“What Archaeology Tells Us About The Ancient History Of Eating Kosher” Article Summary

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Introduction

Lina Zeldovich’s Smithsonian article, “What Archaeology Tells Us About the Ancient History of Eating Kosher,” introduces readers to research by archaeologists Yonatan Adler and Omri Lernau. Their study asks a deceptively simple question: if the Torah prohibits eating aquatic animals without fins and scales, why do archaeologists find remains of catfish, shark, and skate at ancient Judean sites? (Zeldovich, n.d.)…

The original summary accurately identified the researchers, the importance of fish remains, and the connection to the laws of kashrut. It also recognized that discarded food remains can reveal practices that written texts do not fully document. However, it overstated the conclusion by saying that Judean civilization did not follow kosher rules throughout the first millennium BCE and by implying that the research established an exact date when all Israelites began observing dietary law. The evidence is narrower. Adler and Lernau studied one category of food prohibition, examined patterns across many sites and periods, and found that scaleless fish remained common in Judean contexts during the Iron Age and Persian periods before becoming much less common later.

The Article’s Central Question

The article begins with a scholarly encounter. At an event honoring a retiring colleague, Adler discussed ritual baths, while Lernau spoke about fish remains from archaeological excavations. Lernau mentioned species that would not be permitted under the biblical rule requiring aquatic animals to have both fins and scales. Adler realized that these bones could be used to investigate the history of actual dietary practice rather than assuming that the existence of a written rule proved immediate, universal observance.

This distinction between prescription and practice is the foundation of the study. A legal or religious text tells readers what an author or community considered proper. Archaeological remains reveal at

least some of what people acquired, prepared, consumed, and discarded. Neither source is complete. Texts may represent ideals rather than everyday behavior, while bones may be displaced, misidentified, unevenly preserved, or disconnected from the identity of the people who ate the fish. Bringing the two forms of evidence together allows a more careful history.

Kashrut and the Aquatic Prohibition

Kashrut refers to the body of Jewish dietary law, while “kosher” describes food that is permitted under that system. Leviticus 11:9–12 and Deuteronomy 14:9–10 permit aquatic creatures that have fins and scales and prohibit those that do not. Catfish lack the kind of scales required by the rule; sharks and rays are also excluded (“The Hebrew Bible”, n.d.).

The presence of such species at Judean sites is significant because the rule is stated clearly in the Pentateuch. Yet the bones do not prove that ancient residents consciously rejected a fully established religious system identical to later rabbinic Judaism. The dates of composition, editing, circulation, authority, and popular observance of biblical laws are debated. The study contributes evidence to that debate, but it does not settle every question about the formation of Judaism.

It is also important not to treat all biblical food rules as if they developed in the same way. Archaeologists have long examined the rarity of pig bones at many highland Israelite sites. Adler and Lernau found that the pattern for scaleless fish was different. The fish prohibition appears to have been imposed despite an earlier and persistent habit of consuming species that the later written rule rejected. That contrast is one of the study’s most important contributions.

How Fish Bones Become Historical Evidence

Zooarchaeology studies animal remains recovered from archaeological contexts. Fish bones can be especially informative because species often point to particular habitats and trade networks. Remains from Mediterranean species at inland settlements may show that preserved or processed fish moved through commercial routes. Catfish can suggest connections with freshwater sources such as the Nile system or local waters, depending on the species and context.

Adler and Lernau assembled data from 56 archaeological fish-bone assemblages at 30 sites across the southern Levant. The material covered a long period, from the Late Bronze Age through the Byzantine era, approximately 1550 BCE to 640 CE. This broad chronology allowed the researchers to look for change rather than draw a conclusion from one unusual deposit.

The method depends on careful identification. Specialists compare recovered bones with modern reference collections to determine taxonomic group or species where possible. Researchers also consider the excavation layer, date, quantity, and relationship to domestic or public spaces. A single shark tooth used as an ornament would not mean the same thing as repeated food remains in refuse

deposits. The strength of the study lies in the pattern across assemblages, not in one dramatic object.

The Main Findings

The study found that finless and scaleless fish, especially catfish, were not uncommon at Judean sites during the Iron Age and Persian periods. This evidence indicates that people in those communities consumed fish that the Pentateuch later identifies as prohibited. The pattern therefore challenges an assumption that the aquatic rule simply formalized an ancient, widespread food taboo already practiced for generations.

The frequency of prohibited fish declined substantially in later periods. By the Roman era, such remains were far less common in Judean contexts. The decline is consistent with the possibility that observance of the aquatic prohibition became more widespread over time. It does not mean that every person changed behavior simultaneously, nor does it identify a single year when the rule became authoritative.

The researchers also found evidence of non-kosher fish in and around Jerusalem, which complicates any attempt to explain the remains as belonging only to peripheral or culturally mixed settlements. At the same time, archaeological sites contain diverse populations, and the identity of consumers cannot always be determined from a bone alone. The conclusion is therefore probabilistic: the recurring pattern is difficult to reconcile with the idea of universal avoidance in earlier periods.

What the Evidence Suggests About the Development of Practice

The findings support a model in which religious practices developed gradually. Texts, institutions, teachers, political change, and community identity may all have influenced the adoption of dietary boundaries. The Babylonian conquest, the Persian period, the Second Temple era, and later encounters with Hellenistic and Roman power changed the social environment in which Judean identity was expressed.

Food can become a particularly visible marker of identity because it is repeated every day. Avoiding certain animals distinguishes insiders from surrounding communities and brings law into ordinary domestic life. Once such a rule is widely observed, it can appear timeless. Archaeology can reveal that the path to that appearance was historical and uneven.

Adler’s broader Origins of Judaism Archaeological Project asks when practices recognizable as Judaism became widespread among ordinary people. Ritual baths, stone vessels, inscriptions, dietary remains, and other materials can help answer that question. The approach does not reduce religion to garbage. Rather, it recognizes that daily objects sometimes preserve behavior more directly than elite texts do.

Limits of the Archaeological Argument

The article is most persuasive when it presents the study as a new line of evidence, not a final verdict. Preservation varies by site, and fish bones are small and easily missed unless excavation teams use fine recovery methods. Older excavations may have collected animal remains less systematically. Differences in sample size can make one period appear more or less represented than another.

Trade and food processing add another complication. Fish could be transported salted, dried, or prepared in ways that affect which bones reached a settlement. Some remains may belong to non-Judean residents, visitors, soldiers, or merchants. Archaeological labels such as “Judean site” describe a historical context, not the identity and beliefs of every person present.

The chronology of biblical texts is also debated. The study shows that earlier consumption patterns did not match the later prohibition, but archaeology alone cannot establish exactly when the relevant verses were first composed, edited, or publicly enforced. The evidence is strongest when used to reject simple assumptions and encourage more precise questions.

Evaluation of Zeldovich’s Article

Zeldovich succeeds in turning a specialized zooarchaeological study into an accessible narrative. The opening scene at the retirement tribute gives the research a human beginning. Readers see how one scholar’s mention of unexpected fish bones generated a collaborative question. The article then moves from curiosity to method and conclusion without requiring technical training.

The use of quotations from the researchers adds authority and personality, while the explanation of kashrut gives nonspecialist readers necessary context. The article also communicates the excitement of finding historical meaning in ordinary refuse. Rather than presenting archaeology as a search only for palaces and treasure, it shows that food waste can illuminate law, identity, trade, and social change.

The original review complained that the article lacked headings and was difficult to follow. That criticism is understandable for a reader accustomed to textbook formatting, but magazine features often use narrative continuity rather than a formal academic outline. The structure is more coherent than the earlier review suggested: encounter, question, evidence, results, and implications. Still, a subheading explaining the difference between written law and material practice could have helped readers avoid the mistaken conclusion that the study disproved the existence of all kosher observance in the first millennium BCE.

The article necessarily simplifies scholarly debate. It focuses on the most newsworthy conclusion and gives less attention to sampling limitations, competing chronologies, and the difficulty of assigning ethnic identity to archaeological remains. Those omissions do not make the article inaccurate, but

they show why readers should consult the peer-reviewed study for a fuller account.

Historical and Cultural Significance

The research matters beyond the history of one food rule. It demonstrates that communities do not always move directly from text to practice. Laws can be formulated before they are broadly observed, or they can gain new significance during periods of political and cultural change. People may follow some identity markers while ignoring others.

The study also warns against describing ancient Judeans as a uniform population. Practice varied across time and place. Later Jewish dietary observance should not be projected unchanged into every earlier century, just as earlier nonobservance should not be used to deny the religious importance the rule later acquired.

Finally, the article illustrates interdisciplinary scholarship. Biblical studies supplies the textual rule; archaeology supplies dated contexts; zoology identifies species; and history interprets changes in identity and authority. No single field could answer the question as effectively by itself.

Conclusion

“What Archaeology Tells Us About the Ancient History of Eating Kosher” presents a compelling example of how material evidence can test assumptions drawn from written sources. Adler and Lernau’s analysis of fish remains shows that scaleless species were consumed at Judean sites during the Iron Age and Persian periods and became much less common later. The pattern suggests gradual expansion of observance rather than timeless and universal compliance (Adler & Lernau, 2021).

The study does not prove that ancient Judeans ignored every dietary law, and it does not establish a precise date when all communities adopted kashrut. Its achievement is more careful: it shows that the aquatic prohibition did not simply preserve an already universal food taboo. Zeldovich communicates that insight effectively, and the underlying research opens a productive discussion about how religious texts, communal identity, and everyday behavior interact over time.

References

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