

Kosher Meat

Kosher Meat versus Regular Meat

Extract from the book:
What Would Jesus Eat? (2002)
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In 1906, Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*, a book that described practices of the meat-packing industry that threatened the health of consumers. The book garnered the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt, who then became instrumental in passing legislation requiring federal inspection of all meat sold through interstate commerce. The meat-packing industry was required to foot the bill for cleaning up its own industry.

The typical kill rate in the early 1900s was about fifty cattle an hour. The slaughter rate in some of the newest plants is nearly four hundred head of cattle an hour! Most plants slaughter well over three hundred head of cattle every working hour of the week. As a nation, we are consuming far more beef per capita than anyone in ancient Israel could ever have imagined.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, some 37,642,000 cattle and calves were slaughtered in 1991. Perhaps one piece of good news is that in the figures related to 1991, Americans were found to be eating less beef than they had been fifteen years earlier. In 1976, beef consumption was about ninety-four pounds of beef per person per year. In 1991, the typical American ate only about sixty-eight pounds of beef a year [1]. Even so, sixty-eight pounds of beef a year is more than a pound of hamburger per person per week on average! And many Americans eat far more than that.

The Usual Processing of Beef

Very few people I meet understand the procedures of a slaughterhouse. They are important for us to understand, however, if we truly want to eat the way Jesus ate. Let me give you a brief overview.

It takes about twenty-five minutes to turn a live steer into steaks and hamburger in our modern slaughterhouses. Working in a slaughterhouse is one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States, with an injury rate about three times higher than the rate in a typical manufacturing factory. Production lines have been speeded up to increase the volume of production and, thereby, profitability.

In a typical modern slaughterhouse, cattle walk down a narrow chute in single file until they reach a 'knocker'. The knocker is a worker who fires a bolt gun with a retractable metal rod into the steer's forehead. The shot must be precise for it to knock the animal unconscious. There is a high failure rate among many beef plants that use this type of gun - in fact, only 36% of slaughterhouses using it earned a rating of 'acceptable', which means the cattle were knocked unconscious with a single blow at least 95% of the time. Many times an animal has to receive a second or third blow with a bolt gun.

When the steer falls, one of its hind legs is shackled to a chain that lifts the animal into the air where it is ready to be bled and butchered by workers on down the production line. A worker uses a long knife to slit the neck of the steer, severing its carotid arteries. The long knife must hit the exact spot to kill the animal humanely. Often, animals wake up (since they were never really knocked unconscious) and begin moving their heads or twisting and arching their backs; at other times, workers use unsharpened knives due to their production quotas. An animal can get seven minutes down the production line and still be alive. Some, in fact, are still alive as the hide is being stripped off them [2].

Animals are skinned and dismembered within minutes of having their throats cut, and since some animals are still alive at this point in the process, they literally are killed 'piece by piece'. The fear and pain in animals still alive produce hormones that can damage the meat. Also, fear in an animal still alive causes the muscles of the animal to contract and arteries to be constricted - this enables the animal to hold blood in its tissues and meat.

The saying “if slaughterhouses were made of glass, we would all be vegetarians” is certainly true!

The Slaughter That is Biblical

The slaughter of animals in the Bible was quite different from what goes on today. First, animals were not killed in any kind of ‘processing plant’ mode. There was no assembly-line approach. It was the common procedure for one animal to be selected from a flock or herd as described in Deuteronomy 12:21:

“...thou shalt kill of thy herd and of thy flock, which the LORD hath given thee,”

“The actual method of slaughter is known as the *shehitah*. Jews consider this method to have been given to Moses as part of the ‘oral Torah’ – the verbal law that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. Moses revealed this oral law to the religious heads of Israel, who in turn handed it down from generation to generation by word of mouth. The oral Torah was finally written as part of the Talmud in the second century.

The *shehitah* method of slaughter was intended to cause the least amount of pain to an animal, and to result in the extraction of the most amount of blood. The animal’s throat was to be cut rapidly with a to-and-fro cut. The movement was intended to take only a fraction of a second and resulted in the severing of the trachea, esophagus, two vagus nerves, both carotoid arteries, and the jugular vein. The blade of the knife was to be adequately long and was to be kept extremely sharp and free of any nick or irregularity.

An animal’s neck was to be clean and free of mud, pebbles, dirt, and sand prior to its being killed. The cut was to be made without any hesitation, with a continuous stroke, and with no pressure applied - the sharpness of the blade did the cutting.

After the cut was made, the cut was to be examined by the slaughterer, who was called the *shochet*, to make sure the trachea and esophagus had been properly and thoroughly severed. The process is one that requires significant skill and expertise – it was also to be done with piety and respect for the fact that God had created the animal that was being killed. Slaughtermen had to pass a rigid exam and be certified by Rabbinic authorities.

If any of these procedures were not followed, the meat was to be considered unfit for consumption.

After the slaughter, the animal’s lungs and other internal organs were examined. Animals that have been injured in a fall, or that have been torn by wild animals or poisoned, will generally have a defect in their internal organs. Such animals were considered unfit for consumption.

Using this biblical method, no animal suffered more than necessary. No harmful hormones were released into the tissues and meat. The maximum amount of blood was drained from the animal.

What About Veal?

In raising veal calves in America today, a calf is usually allowed to nurse only one or two days before it is removed from its mother. It is then locked in a small stall and given a high-calorie diet absent of iron – this keeps the calf anemic and results in the pale color and tender texture of veal meat. Antibiotics are used to keep the calf from becoming ill. Many veal calves develop lung adhesions. They would certainly not pass the test of a *shochete*.

Notes:

[1] Erik Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001)

[2] *Washington Post*, 13 April 2001