

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier? 2014

Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee

It should not be a great surprise to anyone studying or evaluating the kosher dietary laws, principally contained in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, that the question “**Is eating kosher really healthier?**” is something commonly asked. There is little doubting how the Hebrew Scriptures are materialistic, in the sense that normal human activities like eating or drinking, are not to be looked down upon or spurned. The advice of Ecclesiastes 9:7 is, “eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your work.” Given the many regulations regarding cleanliness in the Torah, both ceremonial and hygienic, the Lord is certainly concerned about the physical well being of His people (consider esp. Deuteronomy 23:13).¹ Even with a great number of various washings intended for ceremonial purposes regarding holiness unto Him (i.e., Exodus 19:14), many washings were indeed intended for the healthy living and sanitation of the Israelites. It is rather logical, in evaluating the significance of the kosher dietary laws, to wonder—among the various reasons why God issued these instructions in His Word—if they have anything at all to do with physical health.

There have been many discussions throughout religious history, from both Jewish and Christian scholars, as to whether or not there is any health dimension present regarding *kashrut*. These discussions have extended into our Messianic faith community, and are present among various people who have addressed the reasons behind kosher—as well as to various scientific and dietary voices, some secular and some religious. Going back to 1953, interestingly enough, David I. Macht presented a paper entitled, “An Experimental Pharmacological Appreciation of Leviticus XI and Deuteronomy XIV,” appearing in the *Bulletin of the Story of Medicine* published by The Johns Hopkins Press²—an article actually referenced in the 1976 Deuteronomy commentary by P.C. Craigie,³ and more recently in the article, “Foods, Clean and Unclean” by W.J. Houston, appearing in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (2003).⁴ Of course, this kind of scientific information by Macht is notably dated, but discussions on the potential dangers of consuming unclean meats (Heb. *tamei*, טָמֵא; Grk. equiv. *akathartos*, ἀκάθαρτος) such as pork or shellfish, do continue into the Twenty-First Century. Exploring whether or not there is a health dimension to *kashrut*, does need to be conducted.

Because the very nature of science is one that is changing, with new studies ongoing in matters of health, nutrition, pharmacology, biology, biochemistry, and zoology—all the main disciplines that

¹ “[A]nd you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement” (Deuteronomy 23:13).

² This article is available for download at: <http://www.friendsofsabbath.org/Further_Research/Health/Appreciation%20of%20Leviticus%20XI%20and%20Deuteronomy%20XIV.pdf>.

³ P.C. Craigie, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 230 fn#9.

⁴ W.J. Houston, “Foods, Clean and Unclean,” in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 338.

Messianic Kosher Helper

surround the issues of whether or not there is a health or hygiene component to the Torah's classification of clean and unclean meats—our purpose here is to engage principally with how Jewish, Christian, and Messianic examiners have approached the “health” aspect of *kashrut*. **What is the purpose of kosher?** This is where we will encounter variance across the spectrum, as some are absolutely convinced that health and hygiene are indeed a significant part of God including instructions on diet in His Word. There are various others who are strongly pessimistic to the idea that the kosher laws have anything to do with health. And, there are those who see the kosher laws as perhaps containing an aspect of health and hygiene, but not as the primary reason for them being issued.

This chapter will be presenting some extensive quotations and references, from those who have proposed various reasons behind God giving His people a dietary code in the Torah. While our intention is to evaluate more what Biblical examiners, as opposed to what scientists or dietitians have said, we will be reviewing some of the thoughts of various figures, who have engaged scientifically and medically with the kosher dietary laws as a matter of health.

Proposed Reasons for Kosher

There is only one reason for God issuing a dietary code in the Torah, that all examiners and readers—Jewish, Christian, and Messianic—can agree upon: **holiness**. This is what Leviticus 11:44-45 specifically states is the reason for the kosher dietary laws:

“For I the LORD am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not make yourselves unclean through any swarming thing that moves upon the earth. For I the LORD am He who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God: you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44-45, NJPS).

Beyond the consecration of diet unto the Lord, there have been various proposals made—which admittedly have to be recognized as being *secondary* or even *tertiary* to the Torah-stated *primary* reason of holiness—surrounding their importance. Three main reasons, generally encountered in a wide selection of Jewish and Christian materials addressing Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, will include:

1. These rules promoted the health of the community.
2. These rules prevented the assimilation of foreign cultic practices into Israel's worship of God.
3. The clean animals exhibited behaviors desirable in humans.⁵

While there are other reasons, for sure, proposed for *kashrut*, these three listed, or some variation of them, will be encountered from Biblical scholars. In a relatively conservative resource such as *From Paradise to Promised Land* by T.D. Alexander, we see how these proposals issued for the dietary laws, as well as several others, are navigated through and often cross-examined:

“Various explanations have been offered to account for the dietary rules in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Some commentators have suggested that the classification of the animals into two types symbolised people and their behaviour. An animal which chewed its cud resembled a human being who meditated on the divine law. The sheep was designated clean because the ancient Israelites viewed God as their heavenly shepherd. The pig was unclean because of its dirty habits which were reminiscent of a sinner's behaviour. Although the arbitrary nature of such explanations has led contemporary scholars to reject them, the basic idea that the two types of animal are symbolic of people is probably correct.

“Other writers have proposed that these ancient food regulations anticipate the findings of modern science regarding hygiene. Whereas the clean animals were safe for human consumption,

⁵ This list is adapted from J.E. Hartley, “Holy and Holiness, Clean and Unclean,” in *Ibid.*, 428. Houston, “Foods, Clean and Unclean,” in *Ibid.*, pp 328-329 offers some further potential reasons for *kashrut*.

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?

the unclean animals were not. Several factors argue against this proposal. (a) While pork is often cited as an example of an unclean meat that is dangerous to human health, this is only true when the meat is not properly cooked. Thoroughly cooked, pork is as safe to consume as any of the meats which are classified as clean. Similarly, camel meat poses little danger to health; indeed Arabs view it as a delicacy. (b) If a danger to health was the reason behind the food regulations, it is strange that this motive is never mentioned in the Bible. Might we not have expected that the Israelites would have been warned of this danger in order to encourage them not to eat the unclean meats? In the light of these factors, the explanation of hygiene is unconvincing.

"Some commentators suggest that the Israelites were instructed to avoid the unclean animals because of their close association with the non-Israelite religions. For example, archaeological evidence suggests that the pig was eaten in Canaanite rituals. Yet, while some unclean animals were clearly used in the cultic activities of ancient Israel's neighbours, it is not possible to demonstrate this for all the animals designated unclean. Furthermore, if this was the rationale behind the classification of the animals, it is surprising that the bull, which was prominent in both Egyptian and Canaanite religious rituals, was not included among the unclean animals. While the rationale of religious associations might account for certain cases, it fails to explain all of the distinction made between clean and unclean animals.

"The most satisfactory explanation of the food regulations rests on the observation that for the Israelites the animal world was structured in the same way as the human world. The clean and unclean animals parallel clean and unclean people (i.e. Israelites and non-Israelites). Within the category of clean animals two further classes may be observed, sacrificial and non-sacrificial; these correspond with the human classes of priestly and non-priestly. By restricting their diet to clean animals the Israelites were reminded of their obligation to be a clean people, distinct from others. Consequently, each meal at which meat was served had religious implications for the Israelites; it spoke of their divine calling to be a holy nation. This link between the food regulations and Israel's divine election is clearly reflected in [Leviticus] 20:24-26...{quotes NIV}...."⁶

The article on the "Dietary Laws" by Harry Rabinowicz, appearing in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, mainly directs inquirers to the Torah statements about **holiness**, but then acknowledges the different proposals present, principally in Jewish history, about some of the rationale of *kashrut*:

"Throughout the ages, many attempts have been made to explain the dietary laws. The Pentateuch itself does not explain them, although in three separate passages in the Bible they are closely associated with the concept of 'holiness.' Thus, Exodus 22:30 states: 'And ye shall be holy unto Me; therefore ye shall not eat any flesh that is torn of beasts in the field; ye shall cast it to the dogs.' Leviticus repeats the idea: 'For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy, for I am holy; neither shall ye defile yourselves with any manner of swarming thing that moveth upon the earth' (Lev. 11:4-45). Finally, Deuteronomy 14:21 states: 'Ye shall not eat of any thing that dieth of itself; thou mayest give it unto the stranger that is within thy gates, that he may eat it; or thou mayest sell it unto a foreigner; for thou art a holy people unto the Lord thy God.' The Pentateuch classifies the dietary laws as *hukkim* [חֻקִּים], 'divine statutes,' which by definition are not explained in the text (Yoma 67b). It has been variously suggested that the underlying motivation for the dietary laws are hygienic and sanitary, aesthetic and folkloric, or ethical and psychological."⁷

A component of being holy or set-apart, is **being separated from influences of sin and paganism**. The dietary laws helping to keep Ancient Israelites and Jews away from their neighbors, and assimilating into other cultures and religions, has been acknowledged as a feature of their being observed throughout history. In the Apocrypha, the exile Tobit, taken from the Northern Kingdom to Nineveh, would state, "Now when I was carried away captive to Nineveh, all my brethren and my

⁶ T.D. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp 228-230.

⁷ Harry Rabinowicz, "Dietary Laws," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. MS Windows 9x. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

Messianic Kosher Helper

relatives ate the food of the Gentiles; but I kept myself from eating it, because I remembered God with all my heart" (Tobit 1:10-12).

A more positive disposition toward possible **health components** of the dietary laws, is recognized in the Leviticus commentary of R. Laird Harris, an evangelical Christian. Yet, Harris' approach toward the kosher dietary laws, in recognizing them as healthy instructions, seems to only go so far for them to be healthy instructions up until more modern, scientifically conscious, times:

"...In general it can be said that the laws protected Israel from bad diet, dangerous vermin, and communicable diseases. Only in very recent times have better laws of health been possible with the advance of medicine. These were rule-of-thumb laws that God gave in his wisdom to a people who could not know the reason for the provision...First, the laws protected Israel's diet. Some of the food forbidden was good some of the time, but not unless it was properly prepared. Pigs spread trichinosis; rabbits spread tularemia...Cows, goats, and sheep are safe to eat under all ordinary circumstances and are economical to raise. The horse and camel were to uneconomical to use for meat...The OT gives no explanation of these laws of uncleanness. No reference is made to demons or spirits, but the laws were wonderfully fashioned by God for the general health of the nation."⁸

Some sort of **behavioral ideal** being represented by the dietary laws, is one that has seen support present in some ancient Jewish literature. The philosopher Philo, for example, taught that various unclean animals represented various negative traits. The pig or the camel, for example, was thought to represent those who were incomplete in wisdom:

"For which reason the lawgiver very admirably compares those of the sophists who live in this manner to the race of swine, who live a life in no respect pure or brilliant, but confused and disorderly, and who are devoted to the basest habits. For he says that the swine is an unclean animal, because it divides the hoof and does not chew the cud, just as he has pronounced the camel unclean for the contrary reason because it chews the cud and does not divide the hoof. But as many animals as partake of both these qualities are very appropriately described as clean, because they have avoided impropriety in both the aforementioned particulars. For division without memory, and care, and a diligent examination of what is best, is but an imperfect good; but the combination and union of the two in the same animal is a most perfect good. And even the enemies of the soul are afraid of this perfection, whom, as they are no longer able to stand up against it, a genuine peace gets the mastery over. And all those who have attained to a half-perfect or half-established wisdom, are too weak to be able to make any effectual opposition to the brood of sins, which have become confined by long usage, and which have gained strength by time (*On Husbandry* 144-146)."⁹

A more modern Jewish perspective of the dietary laws communicating some behavioral ideal for people, is described by Lisè Stern, in her book *How to Keep Kosher*:

"Why, given how many animals are not permitted (horses, dogs, elephants), have pigs become the quintessential symbol for unkosherness? For a number of reasons, the most likely being availability. Unlike camels or donkeys, which served another useful purpose (transportation and portation—they carried stuff), pigs existed solely as a source for food, and peoples all around the Israelites ate pork. Pigs became a way to torture Jews, as in the example of Hannah during the Maccabean revolts. Hannah and her sons died rather than submit to eating pork. Further, pigs are symbolically unappealing, known for eating anything and everything—unselectively eating garbage, the opposite of kashrut, where we are aware of every aspect of what we eat. And pigs wallow in their own filth."¹⁰

⁸ R. Laird Harris, "Leviticus," in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:569.

⁹ Philo Judeaus: *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 186.

¹⁰ Lisè Stern, *How to Keep Kosher: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding Jewish Dietary Laws* (New York: William Morrow, 2004), pp 23-24.

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?

The allegorized view of unclean animals representing human people with negative character, and clean animals representing human people of good character, was a perspective of the kosher dietary laws that even passed into the early Second Century Christian *Epistle of Barnabas*:

"Now when Moses said, 'You shall not eat a pig, or an eagle or a hawk or a crow, or any fish that has no scales,' he received, according to the correct understanding, three precepts. Furthermore, he says to them in Deuteronomy, 'I will set forth as a covenant to this people my righteous requirements.' Therefore it is not God's commandment that they should not eat; rather Moses spoke spiritually. Accordingly he mentioned the pig for this reason: you must not associate, he means, with such people, who are like pigs. That is, when they are well off, they forget the Lord, just as the pig ignores its owner when it is feeding, but when it is hungry it starts to squeal and falls silent only after being fed again. 'Neither shall you eat the eagle or the hawk or the crow.' You must not, he means, associate with or even resemble such people, who do not know how to provide food for themselves by labor and sweat but lawlessly plunder other people's property; indeed, though they walk about with the appearance of innocence, they are carefully watching and looking around for someone to rob in their greed, just as these birds alone do not provide food for themselves but sit idle and look for ways to eat the flesh of others—they are nothing more than pests in their wickedness. 'And you shall not eat,' he says, 'sea eel or octopus or cuttlefish.' You must not, he means, even resemble such people, who are utterly wicked and are already condemned to death, just as these fish alone are cursed and swim in the depths, not swimming about like the rest but living in the mud beneath the depths. Furthermore, 'You shall not eat the hare.' Why? Do not become, he means, one who corrupts children, or even resemble such people, because the hare grows another opening every year, and thus has as many orifices as it is years old. Again, 'Neither shall you eat the hyena.' Do not become, he means, an adulterer or a seducer, or even resemble such people. Why? Because this animal changes its nature from year to year, and becomes male one time and female another. But he also hated the weasel, and with good reason. Do not become, he means, like those men who, we hear, with immoral intent do things with the mouth that are forbidden, and do not associate with those immoral women who do things with the mouth that are forbidden. For this animal conceives through its mouth" (*Epistle of Barnabas* 10:1-8; cf. 11-12).¹¹

While it is witnessed in both Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity, how some compared and contrasted various clean and unclean animals with ethical and unethical humans, such an allegorized view of the kosher dietary laws is speculative at best. A much better alternative to be considered, would be how observing *kashrut* would hopefully **discipline a person to be controlled and moderate** in all other aspects of his or her life, especially in those areas where some temptation to indulge might be present. Sue Fishkoff addresses this in her book *Kosher Nation*:

"If the underlying reasons remain shrouded in mystery (or history), the act of keeping kosher can itself teach moral, spiritual, and ethical lessons. One is self-discipline. The twelfth-century sage Maimonides, also known as Rambam, wrote that the kosher laws 'train us in the mastery of the appetites,' and he didn't mean just those related to food. [Jacob] Traub likes that aspect of *kashrut*. 'Every once in a while there's something you might want that you can't have,' he says. 'And that's not so terrible....A person who has disciplined herself not to eat everything she desires is less likely to indulge in acts such as stealing, adultery, or even murder. It's important that people should realize there are limitations,' he says.

"Although the Torah does not discuss the spiritual benefits of Jewish dietary practice, later rabbis have devoted great attention to the matter. *Kashrut*, they write, is part of an entire network of laws and rituals that promote the idea of living consciously and thoughtfully in the real world.

A variance of this, from an anthropologist's perspective, frequently referenced in resources discussing the dietary laws, is "The Abominations of Leviticus," in Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 1966), pp 42-58.

¹¹ Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, third edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp 411, 413.

Messianic Kosher Helper

Judaism neither denigrates nor glorifies the physical world or the physical body; it is neither an ascetic nor a hedonistic religion. The physical and the spiritual are part of a unified whole. Still, although both are essential to the proper functioning of the universe, a thing's true nature lies on the spiritual plane. The job of the observant Jew, according to this understanding, is to elevate the mundane activities of daily life—eating, drinking, sleeping, elimination of body waste—to the level of holiness, where that true nature can be expressed, by following God's laws. Each activity has its own blessing, reminding Jews to stop and think about how its performance connects them to God, the creator of all reality."¹²

Kosher for Health: What Jews, Christians, and Messianic Have Said

Certainly in the scope of academic engagement, either of *kashrut* in general, or of the Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, where the bulk of the kosher dietary laws are elaborated, both Jewish and Christian examiners have had to say something about whether or not the classifications of clean and unclean meat had anything to do with the health of Ancient Israel. While all authorities are agreed on **holiness** as being the primary reason for kosher, how have not only Jews and Christians approached this as a factor, but even those within our own Messianic faith community? Not surprisingly, perhaps taking cues from both Jewish and Christian scholarship, Messianics have had a little more to say about God wanting His people to be healthy by avoiding unclean meats than anyone else, with only a few exceptions.

Within Jewish examination of the issue of *kashrut*, health is acknowledged as being a possible factor involved for the issuance of some meats as clean, and others as unclean. In the Conservative Jewish resource, *The Jewish Dietary Laws: Their Meaning for Our Times*, Samuel H. Dresner acknowledges how health and sanitation might be a component of kosher, but understandably moves the discussion more in the direction toward evaluating whether or not this was the primary reason for the Torah's dietary code:

"The most common misconception regarding Kashrut is that it is an ancient health measure which may have had its place in antiquity but, what with modern methods of slaughtering, regular government inspection and sanitary food preparation, is quite clearly an anachronism which should be discarded along with the horse and carriage and the high-button shoe. But is health really the purpose of Kashrut? Of course, one must not overlook the concern for disease and the attempt to achieve purity in the Kasher laws; still we must ask the question again: is health the *primary* concern for Kashrut?"¹³

The Orthodox Jewish resource *Kashruth* by Yacob Yipschutz, is a bit more pessimistic toward any reason other than a Jewish person being presumably committed to his or her Jewishness:

"Down through the centuries many have attributed kashruth to either hygienic or social separation purposes. However, these extraneous motivations fail to stand up before the onslaught of human temptations, especially those of our contemporary society. Only when the Jew observes kashruth as a matter of faith does his commitment permeate his entire life, home, and surroundings, bringing to him the meaning of the message of the Almighty's teachings."¹⁴

Christian examination, of the issue of clean and unclean meats in the Law of Moses, is notably much more focused on issues such as hygiene or the Ancient Israelites not participating in some

¹² Sue Fishkoff, *Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America's Food Answers to a Higher Authority* (New York: Schocken Books, 2010), pp 30-31.

¹³ Samuel H. Dresner, *The Jewish Dietary Laws: Their Meaning for Our Time* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly of America, 1982), pp 12-13.

¹⁴ Yacob Lipschutz, *Kashruth: A comprehensive background and reference guide to the principles of Kashruth* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd, 1989), 16.

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?

form of Ancient Near Eastern idolatry, which may have involved consumption of pork, for example. While much of the analysis of the Torah's dietary code is interested in evaluating it historically for Ancient Israel, much of such probing is necessarily concerned with the historical validity of the Pentateuch as trustworthy history. *Why did God give His people these instructions in the past?* If the Bible can be relied upon as being accurate, certainly there are a number of reasons for the kosher laws beyond those of just separating Israel out as holy.

Old Testament scholar Walter C. Kaiser, widely representing the Reformed tradition and its ceremonial separation of the Torah's commandments among those which are presumed to be civil, ceremonial, and moral, is actually a Christian theologian who has been widely regarded throughout the Messianic movement. He is not only favorable, at least broadly, to the validity of Moses' Teaching in the post-resurrection era in terms of its ethical instruction,¹⁵ but is also favorable to the Messianic Jewish movement.¹⁶ In his commentary on Leviticus in the *NIB* series, he observes how while there might be some component of health and hygiene for the kosher dietary laws, these should be viewed more as *resultative* than the *intention* for God giving them to Ancient Israel:

"In more recent times, many readers of Scripture favor another reason for the distinctions between clean and unclean; they argue that the underlying principle was *hygienic*. The divine mind knew of the dangers of tapeworm, trichina in pork, tularemia in rabbits, and infection and spoiling in shellfish, and therefore restricted all potentially dangerous foods for the sake of the health of Israel. That is why, so the argument goes, Jewish people tend to live longer than their fellow citizens, even when they live under sanitary conditions that are worse than those of their compatriots. Now all of this may be very close to some of the truth on the matter, but observing salutary *results* is not necessarily the same as discerning the *intent* for issuing these dietary restrictions."¹⁷

One of the most significant defenses witnessed, for health and hygiene sitting behind God's issuing the instructions on clean and unclean meats in the Torah, was provided by Old Testament theologian R.K. Harrison, in his Leviticus commentary. Harrison is notably the author of the broadly conservative and trustworthy resource *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), which is frequently referenced in the Messianic Apologetics resource *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*. Harrison probably makes the most detailed case for *kashrut* being issued by God for health and hygiene, witnessed among Christian commentators. He mainly says,

"A [significant] explanation of the significance of the distinction between clean and unclean has to do with specifically hygienic and dietary considerations. This approach is sometimes depreciated as being a reflection of current occidental preoccupation with matters of personal health, but since the passage under consideration {Leviticus ch. 11} deals exclusively with flesh which may or may not be eaten as food, questions relating to issues of hygiene and diet are obviously of great importance here. According to this approach, clean animals are comparatively safe as sources of food, whereas unclean ones are to be avoided because of the possibility that their flesh might transmit infection. These concerns have been justified amply by subsequent studies in the area of preventive medicine. . ."¹⁸

¹⁵ Cf. Walter C. Kaiser, "The Law as God's Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness," in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp 177-199.

¹⁶ Cf. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser, eds., *To the Jew First: The Case for Jewish Evangelism in Scripture and History* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), pp 7-8.

¹⁷ Walter C. Kaiser, "The Book of Leviticus," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:1075.

¹⁸ R.K. Harrison, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 124
Ibid., pp 124-127 offers various scientific points regarding land and marine species.

Against: Gordon J. Wenham, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp 167-168.

Messianic Kosher Helper

John E. Hartley probably takes the most pessimistic, yet at the same time, passively favorable, view of the kosher dietary laws having something to do with health. As he puts it in his Leviticus commentary from the *WBC* series,

"...A frequent explanation for the dietary laws is that they promote good health through a proper diet; e.g., pork often carries trichinosis and rabbits tularemia...Even though it has widespread support, it is difficult to accept. Knowledge about the connections of a particular disease with a particular meat is the result of modern science. It is doubtful that the ancient Israelites had discovered the relationship between certain symptoms of illness and the eating of pork. Moreover, wild boars seldom have trichinosis, and proper cooking of pork makes the disease rare. The evidence that Israel's neighbors ate pork indicates that they knew ways to prepare and cook this meat to decrease any ill effects. Conversely, some ruminants also are a host for parasite organisms...The greatest obstacle to the health interpretation is that the NT removes all distinctions between edible and inedible animals. This change is based on the teachings of Jesus and the apostles (Mark 7:14-20; Acts 10:9-16). It is inconceivable that God would do away with rules he had given to promote good health.

"Nevertheless, close adherence to all the laws of ritual purity certainly promoted the community's health, especially in antiquity. Frequent washings, separation from dead bodies of every kind, and the disposal of all that was unclean in an unclean place outside the area of habitation struck a mighty blow against a host of diseases and plagues. The health benefits, however, were a by-product of the purity laws save for their testimony to the belief that Yahweh is the Giver of life, not death."¹⁹

Hartley is right to point out how poor hygiene can be present among those animals, namely ruminants like cattle or sheep, classified as "clean," similar to those like pigs, classified as "unclean." Ultimately, though, his reason for being pessimistic for the dietary laws as substantially involving an element of health, may be said to be guided by his interpretations of passages like Mark 7:1-23 and Acts 10:1-48, which are commonly used to claim that the dietary laws have little significance for those living in the post-resurrection era (addressed further).

Following, at least, the thoughts and interjections of conservative Christian scholarship on the Old Testament, today's Messianic people might be guided to think that the prohibitions of eating unclean meats have something to do with both hygiene, as well as Ancient Israelite avoidance of Canaanite paganism (discussed further).

Messianic writers, who have commented on the Torah's dietary code, will thoroughly address the factor as to whether or not the classifications of clean and unclean have anything to do with health or hygiene, probably because they get asked about it a great deal. Both positive and negative positions are witnessed, with some favoring health as a component of God's issuing the dietary laws, and others being pessimistic toward it.

In his 1996 book *God's Appointed Customs: A Messianic Jewish Guide to the Biblical Lifecycle and Lifestyle*, author Barney Kasdan demonstrates a favorable disposition toward health being a valid reason, involved with God's instruction on clean and unclean meats:

"Chapter 11 of Leviticus is the most detailed account of the principles for *kashrut*. It details the laws concerning mammals in the first eight verses. The clean animals that are permissible for food are described as *tahor* [טָהוֹר] (a Hebrew synonym for 'kosher'). The qualifications for these mammals are that they must both chew the cud and have a split hoof (e.g., the cow and sheep). However, there are also mammals that are classified as *tamey* [טָמֵא] ('unclean')...

"There are many animals that neither chew the cud nor have a split hoof that are clearly disqualified and are not listed in the Bible. It is interesting to note the animals mentioned that met one of the two requirements. For example, the camel chews the cud but does not have a split hoof.

¹⁹ John E. Hartley, *Word Biblical Commentary: Leviticus*, Vol 4 (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), pp 142-143.

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?

Most people automatically regard the pig as the ultimate in non-kosher animals, yet it is specifically listed in Leviticus 11 because it actually matches one of the requirements—it has a split hoof.

“Why was it necessary to have a split hoof? All the animals listed that meet this requirement are herbivores, that is, vegetarian eaters. Being vegetarian helped Israel avoid some unhealthy parasites that often develop in meat eaters. The pig is an omnivore, meaning that it is not picky at all in what it eats, either vegetation or meat.

“Why was it necessary to chew the cud? These animals are known to have much more effective digestive systems (i.e., two, or even three stomachs) that serve as a filter against potentially harmful elements in the food. Those mammals that do not chew the cud swallow whatever they eat, which is quickly transferred into their bloodstream. One can begin to appreciate the wisdom of the Torah in these details....

“In Leviticus, there are set definitions for determining whether a fish is kosher or not (see Leviticus 11:9-12). The fish must have both fins and scales. These characteristics include a great deal of fish, but exclude a number of notable species. The shark and catfish fit the non-kosher description. They have no scales. Those without fins refer to any kind of shellfish, including lobster and shrimp.

“Why does it matter if the fish have fins or scales? Those fish without fins or scales are usually the scavengers of the oceans. Therefore, these species contain high levels of toxins (e.g., mercury) and a high cholesterol. They are certainly part of God’s creation. Such scavengers were meant to be the ‘garbage disposals’ of their world. This is a needed function; however, they are not meant to be eaten as food by God’s covenant people.

“Similar ideas can be seen in the laws concerning kosher and unkosher fowl (see Leviticus 11:13-19). While no general description is mentioned as to what the qualifications are for kosher and *tareyf*, the Bible gives a short list of birds that were considered *tareyf*. The eagle, the vulture and the owl are examples of such birds that are not to be eaten. What is the connection?

“As with the *tareyf* category of fish, these creatures are all birds of prey or scavengers. It is noteworthy that many of these birds have been endangered in recent years (notably the California condor) because of the high toxicity that they take in through their diet. Since they are scavengers, they are on the bottom of the food chain. Therefore, they ingest the greatest concentration of substances causing the problems affecting the animal kingdom at large, for example, chemicals and pollution. These birds serve an important function in helping to clean up the environment, but they are not meant to be food.

“One final category highlighted in the Torah is that of insects and creatures that move on the ground (see Leviticus 11:20-23, 42-43). This includes any snake or lizard as well as such dietary treats as *escargot* (‘snails’) or chocolate covered ants. These insects and creatures that move on the ground were not intended to be food.

“Why did God tell his people Israel to follow such a specialized diet? The reasons seem to be two-fold. The initial supposition is that there are inherent health benefits to *kashrut*. It is often pointed out that these laws have provided important health protection, especially in the ancient Middle East. Before the days of refrigeration, these laws protected Israel from such health problems as trichinosis, commonly found in pork....

“The spiritual symbolism {having just quoted Leviticus 11:45} is much more important than the health benefits found in *kashrut*. Israel was called to be a distinct people, holy or set-apart for God’s purposes. There was no better way to keep his people distinct from the pagan nations than to give them a special diet. Every meal reminded the observant Jew that his calling was different from the world. Since God is set-apart and unique, so too his children should be set-apart and unique. Understood this way, one can appreciate the details of *kashrut* as a custom appointed by God to help his children remember who they are and how they are to live.”²⁰

One of the most widely circulated, and indeed, well-received, Messianic books on the topic of kosher, is the 2005 resource *Holy Cow! Does God Care About What We Eat?* by Hope Egan.²¹

²⁰ Barney Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs: A Messianic Jewish Guide to the Biblical Lifecycle and Lifestyle* (Baltimore: Lederer Books, 1996), pp 99-102.

²¹ Indeed, Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee is actually quoted on the second page of reviews of the 2012 edition:

Messianic Kosher Helper

Chapter 2 of *Holy Cow!* is entitled, “Did God Flip a Coin?: Scientific Support for the Biblical Food Laws.” Its main argument, in favor of the Torah’s dietary code containing a significant component of health and hygiene, is,

Did God Flip a Coin?

God’s design for marriage, for money stewardship, for servant leadership—it seems like God has wisdom for every subject imaginable. Following God’s Word in these matters brings good results. This makes me wonder: why did God designate some animals as clean and others as unclean? Is pork’s compatibility with the human digestive system really any different from cows’? Or did He just flip a coin to determine which would be which? Are the commands set forth in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 arbitrary? Or is there some kind of hidden wisdom in the dietary laws that we have overlooked?

Many traditional interpretations—both Christian and Jewish—claim that there is no rhyme or reason for God’s classification system. But this perspective implies that God essentially pulled names out of a hat when deciding how to categorize His many creatures. It also implies that our bodies, which He carefully designed, are totally indifferent to what we ingest.

I don’t buy it.

Look at the intricate relationship between humans and plants—our prime food source per Genesis 1:29. One of our most basic needs is air to breathe (oxygen). The result of our breath—the associated waste that we exhale—is carbon dioxide. Plants, on the other hand, thrive on carbon dioxide, which we discard. Their output? Oxygen. Just as “one man’s garbage is another man’s gold,” so too with the waste products of both plants and humans, which become vital sources of life for each other.

Given the wisdom behind God’s intelligently designed plant kingdom, it is not surprising that He also carefully crafted the animal kingdom. Let’s see why it is highly unlikely that the clean/unclean designation is random.

Cows Versus Pigs

Think back to grade school science class: do you remember the difference between “omnivores” and “herbivores”?

Here is a hint: herbivores do not eat meat; they generally eat plant-based foods. Omnivores, on the other hand, eat everything—both plants and animals, including those animals that God calls unclean, like rats, spiders and cockroaches. Given their innate diets, would you rather eat an herbivore or an omnivore?

Interestingly, clean mammals—like cows—are inherently designed to be herbivores. God hard-wired them to eat plant-based foods—the same ones He gave to man in Genesis 1:29. Because they do not eat the flesh of other animals, they avoid many of the diseases, parasites and worms that other animals may carry. This makes herbivores healthier to eat than omnivores.

The prevalence of Mad Cow Disease—caused in part by cattle being fed ground-up cattle brains and other remains—is an example of the consequences of circumventing God’s plan for bovine vegetarianism. Dr. Don Colbert, a Christian physician, explains how this happens:

As cattle [were] slaughtered, part of the remains of the cattle were used to make cattle feed. Cattle are herbivores, but slaughterhouses [added] leftover brains, bones, blood, and other cattle parts from slaughtered animals . . . to cattle feed . . . to enable them to grow larger and faster. In Britain, the remains of diseased cattle were mixed into the feed, allowing the disease to develop and spread rapidly [Colbert, Don, MD *What Would Jesus Eat?* Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2002. p.56].

In August 1997 the U.S. banned feeding protein from cud-chewing animals (ground-up cows) to other cud-chewers. Unfortunately, not all cattle farmers follow this rule, which is difficult to enforce. This rule also does not prevent cattle from being fed ground-up animal parts from other,

“I have found *Holy Cow!* to be a breath of fresh air. I greatly appreciate Hope Egan’s inquisitive style of writing, which is sensitive to the needs of a wide variety of people, particularly Christians investigating their Hebraic roots.”

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?

non-cud-chewing animals like cats and dogs. In fact, according to the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), processed chicken feathers, floor wastes from chicken coops and plastic pellets are all permitted in cattle feed.

Remember that one of the characteristics of animals designated as clean in Leviticus 11 is that they must “chew the cud,” which is a complex digestion process. Known as “ruminants,” these animals essentially regurgitate their food for another pass at chewing. Yum. Once I can get beyond this aspect of God’s design, I am fascinated. God gave ruminants a unique, multi-stomach digestive system that removes toxins from their food, before it is absorbed into their flesh. Dr. Colbert compares the ruminant’s stomach to a washing machine that has four wash and rinse cycles. Like a washing machine running through its cycles, the ruminant’s four stomach chambers must each digest the food before it is properly metabolized. The food is expelled upward for re-chewing after it has entered the second pouch, but before it reaches the third. By the time their Genesis 1:29 food has reached their flesh, it is nearly free from anything that might be harmful to humans.

Another telltale sign of an herbivore is the length of its digestive tract. These vegetarian animals obviously need a lot of internal real estate to properly digest their food. As such, their digestive tracts are often six to twelve times the length of their bodies, which gives them time to completely process and eliminate any toxins or poisons.

Herbivores’ natural instincts would lead them to a diet of grains, grass and other vegetation. As one of the clean animals listed in Leviticus 11, cows seem to be designed to be eaten by people, since their meat—in its God-given state—would be free from contaminants.

On the other hand, omnivores do not chew the cud and are designed quite differently. Pigs, for example, have a simpler, shorter digestive system that does not detoxify their food before it reaches their flesh. Considering pigs as a food source is troublesome. Why? Because on their own, pigs will eat everything, including mice, dead animals and feces.

God designed these unclean animals intelligently—but as an environmental cleaner, not a food source. Scavengers were created with a purpose. They were created to clean up anything left dead in the fields, but they were not created to be eaten. Dr. Rex Russell provides an interesting example of this intelligent design:

Pigs have eaten Philadelphia’s garbage and sewage for more than 100 years, saving the city \$3 million a year in landfill costs. This is a wise use of hogs. They are designed to clean our environment [Russell, p. 160].

Can present-day farmers and scientists breed and raise pigs that do not consume such foul food? Of course. But I am captivated by God’s thoughtful, careful design for the animal kingdom, to erring on the side of caution, I avoid eating those intended to clean the environment, regardless of the “scientific advances” man has made...

Scientific studies support the apparent wisdom of the biblical food laws. A Johns Hopkins University study illustrates how pigs and other unclean mammals, birds, fish and insects have significantly higher toxicity levels than clean ones, like cows {referencing Rex Russell, *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, who references David I. Macht}. Another study, in which medical students were fed organic pork that was trichinosis-free, revealed serious changes in the subjects’ blood chemistry after the pork was eaten. The longer-term study could not be completed, since the subjects stopped eating pork after the initial testing.

Fish

God’s distinction between clean and unclean fish seems similarly planned. The two requirements for clean fish are fins and scales—characteristics notably absent in bottom-feeders that live where garbage, dead fish and excretions settle. I marvel at the clearly designed purpose for these scavengers. For example, shellfish can remove cholera from the sea. This toxic pollutant, which is associated with raw sewage, is miraculously absorbed by shellfish without making them sick. Effectively purifying the water, “clams and oysters can filter between twenty and fifty gallons of seawater a day” [Colbert, *What Would Jesus Eat?*, pp. 38-39]. In addition, raw shellfish, like oysters, are known carriers of viral hepatitis, which can lead to cirrhosis, liver failure and liver cancer.

Messianic Kosher Helper

On the other hand, God clearly made clean fish to nourish humans. Species like salmon, mackerel, sardines and herring are especially rich in omega-3 fatty acids. These “essential fatty acids” have a variety of benefits, which include preventing heart attacks, lowering blood pressure, and easing arthritis, migraine headaches and asthma.

Today, however, studies confirm that many fish—including those that God perfectly designed for human consumption—contain poisonous mercury. Should we be scared away from the seafood counter? My hope is that God’s clear, biblical permission to eat fish with fins and scales, combined with His carefully crafted plan for our food, will somehow redeem fallen man’s propensity to mess things up. Dr. Rex Russell provides evidence that might support this theory:

Do you remember being frightened by the publicity about mercury being found in tuna fish? Actually, the alkyglycerols in the lipids of this clean fish pull out the toxic mercury from its flesh. When we eat the fish, the alkyglycerols also remove mercury and other heavy toxin metals from our bodies [Russell, p. 147].

How’s that for God thinking ahead? If you believe that He can raise the dead to life, this should not be a stretch. While the jury is still out on this, I believe that for most folks, eating modest amounts of God-given, nutrient-rich fish fosters good health, in spite of the mercury risks.

The most important thing is not to become paralyzed. If we become obsessed with eating only perfectly healthy food, we will make ourselves—and those around us—crazy. In a world filled with Wi-Fi, microwaves, computers and cell phones, we only have so much control over our environment. We should do whatever we can to make good choices and to help change the world around us—without becoming burned out. Then pray for God to handle the outcome.

Birds

In Leviticus 11 God prescribes which birds to avoid eating, rather than listing those we may eat. Not surprisingly, most of these birds are scavengers, designed by God to help clean our environment. Included in their diets are carcasses, lizards, rats and other animals designated as unclean. Some will eat dead human flesh.

By process of elimination, chicken, turkey, duck, goose and quail are considered clean by most authorities. Their digestive systems are quite different from those of scavenger birds. A chicken’s primary diet consists of grasses and grain, and its craw (part of its digestive system) is similar to the cow’s rumination pouches.

Low in calories and fat, and high in cancer-fighting niacin, immune-boosting selenium, and metabolism-enhancing vitamin B6, chickens seem to be designed by God for us to eat. In fact, “The prostaglandins in chicken have strong antiviral properties. (Maybe your mother’s chicken soup is good for the flu and colds.) [Russell, p. 147]

As with fish, God’s original, intelligent design for clean birds has become somewhat obscured by man’s intervention. Cramming chickens into close quarters and feeding them genetically modified grains and antibiotics reduces their health benefits to us. Thankfully, consumers are becoming more aware of these conditions, which are detrimental to both animals and humans, and some food producers are responding to the public’s demand for free-range, chemical-free birds.

Insects

The New Testament is filled with indirect confirmations of the food laws in Leviticus. Jesus feeds thousands with presumably clean fish. He and the disciples celebrate the Passover feast, presumably by eating lamb, a clean meat. Jesus casts out a legion of demons from a man and into a herd of swine, who tumble off a cliff. Since He was an advocate of feeding the hungry, He probably did not consider the 2,000 hogs a valid food source.

We do, however, see one direct affirmation in Matthew 3:4 and Mark 1:6. John the Baptist is eating locusts, one of the few insects God designates as clean. While it might sound grotesque to us, there is scientific evidence that grasshoppers and locusts are healthy food choices. On a remote island off the coast of Korea, a small community eats a concoction that includes ground up locusts and grasshoppers. With little disease and record-breaking life-spans, they make a good case for the diet followed by John the Baptist.

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?

Perhaps designating locusts as clean is an example of God's grace. When God's judgment came upon the Israelites in the form of swarms of locusts that devastated their crops, they could at least sustain themselves by eating the little critters who caused the damage, thereby avoiding total famine.

Practically speaking, I am not eager to dine on chocolate-covered grasshoppers. But it is interesting....

Isn't He Smart?

Have I fully proven that clean animals are healthy, and unclean animals are unhealthy? Probably not. {Footnote #25: "There are some obvious exceptions to the clean/healthy and unclean/unhealthy generalizations I have made. For example, the unclean rabbit is considered to be a healthy source of protein. The clean carp is a bottom feeder. *In general*, however, the health benefits of clean meats, and the toxicity of unclean ones, is difficult to refute."} My goal is to simply present some information to chew on and pray about before we jump back to the Scriptures. Just as I was convinced of God's wisdom for marriage and sexuality when I understood its logic and benefits, I hope that seeing the practical side of the Bible's dietary standards encourages you to press on in the Scriptures.²²

One, who is widely pessimistic of *kashrut* having any component of health or hygiene associated with it, is Aaron Eby, author of the 2012 resource *Biblically Kosher: A Messianic Jewish Perspective on Kashrut*. Eby actually opens the main body of his book with the sub-section, "Is Health the Reason for Kosher Laws?" He points out that issues of hygiene, disease, and spoilage can involve meats which the Torah classifies as "clean," every bit as much as it can involve meats classified as "unclean." He mainly favors separation unto God as being the overwhelmingly major reason behind the issuance of the dietary laws:

"Many people come to the conclusion that kosher laws were put in place in order to provide physical health benefits. Certain animals may be prone to disease or spoiling; they may be likely to contain toxic substances; or the human digestive system may not be capable of processing them. Although this is a thoughtful and reasonable hypothesis, the Bible does not offer this as rationale for the dietary laws....

"In reality, many foods that meet the Bible's kosher standards are unhealthy. For example, certain brands of sugary snack cakes and potato chips loaded with hydrogenated fats are fully kosher. Likewise, many highly nutritious dishes do not meet biblical dietary standards...Although the science of healthy eating constantly changes, biblical kosher law stays the same. There is not a direct relationship between kosher laws and nutrition.

"This is also true for foods that are organically grown and raised. A pig or cow raised on an organic farm is not any more or less kosher than one raised in an industrial environment, because the Bible does not make a distinction between what is organic and what is not. The distinction did not exist at the time the Bible was written. In certain circumstances, organic foods may be less likely to meet biblical kosher standards. For example, if an organic pesticide was less effective than a conventional one, it could result in a higher amount of bug-infested produce.

"One who views kosher as synonymous with healthful might be tempted to disregard the biblical commandments in favor of what scientific studies determine to be the best diet. Biblical scholar Dr. Nathan MacDonald recently published a book entitled *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times* [2008], in which he makes the case that the diet of the ancient Israelites was not nutritious....

"People often assert that God gave the kosher laws to protect the Israelites from spoiled meat, diseases, and unsanitary practices. But in modern society, they reason those are no longer of any concern. With modern refrigeration, disease prevention, and hygiene regulations, all foods should be permitted. First of all, it implies that kosher laws should not have been 'abolished' in the New Testament times, but only about a hundred years ago when modern sanitation and refrigeration methods began. Cows, sheep, goats, and chickens have also always been subject to

²² Hope Egan, *Holy Cow! Does God Care About What We Eat?* (Shelbyville, TN: Heart of Wisdom, 2012), pp 30-37.

Messianic Kosher Helper

spoiling and disease, just as pigs and camels are. Food produced even in first-world countries is still subject to health problems, as recent recalls due to *E. coli* and salmonella outbreaks prove. Furthermore, scientists still have much to learn about which foods cause health problems, as new studies are constantly published on the topic.

"But most importantly, the Bible never claims that its food laws are for the purposes of health. After all, the very first dietary law in the Bible—the law against eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—was entirely spiritual in nature.

"There are only a few justifications explicitly given in the Torah for the kosher laws: ritual purity, holiness, and sonship....{quotes Leviticus 11:44-47; Deuteronomy 14:1-3}

"It is noteworthy that none of these reasons relate to health. To the contrary, they seem to be related to our spiritual condition and our relationship with God.

"For Jews, the ultimate reason for keeping kosher is to maintain covenant fidelity. God made a covenant with the Jewish people. As part of that covenant, he revealed the Torah and the commandments. Some of those commandments concern what is or is not to be eaten. Keeping kosher means being loyal to the God who created you, knows you, chose you, and loves you.

"There are also good reasons for Gentiles to take on kosher laws as well..."²³

Proper health or hygiene is not at all the main reason stated in the Torah for God issuing His people a dietary code. Whether proper health or hygiene, or other reasons such as avoidance of Ancient Near Eastern idolatry, or simply trying to instill human discipline, are secondary or tertiary reasons for kosher, is something which will likely continue to be debated by examiners.

Kosher for Health: What Popular Writers Have Said

The concept that eating kosher, which for many, mainly means avoiding meats declared as unclean within the record of the Holy Bible, is more healthy for people, is something which is not only compelling, but it has also passed into the popular media. As we have been assembling this *Messianic Kosher Helper* publication throughout 2013-2014, simply consider the list of articles on the issue of kosher, which we have either passively encountered, or have been sent to us directly by readers. These include the following titles:

- "Pancreatic cancer risk increases with every 2 strips of bacon you eat: Study"²⁴
- "Is Pork Still Dangerous?"²⁵
- "Chuck Norris on 'What Would Jesus Eat?'"²⁶
- "Pork and Stomach Cramps"²⁷
- "Was the Bible correct that pork is truly an unclean meat?"²⁸
- "God's Dietary Laws: Why Pigs, Crabs And Lobsters Are Bad For You"²⁹
- "A few good reasons to avoid eating pork"³⁰

²³ Aaron Eby, *Biblically Kosher: A Messianic Jewish Perspective on Kashrut* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), pp 13, 14-15, 16.

²⁴ Ryan Jaslow (2012). *Pancreatic cancer risk increases with every 2 strips of bacon you eat: Study*, 13 January, 2012. *CBS News*. Retrieved 12 August, 2014, from <<http://cbsnews.com>>.

²⁵ Paul and Shou Jaminet (2012). *Is Pork Still Dangerous?*, 08 February, 2012. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved 12 August, 2014, from <<http://psychologytoday.com>>.

²⁶ Janeen Capizola (2013). *Chuck Norris on 'What Would Jesus Eat?'*, 31 March, 2013. *BizPac Review*. Retrieved 12 August, 2014, from <<http://bizpacreview.com>>.

²⁷ Diane Marks (2013). *Pork and Stomach Cramps*, 16 August, 2013. *Livestrong.com*. Retrieved 12 August, 2014, from <<http://livestrong.com>>.

²⁸ Dr. David Jockers (2013). *Was the Bible correct that pork is truly an unclean meat?*, 10 December, 2013. *NaturalNews.com*. Retrieved 12 August, 2014, from <<http://naturalnews.com>>.

²⁹ Susan Patterson (2014). *God's Dietary Laws: Why Pigs, Crabs, And Lobsters Are Bad For You*, 22 January, 2014. *Off The Grid News*. Retrieved 12 August, 2014, from <<http://offthegridnews.com>>.

³⁰ Michael Ravensthorpe (2014). *A few good reasons to avoid eating pork*, 19 July, 2014. *NaturalNews.com*. Retrieved 12 August, 2014, from <<http://naturalnews.com>>.

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?

There is little doubting that if we searched for more articles, with similar titles, that we would be able to catalogue a very, very long list. Admittedly some of these articles are from what would be considered alternative media sources. Still, talk is taking place...

A variety of popular Christian books have been written on the topic of health and diet, including, but by no means limited to, resources such as: *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living* by Rex Russell, M.D. (1996),³¹ *What Would Jesus Eat?* by Don Colbert, M.D. (2002),³² and *The Maker's Diet* by Jordan S. Rubin (2004).³³ All of these publications bear the tenor that the Holy Scriptures impart foundational principles to men and women today, which if followed, will keep them healthy. And, they all, in various ways, deal with the inevitable stubbornness which all people tend to have, when it comes to changes needing to be made, of any kind, in their diet, what and how much they consume, what they drink, how much they exercise, and how much they remain sedentary.

Space does not permit a thorough review of each book's contents, although we suspect that many of you, who have been in the Messianic movement for any period of time, have encountered these resources in some form or fashion. Among these books, Rex Russell's *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, is probably the most comprehensive, in terms of what we are interested in, in evaluating whether or not eating kosher—widely focused around adhering to the Torah's code on clean and unclean meats—actually has any health benefits. What makes Russell's resource stand out among the others, is that he has engaged directly with Messianic writing on the topic of kosher, having written forwards to Hope Egan's *Holy Cow!*³⁴ and her companion cookbook, co-authored with Amy Cataldo, *What the Bible Says about Healthy Living Cookbook*.³⁵

Much of what has guided the discussion of whether or not the Bible has anything to say about health, is the sentiment expressed in Exodus 15:26, "If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, **I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians**; for I, the LORD, am your healer." This verse does not just speak of God bringing *shalom* (שְׁלוֹמִים) in an ethical context, but testifies, *ki ani ADONAI rophekha* (כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה רֹפֵאֲךָ), "I the Lord am thy physician" (Leeser Translation).

Rex Russell's testimony of approaching Biblical passages as concerning human health, involved his own personal diagnosis as a diabetic for many years, and how by only turning to some of the instructions laid forth in Scripture, was he able to see a noticeable difference in his personal constitution. When facing a rapidly debilitating state, and sitting on death's doorstep, in 1976, he was willing to try anything. This would have had to be significant for Russell, being an M.D., and having to move beyond some of his formal training as a physician. Starting an important quest of discovering the significance of the Bible's dietary code, he details how "During a four-year period of study, the different pieces of the puzzle began to fit together. Gradually I came to understand that God gave His laws to protect people, and that astounding measures of health are available to those who obey these laws, whether they are believers or not."³⁶

In *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, Russell broadly believes in the post-resurrection era validity of the Torah, but tacitly appears to think that the kosher dietary laws were for the pre-resurrection era.³⁷ Russell does not at all have a negative disposition toward the kosher dietary laws, though, as he advises, "I believe that eating unclean meat and not being circumcised can result

³¹ Rex Russell, *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1996).

³² Don Colbert, *What Would Jesus Eat? The Ultimate Program for Eating Well, Feelign Great, and Living Longer* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002).

³³ Jordan S. Rubin, *The Maker's Diet* (Lake Mary, FL: Siloam, 2004).

³⁴ Egan, pp xi-xii.

³⁵ Hope Egan & Amy Cataldo, *What the Bible Says about Healthy Living Cookbook: Simple and Tasty Recipes Featuring God's Ingredients* (Shelbyville, TN: Heart of Wisdom Publishing, 2009), pp v-x.

³⁶ Russell, 8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 12-13.

Messianic Kosher Helper

in health problems, many of them serious or deadly.”³⁸ Russell is tempered by the thought of 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, in that the bodies of human beings are to be treated as though they are the temple of God, as he issues the thought, “for those who decide to observe health principles derived from the Old Testament Mosaic law, the reason for following these principles might be the desire to take care of what God has given you physically, thus glorifying your Creator with your health.”³⁹

Russell’s first major area, of addressing health from Holy Scripture, is the prohibition witnessed regarding the consumption of blood (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; 7:26-27; 19:26; Deuteronomy 12:16-24; 1 Samuel 14:32-34). Various illnesses, infections, and viruses, are widely recognized to be transferred via blood, and the consumption of blood in foodstuffs increases the risk of disease.⁴⁰ Immediately following this, Russell lays forth some of his presuppositions on approaching the Torah’s code on clean and unclean:

“In the law-making period of Israel’s history, God was building and solidifying Israel into its particular identity. The distinction between ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ became more sharply drawn. God wanted to preserve His people for his own purposes—to teach them to separate themselves from idolatry and to trust and believe in Him alone. His reputation depended on the validity of the Law. ‘Clean’ meant separated *for* God; ‘unclean’ meant separated *from* God. The word ‘clean’ was associated with purity, holiness and being set apart for God, and acting in an ethically righteous way; ‘unclean’ became associated with death, putrefaction, lewdness and demons (see Lev. 11-15; Zech. 13:2; cf. Lev. 19:4; Ps. 106:37-39; Ezek. 22:3)....

“The laws had an ethical level, teaching the Israelites obedience and the holiness of God...As we look at modern science and nutrition, we find that...there is an amazing overlap between God’s original laws of clean and unclean and solid hygienic principles.”⁴¹

Russell’s study, in *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, does notably go beyond the issues of clean and unclean meats. He lays forth his ideology of health in the three principles: (1) eat only substances God created for food, (2) eat foods as they were created, and (3) don’t let any food or drink become your god.⁴² His book then goes on to address a variety of areas where healthy living is important for people, including:

- sexual conduct⁴³
- the benefits of fasting⁴⁴
- various grains to be consumed⁴⁵
- various fats to be consumed, and not consumed⁴⁶
- olive oil⁴⁷
- butter and cheese⁴⁸
- dangers associated with sugars and sweeteners⁴⁹
- fruits and vegetables⁵⁰
- herbs and spices⁵¹
- water, beverages, and alcoholic beverages⁵²

³⁸ Ibid., 13.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., pp 16, 17, 18.

⁴³ Ibid., pp 37-42.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp 43-47.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp 52-62.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp 62-66.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp 67-68.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp 84-89.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp 90-96.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp 97-102.

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?

Russell's proposals, observations, and conclusions in *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living* are doubtlessly open to a wide range of opinions and interpretations. Russell's evaluation of Believer's drinking alcoholic beverages is quite negative: "because of its effect on the brain and muscular control...I would recommend little or no routine use of alcoholic products."⁵³ Likewise, his opinion of drinking coffee is also negative: "Coffee has been implicated in causing cancer of the pancreas, and in raising cholesterol...Caffeine is one of the world's most psychoactive drugs."⁵⁴ Messianic people do tend to be social drinkers, and will often drink coffee pretty regularly. They will likely not agree with Russell's overall conclusions about alcohol⁵⁵ or caffeine.

Messianic people reading through Russell's *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living* are going to be most interested in his medical evaluation of the Torah's classification of clean and unclean meats. Chapter 8 of his book is entitled "The Meat to Eat: Did a loving God teach something about meats we should still need when He labeled some 'clean' and some 'unclean'?"⁵⁶

Is eating kosher really healthier?

Throughout the past century or so, in North America to be sure, many of the claims for kosher products being healthier and more hygienic, have admittedly been for marketing reasons.⁵⁷ Animals that are slaughtered according to traditional kosher methods, are checked for various wounds or diseases,⁵⁸ and every effort is made to ensure that the method of slaughter is humane and painless. Many of the products certified as "kosher" go well beyond meat, and range from items such as ketchup, beer, or cereal, whose processing has been supervised and approved by various, likely Orthodox, Jewish agencies. While kosher certification of a wide array of common and popular foodstuffs is important for members of the Jewish community, the majority of those in North America who purchase certified-kosher products, where kosher certification is important, are actually not Jewish. **It is believed that "kosher" provides a better quality of product.** Fishkoff summarizes,

"[J]ust 14 percent of consumers who regularly buy kosher food do so because they follow the rules of kashrut. That means at least 86 percent of the nation's 11.2 million kosher consumers are not religious Jews.

"Many are not Jewish at all. They are people turning to kosher food for a wide variety of reasons. They are vegetarians, who trust that a 'D' kosher dairy symbol means a product contains no meat. They are lactose-intolerant consumers who know that kosher products without the 'D' are dairy free, or folks with gluten allergies who stock up on kosher-for-Passover items made without wheat. They are people who follow religious or spiritual practices satisfied by kosher food, including Muslims who buy kosher meat when halal is not available, Seventh-day Adventists who eat only biblically permitted animals, and those who look for the *pareve*, or neutral, kosher symbol, indicating that food contains neither dairy nor meat.

"All these people buy kosher food for what it guarantees in terms of ingredients. But the growing popularity of kosher certification also has to do with perception, with the belief shared by many people, Jewish or not, that kosher food is cleaner, safer, better. In fact, more Americans buy it for these reasons than any other: 62 percent buy kosher food because they believe it is of higher quality than non-kosher food, 51 percent because they believe it is more healthy, and 34 percent because they consider it safer. What with spinach tainted with E. coli, peanut butter laced with salmonella, and beef infected with mad cow disease, Americans uneasy about the country's food

⁵² Ibid., pp 103-113.

⁵³ Ibid., 113.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Consult the FAQ, "Alcohol." (Reproduced in this publication in the **FAQs on Kosher and Eating** section.)

⁵⁶ Russell, pp 73-83.

⁵⁷ Fishkoff, pp 38-40.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 34.

Messianic Kosher Helper

supply might well find comfort in knowing that another pair of eyes—a pair of religious eyes at that—is watching over the manufacturing process.”⁵⁹

With much of the monitoring that does take place, in order to ensure something is certified as “kosher,” many products which are certified as “kosher” may very well be of a higher quality and value than others.

But this does not answer the question of whether eating kosher—specifically viewed as abstinence from unclean meats such as pork or shellfish—actually has a positive physiological effect on people. While there are voices, both theological and medical, who will affirm that abstaining from unclean meats has positive health effects, there are other voices who will dismiss the idea that *kashrut* has anything to do with the physical health of a person. Admittedly, because the Torah’s explicit claim for its dietary code is holiness (Leviticus 11:44-47), any secondary or tertiary reasons proposed are somewhat subjective. Rex Russell of *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, while addressing some excellent points about the dangers of consuming blood, pork, and shellfish, was influenced by his wanting to try anything to live in 1976, when his diabetes took a turn for the worst.

There are Messianic Believers today who are firmly convicted that the kosher dietary laws were given by God for the health of His people. There are other Messianic Believers today who totally dismiss the idea that the kosher dietary laws have anything to do with physical health, thinking instead they involve the separation of the Jewish people from the nations at large. Not surprisingly, Stern mentions how many modern Jews today are not in agreement on some of the reasons why or how they keep kosher:

“The reasons for the particular laws can be a subject of never-ending debate. The reason people keep kosher is one of individual choice. In researching...I spoke with people who observe some aspect of *kashrut* in manner ranging from the bare minimum of simply not eating pork and shellfish to those adhering to the most Orthodox interpretation of halacha.”⁶⁰

People, within the broad Messianic community today, are likely to also have their own individual opinions regarding the reasons God issued a dietary code in the Torah.

Messianic Believers, such as the authors of this publication, cannot disagree or dismiss the thrust of Holy Scripture, which is that *kashrut* is mainly about **being holy**, or **sanctifying** one’s eating unto God. This does not mean, however, that there are not some worthwhile ancillary reasons proposed for kosher, as scientific propositions regarding the dangers of consuming pork or shellfish cannot and should not just be dismissed off hand. At the same time, additional reasons for the Torah’s dietary code, such as the Ancient Israelites needing to avoid an Ancient Near Eastern paganism in Canaan, which might have used pork in its religious rituals, should also not be dismissed either.

The view which we think is likely to emerge in the Messianic community, regarding the secondary importance of *kashrut*, is represented by P.C. Craigie in his commentary on Deuteronomy. His is a fair summation of the additional reasons which sat behind God’s issuing the dietary code to Ancient Israel in the Torah:

“Regarding this section {Deuteronomy 14:3-8} and the two that follow [classifying meats], there has been debate over the principle underlying the regulations on permitted and prohibited foods. There are those who adopt the position that the underlying principle has to do with hygiene. Thus, an American doctor conducted a series of experiments to determine the levels of toxicity in the meats of the animals, aquatic creatures, and birds mentioned in Deut. 14 {referencing D.I. Macht, ‘An Experimental Pharmacological Appreciation of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14’}; he discovered that the various types of prohibited meats contained a higher percentage of toxic substances than those which were permitted. Others have maintained that the principle underlying

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp 6-7.

⁶⁰ Stern, *How to Keep Kosher*, 11.

Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?

the legislation has to do with the association of some creatures with other religions; the animals that the Israelites were prohibited from eating were those revered and held sacred by various foreign religions. The text does not make absolutely clear which position is correct, and it is possible that both positions have some merit.”⁶¹

It should not be argued that the main reason for God issuing the dietary laws to His people was to keep them healthy; the main reason for God issuing the dietary laws was to keep them holy, and for them to consecrate an activity as seemingly mundane as eating unto Him. It should be argued that *an additional reason* for the dietary laws, was that following them had the effect of being healthy. But like all things involving modern science and medical research, the thought that eating unclean meats like pork or shellfish, might have a negative effect on a person’s physiology, is something which will certainly be dismissed by various people, with the presentation of other studies.⁶²

A comparison can probably be made between the Torah’s dietary code *and* the Torah’s sexual code. Anyone reading a chapter like Leviticus 18, which includes the directive, “You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God. So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD” (Leviticus 18:4-5), can see that living within an appropriate sphere of God’s Instruction, is in view. The Torah’s code of sexual conduct was not principally given to prevent the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV or gonorrhea or herpes; the Torah’s code of sexual conduct was principally given to promote holiness and prevent a breach of proper relationship between a married man and woman. Yet, it can be deduced that when the Torah’s sexual code is observed, and sexual intercourse is kept limited between a husband and wife, that many sexually transmitted diseases will be avoided.⁶³

Eating a piece of bacon on a few occasions will no more kill someone than a person smoking a few packets of cigarettes is going to cause lung cancer. *The human body is a magnificent piece of work.* Yeshua Himself said of one who ate bread with unwashed hands, “For it does not enter into the heart but into the stomach, and then is eliminated, cleaning out all foods” (Mark 7:19, TLV-Shared Heritage Bible) or “purging all foods” (Restored New Testament). **The human body, made by a Grand Creator, was able to excrete bread eaten with unwashed hands!** Still, this does not all of a sudden dismiss the importance of eating with washed hands, as eating with unwashed hands should never be a regular occurrence. Similarly, while dangers do come with eating unclean meats such as pork or shellfish—the danger does not really come with their *momentary* consumption, but with their *habitual* consumption. The Lord is concerned with **our total wholeness**, as the Apostle Paul directed to the Thessalonians, “May the God of *shalom* make you completely holy—may your entire spirit, soul and body be kept blameless for the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah” (1 Thessalonians 5:23, CJB).

⁶¹ Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, pp 230-231.

⁶² This would notably include studies like those of Nathan MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); referenced by Eby, 15.

⁶³ Similar arguments can be made in favor of the health benefits of male circumcision, as presented by Russell, pp 10-11; S.I. McMillen & David E. Stern, *None of These Diseases: The Bible’s Health Secrets for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2000), pp 80-85.

Consult the chapter, “Is Circumcision for Everyone?”, appearing in *Torah In the Balance, Volume II* by J.K. McKee (forthcoming 2015).