

Problem Passages – Kosher Laws

Since 9/11, many atheists have begun attacking religion as immoral, the cause of suffering, and the root of bigotry and hatred. One of the common approaches is to take passages from the Old Testament and attempt to show that these are morally evil.

I. Major topics

- God's "Pride" and Divine Jealousy
- The Sacrifice of Isaac
- Kosher Laws and Strange Commandments
- Harsh Punishments, Small Infringements
- The Treatment of Women – bride-price, endorsed rape?
- Polygamy & Concubines
- Slavery
- Genocide & Ethnic Cleansing

II. The Problem Stated: Why does the Law of Moses contain seemingly arbitrary commands regarding food, dress or cleanliness, or odd commands regarding slaves, women, and war?

A. Background

1. The Law was given to a culture very distant from ours, chronologically, geographically, and religiously. The Israelites who received the Law were people who had grown up in Egypt as slaves.
2. God was doing more than giving right and wrong; He was shaping an entire culture. He was re-forming their habits of life, which would affect their worldview. Changing a culture is something done from the ground-up, and must take the people from where they are.
3. Much in the Law was also accommodating the people where they were. Certain habits were already present in the 2-3 million people that constituted Israel. A people with an existing and complex social way of life cannot begin a brand new one overnight. These habits would have included things such as slavery, bride prices, polygamy, slavery. There is no doubt that Israel, as God found her, was crude, and much like the pagan, barbaric, primitive people around her.
4. The Law was good, but it was meant to be temporary. Jer 31. God was patient with human fallenness as He grew a new culture of people to Himself (Acts 17:30).
5. Timeless moral principles are embedded in the Law, which is adapted to train a people who live in an ancient Near-Eastern culture, with all its fallenness and barbarity.
6. Israel itself went through several stages of development.
 - a. Stage 1 – Ancestral wandering clan
 - b. Stage 2 – Theocratic people
 - c. Stage 3 – Monarchy, kingdom, state
 - d. Stage 4 – Exiled community
7. A progress of revelation is clearly seen in Scripture. Consider the progress in the attitude towards slaves from Genesis through to Paul's epistles – particularly Philemon.

8. Not all that is recorded is endorsed. Much is a negative example – showing God's faithfulness to idolatrous nations.
9. When people critique the Law of Moses, they do so from a height which the Law of Moses itself provided! No culture would have reached the place of moral refinement to see things as barbaric or cruel unless God had begun somewhere, with someone.

B. Understanding Clean and Unclean Laws

1. Israel in the land. Three things are at work in the Law: God as Lawgiver (theological), Israel as a people (theological) and the land (economical). The Laws affect these three in various ways. E.g. a man moving his landmark.
2. God was creating a true theocracy – a people ruled directly by Him. Being holy, this holiness was to be extended to the very ordinary and mundane things such as eating, sowing the land, trimming the beard and so forth. There was no sacred/secular division. All of life was to be lived to God. This meant that God created large lists of clean and unclean.
3. The clean/unclean categories should not be thought of as healthy/ unhealthy. Rather, they referred to taboos. Something was allowed or off-limits. What was ritually impure or unclean was not by itself sinful, but to willingly break that taboo was. Many of the unclean matters were part of normal life and part of God's creation. However, in being placed off-limits, God was separating His people from the surrounding nations.
4. Not only did unclean/clean serve as a continual symbol of holiness and separation, but it served as a kind of buffer zone for moral purity. Since holiness brings life, these very physical matters kept teaching the Israelites that obedience and separation to God brought life, not death.

Life – Holiness - Cleanness - Uncleaness – Sin – Death

5. Many of the restrictions have to do with the fact that the food/ act in one way or another represents death/ decay, or has some kind of mixed nature that does not symbolise purity. Mixed breeding of animals, mixed sowing of seed, mixed clothing, and even mixed dress or sexual relationships were forbidden.
6. **Untrue/Partially true ideas**
 - 1) Health – these animals were unhealthy. What about poisonous plants, then?
 - 2) Food eaten by other religions. What about the bull, goat, sheep?
7. **Angle One: The Unclean animals represent a mixing of more than one sphere of Earth.**

Creatures are variously described as those that swim, dwell on the land or fly. The unclean creatures seem to be those that 'mix' two of these spheres. To be clean, a fish must have scales and fins, so creatures with legs, such as shellfish, or eels are unclean. To be clean, a land animal must have split hoofs and chew the cud, -this makes the obvious land dwellers. Animals that do only one – camels, pigs, hares and coneys are excluded. Bird that inhabit water and sky, like pelicans are unclean, Insects that fly but have many legs are unclean. Insects which hop, like grasshoppers, are considered like birds – clean.

This does not mean this foods are unhealthy or inferior. Their mixed nature, which was created by God and declared 'good' at Creation, served as useful symbols of what God wanted to create – a set-apart people that did not compromise or mix with the pagan nations around them. Nor

does it mean that these symbols are permanently to be observed. The church is not a group of people tied to a land, where agriculture and food is central to worldview.

Nevertheless, even in the NT, eating and drinking is to be done for God's glory (1 Cor 10:31)

Angle Two: The unclean animals represent death, abnormality, and the fall.

Therefore, snakes, and most insect were unclean: slithering, swarming representing the curse. Likewise, most carnivores (that cause death), or animals that have died of natural causes were unclean. Animals which hunt (and therefore consume blood) are unclean.

The need to keep life and death separate may explain the command not to boil a kid in its mother's milk, and the command not to kill a calf and its mother on the same day.

C. Discharges and Sexual Prohibitions

1. Similarly, bodily discharges symbolise death, and not life. While nothing sinful in them, they represent the opposite of the life that comes from holiness.
2. Another matter was the widespread fertility cults of the Canaanite religion, which included sexual behaviour in its rituals and temples. Israel was to be far away from this practice, placing human sexuality where it belonged.

Summary: God was creating a culture out of a tribal group of Near-Easterners. This meant teaching them His nature as holy. Beginning with the culture they already possessed as Near-Eastern Semites, God shaped a new culture, integrally connected with the land in which they dwelt. The Laws were to distinguish Israel from other nations, and teach them the difference between holiness and sin, and therefore life and death. Therefore, God constructed large categories of clean and unclean, so that His nature would intrude upon them in the very ordinary matters of life.