

Peter's Vision

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Traditional Christian terms and names are intentionally used throughout this lesson book to reach a larger scope of readers and help those who may be beginners in this knowledge learn with ease.

Shammai and Hillel

Peter's Vision, although short and simple to read, is among the most distorted of teachings.

The common interpretation is God's food laws were done away with and God told Peter he could now eat anything he wanted. The truth is far from that. (God's name is YHVH in Hebrew or Yehovah in English).

Let's begin with a short background about the culture in Israel at that time. This is vital to proper understanding.

During the second temple period, there were two great schools of learning among the Pharisees – the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel. Shammai and Hillel were contemporaries who both led the Sanhedrin.

Shammai was very strict in the interpretation and application of the Torah – Hillel was more flexible. Shammai had an intense dislike for gentiles and taught that gentiles had no place in the kingdom of God unless they became full converts to Judaism and kept all of the commandments of Moses, including circumcision.

Hillel taught the kingdom of God was for all people and that gentiles could become part of the kingdom if they were taught God's ways and then chose to enter into Covenant.

Followers of both Shammai and Hillel were amongst the Pharisees. The Pharisees not only followed the Law of Moses, but they also had a set of man-made laws called the Oral Torah that took precedence over the Law of Moses.

Paul was a student of Gamaliel, who was the grandson of Hillel.

Acts 5:34 Then there stood up one in the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a doctor of the Law honored among all the people. And he commanded the apostles to be put outside a little space.

Acts 22:3 I am truly a man, a Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the exactness of the Law of the fathers, being a zealous one of God, as you all are today.

Many of the arguments in the New Testament, more accurately called the Renewed Covenant, are between these two sets of belief and The Law of Moses. Jesus (Hebrew name is Yeshua) agreed with Hillel on some matters and with Shammai on other matters. It is a great misconception to lump everyone Jesus or Paul argued with as "evil Pharisees". Their arguments were against the added man-made laws of the Oral Torah as well as prohibiting gentiles from coming into Covenant without full conversion. They

were in agreement with the written Law of Moses and the future resurrection of the dead.

The disciples and others in Israel, both then and now, would have been quite aware of the differences and disagreements between the two schools of thought and certainly would be aware of where Jesus (Yeshua) and the disciples stood in regards to these two groups. It is these traditions and man-made laws that Jesus, Paul, and Peter argue against.

Now read this next carefully:

Acts 15:5 But some of those from the sect of the Pharisees, having believed, rose up, saying, It was necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.

The “sect of the Pharisees” does not refer to all Pharisees. We know it is the House of Shammai that objected to gentiles and required full conversion with circumcision immediately. You also learned the House of Hillel had no problem with Jesus or Paul going to the gentiles to teach them.

The question now is, “Why are we studying ancient Hebrew politics in this lesson about Peter’s vision?” The answer comes from Paul, Peter, and David:

Romans 10:3 For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God.

2 Peter 3:16 as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable pervert, as also they do the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.

Psalms 56:4-5 In God I will praise His Word; in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do to me. 5 All day long they pervert my words; all their thoughts are against me for evil.

It is very important to understand the culture with which Scripture was written. Our eyes and ears must be sensitive to the culture of the time. This is true for the entire Bible, from Genesis – Revelations.

Exodus 20:3 You shall have no other gods before Me.

The *Mishnah* tractate of *Avodah Zarah* (“Strange Worship”) had much to say about idolatrous gods. It was a warning written for the people of Israel to not become influenced by those worshipping what they considered false gods. This is part of the Oral Torah that forbade Jews from associating with people serving other gods. Jesus came to be considered a false god by many religious leaders, but not all of them. Even to this day, an Orthodox Jewish leader will not enter the home of a non-Jew.

With this background knowledge, let us now read directly from Scripture and examine Peter’s vision in its entirety.

Peter's Vision

We begin with Cornelius.

Acts 10:1 And a certain man named Cornelius was in Caesarea, a centurion of the Italian cohort,

Cornelius was a Roman centurion; a commander of a band of 100 soldiers known as the "Italian Band".

Acts 10: 2 one devout and fearing God, with all his household, both doing many merciful deeds to the people, and praying continually to God.

3 About the ninth hour of the day he saw plainly in a vision an angel of God coming to him and saying to him, Cornelius!

4 And he was gazing at him, and becoming terrified, he said, What is it, lord? And he said to him, Your prayers and your merciful deeds have come up for a memorial before God.

5 And now send men to Joppa and call for Simon, whose last name is Peter.

6 He is staying with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the seaside. He will tell you what you must do.

7 And when the angel who spoke to Cornelius departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from those who waited on him continually.

8 And explaining all things to them, he sent them to Joppa.

From the above passage, we see Cornelius is a devout man who fears God. God has sent an angel to tell him to send men to Joppa to speak to Peter. Cornelius sends three men. Neither Cornelius nor these three men are Jewish. The vision came at the ninth hour or 3pm.

Acts 10:9 On the next day, as these went on the road, and drawing near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. (Noon)

10 And he became very hungry and desired to eat. But while they made ready, an ecstasy fell on him.

Peter is already thinking about food. While preparing lunch, he has a vision overcome him. Let's continue reading from Acts 10:

Acts 10: 11 And he saw the heaven opened and a certain vessel like a sheet coming down to him, being bound at the four corners and let down to the earth;

12 in which were all the four-footed animals of the earth, and the wild beasts, and the reptiles, and the birds of the heaven.

13 And a voice came to him, saying, Rise, Peter! Kill and eat!

14 But Peter said, Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

Peter knows The Law very well (known as The Torah in Hebrew). This Law contains the food laws that explain which animals, birds, reptiles, insects, and fish are food for us to eat. Some of these animals were created to be a “garbage collector” to keep the environment clean and never meant to be eaten by man. Knowing the food laws, Peter rightfully replies to God saying, “Not so”. In other words, God just told Peter to “Rise and eat” and Peter replies “Not so”. Peter also knows God never goes back on His Word.

Every culture has its own idea of food. If I said, “I eat everything”, those around me know it does not include snakes, cats, or dogs. In some cultures, they do eat these animals. Knowledge of the culture helps determine what is considered food. For those living in Israel at the time of this vision, they would know acceptable food would never include “unclean” animals. Obedience to His Law, His Torah, automatically means eating according to the food laws.

Let’s clarify one more thing about Peter’s response.

Peter uses two words to describe what he has “never eaten” – common (Greek: koinos) and unclean (Greek: akathartos). What is the difference between these two words?

Let’s say that I have a flock of sheep. Sheep are kathartos – clean – animals. I choose the best of my flock and set it aside to take it to the temple for a sacrifice. Somehow, the sheep get mixed up with some pigs and they end up in a pig pen. Oops. It is no longer acceptable as a sacrifice – it has become defiled – common – koinos. I can still slaughter it and use it for food, but I can no longer present it as a sacrifice at the temple. Akathartos (unclean), is the opposite of kathartos (clean). It means unclean by definition – not food. It is a “garbage collector” for the environment. Peter is saying, “I have never eaten anything that has become defiled through association with what is unclean or that which is unclean in itself.”

Acts 10:15 And the voice spoke to him again the second time, What God has made clean, you do not call common.

16 This happened three times, and the vessel was received up again into the heaven.

17 And while Peter doubted within himself what the vision which he had seen might be, even behold, the men who were sent from Cornelius had asked for Simon's house and stood on the porch.

Peter is still confused as to what this vision means.

There is a knock on the door and three men stand anxiously to find Peter.

Acts 10:18 And they called and asked if Simon whose last name is Peter was staying there.

19 And while Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said to him, Behold, three men are looking for you.

God, Yehovah Himself, tells Peter that three men have come to see him.

Acts 10:20 Therefore arise and go down and go with them without doubting, for I have sent them.

Read that verse again. Peter would know not to go with these men, therefore God is explicitly telling Peter to go with them to the home of Cornelius without doubting. This extreme measure had to be taken by God to show Peter that he was to break this man-made law and go with them.

Acts 10:21 And going down to the men, those sent to him from Cornelius, Peter said, Behold, I am the one you are seeking. For what reason have you come?

22 And they said, Cornelius the centurion, a just man and one who fears God, and one of good report among all the nation of the Jews, was warned from God by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear words from you.

In Peter's eyes, even if Cornelius was considered just and feared God, he was becoming koinos / common by his association with those who were akathartos / unclean (the pagan gentiles). But remember what God told Peter, "What God has made clean, you do not call common."

Acts 10:23 Then he called them in and lodged them. And on the next day Peter went away with them, and certain brothers from Joppa went with him.

24 And the next day they entered into Caesarea. And Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his kinsmen and near friends.

25 And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped.

26 But Peter took him up, saying, Stand up! I also am a man myself.

27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together.

This next verse shows Peter himself speaking of this law.

Acts 10:28 And he said to them, You know that it is an unlawful thing for a man, a Jew to keep company with or to come near to one of another nation. But God has shown me not to call any man common or unclean.

This man-made law referred to gentiles as common or unclean, just as food for man (clean) and food to avoid (common or unclean). You can further see that Peter aligned himself with the teachings of Shammai rather than Hillel.

Acts 10:29 Therefore I came without complaint, being sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me.

30 And Cornelius said, Four days ago I was fasting until this hour. And at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing.

31 And he said, Cornelius, your prayer is heard, and your merciful deeds have been remembered before God.

32 Therefore send to Joppa and call here Simon whose last name is Peter, he is staying in the house of Simon, a tanner by the seaside; who, when he comes, shall speak to you.

33 Therefore I immediately sent to you, and you have done well to come. Now therefore we are all here present before God to hear all things that are commanded you by God.

Gentiles hear the Good News!

Acts 10:34 Then Peter opened his mouth and said, Truly I see that God is no respecter of persons;

Peter now understands the vision. He realizes the vision concerning clean, common, and unclean food spoke to his misunderstanding of people. As we have learned, the House of Shammai required anyone who wanted to join with the Jews, had to convert to Judaism, and that included the laws of the Oral Torah which had precedence over the written Torah of Moses. This included the law to avoid gentiles.

God (Yehovah) saw Cornelius' heart attitude and desire to worship Him and God had made him kathartos – clean. “Saved by grace, through faith, not of works, lest any man should boast.” Man looks on the outside, but God looks on the heart. Peter himself interpreted the vision for us, and he finally understood that it was about calling people common or unclean and not about food.

Now, another point to this story is Cornelius (according to the teachings of the House of Hillel), was a God-fearing, righteous sojourner, a ger toshav, who was doing all that was required to be accepted into the kingdom of God. He needed to learn about Messiah – that is why Peter was sent there.

Peter now speaks that which He was sent to do. To teach them.

Acts 10:35 but in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted with Him.

Peter just clarified to whom he speaks. It is for those “who fear Him and work righteousness” and Cornelius fit this. Did Peter speak something new? No. Solomon spoke this very thing:

Ecclesiastes 12:13 Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. Fear God, and keep His commandments. For this is the whole duty of man.

Let's now read what Peter says to Cornelius:

Acts 10:36 You know the Word which God sent to the sons of Israel, preaching the gospel of peace by Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all!);

37 that word which was published throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed;

38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and He went about doing good, and healing all those who were oppressed by the Devil, for God was with Him.

39 And we are witnesses of all things which He did, both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed Him and hanged Him on a tree;

40 but God raised Him up the third day and showed Him openly,

41 not to all the people, but to witnesses hand-picked before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead.

42 And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained of God to be the Judge of the living and the dead.

43 All the Prophets give witness to Him, that through His name whoever believes in Him shall receive remission of sins.

The Holy Spirit Falls on the Gentiles

Acts 10:44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all those hearing the Word.

45 And those of the circumcision, who believed (as many as came with Peter), were astonished because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the nations also.

46 For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered,

47 Can anyone forbid water that these, who have received the Holy Ghost as well as we, should not be baptized?

48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they begged him to stay certain days.

My question to you now is where do we see the food laws done away with?

What we actually read, is the gospel of salvation has been extended to gentiles.

Are you curious about what happens next?

Acts 11:1 And the apostles and brothers who were in Judea heard that the nations had also received the Word of God.

2 And when Peter had come up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him,

3 saying, You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

Yes, this would be those followers of the House of Shammai. When events are placed into proper cultural context, it becomes very clear.

The events in this vision show God (Yehovah) dealing with Peter and others regarding the beliefs of the disciples of Shammai. That is, that gentiles are outside of the covenant and unable to be saved without undergoing full conversion to Judaism. No-one was ever justified by keeping the Torah – ever.

From the very beginning of creation, justification and salvation have always been by grace, through faith. We learned this from Adam, from Abraham, and now from Cornelius. Cornelius was justified not by his righteous deeds, but by his heart attitude. By his belief in the promises of God. His righteous acts were the subsequent fruit of what was in his heart – a love for and desire to live for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. His heart attitude enabled him to receive the message of Jesus (Yeshua) and His sacrifice on our behalf. He was not justified by his deeds, but because of his obedience he received the blessing from God.

Cornelius received salvation because of his faith (believing and acting on the promises of God) and received the blessing (God's favor on his life) because of his obedience.

The same applies to us today.