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Biblically Kosher? Rabbinic Kosher?

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There is little doubting that within the broad Messianic community, there can be huge debates over the application of the Torah's dietary laws. Most frequently, as has been our family's experience, the perspectives surrounding *kashrut* have been too quickly polarized into the realms of those who keep "**Biblically kosher**," versus those who keep "**Rabbinic kosher**." Those who keep "Biblically kosher," are those who often have eliminated pork and shellfish from their diet, but at the same time will often buy commercially processed meat at the supermarket, will not look for a *hechsher* or approved Jewish seal on many food products, and will eat out at most restaurants (perhaps even including fast food). Those who keep "Rabbinic kosher," are those who will only purchase traditionally slaughtered meat, will look for a *hechsher* on most food products, will not eat out at most restaurants, and will observe practices such as not mixing meat and dairy, having multiple sets of dishes and utensils.

It pains me to say this, but one of the reasons why the defense of kosher validity from the Apostolic Scriptures, has not been too well refined as it should be, by many Messianic teachers and leaders now in the 2010s (hence, the size of this publication),¹ is because too many people in congregational authority have been too easily dragged into debates over "Biblically kosher" versus "Rabbinic kosher." Many of these debates have arisen in congregational circumstances such as what food items not to bring to fellowship meal gatherings, or what someone might be served when visiting someone's home for dinner and/or what one sees in his or her host's refrigerator or pantry. Far too quickly—perhaps just as the Prophet Samuel was admonished, "for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1

¹ This would include a lack of appropriate analysis of passages such as: Mark 7:19; Acts 10, 11; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 10:24-33; 1 Timothy 4:14-16; Titus 1:14-16; Hebrews 9:8-10; 13:9-10; et. al. These New Testament passages, among others, are addressed in the **Eating and Kosher in the Apostolic Scriptures** section of this publication.

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Samuel 16:7, NRSV)—there are Messianic people who will, *in spite of warnings to the contrary*, evaluate the spirituality of others on the basis of what they eat or do not eat.

It is important, nonetheless, for an appropriate analysis of the whole topic of “kosher,” for each of us to be aware of the different views and dynamics present among those who classify themselves as “Biblical,” and those who classify themselves as “Rabbinic.” While there might not ever be total resolution over some of this, it is still useful that the various viewpoints present—as well as recognizing some of the diversity within Judaism itself—get put on the table.

Biblically Kosher vs. Rabbinic Kosher?

On the whole, it is easy to deduce that a fair majority of today’s Messianic Jewish leaders adhere to what they consider to be “**Biblically kosher.**” This is mainly a diet that avoids pork and shellfish, but is likely not going to avoid mixing meat and dairy products, and will frequently eat out at many restaurants. At the same time, it is to also be recognized that those who adhere to what they label “Biblically kosher,” will tend to think that the message of the Apostolic Scriptures, while not necessarily abolishing the Torah’s dietary laws, does place less of a significance on them for the post-resurrection era than would have been seen in the pre-resurrection era.

In this section, we will first summarize some of the significant views present in the Messianic community regarding “Biblically kosher,” and then see them contrasted a bit with those who adhere to what many would label “Rabbinic kosher.”

Barney Kasdan’s book *God’s Appointed Customs* (1996), has a wide summary of both Biblical and Jewish practices included, ranging from circumcision, *bar/bat mitzvah*, a traditional Jewish wedding, traditional Jewish death practices, the *mezzuzah*, the *mikveh* or immersion bath, *tzitziyot* or fringes, *tefillin* or phylacteries, and not surprisingly, *kashrut*. While offering a brief, but useful, encapsulation of how *kashrut* has been observed in much of the traditional Jewish community, Kasdan’s concluding remarks reflect those of someone who promotes a “Biblically kosher” model where pork and shellfish are avoided. Yet, Kasdan does not criticize those who separate meat and dairy, or observe other more traditional Jewish interpretations and applications of *kashrut*. He says,

“Much of...the traditional approach to *kashrut* may be applied to a Messianic Jewish lifestyle. A distinctive factor is the freedom that believers have in the *Ruakh HaKodesh* to prayerfully apply certain customs. As with the traditional Jewish community, there is also a great deal of diversity among believers in Yeshua when it comes to *kashrut*. Many follow what might be described as a ‘biblically kosher’ approach. This lifestyle shows deference to the biblical dietary laws. Hence, only kosher animals are eaten; the *tareyf* animals are avoided. Pork, shellfish and the unclean fish listed in Leviticus 11 are avoided.

“A question is often raised as to what to do with the extra-biblical customs the rabbis have included. There is a broad consensus, considering the teachings of the New Testament, that Messianic believers are not *bound* by the traditions of man. The mixing of milk and meat, for example, while an Orthodox Jewish tradition, is not a biblical law. This means that the laws pertaining to separate dishes, silverware and pots are really not an issue in seeking to live a biblical lifestyle. Of course, there are those who may

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choose to follow elements of rabbinic tradition. This is fine as long as it does not contradict Scripture and is done in the right spirit.

“A Messianic believer may want to buy meat from a kosher butcher and/or keep separate dishes. Some believers may prefer some modifications. Whatever approach a Messianic believer takes to *kashrut*, it is wise to walk in love...”²

Daniel C. Juster, in his widely circulated book *Jewish Roots*, has a few things to say about the dietary laws, and makes a difference between what may be considered “Biblically kosher” versus “Rabbinic kosher”:

“‘Do you keep kosher?’ This is a common question addressed to Messianic Jews. The usual answer is yes, but not rabbinical kosher—biblical kosher! Keeping biblical *kashrut*...mainly involves avoiding the forbidden foods listed in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

“Some Messianic Jews, who are more oriented to an Orthodox practice, decry the concept of biblical kosher as not related to Jewish meaning and understanding. However, the concept is quite coherent. Recently, the leader of the American Conservative Jewish movement called on all Conservative Jews to at least keep biblical kosher. He had no problem understanding it and calling for it. However, the rabbinical meaning of the word *kashrut* or kosher is much more extensive. Rabbinical *kashrut* is built on the command, ‘You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk’ (Exod. 12:19 RSV).

“The ancient rabbis adopted the principle of building a fence around the Torah. This meant creating additional laws—which were more rigid than the Torah—to prevent the breaking of Torah command itself. This produced what many see as a burdensome legalism. The reasoning went as follows: How can we know for sure that the animal we cook in milk is not the offspring of the mother from whom we got the milk? Couldn’t this accidentally happen? Well, it is remote, but possible! Therefore, we will never cook meat in milk. However, to make sure that we don’t cook meat in milk, we should perhaps avoid eating meat and milk together because digestion is like cooking in our stomachs. But what constitutes eating meat and milk together? There may be a particle of a dairy product left on the plate that mixes with a meat product. To avoid this, why not separate dishes for meat and for milk? Furthermore, a prescribed number of hours between meat and milk meals should be followed to avoid mixing milk and meat by mouth. A Kosher product, therefore, has no blood and no mixture of milk and meat in it. This is the progression of reasoning.

“As for *kashrut* in this rabbinical sense, we believe that everyone should be led by the Spirit. Is God leading the person to a special level of identification whereby he or she will practice the full rules of *rabbinic kashrut*? Or would this be too restrictive even for our general social relationships in the Jewish community in which we minister? Everyone must seek God in this. Certainly there is no requirement in these matters for Messianic Jews. If people desire to entertain Orthodox Jews in their home, rabbinic *kashrut* becomes a necessity.”³

² Barney Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs: A Messianic Jewish Guide to the Biblical Lifecycle and Lifestyle* (Baltimore: Lederer Books, 1996), 110.

³ Daniel Juster, *Jewish Roots: Understanding Your Jewish Faith*, revised edition (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2013), pp 291-292.

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In his 1996 volume *Return of the Remnant: The Rebirth of Messianic Judaism*, Michael Schiffman also reflects the common view present of “Biblically kosher,” while at the same time leaving the option open for Messianic Jewish Believers who desire to keep kosher via a more traditional manner:

“In addition to a distinction between kosher and unkosher foods (fit and unfit) on the basis of scriptural command, there is a detailed tradition, *kashrut*, separating dairy and meat products. This elaborate separation is based upon Exodus 23:19b, *Do not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk*. This commandment is most probably an ancient prohibition against following Canaanite fertility rituals whose intent had nothing to do with dietary concerns.

“Messianic believers may choose to avoid meats forbidden in the *torah* as a life-style and cultural identification, and yet eat cheeseburgers forbidden by rabbinic traditional law but not by scripture. While believers are not obligated to keep the law for justification, believers have the freedom to do so as part of a godly life-style...

“Tradition may be utilized for cultural identification, sensitivity, and to heighten awareness of the importance of reaching Jewish people with the good news of the Messiah. Tradition can also be reinterpreted to reflect faith in Yeshua. This is perfectly legitimate. The Messiah Himself did so at the last supper by reinterpreting the meaning of the Passover symbols in light of His atoning death.”⁴

While what is often considered to be “**Biblically kosher**,” avoiding pork and shellfish, is what is likely to remain the majority view within today’s kosher-friendly Messianic community, it is true that there is a growing minority of those who would insist upon an observance of what many would consider “**Rabbinic kosher**.” This sector of people would not only adhere to not eating the meat of the unclean animals listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, but also observe many of the customary guidelines and restrictions as derived from traditional Jewish literature like the Mishnah and Talmud, and kept in contemporary Orthodox Judaism for sure, and to a lesser extent many sectors of Conservative Judaism. It is believed that today’s Messianic Jewish Believers need to observe these, what many would consider extra-Biblical rulings and decrees, as a part of their fidelity to God’s Torah.

Dynamics regarding what many label to be “Rabbinic kosher” have become a bit complicated—not because it is true that traditional Jewish interpretations and applications of *kashrut* need to be better understood, from both the Bible and history—but because there are those who will advocate that “Biblically kosher” *is* “Rabbinic kosher.” The 2012 book *Biblically Kosher: A Messianic Jewish Perspective on Kashrut*, written by Aaron Eby, very much summarizes some of his own personal and familial quest to keep kosher. He states,

“I originally wrote this...to help people understand some of the personal decisions that I had made for my family. I wanted to show that many practices that people consider ‘rabbinic’ and that appear to hang on thin air actually have valid sources in the Bible. As it

⁴ Michael Schiffman, *Return of the Remnant: The Rebirth of Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore: Lederer Messianic Publishers, 1996), pp 68-69.

turns out, eating 'biblically kosher' is far more involved than simply avoiding pork and shellfish."⁵

Eby's point should be well taken: **eating "Biblically kosher" involves more than avoiding pork and shellfish.** There are many aspects and dimensions of kosher that are totally missed if a person thinks that all it is about is not eating unclean meat. And, no one should fault Eby and his family for wanting to observe a more Orthodox Jewish style of kosher, if this is how the Lord is truly directing them. What he does not have the right to do—and nor does anyone else for that matter—is to take the term "Biblically kosher" and make his or her interpretations and applications of the Torah's dietary laws, the exclusive property of what "Biblically kosher" entails. *Some interpret the Bible more strictly than others.* Problems certainly erupt when one's interpretation or evaluation of what "Biblically kosher" involves, is less stringent than another's interpretation. Consider the following words of Boaz Michael, leader of the popular Messianic ministry First Fruits of Zion, and definitely a proponent of keeping what many would consider to be "Rabbinic kosher":

"It is tempting, once one has cleared his house of bacon-wrapped shrimp, to begin telling others that he is now eating 'kosher.' In reality, though, he has only taken one step toward obeying all of the Torah's dietary laws.

"To be able to call one's diet 'kosher,' one would not be able to eat at restaurants or on ceramic dishes prohibited by Torah because they have been in contact with unclean meat, or to eat packaged food without a hechsher (a kosher certification; many packaged foods contain pork-derived ingredients that are not obvious from the ingredient list on the label), or to eat any non-certified kosher meat (properly slaughtered, salted, sciatic nerve removed, etc.), or to be anything less than scrupulously and meticulously observant of the laws of chametz during Pesach, among other things.

"Someone who has stopped eating unclean meat has certainly taken steps toward observance, and many of these steps are necessary and praiseworthy...still, [people who have done this] have no platform to call themselves 'kosher'..."⁶

What Michael's remarks have just done is quite obvious: **a majority of the kosher-friendly Messianic community is not considered by him to at all be "kosher."** Just like the divisions which exist between the different denominations of contemporary Judaism, Michael is a figure who will regard Messianic people keeping what they consider "Biblically kosher" to be widely illegitimate, and only his Orthodox Jewish level of kosher to be legitimate. While he is, to be sure, free to have such an opinion—such rigidity is going to do more to polarize the discussion over kosher application than not (specifically regarding what people are *able* to [financially] do, given their circumstances).

Individuals and families, Jewish or non-Jewish, who have been involved with the Messianic movement for some time, have at times been caught within debates over the kosher dietary laws. *Are we really keeping kosher? How far do we have to go to keep kosher? Are we doing it right?* And, there is a huge amount of tension which arises,

⁵ Aaron Eby, *Biblically Kosher: A Messianic Jewish Perspective on Kashrut* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), 9.

⁶ Boaz Michael, *Tent of David: Healing the Vision of the Messianic Gentile* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2013), pp 44-45.

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when one person's kosher is another person's non-kosher. Furthermore, the amount of detail and exegesis given to Biblical passages in both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures, surrounding the topics of eating, drinking, and the validity of *kashrut* in the post-resurrection era **has been utterly under-whelming** from today's broad Messianic movement, its teachers, and its leaders. Richard Harvey issues some highly important directions in his 2009 book *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*, from which we should all take cues:

"A number of theological concerns are at work in the various practices of *kashrut*. The development of Messianic *kashrut* must reckon with the orthopraxy advocated by the Jewish religious establishment; the different interpretations of the New Testament practices and teaching of Yeshua and the first century Messianic Jews; the need to be culturally appropriate and sensitive; and the possibility of variety rather than uniformity in such issues. What is missing from the present discussion is a more systematic theology of Torah which confirms and justifies the validity of the food laws, not simply as boundary markers, but with their own inherent theological rationale. This might be developed from a more historical, anthropological and theological reading of the Pentateuchal legislation, and a more detailed discussion of the place of the food laws within Jewish history and identity formation. Without more adequate justification for *kashrut's* continued validity, the majority of the Messianic movement will not be convinced..."⁷

Orthodox and Conservative Jewish Differences

While it can be a little disconcerting, perhaps, for kosher-friendly Messianics to be informed that there will probably never be total agreement on the application of the Torah's dietary laws within our broad faith community—this needs to be kept in perspective of how two of the major denominations of contemporary Judaism, the Orthodox and Conservative movements, have some well known differences. Both Orthodox and Conservative Judaism accept the Torah's kosher dietary laws as being valid for the present time, but the latter is less strict and does feel free to interpret the various rulings seen through centuries of Jewish orthopraxy a bit loosely in places, and disregard other rulings that are believed to be outdated. Sue Fishkoff summarizes in her book *Kosher Nation*,

"While Conservative and Orthodox Judaism accept the same laws of *kashrut*, the Conservative movement applies some of those laws differently. Conservative authorities in the twentieth century knocked down several 'fences around the Torah' their Orthodox colleagues had constructed, believing them to be unnecessary or even a detriment to the fulfillment of the mitzvot [commandments] they were designed to protect. The Conservative movement does not require American-made cheese to carry a *hekhsher*, although some Conservative rabbis prefer it. The movement also does not require kosher certification of wine...The Conservative movement permits greater leniency in kashering methods, and considers chemical additives derived from non-kosher meat products such as rennet and horse-hoof gelatin to be no longer food, and

⁷ Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 212.

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thus permissible in kosher production. It continues to accept swordfish and sturgeon as kosher even after the Orthodox stopped eating those fish...⁸

Probably one of the biggest areas of contention between the Orthodox and Conservative movements, involves the highly-popular Hebrew National brand of hot dogs, salami, and other lunch meat items. Hebrew National hot dogs are widely found at American supermarkets, and even if contemporary Messianic people do not often buy a great deal of certified-kosher meat, it is more than likely than not that Hebrew National is a preferred hot dog of choice. But as Fishkoff proceeds to explain, Hebrew National adheres to a Conservative Jewish level of kosher, meaning that almost no Orthodox Jews will purchase or consume their products. And not only that, but Hebrew National even having a wide Conservative Jewish customer base, has not been too easy:

"Hebrew National is one of the most contentious issues in American commercial kashrut. The company bills itself as the world's largest kosher meat processor, making 720 million hot dogs a year, but virtually no Orthodox Jews will eat its product. Until 2004 few Conservative Jews did, either. The company was supervised by a longtime house mashgiach [Heb. for 'kosher supervisor'], Rabbi Tibor Stern, whose supervision was considered 'unreliable' by all the national agencies as well as the Orthodox and Conservative leadership. He lived far from the company's midwestern plants, they operated basically on their own, and no one could be sure whether kashrut standards were really being observed. The list of questions put Stern beyond the pale of the kosher mainstream.

"In 2004 Stern died, and the company hired the Triangle K, a supervising agency headed by Rabbi Aryeh Ralbag of the Young Israel of Avenue K in Brooklyn. Soon afterward, [Rabbi Paul] Plotkin and two colleagues from the Jewish Theological Seminary visited all the company's plants to see whether the Conservative movement would be able to endorse them. While hot dogs are the company's biggest seller, and three-quarters of those who buy those hot dogs are not Jewish, the CEO told Plotkin that the Conservative market was its target for the rest of its processed meats. Despite Ralbag's strong credentials, the company had few illusions of being accepted by Orthodox authorities anytime soon, since it used non-glatt meat.

"Plotkin and his fellow rabbis met Ralbag and flew with him to inspect the company's two slaughterhouses in Wisconsin and Iowa, and on to Indianapolis to walk through the main processing plant. Satisfied that kashrut standards were sufficiently tight, the trio presented their findings to the Conservative movement's law committee, which approved Hebrew National products as kosher in June.

"Instead of solving a situation, the Conservative endorsement may have muddled things further. Before 2004, Hebrew National simply was not accepted at kosher events. Now its appearance at an event signals adherence to a particular denominational standard. No Orthodox authority accepts the company's meat as kosher, but they are loath to criticize Ralbag himself; it's enough, they point out, that the meat used for Hebrew National products is not glatt.

"Plotkin wants to make more kosher meat available, but he is concerned that Conservative kosher supervision not become seen as less authentic or watered-down. 'If Conservative certification becomes or is perceived to be the easy way out, we will have

⁸ Sue Fishkoff, *Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America's Food Answers to a Higher Authority* (New York: Schocken Books, 2010), 273.

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demeaned our movement,' he says, adding that Conservative Jews "have a lot to learn" from the Orthodox agencies and mashgichim who speak the language of holiness when discussing kashrut."⁹

While there is a huge sector of Conservative Jews, and likely even Reform Jews, who will not think twice that Hebrew National products are kosher—the Orthodox standard of kosher is what has been widely perceived as the universal standard for much of Judaism, certainly among the past century's commercial kosher products. Fishkoff describes how about a century ago in New York City, the civil government had to step in and help establish more uniform kosher standards, to prevent Jewish consumers from being frauded, not only by those selling kosher meat at an extremely low standard—but even from those passing off non-kosher meat as kosher (although this would likely be beef or poultry that had not been traditionally butchered, or non-kosher fish):

"New York was the first state to enact a kosher law in 1915. Jewish immigrants were pouring into Manhattan's Lower East Side and kosher butchers sprang up on every block, with few regulations to control them. Price gouging was common, particularly before the Jewish holidays, when demand was greatest, and treyf was sold as kosher. Jewish leaders in the city, unable to control the situation on their own, demanded a legislative solution. New York State's 'kosher bill' was designed to primarily protect the kosher consumer from fraud, but also to ward off violent repercussions like the kosher meat riots that rocked the city in 1902.

"'Jews took kosher meat pretty seriously, whether it was the availability, the price, or the accurate representation that it met halachic standards,' says Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein of Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. 'A community that could be victimized by price gouging, or by fraudulent representation that food was kosher, could explode. It made sense to bring its protection under the umbrella of the law.'

"New York's kosher law made it a misdemeanor to sell food purporting to be kosher if that product did not meet standards 'sanctioned by the orthodox Hebrew religious requirements.' It was a consumer protection law, with standards determined by religious authority. In 1924, the U.S. Supreme Court considered a challenge to the law on the grounds that the phrase 'orthodox Hebrew requirements' was too vague; the court disagreed, ruling that the term was 'well enough defined' to be enforceable. Kosher was what Orthodox rabbis determined it to be, a position accepted by everyone; American Jews either kept or did not keep kosher, but they did not question Orthodox authority to decide what the term meant.

"Kosher laws spread to other states, all based on the New York model. Massachusetts and Pennsylvania passed kosher laws in 1929, followed by Wisconsin in 1935, Rhode Island in 1937, and Michigan in 1939...."¹⁰

Fishkoff goes on in her book *Kosher Nation* to detail some of the legal challenges which have occurred between Orthodox and Conservative Jewish authorities, over states in America adopting their own kosher laws, as the kosher standard for commercial sale has had to frequently be classified according to the Orthodox Jewish standard.¹¹ Such challenges involved not only different health agencies checking on whether or not meat

⁹ Ibid., pp 275-277.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp 253-254.

¹¹ Ibid., pp 254-256.

being marketed was kosher, but eventually would raise the issue regarding to what degree the U.S. government could intrude on religion.

Making sure that the consumer can get true *kosher* meat, not being frauded, is the reason why government authorities have involved themselves in the kosher meat sector. Various government agencies favoring Orthodox over against Conservative Jewish standards, has widely made this into a religious issue, though, with much legislation repealed. This means that individual Jews have to ultimately look inward to their own kosher regulatory agencies, and assume that when a product bears a particular seal or stamp, it may be considered kosher.¹² Yet, while Conservative Jews will accept an Orthodox level of kosher certification, the vast majority of Orthodox Jews will not accept a Conservative level of kosher certification.

Issues Surrounding Traditional Kosher Slaughter

There is a significant Torah prohibition surrounding the consumption of blood by humans (Leviticus 7:26-27; 17:10-14), and so concurrent with this, there should be little doubting the reason why *shechitah* (שְׁחִיטָה) or traditional Jewish slaughter, has taken hold over the millennia. Many of the specific details surrounding *shechitah* are found in the tractate *Chullin* in the Talmud. The major intention surrounding the process of *shechitah*, is not just to see that the maximum amount of blood has been removed from an animal slaughtered, but also to provide for the least amount of pain and trauma on the animal slaughtered. Lisé Stern summarizes much of this, in her work *How to Keep Kosher*:

“The word for ritual slaughter is *shechita* [שְׁחִיטָה], based on the Hebrew root letters *shin-chet-tet* [שׁחט], meaning ‘slaughter’ or ‘kill.’ A *shochet* is the person who performs the ritual slaughter. An animal that has been properly killed has been *shechted*.

“Unlike the word *kosher*, the root word *shechita* does appear in the Torah, in reference to sacrificial slaughter, as in **Leviticus 1:5**, ‘*And he shall kill the bullock before the Lord...*’ The word for kill here is *shachat* [שָׁחַט]. A second word for killing an animal, *zavach* [זָבַח], also appears in the Torah (and is the word used in **Deuteronomy 12:21**), but *shachat* evolved into the word used for ritual slaughter of meat for food. The reference to biblical sacrificial slaughter elevates the act of *shechita* for food.

“*Tza’ar ba’alei chayim*, ‘prevention of cruelty to animals,’ is a basic tenet of Judaism... There are several biblical passages, not only in relation to food, that indicate the proper way to treat animals. For example, animals, like people, are commanded to rest on the Sabbath. *Shechita* follows this philosophy. Yes, the animal is being killed, but the method of slaughter should be as quick and painless as possible. The sages determined that cutting the animal’s throat in one smooth, fast stroke, severing vital arteries, was the most merciful method of killing an animal.

“The *Chullin* section of the Talmud deals with many of the laws of ritual slaughter. The laws as they evolved in Talmudic times still govern the methods of *shechita* performed today.

“The laws of *shechita* apply both to mammals and birds; they do not apply to fish. Both mammals and birds are used in ritual sacrifices described in the Torah; again, fish

¹² For a summary, be sure to consult this publication’s section, “**Hechsher Symbols.**”

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are not. There are no rules governing how fish are to be killed; the laws of *shechita* apply specifically to acceptable mammals and birds.”¹³

Fishkoff, in her book *Kosher Nation*, further describes some of the humane aspects which have guided the procedures of traditional Jewish slaughter or *shechitah*:

“Other moral lessons can be derived from the laws of kosher slaughter. In the twentieth century, as animal welfare became more valued in Western society, Jews increasingly pointed to the Torah’s commandments to treat animals with compassion as evidence of the social relevance of their faith. The Torah teaches that domestic animals must not be burdened with loads too heavy for them and must enjoy a day of rest every Saturday along with their masters. When a domestic animal is slaughtered for food, the act must be performed by a quick cut across the neck with a very sharp knife, which is supposed to lessen the animal’s pain.”¹⁴

Fishkoff does note in her book, however, that there have been issues involving Jewish ritual slaughter in America since the late Eighteenth Century.¹⁵ Unlike in various parts of Eastern Europe, where Jewish ritual slaughter may have been prohibited by either authorities in the Russian Empire or Austro-Hungarian Empire, freedom of religion was protected in America. Yet at the same time, the Jewish consumer can easily be frauded, and this necessarily led to various Jewish organizations monitoring kosher quality. There have definitely been incidents of observant Jews dining at kosher restaurants, being served unauthorized or unapproved meat. Yet Fishkoff is clear to emphasize, “most kosher scandals are the result of unintentional error, often made by workers who do not fully understand the observant Jew’s commitment to kosher food.”¹⁶ While being frauded is just a part of human life, which any consumer needs to be aware of—it is also very true that accidents happen.

While among Orthodox and Conservative Jews, adherence to the traditional *shechitah* method of slaughtering animals is rather important, one will see some variance across a kosher-friendly Messianic community regarding it. It is widely and appropriately acknowledged by many Messianic people, that the traditional *shechitah* method of slaughter, is a very high, exacting, humane, and commendable way of butchering animals, removing the highest amount of blood from the meat. In Kasdan’s 1996 *God’s Appointed Customs*, one finds a high amount of respect given to the traditional Jewish method of kosher slaughter:

“The rabbis grappled with the laws concerning exactly *how* a kosher animal was to be slaughtered. Because the *n’veylah* (‘carcass’) and *t’reyfah* animals were not to be eaten, it was understood that even kosher animals must be slaughtered in a ritual manner. The only exceptions to this were fish that were already considered acceptable based on Numbers 11:22 (‘flocks and herds were slaughtered...[but] fish in the sea were

¹³ Lisë Stern, *How to Keep Kosher: A Comprehensive Guide to Understanding Jewish Dietary Laws* (New York: William Morrow, 2004), pp 31-32.

¹⁴ Fishkoff, 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp 56-68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

caught'). The slaughtering procedure is called *sh'khitah*, the noun form of the word in Deuteronomy 12:21, 'you may *slaughter* animals...' Although the Bible gives no additional details on how this slaughter of animals is to occur, the rabbis developed an elaborate system for *sh'khitah*. This ritual way of slaughter is carried out by the kosher butcher known as a *shokhet*, who must be a pious Jew, respected in the community. He performs his duties as a religious obligation while saying the appropriate Hebrew blessings.

"There are a number of aspects to rabbinic *sh'khitah*. First, it should be noted that this type of ritual slaughter is considered the least painful to the animal. The procedure is simple; a flawless knife is used by the *shokhet* to cut the throat of the animal. This technique is used to sever the major nerves, which immediately renders the animal unconscious. This is also the best way to remove the blood from the animal, since it severs major arteries and veins. This fulfills the biblical prohibition against eating blood by not letting it congeal within the meat.

"While there is considerable debate today about animal rights and cruelty to animals, it has been found that the *sh'khitah* method of slaughter is perhaps the most humane. Many modern methods of stunning the animals before slaughter actually inflict injuries on the animals that would render them non-kosher. Many doctors and scientists have agreed that because the *sh'khitah* method renders the animal instantly insensitive, the Jewish way of ritual slaughter is eminently humane (Donin, *To Be a Jew*, p. 107)."¹⁷

While many kosher-friendly Messianic people are favorable to traditional Jewish methods of animal slaughter and butchering, it is a fact that a majority of Messianic people trying to keep kosher, are prone to buy more commercially slaughtered and processed meat, although it will be meat that is classified as "clean" on the food lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. This is meat which does have much of its blood removed, but not necessarily the same amount as *shechitah* would see extracted. Hope Egan, author of the book *Holy Cow! Does God Care About What We Eat?*, which has widely circulated throughout much of the Messianic community, describes some of the differences between USDA approved methods of animal slaughter, compared and contrasted to traditional Jewish *shechitah*:

One of the areas that the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] oversees is allowable slaughter methods. They require that only humane methods be used to kill livestock.

For non-*kosher* meat packers, animals must be rendered "insensible to pain" before being cut, shackled or hoisted. Methods to accomplish this include

¹⁷ Kasdan, 102.

Referenced by Ibid., Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 107 specifically says,

"Methods promoted by animal protection societies for stunning before slaughter would actually inflict injuries severe enough to render the animal trefah. While such stunning may be preferable to the cruelties and pain inflicted by most non-kosher slaughtering, in relation to kosher slaughtering, the shehitah cut itself may be regarded as an effective form of stunning because its effect is to produce immediate insensibility.

"In addition to the humaneness of shehitah, the Jewish method carries with it another distinct advantage over most other methods. It ensures a complete and rapid draining of blood from the animal rather than allowing the blood to congeal within the meat. This contributes to the keeping of the prohibition against the eating of blood. It is also undoubtedly true that the maximum blood drainage has many hygienic benefits."

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1. A single captive bolt stun (essentially a gunshot), which is driven into the cow's brain.
2. Electric stunning applied to the head.
3. Stunning via carbon dioxide poisoning.

While *kosher* meat companies are subject to the USDA's authority, they are exempt from this particular rule, since the *kosher* method of slaughter, when done properly, causes the animal to instantly lose consciousness. Therefore, it is recognized as an equally humane way of slaughter...

[S]everal of God's commands reflect concern for animals. For example, cattle are permitted a Shabbat rest (Exodus 20:10). The Israelites were commanded to help a fallen ox or donkey (Deuteronomy 22:4) and to relieve an overburdened animal of its load (Exodus 23:5). A mother bird is to be driven away before her young are taken (Deuteronomy 22:6-7). As such, *kosher* slaughter was originally designed to be as humane as possible.

When describing the other USDA-approved methods of slaughter, some *kosher* advocates point out that we no longer execute humans via firing squad or execution, since they have been deemed inhumane, so why would we still use them on animals? The bolt gun "stun" method has a high failure rate—which means that animals may wake up before they are slaughtered. Workers with dull knives and production quotas must then contend with partially-conscious, twisting, squirming cows.

At the same time, however, evidence against *kosher* slaughter is compelling. According to Temple Grandin, most of the major *kosher* slaughter plants often do not achieve the ideal slaughter...

The truth about the humanity of *kosher* slaughter probably lies somewhere in between. Objective, scientific studies have shown that when properly slaughtered using *shechitah*, calm calves usually collapse immediately, and calm cattle collapse between 10 to 15 seconds. However, it is difficult to know which *kosher* processors use humane (calm-producing) restraining devices and truly follow *shechita's* high standards.¹⁸

Egan goes on to describe how Messianic people need to make up their own decision on the meat they purchase, but notes how in the Kingdom to come, "In that day, the Law will go forth from Zion and every hamburger will be derived from a healthy, clean animal that was humanely raised, organically fed and biblically slaughtered according to the Torah's high standard. In that day, I'll be loving it."¹⁹ Yet while Egan ultimately leaves the decision on what meat for Messianic people to purchase, as a personal or family matter, Eby's book *Biblically Kosher* (2012), makes the conclusion that while the traditional *shechitah* method is not detailed in Scripture itself, it is the method of slaughter that most of the kosher-keeping Jewish community will only accept. In his view, this would mean that just about any Messianic person who wants to be considered eating "kosher," would need to adhere to this standard:

"Although the Torah does not explicitly describe the proper method of slaughter, traditional kosher slaughter is done in such a way that the major blood vessels in the neck are cut with a sharp knife, without damaging the windpipe. That way, the animal's

¹⁸ Hope Egan, *Holy Cow! Does God Care About What We Eat?* (Shelbyville, TN: Heart of Wisdom, 2012), pp 70-72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

death is almost painless, and the heart continues to pump the blood out of the body until the animal falls asleep.

"One cannot prove purely from biblical text that this is the only proper method of slaughter. Nonetheless, at the very least we can see that the method of death and the method of slaughter are significant in terms of biblical kosher law. We would do well to investigate whether or not killing and butchering methods meet this standard.

"When animals are slaughtered according to USDA regulations, they are first stunned (rendered unconscious), and only then is the animal cut and bled. The USDA highly discourages bleeding without stunning, as is required by traditional kosher law. Stunning is performed in any of the following ways: a) a mechanical blow to the brain, b) electrical shock, c) gassing with either carbon dioxide or a combination of inert gases. According to World Organization for Animal Health, the electrical shock method is sometimes performed in a way that causes cardiac arrest.

"Animals that are hunted for food are subject to more issues. These animals are frequently in a stressed condition at the time of death. Their muscles clench and their bodies are surging with adrenalin, which may inhibit the draining of blood. Their death may be slow and painful, and there may be considerable time between killing and bleeding the animal.

"In defining death, we must also consider the differences in perspective between biblical law, civil law, and modern science. While civil law and modern science may define death as a cessation of brain activity or cardiac arrest, the Bible seems to draw a connection between life and breathing. That is to say, a biblical definition of death appears to be when breathing ceases. Thus, there may be a point at which the USDA considers the animal to be alive, although biblically the animal may already be dead.

"Does the typical USDA method of slaying animals meet the biblical standard? The Jewish community has concluded decisively that it does not."²⁰

I have never found kosher-friendly Messianic people ever being opposed to traditional methods of Jewish slaughter. Most Messianic people I know, who try to keep a kosher-orbit diet, would prefer to buy most, if not all, of their meat, from Jewish sources. What keeps them from doing so is not a lack of obedience or some kind of obstinance; what keeps them from doing so is the issue of financial cost, as authorized kosher meat from Jewish sources can be priced 300-500% more than standard USDA commercially approved meat. Most people, much less most Messianic people, are not willing to become vegetarians. And so, while not eating pork or shellfish or forbidden fish, they are willing to buy more USDA commercially approved meat than not, but are careful to see that blood is removed either via soaking, broiling, or grilling.

Common Messianic Kosher Keeping: "Biblically Kosher" to "Kosher Style"

On the whole, today's broad Messianic community definitely may be described as kosher-friendly, because even with some people in our midst who think that the Torah's dietary laws were only intended for the pre-resurrection era, even they know that there are those who do not share such a conviction, and that they have to be sensitive to other opinions. Among those who would classify themselves as "kosher," in some way, though, are mostly those who would think of themselves as "Biblically kosher." Those who have

²⁰ Eby, pp 81, 82-83.

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considered themselves to be “Biblically kosher” avoid, as best they can, eating the unclean meats of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14—although they will eat out at many restaurants, much of the meat they buy will be commercially processed and not necessarily butchered according to traditional Jewish methods, they are likely to mix meat and dairy, and they do not have multiple sets of utensils for meat and dairy. There are some growing trends that a more Conservative to Orthodox variety of kosher is being adopted and promoted by some notable sectors of people in Messianic Judaism, which would be more stringent about purchasing meat that has been butchered via *shechitah*, not mixing meat and dairy, and looking for a *hechsher* on processed food items. Ultimately, though, the diversity seen in Messianic approaches to kosher is going to **widely be the same** as seen in the broad Jewish community. As Stern describes in *How to Keep Kosher*,

“There are some Jews who keep a kosher home, but when they go out to eat, they do not observe kashrut. It depends on the level you keep kosher. People who are most observant eat only in kosher restaurants and homes. Others may eat in a restaurant that serves unkosher food, but only consume a cold salad or a fruit plate. Some eat fish or vegetarian dishes, but no meat. Others eat meat, but no pork or shellfish. And others eat anything.”²¹

Eby’s 2012 publication *Biblically Kosher* (which is mis-titled) is definitely reflective of the growing, more stringent group of Messianic people observing the kosher dietary laws. In his estimation, a major feature of Messianic Jews keeping the dietary laws—particularly at an Orthodox Jewish level of observance—is to maintain Jewish identity, and prevent Jewish intermarriage and assimilation into wider non-Jewish culture. In his view,

“*Kashrut* is one of the most basic elements of Jewish observance. It has unique power to reinforce and preserve Jewish identity:

1. “Since social activities often revolve around food, one’s diet can determine which social groups a person can join. For children especially, the distinction forged by their special diet can solidify and reinforce their identity and help prevent assimilation in other areas.
2. “A person who keeps kosher will need to live in an area where kosher food is readily available. Most likely, this means living in an area near other Jews. This will further strengthen Jewish identity and enable further participation in the Jewish community and Jewish events.
3. “If keeping kosher is important to a person, then they will also need to find a spouse with the same conviction. A spouse who keeps kosher will be more likely to feel close to his or her Jewish identity. As a result, Jewishness will be a key component of their family life.”²²

²¹ Stern, *How to Keep Kosher*, 3.

²² Eby, pp 20-21.

The publication *Biblically Kosher* advocates a level of kosher observance—which it claims is correct Biblically and thus “Biblically kosher”—which includes a wide amount of adherence to practices such as the separation of meat and dairy,²³ which many Messianic people would balk at. At the same time, while writers like Eby might argue for a level of kosher observance that many Messianic people would not be too excited about adopting, he has done us all a useful service—especially now in the 2010s, when the finer details and Biblical passages about subjects like the kosher dietary laws need to be brought out into the open and discussed—**about how inadequate, at times, the terminology “Biblically kosher” can be.** There is also a definite need to probe, at a deeper theological and exegetical level, the logic of practices such as separating meat and dairy, among others.

It should probably be observed that, given the fact that people interpret the Bible differently and thus one person’s “Biblically kosher” is different from another person’s “Biblically kosher,” what most kosher-friendly Messianics actually observe is a **“kosher-style”** diet. This is actually terminology which is employed by Jewish writers, to describe how many Conservative Jews in America, wanting to be flexible with their kosher observance, do not eat the unclean meats classified in the Torah, but will nominally mix meat and dairy, and will not always purchase meat products or processed food items with a *hechsher*. Fishkoff summarizes in her book *Kosher Nation*,

“Even though Conservative Jews may observe kashrut differently than Orthodox Jews in certain ways, the movement itself accepts kashrut as a commandment. Once kashrut is no longer considered a divine commandment but more a maker of Jewish identity, the entire conversation shifts. As the twentieth century continued, increasing numbers of nonobservant Jews ate Jewish to feel Jewish, and that’s not something they needed to do all the time. In many homes, Jewish ethnic foods became limited to Shabbat and holiday meals, the times when less observant or secular Jews wanted to underscore their membership in the tribe. At these meals, observance of the laws of kashrut was symbolic. The matzo balls and the gefilte fish might be kosher, but the roast chicken might not be, although it would most likely not be slathered in cream sauce or sprinkled with bacon bits. Butter, however, might be placed on the table next to the kosher challah.

“This new way of eating became known as kosher-style. It involved a reimagining of Jewish dietary practice, a tweaking of the laws without their wholesale abandonment. The motivation was to bring Jewish eating in line with contemporary American values, such as proper hygiene and good nutrition, while preserving at least the semblance of kosher practice. Milk was considered healthy for children, so Jewish mothers newly arrived in America began serving it at every meal, even meat meals. The meat, however, was usually still kosher....

“Jewish delis quickly took to kosher-style. In the early twentieth century, kosher-style delis differed from their kosher counterparts mainly in their hours of operation—kosher restaurants closed every Shabbat, whereas most kosher-style eateries closed for the major Jewish holidays. The food itself was still kosher. No pork or shellfish was served, and meat and milk were kept separate. But as the decades passed and kosher-

²³ *Ibid.*, pp 88ff.

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style delis followed the Jewish population out into the suburbs, standards grew more lenient in accordance with changing tastes..."²⁴

It cannot be overlooked, however, as Fishkoff does describe, that there are various Reform Jewish rabbis who do keep what they would consider "Biblically kosher"—mainly avoiding the unclean meats classified by the Torah:

"Reform Jews generally expect their clergy and institutions to set the bar for religious observance. Recent surveys of Reform rabbis and lay leaders show a steadily growing number observing at least some aspects of kashrut, usually by avoiding pork. Some keep 'biblical kashrut,' a diet that follows the Torah's instructions but not those of the later rabbis. Rabbi Jeffrey Brown of Temple Solel near San Diego, who does not keep biblical kashrut, points out that the practice is based on the understanding that Jewish tradition and law evolve over time, with the older parts carrying more authoritative weight than the newer."²⁵

It also has to be observed that while some have said that Jewish people, and even Jewish Believers in Yeshua, have to maintain an Orthodox standard of *kashrut* in order to maintain their religious and Jewish cultural identity—that for many people in the broader Jewish world, their cultural identity, cohesion, and social bond as Jews has been associated not so much with the kosher dietary laws, but rather with traditional recipes and cuisine. Fishkoff explains,

"The phenomenon first emerged in nineteenth-century Europe, where it was known as *fressfroemigkeit*, German for 'eating religion.' It referred to assimilated Jews who symbolically rejoined the community on Jewish holidays by eating traditional ethnic meals. But kitchen Judaism really flourished in the New World, where Jewish immigrants, in their quest to be accepted as real Americans, were eager to cast off their ghetto trappings of kashrut, religious garb, and Yiddish but did not want to give up their favorite foods."²⁶

Non-Jewish Believers in the Messianic world, perhaps thought by some to be infringing upon Jewish identity—by adopting a kosher-style diet avoiding pork and shellfish—are not often keen to adopt traditional Jewish recipes, mainly from Eastern Europe, as a main regimen of their weekly diet. Such non-Jewish Believers, while certainly liking traditional Jewish cuisine like lox and bagels, might be more keen, though, to substitute turkey sausage for pork sausage at breakfast with their scrambled eggs. And throughout much of American Jewish history, at least, Jews have seen little problem selling meat that has been butchered according to the traditions of *shechitah* to non-Jewish people. Fishkoff actually observes,

"[T]he majority of those who buy kosher food are buying it for other reasons, mainly having to do with health and food safety concerns. This is not new, says Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis University. Non-Jews have been buying kosher meat since late colonial times, believing it to be healthier than non-kosher, he says. Americans in the late nineteenth

²⁴ Fishkoff, pp 98-99.

²⁵ Ibid., pp 236-237.

²⁶ Ibid., pp 96-97.

century who were influenced by the health and wellness diets promoted by Kellogg's, Post, and other emerging food giants also sought out kosher meat and poultry."²⁷

A definite motivation for many people—Jewish non-Believers, Jewish Believers, non-Jewish Believers, and others—for adopting a kosher-style of diet, has been for the thought that avoiding pork, shellfish, and unclean fish is something which is inherently more healthy for humans. Certainly in theological evaluation of the Torah's dietary laws, particularly as it concerns the prohibition on eating pork, the issue of health and sanitation has arisen. In a common Christian resource like *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, it is stated,

"The food laws, such as [the] prohibition against pork [Leviticus 11:7] are not intended by God to represent arbitrary and capricious restrictions on Israelite tastes. Rather, they have a serious protective purpose. The vast majority of the foods prohibited are those that (1) are more likely to carry disease in the arid climate of the Sinai desert and/or the land of Canaan; or (2) are foolishly uneconomical to raise as food in the particular agrarian context of the Sinai desert and/or the land of Canaan; or (3) are foods favored for religious sacrifice by groups whose practices the Israelites were not to copy. Moreover, in light of medical research indicating that food allergies vary according to ethnic populations, the food laws undoubtedly kept Israel away from certain allergies. The desert did not contain many pollens to bother the Israelite pulmonary tract, but it did contain some animals whose meat would irritate the nervous system. It is especially interesting to note that the main source of Israel's meat—lamb—is the least allergenic of all major meats, according to specialists in food allergies."²⁸

Of course, there would be many—both inside and outside of theological sectors—who would dispute that there is any ancillary health benefit toward eating a kosher-style of diet.²⁹

The Future of Messianic Kosher

Just like the different branches and denominations of Judaism, there will not be any one, decisive view of the Torah's dietary laws emerge within the Messianic movement. On the whole, among kosher-friendly people, there will be the two wide sectors often identified as "**Biblically kosher**" and "**Rabbinic kosher.**" But as things stand today in the 2010s, many in the latter category will strongly claim that many of the traditional Jewish interpretations and applications of kosher are Biblical, and so because of this many should seriously consider using the terminology "**kosher-style**" more frequently than not.

More than anything else, while it is important to recognize and understand the diversity of kosher keeping within the Messianic community, we have widely lacked coherent analyses of the many Biblical passages over *kashrut* and its validity for the post-resurrection era. Being able to calm down a bit, be more objective and realistic, and understand the major thrust of Psalm 119:103—"How sweet are Your words to my taste!

²⁷ Ibid., 151.

²⁸ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pp 177-178.

²⁹ The various proposed reasons for kosher in the Torah, including the issues surrounding health and hygiene, are evaluated in Chapter 10, "Is Eating Kosher Really Healthier?"