

## Deuteronomy 14:1-10

You are children of the LORD your God. You must not lacerate yourselves or shave your forelocks for the dead. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; it is you the LORD has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

You shall not eat any abhorrent thing. These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain-sheep. Any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof cloven in two, and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. Yet of those that chew the cud or have the hoof cloven you shall not eat these: the camel, the hare, and the rock-badger, because they chew the cud but do not divide the hoof; they are unclean for you. And the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you. You shall not eat their meat, and you shall not touch their carcasses.

Of all that live in water you may eat these: whatever has fins and scales you may eat. And whatever does not have fins and scales you shall not eat; it is unclean for you.

## Acts 10:1-17a

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, 'Cornelius.' He stared at him in terror and said, 'What is it, Lord?' He answered, 'Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.' When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

## Texts in Context

My plan for this morning is to outline two related and yet distinct methods of biblical study. We have simple and pure biblical criticism, which seeks to understand the linguistic and literary and theological and historical background to any given text. One need not actually be a Christian, Jew, or accepting of a higher power to engage in such biblical study. Another side of the ledger is the biblical study in which we commoners and congregations and conferences approach biblical study; one in which “intelligent and educated believers” incorporate biblical criticism into a faith-enhancing exploration of our sacred texts. Sandra Schneiders distinguishes between these two modes as informational and transformational.<sup>1</sup> We have an “ancient, ambiguous and diverse” bible, but with tools of biblical criticism and a trust in God’s spirit we should not fear approaching our bibles. At the very least, we will have each other in the journey.

I am kind of taken with ambiguous texts. They make me curious. For some reason they were important to God’s people at some point. I like the search for what those concerns might have been and considerations if or how they might express themselves today. With this in mind I settled on a pairing of O.T. and N.T. texts seemingly in tension with each other. Sometimes policies and procedures change—in our sacred text, in our lives and in the life of the Church. Let me begin with a story from a church of some decades back.

A well-respected woman falls in love with a man and they wished to be married in church. Her church. Her Mennonite church. Problem: he was divorced. The issue at this time was if the congregation would condone the marriage of a divorcee within the confines of the church building—citing a section of Mark 10 and parallel passages in the gospels. The Deacons meet to discern such weighty matters. They came to no resolution that night, so any decision was suspended pending further discussion—so Mennonite. But they did discuss the request at the next Deacon Board meeting. Yes, they said, they can get married in this church building. No, they can not use the sanctuary. They are permitted use of the basement for the wedding service if they so choose.

As I was listening to this real-life tale of real-life people, I was stunned. “So they were offered second class citizenship?”, I asked rather shocked. The story continued. Given the times they may have not been granted any access. The couple knew being denied completely was a possibility, so they chose to be grateful and had the service in the basement. Years later the bride of the day ran into this person who had been at the wedding. As they caught up with each other, she reported they were doing well.

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 12-13.

In 1525 early Anabaptist Hans Denck published a discussion of 40 paradoxes in the Bible. His conclusion was that only the inner Word of God which comes through the Holy Spirit can be the authoritative guide through such sticky wickets.<sup>2</sup> I like Hans Denck. I also like biblical criticism which might give the Holy Spirit space to guide us. This takes me to our textual case study of the day: Deuteronomy 14 in conversation with Acts 10.

I have chosen to subject us to one of those passages Peter Enns might call ancient and ambiguous. Out of curiosity has anyone here ever heard Dt 14 used as a scriptural basis for a sermon? Anyone? No? Well, that would make it ancient and ambiguous, and maybe worthy of a look. But there is only one way to find out, so let's get to it.

At play within Dt 14 is an attempt to equip the people to live within a framework of the "holy" and the "profane"-- the common we might say. This is where historical studies comes in very helpful. "The complexity is due, in part at least, to the fact that in ancient times the idea of holiness was given a physical, or quasi-physical, connotation. Holiness was a quality attached to places, persons, or things. At the same time, this quasi-physical property of holiness was fundamentally linked to ideas of separation and distinctness. Consequently, it involved the careful marking of boundaries. The holiness associated with God demanded...a careful separation from all that was unclean and that could threaten this holiness. Holiness and uncleanness, if allowed to come together, were a dangerous mixture".<sup>3</sup> I think back to my early years of watching Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* in which poor Scottie the engineer took great pains to keep the make believe matter and anti-matter from coming into contact with each other—for if ever the two should meet, there would be cataclysm. Keep the holy from the profane, please. It is not that the unclean creatures are bad, God made them as well, it is just that they were given this unclean designation.

Dt 14, and other sections of the Jewish bible, affirm Israel as people holy to the LORD God. As such, they were to keep separate from the gentiles and carefully screen their actions and diets. Theologically, these policies kept religious ideas of the nations at a distance. It served a sociological function in that people who observe the same rituals and rules tend to be more cohesive as a people. Finally, it served a health function in that carron feeding birds might transmit diseases or dining on swine might give a person trichinosis and so forth. The rules about the unclean and the clean were a hedge to maintain the holiness of God's people.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [Denck, Hans \(ca. 1500-1527\) - GAMEO](#)

<sup>3</sup> Ronald E. Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (v1 II), (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 397.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

I think knowing some of this information which comes from Biblical studies is helpful as we contemplate the transformative dimensions of Dt. 14 and sections of scriptures like it. There is a place, I would say, for creating good boundaries. Most social workers, counselors, psychologists and pastors would agree. There are actions and attitudes which tarnish the holy mark of God which we humans carry. There are policies which deface God's good creation and creatures. A religious community, in particular, ought to have conversations in which we help each other better understand how to live well with each other, with creation, with the creatures. Our O.T. text for today invites these conversations.

It is also true, however, that the identity reinforcing policy got in the way of their divine commission to be a blessing for all the nations.<sup>5</sup> For example, the German language which contributed to Mennonites maintaining their religious cohesion and social identity got in the way of sharing some of our spiritual gifts with others of the various lands in which they lived. There is this tension of discerning which boundaries are helpful and which get in the way of God's intentions for us and our world. That quandary takes us to our N.T. story.

By the time we get to the 1<sup>st</sup> century and Jesus, things on the ground had changed significantly. The food laws we find in Deuteronomy 14 had become a badge of honour for the Jewish community living amongst non-Jews. While the food laws may have had their place, Jesus drew critical attention to such traditions. In both the gospel of Matthew (23:23) and Luke (11:42ff), Jesus puts food based holiness along side broader consideration of justice, mercy, faith, and inclusion. In John 5 Jesus stays two days in a Samaritan village (John 5:40), and I expect he ate what was set before him. When Jesus sends out seventy in Luke 10 they are told to eat what is provided them by the host of a town, and there is no certainly these towns or a host would have been Jewish (Luke 10:8). In Acts 10 this trajectory of the Gospel narratives comes fully into focus.

In Acts 10 we have scripture interpreting scripture. According to the text we have the holy spirit re-writing and re-defining what it means to be clean. The food laws, and all they represent, are getting in the way of God's mission that God's people might be a blessing to all nations and peoples. While Cornelius has been attending sessions at the synagogue, he is clearly a gentile; God seeks him out. It is awkward enough that he is a gentile, but Cornelius is also a soldier of the occupying Roman force; still God seeks him out. Even more awkward, Cornelius is a centurion—a commander of 100 within the cohort. It is worth noting that in Luke and Acts we often find parallel stories. In this case, in both Acts 10 and Luke

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<sup>5</sup> Gerald E. Gerbrandt, *Deuteronomy* in the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 2015), p. 272.

7 we find a centurion who has a good relationship with the Jewish community. In Luke 7 Jesus heals the Centurion's servant and in Acts 10 the Centurion's household is baptized. Food laws and other identity markers are being dismantled. It is not that the early church does away with boundaries around food (see Acts ch 15 as well as Romans (ch 14). The defining markers of the early church focus more on the fruits of the spirit (love, joy and peace) as opposed to more self-serving behaviour.

It does raise the issue, though, of how we discern the best way to live the ethics of Christ like love in this decade of this century. Simply put, we do it together. On this point Stanley Hauerwas has a quote which I like.

Most North American Christians assume that they have a right, if not an obligation, to read the Bible. I challenge that assumption. No task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America. Let us no longer give the Bible to all children when they enter the third grade or whenever their assumed rise to Christian maturity is marked...Let us rather tell them and their parents that they are possessed by habits far too corrupt for them to be encouraged to read the Bible on their own.

North American Christians are trained to believe that they are capable of reading the Bible without spiritual and moral transformation. They read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who think their common sense is sufficient for understanding the Scripture. They feel no need to stand under the authority of a truthful community to be told how to read. Instead, they assume that they have all the religious experience necessary to know what the Bible is about.<sup>6</sup>

Wow, that is really a zinger. And Really, with such an ancient and ambiguous and diverse test, should we be reading it on our own?

Earlier I referenced Hans Denck who noted some 40 contradictions in the bible. I have always been drawn to Hans Denck as a 16<sup>th</sup> century reformer because he held together reflection, action, compassion, and institutional revitalization. He also valued both Testaments, which I do as well. Denck has been quoted as saying, it is Christ "who has revealed the fundamental spiritual principle that underlies both Testaments, and this principle is the divine spirit of love".<sup>7</sup> May we love the Lord our God, our neighbour and ourselves. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (), p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), p. 162-163

## Children's Time

Orange Shirt Day: [Phyllis Webstad - On Orange Shirt Day. - YouTube](#)  
[Phyllis Webstad - On Orange Shirt Day. - YouTube](#)

## Children's Time (option two)

Here we are again, trying to understand the best way to make sense of the Bible. I want to begin by providing an illuminating illustration which I ran across in Sandra Schneider's *The Revelatory Text*. I present before you a tie (hold up a necktie). I present before you a tie (hold up a shoe lace tie). I present before a tie (hold up a paper with 1-1 written on it). Now, I have presented three differed forms of a tie. If I said in conversation or in sermonizing mode, "It is a tie"; how would we know to which tie I am referring? Context. The location of words in relation to other words give them meaning. The relation of stories within stories give them meaning.