



Book Review

By Ina Lipkowitz

Nathan MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008.

Introduction/Summary

Traditionally, academic studies of biblical food have focused on the twin concerns of sacrifice and the dietary regulations laid out in the book of Leviticus; more popular books on food in the Bible, on the other hand, have either tried to recreate meals that the patriarchs might have eaten or offered up biblically inspired diets for the contemporary world.

Nathan MacDonald's important *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* (2008) set itself a new agenda by examining the social, political, and religious symbolism of food in the Bible. In his own words, MacDonald's next book—*What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat: Diet in Biblical Times*—was “written by accident.” It began life as an introductory chapter to the earlier book, designed to “to set out what we can know about the Israelite diet from the Old Testament and archaeological sources as necessary background for the interpretive work on the Old Testament” (ix). In the pages of *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat*, MacDonald is thus primarily concerned with the material reality of the production, consumption, and distribution of the specific foods that characterized the Israelite diet.

Out of his researches emerged a surprising contradiction: the *representation* of food in the Hebrew Bible does not necessarily (or even often) reflect the *reality* of the Ancient Israelite diet, which he painstakingly reconstructs from a variety of sources, including textual, archaeological, geographical, anthropological, and nutritional. “In the description of the land in Deuteronomy 8 . . . the language is lyrical and Palestine is described as a paradise where the people will lack nothing,” MacDonald writes in his introductory chapter, “but does it describe the reality of Israelite experience?” (7).

The chapters that follow might prove, thus, to be a useful tool for secondary school teachers interested in encouraging their students to read the biblical texts critically and to question why the writers emphasized the particular foods they did. Why was the Promised Land said to flow with milk and honey when in fact it was bland unleavened cakes and parched grain that the Israelites actually ate? Because, MacDonald suggests, “since food is an important symbolic marker, reference to it often indicates more than mere physical sustenance” (11). Necessary to physical survival, food in the Bible also points to God's pleasure (or displeasure) with his people, as Deuteronomy makes abundantly clear: “If you will only heed his every commandment . . . you will gather in your grain, your wine and your oil” (Dt 11:13-17, quoted on 53).

The book opens with a map of the ancient Near East, as well as more specific ones highlighting the archaeological sites and physical geography of Palestine. It also includes a useful time line, beginning with the Neolithic Period (ca. 8000-5000 B.C.E.) and ending with the Byzantine Empire (ca. 324-638 C.E.). The book includes four sections,

each prefaced by a brief synopsis: the introduction sets up the basic premise of the book; the second section, “What did the Israelites Eat,” considers the actual foodstuffs consumed, including the Mediterranean triad of bread, wine, and oil, as well as vegetables, fruits, grains, milk, and meat; the third, “How Well Did the Israelites Eat?” discusses the nutritional deficiencies resulting from food shortages, famines, droughts, warfare, and socioeconomic differences within ancient societies; the conclusion summarizes the previous findings and reflects on the claims made by the so-called “biblical diets” presented in a number of contemporary books. The book closes with several useful indices, including one of scriptural references.

Pedagogical Possibilities

MacDonald writes that “I have sought as far as possible to make this book accessible to the general public,” and he thus confined many of his more academic findings to his prodigious endnotes; it soon becomes clear, however, that it was a college-educated general public he had in mind. For the most part, the book is beyond the abilities of the average high school student who would find many of the chapters difficult to understand and digest.

The writing is often technical, dry, and presupposes—rather than creates—interest in the subject. Teachers might do best to present selected information to students and assign only a few brief chapters, e.g. the introductory, “A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey”; one of the chapters from the second section, “What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat?” and the concluding chapter “The Diet of the Ancient Israelites.” Perhaps the class as a whole could be assigned introductory and concluding chapters, and then be divided into groups; each assigned one of the single food chapters. Each group could then report back to the class about the reality underlying the symbolic foods depicted in the Bible.

Although the book is generally neutral in tone, neither affirming nor denying any faith-based assumptions regarding the biblical texts, the final chapter casts a decidedly critical eye on contemporary faith-based nutritional books touting the benefits of what they present as the biblical diet. Books by evangelical Protestants come under particular scrutiny, and the chapter is chock-full of such phrases as “antievolution polemic,” “strong creationist bent,” “modern nutritional science playing a subordinate role,” “unverified statements,” and “potentially dangerous.” MacDonald’s opinion of these un-academic faith-based biblical diet books is clear: “The books on biblical diet are easily shown to contain examples of biblical interpretation that are misinformed, whimsical, confused, and dominated by agendas that are alien to the Bible” (98). On the next page, he warns of the psychological consequences that might result from a believer’s inability to keep to such a diet: “the failure to keep a ‘biblical diet’ will easily be seen as failing God” (99). Teachers should be aware of the sudden appearance of a judgmental tone at the end of an otherwise scholarly book and decide for themselves whether the final chapter serves the purpose of encouraging students to read the biblical texts critically.

Additional Resources

As noted above, MacDonald acknowledges in his preface that *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat?* was originally meant to serve as a brief introductory chapter to his 2008 *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament*, the stated purpose of which is “to examine some of the many symbolic resonances of food and drink.” It includes chapters on the anthropology of food studies, the Israelite diet, and such specific biblical

books as Deuteronomy and Judges. Certainly beyond the reach of the average high school student, *Not Bread Alone* might be a useful resource for teachers interested in emphasizing the symbolism of biblical food.

Two works that will prove to be more accessible to students are John Cooper's *Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food*, which opens with a brief easy-to-read chapter on biblical food and includes other chapters on the dietary laws, food in the Talmudic Age, and Jewish food to the present day; and Miriam Feinberg Vamosh's *Food at the Time of the Bible: From Adam's Apple to the Last Supper*, a lushly illustrated and eminently readable survey, including discussions of specific food items and their symbolism, as well as biblically inspired recipes. Two of the classic academic works on the subject of biblical food—particularly on the dietary laws—are Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* and Jean Soler's "The Dietary Prohibitions of the Hebrews," the latter of which is a short essay entirely within the compass of an upper-level high school student.

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