Explanations of the Food Laws

Countless rabbis, scholars, and faithful followers have spent hundreds of years pouring over the expanse of passages in Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and the rest of the Torah which provide the law. The result of these efforts in terms of explaining the food laws has consistently been further research. No one is really certain of why the food laws look the way they do. In fact, there are almost definitely many right answers. The food laws given to the people wandering in the wilderness who would eventually be known as Jews could be based on symbolism, alignment with the character of God, cleanliness, association with pagans, or something known only to God.

Jewish food laws have been said to coincide with the countless symbols both common and uncommon in the faith tradition. As an ancient source, Philo speaks extensively on the topic, especially in his work “Special Laws.” Philo begins by explaining the numbers involved in what animals are clean and unclean. There is “arithmetical subtilty”[[1]](#footnote-1) that Moses uses in the repetition of the “perfect”1 numbers 7 and 10. In this case, there are 10 clean quadrupeds. These 10 animals are the result of two requirements: they must split the hoof, they must chew the cud. Philo arrives at the symbolic 10 from the 2 requirements and then supplies the symbolic meaning of each requirement. An animal must split the hoof because it must show the clear division between good and evil in order to be clean, any animal having only one part to their foot could allow space for confusion. Moreover, it is a symbol for a path in life. There are both virtuous and wicked options, not one single path.

Similarly, an animal must chew the cud as an example for those learning new things, especially scripture or doctrine. In order to fully understand a concept, one must hear it, or bite it, then will learn it, or get some basic nutrients, and only when continuing to mull on the information and exercising the memory will they fully comprehend it, or fully digest it.1

There is also an insistence on wholeness or completeness as a symbol throughout the food laws. The requirements of each category of animal are wide spread. For example, an aquatic animal must have scales and fins. This is what most clearly represents a fish. It provides the generalized, over-arching theme in order to unite the category. Anything outside of that single *whole* is unclean. It is different and, therefore, not ok. Each categorical breakdown acts like this as it creates an in-group and out-group.[[2]](#footnote-2) Of course, the actual animals in these groups are fairly unimportant in terms of why they are what they are. The emphasis is on symbolism and definition.

Many of these laws push the Jews to align themselves with the characteristics of God. For example, God’s “discomfort with violence and bloodshed”2 is mirrored in His request for actions “becoming to the gentle soul.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In context, Philo is explaining what to do with carnivorous animals deserving of death. He says that while they do deserve to die, retaliation is more accurately rooted in anger, “a savage passion,”3 which is forbidden. In reality, giving in to any passion is wrong in the eyes of God. The character of God includes the strength of moderation as well. When Philo begins his section on food laws, he first glosses over why these laws exist. He says that God has forbidden many things because they would “excite treacherous pleasure” which leads to “an incurable evil to both souls and bodies.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In the rest of this introductory section Philo uses many comparative and superlative terms like “nicest” and “most delicate.”4 This emphasis on the extravagant ends in a call to embrace the moderation of the character of God. There is a near Aristotelian call for “a middle path”4 observing “minute particularity.”3

Some of the food laws are also based on ritual cleanliness. Fish with both scales and fins are considered clean.3 Fish with scales and fins can also swim upstream or at least live in moving water. Moving water is ritually clean in the Priestly tradition.2 There is thought to be a connection not only in the symbol of the fish being able to swim against the enemy,[[5]](#footnote-5) but also that they are ritually clean because of the consistently clean environment in which they live, allowing Jews to consume them.

The food law functioned inside of the law as a whole in order to separate Israel as the chosen people from the rest of the world. The food law, therefore, took into account what others were eating and using animals for. In this theory, when an animal was used in another cult or religion it would be shunned in order to show allegiance to the God of Israel.[[6]](#footnote-6) For instance, the pig. The pig was frequently used “in the worship of underworld deities”7 by Egyptians, Canaanites, and other pagans,6 so it could not be considered clean. However, the bull was also very frequently used in pagan worship across these same cultures. God not only deems the bull clean, but also commands its use in many rituals of sacrifice and worship.[[7]](#footnote-7)

One of the cruder theories about the food laws assumes that there is simply no rhyme or reason behind them. The logic here is that God implements them to challenge His chosen people in a test of their obedience. It expands to say that God may see certain reasoning in choosing these animals, but it is unclear to the limited mind of humans. “They [the food laws] were given as a demonstration of God's authority”[[8]](#footnote-8) alone and to challenge or disobey them would be to go against the divine command.

As Gentiles began to worship the God of Israel the food laws came into question. When Gentiles asked what and why these things were, Jews needed to have an answer. The idea of separating one group from another had to be abandoned, as the “chosen people” grew to include people from all nations. The symbolism and connection to pagans would be lost as the decades passed unless carefully preserved. Many Christians followed the word of Paul saying that Gentiles are “justified by faith in Christ”[[9]](#footnote-9) and abandoned these cumbersome laws. Some followed his thought in 1Corinthians more closely saying that as long as the individual understands that the food is from the God of Israel it is alright, but never in the sight of someone whose faith may be shaken.[[10]](#footnote-10) Christians, especially as decades turned to centuries, essentially abandoned all of the food laws.

Jews, on the other hand, have remained faithful to nearly all of these laws through not just centuries, but millennia. Whether they were based on symbolism, alignment with the character of God, cleanliness, association with pagans, something known only to God, or something completely unrelated to any of these things, they are strong. There is something truly incredible about laws that persevere across thousands of years, especially when we honestly have no earthly idea of how they came to be the way they are.

References

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New Revised Standard Version

Philo, given in class

Vanderkam, textbook for class, used only for background information on texts

1. Philo, 626 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Morrow, 163-164 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Philo, 626 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. 625 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. 627 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Moskala, 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Morrow, 164 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Moskala, 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Galatians 2:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 1Corinthians 8:4-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)