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## THE COVENANT MEAL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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A cursory reading of the Old Testament reveals a frequent mention of meals. It is usual to ascribe this frequency to the characteristic Semitic admiration for hospitality, but a careful examination discloses more radical implications than the mere satisfying of hunger. To the nomad or to the semi-nomad or even to the descendants of nomadic tribes the mention of food immediately suggests a covenant relationship between the partakers. This understanding is abundantly taken advantage of by the story-tellers in the Old Testament and a realisation of the fact by Biblical students might help towards a better understanding of some difficult passages.

The nature of the relationship engendered by the eating of a meal varied greatly, the religious standing of the participators having certain effects. The king, who was Yahweh's anointed, might effect a lifelong treaty with a subject by means of a special meal. In other cases the food-bond lasted but three days (cp. 1 Sam. 30 12. The Egyptian ceased to owe allegiance to the Amalekites after a three day's fast. Having received food from David he felt free to disclose his late masters' whereabouts). It can be safely stated that there is no mention of a meal in the Old Testament which is not accompanied by some significant feature, whose outcome is connected with the feast.

Many of the theophanies in the early records are marked by meals. These are prepared by men and are eaten or disposed of by the angel visitants. But always there follows a mark of

signal favour bestowed upon the host. Abraham entertained "angels unawares" beneath the oak at Mamre and was promised a son. Lot played host to two angels in Sodom and was even willing to sacrifice the honour of his daughters that his visitors should not fall victims to the lust of the men of Sodom; and Lot escaped the city's doom. Not the least part of Sodom's guilt in the eyes of the Semites would be the violation of the laws of hospitality. Gideon prepared a meal for the "angel of Yahweh" (Judges 6) when that visitor came to call him to defend Israel against Midian. Manoah also invited the "angel of Yahweh" to partake of a specially prepared meal and its reception (Judges 13 23) ensured the safety of Samson's father and mother and validated the promise of a son. It should be noted that it is Manoah who prepared the meal and not his wife, though to her the angel came first.

Elijah ate the food prepared by the "angel of Yahweh" (1 K. 19), and "went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights to Horeb." The meal is a guarantee of his safety from the evil machinations of Jezebel.

In two of the cases cited above children were promised by the heavenly visitants. Later the promise of a child came by way of "men of God." To Hannah, taking part in a cult feast at Shiloh, a son was promised by Eli. Samuel was born in due time and was later dedicated (with a gift of food) to the service of the shrine. Elisha, too, promised his Shunammite *hostess* that a son would be born of her.

Development of the cult or a radical change therein was usually marked by a feast. Abraham was initiated into the cultus of El Elyon by Melchizedek King of Salem and the ceremony was marked by a meal of bread and wine (Gen. 14 18). Jacob set up a *maṣṣēbā* to El Shaddai at Beth-el and poured out a libation, a drink offering and oil. He sacrificed to the God of his father Isaac at Beer-sheba on his journey to Egypt and received assurance of a blessing in the land of the Nile.

Several accounts serve to suggest the time from which we may date the allegiance of Israel as a nation to Yahweh. The feast of the Passover marked the deliverance of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt and showed that the nation had

entered into a covenant with their new (?) God. In Ex. 18 there is an account of the coming of Jethro into the camp of the Israelites. Jethro assumed that Yahweh was his God and to Yahweh he offered burnt offerings and sacrifices. To him came "Aaron and all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God." (Moses is not included since he already was a worshipper.) This seems to be a second account of the initiation of Israel into the cultus of Yahweh. A third account of the same act is found in Ex. 24. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy elders were introduced into the very presence of the God of Israel and "they all beheld God and did eat and drink." After the feast Moses received the commissions for the men named as priests of Yahweh. The three accounts of initiatory feasts lend support to those who consider that not all the tribes of Israel were subjected to the Egyptian captivity.

There is no record of a feast taking place when the ark of Yahweh came to Shiloh—mention may have been suppressed in the interests of the Jerusalem cultus,—but when David brought it to Jerusalem, he feasted the whole nation and thus involved all Israel in the acceptance of Jerusalem as the chief centre of the cultus (2 Sam. 6).

Feasts also marked the following incidents:—The opening of Solomon's temple (2 Chr. 7); the institution of the new cultus at Bethel by Jeroboam (1 K. 12); the reform of Josiah (2 Chr. 25); and the reading of the law in the presence of the people (Neh. 8).

A meal at a shrine had to be prepared correctly (1 Sam. 213 ff.); and yet a simple offering of food was considered sufficient to secure the benefits of the altar (1 Sam. 97). Once eaten the altar meal offered the protection of the god to the feaster (1 Sam. 21, cp. 2213 and note that the bread is mentioned first). The significance of David's message to Saul—"Say, David earnestly asked leave of me that he might run to Bethlehem his city, for it is the yearly sacrifice there for all his clan"—lies in the fact that once David had shared in the feast his clansmen were bound to uphold his cause (cp. 2 Sam. 31).

Treaties and bargains were frequently ratified by meals,

which acted as a guarantee of good faith. Jacob secured his father's blessing by craftily inducing him to eat a meal, and thus ratified, the blessing could not be withdrawn (Gen. 27 33). When Esau's birthright passed to Jacob (Gen. 25) the meal provided by Jacob sealed the bargain, but was not necessarily the purchase price.

Other treaties and obligations ratified by meals are: a treaty between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 26 30); a treaty between Jacob and Laban at Mizpah (Gen. 31 54); an alliance between Israel and Moab (Num. 25 2); a covenant made by Joshua with the Gibeonites, an obligation that held in spite of the deceit of one of the parties (Jo. 9).

A significant element in the gruesome story found in Judges 19 reveals the limitations of the covenant imposed by the sharing of a meal. The host felt compelled to protect the Levite but exhibited no feeling of obligation on behalf of the concubine. Moreover he, like Lot, was willing to sacrifice the honour of his daughter rather than that his male guest's safety should be imperilled. These incidents suggest that women were considered to be outside the "pale" of the meal-covenant. Thus we see (a) why the wife of Manoah makes no effort to prepare a meal for the "angel of Yahweh;" (b) why the covenant between Joshua's spies and Rahab of Jericho was not ratified by a meal (Jos. 2); (c) and why the story of Sisera's murder by his *hostess* awakened no feeling of horror in the minds of the hearers (Judg. 4).

The sequel to the story of the Levite and his concubine discloses further implications of the meal covenant (Judges 20 21). One clan failed to contribute to the commissariat of the army assembled to exact vengeance on the perfidious Benjamites. It was this clan that suffered the loss of its men and provided brides for the defeated and excommunicated tribe.

The three hundred selected soldiers of Gideon "took the victuals of the people" when the rest of the ten thousand went to their tents. Indications are not lacking elsewhere that the victualling of an army was looked upon as a sign of an alliance between clans.

The history of David is full of references to meal covenants the implications of which would be quite clear to the Israelites.

A present of food accompanied David to Saul's court and Saul was thereby bound to protect the lad. A sinister light was thus thrown on Saul's subsequent persecution of David, while David's forbearance was calculated to arouse admiration.

Mephibosheth tried to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds when he stayed in Jerusalem and yet sent food to David fleeing before the temporarily successful rebellion of Absalom. He received a *quid pro quo* when David returned to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 19 29). Shobi and Barzillai were more sincere in their support and their contributions of food were kept in remembrance by David. In due time Barzillai's sons were commended to the care of Solomon in the words "and let them be of those that eat at thy table" (1 K. 2 7).

Elisha forbade Jehoram to smite the bewildered Syrians led by a subterfuge into the heart of Samaria (2 K. 6). Bread and water were set before the Syrians and "the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel" (v. 23). A feast sealed the treaty between Jehoshaphat and Ahab on the eve of the battle that brought death to the northern king (2 Chr. 18 2).

The defections of Jahweh's worshippers to other gods were often marked by the mention of a meal, followed by a disaster. Eve ate of a tree that was taboo. Adam shared the meal. Here we seem to have a foreshadowing of many subsequent defections on the part of the nation that had preserved the story. In the story of the exodus we find the people worshipping a golden calf, ascribing their deliverance to it and sitting "down to eat and drink" (Ex. 32 6). Later the Israelites tired of manna, the food of Yahweh, and craved flesh. A plague followed the granting of their request. There is a strong suggestion here of apostasy similar to that recorded in Num. 25 2 when, after eating before Midianitish gods, the Israelites were smitten by a plague.

But when the people entered Palestine, they partook of "the old corn of the land . . . unleavened cakes and parched corn the same day" (Jos. 5 11), thus linking the food of the old religion and the food of the new land. No plague followed, showing that the fruits of Palestine were not taboo.

In 1 Sam. 14 it is recorded that an oracle from Jahweh could not be had because of the violation of a food law.

Saul sealed his pact with the witch at Endor by eating the meal she prepared (1 Sam. 28). The witch thus secured her own safety even though she worshipped at an altar not dedicated to Jahweh. The story, involving Saul in the worship of a strange god, prepares the mind for the coming death of the monarch and the deposition of Saul's family from the kingship.

The importance attached to the meal by the storyteller is vividly shown in 1 K. 13. The "man of God" who prophesied against the altar at Beth-el escaped the vengeance of the king. He declined "to eat bread or drink water," when the placated monarch desired him to accept hospitality (vv. 8, 9). An old prophet at Beth-el finally prevailed upon him to stop and to eat (v. 19). On his way home a lion slew him. Yahweh's protection was withdrawn immediately the prophet had partaken of food with a worshipper at a strange altar.

The great events of family life had close connections with feasts. A feast heralded the birth of Isaac and another marked his weaning (Gen. 21 8). His betrothal feast was conducted by proxy (Gen. 24), but it should be noted that Abraham's servant *would not eat* until his message was delivered. After the negotiations were settled the feast was held (v. 54). There is no record of another feast when Isaac and Rebekah met, just the story of a happy meeting in the gloaming.

A feast marked Jacob's betrothal to Leah, but none occurred on his wedding with Rachel. Reuel invited Moses to eat bread and this is followed by the announcement of the marriage of Zipporah and Moses (Ex. 2 21 f.). Samson's wedding to the Philistine woman was marked by a feast, but the manner of it was strange to the writer of Judges (Judges 14 10). The renewal of the marriage-tie was also marked by a feast (19 4). In Judges 21 we have the record of a betrothal feast on a community scale.

Other significant references to meals in family life are the following: Isaac regularly ate of Esau's venison and this indicated a tribal bond broken only by Rebekah's cunning; Jesse's feasts always bring into prominence the solidarity of the clan.

A coronation feast, if it secured the approval of Yahweh, seems to have involved a lifelong obligation. It is significant

that these feasts began with Saul and ended with Solomon. A coronation feast involved the presence of Yahweh, and all who took part would be bound to recognise all worshippers of Yahweh as coming into a blood relationship. When the kingdom was divided no monarch would care to assume blood responsibility for tribes that were supporting a possibly hostile sovereign.

The experience of Saul is also illuminating, as it suggests what receives support elsewhere, *viz.*, that representatives at a feast could assume obligations for those who had sent them. It also indicates the way in which the difficulties of the practical working of the law in Deut. 16 16 may be solved. Samuel was responsible for four shrines, three of which he had under his own supervision. The fourth at Beer-sheba he placed under the control of his sons. In 1 Sam. 10 we have one record of Saul's coronation at Mizpah. It is probable that the unnamed shrine in chapter 9 was at Mizpah, as Saul was brought into touch with the other two shrines, Beth-el and Gilgal, which were under the jurisdiction of Samuel. At Mizpah Saul was invited to eat with the specially invited guests, who presumably represented those clans who used Mizpah as their sanctuary. He then proceeded on his journey and received *food* from men on their way to Beth-el. He was commanded to wait at Gilgal until Samuel came. Saul's impatience upset Samuel's plans. We can conjecture that by his premature feast, Saul failed to make a covenant with some clans whose dilatoriness had delayed Samuel, perhaps clans that worshipped at Beer-sheba. There was thus a division in the kingdom from the first. Echoes of this are found in chapter 10 27, and in the fact that it was in the neighbourhood of Beer-sheba that David sought a refuge in later days.

The call and coronation of David were both marked by feasts. Samuel came to the house of Jesse and prepared a sacrifice and selected David to be the future king of Israel (1 Sam. 16). But the final ceremony was performed when Abner, commander-in-chief of the armies supporting the house of Saul, convened a meeting of the elders of Israel and Benjamin, and induced them to ask David to become king of the whole nation. With twenty men (representatives of their clans) Abner came to Hebron.



David made a feast (2 Sam. 3 20) of which all partook (cp. 1 Chr. 12, where the number of men pledged to David is given as 340,000). Abner then brought all Israel to David, but there is no mention in 2 Sam. of a feast on that occasion. The treaty-meal had already been observed and the people pledged, by the action of their representatives.

By a *fait accompli* Adonijah sought to oust his rivals from his father's throne. He made a coronation feast attended by Joab and Abiathar the priest. As a counter-action others of David's leaders secured through Bathsheba the support of David for the claim of Solomon. Solomon was anointed by Zadok and was received by the people with exhibitions of extravagant joy (1 K. 1 40); but it is in 1 Chr. 29 22 that we find specific mention of a coronation feast with the curious addition "and they made Solomon . . . king the second time." The last clause of the verse furnishes a probable explanation. The words, "and they anointed Zadok to be priest" suggest that the first coronation was considered to be of doubtful validity, because another high priest was still in office.

Reconciliations often witnessed a feast. Abigail effected a reconciliation with David by inducing him to accept her present of food. News of this reconciliation sent such a thrill of terror through Nabal that in ten days he died (1 Sam. 25).

The feast given to Abner by David established a blood covenant between them (2 Sam. 3). This is recognised in the words, "I and my *kingdom* are guiltless before Yahweh for ever from the blood of Abner; let it fall upon the head of Joab" (v. 28). The historian was careful to note that Joab was not present at the meal and was not therefore bound to respect the obligation. Moreover it is recorded twice that the deed was justified because Abner had slain a brother of Joab (vv. 27, 30). The obligation of David to Abner, which clashes with his obligation to Joab, is fulfilled in the curse he pronounced on the house of Joab (v. 29) and in his commission given on his death-bed to Solomon (1 K. 2 5 f.).

There are other feasts which might be considered. Balak invited Balaam to curse Israel and offered up sacrifices when he arrived, *i. e.* made a feast. When a blessing resulted in

place of the curse expected the enraged king cried: "Now flee thou to thy place," giving Balaam, we may presume, a three days' start, lest he should violate the meal covenant (Num. 24:11). Naomi looked upon the gift of food made by Boaz to Ruth as an acknowledgement of the kinship between the farmer and the Moabitish maid (Ruth 2). David found himself hampered in his plans against Uriah because that warrior had partaken of the king's hospitality. He escaped the legal taint by causing Uriah to be slain by the enemy. Nathan's parable which was elicited by this may contain an allusion to the meal-bond. As all members of a village were entitled to eat of a sacrificed animal (and all animals slain for food were sacrifices) the "elder" would have a right to say whose turn it was to supply the animal for the reception of a guest by the village. Thus the choice of the poor man's lamb may not have been illegal, but it was brutally selfish. So could the conduct of David be regarded.

We see then that meals are mentioned in connection with almost every phase of life. In every case they add something to the atmosphere of the story. They carry us back to the time when the pervading presence of God was very real to all men. The desire to avoid offences against Him impelled a respect from which much of our morality has evolved. Fear stayed the hand of Balak from slaying Balaam; a magnanimous spirit caused David to refrain from killing Saul; but the true meaning of the impulse is understood only when we hear the words of Jesus, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do." The "fear of God" is the sanction that has produced this trait. Loyalty, forgiveness of an injury done by a guest, care for the loved ones and of those who have eaten a covenant meal,—all these seem to spring from a common root. He that eats with another has God present as a third guest and, in a mysterious way, he and that other have actually a part of God within them.