The Judeo-Christian Tradition and the Human/Animal Bond

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This paper surveys the role of animal imagery in the literature of the Old Testament and in post-biblical Jewish literature, discusses biblical materials that speak to the relation of humankind to animals, and assesses the subsequent use of these traditions to support or negate specific attitudes toward the natural environment.

> *A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel* (Proverbs 12:10).

It is always perilous to some degree to ask a modern question of an ancient text or tradition. The obvious danger is that the investigator will shape the tradition to suit his or her own predetermined purposes and ignore or explain away that which does not fit those aims. The Judeo-Christian tradition has had that sort of treatment on the very question that we will investigate here. Interpretations based on self-interest have been all the more easy to arrive at because the human/animal companion bond is a subject that has not received a great deal of self-conscious reflection in the Judeo-Christian tradition and its literatures, and because many of the ecological conditions within which the contemporary inquiry is raised did not obtain in the ancient world.

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At the same time, this situation holds promise for an even-handed treatment. Historians agree that we get a more genuine answer to our questions when we derive our answers from allusions and reflections in texts that are not tendentious. We are attempting here to follow the advice of Goethe: *"Wer dem Dichter will verstehen, muss im Land des Dichters gehen"* ("To understand the poet, one must go to the poet's land," *i.e.,* meet him on his own turf).

A Survey of Biblical Imagery

Not surprisingly, we find that the human/animal bond, because it enriches the life and culture of a people, is reflected in that people's literature. This is precisely the case with the Old Testament, the primary literature of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the literary legacy of some 1,000 years of Hebrew culture. We notice in the first place that the human/animal bond is a particularly rich source of simile and metaphor in the hands of poets and sages. What follows is a very brief survey of such allusions.

The smaller forms of animal life consistently form a picture of plague and infestation. The sacred text is abundant with lice, mice, locusts, grasshoppers, mosquitoes, moths, maggots and worms:

> *The moth shall eat them like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool* (Isaiah 51;8).

In a culture where animals had a more direct role in the general economy than in our own day, reference to them served as indication of wealth and power, and military prowess.

> *They carry their riches on the backs of asses, and their treasures on the humps of camels* (Isaiah 30:6).

> *The snorting of their horses is heard from Dan; at the sound of the neighing of their stallions the whole land quakes* (Jeremiah 8:16).

> *I have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones* (Isaiah 10:13).

Other examples could be added referring to the camel, the ass, the lion, and various kinds of cattle.

Much in the animal world was very threatening in ancient times, and threat to life is often illustrated in the texts with reference to the bear, the lion, leopard, hyena, wolf, boar, and various birds of prey.

> *It is as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him* (Amos 5:19).

> *The eye that mocks a father, or scorns an aged mother — the ravens of the wadi will pluck it out; carrion-birds will eat it* (Proverbs 30:17).

Recent generations were not the first to enlist religion in the service of stimulating good behavior in children!

The reader of the Old Testament scriptures will note references to the natural environment that are used as pigments to add color to the poet's painting and make it more vivid. For instance, references to wildlife are used to characterize certain locales:

> (Of the land of Edom): *From generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever. But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it, the owl and the raven shall dwell in it* (Isaiah 34:10f.).

> *...through the wilderness, with its fiery serpents, and scorpions and*

thirsty ground where there was no water (Deuteronomy 8:5).

A land laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the beasts have fled and are gone (Jeremiah 9:9).

The passages cited above can be compared with the picture of the "peaceable kingdom," so famous, from Isaiah, chapter 11:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox (Isaiah 11:6-7).

This idyllic or "messianic" scene is at the same time an acknowledgment by the prophet that there is something wrong in the observable relationship of predator and prey in the animal kingdom, as well as in human/animal relationships. He not only promises that things will change, but also evidences a deep yearning for such change.

Animals and Humankind

So far, we have seen little in the scripture that expresses any sense of a direct relationship between humans and animals. We do see this, however, when we begin to notice the frequent comparisons between human feelings and those ascribed to animals.

I lie awake, I am like a lonely bird on the housetop (Psalm 102:7).

I will make lamentation like the jackals, and mourning like the ostriches (Micah 1:8).

Like a swallow or a crane I clamor; I moan like a dove (Isaiah 38:14).

Her maidens lamenting, moaning like doves (Nahum 2:7).

We all growl like bears, we moan and moan like doves (Isaiah 59:11).

I am a brother of jackals, and a companion of ostriches (Job 30:29).

One particularly strong expression of the importance of the human/animal bond is the intimation that humans have a lot to learn by the observation and imitation of animal behaviors. This is a frequent theme of the literature of the Old Testament that is called "Wisdom Literature." It finds expression in fables (which, though infrequent in the bible, are quite common in other literatures of the ancient East) and other more brief proverbial sayings:

Go to the ant, thou sluggard...(Proverbs 6:6-11) (to learn industry and foresight).

The locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank; the lizard you can take in your hands, yet it is in kings' palaces (Proverbs 30:27).

The leech has two daughters: "Gimme" and "Gimme" are their names! (Proverbs 30:15).

Human duplicity is compared to a spider's web; the serpent is the one with a "sharp tongue"; even birds know where to go — a pre-scientific observation of migratory habits. The ox and the ass know their master's crib, and bridles are necessary to curb the unruly behavior of the horse and ass. The folk saying "a little bird told me" finds this interesting precursor from ancient times:

Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedchamber curse the rich; for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter (Ecclesiastes 10:30).

Models of parental habits can be seen in the animal world too: "hide me in the shadow of your wings" is a frequent phrase in the Psalms (17:8, 36:8, and others), and the protective attitude of "the hen who gathers her chicks" finds expression in the New Testament (Matthew 23:37).

In all of this there is recognition that the animals and humans enjoy a kind of symbiotic relationship: the animals contribute to people's enjoyment of life by their sheer presence, by their labor and, perhaps surprisingly to us today, by the many sounds that they contribute to the environment.

Winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land (Song of Songs 2:11-12).

The animals are thought of as companions to humans, sharing a common destiny in weal and woe. The pragmatic/economic view has its place too: "where there is no ox, there is no grain" (Proverbs 14:4). The animals display a kind of wisdom from which humans can benefit by observation and imitation, particularly in their foresight, their willing dependence, and their seeming lack of anxiety. Note this picture of the carefree enjoyment of good times:

You shall go forth leaping like calves from the stall (Malachi 3:20).

Consider the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them (Matthew 6:26).

Another indication of the human/animal bond is seen in the widespread use of animal names in the bible. We mention here some examples, many of which occur in special diminutive forms indicative of the affection with which they were bestowed: little camel, horse, wild-ox, young cow, lamb, lion, pig, puppy, fox, ass, foal, gazelle and young gazelle, ibex, badger, hawk, tortoise, raven, dove and various other birds, bee, beetle, grasshopper; even snake, worm, flea, and fish!

But what about evidence of pets? There is very little expression given to this in the bible, but undoubtedly that special affection between little children and the young animal — calf, kid, lamb — was very prevalent in a society in which herdsmanship played so large a part. We do find mention of birds kept in cages, and though some of this may have been for purposes other than companionship, that played a role as well:

Will you play with him as with a bird, or will you put him on leash for your maidens? (Job 41:5).

One story that does mention a pet is among the most moving in all the Old Testament. It is recorded in II Samuel 12, told by the prophet Nathan to King David:

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him.

The story continues, as the rich man, lacking food to serve a traveler, seizes the poor man's lamb and serves it up for supper to his guest. At this point in the story, David interrupts with a burst of emotion:

> *Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity."*

As the story concludes, we learn that the prophet is using the story to bring the king to account for his seizure of another man's wife — Bathsheba.

Some might be surprised to learn that in ancient times, quite generally, dogs were not kept as pets as they are now. Dogs were commonplace, but they were pariah-dogs, scavengers, and carrion animals who also served to sound the alarm against intruders, rather than as the objects of much affection. In biblical literature a reference to dogs is usually used as a term of self-abasement on the one hand, or as an image of a savage enemy on the other.

> *Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool that repeats his folly* (Proverbs 26:11).

> *He who meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears* (or *tail*) (Proverbs 26:17).

Before concluding this part of our survey we must note how, in the Song of Songs, female beauty is described in this most unusual way:

> *...hair like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of Gilead...and breasts like twin fawns of a gazelle* (Song of Songs 4:1, 5).

Animals in Jewish Literature

The post-biblical literature of the rabbis is marked by extensive legislation designed to ensure a degree of kindness toward animals and to prevent them from being mistreated. A special phrase, *za'ar ba'al hayyim,* stood for "cruelty to anything possessed of life" and was considered a crime. It was recognized that animal slaughter was necessary to society, but very elaborate precautions were taken to minimize the pain involved (Grandin, 1980). By the time of the Middle Ages, Maimonides was to list 70 proscriptions that constituted unskillful and therefore unacceptable slaughter. Investigators have consistently remarked that Jews were not known to kill animals for sport, and had regulations stipulating that fish must be netted, not hooked. The word "hook" occurs in the bible only as a metaphor of cruelty or as an implement of torture used by foreigners (Danby, 1933; Montefiore and Loewe, 1963).

Typical of the attitude of the rabbis is this proscription in Gittin 62a: "Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rab, A man is forbidden to eat anything until he has fed his beast" (Montefiore and Loewe, 1963).

Rabbinical literature is full of stories that center on well-known biblical figures, such as Noah and the Ark, for this particular incident gave occasion for many tales about animals. Here we cite a few references that will illustrate the attitudes that were part of this tradition.

> *If men make a sea voyage, and take cattle with them, should a storm arise, they jettison the animals to save mankind, because people do not love animals as much as they love human beings. Not so is God's love. Just as He is merciful to man, so is He merciful to beast. You can see this from the story of the flood... God remembered Noah and the ani-*

mals that were with him in the ark (Montefiore and Loewe, 1963).

Rabbi Tanhum ben Hiyya said: "The falling of the rain is greater than the giving of the Law, for the giving of the Law was a joy only to Israel, while the falling of the rain is a rejoicing for all the world, including the cattle and the wild beasts and the birds" (Montefiore and Loewe, 1963).

While Moses was feeding the sheep of his father-in-law in the wilderness, a young kid ran away. Moses followed it until it reached a ravine, where it found a well to drink from. When Moses reached it, he said, "I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty. Now you must be weary." He carried the kid back. Then God said, "Because thou hast shown pity in leading back one of the flock belonging to a man, thou shalt lead my flock, Israel" (Montefiore and Loewe, 1963).

Once Rabbi Judah the Prince sat and taught the Law before an assembly of Babylonian Jews in Sephoris, and a calf passed before him. It came and sought to conceal itself, and began to moo, as if to say, "Save me." Then he said, "What can I do for you? For this lot (i.e., *to be slaughtered) you have been created." Hence Rabbi Judah suffered toothache for 13 years.... After that a reptile (or perhaps a weasel) ran past his daughter, and she wanted to kill it. He said to her, "Let it be, for it is written, 'His mercies are over all his works'." So it was said in heaven, "Because he had pity, pity shall be shown to him." And his toothache ceased* (Montefiore and Loewe, 1963).

The theme in this last passage is reminiscent of that of the biblical book of Jonah, where the attitude expressed by the prophet about the inhabitants of Nineveh is countered by the sentiment of the mercy of God toward animate and inanimate life alike: And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night (—because it gave you shelter from the sun). And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left [*i.e.*, are below the age of discretion], and also much cattle?"

The Divine Economy

The framers of the biblical tradition also addressed themselves to themes on the order of the natural world, their own place in it, and the place of the animals that share with humanity the mysterious thing called life. The primary expression of this viewpoint is found in certain portions of the biblical book of Genesis, plus a number of other sources, chiefly the Psalms. In Genesis, the first 11 chapters, we find what may be called a primordial history, or pre-history, into which are worked the basic reflections of the culture on the question of how things came to be the way we see them.

Life is a divine gift: *"then the Lord God formed man of the dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being"* (Genesis 2:7). These words stress not only the fact that life is an independent gift, but also the common bond of man with the earth. And, as with man, so with the animals: *"out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air"* (Genesis 2:9). But in addition to stressing what man and the animals have in common, the tradition also underlines certain critical dif-

ferences. The human being is to exercise a dominion over nature: *"let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth... fill the earth and subdue it"* (Genesis 1:28). The human being has a special task: to be the responsible representative of the cosmic Lord:

> *Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth* (Psalm 8:7-9).

There is, of course, an ambiguity in this commissioning. It holds in it the potential for great benefits to all, and also the potential for violations. Restrictions to the domination of the creation were always recognized and found their way into the national law of Israel (Exodus 23: 19, 34:26; Deuteronomy 22:9; Leviticus 19:19, 22:24, 27 and elsewhere).

There is a felt propinquity, an affinity between man and nature; but also an estrangement and an alienation. There are boundaries, limitations; and closeness as well as distance. As people begin to find themselves in an interdependent relationship with the animal world, the idea of dominance is gradually shaped into one of stewardship. Because all this life derives its origin and its final purpose from a source outside of itself, the man of Genesis is one who tends the garden of God; he is a caretaker (Wolff, 1974).

Equally important as the first chapters of Genesis, for an understanding of man's role as part of nature but also separate from it, are the further statements of the sixth to ninth chapters, the story of the great flood. Here it is said that God has decided to destroy from under heaven all flesh that has the breath of life. Man and animals here share a common fate. But a remnant is saved. In the context of this primeval history, the episode serves the writer's purpose to show that the way things are is not the way they were intended to be but, rather, an accommodation.

When man and the animals emerge from the ordeal of the flood, the guidelines of the accommodation are spelled out:

> *Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark* (Genesis 9:9).

The animals may breed abundantly on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply. To the human being are addressed these words:

> *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered* (Genesis 9:1-2).

The human being is now explicitly responsible:

> *Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood* (Genesis 9:3-4).

The human being now begins to eat flesh — in Genesis 1 and 2, humans were vegetarian. But when man slaughters and kills, he is to know that he is touching something which, because it is life, is

in a special way God's property, and as a sign of this he is to keep his hands off the blood. This regulation can be thought of as a regulation of necessity. Human life is inviolable — animal life is violable; for all their similarity, there is some recognized difference in psycho-physical totality (von Rad, 1961).

In this discussion, as in other areas of concern to the Old Testament writers, there is, in the background, a notion of the precariousness of the order of nature: every living thing in the world is dependent on God's constantly letting his breath of life go forth to renew the created order (Eichrodt, 1967).

> *These all look to thee to give them their food in due season. When thou givest to them, they gather it up; When thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good things; When thou hidest thy face, they are dismayed; When thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created and thou renewst the face of the ground* (Psalm 104:27-30).

Man and animal alike share this utter dependence upon God. But humankind is treated throughout as an independent spiritual "I," while the animals are not; that is, they are not considered to be conscious of the source of their life, and God's good intention for them is in large part mediated by man. In this task, man shares responsibility with the divine.

The recognition that the animal world is not conscious of the source of its gift of life places an added responsiblity on the human being. There is throughout the Old Testament the added dimension that man and beast share the same fate, but it is not open to manipulation by the animal, as it is by man. The human being is the shaper of destiny for the animals. This is first expressed in the Genesis account of the meaning of the animals:

> *The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field* (Genesis 2:20).

In this manner the Old Testament brings onto the scene the idea of *culture*. The creative force that man enjoys is to be discovered in the development and application of his aptitudes (Eichrodt, 1967).

The bible also contains another, more pessimistic statement of the shared fate of man and beast:

> *Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them to show them that they are but beasts. For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so 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, for all are from the 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? So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work, for that is his lot; who can bring him to see what will be after him?* (Ecclesiastes 3:16-22).

Now, finally, we address ourselves to the subsequent use of the biblical tradi-

tion there are evidenced feelings of ambiguity, as well as ambivalence toward the natural order and the role of humankind in it. Some have found in the scriptural material the impetus for great acts of kindness, others the justification for unspeakable cruelty. This might have been expected, considering the ways biblical materials have been used in other controversies throughout history. In truth, the bible represents an open tradition: it is questioning; full of awe at times, of fear at others. But it is clear that, "What people do about their ecology depends upon what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny... that is, by religion" (White, cited by Derrick, 1972). St. Thomas Aquinas has written (*Summa Theologica* I, 99:44-45): "God's purpose in creation was the communication of his own goodness, in which his creatures participate by reason of their existence and in the measure of it." That measure is now large, now small.

Only by the most heavy-handed and insensitive treatment can the bible be used to support the view that the natural world is "at our disposal." What place and what value the animal world and the rest of the created order have is inextricably bound to the question, "What values do we have, and why?" H. Paul Santmire (1970) has written, "Nothing comparable to modern exploitation of nature was known in biblical times. Exploitation and compulsive manipulation were simply not possible on so vast a scale in pre-industrial, pre-technocratic societies." This assessment remains true, but needs to be tempered by archaeological data which show that the critical measure here was not humankind's intent, but merely the state of its technology and its numbers.

The ecological ills of the present that are sometimes said to be the result of biblical influence (especially the command to "have dominion and subdue it") are not at all a *necessary* outgrowth of that statement, as I hope I have shown. The Israelite tradition, at least, did not evidence these sorts of sentiments. A case can be made quite to the contrary, as the present survey demonstrates. To the items mentioned already could be added the injunctions of Israelite law concerning kindness and sensitivity toward the animal world: not to seize the young in a wild bird's nest (and thus to jeopardize the future) (Deuteronomy 22:6); the Sabbath law that prescribes rest not only for people but also for the ox and the ass, or the prescription to let the land lie fallow on the seventh year so that the poor and the wild beasts can eat (Exodus 23:10); and finally, an injunction that maintains its familiarity to our own day, "the ox should not be muzzled when it treads the grain" (Deuteronomy 25:4). The fundamental picture that emerges from a study of the Judeo-Christian tradition is that humankind is not only to respect nature's rights in a passive way, but to act positively to preserve and defend them.

The attitude of superiority and contempt for nature is quite foreign, not only to the biblical world, but to the ancient world in general. I believe it can be shown to be an outgrowth of the eighteenth and nineteenth century mechanistic philosophies, and the elevation of technology above the ideal of service to humankind, such that technology assumes the role of a controlling force, all in the interest of a widespread materialism of a private and egotistical nature.

The desacralization of the world is not a program of church or synagogue; quite the contrary. Cold and mechanistic views have come from the laboratory, not the pulpit. The proper answer to this quandry is not a lot of mythical and mystical nonsense, but a humane reassessment done in reverence and humility, acknowledging the willing interdependence we can exercise in regard to our envi-

rons, and the benefits we can thereby enjoy. It is in our own best interest to do so.

> *The catastrophes of history by which God punishes pride, it must be observed, are the natural and inevitable consequence of men's effort to transcend their mortal and insecure existence and to establish a security to which man has no right* (Niebuhr, 1941).

And finally, as Shakespeare comments:

> *If then the heavens do not their visible spirits*
> *Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,*
> *It will come,*
> *Humanity must perforce prey on itself,*
> *Like monsters of the deep.*
> — *King Lear,* IV, ii.

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