Commensality
From Everyday Food to Feast

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conclusion that can be drawn from this new figure of the human writer seems to be that you cannot write about reality without getting your hands dirty and you cannot, no matter what Confucius might say, drink without getting drunk. All else belongs to the artificial idealism of Diamond Jin’s propaganda department.

Justifications for Foodways and the Study of Commensality

Jordan D. Rosenblum

In 1724, Benjamin Franklin, a founding father of the United States and noted polymath, was traveling aboard a ship, which, due to a lack of wind in its sails, sat idle off the New England coast. At the time, Franklin had resolved to be a vegetarian. However, as he smelled the aroma of freshly caught cod sizzling in his shipmates’ frying pans, Franklin began to rethink his dietary regimen. He quickly decided that, since cod are a fish that consume other fish, it seemed logical that he, in turn, could eat them. After positioning himself within the food chain, Franklin concludes: “So convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do” (Franklin, 2005: 31, original emphasis).

I use Franklin’s astute observation to frame my current project. I am interested in how cultures critique and defend foodways. While scholars have discussed cross-culturally how and why “We” eat the way “We” do and “They” eat the way “They” do, I do not think that enough attention has been paid to the internal and external justifications for this cuisine. My dataset for this project is the Jewish food laws. In particular, I am interested in how ancient Jews defended the kosher laws and how ancient others—including Greeks, Romans, and early Christians—critiqued these practices. Due to length constraints, I will focus in this chapter only on the apologies for the kosher laws, known in Hebrew as kashrut.

While the kosher laws originate in the Hebrew Bible, one cannot understand kashrut solely by consulting Leviticus or Deuteronomy. This is because kashrut as a foodway developed over time and involved interpretations, expansions, augmentations, and innovations of the biblical texts. Yet, biblical texts are used to justify every interpretation, expansion, augmentation, and innovation. This circularity—namely that kashrut extends well beyond the Hebrew Bible but, in doing so, relies upon the authority of the Hebrew Bible—becomes important when one makes an obvious, but all-too-often ignored, observation: namely, that the Hebrew Bible lacks an explicit rationale for the dietary laws contained therein. When the texts themselves
do provide some justifications, they are brief and unsatisfying. To offer the most common justifications: the Israelites should not eat specific foods because: 1) God is holy and Israel is a holy people; 2) Israel is a people set apart so it should set apart certain foods; and 3) God says so.

While scholars have attempted to provide them, every discussion of the biblical food laws must start with the fact that these texts do not supply explicit rationales for biblical food selections. This is where Mary Douglas, Marvin Harris, and others have erred. In their attempts to provide a justification for this cuisine, they never account for this basic absence of evidence. However, this can easily be overcome. Once we move beyond the Hebrew Bible, we encounter numerous texts that fill in this gap. In these texts, ancient Jewish exegesis accepts the authority of the biblical texts, but seeks to offer explicit rationales for biblical legislation. It is in these corpora that we find our first real ancient apologies for the kosher laws.

In this chapter, I will focus on three texts. The first text is from Philo, who was a Jewish philosopher who lived from circa 20 BCE to 50 CE in Alexandria, Egypt. In his day, Alexandria was a major cosmopolitan center of commerce, culture, and education. Writing in Greek, Philo seeks to explain Jewish belief and practice through the lens of Greek philosophy. He thus uses Greek philosophy to articulate the rationality of biblical laws. For Philo, the laws operate on both the literal and allegorical levels, though the latter is understood only by a select few.

With this in mind, we can now turn to the relevant passage from Philo. In explaining the rationale for the biblical legislation concerning not cooking the meat of a kid in its mother’s milk, Philo states:

But so prolific is he [= Moses] in virtue and versatility in giving admirable lessons, that not content with his own prowess, he challenges it to further contest ... He now crowns his bounty with the words “Thou shalt not see the a lamb in his mother’s milk.” For he held that it was grossly improper that the substance which fed the living animal should be used to season and flavour the same after its death, and that while nature provided for its conservation by creating the stream of milk and ordaining that it should pass through the mother’s breasts as through conduits, the license of man should rise to such a height as to misuse what had sustained its life to destroy also the body which remains in existence. If indeed anyone thinks good to boil flesh in milk, let him do so without cruelty and keeping clear of impiety. Everywhere there are herds of cattle innumerable, which are milked every day by cowherds, goat-herds and shepherds, whose chief source of income as cattle rearers is milk, sometimes liquid and sometimes condensed and coagulated into cheese; and since milk is so abundant, the person who boils the flesh of lambs or kids or any other young animal in their mother’s milk, shows himself cruelly brutal in character and gelled of compassion, that most vital of emotions and most nearly akin to the rational soul. (Special Laws 4: 106–8)

Philo interprets this biblical prohibition as a lesson in ethics. Seasoning the meat of a baby animal with the very milk that once sustained it is reprehensible, since it mixes the domains of life and death. For Philo, such a practice goes beyond the pale and is simply cruel. This does not mean, however, that Philo disapproves of eating meat and milk in general. That prohibition will come later with the rabbis. Here, Philo’s concern is not a general meat-and-milk matter, but rather a specific ethical matter reflected in the “cruelly brutal” practice of consuming the milk of a mother together with the meat of her child.

While the Hebrew Bible prohibits cooking a kid in its mother’s milk on three separate occasions, it never provides an explicit rationale for doing so. For Philo, however, the justification is clear: an ethical eater is an ethical person. And since an ethical eater would never be so cruel as to season the dead with the liquid that once nourished and sustained it, the ethical person must follow this dietary and moral prescription.

Philo, among other roughly contemporary authors, represents a pivotal moment in the history of Jewish food when he asks an important question: Why? Although he understands these biblical regulations as binding, he also seeks to explain why these particular rules were commanded. The importance of this shift for the study of Jewish food laws is often missed by scholars. At this moment, Philo, and others like him, seems to be saying: “We agree that God commanded these rules. So what do they mean?”

The ancient rabbis, who lived from roughly 70 to 640 CE in both Roman Palestine and Sassanian Babylon, ask this question, in various ways and on various occasions, and predictably they arrive at various answers. Here, we will discuss two examples; however, many more could be marshaled. In our first example, the rabbis puzzle over what is intended by the wording of Leviticus 11.2, which states: “These are the living things that you may eat …” This biblical passage contains a detailed description of the kinds of domesticated quadrupeds that the Israelites are allowed to eat. While the divine commands requiring cud-chewing and split hooves are clear enough for the rabbis, they puzzle over the specific wording of this initial phrase. Why “living things” (often translated simply as “creatures”) rather than some other word? For the rabbis, no word in the Hebrew Bible is incidental or accidental. Each word is intentional and instructive. In accordance with this basic hermeneutical principle, the rabbins’ job is to determine the intended meaning of each word. This is not to say that they only accept one, singular meaning for a given word; on the contrary, multiple “precise” meanings are accepted, and even celebrated, in rabbinic thought. In Leviticus Rabbin 13.2, a fifth-century text edited in Palestine, one possible explanation is offered for that initial phrase in Leviticus 11.2.

Rabbi Tanhum son of Hanilai said: This may be compared with the case of a physician who went to visit two sick persons, one who would live, and another who would die. To the one who would live, he said, “This and that you may not eat.” But in regard to the one would die, he said to them, “Whatever he wants [to eat], bring it to him.” Thus, of the [other] nations of the world, who are not destined for the life of the World to Come,
Moabite women seduced Israelite men, enticing them to worship Ba’al Pe’or, whom the text considered to be a false god. Interpreting this event, the text states:

She [a Moabite woman] would say to him [an Israelite man]: “Would you like to drink [some] wine?” He would drink and the wine would burn within him and he would say: “Listen to me [i.e. have intercourse with me]!” She would take out an image of Pe’or from under her bra and say to him: “Rabbi, is it your desire that I listen to you? [If so, then] bow to this!”

Drinking together is the first step down a slippery slope that quickly devolves into idolatry. While wine is associated with idolatry by the rabbis, since it is the only beverage libated in Pagan rituals, a later Talmudic text even extends this prohibition to non-wine intoxicants. And what is the reason given for this extension? “Because of marital introversion.” Long before the age of Internet dating, the rabbis knew that a bar was a great place to meet women; they thus add food regulations that limited certain commensal encounters, which they justify on both biblical and social grounds. Biblical warnings concerning whoring after other gods and the sins of idolatry are situated at the rabbinic table, where indiscriminate table-fellowship can lead to illicit sexuality and idolatrous worship. For the rabbis, then, it is better to choose your drink and your drinking companions quite carefully, lest you suffer dire consequences.

So what do these texts add to our discussion in this volume? More than I have space to discuss in depth. However, I will briefly note three main points. First, kashrut is the rabbinic cuisine. In using the term “cuisine,” I follow Warren Belasco’s definition, which defines “cuisine” as:

a set of socially situated food behaviors with these components: a limited number of “edible” foods (selectivity); a preference for particular ways of preparing food (technique); a distinctive flavor, textual, and visual characteristics (aesthetics); a set of rules for consuming food (ritual); and an organized system of producing and distributing the food (infrastructure). Embedded in these components is a set of ideas, images, and values (ideology) that can be “read” just like any other cultural “text”. (2005: 219–20, original emphasis)

In order to understand a cuisine, therefore, one must understand how and why a group chooses to eat the way it does. This is especially the case when that group spills so much ink justifying their cuisine. And, since commensalism is but one aspect of cuisine, scholars must make sure to situate it in its larger culinary context. To rationalize what and how to eat is thus both to create and maintain a particular cuisine. As such, whenever a group accounts for why it eats the way it does, it is simultaneously explaining and creating its own cuisine.

Second, commensalism is concerned with both diner and dinner. We must remember that the phrase “you are what you eat” has a necessary corollary: “you are
with whom you eat.” By looking at how the kosher laws are justified, we encounter explicit rationales for why these ancient authors ate the way they did. Before one approaches the table to share it—the very definition of commensality—many social and cultural criteria must be met. In explaining how these culinary and commensal rules are justified, we can deepen our understanding of commensality. As Benjamin Franklin reminds us, as a “reasonable creature,” a human can justify any action that he or she chooses to. Therefore, the academic study of commensality must seriously grapple with the rationalizations that are offered in support of particular culinary and commensal practices.

Third, the ancient world has much to teach us about the modern world, and vice versa. As the reader might have noticed, the title for this chapter is a play on the title of Michael Pollan’s book *In Defense of Food* (2008). In this book, Pollan seeks to write an “Eater’s Manifesto.” His previous book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), raised a series of serious questions about the modern, industrial food system; he thus felt compelled to answer how one could eat ethically. By comparing Pollan’s food ethics to Philo’s or the rabbis’, for example, we can begin to discuss how groups justify their cuisines. Such comparisons prove fruitful to our understanding of commensality, whether the topic of our inquiry is a convivium in ancient Rome or modern Copenhagen.

I shall end as I began, with a quote that grapples with food choices, in particular in relation to vegetarianism. Author Jonathan Safran Foer recently wrote a book entitled *Eating Animals*, in which he discusses the ethics of meat-eating. At one point, he comments: “There are thousands of foods on the planet, and explaining why we eat the relatively small selection we do requires some words. We need to explain that the parsley on the plate is for decoration, that pasta is not a ‘breakfast food,’ why we eat wings but not eyes, cows but not dogs. Stories establish narratives, and stories establish rules” (2010: 12). When theorizing commensality—which is itself a social practice constructed by narratives and governed by rules—we, as scholars, must listen to these stories.

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**The Role of Food in the Life of Christians in the Roman Empire**

*Morten Warmind*

The Christianization-process of the Roman Empire was not a quick transition, but rather accomplished gradually over several centuries. Although there is a reasonably broad consensus that this was so, it is not always the impression one gets from handbooks and historical overviews of the period. It is not even the contemporary view either, at least to some degree. Many writers in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries declare paganism to be dead and gone, but the fact that they do this in century after century is precisely evidence that paganism did not die in one fell swoop. The edict of Theodosius I on February 27, 380 declaring “catholic” (i.e. Nicene) Christianity the only religion of the state, prompting the removal by Gratian of the altar and statue of the goddess Victory from the senate hall in 382 together with other edicts from Theodosius ever more hostile towards paganism in the first half of the 390s can be seen as very important steps, but actually it seems that this chiefly resulted in the removal of paganism from the cities, making it truly “pagan,” meaning “rustic” (Williams and Frier, 1995: 120ff). A telling example, which was also seen as symbolically meaningful by contemporaries, was the destruction of the famous temple of Serapis in Alexandria in 391. However, it is claimed that even high officials have been known to have been non-Christian under Justinian in the early 500s and certainly there was non-Christian teaching taking place in the Academy in Athens when Justinian ordered it closed in 529 (Mitchell, 2007: 129ff).

Exploring the process of Christianization from the point of view of food seems rather obvious. After all, Christians were defined by or in relationship to food at least in two important senses: They refused to participate in sacrifices or even to eat sacrificed meat. And they were known to participate in a communal meal in secret. A third important aspect of the Christian relationship with food is the denial and abhorrence of it, which became a hallmark of Christian behavior in Syria and Egypt from the third quarter of the third century. These three themes will be explored more thoroughly in this chapter.
5. Women are sometimes praised for their capacity for liquor as well, but it is not expected of them in the same way as it is of a man. The psychology behind this masculine idealization of the great drinker might be connected to the relatively low alcohol tolerance of many Chinese, and yet similar masculine attitudes towards drink are found in many other cultures.

6. And, by extension, the artist in general, but poets are the main interest for this study.

7. Examples of the berserk heroes from this source include the monk Li Zhishen 李志深 and Li Kui 李逵 the pugilist.

8. Detective Hunter, a Hollywood descendant of the hard boiled Private Eye of the 1930s, was very popular in China at the time the writing of Liquorland, and Mo Yan has pointed to him as inspiration for Ding Guo’er (Yue, 1999: 281).

9. Though mainly concerned with male PIs, Rippetoe also has one chapter on alcohol and female detectives, see Rippetoe, 2004: 158-75. For more on gender and alcohol in American literature see Crowley, 1994.

10. Namely the daughter of the legendary ruler Da Yu (大禹 2200–2100 BCE).

11. An early female poet writing about liquor was Li Qing Zhao (李清照 1084–1151 CE).

12. In subsequent citations from the novel the first page number refers to the English translation (Mo, 2000), the second to the Chinese original (Mo, 1992).

13. With the exception of the female mayor of Liquorland who is only mentioned in passing, but whose renowned ability to “hold her liquor” serves to make Mo Yan’s unmanly inability to hold his even more embarrassing (352/273).

16. The Role of Food in the Life of Christians in the Roman Empire

1. Note on the translation: There is a certain tradition of translation when dealing with NT-texts. I have tried to avoid this and to be as precise as possible, rather than elegant. I have consistently referred to “the god,” rather than “God,” because that is what the text says. I have kept “Christos” because I believe it did not yet mean “Christ” as we understand that word. But because Paul does not use an article it should not be translated as “the anointed one,” which is what it originally meant. At this time it seems to be between these two meanings.

15. Justifications for Foodways and the Study of Commensality

1. I would like to thank Israel Hans for his invaluable advice and assistance in preparing this chapter. Any errors that remain should be credited to the author alone.


3. Translation by Colson (1939: 249–51).

4. See Exodus 23.19; 34.26; Deuteronomy 14.21.

5. “The ancient rabbis” refer to the first two groups of rabbis (the Tannaim and the Amoraim). For a brief summary of their history and literature, see Strack and Stemberger (1996). Subsequent rabbis trace their lineage, authority, texts, and practices from these early rabbincic circles.

6. All translations from Hebrew are my own.

17. Ritual Meals and Polemics in Antiquity

1. The terms “external other” and “internal other” are borrowed from Rosenblum (2010a: 141) and Hayes (2007).

2. Jaime Alvar uses the term “commensality” to describe the common religious and cultural context in the Empire (Alvar, 2008: 417–21).

3. Commensality is sharing a table (mensa) with companions. (“Companions” are literally those who share bread, pani.) You eat with those that are part of your group, and each person is usually a member of different groups, a family group as well as groups related to a trade, to society or to religion.

4. Porphyry claimed that animals were offered up to good and bad daimones and not to the highest god or to the celestial gods (Abst. 2.34–36), a view shared with other philosophers (Rives, 2011: 195).

5. The dead were fed with libations of milk, wine, water, honey, and oil that were poured out on the graves. Sometimes a holocaust animal sacrifice was made,