



Sourdough and Bitter Tears: Food and Communal Laments in the Time of COVID-19

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A close friend, with whom I had recently enjoyed an open-air, socially distanced cup of coffee, phoned me. “I think I have COVID,” she said. “I’m feeling OK, but I’ve lost my sense of taste and smell. I put sriracha on my eggs this morning, tasted nothing. Kept pouring it on, but still, nothing. I thought you should know.” Of all the general symptoms of the coronavirus, this sensory dimension of the disease has been particularly puzzling for doctors, especially in the early days of the pandemic. And yet, I would contend that in much of the Western world, we have been progressively losing—not necessarily a COVID-19-triggered sensory disconnect to the plate of food set before us—but losing our fundamental connection to food itself.

This disconnection from food, from how it is produced and distributed, to how it is prepared and disposed of, has oddly seemed to cause us little concern. The only role in the food system we are actively being recruited for—thanks to corporate advertising—is as passive consumers for the processed-food industry. Of this reality, Wendell Berry observes: “We have an unprecedentedly large urban population that has no land to grow food on, no knowledge of how to grow it, and less

With the pandemic, and all the restrictions and shortages it brings, we have become much more attuned to food and to the sources of our food. In our modern world we are often very removed from the sources of our food and the place that food plays in our culture. By looking at the place of food in the Psalms, we are brought again to explore these issues, and our food.

and less knowledge of what to do with it after it's grown."¹ Unlike our pre-packed, grab-and-go food culture, the world of the Hebrew Scriptures was a world shaped by the agrarian realities of land and livestock, hand-mill and hearth. As Ellen Davis notes: "Throughout the Iron Age and into the Persian Period at least, the vast majority of Israelites—eighty-five percent or more—were farmers. So, even if many or most of the biblical writers and editors were urbanites holding 'desk jobs,' they had grown up and still lived in close quarters with agriculturalists."² In light of our disconnection from food in the fullest sense, we as modern, often urban, readers find ourselves entering biblical passages with no ability to "sense" the rhetorical power of these food-infused texts. Like with my friend, the literary sriracha of the text has no effect at all.

In light of many of our own experiences of loss, fear, and uncertainty brought on by the current pandemic, I would like to turn our attention to the Psalter's communal laments, in particular Psalm 80, as an avenue to consider the rhetorical power of food in the hands of the biblical writers. For within this psalm, the community turns to food, with its familiar vocabulary and lived experience, as a means to emphasize their communal plight, while drawing upon food's multidimensionality to intensify their rhetorically charged accusations.

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THE RHETORICAL POTENTIAL OF FOOD

Food language offers a rhetorically rich medium for communication because of its familiarity, its literary flexibility, and its multidimensionality. The "lived reality" of food ordered the daily lives of ancient Israelites. In his study *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*, Jack Goody introduces a classification system that identifies five categories for considering food—its production (including various processes and aspects of agriculture and husbandry), distribution (involving storage, transport, and exchange of foodstuffs), preparation (processing and cooking of food), consumption (serving, eating, and clearing away of food), and disposal (disposing of the leftovers from the meal).³ An ancient Israelite

¹ Wendell Berry, "Agricultural Solutions to Agricultural Problems," in *Bringing It to the Table: On Food and Farming* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009), 24.

² Ellen F. Davis, "Propriety and Trespass: The Drama of Eating," *Ex Audito* 23 (2007): 74.

³ Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 44–49.

would have had an intimate connection to food through taking part in these various activities. And in light of food's quotidian influence, the regular appearance of food language in the biblical text should not be surprising.

Food language's literary flexibility contributes to its rhetorical power as it can be used both literally and figuratively. As Talmon observes, the biblical authors tended to draw from "motifs, patterns and parables which are derived from experiences in which they and their audience share."⁴ Within this shared familiarity with food, the biblical authors could move easily from lived experience to metaphorical possibilities.

Food's multiple dimensions—its physical, sensory, social, locational, and patterned dimensions—allowed it to become a ready language to describe complex situations and emotions.⁵ Each of these five dimensions of food contains a variety of associations that can be drawn upon. For example, food has a physical dimension in that we need to eat to sustain life; thus, food becomes a matter of life and death. Food also has a sensory dimension—it involves taste (e.g., bitter, sweet) and experience (e.g., craving, satisfaction), and is a key sense associated with perception. Food's social dimension is rooted in the communal nature of food consumption. Food's locational dimension draws on the regional nature of food production and the associated issues of access and availability of foodstuffs. The patterned dimension of food is seen particularly in activities associated with food production (e.g., the seasonal cycles of agriculture) and food consumption (e.g., a formal meal following a social script). Each dimension has powerful rhetorical potential. Yet when multiple dimensions of food collide in the same reference, the audience is confronted with an image or scenario with increasing conceptual complexity—engaging the audience on multiple levels of experience (e.g., emotional, visceral, intellectual). For all of these reasons—its ready accessibility, literary flexibility, multidimensionality—one should not be surprised that when Israel needed words to name their deepest pain and longing, they went to the language of food.

COMMUNAL LAMENTS

There is little scholarly consensus on which poems—both within and beyond the Psalter—fall into the category of communal lament or complaint. Formal features, context, and mood play varying degrees of significance for scholars' categorization of these psalms.⁶ In the remarks below, I will limit my focus to a subset of psalms that appear with the greatest frequency across scholars' lists: namely, Psalms 44,

⁴ Shemaryahu Talmon, "Prophetic Rhetoric and Agricultural Metaphora [sic]," in *Storia e tradizioni di Israele: Scritti in Onore di* (Brescia, Italy: Paideia Editrice, 1991), 267.

⁵ For an extended discussion of these dimensions at work in the Psalms, see Michelle A. Stinson, "A Table in the Wilderness?: The Rhetorical Function of Food Language in Psalm 78" (PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 2017).

⁶ For a helpful chart detailing the various proposals, see Walter C. Bouzard, *We Have Heard with Our Ears, O God: Sources of the Communal Laments in the Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 102.

74, 79, 80, and 83.⁷ And as will be seen below, the language of food is used across this collection.

The most distinctive feature of these psalms is that Israel speaks with a communal voice, forgoing a mediator or representative, for their collective pain. In Psalm 44, Israel laments: “You have made us like sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations” (vv. 11).⁸ In Psalm 79, the image moves from agrarian metaphor to morbid actuality: “They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth. . . . We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us” (vv. 2, 4). The power of the plea in these laments is the magnitude of the voices of the multitude in their collective complaint.

The context of these psalms also sets them apart in the Psalter. Unlike the concerns voiced in many of the individual laments (e.g., physical illness, false accusation), these communal psalms give voice to a shared experience of national calamity. Whatever the disaster—war, exile, pestilence, famine, drought—it is suffered by the whole community together. And all of these events—including war and exile—create contexts of food insecurity. Gunkel proposes that the setting for these psalms would have been a national fast, a great complaint festival in response to general calamities.⁹ This gathering would have been in stark contrast to the annual festivals (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles) that drew Israel together to feast before the Lord. Here, the tables would have been turned, as fasting replaced feasting, and sorrow supplanted joy. In this experience of lack of food—through voluntary fasting or food shortage—the language of food becomes all the more rhetorically charged.

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These psalms also share a similar mood. In each of them, there is a longing, a plea, a summons for God to respond to the crisis being faced. In Psalm 44, God’s people exclaim: “Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever!” (v. 23). In Psalm 74, the plea is more graphic: “Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals; do not forget the life of your poor forever” (v. 19).

⁷ Gunkel considers these psalms “pure” laments of the people. Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *An Introduction to the Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 82. One finds a similar list in James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 25.

⁸ All biblical quotations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise noted.

⁹ Gunkel and Begrich, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, 82.

As Gunkel observes: “Here the basic presupposition is that one can say something to God that could influence him.”¹⁰ Repeatedly in these psalms, Israel reminds God of God’s relationship to God’s people.¹¹ These psalms are filled with recollections of God’s work in the past, both primordial and salvation-historical. Psalm 74 celebrates God as King “from of old” (v. 12) who “fixed all the bounds of the earth,” who “made summer and winter” (v. 17)—and thus, the cyclical seasons for agriculture. In Psalm 83:10, the memory of God’s disposal of Israel’s past enemy the Midianites, “who became dung for the ground,” instills the possibility of hope for the present crisis. One finds a surprising intimacy in these verbal encounters, a directness forged in a history of God’s faithfulness to Israel in the past.

PSALM 80 AS A “TASTE TEST”

As seen in the examples above, food language appears across this collection of complaints. The remainder of this essay will focus on Psalm 80, which offers an excellent test case, a literary “taste test,” in that it draws together much of the imagery present in the other psalms.

Psalm 80 is universally classified as a communal lament.¹² The psalm contains three clearly differentiated stanzas, each ending with a refrain: the invocation and petition (vv. 1–3), the lamentation (vv. 4–7), and the parable of the vine (vv. 8–9).¹³ The psalm is an appeal for God to act again on Israel’s behalf like God did in their past.

In each of the three stanzas, the psalmist uses a different image drawn from the arenas of food production or food consumption. Images of husbandry open the psalm with a plea to “the Shepherd of Israel” who leads Israel like “a flock” to listen and come and save them (vv. 1–2). In the second stanza (vv. 4–7), the psalmist turns to a scene at table and laments that while God has “fed” God’s people, their diet has consisted of “the bread of tears” and tears “in full measure” (v. 5).¹⁴ In the third stanza (vv. 8–19), the psalmist describes Israel as a vine that God had

¹⁰ Gunkel and Begrich, *An Introduction to the Psalms*, 86.

¹¹ This relational dimension is seen even in the psalm’s grammatical constructions. As Bouzard notes: “Stylistically these psalms are all marked by both the use of the first-person plural form and the use of the second-person possessive suffix, the latter serving to emphasize the close relationship between God and Israel.” Bouzard, *We Have Heard with Our Ears*, 113.

¹² Westermann uses Psalm 80 as a classic example of this genre. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim and Richard Soulen (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1981), 53–54.

¹³ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, Word Biblical Commentary 20 (Waco: Word Books, 1990), 308. Zenger divides the “parable of the vine” into two sections (vv. 8–13, 14–19). Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, Hermeneia, trans. Linda Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 309.

¹⁴ The word שִׁלֵּשׁ means “a third.” Tanner translates the phrase “to drink tears in triple,” recognizing that here it seems that God is increasing sorrows, not diminishing them. See Nancy L. DeClaisé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth Laneel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 631. In light of Gunkel’s translation, “a great stein” of drink, Tate opts for “by the keg.” Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 306. The NRSV’s translation “in full measure” helps to acknowledge the lack of clarity in the image.

brought out of Egypt and then “planted” in the land (v. 8). The psalm describes how God initially tended the plants (“cleared the ground for it,” v. 9) but later sabotaged (“broken down its walls,” v. 12) and then completely abandoned the vines. Without the protection and maintenance of its boundary walls, the fruit of the vines is “plucked” by those who pass by (v. 12), and various creatures “ravage” and “feed on” it (v. 13). It is the familiarity of the lived realities of field and table that gives rhetorical weight to these food-based images of Israel’s trauma.

The psalm’s collective images—flock (v. 1) and vineyard (v. 8–16)—help to capture the communal quality of the nation’s experience of perceived abandonment. For contrast, one can consider Psalm 102, an individual lament, where the psalmist’s isolation is described as “a lonely bird on the housetop” (v. 7). In addition, Psalm 80’s agrarian examples invite exploration of the relational dimension of the expected care of a shepherd toward the sheep and of a farmer for the vines.

In Psalm 80, food language’s multidimensionality allows the psalmist to picture a world radically out of order. Within its three images drawn from field and table, the psalmist utilizes all five dimensions of food—the physical, sensory, social, locational, and patterned dimensions. The psalm opens with the physical dimension of food, pictured as the threat of a flock without a shepherd (v. 1). Any shepherd, ancient or modern, would understand the likely outcome of this scenario; before the day is done, the beasts of the field would be enjoying a tasty dinner of lamb chops. The second stanza draws together four of the five dimensions of food. The scene is set at table with host and guests, calling to mind the patterned dimension of food. And yet here, instead of a meal appropriate to the guests,¹⁵ the host shows a neglect for the guests’ basic physical needs. While it should not surprise us that the meal involves bread—a major source of daily calories in the Mediterranean world¹⁶—here the guests are given a nutrition-deficient alternative, “bread of tears” (v. 5). And paired with this meal is a cup filled with “tears in large measure” (v. 5). God’s active involvement in the provision of this meal is a rhetorically charged accusation, especially when seen in light of a similar tearful scene of distress in Psalm 42: “My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’” (v. 3). The sensory dimension of this saltwater meal leaves a lingering taste in the audience’s mouth. In the final stanza, the patterned, physical, and social dimensions of food are upended. Here, the expected outcome of the agricultural cycle has been derailed as the summer grapes are consumed off the vines, canceling the hope of a harvest and anticipated wine. The physical dimension of food is also in play as this scene provides a strikingly ironic reversal that bookends the psalm. As McCann observes: “The word ‘feed’ (הָעַר *ra’â*, v. 13) is particularly poignant as it recalls v. 1, where the

¹⁵ In this regard, one might consider Psalm 23 with its still waters and green pastures for the sheep and an overflowing cup—presumably wine—for the table guest.

¹⁶ Magen Broshi estimates that bread or other grain-based foods would have contributed more than half the caloric intake of most inhabitants. Magen Broshi, “The Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period: Introductory Notes” in *Bread, Wine, Walls, and Scrolls*, Library of Second Temple Studies 36 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 123.

word ‘shepherd’ (רֹעֶה *rō‘ēh*) is literally translated ‘feeder.’ God, who traditionally has been the one to feed Israel, is allowing Israel to be devoured.”¹⁷ And in an overturning of the expected social dimension of food, the only ones gathered as community to eat are Israel’s enemies.

In this psalm, Israel is pictured as a deserted flock, hungry table guests, and a ransacked vineyard. It is through these images drawn from everyday life and experience that Israel seeks to capture YHWH’s attention, to persuade, to express in words close to their hearts and hands their deepest pain and hope.

RECLAIMING FOOD, COMMUNITY, AND LAMENT IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

In conclusion, I want to consider how these reflections on food language in Israel’s communal laments may help us reclaim some of the aspects of our human experience that may have gotten disordered or discarded before this pandemic. In particular, I want to consider the three main themes of this essay: food, community, and lament.

The experience of lockdown has become for many an invitation to reengage in a variety of ways with the processes of food production, distribution, preparation, consumption, and disposal. As a result of this great pause in the busyness of our lives, many of us have gained a new vocabulary and posture for engaging with our world.¹⁸ (1) Production. Many in my own community and household planted a garden for the first time in their lives. (2) Distribution. There has been a marked rise in the number of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) participants across the country. The pandemic kept me at home all summer for the first time in over a decade, allowing me to enjoy produce from a weekly farm-share from March to December. This move to buy direct from local farmers—thus eliminating the packers, shippers, and grocery store stockers—creates a context where those who grow our food are paid a fair wage for the work of their hands. (3) Preparation. The domestic arts were revived in many homes as restaurants closed under lockdown and daily meals provided one of the only creative outlets in the day. (4) Consumption. Many families experienced time together around the table, some for the first time in a very long time, as sports practice, school clubs, and evening work events were canceled. (5) Disposal. And with all these newly planted gardens and culinary adventures, the next logical step is composting. From backyard gardening to tentative forays into bread making, the reality of the pandemic has led us back into relationship with the basic elements of soil and sourdough starters, offering us a powerful vocabulary to reclaim as our own.

¹⁷ J. Clinton McCann, “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1000.

¹⁸ I am indebted to Wendell Berry for helping to shape my own posture toward and active participation in food systems and foodways. He admits: “Though I have written many essays on farming, farms, and farmers, I have written only one specifically on food.” Berry, *Bringing It to the Table*, 185. The essay he refers to is “The Pleasure of Eating” in *Bringing It to the Table*, 227–234.

For many, including me, forced isolation has helped us appreciate even more our need for community and the precious gift of relationships. COVID-19 is one of the few shared experiences we have had as a nation and as a world. While the pandemic has in some cases revealed our disunity, it has also created opportunities to draw together and recognize the need we have for one another. May we continue to strive to understand our vital place within our own communities and seek to offer our gifts, resources, and selves in service to one another.

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For many who lost loved ones during the early days of the lockdowns, there were few venues to voice their grief. And yet, this need to grieve, to lament, to name our losses, is vital to the process of restoration and healing. Westermann notes:

It is an illusion to suppose or postulate that there could be a relationship with God in which there was only praise and never lamentation. . . . Hence something must be amiss if praise of God has a place in Christian worship but lamentation does not. Praise can retain its authenticity and naturalness only in polarity with lamentation.¹⁹

As we look to the future and the possibility of once again gathering together for worship, may we not forget to make room for lament. For I would propose that shared lament is in itself a hope-inspiring act, for with it comes a movement from isolation into community.

Like Israel's lament before YHWH in Psalm 80, my hope in this essay is also to persuade an audience—in this case, to persuade an audience, who may find themselves lost for words in the midst of the numbing effects of this extended journey with COVID-19—of the rhetorical and experiential power of food and communal lament. For it is in naming the pain and loss that this season has brought to our families and communities that we also give voice to a hope for the restored well-being of our human communities and the world we inhabit.

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¹⁹ Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 267.