

Biblical diet 'unhealthy'

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A grain silo - a communal location for storing grain - in Meggido, Israel, dating from 8th century BCE. The grain silo had a capacity of 450 cubic metres (photo: Nathan MacDonald).

A new study into the diet of ancient Israel has revealed that far from being 'the land of milk and honey', its inhabitants suffered from the lack of a balanced diet.

Dr Nathan MacDonald, a theologian at the University of St Andrews, carried out a careful examination of the ancient diet using biblical texts and archaeological evidence.

The study disputes the misconception held by many that the Bible provides not just religious instruction and moral guidance, but the recipe for healthy living. In North America, books based on the diet of the Bible such as *What Did Jesus Eat*, *The Maker's Diet* and *The Bible's Seven*

Steps to Healthy Living are bestsellers. In fact, the new research finds that the biblical diet wasn't healthy at all.

Dr MacDonald, a lecturer in the Old Testament, explained, "Though many people have thought otherwise, the evidence is that the diet in biblical times was not very healthy. Except for times of famine and food shortage - which were relatively frequent - it provided the necessary calories, but was lacking in certain key vitamins and minerals.

"A number of books propound a biblical diet because it is thought to be a low fat, high fibre diet. True, many Israelites rarely ate meat, but vegetables and fruit also featured far less than they needed to. In reality, it was not a balanced diet."

Dr MacDonald's examination of diet in the time of the Bible included an in-depth analysis of biblical texts, comparative anthropological evidence, and archaeological finds. The study brings together evidence in a way that has never been done before.

The archaeological evidence was particularly insightful. Dr MacDonald commented, "Scientific examination of human bones from the Israelite period provides evidence of the poor nutritional status of the Israelites. Tests on human remains suggest cases of iron-deficiency anaemia. This is consistent with a diet that is high in flat bread and low in meat and vegetables. Pregnant women and children would have been especially vulnerable to malnutrition with consequences for the rest of their lives."

In studying the neglected topic of food and eating in the Old Testament, Dr MacDonald believes that the Bible has much to say about food that is still relevant today.

"The Bible never purports to provide dietary advice. Even the biblical food laws serve very different purposes than modern nutritional advice.

Nevertheless, the Bible has much to say about food that deserves attention, such as the importance of sharing food with those less fortunate than ourselves," he concluded.

Dr MacDonald's book *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times* is published by Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, MI).

Provided by University of St Andrews

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