

Activity 1. Food Taboos from Leviticus

Instructions: You are a cultural anthropologist studying the origin of traditional Southwest Asian religious beliefs. You accept as true that most religious practices have their origins in local environmental conditions. Your task is to explain the reasons ancient Israelites had so many rules about what foods they could eat and what foods were “unclean” or “abominations.” According to the Book of Leviticus in the Judeo-Christian Old Testament

(<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Leviticus+11&version=NIV>, accessed June 16, 2010), while the children of Israel could eat cows, goats, and lambs, Yahweh forbade them to eat animals that “chew the cud” but “divideth not the hoof.” These animals were described as unclean. They included camels, rabbits (conies and hares), and pigs (swine). Other “unclean” species were any animals with paws, mice, tortoises, and snails. In addition, Israelites could not eat fish or seafood “that have not fins and scales,” or birds such as eagles, owls, and vultures. These were all described as an “abomination unto you.” However, the Israelites were permitted to eat chickens, locust, beetles, and grasshoppers.