

EATING BEFORE THE LORD: A THEOLOGY OF FOOD ACCORDING TO DEUTERONOMY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gordon Wenham notes that three topics are central to Genesis 2–3—food, dominion, and sexuality.¹ He then goes on to briefly observe places in Genesis where these three themes occur.² Reflecting upon the narrative accounts in the Pentateuch, we see that these themes are present throughout the Pentateuch. Despite the frequency of occurrences of the activities of eating and drinking throughout the Pentateuch (and OT³), there has been a paucity of literature on the topic of food in the scholarly literature.⁴ Moreover, the literature that has been written often analyzes food from several non-theological perspectives: social-scientific,⁵ socio-critical,⁶ and literary.⁷ In light of Wenham’s observation on the centrality of food in the early chapters of Genesis, it seems natural to ask the question: what are the theological purposes of food? Space considerations compel us to narrow our focus since a study of even the Pentateuch would require considerable space. Thus, this paper will focus on the book of Deuteronomy. Since Deuteronomy represents Moses⁸ sermons to the generation about to enter the Promised Land, there are many

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¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (OT Studies; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) 28.

² Wenham, *Story as Torah*. For his citations of passages involving food see pp. 28–29; for dominion, pp. 29–30; and for sexuality, pp. 30–33.

³ Rolf P. Knierim notes that there are approximately 1,500 references to the activities of eating, drinking, and becoming satisfied in the OT (*The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Method, and Cases* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 229).

⁴ Nathan MacDonald notes this when he says, “despite the importance of food to the Old Testament authors, the subject has received surprisingly little attention from modern biblical scholars” (*Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008] 2).

⁵ Eleonore Schmitt, *Das Essen in der Bible: Literaturethnologische Aspekte des Alltäglichen* (Studien zur Kulturanthropologie 2; Münster: Lit, 1994).

⁶ Judith McKinlay, *Gendering Wisdom the Host: Biblical Invitations to Eat and Drink* (JSOTSup 216; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁷ Diane Sharon, *Patterns of Destiny: Narrative Structures of Foundation and Doom in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

⁸ Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy is assumed throughout the paper, though it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for it. Moreover, the study will analyze Deuteronomy from the perspective of the final version of the text. Thus, we will not discuss the different layers of it. Rather, we will deal with the text as it now stands.

lessons that Moses underscores that the people should have learned while wandering in the wilderness. In the course of this study, we will uncover several reasons, according to Deuteronomy, why God made humans to eat. (1) Food leads to a recognition of dependence on God (ch. 15). (2) It points to Yahweh's provision for his people (ch. 8). (3) Food teaches Israelites to fear and trust Yahweh (chs. 6, 14). (4) It shows that true satisfaction is found in Yahweh's word (ch. 8). (5) Food is a means of participating in joyful worship of Yahweh's goodness and cultivating thankfulness (chs. 12, 16, 26).

In order to understand the theology of food in Deuteronomy, several key passages will be analyzed. There are two primary reasons why these passages have been selected for our study. First, two of the passages (chs. 6 and 8) are linked through common language and themes. Second, the remaining passages all refer to the command to bring offerings to the place where God had chosen for his name to dwell.⁹ The primary reason to include offerings in a discussion on the theology of food, which is a surprising observation at first, is that the Israelites sacrificed their food. It is often forgotten that some of the offerings the Israelites brought to the sanctuary were eaten.¹⁰ Before surveying the key passages, we will take a brief glimpse into the ancient near Eastern (ANE) practices regarding food and sacrifices to contrast Israel's understanding of food with that of their neighbors. Then, we will look at the relevant passages to trace the theme of food throughout the book: (1) 15:19–23; (2) 8:10–14; (3) 6:10–15; 14:22–23; (4) 8:3; and (5) 12:1–10; 16:10–15; 26:1–11.

It is important to note what is outside the scope of this paper. This paper does not intend to analyze food in regard to purity laws. It also does not seek to understand how and why sacrifices were offered. Finally, it does not intend to examine the Israelite diet and its health benefits. Rather, it seeks to ask a more foundational question: what does Deuteronomy teach us about food and why food was part of religious concern? It is to this topic that we now turn.

II. ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN BACKGROUND

We have little information regarding the food practices of people in the ANE since they do not seem to have had food laws as the Israelites did. However, similar to Israel, Israel's neighbors also sacrificed their livestock and harvest as part of their offerings. In fact, when people in the ANE brought sacrifices, they believed that

⁹ The term *זֶבַח* is used in most of these passages as well (12:7, 12, 18; 14:26; 16:11, 14, 15; 26:11).

¹⁰ Though Deuteronomy does not specify which offerings can be eaten, we see in Leviticus that the burnt offering required the whole animal to be offered (Lev 1:6; 7:8); the peace offering (Lev 7:11–34) was to be eaten by the worshiper and shared with the priest; and the sin offerings (Lev 4:1–5:1), grain offerings (Numbers 15) and guilt offerings (Lev 5:14–26) were eaten by the priests. For a detailed discussion of these offerings, see Richard Averbeck, "Sacrifices and Offerings," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003) 706–32.

their patron deity shared in the meal with them.¹¹ Since the idea of sacrifices dovetails with our study, there are a few important aspects to note in regard to ANE practices regarding sacrifices. The main concern for sacrifices in Mesopotamia was the care and feeding of the gods. Part of the rationale in feeding the gods was that Mesopotamians believed that the gods possessed human and divine qualities. The deities were thought to have human needs and to depend on humanity to meet those needs.¹² In fact, in much ANE literature, man was created by the gods in order to supply them with food.¹³ In contrast, Deuteronomy makes clear that the Israelites are dependent on Yahweh for their food. As we will analyze below, the annual feasts were celebrations to remember that Yahweh was the source of the food that the Israelites consumed on a daily basis. They did not bring sacrifices to Yahweh to feed him, but he is the one who enables them to bring the produce of the land to eat, share, and offer back to him. Altmann also notes that Deuteronomy does not reference a human king providing food for the people as other ANE literature does. He argues that this highlights Yahweh's divine provision.¹⁴ In addition, the feasts were also a means that Yahweh used to involve his people in caring for the poor and disadvantaged (Deut 16:13–14). Thus, there are significant differences between the ANE practices of sacrificing food and the Israelite practices. Israelite practices reflect Yahweh's superiority over other gods in power and character. He does not need anything, and is not served by human hands. Rather, he abundantly cares for his people.

III. FOOD AND TITHES

The first passage we will discuss is found in Deut 15:19–20. This passage (15:19–23) provides a conclusion to the section on tribute that began with instruction in 14:22–23 concerning the firstborn of the flocks and herds.¹⁵ Here, Yahweh commands the Israelites to dedicate to him the firstborn from their herd, and they are to eat it before Yahweh on a yearly basis at the sanctuary (“the place Yahweh will choose,” v. 20). The motif of people eating the offerings they bring to the altar is repeated throughout Deuteronomy (12:7; 14:23; 15:20; 16:1).¹⁶ While there is no

¹¹ Gary A. Anderson, *Sacrifices and Offering in Ancient Israel: Studies in their Social and Political Importance* (HSM 41; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 20.

¹² Martin J. Selman, “Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East,” in *Sacrifice in the Bible* (ed. Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 95.

¹³ Gordon J. Wenham notes the difference with the Genesis account where man is the climax of creation. Furthermore, God provides food for man and not vice versa (*Genesis 1–15* [WBC 1; Waco, TX: Word, 1987] xlix, 33); cf. Daniel I. Block, *The Gospel According to Moses: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012) 188.

¹⁴ Peter Altmann, *Festive Meals in Ancient Israel: Deuteronomy's Identity Politics in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context* (BZAW 424; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011) 98. His work includes detailed descriptions of ANE texts and iconography and compares and contrasts food and feasting in the ANE with that in Israel.

¹⁵ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (NAC 4; Nashville: B&H, 1994) 249. Peter C. Craigie also notes that this law is connected with 12:6, 17; 14:23 (*The Book of Deuteronomy* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976] 239).

¹⁶ Altmann notes that in the commands concerning tithes, Israel differs from its ANE neighbors (Altmann, *Festive Meals in Ancient Israel* 226, 231). He observes that the king is absent from commands

explicit reason given why they are to sacrifice the firstborn of their flock, it seems that Yahweh wants to cultivate in the Israelites a dependence on him. As the Israelites sacrifice the firstborn of the animals that are meant to feed them and provide assistance in working their fields, they must depend on Yahweh for their everyday needs rather than trusting the means through which they support themselves. It demonstrates to the Israelites that Yahweh alone has provided the livestock.¹⁷ Moreover, eating the firstborn of the flock in the presence of Yahweh was to symbolize the first of many meals that Yahweh would provide for them.¹⁸ Thus, food teaches the Israelites to depend on Yahweh for life and sustenance. As they sacrifice the firstborn of their flocks yearly, Yahweh continually reminds the Israelites of their need for him, his provision, and their dependence on him. The tithe points the Israelites back to Yahweh, and reminds them of his character and their dependent position before him.

IV. FOOD AS PROVISION

Deuteronomy teaches that food is Yahweh's provision, and should cultivate dependence and humility.¹⁹ Because we will analyze Deuteronomy 8 regarding other themes, a brief overview of the chapter will be helpful. Deuteronomy 8 details the lessons the Israelites should have learned in the wilderness.²⁰ The forty years in the wilderness should have taught the Israelites to depend on Yahweh.²¹ Moses tells them that manna was given as an answer to their physical needs, but it also had the effect of testing them to see whether they would trust God. The chapter can be divided into a chiasm:²²

- A. Observe the commandments and prosper (v. 1)
- B. Wilderness and the manna (vv. 2–4)
- C. Observe the commandments in prosperity (vv. 5–10)
- C¹. Do not forget the Lord in prosperity (vv. 11–14)
- B¹. The wilderness and the manna (vv. 15–16)

about tithes in Israel, and the Israelites are to eat their tithes instead of giving them to the king. In Assyria and Babylon, tithe collections were always connected with the ruling regime since they were given to the king. In fact, the bringing of tithes showed submission to the ruling monarch.

¹⁷ Timothy M. Willis, "Eat and Rejoice Before the Lord": The Optimism of Worship in the Deuteronomic Code," in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of John T. Willis* (ed. M. Patrick Graham, Rick R. Marrs, and Steven L. McKenzie; JSOTSup 284; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 285.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 287.

¹⁹ MacDonald in another study notes the theme of Yahweh as provider in Psalms 145–147. See Nathan MacDonald, "'The Eyes of All Look to You': The Generosity of the Divine King," in *Decisive Meals: Table Politics in Biblical Literature* (ed. Nathan MacDonald, Luzia Sutter Rehmann, and Kathy Ehrensperger; LNT 449; New York: T&T Clark, 2012) 1–14.

²⁰ It should be noted here that there is considerable overlap in ch. 6:10–19 with the material in ch. 8, though the motifs in ch. 6 receive less elaboration. See Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11* (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 396.

²¹ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996) 92.

²² The following chiasm is found in *ibid.* 92. Tigay omitted v. 5—which I have included with vv. 6–10—and v. 17—which I have included with vv. 18–20.

A¹. Remember and do not forget the Lord or you will perish (vv. 17–20)²³

Moses warns the Israelites, “lest, when you have eaten and are satisfied and have built good houses and lived in them . . . then your heart will be lifted up, and you will forget Yahweh your God” (Deut 8:12, 14). The tendency for the Israelites, repeatedly stated, is that they would forget Yahweh.²⁴ The abundance of the land can be dangerous for the Israelites because it can result in forgetfulness whereby the people attribute the abundance to their own strength and not Yahweh’s.²⁵ The continual temptation for the Israelites was to eat, be satisfied, and then turn to other gods.²⁶ Moreover, the plenty that they receive does not lead to praise, but to a false sense of self-sufficiency.²⁷ The very blessings and abundance of the land would lull the Israelites into complacency in worship.²⁸ However, food is supposed to be the means by which Israel expressed their remembrance of Yahweh.²⁹ Thoughtful reflection would remind the Israelites that Yahweh is the one who created food, gave them the land, gave rain and all the conditions necessary for harvest, and prospered the work of their hands so that they might eat and live. Yahweh provides for his people and feeds them, which should cultivate humility in their hearts as well as remind them of their dependence on the Lord.³⁰

The pattern should not be for one to eat until he or she is satisfied and to forget the ultimate source of food or to let food be an end in itself. Rather, the Israelites should “eat and be full, and you shall bless Yahweh your God for the good land he has given you” (Deut 8:10).³¹ Eating points to Yahweh and is to result

²³ The verb זָכַרְתָּ frames the passage (vv. 2, 18) with the command to remember Yahweh.

²⁴ זָכַח occurs in Deuteronomy thirteen times. We also see this theme (and word use) outside of the Pentateuch in places such as Judg 2:10 speaking about the generation who lived after the generation who entered the Promised Land, “And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel” (cf. Judg 3:7; 1 Sam 12:9).

²⁵ MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone* 84; cf. Craigie, *Deuteronomy* 188.

²⁶ Rudolf Smend, “Essen und Trinken—ein Stück Weltlichkeit des Alten Testaments,” in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolf Smend; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977) 457; cf. Michaela Geiger, “Erinnerungen an das Schlaraffenland: Dtn. 8 als Theologie des Essens,” in *Essen und Trinken in der Bibel: Ein literarisches Festmahl für Rainer Kessler zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Michaela Geiger, Christl M. Maier, and Uta Schmidt; München: Gütersloher, 2009) 29.

²⁷ J. G. McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy* (JSOTSup 33; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984) 172.

²⁸ Merrill, *Deuteronomy* 187.

²⁹ MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone* 75. The theme of remembrance is a constant refrain in Deuteronomy (5:15; 7:18; 9:7; 9:27; 15:15; 16:3). For further discussion of this theme, see Edward P. Blair, “An Appeal to Remembrance: The Memory Motif in Deuteronomy,” *Int* 15 (1961) 41–47.

³⁰ Tim Chester states that “Every time we eat we celebrate again our dependence on God” (*A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community & Mission around the Table* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2011] 70). Here we see the overlap in themes as well. The focus of Deuteronomy 8 is God’s provision while Deuteronomy 15 gives the human side of this issue of seeing God’s provision and recognizing dependence on him. Wenham also notes from the creation narratives in Genesis 1–2 that food is God’s gift to man. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah* 28.

³¹ It should be noted that this is the only place in Deuteronomy where יְהוָה is the object of בָּרַךְ. Normally, יְהוָה is the subject of בָּרַךְ. This seems to highlight the model of how the Israelites should regard eating when they come into the land.

in thankfulness for his gift. At this point in history, Israel's most recent experience of eating was manna from Yahweh's hand. Going into the land, they were to remember that the food they ate—though not always miraculously provided in the same way the manna was—came from Yahweh's hand just the same.³² The Israelites were to have an attitude of humble dependence in their daily experience of the gift of the land's prosperity precisely because they saw it was provided by Yahweh.³³ The repetitive nature of eating should bring to mind God's daily provision of food and life itself.³⁴ Since food is sustenance, it was to remind the Israelites that Yahweh gives them what they need for life and, in a deeper sense, that he himself is their life. Thus, eating serves as a continual reminder of Yahweh's supply of their needs, and should cultivate humility in the Israelites since their wilderness journeys made clear that food and life itself come from the hand of the Lord. Chapter 6 (to be discussed below) teaches that one of the purposes of food is that Yahweh's people would fear Yahweh and trust him. Chapter 8 picks up that theme and expands it. The Israelites' recognition of their need before Yahweh and his all-sufficient, proven ability to care for his people puts them in the right position to trust him in all things.

V. FOOD AND THE FEAR OF YAHWEH

Though it might strike us as odd, Yahweh uses food to teach his people to fear him. Deuteronomy 6 gives a hortatory framework as a context for the remainder of the laws to follow, including those governing food and sacrificial worship.³⁵ Deuteronomy 6:10–15 contains exhortations for granting Yahweh exclusive recognition and worship.³⁶ Yahweh reminds them that they will come into a land with houses they did not build, crops they did not plant, cisterns they did not fill, etc. (v. 10). He emphasizes that they *received* all that they have, and that they have not obtained it by their own hands. Yet the Israelites are warned that they are not to forget Yahweh when they have eaten and are satisfied. As mentioned above, the abundant food of the Promised Land constitutes a threat to Israel's memory of Yahweh's work.³⁷ Moses warned them not to forget Yahweh (v. 12) for "it is Yahweh your God you shall fear; him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear"

³² As Geiger states, "Der Reichtum des versprochenen Landes soll als Ausdruck der Güte Gottes begriffen werden" ("Theologie des Essens" 23).

³³ MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone*, 98; cf. Blair who says that the wilderness experiences should keep Israel humbly dependent on God ("An Appeal to Remembrance" 46). Also, when the spies return, they tell of the abundance of the land in Num 13:27. The provision by God is in contrast to any provision that the Israelites might ascribe to Baal. For a discussion on the Baal polemic inherent in the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan, see J. Michael Thigpen, "Lord of All the Earth: Yahweh and Baal in Joshua 3," *Trinj* 27 (2006) 245–54.

³⁴ Geiger also notes, "Jeder Akt des Essens soll mit einem Segnen Gottes verbunden sein und damit Jhw als Geber des Landes anerkennen" ("Theologie des Essens" 29).

³⁵ For an in-depth discussion of the structure of Deuteronomy 6, see Daniel I. Block, "How Many Is God? An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5," *JETS* 47 (2004) 205–7.

³⁶ Merrill, *Deuteronomy* 169.

³⁷ MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone* 83.

(v. 13). The temptation is to forget the Lord when one has all his or her material needs satisfied. However, Moses teaches the Israelites that even when food satisfies them, it is ultimately to teach them that they should fear Yahweh. It is Yahweh who gave them the land and food to enjoy. Deuteronomy 28 also mentions how curses for disobedience would affect their crops and herds (food sources). Because Yahweh holds all things and can give or take away, the Israelites should trust and fear him. Eating until they are satisfied reminds the Israelites that they did not obtain by their own strength the land they are about to possess and warns against the self-sufficiency that prosperity can induce.

This theological lesson is made explicit in Deuteronomy 14. After a detailed list of clean and unclean animals (vv. 3–21),³⁸ the Israelites are commanded to tithe the seeds of their field (v. 22).³⁹ They are then commanded to tithe their grain, wine, oil, and firstborn of their flock followed by a purpose clause “in order (לְמַעַן) that you might learn to fear Yahweh your God always” (v. 23).⁴⁰ Therefore, the author clearly tells the Israelites that one of the purposes of tithing was to teach them to fear Yahweh. Why does tithing teach the Israelites to fear Yahweh? Though the text does not say explicitly why this is the case, we can offer a conjecture. Because the Israelites were sacrificing their food, the very means of their survival, it taught them to trust Yahweh as the giver. It demonstrated that they were willing to let go of the good gift while acknowledging the good of the giver. It expressed reliance on Yahweh rather than on prosperity. Moreover, as they tithe their food, they learn not to take their prosperity for granted, but to know that it comes from Yahweh.⁴¹ In addition, the following verse indicates that they are to share their food with the Levite, sojourner, and orphan (14:29). Part of loving Yahweh involved showing love and hospitality to others. Trusting Yahweh meant the Israelites would freely give to others because they had faith that he would continue to provide for their needs even as they give an abundance of their own food away.

VI. FOOD POINTING TO YAHWEH'S WORD

Deuteronomy 8 also teaches that food points to the Israelites' need for Yahweh's word for true satisfaction. Yahweh caused the Israelites to be hungry and fed

³⁸ The rationale behind some animals being clean and others unclean is beyond the scope of this paper. McConville argues that some animals were considered unclean because they were used in the worship of other gods (cf. Isa 65:4; Ezek 8:9–10) while others were meat-eaters and may have not been eaten for hygienic reasons (*Law and Theology* 231). For further discussion of the purity laws see Walter Houston, *Purity and Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law* (JSOTSup 140; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

³⁹ Merrill (*Deuteronomy* 240) notes that all the things the Israelites were commanded to tithe were edibles, so these would have been part of a meal shared with Yahweh. Craigie also notes the connection between the sections in the chapter (besides vv. 1–2) is the concept of what may or may not be eaten. He notes that the verb “eat” is used throughout this section (vv. 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 19, 20, 21, 23, 26, 29) (*Deuteronomy* 229).

⁴⁰ לְמַעַן is used both here and in 6:13.

⁴¹ Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 143; Craigie, *Deuteronomy* 233; Merrill, *Deuteronomy* 240.

them “that he cause you to know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word which comes out of the mouth of Yahweh” (Deut 8:3). Yahweh’s providence sustains man, and man’s existence depends not solely on food. The connection between Yahweh’s word and food develops a key theme in Deuteronomy: Israel was meant to learn that their provision came from Yahweh.⁴² The Israelites would ultimately need to eat again, demonstrating that food does not bring ultimate satisfaction. Food only sustains for a time, but nourishment comes from Yahweh.⁴³ Moreover, there seems to be a connection between bread and Yahweh’s word in that the Israelites needed to constantly partake of bread to be sustained. In the same way, the Israelites needed to constantly partake of Yahweh’s word for sustenance. Thus, every utterance from the mouth of Yahweh is more basic to Israelite existence than food. Therefore, even though food was scarce in their wilderness journey, Yahweh called the Israelites to trust him because he would provide for their needs. If the Israelites would obey Yahweh’s commandments, he would sustain them, teaching them that they survive by their obedience to him. Food then points to the satisfaction found in a relationship of obedience to Yahweh, and as the Israelites obeyed him, they expressed their trust in his character.

VII. FOOD AS CELEBRATION OF YAHWEH’S GOODNESS

Food is meant to bring joyful worship of Yahweh’s goodness and to cultivate an attitude of thankfulness. Several passages illustrate this purpose of food. Deuteronomy 12 introduces the theme of Yahweh choosing a place to put his name (12:5). The instruction about worship at the sanctuary indicates the high priority this has in Deuteronomy. As the Israelites settled in the Promised Land, there would be continual temptations to worship other gods. Therefore, Moses gives clear instructions on how they should worship Yahweh. The first section of this chapter (vv. 1–7) details how the Israelites should destroy the Canaanite worship centers, followed by the command to bring offerings to a central sanctuary. The second section (vv. 8–12) contrasts the way Israel currently worshiped Yahweh in the wilderness with how they should do so when they enter the land.⁴⁴ The third section (vv. 13–19) provides the definition of correct sacrifice. After the destruction of Canaanite worship centers is detailed, the Israelites are then instructed to bring their various offerings to the central sanctuary (v. 5). There “you shall eat before Yahweh your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which Yahweh your God has blessed you” (v. 7). Moses commands the Israelites to rejoice in the Lord and his blessing as they eat their offerings.⁴⁵ In fact, there is a three-fold command in this chapter to rejoice (שמח in

⁴² L. Juliana M. Claassens, *The God Who Provides: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004) 17.

⁴³ Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 92.

⁴⁴ Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1990) 131.

⁴⁵ Willis, “Eat and Rejoice” 282.

vv. 7, 12, 18) connected with eating before Yahweh (vv. 7, 12, 18).⁴⁶ The abundance of the land which Yahweh gave them is a cause for joy in his generosity.⁴⁷ Altmann sees Yahweh's abundant provision in contrast with that of Assyrian kings: "the implied promise that Yhwh, as the true high king deserving fealty, would provide enough meat . . . creates the potential for hope that Yhwh will give more than the people need, catering even to their wants (cf. Exodus 16), beyond even the provisions the Assyrian king gave his subjects."⁴⁸

The command to eat "before Yahweh" also highlights the aspect of eating in Yahweh's presence.⁴⁹ Eating the meal in the presence of Yahweh emphasizes the fellowship that the Israelites were to enjoy with him. An important aspect of food is that it cultivates fellowship with Yahweh since it is to take place in his presence. The focus of this meal then is not on the food itself, but the focus becomes eating with Yahweh. The joy the Israelites were to experience as they partook of food was rejoicing over Yahweh's goodness. Moreover, eating in the presence of the one who provided the food cultivated an attitude of thankfulness to Yahweh. It was also a demonstration of Yahweh's hospitality—eating food he provided, in his place.⁵⁰

Chapter 16 continues this theme as well. Chapter 16 contains the instructions for celebrating the Passover and Unleavened Bread (vv. 1–8), Feast of Weeks (vv. 9–12), and Feast of Booths (vv. 13–15)⁵¹ and details how they should worship at the central sanctuary in three feasts. These feasts have a central role in Israel's memory as they celebrate Yahweh's work in their history.⁵² While the Passover celebrates Israel's deliverance from Egypt, the Feast of Booths and Weeks celebrate the gift of the land.⁵³ The Feast of Weeks occurred seven weeks after the beginning of the barley harvest, and it is one of the agricultural feasts in Israel's calendar. The people were to bring their offering for the Feast of Weeks and are likewise commanded to "rejoice before Yahweh your God" (Deut 16:11). It is important to note

⁴⁶ Vv. 7 and 18 explicitly mention eating before Yahweh (אָכַלְתֶּם־שָׂם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה). While v. 12 does not mention eating before Yahweh explicitly, it mentions bringing offerings (v. 11) and rejoicing before Yahweh, so thematically it conveys the same idea of eating and rejoicing before Yahweh.

⁴⁷ MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone* 83. Cf. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 299, where food is received as a gift from God. Sara Covin Juengst also argues that food not only meets needs but is to be partaken of with joy (*Breaking Bread: The Spiritual Significance of Food* [Louisville: Westminster, John Knox, 1992] 28). Craigie notes that the very possibility of bringing sacrifices and offerings demonstrates the goodness of God in the fulfillment of his promise (*Deuteronomy* 217–18).

⁴⁸ Altmann, *Festive Meals in Ancient Israel* 129.

⁴⁹ Walter J. Houston, "Rejoicing Before the Lord: The Function of the Festal Gathering in Deuteronomy," in *Feasts and Festivals* (ed. Christopher Tuckett; CBET 53; Walpole, MA: Peeters Leuven, 2009) 12.

⁵⁰ Block also notes that 12:7; 14:23; and 15:20 "portray YHWH as a divine host, receiving the offerings of his people and then turning around and spreading the meat of the offerings before them" (*The Gospel According to Moses* 189). Cf. images of eating and the Lord's provision in Isa 55:1–2.

⁵¹ Since the focus of the Passover is Yahweh's deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt, we will not discuss it as it pertains to understanding the purposes of food.

⁵² MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone* 80.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 82.

that this was a religious holiday specifically focused on Yahweh's provision of food. The harvest reminds people that the harvest had come from Yahweh and could joyfully be given back to him. In addition, this feast brought a sense of thanksgiving for Yahweh's activity in his creation.⁵⁴

The Feast of Booths (also called Tabernacles) takes place in the fall and marks the ingathering of the grape and wine harvest.⁵⁵ Leviticus indicates that the Feast of Booths is a reminder that the Israelites dwelt in booths in their wilderness wanderings (Lev 23:34–43). However, Deuteronomy makes it an agricultural festival celebrating the harvest. Moses commands the Israelites to “rejoice in your feast” (Deut 16:14)—another festival with food as an integral part of both its content and celebration. The fact that the Israelites celebrate with feasts indicates the lavishness of Yahweh's provision. They did not eat with a meager supply. Rather, a feast as worship is the right response to abundance as opposed to the forgetfulness that they are warned against. In addition, Moses tells the people that “Yahweh your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful” (Deut 16:15). Here, we also see the connection between thankfulness for the land and thankfulness for food. Yahweh's provision of the land for the Israelites is a gift. The food that the land produces is a continual demonstration of the gift of the land as well as a gift of sustenance for the Israelites. Through the abundance of food in the land, Israel is able to express thankfulness to Yahweh. The Israelites were also to care for others in the celebration of this feast.⁵⁶ Servants, Levites, strangers, orphans, and widows also celebrated this feast, presumably eating of the additional food that others brought (Deut 16:13–14). Thankfulness to Yahweh naturally leads to sharing in his abundant provision with others.

Moreover, these festivals cultivated remembrance in the Israelites of Yahweh's great deeds in their history.⁵⁷ This remembrance was intended to bring joy and gratitude. Eating is not meant to be a mere task that is done daily. Rather, people are to eat and rejoice.⁵⁸ Furthermore, consuming food is related to the broader theme of blessing and enjoyment of the land.⁵⁹ Yahweh blessed their land and the

⁵⁴ C. E. Armerding, “Festivals and Feasts,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* 311. Craigie agrees, saying that the festival is a time of rejoicing, “for it celebrated the goodness of the Lord in the provision of food for another year at harvest time” (*Deuteronomy* 245).

⁵⁵ Armerding, “Festivals and Feasts” 303.

⁵⁶ Altmann also notes the connection between sharing a meal and inclusion in the community. His observation is in the context of Ruth, but in Deuteronomy, the inclusion of these groups serves not only to care for them but to include them in the community. See Peter Altmann, “Everyday Meals for Extraordinary People: Eating and Assimilation in the Book of Ruth,” in *Decisive Meals: Table Politics in Biblical Literature* 21, 25.

⁵⁷ MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone* 71.

⁵⁸ Juengst notes that “it is clear that in the Old Testament eating is seen as a way to express joy in life's most important moments” (*Breaking Bread* 76).

⁵⁹ McConville, *Law and Theology* 54. Cf. MacDonald who states, “the memory of the past and the experience of the present are united in acts of joyful celebration, which are central to the Deuteronomic concept of worship” (*Not Bread Alone* 79).

produce from the land (Deut 28:4–5, 11–12).⁶⁰ Conversely, Yahweh would curse them and the land for their disobedience (Deut 28:18, 24, 31, 33, 39–40). This curse comes because “you did not serve Yahweh your God with a joyful and glad heart, because of the abundance of all things” (Deut 28:47). Therefore, we again see the theme of gladness and celebration. Food has an innate celebratory quality, and is one of the ways that human beings experience blessing, joy, and fullness. When the Israelites reflected on the fact that Yahweh was the one who continually provided food for them, it was to bring an experience of joyful worship.⁶¹ The goodness of Yahweh is demonstrated in these passages, leading the Israelites to rejoice in their relationship to him.⁶² Chapters 12 and 16 highlight Yahweh’s generosity through his willingness to provide for his people.⁶³ Even more, the Israelites were to celebrate Yahweh’s sustaining presence with his people. The feasts were not merely about food, they were about the Israelites’ relationship to Yahweh.

Deuteronomy 26:1–11 prescribes how an individual Israelite should bring an offering when the people first enter into the land. The legislation here relates to two particular ceremonies which were to be held once Israel had taken possession of the Promised Land (though we will only focus on the first ceremony).⁶⁴ The ritual consisted of an offering of produce (vv. 1–3a, 4–5a, 10b–11), a statement of the present occasion (v. 3b), a recitation of Israel’s history (vv. 5b–9), and an explanation of what the offerer had done (v. 10a). The basket of firstfruits is a token payment of the tithe presented when each Israelite completed the harvest.⁶⁵ This tithe of the firstfruits was meant as a demonstration of trust that Yahweh would be enough and would continue to sustain. An Israelite was to make a confession regarding Yahweh’s deliverance of the people out of Egypt (vv. 3–9). Then, he is to confess “behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Yahweh, have given me” (v. 10). The latter portion of this confession acknowledges the provision of the Lord as our earlier passages demonstrate. The harvest and resulting offering come from the hand of Yahweh, and the Israelites were to

⁶⁰ Altmann notes “the bond between divine blessing and the produce of the land appears throughout the DC [Deuteronomistic Code] meal texts, and plays a foundational role in their logic” (*Festive Meals in Ancient Israel* 233–34).

⁶¹ Braulik argues that the Feast of Weeks and Booths are feasts because of the joy that takes place before Yahweh in giving thanks for the natural blessings that he granted to the people. See Georg Braulik, *The Theology of Deuteronomy: Collected Essays of Georg Braulik* (Richland Hills, TX: Bibal Press, 1994) 83.

⁶² It should be noted that the same word is used related to rejoice/joy. In 16:11 and 14, the verb **שמח** is used and in 16:15 the noun **שמחה** is used. This demonstrates a similar purpose in the offerings in both feasts.

⁶³ Block notes that Yahweh as host also invites the people to celebrate the Israelites’ relationship with him (Block, *Gospel According to Moses* 189).

⁶⁴ Craigie, *Deuteronomy* 319.

⁶⁵ Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12* (WBC 6b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002) 638. Craigie notes that the basket symbolized the beginning of the experience of blessing in the new land (*Deuteronomy* 322).

acknowledge the giver of that harvest.⁶⁶ Finally, the Israelite is commanded to set it down, worship, and “rejoice in all the good that Yahweh your God has given to you and to your house” (v. 11). In doing so, the worshiper recognizes that Yahweh is the true source of life, and this should elicit joy and gratitude.⁶⁷

Again, there is the connection with worship, rejoicing, and recognition of the Yahweh’s provision. We must remember that the worshiper is bringing a basket of food, so it is clear that the ceremony is tied to the tangible experience of Yahweh’s provision. Thus, one of the purposes of food is to celebrate Yahweh’s goodness. Yahweh’s goodness to the Israelites is seen in the provision of food for them to eat, and they were to have a yearly acknowledgement of this. These yearly feasts were meant to cultivate thankfulness in the heart of the Israelites so that they might rejoice in Yahweh’s action to sustain them on a daily basis.

These three passages emphasize that the feasts and offerings are to take place “before Yahweh.” This phrase demonstrates that Yahweh is the donor of the feast. Unlike other ANE cultures where the people provided the food for their gods, these passages in Deuteronomy clearly show that Yahweh is the one who has provided the feast, and his hospitality cannot be repaid.⁶⁸ Furthermore, this form of worship reaffirms the aforementioned lessons the Israelites learned from food. The worship that takes place in these feasts is a result of the recognition of Yahweh’s provision to him, the fear and trust they have of Yahweh, and the satisfaction that is found in him. As the Israelites reflected on the harvest, they were reminded of these lessons and moved to worship the goodness of Yahweh. Moreover, worship during the feasts reminds the Israelites that Yahweh is the sole provider of all that they enjoy.⁶⁹ Therefore, Yahweh gets the glory as the giver of good gifts. Food is not an end in itself, but it points back to Yahweh.

VIII. SYNTHESIS

Having examined the five themes of food in Deuteronomy, it is necessary to pause and note the similarities and overlap in these themes as well as the cumulative effect of these five themes as it relates to our understanding of food. We see the interrelationship of these themes in that food, from a human perspective, shows humanity’s dependence on Yahweh, and from a divine perspective, it reveals Yahweh’s provision for humanity. The recognition of this provision should lead to a fear and trust in Yahweh. This trust leads to a satisfaction in Yahweh and, finally, results in joyful worship with gratitude to Yahweh. In addition, Yahweh made people for relationship with him, and the Israelites partaking of their food in his pres-

⁶⁶ McConville, *Law and Theology* 380. Tigay states that “offerings of the first products of the soil are a way of acknowledging God as the source of the land’s fertility and the true owner of its produce” (*Deuteronomy* 27).

⁶⁷ Richard L. Christensen, “Deuteronomy 26:1–11,” *Int* 49 (1995) 59.

⁶⁸ Houston, “Rejoicing Before the Lord” 12.

⁶⁹ Willis, “Eat and Rejoice” 285–87. He explicitly mentions that “worship is to be a time when one is reminded that Yahweh is the sole provider of all that is enjoyed at the time of worship and beyond” (p. 287).

ence (as he commanded) pictures the fellowship that Yahweh wants to have with his people.

The cumulative effect of these purposes of food ultimately show us that food points to something greater than itself. Food is meant to point to Yahweh and his character. Food in its varied aspects celebrates Yahweh and who he is. Therefore, eating is not meant to be done simply for sustenance; it should be done in recognition of Yahweh and his goodness displayed in his constant provision and with an attitude of humble dependence on him.

IX. CONCLUSION

Food is a universal human concern. As such, we have analyzed five major purposes of food according to Deuteronomy. (1) We saw that food cultivates a dependence on Yahweh. (2) Food demonstrates the provision of Yahweh for his people. (3) Food should lead to a fear and trust in him. (4) Food points to satisfaction found in Yahweh's word, and ultimately, in Yahweh himself. (5) We saw that food should lead to joyful worship and gratitude in who Yahweh is. Though food is often seen as an end in itself, as a way of gaining sustenance, Deuteronomy teaches that there is more to food than simply consuming energy for the day. Food is meant to point to deeper aspects of Yahweh's relationship with his people.