

“But Didn’t Jesus Eat Meat?”

From SARX: For All God's Creatures

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Veganism, dizzying in the speed of its growth, is now ubiquitous on restaurant menu options, billboards, newspapers and television. The vegan message, with concerns over animal suffering and environmental degradation at its heart, has struck a chord with many Christians. Subsequently, discussions about veganism are becoming more common among people of faith. Whether it be a light-hearted exchange or heated debate, in person or on social media, a question which ubiquitously arises in conversation is “but didn’t Jesus eat meat?”

It is natural for Christian vegans to feel uneasy by what appears to be a providential “thumbs up” for eating animals. After all, if Jesus, the paragon of moral perfection, ate animals does this not short-circuit any faith-based ethical call to veganism? Surely, the only conclusion to the idea of Jesus eating meat is we can eat meat.

An obvious retort is to note that there were many undesirable elements to living in 1st century Palestine. Surely the fact that Jesus was lawfully permitted to keep slaves does mean we should do likewise? Also what would a church equality opportunities board say if Jesus’s choice of disciples, an exclusively male and monoracial selection, was adopted as a model of church leadership today?

Nonetheless what food Jesus chose to eat and why remains an intriguing question and of relevance in helping us make our food choices. To dig deeper into the issue of Jesus and meat eating, we need to understand *what sort of meat* He might have eaten and how it compares to the meat in our supermarkets. Is a spade a spade and a steak a steak?

First of all, and to provide a little background, let us consider the first instances of meat eating in scripture. Whilst Genesis 1 is clear that eating without recourse to killing was the “very good” Edenic ideal, a radical departure takes place in the post-fall world of Genesis 9. As a concession to human sin, God grants a temporary permission for Noah and his family to eat animals: “*Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything*” (Gen 9:3).

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Yet this verse is not an unbridled invitation for humans to kill and eat as many creatures as they please. Contrasting with Genesis 1, the permission to eat meat notably omits the observation that God saw that it was ‘good’. In fact the concession of Genesis 9 is rather presented as a lamentation: *“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”*. God qualifies the permission to slaughter animals for food with a stern caution: *“For your own lifeblood, I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another”* (Gen 9:5).

Whilst permission is given to eat flesh in principle (although detailed and strict regulations were established around the consuming of flesh), surely even the most impassioned BBQ lover may begin to shift uncomfortably at the thought of God demanding a *“reckoning”* for every animal life taken!

This startling warning underlines the fact that eating flesh is not part of God’s original intentions for creation. Indeed it is one of a number of regretful activities (e.g. the keeping of slaves, permission for the Israelites to take women in war, capital punishment, etc) which Jesus referred to as *“not so in the beginning”* (Matthew 19:8), that is to say, permitted but only because of *“our hardness of heart”*. This tension surrounding meat eating is key to understanding what sort of meat might have been found on Jesus’ plate.

It seems entirely plausible to assume Jesus consumed meat at Passover, especially since this animal sacrifice was required by the law. Yet it is important to perceive the gulf between the Passover lamb and the lamb to found at your local carvery. Sacrificial meat was highly regulated with strict conditions applied to its consumption. Mosaic Law prescribed that only

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very particular species of animals without ‘spot or blemish’ were suitable for sacrifice. The slaughter could only take place at the cultic centre (Mispeh, Shiloh and Jerusalem) and, when consuming the body, no fat or blood was to be eaten, for the blood was understood to contain the “life” of the animal. The meat was also to be boiled not roasted, resulting in a kind of unappetising mushy stew with bits of gristle. The unpalatability of the sacrificial meat was to underline the understanding that sacrifice was an act of solemnity and atonement, not an excuse for a fry-up. In fact Eli’s sons, aspiring Old Testament gourmets it would seem, got into trouble for insisting on having roasted, not boiled, flesh and so losing sight of the notion that the sacrificed animal was to be highly regarded as instrumental to the spiritual welfare of the tribe of Israel.



The second type of meat available to Jesus was “secular meat”, that is to say, animal flesh consumed for non-religious purposes. This meat, whilst allowable under the law, is regarded unfavourably within scripture. In its original Hebrew, the language of Deuteronomy 12 associates the permission to kill and eat animals outside the sacrificial system, with lust, wickedness, law-breaking, rebellion against God and the Fall. Numbers 11:4 begins when the people ‘*fell a lusting*’ for flesh and ends with a very great plague ‘*while the flesh was yet between their teeth*’. Even today, some Jews continue to refer to this meat as “the meat of lust”.

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There is no scriptural reason to suggest Jesus ate such meat and it is unlikely He did. In fact, contemporary to Jesus, were particularly religious men who took a ‘Nazarite vow’. Detailed in Numbers 6, this vow was not dissimilar to a monk taking holy orders and required the abstinence from certain lawful but spiritually unprofitable practices such as drinking alcohol and eating secular meat. This tradition, the adherents of which were especially ‘separated’ or ‘holy’ to God, included Samson and Samuel no less. Whilst secular meat was lawful (much like keeping a slave was lawful), it simply was not the sort of thing respected holy men did in the 1st century. Rather like a vicar visiting a strip club – lawful but decidedly frowned upon!

The final piece of meat left on the table is fish. Fish, distinguished from other flesh in the bible (created on a different day, not regulated in the Noachic covenant, treated differently in Mosaic food laws, not used in sacrifice etc.) falls outside of the above categories. Considering how fish was regarded under the law, plus the resurrection account of Luke 24, it is likely Jesus supplemented his diet with fish.

It is striking how different these approaches to eating animal flesh are to today’s norms. Taking the issue of fish, many of fishermen, living in such an arid area without the benefits of modern irrigation and mechanised crop farming had a stark choice; go fishing or don’t feed their families! It was therefore a permissible necessity of the time for men to set sail on their small, wooden boats with nets of a few metres in length.

Most of the fish in our supermarkets are caught using huge ships which trawl or dredge the sea with nets that stretch for up to 2.5 kilometres. These ships, as well as killing large numbers of dolphins, sharks and turtles, cause devastating environmental impact, turning the seabed from, complex habitats rich in coral, sponge and sea fan into wastelands of shifting gravel, sand and mud.

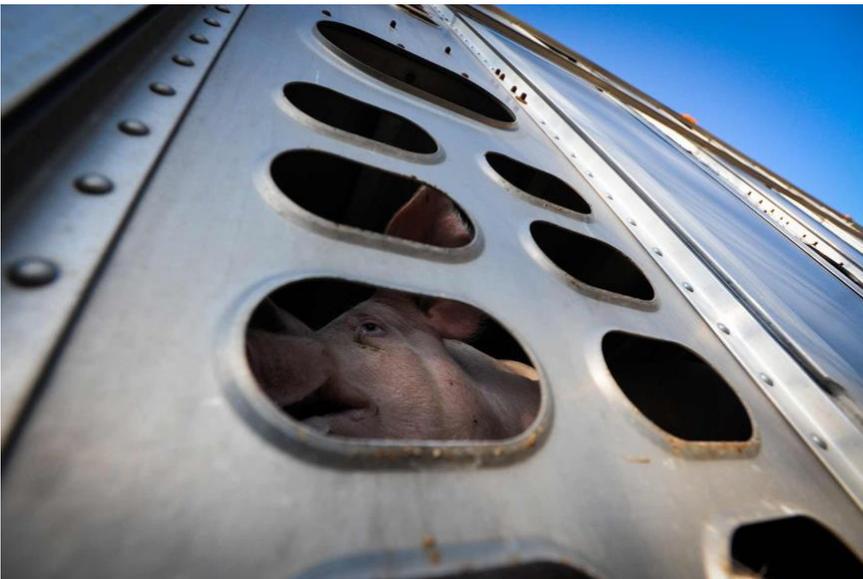
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Workers dismember fish at a processing plant. Species include sea bass and sea bream as well as eel and rainbow trout.
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For most wild-caught, and most farmed fish, during capture and subsequent processing, the severity and duration of their suffering will be high. Most wild-caught fish are likely to die from being crushed in nets or from suffocation, freezing or live dissection after landing. This process will probably take many minutes, or even hours. Most of the world’s farmed fish are also killed by slow and inhumane methods, a practice which violates the rabbinic/Talmudic teaching of *tsha’ar ba’alei Chayim* or not causing suffering to any living creature. In light of this, would Jesus choose to eat a fish whose capture caused both horrific suffering and environmental degradation or would he opt for a more compassion option? Moving onto secular meat, what might we learn from the warning of Genesis 9 and Hebrew scripture’s concern about eating meat for pleasure? Perhaps the danger of lust is that the blinked, selfish pursuit of pleasure causes lasting hurt and suffering to others around us. The shrewd identification of meat with “lust” cuts to the heart of an intensive meat industry.



A pig is transported for slaughter. © Jo-Anne McArthur

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In our lust for flesh, relentless, routine cruelty is inflicted on pigs, sheep, cows, chickens, ducks, geese and other animals who suffer terribly during their short lives. In our lust for flesh, female animals who are forcibly impregnated and their newly born are torn away from their mothers, mutilated and kept in filthy, overcrowded conditions. Such systems of meat production would be simply unthinkable to anyone living in the 1st century. It makes you wonder what expression would be on the face of Jesus if He were standing at the entrance of the abattoir? If, as the trucks rolled through the gates, He met the gaze of their terrified occupants? All for our lust for flesh.

Finally, we have the Passover or sacrificial meat. Well, we know that sacrifice is no longer needed because of Christ. According to the Gospel of John, the last supper took place on the day before the Passover lambs were killed and Jesus died at the time that the lambs were being slaughtered. The significance of these events underlines Christ’s role as the *Lamb of God*, the one whose willing sacrifice promises to bring about freedom, peace and reconciliation for all of creation (Colossians 1:20). We remember Christ, not with the blood of the Passover lamb nor the flesh of lust, but with the peaceful breaking of bread.



In conclusion, in deciding to pop a cut of meat into our supermarket trolley, should muttering “but didn’t Jesus eat meat?” satisfy our conscience? The fact is, the item in the trolley, a piece of one of God’s beloved creatures, bred in horrendous conditions and cruelly slaughtered for nothing other than the financial profit of the seller and gastronomic lust of the consumer is not something anyone living two thousand years ago could have *conceived* of much less eaten. Maybe, as we peruse the supermarket aisles, we should ask ourselves a different question. Indeed for we, who are not living in first century Galilee but rather in a time and country when meat eating necessitates terrible suffering and the devastation of the environment, perhaps the key question to ask is, “what would Jesus have us eat *now*”?

Written by Sarx staff writer with special thanks to Dr Philip J. Sampson for his research and wise insight.