

*The first part of this article appeared as an entry in the *Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Logos Publishing, 2011). The remainder is posted here in addition for study purposes.

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“Food”

That which sustains life; often used in celebration (feasting), mourning (fasting), and as metaphor for a number of spiritual concepts.

Food is that which gives and sustains life. While the Mosaic Law (particularly Lev 11 and Deut 14) prohibited the eating of certain meats, a wide variety of foods were available in ancient Israel. Abundance of food suggested God’s blessing. Consequently, famine could be seen as divine judgment and a threat to life itself. Metaphorically, food items are often used to denote that which gives and sustains the spiritual life of the people of God (e.g., “I am the bread of life,” John 6:25, 25, 48). Because of its intimate connection with life in general, food became one of the central components of expression, for both celebration (in feasting) and mourning (in fasting). Images of gluttony and drunkenness often suggest a life out of sync with God’s intentions.

I. Foods Eaten in Ancient Israel

The land of ancient Israel is described as a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:8, 17, 13:5, 33:3; Lev 20:24; Num 13:27, 14:8, 16:13, 14; Deut 6:3, 11:9, 26:9, 15, 27:3, 31:20; Josh 5:6; Jer 32:22; Ezek 20:6, 15). The description suggests a land rich in livestock and vegetation (Stuart, *Exodus*, 117, n. 36; Sarna, *Exodus*, 16). In 1920 BC, the Egyptian fugitive Sinuhe noted of Israel: “Figs were in it and grapes. It had more wine than water. Plentiful was its honey, abundant its olives. Every kind of fruit was on its trees. Barley was there, and emmer. There was no limit to any (kind of) cattle ... Bread was made for me as daily fare, wine as daily provision.” (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, “The Story of Sinuhe,” 80-90). Though certain foods were only available regionally, ancient Palestine produced a wide variety of

- * grains (wheat, barley, millet, spelt)
- * vegetables (cucumbers, leeks, onions)
- * fruits (grapes, dates, figs, olives, pomegranates, apples)
- * livestock (cattle, sheep, goats, chickens)
- * dairy products (from the milk of goats and cows)
- * spices and condiments (such as salt, mint, dill, cumin, coriander, honey, and mustard).

A. The Daily Diet

While the land produced a plethora of food stuffs, the three main staples of the ancient Mediterranean diet seem to have been what MacDonald calls “The Mediterranean Triad”: grains, oil, and wine (MacDonald, *What Did Ancient Israelites Eat?*, 17-24). The phrase “grain, new wine, and olive oil” appears frequently in Deuteronomy as a

description of the promised land (Deut 7:13, 11:14, 12:17, 14:23, 16:9, 18:4, 23:25, 25:4, 28:51, 33:23), and the three were common elements in the required sacrifices (Lev 2:1-16, 6:14-23, 7:11-34, 24:1-9; Num 15:1-12, 28:1-25; Deut 18:3-5; Amos 4:5). In addition to grain, oil, and wine, *Sirach* 39:26 includes salt, milk, and honey as components of the most basic Israelite diet. When life was threatened or in want, diet consisted of bread and water, or perhaps bread and wine (Gen 21:14; 1 Kgs 18:13, 22:27; Lam 2:12).

Because the butchering of animals was laborious and messy, meat was not a daily component of the ancient Israelite diet. C. Blomberg, in his study of meals throughout Scripture, has suggested that meat was *rare* in the ordinary Israelite's diet (*Contagious Holiness*, 52). But the prohibition of certain meats in the Mosaic Law implies that a variety of others were eaten regularly. Sparrows were sold as an inexpensive food source (Matt 10:29), but the indiscriminate size of the bird suggests a meager amount of meat for the trouble. Butchering livestock for the purposes of consumption presumed that numerous people would attend the meal, so meat was normally reserved for feasting and banquets (Luke 15:23; Isa 25:6). MacDonald offers caution, that "whilst we should hesitate to assume meat was rarely eaten, it would be unwise to regard it as a regular part of the average Israelite's diet" (*Not Bread Alone*, 64).

B. Old Testament Food Laws

Intricately connected to the life of Israel—both its sustenance and its religious life—were the food laws given in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. The people of God were provided with a wide range of food options, but were prohibited from eating certain kinds of foods, particularly meats. Jews were widely known throughout the ancient world as those who did not eat certain foods and refused to share the table with Gentiles. The first-century BC Roman author Diodorus Siculus understood their refusal to eat with Gentiles as a hatred of all humankind (*Bibliotheca Historica* 34-35.1).

Scholars from the fields of anthropology and biblical studies have renewed their attempts to understand both the structure and the purpose behind the prohibitions in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Anthropologists have suggested economics (M. Harris, *Cannibals and Kings*, 129-138; *Good to Eat*, 15, 74-77) and the relative inhospitality of the Israelite landscape for raising pigs (Simoons, *Eat Not This Flesh*, 13, 92-94; Harris, *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches*, 33-38). But these factors only account for the prohibition of swine, and not other animals listed, nor the exceptions given in the text. The most prolific study came from M. Douglas, whose insights into sociological taboos brought her to the conclusion that Israel's food laws were an attempt to foster respect for the created order (*Purity and Danger*, 41-57; *Natural Symbols*, 11-13). Her insights have been challenged by biblical scholars, however, on the grounds that these laws reflect a larger concern of holiness for the people of God. They do not arise from the community to protect societal norms, but rather are given by God to protect the norms that He established for the community. J. Milgrom (*Leviticus*, 656-659, 718-736), noting the vocabulary of holiness that pervades Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, concluded that the laws were given to separate Israel from the nations and to foster within God's people a respect for life, not food. W. Houston (*Purity and*

Monotheism, 123, 218-258) and N. MacDonald (*Not Bread Alone*, 18, 43-69) have taken the most eclectic approach, integrating societal boundary-marking, economic factors, and a desire for holiness (combined) as the factors which gave rise to Israel's food laws.

Attempts to explain the prohibitions in the Jewish diet based on hygienic or microbial contamination (Macht, "Pharmacological Appreciation") can be traced back to the times of Origen (*Homily on Leviticus* 7.7.2-3) and Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 3.48) but fail to answer important questions (namely why certain animals are restricted, but were just as dirty as some that were included) and have been largely dismissed.

Israel's food laws help define *who* is the life of Israel: Yahweh (Deut 8:3). Only in Him is there life. This helps to explain why the food laws contribute to the exclusive Jewish persona by the first century AD. Jews did not eat with Gentiles, for Gentiles ate things that were forbidden for Jews to eat, things sacrificed to pagan gods. The refusal of Jews to eat with Gentiles was as much about their covenant faithfulness to Yahweh as it was about the food set before them.

II. Feasts

If the basic consumption of food is for the sustaining of life, then feasting comes to represent a *celebration* of life. Feasts were times of celebration, and were often held to ratify covenants (Gen 26:28-31, 31:53-54, Exod 24:8-11; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:20), celebrate marriages (Matt 22:2; John 2:1-10; Rev 19:9) and birthdays (Mark 6:21), and for kings to impress their nobles (Esth 1:3-9; Dan 5:1-4; Matt 14:6-10; Luke 14:7-11). Wine was an important part of the feast event, for wine signified joy and merriment (Judg 9:13; Ps 104:15; Esth 1:7-8; Isa 25:6; Dan 5:1-4; *Sirach* 31:27-28). Meat was also part of the "prestige food" (Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting*, 11-12) offered in joy. Jesus' practice of eating with sinners incarnated the joy that God has over their repentance and their newfound life in Him (Luke 15:7, 10, 22-24, 32). The eternal life found with God in the eschaton is pictured as a celebration feast (Isa 25:6-8; Matt 8:11-12; Luke 14:15; Rev 19:9; *1 Enoch* 60:7-8, 24; 62:9-13; *3 Enoch* 48a; *2 Baruch* 29:1-8; *Testament of Isaac* 6:22-23, 8:6-7; *Testament of Jacob* 7:23-24; *Sibylline Oracles* 3:741-761). That Jesus indiscriminately ate with sinners and tax collectors (Matt 9:10; Luke 15:1, 19:1-7), Pharisees and scribes (Luke 7:36, 11:37, 14:1), his disciples (Mark 1:29-30; Luke 24:13-30; John 12:1-3), and the burgeoning crowds (Mark 6:32-44; 8:1-9) suggested that the Messianic Banquet described in Isaiah 25:6-8—to which "all peoples" are invited—was becoming reality in his ministry.

Feasting out of control, however, led to gluttony—a sign that life was outside the boundaries set by God. Gluttony is pictured in the Bible as life lived to excess. This excess, while primarily involving good things, spilled over into other areas of life, causing laziness, apathy, and destruction (Judg 3:12-25; Prov 23:21; Isa 22:13; Luke 12:19, 45-46, Phil 3:19; Titus 1:10). Sharing one's food was an important aspect of justice in the Hebrew mindset (Isa 58:7; Ezek 18:16; Luke 3:11), and overconsumption of one's resources (particularly food) prevented the sharing of those resources with

those who vitally needed them (Job 31:17; Prov 25:21-22; *Sirach* 31:23-24; Matt 25:35-36; Acts 4:32-35; Rom 12:20; Jas 2:15-17; Heb 13:2).

Of particular note is the feasting that accompanied idol worship in both the Old and New Testaments. If Yahweh is the source of life, then participation in idol feasts was a blatant disregard for His provision and an affront to His sovereignty. Many first-century Jews and Christians were scrupulous about abstaining from meat that was, in any way, connected to idol sacrifices. Paul and John are sometimes thought to be at odds on this, for while Paul did not condemn the eating of meat sacrificed to an idol, so long as it did not cause another believer to stumble (Rom 14:13-21; 1 Cor 10:27-32), and suggested that prohibition against idol meat constituted “things taught by demons” (1 Tim 4:1-5), John chastised churches that permitted the eating of idol-food (Rev 2:14, 20). The difference involved their respective situations: Paul distinguished between purchasing and cooking meat bought from the marketplace (1 Cor 10:25-29) and (with John) full-blown participation in an idol-feast (1 Cor 8:1-13, 10:14-22), where drunkenness and sexual immorality naturally followed (Witherington, “Idle Thoughts,” 237-251).

III. Fasting

As it relates to food, fasting is both recognition that life is being lived outside the boundaries of God’s desire and a conscious attempt to bring these aspects of life back under His reign. Fasting is not a means of getting God’s attention when prayers aren’t answered. Instead, fasting is a natural response to a grievous, sacred moment (McKnight, *Fasting*, xx, 18, 166-169). True fasting, says Isaiah, leads to justice, release for the oppressed, and sharing food with the hungry and poor (Isa 58:1-10). These all come from a recognition that life is out of kilter with God’s desires and a conscious attempt to get them back under His control.

Fasting often involved the abstinence of solid food for a twenty-four-hour period. On rare occasions individuals fasted without food and water. Esther’s call for the Jewish people to fast came in response to the threats against God’s people. The life of the nation was at stake and the people responded with prayers and petitions in kind, accompanied by fasting (Esth 4:15-16). The two most notable individuals in the Old Testament to undergo a forty-day fast were Moses (Exod 34:28; Deut 9:7-18) and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:7-8). In both cases the presence of God miraculously sustained them while they performed His work. Jesus’ imitation of these forty-day fasts (Matt 4:2)—and the re-enactment of Israel’s wilderness experience—reinforced the idea that “man does not live by bread alone” (Matt 4:4; Deut 8:3) but, like Moses and Elijah, by the very presence of God.

Involuntary fasting—famine and (or caused by) drought—threatened the life of God’s people, both individually and nationally (Gen 12:10, 26:1, 43:1; 2 Sam 21:1; 1 Kgs 18:1-5; 2 Kgs 4:38; Jer 14:1-6; Acts 11:28). Famine may have been caused by natural disasters (1 Kgs 8:37; Joel 1:1-2:27; Amos 4:6-10) or by war (2 Kgs 6:24-29, 7:4, 25:2-3; Lam 4:8-10), but the causes of these events were sometimes attributed to the

judgment of God (Deut 28:20-24; 2 Sam 21:1; 2 Kgs 8:1; Isa 3:1; Jer 24:10; Amos 4:6-10).

IV. Food as Metaphor

Apart from the literal use of food and its life-sustaining qualities is a deep well of metaphorical use of food imagery in the Bible that points to God as the sustainer of the spiritual life of His people. As far back as Israel's wandering period, God had reminded them that the manna He provided was not only for sustaining their physiology, but for their spirituality, and to foster a dependence upon Him for their very existence (Deut 8:1-4). Isaiah portrayed the salvation of God to free food that satisfies on a deeper level than the body (Isa 55:1-2). Jeremiah's two baskets of figs—one edible, the other inedible—was a fitting metaphor for the faithfulness of the exiles (Jer 24:1-10).

Food is a frequent metaphor in the New Testament for the sustenance of God. Jesus rebuked the devil with a recitation of the Deuteronomy text about the manna: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deut 8:3 NIV; Matt 4:4). He seemed disinterested in food at times, working through mealtimes (Mark 3:20) and claiming that his "food" was to do God's will (John 4:32, 34). Like His Father, Jesus spoke of his presence as the spiritual nourishment of God's people. He described himself as the "bread of life" (John 6: 33, 35, 41, 48, 51) and "living water" (John 4:10, 13-14, 6:35, 7:37).

Food items were used as illustrations for a variety of spiritual concepts in the New Testament. Salt became a metaphor for both the believer's effectiveness in the world (Matt 5:13) and flavorful speech (Col 4:6). Yeast, a small item whose impact is comprehensive within, was a fitting illustration for both the kingdom (Matt 13:33) and the teaching of the Pharisees (Matt 16:5-12 ; Luke 12:1). Paul and Peter both contrasted the elementary and deeper teachings of the faith to milk and solid food (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:14; 1 Pet 2:22). The work of the Spirit in the believer's life is likened to fruit (Gal 5:22-23). Perhaps the greatest, most sustaining metaphor is that of the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, used to represent the sacrifice of Jesus (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25). The one who overcomes is promised permission to drink living water (Rev 22:17) and to eat from the hidden manna and the tree of life (Rev 2:7, 17; 22:19).

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See Also:

Jewish Identity Markers

Kosher (or Dietary Regulations)

Idol Worship

Leviticus

Lord's Supper

Manna

Meals

Meat Sacrificed to Idols

Sacrament

Sin