



*The Bible and
Veganism: 14
Answers to 14
Objections*

MARCELLO NEWALL

*The Bible and
Veganism:
14 Answers to 14 Objections*

Marcello Newall

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	p. 2.
1. <i>Genesis 1:26: humans were given 'dominion' over animals</i>	p. 3.
2. <i>Genesis 4:3-5: Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain</i>	p. 3.
3. <i>Genesis 6-9: Noah was told to eat animals after the Flood</i>	p. 3.
4. <i>Moses told the Israelites they could eat animals</i>	p. 5.
5. <i>God commanded people to offer animal sacrifices</i>	p. 6.
6. <i>Jesus said all foods are 'clean'</i>	p. 8.
7. <i>Jesus went fishing with his disciples</i>	p. 10.
8. <i>Jesus sent the Gadarene demons into the herd of pigs</i>	p. 11.
9. <i>In Acts 10 Peter is told to eat animals</i>	p. 12.
10. <i>In Romans 14 Paul says vegetarians are 'weak'</i>	p. 13.
11. <i>1 Timothy 4 says vegetarianism is 'demonic'</i>	p. 14.
12. <i>Christians should always eat what is 'set before them'</i>	p. 16.
13. <i>We will eat lamb in heaven</i>	p. 20.
14. <i>God will restore the Jewish Temple in heaven and there will be animal sacrifices</i> ...	p. 20.

Introduction

In this short booklet I attempt to answer some of the most common objections to veganism from the Bible. I have tried to keep my answers concise but for certain objections longer explanations were necessary in order to clarify the points made. Ultimately, I seek to show that the arguments made against veganism are based on erroneous readings of key scriptural texts and an abuse of their context together with a misunderstanding of the overarching message of the gospel. In this sense, while there may be debate over the specific interpretation of certain biblical texts — many of which are from thousands of years ago and are therefore culturally distant from us — the overall story of the Bible is in fact very clear. The message regarding Christ is the story of how God overcame sin, death, and the devil through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, his messiah. It is also the account of how God in his incarnation enters, and experiences, the suffering of his creation from the inside. The cross of Christ, then, is the bridge between the ruinous Fall of mankind in the opening chapters of Genesis and the final cosmic restoration of peace and justice at the end of Revelation. It is, above all, the story of how the love of God in Jesus overcomes all evil, violence, and injustice and the triumph of goodness and truth in the coming kingdom of God. In the story of Jesus, as the restorer of what was lost through sin, animals and our treatment of them have their place both in the initial vegan ideal of a perfect world given in Genesis 1:29 but also in the hope a restored world of peace for all creation given in Isaiah 11:6-9, and which will be fully brought to completion at the return of Christ (Rom. 8:19-23, Rev. 21:1-27). Finally, the question of veganism, and one's food choices more generally, have gained even more importance for the Christian in light of the enormous issues humanity currently faces, these range from world hunger and extreme environmental degradation to climate change, species extinction, severe drought, resource depletion, chronic disease and obesity, and extreme animal cruelty. In this day and age, then, perhaps more than ever before, it behoves the Church, in this area as in all others, to incarnate Jesus' path of love, truth, and justice thereby pointing towards the coming kingdom of God.

1. Genesis 1:26: humans were given 'dominion' over animals

While it's true that in Genesis 1:26 humanity is given 'dominion' over animals and over all other creatures this clearly cannot mean tyranny or ruthless exploitation. Firstly, because almost immediately afterwards, in Genesis 1:29, this statement is qualified and humans are given a completely vegan diet showing they are to be non-violent towards other creatures; secondly, God himself has 'dominion' over human beings and the world (Job 25:2, Job 38:33, Psa. 22:28, Psa. 103:22, Psa. 145:13, Dan. 4:3) and yet is called the 'Good Shepherd' (Jn. 10:11) who benevolently cares for his creation and its creatures. In this sense, human 'dominion' should imitate God's rule over us and cannot imply violent oppression. Sadly, this word has been used as a pretext for promoting a vision of creation and animals which is foreign to Scripture.

2. Genesis 4:3-5: Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain

In Genesis 4:3-5 we are told how while Abel had flocks Cain was a man of the soil and grew plants. God appears to accept Abel's offering, fat portions from the first-born of his flock, while he rejects Cain's offering of fruits of the soil. Thankfully, Scripture clearly tells us what the issue was, in Hebrews 11:4 we are informed that, 'By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings'. Cain simply lacked faith in God and the future Saviour and the nature of the offering wasn't the real issue. The Bible goes on to tell us in other books that in reality God was never interested in animal sacrifice itself (Psa. 40:6, Heb. 10:1-18) but was willing to accept this offering as a form of faith from primitive peoples who did not yet have a full understanding of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. In this sense, God's acceptance of animal sacrifices was an accommodation to human weakness and the culture of the period.

3. Genesis 6-9: Noah was told to eat animals after the Flood

The Flood story of Genesis is far more profound than most realise and must be read from the beginning of chapter 6 right through chapter 9, instead of being removed from its greater context. While some have asserted that a lack of food after the destruction caused by the Flood resulted in a concession to eat meat — and this is a possible explanation — the main problem of the antediluvian world appears to have been widespread wickedness and especially violence (6:5, 13). In particular, we are told how, ‘Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence’ (6:11). This violence, which is underlined *repeatedly*, was most probably towards both humans and animals. In particular, some Jewish traditions — reflected for example in the Noahide laws — believe not only that human beings had violated the vegan diet of Genesis 1:29 and had begun eating animals, but were also eating animal body parts while these creatures were still alive. It seems that incredible violence amongst humans was accompanied by heinous cruelty and violence towards animals as well. Jesus himself appears to consider the ‘days of Noah’ as a period of terrible evil and sinfulness (Matt. 24:37-39) and seems to single out a deeply ungodly ‘eating and drinking’ as well as an abuse of marriage. It may be that Jesus’ mention of marriage is related to the intermarriage between the righteous line of Seth with the violent and wicked line of Cain (Gen. 6:1-4) which ultimately brought about the corruption of the whole human race apart from Noah’s family.

In the account given we are told that humanity has sunk to such a low level that God is actually sorry he ever made them and decides to judge his creation (6:6-7, 7:4). In this context, Noah, a righteous man for his time, is spared with his family because of his faith. After the Flood has subsided and the world has been judged, Noah offers sacrifices to the Lord, and God immediately underlines that ‘even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood’ (8:21) he has decided not to judge the earth again through a flood. God’s assessment of the human condition after the Flood appears to be an acknowledgement of the sinfulness of the humanity, the necessity of grace, and an additional lowering of his standards in order to avoid a further judgement, but also a series of penalties in order to halt a similar descent into violence and evil. God’s two main concessions and regulations after the Flood both regard *precisely* the kinds of violence which had infested the antediluvian world: first murder is regulated and then meat-eating. It is only in this context of a world gone out of control, and the real possibility of an end of all of creation, that we can comprehend the concession of meat-eating in 9:3-4 and the prohibition of eating blood, which would stop the more extreme forms of cruelty, such as eating living animals. God appears to accommodate to human ignorance and weakness in order to permit the

continuation of the created order. The covenant which follows is one of pure grace (9:8-17), despite mankind's sinfulness, God commits himself to maintaining his creation. The whole episode is hardly something human beings should boast about, but rather a demonstration of God's incredible patience and kindness towards the human race despite its deep sinfulness and violence. This is done no doubt in hope of a better day when human beings would have recuperated from their very low moral condition and in particular the arrival of Christ and the proclamation of the coming kingdom of heaven.

4. Moses told the Israelites they could eat animals

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.” (Matt. 19:7-8)

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 in their spiritual, moral, and cultural development. 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 — defined in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 — and are simply concessions made to the culture of the time and the hardness of people's hearts. This is true in various areas ranging from marriage to food, warfare, slavery, and the role of women. Often this 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. (Deut. 12:20).

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. (Deut. 17:14-15).

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

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.” (1 Sam. 8:4-8).

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 practices for a time in view of their eventual elimination. In this sense, we see that when God will finally have his way his initial vegan ideal of Genesis 1:29 will be restored and the lion will dwell with the lamb in total peace (Isa. 11:6-9).

5. God commanded people to offer animal sacrifices

In the biblical account animal sacrifice represents a concession made to fallen humanity which God, taking into consideration the ignorance of human beings, accepted for a time as a form of worship. As Hosea underlined, and Jesus repeated, God desires ‘mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings’ (Hos. 6:6, Matt 9:13). 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? (Psa. 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 (Isa. 1:11).

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.” (Psa. 40:6-7).

In light of Christ's 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 (Luke 12:6, Deut. 22:6). Both in the Old and New Testaments a cruel disposition towards animals is considered a moral defect that does not reflect God's benevolence and compassion.

In Isaiah's vision, echoed by Hosea (Hos. 2:18) and by the authors of the New Testament (Isa. 65:25, Rev. 21:4-5) 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:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
The infant will play near the cobra's den,

and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. 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' (Isa. 11:6-9).

6. Jesus said all foods are 'clean'

For many Christ's teaching that it is not what enters the mouth that defiles man is an explicit rejection of vegetarianism. In reality, Jesus' teaching of holiness 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 dimension of faith.

In a famous passage recorded in both Matthew and Mark, Jesus seeks to overcome the typical religious distinction between what is externally 'clean' and 'unclean'. The immediate context is actually discussing the eating of food without having gone through ceremonial handwashing:

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?"... Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them." After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft,

murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” (Mark 7:1-5, 14-23).

First of all, it must be remembered that these verses *actually constitute a parable* (Verse 17). Likewise, the Gospel of Matthew concludes the passage with a reference to unwashed hands as a summary of what has just been taught: ‘But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone’ (Matt. 15:20). In summary, these verses do away with external ritual purity, ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’, and replaces them with a teaching that posits a person’s inner purity and motivations at the centre of his/her spirituality as opposed to a form of antinomianism and lawlessness.

In a similar way, when the apostle Paul expanded on the topic in his discussion of meat sacrificed to idols and the greater principles that the whole situation introduced, he was quick to underline, as a check against antinomianism, that each of us would one day answer to God for their actions:

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written,
“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” So then each of us will give an account of himself to God (Rom. 14:10-12).

The apostle Paul in both Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 underlines how the Christian’s food choices are in fact important and should be based on love for God and others. In this sense, Paul is applying Jesus’ teaching of love for God and neighbour to the Christian community’s food choices (Matt. 22:36-40). Love is ultimately the food law of the Christian (1 Jn. 4:16, 1 Cor. 13:1-13, Gal. 5:14). Paul underlines how one’s choices should be done ‘for the Lord’ and based on a heart of faith and love. In fact Paul in Romans 14:23 goes on to say that if one’s eating is not ‘based on faith’ it is sinful, i.e. if one’s eating is not based on his/her personal faith walk with Christ. Paul concludes his discussion on food underlining how, like Jesus, it is not the food itself which is the issue, but whether these choices are conducive to, and based on righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). Far from a being a celebration of a sort of antinomian free-for-all the Christian gospel teaches that one’s eating should be based on love and righteousness coming from the heart.

Various pagan philosophies have always tended to circumscribe righteousness to limited areas of a person’s life, while neglecting others, such as those regarding the body. The Corinthian believers had come under this influence when they began quoting slogans, *some eerily reminiscent of the words of many contemporary Christians*, like ‘Food for the stomach and the

stomach for food' (1 Cor. 6:14), or 'All things are lawful for me' (1 Cor. 6:12). Likewise, other groups justified sexual promiscuity on the basis of the idea that the spirit could not be defiled by what was done in the body (1 Cor. 6:16). This was normally done under the guise of a twisted concept of 'freedom', which conversely in the New Testament is always about serving others in love in the power of the Holy Spirit, and never self-centred: 'For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another' (Gal. 5:13). Judaism and later Christianity taught that God is interested in every aspect of our lives, from our sexuality and our speech to how we use our money, treat the poor, use our time and also our food choices. The idea that this area of our lives is now unimportant under the New Covenant is simply unscriptural. In this sense, the apostle Peter affirmed that we should be seeking holiness *in all we do*: 'But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."' (1 Pet. 1:16). Our food choices, like the rest of our lives, therefore, should be motivated by love (1 Cor. 16:14).

7. Jesus went fishing with his disciples

Jesus' fishing with his disciples represents simply an accommodation to the culture of first-century Palestine, much like Jesus' multiplication of bread and fish which was a meal of first-century peasants; in this second case Jesus, more than actually choosing those foods simply multiplied what was handed to him. It must be remembered that God entered human history at a certain point in time and could not instantly change the culture and the economic and social conditions of the period while respecting the free will of human moral agents. God slowly changes cultures from within through the preaching of the gospel and its effect on individuals and nations, as was the case of slavery and its eventual abolishment. Furthermore, being a fisherman in the first-century normally meant being poor and not having any land to cultivate. In this sense, Jesus' willingness to fellowship with fishermen was in reality most probably a willingness to be amongst the poor and is not primarily about fishing itself. In conclusion, God meets people where they are in their understanding in order to bring them to his desired destination. We see already that in Jesus' encounter with his disciples that he is leading them upwards towards the future coming of the kingdom of God and how he transforms their catching of fish to kill them into a redeemed metaphor of 'catching' human

beings in order to save them: ‘And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”’ (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17).

8. Jesus sent the Gadarene demons into the herd of pigs

In Luke 8:26-39 we are told of an episode in which Jesus delivers a demon-possessed man, the so-called Gadarene demoniac, from many unclean spirits. These demons were particularly strong and had been driving the man insane, making him live without clothes and forcing him to dwell amongst the tombs. When Jesus orders them to come out they beg him not to be sent into the abyss, he then asks them what their name is, to which they respond ‘Legion’. A Roman legion was around 5000 men and was particularly powerful and feared in the ancient world. The demons subsequently beg Jesus to be sent into a nearby herd of pigs to which he gives permission. Immediately after being allowed to enter these pigs the entire herd goes insane and throws itself down into the nearby lake and drowns.

Many things should be said about this story, the most important being *that ultimately it is not Jesus that killed the pigs*. The death of the pigs is literally the result of demonic activity. It is the work of demons which like Satan desire to kill, steal from and destroy God’s creatures and deface his creation. Moreover, the fact that the work of demons is often attributed to Jesus Christ by many theologians is particularly astounding. The question then is why did Jesus allow the demons to attack these innocent creatures? A few points on demonology need to be made and without a worldview which takes into account these spiritual forces the entire episode will not likely make sense: our rationalistic Enlightenment understanding of the world may be one of the greatest barriers to understanding it. Firstly, demons, as disembodied beings, normally seek a host, especially a body of some sort which they can inhabit. Jesus may have feared that had he simply sent the demons out of the man they may have gone on to torment thousands of the local inhabitants, making the situation even worse. Jesus also may have feared that the situation of the possessed man could have been worsened had he rejected the gospel message resulting in an even greater, perhaps seven-fold, infestation of demons (Luke 11:25-26, Matt. 12:45). Sending them into the herd may have been the only way to dispose of them in that they were then sent into the depths of the lake. Secondly, Jesus’ sending of the demons into the pigs may have been a form of judgement against the local, perhaps Hellenised, Jews who had begun raising what for the law of Moses — the law they were under at the time — were considered ‘unclean’ animals. It may had also

been a rebuke towards the local people for seemingly not having done anything to help the man in his tormented condition. In a sad sense these animals were destined to be sent to slaughter: for the local herdsmen they were simply property. It may be that God was rebuking these people in a way that was *understandable* to them and their culture which had a low regard for animal life; the economic loss would have been substantial and painful. Thirdly, it seems that these demons were particularly stubborn and strong. They even appear to refuse to leave the man the first time Christ orders them and attempt to barter with him. This may have been one of the reasons why Jesus was willing to allow such a solution.

Ultimately, we know from the very word of Christ that God cares for every creature he has made (Matt. 12:11, Luke 12:6; also Jonah 4:11, Psa. 36:6), and this would have included the herd of pigs. It is true that God does comparatively place human life above animal life (Matt. 6:26) and it may be that in this extreme situation Jesus within the limits of the self-humbling of his earthly life, the complex interplay of creaturely free will, and the framework of a fallen world, had no better option available to him. At the same time the use of this story by theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, and also modern Christians, as a license for a total disregard for animal life is unwarranted and fails to underline that whatever the rationale behind Christ's *permission* may have been, the *actual* death of these creatures is clearly the work of demons.

9. In Acts 10 Peter is told to eat animals

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'. Soon 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 realise 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. In this sense, the vision is something *specifically* tailored to Peter and his cultural background. It should always be remembered that this was a vision given *individually* to Peter, even if the ultimate meaning of it transcends the specific event. 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 when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?” (Acts 10:27-29).

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, the disciples of John the Baptist, and then to ever-increasing groups of Gentiles. This is repeated in Peter’s explanation of his actions to the believers in Jerusalem: “When they heard this, their objections were put to rest, and they glorified God, saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18). 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’ (Acts 1:8) have been at least partially fulfilled: Paul’s arrival in Rome at the end of the book (Acts 28:30-31) demonstrates how Jesus’ 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 and work righteousness, as Peter exclaimed having understood that God had accepted the Gentiles: ‘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’ (Acts 10:34-35).

10. In Romans 14 Paul says vegetarians are ‘weak’

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:

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 (1 Cor. 8:7, 10-12).

In this situation Paul applies Jesus' 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' (Rom. 14:6) 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 a 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 a mistake to render universal a local situation (meat sacrificed to idols) while at the same time not understanding the universal principles (eating or not eating based on faith and love) that Scripture 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 ended 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.

11. 1 Timothy 4 says vegetarianism is 'demonic'

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 and says they 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 dualistic 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. For this reason they denied the incarnation of Christ, as well as the resurrection, as they did not believe that a divine being could have assumed a physical body (1 Jn. 4:1-3). 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 yet others ascetic in nature.

What Paul criticises here in particular is this proto-Gnostic group's very negative view of food and the body in general, and in response he underlines that God's creation is good and that God created food to be received with thanksgiving; this is in line with the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2 which highlights the goodness of creation and God's giving of food as a blessing. 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. The King James Version of the Bible uses the word 'meats' which many erroneously interpret in the sense of flesh but which meant simply food/foods in 17th century English. Moreover, 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 *somatike gymnasia*, which must have been a very harsh and severe form of deprivation and asceticism. While this *also* most likely entailed not eating meat this is simply a correlation together with their general asceticism and strong food-restriction, much like an anorexic's diet in today's world may technically be 'vegetarian'. What is being described here is most probably a severe calorie restriction coupled with a very limited food choice and frequent fasting which all had the goal of mortifying the body and were typical of the harsh asceticism of the ancient world. The fact that these people also normally did not consume meat is somewhat incidental and is not the main issue being discussed and criticised.

We know of early Gnostic groups, like the Marcionites, which despised sexuality, had a very austere diet and practiced prolonged fasts. Certain ascetics of the ancient world would eat only a small meal once a day or even once every second day. Many lived on essentially bread and water, which often consisted of dry bread which was then put in water to render it edible. These groups believed that by mortifying the body one could obtain a form of holiness. Paul criticises a similar proto-Gnostic heresy at the end of Colossians chapter 2, where he underlines how this kind of asceticism entailed a harsh treatment of the body and a false humility (Col. 2:23) but was useless in overcoming sins of the heart. As mentioned earlier, the modern-day equivalent of this would be more akin to a semi-anorexic and has nothing to do with a balanced vegan diet with sufficient calories and variety.

In the text Paul goes on to underline how God's creation is 'good' (1 Tim. 4:4); sadly once again the words 'every creature' in KJV are used by many as indicating actual animals are

being talked about, whereas the text most likely intends God's creation generally as it is translated by the NASB: 'For everything created by God is good'. The word *ktisma* κτίσμα, used here for 'creature', refers to that which is created and contrasts with the proto-Gnostic view of creation and the material world as evil. As in the rest of 1 Timothy, Paul is combating the false myths and endless genealogies (1 Tim. 1:3-7) of the proto-Gnostics with the true creation story of Genesis 1 and 2 in which God created the world, the body, and human beings, and pronounced it all 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). In summary, far from believing that mankind needs salvation from the body and the physical world, like the proto-Gnostics, the Christian gospel teaches that God will resurrect the human body and restore the physical creation to its original perfect state beyond all corruption and violence.

12. Christians should always eat what is 'set before them'

One of the main passages used to support the idea that Christians should always eat what is set before them is a passage in Luke:

After this, the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of Him to every town and place He was about to visit. And He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Carry no purse or bag or sandals. Do not greet anyone along the road. Whatever house you enter, begin by saying, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay at the same house, eating and drinking whatever you are offered. For the worker is worthy of his wages. Do not move around from house to house. If you enter a town and they welcome you, eat whatever is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.'" (Luke 10:1-9).

This passage of Scripture, which is very similar to another one in chapter 9 of the same Gospel, talks about how the Lord sent out the seventy-two disciples into the surrounding villages in order to preach the gospel. The main thrust of this section is that the disciples were to feel free to rely on the hospitality that was offered them. This interpretation is also confirmed by a later passage in the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus mentions sending the apostles without purses, and how this had taught them to rely on God for their daily material

needs: ‘Then Jesus asked them, “When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?” “Nothing,” they answered’ (Luke 22:35). This was considered legitimate because gospel workers should be repaid for their labours as the passage clearly explains: ‘Stay at the same house, eating and drinking whatever you are offered. *For the worker is worthy of his wages*’. The fact that these disciples were not to carry a bag or a purse meant that they were to base themselves entirely on God’s provision. The final verses that contain the famous words ‘eat what is set before you’ should be therefore read in the context of taking advantage of the free food and lodging offered to them: it is not intended to create a burden for these Christians but to ease their spreading of the gospel by giving a theological justification for not paying for their food and lodging. It is supposed to help gospel workers. The verb that is used for the expression ‘is set before you’ is *paratithēmi* παρατίθημι, which normally has the meaning of place before, lay before, to place by the side of, to deposit, and to entrust. The next chapter after this passage, in Luke 11:5-8, gives some insight as to what this expression may have really meant:

Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer [*paratithēmi*] him.’ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

The very same verb, *paratithēmi*, that in our text is translated as ‘set before you’ here is translated as ‘to offer’, in the sense of providing food. The Good News Translation (GNT) of the same verse helps us understand better the sense of the passage with its translation: ‘A friend of mine who is on a trip has just come to my house, and I don't have any food for him [*paratithēmi*]!’ The typical evangelical interpretation instead sees these verses in the context of scrutiny, i.e. the food must be eaten in order not to offend the people involved and thus further the gospel. The problem is that this interpretation in this context simply *doesn't* make sense. While Jesus during his ministry at times came into contact with non-Jews, it must be remembered that this initial ministry was taking place almost exclusively within Israel and amongst observant Jews, making the eating of non-kosher food highly *unlikely*. In fact, Scripture itself specifically tells us that Jesus’ disciples were not going amongst the Gentiles at this time. The main text that we are analysing is chapter 10 of the Gospel of Luke,

in the chapter just before it, chapter 9, Jesus sends out the Twelve to preach the gospel, and their instructions were similar:

Then Jesus called the Twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons, and power to cure diseases. And He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. “Take nothing for the journey,” He told them, “no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no second tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that area. If anyone does not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that town, as a testimony against them.” (Luke 9:1-5).

The same episode is narrated in the Gospel of Matthew, where we are told that Jesus specifically commanded the Twelve to not go amongst the Gentiles and Samaritans. Once again, the main idea behind these verses is that ‘the worker is worth his keep’ and the Twelve were not to bring any gold, essentially money, with them but allow those they were staying with to provide for them:

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, and drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. “Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts — no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. (Matt. 10:5-11).

In a similar way, just before our passage in the Gospel of Luke we are informed that the Samaritans, who ate kosher food, had actually rejected Jesus’ message: ‘And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.’ The fact that this is mentioned shows that interactions with Samaritans, who adhered to the Law of Moses, but had their own interpretations on various issues, were quite rare and that the Seventy-Two were not going amongst them at this time. Likewise, that a later chapter of Scripture, Acts 10, is entirely dedicated to the problem of Jews interacting with Gentiles and the huge issues this created shows that the idea that these Jewish disciples, at this early stage, were going into non-Jewish homes and eating with them does not appear credible. But even if for the sake of argument we were to accept that this was truly the issue,

why is only the verse 'eat what is set before you' selected as an immutable law and removed from its context? Why are the other instructions in this passage ignored by contemporary Christians? Instructions like not taking a purse, or a bag or not greeting people on the road? Or even healing the sick or not moving from house to house? Finally, it must be remembered that Jesus himself actually later reversed these instructions, which were probably only a temporary form of training under the safety and supervision of Christ himself and within Israel: 'He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one"' (Luke 22:36).

A second text which is often cited is 1 Corinthians 10:23-32. In these verses Paul is tackling the difficult question of meat sacrificed to idols. As he does in the rest of 1 Corinthians the apostle constantly quotes parts of what was probably a letter the Corinthians themselves had sent to him, as well as slogans they often used. There appears to have been a libertine current within the Corinthian church which believed that freedom in Christ meant it was possible to do whatever one pleases. In contrast to this, throughout Paul's letter the apostle continually seeks to inscribe Christian freedom within a framework of love. In this passage the apostle cites the Corinthian slogan 'All things are lawful' and refutes it by showing that not all things are helpful and that one should be seeking the good of his neighbour (10:23-24). This is similar to 1 Cor. 6:12-13 where Paul refutes again the same libertine slogan together with another which proclaimed, 'Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food'. The Corinthians had most likely asked the apostle if they could eat meat sacrificed to idols in the meat market or in the home of a non-believer to which Paul responds by telling them that while they had the possibility to do so if they desired, their freedom in Christ should be regulated by concern for others. It is in this context that Paul talks about eating 'whatever is set before you' in relation to whether it was offered in sacrifice (10:27). This does not appear to be a commandment but simply a permission the apostle gives and goes along with his words about sacrificial meat in the meat-market, where the apostle is clearly not commanding the Corinthians to eat whatever is sold in the meat-market but simply permitting it (10:25) within the framework of his argument on meat sacrificed to idols. One problem with ancient Greek is that there are no quotation marks so we really can't be sure where Paul is quoting the Corinthian believers that wrote to him or speaking himself; in this sense it appears that the apostle may be quoting the Corinthians again in 10:29b-30 and critiquing their mistaken liberty without consideration for others. While the whole section is deeply related to the culture of the time and the ancient Roman empire, the final part of the section concludes with several universal principles. In particular, as a summary of all the apostle has said until

now he underlines how the underlining guiding principle in one's food choices should be love for others (10:32-33), and even more importantly the importance of giving glory to God: 'So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God' (10:31). Instead of a fixed law to be applied throughout the ages — like 'eat what is set before you' — the apostle leaves Christians with a universal principle which should guide not only their food choices but their lives, that of giving glory to God.

13. We will eat lamb in heaven

The idea that Christians will eat lamb in heaven is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of fulfilment. Jesus tells us that he will not eat the Passover again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of heaven: 'For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God' (Luke 22:16). The fulfilment of the Passover lamb is not the literal Passover itself but a higher reality symbolised by the sacrificial Passover lamb, which was an accommodated symbol used to teach a primitive people that practiced the raising of sheep. What this will be exactly is a mystery. It may be that this is already being fulfilled to a certain degree in the Holy Supper that Christians partake of, and in which Jesus is spiritually present, or it may find its fulfilment in the future kingdom of God where death and suffering will be abolished forever.

14. God will restore the Jewish temple in heaven and there will be animal sacrifices

This is an idea which is often found amongst dispensationalists, and certain fundamentalists, and the main text used in support of it is Ezekiel's vision of the restoration of the temple in Ezek. 40-47. In this sense, some believe that Ezekiel's vision is of a future millennium temple in which animal sacrifices will be restored together with the Levitical priesthood. This interpretation seems particularly flawed as the New Testament clearly states that animal sacrifices have been abolished in Christ (Heb. 9:11-10:18) and were a mere shadow and symbolic representation of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Likewise, the Levitical priesthood has been superseded by a superior one (Heb. 7:11-28). It simply does not make sense for God to then return to an imperfect and accommodated symbol of Jesus' crucifixion when

this event has already come to pass. Jesus himself declared that he would raise up a new temple to take the place of the old one (Jn. 2:19-21) and that this would be accomplished through the resurrection of his body. The concept of the new temple being Jesus' resurrected body and also the body of his people, the church, is likewise present throughout the New Testament (Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Cor. 3:16-6:19, 2 Cor. 6:16). Overall, the concept of a restoration of the Jewish temple and a literal Levitical priesthood seems to run contrary to the entire direction of the New Testament. Finally, in Revelation 21:22 we are told, 'I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple'. The old order of death and sin has passed away and shadow has been replaced by the reality of Christ's resurrection, a physical temple is no longer needed as what it imperfectly and temporarily pointed towards has come to complete fulfilment. In the last vision of the Christian canon death has been swallowed up in victory and peace has triumphed forever (Rev. 21:4, Isa. 11:6-9, 1 Cor. 15:54).