

Why Did God Allow Killing Animals?

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A question that often comes up from both Muslim, non-Muslim and even ex-Muslim vegans is “*why did God allow humans to kill animals?*”

“Why would God create something that has the ability to feel pain and suffer then allow you to harm it?! Any ideology that allows killing can’t be from God!”

Many struggle with this; questioning why The Most Merciful would permit us to do something that to our perceptions, isn’t merciful.

These are very valid and interesting questions I’ve reflected over for some time and it’s difficult to give a black and white answer without first examining the concept of life and death from a historical and evolutionary perspective.

What appears to be happening among many well intentioned folks is they look at this issue through the lens of their limited human faculties; essentially reducing God to the confines of human thought. However it’s not unreasonable to ask when something is troubling you:

And when Abraham said, “My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead.” [Allah] said, “Do you not believe (that I can)?” He said, “Yes, but [I ask] only that my heart may be reassured.” 2:260

If it was good enough for Prophet Abraham to question and want answers from God himself, then it’s sure good enough for us to ask around when we’re unsure.

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So why would God allow the killing of animals?

Some Muslims have attempted to answer this by arguing it's because God can do whatever He likes; that He is All Knowing, All Seeing and All Hearing. Therefore, we humans can't possibly be more merciful than God.

That's all good and well but it doesn't really answer the question of "*why*".

I'd like to point out those posing such questions invariably live in a developed country where life is relatively comfortable. They have ample food and water on demand among many modern day comforts. There is zero risk of dying of starvation unless they choose not to eat.

I make these observations as a prelude to this discussion and to propose questioning from a position of privilege that's divorced from historical context isn't conducive to objective analysis. It's very important to get some perspective.

I will try and address these important questions as well as highlight how we as Muslims can forge a better way forward in a deteriorating world.

When Did This All Start?

In order to really get the *big picture*, one must take a step back – way back to when advanced life first started appearing on Earth. The Qu'ran encourages one to explore the origins of life:

"Say (O Muhammad to them), "Travel throughout the land and see how He began creation..."

-Qu'ran 29:20

So let's do that!



The [geological timescale](#) shows periods rich in flora and fauna hundreds of millions of years ago.

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From gigantic dinosaurs to supersized insects, behemoths in the sea and birds as big as fighter jets; each era eventually died out paving the way for new and different ones to emerge.

The common denominator between all eras – prehistoric and modern is without exception, the natural world had a finely tuned predator-prey balance.

This was extended to all types of animals whether they lived in the land, air or sea.

Predators didn't always catch their prey and prey didn't always escape. Each was equipped with abilities to catch/evade the other and this plays itself out to this very day (*Vs today when humans mass produce defenseless animals in tight enclosures claiming it's "natural"*).

Prey animals have also developed breeding cycles that ensured their numbers would be plentiful which in turn supported both predators, scavengers and the plants around them. Consider if everything was either herbivorous or carnivorous, life would cease to exist pretty quickly. Animals would either rapidly overpopulate and starve to death or they'd wipe each other out.

God had already established that both predator and prey *together* are essential for life on this planet. This was nature's built in mechanism of checks and balances that keeps everything in order. God states in the Qu'ran:

And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance. That you not transgress within the balance. And establish weight in justice and do not transgress against the balance. 55:7-9

Every creature is connected to the other in a divinely expressed balance. This is in every ecosystem on the planet: you will find when one animal eats another, there is a positive cascading effect on the rest of the ecosystem (*we on the other hand, actually have a very negative effect on the natural world through killing of other creatures*).

So the concept of taking life between animals has been occurring for hundreds of millions of years until the present day. If you are ok with "nature" as it's been for 550-600 million years, then by default, you accept some level of "suffering" naturally occurs *without humans* regardless whether you believe in God or not. God "allowed" other life forms to consume one another as part of an interdependent ecosystem.

Then another life form emerged some [210,000 years ago](#) that would change the course of the world forever.

Humans.

At this point; I'd like to examine a verse from the Qu'ran that I feel is critical to this discussion and offer an alternative interpretation:

And when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority (khalifa)." They said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption in it and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" (Allah) said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know." Quran 2:30

The common understanding of this verse has generally been that God is creating a vicegerent/caretaker/trustee/custodian or anyone who takes care of something and establishes authority. Now this understanding of being God's caretakers is certainly one of great honor however it raises an important question:

Given the planet was doing just fine for billions of years before mankind; why did God suddenly need a caretaker? He had taken care of the Earth very well without humans and judging from how we have literally destroyed this world, perhaps it's time to consider an alternate explanation in light of what we know today about our own species' evolution.

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Consider this:

The word “khalifa” comes from the root word “*khalf*” which means to come after something; to succeed or to follow something after it’s end:

	1. ⇒ خلف
ا	خَلَفَ, aor. - {يَخْلُفُ}, inf. n. خَلْفٌ, <i>He came after, followed, succeeded, or remained after, another, or another that had perished or died.</i> (TA.) Hence, in the Qur [vii. 168 and xix. 60], فَخَلَفَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ خَلْفٌ (TA) <i>And there hath succeeded them, or come after them, [a posterity, or] an evil posterity.</i> (Bḍ in xix. 60.) And خَلَفَهُ <i>He came after</i>
ب	<i>him,</i> (Ṣ, A in art. دبر, Mgh, Mṣb, TA,) or <i>behind him,</i> (A ubi suprā, Mgh,) or <i>following him nearly;</i> (A ubi suprā;)
ت	inf. n. as above, (Mgh, TA,) and خَلْفَةٌ also: (Mgh:) or <i>he remained after him:</i> (Ḳ:) and جَاءَ خِلَافَهُ ↓ likewise signifies
ث	[the same as جَاءَ خَلْفَهُ; an inf. n. of خَالَفَ being thus used as an adv. n.; i. e.] <i>he came after him.</i> (TA.) You say also,
ج	خَلَفَ اللَّيْلَ النَّهَارَ, inf. n. خَلْفٌ and خَلْفَةٌ, <i>The night followed, or came after, the day.</i> (MA.)
ح	Root: خلف - Entry: 1. — Signification: A2
د	

Now this is interesting because we (*homo sapiens*) came *after* the last homo species. All species within the genus except us are extinct.

So doesn't it stand to reason this verse could very possibly mean: God is going to create humans in their “final form” to come *after* the previous homo species? A successor to all previous species in this genus.

One homo to rule them all.

The second question here is why did the angels think this new creation they had just been informed about would shed blood and cause corruption when they had nothing to base their assumption on since this new creation hadn't been created yet?

Or had it?

I've read many different explanations such as they witnessed jinn wars and infighting, they were given prior knowledge, etc. but in light of the above, I'd like to explore something a bit more contextually relevant.

What if the angels actually had prior experience with hominins before humans? It turns out the genus homo has a long history of violence and bloodshed. In fact, they've been violent since their **very beginning**.

So the angels were well within their right to ask having witnessed all other hominins killing each other.

As the “final form” of humans, it is not only our technological advancements that distinguishes us from early man but also our ability to demonstrate consistent levels of compassion to other beings. Early hominins were opportunistic feeders and ate whatever they could find or catch. They had no moral or religious regulations on their consumption since they operated purely from survival instincts.

A Critical Point In History



We also now know via genetic mapping that cattle were first domesticated in the Middle East [nearly 10,000 years ago](#). Domestication of sheep occurred around 11,000 – 12,000 years ago and goats 12,000 years ago. So basically, all around the same time.

This is much earlier than the advent of **all** religions so clearly, religion incorporated animal consumption as it was already occurring and did not originate the idea.

This thoroughly refutes the fallacious argument of “*if religion wasn’t around, we wouldn’t have needless suffering of animals*” that’s propagated within certain vegan circles.

So based on these timelines, it’s clearly established earlier humans had pre-existing relationships with domesticated animals about 10,000 years before Islam.

Now here’s the pertinent question:

Why did humans have pre-existing relationships with animals through domestication thousands of years before Islam?

In short – food, transport, shelter, clothing and warfare.

Even the staunchest vegan will concede early humans had little choice but to eat and use what was available.

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Certain animals also made life much easier, particularly when it came to transporting goods via trade caravans or moving possessions from place to place which is a hallmark of nomadic societies. These were largely symbiotic relationships where both humans and animals benefitted. Animals gained protection, constant sources of food, water, breeding and in return, humans sustained themselves with them and used them for work and transport.

Interestingly, camels were first domesticated in the [Southeast Arabian Peninsula](#) and it helped them enormously maintain a genetic diversity only found in wild animals due to them constantly traveling into different geographical areas for trading purposes. Their original ancestors died out. This is a prime example of how a symbiotic human-animal relationship should play out instead of the one way domination that occurs today.

So clearly domestication, use and consumption of animals occurred out of absolute *necessity*.



This human dependency on animals continued right up to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Pre-Islamic Arabs were one link in a long chain of civilizations who relied heavily on animals for survival.

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Before the agricultural revolution, people who lived in isolated or nomadic societies ate whatever was available and hunger was a real and present threat. Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) society was a desert dwelling, semi-nomadic tribal society who had relied on animals for sustenance for thousands of years. They ate among other things; [lizards](#) and locusts.

So when the Qu'ran speaks of consuming animals, it does so from a very contextualized understanding of the human-animal dynamic as it was for tens of thousands of years and by extension, how people lived during the time of the Prophet. The Qu'ran simply spoke to them in a language they were already living on a daily basis:

And the grazing livestock He has created for you; in them is warmth and [numerous] benefits, and from them you eat. 16:5

And they carry your loads to a land you could not have reached except with difficulty to yourselves. Indeed, your Lord is Kind and Merciful. 16:7

It is Allah who made for you the grazing animals upon which you ride, and some of them you eat. 40:79

Given animals were so crucial to society then, it would have been truly oppressive for God to forbid a civilization's primary source of sustenance.

This is the backdrop with which the Qu'ran dealt with the topic. It did not introduce animal consumption. The Qu'ran **recognized then regulated it** just like it did with polygamy and slavery.

So now we know:

1. Other life forms had been consuming one another 500-600 million years before humans appeared in a finely tuned balance
2. We are the final chapter in the genus homo; the last of our species
3. We've had an inherently violent streak since we existed some 200,000+ years ago.
4. We domesticated animals out of pure necessity
5. Islam was the only major faith that heavily regulated animal consumption

Up until the advent of Islam, the people of Arabia had no moral guidance on how to interact with the natural world around them.

Despite the Prophet Muhammad living in a society that had no concept of animal rights, was plagued with political, economic and social turmoil; his diet was predominately plant based where dates and barley were his staple. He showed compassion not only to animals but gave hope to those who showed the same compassion:

*Qurra ibn Iyas reported: A man said, "O Messenger of Allah, I was going to slaughter a sheep but I had mercy on it (or felt sorry for it)." The Messenger of Allah said, "If you had mercy on the sheep, then Allah will have mercy on you twice." (al-Adab al-Mufrad 373 Book 20, Hadith 373), Graded as **Sahih**(authentic) by Sh. Al-Albani.*

What About Animals Feeling Pain?

Central to the argument of animal consumption is the issue of causing pain to another sentient creature.

It's important to recognize if God was to take away our and our animal friends' ability to feel pain, emotion and suffering; this takes away that which makes us who we are. Our ability to empathize and extend compassion to others is centered around our perception of their state of being.

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All vertebrates with a central nervous system have the ability to feel pain.

It is absolutely clear from the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that if an animal was to be killed, his priority was to spare that animal any suffering:

“Verily Allah has prescribed ihsan (excellence) in all things. So if you kill, kill well; and when you slaughter, slaughter well. Let each one of you sharpen his blade and let him spare suffering to the animal he slaughters.” –40 Hadith, Nawawi #17



Now bear in mind; this statement was made 1400+ years ago when even the concept that animals were sentient beings was non-existent. Up until the Prophet's arrival, animals had zero rights and were [treated in horrific ways](#).

Even today in the United States and most Western nations; “livestock” have no rights whatsoever. One can torture a cow, sheep, pig or chicken to death with minimal to no consequences.

Yet from this narration; we see the Prophet Muhammad's only concern here was to spare the animal any suffering. The quickest way to spare an animal suffering known at the time was to quickly cut the throat region with a very sharp blade.

Given the fact the Prophet's only goal was to spare any animal suffering, it's only fair and reasonable to state had he known of a better way to eliminate animal suffering he would have used it.

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How then can we possibly argue he would stand for the ghastly slaughterhouses, gas chambers, butchers and other modern ways in which animals are killed whereby they endure GREAT suffering from birth to death?

This is why I strongly believe that today, if one *absolutely must* consume an animal; they do it by using anesthetic or some type of sedative so the animal does not suffer at all. I feel this is far more in line with the Prophetic tradition than the horrific bloodbaths that take place amidst agonizing screams of dying animals.

We can no longer claim “halal slaughter” is painless as this has been thoroughly studied and disproven – [this latest study](#) just being released months ago.

If we have used other advancements they didn't have at the time – like calculating exact prayer times – why can't we do the same when it comes to the suffering of God's creatures?

Better yet, don't kill animals; then there's no debate.

That Was Then, What About Now?

Okay let's set aside what we've covered so far in the past and examine our present.

- Do we actually need (out of necessity), domesticated animals for food, shelter, warfare, clothing or transport? **NO.**
- Are we following the symbiotic relationship model with domesticated animals where both species benefit? **NO.**
- Are modern day humans modeling current day practices of early humans? **NO.**
- Are modern day Muslims modeling current practices on the Prophet Muhammad's society? **NO.**

There is absolutely nothing in today's mainstream or “halal” farming industries that mimic what our ancestors did out of necessity.



It has devolved into an insidious exploitation on a global scale where greed, gluttony and profit maximization have cancelled out any notion of animal welfare. Our ancestors did not artificially breed billions of land animals, fish the oceans dry and literally burn the world around them for a sandwich.

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In fact, [from 1961 to 2004](#), the population of “livestock” skyrocketed from 2.7 to 4.1 billion and domesticated fowl went from 3 to an astounding 16 billion. It is outright insulting and disingenuous to draw parallels with the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and even those who came before him as they did not engage in this type of systematic exploitation.

They didn't create a global “halal food” market soon to be worth [\\$12 TRILLION](#), they simply consumed what was necessary to survive from the small flocks they kept.

To invoke the Qu'ran in justifying these modern day crimes is just offensive.

It is an outright crime against God to continue mass producing and consuming animals when this very action is the prime impetus of the current global meltdown. We cannot continue turning a blind eye to what animal agriculture is doing to our world. [Enough warnings](#) have been issued by tens of thousands of scientists and the Muslim world and its idle leadership have done very little.

We have largely stopped using animals for transport, war, shelter and clothing but have increased our demands to consume them even though we have many healthier, better options. It's time we stopped using Islam to justify our unchecked greed and live as if we're the only one's worthy of this planet.

Final Thoughts

God didn't allow animals to be killed anymore than what it was already occurring for hundreds of millions of years.

What He did do however, was hold humans to higher standards than other animals.

So whilst animals routinely kill one another out of necessity; sometimes in quite brutal ways – ripping one another apart, eating another alive or sometimes killing rivals for territory; Islam's focus was on minimizing/eliminating suffering as much as possible if the need came to take an animal's life.

Right now, there is even more reason not to consume animals. Not only do we not need to since there's an overabundance of plant based options, but doing so is contributing to the current sixth mass extinction of our wildlife. The last mass extinction to have occurred was [66 million years ago](#).

Let that sink in before you insist on “but it's halal!”.

Humans domesticated animals around 10,000 years ago out of necessity and religion simply dealt with the reality on the ground.

We are blessed to be living in this day and age where we no longer need to kill animals out of need. Of course it is good to know that if the situation ever called for eating an animal, then there are sanctioned options but by and large, we do not need to imitate our early ancestors.

Remember, it is always better to not kill than to kill.

When it comes to eating animals; now's the time to ask yourself “*Is this the right thing to do?*” rather than worry about your individual right.

The Qu'ran dealt with issues as they arose but also set a trajectory for its followers to emulate its highest principles and to reflect the ethics of their age. This is why slavery is now unequivocally declared *haram* even though it's not expressly forbidden in the Qu'ran.

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Given the fact the Prophet Muhammad forbade cutting down trees even during war, I sincerely believe if he were alive today and saw what was happening to these animals and our world, he would be distraught on so many levels.

He ate for survival.

Now our survival depends on what we don't eat.