

# Q 5.1 Were the Apostles and the Early Church Vegan?

There is a considerable amount of evidence from our earliest sources that the apostles and family members of Jesus were individually and collectively vegan. According to these sources, they all abstained from flesh-eating and opposed the killing of animals.

## Introduction

It is often claimed that Jesus and His earliest followers were not vegan and that Christians today therefore have no reason to be vegan. These claims, however, are contrary to the evidence found in our earliest sources. As we examine the evidence on the subject, let us ask ourselves the following questions: does the earliest evidence suggest they were vegan or non-vegan? Did they promote or oppose the killing and eating of animals?

## The Various Titles for Jesus and His Followers

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus and His followers are identified by a few different titles: Χριστιανός (Christianos), Ναζωραῖος (Nazóraios), πτωχός (ptóchos/Ebyōnīm), and followers of the Way ὁδός (hodos). The most common title for Jesus is the Christ (Χριστός Christos in Greek),<sup>1</sup> which means the Messiah (משיח Ha-mashiach in Hebrew): *“The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ)”* (John 1:41, NIV). Followers of Jesus the

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<sup>1</sup> “But what about you?’ Jesus asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29, BSB); “And demons also came out of many, crying out and saying, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of God!’ And He, rebuking them, did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ” (Luke 4:41, NKJV).

Christ are likewise commonly referred to as Christians (Χριστιανός Christianos):<sup>2</sup> *“And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch”* (Acts 11:26b, NKJV).

### **Jesus the Nazarene and the Nazarenes**

Before they were called Christians, Jesus and His followers were called ‘Nazarenes’ (Ναζωπαῖος Nazóraios):<sup>3</sup> *“He then asked them again, ‘Whom are you seeking?’ And they said, ‘Jesus the Nazarene’”* (John 18:7, NASB). ‘Nazarene’ was the chosen moniker to be written on the cross at His death: *“And Pilate wrote a title and placed it on his cross, but it was written thus: ‘This is Yeshua the Nazarene, The King of the Judeans’”* (John 19:19, ABPE). Followers of Jesus the Nazarene are likewise referred to as Nazarenes, including Paul: *“For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes”* (Acts 24:5, NKJV).

### **The Nazarenes did not Sacrifice Animals or Eat Flesh**

Epiphanius, a fourth century church leader, says the Nazarenes *“would not offer sacrifice or eat meat; in their eyes it was unlawful to eat meat or make sacrifices with it. They claimed that... none of these customs were instituted by the fathers”* (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 18.1.4). Theophilus, the archbishop of the church of Antioch from approximately 168 until 182 C.E., to whom Canonical Luke<sup>4</sup> and Acts<sup>5</sup> were addressed, elaborates on this belief that killing and eating animals was considered unlawful by early followers of Jesus. In his letter to Autolycus he says, *“For as the fish and the fowls are*

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<sup>2</sup> “Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?’” (Acts 26:28, NIV); “However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:16, NIV).

<sup>3</sup> “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a Man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—” (Acts 2:22, NASB). See also Acts 3:6; 4:10.

<sup>4</sup> “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4, NIV).

<sup>5</sup> “In my first book, O Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1, BSB).

*of one nature,—some indeed abide in their natural state, and do no harm to those weaker than themselves, but keep the law of God, and eat of the seeds of the earth; others of them, again, transgress the law of God, and eat flesh, and injure those weaker than themselves: thus, too, the righteous, keeping the law of God, bite and injure none,<sup>6</sup> but live holily and righteously. But robbers, and murderers, and godless persons<sup>7</sup> are like monsters of the deep, and wild beasts, and birds of prey; for they virtually devour those weaker than themselves” (Theophilus, To Autolyclus 2.16).*

### **Jesus the Way and the Followers of the Way**

Jesus described Himself as the Way (ὁδός hodos in Greek):<sup>8</sup> *“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6, NKJV).* His teachings were likewise referred to as “the Way” and the followers of His teachings as followers of the Way: *“But when some of them stubbornly refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way, Paul took his disciples and left the synagogue to conduct daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus” (Acts 19:9, BSB)<sup>9</sup>.* Paul even admits he formerly persecuted followers of the Way: *“And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison” (Acts 22:4, NLT).* Like the term ‘Nazarene’, ‘the Way’ was considered by outsiders to be a religious sect: *“But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14, ESV).<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:14-16, NIV).

<sup>7</sup> “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10, NIV).

<sup>8</sup> “For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him” (Matthew 21:32, NKJV); “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.’ John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Mark 1:3-4, NKJV).

<sup>9</sup> See also Acts 19:23.

<sup>10</sup> “and the way of peace they do not know” (Romans 3:17, NIV, referencing Isaiah 59:8). See also Acts 24:22.

## **Followers of the Way Abstain from Idolatrous Flesh-Eating, Blood, and Death**

The Way is elaborated in more detail in the Didache, an early church catechism from the first few centuries. It says, *“There are two ways, one of life and one of death; but a great difference between the two ways. The way of life, then, is this: First, you shall love God who made you; second, your neighbour as yourself; and all things whatsoever you would should not occur to you, do not also do to another”* (Didache 1). This is consistent with what Jesus taught was the essence<sup>11</sup> and crux<sup>12</sup> of God’s instructions. Concerning food, the Didache says to strive for perfection, *“See that no one cause you to err from this way of the Teaching, since apart from God it teaches you. For if you are able to bear all the yoke of the Lord<sup>13</sup>, you will be perfect<sup>14</sup>; but if you are not able, what you are able that do. And concerning food, bear what you are able<sup>15</sup>; but against that which is sacrificed to idols be exceedingly on your guard; for it is the service of dead gods”* (Didache 6). This teaching is remarkably similar to our earliest witness of the Jerusalem Council ruling in Acts 15, which includes abstinence from flesh and blood, *“For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; that you abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from fornication; and whatsoever you do not wish to be done to you, do not to others: from which preserving yourselves, you shall do well, walking in the Holy Spirit”* (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.12.14).

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<sup>11</sup> “In everything, then, do to others as you would have them do to you. For this is the essence of the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12, BSB).

<sup>12</sup> “‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:36-40, NIV).

<sup>13</sup> “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30, BSB).

<sup>14</sup> “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48, NIV). See also James 1:4.

<sup>15</sup> “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13, NKJV).

## The Jerusalem Ebyonim

The followers of Jesus are also frequently referred to as ‘the poor ones’ (πτωχός ptóchos in Greek, עֲבֹיֹנִים, ’Ebyōnīm in Hebrew).<sup>16</sup> This term is most often used in reference to the original community of disciples in Jerusalem, led by James the brother of Jesus,<sup>17</sup> who said: *“Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?”* (James 2:5, NIV). Jesus became poor for the sake of the poor<sup>18</sup> and referred to His community of disciples as the poor ones who inherit the kingdom of God: *“Looking at his disciples, he said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God’”* (Luke 6:20, NIV). The Ebyonim shared everything communally: *“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need”* (Acts 2:44-45, NKJV). Those joining the Ebyonim relinquished all their personal possessions and money to the community,<sup>19</sup> laying it all at the apostles’ feet<sup>20</sup>, and withheld nothing.<sup>21</sup> Epiphanius likewise ascribes these practices to the Ebyonim: *“they are poor because they sold their possessions in the apostles’ time and laid them at the*

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<sup>16</sup> “‘Ebion,’ translated from Hebrew to Greek, means ‘poor’” (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.17.1). ‘Ebyonim’ is sometimes translated as ‘Ebionites’.

<sup>17</sup> “When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:17-19, NIV).

<sup>18</sup> “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9, BSB).

<sup>19</sup> “So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not [carefully consider the cost and then for My sake] give up all his own possessions” (Luke 14:33, AMP); “Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me’” (Mark 10:21, NKJV. See parallel passage in Luke 18:22).

<sup>20</sup> “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had... that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need” (Acts 4:32-35, NIV).

<sup>21</sup> “With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet. Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?’” (Acts 5:2-3, NIV).

*apostles' feet, and went over to a life of poverty and renunciation; and thus, they say, they are called 'poor' by everyone" (Epiphanius, Panarion 30.17.2).*

### **The Authority of the Jerusalem Ebyonim**

The other church communities founded by the apostles acknowledged their indebtedness<sup>22</sup> to the Jerusalem Ebyonim. Paul similarly acknowledged the Jerusalem Ebyonim authority, seeking their guidance on controversial issues<sup>23</sup> and recognizing the need for their approval of the gospel he was preaching: *"Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain" (Galatians 2:1-2, NIV).* And they asked only that he remember the Ebyonim Way: *"And recognizing the grace [that God had] bestowed on me, James and Cephas (Peter) and John, who were reputed to be pillars [of the Jerusalem church], gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we could go to the Gentiles [with their blessing] and they to the circumcised (Jews). They asked only [one thing], that we remember the poor, the very thing I was also eager to do" (Galatians 2:9-10, AMP).*

### **The Ebyonim Rejected Animal Sacrifice and Flesh-Eating**

As with the description of the Nazarenes, Epiphanius says the Ebyonim believed it was unlawful to kill and eat animals, despite certain passages in the Torah suggesting that it

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<sup>22</sup> "They were glad to do this because they feel they owe a real debt to them. Since the Gentiles received the spiritual blessings of the Good News from the believers in Jerusalem, they feel the least they can do in return is to help them financially" (Romans 15:27, NLT). See also Romans 15:26, 1 Corinthians 16:1-3, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.

<sup>23</sup> "Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question... The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe" (Acts 15:1-2;6-7, NIV).

was lawful.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, they would claim that it was Christ who revealed this teaching to them, “Nor do they accept Moses’ Pentateuch in its entirety; they reject certain sayings. When you say to them, of eating meat, ‘Why did Abraham serve the angels the calf and the milk? Why did Noah eat meat, and why was he told to by God, who said, ‘Slay and eat?’ Why did Isaac and Jacob sacrifice to God—Moses too, in the wilderness?’ he will disbelieve those things and will say, ‘What need for me to read what is in the Law, when the Gospel has come?’ ‘Well, how do you know about Moses and Abraham? I know you admit that they exist, and that you put them down as righteous, and your own ancestors.’ Then he will answer, ‘Christ has revealed this to me,’ and will blaspheme most of the legislation, and Samson, David, Elijah, Samuel, Elisha and the rest” (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.18.7-9). Also according to Epiphanius, the Ebyonim attested that Jesus said, “I came to abolish the sacrifices, and if ye cease not from sacrifice, wrath will not cease from you” (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.16.5). Jesus seeking to end the sacrificial system is consistent with Him disrupting the temple<sup>25</sup> and establishing in its place a more perfect priesthood through a once for all sacrifice.<sup>26</sup>

### **Apostles Matthew, Paul, and Peter**

According to our earliest sources, each of the apostles and family members of Jesus practiced abstinence from flesh-eating. In the late second century, Clement of Alexandria reported that the apostle Matthew had lived plant-based by reason of virtue, deeming the opposite to be demonic: “It is far better to be happy than to have a demon dwelling with us. And happiness is found in the practice of virtue. Accordingly, the apostle Matthew partook of seeds, and nuts, and vegetables, without flesh.”<sup>27</sup> Paul likewise declared that he would never again eat meat,<sup>28</sup> and he advised others to follow

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<sup>24</sup> The Epiphanius passage that follows suggests that Jesus and the apostles taught that the correct way to read Ezra’s Torah was to differentiate between the Yahwist passages and the Elohist passages, since each of the passages mentioned are Yahwist.

<sup>25</sup> See John 2:12-17.

<sup>26</sup> See Hebrews 7 through 10.

<sup>27</sup> Clement of Alexandria. *The Paedagogus* 2.1.16. T.r. by William Wilson. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.

<sup>28</sup> “Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won’t cause my brother or sister to fall” (1 Corinthians 8:13, CSB).

his example: *“It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall”* (Romans 14:21, NIV). According to first century Clement of Rome, Peter ate *“only bread and olives, and rarely pot-herbs”*<sup>29</sup> because he believed it was pleasing to God *“to abstain from the table of devils, not to taste dead flesh”*<sup>30</sup> (Homilies 12.6; 7.4). This diet of Peter’s is described in Acts 10 as abstaining from anything ‘common or unclean’: *“For I have never eaten anything common or unclean”* (Acts 10:14, NKJV).

### **Mary the Mother of Jesus, and John the Baptist**

This description of not eating anything common or unclean is also made about Mary in our earliest source about her upbringing. Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anna, *“allowed nothing common or unclean to pass through her”* (Protoevangelium of James 6). She was fed by angels, *“And Mary was in the temple of the Lord as if she were a dove that dwelt there, and she received food from the hand of an angel”* (Protoevangelium of James 8). The Bible describes angel’s food as manna,<sup>31</sup> sweet bread from heaven made from seed resembling coriander.<sup>32</sup> John the Baptist is likewise described as eating this diet of angelic food, *“whose taste was the taste of manna, as a cake in oil”* (Epiphanius, Panarion 30.13.4). Professor James Tabor describes Matthew 3:4 ‘locusts and wild honey’ as a mistranslation. He says, *“The Greek word for locusts (akris/ἀκρίδες) is very similar to the Greek word for “honey cake” (enkris/ἐγκρίς) that is used for the ‘manna’ that the Israelites ate in the desert in the days of Moses. According to this ancient text it was not locusts but these cakes cooked in olive oil. If this is the*

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<sup>29</sup> Clement of Rome. *Clementine Homilies 12.6*. T.r. by Peter Peterson. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 8. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886. This passage corresponds to *Recognitions of Clement 7.6*.

<sup>30</sup> Clement of Rome. *Clementine Homilies 7.4*. T.r. by Peter Peterson. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 8. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886.

<sup>31</sup> “He rained down manna for them to eat; He gave them grain from heaven. Man ate the bread of angels; He sent them food in abundance” (Psalm 78:24-25, BSB).

<sup>32</sup> “Now the manna resembled coriander seed, and its appearance was like that of gum resin. The people walked around and gathered it, ground it on a handmill or crushed it in a mortar, then boiled it in a cooking pot or shaped it into cakes. It tasted like pastry baked with fine oil” (Numbers 11:7-8, BSB).



case then John would have eaten a cake of some type, made from a desert plant, similar to the 'manna' that the ancient Israelites ate in the desert in the days of Moses. This 'bread from heaven' is described as 'like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.'<sup>33</sup>

### **James the Just and Judas Thomas**

Hegesippus in the second century reports that Jesus' brother James never ate animal flesh, nor did he wear wool, "*He was holy from his mother's womb; and he drank no wine nor strong drink, nor did he eat flesh... He alone was permitted to enter into the holy place; for he wore not woolen but linen garments*" (Hegesippus, quoted in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 2.23.5-6)<sup>34</sup>. Judas Thomas, the brother of James, like Peter, ate only bread. It says in the second century *Acts of Thomas*, he "*goes round the cities and the districts, and if he has anything he gives all to the poor, and teaches one new God, and heals the diseased, and drives out demons, and does many other extraordinary things... But his acts of compassion, and the cures done by him as a free gift, and still more, his single-mindedness, and gentleness, and fidelity, show that he is a just man, or an apostle of the new God whom he preaches; for he continually fasts and prays, and eats only bread with salt, and his drink is water, and he carries one coat, whether in warm weather or in cold, and he takes nothing from anyone, but gives to others even what he has.*"<sup>35</sup>

### **Every Disciple of Jesus Abstained from Flesh-Eating**

In *Demonstratio Evangelica* 3.5, early fourth century church historian Eusebius says that all of the disciples were poor men (Ebyonim) of high moral virtue, who loved the holy instruction (the Way) of Jesus, and who abstained from flesh-eating: "*let me recur*

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<sup>33</sup> Professor James Tabor, *Did John the Baptist Eat Bugs, Beans, or Pancakes?* (2015). See also Exodus 16:31; Numbers 11:8.

<sup>34</sup> Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History, Book II*. T.r. by Arthur Cushman McGiffert. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 1. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890.

<sup>35</sup> The Acts of Thomas. Translated by Alexander Walker. From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 8. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886.)

*to the truth of the sacred writings, and consider the character of the disciples of Jesus. From the men as they stand, surely any sensible person would be inclined to consider them worthy of all confidence; they were admittedly poor men without eloquence, they fell in love with holy and philosophic instruction, they embraced and persevered in a strenuous and a laborious life, with fasting and abstinence from wine and meat, and much bodily restriction besides, with prayers and intercessions to God, and, last but not least, excessive purity, and devotion of body and soul.”<sup>36</sup>*

## **Conclusion**

Before they were called Christians, Jesus and the apostles were called Nazarenes, Ebyonim, and followers of the Way. Each of these are described by our earliest sources as abstaining from flesh-eating and rejecting animal slaughter. The apostles and family members of Jesus are likewise individually and collectively described as abstaining from flesh-eating. Given this abundance of evidence in support of Jesus and His earliest followers all living vegan, it is hard to deny the conclusion that this is a historical fact.

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<sup>36</sup> Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica* 3.5 (Tr. W.J. Ferrar, 1920)