


Food, memory and cultural-religious identity in the story of the 'desirers' (Nm 11:4–6)

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This article examines the nutritional and cultural meaning underlying the list of foods mentioned in the claims of the Israelites in Numbers 11:4–6. The foods eaten by the Israelites in Egypt express stability and a familiar routine, whilst the foods of Eretz Israel, although depicted as choicer, express uncertainty. The list of foods has a literary role on several spheres: (1) The foods are elements distinguishing the agricultural practices in Eretz Israel and Egypt. (2) Fish and vegetables are an indicator of the low class of the Israelites – eating fish reflects the practice of obtaining protein from small animals available to the poor. In Egypt, vegetables were more readily available and were a more prominent ingredient in the diet of the poor and slaves. (3) The food is an indicator of the Egyptian cultural identity of the Israelites – the Bible identifies the longing for the fish and vegetables characteristic of their Egyptian diet as a sign of the Israelites' cultural and mental affiliation with Egypt. Although they left Egypt physically, they remained affiliated with Egyptian culture and identity.

Contribution: This article contributes to the understanding of the biblical story of the 'desirers' (Nm 11:4–6) from a multidisciplinary perspective. It combines the fields of ancient Egyptian agriculture, nutrition, culture and research on features of immigrants' foods.

Keywords: Numbers 11:4–6; food in Antiquity; ancient Egyptian agriculture; ancient Egyptian food; food in the Bible; foods of slaves; diet and identity; diet and belonging; manna; food and migration.

Introduction

The biblical narrator devotes a great deal of attention to the events that occurred to the Israelites from the time they left Egypt until arriving in Eretz Israel. The 40 years of wandering and tribulations in the desolate and arid Sinai Desert were a challenging time for Moses and for the Israelites, both physically and spiritually.

Among other things, Moses was compelled to deal with the arguments and complaints of the Israelites resulting from the harsh desert conditions – the lack of water (Ex 17:1–7; Nm 20:2–13) and exposure to undrinkable water sources (Ex 15:22–26), demands for food (Nm 21:5), snake bites (Nm 21:7–9) and others.

In Numbers 11:4–6, the scriptures describe the Israelites' complaints concerning the manna:

[T]he rabble [*asafsuf*] with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish [*daga*] we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers [*kishuim*], melons [*avatihim*], leeks [*hatzir*], onions [*betzalim*] and garlic [*shunim*]. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'¹

The first to complain about the manna were the 'rabble', and then the feelings of frustration and rage began to spread among all the Israelites (on the identification of the *asafsuf* with the *erev rav*, see Ibn Ezra 1976:143; Onkelos 1884:160). The word *asafsuf* is a biblical hapax legomenon. At first glance, it appears that the rabble are a radical marginal group within the Israelite collective. However, in the traditional post-biblical commentaries, this group is identified as a mixed multitude (*erev rav*), that is, Egyptians who for various reasons had left Egypt with the Israelites (Ex 12:38). Even if we accept this interpretation, it is clear that these were people with a low or average status within Egyptian society and not wealthy people of high status, as the latter preferred to remain in Egypt.

1. The English translation is according to the Revised Standard Version (RSV). On literary analysis of the story, see Ashley 1993:208–209, Beirne 1963:201–203, Cassuto 1973:41–45, Cole 2000:185, Goringe 2005:12–14, Gray 1903:102–106, Le 1993:321–322, Milgrom 1990:84–85 and Noth 1968:85–87.

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Manna is described in the Bible as a food that descended from heaven miraculously (Nm 11:9). After a while, however, the Israelites decided that they had had enough of it, claiming that it was a monotonous food that they had no choice but to eat every day for a lengthy period. As an antithesis to the manna, the Israelites longingly spoke of various types of food that they had eaten whilst in Egypt, but there is a significant discrepancy between the fairly simple food they had eaten and their current demand for meat. In contrast to the story of the bitter water (*mei mara*), where the reason for the complaint was accompanied by a justification – the lack of drinkable water (Ex 15:22–24) – the demand for meat had no real vital justification. The scriptures state explicitly that the reason for the demand was ‘desire’ (*ta’ava*), and this is accentuated by words from the root *tav* that recur five times in the story of the desiring (Nm 11:4, 33–35).

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this article is to examine the nutritional and cultural meaning underlying the list of foods mentioned in the claims of the rabble. We shall address several questions:

1. What is the correct identification of the agricultural crops mentioned? What do they have in common?
2. Why do the foods mentioned constitute an antithesis to the manna? What do these foods characterise – slavery or Egyptian agriculture in general?
3. What meaning do these foods occupy in the collective memory of the Israelites, characterised as they are as a migrant society?

List of Egyptian foods – Identification and historical background

The Israelites mention six types of food that they had eaten in Egypt in the following order: *daga*, *kishuim*, *avatihim*, *hatzir*, *betzalim* and *shumim*. The initial classification of these foods is by their origins in the natural world – fish from the animal world and the rest of the products from the plant world. The agricultural crops can be classified as belonging to two separate groups: field crops from the family Cucurbitaceae (*kishuim* and *avatihim*) and hot vegetables (*hatzir*, *betzalim* and *shumim*). Next we present the identification of the foods mentioned and discuss their nutritional significance.

Fish

The term *daga* in the Bible is a singular noun (Jnh 2:2), but it also used as a collective noun (Ex 7:21). In our case, the first meaning is clearly the relevant one. The Israelites emphasised that fish were consumed in Egypt ‘at no cost’; in other words, fish were caught in open waters and not purchased with money. The Nile River provided an abundance of fish, and these constituted an important nutritional and economic source (Brewer & Friedman 1989; Curtis 2001:173). The bountiful fish and the manner of fishing in the Nile are evident from Egyptian wall drawings, papyri (e.g. Papyrus

Lansing; see Lichtheim 2006:173) and the biblical text that describes the fatal damage inflicted on the fish during the plague of blood and subsequent disastrous natural events (see Ex 7:21, Ps 105:29 and compare Ezk 29:4; on the harm to the Nile’s economy in years of drought when the sources of the Nile ran dry, see Is 19:8; Hab 1:15–16). The praise of Egypt’s fish was sung throughout the ancient world, and various types of fish were exported to neighbouring countries. For example, remnants of Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*) bones were found in archaeological sites in the Eastern Mediterranean dating at least from the beginning of the Late Bronze period (16th – 12th centuries BC) (see Bouchnick et al. 2009:97–118; VanNeer et al. 2004:101–148).

Cucumber

This is clearly not the modern *Cucurbita pepo*, which was brought from the New World (North America), but rather an ancient domesticated crop. Modern researchers customarily identify the *kishuim* in the list with the hairy cucumber (*Cucumis melo* var. *chate* = *C. melo* convar. *adzhur* = *Cucumis melo* var. *flexuosus*), a type of melon that is known by the Arabic name faqqūs (فُقُوس) (Amar 2012; Janick, Paris & Parrish 2007:1441–1457; Kisleev 2013:447–496). The different species of melon are divided into sweet and unsweet, and the hairy cucumber belongs to the latter group (Amar & Lev 2011:193–204).

Melon/watermelon

Avatihim appears to be a collective noun for watermelons (*Citrullus lanatus* = *C. vulgaris*) and sweet melons (*Cucumis melo*). Seed remnants of these two crops were found in graves and digs at Egyptian sites, and botanical archaeological evidence indicates that they were cultivated in Egypt beginning in the second millennium BC. Watermelons and melons also appear in illustrations on several royal graves in ancient Egypt (Ikram 2001; on melon and the watermelon in ancient world, see Arnon 1990, vol. XII, 69–71; Smart & Simmonds 1995:92–94; Zohary & Hopf 1994:181–183; on the watermelon in the Bible, see Felix 1976:164; Löw 1924–1934, vol. I:551–553).

Leek

The term *hatzir* is mentioned in the Bible about 20 times, mainly to designate green grass used as food for animals (see e.g. 1 Ki 18:5; Job 40:15). In the context of human food in Egypt this meaning is irrelevant, and many of the translations, traditional commentators and modern researchers identify it with the leek (*Allium porrum*). This is a tall plant with an elongated white tuber whose long green leaves were apparently the reason for its biblical name, because of the visual similarity to green grass. The leek is an ancient Mediterranean crop that was known in Egypt, Greece and Rome (on the leek in the Bible, see Löw 1924–1934, vol. II:131–138). Archaeological finds show that leeks were cultivated in Egypt, but apparently only from the late New Kingdom period (Ikram 2001).

Onions

The *betzalim* in the Bible may be identified beyond doubt as onions (*Allium cepa*), an ancient domesticated crop grown in irrigated agriculture, eaten in fresh and dried form, and utilised to prepare uncooked and cooked dishes (on the onion in the Bible, see Felix 1976:169–170; Löw 1924–1934, vol. II:125–131). The bulb onion originates from central Asia, and it was known in India, Greece and Eretz Israel (Nutman 1990b:80–81; Zohary & Hopf 1994:185).

Historical and archaeological sources indicate that onions and garlic were important domesticated crops in Egyptian agriculture and a common ingredient in the local diet (Ikram 2001). Evidence of their popularity remains in beliefs popular as early as the Roman period. They were considered sacred vegetables that the Egyptians would swear by, and some even prohibited their consumption, similar to sheep meat (Friedheim 2017:93–95; Juvenal 1918:Satire XV; Plinius 1956, vol. XIX: 101, 110).

Garlic

Shumim is identified with certainty as garlic (*Allium sativum*). This species originates from Central Asia. It was a well-known domesticated crop in the Fertile Crescent, in ancient Egypt, and was common in Rome in the classical period (Nutman 1990a:81; Smart & Simmonds 1995:344–350; on garlic in the Bible, see Felix 1976:72; Löw 1924–1934, vol. II:138–148). Garlic is eaten raw or used to flavour dishes, and organic remnants of garlic were found in graves in Egypt, particularly that of Tutankhamun (14th century BC, 18th dynasty) (Ikram 2001).

Herodotus (1920, vol. II:6, 125), who visited Egypt in the 5th century BC, tells of an inscription on one of the pyramids that mentions garlic and onion as the food of the slaves who built the pyramids. He writes: ‘There are writings on the pyramid in Egyptian characters indicating how much was spent on radishes and onions and garlic for the workmen’. The inscription indicates that garlic and onion were a popular food among slaves, as evident from the words of the complainers. Indeed, Herodotus’ testimony dates later than the biblical period and the stories of the complainers, but it may reflect the place of savoury vegetables among slaves in general. Radishes are not mentioned in the list cited by the complainers although they were a known vegetable in ancient Egypt (Ikram 2001), perhaps because the Bible focused on the most prominent savoury vegetables, and from this respect, radishes were less important than onions and garlic.

The nutritional meaning of the list of the Egyptian foods

The Egyptian foods are listed by order of significance (in descending order). First mentioned are the fish, because they are the most important, nutritious (animal protein) and desired. Then come field crops, which are juicy fruits, and

finally the simplest, three species of hot and savoury vegetables. Assumedly, each of the foods mentioned had a culinary role in the Israelites’ meals and diet in Egypt. Fish are eaten as a main dish. Leeks, and particularly savoury vegetables, are used as a piquant addition to bread (cheap entrées) as well as for cooking (Ikram 2001). Watermelons and melons contain a high liquid volume and may quench one’s thirst in the hot Egyptian climate. Because of their sweetness, it is to be assumed that they were consumed as a dessert or for pleasure.

Historical studies, based on texts, inscriptions, wall drawings and organic food remnants found at archaeological sites, indicate that the average diet in Egypt consisted mainly of bread, beer, fish, legumes, milk and milk products (cheese, butter), meat from hunting and from farm animals, fruit, vegetables and honey (Curtis 2001:99–177; Ikram 2001; on olive oil imported from the Middle East, see Hawass 2006:165). The foods mentioned by the complainers are not sufficient to comprise a full and healthy diet, so this is clearly only a partial list. The question is: Why did the biblical narrator describe the complainers as mentioning these foods specifically whilst leaving out others that were more important? For instance bread, a basic food in ancient Egypt, is not mentioned in the list of foods (on grains and preparation of different types of bread in Egypt, see Darby, Ghalioungui & Grivetti 1977:506–525; Dixon 1969; Samuel 1989, 1993, 1996b, 1999, 2001).

Cattle breeding was an important source of income in Egypt, but the text does not mention milk or milk products (see Gn 41:2; Boessneck 1988; Brewer, Redford & Redford 1994; Clutton-Brock 1993:61–70; Curtis 2001:173; Ghoneim 1977). No beverages are mentioned, and particularly absent is beer, a common beverage in Egypt among all social classes (on beer consumption in Pharaonic times, see Geller 1992:19–26; Homan 2004:84–95; Samuel 1996:3–12). Moreover, a conspicuous fact is that the list includes field vegetables and crops but mentions no fruit trees, as we shall discuss below.

The Bible is a book of theology, religion and morals. Hence, the occurrences and plots it contains specify only random information related to material culture (Felix 1994:10). The biblical literature constitutes a considerable source of information on meals and types of food eaten in Eretz Israel, Mesopotamia and Egypt in ancient times (on food and meals in the biblical literature, see Arrington 1959:816–820; Brothwell & Brothwell 1997:147–144; Felix 1994; Haran 1962, vol. IV:543–558; MacDonald 2008:69–47). However, because of his theological aims, the biblical narrator often intentionally disregards the ingredients of meals, using the general phrase ‘bread’ (in the biblical literature the term ‘bread’ is a collective designation for various types of food, an entire meal, a tax; or a stipend; see Licht 1962, vol. IV:487–493). Nonetheless, when the types of food are significant for the plot or may enhance the message that the biblical narrator wishes to convey to the reader, he expands and specifies the different ingredients.

Examples of this are the detailed ingredients of the meal that Abraham prepared for his guests (both quantitatively and qualitatively), indicating his generosity and hospitality (Gn 18:5–8), as well as the food products served in King Solomon's royal kitchen, which testify to his capacity and economic might (1 Ki 5:2–4; on the consumption of meat in the Egyptian palaces, see Ikram 1995:199–230). In the same way, the Bible does not mention food products that were obvious or that were not unique and therefore there was no reason to note them. Namely, in our story on the types of food consumed in Egypt, the assumption is that the Bible focuses on foods that represented and were characteristic of Egyptian agriculture and cuisine, as through these the reader may better understand the root of the claims made by those who desired meat.

The list of the foods as expression to the oppositeness between Egypt the desert and Eretz Israel

The vegetables in Egypt as an antithesis to the manna eaten in the desert – Past versus present

In the current story, the Israelites cite a detailed and 'diverse' list of Egyptian foods as an antithesis to the only food they ate in the desert – the manna (on the phenomenon of manna according to scientific research, see Bodenheimer 1947:1–6, 1957, vol. II:297–302; El-Gammal 1994:17–19). Namely, the Israelites miss the foods they ate in Egypt in the past because the manna does not satisfy them. In order to refute the false claims brought by the desirers concerning the disadvantages of the manna, the scriptures stress its virtues and unique qualities. They describe its round shape that resembles white coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*) seeds, its aesthetic appearance, its subtle taste and the fact that it could be prepared in various culinary forms – by grinding, cooking and for preparing cakes (Nm 11:8). A parallel source further adds that its colour was white and its taste sweet and that it had a solid texture but melted in the sun (Ex 16:21, 31).

The downside of the manna was that it had a short shelf life. It could not be accumulated and stored as it would spoil and become wormy (Ex 16:20). It was gathered every day anew, but the amount gathered was predetermined (Ex 16:16–18). Hence, a diet based on manna generated a sense of uncertainty regarding the future and absolute dependence on God. In contrast, the vegetables in Egypt, watered by the abundant Nile, reflected a stable and long-term economy and nutrition.

The Israelites complained that the manna was 'drying out' their soul (Nm 11:6). Many commentaries were suggested to the phrase *nafshenu yevvesha* – 'our gullets are shriveled' (NJPS)/'our strength is dried up' (RSV, NRSV, ESV); 'our throats are dry' (Noth 1968:86)/'we are dehydrated' (Cole 2000:185 and at length Hamilton 1982:333–334; Baker, Brueggemann & Merrill 2008, vol. II:291–292). It seems that the meaning of 'drying out' the soul is that repeatedly eating a certain food (a one-meal menu) is a 'boring' culinary experience. A rich and varied diet is not only more nutritious

but might also be good for one's mood. Whilst fish and vegetables come in varied flavours – sweet, savoury or neutral (cucumbers or fish whose flavour depends on their mode of preparation) – the manna has only one flavour – sweet.

It may be proposed that the phrase 'our soul is dried out' (*nafshenu yevvesha*) is related to the dry texture of the manna, in contrast to the 'moist' nature of fish and of the juicy vegetables, particularly the watermelon and the melon, that quench the thirsty soul. The 'dryness' related to the manna may also be associated with the symbolic identification of the manna with the arid and hot desert surrounding them. The Bible relates that the Israelites had not been familiar with the manna when they were in Egypt and that it ceased to appear when they entered the land of Israel (Ex 16:15; Jos 5:12). Namely, it was a conspicuous nutritional feature of the period of wandering in the Sinai Desert. In contrast, the foods mentioned by the complainers are linked to the Nile. The fish that live in its water and the vegetables intensively watered by it create an association of humidity and freshness. Hence, the Egyptian foods were not only a component of the diet, but rather they reflected memories of places and experiences associated with the landscapes and culture that the Israelites had left for the desert.

The list of vegetables as characteristic of Egyptian agriculture – Past versus future

As the description continues, it becomes evident that the foods of the past are not only a culinary antithesis to the manna but rather are associated with longing for the Egyptian style of life and agricultural reality. When God announces to Moses that he will provide the Israelites with meat, he adds an insight not mentioned in their original complaint: 'you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, "Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt"' (Nm 11:18 [RSV]). The idea of returning to Egypt or the statement that Egypt is a good land and even 'a land of milk and honey' are nothing new (see Nm 14:3–4; Nm 16:13). The Israelites' longing for Egyptian food reveals their rootedness and connection to the Egyptian existence and culture and indicates their strong doubts regarding the plan to enter the land of Israel and conquer it.

The meaning of the Israelites' declaration that they had had a good life in Egypt also indicates that they are not interested in a new agricultural, and mainly theological-religious reality in Eretz Israel. In several incidents during the Israelites' wandering in the desert, Moses addresses the differences between the agriculture and crops in Egypt and in Eretz Israel and the advantages of the latter. A conspicuous example is Deuteronomy 11:1–12:

[F]or the land which you are entering to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your feet, like a garden of vegetables; but the land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land which the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of

the LORD your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

Vegetable gardens in Egypt are irrigated by the flooding of the Nile following the summer rains (from June to September (that descend from the Blue and White Nile. When the water level is low, the fields are watered by means of pumps, such as the *shaduf* (شادوف), or through a network of canals, a method suitable for flat areas (on this agricultural method in traditional regions in Egypt, see Dalman 1928–1942, vol. II:223; Felix 1991:301–306; Schnebel 1925:72; Wiedemann 1920:24). In contrast, Eretz Israel is a land of hills and valleys, and its fields and groves are watered by rains that cover extensive areas. This method of irrigation spares the hard work involved in drawing water when the water level is particularly low.

The verse concluding the section quoted emphasises the advantage of Eretz Israel not only in the material sphere but also theologically, as God is present and supervises it. According to the context, its theological advantage may be related specifically to the rains. Rain is an irregular and uncertain resource, and therefore this encourages prayers and contact with God. In contrast, a regular supply of water, as in the Nile, although allegedly preferable from an agricultural respect, prevents human dependency and affiliation with God and might result in their separation (Feliks 1992:76).

The rain-fed agriculture of Eretz Israel specialises in cultivating fruit trees, which in the Bible were considered choicer than vegetables. For example, Moses instructs the spies headed to the land of Canaan to inspect whether there are fruit trees, and he also orders them to bring back some of the fruit, as they indeed do (Nm 13:17–26). Showing proof of the existence of fruit trees was aimed at establishing the agricultural advantage of Eretz Israel versus the focus on growing vegetables in Egypt.

Egyptian agriculture, in contrast, is based mainly on irrigated crops, of which the most conspicuous branch is vegetables. The difference between the two types of farming is that trees could not be cultivated on a large scale by flooding groves with water from the Nile as then the roots would rot. (As of 1960, fruit trees in Egypt occupied less than one per cent of all land utilised for crops; see Feliks 1992:78; Horowitz 1966:32.) In contrast, cultivating vegetables in this manner is optimal, as vegetables need intensive and regular irrigation. Domesticated fruit trees were grown in ancient Egypt, for instance dates (the most common fruit in ancient Egypt), figs, sycamores, grapevines, dom palm nuts (*Hyphaene thebaica*) and *nabk* (in Arabic: نَبَاق [the fruits of Christ's thorn, jujube] [*Ziziphus spina-christi*]) (Ikram 2001).

Nonetheless, as stated by Feliks, fruit trees were cultivated in Egypt to a limited degree on elevated plots above the flat agricultural area alongside the Nile (Felix 1994:41; on grapevine crops, producing wine and the place of the wine in the diet and religion in ancient Egypt, see Lesko 1977;

Poo 1995). Feliks (1992:78) also suggests that the five types of vegetables that the Israelites listed are an 'antithetical list' to the five species of fruit in the seven species for which Eretz Israel was known (Dt 8:8).

Accordingly, Egypt and Eretz Israel differ not only in the nature of the food products (vegetables versus fruit) but also in the type of agriculture (irrigated farming versus rain-fed farming). Moreover, the material culture is underpinned by a theological difference. Eretz Israel, which depends on the rains, encourages farmers to maintain a connection with God, whilst the complainers' preference for Egypt indicates that they do not desire a connection with God.

The agricultural and hydrological characteristics of Eretz Israel and Egypt are evident also in another complaint of the Israelites, in the story of *mei Meriva*:

[A]nd why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for *zera[im]*, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink. (Nm 20:5)

The Sinai Desert is not 'a place of *zeraim*' (grains and vegetables), as familiar to them from Egypt, nor a place with choice fruit trees (figs, grapes, pomegranates) as in the promised land, and it also lacks water – unlike Egypt, which has a river, and unlike Eretz Israel, which is watered by the rain.

The list of foods – Simple components in the diet of slaves

The list of foods fondly remembered by the Israelites is a testimony to the poor diet of a society or community with a low socio-economic status. They have high regard for these foods because that is what they were accustomed to, and therefore they arouse good memories.

Fish versus meat

The Israelites demand that Moses provide them with meat, although they brought a large number of livestock with them from Egypt, not to mention that meat is not a basic need (Ex 12:38). It is obvious that they are not interested in obtaining meat from their own animals but covet free meat, similar to the fish they ate at no cost in Egypt. The Israelites' demand for meat appears in Exodus 16:3 as well, but there it is formulated in a more demanding and radical manner:

[W]ould that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.

The Israelites are concerned about 'dying of hunger', and as a solution they demand meat. They do not make do with simple foods, but they desire meat, which they claim to have eaten in Egypt. In contrast to the story of the complainers, who remember eating fish, which may indeed reflect actual circumstances, in the story in Exodus the Israelites remember sitting around pots of meat in Egypt – alluding to calm,

lengthy, unconcerned eating, resembling masters. Moreover, they note that they were sated by the meat, in other words they consumed large quantities of meat. Indeed? This description arouses two queries.

First, in the ancient world, eating meat was typical of members of the higher classes and certainly not of slaves. (Choice meat occupies a prominent place in the cuisine of kings in the ancient East. An example is the various types of meat served on King Solomon's table; see 1 Kings 5:3). In daily life, most people could not afford meat, and it was considered a luxury, as household animals were raised for their produce (milk, wool) as well as for agricultural work. The demand for meat, a status symbol of the upper classes, contradicts the poor food of a slave society. This fact explains the phrase 'had a strong desire' (*hithavu ta'ava*), used by the Bible to describe their request, which exceeds the boundaries of their social class and of their real circumstances. Namely, they are controlled by their urges and passionate to gratify their cravings, rather than acting on a real need that takes into account their social status.

Second, according to the Bible, the Egyptians considered eating meat an abomination. In the story of the encounter between Joseph and his brothers in the palace, the Hebrews are described as eating meat separately from the Egyptians, who avoided meat (Gn 46:34). In Exodus 8:22, Moses claims that slaughtering sheep and cattle might endanger the Israelites as it might insult the Egyptians' feelings ('If we sacrifice offerings abominable to the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?'). Hence, as slaves from a low social class, the Israelites avoided eating meat in public for concern that they would be harmed.²

It is hard to assume that the Israelites ate no meat at all. In the same way, the description of sitting around the pots and eating large quantities of meat ('to the full') is certainly exaggerated. The thickets on the banks of the Nile were home to many animals that may have been hunted for their meat (Ikram 2001). The Israelites probably varied their diet by fishing and hunting small mammals and birds, as customary among poor people in Egypt, in contrast to the rich, who hunted larger animals mainly for sport (Ikram 2001). It appears that only fish were mentioned in Numbers 11:4 because this was the most common meat, most typical of their food. In contrast, meat (obtained by hunting rather than

from farm animals) was in limited supply, but they described this marginal culinary experience with a great deal of exaggeration.

The Israelites seem to crave the meat of beasts, considered particularly choice in the ancient world. In the miracle that follows, they received quail (*Coturnix*) meat, referring to a small bird that migrates from Europe to Africa through the Mediterranean and back (on the migration of quails, see Braslavsky 1946:339–347; Paz 1987:8–11). The Israelites' eagerness for meat ended badly. As related further on in the story, consumption of the quail meat resulted in a grave epidemic with many victims, and the educational message conveyed by the scriptures is that lustful eating leads to sickness (on poisoning caused by eating the migrated quails, see Kennedy & Grivetti 1980:15–41; Korkmaz et al. 2008; Lewis, Metallinos-Katzaras & Grivetti 1987).

Vegetables versus fruit

Vegetables occupied a major part of the diet in ancient Egypt. On this culinary reality writes Salima Ikram (2001):

[A] large portion of the Egyptian diet was comprised of fruits and vegetables, and their by-products. These were more readily available than meat to the average Egyptian, and consequently the main source of nourishment after bread and beer (that were the two staples of the Egyptian diet). (p. 393)

The list of vegetables known to have been available in ancient Egypt is fairly extensive, and it includes garlic, onions, radishes, scallions, garden leek, Egyptian lettuce, celery, cucumbers, melons and watermelons (Ikram 2001). Fruit grew in Egypt, as stated, on a limited basis relative to Eretz Israel (with the exception of dates; see Shemesh 2002), and Felix' assumption that they were more expensive and consumed mainly by the higher classes is reasonable (Felix 1994:41). The absence of fruit from the food list of the desirers and the focus on vegetables is not accidental. It reflects the diet of a lower class, as in the ancient world vegetables were considered the least significant of all foods (see Broshi 1987:15–32). According to Philo (2017, vols. I, XV:79, 308) of Alexandria, the Israelites expressed a longing for the foods they ate in Egypt although these had bad health features.

Conclusion

The foods eaten by the Israelites in Egypt are presented in Numbers 11:5 and in other places in the Bible as a distinguishing element between Egypt and the desert or the land of Israel. The period spent in the Sinai Desert aroused quite a few existential and theological difficulties – a lack of water, insufficient food, side by side with doubts as to the ability of God to deliver them to the promised land. Further Eretz Israel, the destination of the Israelites was an unknown country that aroused questions. Moses promised them that they would reach a better and choicer land than Egypt. However, they preferred the familiar – Egypt, where they had lived and which they knew – over an unclear future in Eretz Israel. Hence, the foods of the past express stability and

2. Herodotus' (1920, vol. II:41) later testimony also indicates that the Egyptians refrained from eating certain animals, such as cows that were sacred to the Goddess Isis and therefore served only for ritual purposes. However, the researchers showed that the ancient Egyptians did eat various animals. Salima Ikram (2001:390) writes: 'The Egyptians ate both wild and domestic animal meat. In the lush environment of the Predynastic period when more wild species were present, hunting was the main source of meat. Antelope, gazelle, hippopotamus, crocodile, pig, ostrich, waterfowl, riverine and marine fish, small game, hyena, wild ass, sheep, goats, and wild cattle were all consumed [...] The Egyptians' main domesticates were: sheep and goats, cattle, donkeys, pigs, and poultry' (see also Hecker 1982:59–71). Moreover, excavations of the residential area occupied by the pyramid builders in the city of Giza (4th dynasty, 2575–2465 BC (indicate that members of the lower class ate meat, too. The archeological finds present evidence of large numbers of oxen, pigs and sheep slaughtered (175 000 bones and bone fragments), which according to the researchers may have provided meat on a daily basis for the laborers or slaves who built the large pyramid. See Hawass 2006:157–178; Redding and Hunt 2006. Evidence of eating or avoiding meat can be found in different periods and places in Egypt. Namely, there were probably different customs in this respect, and no uniform reality can be indicated.

a familiar routine, whilst the foods in Eretz Israel, although depicted as choicer, express uncertainty.

In light of the above, it appears that the list of foods in the story of the complainers has a literary role in several spheres.

Food as a distinguishing element between the agricultural practices in Eretz Israel and Egypt

Because of its regular water sources, Egypt is characterised as a land of fish and vegetables ('seeds' or 'vegetable garden' in Nm 11:10). Fruit trees indeed grew in Egypt but to a limited extent, and they had a less conspicuous place than vegetables in agriculture and in people's diet. Then again, vegetables were also present in the Eretz Israel diet, but fruit trees, particularly those cultivated by rain-fed agriculture, were more conspicuous and characteristic (Felix 1992:76–78).

Food as an indicator of low sociological class

The emphasis on fish and vegetables in the diet of the complainers, which may be an intentional literary adaptation by the biblical narrator, is a classical feature of the diet of the lower classes in Egypt. This list of foods accentuates the discrepancy between their request for meat and their customary food. Eating fish reflects the practice of obtaining protein from small animals available to the poor. As seen in the Bible, the fruit typical of Eretz Israel is considered preferable to vegetables. In Egypt, vegetables were more readily available and were a more prominent ingredient in the diet of the poor and of slaves. In contrast, fruits, particularly of Mediterranean origin, were more expensive and were normally consumed mostly by people from the higher classes (Felix 1994:41).

Food as indicating an Egyptian cultural identity

The Bible identifies the longing for fish and vegetables characteristic of the Egyptian diet as a sign of the Israelites' cultural and mental affiliation with Egypt. Although they left Egypt physically, they remained affiliated with the Egyptian culture and identity. Hence, they must become liberated from their past and proceed towards the future, which requires them to forge a new Israeli identity.

In his book *The Physiology of Taste*, the French gourmet Brillat-Savarin (1755–1826) coined the well-known saying, 'Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are' (compare to the words of Sutton [2001:7]: if '[w]e are what we eat' then '[w]e are what we ate'). This saying is based on the insight that a society's food and eating patterns are conspicuous components of their ethnic culture and identity (religious beliefs, social structure and gender roles). Culinary culture is an important element of social belonging, part of the structuring of identity, and it maintains the community's social and cultural uniqueness. The food sources, role divisions involved in preparing food and how it is eaten reflect explicit and implicit social codes and may attest to the texture of family, community and national life (on the

connection between food, culture and ethnic identity, see Bailey 2017:51–60; Counihan & Van Esterik 2013:1–15).

The scientific field of the sociology of food refers extensively to the transformations and changes in the food culture of migrants, as well as to their impact on the destination society (Abbots 2016:115–132; Gabaccia 1998; Halloran 2016). Many of these studies indeed deal with migration processes in the modern era, but their sociological and psychological characteristics are relevant for all people and societies. Studies indicate that members of the first generation of migration tend to preserve the traditional cuisine and eating habits familiar from their country of origin. In contrast, members of the second and third generations, who become gradually assimilated into the culture of the destination country, tend to change their traditional eating patterns. For the members of the first generation of migration, food is a means utilized by migrants to maintain their ethnic identity, and they tend to cling to the food of the past – its sources, flavours, aroma, which differ from the food of the destination society (Ray 2004; Sabar & Posner 2013:197–222; Sutton 2001).

On this issue, Laura Terragni and Gun Roos (2018) write:

When move, they not only bring their food with them but also their representations and ideals related to foods that are 'good' to eat. The memories of food from home, the ideals of good food and the food that is available in a new country shape immigrants' food-related experiences. (p. 1)

The Israelites' longing for the food in Egypt is an ancient example of how a migrant society deals with changes in the food culture. When in the Sinai Desert, the Israelites were compelled to eat manna, food with which they had not been previously acquainted and that was foreign to them. In contrast to the simple and crude food of Egypt that marked them as slaves, the manna was a miraculous phenomenon ('food from heaven'), a change in food aimed, even if only during the desert period, at creating a collective with a new identity and image of a chosen people that is privileged to receive special treatment from God. However, the Israelites rejected this and wished to remain in the material world and mentality of slaves.

Thus also with regard to Eretz Israel. The Israelites were exposed to the divine plan that in Eretz Israel they would encounter a different agricultural culture and types of food than those they had previously known, and they were aware that the food is only a cover for the demand to internalise a different and obligatory culture and identity, which created a complexity and sensitivity that returned them to memories of the past.

Food as an indication of a poor spiritual or faith state

The Israelites preferred the fish and vegetables of Egypt over the manna and over the fruit of Eretz Israel. The miraculous phenomenon of the manna descending from heaven reflects on one hand a reality of 'a supporting and providing God'.

However, on the other, the constant daily quota of manna and the inability to accumulate it is an expression of man's dependence on God. The Israelites preferred free fishing ('at no cost') and eating vegetables that could be grown regularly using the abundant water of the Nile, which symbolises independence and lack of dependence on any external element, including God.

Life under the irregular rain regime of Eretz Israel creates a dependence of man on God. Hence, Eretz Israel encourages a religious and theological life more than Egypt. The Israelites' preference for the Egyptian diet indicated that were not interested in a constant relationship with God, attesting to their deficient spiritual state.

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