

Does All Mean All?

Ángel Manuel Rodríguez

Based on Genesis 9:3—“Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you”¹— would it not be correct to conclude that after the Flood humans were allowed to eat the flesh of both clean and unclean animals?

The passage does seem to support your suggestion, but only if its context is ignored. There are also matters related to the meaning of the terminology used that have to be taken into consideration as we seek to better understand this passage.

1. Clean and Unclean Animals: The narrative of the Deluge introduces a distinction between clean and unclean animals for the first time in the Bible. The text appears to assume that they could be distinguished from each other, even though they all belonged to the same general categories of animals: cattle (or beasts), birds, and creeping creatures (Gen. 6:18, 19; 7:2, 3; 8:17). The distinction antedates the giving of the law of clean/unclean animals to the Israelites in Sinai (Lev. 11). Although in the Flood narrative we are not given an explicit rationale for the distinction, the differentiation plays an important role in the narrative. The value of clean animals is particularly emphasized by taking seven pairs of each of them into the ark, while only one pair of the unclean are preserved.

All animals are taken into the ark for survival purposes, in order to preserve their class. After the Flood they would multiply and populate the earth again (Gen. 9:17). But in the case of clean animals more was intended than survival. This is indicated by that which took place immediately after Noah and the animals came out of the ark. Noah “built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it” (Gen. 8:20). Clean animals were used as sacrificial victims offered to God in gratitude for the preservation of Noah and his family. These sacrifices were placed on His altar (the table of the Lord, so to speak), and He accepted them.

2. Terminology Used: The phrase “everything that lives and moves” appears to be all-inclusive, but that’s not necessarily the case. “Everything,” or “all,” is used in the story to refer to “all” unclean animals (Gen. 6:19) as well as to “all” clean animals (Gen. 7:2). The phrase “that lives and moves” is problematic and is not employed anywhere else in the Flood narrative. While “what lives” is used in other parts of the story to refer to living creatures (Gen. 6:19; 8:21), “what moves” (Hebrew *remeś*, “creeping things”) designates mainly small animals such as reptiles (e.g., Gen. 6:7; 7:23). A literal translation would read “All living creeping animals will be food for you.” The other possibility is to interpret the Hebrew term as designating animals in general based on the use of the verb rather than on the use of the noun (e.g., Gen. 7:21; Ps. 104:20). This is the most common interpretation of the phrase among Bible students. But the singularity of the expression, as well as the use of “all/everything” to designate all clean or unclean animals, suggest that the biblical writer was not necessarily referring to all types of animals, only to clean ones.

3. Dietary Determination: The passage is about food for humans and therefore regulates human diet. God modified the human diet immediately after the Fall, allowing Adam and Eve to eat “green plants” (Gen. 9:3). Interestingly, according to Genesis 1:30, the phrase “green plants” (*yereq ešv*) was a general designation for the food of animals. But in Genesis 9:3 the same phrase is used to refer to “seed-bearing plants” (e.g., legumes and cereals), as indicated in Genesis 3:18. The all-inclusive phrase “green plants” is not all-inclusive but is restricted to the meaning found in Genesis 3:18. Now the Lord is allowing humans to eat animal flesh as *food* for them; and again, it is not flesh in general but certain types of it. The context strongly indicates that this is the flesh of all *clean* animals. Humans are allowed to bring to their tables the same type of food that goes to the table of the Lord.

¹ Scripture quotations in this article are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.