

Animals and the Apocalypse
A Word Study of Animals in the Book of Revelation

“A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as well as that of his fellowman, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help.”

~ Albert Schweitzer

If animals have souls, the logic goes, then they have some claim to just and moral treatment, since the soul is the seat of life beyond mere physical characteristics. If, on the other hand, animals do not have souls, then their status as part of God’s creation is arguably no more important than that of trees and flowers: helpful, even beneficial, to human survival and for that reason deserving of our attention, but a means to an end nonetheless. We have dominion over animals, in other words, in the same way we have dominion over trees and plants: we are to keep them alive, to be sure, but we do so for our benefit and pleasure, and it doesn’t mean we can’t cut them down, or prune them, or eat them for lunch.

The English words “animal,” “creature,” and “beast” (but not including “beast” as that term refers to the beasts of the apocalypse in Revelation) appear 44 times in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the New Testament, with over half (24) occurring in the book of Revelation.¹ Animals, in other words, make a definite appearance in the New Testament record, and particularly so in its last book. Any serious study of a Christian basis for animal welfare, then, would be wise to begin where the bible ends, in Revelation.

The Greek language has five separate words for animal that occur in the New Testament: θηριον, εναλιων, τετραπους, κτισει, and ζωον. The last of these, ζωον, is by far the most common term, appearing 32 times in the Greek New Testament, of which 20 occur in Revelation alone.² θηριον occurs twice in Revelation, κτισει occurs once, and εναλιων and τετραπους do not appear at all in Revelation.

So the writer of the book of Revelation had at least three words to choose from when his vision turned to animals or creatures, which it does five separate times in the book (all the other mentions of animals refer strictly to the “four living creatures” of the apocalypse). Of those five:

- a) the first two attestations [θηριον] in Rev. 6:8 and 18:2 refer to animals in a derogatory manner, but the first of these is a direct quote from Ezekiel and the other is a contested attestation that does not appear in many ancient Greek manuscripts;³
- b) the third reference, in Rev. 5:13, talks of creatures [κτισει] giving praise to God;
- c) the final two references to animals, in Rev. 8:9 [ψυχας] and 16:3 [ψυχη ζωης] (translated “living creatures” and “living things” in the NRSV respectively), actually use the Greek word for “soul” [ψυχη].

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¹ I do not here include the word “beast” as the vast majority of occurrences of that word in the NRSV (38/40) refer to the beasts of the apocalypse in Revelation.

² ζωον is related etymologically to the Greek word for life, ζωη.

³ The Revised English Bible and New Jerusalem Bible do not translate the word at all, and the NRSV and New American Bible have explanatory notes and/or put the word in parentheses.

Bauer's Greek-English Lexicon states about ψυχη (from which we get the English word "psyche") that "it is often impossible to draw hard and fast lines in the use of this multivalent word." In reference to the specific uses of this word in the Revelation texts cited above, Bauer designates both under ψυχη's principle meaning of *(breath of) life, life-principle, soul, of animals* (8:9) and *that which possesses a life/soul* (16:3). The exact form used in 8:9 [ψυχαζ] is attested to elsewhere in the NT, for example in James 1:21, which speaks of "the implanted word that has the power to save your souls." It seems apparent that the author of Revelation appears to have used this word deliberately in reference to animals to indicate that they are more than mere physical beings; that they contain a soul or, at the very least, sentience.

The stronger case comes with the Rev. 16:3 text, where ψυχη is used in conjunction with the Greek word ζωης, which is the genitive form of ζωη, meaning *life, living existence, or source of spiritual life*,⁴ and it is distinct from ζωον, which specifically refers to the life of *a living creature, or animal*,⁵ and which is specifically used throughout the NT to refer to a life with spiritual value.

Most of the other references to animals in the NT are almost uniformly positive and seem to indicate a spiritual value to animals' lives, as in Col. 1:23 ("...the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature [κτισει] under heaven") and Hebrews 4:13 ("And before him no creature [κτισις] is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account"). On the other hand, Romans 1:23 indicates that this same creature should not be worshipped as if it were God, as when we do this, we disregard a proper worship of God and end up worshipping creation instead.

It is surprising that the translating committees of the various versions of the Bible chose to translate the Greek term for "soul" in Rev. 8:9 and 16:3 as "living animals" and "living things." There is no precedence for this interpretive move anywhere in the New Testament and thus appears to reflect a reticence on the part of these committees to look like they might be encouraging a panentheistic view of animals. There can be no other reason, it seems to me, to have engaged in such an unwarranted translation.

It is perhaps best, when attempting to understand the place of animals in scripture, to use what I call the Sparrow's Corrective, which is found in Matthew 10:28 and versions of which are found in Matthew 6 and Luke 12: God loves animals, as not even a sparrow falls from the sky that God does not care about. But humans are of more value to God than animals are – and thus held more accountable, too. As for the animals, they are not mere objects to do with as we please, nor are they of equal value to human beings. At the very least, they are fellow creatures with souls who God cares about immensely, and to that end, he requires us, as the priests of his creation, to take care to treat them with compassion and to use them for our purposes only with the greatest restraint.

For this principal reason, but also for many others, Christians should be on the forefront of any effort on behalf—and for the welfare—of animals. And that shouldn't be a revelation.

⁴ The Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament, Mounce, 1993.

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