

Ancient fish bones reveal non-kosher diet of ancient Judeans, say researchers

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Ancient Judeans commonly ate non-kosher fish surrounding the time that such food was prohibited in the Bible, suggests a study published in the peer-reviewed journal *Tel Aviv*.

This finding sheds new light on the origin of Old Testament dietary laws that are still observed by many Jews today. Among these rules is a ban on eating any species of [fish](#) which lacks scales or fins.

The study reports an analysis of ancient fish bones from 30 [archaeological sites](#) in Israel and Sinai which date to the more than 2,000-year span from the Late Bronze Age (1550-1130 BCE) until the end of the Byzantine period (640 CE).

The authors say the results call for a rethink of assumptions that long-held traditions were the basis for the food laws outlined in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

"The ban on finless and scaleless fish deviated from longstanding Judean [dietary habits](#)", says Yonatan Adler from Ariel University.

"The Biblical writers appear to have prohibited this food despite the fact that non-kosher fish were often found on the Judean menu. There is little reason to think that an old and widespread dietary taboo lay at the root of this ban".

The Old Testament was penned at different times, beginning in the centuries before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and into Hellenistic times (332-63 BCE). A set of passages repeated twice forbids the eating of certain species of fish.

The Book of Leviticus states: "Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you", and Deuteronomy decrees that '...whatever does not have fins and scales you shall not eat; it is unclean for you.'

In both, the references immediately follow a prohibition on 'unclean' pig which has received wide scholarly attention. However, the origins and

early history of the seafood ban have not been explored in detail until now.

The authors in this study set out to discover when and how the fish prohibition first arose, and if it was predated by an earlier taboo practiced prior to the editing of the Old Testament passages. They also sought to establish the extent to which the rule was obeyed.

Adler's co-author Omri Lernau from Haifa University analyzed thousands of fish remains from dozens of sites in the southern Levant. At many Judean sites dating to the Iron Age (1130-586 BCE), including at the Judean capital city of Jerusalem, bone assemblages included significant proportions of non-kosher fish remains. Another key discovery was evidence of non-kosher fish consumption in Jerusalem during the Persian era (539-332 BCE).

Non-kosher fish bones were mostly absent from Judean settlements dating to the Roman era and later. The authors note that sporadic non-kosher fish remains from this later time may indicate 'some degree of non-observance among Judeans'.

The authors now intend to analyze more fish from around this timeframe to establish when Judeans began to avoid eating scaleless fish and how strictly the prohibition was kept.

More information: Yonatan Adler et al, The Pentateuchal Dietary Proscription against Finless and Scaleless Aquatic Species in Light of Ancient Fish Remains, *Tel Aviv* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/03344355.2021.1904675](https://doi.org/10.1080/03344355.2021.1904675)

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