

Leviticus 17:10-16

“A Prohibition on Eating Blood”

“And any man from the house of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.’ Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, ‘No person among you may eat blood, nor may any alien who sojourns among you eat blood.’ So when any man from the sons of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, in hunting catches a beast or a bird which may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. For *as for the* life of all flesh, its blood is *identified* with its life. Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, ‘You are not to eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off.’ When any person eats *an animal* which dies or is torn *by beasts*, whether he is a native or an alien, he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he will become clean. But if he does not wash *them* or bathe his body, then he shall bear his guilt.”

The prohibition against eating blood, listed here after the issuing of what specific animals may and may not be eaten in Leviticus ch. 11, is something that is rooted within the directive of Genesis 9:4-6—presumably as the eating of animal flesh but non-consumption of blood, is to teach human people to take human life and the taking of human life quite seriously. *If animals have to be respected before eating them, then human life created in God’s image is infinitely more valuable.* Leviticus 17:10-16 is not the only place in the Tanach or Old Testament where it is communicated that the consumption of blood is forbidden (Leviticus 7:26-27; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23-25; 15:23), and that by eating it significant problems will manifest (1 Samuel 14:32-34).

Although he uses the Leviticus 17:10-16 instructions to uphold the usefulness of traditional Jewish slaughter of animals, or *shechitah* (שְׁחִיטָה), J.H. Hertz astutely observes,

“The reason for these repeated solemn injunctions is not given. The purpose may be to tame man’s instincts of violence by weaning him from blood, and implanting within him a horror of all bloodshed. The slaying of animals for food was in time taken away altogether from the ordinary Israelite, and was relegated to a body of pious and specially trained men, *Shochetim*. These injunctions have undoubtedly contributed to render the Israelites a humane people.”¹

While various ethical reasons pertaining to respecting both animal and human life are right and proper to propose as sitting behind the prohibition of consuming blood, some possible Ancient Near Eastern religious reasons need to also be considered. *IVPBBC* mentions how ritual consumption of blood, in order for people to incur a longer lifespan or some kind of supernatural energies, by Ancient Israel’s contemporaries, may also be a factor:

“The idea that blood contained the essence of life is evident in the Mesopotamian belief that the first people were created from the blood of a slain deity. But there were no

¹ Hertz, 487.

dietary restrictions regarding blood and nothing to suggest a ritual use of blood, either in terms of what was offered to deity or in purification rituals, anywhere else in the Ancient Near East.”²

People consuming blood, to many in the ANE, would be tantamount to absorbing the life force of another creature (vs. 11, 14). Such a life-force of animals, though, is explained to be something that belonged entirely to God, and not to mortals. And with the consumption of blood by people, perhaps tied to various pagan religious ideas, the need to control how Ancient Israel would have eaten meat—not just clean meat, but meat with its blood removed—is especially highlighted by the fact that eating meat was not a common occurrence for the average person. Walter J. Houston points out, for example, how “Except among the wealthy, the eating of meat was a relatively rare event nearly always associated with a celebration, and in early times it is likely that the slaughter of domestic animals was always a religious ceremony, a sacrifice.”³ So once again, in addition to various humanitarian considerations for not consuming blood, should eating meat be something that more regularly occurred around various festival times for the people of Ancient Israel—the need for the people to not fall into various pagan-styled practices when eating meat, perhaps seen at various other festivals or religious gatherings, would be imperative.

17:10 It is made very clear to the reader that both the native Israelite, and the sojourner (*ger*, גֵּר), within the community of Israel, were to carefully observe the instruction on the prohibition of blood. There would be no ambiguity when encountering the directive, “And every man of the house of Israel and of the sojourner who sojourns in their midst who consumes any blood, I shall set My face against the living person who consumes blood and cut him off from the midst of his people” (Alter). It is, of course, easy to recognize how those *m’Beit Yisrael* (מִבֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל) or “of the House of Israel,” are natives to Israel. Yet, *ha’ger hagar b’tokham* (הַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכָם), which the TNIV has as, “any foreigner residing among them,” is to be cut off *m’qerev ammah* (מִקְרֵב עַמָּה), “from among his kin” (NJPS), “from among his kinspeople” (Fox),⁴ or “from his people,” as well. The significance of this is that the *am* (עַם) or “people” in view, is the community of Israel, of which both the native and sojourner equally compose. This is more specific than the preceding instruction of Leviticus 7:26-27, which only identifies persons within the community as *kol-nefesh* (כָּל-נֶפֶשׁ):

“You are not to eat any blood, either of bird or animal, in any of your dwellings. **Any person** [Whatsoever soul, KJV] who eats any blood, even that person shall be cut off from his people.”

While the native and sojourner are not exactly the same, an instruction like Leviticus 11:10-16 is still used to significantly highlight the widescale commonality of the native and sojourner. If the prohibition against eating blood were at all violated, then the penalty that would ensue would be being cut off. This is represented by the Hebrew verb *karat* (כָּרַח), which in the Hifil stem (casual action, active voice) can involve, “to **exterminate**,”

² Walton, Matthews, Chavalas, 132

³ Walter J. Houston, “Leviticus,” in James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 115.

⁴ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 592.

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but specifically how “God...exterminates...through early death” (*HALOT*).⁵ While the verb *karat* can mean, in various places, to issue capital punishment upon an offender, it can also have a more general meaning of removing or excommunicating someone from the community, and/or people being withheld something significant during their lifetime on Earth, such as not having any offspring.⁶ John E. Hartley thinks that *karat* here means “being cut off from the community.”⁷

17:11-12 The severity of why all people within the community of Ancient Israel were not to consume blood is explained: “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life. Therefore I say to the Israelites, ‘None of you may eat blood, nor may an alien living among you eat blood’” (NIV). In view of the preceding statement in v. 6a, “The priest shall sprinkle the blood on the altar of the LORD at the doorway of the tent of meeting...,” there are some significant sacramental components present regarding animal blood, as the presentation of blood before God, upon the altar and/or within the Tabernacle (i.e., 1:5; 3:2; 4:6, 25; 7:2), would provide (some sort of) a covering (Heb. verb *kafar*, כָּפַר) for human sin.

The assertion of v. 11a is, *ki nefesh ha’basar b’dam hiv* (כִּי נֶפֶשׁ הַבָּשָׂר בַּדָּם הִיּוּא), “For the soul of the flesh is in the blood” (ATS). The diversity of applications of the Hebrew term *nefesh* (נֶפֶשׁ) has to be recognized here. The *CHALOT* lexicon actually provides nine different definitions and applications available for the interpreter to pick. These include: “throat,” “neck,” “breath,” “living being,” “man, men, person, people,” “personality, individuality,” “life,” “soul’ as seat & support of feelings & sensations,” and “someone dead.”⁸ In the case of Leviticus 17:10-16, the life-principle of the animals that God permits people to slaughter for food is in view. While teaching the human beings who kill them something about their own humanity, this does not mean that the life-principle of such human beings is exactly the same as animals, as people are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27)⁹ and animals are not. Walter C. Kaiser further explains,

“What is v. 11 claiming...? It is claiming that creatures are living and vital, so long as their blood is in their flesh; but when their blood is separated from the *bāśār* [בָּשָׂר, flesh], the creatures are no longer alive! The vitality of the creature is directly linked with its blood. Since there is such a strong link, those who obey and refuse to eat the blood of the animal honor the life of the animal. To honor this injunction is to honor life; to despise this injunction is to despise life.”¹⁰

John E. Hartley also details how,

“The ancients observed that as an animal loses its blood, its strength wanes, and with the continued loss of blood it dies. Therefore, blood serves as the tangible center of an animal’s life force...Blood also symbolizes a life given up in death.”¹¹

⁵ *HALOT*, 1:501.

⁶ Cf. Elmer B. Smick, “כָּרַח,” in *TWOT*, 1:457.

⁷ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 273.

⁸ *CHALOT*, pp 242-243.

⁹ Consult the sub-section, “Are human beings just animated chemicals?”, in the publication *To Be Absent From the Body* by J.K. McKee.

¹⁰ Kaiser, in *NIB*, 1:1119.

¹¹ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 274.

Leviticus 17:10-16 Eating and Kosher in the Tanach

While an animal has to die and give up its blood, in order for a human being to eat its flesh to presumably live—the sacredness of such blood is truly highlighted by it being associated with the sacrificial system. It is communicated, “I have appointed it to you to make atonement on the altar for your lives, since it is the lifeblood that makes atonement” (v. 11b, HCSB). Repeating the view of Jewish scholar Jacob Milgrom, Samuel E. Balentine—even with some liberal presuppositions present about the composition of the Pentateuch—does fairly observe, “the author of the Holiness Code now innovatively interprets the well-being offering in order to make clear that killing animals for food, that is, for personal consumption, is so dangerously close to the taking of human life for selfish reasons, it is tantamount to homicide.”¹² Today, for example, much of the meat that is purchased in the supermarket, be it kosher-certified by Jewish authorities or not, has been processed on some kind of an assembly line, with animals slaughtered very quickly for production purposes. One does not get the impression that the Torah’s thrust is for an animal to be so quickly killed, just to make room for the next one.

Christian examiners of vs. 11-12 have tended to focus on the far more reaching Messianic significance of the shedding of blood. Many will direct readers of Leviticus to a passage like Hebrews 9:22, which speaks of the sacrifice of Yeshua: “And according to the Law, *one may* almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness,” given how animal sacrifices would have to continually be offered and were limited in their effectiveness. Another passage of importance may be Yeshua’s word of John 6:54, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day,” speaking of the close identification His followers must have with His being beaten and murdered, that they might have their sins permanently atoned for.

17:13-14 The requirement to be careful with the blood of the animals one slaughters for food, is extended beyond the domesticated animals in the local community, to the animals that are caught by a native Israelite or sojourner out in the wild. It is stated, “And every man of the Israelites and of the sojourner who sojourns in their midst who hunts down prey, beast or fowl that may be eaten, he shall spill out its blood and cover it with earth” (v. 13, Alter). While hunting game or birds is permitted, such animals must be caught, and their blood must be removed.

It cannot go overlooked that both the native Israelite and sojourner are limited to the types of animals that they may catch in the wild. V. 13a says, *asher yatzud tzeid chayah o-of asher yei’akeil* (אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֹד צִיד הַחַיָּה אוֹ-עוֹף הָאֲשֶׁר יֵאָכֵל), “who he-hunts animal wild or bird that he-may-be-eaten” (Kohlenberger).¹³ The clause *asher yei’akeil* is rightfully concluded to mean, as some dynamic equivalency versions have put it: “is approved for eating” (NLT), “which is ritually clean” (Good News Bible), or Hartley’s rendering, “that is lawful to eat” (WBC).¹⁴ R.K. Harrison notes these animals to be “the blood of clean game caught in the hunt.”¹⁵

¹² Samuel E. Balentine, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Leviticus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002), 148.

¹³ Kohlenberger, 1:323.

¹⁴ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 261.

¹⁵ Harrison, *Leviticus*, 182.

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To a certain extent, the instruction of v. 13 can be a reflection of many Israelites'—but most especially most sojourners'—low economic status. As it concerns the latter group, those who frequently must glean a farmer's field for crops (19:10; 23:22), are the same who will often have to hunt and scavenge for wild animals to eat. The higher principle for sure, for both native and sojourner, is to abstain from consuming animal blood. A sojourner in Ancient Israel, who had not been trained in the Torah from an early age, was notably limited in what animals may be caught in the wild—the same animals that the native is only permitted to consume—and would by necessity be pointed to know what domesticated animals may be eaten, which are largely detailed in Leviticus ch. 11. That the *ger* or sojourner, within the community of Ancient Israel, was anticipated to observe the kosher dietary laws along with the native, is definitely detectable. It would not make any logical sense for the *ger* or sojourner to only be limited to eating permitted, clean animals caught in the wild—but not have the same prohibition for domesticated animals.

The blood of such animals caught in the wild was to be drained out, and was to be covered over with dirt. The need for the blood of animals to be honored by all in the community is repeated: "For the life of all flesh—its blood is its life. Therefore I say to the Israelite people: You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off" (v. 14, NJPS).

17:15-16 While prohibited in the Torah's instruction, there would be instances arise in which both native Israelites and sojourners would eat animals that had died of either natural causes and/or horrific causes, specified by the terminology *neveilah u'tereifah* (נִבְלָה וְטֶרֶפָה), "carcass or-torn-animal" (Kohlenberger).¹⁶ It is noted that when this happened the person was to launder his clothes and bathe, being restored to cleanness by evening: "And any person that eats a carcass, or an animal-torn-to-pieces, among the native-born or among the sojourners, when he scrubs his garments and washes in water, and remains-*tamei* until sunset—then he is pure" (v. 15, Fox).¹⁷

While it is not stated directly in the text, perhaps eating meat from animals that died of less-than-appropriate causes occurred in instances of ignorance when being served a meal, and/or in instances of circumstance when facing starvation. Blood would have coagulated within the carcass and would have been consumed with the meat, not having been drained to any sizeable degree. Those who ate this meat were obviously not "cut off" or penalized, if they followed the prescribed cleansing procedure—so it is best that the general statement of v. 10 be viewed from the perspective of it involving those who would perpetually consume blood and/or disregard these instructions. Being "cut off" did not involve those, who from time to time, would find themselves having eaten animals that died of natural causes. Those who would "be held responsible" (v. 16, NIV) were those who disregarded the Torah's instructions completely, and the purity procedures.

While expressing a source-critical view of the Pentateuch, Houston points out that for this passage, "Most of the laws here are binding on the alien as well as the Israelite. This is a characteristic of H and its concern with the holiness and the land they share

¹⁶ Kohlenberger, 1:324.

¹⁷ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 592.

(18:25).¹⁸ But how would this correspond to a passage like Exodus 22:31: "You shall be holy men to Me, therefore you shall not eat *any* flesh torn to pieces in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs"? Or later in Deuteronomy 14:21 how it is stated, "You shall not eat anything which dies *of itself*. You may give it to the alien [*ger*, גֵּר] who is in your town, so that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner [*nokri*, נֹכְרִי], for you are a holy people to the LORD your God"?

The ideal is for animals that are killed by wild beasts, to simply be cast out as dog food (Exodus 22:31). The option is available, most probably because of the lowly state of the *ger* or sojourner in the community, for them to receive animals that had died of natural causes as a kind of welfare or free handout to them (Deuteronomy 14:21). With some source-critical views of the Pentateuch detectable, Hartley directs our attention to how the later Deuteronomy instruction permitting sojourners to eat animals that had died of natural causes, gave them a source of meat at low cost:

"Deuteronomy...strengthens the standard for an Israelite but eases it for a stranger or an alien, making available to them an inexpensive source of meat. These variations in the law on this matter illustrate how the law was living in ancient Israel..."¹⁹

Presumably, though, as stated in Leviticus 17:15-16, sojourners, who would be permitted to eat animals that had died of natural causes, would still have to launder their clothes and bathe, that they might be ritually clean. Their being permitted to eat such animals should be viewed as a matter of circumstance for survival, an indication of sojourners being widely poor and almost-destitute persons who would enter into Israel's community often for more reasons than just being attracted to Israel's God.

17:10-16 application The Torah instructions prohibiting the consumption of blood are obviously very serious, as it concerns how people view eating meat as a privilege granted by the Creator God. The scene of 1 Samuel 14:32-34 depicts how severe it was viewed to offend God by haphazardly slaughtering animals, and eating them with the blood coagulated within the meat:

"The people rushed greedily upon the spoil, and took sheep and oxen and calves, and slew *them* on the ground; and the people ate *them* with the blood. Then they told Saul, saying, 'Behold, the people are sinning against the LORD by eating with the blood.' And he said, 'You have acted treacherously; roll a great stone to me today.' Saul said, 'Disperse yourselves among the people and say to them, "Each one of you bring me his ox or his sheep, and slaughter *it* here and eat; and do not sin against the LORD by eating with the blood.'" So all the people that night brought each one his ox with him and slaughtered *it* there."

Even with some of the limitations present within the meat processing industry of today, it is widely acknowledged that the blood of an animal needs to be largely removed in the slaughtering process, with remaining traces then cooked out.

The prohibition of Leviticus 17:11 was taken up into the Apostolic decree of Acts 15, regarding what regulations the new, non-Jewish Believers were to follow in order to be welcomed into the Body of Messiah. It was ruled that they were to "abstain...from what is strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:21; also 15:29), meaning that they could not eat meat

¹⁸ Houston, in *ECB*, 116.

¹⁹ Hartley, *Leviticus*, 278.

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that had been choked, likely in pagan sacrifice, with the intention of seeing its blood coagulated within the meat (i.e., as would be seen in Philo *Special Laws* 4.122).²⁰ This meant that the new, non-Jewish Believers would have often had to procure their meat from Jewish sources, where this would not have been an issue. As various parts of the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament make clear, following these instructions, and/or being flexible with their implementation, was not easy.²¹ And today, among various Christian examiners of Leviticus 17:11-16 (but not all), it can be viewed that both the prohibition from consuming blood in the Torah and in the later Apostolic decree were instructions only for past generations of God's people. Gordon Wenham is one who concludes,

"For the modern interpreter the Jerusalem decrees raise problems. Were they intended to be permanently binding? Or were they a compromise to avoid offending Jewish sensitivities (cf. Rom. 14)? Clearly unchastity (*porneia*) was never approved (1 Cor. 5; Rev. 2:14). But Paul does allow Christians to eat food offered to idols as long as the meal does not take place in a pagan temple and it is not misinterpreted by pagan friends (1 Cor. 8; 10:25ff). It seems likely, therefore, that Paul did not view eating blood as something that was intrinsically wrong, but held that it should be avoided whenever it might offend Jewish Christians (cf. Rom. 14:2-3, 14-15). Some groups in the Church continued to abstain from blood as late as Tertullian's day (early 3rd century)."²²

For kosher-friendly Messianic people who are investigating the place of the Torah's dietary laws in the post-resurrection era, Wenham has done a service in listing a number of passages that will need evaluation, and some reconsideration for their original setting and intentions, as would be seen in some of his conclusions (discussed further).

In more practical terms, Leviticus 17:11-16 does emphasize the significant need for God's people to avoid consuming blood. This has been approached throughout Jewish history via the process of *shechitah* or ritual slaughter, and even many Christians have recognized the sanctity of not consuming the blood of animals (even if they have eaten non-kosher animals).²³ Messianic people today, who eat a kosher-style of diet, will widely eat commercially-processed meat, which has been butchered on some sort of an assembly line. Most of the blood of such meat has been drained, and remaining traces are often able to be removed in the cooking process. Regardless of how meat is butchered, *it is impossible to remove every single trace of blood within meat that is eaten*. So, what Leviticus 17:10-16 decisively prohibits is the direct consumption of blood, and/or the consumption of meat that is saturated in blood that could have been removed by more responsible methods of butchering.

²⁰ "But some men, with open mouths, carry even the excessive luxury and boundless intemperance of Sardanapalus to such an indefinite and unlimited extent, being wholly absorbed in the invention of senseless pleasures, that they prepare sacrifices which ought never be offered, strangling their victims, and stifling the essence of life [Leviticus 17:11], which they ought to let depart free and unrestrained, burying the blood, as it were, in the body. For it ought to have been sufficient for them to enjoy the flesh by itself, without touching any of those parts which have a connection with the soul or life" (*Special Laws* 4.122; *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 628).

²¹ For a detailed analysis, consult the commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

²² Wenham, *Leviticus*, 247.

²³ Cf. "blood (as food)," in David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), pp 77-78.