

23 August 2015

All Creatures Great and Small
Psalm 50:7-15; Proverbs 12:10

Here's how people in the Ancient Near East during Bible times related to animals. To begin with, they were the first to domesticate them to serve their own needs. That was partly because the animals indigenous to the Middle East *can* be domesticated – oxen can be trained to pull a plow, and African wildebeests and American bison can't, for instance – but whatever the reason, the people of the Near East were able to make animals their servants. Second, those domesticated animals became society's measure of wealth. We see this throughout the Bible. Abraham's wealth, Jacob's wealth, Job's wealth – all are measured in terms of sheep, goats, oxen, camels, and female donkeys. I don't know why they specify *female* donkeys, but they do. Male jackasses were not valued, apparently. Oversupply, maybe. Anyway, animals were trained to serve humans and were valued as property. Third, Ancient Near Eastern worship invariably involved sacrificing animals to their gods: animals were sacrificed to Baal, El, Chemosh, Marduk, Molech, and Rimmon. You can see why. How else to show devotion to the gods but by giving up what was valuable? And value was measured in terms of livestock. This was how Israel's neighbors related to animals, and we see the same patterns in Israel. There, too, animals were servants for humans, were prized possessions, and were sacrificed to show devotion to their God.

But even as the Old Testament conforms to the customs and practices of Israel's cultural context, the Hebrew Bible also bears witness to a different approach to animals. In Genesis 1, we read that God created the animals first and declared that they were good – *before* creating humans. That's an important distinction. God created and approved of the animals completely independently of humans. Animals are loved by God first of all for their own sake, not for the sake of how useful they are to us. *Animals are not just our servants; they are valuable in and of themselves.*

This leads to a second distinction. If animals are important to God for their own sake, then they are not just *our* possessions, to dispose of as we wish. And this, in turn, calls into question the whole notion of worshiping by means of sacrificing animals. I read to you now from Psalm 50, verses 7-15.

⁷ *'Hear, O my people, and I will speak,
O Israel, I will testify against you.
I am God, your God.*

⁸ *Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt-offerings are continually before me.*

⁹ *I will not accept a bull from your house,
or goats from your folds.*

¹⁰ *For every wild animal of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.*

¹¹ *I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field is mine.*

¹² *'If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.*
¹³ *Do I eat the flesh of bulls,
or drink the blood of goats?*
¹⁴ *Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and pay your vows to the Most High.*
¹⁵ *Call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.'*

Here God says simply, “I don’t need your animal sacrifices; the animals are already mine. I take no pleasure in their blood on your altars. If you want to worship me, be grateful for what I have given you, keep your promises to me, and turn to me when you’re in trouble. That’s all I want.”

Now, this radically different approach to worship didn’t take. The people of Israel continued worshiping by means of animal sacrifice – off and on, at least – right up through the time of Christ. Cultural patterns are hard to shake. But this passage – and similar readings in 1 Samuel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah – suggests a deeper sort of worship, implying a different sort of relationship to the animal world. Animals are not tools or toys for our use or amusement. They are our co-creatures, loved by God for their own sake just as we are. We all belong to God. In the words of the hymn, we are “all creatures of our God and king.”

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So humans are in some ways on the same plane as the animals. All of us are God’s creatures, approved of and loved for our own sake. But that doesn’t mean that we are the same, or equals. While Genesis 1 says that God approved of the animals independent of humanity, it also says that we humans were created with a special gift and status. We alone were made in the image and likeness of God. Now I’ll let the theologians argue about what all that means, but at the very least it indicates that we relate to God differently than does any other creature. And as a part of that different relation to God, we have a special relationship to the other animals as well. Genesis 1:26 says, “*Let [humans] have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.*”

That word “dominion” is a little vague. What does it mean? Some have interpreted it to say that the animals have been granted to us to use as we wish, for our profit or entertainment, regardless of the animals’ own well-being. We see this attitude in such human activities as cock-fighting, dog-fighting, and flying to Africa to kill an animal so to cut off its head and hang it on the wall as a symbol of compensatory manliness. We also see this attitude in puppy mills and in factory farms where animals are raised like cash crops, confined for their entire unnatural lives in tiny pens. So that’s one way to interpret “dominion.” But remember what we said earlier: these animals are not ours but God’s. With that in mind, we have to say that we have not been *given* animals, but *entrusted* with them. And the Bible makes clear that God does, in fact, care how we treat the animals. The Fifth Commandment, ordaining the Sabbath, specifies that that day of rest extends to cattle as well, and one fascinating law, repeated several times, says, “*You shall not muzzle an ox while he is threshing.*” Think about that for a second. What it’s saying is that

there's nothing wrong with using an ox to thresh your field, but if you do that, leave his mouth free so he can eat his fill while he works. God expects our beasts of burden to be treated as partners, not slaves.

Our relationship to God's other creatures is one of stewardship. We were made like God and granted a special relationship with God, but that involves special duties as well. We may own animals, but we must remember that they were God's first. We may train animals to work for us, but we must treat them with kindness and care, as fellow creatures and co-laborers. It is a moral matter. As Proverbs 12:10 says, *The righteous know the needs of their animals.*

We need to add something today, though. The Bible tells us to respect the beasts of the field and the cattle we use on our farms, but it says nothing about pets. Basically, they didn't have pets, but we do. For most of us, that is our primary contact with the animal kingdom. So let's reflect briefly on our relation to these animals. First the obvious: they too, are fellow creatures with us and valuable in God's eyes. But pets have a special role in our lives, I think. Our pets are completely dependant on us, and I know of no truer measure of our humanity than the way we treat those who are in our power. This is why we are so outraged when we hear of someone who has abused a pet. It is the cruellest abuse of power. The task that God gave us from the beginning demands that we care for God's creatures, *especially* those that depend on us.