

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #144

BIBLE FOODS, PART TWO

By John Temples

In Part one of this article, we looked at food customs and diets in Bible times. Now we will look at some unusual foods and dining practices recorded in Scripture.

THE FRUIT OF THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

This tree is mentioned in Genesis 2:9 and 17 and in chapter 3. Everyone knows what happened: God gave Adam and Eve strict instructions not to eat the fruit of this tree. It is not that there was something magical in the fruit that would suddenly enhance their mental powers; rather, the command was a test of obedience. Of course, Adam and Eve failed the test, ate of the fruit, and thus brought death and decay into the world, affecting all mankind ever since.

What was this fruit? It is traditionally thought to be an apple, but this is conjecture. All we know about the forbidden fruit is that it was good for food, meaning it was edible; and it was pleasing to the eye, which means it was attractive.

Some folks have said of this fruit, “I don’t know what that fruit was that made Adam and Eve ashamed to be naked, but I wish we could get some more of it today!”

THE JEWS’ DIET IN EGYPT

The Israelites were prone to constant complaining during their wilderness wandering. Exodus 16:3 tells us that they missed having their “pots of meat” and plentiful supplies of bread in Egypt. Another of their laments is found in Numbers 11:5: “We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic....” How quickly they forgot their bondage in Egypt and only remembered their fleshly enjoyments!

WHAT THE ISRAELITES ATE IN THE WILDERNESS

Manna. In the wilderness, God miraculously provided food for the Israelites in the form of something called “manna.” Six mornings a week, this “bread of heaven” (Ps 78:24; 105:40) fell in the camp and provided all the nourishment they needed for the day. Numbers 11:7-9 describes it: “Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color like the color of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it, ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil. And when the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna fell on it.” The exact nature of manna is not known, but it was obviously granular and could be used for baking.

The origin of the name “manna” is amusing and interesting. Exodus 16 describes the Israelites’ response the first time they encountered it: “And when the layer of dew lifted there, on the surface of the wilderness was a small round substance, as fine as frost on the ground. So when the children of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat.’.... And the house of Israel called its name Manna.” Their query was, “What is it?” which in Hebrew is *man hu*, or “manna” in English. The question became the name!

Besides being a gracious provision for the wilderness wanderers, manna was a Biblical type, pointing to the true Bread from heaven. In John 6, Jesus identified Himself as the source of that bread in the wilderness and claimed to be its spiritual fulfillment. “I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (John 6:48-51).

Quail. Besides manna, God provided meat for the wanderers. Numbers 11:31 says, “Now a wind went out from the Lord, and it brought quail from the sea....” The Psalmist wrote, “The people asked, and He brought quail, and satisfied them with the bread of heaven” (Psalms 105:40).

THE SEVEN “SUPERFOODS” OF THE PROMISED LAND

As the forty years of wandering in the wilderness were winding down, and the children of Israel were poised to actually enter the land they had only heard about,

Moses reminded them of God's protection and provision through the wilderness, and he also told them what they could look forward to in their new home. Here is part of what Moses told them, from Deuteronomy 8:7-10: "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines [grapes] and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper. When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you." There are seven foods in this list, some of which the Israelites had never eaten before (and certainly foods they had not eaten for at least forty years). We now know each of these seven to be true "superfoods," which provide abundant minerals, vitamins, and nutritional building blocks for a healthy and satisfying life. Not to mention that they are tasty!

AN INTERESTING DESCRIPTION OF KINGS' FOOD

1 Kings 4:22-23 tells us, "The daily food requirements for Solomon's palace were 150 bushels of choice flour and 300 bushels of meal; also 10 oxen from the fattening pens, 20 pasture-fed cattle, 100 sheep or goats, as well as deer, gazelles, roe deer, and choice poultry" (New Living Translation). You might wonder how Solomon could consume this fantastic quantity of food. He didn't eat all this by himself; he had a palace staff to feed. And remember, he had to provide for 700 wives, 300 concubines, and who knows how many children! (1 Kings 11:3).

A DEADLY STEW

"And Elisha returned to Gilgal, and there was a famine in the land. Now the sons of the prophets were sitting before him; and he said to his servant, "Put on the large pot, and boil stew for the sons of the prophets." So one went out into the field to gather herbs, and found a wild vine, and gathered from it a lapful of wild gourds, and came and sliced them into the pot of stew, though they did not know what they were. Then they served it to the men to eat. Now it happened, as they were eating the stew, that they cried out and said, 'Man of God, there is death in the pot!' And they could not eat it. So he said, Then bring some flour. And he put it into the pot, and said, Serve it to the people, that they may eat. And there was nothing harmful in the pot" (2 Kings 4:38-41).

Imagine your friend offers you a bowl of stew. You eat it and exclaim, “That’s delicious! What is it called?” He replies, “It’s called Death In The Pot.” Kinda puts a damper on your appetite! What caused the stew to be deadly? Sadly, a young man gathering gourds for the stew mistakenly chose poisonous ones. The Enduring Word Commentary says, ““The gourds were probably colocynth. Popularly called ‘wild cucumber,’ the vine still grows near the Dead Sea. When the gourds are cut open the pulp dries rapidly and forms a powder, which in that part of the world is still used as a cathartic medicine. It has a very bitter taste. If eaten in enough quantity, it induces colic and can be fatal.” The addition of flour by Elisha, which purified the stew, was obviously a gracious miraculous “antidote” from God.

ESAU’S POTTAGE

We’re all familiar with the sad account of Esau, who sold his birthright for “a mess of pottage.” What was this fantastic dish that would prompt Esau to do such an extreme thing to get it? Actually, it was just plain old lentil stew. Genesis 25:29-34: “Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. And Esau said to Jacob, ‘Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.’ Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, ‘Sell me your birthright as of this day.’ And Esau said, ‘Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?’ Then Jacob said, ‘Swear to me as of this day.’ So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

If you’re interested, here is a link to a recipe for Esau’s pottage. It’s found on a Jewish website, so it might be pretty close to the real thing:

<https://toriavey.com/toris-kitchen/jacobs-lentil-stew-2/>

THE FIRST FREE REFILLS

“Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], saying, ‘Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.’ So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, indeed a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, ‘Please bring me a little water in a cup, that I may drink.’ And as she was

going to get it, he called to her and said, 'Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.' So she said, 'As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar; and see, I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.' And Elijah said to her, 'Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel: "The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth.'" So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke by Elijah." (1 Kings 17:8-16)

There was a famine going on, and Elijah had many reasons to question God's solution for his hunger: (1) Zarephath was a Gentile city. (2) Widows were notorious for being poor and having limited resources. (3) Elijah soon found that she was not only poor, but *desperately* poor, down to her last morsels of food. Nevertheless, both Elijah and the widow exercised great faith in God, and both were rewarded.

DANIEL'S DIET IN BABYLON

Around 600 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged Jerusalem and took captive several choice Jewish men, "young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king" (Daniel 1:4-5). Among these men was Daniel.

You might think that Daniel had a good deal, because he and his friends got to eat daily from the king's table. But among the king's delicacies were foods that were unclean for a Jew. So Daniel determined in his heart to refuse the king's food (verse 8). He requested a ten-day test in which he and his companions would consume only vegetables and water. Verse 15 says that "...at the end of ten days

their features appeared better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king's delicacies."

So basically Daniel was a vegetarian during his three-year training for service in Babylon. I will not get into the pros and cons of vegetarianism, but certainly it would do us all good if we ate more veggies and less meat. There is a "Daniel diet" (also called "Daniel plan" or "Daniel fast") which you can research on the Internet if you are interested.

EZEKIEL'S BREAD

As part of God's charge to Ezekiel, He gave him a recipe for bread. This recipe came from God Himself, so in no way am I going to say anything bad about it! Here it is: "Also take for yourself wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt; put them into one vessel, and make bread of them for yourself" (Ezekiel 4:9).

The setting for this recipe was a siege (of Jerusalem) and the resulting famine. Brother Burton Coffman writes, "In this paragraph Ezekiel is to be identified...as a representation of the besieged and captive Israelites. The prophecy means that they shall suffer famine, severe food shortages, the ration of water, and all of the other rigors of a siege.... Some have thought that the mixing of all these edibles in one vessel was a ceremonial violation regarding unnatural mixtures (Lev 19:19); but the more likely understanding is that it indicates merely the scarcity of food. Wheat and barley were normally used by the rich and poor respectively, and this was also true of beans and lentils; but the millet, and spelt (fitches) were often used as food for animals. The "fitches" (spelt) was a kind of wild wheat, resembling the seed of some grasses. The picture that emerges is that of a family scraping together a small handful of half a dozen different products in order to find enough for a single piece of bread."

You can buy "Ezekiel 4:9 bread" today at your local grocery or health food store. In fact, I have some in my freezer as I write this. The company who makes it bills it as "a nutritionally superior bread produced by divine inspiration."

THE DIET OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

“Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6). Luke 7:33 also tells us, “John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine....” You might say that John ate a very restrictive diet, or that his grocery list was extremely short. Why such an austere diet?

For one thing, John was under a lifelong Nazarite vow. This is clearly implied by the instructions given by the angel to his father Zechariah in the Temple that he would “drink neither wine nor strong drink” (Luke 1:15). A Nazarite was also forbidden to cut his hair (see for details on the Nazarite vow). So John must have had a formidable appearance and would not have won any prizes for social graces!

For another thing, John’s ministry was in the desert, and food choices there are not exactly plentiful. Locusts and other grasshoppers and crickets were permitted as food under the law of Moses in Leviticus 11:22. Some scholars have suggested the word translated “locusts” refers to the beans of the carob tree, commonly called “St. John’s bread.” However, the Greek word translated “locusts,” (akris/ακρις) seems to clearly refer to a species of grasshopper.

John’s austere diet, along with his “counter-culture” lifestyle and dress, were all part of his “coming in the spirit and power of Elijah” persona.

You might not want to try John’s diet, but perhaps this study has encouraged you to incorporate more Bible foods into your meals. They ate fresh, unprocessed food, mostly fish, whole grains, vegetables and fruit, which certainly cannot harm you. After all, if Jesus ate it, it must be good! You can eat very closely to what Jesus and His contemporaries ate by following the modern Mediterranean or Blue Zone diet. Information on these diets is readily available.

CONCLUSION: FOOD AND OUR SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

It’s interesting indeed to study how people ate in Bible times and perhaps to improve our diets and eating habits in the process. But “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). We do not live by bread alone (even Ezekiel bread), but by every word given by God. So here are three principles to take away from this study:

- a. *Food--"our daily bread"-- reminds us of God's goodness and our dependence upon Him.* "And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:2,3).
- b. *Food was and is an important part of the fellowship of God's people.* "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart...." (Acts 2:46).
- c. *When all is said and done, God is more concerned with what comes out of our mouths than what goes into them.* Jesus said, "Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Matthew 15:17-19). "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). --John Temples