

Eating Abjection

“The fact remains that all food is liable to defile.” – Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

Food, as Julia Kristeva posited more than thirty years ago, marks and destabilizes the boundaries of individuals and communities. For Kristeva, and other psychoanalytically inflected theorists in the latter half of the twentieth century, the ingestion of food reveals the illusion of corporal boundaries. So, too, do attempts to block food: as I assert control over the boundaries of my body—“I will eat this, I will not eat that”—I am, on a very profound level, acknowledging that my body *has* no permanent or stable boundaries (otherwise, what need would I have to assert such control?). The moment I accept into or reject food from my body, I am always already straddling the precarious border between purity and defilement. “All food,” as Kristeva tells us, “is liable to defile.”

It is this borderline precariousness that I find so intriguing in this compelling chapter of David Freidenreich’s *Foreigners and their Food*. As Freidenreich explains, Jewish eating was marked as both heretical (as eating with Jews signalled approval of their unorthodox food restrictions) and as idolatrous (as eating Jewish food, especially unleavened bread, was like eating the suspect “idol offerings” [*eidōlothuton*] of pagans). To eat with Jews is to dine with heretics; to eat Jewish food is to ingest the poison of pagans.

Freidenreich highlights the central paradox of this Christian view of Jewish eating. Christians reject Jewish commensality *because* Jews embrace an outmoded and superseded system of dietary laws; yet the “inexorable logic of rhetoric about Jewish impurity... demands an embrace of the notions that Jewish food is impure and its consumption by

Christians forbidden” (124). Jews are impure because they reject certain foods; consequently *their* foods must be rejected as impure by Christians. Anti-Jewish rhetoric requires embracing the very behavior that is rejected as heretical. To be anti-Jewish is, ergo, to Judaize.

I would like to push the significance of this paradoxical discourse a bit farther than Freidenreich. Specifically I question his assertion that “Christian clerics, like their Rabbinic counterparts, prize the establishment and preservation of proper categories” (114). On my reading—facilitated precisely by the paradoxes illuminated by Freidenreich—we are not witnessing merely a process of assortment, categorization, and rejection, in which “proper categories” are preserved. Rather, following Kristeva’s lead, I suggest the “Christian clerics,” despite their hardline rhetoric, indicate the porous boundaries of the Christian cultural body in their focus on the abject quality of food. The abject (as Kristeva writes in *Powers of Horror*) belongs neither to self or other, but lingers at the fuzzy boundary in-between: it enunciates the fear of and desire for the dissolving bounds of personhood. Food—passing through, in and out, object of desire and fear (purity and pollution)—is abject. The process of eating can never establish secure boundaries, but only create a new scene of abjection. That is: At exactly those points where Christians assert difference, distinction, and “proper categories,” we may suspect those categories of failure. The flipside of this constant, vibrating Christian anxiety over eating with Jews is the strong, pressing desire to restrict food *like Jews*. Christians are always already engaged in Jewish eating, at no point more ferociously than when they are engaged in their rejection of Jewish food. The body Christians work so hard to protect from pollution is revealed, by their

efforts, to be always already breached by defilement. On a deep level, Christians desire this infiltration: the fear and desire are intertwined, interconnected, mutually nourishing.

Freidenreich suggests that both Jews and Christians analogously “embrace” the same biblical notion of “Israel [which] possesses a monopoly on holiness and an exclusive relationship with the divine” (128). Yet this Christian absorption of the identity of “Israel” precisely articulates the nexus of fear and desire that Freidenreich has mapped in Christian attitudes toward Jewish eating: to be the “new Israel” is to “embrace” a specifically Jewish logic of the divine (including the logic of Jewish food purity) while *simultaneously* fearing and rejecting “old Israel” for that selfsame religious logic. To be “new Israel” is to become what they fear. That so much of this discourse of “impure” Jewish eating can take place in the total absence of “real” Jews (see p. 115) signals to us that larger issues are at stake: not merely fear of being/desire to be “Jewish,” but a broader anxiety over religious borders projected onto imaginary Jewish bodies. Freidenreich writes, “The hermeneutical Jew functions as a magnet that attracts negative depictions precisely because the Jew is imagined to be the polar opposite of true Christianity and thus the embodiment of everything which Christians do not want to be themselves” (124). This statement is only partially true: these fantasy Jews embody everything Christian do not want to be themselves *and also what they deeply desire to be*. This is the power of the abject: to experience the precariousness of boundaries, to imagine their dissolution, a feeling at once thrilling and horrifying.

There is much more in this chapter I find compelling: the links between Christian boundaries and imperial discourse (p. 125), as well as the notable—and clearly vital—distinction between Christians’ obsessive fixation on the figure of the Jew, and Talmudic

Jews' studious uninterest in Christian Empire (p. 126). Both of these observations, I think, also make sense when we imagine food and eating not only as modes of social control and distinction, but as symbols for the internalization—the *ingestion*—of otherness (as Empire consumes its provinces, and rabbinic sages refuse to be consumed). When Christians in late antiquity deploy a (de-)Judaized rhetoric of impurity, we witness in this moment a discursive sleight of hand: a fear of contamination covering over a desire for the other, internalized and absorbed like a forbidden bit of unleavened bread.