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Contact: Marianne Hause
540-462-7116
hauseml@vmi.edu

Is God a Vegetarian?

What does the Bible say about what we should eat? That is the question Josh Cheung '24, a Virginia Military Institute cadet double majoring in English and biology, sought to answer in his honors thesis, "Is God a Vegetarian?"

Cheung started to consider the question a few years ago when his father, a seminary student at the time, shared that one of his professors posed the question to his class when discussing the story of Cain and Abel. After much debate, one student pressed the professor on his opinion, to which he replied, "It doesn't matter what I think, this question isn't meant to be answered." Despite what his father's professor said, Cheung did want the question answered, so he researched what other scholars had to say.

Cheung presented his findings through his own Christian Protestant perspective. He also shared that he is not a vegetarian. "I'm not here to push a vegetarian agenda, I'm not here to spread the Gospel. My goal here today is look in the Bible and see what God says about what we should eat. This is fundamental for everyone, regardless of religious background, because all of us eat food. No matter what you believe, I think there's probably something you can take away today," he said.

Cheung focused especially on the opening and closing books of the Bible. Genesis, the first book in the Bible, was referenced by Cheung to examine how God created the world and his original plan for humans. Genesis 1:27-29 reads, “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. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.’” Cheung interpreted the passage that God created a world that’s vegetarian. “It’s obvious that God intended the world and everyone in it to be vegetarian. And, of course, God can’t be a hypocrite, so he must be a vegetarian himself,” he stated.

However, Cheung pointed out that later in Genesis, sin entered the world, and Cain kills his brother Abel in a jealous rage. “Both of them gave offerings to God. Being a farmer, Cain offered fruit to God, while Abel, a shepherd, offered the best from his flock. God is very pleased with Abel’s offering, and some people interpret this as God not being a vegetarian, since he clearly preferred meat.” Cheung rejected that theory however, based on the descriptions of the offerings in the text. Instead, he interpreted the passage, that people should offer their best to God, whatever it is.

Cheung then delved further into Genesis with the story of Noah and the flood. “After the flood, Noah gets off the ark and God makes a covenant with him. God told Noah, ‘Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, now I give you everything.’ This is when everything changed. God gave humans permission to eat meat,” he stated.

In his research, Cheung found some scholars argued that Noah had evolved into the greatest steward of God's creation. Only through Noah's efforts were the animals saved from the flood. Because the animals owed Noah their lives, he and his descendants gained authority over them, including the right to consume them. "Furthermore, as soon as Noah left the ark, he built an altar and sacrificed burnt offerings of clean animals and clean birds to the Lord. Noah understood the value of animals better than anyone else, which made him the most responsible eater. He knew how much effort it took to care for everything he ate. God deemed humans worthy of eating meat, because of Noah's actions on the ark," said Cheung.

Moving to the Book of Revelation at end of the Bible, Cheung pointed out that the book discusses the end of time, when all of God's people will live in a new Jerusalem, an absolute paradise, the way God intended for the world to be. The Tree of Life, which existed in the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis, appears in the New Jerusalem, and yields 12 kinds of fruit. The return of this tree signifies humanity's return to a vegetarian diet. Cheung also referenced the Book of Isaiah in which God showed a vision to the prophet of what the end of the world would look like. "In the vision God said, 'The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.' It's clear that both ends of the Bible point toward the same vision of a vegetarian world. Neither humans nor animals will be eating any meat."

Cheung concluded that yes, God is a vegetarian. "I don't think God actually eats food, but metaphorically is a vegetarian because as we see in Genesis and Revelation, God's perfect world is one without meat, where all of his creatures live harmoniously. But there's a caveat to this.

Although God might be vegetarian, humans definitely are not. Nor do I think they should be. I think that if we eat meat responsibly, so we don't devour a species to extinction, then we have God's permission to eat whatever we want. We should be environmentally conscious and consider how we're treating and raising animals. Just because God gave us permission to eat meat, doesn't give us an excuse to ruin the environment and treat animals poorly."

Lt. Col. Steven Knepper, associate professor in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies, has served as Cheung's advisor on the project. "Josh has been a model student who always had great ideas and drafted new text each week. One of the things I like about this project is that we see some really great interdisciplinary work that ranges from religion to literary studies to ethics to rhetoric. I think you see a lot of the main elements in the English major at VMI reflected in this project," stated Knepper.

Cheung is the son of Kenneth and Patricia Cheung of Brookfield, Connecticut. He is an alumnus of Education Without Walls in nearby New Milford. He will commission into the Army in the military intelligence branch. After his service, he plans on getting a law degree and pursue a career as a forensic attorney.

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