



The Bible's Teachings



on Protecting Animals and Nature



Introduction

The Bible and the Judaic-Christian tradition teach and command us to treat animals with kindness and respect. The massive abuse and suffering legally inflicted on billions of animals every year is a clear violation of the teachings of our religious faith and cannot be justified by any person of faith and decency.

The people for whom the Bible was written thousands of years ago were intimately familiar with wildlife and domestic animals, especially the practice of raising cattle and other animals. The Bible contains strict rules governing the

treatment of farmed animals, and indeed all of God's creatures, which were designed to prevent any unnecessary pain and suffering.

Modern day animal agriculture violates core Christian values. It wipes out entire populations and species of wildlife, confines huge numbers of animals in miserable conditions on factory farms, damages the environment, squanders scarce resources, and harms the health of people.

The Ten Commandments: Do Not Overwork Animals

The Mosaic Law in the Hebrew Scriptures forbids overworking animals and requires that people help stray and lost creatures. Many injunctions are clearly written for the sake of the creatures and not the owners.

The Law requires that one help animals who belong to enemies to whom one owes no obligation, as well as those of friends. One may not "pass by" an animal in distress: "If you meet your enemy's ox or his ass going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the ass of one

who hates you lying under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it, you shall help him to lift it up" (Exodus 23:4-5).

The Ten Commandments specifically mentions that cattle and donkeys must not be worked on the Sabbath. In the twenty-third chapter of Exodus, several animal-protection statutes are given by God to Moses: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your ass may have rest ..." (Exodus 23:12). Similarly, "the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son ... or your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle" (Deuteronomy 5:14).

God also commands that every seventh year one should not sow or harvest the land, the vineyards, and the olive groves. They should be allowed to "rest and lie fallow" (Exodus 23:11). God commands that what grows naturally in the fields left fallow in the seventh year shall be for oneself, one's servants, one's guests, and "for your cattle and also for the beasts that are in your land all its yield shall be for food" (Leviticus 25:4-7).

Forbidding Cruelty to Animals

The Bible forbids cruelty to domestic animals. It would be harsh to prevent the ox from eating while working, and consequently Deuteronomy 25:4 reads, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Moreover, Deuteronomy 22:10

says, "You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together." Pairing animals of different sizes and strengths would place a strain on the weaker of them, or perhaps on both.

Contrast these ancient laws that sought to reduce animal suffering with modern-day factory farming practices. Today, for example, farmers take calves raised for veal from their mothers at birth, deny the calves their mother's milk, and deliberately deprive the calves of iron. Farmers often keep the calves their entire lives in crates so narrow that they cannot turn around. These circumstances render the calves' muscles soft and anemic, making the flesh tender and lightly colored. Such treatment is incompatible with the Bible's teachings.

*A righteous man
has regard for the life
of his beast.*

PROVERBS 12:10



A Righteous Man Has Regard for the Life of His Beast

Proverbs 12:10 declares, "A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked are cruel." This important verse suggests a Biblical division of people into two distinct types – those who are "righteous" and just are kind to their animals, and those who are "wicked" and are cruel to creatures under their care.

The story of Rebekah at the well stresses the importance of kindness to animals as a personal attribute. In this account, the patriarch Abraham, seeking a wife for his son Isaac, sends his trusted servant out to search for a suitable woman. The servant chooses Rebekah after she demonstrates a kind disposition by drawing water not just for him but also for his camels

(Genesis 24:19).

Similarly, 2 Samuel Chapter 12, God uses the sad story of the inexcusable killing of a family's beloved pet lamb to show King David the error of his ways.

When Jacob called together his twelve sons – representing the

twelve tribes of Israel – to say what fate would befall them, Simeon and Levi were castigated and chastised for crippling oxen, among other things (Genesis 49:6-7).

The Beasts of the Field Shall Be at Peace with Thee

The Book of Psalms relates that God's goodness and compassion are not reserved just for humans but extend to all of God's creatures. Psalm 36:6-7 praises God, saying "man and beast thou savest, O Lord. How precious is thy steadfast love, O God! The children of men take refuge in the shadow of thy wings."

Psalm 145 reiterates this theme of God's concern for all God's creatures: "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. ... thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing" (9, 16).

Similarly, God's explanation to Jonah for why God elected not to destroy Nineveh reflected God's concern for animals. The "great city" contained 120,000 people "and also much cattle" (Jonah 4:11).

*The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over
all that he has made.*

PSALM 145:9



God's Ideal Includes Peace with Animals

The book of Hosea (2:18) suggests that God would make a pact with the animals to give them safety from being hunted and persecuted by abolishing the instruments of their destruction: "And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety."

The Book of Job 5:23 describes

as an ideal a day when humankind will be at peace with nature: "For you shall be in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with you."

Isaiah 11:6-9 eloquently depicts how the animal kingdom will be included in the blessings of peace on earth when it is achieved: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion ... and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord".

Reverence for Life in the New Testament

The New Testament contains many references favorable to protecting animals and nature. In Luke (12:6), Jesus stresses that God loves even the lowliest of creatures: "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God." Matthew 10:29 also reports Jesus' belief that God cares for all God's creatures, even those of little monetary value to us. In teaching God's infinite wisdom and love for mankind, Matthew quotes Jesus as saying: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall on the ground without your Father's will."

In Luke (13:15), Jesus uses the Biblical laws of humane treatment of animals to justify healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath, saying, "Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it?" Again in Luke, Jesus similarly justifies healing a man on the Sabbath, saying, "Which of you having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on a sabbath

day?" (14:5) And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks of "the birds of the air", saying that "your heavenly Father feeds them" (Matthew 6:26).

Interestingly, the New Testament never depicts Jesus eating meat in his lifetime, not even at the Last Supper, although on two occasions after his death and resurrection the Bible describes his eating fish.

Many Christians see deep significance in the story of Jesus beginning his life among the animals (Luke 2:7). Denied shelter and lodging by the humans of Bethlehem in Judea, Mary and Joseph were forced to use a manger for Jesus' birthplace. There, Jesus was born, presumably in the company of such creatures as donkeys, oxen, cows, and sheep.

Jesus' appreciation for animals is demonstrated by the repeated analogies and references to animals that he used in his teachings. He referred to his followers, and those who worship God, as sheep, and he compared God's care for Jerusalem with a hen's concern for her brood. Often in his teachings, Jesus compared himself to such animals as the lamb and the dove, known for their innocence, meek-

ness, and docility. He often represented animals as being under God's providence, and Jesus' repeated statements to practice love, mercy, and compassion are consistent with, and indeed fundamental to, the humane and preservation ethic.

The Bible's Conservation Message

The obligation of humans to respect and protect the natural environment is a theme that appears throughout the Bible. Frequently, the mandate directly relates to the problems we face today – cruelty to farmed animals, destruction of wildlife and habitat, and pollution of the land, water, and air.

Perhaps the world's first anti-pollution law is found in Deuteronomy (23:13-15), which forbids contaminating the land with human waste. In the books of Jeremiah (9:9-11) and Habakkuk (2:17), God warns against destroying nature and wildlife. In Jeremiah, God describes "weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes

*I desire mercy
and not sacrifice.*

MATTHEW 9:13, 12:7

through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; for both the birds of the air and the beasts of the field are gone" (9:10). Similarly, Habakkuk predicts "... the destruction of the beasts will terrify you, for the blood of men and violence to the

earth, to cities and all who dwell therein" (2:17). In both cases, destroying the land – much as we are doing today to farmland and the wilderness – brings misery.

The Bible accords special reverence for trees and forests, and one of the first things the Israelites were commanded to do when they "came into" the Promised Land was to plant trees and allow them to mature before eating their fruits (Leviticus 19:23).

The Mosaic Law contains a remarkable nature-protection regulation that forbids the destruction of fruit-bearing trees when waging war against a city (Deuteronomy 20:19). Elsewhere the Mosaic Law sets forth strict and detailed rules regarding caring for trees. For example, Leviticus (19:23-25) orders that fruit trees be left wild and unpicked for the first few years in order to give them strength and increase their yield.

Throughout the Bible, in stressing the reverence humans should



have toward the land, the Scriptures impart a strong conservation message, warning against over utilizing and wearing out natural resources. In Leviticus (25:4), God commands that: "in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath rest for the Lord; you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard."

Also Leviticus (26:3-6) describes God's appreciation for the land by promising the Israelites that, if they obey God's commandments, the land will reward them: "If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. ... And I will give peace in the land ..."

God's Love for Nature

Throughout the Book of Genesis, God looks with special favor on "the swarms of living creatures." God created them, blessed them, and commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply," repeatedly characterizing their creation as "good."

Some Biblical scholars see significance in the fact that God pronounced each thing God created – the whales, birds, cattle, "everything that creeps upon the ground," and the other "beasts of the earth" – as "good" in itself (Genesis 1:21, 25). And when God reviewed the entire Creation, God declared it "very good" (Genesis 1:31), perhaps because God had created a universe of harmony.

Psalm 104 eloquently sums up the theme of God's concern for Creation, praising God for providing for all of God's creatures. It notes how we all depend on the ecological system that God has established, proclaiming: "O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, which teems with things innumerable, living things both small and great. ... thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good things. ...

thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground. May the glory of the Lord endure for ever, may the Lord rejoice in his works ..." (Psalm 104:24-31).

*For every beast of the forest
is mine, and the cattle
upon a thousand hills.
I know all the fowls of the
mountains: and the wild
beasts of the field are mine.*

PSALM 50:10-11 (KJV)

In the Book of Deuteronomy (8:7-9), Moses describes the Promised Land as an ecological paradise, noting its rich and beautiful environment and its "fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills ..." Moses stresses to the Israelites the sanctity of the land: "a land which the Lord your God cares for, the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (Deuteronomy 11:12).

God's love of the land for its own sake, not just for humans' benefit, is apparent when God speaks to Job from the whirlwind, telling him how God does "bring rain on a land where no man is, on the desert in which there is no man; to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass" (Job 38:26-27).

The Book of Job tells us that humans must live in harmony with nature and seek to learn from its wise and mysterious ways: "But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not

know that the hand of the Lord has done this?" (Job 12:7-9).

Human-Stewardship Responsibilities



Not only does the Bible stress that nature reflects God's glory and greatness, but the Scriptures assert that humans have been given a

special responsibility to protect and care for the natural environment. Yet ironically, this Biblical mandate has often been used as a license to despoil and destroy instead of an obligation to protect and preserve.

Probably no passage in the Bible has been so misunderstood and misinterpreted as Genesis 1:26, where God gives humankind "dominion" over nature and animals. This has often been mistakenly interpreted as a synonym for ownership, giving humans the right to treat nature and animals as they see fit. However, since there was no violence in the Garden of Eden and since God described all of Creation as "very good," it is much more reasonable to regard human "dominion" as a

sacred responsibility to be good stewards of the natural world. In addition to caring for and protecting the earth, Genesis 1:28 commands humankind to “replenish the earth.”

In contrast to those who hold that the earth belongs to humans, in Leviticus (25:23), God proclaims, “the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me.” Similarly, the Twenty-fourth Psalm relates that the world belongs not to humankind but to God: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world, and they who dwell therein ...” Also, Deuteronomy 10:14 proclaims, “Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it ...” All living things belong to God, and God declares in Psalm 50:10-11, “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine” (KJV).

Into Your Hand Are They Delivered

The Bible contains numerous strictures against wanton or cruel killing of wildlife and domestic animals. Ecclesiastes (3:19-21) asserts that humans are

vain to believe that their destinies differ from those of animals: “For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth?”

In numerous places in the Bible, God acts toward humans and animals in an equitable way. When God saved Noah and his family from destruction, God treated the animals in a similar manner: “And God remembered Noah and every living thing, and all the cattle that were with him in the ark” (Genesis 8:1).

Genesis 9:8-10 relates that, after the waters of the great flood receded, God promised a flood would never again destroy the earth. God made this covenant not only with Noah and his descendants but also with “every living creature that is with you, the fowl, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that go out



of the ark, even every beast of the earth.” Indeed, God makes no distinction between people and animals in establishing God’s covenant “between me and the earth” (Genesis 9:12-17).

Many people regard God’s giving Noah permission to eat animals as validating humankind’s entitlement to treat animals as we please. However, killing and eating animals came with a curse – whereas previously people and animals had lived in harmony, now “the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth ...” (Genesis 9:2). Enmity with God’s animals is a great price to pay for the gustatory satisfaction of eating them. And there is another curse – the fat, cholesterol, and harmful chemicals and other substances that promote heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers, and other degenerative diseases that kill or disable millions of Americans each year.

Animal Sacrifices

Some people ask how the ritual sacrifices of animals described in Leviticus can be reconciled with

the thesis that God cares deeply about animals. The ostensible purpose of the sacrifices was to atone for sin, so it is reasonable to regard animal sacrifices as a necessary

step away from the practice of human sacrifice (Numbers 31:30, 40) on the road to abolition of all sacrifice.

The later prophets, including Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Jeremiah, condemned animal sacrifice. For example, Isaiah (1:11-13) describes how God told the Israelites to bring no more sacrifices since

they were “an abomination.” In Isaiah 66:2-3, God compared the killing of an animal with the murder of a human: “He who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man ...”

Similarly, Hosea wrote, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings” (6:6). In Jeremiah, God declared “Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices pleasing to me” (6:20). Jeremiah also related for God, “For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offer-

*What does the Lord require
of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly
with your god?*

MICAH 6:8

ings and sacrifices" (7:22).

King David wrote, "Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire" (Psalm 40:6). Amos, speaking for God, related that God strongly condemns sacrifices: "I hate, I despise your feasts, ... Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them" (5:21-22).

Micah similarly described God rejecting sacrifices: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has showed you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? " (6:6-8).

Jesus' ministry reflected the teachings of the later prophets, and Matthew relates that twice Jesus echoed Hosea, saying, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (9:13, 12:7). In the Temple, Jesus

drove out the merchants selling animals for sacrifice, those changing money for the purchase of animals, and the animals themselves (John 2:15).

Religion and Protection of Animals

These conservation and humane precepts of the Scriptures were well understood by the early leaders of Judaism and the Christian Church. For the first thousand years or so, numerous stories and

legends depict the Christian saints as having close and friendly relationships with wild and domestic creatures, including such revered saints as Giles, Jerome, Benedict, Meinrad, Columba, Cuthbert, Patrick, and hundreds of others. The best known, of course, is the patron saint of animals, Francis of Assisi.

Similarly, Judaism has a long tradition of reverence for animals and nature based on Biblical teachings. The Jewish Encyclopedia notes, "Moral and legal rules concerning the treatment of animals

are based on the principle that animals are part of God's creation toward which man bears responsibility. Laws and other indications in the ... Bible make it clear not only that cruelty to animals is

forbidden but also that compassion and mercy to them are demanded of man by God. ... In later rabbinic literature ... great prominence is also given to demonstrating God's mercy to animals, and to the importance of not causing them pain."

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a medical missionary and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, wrote that humans were "compelled by the commandment of love ... proclaimed by Jesus" to respect all forms of life. He taught that one should avoid "carelessly cutting off the head of a single flower growing on the edge of the road, for in doing so (would be to) injure life without being forced to do so by necessity." Schweitzer wrote eloquently of the need to show reverence for all forms of life: "A man's religion is of little value unless even seemingly insignificant creatures bene-



fit from it. A truly religious man does not ask how far this or that deserves sympathy ... to him, life as such is sacred."

Another leading Christian theologian, Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, has stated, "I do not believe a person can be a true Christian and at the same time deliberately engage in cruel or inconsiderate treatment of animals."

The Rev. Dr. Billy Graham has noted, "The Bible teaches that we are not to abuse or punish animals in a cruel way. God has created them, and while mankind is given dominion over the animals, we are not to treat them cruelly."

Rev. Lloyd Putman has warned against practicing "religious myopia," saying that "we have a small religion if it has no room for the rest of God's creatures." The famous English theologian



Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801- 1890) once wrote that “cruelty to animals is as if a man did not love God.”

Pope John Paul II has stated that Christians have a moral obligation to protect the environment, saying in a homily that “respect for natural resources of our planet” must be a part of everyone’s conscience. He has also said that “To repair ... and to prevent ... damage inflicted on nature” is a “grave moral obligation.”

In the final analysis, perhaps the strongest argument for kindness to animals can be made on the grounds of equity. How, some have asked, can people ask for mercy from above unless they are merciful to those at their mercy?

The Devastation Caused by Factory Farming

The authors of the Bible could hardly have foreseen the suffering and devastation of animals caused by modern-day society, which clearly violate the spirit and letter of the Biblical laws. In factory farming, for example, crowding together billions of animals in thousands of such facilities is causing massive damage to the environment. Manure, chemical pesticides, and fertilizers are polluting our rivers, lakes, streams, aquifers, and other drinking water sources, killing off fish and wildlife, and causing tragic human health problems such as cancer,

miscarriages, and birth defects.

Huge amounts of water, energy, and grain are being used, and largely wasted, raising cattle, pigs, chickens and other animals. These animals emit enormous amounts of gases that cause or exacerbate global warming and depletion of the planet’s stratospheric ozone layer that protects all life on earth from deadly radiation.

The growing environmental crisis has become one of the great political issues of our day. What many people fail to realize is that it is also a moral and spiritual

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?

And not one of them is forgotten before God.

LUKE 12:6

issue, since humankind is overwhelming the earth’s ability to support not just wildlife but human life as well. What greater sin can there be than to destroy future generations’ ability to live on our planet?

Fortunately, the solution to many of these problems may be found in the doctrines of the Bible. If adhered to, these teachings, which promote a reverence for the earth and its creatures, might prevent many of the threats to the environment and could ensure a secure future for humanity.



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*O Lord, how manifold
are thy works!
In wisdom hast thou
made them all;
the earth is full
of thy creatures.*

PSALM 104:24

