



Divine Law and Animal Rights: Ethical and Legal Perspectives in the Old and New Testaments

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Abstract

This article delves into the parallel natures of both the divine law and animal rights within the religious contexts of the Old and New Testaments. Employing a comparative approach, the paper inspects the developing perspectives on the treatment of animals in biblical scriptures, shedding light on the ethical and legal dimensions embedded in religious teachings. The study investigates key subtopics such as sacrificial rituals and moral imperatives, providing a nuanced understanding of the historical development of attitudes towards animals. Additionally, the analysis of this article encompasses ethical considerations, legal implications, and societal attitudes towards animals, drawing connections between ancient laws and contemporary discourse. Moreover, this article will look at the contemporary needs of society and how religious discourse and juristic principles can be applied to ensure the safety and rights of animals.

Keywords: animal wellbeing, ethics, Old Testament, New Testament, sacrifice.

Introduction

This literature study investigates the nuances of the anthropo-zoological relationship from a theological and Biblical perspective in order to solidify a morally and ethically orientated outlook towards animal care and wellbeing. While the Old Testament teachings primarily delineated sacrificial rituals, and explicit guidelines on the humane treatment of animals, the New Testament is predominantly focused on human salvation and spiritual renewal. The ethical framework concerning the treatment of animals in the New Testament reflects the evolving perspectives of Christian doctrine, intertwining theological principles with practical implications for human-animal relationships. Within this notion human beings are viewed as the stewards of Creation and are expected to demonstrate responsibility in caring for all living beings, human or animal. It is through the interpretation and following of these scriptures that one is able to ascertain that humans have been divinely appointed to care for and respect animals in the same way that we are expected to care for fellow humans.

Examining Animal Treatment in Ritual Contexts in the Old Testament

Within the Old Testament the treatment of animals is a topic of immense significance even though it is a topic which is for the most part sidelined by modern authors. Contemporary authors prefer to prioritise human centred issues and social ills. For example, social justice,



human rights, political and economic concerns. Additionally, modern theological discussions tend to be more pre-occupied with human salvation, morality and the divine nature of God. Scholarly works regarding Old Testament teachings typically exhibit a concerted effort to explore theological, historical or linguistic topics as opposed to animal ethics.

The books of the Old Testament frequently make mention of animals be they in everyday life, or as sacrificial entities and also in metaphorical purposes (Wünc, 2020). These references commonly exhibit themselves as laws concerning the Israelites relationship with Yahweh (God) and other Israelites. In the Old Testament there appears to be a clear focus on laws with regard to animal care and thus, it is used as an everyday means of growing the Israelites relationship with Yahweh (Wünc, 2020). The most important question of all these however, is how we can understand these laws concerning animals if read from a canonical standpoint? For the most part, many of the scriptures and laws pertaining to animals and their relationship to us as humans have a dualistic nature out of which one can surmise two main ideas. Firstly, these laws can be seen as the implementations of a divinely specified orders given directly by Yahweh and secondly, these laws can be seen as exemplifications of humane care, love and compassion towards God's creation (Wünc, 2020).

The author Father Robert J Murray (Head of School at St. Augustine Preparatory School in the USA) aptly describes these laws with regard to compassion for animals in the following way:

It will be argued here (a) that com-compassion, or proper feeling for fellow-creatures, is indeed fundamental and is seen as a religious duty, but also (b) that many of the laws are to be understood as determined by a concept or order as 'holiness', which requires distinctions to be maintained as a proper way of reverencing the Creator in all his crea-tures (Murray, 1992).

This perspective raises many questions. Firstly, should we in modern society understand these teachings as a form of humane behaviour? Are these laws explicitly focused on animal protection and well-being? Do these laws maintain a compassionate outlook on the animal world? In answering these questions, we must first look at Old Testament scriptures concerning the creation as well as the sacrificial rites of animals and how they were used for food and for spiritual cleansing purposes.

In the book of Genesis God orders the creation of the cosmos, the earth, humans and animals. The creation is given in two accounts and both make reference to the idea that humans and animals share a common habitat. The first account of creation is given in Genesis 1:29-30 (King James Version):

²⁹ And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

In the verse above that God provides all green plants as food for both humans and animals, indicating that neither humans nor animals are to eat any other humans or animals. The second account is given in Genesis 2:8-9 and Genesis 2:15-17 (King James Version):

⁸ And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.



¹⁵ And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: ¹⁷ But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

In the above verses, God places humans in the Garden of Eden, providing them with trees that are good for food. The diet for animals is not explicitly mentioned in this account. Both accounts show that God establishes creation in an equal relationship by providing both animals and humans with food, thus displaying the idea of harmonious existence (Adam., et al, 2019). Moreover, in Genesis 1:26 God gives humans dominion and control over all living things on the earth. He places humans as the stewards and protectors of all animals (Adam., et al, 2019).

²⁶ And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

Similarly, in Genesis 2:18-19 (King James Version) God appoints Adam, 'man', to name all the animals which God had created for the earth.

¹⁸ And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.¹⁹ And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

It is evident that right from the onset of the Holy Bible God immediately appoints humanity to care and preserve animals of all kinds. By granting Adam the ability to name all animals, God is essentially showing humans that the nomination of animals creates an additive personal slant and enhances the idea that we as humans are required to understand animals as kin (Walker-Jones, 2017). The human leadership over animals that God grants humans is profound and imparts to humans the massive duty of supporting all animals' well-being by exercising God's love through neighbourly love for the very animals He created alongside us (Adam., et al, 2019). God commands humans to rule (*rādā*) or rather to exercise dominion over other animate life that he created alongside us. *Rādā* represents control and power and is typically associated with kingly rule and of those with higher authority normally leading others. However, in this sense since God created man and animal from the dust of the earth both are referred to as simply living beings (Preece & Fraser, 2000). Likewise, in the book of Exodus specifically chapter 22 and verse 12 (King James Version) we observe another command regarding the care of animals as advocated by God:

Six days thou shalt do thy work, and on the seventh day thou shalt rest: that thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed.

The above scripture is explicit in its command and highlights that God displays concern for the welfare of animals and as such we cannot doubt that we are required to display care and love towards animals by giving them a period of rest. This period of rest coincides with our own and further highlights that humans and animals in many ways should be considered as equals (Young, 1798).



Noah and the Great Flood: A Case for Animal Care

Similarly, in the scriptural account of Noah and the great deluge, one is able to see another crucial example in which God displays how humans should love and protect animals. In Genesis 7:1-5 it states:

¹And the Lord said unto Noah, come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation.² Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and his female. ³ Of fowls also of the air by sevens, the male and the female; to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth. ⁴ For yet seven days, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and every living substance that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the earth. ⁵ And Noah did according unto all that the Lord commanded him.

In this account, God commands Noah to take his family and every kind of domestic and wild beast onto the ark before the flood begins. God is so angered with the sins of man that He needs to completely encompass all sinful people in a flood that would wipe out evil. God does not permit any other humans onto the vessel, and by directly stating that two of every animal can board the ark displays that animals unlike humans are peaceful and do not sin. They are pure of heart and carry no deceit. God chooses to save animals over humans in this instance which further highlights how dear the Divine Creator holds animals in his sight. The wild creatures readily embark the ark. Likewise, the same hand that delivered the animals to Adam to be named would now deliver the animals to Noah to be preserved since man had become more brutish than the brutes (animals) themselves. Humans for one, deliberately ignored the commandments set out by God. They committed acts of violence and bloodlust that severely degraded their moral capacities. The people of Noah's time committed perverse acts of widespread physical aggression, murder, and harm against one another. Additionally, they committed acts of deceit, theft, sexual immorality, including but not limited to adultery, fornication, worshiping idols and participating in pagan rituals.(Henry, 2000). This is the first covenant that God makes with us after He had destroyed the world in the flood. God makes an agreement with Noah and his own family. This covenant extends to include animals as well. It is not an ordinary covenant between only deity and humanity but rather the deity and the entirety of creation. God himself promises to never again destroy creation. By saving animals ahead of humans in this instance God further highlights that animals in certain aspects are purer, sinless and more spiritually in tune than many humans (Pinches & McDaniel, 2008).

Balaam's Donkey: Respecting Animals

Additionally, we see in Numbers 22:28-35 (King James Version) in a further example, that God again makes mention of animal care and openly admonishes a human for the brutal punishment of his animal.

²⁸ And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, what have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?
²⁹ And Balaam said unto the ass, because thou hast mocked me: I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee. ³⁰ And the ass said unto Balaam, am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee? and he said, Nay. ³¹ Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face. ³² And the angel of the Lord said unto him, wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I went out to withstand thee, because thy way is perverse



before me: ³³ And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times: unless she had turned from me, surely now also I had slain thee, and saved her alive. ³⁴ And Balaam said unto the angel of the Lord, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again. ³⁵ And the angel of the Lord said unto Balaam, go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak. So, Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

Of the many scriptures that teach us to show care to all animals, this seems to be one of the most striking accounts in the Old Testament. It presents the reader with a miracle that highlights the power of God: “And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass.” These words convey a rebuke of cruelty towards animals and it does so in a manner that can be likened to God giving a direct command to Moses on Mount Sinai (Young, 1798). God detests animal cruelty and the cruelty shown by Balaam towards his donkey enrages God into granting Balaam’s donkey the ability to speak (Doody., et al, 2019). The donkey pleads with Balaam and questions why he was so angered to beat her even though the donkey has been a faithful servant to Balaam throughout his life. God makes Balaam realise that all animals are sacred. He is held guilty by God of committing an act of cruelty towards a fellow living breathing being without any justifiable cause (Young, 1798). When God opens Balaam’s eyes to see the angel, the angel rebukes Balaam for his cruelty towards the donkey and explains that the donkey had saved Balaam’s life by turning away from the angel.

Interestingly, in this scripture, the animal in the scenario is able to sense the presence of an angelic being in the road and Balaam is completely unable to do so. So, what point does this raise? Quite simply it raises the idea that animals unlike most humans are in actuality far more adept and aware of the presence of spiritual entities like angels (Henry, 2000). Balaam beset with unbridled anger is taught a valuable lesson by God in that if he cannot treat his animal with respect how is he ever going to be able to treat his fellow humans with respect. Moreover, God makes us recognise the simple fact that when animals deviate from their usual obedience towards us, we should first enquire as to why within our own being before we lash out in unbridled rage (Henry, 2000). It is forever certain that God will call us out on the account of our abuses done to His creatures. Through this divine intervention and the miraculous loosening of the tongue of Balaam’s donkey, the scripture emphasizes the importance of treating animals with the utmost kindness and respect, stressing that cruelty towards animals is a serious moral failing in the eyes of God (Henry, 2000).

Akin to the above scriptures another clear example in the Old Testament of the necessity to show care and love towards animals is evident in the life of King David. His suitability to becoming monarch was indicated by his meticulousness and courage in safeguarding his father’s sheep as is seen in 1 Samuel 17:34-35 (King James Version):

³⁴ And David said unto Saul, thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock: ³⁵ And I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him.

Furthermore, this scripture highlights that in showing love and care towards animals, one becomes more suitable for roles of leadership since compassion is an important aspect for a leader to possess. This is exemplified in the modern era by the examples of global leaders of excellence relating to ecological conservation such as Jacques Cousteau, Jane Goodall, and Sir David Attenborough who stress animal welfare in their quest to demonstrate the need for the preservation of animals and ecological sustainability.



The role of a shepherd in the Bible is often utilised metaphorically to label the ideal values of a king or leader. A good shepherd knows and cares for each sheep, ensuring their well-being, just as a good king should care for each of his subjects (Preece & Fraser, 2000). David's inclination to risk his own life to save a sheep indicates thoughtful care and respect for the animals under his charge. This aligns with the broader Biblical ethos of kindness and protection towards animals (Preece & Fraser, 2000). Furthermore, in the New Testament Christ is the Good Shepherd and believers are His flock.

Likewise, there appears another prime biblical reference to wild animals. Wild animals are generally seen in a less positive light when compared to their domestic counterparts as is evident in the above recollection of David slaying the wild bear and lion in protecting his father's sheep. However, many other passages display wild animals in particular as very important to God (Preece & Fraser, 2000). The very existence of these creatures is determined by the divine will of God and they are reliant on the resources that God has graciously provided for them. The fact that God has appointed these animals the resources necessary for their survival is a clear indication that exactly like humans God holds a very special place for animals and in doing so he encourages man to follow these moral paradigms of showing care and recognition toward all living things (Gnuse, 2021). For example, Psalm 104 (King James Version) recounts how God created the entire planet for the benefit of all living creatures both wild and domestic. This psalm in particular equates humans and wild animals as both parts of a larger and more complex system (Gnuse, 2021).

¹⁰ He sendeth the springs into the valleys, which run among the hills.

¹¹ They give drink to every beast of the field: the wild asses quench their thirst. ¹² By them shall the fowls of the heaven have their habitation, which sing among the branches. ¹³ He watereth the hills from his chambers: the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy works. ¹⁴ He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth; ¹⁵ And wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart. ¹⁶ The trees of the Lord are full of sap; the cedars of Lebanon, which he hath planted; ¹⁷ Where the birds make their nests: as for the stork, the fir trees are her house. ¹⁸ The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats; and the rocks for the conies. ¹⁹ He appointed the moon for seasons: the sun knoweth his going down. ²⁰ Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth. ²¹ The young lions roar after their prey, and seek their meat from God. ²² The sun ariseth, they gather themselves together, and lay them down in their dens.

Psalm 104 otherwise known, rather aptly, as the Psalm of Creation expresses poetically and enthusiastically the power of the natural world and highlights its tender beauty (Westermann & Porter, 1989). In a similar vein, this psalm explicitly reminds the reader of the great variety of sentient beings in the natural world. This further generates the notion that all natural things are unified into a unitary body and therefore, it offers itself as a reminder of the theological reflection regarding environmental issues and how crucial it is that we as stewards care for the wellbeing of the natural world entrusted to us (Brueggemann, 1984).

Likewise, in Deuteronomy 22: 6-7 (King James Version) it states:

⁶ If a bird's nest chance to be before thee in the way in any tree, or on the ground, whether they be young ones, or eggs, and the dam sitting upon the young, or upon the eggs, thou shalt not take the dam with the young:

⁷ But thou shalt in any wise let the dam go, and take the young to thee; that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days.



One can ascertain that the precept contained in this law instructs humans to show a certain level of humanity to animals. In particular, it looks at restraining the cruelty of severing a mother bird from her brood. This command to prevent the killing of the mother bird alongside her young emphasises the importance of respecting animal life. By allowing the mother to go free, it maintains that she can continue to reproduce and therefore, sustain the species (Young, 1798). The law's dictation indicates that by showing compassion and kindness towards animals it allows for the prevention of needless suffering of the mother bird which would be distressed if parted from her young or her eggs (Young, 1798). The law's broader principle underpins that treating animals with care and respect is a significant component of living a good and morally orientated life. Thus, the above passage acts as a further example of the necessity of treating animals with respect and love.

Old Testament Sacrifice and Animal Well-being

So, one major question may arise. Why did God require humans to sacrifice animals to Him as part of the atonement for their sins? Does this not go against the teachings that God wants us to treat animals as equals? Why are animals sacrificed for the sins of man? In answering these questions, one must first understand the idea of animal sacrifice in biblical contexts, secondly one must recognise the types of sacrifice as described by the Book of Leviticus.

The Old Testament scripture speaks of ritual sacrifice to God. In dealing with the Old Testament, in particular early Judaism and Christianity, "sacrifice" is best defined as, "the ritualized slaughter of animals and the processing of their bodies in relation to supernatural forces (especially gods)" (Gilders, 2010). Blood sacrifices formed a vital part of Israelite worship. A practice that entailed the death of the victim with the aim of restoring and/or maintaining correct relationship with God. For example, Abel sacrificed the firstborn of his flock (Genesis 4:4). Abraham also tried to sacrifice his only son (Hebrews 11:17). There were also a number of sacrifices (see Numbers 18:15) which point towards Jesus Christ as the sacrificial lamb for the shortfall of humanity and for attaining its redemption. These sacrifices were considered to be righteous because spiritual behaviour honours God. The chief reasons for blood sacrifice ranged from offering thanks to God, making propitiation, cleansing, and the prevention of future evils (Allison, 2016). Old Testament sacrificial practices are thus, significant since the offeror recognises himself or herself as the victim 'sacrificial animal' and in doing so displays a sign of surrender and substitution before the animal was slain and its blood was sprinkled for the atonement of the offeror's sins (Allison, 2016).

The types of sacrifice carried out by the Israelites were dependent on the type of offence that was committed against God and the Commandments. These types of sacrifices are described in the Book of Leviticus. Leviticus stipulates how sinful people could approach God and how they could receive atonement for their sins and ultimately live holier lives. To make their atonement pleasing to God the Lord prescribed a series of sacrifices (Gane 2022). These 5 basic types of sacrifices included the burnt sacrifices (*Olah*), peace offerings (*chebach shelamim*) (Leviticus 3:1-17), grain offerings (*Minchah*) (Leviticus 2:1-16), sin offering (Leviticus 4 & 5), trespass offering (*Asham*) (Leviticus 6:1-7), all of which denote purification, sacrifice, redemptive behaviour and a person's dedication to God.

Burnt sacrifices are mentioned in Leviticus 1:3-17. The burnt offering was one of the most common among the Israelites and the animal was burnt in its entirety (Wolf, 2007). None of the animal was to be consumed at all, and therefore fire expended the whole sacrifice. It was the most typical of the ancestral rites of the Old Testament. The Hebrew word *olah* (burnt offering) originates from the verb *alah*, meaning 'ascend', and expresses the image of fire, smoke, and fragrance rising upwards to God (Wolf, 2007). The offeror sacrificed an animal as an expression of sharing his body with a creature. Through touching the sacrifice's head, he



offered himself to God and thus, the offeror equated himself with the beast. The death of the sacrifice is likewise the death of the man, and the sacrifice to God meant giving himself to God (Lee, 2021). The priest was then tasked with sprinkling the animal's blood on the altar, this represented returning the life of the animal to God. The burning of the animal's flesh could be likened to the offerors eternal damnation should he not repent and atone for his sins. The sins of men evoke the wrath of God and the wrath of God leads to judgment (Lee, 2021).

Equally important is the idea that a blood offering resulted in the union as in a covenant between two persons. A blood covenant, as it were, sustained man's relationship with God through the usage of animals as a vessel of this covenant (Allison, 2016). The Israelites strongly maintained that the ritualistic sacrifice of the victim animal strengthened the covenant relationship between them and God. This ultimately changed in the New Testament where Jesus Christ fulfills the role of the scapegoat for all human sins and thus, physical animal sacrifices after Christ's resurrection were no longer necessary (Abe, 2004). Furthermore, this action suggests that Christ no longer wishes animals to be used as vessels for sacrificial rites of atonement.

The consequence of blood sacrifice in the Old Testament could be seen in its union primarily with God and secondarily with animals, from whom man distanced himself due to man's disobedience to set laws as advocated by God. This union of God, man, and animal eventually concludes in substitution, for the fact that the just punishment for sins can never be averted (Abe, 2004). Similarly, the concept of substitution in the sacrifice has to do with taking the place of the actual offender. The offeror substitutes his life for that of the animal in order to undertake his deserved punishment due to his own misconduct and sin. Blood in its very essence is life (Abe, 2004).

Ethical Considerations of Animal treatment in New Testament Teachings and Writings of the Early Church Fathers

A cursory reading of the New Testament might suggest that there is little to no discussion on the ethics and treatment of animals (Bauckham, 1998). However, upon deeper inspection, a great deal of knowledge is to be gleaned on the relationship of man to all other living creatures. In Jewish traditions, particularly in the texts of Genesis and Psalms, there exists a foundational understanding of God's creation as inherently good and deserving of care (Clifford & Collins, 2023). Animals form an integral part of this creation and are depicted as subjects of divine concern and care alongside humans (Psalm 104:10-18). Through this a precedent is established to view animals as not merely resources for use but as creatures highly valued by God that should be treated both ethically and morally. Jesus' teachings in the New Testament demonstrate a profound continuity with the religious and ethical attitudes towards animals described in the Old Testament and later Jewish traditions (Moritz, 2009). Jesus does not merely acknowledge these attitudes, but rather integrates them into His teachings underscoring them in the fundamental relationship between creation, humans, and God.

The New Testament offers insights into the ethical treatment of animals through its teachings on stewardship, compassion, and the inherent value of all living things (Webb, 1998). By interpreting and relating the teachings of Jesus Christ to the Jewish religious tradition to which he belonged it can be ascertained that all aspects of Jesus' ministry were inextricably linked and continuous with the Jewish tradition of the Old Testament (Fredriksen, 2008). While the Gospel writers of the New Testament say little explicitly about animals, references to their welfare and associated ethics are evident (Bauckham, 1998). Perhaps the most important example of this can be observed in Jesus' sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 6:26 where he exclaims: ²⁶*“Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?”*



In the context of animal ethics from a New Testament perspective, the above passage is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the verse emphasizes the intrinsic value of animals held by God the Creator, as He provides the necessary provision (Davidson, 2021). In this way, Jesus underscores that animals are under divine care and provision. It is through this divine attention and acknowledgment of the needs of animals that their worth and importance are made clear within God's creation (Ware, 2019). Moreover, this verse also reveals the broader theological principle of God's providence and compassion. If the Creator cares and provides for the 'fowls of the air' does this not establish a model for mankind to engage in stewardship and emulate concern and divine care for all living creatures as the custodians of His Creation? (Hughes, 2022).

The rhetorical question posed in the verse "*Are ye not much better than they?*" can be interpreted in a dual sense, while this phrase acknowledges the unique position and value of humans in God's creation, it simultaneously describes that the well-being of animals is of utmost concern to God. All creation has unique value in God's sight with that being said there is a hierarchical system, with some living creatures holding a more significant value than others (Ware, 2019). The precise significance of this hierarchy was clearly described in the first book of Genesis 1:26:

²⁶ *"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."*

The God-given dominion entrusted to mankind over animals is not an arbitrary domination but rather that mankind is to extend the same compassion and loving kindness that God himself extends towards the whole of creation (Preece & Fraser, 2000). As the late Kallistos Ware (2019), Archbishop of Diokleia in Phrygia under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople describes our dominion [as mankind] is to be God-reflective and Christ-like'. This verse serves as a pivotal reference in New Testament teachings regarding animal ethics, not only does it affirm the value God places on animals, but it also calls upon humans to reflect and uphold these values as stewards of creation.

Challenging Legalism concerning animals

In Luke 13:15-16, we see Jesus engage in a profound critique of legalistic interpretations according to Judaism that prioritize human interest at the expense of animal welfare:

¹⁵ "The Lord then answered him, and said, Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering?"

¹⁶ "And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?"

The passage unfolds within the context of an encounter where Jesus heals a woman who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. In response to her healing on the Sabbath (a day traditionally reserved for rest and religious observance) the synagogue leaders express indignation, admonishing the crowd for seeking healing on the Sabbath and accusing Jesus of violating the laws (Zámečník, 2023). According to certain religious traditions established by the scribes and Pharisees, the act of healing was considered work and therefore not permissible on the Sabbath (Doering, 2009). The Pharisees believed that by zealously upholding these peripheral traditions they were serving God however such strict adherence to legalism ultimately makes them insensitive to God's mercy and love (Hobgood-Oster, 2008).



Jesus responds to the leaders with a dual rebuke, addressing both the Pharisees' hypocritical interpretations and emphasis on legalistic minutiae and its implication for moral and compassionate action by alleviating suffering and demonstrating mercy towards fellow man and animals (Phelps, 2002). By challenging their strict legal observance over the broader moral imperatives of love and mercy, Jesus stressed the need for a paradigm shift in ethical priorities which transcends strict adherence to religious laws (Wright, 2014). Thus, by healing on the Sabbath, Jesus affirms the principle that alleviating suffering and prioritizing the welfare of all including animals must take precedence over strict adherence to legal codes. This narrative serves as an important case to explore the intersection of strict legal interpretation and adherence, religious ethics, and moral responsibility. By drawing attention to the compassion that should be extended towards livestock by leading them to water, Jesus implied that if such care is extended towards animals how much more should it be extended to a human being who has suffered greatly and requires healing? (Webb, 1998).

Another example of Jesus directly addressing Pharisaic legalism regarding compassion over rigid adherence to religious laws can be found in Matthew 12:11, where Jesus poses a rhetorical question to the Pharisees ¹¹" And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?"

Not only does this question challenge their interpretation of the laws regarding religious observance on the Sabbath by appealing to practical compassion but it also emphasizes that care for a distressed animal is not only permissible but morally necessary. When analysing these two verses together Jesus illustrates a consistent challenge to the prevailing legalistic attitudes of the time which prioritised strict ritual observance (Hyland, 2000). These verses display Jesus' use of metaphors drawn from nature to convey spiritual truths. Animals are creatures of God and are therefore recipients of His love and concern. In both verses, Jesus emphasizes ethical, morally just behaviour including the humane treatment of animals through his reference to common practices like leading an animal to water or rescuing a sheep from a pit (Clough, 2018). This highlights Jesus' commitment and advocacy that upholds the intrinsic value of all living beings and the moral duty to alleviate suffering which extends beyond human relationships to encompass care for all living creatures.

These passages clearly resonate with environmental and ecological ethical issues and more especially animal welfare. It is evident in the New Testament the narratives of Jesus, and animals are reflected relationally in an atmosphere reflecting His omnipresent empathy and benevolence.

Paul's Theological Exposition

The boundless compassion taught by Jesus for all of creation is intricately woven into the fabric of the New Testament teachings, this is evidenced in the fine details of the Gospel accounts and the theological expositions in the letters of Saint Paul. The theological writing of Saint Paul frames Jesus' redemptive work as encompassing all of creation (Stenschke, 2017). In Romans 8:21-22 Paul describes:

²¹ "Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

²² For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now."

This verse implies a cosmic dimension to Jesus' salvation where the redemption He brings is not limited to mankind but extends to all of creation (Neary, 1981). This 'groaning' describes a desire for liberation from bondage to greater things and the ultimate transformation of all



creation to an eternal harmony under God's sovereign rule. This is further exemplified in Ephesians 1:10 and Colossians 1:20 where Paul's writings emphasize that God's salvation extends to 'the fullness' of all, not only for humanity but for the whole of creation. This holistic all-encompassing view of salvation engenders a restored harmony between humanity and all of God's creation.

Paul's writings underscore the intrinsic value of animals and the entire natural world as they are situated within the scope of God's redemptive plan (Moule, 1967). This theological framework challenges anthropocentric attitudes which prioritise human interest over the welfare and concern of the environment, and it instead calls for a compassionate approach and regards creation as an integral part of God's salvific plan (Peterson, 2001). It is a violation of our ecological responsibility if we *inter alia* continue to destroy the order of nature, remain unconcerned about pollution, deforestation, climate change and facilitate the wilful extinction of whole groups of animals through mindless and irresponsible behaviour (Harakas, 1992). Therefore, mankind requires environmental sensitivity for the rights of not only fellow human beings but also for the use and enjoyment of the good things of nature. In this way displaying concern for the natural world and ecology of the planet is the ultimate display of respect and appreciation of God's creation. From an ethical perspective, mankind has the responsibility to be responsible custodians of the natural world bequeathed to us by God.

Animal sacrifice in the New Testament

The writings of the New Testament underscore a major theological shift from the animal sacrificial rights of the Old Testament to the new covenant established through Jesus, marking a major shift in theological practice and ethical consideration (Linzey, 1995). The animal sacrifice described in the Old Testament forms part of the ceremonial practice aimed at the cleansing and expiation of sins as people strive for redemption and ultimately to renew the covenant between God and Israel (Allison, 2016). While the animal sacrifices were significant from a religious context it also reflects the hierarchical view of creation such that animals were instrumentalised for the spiritual benefit to man. The Hebrews of the Old Testament were able to mandate acts of compassion towards animals alongside the sacrificial ideology prescribed under the law (Webb, 1998). The writings of the New Testament continue this tension by simultaneously exemplifying Jesus as against all acts of violence and signifying His death as the form of ultimate sacrifice for mankind. In John 1:29 it states: *"²⁹... Behold, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world!"*

This verse essentially states that all the transgressions of the law are removed thus liberating the world from the law and its power in the book of Hebrews verse 9:12 states: *¹²"Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us."*

This verse highlights the ultimate efficacy of Christ's sacrifice, as the last sacrificial lamb, which contrasts sharply with the repetitive and temporary nature of animal sacrifice prescribed under the Mosaic law (Ullucci, 2012). This shift describes a major reevaluation of the ultimate purpose and significance of animal sacrifice within Christian theology. Paul's assertion emphasizes that the sacrificial death of Christ was singular, all-encompassing which permanently atoned for sin, rendering animal sacrifice futile and unnecessary. It is important to note that the writings of Paul often employ sacrificial language and imagery to articulate theological concepts like redemption from sin and atonement, where he shifts the focus from animal sacrifice to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ (Kurialan, 2008). This transition in thought marks an early stage in early Christian thought where the belief surrounding the significance of sacrificial rituals evolved towards having a more spiritual and symbolic understanding (Musurillo, 1957). This transition marks an early stage in Christian thought where the significance of sacrificial rituals begins to evolve towards a more symbolic and spiritual understanding.



In the landscape of early Christian thought the practice of animal sacrifice emerged as a noteworthy theological point, reflecting the diverse array of perspectives on its appropriateness and ethical implications (Linzey, 1995; Ullucci, 2012). Early Christian teachings, while influenced by Jewish tradition and philosophical schools like Stoicism gradually developed a theological view that valued spiritual over material aspects of sacrifice, thereby influencing ethical consideration regarding animal treatment (Stowers, 2011; Ullucci, 2012). The writings of early Christian theologians describe the various approaches regarding the relationship between ancient religious rituals within the context of Christian ethics (McGarth, 2022). For example, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, St Origen and St Clement of Alexandria represent a stream of thoughts that sought to reinterpret the notion of sacrifice, their writings emphasize the moral dimensions of sacrifice and argue that the true essence of sacrifice lay not in physical animal offering, but rather in spiritual devotion (Lattey, 1916; Lucas, 2022; Messer, 2022). The sacrifice of Christ superseded animal sacrifice essentially rendering it obsolete in Christian worship. In his exegesis, St Origen often reinterpreted Old Testament rituals to emphasize their spiritual significance, suggesting that the sacrificial laws were meant to instruct believers in the virtues of self-denial and devotion to God, rather than to prescribe literal animal sacrifice (Caspary, 1979; Webber, 1994).

Early Church Fathers and Ethical Treatment of Animals

A common interpretation and perception held by Christians over the past two millennia maintains that mankind holds a form of dominion over animals and the natural world. This ideology can be attributed to the readings and interpretations of the Scriptures within a Hellenistic culture and articulating the faith within that cultural framework (Bauckham, 2002). As a result, many of the concepts and interpretations that emerged in early Christian tradition concerning the relationship between mankind and creation have their roots in Hellenistic philosophy as opposed to strictly biblical theology (Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), 2010). This Hellenistic influence on early Christian tradition can be broadly categorised into two main themes.

In the first is the concept of the Platonic metaphysical dualism, which posits a clear distinction between spirit and matter asserting the importance of the spiritual world over that of the physical world which regards nature as a 'shadow' of the spiritual world (Hiebert, 2000). This concept of dualism aligned with the delineation emphasised by the apostle Paul on the demarcation between spirit and flesh (Ford, 2018).

Secondly, the concept of Middle Platonism's hierarchical ontology promoted Christians to conceptualise reality as a great chain of being (CTCR, 2010). At the apex of this hierarchical ladder is God, beneath God are higher spiritual beings like angels, followed by humans who possess both spiritual and physical elements, while animals occupy the lowest rung of the hierarchy as they exist as purely physical entities devoid of a soul (Hiebert, 2000). In this worldview, mankind and animals are perceived as being fundamentally disparate, and asserts that all creatures exist for the sake of their usefulness to mankind, reinforcing the ideology that animals' sole purpose is to serve human needs which has led to the exploitation and utilitarian treatment of the creation (Linzey, 1995).

However, this anthropocentric view of creation was challenged by the early Church Fathers who advocated for a more compassionate and 'caretaker' stance toward animals and nature (Harakas, 1992; Smith, 2002). In the writings of the early Church Fathers they assert that animals are not instruments for human use but are fellow creatures (Ware, 2018). Their writings call for the ethical and humane treatment of animals, presenting a significant departure from the prevailing Hellenistic view concerning creation (Gilhus, 2006).



The writings, scriptural teachings, philosophical influences, artwork, hagiography, iconography, and oral traditions of the early Church Fathers further reflect on the ethical treatment of animals and reveal a close connection in Christian thought between the human and the natural world (Hobgood-Oster, 2008). A central theme of the ethical frameworks of early Christian writing is the interconnectedness of creation, the interconnectedness of their suffering, and a recognition of the repercussions of human actions on the natural world. St. Basil the Great (bishop of Caesarea Mazaca, Cappadocia, from 370–379 CE) and St. Gregory of Nyssa (Bishop of Nyssa in Cappadocia from 372–376 CE and from 378 until his death in 394 CE) both articulated a view that human sin not only influences human relationships but also has ramifications for all created order (Trostyanskiy, 2021). In the early church, the ethical treatment of animals was interwoven with the theological reflections on creation, sin, and redemption (Degnan, 2023). The writings of the early Church Fathers provide significant insights underscoring compassionate ideals and challenges to existing practices revealing evolving thought concerning humans and the natural world (Hobgood-Oster, 2008). St. Basil the Great in his work "*Hexaemeron*," a series of nine homilies commenting on the six days of creation, discusses how human corruption and proclivity for evil have resulted in the disruption of the original harmony of creation, affecting both mankind and the natural world alike (Longbons, 2019; Warnez, 2021). He writes:

"Such was man's inheritance from his transgression; and God's curse upon the earth still rests as a heavy weight upon the soil. It is no longer as it was originally created, when a gracious soil poured forth for human food every kind of plant, to be a pasture for the flocks and herds, and for the beasts of the field, which were obedient to him, and roamed at will, making the whole earth one vast meadow." (St. Basil the Great, *Hexaemeron*, Homily 5)

St. Basil's description of the prelapsarian world where humans and animals coexists in a state of mutual harmony underscores a theological vision of the interconnected nature of all God's creation (Moritz, 2011). In this view, the natural world is not merely to be seen as a backdrop for human activity but rather a fundamental aspect of divine order. The fall of mankind through sin brings in chaos and disrupts this harmony ultimately affecting how mankind interacts with the natural world. The writings of St. Basil in his *Hexaemeron* resonate with contemporary views on animal ethics (Bud, 2020). The emphasis in his writings on the original harmony of creation aligns with modern ecological principles advocating for the preservation and restoration of natural habitats (Harakas, 1992). The view of St. Basil regarding animal ethics is further encapsulated in the following prayer attributed to the saint in which he states:

"O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, even our brothers, the animals, to whom Thou gavest the earth as their home in common with us. We must remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to thee in song, has been a groan of pain. May we realize that they live, not for us alone, but for themselves and for Thee and that they love the sweetness of life."

By referring to animals as mankind's 'brothers', St. Basil reinforces the kinship that man shares with all creatures, and in this way exemplifies a moral duty to consider their intrinsic value and role in the broader ecosystem (Linzey, 1995). Expanding on this St. Gregory of Nyssa provides further commentary to Christian theological reflection on the treatment of animals. In his treatise *On the Making of Man*, St. Gregory argues that the human dominion given over animals as described in Genesis should not be understood as a form of dominion and exploitation but rather as a form of stewardship with a responsibility to nurture and safeguard the natural world (Kolářová, 2023; Miltiadis, 2023). In his *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, St. Gregory writes:



"Thus the creation shared in the corruption of humanity, having been made subject to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."

This observation aligns with Pauline theology reflecting the idea that the natural world suffers as a result of human sin which is evident today through the gross abuse of the natural environment, emphasizing the interconnectedness of creation and the need for a redeemed relationship with creation (Kolářová, 2023). The writings of St. Gregory further posit that animals are part of God's creative order, designed with specific attributes and roles that contribute to the harmony of the whole (Meyer, 2012). In his Homilies on Ecclesiastes, he reflects on the interconnected nature of all creatures and suggests the need for a communal responsibility towards the well-being of all living creatures:

"Let us lift up our eyes to the whole course of nature, and reflect how all creation is bound together in one embrace of sympathy, one unity of interrelationship" St Gregory the Great, Homilies on Ecclesiastes

Another important figure in the early church who often wrote about the ethical treatment of animals within the context of Christian virtue and compassion is St. John Chrysostom (Archbishop of Constantinople 347–407 CE) (Leyerle, 2019). Renowned for his eloquent homilies and theological teachings he emphasized the moral imperative of compassion towards all living beings within the Christian framework (Vélez; 2023). In his Homily XXXIX:35 Commentary on Epistle to the Romans, Chrysostom cites the shared origin of mankind and creation as a compelling reason for humane treatment, and advocates for a merciful and compassionate approach (Bozinis, 2019): *"Surely, we ought to show them [animals] great kindness and gentleness for many reasons, but, above all, because they are of the same origin as ourselves."*

The relationship between man and animals was undoubtedly close to all hermits, eremite, and desert fathers (Gilhus, 2006; Gšrg, 2011). There are countless examples of the relationship between early Christian ascetics and animals: (1) from the desert fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries (St. Anthony the Great (c. 251–356 CE), St. Paul of Thebes (c. 226–341 CE), and St. Macarius of Egypt (c. 300–391 CE), St. Gerasimus of Jordan (died c. 475)), (2) the Celtic saints of the sixth and seventh centuries (Saint Ciaran of Clonmacnoise (c. 516 – c. 549 CE), St. Cuthbert (c. 634-687 CE), and St. Columba (521-597 CE)) as well as the (3) later saints from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries ((St. Sergius of Radonezh (1314-1392), St. Herman of Alaska (1756-1837) and St. Seraphim of Sarov (1754-1833)). The enduring legacies and writings of these saints not only span thousands of years but also cover a wide geographical range and more importantly reflect their profound connections with animals (Preece & Fraser, 2000; Nellist, 2018).

Among these revered Christian ascetics, St Modestos (born in 292 CE) is renowned as the Orthodox Christian patron saint of animals, epitomizing the deep connection between sanctity and the natural world (Brady, 2007). Throughout his life, St Modestos demonstrated profound piety and a remarkable respect for animals such that they are viewed as integral parts of God's creation. His most famous prayer explicitly seeks the Creator's divine protection for all creatures and their safeguarding from illness and injury (Nellist, 2018). The legacy of all these saints and the hagiographic accounts of their lives and harmonious companionship with wild animals symbolise their spiritual purity and the restoration of Edenic innocence achieved through ascetism (Brock, 2016; Ware, 2018). Moreover, it is an indication of their sanctity but also a broader call to all the faithful to recognise and honour the sanctity of all life. The veneration of these Saints within the Christian tradition emphasises the enduring conviction that compassion displayed towards animals and the natural world is a true reflection of one's faith and divine love.



Implications for Modern Perspectives on Animal Rights

The exploration of animal rights within the context of divine law as presented in the Old and New Testaments reveals a complex interplay between theological principles and ethical imperatives. By utilising a comparative analysis, this paper has traced the development of the various attitudes towards animals, from the sacrificial rituals of the Old Testament to the moral teachings emphasized in the New Testament. The various ethical frameworks presented in these religious texts' highlights humanity's role as custodians of creation, tasked with the responsibility to care for and respect all living beings. Within the modern world, the arguments constructed by this study have significant implications for both social, economic and political spheres. The ethical treatment of animals has gained ever increasing attention in the 21st century. Christian religious teachings can assist in formulating behaviours for humans to engender a spirit of stewardship and compassion with the aim of developing ethical policies and practices to promote and foster animal welfare.

If our thanks to God for the animals we receive as food is to be more than a meaningless formality, and if our consumption of animals is to be sacramental (sanctified, holy), we must be conscientiously grateful to God for the animals that become our food. Beyond that, our gratitude to God for animals should be extensive: for the comfort and joy we have from their company, the benefits we derive from their service, our delight in their beauty and antics, and our informative observations of their intelligence. Thank God for all of His creatures great and small.(Black, 2018)

By drawing from scriptural teachings of the Old and New Testaments religious institutions and leaders have the potential to influence public discourse and advocate for the humane treatment of animals. By fostering a culture of respect and care for animals, Christian communities can contribute to broader societal efforts to address issues such as animal cruelty, exploitation, pollution and habitat destruction. Legislative bodies can derive principles from biblical teachings to form ethically founded legal imperatives to craft laws that embody a concerted effort to ensure animal protection and welfare across all sectors including, but not limited to, agriculture, tourism, research and entertainment. Therefore, through the parallel examination of divine law and animal rights within the Old and New Testaments valuable insights into the ethical and legal dimensions of human-animal relationships are gained.

This paper makes an important contribution by integrating religious teachings with contemporary ethical principles, and furthermore it highlights the enduring relevance of Christian theological principles in addressing modern-day challenges related to animal ethics and welfare. Embracing these principles can lead to a more compassionate and just society, where the rights and wellbeing of all living beings are respected and protected.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one is able to clearly define that by briefly reconnoitring the Old Testament, the New Testament, and teachings of the early Church Fathers, that both humanity and the animal kingdom are indeed fundamental cogs of a more complex system. Although they (animals and humans) may hold different roles within this said system it is clear that they do share a common ground. The interdependence of animals and humans is consequently and rather clearly outlined in the Holy Bible and teachings of the church. Indeed the Holy Bible asserts, "A righteous man regards the life of his animal" (Proverbs 12:10).One evidently cannot survive without the other. Furthermore, as stewards of the natural world humanity should be continually reminded of its critical role in protecting the natural world. The central teachings and core principles of the church advocate that animals have every right to be cared for by



humans. They ought to be granted the same respect, mercy and compassion that we as humans are required to show each other.

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