

# Is Vegetarianism Biblical?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In our interpretation of the Bible we should always take into account that the Scriptures represent a complete narrative that begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation. When Christians or others attempt to surgically remove isolated passages from their context and from the entire scriptural story they are opening themselves up to false and sometimes even bizarre interpretations that go against the authors' message. Taking into account the entirety of Scripture it becomes evident that God's original plan and his ultimate goal for creation are total *Shalom*, or peace, in which mankind made in his image are supposed to enjoy Him, the source of all beauty, and rejoice in his creation benevolently looking after the animal kingdom.<sup>1</sup> All violence and death are in reality inherently antithetical to God's gracious character and far from his ideal, and represent the negative effects of human and angelic rebellion. That entire segments of the Christian faith should miss this fundamental aspect of the gospel is absolutely astounding and is telling of how even Christians can be blinded to foundational trajectories present in the Bible. Entire books have and could be written on this subject and I will try to briefly summarize my understanding of the matter and answer the main objections to vegetarianism.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. IN THE BEGINNING

In Genesis 1, the opening chapter of the Bible, we are told:

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food."

And it was so.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1-2, Isaiah 55:12, John 16:33, Revelation 21:1-5.

<sup>2</sup> By vegetarianism I intend generally the practice of abstaining from meat, animal flesh, of all kinds. I also mean its purer form, namely veganism.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:29-30

Whereas in modern societies we tend in general to value that which is 'new', or recent, in the ancient world what was older or had a longer history had more prestige and therefore was more authoritative. In this context when asked about remarriage by the Pharisees, who wanted to send away their wives simply with a divorce certificate, Jesus answered:

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.”<sup>4</sup>

In this passage Jesus introduces a very important hermeneutical key to understanding Scripture: *the principle of accommodation*. According to this concept God is willing to lower his standards in order to meet people where they are, much like what a missionary might do in a very primitive tribe. The Law of Moses, like much of the Old Testament, represents in this sense many aspects that are in fact inferior to God's ideal and simply concessions made to the culture and the hardness of people's hearts. Often these themes can be discerned through a careful reading of Scripture, for example notice the striking similarities between these two passages found in Deuteronomy:

When the Lord your God has enlarged your territory as he promised you, and you crave meat and say, “I would like some meat,” then you may eat as much of it as you want.<sup>5</sup>

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,” be sure to appoint over you a king the Lord your God chooses.<sup>6</sup>

And now relate them to how the Lord considered Israel's request to have a King:

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 19:7-8

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 12:20.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 17:14-15.

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”

But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.”<sup>7</sup>

These passages clearly show how God actually gives to the Israelites what they desire even though this does not reflect his perfect will: God often tolerates certain cultural aspects for a time in view of their eventual elimination. We see that the concession to eat meat was made not after the Fall of man but subsequent to the Flood:<sup>8</sup> some interpreters believe this may have been due to a scarcity of plant food after the devastation that occurred and because of spiritual weakness.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. ANIMAL SACRIFICE

One argument that is often mustered against vegetarianism is the difficult topic of animal sacrifice: why does God issue commandments in regard to this practice, sometimes almost seeming to encourage it? As discussed previously animal sacrifice represents a concession made to fallen man, that the Lord, taking into consideration the ignorance of human beings, accepted for a time as a form of worship. The Bible itself actually ends up rejecting the practice of animal sacrifice as a possible form of atonement or even as something pleasing to God:

I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens,  
for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every  
bird in the mountains, and the insects in the fields are mine. If I were hungry I would not  
tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the  
blood of goats?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 8:4-8.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 9:3.

<sup>9</sup> A. Linzey, D. Cohn-Sherbok, *After Noah*, (Great Britain, Mowbray, 1997), 57.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 50:9-13.

“The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.”<sup>11</sup>

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have opened, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.

Then I said, “Here I am, I have come it is written about me in the scroll.

I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart.”<sup>12</sup>

In light of Christ’s ultimate sacrifice of himself, the fact that animals prefigured spiritually his torment and death should actually lead us to consider their innocence and value in God’s eyes. The suffering of an innocent animal symbolizes no less than the death of Jesus himself: this alone should bring a greater respect to their plight. Animal suffering and pain is in reality symptomatic of a world gone horribly wrong and practically the first sign of a broken relationship with God in Genesis is animal death. We are specifically told in Scripture that God cares for every creature he has made and that their pain and suffering grieve him.<sup>13</sup> Both in the Old and New Testaments a cruel disposition towards animals is actually considered a moral defect that does not reflect God’s benevolence and compassion.<sup>14</sup>

In Isaiah’s vision, echoed by Hosea<sup>15</sup> and by the authors of the New Testament,<sup>16</sup> one of the signs of the coming of the kingdom of God will be the elimination of predation amongst animals and the restoration of complete harmony within creation. The reason given is that in the future Age there will be a new and greater understanding of who God really is: “They will neither harm or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 1:11.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 40:6-7.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 12:6, Deuteronomy 22:6.

<sup>14</sup> Proverbs 12:10, Luke 14:5.

<sup>15</sup> Hosea 2:18.

<sup>16</sup> Isaiah 65:25, Revelation 21:4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 11:8-9.

#### 4. THE TEACHING AND EXAMPLE OF CHRIST

But what about the teaching of Jesus himself? For many Christ's teaching that it is not what enters the mouth that defiles man is an explicit rejection of vegetarianism,<sup>18</sup> which would therefore be considered sub-Christian. In reality Jesus's teaching of holiness<sup>19</sup> of the heart in no way precludes this choice but simply bases it on the inner motivations of the individual or what is defined as the 'heart' as opposed to external laws or ritual purity. For me it is quite surprising how this teaching has been twisted to mean that a Christian's food choices are wholly indifferent when in reality Jesus simply internalized God's law to an inner personal dimension of faith.

The example of Jesus himself is at times cited as evidence that Christians should indeed eat meat. The fact that Jesus ate fish and participated in the Passover meal can be explained by his role as the fulfilment of the Law of Moses<sup>20</sup> and by the concept of God's gracious lowering of himself in order to meet his human creatures where they were culturally. Jesus entered a fallen world and moved within the ignorance and limitations of the Israelite culture of the time<sup>21</sup> and as a Jew Jesus had to fulfil the Law of Moses<sup>22</sup> which was in and of itself a concession to human weakness: Jesus' own teaching accepted the inspiration of the Law but pointed beyond it towards the higher ethic of God's ideal and towards love as the essence of God's being.<sup>23</sup> In Jesus we find a form of continuity with the Law but also a transcending of the Law, which is seen as anticipatory and typological: 'for the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'.<sup>24</sup> In reality the teaching of Jesus far from basing itself on ritual purity or a series of laws and prohibitions is a radical ethic of *agapé* love lived in personal fellowship with the Father that finds its ultimate manifestation in the cross.<sup>25</sup>

#### 5. THE APOSTLE PAUL

Many have used Paul's letters as a justification for a complete rejection of a non-violent way of eating. I've personally come to believe that the interpretations of key texts used in

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew 15:10-11.

<sup>19</sup> The entirety of Scripture teaches the concept of heart holiness: Dt 10:16, Ps 51:10, Mt 5:8.

<sup>20</sup> Romans 10:4, Galatians 4:4.

<sup>21</sup> Galatians 4:4 says Jesus was 'born under the law'.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 24:44.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 5:17-48, Matthew 22:36

<sup>24</sup> John 1:17.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 5:8.

the debate are deeply flawed and often skewed by biased translations: I'll try to address the most important verses used. Romans 14 is a classic text that many appeal to in order to condemn vegetarianism as 'weak': in reality in this chapter Paul very intelligently uses a local situation as a case study in order to introduce universal principles and teachings. Even a basic reading of Scripture shows us that the issue at stake was meat sacrificed to idols.<sup>26</sup>

Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled [...] For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.<sup>27</sup>

In this situation Paul applies Jesus's teaching of heart holiness and tells us that God looks to the inner motivations of the person. Even though most translations read something like 'he who eats meat does so for the Lord [...] he who abstains does so for the Lord',<sup>28</sup> the original Greek does not actually contain the word 'meat' and says merely 'he who eats does so for the Lord [...] he who abstains does so for the Lord'. The original text is actually far more universal in scope and need not be forever anchored to meat versus no meat paradigm. For modern day Christians it could be equally applied to soybeans, nuts or any food choice that divides believers. It is actually a form of poor exegesis to render universal a local situation while at the same time not understanding the universal principles that the Apostle is trying to convey through this case study. The argument that abstaining from meat or any kind of food is a form of weakness is definitively obliterated by the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:18, where the Apostle asserts that he would never eat meat again if it were necessary in order not to offend a brother in Christ: one doubts that his faith was weak.

Those that want to make a stronger case against abstaining from meat will often bring up the cloudier text of 1 Timothy 4, which sadly has been used in this direction. Paul in this chapter warns against false teachers that will deviate from the faith<sup>29</sup> and says they

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<sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Acts 15:29.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:7, 10-12.

<sup>28</sup> Romans 14:6.

<sup>29</sup> The Gnostics in particular denied the central doctrine of the incarnation of Christ: 1 John 4:2.

will forbid marriage and impose certain dietary restrictions on their followers. The heresy that Paul describes in this text is a form of proto-Gnosticism which later developed into full blown Gnosticism in the 2nd and 3rd centuries: this strain of greek thought despised matter and believed that this present creation was the fruit of an evil demiurge. For the Gnostics the only hope of salvation was not simple faith in Christ and his resurrection but special esoteric knowledge, *gnosis*, available to the initiated. Since matter was evil for the Gnostics, marriage and in particular procreation were despised. There were in fact several strains of Gnosticism and sadly most people don't pay the necessary attention to discern what Paul is criticising: some were legalistic, others libertine and others ascetic in nature.<sup>30</sup>

What Paul criticises here in particular is this Gnostic group's very negative view of food and the body in general, and in response he goes on to say that God's creation is good and that God created food to be received with thanksgiving. In the original Greek there is absolutely no mention of meat or animal foods but simply the use of the word *bróma* (specifically the genitive plural *bromaton*) which is a generic word for food. I believe that the translations in most Bibles are a bit biased, and even though the King James version is better it uses the word "meats" which many erroneously interpret in the sense of flesh but that means simply food/foods in old English. The *NIV* inserts the word "certain" before 'foods' which changes the sense of the entire passage: the word "certain" is not found in the Greek and is completely based on the translator's interpretation of the passage. Paul calls the Gnostics' negative view of food 'bodily exercise' or *gymnasia*, which must have been a very harsh and severe form of deprivation and asceticism.<sup>31</sup> We know of gnostic groups like the Marcionites who despised sexuality, had an extremely austere diet and practiced prolonged fasts.

A negative view of creation, the body, food and marriage is in reality completely unbiblical and goes against God's ideal revealed in Genesis 1 and 2 and Paul underlines this. Food in particular is seen in Scripture as a gift from God to be enjoyed and the material creation even though now fallen was pronounced good by the Lord.

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<sup>30</sup> Sometimes these strains are mixed together, for example in Colossians chapter 2 Paul begins by criticizing Gnostic legalism and then goes on to denounce their asceticism, which was probably a sub-group within it.

<sup>31</sup> Paul was man who had been raised in the strictest discipline of the Pharisees (Phil 3:5) and as a Christian often fasted and at times was forced to go without food (2 Cor 6:5). He was unmarried during his apostleship (1 Cor 7:8) and was flogged, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked and sent to prison on numerous occasions (2 Cor 11:23). For him to call something harsh signifies it must have been very severe by our modern standards.

Marriage, also, is seen in Scripture as a symbol of the joy that exists eternally within God himself and was the original plan for creation. Finally the Judeo-Christian worldview has a very positive view in regard to the body: the body will be resurrected and is considered the temple of the Holy Spirit and should therefore be looked after<sup>32</sup> and kept as much as possible in good health.<sup>33</sup>

Far from being damaging to human health a large body of scientific and epidemiological evidence now exists that suggests that a balanced and well planned vegetarian diet coupled with exercise, avoidance of tobacco and moderation or elimination of alcohol is optimal for the prevention of a large number of chronic diseases.<sup>34</sup> To date the longest living population ever formally documented in the scientific literature remain vegetarian Californian Seventh Day Adventists<sup>35</sup> who practice all of the above along with a weekly day of rest.

## 6. ACTS 10

Some maintain that the verses in Acts 10 negate vegetarianism and make the killing of animals a mandatory practice for Christians. In this passage, shortly before meeting Cornelius in a vision Peter is shown a tablecloth containing various ritually impure animals and is instructed by God to 'Kill and eat'. Shortly after Peter is invited to go and meet Cornelius, a gentile centurion and righteous man who needs to hear the gospel. In order to understand this vision we have to realize that Jews did not normally mix with Gentiles, who were considered 'impure': it is probable that God was trying to shock Peter, almost to offend him, in order to help him overcome his enormous prejudice towards the inclusion of the Gentiles within the community of faith. Peter himself gives this explanation of the vision:

While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So

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<sup>32</sup> Ephesians 5:29.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

<sup>34</sup> For example, only to mention three of the most significant: *The Oxford-Cornell China Study* directed by Colin T. Campbell, *The Framingham Heart Study* and the *Adventist Health Studies* (AHS-1, AHS-2).

<sup>35</sup> G E. Fraser, D. J. Shavlik, "Ten years of life: Is it a matter of choice?", *Arch Intern Med.*, vol. 161, no. 13, 2001, 1645 - 1652.



when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?<sup>36</sup>

While it is true that ritual purity no longer exists in regard to our dietary choices, *this is not the main meaning of the text in question* which following the general thrust of the entire book of Acts wants to show how the gospel expanded from Jerusalem and the strictly Jewish community outwards first to the Samaritans and then to the Gentiles. The book of Acts proposes to illustrate how by the power of the Holy Spirit the words of Jesus of bringing the gospel to the ‘ends of the earth’<sup>37</sup> have been at least partially fulfilled: Paul’s arrival in Rome at the end of the book<sup>38</sup> demonstrates how Jesus’s message has now reached the centre of the known world. Luke, the author of the book, wants to show that the gospel message is in fact transcultural and transnational. It is the universal offer of salvation for all who have faith in Jesus, as Peter exclaimed: ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.’<sup>39</sup>

## 7. AS IT WAS IN THE DAYS OF NOAH

Many Christians often look to the Bible in order to discern the times of Christ’s return and various interpretations have been given in regard to the events that will characterize it. Strangely most tend to ignore the very words of Jesus in favour of strange and mysterious speculations. When asked about the signs of his return Jesus mentioned what would seem to be relatively ordinary events:

As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark.<sup>40</sup>

It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Acts 10: 27-29.

<sup>37</sup> Acts 1:8.

<sup>38</sup> Acts 28:30-31.

<sup>39</sup> Acts 10:34-35.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew 24:37-38.

<sup>41</sup> Luke 17:28.

It's interesting to note that the only recurring theme in both the days of Noah and Lot is eating and drinking, the others change. An analysis of the days of Noah and Lot in Scripture gives other clues into the situation that Jesus describes. Genesis 6:11 tells us that in Noah's time violence filled the earth and God was forced to judge its inhabitants, whereas the book of Ezekiel reveals to us that one of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, where Lot lived, was overeating and not caring for the poor.<sup>42</sup> The violence that Scripture mentions is certainly towards humans but most probably involved violence towards animals as well. *Greed, unconcern towards the poor and violence*: these are the signs that will accompany the end of the Age. We should ask ourselves how our dietary choices impact the poor and hungry of the world,<sup>43</sup> the stewardship of the environment,<sup>44</sup> precious resources like land and water and if we are contributing to unnecessary violence towards animals.<sup>45</sup> While we don't know with precision when Christ will come back<sup>46</sup> it behoves his followers to be attentive to his words and not overlook the signs that he says will typify his return.

## 8. HOPING IN GOD'S FUTURE

The Christian life is a life of hope lived in the expectation of God's future, it lives the present in view of God's kingdom and the restoration of all things in which creation will be made new.<sup>47</sup> In this sense vegetarianism can be seen as an anticipation of the future world purchased for us on the cross by Christ and a sign of hope for creation: it points beyond itself to an eschatological realization and testifies to a kingdom 'not of this world'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ezekiel 16:49.

<sup>43</sup> Isaiah 58:7, Matthew 25:35.

<sup>44</sup> Genesis 1:28.

<sup>45</sup> Habbakuk 2:17.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew 24:36.

<sup>47</sup> Revelation 21:5.

<sup>48</sup> John 18:36.