

“This is a delightful book. It contains the most complete repertoire on the theme of food in Luke’s Gospel of which I know.”

*Hans-Josef Klauck, O.F.M.
Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Literature
The University of Chicago Divinity School, Chicago, Illinois*

“Robert Karris writes with ‘serious levity.’ He has fashioned a ‘meal’ that provides enticing and nourishing food for thought, meat for good homilies, and staples for a life of Christian discipleship.”

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Associate Professor of Sacred Scripture
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**Eating Your Way
Through Luke's Gospel**

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Robert J. Karris, O.F.M.



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Introduction

I have fashioned this book for people doing continuing education in New Testament. Most of them have some background and want to learn more. They may be asking: “What’s the latest?” or “How can I get a new angle on familiar materials?” Perhaps, adult education groups might also benefit from this work. If my readers are getting the drift that this is not a book for scholars, they’ve gotten my point. For teachers or those who might want additional resources I have added a section on Suggestions for Further Reading to each chapter. I conclude with a listing of books that I have found especially helpful.

My title indicates that I have written this book with serious levity. As my subject allows, I will add illustrations and anecdotes to get my point across. At the end of each chapter I provide some questions for further reflection. My final chapter will suggest how the theme of food in Luke may connect with contemporary issues.

This book has a dual origin. It first emerged from the oven of lively classroom discussion at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and became a highly regarded chapter in my 1985 book *Luke: Artist and Theologian*. Since lots of new recipes on how to knead the theme of food in Luke’s Gospel had hit the market since 1985, I decided to update and expand my materials for a 2004 summer session course at Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. I thank the twelve students who participated in this course of continuing education: Machrina Blasdel, Sheila Brennan, Christine Gutleben, Jerry Holland, Jim Hopkins, Monica Lowy, Wayne Miraflor, Mary Morrison, Janet Reid, Michelle Stinson, Paul Watkins, and Patty Zarkin. I have

learned much from our lively discussions from various faith traditions. I thank each one of them for making this a better book.

I dedicate this book to the president, dean, faculty, and staff of the Franciscan School of Theology, Berkeley, who over the years have generously opened their doors and hearts to this teacher, turned administrator, turned teacher again, turned researcher, turned teacher again. *Mille grazie!*

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical translations are from the *New American Bible*.

Chapter 1

The Realia of Food and Drink during the Time of Jesus and Luke

This first chapter deals with data that one rarely finds in contemporary commentaries or books on Luke's Gospel. Without a heavy dose of what I call "realia" or the "real things" we might quickly succumb to a lazy imagination. That is, we imagine or read into Luke's Gospel our contemporary notions and practices of food and drink and fail to try to imagine what it was really like back then. Take one simple example. Most of us relish pork whether as ribs, chops, hams, or bacon and would willy-nilly imagine Jesus and Luke sampling the same savory food. But Jesus and Luke were Jews who didn't eat pork. Those who have the money, motivation, and time can short-circuit their imaginations by traveling to an underprivileged country and partaking of its diet and thus learn firsthand what it was like for Jesus and Luke. Rice and beans may well be your daily fare. You might celebrate Sunday by adding one ounce of meat to your regular fare.

Let's continue to excite our imaginations and thereby shed a little of our cultural skins, so that we can read afresh what Luke says about Jesus and food. I indicate briefly some contrasts between our food culture and that of Jesus and Luke. After that I want to pick apart their menu and explore their wine cellar.

No hamburgers, hot dogs, brats, steaks, or ham for Jesus and Luke. They rarely ate meat and surely didn't eat pork.

We flock to the Friday fish fry. Fishermen Peter, Andrew, James, and John ate very little of the fish they caught, for they had to sell almost all their catch to pay their taxes.

Fewer and fewer foods are seasonal for us, as we can eat what we want when we want. Jesus and Luke eat table grapes in season and didn't enjoy red table grapes from Chile in January.

Jesus and Luke had no soft drinks or coffee or tea or beer or even bottled water. Boiled water and watered-down wine were the drinks of their day.

No ice cream. No sugar, whether real or artificial. Honey and fresh or dried fruit mollified their sweet tooth.

Two meals a day instead of our three squares with "midnight" snacks of pizza, popcorn, and potato chips.

White bread, made from the finest wheat, was for the rich. Coarse, cheap barley bread was for the poor. Those of us who still eat bread, which is full of carbs, prefer brown bread.

We eat on the run and graze, infrequently sitting together as a family. During those infrequent sit-down meals the sounds of cell phones and TV may be louder than our conversation together. Jesus, Luke, and their contemporaries knew of and participated in symposium meals, at which they reclined on couches and that were long and festive, featuring food and drink and lengthy conversation. No gulping and galloping at those meals.

A Leisurely Look at Food and Drink in Roman Palestine and in Luke's Environs

Perhaps it's good to begin with a sobering thought: During the time of Jesus and Luke, life expectancy at birth was about thirty years. Of course, diet was a big factor in a person's longevity. The rich had a better diet, while the poor person's diet was meager. When catastrophe or famine crashed the scene, death was near at hand for the poor. As one rabbinic source starkly puts it: "While the fat person becomes lean, the lean becomes dead."

After giving an overview of the diet of the rich and the poor in Roman Palestine, I will delve into the various food items in detail. What Gildas Hamel, a noted authority, says about Roman Palestine also applies to Luke's hometown:

Wealthier people . . . were the only people regularly eating good meat, old wine, excellent bread, varied vegetables, fruit, and nuts. Most people ate bread or porridges made of barley, various cereals and legumes, or more rarely wheat. They supplemented them usually with salt and oil or olives, occasionally a strong sauce, honey, or sweet fruit juices. . . . They could not afford "noble" meat, except for festivities, and even then in small quantity. Greater poverty meant having a worse bread, full of bran and impurities, accompanied by salt and little oil. It also meant no meat and no vegetables, except roots and wild edible plants" (54–55).

Meat

Gildas Hamel has given the common wisdom regarding the consumption of meat in antiquity. Edwin Firmage agrees: "Regardless of the place or period in question, diets in antiquity were predominantly vegetarian. . . . Most people could afford to eat meat only on special occasions" (1120). Andrew Dalby forces us to put some nuance onto the common consensus, for he points to the Roman cook shops and the thriving trade in sausages, fat, and offal, and an established system of salting, and maintains: "In Rome . . . fresh meat was perhaps more prominent in the average weekly diet" (213). But it seems to me that these cook shops would not have been for the poor or of great interest to Luke, if he knew of them, for the meat on their menus mainly came from pigs. In brief, Jesus and Luke would have enjoyed lamb at annual Passover, for it was an exceptional treat.

Water

While most accounts take it for granted that people drank water, it should be emphasized that water was a major ingredient

in the diet of Jesus and Luke. Peoples of old had learned, often through trial and error, that water should be boiled. So water was used in cooking, for drinking, and as a means of stretching and decreasing the strength of the wine consumed daily.

Wine

Wine was the main beverage, but generally mixed with three parts water. Magen Broshi has shown how plentiful wine presses were in Roman Palestine. For example, there were three hundred in Samaria alone. Broshi also estimates that the average daily consumption of wine was one liter. At this point I remind my readers that the second part of a symposium meal was mainly taken up with wine drinking and conversation, that Jesus was invited to many symposium meals in Luke, that Jesus was accused of being “a glutton and a drunkard” (Luke 7:34), that Jesus’ final earthly meal in Luke 22 had cups of wine, and that the soldiers offered wine to the crucified Jesus (Luke 23:36).

Readers should not get the impression that all this wine was of superior quality. For example, the soldiers’ wine was common stuff. Perhaps their wine was made from a recipe similar to that found in Cato’s book “About Things Agricultural” no. 104:

Wine for the slaves to drink through the winter. Pour into a vat 75 gallons of must, 15 gallons of sharp vinegar, 15 gallons of boiled must, 375 gallons of fresh water. Stir with a stick twice a day for five consecutive days. Then add 5 gallons of old sea water, cover the jar, and seal ten days later. This wine will last you until the summer solstice. Whatever is left over after the solstice will be a very sharp and excellent vinegar.

Incidentally, Cato fed his slaves on rough and dark bread, inferior olives, fish pickle, vinegar, and olive oil. Even those slaves, doing hard labor on the chain gang, got no meat, whether noble or otherwise.

Fish

Fish seems to dominate the first part of the story of Jesus in Luke, as Jesus calls fishermen to be his first disciples and moves about the Sea of Galilee in his ministry of mercy. As a matter of fact, Jesus causes Peter to catch so many fish that the catch threatens to sink not one, but two boats 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide, and 4.5 feet deep that had a capacity in excess of one ton. It would seem that fish would be a major food item in Roman Palestine. Yet it was not, except in fish sauce. Megan Broshi comes to the startling conclusion that on average 1.4 ounces of fish were consumed per week per person. K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman remind us that the Sea of Galilee was a royal lake and that one had to pay to fish on it: "Fishing was controlled by the ruling elites. The local rulers . . . sold fishing rights to brokers . . . who in turn contracted with fishers. The fishers received capitalization along with fishing rights and were therefore indebted to the brokers . . ." (106). So most of the two boatfuls of fish went to the taxman.

People commonly consumed bread in a fish sauce, which made hard bread more palatable. Unfortunately I could not find a recipe for the fish sauce made at Magdala (in Greek, Tarichaeae, or "fish works") on the Sea of Galilee and three miles from Tiberias. Saint Mary of Magdala apparently never shared the recipe for her world famous fish sauce with anyone. Here is a less famous recipe: Various fish and innards of fish are to be mixed with plentiful salt and allowed to stand in the sun for about two months. Then pour the liquid off. The salty, fish liquid is called *garum*; the solid residue is called *allec*. While very flavorful, both stink to high heaven (see Dalby, 156). Dalby says that there is a close resemblance between these products and the fish sauce of modern Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

Bread

As we have seen already, poor people ate coarse, brown bread or barley bread, and the rich ate white bread. In his Fifth Satire,

Juvenal describes how the patron, Virro, treats his client, Trebius, at a banquet. The boss eats high off the hog whereas the subject barely gets a pig's foot. I quote the section about the different breads each is served:

Trebius is given a bit of hard bread that he can scarcely break in two and bits of solid dough that have turned moldy, stuff into which no tooth can gain admittance. The patron and host, Virro, is served a delicate loaf of bread, white as snow and kneaded of the finest flour. If Trebius tries to take some of that bread from a nearby basket, the bossy servants tell him to put it down and learn the color of his bread.

If you're a brown-bread person, keep your hands off the white bread.

Each of the Gospels has the story of Jesus' multiplication of loaves. See Luke 9:10-17, for example. Although John is the only Gospel to mention that the loaves were made out of barley (6:9), it is no doubt true that this was the case in the miracles narrated in the other three Gospels. After all, barley bread was the bread of the people who followed Jesus. I have mused—in one of my lighter, humorous moments—whether there are two miracles here: the feeding of thousands from so little barley bread, and the fact that people didn't break their teeth on these hard loaves. Without the benefit of water or fish sauce or some relish these barley loaves were exceedingly hard and brutal on molars.

Symposium

When we think of a symposium, we most often think of a conference during which speakers will address various aspects of a theme, e.g., "A Symposium on Food." Our modern-day use of the word symposium captures just one dimension of what Jesus and Luke meant by a symposium. For Luke and Jesus a symposium was a meal, generally a festive one, at which the participants reclined, ate, drank wine, and conversed. In the strictest sense, the meal was first and was followed by the drinking of mixed wine

and conversation. In Greek, symposium means “drinking with.” Places of honor were generally on the middle couch of a three-couch or *triclinium* setup. On each of the three couches three people reclined. Thus, there would generally be nine people present. The Greco-Roman authors Lucian and Plutarch describe dignified women as present. Lucian places the women together by themselves on the left couch. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus frequently eats at a symposium: with toll collector Levi (5:27-32); with Pharisee Simon (7:36-50); with other Pharisees (11:37-54); with still other Pharisees (14:1-24); with his male and female disciples (22:14-38). Many of the features we might find strange in Luke’s accounts of Jesus’ meals make sense in the setting of a literary symposium. For example, the strange fact that the woman sinner crashes the gate of the symposium in Luke 7:36-50 finds a ready parallel in “the uninvited guest” feature of the ancient symposium. Further, Lucian’s *Symposium* satirizes the common practice of guests to squabble over who should get the choice couch at a symposium. Recall Luke 14:7-14.

Hospitality

The theme of hospitality holds hands with the theme of food in Luke’s Gospel. The frequency with which the Lukan Jesus was invited to meals clearly indicates the high regard in which hospitality was held at his time. When the Samaritans were inhospitable to Jesus and his disciples as they journeyed to Jerusalem, Jesus forbade their destruction (Luke 9:52-56). Jesus the stranger blesses the hospitality of the two disciples journeying to Emmaus (24:13-35). There is a negative side to this theme of hospitality, though. Jesus wants the religious authorities to break open their guest lists and show hospitality to sinners, the poor, the blind, and the maimed (Luke 14:13, 21). As a matter of record, Jesus is accused of accepting hospitality from the wrong kind of people. He is “a friend of toll collectors and sinners” (7:34).

As the astute reader has begun to surmise, not everyone practiced generous hospitality at the time of Jesus and Luke. One of

the reasons was that the householder could not be sure that the stranger was friend or foe. While Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* is a great romantic tale about the ill consequences of being too inquisitive (the hero is turned into an ass), its eleven chapters are chock full of stories of inhospitality, such as farmers unleashing attack dogs on a band of travelers who are seeking hospitality. I conclude this section with a summary of a tale from Book VIII of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which will highlight hospitality and a simple meal from "egg to apple" or, in our parlance, "from soup to nuts."

After a thousand houses had barred their doors to the gods Jupiter and Mercury, Baucis and Philemon hospitably opened the doors of their humble cottage to them. This elderly couple prepare over the rekindled hearth a copper kettle for the cabbage from their garden that will be cooked along with a little bit of cherished smoked bacon. Conversation ensues, the guests' feet are washed, and they are bade to recline. The appetizers consist of low-grade olives, wild cherries preserved in the lees of some wine, endive, radishes, soft cheese, and eggs roasted in the coals of the hearth. All these foods were served in simple earthen dishes. Next comes the main course of the boiled cabbage with a bit of bacon. The wine of no great age is served in cups of beechwood coated on the inside with yellow wax. This was followed by the second course of nuts, figs, dried dates, plums, fragrant apples, and purple grapes just picked from the vine. In the center of the table was a comb of clear white honey. Besides all this, pleasant faces were at the board and lively and abounding goodwill. Since the wine did not run out, Baucis and Philemon realized that they were in the presence of the divine (Loeb Classical Library).

Note in this tale of exceptional hospitality that Baucis and Philemon serve their best, that little meat is served, that wine flows, and that egg comes first and apple last (in Latin: *ab ovo ad mala*).

Conclusion

I am a great fan of American classical music and often read the brochures that accompany the CDs. Sometimes I learn that a symphony or concerto has never been played before or is rarely played and thus has no or little performance history. The material I have presented in this chapter may be quite new, rarely heard in the classroom or from the pulpit. My goal has been simple. I want to excite our imaginations to read Jesus' story in Luke more from Jesus' and Luke's perspective on food than from our own.

Suggested Questions for Reflection

1. View Fellini's movie *Satyricon*, which humorously satirizes almost all the abuses that could possibly occur at a symposium. Contrast Fellini's meal with those of Jesus in Luke's Gospel.
2. On p. 33 of his *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Peter Garnsey writes: "In antiquity, food was power." In our day, is control of food still power, as squabbles over the composition of the food pyramid indicate? Who is exercising this power and why?
3. In the light of the information contained in this chapter, pick up Luke's Gospel and read chapter 16, verses 19–31. Have your eyes be opened to see this parable afresh?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Broshi, Magen. "The Diet of Palestine in the Roman Period: Introductory Notes" and "Wine in Ancient Palestine: Introductory Notes" in his *Bread, Wine, Walls and Scrolls*. Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Supplement Series 36. London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001, 121–43, 144–72.
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