

# The Case for Torah

A Study of Genesis 9:3

Authors  
Eric Muhly  
Amy Muhly

In Genesis 9, does God tell Noah that mankind can now eat all animals? Let's look at the passage:

And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. **Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.** But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it" (Genesis 9:1-7).

Here it says that "every moving thing that lives shall be food for you." Does that mean that Noah would have thought to eat centipedes, mice, and pigs?

Before we interpret Genesis 9, let's consider what man could eat prior to the flood. Beginning in Genesis 1, God specifies what may be eaten:

And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food" (Genesis 1:29-30).

In Genesis 1, God describes man's diet as vegetarian. Even so, people raised and even slaughtered flocks of animals. This does not necessarily mean that they were eating the animals. Animal parts could serve many purposes such as using their skins to make clothes, their bladders to transport water, their fat to use as fuel for fire, and their bones to serve as sewing needles or tools.

But beyond this, we also see that man offered animals as sacrifices to God. In Genesis 4:4, Abel brought the firstborn of his flock and offered it with its fat portions to God, and it was pleasing to God. "... and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering ..."

Furthermore, God designated some animals as acceptable offerings whereas others were not acceptable. Those that were acceptable to God were "clean" whereas those that should not be used as a sacrifice were "unclean."

### **Clean Versus Unclean**

There is confusion about the terms "clean" and "unclean." In Hebrew the words are tahor (clean) and tamei (unclean). The English translation seems to imply that clean is righteous, good, and pure, whereas unclean is sinful, bad, and corrupt, but this is not necessarily the case. Rather, tahor means

acceptable for the temple, whereas tamei means unacceptable for the temple. There are many things that could cause a person to become unclean/tamei, including but not limited to eating animals that are designated tamei. This is a brief and possibly oversimplified explanation.

In Deuteronomy, we learn that eating an unclean animal is designated as a sin (Deuteronomy 14:3-20). Yet, some other activities that make a person “unclean” are not sinful. These include having sexual relations (Leviticus 15:18), giving birth (Leviticus 12), and coming in contact with a dead body (Numbers 19:11). It is not wrong to be sexually intimate with your spouse, give birth to a child, or take care of the body of someone who has passed away. Rather, these are good things. Yet all of these make a person “unclean.”

What, then, does it mean to be unclean? If someone is unclean, he is not able to go to the temple and make sacrifices. God requires a varying amount of time to pass (depending on the circumstance that made the person unclean), as well as the person taking a ritual bath before he or she can enter the temple.

With this understanding, it is important to note that unclean animals are not “bad” animals. They are not innately sinful or abhorrent to God. When he created the animals, he declared them as good. However, there is something about them that is not acceptable for temple sacrifice, just as a person who is in an unclean state is not “bad” but is not ready to participate in temple worship. For example, pigs are good. Sacrificing pigs is sin.

Long before the Mosaic Law, Noah understood the division between clean and unclean animals. While at this time, Noah did not eat any meat, he knew that some animals could be offered to God on the altar and others could not:

Then the LORD said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you **seven pairs of all clean animals**, the male and his mate, and **a pair of the animals that are not clean**, the male and his mate, and seven pairs of the birds of the heavens also, male and female, to keep their offspring alive on the face of all the earth (Genesis 7:1–3).

God gave Noah instructions to take seven pairs of clean animals and just one pair of unclean animals onto the ark. In Genesis 8, we learn the purpose of taking along the extra pairs of clean animals:

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Genesis 8:20–22).

In Genesis 8, it says “The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma.” In other words, God was pleased with the offering for several reasons. First, Noah chose the right animals. Second, Noah’s obedience was not just an external obedience; his heart was in the right place. When our hearts are wrong, then our offerings are a stench to God (Amos 5:21). God’s pleasure with the sacrifice confirms Noah’s faith and obedience.

## **God’s Food**

Now, in the Scriptures we see that God calls the offerings his "food." In Numbers 28:2-3 it says:

Command the people of Israel and say to them, “My offering, my food (lechem) for my food offerings, my pleasing aroma, you shall be careful to offer to me at its appointed time.” And you shall say to them, This is the food offering that you shall offer to the LORD: two male lambs a year old without blemish, day by day, as a regular offering.

The idea of offerings as God’s food may seem strange to us because we know he does not actually eat the animals. Nevertheless, he calls them his food. And while God does not chew and swallow and digest the sacrifices, he does consume them.

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. (Leviticus 9:22–24; cf. 1 Kings 18:38 and Judges 6:21).

So animals were sacrificed to God as his food, and it was only a certain division of animals that were acceptable as offerings. With this in mind, let’s return to the passage in question: “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.” (Genesis 9:3)

## **Every Green Plant? Every Moving Thing?**

Note that it says, “as I gave you the green plants.” Did God give Adam the green plants as food? The Hebrew for “green plant” is *yereq esev*. Let's look at Genesis 1:29-30:

And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant (*yereq esev*) for food.”

According to this passage, who gets to eat “every green plant” (*yerek esev*)? It is the animal kingdom that eats everything that grows while Adam eats a selection within that. Specifically Adam eats plants

yielding seeds and trees with seed in its fruit. He does not eat every green plant. Even today, there is plenty of vegetation humans do not eat.

So then, there is a division of food in Genesis 1, and because God reiterates this to man in Genesis 9, then it is likely that there is a division of food in Genesis 9. That is, when it says in 9:3 that every moving thing is food for you, this applies to the animal kingdom at large. Every moving thing is now food for animals. Within these “moving things,” there is a division of what mankind may eat.

When Noah was told man can eat the animals just as man can eat the green plants, he understood that he will eat a division of the animals just as he eats a division of the green plants. The question then becomes, what animals are intended for man to eat?

God established at creation that man was made in God’s image:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26–27).

Noah, who walked with God (Genesis 6:9), was well aware that he and all of mankind were made in the image of God. In fact, God explicitly tells this to Noah in Genesis 9:6: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” It would therefore be understood by Noah that God would invite his image-bearers to eat the same food God eats. Noah used wisdom and understanding of his relationship with God to say, “I am going to put something in my body that up until now has only been for God. What is God’s food has now become my food.” Noah, knowing that he is created in the image of God, understood that he was being invited to God’s table. It is an intimate act of fellowship with the Creator. Mankind has been invited to share in the food of the Creator, which does not include centipedes, mice, and pigs.

### **Which Clean Animals were Sacrificed?**

Granted, there are some clean animals that God does not allow on his altar (such as fish and deer). Let’s consider why certain clean animals are to be sacrificed at the temple and others are not. Deuteronomy makes a distinction among the clean animals that are brought to God’s altar and the clean animals that are not:

Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see, but at the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you. “However, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your towns, as much as you desire, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you. The unclean and the clean may eat

of it, as of the gazelle and as of the deer. Only you shall not eat the blood; you shall pour it out on the earth like water (Deuteronomy 12:13–16).

According to this passage, offerings must be sacrificed at the temple (the place that the Lord will choose). However, the wild animals that are hunted do not need to be slaughtered at the temple, but rather can be eaten within any town. Yet God is very clear that domestic animals, as well as the tithe of crops must be brought to the temple:

You may not eat within your towns the tithe of your grain or of your wine or of your oil, or the firstborn of your herd or of your flock, or any of your vow offerings that you vow, or your freewill offerings or the contribution that you present, but you shall eat them before the LORD your God in the place that the LORD your God will choose (Deuteronomy 12:17–18).

Therefore a distinction is made among the animals that are owned and used as livelihood and those that are hunted. Livestock must be sacrificed at the temple, while hunted animals can be eaten in any town. (If a person lives too far from the temple, he is allowed to slaughter and eat the animal within his town – Deuteronomy 12: 20-22.)

Why is this distinction made? It seems that God calls us to share our livelihood with Him, to acknowledge that He is our Provider. A portion of our livestock and grains are His. Deuteronomy 12 goes on to say:

But the holy things that are due from you, and your vow offerings, you shall take, and you shall go to the place that the LORD will choose, and offer your burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, on the altar of the LORD your God. The blood of your sacrifices shall be poured out on the altar of the LORD your God, but the flesh you may eat (Deuteronomy 12:26–27).

Therefore, it is not only clean animals that we share at God’s table, but moreover clean animals from our own means of living. It is a purposeful sacrifice in which we bring to God from our own resources what rightfully belongs to Him.

## **Back to the Garden**

The idea of “what to eat” and “what not to eat” was deeply understood by Noah because of the Garden. He knew there were consequences for eating what people were not supposed to. Adam and Eve had eaten a division of food that was off-limits, and it affected all of creation:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:15–17).

Interestingly, even some of the consequences of this first sin were about eating. The serpent would eat dust (3:14) and Adam would eat bread by the sweat of his brow (3:18).

Prior to the flood, Noah knew about clean and unclean animals. As part of the righteous seed of Seth, he sacrificed clean animals to God. This was an act of worship. Amazingly, in Genesis 9, Noah and all of mankind are invited for the first time to partake of God's food, to actively participate in the act of worship by eating with God, sharing his food.

As for the animal kingdom, they now eat other animals. Of course, animals do not cook their meals or drain the blood out or discriminate what animals can be preyed upon. But man must not eat meat with blood in it. Why? Because he is made in the image of God. People bear God's image, and so people, not animals, are invited to share in God's food.

What does God eat? What does God allow on his altar? Noah is no fool. He is aware of God's division of clean and unclean animals. He knows what God eats and does not eat because Noah has offered up sacrifices to God before. He knows what is acceptable, what is allowed. He does not want a repeat of the Garden.

### **Eating as Worship**

When we consider eating as an act of worship, it sheds light on so many things:

- Our bodies as temples of God (1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16)
- Why people pray before meals (Acts 27:35)
- Believers sharing communion together (Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Cor 11:20-34)
- Why some people were dying for wrongly participating in communion (1 Corinthians 11:30)
- Why we cannot eat meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; Revelation 2:14,20)
- Nadab and Abihu offering strange fire (they offered something unacceptable to God) (Leviticus 10)
- God's requirement that people sacrifice their meat at the temple if they want to eat it (Leviticus 17:1-8)
- The wedding supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9)
- And probably much more!

The Creator of the Universe has invited us to feast with him, to share his food with him. If we fill our plates with unclean meats and sit down to dine with God, isn't this offensive to Him? Are we offering him a meal that He does not consider to be food? Are we acting like animals, with whom God does not invite to share His meals? Are we acting like beasts, who in Genesis 9 can now eat all moving things?

God loves our obedient actions and obedient hearts. When we join him at his table, sharing food that he loves, he is pleased. Similarly, it is offensive to him when we bring the wrong kind of food to his table:

But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, ‘How have we polluted you?’ By saying that the LORD’S table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? (Malachi 1:6–8)

I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks; who sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat pig’s flesh, and broth of tainted meat is in their vessels (Isaiah 65:2–4).

Of course, it is not simply what we bring to eat but also how we bring it. Remember, God was pleased with Noah’s external and internal obedience, and so he is with ours:

He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck; he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig’s blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol. These have chosen their own ways, and their soul delights in their abominations; I also will choose harsh treatment for them and bring their fears upon them, because when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, they did not listen; but they did what was evil in my eyes and chose that in which I did not delight” (Isaiah 66:3–4).

Let’s not despise his name by offering polluted food upon his altar. Let’s not choose that which is evil in his eyes and in which he does not delight. Let’s not despise his table, but rather sit down with him in joy and reverence and celebration, knowing that “He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love” (Song 2:4).