

Editorial

The symbolism of food. Biblical, religious historic and literary perspectives



Food is about much more than simple nourishment. The basic human need for sustenance for survival has always been imbued with symbolisms, both within religious and worldly contexts. The Bible contains many texts, from its first chapter to its last, that demonstrate how eating and drinking transcend the shared nature between humans and animals through religious importance, metaphorical meaning and the power to build and shape social community. One such example can already be found within the first pages of the Hebrew Bible.

While the first creation story describes all plants as well as their seeds and fruits as a source of food for humans and animals (Genesis 1:29–30), the second creation story introduces an explicit restriction: God forbids humans to eat from the so-called tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17). The tree is a special plant that represents the mythological character of the narrative. In the Garden of Eden, food is not just sustenance, it carries and contains important symbolism. When the primordial couple disregard God's warning, instead of experiencing satiety, their eyes are opened and they experience knowledge (Genesis 3:6–7).

As in many other stories of the Old Testament, food can be interpreted as a metaphor for ingesting spiritual knowledge and wisdom in this narrative. Indeed, food is laden with similar symbolisms in sapiential and prophetic books. The New Testament also includes numerous texts that reveal different facets of food and drink. Gospels and epistles are full of multi-layered metaphors of eating and drinking, and the meal.

This issue of **LIMINA** is dedicated to Biblical aspects associated with food and drink and further examines Jewish meal traditions. The final article offers insights into refugee experiences and their literary expression through

Translation:
Dagmar Astleitner MA
PRISM Translations, London

the metaphor of food as told by the US-Austrian author Lore Segal. The current issue is a continuation of [LIMINA 4.2](#) (2021) with the title *Food. Religious, ethical and philosophical aspects*, which already served a rich plethora of essays.

The first article “Food cult? Food and its socio-religious functions in early Judaism, early Christianity and today” traces a line from ancient Bible scriptures to pressing issues of the present day. In early Judaism, dietary rules were a tool to distinguish Israel from other nations. Early Christianity did not reject these fundamental Jewish food taboos, however, their segregating dimension was diminished and replaced by a focus on the connective characteristics of food. *Christina Eschner*, the author of this article and professor of New Testament Studies at the Faculty of Theology at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg combines her research with the observation of an emerging resacralisation of food and dietary rules. This current trend brings with it a renewed importance to remember the connecting power of food.

Martina Weingärtner, post-doctoral researcher in Old Testament / Hebrew Bible Studies and research associate at the Institute of Protestant Theology at the University of Koblenz, investigates the narrative symbolism of the meal in the stories of Genesis 18:1–15 (Abraham’s three visitors) and Genesis 19:1–11 (Lot accommodating the angels in Sodom). Under the title “Spontaneous, abundant, metabolic. Food as a narrative symbol for encountering the ‘other’ through acts of hospitality on the example of two Bible stories“, she highlights the contrasting depictions of a shared meal in the two consecutive chapters of the book of Genesis that both come to an antithetical end: one benevolent, the other malevolent. *Weingärtner* analyses elements of foreshadowing throughout the meal by decoding the symbolisms contained within it.

Friederike Ruth Winkler, lecturer in Jewish Religion at the KPH Wien/Krems, Jewish scholar and political scientist, discusses the importance and relevance of dietary rules for practicing Judaism in her article “A Jewish perspective on aspects of food“. She thinks beyond the rules governing Jewish dietary traditions to extract the spiritual value of following them, as expressed within the philosophy of the kabbalistic books of the Zohar. Feasts and fasting as well as socio-ethical aspects and considerations of animal welfare receive as much attention as the imperative to preserve the Earth for future generations as repeatedly referenced in the Torah.

Soham Al-Suadi, professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Rostock continues the discourse on the symbolic and religious connotations of food in her article “Contra orthorexia. The ritual transformation of the meal in Paul and the New Testament”. Al-Suadi lifts the communal meal from its temporal contexts, revealing it to be a daily practice that reflects, changes and rejects the value systems of individuals as well as communities. She examines ancient texts through the lens of social and cultural science. To further demonstrate that the dynamic dimensions of the meal are not exclusive to early Christianity, she draws on extrabiblical textual sources that allow for a re-examination of “Christian” characteristics of the meal. The title references a transformation away from strict dietary rules and food taboos, which is presented in contrast to the steep rise in orthorexia, a psychological disorder defined as a pathological obsession with healthy eating which in many cases leads to social isolation. *Al-Suadi* identifies a counter-dynamic in the Hellenistic meal traditions which form a common thread in the ancient texts she examines. Instead of promoting self-optimisation and exclusion, these traditions serve to build social connections and to strengthen the bond among (religious) communities.

Eva-Maria Trinkaus, post-doctoral researcher in American Literature Studies and Aging Studies at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Aging and Care (CIRAC) at the University of Graz, delves into the world of 20th century exile literature. Based on the autobiographical short story by the US-Austrian author Lore Segal that tells the journey of a young girl fleeing from the clutches of national socialism, *Trinkaus* examines the symbolic value of food through the eyes of the protagonist. Her essay “‘It Was Ugly and Shriveled, With One End Nibbled Off.’ The *Knackwurst* as a Metonymy in Lore Segal’s Story ‘Wir aßen stumm. Auf dem Kindertransport’” describes how a familiar piece of food from childhood can transform into an object of nostalgia and become an embodiment of grief and loss.

Please take a seat and enjoy the food for thought served by our contributors. We hope you find it nourishing as well as rich in knowledge and insight. Perhaps you find new flavours that can complement your own personal food traditions.

Edith Petschnigg and Peter Ebenbauer
Issue Editors, on behalf of the editorial team