

THE FOOD OF THE BIBLE/2

Milk, mankind's first nourishment

CULTURE

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Milk is the beginning of mankind's food alphabet: it is the first nourishment taken. Rich in substances that increase the infant's defences, liquid and therefore drinkable, breast milk is an extension of the very special relationship the child has with its mother.

Begun in the womb, the intimate relationship between mother and child continues through the practice of breastfeeding. It is just the two of them: mother and child,

whichever their religion and whatever their latitude. From the mother described by the Dalai Lama through her milk ("We do not come from the stars or the flowers, but from our mother's milk. We have survived because of human compassion and our mother's care. This is our principal nature"), to the sublime Mother, Our Lady, who holds her divine Son in her arms and whom Sartre describes as follows:

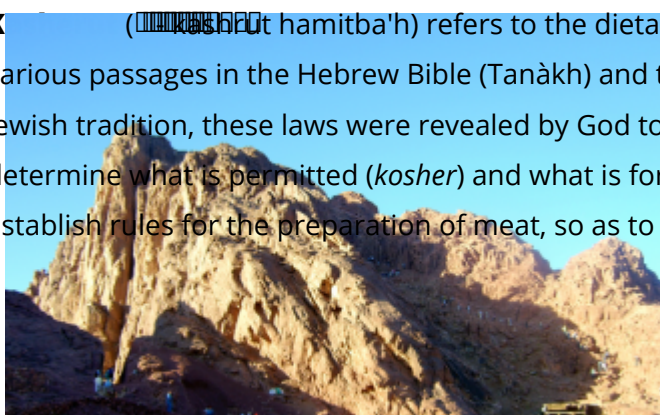
"She looks at him and thinks, 'This God is my son. This divine flesh is my flesh. He is made from me. He has my eyes, and the shape of his mouth is the shape of mine. He takes after me. He is God, and he takes after me. No other woman has ever had her God fall to her lot in this way. A small God whom I can take in my arms and cover with kisses. A warm God who breathes and smiles. A God who lives and whom I can touch'".

In the Bible, milk is described several times, in many verses. But one passage in particular attracts our attention:

"The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great oak trees of Mamre while he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and saw three men standing across from him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself toward the ground. He said, "My Lord, if I have found favour in Your sight, do not pass by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree. I will bring a piece of bread so that you may refresh yourselves. After that you may pass on, now that you have come to your servant". And they said, "So do, as you have said." So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quickly prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it, and make cakes." Then Abraham ran to the herd and took a choice and tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought butter and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate" (Genesis 18, 1-8).

What is astonishing in this biblical passage is the fact that the guests, among whom was the eternal Son (i.e. Jesus) in human form, eat meat and milk together, which is absolutely forbidden in the Jewish religion. The eighth verse clearly shows that Jesus, who was born in a Jewish context, no longer takes the "kasherut" (or kosher) rules into account.

K (כּוֹשֵׁר) (קַשְׁרוּת hamitba'h) refers to the dietary laws prescribed for Jews in various passages in the Hebrew Bible (Tanàkh) and their interpretations. According to Jewish tradition, these laws were revealed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. They determine what is permitted (*kosher*) and what is forbidden (*terefah*). In particular, they establish rules for the preparation of meat, so as to avoid the consumption of blood,



and impose the separation of meat and dairy products. The latter prohibition is based on a command repeated three times in the Torah: 'Do not cook the kid in its mother's milk' (Exodus XXIII, 19 and XXXIV, 26; Deuteronomy XIV, 21).

This prohibition does not mean that Jews should not consume dairy products.

On the contrary, dairy products are very much present in the culinary traditions of Jews all over the world: yoghurt among Sephardic Jews in the Middle East, sour cream and cheese among Ashkenazic Jews in Central Europe and America... It simply means that observant Jews are not allowed to cook dairy and meat foods together, nor to consume them during the same meal: dairy products may be eaten after meat after a period of varying length, according to local customs (six hours for Central European Jews, three hours for Germans, one hour for the Dutch...).

Dairy, meat and dairy products are even isolated at all stages of their use (storage, dishes, utensils, etc.). Why this ban? The prohibition to "cook the kid in its mother's milk" has been interpreted in different ways by rabbinic tradition and anthropologists: a desire to break with ancient pagan fertility rites, distinction of the group of believers from the others, the need for spirituality and elevation that detaches man from his animality...

Be that as it may, this example shows that food prohibitions are not biological but cultural, since human beings are omnivorous: identity markers par excellence, they are collective manifestations that testify to belonging to a group. Moreover, among Jews, in a context of multi-secular diaspora, the observance of food laws maintains and reinforces the common identity of practising Jews.

Returning to Genesis 18:1-8, we can consider that Jesus (who was a *rabbi* and as such a teacher of the faith), although born in a Jewish context and respectful of the dietary rules of his people, changes after his baptism and eats more "freely" (meat and milk together). This passage puts an end to the never-ending *vexata quaestio* on the question: "Did Jesus eat kosher"? No, He brought an end to that custom.