



The Law given through Moses*

8. Food and national health

Islip Collyer

THE STRINGENT laws regarding food have perhaps been kept by the Jews better than any of the other features of the Mosaic economy. This is in harmony with general experience. Men tend to be conservative in this matter, strong prejudices persisting from one generation to another. There can be no doubt that the dietetic rules were good for health, especially in a land where the weather was often warm. Even in colder climates, many people have discovered that the nearer they keep to the Mosaic laws of diet the better they are in health. There may have been a deeper meaning in these rules, but expositors who have attempted to find it have not been very successful, and this is not the time to make a new effort in this direction.

There is no justification for the argument sometimes raised that, as the Law was given with a religious and moral object, it cannot have been designed to keep the people in bodily health. There is surely nothing incompatible between the two ideas; rather do they naturally go together.

There have been many instances of willing and capable minds being hindered and shackled by physical defects. If the bodily disabilities are caused or aggravated by unwise habits of life, there is a clear moral fault in the matter. Many people may come together to hear the instruction of one who is well qualified to teach them. If the teacher is unable to discharge his duties through physical illness, it is unfortunate for all concerned. If the incapacitating malady was caused by unwise action, for instance the taking of food that was known to be attended with danger of gastronomic disturbance, the teacher is surely at fault.

To be a holy people for the service of God, it is incumbent upon us to maintain our health and strength as well as possible. Whatever hidden meanings there may have been in the food laws

given to Israel, it is certain that national health was one of the objects. Nor can there be any doubt that something was effected in this direction. It is related that in a time of dreadful plague, the Jews suffered so little that some of the sorely stricken Gentiles accused them of being in some way the cause of epidemic.

Some statistics showing average expectation of life reveal a marked superiority of the Jew in many lands. In Hungary, in the nineteenth century, the difference was startling, the average life of Croats being given as 20.2, Germans 26.7, and Jews 46.6. Obviously, these are whole life figures, and the main difference would be in the matter of infant mortality. Gentiles who attain to old age sometimes linger on, when the more intense Jewish life burns itself out. It is in younger days, and especially in infancy, that the Jew shows greater stamina, in spite of persecution and deprivations. He has probably kept the laws regarding food better than any others.

DISCIPLES of Christ who are called upon to be "a royal priesthood, an holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9), are surely under an obligation to keep from that which endangers health, so as to maintain body and mind in form for active service. Christians, however, in this as in all other features of the Law, are given liberty. This certainly does not mean that they are free to act according to natural inclination. It is an emancipation given to those who are supposed to be fit for freedom, with a recognition of the responsibilities that go with privilege.

When we loose a dog from the lead, it is not an intimation that he can behave just as he may desire. We give him liberty because he is supposed to have learned certain lessons so well

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that he can be trusted. If he betrays the trust he must be chained again. In this, as in all other matters, Christians are called upon to be temperate and moderate. We must neither be careless with food to the detriment of health, nor must we make a religion of our dietetic principles, for that is equally harmful.

If it is suggested that the Mosaic Law regarding clean and unclean food is not in accordance with any scientific classification, it may be answered that it was intended to be practical, giving rules which could be understood by ordinary people. Again, we may recognise the possibility of much deeper reasons, but for the moment we are only considering the obvious bearings of the matter. The Law gave the people the rules in terms that they could understand.

IT MAY be noted that in the matter in which Gentiles have departed most definitely from the Law, the British people have devised a homely rule for their guidance. They eat pork, but the rule has been laid down only to take it when there is an 'r' in the name of the month. This sounds most unscientific, and yet it is in accord with well-attested fact. It excludes the months of May, June, July and August, when the weather in the British Isles is apt to be warm. There have been instances of people transgressing this old rule and deeply regretting their error. Many of our friends, without any attempt to impose the restrictions of the Mosaic Law, hold that pork is unfit to eat at any time. All agree that it is not a suitable food for warm weather. If it is unsuitable in an English summer, it would certainly not be fit for food in a warmer land.

This suggests a practical reason for more individual liberty to be given in Christian lands. The gospel call was to go into all the world. In some lands it would not only be impossible to maintain the old form of worship with Jerusalem as the centre, but even laws of diet might need modification. The fats which, under the Law, had to be burnt unto the Lord, would not have been good for food in a warm country; but in some extremely cold regions it might hardly be possible to sustain life without them.

That physical health is affected by our food will be admitted by everyone. It is hardly less obvious that there is a connection, too, with mental and moral qualities. A traveller to many lands once described a scene he had witnessed when a crowd of savages feasted on a whale that had been cast up dead on the beach. We should

not expect such gross feeders to be of a high mental and moral standard; and it was not surprising to learn that they were as low as their habit of feeding suggested. A measure of discrimination in such matters would surely go with mental and moral culture. On the other hand, it is certainly not indicative of advanced mentality if people are so particular in this matter that food appears to be the most serious problem of life. As in all other subjects, moderation should be the rule.

ANOTHER matter in which the Law pressed heavily on the experiences of ordinary life was in the rules to be observed when a child was born. The mother was accounted unclean for a week if the child was a boy, and two weeks for a girl. After this she had to continue a further purification, to touch no hallowed thing nor come into the sanctuary for thirty-three days for a son, or sixty-six days for a daughter. Then a sacrifice had to be brought for a burnt offering.

There has been much controversy regarding this matter, and much rebellious murmuring of the flesh, especially at the discrimination between male and female, apparently to the detriment of the latter. Some students have suggested that the longer period of uncleanness for a daughter is a reference to original sin, and the fact that the woman was first in the transgression. Others have pointed out the significance of circumcision in the male child, having no counterpart in the female.

There is certainly something to be said for this idea. Circumcision was inaugurated in patriarchal times, and it was incorporated in the Mosaic system. It was another of those laws with a double object, and it furnishes another instance of the manner in which increased knowledge has forced critics to change their tone. We can remember an ancient attack in which the writer said it was impossible to believe that God would ever order such a barbarous and senseless act. Then it was found that, instead of being barbarous and senseless, it was advocated by some modern physicians, not as a sign or symbol of anything, but simply as a practical provision for physical health.

As with the dietetic rules, this may have been one object. With such a people as ancient Israel, and in the conditions of life which then prevailed, circumcision may have been desirable from this point of view. Clearly, however, there was something more, and of far greater

importance. Circumcision was a most obvious and impressive sign of the cutting-off of sinful flesh. That this deeper significance was understood even in Mosaic times is shown by the reference to uncircumcised hearts (Lev. 26:41). The circumcision of the male child on the eighth day might well have some bearing on the mother's period of uncleanness.

Some years ago Mr H. L. Hastings suggested a more practical reason for the longer period of separation after the birth of a daughter. He claimed that, with a vigorous and virile people, the strict observance of this rule would slightly increase the proportion of male births. He maintained that this result had actually followed with the Jews, and that, especially in days when men were constantly exposed to danger of sudden death, it was an advantage to have this increase of male lives. This involves a biological argument which we need not consider now. It is interesting, however, in passing, to recognise the possibility of laws, which may seem strange to us, being backed by reasons of which we should never have thought.

IN Palestine it was inevitable that a comprehensive law should pay special attention to the terrible scourge of leprosy. The priests had to undertake the unpleasant work of scrutiny that in modern times would fall upon medical practitioners. On suspicion of leprosy breaking out, the priest was called upon to make a most careful examination. After an interval there was to be further scrutiny to ascertain whether the apparent infection had spread. If it was proved that a man was, in fact, a leper, he was excluded from the congregation. This was inevitable in the interests of the nation.

There were several varieties of leprosy, the description of which may not quite correspond to that which can be observed in the East now. Diseases sometimes change their character, and, even in these days of highly specialised knowledge, there are different maladies that are loosely described by a single word. Influenza, for instance, either changes its character frequently, or else there are several different diseases that are called by the same name. There was one form of leprosy, which, if it ran its full course, turning the whole of the skin white, had no more power for evil; and the victim, although unsightly, might be accounted clean. There were some far more terrible forms of the scourge, in which the plague was progressive until the human form was destroyed. Clearly there were some skin eruptions of a different order for which a cure was possible. Skin diseases were not always leprosy, any more than tumours are always malignant.

These matters, however, need not claim our attention here. The most important aspect of this matter is in the fact that in Scripture leprosy is taken as a symbol of sin. In its insidious beginning, its gradual development, its terrible effects and the growing insensitiveness of the victim, both physically and mentally, it is a most appropriate parable of sin. Here again we may observe in the Law that remarkable blend of the practical with the parabolic. When lepers were cured and restored to the congregation, the final cleansing was an elaborate and prolonged process, partly most practical and approved by modern science, and partly ceremonial—with no practical object, but with symbolic meanings which can hardly be resisted, even by unwilling students. This, with many other lessons of ritual prophecy, will be considered a little later.

HIDDEN JEWS EMERGE IN MEXICO (continued from p. 477)

of people worshipping in a synagogue with a Torah scroll and burning olive oil in a lamp. There are now two hundred worshipping there in a newer synagogue, but one which is entered through an unmarked door in a high brick wall, a habit derived from many years of worshipping in secret.

The rabbi of a congregation in El Paso, Texas, just over the border from Mexico and once part of Mexico, has experienced increasing numbers

of people coming to him and claiming to be Jews, as have rabbis in other areas. Just how many of these hidden Jews there are in north Mexico is not known; one estimate is that up to a quarter could be of Jewish ancestry, but this is almost certainly much exaggerated. It seems, however, that bit by bit all over the world communities of Jews are coming to light ready for that day when their Messiah comes and the call goes forth for them to return to the land of their forefathers.