

USDA or YHWH? Pursuing a Divinely Inspired Diet

Recent work in Old Testament Theology has focused attention on the context of the interpreter and the role this plays in orienting and shaping the work of interpreters engaged in Old Testament Theology. In a chapter titled “What is a ‘Theology of Genesis’?” in his *Theology of the Book of Genesis*, Walter Moberly writes, “There is something intrinsically contextual and provisional about theological use of the biblical text. Theology is not a once-for-all exercise in finding right words and/or deeds, but rather a continuing and ever-repeated attempt to articulate what a faithful understanding and use of the biblical text might look like in the changing circumstances of life” (Moberly 2009: 19).¹ According to Moberly, the context of the communities of faith in which theology is done is a part of what shapes the kind of work that falls under the rubric of Old Testament Theology: “the context of the interpreter becomes significant in a variety of possible ways. The entrance point into working theologically with Genesis need not arise from systematic reading of the biblical text itself, but rather from some issue or challenge within continuing Christian life” (Ibid., 17). John Rogerson concurs: “However hard scholars may strive for objectivity, however hard they may try not to read their own interests and assumptions into the way they organize their work, they will not be able to avoid the fact that they are situated in times and circumstances that inescapably affect and shape what they do” (Rogerson 2010: 10). Rogerson is not greatly concerned about the question of how to organize a theology of the Old Testament—the well-known debate between Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad notwithstanding—because he understands the activity to be contextualized

¹ Moberly’s vision strikes me as congruent in significant ways to concerns raised by James Barr in his analysis of the discipline of Biblical/Old Testament Theology (Barr 1999: 53-84, esp. 60-61, 74-75, 79-80, 83-84).

by the interpreter.² He describes his own *Theology of the Old Testament* as “a scholarly exercise, with Old Testament texts being interrogated and expounded with the help of critical scholarship, but in accordance with an agenda set by one person’s [Rogerson’s] perception of the human condition in today’s world(s)” (Ibid., 11). As a self-described humanist and socialist, Rogerson frequently interacts with like-minded writers to develop his own theological reflection. For Moberly, the contemporary debates on creationism/evolution and science/religion, the (ab)use of natural resources in a warming world, interfaith dialogue among Jews/Christians/Muslims, and new-atheist critiques of religious faith—specifically of the God of the Old Testament—are some of the contextual issues and challenges that shape the theological agenda of his book.

These two interpreters exemplify one way in which one might approach the task of Old Testament theology, whether of a particular book or of the larger canon. In what follows, I intend to adopt a similar posture. My own interest in the text of Leviticus (and by extension Deuteronomy), specifically the legislation surrounding food, is shaped largely by current ethical issues surrounding industrialized agriculture and foodways in America. I am sympathetic to the notion that food systems provide a center, moral or otherwise, which helps shape the physical and spiritual health of a society (Davis 2008). We live in an impressive age of technological innovation. Industrialized agricultural methods of food production produce an unprecedented volume of food, so much so that “enough food is grown worldwide to provide 4.3 pounds of food per person per day, which would include two and a half pounds of grain, beans, and nuts, a pound of fruits and vegetables, and nearly another pound of meat, milk, and eggs” (Kimbrell

2 Rogerson argues concerning the work of von Rad, that it “was fundamentally shaped by the dominating concerns of German protestant Old Testament scholarship of the 1930s and 1940s.” He also wonders “whether von Rad’s stress on Israel’s confession of its faith was in any way influenced by his opposition to National Socialism and his involvement with the Confessing Church” (Rogerson 2010: 11).

2002: 7). Unfortunately, this does not mean that industrialized agriculture has brought an end to world hunger. As I write this essay, East Africa is experiencing a drought-induced famine that threatens the well-being of over 13 million people. Industrialization may produce enough food to feed the global population, but it does not guarantee equitable distribution. Unfortunately, the humanitarian aid response thus far has been insufficient, and insurgency continues to exacerbate the crisis in East Africa. According to Kimbrell, the very idea that a surplus of food produced by industrialized agriculture will end world hunger is a misguided notion: “World hunger is not created by lack of food but by poverty and landlessness, which deny people access to food. Industrialized agriculture actually increases hunger by raising the cost of farming, by forcing tens of millions of farmers off the land, and by growing primarily high-profit export and luxury crops” (Ibid., 6). Indeed, the World Bank’s Poverty Reduction and Equity Group identifies the high fluctuation of domestic food prices in the area of East Africa as a contributing factor to this famine (World Bank Poverty Reduction and Equity Group 2011). While shortfalls in yields can and do contribute to these unstable food prices, the report lists other, non-agricultural factors such as global stocks and, in the case of maize, increased demand for the production of biofuels (Ibid., 2). It is disquieting news that some people in East Africa may starve to death so that other countries can satisfy their energy appetite!

Hunger is not, however, the only enemy we face in an industrialized age.

Industrialization has introduced new moral dilemmas about the health of our food, from what we grow and raise, how we grow and raise it, through processing, packaging and distribution, marketing, and finally to consumption. Should we eat meat (Foer 2009), and if so, how much (Pollan 2008)? How important is growing and raising organic foodstuffs (Rodale 2011)? What

constitutes something grown or raised organically (Pollan 2006)? Are GMOs safe to produce and consume (Smith 2003)? Might they be necessary in a warming world (Lappé 2010)? Should consumers be concerned about CAFOs or the methods of production used in slaughterhouses (Imhoff 2010)? Clearly, the world in which we live is one where we are faced with numerous ethical dilemmas as both consumers and citizens. As consumers in a capitalist society, the food items we purchase—and what we avoid—impacts the future trajectories of agribusiness. As citizens in a democracy, our voices influence politicians and legislators who establish the standards that govern agribusiness.

While these two aspects of our society, capitalism and democracy, play a profound role in shaping and developing industrialization and agribusiness, there is a third aspect that has in times past proven immensely influential—religion. For example, protestant Christian denominations and parachurch organizations like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union had a considerable role to play in promoting the cause of prohibition in America, enacted in the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution which governed the manufacture, sale, transportation, and consumption of alcohol.³ Even today, religious dietary traditions create demand for kosher and halal food products which are increasingly commonplace in grocery chains across America. That having been said, the concerns raised by industrialization do not necessarily fall within the purview of religious dietary traditions. From a historical perspective, this is natural. But the ability of these traditions to address emerging concerns raised by industrialization will prove significant in determining the role of religion in shaping the moral sensibilities of an

3 The influential role of protestant Christian denominations and parachurch organizations in promoting the cause of prohibition is documented in the first episode of Ken Burns’ PBS documentary, *Prohibition* (Burns and Novick 2011: episode 1, “A Nation of Drunkards” [originally aired October 2, 2011]). Prohibition in America was subsequently repealed by the Twenty-first Amendment.

industrialized (or post-industrialized?) society.

There are no dominant dietary traditions within American Christianity shaping the larger food culture today. This should be attributed, at least in part, to the instruction stemming from the New Testament that suggest dietary traditions are not central to the Christian gospel (Rom 14:17; Col 2:16). There are some Christians, however, who suppose that the Bible may yet have something to contribute to the discussion of diet. In the final chapter of his book *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat?*, Nathan MacDonald addresses the phenomenon of so-called “biblical diets”—programs promoted by individuals who identify within the pages of the Bible a divinely inspired diet. They tend to romanticize the dietary lifestyle of ancient Israelites and/or early Christians (especially Jesus), promising exceptional health benefits, physical and sometimes even spiritual. A common denominator among these diets is the relevance of Israel’s dietary legislation in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 for modern day Christians. “Although this is a departure from traditional Christian thought and some New Testament texts, the dietary laws are important to the authors of ‘biblical diets’ because they appear to justify the view of the Bible as a nutritional handbook. . . . Through an American Protestant lens, however, these cannot be laws that have to be obeyed, merely the Creator’s advice that we would do well to heed” (MacDonald 2008b: 96-97). As MacDonald recognizes, “biblical diets” are most likely to attract adherents from American Evangelicalism, particularly those who subscribe to the “theory about and style of using the Bible” described by Christian Smith as *biblicism*. Its assumptions and beliefs culminate in the following outlook: “The Bible teaches doctrine and morals with every affirmation that it makes, so that together those affirmations comprise something like a handbook or textbook for Christian belief and living, a compendium of divine and therefore inerrant

teachings on a full array of subjects—including science, economics, health, politics, and romance” (Smith 2011: 5).⁴

Biblicists advocating “biblical diets” express the Christian conviction that Scripture is divine spiration (θεόπνευστος) and relevant to the Christian life (2 Tim 3:16-17). The question of the relevance of texts like Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 is not a matter of “If?” but “How?” MacDonald’s critique of the “biblical diets” posture is sensitive to this conviction. He distinguishes between “Biblical Food and the Bible on Food,” arguing “the Bible does not purport to offer dietary advice, but it does frequently touch upon food and human responses to it. . . . The Old Testament presses for food to be grown responsibly, received with thankfulness and rejoicing, given generously to others, and enjoyed in moderation” (MacDonald 2008b: 98-101). MacDonald’s four observations are cogent, though one might struggle from these to see the influence of texts like Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, the texts most influential to American Evangelicals or biblicists adopting a “biblical diet.” While we should recognize that they are not, strictly speaking, “dietary advice” to modern day communities of faith, they do belong to Scripture and should contribute to our theological understanding of their respective contexts. In this respect, questions of their presence and function within Scripture are appropriate.

In considering the theological significance of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, it is advantageous to first highlight their distinctiveness. While biblicists, generally speaking, prefer for related passages like these to cohere “like puzzle pieces into single, unified, internally consistent bodies of instruction” (Smith 2011: 5), Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 challenge

4 Smith’s own thesis is that biblicism is impossible, undermined by pervasive interpretive pluralism (chapters 1 and 2). As an alternative, he suggests (Christian evangelical) communities of faith adopt a Christocentric hermeneutical key (chapter 5) to help them navigate the complexity and ambiguity of Scripture (chapter 6). In the final analysis, I am unsure how Smith’s proposal sufficiently distinguishes itself from certain aspects of biblicism he finds untenable (see Smith 2011: 134-139, esp. 136).

this assumption. Christophe Nihan painstakingly lays out the issues involved and convincingly demonstrates that, rather than construe one text as having derived from the other, each stems from a common source (Nihan 2007: 283-99). This is built largely on the observation that each text contains unique features not found in the other, and that neither trajectory can account for both the expansion and the omission of material: “attempts to derive Deut 14 from Lev 11 or Lev 11 from Deut 14 are too simple to be regarded as satisfactory, and the parallels between the two texts are best explained by the assumption of a common source” (Nihan 2007: 288). We need not concern ourselves too much with this hypothetical *Vorlage* beyond the fact that, in as much as this is true of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, it provides a window, however partial, into the diet of ancient Israel (MacDonald 2008a: 60-65; 2008b: 33, 91-93). Neither of the two biblical texts is the origin of Israel’s dietary tradition, as though the distinction between clean and unclean animals is something that YHWH establishes *ex nihilo* on Mount Sinai (Houston 2003: 159; Gen 7:2-3, 8-9; 8:20). Rather, each text assumes an established Israelite dietary tradition with its attendant concerns, and each invests this tradition with its own language and theology (Nihan 2007: 288).

From this, we can draw two important theological conclusions about the role of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 for contributing to a theological perspective on food. First, the abiding value of these texts for subsequent communities of faith is in the theological worldview(s) with which they invest ancient Israel’s dietary tradition. The prohibited and permitted meat belongs to the culturally situated and temporally restricted context of ancient Israel. Christianity has largely adopted this opinion, though often for theological motivations that arise from the New Testament, not from a close reading of the texts in the Hebrew Bible. But even when one restricts

oneself to the Hebrew Bible, one must come to grips with the limited (in scope) and irreconcilable advice of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. The legislation does not anticipate the dietary concerns or opportunities of people living beyond Iron Age agriculture, nor are many of the dietary dilemmas facing ancient Israelites addressed by this legislation.⁵ This dietary advice is not comprehensive in scope, not even for ancient Israelites. Moreover, the legislation in each text cannot entirely be reconciled together. This is most obvious and problematic with respect to the legislation concerning the insects—Leviticus allows for the consumption of certain clean insects where Deuteronomy prohibits all insect consumption (Lev 11:20-23 and Deut 14:19). Therefore, attention is misplaced if it is focused on the dietary advice divorced from the unique language and theology of each text. If we want to learn from these texts, we must focus our attention on the significance of the latter.

Second, we must recognize legal development as a canonical reality and follow the implications for what this implies of divine law as conceived in the Hebrew Bible (Fretheim 2005: 152-56). The fact that Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are ultimately irreconcilable must reflect something of their different circumstances. According to the biblical narrative, a forty year interval separates them. We might say with Fretheim that “God moves with this people on their life’s journey, and God’s will for them changes because they are changing” (2005: 153). Even if the circumstances at the beginning and end of this forty-year interval do not provide the historical circumstances that occasion the differences between them, the development of law within the Pentateuch is a reality with significance for those who see themselves as spiritual heirs

5 According to MacDonald, the evidence suggests the existence of nutritional deficiencies in the diet of ancient Israelites (MacDonald 2008a: 65-68; 2008b: 80-87). These deficiencies do not arise from Israelites failing to adhere to the dietary constraints of Leviticus 11 or Deuteronomy 14.

of these laws. If law can develop within the canon of Scripture as it charts the development of Israel, why should this not continue as the spiritual heirs of these texts continue to develop as well?

The postbiblical formulation of new laws by human beings should be seen as being in tune with the divine intention regarding creational life and well-being evident in biblical law. Because these ever-emerging laws, however, are usually associated with legislatures, courts, and church assemblies and developed by human beings, we tend not to think of them as God's laws: but of course, they are. It may well be that some of these newer laws will stand over against their biblical predecessors, but this would be not unlike their biblical predecessors in, say, Deuteronomy. (Fretheim 2005: 155)

This provides a way forward for taking seriously the theological witness of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 while at the same time addressing concerns that require new insights and the integration of new laws into the life of faith.

How, then, might we look upon Leviticus 11 to speak to the particular questions raised earlier in this essay? In his essay, "Towards an Integrated Reading of the Dietary Laws of Leviticus," Walter Houston moves this kind of discussion forward by evaluating how three interpreters—Philo, Jacob Milgrom, and Mary Douglas—each "view the ritual and morality of Leviticus as parts of a unified whole" and then shares his own reflections on the matter (Houston 2003: 143). For Houston in particular, it is not necessary to find a single principle or ethical system that explains every minutia of these laws; rather, "the dietary laws are part of a much broader structure of moral and cosmological thinking, and serve to maintain not only the specific holiness of Israel in relation to Yahweh, but cosmic righteousness or right order in general" (Houston 2003: 160; cf. 1993: 253-58). Important to this argument is the role of the larger narrative story line of the Pentateuch, specifically the literature that is recognized by scholars as belonging to the Priestly strata of the Pentateuch. To begin with, this includes Genesis 1:26-30

where the primeval situation envisioned is one in which all humanity participates in a vegetarian diet. This text is not, strictly speaking, promoting vegetarianism, something towards which the Hebrew Bible has a generally negative posture (MacDonald 2008b: 25-26; Prov 15:17). Rather, “vegetarianism is a way of describing a world at peace with itself” (Rogerson 2010: 44). As Rogerson capably demonstrates, Genesis 1 stands over against the world humanity creates at the conclusion of the flood narrative (another Priestly text),

This [Genesis 9:1-3] is no longer a vegetarian world at peace with itself. It is a world in which the human race may kill and eat animals provided that they avoid eating their blood (Genesis 9.4). . . . If Genesis 1 and Genesis 6-9 are compared, it will be seen that Genesis 1 is a critique of the world described in 6-9. The former world results from the creative word of God. The world of our experience is a compromise world, born of human wickedness and necessarily adapted to the destructive creature that humanity is, or has become. (Rogerson 2010: 48)

For Rogerson, the story of the Old Testament can be read as a divine project in which humanity is (re)created to live in the kind of world envisioned in Genesis 1 (Rogerson 2010: 48, 171-95).

Eschatological texts like Isaiah 11:6-9 and 65:17-25 contribute to this vision and narrative arc.

As Houston observes, Leviticus 11 functions as one step in this direction:⁶ “It is only when each creature observes its place in the cosmic order, and humanity, in dominion over them all, preserves the place of each, that justice and harmony can be maintained in the world.”

Recognizing this falls short of the primeval or eschatological ideal, he concedes “it is an acceptable substitute” (Houston 2003: 160). The challenge of Leviticus 11 for contemporary people of faith is to invest their own cultural dietary values and traditions with such an orientation.

In my own American context, there is currently great concern for the health and

⁶ Deuteronomy 14 has an altogether different orientation, though exploring the unique language and theology of this text is outside the scope of this essay. In the secondary literature, the place to begin is Mayes, 1994.

wellbeing of both consumers and that which is raised for consumption. Consumers are increasingly overweight and unhealthy, and the way in which we raise our food, both animal and vegetation, gives us cause to question the wholesomeness of our material culture (Davis 2009: “A Wholesome Materiality: Reading Leviticus” 80-100). With these concerns in mind, it should be obvious that American culture would not be served by adopting a “biblical diet,” so-called. But neither should communities of faith believe that, by abandoning the biblical distinctions between clean and unclean animals, they are abandoning the (only) divinely inspired diet. The pursuit of a divinely inspired diet follows the path of law as it develops over time, and invests the laws of one’s culture with the values and ideals that transcend that which is culturally relative in the Hebrew Bible (Houston 2003: 161; cf. 2008). It is not a question of either/or—of USDA or YHWH—but rather both/and. The laws of legislatures, courts, and church assemblies are not absolute (just as the laws in ancient Israel were not!), but when they are understood, critiqued, and invested with the theological vision of Leviticus 11, they are no less divinely inspired.

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