



They Were Reclining

FIRST-CENTURY
DINING PRACTICES

By Martha S. Bergen

A PHRASE SOME ADULTS HEARD growing up is, “Keep your elbows off the table.” In this writer’s generation people considered having elbows on the table during mealtime to be improper, rude, and ill mannered. Though social mores differ from culture to culture, and frequently within cultures or across generations, the above instruction speaks to the fact that eating is more than just a physiological activity; it is also social and communal, which influences us more than we might think. Sharing a meal with others is usually preferable to eating alone. Relationships are built and enhanced at mealtime. But more than that, a shared dining experience also connects us to situations that help shape who we are and what we think.

Meals in Biblical Contexts

Scripture highlights the importance of food in its social as well as spiritual contexts. Often, meals accompanied noteworthy, though sometimes less-desirable, circumstances and occurred in various types of settings. The feasts, festivals, and holy days God established under Moses’ leadership provided the framework for the larger Israelite community to worship Yahweh and celebrate His purpose and blessings around shared meals—for example, the Feast of Passover or Tabernacles. These were learning opportunities that helped reinforce God’s truths and expectations for His people, and as such, were also occasions to pass

along Israel’s history and heritage to future generations.

Within the biblical world, people would eat meals in a variety of settings, either indoors or outdoors. Examples of meals eaten outdoors are those under trees, as in the case of the three men who visited Abraham (Gen. 18:8) or within the fields, such as Ruth among Boaz’s harvesters (Ruth 2:14). Indoor places included tents, as when Jacob received the blessing from his father, Isaac (Gen. 27:25); around a table, as evidenced by Mephibosheth being at David’s table (2 Sam. 9:11); and in a house, such as the man of God with the old prophet (1 Kings 13:19).

In the New Testament, we commonly find Jesus eating meals and celebrating with others on different occasions and

Below: Banqueters shown reclining on draped and cushioned couches. They are accompanied by servants and other attendants; dated to the 4th cent. B.C.; from the Nereid Monument at the

Arbinas tomb, from Xanthos, Lycia.

Right: In preparation for the Feast of Tabernacles (or Sukkot), a grandfather shows his grandson a *lulav* and *etrog*. The *lulav* is made of three

branches bound together, a palm, willow, and myrtle. The *etrog* (citron) is a citrus fruit. Waved during part of the Sukkot celebration, the four symbolize God’s blessing, including agricultural abundance.



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in various locations—in Cana at a wedding feast (John 2:1-2); in Bethany at the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-39); at the home of Simon the leper (Matt. 26:6-7); at a prominent Pharisee’s house (Luke 14:1); or with the two disciples at Emmaus after His resurrection (24:28-30). Jesus most often used such events as platforms for teaching, His most poignant being the occasion of the Last Supper (Matt. 26:17-18,26-29). His primary teaching methods were stories and parables. Among Jesus’ parables, three in particular deal with the specific category of feasts and banquets (Matt. 22:1-14; Luke 14:7-14,16-24).

Below: Dated to early in the 1st cent., a pair of silver trullae or

-serving pans. One is smaller, allowing the pieces to nest when not in use. In the foreground is a wine strainer, silver, dated to the mid-1st cent. B.C. From the region

of Lake Trasimene in central Italy; this strainer for wine has a deep, pointed bowl perforated with tiny holes. It also has two vertical handles, each shaped to fit the grip of the thumb and forefinger, an arrangement usually found on drinking cups.



Roman Influence on Jewish Dining

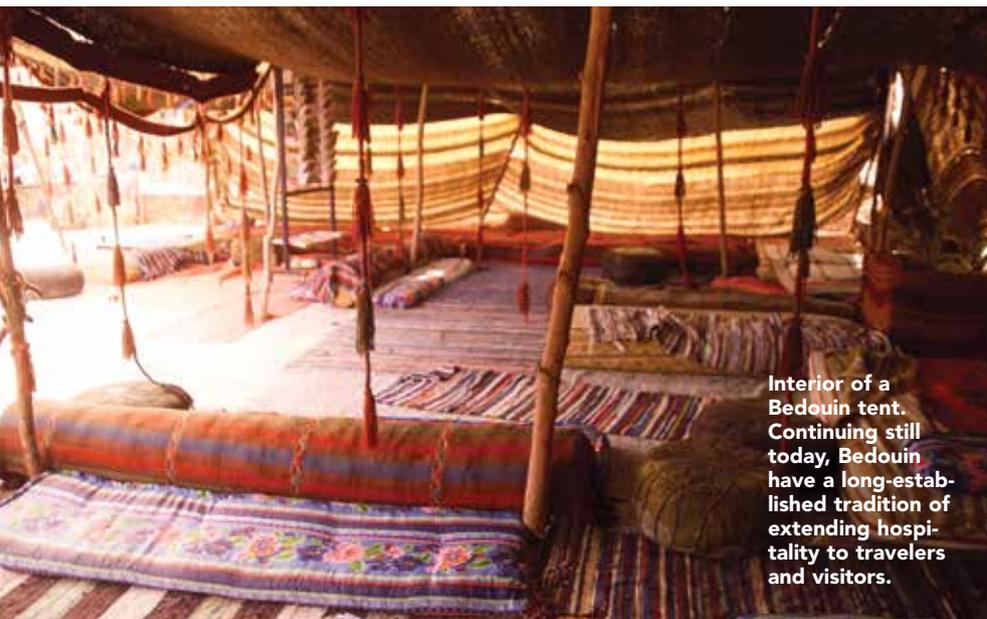
Several times the Gospels speak of Jesus and others “reclining at table.” This was not, however, the usual posture for ordinary day-to-day meals. Families typically sat on the floor or squatted around a rug or low tables on which sat a communal pot of lentil or vegetable stew along with bread. Sometimes, though, seating was available for special ceremonies or events associated with royalty or the wealthy. By the first century, some among the Jews had adopted the Roman practice of using the triclinium for meals. The triclinium was an arrangement of tables in a U-shaped format with couches or cushions extending in a perpendicular angle from the outer sides. This left the inner part of the “U” open, which allowed servants easy access for placing or removing food as needed. Guests, along with their host, would recline or lean on their left arm, leaving their right arm free. Thus persons would use the right hand for eating, since the left hand was relegated for unclean tasks. The right hand was the main utensil, although people did use spoons with some foods. People used bread for scooping stew from the communal pot or soaking up gravies, soups, or sauces.¹

Formal meals such as banquets required an invitation for attendance, though onlookers—those of more humble means—were able to peer in and observe, especially since banquet rooms were well lit in contrast to the nighttime

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Triclinium with carved couches at Petra.



Interior of a Bedouin tent. Continuing still today, Bedouin have a long-established tradition of extending hospitality to travelers and visitors.

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darkness.² The host made sure the gala affair was worth attending. He provided various types of entertainment—anything from music and dancing to having someone read literary works. Afterwards, guests were given an extended amount of time to talk and share stories.³ A biblical example of a festive banquet celebration is that of Herod’s birthday, where his step-daughter entertained with her provocative dancing (Mark 6:21-22).

Petronius, a well-known first-century Roman writer, described a pagan banquet reflective of the customs during his era. The following is an excerpt from his description of the occasion:

We took our places. Immediately slaves from Alexandria came in and poured ice water over our hands....[T]he *hors d’oeuvres* were served, and very sumptuous they were....On a large tray stood a donkey made of rare Corinthian bronze....Flanking the donkey were two side dishes, both engraved with Trimalchio’s name and the weight of the silver, while in dishes shaped to resemble little bridges there were dormice, all dipped in honey and rolled in poppyseed.... We were nibbling at these splendid appetizers when suddenly the trumpets blared a fanfare and Trimalchio was carried in, propped up on piles of miniature pillows.⁴

The Last Supper

When Jesus directed the disciples to make preparations for the Last Supper, He was perhaps asking them, in part, to find a place with a triclinium. This would not have been unlikely, especially since this would be the

last meal He would share with His disciples before His death. The intimate arrangement of the triclinium setup, along with what Jesus wanted to share with the Twelve, would have made this setting most appropriate, including His act of servanthood in washing the disciples’ feet. Furthermore, associated with the triclinium arrangement were cultural dictates for guest placement. Next to the host were the two most-honored guests; the highest-honored was on the host’s right, the next, on his left. The mother of James and John, whose father was Zebedee, no doubt had this cultural norm in mind when she asked Jesus that her sons be allowed these privileged positions

in His kingdom (Matt. 20:20-21). Scripture lends support that on the night of the Passover meal preceding Jesus’ arrest, the apostle John was seated to Jesus’ right, while, ironically, Judas was likely the one to His left (John 13:22-27). The fact that Jesus could hand Judas the piece of bread dipped into the dish would necessitate close physical proximity between the two, especially considering their reclining position.

The Wedding Banquet

As Christians, we have received an invitation to a banquet feast that will make any earthly dinner party pale in comparison. The celebration enjoyed there will only be surpassed by the purpose of the event itself—the marriage of the Lamb to His bride, the Church, resulting in the worship and glorification of the Great Host Himself. We will forever be indebted to Him, for without His invitation, we would never have made it to the event. “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” (Rev. 19:9, NIV). Praise to our Savior, the One who chooses to “recline” with each of us! 🔥

1. Ralph Gower, “Food” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [HIBD], gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 589-590; Fred H. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), 59, 63.

2. Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*, 62; Gower, “Food” in HIBD, 590.

3. Gower, “Food” in HIBD, 590.

4. Petronius, *The Satyricon*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: The New American Library, 1959), 42-43.

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