

Why Does the Bible Prohibit Eating Pork?

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One of the most distinctive food practices in both [Judaism](#) and [Islam](#) is the avoidance of pork products. In Judaism, the prohibition has been a way of showing Jewish identity and of challenging it. For example, the books of Maccabees describe how the Maccabean revolt came about in part through the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes' attempt to force Jews to eat pork and their refusal to do so (2 Macc [6:18](#); [7:1](#) cf. 1 Macc [1:47](#)). Similarly, the avoidance of pork in Islam is a primary food rule (Qur'an 5:3; 6:145) and thus a way of maintaining Muslim identity. The prohibition is important enough that in the Islamic Republic of Iran, bringing pork into the country is punishable by a three-month jail sentence. But why is the prohibition so important in both religions? What does it mean?



Eleazar refusing to eat pork, Jean-Simon Berthelemy (Credit:: Musee de la Chartreuse, Douai, France/Bridgeman Images).

As with most [rituals](#), we cannot say for sure what its "meaning" is. The avoidance may have multiple meanings, or it may have none at all. The primary function of many rituals is to create identity, be it religious, ethnic, or otherwise, and may have no other inherent meaning, or at least not a clear one. For example, circumcision (Gen [17](#); Lev [12:3](#)) is a way of showing one's identity as a member of the offspring of Abraham and the covenant community. It illustrates difference between members of the Israelite community and foreigners, most famously the "uncircumcised Philistines" (Judg [14:3](#); [15:18](#); etc.). Yet the scriptures never state why, of all things, circumcision should be the means of creating and enacting this identity. We can guess at why it is meaningful (it is related to lineage and genealogy, male fertility, paternal power, and the like), but this gives us multiple uncertain meanings, none of them concrete.¹ The only thing we can know for sure is that circumcising separates those who are circumcised from those who are not. Similarly, the primary purpose of the pork prohibition may be simply to create religious identity by separating those who don't eat pork from those who do. We may never know for sure how or why pork became banned, but perhaps by rethinking some aspects of the prohibition we can see more of its function and underlying worldview.

The earliest evidence we have for the prohibition is the Hebrew Bible, which lists forbidden animals. For example, in Deuteronomy:

These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain sheep. Any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof cloven in two, and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. Yet of those that chew the cud or have the hoof cloven you shall not eat these: the camel, the hare, and the rock-badger, because they chew the cud but do not divide the hoof; they are unclean for you. And the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you. You shall not eat their meat, and you shall not touch their carcasses. ([14:5-8](#); cf. Lev [11:2-8](#))

Although these instructions are unequivocal in their rejection of pigs and their meat, the underlying reason for the prohibition remains unclear. The text states that pigs are forbidden because they do not chew cud, yet it frustratingly does not explain why not chewing cud is so problematic! As in many ritual texts, the explanation for the practice clarifies very little.

Because the text does not get to the heart of the larger meaning and purpose of the ban, the underlying rationale for the prohibition has been greatly debated since ancient times, with varied explanations. For example, the first-century CE Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria argued that pork was not permitted to Jews because it is the tastiest of the land animals and eating it would lead to gluttony; the legal prohibition teaches self-restraint and frugality. In addition, he thought, animals that chew cud are permitted because as vegetarians they befit nonviolent "gentle mannered" souls, and their literal ruminating on their cud models the intellectual ruminating of good students who ponder the principles of knowledge taught by their teacher (On the Special Laws 4:100-107).

A more common and persuasive argument was made in the Middle Ages by Moses Maimonides, who argued that the Torah prohibits swine for food because both their habits and their own food are dirty and loathsome; eating swine would lead to disgusting homes and streets, making them dirtier "than any cesspool" (Guide for the Perplexed 3:48). Indeed, he cites the Talmudic statement that "The mouth of a swine is as dirty as dung itself" (b. Ber. 25a). This disapproval of the pig's food and habits is the most common explanation of the prohibition. Swine do have food habits that are different from the main domesticated animals that are raised for food, in both ancient Israel and the modern world, namely cows, sheep, and goats. Pigs not only don't chew cud or graze on grass, but they will also eat waste of many kinds, such as animal and human dung and slop and other leftover garbage, and they will eat meat, including human flesh and that of their own offspring. Moreover, Maimonides was alluding to the swine's other objectionable behavior of wallowing in urine and excrement when they do not have mud to cover their skin.

A more modern explanation of how the eating habits of pigs relate to their problematic nature was somewhat famously described by Marvin Harris, who argued that pigs were shunned by ancient Israelites and other in the ancient Near East because the land does not accommodate them well.² He argued that pigs not only require abundant water, which is difficult to find in the Middle East, but they

do best in heavily forested areas where they can forage, mostly for acorns. Since forests are also scarce in the Middle East, pigs were difficult to raise there. The prohibition against them, he thought, comes from such practical difficulties. However, archaeological and written evidence shows that it was possible to raise swine in the Middle East—as in fact the Philistines did, and any difficulty raising them does not adequately explain why they are shunned and considered abhorrent. It seems to have a more deep-seated cultural concern.

Other explanations for the prohibition include that eating pork can lead to trichinosis, a parasitic infection that can develop from eating undercooked meat. Yet there is no evidence that pork is more likely to cause trichinosis than other meats, nor are there any other known health concerns that arise specifically with pork—unlike, say, shellfish, which is also forbidden and which can cause deadly allergic reactions among some people.

Why, then, is pork prohibited among the land animals? The prohibition seems to go beyond the practical into the symbolic. Indeed, in the Hebrew Bible, eating pork is not only unclean, it is treated as disgusting and horrific. The book of Isaiah associates it with death, idolatry, and sin ([65:4](#); [66:3](#)). Whatever the problem, it appears, in some way, to violate important cultural principles. Though this may be related in part to what pigs eat, there may be other contributing factors that are deeply entrenched in society, and in fact related to the very construction of the social system.

One key way in which pigs are radically different from 'clean' land animals is not how they eat, but rather how they mate, and more specifically how they reproduce.³ That may seem like a strange concern, yet many cultures have pronounced cultural restrictions and taboos around reproduction and sexuality. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, both sex and birth are important sources of ritual impurity ([Lev 12](#); [15](#)). All the clean land animals listed in Deuteronomy have a reproductive feature that is different from pigs: they give birth singly or to twins. Unlike cows, sheep, goats, and deer of various kinds, pigs give birth in litters. In the modern world, the average pig gives birth to 12 piglets at one time; the record is 37!⁴ Thus pigs' manner of birth does not resemble that of clean animals, nor, importantly, does it resemble that of Israelites (and all humans). Reproductively speaking, pigs are incongruous with the Israelite community, yet uniparous (bearing singly) animals are considered a part of it, and even observe its Sabbath ([Ex 20:10](#); [Deut 5:14](#)).

The biblical text does not directly discuss this reproductive aspect of pigs, yet the multiparity (bearing in litters) of pigs comes into direct conflict with other aspects of biblical ritual involving animals. Aside from the fact that no clean land animal is multiparous, and that most unclean animals are multiparous or egg layers, pigs' manner of reproduction does not allow them to bear a single firstborn (in Hebrew, the *pe?er re?em*, "womb opener," or *bekor*, "firstborn"). Either one would need to witness the birth to see which was born first, or possibly the entire litter would be considered the firstborn. This may seem inconsequential, but in biblical thought, the firstborn male of domesticated animals is the most sacred animal, and must be offered to God. The firstborn of cows, sheep, and goats is either slaughtered or given to the sanctuary ([Ex 13:12](#); [Deut 15:19-20](#)), or given to the Levites ([Num 18:15-17](#)). According to Deuteronomy, the only animal offerings one must make, aside from offerings at pilgrimage festivals, are one's firstborn male animals ([Deut 15:19-21](#)). Thus the firstborn male of all land animals raised for food

must be offered to Yahweh. Why exactly this is the case is not clear, but it seems to express some sense that the deity owns the firstborn and that by giving the deity the firstborn there will be continued fertility.

The firstborn male animal is ritually significant on its own as well as in relation to firstborn male humans, who too are devoted to the deity. For example, Exodus ritually and ideologically equates firstborn sons with firstborn animals as well as with first fruits:

You will not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You will do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: for seven days it will remain with its mother; on the eighth day you will give it to me (Ex [22:29-30](#) [Heb [28-29](#)]).

Luckily for him, other passages state that the firstborn child is to be redeemed back from the deity:

All that first opens the womb is mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep. The firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem (Ex [34:19-20](#)).

Offering to God the firstborn son, as well as the animal, indicates divine control of fertility. Yet firstborn sons have prominent social and economic roles. The firstborn son is the proper heir of his father (though sometimes a non-firstborn becomes the heir, such as when selected by Yahweh, like Isaac).⁵ The firstborn son will inherit his father's land and property, and will be responsible for carrying on his father's name (Deut [21:15-17](#) cf. Deut [25:5-10](#)). Therefore the sanctity of the firstborn and firstling is a means not only of showing fertility and its control, but also of creating the special status of the firstborn son, who is redeemed so that he can become the heir of the father who offers him. By extension, the offering of the firstling male animal is intrinsically related to the process of lineage and inheritance, which is a primary means of reckoning social status and of distributing wealth. Furthermore, the ideology of the firstborn is related to Israel's priesthood, in which the Levites are the substitutes for the firstborn Israelites and themselves eat the donated firstling animals. More importantly, the firstborn ideology relates even to Israel's very self-definition as God's "firstborn son" (Ex [4:22-23](#)), whose own firstborn are saved in the Passover event. Firstborn ideology has fundamental social importance as well as ritual importance. Raising and eating pigs would not allow for this central cultural expression, or at least would require a significant adaptation of firstling rituals.

Another problematic aspect of pigs' reproduction also relates to ritual-cultural ideology. The Bible is a patriarchal and patrilineal text. It presents a culture based largely on paternity and paternal identity. (Witness the long genealogical lists of males that are so distinctive of biblical style!) The fertility of swine, in which one female bears many offspring at a time, would appear to highlight female fertility and motherhood instead of fatherhood. In fact, the rituals of many ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures specifically use female pigs to represent female fertility. For example, the Hittite ritual text "The Benedictions for Labarna" states, "Just as a single pig gives birth to many piglets, let every single branch of this vineyard, like the pig, bear many grape clusters."⁶ Another ritual for the fertility of land (KUB 12.44 iii 16-19) involves throwing a sow's genitals into a ritual pit.⁷ Pigs were used

in other Hittite rituals to ensure the fertility of women, as in a rite in which it is said "let her give birth often like the pig" (Bo 3617 i 4'-17').⁸ Similarly, the relationship between the fertility of female pigs and human women appears in the Greek and Anatolian rite of the Thesmophoria, in which the fertility of both women and fields is reinstated and enacted.⁹ This event requires all married women to bring a piglet which also will be thrown into a ritual pit; at the end of the ceremony the previous year's piglets are dug up and spread onto the fields as a kind of fertilizer. This ritual was performed in honor of Demeter, the goddess of grain and mother of Persephone, who preferred pigs in most of her rites.

While we have no evidence that biblical pork avoidance was a direct polemic against goddess worship, the image of fertility enacted in these rites opposes the biblical concept of fertility. In the Bible, female—and male—fertility is largely minimized and controlled. Sex, birth, and other evidence of reproduction is deemed impure and must be carefully controlled through ritual (see especially Lev [12](#); [15](#)). In the Bible, the male deity controls the womb and what comes from it: he says, "every womb opener is mine" (Ex [34:19](#)). Numerous biblical texts emphasize that Yahweh alone has the power to open and close the womb and to create its contents (e.g., Gen [20:18](#); [29:31](#); [30:2](#), [22](#); Deut [28:11](#); 1 Sam [1:1-11](#); Ps [139:13](#); Isa [44:2](#), [24](#); cf. Num [5:21-27](#)). The image of the female pig, reproducing abundantly, challenges the form of controlled, restrained and male-dominated fertility imagined in the Bible.

In addition, as multiparous animals, pigs can further confuse and obscure paternity. Multiparous female animals are capable of bearing the offspring of different males simultaneously. When multiparous female animals conceive, they are in estrus for multiple days, during the course of which they release several eggs. If they mate multiple times during this period, the eggs can be fertilized by the sperm of different males. Therefore, under the right conditions a female's litter can consist of many "half-siblings" with different fathers. In this case, the paternity of the offspring might be unidentifiable, and by extension even irrelevant. The offspring could be recognized only by its mother, not its father. This scenario would be horrific for a society based on fatherhood and paternal identity, clashing with the fundamental biblical ritual perception of gender. Perhaps the exclusion of pigs from the Israelite diet, and systems of animal husbandry, intentionally prevents this model of gender construction and reproduction from becoming valued and upheld as part of sacred ritual.

Of course, most ancient religions were both patriarchal and patrilineal, including some that considered pigs clean and offered them as sacrificial victims. Ancient Greece, for instance, was both patriarchal and patrilineal, and yet made many swine offerings to different deities. Every culture has its unique ways of relating ritually to the natural world in accordance with its perspective and social structure, and objects can have very different significance in different cultures. Why biblical thought constructed its ritual in this particular way is likely unknowable. It seems possible that monotheistic thought, which eliminated the worship of all other deities, was more inclined to vilify symbols related to both female deities and underworld deities, as pigs were. If so, perhaps the prohibition of pigs became part of the process of articulating and enacting a monotheistic worldview, which in turn related monotheistic practice with proper social behavior. However, the outcome of the pork ban, whatever its original "meaning" or purpose, is to separate those who worship the one deity from those who do not, and it ensures that the proper worshipers of that deity only eat land animals who reproduce as humans do.

So is their reproductive oddity the reason pigs were forbidden? We cannot know for sure. Most likely, multiple factors, both practical and symbolic, contributed to their status. However, their reproductive behavior only adds to their complicated and unusual nature, and it causes them to clash profoundly with biblical ritual systems and larger cultural ideology. Perhaps their reproductivity along with their eating and wallowing habits clinched their position as the ultimate impure animal.

Notes

¹Note also that the reason for observing the Sabbath is different in the two versions of the 10 commandments: In Exodus [20:11](#) the rationale is that God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh, but in Deuteronomy [5:15](#) the reason is for the Israelites to remember that they were slaves in Egypt and to allow their slaves to rest. Thus, there is no single reason to observe the Sabbath, yet the result of observing it is that there are those who do, and they are different from those who don't.

²*The Sacred Cow and the Abominable Pig: Riddles of Food and Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985) (Reprinted as *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture* [Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1998]), Chapter 4.

³For a more complete discussion of this argument, see my article "Pigs, Purity and Paternity: The Multiparity of Swine and Its Problems for Biblical Ritual and Gender Construction" in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134 (2015): 489-504.

⁴Born in the U.K. in 1993, according to *Guinness World Records*.

⁵Note that in the Aqedah (Gen [22](#)), Isaac, who is not technically his father's firstborn, is a sacrificial victim who is redeemed; he has already become his father's heir (Gen [17:19](#); [21:12](#)). Thus the act of sacrifice and redemption ritually ratifies his status as heir. It may be that some Islamic traditions claimed that Ishmael, and not Isaac, was the son who was bound because they consider him to be Abraham's religious heir.

Note as well that rabbinic law distinguishes the biological (and ritual) firstborn from the legal firstborn (for purposes of inheritance and status); see, e.g., *b. Bek.*, 46a-47b.

⁶Billie Jean Collins, "Pigs at the Gate: Hittite Pig Sacrifice in Its Eastern Mediterranean Context," *JANER* 6 (2006), 162.

⁷Billie Jean Collins, "Necromancy, Fertility and the Dark Earth: The Use of Ritual Pits in Hittite Cult" in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (ed. P. Mirecki and M. Meyer; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 232.

⁸Collins, "Necromancy, Fertility and the Dark Earth," 231-32; "Pigs at the Gate," 170.

⁹Also discussed in Collins, "Pigs at the Gate," 169; in 169-70 she gives additional examples of the relationship between pigs and women in Greece and Rome.