Gastronomy and alimentary theology among Christians in Israel,
Palestine and Jordan

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Abstract: This paper focuses on what gastronomy and alimentary theology means among Christians in Israel, Palestine and Jordan in 2018. The case study is based on preliminary sources such as cookbooks, interviews and personal observation in the area in February 2018 and should be seen as a case study. The content of the modern cookbooks indicates that the food culture in the area is vivid and rich, where the main ingredients are vegetables and grains. The study shows the complexity of claiming certain dishes as unique to one nation. Theology not only pays closer attention to matters related to food and nourishment, and the many ways they can relate, inspire and inform theological reflection. It is a theology that envisions itself as nourishment: food as theology and theology as food. Several of the informants have a clear vision for what gastronomy can do for a peaceful coexistence today and for the future. The key is education in order to understand each other and gastronomy plays a very important part in that since everyone has a relation to gastronomy. The alimentary theological approach to gastronomy and faith reflects in the informants and in the following observations, since it seems to be implicit in everyone. A person’s relation to God can be very complex and include a lot of space and people, or it can be a very close relation only between oneself and God, in that sense gastronomy and alimentary theology have a lot in common.

Keywords: Middle East, gastronomy, alimentary theology, Christianity, education

JEL codes: Z0, Z1.

1. Introduction

The foodways of Israel have their origin in several cultures and if one asks an Israeli what is typical for Israeli food he will tell you that there is no such thing as a typical Israeli food. The influences in the Israeli cuisine have been made by immigration of Jewish people from over 80 countries from the Middle East, North Africa, the Mediterranean Basin, Central and Eastern Europe to India. Of the 7 million inhabitants it is estimated that a little more than 76 % are of Jewish origin, approximately 19.5 % consider themselves as Arabs, mainly Muslims, however there is also a minor percentage who are Christians. The remaining little over 4 % comprise Druze, Circassians and others that do not classify themselves by religion. Foods that are typically considered to be “Israeli” originate from a wider cuisine of the Middle East, falafel and the so called “Israeli salad” consisting of cucumbers and tomatoes cut in small pieces. In addition, Jewish traditions from Eastern Europe have an important significance in Israeli cooking with different dishes such as borsht

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and blinier (originally from Russia). Food custom in Israel also carry markers of the Mediterranean region where lunch instead of dinner is the main meal of the day.¹

It is often said that the human act of eating is to fill one of the basic needs to function, on an empty stomach not much else works. But what happens when the stomach is full, and you are not hungry anymore? What does gastronomy mean then? Alternatively, are these questions without relevance?

The following study is an attempt to figure out what gastronomy along with alimentary theology means for the identity of the Christians in Israel, Palestine and Jordan in 2018. The study should be seen as a case study and relies on interviews and observations that were made during a two-week period in February-March 2018.

2. Alimentary theology

In making a recipe or a dish there is an interaction between ingredients, narratives and traditions that coexist in the same recipe or dish. Alimentary theology is a theology that is attentive and welcomes multiple layers contained and implied in the making of theology. Theology not only pays closer attention to matters related to food and nourishment, and the many ways they can relate, inspire and inform theological reflection. It is a theology that envisions itself as nourishment: food as theology and theology as food. Alimentary theology can be used as food for thought since it addresses some of the spiritual and physical hungers of the world and also seeks ways of bringing about nourishment. It is also a theology that sees itself as a culinary art that is not aesthetic but points to the necessity of integrating ethics and politics that question the systems of global exchange. Like cooking, alimentary theology is the making that requires contemplation and action. Alimentary theology can be defined as a complex culinary art, a theological vocation that is simultaneously a gift and reception, preparation and sharing, contemplation and consumption, material and transcendent and both human and divine.²

3. Method

The method used is a hypothetical-deductive method. This means that a working hypothesis is created in order to try to explain a phenomenon. Thereafter the accuracy of the hypothesis is tested by further observations or experiments. In deductive argumentation the researcher has the opportunity to create a thesis as a hypothesis in order to investigate what comes out of it. If a contradiction emerges as a result, the hypothesis has been proven wrong. The hypothesis for this study is that food is more than only pure nourishment for the body for the Christian identity in Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

3.1 Sources and source criticism

The primary sources used in the study are informants. These are of different ages, gender and professions. The common denominator among the informants are that all of them are Christians. I have chosen to make the informants anonymous in order not to put any of them at risk, for whatever reason that might be. Having said that as a researcher one always needs to keep in mind that interviews are based on an

¹ Gila, Levine, T, Simply Israel- a collection of recipes from the people of Israel, Israel, 2016: introduction.
interaction between the one who is asking the questions and the informant, and that the informant might have
his own agenda with the interview. When I booked interviews that were undertaken by myself, I informed
the informants about the field of interest, so they knew in advance what kind of questions would be asked.
During the group interviews that had been set up by the group’s spokesman, the group members were asked
to present themselves and their field of interests concisely. In this way the informants were given an idea
about the questions to come. After having gone over all the recorded interviews I am of the opinion that the
informants have answered the questions sincerely. Therefore, I consider the informants honest in their
answers and trustworthy.

Another primary source I use in the text are cookbooks about the food culture in Israel, Palestine and
Jordan. All the cookbooks were bought by me during the field study and have been analyzed for this paper.
All these cookbooks are in English since my knowledge of Arabic and Hebrew is close to none. Cookbooks
are mainly written for being published for an interested common public. Interest in gastronomy has in recent
years increased at an enormous rate and the publication of cookbooks has followed. Cookbooks are seldom
used in academic research; however, I am of the opinion that they are very useful as sources for research as
has been proven previously.  

4. Hospitality and culinary arts

I visited the monastery for the sisters of the Swedish Saint Birgitta in Bethlehem; I came unannounced to
the monastery and was greeted warmly by one of the sisters. This was during Lent, which meant that the
sister was fasting. This did not stop her from serving tea and homemade cookies (made by herself).

Apart from during Lent the sisterfasts every Wednesday and Friday. Sunday is a day for feasting. As for
all other monasteries of the order the sisters’ ordinary days follow a schedule of prayer, work and rest. Since
it is located in Bethlehem the monastery is surrounded by walls, intercom, security cameras and wires and
the sisters seldom leave the premises. However, this does not mean that they are cut off from the outside
world. The sisters are running a guesthouse for visitors, the same as all the other monasteries of the order.
The motherhouse is located in Rome, in the same house where Birgitta herself once worked, lived and died.  

The working tasks in the monastery are divided between the sisters after a rotating schedule. That means
that they take turns in the kitchen. The sisters are of different nationalities and the dishes that are made on a
daily basis for the sisters are depending on the sister’s nationality as well as also on what food items are
available for the day. If the sisters cannot find the exact ingredients for the dishes they want to make from
their home countries such as certain spices, they modify the recipe according to the ingredients at hand.
Sometimes the sisters go to the market themselves to buy the food they need. At, other times neighbours
come with the items to the monastery. The sisters will eat whatever dish that has been made for the day
regardless of their own taste and preferences.  

While in Bethlehem, I also attended a dinner in a family home in Beit Sahour. The father of the
household greeted me with tea that was seasoned with fresh herbs from his own back yard. While working
with the mother in the kitchen preparing a dish made out of chicken, rice, corn, green peas, olive oil and
several different spices she told me that the recipe had been handed down from her own mother. There was
no measurement for the ingredients; she had that in her fingers and in the palm of her hand. Along with the
warm dish there was a salad made from fresh vegetables, bought on the same day. Food played an important

3 Söderlind, Ulrica, “The Georgian cuisine according to some national and international cookbooks”, Review of
Applied Socio-Economic Research, Volume 8, Issue 2/2014: 180-190
4 Anonymous Sister, Bethlehem, 2018-02-23
5 Anonymous Sister, Bethlehem, 2018-02-23
role in this woman’s life, not only at home but also at church. The members of the church gathered at least once a week and everyone brought something edible or drinkable with them. The gatherings were not only food for the body but also food for the soul. Before the meal was served grace was said at the table by one of the other guests. The daughter of the house did not fancy cooking much but considered her mother’s kitchen the best restaurant in town.\textsuperscript{6}

Fig.1. Preparing a family dinner in Beit Sahour. © Author, 2018

Chefs for Peace is an organisation founded in Jerusalem in November 2001. The founding members were from Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Today the organization has approximately 20 chefs, both men and women. The main interest of the chefs is to explore cultural identity, diversity and coexistence by the way of food. The organisation works with food through its preparation, sharing and joy as means for creating bonds between others and reveals what is held in high regard by the three faiths: food, family and friends. For Chefs for Peace food in itself carries the power to build relations and bridges for mutual acceptance and to see peace as a delicious possibility. The message is the following: “Only real people living and working together, not politicians, will create peace on the ground”.\textsuperscript{7}

Chefs for Peace started by making meals together only for the members. Sitting down at the table sharing the newly prepared meal the conversations dealt with many subjects, except politics and religion. After the initial years the organization is now working on bigger events as chefs. The chefs come together for certain occasions such as private parties and different kinds of galas, business events, inter-faith gatherings, events at colleges, youth groups, weddings and so forth. The organization creates events as requested.\textsuperscript{8}

They also have cooking classes for Jews and Arabs; there are also special cooking classes for children. The latter are very popular. The organization also has special tours within the walls of old Jerusalem or the “Old City” but also at the open-air market in western Jerusalem. However, if one wants to

\textsuperscript{6} Anonymous informants, Beit Sahour, 2018-02-23
\textsuperscript{7} https://chefs4peace.weebly.com/about-us.html, 2018-03-16
\textsuperscript{8} Anonymous member, Chef for Peace, Jerusalem, 2018-02-22, 2018-02-24
get the best fresh herbs, they are found in the “Old city” where the vendors are women who come in from their villages with their fresh herbs. They really know their merchandise. Including in the tours are also visits to spice shops, these are highly appreciated.
The idea behind the tours is to arouse awareness of the freshness of and what kind of food that can be found in Jerusalem and the neighboring areas among tourists and chefs who come from abroad. Several foreign chefs have visited Chefs for Peace in Jerusalem in order to learn more about the organization and create new dishes in the kitchen. The members of Chefs for Peace also have been abroad on different occasions and created menus and events in different countries in Europe and Scandinavia. The working exchanges that goes both ways are of great importance for all involved since they creates a deeper understanding for all that are involved, both for the chefs who have roots in the Middle East and those who come from Europe. Many of the food items that can be found fresh in Jerusalem are of a lot better quality than those found in Europe and this is essential to the smell and taste of the finished meal. Not to say that meals cannot be tasteful with dried herbs. Some of the seasoning that is used in the Middle East is not used at all outside the region, such as sumac. Sumac is a red berry that is used dried and ground in many dishes in the Middle East and gives the meal a special taste. Many visitors encounter sumac for the first time when they come to visit the Chefs for Peace. There have been attempts by the organization to hold a dinner for the Israeli government; the outcome was poor since only one guest turned up. That does not mean that the organization is giving up the work for peace by the means of gastronomy.9

9 Anonymous member, Chef for Peace, Jerusalem, 2018-02-22, 2018-02-24
4.1 Education in hospitality and culinary arts

At Bethlehem University, there is a program within the framework of Institute of Hotel Management and Tourism. The day for my visit was a busy day for the students, they had lunch service upon my arrival. Until now there are no courses given that are based on diet in the Bible or theology at the university, however this does not mean that attempts of cooking in the biblical way has been undertaken by others. There have been attempts by the Israeli government to commercialize biblical meals in combination with a hike. During these hikes and cooking classes, allergies or special diet requirements are not meet. At the same University, there are plans to start research about food in the Bible and connect it to the field of theology. There has been research about old historical Palestinian cuisine (from north to south), 3000 questioners was distributed among elderly women of the age 85 and older. Every woman was asked to give five recipes and when these were sorted, one of the results was that the same recipe came up in different places with different names, so those recipes were not taking into account for the analysis. The researcher was left with 287 recipes for dishes that were not commonly known to the modern public. They were written down and are on the way to being published in the near future. This research shows how important it is to use oral sources and storytelling in order to preserve a cultural heritage that otherwise will be gone when the old generation passes away. Even so, if one talks about food as such, without mixing politics into it seems like it is very difficult to separate which dish or meal originates from what area in the Middle East since in Biblical times the modern borders where not there.

During the different fasting periods within Christianity the followers also learn and feel that gastronomy is not only for the body but also for the soul. There are different fasts within the framework of Christianity, some harder than others but with the same purpose, to live of what the land produces in form of vegetables and grains.10

At Notre Dame culinary school in Jerusalem, there is a course in culinary arts financed by the Catholic Church, with a student body of 150 students. The school has its own curriculum and they also publish their own material. The students are from both a Christian and Muslim backgrounds, from Israel and Palestine. There are also cooking classes for small children (free of charge) that are very popular. The reason for not having Jewish students are the strict kosher diet rules, which makes it difficult to separate meat and dairy products and utensils in the kitchens and that the teaching are done in English and Arabic.11

11 Anonymous informant, Notre Dame, Jerusalem, 2018-02-24
There are several modern kitchens at the school that are of very high quality with a separate bakery for pastry making. The students are given a set of knives and other tools. These are given to them on their first day and on the day of graduation, they need someone with a car to come and pick them up, since it is not safe to carry these knives home in the streets of Jerusalem. The students are also sponsored with clothing for the kitchen and they are taught to be proud of their uniform and the profession that they are studying for. If the students are given the opportunity to go abroad and work after graduation many of them do, however most of them return after some time.¹²

On the day of my visit, a Saturday, the school was very busy since there were 30 minutes between the classes, starting with a class in pastry-making followed by a class of cooking in the warm kitchen. In the pastry class, the teacher was a pastry chef who had set the agenda for the day. The students were going to make a lemon meringue with a modern twist. That means that the students first are taught the classic way of making the dessert and then create a modern version of it. Meringue is not easy to work with so not an easy task at all. The cooking class in the warm kitchen had a different theme and working schedule. In advance the student has been asked to create a menu, write it down, prepare it and present it within three hours. One thing that is of great importance working in a kitchen is your preparation, and having your work place tidy and clean. The students worked very hard against the clock in order to get the meals done on time. Minor mishaps happen on the way but every student served the menus on time. The teachers then gave the students constructive criticism of the work and the plates they presented.

In Amman, I visited refugees from Iraq in a monastery. The monastery has engaged the refugees in different projects over several years in order to both give them a chance to learn a profession and have something valuable to do during the wait for a visa to take them to their new homes. It seemed that none of the refugees were planning on settling down in Jordan. One of the things that the monastery had been able to create was a pizzeria. Over a longer period, an Italian chef had come to the monastery to teach some of the refugees how to make pizzas. The kitchen for the pizzeria is modern and of high quality. The pizzeria offers several kinds of pizza but on special occasion, the chefs working in the pizzeria also make and serve more traditional Middle Eastern dishes. I along with others was lucky enough to be invited as guests for such an

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¹² Anonymous informant, Notre Dame, Jerusalem, 2018-02-24
event, where local and German beer, non-alcoholic drinks, several different pizzas, different kinds of Middle Eastern breads were served and for the finale- a cake. At the end of the event, I had a small chat with the chef for the evening and he was very happy and tired after such a working day.

![Pizza and zaatar bread](image1.jpg) ![Cake](image2.jpg)

**Fig.7.** Pizza and za’atar bread as a good example of gastronomic fusion in the kitchen in Amman and the cake that ended the celebration. © Author, 2018

### 4.2 Cookbooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the book</th>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Mezze</th>
<th>Salads</th>
<th>Soups</th>
<th>Vegetable dishes</th>
<th>Rice dishes</th>
<th>Stews</th>
<th>Mahashi</th>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Poultry</td>
<td>Fish, shellfish</td>
<td>Bread, dough</td>
<td>Sweets, desserts</td>
<td>Jams</td>
<td>Refreshments</td>
<td>Pickles, Sauces</td>
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<tr>
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Here I will give a short summary of the contents in the cookbooks. For Palestine and Israel there are three books that have breakfast listed as a category and there one finds different kinds of egg dishes. The spice mixture Za’atar is very often used for breakfast. In the books for Palestinian cooking za’atar is a mixture of fresh oregano, wild thyme, lemony sumac and toasted sesame seeds. Spice is served with different kinds of bread, cheese, eggs, meat and different vegetables and beans. When it comes to cooking in Jordan, it is stated in “Jordan cooking” that breakfast in the country is private and what is served has changed very little over time. If one is alone one eats a smaller breakfast. Breakfast is enriched on special occasions. It can include Arabic bread (pita bread), Za’atar (here it is a mixture of sumac powder, fresh thyme, roasted sesame seeds, marjoram, oregano and coarse salt), baked bread with za’atar and olive oil, labaneh (strained yoghurt), olives, chickpeas with tahini, eggplant with tahini, chickpeas with bread and tahini, fava beans, falafel (made of grounded chickpeas and fava beans) and eggs with minced meat.

**Mezze**

Four of the books have mezze as a category and the recipes vary in the books from between 12-30. The recipes are mainly vegetarian with some egg recipes, even on occasion there also are recipes for liver. The dishes are served both cold and warm.

**Salads**

Salads can be found in all the cookbooks and they differ in amount from 7-42 recipes. The major part of the salads are vegetarian even if there are a few recipes with chicken. Salads that contain cucumbers and tomatoes with herbs seem to be favourites in this category. Fresh herbs are used in all of the salads.

**Soups**

Soup as well as salads is a category that appears in all the cookbooks, and like the salads there is a large span among the recipes, from 2-11. There are both warm and cold soups and the main group of recipes has fruits, lentils, beans, grains or vegetables as the main ingredients. Some soups have yoghurt as the main ingredient. However, there are also soups with meat from lamb and chicken and some with shellfish.

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Vegetable dishes
All the cookbooks except one have listed vegetable dishes, the numbers varying between 1-25. The main ingredients in the category are artichokes, beans, aubergine, potatoes, lentils, onions, cabbage, tomatoes, grains, peppers, okra, spinach, pumpkin, cauliflower, vine leaves, cheeses, mushrooms and zucchini. Fresh herbs are used in all of the recipes. All these recipes are to be served warm.\textsuperscript{18}

Rice dishes
Before rice was introduced to the Arab world, some dishes were only made with bulgur or smoked wheat. When rice came, it speedily became a popular substitute. For many of the dishes Egyptian rice kernels that are small, round and broken are the only rice used in order to make an authentic version of the dishes, second best is the Chinese white rice. In five of the books there is a category that has rice as the main ingredient. There are dishes with plain rice but also recipes with rice together with meat mutton, lamb and beef chicken, shellfish and vegetables, cauliflower, chickpeas, lentils and beans, pine nuts and raisins.\textsuperscript{19}

Stews
Three of the books have stews as a category. The major part of the recipes are vegetarian stews with main ingredients such as okra, beans, cauliflower, potatoes, peas, lentils, butternut squash, spinach, tomatoes and aubergine. There are also stews with the main ingredient of lamb or beef. Fresh garlic and herbs are very often used in the recipes.\textsuperscript{20}

Mahashi
Mahashi dishes are dishes that are linked to Sundays and holidays since they can be prepared the day before. The preparation is time-consuming and is delicate that requires a lot of patience and skill in order to make these stuffed dishes. Preparation of the stuffed food items requires a special coring tool. In “Classic Palestinian cuisine”, the following are found under Mahashi; two different recipes of stuffed vine leaves and marrows, stuffed aubergines, stuffed marrows with tomato sauce, stuffed cabbage and stuffed marrows with yoghurt sauce.\textsuperscript{21}

Meat dishes
Meat dishes are found in all the cookbooks studied here and the recipes vary between 2-39. Lamb is by far the most common meat in the recipes in forms of meatballs, meat loaf, kebab, chops, makloubeh, followed by beef. Meat is often accompanied by vegetables. Even so vegetables play a major role in this category even if they are not the main ingredient since meat is often stuffed in aubergines, vine leaves, zucchini, squash, cabbage or artichokes. Another common dish is meat pie. There are also recipes for dishes for sheep’s brains. Many fresh herbs and garlic with sumac and za’atar are used in the meat dishes.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{21} Dabdoub Nasser, 2013:101-113
Poultry
All the cookbooks have dishes of poultry and the recipes vary between 1-19. Chicken is by far the most common bird mentioned in the books. Chickens are prepared in bread, boiled, in stews, as shawarma, or baked, with different kind of seasoning, stuffed, grilled, on a skewer, kebab and prepared with fruits such as apricots. Another bird that is used in the books from Jordan is pigeon. Pigeons are prepared with cracked wheat and stuffed.  

Palestinian couscous with chicken is often in USA referred as to “Israeli couscous”. According to one of the authors, its proper name is maftool. The dish takes a very long time to make since the grains are made by hand and to the author it is a clear proof “how important food was and remains in our culture”.  

Fish and shellfish
Recipes for fish and shellfish are found in six of the books and the recipes vary between 1-16. Fish are more common than shellfish. Bass, perch, tuna, cod, halibut, salmon, flounder, red snapper, sardines and S:t Peter’s fish are used for boiling, frying, grilling, roasting, baked, with different fresh herbs and za’atar. Some recipes are also with raw fish, such as salmon or bass tartare. Prawns and jumbo shrimps are served with different sauces, clams are served with za’atar, calamaris are served with strong spices, crabs are stuffed and roasted, and squid are served stuffed. There are also seafood soups.  

Bread and dough
In five of the books there are recipes for bread and dough and they vary between 2-11. Arabic bread is the base for the rest of the bread-recipes and the dough is made from of warm water, dried yeast, sugar, plain flour and whole-wheat flour, powdered milk or plain yogurt, sea salt and virgin olive oil. These breads are often topped with other products such as cheese, spinach, meat, eggs and different kind of spices. There are also recipes for Passover bread.  

Sweets and deserts
There is only one book that does not have sweets and desserts, in the other books the recipes vary between 4-37. A variety of different kinds of white goat’s cheese is often used in this category, a cheese that is typical of Palestine where there is no actual cheese culture as such. The way of making it has been unchanged over generations. It starts in the spring when milk is plentiful. The milk is boiled and preserved in salted water for use throughout the year. During the boiling izha, mahlab and gum Arabic are added. The cheese is preserved in glass jars in containers and when one is in need of the cheese, the right amount is taken out of the container and soaked in water for some hours before use.

Bishara, 2014:140  
Other recipes that are common are knafeh, different kinds of puddings, fritters and pancakes with syrup, different kinds of fruit compotes, different kinds of sweet cakes, dumplings, baklava and sweet syrups.  

Jams

Jams are only found in “Classic Palestinian cuisine” where quince, apricot and azaroles are used. These jams are considered by the author to be representative for the traditional Palestinian cuisine. They are more or less classics.

Refreshments

In five of the books, there are recipes for refreshments such as different kinds of coffee, tea, syrups and molasses, nectars, juices, flavoured milk, wine, lemonades and juices.

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28 Dabdoub Nasser, 2013:182-186
Pickles and sauces

Recipes for pickles and sauces are found in five of the books studied here, the recipes vary between 1-14. Turnips, beetroot, cauliflower, carrots, aubergines, avocados, lemons, jams, figs, oranges, kumquats, pomelo, jalapeños and peppers are used for different kind of spreads, dips and pickles.  

The cookbooks give an indication of the richness in the food culture of Israel, Palestine and Jordan. A closer look at the recipes in the books reveals that many of them are more or less the same and that vegetables are the main ingredients used. Very few recipes can be found under “bread”, which is interesting since bread is served at every meal. One reason for the lack of recipes in the cookbooks can be that the knowledge of making dough and baking bread is so well known that it is not necessary to have the recipes in cookbooks. It is a so called “silent knowledge” that everyone knows is there.

I found that the richness of the food culture in Israel and Palestine in the cookbooks could be found at different markets in Jerusalem, both in the western as well as the eastern part of the city. The open-air market in western Jerusalem is a place that made me breathless when it comes to the variety of food items. Entering the market, I was more or less knocked down by all the smells and colours, and later on, also by all the tastes that I was offered during my visit to the market. Some of the vendors spoke English and they were those that treated me best. The supply of food items between the vendors was more or less the same, depending on what kind of specialty they had. However, there was a difference in prices between the competing stands,

Fig. 10. Different kinds of bread and bread making in Jerusalem and Amman. ©Author, 2018

both fresh and prepared items of vegetables and meat, fish and poultry. What was striking was that all the vendors had the prices on display and I could not hear anyone bargain about the prices.

Visiting the market and stores in the eastern part of the city was very different, even if the knowledge of English was limited all the vendors were very friendly. Something that was striking here was that I could not find any prices at all for food on display, a big contrast to the open-air market. It might be that all the customers already knew the prices by heart, or the prices were on a day-to-day basis. Yet another possibility is that regular customers bargained about the prices. On other articles there were clear signs of the price.

Falafel

There is one dish that can be found in all the cookbooks and that is falafel. Therefore, I have chosen falafel as an example of how one dish can be synonym with a food culture. One of the informants of Palestinian origin says that Israel has stolen the Palestinian cuisine and feels that it is equal to having a child stolen from you. Several other informants that also are Palestinian Christians agree with that statement and they expressed strong emotions such as sadness and anger talking about it.  

The ingredients for Egyptian Falafel: large fava beans (broad beans), brown or green, finely chopped onions, crushed garlic cloves, finely chopped fresh parsley, cumin, fresh coriander, baking powder or baking soda, salt. For Falafel one finds the following ingredients in the cookbooks; dried chickpeas or green fava beans, chopped onion and garlic cloves, grounded or fresh coriander, cumin, cayenne pepper, chopped fresh parsley, salt, baking powder, oil for frying. The seasoning can vary, and some add all spice, black pepper, hot red pepper, cinnamon, grounded paprika, grounded chili, cilantro, sesame seed and sumac as well. Falafel is a deep-fried dish. The recipes are more or less the same for falafel in the cookbooks.

When I was walking in Jerusalem I found the following postcards;  

31 Anonymous informant, Nazareth, 2018-02-19, Anonymous informants, Jerusalem, 2018-02-2  
The first postcard states Falafel as an Israeli snack and the second one states that the same dish is a Palestine snack. The Israeli flag has been replaced with the Palestinian flag and the word 'Israel' has been crossed over and replaced with 'Palestine,' like a graffiti. Both the postcards have the same recipe for the dish on the backside as shown above, with the headline “A recipe to mail- Falafel”. As can be seen the ingredients are the same on the postcard as it has been presented previously in the text. However, having said that, the recipe on the postcard is not identical to any in the cookbooks, so it is not taken from them.

5. Conclusions

The material presented in the previous text should be seen as a case study regarding gastronomy and theology in Israel, Palestine and Jordan. In the introduction, some numbers are presented from 2016 on how many percentages of the inhabitants belong to Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other faiths. Here it is important to keep in mind that those numbers are approximate numbers. However, it indicates that the Christians are a minority in the region.

The cookbooks that have been used in the study indicate that the food culture in the area is vivid and rich, where the main ingredients are vegetables and grains. When meat is used it is mainly lamb, and fish are used more frequently than shellfish. How important the food culture is for the Christians is evident in the opinion among the informants that they feel like they ‘have been robbed of a child.’ That says a lot in this context since family is of great importance in the area and held close to the heart. The case study also shows
the complexity of claiming certain dishes as unique to one nation. Falafel is such a dish, both Palestine and Israel are claiming the dish as their own and in a very powerful and effective way, by making a postcard of it. Postcards that easily can be spread all over the world, as long as people still send postcards. On the other hand some of the informants are of the opinion that it is very difficult to claim a dish to a specific nation since the modern borders are just that - modern. When the dish saw the light of day and where, no one knows. People have moved over large areas in the Middle East throughout history and it would be surprising if they did not take with them their food culture and showed it to others.

The sisters at the monastery in Bethlehem are a good example on how gastronomy is fusioned when the sisters use other spices or ingredients to their native recipes. No sister can refuse what is served at table and the sister working in the kitchen that day decides what the others will be eating. In a way the sisters live in a global cuisine (due to their many nationalities) that is transformed to fit in to the Middle East.

Several of the informants have a clear vision for what gastronomy can do for a peaceful coexistence today and for the future. The key is education in order to understand each other and gastronomy plays a very important part in that since everyone has a relation to gastronomy. The education in hospitality and culinary arts in both Jerusalem and Bethlehem gives an indication that the young generation also sees the benefits of learning more about the subjects and how to use that in order to get a profession that they can live on, and hopefully in the future educate the generation that will follow them. Even if the monastery in Amman does not have education in culinary arts per se, the work that is carried out in teaching refugees to become chefs is of great importance for the refugees. They are given a chance to do something meaningful while they are waiting for their visas and are given a foundation for a profession that they later can build on. Gastronomy gives hope for the future!

During the interviews and the participating observations in the Middle East I noticed that everyone has a relation to gastronomy and faith, even if it is not outspoken. Sometimes I had to wait for an answer regarding the meaning or connection between gastronomy and faith.

The alimentary theological approach to gastronomy and faith reflects in the informants and in the following observations, since it seems to be implicit in everyone. There seem to be a floating line between food for thought and food as nourishment for the body for the informants. The reasons for that can be several such as that the informants never have thought about it in those terms since it seems to be the most obvious thing in the world and in their lives. Another reason can be that the informants do not need to put it into words, they constantly live by it without thinking about it. In the field of gastronomy and meal science the terms “the larger room” and the “smaller room” are often used. The “larger room” can mean the room where the meal is served. The term “the smaller room” can refer to the guest and the cover on the table. However it can also mean the inner room since food memories are a big part of one’s identity since childhood. Food memories, good or bad never leave a person. In my point of view alimentary theology can be the same. A person’s relation to God can be very complex and include a lot of space and people, or it can be a very close relation only between oneself and God, in that sense gastronomy and alimentary theology have a lot in common. That would mean that they practice alimentary theology every day of their life. According to me the Arabic proverb “Who does not enjoy food does not enjoy anything else in life “is very fitting to end this text with since it says it all.
6. References


