

How Do We Properly Keep Kosher?

by J.K. McKee posted 01 November, 2006 www.tnnonline.net

Eating is something that every human being must do for survival. Without the ingestion of food into our bodies, we will not receive the nutrients that we require to continue living. It may come as a surprise to many of you, but there is no specific commandment in the Bible “to eat.” The fact that people will eat is already assumed by the Biblical authors. However, simply because there is no command “to eat” does not mean that God does not have specific regulations on *how we are to eat*. In the Torah, both Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 lay out the laws of *kashrut* (pronounced *kashrus* in the Askhenazic tradition), specifying those animals that are fit for our consumption.

Adopting kosher eating habits is admittedly one of the most difficult things for new Messianic Believers to do. There are many theological arguments made from the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) that when viewed a particular way, can seem to suggest that the importance of the dietary laws was rendered inoperative via the work of Yeshua the Messiah. Once a person has overcome many of these theological hurdles in his or her Messianic quest,¹ and sees the validity of the dietary laws in the Bible and how the Apostles continued to eat kosher, the question of how one is to follow them in a Twenty-First Century world needs to be asked.

Transitioning from eating whatever one’s palate desires to following the guidelines God has laid out in His Word is admittedly not something that is easy. Many of us have grown up in cultures where the eating of unclean things is simply a given. Our church culture is filled with those special prayer breakfasts where we all had bacon and sausage, as well as those potluck Wednesday night Bible studies with all manner of unclean things. Some of our best family memories may be centered around a ham, or picking apart a crab. When we are convicted that such things are not food, it can be difficult to give these things up—because after all, what is so evil about fried shrimp? It is not as though any of us were consuming illegal drugs and “getting high.” We were just eating what everyone else was eating.

When our family went fully kosher in 1996, we really did have a great deal to give up. I was raised with a Southern style of cooking inherited from my mother’s family that cooked with bacon fat. My all time favorite food was a pulled pork bar-b-que sandwich. Add to this the fact that my mother was raised in Maryland on the Chesapeake Bay, where the best crabs in the world come from. A great deal of our “tasty treats” were considered unclean by Biblical standards. Pork, crabs, shrimp, and many other things that we liked to eat had to be eliminated from our diet. I will admit to you now that I went kosher “kicking and screaming.” I did not see what was so “wrong” with eating these things. After all, I surmised, many generations of faithful Christians had been eating this before me, and surely they were with the Lord in Heaven. Why do I have to do anything different?

It is possible that many of you coming from an evangelical Christian background have had some of the same thoughts as I had regarding the dietary laws. Perhaps while respecting them when reading Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 in the Bible, knowing that this is why the Jews “don’t eat pork,” you reasoned that since there are so many godly and loving people who eat bacon every day—and surely God would not send them to Hell for doing so—then why does it really matter? This is probably what makes eating kosher so difficult. **Because following the dietary laws is not a “salvation issue,” we often miss out on some key lessons that God tries to teach us through our obedience to them.**

In this article, I will be exploring some of the challenges that we often face as Messianic Believers who want to obey our Heavenly Father to the fullest extent, but also maintain an active testimony to the world around us. We will discuss some of the variance that we see in the emerging Messianic movement regarding adherence to the kosher dietary laws, some things that we have to keep in mind regarding Jewish tradition and Judaism’s general interpretations regarding *kashrut*, and most importantly the proper attitude that we need to have regarding our observance.

¹ Consult the editor’s article “To Eat or Not to Eat?” for an examination of the validity of the kosher dietary laws for Believers today. It is recommended that if you have not already read this article, that you go ahead and do so now.

Hopefully, this will give you a good overview of many of the issues at hand, and give you encouragement in your Messianic walk of faith.

Kosher Challenges in Today's Messianic Community

A great deal of discussion regarding the kosher dietary laws and Messianic Believers today often takes place concerning what they are, and various arguments that are commonly made against their continuing validity. While this is extremely important for the development of one's personal theology, as well as for an overall Messianic theology, the discussion of how we are to "keep kosher" often gets shuffled away—or worse yet, is sometimes oversimplified. How one keeps kosher is often contingent on how a person sees it modeled by his or her Messianic congregation or fellowship, frequently with no framework on how things are to be done. A person may simply ask someone else, "What can I bring to the meal afterwards?" and no serious explanation of what kosher really means is given. While I think all of us have asked people about kosher this way (and probably a great number of other things as well), I believe in the long run we must have more information at our disposal to develop valid opinions and applications for ourselves. These opinions need to be based on the Bible and traditional understandings of what the kosher laws really mean.

Anyone who surveys the Messianic community today is going to witness a wide variance of how people keep kosher. At one end of the spectrum are some Messianic Jews who do not believe that the dietary laws must still be followed, but they do so because they are an integral part of a Jewish lifestyle. They tell Messianic non-Jewish Believers that they can continue to eat whatever they want, however they want. (Of course, there are some Messianic Jews who do not keep kosher.) At the other end of the spectrum are Messianics who strongly insist that those who do not follow the dietary laws infuriate God, and not only that they must be followed, but they must be followed consistent with what one sees in Orthodox or ultra Orthodox Judaism. Between these two extremes, I think it is safe to say, lie the bulk of the Messianic movement.

What we generally find in the Messianic movement today are three broad categories of people who believe that the kosher dietary laws are still valid:

1. Those who follow only what the Written Scripture says in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 regarding clean and unclean animals.
2. Those who follow a strict view of *kashrut* consistent with Orthodox Judaism.
3. Those who follow some kind of middle way between Written Scripture and applied Jewish tradition regarding *kashrut*.

Among these three broad groups, the second position of people following a strict view of *kashrut* consistent with Orthodox Judaism is the minority view. The divisions between those who follow a strict Scripturalist view of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, versus those who integrate a great deal of Jewish tradition in their interpretation, though, are often blurred. Both may claim to keep "Biblically kosher." However, it is probably true to an extent that all keep "Biblically kosher" as the dietary laws are found in the Bible. Challenges arise when one may ask the question, "Biblically kosher according to whom?" because each individual who reads the Scripture (on any topic) may have a diverse array of opinions. To a certain extent, the term "Biblically kosher" is an oxymoron because what one person thinks the Bible says about kosher is likely going to be different from the next person. One wanting to have a good handle on how to keep kosher needs to have some options presented that weigh a variety of factors that often do not appear in a simple reading of the Biblical text.

Having the options available at our disposal regarding how we can properly keep kosher is very important for any number of reasons. The first reason is obvious: each one of us eats every day. We need to know that what we are putting into our bodies is acceptable to God, as we are a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), and He wants us to be physically fit. The second reason is also obvious: we should want to obey God to the fullest possible extent, incurring the most blessings that He has for us. The third reason is not as obvious, and sadly, not frequently discussed in the Messianic movement: we interact with family, friends, and non-Messianic

Believers and need to know how to keep kosher in a largely non-kosher world. We need to be a positive testimony to others through our eating habits, and not be a deterrent to the work our Heavenly Father is trying to accomplish in this hour via the restoration of the Hebraic Roots of the faith to His people.

What Do the Dietary Laws Teach Us?

Christians who examine the dietary laws, including conservative Old Testament scholars, are often at a loss in understanding what they represent to followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. T.D. Alexander validly indicates, "At first sight it is difficult to see any connection between these food regulations and the divine desire that Israel should be a holy nation. In what way did the eating of particular animals fulfil Israel's calling to be a holy people?"² Perhaps some see the importance for a comparatively ancient and primitive culture such as Israel to separate so-called "clean" animals from "unclean" animals, and they would admire the lessons that can be learned from this. But surely, God does not expect us to observe these rituals today, does He? Does it really matter that we separate clean and unclean land animals, marine creatures, and birds?

Christian exegetes of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 have generally been at a loss in understanding the significance of the dietary laws for one's life, namely because they are not considered to be valid for "New Testament faith." Many modern interpreters try to allegorize the dietary laws, saying that certain animals represent various kinds of people. Alexander, for example, suggests that "An animal which chewed its cud resembled a human being who meditated on 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."³

It is possible that beyond the straightforward separation of clean and unclean animals for one's diet that God intended various animals to represent different kinds of human behavior. History shows that many Diaspora Jews of the First Century allegorized the Torah's commands on *kashrut* and ate whatever they wanted. But up until the Enlightenment in Europe and rise of Reform Judaism this view has always been in the extreme minority. To a Jew who keeps kosher, the thought of being a part of God's holy people is at the epicenter of his or her observance. It is the call of Leviticus 20:24-25: "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."

The Jewish theological framework of understanding the kosher dietary laws is that the Creator God has every right to tell His people how they are to conduct *every aspect of their being*. Surely, every single person who believes in the God of the Bible believes that He has the right to regulate our sexual activities. So, if God can tell us how and when to engage in proper sex, certainly He also has the right to tell us what we can and cannot eat. Samuel H. Dresner explains, "the purpose of Kashrut [is] holiness and that holiness meant *hallowing*, in this case the hallowing of the act of eating."⁴ He goes on to explain that if one can learn to keep kosher both inside *and* outside the home, not maintaining a double standard of kosher inside the home and unkosher outside the home, then it is one step toward a person maintaining a sound ethos and moral stature both inside *and* outside the home.

The thought of being holy, set-apart, or sanctified by God is something that we see throughout the Bible, including the Apostolic Scriptures. It is the premise that as followers of Him, we are to be different from the rest of the world. This is what the Apostle Peter emphasizes when he writes, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your*

² T.D. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 227.

³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴ Samuel H. Dresner, "Their Meaning for Our Time," in *The Jewish Dietary Laws* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly/United Synagogue, 1982), 44.

behavior; because it is written, 'YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY' (1 Peter 1:14-16). While primarily directed against "the evil desires" (NIV), Peter ironically quotes from Leviticus 11:44:

"For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth."

Protestant Christianity has had many holiness movements that focus on a Believer's relationship to the Lord through prayer, study of Scripture, and conforming oneself to the character of Messiah Yeshua. **These are all good things.** We need to be transformed by the love of Yeshua, and be able to demonstrate a sound morality in our daily lives. We need to be the same people *ethically* at home as we are in the world, or vice versa. But how many people have ever considered that a part of being transformed into the character of Yeshua is not just keeping the "moral commandments" of the Torah that He modeled for us, but also areas like *kashrut*? One of the reasons that the kosher laws are not dealt with extensively in the Gospels is that the Gospel writers assumed that their audience(s) knew that Yeshua as a good Jew would have kept kosher!

Thankfully, many sincere Believers who are reading their Bibles are being convicted by the Holy Spirit that there is more to the life of Yeshua than is commonly perceived. They are beginning to understand that being holy does not just mean that consecrating ourselves to God means that we are to demonstrate His love, but also that we are to witness His goodness by what we do with ourselves—even something as "mundane" as what we eat and do not eat.

One of the most frequent justifications for those who may see some validity or importance for eating kosher from the Scriptures, yet who do not follow it, is the claim that what a person eats ultimately will not hurt him. Did God give His people the dietary laws to protect them from disease and plague? Alexander argues, "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."⁵ However, have Christian interpreters such as he simply dismissed many centuries of Jewish history that have demonstrated that eating kosher can protect one from disease and plague?

Ronald L. Eisenberg notes in the *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, "medieval Jews suffered less than their gentile neighbors from the waves of epidemics that decimated the population."⁶ History shows that many Europeans thought that their Jewish neighbors were being protected from the plague or the Black Death because they were operating in some form of witchcraft, when in fact, all they were doing was eating kosher and not eating unclean meats. Furthermore, the practice of proper hygiene and bathing added to the Jews' defense against receiving these deadly diseases.

But it is notable that Jewish rabbis and theologians, while recognizing that there are physical benefits to following God's dietary instructions, ultimately recognize that it is an issue of obedience. Leviticus 10:11 lists the dietary laws among God's "statutes" or *chuvim* (חֻמִּים), "divine statutes that by definition are not explained in the text."⁷ The only major explanation comes in Leviticus 11:44 where God summarizes *kashrut* law as being a part of the holiness He requires of His people. Others may explain that "By following the dietary laws, the observant Jew may have less opportunity to socialize with non-Jews (since this often entails eating together). According to this view, the observance of *kashrut* has been a critical factor in decreasing the rates of Jewish assimilation and intermarriage."⁸

Consequently, a major issue in the First Century, as the gospel began to be spread beyond the Land of Israel, was how much or how little Jewish and non-Jewish Believers should congregate together. This was a serious challenge that divided a sizeable part of the early *ekklēsia*, but was necessary to address because a key part of being "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6)

⁵ Alexander, 229.

⁶ Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 666.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 665.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 667.

is actually going out to the nations. To some degree, this may require considering which commandments of God are given higher priority than others. And, the Apostolic testimony is unanimously clear that the command to love others is the highest⁹—even more than what one eats. The challenge, of course, is how one can maintain the integrity of following the dietary laws, while at the same time remembering that how we treat others is *more important*.

What Do I Do About Meat?

My personal experience since 1996, and especially since being called to be a Messianic teacher, is that I have seen a great number of new Messianics seem a bit overwhelmed when they hear about the kosher dietary laws. They think that there is this huge overarching series of requirements that God expects us to follow, but when we really examine what kosher is—even including some of the Rabbinical views of it—it is not something that difficult to follow or understand. Our challenges often come from our palate's desire to want to eat unclean things, a misunderstanding of God's holiness, and peer pressure that can often be exerted by family and friends. Furthermore, added peer pressure may actually come from people *inside* the Messianic community because a person does not eat kosher as "they do." This can, as should be expected, lead some to feeling depressed. All of a sudden a person eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a bag of potato chips starts to feel their stomach churn as though what is being eaten is somehow "dirty." I do not believe that God wants people to think this way, and that a more pragmatic view of kosher is needed.

When one is convicted that a kosher diet needs to be followed as part of one's continued growth in the faith, does this mean that he or she can no longer "eat out" at a favorite restaurant? This is a common question that I have been fielded many, many times. In particular a great amount of debate is present between those who, while recognizing that certain meats such as pork or shellfish are still unclean, think that clean meat can be purchased and eaten from anywhere—versus those who believe that it must be purchased from Jewish sources where the blood has been ceremonially drained.

The Biblical requirement regarding clean meat is that "You are not to eat any blood, either of bird or animal, in any of your dwellings. Any person who eats any blood, even that person shall be cut off from his people" (Leviticus 7:26-27; 17:10-14). Orthodox Judaism today follows a ritual tradition known as *shechitah* (שחיטה) that is employed to ensure that all blood is removed from a kosher animal. As Eisenberg notes, "Jewish ritual slaughtering strives to prevent unnecessary suffering to the animal. It requires one continuous deep horizontal cut with the perfectly sharp blade with no nicks or unevenness. This severs the windpipe and all of the great blood vessels of the neck so that the animal instantly loses all sensation."¹⁰ The animal will immediately lose consciousness, while the heart pumps out a great deal of its blood.

Once this meat has been processed by a butcher, the home cook is then required to wash the meat of all visible blood, covering it in salt, and placing it in a large container of lukewarm water for around 30 minutes. This is designed to remove all of the remaining blood before cooking.¹¹ It is notable though, "Meat that is to be broiled does not need to be koshered, since the broiling process drains off at least as much blood as is removed by soaking and salting."¹²

This process of ritually killing an animal and removing its blood is quite common if one is a part of a close-knit Orthodox Jewish community. The question of eating at one's favorite restaurant for an Orthodox Jew is an easy one, as only an authorized kosher Jewish restaurant would be frequented. However, Orthodox Jews only make up around 12% or less of the total world Jewish population, and even most Jews who keep kosher do not keep it to the extent of making sure that all meat has been ritually slaughtered, every visible cell of blood has been removed, and the meat has been thoroughly salted. Many Jews who consider themselves religious

⁹ Matthew 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.

¹⁰ Eisenberg, 659.

¹¹ Ibid., 661.

¹² Ibid.

would eat at Outback Steakhouse or even eat a McDonald's hamburger, and not consider it to be a violation of kashrut law.

This is the challenge we largely have today in the Messianic community. Among the large sector of people who believe that the kosher laws are still to be followed are those who believe that it is necessary that one purchase koshered meat from Jewish sources. These people are notably in the minority. The majority of those who eat kosher, while perhaps preferring to find Hebrew National hot dogs or Empire Kosher frozen chickens and turkeys, still largely buy the regular beef, chicken, and fish available at their local supermarket. This meat will then be taken and koshered with salt and water before being cooked.

Which position is the right position to take? If you are to eat kosher, is it required that every piece of meat you ingest has an "approved kosher" symbol or seal by a rabbi? Or is it sufficient for you to judge for yourself?

I think a strong analogy can be made between eating kosher and the spiritual gifts that God has given a person. What spiritual gifts has the Lord given you? Do you prophesy? Do you speak in tongues? Do you have visions? Do you cast out demons? Do you teach or proclaim the gospel? Or do you simply study your Bible and love others? Some would say that certain gifts of the Spirit are "necessary" for salvation. I do not believe so. I believe that our Heavenly Father distributes certain gifts to the people that need them considering the sphere of influence in which He has placed them. I do not believe that every single Believer is called to have every single gift. Certain ones are called to have certain gifts (Ephesians 4:11-12).

I think the best option for concerning what "kosher" meat someone eats or does not eat is ultimately contingent on what sphere of influence a person finds himself. How many of you interact with Orthodox Jews on a regular basis? How many of you feel a sincere call to minister to Orthodox Jews? If this is you, then I would strongly encourage you to buy all of your meat from Jewish sources and make sure that it has a rabbinical "seal of approval" on it.

It is notable, however, that the vast majority of us (including myself) will not be called to testify the good news to the Orthodox Jewish community. We will rather be called to testify the gospel to that remaining 88% of the Jewish community, as well as testify of why we eat kosher to a rather large sector of evangelical Christianity. While I respect those who feel called to make sure that all of their meat has been ritually slaughtered, and think that if some meat is readily available to someone that it can be purchased as a gesture of goodwill to the Jewish community, I do not feel that it is entirely necessary. Buying meat at the supermarket and koshering it at home should be sufficient, as this is something that is done by many Conservative and modern Orthodox Jews.

The issue of what meat was acceptable and not acceptable for consumption probably appears in some of the Apostle Paul's instructions in his letter to the Romans. He writes,

"Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. I know and am convinced in the Lord Yeshua that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Messiah died" (Romans 14:13-15).

Paul rightly emphasizes the fact that dividing the Body of Messiah over the subject of food is entirely unnecessary. However, does Paul's definition of "food" include anything that one puts into his mouth? Many would automatically assume so, because v. 14 says "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself" (NIV). The problem with this translation is that the typical Greek word that communicates the concept of "unclean," *akathartos* (ἀκάθαρτος), used in the Septuagint to render the Hebrew *tamei* (טָמֵא), is **not used in this text**. The specific term that Paul uses is *koinos* (κοινός), meaning "common, shared in common" (LS).¹³ BDAG explains that *koinos* can concern "that which ordinary people eat, in contrast to those of more refined tastes."¹⁴ The LITV version correctly renders *koinos* as "common."

¹³ H.G. Lidell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 440.

¹⁴ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 550.

One of the requirements of the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 was that non-Jewish Believers coming to faith were to abstain “from blood” and “from the meat of strangled animals” (Acts 15:19, NIV). In no uncertain terms, they were to follow the dietary laws of the Scriptures. But to what extent were they expected and required to follow *kashrut* law? I think this may be one of the issues Romans 14 addresses when we examine the vocabulary in greater detail. We know that some of the Roman Believers were abandoning eating meat and going vegetarian (Romans 14:2). Is this because they could not acquire “approved” kosher meat, and instead would only eat fruits and vegetables?

Notice that what Paul truly writes the Romans is, “I know and am persuaded in *the* Lord Jesus that nothing by itself is common; except to the *one* deeming anything to be common, *it is* common” (Romans 14:14, LITV). To paraphrase, he might be saying “I know in the Messiah that no meat is considered to be for ‘refined tastes,’ except for the person considering it to be for his ‘refined taste.’” A Roman slaughterhouse in the First Century would butcher a cow, goat, or chicken removing most of its blood, not that much different than a Jewish slaughterhouse in Rome. The difference would be that a Roman slaughterhouse would sell meat to whomever would pay; a Jewish slaughterhouse may only sell to members of the Jewish community. Could it be that many of the Roman Jews who believed in Yeshua could now only buy meat from Roman slaughterhouses? If this be the case, would it be surprising if some became vegetarian?

I believe that this is not only a valid solution to understanding Romans 14:14 and upholding the validity of the kosher dietary laws, but also for understanding how we are to follow them as Messianic Believers today. We do have the advantage that most meat from Jewish sources is available to any consumer. While more expensive than standard clean meat, it is often available to those living near a large Jewish population. But this is not always available to everyone, and many may find it necessary to eat “common” meat available from a local supermarket. Would Paul have eaten “common,” yet clean meat, served to him by the Romans? Yes. But would he have recognized that some Believers would not have eaten it? Yes. His answer is to not make a huge issue out of it, and not to hurt others because of their personal convictions.¹⁵

But what about going out to eat? Are Wendy’s and McDonalds now “off limits”? Well, this is only a decision that can be made by you. It is absolutely safe to say that eating fast food as a regular part of one’s diet can cause severe health problems. Any good nutritionist will tell you this. Watch the Morgan Spurlock film *Super Size Me!* But the ultimate decision rests with whether a Kentucky Fried Chicken or Pizza Hut is a clean and sanitary environment for food preparation. Unfortunately, this has to be considered on a case-by-case basis as with anyone’s “favorite restaurant.” Only you can know and decide whether your favorite place to eat is a clean and well-maintained place with a courteous staff and good service. Some places are probably just fine to eat at, and other places you *really* want to stay away from.

Can Tradition Be Totally Discarded?

While many Messianics who observe the kosher dietary laws may not purchase all their meat from “authorized” Jewish sources—and many Jews do not, either—there is a large ignorance of incorporating Jewish tradition into our discussion about how to eat kosher. If the call of non-Jewish Believers in Messiah, in particular, is to provoke their Jewish and brothers and sisters to jealousy (Romans 10:19) for faith in Yeshua, then should we at least know some of the principal elements of how Jews at least nominally keep kosher?

There are two main elements of keeping kosher to your average Jew. The first element is the widescale Jewish aversion to pork. While consumption of the pig is forbidden in the Torah (Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8), there are some additional reasons to consider. They include the forced eating of pork on Jews during the Maccabean era by the Seleucid-Greeks, the forced eating of pork on Jews by some Catholic Christians during the Inquisition, and today the

¹⁵ For a further examination of some of the issues presented by Romans 14, consult the editor’s article “Does the New Testament Annul the Biblical Appointments?”

widescale consumption of pork as a culinary industry. Almost everyone who knows something about Judaism knows that Jews do not eat pork. This extends to Messianics who eat kosher as well.

The second main element of eating kosher for your observant Jew is not as widely known. It is the separation of meat and dairy. No good Jew would eat a cheeseburger, or would eat a baked potato with sour cream along with his roast beef. The challenge with understanding this practice is that many in the Messianic community consider it to be an invalid interpretation of “You are not to boil a young goat in the milk of its mother” (Exodus 23:19; 34:26). It is assumed that if one eats “Biblically kosher” that cheeseburgers are “okay.” It is not uncommon to quickly dismiss the Jewish separation of meat and dairy. I do not believe this is something that is wise and that will work well for the Messianic movement in the long run. Simply dismissing the Jewish separation of meat and dairy as “a tradition of men,” as frequently takes place, shows us to be somewhat ignorant and unwilling to dialogue.

When the Lord appeared to Abraham, the narrative tells us that he “ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave *it* to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed *it* before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate” (Genesis 18:7-8). Many Messianics interpret this as meaning that Abraham served meat and dairy together, and thus it is acceptable for us to do so today. However, many Jewish interpreters are of the opinion that Abraham *did indeed separate* meat and dairy, serving the curds first, while the calf was being slaughtered, butchered, and cooked. J.H. Hertz explains,

“The verse may be understood as meaning that the guests were given curd and milk to shake their thirst and refresh them...and then followed the meal proper, which consisted of the calf. This procedure would be quite in accord with the dietary laws.”¹⁶

For many in the Messianic community, this would not be sufficient evidence for them to give up eating a cheeseburger, even though it is an interpretation based on a reasonable exegesis of Genesis 18. Abraham could not just go to his refrigerator and put a few steaks on the grill. A calf had to be slaughtered for his party to enjoy. Some amount of time had to pass between Abraham’s guests arriving and then being served the meat items.

While there can be significant debate over whether or not the Jewish explanation of Abraham serving dairy and meat in succession is legitimate, our ultimate answer is going to be found in First Century history, and whether or not Yeshua the Messiah was raised in a Jewish culture that separated meat and dairy. Consequently, when we look at the main Jewish literature following the time of Yeshua, the Mishnah and the Talmud, we see that there are debates regarding the separation of meat and dairy. These debates would represent some of the views that were present among the Pharisees of Yeshua’s time, and could possibly also include how the Apostle Paul was trained in keeping kosher. The Mishnah indicates:

“A drop of milk which fell on a piece [of meat], if it is sufficient to impart flavor to that piece [of meat]—it is prohibited. [If] one stirred the pot, if there is in it sufficient [milk] to impart flavor to that [entire] pot[’s contents], it [the contents of the pot] is prohibited” (m.*Chullin* 8:3).¹⁷

The comments on this in the Talmud may be summarized as,

“The whole of our Mishnah is in accordance with R. Akiba’s view, for this is what it means, EVERY KIND OF FLESH IS FORBIDDEN TO BE COOKED IN MILK: some being forbidden by the law of the Torah and others by the enactment of the Scribes, EXCEPTING THE FLESH OF FISH AND OF LOCUSTS, which are neither prohibited by the law of the Torah nor by the enactment of the Scribes” (b.*Chullin* 104a).¹⁸

¹⁶ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 63.

¹⁷ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 780.

¹⁸ *The Soncino Talmud. Judaic Classics Library II.* MS Windows 3.1. Brooklyn: Institute for Computers in Jewish Life, 1996. CD-ROM.

For the most part, these remarks concern the mixing of meat and dairy, but there was considerable debate in either the First Century or the time immediately following whether or not fowl and dairy could be served together. These comments do appear in the Mishnah:

“What is prohibited on the grounds of carrion [also] is prohibited to be cooked in milk. Fowl, which is prohibited on the grounds of carrion, is it possible that it is prohibited to be seethed in milk? Scripture says, *In its mother's milk*—excluding fowl, the mother of which does not have milk” (m.*Chullin* 8:4).¹⁹

The Talmud likewise concurs with these conclusions:

“In the locality of R. Jose the Galilean they used to eat flesh of fowl with milk. Levi visited the home of Joseph the fowler [and] was offered the head of a peacock in milk, [which] he did not eat. When he came before Rabbi he asked him, Why did you not place them under the ban? It was the locality of R. Judah b. Bathyra, replied he, and I thought, Perhaps he has lectured to them in accordance with R. Jose the Galilean. For we learnt: R. Jose the Galilean said: It is said, Ye shall not eat any nebelah, and it is said, Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother's milk: [this teaches,] that which is forbidden on the score of nebelah may not be seethed in milk. Now since a fowl is prohibited when nebelah, you might think that one must not seethe it in milk; therefore it is stated, ‘in its mother's milk’, hence a fowl is excluded, since it has no mother's milk” (b.*Shabbat* 130a).²⁰

Apparently, some of the contemporaries of Yeshua probably separated meat and dairy, and I think it is likely that He probably did as well. There were debates, though, over whether or not fowl and dairy could be mixed, as birds do not give milk. While Yeshua and Paul would probably not eat cheeseburgers if they came into our world today, would they eat chicken quesadillas? If they followed the *halachah* recorded here in the Mishnah and Talmud, they probably would. The Orthodox Jewish *ArtScroll Chumash* commentary on Exodus 23:19 indicates, “Rabbinic law extended the prohibition to all other kosher meat **and fowl**,” not specifying any Midrashic or Talmudic reference, which means that it probably came much later in the Middle Ages.²¹ This would be why the mixing of fowl and dairy is not followed in Judaism today, even though it was apparently followed in ancient times.

It is important to consider the fact that while the separation of meat and dairy was practiced by many Jews in Yeshua's time, it was certainly not as elaborate as it has become today in Orthodox Judaism. No Jew of Yeshua's time probably kept two sets of dishes and utensils, two basins for washing one's cookware, and certainly did not have two refrigerators! Furthermore, there is considerable variance among Jews today about how much time should pass between eating meat products and dairy products (or vice versa) that are present in one's community. Seymour Siegel and David M. Pollock remark, “The length of time one waits after eating meat before eating dairy products is a matter of custom: Among Jews from Western Europe, three hours; Jews from Eastern Europe, six hours; Jews from Holland, 72 minutes.”²² Eisenberg actually indicates that among some customs, “One is generally permitted to eat meat almost immediately after a milk meal, after thoroughly rinsing the mouth and eating a piece of bread or some other ‘neutral’ solid.”²³ Feasibly, if one were to follow the tradition of Dutch Jewry, a person could have an elaborate roast beef dinner, and then for dessert have pie and ice cream—assuming the meal lasts over two hours.

I realize that many in the independent Messianic community, particularly those from non-Jewish backgrounds, often do not have a very high opinion of the traditions in the Mishnah and Talmud to incorporate them in their *halachah*. Many times I have heard the statement “The

¹⁹ Neusner, 781.

²⁰ *The Soncino Talmud*. [Judaic Classics Library II](#).

²¹ Nosson Scherman, ed., et al., *The ArtScroll Chumash, Stone Edition*, 5th ed. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2000), 437.

²² Seymour Siegel and David M. Pollock, “A Guide to Observance,” in *The Jewish Dietary Laws*, 60; cf. Eisenberg, 664.

²³ Eisenberg, 664.

Rabbis say this, but the Scriptures say this” from Messianic teachers. Certainly, our focus for keeping kosher is Scripture itself, but can we totally remove the factor of Jewish tradition from the conversation? Should not tradition be a way to gauge ourselves as to whether we are doing this right?

Even if a person rejects the separation of meat and dairy that we see in First Century Jewish history, it is still likely that he or she is following some kind of tradition in keeping kosher. The mainstay meat of the modern Jewish diet today (and also the American Southern diet) is, without a doubt, **the chicken**. Interestingly enough, the chicken is not listed as being permissible for eating on the food lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. While clean land animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, and deer are listed, and the pig is targeted as being forbidden—only birds of prey are listed as being forbidden (Leviticus 11:13-19), and no permitted birds are listed. Why is this? Why is the chicken kosher?

Conservative theologians arguing for the antiquity of the Torah or Pentateuch²⁴ point out that the failure of having chicken mentioned indicates that the text had to be composed before the introduction of chicken into the Ancient Near Eastern diet. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (surprisingly a liberal source) indicates that chickens do not readily appear in Israel until about the Eighth Century B.C.E., which would be at least five hundred years after the Exodus:

“The wild ancestor of the domestic chicken (*Gallus domesticus*) is the red jungle fowl (*Gallus gallus*), a native of India. The earliest attestation of the domestic chicken in Palestine comes from the LB Age at Tell Michal...The chicken makes its first appearance in Israelite art in seals from the late 8th century B.C.E....According to Talmudic sources, chickens produced on average 10 eggs per month.”²⁵

The fact that Jews, and consequently Messianics also, eat chicken as a part of observing the kosher dietary laws, is based on a tradition that was established since the giving of the Torah. This is even more true for those who consume fowl such as turkey, which is a New World bird that was introduced to Europe via colonization into North America. Even though many Messianics might decide that they will only be “Biblically kosher” and follow “only the Scriptures,” I think it is doubtful that many will give up eating chicken. Chicken is considered kosher because of a ruling that was made centuries ago by the religious milieu of Israel long after the Written Torah was compiled. No matter how hard some may try, tradition simply cannot be removed from our application of *kashrut* law.

Eating Kosher and Being a Witness

When we consider what it means to properly keep kosher, by far the most important part of our obedience is being able to maintain an active witness for our faith in Yeshua. While many Christians will assert that what one eats and one drinks is unimportant regarding salvation, many Messianics in response will judge others unfairly for eating unclean things—in spite of the fact that some of the same may have eaten them at one point in their lives. I believe Paul is absolutely correct when he says “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:7). If we do not have righteousness, peace, and joy—how do we expect to be able to model a proper obedience of God’s dietary laws to others? Are not people supposed to be attracted to us because the Holy Spirit and God’s love radiates from us? How do we maintain the integrity of conveying the mercy of God to others, while at the same time eating what He wants us to eat?

²⁴ Please note that there is an entire liberal theological school of thought that discounts any Mosaic involvement in the composition of the Torah, and may even discount many of its accounts as only being a part of Ancient Israel’s “mythology.” They often date the Torah’s composition to the Sixth Century B.C.E. with the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. Conservative Biblical scholars such as R.K. Harrison, K.A. Kitchen, and U. Cassuto have all written against these beliefs and date the composition of (the bulk of) the Pentateuch to the time of Moses, but most in the Messianic movement are largely ignorant that such hypotheses even exist. Consult the FAQ entries on the TNN Online website that deal with the composition of the Tanach for more details.

²⁵ Edwin Firmage, “Zoology (Animal Profiles),” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:1145.

This is a challenge for Messianic Believers today when we consider how we are to interact with others in the world. The Orthodox Jewish community today that is the model for many to keep kosher largely remains to itself, and does not frequently interact with anyone on the outside. Some Messianics have adopted this mentality, and likewise do not frequently interact with anyone outside their faith community. Personally, while I understand the logic of those who do this, preferring to protect their families from the temptations of the world—I do not agree with it.

This is not the example that we see in the Book of Acts or in any of the Apostolic letters with the early Believers going out into the world and wanting to see lives changed with the power of the gospel. They went to cities far beyond the borders of Israel where there may have only been a handful of Diaspora Jews, and many, many pagan Gentiles. They interacted with others who did not even acknowledge the God of Israel. At most, many of us today as Messianic Believers may have to interact with Christians who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, but still eat pork products and shellfish. There is a big difference between what the Apostles were doing in the First Century, and what most of us have to do today. *We need not close ourselves in.*

The Apostle Paul's instructions to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 10 speak very profoundly to the situations that we are often presented when we interact with our Christian brethren, or any unbeliever for that matter. He writes,

"Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS. If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, 'This is meat sacrificed to idols,' do not eat *it*, for the sake of the one who informed *you*, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other *man's*; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God" (1 Corinthians 10:25-32).

These verses can easily be taken out of context when we do not consider the fact that Paul is speaking of **missionary evangelism** of non-Believers. He does instruct the Corinthians "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market" (CJB), but then issues the conditional phrase "If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go" (NRSV). Using one's spiritual discernment, if an unbeliever asks one of us to go to a meal with him, and we believe that it could be an opportunity to testify of Yeshua, then if we go we are to eat whatever is set before us with asking about it. This is because one cannot lose his or her salvation by eating something that has been fried in pork lard or cooked in clam juice.

In Paul's context, there was a serious dilemma as some animals (typically cattle) killed in the pagan temples for sacrifices would later be butchered and sold in the common meat market. While he writes "we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one" (1 Corinthians 8:4), he also must state, "not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat *food* as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled" (1 Corinthians 8:7). He later says that meat that was sacrificed to idols can really do nothing to a person spiritually (1 Corinthians 10:19), but many of the weak brethren in Corinth may have still struggled with the rituals that it took to kill the animal that provided the meat. If they were to see older brothers and sisters in the faith eating such meat, it may cause them to stumble back into their old habits.²⁶ This is not something that we generally have to worry about today, as most of the meat that we eat—whether provided by a Jewish butcher or not—is raised on farms and processed in an industrial slaughterhouse.

There is much we can gain from understanding Paul's words to the Corinthians as we may be invited to a relative's house or friend's house for a special dinner, and find things on our plate

²⁶ A readily identifiable modern-day application might be a young Believer in Yeshua, formerly an alcoholic, seeing an older Believer in Yeshua consuming alcohol. Seeing the older Believer drinking alcohol, this younger Believer could relapse into his or her former habits. This is why we have to be very conscious of our behavior when others are watching.

that are unkosher. Furthermore, a Messianic congregational leader or teacher may be invited to someone's house to eat and have something put on his plate that is unkosher. For the most part, the people serving the meal do not know about the kosher laws of clean and unclean, and they are simply trying to be gracious hosts. What is one to do? Certainly, if there is a buffet or the food is being passed around the table, you do not put unclean things on your plate. But if something is put on your plate by your host—*eat it without asking*. And remember, you do not have to ask for seconds. Be an example of respect, and honor your host.

Yeshua the Messiah told a group of Pharisees, "Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man" (Matthew 15:17-20). What we ingest into our bodies, whether it is food eaten with dirty hands, or that hidden piece of bacon in the green beans, will eventually be processed and excreted via human waste. Ultimately, what is more important is how we treat other people. If we treat others who eat pork or shellfish with contempt, should we be surprised when they want nothing to do with the Torah or the restoration of the Hebraic Roots to our faith? How do we maintain the integrity of eating kosher, speaking words of life and spiritual edification to others?

It is ironic, but I know many more people in the Church who have instructed me about the Torah's commandments regarding demonstrating God's love and mercy to others in the world, than those in the Messianic community. This is not because there are more people in evangelical Christianity than the Messianic movement; it is because I have encountered too many who want to "beat other people up" than love them with the self-sacrificing love of Yeshua. Many of the accusations, sadly, often include descriptions such as "pork loving" or "swine kissing Christians." What does this say about our maturity level? Are we truly following Yeshua's words about not speaking "Wicked thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, perjury, [and] slander" (Matthew 15:19, NEB)? These are the most important parts of the Torah. I think we may have a long way to go. Keeping kosher is to make us *more like the Lord*—not less.

Growing on Your Own

Adopting a kosher diet is something that has admittedly been very difficult for many of you. You not only have to give up certain "tasty treats" that you may have been raised with your entire life, but you also have to consider the debates that exist regarding how the kosher laws are to be applied in today's world. On top of this, even when one commits to keeping kosher, there are pressures from without and from within on whether or not it is being done correctly or to be done at all. Suffice it to say, it can be easy to give up or give into some of the pressures when they are presented.

Yeshua the Messiah was absolutely right by saying that what comes out of a person's mouth is more important than what goes into it. But notice that He did not say that what goes into someone's mouth was totally unimportant, either. The Lord wants us to obey Him. He wants us to be holy. He wants us to give Him complete control not only over our thoughts and our motivations, but also our bodies. He wants us to demonstrate a total obedience to Him so that He can bless us. And perhaps, if we are doing this properly, He can use our obedience of the dietary laws to stir some interesting conversations about what He is doing in this hour. But that requires that we obey Him with a proper attitude and that we continually entreat His mercy.

I do not believe that any of us has the right to go into a fellow Messianic's refrigerator and then begin criticizing what is in it. We do not have the right to go into someone's house or fellowship and then begin criticizing what is wrong when our opinion has not been solicited, and people are doing the best that they can—possibly on limited information. Likewise, we should not be looking with disgust at our Christian brethren who may eat bacon every day for breakfast. All of these people are made in God's image, and we have the responsibility as those emulating Yeshua to respect them and recognize that none of us are totally perfect. Even the best religious

Jews at times have eaten pork or shellfish in secret out of curiosity. What have we done in secret that is far worse than eating unclean things?

I sincerely hope that this information has helped give you some options regarding what it means to keep kosher in today's Messianic community. If you still need help, I would strongly encourage you to grow at your own pace concerning this issue. As you grow in God's grace and love, coupled with your Messianic understanding of His Word, He will show you how you need to keep kosher based on the sphere of influence where He has placed you. Do not be intimidated by others for what you are doing, or are not, doing. There will probably never be uniformity on kosher in the Messianic movement, any more than certain people liking spicy food versus bland food, or even liking Coke versus Pepsi. I think that in spite of the variance that exists, we can each respect one another. We can recognize that who we are must be first determined by our sound ethical conduct in the world, so what we eat is then a reflection of the greater maturity that the Lord is accomplishing in us. Feel honored that He would call you to this greater level of being sanctified, and be an example that others can emulate in the future.²⁷

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

²⁷ For a further discussion on the application of the kosher dietary laws from a Messianic perspective, consult the book *Holy Cow: Does God Care About What We Eat?* by Hope Eagan (Littleton, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 2005).