

WHAT THE GENESIS STORY TELLS US ABOUT THE ANIMALS

Almost everyone has read the Genesis story but few, including the theologians, have paid much attention to what Genesis tells us about the animals. It seems that most people dismiss Genesis and the animals with the idea of dominion. The Creator has given man dominion over the animals, Gn. 1:28, and so they say, "That is the end of the story. There is no animal problem, they say-we just do what we please. We are in charge." But almost all biblical scholars now think that dominion refers to a caring solicitude. Dominion does not mean domination. Dominion as used here refers to the way God has dominion over us, thus showing us the way we should exercise dominion.

In the first chapter of Genesis we are told that God created the animals, giving them "nephesh chayah", Hebrew, translated: the "breath of life", i.e., (a living soul), Gn.1:21). Thus the animals are sentient, i.e., able to seek physical pleasure and to avoid physical pain; to desire to continue living, seeking to avoid death and to able "suffer" the emotions. Then God created man and breathed into his nostrils the same "breath of life", "nephesh chayah", (Gn.2:7) which is the living soul. Man and the other animals are equally animals. By reason of this commonality of possessing a living soul the animals are also our neighbors.

From this it follows that we must exercise our dominion over the animals the way God exercises dominion over us. This is done by following the Golden Rule, i.e., we must treat the animals the way we would want to be treated if we were in their circumstances. This is a powerful statement requiring powerful action on our part.

No doubt, due mostly to the hubris of man, many of the English translations of the original Biblical Hebrew language, "nephesh chayah", refers to man as "living soul" but to the other animals as "creatures". These mistranslations (See also Gn. 2:19) has caused great confusion and has all but obliterated the idea of the animals possessing a living soul and being our neighbors.

Jesus said treating others the same way you want them to treat you is the whole Law and the Prophets (Mt. 7:12). The famous teacher, Hillel the Great, said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself", is the foundation of Jewish ethics. But St. Thomas Aquinas, 13th century Catholic theologian, denied that animals are our neighbors and following the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, taught that we do not have any obligation to treat the animals kindly because they do not have anything that counts in common with us; the animals are not "rational", i.e., capable of abstract reasoning. Unfortunately this teaching has had a great influence on the treatment of animals. In 1789, Jeremy Bentham, an Enlightenment philosopher, challenged the Thomistic teaching by saying that it is their ability to suffer which made animals our neighbors, not their rationally. Other famous teachers then began to take up the argument.(John Wesley, Methodism founder; Dr. Humphrey Primatt, Anglican clergyman; Arthur Broome & Lewis Gompertz, SPCA).

In Genesis 1:29-31, we find the command by God, given to man and animals alike, to eat a Plant Based Diet. It is the food that suits our nature, causes us no harm and causes no animal suffering. Yet it seems hardly anyone notices this God-given proscription. All attention has been turned to the story of the flood and the allowance for man to eat the animals, Gn. 9:1-3. But this new concession was not a command; it more likely is a divine tolerance for what was already occurring under the God-given free will of man's character. Please note that it would be a contradiction for God to have made the animals able to suffer, declare that that this was good, Gn. 20:21, and then turn around, cause the animals great suffering by giving them to man to eat.

Genesis section, 9:4 gives the absolute prohibition against eating meat with the blood in it. This is the basis for the kosher laws. Abraham Isaac Kook, first chief rabbi of modern Israel, advocated vegetarianism and saw in this law, not an approval of meat eating but a reminder that meat eating is morally wrong.

When Noah leaves the Arc after the flood, he thanks God for protecting him and his family by offering holocausts of every clean animal and bird, Gn.8:20. Animal sacrifice was such an established custom that it was the "natural" thing to do. The scripture reports that it was the sweet odor which moved God to consider the covenant. But the story is strange because supposedly all the animals had been killed by the flood and Noah was ordered by God to a male and female of each species on the Arc in order to save all the species. If Noah sacrificed any animal from the Arc he would have wiped out their species. Of course later animal sacrifice was condemned by the prophets and by Jesus (Mt. 9:13; Mt. 12:7). Other animal issues considered: clothing, Gn.3:21; hunting, Gn. 10:8-9, 25:27, 27:5 and kindness to animals required Gn. 49:6-7.

Lastly, the Genesis story insists that God takes the animals seriously by making a covenant with the animals as well as with man, Gn 9:8-17. A covenant is later made again to the animals in Hosea 2:16, when God promises the animals a place to "lie down in safety". i.e., to be in peace. Thus the animals are promised by God that they will be in the Peaceable Kingdom.

References :

Norm Phelps. *The Dominion of Love: Animal Rights According to the Bible*, NY: Lantern Books, 2002.

Andrew Linzey. *Why Animal Suffering Matters: Philosophy, Theology and Practical Ethics*. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2009.

N. B. Please note that this presentation takes Genesis as a story which tells some basic truths. It does not take Genesis literally. This is not a fundamentalist approach.

Elizabeth Farians, Ph D. ejf.ape@juno.com (AR O9)