

## ***Are Veggies and Fruits Always Good for You? An Analysis of Biblical Produce in the Book of Genesis***

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*Abstract— The book of Genesis is a timeless account of the lives of various families and individuals and their complex relationships with God. Among the common threads that run through the different narratives, food emerges as a powerful symbol of the struggles and choices the characters face at that time. While many biblical figures succumb to the physical temptations of food, leading to their separation from the Divine, Abraham manages to elevate the everyday necessity into a spiritual and genuine experience. In contrast to Adam, Eve, and Esau, who distance themselves from their communities after indulging in their alluring snacks, Abraham prepares a meal to bring people together and ensure their well-being through his hospitable and inclusive approach. In the broader context of these stories, food becomes a powerful cipher for choice, where decisions about what to eat and when to indulge carry lasting consequences not only for individuals, but for the future of entire nations as well.*

The book of Genesis is a timeless account of the lives of various families and individuals and their complex relationships with God. While each story has new characters and themes, many share a common ingredient: food. Food is initially presented as a thoughtful creation by God in chapter one, but soon becomes a test of loyalty and humility for humankind. Adam and Eve are captivated by the Tree of Knowledge's forbidden fruits, and overstep the boundaries issued by God when they decide to pick from the tree. Esau is guaranteed a life wholly protected by the Divine, but in a moment of anxiety and thoughtlessness, trades the birthright blessing to his brother for a bowl of lentil soup.

Whereas these biblical figures succumb to the physical temptations of food, leading to their separation from the Divine despite intentions to grow closer, Abraham manages to elevate the everyday necessity into a spiritual and genuine experience. He acts quickly to prepare bread and meat for three strangers, ensuring their comfort and well-being through

his hospitable and inclusive approach. Abraham is able to see beyond his own physical demands to meet the appetite of others. In the broader context of these stories, food becomes a powerful cipher for choice, where decisions about what to eat and when to indulge carry lasting consequences not only for individuals, but for the future of entire nations as well.

The presence of forbidden, yet tempting, food notoriously appears in the beginning chapters of the Bible. No less important than the heavens and the earth, food was a thoughtful creation that God decided to put in His world. It is clear throughout the first two chapters that God does not rashly bring creations into being, but, rather, He reflects and ensures that His decisions are “good.”

After almost every day of creation, the verses explicitly state, “God saw that it was good,”<sup>1</sup> and after He finishes building the foundations of His entire world, the verse adds that “God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good.”<sup>2</sup>

In chapter three, Eve uses very similar language to justify her eating fruit from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: “[she] saw that the tree was good for food... and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.”<sup>3</sup> Instead of relishing in the utopic garden God grants her and Adam, Eve defends her sinful actions by claiming she “saw” that the fruit was “good,” just as God did in chapter one. From this linguistic parallel, the text suggests that Eve is not interested in the taste itself, but rather what the fruit offers her: Divine knowledge and wisdom, two traits that up until this point are embodied by God alone. Thus, perhaps Eve crosses God’s will not when she eats the fruit, but rather a step before, at the moment, she decides she could know what God knows.

Though humankind is created “in the image of God,”<sup>4</sup> the texts clarify that humanity is not God. The forbidden fruits, thus, symbolize these uncrossable boundaries between man and his Creator.

By allowing Adam and Eve the free choice to eat from every tree in the Garden except from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, God is testing whether His creations understand their mortal limits. He is testing their loyalty and humility. It is not our job to decide if the fruit or item itself is good, but rather if the action accompanied with it is good in the eyes of God. Now, instead of fruits being a magical gateway to wisdom, God transforms food simply into a necessity and burden of life: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:10,12,18,21,25.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:31.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:6.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:27

days of your life... By the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread.”<sup>5</sup> God puts the exclamation point when He finishes with, “For dust you are and to dust you shall return.”<sup>6</sup> No matter how hard man strives to be like God, we are humbled by our mortality. The fruits of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil serve as hazardous warnings to always remember our place and limits in God’s world.

In the following chapter, Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve’s sons, offer up their fruits and flock, respectively, as sacrifices to God.<sup>7</sup> By taking the literal fruits of their labor that are clearly permitted to them and presenting parts to God, Cain and Abel are acknowledging that their wealth is not only a result of their own toiling, but of God’s support too. They correct their parents’ sins by not only recognizing their subservience to God, but by spiritually elevating their reality as well. The food, here, symbolizes an awareness and appreciation for God’s role in our vocational lives.

However, while Cain had enough reverence to offer up his crops, his very choice of profession is somewhat jarring following the conclusion of the previous chapter. God cursed the land of the earth and promised to make harvesting and agriculture a laborious endeavor. Perhaps that is why Able pursues herding as his livelihood, staying clear of the cursed ground. Cain, on the other hand, is not phased by the punishment and devotes his life to the field. Actively deciding to work in the sector that God just damned demonstrates Cain’s great hubris and his belief that he does not need help from God to succeed. Therefore, although he decides to gift God with the fruits of his labor, God does not want them at that time. Or perhaps an alternative reading: Cain specifically offers up his crops to stick it to God that he is able to prosper in spite of the curse. Regardless, Cain, like his parents, oversteps his boundaries, thereby distancing himself from God despite apparent intentions to grow closer.

The pattern of falling prey to the temptations of food continues throughout Genesis with Esau, for he, too, trades his entire future for an alluring snack. When Esau returns home after a day of strenuous hunting, Jacob bribes his famished brother with freshly cooked lentil soup in return for the birthright blessing. To this Esau moans, “I am about to die; of what use is the birthright to me?!”<sup>8</sup> Although both Esau and Abel pursue similar professions in the field, Abel recognizes God’s assistance by offering a sacrifice while Esau does not attribute his hunting skills to any Divine gift. Other than his father who asks Esau to hunt food for him in chapter 26, we don’t see Esau openly share his wealth with anyone, especially God. His selfish treatment of his God-

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 1:17, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1:19.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 4:3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 25:29-32.

given gift shows that his true focus is on temporary desires, and selling his birthright demonstrates his lack of respect for the position and privilege.

Furthermore, whereas Eve makes a careful calculation whether or not to eat from the forbidden tree—“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruits and ate”<sup>9</sup>—Esau sins when he makes a rash decision, getting too caught up in his external, human demands.

When it comes time for Isaac to bestow the birthright blessing a chapter later, he, unlike his son, does not allow hunger to cloud his judgment. He calls in his eldest son Esau and requests, “prepare for me savory food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike Esau who allows his stomach to drive life-altering decisions, Isaac will not allow external needs to threaten these perennial blessings. This divergence represents a fundamental difference between the two characters: Isaac is someone who thinks thoughtfully about the future, especially one protected by an all-powerful God, but Esau cannot imagine a life past the here and now. Esau’s main character flaw is allowing the present to govern him, as opposed to taking control over his temporary demands. He thoughtlessly trades away his birthright for convenience, whereas Isaac ensures he is in the right physical shape before discussing a Divinely ordained future.

An alternative reading of the same verses, however, is also possible. Esau is Isaac’s favorite son, for as it states, “Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of game.”<sup>11</sup> Before blessing him, Isaac calls to Esau, “take your weapons, your quiver, your bow and go out to the field and hunt game for me.”<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, when Isaac asks his son for food, it is not only because he is hungry; rather, he wants to glory in Esau’s power as a manly hunter one more time before blessing him with generational power over Jacob. It is not the taste of the food that excites Isaac, but how he prizes the thought of his son as a mighty hunter. In fact, Isaac cannot actually taste the difference between what Esau hunts in the field and what his wife Rebecca prepares from the flock.

With this interpretation, the food, like in the Garden of Eden, is an obstacle that distracts Isaac from granting his son a life of Divine protection and choosiness. The minute Jacob entered Isaac’s tent attempting to impersonate his brother, Isaac knew it wasn’t Esau. But the fresh meat (and Jacob’s great costume) persuaded Isaac to abandon

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 3:6.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 27:7.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 25:28.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 27:3.

his instincts, causing him to bestow an eternal blessing to the wrong child.

While clearly in some cases food leads characters to act on desires they would later regret, Abraham deviates from this pattern, using bread and meat to elevate his situation and enrich the lives of others. When three strangers pass by Abraham's tent in Chapter 18, he runs to greet them with no hesitation. He makes it seem as though the men are doing him a favor if they allow Abraham to offer them food and wash their feet. After they agree, Abraham goes beyond the "little bread"<sup>13</sup> he initially offered and asks his wife to prepare "three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes,"<sup>14</sup> and he himself "took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them."<sup>15</sup> Here, food clearly represents welcoming and community.

After just being circumcised at the age of 99, we would expect Abraham to be weak and recovering. Instead, we see the opposite. He acts with alacrity at the sight of an opportunity to embrace guests, and his haste coupled with the abundant meal offering make the strangers feel comfortable in Abraham's tent.

Furthermore, the text chooses to detail all the foods Abraham and Sarah prepare in stark contrast to the way it describes the food availability to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. There, God simply says, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat."<sup>16</sup> Whereas the emphasis in the second chapter is clearly on the latter half of the verse—on the prohibition with respect to the fruits—in the eighteenth chapter, the detailed descriptions of what Abraham and Sarah prepare shed a positive light on the cuisine. The food is made specifically for eating and enjoying. These contrasting portrayals of foods underline the importance of perspective. Eve sins because she is only able to focus on what she is not allowed to have; Abraham excels when he chooses to maximize what is in his control.

Food is such a basic yet essential part of human existence, and in the cases of Adam, Eve and Esau, this fleshliness is what leads them astray. They are not able to postpone what their bodies and minds demand of them during a moment when God expects something else. Abraham inspiringly suppresses all external pain to elevate the lives of others, even strangers. He does not allow his circumcision or "the heat of the day"<sup>17</sup> to interfere with an opportunity to act righteously not only in the

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis 18:5.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 18:6.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 18:8.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 2:16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 18:1.

eyes of God, but in the eyes of man as well. Thus, it is no surprise that God chooses Abraham to be the father of His chosen nation. Although Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruits to better understand God and grow closer to Him, and although post-facto, Esau regrets trading his divine birthright and begs his father for a new blessing,<sup>18</sup> their mistakes eternally cost them and their offspring divinely ordained roles.

We are constantly presented with decisions throughout our daily lives that mirror these of our biblical ancestors. Some choices feel like Adam and Eve's story, where there is an obvious right and wrong option. Some decisions may deceptively feel like Esau's circumstance, where we do not even realize that our desires are clouding our judgment at all. And some episodes may manifest like Abraham's situation, where if we would ignore what is presented before us, the loss is zero and the gain is zero; but, if we go out of our way to address said presentation, we can only gain. The motif of food throughout the Book of Genesis encourages us to examine our situations and their consequences fully and rationally before making any big or small decision, and it invites us to think about how we could properly bring the Divine into our everyday, mundane activities.

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<sup>18</sup> Genesis 27:34.