



Janling Fu, Cynthia Shafer-Elliott, and Carol Meyers, eds.

T&T Clark Handbook of Food in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel

T&T Clark Handbooks

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Over the past two to three decades, food and food studies have been a growing, fruitful, and dynamic subfield in historical studies, including biblical studies. In Hebrew Bible scholarship, one could say that food studies were put on the map, or on the menu, in earnest in 1999 with the publication of a themed issue of the journal *Semeia* on *Food and Drink in the Biblical Worlds*.¹ Since then, a number of modern classics have appeared, such as Nathan MacDonald's *Not Bread Alone*, Cynthia Shafer-Elliott's *Food in Ancient Judah*, and Peter Altmann and Janling Fu's edited volume, *Feasting in the Archaeology and Texts of the Bible and the Ancient Near East*.² Much of this research has developed in and around the SBL Annual Meeting program unit "Meals in the HB/OT and Its World." In many ways, the publication of the *T&T Clark Handbook of Food in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* is the epitome of this development, a feast of the knowledge, perspectives, and expertise on food, meals, and eating that has amassed in Hebrew Bible scholarship in recent years,

1. Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten, eds., *Food and Drink in the Biblical Worlds*, *Semeia* 86 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999). This is true for the English-speaking parts of the world, but Eleonore Schmitt's 1994 monograph, *Das Essen in der Bibel: Literaturethnologische Aspekte des Alltäglichen* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1994), could be said to mark a starting point for German-speakers.

2. Nathan MacDonald, *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Cynthia Shafer-Elliott, *Food in Ancient Judah: Domestic Cooking in the Time of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013); Peter Altmann and Janling Fu, eds., *Feasting in the Archaeology and Texts of the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014).

and exactly the kind of authoritative and near-exhaustive handbook that anyone with a research interest in food in the Bible has wanted for years.

The handbook is ambitious and extensive. In roughly six hundred pages, its thirty-one chapters, divided into five thematic sections, cover everything from the environmental and socioeconomic context of food production, food techniques, cultural contexts of food, and food in ancient texts and inscriptions. Each chapter closes with an annotated list of suggestions for further reading before the bibliography. The book begins with a helpful introduction by its three editors, Janling Fu, Cynthia Shafer-Elliott, and Carol Meyers, in which they give an introduction to food studies and food in the Hebrew Bible.

The first part, “Environmental and Socioeconomic Context,” is the briefest with only three chapters. George A. Pierce writes on “Environmental Features,” such as topography, geology, and climate. In a final subsection of the chapter, Pierce draws connections between the actual environmental features in Bronze and Iron Age Israel and Judah and biblical references to natural phenomena, such as different kinds of rain, snow, and hail. James W. Hardin divides his “Houses, Households, and Social Structure” into two parts. The first gives a clear presentation of social units referred to in Hebrew Bible texts, such as the “house of the father,” “the clan,” and “the tribe.” The second half is dedicated to the built environment of these social units, in particular to the three- and four-room house, a widespread domestic structure in the Iron Age Southern Levant, and with special attention to where food-related activities could take place in and around these structures. Joshua Walton completes the first part with “Economy and Trade.” He first introduces his theoretical framework, an institutional approach, inspired by the school of New Institutional Economics, which focuses on the contexts of economic activities. Walton then proceeds to describe six contexts that are of relevance to the production, consumption, and exchange of food in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel: subsistence agriculture, pastoral nomadism, the redistributive economy, the market economy, administered trade, and the extractive economy.

The second part of the book is dedicated to “Food Procurement and Production.” Justin Lev-Tov writes on “Animal Husbandry,” Jennie Ebeling on “Grains, Bread, and Beer,” Eric Lee Welch on “Olives and Olive Oil,” Carey Ellen Walsh on “Grapes and Wine,” Cynthia Shafer-Elliott on “Fruits, Nuts, Vegetables, and Legumes,” Joshua Walton and Lauren M. Santini on “Spices, Herbs, and Sweeteners,” and Deirdre Fulton and Paula Wapnish on “Underrepresented Taxa: Fish, Birds, and Wild Game.” All these chapters are instructive and lucid presentations of their subject matter, and they all commendably manage to combine insights from the appropriate scientific field, such as zoology and botany, with relevant archaeological material and biblical literature. The chapters all cover the classic, near-mandatory themes in relation to food and the Bible, but they also bring new and innovative perspectives to the table. For instance, Lev-Tov’s chapter includes an unsurprising but also constructive and nuanced discussion of the place of the pig in ancient Israel and Judah as well as a refreshing and more surprising discussion of edible insects and beekeeping. Particularly

the final chapter in this section, Fulton and Wapnish Hesse's discussion of the underrepresented taxa, is a welcome addition to the investigation of biblical food. Walton and Santini's chapter on spices and sweeteners is also a most welcome treatment of a sometimes-neglected group of foodstuffs. Despite our limited knowledge of herbs and spices in the Hebrew Bible, this chapter contains a wealth of information on the socioeconomic, practical, and sensorial aspects of spices and sweeteners.

In the third part of the book, six chapters are dedicated to "Techniques of Food Preparation and Preservation." Leann Pace writes on "Tools and Utensils," Nava Panitz-Cohen on "Ceramics in the Iron Age," and Gloria London on "Ceramics and Ethnoarchaeology." At first glance, there appears to be quite a bit of overlap between these three chapters, but each does cover its own specific material and angle. Pace makes the Hebrew Bible texts her starting point as she searches for passages that refer to food-related tools and references to processes that may infer tools and utensils. She then turns her attention to material culture, archaeological evidence in particular, in order to flesh out and substantiate the often-limited descriptions in the text. Pace's survey is a worthwhile and thought-provoking exercise, especially to "text people" with limited knowledge of material culture. Panitz-Cohen's chapter is a systematic and well-illustrated presentation of food-related types of Iron Age ceramics. The chapter concludes with a section on Hebrew Bible terms for food-related vessels. London also makes food-related vessels and pots her starting point, but she applies an ethnoarchaeological approach and shifts the focus of the analysis toward producers, users, and food-related functions of these vessels. London's chapter is quite fascinating because it brings the people behind (and the contents inside) the pots to life. It is also one of the few chapters that engages sparingly with biblical literature. In the following three chapters, Tim Frank writes on "Cooking Installations," David Ilan on "Storage," and Zachary C. Dunseth and Rachel Kalisher on "Spoilage." Frank's main focus in the chapter is on archaeological material and on different types of ovens and hearths, but he supplements this with a section on ethnography and on Hebrew Bible texts. Ilan tackles storage by first listing the substances that are stored, such as grain and water, and then the vessels in which these substances may be stored, such as pithoi, jars, and even sacks and chests. Ilan makes occasional references to biblical texts throughout the chapter and adds a concise overview of texts on storage in the Hebrew Bible in his conclusion. There is some overlap between the chapters in this part of the book, and the chapters are structured quite differently, which makes the technique section of the handbook a little less cohesive and somewhat disjointed. However, each chapter does make a valuable contribution to the topic, and none could have been left out. This is particularly true of Dunseth and Kalisher's chapter on spoilage, in which they take a chemistry-based and rather technical but also highly illuminating approach to the subject. Spoilage, deterioration, and foul smells are obvious and inseparable aspects of food production and consumption, but they are also sadly overlooked. Hopefully, Dunseth and Kalisher's chapter will inspire further work on spoilage and its practical and symbolic implications.

The fourth part of the book treats a selection of food-related cultural contexts. Jonathan S. Greer writes on “Feasting and Festivals,” Matthew J. Suriano on “Food, Death, and the Dead,” Margaret Cohen on “Diet and Nutrition,” Rebekah Welton on “Gluttony and Intoxication,” Peter Altmann on “Hunger and Fasting,” Carol Meyers on “Food and Gender,” Joseph Lam on “Food in Canaanite Myth,” and Max Price on “Food and Israelite Identity.” Greer begins with an anthropological introduction to feast and festivals, including the power dynamics and hierarchies that are enacted at these occasions. He then goes on to describe feasts and festivals in the Hebrew Bible, in the ancient Near East, and in archaeology and concludes with a synthesis of feasts and festivals in ancient Israel. The chapter is rich and interesting, but the strong focus on so-called specialized eating events means that a nonspecialized eating event, the ordinary meal, which also works social magic at multiple levels, disappears somewhat into the background. Suriano focuses on a core aspect of ancient Levantine mortuary culture: to remember and to feed the dead. He gives a lucid and balanced presentation and discussion of the evidence from Sam’al, of funerary archaeology from Iron Age Judah, and of relevant biblical literature. Cohen’s piece is a fascinating investigation of what was most likely eaten in Israel and Judah and of the interplay between diet, nutrition, and social status. Cohen draws on textual evidence from both biblical and rabbinic literature, on archaeological data, and on ethnographic comparisons as she weaves an illuminating description of Iron Age people and their food. Welton’s chapter on excess food and drink is an engaging survey of Hebrew Bible texts on gluttony and intoxication and how these phenomena are described as a blessing in some texts and contexts and as a sign of sinfulness in others. Altmann’s chapter on the absence of food begins with a discussion of famine, the causes of famine, the way famine was addressed among Israel and Judah’s neighbors, and how famine is treated in the Hebrew Bible. It then moves on to fasting and to an interesting reflection on fasting as a socioreligious practice in a culture where food insufficiency is a regular occurrence. Meyers’s chapter focuses on women as food producers in Israelite households. She combines ethnography, archaeology, and Hebrew Bible texts to describe women’s food activities. Readers familiar with Meyers’s excellent previous research on this topic will recognize her careful retrieval of women’s socially and culturally central roles as food procurers and producers. In the introduction, Meyers recognizes the role of men in elite food production in particular, but she explains that she will focus on women’s roles because they are so often overlooked in both the texts and in archaeology. I do not dispute that women’s food activities deserve attention, but considering the recent surge in Hebrew Bible masculinity studies and the incredible insights this research has produced, the absence of a focused discussion on food and masculinity is regrettable. Lam’s chapter is an interesting survey of food and particularly of feasting in Ugaritic mythological texts, such as the Baal Cycle and the story of Kirta. Lam considers both the practicalities and the social dynamics of food events in Ugarit, and he concludes the chapter with an illuminating and helpful discussion of the implications of his observations for our understanding of food-related passages in the Hebrew Bible, such as the banquet scene in Ps 23. Price’s chapter on food and Israelite identity has some overlap with Cohen’s chapter on diet and nutrition and with Lev-Tov’s chapter on animal husbandry. However, Price

adds a critical, clear and engaging discussion of the question of foodways and dietary taboos and how they may (and may not) relate to questions of ethnicity and social identity. This chapter is highly recommended to anyone interested in biblical dietary rules.

The fifth and final part of the book focuses on food in ancient texts and art. Janling Fu writes on the “Iconography of Food and Drink” and Christopher A. Rollston on “Food in Epigraphic Sources.” The next five chapters are dedicated to the Hebrew Bible. Kurtis Peters writes on the “Language of Food and Cooking,” Dorothea Erbele-Küster on “Food in the Tetrateuch,” Janling Fu on “Food in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets,” Andrew T. Abernethy on the Latter Prophets, and Klaus-Peter Adam on “Food in the Writings.” If we begin at the end, the final four chapters are practically a food-focused mini-commentary embedded in the handbook. Erbele-Küster, Fu, Abernethy, and Adam have all written excellent and rich chapters that address selected food-related passages in their respective group of Hebrew Bible texts in a clear and insightful manner. These chapters are a good place to start for anyone embarking on alimentary exegesis of a Hebrew Bible passage. Going back to the beginning of the book’s part 5, Fu’s chapter on iconography demonstrates how southern Levantine depictions of food and drink partake in broader Levantine and ancient West Asian iconographic conventions of how banqueting and ceremonial drinking scenes should be depicted. The presentation is clear and systematic, and the chapter is well-illustrated. Rollston’s chapter on epigraphic sources is equally systematic, clear, and informative. His focus is food-related sources from the Iron Age southern Levant, supplemented with additional Northwest Semitic material in Moabite, Ammonite, and Edomite to provide further context. In this chapter, Rollston applies a fresh perspective to a body of material that has almost been worn out by scholarly interest and scrutiny and demonstrates that the epigraphic material has much to tell us about food production and food supplies. Lastly, Peters’s chapter on the Hebrew Bible’s food-related terminology is an excellent mini-encyclopedia that contains information on cooking activities such as baking or cooking concepts that describe how items of food are created, changed, and made through various processes. It sounds a little complicated, and it is, but Peters does a good job of presenting his approach as well as the material, and the chapter leaves the reader with a good insight into the building blocks of food language in Biblical Hebrew.

In sum, the *T&T Clark Handbook of Food in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* is a major achievement and an invaluable source for anyone interested in food and drink in the Hebrew Bible.