

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #144:

BIBLE FOODS, PART ONE

By John Temples

We spend a lot of time thinking about, procuring, cooking, and enjoying FOOD. It would be interesting and profitable for us as students of Scripture to study what the Bible says about food and what kind of food people ate in Bible times.

SOME FOODS MENTIONED IN THE BIBLE

Herbs and spices: anise, coriander, cinnamon, cumin, dill, garlic, salt.

Fruits: olives, grapes, apples, dates, figs, melons, pomegranates.

Nuts: almonds, pistachios.

Vegetables: beans, lentils, cucumbers, leeks, onions.

Grains: barley, corn, wheat, millet, spelt.

Meats: fish, birds, calves, goats, lambs, oxen, sheep, quail.

Dairy: milk, butter, cheese, curds, yogurt.

Miscellaneous: eggs, wine/grape juice, honey, olive oil, vinegar.

WHAT PEOPLE ATE IN BIBLE TIMES

Before the Flood: Prior to the Flood, God evidently intended for people (and even animals) to eat only fruits and vegetables. At the creation, God told Adam and Eve, “See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food....” (Genesis 1:29-30). Presumably, this vegetarian diet continued until the Flood; however, given mankind’s propensity to disobey God, it wouldn’t surprise me if they ate meat.

After the Flood: At this time, God made radical changes to man’s diet, allowing the eating of meat. Genesis 9:1-4: “So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. 4 But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.”

Burton Coffman comments: “There is much difference of opinion about whether or not man had been permitted to eat meat before this, and our opinion is that nobody knows for sure. Our assumption here is that it had not been intended from the first, but that the introduction of animal sacrifices in the days of Abel supports the conviction that after the Fall and the institution of sacrifice, men surely ate meat. Also, we have noted that the preponderance of ‘clean animals’ in the ark was also presumably related to the food supply. We agree with Alford, Keil, Whitelaw, and others that, ‘Whether permitted or not, prior to the Flood, it was used, and here for the first time was formally permitted by Divine edict.’ There is more than sufficient reason for the special mention of animal food just here because of the restriction about to be placed on it, without the necessity of supposing that for the very first time men were allowed to eat animals. Willis and many other respected scholars take a different view.”

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Diet under the Law of Moses: There were extensive restrictions and rules regarding foods under the Mosaic system. The post-Flood prohibition against consuming blood was continued and emphasized. Animals were divided into clean and unclean categories, clean meaning suitable for food and sacrifice, and unclean signifying not suitable. You can read the extensive Mosaic laws regarding food in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

The Mosaic prohibition against eating pork (Deuteronomy 14:8) is well known. A Jewish website sheds light on that and other Mosaic dietary laws:

“MEAT: Meat was restricted by dietary laws. ‘You may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud’ (Leviticus 11:3). The key word is ‘and,’ for Leviticus 11 continues to describe the animals that have one or another attribute, but not both at the same time, e.g., the camel, coney, rabbit, and pig. Of them, it says, ‘You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses’ (Leviticus 11:4-8). This leaves the sheep, goat, ox, steer,

and wild game, e.g., gazelle, deer, roebuck, wild goat, wild ox, and chamois. Even ritually fit animals, however, were subject to certain regulations and methods of preparation. Meat was usually boiled, but was also roasted as prescribed for the paschal lamb at Passover, or cooked in a stew. At no time could a kid be boiled in its mother's milk (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21). The regulation was later extended to include the prohibition against even eating meat and milk products together at the same meal. Archaeology has proved it to have been a ban on a pagan practice. Findings at Ugarit [an ancient city whose ruins are located on the Syrian coast] have shown that it was the custom there to boil a kid in its mother's milk as a lucky charm.

“FOWL: Certain kinds of fowl were forbidden, including birds of prey (eagle, osprey, hawk, falcon, owl); those that feed on carrion (vulture, buzzard, raven); certain waterbirds (pelican, stork, heron, swan, sea gull); and other birds (ostrich, bat, lapwing). Poultry (goose, chicken, duck), pigeon and doves, and wild birds not on the above list were permitted (Leviticus 11:13-19; Deuteronomy 14:12-18). Only the eggs of clean fowl could be eaten.

“FISH: Fish could be eaten if it had fins and scales. This excluded all shellfish and fish that had fins but no scales, e.g., shark, catfish, and eels (Leviticus 11:9-12; Deuteronomy 14:9-10).

“INSECTS AND CREEPING THINGS: Certain insects were acceptable as food, including the locust, katydid, cricket, and grasshopper. ‘All other flying insects that have four feet shall be an abomination to you’ (Leviticus 11:20-24). Creeping things that crawl upon the earth are considered unclean, including worms, caterpillars, snakes, snails, lizards, chameleon, and moles (Leviticus 11:30,41-43). According to Mosaic law, if any of the unclean creeping things dies and falls into a clay water pot, the water is to be considered unclean, and a source of contamination. The clay pot must be broken and if the carcass of a creeping thing touches the oven, it must be broken as well (Leviticus 11:33-35).”

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/food-laws-in-the-bible/>

Diet under the New Testament: In the New Testament, the law under which we live, all distinctions between clean and unclean foods are removed; however, the law against ingestion of blood is maintained. Here are some pertinent Scriptures:

- “The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.’ And a voice spoke to him again the second time, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again” (Acts 10:9-16). (God’s purpose in this vision was to teach Peter that Gentiles were fit subjects for the gospel; but the illustration also taught the New Testament principle regarding foods.)
- “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20).¹
- “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:3-5).

¹ The prohibition against eating “things strangled” is because an animal or bird killed by strangulation would still have raw blood in it. Meat with the blood still in it was considered a delicacy by the pagan nations surrounding Israel.

- “One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks” (Romans 14:5-7).
- “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing [no food; context] unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:14-17).

Though still living under the Law of Moses, Jesus gave the Jews advance notice of the impending change of dietary laws. Mark 7:15-23: “When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, ‘Hear Me, everyone, and understand: There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!’ When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. So He said to them, ‘Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?’ And He said, ‘What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.’”

So it is clear that under the New Testament, we may eat any food we like, with only two Biblical restrictions:

1. *We may not consume raw blood.* Why is God so emphatic about this? Three reasons: one, the eating of blood was a pagan practice; two, blood represents life (Leviticus 17:11); and three, blood carries many diseases. Commentator Albert Barnes says, “The eating of blood was strictly forbidden

to the Jews. The reason of this was that it contained the life, Lev 17:11,14.... The use of blood was common among the Gentiles. They drank it often at their sacrifices, and in making covenants or compacts. To separate the Jews from them in this respect was one design of the prohibition. (Comments on Acts 15:20)

2. *We may not violate our conscience in eating food.* Here is Romans 14:14 again, this time from the NLT paraphrase: "I know and am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong." If you, from the heart, believe that eating a certain food is a sin, yet because of temptation or peer pressure you eat that food, it is accounted to you as sin; because you violated your conscience. Hence, even an innocent action can become wrong if we go against our sincerely held moral beliefs.

"WHAT I EAT IN A DAY, BIBLE STYLE"

There are a lot of YouTube videos on "What I Eat In A Day." If a Jew living in Jesus's day made such a video, here is what it would look like:

Bread was the basis of almost every meal, so basic that it came to represent the entire meal. Jesus spoke of "our daily bread" (Luke 11:3). Bread was eaten because it was widely available, cheap to produce, required no refrigeration, and could be easily transported. Bread could be made from barley or wheat and could be leavened or unleavened. It was baked in communal ovens, on heated stones, or draped over a heated pitcher or dome.

Besides bread, beans, lentils, olives, cheese, and fruit were customary foods. Meat was eaten sparingly or on special occasions. (This sounds a lot like the modern Mediterranean or Blue Zone diet, because it is.)

Milk was obtained from cows, sheep, and goats, and was used to make yogurt, butter, curds, and cheese.

Water was often impure, so wine was a customary drink (1 Timothy 5:23). The word "wine" in Scripture could refer to either fermented or unfermented grape juice. When Jesus made a large quantity of wine at the Cana wedding, it was most

likely pure grape juice. For a further study of the nature of this “wine,” see <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/666-john-2-1ff-the-wine-that-jesus-made> and http://www.christianlibrary.org/authors/Chuck_Northrop/christliv/wine.htm.

There were two main meals each day, breakfast and supper (Exodus 16:12). When guests entered a house, they would receive a kiss of greeting, and a servant or member of the household would wash their hands and feet. After a prayer of thanks, a pot of food would be placed on a rug, and the family would sit around the pot and scoop out the contents with pieces of bread (“sops”). At a feast or formal banquet, the guests would recline on couches or cushions around a low table, propping themselves up with one arm while eating with the other arm. (This explains why John was “leaning on Jesus’s bosom” at the Last Supper, John 13:23. The NIV says John “was reclining next to him.”)

In Part Two of this article, we will look at some interesting Biblical references to food, including the wilderness manna, Esau’s pottage, Daniel’s pulse, an unusual stew recipe, and the first “free refills.” --John Temples