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DOES THE BOOK OF ISAIAH IDEALIZE VEGETARIANISM?

by Andrew T. Abernethy

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During seminary, I lived in a dorm with a student from a small island off of Norway and Denmark. I asked him, “What is the biggest difference between people from the United States and the Faroe Islands?” His response struck me: “People in the United States do not know where their meat comes from. In the Faroes, we see fish and chicken — alive — before we slaughter and eat them.” He’s right. Most of us Westerners do not even think about a cow or chicken being slaughtered as we eat a steak or chicken sandwich.

Taking the life of an animal can be unsettling, and this manifests itself in many religions. In some religions, such as sects within Islam or Judaism, meat eating is permissible, but only when an acceptable animal is slaughtered in a humane way while a prayer is being offered. For others, such as Hare Krishnas, meat eating is forbidden strictly because taking an animal’s life is reprehensible. To support this, they note how various religions idealize a vegetarian diet.¹ They also claim that certain texts from the Old Testament, including several from Isaiah (1:11, 15; 7:14–15; 66:3), which will be the focus of this article, support this vision.² Does Isaiah idealize vegetarianism?

When attempting to discern what the Bible teaches, one must begin by considering a passage within its immediate historical and literary context. The first verses from Isaiah that Hare Krishnas claim condemn meat eating are a combination of verses 11 and 15 from Isaiah 1:

“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.
...
When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I hide my eyes from you;

even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.
Your hands are full of blood!”³

Extracted from their context, these verses seem to say that God opposes killing animals in sacrifice and does not hear the prayer of His people because their hands are covered by blood from these sacrifices. A look at the immediate context and intervening verses, however, reveals that God is rejecting a larger litany of worship, including appearing before God in the temple, holding religious festivals, and offering prayers (1:12–14). God rejects animal sacrifice in Isaiah 1 because God opposes all forms of worship by this particular people. Why? It is not because their hands are full of the blood of animal sacrifices. Instead, the blood on their hands (1:15) signifies Judah’s culpability, especially its leaders, in not bringing justice to the marginalized, oppressed, orphan, and widow (1:17, 23, 27).

It is safe to assume that God would delight in the sacrifices, festivals, worship, and prayers of His people — He had prescribed such things in the Pentateuch — but He does not want their worship if they are involved in oppression (see also Isaiah 58). Thus, Isaiah 1:11 and 15 are not a prohibition of animal slaughter; instead, in unison with many eighth-century BC prophets (Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:6–8), these verses are part of a stinging indictment that reminds God’s people that worship should go hand-in-hand with promoting justice in the world.

Another passage from Isaiah that Hare Krishnas point to as prohibiting meat eating is Isaiah 7:14–15. As they make the case that Jesus never ate meat, they claim that His supposed vegetarianism aligns with Isaiah’s prophecy: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right.”

If the promised Messiah (“Immanuel”) will eat curds and honey, then surely vegetarianism is the Bible’s ideal, right? A look at Isaiah 7:14–15 within its original context yields a different understanding. While Christians tend to jump immediately from Isaiah 7:14 to Jesus in Matthew, Isaiah 7 originally addresses a dire situation in Judah (ca. 730s BC). Aram and Israel have joined forces to overthrow Jerusalem and replace its king (7:1–9). To assure King Ahaz of Jerusalem, Ahaz is given the opportunity to ask God for a sign — an opportunity Ahaz declines (7:10–11). As a result, God offers His own sign.⁴ Within its immediate context, God’s sign refers to a child who would be born to a virgin; presumably, this woman is known to Ahaz and would become pregnant through intercourse with a man. By the time the child, Immanuel (“God with us”), knows right from wrong — perhaps two or three years old — he will be eating curds and honey. This is not referring to the distant future, for verses 16–17 indicate that a diet of curds and honey will be the byproduct of life in the aftermath of an Assyrian invasion that overthrows Aram and Israel (7:16) and wreaks havoc within Judah (7:17; 8:6–8).

Isaiah 7:15, then, is not idealizing a vegetarian diet for a Messiah; instead, it is teaching that in the near future a boy named Immanuel will be eating a nomadic diet of curds and honey, due to an Assyrian military disruption, as a symbol of “God with us” in judgment. While the sign of “God with us” in Matthew reaches another dimension of fulfillment in Jesus’ birth to the virgin Mary, the reference to curds and honey in Isaiah 7:15 (cf. 7:22) is not an ideal diet but an unfortunate consequence of war. As a modern analogy, to claim that Isaiah 7:15 is idealizing vegetarianism would be like drawing a similar inference from a refugee child eating wild berries and drinking goat milk amidst flight from a tyrannical regime.

The final passage from Isaiah that is said to prohibit meat eating is the first line of Isaiah 66:3: “But whoever sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a person.” If one reads the rest of this verse, there is more to it than prohibiting meat eating: “And whoever offers a lamb is like one who breaks a dog’s neck; whoever makes a grain offering is like one who presents pig’s blood, and whoever burns memorial incense is like one who worships an idol.”

This verse consists of four lines that contrast approved modes of worship from the first part of the line — sacrifices of bull, lamb, grain and incense — with condemned practices in the final part of the line, such as manslaughter, sacrificing dogs or pigs, and idol worship. As in Isaiah 1, the point is not that God is against animal sacrifice; instead, when the people make such sacrifices, their standing with God is already tainted by their apostasy to such an extent that these offerings do nothing to change God’s view of them.

By examining these verses within their immediate contexts, it is clear that they do not prescribe or idealize vegetarianism. It is also important to consider how this relates to the entire book of Isaiah and the canon of Scripture. Within Isaiah, there are several references to future occasions when animal sacrifice, even by faithful foreigners, will be accepted by God (Isa. 19:21; 56:7). Within the larger storyline of Scripture, from the time of Noah (Gen. 9:3) to the Sinai Covenant (Lev. 11) — albeit with its restrictions — and during the era of the Apostles, when all meats become permissible to eat (Acts 10:9–23), vegetarianism is not mandated for God’s people. What is more, Jesus, even in His resurrected body, eats fish (Luke 24:41–43). Thus, the book of Isaiah and the entire Bible do not mandate vegetarianism.

Two qualifications are in order, however. First, even though meat eating is permissible, the Scriptures recognize that taking the life of an animal is a weighty event. For this reason, Israelites were to eat only the meat that derives from the context of sacrifice (Lev. 3; Deut. 12). While Scripture does not go as far as Hare Krishnas by prohibiting meat eating, Christians should be mindful that animal life has been taken when meat is consumed and should promote ethics in the meat industry.

A second qualification is that an individual Christian may have sound reasons for choosing a vegetarian diet — such as health, missional context, or conscience. One should not, however, quote from Isaiah to prove that vegetarianism is a categorical requirement for all Christians.

While I have addressed several verses from Isaiah that Hare Krishnas take out of context to support vegetarianism, Christians too must take the plank out of our own eyes. Are we giving due diligence to understand what other religions are saying, rather than extracting verses from here or there, out of their contexts? Do we do the same thing with our own Scriptures to support this or that cause? Certainly, these verses from Isaiah do not teach vegetarianism. If we stop there, however, merely to support a crusade for being omnivores, we miss out on what these passages are actually trying to teach. Isaiah 7:14–15 warns of the dreadful prospect of “God with us” in judgment, albeit with a lining of hope as a remnant survives. This comes to its fullest realization in Christ’s own birth (Matt. 1). Isaiah 1 and 66 challenge God’s people not to assume that religiosity guarantees a right standing with God. In an era when worship music and services can be streamed by the minute and attended daily, it is easy to presume that these please God. Right standing, however, derives only from the blood of Jesus. At the same time, those washed by the blood of the Lamb are to be worshipers who also promote justice for the oppressed.

Andrew T. Abernethy (PhD) is assistant professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College. His most recent book is *The Book of Isaiah and God’s Kingdom: A Thematic-Theological Approach* (InterVarsity Press, 2016).

NOTES

1. <http://www.harekrishna.com/col/books/VEG/ht/chapthr.html>.
2. For a technical treatment of food-related passages in Isaiah, written for a scholarly audience, see Andrew T. Abernethy, *Eating in Isaiah: Approaching the Role of Food and Drink in Isaiah’s Structure and Message* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2014).
3. All Bible quotations are from the NIV.
4. For more on Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew’s use of it, see Andrew T. Abernethy, *The Book of Isaiah and God’s Kingdom: A Thematic-Theological Approach* (London/Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 121–25.