

Is the Bible a message from a God I can't see?

— A law ahead of its time (part 1)

1. Overview

This section will show you that a system of law given to the early Israelites was thousands of years ahead of its time.

Compared with the practices of other nations at the time, the Bible's advice on community health was remarkable. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that most European countries discovered and adopted ideas found in this law which was given thousands of years earlier.

There are parts of this civil law which are even ahead of our time. We shall look at some recommendations which would reduce the problems we have in our world at the moment.

The idea of preventing disease is a relatively recent one. This is shown by the fact that the very first Medical Officer of Health in Britain was appointed in Liverpool in 1847. Community health is now taken very seriously. But the law of Moses was concerned with community health 3,500 years ago.

Community medicine is concerned, amongst other things, with guidance on the food we eat, disposal of waste and control of disease. We shall see that, in all three areas, the Bible is not only accurate but far ahead of its time.



A typical modern Community Health Centre

2. The Bible good food guide

The law of Moses placed no restriction on eating fruits or vegetables. There were, however, severe restrictions on eating the flesh of animals. Animals that were not to be eaten were “unclean”. There were hundreds of species of animals around in Moses’ time available for food. But the Jews were by the law restricted to a small number. The amazing thing is that, nearly thirty-five centuries later, experience and science have led us to the same conclusions.

Under the law of Moses, only certain types of flesh could be eaten.

These restrictions applied to:

- meat
- fish
- birds
- fat
- blood

a) Meat

Leviticus 11 lays down the basic principle:

*Among the animals, whatever divides the hoof, having cloven hooves and chewing the cud
– that you may eat.*

Leviticus 11 v 3



Sheep and cows – permitted food

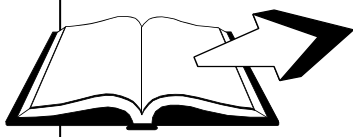
Meat was permitted from animals which had cloven hoofs and which also chewed the cud. This meant that sheep, cows and deer could all be eaten. This rule excluded all meat-eating animals. With the exception of pigs, we generally follow the same rule today.

We can safely eat pig meat in many countries today, but only because strict regulations protect us from becoming involved in the life cycle of the pig tapeworm or the pig roundworm. This can happen when people eat raw or undercooked pork or bacon containing the larvae of the tapeworm or roundworm. The results can include blindness, paralysis, epilepsy and even death.



Pigs – eating pig meat is safe now with modern controls

Pigs also transmit a number of other infections, including the well-known *salmonella* bacteria. An even more serious infectious disease known as “pig-bel” is sometimes seen in the highlands of New Guinea following ritual pig kills and pork feasting.



The law of Moses

- Prohibited eating of unsafe meat
- Permitted eating of meat we now know to be safe

A law ahead of its time

b) Fish

Leviticus 11 v 9 and 10 gives the guidelines:

These you may eat of all that are in the water: whatever in the water has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers – that you may eat. But all in the seas or in the rivers that do not have fins and scales ... they are an abomination to you.

Leviticus 11 v 9 and 10



Cod – permitted food

Of all the animals living in water, only fish with fins and scales could be eaten. This excludes all other aquatic animals, including shellfish and crabs.



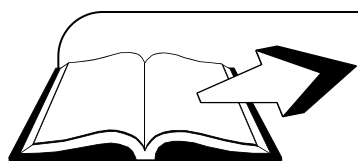
Shellfish – not permitted

Most sea-food poisoning today comes from eating shellfish and crustaceans (shrimps, crabs and lobsters), which were forbidden under the law of Moses. If we look closely at these animals we can understand why. Their favourite habitats are shallow tidal waters and estuaries, where they survive by filtering out the suspended organic matter. This will often include products of sewage outfalls, which contaminate the shellfish with bacteria and viruses, causing dysentery, typhoid and hepatitis. Shellfish grown in cool water passed through filtration tanks are safer. But viruses cannot be filtered out, so the restriction of the law of Moses is still the best guide. Bacteria and viruses are killed by thorough cooking, but shellfish poisoning can also come from other sources.



Crab – not permitted

Crabs, crayfish and shrimps were all “unclean.” It is now known that they transmit several different species of lung flukes, which are parasites that live in our lungs. Again, it is safer to follow the regulations of the law of Moses!



**A law
ahead of its time**

The law of Moses

- Permitted eating only fish with fins and scales
- Prohibited eating fish we now know can be harmful

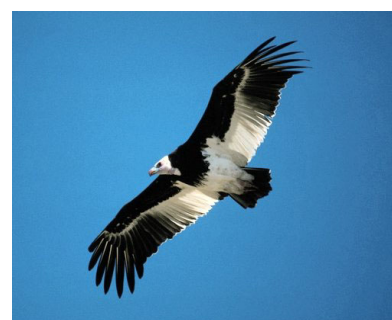
c) Birds

Again we find the guideline in Leviticus 11:

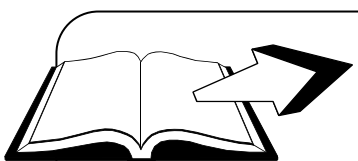
These are the birds you are to detest and not eat because they are detestable: the eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, the red kite, any kind of black kite, any kind of raven, the horned owl, the screech owl, the gull, any kind of hawk, the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, the white owl, the desert owl, the osprey, the stork, any kind of heron, the hoopoe and the bat.

Leviticus 11 v 13 to 19 (NIV)

One or two of these birds are difficult to identify precisely, but it is clear that all of these forbidden birds are carnivorous or carrion-eating. This again is the accepted standard today – we do not eat birds such as vultures, but we do eat the birds which are mainly vegetarian, such as chickens and turkeys.



The vulture – not permitted as food



**A law
ahead of its time**

The law of Moses:

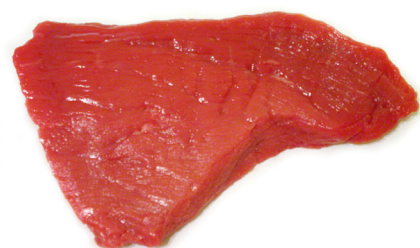
- Permitted eating of grain-eating birds
- Prohibited eating of carnivorous birds

d) Fat

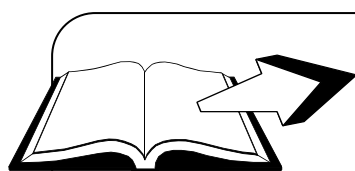
The regulations God gave to Moses were very clear about eating fat:

Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'You shall not eat any fat, of ox or sheep or goat, ... the fat that covers the entrails, the two kidneys and the fat that is on them by the flanks, and the fatty lobe attached to the liver above the kidneys, he shall remove; and the priest shall burn them' ...
Leviticus 7 v 23, 3 to 5

This prohibition of animal fat, especially abdominal fat, is interesting. This fat from which suet and tallow are made is highly saturated and unhealthy. It is significant that the unsaturated fat of fish and vegetable oils is not mentioned here. Again the law given by Moses agrees exactly with modern medical advice that we should eat unsaturated vegetable oils and fish rather than saturated animal fats.



Low-fat steak – a permitted food



**A law
ahead of its time**

The law of Moses recommended:

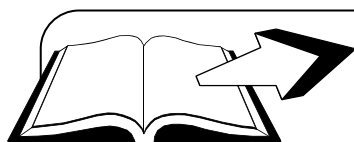
- No animal fat to be eaten
- No restriction on fish and vegetable fat

e) Blood

Leviticus 17 v 14 forbids eating blood:

... for it is the life of all flesh. Its blood sustains its life. Therefore I said to the children of Israel, 'You shall not eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.'
Leviticus 17 v 14

Blood has a high cholesterol content and so it is good health practice not to eat it. In addition, meat keeps better if it has been drained of blood. For this reason animals killed for meat are always drained of most of their blood after being killed.



**A law
ahead of its time**

- The law of Moses did not allow eating of blood

3. Water supply and waste disposal

a) The Bible guide to water supplies

The law of Moses shows the care that had to be taken to ensure that water supplies were pure. If a dead animal was found in a container, the water could not be used. After listing the animals that could not be eaten, the law said:

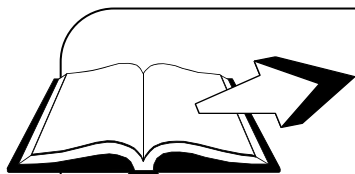
Anything on which any of them falls, when they are dead shall be unclean ... Any earthen vessel into which any of them falls you shall break; and whatever is in it shall be unclean ... any drink that may be drunk from it becomes unclean ... Nevertheless a spring or a cistern, in which there is plenty of water, shall be clean, but whatever touches any such carcass becomes unclean.
Leviticus 11 v 32 to 36

This would mean that, if a dead animal was found in a container of drinking water, the container should be either washed or destroyed. But notice that this does not apply to flowing water in a river or spring, where the risk of disease is much less than in stagnant water. The water may be used, but anything touching the carcass was regarded as unclean.



Drinking stagnant water forbidden

There is another interesting fact to note from this verse. It says that an earthen drinking vessel must be smashed when a dead animal is found in it. This would mean that they were not to drink from a clay pot which had a dead creature in it. There is no mention, however, of destroying vessels made of wood in similar circumstances. Scientists now know that wood has anti-bacterial properties, so it only needs to be rinsed to make it safe after being in contact with a dead animal. We shall see more of this contrast between earthen and wooden pots on page 37. Yet again we can see that the law given to Moses was ahead of its time.



**A law
ahead of its time**

- Stagnant water containing dead animals must not be drunk
- Drinking water could be taken from a flowing stream containing a dead animal
- Earthen pots were to be destroyed after contact with a dead animal – no similar restriction on wooden pots

b) The Bible guide to sewage disposal

The Bible is right up-to-date on this subject as well.

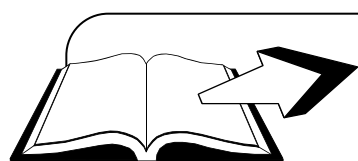


We build treatment works like the one in the picture to process our sewage and make it safe. Before such works had been developed, it was wise to follow the advice of the law of Moses and bury sewage away from habitation:

Designate a place outside the camp where you can go to relieve yourself. As part of your equipment have something to dig with, and when you relieve yourself, dig a hole and cover up your excrement.

Deuteronomy 23 v 12 and 13 (NIV)

Typhoid fever and dysentery have been the downfall of many armies in the field because this advice was not heeded. It was not until the 1914 – 1918 war that it was realised that sewage left lying around in the camp affected the water supply. It also attracted flies which then infected food. By contrast, the Talmud, which was the Jewish civil law based on the law of Moses, upheld modern standards of public hygiene back in the first century. The Talmud would not allow rubbish heaps and dunghills inside cities like Jerusalem. Fires were kept burning in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem as a kind of public incinerator. This was by far the best way of controlling fly-borne infections, and was of great value to public health.



**A law
ahead of its time**

- Sewage must be buried away from habitation

4. Disease control

a) Infectious discharges

The law of Moses had strict guidelines regarding conditions giving rise to any form of bodily discharge:

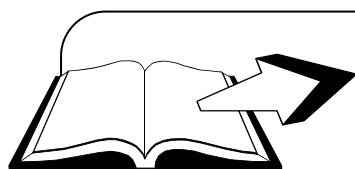
Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When any man has a discharge from his body, his discharge is unclean ... Every bed is unclean on which he who has the discharge lies, and everything on which he sits shall be unclean ... He who sits on anything on which he who has the discharge sat shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening. And he who touches the body of him who has the discharge shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening. If he who has the discharge spits on him who is clean, then he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening ... The vessel of earth that he who has the discharge touches shall be broken, and every vessel of wood shall be rinsed in water.'

Leviticus 15 v 1 to 12

In these verses there are several up-to-date principles of public hygiene:

- All discharges were regarded as unclean
- The person having the discharge was also unclean
- Furthermore, anything he came into contact with was unclean
- Anyone spat upon by a person who was unclean was made unclean
- Contaminated earthen vessels were to be destroyed, but wooden vessels could be rinsed in water (see page 35)

It is only relatively recently that we have learnt that disease is spread by contact from discharges and from spitting.



**A law
ahead of its time**

- All contact with bodily discharges required washing
- Being spat upon required washing
- Contaminated earthen pots were to be destroyed
- Contaminated wooden vessels could be rinsed

b) Washing after handling dead bodies

He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean.

Numbers 19 v 11 and 12

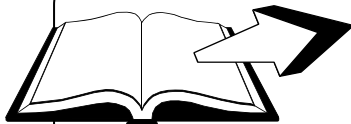


Washing –
a vital part of modern hygiene

Moses told the Jews that after they had handled a dead body they had to be quarantined for seven days, and then undergo an elaborate washing procedure afterwards.

Until about a hundred years ago surgeons used to handle the dead and the dying and then go straight into the operating theatre without washing. Many of their patients died of infections. These might have lived if early surgeons had kept this principle from the law of Moses.

Nowadays healthcare workers are aware of the risk of cross infection between patients. They wash their hands frequently and wear protective clothing, such as disposable sterile gloves and theatre gowns.



**A law
ahead of its time**

- Washing is required after handling dead bodies

c) Isolation of infectious diseases

Now the leper on whom the sore is, his clothes shall be torn and his head bare ... He is unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Leviticus 13 v 45 and 46

“Lepers” were commanded to live separately from the rest of the people. The Biblical term “leprosy” includes a whole group of infectious diseases. The modern practice of isolating those suffering from infectious diseases was derived directly from the Jews.

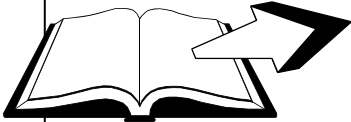


Modern isolation ward symbol

...the priest shall isolate the one who has the sore seven days. And the priest shall examine him on the seventh day; and indeed if the sore appears to be as it was, and the sore has not spread on the skin, then the priest shall isolate him another seven days. Then the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day

Leviticus 13 v 4 to 6

The law of Moses also recommended what we know as “quarantine”, which involves isolation and re-examination to confirm the diagnosis in doubtful cases.



- People with infectious diseases should be isolated
- Quarantine is required for doubtful cases

**A law
ahead of its time**

We have seen that the law of Moses given 3,500 years ago incorporates many aspects of modern public health which have only been rediscovered in the recent past. We can conclude that the intelligence behind the law given to Moses was from a being with knowledge far ahead of the civilization of those days.

