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Milk and Meat: Unlikely Bedfellows

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The prohibition *lō'-tābaššēl gādī behaleb 'immō*, “you shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk,” appears thrice in the Old Testament (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21). In Exodus it concludes an appendage to the cultic calendar of sacrificial offerings, but in Deuteronomy it is part of the dietary prohibitions. The change that has occurred between the time of Exodus and Deuteronomy bears investigation, as does the absence of this prohibition from Leviticus. But first, what does this prohibition mean? The rabbis claim that it mandates an absolute ban on mixing dairy and meat dishes, and they interpret its threefold occurrence as prohibiting the eating, cooking, or profiting from such a mixture.¹ The rabbinic solution seems so removed from the plain meaning of the text that we shall, for the present, pass it by without further comment.

Scanning the legion of interpretations put forth through the ages, there are four that merit consideration. One firmly established view is that this prohibition is directed against Canaanite cultic practice. It was first proposed by Maimonides:

As for the prohibition against eating meat [boiled] in milk, it is in my opinion not improbable that—in addition to this being undoubtedly very gross food and very filling—*idolatry* had something to do with it. Perhaps such food was eaten at one of the ceremonies of

their cult or at one of their festivals. A confirmation of this may, in my opinion, be found in the fact that the prohibition against eating "meat [boiled] in milk," when it is mentioned for the first two times, occurs near the commandment concerning pilgrimage: "Three times in the year," and so on (Exodus 23:17; 34:23). It is as if it said: When you go on pilgrimage and enter "the house of the Lord your God" (Exodus 23:19; 34:26), do not cook there in the way they used to do. According to me this is the most probable (lit., the strongest) view regarding the reason for this prohibition; but I have not seen this set down in any of the books of the Sabians (idolaters) that I have read.²

Maimonides' opinion that eating a kid boiled in its mother's milk was an idolatrous rite has been championed by commentators down to the present day who, however, have glossed over³ Maimonides' admission that he had no evidence for it.

Nonetheless, a powerful impetus was given the view, some fifty years ago, with the unearthing of the second millennium Ugaritic texts at Ras Shamra, a site on the Mediterranean coast of Syria. In one of its mythological tablets, the following line appears: *tb[hg]d bhlb annh bhmat*,⁴ which was translated as "Coo[k a ki]d in milk, a lamb (?) in butter."⁵ This text, it should be noted, being broken, requires reconstruction. The reconstruction is, at best, an educated guess—undoubtedly influenced by our biblical prohibition. However, this reconstruction was accepted at once by virtually every interpreter,⁶ and it became a dogma of scholarship that Maimonides' intuition concerning the practice as a pagan rite was correct. A notable early skeptic was Gordon,⁷ who suggested that "*tb[h]*" could mean "slaughter." Other objections posed by Loewenstamm⁸ and reinforced by Haran⁹ have once and for all vitiated the reconstruction. The objections are as follows:

(1) The broken passage must now be read differently:

!b.(?)[g]d,¹⁰ which indicates that the dividing mark between the two words follows *tb*, thereby leaving no room for adding the letter *h*. Thus the reconstruction *tb[h]* must be rejected.

(2) Moreover, even were the reconstruction correct, *tbh* does not mean “cook,” but “slaughter.”¹¹

(3) The probability is that the term *annh*, contained in the next clause, corresponding to Akkadian *ananihu*, which means “garden” or “plant,”¹² does not refer to an animal but to an herb.¹³

(4) It therefore follows that [g]d – presuming the correctness of the reconstruction – cannot mean “kid” but, since it must correspond in meaning to the parallel word *annh*, also connotes a plant. Hence, *tb[h]* – keeping in mind that the reading is speculative – cannot mean “slaughter,” a term hardly appropriate for a plant.

(5) Finally, there is nothing in the text which states that the kid (?) was cooked (?) in the milk of *its mother*, in which case it has absolutely nothing to do with our biblical prohibition!

In sum, the Ugaritic text in question is a broken one, its suggested reconstruction is palpably wrong, its clearer portion has been misconstrued, and a key word of the biblical prohibition, “mother,” is not there. In recent memory, nothing matches this example of the hazards in interpreting broken texts on the basis of a purported biblical echo. Thus, the cultic theory cannot be grounded in Ugaritic practice and, without any support, biblical or extra-biblical, it must be abandoned.

The second theory, also a respected one, espouses a humanitarian interpretation. It originates with Philo of Alexandria who writes as follows:

He has forbidden any lamb or kid or other like kind of livestock to be snatched away from its mother before it is weaned [cf. Exodus 22:29; Leviticus 22:27]. . . . If indeed anyone thinks [it] good to boil flesh in milk, let

him do so without cruelty and keeping clear of impiety. . . . The person who boils the flesh of lambs or kids or any other young animal in their mother's milk, shows himself cruelly brutal in character and gelded of compassion.¹⁴

Philo's focus on cruelty as the basis for the prohibition is echoed by Clement of Alexandria¹⁵ and, independently, by Ibn Ezra¹⁶ and Rashbam (who surely were unaware of both Philo and Clement).¹⁷ Among moderns, this view is championed by Haran¹⁸ and Ginsberg¹⁹ who, in agreement with Philo, argue that the kid law is cut of the same cloth as the prohibition against slaughtering the dam and its offspring on the same day (Leviticus 22:28), sacrificing the newborn during the first week of its life (Leviticus 22:27; Exodus 22:29), or taking the mother bird together with its young (Deuteronomy 22:6-7).

Haran builds on the arguments of Ginsberg and Dalman to support his humanitarian theory. Ginsberg suggests, citing Dalman,²⁰ that he-goats, unlike rams, are expendable since they provide neither wool nor palatable meat, and therefore it must have been a common practice to dispose of one's superfluous male kids during the Sukkot festival.²¹ The attribution of this prohibition to Sukkot would appear to be justified both from its position in the biblical text when it occurs after injunctions concerning the other two pilgrimage festivals, Pesach and Shavuot (Exodus 23:18-19; 34:25-26), and from its zoological basis, since goats give birth to their young in the rainy season which begins in autumn. "Therefore," argues Haran, "the Israelite is warned that during the feast of ingathering, the most exuberant and joyful of the annual pilgrim-feasts, celebrated with much food and drink and the choicest delicacies—he must remember not to seethe a kid in its mother's milk, . . . a deliberate reminder of humane behavior even in the midst of general jollity."²²

If, however, humanitarianism is the motivation, should

not our prohibition embrace all animals instead of being restricted to a kid? Look at the other cited animal prohibitions. It may be true that one may not slaughter the dam and its young on the same day (Leviticus 22:28), but surely it was permitted on successive days. The newborn must be permitted to suckle for seven days (Leviticus 22:27; Exodus 22:29), but on the eighth day it may be brought to the altar – even though it is still suckling. The mother bird and her fledglings or eggs may not be taken together (Deuteronomy 22:6), but surely they may be taken separately (Deuteronomy 22:7). By the same token, the mother goat can in no way be aware that her kid is boiling in her milk. Incidentally, there is genuine doubt whether this prohibition can be tied to the Sukkot festival. Weaning time for goats begins in December²³ – at least two months after Sukkot! Thus, it is more likely that this prohibition was intended to be enforced at all the pilgrimage festivals or, for that matter, whenever a sacrifice was offered at the sanctuary. In any event, the humanitarian theory must give way to another.

Recently, under the influence of the French school of structural anthropology, which has proven so helpful in understanding Leviticus 11,²⁴ a third theory has been propounded. Starting with the Durkheimian hypothesis that a customary or legal prohibition reflects some societal taboo, J. Soler interprets the kid law as meaning: “You shall not put a mother and her son into the same pot any more than into the same bed.”²⁵ That is to say, it is an injunction against incest.²⁶ This theory is fascinating but it is undermined by one glaring fault: the word *gōdî*, “kid,” is asexual. Indeed, in biblical Hebrew, animal names that are masculine in form and have no female counterpart denote both sexes. Thus, in Isaiah’s vision of messianic bliss (Isaiah 11:6), the *zā’eb*, “wolf”; *kebes*, “lamb”; *nāmer*, “leopard”; and – to cite our case – *gōdî*, “kid” are generic names, applying to both male and female of each species. A more

instructive proof text is the one cited above: “You shall not slaughter a cow (*šor*) or ewe (*seh*) and its young (*bānō*) on the same day” (Leviticus 22:28). Despite the use of the masculine forms *šor* and *seh* for the parent and *bēn* for the child, the mother and her offspring of either sex are clearly intended. To be sure, as indicated above, the economically unviable male kids were slaughtered for their meat. However, the prohibition as it stands applies to the female as well. Had it been restricted to the male it would have been so worded, e.g., *gādi zākar*, “a male kid” (cf. *seh zākar*, “a male sheep,” Exodus 12:5) or *zākar bāizzīm*, “male of the goats” (cf. *zākar babbāqār*, “male of the herd,” Leviticus 22:19). Just as it is forbidden to slaughter the mother on the same day as her young – of either sex – so it is forbidden to cook the young – of either sex – in its mother’s milk. The social anthropologists, I believe, are correct: society’s values are mirrored in its laws and mores, especially in its food taboos. However, in this case, they picked the wrong one.

A fourth, and more fruitful, approach has recently been broached by O. Keel.²⁷ His iconographic studies in ancient Near Eastern art have led him to the plethora of seals and ceramic and rock tomb-paintings which feature the motif of a mother animal suckling her young. The symbolism takes on cosmic dimensions as soon as it is realized that the portrayed animals can stand for divinities. For example, in Egypt, the human (or animal) nursing at the udders of the cow-goddess Hathor (or another animal divinity) is the young Pharaoh himself. The suckling mother, according to Keel, is thus the symbol of the love and tenderness that are sustained by the divine order of the universe.²⁸ Since this image, as it appears in the art of Syro-Palestine, is not attributable to any particular deity, it would have encountered no difficulty being incorporated into the monotheism of ancient Israel. There, it would have resulted in a taboo against cooking a kid in its mother’s milk, a culinary prac-

tice which in effect would have opposed and vitiated the life-sustaining and divinely ordained nurture inherent in all living beings.

Keel, I submit, is on the right track. His explanation, more so than the humanitarian theory, throws clearer light on the prohibition to slay the mother and its young simultaneously (Leviticus 22:28). Here he is in accord with Philo, whom he quotes, that "it is the height of savagery to slay on the same day the generating cause and the living creature generated."²⁹ Yet when applied to the kid prohibition, Keel's theory does not fully satisfy. The mother has been separated from her young. Thus the image of the suckling mother, which represents the transmission of the life-sustaining force proceeding from generation to generation, is not present. More to the point is another of Philo's comments: "[It is] grossly improper that the substance which fed the living animal should be used to season and flavor the same after its death . . . [and that] the license of man should rise to such a height as to misuse what has sustained its life to destroy also the body which remains in existence."³⁰ This citation is used by C. M. Carmichael³¹ to propose that the root rationale behind the kid prohibition is in opposing the commingling of life and death.³² A substance which sustains the life of a creature (milk) should not be fused or confused with a process associated with its death (cooking). This would be but another instance of the binary opposition characteristic of biblical ritual and praxis: to separate life from death, holy from common, pure from impure, Israel from the nations.

Both ideas inhering in the kid prohibition—the reverence for life and Israel's separation from the nations—are also present in the dietary laws, the former in the blood prohibition and the latter in the animal prohibitions.³³ Thus the kid prohibition was automatically locked into Israel's dietary system. Therefore, it should occasion no surprise that the kid prohibition, which in Exodus is related to the

cult and sacrifices, is transformed in Deuteronomy into a dietary law. Deuteronomy, it should be recalled, has transferred the act of slaughtering an animal for its flesh from the sanctuary to the home. With the centralization of worship at the Temple, Deuteronomy had to enact a concomitant law permitting common slaughter in order to obviate the necessity of journeying to the Temple each time a family desired meat for the table.³⁴ The result is that the taboo of cooking a kid in its mother's milk, which needed but to be observed within the sanctuary compound while under priestly supervision, henceforth had to be heeded by every Israelite family, without outside supervision, in every kitchen.

The life versus death theory, I submit, completely and neatly elucidates the other prohibitions which, heretofore, have been explained as humane. The common denominator of all these prohibitions is the fusion and confusion of life and death *simultaneously*. Thus, the life-giving process of the mother bird hatching or feeding her young (Deuteronomy 22:6) should not be the occasion of their joint death. The sacrifice of the newborn may be inevitable, but not for the first week while it is constantly at its mother's breast (Leviticus 22:27), and never should both the mother and its young be slain at the same time (Leviticus 22:28). By the same token, the mother's milk, the life-sustaining food for her kid, should never become associated with its death.

Is it then so far-fetched for the rabbis to have deduced that all meat (not just that of the kid) and all milk (not only that of the mother) may not be served together? Their interpretation is clearly an old one. It is already adumbrated in the third-century B.C.E. Septuagint which translates the word *gōdî* in all three occurrences of the prohibition—but only there—not as “kid” but as “sheep.” By the first century C.E. the tradition is recorded by Philo that the prohibition applies to “the flesh of lambs or kids or any other

young animal.”³⁵ One cannot say that Philo is dependent upon the Palestinian rabbis for his teaching since he holds, contrary to their view, that the prohibited milk is only that of the animal’s mother (a view also held subsequently by the Karaites).³⁶ Alexandria, then, the home of the Septuagint and Philo, must have harbored a tradition which had extended the biblical prohibition to embrace all animals. It is, therefore, not too difficult to foresee that the next logical step would have been to forbid the use of any milk with any meat. For milk, the life-sustaining force of the animal, should not commingle with meat, the animal that has met its death.

The binary opposition of life and death is also at the root of the severe impurities that are the subject of Leviticus 12-15.³⁷ It is therefore fitting and logical that Leviticus 11, the chapter that ensconces the life-death principle in the laws dealing with animal impurities, be the prelude to the same principle in the laws dealing with human impurities.

Is it, therefore, not puzzling that the kid prohibition which also embodies this principle does not occur in Leviticus 11? Only one answer, I submit, is possible. The deuteronomic transformation has not yet taken place. Leviticus still breathes the atmosphere of Exodus. Cooking a kid in its mother’s milk is still a cultic act, a sacrifice that takes place in the sanctuary under the control of the priests. It is still not the concern of the home, a radical change which only Deuteronomy engineered. Here, once more, is another indication of the preexilic and predeuteronomic origin of the priestly laws in the book of Leviticus.³⁸

[Completed March 1985]

Notes

1. M *Hullin* 8:4; *Mekhilta Mishpatim*, par. 20; M *Hullin* 115b (bar.).
2. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Shlomo Pines, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), part 3:48.
3. Although Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Ex-*

odus, tr. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1951, 1983), 305, does acknowledge that Maimonides was conjecturing.

4. UT 62:14 in G. R. Driver and J. C. L. Gibson, eds., *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1978), 123.

5. Louis Ginsberg, "Notes on 'The Birth of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods,'" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1935): 65; cf. Charles Virolleaud, "La naissance des dieux gracieux et beaux," *Syria* 14 (1933): 140.

6. For example, Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 305; Driver and Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 123; Theodore M. Gaster, *Thespis* (New York: Gordon Press, 1961, 1975), 407-9, 422-23; Hans Kosmala, "The So-Called Ritual Decalogue," *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 1 (1962): 52-53; Loren R. Fisher, *Ras Shamra Parallels*, 3 vols. (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1972-81), 29.

7. Cyrus M. Gordon, *Ugaritic Handbook* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1947), 232.

8. Samuel E. Loewenstamm, "Lexicographical Notes on 1. *tbh*; 2. *hnnny/hlnty*," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 5 (1973): 209.

9. Menahem Haran, "Seething a Kid in Its Mother's Milk," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 20 (1979): 25.

10. Andrée Herdner, *Corpus des Tablettes en Cuneiformes Alphabétiques*, 2 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1963), 98.

11. Jacob Milgrom, "Profane Slaughter and a Formulaic Key to the Composition of Deuteronomy," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 47 (1976): 1-17.

12. *The Assyrian Dictionary*, Ignace J. Gelb et al., eds. (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1956-), part 2, 1:111, s.v. *ananihu*.

13. Joseph Aistleitner, *Untersuchungen zur Grammatik des Ugaritischen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954), 41; Driver and Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 123, who translate it as "coriander"; André Caquot, Maurice Sznycer, and Andrée Herdner, *Textes Ougaritiques I* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1974), 371, n.q.

14. Philo, *De Virtutibus* 142-44. The English translation here used is F. H. Colson's in the Loeb classics series (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 8:250-51.

15. Clement, *Stromata* II, 18 (cited by Haran, "Seething a Kid in Its Mother's Milk," 29).

16. Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Haran, "Seething a Kid in Its Mother's Milk," 29.

19. Harold L. Ginsberg, *The Jewish Israelian Heritage of Judaism in America* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1982), 52, n. 69.

20. Gustaf Dalman, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, 6 vols. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1928-39), 6:189.

21. Ginsberg, *The Jewish Israelian Heritage*, 53; cf. also Isaac Abravanel, *Exordium Commentariorum in Leviticum* (London: Flesher, 1683).

22. Haran, "Seething a Kid in Its Mother's Milk," 35.

23. Y. Ahituv, "Só'n," in Umberto Cassuto et al., eds., *Encyclopaedia Miqrail*, 8 vols. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1954-76), 6:648.

24. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, forthcoming), vol. 1.

25. Jean Soler, "Sémiotique de la nourriture dans la Bible," *Annales Economies Sociétés Civilisations* 28 (1973): 943-55. "The Dietary Prohibitions of the Hebrews," tr. Elborg Forster, *New York Review* 26/10 (June 1979): 24, cf. 30.

26. Fully developed by Francis Martens, "Diététique ou la cuisine de Dieu," *Communications* 26 (1977): 16-45.

27. Othmar Keel, *Das Böcklein in der Milch seiner Mutter und Verwandtes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1980).

28. *Ibid.*, 51.

29. Philo, *De Virtutibus* 134.

30. *Ibid.*, 143.

31. Calum M. Carmichael, "On Separating Life and Death: An Explanation of Some Biblical Laws," *Harvard Theological Review* 69 (1976): 1-7.

32. Compare Arthur Weyne, "Why We Do Not Mix Meat and Milk," *American Examiner*, Thursday, 31 March 1960, 13.

33. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, vol. 1.

34. Milgrom, "Profane Slaughter."

35. Philo, *De Virtutibus* 144.

36. Leon Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 267.

37. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, vol. 1.

38. See Jacob Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 104-18.