Food and humanity are intertwined—in the biblical creation stories as well as in biological reality. It is no accident that the food sources for humanity are announced in Gen 1 as soon as human beings are created (Gen 1:29) and that food-producing plants are mentioned in Gen 2 before the creation of humankind is described (Gen 2:5–7). Without sources of nutrition, human life is inconceivable. Yet the role and significance of food is rarely contemplated in biblical studies, and food as a biocultural phenomenon seldom if ever figures in our thinking about the opening chapters of the Hebrew Bible.

Perhaps the best example of inattention to food as a thematic aspect of the beginning of Genesis is that the recurrence of ’cl (“to eat”) is virtually ignored. In reference to human consumption, the root appears twenty-one times—a multiple of seven contributing to symbolic emphasis, in Gen 2–3.¹ This strikingly frequent usage gives ’cl the status of a “word-motif,” rhetorically drawing attention to an important theme.² The abstract notion—that food is an intrinsic human concern—is given concrete form and dramatic emphasis by the abundant repetition of ’cl. This word-motif denotes a primary Israelite existential issue while also advancing the narrative plot. That YHWH God’s first words to the first human concerns what they can eat (Gen 2:16) also signals food’s importance.

Why are these signs of food as a theme overlooked? Several factors come to mind:

1. Food is not the same kind of issue for us in the developed world as it was for the ancient Israelites. We have too much; and, as will become clear, they often had too little. And few of us have a direct connection

¹ In contrast, the word “sin” never appears in Gen 2–3 but often figures prominently in interpretations of these chapters.
with our food sources. Yet we tend to interpret ancient texts as if the world was the same in essential ways for the ancients as for us.

2. The interpretive trajectory examining the misdeeds of the first family has dominated the study of Gen 2–4 since antiquity even though the Hebrew Bible itself, despite its concern about disobedience, never references their problematic deeds. In fact, the archetypal humans are barely mentioned after chapter 4. In contrast, they appear frequently in Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions. Adam, for example, is mentioned more often in the New Testament than in the Hebrew Bible. This post-Hebrew Bible prominence stems from the interests of early Judaism and Christianity in sin, evil, disobedience, punishment, human responsibility, and related matters; and the focus on these issues in the earliest references to Gen 2–4 (e.g., Sir 25:24; Wis 10:1–3; 1Tim 2:13–15; 1John 3:12) has influenced virtually all subsequent scholarship.

3. Because they present two episodes, the narratives about the first couple (Gen 2–3) and the first offspring (Gen 4) tend to be examined independently of each other. Yet the human characters in all three chapters are part of the same first family, and subsistence issues inextricably link them. They may have originally been separate literary units; but in their canonical form, one is an essential and complementary sequel to the other. In fact, they are distinct from Gen 1 but part of a longer beginnings tradition that continues to Gen 11:26. That is, the story of the first family is the opening section of a longer story that precedes the ancestor narratives of Gen 12–50.

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3 Only Adam and Seth appear elsewhere: in the genealogies of Gen 5 and 1Chron 1.
5 Note that the first two monographs mentioned in the preceding note analyze Gen 2–3 but not Gen 4; and many textbooks and commentaries treat the two episodes independently. A notable exception is Ilana Pardes (*Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992], 40), who insists that Gen 4 is an “immediate continuation” of Gen 2–3.