Food Taboos and Biblical Prohibitions

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Reassessing Archaeological and Literary Perspectives

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Introduction

Setting the Table

Peter Altmann, Anna Angelini, and Abra Spiciarich

1. Context and Purposes of the Present Volume

This volume represents a number of contributions presented at "The Larger Context of the Biblical Food Prohibitions: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approaches" conference that took place in Lausanne, Switzerland on June 14–15, 2017. The conference itself considered the topic of one subproject of the larger Swiss National Science Foundation Sinergia project entitled "The History of the Pentateuch: Combining Literary and Archaeological Approaches" carried out jointly by researchers at the Universities of Lausanne, Tel Aviv, and Zurich under the auspices of Konrad Schmid, Thomas Römer, Christophe Nihan, Oded Lipschits, and Israel Finkelstein. As part of the larger project, the aim of this conference and the resulting volume was to study the biblical food prohibitions from comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives.

The dietary prohibitions of the Hebrew Bible have long fascinated biblical scholars as well as anthropologists, and, more recently, have started to draw the attention of archeologists. These multiple areas of research have given rise to numerous publications in the different fields, but unfortunately they rarely cross the boundaries of the specific areas of scholarship. However, in our opinion the biblical food prohibitions constitute an excellent object for comparative and interdisciplinary approaches for several reasons: their very materiality, their nature as comparative objects between cultures, and their nature as an anthropological object. The present volume tries to articulate these three aspects within a perspective that is both integrated and dynamic.

Food prohibitions in general represent a topic concerned with both symbolic representations as well as with materiality. The symbolic dimensions of biblical food avoidances have received lengthy discussion in previous research, leading to highly relevant overarching theories, which continue to raise debate in biblical scholarship.[1] The material aspects of the food prohibitions have garnered less

[1] The huge discussion surrounding the work of Mary Douglas (Douglas 1966, 1972, 1999)

attention in recent biblical scholarship. Such concerns merit a privileged role in theories concerning human consumption,[2] and the work of Houston points in this direction.[3] By affirming this point, we do not, however, suggest a return to the past, i. e., to purely materialistic explanations, like those suggested by Harris,[4] nor to exclusively functionalist theories. We instead propose an emphasis on the necessity of a more dynamic dialogue between biblical scholars, scholars of the broader ancient Mediterranean, and archeologists in order to outline more complex and appropriate approaches to the biblical dietary prohibitions.

On the one hand, within archaeology, the recent development of zooarchaeology offers a relevant contribution to a wider understanding of the context for the biblical food prohibitions. An excellent example of the way in which recent archaeological developments challenge part of the assumed knowledge regarding patterns of consumption in ancient Israel appears in the studies on the pig conducted by Lidar Sapir-Hen and others from the University of Tel Aviv.[5] She convincingly demonstrates that pig avoidance does not reflect daily life in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the Iron Age IIB, and, more generally, that the presence or absence of pig bones cannot work, *ipso facto*, as an ethnic identity marker concerning the presence or absence of Israelites. Overall, the newest methodological developments in the archaeology of food, such as organic residue, biomolecular, and DNA analyses, advance the discipline considerably and lead to the questioning of more traditional and "essentializing" approaches to foodways.[6]

On the other hand, the internal diversity of the logic underlying the formulations of food prohibitions requires attention from archaeology. This means, for example, that the textualization of the food prohibitions may not have served simply and always to regulate societal practice: *several divergent reasons* can give rise to the mention or the exclusion of certain animal types. Moreover, the chronological process involving the redaction of the food prohibitions requires adequate attention. In order to renew the discussion and to foster fruitful dialogue between archaeological and textual data, we shift the focus from the issues concerning the ultimate origins of these prohibitions, as well as from the related question of "what came first, the taboo or the criteria?"[7] Instead, we draw attention to the multiple contexts surrounding the developments, transmission, and

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constitutes a paradigmatic example. See further the essay of Altmann and Angelini in this volume.

[2] Fowles 2008

[3] Houston 1993.

[4] Harris 1975, 1979.

[5] Sapir-Hen et al. 2013; Sapir-Hen 2016.

[6] See, e. g., the recent conference organized by Aren Maeir and Philipp Stockhammer for the "Minerva-Gentner Symposium, Food and Identity Formation in the Iron Age Levant and Beyond: Textual, Archaeological and Scientific Perspectives," Weltenburg Abbey, April 28th to May 1st, 2019.

[7] Milgrom 1990, 184; see also Houston 1993, 65–67.

enactment of dietary laws in antiquity. Such contexts offer better documentation both in texts and archaeology; moreover, they can also be contrasted with comparative evidence from other ancient Mediterranean societies.

In this regard, food prohibitions fit particularly well with the proposed approach. They constitute a common feature of many ancient cultures and are still at the heart of some contemporaneous religions and philosophies. They therefore provide an intriguing subject for comparison. Despite the fact that ancient as well as modern religious systems might share food avoidances, it is worth remembering that food prohibitions are *conceptualized divergently* in different cultures. One of our goals is to highlight such divergent conceptualizations. More specifically, the way in which the Hebrew Bible presents dietary prohibitions displays relevant similarities, but also significant differences from their formulations in neighboring cultures, such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, where food prohibitions largely concern locally oriented or specific cultic contexts. In this regard, the permanent and delocalized nature of biblical dietary prohibitions represents a rather exceptional situation in ancient contexts. However, the gaps between biblical formulations and what we can reconstruct about the sociology of food consumption in the ancient Levant calls for a reexamination of the relationship between the theory and the practice of the biblical dietary laws

2. The Essays in This Volume

In their opening contribution, Peter Altmann and Anna Angelini address the theoretical and methodological issues related to the peculiar nature of the food avoidances in ancient Israel. These issues point toward a more complex relation between the theory and the practice of the biblical food regulations. In this regard, a close collaboration between biblical scholars and archaeologists proves fruitful.

After presenting competing perspectives on dietary prohibitions from current anthropology with its focus on disgust and much of biblical scholarship that views the texts through a more structuralist lens, Altmann and Angelini turn to the texts of Lev 11 and Deut 14 themselves. They highlight a number of differences between the two chapters, leading to the conclusion that each individual text performs significant and partly distinct functions within its immediate context. Thus, a diversity of meanings prevails: in Leviticus the prohibitions evince a ritual dimension concerned with the purity and holiness of the sanctuary. In Deuteronomy on the other hand, the language of abomination (*to'ebah*) serves to connect dietary prohibitions with a number of other types of practices detested by Yhwh. Furthermore, the concern for meat consumption plays a larger role in Deuteronomy's legal statutes, providing insight to the use of Deut 14:4–5 to ground the prohibitions into Deuteronomy's point of view. Utilizing

the theoretical perspective provided by Dan Sperber, the essay fleshes out the significance of the diachronic and synchronic differences with regard to the genesis of the prohibitions as well as their reception in Judaism.

The essays of Youri Volokhine and Stefania Ermidoro provide what we might call the "broader context" of the biblical food laws. By illustrating the characteristics of food avoidances, especially meat avoidance but also other foodstuffs, in the religious contexts of Egypt and Mesopotamia, they demonstrate the divergent ways in which these cultural-religious settings approached food prohibitions. The comparison casts the biblical texts in a new light. For unlike the ancient Near Eastern texts, the present form of the biblical texts conceives of the dietary laws as absolute prescriptions for Israel: i. e., as divine rules intended for everyday observance in every location, thereby constituting an *unicum* among the practice of food prohibitions in antiquity.

Ermidoro's investigation of prohibitions in Mesopotamia in the first millennium BCE addresses ritual, omen, medical, and hemerological texts. From this survey, she concludes that all meat prohibitions concern temporary though detailed observances. One had to avoid different substances at different times or places such than no one item was completely banned. However, for the most part, these rules govern action in religious contexts, often serving the success of specific rituals. Generally speaking, the range of foodstuff prohibitions – as well as preparation techniques or etiquette – display considerably more diversity than what appears in Lev 11 and Deut 14 or the rest of the biblical material. Furthermore, the consequences for breaking the prohibitions in Mesopotamian contexts resulted, according to the texts, in a considerable variety of punishments, even for eating the same animal meat.

The essay by Volokhine highlights how the debate on dietary prohibitions in Egypt is largely constructed by Classical traditions. Ancient Greek and Roman authors considered Egyptians and Jews "nations of priests" who kept food taboos (especially the taboo of pork). However, such a discourse does not reflect social reality in any Egyptian contexts. Volokhine's survey of the available Egyptian evidence (funerary texts, calendars, Ptolemaic lists of nomes, and other scattered documents) reaches conclusions similar to Ermidoro's analysis of Mesopotamian materials. No permanent dietary taboos existed in Egypt, but only temporary and localized prohibitions. Purity concerns for the king might explain the avoidance of particular animals in specific circumstances, as it is the case for the fish and, occasionally, for pork. Calendar texts also provide mythical etiologies, which trace the origin of particular food prohibitions back to a specific god or cult. However, no link whatsoever seems to be attested between occasional dietary prohibitions and issues of "Egyptian" identity outside of Greek texts. This also proves that the "sociology" of diet in ancient Egypt was a rather complex phenomenon, regulated by more factors than just priestly rituals and religious concerns.

Within the broader context of ancient Near Eastern cultural-religious instances of food prohibitions, the volume also turns to discussions of the overlap between textual and material evidence within the southern Levant. Although some effort has been attempted in this direction,[8] the time is now more fully ripe, we believe, to pursue this line of inquiry actively. While this collaboration helps biblical scholars by providing a concrete background against which to interpret biblical food prohibitions, it also serves zooarchaeologists from a methodological perspective, in order to evaluate the complexity of the relationship between the reconstruction of food prohibitions within the material culture and the information coming from the texts. To this end Abra Spiciarich addresses the methodological issues related to the identification of the biblical food laws in zooarchaeology.

Spiciarich, working from the archaeological perspective, uses zooarchaeological methods as a means to connect the physical remains to the textual sources. She argues that applying zooarchaeological principles and methods to the discussion of the biblical food laws sheds light on the extent to which these laws were incorporated into ancient daily life. The core of her exploration follows the methodological issues of presence versus absence of not only certain species, but also of specific body parts deemed pure or impure in the biblical texts. Her discussion results in the establishment of a series of parameters for the identification of the biblical food laws within archaeological assemblages.

This second section goes on to explore the relationship between biblical food laws and zooarchaeology with specific case studies. These essays discuss methodological issues, as well as new zooarchaeological data, addressing different patterns of animal consumption from different sites.

Jonathan Greer presents a case study from the site of Tel Dan in which he suggests that, while tentative, the avoidance of pig consumption at Tel Dan proves significant. In order to push the discussion further, he proposes that support from the other side of the spectrum of specialized food status, the priestly prescription of the right limb, demonstrates a link between cultic consumption and dietary prohibitions. Greer explores issues of ethnicity, socioeconomics, archaeological context, and environmental conditions in relation to the presence of the biblical food laws at the site of Tel Dan.

A further issue for exploration is constituted by the analysis of patterns of fish consumption, which was the subject of the presentation by Omri Lernau in the conference, although the author unfortunately did not choose to submit his work for publication in this volume. This analysis challenges the *communis opinio* of a generalized lack of interest in fish by ancient Israelites, thereby questioning the

[8] See for example Amar, Bouchnick, and Bar-Oz 2010 on the identification of some of the clean quadrupeds mentioned in Deuteronomy by crossing ancient literary witnesses with evidence coming from southern Levantine zooarchaeology.

assumption of a straightforward relationship between the theory and the practice of the food prohibitions, instead suggesting the necessary reexamination of the origins of the biblical prohibitions on unclean aquatic animals.[9]

The third section of essays focuses on the relevance of dietary practices for the beginning of processes of ethnogenesis in different historical contexts: the distinction between Judea and Philistia by Deirdre Fulton and the fashioning of Jewish identity during the Hasmonean period by Débora Sandhaus. The analyses of these processes also consider the role of other elements of material culture related to food, notably pottery.

Fulton's essay, "Distinguishing Judah and Philistia: A Zooarchaeological View from Ramat Raḥel and Ashkelon," investigates the overlap and differences between the zooarchaeological remains from two specific sites – one Judahite and the other Philistine – and their meaning for dietary prohibitions. She specifically presents data from the late-Iron II marketplace, located in Grid 50 and 51 in Ashkelon and several loci, including a festive pit in Locus 14109 from Ramat Raḥel. Her comparison yields a generally negative conclusion: little separates the consumption habits in the two locations, except for what arises from external economic pressures. Instead, both generally consume foods in accordance with the texts of the Pentateuch, though both exhibit consumption of Nile Catfish, a prohibited type.

On the other hand, the evidence collected by Reem from the Hellenistic period onwards (especially third-second century BCE), points towards a connection between patterns of food consumption and the expression of Jewish identity. She analyzes cooking assemblages in the central Shephelah, alongside the 'Ella Valley, a boundary zone between the provinces of Yehud/Judea (North) and Idumea (South), an area experiencing a large presence of foreigners. While the southern (Idumean) side developed significant openness to foreign pots beginning in the third century BCE, the expansion of Hasmonean hegemony over the entire valley resulted in the rejection of foreign pottery types, presumably to solidify the Hasmonean identity in the region. Once this was secured, a renewed openness to foreign types developed, these being now produced in the Central Hill region of Judea. The different and partly new cuisine practices emerging in the region, and sometimes coexisting with older culinary traditions, involve different strategies of acceptance, rejection, adoption, appropriation of foreign practices that eventually transformed the local cuisines.

[9] However, one can see, e. g., the reports on fish bones in Reich et al. 2007; Lernau 2008; Lernau 2011; Horwitz et al. 2012; and Fulton et al. 2015.

3. Results and Future Perspectives

With this volume we hope to offer a number of new and insightful perspectives on the dietary prohibitions. Especially viewed as a group, the contributions demonstrate the wide range of investigations required for understanding both the food laws specifically, and the more general ways in which these laws reach deeply into the archaeology, anthropology, and literature of the southern Levant and broader ancient Near East.

Several important directions for research and desiderata for future scholarship arise from the discussions in this volume. Integrating archaeological perspectives within the study of food prohibitions not only allows for the deconstruction of previous assumptions concerning both the rigidity and the extent of their applications as well as their supposed more or less symbolic meaning. It also substantially contributes to the appreciation of the complexity of the dynamics of exchange and cultural participation between ancient Israelites and neighboring societies.

In this regard, the dialogue between text and archaeology should extend to other areas of investigation related to foodways. A number of archaeological questions remain unexplored. While included in Omri Lernau's presentation on "Remains of Non-Kosher Fish in Excavated Jewish Settlements in Israel" in Lausanne, this volume does not offer a discussion of the widespread consumption of prohibited aquatic animals throughout the Iron Age and even later southern Levant. A similar overview discussion of the zooarchaeological evidence on birds could address this further category of prohibited animals.[10]

Moreover, the spectrum of the comparison with other prescriptions regarding food in antiquity requires further expansion. An important perspective could be offered through investigation of Persian, Greek, and Roman food avoidances. While these cultures remain a bit more removed from the likely provenance of the rise of the biblical dietary prohibitions, they offer suggestive ways of viewing animals and animal consumption that certainly influenced the reception of the biblical material, if not perhaps playing some role in their formulation. The enlargement of the comparative perspective should also carefully consider the role played by ancient discourses in associating foodways with issues of ethnic identity.

Finally, understanding the relationship between food consumption and processes related to the construction of identity in ancient Israel biblical dietary prohibitions calls for a larger complementary study of dietary habits and practices concerning ways of preparing, cooking, and consuming food. Patterns of storage and consumption of vegetables and liquids (notably oil, wine, and beer) should also be the object of an integrated analysis. This further venue is justified first

[10] See, however, Altmann 2019.

by the fact that these items progressively became part of the Kashrut in ancient Judaism. Secondly, reconstructing discourses about identity requires interaction between food choices and the more complex dimensions involved in the entire sphere of a culture's cuisine.

On the whole, this volume provides a number of larger parameters and several depth discussions necessary for circumscribing and understanding the practices, causes, and meanings of the biblical dietary prohibitions in their broader archeological, cultural, and theoretical settings. As such, it both lays a foundation and provides a roadmap for further scholarly discussion.

Purity, Taboo and Food in Antiquity

Theoretical and Methodological Issues

Peter Altmann and Anna Angelini

Several methodological and theoretical issues arise with regard to topics that seek to combine the disciplines of ancient Near Eastern studies, archaeology, and Hebrew Bible studies, as intended in the contributions in this volume. The primary issues that this essay seeks to address are the questions of the nature, the structure, as well as the cultural meanings attributed to the practices in the texts of Lev 11 and Deut 14. In particular, we investigate the differences and overlap between the understandings of the dietary prohibitions in two different parts of the Pentateuch.

The discussion will develop as follows: (1) reflection on recent scholarship, (2) consideration of the biblical texts themselves, offering a discussion of their relationship with one another and their individual internal logics. (3) The identification of the complexity results in the need to articulate a different theoretical approach to account for the multiplicity of meanings throughout the compositional history of the prohibitions within their literary settings of Lev 11 and Deut 14. (4) The final section will highlight some of the meanings from their pre-scriptural origins to their reception in Hellenistic contexts.

1. Reflections on Explanations from Anthropology and Biblical Studies

Recent anthropological research highlights significant factors for the explanation of the emergence of food taboos, with particular focus on meat avoidances. Among these factors, a relevant role seems to be played by the combination of specific features of the environment with normative moralization, i. e., the tendency to attribute moral value to common patterns of behavior, and the subsequent prestige-biased transmission, that is, the propensity to conform to prevailing patterns of behavior.[1] Many studies underline the propulsive role of disgust

[1] E. g., Fessler and Navarrete 2003.

in eliciting meat avoidance.[2] While these criteria may help with interpreting some of the aspects related to biblical dietary restrictions, such as the relationship between delineation of food taboos and exercise of power by self-interested parties, they tend to overlook the religious dimension of the food prohibitions. This dimension instead constitutes a prominent characteristic of food avoidance in antiquity.

Conversely, structuralist approaches, beginning with Mary Douglas' theories,[3] and continuing on through all the explanations and corrections resulting from the numerous critiques that followed her work,[4] point to a different series of issues that remain quite compelling for the study of ancient food restrictions. Largely viewing the food prohibitions as one piece of a larger cultural system, structuralist approaches are able to take into account the integration of food prescriptions within broader aspects of ancient societies. This includes the relationship between regulations concerning food and other purity rules, a relationship which is of primary importance, at least in the formulation of the dietary laws in the book of Leviticus. While the general questions raised by symbolic and structuralist approaches are central in approaching and interpreting biblical food prohibitions, the generalized view offered by structuralism, which tends to see the biblical food laws as a comprehensive system primarily conveying symbolic value, remains unpersuasive for a number of reasons.

First, as we will demonstrate below, biblical food prohibitions did not appear as a unified system from their beginning. They were instead the product of a long compositional and transmission process that developed in different historical moments. Moreover, the stages of this process are far from completely clear, and the two main corpora that preserve biblical food prohibitions, Lev 11 and Deut 14, still present significant differences from one another. Second, although we approach the ensemble of the biblical food laws in their final form as a meaningful synchronic body of regulations, the texts do not always display a strict unified logic, and multiple differences remain in the formulations of the various sets of rules. The prescriptions concerning quadrupeds, fish, birds, insects, and reptiles neither follow a single scheme nor a consistent order. Most of the given criteria classify animals based on their means of locomotion, but this is not always the case (e.g., chewing the cud is one of the main requirements for the cleanness of ruminants, and there is no connection between this criterion and means of locomotion). In some cases, such as the fish, only criteria appear without any examples of clean or unclean types or species. In other cases such as that of birds, no criteria appear at all, but we instead only find a list of prohibited types.

[2] Rozin et al. 1997; for recent application of theories on disgust to biblical food prohibitions see Kazen 2011, 71–81.

[3] Douglas 1966, 1993, 1999.

[4] Tambiah 1969; Sperber 1996b; Eilberg-Schwartz 1990; Milgrom 1991; Nihan 2011; Meshel 2008; Burnside 2016.

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