

## Q4.5 What does it mean for a land to be flowing with milk and honey?

To be flowing with milk and honey means a land is conducive to abundant life. The phrase refers specifically to the Israelite promised land, which symbolically represented the heavenly kingdom. The phrase is not an endorsement for consuming animal products.

### A land flowing with milk and honey

*‘A land flowing with milk and honey’* refers to the promised land that God was leading the Israelites into during their exodus out of Egyptian slavery: “*So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey*” (Exodus 3:8, NIV). Isaiah the prophet symbolically describes the land as a mother providing sustenance for her children, “*Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance*” (Isaiah 66:10-11, NIV). This study is designed to clear up any misconceptions about why the promised land is described in these terms.

### Why a literal interpretation fails

A common objection to veganism is that God must want us to drink animal milk and eat bee honey since that is what the promised land consists of. This perspective, however, assumes that the reason the land is described in these terms is because those items are intended for us to consume. But if that were the

case, then it wouldn't have made much sense for Caleb and the other spies, when attempting to prove that the land was flowing with milk and honey, to do so by bringing back grapes, pomegranates, and figs: *"Then they came to the Valley of Eshcol, and there cut down a branch with one cluster of grapes; they carried it between two of them on a pole. They also brought some of the pomegranates and figs"* (Numbers 13:23, NKJV). Instead of bringing back milk and honey to prove that the land was *'flowing with milk and honey'*, they brought back fruit: *"And they gave this account to Moses: 'We went into the land to which you sent us, and indeed, it is flowing with milk and honey. Here is some of its fruit!'"* (Numbers 13:27, BSB). Also, if the land were literally flowing with milk and honey, the milk would go rancid after a few days and the rivers of honey would make everything sticky all the time. A land of rancid stench and perpetual stickiness doesn't sound like *'the glory of all lands.'*<sup>1</sup>

### **What milk and honey indicate about a land**

The reason it made sense for Caleb and the other spies to prove the land was flowing with milk and honey by bringing back fruit is because of what the presence of milk and honey indicate about the land, namely that the land is conducive to abundant life. Milk indicates that animals, specifically mammals, are flourishing and reproducing, and thereby also the grass and herb of the ground that most land mammals eat. Honey indicates bees are flourishing and pollinating, and thereby also the flowering plants that yield fruit and vegetation. And of course the flourishing of animals and vegetation also indicates an abundance of water since water is essential to both plant and animal life. Hence a land flowing with milk and honey indicates a place where plants and animals are abundant and thriving and therefore also a place that is blessed and

---

<sup>1</sup> "On that day I swore to bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the glory of all lands" (Ezekiel 20:6, BSB).

conducive to human flourishing. It is a description used in contrast to a desolate wasteland,<sup>2</sup> a cursed place of desperation that is not conducive to life, where famine and drought abound.

### **Symbolically representing the heavenly kingdom**

The land flowing with milk and honey also symbolically pointed to the heavenly kingdom. Moses led the people to the promised land, but he could not himself go in,<sup>3</sup> nor could anyone who lacked the faith of Caleb.<sup>4</sup> Instead Joshua was chosen by God to lead the people into the promised land<sup>5</sup> since Joshua and Caleb were the two spies who gave the true report of the land.<sup>6</sup> In Hebrew, the name Joshua (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ Yehoshua) is nearly identical to Jesus (יֵשׁוּעַ Yeshua), each name meaning to rescue, deliver, or save. This need for Joshua to lead the people where Moses could not lead them symbolically represented the Levitical laws of Moses<sup>7</sup> being insufficient by themselves to lead people into the heavenly kingdom.<sup>8</sup> They can

---

<sup>2</sup> "Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I have made the land a desolate waste because of all the abominations they have committed" (Ezekiel 33:29, BSB).

<sup>3</sup> "Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.'" (Numbers 20:12, NKJV).

<sup>4</sup> "They certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it" (Numbers 14:23-24, NKJV).

<sup>5</sup> "But commission Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead this people across and will cause them to inherit the land that you will see" (Deuteronomy 3:28, NIV).

<sup>6</sup> "Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes and said to the whole congregation of Israel, 'The land we passed through and explored is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD delights in us, He will bring us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and He will give it to us.'" (Numbers 14:6-8, BSB).

<sup>7</sup> Specifically, the laws of Moses as represented in the Yahwist version of the Torah.

<sup>8</sup> "As Jesus started on His way, a man ran up and knelt before Him. 'Good Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'Why do you call Me good?' Jesus replied. 'No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not cheat others, honor your father and mother.'" 'Teacher,' he replied, 'all these I have kept from my youth.' Jesus

only get one to the entrance, looking in.<sup>9</sup> Wholeheartedly following Jesus—the way of salvation<sup>10</sup>—is required to enter into the promised kingdom: “*Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’*” (John 14:6, NKJV).

### **Consuming milk and honey is harmful and covetous**

Since consuming milk and honey harms and destroys animals, it stands to reason that we will not be consuming either of them in the heavenly kingdom: “*They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*” (Isaiah 11:9, NIV). Honey is designed for bees, not for humans. Consuming it harms and destroys bees.<sup>11</sup> If you do not buzz around all day landing on flowers, honey is not for you. Similarly, a mother’s milk is intended for her baby and no one else. Consuming animal milk harms and destroys animals.<sup>12</sup> If you are not a baby and the milk does not come from your mother, then it is not for you. Therefore, in order to be the good stewards of God’s creation that He purposed us to be,<sup>13</sup> it is best to abstain entirely from consuming milk or honey and instead to leave those things for our animal neighbors they are designed and intended for. Doing

---

looked at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘There is one thing you lack: Go, sell everything you own and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me.’” (Mark 10:17-21, BSB).

<sup>9</sup> God speaking to Moses: “Although you shall see from a distance the land that I am giving the Israelites, you shall not enter it” (Deuteronomy 32:52, BSB).

<sup>10</sup> “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, NIV).

<sup>11</sup> “Many vegetarians, animal rights activists, and environmentalists already avoid bee-derived products, including honey, beeswax, bee propolis, bee pollen, and royal jelly. Those who do not may be unaware of how harmful the cultivation of such commercial products is to the famously busy insects whose lives are directly and adversely affected” (Gang, Elliot L. “The buzz about honey.” *The Animals’ Agenda* 17.6 (1997): 26).

<sup>12</sup> For more information about how milk consumption harms and destroys cows, see: King, Sarah Withrow. *Vegangelical: How Caring for Animals Can Shape Your Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016, page 140.

<sup>13</sup> “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15, NIV).

otherwise would constitute covetousness—desiring something not intended for you. The Bible warns about covetousness<sup>14</sup> and says it will keep one from entering<sup>15</sup> the kingdom of God, *“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, or his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor”* (Exodus 20:17, BSB).

### **An alternate reading of ‘honey’**

The term דְּבַשׁ (dvash) is often translated 'honey', which is not wrong, but it is often confused with the substance produced by bees in a beehive. In the Bible, דְּבַשׁ (dvash) usually refers to a sweet fruit syrup made from soaking, straining, and boiling dates into a thick, dark brown syrup. It has been a dietary staple throughout the Middle East for thousands of years. In English it is commonly called date honey, date syrup, date molasses, or date honey syrup. In Hebrew it is sometimes also called סִילָן (silan). In Arabic it is called رُب (rubb) or دِيبِس (dibis). It is commonly used as a sweetener for tea, pastries, pancakes, or bread. Jewish author and philanthropist Jodi Jarvis says, *“The ‘Seven Species of Israel’ are identified in the description of Israel in Deuteronomy 8:8, ‘a land of wheat, barley, grapevines, figs, and pomegranates; a land of oil olives and date honey.’ These fruits and grains were the staple foods of biblical times, and still maintain a presence across modern Israel’s landscape. It has become a tradition to include tastes of the seven species on Tu B’Shevat, the Jewish holiday celebrating the New Year of the Trees.”*<sup>16</sup> So there is evidence to suggest ‘honey’ may actually refer to a fruit product rather than a bee product.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Numbers 11 for a description of what happens when one serves the covetous desires of the flesh instead of being content with the food God provides and says is good for us.

<sup>15</sup> See also Colossians 3:5; James 1:14-15; Romans 7:7.

<sup>16</sup> Jarvis, Jodi. *Fun Facts About the Seven Species of Israel*. Jewish Boston. 22 January, 2018. <https://www.jewishboston.com/read/fun-facts-about-the-seven-species-of-israel/>

## An alternate reading of ‘milk’

In his commentary on Genesis 4:4 about what Abel brought before God, first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote: “*But Abel brought milk.*”<sup>17</sup> In the phrase מְבִכְרוֹת צֹאֲנוֹ וּמִחֶלֶב, ‘*the firstborn of the fat of his flock*’ the word translated ‘*fat*’ in Hebrew is חֶלֶב (cheleb), which is identical to the Hebrew word for ‘*milk*’ חָלָב (chalab), but with different vowels.<sup>18</sup> Since vowels were not added to the Hebrew alphabet until hundreds of years after Josephus, the original word describing Abel’s gift may have been *milk* rather than *fat*. This is true of every other instance of the two terms throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Similarly, ‘*fatness*’ (וְחִשְׁמָנִי) is elsewhere used to describe fruitful conditions of a land, “*May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness (וְחִשְׁמָנִי) of the earth and plenty of grain and wine*” (Genesis 27:28, ESV). So the original term may have had nothing at all to do with milk but instead ‘*fatness*’, which others have translated ‘*richness*’ (NIV, BSB) or ‘*abundance*’ (NLT, AMP) in this passage. Regardless of whether the term was originally supposed to be חֶלֶב (cheleb) or חָלָב (chalab), it almost certainly referred to a favorable condition of land being fruitful, given that other similar words are also used to describe it as such.

## Conclusion

A land ‘*flowing with milk and honey*’ means the land is fertile and conducive to abundant life. It does not mean a land of stickiness and rancid stench, nor does it mean a land filled with rampant animal cruelty and unrestrained covetousness. In the time of Moses, it referred specifically to the promised land the Israelites were

---

<sup>17</sup> Josephus, Flavius. *The Antiquities of the Jews: History of the Jewish People from Adam and Eve to Jewish–Roman Wars* (Bk.1 Ch.2.1), tr. by William Whiston. E-artnow, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> “And they gave this account to Moses: ‘We went into the land to which you sent us, and indeed, it is flowing with *milk* [חָלָב (chalab)] and honey. Here is some of its fruit!’” (Numbers 13:2, BSB).

journeying toward. This promised land symbolically pointed to God's heavenly kingdom, a place with abundant life: *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came so that they would have life, and have it abundantly"* (John 10:10, NASB). In the heavenly kingdom, everything will return to the very good way God designed it to be: *"Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good"* (Genesis 1:31, NKJV). A mother's milk will only be consumed by her baby, and honey will only be consumed by the bees it was designed for. In anticipation of Jesus' return, let's choose to be the loyal stewards of God's creatures that He created us to be.<sup>19</sup> Let's do so by abstaining entirely from taking and consuming the milk or honey that was designed by God for the animals: *"Blessed is that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns"* (Matthew 24:46, BSB).

---

<sup>19</sup> Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:26, NKJV).