

Prologue

Lunch with a Nice Jewish Girl

“Does the split pea soup have ham in it?” Elizabeth asked the waiter. After he answered and took our order, I asked her, “Are you a vegetarian?”

“No,” she casually said, “I’m just trying to keep *kosher*.”

“*Kosher*?” I asked her. “You mean you have two sets of dishes? And you don’t eat milk and meat together?”

“No,” Elizabeth answered, “I don’t keep traditions that require two sets of silverware and dishes; those aren’t in the Bible. I focus on the biblical ones, like not eating pork or shellfish. Leviticus 11 spells out pretty clearly which foods God created to be eaten and which ones He didn’t. I don’t believe that He changes His mind, so I try to follow His guidelines.”

“Hmmm ...”

I first met Elizabeth at our church’s book club. I was excited to have lunch with her, since her wisdom and passion about the Bible were apparent, and since, like me, she was a Jewish believer in Jesus. The concept of avoiding pork and shellfish, however, seemed peculiar. At this point I had been a follower of Jesus for several years and never considered that any faith-based eating guidelines might apply to me. I was under the distinct impression that God did not care about what we ate.

Dietary Law Confusion

From my childhood I knew that observant Jews don’t eat pork or shellfish. In addition, they avoid eating dairy and meat together, and they don’t eat meat-based foods on dishes used for dairy foods (and vice versa). I was open to anything God wanted for me, but

did He really care whether I ate today's beef chili in yesterday's cereal bowl? Before making any radical changes for God, I would need to believe that it was truly His will and completely in line with His Word. From my reading, the meat/dairy separation currently practiced in observant Jewish homes was not found in the Bible.

While Elizabeth's perspective on "keeping *kosher*" was much simpler than mine, it was still odd. After all, I'd never heard any Christians even mention abstaining from pork. I certainly didn't abstain. Ribs were my favorite meal and my choice for my annual birthday dinner. Besides, wasn't ham a traditional Christian holiday food? If faithful Christians celebrated Jesus' birth and resurrection with pork, I figured they must have carefully weighed this decision—especially since the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) contains explicit prohibitions against it.¹

Yet Elizabeth's avoidance of pork intrigued me.

Is the Bible Reliable?

My lunch with Liz raised an issue that had troubled me for several years. I had often wondered, "How can I rely on the New Testament to learn about Jesus, when it sometimes seemed to contradict my ancestors' Scriptures?"²

Five years earlier I had joined a small Christian faith community in which I learned about Jesus and the Bible—two things I knew very little about. I eventually committed my life to Jesus, but my journey was filled with confusion. Why did Jesus have to die? What's the atonement? Is Satan real?

Whenever I asked questions, my friends always turned to the Bible as the ultimate information source. Their reverence for this book seemed extreme, but their wise ways of dealing with life's toughest issues hooked me. Since the Bible was the foundation for that wisdom, I was compelled to read it.

My first reaction to the Christian Bible was shock: I had no idea that over two-thirds of it was identical to the Jewish Bible. How could Christianity share such a large chunk of its Scriptures with Judaism, yet the two religions seem so different?

I started at the beginning. As I read, I rediscovered characters from my brief religious education: Adam and Eve, Noah, Joseph

and other familiar heroes. My Bible was coming alive with the same stories that I had glossed over as a child.

Leaning heavily on my footnotes, I read about vaguely recognizable people and events with both joy and confusion. Growing up, I didn't really believe in God, yet our family observed Passover much like Exodus 12 directs. I was excited to see the ancient roots of my family's tradition, but why didn't my new Bible friends even mention Passover? As I continued to read, the questions continued to surface. Deuteronomy 6 commands us to mark the doorposts of our houses with God's Word to remind us of Him. Again, this is something we did growing up; why is it totally absent in Christianity? Leviticus 11 plainly forbids us to eat pork. So why did most Bible-believing Christians eat it?

Sadly, I didn't really care about Jewish faith observances, since they felt empty to me growing up. I was, however, confused. I needed to understand why some commands in the Hebrew Scriptures seemed to be ignored if I was going to take the Bible and Christianity seriously. I yearned for a worldview that made sense, but being urged to believe in the truth of the whole Bible—while disregarding emphatic parts of it—literally made me queasy.

When I asked why we omitted certain Bible passages from our daily lives, my friends gave me confident, authoritative answers like, "Jesus fulfilled the Law" and "We are no longer under Law; we're under grace." Still perplexed, I assumed that my young faith kept me from understanding their answers and trusted that concepts I didn't fully grasp would become clear later. After all, I wasn't stupid. I graduated from the University of Illinois with highest honors, passed the CPA exam on my first try, and counseled senior executives on how to plan for their financial futures. I gave up trying to reconcile the apparent contradictions and committed to "sit in the tension," knowing that God would eventually put the pieces together for me. I continued on my Christian journey, eating my special rib dinners and leaving the doctrinal issues to the theologians.

I thought I had let go of the whole contradiction issue, but after my lunch with Elizabeth, my questions reappeared. In addition, I realized that my last few rib dinners had grossed me out, and that I no longer enjoyed the shrimp and scallop meals that I'd occasion-

ally cook. Was this the power of suggestion, or was the Holy Spirit moving and convicting me?

God's Design for Healthy Eating

At this point in my life, I was NOT looking to eliminate anything from my diet. For both physical and emotional health reasons I'd already spent many years striving to clean up my eating habits, and—only by God's grace—had been reasonably successful. In fact, it was only through my assorted food struggles that I realized how much I needed God and His power in my life. I couldn't have changed my diet without Him and His empowering Spirit.

Now, just when I finally felt at peace about how I was eating, and my physical and emotional health were restored, God showed me something else to let go of: ribs, one of my few lingering food indulgences. Oy!

Committed to doing God's will in all areas of my life, I took the plunge and gave up pork and shellfish. Since the other areas that I'd submitted to Him (like money, work and relationships) had always turned out beautifully, I trusted that the pork thing would too. Because of my skepticism, however, I needed to understand it—both biblically and scientifically.

A book by Dr. Gordon Tessler, a Christian nutrition expert, gave me a new perspective. His book, *The Genesis Diet*, began to help me see that God might very well care about what I ate. How? By illuminating God's design for eating, which includes both plant- and meat-based foods, but which excludes pork and shellfish. Even more importantly, *The Genesis Diet* challenged some common theology used to explain why the Hebrew Scriptures' instructions no longer apply. My brain-fog began to clear as I found answers to some of my most vexing questions.

Rejuvenated Faith

Besides learning about God's design for eating, I learned how to read and study the Bible more carefully. Until that point, I focused on listening to my teachers, studying commentaries, and reading footnotes rather than reading the Word itself. Another bonus from my exploration: a better understanding of the Bible's ancient Near Eastern setting. I knew that “context, context, context” was impor-

tant for understanding the Bible, but few resources adequately shed light on this ancient culture.

In addition to reading *The Genesis Diet*, I began to read magazines and books published by First Fruits of Zion, TorahResource.com, and other messianic publishers. These writers unpack the Scriptures, using mainly the Bible itself, ancient texts and their knowledge of the original Greek and Hebrew. I always knew that Jesus was Jewish. Now I finally began to understand the holidays He celebrated, the foods He ate and the culture He lived in—and how these things applied to me. My two-dimensional faith was becoming three-dimensional!

I soon discovered an entire sub-culture within Christianity that believes that the Hebrew Scriptures' instructions apply to believers in Jesus as a natural response to their relationship with God—not as a prerequisite. They believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that we are saved by grace, through faith (Ephesians 2:8). However, they also believe that Jesus “fulfilled the Law” by giving the Hebrew Scriptures its fullest meaning. How did He do this? By interpreting it properly and by fully living it out.³

Excited to reconcile some of my life's biggest faith questions, and finally feeling like I had found a theological home, I shared this information with my non-Jewish husband, Brian. He was understandably skeptical.

“You mean we're going to have to get two sets of dishes?”

Unfortunately, when he asked this question I was not as grounded as Elizabeth had been with me. My feeble response caused him to quote a flurry of Bible verses to prove that our existing food choices were perfectly in line with Scripture: “One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only ... each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.” (Romans 14:2, 5) “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.” (1 Timothy 4:4–5) and “Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake ...” (1 Corinthians 10:25)

Not knowing how to respond, I wept, and the tension between us grew. The more I tried to convince him that examining the historical context and original languages shed new light on this topic, the more verses he quoted, and the more convinced he became that

I was wrong. At one point he told me, “Languages-schmanguages! It’s pretty clear to me that it doesn’t matter what we eat!”

God had been the glue that bound us together, but now it felt like our different interpretations of His Word were driving a wedge between us. How crazy is that? We tried to ignore the issue, but I felt estranged from him. Distraught, I completely lost my appetite and struggled to eat, a rare occurrence for me.

Explaining my new perspective was not working, so I tried a subtler approach. I left my Hebrew roots of Christianity magazines lying around, hoping he would read one. It was inconceivable to Brian that this magazine, covered in Hebrew letters, could have anything to do with the Bible or Jesus. In fact, it filled him with dread. “Where is she going with all this? Is she going to become Orthodox? She’s gone off the deep end—in a bad way.”

Brian’s antennae about my new studies went up quickly. He associated teachings that looked “Jewish” with the rejection of Jesus. While certainly not anti-Semitic (his love for me and my heritage was clear from the day I met him), he did fear that my current path was the first step towards abandoning Messiah. Since I had flirted with Orthodox Judaism earlier in my faith walk, his concerns were valid. There is no room in Orthodox Judaism for the messiahship of Jesus.

My husband had a passion for discerning truth from error, and he was very leery of anything not accepted by mainstream Christianity. He often listened to Bible teaching on the radio, and he was committed to using only trustworthy sources to help him understand God’s Word.

To investigate the perceived “error” that I had slipped into, Brian picked up my latest magazine within a few weeks. The opening article affirmed how central Messiah is to our walk. The Passover-related articles pointed to Messiah. Most importantly, a featured article addressed the meat-related food laws of Leviticus 11 and many of Brian’s original concerns.

After reading this article and researching the topic himself, he was also convinced that the Bible’s instructions about which meats God designed to be eaten still applied to us. Concerned about why this new conclusion was so different from what he had always been taught, my heresy-hunting husband joined my path, and together we began our journey to reconcile the Old and

New Testaments and their current applicability to our lives. The foundation of faith on which we had originally built our marriage was not only restored, it has since grown and flourished with our shared view of the continuity of Scripture!

Join My Journey

Meanwhile, I continued to investigate God's design for healthy eating, which extends far beyond the issue of meat. Urged by others to share what I had been learning, I spoke about biblical eating at our church's women's ministry events and met Amy, who shared my passion for God and all of His intelligently designed foods. Together we started a monthly cooking club, spoke at local churches' women's events, and wrote a cookbook.⁴

During this time I dialogued with many women and heard their questions about God's design for eating. Some of these women shared my earlier confusion about pork and shellfish; others were blessed to find peace and clarity with traditional explanations. These conversations, in part, have inspired me to write this book.

Regardless of whether your current beliefs overlap with mine, I feel privileged that you've read this far and pray that you continue reading. If you do, please hold my perspective with an open hand. Why? Folks who suspend judgment often find this exercise fascinating, regardless of their ultimate conclusion.

God's perspective on food is not the core of my faith; it is merely a single facet in a lifelong journey of spiritual growth and discovery. I share this information with you so you can learn more about the specific topic at hand—not as a way to gain right-standing before God. This book is not about doing something (or avoiding something) so that we can have a relationship with Him or be “saved.” Rather, exploring this topic is a response to our faith. It arises naturally from our longing for obedience to God. *Because* we already have a relationship with Him, we respond to His love for us by seeking His will and wisdom in all areas of our lives—including what we eat. As redeemed people, we bear the most fruit when we submit our whole selves to our Creator. In other words, dietary issues are not the core of my faith, but they are the main focus of this book.

Neither a theological treatise nor a diet manual, *Holy Cow!* is simply what I, a layperson, have learned as I have attempted to discern God’s instructions for eating.⁵ You may or may not agree with my conclusions, but I pray that this investigation enriches your understanding of the Bible and that you find great joy in the process!

Questions to discuss and ponder

1. What beliefs about Jesus have you inherited from your family, your religious educators or society? Which have you researched on your own? What has that research involved?
2. What beliefs about eating pork and shellfish have you inherited from your family, your religious educators or society? Which have you researched on your own? What has that research involved?
3. What do you hope to learn from this book?
4. What do you understand the term “keeping *kosher*” to mean?
5. Does God factor into any of your food choices? If so, how did you arrive at your conclusions?

Endnotes

- ¹ Leviticus 11:7 and Deuteronomy 14:8
- ² I share how I have begun to reconcile these apparent contradictions in chapter four.
- ³ Traditional interpretation generally holds that because He “fulfilled the Law” we need not follow it. This is discussed further in chapter four.
- ⁴ The *What the Bible Says about Healthy Living Cookbook: Simple and Tasty Recipes Featuring God’s Ingredients* (Heart of Wisdom).
- ⁵ See Part II, *Man Alive! There’s More!*, written by Bible teacher D. Thomas Lancaster, for deeper, more theological explanations of my Part I material.