

VEGETARIANISM AND THE BIBLE: Peace, Plants, and the Kingdom of God

The Bible tells the story of God's covenantal relationship with God's chosen people and the whole world. While Christians and biblical scholarship tends to focus on what this means for humanity, God's love is not so narrow. Rather it embraces all animals, plants, and even the changing landscapes.

Though scholars have wrestled with the idea of dominion rooted in the first chapter of Genesis, this struggle rarely occurs in practice. Rather, Christians tend to act as colonizers, latching quickly onto the dominion of animals, people, and land. As a result, the earth has been abused, the environment has been neglected, and animals and women alike have been objectified and treated with violence, all in the name of God. A vegetarian poses a threat to this way of life, for she steps down from this unjustified position of privilege, prioritizes compassion, and advocates for others in need.

In this study, I will holistically consider the relationship the role of animals in the Bible, and what this teaches readers about our relationships with one another, animals, and the world itself through it. Through a theological examination of relevant biblical texts and excerpts from Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, I will discuss the potential of a Christian vegetarian diet as a signpost of the Kingdom of God.

I argue that the Bible asks readers to thoughtfully consider their choice of food, as they look back to the created order and toward the coming consummation. This project will trace the widespread place occupied by food in the Bible and the complicated relationship readers have had with it, reinvigorating the neglected issue of vegetarianism as a spiritual practice.

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The popularity of vegetarianism has rippled throughout the history of the Christian church. While early Christian thinkers tended to lift up the value of controlling one's body and its desires, modern advocates tactically emphasize the horrors of factory farming, incredible intelligence of animals, virtues of a non-violent lifestyle, longterm wellbeing of the environment, and individual health benefits. Either way, the focus is the same: to convince others of the moral merit of this way of life. Though a vegan subsistence is of great virtue and importance, the overwhelming focus on morality has come at the expense of understanding the eschatological character of God's will and action.

Karl Barth is an unparalleled conversation partner on this topic, due to his deep belief in the work of God that has already been accomplished for us in Jesus Christ. Rather than thrusting upon readers the burden of bringing God's will to pass, Barth simply points humanity to our responsibility to seek to live in affirmation of what Christ has done for us. Herein, Barth avoids the stringent fundamentalism that expects one to merit the Kingdom of God, as well as the flippancy of those who dismiss sanctification as an archaic or impossible concept. Barth holds in tension the simultaneously saved and sinful world, maintaining a true paradox, and it is from there he extends God's call to liberated action. By framing the topic of vegetarianism with Barth's understanding of reconciliation in mind, we will be grounded both in the created order and the coming consummation of God's will. Herein, we will uncover the practice of vegetarianism as a signpost of the Kingdom of God.

The will of God for a peaceful, shared life amongst humanity, animals, and even the rich landscapes is evident from the very beginning of the Bible. This peace between "the Creator and

creatures” and “among creatures themselves” is rooted in the fundamental orientation of all life to God, rather than a hierarchical model (Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 209). Barth explains, “Animals and plants do not belong to [humanity]; they and the whole earth can belong only to God” (III/4, 351). As such, all are directed to find nourishment in the plant kingdom alone. Sharing this table by the “free divine decision to which neither [humans] nor beasts have any natural right,” their needs are met and they experience no “struggle for existence” (III/1, 208). In the creation narratives, the relationships of creatures with the earth was peaceful as well, as their consumption of what grew was not violent or destructive. In fact, Genesis 1:11-12 describes the plants that were eaten as being seed bearing, meaning they did not ultimately experience death but a constant resurrection. This peaceful coexistence is the “unalterable order of creation,” according to Barth, and “whether or not we find it practicable or desirable,” we must recognize “the diet assigned to [humans] and beasts by God the Creator is vegetarian” (III/1, 208).

Unfortunately, we live within the story of a people who fell quickly, and repeatedly, away from this harmonious purpose. Together, animals, plants, and people experience the resultant struggle, engaged in conflict with each other and God and impacted by the conflict in which others engage. For example, when the land is struck by famine after people turned from God, not only does the land and many animals suffer, we see human relationships deteriorate - from Abram fearfully pawning off his wife to the Pharaoh in Genesis 12 to the woman eating her own son in 1 Kings 6. The ten plagues of Egypt are a vivid example of how conflict between humans results in widespread suffering and death, among people, other animals, and crops alike (Ex. 7:20-11:7). Judges 15 recounts the destruction of the Philistines’ fields, after Samson’s frustration drives him to tie the tails of jackals together and lite them on fire. Perhaps most gruesome, in 1

Samuel 11, seeking to make any who would oppose him afraid, Saul kills an ox and sends the bloody pieces throughout the region.

These examples illustrate well the brokenness of the created order, as well as the need for God's accommodation in this "new and different order" (III/4, 353). In a world where animals and humans are at odds, new guidelines are necessary, even though they may not reflect the fullness of God's will. Consequently, permission is given by God to kill animals, either in a proper sacrifice to YHWH or for food. Neither of these make the taking of a life legitimate "from the standpoint of their creation" (III/1, 208) and in no way does this permission give humanity the authority to take a life. Rather, one is permitted to "kill it, knowing that it does not belong to him but to God" (III/4, 355). Finally, this authorization is both temporary and limited; Barth suggests humans can only retain a good conscience in this taking of life in so far as we "glance backward to creation and forward to the consummation as the boundaries of the sphere in which alone there can be any question of its necessity" (III/4, 355).

Practice of Animal Sacrifice

First, in consideration of the permission to make sacrifices to God, we recognize their deep connection to relationships. Acting as proof of a promise or covenant that had been made, or being made out of gratitude or guilt, sacrifices were especially prevalent in times of renewal, when the temple is established, and upon return to Jerusalem. The sacrifices described in the Bible do not seem like hoops to be jumped through for the sake of getting closer to holiness or God. Rather, they provide a way to demonstrate one's guilt and desire for a reconciled relationship with God. In fact, the first sacrifices were not requested by God at all. However, when Abel presented choice cuts of meat from a firstborn animal, which was of great value, God honored it. In contrast, his brother, Cain, offered produce from the field; as this was not a sacrificial act for

him, God rejected it. After all, as Barth notes, a sacrifice is only an act of obedience if it is accompanied by “a deeply reverential act of repentance, gratitude and praise on the part of the forgiven sinner” (III/4, 355).

As the narrative of Scripture continues, there are many occasions upon which people made sacrifices and particular instructions relating to them. These include when it could be eaten, what kinds of animals and their conditions would be appropriate for each type of offering, the dedication of the firstborn and a tenth of the land’s produce to God, the function of priests, and guidelines for the altar. These are perhaps in an effort to provide an opportunity to practice obedience or demonstrate an intent to follow God. On the other hand, ignoring these guidelines would signify, at best, a disinterest in a faithful life, and at worst, utter contempt for God. 1 Samuel 2 offers an example of the latter, as Eli’s sons had “no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people.” They cooked meat presented to them for sacrifices, according to their taste rather than God’s direction, and were killed as a result. Later on, we see an example of someone who sought out sacrifice faithfully: David. Upon building an altar to God, another person tried to give him an ox to sacrifice. David refused to take it, insisting he needed to pay a fair price in order for it to be a truly sacrificial act (1 Chron. 21:23-26).

There are a variety of things set aside as offerings by Israel - metals, materials, wood, oil, spices, and stones - but the role of animals does seem particularly important, for it has to do with life and death. After all, “It undoubtedly means making use of the offering of an alien and innocent victim and claiming its life for ours” (III/4, 354-355). Barth explains the surrender of the life of the animal as a “substitutionary sign” of the human life and thus “a sign of his reconciliation accomplished by God” (III/1, 210). Being “in positive agreement with the will of God,” the resulting sacrificial meal is permissible, and thus, “carnivorosity is not a crime” (III/1, 210).

Within the “original order of the Creator,” this would not have been necessary, as there was no need for reconciliation and therefore “no need for the eating of flesh” (III/1, 210). Thus, the story of creation acts as a measure by which readers can comprehend the dire changes that have occurred (III/1, 210).

Though sacrifices are permitted, and even commanded, there are various scriptures that point to sacrifice as a divine accommodation for people who desperately wanted a tangible way to relate to God. For example, in Exodus 20, God tells the Hebrews they can sacrifice to God instead of making gods of precious metals, seeking to steer them away from worshipping other gods. Further, being that child sacrifice was common in the Ancient Near East, the utilization of animals was possibly an effort by God to save the lives of children. The most well known example is the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, wherein God provided a ram instead of allowing Abram to sacrifice his son.

A move away from sacrifices entirely finds even greater footing in the prophets, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. For instance, 1 Samuel 15 recounts the Hebrews’ destruction of the Amalekites, with the exception of the best animals to use as sacrifices. The prophet Samuel was deeply upset at this, asking them to consider if God delighted as much “in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord,” insisting “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22). Additionally, Psalm 50 suggests acting in thanksgiving to God as being better than sacrificing animals. The first chapter of Isaiah describes sacrifices as undesirable and futile, lifting up God’s desire for a willingness to serve and obey. In chapter 66, God mocks those who make sacrifices without listening to God, suggesting their likeness to murder. Finally, while Jeremiah 6:20 speaks against sacrifice directly, Micah 6:6-8 goes so far as to say the life God prefers is the one lived in justice, humility, and love.

As we turn to the second permission of killing animals, we cannot help but first recognize the connection between taking an animal life in sacrifice and for the purpose of food. After all, the shared ground is at least in the consumption of the sacrifice, either by the priest or the person who had offered it. Barth goes a step further, though, insisting the killing of an animal is possible “only as an appeal to God's reconciling grace, as its representation and proclamation” (III/4, 354). While this may seem obvious when it comes to sacrifice, many people would not consider this in light of a meal that contains meat. However, Barth points to a higher standard than we typically consider when it comes to food, arguing our “real and supposed needs certainly do not justify” the claiming of the life of an animal (III/4, 335). Rather, it is only possible to kill an animal in “acknowledgement of the faithfulness and goodness of God” (III/4, 355).

The second explicit permission of the killing of animals follows the flood narrative in Genesis 9. In verse 3, Noah is told, “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.” This is in direct contrast to Genesis 1:29-30 which bestows only the plant kingdom to humans and other animals for food. What's more, Genesis 9:1-2 reads, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.” This presents another shift away from Genesis 1, particularly verse 28, which reads, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” The “gift of dominion,” as it is often referred, is nowhere to be found in the command given to Noah. Rather, it has clearly been replaced with a description of humanity's flawed relationship with other animals.

Barth is quick to speak of this as an important problem which cannot be ignored (III/4, 350). Indeed, humanity is compelled to “think and act responsibly” in this matter, as “the world of animals and plants forms the indispensable living background to the living-space divinely allotted to [humanity] and placed under his control” (III/4, 350). Moreover, it is important because though the permission to eat animals is given, it is not the ultimate order of being. Rather, the animals wait in “earnest expectation” for the “liberation of those who now keep them imprisoned” (III/4, 355). As these wardens, we reflect the actions of the leaders of the Hebrews who were criticized in Ezekiel 34. Describing them as shepherds, the prophet speaks to their commission to care for the sheep, and their choice to drink the milk, make clothes from the wool, and roast the lambs instead; this exploitation was not the life determined for humans or animals.

In fact, the Bible speaks very highly of animals, even presenting them as being highly connected to God. For example, Numbers 22 in particular offers an interesting story about a donkey who sees the angel of God in the road with a sword. As the donkey’s mouth is opened to speak to his rider, Balaam, so too the angel admonishes Balaam for beating this donkey who had tried to protect him. Other stories include Job 12 where the protagonist tells Zephar to listen to the animals, asking them to teach him about God’s sovereignty. Further, in Psalm 84 birds are said to make their home in God’s house and Psalm 148 presents a call for animals to praise God. Indeed, in Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar is even forced to live like an animal for seven years in order to learn about God, something he could not master as a mere human. God is also compared to an animal many times, including a dove (Jn. 1) and an eagle (Ps. 57, Is. 31, and Deut. 32). Disregarding this, humans subjugate other animals, leaving them to “[groan] and [cry] with us in the birth-pangs of a new aeon” (III/4, 355).

Awaiting what is to come, we look to the boundaries and limits presented in the Bible for this “in between time.” In so far as it relates to animals, Exodus 21-23 suggests how to react if an animal kills a person, falls in a pit, is injured by someone or stolen, is let to graze somewhere, someone commits bestiality with it, or if it is found dead. It even presents what to do if one encounters a neighbor’s animal hurt or stuck somewhere - help it! - and insists on allowing animals to rest on the sabbath. Readers are repeatedly warned against eating the fat or blood of an animal (such as Lev. 7, 17, 19), and certain animals are not allowed to be eaten at all (Lev. 11). Barth believes these aid in reminding people “that the life of another being does not belong to other living beings but to God alone” (III/1, 209). Furthermore, they point to the call to live responsibility before God and others, which includes compassion. Barth speaks to a difference between “a good hunter, honourable butcher and conscientious vivisectionist” and a bad one, in that “even as they are engaged in killing animals they hear this groaning and travailing of the creature, and therefore, in comparison with all others who have to do with animals, they are summoned to an intensified, sharpened and deepened diffidence, reserve and carefulness” (III/4, 355). Though some may disregard a vegetarian way of life, discounting it for its “inconsistencies, its sentimentality and its fanaticism,” Barth also warned against writing it off as a result of “our own thoughtlessness and hardness of heart” (III/4, 356).

Our responsibility also includes a move away from a raucous or gluttonous life. Proverbs 25:16 tells readers they will get sick if they eat more than should, the Psalmist speaks of the table as a trap and wishes it upon his enemies (Ps. 69:22), and Philippians 3:18-19 condemns those who make their bellies their gods, a relevant text for all those who could not possibly “live without” bacon or cheese. Of the many texts that speak against gluttony, there are a surprising number which highlight meat. The most gruesome occurs after the Hebrews had been freed from

slavery in Egypt. We find them grumbling about being hungry, even complaining after receiving bread miraculously from heaven, for it did not meet their craving for meat. Quail were sent for them, but this did not hold them over long, as in Numbers 11, we find them whining yet again for meat. Having rejected God and how God had provided for them, Moses tells the people they were going to get so much meat it would make them sick. In turn, God sends more quail than anyone could imagine, but just before these people who had desperately craved it could partake, God killed them.

Though in “the interim period,” as Barth calls it, “peace between creature and creature is broken and replaced by the struggle for existence,” this history of broken relationships will not continue (III/4, 353). Rather we can look behind us to the “true and original creative will of God” and be assured that if it was not so in the beginning, it “will not therefore correspond to a final” (III/1, 209). Furthermore, we can look forward to the other boundary of history, the consummation, when this struggle will have ceased, as will the “slaughter between [hu]man and beast” (III/4, 353). Within the narrative of the Hebrew Bible, we are encouraged by the coming “final era,” that is, “the hope set up with the covenant between the gracious God and sinful [humanity]” (III/1, 211). Isaiah speaks extensively about this. In chapter 11, we find a description of animals and humans living in harmony - and the statement that none will “hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (Is. 11:9). Indeed this is also described in Isaiah 65, which relates that in the new heaven and new earth, not only will animals live in peace with one another, none will be hurt or killed; furthermore, what will be eaten is that which is grown. Isaiah 32 speaks of righteousness abiding in the field and people living in peace, quiet, and safety. God will make things right, at which point there will be flowers in the desert and water in the wildness (Is. 35). Instead of letting enemies take over again, the farmers will be able to eat what they grow (Is. 62:8-9).

Joel 2:18-22, Amos 9:13-15, and Hosea 2:16-23 all point to this time, speaking of a covenant to be made with animals and all signs of war being swept away, resulting in safety and plentiful produce from the land.

One of the most intriguing parts about this hope is its presentation as something we should live into. Indeed, Jeremiah 28 tells those in exile to settle in, seeking after the welfare of the land in which they are living. Though this was not their last stop, they are told to build homes and plant gardens, echoing the descriptions of the prophetic final era. Scripture also makes it clear humanity ought to work to make right its relationship with the world and all its inhabitants. Jonah's story reminds us that at the very minimum, we ought to hope for restoration. When God decided not to destroy Nineveh and all who lived there, Jonah became deeply upset and pouted under a tree God had grown for him. When God sent a worm to kill it, Jonah felt "angry enough to die" (Jon. 4:9). God's retort is quick, compassionate, and final: "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow...And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jon. 4:10-11).

As we turn to the New Testament, there is a shift, both in terms of the sacrifice and consumption of animals. Because Christ was sent to live and die as the ultimate sacrifice, the world is no longer in need of making its relationship with God right (Rom. 5). Barth considers Christ's action to be the starting point for questions relating to the relationship between humans and animals, saying we must recall He "who intercedes for him and for all creation, and in whom God has accomplished the reconciliation of the world with Himself" (III/4, 355). Hebrews 9 emphasizes the effectiveness of Christ's blood over that of animals and Romans 10 describes animal sacrifices as unable to remove sin. Recalling 1 Samuel 15:22, the author of Hebrews points to the

role of obedience over animal sacrifice, then describes Christ's sacrifice on our behalf as that which has sanctified us "once for all" (Heb. 10:10). Furthermore, Hebrews 13:15-16 beckons us to offer the sacrifices of praise, doing good, and sharing with one another, echoing the call of the prophets.

The consumption of animals in the New Testament is intriguing, but we must start with the Eucharist, for it is our foundational meal, enabling us to remember and live in line with the reconciliation God has accomplished. Each time we partake, we do not need to repeat Christ's sacrifice by spilling the blood of another animal, but may simply take the wheat from the field and grapes from the vine, thus sharing in a peaceful meal consistent with the created order. Another miraculous use of bread is its multiplication in order to feed hungry crowds (Matt. 15:32-38, Mk. 6:37-44, 8:2-9, Jn. 6:5-13). Though Christ asks the disciples for bread, they return with fish as well. He multiplied it into food for all, accommodating all the gifts they had brought in their desire to be faithful.

In the New Testament we witness a widening of the family of God through a permission to eat anything, even that which is beyond the law of the Hebrew Bible. To be sure, this is not as much about the food being served but the seat being provided. The most vivid description is found in Acts 10-11 wherein Peter receives a vision from God giving him permission to kill and eat profane animals. He is then met by the messengers of a Roman Centurion, Cornelius, who also had a vision. When they arrive in Caesarea, Peter describes the separation of this culture based on diet, saying to Cornelius, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean" (Acts 10:16). He goes on to explain, "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him," for Christ is "Lord of all" (Acts

10:34-36). Just then, the Holy Spirit came upon them all and the first Gentile Christians were baptized. The purpose of this story is not the consumption of meat, but the commission of a new mission field, involving those who would have otherwise been isolated from Christ's followers because of food related practices.

However, in turn, we also see the Jewish Christians asking the Gentile converts to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication” (Acts 21:25). While the previous story relates the flexibility of eating anything for the sake of sharing the Gospel, this one warns against eating particular things for the sake of adhering to it. A few passages bring these two polarities together, the first one prioritizing God's welcome of all, regardless of one's understanding about food practices. Romans 14:6 insists, “those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.” Second, we come to the realization that our food choices have an effect on other people, so we must prioritize their conscience over our desires. 1 Corinthians 8:13 states, “if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.” The author states it would be better to “endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:12). In the end, what matters is not what is permissible, but what is beneficial, both in affirming God's welcome and making others feel welcome (1 Cor. 10:23). 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 encapsulates this: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved.”

Together with the New Testament Church, we stand in “imminent expectation” of the consummation of God's reconciliation, as the ten virgins in the parable of Matthew 25 (III/2,

505). For Barth, this parable asks the community of Christians who stands in the “interim between the resurrection and the parousia” where we stand in relation to “the goal of creation which is the goal of its very existence” (III/2, 506). Barth insists this time “is not the time of an empty absence of the Lord, nor is it the time of a bewildering delay in His return, in which it is enough for the community to maintain and help itself as best it can” (III/2, 507). Rather, he believes the Church has a task: to make known to the world what God has done for it (III/2, 507). Recalling God’s already won victory in Christ, Barth uniquely poises humanity as those who are called to act in accordance with this fact today, before the consummation is here in its fullness.

Furthermore, because “from the very outset God has intervened to separate [it] from the power of darkness,” humanity has been denied “not only the right but also the possibility of deciding for chaos and darkness” (III/2, 146). The trajectory for right relationships has already been determined, and therein, we cannot blame the broken state of creation as a way to justify how we live within it. Nor can one make an “appeal to his defencelessness” or “bewail and justify himself as a sinner on the ground that he is inevitably delivered up to the forces of evil” (III/2, 144). Rather, we experience freedom and integrity in who we were made to be as we participate in Christ’s victory by turning away from whatever threatens right relationships.

Thus, in a world that tends toward violence, gluttony, and pride, it seems the practice of vegetarianism could be conceived of as a signpost to this already established and still yet to come Kingdom of God. Every day, we are faced with the choice of living in affirmation of the created order and peaceful consummation that is to come, or in denial of it and in accordance with this fallen, broken, and defeated existence. The former will result in a more free life, as we shake off some of the bonds and brokenness of this world. Whereas the latter will result in a continued struggle for existence, as we let the disorder of our whims, greed, and habit dictate our lives. We

must consider which comes closer to a faithful witness to others and awaiting of our coming Lord.

In conclusion, though permissions are given and divine accommodations made throughout the narrative of Scripture, as it pertains to the use of animals, there is a definitive vision of new life that is eternally peaceful for all. By practically living in line with the hope to which we are called through a peaceful diet, we will discover a more consistent witness to the Kingdom of God. Alan Rudrum once spoke of the foundational stories of Christianity as being “carnivorous rather than vegetarian” (Rudrum 2003, 87). However it seems the only carnivorous aspect of the Bible is the interim time, as both the created order and consummation in the Kingdom of God are grounded in a peaceful, shared way of life that just so happens to be vegetarian.

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