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It Doesn't Matter What You Eat, it's Who You Eat:
The Pharisees and Food in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's gospel uses food to argue that Jesus is not fixated on rules. Matthew's gospel is making a specific argument against the Pharisees who Matthew paints as fixated on rules of consumption, whereas Matthew argues it does not matter so much *what* you eat, as long as you mind *who* you are eating (that is the bread of Christ).

Historical Background

I would like to begin with some historical background. By the time the Gospel of Matthew is written there has been approximately one-hundred years of debate between the early Church and the Pharisees. At the same time, for both Christians and Pharisees, it is impossible to separate the importance of food. For both traditions, *manna* from heaven in Exodus 16 is a significant story. This means food is an obvious poetic topic for Matthew to utilize to use as a position of debate with the Pharisees.

Matthew's gospel emerges at a time following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem where there are two major religious traditions that survive for the Jewish people: early Christianity and the Pharisaic tradition (Fossum and Munoa 104). This provides a historical platform for Matthew's sharpened critiques against the Pharisees, that earlier Christian texts such as the Gospel of Mark do not engage with. In fact,

stories in Mark's gospel with vague or unnamed critics are named as Pharisees in Matthew's gospel (Pickup 93-95).

Explication

On that note, I would now like to discuss the text itself. I will first briefly discuss the first appearance of the Pharisees in Matthew 3, then I will address at length the pivotal chapters on Pharisees and food Chapters 15 and 16, following up with the polemical Chapter 23, and then conclude by briefly discussing other areas the Pharisees are brought up with relation to food.

The first appearance of the Pharisees, is in Matthew 3:7-10. Jesus condemns the Pharisees and Sadducees, beginning by calling them "brood of vipers." Even from the start Pharisees are associated with food with Jesus' phrase "every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." The first appearance of the Pharisees involves a comparison to food, particularly to fruit that has not grown well.

Moving on, I will read Chapter 15:10-20:

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand:¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"¹³ He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted.¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."¹⁵ But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us."¹⁶ Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding?¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

I think that this passage is the foremost passage in the Gospel on the issue of food. This passage directly mirrors 12:36-37 "...for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." and 5:22 where Jesus states "and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." This recurring discussion on words demonstrates that throughout the Gospel, Matthew's Jesus is highly concerned about righteous language, comparing using the wrong words with condemnation to hell from the quoted verses. The phrase Jesus says, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." is not only the foundation of an ethical position within the early Church regarding dietary law, as Matthew's audience, both at the writing into the contemporary period, would be and is fully aware of the symbolic meaning food has in the Christian tradition. Jesus here is not speaking in a code or espousing some kind of secret, rather Jesus' words in addition to the literal meaning, should be read poetically, with the food of bread being a representation of his body (and presumably other "foods"), and this story should not be merely read as Jesus providing a sort of relief for a legalistic rules when Jesus distances the Church from dietary law.

"Ingesting" the ideas of other religious communities at the time of Matthew, whether Roman, Jewish, or Christian (and their diverse sects) is not as important as speaking right and doing the right thing, this can be read as an acceptance of religious pluralism and perhaps if stretched, a mumbled universalism from Matthew's Jesus. Jesus here is not concerned about what ideas go into the body and Jesus uses the crude

symbolism of defecation what “enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer” to discuss the temporary function of ideas. “Evil intentions” and so on, that come out from the heart, is the concern of this Jesus, not so much the obedience of a dietary rule or the ritualic symbolism it embodies.

This suggests to me, Matthew’s emphasis on the last supper would not be its ritualic significance but rather the communion ritual is of tremendous importance because it leads to Christians having hearts that do not fornicate, do not murder, do not slander, and so on. This passage is where Jesus most explicitly condemns the Pharisees and here, the Pharisees are associated with food imagery.

Moving on, allow me to read from Chapter 16:

⁵When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶Jesus said to them, “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ⁷They said to one another, “It is because we have brought no bread.” ⁸And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? ⁹Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!” ¹²Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Verses 11-12, especially Verse 12 is an explicit confirmation that bread can be symbolic with the Pharisees and Sadducees. As mentioned in Roland Boer’s book *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel*, bread would be historically synonymous with wealth and subsistence at this time, not unlike today. However, there is more of a religious connotation because several earlier Southwest Asian religions also had religions with

bread and wine or beer (Boer 62-63). For Christians specifically, bread would also be associated with Jesus' sacrifice. Matthew's audience take bread seriously. In Verse 11, Jesus even compares his disciples who do not perceive the association as foolish. The lesson that accompanied the feeding of the five thousand is also addressed in Verse 9. Verse 5, the disciples forgetting the bread, seems to indicate within the metaphor the Early Church had forgotten the importance of Jesus' sacrifice. The details of this are not clear but crossing over to the other side seems to be symbolic of some transition for the early Church, perhaps the reaching out to gentiles. Regardless of the polemical meaning, in this passage we have an explicit confirmation within the text of the bread's symbolism.

Matthew 23 is an entire chapter dedicated to decrying the Pharisees and importantly, food is alluded to or explicitly mentioned throughout the entire chapter. In Martin Pickup's summary of this sequence, he notes the structure of the chapter is in three sections: a warning by Jesus to the people that the scribes and Pharisees are accurate but inadequate teachers (verse 1-12), then the woes pronounced to the scribes and Pharisees (verse 13-33), and finally (verses 34-39) a lament over Jerusalem (102).

Interestingly this passage is an expanded passage from Mark, however, as noted previously, while Mark simply say "scribes" Matthew embellishes the story to mention "scribes and Pharisees" (Pickup 93-95). Verse 6 is the first allusion to food, when Jesus says "They love to have the place of honor at banquets" that is yet another subtle association of food with the social role of the Pharisees, taking places of honor at banquets where food would be consumed, especially food of great wealth. Perhaps by

building off the Chapter 15 passage selected, the Pharisees are not sinning by the food they consume at the banquet but the fact they hold themselves in high regard. In the next section, starting at Verse 19 “How blind you are!” Jesus begins by calling the scribes and Pharisees “blind guides” and mentioning gold, “For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?” This is particularly a significant for the transition of sacrifice in Christian ritual practice. No longer must an animal (potential food source) must be sacrificed, as the Messiah now functions as the eternal sacrifice (1 Corinthians 5:7). The next part of this section in verses 23-24 Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!”

These verses are rich with consumption imagery. Jesus, once again in the Gospel of Matthew, comparing that the focus on food is not as important as larger concepts by asserting the tithing of spices are not as significant as focusing on justice, mercy, and faith. Further, the “swallow a camel” imagery is powerful poetry and no accident on the account of the Gospel author, especially how this relays back to the Jonah story. In addition, the “camel in the eye of a needle” metaphor about the rich from 19:23-24, can be associated with this statement as well.

The next two verses, continue the consumption imagery and shifting in a more social role of dining: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean." Here, in verses 25-56, the food imagery ends before Jesus goes on to discuss death in the next ten verses. The chapter ends with Jesus comparing himself to the mother hen. This is a sudden shift from Jesus' righteous anger against the Pharisees shifting to a feminine gentleness and his association as a public mourner (which was a role for women). While the purpose of this passage can be read to express the divine's gender fluidity (as some progressive Christians do), its function in Matthew may be to suggest an invitation of reconciliation and humbleness on the behalf of Jesus, and by extension Matthew's church in hoping to potentially mend bonds with the Pharisees. The central purpose of this chapter is that Jesus is seen as a more authoritative source of the law, compared to the Pharisees, that would be important to a primarily Jewish audience. Further, Jesus' authority over dietary laws, is significant because Jesus' crucified body becomes a symbol in the bread of the Church.

I would like to now discuss Matthew 21. Matthew 21:33-46 has Jesus tell a parable about a vineyard being placed in the hands of wicked tenants who beat and kill the slaves of the landowner and eventually the landowner's son. Then, Jesus quotes Psalm 118 about the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone thanks to God and how this is marvelous in the eyes of the Psalmist. In Matthew's fashion, he has Jesus explain the parable in whole, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom." (22:43). Then Matthew explains the outrage of the Pharisees and chief priests upon hearing this and the author notes the crowds' adoration of Jesus as a prophet that is what prevents his

arrest. The fact Jesus employs vineyard imagery in his parable but then quotes the Psalmist's construction imagery is interesting, as this creates another instance of the Pharisees being mentioned in the context of food, this time in the production of some kind of vine fruit which further correlates wealth and food polemically against the Pharisees.

Analysis

Let me conclude with an analysis and summary. The types of passages in Matthew regarding the Pharisees and food can be summarized in three categories. The first form, is the Matthew 15 passage, of not worrying about consumption of physical food. The second form is the more explicit literal revealing of the food metaphor in Matthew 16 that mirrors the previous chapter. Here, Jesus is concerned about food but it is no longer physical food. The three other passages are supplementary and although may be more subtle, add an important ornamentation to certain other passages that seems to contribute to the aforementioned model of Chapters 15 and 16. The message is incredibly clear it does not matter *what* a Christian in Matthew's community eats, it is *who* the Christians eat, the importance of Jesus as bread in the last supper, and following correct ideas that correspond with the bread, not so much the bread itself literally

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