

A Different Interpretation
of Five Hebrew Words

Should Cheeseburgers Be Kosher?

JACK M. SASSON

You may not seethe a kid in its mother's milk" is one of the Bible's more puzzling interdictions. This short phrase—only five words in Hebrew (*lo' tebaššel gdi baḥaleb immo*)—is repeated three times, once in Exodus 23:19, again in Exodus 34:26 and finally in Deuteronomy 14:21.

Since Talmudic times, that is after 200 C.E., these few words have anchored a major component of Jewish dietary laws, laws that forbid the mixing of milk and meat products in food preparation. To this day, that means no cheeseburgers or meat lasagna if you're kosher. Clearly, Jewish tradition has interpreted the passage distinctively. But has it interpreted accurately its true purpose?

One oddity of the biblical passages is that in each case the prohibition doesn't seem particularly relevant to the preceding passages (see box, p. 43). Or, as scholars might put it, the prohibition is only tenuously attached to its context. In the two Exodus passages, the prohibition is preceded by instructions on how to celebrate agricultural festivals. In Deuteronomy, the formulation comes at the end of a list of clean and unclean animals. It may be that these five Hebrew words were not organic to their contexts.

From ancient times until today, the prohibition against seething a kid in its mother's milk has generated a vast amount of interpretive literature, much of it focused on what kind of animal is specified. The Hebrew word *gdi* means "kid," another word for a young goat; but when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, in the Septuagint, around 300 B.C.E., the word was translated *arnos*, which generally refers to a lamb or sheep, but occasionally to a goat. Philo, an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher at the turn of the era, said the word referred to any domesticated animal acceptable for sacrifice. More than a thousand years later, the great medieval Jewish commentator Rashi came



THE PATRIARCH ABRAHAM prepares a meal for the three divine messengers, as shown in a sixth-century mosaic (above) from the church of San Vitale, in Ravenna, and in a colorful acrylic painting (on p. 40) by contemporary Texas artist James Janknegt. The messengers have come to alert Abraham and his aged wife, Sarah, that they will bear a child.

According to Genesis 18, Abraham prepared a meal of calf, rolls, and curds and milk (the modern equivalent of a cheeseburger on a bun). Was the patriarch unaware of the Jewish dietary law forbidding the mixing of meat and milk? Did the law—based on the biblical prohibition of cooking a goat kid in its mother’s milk (repeated in Exodus 23:19, 34:26; and Deuteronomy 14:21)—not exist in his day? Or is the longstanding dietary law based on an eccentric interpretation of the prohibition?

to the same conclusion. Both believed that the prohibition had its origins not in dietary practices but in ritual sacrificial practices. Philo thought that the prohibition applied only when the animal was cooked in its own mother’s milk. The rabbis quickly ruled, however, that the flesh of any animal, not just of goats, could not be mixed with any milk, not just its mother’s.

A number of commentators have suggested humanitarian motives behind the prohibition. Some think that a goat “at its mother’s teat,” as St. Augustine put it, is of simply too tender an age to be slaughtered. This seems to contradict the fact, reflected in 1 Samuel 7:9, that it was permissible to immolate sacrificial animals that are still suckling, as also stated in Leviticus 22:27 (see below). Others imagine that this law is evidence of an ancient belief that an intimacy between mother

and child was deeply carved into the psyche of all animals, including mammals.

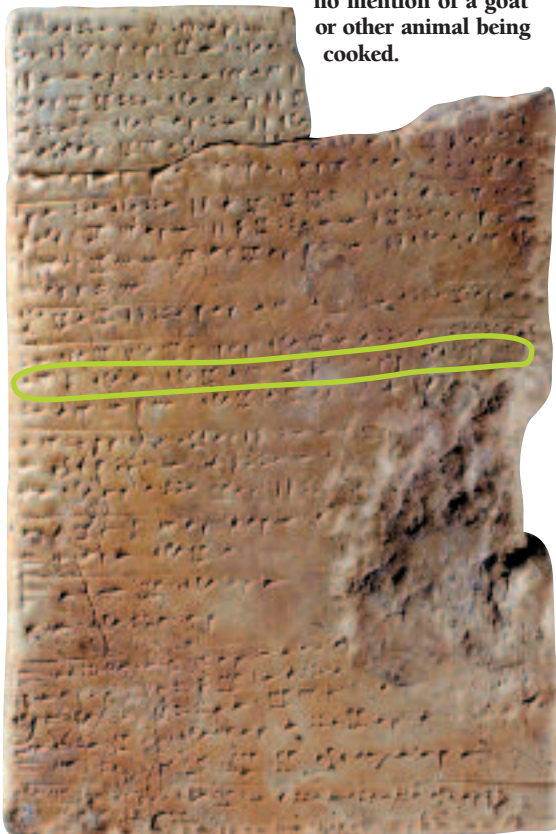
Literary references show that meat mixed with milk was included in ancient diets, among the best known being an episode from the Egyptian tale about Sinuhe (1900 B.C.E.), an army deserter who found fortune, but not happiness, in Canaan. Sinuhe was taken into the home of a local king, where he married a princess and dined on bread and wine, and meat and roast fowl, with “milk in every cooked dish.” More familiar is the account in Genesis 18 where we are told about Abraham hosting divine messengers: “Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who hastened to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree as they ate” (Genesis 18:7-8).

Based on passages like this, some scholars have proposed that the prohibition’s origins lie in the Hebrews’ efforts to distinguish themselves from their neighbors in later times. The theory goes that the mixing of milk and meat products was common at celebratory banquets in an early period, as testified by the Tale of Sinuhe as well as Genesis 18. After the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., however, the Jews in exile wanted to separate themselves from their non-Jewish neighbors with whom the exiles were now competing, hence, the broad application of the prohibition. But why would Israel demarcate itself in just this way? Although milk and its derivatives were

used commonly in the cuisines of antiquity, including as an additive to meat dishes, there is never an insistence in any literature that milk and meat be the product of the *same* animal, which is precisely the idiosyncrasy of the Hebrew prohibition.

Another venerable opinion came from the great Jewish medieval exegete Maimonides (12th century C.E.), who suggested that boiling a kid in its mother's milk was a Canaanite ritual: "Meat boiled in milk is undoubtedly gross food, and makes overfull; but I think that most probably it is also prohibited because it is somehow connected with idolatry, forming perhaps part of the service or being used on some festival of the heathen. I find a support for this view in the circumstance that the Law mentions the prohibition twice after the commandment given concerning the festivals."¹ According to Maimonides, by prohibiting this diet, Moses was not only instilling ethical, sensitive behavior, but was also shielding Israel from sliding toward idolatry.

GOT THEIR GOAT. The cuneiform inscription on this 13th-century B.C.E. tablet from Ugarit, in modern Syria, was initially seen as evidence that the Israelites banned the mixing of milk and meat in order to distinguish themselves from their pagan Canaanite neighbors. Early 20th-century translators suggested the list of cult practices on the tablet included the slaughtering of a kid in milk. More recently, however, scholars have suggested that the relevant line (circled) is better translated, "Over the fire, seven times the sweet-voiced youths chant, 'Coriander in milk, mint in butter.'" The tablet makes no mention of a goat or other animal being cooked.



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Out of Context

The prohibition against seething a kid in its mother's milk appears three times in the Bible, in two very different contexts. In Exodus, it appears twice in discussions of agricultural practices; in Deuteronomy, it is the last item in a list of animals considered unfit for human consumption. None of the contexts seems relevant to the prohibition, leading author Jack Sasson to speculate about its original meaning and intent.

Exodus 23:19

You will bring the best of your land's early harvest to the Temple of the Lord, your God. You will not seethe a kid in its mother's milk.

Exodus 34:26

You will bring the best of your land's early harvest to the Temple of the Lord, your God. You will not seethe a kid in its mother's milk.

Deuteronomy 14:21

You will not partake of naturally dead animals. You may give it to a resident foreigner who may eat it or you may sell it to a foreigner, for you belong to a people sanctified by the Lord. You will not seethe a kid in its mother's milk.

Maimonides was just guessing; but his opinion was given new life when documents were unearthed from Ugarit, across from Cyprus on the Syrian coast. One tablet from around 1300 B.C.E., which tells of the birth of two minor gods (Dawn and Dusk), is full of Canaanite cultic instruction. Inspired by the Bible, early interpreters of this tablet decided that one line mentioned "slaughtering a kid in milk." Although there was no mention of *mother's* milk, the line seemed to corroborate Maimonides's insight.

The connection has proven too good to be true. With a better grasp of how Ugaritic poetry works, it is now understood that the string of letters involved contains parts of different phrases, resulting in a passage about pleasing voices that chant about coriander in milk. There's no mention of a goat at all.²

This variety of opinion only underscores the obvious: The origin and intent of the prohibition against seething a kid in its mother's milk has been an enigma for centuries. So, forgive me for adding one more interpretation.

My theory is based partly on the fact that we are not reading the passage according to its original pronunciation. That's because the text of the Hebrew Bible was originally written without vowels, just consonants. As in many languages, however, the meaning and pronunciation of any particular word depend on which vowels are inserted. As analogy, consider how many meanings the three consonants *RBN* would give us in English. We may supply vowels or double the consonants to give us such radically different words as "robin,"

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“ribbon,” “urban” and “Reuben.” In the case of Hebrew, the rabbis added vowels to the consonants only hundreds of years later in an effort to stabilize the text. But when they did, they largely followed the rules of grammar, not of Biblical Hebrew, but of Mishnaic Hebrew, the language current around the time of the Roman occupation in the first and second centuries C.E.

In the Talmud, the rabbis frequently sought to affirm their rendering of the Hebrew text. They insisted that how they read (and interpreted) the Hebrew text was not whimsical; rather, it was correct and unchanged from the original, as orally communicated through the ages. On one occasion, our prohibition against mixing milk with meat was even used as proof that the traditional vocalization of sacred texts was correct. In tractate *Sanhedrin* from the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Aha b. Jacob argued that the vowels added to *HLV* to make *halav*, or “milk,” must be correct because it would not make sense to read them otherwise, specifically as *helev*, or “fat,” since it would produce what to him was the nonsensical “you must not seethe a kid

in its mother’s fat.”³ Rabbi Aha reasoned that since fat could come from both male and female animals, the mention of “mother” must intentionally be narrowing the choice to “milk” and not “fat.”

In fact, the issue of which vowels to assign to *HLV* when it appears throughout the Bible has been a problem since antiquity. For example, the Greek Septuagint translates the three consonants as “milk” in Ezekiel 34:3 where the Hebrew version vocalizes them as “fat.” Just the opposite occurs in Ezekiel 24:5.

Furthermore, there is contention surrounding the verb of our prohibition. On the same page of the Talmud mentioned above, another rabbi insisted that the verb *biššēl* could only apply to processing liquids and not fats because, in his opinion, the verb referred to boiling, which is something you don’t do to fat. However, based on cognates in other Semitic languages like Akkadian, Aramaic and Arabic, we are now certain the verb does not apply just to boiling, but to a broad category of cooking that includes boiling. For example, in Deuteronomy 16:7, the same verb is used to describe preparing the Passover lamb where elsewhere (Exodus 12:9) boiling the lamb is forbidden. Furthermore, the same verb is used when Elisha grills oxen-flesh over a wood fire and

feeds it to the community (1 Kings 19:21).

So it is possible that our prohibition was really about cooking (rather than boiling) a kid in its mother’s fat. Yet, there is a potential problem with this interpretation: When sacrifices were made in ancient Israel, the fat and other segments of the animal were offered to God alone. They were forbidden to man. Might a similar prohibition have applied to nonsacrificial meat and fat?

Some biblical passages like Deuteronomy 12:21-23 imply that for those who did not have ready access to the Temple where they could participate in ritual sacrifices, blood—not fat—was proscribed from a meat diet:

If the place where your Lord God has chosen to set his name [that is, the Temple] is too far from you, then slaughter, as I have instructed you, from cattle or flock that the Lord has given you, and eat from it within your town as much as you desire. But eat it as are partaken gazelles and deer; the clean no less than the unclean may eat from it. Take good care, however, not to eat blood, for blood is life and you may not eat life with the meat.

It would seem therefore that certain fats could be eaten when derived from profane rather than sacral occasions.

Nevertheless, the evidence for the use of fat in cooking in ancient Israel is somewhat sparse, although elsewhere in the ancient world (we learn this mostly from Egyptian cookery), suet (hard fatty tissue) was generally used to fry, braise and sauté meats and vegetables.

Since *biššēl* can mean “cook,” and *hly* can refer to “fat,” and the Israelites were apparently permitted to eat fat as long as it did not come from a sacrificial offering, I propose translating our prohibition: “You may not cook a kid in its mother’s fat.” If so, we would be dealing not with an arcane or enigmatic dietary injunction, but with a wise counsel, an aphorism, instructing a farming community not to squander the bounties that God has given Israel. For, to cook an animal in its mother’s fat would require the slaughter of both the mother and the young. The imprudent killing of the producer and the produced on the same occasion would lead to a serious reduction in stock, with potentially disastrous results.

The same kind of prudent advice is found in Deuteronomy 22:6-7: “Should you chance upon a bird’s nest before you on the road, on any tree or on the ground, as hatchlings or as eggs, with the mother sitting by the hatchlings or on the eggs, do not take the mother along with the young. Shoo away the mother and take the young, so that you may prosper and live long.” As in our

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prohibition, banning the killing of the mother bird allows the mother to produce more eggs to chance upon later.


Scholars have explained that the prohibition is repeated three times in the Bible because it occurs in three different compilations of biblical laws attributed to separate authorial sources: Exodus 34:26 is said to be embedded in the so-called Brief Covenant, attributed to the authorial strand called J, or the Yahwist; Exodus 23:19 is allocated to the Book of the Covenant, attributed to E, or the Elohist, from about a century later; Deuteronomy 14:21 is attributed to D, the Deuteronomist, yet another century later. Strikingly, the prohibition appears to be missing from the fourth and final set of laws, the Holiness Code in Leviticus (part of P, the Priestly Code); but this absence may be deceptive.

Leviticus 22:27-28 advises that young animals may be slaughtered as early as eight days from birth. However, it states that "no animal and its young, from herd or flock, can be slaughtered on the same day." Several scholars have sensed a link between this injunction and what is said about cooking a young goat, but as long as the caution was against cooking an animal in its mother's milk, the connection remained tentative and unclear. However, when translated, "You may not cook a kid in its mother's fat," the thrice-repeated law finds its equivalent in the Holiness Code, from which it had been so conspicuously missing.

This interpretation may clear up another problem. As we noted earlier, Abraham served the messengers of God milk and meat together. Perhaps when this passage was composed, the common interpretation of *HVL* as "milk" had not yet become standard. By the time of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Bible), around 300 B.C.E., however, the Hebrew word was already translated by the Greek word for "milk," *galaktos*. Perhaps the later exegetes saw a chance to resolve a confusing part of Scriptural law. Whatever its origins, however, the application of this dietary restriction helped sharpen the distinctiveness of Jewish ritual practices from those of their neighbors. Such a drive to forge uniqueness through the interpretation of Hebrew law was greatly increased after the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.

Within a couple of centuries after the Hellenistic period, the interdiction against cooking a kid in milk itself developed from a quaint, narrowly interpreted practice to one with a sweeping application against mixing milk and meat. In passages of the Talmud, the injunction inspired a major segment of Jewish traditional practice of *kashruth*, or kosher laws. In turn, as it has

been persuasively argued, this attachment to a remarkable interpretation of dietary rules and regulations became a bulwark for Jewish survival. Adopting them, observant Jews found it necessary to avoid intimacy with populations that obeyed no religious rules concerning the eating of meat, preserving their distinctiveness as a community in faith and practice.

I have sought to explain the original meaning of a law that remains enigmatic to scholarship. Yet this explanation should prove irrelevant to how traditional Jews today display their attachment to their faith. Traditional Judaism owes its rules of practical life to biblical laws as interpreted by the Jewish sages. This means that lasagna and cheeseburgers must still not be served at their tables.⁴ 

¹ Maimonides, *The Guide to the Perplexed*, iii.48.

² See the translation of Dennis Pardee, *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 278-279.

³ b. *Sanhedrin* 4a-b.

⁴ For a fuller exposition of these ideas with ample bibliographic and textual citations, see Jack M. Sasson, "Ritual Wisdom? On 'Seething a Kid in Its Mother's Milk,'" pp. 294-308, in Ulrich Hübner and Ernst Axel Knauf, eds., *Kein Land für sich Allein: Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palestina und Ebrnāri für Manfred Weippert zum 65 Geburtstag*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 186 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 2002).

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