



The CRAYFISH TALE

CRAYFISH AND THE BIBLE

Those of us who read the Bible now and then, have surely stumbled upon some of the books in the old testament that tell what to eat and what to avoid. Coming out of captivity in Egypt, Moses talked often about good food, clean food, and unclean such. Among many other statements he quoted God saying: *"Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood."* (Exodus)

However, as we scrutinize the Bible further for foods that were allowed, we find increasingly many regulations that both surprise us modern eaters as well as confuse us. We all know about the ban on pork in the Bible. We may also agree that as some swine herds have the tendency to develop trichinosis, that ban may have been justified. Then, at least.

But then we come to some admonitions such as: *Whatsoever goeth upon the belly, and whatsoever goeth upon all four, or whatsoever hath more feet among all creeping things that creep upon the earth, them ye shall not eat; for they are an abomination.* (Leviticus 11:9-12)

Does that refer to crayfish by any chance? Somewhere I read that whatever has 'many legs' is also an abomination. That surely includes crayfish as well as lobsters, crabs and shrimp which are all decapods. They have 'many' legs, exactly ten of them including the claws.

Again, knowing how quickly crustaceans, which includes crayfish, lobsters, crabs and shrimp, decay and simply go

bad after they are dead unless you cook them or freeze them properly, it certainly made some sense to tell the old Palestine inhabitants to be careful about such creatures. Poorly cooked or out-of season seafood can cause food poisoning (especially when the red tide is blooming). Nevertheless, shellfish remain forbidden in Jewish Kosher cuisine, Islamic Halal, and the diets of a few Christian sects, such as Seventh-Day Adventism. We, who live among freezers, refrigerators and plenty of easily purchased ice of different shapes, should still bear this in mind. This simple rule is valid even today, several thousand years after the words were written in the Bible, that when you cook crustaceans, don't cook dead ones unless you know how long they have been dead. As the old Jews had neither ice nor refrigeration of modern kind, it was certainly a good rule to follow. Then.

So, it is clear what the Bible says about crayfish; those critters with "many" legs. Yet, if we go rapidly into the annals of the Middle Ages and check on habits concerning crayfish eating we find some rather conflicting information. It is well known that Swedish royalty in the 15th and 16th centuries, King Erik of the Vasas e.g., enjoyed eating crayfish, and raised more of them in the moats of their castles. But it is also apparent that at the same time the lower classes, country people, farmers and peons out in the boonies, stayed away from crayfish. And why? Those who have studied the situation are sure that it was simply because the lower classes took their biblical learning, whatever there was of it, more fundamentally and followed its admonitions about "crawling critters with

many legs” to the letter. So they stayed away from them while kings and queens and all their followers merrily slurped crayfish brine and downed the tail meat with beakers of mead, or whatever they drank in those days.

King Erik Vasa was a gourmet and had developed a taste for crayfish while traveling in Germany. There, the savory attributes of crustaceans had long been appreciated by the monks of some monasteries. Actually, the monks’ appetite for crayfish was increased by the Catholic Church traditions of staying away from meat during lent. Indeed, we read stories about certain monasteries consuming thousands of crayfish during lent. Maybe the monks applied the smorgasbord-view of cherry picking what they liked in the Bible, which clearly forbade eating animals with more than four legs. But, they must have reasoned, as these crustaceans dwelled in the water among the fishes, they must be fishes of a sort, and therefore acceptable to eat on Fridays. Fridays had long been set aside for meatless sustenance by Catholics, and cloister members were, at that time at least, all Catholics. And crayfish they ate.

The Bible is not just picking on crayfish eaters when numbering all the

foods that are “abominations”. Checking the regulations you find that you, if you are a follower of the Old Testament, must stay away from foods from e.g. dogs and foxes, mules and horses, cats and lions. No problem for most of us today to follow those admonitions. But then they also forbade eating catfish, eel and turbot, abalone, oysters and scallops, to say nothing of squid, dolphins and seal. Some would object to not being able to eat caviar from the sturgeon. Marine critters without fins and scales were classified as an abomination and only animals that had hoofs and were cloven-footed and chewed the cud were acceptable.

Once royalty began to eat crayfish, the aristocracy and the middle class soon followed in their footsteps. Soon also fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible became rare and before long, the crayfish was a sought-after food among the well-heeled, whereas farmers and fishermen still couldn’t care less. At least not until they found they could make money by selling crayfish to the well heeled upper crust. Soon the habit of emulating the upper classes seeped down to all classes, and today, crayfish eating is accepted by all no matter what the Bible says.

CRAYFISH MATERIAL WANTED

The Crayfish Tale Newsletter you are just reading has been issued for almost five years. Recently I have often been at a loss about what subject to cover, a situation increasingly occurring as time goes by. Please, if you have some favorite ideas about crayfish topics or articles concerning our common interest, drop me a line about it to help me continue this series of newsletters.

Trapper Arne