

Taste and Feast: Images of Eating and Drinking in the Book of Mormon

Interwoven throughout the Book of Mormon are images of eating and drinking that serve as symbols and metaphors inspiring readers to flee degradation and partake of eternal life.

Richard Dilworth Rust

“You are what you eat,” the adage goes. Turning that around, Jean Brillat-Savarin in his treatise on eating, *The Physiology of Taste*, says: “Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are.”¹ This observation holds true for the Book of Mormon, in which literal and metaphorical references to eating and drinking (or the lack thereof) define the essential nature of people, emphasize problems of survival, illustrate degradation, characterize social relationships, reinforce covenants, poetically define a hope for eternal life, and suggest a response to the book as a whole. These images support a point made by Peter Farb and George Armelagos in *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating*: “Because of values that go far beyond filling the stomach, eating becomes associated, if only at an unconscious level, with deep-rooted sentiments and assumptions about oneself and the world one lives in.”²

Filling the stomach is an immediate concern in the Book of Mormon, with symbolic meanings arising from literal images of eating and drinking. Initially, food and drink are significant as they help determine survival or death in the wilderness. Lehi discovers in the brass plates that he is descended from Joseph, who preserved his family from starvation (1 Ne. 5:14); likewise, in the wilderness he and Nephi have primary responsibility for preserving their own family—with correspondences to the children of Israel in the wilderness (1 Ne. 17:28–29; Mosiah 7:19). As is frequently affirmed,

this preservation ultimately comes from the Lord and depends on the people's righteousness (cf. 1 Ne. 16:39; 17:3). "Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?" the Psalmist asks (Ps. 78:19), and the answer is yes—on the condition of obedience. Through disobedience, Lehi's family comes close to perishing; ironically, the same brothers who contemplate leaving Nephi in the wilderness "to be devoured by wild beasts" (1 Ne. 7:16) are saved by him (2 Ne. 1:24).

The drastically different responses of Nephi and Laman to the invitation to partake of spiritual food are foretold in Lehi's vision of the tree of life, which Bruce Jorgensen appropriately considers a controlling image in the Book of Mormon.³ This dream occurs in the context of the family gathering "together all manner of seeds of every kind, both of grain of every kind, and also of the seeds of fruit of every kind." This information is followed by Nephi's statement that "it came to pass that while my father tarried in the wilderness he spake unto us, saying: Behold, I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision" (1 Ne. 8:1-2). While on the surface not related (although they are part of the same paragraph in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon), these verses exemplify how the Book of Mormon understates matters and lets the reader discover connections between important points. Lehi and his family have been gathering "seeds of fruit of every kind." Presumably, to get the seeds, they would have first eaten the fruit (or sampled it, at least), all the while thinking of physical survival. Like Robert Frost's orchardist in "After Apple-Picking," who dreams of magnified apples, it would be natural for Lehi, the fruit picker, to dream of fruit—as an archetypal symbol. Reporting his dream, Lehi says the fruit of the tree of life "was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted" (1 Ne. 8:11). Because the family have all been tasting fruit, the comparison is probably rooted in their immediate experience. Lehi affirms that the fruit "was desirable above all other fruit" (1 Ne. 8:12), and in the account of his dream, he repeats that phrase when he beckons his family to "partake of the fruit" (1 Ne. 8:15). He would know the superiority of this fruit since he has tasted the "fruit of every kind" in order to gather seeds. The fruit of the tree of life is a spiritual fruit—the love of Christ—and exceeds in value any physical fruit.

This is a lesson Nephi tests and accepts; Laman and Lemuel, however, cannot get beyond physicalities.

Subsequently, Nephi and his followers are described as agriculturalists; conversely, in their degradation, the Lamanites feed “upon beasts of prey” and many of them eat nothing save raw meat (Enos 1:4, 20). Jarom says of the Lamanites of his time, “They loved murder and would drink the blood of beasts” (Jarom 1:6). Although eating raw meat is generally deplored, there are exceptions. In their necessity in the wilderness, Lehi and his family eat uncooked meat which is made sweet unto them. Indeed, such a provision is evidence of God’s approval: “If it so be that the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them” (1 Ne. 17:3).

In the Book of Mormon, excessive eating and drinking indicate spiritual weakness. Zeniff describes the people of King Laman as “a lazy and an idolatrous people” who want to bring Zeniff’s people into bondage so as to “glut themselves with the labors of our hands,” to “feast themselves upon the flocks of our fields” (Mosiah 9:12). Winebibbing sets up Laban’s execution (1 Ne. 3–4) and provides a stratagem for the Nephite ally Laman to overpower the Lamanite guards (Alma 55).

The extreme of spiritual corruption in eating and drinking is anthropophagy, or cannibalism.⁴ While only a small window is opened on cannibalism in the Book of Mormon, it is sufficient to signal the degradation of the Lamanites and the even more extreme degradation of the Nephites. Eating human flesh is introduced in passages quoted from Isaiah: “I will feed them that oppress thee with their own flesh; they shall be drunken with their own blood as with sweet wine” (1 Ne. 21:26). The evil Amalickiah swears with an oath that he will drink Captain Moroni’s blood (Alma 49:27). While he fails to carry out this vow, in the last destructive battles Lamanites actually feed the Nephite women upon the flesh of their husbands and the children upon the flesh of their fathers (Moro. 9:8). The most horrifying cannibalism is that of the perverted Nephites who raped the Lamanite women and then, according to Mormon’s report to Moroni, “did

murder them in a most cruel manner, torturing their bodies even unto death; and after they have done this, they devour their flesh like unto wild beasts, because of the hardness of their hearts; and they do it for a token of bravery” (Moro. 9:10). In the perspective of the whole Book of Mormon, such violated flesh of death is a complete perversion of the sacramental fruit of the tree of life.

Social relations among the Nephites and Lamanites are in part defined through offering or denying food and drink. “In all societies,” anthropologists Farb and Armelagos say, “eating is the primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships. In fact, the English word *companion* is derived from French and Latin words that mean ‘one who eats bread with another.’”⁵ In the Eastern world out of which the Book of Mormon peoples came, “to admit [a stranger] to the table was always a sign of friendship” as well as an implied offer of protection.⁶ A poignant Book of Mormon example of this kind of offer is Amulek’s willing response to the hungry Alma’s plea, “Will ye give to an humble servant of God something to eat?” (Alma 8:19). At the end of their missionary service together, Alma reciprocates this generosity (Alma 15:18). Conversely, the hard-hearted people of Ammonihah throw Alma and Amulek into prison and deprive them of food and water (Alma 14:22). The Lamanites do the same to Nephi and Lehi (Hel. 5:22), although their hearts are subsequently softened by a conversion experience. Likewise, the sons of Mosiah initially suffer hunger, thirst, and fatigue during their mission (Alma 17:5). The cruelest deprivation is that of the Jaredite Akish, who imprisons his son and starves him to death (Ether 9:7).

The opposite of Akish’s behavior is living the law of consecration. The Church in the early years of Alma’s reign, we are told, “did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, . . . having no respect to persons as to those who stood in need” (Alma 1:30). Sadly, however, they soon become proud to the point of “turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry, and those who were athirst” (Alma 4:12). The plight of the deprived people reminds one of Christ’s words from the cross: “I thirst” (John 19:28).

A temporary deprivation of food and water in the form of a fast is the sign of a disciple who, having taken no thought what he

should eat or drink, is then provided for by the Lord (Alma 31:37; 3 Ne. 13:25, 31). However, long-term deprivation in the form of famine is usually a major result of war and is often described as a punishment for wickedness (cf. Mosiah 9:3; 12:4; Alma 10:22; Ether 9:28). A striking example is that of Nephi calling on divine power to smite the earth with famine (Hel. 10:6).

Discipleship as it relates to eating and drinking is most profoundly developed in the Book of Mormon in respect to the sacrament. The word *sacrament* has “sacredness” as part of its root meaning and implies sacrifice—an offering to God paradoxically made by acceptance of the bread and wine God offers. The word *Eucharist* comes from a Greek word meaning thanksgiving, and the word *communion* implies sharing, even of one’s possessions. These meanings are all contained in the Lord’s sacrament and feasts described in Third Nephi. There we find communion of the faithful, a representation of the Savior’s atonement, a meal of the kingdom, and an invocation of the Spirit.

Partaking of the sacrament is central to the event anticipated from the Book of Mormon’s first pages: the visit of the resurrected Christ to the “more righteous part” of the people in the New World. The Savior twice administers the sacrament through his disciples to the gathered multitude, the second time providing bread and wine miraculously. These people, defined by Jesus as those “with whom the Father hath covenanted” (3 Ne. 20:19), have come unto Christ literally and then symbolically. They act in his place as they imitate his actions: “That which ye have seen me do even that shall ye do,” Jesus says (3 Ne. 27:21). Partaking the emblems of Christ, the people have the potential to become what they eat: “Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Ne. 27:27).

As the divine host at the feast, Christ shows there is enough and to spare both of the bounties of the earth and of God’s inexhaustible love.⁷ When the disciples partake of the bread and wine, they are physically filled but, more importantly, are also “filled with the Spirit” according to the Savior’s promise that their souls would “never hunger nor thirst, but shall be filled” (3 Ne. 20:9, 8). Then they signify discipleship in meeting together often “to partake of bread and wine, in remembrance of the Lord Jesus”

(Moro. 6:6). Several generations of Nephites keep the sacramental covenant of sharing by having all things in common (3 Ne. 26:19; 4 Ne. 1:3). Thus this sacred covenant of thanksgiving and remembrance at the table of the Lord culminates in full consecration.

In many parts of the Book of Mormon, the sacrament is presented figuratively through references to the metaphor of the tree of life introduced in Lehi's dream and developed so beautifully by Alma. Alma beckons his listeners, for example, to come and be baptized and thus "partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely" (Alma 5:34, 62). A person's willing acceptance of the baptismal covenant opens access to God's gift of eternal life, symbolized as bread and water.

Alluding to the fountain or "waters of life," Moroni uses richly poetic language in his anticipation of a millennial time when humankind "may be persuaded to do good continually, that they may come unto the fountain of all righteousness and be saved" (Ether 8:26). He echoes earlier poetic appeals which draw on the imagery of eating and drinking. "Come, my brethren," Jacob pleads, "every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come buy and eat; yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price" (2 Ne. 9:50). "Receive the pleasing word of God," he urges, "and feast upon his love" (Jacob 3:2). Alma says,

Because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with the word in nourishing it, that it may take root in you, behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst. (Alma 32:42)

Metaphorically, drinking can also be negative. Wicked Nephites "thirst after blood and revenge continually" (Moro. 9:5). Carnal people, King Benjamin preaches, "drink damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves and become as little children" (Mosiah 3:18). Those whose works have been evil, Alma says, will "drink the dregs of a bitter cup" (Alma 40:26). The unrepentant who partake of the sacrament unworthily "eateth and drinketh damnation" to their souls (3 Ne. 18:29).

Such metaphors exemplify the richness of the imagery of eating and drinking in the Book of Mormon. King Benjamin's people taste of God's love (Mosiah 4:11), Alma tastes light and joy (Alma 32:35; 36:24),⁸ Mormon tastes and knows of the goodness of Jesus (Morm. 1:15), and those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness" shall "be filled with the Holy Ghost" (3 Ne. 12:6) and feast upon the word of Christ (2 Ne. 31:20; 32:3). (In respect to the last reference, the Book of Mormon is rich in its direct quotation of Christ—indeed, there are nearly 26,000 of the Lord's words.⁹) As the provider of the feast, Jesus says, "How oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and have nourished you" (3 Ne. 10:4).

Granted that the iron rod is the word of God, the fruit of the tree of life is also the word of God—delicious to the taste. As the Psalmist says, "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps. 119:103). For those who accept "the Book of Mormon to be the word of God" (A of F 8), who savor the words of the book and are nourished by them (compare Moro. 6:4), the Book of Mormon itself could be considered a tree of life—a work of beauty and purity, with its words to be feasted upon. (It could also be metaphorically a tree of knowledge, containing bitter as well as sweet fruit—see 2 Ne. 2:15).

In significant ways, then, the Book of Mormon employs images of eating and drinking or the absence of them to develop implications of survival, social relations, and covenants. Its metaphorical use of these images is especially rich. It calls to those who approach it, "Taste and feast."

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NOTES

¹ Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, trans. M. F. K. Fisher (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 3.

² Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 97.

³ Bruce W. Jorgensen, "The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon," in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1981), 217-31.

⁴ Peter Gzowski's book, *The Sacrament: A True Story of Survival* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), and the film *Alive*, both about survival after a plane crash, argue that eating human flesh can be sacramental. Nowhere does the Book of Mormon accept such an argument.

⁵ Farb and Armelagos, *Consuming Passions*, 4.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Lord's Supper* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), 95. Barclay also writes of the Eastern custom of ratifying a treaty or covenant with a common meal (see Ex. 24:11).

⁷ This concept is developed at length by John Frederick Jansen in *Guests of God: Meditations for the Lord's Supper* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956). The linked sharing of bread and hospitality is developed by Joseph A. Grassi in *Broken Bread and Broken Bodies: The Lord's Supper and World Hunger* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985).

⁸ According to Gordon C. Thomasson and John W. Welch, "The Sons of the Passover," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 198, Alma's testimony to his son Helaman about tasting joy is in the context of "a Nephite observance of the feast of the Passover." For Alma, tasting of joy leads to being born of God: "I have labored . . . that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God"; in turn, Alma sees this rebirth as a promise of being raised up "at the last day" and a deliverance akin to God's bringing "our fathers out of Egypt" (Alma 36:24, 27-28). The symbolism of Alma's deprivation ("I could not open my mouth" [Alma 36:10]) and subsequent joyful tasting may be related as well to what Jacob Neusner in *An Introduction to Judaism* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 4, infers from "the individual's experience of hunger and satiation" about "the encounter with calamity and renewal, today and the Sabbath, this life and the coming age." Neusner also says that "in classical Judaism the table at which meals were eaten was regarded as the equivalent of the sacred altar in the Temple."

⁹ Just as a red-letter edition of the Bible highlights the direct words of Christ, so one could be made of "Another Testament of Jesus Christ." See the appendix for a guide to markings. This guide evolved over several years. I first noted the words most clearly attributable to the Lord (Jehovah, Jesus, Christ, etc.) that I found in my own readings, relying as well on the identification of speakers set forth in the three-volume *Book of Mormon Critical Text: A Tool for Scholarly References* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1984-87). Then, thanks to the F.A.R.M.S. preliminary report by John Hilton and Ken Jenkins on narrators and speakers in the Book of Mormon ("The King James Bible Referenced to the Book of Mormon," November 6, 1982, F.A.R.M.S.), I compared my findings with theirs. In its unpublished format, the guide has been used by families helping their children more clearly find Christ in the Book of Mormon; for others, it is a missionary tool, allowing for the creation of a red-letter edition of the Book of Mormon comparable to a red-letter edition of the Bible. It highlights a point the psalmist makes: "The words of the Lord are

pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times” (Ps. 12:6). The new subtitle of the Book of Mormon is highly appropriate in this regard: “Another Testament of Jesus Christ” is not only a testament *with* and *about* Jesus Christ, but, with the double meaning possible in “of,” it is a testament *by* him.

Appendix

“Feast on the Words of Christ”:

A Red-Letter Edition of the Book of Mormon
Markings Suggested by Richard Dilworth Rust

1 Nephi 2:1	26:17-22, 25
2:19-24	27:15, 20-23, 25-35
4:14	28:17, 30-32
13:33-37	29
14:7	31:10-12, 14-15
15:11	Jacob 2:11, 23-33
16:26	5:3, 7-9, 11-13, 15, 18-20,
17:7, 8, 12-14, 53	22-26, 29, 31-33, 35-38,
19:16	41-47, 49, 51-54, 57-69,
20	71, 75-77
21:6-26	Enos 1:5, 8, 10, 12, 15, 18, 27
22:9, 20	Jarom 1:9
2 Nephi 1:20	Omni 1:6
3:7-13, 16-21	Mosiah 3:24-27
4:4	7:29-31
5:20, 22-23, 25, 30	11:20-25
6:6-7, 17-18	12:1-8, 34-36
7:1-3	13:12-14
8:1-25	24:13-14, 16-17, 23
10:7-19	26:15-32
11:3	27:13, 25-26
13:4, 15-16	28:7
15:1-15	Alma 3:14-17
16:8-10, 11-13	5:33-36, 57-58
17:3-9, 11	7:9-12
18:1, 3, 6, 12-16	8:29
20	9:13
21:1-10	10:20-21
23:2-22	12:23, 33-35
24:21-32	17:10-11

Alma, cont.

19:23
 20:2
 26:27
 27:12
 37:23, 25
 43:46-47
 45:16
 50:20
 60:33

Helaman 5:29, 32, 47

7:23
 10:4-11, 14
 11:14
 13:8-20
 14:9
 15:16-17

3 Nephi 1:13-14

9:2-22
 10:4-7
 11:7, 10-11, 14, 21-41
 12-16
 17:1-4, 6-8, 14, 20, 23
 18:5-7, 10-16, 18-25, 27-35

19:20-23, 26, 28-29, 35-36

20:8, 10-46

21-22

23:1-7, 9, 11

24-25

26:2, 11

27:2, 4-33

28:1, 3, 4, 6-11

30:2

Mormon 3:2, 15

8:20

9:22-25

Ether 1:41-43

2:15-16, 20, 23-25

3:7, 9, 11, 13-16, 21-24, 27

4:6-19

9:20

12:26-28, 37

15:33

Moroni 2:2

7:26, 33-34

8:8

10:23