

## Why Did God Permit Man to Eat Meat?

By: James R. Hughes (2004-01-19; updated 2019-03-08)

In Genesis 1.29-30 we read:

<sup>29</sup>Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.

<sup>30</sup>And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so. (NIV)

In Genesis 9.1-5 we read:

<sup>1</sup>Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. <sup>2</sup>The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands.

<sup>3</sup>Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. <sup>4</sup>“But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. <sup>5</sup>And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal.” (NIV)

It appears from a comparison of these two statements that after the Flood, God changed the order that had been established in the Garden of Eden. Before the Fall and, presumably, after the Fall until the Flood, men were to be, by God’s decree, vegetarians. It is, of course, possible that men ate meat before the Flood since their wickedness was great and every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil all the time (Gen 6.5). Some men may have eaten meat for either of the following reasons:

- They may have resorted to cannibalism. Cannibalism is found among the most degraded portions of mankind after the Flood, so it is not far fetched to surmise that this same evil also occurred before the Flood. If men ate the flesh of other men, it is not inconceivable that they also found a reason in their invented religions to eat animal flesh.
- It appears that God introduced animal sacrifice after the Fall (Gen 3.21; Gen 4.4,5) as a symbol of atonement from sin. It may be that men lusted after the ‘food of God’ and took animal flesh for food so that they could be ‘like God’.

Calvin in his commentary on Genesis<sup>1</sup> suggests that men may have been permitted to eat animal meat because they were allowed to use the hides and skins of animals for clothing and shelter. He indicates, however, that he realizes that there are other opinions on this matter and he would not take a strong position in favour of his view. His conclusion on the question of whether or not men ate meat before the Flood is that it is of “little consequence.”

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries On The First Book Of Moses Called Genesis* (Baker, 1996, [www.ccel.org/c/calvin/calcom01/cache/calcom01.html3](http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/calcom01/cache/calcom01.html3)).

Calvin, assuming that men ate meat before the Flood, says further in his comments on Genesis 9.3 that the reasons God explicitly granted animals for food to men were: 1) to control unbridled licence since the right was granted by God after the Flood, 2) free men from having doubts about the propriety of eating meat. In other words, God validated what men had been doing without explicit licence before the Flood. He argues further that since God granted the right, it is now wrong for men to bind the conscience of others with their ‘fictitious laws’. He is probably referring to ‘laws’ such as that enacted in the Roman Catholic church which prohibited eating meat on specific days.

Matthew Henry states that he thinks that men were vegetarians before the Flood, and provides another perspective on why God may have granted man the right to eat meat.<sup>2</sup> He suggests that immediately following the Flood, there was a shortage of food since all the vegetation had been washed away, and thus men needed to eat meat. This seems like a peculiar reason since God had told Noah to take into the ark sufficient food for himself and the animals (Gen 6.21), and it does not explain why man was permitted to continue eating meat once the vegetation had re-grown.

Some commentators do not address the reason *per se*<sup>3</sup>, and others, such as Leupold<sup>4</sup> and Morris<sup>5</sup>, have suggested that the reason man is now permitted to eat meat is because of the changed environmental conditions after the Flood and the declining strength of man. Plant food alone may now no longer be sufficient to provide the necessary nutrients for man to live on. God in mercy, therefore, permitted man to eat meat. This reason has subtle leanings to Deism since it seems almost to make God a victim of circumstances. God could have just as easily ensured that man would be able to obtain all of the nutrients he needed (e.g., the B vitamins) for good health through vegetable matter if that had been his plan. To suggest that Morris, for example, is a Deist is, of course, nonsense. However, it does demonstrate that commentators appear to be grasping for an explanation of the reason that God permitted man to eat meat.

Morris also suggests that the reason may be that God wanted clearly to differentiate between men and animals as a clear reminder that there is not “evolutionary continuity of life in all flesh” and to ensure that men would not equate man and animals. Keil and Delitzsch hint at a similar idea by suggesting that as part of the placing of animals under the power of man, man was granted permission to eat them for food. These explanations seem to be unnecessary. God had already clearly differentiated animals from man through the creation of man as separate from the animal kinds, as recorded in Genesis 1. There is no room for evolutionary continuity in that account. In addition, the animals had already been placed under the hand of man (Gen 1.26; 2.19, 20). God did not need to demonstrate man’s delegated sovereignty over the animals by permitting man to eat them.

I refer to the opinions of these scholars of Scripture not to discredit them, but rather to show that there is not a consensus on the reason for God permitting man to eat meat. I believe that this

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 29.

<sup>3</sup> C. F. Keil and G. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (vol. 1 of *Biblical Commentary on The Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Mi.: Eerdmans, 1949), 152.

<sup>4</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Book House, 1967), 330.

<sup>5</sup> Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker Book House, 1980), 222-223.

confusion exists because commentators have missed the relationship of this provision with the re-enactment of the Covenant. If there is a covenantal purpose for this provision, then it is likely that the reason for God’s permitting man to eat meat is significant.

Human covenant making included a ratification meal (e.g., Gen 26.27-31; 31.44-46; 2 Sam. 3.17-21). Likewise, all of the covenant administrations between God and man appear to have the consumption of food associated with them, usually in the form of a covenantal meal. The following table provides a summary of the key covenantal administrations recorded in the Bible and, what appears to be, their associated covenant fellowship (ratification) meal.

<b>Covenant Administration</b>	<b>Covenant Mediator</b>	<b>Significant Feature<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>Covenant Fellowship Meal</b>
1. Creation	Adam	Commencement	Vegetables and Fruit (Gen 1.29,30) Fruit from Tree of Life (Gen 2.9; 3.22-24)
2. New World	Noah	Preservation	Animal meat (Gen 9.1-4)
3. National	Abraham	Promise	Bread and wine (Gen 14.18)
4. Sinaitic	Moses	Law	Passover (Ex 12) Manna (Ex 16) Clean animals (Lev 20.25)
5. Royal	David	Kingdom	Bread, dates, and raisins (I Chron 16.1-3)
6. New	Christ	Consummation	Bread and wine (Lk 22.19,20)
7. Eternal	Christ	Eternity	Wedding Supper (Rev 19.9) Fruit from the Tree of Life (Rev 22.2,19[NIV/ESV])

The provision of vegetables and fruit as food for mankind in the Garden appears in the context of the enactment of the Covenant of Creation. The provision of animal meat as food occurs in the context of a new covenantal administration—the New World Covenant mediated with Noah. The covenantal context of this dietary change indicates that there may be something significant that occurred with the change in covenantal administration.

If this observation is correct, then we should try to understand what is the significance of the dietary change between the first two covenantal administrations. All that God does in each covenantal administration has profound significance. All that he does is worth considering and valuable for our instruction in faith and to guide our walk before him (2 Tim 3.16-17). It is therefore worth considering the question: Why did God permit man to eat meat?

I suggest that the reason for the dietary change relates to the introduction of a new element in the Covenant. In the Covenant of Creation we find, at least, the following elements found in the other covenant administrations:

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from: O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 61.

- The Great-King to vassal relationship (Gen 1.26; compare Ex 6.7; Num 12.7; Ps 2.2, 77; 2 Cor 6.18).
- The condition of obedience (Gen 1.28; 2.15-17; compare Gen 17.9ff; Dt 4.1; Mt 5.17-48; Jn 14.15; Heb 10.7).
- The offer of life upon fulfilling the obligations (Gen 2.16,17; compare Dt 30.15-20).
- The provision of a food to ratify the covenant (see table above).

There is however, an element found in all the subsequent covenantal administrations that is *not* found in the Covenant of Creation. This is the redemptive-substitutionary element. Since Adam had not sinned, there was no need for the inclusion of the redemptive-substitutionary element. We see this element introduced, more or less explicitly, in the provision of the ram for Abram; in the blood of lamb in the Passover and the sacrifices in the OT ceremonial system; and in the Lord's Supper that is, among other things, a memorial of the death of Christ.

It seems reasonable to conclude that when God reconfirmed the Covenant with mankind, in Noah, he added the redemptive-substitutionary element. If this is the case, then we should be able to find that element introduced in the context of the covenantal administration.

We find a hint of the redemptive-substitutionary element in Genesis 4.4 when Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock as an acceptable offering to God. We see a development of this formative concept in the inclusion of seven pairs of clean animals in the ark (Gen 7.2) and Noah's offering some of these animals after exiting the ark (Gen 8.20).

We do not find a re-enactment of the Covenant in the context of Abel's sacrifice of animals or at any time before the Flood.

It is not until Noah's sacrifice of the clean animals that the covenant is reconfirmed (Gen 8.20-9.17). It is in the context of the New World Covenant that animal sacrifice is first associated directly with the Covenant, and the redemptive-substitutionary element is introduced into the Covenant.

With the introduction of the redemptive-substitutionary element there was an associated change in the covenant fellowship meal. In the first covenant administration the meal was based on life—fruit from the Tree of Life, and did not involve sacrifice or blood since there was no sin and no need for substitution. The second covenant administration, however, required both sacrifice and shedding of blood (Heb 9.22). The covenant fellowship meal was changed from 'life' to 'death' in that it involved eating a portion of the redemptive-substitutionary sacrifice—a portion of the meat of the clean animals that were sacrificed to God.

Participation in eating a portion of the redemptive-substitutionary sacrifice was likely a component of the National Covenant made with Abraham. Although, if my suggestion is correct, we find an addition to the covenant fellowship meal—bread and wine. It is possible that this was a foreshadow of the coming Priest-King who would be of the order of Melchizedek and would change forever the covenant fellowship meal.

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<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, of course, these words apply to Christ. But they applied to David as a type of the Messiah.

Participation in the redemptive-substitutionary sacrifice was reinforced with the Passover in the Sinaitic covenant and may have included portions of some of the sacrifices from the ceremonial system (Lev 7.21; 1 Sam 9.13), although consumption of some portions may have been permitted only of the priestly caste (Lev 22.10).

In the New Covenant we find the same concept. Those who partake of the covenant fellowship meal eat a portion of the redemptive-substitutionary sacrifice (Mt 26.26; 1 Cor 11.24). However, in the New Covenant, at least two changes occur: 1) the redemptive-substitutionary component is no longer bloody, because Christ's blood has been shed once for all time (Heb 7.27); and 2) the participation in the eating is not physical but spiritual. The covenant fellowship meal has been changed from eating a portion of the sacrificed animals to symbolical elements (bread and wine) that allow us to participate spiritually in the once-for-all-time sacrifice of Christ.

The change of the components of the covenant fellowship meal to bloodless elements may point back to the Garden and forward to eternity. When there was no sin, there was no need for a redemptive-substitutionary element in the covenant, and therefore no need for animal sacrifice. With the completion of the work of redemption in Christ, there is no longer the need for animal sacrifice. It may be that the elements were changed to point to the complete removal of sin and to provide a symbol of hope that in the New Heaven and New Earth there will no longer be any sin (Rev 21.2-4, 27) and that access will once again be granted to the Tree of Life (Rev 22.2).

If this analysis is correct, it explains why men were permitted to eat meat. It however, does not explain why man:

1. was allowed to eat meat at any time and of any kind, and not just clean animals during the covenant fellowship meal;
2. is allowed to eat meat now that Christ has come and the sacrificing of animals is no longer required; and
3. is allowed to eat meat from animals that were once considered unclean.

It is necessary to provide reasonable answers to these questions in order to validate the association of the permission to eat meat with the enactment of the New World Covenant.

The answer may lie in the *scope* of the New World Covenant. Subsequent covenant administrations were made with only portions of mankind. For example, the National Covenant, mediated through Abraham, was made with those who were called out of Ur and their descendents and who had the sign of circumcision placed upon them; the New Covenant, mediated through Christ, was made with all those who are Christians, and have the sign of baptism placed upon them. In contrast, the New World Covenant, mediated through Noah, applied to Noah and all of his descendants (Gen 8.21,22; 9.9-11). The New World Covenant and the Covenant of Creation, mediated through Adam, are distinct from the other covenant administrations that followed because of their scope—they apply to all mankind.

The sign of the New World Covenant that God gave to mankind is the rainbow (Gen 9.12,13). All men, everywhere on earth 'participate' in the sign every time the rains end and the sun begins to shine again. In the same way, all men everywhere participate in the covenant fellowship meal when they eat the meat of an animal.

I therefore suggest the following:

1. Every time a person eats meat, he participates in the covenant fellowship meal of the New World Covenant. This places man under the covenant obligations of the Covenant between God and man and reminds man that he is a creature dependent on the Creator and a vassal lord over creation, under the Great King.
2. When a person eats meat, it reminds him that death is the result of sin, which requires punishment.
3. Mankind, in general, can continue to eat any kind of animal meat, not just the meat of the clean animals, because the New World Covenant is a universal and perpetual form of the Covenant.
4. God introduced the exclusivity of eating only clean animals—those that alone could be sacrificed to God—to point to the requirement for a redeemer who would be holy and a perfect substitute for man. People under the Sinaitic Covenant, mediated through Moses, were called to a holy separation to represent the coming Messiah. The limitation on their meat diet continued the symbolism that sin resulted in death, but *added* the symbol that substitution required perfection.
5. In the NT economy the limitation of physical separation of Jews from Gentiles is removed (Acts 10.1-11.18) and the true implication of the separation—a spiritual separation in Christ—is emphasized. The removal of the one element of symbolism in meat eating—the requirement for a pure sacrificial substitute—does not, however, remove the other—the universal symbol associated with the New World Covenant. Therefore all men everywhere continue to eat meat from all kinds of animals as a symbol of their universal obligation to God

To this point, I have emphasized the permissive aspect with regard to meat eating found in the Covenant enactment in Genesis 8 and 9. Without doubt, God permitted man to eat meat. However if we read the passage carefully, it appears that the provision of meat eating is not just *permissive*, but also *prescriptive*. Just as there is the command to “be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Gen 9.1), there may also be a command embedded in the words “everything that lives and moves *shall* be food for you” (Gen 9.3 ESV).

If in fact the provision of meat eating is prescriptive and not just permissive, there may be some implications that have a direct bearing on aspects of our culture and the larger world, in which we find ourselves living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The following are suggested implications of the God’s provision of meat eating within the framework of the universal Covenant between God and man.

1. Religions, such as Hinduism, that reject eating meat, are an abomination to God. Their man-made regulations that require vegetarianism put them in direct rebellion against a universal requirement of God and place them under his curse. A person who refuses to eat meat rebels against the command of God, refuses to participate in the covenant fellowship meal, and denies his subordinate role to God the Creator.

2. Vegetarianism, even if not participated for 'religious' reasons, is rebellion against the Covenant. Personal-choice vegetarianism may be a slap in the face of God, and is to go the way of the heathen.
3. Islam, Judaism, and Seventh Day Adventism, all reject some aspect of meat eating; albeit for different reasons. They are in rebellion against God's command. They refuse to accept Jesus as the final perfect sacrifice and they refuse to be placed under the obligations of the New World Covenant.
4. Organizations such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and militant vegans pervert God's covenantal requirement to eat meat and attempt to position meat eating as a 'sin' We should not flippantly dismiss them since they have support from influential people. We need to stand firmly against them because their rejection of meat eating is a direct challenge to God's perpetual Covenant with mankind.