

“You Shall Not Boil a Kid in Its Mother’s Milk”

An archaeological myth destroyed

By [Jacob Milgrom](#)

One of the oldest prohibitions in the entire Bible is the injunction against boiling a kid in the milk of its mother. It is repeated three times in identical words: “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”^(a)

From these words, the rabbis extrapolated a complex set of dietary laws, which to this day prohibit observant Jews from mixing foods containing milk or milk byproducts with foods containing meat.^(b) The prohibition against mixing milk and meat is an essential element of the dietary laws of *kashrut*; it is a significant part of what it means to “keep kosher.”^(c)

Yet the basis for the biblical prohibition itself is elusive. Why would the ancient Israelites even have contemplated boiling a kid in its mother’s milk?



The cognoscenti know how modern archaeology has solved the puzzle. It is a beautiful story, especially because the archaeological solution was presaged by a famous medieval Jewish exegete, Maimonides, who somehow managed to intuit from the text itself the same solution archaeology produced centuries later.

In 1195, Maimonides suggested:

“As for the prohibition against eating meat [boiled] in milk, it is in my opinion not improbable that—in addition to this being undoubtedly very gross food and very filling—*idolatry* had something to do with it. Perhaps such food was eaten at one of the ceremonies of their cult or one of their festivals” (*The Guide to the Perplexed* 3:48).

Maimonides admitted, however, that he could find no support for his theory:^(d)

“[Although] this is the most probable view regarding the reasons for this prohibition ... I have not seen this set down in any of the books of the Sabeans [pagans] that I have read.”

On May 14, 1929, at a site in Syria that we now call Ugarit and that the local Arabs call Ras Shamra, French archaeologist Claude Schaeffer was excavating a room that turned out to be a royal library. On that day he uncovered the first of more than thousand cuneiform tablets from about the 14th century B.C., written in a hitherto unknown script consisting of only about 30 signs—a kind of cuneiform alphabet.^(e)

Most of the tablets are typical of a state archive—administrative texts, census lists economic texts and letters. But the cache also included literary, mythological and religious texts. Some of these tablets of a more ritual character, illuminating the daily practice of religion in ancient Canaan. One scholar refers to a series of tablets relating to the Canaanite god Ba'al, whose worship is so frequently condemned in the Bible, as a “Canaanite Bible.”

One of these tablets describes an obscure Canaanite religious ritual. The tablet was first published in 1933 by Charles Virolleaud, the local director of antiquities at Ugarit, who later became instrumental in the decipherment and publication of the Ugaritic tablets. Virolleaud called the text “The Birth of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods.” On

one side of the tablet was a list of ritual commands; on the other was a story about some of the sexual escapades of the head of the Canaanite pantheon, the supreme god El.

In the myth related on one side of the tablet, El fathers the gracious gods, who are suckled by the goddesses Athirat (biblical Asherah)^(f) and Rahmay. Many scholars believe that the text is actually the libretto of a cultic play in which the mythological roles were played by human beings, perhaps culminating in a sacred marriage rite.⁽¹⁾ Performance of the rituals prescribed by the text may have accompanied the reenactment of these mythical events.⁽²⁾ The purpose of the ritual was to ensure the land's fertility, symbolized by the birth of the good gods.⁽³⁾

Our present concern is with one line in this tablet. Unfortunately, this critical line is damaged. Virolleaud therefore “restored,” as the scholars say—more accurately, he reconstructed—part of the text. In the following quotation, the part in brackets is Virolleaud's reconstruction. As restored, the text reads as follows: *tb[h g]dbh/b. annh[.]bhm'at*.⁽⁴⁾ Virolleaud translated the first three words of the line this way (again the restored part is in brackets): “Fais [cuire un che]vreau dans le lait” (“Cook a kid in milk”).⁽⁵⁾

A few years later, H. L. Ginsberg published several studies of this text in which he drew attention to the biblical parallels.⁽⁶⁾ Both the Ugaritic text and the Bible contain references to cooking a kid in milk. Ginsberg concluded that the ritual described in the Ugaritic tablet was the “same idolatrous custom that the Torah forbade.” In the Canaanite ritual, the milk in which the kid was cooked symbolized the milk that the newly born gods were given when suckled by the pagan goddesses Athirat and Rahmay. The cooking of a goat in milk was forbidden in the Bible because it “symbolizes the suckling [by the pagan goddesses] of the newborn gods!”⁽⁷⁾

So here at last was the explanation of the biblical prohibition. Maimonides' intuition was right; the biblical prohibition was a reaction against a Canaanite ritual involving the boiling of a kid in its mother's milk.

In the ensuing years, this explanation gained wide acceptance among both Ugaritic and biblical scholars, and indeed became almost a dogma of scholarship. Anton Schoors concluded that “the parallel is most striking and the biblical prohibition is certainly directed against the practice described in this text.”⁽⁸⁾ Umberto Cassuto said, “It is

clear that this was the practice of the Canaanites on one of their holidays” and we can now “guess that this custom was widespread in the ritual of the [Israelite’s] pagan neighbors.”⁽⁹⁾ And Edward Ullendorff found that the two texts’ “astonishing verbal resemblance helps to illuminate some of the obscurities of both: it is clear that the Pentateuch is inveighing against an obnoxious Canaanite custom, perhaps a fertility cult or some other ritually significant ceremony.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Bible commentaries quickly made use of the scholars’ work to illuminate this previously obscure commandment. *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Moody Bible Institute Commentary, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, *Daily Study Bible*, New Century Bible Commentary, Torch Bible Commentary, Bible Study Textbook Series, Old Testament Library, and other commentators, all concluded that the Ugaritic text conclusively demonstrated that the Bible prohibition was aimed at discouraging the Israelites from participating in some sort of Canaanite fertility rite.⁽¹¹⁾

Recent scholarship, however, has thoroughly undermined this explanation.

First, the most obvious problem is that the Ugaritic text makes no reference to *mother’s* milk. Even after the Ugaritic text is reconstructed, it refers only to boiling a kid in milk, not in its mother’s milk.

Second, the reconstruction of the Ugaritic text is almost certainly wrong. The scribes at Ugarit marked the division between words with a special symbol, a small vertical wedge, which epigraphers transliterate as a dot. There is little room in the text of our tablet both for the customary word divider and for the extra letter, *h*, that would allow the word Virolleaud reconstructs as “cook” actually to be read that way.⁽¹²⁾

Even if the *h* could somehow be squeezed into the line, however, the resulting word *tbh* never means “to cook” in Ugaritic anyway, only “to slaughter.”^{(g)(13)} So the text would refer to slaughtering a kid rather than to cooking it.

Finally, the Ugaritic word *gd* doesn’t mean “kid.”^{(h)(14)} It probably means coriander, an aromatic herb, a meaning found in the Bible.⁽¹⁵⁾

So whatever it was that happened “in milk” during the Ugaritians’ ritual did not involve any cooking, and mother’s milk certainly wasn’t used. Moreover, whatever happened “in milk” didn’t happen to a kid but to some kind of plant, probably coriander.

In short, no “cooking,” no milk of “its mother” and probably no “kid.” There is thus no way that this Ugaritic tablet can be used to illuminate the basis for the prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk.

We are left, then, with the same puzzle: what is the basis for the biblical prohibition?

One intriguing possibility is that the Bible verse has a hidden purpose: it is actually directed against *incest*. Starting with the hypothesis that legal prohibitions often reflect society’s taboos, the French diplomat-scholar Jean Soler interprets the law concerning a kid to mean: “You shall not put a mother and her son in the same pot any more than in the same bed.”⁽¹⁶⁾

This explanation has one major drawback: it’s not linguistically sound. In order to fit within the “incest” paradigm, we must have *both* a mother goat *and* her male offspring. But the Hebrew word for kid, *gdy*, is asexual. So the prohibition, as it stands, applies to *female* kids as well as to males.⁽¹⁷⁾

We must therefore look for a more plausible explanation.

Several exegetes have suggested that the prohibition against boiling a kid in its own mother’s milk has a humanitarian basis, that it’s a sort of “kindness to animals” legislation. In the end, however, this theory is also an unsatisfying solution to the crux.

Those who espouse the humanitarian theory point to the biblical passages showing a special concern for the comfort and even “feelings” of animals. The Israelites are commanded to be especially sensitive to the tender relationship between mother animal and her young. For example, animals may not be slaughtered on the same day as their offspring (*Leviticus 22:28*); a wild mother bird may not be taken out of her nest along with her eggs or

fledglings (*Deuteronomy 22:6–7*); and no animal may be sacrificed to God unless it has first been given a week with its mother (*Leviticus 22:27; Exodus 22:29*).

According to these scholars, a kid may not be boiled in its mother's milk for the same reason: to prevent cruelty to animals.⁽¹⁸⁾

The reason this solution is unsatisfactory is that, while it is true that the Bible recognizes that a mother and her young feel pain at separation, this principle is not taken to extremes. A dam and her offspring certainly can be slaughtered on *consecutive* days, a bird and its fledglings may be taken separately from the nest, and an eight-day-old lamb or kid may be sacrificed, even if it is still nursing. In our case, a concern about maternal sensibilities could not have given rise to the prohibited practice because the mother goat can't possibly be aware that her offspring is boiling in her milk.

A second humanitarian-type motive for our biblical passage has been advanced by scholars: that its purpose was to maintain the comfort of the *mother* animal. This interpretation depends on a different translation of the Hebrew text, made possible once the text is freed of the incubus of the supposed "Ugaritic parallel."

Under this new reading, the Israelites are commanded to make certain, when they bring their first fruits and their first-born animals to Jerusalem to sacrifice, that they do not sacrifice (by boiling) "a kid [which is yet] in the milk of its mother": in other words, still nursing, and supported *solely* by its mother's milk.⁽¹⁹⁾

The nursing kid prohibition so interpreted would thus be closely related to the command to refrain from sacrificing a newly born animal during the first week of its life (*Leviticus 22:27; Exodus 22:29*). The basis for this command is a principle of animal husbandry that would have been well known to the agricultural Israelites. Philo of Alexandria⁽¹⁾ explained it this way:

"[During the first week after the birth of its offspring, the mother's] udders are a true fountain, but [the mother] has no young ones to suck when one removes them. Since the milk finds no more exit, the teats become hard

and heavy, and by the weight of the milk stuck inside they begin to hurt the mother” (Philo, *De Virtute*, ¶¶ 128–129).

Thus, the prohibition may be just a shorthand reminder, to the Israelites of a salutary husbandry rule set out elsewhere in the Bible; for the mother animal’s comfort, her newly born offspring should not be taken away from her for sacrifice during the first week of their life, while they are still sucking their mother’s milk.

Again, the fatal flaw in this theory is philological—in biblical Hebrew it is not possible, as this interpretation requires, to refer to a “suckling” as one that is “*in* his mother’s milk.”⁽²⁰⁾

Yet another possibility has been advanced by the Swiss scholar Othmar Keel.⁽²¹⁾ In a new book he brings together a wealth of iconographic material from the ancient Near East—seals, pottery and rock tomb-paintings—bearing the image of a mother nursing her young. He thinks that this material has a special significance for the biblical prohibition. According to Keel, the pervasiveness of this image reflects its symbolic power for the primarily agricultural societies of the Bible: The nursing mother is a source of fertility and benevolence, and her milk is a fount of growth and new life.

The symbolism takes on cosmic dimensions because the animal portrayed in this Near Eastern iconography can stand for divinities.

In Ugaritic mythology, for example, the goddess Anat, daughter of El and Athirat, assumes the shape of a heifer and acts as wet nurse to the gods, as does Athirat. Both goddesses, in addition, suckle specially deserving humans who are destined for great things.⁽²²⁾

The Egyptian goddess Hathor is also represented as a cow. She is depicted suckling Pharaoh Mentuhotep 2 on the rock paintings found at Deir el-Bahari.

In Babylonia, the mountain goddess Ninhursag is pictured flanked by the wombs of animals, suckling a child.

The nursing mother image as it appears in the art of Syro-Palestine, unlike the Ugaritic, Egyptian and Babylonian iconography, is not attributable to any particular deity. For this reason, Keel believes that the image could easily have been absorbed into the monotheism of the Israelites. A ban on seething a kid in its mother's milk makes sense against this Canaanite cultural background, for boiling a kid in the milk of its mother would be opposed to and would vitiate the life-sustaining and divinely ordained nurture inherent in all living beings.

Keel is, I submit, on the right track. But his explanation is not fully satisfying. The kid of the biblical command is not being suckled; it has already been separated from its mother. The focus in the biblical verse is upon the kid, not upon the nursing mother—in fact, the mother, which under Keel's theory represents the transmission of the life-force, is totally absent; Only her milk is present. In the biblical image, we do not find the image of the suckling mother representing the transmission of the life-sustaining force proceeding from generation to generation.

I believe it is more productive to take our cue from Philo, the first-century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher and exegete. As Philo put it, it is “grossly improper that the substance which fed the living animal should be used to season or flavor it after its death” (*De Virtute*, ¶ 143).

Hence, according to Philo, the root rationale behind the kid prohibition is its opposition to commingling life and death.^(j) A substance that sustains the life of a creature (milk) should not be fused or confused with a process associated with its death (cooking).

This prohibition is, thus, simply another instance of the emphasis on opposites characteristic of biblical ritual and practice: to separate life from death, holy from common, pure from impure, Israel from the nations. The reverence for life and Israel's separation from the nations are ideas reflected throughout the dietary laws. For example, the reverence for life is reflected in the blood prohibition. Separating Israel from the nations is reflected in the prohibition against eating certain animals such as pig and crustaceans.

Thus the prohibition against cooking a kid in its mother's milk conforms neatly with Israel's overall dietary system.

The command not to boil a kid in mother's milk is first set forth in Exodus, where the context in which it appears shows that it probably applies only to kids sacrificed on one of the Israelites' pilgrimage festivals. By the time the command appears again in Deuteronomy, however, it is apparent that it has been transformed into something much broader, a new dietary law.

It is easy to see why this prohibition would have been so quickly integrated into the Israelites' dietary system. It embodies two common biblical themes: reverence for life, even dumb animal life, and Israel's separation from the nations.

This life-versus-death theory also completely and neatly elucidates the other biblical prohibitions mentioned earlier that, heretofore, have been explained as having humanitarian motives. However, the common denominator of all these prohibitions is that they prevent fusion of life and death. Thus, the life-giving process of the mother bird hatching or feeding her young should not be the occasion of their joint death (*Deuteronomy 22:6*). The sacrifice of the newborn may be inevitable, but not for the first week while it is constantly at the mother's breast (*Leviticus 22:27*); and never should both the mother and its young be slain at the same time (*Leviticus 22:28*). By the token, the mother's milk, the life-sustaining food her kid, should never become associated with its death.

Is it, then, so far-fetched for the rabbis to have deduced that all meat, not just of the kid, and all milk, not only of the mother may not be served together? In a fundamental way, the rule encourages a reverence for life, a separation of life and death—and separates Israel from the nations.

Footnotes

1.

Exodus 23:19 (in the Book of the Covenant); *Exodus 34:26* (in the renewed covenant); and *Deuteronomy 14:21*.

2.

Babylonian Talmud, *Hullin*, 113a–116a. Although the Bible text prohibits only boiling a *kid* in its *mother's* milk, the rabbis built what is called a “fence around the law,” interpreting the prohibition broadly; this “fence” would keep milk and meat as separate as possible in order to insure that the underlying, core commandment would never accidentally be violated.

3.

There is, of course, much more to keeping kosher than this, including not eating prohibited foods such as pig and shellfish, eating meat only from ritually slaughtered animals, etc.

4.

Sabea, a kingdom of the ancient Near East, flourished from about 900 B.C. to 450 B.C. in the part of southern Arabia that is now Yemen. The Queen of Sheba may have been a Sabean, and Sabea may be mentioned several times in the Bible, see *Job 1:15*; *Genesis 25:3*; *1 Chronicles 1:32*. Maimonides uses the term “Sabean” broadly to mean “pagans” generally.

5.

See “[Claude Frederic-Armand Schaeffer-Forrer \(1898–1982\): An Appreciation](#),” *BAR* 09:05, by James H. Robinson; “[The Tablets from Ugarit and Their Importance for Biblical Studies](#),” *BAR* 09:05, by Peter C. Craigie; and “[The Last Days of Ugarit](#),” *BAR* 09:05, by Claude F. A. Schaeffer, translated by Michael D. Coogan.

6.

The Ugaritic *t* (th) is equivalent to the Hebrew *s* (sh), and the Ugaritic feminine ending *–t* is equivalent to the Hebrew ending *–h*.

7.

tbh usually means “to slaughter” also in biblical Hebrew.

8.

As in biblical Hebrew, *gdy* is used in the Ugaritic corpus to mean “kid.”

9.

Philo Judaeus of Alexandria was a Jewish philosopher who lived from about 25 B.C. to about 50 A.D. Philo wrote in Greek in the century of Jesus, Herod the Great, Paul and Hillel, and his works are thus of key importance to scholars.

10.

This has also been suggested by A. Wayne, “Why We Do Not Mix Meat and Milk,” *American Examiner* (March 30, 1960), p. 13, and by C. M. Carmichael, “On Separating Life and Death: An Explanation of Some Biblical Laws,” *Harvard Theological Review* 69 (1976), pp. 1–7.

Endnotes

1.

See J. C. de Moor, *New Year with Canaanites and Israelites*, pt. 2 (1972), p. 17; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (1973), pp. 22–24; Cross, “*el*,” in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* I, ed., G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (1974), pp. 242–261; Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* (1949), pp. 57–62.

2.

See Hans Kosmala, “The So-Called Ritual Decalogue,” *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 1:31–61 (1962), p. 52.

3.

See David T. Tsumura, “The Ugaritic Drama of the Good Gods: A Philological Study.” Ph. D. dissertation, Brandeis University.

4.

Ugaritic Texts, 52:14; *Corpus des tablettes en cunéiformes alphabétiques*, 23:14.

5.

See *Syria* 14:128–151 (1933). Virolleaud drew no biblical parallels, however, calling his reading “simplement conjecturale.”

6.

See H. L. Ginsberg, “Notes on ‘The Birth or the Gracious and Beautiful Gods,’” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (1935), pp. 45–72; especially p. 65 and note 4.

7.

Ginsberg, *The Ugarit Texts* (Jerusalem, 1936), p. 77 (in Hebrew).

8.

Anton Schoors, “Notes on UT 52:14,” in Loren R. Fisher, ed., *Ras Shamra Parallels* 1:29–32 (1972), p. 31.

9.

Umberto Cassuto, “A Kid in Milk,” *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 2 (1954), pp. 436–437 (in Hebrew).

10.

Edward Ullendorff, “Ugaritic Studies Within Their Semitic and Eastern Mediterranean Setting,” *Bulletin John Rylands Library* 46:236–49 (1963), p. 240. See also Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis* (1961), p. 423 (“Maimonides’ ... shrewd

conjecture ... is now confirmed by our text”); Samuel Henry Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (1963), p. 93 (in the Ugaritic text, “preparatory rituals are described, among which is the cooking of a kid in milk, a ritual which was forbidden in the early Hebrew sacrificial regulations”).

11.

The Interpreter's Bible 1:1013–14 (1952) (Ugaritic text cited); Ronald F. Youngblood, *Exodus* (Moody Bible Institute, 1983), p. 108 (Bible clause protests against pagan ritual mentioned in 15th century text); Robert Alan Cole, *Exodus* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, 1973), p. 180 (“The Canaanite texts show this to be a magic spell, so the prescription is more ritual than humane”); Henry Leopold Ellison, *Exodus (Daily Study Bible)*, 1982, p. 134 (Ugarit seems to confirm rabbis’ view); James Philip Hyatt, *Exodus* (New Century Bible Commentary, 1971), pp 249–250 (“The true explanation seems to be that this rite was forbidden by the Israelites because it was a sacrificial practice of the Canaanites. This is suggested by one or the Ugaritic texts, which is mythical-ritualistic.... A part of this line is broken, but the reading and translation are fairly certain”); Gwynne Henton Davis, *Exodus* (Torch Bible Commentaries, 1967), p. 189 (the “prohibition [is] now explained by reference to a Ugaritic text.... There, at sacrifices, a kid was cooked in milk and the fields were then sprinkled with the dish to ensure their fertility. The Israelite law prohibits Canaanite magical processes in the name of Yahwism”); Wilbur Fields, *Exploring Exodus* (Bible Study Textbook Series, 1976), pp. 515–516 (“This law is now generally understood to make allusion to a Canaanite religious practice, in which a kid was boiled in its mother’s milk. This practice was included in the rituals at Ugarit, when such a dish was prepared at restal ceremonies pertaining to the fertility of the soil”); George Angus Fulton Knight, *Theology as Narration; A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (1976), p. 151 (“In the fourteenth century B.C. boiling a kid in its mother’s milk was accepted ritual act. Probably beginning as an ancient taboo it was later bound up with the acceptance and use of incest as an act of worship”); John H. Dobson, *A Guide to the Book of Exodus* (1977), p. 129 (Bible prohibition refers to Canaanite fertility rite); Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus* (1974), p. 486 (“the biblical prohibition was directed specifically against a Canaanite ceremony, which was probably connected with its fertility cult”); Martin Noth, *Exodus* (1962), p. 192 (“Verse 19b presumably forbids a practice usual in foreign cults”).

12.

See A. Herdner, *Corpus des Tablettes en Cunéiformes Alphabétiques Découvertes à Ras Shamra-Ugarit de 1929 à 1939* (1963), p. 98.

13.

See Samuel E. Loewenstamm, “Lexicographical Notes,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 5:209–10 (1973), p. 210; J. Aistleitner, *Wörterbuch der Ugaritischen Sprache* #1111 (1967).

14.

See André Caquot, Maurice Szyner, André Herdner, *Textes ougaritiques 1: Mythes et Légendes* (1974), p. 371 n.p.

15.

Exodus 16:31; Numbers 11:7. See G. R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (1956), p. 146, note 10. The parallel to *gd* in our text, *annh*, probably derives from the Akkadian *nanahu*, meaning “mint”; *ibid*, p. 135, note 28.

16.

See J. Soler, “The Dietary Prohibitions of the Hebrews,” *New York Review of Books* 26/10 (June 14, 1979), p. 24ff., and F. Martens, “Diététique ou la cuisine de Dieu,” *Communications* 26 (1977), pp 16–45.

17.

See, e.g., *Isaiah 11:6*. Had only the male been intended, the text would have used *gediÆ zaḡkaḡur*, a “male kid” (compare *seh zaḡkaḡur*, a “male sheep,” *Exodus 12:3*), or *zaḡkaḡur baḡ,izziÆm*, “male of the goats” (compare *zaḡkaḡur babbaḡqḡur*, “male of the herd,” *Leviticus 22:19*).

18.

Philo of Alexandria, Clement of Alexandria, Ibn Ezra and Rashbam are among those who think that this humanitarian motive explains the prohibition. For modern support, see Menahem Haran, “Seething a Kid in its Mother’s Milk,”

Journal of Semitic Studies (JSS) 30:23–35 (1979): H. Louis Ginsberg. *The Israelian Heritage of Judaism* (1982), p. 52, note 69; Umberto Cassuto. “A Kid in Milk.” *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 2:436–37 (1954) (in Hebrew).

19.

This reading is suggested by Hans Goedicke in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 42:302–03 (1983), p. 303, and, interestingly, was also proposed by Luther.

20.

See M. Haran, “Seething a Kid in its Mother’s Milk,” *JSS* 30:23–35 (1979), p. 27.

21.

Othmar Keel, *Das Böcklein in der Milch seiner Mutter und Verwandtes* (Göttingen, 1980).

22.

See Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (1967), pp. 20, 52.