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## Food in the Medieval Era

JONATHAN BRUMBERG-KRAUS

It was told that the wealthy and learned Jews of medieval Provence took special care to feed many of the poor from their tables. When these generous benefactors died, their tables were made into the coffins in which they were buried. According to a rabbi who heard of and praised this custom, these pious Jews did this because they believed “the table in the house is like the altar in the Temple [and] just as an altar atones, so also a table [upon which one fed the poor] atones.” By turning their tables into coffins, they taught by their example that even if one’s power reaches to the clouds and one’s wealth equals that of King Solomon, only the compassion and generosity bestowed upon the poor in this world, especially by feeding them, is what counts before the divine judge in the next world.<sup>1</sup>

As in the past, during the medieval era, Jewish eating and food behaviors were often expressed in terms of a relationship between Jews and God. In the eleventh to the sixteenth century—the period this chapter will cover—Jewish cuisine, rituals, and food laws became more complex, demanding, and variegated. Jewish settlements remained in Mediterranean lands, but Jews also established themselves in Spain and northern, central, and eastern Europe. In this era, the regional differentiation between Jewish practices became greater. Relative to the past, rabbinic authority over Jews’ daily lives grew stronger. Muslim and Christian clerics insisted on Jews’ theological inferiority and influenced rulers to support discriminatory policies toward their Jewish subjects. In response, the rabbis shaped foodways to affirm Judaism’s superiority over other religions and emphasize Jews’ unique and special relationship with God. Although rabbis legislated for all Jews regardless of class, they adopted behaviors and innovative theologies around eating that enhanced their

own intra-Jewish standing by demonstrating their superior piety and authority. The title of the major law code composed in the sixteenth century, *Shulhan Aruch* (“Set Table”), and its accompanying commentary, *Mappah* (“Tablecloth”), signal the symbolic importance of the food-laden table in medieval Jewish life.

## Food in Medieval Times

Medieval sources give ample evidence for historians to describe the daily meals of common people, and this depiction will help the reader understand the changes taking place. At the start of the medieval era, eating itself was technologically very simple. Dishes, tableware, cooking utensils, and tables themselves were minimal. Even in the homes of the wealthy, dinner tables typically consisted of boards set on trestles that were moved out of the way when meals ended. Linen tablecloths and napkins were widely used, but sometimes a tablecloth on the ground alone sufficed for outdoor dining. People did not eat their main meals on individual plates but on dried pieces of bread, so-called trenchers. Diners might be given spoons (and cooks certainly used larger spoons and ladles to cook and serve), but they were usually expected to bring their own knives. Forks were not in the picture yet; people ate primarily with their hands—hence the need for napkins and, among the more “refined” classes, hand-washing rituals.<sup>2</sup> People usually ate the main and largest meal of the day in the afternoon, typically stews or savory pies, and a lighter, plain supper in the evening. Many peasants and craftsmen ate some sort of breakfast at daybreak too, usually a porridge or gruel made from grains—although this was not recognized as a meal, and moralists disparaged it as being low class and appropriate only for children, the elderly, and the sick.

At the local level, food commerce, food preparation, and even some eating and drinking occurred in a context in which people collaborated, despite their different religious identities, and they bought their food from common local markets or grew it themselves. Jews by this time were generally no longer farmers, and they lived in villages, towns, and the few large cities of the Islamic and Christian empires. Although much of the populace lived on or near farmed lands, the number of towns and cities grew during the eleventh to the sixteenth century. Outside

the large cities, people kept small livestock for milk, eggs, and occasionally meat on small plots of land. Bread was a staple food everywhere. Women would bring wheat grains to the communal mill and grind it into flour, although the very poor often supplemented the small amount they purchased with less costly barley, oats, beans, or chestnuts. In the villages and larger settlements, most people purchased their breads and pies from local bakers or baked their own foods in communal ovens, because only the very wealthy had ovens inside their homes.<sup>3</sup> Most common was an indoor hearth for heating and cooking food in a pot over a fire or warming it on heated stones. Communal butchers would slaughter larger animals for meat. Taverns made and served ale and wine and provided meals and beds for the night to travelers. While women were the primary cooks in homes, professional food preparers were usually men. Among the wealthy and nobility, male and female servants were in charge of or helped with domestic food preparation—the wealthier the householder, the more specialized the servants.<sup>4</sup> In Arab courts, chief cooks held very high status, and some composed learned treatises on banquet dishes in verse.<sup>5</sup>

In both the Muslim and Christian empires, medieval consumers had a reliable quantity of food. Except during periodic bad harvests, food staples were available. People knew how to preserve some foods for future use, such as salted or dried fish and meat and cheeses. The markets (*sucs*) and bazaars in the coastal cities of North Africa and the inland cities of the Islamic states in the Levant and Mesopotamia were places where food sellers sold their plentiful and varied foods such as already prepared meats, baked goods, snacks, drinks, spices, fruits, and vegetables. The extensive trade provided variety, although “New World” foods such as the potato, tomato, corn, cacao, and turkey were still unknown in the “old-world” lands. Arab and Jewish merchants acquired foods in the Mediterranean markets and sold them across distant lands. Jews played an important role in producing refined sugar and exporting it as well as spices and citrus fruits, and they of course ensured that foods required for Jewish rituals, such as *etrogim* (citrons) for the holiday of Sukkot, were available.<sup>6</sup> The wealthy living in the Christian West prized sugar and distilled flavorings produced through Arab technological innovations, spices imported from the East, and the elaborate sweet-and-sour stews and pies originating in the Muslim East. The pies

and vermicelli eaten by Jewish communities in both Italy and Andalusia (southern Spain) were made according to recipes that originated in the Islamic East, and the *flodens* (fried flat cakes) and *kugels* (noodle puddings) of Central and Eastern European Jewish cuisine were introduced by traveling Jewish merchants.<sup>7</sup>

People drank a wide range of beverages. The most common was water and fermented or unfermented fruit juices. In Northern Europe, the typical drink was ale, cider, and mead (honey-based alcohol). Wine was the favored choice throughout the medieval world, even though Islamic law regarded it with some disapproval.<sup>8</sup> It was often prepared in sweetened and spiced blends; infused with sage, roses, or cloves; or combined with ready-made mixtures of powdered spices and sugar. According to medical treatises from both Christian and Islamic lands, wine was beneficial to health.<sup>9</sup>

Regional agriculture, bad harvests, costs, and preservability shaped the diet, but religious factors also played a role. Christians were supposed to refrain from eating meat during the forty days of Lent and on Fridays year round, and there were numerous fast days in the religious calendar. Islam prohibited pork, alcohol, and blood, and the yearly month-long celebration of Ramadan required fasting during the day and feasting at night. Jewish law allowed only meat slaughtered by a Jew and prohibited a number of land animals, fish, and fowl. These were merely the larger principles; numerous religious customs and rules shaped everyone's eating practices.

Yet dietary religious distinction may have been a lot less pronounced than we might imagine, especially for the poor, whose less meaty and simpler diet was similar across the globe. Some religious food proscriptions, especially those that required separation from the foods of others, were probably not universally observed when religious groups lived in close proximity. Jews, Muslims, and Christians would share communal ovens. From the Muslim East to the Christian European West, they interacted with one another in the production, trade, and consumption of food and drink. We know of such intermingling because religious and sometimes political authorities decried and legislated against it. For example, Christian authorities legislated against Christians purchasing from Jewish butchers the parts of kosher animals unfit for kosher

consumption, and Jewish, Christian, and Muslim clerics lamented that their coreligionists were socializing together over wine.

Because of the greater distance between Jewish population centers, a pronounced differentiation between Jewish cuisines appeared. The Jews of Spain, called Sephardim, as well as the Jews living in the lands to the east bordering the Mediterranean had what is now called a Mediterranean diet: primarily grains, wine, olive oil, vegetables and nuts, and small amounts of meat and fish. The Ashkenazim, or the Jews living in northern, central, and eastern Europe, relied on root vegetables, legumes, and fermented foods (including fish like herring) better suited to the shorter growing seasons and long winters. Significant differences in *kashrut*, the dietary laws, between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews began to appear at the end of the medieval era.

### Political and Rabbinic Authority and Jewish Foodways

The political framework of medieval society affirmed both Jews' legitimacy as members of society and their corporate legal separatism—that is, their right to choose their communal leaders and live according to their own laws within the larger political-legal unit. Jews were not legally segregated but often lived clustered together in sections of towns and villages; it was only in the early sixteenth century that Christians and Muslim authorities imposed residential segregation upon Jews in some lands. Even where such residential segregation occurred, we have much evidence that Jews and gentiles had social contact with one another in each other's designated neighborhoods.

In the medieval period, the majority of Jews lived in Muslim lands in the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and other Arab lands. Muslims ruled Spain, which Jews called Sepharad, from the eighth to the twelfth century, and then it was gradually overtaken by Christian rulers. Muslims considered Jews and Christians “people of the Book” and therefore “protected peoples” (*dhimmi*) who held property rights, freedom of movement and occupation, and permission to practice their religion in peace. Nevertheless, the Pact of Umar—a political-religious document attributed to the second Muslim caliph—made them “second-class citizens” politically, socially, and theologically subordinate

to Muslims. Jews in the multireligious Islamic lands tended to fare better than they did in Christian lands. In the former, they shared the language (Arabic—though Jews often wrote it in Hebrew letters), analogous religious legal traditions (*Shari'ah* and the oral Torah, respectively), literate intellectual traditions (Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic philosophy, Arabic poetry, and belles lettres), and even the common dietary prohibition of eating pork.<sup>10</sup> In some lands, Jewish rabbinic authorities rose to prominent positions in Islamic imperial courts.

Under the Abbasid Caliphate beginning in 750, Jewish self-governing rule became centralized under rabbinic leaders known as *Geonim* (discussed briefly in the previous chapter). Headquartered near the Islamic capital of Baghdad, they supplied the religious and social structures for the predominately urban Jewish communities in Spain, North Africa, and what the Jews called Babylonia (present-day Iraq and Persia). The Geonim were responsible for making the Babylonian Talmud the preferred basis for Jewish law (over the Palestinian Talmud) and for the standardization of Jewish prayer in the *siddur* (“order [of prayer]”) that established the basic structure for subsequent Jewish liturgy. They disseminated their influence through their writings and by appointing rabbis who had been educated in geonic academies to distant communities. By the eleventh century, they had less control over Jewish communities at a distance. For example, influential rabbinic teachers in the Jewish communities of Egypt and Spain established independent local rule.<sup>11</sup>

In the eastern and especially western Christian lands, Jews lived under the protection and by the permission of local kings and lords, but they were treated as a subordinate group as a punishment for rejecting Christianity. They could not own land, and they were subject to professional restrictions and sometimes distinguishing dress requirements (special hats or badges). Jews’ differences from their Christian neighbors and their sense of unity with one another were strengthened by their unique vernacular—for example, Judeo-Greek in Byzantine lands and Yiddish (Judeo-German) in the German and Slavic regions of Christian Europe. In addition, Jews had a higher level of literacy.

In Christian Europe, Jewish authority tended to be more decentralized than in the Islamic empire. Compared to the Islamic lands in northern Africa, the Middle East, and Muslim Spain, Ashkenazic Jewry tended to be more dispersed. As in the Islamic empire, Christian rulers

delegated the direction of internal Jewish communal affairs to the Jews themselves. However, in Ashkenazic lands, Jewish governance typically operated at the local level under the most prominent—usually the wealthiest—members of the Jewish community, who then appointed specific rabbis as authorities of *halakhah* (Jewish law). Local Jewish communities had their own courts and administered their day-to-day affairs, such as arranging marriages and burials, appointing communal butchers and bakers, and so on. These separate communal institutions were not readily available in towns where there were only a few Jewish families. Even in Jewish communities that were big enough to support them, the rabbis' authority tended to be more limited in its geographic influence.<sup>12</sup>

As elsewhere, local rabbis directly engaged with the most mundane aspects of communal life, like the production, trade, preparation, and consumption of food, and adjudicated and even published written works addressing the questions and controversies that emerged from these activities. These dispersed rabbinic authorities communicated with each other and read each other's works (albeit in handwritten and copied manuscripts, since the printing press was invented in the fifteenth century). The rabbis of the Jewish communities in the Iberian Peninsula (Muslim Andalusia and Christian Castile, Aragon, and Catalonia) and Provence in southern France played a particularly important bridging role between Christian and Islamic cultures, since many were fluent both in Arabic and Hebrew and some in the vernaculars of their lands. Hebrew functioned as a *lingua franca* for the sharing of Jewish lore and law.

In the feudal system of Christian Europe, Jews were special subjects of the crown, but locally they were dependent upon the nobles on whose lands they lived. Christian rulers found it economically advantageous to protect the Jewish communities in their lands because of Jews' commercial contacts across the European continent and in the Muslim world and because Jews, unlike Christians, could lend them money. Jewish religious distinctiveness and economic roles could make them hated by their Christian neighbors, foster resentment among their Christian debtors, and subject Jews to the whims and political expedience of their Christian protectors who could expel or permit violence against them. Jews were expelled en masse from England, France, and the Germanic lands in the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, and their



eastward migration brought them to Poland and Lithuania. Periodically the Catholic authorities mounted campaigns to convert the Jews—for example, in the campaigns of the Franciscan and Dominican orders in the thirteenth century and the humiliating disputations in which Christian clerics (some were Jewish converts to Christianity) “debated” Jewish leaders to prove the theological superiority of Christianity over Judaism. The Christian rulers of Spain sanctioned anti-Jewish riots and forced conversions from the late fourteenth century onward until they expelled all Jews in 1492.<sup>13</sup>

Rabbis believed that Jews’ political and social denigration by gentiles was at odds with the elevated status Jews should have had. From their perspective, Jews were God’s “chosen” people, morally superior and more educated than their non-Jewish neighbors. Medieval rabbis regarded it as their task to protect this status by studying, elaborating upon, and recording rules for the conduct of Jewish life. They were concerned to put all Jewish life under their understanding of Torah, and food practices were just one aspect of this larger goal. We do not know with certainty the extent to which these Jewish laws and practices developed in the medieval period were actually being followed and by whom, but we do know medieval Jewish rabbinic leaders possessed the authority to promulgate the food practices, and they were regarded by Jews and non-Jews as an elite in relation to other Jews.

There are a number of important figures whose writings contain key teachings on Jewish food and who will be referenced in this chapter. The Geonim from the eighth to the eleventh century laid the post-Talmudic foundation for Jewish practice. After them, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (also known as Rambam or Maimonides, 1135–1204) in Islamic Spain (Andalusia) and Egypt wrote an influential code of law called *Mishneh Torah*. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (1269–1340), who was born in the Christian lands of the Holy Roman Empire and then lived in Castile in Spain, produced a code called *Arba'ah Turim*. In northern France, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (also known as Rashi, 1040–1105) wrote commentaries on the Talmud. Subsequent scholars in France and Germany known as the Tosafists built upon Rashi’s teachings, such as Rashi’s grandson Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (also known as Rashbam, 1085–1158) and Rabbi Baruch ben Isaac of Worms (1140–1212). In Christian Spain, Rabbi Solomon

ben Abraham ibn Adret (1235–1310) wrote *Torat Ha-Bayit* (Torah of the home), a legal treatise focused primarily on food and related subjects, and Rabbi Bahya ben Asher (1255–1340) assembled and systematized many disparate food traditions into a single work devoted to theory and practice of Jewish eating, titled *Shulhan Shel Arba* (Table of four). These and other rabbinic scholars commented upon, criticized, and supplemented with their particular local customs each other's teachings about food and food-related rituals, with an eye toward encouraging Jews in their communities to adopt the practices and the rationales they advocated.

Many of these medieval rabbinic traditions were eventually incorporated into what became the most authoritative code of Jewish law of the late medieval era, the *Shulhan Aruch*. Composed by Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488–1575), a Sephardic Jew who left Spain for the Ottoman Empire, the *Shulhan Aruch* represented Karo's own Sephardic Jewish customs. It was a complete summary of laws pertaining to all aspects of Jewish life, so only some sections of it were devoted specifically to food laws. Rabbi Moses Isserles of Krakow (1520–72) wrote a gloss that supplemented Karo's code with laws and customs drawn from his own Polish tradition; that is, the Sephardic and Polish traditions were preserved separately in the same work. Published in print form, the *Shulhan Aruch* was widely circulated, but it was not universally authoritative, especially for communities whose regional traditions differed. Eventually, however, the code's comprehensiveness made it the primary textual guide to *halakhah* (practical Jewish law) and codifying both "Sephardic" and "Ashkenazic" laws and customs.<sup>14</sup>

### Jewish Food Practices within Medieval Society

The food rules and practices that medieval rabbinic authorities developed or encouraged and that had the greatest impact on subsequent Jewish foodways were in *halakhah*, theology, and liturgy. Although their innovations were based on earlier biblical and rabbinic traditions, their changes were clearly a response to the medieval reality. Jewish foodways under Torah as the rabbis envisioned them were to have three important effects. First, they would lessen the contact of Jews with gentiles. This had been an element in late biblical and classical rabbinic-era

food practices, and the medieval rabbis were continuing and strengthening it. Second, rabbis suggested a stricter standard for themselves than what they could reasonably demand from the Jewish community at large. In doing so, they were demonstrating their superior piety and bolstering their credentials and class status upon which their Jewish authority was based. Third, rabbinic authorities sought to dignify and sanctify eating for all Jews—male and female, rich and poor—and counteract the social and theological humiliation intended by Islamic and Christian rulers. Rabbi Bahya ben Asher states this last point quite explicitly:

We are distinguished by our regimen of pleasures from the nations who err, rebel, and sin. . . . In the desert . . . [God] set for us a table against the nations. . . . He gave us a marvelous portion of the bread in our law . . . [The] Torah of the Lord with us will save us. . . . The food on our table will help us recognize and remind ourselves to respect His greatness. Let us bless over the table of Him whose food we have eaten. It is not so with the wicked, whose sins have earned them an inextinguishable fire; their table lies before them like mire. Rising early in the morning they devour food and they do not call to the Lord; their hearts and eyes they raise to what delights them, but toward the One above not even the slightest look. Such is the sentence of the nations, that they are a vile and foolish nation filled with folk devoid of sense.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to remember the fundamental similarities, social interactions, and resources shared between Jews, Muslims, and Christians in the medieval era. Bahya's accentuation of differences between Jewish and gentile regimens of eating is more aspirational than it was reflective of the actual differences in what and how Jews and non-Jews ate and drank.

Indeed, medieval Islamic, Christian, and Jewish cuisines shared elements of what Rachel Laudan regards as a prevailing culinary philosophy. Christian and Muslim scholars clarified culinary principles in their learned tracts, and when Christian and Muslim rulers imposed these religions on their empires, they were also imposing a cuisine. By virtue of their inclusion in these empires and in broader cultural life, Jewish intellectuals accepted these principles and adapted them to Judaism.

One common notion, originating in ancient Greek medicine, was the belief that the human body contained four distinct humors (bodily fluids) that needed to be kept in balance. Medieval scholars advised which food and food combinations preserved or harmed the right balance of the humors. Furthermore, they believed that fire refined and purified the essence of the food and so enabled cooked food to be more healthful than fresh or raw food. Another common belief was that there was a hierarchy in modes of eating. That is, there was a distinction between the “high” cuisines for the court and humble cuisines for the urban and rural poor. The religious elite adapted this to elevate their own diet and thus their status over that of conventionally religious people.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Laudan argues that a third principle was a new understanding of sanctified eating: the medieval religious elite believed that ascetic or very regimented diets would bring salvation or enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> In the halakhic, ritual, and theological developments described in the rest of this chapter, these components of the medieval culinary philosophy find expression in new forms of Jewish eating.

### *Halakhic Innovations in Jewish Dietary Laws*

Jewish communities throughout the medieval world eventually adopted three significant medieval expansions of food halakhah: enhanced prohibitions against mixing meat and milk, the prohibition of drinking the wine of gentiles, and Passover stringencies.

#### MEAT AND DAIRY

Medieval religious authorities broadened the thrice-repeated biblical commandment “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk” (Exodus 23:19, 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21). As discussed in the preceding chapter, this precept was interpreted by the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud to prohibit mixing or cooking together all permitted milk products and land animals and to prohibit serving them together at the table—that is, during the same meal. Some rabbis adopted a stringent practice of waiting after eating meat before consuming milk and milk products, but the general rule was that it was sufficient to wipe one’s mouth and hands or wash these with water to remove the residual tastes or particles of dairy

and meat and maintain the separation between the foods.<sup>18</sup> The Geonim of the post-Talmudic era (eighth to eleventh century) generally followed these traditions.

During the following years, changes in the interpretation of the law are evident in certain regions. First, by the twelfth century, some rabbis specified the length of the temporal pause between eating meat and dairy. In *Mishneh Torah* and *Arba'ah Turim*, law codes composed in Sephardic Jewish societies, a six-hour wait after eating meat before eating milk products is required; this waiting time did not apply to eating meat after dairy. The rabbis of northern Ashkenazic Europe did not immediately adopt this Sephardic practice.<sup>19</sup> Second, in Ashkenazic lands, fowl was regarded in the category of meat (and therefore subject to the meat and dairy prohibitions), whereas Italian and Sephardic rabbis did not do so until some point in the sixteenth century. Third, in Ashkenazic lands, meticulously pious Jews began to insist upon maintaining separate dairy and meat pots and cooking utensils. For example, Rabbi Baruch ben Isaac (1140–1212) prohibits a spoon used for milk foods to stir a pot filled with a meat stew, and he notes that items used for milk foods should not be washed with items used to cook meat.<sup>20</sup> In the fourteenth century, the Sephardic *Arba'ah Turim* code requires that if metal pots are used to cook one category of food, they cannot be used to cook the other category of food unless they are first “koshered”; in contrast, ceramic pots used for one category could not be “koshered” and reused to cook food of another category. Rabbi Jacob ben Moses Moellin (ca. 1360–1427) of Germany affirms this in his summary of dietary laws, and he adds that the separate cooking utensils are in themselves considered dairy or meat, as opposed to just the food-stuffs cooked in them.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to consider what these new opinions can and cannot teach about actual common Jewish practice. We do not know whether the rules, most of which are performed in the privacy of the home, were generally obeyed. The consumption of meat increased in Europe during the late Middle Ages, and this would have increased the opportunity to honor the dairy-meat taboo.<sup>22</sup> While the rabbis were reluctant to add expensive restrictions, the requirement to wait a specific number of hours after eating meat did not add any costs. This was in contrast to the rabbinic rulings for physically separating meat and dairy pots and

utensils. Given the meager set of cooking and serving utensils typical in the homes of the era, it seems unlikely that most Jews could afford separate cooking pots and utensils. Only those who aspired to the status of “holy” and who had the means would adopt this practice; scholars surmise that perhaps wealthier women, even more than men, were responsible for this stringency. Furthermore, at this time, no Jews in North Africa and Palestine were maintaining separate cooking pots and utensils.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the Ashkenazic rabbinic authorities were fostering an intra-Jewish distinction between Ashkenazic and non-Ashkenazic Jews as well as between elite Jews who observed more stringent, more ascetic interpretations of rabbinic dietary rules and Jews who did not.<sup>24</sup>

## WINE

As this chapter explained earlier, in lands where people of different religions lived side by side with each other, they also produced food alongside or with each other and bought food from and sold food to each other. Religious and sometimes political authorities discouraged some of these interactions, and the conclusion that these authorities were ignored is evident in their repeated complaints about and rulings against such mixing. The rabbis considered wine the most important food to keep separate. The previous chapter in this volume describes Talmudic rabbis’ prohibitions and limitations on Jews’ consumption of gentile-made wine and joint efforts in production, consumption, and drinking together of even Jewish-made wine. Yet we know that during the medieval era, some Jews worked with gentiles in wine production and trade. In Christian Europe, particularly in France, Spain, and Italy, Jews produced, traded in, and consumed wine. Jewish wine production frequently brought Jews into contact with Christians who worked in their vineyards and purchased their wine.<sup>25</sup> Rabbi Abraham ben Nathan Ha-Yarchi, writing in thirteenth-century Muslim Spain, reported that some Sephardic communities have no concern whatsoever that their wine might be produced and handled by Muslims. He wrote, “There are persons [Jews] who purchase their wine during the harvest season in villages in the house of Gentiles, and the Gentiles measure out the wine and give i[t] to the Jews in their skins. . . .”<sup>26</sup> Despite Islamic prohibitions on drinking alcohol, Muslims (especially those in the courtier classes) did imbibe. The rabbi expressed dismay

that Jews drank wine with Muslims, echoing the Talmudic rabbis' fear of wine leading to intimate neighborly relations.

Medieval Jewish religious authorities had to interpret Talmudic wine prohibitions in light of the new realities. Did Talmudic proscriptions against drinking the wine of idol worshipers apply to the practitioners of Islam, who not only were monotheists but also rejected the use of icons? Was Christianity idolatry and was the use of wine in the Eucharist tantamount to offering libations to idols? To what extent should the economic realities, in which people of different religions worked and traded with each other, mitigate the inherited rabbinic prohibitions? Rabbinic decisions on wine provided parameters for the marking and crossing of social boundaries between Jews and gentiles and boundaries between a Jewish religious elite (who would follow rabbinic principles strictly) and ordinary Jews.

Medieval Jewish authorities proffered many nuanced opinions, but a glance at the rulings of three of them provides a range of some of the responses. Maimonides, who lived in Muslim lands, determined that Muslims are not idol worshippers, and so he permitted Jewish-made wine handled by Muslims for drink and trade. However, Maimonides considered Christians idol worshippers, and he regarded both their wine and Jewish-made wine touched by Christians to be off limits.<sup>27</sup> Second, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, who lived in an Ashkenazic Christian cultural context, regarded the status of Christianity and Islam vis-à-vis idolatry as irrelevant, and he prohibited the wine of all gentiles and Jewish-made wine touched by them “because of their daughters”—that is, to preserve social segregation.<sup>28</sup> Third, Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret, who lived under Muslim and then Christian rule in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Spain, recognized no drinking and financial prohibitions on certain fermented, intoxicating drinks made by Jews and handled by non-Jews, such as beer, boiled wine (*yayin mevushal*), or wine mixed with significant amounts of honey and pepper.<sup>29</sup>

Medieval rabbinic leniencies in the Islamic world on the grounds that Muslims are not idolaters may indicate a positive assessment of Islam or a more collegial relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Muslim Spain, or it could simply be an after-the-fact concession to the realities of Jewish-Muslim commercial and social interactions.<sup>30</sup> Rabbinic rulings were more restrictive in Christian lands. They had

the effect of intensifying earlier prohibitions on drinking or deriving financial benefit from gentile wine and actually worked to the financial disadvantage of Jewish wine producers and dealers in northern France.<sup>31</sup> Wherever they lived, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders were deeply invested in differentiating their religions and their congregations from each other. A different diet indicated a different identity. In Islamic lands, drinking wine was a sign distinguishing Jews from the Muslim majority (though not the elite courtier class) and associating them with Christian minorities. Pork abstention associated Jews with the Muslim majority and separated them from Christian minorities. Conversely, in Christian lands, Jews' avoidance of pork and blood differentiated them from the Christian majority, and it associated them with Muslim minorities.

#### PASSOVER STRINGENCIES

New halakhic demands also appeared for Passover foods. Biblical and rabbinic law prohibited the consumption of leavened forms of five grains (wheat, barley, rye, oats, and spelt). Beginning in the thirteenth century, European rabbis added a new restriction, a category of food they called *kitniyot* that includes legumes and rice. The underlying reason for this is unclear and was unclear even then. One medieval rabbinic authority from Provence explained that these foods “rise and become *hametz*” (leavened), noting that this was the accepted and “universal custom” among the rabbinic authorities in Ashkenaz. Another suggestion was that it is a stringency to avoid mistakenly eating hametz, because lentils and other beans could look like and be ground like wheat kernels. Perhaps the prohibition was the result of the European cultural belief that legumes were a “poor person’s foods” and beneath the dignity of celebratory holiday food.<sup>32</sup> The practice did not extend outside of Ashkenaz. To this day, Sephardim and Jews with background in Muslim lands enjoy *kitniyot* on Passover, while Ashkenazic Jews continue to debate whether it is necessary to avoid them.<sup>33</sup>

Another Passover stringency originating in Ashkenazic lands was the mode of preparing matzah, the unleavened bread specially prepared for Passover. Matzah was a flatbread similar to what was typically eaten in the Mediterranean region, although no leavening would be added, and women of the household made it in a pan over a fire. At the Passover Seder meal, when participants recounted the story of the Exodus by use



of food symbols arrayed on the table, they rolled this matzah around the *maror* (bitter herb) dipped in *haroset* (fruit relish) to make a type of sandwich.<sup>34</sup> Because such matzah would become stale quickly, women baked it frequently during the holiday. The change first occurred in fifteenth-century Germany, when rabbis ruled that in order to reduce the chance of natural leavening, enough matzah for the entire holiday should be prepared prior to the holiday by baking it at a high temperature in an oven; thus, matzah became a hard and dry cracker-like food. This demand removed matzah baking from women's domestic responsibilities and turned it over to communally designated men.

Although these examples of different Sephardic and Ashkenazic dietary practices during Passover seem to be influenced by what was most easily available seasonally in their respective regions, it is also clear that cultural factors were at work. Ashkenazic rabbinic authorities were choosing more stringent and more ascetic eating practices in these instances (Sephardic authorities chose more stringent standards in other aspects of kashrut<sup>35</sup>), exemplifying the "principle of hierarchy" typical of theocratic cuisines. Regional traditions were respected more than uniformity in worldwide Jewish practice. As in the case of the new meat and dairy demands, the rabbis were encouraging intra-Jewish distinctions between those who adopted their elite cuisines and those who did not.

### *New Liturgy and Theology: Eating with Books and Words of Torah*

When Jews today read from wine-stained illustrated books at a modern Passover Seder or sing the Kiddush and grace after meals from a little booklet, they may feel that having books at the table during meals is normal and something that people (or at least Jewish people) have been doing from time immemorial.<sup>36</sup> However, only in the rabbinic era did the practice of speaking words of Torah at the table become part of Jewish practice, and having actual physical books started centuries later. Four ways of ritualizing eating and Torah study at the table appear in the medieval era. Medieval Christians recognized Jews as matzah eaters and pig abstainers, but through these table practices, Jews declared themselves "Torah eaters."

## MEDIEVAL HAGGADOT

An important innovation from the medieval era was the development of the Passover *Haggadah*, the written text used to fulfill the commandment to recount the Exodus from Egypt during the evening meal on the first night of Passover, the Seder meal. Neither biblical nor Talmudic rabbinic writers mandated a script for the recounting of the Exodus, although the latter specified that certain topics must be included. Further, special foods are eaten in a set order—matzah, maror, haroset, and the matzah wrapped around the maror—and the participants are obligated to talk about these foods. According to the Mishnaic teaching, which became part of the Haggadah, “Rabban Gamliel used to say, ‘Whoever does not mention these three things on Passover does not discharge his duty, and these are the Passover-offering, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs.’”<sup>37</sup> The Geonim first compiled separate scripts for the recounting in the seventh and eighth centuries, and thereafter many other versions appeared in which the basic elements of the service were augmented by commentaries, poetry, and *midrash*—that is, imaginative interpretations and applications of biblical passages. The purpose of the written Haggadot (plural) was to stimulate diners—men and women alike—to make dynamic associations between their ritual actions, their sense experiences of the food and drink, and their lives as followers of Torah.

Handmade illuminated versions of the Haggadah first appeared in the Christian lands in thirteenth-century Spain. These may have originally served to keep the children attentive to the Seder lessons or to stimulate discussion for children and adults by making visual associations of the Exodus story. Because of some of the details in the illuminations of the Haggadot, Katrin Kogman-Appel suggests they may have been composed in collaboration with popular preachers and rabbis.<sup>38</sup> Historians have noted that the phenomenon of illuminated Haggadot occurred during a time when the towns and cities were growing, and the greater security and wealth in such places enabled the establishment of book-making workshops. The small size of the Haggadah meant that the head of a Jewish family could afford to commission a simple illuminated version for the use in his home, and quite a few of these handwritten manuscripts from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Germany have survived. The advent of printing changed matters even more dramatically,

democratizing access to the books needed for the ritual practices of reading and eating.<sup>39</sup>

A class differentiation within the Haggadot is also evident. Illuminated Haggadot such as the Rylands, Sarajevo, and Golden Haggadot, with their fine calligraphy and lavish decorations, were obviously commissioned by very wealthy and educated Jews. They had both the financial means and the contacts to engage artists to produce Jewish books in accordance with their own tastes and religious needs of like high quality and in the contemporary style. Unlike the Christian books, however, the wine and food stains show that these Haggadot were actually used at the table. Furthermore, the images in the Jewish books asserted Jewish religious superiority. Michael Batterman suggests that depictions of the preparation and pictorial depiction of flat, round *matzot* (plural of *matzah*) in the illuminated Sephardic Haggadot, images characteristically painted in gold with elaborate geometric designs on them, may have been implicit, symbolic assertions of cultural equality or superiority to the dominant Christian Spanish culture. The *matzah* appears as a potent force and a badge of Jewish efficacy, empowering Jews culturally to respond to the Christian threat and to fortify their own position. The rituals, customary practices, and visual images of Passover functioned as polemical tools and lessons for the Jewish participants.<sup>40</sup>

#### EATING TORAH AS A JEWISH BOY'S INITIATION RITE

Another ritual connecting eating and learning is an initiation rite that first appeared in Jewish literature in twelfth-century Germany. Performed in the springtime between the holidays of Passover and Shavuot, it marked the beginning of formal Torah study for boys when they were five or six years old. The father wrapped the boy in a *tallit* (prayer shawl) and carried him to the home of his teacher. The child was placed on his teacher's lap and shown his writing slate, upon which honey was spread, and the boy was directed to lick the honey off the tablet. He was served peeled hard-boiled eggs and honey cake inscribed with Hebrew alphabet and some biblical phrases, and blessings and incantations against a demon of forgetfulness were recited.<sup>41</sup>

Although the ritual did not become widely practiced among Jewry as a whole, it demonstrates the association of eating and Torah study that emerged in the medieval era. At its simplest level, the ritual showed

the young student that Torah study was pleasurable and desirable; it affirmed for his father and teacher the value of the boy's education and the importance of their own role in furthering it. The historian Ivan Marcus has shown that this ritual makes a deeper statement: when the child enters the stage in his life when he can study Torah, "the child enters the Torah (*nichnas la-torah*) by means of the Torah entering the child."<sup>42</sup> Through the consumption of Hebrew letters, Jews were asserting that they were people of Torah. They created this ritual to contrast with the primary religious ritual of the Christian majority, the Eucharist, which presented a holy wafer and wine as the body and blood of Christ to be eaten by the worshiper. The Jewish initiation ritual actually was inverting the symbolic meaning of the Eucharist. Scorned by Christians as deniers of Christ and, in extreme situations, as Christ killers and murderers of young Christian males in order to ritually use their blood, Jews "expressed elements of their Jewish religious cultural identity by internalizing and transforming various genres, motifs, terms, institutions, or rituals of the majority cultural in a polemical, parodic, or neutralized manner." Medieval Jews were giving the ingestion of Torah a symbolic power as a marker of distinctively Jewish identity, proclaiming themselves a people of the Torah.<sup>43</sup>

#### KABBALISTIC EATING

A new "theology of eating" emerged in twelfth- through fourteenth-century Provence and Christian Spain in Kabbalah, the collective term for writings and activities that are understood as "secret wisdom" transmitted over the generations by a rabbinic elite. These teachings include knowledge of God's inner workings, God's design of the universe, and the means to continually sustain and repair the world. The Zohar, the primary written document of Kabbalah, revived the metaphor of the biblical sacrifices for eating and deepened the rabbinic idea of the domestic table as a *mikdash me'at*, an altar or "mini-Temple." Medieval kabbalists taught that when enlightened Torah scholars eat with the proper intentions—this is fostered by discussing appropriate passages from the written and oral Torahs and reciting rabbinic table blessings—they are engaging in worship that is functionally equivalent to the service of the priests in the time of the Temple. Such a meal maintains the Divine Presence in the midst of the people of Israel and returns the divine

energy in foods to its source.<sup>44</sup> The kabbalistic texts imagine these Torah scholars primarily as male, but there is nothing in principle that prohibits Jewish women from engaging in these or similar rites. Although the first practitioners of this kabbalistic eating were a small elite, their ideas spread to broader circles in many lands within decades.

A typical example of the kabbalistic interpretation of earlier ideas is the reworking of the biblical phrase “This is the torah [law] of beast and fowl” (Leviticus 11:46) as a theodicy justifying meat eating based on a theory of reincarnation.<sup>45</sup> They built upon an earlier Jewish tradition that, upon God’s request, animals consented to be killed for food. According to kabbalistic teaching, an animal’s soul may be reincarnated and raised to a higher level if the one consuming the animal is higher up in the great chain of being.<sup>46</sup> They explain this by comparing a Torah scholar’s digestion to the sacrificial fires of the Temple in the *olah* sacrifice, the sacrifice that is totally consumed and ascends to its original source in God. The Hebrew Bible describes the offering being turned into *re’ah niho’ah*, “a pleasing aroma,” before God. The intellect of the Torah scholar has the “fire” lit by the “light” of Torah—in contrast to the unlearned Jew—which enables him to “cook” denser, meatier substances into refined intellectual and spiritual “soul” or divine food. Foods that are considered more easily “raised,” since they have souls that are less earthbound such as fowl or grain (birds fly in the air, plants grow “up”), may be eaten by the unlearned. Only Torah scholars should consume beasts that tread on the land with cloven hooves.<sup>47</sup> In fact, we know that medieval Jews ate red meat no matter their educational or spiritual status. However, this new theology of eating enacts the principle of hierarchy typical of theocratic cuisines: “if you are a holy man, eat like a holy man.”

Another description of kabbalistic eating by Torah scholars defines it as a visionary, prophetic experience similar to that of the meal of the elders of Israel after the revelation at Sinai, referenced in Exodus 24:11: “And they *envisioned* (*va-yehezu*) God, and they ate and drank.”<sup>48</sup> Further, such “real eating,” as it was sometimes called, fuses together nourishment of the body and soul simultaneously and in a unified, mutually sustaining way. Kabbalists imagined this occurring both in this world and in the “world to come” after death and in the Messianic era.

## RITUAL MANUALS AT NON-PASSOVER MEALS

Much of the kabbalistic theology of eating was disseminated in a new kind of book, a ritual manual, exemplified by Rabbi Bahya ben Asher's *Shulhan Shel Arba*. Bahya composed his eating manual to be used at the table in order that eating could be transformed into sanctified dining and so elevate participants to their highest potential. He understood the ritual enactment of eating as an act of receiving divine revelation.

Bahya divided his book into four "Gates" that provide reading and discussion material for the meal's duration. In the First Gate are the distinctive Jewish meal rituals of blessings and hand washing. In the Second Gate, he presents the kabbalistic interpretation of the "physiology" of eating as a sacred act that achieves the multiple effects described in the Zohar. Table manners fitting such lofty purposes are the subject of the Third Gate, and the Messianic Banquet reserved for the righteous at the end of time is described in the Fourth Gate. In each gate, Bahya provides interpretations of certain specific passages from the Torah.<sup>49</sup> While he did not organize his book as a script to be recited, he expects readers to glean talking points from the book to be discussed during meals. *Shulhan Shel Arba* functions like a running commentary, enumerating and providing extensive explanations of the specific blessings, washing, and other table rituals prescribed for Jewish meals. Bahya is prompting a chain of associations that transform a meal into a replication of the meal of manna in the desert wilderness, the experience of prophetic vision on Mount Sinai, divine service, and a foretaste of the Messianic world of the future. Here is Bahya's description of the effect of such a meal:

And thus it is necessary that when one eats, he turn his thought (*mahshevato*) so that it rambles about (*meshotetet*) the Holy One Blessed Be He over each and every bite—according to the matter of "They envisioned God and they ate and drank" [Exodus 24:11].<sup>50</sup> This is like the way our sages interpreted "Let all that breathe (*kol ha-neshamah*) praise the Lord," over each and every breath (*kol neshimah ve-neshimah*) give praise to Him. . . . So you find yourself learning that *when a person stands over his table and eats with this thought in mind*, see! This eating is indeed physical and a natural activity, but see! It also revolves into a higher, intellectual

form of worship, and this is the reason why it is written, “In all your ways know Him,” [Proverbs 3:6] as I discussed above. And if so, you see how one’s eating is thought to be a perfect act of worship like one of the forms of divine service [i.e., the sacrifices], and the quintessential commandment of all the commandments. And this is the point of having the right intention at a meal at the table—that the body be nourished by it and take its bodily portion from the bodily eating, and the soul by this act of thought is filled, fed, and satisfied as if from the choicest parts of “real eating” of the ways of Ha-Shem [God] and His pleasantness, and regarding this it is said, “Your table is laid out with rich food” [Job 36:16].<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, Bahya frequently employs demonstrative pronouns to make sure his readers make the explicit connection to the Temple altar—for example, the declaration “*This* is the table before the Lord!” (Ezekiel 41:22). He likens the physical gesture of ritually washing one’s hands prior to eating and raising the ten fingers of one’s hands upward to energy flowing up from the toes through the body and connecting back to the divine heavenly source. The words recited at the meal are like the smells and sights of aromatic oils and smoke wafting up to the heavens at the ancient Temple altar.

This high evaluation of eating in medieval Jewish thought not only enhanced the social status of the Jewish scholars who know the secrets of their ritualized eating in comparison to unlearned Jews; it also promised an enhanced social status to even unlearned Jews over the non-Jews in power who legislated Jews’ political and theological humiliation. By making Torah into a regimen over the appetites that distinguished Jews from gentiles, the Torah itself becomes the metonymic Jewish food—that is, it represents the Jews. When one attaches the words of Torah to the foods one eats while at the table, the food itself becomes a revelation of Torah, like the “real eating” that sustained Moses as he received the Torah from God. The multisensory, synesthetic experience of saying, hearing, seeing words of Torah with one’s companions and touching “words of Torah” in books at the table becomes a way of “tasting” Torah at the table.

Bahya’s *Shulhan Shel Arba* was popular. During the medieval era, it was copied relatively frequently in handy, table-sized formats.<sup>52</sup> In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, kabbalistic ideas and practices spread

to all corners of medieval Jewish society, in Muslim as well as Christian lands, and Bahya's ritual manual played an important role. From 1500 to 1800, kabbalistic theology was accepted on the popular level in a simpler form and integrated into religious practices, legend, song, and ethics. Bahya's eating manual continued to be read and appeared in printed form, and it may be that it was an influential source for the other "theologies of eating" and liturgical compositions that appeared.<sup>53</sup> For example, in early eighteenth-century Ukraine, Sarah bas Tovim wrote a book of women's petitionary prayers, *The Tkhine of the Three Gates*, that equates the Jewish women's practice of separating a small piece of dough (*hallah*) and lighting the candles at the Shabbat table to the sacrificial worship of the high priest at the ancient Temple.<sup>54</sup> Later in that century and the next, Hasidic Jews likewise elevated all types of eating to the level of priestly worship. They used the term *avodah be-gashmiyut* (worship through material things) to refer to the process of "raising sparks" of divinity trapped in the material world and returning them to their source in the divine realm. This special worship can occur through all sorts of daily activities, but most frequently it occurs through eating in accordance with Jewish law.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

During the medieval era, the expansion of the Jewish Diaspora brought far more variety into religious life. Jewish communities became established in lands with far different climate and agriculture than before. Jewish cuisine expanded to include different foods and modes of food preparation than in the past. The authority of the rabbinic class increased, and rabbis produced a great number of halakhic and theological writings that touched all areas of Jewish life. Regional differentiation in food customs and laws became apparent, although the publication of law codes with wide appeal kept a measure of unity in religious practice. As before, rabbinic authorities sought to preserve Jewish cultural separateness despite interreligious collaboration in food preparation and trade. The rabbis were acutely aware of the pressures upon Jews—sometimes fierce, oftentimes friendly—to accept the religious views and practices of their non-Jewish neighbors and business associates. The developments in halakhah about separating meat and dairy,



gentile wine and “mixed drinking,” and Passover stringencies should be regarded partly as efforts to create a distinctive, sacred mode of Jewish eating in a challenging social and religious context. These and new Jewish food rituals enhanced the status of Jews as a whole in relation to the majority cultures and made a statement to Jews about the value of their religious practice. In the process, the rabbis found an outlet for their own pious expression and their sense of self-importance relative to ordinary Jews. For all Jews, eating played an important role in qualifying one to be among the righteous in this world and earning the banquet reward in heavenly world to come.

## NOTES

1. Bahya, “Shulhan Shel Arba,” 474.
2. Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times*, 156–58.
3. Adamson, 2.
4. Adamson, 55–57, 64, 102; Desportes, “Food Trades,” 276, 278.
5. van Gelder, *God’s Banquet*, 63–64.
6. Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire*, 143. Marks, *Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Sugar,” 567; s.v. “Spice,” 558–59; s.v. “Citrus,” 134.
7. Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied*, 83–84.
8. Matthee, “Alcohol,” 100–125.
9. Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times*, 50–51; Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire*, 137.
10. Efron, *Jews*, 151–55.
11. Efron, 156–61.
12. Efron, 178–87.
13. Efron, 184–86, 203–5.
14. Rabinowitz, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Shulhan Arukh,” 14:1475–77.
15. Bahya, *Shulhan*, 459.
16. Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times*, 42–44.
17. Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire*, 104.
18. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating*, 87–91.
19. Kraemer, 89–91.
20. He makes this point in his *Sefer Ha-Terumah*; also see Kraemer, *Jewish Eating*, 103.
21. This is in his *Sefer Maharil*; also see Kraemer, *Jewish Eating*, 105.
22. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating*, 93.
23. Kraemer, 102, 119–20.
24. Kraemer, 97, 106–7.
25. Soloveitchik, *Wine in Ashkenaz*, 37–39.
26. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating*, 131.
27. Freidenreich, *Foreigners*, 214.
28. Freidenreich, 219–20.

29. Ibn Adret, *Torat Ha-Bayit*, 512–13. Also see Freidenreich, 221–22.
30. Freidenreich, *Foreigners*, 220–23; Kraemer, *Jewish Eating*, 129–30.
31. Freidenreich, *Foreigners*, 216, citing the research of Haym Soloveitchik.
32. Marks, *Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Kitniyot,” 316.
33. In 2016 the Conservative Movement of American Judaism overturned this prohibition; see Schoenfeld, “Conservative Movement.”
34. See Marks, *Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Matza,” 394; s.v. “Koraik (Wrap),” 325.
35. Marks, s.v. “Glatt,” 226.
36. This section summarizes a more extensive discussion in my article “Mitzvot with the Mouth.”
37. Mishnah Pesachim 10:5.
38. Kogman-Appel, *Illuminated Haggadot*, 222–23.
39. Narkiss, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Haggadah, Passover: Illuminated Manuscripts.”
40. Batterman, “Bread of Affliction,” 61.
41. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, 18–34.
42. Marcus, 77–78.
43. Marcus, 11–12. Also see Brumberg-Kraus, “Ritualization of Scripture.”
44. Hecker, *Mystical Bodies*, 149–50.
45. Brumberg-Kraus, “Meat-Eating,” 228–29.
46. Gikatilla, *Shaare Orah*, 11–12. See also Hecker, *Mystical Bodies*, 95–99.
47. Bahya, “Shulhan Shel Arba,” 496. Also see Brumberg-Kraus, “Meat-Eating,” 254.
48. Bahya, “Shulhan Shel Arba,” 492–93.
49. Brumberg-Kraus, “Ritualization of Scripture,” 17.
50. Bahya, “Shulhan Shel Arba,” 492–93; Brumberg-Kraus, “Real Eating,” 119–31.
51. Bahya, “Shulhan Shel Arba,” 497.
52. Brumberg-Kraus, *Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. “Communal Meals.”
53. Gries, *Sifrut Ha-Hanhagot*, 82n137.
54. See Klirs, *Merit of Our Mothers*.
55. Jacobs, “Eating as an Act,” 157–66. See also Hecker, “Eating,” 81.

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