

1 TIMOTHY 4 AND VEGANISM: A CLOSER LOOK

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First Timothy chapter 4 is often used to denounce veganism as being anti-Christian and even demonic. This is a favourite theme for many hard-line fundamentalists, but it is also used by right-wing conspiracy theorists. In contrast, I argue that a closer examination of the passage in question, and its context, shows that Paul is *clearly* not referring to anything similar to contemporary veganism but to a very *harsh* form of asceticism based on an unbiblical view of creation. In fact, after analysing the King James Version of the Bible it becomes apparent that much of the confusion over this matter is *simply* linked to the use of ‘meats’ in 17th century English, which does *not* mean ‘animal flesh’ like its present-day equivalent.

Far from denouncing veganism I maintain that Paul is actually upholding the creation account given in Genesis chapters one and two. His polemic was and is against those who deny the incarnation of Christ, the goodness of God’s creation, and promote dualism and *severe forms of asceticism* as a means of union with God and sanctification. Paul contends that *harsh bodily mortification* is useless and that Christians should be seeking true inner godliness instead. I see the misreading of 1 Timothy 4, ultimately, as an example of how the Bible can be used in order to help perpetuate worldviews and traditions which are beginning to be questioned in society; it also underlines how Scripture can become a pretext to promote false ideologies. Sadly, as is the case with much poor exegesis I argue that 1 Timothy 4 has been excluded from its:

- 1) Immediate context: both linguistic and conceptual
- 2) The general context and message of 1 Timothy
- 3) The rest of the New Testament
- 4) The overall teaching and direction of Scripture
- 5) Common sense and knowledge from other fields of learning

1. CREATION AND Gnostic MYTHS

From the book itself we can understand that the letter of 1 Timothy was written by Paul to Timothy in order to help his young pupil who was stationed in the church in Ephesus. Timothy

was young (4:12), and apparently fearful.¹ Paul at the start of the Letter immediately underlines the purpose of his writing:

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,⁴ nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.⁵ The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.⁶ Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion,⁷ desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions (1:3-7).

Paul wants Timothy to stop certain false teachers ‘who devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies’.² These teachers also seem to act as if they are teachers of the ‘law’, even though their interpretation of the Law of Moses is particularly heterodox: the Hebrew Scriptures appear only to be a starting point — and were normally turned upside down — from which they developed their convoluted theories and stories.³ Many scholars agree,⁴ and the internal evidence in the letter point to a form of proto-Gnosticism as being the error that Paul is attacking;⁵ in fact, Paul directly mentions proto-Gnosticism at the end of the letter. This is not so easy to understand from the English translation but is seen clearly in the Greek: ‘O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “knowledge” [gnosis]’. The word for knowledge is *gnosis*, from which the word ‘Gnosticism’ is derived. The errors mentioned in the letter fit perfectly with what we know about Gnosticism, even though this would develop *fully only in the next two centuries*.⁶

While being a philosophy that encompassed various positions and contradicted itself in many doctrines, Gnosticism was essentially an esoteric and dualistic view of the world that believed that the physical creation was made by an inferior demiurge.⁷ This lesser ‘god’, whom the Gnostics identified with the Jewish God of the Old Testament, had trapped human beings in the inferior material creation. At the same time a more spiritual god had sent Lucifer to aid humanity by opening its eyes and helping it to escape the bondage of the material realm. As can be seen, the Gnostic account of creation, which could actually be extremely complex and utilised long

¹ 2 Timothy 1:7.

² See also Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy. *The New Jerome Bible Handbook* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), 277-283.

³ Their teachings appear to have little to no resemblance to traditional forms of Judaism, and are often the complete opposite of the way these Scriptures were interpreted, with the addition of elaborate elements.

⁴ Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 1834, 1840; See also Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 59-66, 117-125.

⁵ Myer Pearlman, *Through the Bible Book by Book, Part IV Epistles and Revelation* (Springfield MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1935), 48-53.

⁶ Terrance L. Tiessen, “Gnosticism as heresy: the response of Irenaeus,” *Didaskalia* 18, no. 1 (2007): 31-48.

⁷ Edward Moore and John Turner, “Gnosticism,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lloyd Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 174-196.

convoluted genealogies, contradicted almost completely the Biblical view of creation. The Gnostics also believed they possessed special ‘knowledge’ that helped them escape the earthly realm of existence, and which would bring about their salvation. Despite their controversies Gnostics tended to have four main areas of agreement:

First, they believed in one God who is wholly transcendent, spiritual and far removed from the fallen, material universe, which he did not create. The physical universe was created by an evil or demented lesser god (a “demiurge”). Second, human beings are sparks (or droplets) of the same material substance that God is and have somehow become trapped in physical bodies, which are like tombs to be escaped. Third, Gnostics all agreed that the “fall” that led to sin and evil is identical to the fall into matter. Creation and fall coincide. As long as spirits are trapped in physical bodies and materiality, they will be subject to sin, which is caused by ignorance of their nature and home. The fourth common feature of Gnostic belief was their vision of salvation. All Gnostics agreed that salvation is to escape from the bondage of material existence and travel back to the home from which souls/spirits have fallen. The possibility is initiated by the great Spirit, God, who wishes to draw back to himself the stray bits and pieces. God sends forth an emanation of himself — a spiritual redeemer — who descends through layers and layers of reality from pure spirit to dense matter and attempts to teach some of the divine sparks of Spirit their true identity and home. Once awakened, they are able to begin the journey back. Salvation is by knowledge — self-knowledge. Finally, all of the Gnostics (so far as anyone knows) considered themselves Christians and regarded Jesus as the human vehicle for this heavenly messenger, “Christ”. All rejected the idea of God becoming incarnate, dying and rising bodily. Such beliefs were considered unspiritual and against true wisdom because they entangled spirit with matter.⁸

As mentioned earlier in the first century Gnosticism was not the fully developed kind we find in the 2nd and 3rd centuries and it would be more appropriate to talk of *proto-Gnosticism*. At the same time, many of the features of later Gnosticism are already present. The dualistic worldview of Gnosticism led to the *opposite* tendencies of extreme licentiousness and harsh forms of asceticism: this was because the body was of limited importance and had been transcended through special spiritual knowledge. Whereas letters like 1 John, 2 Peter and Jude — together with parts of 1 Corinthians — lambast the libertine version of Gnosticism, 1 Timothy and Colossians appear to address the more legalistic and especially the Gnostic tendencies that brought about self-mortification. And yet it would seem that libertine tendencies, and profound greed, may have been present even in the church of Ephesus and that Paul addresses some of them in 1 Timothy.⁹ Various Gnostic tendencies, whether legalism, asceticism or libertinism often coexisted in the churches as mixtures or in opposition to each other: many Gnostic sects and movements were

⁸ Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 37-39.

⁹ 1 Timothy 6:5.

actually often an amalgam of legalism and asceticism as in the case of certain Gnostics in the church of Colossae.¹⁰

2. THE TEXT OF 1 TIMOTHY 4

¹ But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,² by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron,³ *men* who forbid marriage *and* *advocate* abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude;⁵ for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.⁶ In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, *constantly* nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.⁷ But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness;⁸ for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to come (1 Timothy 4:1-8, NASB).

The NASB translation is perhaps one of the best available for this text together with the NRSV (1989).¹¹ On the other hand, The King James Version (KJV) sadly creates some confusion by its use of 17th century English and the word ‘meats’:

³ Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.⁴ For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving;⁵ For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:3-5, KJV).

Another Bible translation, ‘Young’s Literal Translation’ (YLT), from 1862 is very good but again uses the old English ‘meats’, which simply means food:

¹ And the Spirit expressly speaketh, that in latter times shall certain fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and teachings of demons, ² in hypocrisy speaking lies, being seared in their own conscience, ³ forbidding to marry — to abstain from meats that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those believing and acknowledging the truth ⁴ because every creature of God [is] good, and nothing [is] to be rejected, with thanksgiving being received, ⁵ for it is sanctified through the word of God and intercession. ⁶ These things placing before the brethren, thou shalt be a good ministrant of Jesus Christ, being nourished by the words of the faith, and of the good

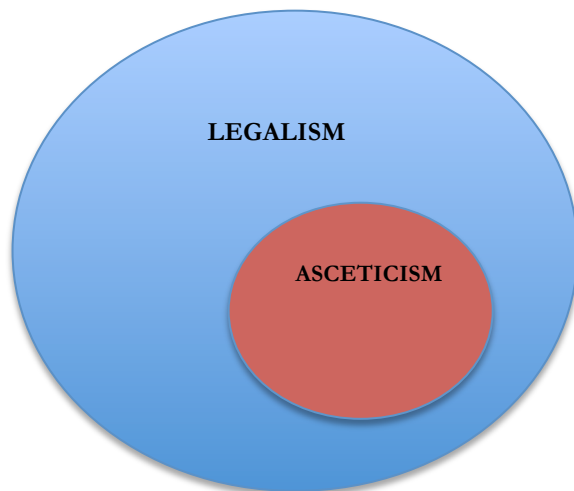
¹⁰ Colossians chapter 2.

¹¹ NASB: New American Standard Bible (1995), NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989).

teaching, which thou didst follow after, ⁷ and the profane and old women's fables reject thou, and exercise thyself unto piety, ⁸ for the bodily exercise is unto little profit, and the piety is to all things profitable, a promise having of the life that now is, and of that which is coming; (1 Timothy 4:1-8, YLT).

The problem with the KJV translation is that 'meat' in 17th century English simply meant food and not animal flesh. What is supposed to be received with thanksgiving is likely *food*, and creation, in general. While many tend to read vegetarianism into this passage, this is never explicitly mentioned and is simply the bias of the reader. I believe that many interpreters *have confused legalism with asceticism* and have mixed them all together; ascetics are almost invariably legalistic to some degree, yet not all legalists are ascetics: they are in fact two distinct phenomena which need to be understood separately *even* when asceticism is a subset of legalism. The NIV translation, for example, adds the word 'certain' to 'foods', which is not found in the original Greek and is simply the opinion of the translator: this can be seen in the NIV Concordance¹² where it actually states that 'certain' in this verse is *NIG, or Not In Greek*. This choice of adding 'certain' slants the reading of the text and makes it appear that Paul is talking about specific foods that are being forbidden whereas this is not *explicitly* talked about in these verses.

**ASCETICISM IS
NORMALLY A SUBSET
OF LEGALISM**



At the same time some modern interpreters seem to carelessly use the term 'asceticism', which literally means 'discipline', and end up constantly throwing this word around. For these exegetes *any* form of dietary restriction appears to be described as 'ascetic'. Not eating cheeseburgers and drinking milkshakes every day would probably be considered 'ascetic', as it would be seen as a form of discipline that requires self-control. Even following a healthy diet with abundant food, excellent taste, and ample variety would probably be considered a type of 'asceticism' by them.

¹² Edward W. Goodrick and John R. Kohlenberger III, *The Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 190.

But this form of understanding *totally betrays* what is being talked about in this context. What is being discussed here goes far beyond *even* the temperance, moderation, and self-control promoted, for example, by Buddhism, or originally by Plato in Ancient Greece, and which are often mistaken for severe asceticism.¹³ What Paul has in mind here is clearly a *harsh form* of asceticism¹⁴ not simply a kind of normal modern day dietary regimen. Paul extolled self-control as a fruit of the Spirit,¹⁵ and his own life was particularly difficult: he had been imprisoned, stoned, shipwrecked, whipped, exposed to the cold, attacked, persecuted, he had gone without food for days, was used to fasting, and had been raised in the strict discipline of the Pharisees.¹⁶ If Paul called something ‘harsh’ it must have been *particularly* so. This is a far cry from the idea most contemporaries have of ‘asceticism’ which appears to be a parody of its real meaning, and a projection of our present culture.

Others have instead correctly understood that these verses are talking about asceticism — many commentaries underline this so it is not a mystery — but then strangely read veganism/vegetarianism into it. Their reasoning goes something like this: ‘veganism is ascetic therefore every time the Bible is talking about asceticism it is in fact talking about veganism’. Or they simply *assume* that since some Gnostic groups refrained from eating — particularly red — meat that this is automatically what Paul is criticising. This is wrong on two accounts. Firstly, Gnosticism, and proto-Gnosticism, was particularly varied and often contradictory in its positions and even in its dietary requirements; some Gnostic groups — like the Nicolaitans¹⁷ — even encouraged their followers to eat meat sacrificed to idols because they had been freed from the constraints of the body and were beyond normal morality. Secondly, as I mentioned earlier, asceticism is often a subset of legalism and alloyed with it, so it is normal that the two would appear together, but they *must* at the same time be distinguished. They are simply *not* the same thing.

These exegetes seem to begin with a series of prejudices against veganism, or what they believe these verses are talking about, and then read them into the text. This strong form of *circular reasoning* works something like this:

¹³ While Buddha initially practiced a severe form of asceticism, he eventually considered this futile and chose a middle path of moderation and avoidance of extremes. Buddhism is actually opposed to harsh forms of asceticism. Likewise, the philosopher Plato, while advocating for a certain temperance in food and drink, believed that a healthy body was important for a healthy mind and for citizens, and never promoted this kind of harsh asceticism: Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Middle Way: Buddhism”, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Middle-Way>, accessed April 6, 2018; G. R. F. Ferrari, ed., *Plato: The Republic*, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54-56.

¹⁴ For context on severe food restriction: Liliana Dell’Osso, et al. “Historical evolution of the concept of anorexia nervosa and relationships with orthorexia nervosa, autism, and obsessive-compulsive spectrum,” *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment* 12 (2016): 1651-1660.

¹⁵ 2 Timothy 1:7; Titus 1:8; 1 Corinthians 9:21-24, Galatians 5:22-23.

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 11:21-33, Philippians 3:5-6.

¹⁷ See for example Revelation 2:14-15.

CONTROL BELIEF

CIRCULAR REASONING

‘VEGANISM IS A FORM OF ASCETICISM’

→→→→→→

ASCETICISM = VEGANISM

‘SOME GNOSTICS DID NOT EAT MEAT’

→→→→→→

PAUL IS CONDEMNING VEGETARIANISM

And yet there is no reason to believe that veganism *is intrinsically* a harsh form of asceticism in any way — while no doubt it can be made to be if one were to semi-starve oneself on tiny amounts of plant foods. Veganism’s modern version is for the most part anything *but* this, and is normally a positive message that promotes compassion, abundance, enjoyment of life, and healthy living.¹⁸ Far from condemning their asceticism Augustine even criticised certain vegans of his day of being gluttonous and for overeating!¹⁹ Furthermore, seeing veganism are synonymous with asceticism is based on modern erroneous ideas on diet and lifestyle. In the ancient world of the Roman Empire the main staples were cereals and bread, and not meat or animal products — which were consumed sparingly among the common people. Jesus called himself the ‘bread of life’ as bread was the food that gave sustenance, and instructed that people pray ‘give us today our daily bread’.²⁰ Meat was essentially a *luxury item* that was eaten rarely by the poor and the working classes, which made up the bulk of the population. While the aristocrats and royalty ate meat and animal foods much more abundantly, the rest of the population subsisted primarily on a vegetarian diet. In fact most of humanity throughout *recorded* history has subsisted on primarily vegan/vegetarian eating patterns without which large populations would not have been possible.²¹ Apart from certain tribes living on the edges of the human oecumene, during most of the history of human civilisation meat has always been eaten rarely, if at all.²² Similarly, the basic diet of the majority of people living in the Roman Empire consisted of starches, oil, legumes, and locally grown produce.²³ Most of the poor population in Rome lived off the so-called ‘Corn Dole’, which

¹⁸ In fact the longest living people formally recorded in the world are the Seventh-Day Adventist vegetarians. Vegan Seventh Day Adventists also have particularly low cancer, diabetes and heart disease rates: Gary E. Fraser and David J. Shavlik, “Ten years of life: Is it a matter of choice?,” *Archives of Internal Medicine* 161, no. 13 (2001): 1645-1652; Yessenia Tantamango-Bartley, et al. “Vegetarian Diets and the Incidence of Cancer in a Low-risk Population,” *Cancer Epidemiological Biomarkers Prev* 22, no. 2 (2013): 286-294; Sigve Tonstad et al. “Vegetarian diets and incidence of diabetes in the Adventist Health Study-2,” *Nutrition, Metabolism and Cardiovascular Diseases* 23, no. 4 (2013): 292-299; Gary E. Fraser, “Vegetarian diets: what do we know of their effects on common chronic diseases?,” *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 89, no. 5 (2009): 1607S–1612S.

¹⁹ David Grumett and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu: Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 92.

²⁰ Matthew 6:11.

²¹ John McDougall, *The Starch Solution* (USA: Rodale, 2012).

²² The Bantu in Africa for example: J. F. Brock and H. Gordon, “Ischaemic Heart Disease in African Populations,” *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 35, no. 402 (1959): 228; A.G. Shaper and K. W. Jones, “Serum-cholesterol, diet, and coronary heart-disease in Africans and Asians in Uganda,” *International Journal of Epidemiology* 41, no. 5 (2012): 1221-1222; In China: W. R. Morse and Y. T. Beh, “Blood pressure amongst aboriginal ethnic groups of Szechwan Province, West China,” *Lancet* 229, no. 5929 (1937): 966-968.

²³ David Kessler and Peter Temin, “The organization of the grain trade in the early Roman Empire,” *Economic History Review* 60, no. 2 (2007): 315; Quatr.us from Professor Carr, “Roman Food — Rich and Poor,” <https://quatr.us/romans/roman-food-rich-poor.htm>, accessed 14 March, 2018.

consisted in huge amounts of wheat that the Roman authorities gave for free to the huge urban population in order to keep them under control.²⁴ The idea that Paul would be condemning the average diet of the working classes for not being ‘rich’ enough — or for being ‘ascetic’ — appears absurd. Moreover, according to the biblical record all of God-fearing humanity from Adam to Noah subsisted on a *totally* vegan diet.²⁵ We have to be careful not to read modern Western dietary patterns, where people eat huge amounts of meat and animal products, into the Bible. Even two hundred years ago the current dietary patterns of modern-day Western countries would have been seen as incredibly extravagant by all but the kings, queens, and aristocrats of the earth.²⁶

So what is Paul condemning here? From the context I believe it is actually clearly underlined; Paul is condemning ‘*apechesthai brōmatōn*’, ἀπέχεσθαι βρωμάτων, literally ‘abstaining from foods’: while *broma* is used many times in the New Testament the expression ‘*apechesthai brōmatōn*’ appears *only* here in the entire New Testament. ‘*Apéchō*’ ἀπέχω, the verb *apechesthai* comes from, can mean to ‘abstain’ but its root actually means to keep ‘distant from’, ‘stand away from’, or ‘hold off’.²⁷ The word *bromaton* is a genitive plural of *broma* βρῶμα, which simply means ‘food’ or ‘that which is eaten’.²⁸ Even though it is a plural it can also be rendered a collective noun as ‘food’, as the NASB and NIV do in 1 Corinthians 6:13. Furthermore, *broma* does not signify in any way animal flesh, which in ancient Greek is ‘*kreas*’, κρέας, and *which is a word that Paul could have used if that had been his intention*.²⁹

From the context I maintain that the phrase ‘*apechesthai brōmatōn*’ is depicting a *very negative attitude towards food*, described literally as ‘keeping distant from food’, and this is what Paul is condemning. Furthermore, the emphasis here is probably more on the very limited *quantity*, and in particular the *inner attitude* of self-mortification it was based on, rather than on the specific types of food eaten. It is in this that I believe a lot of exegetes go astray. Paul is not condemning legalism *but a dualistic* asceticism — telling someone not to eat a *certain* food could be legalistic but it wouldn’t qualify automatically as ascetic. He highlights this in the verse 8 when talking about ‘bodily exercise’ *gymnasia sōmatikos*, γυμνασία σωματικός, translated ‘discipline’ by the NASB, but which is referring to the self-mortification he was attacking — in this context it is not about going to the gym, or doing sport, as some have assumed. In fact, the very word ‘asceticism’ comes from the Greek ‘*askeō*’, which technically has the meaning of ‘to exercise’ or ‘to train’. Paul

²⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (London: SPCK, 2010), 96; Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1993), 362-363.

²⁵ Genesis 1:29-30, 9:2-4.

²⁶ See also: Dennis P. Burkitt, “Some diseases characteristic of modern Western civilization,” *British Medical Journal* 1, no. 5848 (1973): 274-278; John McDougall, The McDougall Newsletter, “The Egyptian Mummy Diet Paradox,” modified May, 2011, <https://www.drmcDougall.com/misc/2011nl/may/egyptian.htm>.

²⁷ Strong’s Greek NT no. 568, Thayer’s definition: “Entry for Strong’s 568.” StudyLight.org, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.studylight.org/lexicons/greek/568.html>; “568. Apechō,” Bible Hub, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://biblehub.com/greek/568.htm>.

²⁸ Strong’s Greek NT no. 1033, Thayer’s Greek Lexicon: “1033 Broma,” Bible Hub, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://biblehub.com/str/greek/1033.htm>.

²⁹ Strong’s Greek NT no. 2907, Thayer’s Greek Lexicon: “2907 Kreas,” Bible Hub, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://biblehub.com/str/greek/2907.htm>.

certainly does attack legalism in other passages of Scripture,³⁰ but it is not his intention here. It is true that some proto-Gnostic groups had various dietary restrictions — they were often pescatarian — depending on the sect, at the same time the strand of Gnostic thought that Paul is attacking here is an ascetic one, not just a simple form of ritual purity, *hence also* the mention of not permitting marriage.

As mentioned before, asceticism in Paul's day could be *extremely harsh* and in dietary terms could mean eating the *bare minimum* for survival, eating one meal every three days, or essentially living off bread and water.³¹ In Western contemporary society we have few examples of this, as opposed to the fakirs and ascetics in India and the far east, and perhaps the closest example would be forms of semi-anorexia, semi-starvation, or full-blown anorexia nervosa.³² In the Middle Ages these tendencies developed into what has been described as 'holy anorexia';³³ many 'saints' from this period practically starved themselves — some to death — as a way of attaining holiness.³⁴ In a similar way, the very ascetically oriented groups in the ancient world also practiced harsh and exaggerated forms of fasting. These practices resulted in forms of *severe* deprivation. Some scholars have even historically linked forms of semi-starvation and extreme asceticism in the West directly to the influence of Gnosticism and its dichotomy between spirit and body.³⁵ In general, the ascetic proto-Gnostic groups believed that treating the body and its desires harshly was a means to purity and salvation: one such group led by a famous proto-Gnostic called Marcion was created shortly after 1 Timothy was written in the first century. Marcion had in fact had debates with Polycarp who was a direct disciple of the apostle John. Furthermore, Marcion believed that the physical world was evil and the God of the Old Testament was malevolent: humanity was trapped in the material world but could one day hope to escape and reach a pure spiritual realm. His was a profoundly dualistic worldview; for these reasons Marcion commanded his followers not to marry and practiced harsh forms of asceticism. We are told for example that: 'his habits were exceedingly ascetic; for he considered it the chief object of life to mortify the body. It was a rule with his sect to eat and drink merely enough to sustain existence. They fasted often...'³⁶

This same harsh form of asceticism is also condemned in the letter to the Colossians. This letter is actually clearer in many respects — and helps us to understand better 1 Timothy 4 — as it shows that this form of mortification of the body was a *subset* of ritual purity and legalism but

³⁰ Romans 14, Titus 1:15, Colossians 2:16.

³¹ Jules R. Bemporad, "Self-starvation through the ages: Reflections on the pre-history of anorexia nervosa," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 19, no. 3 (1996): 219;

J. Griffin and E. M. Berry, "Modern day holy anorexia? Religious language in advertising and anorexia nervosa in the West," *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 57 (2003): 43-51; Sarah H. Dickens, "Anorexia nervosa: Some connections with the religious attitude," *British Journal Of Medical Psychology* 73 (2000): 67-76.

³³ The Guardian, "Holy Disorders," Modified March 4, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2004/mar/04/mentalhealth.health>.

³⁴ Catherine of Siena, for example, appeared to be suffering from a severe form of anorexia nervosa and spent years eating hardly anything: David Rampling, "Ascetic ideals and anorexia nervosa," *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 19, no. 2-3 (1985): 89-94.

³⁵ Jules R. Bemporad, "Self-starvation through the ages: Reflections on the pre-history of anorexia nervosa," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 19, no. 3 (1996): 217-220.

³⁶ Lydia M. Child, *Progress of Religious Ideas, through Successive Ages*, vol. 2 (New York: James Miller, 1855), 390.

different from it. After attacking legalism/ritual purity in 2:16, Paul goes on to denounce harsh forms of religious asceticism. Here I include both the NASB and the ESV:

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, (Colossians 2:18, NASB).

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind (Colossians 2:18, ESV).

²⁰ If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ²¹ “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” ²² (which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ²³ These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence (Colossians 2:20-23, NASB).

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:20-23, ESV).

Paul talks of ‘self-abasement’, translated as ‘false humility’ in the NIV *and more precisely as ‘asceticism’* in the ESV, *twice* and once of ‘the severe treatment of the body’ — rendered ‘harsh’ in the NIV. I see the error he is attacking as similar to that of 1 Timothy and as a *severe asceticism and food restriction* which believed that through the mortification of the physical body and the senses a higher form of holiness and spirituality could be attained.³⁷ In chapter three of Colossians Paul underlines true Christian holiness, which is not obtained through the self-mortification but ‘by putting to death’ evil desires and ungodly behaviour. Paul actually *plays* on this contrast in chapter 3 and mocks the false form of ascetic holiness; for Paul and Jesus true holiness is holiness of the heart which expresses itself through love and genuine goodness not by semi-starving oneself: ‘Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience’ (Colossians 3:5-6). In 1 Timothy 4 Paul does essentially the same thing he did in Colossians; in 1 Timothy 4:7-8 Paul contrasts *gymnasia sōmatikos*, ‘bodily exercise’, with true godliness and tells Timothy to ‘exercise’ this: ‘and exercise thyself unto piety,

³⁷ For an overview of severe food restriction see also: Jules R. Bemporad, “Theoretical Medicine, Cultural and Historical Aspects of Eating Disorders,” *Theoretical Medicine* 18, no. 4 (1997): 401–420.

for the bodily exercise is unto little profit, and the piety is to all things profitable, a promise having of the life that now is, and of that which is coming' (KJV). Sadly most commentators seem to ignore Paul's comment on 'bodily exercise', which is *fundamental* in understanding what he meant by '*apechesthai brōmatōn*' or 'abstaining from foods'. We can see how the pattern used in 1 Timothy mimics what Paul does in Colossians (below):

HARSH ASCETICISM		TRUE INNER GODLINESS	
COLOSSIANS 2:18-23	➡➡➡➡➡➡➡	COLOSSIANS 3:5-6	
'HARSH TREATMENT OF THE BODY'	Vs	MORTIFICATION OF THE SINFUL NATURE	
1 TIMOTHY 4:8A	➡➡➡➡➡➡➡	1 TIMOTHY 4:8B	
'BODILY EXERCISE'	Vs	TRUE 'PIETY'/GODLINESS	

3. THE GOODNESS OF CREATION

After having condemned asceticism, Paul goes on to counter the teaching of the proto-Gnostics in regard to creation. Sadly, once again the older translations, while excellent, like the KJV and even YLT obscure the sense of Paul's words by using archaic English expressions. The KJV for example tells us that 'every creature of God is good', which sadly some have erroneously understood as talking about animals being 'good' to eat. 'Every creature' from '*ktisma*' κτίσμα, simply refers to creation, or that which is created, and is not talking in particular about individual animals. The idea that Paul is talking of 'every creature' in the sense of actual animals and meat would not even make sense *biblically or factually* as God did *not* create animals as food in the first two chapters of Genesis. This only occurred later as a *concession* to human hard-heartedness, and perhaps necessity, after the Flood.³⁸ Conversely, I understand the verses as being correctly rendered in the NASB: 'For everything created by God is good'. At this point Paul is actually referring to Genesis 1 when God pronounces his creation 'good' 6 times and finally 'very good' at the end of the chapter, and is refuting the Gnostics' dualistic view of creation which saw the

³⁸ Genesis 9:2-4: the chapters leading up this describe humanity's descent into violence and evil, and the consequent judgment which follows. The language used to describe God's giving of animals to the post-diluvian generation appears to be concessional and based on the low spiritual and moral condition humanity had sunken to. Richard Bauckham describes it as a sort of 'holding operation' until humanity regained a greater spiritual condition. It may also have been based on a lack of plant food available at the time: Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2010), 134-136; Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Exeter: Dartmon, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2010), 23-26.

lower material realm as evil and the spiritual realm above as pure. *Every part* of God's original world is called 'good' as the 7 days of creation progress. The fact that God calls his creation 'good' 7 times in total, with the final utterance being 'very good', indicates the completeness of it: 7 in Scripture is always the number of *divine perfection* and fullness.

The word for 'good' in Hebrew is *tôwb*, טוב, which is feminine and can also mean beautiful, excellent, right (ethically), or pleasant.³⁹ Scripture is communicating that there is complete harmony and beauty in God's perfect world. Furthermore, Paul in this passage is upholding the goodness of Genesis 1 and 2 against the false accounts of creation of the proto-Gnostics: in this sense Paul is contrasting various aspects of the Gnostic account of creation with the biblical one; we see this with the underlining of goodness of God's creation (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), the goodness of food (Genesis 1:29-1:31), and the goodness of marriage and procreation (Genesis 1:28; Genesis 2:18-25). In fact, Paul's quoting of Genesis 1 and 2 can be seen as a *point by point* rebuttal of the dualistic Gnostic creation story:

<u>GNOSTIC ACCOUNT</u>	<u>BIBLICAL ACCOUNT</u>
1. ORIGINAL CREATION: GOOD AND EVIL	1. ORIGINAL CREATION: TOTALLY GOOD
MATERIAL WORLD AND MATTER ARE EVIL	MATERIAL WORLD AND MATTER ARE GOOD
2. MARRIAGE AND PROCREATION ARE EVIL	2. MARRIAGE AND PROCREATION ARE GOOD
3. FOOD IS NOT A BLESSING	3. FOOD IS A BLESSING
MORTIFICATION OF THE BODY	CARE FOR THE BODY
DENY ALL SENSUAL PLEASURES; REJECT CREATION	ENJOYMENT OF GOD AND CREATION

It is important to reread the sevenfold pronouncement of 'good' in chapter 1 of Genesis and notice how veganism and non-violence, far from being demonic, are *in fact* foundational to the *final* pronouncement by God that all of creation is 'very good':

- 1) ⁴ God saw that the light **was good**; and God separated the light from the darkness.
- 2) ¹⁰ God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that **it was good**.
- 3) ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw **that it was good**.
- 4) ¹⁷ God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that **it was good**.
- 5) ²¹ God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that **it was good**.

³⁹ Strong's Hebrew no. 2896: "2896. Towb," Bible Hub, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/2896.htm>.

6) ²⁵ God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that **it was good**.

7) ²⁸ God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” ²⁹ Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; ³⁰ and to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to every thing that moves on the earth which has life, *I have given every green plant for food*”; and it was so. ³¹ God saw all that He had made, and behold, **it was very good**. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day (NASB).

The passage from 1 Timothy 4 we have been discussing would, therefore, best be understood as highlighting how *God’s creation*, which was so beautifully described in Genesis 1, should be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth, as it is God’s gift to us and was pronounced good by him.

4. JEWISH TRADITION AND FOOD

In this context it is interesting to analyse how Jewish tradition has understood the blessing of food before meals. I believe this may actually be closer to Paul’s worldview compared to the Graeco-Roman culture within which Christianity initially grew, and the other cultures it has been influenced by. Interestingly, in Jewish tradition meat and fish, together with animal foods, come last in the list of foods to be blessed, and do not actually receive a *specific* blessing over them but only a general one. They are not even mentioned by name and come last; in many ways their blessing appears *concessionary*:⁴⁰ this helps to show the limited place meat and fish actually have, at least *symbolically*, in Jewish tradition and what were considered the important ‘foods’. On the contrary, plant-foods of various kinds come first and each category receives a specific blessing. If bread is eaten this is blessed first and the blessing over it covers all foods except wine/grape juice. On Sabbaths and festivals wine/grape juice is the first to be blessed. The order of blessing, *bracha*, when there is no bread is: 1) Wine/Grape Juice, 2) Baked grains, 3) Tree fruits, 4) Vegetables, 5) all the other foods, including meat and fish.⁴¹ It is especially important to read the texts of the various blessings in order to understand how Jewish tradition in the final blessing, the *Shehakol* — which simply means ‘by whose word all things come to be’ — does not even directly bless, or mention, animal foods but merely blesses God more generally as Creator, and for his Word:

⁴⁰ See also: Andrew Linzey and Dan Cohn-Sherbock, *After Noah* (London: Mowbray, 1997), 56-58.

⁴¹ Richard H. Schwartz, *Judaism and Vegetarianism* (New York: Lantern Books, 2001), 10-11.

1) *Hamotzi*: The Blessing on Bread

הָאֵרֶץ מִן לֶחֶם הַמּוֹצִיא הָעוֹלָם מִלֶּךְ לְהִינוּ-אֱ-יָ אֵתָהּ בְּרוּךְ

BA-RUCH A-TAH A-DO-NOI
ELO-HAI-NU ME-LECH HA-O-LAM
HA-MO-TZI LE-CHEM MIN HA-A-RETZ.
Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the
Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

2) *Mezonot*: The Blessing on the Five Grains

מְזוֹנוֹת מִיָּנִי בּוֹרֵא הָעוֹלָם מִלֶּךְ לְהִינוּ-אֱ-יָ אֵתָהּ בְּרוּךְ

BA-RUCH A-TAH A-DO-NOI
ELO-HAI-NU ME-LECH HA-O-LAM
BO-RAI MI-NAI ME-ZO-NOT.
Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the
Universe, Who creates various kinds of sustenance.

3) *Hagafen*: The Blessing on Wine & Grape Juice

הַגָּפֶן פְּרִי בּוֹרֵא הָעוֹלָם מִלֶּךְ לְהִינוּ-אֱ-יָ אֵתָהּ בְּרוּךְ

BA-RUCH A-TAH A-DO-NOI
ELO-HAI-NU ME-LECH HA-O-LAM
BO-RAI PRI HA-GA-FEN.
Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the
Universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine.

4) *Ha'etz*: The Blessing on Fruits

הָעֵץ פְּרִי בּוֹרֵא הָעוֹלָם מִלֶּךְ לְהִינוּ-אֱ-יָ אֵתָהּ בְּרוּךְ

BA-RUCH A-TAH A-DO-NOI
ELO-HAI-NU ME-LECH HA-O-LAM
BO-RAI PRI HA-AITZ.
Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the
Universe, Who creates the fruit of the tree.

5) *Ha'adamah*: The Blessing on Vegetables

הָאֲדָמָה פְּרִי בּוֹרֵא הָעוֹלָם מִלֶּךְ לְהִינוּ-אֱ-יָ אֵתָהּ בְּרוּךְ

BA-RUCH A-TAH A-DO-NOI
ELO-HAI-NU ME-LECH HA-O-LAM
BO-RAI PRI HA-A-DA-MAH.
Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the
Universe, Who creates the fruit of the earth.

6) *Shehakol*: The Blessing on All Other Foods, including Meat and Fish

בְּדִבְרֵי נִהְיָה שֶׁהַכֹּל הָעוֹלָם מִלֶּךְ לְהִינוּ-אֱ-יָ אֵתָהּ בְּרוּךְ

**BA-RUCH A-TAH A-DO-NOI
ELO-HAI-NU ME-LECH HA-O-LAM
SHE-HA-KOL NI-H'YAH BI-D'VA-RO.
Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the
Universe, by Whose word all things came to be.⁴²**

5. A DENIAL OF THE INCARNATION

Finally, it is also important to note that 1 Timothy 4 comes immediately after the end of 1 Timothy 3. Chapter *divisions* are not actually part of Scripture, and while often useful for reference purposes, here they end up obfuscating the passage. The verses directly before our chapter, 1 Timothy 3:16, underline the *incarnation*, and the resurrection, as foundational to the gospel: 'He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.' This is in line with the apostle John's condemnation of those who denied the incarnation:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world (1 John 4:1-3, NIV).⁴³

In this sense, Paul in 1 Timothy 4 is simply continuing what he said in 1 Timothy 3:16: the faith that is 'departed from' is the faith in the *incarnation, death and resurrection* of Christ which he just highlighted, and which the proto-Gnostics strongly denied.

It would appear that *instead* of applying the apostolic and scriptural test for orthodoxy, namely the *incarnation* of Christ and belief in Jesus' death and resurrection, as John, Peter and Paul underlined in their letters,⁴⁴ and for orthopraxy, that is, a life of true inner holiness and love,⁴⁵ many Christians and churches have created a *false dietary test* for orthodoxy. Belief in the incarnation of God in Christ and in the crucifixion and resurrection as the foundation of the gospel, and a life of authentic holiness, have been replaced by a legalistic and unbiblical dietary imposition that makes meat-eating the *hallmark* of a true Christian, a doctrine nowhere to be found in Scripture, and which denies Jesus' teaching.

⁴² "Texts of Blessings Before Eating," Chabad.org, accessed March 13, 2018, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/90551/jewish/Texts-of-Blessings-Before-Eating.htm.

⁴³ See also 2 John 7.

⁴⁴ Paul highlights the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 (ESV): 'Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures'.

⁴⁵ 1 John 3:1-19.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, in this essay I have argued that 1 Timothy 4 is simply reiterating the teachings of traditional Judaism about the goodness of God's creation, marriage and the body. It does this within the framework of Genesis 1 and 2 and also based on the incarnation and resurrection of Christ in the body, which definitively vindicated the goodness of creation, and of God. I hold that in these verses Paul is condemning a *particularly harsh* form of asceticism in regard to food and the body. Paul's condemnation of this form of dualistic asceticism in 1 Timothy 4 follows closely the same pattern used in Colossians 2 and 3: it juxtaposes severe bodily mortification and false humility with true inner holiness and love. This is also one of the reasons why Paul at the end of the letter talks about 'God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment' (1 Timothy 6:17), in contrast to the Gnostics and their depreciation of the physical world. Moreover, I maintain that Paul is not inventing some novel doctrine that Christians have to eat meat or animal foods in order to please God, but is underlining that *food*, in general, and creation — having been pronounced good — are to be received with thanksgiving.

What I have attempted to show is how in the exegesis of 1 Timothy 4 the chapter has been severed from its immediate context, the other Scriptures of the New Testament, the overarching biblical story that began in Genesis, a historical understanding of diet, and traditional concepts found within Judaism. In this distorted interpretation Paul ends up condemning and contradicting the very Genesis account that he was in fact strenuously defending. Paradoxically, in this view Paul is cut off from the Hebrew Scriptures and is *himself* cast as a sort of Gnostic who believes that God's original perfection was demonic.

Jesus' mission was — and is — to restore the perfect world of Genesis 1 and 2.⁴⁶ Moreover, death, killing and predation are the result of sin in the Bible story,⁴⁷ and meat eating is a concession only made by God in Genesis 9 after the Flood. Jesus himself considered Genesis 1 and 2 to be God's ideal world (Matthew 19:8), and we are told that one day God intends to restore it (Isaiah 11:6-9, Romans 8:19-23, Revelation 21-22). All this makes up the Bible story that has at its centre the cosmic redemption — of humans, animals and creation — purchased by Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross: this is also the framework for the gospel message of which Paul was both a preacher and apostle. Conversely, many interpretations of 1 Timothy 4 appear to create a fracture in the Bible narrative, and end up pitting the New Testament against the Old.

No doubt various factors have brought about what I believe to be a deeply distorted interpretation of 1 Timothy 4, including a general Church tradition and the development of the

⁴⁶ Matthew 18:11.

⁴⁷ See also Andrew Linzey, *Animal Gospel: Christian Faith as though Animals Mattered* (London: Hodder&Stoughton, 1998), 32-36.

Christianity in the West which, while deeply interesting, go beyond the scope of this essay.⁴⁸ This interpretation has also been used more recently by forces within society which are seeking to make a case against the growing vegan movement. And yet I have attempted to demonstrate that the whole argument simply falls apart under greater scrutiny, and creates stilted and legalistic doctrines which are contradicted by the rest of Scripture. This interpretation also seems to misrepresent God and his character. God is merciful to both man and animals: ‘The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made’.⁴⁹ Furthermore, meat-eating is made into a *false* test for Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy: a doctrine that does not appear in Scripture, which upholds Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection, and authentic Christian holiness based on love, as the basis for both.

Contrary to what is often promoted, I maintain that veganism is a dietary choice that is perfectly in line with Scripture if a Christian is led by God to make it. Our freedom in Christ, motivated by love, and guided by the Spirit allows for it.⁵⁰ Paul talked about Christians abstaining from certain foods for the Lord (Romans 14:1-5), and even affirmed that he would never eat meat again if necessary (1 Corinthians 8:13). Jesus taught that what counts is the inner disposition of the believer: God’s truly looks to the heart (Matthew 15:11-20). While it may not have always been possible for all believers throughout history, veganism still represents God’s original blueprint for humanity and new reasons for being vegan have arisen *strongly* in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These range from human health, animal cruelty, the environment, to the use of resources and world hunger, with many of these become more compelling by the day.⁵¹ But above all veganism can be seen as a sign of hope for the restoration of God’s creation, and a disruption of the history of death and violence of the world. In this sense, it can help to create a horizon of expectation for the coming kingdom of God, and the ultimate and final victory of Christ (Revelation 19-22).

In fine, it appears sad, and dumbfounding, that God’s ideal, and future hope, have been maligned to the point of being called ‘demonic’ or ‘evil’; no doubt even this is part of the pain and mockery that Christ has to bear in his journey through history, and it is part of the cross that Christian vegans and vegetarians have had to faithfully carry with him. But, together with the apostle Paul, we eagerly look forward to the coming resurrection of the body and the restoration of all of God’s *good* creation.

⁴⁸ See also Grumett and Muers, *Theology on the menu*, 89-106.

⁴⁹ Psalm 36:6; Psalm 145:9.

⁵⁰ Galatians 5:13-25.

⁵¹ See Cowspiracy, “The Facts,” accessed 15 March, 2018, <http://www.cowspiracy.com/facts/>; Marco Springmann et al., “Analysis and valuation of the health and climate change cobenefits of dietary change,” *PNAS* 113, no. 15 (2016): 4146-4151; Bojana Bajželj et al., “Importance of food-demand management for climate mitigation,” *Nature Climate Change* 4 (2014): 924-929; Gidon Eshel and Pamela A. Martin, “Diet, Energy, and Global Warming,” *Earth Interactions*, 10 (2006): 1-17; FAIRR, “Factory Farming: Assessing Investment Risks, 2016,” accessed 19 November, 2017, http://www.fairr.org/wp-content/uploads/FAIRR_Report_Factory_Farming_Assessing_Investment_Risks.pdf; Wired, Brandon Keim, “Swine Flu Ancestor Born on U.S. Factory Farms,” modified May 1, 2009, <https://www.wired.com/2009/05/swineflufarm/>.

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