

# THE BIBLE & ANIMAL WELFARE

by Helen Hall



Para Javier,  
gracias por todo

# INTRODUCTION

Many great Christian evangelists, pastors and teachers down the ages have been concerned about the welfare of animals. Figures as diverse and devout as John Wesley and St Francis of Assisi have spoken for them. This is not surprising, given the prominent place which our fellow creatures occupy in Scripture. The Bible reveals a lot about God's feelings towards His Creation, and also about our duties towards all that He has made, loved and redeemed.

## GOD AS CREATOR

The first Creation story in the Bible appears in

Genesis 1-2:4. Over six days God forms the universe, pronouncing each part of it good at the end of every day. It is sometimes mistakenly suggested that the creation of humankind is the climax of this story; but in fact human beings appear on the sixth day along with the other land animals. The high point and completion of the story comes with the seventh day which God blesses, and on which he rests from all his in Creation (Genesis 2:3).

Human beings are acknowledged as special however, because they are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27). The meaning of this verse is mysterious, but it is often understood to mean that humans are the only creatures with the capacity to make moral choices and to have knowledge of good and evil. Humankind is also given 'dominion' over the

other creatures. In the past this has been used to justify treating animals as resources which people are entitled to use however they like, but this is a misguided way to understand the term 'dominion'. Stewardship is perhaps a more helpful word to convey the sense of the text in English.

When God gives power to people in the Bible, it is almost always with the intention that they should use this to benefit the weak rather than to exploit them. For example, kings and priests are expected to care for God's children, not to use their position for personal gain and benefit. When they forget this, the prophets have some fairly direct reminders and juicy curses for them. (Think for example of Nathan scolding King David for murdering Uriah and taking his wife Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 12:1-9). Therefore if humankind has been given special power, it is reasonable to assume that with it comes a special responsibility. Dominion or stewardship is not a right, but a duty of care.

## GOD & HIS KINGDOM

Christians do not believe in a creator who made the universe, and then who wandered off leaving it to its own devices. God is certainly not an absent Father! The God of the Bible continues to delight in, care for and interact with the world he has formed. Bearing this in mind, it is hardly surprising that he should have given beings made in his image a special duty to look after his works.

We are all part of something bigger than our individual lives and concerns. There are many passages in the psalms where the worship of human beings is presented as part of the wider worship of Creation. Our loving relationship with God is located within a greater loving relationship between God and all of the works of his hands. See for instance Psalm 148, in which humans are invited to join a chorus of praise alongside, angels, stars, sea-monsters animals and birds.

And the traffic of love flows both ways; creation praises the Lord and the Lord is depicted as responding to his creatures and providing for them. For example Psalm 147 v 9: 'He gives to the animals their food; and to the young ravens when they cry' and Psalm 104 v 21 'The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their

food from God'. Animals have worth and significance in their own right, and a relationship with their Creator.

Animals do not appear in the Old Testament as tools created for the benefit of human beings. God's response to Job's questioning contains a vibrant and colourful portrait of many creatures, presented as examples of the wonder of God's work. In painting the untameable Leviathan (Job 41:1-6) and wild animals like the mountain goat, aurochs and ostrich (Job 39: 1-30) the speech from God not only shows his glory, it also makes it clear to Job that 'This universe isn't all about you!' The animals described lead free lives away from humankind, and the limits of human knowledge and control are unlined:

### JOB 39

<sup>1</sup> Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer?

<sup>2</sup> Can you number the months that they fulfil, and do you know the time when they give birth,

<sup>3</sup> When they crouch to give birth to their offspring, and are delivered of their young?

<sup>4</sup> Their young ones become strong, they grow up in the open; they go forth, and do not return to them.

<sup>5</sup> 'Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, 6 to which I have given the steppe for its home, the salt land for its dwelling-place?

<sup>7</sup> It scorns the tumult of the city; it does not hear the shouts of the driver.

<sup>8</sup> It ranges the mountains as its pasture, and it searches after every green thing.

<sup>9</sup> 'Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will it spend the night at your crib? 10 Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes, or will it harrow the valleys after you?

<sup>11</sup> Will you depend on it because its strength is great, and will you hand over your labour to it?

<sup>12</sup> Do you have faith in it that it will return, and bring your grain to your threshing-floor?

Similarly when God sets the rainbow in Heavens at the end of the flood story in Genesis, he is explicitly making a covenant with all life, not just with human beings. Once again human beings have a central part to play in the story, but it is not simply about them. Genesis 9:16

'When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.'

And this is not the only Divine promise reaches beyond human

beings. One of the most quoted verses in the New Testament, sometimes described as 'the Gospel in a nutshell' embraces all that God has made: John 3:16 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.' The word usually translated as 'world' in passage is 'kovsmoß', from which we get 'cosmos' in English. Jesus does not come to Earth solely for the love of human beings, but for the love of everything which His Father has made.

This idea is echoed elsewhere in the New Testament: the promise in Revelation of a new Heaven and a new Earth (Revelation 21:1-4); and St Paul's declaration that all Creation is awaiting renewal (Romans 8:19-23). By the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has healed and is healing the brokenness of his universe as a whole.

It is not necessary to read the Genesis stories literally to understand them as presenting the world before the Fall as the kingdom which God truly desires, a kingdom free from suffering and death. Animals were part of the original beautiful Creation which God pronounced good; they were not an accident or an after-thought!

Furthermore, pain and death for animals is linked with the brokenness of sin. In the first instance, all beings are vegetarian; there is no economy of life which requires creatures to kill or be killed (Genesis 1:29-30). If therefore Christianity understands animals as experiencing suffering because of the brokenness of sin, surely both logic and justice demand that they should experience healing and joy when that brokenness is restored. This also fits with prophetic writings in both the Old and New Testament which speak of comfort and harmony for animals in God's promised kingdom. See for instance Isaiah 65:25

'The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.'

The fact that biologically lions are not able to survive on grass and snakes cannot gain nutrients from dust is not the point! The vision is of a world where animals and people exist together, in love and without strife or pain. The Christian understanding of Heaven is of this present universe restored rather than replaced; so if animals have a God given place in this world then they evidently have a place in the coming Kingdom. This

means that not only do animals matter to God, they matter eternally.

## ANIMALS & HUMANS - BUT AREN'T WE MORE IMPORTANT?

Having acknowledged the importance of animals, there are still pragmatic questions to face. In a world of limited resources, stewards of creation must after all decide where and how their energies can best be directed. And in a hierarchy of need, surely humans in distress should be prioritized? Put more starkly, it is sometimes suggested that Christians should feed starving children before worrying about suffering animals.

But reflecting on Scripture, and the God who emerges from it, quickly reveals that the situation is so much more complicated than that. Many resources may be finite, but compassion is certainly not one of them. Caring for humans and animals is not an either/or choice.

The sulky prophet Jonah is scolded for his callousness towards the world in general. Not only is Jonah roundly rebuked for wanting to see the human inhabitants of Nineveh perish, he is told that many animals would have died along with them (Jonah 4:11).

Much less humorously, when the massacre of the priestly city of Nob is reported in the 1 Samuel, animal victims are mentioned as part of the wanton carnage (1 Samuel 22:19). Amongst other things, this illustrates graphically how cruelty tends to breed cruelty and love tends to breed love. Indifference towards the suffering of animals and indifference towards the suffering of people often go hand and hand. It is not surprising that sociologists have now found evidence that households in which domestic pets are abused are often also households in which there is domestic violence and abuse.

Neither is it an accident that the Jewish law included livestock in the Sabbath observance (Exodus 20:10).

This doesn't mean that domestic animals were to be treated in exactly the same way as human members of the community. But it did reflect the reality that their lives and the lives of the humans surrounding them were bound together.

## EVERY SINGLE SPARROW

Not only does the Bible reveal that Christians have a responsibility towards animals in general, it also reminds us of the importance of individual animals.

In the charming story of the prophet Balaam and his donkey (Numbers 22:21-35) the delinquent prophet fails to perceive a wrathful angel barring his path. It is only because his loyal donkey turns aside three times, despite being beaten for her trouble, that the angel refrains from killing him. The donkey receives the power of speech to remonstrate with Balaam about the injustice of her treatment, and the angel also adds his voice. If the donkey hadn't turned aside, he would have slaughtered her master, but left her unharmed. In the crisis which Balaam faced, it was still important whether that particular donkey lived or died!

Of course the Gospels contain Jesus' famous statement that God watches the fall of every sparrow (Matthew 29-31; Luke 12:6-7). Our infinite and omnipotent God has both the capacity and inclination to notice and care for each one of his creatures. In choosing the sparrow as an example, Jesus would have been aware of Psalm 84:

'Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.'

It is true of course that Jesus cites the sparrow and points out that his audience are worth more

than many such birds. It's less than clear however quite what he meant by 'worth'. For modern readers it is easy to forget that human beings were sold in the same market as sparrows; and that his listeners would have fetched a lot more cash as slaves than a couple of sparrows for the cooking-pot! Was Jesus making a slightly pointed joke? It is certainly interesting to note that once we reduce the worth of our fellow creatures to their value in money, we are often not far away from doing the same thing with our fellow human beings.

Animals would have been part of the fabric of Jesus' everyday life, as was the case for everyone in his society. Born in a stable, riding a donkey and spending days and nights in the wilderness with beasts Jesus did not scorn close contact with his fellow animals. In taking on flesh, God took on something common to more of his Creation than humankind.

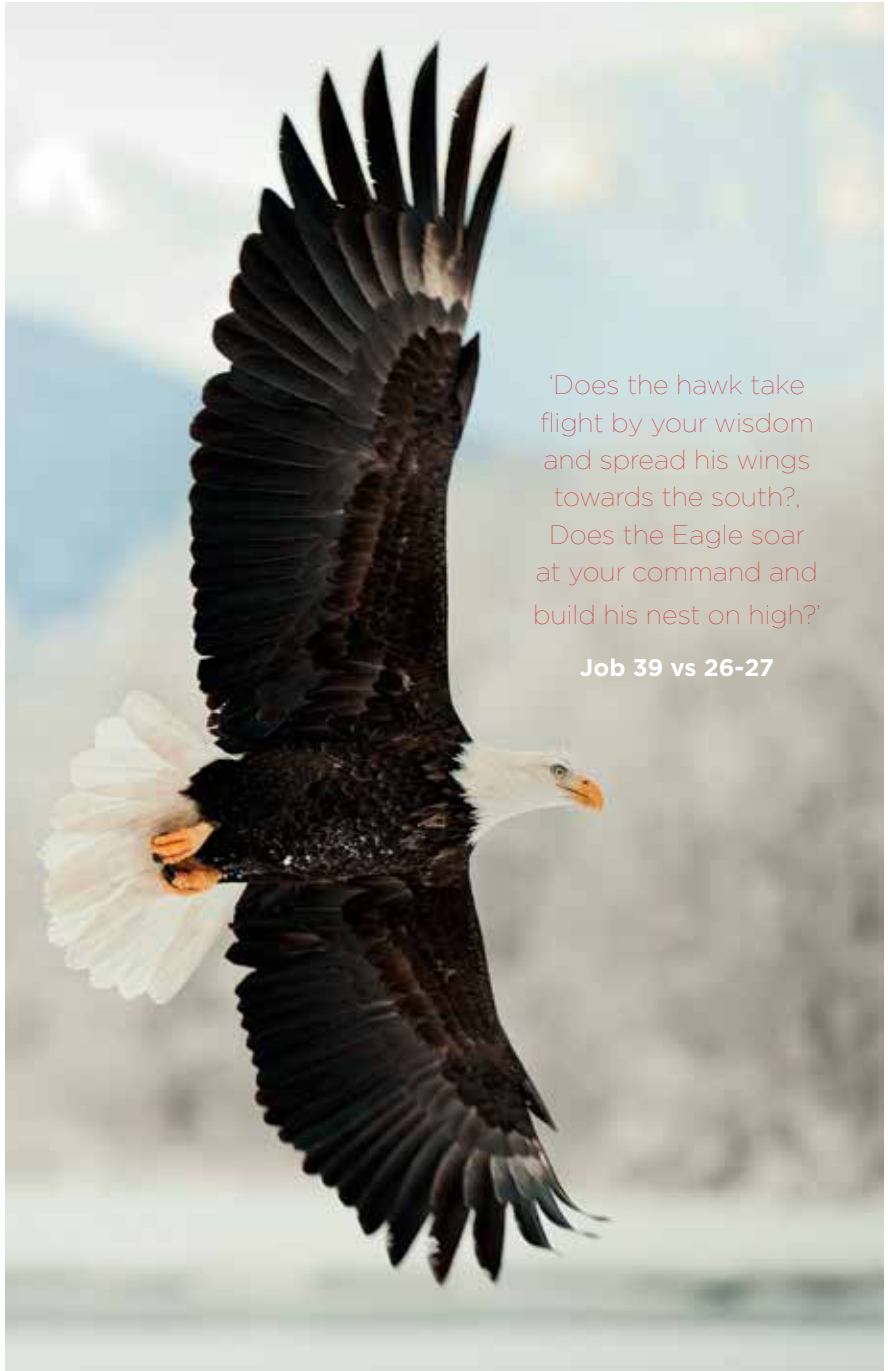
We all of us know what it is like to be cold, isolated, frightened, hungry or in pain. We also know what is like to be warm, cuddled, secure, well fed and comfortable. Scientists (and centuries of

unscientific but careful observers) have realised that we share many basic needs and experiences with our fellow creatures. Many animals can also anticipate and remember these bad and good experiences. They display behaviour which looks remarkably like an exhibition of affection, grief and playfulness.

Ultimately, in considering the God revealed in the Christian scriptures, we are left with a very simple question. Would the God in whom we believe, create beings, capable of intense pain and intense pleasure, with consciousness, emotion and memory, and then not care whether they suffered? What kind of creator God would that be? And if God cares, surely we should also care.

Why should Christians care about animal welfare? This booklet explores the spiritual and moral obligations which human beings owe towards their fellow creatures from a Biblical perspective, arguing that duty of care and compassion is a key part of discipleship.





'Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread his wings towards the south? Does the Eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high?'

**Job 39 vs 26-27**

# The Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals

## **President**

The Rt Revd Dominic Walker OGS

## **Vice President**

Revd Dr Martin Henig

## **Chair**

The Revd Dr Helen Hall

## **Treasurer:**

Jenny White

PO BOX 7193 Hook, Hampshire RG27 8GT

Tel: +44 (0)1252 843093 • E-mail: AngSocWelAnimals@aol.com

## **Correspondence**

Mrs Samantha Chandler

Secretary: PO BOX 7193 Hook, Hampshire RG27 8GT

Tel: +44 (0)1252 843093 • E-mail: AngSocWelAnimals@aol.com

## **Editor of Animalwatch**

Revd Jennifer Brown

PO BOX 7193 Hook, Hampshire RG27 8GT

Tel: +44 (0)1252 843093 • E-mail: Animalwatch@jenbrown.org.uk

## **Theological Consultant**

The Revd Hugh Broadbent

The Vicarage, 11 St Katherine's Lane, Snodland, Kent ME6 5EH

## **Membership Secretary**

Mr Keith Plumridge

23 Barton Court, Barton Road, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire GL20 5RL

## **Australian Representative**

Mrs Olga Parkes

106 Grandview Road, New Lambton Heights,

Newcastle NSW 2305 Australia

E-mail: ocp@idl.com.au

Registered Charity No. 1087270

'The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand, and satisfy the desires of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving towards all he has made'

**Psalm 145 vs 15-17**





## Putting Animals on the Agenda of the Christian Church

Anglican Society for the Welfare of Animals,  
PO Box 7193, Hook, Hampshire, RG27 8GT, UK.

**T:** +44 (0)1252 843093 • **E:** AngSocWelAnimals@aol.com

**[www.aswa.org.uk](http://www.aswa.org.uk)**