

## THE BOOK OF ACTS

### Lesson 24, Chapter 10 continued

It is said that to a hammer, everything looks like a nail. So I suppose for me as a Hebrew Roots Bible teacher, Acts chapter 10 looks like one of those places in the Bible that needs to be attacked with great vigor. Therefore as we enter our 2<sup>nd</sup> week studying Acts chapter 10, we'll continue to move deliberately and carefully dissect this chapter as it plays a crucial role in Christian and Messianic doctrine.

I suspect that what we discussed last week concerning especially the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of chapter 10 (about the sheet with the animals coming down from Heaven) was challenging to absorb due to the many nuances that are present there and the difficulties of using terms that Christians aren't used to hearing. If it was challenging or confusing for you don't feel bad about it; it is indeed complex. That said, it is critical that we understand the intended meaning behind the 4 legged beasts and the other creatures in the sheet that descends from Heaven as thoroughly as we can because frankly it has been poorly interpreted and taught for centuries by some of our greatest and most recognized Bible scholars. This is due to two factors: 1) a built-in denominational and doctrinal bias that ignores the plain meaning of passages, and 2) a lack of knowledge about Judaism, the Synagogue, **Halakhah**, and ancient Jewish culture in general that prevents an otherwise superior Bible scholar from seeing what is actually occurring in its historical context. The result has been some Christian doctrine that is not only incorrect, but it fosters anti-Semitism and the powerless, casual Christianity that we see present in our day.

I want to review with you a bit from last time and to add some additional information and explanation in hopes of helping you to grasp this as best you can before we continue with the next several verses of Acts chapter 10. It is a little like the importance of first being comfortable with basic math (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) before moving on to Algebra.

I'll begin by giving you an example of the nature of the problem that Bible students wrestle with in trying to discover the truth of Acts chapter 10 by quoting to you from perhaps the most authoritative modern commentary on the Book of Acts in publication today, as authored by the venerable F. F. Bruce. I ask you to listen carefully to what he says about the nature and plain meaning of this passage; but then notice how despite admitting the truth he does an about face and reverts to his doctrinal stance as an obvious self-contradiction. In his Commentary on the Book of Acts in reference to Acts 10:9-19 F. F. Bruce says this:

***“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’.”***

So Bruce fully acknowledges that the vision Peter witnesses is a parable; that is, it is not literal

but rather it is a simple story using commonly known objects and items symbolically to get across a point. The sheet full of animals is meant to represent something else entirely. Let me give you an example of how a parable works using one that we're all familiar with, the parable that Yeshua told about the 10 virgins.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Matthew 25:1** *"The Kingdom of Heaven at that time will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the groom.*

<sup>2</sup> *Five of them were foolish and five were sensible.*

<sup>3</sup> *The foolish ones took lamps with them but no oil,*

<sup>4</sup> *whereas the others took flasks of oil with their lamps.*

<sup>5</sup> *Now the bridegroom was late, so they all went to sleep.*

<sup>6</sup> *It was the middle of the night when the cry rang out, 'The bridegroom is here! Go out to meet him!'*

<sup>7</sup> *The girls all woke up and prepared their lamps for lighting.*

<sup>8</sup> *The foolish ones said to the sensible ones, 'Give us some of your oil, because our lamps are going out.'*

<sup>9</sup> *'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both you and us. Go to the oil dealers and buy some for yourselves.'*

<sup>10</sup> *But as they were going off to buy, the bridegroom came. Those who were ready went with him to the wedding feast, and the door was shut.*

<sup>11</sup> *Later, the other bridesmaids came. 'Sir! Sir!' they cried, 'Let us in!'*

<sup>12</sup> *But he answered, 'Indeed! I tell you, I don't know you!'*

<sup>13</sup> *So stay alert, because you know neither the day nor the hour.*

If we don't notice that this is a parable, and if we don't recognize that Yeshua is employing commonly understood terms and characters and objects used within Jewish culture to concoct a fanciful and memorable story to make His point, then we leave this passage deciding that He is instructing His followers about literal grooms, virgins, lamps and olive oil. So if this wasn't a parable then what other conclusion can we arrive at but that if you are not a Jewish virgin, this simply doesn't apply to you? And if you are a Jewish virgin, you urgently need to acquire a couple of lamps and stock up on a ready supply of olive oil to fuel them if you expect to succeed in getting married. But of course it is a parable and so the people and objects (the virgins and the lamps) are symbolic of something else.

Now let's apply this to Acts chapter 10. F. F. Bruce agrees and unequivocally states that the vision of the sheet with the animals and the instruction to kill and eat is a story (in this case a vision) told as a parable. That is, the scene uses objects and circumstances familiar to Jews to make a point. But like with the parable of the 10 virgins that doesn't actually mean for the hearer to think that this is all about virgins and lamps, so Peter's vision doesn't actually mean for the hearer to think that this is all about a sheet and some unclean animals, nor is it about killing and eating them. Rather it is about something else entirely; which is how all parables work.

A couple of sentences later after Professor Bruce acknowledges that Peter's vision is a parable (which of course it is), and the meaning has to do with the acceptance of gentiles, he then turns right around and says this:

***“Yet the cleansing of the food is not wholly parabolic; there is a connection between abrogation of the Levitical food laws and the removal of the barrier between Jews and gentiles.”***

I'm not intending to single out F.F. Bruce; however his comment is representative of so many others. He (as do most Christian commentators) approaches the entire New Testament with the viewpoint that the Levitical food laws (as well as all other Torah laws) have been abolished, and so everything that happens in the New Testament must fit within that understanding no matter if the text says something entirely different. Yes, Bruce agrees, Peter's vision is a parable. Yes, Bruce agrees, the animals are symbolic. Yes, he agrees, Peter himself acknowledges that this has nothing to do with animals or food but rather this is about admitting gentiles into the fold. However, in the opinion of Bruce and of many other gentile Bible scholars this is equally about God abolishing the kosher food laws. So I suppose if that is the case then the parable of the virgins must be equally and literally about virgins and lamps. The parable of Jesus using the seeds falling onto rocky soil to characterize Believers must be equally and literally about seeds, rocks and soil, and so on. I hope you can see this odd conclusion makes this one parable (Peter's vision), out of all other parables in the Bible, to operate entirely differently whereby the fanciful objects that are symbolic suddenly become real and literal. Why would Bruce and others claim such a thing? Because it is his and their foundational Christian doctrine (regardless of what the Bible actually says) that gentile Christians have no duty to follow God's food laws, because Christ abolished the Law (something which Christ explicitly said He did NOT do!) Let's never miss an opportunity to revisit this foundational teaching of Messiah Yeshua.

### **Matthew 5:17-19 CJB**

***<sup>17</sup> "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.***

***<sup>18</sup> Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.***

***<sup>19</sup> So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be***

***called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.***

This statement made by Yeshua couldn't be more definitive. He bluntly says He didn't abolish the Torah (the Law), and then He expands upon it, and then He warns against teaching against what He just said. So admittedly this statement forms the nucleus of my worldview about Yeshua and the relation of the Law of Moses to Believers, and from it I have full confidence to challenge Church doctrines that are not in compliance with this commandment from Christ. Outside of Salvation there is no other issue of this magnitude than our understanding the place of the Law of Moses in the life of a Believer. And while I don't have all the answers about HOW to do it, without doubt the Law of Moses remains and we are to obey it. And when we don't obey, we sin.

Now let's revisit the complex issue of the conversation between Peter and God (when Peter was in a trance and essentially having what we might call an out-of-body experience). This is important because it explains his vision on Jewish terms, which of course is how it is told. After the heavenly voice tells Peter to kill and eat the unclean animals in the sheet, Peter responds with "no" because he's never eaten such things (no doubt Peter thought it was a test otherwise he wouldn't have emphatically refused God's order). In Acts 10:14 Peter adds the statement that he's never eaten anything common or unclean. The CJB along with most other English Bible versions replaces the word "common" with either "unholy" or "unclean". Some Bibles will replace the word "common" with "profane". Unholy, unclean and profane are all incorrect translations. The Greek word is ***koinos*** and it means "common" and that is the proper translation. It is the same word from which we get the type of Greek that the New Testament is written in: Koine Greek, meaning common Greek. The Greek of everyday language and conversation.

In Biblical terms, however, "common" is not an adjective that means something that is regularly done or is ordinary; rather "common" is a spiritual status assigned to certain objects and people. The 3 possible states of spiritual status for humans and objects (as spelled out to us in the Torah) are: holy, common, or unclean. Holy means sanctified, set apart for God. Common means something that has **not** been set apart for God (but it doesn't mean evil, wicked, bad, or unclean). Common is kind of a neutral and natural state that exists in between holy and unclean. And then the 3<sup>rd</sup> possible spiritual status is unclean. Unclean is a condition of defilement that means an object or a person is not suitable for use by God; and to try to use an object or person in its unclean state for such a purpose is indeed wicked. Unclean is a condition that is caused by something; nothing in its naturally created state is unclean.

Unclean food is food that has in some way been contaminated or mishandled. Unclean food is otherwise kosher food, but something has ritually defiled it; thus unclean food must not be consumed. What is important for us to understand is that there is no such designation as "common" food. Common is not a food category, nor is it a God-ordained condition of edible items. Common doesn't apply to food. Holy food is a food category, and it is kosher food that has been used for altar sacrifices. Only priests are allowed to eat certain portions of holy food that has been brought as a sacrificial offering. So regular Jews (like Peter) can NOT eat holy food; ever.

Rabbi Joseph Shulam points out that there is a food category called **chullin** that refers to kosher food that has NOT been used for sacrifices and thus regular Jews can eat it. It is the category name for every day food that regular Jews eat. So the rule is that regular Jews eat **chullin** food, while only priests can eat holy food. In fact according to God's laws the ONLY food regular Jews can eat is **chullin** food. So Shulam says perhaps the word "common" is being used in place of "**chullin**". However if that is true, then Peter's statement becomes all the more strange because Peter claims that he has NEVER eaten food from the very food category (**chullin**) that is the ONLY food category a regular Jew is allowed to eat (Peter was not a priest). I hope you're beginning to see the dilemma of this verse.

But there is an obvious solution to the dilemma. I told you last week that in the end, what is happening here is that this vision is a parable, and so the food isn't the subject but rather it is merely the symbol of something else (soon we learn that "something else" is gentiles). This understanding then explains why a term (common) that doesn't apply to food but does apply to human beings, is being used in the vision of the animals. And this is also why Peter was so perplexed over the meaning of this vision because taken literally it makes no sense. The image doesn't match the narrative.

Let's re-read a portion of Acts 10.

### RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 10:17 – 29

Typically Bible commentators say that the reason for Peter being bewildered about the vision is because God told him it was OK now to just forget the food laws and from here on he can eat anything he wants to; but Peter simply couldn't accept that. But as I just demonstrated, that wasn't the case at all. For one thing Peter had heard directly from Yeshua's mouth that the Torah wasn't changed in the least, let alone abolished. Rather Peter was bewildered because the terms applied to the food in his vision weren't food terms; they were terms reserved for describing the spiritual status of humans and objects. As he was no longer in his trance and was now pondering this strange vision, the men that the Centurion Cornelius sent to fetch him arrived at Shimon the Tanner's house and asked about Peter. The Holy Spirit tells Peter that these 3 men are looking for him, and that God has pre-planned this meeting so Peter doesn't need to be alarmed but he does need to go with them. So at this point Kefa doesn't know what is going on or what is supposed to happen. Under the circumstances if it was me I would assume this was somehow connected to the vision and I imagine Kefa assumes that as well.

As Peter goes down from the roof to meet these men he asks their purpose. They reply that they are here on behalf of the Roman Centurion Cornelius and that he is an upright man and a God-fearer. This means to Peter that Cornelius is a gentile who worships the God of Israel, but he has not been circumcised. That is, Cornelius has not gone so far in his beliefs that he has converted and become a Jew. These men go on to explain that an angel appeared to their master and told him to send for Peter, and that they were assigned to go to Yafo and escort Peter back to Caesarea. There was no demand involved; it was all just matter of fact. No doubt if Peter had not had his vision, and if the Spirit (in some unnamed way) hadn't told Peter to go, he would have been too fearful to go voluntarily.

It needs to be stated that at this moment Peter had no idea what God was up to. He had no inkling that gentiles could be admitted to Christ's Kingdom and could attain the same holy spiritual status as the Hebrews. Why is that? Because the teachings of the Synagogue were that gentiles were unclean; this was not disputed among Jews. It wasn't that the Jews hated their Roman oppressors so they simply didn't want to associate with them and so called them unclean as kind of a nasty epithet. Rather it was a given among Jews that God saw gentiles as ritually unclean. But the truth is that according to the Torah gentiles were not created unclean; they were created and classified by Yehoveh as just not holy; instead gentiles were created spiritually common. And if we go back to our discussion of the vision of the animals in the sheet then we understand what God was telling Peter. God wasn't telling Peter that at one time gentiles were unclean, but now He has made them clean. Rather He was telling Peter that He made (He created) gentiles spiritually common, and thus Peter (and by extension, all of Judaism) had no authorization to change the classification of gentiles to unclean. God was straightening out Peter's theology. This was not new theology or changed theology. This was how it had always been since God declared Abraham as holy and set apart, and thus at that moment divided and separated the human race into 2 parts: holy Hebrews and common gentiles. But the Synagogue authorities had created a doctrine that overturned God's commands, and now God was dealing with it beginning with Peter and Cornelius.

Peter left with the men, but some of the other brothers (referring to Believers) tagged along. This was an unusual situation and it showed wisdom for Peter to not go it alone. We find out in the next chapter that 6 Believers went along with him. While Peter was traveling (about a 2 day journey) Cornelius was gathering his relatives and close friends to his house to hear what Peter had to say to them. He understood that whatever it was it would be highly important since God Himself had arranged all this.

As Peter arrives he sees the throng awaiting him. I imagine it embarrassed him to have a Roman Centurion fall on his face before him; and this was in front of all those people. So Peter quickly says to get up; he's only a man and not to be worshipped. Entering this gentile's home was unfamiliar territory; such an act was unthinkable to a Jew. And yet here he was, and at God's instruction to boot. Peter feels he needs to explain the situation to Cornelius and his family and friends before things get underway. And it is important that we hear what he says in the way he meant it.

Verse 28 in the CJB has Peter saying this:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Acts 10:28** *He said to them, "You are well aware that for a man who is a Jew to have close association with someone who belongs to another people, or to come and visit him, is something that just isn't done. But God has shown me not to call any person common or unclean;*

However that is a very loose translation of what was said. Here is one that sticks more to the actual meaning of the Greek:

<sup>RSV</sup> **Acts 10:28** *and he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should*

### ***not call any man common or unclean.***

So Peter says it is unlawful to be doing what he is doing, which is to associate with, or go into the dwelling place of, a gentile. The Greek word being translated as unlawful is ***athemitos***. It is a word that means to do something that is illicit, or breaks a law code, or is criminal. Peter is not referring to the Law of Moses, he's referring to ***Halakhah***; Jewish Law. Tradition. So immediately Peter deals with the issue of the purity laws as it pertains to gentiles; a touchy subject to say the least. Peter understood and believed that Cornelius was a God-fearer; a gentile that worshipped the God of Israel. So idolatry was of no issue. Nonetheless it didn't change Cornelius's status from being a gentile so ritual purity issues remained as far as Jews were concerned. Food was an especially big issue, of course, as it was the central part of hospitality. But food wasn't the only show stopper from the Jews' perspective. As I mentioned idolatry was another major issue as it was standard for gentiles to have god images in their homes. Blasphemy also was an issue as were the loose sexual morals of gentiles as compared to those of the Jews.

But then Peter says that God has shown him that he should not call any man common or unclean. Again, the Greek word ***koinos*** is used meaning common; and the Greek word ***akathartos*** is also used meaning unclean. So in the intervening 72 hours since Peter's vision and his arrival at Cornelius's home, the meaning of the vision-parable has become clearer to Peter; this is all about gentiles and their spiritual status before God.

Yet, while it is rather easy for us to understand why Peter would say that God showed him not to call any man unclean, it is less easy to understand why he would also say that no man should be called common. Recall that there are only 3 possible spiritual statuses for a human: holy, common, or unclean. So on the surface it seems as if Peter is saying that God has eliminated 2 of the 3 possible spiritual status conditions for humans (common and unclean), which only leaves holy. So are we to take from this that Peter, and God, now see all human beings on this planet as holy? No, of course not. So what exactly does this mean to communicate? First of all, we have here humans talking in the usual way; neither Peter nor Cornelius are theologians or scholars. So saying "any man" is not meant to be precise as in "every single human being in existence". What Peter and God are saying is that a) a gentile is not unclean and shouldn't be called as such. And b) that while common has been considered as the natural spiritual status for gentiles, that indeed being elevated into the holy status (like Hebrews are) is possible for gentiles. So gentiles aren't permanently relegated as holding the "common" status without hope of ever being upgraded to holy. But no doubt Peter didn't understand the breadth and depth of this new revelation. In fact it would be mostly Paul that would try to articulate what this meant for gentiles, and then of course the relationship between Jews and gentiles, in light of Christ's advent.

I do want to repeat: this was NOT new theology. This was NOT that Christ's death had changed the spiritual status of gentiles from unclean (because gentiles weren't unclean). It was only new ***Halakhah*** for Peter and for virtually all Jews. God was only reinforcing and instructing about what had always been. He was not changing the status of gentiles; they were still common. Rather the Jewish Synagogue leaders had overturned God's law on the subject of gentiles, and now God was overriding the wrong doctrine of those Synagogue leaders; and

oh my, the trouble that was going to lead to!

But (and it is not clear to Peter yet that this is the case) gentiles who accepted Christ could be elevated from their status as common to holy, and they could remain as gentiles. Was this the first time, then, that gentiles could leave behind their common status and attain a holy status (like the Hebrews enjoyed)? No! Gentiles had always had the option of leaving behind home, family and nation and becoming a Hebrew. Such an offer was open to both male and female gentiles (Ruth being one of the most famous cases of an unmarried woman making the decision on her own to become a Hebrew, as she was a foreign widow). But the **only** means for a gentile to gain holy status before the coming of Christ was to become a Hebrew. Yeshua's death and resurrection indeed changed that. Now through faith and trust in Him as the Messiah and as God's Son, gentiles could attain the spiritual status of holy. They did not have to first become Hebrews; but it took time before this understanding took hold among the Believing Jews.

This raised another sensitive and contentious issue because to become a Hebrew a male had to be circumcised. And from the Jewish Believers' viewpoint, why would a gentile want to have a Jewish Messiah if he didn't also want to be Jewish? Since for Jews circumcision was the primary outward symbol that separated Hebrews from gentiles, then it still made no sense to most members of The Way how a gentile could hope to accept Yeshua if he wouldn't also accept circumcision. And in a few more verses we see that issue arise in force as we'll hear of the Circumcision faction intervening. And this faction was embedded within the body of Jewish Believers. So already we see that the Body of Believers was divided; at first it was divided into Hebrew speaking Believers and Greek speaking Believers. Now we see that of those two groups some formed the Circumcision faction that believed that while gentiles could accept Yeshua, it didn't change the requirement for them to be circumcised and therefore to essentially become Jews. In other words, in their minds Christ enabled gentiles to have Messiah Yeshua for Salvation but they had to stop being gentiles in order to do it. It is not at all unlike the bulk of Christianity that has for 1800 years determined that Christ is for gentiles and while a Jew can accept Jesus, first he has to renounce His Jewishness and essentially become a gentile. One of the core missions of Seed of Abraham Ministries Torah Class is to put the truth to this wrong-minded, manmade doctrine. Jews do NOT have to leave their Jewishness behind to accept Messiah; Yeshua came as the Jewish Messiah.

We will finish up Acts chapter 10 next time.