

WILL YOU HAVE A LOCUST WITH YOUR HONEY?

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You have probably read the description of John the Baptist's diet with a certain amount of wonder – if not revulsion. As a tasty morsel, locusts have about the same allure as sheep's eyes to the average westerner. To add to the complication the book of Deuteronomy seems to forbid the eating of all swarming insects. (Deut 14:19) Was John the Baptist, so revered for his piety, not an observant Jew? Did he habitually break the command which forbade the eating of all swarming insects?

Your response to these questions may be a good indicator of your own attitude to the Torah and the place of the Jewish context in your understanding of the Gospels. Clearly, the issue of Torah observance was very important to John the Baptist's audience which included Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 3:7). The failure to keep a dietary requirement, which would be regarded as a light command, would undoubtedly discredit a Jewish teacher. How did John the Baptist manage to bypass this command?



There are some commentators who have claimed that John the Baptist's diet consisted not of insects but of beans from the locust tree and while this may be open to speculation it does not seem a convincing alternative.

How would you like your locust?

Many Christians find the laws of kashrut very alien and confusing. Kashrut refers to the corpus of Jewish laws that relate to the preparation and fitness of foods and to items such as textiles and ritual scrolls used by the Jewish community. Christians seldom take much notice of the biblical injunctions about clean and unclean foods because they believe that they have a limited application for the religious practice of the Jewish community. The kosher laws do not apply to gentile believers who make up the vast majority of the Church worldwide.

This disjoint between Christian and Jewish lifestyles is further complicated by the fact that kashrut has developed through two strands, the Hebrew Scriptures which contain commands known as "*de'Oraita*," (biblical mandates) and rabbinic mandates contained in the Talmud which are called "*de'Rabbanan*." Rabbinic Judaism has developed kashrut which is highly specific and, in some cases, differs between the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities and between people living in Israel and those in the diaspora.

It is little wonder that the vast majority of Christians have little or no insight into these practices. Yet these dietary practices have constituted one of the main features of Judaism that have differentiated Jews from their neighbours for centuries.

Good news, Gentiles can feast on locusts without condemnation!

Are gentile (non-Jewish) believers in Jesus exempt from the laws of kashrut?

The short answer to this is that the Jewish Council of the first congregation in Jerusalem made a ruling which "loosed" the gentile believers from the regulatory requirements of kashrut and many other customary laws which were expressions of distinction. (Acts 15) The problem with the short answer is that it oversimplifies a complex situation in which this halakic decision is made. To understand this ruling the identities and praxes of the various players must be understood. The leadership in Jerusalem, the gentile believers in Antioch and elsewhere, and the various groups of influence in the Council at Jerusalem, all add to our understanding of the complexities of the pastoral ruling given in Jerusalem. The significance of the leadership provided by this congregation is described by Kinzer (2005:155)

This congregation truly was "the mother church" for the whole movement, and its leader [James] was inevitably put in a position of central importance. Given the special role of the Jerusalem congregation and its leader within the worldwide Yeshua movement, it is noteworthy that Luke stresses its strict adherence to Jewish practice and its active participation in the religious life of the wider Jewish community. As faithful Jews, members of the Jerusalem congregation observe the Sabbath (Acts 1:12), gather for worship on the holiday of Pentecost (Acts 2:1), and pray at the times ordained by Jewish custom (Acts 3:1). They include among their ranks many priests and Pharisees (Acts 6:7; 15:5). They are a community "zealous for the Torah" (Acts 21:20). They attend the temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1) and meet in its courts (Acts 5:12; 5:42), and the people of the city hold them in high regard (Acts 2:47; 5:13).ⁱ

The upshot of this is that the leadership of a highly observant Jewish congregation expressed a view which was in keeping with rabbinic attitudes of the second temple period, with regard to the *goyyim* (gentiles). The general view was that gentiles were not included in the Sinai Covenant which was given exclusively to Israel. Gentiles however were not a monolithic group in their relationship to the Jewish community. There were differing degrees of relationship and this is reflected in the rabbinic literature.

"... the rabbis felt, as seems clear from the passage in Gen. 9:1-18, there is a covenant for all the children of Noah (i.e., the whole world), including not only people but all living creatures (see v. 10). Based on this section of Scripture, the rabbis found seven major requirements incumbent on all nations:

- 1) no idolatry;
 - 2) no incest/adultery;
 - 3) no murder;
 - 4) no blasphemy (profanation of the name of God);
 - 5) no theft;
 - 6) justice towards others (see Gen. 9:5);
 - 7) no eating flesh with blood in it and/or cutting off flesh from a living animal.
- To these generally-agreed-upon tenets some rabbis added others such as taking blood from a living animal. Several also mention prohibitions against witchcraft and other spiritual sorcery, such as found in Deut. 18:10-11.ⁱⁱ

The *goyim* who chose to abide by the Noachide covenant were called "foreigners" or "aliens." Any Gentile who lived in/among Israel was enjoined, at the very least, to keep the Noachide covenant. This was their "bottom line"—if they did not, they were to be expelled. If they did keep it, they were no longer called *goyim*, but *gerim*. The Talmud delineates them further by the new term *ger toshev*. These were foreigners living in the land of Israel who were keeping the seven Noachide commandments. By the time of the Septuagint (about 200 B.C.E.) the translators used the term "fearers" for the righteous outside of natural Israel in contrast to the term "proselytes," those righteous Gentiles who formally identified with Israel through conversion.ⁱⁱⁱ

So we cannot speak simply of gentiles and Jews. There were different degrees of relationship between them. When addressing the issue of gentile believers in the early church the leadership in Jerusalem responded by giving a ruling for faith and practice. The standard set for gentile believers was the same as those practiced by the "God-fearers", a standard many of them would have been living by already. This decision demonstrates great wisdom as it keeps the gentile believers in a lifestyle which their Jewish brothers and sisters would not find offensive, and so the unity of the early church was preserved.

How different this is to the lawlessness individualism of so many Christians today who honestly believe that they are free to make their own rules and ignore the commands of Scripture in the name of freedom in Christ.

Locust stew – it's good for you...

Recently the pastor of the largest church in America, Joel Osteen, added keeping kosher to his "feel good gospel". I mention Joel Osteen because he is a good example of a Christian who does not understand the rabbinic concept of kashrut and has reinterpreted it to suit his message of health and wealth. He told his congregation of an estimated 90,000 followers that he had given up meats like pork because they are unclean and contain toxins. How much consideration he has given to hormones that are in beef He does not say.

Joel Osteen equates what the Bible calls "clean" as meat that is healthier for those who eat it. In other words Osteen thinks that kosher laws are ultimately about the health benefits to those who observe them rather than obedience to God. In this "all about me" gospel there has to be a personal benefit at the heart of a spiritual discipline. Compare what the pastor teaches with what Rabbi Alfred Kolatch, (who understands the concept of kashrut), says in *The Jewish Book of Why*.

"One of the great misconceptions under which many of us labour is that the Jewish dietary laws (the laws of kashrut) were instituted for health reasons." ^{iv}

Rabbi Kolatch also states in *The Jewish Home Advisor*,

"The Bible (Leviticus 11:45) offers a single reason for the dietary laws: to help Israel become a holy nation. By following a distinctive diet, Israel was encouraged to remain apart, separate from its idol-worshipping neighbours. This lifestyle insured that the adoption of idolatrous ways by Jews would be kept to a minimum." ^v

In his commentary on Leviticus Wenham (1979:166-169) points out that there have been a number of attempts to rationalise the division of clean and unclean animals. The cultic explanation, which associates unclean animals with those used in pagan cultic rites, forbids them to the people of Israel. A second rationalisation is the hygienic explanation which, as we have seen above, suggests that unclean animals were so defined because they carry disease. This conjecture is supported neither scientifically nor biblically. A third rationalisation is the symbolic explanation which suggests that the behaviour of the unclean animals could be related to the behaviour of sinners as apposed to the Israelites. Finally, there is an explanation given by the social anthropologist Mary Douglas (in Wenham) which is based on conformity to classification.

The animal world is divided into three spheres: those that fly in the air, those that walk on the land, and those that swim in the seas (cf. Gen. 1:20-30). Each sphere has a particular mode of motion associated with it. Birds have two wings with which to fly, and two feet for walking; fish have fins and scales with which to swim; land animals have hoofs to run with. The clean animals are those that conform to these standard pure types. Those creatures which in some way transgress the boundaries are unclean. Thus fish without fins and scales are unclean (Lev. 11:10; Deut. 14:10). Insects which fly but which have many legs are unclean, whereas locusts which have wings and only two hopping legs are clean (Lev. 11:20-23). Animals with an indeterminate form of motion, i.e., which "swarm," are unclean (Lev. 11:41-44).^{vi}

"Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong."^{vii}

According to this view the extent to which some animals do not conform, renders them unclean. Ingenious though they may be, none of these rationalisations is even hinted at in Scripture.

Having established that kashrut is about obedience rather than health, association with pagan rites, symbolism or chaotic movement, we can move on to look at the seemingly contradictory passages in Leviticus and Deuteronomy that deal with swarming insects.

Pass the locusts please...

The prohibition on swarming insects is given without elaboration in the book of Deuteronomy. (Deut 14:19). How should we view this command? First, we must take into account the nature of the literature in which it appears. The name “Deuteronomy” literally means the “repetition of the law” which although the name is based on a misunderstanding of the words “a copy of this law” Deut 17:18^{viii} does indicate that the expression of the law is not limited to the single book of Deuteronomy. Every verse in Deuteronomy must be read with the other four books that make up the Torah in mind. When we view the two passages together it is clear that while the prohibition on swarming insects, such as gnats, is accepted by both texts Leviticus introduces an exception to the rule. Milgrom acknowledges that the reason for this exemption is in not clear.^{ix}

The Bible generally gives the locust a negative image. Locusts tend to be an image of terror and the destruction of crops, usually with the added connotation of their being an agent of God’s judgment against a rebellious nation. On the other hand there are some positive aspects noted in Scripture. Locusts, unlike other swarming insects, were ceremonially clean that the Old Testament Jewish Community was allowed to eat (Lev 11:20–23). This image of locusts as an image of nutrition is illustrated by the description of John the Baptist’s eating of locusts and wild honey (Mk 1:6), which was presented as an element of the ascetic piety of a wilderness experience. On the other hand, the prohibition against swarming insects is reflected in Jesus’ humorous comment about straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. (Neither of which were kosher). (Matt 23:24)



Leviticus 11:22 & Deuteronomy 14:19

<p>The Levitical prescription is introduced and concluded with the words “...all the winged insects that walk on all fours are detestable to you.”</p>	<p>The Deuteronomic proscription appears in the context of the creatures of the air which is introduced and concluded by the words, “You may eat any clean bird.”</p>
	<p>11 "You may eat any clean bird. 12 "But these are the ones which you shall not eat: the eagle and the vulture and the buzzard, 13 and the red kite, the falcon, and the kite in their kinds, 14 and every raven in its kind, 15 and the ostrich, the owl, the sea gull, and the hawk in their kinds, 16 the little owl, the great owl, the white owl, 17 the pelican, the carrion vulture, the cormorant,</p>

akal tame' ha-oph sherets Kol

So what Deuteronomy gives us is the first part of the prohibition while Leviticus gives us the fuller text which includes the exception. It is not that they contradict each other – they don't. One gives a more complete teaching than the other.

Make sure my locust is clean ...

The purpose of the dietary and ceremonial law was to instill ritual purity so that the pure and the impure were clearly differentiated. "For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44).

The concepts of ritual purity are another aspect of kashrut that are fairly foreign to the average Christian. Many wrongly equate ritual impurity with sin and are shocked to discover that Jesus was often impure from a ritual perspective. For instance, when the woman with the hemorrhage touched the hem (tzit tzit) on Jesus' prayer shawl he was ritually unclean. (Mark 5:25f / Lev 15:7, 19, 25-28). When Jesus reached out and touched the leper (Mark 1:40-41/Lev 13:11) He was immediately rendered unclean and would have had to pass through the waters of the mikveh before He entered the Temple precincts.

Some people argue that these rules are simply arbitrary prohibitions, created so that a religious elite could have a code of behaviour to enforce and thus have a concrete way to define themselves as different from others (Douglas, 2002). Continuing from this, others argue that the arbitrariness of these laws does not need to be explained, as God needs a way to test the faithfulness of the Israelites. If they followed these laws, even when they made no sense, they became closer to holy purity and thus, closer to God himself. Thus, it is pointless to look for an explanation, they argue.

Many others reject this and argue that the laws are not arbitrary, but that they are rules based simply on allegory, and that the prohibition of pork is because "The dividing of the hoof and chewing of the cud signify discretion between good and evil, and meditating on the law of God; and where either of these is wanting, man is unclean." (Douglas, 2002)

Allegory may have played a part in these taboos, and some of them may have been enacted through nothing more than traditions of sheep preference or personal disfavor, but this does not get at the root of the problem. The idea of holiness is concerned with being pure and purposeful, obeying and submitting to the laws set down by a higher power. Things that do not fit into this pattern, acts that go against this divine law are unholy, unclean, forbidden. "Uncleanness is matter out of place...that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained." (Douglas, 2002)

This concept of matter out of place coupled with the biblical attitude towards lifeblood could explain many of the prohibitions set forth in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. The strange and very explicit bird prohibitions in Leviticus 11: 13-20 make much more sense in this light: ostriches are unclean because they are birds that do not fly, buzzards and raptors are unclean because they eat the lifeblood of other animals, the seagull, heron, cormorant, and stork are all unclean because they are birds that spend a lot of time in and around water, instead of in the sky where they belong, and the bat is unclean because it flies, yet it has fur. Goats, sheep, deer, cattle, and pigs all have divided hooves, but because pigs do not chew cud (the other four do), they do not fit the pattern and are excluded. Fish inhabit the seas, and fish should have fins and scales. Every type of "fish" that does not fit this description is thus unclean (Leviticus 11: 9-13). No otters, no water birds (e.g. penguins), no eels, nothing that does not fit into the defined category of what a fish should be is allowed. Hares would be unclean under the rule about creatures that walk on their paws, but they are doubly unclean for hopping across the landscape. Had the biblical authors known of their existence, kangaroos would most certainly not be kosher because of the way

that they bound across the landscape.

Two passages come in direct conflict as to the classification of winged insects: Leviticus 11: 20-24 and Deuteronomy 14: 19. Deuteronomy explicitly and absolutely states: "And all winged insects are unclean for you; they shall not be eaten." Leviticus, however, adds the qualifier that only the winged insects "that walk on all fours" are unclean. Leviticus goes on to enumerate specific exceptions to this rule, including the locust and the grasshopper. This conflict may be due to one author being more pessimistic and realistic than the other. In light of one of the biblical plagues being locusts, it is reasonable to assume that the authors of the Bible were well familiar with the devastation that a cloud of these insects could wreak on a field of crops. While not particularly appetizing, locusts do make a solid meal. In fact, John the Baptist subsisted on "locusts and wild honey" (Matthew 3:4) exclusively while he lived in the wilderness (Milgrom, 2004). They are very plentiful in years when they do appear, and they contain a decent amount of protein and fat for the size they are. So, the author of Leviticus seems to think that it is more important that people are able to turn to this resource in years when food might be very scarce, rather than prohibiting this last resort food source.

Haghabh is one of the clean leaping insects of Lev 11:22 (English Versions of the Bible "grasshopper"). The word occurs in four other places, nowhere coupled with the name of another insect. In the report of the spies (1Ch 10:9), we have the expression, "We were in our own sight as grasshoppers"; in Ec 12:5, "The grasshopper shall be a burden"; in Isa 40:22, "It is he that sitteth above the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers." These three passages distinctly favor the rendering "grasshopper" of the English Versions of the Bible. In the remaining passage (2Ch 7:13), "... if I command the locust (English Versions) to devour the land," the migratory locust seems to be referred to. Doubtless this as well as other words was loosely used. In English there is no sharp distinction between the words "grasshopper" and "locust."



The Book of Joel is largely occupied with the description of a plague of locusts. Commentators differ as to whether it should be interpreted literally or

allegorically.

Four names *'arbeh*, *gazam*, *yeleq* and *chacil*, are found in Joel 1:4 and again in 2:25. *Gobh* is found in the difficult passage (Amos 7:1), "... He formed locusts (the King James Version "grasshoppers," the King James Version margin "green worms," Septuagint akris) in the beginning of the shooting up of the latter growth"; and (Nahum 3:17) in "... your marshals (are) as the swarms of grasshoppers (Hebrew *gobh gobhay*; the King James Version "great grasshoppers"), which encamp in the hedges in the cold day, but when the sun ariseth they flee away, and their place is not known where they are." The related *gebh* occurs but once, in Isa 34:12, also a disputed passage, "And your spoil shall be gathered as the caterpillar (*chacil*) gathereth: as locusts (*gebhim*) leap shall men leap upon it." It is impossible to determine what species is meant, but some kind of locust or grasshopper fits any of these passages.

Locusts are instruments of the wrath of God (Ex 10:4-19; Ezr 8:8,12; 2Ch 7:13; Ps 78:46; 105:34; Na 3:15-17; The Wisdom of Solomon 16:9; Re 9:3); they typify an invading army (Jer 51:14,27); they are compared with horses (Joe 2:4; Re 9:7); in Job 39:20, Yahweh says of the horse: "Hast thou made him to leap as a locust?" the King James Version "Canst

thou make him afraid as a grasshopper?" Locusts are among the "four things which are little upon the earth, but are exceeding wise" (Pr 30:27). Like the stars and sands of the sea, locusts are a type of that which cannot be numbered (Job 15:16; 17:6; Jer 46:23; Judith 2:20). Grasshoppers are a symbol of insignificance (1Ch 10:9; Ec 12:5; Isa 40:22; 2 Esdras 4:24).

Locusts as Food

The Arabs prepare for food the thorax of the locust, which contains the great wing muscles. They pull off the head, which as it comes away brings with it a mass of the viscera, and they remove the abdomen (or "tail"), the legs and the wings. The thoraxes, if not at once eaten, are dried and put away as a store of food for a lean season. The idea of feeding upon locusts when prepared in this way should not be so repellent as the thought of eating the whole insect.

In the light of this it is not incredible that the food of John the Baptist should have been "locusts and wild honey" (Mt 4:19).

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- ⁱ Kinzer, M.S. 2005 *Post Missionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining the Christian Engagement with the Jewish People*. Michigan. Brazos Press.
- ⁱⁱ Fischer, J ed. 2000. *Enduring Paradox: Exploratory essays in Messianic Judaism*. Maryland. Messianic Jewish Publishers.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*
- ^{iv} Kolatch, Rabbi Alfred. 2003 *The Jewish Book of Why*, New York. Penguin USA
- ⁵ Kolatch, Rabbi Alfred. 1990 *The Jewish Home Advisor*. New York. Jonathan David Publishers
- ^v
- ^{vi} Wenham, J. 1979 *Leviticus (The New International Commentary)* Michigan. William Eerdmans.
- ^{vii} Douglas, Mary. 2002 *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York. Routledge.
- ^{viii} *New Bible Dictionary IVP*
- ^{ix} Milgom, J. 2004 *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics (A Continental Commentary)* Minneapolis. Fortress Press.