

June 2025 by Tiina

Then I asked “Lord, which is the way?

Do I go to the right or the left?”

And the Lord answered, “Look straight ahead,

Don’t turn aside and don’t ever look back.”

I persisted, “Lord, show me a sign.”

He replied “I am always with you,

Whether you turn to the left or the right,

I will prosper you in all that you do.”

The Jewish God who argues with us:

When I was a teenager in high school, an English teacher of ours had a bulletin board on the wall next to the door for short articles, poetry, and notices of events. One day as I was leaving class I noticed a copy of a recent article from the newspaper: Its headline read: “God grows as man grows.” This statement seemed troubling at first... was the author trying to say that God is created by man... or was he inferring that as man grows in his faith that God’s mercy seems greater?

Take for instance, the reformation – that rebellion against the hierarchy of the church and the sale of indulgences led by Martin Luther – which was itself the culmination of years of public discontent with the far-reaching arm and onerous intrusiveness of religion into government. In so doing, Luther bravely articulated what many educated people already believed: that congregants should be allowed to read the Bible and interpret the scriptures for themselves. This was a problem for the church because it meant giving up power, but also because it conflicted with religious dogma... dogma which wasn’t reflected in the words of the Bible. And once the Bible was in their hands, this knowledge gave birth to a massive religious revival movement which in many ways led not only to the Reformation, but also to the separation of church and state, as well as the freedom of thought and freedom of speech that we enjoy today.

This freedom to question authority and our belief in equality isn’t a recent development, but in fact, is an inheritance of the Judeo-Christian tradition; for in contrast to the Muslim God who demands total submission, the Judeo-Christian God is a God who throughout the Bible demonstrates that He wants to have a personal relationship with us. Even more

surprising, He is a God who allows us to argue with Him over everything from our daily diet to what should be the punishment for sin.

Of course, the idea that an immutable God would deign to argue with His flock is in some ways a shocking idea to many Christian fundamentalists, but this idea has been taken for granted for thousands of years within the Jewish faith, something that is apparent even in the New Testament as the scribes and Pharisees argued repeatedly with Christ over the law within Jewish traditions.

And yet for hundreds of years the authorities in the church used people's ignorance of the Bible to exploit their power... even to the afterlife. Confessionals and indulgences were used to manipulate, or milk the guilt of the penitent for cash for the church, and rosaries heaped mountains of prayer upon the sinner as punishment... despite the fact that the Bible warns against rote memorization and repetitive, mindless praying; As it says in Matthew 6:7 "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words."

Rather, God is responsive to, and even encourages critical thinking. In fact, He actually seems to reward those who challenge Him. For instance, the first diet given to man in the garden of Eden is one that consisted exclusively of fruit and nuts; As it says in Genesis 1:29 "And God said, See, I have given you every herb *that* yields seed, which *is* on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food." No meat was included, as there was never supposed to be any bloodshed.

But by the next book, Exodus, man was already beginning to test those dietary boundaries. When the Jews were brought out of Egypt and wandering in the desert, God sent them manna, a bread from heaven. But manna alone did not satisfy them. They clamored for meat, and so in Exodus 16:12 the Lord speaks to Moses again, saying "I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel. Speak to them, saying, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread....'"

However, by the following book, Leviticus, the types of meat that God's chosen people were allowed to eat was being reigned in again, their diet restricted to particular animals and particular parts of the animal. Fat and blood were not allowed, and only those animals which subsisted on a vegetarian diet were included. Effectively excluded were all carnivorous animals and omnivores... such as pigs, rats, bear, and shellfish, which limited foods to those lower on the food chain.

It's a fascinating account of a back and forth, almost a sort of negotiation between God and His people, and it is stunning not only in this regard, but because this type of negotiation was repeated again and again throughout the Bible.

In Genesis 18, Abraham argues with God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, almost as if he were bargaining at a market. First, Abraham asks God to spare the city for fifty righteous men. Yet after his request is granted, Abraham still isn't satisfied; so he asks again, lowering the number to forty-five righteous men, then forty, then twenty, and finally, asking, and being granted his plea that God spare the city for only ten righteous men!

In Genesis 32, we even find an astounding account of one man, Jacob, actually wrestling with God all night. Finally, God says "Let me go, for the day breaks" but Jacob would not let Him go until he received a blessing, so God blesses him, saying "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."

This renaming (in this case of Jacob to Israel) is yet another example that is frequently used throughout the Bible to show us that as man grows, God grants him more rights, and more responsibilities to live up to. In Genesis 17, for example, God renames Abram to Abraham, and his wife Sarai to Sarah, blessing them.

These stories seem to make a case for the idea that God is not only interacting with us, but is allowing us a degree of autonomy as well. The Bible seems to state, over and over again, in different ways with different stories, that man is not just a victim of fate or predestination, but that he also has free will, the ability to change the course of his life with his determination and fortitude.

For instance, in Romans 14, we hear "For one believes he may eat all things; but he who is weak eats *only* vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him...." Romans 14:5 continues, "One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind...."

In other words, this passage isn't only talking about 1st century conscientious objectors refusing meat in favor of vegetarianism, it's a broader statement about making independent judgements based on your conscience and an ongoing conversation with God. There isn't an absolute. It isn't laid out in black and white. It's a very significant statement about the amazing amount of freedom God has given the individual, provided He is being honored and consulted in the decision-making process.

That's because God's design was to have a personal relationship with each of us. So it is perhaps no coincidence that the Bible doesn't exactly cover every modern-day luxury or convenience, or each radical new medical procedure point by point. Instead, we're left to navigate and negotiate our own individual solutions (even while some pedantic Christian sects still condemn surgery, using power tools, or driving a car.

In fact, many Christians want to interpret the Bible in absolutes. Yet in contrast to man's often literal application of the law, God asks us to focus not on the letter of the law, but on the spirit of the law... and the spirit of the law is not about black and white absolutes, but shades of grey. The spirit of the law is not about easy answers, but hard questions.

So while churches and denominations still argue amongst each other about how to worship, who to vote for, and which passages of the Bible to follow and which passages to ignore, Romans 14 tells us that **our own conviction** determines what is sin; "One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind..."

So you see, this passage from Romans is about faith... but it is also about a God that allows us individual choice. Whether vegetarian or meat eater, whether you celebrate birthdays and holy days or all days as alike – whether you are pro-life, or pro-choice – makes no difference to Him. God allows the individual to make that determination: Our range of choices and the way we see God will be defined by the breadth of our faith. That is, if we have a rigid religion and a narrow faith we will see God as rigid and demanding. If we have a less demanding religion and a broad faith we will see God as open-minded and tolerant.

"God grows as man grows" – in knowledge, in faith and in conviction. Or, speaking metaphorically, the size of our faith is in many ways a reflection of the size of our God.

Then Moses answered, "Look, they won't believe me and they won't listen to me. Instead, they'll say, 'The LORD didn't appear to you.'" "What's that in your hand?" the LORD asked him. Moses answered, "A staff." Then God said, "Throw it to the ground." He threw it to the ground and it became a snake. Moses ran away from it. – Exodus 4: 1-3