

Torah Observant “SHOMER MITZVOT”

שׁוֹמֵר מִצְוֹת

A Series on Practical Messianic Living and Apologetics (halakhah)
By Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy

Exegeting Acts 10

(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

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In **Acts chapter 10** we find an interesting story involving "a Jewish man and his commitment to only eat kosher food." I shall paraphrase the passage to conserve space:

Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, a non-Jew, yet a devout "God-fearer" (Greek=*phobeo* φοβέω + *theos* θεός) is instructed in a vision by an angel of God to send for Simon Peter (Shim'on Kefa) to come to his house in Caesarea. The next day in Jappa Kefa—a Jewish fisherman—also has a vision from HaShem concerning a four-cornered sheet containing all manner of animals on it. He is instructed three times to "Rise, ... kill, and eat." All three times he refuses, explaining that he will not eat something *treif* (literally torn, or not fit for consumption), for he has remained kosher all of his life. While the food is still in view, HaShem tells him not to call "common," Greek=*koinoo* κοινώω, what He has "cleansed," Greek=*katharizo* καθαρίζω (KJV). The vision fades.

Meanwhile, Cornelius has sent men to inquire of Kefa, who eventually accompanies them back to their master. A fairly well sized mix of at least one Jew and many non-Jews gathered together as Kefa met in Cornelius' home later on. Kefa explained that it was not "lawful," Greek=*athemitos* ἀθέμιτος for Jews to *schmooze* (mingle) with non-Jews, however, with people (instead of food) now the topic on Kefa's mind, he realizes that HaShem had truly instructed him (Kefa) not to consider non-Jews as "unclean" (Greek=*akathartos* ἀκάθαρτος) or "common" (Greek=*koinos* κοινός). Indeed, Kefa proclaims that he now understands, after hearing Cornelius' vision account, that HaShem is "no respecter of persons" (KJV). The good news, that Yeshua can and will save Jew as well as non-Jew, is made clear to everyone in the room. To be sure, as Kefa is speaking, suddenly the *Ruach HaKodesh* (Holy Spirit) falls "on all them which hear[d] the word" (KJV). The chapter portion ends with the men being immersed (the last halakhic step normally associated with conversion to Judaism) into the name of ADONAI.

Okay. Let us exegete this passage. Firstly, with the help of Thayer's and Smith's Bible Dictionary (TSBD) we must take special notice of the Greek words I wove into the English commentary above (the Strong's number precedes the word):

- 5399-Phobeo φοβέω (V)+2316-theos θεόν (N, M)=feared+God (i.e., God-fearer).
- 2840-Koinoo κοινόω (V)=to make common, to make (Leviticallly) unclean, render unhallowed, defile, profane.
- 2839-Koinos κοινός (A)=common, i.e., ordinary, belonging to generality, by the Jews, unhallowed, profane.
- 2511-Katharizo καθαρίζω (V)=to make clean, cleanse, consecrate, dedicate, purify (morally or ritually).
- 111-Athemitos ἀθέμιτος (A)=contrary to law and justice, illicit, (i.e., taboo).
- 169-Akathartos ἀκάθαρτος (A)=unclean, ceremonially, that which must be abstained from according to Levitical Law, foul.

Even though the above-supplied words and definitions come to us from the TSBD, itself keyed to the large Kittel and the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TWNT), we must allow context to help us sort out the proper applications of the nuances and ways in which the words impact our understanding of the passage. A series of questions and answers should accomplish this goal:

Q: Is Cornelius described as a Jew or something else in the passage? Does it matter?

A: Cornelius is described as a “God-fearing” non-Jew, a man who held a good report among all the nation of the Jews. It matters because according to the prevailing halakhah of the day, non-Jews were not understood to be permitted to follow Torah. The Torah was a Jewish-only document. What is more, if a non-Jew wished to gain covenant status among Isra'el, he or she must convert to Judaism first. Thus, the halakhah stated, “All Isra'el and only Isra'el shares a place in the World to Come.”¹

Q: Is Peter a Jew?

A: Of course he is. He is not a learned Jew, the likes of Sha'ul, but he is a Jew.

Q: Where would Kefa get the chutzpah to tell HaShem “Not so LORD,” in regards to him being commanded to “Rise, kill, and eat...” all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and fowls of the air?

A: Perhaps Kefa was familiar with our passage in Leviticus chapter 11 as well as Deuteronomy chapter 14.

¹ For more on this topic, see my commentary to “*Shomer Mitzvot: Introduction to the Series*” at this link: <http://www.graftedin.com/images/Parashot/00ShomerMitzvotIntro.pdf>

Q: Why does Kefa make the dual distinction of “common” and/or “unclean” foods in verse 14 (rendered from the KJV)? What do these words convey in their original languages?

A: “Common” in the English of verse 14 is the Greek word *koinos κοινός*. It refers to biblically defined and permitted food (beef, chicken, lamb, etc.) that has been rendered profane, for instance, by contact with that which the Bible forbids and does not define as food (pork, shellfish, shrimp, buzzards, spiders, mouse, etc.). The force of this word, when compared to *akathartos ἀκάθαρτος* is that *koinos κοινός* connotes that which man declares unclean, whereas *akathartos ἀκάθαρτος* connotes a God-given declaration of uncleanness. This Greek word *koinos κοινός* is not found in the Septuagint (LXX) reading of Leviticus chapter 11, the Greek version of the TaNaKH. Kefa cannot comply with the LORD’s request because the sheet clearly contains both food and non-food items, of which the food items have now been declared by himself as contaminated (common “*koinos κοινός*”) by contact with the non-food items (“...I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean” KJV). The English term “unclean” in this verse is the Greek word *akathartos ἀκάθαρτος*. This word is a composite of the article “a” plus the word “*kathairo καθαίρω*.” *Kathairo* means “to cleanse, of filth or impurity,” and the article “a” is used to negate the meaning, that is, give the opposite significance,² thus, *akathartos ἀκάθαρτος*=unclean. However, this time, we have the equivalent Hebrew term of this word showing up in the LXX version of Leviticus chapter 11. Everywhere the Hebrew word *tamei טָמֵא* is found, the LXX chooses *akathartos ἀκάθαρτος*. To fully grasp Kefa’s choice of wording, we must understand that a Jewish definition of applying *akathartos* to that which the Torah describes as non-food stems from the conclusion that HaShem created certain animals intrinsically “*tamei*” (unclean) and others intrinsically “*tahor*” (clean). This is not a defect in the animals themselves. This speaks of the superior intellect of a Creator that is in control over the ecosystem that he created. Some animals ingest helpful items and consequently produce toxins. Other creatures ingest toxins and consequently produce helpful waste in its place. Obviously I am describing biological symbiosis. Even if we argue against this logic, based on our lack of understanding, we cannot argue that God told Noach (Noah) to gather two of each kind of every unclean animal into the ark while also commanding him to collect seven couples of the clean animals!

1 ADONAI said to Noach, "Come into the ark, you and all your household; for I have seen that you alone in this generation are righteous before me. 2 Of every clean animal you are to take seven couples, and of the animals that are not clean, one couple; 3 also of the birds in the air take seven couples - in order to preserve their species throughout the earth (Genesis 7:1-3).

² TSBD, *καθαίρω*.

How are we to argue that clean and unclean is only related to the Torah that Moshe handed down when Noach lived thousands of years prior to any written Torah that we know of?! The argument is pointless. God knew which animals were clean and which were unclean because he made them that way and he obviously endowed Noach with a way to tell!

Q: While the vision of the food is clearly in view, when HaShem responds to Kefa's refusal, he only instructs Kefa not to call common (koinoo κοινόω) that which he (God) has cleansed katharizo καθαρίζω. Why doesn't HaShem also teach Kefa not to call unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος) that which God has ostensibly cleansed katharizo καθαρίζω?

A: Obviously God has not cleansed (katharizo καθαρίζω) those animals that he created to be intrinsically unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος!) If I, Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy, the author of this commentary, could convey this single, important point to your average Christian pastor, then we would not be having this conversation at all! The vision is just that—a vision! The proof that God is not truly altering Kefa's paradigm in regards to food but rather to non-Jews is born out by the careful attention to not mention akathartos ἀκάθαρτος in verse 15, yet by his Ruach HaKodesh impress Kefa to utilize the word akathartos ἀκάθαρτος in regards to non-Jews in verse 28. The Levitical definition of permitted and forbidden animals, as outlined in chapter 11, cannot change! God remains the same both yesterday, today, and forever! Why would he need to change the rules governing the definition of food with the arrival of his Son? It makes nonsense to suppose such a reading of Acts chapter 10! To be sure, if God were supposedly changing the rules, giving the information to a "country bumpkin" like Kefa—and in a vision no less—is the wrong way to go about doing it, wouldn't you agree? We should not suppose that this is a mystery hidden from the Jewish people only now to be revealed after his Son has gone to the execution stake (on the same level as the mystery of the gospel that the Gentiles are now to be welcomed into Isra'el as full-fledged covenant members if they place their trust in Yeshua).

Q: If HaShem is not cleansing (katharizo καθαρίζω) unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος) animals then what is he cleansing? How are we to understand the vision?

A: I personally believe that Kefa's interpretation of his own vision is the best and most important interpretation offered. Namely this: what HaShem has designated as *kosher* (fit for consumption) and *treif* (not fit for consumption) in the Torah of Moshe, concerning food, still remains clean (tahor טָהוֹר) and unclean (tamei טָמֵא) respectively. Although the sheet contained all manner of animals, I believe what HaShem is trying to get Kefa to understand is that the animals represent all manner of peoples, not the literal animals themselves. This interpretation is in accord with the unchangeable nature of HaShem. To be sure, is this not how Kefa interprets the vision himself in verses 28, 34 and 35?

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.

34 Then Kefa addressed them: "I now understand that God does not play favorites, 35 but that whoever fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what people he belongs to (Emphasis, mine).

Q: But I thought that the Torah forbade Jews from having contact with Gentiles. Isn't that what Kefa explicitly tells his Gentile associates in verse 28, which you quoted above?

A: Observe Acts 10:28 in 10 various, yet common English translations (the original Greek word *athemitos* ἀθέμιτος has been identified and underlined in each version):

NASB (New American Standard Bible): And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean.

GWT (God's Word Translation): He said to them, "You understand how wrong it is for a Jewish man to associate or visit with anyone of another race. But God has shown me that I should no longer call anyone impure or unclean.

KJV (King James Version): And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

ASV (American Standard Version): and he said unto them, Ye yourselves know how it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to join himself or come unto one of another nation; and yet unto me hath God showed that I should not call any man common or unclean:

BBE (Bible in Basic English): And he said to them, You yourselves have knowledge that it is against the law for a man who is a Jew to be in the company of one who is of another nation; but God has made it clear to me that no man may be named common or unclean:

DBY (Darby Bible Translation): And he said to them, Ye know how it is unlawful for a Jew to be joined or come to one of a strange race, and to me God has shewn to call no man common or unclean.

WEY (Weymouth New Testament): He said to them, "You know better than most that a Jew is strictly forbidden to associate with a Gentile or visit him; but God has taught me to call no one unholy or unclean.

WBS (Webster Bible Translation): And he said to them, Ye know that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come to one of another nation; but God hath shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

WEB (World English Bible): He said to them, "You yourselves know how it is an unlawful thing for a man who is a Jew to join himself or come to one of another nation, but God has shown me that I shouldn't call any man unholy or unclean.

YLT (Young's Literal Translation): And he said unto them, 'Ye know how it is unlawful for a man, a Jew, to keep company with, or to come unto, one of another race, but to me God did shew to call no man common or unclean.

Isn't it interesting that from 10 English translations all but 3 render our Greek word as "unlawful?" The GWT, the BBE, and the WEY, however, attempt to supply a slightly different nuance than unlawful to this word, an attempt I call commendable. Even The Scriptures, a version popular among Messianics, leaves room for questioning the real intent of the translators:

And he said to them, "You know that a Yehudite man is not allowed to associate with, or go to one of another race. But Elohim has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

The Greek word athemitos ἀθέμιτος, found in only two places in the Apostolic Scriptures,³ is a composite of two Greek words: the word tithemi τίθημι meaning "to set, put, place, set forth, establish," and again, the article "a" rendering the word tithemi τίθημι into its negative value.⁴ Thus athemitos ἀθέμιτος does convey the notion of "unlawful," but we should carefully note that if Kefa were wanting us to understand that such a prohibition were rooted in the written word of God, the Torah, then he would have used a conjugation of the Greek word nomos νόμου which normally refers to God's Torah. To be sure, our writer Luke uses anomos ἄνομος at Acts 2:28 (rendered "wicked" in KJV and "godless" in the NASB) when referring to those men who crucified Yeshua. The TSBD defines the adjective anomos ἄνομος as "destitute of the Mosaic law, departing from the law, a violator of the law, lawless, wicked."⁵ By comparison, the adjective athemitos ἀθέμιτος refers to that which, although not written down, is simply

³ Acts 10:28; 1 Peter 4:3

⁴ TSBD, ἀκάθαρτος.

⁵ TSBD, ἄνομος.

socially unacceptable, viz, taboo, but certainly not proscribed by Mosaic Law. David Sterns CJB is a better translation of this pasuk:

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 (Emphasis, mine).⁶

The Torah of Moshe never prohibits Jews from "keeping company" or "coming unto one of another nation." This statement of Kefa's reflects the "ethnocentric Jewish exclusivism" baggage that the Torah communities of his day had engineered, baggage not uncommon among people groups who are marginalized. In other words, Kefa was just regurgitating the standard mantra of his day. This did not excuse his error, which is why HaShem went through all the trouble to send him the vision in the first place.

In the end, the message of the Acts 10 vision is crystal clear: Gentiles in Yeshua are not intrinsically unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος), as the 1st century Judaisms were professing. They, like all men, have been created in God's image, and as such, can be viewed as defiled (koinos κοινός) by the stain of sin, in need of cleansing (katharizo καθαρίζω). Man, created clean (katharos καθαρός), fell to a state of unclean (koinos κοινός), later to be declared cleansed (katharizo καθαρίζω) by the blood of the Sacrificial Lamb of God if he accepted such an offer. To use the language of the vision: Jews are not lambs while Gentiles are pigs. Rather, Jews and Gentiles are both lambs! Both have become unclean (koinos κοινός), by sin; both have been cleansed (katharizo καθαρίζω) by Yeshua! No one is intrinsically unclean (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος)! No one was created sinful! Born into sin, yes; created sinners, no!

However, it must be carefully noted that God himself reserves the right to look into the life of a man, recognize his hardened heart, his rejection of Jesus and his continual proclivity to sin, and ultimately pronounce such a man "damned," "cursed," viz, "unclean ἀκάθαρτος." Would God really do that to such an individual? Would an "all-loving" God rightfully send a person to hell for his continual and unrepentant sin? Observe the language of Ephesians 5:5:

For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (KJV).

Did you notice the underlined word "unclean" above? Care to guess what the original Greek word is? Yup. You guessed it! Akathartos ἀκάθαρτος! "But," you object, "I thought that God did not create anyone akathartos ἀκάθαρτος!" This is true. Men are created "innocent" (katharos καθαρός). However, man has the free choice to reject

⁶ For a thorough treatment of Stern's reasoning behind his translation of this verse see his Jewish New Testament Commentary, pp. 258-259.

God's Messiah and thus leave God no choice, as it were, but to ultimately and finally pronounce him "unclean" (akathartos ἀκάθαρτος) in the Heavenly Court of Law, thus man effectively condemns himself. But until such a sentence is passed, men, both Jews and Gentiles alike, are given grace to repent. All men are created innocent (katharos καθάρος). Kefa's assessment (the standard Jewish song and dance) that "the Gentiles were to be avoided" was wrong from the word "go."

Gentiles are to be accepted as bonafide Isra'elites without having to succumb to any man-made conversion rites. Again, in the language of the vision: pigs (an unclean animal, viz, tamei תמי/akathartos ἀκάθαρτος) do not need to become lambs (a clean animal, viz, tahor תהור/kathairo καθαίρω) in order to be accepted into Isra'el. What is more, Gentiles in Yeshua are to be treated as cleansed ("katharizo καθαρίζω") in every sense of the word! No longer should the Jewish believers view them with suspect. The sociological borders of Isra'el have been expanded to make room for those whom God is calling out from the nations into his chosen family of the faithful remnant! We have now properly demonstrated a better historical, sociological, theological, and grammatical treatment of Acts chapter 10.

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