

Animal Welfare in the Bible

Stephen Warren

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The first two chapters of Genesis present two different views of our relationship with animals. In [Genesis 1](#), people are created after animals and are to “have dominion over” them. In [Genesis 2](#), a man is created first, then animals are created so that he will have company.

There’s a simple reason for these contrasting accounts: The Bible contains two different creation stories.

The traditional view was that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible (the [Torah/Pentateuch](#)). However, Bible scholars have identified several distinct sources for these books. (See the [Documentary Hypothesis](#).)

Genesis 1.1-2.3 comes from the so called [Priestly source](#), which goes back to the 6th century B.C. This is the seven-day creation story. In this story, God (Elohim) creates plants, then animals, then people. A clear hierarchy is formed with people at the top. People are given possession of everything. They are to “subdue” the earth and “have dominion over” all the animals. (Also see [Genesis 9.2-3](#).)

Genesis 2.4-25 comes from the so called [Yahwist source](#), which goes back to the 10th century B.C. In this story, God (Yahweh Elohim) creates a man, then plants, then animals, then a woman. After creating a man and the garden, God says “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” God then created animals, “but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.” So God then put the man to sleep and created a woman from one of his ribs. God’s second attempt was a success. The man was well satisfied with his new partner.

This Yahwist creation story, along with much else in Genesis, owes much to an even earlier story, [The Epic of Gilgamesh](#), which goes all the way back to the 21st century B.C. The Hebrews would have picked up this story, among others, during the [Babylonian exile](#) in the 6th century B.C, if not before.

In this story, Enkidu is made from clay and is a companion to animals. He “ate grass in the hills with the gazelle and lurked with wild beasts at the water-holes.” After having sex with a woman, she tells him “you have become like a god” and the animals will no longer come around him.

In Genesis 2 Adam and Eve become “like God” after eating the fruit.

In *Gilgamesh* animals are former companions. In Genesis 2 they are failed companions.

The Priestly creation story of Genesis 1 does away with this earlier conception of animals as companions. In this conception, they are just subordinates to be ruled over. But this conception does not deny moral responsibility concerning animal welfare. In fact, [Proverbs 12.10](#), which follows the Priestly conception, makes our moral responsibility quite clear: “The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.” Only a wicked person would mistreat animals. (Also see [Genesis 49.5-7](#); [Exodus 23.5,12](#); [Deuteronomy 22.4,6-7](#); [25.4](#); [Proverbs 27.23](#).)

Ecclesiastes, written sometime [between 450 and 330 B.C.](#), takes back up the *Gilgamesh* theme of solidarity and kinship with animals: “I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing

them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again" ([3.18-20](#)).

Whether we take the Genesis 1 view that animals are ours to subdue and dominate or the Ecclesiastes view that we "are but animals," sharing the same fate, and that we "have no advantage over" them, we are obligated to treat them well. Proverbs 12.10 makes this crystal clear, not to mention common decency.

Also crystal clear is that the factory farming of animals, which [most of us support](#) on a daily basis, is an egregious violation of this basic obligation. Factory farmed animals live in terrible conditions and suffer all sorts of abuse. (See "[Farm to Fridge](#)" on YouTube.)

We don't have to support this cruelty. We can live long and [healthy lives](#) without meat or other animal products. If we do eat meat and animal products, we can make sure that we get them from humanely raised sources. The ASPCA has a "[Meat, Eggs and Dairy Label Guide](#)." We can also get these products from local farmers that we know treat their animals well. We can also hunt, fish and raise our own animals.

The idea of completely giving up all factory farmed meat and animal products is a daunting proposition for most people. We need not give it all up at once to make a huge difference. To learn how to most effectively reduce suffering through small changes in diet see "[Suffering by the Pound](#)" at [stephenwarren.org](#).

Many organizations are working to improve conditions for factory farmed animals. Go to [animalcharityevaluators.org](#) to learn how to support these efforts.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" ([Matthew 5.7](#)).

Stephen compiled "[The Moral and Existential Teachings of the Bible](#)," which can be read at [stephenwarren.org](#). He lives in Waverly and can be contacted at stephenwarren000@gmail.com.