



An Inconvenient Truth: What the Bible Says About God's Way with the Animals

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At first sight, the philosophical concept of a God characterized by omnipotence, omniscience, and benevolence is incompatible with a creation in which animals suffer. One possible way out of this is to assume that different moral standards apply to God than to humans. Whether this really offers a solution is the subject of much debate in which one's ideas about God's character determine one's position. The grounds on which the authors participating in this discussion determine their thoughts about the character of God are rarely made explicit. In this article, I discuss what the Bible says about God's way with the animals and what it could mean for human ideas about God's moral character. Do the same moral principles apply to God as to humans, or are they different? The answer to this question appears to depend on the status assigned to animals.



Introduction

Many people today are convinced that all the evil and suffering in nature, including the vast amount of suffering and death that occur in the animal world—proverbially summed up as “nature red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson 1850)—is incompatible with the belief in a benevolent God who takes care of all living beings.

This view has been contradicted by theologians, philosophers, and other scholars who have argued that the suffering of animals does not threaten belief in the existence of God, not only after Darwin published his theory of evolution but long before (Slootweg 2022). In this discussion, the emphasis is on justifying God by condoning animal suffering as less intense than it initially appears (Aguti 2017), by assuming it serves a higher purpose (Rolston 2018), by viewing it as a temporary evil for which victims will receive compensation on the renewed earth (Sollereder 2019, 156–82), by believing it is the effect of evil counterforces thwarting God’s purposes and intentions (Lloyd 2018, 262–79), or by supposing that God could not have created the present world in any other way (Attfield 2000; see also Schneider 2020; Southgate 2023 for critical analysis of the different views).

In this debate, the belief that God intends the best for everything and everyone and takes special pity on the weak and vulnerable is seldom doubted. Only a few dare to assume that different moral standards apply to God than to humans (Geach 1977, 67–83; Maller 2009; Gasser 2021, 2022), an assumption that generally evokes objections (Ferré 1986; Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022), where terms such as “blasphemous” or “libelous” are not shunned (Dougherty 2014, 17n). Apparently, the belief that divine and human moral principles should be the same (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022, 5–8) is so engrained that it is illicit to doubt.

However, the fact that a view is considered beyond doubt does not mean that such a view is right. To gain clarity on this point, it is not a matter of exchanging arguments or judgments but of thinking about how God can be known (Southgate 2018a). The church has traditionally confessed that there are two sources for this: nature and scripture (Tanzella-Nitti 2005; *Belgic Confession*, Article 2). It is evident that, thus far, the revelation of God through nature—through divine attributes like goodness and love—has not led to agreement on the moral character of God. The purpose of this article is to investigate whether an examination of what the Bible reveals about God provides more clarity.

Little research has been done in this area. Most authors who pay attention to the role of animals in the Bible discuss God’s care for creation in general terms, focusing on the guidelines God gives about how animals should be treated or referring to the moral lessons animals provide (Preece and Fraser 2000; Bauckham 2012, 1–13; Gilmour 2014, 26–55; Van den Brink 2020, 101–6). How God deals with animals is rarely discussed apart from a few exceptions (Clough 2012, 31–43), hence the need to examine in more detail what the Bible

says about the relationship between God and non-human animals. Does the description of God's way with animals revealed in the Bible indeed support the view that God wants to protect all creatures from evil, thereby taking special care of the weak and vulnerable?

To answer this question, I have examined what the Bible says about God's dealings with animals. The danger of such studies is a biased selection of biblical texts and a neglect of their contexts; historical, prophetic, and poetic texts each deserve their own interpretation tailored to their character. Awareness of these pitfalls will help to avoid them and, moreover, my research was exploratory without the aim of finding biblical arguments to reject or confirm a preconceived hypothesis, which also reduces the risk of selective Bible reading. The so-called divine-human-animal triad proposed by Gilmour (2014, 38–40) proved a useful aid in the interpretation of the texts. This triadic pattern is helpful to assess how divine, human, and animal characters interact with each other in a particular text, what message the author intends to convey, and how the animals contribute to the impact of that message. For the purpose of my study, the role of humans in this triad was primarily passive—sinner, spectator, beneficiary, or victim—as my goal was to explore what the Bible says about God's interactions with animals. Because of this focus on God's way with the animals apart from active human participation, I did not address the guidelines the Bible gives on how to treat the animals and the significance of animals as a sacrifice in the cult of Old Testament Israel. The same applies to texts in which the animals are presented as a metaphor for humans. An example of this is the often-debated text in Deuteronomy 25:4 in which God forbids the muzzling of a threshing ox, a text the apostle Paul applies to people in 1 Corinthians 9:9–10 (Gilmour 2014, 28–36). Such texts are not included, because God focuses on people rather than animals as well as because it is uncertain whether the animals are only used as metaphors.

Animals in the Bible

The poetic texts—the Book of Job and the Psalms—that deal with God's relationship with animals emphasize that animals are the objects of a continuing providential care. All animals expect their food from their Maker, and their dependence on God's sustaining care is shown by their returning to the dust from which they were taken when God takes their breath away (Psalm 104:27–29; Psalm 145:15–16; Psalm 147:9). The poetic texts also provide grounds for the belief that God is glorified through animals. The beasts of the wild, the cattle of the field, everything that creeps and takes wing are urged to praise the Lord (Bauckham 2012, 147–62). Natural phenomena such as hail and snow are also included (Psalm 148:7–10). The destructive power of those natural phenomena does not detract from the fact that they glorify God; in the violence of the storm, God's majesty is acknowledged (Psalm 29:8–9). In return, God

takes pleasure in what is created; the fire-breathing Leviathan (Job 41:18–21) is God's plaything (Psalm 104:26).

The exaltation of God as Creator, to which the poetic texts testify, should move humans to humility. Can we hunt prey for the lion and satisfy the hunger of the cubs? The answer is given with the question: we cannot, any more than we are capable of supplying the raven with the food its young call for (Job 39:1–3; Psalm 147:9). The falcon that spreads its wings and the eagle that builds its nest high in the mountains are living proofs of God's power and wisdom far beyond human comprehension (Job 39:29–33). That this should bring us to praise and worship is underlined by the poet of Psalm 104. The fact that young lions roar and ask God for food is not a reason to ask God why such beasts of prey were created but a reason to offer praise through our songs (Psalm 104:21, 33).

The prophetic texts also show that God made animals to honor their Creator: "The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches" (Isaiah 43:20 NRSV). The choice of jackal and ostrich is striking. Of the ostrich, it is said that God has "made it forget wisdom and given it no share in understanding" (Job 39:17 NRSV); it is a bad place for humans where jackals dwell (Isaiah 13:21–22, 34:11–15, 35:7). They are not the first animals that come to mind when looking for examples to support the belief that creation glorifies its maker. Yet they are assigned this role.

When reading the writings of the prophets carefully, we also encounter other messages. God not only uses animals as examples for humans when it comes to praise and trust but also uses them to admonish, punish, and chastise us when we go astray. The prophets repeatedly emphasize that God may use animals to punish the Israelites either by destroying the harvest—successive swarms of locusts will leave a stripped land (Joel 1:4)—or giving the area they inhabit to the wild animals. Texts that mention the latter in particular can be found from the prophet Isaiah, who writes of regions in which hyenas, jackals, ostriches, and snakes dwell (Isaiah 13:21–22, 18:6, 34:11–15). The prophet Ezekiel conveys a similar message when he speaks of a land through which no one passes because of the wild beasts (Ezekiel 14:15). The other side of this is the absence of wild animals as a sign of God's favor. In Exodus, God promises Israel that he will drive out the inhabitants of Canaan gradually rather than all at once, otherwise the wild animals would take control of the depopulated land (Exodus 23:29; Deuteronomy 7:22). But when Israel turns away from its God, its land becomes inhabited by wild beasts.

The prophetic texts not only speak about animals as executors of divine punishment but also describe how animals suffer when people ignore divinely ordered laws. Because of Israel's transgressions, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and even the fish in the sea perish (Hosea 4:3). It is not only the wild animals that suffer but also the tame ones. The cattle wander because they have nowhere to graze, and the sheep and goats are also punished (Joel

1:18–20). That animals suffer because of their owners—in this, case not the Israelites but their enemies—is also found in the prophet Zechariah (14:12, 15 NRSV): “This shall be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples who wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh shall rot while they are still on their feet, their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and their tongues shall rot in their mouths;” “And a plague like this plague shall fall on the horses, the mules, the camels, the donkeys, and whatever animals may be in those camps.”

The linkage of the fates of humans and animals is also repeatedly mentioned by the prophets when they warn the Israelites not to stray from the right path. Jeremiah foretells that God will pour out anger and wrath on humans and animals alike (7:20) and that God will cause both humans and beasts to die of a great pestilence (21:6); Ezekiel speaks of the extermination of both by a famine (14:13–21). That God strikes humans and beasts in the same way not only applies to Israel but also to the surrounding nations. When the wrath of the Lord strikes these nations, his sword “is sated with blood; it is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams” (Isaiah 34:6 NRSV). On the other hand, the linkage of the fates of humans and animals also appears from the fact that God wants to be merciful to both as is witnessed by the admonition that Jonah receives when he complains about the withering of the tree that protected him from the striking sun (Isaiah 4:11).

Animals also play a role in the historical texts. On his journey to the king of Moab, the soothsayer Balaam is confronted by an unwilling donkey (Numbers 22:23–33; 2 Peter 2:16). A lion kills the prophet from Judah who, contrary to God’s clear and explicit command, did not return immediately after completing his task but complied with the request of his brother in office from Bethel to have something to eat and drink at his home (1 Kings 13:11–32). In another example, two bears tear apart forty-two children as punishment for their mockery of Elisha (2 Kings 2:23–24).

Furthermore, animals are discussed extensively in the historical record of the plagues that struck Egypt prior to the exodus of Jacob’s descendants. These plagues affect not only the pharaoh and his subjects but also the animals (Exodus 7–12). The first plague takes the lives of countless fish, and the second plague ends with so many dead frogs that the land stinks. In the third plague, humans and animals suffer because of gnats. The flies in the fourth plague seem to affect only the Egyptians, but in the plague that follows, a pestilence claims the lives of “horses, donkeys, camels, the herds and the flocks” (Exodus 9:3 NRSV). The sixth plague, boils, and the seventh, hail, again strike both humans and animals. The eighth plague takes the lives of countless locusts, which God destroys from the Earth by throwing them into the sea after they have devoured everything, and the tenth plague affects not only all the firstborn among the people, but also those of cattle. In this series of plagues, God kills animals after first using them as instruments of punishment—frogs, locusts—or

make animals suffer to punish humans: fish die, animals suffer from gnats, a contagious disease takes the lives of many animals, hail strikes humans and beasts, and all the firstborn of the cattle die.

In the events prior to Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt, God uses the animals to punish people for their disobedience, and the animals suffer because of a sinful people. Examples of the latter can also be found elsewhere in the historical Old Testament texts. God orders the stoning to death of Achan with all that belonged to him—including "oxen, donkeys, and sheep" (Joshua 7:24 NRSV)—because he took of the spoils of Jericho against the divine commandment and commands King Saul's to destroy Amalek, including "ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Samuel 15:3 NRSV).

There are also historical texts that suggest that animals have their own responsibility towards God independent from humanity. In Genesis 6:12–13, God complains that all flesh has a corrupt way of life and has filled the earth with violence. If "all flesh" includes the animal world in addition to corrupt humanity, the conclusion is obvious that God also considers the animals guilty; therefore, it is not unjust that God also punishes them with the flood. Elsewhere are allusions to punishable animal behavior. In Genesis 9:5, God states that retribution will be exacted from the animals for the lives of humans, and in Exodus 21:28–32, an ox that mortally wounds a human being must be stoned. In the legislation at Sinai, God warns Moses that both people and animals who dare to climb or even touch the mountain should be killed (Exodus 19:12–13).

In the New Testament, passages that concern animals are scarce. Jesus mentions them not so much because of their inherent value but mainly to illustrate God's care for us humans. If God takes care of the birds and does not forget the sparrows, will God not also provide us, who are far above those sparrows in value, with everything we need (Matthew 6:26; Matthew 10:29–31; Luke 12:6–7)? Animals also become victims in the battle between Jesus and the demons. The healing of a man possessed by evil spirits results in the death of 2,000 pigs (Matthew 8:28–32; Mark 5:1–16; Luke 8:26–33). God's ways with animals are manifold.

Evaluation

When the biblical passages that tell about God's way with animals are considered, it is clear that they are objects of God's providential care and contribute to God's glory; the Book of Job and the Psalms bear witness to this. Animals have their own relationship with God in which humans play no role (Page 1996). But it also appears that this providential care does not imply that God protects every creature against a violent death. The Bible says that God sustains all that lives, but it also says that young lions roar for prey—that is, other animals—and demand their food from God. God's care for one animal requires the life of another. The sustenance of the creation does not mean that each individual

creature is protected from suffering. Jesus mentions sparrows but mainly to emphasize that nothing escapes God's notice and to illustrate God's concern for mankind; if God cares for sparrows, how much more must he care for us? And whoever wants to take the care for birds mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount as proof of God's goodness must also recognize that such care takes the lives of uncountable numbers of insects.

The observation that animals kill each other does not conflict with the image of God revealed in the Bible. On the contrary, that is how God created them.¹ Scripture provides no basis for the supposition that death and violence in the animal world do not fit the image of God. One can argue that allowing animals to suffer is contrary to the image of God, but such a statement ignores what the Bible mentions about God's dealings with animals, a view shared by several contemporary authors (Snook 2004; Blocher 2009; Edgar 2014).

Nor can it be maintained that, contrary to popular belief, scripture supports the view that God's dealings with animals are characterized by a preference for those that are weak and vulnerable. This is not to say that God does not take pity on the weak and vulnerable, but the texts often referred to in this context are not about animals but people. That this is not generally recognized is evidenced by a recently published survey of biblical texts compiled by Rik Peels, in which all the passages quoted to support the belief that the Bible teaches a preference by God for the weak and vulnerable are about people, not animals (Peels 2018, 550–51). What applies to God's dealings with humans does not automatically apply to God's dealings with animals. A fallacy of composition is lurking here; properties of one part of creation—humanity—should not be attributed to creation in its entirety.

It cannot be denied that the Bible speaks of God's care for animals, nor can it be denied that this care does not guarantee a paradisiacal life for each of them individually. Rather, the Bible texts enumerated in this article demonstrate that God does not hesitate to make animals suffer if God deems it necessary for the wellbeing of inhabitants of the Promised Land; in the historical and prophetic texts, God uses animals to keep the nation of Israel on the right path, something that often did not benefit the animals themselves.

Nowadays, humans think differently; we have come to see animals as creatures of God whose value is not derived from their use to us (Clough 2012, 6–15, 22–25). However, the question is whether this changed view on the status of the animal does justice to what the Bible says about this. After all, the scriptures give countless examples of situations in which animals suffer and die when God uses them to punish or correct humans going astray. Apparently, God's care for humans outweighs God's care for animals. It is Jesus's own words that humans are worth more than sparrows and sheep. Such a view explains why in the past, people had no trouble with the view that God created animals for our benefit: "God also sustains and governs them all, according to his eternal

providence and by his infinite power, that they may serve humanity, in order that humanity may serve God” (*Belgic Confession*, Article 12).

To current human understanding, it is unjust for God to make animals suffer or take their lives because of the sins of the people, but the Bible has no such scruples as can be inferred from the texts mentioned previously. When cities of enemies are conquered, God sometimes expressly commands that both the humans and animals be exterminated, and when drought afflicts the land of Canaan because of the idolatry of its inhabitants, the cattle also suffer. The animals share in the punishment that befalls Israel.

From this biblical data, it must be concluded that the way God deals with animals does not conform to current human ideas of justice; according to the Bible, the interests of humans are apparently more important than those of animals. God not only uses animals for our physical wellbeing but also to keep us on the right path. Animal suffering is not, as in the thoughts of Hick ([1966] 1968, 345–53), Swinburne (1998, 189–92, 217–19), and Corey (2000, 151–66), to enable us to grow in virtues that we would not develop without confrontation with that suffering but rather to teach us to let go of our vices.

The idea that humans occupy a special position in creation is not popular in our time (Clough 2012, 35–43). This is not surprising, as this view has contributed to the unlimited exploitation of creation from which humanity reaps the bitter fruits today (McKibben 1990). On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that the biblical data is more in favor of humanity having a special position than against it. That we abuse this position is no reason to deny this truth unless we throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. That the Bible shows animals and humans as equal objects of God’s providential care and equally caught up in manifestations of God’s wrath does not imply that the Bible assigns them equal value: “Look at the birds of the air ... Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:26 NRSV, see also Matthew 10:29–31; Luke 12:7; Luke 12:24). People and animals have a lot in common, but God nevertheless values the lives of people more than those of animals (cf. Clough 2012, 75).

Human interests exceed those of animals, and that justifies why they suffer; it serves a purpose that can be deduced from the aforementioned Bible passages. The physical and spiritual wellbeing of humans is so dear to God’s heart that when it comes to people and their salvation, God does not spare the non-human animals. To do justice to the biblical data about God’s dealings with animals, it must be recognized that God cares for the creation, but not always in a gentle way; animals compete for food and prey upon each other. That is how they are made, a conclusion that goes all the way back to the early days of Christianity. Already at that time, Church Father Augustine (1966, 17–19) and many other theologians from the early Church were convinced that animals were not created to show divine benevolence or righteousness but rather divine

power and majesty (Slootweg 2022, 30–52); the confessions from the time of the Reformation convey the same message (*Belgic Confession*, Article 2; *Westminster Confession of Faith*, IV.1). Animals have their own role in this theatre, and that is not always to their advantage. A telling example of this is the course of events surrounding the plagues prior to the departure of the people of Israel from Egypt. The pharaoh's stubbornness cost the lives of countless animals.

Philosophers may argue that God should prevent all evil unless there are good reasons to allow it (Murray [2008] 2011, 11–19), but the Bible offers no grounds for that demand, an inconvenient truth that may be hard to swallow. God disposes of the animals as God deems appropriate, a privilege not granted to humans in our use of animals. The Reformer John Calvin was deeply aware of this. In a sermon on Genesis 7 in which he addresses the question of why animals also had to perish in the flood, he puts it clearly: “It would be greatly presumptuous of us to raise our voice against God for perpetrating such harsh rigor on the animals, for everything is in His hands ... For who are we to judge and condemn him” (Calvin 2009a). This reluctance to criticize God also comes up in his sermon on Genesis 9, in which dealing with animals that kill people is addressed: “[I]f we find it strange that He punishes the animals, which are not guilty in our way of thinking, let us realize that it is not our role to oversee His judgments, which surpass all human understanding” (Calvin 2009b).

The picture that emerges from the biblical data indicates that God does not conform to human moral principles unless it is assumed that God places human interests above those of the animals. If God values non-human animals equally to humans, then God is not dealing with the animals according to human moral principles, as in that case the benefit humans derive from the suffering God inflicts on animals falls short of God's justice. On the other hand, if the biblical message that human interests prevail is accepted, God has the right to use animals to promote human wellbeing without violating common moral principles, because in that case, a greater good—human wellbeing—justifies the lesser evil of animal suffering.

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Note

- ¹ In this I differ from Neil Messer, who argues that the way animals interact with each other today is not the way God originally intended. For him, the goodness of creation mentioned in Genesis 1 should be understood as a situation of “plenty and peace” without any violence (Messer 2009, 141), similar to the situation described in Isaiah 11:6–8 and 65:25 (Messer 2009, 148). Both assumptions are questionable. It is generally accepted that the goodness of creation should be interpreted as fit for the purpose God intended (Collins 2006, 69–70; Southgate 2018b, 918); to what extent the future peaceful coexistence of wolf and lamb and lion and goat prophesied by Isaiah represents the restoration of a lost prehistoric golden age is also disputable, if only in view of the varying interpretations given to these prophecies—symbolic or literal (Van Ee 2018; Garvey 2019, 49–51).

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