

FOOD IN SCRIPTURE

By MARGARET BARKER

BREAD AND WINE, MILK AND HONEY, the vine and the fig tree. Food. Yet each of these phrases is instantly recognized as biblical, from the heart of our Scriptures, and this is because food is central to the biblical description of our relationship with God.

Our name for the first part of the Bible is the Old Testament, the Old Covenant. This Covenant was the world-view of ancient Israel who imagined the creation as a great system of bonds held together by the power of God. The individual bonds of this web were the bonds of the covenant (the word means 'binding') within which all creation could flourish. The biblical name for this Covenant was the Covenant of Eternity (Isai 24:5) or the Covenant of Peace (Num 25:12).¹ The first covenant mentioned in the biblical narrative is the covenant with Noah. After the destruction of the created order, God renewed the Everlasting Covenant with Noah (Gen 9:16). The natural order of seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, would be secure (Gen 8:22). The sign that the covenant stood firm was the gift of food, and Noah was instructed what he could and could not eat. Everything could be consumed, both plants and animals, but blood was forbidden (Gen 9:3). This fundamental Noahic law eventually became the basis on which Jewish and Gentile Christians were able to share table fellowship: the more complex Jewish food laws were set aside but the fundamental law remained (Acts 15:20).

All God's laws, both the laws of nature and the rules for human society, were part of this one covenant system, and when human sin destroyed the bonds of the covenant, the whole system began to collapse. Nature wasted away and there was no food. Isaiah has a vivid description of such a disaster:

The earth mourns and withers,
 the world languishes and withers;
 the heavens languish together with the earth.
 The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;
 for they have transgressed the laws,
 violated the statutes,
 broken the everlasting covenant.

Therefore a curse devours the earth . . .
 The wine mourns, the vine languishes . . .
 (Isai 24:4-7)

Joel also describes the broken covenant:

The fields are laid waste,
 the ground mourns;
 because the grain is destroyed,
 the wine fails,
 the oil languishes.
 Be confounded, O tillers of the soil,
 wail, O vinedressers,
 for the wheat and the barley;
 because the harvest of the field has perished.
 The vine withers,
 the fig tree languishes.
 Pomegranate, palm and apple,
 all the trees of the field are withered . . .
 (Joel 1:10-12)

The prophet knows the reason for the disaster:

Yet even now, says the Lord,
 return to me with all your heart . . .
 Rend your hearts and not your garments . . .
 (Joel 2:12-13)

Human sin had brought the disaster; the covenant had been damaged and the creation could not flourish. Famine was not simply a punishment from an angry or jealous God; rather, it was recognized that when the Eternal Covenant had been damaged, there were inevitable consequences. The pattern of life had been broken. Famine always brought a call to repent; it did not prompt, as it might today, questions about God allowing natural disasters or the problem of evil. Rather it was seen as a consequence of human sin. Amos could point to drought and famine as a warning that sin had separated the people from God:

I smote you with blight and mildew;
 I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards;
 your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured;
 yet you did not return to me, says the Lord.
 (Amos 4:9)

Psalm 72 shows how the supply of food was closely linked to the upholding of God's law. In the period of the first temple (approximately 1000–600 BCE), the king had been the central figure in the worship of Israel. As the Anointed One, the 'son' of God (Ps 72:1), his duty had been to uphold God's laws and see that the poor and needy received the justice due to them (Ps 72:4). His justice and righteousness would itself ensure the fertility and prosperity of the land (Ps 72:3, 16). There was no doubt that the source of material prosperity was food. Economic injustice, it was recognized, destroyed the Covenant, and the creation could not flourish. All suffered.

The threat from the fertility religions of Canaan is illustrated by Elijah's epic confrontation with Jezebel, the Phoenician princess who became Ahab's queen. The great drought, followed by the contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, had established that the Lord was the source of rain and fertility (1 Kg 18). Jezebel had assumed she had the right, as queen, to take away Naboth's vineyard, the source of his food (1 Kings 21), but Elijah (his name means 'The Lord is God') thought otherwise. The land, and the food which it produced, belonged to God and were his gift to his people. Thus we read in Deuteronomy of the people of Israel who, year by year, brought their first-fruits to the temple, in recognition that they had been given by God: 'And behold, now I bring you the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, hast given me' (Deut 26:10).

The law of the Jubilee ensured that nobody could lose his land, and thus his food supply, for ever. Even those who had been forced through hardship to sell could only, in effect, rent out their land for a limited period. At the end of each fifty-year period, all land was returned to its original owner, and this was deemed to be part of the great Day of Atonement:

... on the Day of Atonement you shall send forth the trumpet throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and to his family. (Lev 25:9–10)

It is interesting to see that returning land to its rightful owners was considered an act of atonement; Israel's picture of the golden age was a time when swords became ploughshares and spears pruning hooks (as is inscribed on the wall of the United Nations building in New York), when every man would sit under his *own* vine and fig with none to make him afraid (Mic 4:3–4).

Hosea is witness to the persistent attraction of the religion of Canaan. He it was who first depicted the Lord as the husband of the land, the one who made it fertile and caused it to produce food. Just as he cared for his people, so he cared for the land, but his people had been blinded to this fact and had been lured away to other gods. Hosea learnt this from the bitter experience of his own marriage, and he compared the infidelity of Israel to that of his own wife: 'For she said, "I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink" . . . and she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine and the oil . . .' (Hos 2:5, 8).

Deuteronomy warned against any idea of self-sufficiency. The good land they had been promised would be a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which they would eat bread without scarcity, in which they would lack nothing (Deut 8:8-9). But the dangers of prosperity were recognized: 'Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth". You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the power to get wealth' (Deut 8:17-18).

Prosperity meant food; for Israel, this was the good life. In the golden days of Solomon, 'Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea; they ate, drank and were happy' (1 Kg 4:20). They feasted with the Lord in the temple, offering him the choicest parts of their peace sacrifices, before sharing them as a communal meal. When the Israelite brought the tithe of his produce to the temple, he feasted there, 'eating before the Lord' and rejoicing with his household (Deut 14:26). In one of the most enigmatic passages in the Old Testament, we learn that the elders of Israel ascended Sinai with Moses, found themselves in the presence of God, and then 'ate and drank' (Exod 24:9-11). David celebrated bringing the Ark to Jerusalem by holding a huge feast; he blessed the people in the name of the Lord and then gave them food: bread, meat and raisins (2 Sam 6:18-19). Solomon presided over a huge feast when the temple was dedicated (1 Kgs 8:62-66); and we must not forget that the temple buildings included kitchen areas where the meat from the sacrifices could be cooked and eaten as part of the act of worship (1 Sam 2:13-14; Ezek 42:13).

For Israel, the temple was the place of God's presence and the source of the fertility of the land.² Originally the tabernacle had been built so that God could be in the midst of his people (Exod 25:8), and Haggai reminded those who attempted to rebuild Jerusalem after the exile that without a temple in their midst, without God's presence, there would be

no prosperity. He describes their situation: 'You have sown much and harvested little; you eat but you never have enough; you drink but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves but no one is warm; and he who earns wages, earns wages to put them into a bag with holes' (Hag 1:6). The problem was one of priorities: they were rebuilding their own houses but the temple was left in ruins. 'Therefore the heavens above you have withheld their dew, and the earth has withheld its produce' (Hag 1:10). A plentiful supply of food was a sign that God was with his people.

The temple was the source of all life and thus the river of life flowed from the throne of God in the holy of holies. Ezekiel describes this river, flowing out from the temple, transforming the barren land and the salty waters of the Dead Sea (Ezek 47:1-12). What was water to some was fire to others: the same river of living water became, for sinners, the river of fire in which they were judged. One of the hymns found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls tells of an ever-flowing fountain, i.e. the river of life, in whose bright flames all the sons of iniquity would be consumed (1QH 6). St John also saw this river of life in his vision of the new heaven and the new earth; he called it the river of the water of life (Apoc 22:1).

The Psalms celebrate the provision of food, not only for humankind but for all creatures.

Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine,
and bread to strengthen man's heart . . .
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God . . .
These all look to thee,
to give them their food in due season.
When thou givest to them, they gather it up;
when thou openest thy hand,
they are filled with good things.

(Ps 104:14, 15, 21, 27, 28)

The prayer of the Israelite to his God was for food:

May our garners be full,
providing all manner of store;
may our sheep bring forth thousands

and ten thousands in our fields . . .
 Happy are the people, to whom such blessings fall!
 Happy the people whose God is the Lord!

(Ps 144:13, 15)

Paradise, the place of God's presence, was a place of food, fruit trees which grew of themselves and did not require any hard labour. In his original state, Adam ate no meat, and it was only after Noah's flood that animals were killed for food. 'Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood' (Gen 9:3-4). Apparently the need to grow grain was also a sign of the fallen world, part of the curse which Adam suffered when he was driven from the presence of God: 'In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return' (Gen 3:19). Bread was the symbol of his mortality.

Bread, too, was to be the standard by which people were judged. Those who did not share their food had not understood the true demands of their religion.

Is not this the fast that I choose . . .
 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
 and bring the homeless poor into your house?
 (Isai 58:6-7)

Jesus took up this theme in the parable of the sheep and the goats. Those who would inherit the kingdom, he said, were those who helped the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger. Those who denied them would be recognized as the messengers of Satan and sent to eternal punishment (Mt 25:34-35, 41).

The tithe paid to the temple was not for the upkeep of the services but for the needy: the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow could 'eat and be filled' in the temple (Deut 14:28-29). The laws of the harvest also provided for the poor: it was forbidden to go back for a forgotten sheaf of grain, or to harvest right into the corners of a field; it was forbidden to harvest twice from the olive trees or the orchard and it was forbidden to strip a vineyard or to gather fallen fruit. All this was to be left for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger (Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19-21).

The autumn new year festival in Israel was the final harvest festival of the year. It was the time when the kings of Israel had been enthroned

and when the annual renewal of the kingship was celebrated. With the passing of time, this festival of enthronement and renewing the year became the setting for the expected enthronement of the Messiah and the last judgement, when the whole creation would be purged and renewed. Thus it was that images of food and harvest became images of judgement. The earliest of these can be found in the Old Testament, where Isaiah describes the bloody winepress of the judgement (Isai 63:1-6) and Amos the basket of ripe fruit which warned of the imminent end (Amos 8:1-3). The harvest as judgement is most familiar, however, from Jesus' parable of the angel reapers, where the angels of judgement gather the good sheaves into the barn but collect the weeds for the fire (Mt 13:36-42); or from the terrifying picture of the angel reaper in the Apocalypse:

Then I looked and lo a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, 'Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe'. So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth and the earth was reaped.

The reaping angel then 'swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God' (Apoc 14:14-16, 19).

After the judgement the earth would be renewed and its fertility restored. The best descriptions of this happy state are found in the ancient texts, both Jewish and Christian, which did not become part of the Bible. 1 Enoch, for example, was only preserved as part of the Bible in the Church in Ethiopia, but it was used by the early Christians, and pre-Christian fragments have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Enoch the prophet has a vision of the day of judgement and after this he sees the renewed creation:

Destroy all wrong from the face of the earth and let every evil work come to an end: and let the plant of righteousness and truth appear . . . And then shall the whole earth be tilled in righteousness and shall all be planted with trees and be full of blessing. And all desirable trees shall be planted on it, and they shall plant vines on it: and the vine which they plant thereon shall yield wine in abundance and as for all the seed which is sown thereon, each measure shall bear a thousandfold and each measure of olives shall yield ten presses of oil. And cleanse the earth from all oppression, and from all unrighteousness and from all sin . . . (1 Enoch 10:16-20)

Traditions about Jesus not recorded in the New Testament but nevertheless well attested suggest that he too spoke of the great fertility of the messianic age. Irenaeus, who wrote at the end of the second century AD, records a tradition handed down through the disciples of St John:

The Lord taught concerning those times and said: The days shall come wherein vines shall grow each having ten thousand branches and on one branch ten thousand shoots, and on every shoot ten thousand clusters and on every cluster ten thousand grapes and every grape when it is pressed shall yield five and twenty measures of wine . . . Likewise he said that a grain of wheat shall bring forth ten thousand ears, and every ear shall have ten thousand grains, and every grain shall yield five double pounds of white, clean flour . . . (*Against heresies* v.33.3)

Similar traditions are recorded in Hippolytus's *Commentary on Daniel*.

What may we conclude? Any preacher knows it is simplistic to take the biblical picture and transplant it direct to another age and another culture. But the biblical picture gives us much to ponder: the joy of food as the sign of God's goodness in an age of polluted crops and junk food, where half the world is starving and the other half trying to lose weight; the image of the Cosmic Covenant where God's law for human society is seen as directly affecting the fertility of the creation; the last judgement as the great harvest of evil and injustice; and the kingdom of God as a time when all have enough to eat. God comes to God's people in bread and wine.

Perhaps we should find a new significance in the familiar juxtaposition: 'Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins . . .'

NOTES

¹ This idea has been developed by Robert Murray in his book *The cosmic covenant* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1992).

² These ideas of temple and fertility are further developed in my books: *The gate of heaven* (London: SPCK, 1991) and *On earth as it is in heaven* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).