

## Leviticus 20:22-26

### “Kosher as Holiness”

“You are therefore to keep all My statutes and all My ordinances and do them, so that the land to which I am bringing you to live will not spew you out. Moreover, you shall not follow the customs of the nation which I will drive out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I have abhorred them. Hence I have said to you, ‘You are to possess their land, and I Myself will give it to you to possess it, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. You are therefore to make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; and you shall not make yourselves detestable by animal or by bird or by anything that creeps on the ground, which I have separated for you as unclean. Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine.”

In reviewing some of the preceding content of Leviticus ch. 20, readers encounter significant directions given against Ancient Israel sacrificing to Molech (20:1-5), or being involved with spiritism or soothsaying (20:6). Father and mother are not to be cursed (20:7), and there are a variety of forbidden sexual relations and unions that are described (20:10-21), which include prohibited heterosexual activities, homosexual activities, and bestiality, among other things. It is obvious that as the community of Ancient Israel prepares itself to move into the Land of Canaan, that the Lord does not want the people to observe any of these detestable things—things which many of His people in both Judaism and Christianity today readily agree should still be followed.

Interjected into this, however, is the stated need in Leviticus 20:22-26 for Ancient Israel to keep God’s instruction, especially in distinguishing between clean and unclean animals, something which had been addressed previously in Leviticus ch. 11. Some of the inclusion of these instructions might be stylistic, in that the section of material in chs. 11-20 is widely closing. Alternatively, it can certainly be suggested, in light of the preceding material on idolatry, spiritism, and forbidden sexual unions—that there are some associations to be made with separating clean and unclean meats, and the Israelites avoiding various pagan rituals in Canaan, which might have featured pork, for instance. Oswald T. Allis is among examiners who thinks that the inclusion of this instruction is to serve as a reminder of how God’s requirement to be holy is all-encompassing:

“Since eating and drinking were an important part of the daily life of the people, and since vv. 22-26 serve as a kind of conclusion to this great body of laws, ceremonial and moral, which the people are to observe, a reference back to ch. 11 with which it begins is entirely appropriate.”<sup>1</sup>

20:22-24 In light of the instructions issued within ch. 20, the Lord was very serious about His people entering into the Promised Land, directing them, “You shall observe My statutes, all My judicial decisions and fulfill them; so the land to which I am bringing you to settle in shall not vomit you out” (v. 22, Keter Crown Bible). The verb *qi* (קִי), appearing in the Hifil stem (casual action, active voice), has a variety of important meanings to keep in mind here: “to vomit something: of a person, what has been eaten,” or “of a land, to spew out its inhabitants” (*HALOT*).<sup>2</sup> English versions vary with having either “spew” (NASU) or “vomit” (RSV/NRSV/ESV, et. al.), but with ATS actually having “disgorge.” The point to be taken is that if the Israelites do not follow what God tells them to do, their removal from the Promised Land is going to be violent, perhaps even like someone throwing up. One could wonder if the sins described in the vicinity of ch. 20, are intended to invoke a nauseating physical reaction on the part of the people who have to consider them.

It is stated by God, “And you shall not go by the statutes of the nation,” *v’lo teil’ku b’chuqot ha’goy* (וְלֹא תֵלְכוּ בְּחֻקֵּי הַגּוֹי), “which I am about to send away before you, for these things they have done, and I loathed them” (v. 23, Alter). A legal term, *chuqah* (חֻקָּה), is invoked here, which would

---

<sup>1</sup> Oswald T. Allis, “Leviticus,” in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 160.

<sup>2</sup> *HALOT*, 1:1096.

relate to “(human) **statutes**: of nations” (*CHALOT*),<sup>3</sup> but *chuqot* is variably translated as “customs” (NASU), “practices” (NRSV, NJPS), “statutes” (NKJV), “regulations” (CJB), or even “traditions” (ATS). Regardless of what appears in English translation, the *chuqot* are identified as the detestable actions mainly prescribed immediately in ch. 20. God says, “you shall not walk in the customs of the nation which I am casting out before you” (RSV), with readers getting the definite impression that what has gotten the Canaanites cast out will get the Israelites cast out if they do not obey Him.

Because of the Canaanites being removed from the Promised Land, it is asserted, “But I have said to you, You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess it, a land that flows with milk and honey: I am the LORD your GOD, who have separated you from the peoples” (v. 24, Jerusalem Bible-Koren). The Promised Land is depicted as being agriculturally rich, yet inheritance of it on behalf of Israel will come with a recognition of their distinction as a community: *asher-hivdal’ti et’khem min-ha’ammim* (אֲשֶׁר-הִבְדַּלְתִּי אִתְּכֶם מִן-הָעַמִּים), “I-set-apart you from the-nations” (Kohlenberger),<sup>4</sup> “set you apart from the peoples” (Keter Crown Bible). The verb *badal* (בָּדַל), appearing in the Hifil stem (casual action, active voice), can often involve “to **separate**, to **divide from**: with...to **make distinction** between,” “to **single out**, to **select**,” and for Leviticus 20:24 it is noted with “God as subj.: to **single out**” (*HALOT*).<sup>5</sup>

When God’s people would follow the instructions in view, they would find themselves separated and distinct from their neighbors—which would have been vitally important should Ancient Israel have truly wanted to remain in the Promised Land, and not be ejected from it. Looking for some contemporary application of this concept, Derek Tidball usefully observes,

“Being holy still entails living a lifestyle that runs counter to the customs of the people around us where they live in ignorance or opposition to the revealed will of God. Our calling is not to be fashionable, acceptable or conventional but to be the best we can be for God. The reason for our separation, however, is not negative but positive. It is because we belong to God and enjoy a special relationship with him.”<sup>6</sup>

20:25-26 Because of God’s selection of Israel as holy, and how His people are to be different from the previous inhabitants of the Promised Land, He asserts, “So you are to separate between the pure animals and the *tamei*-ones, and between the *tamei* fowl and the pure ones, that you not make your selves detestable through animal or fowl or anything with which the soil stirs, that I have separated for you to treat-as-*tamei*” (v. 25, Fox).<sup>7</sup> God is the One who states that He separated out the unclean animals as unclean—“which I set apart for you as unclean” (Alter)—and so when the Israelites would do this, they would actually be patterning themselves after God. Gordon Wenham concurs, “In distinguishing between the different kinds of creatures they are imitating God, who chose Israel from all the nations to be a people for his own possession.”<sup>8</sup> Aside from all of the other important reasons that might be considered for the issuance of the kosher dietary laws, God’s holiness and the distinction of His people are key: “You shall be holy for Me, for I HASHEM am holy; and I have separated you from the peoples to be Mine” (v. 26, ATS).

The holiness component to separating out clean and unclean meats is not something that has been generally lost in the Jewish theological tradition. J.H. Hertz observes, for example, “It is a reminder, still required by the Jewish people, that the ideal of holiness for the Israelite consists in more than moral purity. The dietary laws have likewise their essential place in the scheme of the Torah, and form a necessary aid in the pursuit of the goal set by God.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *CHALOT*, 114.

<sup>4</sup> Kohlenberger, 1:332.

<sup>5</sup> *HALOT*, 1:110.

<sup>6</sup> Tidball, *Leviticus*, pp 258-259.

<sup>7</sup> Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 610.

<sup>8</sup> Wenham, *Leviticus*, 280.

<sup>9</sup> Hertz, 508.

## Messianic Kosher Helper

The placement of a reminder to separate out clean and unclean meats, in a section of Leviticus that addresses the arguably more important direction of Ancient Israel not sacrificing children to Molech, or not engaging in forbidden sexual activities—should and must remind the modern Bible reader that God does want His people *to balance* high moral actions that would incur capital punishment, with mundane daily actions like eating. A Christian commentator like R. Laird Harris fairly indicates,

“There is here a reminder that all God’s laws for Israel were intertwined and all had a religious sanction. It is convenient to divide the laws into moral, ceremonial, and civil; but the Bible itself makes no such distinction. They were all God’s laws and were given in wisdom for the regulation of the life and worship of his people.”<sup>10</sup>

While it is easy for serious, modern Believers to understand how worship of a foreign god (by an abominable practice like child sacrifice, of all things!), or engaging in inappropriate sexual activities, **severely damages relationships** like the communion the Lord desires with His people and the proper relations that human beings should have with one another—it is not so easy for contemporary Believers to often compute the placement of instructions like the kosher dietary laws in this. *Are they just intended to be obeyed, because God “said so”?* Or, is their placement in a piece of text like Leviticus ch. 20 to indicate the diverse spectrum of activities that God wants His people to consecrate unto Him? Samuel E. Balentine is one who thinks,

“[W]hen Israel consecrates itself to God, by devotion and by deed, it does so not only for its own sake but also for the sake of the world. For the wholeness that God intends, creation itself requires a people who aspire to be holy as God is holy.”<sup>11</sup>

**20:22-26 application** Today’s Jewish readers of Leviticus 20:22-26, who are serious about maintaining some level of noticeable Jewish identity, will likely have fewer challenges computing the logic of God wanting His own to be distinct in a wider range of areas—than today’s common Christian readers, who will tend to only think that commandments against idolatry or perverse sexuality are those which are important. R.K. Harrison is one Old Testament theologian, though, who advises in his commentary, how “God’s elect people must be recognizably distinct from those who are not dedicated to the ideals of holiness, an emphasis that is equally valid for people of the new covenant. Christians are urged to be obedient children, and holy in their manner of living (1 Pet. 1:14-15), and to avoid all the works of the flesh (Rom. 13:13; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:8, *etc.*)”<sup>12</sup>

Messianic readers of Leviticus 20:22-26, who believe that via the salvation of Yeshua the Messiah, the New Covenant imperative of God’s Instruction being supernaturally transcribed onto the heart and mind (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27)—actually involves spiritually maturing **in all aspects of life**—have a responsibility to treat both Leviticus 20:22-26, and its surrounding message, with a high degree of value. Much of this will involve demonstrating the proper attitude when either honoring the kosher dietary laws, *or* being criticized by outsiders for honoring them. Much of it will also involve being better prepared to explain the ongoing importance of the kosher dietary laws in the post-resurrection era. To what extent is the separation that results from keeping the Torah’s dietary instructions, still necessary for the people of God? Walter J. Houston, among examiners, presents some questions for us:

“This understanding of the symbolism of the dietary laws remained influential, and the refusal to share Gentiles’ tables expressed it in practice. Acts 10 uses it in order to reverse the demand for separation.”<sup>13</sup>

Our attention to common interpretations of Peter’s vision of Acts chs. 10-11, or the Galatians 2:11-21 incident in Antioch, will be necessary (examined further). For, if God’s people are to be separated or distinguished *to any degree*, no matter how small, by eating and not eating certain

---

<sup>10</sup> Harris, in *EXP*, 2:614.

<sup>11</sup> Balentine, 155.

<sup>12</sup> Harrison, *Leviticus*, 207.

<sup>13</sup> Houston, in *ECB*, 119.

## Leviticus 20:22-26 Eating and Kosher in the Tanach

things—then it must not only be enjoined with a recognition that not observing the dietary laws are **not** a capital offense, but also with an adequate defense of their relevance. For, the biggest problem which is often encountered by kosher-friendly Messianics, is a **widescale inability** to allow the Holy Spirit to transform internal heart morality, provide a fair external observance, *and* impute the skills to explain one's faith practice to the (often Christian) skeptic. Yet, as Tidball observes—as one who does not believe in the continued validity of the dietary laws, no less—this part of the Book of Leviticus elucidates God's desire to want to control all aspects of the lives of His people:

“Many struggle with the inclusion of a verse [20:25] about clean and unclean animals at this juncture, as it seems like an interruption to the flow of the chapter and a deviation from the topic being addressed. But it serves as another reminder that holiness has a comprehensive reach into our lives. It is neither just about piety nor just about morality. God claims total allegiance in every department of our lives and calls us to live with purity.”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, let us each be able to properly balance outward action with internal attitude—***allowing God to have total control over all of our activities!***

---

<sup>14</sup> Tidball, *Leviticus*, 259.