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**RELIGION AND HEALTH: A STUDY ON SELECTED
OLD TESTAMENT DIETARY LAWS
FOR HEALTHY LIVING**

Nesta ANDY-PHILIP
andynestaphilip@yahoo.com
+234 08035776084

Department of Christian Religious Studies
Faculty of Arts, University of Abuja,
Abuja, Nigeria.

Fortunatus Godwin Pontifex ALABI, Ph.D
fortunatusgodwinp.fg@gmail.com
+2348065688983

Department of Christian Religious Studies,
College of Humanities, Redeemer's University Ede,
Osun State.

Abstract

Healing and divine health are God's perfect will for mankind. God's plan for man was that he would enjoy divine health. Good health is one of the requisites for worship. A personality in good health stands on a better

pedestal of worship than a personality with health challenges. Just as the soul needs *hadebar- the Word* for sound mind, games, natural foods rich in minerals, vitamins, trace elements, vital nutrients and other substances which have positive medical and curative properties are needed to keep the physical body in good health, in this era of wonder drugs, hormones and synthetic compounds. This paper which is mainly an inductive study, seeks to re-echo the need for all and sundry to adopt and apply biblical dietary principles for the enhancement of good health. Therefore, through this inductive study, the paper projects God's standard on the issue of diet as taught in the Scripture. From the findings of the study, the reasons, and benefits of the dietary laws in the Scripture are germane.

Introduction

Human beings today struggle with array of ailments such as cancer, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes etc. to mention but a few. All these ailments are believed to have their root from poor feeding and disobedience to dietary rules. According to Don Colbert,



Both are incredible pieces of machinery. What would happen to either of these automobiles if you did not change the oil regularly? What if you put water in your Mercedes' gas tank instead of gasoline? What if you never had it serviced, failed to put air in the tires and never replaced the air

filter? Instead, you simply drove it constantly and recklessly. What if you left road salts and acids on the body and frames? What would be the life span of this expensive automobile? Millions of individuals are doing the same thing to their bodies. We are filling our tanks with junk foods and wondering, why do I always feel so exhausted? We are subjecting our bodies to environmental toxins and wondering why we contract diseases.¹

This paper treads on the same line as Colbert, it is a thing of great concern as younger and younger people are stricken with cancer, heart disease and many other diseases. Many people in Nigeria today are caught up in a fast-paced, fast-food lifestyle that has little regard for health and nutrition. In order that we may avoid further complications of our health status, this study therefore, is a clarion call to the resurgence of dietary laws in the scripture.

All throughout the Bible, references are made to the medicinal properties of foods and herbs. Representing health and longevity from God, the importance of diet and of preparing and eating food was oftentimes seen as a spiritual act. This study, explores biblical dietary regulations and their health implications under the following sub-headings:

Key Terms

Kosher: means to be right and proper to something that is according to the rules of ritual purity.

Halakh: The Jewish Laws associated with conduct of lives divided into diet, purity and idolatry.

Basar with the synonyms: *Mahut*, *Ikar* and *Tkchen*, all mean meat.

Meat, in its broadest definition, is animal tissue used as food. Most often it refers to skeletal muscle and associated fat, but it may also refer to non-muscle organs, including lungs, livers, skin, brains, bone marrow and kidneys. The word *meat* is also used by the meat packing and butchering industry in a more restrictive sense- the flesh of mammalian species (sheep, cattle, etc.) raised and butchered for human consumption, to the exclusion of fish, poultry, and eggs. Eggs and seafood are rarely referred to as *meat* even though they consist of animal tissue. Animals that consume only or mostly animals are carnivores.

Mazon with the synonyms *Lechem*, *makhal*, *okhel* and *Okhla* mean food. Food is any substance, usually composed primarily of carbohydrates, fats, water and/or proteins that can be eaten or drunk by an animal or human

being for nutrition or pleasure. Items considered food may be sourced from plants, animals or other categories such as fungus or fermented products like alcohol. Although many human cultures sought food items through hunting and gathering, today most cultures use farming, ranching, and fishing, with hunting, foraging and other methods of a local nature included but playing a minor role.²

Origin of the Dietary Laws

The biblical health laws are usually referred to as the Laws of Moses. Many scholars assume that Moses collected primitive taboos to form a code of laws. Some claim that the reasons for clean and unclean foods are purely arbitrary, irrational or unexplainable. Some anthropological speculations suggest that unclean animals are imperfect members of their species. Scholars also claim that the biblical laws have nothing to do with health, but were merely rituals to separate the Israelites from their pagan neighbors, and that only Jews need to observe these laws today. However, all these attempts to explain the biblical health laws are inadequate, as we will see in this paper.

In Leviticus 11–20, where dietary laws are first outlined in detail, the Scripture say "the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them", "Speak to the children of Israel, saying, "These are the animals which you may eat upon the earth" (Leviticus 11:1–2). This same introductory statement precedes the enumeration of other health laws in the book of Leviticus. According to the Bible, the author of the biblical health laws was not Moses but God Himself. God explained to the Israelites that, if they obeyed His commandments they would experience none of the diseases that plagued other nations (Exodus 15:26). God gave these laws to His chosen people so they could be an example to the world. God wanted their better health to be noticed by surrounding nations who could then inquire how they, too, could gain the same results (Deuteronomy 4:1–8). According to Lawrence Boadt, "While some theologians have naively suggested that these regulations were given to Israelites to punish them for their disobedience, these laws were actually given by a God of love to show human beings a better way to live. The health laws were to be taught by the priests, because of their fundamental importance."³

It is quite instructive to read what Bible reference books have to say about the health laws. David and Pat Alexander state, "Moses' Law... including its Health and Food regulations, was far purer, more rational,

humane and democratic than, and showed a wisdom far in advance of, anything in ancient legislation, Babylonian, Egyptian or any other."⁴ David E. O'Brien concurs: "Today we are able to understand and appreciate the sound principles of diet, hygiene and medicine which these laws express."⁵ W. E. Vine commenting on Leviticus 11, states that "The Levitical laws of cleanness have no known extensive parallels in surrounding cultures, so the idea of Moses borrowing primitive taboos does not hold up, because surrounding cultures exhibit little of this sort of law."⁶

While some scholars assert that the biblical laws were not given for reasons of health, John H. Walton states that "The spiritual and hygienic reasons for the laws may still be affirmed. They are remarkably valuable in the area of public health... These laws protected Israel from bad diet, dangerous vermin and communicable diseases... These were rule-of-thumb laws that God gave in His wisdom to a people who could not know the reason for the provision" (Walton, 2007, p.149). Thus, the idea that these biblical laws are outdated and old-fashioned and have nothing to do with health is simply an aberration. These rules are as old and at the same time new because they meet contemporary therapeutic needs.

Dietary Laws

The most familiar biblical health laws define clean and unclean meats, creatures that are acceptable to eat and those that are not. Yet, most people have little or no understanding of the medically sound reasons behind these rules. The scientific wisdom behind the biblical dietary rules is seldom taught today; instead, these laws are commonly viewed as Old Testament regulations that are no longer applicable. However, Richard L. Pratt, Jr. opines: "These lists of clean and unclean creatures have a significance often ignored. Far from being based on fad or fancy, these lists emphasize a fact not discovered until late in the last century... that animals carry diseases dangerous to man."⁷ In fact, the same animals labeled unclean in Scripture still carry parasitic diseases that are still dangerous to human beings today. Nigerians will not forget the Ebola and monkey pox pandemic too quickly.

Clean land animals are ruminants grazing animals such as cattle, sheep, deer and elk, whose digestive tracts are designed to turn grass that human beings cannot digest into meat that we can digest. Most unclean animals are carnivores or scavengers that can transmit dangerous diseases

to human beings. Pigs eat roots and grains, rather than grass, and thus are ecological competitors to human beings. Clean fish have fins and scales. Unclean aquatic organisms like clams and oysters are filter feeders that purify water, and that concentrate poisonous chemicals and pathologic bacteria and viruses in their tissues. Eating an oyster is like eating your vacuum cleaner bag, yet modern connoisseurs do not like to think about this. Crabs and lobsters are scavengers that eat dead things on the bottom of bodies of water.⁸ Most unclean birds are carnivores or scavengers. God in His wisdom inspired laws that protect humans from contracting dangerous diseases, but also protect nature's cleanup crew by making them off limits as food for mankind. These biological principles still operate today.

However, the laws of clean and unclean meats are not the only biblical rules that concern diet. In Leviticus 3:17, we read that "you shall eat neither fat nor blood" (Leviticus 7:23–27). One of the most significant discoveries in the last century was that high fat diets are linked to increased levels of heart disease, stroke, cancer of the colon and breast and a host of other pathologies; including obesity; that bring additional complications. Our challenge is to learn to recognize major sources of fat in our diet (visible fats on meat, fatty cuts of meat, like bacon, generous amounts of heavy dressings, spoonfuls of oil etc.), and reduce our intake of fats that are high in calories and often high in saturated fats. It has also become painfully obvious in recent decades that contaminated blood and blood products can transmit AIDS and hepatitis.⁹ The simple principle of avoiding fat and blood is a powerful principle of prevention if it is followed, because it still works today.

Biblical principles also cover the use of plant foods and carbohydrates. Ezekiel was instructed to make nutritious bread from "wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet and spelt" (Ezekiel 4:9). This was multi-grain bread containing complex carbohydrates for energy, different kinds of fiber and multiple amino acids for proteins and bodybuilding. It was not a highly refined product like today's common breads that have most of their nutrients removed, then are misleadingly called "enriched" when a few nutrients are added back. This anomaly is captured by J. A. Jussawalla thus:

Undoubtedly, this distance from nature has denied the present generation of farm-fresh foods prepared by nature to meet man's nutritional needs. Most food, especially the increasingly popular convenience foods are largely denatured, artificially flavoured, turgid and semi-

synthetic; devoid of their vital food values. Whatever nutrients are left in them after long processing, storage and transportation are poor substitutes for natural wholesomeness. Such packed and preserved foods are nothing but foodless foods.¹⁰

The Bible advises us to use sweets like honey or other simple sugars sparingly (Proverbs 25:16). We are warned against overeating, gluttony (Proverbs 28:7). Modern books on health give the same advice. The biblical dietary laws are not old-fashioned, burdensome regulations. They are divinely inspired guidelines that have taken mankind's science thousands of years to understand.

The Kosher Foods

Kosher comes from the Hebrew word *Kosher* meaning 'fit', as in fit for consumption and refers to food that is fit to be eaten according to Jewish dietary law. The word is also used as a euphemism for that which is legitimate. There are Kosher foods and the Kosher diet in the scripture, the following are noteworthy:

i) *Trees whose edible yield is bearing seeds or is seed.* This kind of food is mostly fruits. All fruits are acceptable in the biblical diet, insofar as they come from seeds. Fruits from fruit trees are okay to eat, as well as anything that grows on a vine, a shrub or anything with a woody bark tissue. H. K. Bakhru opines, "Fruits are one of the oldest forms of food known to man. In fact, Adam, the first man ate an apple, "the forbidden fruit". According to the Quran, the fruits, like grape, date, fig, olive and pomegranate are the gifts and heavenly fruits of God. Fresh and dry fruits are the natural staple food of man. They contain substantial quantities of essential nutrients in a rational proportion."¹¹

ii) *Plants whose edible yield is bearing seeds or are seeds:* This classification refers to any thing that may grow on plants that are not necessarily trees. Examples of seed-bearing plants include squash, tomatoes, corn and beans.

iii) *Field plants:* Field plants or plants of the field are the next thing on the list, which can consist of herbs, roots and green, leafy vegetables.

iv) *Clean meat*: The definition of clean meat is pretty complex. According to Leviticus, clean meat is defined as the meat of every animal that has the hoof cloven in two and chews the cud. Examples of clean meat include the ox (cattle), buffalo, sheep, goat, deer, gazelle, antelope and mountain sheep, just to name a few. Examples of unclean meat include pig, camel, hare and rock badger. The Bible also instructs us not to eat the blood of animals or to eat any meat that has been sacrificed to idols.

v) As for seafood, everything with fins and scales are allowed, but whatever doesn't have fins such as shellfish is prohibited. For birds, everything is allowed except eagles, vultures, kites, ravens, ostriches, seagulls and owls. It is also noted that all winged insects are considered unclean.

vi) *Olives and Olive Oil*-Deut. 6:10-11: The Jews were the elite olive merchants of their day. During antiquity, this precious commodity was used for its healing capabilities, for cooking, to light lamps, for soaps, for cosmetics and even for currency. Olive oil was considered so sacred to ancient culture that it was even used to anoint kings and priests.

vii) *Pomegranate* Deut. 8:7-8: Several research studies have shown that pomegranates contain strong anti-inflammatory, anti-oxidant, anti-obesity and anti-tumor properties. According to researchers, Peter J. D'Adamo noted that: "Many beneficial effects are related to the presence of ellagic acid, flavonoids, anthocyanins, and flavones, which seem to be its most therapeutically beneficial components."¹² Subsequently, pomegranates are being considered valid treatment options for chronic diseases such as cancer, insulin resistance, intestinal inflammation and obesity.

viii) *Fermented Grape*: Song of Solomon 1:2: Several epidemiological studies have argued that moderate alcohol intake, particularly drinking red wine, may lower the risk of cardiac mortality due to atherosclerosis. The general recommendation is no more than one (five ounces) of red wine per day except for men under the age of 65 who may be able to have two drinks per day. "When grape juice is fermented, natural anti-oxidant and flavonoid properties are exemplified through a substance called resveratrol. Consequently, researchers have focused much of their attention on evaluating the health benefits of resveratrol in recent years,

which has been linked to chronic disease prevention and treatment including diabetes and obesity"¹³.

ix) *Flax*- Proverbs 31:10, 13: One of the most important plant fibers in the Bible, flax has been used to make linen for as long as recorded history. Although it has been widely replaced by cotton in recent years, flax remains one of the most important fiber plants in the world and one of the top Bible foods. According to Jordan S. Rubin "Having a rich history of medicinal use dating back to Babylon in 3000 B.C., flax seeds have been wholeheartedly embraced by natural health and medical circles alike because it provides a natural, vegan source of omega-3 essential fatty acids, lignans and fiber. Subsequently, research shows that flax seeds may be able to help fight against cancer, lung disease and heart disease."¹⁴

x) *Sprouted Grain Bread*-Ezekiel 4:9: In the Book of Ezekiel, God gave the prophet Ezekiel a recipe for what has proven to be the perfect bread as science has recently shown us that it creates the complete protein, one that contains all essential amino acids. The main reason that Ezekiel's bread is healthier than other breads is because the grains and legumes are soaked and sprouted, which makes them easier to digest and as a result, is the only bread to make this list of top Bible foods. Harvesting sprouted grains happens right after the seed has started to sprout, but before it has developed into a full-grown plant. During this critical growth state, the young shoot digests a portion of the starch to fuel its growth. Subsequently, because the grain's starch has been utilized, the level of vital nutrients including proteins, vitamins and minerals are enhanced.

xi) *Raw Goat Milk*- Proverbs 27:26-27: Raw milk is filled with the vitamins and minerals that contribute to a healthy dental fluid flow and help maintain strong teeth. Its importance is captured by Jordan S. Rubin thus:

Loaded with calcium, vitamin K2, magnesium, phosphorus and fat-soluble vitamins, researchers have carried out a comparative study on the properties of cows' milk compared to those of goats' milk and have discovered that goats' milk may be even more beneficial. Unlike cows' milk, scientists from the University of Granada have revealed that data concerning goats' milk suggests that it could prevent diseases such as anemia and bone

demineralization. Additionally, goats' milk has properties that help with the digestive and metabolic utilization of minerals such as iron, calcium, phosphorus and magnesium.¹⁵

xii) *Lamb* -Exodus 12:11: Due to the significance of the Passover Lamb and equating that role to Christ, lambs are the most revered animal in history, and the most honored food in the Bible. Lamb is the meat of young sheep that are generally one year old or younger. Due to slaughtering the animal at such a young age, the marbled fat content is considerably lower than older varieties of meat, which contributes to heart health and helps prevent obesity. "Rich in protein, vitamin B12, vitamin B6, niacin, zinc and other vital nutrients, it is arguably the healthiest red meat on the planet. On a side note, make sure to purchase local, organic, grass-fed varieties when possible. Grain-fed factory farmed animals are loaded with genetically modified corn feed, countless additives and are simply not worth the risk."¹⁶

xiii) *Bitter Herbs-coriander and parsley*-Exodus 12:8: According to Ryken L et al: Scholars are not in complete agreement on which plants the authors of the Bible were referring to when writing about bitter herbs, but coriander and parsley generally make the list. Coriander is the seed of the powerful anti-oxidant and natural cleansing agent cilantro. Traditional medicine has long used and labeled coriander as an anti-diabetic plant and scientific research confirms its helpful effects on blood sugar. Coriander also appears to be helpful for high blood pressure and heavy metal detoxification amongst other positive health effects. Parsley is another health-promoting herb and a rich source of several crucial vitamins, including vitamin A, vitamin C and potassium.¹⁷

xiv) *Vegetables* - *Daniel 1:12*: Instead of eating the tasty dainties of the Babylonians, Daniel and his friends requested to live on a vegetarian diet. When it was time for them to be presented to the king, Nebuchadnezzar and all of the leaders were astounded to see that the four young Jewish friends were fit and looked better than the other young men who ate the Babylonian fare. Often referred to as the Daniel diet or the Daniel fast, history and biblical text actually support that Daniel continued his vegetarian lifestyle throughout his entire life. "Of all the food groups, vegetables are arguably the most nutrient-dense and safest to eat. There's

relatively no risk in consuming too many of them; whereas, if you eat fruit all day, you run the risk of spiking your blood sugar or developing dental caries because of the excess sugar."¹⁸

(xv) *Raw Honey- Proverbs 25:16*: It is no wonder raw honey is referred to as "liquid gold." The medicinal applications to the skin and internal body seem limitless. First of all, raw honey is loaded with key nutrients. Josh Axe noted that: (xvi) Research has also shown that honey contains the disease-fighting antioxidant flavonoids like pinostrobin, pinocembrin and chrysin. In addition to being a fantastic replacement to energy drinks for athletes and people needing a little boost, raw honey also supports the growth of probiotics in gastrointestinal tract including (Bifidobacteria). Another fascinating quality of honey is its ability to improve allergy symptoms. However, be sure to purchase the local variety, as it will contain indigenous pollen species unlike generic store-bought brands.¹⁹

Benefits of Kosher Foods

The four classifications of food trees that yield seed, plants that yield seed, field plants, and clean meat is the foundation of a biblical diet. There are also other important things to consider when starting or following a biblical diet:

i) *Water, sunshine and exercise*. These three are absolutely key to good health. You should always remember to drink lots of water, get lots of exercise and go outside. It is recommended that one drinks quart water daily for every 50 pounds of weight. Also, it is important to drink high quality water.

ii) *Eat safe, clean meat*. This means abstaining from certain kinds of meat and sea food such as pork, lobster, clams and mussels, shrimp and catfish.

iii) *Eat foods that are in season*. The Bible states that everything has a season. This should also be our attitude when it comes to picking out the things we eat. Lean towards eating fruits, vegetables and herbs that are in season, as they refresh and better for your health.

iv) *Eating raw.* Eating uncooked raw food is very much encouraged. Some vegetables may need to be cooked, but a majority of them can be enjoyed raw.

v) *Unprocessed real whole foods.* What you eat should ideally be consumed in the way that it was found in nature. This means that we should stay away from preservatives processed foods, or those produced with lots of contact with hormones, fertilizers and pesticides.

All these food restrictions may seem like a whole lot of sacrifice, but what about the rewards. According to Rubin, those who practise biblical diets and eat Bible foods can look forward to the following benefits:²⁰

i) Weight loss

A diet high in unprocessed food, fruit and vegetables is ideal for weight loss. Natural and raw fruits and vegetables carry fewer calories and are easier to digest than other processed foods.

ii) A longer life span

Josh Rubin claims that some of our ancestors that went on the Biblical diet went on to live for 120+ years. Although we may not reach that age, studies show that a diet high in fruits and vegetables lead to little or no health complications, thus indicating a longer life span.

iii) Energy and improved mood

When our bodies are in a state of imbalance due to poor dietary habits, we immediately feel it. We can feel sickly, sluggish and depressed. Eating right can increase energy, balance hormones and improve our mood.

Conclusion

While some extreme diets may suggest otherwise, we all need a balance of protein, fat, carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins, and minerals in our diets to sustain a healthy body. We don't need to eliminate certain categories of food from our diet, but rather detect and select the healthiest options from each category. Possibly the better approach is to make a few small changes at a time.

End Note

¹D. Colbert, *Living in Divine Health: It is Never Too Late to Form Healthier Habits.* (Florida: Siloam, 2006)

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³L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction.* (New Jersey: Paulis Press, 2012), 158.

⁴P. Alexander, and A. David, *The Lion Handbook to the Bible.* (Australia: Lion Publishing, 2016), 138.

⁵D. E. O'Brien, *Today's Handbook for Solving Bible Difficulties.* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2017), 176.

⁶W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2016), 1120.

⁷R. L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories: A Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives.* (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1993), 61.

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¹⁰J. M. Jussawalla, in Bakhru, H. K. *Foods that Heal: The Natural Way to Good Health.* (Delhi: Orient Press, 2010), ii.

¹¹H. K. Bakhru, *Food that Heal: The Natural to Good Health.* (Delhi: Orient Paper Backs, 2010), 13.

¹²Peter J. D'Adamo, *Eat Right for Your Type: The Individualized Diet Solution to Staying Healthy, Living Longer & Achieving Your Ideal Weight.* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1996), 70.

¹³Peter J. D'Adamo, *Eat Right for Your Type: The Individualized Diet Solution to Staying Healthy, Living Longer & Achieving Your Ideal Weight.* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1996), 72.

¹⁴J. S. Rubin, *New Testament Dietary Laws-Different for Jews and Gentiles?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan. Zondervan Publishing, 2017), 223.

¹⁵J. S. Rubin, *New Testament Dietary Laws-Different for Jews and Gentiles?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan. Zondervan Publishing, 2017), 77.

¹⁶J. S. Rubin, *New Testament Dietary Laws-Different for Jews and Gentiles?*, 78.

¹⁷ L. Ryken, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An encyclopedic exploration of the images, symbols, motifs, metaphors, figures of speech and literary patterns of the Bible.* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 1998), 297.

¹⁸ C. J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God.* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 125.

¹⁹ J. Axe, *Do you Really Want to Eat?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Press, 2017), 93

²⁰ J. S. Rubin, *New Testament Dietary Laws-Different for Jews and Gentiles?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan. Zondervan Publishing, 2017), 78.

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