

Coming clean: What would Jesus eat?

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

Comic W. C. Fields spoke for all of us when he said: “I have spent a lot of time searching through the Bible for loopholes.” Literalists find loopholes by choosing which texts about which to be literal. Liberalists find them hermeneutically. In a new book—*Holy Cow* (First Fruits of Zion; <http://ffoz.org>)—Hope Egan and (though he is not mentioned on the cover) D. Thomas Lancaster look for loopholes. The subtitle is *Does God Care About What We Eat?*

Egan is a Jewish convert to what she calls “an entire subculture within Christianity that believes that the Hebrew Scriptures’ instructions apply to believers in Jesus.” The members of this subculture “believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that we are saved by grace, through faith.” They also believe in literally following the Hebrew scriptures’ laws.

She does not have a mean bone in her. Her chosen subject, food, makes it possible for her to avoid all those scriptural laws and punishments which would be inconveniencing and, if effected, murderous. She sticks to food and so will we.

About the choices we inconsistent half-believers make, she is not vindictive. She regrets that we do not catch on and wishes for our sakes that we would. But she wants to make the positive case.

Many of the prohibitions are easy to follow. The Lord says don’t eat camels, rabbits, vultures, buzzards, geckos, crocodiles, chameleons, etc. We can eat locusts (so John the Baptist did not violate the Leviticus food code).

The problem that Egan and Lancaster have to face is Jesus’ statements in Mark 7, and especially the comment in 7:19, which the English versions put in parenthesis because it interrupts the plot. Jesus is in an argument with the Pharisees, and we read: “(Thus he declared all foods clean.)” All.

Two absolutes collide. Where’s the loophole? “How can Jesus legitimately declare all foods clean when His heavenly Father has said that we are to distinguish between clean and unclean meats? Can Jesus topple the laws of the Father? Wouldn’t that be

a contradiction?” Would he thus not “disqualify Himself as Messiah?”

The loophole? “The Greek manuscripts of the book of Mark do not actually contain the words, ‘Thus he declared all foods clean.’” Check your trusty old King James Version. It reads quite differently. Then comes the literalist ploy: “The disciples misunderstood because they thought He was speaking literally. He was not. It was a parable.” We are to note the context: “The Greek text literally says, ‘purging all foods.’” Jesus was not setting aside the law. He was talking about (ahem) “going potty.”

Uneasy about this loophole, the authors add a thought: “But what if the parenthetical statement created by the translators is actually correct? Is it possible that Jesus, contrary to Torah, declared all foods clean?” Hold on: “Jesus did not declare all foods clean; He did not contradict the Scriptures.” Grant the authors a point: the original text does raise complicated issues, because Mark is interpreting what Jesus said. But take back half of that half point: however one translates the passage, it *is* part of what the authors call the inerrant word of God.

Egan and Lancaster cite scientific evidence to back their interpretation of the laws. “Pigs have eaten Philadelphia’s garbage and sewage for more than 100 years. . . . They are designed to clean our environment.”

Let me agree with the authors that some of the dietary laws can have beneficial effects. Even without them, however, I am not likely to order a vulture appetizer and a camel entrée. Time for dessert.