

Not Bread Alone

The Uses of Food in the Old Testament

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Introduction

‘Man cannot live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds from the mouth of YHWH’. In this way Moses summarized the lessons learnt by Israel at the end of forty years in the wilderness, and in the New Testament Jesus quotes these words in his struggle with the devil after his own wilderness experience. Without YHWH and what he provides there is no life for human beings. Yet, that single word ‘alone’ implies that bread is also necessary for life. Without food human beings will survive little more than a month, without liquid less than a week. ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ is not an indulgent or otiose request, especially in the vulnerable environment of ancient Palestine.

It is little wonder then that the perennial concern for food makes an impression on the texts that have survived from ancient Israel. Even for the scribal authors who composed the Old Testament, belonging as they did to the social elite, a regular supply of food probably could not be taken for granted.¹ (It should not be forgotten that occasional food shortages were a part of life in Europe even in modern times, and it is only within the last two hundred years that the general population has enjoyed a secure food supply.) The biblical authors express this reality in a number of places by attributing the provision of food to God the creator. In the great antiphonal psalm, Psalm 136, for example, the leader exhorts the worshippers to,

Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
His love endures for ever . . .
Who gives food to every creature.
His love endures for ever

(vv. 3, 25)

¹ In the following pages I will largely refer to the canon of Jewish scriptures or the first part of the Christian scriptures as the ‘Old Testament’. Although some other scholars prefer alternative nomenclatures, the designation ‘Old Testament’ reflects the author’s communal location and that of the large majority of the book’s probable readers. ‘Old Testament’ also has the advantage that in its most capacious sense it includes the books of the Apocrypha, some of which receive attention in Chapter 7. When I make reference to the ‘Hebrew Bible’ it is particularly when I have in mind the shorter canon and where a reference to ‘Old Testament’ would be ambiguous.

In the present canonical form of the Old Testament, the divine provision of food is given a central place from the very beginning. According to Genesis 1–11 when God created the world he gave the leafy green plants to the animals as food, whilst he gave the cereals and fruits to humanity. After the deluge human beings are permitted to consume the animals as well. The relation of humanity to this divine provision appears especially in the story of Genesis 3. It is through food that Adam and his wife are tested. They are granted the fruit from every tree in Eden, except for the tree that is in the centre of the garden.

Despite the importance of food to the Old Testament authors, the subject has received surprisingly little attention from modern biblical scholars. The neglect of food in Old Testament scholarship is striking when compared to the number of studies that have been produced on the related subjects of land or agriculture.² Land, in particular, has received a great deal of attention, but though much space has been given to the different ideologies of land and its possession, little reflection has been given to how the land might have been used.³ In the modern world land can be utilized for any number of purposes: residential estates, retail parks, sports facilities, industrial plants, country parks, agriculture. In ancient Israel, except for the small area utilized for villages and towns, land served one purpose only: the production of food. Fertile plains were used for crops, hillsides were planted with olives or vines, and the remaining land was used as pasture for flocks. In the ancient world, land means food. In defence of those who have written studies on land in the Old Testament perhaps this is almost too obvious to mention.

What are the reasons for overlooking the subject of food in the Old Testament? They are, perhaps, not too difficult to discern. First, food is ubiquitous in the Old Testament. There is scarcely a page in the Old Testament where food is not mentioned. It is difficult to know where to begin with a subject that is so broadly represented in the Old Testament corpus. Second, food and drink are so commonplace in the Old Testament and our own human experience that they do not appear to demand particular attention or study. Food is a natural consequence of our physicality that requires little comment. Within the academic study of the Old Testament other perennial problems make more

² N. C. Habel, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); W. Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd edn. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); E. W. Davies, 'Land: Its Rights and Privileges', in R. E. Clements (ed.), *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological, and Political Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 349–69.

³ Habel, for example, touches on what the land produces on only a few occasions and then only in passing (e.g. Habel, *Land is Mine*, 43, 103).

pressing demands on the biblical scholar. Third, the Bible has traditionally been valued for its profound religious and ethical ideas. Consequently, the focus of much biblical scholarship has been to achieve an understanding of the intellectual and spiritual life of the Israelites, not their bodily appetites. Fourth, two particularly intractable problems in the interpretation of the Old Testament concern food: the meaning and significance of sacrifice and the food laws. One of the principal purposes of sacrifice is to create the appropriate ritual circumstances in which animals might be killed and meat consumed. Yet the possible meanings of sacrifice—if meaning is the right category with which to analyse the issue—has long been an unresolved problem within Old Testament scholarship. The Old Testament dietary laws are also a well-known *crux interpretum*: can we discern their underlying system and logic? These two intellectual problems, dietary laws and sacrifice, have attracted significant scholarly energy and obscured a larger area of potential interest: food. Finally, one of the reasons for the lack of any works on food in twentieth-century scholarship was the comprehensive discussion of food and food-related issues by William Robertson Smith in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*.⁴

A significant part of Smith's celebrated lecture series seeks to show how ideas such as sacrifice, taboo, tithes and covenant had developed out of primitive Semitic communal feasts. Smith's central insight was that 'the fundamental conception of ancient religion is the solidarity of the gods and their worshippers as part of one organic society'.⁵ The gods quite literally belong to the same tribe as the worshippers. This community was effected through a communal meal. 'The law of the feast was open-handed hospitality: no sacrifice was complete without guests, and portions were freely distributed to rich and poor within the circle of a man's acquaintance. Universal hilarity prevailed, men ate drank and were merry together, rejoicing before their God.'⁶

Sacrifice in Smith's understanding originated as part of this communal feast in which the whole clan was involved. An essential element of the feast was the consumption of flesh. Indeed, in the early nomadic communities meat was rarely eaten, and it was only at the communal feast that such a special event

⁴ W. R. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: Their Fundamental Institutions*, 3rd edn. (London: A. & C. Black, 1927). Our concern is primarily with the first series of lectures, since the second and third series of lectures were not published in Smith's lifetime. In addition, the subject matter of the unpublished lectures does not touch on food to the same extent, with the exception of the first lecture from the second series. This lecture addresses the Israelite feasts and is primarily a discussion of calendrical matters (W. R. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: Second and Third Series. Edited with an Introduction and Appendix by John Day*, JSOTSup, 183 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), esp. 33–43).

⁵ Smith, *Religion of the Semites, First Series*, 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

took place. Consequently, a feast meant meat, and meat meant a feast.⁷ If the consumption of meat creates a community between the gods and men, it also does so between men. A key presupposition of the early Semites was that 'those who eat and drink together are by this very act tied to one another by a bond of friendship and mutual obligation.'⁸ The biblical texts that portray the sealing of a covenant by a communal act of eating and drinking bear the imprint of this primitive Semitic idea.⁹

Smith's arguments give historical and logical priority to the communion interpretation of sacrifice. 'The leading idea in the animal sacrifices of the Semites... was not that of a gift made over to the god but of an act of communion, in which the god and his worshippers unite by partaking together of the flesh and blood of a sacred victim.'¹⁰ Sacrifice was a development of the public feast of clansmen, in which the deity is also included.¹¹ Other theories of sacrifice derive from this as the communal and sacramental theory of sacrifice lost some of its original power. Thus, the interpretation of sacrifice as a gift was a notion transferred from the royal courts of early kingdoms where kings received homage or tribute from their subjects. Similarly, sacrifice as an offering that achieved atonement only developed with later ideas of guilt or obligation. The original Semitic sacrifices were occasions of unalloyed joy and revelry for the tribal community in the presence of their gods.¹²

Smith's ideas about sacrifice also provided an explanation of the Jewish dietary laws. In later forms of Semitic religion a distinction was made between those animals that may ordinarily be sacrificed, and those that were sacrificed only in exceptional circumstances. In the former case, the animal could only be consumed by being brought into the domain of the holy through sacrifice; and, in the latter case, the tabooed animal belonged to the domain of the holy and was prohibited. Behind this distinction Smith perceived a primitive inability to distinguish between the holy and the taboo, which he understood as a relic of early Semitic religion where no distinction was made between ordinary and extraordinary sacrifices, and the killing of any animal was considered a sacrilegious act that could only be done in the presence of the gods and the clan.¹³

Smith's lectures provide a compelling account of the history and development of food and feasting and their relation to key religious ideas and institutions. With a few guiding conceptions Smith is able to produce a comprehensive synthesis that explains sacrifice, public feasting, covenant meals and

⁷ Smith, *Religion of the Semites, First Series*, 224, 255; cf. 280–1. ⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 271. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 226–7. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 280. ¹² *Ibid.*, 245–63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 312. For a later critique of this idea, see M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 7–28.

taboo foods. The arguments are supported by evidence drawing widely from classical sources, the Old Testament and nascent comparative anthropology. It is, perhaps, not surprising that subsequent discussions of food, such as the interest in covenant meals, were mere footnotes to Smith's intellectual edifice.¹⁴

FOOD IN RECENT OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP

The credit for observing the absence of food in recent Old Testament scholarship must be given to Rudolf Smend, who as early as 1977 drew attention to this omission. The stimulus for Smend's observation was Walther Zimmerli's considerations of the *Weltlichkeit* of the Old Testament.¹⁵ Zimmerli had argued for the importance of the material world in the theology of the Old Testament and, consequently, for Christian theology. His argument was supported by an examination of the views found in the Old Testament on subjects such as the creation of the world, marriage and sexuality, land and possessions, conduct towards other humans, and life after death. He had, however, omitted any discussion of food and drink in the Old Testament, which Smend identified as a significant lacuna. In Zimmerli's *festschrift* Smend wrote a brief essay on eating and drinking which he offered as an addendum to

¹⁴ See, e.g., W. T. McCree, 'The Covenant Meal in the Old Testament', *JBL* 45 (1926), 120–8; T. H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 372–5; L. Koehler, 'Problems in the Study of the Language of the Old Testament', *JSS* 1 (1956), 3–24, esp. 4–7; D. J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions*, *Growing Points in Theology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 30–1, 41–3; A. W. Jenks, 'Eating and Drinking in the Old Testament', in *ABD* 2: 250–4.

The influence of Smith and the 'covenant meal' are also discernible in Gillian Feeley-Harnik's study of food in early Judaism and Christianity (G. Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table: The Meaning of Food in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981)). Feeley-Harnik's focus is upon the symbolism of food in the Old Testament as it relates to sectarian attitudes to the table in first-century AD Judaism and Christianity. '*The Lord's Table* focuses on why and how sectarians in the intertestamental period used dietary rules and other eating practices to address major ethical questions of identity and affiliation in radically changing circumstances' (p. xiii). Controversy over the validity and interpretation of the dietary laws is placed within the wider context of early Jewish food practices. Consequently Feeley-Harnik is interested in the influence of the final form of the Old Testament upon Jewish and Christian thought and the result is a synthetic account of beliefs about food arising from the Old Testament. Feeley-Harnik gives particular attention to the relationships established between God, food and the people consuming it. God demonstrates his power and authority through food, by which he gives life or confers punishment. Those who accept his authority symbolize this through acceptance of his food, whilst rebels seek forbidden food. The eating of the food provided by God is a commensal act, forging relationships with one another and also with God.

¹⁵ W. Zimmerli, *The Old Testament and the World* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976). It should be noted, however, that Zimmerli had briefly considered Israel's ritual feasting.

Zimmerli's work.¹⁶ In his essay Smend warns against interpreting references to eating and drinking in the Old Testament as simply ciphers for the covenant meal, or for a joyful mental state. He considers examples of food as a symbol of distress and happiness, the concerns about sensuality and satiation, and its role in celebrations and other communal events, including the covenant meal.

In recent years the absence of food within the study of the Old Testament, or at least its narrow focus on the questions of sacrifice, food laws and covenant meals, has begun to contrast strongly with other areas of historical study. The subject of 'food and foodways' has become a significant area of intellectual enquiry.¹⁷ Numerous works have been published on food in the classical world;¹⁸ and for the medieval period and onwards the reader is well served with broad surveys and detailed studies.¹⁹ The work on the classical period has even stimulated numerous studies in New Testament. Sustained attention has been given in recent years to issues such as table fellowship, food offered to idols and the application of dietary laws in the nascent Christian church.²⁰ What has driven this interest in food and drink has not merely been the biological necessity of food as a source of nourishment. Rather it has been the

¹⁶ R. Smend, 'Essen und Trinken—Ein Stück Weltlichkeit des Alten Testaments', in H. Donner, R. Hanhart and R. Smend (eds.), *Beiträge zur alttestamentliche Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 447–59.

¹⁷ 'Foodways' are the culinary practices and eating habits of a culture.

¹⁸ Note, *inter alia*, P. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Response to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); P. Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*, Key Themes in Ancient History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); E. Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); J. Wilkins, D. Harvey and E. Dobson (eds.), *Food in Antiquity* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995); J. M. Wilkins and S. Hill, *Food in the Ancient World* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

¹⁹ See, e.g., B. A. Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976); S. Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 2nd edn. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); S. W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); P. Scholliers (ed.), *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe since the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

²⁰ See, e.g., C. L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005); W. Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14*, SNTSMS, 85 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); K. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993); J. Fotopoulos, *Food Offered to Idols in Roman Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Reconsideration of 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1*, WUNT, II/151 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); D. E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). Note also the SBL unit that in recent years has been devoted to the subject of 'Meals in the Greco-Roman World'. Its aims are described as follows: 'The Greco-Roman banquet, which was a complex and highly influential hellenistic institution, will be explored as a lens into Greco-Roman social bonding and boundaries and as a pivotal consideration in reconstructing the history of early Christianity and Judaism.'

cultural and social uses of food. Food is basic to life, but it is also an important social, cultural and economic marker. In the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, one of the most important and influential theorists on food and its role in society, food is ‘bon à penser’.

In the last decade or so, the possibility that food might not only be good to eat, but also good to think has begun to become apparent to a small number of Old Testament scholars. In 1995 Rolf Knierim observed the absence of the subject in biblical theology.

The lack of biblical studies on food is strikingly evident in the history of Old and New Testament theologies. Despite the biblical evidence, the issues of food has never received attention worthy of a chapter in a theology, let alone the issues of its function in the whole of biblical theology—as if it were theologically irrelevant!²¹

In the light of this observation Knierim composed a short essay on the theology of food in the Old Testament relating the subject to two topics that have received far more attention: land and justice. Four years later, Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten noted that ‘hardly any works are to be found on cooking, eating and drinking in the worlds of the Bible’.²² Consequently they sought to alert the biblical guild to this ‘exciting new theme’ and edited a *Semeia* volume with essays devoted to food and drink, examining the subject primarily from a social-scientific, a socio-critical or a literary perspective.²³ In recent years the clarion call of Knierim, Brenner and van Henten has been answered with a number of monographs that examine the subject of food in the Old Testament. These studies can be classified according to the different perspectives found in the *Semeia* volume on food.

Food in Social-scientific Perspective: Eleonore Schmitt

The most comprehensive academic study of the material production of food in ancient Israel and its symbolic significance is found in Eleonore Schmitt’s *Das*

²¹ R. P. Knierim, ‘Food, Land and Justice’, *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Methods and Cases* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 225–43, here 226.

²² A. Brenner and J. W. van Henten, ‘Food and Drink in the Bible: an Exciting New Theme’, in J. W. Dyk et al. (eds.), *Unless Someone Guide Me . . . : Festschrift for Karel A. Deurloo*, Amsterdamse Cahiers voor Exegese van de Bijbel en zijn Tradities Supplement Series, 2 (Maastricht: Uitgeverij Shaker Publishing, 2001), 347–54, here 349. This essay is a revised version of A. Brenner and J. W. van Henten, ‘Our Menu and What Is Not On It: Editor’s Introduction’, in A. Brenner and J. W. van Henten (eds.), *Food and Drink in the Biblical Worlds*, *Semeia*, 86 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), pp. ix–xvi.

²³ Social-Scientific perspective: Brumberg-Kraus, Davies, Frick, Matthews, Tomson; Socio-Critical: Brenner, Corley, McKinlay; Literary: Appler, Carroll, Sharon.

Essen in der Bibel: Literaturethnologische Aspekte des Alltäglichen.²⁴ Schmitt's work, which appeared in 1994 prior to the essays of Knierim, Brenner and van Henten, is the first attempt to draw upon the extensive research on the anthropology of food and apply it to biblical texts other than the food laws and sacrifice. In two chapters anthropological studies on food and biblical scholarship on food are reviewed. Two further chapters examine food in the biblical texts. The first utilizes Goody's model of production–distribution–preparation–consumption–disposal, augmented with the additional category of 'selection', to examine the socio-material context of food.²⁵ Goody's model allows Schmitt to consider all aspects of food production and consumption in ancient Israel comprehensively. The second is an examination of the religious and social significance of food. Schmitt considers food as a means of characterizing individuals and situations, as a narrative tool to signal scene changes, the use of gastronomic metaphors and its association with other biblical motifs such as poverty, blessing or death.

Schmitt's book is a valuable contribution to the subject of food in the Bible, and its application of the anthropology of food beyond the food laws is an important development. Nevertheless, the attempt to deal comprehensively with food across both testaments in relatively short compass means many interesting topics receive only a brief treatment. In addition, Schmitt's work views food and its symbolism in a static manner, drawing material from across the Bible to produce a synthetic account. The distinctive use by different biblical writers or the possibility of historical change finds no place in Schmitt's discussion.

Food in Socio-critical Perspective: Judith McKinlay, Juliana Claassens and Ken Stone

As the title suggests, Judith McKinlay's *Gendering Wisdom the Host: Biblical Invitations to Eat and Drink* is primarily concerned with questions of gender.²⁶ McKinlay begins with the observation that in Proverbs 9, Ecclesiasticus 24 and

²⁴ E. Schmitt, *Das Essen in der Bibel: Literaturethnologische Aspekte des Alltäglichen*, Studien zur Kulturanthropologie, 2 (Münster: Lit, 1994). Schmitt's volume, originally a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Mainz, is unfortunately overlooked by Brenner and van Houten, who wrote in 1999, 'To the best of our knowledge, there is no volume on the market—be it a monograph or an anthology—that has food and drink in the Bible and related texts as its center' (Brenner and van Henten, 'Our Menu', p. x).

²⁵ See J. Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*, Themes in the Social Sciences (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²⁶ J. E. McKinlay, *Gendering Wisdom the Host: Biblical Invitations to Eat and Drink*, JSOTSup, 216 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

John 4 we have three invitations to eat and drink that appear to stand in an intertextual relationship with one another. Whilst the content of the invitation is relatively constant, the host undergoes significant changes. ‘First Wisdom, then Wisdom/Sophia, and third Jesus; not only a change of inviter, but a change of gender. The once host/ess has seemingly become a host.’²⁷ The one to whom the invitation is issued also changes: the young man of Proverbs 9 becomes the Samaritan woman of John 4.

The feminist reader cannot overlook these changes because they might have important consequences for the perception of gender and sexual relations. McKinlay’s study is an attempt to investigate this change and is consequently an examination of the three passages and the portrayal of women in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus and John. At stake for McKinlay is the question of whether we have an incorporation of the feminine into the divine, or the exorcizing of feminist elements by the masculine Jesus. In her view, ‘the use of the Wisdom material in John’s Gospel is not so much the Christian statement of the culmination of Wisdom expressing the feminine divine, but the final stage of the long process of the masculinization of Wisdom.’²⁸ It is apparent, then, that the presence of language about eating and drinking is peripheral to McKinlay’s concerns. This is especially clear in her suggestion that the process she discerns in the biblical tradition was already underway in Proverbs 9, where McKinlay suspects goddess language has been appropriated. This is hardly a novel suggestion, and the evidence is well rehearsed along with a detailed examination of what is known about the goddess Asherah. What McKinlay overlooks, however, is the absence of any references to Asherah as a *host*.²⁹ The alimentary imagery is omitted

²⁷ Ibid., 11. ²⁸ Ibid., 240.

²⁹ Esp. *ibid.*, 17–37. The presentation of Athirat in the Ugaritic texts is discussed, *inter alia*, by Binger (T. Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel and the Old Testament*, JSOTSup, 232 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997)) and Hadley (J. M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess*, University of Cambridge Oriental Publications, 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 38–53). The only text concerning Asherah that touches upon hosting is peculiarly inapt for McKinlay’s argument: ‘As soon as El sees her, | he opens his mouth and laughs. | He set his foot on the footstool | and turns his fingers round. | He lifts his voice and sh[outs]: | Why has Athirat, Lady Day, come? | Why has the creatress of the gods arrived? | If you are very hungry and want [to eat] | If you are very thirsty and want [to drink] | Eat or drink! | Eat of the food on the tables! | Drink of the wine in the cups! | Blood of the trees from a golden beaker. | Or is it the ‘hand’ of the king, of El, that excites | you the love of the Bull that arouses you?’ (KTU 1.4 IV 27–39; Binger’s translation). Here it is El that is host at the feast with food a metaphor for intercourse. The juxtaposition of a feast prepared by El and sexual intercourse is also found in ‘The Feast of the Goodly Gods’: ‘As for El, his staff descends (?) | As for El, his love-shaft droops (?). | He lifts (his hand), he shoots skyward, | He shoots in the sky a bird, | He plucks, sets (it) on the coals; | El indeed entices the two females’ (KTU 1.23 35–9; Smith’s translation). Smith takes the roasting imagery as a metaphor for El’s conquest of the two goddesses, an interpretation which is also appropriate for El’s enticement of Athirat in KTU 1.4 IV (M. S. Smith, *The Rituals and Myths of the Feast of the Goodly Gods*

when it no longer serves the socio-critical argument that McKinlay wants to make.

A more conservative feminist approach is to be found in Juliana Claassens's analysis of the metaphor of divine provision.³⁰ Claassens wishes to extend the metaphorical images for God employed within the Christian tradition and particularly those images which have female associations. Her study traces the idea of divine provision from Israel's experience in the wilderness through the threat of loss as a result of covenant curses and promised restoration. She argues that the metaphor of provision is not gender neutral, but an important maternal image that portrays God as a mother caring for her children's needs, whilst also disciplining and teaching. The approach is biblical-theological and operates on the level of the final form of the text in dialogue with traditional Christian and Jewish interpretations. Claassens's study is valuable if somewhat restricted in its interests and having a tendency to interpret even neutral descriptions of divine provision as evidence of female imagery.

The most sophisticated use of socio-critical hermeneutics is in the work by the queer theorist Ken Stone entitled *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective*.³¹ His book analyses just some of the many texts in the Old Testament that juxtapose sex and food, and shows how these two cultural domains shed light upon each other. In yet another appropriation of Claude Lévi-Strauss's famous dictum that food is not so much good to eat as good to think, Stone follows the anthropologist Donald Pollock in arguing that food and sex are good to think each other. More than that, Stone wishes to argue that 'food and sex are "good to think" the nature and goals of a safer biblical interpretation in the contemporary world'.³²

The chapters of Stone's book do not form a linear argument, but a series of overlapping studies that touch each other at various points. Stone examines diet and sexual practices as boundary markers of the community, and argues that such markers need to be subjected to rigorous interrogation and destabilization. He considers the public implications of sex and food in 2 Samuel and Genesis in order to undermine the commonly assumed division between

of KTU/CAT 1.23: Royal Constructions of Opposition, Intersection, Integration, and Domination, Resources for Biblical Study, 51 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 83–8). Thus, not only can the trajectory of female hostess to male host not be sustained by an examination of the Ugaritic literature that McKinlay uses to support her claims about the presence of a goddess in ancient Israelite religion, but the hosting is related to El's sexual seduction.

³⁰ L. J. M. Claassens, *The God Who Provides: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

³¹ K. Stone, *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective*, Queering Theology Series (London: T&T Clark International, 2005).

³² *Ibid.*, 22.

public and private life. Through an analysis of 2 Samuel 13 and the Song of Songs he argues that sex and food have the potential to bring pleasure and danger to those who partake. From the portrayal of ΥHWH in Hosea Stone argues that the provision of food for the family and the control of female sexuality are interrelated matters of male honour. Such agonistic male norms are as endangering to female flourishing as to male, and consequently are in need of deconstruction. Finally, Stone turns to the portrayal of food and sex in the Wisdom literature, arguing that we have in Ecclesiastes a positive message ‘that enjoyment of the bodily pleasures of food, drink and sex is one of the best things we can do with our lives, and has been ordained by God’.³³

Stone’s suggestion that food and sex are good to think each other suggests that his reading of the biblical texts will pose ideological and moral challenges to how we think about food and sex. Indeed, in his first chapter he seeks to undermine the tendency of modern biblical readers to overstress the gravity of sexual matters in comparison to food. Examining the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2–3 Stone argues that the story is as much about food as it is about sex. Modern scholars and readers of the text overwhelmingly understand the story to be establishing heterosexuality as a creation norm. Yet the story can be seen to be as much about desire for food, as indeed was the case in much early Christian interpretation. The ethical and theological significance of food is a point well made—particularly, one would have thought, in a world where access to food is so inequitable—but Stone’s subsequent interpretations of biblical texts and the hermeneutical implications that he adduces from his interpretations prioritize sexuality to the detriment of food issues. This is, perhaps, hardly surprising given Stone’s self-identification as a gay man who is also a biblical scholar working in a context where the place of homosexual believers within many Christian denominations is clearly under negotiation. Food is indeed a more important ethical issue than is usually allowed in the Western Christian tradition, but it is difficult for Stone to avoid the existential import of his particular context. In addition, many of the biblical passages that Stone examines use food to speak about sex, rather than the reverse. Thus, Nathan’s parable of the poor man’s lamb serves to confront David with his crime against Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam. 12), whilst in the Song of Songs food items are metaphors of parts of the body, and consumption, of sexual acts. In Stone’s book, then, food is really only a vehicle to talk about sex, despite protestations to the contrary.

³³ Ibid., 149.

Food in Literary Perspective: Diane Sharon

Diane Sharon's *Patterns of Destiny: Narrative Structures of Foundation and Doom in the Hebrew Bible* seeks to examine the function of eating and drinking within biblical narratives.³⁴ Utilizing the structuralist methodology of the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, Sharon argues that eating and drinking appears as a constant, a structurally constitutive component of the narrative, in two narrative patterns. In the first pattern, the Establishment/Foundation Genre, the eating or drinking event is followed by a positive oracle; in the Condemnation/Doom Genre the eating or drinking event is followed by an oracle of doom. The description of the eating or drinking event provides clues to the nature of the destiny portended.

An example of Sharon's exegesis is her examination of Abraham's entertainment of the three visitors in Genesis 18. The three men arrive at Abraham's tent, where they are given a meal. There is a verbal encounter during which an oracle is given promising Abraham and Sarah a son. The men depart, after which $\Upsilon\text{N}\text{W}\text{H}$ affirms the oracle in a soliloquy (Gen. 18.18–19). An annunciation does not require an eating or drinking event argues Sharon. Yet here we have a Foundation pattern where Abraham's line is being established through Sarah, thus 'it is no accident that...an eating and drinking event appears in this text'.³⁵

Sharon's work makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of the role of eating and drinking, not only in biblical narratives, for she also traces the pattern in ancient Near Eastern texts as early as the third millennium BC. She demonstrates how frequently events of eating and drinking occur in ancient texts and presses for an explanation of this phenomenon. Her work has, however, an involved methodology and it is this, rather than any explorations of the literary role of eating and drinking, that Sharon envisages as the primary contribution of her research. Her work is not immune to the criticism often brought against structuralist theory that its cumbersome methodologies produce relatively modest results.

OUTLINE OF WORK

Our review of recent literature demonstrates the capacity of this subject, food in the Old Testament, to enlighten relatively unexplored aspects of the

³⁴ D. M. Sharon, *Patterns of Destiny: Narrative Structures of Foundation and Doom in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

Israelite world and to provoke new interpretations of familiar biblical texts. Such a survey, however, also highlights certain dangers. First, it is possible for the subject to be overwhelmed by the methodological approach. This issue is especially apparent in socio-critical hermeneutics, where a laudable concern with the ethical or unethical utilization of the text in the present day is the primary stimulus for the hermeneutical method. Food is only interesting to the extent that it sheds light on constructions of gender and sexuality. To describe this as a problem is not, of course, to hold that these matters are unimportant, but only to argue that food's symbolic palette is much richer and more extensive than such studies suggest and worthy of analysis in its own right. Second, the studies that we have examined pay little heed to the historical issues which scholars of the past have felt so pressing. Socio-critical and literary approaches usually engage with the biblical text in its final form and as that text bears on the reader as an ethical or aesthetic being. Historical issues are only of relevance to the extent that they bear on or enlighten the interpretation of the text in the present. In the case of McKinlay's book a critical awareness of historical issues substantially undermines the argument she wishes to make. Schmitt's work, on the other hand, with its socio-scientific methodology, is required to be historically aware, but the assumption underlying the work appears to be that food production and the symbolism of food are fairly static through Israel's history.

The chapters that follow seek to examine some of the many symbolic resonances of food and drink. They make use of both literary and historical approaches. In addition, they utilize some of the numerous anthropological studies of food in human cultures. The nature of the material means that what is offered is not a sustained argument, but a series of interrelated studies. I have prepared, so to speak, a meal with a number of courses, rather than a single dish.

The present state of biblical studies and the questions that we have raised about the existing studies on food in the Old Testament means that the question of methodology cannot be avoided. How have I prepared the meal that you, as reader, are about to enjoy? In seeking to do justice to the insights of anthropological studies, the biblical text's literary nature and the many perplexing historical questions, I wish to propose a methodology that is self-consciously pluralistic. This stems from a belief that no one method produces *the* interpretation of biblical texts and that decisions about the appropriateness of many methods cannot be made *a priori*. Expressed in alimentary imagery it would be a foolish chef who limited himself to one way of cooking or to one set of ingredients. Baking, braising, boiling, frying all have their place, as do

cumin, pepper, oregano and thyme. The culinary creation cannot be judged on the basis of its components or the methods of cookery used. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

The first chapter, therefore, seeks to articulate a methodological approach to the study of food in the Old Testament that is fully responsive to research on the anthropology of food, the literary form of the biblical text and historical-critical biblical scholarship. The necessity of all these aspects will be demonstrated through an analysis of work on the Israelite dietary laws in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. For this classical interpretative puzzle Mary Douglas's work, *Purity and Danger*, has been a decisive turning point. Her analysis has stimulated many biblical scholars, but this has required her own views to be re-articulated in light of closer readings of the text and the work of historical-critical scholarship. The conversation not only shows the need for well informed use of anthropological research, literary analysis and historical-critical scholarship, but also the necessity of moving beyond tired debates between materialists and structuralists, or, in the usual terms of biblical scholarship, diachronic and synchronic.

The second chapter demonstrates how a careful coordination of historical and literary issues might enlighten our understanding of an issue such as the diet of the ancient Israelites. The Old Testament portrayal of Canaan as a 'land flowing with milk and honey' has determined many assessments of the Israelite diet. These fail to take into account the literary and rhetorical nature of the biblical materials. They also fail to make critical use of the many available resources from archaeology, palaeopathology, archaeozoology and comparative anthropology. The more realistic assessment of Israelite diet that is offered owes much to Peter Garnsey's studies of food issues in the classical world. Garnsey pioneered the utilization of nutritional anthropology in the study of Graeco-Roman diet and society, convincingly demonstrating the frequency of food scarcity and the poor diet of most subjects of the Roman empire.

The third chapter applies recent anthropological work by David Sutton on the relationship between memory and food to the book of Deuteronomy. Rhetorically poised between the wilderness and the Promised Land, Deuteronomy uses food as a vehicle for articulating Israel's memory of exodus, wilderness and conquest. In doing so it takes a number of radical departures from the book of Exodus in its description of the Canaanite cult and in defining Israelite religion focused around pilgrimage feasts to the chosen cultic place. The book also defines the identity of the chosen people through narratives of hospitality or inhospitality that underline its requirement to offer food to the poor and vulnerable.

The fourth chapter utilizes Mary Douglas's theories of *matter out of place* to consider the use of food in the book of Judges. According to Douglas the Israelite dietary laws catalogued animals according to their physical domains. Clean animals had certain characteristics appropriate to those domains. Animals lacking those characteristics are *out of place* and deemed unclean. In Deuteronomistic ideology sacrifice, food, warfare and sexual intercourse occupy separate domains that should not be confused. The book of Joshua is exemplary in maintaining the boundaries between these domains. In Judges, however, these boundaries are frequently transgressed. In this way the book conveys the dissolution of Israelite society prior to the establishment of the monarchy.

Although food is often viewed as a conservative element in society it can also have a role in social change as recent work on feasting has sought to demonstrate. In Chapter 5 the development of Israel from a segmentary society to a monarchy is re-examined. Whilst early proponents of the use of social-scientific methods made significant gains in their analysis of early Israelite society, their work had numerous gaps. One of these was the use of agricultural surpluses and how these were controlled and invested to drive forwards technological and social change. Recent anthropological work on feasting allows this lacuna to be filled, whilst also highlighting that the Old Testament literature was conscious of the importance of food circulation in the social and political economy of the Israelite kingdoms.

The sixth chapter examines the symbolism of the table as the context for divine and human judgement. The association of the table with the feasting of the king and his officials may lie behind this idea. The use of the symbolism and its inversion will be examined especially in the books of Samuel and Kings. This motif may provide an explanation for the otherwise mysterious conclusion of the Deuteronomistic History with Jehoiachin's elevation to the table of Evil-Merodach. The relationship between table and judgement is also expressed in imagery such as the 'cup of wrath' and Psalm 23's overflowing cup. An important development for later Jewish and Christian thought is found in Isaiah 25, where the image of the table is transported into the eschatological future.

The post-exilic period is often thought to see important developments in the food consciousness of the Israelites, usually in relation to the dietary laws. In Chapter 7 the fascination with the feasting habits of the Persians will demonstrate that there was another aspect to this developing religious consciousness. The Persians indulge in conspicuous consumption, which both fascinates and repels the writers of Jewish narrative. The characterization of the Persians is important for establishing the nature of Jewish identity, which

is exhibited in a moderate attitude towards food. Similar ideas in relation to Greek identity are found in the work of Greek historians. In the Jewish writings this theme is combined with the idea of divine judgement at the table. The table, thus, becomes the place at which ungodliness or righteousness is expressed and punished or rewarded.

The volume concludes with a brief consideration of how some of the aspects of food in the Old Testament find resonance in the books of the New Testament.