

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE OBSERVANCE OF PENTATEUCHAL DIETARY
LAWS IN LEVITICUS 11: 1-19 BY THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST
CHURCH IN NIGERIA**

Luke Emeka Ugwueye, PhD

&

Ogbonnaya, Joshua Isaac

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

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Abstract

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is known for their commitment and obedience in keeping the pentateuchal dietary laws irrespective of the ever dynamic world people live in. The Seventh-day Adventist Church sees the levitical dietary laws to be very important because not only careful exegesis and theological reasoning prove that these are God's requirements and were not revoked but that when observed, they express respect for the holy creator. The teaching concerning clean and unclean meats has been a remarkably enduring element of Seventh-day Adventism. It is worthy to note that the Adventists attest to the fact that the major reasons why God gave the dietary laws to his people is to set them apart from other nations and for them to be holy unto him, as he is holy. It is an indisputable fact that there are foods one can eat and such food will corrupt and defile the person's system. Holiness is essentially the theological basis of these dietary laws even though other theological explanations can be deciphered. In the same vein, obeying the dietary laws makes the Adventists to live longer and healthy and as a result, they have quality time to serve God here on earth. The quality of life that people live as it concerns their health and longevity depends on what they eat. Most unclean animals are transmitters of communicable diseases. Therefore the major focus of this work is to discuss the implications of the levitical dietary laws by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which includes holiness or set apartness, health benefits and strong moral discipline of the Adventists. Keeping the dietary laws therefore sanctifies and distinguishes the Adventists as God's covenant people.

Introduction

The food prohibitions are certainly older than the rationale given to them in the scripture. No doubt their origins were quite varied. Laymon (1971) observes that some creatures were disgusting in appearance or habits, while others were discovered from experience to be carriers of diseases; attributed to demonic forces. He further notes that taboos against some creature were no doubt the remnants of long-forgotten associations with tribal enemies. Laymon asserts that recent

research has pointed to the possibility that some dietary prohibitions were directed against the cultic practices of pagan neighbours. Brunt (1981) notes that regardless of individual origins, the development within Israel of the diet laws as a total system must be attributed to the one reason offered by all scriptural passages referring to these laws, which has to do basically with "holiness." It is noteworthy that no punishment for violating these laws is over mentioned. The prohibited foods are simply declared "unclean," and it is understood that anyone absorbing their impurity would be cut off from all contact with the holy and therefore from God. The concept of holiness bears a dual connotation; not only separation from impurities, especially, those of pagans, but also sanctification, the emulation of God's nature. The food prohibitions taken together with the blood prohibition form a unified dietary code whereby man may indulge his appetite for meat and not be brutalized in the process.

The Seventh-day Adventist rules regarding food as they practice them now are more about spiritual defilement than health, even though health remains a cogent reason for keeping the pentateuchal dietary laws. Their spiritual identity in this area is not about caring for their bodies intelligently, but avoiding what they think God considers being impure foods. If intelligent care of the body is the goal, the case for vegetarianism as made by Ellen G. White, backed up as it is by moral, economic and scientific arguments, is much stronger than the Biblical case for clean meat. But even vegetarianism is far from a total health regimen. For good health one has to exercise, limit sugar and add a heavy dose of fruits, nuts and vegetables, plus a host of other constantly evolving discoveries by health researchers.

Interestingly, the pentateuchal dietary laws have health benefits embedded in them. Diet and health cannot be divorced. The Levitical dietary laws propose a good resort for preventive and curative healthcare. With the challenging and persistent problems of degenerative diseases, effective observance of the dietary laws remains paramount for healthy living. More so, the dietary laws inculcate ethical and moral reflections in the area of discipline and self-control in the life of the Adventists. Therefore, the Seventh-day Adventist diet is a diet plan promoted by members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is mostly plant based diet that avoids substances that they consider unclean or harmful.

Holiness of Dietary Laws in Leviticus 11: 1-19 and Seventh-day Adventist Church in Nigeria

Immediately after God addresses his sons in Leviticus 11: 1 he then speaks to them about the importance of being holy to God. Holiness is a direct product of the character and nature of God as God. Apart from God revealing to people his nature, people would not know holiness. But the good news is that he does reveal his nature to people. Then he looks at his children and says, "The very nature I am telling you about is how I want you to behave as well." In other words, he says that because you are my children, it is of the utmost importance that you reflect my character in your actions. Be holy as I am holy.

As an additional reference, Leviticus 11 is an entire chapter devoted to what is acceptable for God's children to eat and what isn't acceptable. At the conclusion of this matter, he points back to holiness as his motivation for revealing these beautiful commands to his children. Nevertheless, food is a matter of holiness. **Food has always been a great litmus test for the true heart condition of the sons of God.** Lest we forget, eating forbidden food was literally the sin that caused Adam to be removed from the presence of God in the Garden of Eden. Many people haven't taken this subject matter seriously enough. Too many have long been ruled by the gods of their stomachs. God's desire is for his children to be holy. This holiness involves more than just a few superficial changes: it is the state of being committed and devoted to God with our entire lives, including what we eat.

M. Amaefuna (personal communication, 25th March, 2023) affirms that the Seventh-day Adventists are the spiritual Israelites and that anywhere God dwells is holy. The Adventists believe since God dwells in our body, we should not desecrate our body with what we eat. The unclean animals God has asked the Adventists to avoid are harmful to the body and most especially can defile someone spirituality. Land (2005) notes that cleanness has the basic meaning of purity or holiness and the distinctions between clean and unclean were designed to keep Israel separate from pagan religious practices. God chose Israel to be a special people and to be different from other nations, especially in their moral behaviour. He further notes that these particularly degrading aspects of pagan worship; especially those involving the occult; that used certain animals may have been the reason for their ban in Israel, the pig was used in the worship of underworld deities and was employed in Canaanite rituals as well.

Thus the reason for avoiding the unclean animals is simple: it is for the sake of holiness. This is an indisputable fact straight from God's own mouth. By enforcing a certain diet as acceptable for his people, God effectively separated them from the surrounding nations who had no issue with eating whatever food they could find.

Although other nations who did not know God behaved in this manner, God's children were held to a higher standard. Their distinctive diet would make them stand out, and when they interacted with other nations, inevitably these other individuals would be curious and ask, "Why don't you eat the same way we do?" Thus holiness in action would open opportunities to spread God's message of holiness to other groups of people. While it is possible to speculate about why God chose the particular animals he did and how these individual selections would lead to holiness, the most important thing to take away from this passage is that the kosher laws were indeed established as a standard for walking in holiness.

From Leviticus 11: 1-19, it does appear to be indisputable that dietary laws are an important aspect of holiness. The primary reason offered in the Torah is that the dietary laws are to sanctify, make holy and distinguish a relationship between the Israelite people and God. This is found in the refrain that appears as both preface and afterword to many of the laws: "I am the Lord who brought you up from Egypt to become your God. You are to keep yourselves holy because I am holy." In more contemporary writings, kashrut is associated with an innate ethical aspect of the laws. The implication is that holiness and God's favour are available to those who practice kashrut because the laws themselves represent a better, more ethical way of eating.

Central to the dietary laws are the law on forbidden flesh in Leviticus 11. It is specifically this law that is chosen by the author of the code of holiness to symbolize the 'separation' of Israel as God's holy people 'from the peoples.' In Leviticus 20: 25-26, God told the Israelites that you are to make a clear separation between clean beasts and unclean beasts and between unclean and clean birds. You must not contaminate yourselves through beast or bird or anything that creeps on the ground, for I have made a clear separation between them and you, and declaring them unclean. You must be holy to me, because I the Lord am holy. I have made a clear separation between you and the heathen that you may belong to me. Therefore, God's original intention of given the Israelites the dietary laws were to separate them from other nations and to make them pure and holy.

G.C. Emenike (personal communication, 6th July, 2023) observes that God told the Israelites that they are a holy people unto him. God chose them and they are not the ones that chose God. He demanded for them to be holy. It is worthy to note that there are foods one will eat and your system will be corrupted. God wants the Israelites to be unique, set apart and not to be like other nations. The reason for

been set apart doesn't mean that such a person is holy than others, but to maintain your identity with God.

Health Benefits of the Dietary Laws in Leviticus 11: 1-19 and Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Eastern Nigeria

The dietary principles of Leviticus 11, together with other sanitary and health regulations, were intended by a wise creator to promote health and longevity. Based as they are upon the nature and requirements of the human body, these principles could in no way be affected either by the cross or the disappearance of Israel as a nation. Principles that contributed to health 3,500 years ago will produce the same results today.

The sincere Adventist considers his body to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. Appreciation of this fact will lead him, among other things, to eat and drink to the glory of God, that is, to regulate his diet according to God's revealed will. Thus he or she must, to be consistent, accept and obey the principles of the dietary laws set forth in Leviticus 11. Brunt (1981) asserts that the Seventh-day Adventist Church believes and practices the dietary laws in Leviticus 11. He notes that these laws were given for the health benefits of the Children of Israel. Brunt states that God instructed the Israelites on what they should eat for their longevity and health as they travelled on their journey to the promise land. He told them the animals they should eat and the ones they should avoid.

The animals that chew cud are called clean animals while the ones that God didn't permit them to eat are called the unclean animals. Mueller (2015) observes that the idea of clean and unclean animals did not start in the book of Leviticus, rather in Genesis 7: 2, God asked Noah to pick the animals that are clean, seven of each kind and a pair of the unclean ones. He further notes that eating of meat started after the flood, because there was not enough vegetation for human beings to eat after the flood. Mueller further asserts that the World Health Organization in 2004 conducted a research to compare among the different religious organizations of the world, to study their life span and longevity. The study shows that the people with the highest rate of longevity were the vegetarians, followed by those that kept the dietary laws. The lowest according to the research was those that eat everything.

It is worthy to note that the Seventh-day Adventists are not the only people that keep the dietary laws. God gave these laws so that people can live healthy. Most of the things that God asked people not to eat are highly fatty food or they contain high cholesterol, and as such, are very harmful to the body. There are certain sicknesses that are common with people who eat everything that comes on their way. For example diabetes, sight malfunction, obesity, etc. but this is not common with the Adventists.

D.U. Oriaku (persona communication, 6th July, 2023) observes that if not for sin, man was given vegetables to eat. God destroyed the world with flood because of sin and after the flood, man started to eat flesh. But God told man the flesh to eat (clean animals) and the ones to avoid (unclean animals). The Seventh-day Adventist Church is not taking dietary laws as a doctrine but they are practicing it because of its health reasons. A. C. Ezenwa (personal communication, 18th July, 2023) attested that he had never slept in the hospital because of sickness. He affirmed that as an Adventist, what has been helping him to live a healthy life was his diligent observance of the dietary laws. He acknowledges that the Seventh-day Adventist Church accepts the dietary laws of Leviticus 11. He also notes that the reason why God told the Adventists not to eat the unclean animals is very obvious. This is because some of those animals are scavengers, like the pigs, and some of them are dangerous to the body.

Ezenwa notes that Loma-Lind University in the United States of America was called a blue zone by Cable News Network (CNN) because most people who live there lived above 100 years old and majority of them were Adventists and they were ardent observers of dietary laws. White (1976) observes that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has gone beyond encouraging their members to eat clean animals, rather they are advocating presently for their members to be vegetarians. They also encourage their members to avoid carbonated foods. White notes that although we cannot live in this world forever, but we are not permitted to kill by eating things that kills us. She emphasized that our bodies are temple of God, so we should manage them well.

White (1976) also maintains that the Seventh-day Adventist Church teaches her members that if you cannot be a vegetarian, then eat what God had permitted them to eat. She states that the deadliest meat to eat is pork, because it doesn't excrete toxins, even the crayfish falls in the same category. White emphasizes that the Adventists believe in the wholeness of the body. People should not eat

recklessly. Jesus died for us so that we can live a good life and help other to live a good life.

Nichol (1978) agrees that since its organization as a denomination in the mid-nineteenth century, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been advocating the counsel of the Church's primary health reformer, Ellen G. White, which emphasizes the role of lifestyle in promoting health, happiness and enhanced spiritually. He notes that in 1905, Ellen G. White consolidated her counsel into this concise statement: "pure air, sunlight, abstemiousness, rest, exercise, proper diet, uses of water and trust in divine power – these are the true remedies." Consequently, it is not surprising that research on health of Seventh-day Adventists since the 1950s has shown that they appear to enjoy low rates of chronic diseases and lower total mortality, despite living in areas where chronic diseases are prevalent. The contemporary Adventists deduced from the teaching of Ellen G. White the idea of "NEWSTART" which is the Church acronym that stands for the following health indicator:

N – Nutrition (i.e. wholesome diet)

E – Exercise the body

W – Water (i.e. drink a lot of water)

S – Sunlight

T – Temperance (do not over work yourself)

A – Air (take fresh air. Do not cut down every tree within your environment)

R – Rest (always rest the body and have good sleep)

T – Trust in God

Science is only now validating the significance of this Adventist health ideas and its importance for physical and mental health, as chronic disease rates escalate in the twenty-first century. R. Nwankpa (personal communication, 20th July, 2023) observes that if people follow the dietary laws, it is hard for such people to be sick. He notes that people are not utilizing what God gave to humanity naturally. He further affirms that if people abide by what God has instructed them with respect to the dietary laws and stop eating flesh, they will live longer.

Nwankpa maintains that processed or carbonated food and food with high cholesterol is a major cause of sickness today. He asserts that God originally instructed man to eat fruits, nuts and later added herbs. These herbs were for the healing of the nations after the flood. He submits that if people can go back to the original instructions of God with respect to dietary laws, people will live longer

and praise God. But for one to keep these laws, such a person needs the help of God and must trust in God. E.U. Ukpulor (personal communication, 25th July, 2023) opines that the essence of the dietary laws was for human beings to live longer in order to serve God better. He reiterated that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is currently emphasizing on vegetarianism. The Adventists believe that the dietary laws are binding and therefore, they preach, teach and encourage their members to observe it.

Obedience to the Dietary Laws as Paradigm for the Observance of the Moral Laws of God

The level at which the Jews, Seventh-day Adventists and other Sabbatherians keep the dietary laws is highly commendable. The rationale behind their observance of the dietary laws which has to do with holiness, healthy living and most especially to remain in good relationship with God is something worthy of emulation.

It is therefore pertinent to note that the dietary laws are one aspect of God's laws to humanity. The laws that God gave to the Jews can be grouped into four; which are as follows: the civil laws, the dietary laws, the moral laws and the ceremonial laws. In all these laws, the moral laws (i.e. the Ten Commandment or the Decalogue) summarize the entire laws that God gave to man. It explains how man should relate with God and how man should relate with his fellow human beings. The moral laws or the Ten Commandments are holy and eternal. They cannot be equated to the dietary laws, even though they all have to do with obedience.

It has been observed how the Seventh-day Adventists had been dedicated and committed in keeping the dietary laws. It is however important to note that if people strive to extend such commitment the Adventists exhibit while observing the dietary laws, to keep the moral laws of, man's relationship with God and his fellow human being will be better and the society will equally be improved. There are testimonies to what people benefits from keeping to the dietary laws; we can now imagine the enormous benefits we can enjoy when we keep to the moral laws of God. It is a win-win game which will benefit our spirituality, health, peace of mind and enhance our relation with God. If everyone in the society, including the Adventists adheres strictly to the observance of the moral laws of God, both the vertical (with God) and horizontal (between human beings) relationship among human beings will be greatly enhanced.

The Ten Commandments were written directly by God and was given to the Israelites through the mediator in the person of Moses. Here God stipulates the

moral instructions that will guide his relationship with man and by extension, man's relationship with his fellow human being. The Decalogue is written in Genesis 20 and they are as follows:

Thou shalt not have any other god's before God.

Thou shalt not make yourself an idol.

Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain.

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

Honour your father and mother.

Thou shalt not murder.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Thou shalt not steal.

Thou shalt not testify or bear false witness against your neighbour.

Thou shalt not covet.

The Jewish tradition holds that all 613 laws found in the Torah are summed up in the Ten Commandments and the Christians view the Ten Commandments as the foundation of God's moral law. Jesus in the New Testament called people to an even higher standard by obeying the commandments not only in their actions but also in their hearts. For instance, Jesus quoted the command not to commit adultery. He said; 'You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

The first four commandments kept the Lord God as the focus. God created the world and everything in it. He knew what was required for a successful and holy life. Therefore when man worship or reverence God and keeps the Sabbath in truth and spirit, he is strengthening his relationship with his maker that will eventually grant him the inner strength to do the bidding of his creator.

The Sabbath is set apart to connect with God and with other people. No one was excluded from the command to rest on the Sabbath day; even foreigners, servants and livestock were called to take a break from work on the Sabbath. It was to be a blessing for all of creation. God commanded his people to take the Sabbath for their benefit. God wants people to delight in his word, enjoy his creation, celebrate beauty and love; and rejoice in the harvest. God intended for his people to enjoy their relationship with him and each other by valuing the Sabbath.

On the other hand, our relationship with our parents is the foundation of our future relationships and choices. The family is the bedrock of the society. If

children learn how to honour and respect their parents, the culture of love, respect and honour of elders and people in authority will be inculcated in them. So the family has enormous responsibility in raising responsible children that lead to a good society. The reason why we have a failed society is as a result of the failure of the family in raising responsible children.

After establishing healthy relationships with God and family, the next commandments dealt with relationship with other people. Most of the negative challenges we are witnessing in our society today are as a result of people failing in keeping the Ten Commandments or the moral laws given to man by God. It is worthy to note that God had instructed man not to commit murder. Today, people kill their fellow human beings without any regard for the sanctity of life. There are cases of kidnapping, herd's men attack on farmers, assassination, ritual killing for money and power and other intentional murder committed by man to his fellow human being. God had commanded his people not to murder; because people are made in the image of God and life has value. Murder is an intentional act that says that a person's life has no value compared to other's priorities. Intentionally, God did not say, "Do not kill." Hebrew has nuances that consider the difference between murder, accidental death and an act of war.

God commanded his people to be faithful in marriage and to respect other people's vows as a model of faithfulness in their relationship with God. The lack of chastity among unmarried and married individuals has been on the increase in our society. This is one of the major causes of failure in marriages or divorce. Adultery devalues the commitment made between a husband and wife and to God. Interestingly, God's command not to commit adultery was an equal standard for men and women. In the New Testament, Jesus called his followers to faithfulness in marriage (Matthew 5: 27-28; Mark 10: 11-12). Paul explained to the Corinthians how to avoid sexual immorality by being faithful to one's spouse. But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relationship with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband (1Corinthians 7: 2).

Another commandment of God in the Decalogue is "You shall not covet your neighbour's house, your neighbour's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. The issue of covetousness is the root of all corruption and evil in the society. The menace of corruption has eaten deep into the fabrics of our society, whether within ecclesiastical circle or in the civil setting. People are no longer satisfied with what they have. Embezzlement of public fund has become order of the day and this evil has led to

underdevelopment of the society, insecurity, extreme poverty or untold hardship to the citizens and in most cases loss of lives and properties in the society. Why would God include coveting in the same list as murder, stealing and adultery? This is because God knew that coveting a neighbour's servant, ox or wife was a stepping stone to ungratefulness and discontentment; even lying, stealing, murder and adultery are all foxes that destroy the fabrics of our society. Focusing on what others have diminishes our ability to appreciate the good things in our lives.

It is worthy to note that the law is seen by the Seventh-day Adventists Church as a chain. The strongest chain is as weak as the weakest chain. All of them are very important. The moral laws (the Ten Commandments) are revelational knowledge about God's relationship with man and man's relationship with his fellow human being. The Decalogue forms the bedrock of the constitutions of nations. If only these laws are obeyed and kept by people, the society will be a wonderful place to be. There is nothing like partial obedience. He that defaults in one has defaulted in all. So if people keep the dietary laws; whether it is the Adventists or other Sabbath keepers, they should equally be diligent in keeping the moral laws of God or the Ten Commandment. Obeying the moral laws of God is the only way we can reciprocate God's love to humanity and maintain a healthy relationship between God and our fellow human being and as such, have a society where peace progress and righteousness reigns.

Conclusion

The Seventh-day Adventists believe in making distinction between clean and unclean food in order to avoid eating what is unclean, i.e., not fit for human consumption. They believe that along with adequate exercise and rest, they are to adopt the most healthful diet possible and abstain from the unclean foods identified in the scriptures.

The biblical clean and unclean food are built on the following regulations: clean land animals that chew the cud and have a split hoofs, unclean birds are only enumerated with birds of prey, which are forbidden to be eaten, fish with scales and fins are permitted for human consumption, all swarmers, including sea food like crabs or oysters and insects are the forbidden category except for four kinds of locusts (Leviticus 11:22).

It is worthy to note therefore, that the Seventh-day Adventists incorporated abstinence from unclean food into their fundamental beliefs. The levitical dietary

laws were given for holiness and redemption motifs and more so, for health and hygienic reasons for those that observe these food regulations. On this note therefore, it could be emphasized that the pentateuchal dietary laws were given by God to his people because of the following reasons: health benefits, respect for life, holiness, natural repulsiveness and a wall against the infiltration of paganism into their lifestyle.

It is pertinent to note that God desires that as Adventists, we give him glory in life's everyday activities, including eating and drinking, because we are accountable to him due to the fact that we are not our own, our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and in our body, we should glorify our redeemer. Food on our tables should be a silent witness that God and his word have the ultimate authority in our lives.

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