

Philippians 3:17-19

“Can One’s Appetite Actually be Adhering to the Kosher Dietary Laws?”

“Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* enemies of the cross of Messiah, whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.”

Paul’s letter to the Philippians¹ is widely agreed to principally be a letter of thanksgiving, to a group of Believers who have supported the Apostle financially, and who are near and dear to his heart. There is scarcely a negative tone in Philippians, with the major exceptions being for Euodia and Syntyche to get along (3:2) and for some warnings issued about those labeled as “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “the false circumcision” (3:2). In all likelihood, such troublemakers in view are those similar to the Judaizers/Influencers who insisted that the non-Jewish Galatians be circumcised and convert to Judaism to be saved. Paul makes it clear that his confidence has been placed not in his Jewish pedigree or Torah observance, but rather in what Yeshua the Messiah has accomplished for him (3:4-10ff).

Within Paul’s discussion about how the Philippians are to emulate his example of service unto the Lord, the Apostle mentions a few things about various opponents of the Messiah, and he specifically speaks of how “their god is their belly” (3:19, TLV), *ho theos hē koilia* (ὁ θεὸς ἡ κοιλία). As we see, while many readers of Philippians interpret what Paul has to say as regarding the base attitudes and self-indulgence of the troublemakers or agitators warned about, there are a few others who interpret “appetite” (RSV) or “stomach” (NIV) in Philippians 3:19 to be a reference to the kosher dietary laws. Is this an appropriate conclusion to draw? What are some of the opinions and views present, and how do they align with what Paul communicates?

3:17 The Apostle Paul presents himself as a person who lives appropriately, as one who follows Yeshua the Messiah—which is to sit in stark contrast to any of the troublemakers or agitators who may come to stir up the Philippians. Paul admonishes his audience, “Join with others in following my example” (NIV). This parallels his words in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Messiah.” It can be deduced that if Yeshua Himself followed the Torah or Law of Moses, then Paul himself likewise certainly followed it as His Lord demonstrated it (cf. Galatians 6:2), with the imperatives of loving God and neighbor being most vital.² Ralph P. Martin actually asserts that what Paul talks about here “is the New Testament counterpart to the Hebrew term *halakhah* [הלכה], i.e., practical conduct (lit. ‘walking’) as distinct from mental activity.”³ Was Paul, as the good Jew that he was, actually encouraging the Philippians to follow his example of obedience to God’s Law?⁴ There is certainly an ample amount to consider from the Tanach or Old Testament on what it means to walk with God:

“Enoch walked with God...” (Genesis 5:24).

¹ This section has been adapted and expanded from the commentary *Philippians for the Practical Messianic* (2006) by J.K. McKee.

² Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; cf. Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.

³ Ralph P. Martin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, Vol 11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 157.

⁴ Obviously, Paul does speak about how “[I] may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law” (3:9a). Not being afforded a status of righteousness or *dikaïosunē* (δικαιοσύνη) from one’s personal Torah observance, does not negate the need for obedience to God’s commandments via His Spirit.

For some further thoughts, consult the article “What is the New Covenant?” by J.K. McKee, appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*.

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"These are *the records* of the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:9).

"Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless'" (Genesis 17:1).

"The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9).

"He who walks righteously and speaks with sincerity, he who rejects unjust gain and shakes his hands so that they hold no bribe; he who stops his ears from hearing about bloodshed and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil" (Isaiah 33:15).

"Teach me Your way, O LORD; I will walk in Your truth; unite my heart to fear Your name" (Psalm 86:11).

Of course, one of the challenges, to walking properly in the Lord, is seen in the second half of v. 17: "You have us for a model; watch those whose way of life conforms to it" (NEB). The Philippians had to find able servants of the Lord to emulate in their walk of faith—people with the right motivations who themselves were transformed by the Holy Spirit. It was surely not enough to just obey God's commandments or instructions, but demonstrate His love, mercy, and wisdom toward other people: Jewish *or* Roman. Gordon D. Fee indicates,

"The idea of 'emulating' a teacher had precedent in Paul's Jewish heritage, where a pupil learned not by simply receiving instruction but by 'putting into practice' the example of the teacher; the one who 'imitates' thus internalizes and lives out the model presented by the teacher."⁵

In the Messianic community today, it has been said by some that to be a disciple of Yeshua a person must emulate Him in all respects. *With this we should all agree.* But, in some sectors it is emphasized that a First Century disciple emulated his teacher down to the minutiae of adopting the mannerisms, dress, and even eating style of him. This has manifested itself today by some Messianic pupils emulating their teachers to the point of standing, gesturing, or even pronouncing words the way that they do. While this is not always a bad thing, it can sometimes be emphasized at the expense of one's own unique communication style because the teacher being emulated may not have conveyed what really matters: **demonstrating an example of how one is to love others as Yeshua, and deal with complicated issues in the Body of Messiah as they present themselves.**

When you listen to Messianic teachers, do you follow them so that you might dress or eat like them? Or, do you follow them because they are properly emulating the Master and how He lived and how He loved and served others?

The Apostle Paul himself is a person worthy of emulation on our behalf. Paul demonstrated a willingness to suffer and even die for the sake of the gospel. As a teacher, he also was forced to apply the Torah in some unique circumstances among the new, non-Jewish Believers coming to faith out in the Mediterranean basin. One of the most important elements in a true Torah observance is having love and patience for others, not necessarily forcing things on people who are still new and/or maturing in their walk. (And this is certainly true of how anyone approaches an issue like the kosher dietary laws!) For Believers being sanctified by the Holy Spirit, this requires one to emulate an example which shows that obedience to God brings His blessings, as a result of one being continually changed by Him *for the better*. Unfortunately in the First Century, there were many of Paul's peers who were unable to do this—and not surprisingly, not that much has changed today with Messianics who place obedience to the Torah *before* their salvation in Yeshua.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp 363-364; cf. *Ibid.* fn#7 for examples of this in Jewish and some elements of Greco-Roman society.

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3:18 Paul expresses a deep emotion for those who have sought for their own human achievements being superior to the Lord, writing the Philippians, "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" (ESV). Paul wails and laments over these people, and it is not difficult to assume that he is mainly speaking of his fellow Jewish brethren who have either rejected Yeshua and/or perverted the simplicity of the good news into something that it is not. Paul has already warned them about the Judaizers/Influencers who insist that one's redemptive status before God does not come as a result of faith in Yeshua, but instead via circumcision and probably also conversion to Judaism. Peter T. O'Brien makes the pertinent remark,

"The presence of περιπατοῦσιν [*peripatousin*] in the first clause indicates that it was the *behaviour* of these people that made them 'enemies of the cross of Christ'. . . rather than that they opposed the doctrine of the saving significance of the cross. . . it was by their manner of life that they spurned the cross of Christ and did not accept its implications for daily living."⁶

What are we to make of this? Perhaps the "dogs" (v. 2) which Paul has warned his Philippian friends about are not directly teaching anything against Yeshua, but they want non-Jewish Believers to express their confidence in something *other than* Yeshua—namely circumcision. Do we know any Messianics like this today? Do we have people who do not deny Yeshua in specific words, but by their behavior demonstrate that they are enemies of Him nonetheless—because they place *something else* ahead of Him? While Yeshua would assert "the law permits a person to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:12, NLT), how can a person be empowered to do good when he or she is concerned about *extremely minor points* like having to pre-tear toilet paper before *Shabbat*? You might think this is an extreme (and even ridiculous) example, but it is present in some parts of today's Messianic community.

Perhaps one's theology on paper may not deny the importance of having some kind of association with Yeshua. But, can one's actions demonstrate that he or she is really an enemy of Him? Paul was fairly candid in warning his Philippian friends about such people. Who might we need to be warned about as the present Messianic movement grows and matures? Who will impede our ability to be totally devoted to Yeshua to the extent of suffering for Him?

3:19 Paul expresses that the *telos* (τέλος) or goal that the enemies of Messiah's cross are reaching toward is not a pleasant one. He says, "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things" (NIV).

There is considerable disagreement among commentators about what is being referred to by Paul when he says that "their god is their bodily desires. They are proud of what they should be ashamed of, and they think only of things that belong to this world" (Good News Bible). Some are of the view that this is to be taken as a general remark about the bad, corruptible behavior of troublemakers and agitators, likely Judaizers/Influencers, but others consider it to be a disparaging statement about Torah-related practices. Some of the early Christian commentators (Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ambrosiaster, Pelagius)⁷ considered "appetite" to be a reference to the dietary laws of the Torah, and "shame" to actually be a reference to circumcision. Gerald F. Hawthorne actually adopts this interpretation in his paraphrase of v. 19: "Their observance of food laws and their glorying in circumcision has become their god" (*WBC*).⁸

What have a selection of interpreters actually concluded about Philippians 3:19? Is the *koilia* (κοιλία), "the large cavity of the body, the belly" (*LS*),⁹ to be viewed as a reference to the Torah's dietary laws *or* to immoral behavior and self-indulgence?

⁶ Peter T. O'Brien, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 453.

⁷ Cf. Gerald F. Hawthorne *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians*, Vol. 43 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 166; Fee, 372 fn#39; O'Brien, 455.

⁸ Hawthorne, 162.

⁹ *LS*, 439.

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ΚΟΙΛΙΑ KOILIA in PHILIPPIANS 3:19	
DIETARY LAWS	IMMORAL BEHAVIOR
<p>"In Rom 16:18 κοιλία [<i>koilia</i>] is used...[for] things which, in Paul's mind, could and did include devotion to the Law. Early Christian commentators, such as Theodore of Mopsuestia, Ambrosiaster, and Pelagius took κοιλία as a reference to Jewish laws about food...Their scrupulous observance of food laws became their belly-god."¹⁰ Gerald F. Hawthorne</p>	<p>"[T]hey worship themselves: <i>their god is the belly</i>. They recognize no need and no authority outside personal satisfaction. Their appetites dictate their lives."¹¹ J.A. Motyer</p>
<p>"In v. 19 the characterization of these troublemakers is even more graphic. For one thing, their 'goal' or 'end' (<i>telos</i>) is destruction, the very opposite goal to the one Paul and his converts are striving toward. Note the contrast—they are walking toward destruction while Paul is running toward the proper goal, the prize. For another thing, what is really ruling or running their life is their belly (probably food laws, but cf. Rom. 16.17-18 and 3 Macc. 7.11), and their honor is in their shame (i.e., their circumcised genitals)."¹² Ben Witherington III</p>	<p>"Their god is their stomach; compare Romans 16:18, where the Roman Christians are warned against undesirable characters who 'are not serving our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites'...Similarly in 1 Corinthians 6:13, where Paul quotes the libertine epigram, 'Food is for the stomach [<i>koilia</i>], and the stomach [<i>koilia</i>] is for food,' the context makes it plain that sexual license, not freedom from food restrictions, is the subject under discussion. If their god is their 'appetites,' that means that their 'appetites' are their ultimate concern; they do not say so expressly, but that is the implication of their way of life."¹³ F.F. Bruce</p>
	<p>"In contrast to an ascetic line of interpretation with its over-scrupulous attention to the purity of foods, most interpreters have read the expression in a libertine manner...Others have understood the expression is a less narrowly literal sense to describe libertines who indulge in 'bodily desires', that is, sensual delights and the pleasures of the table. Paul is thus condemning the opponents who surrendered to gluttony and licentiousness, that is, who worshipped their sensual nature."¹⁴ Peter T. O'Brien</p>

¹⁰ Hawthorne, 166.

¹¹ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 185.

¹² Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 216; cf. Ben Witherington III, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 96.

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *New International Biblical Commentary: Philippians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 130.

¹⁴ O'Brien, *Philippians*, pp 455-456.

	<p>"The self-indulgence of these people expresses itself in their appetites, their pride, and their mind: <i>their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.</i> Though the word <i>stomach</i> refers literally to the 'organ of nourishment,' here it refers metaphorically to the 'seat of the inward life, of feelings and desires' [BDAG]. In Romans 16:18, Paul describes people who 'are not serving our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites' (literally, 'their stomachs'). In the context of addressing the problem of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians, Paul quotes those who legitimize giving in to sexual desires by saying, 'Food for the stomach, and the stomach for food' (1 Cor 6:13). Paul's response to such rationalization is that 'the body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord' (1 Cor 6:13). These passages indicate that Paul uses the term <i>stomach</i> to represent 'unbridled sensuality, whether gluttony or sexual licentiousness' [TDNT]. For those who have no higher authority for the way they live than the dictates of their bodily appetites, <i>their god is their stomach. They worship their appetites.</i>"¹⁵ G. Walter Hansen</p>
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Martin's 1959 Philippians volume in the *Tyndale NT* series concluded for Philippians 3:19, "*Whose God is their belly...*[is] a reference to [the false teachers'] distinctions between clean and unclean foods, a characteristic trait of Jewish Christianity."¹⁶ Later, however, in Martin's 1976 Philippians volume in the *New Century Bible Commentary*, one notices how he switched positions: "The term means here not their scrupulous observance of food-laws...but their immorality, to which they have been led by their false anthropological notions."¹⁷ He makes specific reference to the TDNT entry for *koilia* (κοιλία), which actually notes the different options at an interpreter's disposal:

"In Rom. 16:18 and Phil. 3:19 it might be that Paul is referring to unbridled licentiousness and gluttony (cf. the rendering 'appetites'), but another possibility is that he has in mind Judaizers who lay too much stress on dietary regulations."¹⁸

It is, of course, not outside of the realm of possibilities for *koilia*, "belly" (RSV), "stomach" (NIV), or "appetite" (NASU) to represent some sort of unbalanced fervor for the Torah's dietary laws. Yet at the same time—and certainly offered by Christian interpreters who hardly think that the kosher instructions on clean and unclean meats are relevant in the post-resurrection era—it is far more preferable to approach *koilia* as representing human sin and self-indulgence. Consider the following dialogue from Euripides' *Cyclops*:

¹⁵ G. Walter Hansen, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 266.

¹⁶ Martin, *Philippians-1959*, 158.

He references: Acts 15; Romans 14; 16:18; 1 Corinthians 8-10; Colossians 2:16.

¹⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *New Century Bible Commentary: Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 145.

¹⁸ J. Behm, "*koilia*," in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 447.

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"Whether it wants or not, the earth must grow the grass that feeds my flocks. And as for sacrifices, I make mine, not to the gods, but the greatest god of all, this belly of mine! To eat, to drink from day to day, to have no worries—that the real Zeus for you clever man!" (334-335).¹⁹

Ben Witherington III, who thinks that *koilia* relates to the Torah's dietary laws, still has to note the significance of *Cyclops*, stating, "It is possible that Paul draws on a metaphor familiar to the Gentile Philippians, for we find the same phrase about the body being one's god in Euripides."²⁰ Most importantly, though, *koilia*, representing a person's internal character and makeup, is something seen in Yeshua's word of John 7:38: "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being [*koilia*; belly, KJV] will flow rivers of living water.'" Paul himself also states in Romans 16:17-18, "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Messiah but of their own appetites [*koilia*; belly, KJV]; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting."

Noting the view that "belly" could represent Paul disparaging the Torah's dietary laws, G. Walter Hansen—who definitely believes that the Torah has been abolished in the post-resurrection era—is still forced to conclude, "The difficulties faced by this interpretation...are the absence of any clear connection between Jewish food laws and idolatry in Paul's letters, the absence of any evidence that Paul viewed circumcision or male genitals as shameful, and the absence of Paul's dismissal of Jewish privileges as earthly things."²¹ Fee, however, while noting the different options for *koilia* in Philippians 3:19, is non committal to any of them, but he does note that the dietary laws being disparaged does have significant difficulty to it:

"A greater difficulty rests with those who think Paul is here further describing the 'dogs' of v. 2, as sarcasm for their being into 'food laws' as well. But that seems much too circuitous; and Paul is forthright about this issue elsewhere. All in all, we must again beg a degree of ignorance on this matter, except to repeat that it is almost certainly a specific illustration of the way in which these people have set their minds on earthly things."²²

More to the point is how Philippians examiners are prone to conclude that *koilia* or "belly" represents the base immorality of any troublemakers or agitators that Paul's audience may encounter. Noting several Greek terms, O'Brien describes,

"[I]t has been suggested that κοιλία [*koilia*] is being employed here similarly to Paul's use of σάρξ [*sarx*, flesh] in an ethical sense to describe the old earthbound humanity from which the believer has been rescued into the new humanity in Christ...This line of interpretation may well be correct; accordingly, those who are enemies of Christ's cross have failed to accept the death of the old life, the *koilia*, and have disqualified themselves from the new, because 'they are serving their own fleshly impulses.'²³

Reflecting on the implications of this for contemporary readers of Paul's letter to the Philippians, J.A. Motyer summarizes,

"Their appetites and emotions have ceased to be subject to them and have been accorded the place of lordship and worship. They are governed by self-pleasing in bodily matters. Paul does not elaborate. He does not call them fornicators or drug-addicts or particularize their pet sensualities. If he did so we might stand aloof from the warning, if it did not happen to apply to us. The warning is not against particular sins, but against the underlying sin of pandering to self."²⁴

¹⁹ William Arrowsmith, trans., "Cyclops," in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., *Euripides II: The Cyclops, Heracles, Iphigenia in Tauris, Helen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 25.

²⁰ Witherington, *Philippians-2011*, 216.

²¹ Hansen, *Philippians*, 264.

He goes on to conclude, "In fact, Paul expresses his approval of observing Jewish food laws in certain circumstances (1 Cor 9:20; Rom 14:1-17)."

²² Fee, *Philippians*, 372.

²³ O'Brien, *Philippians*, 456.

²⁴ Motyer, *Philippians*, pp 186-187.

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The best that the ungodly figures in view can attain to is a glory which is actually shame: *hōn to telos apōleia* (ὥν τὸ τέλος ἀπώλεια), “whose end is perdition” (American Standard Version). One may be reminded of the sentiment expressed in Isaiah 45:24-25:

“They will say of Me, ‘Only in the LORD are righteousness and strength.’ Men will come to Him, and all who were angry at Him will be put to shame. In the LORD all the offspring of Israel will be justified and will glory.”

It is also not unimportant for us to keep in mind the rash act of Esau by giving up his birthright for the sake of a meal (Genesis 25:29-34). Esau was a man of the flesh who gave into his indulgence, the same way that those who might come and lead the Philippian Believers astray would. Admittedly within the First Century, there would be various Jewish individuals negatively influencing mixed assemblies of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, and they would place a high level of emphasis on eating restrictions. Here in Philippians 3:17-19, however, their attitudes of ungodliness are crafted in terms of their “belly” or “stomach”—which is the place from which their motives originate:

“And he shall conceive sorrows, and his end shall be vanity, and his belly [*koilia*; Heb. MT: *beten*, בֶּטֶן] shall bear deceit” (Job 15:35, LXE).