

Titus 1:14-16

“So-called Purity and Human Commandments”

“[N]ot paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by *their* deeds they deny *Him*, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.”

1:14¹ What the troublemakers in Crete are said to have been pushing were “Jewish myths or...merely human commands” (TNIV). This would not be referring to the Torah itself, nor to mainline synagogue Judaism of the First Century, as the Torah as Holy Scripture is hardly something that the Apostle Paul would refer to as a “myth.” This is not the first time that human ordinances have been spoken against by him (Colossians 2:22),² which may be the closest clue we can see as to what kind of false teaching circulated in Crete. I. Howard Marshall & Philip H. Towner inform us that the main thrust here is that “the false teaching [is] human and therefore inferior to the apostle’s teaching which is truth from God.”³

David H. Stern renders v. 14 with “Judaistic myths or to the commands of people who reject the truth” (CJB). His interpretation of what is said is, “I do not believe these myths were part of normative non-Messianic Judaism, but rather that they expressed the Circumcision faction’s preoccupation with the trappings of Judaism...that is, imitative of Judaism without actually emanating from normative Judaism.”⁴ He goes further and argues that the “circumcision” group was largely non-Jewish (cf. 1:10).⁵ From his perspective, the problem present in Crete was that non-Jewish people were trying to act Jewish, but were not really so. We should appreciate his assertion that the myths present were not the standard Judaism one would find in the Synagogue of the time, but it is doubtful that the actual problem in Crete was the circumcision status of the non-Jewish Believers, with myths somehow being representative of the troublemakers’ misinterpretation of Jewish teaching—and not representative of speculative elements instead.

In referencing *Ioudaikois muthois* (Ἰουδαϊκῶς μύθοις) Paul is not criticizing Judaism in general, especially given the rich heritage of the Tanach (Old Testament), religious liturgy and worship style, and leadership style that the First Century *ekklesia* directly inherited from the Synagogue. Instead, whatever *muthos* (μῦθος) is, is to be viewed as being outside the mainstream, and perhaps the later reference to “genealogies” (3:9) is similar to its usage in 1 Timothy 1:4,⁶ where exaggerations and embellishments on various Tanach figures are in view. George W. Knight III suggests, “It is likely...that the ‘myths’ here are concocted stories related to the ‘genealogies’ spun out from those given in the OT.”⁷

The kinds of myths that the Cretan troublemakers would have been introducing could have been along the lines of the kind of speculative stories that one can find in some parts of the Pseudepigrapha.⁸ William D. Mounce thinks that this “refers to stories the opponents had created

¹ This section has been adapted from the commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic* (2012) by J.K. McKee.

² “which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?” (Colossians 2:22).

³ I. Howard Marshall, with Philip H. Towner, *International Critical Commentary: The Pastoral Epistles* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 206.

⁴ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 655.

⁵ “For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision” (Titus 1:10).

⁶ “[N]ot to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than *furthering* the administration of God which is by faith” (1 Timothy 1:4).

⁷ George W. Knight III, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 300.

⁸ James D.G. Dunn, “The First and Second Letters to Timothy and the Letter to Titus,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 11:866.

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around minor OT characters, stories that contained their secret knowledge,⁹ which would primarily be figures who are only mentioned once or twice in the Tanach, but for whom there was a large amount of data in various works compiled long after the time period they lived. Philip H. Towner further observes, "it is probable that the Jewish-Christian opponents were creating speculative doctrines based on stories of ancient OT heroes and using them to lend the weight of antiquity to certain questionable practices that Paul regarded as ungodly."¹⁰ Far be it from using the Torah or Tanach properly as a guide for ethics and living holy (1 Timothy 1:7-11), the Cretan troublemakers used it inappropriately to promote their own interests.

All various myths and made up stories about Biblical figures would be pushed, so would *entolais anthrōpōn* (ἐντολαῖς ἀνθρώπων), various "commandments of people" (*WBC*).¹¹ Mounce states that this "refer[s] to human-made laws in distinction from what God intends,"¹² and one can see echoes of the *mitzvat anashim* (מִצְוַת אָנָשִׁים) of Isaiah 29:13 present here (cf. Colossians 2:22; Mark 7:7; Matthew 15:9). The troublemakers, then, were not pushing "Torah observance" onto the Cretans, but instead their own rules and regulations that ultimately subtracted from the real purpose of God's Law. Their human commandments replaced the far more important ordinances of God, and as Knight describes, "commandments of humans'...[are] put in place of obedience to God and what he requires."¹³

What so-called "commandments" were actually pushed by the Cretan troublemakers? Towner notes how "Jesus employed the term ['commandments of men'] in order to contrast the Jewish obsession with rites of purification with the real thrust of God's law (Matt 15:9; Mark 7:7)."¹⁴ Ben Witherington III similarly thinks, "It would appear that the commandments have to do with purity rules..."¹⁵ In Mark 7:3-4 the issue in play is a rigorous man-made ritual handwashing, rigidly enforced at the expense of other, more critical Torah instructions of respect. *Testament of Asher* 7:5 may shed some light on the circumstances in Crete: "For I know that you will be thoroughly disobedient, that you will be thoroughly irreligious, heeding not God's Law but human commandments, being corrupted by evil."¹⁶

1:15 In v. 15 we see the only sizable clue given to readers regarding the human commandments (v. 14) advocated by the Cretan troublemakers: "To the pure, all things are pure." Paul goes on to describe these individuals as being "corrupt and unbelieving...their very minds and consciences are corrupted" (RSV). Whatever they did to consider themselves *katharos* (καθαρός) or "clean," was of absolutely no effect in helping their attitudes or spirituality.

To what degree is 1 Timothy 4:4 in view, and the prohibition on eating meat that the false teachers in Ephesus pushed? Does the Cretan problem reflect more of the Colossian false teaching, which advocated the more general, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (Colossians 2:21)? In Ephesus, some kind of quasi-Edenic lifestyle was being touted, whereas an errant human philosophy that tried to appease the elemental spirits was practiced in Colossae. For some reason or another, the troublemakers on Crete were staying away from things that they thought would contaminate them, when the real spiritual battle is not necessarily for ritual purity, but instead for one's spirit and mind not being influenced by evil thoughts and ideas. The Jewish philosopher Philo

⁹ William D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary: Pastoral Epistles*, Vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 400.

¹⁰ Philip H. Towner, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 705.

¹¹ Mounce, 394.

¹² *Ibid.*, 401.

¹³ Knight, 301.

¹⁴ Towner, 705.

¹⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 124.

He considers it to be "Jewish halakah, the so-called tradition of the elders."

¹⁶ H.C. Kee, trans., "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 818.

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offers some excellent thoughts to keep in view in examining what v. 15 says about whatever was occurring on Crete:

“And the law says, ‘Let everything which a man that is unclean has touched be also unclean as being polluted by a participation in that which is unclean.’ And this sacred injunction appears to have a wide operation, not being limited to the body alone, but proceeding as it would seem also to investigate the dispositions of the soul, for the unjust and impious man is peculiarly unclean, being one who has no respect for either human or divine things, but who throws everything into disorder and confusion by the immoderate vehemence of his passions, and by the extravagance of his wickedness, so that everything which he touches becomes faulty, having its nature changed by the wickedness of him who has taken them in hand. For in like manner the actions of the good are, on the contrary, all praiseworthy, being made better by the energies of those who apply themselves to them, since in some degree what is done resembles in its character the person who does it” (*Special Laws* 3.208-209).¹⁷

Paul’s assertion *panta kathara tois katharais* (πάντα καθαρὰ τοῖς καθαρóις) is sometimes connected to Peter’s vision of the sheet (Acts 10:9-15), but the issue there is not the reversal of the dietary laws of the Torah, but instead is the cleansing of all people via the sacrifice of the Messiah (Acts 10:28).¹⁸ In a place like Mark 7:15, “there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man,” the issue is how external cleanliness is far less important compared to moral cleanliness—but no one can see any negation of how being physically clean is still important. The point is that outside things really cannot corrupt those who are pure inside, as one will just inevitably become ritually unclean in the daily affairs of life, perhaps just by touching various things. The issue of v. 15 is moral and spiritual purity, and as Stern rightly asserts, it is “to be taken as a statement about ‘priorities’ within the framework of *Torah*, not altering the laws of *taharot* [טהרות] but establishing purity of **minds and consciences** as more important.”¹⁹

It is to be expected that there are a variety of commentators who do favor kosher eating being a factor in v. 15.²⁰ Mounce summarizes this view with, “Paul’s Jewish Christian opponents would have been teaching that a morally pure person is still made unclean by eating unclean foods or by touching any defiled thing.”²¹ Interestingly enough, though, is that nowhere in the text are the terms “food” or “meat” to be found. And, if kosher eating is the actual issue of v. 15, then it is notable that Paul would have just associated *kashrut* law as being a Jewish myth and composing commandments of human, not Divine origin (v. 14). Interpreters like Marshall & Towner, who favor the Torah’s dietary laws being a part of the Cretan troublemakers’ deception, are a little cautious, stating, “The ‘Jewish’ classification is more suggestive of food rules, but the question remains open.”²² Even Mounce has to acknowledge that a more general issue is in play, noting, “Paul’s opponents were evidently teaching that one could attain ritual purity by following the ascetic laws.”²³ But, nowhere in the Torah are the kosher dietary laws defined as a kind of asceticism, as asceticism (which can involve things like intense fasting and total abstinence from sexual intercourse) is often employed to induce various spiritual experiences (cf. Colossians 2:18), not just be a part of normal everyday activities.

¹⁷ Philo Judaeus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 615.

¹⁸ Similarly, in Romans 14:20, the issue in view is what was eaten during fellowship meals of the Roman Believers, and how a sector of Jewish Believers would not eat the meat that was *koinos* (κοινός) or “common” (Romans 14:14).

¹⁹ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 656.

²⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *New International Bible Commentary: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 181; Marshall & Towner, pp 207-208; Dunn, in *NIB*, 11:866; Towner, pp 706-708.

²¹ Mounce, 401.

²² Marshall & Towner, 209.

²³ Mounce, 401.

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Not all see "To the pure, all things are pure" as a reference to kosher being a major part of what the Cretan troublemakers were pushing, but as D. Edmond Hiebert indicates, what is instead in view in Titus 1:15 are some kind of "ceremonial distinctions"²⁴ otherwise undefined. Knight further explains, "Paul is not dealing here with OT ceremonial laws of impurity, which did not deal with moral impurity but with things that God declared ceremonially impure so that they might serve as object lessons for spiritual matters."²⁵ But, Knight really does not know what do to with Titus 1:15, Acts 10:15 and Peter's vision are noted, and he might hold to the view that the prohibited animals in the dietary laws represented certain types of people, a view expressed in some parts of the Second-Fourth Century Church. However, Knight does rightly recognize the human commandments in view (v. 14) to be "not commandments of Moses."²⁶ Towner's thought on Titus 1:15 is actually much clearer, as he concludes, "the Jewish character of the teachers is more prominent in Titus, though, to be sure, laws of ritual purity may have encompassed more than simply foods."²⁷

There may never be any resolution as to what v. 15 really refers to in terms of what the Cretan troublemakers were specifically advocating. With "Jewish myths" (v. 14) associated with what they were doing, what was taking place probably had more similarities to the Colossian error where self-abasement was involved in appealing to the elemental spirits and worship of angels (Colossians 2:18-19). Whatever the troublemakers were staying away from did not help their ethics or morality; they were still stirring up families and/or home assemblies, and as Knight rightly puts it, "They are trusting in their asceticism to make them pure, but this [is] reliance on oneself..."²⁸ Gordon D. Fee further asserts how "They obey human **commands**, but they are **disobedient** to God himself,"²⁹ which is not exactly a description of the kosher dietary laws given by God, nor does this describe giving kosher a higher place than the more important Torah instructions of morality and ethics and appropriate interaction among people.

All of those who read v. 15 are agreed how "Everything is clean to those who have clean minds" (Phillips New Testament), as the defilement of a person does not begin with the outward things we may encounter, but with the heart of a person.³⁰ There are certainly physical sins which can not only render a person ritually unclean according to the Torah, but also spiritually and ethically corrupt. Nowhere in Paul's epistles does he allow Believers to commit idolatry or sexual immorality, as though such physical practices do not affect a person spiritually. The kind of cleanliness in view in v. 15 would have been an over- or hyper-sensitivity to daily interactions that would have been normal to people in the home or workplace, and in the troublemakers stirring up problems and division over what were not monumentally important issues in the larger scope of one's salvation. At the very most, if kosher eating were a factor within whatever the Cretan opponents were pushing, it would have been a misuse or over-emphasis on it at the expense of more critical Biblical teachings. Even if the troublemakers considered themselves spiritually enlightened Jews, they were actually no better off than the stereotypical Cretan (v. 12).

1:16 Whatever the opponents Titus would have to see stopped in Crete advocated, they were ungodly deeds that demonstrated themselves to not be of God. Paul concludes, "They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work" (ESV). Given the usage of "know" (Grk. *oida*, οἶδα), here, is a kind of Gnosticism being refuted? Hiebert suggests, "Their claim may be pride in assumed Jewish religious privilege or an

²⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, "Titus," in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. et. al. *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:434.

²⁵ Knight, 302.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

²⁷ Towner, 706 fn#128.

²⁸ Knight, 302.

²⁹ Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 182.

³⁰ Marshall & Towner, 210.

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expression of the Gnostic claim to an esoteric knowledge of God.”³¹ What Donald Guthrie expresses might be more the actual situation in view: “Since the Cretan heresy was strongly Jewish, it is more reasonable to suppose that Judaistic pride in monotheism here is in mind.”³² The Cretan troublemakers were self-assured of their right standing before God because of their Jewish ethnicity (1:10), and were not worried about never “knowing” Him. In contrast, the Tanach is clear that those who truly know God are those who accomplish good (Hosea 8:2-3) and are concerned with positive acts of kindness (Jeremiah 22:16). The main action of these persons would have instead been their greed (1:11) and self-delusion.

³¹ Hiebert, in *EXP*, 11:434.

³² Donald Guthrie, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Pastoral Epistles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 202.