

Animals and the love of God: Learning from Genesis

by [William Greenway](#) in the [June 21, 2000](#) issue

Many of us feel a little silly if we react strongly to the death of a pet or the plight of an animal. “Well, it was just a cat,” we say, embarrassed by our grief. Where does this attitude come from? It’s certainly not biblical. Our modern view of animals can be traced primarily to such Enlightenment philosophers as René Descartes, who argued that animals are biological machines unable to feel pain or experience emotion and unimportant except as they affect the lives of human beings. In the Bible, by contrast, value and redemption extend not only to humans but to all animals.

In Genesis 1:1–2:4, God first creates the heavens and the earth, then the plants, fishes, birds and all the other animals—and God repeatedly declares that this creation is good. Finally, God creates male and female human beings in God’s image and gives them dominion over the earth. They are to fill and subdue it.

We are all familiar with these parts of the creation story, but we often overlook what God then says to the man and woman: “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” The passage concludes, “and indeed, it was very good.”

The message is startlingly clear: we were given plants and fruits for food, and so were all the other animals who have “the breath of life” in them. Not only are all the creatures of the earth proclaimed to be pleasing to God, but neither animals nor we are given other animals to eat. The beginning of Genesis depicts a harmonious creation where none kills to live.

This first creation account, known as the Priestly, or “P,” account, was written during the Babylonian captivity. As the people of Israel worried that the Babylonian gods might be superior to their God, this narrative boldly asserts that despite all appearances the God of Israel is lord of all. Amazing though that declaration is, even

more amazing is the people's assertion not only that their present suffering is not what God intended, but that suffering is not God's intention for any of the rest of creation, human or animal.

The writers of these words were not romantic idealists unfamiliar with nature's harsh realities. They were people who struggled to survive in what we would consider a desolate wilderness. They fought lion and viper. They knew that suffering suffuses nature, just as they knew the harsh realities of defeat and captivity. Yet they were convinced that none of this was God's original intention. With the audacity of faith, they declared the present order to be fallen, and articulated a beautiful vision of a harmonious and happy creation.

This vision is the context in which we should read the P strand of the flood account, in which God tells Noah that people now have God's permission to eat other animals: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything" (Gen. 9:3). This accommodation within a fallen order does not negate the previous vision. The next verse explicitly instructs people not to eat the animal's life—that is, its blood. And God's covenant with Noah is also and explicitly with "every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth" (Gen. 8: 9-10).

Not only did the Israelites claim that the world we know is not the world that God intended, but they also expressed their hope in a messianic age in which God's original intention would be realized. They proclaimed an eschatological vision of a creation that has realized perfect harmony. Isaiah 11, the classic text, begins by describing an end to the political injustices afflicting the Israelites, but extends the vision beyond human concerns:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand in the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

The commentaries on these texts almost exclusively emphasize how glorious it is to be human. They stress the hierarchy within creation. Repeatedly they remind

humans that only they are created in God's image, that only they have been given dominion and told to subdue the earth, that only they are directly addressed by God, and that only they have speech and the right to name all other creatures. But amidst all the exegetical energy bent on glorifying humanity, a pivotal theological teaching is neglected: that all life is sacred, and that we are to love all creatures.

The hierarchy on which the exegetes focus is indeed present in these texts. Humans are elevated over the rest of creation by being formed in the image of God. But the primary hierarchical division in Genesis is not between us and the rest of creation; it is between God and creation. True dominion lies not in us, but in God. If we are rightly to understand how to exercise our dominion, we must strive to imitate and understand God's dominion.

This realization returns us to a classical theological confession: that first and foremost God's creative act testifies to the love of God, to the willingness of God to make and bless that which is other than God. Indeed, God so loves all that God has made, even in its fallen state, that God acts in love for us and all the world through Jesus Christ.

If God exercises God's dominion over creation through love, can we reflect God's image in our dominion? If God graciously reaches out to us, how should we treat animals—even insects? We are tempted to turn the unmerited gift of our creation in the image of God into a claim of greatness, into a reason not to love those who are not our equals. We often resemble the man in the parable of the unmerciful servant, who owed a king a great debt, was forgiven it, and then did not extend the same grace to those beneath him.

That we pervert the image of God in ourselves when we do not love that which is beneath us is the critical spiritual insight of St. Francis of Assisi and of Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer argues that one is holy only if one

assists all life as one is able, and if one refrains from afflicting injury upon anything that lives. One does not ask in what way this or that form of life merits or does not merit sympathy as something valuable. . . . Life as such is holy. . . . When working by candlelight on a summer night, one would rather keep the windows closed and breathe stuffy air than see insect after insect fall on the table with wings that are singed. If one walks along the street after rain and notices an earthworm which has lost its way . . . one

carries it from the death-dealing stones to the grass. If one comes upon an insect that has fallen into a puddle, one takes time to extend a leaf or a reed to save it. One is not afraid of being smiled at as a sentimentalist.

Karl Barth, citing these words, observed that “those who can only smile at this point are themselves subjects for tears.” Barth goes on to argue that if we are to obey God, the killing of animals is only possible as a deeply reverential act of repentance; it is permissible only “as we glance backward to creation and forward to the consummation as the boundaries of the sphere in which alone there can be any question of its necessity.”

Like Barth, Schweitzer was a realist. He regularly killed insects, viruses and other animals in order to protect patients at his hospital in Africa. In a fallen world, one does sacrifice other animals’ lives when protecting human life demands it. But Schweitzer undertook such actions with a heavy heart, as a lamentable necessity in a fallen world. He never considered it his uncontested right as a superior creature.

Most people deny the sacredness of animal life not out of pride but because it is too painful to acknowledge. There is simply too much animal suffering, and we too often find it necessary to hurt animals. It is far easier simply to turn away from the problem. Consequently, we seldom talk about or even allow ourselves to be conscious of our conflicted feelings. We live with animals, name, feed and play with them and value their companionship. We wonder at their beauty and grieve when they die. And we also eat, wear and experiment on them.

My convictions turned me into a vegetarian several years ago. But as I write this, I’m wearing a belt and shoes made of cowhide. When I walk to my office I see the gleaming smokestacks atop the University of Texas animal research facility, and I depend on drugs developed through excruciating animal testing. There seems to be no way out. And it’s hard enough to cope with human suffering without worrying about the suffering of other animals. When we see the consumptive, destructive ways of nature and realize our own inevitable participation in the carnage, it’s easiest to say, “They’re just animals,” or “That’s just the way it is.”

But the Bible asks us to have the courage displayed by the people of Israel—the courage of people who know full well what it means to be carnivores and yet who dream of a day—past and future—when lions will eat hay. To repress our sympathy for animals leads to an all the more destructive disrespect for them and for all of

creation.

Schweitzer knew that allowing ourselves to love all creatures would not suddenly deliver us into an easy and carefree life. For the person who loves and shows concern for all creatures, life will “become harder . . . in every respect than it would be if [one] lived for [oneself], but at the same time it will be richer, more beautiful and happier. It will become, instead of mere living, a real experience of life.”