



A Law ahead of its time

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 how, in all three areas, the Bible is not only accurate but far ahead of its time.



A typical modern Community Health Centre

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 hooves 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.



- Eating of unsafe meat was restricted
- Eating of meat we now know to be safe was permitted

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.

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!



Crab – not permitted



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



The law of Moses:

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

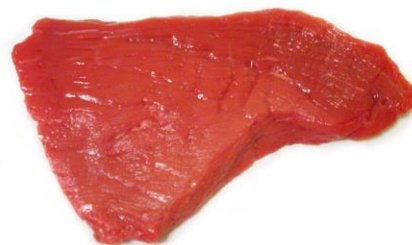
d) Fat

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



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.



- The law of Moses did not allow eating of blood

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 restricted



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 11. Yet again we can see that the law given to Moses was 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.



- Sewage must be buried away from habitation

4. The Bible guide to 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 6)

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



- 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.



- Washing is required after handling dead bodies

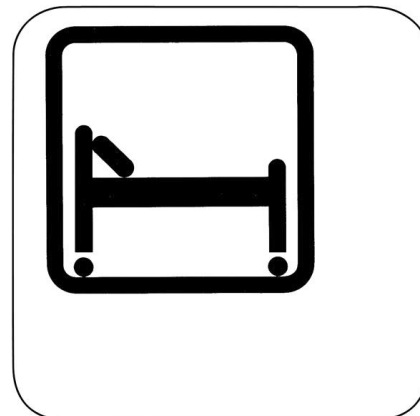


c) Isolation of infectious diseases

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

We have seen that the law of Moses given 3,500 years ago incorporates many aspects of modern public health which have only been discovered 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.



A civil law ahead of its time

There are many problems in our modern world which could have been prevented or reduced if we had used the law of Moses to regulate our world. When we look at the principles, we can see just how wise the law was.

a) Equal division of wealth

Land was wealth in Moses' time. When the land of Israel was to be divided, Moses was told:

And you shall divide the land by lot as an inheritance among your families; to the larger you shall give a larger inheritance, and to the smaller you shall give a smaller inheritance

Numbers 33 v 54

The wealth of the nation was to be shared out equally. But that did not prevent individual families from becoming poor when, for various reasons, they got into debt. They would then have to borrow money or sell parts of their land to keep going.

The law of the Year of Jubilee (every fiftieth year) ensured that eventually they got their land back again:

In this Year of Jubilee, each of you shall return to his possession.

Leviticus 25 v 13



Large estates not allowed

This law very wisely prevented families from permanently losing their land.

The amount of money they could raise by selling their land was controlled by the number of years to the next Jubilee, when they would get their land back again and have a fresh start:

According to the number of years after the Jubilee you shall buy from your neighbour, and according to the number of years of crops he shall sell to you. According to the multitude of years you shall increase its price, and according to the fewer number of years you shall diminish its price; for he sells to you according to the number of the years of the crops.

Leviticus 25 v 15 and 16



We can see the wisdom of this law, which would prevent rich fortunate families having large estates and poor unfortunate families having no land and so no means of getting out of debt.



- Wealth was equally distributed
- Transfer of land ownership was restricted
- Extremes of wealth and poverty were prevented

b) A day of rest

The law of Moses introduced a compulsory day of rest once a week:

Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.
Exodus 20 v 9 and 10

We now know that a regular day of rest is beneficial to both people and animals. When this idea is ignored, people cannot work efficiently.



- Work was to be restricted to six days a week

c) Treatment of criminals

The law of Moses was radically different from modern ideas of treating criminals, in that there were no prisons. Criminals were responsible for their actions.

If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep.
Exodus 22 v 1

The thief had to recompense his victim. Provision was made for the case when he could not repay:

...if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft.



Prisons did not exist under the law of Moses

Exodus 22 v 3

The thief was sold as a servant so that the victim could be repaid. The thief would have to work to pay back what he had stolen. This is much wiser than locking the thief up in prison where he is a burden on society and the poor victim has to suffer the loss!



- Criminals were to be responsible for their deeds
- The victim must be recompensed
- Criminals were not a burden on society

d) Consideration for others

... you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Leviticus 19 v 18

This statement in the law of Moses makes it different from all other systems of law. People were to show consideration for others. Other systems of law just stop people harming each other. This creates a society where people bend and break the rules and laws and see if they can get away with it. More often than not they can.

If the ideas in Exodus 23 verses 1 to 9 were followed, our world would be a much more pleasant place:

<i>Exodus 23 v 1 You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.</i>	Slander and perjury would be things of the past.
<i>2 You shall not follow a crowd to do evil</i>	Mob violence would not occur. Trouble often arises when lots of people get together in gangs.
<i>3 You shall not show partiality to a poor man in his dispute.</i> <i>6 You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute.</i>	Everyone would be treated equally. Many modern laws tend to favour the rich who can afford expensive "legal action".
<i>4 If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again.</i> <i>5 If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it.</i>	People would help those they disliked.
<i>8 And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous.</i>	Bribery would not be allowed. A lot of wrong can be covered up by bribery.
<i>9 Also you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.</i>	Hatred of people of other nations would stop. Much trouble in our world is a result of racial hatred.





- Deceit and lying are forbidden
- Mob violence is prohibited
- There is equal justice for poor and rich
- Consideration for other people must be shown at all times
- Bribery is not allowed
- Racial hatred is not allowed

Summary

We have now seen that the law of Moses given 3,500 years ago was in many ways wiser than our modern civil laws. Our world would be a far better place if the law of Moses governed it. We can only conclude that the intelligence behind the law given to Moses was from a more knowledgeable being than us.

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