Food and Identity: An Old Testament Perspective

An outline of the deep-seated relationship between food and identity in the Old Testament. Food has a central role in ancient Jewish identity and is frequently mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures.

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'You are what you eat', we often say. In this way we express the close relationship that we perceive to exist between our food and our identity. The expression also brings to the surface our anxieties about food. If we are what we eat, what exactly are we eating? The recent scandal about horsemeat exposed these insecurities, as well as the deeply ambiguous, even confused, relationship we have to the food we eat. Whatever British identity might mean in these days of significant migration and unresolved devolutionary dilemmas, it does not involve the consumption of horse – no matter what our benighted continental neighbours have on their menu. Of course, it does not take much reflection to realise that our attitude to horse is not so very different to the Arab attitude to pork, or how many Indians view beef. It is no less meat, and few of us have sampled it so as to offer a considered decision on the merits of its flavour. But that's not the point. Eating horse is as British as cross-country skiing, or speaking Nepalese.

National stereotypes play on this relationship between food and identity. We speak derisively of the French as Frogs, and the Germans as Krauts. And our contempt is reciprocated: the French label the English *Les Rosbifs*. Food and identity is not just a national matter. Localities are identified by their specialities. Every German region has its *Wurst* and every French locality its cheese and wine. In Britain too local delicacies are prized and defended tenaciously. Even for those who dislike the European Union, it seems to have its uses in providing protection for Melton Mowbray pies, or Arbroath smokies or Cornish pasties, or our regional cheeses such as Cheshire, Leicester and Cheddar.

The Image of God

The relationship between food and identity is deep-seated. Indeed, we find evidence of it already in the Old Testament. When we sit in front of the Bible and read it from the beginning, the first statement about human identity is the deeply surprising affirmation that human beings are made in the image of God (Gen 1.26). There is no end of debate about what constitutes this image. Most agree that it entails, at very least, rulership over the animal kingdom (1.27). But what makes a human different from an animal? The creation story in Genesis 1 has its own answer to that question: 'God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food"' (Gen 1.29–30; NRSV).

The story of creation in Genesis 1 is all about how God brings order through dividing one thing from another. Light from darkness; land from sea; humans from animals. For the writer of Genesis 1, humans and animals are distinguished at the very beginning of time by what they eat. Animals consume the green vegetation: grass, herbs, etc. Human beings, however, eat seed-bearing plants: grains and fruit.

The language of the 'image of God' is surprisingly rare in the Old Testament. One of the few places it recurs is just after the end of Noah's flood. Again, the question of human food is important. After the flood, perhaps as a concession to the human instinct for violence, God permits

Noah and his descendants to kill animals for food. God tells Noah, 'Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything' (Gen 9.3).

It is difficult not to wonder at this close relationship between human food and the image of God. I don't think this speculation has been offered before, but the language of the image of God is usually associated with priestly authors, and the priestly authors do insist that both grain offerings and animal offerings are appropriate sacrifices for God. The author of Leviticus 3 can even go so far as to call the sacrifice of well-being God's food (vv. 11,16). At this point there is some similarity between God and human beings.

If we are what we eat, what exactly are we eating?

The Fruit in the Garden

I doubt very much that the ambiguous expression 'the image of God' means no more than God and humans consume meat and grain. But the image does seem to be entangled with the question of what we eat. We meet this also in the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 — 3. We find no mention of the 'image of God', but the idea seems to be reflected in the story's play on what it means to be *like* God. The serpent tempts the women with the prospect of being 'like God in knowing good and evil' (Gen 3.5). Eating the forbidden fruit makes one divine it would seem. Fatefully, the woman takes of the fruit and eats. As a result, she and her husband are barred from the other tree. This tree too appears to allow one to be 'like God', not through knowledge, but by living forever (Gen 3.22).

The story reflects the terrible ambivalence of the human condition. Our understanding is practically divine, setting us apart from other created beings. But we are frustrated by our transience. Immortality, it seems, was within human grasp, but only if our first parents were prepared to forego the knowledge of good and evil. Maturity and mortality or innocence and infinite life. In some sense we are like God, his image, but only by also being unlike him in another way.

What it means for us to possess our identity as divine image is bound up with that fateful decision of Adam and Eve: to eat or not to eat the fruit of the tree. Many readers of the biblical text have been irritated by the apparent contradiction between the gravity of the issues and the triviality of Eve's actions. One of the towering Old Testament scholars of the last century, James Barr, complained, 'What a fuss about a mere apple!', describing God's commandment as 'an ethically arbitrary prohibition'. In many respects, I suspect Barr's comments reflect our distance from the biblical text as modern readers. Food laws appear arbitrary and seem to have nothing to do with ethics. Or at least they do, until I fear that I have eaten horsemeat because of the desire for a quick profit by abattoirs and supermarkets, and my own desire for cheap food. For early Jewish readers, familiar with the dietary laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, a commandment not to eat food would not have appeared arbitrary. Far from it! Obedience to such laws was integral to what it meant to be a Jew. Whilst it may not be possible to undo the fateful actions of Adam and Eve, through obedience to the food laws faithful Jews could hope to bring their lives in line with the creator's commandments.

A Holy People

The dietary laws in Deuteronomy raise the question of identity explicitly. 'You are the children of the LORD your God" (Deut 14.1) and 'You are a people holy to the LORD your God' (v. 2). Yes, and what does that entail? 'You shall not eat any abhorrent thing' (v. 3). Lest we miss the point, the entirety of the dietary laws are bracketed at both ends by the statement, 'You are a people holy to the LORD your God' (vv. 2,21).

Many readers of the biblical dietary laws assume that God was concerned for the health of the Israelites. Studies that suggest a link between pork consumption or the consumption of shrimps and lobsters and harmful bacteria are seized upon as evidence of the healthy effects of a 'biblical diet'. Whatever 'holy to the LORD your God' means, it does not mean 'healthy to the LORD your God'. The concerns of the biblical authors are quite different from ours.

A clue to the intent of the biblical writers is provided by their division of the animal world into three: land animals (Deut 14.4–8), fish (vv. 9–10) and birds and winged insects (vv. 11–20). This division understands the world in exactly the same way as the creation story in Genesis 1. The world is divided into three parts, and the Israelites are permitted to eat those things that *fit* their part of the world. So, fish have fins and scales. There appears to be another principle at work too. None of the animals eats meat. The permitted land animals chew the cud, which means they are herbivores, just as Genesis 1 envisages. The forbidden birds are flightless, birds of prey, or consume carrion.

In its present form the Old Testament text does not offer a way back into the Garden of Eden. It does offer to Israel the path of obedience that Adam and Eve forsook. This way involves a denial of appetite that the first couple could not follow. In this way the people become 'holy to YHWH'.

The Joy of Feasting

The Old Testament may not seem the most obvious place to find an idea of self-denial when it comes to diet. The desires of the Israelite tribes wandering in the Sinai desert and the Judeans exiled to Babylonia was for a land of their own, where they could settle down, grow crops and raise their families. The stories of the wilderness journeys tell of a people sustained by a promise that they are being led to 'a land flowing with milk and honey'. There is considerable disagreement about what this expressions means exactly, but the land clearly is naturally bountiful. Desire rather than denial seems to be more prominent a theme in the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy reflects the expectations of those who live outside the land. Its various laws insist time and again that the people rejoice and feast when they arrive in the Promised Land. Indeed, in Deuteronomy the Hebrew word for 'rejoice' often seems to mean nothing more than join together and celebrate. The various laws also envisage the Israelites being as generous as possible to those amongst them who have less: the widows, the stranger, the orphans and the Levites (e.g. Deut 16.11). The book appears to set up an expectation of how Israelite landowners will act when they arrive in the land. We would not be far wrong if we see the book as defining Israelite identity as one of generosity.

In contrast to the generosity of the Israelites is set the actions of the Moabites and Ammonites when the Israelites came through their land at the end of the wilderness wanderings (Deut 23.3–8). Through stories about the lack of generosity of other nations, and by providing laws that set out an alternative expectation of generosity, the writers of Deuteronomy seek to establish an ethic that will characterise the Israelites in the land.

Self-Denial in Exile

Whilst many texts show a desire for land and food, there are some that move in a different direction as a result of the deeply traumatic events of the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. These events had a dramatic effect on all aspects of Judean life and worship. One of the changes was the institution of regular fast days (Zech 8.19), which memorialised key moments in the fall of Jerusalem. Whereas the earlier festive calendar had marked out a series of joyous festivals, the calendar was now also interspersed with days of mourning. Jewish life oscillated between fasting and feasting. In this way the new reality of Jerusalem's defeat was embedded in the lives and practices of those who survived.

New practices give rise to different sensibilities, and this can be seen in a changed attitude to the spectacle of royal feasting. Throughout the ancient Near East, but particularly in the vast Mesopotamian empires, there had long been the practice of kings demonstrating their power and influence through huge feasts. These were important vehicles of ancient royal ideology for they stressed the generosity of the human king. They were a means of rewarding loyal courtiers and provided a context in which status in court could be measured and attained. The value of large feasts for securing loyalty to the king and helping the empires to function is seen in the flourishing of royal feasting for millennia. Nor was Israel a stranger to these practices. Solomon's table was celebrated for its abundance and the number of courtiers who sat at it.

Despite the fact that royal feasting was part of their history, the Jewish encounter with Persian feasting produced an unexpected reaction. The extravagant excess of the Persian court jarred with the new sensibilities that came from a life regulated by feasting *and* fasting. In novellas set in the imperial court, such as Daniel, Esther and Judith, Jewish writers depict the conspicuous consumption of the Persian rulers. A good example of this is the lavish banquet of 180 days that opens the story of Esther. 'There were white cotton curtains and blue hangings tied with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and coloured stones. Drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king' (Esth 1.6–7; NRSV).

Though readers were no doubt fascinated by this display of excess, they were also intended to be repulsed. The Persian monarchs and officials who participate in these vast meals are seen to lack moral fibre. They are indecisive, sexually indulgent, foolish and lack the perceptiveness needed to see when they are being misled.

The Old Testament is clear. There is a relationship between food and identity, and it matters.

The Jewish heroes and heroines in these stories are marked instead by the simplicity and modesty of their lives. Daniel and his friends refuse the rich food of the royal table preferring simple vegetables. Esther and her friends go without food and pray through the night. The widow Judith leads a modest life of fasting and prayer. For each of these characters, dietary discipline goes hand in hand with moral courage, fortitude and wisdom. Nor do the writers ignore beauty. Daniel and his friends appear healthier after 10 days on just vegetables, Esther is the most beautiful woman in the whole empire, and Judith is celebrated for her beauty. Ultimately, of course, the apparent success of the Persian feast proves to be a sham, and the stories end with the Jewish protagonists being honoured by all.

These novellas of court life were remarkable vehicles for the moulding of Jewish identity. They set out a picture of dietary and moral discipline in contrast to the alien 'other'. They promote the view that true success is not to be found in opulence and excess, but in modesty and faithfulness to ancestral traditions.

Conclusion

Much of the Old Testament is now thought to address the question of Jewish identity in the exilic and post-exilic period. Food has a central role in Jewish identity, which is no surprise when we remember how frequently food is mentioned in the Old Testament. The New Testament is no different in this respect. It would be mistaken to imagine that verses like Matthew 15.11, 'it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles' or Romans 14.17, 'the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking' made this any less true. This is far from the case! A brief skim of the New Testament will reveal food to be as much of a concern to Jesus and the apostles as it was to the writers of the Old Testament. The weak and the strong, purity laws, meat offered to idols, the place of the poor at the common table – questions of what we eat and how we eat are also questions of Christian identity. Thus, on the relationship between food and identity both Old and New Testaments agree: there is one, and it matters.