

On the Cooking of Young Goats
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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Exodus 23:19, 34:26, Deuteronomy 14:21

“*Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.*” Do you remember that obscure law? It occurs three times in the books of the law, the Torah, and every single time it seems to come out of left field. You get a sense of that in the English translation. Every time it comes up, the translators give the law its own paragraph, because it doesn’t seem to flow naturally from what’s before, and it doesn’t seem to flow naturally into what comes after. The law just seems to drop from the sky. And yet it clearly matters. It’s mentioned three times! Jewish scholars identify 613 separate laws in the Torah (the Book of the law); very few of those laws merit three separate mentions.

It’s also a fairly influential little law. If you were a Jew, this law would have a strong impact on your daily life. Through the ages the rabbis have expanded this law to include a broad prohibition against any kind of meat cooked in milk. Observant Jews may not cook meat in milk. In a kosher kitchen the preparation of meat and dairy are supposed to be kept separate because of this law. The Mishna says, “*Every kind of flesh of [cattle, wild beast, and fowl] is prohibited to cook in milk, except for the flesh of fish and locusts. And it is prohibited to serve it up onto the table with cheese.*” So...no chicken parmesan. No beef stroganoff. All because of this little law. In some Jewish circles, rabbis even suggest that just to be safe, you should make sure to wait a safe period between the consumption of beef and the consumption of and dairy products. Different scholars suggested different things: Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish scholar suggested a 6 hour waiting period, although the Tosafists held that it was sufficient to finish the meat and say grace and then you could eat your ice cream. (Irving Wellfield, *You Shall not Boil a Kid in Its Mother’s Milk: Beyond Exodus 23:19*, Jewish Biblical Quarterly). So this law has a really strong presence in Judaism.

But while the law is widely practiced, it’s not widely understood. Old Testament laws aren’t just random regulations that God dumps on people; they have a purpose. There are deeper principles behind them. So, for example, the command not to reap to the very edge of your field (Leviticus 19:9) is not a random rule; it’s a way to make sure the poor and landless have enough to eat. It reveals the heart of God. It tells us that God cares about the poor. When people meditated on the law of God – like the psalmist talks about in Psalm 119 – they weren’t just learning the rule, they were meditating on the underlying moral principle. To put it another way, they weren’t just trying to understand the ‘what’ of the law, they were trying to understand the ‘why’. But when it comes to this law, the ‘what’ of the law may be clear, but the ‘why’? What’s the underlying moral principle behind this cooking rule!?? Both Jewish and Christian scholars have struggled to figure that out. One of my commentaries just shrugs its shoulders helplessly at this verse: “A number of explanations [for this law] have been suggested, but they are all speculative. In the final analysis, the original meaning of this law remains obscure, and we will make no attempt to nail it down.” Not particularly helpful.

I would like to try to do a little better than that. I would like to see if we can discern the deeper principle behind this law. I would like to see if we can discern what this law reveals about

the priorities of our Lord and how he would have us live in the world. To do that I will go through three classes of explanation for this law that I came across in my study this week.

First, there are the explanations related to idolatry. A number of commentators speculate that this law is a reaction to Baal worship and Asherah worship. Many laws have this sort of origin. God's people are supposed to be holy. To be holy is to be set apart, to be different from the rest of the world. Over and over again God tells Israel: don't be like the other nations! Leviticus 18:3 is just one of many examples here: "*You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices!*" Many of the laws that seem strange to us were given to Israel to distinguish them from pagan neighbors. So perhaps some Canaanite nation cooked a young goat in its mother's milk as a religious practice, perhaps as a fertility rite. Maybe in the cult of Baal or the cult of Asherah, you would eat the goat cooked in mother's milk so that your fields will be fruitful and your family will be fruitful. Perhaps the Lord prohibits the practice among his people to guard their holiness, to set them apart. Maimonides, the medieval scholar is an example of this view "*Idolatry had something to do with it. Perhaps such food was eaten at one of the ceremonies of their cult or one of their festivals.*" (Welfeld, op cit)

The problem with this interpretation is all about the "perhaps" in that sentence. While it is possible that this law responded to some pagan practice, we don't have record of anything like that. There is one Ugaritic tablet, which has a very uncertain fragment, of a possible sentence, that might say something about cooking a goat in milk, but the fragment is not clear at all and it doesn't say anything about mothers. So while it is possible that this is the basis of this command, there's no real evidence for it, and in the end, I don't think it's our best explanation of what's going on.

The second Group of explanations about the why of this law fall into what I would call the wacky category. I share them with you partly because they are interesting, but also because they remind us that in this internet age, you have to be really discerning about biblical interpretations that you find. In an article written by a rabbi that I read on the Jerusalem Post's website, I found what might be considered an allegorical interpretation of this passage. Allegory is a kind of highly symbolical form of interpretations where the elements in a story or in a law don't stand for themselves; they are symbols for something different. So Rabbi Dror Ben Ami says that this law is not about eating habits at all. He says that each of the 4 elements in this law stand for something else. Milk represents basic spiritual instruction – as when Paul talks about beginning teachings as spiritual milk. Mother represents a teacher of basic spiritual things. So mother's milk is basic teaching from an authoritative source. Cooking is not the preparation of food, it is thinking, ruminating, philosophizing, like when you cook up an idea. And the goat is a symbol of deception, as when Rebecca cooked up a goat and used its skin to trick Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing. So cooking a goat is cooking up a deceptive idea. Therefore, concludes the rabbi, and now I'm quoting, "*Don't cook a young goat in its mother's milk actually means, 'Teachings about God are difficult to understand. Don't accept new spiritual teachings about God that look too good, and too easy, to be true; they have probably been deliberately 'cooked up' to deceive you.'*" Is it just me, or is that interpretation ironic. It feels like rabbi Ben Ami is the one doing the cooking. In any case, as with any difficult Biblical passage there are a whole group of outlandish interpretations that people attach to this text.

That brings us to our third and final interpretation of this passage, the one I think represents the true meaning of this law. This law is about maintaining the value of life. Cooking a young goat in its mother's milk goes against the grain of the universe. Cooking a young goat in

its mother's milk violates the essential order of creation. How so? Well, what kind of substance is mother's milk? It is an intimate life-giving thing. Think of a nursing child at her mother's breast, or, think of a mama dog nursing a litter of puppies; those are life-affirming images. If you were creating some kind of presentation for work and you wanted to pick an image that illustrated the delicate gift of life, you'd be hard pressed to come up with a better image than an image of a mother nursing. Mother's milk is a gift of God. It is a gift given to nurture life. To take a baby goat, and cook it in the very substance that is supposed to give it life, to cook a baby goat in its own mother's milk so that you can devour it, is to put the purposes of creation in reverse. It is to take the stuff of life and use it for death. This is how the great Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel understands the law. Here's how he says it: "*[Mother's milk] the only food which by reason of its proper composition of fat, carbohydrate and protein can by itself sustain the human body. How ungrateful and callous we would be to take the child of an animal to whom we are so indebted and cook it in its very milk.*"

In this interpretation, this small law about how to cook a goat is used to remind Israel of a much, much larger principle – the valuation and preservation of life. There are lots of laws that work this way in the Torah. Circumcision is this kind of law. It's a small physical act, but it reminds Israel of a much, much bigger principle: that they are set apart as God's covenant people. In the same way, with this small law, God reminds his people that he loves and values all life, and he calls us to be preservers and sustainers of life. That's a big and important principle; big enough to warrant three repetitions.

Interpreted this way there are a couple of implications I hear in this law. First, this law becomes a reminder to me of how much God values the life of small and weak things. It makes perfect sense that the God who gave this law should also be the one who welcomed little children on His knee and blessed them. The God of this law is a God of the weak and the small. I hear in this law a call to care for the weak, the outcast, the unborn, the marginalized, and the refugees. I hear in this law a call to make sure that my appetite for things and for convenience and security don't end up devouring these vulnerable ones. Because the God who gave this law is a God of life whose care goes all the way down to baby goats.

Second, I also hear in this law that God's care for life does not stop with human beings, it includes the care of animals and creation. When you start studying it, you realize that there are a whole set of laws that show God's care for creatures. They may be small and obscure, but they signal God's concern for creature care. May I just share a few of those? In Leviticus 22:28 "Do not slaughter a cow or a sheep and its young on the same day." That's a law about valuing life and treating animals with care and respect. In Deuteronomy 22:6-7 "If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, do not take the Mother with the young. You may take the young but be sure to let the mother go so that it may go well with you and you may live a long life." You can hear it at the end there: this is about life! In Deuteronomy 25:4 "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Again be fair; don't be cruel. Then outside the law you have passages like Proverbs 12:10. The righteous care for the needs of their animals. In Jonah 4:11 where God tells Jonah that he's not just concerned about the people who would be destroyed in the judgment of Nineveh, but the animals too. In Matthew 6:26 where Jesus tells us that the heavenly Father feeds the birds of the air. In Luke 12:6 where Jesus tells us that the Father does not forget even a single sparrow, even though you can buy six of them for a penny.

Put it all together and a clear picture emerges: our God loves all the animals he has made and their life is precious to him. His concerns go well beyond the state of our soul to the state of

all his creatures. He may have given them to us for food, but that does not mean that he does not value them or that the life that he has placed in these living things is disposable. It is not. God created these creatures good and their life gives him praise (Psalm 148). When Jesus dies on the cross (with the crown of thorns on his brow) it's not just our souls he's saving, he's making all creation new. And when Jesus returns in glory there will be a new heaven and a new earth and I believe creatures will be part of that world too. Thanks be to God for the gift of life in all its forms.

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