

WAS JESUS VEGAN OR VEGETARIAN? POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF EXEGESIS AND OTHER METHODS OF INTERPRETING CHRISTIAN SOURCES

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ABSTRACT

The question of the textual and historical sources of the beliefs of religions is often inextricably linked with the question of the validity of those beliefs. Consequently, it is imperative that research be conducted with the utmost thoroughness, gathering all available information in order to provide a well-founded contribution. This article employs the case of the question of a potentially vegan Jesus to illustrate the types of sources and methodologies that can provide answers. In order to achieve this objective, the methodologies employed in theological inquiry and other avenues of historical research are initially subjected to critical analysis. The applicability of current methods of social science research to biblical and historical texts is also examined. The objective is to ascertain why and in what manner contemporary authors can arrive at results that cannot be achieved with the scientific methods of theology and also with social science methods. In this article, the approach is intended to describe the possibilities and limitations of different types of methods so that researchers can draw inspiration for their own choice of methods when evaluating historical and religious sources if they wish to investigate similar aspects that may arise due to the way of life and thinking of the present day.

Keywords: Validity of belief, historical research, contemporary methods.

INTRODUCTION

The public appearance of previously unfamiliar questions from scientists about, and alternatives to, basic elements of Christian doctrine thought to be certain can be confusing to believers and scholarly theologians alike. This may be due to the fact that common beliefs have been codified by a theology that has tied its right to exist primarily to serving the doctrine of its churches rather than to the paradigm of open research and critical thinking.

The interpretation of biblical texts became an integral part of sermons and, according to the principles of the doctrine of preaching, homiletics, has the primary task of moving and instructing people, which in the Catholic Church is reserved for ordained priests, see *Codex Iuris Canonici 767* (Vatican n.d.). The reason why a Bishop holds the pastoral staff in his hand during the homily is that he represents his Magisterium by preaching (Domradio Cologne 2022). This points to the connection between all exegetical work and the task of proclamation in the Church's liturgy.

According to the patterns of cognitive dissonance (Pilat and Krastev n.d.) church-socialized and church-affiliated people turn away from alternative interpretations, for example, when Jesus is described to them as a vegetarian or even a vegan on the basis of biblical and extra-biblical sources, and when the resurrection and ascension are described as constructed stories from a later time.

The question of this study is therefore How do today's interpretations of biblical sources come about, and why may they differ from what has been learned and presented?

This will be done through an in-depth review of the literature, two examples, and a discussion of the results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Firstly (A.), sources are presented which describe the usual principles and applications of methods which can therefore be considered in the common interpretation of religious texts.

Secondly (B.), newer instruments of the social sciences will be presented, which can also be helpful for new interpretations of religious texts, as they can focus on connections between individual lifestyles and experiences with the religious texts.

Finally (C.), current interpretations will be presented, which provide the occasion for the search for methods of interpreting biblical and comparable archaeological sources. These alternative interpretations of biblical sources ultimately describe a different image of Jesus than that which prevails in the traditions of the Christian churches.

A. Original Methods of Interpreting Religious Sources

The exegesis of the Old Testament employs the historical-critical method to comprehend the texts as products of their time. This method considers the context, including political, social, and religious-historical conditions, to be important. This method is typically taught at Christian theology faculties.

Historical criticism employs interpretive strategies that analyze texts and their meaning in various historical contexts. These strategies are employed with the objective of uncovering the historical background, cultural influences, and authorial intent behind biblical writings, non-canonical texts, and biblical canons. (Smith 2022)

New Testament exegesis employs different methodologies than Old Testament exegesis, yet both employ the same dimensions: philology in interaction with literature and linguistics, historiography and hermeneutics (Söding n.d.).

Furthermore, literary approaches to the evolution of the texts and hermeneutics for interpreting the sources are also employed. In this manner, the theological perspectives of the authors of the ancient texts are to be recorded hermeneutically. (Hensel and Wetz 2023) Thematic analysis is identified as a component of exegetical research, as it facilitates the interpretation and comprehension of biblical texts. (Fernandes 2020)

Narrative exegesis is a method of analysis that focuses on the form of the texts and the narrative styles employed. It is one of the methods that can be found in conjunction with other methods in an interdisciplinary context in the book "Methoden der neutestamentlichen Exegese: An Introduction for Study and Teaching" (Finnern and Rügemeier 2016). The overarching framework for interpreting texts presented in this model (determination, origin, structure, explanation, after-effect) is of particular relevance to our research question, as it emphasises the necessity of adopting a multifaceted approach to understanding the complexities of biblical texts.

B. Newer Instruments of the Social Sciences

The content analysis method, as defined by Krippendorff, could be applicable in this context. Depending on the definition of the established criteria, it can also be used to record context factors, which in turn are helpful in evaluating the occurrences in the "actual" variables to be recorded. This approach involves the interpretation of the meaning of the communicated content for the recipients, which can be understood as the analysis of communication as text in the context of its social use. (Krippendorff 2018)

In empirical theology, further instruments of the social sciences have also been employed. Rather than viewing the handling of ancient texts as a process of interpretation, for which hermeneutics provides a definable interpretation of the texts, it is now regarded as an act of communication between today's readers and the earlier texts (van der Ven 1990:56).

Insofar as communication contributes to the generation of systems and constructions, the models of systems theory (Luhmann 2012; Scholl 2002) and radical constructivism (Scholl 2011; Von Foerster et al. 1992; Watzlawick 2006) are also relevant. Such models could be employed in the analysis of biblical texts, which provide the foundation for the systems and constructions of reality espoused by Christian churches.

Nevertheless, the analysis of the interaction between intertextuality and the creation of meaning from one's own current perspective has only rarely been observed to date (van Heerden 2009).

C. Alternative Interpretations of Biblical Sources

James Tabor, a renowned biblical scholar based in Charlotte, USA, is known for his investigations into the origins of Christianity and the historical contexts of biblical texts. Tabor is particularly renowned for his research into the early Christian movements and the historical Jesus. In his book, *The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity*, (Tabor 2006) posits that Jesus should be regarded as a political and religious leader whose family and followers constituted a "dynasty" that played a pivotal role in the early dissemination of Christianity. Tabor employs historical and archaeological sources to substantiate his arguments. And in his book *"Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity"* (Tabor 2013) he examines how the apostle Paul reinterpreted and changed the teachings of Jesus, which led to a transformation of early Christianity. Tabor presents the differences between the messages of Paul and Jesus and analyzes how these differences influenced the development of Christianity.

In Colorado (USA), Keith Akers offers *"The Lost Religion of Jesus: Simple Living and Nonviolence"* (Akers 2000), which presents his own interpretation of religious texts, especially Christian scriptures. Akers argues that Jesus' original message was focused on simple living and non-violence towards all living beings. This aspect has been lost in Christian traditions. Akers provides an in-depth analysis of specific theological themes that encourages reflection on the application and relevance of these themes in the modern world.

Tabor and Akers publish text articles in conventional distribution media, but they also utilize social media platforms to disseminate their work. In the current social media landscape, the two US authors present Jesus as a man who lived a consistently non-violent life and a plant-based diet. They also emphasise the co-creativity of animals and challenge the sacrificial cult of the temple of his religion and time (Akers 2024; Tabor 2022).

The assessment of animals as fellow creatures of God is also shared by other theologians. Andrew Linzey, of Oxford University in the United Kingdom, asserts that all creatures were created by God and therefore possess inherent value (Linzey 1999). This is based on the creation account in Genesis, where God describes every creation, including animals, as "good." Linzey posits that this represents a fundamental recognition of their value by God himself, and that humans therefore have a responsibility to care for animals. In essence, Linzey corroborates the Old Testament interpretations of Akers and Tabor, yet he himself does not engage with a comparable (re)interpretation of the New Testament Jesus.

Rainer Hagencord in Münster (Germany) also adheres to a fundamental theological perspective that has not yet led to a distinct portrayal of Jesus. However, it does challenge conventional biblical anthropology, which posits that humanity occupies a superior position (Hagencord 2018). In an interview, he states that, with regard to the Last Supper, Jesus no longer ate meat but instead ate bread. Conversely, he explicitly states that there is no evidence that Jesus was a vegan. (Rauch 2022)

CASES

This section will examine two case studies, those of Tabor and Akers, from C. above.

Both individuals are active on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, and on occasion, they produce and post videos on Instagram. This indicates that they engage in dialogue with individuals who are also active in such communication channels. According to the approaches of systems theory and constructivism, this suggests mutual influences and connections with others active in these channels.

In the two videos by Tabor and Akers, the two interpreters of biblical and extra-biblical texts explain why they consider Jesus to be a vegetarian or vegan and link the events of the temple expulsion to this.

Subsequently, the question will be posed as to how the respective interpretations were arrived at.

A summary of the Statements made in Tabor's Video (2022)

James Tabor (born 1946) presents a hypothesis that Jesus and his followers may have been vegetarians, citing various biblical and historical references.

1. Basic Considerations from the Time before Jesus

- Daniel and his companions rejected the royal fare and demanded a plant-based diet, which proved to be an optimal dietary choice for them. A number of prophets, including Jeremiah and Hosea, expressed criticism of animal sacrifices and placed greater emphasis on mercy than sacrifice.
- The original diet, as described in Genesis 1:29, was plant-based. This concept may have influenced Jesus, as evidenced by his quotations from Genesis and his familiarity with these texts. In Genesis 9, the consumption of meat is permitted, although the rationale behind this change is not entirely clear. In the wilderness, the Israelites subsisted on manna and desired meat, a dietary shift that had adverse effects.

2. Reports from the Time of Jesus

- John the Baptist lived an ascetic life, abstaining from meat and alcohol, possibly following the ideals of the Essenes. This group and other Jewish movements rejected the practice of animal sacrifices and instead espoused a vegetarian lifestyle.

- In addition, Jesus criticized the sacrificial practices in the temple, denouncing them as a "den of thieves." This may be indicative of a rejection of animal sacrifices.
- The Gospels indicate that Jesus consumed bread and wine, but it is unclear whether he ate meat, particularly fish. The accounts of the Last Supper may be symbolic and emphasize the rejection of animal sacrifices.
- Some early Christians, such as the Ebionites, were vegans and rejected the virgin birth and Paul's teachings. They espoused the teachings of James (the brother of Jesus) and advocated a plant-based diet. The plant-based diet was regarded as healthier and morally superior, and there were references to this practice in various biblical texts and early Christian groups.

In this video, James Tabor emphasizes that there are numerous references to vegetarianism and veganism, as well as the rejection of animal sacrifice, in both biblical and early Christian history. These references may have influenced Jesus' own practices. (Tabor 2022)

Summaries of the Statements in Akers' Video (2024)

In the video, Akers (born 1951) posits in his video "Why do you think that Jesus was a vegetarian who opposed animal sacrifice?" that the earliest written records of Christianity originate from Paul, whose letters were written in the 50s. However, the Gospels themselves were not written until after the destruction of the temple in the year 70.

- Paul had contended that individuals with robust faith could consume any food, including meat sacrificed to idols. Nevertheless, he underscored the necessity of consideration for those with limited faith who adhere to a vegetarian diet, in order to prevent discord within the community.
- A number of early Christian leaders, including James (Jesus' brother), Peter, and John, were vegetarians. This is corroborated by other historical sources which demonstrate that they abstained from alcohol and adhered to a vegetarian diet. Similarly, the early Jewish Christians, who continued to adhere to the tenets of the Jewish law and considered themselves Jews, were also frequently vegetarians. This practice was documented by the Church Fathers and other sources.
- All four gospels recount Jesus' cleansing of the temple, which involved not only overturning the tables of the money changers but also driving animals and merchants out of the temple. This was a significant action that caused offense among the Romans, as it disturbed their public order.
- Jesus' teachings were primarily directed towards the impoverished, who frequently adhered to a vegan lifestyle in the ancient world due to the high cost of meat. His message placed a strong emphasis on the support of the poor and the redistribution of wealth. As Christianity gained a foothold among the upper classes of Rome, it became more widely known and attracted a greater number of converts. Paul's message of not arguing about eating habits and eating everything with a clear conscience facilitated the integration of the movement into different social classes.

In conclusion, Akers underscores Paul's pragmatic approach to dietary habits and the early Christian practice of vegetarianism, as well as the social dynamics of early Christianity. (Akers 2024)

What Methods and Connections with One's own Lifestyle are involved?

Both authors arrived at their findings through historical and textual analysis. The authors are now over 70 years old and are therefore familiar with the current methods of scriptural interpretation, which include exegesis and hermeneutics.

At the same time, they themselves underwent a significant lifestyle change years ago, transitioning to a vegan diet (in accordance with contemporary understanding).

A correlation may exist, which is why the author of this article posed the identical question to both of them in the Messenger regarding the chronological connection between their own vegan lifestyle and the discovery of references to a vegan Jesus and James (brother of Jesus) and Daniel (Old Testament). One might inquire as to whether these occurrences occurred simultaneously or in sequence.

Akers responded to the inquiry on May 21, 2024, stating that he had adopted a vegan diet in 1980 and had first learned about Jesus' vegetarianism while researching for his book, *A Vegetarian Sourcebook* (1983). Consequently, he postulates that his personal veganism preceded his conversion to Christianity. In 1987, he ceased consuming alcohol, having learned that early Christians such as the Ebionites abstained from alcohol.

Tabor did not respond to the same question regarding the connection and sequence of interpretations of old texts and his own switch to a vegan diet and lifestyle.

RESULTS

In the case of Tabor and Akers, it can be assumed that their own vegan lifestyle, which is inherently ideological due to its holistic nature, has a systemic and reality-constructivist connection with their interpretations of the sources.

James D. Tabor, a distinguished historian and religious scholar, has authored numerous works on the historical figure of Jesus. It can be reasonably inferred from Tabor's writings that Jesus led a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle. Additionally, Tabor bases this thesis on sources pertaining to the Essenes, a Jewish sect that espoused a vegetarian or vegan diet, with which Jesus may have had connections. Tabor underscores the ethical and spiritual dimensions of non-violence, which could have been exemplified in the lifestyle of Jesus and his followers.

In his book, *The Lost Religion of Jesus: Simple Living and Nonviolence in Early Christianity*, Keith Akers posits that Jesus and his early followers were vegetarians. Akers posits that Jesus' original teachings included a rejection of violence and animal sacrifice, which points to a vegetarian lifestyle. He draws on early Christian writings and historical circumstances to demonstrate that Jesus and his disciples probably did not consume animals and were therefore vegetarian.

Similar findings can be found at Rainer Hagencord, who, with reference to his sources, even denied that Jesus led a vegan lifestyle.

DISCUSSION

Akers and Hagencord therefore lack the indications from Tabor that Jesus may have lived not only a vegetarian lifestyle, but even a vegan one. In contrast to the term vegetarian, vegan, as defined by contemporary standards, represents a more consistent and informed approach to

dietary choices. (Huth 2023) It can be argued that the cruel animal husbandry employed in the production of every vegetarian diet, including the forced impregnation of animals and the killing of unwanted calves and male chicks, renders the vegetarian diet, which condones this, no better than that of omnivores when viewed in a critical light.

The term "vegan" has a relatively recent origin, dating back to 1944, when it was first defined by Donald Watson, a co-founder of the Vegan Society in the United Kingdom. Watson coined the term "vegan" by taking the first three and last two letters of "vegetarian." In the inaugural issue of *The Vegan News* magazine, Watson elucidated that the vegan lifestyle is predicated upon the avoidance of all forms of exploitation and cruelty to animals, including the utilization of animals for food, clothing, and other purposes. (The Vegan Society n.d.)

It is evident that James D. Tabor's investigative view of the historical Jesus extends beyond the scope of traditional scholarship when one considers the depth and breadth of his research. He frequently employs historical sources that fall outside the purview of the biblical canon. Tabor employs a combination of historical and text-critical methodologies to arrive at his conclusions, eschewing the exegesis rules of the churches that would otherwise dictate his source choices. If he wishes to gain further insight into the figure of Jesus, Tabor incorporates the Q source, Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, the Epistle of James, the Didache, fragments of the Gospel of Peter, fragments of the "Hebrew Matthew," and the Gospel of Thomas, despite the fact that researchers do not concur on the precise dating of these sources. Tabor asserts that the letters of Paul are older than any of the Gospels. He further posits that the Acts of the Apostles is one of the most recent sources, frequently and erroneously regarded as the foundational text of the New Testament. (Tabor 2016)

Tabor himself regards his work as a scientific investigation with the objective of elucidating the historical roots of Christianity and the figure of Jesus, frequently incorporating archaeological findings into his analysis. The Academy for Christian Educators holds him in high regard for this. Tabor's scientific approach serves as a model for the integration of faith and reason. Through meticulous, empirically-grounded inquiry, he has delved into the historical origins of Christianity, thereby facilitating a more nuanced comprehension of the intricacies of religious tradition. (Klein 2024)

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the question posed in the title, it can be concluded that Jesus' lifestyle and diet can be assumed to be vegetarian/vegan based on historical sources and analyses of the texts. Since the distinction between the two terms was only possible since 1944 with the creation of the word "vegan," a more precise definition and differentiation of the facts two thousand years ago is hardly possible.

The fact that such conclusions have not been reached using the methods of exegesis and hermeneutics can be explained by the perspective and the mission of these methods, which are intended to proclaim, i.e. preach, the message of the religion and thus also the church's understanding of the texts and their meaning.

In the contemporary era, however, modern social science methodologies are not employed to examine foundational theological questions, but rather practical issues pertaining to everyday life and the practice of faith within religious institutions. Empirical theology, as developed by

Johannes van der Ven (1990), aims to integrate theological theorizing into the formulation and resolution of inquiries, thereby providing feedback and impetus for theological disciplines.

Upon examination of the sources cited here and the scientific methods employed, it can be confirmed that the objective of every research and practical project always determines the choice of methods, which in turn predetermines the type of results. It is therefore not surprising that researchers who focus on their own plant-based diet find sources that can produce a similarly influenced image of Jesus. It is also not surprising that an increasing number of religious individuals and groups with a vegan orientation can be found, given that veganism as a way of life is gaining more and more followers, and the idea of a vegan Jesus is also evident to them.

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