

“as” one mistreats oneself or has been mistreated. Alternatively, he believes that Lev 19.18 only refers to how Jews should be treated, and he proposes a verse from early in Genesis, before the Abrahamic covenant, which suggests that all people must be treated equally well, since all people were created in the divine image. In either case, Ben-Azzai’s position affords a cautionary perspective on the valorization of the Golden Rule and Lev 19.18.

If we think of the historical Jesus as having kept Torah law (Mt 5.17–19), and as having been concerned with a mission to Israel (Mt 10.5–6; 15.24), then his use of Lev

FOOD AND TABLE FELLOWSHIP

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Food and table fellowship figure prominently in the New Testament. Many of Jesus’ parables draw on food imagery such as yeast, mustard seeds, and banquets, and he speaks of bread and wine as his body and blood. The Gospels—especially Luke—describe several of Jesus’ meals as well as occasions on which Jesus miraculously feeds large crowds. Leaders within the Jesus movements use table fellowship to unite believers and promote a sense of collective distinctiveness. Familiarity with Jewish food practices deepens our understanding of the New Testament and, by extension, the nascent Christian community.

FOOD RESTRICTIONS

Every culture classifies certain items as unacceptable in a civilized diet, and communities often identify themselves, or are caricatured by others, in terms of what they do or do not eat. The Torah prohibits its followers from consuming various types of meat, seafood, and crawling creatures (Lev 11; Deut 14). Within Hellenistic and Roman society, abstention from pork in particular marked Jews as different from others and drew the scorn of Gentiles (e.g., Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4.2).

Jews who embraced Hellenistic culture developed allegorical interpretations in which biblical dietary laws represented moral virtues. For example, the *Letter of Aristaeas*, a Jewish text probably written during the second century BCE, explains that the requirement for animals to have split hoofs “is a symbol to discriminate in each of our actions with a view to what is right” and that chewing the cud “signifies memory, as rumination is nothing but the recalling of life and its subsistence” (*Ep. Arist.* 150, 153–54; cf. Lev 11.3). Such allegorical interpretations, however, do not supplant the literal sense of the laws: Philo of Alexandria, a first-century CE philosopher, pairs

19.18 appears to be quite similar to Akiva’s and quite dissimilar to the way it was understood by the later Christians. Like both his Pharisaic contemporaries and later rabbinic Jews, Jesus neither redefined the category of the neighbor to include Gentiles nor replaced all the laws of Judaism with one or two commandments. Like Akiva and his students, he regarded Lev 19.18 as the greatest of the commandments in the sense that it is a superlative commandment that should be used to interpret the rest of the law. Only later, during the Gentile mission, did his followers revise this position.

his allegorical interpretations of these laws with sharp admonitions about the importance of obeying them (*Spec. Laws* 4.95–131). Adherence to biblical dietary laws remains an important element of rabbinic Judaism: the tractate devoted to this subject, *Hullin* (“slaughtering” [animals for food]), is among the longest in the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud.

Jesus and his disciples also adhered to these norms. Although Mark reports that Jesus “declared all foods clean” (7.19), it is clear from context and parallel passages (Mt 15.1–20; Lk 11.37–44) that this phrase constitutes a late and historically inaccurate interpretation of Jesus’ lesson. In these narratives, Jesus does not reject the dietary laws of the Torah but rather dismisses the Pharisaic requirement that food be consumed in a ritually pure fashion. The Hebrew term for “impure,” *tamei*, refers both to ritual defilement of the type that concerned the Pharisees and also to moral defilement caused by sinful behaviors such as those listed in Mk 7.21–22; Jesus teaches that one should worry primarily about the latter.

Jesus also dismisses the observance of frequent fasts, a practice ascribed to Pharisees and disciples of John the Baptist (Mt 9.14–15; Mk 2.18–20; Lk 5.33–35). Jesus was not opposed to fasting as such, however, and the cited passages suggest that fasting became a regularized practice among Jesus’ followers (cf. Acts 13.2–3). In the Tanakh, fasting is primarily understood as a means of eliciting divine mercy by arousing God’s pity (e.g., 2 Sam 12.16–23); by the Second Temple period, Jews also regarded fasting as a form of repentance and thus a means of obtaining divine forgiveness (e.g., Joel 2.12–13; Jon 3.4–10; Neh 9.1–2). Jesus, who endorses the latter conception of fasting, objects not only to what he regards as excessive fasting but also to ostentatiousness: as the true merits of fasting accrue in heaven, he teaches, it is

best that God alone should notice one’s self-affliction (Mt 6.16–18). This perspective on how one ought to fast contrasts with earlier yet persistent notions of fasting as a form of public humiliation that arouses the pity of others (e.g., Ps 69.11–13; Esth 4.1–3). Jesus’ critiques of certain contemporaneous practices, however, in no way indicate that he rejected the food restrictions and fasts enjoined by the Torah.

In a letter sometimes referred to as the “Apostolic Decree” (Acts 15.23–29), James the brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, enjoins Gentile believers to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.” (Condemnation of fornication and eating food sacrificed to idols also appears in Rev 2.14, 20.) The Apostolic Decree’s prohibition of “what is strangled” refers to meat from animals slaughtered in a manner that does not allow their blood to drain out. Various passages in the Torah and Prophets compare consumption of blood to murder and declare that all people, or all in the covenant community, must abstain from such activity (Gen 9.3–6; Lev 17.10–12; Ezek 33.25–26). Jews of the Second Temple period regarded consumption of food offered to idols as tantamount to idolatrous worship, and some embraced martyrdom rather than consume such meat (1 Macc 1.62–63; 2 Macc 6–7; cf. 4 Macc). The Apostolic Decree thus draws upon norms Jews regarded as universal to establish basic markers that distinguish Christ-believers from non-believing Gentiles. Early Christian interpreters of the New Testament uniformly interpret the Decree’s food restrictions literally: the argument that Christians need not abstain from blood and meat containing blood was first made by Augustine (ca. 400) and never took hold in the Eastern Churches.

A faction within the Corinthian community saw nothing wrong with eating meat offered to idols (1 Cor 8). Paul, in contrast, declares, “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (1 Cor 10.21). Nonetheless, Paul permits Christ-believers to eat food purchased in the marketplace—where much of the meat available came from sacrifices in local temples—as well as food served in pagan homes so long as the believers do not know that it had been offered to idols (1 Cor 10.25–29; cf. 5.9–10). Paul’s permissive stance regarding meat of unknown provenance finds parallels within early rabbinic literature (*t. Hul.* 2.20).

Unlike Jesus, Paul declares that “nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” (Rom 14.14, perhaps an inspiration for the gloss in Mk 7.19). In other words, Gentile believers in Christ need not adhere to the Torah’s dietary laws, but those who

regard these norms as binding, likely Jewish believers, should continue to obey them. To promote “peace and . . . mutual upbuilding,” Paul encourages those who eat all foods to accommodate those who follow the Torah’s laws (Rom 14.19). A later letter pseudonymously ascribed to Paul, however, condemns abstinence from particular foods (1 Tim 4.3–4). Christian writers of the second and third centuries polemicize against Jews and those who would follow Jewish practice for their literal adherence to the Torah’s dietary laws: these statements, they insist, are purely allegorical. According to the *Letter of Barnabas* (ca. 130), for example, Moses conveyed “spiritual” messages, “but because of their fleshly desires the people accepted them as though they referred to actual food” (10.9).

THE LORD’S SUPPER

The most significant meal in the New Testament is the “Lord’s Supper,” also known as the Last Supper, the final meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. Paul’s letters make clear that the commemorative reenactment of this event constitutes the central ritual of the Christ-believing community. Indeed, the importance of this commemorative meal within the Jesus movements may help to explain why the New Testament, especially Luke and Acts, contain so many stories about meals. Unlike the present-day celebration also known as the Eucharist (from the Gk for “thanksgiving”), Holy Communion, the Mass, or the Divine Liturgy, the practice in the New Testament period was to serve a full dinner, a Christian version of the Greco-Roman banquet. Paul emphasizes, however, that the ritual is designed not to satisfy physical hunger, but to unite believers in remembrance of Jesus’ death through the communal worship that occurred in the course of the meal (1 Cor 11.17–34). See “Baptism and Eucharist,” p. 674.

Paul treats bread and wine, staples in Mediterranean antiquity, as the primary elements of this meal. He reports that Jesus himself associated the bread with his body and the wine with his blood (1 Cor 11.24–25). This association is further developed in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 26.26–29; Mk 14.22–25; Lk 22.17–20). In Jn 6.53–54, Jesus declares that “unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.” This statement both emphasizes the significance of the Lord’s Supper and alludes to the biblical motif of ingesting God’s words (e.g., Ezek 3.1–3; Prov 24.13–14; see also Rev 10.8–10); John declares explicitly that Jesus is the Word incarnate (Jn 1.14). New Testament depictions of the Lord’s Supper and some of Jesus’ other meals and meal-related parables draw upon Jewish traditions about a messianic banquet in which the consumption of sacred

foods in the presence of God or the Messiah symbolizes the joys of the end-time (e.g., Isa 25.6–8; 1 En. 62.12–14). Rabbinic visions of the messianic era include a banquet for the righteous that God will prepare with the meat of mythical beasts (e.g., *b. Pesah.* 119b; *b. B. Bat.* 74b).

New Testament authors differ regarding when Jesus' Last Supper occurred. Paul, who provides the oldest reference to this meal, does not address this issue. The Gospel of John depicts Jesus himself as the sacrificial lamb, crucified at the time the Passover lambs were slaughtered (Jn 19.14; cf. 19.36). According to John, therefore, the Lord's Supper occurred before Passover began. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in contrast, associate the Lord's Supper with the Passover meal in which Jews gathered to consume the paschal sacrifice. It is anachronistic to call that meal a *seder*, that is, the Passover meal consisting of special foods and readings: the practices distinctive to the *seder* developed after the destruction of the Temple, when the paschal sacrifice was no longer offered. The *seder* and the meals of Jesus and his followers do, however, all contain elements common to Greco-Roman banquets, including the practices of reclining while eating (e.g., Mk 2.15), reciting prayers and hymns, and sharing copious wine.

TABLE FELLOWSHIP

The Greco-Roman banquet constituted an especially important means of strengthening bonds within social groups, including Jewish groups. Members of the Qumran community were expected to “eat in common and bless in common and deliberate in common” (1QS 6.2–3); non-members and those expelled from the community were barred from participating in such gatherings. Given the interest of Pharisees and Essenes in food purity, scholars generally presume that the sharing of meals also figured prominently in the life of these groups.

It is no surprise, therefore, that early leaders of the Jesus movements also devote particular attention to table fellowship. Paul employs exclusion from such fellowship as a means of disciplining Christ-believers (1 Cor 5.11). He and other leaders of the Jesus movements debate whether to include Gentile believers in their table fellowship because they regard participation in commemorations of the Lord's Supper as a sign that one belongs to the community.

Paul insists that membership in assemblies of Jesus' followers be open to Jews and Gentiles without distinction. For that reason, he sharply rebukes Peter (called Cephas) for withdrawing from commensality with Gentile believers “for fear of the circumcision faction” (Gal 2.11–14). Paul tolerates continued observance of Jewish food practices (Rom 14), but he insists that all Christ-believers,

Jewish and Gentile, can and ought to eat together as equals. Others within the church, the “circumcision faction” which Paul derides, object to such commensality between Jewish and Gentile members. In Acts, it is Peter who alludes to—and rejects—this practice of refusing to eat with Gentiles (10.28). Numerous Jewish works from the Second Temple period teach that Jews ought not share meals with Gentiles or eat food prepared by them (Dan 1.8–12; Tob 1.10–11; Jdt 10–12; Add Esth C 26; *Jub.* 22.16; 11QSTemple 63.14–15). According to Josephus, a noteworthy number of Jews in Judea and Syria abstained from Gentile olive oil (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.119–20; *J.W.* 2.591–92). Rabbinic sources uniformly forbid consumption of certain foods prepared by Gentiles but differ over whether Jews may eat with Gentiles (e.g., *m. Avod. Zar.* 2.3–7; 5.5; *t. Hul.* 1.1; *y. Shabb.* 1.4,3c; *b. Avod. Zar.* 8a–b).

Jesus as well reportedly adhered to these traditional norms. Jesus eats with “tax collectors and sinners” and compares this behavior to a physician's focus on the sick (Mt 9.10–13; Mk 2.15–18; Lk 5.29–32); he also offers parables about a messianic banquet open to all, “both good and bad” (Mt 22.10; cf. Lk 14.21). No Gospel, however, depicts Jesus eating with Gentiles. Matthew reports that Jesus envisions a time when the faithful, likely including Gentiles, will eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (8.11; cf. Lk. 13.29), but the fact that no early followers invoked Jesus' own practice in support of their inclusion of Gentiles in communal meals suggests that they had no such tradition on which to draw.

Acts, which portrays “the breaking of bread” as a paradigmatic activity of Christ-believers (2.42), uses stories about shared meals to trace the process through which the community opened to Gentile participation. Peter, criticized by “circumcised believers” for his decision to “go to uncircumcised men and eat with them” (11.2–3), justifies his willingness to convert the centurion Cornelius and his Gentile household on the basis of a vision he experienced (11.4–12). (The vision itself, in which Peter is instructed to eat animals forbidden by the Torah, suggests that Peter should no longer distinguish between permitted and prohibited meat, but the message Peter takes from it is that he ought not distinguish between Jews and Gentiles.) When the church leaders meet to consider whether Gentile Christ-believers must adhere to the Torah, Peter reminds them that God bestowed the Holy Spirit upon the Gentile Cornelius and his household. The leaders consequently rule that Gentiles may become full members of the Christ-believing community so long as they adhere to the conditions listed in the Apostolic Decree (15.1–29; see above).

The following chapters of Acts recount Paul's outreach efforts toward Gentiles, work that regularly in-

volves shared meals (16.15,34). One incident epitomizes the growing estrangement of Christ-believers from the Jewish community: when the Jews of Corinth spurn Paul's message, he leaves the synagogue and accepts the hospitality of a neighboring Gentile (18.6–7). Later, on

BIRKAT HA-MINIM A JEWISH CURSE OF CHRISTIANS?

Ruth Langer

The *birkat ha-minim* (lit., “blessing concerning the sectarians”) is a short prayer that functioned for much of its history as a curse of Christians. In its medieval central-European version it read:

May there be no hope for apostates;
And may all the *minim* immediately perish;
And may all the enemies of Your people Israel
speedily be cut off;
And may You speedily uproot, smash, and defeat
the empire of arrogance; and humble all
our enemies speedily in our day.
Blessed are You, Eternal, who breaks enemies and
humbles the arrogant.

The Babylonian Talmud (*Ber.* 28b) relates that, in the late first century CE, more or less contemporary with the writing of the Gospels, Rabban Gamaliel II, the patriarch of the rabbinic court at Yavneh (Jamnia), called for adding this curse of heretics to what was called the “eighteen benedictions” (Heb *Shemoneh Esreh*, or “eighteen”), thereby creating a prayer of nineteen benedictions. The little-known but pious Samuel the Little performed the task then, but some time later forgot the new blessing's text. Only because he had formulated the prayer was he not replaced as prayer leader.

The *Shemoneh Esreh*, also called “The Prayer” (Heb *Tephillah*) in early texts, and later the *Amidah* (“standing”) for the posture in which it is recited, was and remains the central element of rabbinic liturgy, recited at every service. It consists of three introductory and three concluding benedictions that are recited daily, and a central section of twelve (or thirteen) petitions. On the Sabbath and other holy days, these petitions are replaced by a single blessing acknowledging the holiness of the day, since disturbing God's rest by such petitions is considered inappropriate.

The *birkat ha-minim* is one of these intermediate petitions. The earlier petitions address the needs of the individual for things such as knowledge, repentance,

healing, and sustenance. The latter ones focus on the key communal need by imploring God to inaugurate the messianic age and thereby bring about its various necessary components, including the ingathering of the exiles and the restoration of Jewish sovereignty and just governance in the Land of Israel. In this context, the *birkat ha-minim* makes sense; it seeks the elimination of those who would undermine the restored community.

Historical problems suggest that this story of Rabban Gamaliel and the petition's origin does not reflect actual first-century events. The account of the gathering at Yavneh and the associated institution of the petition then and there are not supported by other evidence. The Talmud's discussion of the *birkat ha-minim* contains many elements more characteristic of later Babylonian reality than that of the supposed time and place of the narrative: the image of an authoritative rabbinic court; its presumption that prayer texts were composed verbatim, and that error in reciting a prayer required not correction but removal of the precentor. While some late-first or early-second century rabbis may have included the *birkat ha-minim* in their prayers, its successful spread beyond their circles cannot be dated to this early period. The talmudic account is more likely a legendary explanation of how the Babylonian “eighteen benedictions” came to contain nineteen.

In the name of the prayer, *birkat* means “blessing of/concerning,” the prefix *ha* means “the,” and *minim* simply means “kinds” or “sorts.” Therefore, the specific meaning of *minim* has to be determined from context. As used in the benediction, *minim* likely referred originally to Jews whom the rabbis considered sectarians or heretics, for example, those who believed in “two powers in heaven” or followers of Jesus; other *minim* may simply have been Jews who did not accept rabbinic authority. The rabbis appear to have paid little attention initially to Gentile Christians; that they were not Jews and so not subject to rabbinic authority takes them out of the “Jewish heretic” category. Yet after the Christianization of the

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