

Gluttons, drunks and fools

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Reconstruction of an ancient olive press, Hazor, North Israel.

(PhysOrg.com) -- An academic from the University of St Andrews has delved into the Bible to provide food for thought on the subject of eating and drinking.

In the new study Dr Nathan MacDonald from the School of Divinity has examined some of the rich imagery about food and drink in the Old Testament.

The research will contribute towards a better appreciation of the lives and ideas of ancient Israelites, as well as shedding new light on many parts of the Bible.

Dr MacDonald commented, "Too often the Bible has only been read for

its profound intellectual and spiritual ideas, and the apparently mundane matters relating to food and physical appetite have been overlooked. But for the ancient Israelites most of their lives were spent in growing and processing food.

"As a result different foods and the acts of eating and feasting become some of the most important symbols in the Bible. There is hardly a page in the Bible that does not mention food in some way."

In his research, Dr MacDonald highlights the important role food played in expressing national identity.

He explained, "Using food as a means of national characterization and ridicule is well known. The British label the French frogs, and are called les rosbifs in return. Such insults have a long pedigree.

"In the centuries before Jesus a number of Jewish writers wrote stories which mock the Persians for their enormous feasts. The Persian kings and nobles are presented as gluttons, obsessed by their bellies, making stupid decisions whilst drunk. In contrast Jewish heroes such as Daniel, Esther and Judith control their appetites."

In these satirical stories Dr Macdonald has shown how Jewish writers were, on the one hand, borrowing ideas from the Greek intellectuals, whilst on the other, sharply distinguishing themselves from the Greeks.

"What is fascinating is that the ideas are borrowed from earlier Greek literature," continued Dr MacDonald. "Greek writers frequently contrasted their modest diets with Persian gluttony.

"Yet these Jewish stories are being composed around the very same time that Judaism is in an epic struggle with Greek culture. Most people are familiar with the Jewish dietary laws, which have been so important to

Jewish identity. These became central to Jewish practice during the time of Greek dominance when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple and sacrificed a pig on the altar.

"The oppression of the Jews included being forced to eat unclean meat according to the book of Maccabees. In response, keeping the dietary laws becomes an expression of anti-hellenism. Thus, Jewish responses to Greek influences are far more complex than they appear at first glance."

Dr MacDonald's work is part of a growing interest in food amongst academics, an interest shared more widely amongst the public.

"Everyone is interested today in food miles, what goes into our food, and whether there will be enough to go around", said Dr MacDonald. "The concerns of ancient people can be different, but they can also be strangely familiar."

"Occasionally Christians have been tempted to view food and the body as unimportant. I hope my work shows just how important food and eating are in the Bible. As churches and Christians think about modern food issues, they should not forget that the Bible may have something to say to our modern concerns."

Dr MacDonald's book 'Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament' is published by Oxford University Press.

Provided by University of St Andrews

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