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THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SHARING MEALS IN THE NARRATIVES OF GENESIS AND EXODUS

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Ordination

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Referee, Dr. Alan Cooper

To my wife Jill.
Thank you for growing with me.

DIGEST

Anthropologists and sociologists have long asserted that "who may eat what with whom" is a direct expression of the social, political, and religious relations of a given era of time. The symbolism of food conveyed through eating habits and rituals surrounding the sharing of a meal teach us a great deal about the social and religious dynamics of a certain people. This thesis examines the significance of shared meals for the communities of our biblical ancestors as depicted in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis and Exodus. Although scriptural references to eating are limited, social scientific research reveals that biblical meals are rich with symbolism. In the context of each reference to a shared meal is significant information about the participants and their religious, cultural, and social orders. In contrast with modern interpretations of meal-sharing, the act of sharing a meal in Semitic antiquity was an explicit indication of mutual fellowship and social obligation.

Chapter 1 contains introductory remarks concerning the biblical authors' intentionality regarding the references to shared meals. Additionally, this chapter highlights a popular example of a shared meal in Genesis and addresses the inadequacies of interpretations which fail

to realize the full symbolism of eating together. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the works of some prominent thinkers who approached their research of the Bible using social scientific methods. I consider the works of such scholars as William Robertson Smith, Sir James Frazer, and Mary Douglas. Chapter 3 contains a survey of various theories on the significance of the sharing of meals. In this chapter I examine more fully the ways in which sharing a meal both affects and reflects the social and religious orders of a society.

In Chapter 4, I specifically consider the scriptural references to the sharing of a meal in the Genesis and Exodus narratives. Applying the theories discussed in the previous chapters, I offer these conclusions: biblical meals are representative of the social order and the relationships of the participants; they are frequently used as a mechanism with which to seal a covenant or treaty; and they point to vestiges of ancient cultic activity among local tribes which survived in the redacted text. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the extent of modern awareness of the semiotics of food and describes venues in our own society in which the sharing of a meal reflects the social and religious dynamics of the community.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The biblical authors and redactors left future readers with few specifics about daily life in patriarchal society. Many of the mental images that we possess regarding the patriarchs and their contemporaries result from much later works written by the Rabbis and other biblical interpreters. When we consider the nature of the Bible's concerns, though, it is understandable that the text is chary with details about aspects of daily life for our forebears. Consequently, much about the lifestyle, behavior, and interaction of the biblical personages truly remains unknown and curious. For instance, while the necessity of sleep is unquestionable, the text almost never informs us when our biblical forebears do. Similarly, we rarely encounter them "going off to work."[1] According to the text, they were also seemingly exempt from the mundane activities of cleaning, playing together, going to the bathroom and other matters of hygiene, and similar tasks which we can only presume occurred. Significant to this thesis, only occasionally do we

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[1]See the reference in Gn 37:12-13 to Jacob's sons going off to pasture their father's flocks as an exception to this generalization.

witness our biblical ancestors preparing and eating food or sharing a meal.

When the text does depict ordinary activities such as the sharing of a meal, we should take notice and question the authors' reasons for including this information. Why should the narrators mention the seemingly unimportant event of a shared meal? Is there significance vested in the everyday act of eating? We can assume that if the authors chose to include such commonplace activity in the text, then the reference possesses some special significance. In other words, when the biblical sharing of a meal is mentioned, that experience is intended to convey more information than simply the manner in which the patriarchs satisfied their hunger. With further explication, the biblical references to the sharing of meals in the narratives of Genesis and Exodus might provide us with an open window into the social and religious orders of patriarchal society.

The belief that eating habits are significant to history, society, and even God begins, arguably, at the beginning of the Bible with the story of Eden and Eve's taking of the forbidden fruit. "The storytellers chanted that human history itself began when human beings violated a special Divine command of what to eat" (Waskow 1995, 17). Yet, other biblical tales also emphasize the importance of food as central to the mythic

history of the patriarchs: Melchizedek brings out bread and wine to bless Abram (Gn 14:18); Abraham serves a meal to the three messengers who came to announce the impending birth of Isaac (Gn 18:8); and Jacob gave his brother Esau some stew he was cooking in exchange for Esau's birthright (Gn 25:34). We will consider the deeper implications of these and other shared meals more fully later in this thesis. However, these three examples already indicate the textual presence of meal-sharing during important biblical events and allude to the importance of food at each occasion.

Using sociological and anthropological theories and approaches to the Bible, I hope to elucidate the intentionality of the biblical authors in highlighting these eating experiences, and to understand the rich symbolism of the sharing of a meal. Robert Wilson (1984) noted that a definitive understanding of the text can never be achieved, as different readers will see slightly different things in the same text. "However, each divergent reading can be considered valid so long as it is an *informed* reading that is aware of the conventions being employed by both reader and author" (Wilson 1984, 5). In researching this project, I have drawn upon comparative philology and Ancient Near Eastern texts to understand better the culture and thought patterns of the writers of the biblical era. I have also relied heavily upon insights from the social

sciences in order to understand the sociology of ancient Israel. With the assistance of these primary sources, I hope to offer an "informed" interpretation of the symbolism of the shared meal in the text and bridge the temporal, cultural, and spacial gap between the modern reader and the biblical author.[2]

Before continuing with the body of this work, it will be useful to illustrate the possible implications of one instance of a shared meal in the text. In Genesis 18, three "men" come upon Abraham as he sits near the entrance of his tent. Abraham gives his unexpected visitors the "red carpet treatment" and rushes about in order to ensure their comfort. Finally, we are told that Abraham serves his guests a meal consisting of *ugot,* a choice calf, milk, and butter (Gn 18:6-8). It is upon this tale that the Rabbis based the mitzvah of "welcoming the stranger." In truth, however, the story of demonstrating hospitality to unexpected visitors did not originate in the Hebrew text with Abraham. In numerous folktales from the Ancient Near East, sharing one's own food with a stranger (who

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[2]Wilson 1984. The author explains that in every act of reading there is a communication gap between the reader and the text, and this gap becomes progressively larger as the distance between reader and author increases. The reader must overcome a lack of congruence in perceptions of reality and patterns of linguistic usage in order to understand the author's text.

might turn out to be an angel) was a standard indication of saintly generosity.[3] As in Ugaritic and Akkadian texts, biblical texts placed a strong emphasis on eating together as basic to the guest-host relationship.[4] Israelites demonstrated righteous behavior by extending the symbolic solidarity of the family meal to outsiders.

Under scrutiny, however, the hospitality theory proves to be inadequate. As this story continues in the text, we learn of Lot's similarly gracious treatment of two of the "men" (now identified as angels). He invited them to his home and prepared a banquet and *matsot* for them (Gn 19:1-3). Yet, as we discover, Lot's fate was drastically different from Abraham's. To justify and rationalize Lot's outcome, in spite of his seemingly hospitable behavior, the Rabbis later composed a midrash that maligned Lot's character. However, ignoring the midrashic creation, we cannot conclude that Lot's form of hospitality was inferior to that of Abraham from the biblical text alone. Accordingly, it is possible to

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[3]Gaster 1969. The stories of how both Abraham and Lot entertain angels unawares are but Hebrew versions of the widespread folktale of *Hospitality Rewarded.* According to Gaster, this tale exists in two forms: one in which the host is rewarded in some fashion (Abraham and Sarah with Isaac); the other in which the host's rude neighbors are punished for their treatment (destruction of Sodom).

[4]Jenks 1992. The author notes that the two words *akhal* and *shatah* are used together in a fixed expression in biblical, Ugaritic, and Akkadian texts to indicate that full hospitality was extended to visiting strangers.

suggest that these stories are not intended to teach us about hospitality. Perhaps we should draw different conclusions from these stories based on the biblical text itself and parallel accounts. Do the respective meals enable us to suggest alternative theories about the encounters between Abraham and Lot and their divine visitors?

Cooper and Goldstein (1992) attach cultic significance to these similar meal experiences in Genesis 18 and 19. They propose that the hastily prepared meal of meat and *matsot* served by Abraham and Lot is actually the ritual meal of ancient Israel's ancestor cult. Comparing the elements of these meals -- what was eaten, when it was eaten, how it was prepared -- with similar instances in the Bible (I Sam 28:22-25; Ju 6:11-24, 13:2-24), they conclude that the original "purpose of the meal is to propitiate the ancestral spirits and to seek the bounty that they bestow" (Cooper and Goldstein 1992, 33). Divine encounters that go as planned, as Abraham's obviously did, are rewarded with blessing. Conversely, when such experiences do not go well, as with Lot, destruction occurs. The interpretation of these contrasting stories offered here suggests that references to the sharing of meals in the text are evidence for private cultic activity among individual communities in Israelite society. Understandably, the biblical redactors attempted to

bury in the narratives any hint or suggestion of localized cultic practice among our biblical ancestors.

Far from the explanation of these events as "diplaying proper hospitality," interpretations of biblical meals such as Cooper and Goldstein's bring into focus more of the intricacies of biblical society. Theories such as these enable us to add detail to the sparsely drawn portrayals of life in Semitic antiquity and to offer suppositions about the social dynamics, cultic and religious practices, and thought processes of the biblical narrators, if not the patriarchs themselves. Later in this thesis, we will consider a more detailed analysis of several biblical accounts of shared meals.

Chapter 2 provides a brief historical overview of social scientific approaches to biblical interpretation. I will examine the research and impact of anthropologists such as William Robertson Smith and Sir James Frazer from the turn of the century and conclude with the efforts of more recent scholars such as the cultural sociologist Mary Douglas. Chapter 2 reflects the changing modes of social scientific biblical interpretation over the decades and comments on the strengths and weaknesses of particular theories and approaches.

Chapter 3 contains a more detailed consideration of various social scientific theories and their suggestions regarding the significance of

food. Specifically, Chapter 3 is divided into two parts: one section examines the importance of food and the sharing of meals for the social order; the second section addresses the religious and cultic implications of the sharing of a meal. Using comparative anthropology,[5] Ancient Near Eastern parallels, and more contemporary societal examples, I will explore alternative hypotheses for the significance of the sharing of a meal in both the social and religious orders. Chapter 3 sets the stage for our suggested interpretations and theories regarding shared biblical meals.

In Chapter 4, I consider further biblical instances of the sharing of meals. I will apply various social scientific theories about the semiotics of food to the narratives of Genesis and Exodus in order to conjecture about biblical society. This chapter explores three categories of biblical meals: meals that define social relations and family activity, meals that are used to seal a covenant between parties, and meals which point to ancient cultic activity.

Finally, in Chapter 5 we will consider extensions of these theories for modern society. What are the current implications, if any, of people sitting down to share a meal together? Are there vestiges of primitive

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[5]See Chapter 2 regarding the works of Robertson Smith and his contemporaries for an explanation of comparative anthropology.

rites which have survived in contemporary society that reflect the necessity of sharing food to cement relationships? Chapter 5 contains observations and concluding remarks about the relevance of social scientific theories addressed in previous chapters for us today and importance of food in our society.

CHAPTER 2

THE RISE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE BIBLE

With the formalization of the social sciences during the past century, scholars began to direct much of their attention and effort toward an understanding of ancient civilizations and primitive societies. The thinkers of the day were convinced of the importance of these societies for theories concerning nature and the development of social institutions. The community of the biblical patriarchs, in particular, captured the interest of many anthropologists of the day, and the desire to reveal the unknown about our Israelite ancestors consumed much of their writing and scholarship. These scholars searched for paths which would lead them beyond the sparse details provided in the biblical text and reveal the actual customs, rituals, and beliefs operating within Israelite communities in Semitic antiquity.

A recent scholar, Norman Gottwald (1979), suggests that "one cannot truly understand the spirituality of Israel without understanding the materiality of Israel." Though writing almost one hundred years earlier, intellectuals such as William Robertson Smith and Sir James Frazer

affirmed this same theory. These men and their contemporaries attempted to elucidate and understand biblical society through social scientific study. Smith and Frazer, as well as more recent anthropologists, defined the material culture of Israel partly in terms of the culture of food. By studying the food cultures in primitive communities of their own day, Smith and Frazer offered comparative theories about biblical society and how the use of food and the sharing of meals related to Israelite world views and religious values.

In this chapter I will examine the historical works of Robertson Smith, Frazer and others who have influenced current sociological and anthropological understandings of the Bible, particularly with respect to the role of the meal in Israelite society. I intend to indicate both the strengths and weaknesses of Robertson Smith's comparative anthropology, and to describe the attempts of later social scientists to remedy the flaws of his arguments through their participant fieldwork. I hope to demonstrate that through the use of earlier comparative materials synthesized with later fieldwork studies, we can understand properly the culture of food and its relation to the social structure of the community.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an extensive literature review of the varying studies of food that have surfaced in the

academic world. I will not address, for example, the numerous scholarly works which focus more on the specific diet of our early ancestors than on the societal implications derived from the sharing of a meal. Nutritional anthropologists, ethnobotanists, paleonutritionists, and others have endeavored to study the interrelationship between diet and culture and their mutual influence upon one another. Though important, these works are not relevant to the goals of this thesis. Rather, I will highlight some of the representative thinkers from the past century and consider their approaches to the social scientific study of the biblical community.

WILLIAM ROBERTSON SMITH

During the late nineteenth century, we encounter the seminal works and ideas of William Robertson Smith and his contemporaries. These men were struck by the apparent similarities of belief and custom to be found among different peoples of the world and they developed theories to account for these similarities. Basing their assumptions upon the theory of evolution, men like Robertson Smith "tried to build an historical picture of how human societies, social institutions, and religious beliefs had originated and grown (Rogerson 1978, 12)."

Robertson Smith and, later, Sir James Frazer used a method of research known as comparative anthropology to reconstruct a societal

picture. Assuming that all races had passed through similar, if not identical, stages of social and religious development, they determined that the "forebears of civilized peoples once lived, thought, and believed like contemporary primitives (Ibid., 13)." Related to this theory, Robertson Smith and his contemporaries deduced that, as among contemporary primitive societies, there was no separation between religious and everyday activity in ancient communities. "Religion" could be found in every aspect of society, especially in the process of eating and sharing of a meal.

Mary Douglas, a mid-twentieth century social anthropologist, described Robertson Smith as "first and foremost a theologian and Old Testament scholar (1966, 11)." Though controversial for the time in which he wrote, Smith demonstrated an interdisciplinary approach to Bible in which he saw no parochial restrictions separating good social science, good history, good linguistics, and good theology (Beidelman 1974). Biblical and academic scholarship based upon reason and rational thought were of utmost importance for Smith. He refused to allow preconceived notions of Scripture to determine its true meaning, even if his positions cost him his employment. Smith was removed from a professorial chair at the Free Church of Britain in Aberdeen because of his sympathy for biblical criticism.

Robertson Smith's greatest contribution to anthropology and Semitic studies comes from his works *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* and *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites.* In these writings, he compares the cultural and social phenomena that are common to all the Semitic tribes of the region and to the communities lying outside the orbit of the Arabian Peninsula. Smith's more specific interest, however, was the relation of primitive Semitic religion with the religion of the ancient Hebrews (Smith 1927).

Robertson Smith is regarded as one of the founders of the comparative method of anthropology and among the very first to use such an approach in biblical scholarship (Beidelman 1974). Beidelman considers Smith's work to be characterized by a few dominant concepts:

1) Smith was convinced of the evolutionary progress of society, and, more importantly, of the intellectual consciousness that was both a cause and result of that changing social environment. His theories concerning totemism and survivals (discussed later in this chapter) are contingent upon this evolutionistic belief.

2) Smith emphasized the close relation between the nature of social groups and the state of intellectual and moral life. Aided by his insistence on evolution, Smith offered sophisticated ideas about social process and cultural relativism.

3) Smith insisted upon the primacy of ritual over mythology and belief. Anticipating the scholarship of Emile Durkheim, Smith asserted that early primitive religions lacked creeds and dogmas and consisted entirely of institutions and practices. He firmly believed that there was no separation between religion and the ethical values of community life within primitive societies (Douglas 1966).

4) Smith championed two ideas developed by his contemporary, J.F. McLennan, concerning the ancient family. He held these ideas to be true for the entirety of ancient Semitic society, including the earliest ancestors of the Hebrews. First, Smith supported the theory that totemism was a phase of religious belief through which all societies passed. Second, he was convinced that "mother-right" invariably preceded "father-right" as a mode of reckoning descent. Both ideas will be elucidated further in this chapter.

In his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* Robertson Smith wrote:

> The record of the religious thought of mankind, as it is embodied in religious institutions, resembles the geological record of the history of the earth's crust; the new and the old are preserved side by side, or rather layer upon layer. The classification of ritual formations in

> their proper sequence is the first step toward their explanation, and that explanation itself must take the form, not of speculative theory, but of a rational life history (1927, 24).

Careful reasoning by means of comparison and observation enables the researcher to recreate the order in which various types of social structures succeed one another. Arguments such as these undergirded Robertson Smith's belief that elements from earlier stages tend to persist in distorted form long after they are no longer fully comprehended and are no longer an essential part of the social system (Beidleman 1974). These societal elements, manifested in the form of processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, are known as "survivals." Carried by force of habit into a new society, survivals remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has evolved.

Robertson Smith inherited the concept of survivals from Henry Burnett Tylor, who sought to illustrate the general continuity of human culture and asserted that "civilization is the result of gradual progress from an original state similar to that of contemporary savagery" (Douglas 1966, 12). Similar to Tylor, Smith argued that modern, civilized man represents the culmination of a long process of evolution. Smith's goal was to reveal aspects of contemporary savage cultures that were also

present as survivals in modern societies as well, thereby proving their evolutionary status. By highlighting the common elements and experiences in both modern and primitive societies and affirming his evolutionary theory of survivals, Robertson Smith could draw conclusions about ancient Semitic societies in general, and the biblical community in particular.

As previously noted, Smith maintained that there was no division between daily life and religious life. He and other anthropologists such Sir James Frazer "centered their interest largely upon questions of taboo, totemism, sacrifice, and communion, that is, essentially on religious aspects of the process of consumption" (Goody 1982, 10). Religion infused every aspect of the ancients' communal and cultural activities. Smith illustrated this assertion with his insistence that "commensalism" -- the sharing of a sacrificial meal by the members of the community -- was crucial for establishing and maintaining social relations. "According to antique ideas, those who eat and drink together are, by this very act, tied to one another by a bond of friendship and mutual obligation. All those who share a meal are brethren and the duties of friendship and brotherhood are implicitly acknowledged in their common act" (Smith 1889, 247-48). Blending religious beliefs and rituals with the activities of daily living, commensalism was understood as the great promoter of

solidarity in the community. Smith and Frazer discovered taboos, totemism, sacrifice, and other cultic activities distributed across a wide range of human societies and embedded even within their own cultures of nineteenth-century Europe, albeit in a diluted form. They sought to explain rationally the presence of these surviving elements in modern societies in light of the evolution of social institutions (Goody 1982).

Smith argued that one of the earliest forms of sacrifice, from which all other forms derived, involved an act of communion by means of a religious feast between a social group and a supernatural being. Smith hypothesized that the Semitic societies of ancient Arabia were composed of matrilineal clans, each of which had a sacred relationship to a species of animal, their "totem" (Pritchard 1965). At these religious feasts, the clan would slay their totem and share the flesh and blood of the creature. By doing so, the members of the clan cemented their bonds with each other as a cohesive social group, and with their god who was represented by the totemic creature. Though this theory of sacrifice proved to be controversial, Smith maintained that these early forms of commensalism were present in Israelite society as well. He insisted that sacrifices intended for expiation or ablution were later derivatives of these earlier sacrifices for the benefit of communion.

Unquestionably, "Smith's single greatest contribution to social research was his emphasis upon the social basis of belief and values" (Beidelman 1974, 66). In relation to this concern, Branislaw Malinowski, an anthropologist of the mid-twentieth century wrote:

> Robertson Smith was perhaps the first scholar clearly to recognize the sociological aspect in all human religions and also to emphasize the importance of ritual as against dogma...In this, Robertson Smith recognizes clearly that any narrative has to be assessed by the function that it plays in organized religious behavior (1962, 254).

Smith's work and ideas, as much as any subsequent scholar's, provide direction and insight for an anthropological and sociological approach toward understanding the biblical narratives. The significance of Robertson Smith's work will resurface later in this thesis when we apply some of his hypotheses to textual interpretations.

We would be irresponsible not to note some of the criticism which Robertson Smith's ideas and theories have garnered from his contemporaries and later social scientists. Unable to rid himself of preconceived notions which he brought to his research, Smith undoubtedly employed stereotypes when considering the thought

processes of savage peoples. For example, he assumed incorrectly that savages did not distinguish between organic and inorganic nature, or between imagination and reason. Such assumptions were disproved by later anthropologists and fieldworkers who studied the primitive peoples by living amongst them.

Additionally, "Smith's scholarly evidence for early semitic mother-right [descent] and totemism, which he helped to popularize, is very questionable and [often] discredited today" (Beidleman 1974, 37). However, the greatest criticism regarding Robertson Smith's theories focuses more specifically on the shortcomings of the comparative method of anthropological research. Historians of comparative religion often misuse the comparative method and explain Israelite sacrifice in terms of the practices or ideas of people with completely different religious concepts. In particular, scholars such as Smith "look for analogies between Israelite ritual and the customs of the so-called 'primitive' peoples, for among these primitive peoples, they claim, we find the significance of ritual" (de Vaux 1965, 447).

In his prolegomenon to the reprint of *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (Smith 1927), James Muilenberg comments:

> There is no scholar today who would attempt to write the early history of Israel's religion from

> Robertson Smith's point of view -- filled with animistic theories, espousing an evolutionary doctrine, and dependent upon the Arab tribes and their religion and folkways for an understanding of the religion of ancient Israel (1969, 23).

Still, despite all of these drawbacks, the work of William Robertson Smith remains an invaluable collection of anthropological data, reflecting decades of serious, dedicated scholarship. "Robertson Smith's work is a necessary approach to an understanding of religion" (Ibid.).

JAMES GEORGE FRAZER

As important as Smith was for popularizing sociological and anthropological approaches to the Bible, his reputation was in large part superseded by that of his protegé, Sir James Frazer, within a decade after his death in 1894. In his works, *The Golden Bough* and *Folklore in the Old Testament*, Frazer also applies the comparative method to study Hebrew antiquity. Frazer finds the pages of the Bible to be filled with indications of the savagery and superstition which underlay the civilization of ancient Israel (Frazer 1918). Similar to Robertson Smith, Frazer concluded that all civilized races emerged from a state of

savagery resembling the state in which primitive races have persisted to the present time. By examining primitive peoples in his own time, Frazer argued that he, too, could draw conclusions about all ancient societies.

Frazer also affirmed Tylor's theory of survivals and was intrigued with the traces of old modes of life that could be found in the institutions and habits of modern people. He included such survivals under the heading of folklore which, he suggested, embraced the whole body of a people's traditionary beliefs and customs (Frazer 1918). Through examination of the biblical literature, Frazer elucidates references to belief and practice that can hardly be explained except on the supposition that they are survivals from a far lower level of culture. "Despite the high moral and religious development of the ancient Hebrews which the text highlights, there is no reason to suppose that [the Israelites] did not pass through a rudimentary stage just like every other race" (Ibid., vii). Frazer's ideas will also come to the fore later in this thesis when we apply some of his theories to the text and consider the deeper implications of the sharing of a meal within the ancient Israelite society.

Like Robertson Smith, Frazer certainly has his detractors. Mary Douglas, an important scholar in her own right, is highly critical of Frazer's writing and work. Douglas (1966) explains that Frazer made

two incorrect assumptions concerning our early ancestors that need to be corrected. One assumption was that the thinking of the ancient Israelites was dominated by magic and had nothing to do with morals or religion. She asserts that the division between religion and magic is an ill-considered one.

> Frazer crudely tidied up the evolutionary assumptions implicit in Robertson Smith and assigned to human culture three stages of development: magic was the first stage, religion the second, science the third (Douglas 1966, 23).

The second incorrect assumption of Frazer's was his insistence that ethical refinement within a society was found exclusively in advanced societies. Douglas disputes this theory and contends that ethics were not strange to primitive religion. She argues that the ancients were cognizant of the moral implications of their actions and that Frazer's writing, therefore, is misleading. E.E. Évans-Pritchard (1965) also found Frazer's work, as well as the work of other comparative anthropologists, to be problematic, though for different reasons. Evans-Pritchard was most critical of the comparative method:

> Statements about a people's religious beliefs must always be treated with the greatest caution, for we are then dealing with what neither European nor native can directly observe, with conceptions, images, words, which require for understanding a thorough knowledge of a people's language and also an awareness of the entire system of ideas of which any particular belief is part, for it may be meaningless when divorced from the set of beliefs and practices to which it belongs (1965, 7).

Regardless of criticism, Frazer's work does, nonetheless, offer us a potential window into the life and culture of our Israelite forebears. His folkloric portrayals and explications provide a pathway into the community of our ancestors and offer a rare perspective of biblical life not imaginable with other forms of anthropology. Although the following era of anthropological fieldwork supposedly superseded the work of Frazer and Robertson Smith, the influence of these men is still an important factor in biblical scholarship. Their social-scientific data, both for the interpretation of the Bible and for the reconstruction of ancient Israelite history and religion, are still valuable resources for biblical scholars (Wilson 1984).

FIELDWORK AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Whereas anthropologists such as Smith and Frazer abstracted data from a number of societies in order to form a comparative theory about earlier communities, the scholars of the next generation stressed the importance of studying whole societies in detail. The goal of social anthropology, driven by practices of fieldwork and functionalism, is to study all of the various aspects of a society and to understand how these parts relate to the society as a whole. While comparative anthropology was concerned primarily with culture, beliefs and customs, fieldwork anthropologists emphasized the distinction between culture and society (Rogerson 1978). To accomplish their goals, social anthropologists study family units, kinship systems, political life, religious cults, and other societal realms which blend together to define the operation and values of the community.

Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown were two of the scholars who helped to define the field of social anthropology in the early part of this century. Though they admired and used the work of their predecessors, they sought to correct what they felt were methodological weaknesses in the comparative method of research. Arguing that societies are best understood when conceived in biological terms, Radcliffe-Brown explained that "just as a biological organism consists of

interacting parts which together form an integrated whole, so a society consists of individuals and groups tied together by social relations. These interacting social units form the structure of the society; one may then speak either of the functioning of the society's structure or of the function of any particular part in relationship to the whole" (1952, 180). In order to study a society in detail and to understand better the parts of the whole, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and other fieldwork anthropologists immersed themselves in their subject matter by joining the communities and living among the primitive peoples.

It is significant that, in some instances, the data from the functional approach confirmed many of the observations that William Robertson Smith had suggested from his research using the comparative method. For instance, Robertson Smith's insistence upon the role of commensalism in establishing and maintaining social relations matched very closely the data which Radcliffe-Brown collected through his participant fieldwork. Radcliffe-Brown emphasized that "among the Andaman Islanders of the Bay of Bengal, the most important social activity is the getting of food; it is around food that the social sentiments are most frequently called into action" (1922, 227). These sentiments are implanted in people by a series of initiation ceremonies during which a boy or girl has to give up certain relished foods. Later in the course of

their maturation, this prohibition is removed. By this means, the social value of food is taught at an impressionable age, a form of moral education that is carried out not by one person but by the whole society backed by the force of tradition (Goody 1982).

Social anthropologists working in the functionalist tradition have repeatedly turned to the role of food and the sharing of meals as an excellent indicator of social structure. The giving and receiving of cooked food, for example, has been shown to be a particular feature of marriage transfers, symbolic of the legal or economic relationship which entails the transfer (Richards 1939). And, "the preparation of porridge...is the woman's most usual way of expressing the correct kinship sentiment towards her different male relatives" (Ibid., 127). Social anthropologists living and working among native populations surmised quickly that food habits were an important key to the details of a society's structure. Understanding the various roles of food within the society permitted them to make sense of less explicable and seemingly illogical forms of human behavior. "Customs that seemed at first sight meaningless or ridiculous [were] shown to fulfill the most important functions in the social economy" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, 330).

Through her functional analysis, Audrey Richards examined both the social and psychological context of food, its production, preparation,

and consumption. In the field community of Northern Rhodesia, she studied the way food was linked to the life-cycle, to interpersonal relationships, and to the structure of social groups (Richards 1939). Richards concluded by stressing the sociological significance of food and the value of the study of eating habits. Most social anthropologists, like Richards, stress the role of the production and distribution of food in families and kinship systems, as well as the importance of prohibitions on the consumption of food. Anthropologists return to these themes again and again, particularly in studying societies characterized by simpler forms of agriculture (Goody 1982).

Certainly, the communities of our Israelite ancestors were dependent upon simple agriculture for subsistence. Applying anthropological theories about the semiotics of food to what we know about biblical communities might, in fact, reveal a great deal about the social relationships and societal structure of those communities. By studying the eating habits and the sharing of meals which the biblical redactors included in the text, perhaps we can draw some inferences about family systems, community relationships, and religious practice in biblical communities. Though criticized by some as conjecture, the comparative anthropology of Frazer and Robertson Smith will be helpful as we seek to understand more about biblical life. By synthesizing their

theories with the ideas of the social anthropologists who followed them, we might offer some hypotheses about the significance vested in the textual references to the sharing of meals.

The work of more recent sociologists and anthropologists will influence our hypotheses as well. In *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class*, Jack Goody (1982) describes many of the changing methodologies used in the discipline of anthropology; he explains how these methodologies have affected the study of food. One of the more acclaimed sociologists of the past three decades is Mary Douglas, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Goody describes Douglas' approach to the study of this subject as a cultural one.

Douglas focuses her attention on the analysis of a meal. For her, food is a code which must be deciphered: "The message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed" (Douglas 1975, 61). In her influential works, *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Implicit Meanings* (1975), Douglas describes food and meals as complex structures of symbols which elucidate the organizing principles of any given society. She suggests that a meal, to be properly understood, should be placed in the context of other meals consumed in the course of time. "Each meal carries something of the meaning of other meals;

each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image" (Douglas 1975, 69).

Douglas' work, including her analysis of the laws of *kashrut,* is highly regarded and often cited. However, among the criticisms she has received, Goody includes the fact that her cultural approach to the subject "tends to give material and hierarchical factors less weight than they deserve. [Douglas'] concern for continuity often leads to the neglect of change, and that for holism to the neglect of difference" (Goody 1982, 32). Still, Douglas' insights facilitate our efforts to decipher the significance of textual references to meals.

The theories and analyses of additional sociologists and anthropologists will come to the fore as we consider more closely the biblical accounts of meal-sharing. However, my primary approach to interpretation will be taken from the theories set forth within this chapter. Drawing from the best of these ideas and avoiding the limited world view that some earlier scholars brought to their work, I hope to uncover elements of the social structure of biblical communities that are buried in the textual references to the sharing of meals. Through such analysis, perhaps we will come to understand better the relationships and personalities of our Israelite ancestors.

CHAPTER 3

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SHARING A MEAL FOR THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS ORDERS

"The very definition of anthropology -- the study of man, all he requires, creates, uses, and how and where he lives -- implies that the study of anything so basic to man's survival as food is essential" (Arnott 1993, v). Following the efforts and writings of men like Robertson Smith, Frazer, and their contemporaries, numerous anthropologists and sociologists have continued to examine the relevance of food and the culture of eating in order to gain a better understanding of various communities. Since it has ramifications for all human relationships and activities, the study of food remains of crucial importance to social scientists (Ibid.). As Mary Douglas suggested, the use of food and the sharing of meals imparts a great deal of information about the construction of any given society. Meals symbolize proper behavior among social groups in relation to one another and in relation to God. "Who may eat what with whom is a direct expression of social, political, and religious relations" (Feeley-Harnik 1994, 6).

As reflected in the scriptural narrative of Abraham and the divine visitors,[1] the sharing of food through acts of hospitality can teach us about a society's attitudes toward outsiders. However, I intend to show in this chapter that the sharing of a meal has implications for the realms of social order and religious life as well. "In simpler societies, eating is associated with initiation and burial rites, the roles of the sexes, economic transactions, hospitality, and dealings with the supernatural -- virtually the entire spectrum of human activity" (Farb and Armalogos 1980, 1). After considering thoroughly the manner in which food and meal-sharing affect various segments of human societies in general, we will then apply these theories to scriptural incidents of the sharing of meals in the hope of gaining a better understanding of the Israelite communities in particular.

In *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating,* the authors, Farb and Armalogos (1980), use historical, biological, and anthropological studies to explain aspects of the eating behavior of human beings. They state in the prologue:

> Cultural traits, social institutions, national histories, and individual attitudes cannot be entirely understood without an understanding

[1]Gn 18. This example is addressed in chapter one of this thesis.

> also of how these have meshed with our varied and peculiar modes of eating (Ibid., 4).

In other words, understanding the eating customs of people is essential for understanding their culture. To know where, how, when and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society. Farb and Armalogos understand the cultural system of any society to be composed of interlocking sectors involving the transformation and distribution of food, the place within the social structure of those who consume the food, and the ideology of the community members concerning the world. When we understand the broad societal context and how these sectors affect one another, we can better explain eating habits and the significance of the sharing of a meal within that society. Conversely, if we can determine specific eating habits and meal patterns, then we might be able to draw inferences about the social and religious structure of a society as well. In this chapter I will focus on the implications of meal-sharing for the social order and the religious life of a community.

SOCIAL ORDER

Social anthropology aims at a reasoned comparative analysis of how people behave in social circumstances. In almost all societies,

eating is essentially a social activity. The way in which food is prepared and served, the occasions during which people eat in companionship, the situations in which people will not eat together -- all express ways in which individuals in different societies express their identities (Fitzgerald 1976). The social anthropologist seeks to explain the dynamics of a given society and how activities in the social life of a community, such as eating habits, shape and determine the existence of each member within the society. Some of the primary issues with which the social anthropologist is concerned are the main patterns of human behavior in a given society, the controls for group action and for individual interpersonal action, and the sets of values which give meaning to the behavior of people in social circumstances (Firth 1951). We will explore these issues as we consider the works of several sociologists and anthropologists who have examined the social significance of meal-sharing.

Concerning this field of study, Raymond Firth notes a problem that we must keep in mind as we offer hypotheses about social and religious dynamics, namely "the imputation of [our] needs to human social behavior" (1951, 4). As he states, it is reasonably easy to discern the proximate ends of social activity. The proximate ends of a feast, for example, clearly include consuming food. However, it is not as easy to

identify and separate the ultimate ends -- those which give basic significance to the activity as part of the total pattern of the social life. Using the same example of a feast, the ultimate end is not the satisfaction of hunger. Humans can satisfy the need for food in much simpler ways.

Possibilities for the ultimate end of a feast are many: a form of sociability in which the assembled derive pleasure; the opportunity for status display and personal enhancement; or the marking of a communal event in which the assembled celebrate with food. As Firth points out, one of the great challenges in studying social behavior is the "personal refraction of the student -- the conditioning of the social image by the student's own views of purpose in social life" (1951, 4). At a certain point in the analysis, it becomes difficult to do more than infer the human needs from the behavior being studied. This insight will be significant as we suggest correlations between the scriptural text and social dynamics.

Research has shown that an anthropologist who knows what the members of a society eat already knows a lot about them. Learning how food is obtained and who prepares it adds further information about the way the society functions. And once the anthropologist discovers where, when, and with whom food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about the relations among the society's members (Farb and

Armalogos 1980). Douglas maintains that "if food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed" (1975, 249). These messages might be about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, communal boundaries, or transactions across the boundaries. Similarly, in *The Lord's Table*, Gillian Feeley-Harnik asserts that, within ancestral communities, "food, articulated in feeding, eating, starving, and fasting, provided a powerfully concentrated language for transforming social relations" (1994, xiii).

For instance, in *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885), Robertson Smith was one of the first scholars to articulate the importance of food and eating in defining and maintaining kinship and marriage bonds. His emphasis on commensality -- the sharing of meals -- as a transformative experience has remained a forceful argument for many anthropologists. Feeley-Harnik cites wedding feasts, the passover, and eucharist as prime examples of commensality which can be understood only in terms of the interrelated segments of the cultural system. "In establishing who eats what with whom, commensality is one of the most powerful ways of defining and differentiating social groups" (Feeley-Harnik 1994, 11).

Commensality may be used to affirm kinship, and it may also be used to establish a community of common interests, marking close

relationships among those who are not kin. "The very act of eating and drinking with a man was a symbol and confirmation of fellowship and mutual social obligations" (Feeley-Harnik 1994, 11). Farb and Armalogos noted that, in both simple and complex societies, eating is the primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim noted:

> In a multitude of societies, meals taken in common are believed to create a bond of artificial kinship between those who assist at them. In fact, relatives are people who are naturally made of the same flesh and blood. But food is constantly remaking the substance of the organism. So a common food may produce the same effects as a common origin (1915, 378).

This theory is manifest, for example, among the Bantu of southern Africa who regard exchanging food as the formation of a temporary covenant with individuals. Similarly, in India, a child who is given food at the table of another family is bound to it by special obligations. And, implying that covenants among biblical communities were also formed through the sharing of a meal, Johannes Pederson argued that there is a connection between the Hebrew word for "covenant" *(berit)* and the verb "to eat" *(bara)* (Pederson 1926). A more contemporary example is provided by

Farb and Armalogos who point out that, among the Chinese, most social transactions are almost inseparable from eating transactions.

An even more forceful argument that food is an essential factor in determining human relationships is demonstrated by the "milk tie," a widespread belief in the Balkans and surrounding regions which asserts that unrelated children who have been nursed by the same women maintain a lifelong social connection with her and with one another (Farb and Armalogos 1980). The concept of the milk tie is taken to an even further extreme in Arab communities, in that a boy and girl fed by the same wet nurse are considered blood relatives and are forbidden to marry. Each of these examples illustrates the power and significance of the sharing of food in various cultures. Pederson hypothesized that it was no different for our biblical forebears. "Food, articulated in terms of who eats what with whom under which circumstances, was one of the most important languages [for the ancient Israelites] in which they conceived and conducted social relations among human beings and between human beings and God" (quoted in Feeley-Harnik 1994, 72).

However, just as the sharing of a meal speaks to the social relations of the participants and the bonds resulting from a commensal experience, so, too, does the reality of who may *not* eat together speak to the issue of social dynamics. The values with which we imbue the act

of eating go far beyond the stomach. Consequently, even if only at an unconscious level, the inability of two individuals, families, or classes to share a meal becomes associated with deep-rooted sentiments and assumptions about oneself and the world in which one lives (Farb and Armalogos 1980). Pederson explains, "Food gives life and strengthens the soul; the common strengthening makes common life. [Thus] to eat with enemies would be inconceivable. He who is to maintain a special strength within himself must not weaken it by eating with others" (1926, 2:305).

Decisions about whom we will eat with are as significant as decisions about what we will eat. Patterns of commensality reveal many of the operative structures of society: meals are social events of immense import. "Thus, the social force of excommunication resides in [our] refusal of commensality" (Burkhart 1982, 78). Because commensality may be the most important basis of human associations (Fitzgerald 1976), the prohibition against people sharing a meal together defines and regulates social activity and effectively separates human groups. As Robertson Smith affirmed, "Those who sit at meat together are united for all social effects; those who do not eat together are aliens to one another, without fellowship in religion and without reciprocal social duties" (Smith 1889, 251). Similarly, Feeley-Harnik claimed that "Those

who do not eat or drink together are without any obligation to one another, if not actually enemies" (1994, 86).

It is worth noting that the *place* in which meals are consumed is an additional factor that often influences the social significance of sharing a meal. Feeley-Harnik writes:

> Feeding speaks to processes of re-grounding people in relation to one another through complex sensory memories of experiences anchored in places -- tables, tablets, houses, homelands. Gastronomy is geography; foods are intimately linked to the place-times of their growing, making, and eating (1994, xvi.).

An examination of particular textual passages in the next chapter will illustrate concretely the importance of the place in which meals are shared, not only for the social order, but for the cultic realm as well.

We must explore one additional factor when considering the social order and the multiplicity of ways in which food influences the social realm: control of the food supply. It is not immaterial who gives the meal or provides the food. Rather, the issues of who controls the food supply and who determines what, how much, and when food will be eaten, is important for understanding the social dynamics of both a family as well

as a community. "In the covenant strengthened by the meal every one has his place, and he who at the table occupies the place of the father of the house has the place of honor" (Pederson 1926, 2:305). Though it will be elucidated further in chapter 4, the narrative of Joseph sharing a meal with his brothers is a clear example of this principle (Gn 43:16-32). Joseph, as the figure who controls the allocation of food in the house, clearly dictates the social dynamics of his encounter with his brothers.

Control of the food supply must be understood as a pre-condition for the development of human culture. Yet, because of its importance it has become intertwined with many other human activities and, therefore, is seldom considered a cultural activity in its own right (Fitzgerald 1976). However, as M.W. Young expressed, "Food is used everywhere to create, maintain, and manipulate social relationships... Food is the organizing ethic of the social system" (1971, 146). It stands to reason, then, that those who control the supply of food are responsible for dictating much of the social order. It follows as well that the symbolic status of the dependent individuals in a society may be mirrored by the amount and kind of food allotted to them. Inequity regarding food allocation may affect mortality rates and general health considerations, especially among individuals of low caste (Fitzgerald 1976). Also related to the control of food are the dietary laws that we enforce within a

community. In upholding dietary rules that dictate what to eat, when and when not to eat, or even how to eat, groups maintain control over their members (Ibid.).

Examining the role of food in the lives of medieval women, Caroline Bynum explains that food practices were means by which women controlled both their social and religious circumstances. Citing histories of numerous women, she demonstrates how "women's food practices were effective ways of shaping their lives, of rejecting roles they did not desire, of criticizing and redirecting the values of husbands and parents" (Bynum 1986, 227). Through their food practices, the women controlled their religious circumstances as well, even "bypassing ecclesiastical limitations on their intimacy with God and elevating their fasting and hunger for God into cosmic significance" (Ibid., 237). Yet, food was more than a device by which women manipulated their fathers, husbands, and religious leaders who had authority over them. By controlling their food observances, food miracles, and food metaphors, women managed to shape for themselves acceptable roles within every realm of their society, and to create desirable social relationships for themselves (Bynum 1986).

To this point, we have considered aspects of the social significance of food and the sharing of meals, as well as the use of food

to determine the social order of a community. In her oft-cited work, "Deciphering a Meal," Douglas summarizes with the following:

> The meaning of a meal is found in a system of repeated analogies. Each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals; each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image (1975, 260).

Recalling the powerful symbolism associated with commensalism in numerous cultures, the strong messages conveyed through prohibitions against sharing a meal together, the importance of the place-time of a meal, and the significant factor of who controls the food supply, we see clearly that food as substance and metaphor is vested with a great deal of relevance and value for understanding the social order.

CULTIC/RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS

After studying the Lele cult of Central Africa, Mary Douglas asserted that by learning the symbols of a primitive culture in their secular context, we can find a back-door approach to that culture's religion (Douglas 1975). Because the majority of primitive peoples, both ancient and modern, have no apparent systematized theology, it is often difficult to comprehend the meanings of societal rituals and prohibitions.

In order to gain a better understanding of various rites in the community, therefore, it is necessary to examine the everyday situations in which the symbols are used. For primitive communities, the sharing of meals provides a window into the religious life of the community. Understanding the significance which the Lele and similar cultures attribute to food, Douglas and other anthropologists suggest a strong connection between eating and religion in primitive societies (Ibid.).

Throughout her work, Douglas maintains that there is a strong association between table and altar in the community of ancient Israel, a proposition shared by numerous social scientists. As previously noted, Robertson Smith asserted that there was no separation between the secular and religious life of biblical Israel. He argued that all Israelite activities, including the eating of meals, were invested with religious meaning. Smith's theory of totemism maintained that every shared meal was, in fact, a religious feast in which the participants sacrificed and consumed their totem, thereby becoming one with their god. Not long after Smith, Pederson wrote that "when an important covenant was concluded in ancient Israel, it was frequently inaugurated by a common meal" (1926, 2:305), a feast that resulted from a sacrificial offering. And more recently, John Burkhart (1982) explained that, with few exceptions,

all biblical meals were religious feasts during which humans recognized God.

The custom of feasting together is a direct development of the meal partaken in common. One theory suggests that because food was prepared in the presence of the gods, the gods came to be recognized at the common meal by being presented with some of the food (MacCulloch, "Feasting" in Hastings 1922). Whether biblical sacrifice manifests this "gift theory" or Robertson Smith's totemic theory in which the divine victim was eaten, many scholars proposed that all eating and food acquired a religious aspect. Among the ancient Greeks, for instance, the sacrificial feast was well known. "Every meal had a sacrificial aspect, and there, as elsewhere, feast and sacrifice were almost synonymous terms" (Ibid., 804). The fact that the biblical meal was partaken of in common made it a bond of union between the eaters; and, since it was shared with the gods, the meal obtained a sacramental character as well.

The connection between table and altar did not conclude with our biblical ancestors or the Greeks. "In late medieval Europe, eating was not simply an activity that marked social status, it was also an occasion for union with one's fellows and one's God" (Bynum 1986, 3). Sharing one's food with a stranger was an indication of saintly generosity and

high religious morals. The relationship of food and religion was evident from the popularity of religious charities that fed the poor and the ill. However, though partaking of food was seen as the most basic and literal way of encountering God, abstaining from food at the appropriate times was also deemed godly behavior. Regarding the religious value associated with fasting, Bynum writes:

> In early references to both individual and corporate fasts, many motives intermingle. Fasting was a meritorious work for God and neighbor. Fasting could also be penitential. As it had been for the ancient Hebrews, food abstention was an expression of grief and repentance, a plea for deliverance from some test or chastisement,... an intercession and a preparation for meeting God (1986, 35).

It is certain that in medieval culture both feast and fast were forms of religious expression, attempts by both men and women to respond to the rhythm of nature created by God.

Throughout history, many cultures have exhibited folk customs dealing with the care of food, its preparation, and the consumption of food that were religiously potent for the members of the community. In India, for example, the question of food was considered highly important

from a religious standpoint up until the middle of this century. India's strict rules of caste hinged primarily on the preparation of food and the persons with whom it could be eaten. Food that was prepared or handled by a member of a lower caste caused ritual defilement. Thus, eating with persons of a lower caste was grounds for expulsion from a higher caste and one of the most feared punishments in India (Jolly, "Food (Hindu)" in Hastings 1922). "There [were] natives of India who would rather starve to death than allow food prepared by a man of inferior caste to pass their lips" (Ibid., 64).

Similarly, the Moorish custom of *l'-ar* seemed to depend on the theory that curses were transmitted by food (Crawley, "Food" in Hastings 1922). The curse -- "the food will repay" -- was conditional and the persons eating together to form a covenant took it upon themselves. In the event that one should break his word, the curse would be activated (Ibid.). The curse notwithstanding, it is readily apparent that in the Moorish custom, as well as among countless other communities, religious expression is manifest in a sacral meal.

SUMMARY

Social anthropologist Mary Douglas reminds us that "food is not feed" (Burkhart 1982, 75). Eating and drinking are not simply biological

occurrences but are human occasions, expressions of commitment to a particular people and its ways of behaving (Ibid.). "The root metaphor of sociality, of cohumanity, is companionship. Companionship, from *cum* + *panis* -- *breaking bread together,* is the essence of community" (Ibid., 76). Whether we understand shared meals to have implications for the social order, the religious life of the community, or both, we must realize that shared meals do express human relationships. As we consider the scriptural references to the sharing of a meal in the next chapter and attempt to offer explanations of their significance, this premise will be of primary importance.

CHAPTER 4

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SHARED MEALS IN THE BIBLICAL TEXT

While a strong relationship exists between people and food, the nature of that relationship varies from society to society. Scholars have suggested that great differences separate our modern societies from the ancient pre-industrial communities of our forebears. We must examine Israelite society carefully in order to understand properly the role of food in the lives of our biblical ancestors (Reed 1986). Properly read, the biblical text provides us with the largest window into Israelite culture and community.

A cursory reading of the narratives of Genesis and Exodus reveals few details surrounding the shared meal experiences. It is common to ascribe the significance of these meals to a Semitic value and practice of hospitality. However, anthropological and sociological biblical studies of food in the Bible suggest additional possibilities for the interpretation of these meal experiences. In this chapter, we will examine a selection of the scriptural references to the sharing of a meal and offer hypotheses about the relevance of these meals for the Israelite community in the light of social scientific research.

Interpreting the biblical narratives is a challenge for any reader. First, we do not know if the scriptural material is true or not. "It is not methodologically valid to assume the 'essential historicity' of any biblical text. In the absence of essential corroborating evidence, there is no way to decode the fictional and ideological tropes of the text in order to recover the kernels of historical 'fact.'"[1] A second interpretive challenge arises from the fact that there are numerous standpoints from which we can read and explicate the text: those of the author or editor, the ancient Israelite community, the Rabbis, or the modern reader. In explicating the Bible, "the text is a silent partner in a conversation between it and the reader, having spoken already before the conversation begins" (Hendel 1987, 33). The way in which we view the text colors our interpretations and, possibly, alters the nature of the text's original intentions. Consequently, as we offer interpretations, we must be careful with our suggestions about what the text may or may not actually disclose.

Mary Douglas wrote, "We know plenty about the ancient Hebrews. The problem is how to recognize and relate what we know" (Douglas 1966, 261). According to many, the place where we can learn the most

[1]Cooper and Goldstein 1992, 23. This article focuses primarily on the historicity of the Exodus story and on the festival of *massot* as a separate entity from the cycle of agricultural *haggim*.

about Israelite society in general, and the significance of sharing meals in particular, is in the myths, stories, and folklore that fill the pages of the Bible. "[Folklore] is the residue of what Israel inherited from her pagan ancestors and adapted from her neighbors" (Gaster 1969, xxv). Since we possess more evidence from other Ancient Near East cultures than we do from Israel itself, folklore can be an important tool, helping us to reveal some of the community dynamics of ancient Israel that are buried within the text. Some scholars contest that the text is replete with multiforms, lines of continuity signifying the presence of a strong oral tradition in the Bible.[2] Others assert that parallels in the literature of the Ancient Near East help to shed light on the true intentions of the biblical narratives and enable us to clarify many of the beliefs and customs of the primitive peoples.[3] As we examine relevant textual passages, we

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[2]Hendel 1987, 43-44. "The asking of the name of the name of the angel and the angel's refusal to disclose it (Ju 13:17-18) is a multiform of the similar theme in the story of Jacob's wrestling with his divine adversary in Gn 32:30-31. Manoah's comment that "We will surely die, for we have seen God" (Ju 13:22) has analogues in Gn 32:41, Ex 19:21, 33:20, and Ju 6:22-23. Also, Manoah's offer of a meal to the visiting angel (Ju 13:15) has a counterpart in the offering of a meal to the divine visitors in Gn 18, whose task is to announce the birth of Isaac."

[3]Gaster 1969. Literature from regions such as Mesopotamia, Canaan, Ugarit, and Egypt is reflected clearly in many biblical tales. One example is the story of the rivalry between Jacob and Esau, a contest between a civilized man and his savage antagonist, which appears in the earlier Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh.* Some other familiar parallels are the stories of a man who, like Abraham, entertains angels unawares, and

will draw upon comparative folklore and studies of primitive cultures in order to explain the significance of shared meals in biblical society.

"It can be safely stated that there is no mention of a meal in the Bible which is not accompanied by some important feature" (McCree 1926, 120). A perusal of the text reveals a variety of events that are marked by meals. To the biblical nomad or descendant of nomadic tribes, the mention of food immediately suggests a covenant relationship between the partakers, an understanding clearly exploited by the biblical authors (Ibid.). For other biblical figures, many of their early theophanies are marked by the sharing of meals. Generally, these meals are prepared by men and are "eaten" by angelic visitors. Additionally, numerous family events are marked by meals at which those participating reaffirm their bonds of kinship and mutual responsibility. Finally, through their order and ritual, shared meals help to define the social roles and rights of the various participants. In the remainder of this chapter. we will attempt to uncover some of the deeper significance vested in superficially insignificant biblical meals.

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the story of the Flood.

MEALS DEFINING SOCIAL RELATIONS AND FAMILY ACTIVITY

As highlighted in chapter 3, eating habits define social relationships and regulate social activity. The fear of defilement and pollution, prohibitions against people eating together, and rules controlling diet all combine to affect the eating rituals of populations and effectively separate human groups. It follows, then, that commensalism -- the ability to share a meal together -- may be the most important basis of human associations and social contact. Several textual references can be brought in support of this argument.

We begin with a consideration of the conclusion to Genesis 43, just before Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers. In this passage, Joseph, having joined Benjamin and his brothers at his house, orders his servants to "Serve the meal."

> They served [Joseph] by himself, and [the brothers] by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians (Gn 43: 31-32).

Among the many messages in this text is Joseph's need to maintain a distance from his brothers. As Jenks (1992) explains in his article "Eating and Drinking in the Old Testament," the act of eating together

implies a relationship of closeness and trust; people who do not wish to be intimately related do not eat together. By serving his brothers separately, Joseph is accentuating the difference in status between him and his brothers. He is exercising his power over his guests and demonstrating his unquestionable authority by once again illustrating to his brothers that he controls the food supply.[4]

In the same article Jenks writes, "'To eat' means 'to live.' The intake of food is directly correlated to the quality of one's life force" (Ibid., 251). In modern societies, and certainly in famine-ridden Canaan and Egypt as well, the intense need for food leaves all of society at the mercy of those who can exploit its scarcity. Those who control the food supply have a great deal of power. We see this power manifested not only in the case of Joseph and his brothers, but in other biblical events involving the control of food as well. Jacob, cooking some stew in the house, withholds the food from his famished brother Esau until he swears to sell his birthright to Jacob (Gn 25:29-34). Later, Jacob exploits his father's taste for game and obtains the sought-after patriarchal blessing by serving Isaac a meal (Gn 27). In both of these instances, Jacob was

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[4]Gn 41:48-49, 55-57. These verses tell how Joseph gained control of the food supply throughout Egypt and how he was solely responsible for supplying food rations to the hungry people.

able to alter his course in life and to redefine his rights and social status as the firstborn because he was in control of the food.

In relation to this same story, we might also consider Rebecca's role as the person controlling the food in Isaac's household. It was she who overheard Isaac's intentions to bless Esau (Gn 27:5-7). And, because she favored Jacob, she manipulated the events to ensure that Jacob received Isaac's blessing instead of Esau (Gn 27:8-29); her needs were thereby met. In the presumably male-dominated societies of the ancient Israelites, perhaps women such as Rebecca controlled food in order to find an outlet for personal expression and to help determine their futures. As Caroline Bynum noted regarding medieval women, "food observances...were a means by which women shaped for themselves a complex, spiritually effective, and distinctive role within the church" (Bynum 1987, 237).[5] Contemplating the probable role of women in ancient society, Rebecca's use of food to gain control in this story presents itself as an excellent opportunity to do the same.

Returning to the Joseph story, the description of this shared meal in Joseph's home communicates another distinct message. It is clear from the narrative that there was a strict caste system in ancient Egypt in

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[5]See also Carol Meyer's remarks about Israelite household economy in her *Discovering Eve*.

which food habits played an important and distinguishing role. Recalling the example of the caste system in India earlier in this century, we see that here, as in ancient Egypt, food roles were a significant determinant of social status. In India, one of the most dreaded punishments was expulsion from one's caste. And, "eating prohibited foods, or dining for a considerable period with persons of a lower caste, [was] among the most ordinary causes of [such] expulsion" (Jolly, "Food (Hindu)" in Hastings 1922, 63). These restrictions are explicable both in Egyptian and Indian societies by the fact that during the act of eating, one is more susceptible to religious impurity and defilement.[6] Related to this point, Douglas noted that pollution could also be transmitted by sitting in the same row at a meal. Therefore, when individuals of another caste are entertained, they should be seated separately (Douglas 1966). In reference to the meal shared in Joseph's palace, Douglas' observation is certainly relevant. As the text indicates, it would have been a "*to*◦*evah* -- an abomination" -- for the Egyptians to eat with the Hebrews (Gn 43:32).

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[6]Douglas 1966, 32. "In the Havik Brahmin pollution rules, they recognize three degrees of religious purity. The highest is necessary for performing an act of worship; a middle degree is the expected normal condition, and finally there is the state of impurity. While eating a person is in the middle state of purity and is susceptible to becoming impure and to causing impurity in others."

By serving his brothers separately, Joseph was careful not to violate the caste rules of ancient Egypt. However, regardless of his carefully choreographed actions, we can presume that the Egyptian servants still found Joseph's invitation of the Hebrews to his home to be risky and inexplicable. It is possible that the biblical authors are using the shared meal experience between Joseph and his brothers to illustrate more than the Egyptian caste system. Rather, this reference is also one of the many instances in which the Bible uses shared meals to mark significant family events. Robertson Smith (1885) was one of the first scholars to emphasize the importance of food and eating in defining and maintaining kinship and marriage bonds. He wrote that commensalism was thought of "as confirming or even constituting kinship and family bonds in a very real sense" (Smith 1889, 257). We see that Joseph was not only concerned with rules of caste, but that he was reaffirming his kinship with his brothers by sharing his own food with them. As we read in the text,

> *Vayisa mas'ot me-et panav alehem...vayishtu vayishkru imo* - He served them portions from his own table...and they drank their fill along with him (Gn 43:34).

Partaking of the same food and drink, Joseph and his brothers marked a significant event in the history of their family. As commensalism affirmed kinship, the meal which they shared was a feast of re-unification.

Many biblical depictions of family life entail feasts. The Bible shows families and extended kin groups eating and drinking together on both humble and festive occasions. A feast heralded the birth of Isaac (Gn 18:8-10) and another marked his weaning (Gn 21:8). A feast marked Jacob's betrothal to Leah (Gn 29:22); and, following Reuel's invitation to share a meal, Moses' marriage to Zipporah is announced (Ex 2:21). Isaac regularly ate of Esau's venison, indicating a tribal bond between them (McCree 1926). There are many biblical references to feasts which mark family events. However, the power and significance with which the sharing of a meal is imbued is more apparent in some biblical stories than in others.

One especially significant story involves Abraham's servant, Eleazer, and his mission to find a wife for Isaac (Gn 24). We recall that, upon meeting Rebecca at the well, Eleazar sits down to eat with Laban and the rest of Rebecca's family. However, it is notable that Eleazar refuses to partake of any food until he has completed his errand and shared the nature of his business. Eleazar's refusal to share in the meal

speaks to the core of what the meal symbolizes. One interpretation is offered by modern commentator Benno Jacob:

> The conscientious servant will not eat before he has discussed his errand. Everything depends upon the impression which the incident will make upon the family, for they have to decide (Jacob 1974).

Benno Jacob understands Eleazar's actions to be proper for a person of his status, a servant trying to win a bride for his master. In my view, however, Robertson Smith came closer to explaining the significance of this meal with this interpretation:

> Those who sit at meat together are united for all social effects, those who do not eat together are aliens to one another, without fellowship in religion and without reciprocal social duties (1889, 251).

In other words, by partaking of the food set before him and sharing the meal together with Rebecca's family, Eleazar would symbolically effect a marriage between Isaac and Rebecca. Understanding both the duties of his role and the power invested in the meal, Eleazar could not effect that relationship until he was certain that Rebecca and her family understood

the expectations of the marriage proposal. If they did not eat together, the parties would separate without any marital bond between Isaac and Rebecca. The meal they eventually consumed together sealed the marital agreement and defined the beginning of a new family relationship.

Considering the importance of the shared meal for affirming kinship bonds, it is understandable that one's absence from such an event is serious and communicates a significant message. To absent oneself voluntarily from a meal is to convey feelings of alienation or anger, as in the case of David missing Saul's feast (I Sam 20:34). However, "the strong image of trust, kinship, and solidarity which the text projects onto the family meal is subject to exploitation" (Jenks 1992, 252). Such exploitation is clear in Jacob's use of food to dupe both his famished brother and his blind and aged father, thereby receiving irrevocable kinship rights.

One other text in the Genesis narrative is especially noteworthy in regard to this theory: the tale of Joseph's brothers throwing Joseph into an empty, dry pit (Gn 37:23-24). Immediately after the brothers rid themselves of Joseph, we read, "*Vayeshvu le'ekhol lehem* -- then they sat down to a meal" (Gn 37:25). By sharing a meal immediately after throwing Joseph into the pit, the brothers signify the new dynamics of

their family unit. Their meal solemnizes the loss of Joseph, while at the same time it re-cements the kinship bond among them. By including this reference to a meal in the text, the biblical authors again illustrate the value for social and family relationships that is vested in the biblical meal.

COVENANTS SEALED BY THE SHARING OF MEALS

Biblical narrative includes numerous references to shared meals that ratify agreements between two parties. As we learn from Eleazer's initial refusal to eat (Gn 24:33), persons who have broken bread together, and thus absorbed a common substance, enter into a mutual relationship. Once food has been shared, the resultant covenant is understood to be unbreakable. Jacob's interactions with both Esau and Isaac illustrate this fact. When Esau's birthright passed to Jacob, the meal Jacob provided sealed the bargain (Gn 25:33-34); and, once Jacob secured his father's blessing by inducing him to eat a meal, the blessing could not be withdrawn (Gn 27:33). Isaac's covenant with Jacob was also ratified by the sharing of food.

Non-biblical cultures highlight a similar emphasis upon food-sharing as a means of cementing bonds between people. Among Bedouin Arabs, if one takes but a morsel of food or even a few pinches

of salt in another man's tent, then he is put under that man's protection (Gaster 1969). "[Similarly], Herodotus informs us that the Nasamonaeans used to conclude pacts between individuals by each drinking and eating out of the other's hand" (Ibid., 139). Indeed, the text suggests that a union between two parties, a covenant which is inaugurated by a meal, approaches kinship in strength (Pederson 1926). The implication is that covenant partners will, henceforth, regard each other as family and act accordingly.

Some biblical scholars propose that the Hebrew *berit* derives from the rare verb *bara*, meaning "to eat." Consequently, when the Bible uses the word *berit* to describe a mutual oath or covenant between individuals, or between God and Israel, it can be deduced that a meal was involved in the formation of that covenant. We will examine three passages that clearly mention the sharing of a meal in conjunction with the ratification of covenants and discuss the significance of the meal in each example. We will also attempt to draw inferences from other commensal incidents in the text with respect to religious and covenantal import wherever there is no explicit mention of covenant.

Three texts in Genesis describe covenants between people in which meals are eaten together as part of the ritual to seal their relationships: Genesis 14:18-20, 26:28-31, and 31:46-54. There are, in

addition, numerous references to the covenant meal as a sacred event. Through stories about the swearing of solemn oaths, and with meals that ratify the covenant between man and God, biblical authors provide us with a glimpse into the religious life of the ancient biblical society. Some scholars contend that the religious component of the covenant meal figures heavily into most, if not all, of the meals shared in the Bible.

The first occurrence of a covenant meal in Genesis highlights both a sense of mutual obligation between the two parties and the religious nature of the event. After defeating King Chederlaomer and his allies, Abram returns with the recaptured possessions of the kings of Sodom and Salem. The text then continues:

> And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out
> bread and wine; he was a priest of El 'Elyon.
> He blessed him saying,
>
> 'Blessed be Abram of El 'Elyon,
> Creator of heaven and earth.
> And blessed be El 'Elyon,
> Who has delivered your foes into your hand.'
>
> And Abram gave him a tenth of everything (Gn 14:18-20).

Melchizedek accompanies his offering of food and drink with a solemn declaration that Abram is thereby embraced within the cult of El 'Elyon.[7] By partaking of the meal with Melchizedek, Abram seals a covenant with the two kings. In addition to agreeing to return all the spoils of war to the king of Sodom, Abram joins the cult of Melchizedek.

The religious implications of this pact are obvious: Abram joined a cult and a meal was shared to celebrate the event. Jenks writes, "[Any] development of the cult or a radical change therein was usually marked by a feast" (Jenks 1992,121). Jenks' theory is bolstered by the example of Jethro's affirmation before Moses and the Israelite community. This text reads:

> Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, yes, by the result of their very schemes against the people. And Jethro...brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came

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[7]Gaster 1969, 140. "The point of [Melchizedek's] declaration is that the local or family god was regarded among the ancient Semites as a member of the kindred group. [This is the theory of Robertson Smith. RMS] Accordingly, when members of different groups entered into a pact of commensality, their gods also were involved in the arrangement and had also to extend their protection to the 'party of the second part.' This is supported with the illustration found in the Ugaritic *Poem of Aqhat.* The character Yatpan extends protection to the maiden Pughat by proffering a goblet of wine to her and to the gods who own these domains." (Gaster, p.140)

> with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with Moses' father-in-law (Ex 18:11-12).

By sacrificing and then sharing that meal with the community, Jethro accepted upon himself the covenant between God and Israel. He was now obligated to observe fully the responsibilities shared by the rest of the covenantors in the community.

The fact that the covenant -- God's treaty with Israel -- is ratified in activities that culminate in a meal is illustrated further in Exodus 24: "Then Moses...and the elders of Israel...beheld God and ate and drank."[8] And finally, though it perverts the original purpose of affirming God's covenant with Israel, the meal shared by the community after the golden calf is made[9] retains a strong religious component. One scholar wrote that in all cases, "the underlying higher motive for feasting among the ancient Hebrews is religious joy of one degree or another" (Margoliouth, "Feasting (Hebrew and Jewish)" in Hastings 1922, 805).

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[8]Ex 24:9-11. Moses, Aaron, his sons, and the elders ascended and 'saw God', yet God did not raise His hand against them. This indicated God's willingness to effect a covenant with the Israelites. The religious event was marked by sharing a meal.

[9]Ex 32:6. "Early the next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance."

The next Genesis text in which the characters share a meal in order to seal a covenant involves Isaac and the Philistines. After Abimelech and his advisors pursued Isaac to Beer-sheba, Isaac inquired as to their purpose. They responded:

> 'We now see plainly that the Lord has been with you, and we thought: Let there be a sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you that you will not do us harm, just as we have not molested you but have always dealt kindly with you and sent you away in peace. From now on, be you blessed of the Lord!' Then [Isaac] made for them a feast, and they ate and drank. Early in the morning, they exchanged oaths. Isaac bade them farewell, and they departed from him in peace (Gn 26:28-31).

In this covenant between the two parties is an explicit religious formula -- *"Be you blessed of the Lord"* -- as well as the conditions to which the participants agree. And, in order to ratify the covenant with the Philistines, Isaac prepares a feast for them. Another important detail of this text is that Abimelech sought after Isaac and asked him to make a covenant with them, but it was Isaac who prepared the meal. The fact that it is Isaac who gave the feast should not be overlooked. "In the

covenant strengthened by the meal every one has his place, and he who at table occupies the place of the father of the house has the place of honor" (Pederson 1926, 305). By giving the meal, Isaac asserted himself and Israel as the superiors in the covenantal relationship with Abimelech and the Philistines. The next morning, after the mutual oaths, Isaac allowed his guests to depart in peace. Another incidence depicting the superiority of the host is in Exodus 18. Here, it appears that Moses hosts the meal, even though it takes place in Jethro's territory and Jethro acts in a sort of priestly role.

The superiority of the meal-giver is also evident in our final example in Genesis: the covenant between Jacob and Laban. Their covenant on the cairn provides us with the most detailed instance of the ratification of a treaty in Genesis. This text provides more than a clear example of a shared meal cementing an agreement between two parties; it also reveals some of the ancient cultic rituals which might have accompanied these events.[10] The narrative reads:

> And Jacob said to his kinsmen, 'Gather stones.'
> So they took stones and made a mound; and
> they partook of a meal there by the mound...

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[10]Much of Frazer's (1918) biblical folklore focuses on the cultic and magical elements of ancient Israelite society and will be highlighted in the following section.

> And Laban declared, 'Here is this mound and here the pillar which I have set up between you and me: this mound shall be witness and this pillar shall be witness that I am not to cross to you past this mound, and that you are not to cross to me past this mound and this pillar, with hostile intent. May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor judge between us.' And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac. Jacob then offered up a sacrifice on the Height, and invited his kinsmen to partake of the meal. After the meal, they spent the night on the Height (Gen 31:46, 51-54).

In the process of sealing this covenant, we can surmise that Jacob's kinsmen set up a large stone as a pillar and gathered a cairn of smaller stones about it (Frazer 1918). Then, sitting or standing upon the cairn, they all shared bread together. As specified in the text, the cairn marked the boundary which neither party should pass for the purpose of harming the other and the pillar served as a witness between them. The pillar was to watch over the actions of both parties when they were out of sight. Jacob and Laban finalized their covenant with a sacrificial meal shared by all who were present.

Much about this pact between Jacob and Laban is significant to our discussion. Notable first of all are the two meals shared in the process: they ate a meal by the mound and, after the oaths had been sworn, shared a second meal consisting of a sacrificial offering. Why were two meals necessary? One suggestion asserts that this story highlights the intense level of mistrust between Jacob and Laban. Before the suspicious parties could ratify a covenant together, it was necessary to reaffirm their kinship by sharing the first meal. As previously discussed, sharing a common substance created a bond approaching kinship in strength. Once their communal bond was reestablished, oaths could then be sworn and accepted with a level of trust that was nonexistent before. The text confirms this new, heightened level of trust with Jacob's invitation to the kinsmen to share the meal: "*Vayikra le-ehav le'ekhol lehem, vayokhlu lehem* -- [Jacob] invited his kinsmen to partake of the meal, then they ate the meal" (Gn 31:54).

Another interpretation of the necessity for two meals is related to the importance of the cairn and the pillar in sealing this covenant. According to Frazer, the fact that the food was eaten upon stones was significant for the ratification of the treaty. "In various customs from differing cultures, stones symbolize the stability of the confirmation, oath, pact, and person" (Gaster 1969, 202). This idea seems to suggest that

the qualities of the stone would somehow pass into the swearers so that they would act purely through the stone's physical properties of weight, solidity, and inertia. By eating upon them, "a man absorbs the valuable properties of the stones just as he might absorb electrical force from a battery" (Frazer 1918, 404). Knowing that they had assumed stone-like qualities would ensure that their oaths would be kept.[11] According to this theory, Jacob and Laban's eating upon the stones and their ensuing oaths were purely magical in character. A final theory applicable to this text is that the stone is used to call down the vengeance of a god whom the covenantors have called upon as a witness.[12] In this case, the stone appears to be conceived as an entity with divine life that enables it to hear the oath, to judge its truth, and to punish the transgressors.

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[11]Gaster 1969. The author cites an example of a stone at Athens on which the nine archons stood when they swore to rule justly and according to the laws. Also, "in Brahmin marriage and initiation customs, stones are an essential part of the ritual; individuals are charged to 'Tread on this stone. Like a stone be firm'" (Ibid., 202).

[12]Smith 1889, 85-86. "Savages habitually ignore the distinctions, which to us seem obvious, between organic and inorganic nature...They ascribe to all material objects a life analogous to that which their own self-consciousness reveals to them."

Jenks 1992, 252. Jenks notes the fact that not only people and animals eat and drink, but so do things and abstractions. "This suggests that there may be some truth to Pederson's observation that the Hebrews did not firmly distinguish between living creatures and 'lifeless' nature. Everything which has its own special peculiarities and faculties is thought of as 'living,' whether a stone or the earth itself."

Frazer understands both magical and religious elements to be factors in the covenant between Jacob and Laban. The covenantors attributed life and consciousness to the stones by calling upon them to witness the agreement. The shared sacrificial meal which followed was likely retributive in importance,[13] cementing their covenantal oaths. On the other hand, the initial act of eating together upon the cairn established the traditional bond of union between the covenantors through the sharing of a meal, "while at the same time, they strengthened and tightened the bond by magically absorbing into their system the strength and solidity of the stones on which they were seated" (Frazer 1918, 408).

Robertson Smith explained the covenant between Jacob and Laban to be a clear illustration of totemic activity within biblical society. The covenant-sacrifice that ratified their pact was an example of the communion-nature of the rite in which the god and his worshippers participated. By sharing the sacrifice, the participants were mystically bound with their god, celebrating the natural community of blood within the tribe. According to Smith, such a sacramental act was the exact

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[13]Frazer 1918. According to the retributive theory, the killing and consumption of the victim is symbolic of the retribution which will overtake the man who breaks the covenant or violates the oath.

nature of the final sacrificial meal shared by Jacob and Laban. In the sacramental meal the god and his worshippers are commensals, and every aspect of their mutual relationship is solidified as the covenantors partake of a shared meal (Smith 1889). A covenant sealed with this understanding carried with it the highest expectations and dedication of its participants.

CULTIC RITUALS AND CEREMONIES REFLECTED IN BIBLICAL MEALS

According to some scholars, the biblical myth serves as a "libretto" for the cultic rituals of ancient communities, even when little or nothing is known of the performative context of the myth in question (Hendel 1987). There are numerous instances in which sacred narrative and sacred acts can be seen to converge, especially with regard to the behavior of Jacob. Hendel highlights a clear example of this convergence with Jacob in the Bethel narrative:

> Jacob performs certain unmistakably cultic acts within the context of the narration. Even if Jacob is unaware of the cultic importance of his actions, the audience is well aware that he is acting according to the requirements of cult...The question posed here is not when or whether the Bethel narrative was acted out, but how Jacob is acting out cultic concerns within the context of the narrative (1987, 70).

This interaction between cult and narrative is evident in other texts as well. Though the allusions might be subtle, it is possible to extract dimensions of cultic practice and belief from many biblical stories. The narrative we will consider in this section depicts Jacob's use of food both to acquire the birthright from Esau and to deceive Isaac (Gn 25:29-34, Gn 27). Read correctly, this story provides much insight into the cultic world of Semitic antiquity.

Frazer regarded Jacob's deception of Isaac as a "new birth story." He deemed the imputation of fraud and treachery to Rebecca and Jacob to have been imported into the text by a later narrator who failed to understand the true nature of the transaction. "That transaction was neither more nor less than a legal fiction that Jacob was born again as a goat for the purpose of ranking as the elder instead of the younger son of his mother" (Frazer 1918, 27-28).[14] Gaster (1969) describes a similar ceremony of the Akamba and the Akikuyu in which a child is "born again" by donning the proper skins upon his hands, fingers, over the shoulders, and around the neck, and then partaking of the

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[14]Much of this theory is based on Jacob's wearing of skins to deceive Isaac. Frazer and Gaster cite numerous accounts of tribes using the skins of animals for ceremonies of all kinds. Often, the flesh of the animal is eaten after it has been cut up. Gaster provides an example of the tribes of East Africa: "Among these it is common practice to sacrifice an animal, usually a goat or sheep, skin it, cut the skin into strips, and place the strips round the wrists or on the fingers of persons who are supposed to benefit thereby." (Gaster 1969, p.172)

meat of the animal. The Akikuyu used this ceremony as a preliminary to circumcision, it is presumed, to protect the performers from evils which might otherwise befall them (Gaster 1969). In India, the fiction of a new birth from a cow was used for the purpose of raising a man of low caste into a higher social rank, much in the same way that Jacob theoretically raised his status to that of the first born.

In each of the above new birth ceremonies, the sacrificing of an animal, the donning of its skins, and the partaking of the meat combine to effect the change in status. In Jacob's deception of Isaac as well, each of these stages occurs: the goat is sacrificed and prepared, Jacob covers his arms and neck with the skins of the animal, and he proceeds to feed his father some of the meat. The parallels between this narrative and other primitive new birth rituals are clear. Through his cultic actions, Jacob effectively raised his status to that of the first born son.

Robertson Smith discussed another ritual interpretation of Jacob's wearing of the skins. Smith drew his ideas from the work of Lucian, who wrote concerning pilgrim activities in ancient Syria:

> Whenever someone is about to come to the Holy City, he shaves his head and his eyebrows. Then after sacrificing a sheep, he carves it and dines on the other parts. The fleece, however, he lays on the ground and kneels upon it, and the feet and the head

> of the animal he puts on his own head (Attridge and Oden 1976).

Significant in this observation is the apparent "smoothness" of the sacrificer, accomplished by the shaving of his hair and the wearing of the skins. For Smith, this incident and others like it resonated with the Jacob narrative. Considering Jacob's traits, we recall him as a "smooth" individual (both physically and metaphorically) who dons the skins of the sacrificed goat to deceive his father. A cultic dimension common to both stories suggests that "just as Jacob 'became' Esau by [donning skins], wearing his clothes, and receiving his blessing, so the sacrificer 'became' the sacrificed animal by wearing the skins of the animal" (Hendel 1987, 86). In both instances, the symbolic transformation was for the sake of a blessing.

A final point of interest observable in the Jacob narrative is the textual distinction between the states of "nature" and "culture" (Hendel 1987). In the traditions of the Ancient Near East, culture was valued and desirable; lack of culture was disparaged. Existence without culture was depicted as a state of confusion and strife. This theme is manifest in the Bible as well, especially when we contrast Jacob, the man of culture, with Esau, the man of nature. Using only meal experiences as references to their character, we first encounter Jacob cooking a lentil stew while Esau is in the wilderness hunting.

Upon returning from the field, famished, Esau crudely asks Jacob for some of the "red stuff." In turn, Jacob engages Esau culturally by offering a trade -- Esau's birthright for some of the stew (Gn 25:29-34). Repeatedly, "Jacob is operating on the level of culture while Esau is operating on the level of nature" (Hendel 1987, 128-9). Jacob's successful acquisition of the birthright clearly illustrates Hendel's theory that culture was preferable to nature and that possession of culture was essential for survival.

This nature/culture dichotomy is also clear the second time we see Jacob preparing a meal: when he deceives his father Isaac (Gn 27). While Esau is off hunting wild game, Jacob serves Isaac a meal of domestic goats. Once again, the wits of the man of culture proved superior to those of the man of nature. Jacob, as the man of culture, succeeded in masking his "smoothness" and tricked his father into giving him the blessing. In both of these incidents, Jacob used food as a means of achieving what he desired. These narratives clearly reflect the important role of food and the sharing of meals in the cultic world of Semitic antiquity.

CHAPTER 5

SOME MODERN OCCASIONS OF MEAL-SHARING

An in-depth exploration and analysis of biblical meals reveals that, since patriarchal times, the sharing of food has impinged upon many aspects of society. Whether in the social or religious realm, shared meals, when taken together by choice, express human relationships. In contemporary societies evidence suggests that companionship, the breaking of bread together, still embodies the essence of community. However, in contrast with biblical personages, it is questionable whether people today comprehend any of the significance vested in the shared meal experience, or whether they simply partake blindly in symbolic meal rituals without understanding their true import. In this chapter we will consider some of the modern arenas in which the prominence of food habits and the sharing of meals are manifest in human behavior and the determination of relationships.

John Burkhart suggests that "Patterns of commensality reveal many of the operative structures of society" (1982, 256). He and others maintain that when people in modern societies organize various social events, they are using food and drink as metaphors for the character of

the relationships with their guests. Decisions about whom we will eat with are as important as the decisions about what we will eat. Douglas explains that social categories emerge from close observation of meals. She writes:

> Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, and honored guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance. Those we know at meals we also know at drinks. The meal expresses close friendship. Those we know only at drinks we know less intimately (1975, 255).

Our personal experiences largely confirm the theories of Douglas and Burkhart. When a couple meets and begins to date, often they will first meet for a drink in order to assess one another and determine if there is enough interest to continue dating. As the relationship builds, they will dine together. And, when they are ready for more intimate communication, the meal experience will move from the public to the private arena. In many ways, the nature of a meal shared between people as they build a relationship is an expression of the importance of that relationship.

Similarly, we use food and meals to express symbolically our moods or feelings about another. A vivid example of this form of communication might be manifest in a spousal relationship. Feelings of love or anger are frequently expressed through the medium of food. We might demonstrate love for the other with the preparation of special and favored foods, or by going out to a particularly nice dinner. Conversely, we communicate anger by withholding food, preparing undesirable meals, or even avoiding shared meal experiences. In both instances, though, the meal clearly represents more than a biological necessity. The sharing of a meal symbolizes the state of the relationship.

In chapter 2 we discussed Audrey Richards' analysis of the social and psychological context of the production, preparation, and consumption of food. Similar to Douglas, she asserted that these processes are linked to interpersonal relationships and to the structure of social groups (Goody 1982). This connection is plainly evident in contemporary society. Consider, for instance, the hosting of a dinner party. We labor diligently to plan, prepare, and serve a menu to our guests that is befitting the quality of our relationships: the more honored or special the guests, the more energy we expend to ensure that everything is "just right." In situations where we want to make a favorable and lasting impression upon honored guests, the meal takes on

enormous significance. It follows that if our invitation to dine together is refused, then hurt feelings inevitably result. "When we refuse to share a meal with people, their humanity is impugned, spurned, or denied" (Burkhart 1982, 78). The social function of food is evident; the meal implicitly defines the importance of a social event.

In addition to the fact that the sharing of a meal defines the nature of a relationship, food habits during the meal say a great deal about the individual participants. Douglas (1977) reminds us that "food is not feed." Eating and drinking are not simply biological occurrences, but are human occasions. Meals not only constitute relationships, they are expressive in their performance of our own humanity. When we eat with manners, we convey the message that we understand the value of food and, perhaps, even the role that the meal plays in defining relationships. However, when we eat hastily, indifferent to those about us, we seemingly equate food with "feed" and lower the eating experience to a mere animal occurrence by "making a pig of ourselves." The value of table manners and the importance of individual behavior during the meal is captured in the wisdom literature:

> Do not reach out your hand for everything you see,
> and do not crowd your neighbor at the dish.
> Judge your neighbor's feelings by your own,

and in every matter be thoughtful.
Eat like a human being what is set before you,
and do not chew greedily, lest you be hated (Eccl 31:14-16).

Our society places a great deal of emphasis on table manners and eating habits. Based on food habits alone, we form impressions of others, evaluate character and status, and choose whether or not to engage in future shared meals. Claude Levi-Strauss and others have repeatedly asserted that table manners are never simply manners; table manners express a vision of reality (Burkhart 1982).

Just as the sharing of a meal has modern social implications, so, too, does the meal affect our religious lives as well. The importance of food habits and sharing meals is apparent at religious holidays and life cycle events for individuals of every faith. Jews have elevated the sharing of a meal prior to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to a position of prime importance. The fact that more Jews participate in a Passover Seder than perform any other Jewish ritual accentuates the fact that the meal experience is vital to the observance of this holiday.[1] The growing

[1]Council of Jewish Federations 1992, 21. *Jewish Environmental Scan Toward the Year 2000.* Statistics in this 1990 Population Survey reveal that attendance at a Passover Seder is the most widely practiced ritual among households that are entirely Jewish (86% attend), mixed households (62%), and households with no core Jews (25%).

popularity of the Tu B'Shevat Seder is further evidence of this same theory. The mitzvah of partaking of a meal in a sukkah and the minhag of eating special foods in connection with certain holidays all attest to the reality that food is an important aspect of our religious lives.

In the cultural realm of contemporary society, the powerful messages vested in the sharing of meals are manifest in numerous media as well. In venues such as film, print, and music we experience artistic attempts to communicate the importance of food. Paintings such as Van Gogh's *Still Life With Fruit* and the numerous portrayals of the *Last Supper* express the value of food and the symbolism of eating together. Movies provide the most explicit artistic expressions of eating habits in connection with human relationships. In the recent film *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman,* director Ang Lee uses the shared meal experiences around the family dinner table as the setting to address the struggle between traditional family roles and the modern struggle for individuality. The movie *Like Water for Chocolate* brilliantly uses food as a device to explore both captivity in family roles and issues of repressed desires and sexuality. In *The Big Chill,* the funeral of one man brings old friends together to reminisce and re-cement their relationships. Appropriately enough, some of the more memorable scenes in the film are set in the kitchen and involve the preparation and sharing of food. Perhaps the

film's director recognized the ability of food to unite the friends into a community of strength. There are other representations we could mention, but the above examples aptly illustrate the powerful symbolism attached to food and the sharing of meals in the sphere of art.

The impact of food on our lives is also manifest in the realm of media. In both television and newspaper media, subject matter often centers around themes of food habits and acts of eating, frequently with a comedic edge. A glance in the daily newspaper, for example, reveals comic strips such as *Blondie,* which tells the ongoing story of a food caterer and her husband with an insatiable appetite; *Cathy* and *Garfield* are strips which often address our perpetual desire for food and its control over our lives, regardless of the physical price we might pay. In the realm of television, sitcoms such as *Roseanne* maximize their comedic punch by poking fun at the food habits of its characters, and the plot for *Seinfeld* often unfolds over a shared meal in the corner diner. By focusing on the compelling human attraction and need for food, the cultural media, intentionally or not, elucidate the centrality of food in our modern society.

Far more than a source of mere physical nourishment, food is a polyvalent symbol that communicates important messages for every sphere of our lives. The offering of food and the sharing of meals are

still two of the most powerful ways in which we express and cement relationships. We experience this not only in our private and religious lives, but in the civic and cultural communities as well. Opportunities to gather and share a meal possess powerful appeal and often serve as the sole foundation of a collective group. Consider the success of the *Chavurah* movement and dining clubs. Although *chavurot* now usually include ongoing study programs and life cycle celebrations, they began as social occasions for individuals to eat together. In the broader community, similar ends were accomplished through the formation of exclusive eating clubs. Here again, food was a medium for expressing social roles. Often one's social standing and place of honor in the community was determined by acceptance or rejection from these establishments.

If we analyze the success or failure of any meeting or program, we might realize that food frequently plays an important role in determining the appeal of that event. Most successful gatherings will include the sharing of food among the participants. The popular *Food for Thought* lectures at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion offer stimulating lectures by faculty scholars and an opportunity to share lunch. Youth group functions, staff meetings, and civic club functions are undoubtedly better attended when free food is offered to those who

come. Even religious services attract more worshippers when they know that either dinner precedes the services or a great reception follows.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of our discussion is a perceived psychological need to partake in a shared meal experience. It seems as if we deliberately search out occasions in which we can share a meal with others in order to build and affirm relationships. Considering the covenantal role of meals in biblical and primitive societies, it is likely that our desires for community are vestiges of a primal and essential aspect of human nature. An opportunity to share a meal with others affirms our own sense of self as a desirable and suitable member of a larger group. Sharing a meal -- companionship, commensality -- redeems us from a perpetual and fearful state of loneliness.

Although we demonstrate through our behavior that we deem the act of sharing a meal to be one of supreme importance, the reality is that, consciously, we seem to understand less and less the immeasurable value of the meal as a defining act of community. For the ancients, a shared meal was a clear expression of kinship and covenantal relationships that were fundamental to their social and religious systems. In contrast, we have secularized and internalized these values that were so explicit to our ancestors. It is arguable that

the "family values" symbolized by the traditional nuclear family have broken down partially because family units rarely have the occasion to break bread together. Instead, family members today commonly come and go their separate ways, "grabbing a bite to eat" whenever they are able. In doing so, they continually forego the chance to reaffirm their bonds of kinship. For most people in contemporary society, the shared meal consciously symbolizes little more than an opportunity to satisfy biological needs. Despite the preponderance of evidence in the social, religious, and cultural realms that attest to the unique power and symbolic value of food, we have relegated the semiotics of food and the sharing of meals to the *peshat* of providing and enjoying simple hospitality.

APPENDIX - A SUMMARY OF THE SHARED MEALS IN GENESIS AND EXODUS

CITE	TEXT	TRANSLATION	CONTEXT of MEAL	SIGNIFICANCE
Gn 14:18	*U-Malki-Tsedeḳ melekh Shalem hotsi leḥem ṿa-yayin ṿe-hu kohen le-el ·elyon.*	And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High.	After his military victory, Abram is initiated into the cult of El Elyon with the sharing of a sacrifical meal.	Allusion to ancient cult. This is likely a covenant meal.
Gn 18:8	*Ṿa-yiḳaḥ ḥem'ah ṿe-ḥalav u-ven-ha-baḳar asher ·asah ṿa-yiten lifnehem ṿe-hu ·omed ·alehem taḥat ha-·ets ṿa-yokhelu.*	He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on them under the tree as they ate.	Abraham is serving a meal to the divine visitors who have come to herald the birth of Isaac.	Ancient private cultic meal which results in the blessing of the divine spirits.
Gn 19:3	*Ṿa-yifṭsar-bam me-od ṿa-yasuru eleṿ ṿa-yavo'u el-beto ṿa-ya ·as la-hem mishteh u-matsot afah ṿa-yokhelu.*	But he urged them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.	Lot has convinced two of the divine visitors to come to his home and he also prepares and serves a meal to them.	Cultic meal also meant to seek divine reward; here, no blessing resulted.
Gn 21:8	*Ṿa-yigdal ha-yeled ṿa-yigamal ṿa-ya ·as Avraham mishteh gadol be-yom higamel et-Yitsḥak.*	The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned.	Text is milestone in Isaac's life; Abraham celebrates life transition with a meal.	Meal used to mark family event.
Gn 24:33	*Ṿa-yusam le-fanaṿ le'ekhol ṿa-yomer lo okhel ·ad im-dibarti devarai ṿa-yomer daber.*	But when food was set before him, he said, "I will not eat until I have told my tale." He said, "Speak then."	Seeking a wife for Isaac, Eleazar will not share a meal until the conditions of the proposal are clear.	Shared meal that will affirm kinship and responsibility to each other. Meal marks family event.
Gn 25:34	*Ṿe-Ya ·aḳov natan le-·Esaṿ leḥem u-nezid ·adashim ṿa-yokhel ṿa-yesht ṿa-yaḳom ṿa-yelekh ṿa-yivez ·Esaṿ et-ha-bekhorah.*	Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away. Thus did Esau spurn the birthright.	Jacob takes advantage of Esau's hunger and persuades him to trade his birthright for food.	Control of food supply used to extract a binding covenant promise

CITE	TEXT	TRANSLATION	CONTEXT of MEAL	SIGNIFICANCE
Gn 26:30	*Va-ya ·as le-hem mishteh ya-yokhlu ya-yishtu.*	Then he made for them a feast, and they ate and drank.	Isaac enacts a peace treaty with Abimelech after being pursued by them.	Covenant meal. Isaac, as host of meal, is superior.
Gn 27:25	*Va-yomer ha-gishah li ye-'okhlah mi-tsed beni le-ma ·an te-varekhekha nafshi ya-yegesh-lo ya-yokhal ya-yave lo yayin ya-yesht.*	He said, "Serve me and let me eat of my son's game so I may give you my inner-most blessing." So he served him and he ate, and he brought him wine and he drank.	Jacob has deceived Isaac by disguising himself as Esau and serving Isaac a meal in order to receive the blessing.	Likely a cultic "new birth" ritual in which one elevates his social status. Meal cements ritual.
Gn 31:46	*Va-yomer Ya ·akov le-ehav liktu avanim ya-yikhu avanim ya-ya ·asu-gal ya-yokhlu sham ·al-ha-gal.*	And Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones." So they took stones and made a mound; and they partook of a meal there by the mound.	Jacob and Laban are agreeing to a truce with the pillar and mound to serve as a witness between them.	Covenant meal. Stones magically add solidity to the covenant promise.
Gn 31:54	*Va-yizbah Ya ·akov zevah ·ba-har ya-yikra le-ehav le'ekhol-lehem ya-yokhlu lehem ya-yalinu ba-har.*	Jacob then offered up a sacrifice on the Height, and invited his kinsmen to partake of the meal. After the meal, they spent the night on the Height.	Following the covenant vows, Jacob offers a final sacrifice to cement the pact between he and Laban.	Covenant meal. Jacob as host is superior to Laban.
Gn 37: 24-25	*Va-yikehuhu ya-yashlikhu oto ha-borah ye-ha-bor rek en bo mayim; ya-yeshvu le'ekhol-lehem.*	[They] took him and threw him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Then they sat down to a meal.	After stripping him of his tunic, Joseph's brothers throw Joseph into the pit to get rid of him. They then share a meal.	Meal defining social relations and family unit. Joseph's absence is significant.
Gn 43:32	*Va-yasimu lo le-vado ve-la-hem le-vadam ve-la-Mitsrim ha-'okhlim ito le-vadam ki lo yukhlun ha-Mitsrim le'ekhol et-ha- ·Ivrim lehem ki-to ·evah hi le-Mitsrayim.*	They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with them by themselves; for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians.	Joseph has a meal served to him, his brothers, and his courtiers back at his palace before revealing his identity. None of the groups are permitted to eat together.	Meal defining social relations and status. Joseph as controller of food supply is authority

CITE	TEXT	TRANSLATION	CONTEXT of MEAL	SIGNIFICANCE
Gn 43:34	*Va-yisa mas'ot me-et panay alehem va-terev mas'ot Binyamin mi-mas'ot kulam hamesh yadot va-yishtu va-yishkru ·imo.*	Portions were served them from his table; but Benjamin's portion was several times that of anyone else. And they drank their fill with him.	Same context as 43:32. Sharing food from Joseph's table is important in that they are consuming the same substance.	Consumption of same food re-affirms kinship bond of brothers.
Ex 2:20	*Va-yomer el-benotay ve-ayo lamah zeh ·azavten et-ha-ish kir'en lo ve-yokhal lahem.*	He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread."	Reuel invites Moses to share a meal after Moses defends the daughters at the well.	Meal marks marriage of Moses & Zipporah Covenant meal of sorts.
Ex 18:12	*Va-yikah Yitro hoten Mosheh ·olah u-zevahim lelohim va-yavo Aharon ve-khol zikne Yisra'el le'ekhol-lehem ·im-hoten Mosheh lifne ha-elohim.*	And Jethro, Moses' father-in'law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal before God with [Jethro].	Jethro affirms the superiority of the Israelite God and accepts God through the offering of sacrifices and sharing of a meal.	RItual meal that celebrates a covenantal affirmation & addition to cult.
Ex 24:11	*Ve-el-atsile bene Yisra'el lo shalah yado va-yehezu et-ha-elohim va-yokhlu va-yishtu.*	Yet God did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God and they ate and drank.	Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and 70 elders ascended and beheld the God of Israel, but God did not harm them.	Covenant meal marking cult's encounter with their God.
Ex 32:6	*Va-yashkimu mi-mohorot va-ya·alu ·olot va-yagishu shelamim va-yeshev ha-·am le'ekhol ve-shatu va-yakumu le-tsahek.*	Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.	Following the building of the golden calf, the Israelites celebrate with sacrifices and a shared meal.	Cultic meal intended to propitiate the divine spirits

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