

Getting to Know the Bible Sheet

How do I make sense of the animal regulations of Leviticus 11?

What do “clean” and “unclean” mean?¹

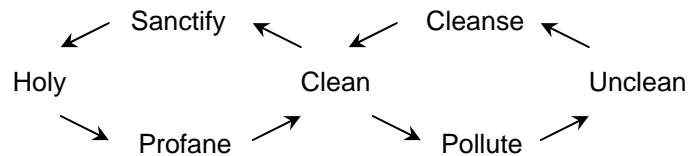
A observant reading of Leviticus gives the following understanding of the words clean, unclean, and holy.

Clean- the normal condition of most things and persons. Nuances of the meaning include purity and normality (e.g.- functioning as was intended, having life and good health). Clean things are not necessarily holy, but can become holy via the proper channels. Clean things can also become unclean via contact.

Unclean- some things are unclean in and of themselves (the animals in Lev. 11); other things can become unclean for various reasons (women and childbirth in Lev. 12). Nuances of the meaning include impurity and abnormality (e.g.- abnormal to intended function, associated with death and illness). *It is important to note that being “unclean” does not equate being “sinful.”* Permanent uncleanness cannot be altered, though temporary uncleanness can. This is important because contact between the unclean and holy can be fatal.

Holy- anything clean that is set apart for God, though God ultimately is the one who makes something “holy” (e.g. Lev. 22:16). Thus holiness embodies such concepts as purity and normality (functioning in a way something was intended).

The following diagram is helpful (Wenham, 19):



What is the reasoning behind the division of animals as clean and unclean?

Most likely the animals are divided by the concept of normality/abnormality mentioned above (i.e.- if the animals conform to creation “norms”) and death. So for example:

Land Animals (v.1-8)- the norm for animals that can be consumed are ones that both 1) ruminates over their food (or appear to ruminate- rock badgers/hyrax do not do this, but they appear to be doing so; hares may ruminate in the sense that some species go back and eat their droppings) and 2) have split hooves (or appear with split hooves- camels have them, though the split is hidden). Deviations from this norm are unclean (as shown in above examples).

Birds (v. 13-19)- all the birds listed here eat on dead flesh or other animals. This is not according to the “norm” of Genesis 1, where presumably birds and other animals were not carnivorous.

“Swarming things” (v.29-45, “move about on the ground” in NIV is less literal)- while many of these animals are carnivorous, the description of them swarming may be pointing out the fact that these animals do not conform to the “normal” of creation order in terms of their movement- swarming connotes chaos. This may be the way to understand the prohibition on insects (v.20-23)- the term translated “four footed” may also connote random movement.

Another plausible explanation is that some (not all) of the animals were a part of the life of certain pagan nations surrounding the Israelites, and so God kept certain animals away to help the Israelites maintain their distinction from them.

Do the animal regulations apply to Christians today?

In general, the New Testament is very clear that a Christian is not obligated to follow the Mosaic Law (Genesis- Deuteronomy. See Gal. 3 for an example). In regard to the animal regulations, a number of texts specifically point to its irrelevance to Christians today: Mark 7:1-23, Acts 10 and 15; Romans 14:14, I Timothy 4:1-5.

¹ All information gathered from Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* in NICOT, and John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* in WBC. They rely heavily on M. Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*.