

Deuteronomy 14:3–8

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-14/deuteronomy-143-8/>

Continuing the theme of holiness, Moses then moves to what food the Israelites were permitted to eat and what they were prohibited from eating. He specifies which land animals were acceptable as food and which ones were to be avoided.

In the matter of diet, the Israelites were to refrain from eating any abominable thing. In [Leviticus 11](#), the Suzerain God already issued a command regarding dietary laws that His vassals (Israel) were to follow. Here again, He repeats these laws to ensure His vassals live in perfect harmony with Him, abiding by His own standard of holiness.

Moses told the Israelites that they could *not eat any detestable thing* (v. 3). The term translated *detestable thing* is the Hebrew word “tō’ēbā,” a term often translated into English as “abomination” ([Deuteronomy 7:25](#)). The Hebrew word can refer to something that is unclean or impure. This word is also associated with idolatry ([2 Kings 23:13](#)).

As a part of the holy life to which the Israelites were called, they were to avoid eating unclean food. The Suzerain God called His people to understand the difference between clean and unclean food. Whatever was clean was good for them to eat. Whatever was unclean was detestable and to be avoided. These dietary laws are given in vv. 4-21 below. God does not explain why these laws are in their best interest, just that they are. Many of these foods might have been prone to carrying disease or worms, so God might have had a health rationale. But God does not give a reason. He only asks them to trust Him.

In the New Testament, God showed unclean animals to Peter in a vision and stated that He had made what was unclean to be clean ([Acts 10:15](#)). Therefore, God told Peter to no longer call what He had cleansed “common” or profane. This vision related to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people), but also indicates that God’s intent is that all things be redeemed and become clean. Animals were not consumed as food prior to Noah’s flood. But after the flood, God authorized animals to be eaten ([Genesis 9:3](#)). Now God narrows what is allowed for His chosen, priestly people.

Having prohibited the Israelites from eating detestable foods (v. 3), Moses went on to describe the animals that were permitted or prohibited. This section deals with the land animals that may be eaten in Israel. Moses began by saying, *These are the animals which you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat.*

— An *ox* is an adult cow, a domesticated animal used primarily in Israel for farm work such as plowing, as indicated by [Deuteronomy 22:10](#). It was used to transport burdens. Therefore beef was clean.

—The *sheep* is also a domestic animal. In ancient times, the sheep represented the chief wealth and livelihood of farmers, providing food to eat and milk to drink.

—The *goat* is a cud-chewing animal with backward arching horns. It was also clean and allowable for food.

These first three animals—*the ox, the sheep, and the goat*—were all domestic animals that the Israelites could freely eat.

Next, Moses told the Israelites that they could freely eat *the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope and the mountain sheep.*

—The *deer* is an antlered animal with two large and two small hooves.

—The *gazelle* is a fleet-footed animal resembling an antelope, but smaller.

—The *roebuck*, sometimes called “roe deer” is a small animal. In fact, it is one of the smallest species of deer, measuring approximately 26 inches at the shoulder ([2 Samuel 2:18](#)). It is dark reddish-brown in summer and yellowish-gray in winter.

—The *wild goat* is like the domestic goat. The only difference was that the *wild goat* lived on its own in the hills and forests without any help from humans.

—The *ibex* is from the species of wild goat. It has large curved horns and is native to high mountain areas ([1 Samuel 24:2](#); [Psalms 104:18](#)). For this reason, it is sometimes called “mountain-goat.”

—The *antelope* is a fleet-footed mammal with horns, about the size of a donkey.

—The *mountain sheep* is a small goat-like antelope standing about 2 feet high.

Along with the three animals already mentioned — *the ox, the sheep, and the goat* — these seven wild animals could be eaten.

To ensure the Israelites understood which animal was considered clean, Moses provided a description which consists of two components. First, the Israelites *may eat any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof split in two*. The animal that *divides the hoof* is that which has separated hooves (each hoof has two separate digits or “toes”).

Second, the Israelites may eat any animal that *chews the cud*. An animal *chews the cud* by bringing up a portion of the food from its stomachs in order to chew it again (a ruminant animal). To be considered clean, an animal had to fit both descriptions: it had to have split hooves and chew its cud.

After the description of the land animals that were clean and permitted (vv. 4-6), Moses described those animals that were unclean and forbidden. He provided some exceptions among those animals that *chew the cud* or *divide the hoof*. (v. 7). Animals that *chew the cud* are those that bring up a portion of the food from their stomachs in order to chew it again. Animals *that divide the hoof in two* are those having the hooves of their feet separated in the middle. To be considered clean, an animal had to fit both descriptions: it had to have split hooves and chew the cud.

Moses then listed the specific animals which fit one of these descriptions, but not both. First he described three animals that chew their cud but do not have divided hooves—*the camel and the rabbit and the shaphan*.

—The *camel* was a large beast of burden, most often used to transport both goods and people ([Genesis 37:25](#)). It was useful in time of war ([Judges 6:5](#)) because it could walk 60 to 75 miles a day and could carry a load weighing at least 600 pounds. The camel has thick elastic pads of fibrous tissue on its feet and can walk on hot desert sands. It can live without water for a long period of time and can even subsist on vegetation which grows on saline soils. The animal’s nostrils are pinched together and can be closed at will in order to prevent penetration of sand during violent sandstorms. The *camel* was the same animal as we know today.

—The *rabbit* was a small, long-eared furry mammal, the same as we know today.

—The *shaphan* was a small furry animal that resembled a rabbit in size and color. Some associate this type of animal to the rock badger. It lived in the rocky cliffs ([Psalms 104:18](#); [Proverbs 30:26](#)).

Moses told the Israelites that though these animals *chew the cud, they do not divide the hoof*. Therefore, *they were unclean*. The adjective *unclean* refers to that which is ritually or ceremonially impure and was thus unacceptable for worship. In Old Testament times, ritual impurity could be caused by such things as leprosy, body discharges, contact with dead bodies etc.

Then, Moses added *the pig* (v. 8) to the list. The reason for this was *because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, it is unclean for you*.

The *pig* was a stout-bodied animal with a large snout and thick skin, the same as we know today. This animal became a symbol for paganism and was often used in the Bible as metaphor for uncleanness ([Proverbs 11:22](#); [Matthew 7:6](#); [2 Peter 2:22](#)).

Because these land animals did not meet both requirements—to have their hooves separated in the middle and to chew the cud—they were regarded as *unclean* in the sight of the Suzerain (Ruler) God. Therefore, Moses commanded the Israelites not to *eat any of the flesh* of these unclean animals *nor touch their carcasses* (the dead bodies) of these animals.

Biblical Text:

³You shall not eat any detestable thing. ⁴These are the animals which you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, ⁵the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope and the mountain sheep. ⁶Any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof split in two *and* chews the cud, among the animals, that you may eat. ⁷Nevertheless, you are not to eat of these among those which chew the cud, or among those that divide the hoof in two: the camel and the rabbit and the shaphan, for though they chew the cud, they do not divide the hoof; they are unclean for you. ⁸The pig, because it divides the hoof but *does not chew* the cud, it is unclean for you. You shall not eat any of their flesh nor touch their carcasses.