

Deuteronomy 12:15-24

“Slaughtering and Butchering Animals for Food”

“However, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your gates, whatever you desire, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you; the unclean and the clean may eat of it, as of the gazelle and the deer. Only you shall not eat the blood; you are to pour it out on the ground like water. You are not allowed to eat within your gates the tithe of your grain or new wine or oil, or the firstborn of your herd or flock, or any of your votive offerings which you vow, or your freewill offerings, or the contribution of your hand. But you shall eat them before the LORD your God in the place which the LORD your God will choose, you and your son and daughter, and your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God in all your undertakings. Be careful that you do not forsake the Levite as long as you live in your land. When the LORD your God extends your border as He has promised you, and you say, ‘I will eat meat,’¹ because you desire to eat meat, *then* you may eat meat, whatever you desire. If the place which the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, then you may slaughter of your herd and flock which the LORD has given you, as I have commanded you; and you may eat within your gates whatever you desire. Just as a gazelle or a deer is eaten, so you will eat it; the unclean and the clean alike may eat of it. Only be sure not to eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh. You shall not eat it; you shall pour it out on the ground like water.”

The instruction detailed in Deuteronomy 12:15-24 permitted the Ancient Israelites to slaughter and butcher clean animals for food, which would have previously been limited to various sacrificial purposes at the Tabernacle. These domesticated animals, which for the Israelites in the wilderness would have been slaughtered and either directly involved in certain sacrifices, or at the very least slaughtered and butchered with immediate priestly oversight, will now be permitted to be slaughtered outside of a religious context for the Israelites, as the people settle in Canaan. Earlier, it is witnessed how in the wilderness, eating meat was most often associated with some kind of an offering presented before the Lord (Leviticus 17:1-12). This would be a restriction to be lifted by the people entering into Canaan, who will no longer be living in a concentrated area like the wilderness camp. Yet while God would allow His people to eat meat for food purposes, certain procedures would have to be in place. Jewish commentator Jeffrey H. Tigay summarizes,

“Previously, only game animals could be slaughtered nonsacrificially...Domestic cattle (oxen, sheep, and goats) could only be slaughtered on altars, as sacrifices, even if the offerer’s purpose was solely to use them for food. Only after the blood was dashed on the altar and certain of the innards burnt there could the remainder be eaten. This rule was practical when all Israelites lived near a sanctuary, as when they lived in the wilderness. Even after they settled in Canaan and scattered across the land, it would remain practical as long as it was legitimate to have sanctuaries throughout the land. But once a single sanctuary was chosen the requirement would become impractical, since those who lived

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far from it would be able to eat meat only on the infrequent occasions when they visited there.”¹

The scene of Deuteronomy, with Moses repeating much of the previous Torah instructions to the people, is preparatory for those getting ready to enter into the Promised Land. The scene, as noted by J.H. Hertz, is how “Israel was now about to settle in Canaan, and the individual Israelite could not be expected to go to the Central Sanctuary in Shiloh or Jerusalem whenever he wished to partake of meat food.”² While conservatives, who believe that Deuteronomy is a genuine product of Mosaic origin (with the exception of ch. 34 describing Moses’ death being composed by either Joshua or someone else in Moses’ inner circle), liberals who hold to the JEDP documentary hypothesis will draw the attention of readers of Deuteronomy 12:15-24 to the firm establishment of Jerusalem as the main center of religious activity during the time of King Josiah (2 Kings 23:15-20).³ The JEDP hypothesis advocates that this was the time when the Book of Deuteronomy was composed as a so-called “pious fraud” discovered by the priests, and whose instruction was implemented for the period of the Josianic reforms. The analysis offered here, however, adheres to Mosaic origin of the Book of Deuteronomy, with the Ancient Israelites being prepared to enter into the Promised Land, establishing new homes and towns.⁴

12:15-16 The Israelites in general are granted permission by God to slaughter domesticated animals for food, just like they already were for wild game: “whenever you desire, you may slaughter and eat meat in any of your settlements, according to the blessing that the LORD your God has granted you. The unclean and the clean alike may partake of it, as of the gazelle and the deer” (v. 15, NJPS). New provisions would have to be issued per the transition of venue from the wilderness and Tabernacle, to Israel settling Canaan, as domesticated animals normally reserved for sacrifice, could be eaten. As Christopher Wright informs us, “unlike the Israel of the wilderness camped around the tabernacle, many would live at a distance from Yahweh’s sanctuary. In such circumstances, to insist that no meat be eaten except that which had been sacrificed at the sanctuary would consign the majority of the population to a vegetarian diet supplemented by game birds or animals caught by hunting.”⁵ Animals such as cattle, sheep, and goats are asserted that they can be used for general food consumption.

It is also noted how *ha'tamei v'ha'tahor yo'k'lennu* (הַטְּמֵא וְהַטְּהוֹר יֹאכְלֵנּוּ), “the *tamei* and the pure (alike) may eat it” (Fox),⁶ the NIV offering the extrapolation, “the ceremonially unclean and the clean.” The main thrust is while only the ritually clean would have been able to eat of meat that had been offered as a sacrifice, now those who were ritually unclean would be able to eat meat that had been slaughtered and butchered entirely for food purposes. Such ritually unclean people, per a brief survey of Leviticus

¹ Tigay, 124.

² Hertz, 803.

³ Cf. Gerhard Von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), pp 93-94; Clements, in *NIB*, 2:387.

⁴ For a further review, consult the entry for the Book of Deuteronomy in the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

⁵ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, pp 166-167.

⁶ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 908.

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chs. 11-15, 19, would include women who were menstruating or had just given birth, men who had recent sexual discharges, or lepers, among others. Daniel I. Block is right to state, "To restrict consumption of the meat to those who were ceremonially pure would prove unworkable, since at any given time a large portion of the population would be in a state of ceremonial impurity. Indeed, the act of slaughtering an animal would render one unclean."⁷

It does have to be recognized how the verb *zavach* (זָבַח), appearing in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice) in v. 15, can mean both "slaughter for sacrifice" and "slaughter for eating" (BDB).⁸ Context obviously determines what kind of animal slaughter is being specified in the Torah. But with the Israelites now being permitted to slaughter animals that would have been mostly reserved for sacrifice, for food, there are procedures to be followed. There is a need to honor both God as the Creator who made the clean animals for food, and the life of the animal itself which would die in order that a human being might eat its flesh and live.

The consumption of animal blood is prohibited: "Only the blood you shall not eat. On the earth you shall spill it like water" (v. 16, Alter). This is a repetition of significant injunctions already witnessed in the Torah (i.e., Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17). Blood is regarded to be the life of the animal (vs. 23-24), and even though slaughter of animals for food purposes is what is being detailed, animal blood is still notably used for atonement purposes (Leviticus 17:10-12), and thus it needs to be treated with great respect. Pouring the blood on the ground, as a means for disposal, would ensure that the Israelites could not use it for any inappropriate purposes beyond just possible consumption.

While it is communicated in v. 15, "whatever you desire" (NASU) or "whenever you desire" (NRSV), *b'kol-avvat nafshekha* (בְּכָל-אַוַּת נַפְשְׁךָ) more literally being something like "whenever your soul desires" (Keter Crown Bible), "in your soul's desire" (ATS), or "with all the desire of your soul" (LITV)—meaning that the community of Israel is definitely permitted to eat clean meat, when they establish themselves—it is important to recognize that eating meat is not going to be something that happened all the time. Tigay appropriately summarizes for the modern Bible reader,

"Meat was eaten less frequently in the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world than in modern Western society, and this must have been due in part to economic factors. Domestic cattle were used primarily for their products and for labor, and only the wealthy could regularly spare some for slaughter. Furthermore, without modern refrigeration techniques, meat could only be consumed when there were enough people present to finish it before it spoiled. This would limit consumption to special occasions, such as sacrifices and festivals or the presence of an honored guest, or to large or fairly wealthy households. In talmudic literature the daily consumption of meat is regarded as an extravagance that could reduce all but the wealthy to poverty. Note that verse 20 refers to eating meat as the result of a special 'urge,' implying that it was not a daily expectation."⁹

⁷ Block, *Deuteronomy*, 317.

⁸ BDB, 256.

⁹ Tigay, 124.

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Indeed, to review one of the main Talmudic passages that describes the consumption of animal flesh, it is asserted that eating meat should be considered something that should not occur regularly:

The Torah taught proper behavior. For a person should eat meat only after this kind of [extensive] preparation. [One should not eat meat often lest he become poor.] [Cf. T. Arak. 4:28.] *Our rabbis taught on Tannaite authority:* "When the Lord your God enlarges your territory, [as he has promised you, and you say, 'I will eat flesh,' because you crave flesh, you may eat as much flesh as you desire]" (Deu. 12:20). The Torah taught proper behavior. A person should eat meat only when he craves it. You might infer that a person may buy meat from the market place [any time he desires] and eat it. It comes to teach, "[If the place which the Lord your God will choose to put his name there is too far from you], then you may kill any of your herd or your flock, [which the Lord has given you, as I have commanded you; and you may eat within your towns as much as you desire]" (Deu. 12:21). You might infer that he may kill all his herd and eat it or kill all his flock and eat it. It comes to teach, "Of your herd" — and not all your herd; "[Of] your flock" — and not all your flock. [Cf. T. Arak. 4:26.] Based on this said R. Eleazar b. Azariah, "Whoever has a *maneh* should buy a *litra* of vegetables for his stew. If he has ten *manehs* he should buy a *litra* of fish for his stew. If he has fifty *manehs* he should buy a *litra* of meat for his stew. If he has one hundred *manehs* they should cook up a stew for him every day." [Cf. T. Arak. 4:27.]

And for the others [who have less than a hundred] when should they [cook up a stew]? On every Sabbath eve. Said Rab, "We must show concern for the words of an elder [i.e., for the view Eleazar and make do on a modest diet]." Said R. Yohanan, "Abba [Rab] was from a healthy family [who could thrive on this diet]. But we [are not]. Whoever has a penny in his pocket should run and take it to the storekeeper [and not wait in accord with Eleazar's teaching]." Said R. Nahman, "But we [are not like that]. We borrow to eat." [On modesty and parsimony we have the following two verses in Proverbs: "The lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats the price of a field. There will be enough goats' milk for your food, for the food of your household and maintenance for your maidens" (Pro. 27:26-27).] "The lambs will provide your clothing," [means] from the shearing of your lambs you should make your clothes. "And the goats the price of a field," [means] a person in general may sell his field to buy goats. But he may not sell his goats to buy a field. "There will be enough goats' milk" [means] it is enough if a person sustains himself through the milk of goats and lambs that are in his household. "For your food, for the food of your household" [means] your food should take precedence over the food for your household. "And maintenance for your maidens" — said Mar Zutra the son of R. Nahman, "Provide maintenance for your maidens. From this stipulation the Torah taught us proper behavior. For a person should not teach his child [to expect to have] meat and wine" (b. *Chullin* 84a).¹⁰

12:17-19 While Ancient Israel is being granted permission to eat from animals that would have been regularly reserved for sacrificial purposes, this does not mean that they were to forget about the various other tithes expected of them from their agricultural

¹⁰ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

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produce, as well as the firstborn of the flocks and herds, to be presented before the Lord at His appointed place:

“You may not partake in your settlements of the tithes of your new grain or wine or oil, or of the firstlings of your herds and flocks, or of any of the votive offerings that you vow, or of your freewill offerings, or of your contributions. These you must consume before the LORD your God in the place that the LORD your God will choose—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, and the Levite in your settlements—happy before the LORD your God in all your undertaking” (vs. 17-18, NJPS).

What is especially highlighted is that when settled within the Promised Land, the general population of Israel was to take special care of the Levites as a protected class of people, who would not have a specific tribal inheritance of land:

“Be sure not to neglect the Levite as long as you live in your land” (v. 19, NJPS).

12:20-22 Vs. 20-22 include a repetition of what has just been communicated, but with some further detail about what it means for the Lord to allow the Israelites to eat of meat that would normally be offered at His appointed place, and then consumed:

“When the LORD your God enlarges your territory as He has spoken to you, and you say, ‘Let me eat meat,’ when your appetite craves eating meat, wherever your appetite’s craving may be, you shall eat meat. Should the place be far away from you that the LORD your God will choose to set His name there, you shall slaughter from your herd and from your flock that the LORD has given you as I have charged and you shall eat within your gates wherever your appetite’s craving may be. Yet, as the deer or as the gazelle is eaten, thus you shall eat it, the unclean and the clean together shall eat it” (vs. 20-22, Alter).

The verb *avah* (אָוָה) in the Piel stem (intensive action, active voice) can mean “**want, crave**” (*CHALOT*),¹¹ and so with the people having some stirring to want to eat meat, there is a reminder that the place of slaughter for food animals is to be treated as the place where God has set Himself. Customarily, the sanctuary would be the place where animals would have been slaughtered for food, but now the Israelites are certainly permitted to slaughter animals wherever they want, as their hold on the Promised Land will grow and expand. Slaughtering and butchering animals, though, is to be conducted with the utmost care and respect. *IVPBB* interjects the following, useful thought:

“The promise that the Israelites would be able to eat their fill of meat is tied to the *covenantal promise of land and fertility. This society, however, was generally never so rich in animals that they could be slaughtered indiscriminately. Animal sacrifice was therefore both a sacred and solemn occasion. The meat of the sacrifice might be the only meat eaten for weeks at a time.”¹²

In customary Jewish examination of v. 21, the clauses “you may slaughter...as I have instructed you” (NJPS), are viewed as a place where the traditional method of *shechitah* (שְׁחִיטָה) is in view. Hertz indicates, “Since this is nowhere mentioned in the Pentateuch, it follows that Shechitah, the Jewish method of slaughter, must have been communicated orally to Israel.”¹³ Because the verb *zavach* is employed to describe this “secular slaughter,” as Tigay states, “The text’s use of the verb *zavah*, which refers to sacrificial

¹¹ *CHALOT*, 6.

¹² Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, 183.

¹³ Hertz, 803; cf. Scherman, *Chumash*, pp 1004-1005; Tigay, 125.

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slaughter, indicates that secular slaughter is to be performed by the method used in sacrificial slaughter.”¹⁴ And, there should be little doubting how the traditional method of *shechitah* is a definite way of seeing the most amount of blood removed from an animal to be slaughtered and butchered.

12:23-24 It is repeated again that when slaughtering animals for food, that the blood is not to be consumed. It is also asserted how when this is done, that it will go well for the people:

“But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh. You must not partake of it; you must pour it out on the ground like water: you must not partake of it, in order that it may go well with you and with your descendants to come, for you will be doing what is right in the sight of the LORD” (vs. 23-24, NJPS).

Later, in vs. 29-31, it is witnessed how the Ancient Israelites are totally prohibited from acting like the Ancient Canaanites, particularly in how the latter would inquire after their gods and goddesses. While it is reprehensible and abominable to see how they would burn their children to their deities, these prohibitions also need to take into consideration the various uses of animal blood to communicate with the demonic realm:

“When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?’ You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods” (vs. 29-31).

The *Soncino Chumash* is one resource which interjects the important thought, “This stern warning against eating blood was necessary, because eating blood as part of the Egyptian worship of satyrs was still practised by the Israelites.”¹⁵ Leviticus 17:7 previously directed, “So they shall no more slay their sacrifices for satyrs [goat demons, NASU; Heb. *se’ir’rim*, שְׂעִירִים], after whom they play the harlot. This shall be a statute for ever to them throughout their generations” (RSV). Not consuming animal blood had far more dimensions to it, than the Ancient Israelites simply respecting animal life. Far from Israel using blood in such a way, the blood of the sacrifices offered to God at His appointed place, was to be poured on the altar (vs. 26-27). Whether it was the blood of such a sacrifice, or the blood of a slaughtered animal for food, blood was poured out and was not to be consumed.

12:15-24 application In Deuteronomy 12:15-24, we witness how God recognizes that His people are widely not going to be satisfied with a vegetarian diet. The previous restriction of animals being slaughtered for meat, being killed at the Tabernacle (Leviticus 17:1-12), would be impractical as Israel moved from the wilderness into the Promised Land, establishing new homes and towns. Domesticated animals once widely reserved for sacrificial slaughter, can now be employed for secular slaughter and general food consumption. Such food consumption is something both the ritually clean and ritually

¹⁴ Tigay, 125.

¹⁵ Cohen, *Chumash*, 1060.

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unclean can partake of. The consumption of blood, however, is prohibited, be it for sacrifice at God's appointed place or slaughter for meat-food.

When today's Messianic Believers see Deuteronomy 12:15-24, we need to be reminded how, generally speaking throughout history, the consumption of animals for food has gone from being a widely religious affair to now almost an entirely commercial affair. Most of the meat that we see in the supermarket, be it certified-kosher from Rabbinical Jewish authorities, or meat from classified-clean animals that have been slaughtered on an assembly line—has not had a huge amount of religious attention directed toward it—as much as animals are just killed, their blood drains out to various degrees, and then they are butchered so that various cuts will be processed for the consumer. While there are commercial processes and companies which are more concerned about care for the animal, than others—particularly in the more “organic” realm—in the Torah, the eating of clean animal flesh was intended to be an affair with various religious overtones and undertones. More than anything else, the instructions detailed in Deuteronomy 12:15-24 were to make the Ancient Israelites truly appreciate God's blessing His people with meat.

In reflecting upon this section of the Book of Deuteronomy, Block's thoughts about contemporary Christians needing to pay attention more carefully for the treatment of animals in the food industry, should be well taken. Even with today's Messianic kosher-friendly people, often being a bit flexible about their sources of beef or chicken, we probably do need to be a bit more conscientious of what supplies of meat we consume:

“[E]ven as this passage encourages us to enjoy the provision of God, it does so with a profound ethical sensitivity. The slaughter of animals for meat could easily degenerate into savagery and a ruthless disregard for the life of the animal. However, the ritual of draining the blood reminds the persons who slaughtered the animal and those who eat its meat that even the life of the creature is sacred. If the meat is eaten with its blood, the blood will cry out to God and the offender will become the target of divine fury. While the flesh is sanctioned for human consumption, life itself is inviolable, and God remains the guarantor of the sanctity of the life of the animal.

“However, there is another aspect of the ordinance that is seldom noted. It is easy to imagine a hunter being calloused toward the life of his victim, especially when the animal is killed from a distance with a projectile (arrow, spear) or in a trap. This ordinance forces those who kill animals for their meat to identify with the creature by touching it and personally bearing responsibility for its death. This identification with a nonhuman animal in its death enhances humans' appreciation for all life and forces them to grieve over the loss, even as they take advantage of the benefit the animal offers them. Since all slaughter is sacrificial and substitutionary—a life for life—the slaughter of animals may be profane (dissociated from the cult), but it is never secular. So whether the occasion is a festive Thanksgiving dinner or a common meal, when we sit down to feast on the turkey or mutton set before us, we need to give thanks to God who has blessed us by providing food, but we also need to thank him for the animal that has given its life for us.

“After studying this passage I understand better my father's emotional stress every fall when it was time to fill the larder with meat for his large family. He was uncomfortable selecting one of the animals and then having to kill it that we might have food. But cutting the jugular and watching the blood drain onto the ground was for him a religious experience. We youngsters should be grateful to God and his

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creation for this provision. This text speaks to the ethical problems posed by some practices in slaughterhouses across the country. If factory farms have depersonalized and dehumanized animal husbandry, gigantic slaughterhouses have desecrated the life of these animals. While the Scriptures offer no warrant for vegetarianism, and we obviously cannot go back to the small family farm where hogs were recognized by personality and temperament and every cow had a name, Christians need to be in the forefront of efforts to ensure the ethical treatment of animals from birth to death.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Block, *Deuteronomy*, pp 321-322.