 the divine messenger to Cornelius told him to send some of his men to Yafo to fetch Peter. He orders two of his slaves and one of his military soldiers to go and ask Peter to come, and to safely escort him to Cornelius.

Peter now has a corresponding vision to Cornelius's; and it is very unsettling to Peter. And it

has been unsettling to much of the Church ever since this vision was written down and recorded for us. It was about noontime the next day when Peter goes up on the roof of Shimon the Tanner's house for his regular prayer time. Almost all houses in this era were built with flat roofs and they served as another floor of the house. Going up there gave Kefa some privacy. Now verse 10 is actually one of the most overlooked, but key, passages in this chapter. It says that while Peter was up there, he began to feel hungry. In fact we are told that he hoped to eat; and further, that downstairs a meal was being prepared. So where was Peter's mind when he went up to the roof to pray? It was on food! This is the natural context to the vision Peter is going to receive.

While he was on the roof, hungry, fixated on food, he goes into what the Greek says is *ekstasis*. It is where we get the English word ecstasy or ecstatic from. Most English Bibles translate the word to trance; that is, Peter went into a trance. Webster's Dictionary says a trance is a daze, or a stupor, or a hypnotic state. Probably this is an acceptable meaning provided we understand that this is a God-induced condition in which a person is transported beyond his normal physical state and consciousness to a place that he can perceive things that are of another dimension, but it seems to him as though he is perceiving them in the real world using his normal senses of sight, hearing, touch, etc. Peter sees Heaven open and descending from Heaven is something like a rectangular piece of fabric with 4 corners. It is important that we understand that what Peter says in his ecstatic state is greatly influenced by God. That is, Peter's words aren't necessarily his own; God is intervening in both sides of the dialogue. Peter is in a spiritual trance; he is not having a dream.

Peter's ecstatic vision is symbolic; but as Peter says, it was also a puzzlement to him. It wasn't at all straightforward in its meaning. The Heavens opening up is a Biblical expression that means to reveal God's glory from on high. That we are told that the cloth had 4 corners is also important. In Hebrew thought the number 4 is indicative of the world and its 4 compass directions. So the 4-cornered cloth represented something concerning the entire world and its inhabitants. Now it is common in Hebrew Roots and in Messianic Judaism to say that the 4 corner cloth that came down was a Tallit, a prayer shawl. Perhaps. But it would have been awfully easy to just say so if that was the case. Further, while today we tend to see prayer shawls as external garments that are used for religious purposes and then put away, in Peter's day it was worn as a sort of cloak between a man's underwear and his outer garment. That is, they were part of everyday dress. So where I'm going is that it seems terribly unlikely that it was visually a Tallit as we know them today that Peter saw; thus it is described as "something like" a large sheet or piece of cloth.

In this cloth were an assortment of 4 legged animals, crawling creatures and wild birds. All crawling creatures and almost all wild birds are not permissible for food. Some 4 legged animals are permitted, others are not. Beyond that brief description we know no more about what the animals were that were riding on that sheet. Peter is instructed to kill the animals and to eat them. Let me pause for a second: what is the context for Peter's vision? He was hungry, yearning for food, and in fact a meal was being prepared downstairs so he would have smelled the odor of the food being cooked as he prays upstairs. So is it surprising that this ecstatic vision involves eating? Hardly.

But Peter recoiled from the instruction to kill and eat because he says that he has never eaten food that was of this kind. And what was this kind? The passage says in Greek that it was **koinos** and **akathartos**. Our CJB says it means it was unclean and **treif**. **Treif** is Hebrew that literally means torn, in the sense of an animal that was torn to death by a wild beast. And such meat, even if it was a type of animal that was normally permissible for food, is not to be eaten according to the Law of Moses if it was attacked and killed by a wild beast. However the CJB translation is a poor one. **Koinos** means common, and **akathartos** means unclean. Common means something that is not holy. Unclean means something that is not ritually pure. Common and unclean are entirely separate issues and are treated differently by God's laws. However in reality what we see here is Peter making a response that likely is a combination of citing God's Torah law and citing Tradition; but also as we'll shortly see, there is a disconnect between the terms Peter uses and the kosher status of the animals offered as food. To begin with there is nothing in God's law against eating something common (in fact the term "common" is not used in reference to food; that is, "common" is not a food classification). Yet, we find that word used here in this conversation. On the other hand there is indeed a prohibition against eating something unclean. In a few verses (next week actually) when we see what the conversation between Yehoveh and Peter meant, if we understand both the Greek terms **koinos** and **akathartos** and we understand **Halakhah**, it becomes much clearer.

So let me say it another way: the issue facing Peter is primarily about **Halakhah**. But since **Halakhah** consists of the actual Torah of God, plus Traditions, plus customs then we have to untangle something that to Peter's mind was supposed to be tangled. That is Peter and Judaism made little practical differentiation between the Torah of Moses, Traditions and customs. They were seen as essentially one in the same. And to help us grasp that, I'll point out that Christianity generally sees the Holy Scriptures and Church doctrines as one in the same, even if Christians don't always consciously consider the effect of such an attitude.

Stay with me; this is important. The Torah of Moses shows us that all objects, including people, are in God's eyes in one of three states: holy, common, or unclean. Holy means set apart for God. Common means things that are not set-apart for God; but that doesn't in any way mean that common things are evil or wrong. It just means that these common things aren't given the special status of holy. Unclean speaks of things that would otherwise be acceptable to God, but for any number of reasons are in a state of ritual impurity and in this state of unclean they cannot be used for service to God. Thus where the CJB will say unholy instead of using the word common, that is not entirely wrong, but a) that is an incorrect translation of the Greek and b) it gives us the wrong impression. For a gentile Christian especially, unholy presents a mental picture of something being wicked or bad; something that is opposed to God. But common doesn't mean wicked, and so as we think of the term common in our day it also doesn't mean unholy.

In Biblical terms gentiles are common, while Hebrews are holy. Hebrews are imputed with a status of holy because beginning with Abraham the Lord set Hebrews apart from all other people on this earth (gentiles) for Himself. Being set apart for service to God is the definition of holy. Gentiles having a status of common does not mean that gentiles are bad; and it certainly does not mean that they also automatically have the status of unclean. Rather, gentiles are just not sanctified, not holy (not set apart) for God. Of course Christ provided a means for gentiles

to cross over that status barrier and that is what Peter was soon to find out.

But Peter's response to God's instruction to kill and eat is also somewhat mysterious assuming Luke has chosen the proper words to record this event. And I assume he did since this is God inspired. That is, when it comes to describing whether edible items (food) are God-authorized food for Hebrews (kosher) then the issue is whether that food is categorized as permissible or prohibited. If it is prohibited, then it is simply not food. Ever. If it is permissible, then it is food. However there is no category called "common" as regards food EXCEPT in a kind of off-handed way and in one instance. And this reality is central to the meaning of our story. I don't want to complicate matters too much but if I don't say something about it I'll get some bad email.

According to the Torah Law, some of the meat and produce brought by Hebrews for sacrifice was to be set apart and given to the Priests as payment for their services. This all depended on what kind of sacrifice it was, and it depended on the occasion. This particular portion had to be eaten only by priests and it usually had to be eaten at the holy precinct, meaning the Temple grounds. Thus this food portion for the priests was considered especially holy (set apart). Now if, for instance, the sacrifice was a lamb and some of it went to the priests then it was considered holy food. But if a lamb was NOT used for sacrifice, and a regular Hebrew killed it, cooked it and ate it for a meal, then it was NOT holy food (because it hadn't been dedicated to God). It was perfectly kosher food, it just wasn't holy. However because it was not holy doesn't then make it common, except in an off-handed sense that it wasn't made holy. So the important point is this: common was not a food category; common isn't a term applied to food. It is only that regular Hebrews could NOT ever eat holy food; that would have been sin. Holy food was reserved exclusively for the priests. And the only holy food was food that had been offered for sacrifice at the Temple.

So when Peter says he has never eaten common (*koinos*) food, then it doesn't make any sense, since common isn't a food word in the first place; and besides all Hebrews (except for priests) ONLY ever ate food that wasn't holy. So if common is just semantics indicating food that had not been set apart as holy for the priests, then it is further confusing because the ONLY food Peter would have ever eaten was common (not holy) food. Yet, Peter insists he has never eaten common food. So then what did he eat?!

As for eating unclean food? Of course; no Hebrew would knowingly eat unclean food. But understand; unclean is not the term that defines the list of what edible items Hebrews cannot eat or can eat. That list is the list of permissible foods and prohibited foods. For instance a cow is permitted, but a horse is prohibited for food. But that is not the same as clean and unclean. The Biblical Torah food rules works like this: food on the permitted list can be eaten but it must be dealt with properly. It must be raised properly; if an animal it must be slaughtered and butchered properly; its blood drained properly and it must be handled and stored properly. If the permitted food item is not dealt with properly it can become defiled and thus it becomes unclean. So clean and unclean doesn't define which things are allowed for food; it only deals with the handling of permissible food. Handle food wrong, and it becomes unclean.

What has made this so difficult for gentiles (and many Jews as well) to understand is that in the

usual way of speaking the terms unclean and prohibited have become interchangeable; and this can get very confusing. I won't go on with this, because I don't want to get bogged down. But it matters greatly in this story.

So for certain when we look at the original Greek, Peter says he has never eaten common or unclean food (two different things); and because it was animals and not produce in the lowered sheet obviously Peter means he's never eaten common or unclean meat. Yet, that presents a problem since because Peter isn't a priest the only meat he has ever eaten was common (meaning not holy). What gives? I sure hope you're focusing and paying attention, because now it gets a bit more complicated.

God responds to Peter's refusal to kill and eat what is in the sheet from Heaven by saying that Peter should not call common (*koinos*) that which God has made clean (*kathartos*). Our CJB has it wrong when it says: "Stop treating as unclean what God has made clean". That is, the CJB makes it sound that something was formerly unclean, but now God has cleansed it. That is not what the passage literally says, and that is not what the passage means. Rather the Lord is literally telling Peter not to call common things unclean. And this is actually just a basic Torah principle; common things are merely common. From the Torah perspective common things in their natural state are clean. Common things were not created unclean; common things are not considered unclean by God and can only become unclean if they are improperly used or are ritually defiled. Once again; the term common also doesn't actually apply to the issue of kosher animals (animals that are fit for food for God's people).

Thus on the surface, we have a conundrum; the words don't seem to be coherent. The visual imagery and the conversation sure seems to be about food animals; but after Peter refuses to kill and eat, some of the terms used by God and by Peter aren't terms that apply to kosher food; the term *koinos*, common, in particular doesn't apply.

God told Peter not to call common things unclean for a second time. Saying or doing something twice in the Bible means that it has great significance. That this entire sequence was repeated 3 times validates that it was divine.

Confused about what just went on? Don't worry; so was Peter. The verse says that Peter was puzzling over the meaning of the vision he had seen when suddenly Cornelius's men show up. It is usually said about this verse that Peter was puzzled because he couldn't imagine why God would tell him to kill and eat unclean animals. I'm here to tell you that this is not what puzzled Peter. His confusion was that while food at first seemed to be the topic, suddenly the terminology of the conversation switched mid-stream and terms not used for food started to be used; both by God and by Peter. Recall; Peter was in a God-induced trance so what came out of his mouth was not his own. Peter was essentially observing a conversation between himself and God.

In a few more verses, Peter is finally going to understand what this bewildering ecstatic vision was all about. And that is what we'll discuss next time.