

**Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists**

**BIBLICAL AND ADVENTIST VIEWS
OF A NUTRITIONIST'S WORLD**

**Joan Sabaté
Department of Nutrition
Loma Linda University**

**2nd Symposium on the Bible and Adventist Scholarship
Juan Dolio, Dominican Republic
March 15-20, 2004**

I. Introduction

Although food has always been essential to man, the actual discipline of nutrition is relatively new. Its roots go back to the Garden of Eden when God gave man instructions on what to eat and not to eat, but nutrition only became a formal academic discipline in the last part of the Nineteenth Century.

Whether based on belief or science, certain foods have been credited with healing powers beyond sustenance properties. More than two thousand years ago, Hippocrates, the precursor of modern medicine, coined the aphorism “May your food be your medicine, and may your medicine be your food.” The play on words by this wise Greek sage demonstrates that our daily food, more than merely sustaining us, may contain curative properties. Although postulated throughout the course of medical history, scientific evidence has only recently established the fact that some nutrients in our diet are agents that cause or cure certain diseases.

It was first demonstrated in studies with laboratory animals, and later on humans, that the lack of certain foods or nutrients in the diet caused deficiency diseases such as rickets, and that the inclusion of those foods cured patients with those diseases. Although over one billion people worldwide do not have enough foods to eat, and about one third of the children in developing countries are malnourished, deficiency diseases are not a problem for most of the world population. Indeed, many actually suffer from and die of chronic diseases resulting from “overnutrition”. In recent years nutritional investigation has concentrated on the effect diet has on the prevention and treatment of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and obesity, since these are currently the most frequent.

For the nutritionist who is a believer, and especially for the Adventist nutritionist, what are the unique perspectives that the Bible and Adventism have to offer? The purpose of this paper is to provide one believer's view on the world of nutrition.

II. Biblical Views

The Bible is rife with references to foods. Hundreds, if not thousands of Biblical verses mention many different foods and agricultural products. Also widely referenced in the Bible text are the food preparation techniques and agricultural practices of that time and place. In a way, the Bible is a rich historical and anthropological source of information of the populations, societies and cultures that developed a few thousand years ago in the Middle East and around the Mediterranean. There are treatises on the subject of foods and the Bible, primarily from the theological or anthropological perspectives. For the believers, those that take the Bible as the Word of God, there is the potential to attribute the many cultural references to food preparation and consumption in the biblical text as normative behavior. As a nutritionist and believer, I have distilled three viewpoints from the Bible teachings.

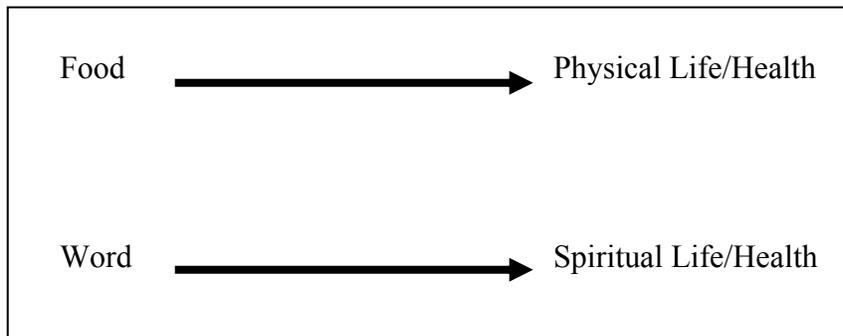
A. Biblical Account of Food Recommendations

The Bible is a source of normative food behavior. However, most references to food in the Bible may not apply. There are few commands by God with respect to the human diet. These are found in the account of the creation of man, after the Fall, and after the Flood. These are three unquestionable episodes of God's intervention into human history in which, among other things, God gave specific instructions with regard to food consumption. First, God gave man a diet of fruits, nuts and grains reserving greens for the animals. "Then God said, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed

in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.’ And it was so.” (Gen 1:29-30 NIV) Second, after the Fall, God allowed man to partake of the food of the animals: the greens. “You shall eat the herb of the field.” (Gen 3:18 ASV) Third, at the Flood, God specifically allowed man to consume the animals themselves. “Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.” (Gen 9:3 NIV) Afterward, mainly through Moses, there are innumerable specifications for those who choose to eat meat, namely clean and unclean, blood drainage, mixing animal products (meat and milk) and many more. All these become a small matter for those who follow a meatless diet, as prescribed in chapter 1 of Genesis.

B. Nourishment is essential for body and spirit – both are needed for man’s well being

Figure 1



The links between food intake and physical health is a biblical insight. The Bible also makes a clear connection between spiritual food and spiritual life and health. *Food is to soma as The Word is to psyche.* Figure 1 depicts these all pervasive Biblical links and parallelism. We need to nourish our body as well as our spirit. “It is written ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matt 4:4 NIV). Nourishment is essential

for body and spirit – both are needed for man’s well being. As we need to take good care of our physical being, so also we need to take good care of our spiritual well being.

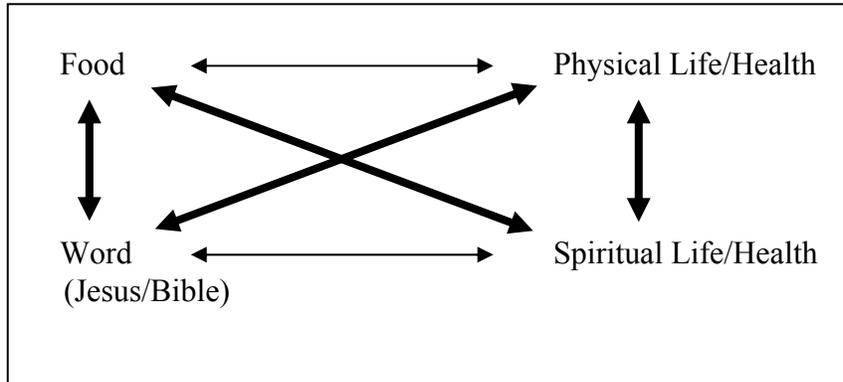
The first dietary intervention trial ever recorded in the literature is described in the book of Daniel (1:11-20). This nutritional experiment, with remarkable health outcomes, illustrates the importance the Bible places on the link between food choices and physical health.

The teachings of the Bible are first and foremost for our spiritual life. Jesus and the Bible are spiritual food for the believer. Given the inherent difficulty to comprehend spiritual concepts and the relative simplicity to understand physical ones, Jesus and the Biblical authors made ample use of food and food practices to illustrate spiritual sustenance. They also draw parallels between the well known relationship between diet and body and the more subtle relationship between spiritual disciplines and spiritual life. For instance “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35 NIV), “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” (John 6:53 NIV) and “What goes into a man's mouth [*food?*] does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, [*words?*] that is what makes him ‘unclean.’” (Matt 15:11 NIV)

Similarly, the nutritional concepts of food choices and food quality are used by the Biblical authors to illustrate “spiritual food” choices and quality. As nutritionists emphasize quality of food and food choices, the Biblical authors used these concepts for the “spiritual food.” The complaint of Paul to the Corinthians “I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it.” 1 Cor 3:2, clearly illustrates this point. Paul wants us to strive for the best quality of spiritual food. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” Phil 4:8 (NIV)

C. Interactions between food, spiritual food, physical and spiritual life

Figure 2



The potential interconnections between the four elements – food, body, the Word (Jesus and the Bible) and spiritual life are delineated in Figure 2. The connections between food and physical life/health and between the Word and spiritual life were explored in the previous section, and are depicted with their arrows in figure 2. Here follows the concept of a Biblical view of the interconnection between all four elements:

- Paul’s assertion that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 6:19) is perhaps the most powerful theological reason to take care of our physical health. Moreover, it is the most explicit Biblical connection between the body and the spirit.
- Eating habits are coupled with spiritual discipline. Fasting (the partial or total avoidance of food for a given time) and praying (a spiritual discipline) are commonly associated and related to the spiritual life. Diet and other behaviors relate to our

spiritual life “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Cor 10:31 NIV).

- What we eat may also affect the spiritual life of others as well. Paul’s admonition to not offend our brothers speaks to this issue. “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to stumble” (Rom 14:21 NIV)

III. Adventist views

Religious thought seeks its expression in diet, and diet reflects religious thought (Blix, 2001). Most religions have specific norms of diet and foods, but Adventism seems to be at the forefront of most creeds in this issue (Sabaté, 2004).

A. Counsels on Diet and Foods

Most of the Adventist idiosyncrasies on dietary patterns have been summarized in the book *Counsels on Diet and Foods* (White, 1938). This book is a compilation of Ellen White’s diverse writings on the subject. These were intentionally collected in the late 1920’s for the purpose of serving as a textbook for the students in the School of Dietetics at the College of Medical Evangelists (now named Loma Linda University). It has since served as the “reference manual” for the average member, pastor and health professional in search of guidance, inspiration or specific normative behavior.

The book provides spiritual and health reasons for believers to reform their diets. It also makes an eloquent connection between dietary habits and physical, as well as spiritual, health. But it does not stop at generalities. *Counsels on Diet and Foods* contains very specific recommendations on what to eat, how to eat, and what to avoid. Recommendations are made on consumption of fruits, vegetables, cereals, legumes, and nuts; to avoid meats, condiments, heavy

desserts and stimulant drinks. And going beyond foods, it even deals with the few nutrients known at that time: fats and proteins. In a seamless treatise the book deals with nutrients, foods, and food patterns.

Over all, based on the teachings of this book and despite the cultural influences, a clear message has survived in many lands and persisted through the years in Adventism: the adoption of a simple diet based on plant foods, avoiding flesh but including some animal products: dairy and eggs. What, in brief, has been named a lacto-ovo-vegetarian diet.

B. The evolving curve of nutritional paradigms approach Adventists view

Adventism has distinctive worldviews and these views concern many disciplines. The development of each discipline has followed different paths with respect to the pertinent Adventist viewpoint. The paradigms of some disciplines have evolved in ways that are utterly opposed to the Adventist viewpoints. This appears to be the case for some natural sciences.

On the contrary, nutritional sciences, a discipline that started, chronologically speaking, at the same time as Adventism, have followed a different path. Over the years, the “asymptotic curve” of successive paradigms shifts in nutritional sciences has approached the “line” of Adventist viewpoints on diet and foods. (*Asymptotic* is a curve whose distance to a given line tends to zero.) A review of the scientific literature of the last fifty years clearly shows that many nutrition concepts and ideas are coming progressively closer to the corresponding Adventist notions (Sabaté, 2001). This convergence is so evident in the last few years that one gets the impression that nutritionists are “catching up” with Adventists. There may be no other instance among the scientific disciplines where these trends are so evident.

The following section illustrates the thoughts expressed above with one of the most comprehensive and typical Adventist notions on the subject – vegetarian diets. This is an

abridged version of my keynote address to the Fourth International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition (Sabaté, 2003).

B.1. The contribution of vegetarian diets to health and disease – changing paradigms

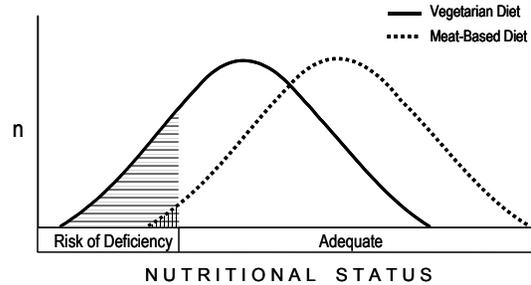
Advances in nutrition research during the past few decades have changed scientists' understanding of the contribution of vegetarian diets to human health and disease. Diets based largely on plant foods, such as well-balanced vegetarian diets, best prevent nutrient deficiencies as well as diet-related chronic diseases. However, restrictive or unbalanced vegetarian diets may lead to nutritional deficiencies, particularly in situations of high metabolic demand such as growing children or pregnant and lactating women. If vegetarian diets are generally healthier than diets based largely on animal products, this constitutes an important departure from previous views on dietary recommendations to prevent disease.

Based on different paradigms, Figure 3 depicts 3 models of the population health risks and benefits of vegetarian and meat-based diets. Section A shows the model prevailing through the 1960s comparing the adequacy of vegetarian diets with meat-based diets. The basic tenet of this model was that a population following a vegetarian diet was at higher risk for developing nutrient deficiency diseases than a population following a meat-based diet. This early model used a unilateral approach to the relationship between vegetarian diets and health because it only gave attention to the health risks and not to the potential benefits.

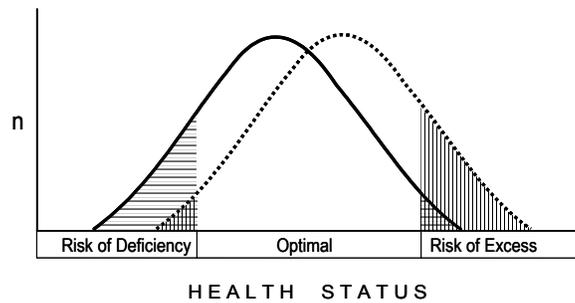
However, during the past 20 years, scores of nutritional epidemiologic studies have documented important and quantifiable benefits of vegetarian and other plant-based diets, namely a reduction of risk of many chronic degenerative diseases and total mortality.

Figure 3. Models depicting the population health risks and benefits of vegetarian and meat-based diets*

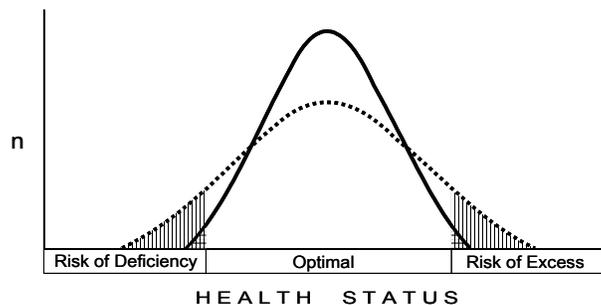
A. Early model prevailing through the 1960s on the adequacy of vegetarian diets.



B. Past model prevailing from the 1970s through the 1990s .



C. Proposed/Current model



*. The area under each curve represents the proportion of individuals in a population for which a given diet pattern may be a health risk or benefit (adequate or optimal). At both extremes of the health continuum, there is risk of disease for deficiency or excess of nutrients. The area in the center represents the proportion of individuals for which the diet is optimal or most beneficial. The risk-to-benefit ratio of a diet is defined as the proportion of subjects at risk divided by the proportion of subjects benefiting.

Vegetarians living in affluent countries enjoy remarkably good health, exemplified by low rates of obesity, coronary diseases, diabetes, and many cancers, and increased longevity. Those benefits are possibly due to the absence of meat in the diet, as well as to a greater amount and variety of plant foods. While meat intake has been related to increased risk for a variety of chronic diseases such as ischemic heart disease and some cancers, abundant consumption of essential food components of the vegetarian diet such as fruit and vegetables, legumes and unrefined cereals and nuts has consistently been associated with a lower risk for many chronic degenerative diseases, and in some cases with increased longevity.

Section B of Figure 3 depicts the model prevailing from the 1970s through the 1990s for the health risks and benefits of vegetarian and meat-based diets. In this model, there is no overall difference on the risk-to-benefit ratio of one compared with the other diet pattern. This model is likely to encourage the conclusion that no overall improvements can be accomplished if the population distribution curve is displaced to the right or left by changing the mix of plant and animal foods in the diet. If the curves moved, the same amount gained in one end would be lost at the other end.

A new paradigm is emerging. For the past 10–20 years epidemiologic, clinical, and basic science research on the health effects of several plant foods is greatly expanding scientists' understanding of the role these foods have on human health and nutrition. Antioxidants, abundantly present in plant foods, have been postulated to prevent cardiovascular disease and certain cancers. Anticarcinogenic properties have been described for a myriad of substances present mainly in fruits, vegetables, and other plant foods, namely vitamins and phytochemicals. Section C presents the proposed /current model that captures the new paradigm on the contribution of vegetarian and meat-based diets to human health and disease. In this new model

the relative contribution to the causation and prevention of diseases for excess or deficiency is clearly unequal for the two contrasted diets, with a more favorable benefit-to-risk ratio for the vegetarian diet.

This series of models in Figure 3 encapsulates the evolution of scientific understanding on the overall effects of these dietary patterns on human health. Recent scientific advances seem to have resulted in a paradigm shift: diets largely based on plant-foods, such as well-balanced vegetarian diets, are viewed more as improving health than as causing disease, in contrast with meat based diets.

IV. Summary and Conclusions

This paper has outlined Biblical and Adventists views as they relate to the world of a nutritionist-believer. The Bible is an authoritative source of information on the design of a healthful diet for man. It also, on it's own, provides sustenance for the spiritual life, as food provides nourishment for the body. All these elements are interconnected and one has an effect on the others.

Adventism has unique views on food and nutrition. These views are becoming more mainstream within the scientific community. In contrast with other disciplines, the evolution of the nutrition paradigms have, over the years, shifted toward many of the Adventist views.

References

Bible Versions: NIV – New International Version; ASV – American Standard Version.

Blix, G. (2001) Religion, Spirituality, and a Vegetarian Dietary. In *Vegetarian Nutrition* [Sabaté, J. editor], CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL, 507-532.

Sabaté, J. (2004) Religion, Diet and Research: Invited Commentary. *Br J Nutr*, (in press).

Sabaté, J. (2003) The contribution of vegetarian diets to health and disease: a paradigm shift? *Am J Clin Nutr*, 78:502S-507S.

Sabaté, J. (2001) The Public Health Risk-to-Benefit Ratio of Vegetarian Diets – Changing Paradigms. In *Vegetarian Nutrition* [Sabaté, J. editor], CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL, 19-32.

White EG. *Counsels on Diet and Foods*. Washington DC:Review and Herald; 1938

General Reading

Fraser GE. *Diet, Life Expectancy and Chronic Disease, Studies of Seventh-day Adventists and Other Vegetarians*. Oxford University Press, New York; 2003.

Sabaté, J editor. *Vegetarian Nutrition*. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL;2001.