

Response:
David Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law*
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In one of the many sparkling passages with which Peter Brown illuminates the world of late antiquity, a self-pitying Greco-Roman senator posted on the Danube frontier writes home, “the inhabitants...lead the most miserable existence of all mankind, for they cultivate no olives and they drink no wine.”¹ In this brief but eloquent lament is condensed all the essence of Roman-ness: wine + olive oil = civilization, urbanity, conviviality, taste. (Many of us would still agree.) The inescapable corollary, of course, is that the Germanic locals’ consumption of butter and beer signaled their utter barbarism and brutishness.

In this learned chapter David Freidenreich argues that early medieval Christian discussions of Jewish food practices served a similar function, helping to define Christian identity by constructing Judaism as irremediably Other. By going beyond the Apostle Paul’s rejection of kashrut to insist that Jewish feasts were the “tables of demons,” that Jewish food was contaminated by their bloodied and “impure” hands, and that buying Jews’ cast-off meat was to risk contagion and degradation, bishops and preachers used food to draw borders around Christian communities and increase the distance between Jews and Christians. Freidenreich makes a convincing case: the dichotomy of purity/impurity undoubtedly offered a sturdy framework for differentiating Christians and Jews. But – to shift to a more pertinent metaphor – it is a skeleton oddly devoid of flesh and blood. What I am most struck by is the schematic nature of this discourse, especially compared to the pungent food-talk inspired by other religio-ethnic rivalries.² Jewish food practices are condemned in strident but highly generic terms.³ Jewish rejection of pork is barely mentioned, and nothing is said about Jewish avoidance of shellfish or the ban on the mixing of meat and milk.⁴ Moreover, none of these sources offers a positive counter-vision for Christian eating, a food-based identity comparable to that cherished by our homesick Roman. The impression conveyed by these texts is that during the period in question food was a rather limp banner around which to rally Christian community.⁵

Indeed, it was a tricky business trying to decide how to “eat like a Christian” in this period. Instructing Christians not to eat with or like “impure” Jews did not take you very far: how might this “not-eating” be manifested? As spiritual leaders trying to eradicate vices such as gluttony and luxury from their flocks, ecclesiastics hardly could sing the praises of pork and shellfish. In the face of the dualist challenge (whether real or imagined), which labeled *all* flesh carnal and corrupt, they shied away from preaching extreme asceticism. Augustine sought to offer a middle way, insisting *contra* both dualists and Jews that all things made by God were pure. But were all orthodox Christians quite convinced of this in their heart of hearts? Early penitentials proscribed the eating of a long list of forbidden foods,

including horse flesh, carrion, lice, cattle that had fallen from a rock, and many more.⁶ Even the most sternly orthodox authorities conceded that some foods were purer than others: saints were praised for fasting, monastic rules strictly regulated the kind and amount of food allowed, meat was given up for Lent (though only by those who could afford it to begin with). And in any case, what would a diet consisting of “all things made by God” look like?

So eating was not a unifier but a divider within Christian society. It separated the pious from the gluttonous, saint from sinner, Catholic from heretic, rich from poor. But there was another problem too. For all the legists’ attempts to stress Jewish-Christian difference, as often as not wealth, rather than faith, determined diet. At least in the early medieval West, food could *connect* Jews and Christians, when they shared economic interests. In the Frankish kingdoms, it was Jews who supplied Christian nobles with their dietary delicacies, cultivated the finest wines, and both catered to and fostered their taste for pepper, ginger, cloves, and other spices. On the other end of the scale, it was the need of common Christians for affordable food that kept alive the secondary market in Jewish meat in the face of prohibitions repeated over many centuries.

The problems faced by Church leaders in constructing Christian ways of eating are crystallized in the image from the *Bible moralisée* reproduced in Freidenreich’s Figure 8. As Freidenreich notes, it presents Jewish-Christian contrasts, but it is not quite “dualistic.” Instead of two opposed scenes, Christian and Jewish, we have a triad: Christian sacrament (the priest raising the host), Judaic sacrament (the white-bearded Jew raising the holocaust offering above an altar), and Jewish food practice (the younger Jew engaged in kosher slaughtering). The first two clearly form a contrasting pair, but they are not total opposites. They share some key features: the sacrificing Jew, like the priest, looks heavenward, and his offering, like the host, is pure and white. The kosher slaughterer, on the other hand, while deeply unlike the Catholic priest in appearance and pose, has no real Christian counterpart. The proper pendant to this figure would be a Christian butcher or banqueter, but no such image appears. Like their early medieval predecessors, the biblical scholars who made this manuscript found it hard to imagine a (non-Eucharistic) Christian food culture because they located Christian identity in Scripture and sacrament, not kitchen or dining hall, and because it was hard to locate “the spirit” in things of the flesh.

All this began to change, however, with the spread of lay piety in the later Middle Ages. As the site of Christian identity extended from church to city and household, and as fears of dualism receded, Christians did forge a positive food identity. As Claudine Fabre-Vassas has shown us, Christians gradually came to use the consumption of pork to define themselves against Jews.⁷ These mundane practices – the making of blood sausage, the hallowing of the Sunday ham – defined Christian identity far more effectively than conciliar decrees. They also proved a more potent means of distancing Jews and Christians, for in all too many Christians’ minds, the Jews’ analogue of the blood sausage was the matzah baked with Christian

blood or the heart of a murdered Christian child. This grim development demonstrates yet again the truth of the dictum, “Beware of what you wish for,” for in response to the spread of the Blood Libel in the high and later Middle Ages, popes were forced to issue edicts denying that Jews ate blood or touched dead bodies, and forcefully asserting the biblical warrant for and ongoing acceptability of Jewish eating practices.⁸

¹ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity A.D. 150-750* (New York, 1989), p. 11.

² Take, for example, William of Malmesbury’s mocking characterization of the nations that departed on the First Crusade: “the Scotsman forsook his familiar fleas, the Dane gave up his long-drawn-out potatoes, the Norwegian left his diet of raw fish.” *Gesta Regum Anglorum* iv.348. Less humorous examples include the virulent Nazi propaganda against kosher slaughtering, and such insulting epithets as “bagel-dog” (for a Jew) or “black bean” (for a Mexican American).

³ In an earlier chapter (p. 102) Freidenreich notes that second and third-century Christians critiqued Jews’ “tiresome legislation about meat,” but this is mild stuff.

⁴ Jews’ refusal to eat pork is criticized in the so-called Apostolic Council of Antioch, which probably took place in the third or fourth century; this canon is not mentioned in Freidenreich. Charles Joseph Hefele, ed., *Histoire des Conciles d’après les documents originaux* (Paris, 1907), Vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 1076-77. This council is discussed in Claudine Fabre-Vassas, *The Singular Beast: Jews, Christians, and the Pig*, trans. Carol Volk (New York, 1997), p. 6 and p. 147; note that the Hefele volume number is cited incorrectly on p. 359n28.

⁵ The Eucharist is an obvious exception, but it is far too vast a topic to deal with here. I will just briefly note that even if early medieval Christians were as moved by the sacrament as they were supposed to be, it left many hours (and meals) unoccupied. For the role of the Eucharist in later medieval food culture, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987) and Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁶ See *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, ed. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer (New York, 1965), pp. 112-133, 120-121, 131-134, 157-159, 191, 313. My colleague Joel Rosenthal notes that the ban on horseflesh was most likely designed to differentiate new Christians from “barbarous” Germans.

⁷ Fabre-Vassas, *The Singular Beast*. Fabre-Vassas’s survey ranges from the early Christian period to the nineteenth century, but the bulk of her evidence concerning pig-related traditions dates to the thirteenth century and after.

⁸ See, for example, the letters of Pope Innocent IV condemning the libel in Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the Thirteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1933), pp. 268-271; 275.