

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #92: WHAT ABOUT CANNIBALISM?

By John Temples

Preachers get asked some strange questions. Many years ago, when I was preaching in Utah, a church member asked me, “What is the position of the church of Christ in regard to cannibalism?” (Cannibalism is the practice of eating the flesh of one's own species. It usually refers to humans eating the flesh of other humans.) My initial reply was something like, “Well, the church is not a denomination with a central governing authority, so it has no ‘official’ position regarding cannibalism; but I feel confident most congregations would be opposed to it.”

In yet another assault on Biblical principles, a few elitist voices today are beginning to advocate cannibalism as a beneficial “social” function, claiming that the only reason for not doing so is tradition or cultural norm:

“At a summit for food of the future (the climate-ravaged future) called Gastro Summit, in Stockholm Sept 3-4, a professor held a powerpoint presentation asserting that we must ‘awaken the idea’ of eating human flesh in the future, as a way of combatting the effects of climate change. In a talk titled ‘Can you Imagine Eating Human Flesh?’ behavioral scientist and marketing strategist Magnus Söderlund from ‘Handelshögskolan’ (College of Commerce) argues for the breaking down of the ancient taboos against desecrating the human corpse and eating human flesh. He refers to the taboos against it as ‘conservative,’ and discusses people’s resistance to it as a problem that could be overcome, little by little, beginning with persuading people to just taste it. [He says] that since food sources will be scarce in the future, people must be introduced to eating things they have thus far considered disgusting—among them, human flesh.”

(https://www.theepochtimes.com/swedish-researcher-pushes-human-flesh-eating-as-answer-to-future-climate-change-food-shortages_3068833.html)

Cannibalism might be practiced for several reasons, including:

- Extreme hunger (e.g., the Donner party)
- Pagan superstition
- Mental aberration/insanity

Ironically, the early Christians were called cannibals by the Romans due to misunderstanding of the nature of the Lord's supper.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT CANNIBALISM?

There is no specific prohibition in the Bible against cannibalism, yet the consistent tone and tenor of Scripture point to its being a horrible and inhuman evil.

There are some nine passages in the Old Testament referring to cannibalism. (I've printed out the passages at the end of this article.) The only references to cannibalism in the New Testament are metaphorical. Jesus said, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53). The Lord's meaning was that we should assimilate the benefits of His atoning sacrifice into our souls as spiritual food. There is similar metaphorical language used in reference to the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Corinthians 11:24-26).

There are instances in Biblical Jewish history where the Jews were reduced to such dire straits (due to siege and starvation) that some of them ate the flesh of their own children. The implication of the Bible record is that such a practice was horrifying and revolting, something that under normal circumstances no Jew would do.

There is no doubt that cannibalism was practiced by some of the heathen tribes surrounding Israel. There was a belief that by consuming the blood and/or vital organs of a conquered enemy, a warrior received the strength of his enemy into his own body.

The eating of blood (animal blood, one's own blood, or that of someone else) was forbidden in Scripture from very early times. After the Flood, God gave Noah and his descendants permission to eat animals (evidently it had not been so before),

but He firmly forbade the consuming of blood or flesh with blood in it (Genesis 9:4). The reason for this prohibition is that the blood contains the vital principle or essence of life. “For the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11-14). Because of the sacredness of life, the Israelites were forbidden to eat blood, or even flesh from which the blood had not been carefully removed.

This prohibition against eating blood was reaffirmed in the New Testament. Acts 15:28-29 commands that Christians “... abstain from things offered to idols, **from blood**,¹ from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.” The prohibition against eating flesh which had been killed by strangling is due to the fact that the blood, symbolic of the life, would still be in the flesh.

All this, coupled with the fact that one’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17), is sufficient to make cannibalism a sin in principle. Respect is due the body because it is the house in which we live. God has graciously put into normal human beings a revulsion at the thought of eating the flesh of another human. This revulsion can only be overcome by extreme wickedness or extreme desperation.

But what if a person were in such destitute condition as to be faced with the choice of eating the flesh of another human being or starving to death? The Christian response surely must be, “If I die, so be it.” Self-preservation does not justify barbarism. We must trust God, even to the point of death. One cannot sin against the Scripture or his own conscience and be justified before God. We must follow the example of Jesus who, after going without food for forty days was weak and very hungry; but when tempted by the devil to miraculously feed Himself, said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). He was telling the devil, “When God provides proper food for Me, or tells Me to eat, I will eat; but not before.” Being faithful to God and not going beyond His word are more important than eating--even eating to survive.
--John Temples

¹ So what exactly does it mean to abstain “from blood”? Is it a sin for a Christian to eat a rare steak? See the postscript for some information on this.

POSTSCRIPT: DOES “ABSTAIN FROM BLOOD” MEAN I CAN’T HAVE A RARE STEAK?

Here are some enlightening results of an Internet search I did on this issue. A commentator named John Mackay had this to say in answer to a question of how zealous we have to be in removing all the blood from meat before cooking and eating it:

“My brief answer is that God does not expect us to do more than He told the ancient people to do. Let’s look at the history of God’s instructions about blood.

“The first instructions by God about not eating blood were given to Noah, at the same time as God first gave Noah permission to eat meat. Note this was given at a time when Noah’s family constituted the entire human race, long before the Law of Moses was given.

Therefore, this law applies to all people, not just Jews. Any non-Jews who wanted to live in ancient Israel also had to obey the Mosaic law about blood. See Leviticus 17:10-14. This is affirmed by the Apostles and Elders of the first generation Christian church who instructed any Gentile converts they should not eat blood or eat strangled animals. See Acts 15:28-29.

“As to how that applies to Christians in the 21st century: God did not expect any ancient people to do more than what was feasible with their technology, i.e. slitting the throats and draining the blood. Therefore it is reasonable that he does not expect us to do any more, or less. It is technically impossible to remove every blood cell from meat, even with modern technology. Therefore, draining the blood out by cutting the animal open as soon as it is killed is enough to obey God’s instructions. Doing this removes the blood that had been flowing in the blood stream and sustaining the life of the animal, so it is enough to be the perpetual reminder that the life is in the blood.

“Furthermore, we need note that the red fluid that seeps out of uncooked meat, and is still there in rare steaks, is not blood. It is tissue fluid stained with myoglobin, which is the protein that gives red meat its colour. Myoglobin is a protein found in all meat, and does not need to be removed.

“Therefore, Christians are free to eat any meat that has been killed in any modern day western abattoir (not just a Jewish one), as they drain the blood straight away. Farmers who kill their own meat should do the same. Christians can also hunt and eat game animals and birds provided the blood is drained out.”

On the question of whether the red fluid that drains from raw or rare-cooked steak is blood, Mr Mackay said it is not. I did some additional research and confirmed that his statement is accurate. Read the article at <https://steakschool.com/learn/red-liquid-steak-plate-not-blood/#:~:text=Even%20the%20rarest%20and%20reddest,in%20muscle%20tissue%20called%20myoglobin.>

So enjoy your rare steak!

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SCRIPTURE REFERENCES RELATING TO CANNIBALISM AND THE EATING OF BLOOD²

Genesis 9:1-4--”So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand. Every moving thing that

² There are a few other OT passages that use cannibalistic language, but they are figurative. An example is Micah 3:1-3--”Hear now, O heads of Jacob, and you rulers of the house of Israel: Is it not for you to know justice? You who hate good and love evil; who strip the skin from My people, and the flesh from their bones; who also eat the flesh of My people, flay their skin from them, break their bones, and chop them in pieces like meat for the pot, like flesh in the caldron." This is a rebuke of the cruel treatment of the common people by the rulers.

lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.”

Leviticus 17:10-14--”And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul. Therefore I said to the children of Israel, 'No one among you shall eat blood, nor shall any stranger who dwells among you eat blood.' Whatever man of the children of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who hunts and catches any animal or bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with dust; for it is the life of all flesh. Its blood sustains its life. Therefore I said to the children of Israel, 'You shall not eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.'”

Leviticus 26:27-29--”And after all this, if you do not obey Me, but walk contrary to Me, then I also will walk contrary to you in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins. You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters.” (This was a prophecy, not a command or endorsement of cannibalism.)

Deuteronomy 28:52-57--”[Your enemies] shall besiege you at all your gates until your high and fortified walls, in which you trust, come down throughout all your land; and they shall besiege you at all your gates throughout all your land which the Lord your God has given you. You shall eat the fruit of your own body, the flesh of your sons and your daughters whom the Lord your God has given you, in the siege and desperate straits in which your enemy shall distress you. The sensitive and very refined man among you will be hostile toward his brother, toward the wife of his bosom, and toward the rest of his children whom he leaves behind, so that he will not give any of them the flesh of his children whom he will eat, because he has nothing left in the siege and desperate straits in which your enemy shall distress you at all your gates. The tender and delicate woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground because of her delicateness and sensitivity, will refuse to the husband of her bosom, and to her

son and her daughter, her placenta which comes out from between her feet and her children whom she bears; for she will eat them secretly for lack of everything in the siege and desperate straits in which your enemy shall distress you at all your gates.”

2 Kings 6:24-29--”And it happened after this that Ben-Hadad king of Syria gathered all his army, and went up and besieged Samaria. And there was a great famine in Samaria; and indeed they besieged it until a donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and one-fourth of a kab of dove droppings for five shekels of silver. Then, as the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried out to him, saying, ‘Help, my lord, O king!’ And he said, ‘If the Lord does not help you, where can I find help for you? From the threshing floor or from the winepress?’ Then the king said to her, ‘What is troubling you?’ And she answered, ‘This woman said to me, “Give your son, that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.” So we boiled my son, and ate him. And I said to her on the next day, “Give your son, that we may eat him”; but she has hidden her son.’” (No doubt this was a fulfillment of the prophecies of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.)

Jeremiah 19:6-9--”Therefore behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, that this place shall no more be called Tophet or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. And I will make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem in this place, and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hands of those who seek their lives; their corpses I will give as meat for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. I will make this city desolate and a hissing; everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss because of all its plagues. And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his friend in the siege and in the desperation with which their enemies and those who seek their lives shall drive them to despair.”

Lamentations 2:20--”See, O Lord, and consider! To whom have You done this? Should the women eat their offspring, the children they have cuddled?”

Lamentations 4:9-10--"Those slain by the sword are better off than those who die of hunger; for these pine away, stricken for lack of the fruits of the field. The hands of the compassionate women have cooked their own children; they became food for them in the destruction of the daughter of my people."

Ezekiel 5:5-10--"Thus says the Lord God: 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the midst of the nations and the countries all around her. She has rebelled against My judgments by doing wickedness more than the nations, and against My statutes more than the countries that are all around her; for they have refused My judgments, and they have not walked in My statutes. Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you have multiplied disobedience more than the nations that are all around you, have not walked in My statutes nor kept My judgments, nor even done according to the judgments of the nations that are all around you — therefore thus says the Lord God: Indeed I, even I, am against you and will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. And I will do among you what I have never done, and the like of which I will never do again, because of all your abominations. Therefore fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers; and I will execute judgments among you, and all of you who remain I will scatter to all the winds.'"