

Food for Thought: Ethical Considerations of Meat Eating

Nekeisha Alexis-Baker
Thinking Ethically
Prof. Regina Shands Stoltzfus
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God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind,
and the cattle of every kind,
and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind.
And God saw that it was good.
— Genesis 1:25

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
The earth is full of your creatures.
— Psalm 104: 24

Since becoming vegetarian and, more recently, vegan, it feels like I talk about food more than I eat. These conversations frequently occur around tables during meals at which meat is present and I am in the minority. The dialogue often begins when someone who knows my eating habits or notices the food on my plate asks why I don't eat meat. After I briefly outline the theological, environmental, compassion and health reasons for my decision, I usually face two types of responses. While some people express interest with follow-up questions like, "How do you get your protein?" or "What do you eat instead?" others make jokes, challenge my position or defend their preference for animal flesh. At least two assumptions undergird these exchanges, regardless of the direction the discussion takes. First, there is the underlying belief that eating the bodies and byproducts of nonhuman animals is 'just what people do.' Second, there is the implicit conviction that, because meat eating is normal and natural, vegetarianism is an abnormal, personal preference that requires explanation.¹ Yet meat eating is not natural. It is a learned activity that has ethical implications. Meat eating is intertwined with nonhuman animal suffering, environmental degradation and distorted relationships between men, women and nature. For these reasons, this

¹ Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (London: Routledge, 1992), 4. Fiddes indicates that this symbolism is "the most important feature of meat."

everyday practice deserves more rigorous ethical scrutiny by Christians who care about creation.

Meat Is Not Neutral

Many people throughout history have consciously and unwittingly accepted the belief that humans are entitled to subdue the rest of creation for our purposes. For example, Aristotle first envisioned the world as a hierarchical order with a god at the pinnacle, humanity at the center, and animals, plants and inanimate objects at the bottom. Centuries later, influential Western thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and Frances Bacon modified this concept of the Great Chain of Being, by deemphasizing God and the angels and elevating human status. The resulting system gave humanity a preeminent position in the Chain and “supported the assumption that all material things exist for the sake of humans.”² Devouring the bodies of nonhuman animals is one of the ways people have lived out this conviction.³

As Western societies became more industrialized and dependent on technological and scientific reasoning, people increasingly saw themselves above and in stark contrast to nonhuman animals. For example Rene Descartes insisted that animals were distinct from humans because they did not have souls, intelligence or the ability to experience pain or pleasure. In his view, the cries an animal made when it was beaten were no different than a clock’s chime.⁴ Similarly, seventeenth century philosopher Henry More “was sure that cattle and sheep had only been given life in the first place to

² Fiddes, *Meat*, 53. Fiddes provides an overview of historical thought on the Great Chain of Being from pages 52–54.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (New York: Mirror Books, 1996), 24.

keep their meat fresh ‘till we shall have need to eat them.’”⁵ David Hume continued this Enlightenment way of thinking, albeit in a more nuanced way. Though he conceded that nonhuman animals can reason, he still believed they were humanity’s servants.⁶ In light of these rationales, “experiments on animals became an even more macabre endeavor since any cries or displays of suffering or efforts to escape were viewed as the sounds and movements of veritable wind up toys.”⁷ This low view of animals coupled with indiscriminate uses of science and new technologies also facilitated a sharp increase in meat eating throughout the early modern period.⁸

The belief that humans are privileged to dominate lesser beings has persisted into the present. It is obvious when contemporary philosophers, academics and others still insist that animals lack consciousness, reason and the ability to suffer, and as such can be treated as mere resources.⁹ It is evident when people contend that farm animals prefer being confined to stalls and cages more than living freely outdoors with other members of their species.¹⁰ It is perhaps most prominent in factory farms where billions of cows, goats, pigs, hens and sheep are “genetically designed by machines, inseminated by machines, fed by machines, monitored, herded, electrocuted, stabbed, cleaned, cut,

⁵ Fiddes, *Meat*, 54.

⁶ Angus Taylor, *Animals and Ethics: An Overview of the Philosophical Debate* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003), 43–44.

⁷ Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison*, 24.

⁸ Fiddes, *Meat*, 54.

⁹ Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 196–198. There is ample research to contest this position. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Humans Beings Need the Virtues*. Chicago: Open Court, 1999; Evelyn Pluhar, *Beyond Prejudice: The Moral Significance of Human and Nonhuman Animals*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995; and Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 3rd ed. New York: Ecco/Harper Collins, 2002 for a few examples.

¹⁰ Scully, *Dominion*, 30–31. Scully records an exchange with Dennis Avery, director of global food issues at Hudson Institute, who believes “pigs and other animals never really care much for the outdoors” and “birds and animals are more comfortable in confinement.’”

and packaged by machines.”¹¹ Support for human domination over nonhuman animals also occurs in more nuanced ways. It characterizes our discourse when we use ‘free range’ to describe animals who are legally defined as property and ultimately subject to human control, or talk about ‘humane killing’ as if it is the animals and not their killers who benefit from a ‘less violent’ demise. It is present when we call butchering animals ‘part of a natural cycle of life and death’ instead of calling it an act of violence to satisfy a culinary craving. These thoughts and actions reflect a deep-seated belief that humans are entitled to exert their will over other beings because we want to and we can.

Meat is Man Made

Meat is not only a tangible sign of humanity’s power and supremacy. It is also a potent symbol of idealized manhood and male dominance. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* Carol J. Adams observes that, “Manhood is constructed in our culture, in part, by access to meat eating and control of other bodies”¹² and points to the widely held myth that “meat is masculine food and meat eating a male activity.”¹³ In a random survey of nineteenth and twentieth century cookbooks, Adams discovered a pattern whereby recipes for barbecues, steaks and other meats were directed toward men, while “women’s foods” were classified as vegetables, cheese dishes, and other non-meat items.¹⁴ Advertising also promotes the notion that meat is man-food. In a recent Taco Bell commercial, a woman enters a bar with a bacon and chicken sandwich in her purse to attract guys and successfully draws three men to her table. One of them sniffs the air

¹¹ Scully, *Dominion*, 29.

¹² Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 17.

¹³ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17–18, 38.

and asks, "What are you wearing? It's intoxicating."¹⁵ In another ad for Hummer, a young vegetarian male rushes from the supermarket to purchase one of the massive vehicles after enviously eyeing another man's meat-filled shopping cart. The commercial's tagline—"Reclaim your manhood"—portrays men who renounce animal flesh as desperately needing a testosterone boost. Based on similar evidence, Adams concludes, "From a *Seinfeld* episode that features the comedian desperately trying to hide the fact that he is not eating meat so his date will not mistake him for a 'wimp' to . . . *Cosmopolitan* and *New Woman*, the message continues to be that men are supposed to eat meat and that meat is associated with virility."¹⁶

A quick survey of historical evidence indicates that these stereotypes represent the majority voice in various cultures. Adams identifies similar beliefs in non-Western countries, including several indigenous communities in Asia and Africa.¹⁷ In early twentieth century London, a four-year study of thirty working class families determined that, "Meat is bought for the men."¹⁸ Similarly, in situations of poverty during the nineteenth century, researchers determined that women "saved the meat for their husbands" and were "the worst fed of the household."¹⁹ Theories about hunting and human history also feature long-standing assumptions about meat and masculinity. Based on tenuous anthropological evidence, innumerable writers have dated the rise of civilization and human progress to the moment prehistoric man began

¹⁵ The video is currently available on the YouTube Web site at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4Ts4TtEwDc> (accessed May 1, 2008). Thanks to Andy Brubacher Kaethler for alerting me to this commercial.

¹⁶ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37–38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

hunting for his food and making hunting tools.²⁰ Many of these writers also attribute men's superior strength, agility, leadership and intelligence to this "properly male pursuit."²¹ Reading the historical evidence in this way suggests that the thrill of the hunt and the desire for meat are biologically male traits. Associating the advent of hunting and civilization with men and the separation of the sexes also legitimizes women's past and present subordination.²²

Sexist assumptions about meat and masculinity are also prominent in our everyday language. Slurs that denigrate women like bitch, heifer, chicken-head and hood rat refer directly to animals and most of these terms reference domesticated animals bred for human service.²³ For example, using the word *chick* to describe a woman "communicates scorn because hens are exploited as mere bodies—for their egg-laying capacity or flesh. In viewing the actual chick, the egg or 'poultry' producer anticipates her exploitation as hen. Analogously the sexist male desires to exploit the human 'chick' as a female body, for sexual pleasure."²⁴ In general, sexual language is filled with meaty images. Women seeking a mate may say they are 'on the market.' A man may go 'hunting' for "a bit of 'raw', 'juicy', or 'succulent' flesh . . . to satisfy his

²⁰ Fiddes, *Meat*, 55. According to Fiddes, the prehistoric evidence people use to talk about hunting can be read in other ways. Fiddes references the work of feminist anthropologist Sally Slocum, who argues that the archaeological, anthropological, psychological and genetic evidence simply "does not support the male-biased speculative interpretations that are loaded onto it" (61). As a result, there are other ways to interpret the fragments of prehistoric life. For example, tools that are usually referred to as hunting weapons could easily have been tools for gathering and preparing plant-based foods (61). This suggests that the typical tale of the rise of human civilization is not necessarily immune from sexism simply because it relies on historical proof.

²¹ Fiddes, *Meat*, 55. Fiddes cites examples by D Bowser, S, Washburn and C.S. Lancaster, Robin Fox and Serge Moscovici to illustrate this reasoning (55–58).

²² Fiddes summarizes Slocum saying, "It is nonsense with one breath to relate hunting prowess to such skills as control, leadership, and eloquence, and above all intelligence, and then to suggest that women are less well equipped to hunt than men" (61).

²³ Joan Dunayer, "Sexist Words, Speciesist Roots" in *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explanations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

sexual appetite.”²⁵ Fifteenth century colloquialisms like ‘a bit of meat’ (sexual intercourse), ‘fresh meat’ (a new prostitute), ‘raw meat’ (a naked prostitute or women in general) and ‘hot meat/mutton/beef (a loose woman) are especially explicit.²⁶ The aforementioned Taco Bell ad, which conflates the scent of cooked animal flesh with a beautiful woman’s perfume, simultaneously likens the desire for meat with the desire for women’s flesh. Today, men and women alike linguistically dismember female bodies into “the same names as the animals on a supermarket shelf — leg, thigh, rump, or breast.”²⁷ These analogies thrive in societies that equate meat with male superiority and sexuality, and objectify, fragment and consume both women and animals.²⁸

Meat is a tangible sign of domination over nature, idealized manhood and sexist attitudes. Meat eaters abide by and uphold these socially constructed meanings whether or not they adhere to them personally.²⁹ Just as the American flag embodies national myths and values whether it is worn on a lapel or burned in the street, meat also retains its symbolism. Meat represents and is a product of the imbalances between humanity, nature, men, women and nonhuman animals. Sadly, the primary victims in this hierarchy are the voiceless animals whose bodies and byproducts we consume.

The Suffering Servants

Approximately twenty years ago, 5 billion chickens and over 100 million cows, pigs and sheep combined were raised and killed for food in the United States

²⁵ Fiddes, *Meat*, 150.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 151.

²⁸ Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 58. Adams cites the work of Peggy Sanday whose research on over a hundred “nontechnological cultures” revealed that societies that depended on meat production featured “sexual segregation in work activities, with women doing more than men, but work that is less valued; women responsible for child care; the worship of male gods; patrilineality” (45).

²⁹ Fiddes, *Meat*, 3.

annually.³⁰ Today, approximately 100 million pigs, 35 million cattle, 10 billion ‘broiler’ chickens and 250 million turkeys are slaughtered each year in the U.S., while 300 million hens and 9 million dairy cows are held captive for their eggs and milk respectively.³¹ This trend of increased animal consumption is not limited to the United States. From 1962 to 2003, meat consumption in developing countries jumped from 10 kg per person each year to 29 kg, while milk consumption doubled.³² As national economies develop, populations grow internationally, diets change across cultures and urbanization spreads, millions more non-human animals will be farmed and killed worldwide.³³

‘Factory farming’

Although meat eating has always been painful for animals, the rise of ‘factory farming’ as a way to meet global demand has brought nonstop suffering to these creatures lives. As their male counterparts are dismembered or discarded shortly after birth, female chicks’ sensitive beaks are mutilated so they can share overcrowded cages the size of small filing cabinet drawers. Meanwhile, artificially inseminated and perpetually milked cows are subjected to immobilizing stalls, separation from their calves, and chronic swelling of their udders from bacterial infection. Newborn pigs, born to mothers housed in metal crates with concrete floors, suffer as their tails, testicles and ears are sheared without painkillers. Because these types of practices are industry

³⁰ Peter Singer, “Down on the Factory Farm,” in *Earth Ethics: Introductory Readings on Animal Rights and Environmental Ethics*, ed. James P. Sterba (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2000), 32.

³¹ Visit www.farmsanctuary.org for more information.

³² Henning Steinfeld and others, *Livestock’s Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Option* (Rome: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2006), 10.

³³ *Ibid.*, 6–11.

standards, factory farmed ducks, goats and sheep all experience similarly harsh conditions.³⁴

Organic animal farming

As Americans look to organic animal farming as a viable alternative to factory farmed, many are unaware of the ways this industry remains a part of the larger abusive system.³⁵ Although the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) excludes drugs and restricts certain types of feed, it does not have rules to protect animals from cruel treatment. Therefore, animals raised on organic farms are often subjected to some of the same treatment as their factory farmed relatives, including denied access to food and water and overcrowding while being transported to the slaughterhouses where they all share the same terrifying deaths. Ironically, the USDA's prohibitions on antibiotics and painkillers on organic farms, though good for humans, are detrimental to animals when they are in pain. Organic dairy farming also has the same direct link to the meat industry as factory farming operations. Since raising the male calves that are born to impregnated cows is not profitable for factory or organic farms, male calves are often sold days after birth and sentenced to life as a 'veal calf'³⁶ or ground into low-grade meats. Even if organic farming could consistently provide animals with optimal lives and insure less horrific deaths, it still would not challenge the assumption that humans have a right to subjugate and use other animals

³⁴ For more information on factory farming see Singer's "Down on the Factory Farm" and Scully's *Dominion*, or visit www.farmsanctuary.org and www.goveg.com. Farmed fish are also subjected to unnatural conditions and various abuses, however they are not usually referred to as 'factory farmed' animals.

³⁵ My focus in this section is on organic farming as it is evolving in the United States.

³⁶ Singer, "Down on the Factory Farm," 38–41. Veal production is one of the most abusive forms of factory farming. Male calves are chained to their stalls by the neck and their movement is severely restricted. Unable to walk, stand or turn around for their short lives, the animals quickly become anemic, which makes their flesh the ideal texture, color and taste for veal enthusiasts.

as they see fit. Being kind to an animal that wants to live before ‘humanely’ sacrificing it, though preferable to factory farming, does not negate the violence that is committed or the life that is taken.

Cloning and genetic engineering

The burgeoning industry of animal cloning is another farming practice that is causing vigorous debate. No longer the stuff of science fiction, technological advances have already made cloned animals a part of our food chain.³⁷ In simple terms, cloning aims to “bring forward a particular trait in a herd in rapid time” by artificially inseminating the genetic material from a well-bred adult animal into an emptied embryo and inserting the newly engineered egg into a female surrogate.³⁸ While opponents are rightly concerned about the long-term effects cloned meat and milk may have on humans and upset by the Food and Drug Administration’s refusal to mandate special labels on these foods, the process’ affects on animals are reason enough for consternation. Cloned fetuses may become painfully large within the surrogate mother’s womb, killing her and her offspring or forcing cesarean sections. Clones and their offspring are also at high risk for early death and developing malformed organs.³⁹ Underdeveloped immune systems and early onset of diseases plague cloned animals,

³⁷ Ed Pilkington, “If this meat was from a cloned animal, would you eat it?” *The Guardian*, 21 April, 2008 (accessed May 12, 2008); available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2008/apr/21/genetics.gmcrops>; Internet. In January 2008, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the sale of meat and milk from cloned animals after removing a voluntary ban it issued in 1999. In this article, at least one farmer admits to selling up to 20,000 units of sperm from two cloned bulls before the ban lifted.

³⁸ Pilkington, “If this meat was from a cloned animal.” I am especially reminded here of Delores Williams book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, which addresses Black women’s surrogacy roles during and after slavery.

³⁹ Sean Poulter, “Clone farming has arrived,” *Daily Mail*, 10 January, 2007 (accessed May 12, 2008); available from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=427714&in_page_id=1770&ico=Homepage&icl=TabModule&icc=NEWS&ct=5; Internet.

and cows who are routinely used as surrogates are killed once they become ‘spent.’ In spite of the dismal mortality rate—approximately 50% of newborn clones die prematurely⁴⁰—work to clone pigs, horses and chickens is well underway.

If cloning takes human domination over animals to new heights, transgenics is the tool for total subjugation.⁴¹ Transgenic animals are clones whose DNA have been modified with genetic material from another species. For example, Dolly, the famous cloned sheep born in 1996, was designed “as part of a commercial project to produce drugs in sheep’s milk in order to treat human diseases like haemophilia and cystic fibrosis” and cultivate “living drug factories.”⁴² Using cloning and genetic engineering to extend human control over animals’ mating, birth and growth processes and create more perfect industrial ‘machines’ reflects the depth of human hubris. In this system, animals are further devalued as failed embryos are discarded, ‘deficient’ animals suffer and prized clones are collected by the rich and powerful like expensive antiques.⁴³ Yet for cloning advocates and profiteers, these are small sacrifices to make to supply the demand for “rock star” herds and “boundless cheap food.”⁴⁴

All Creation Groans

⁴⁰ “Farm Animal Genetic Engineering and Cloning” (Compassion in World Farming Trust, accessed May 12, 2008); available from http://www.ciwf.org/publications/reports/farm_animal_genetic_engineering_and_cloning_summary_2002.pdf; Internet.

⁴¹ Compassion in World Farming Trust provides some examples of the experiments that have been conducted including a genetically engineered cow that produces a human milk protein and genetically engineered Belgian Blue beef cattle which was given a gene to double its muscle mass.

⁴² Taylor, *Animals and Ethics*, 137.

⁴³ Poulter notes that the offspring of a cloned Holstein named Dundee Paradise was sold for £14,000 before she was born. A member of the Bahrain royal family who collects prized-pedigree Holsteins made the offer.

⁴⁴ Poulter, “Clone farming has arrived.” See also Pilkington, “If this meat was from a cloned animal.”

If farmed animals are the primary victims of meat eating, the environment may well be considered ‘collateral damage.’ A 2006 report by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization concluded that livestock production is “one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global.”⁴⁵ Currently, livestock grazing uses the equivalent of 26% of the ice-free surfaces on the earth, while 33% of the total arable land is dedicated to growing feed crops. As the livestock industry has expanded globally, it has also led to major increases in deforestation, overgrazing, compacted soil and soil erosion. Latin America has been hit hardest as farmers have cleared 70% of the Amazon forest for pastures and have used much of the remaining land for feed. Animal farming’s impact extends from land to water. It is a primary source of water pollution, coastal ‘dead’ zones, coral reef degradation and the emergence of antibiotic resistance. The industry also uses 8% of human water sources for irrigation, posing a threat to human health and safety as drinkable water becomes scarcer and factions fight over resources.⁴⁶ Finally, animal farming accounts for approximately 18% of greenhouse gas emissions—more than the amount produced by transportation—and has caused a rapid decline in biodiversity because of the wildlife habitats that are destroyed to produce feed.⁴⁷

With meat and milk consumption expected to rise to 465 million tons and 1,043 million tons respectively by the year 2050, the animal agriculture industry needs to reduce its environmental impact by half “just to avoid increasing the level of damage.”⁴⁸ Some of the U.N.’s recommendations to reach that goal include pricing meat to better

⁴⁵ Steining, *Livestock’s Long Shadow*, xx.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xxii and 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xxi and xxii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xx.

reflect hidden costs of its production and developing local, national and international policies regulating environmental safeguards for meat, milk and egg producers.⁴⁹ People within this sector also have a few solutions of their own. For Dennis Avery, director of global food issues at Hudson Institute, the best way to reduce the ecological footprint of pork production is bigger and better factory farms.⁵⁰ For Mark Walton, president of cloning company Viagen, these problems are easily addressed by cloning animals whose excrement is less polluting.⁵¹ Scientists are currently working on yet another environmental and cruelty-free alternative: growing animal flesh in laboratories. Although these proposals for reducing animal farming's ecological impact represent different agendas—from hardcore profit motive to genuine concern for the planet—they all have one thing in common. None of them contest meat's role as a social symbol of domination over nature and nonhuman animals, distorted male identity and women's inferiority. Indeed, because the primary goal is to provide meat, in some instances at all costs, they are likely to reinforce each of these destructive tendencies.

Jesus, the Bible and Animal Welfare

In order to begin transforming humanity's relationship to the earth, challenging our view of animals as mere resources and constructing more whole male and female identities, Christians who care about creation must view nonhuman animals in light of Jesus and the Bible, instead seeing them through the eyes of Enlightenment theories, scientific reasoning and patriarchal readings of history. In so doing, we will be able to make better ethical choices about animals in general and meat eating in particular.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 288–289.

⁵⁰ Scully, *Dominion*, 30.

⁵¹ Pilkington, "If this meat was from a cloned animal."

Looking to Jesus

Like many of the issues facing the church today, Jesus did not specifically teach his followers how to treat animals or say whether they should to eat meat. However, there are a handful of New Testament accounts that show God's care for nonhuman creatures. In Luke 12:6, Jesus observed that God remembers every sparrow that is sold. Similarly in Mathew 6:26, Jesus reminded his disciples that God feeds the birds of the air, signaling God's attentiveness to the creatures God has created. In each of these instances, Jesus uses God's care for the animals to demonstrate how much more God values humans. Though one may be tempted to see these texts as more evidence that nonhuman animals are worthless compared to humans and can be treated as such, this is not their intended meaning. Instead, these passages show that, "The sparrow has value and . . . has significance for God. Indeed, Jesus' point is that we who have more value than sparrows can take comfort from the fact that a knowing concern is directed by God, even to the sparrows."⁵² Just as valuing my mom more than a stranger on the street does not give me permission to abuse the stranger, valuing humans more than nonhumans animals does not give people a free pass to harm God's creatures.

While Jesus' brief comments on animals are good starting points, other examples from his life and ministry may also be useful. For example, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to his followers, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."⁵³ If Christians saw this beatitude as an invitation to be agents of peace between humans and creation as well as between people, perhaps we might be compelled to respond more actively to the violence that is inherent in meat production.

⁵² Robert N. Wennberg, *God, Humans and Animals: An Invitation to Enlarge our Moral Universe* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 291.

⁵³ Matthew 5:9

Similarly, Jesus told his listeners in the synagogue that he came “to proclaim release to the captives . . . and let the oppressed go free.”⁵⁴ As Christians do Jesus’ work of liberating people from physical and spiritual bondage in an age of factory farms and genetic manipulation, we are also faced with the question of whether God’s good news of freedom should be limited to human animals alone.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus pushed his disciples and critics to widen their circles of care and compassion. By attending to the sick, sinners and other social outcasts, he challenged the broader community to become conscious of marginalized people. Yet Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman suggests that even he needed to be reminded to broaden his horizons. After ignoring the woman’s cry for help, Jesus replied that his mission was to the people of Israel therefore he would not “take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” The Canaanite woman response that “even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from their master’s table”⁵⁵ challenges Jesus to extend his ministry to those who have been deemed outsiders. Throughout the church’s history, believers and nonbelievers alike have also called on Christians to extend its mission to those it has neglected and abused. A similar call exists for Christians today with regard to nonhuman animals. The suffering of these creatures and the destruction of the environment we share compels us to include them in our theology and ethics.

Looking to the Bible

Unlike the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible is filled with references to nonhuman animals. Genesis 1, the most exemplary of the Old Testament texts, details

⁵⁴ Luke 4:18

⁵⁵ Matthew 14:26-27. Reading this text in light Adams work, I see possibilities for an even richer interpretation of this encounter. For example the woman self-identifies and is identified by the writer as akin to dogs for whom there is no moral concern.

how God creates birds, fish, cattle and all other animals before declaring them good. In this nonviolent paradise, human and nonhuman animals alike satisfy their appetites by eating plants, instead of consuming one another's flesh. In the story of the flood, God instructs Noah to save all the nonhuman animals before the flood, remembers the wild and domesticated beings in the ark and makes an everlasting covenant to spare their lives from future destruction by fire and water.⁵⁶ In this text, the reality of human violence and sin upsets the harmonious relationship between human and nonhuman that once existed in Eden: the animals will not live in fear of humans who in turn use them for flesh. In spite of this new reality, God continues to limit humanity's use of animals. The people of Israel were not to eat the flesh of another animal while its life (blood) remained within it⁵⁷ and anyone who killed an animal was expected to provide suitable restitution—"a life for a life."⁵⁸ Even the psalms are rich with poetic imagery depicting animals as recipients of God's care.⁵⁹ While Christians are increasingly becoming aware of what this scriptural witness means for our care of the earth and for the ways we treat nonhuman animals like members of endangered species, we are still far behind on what these texts might mean for the 'beasts of burden' that we eat.

Toward a Disruptive Kingdom Ethic of Meat

Given the suffering that animals endure to become our food, the environmental crisis that has been created to fill some of our appetites and the other aforementioned problems associated with meat as a symbol, *and* the Biblical witness that God notices and cares for nonhuman animals and that Christians are called to nonviolence and

⁵⁶ Genesis 7:1–3

⁵⁷ Genesis 9:4

⁵⁸ Leviticus 24:21

⁵⁹ See Psalm 104 for one example.

liberating work, Christians need a disruptive kingdom ethic of meat. A disruptive ethic displaces meat eating as the privileged activity, making care for nonhuman life our primary responsibility, and protests the actions that make meat possible. A kingdom ethic witnesses to the world that, “God’s creation is not meant to be at war with itself. Such a witness . . . is an eschatological sign that our lives are not captured by the old order.”⁶⁰ Like all ethical stances, a disruptive kingdom ethic of meat will look different in various contexts. I contend that Christians who can abstain from meat and other animal byproducts without risking their health and who can access meat-free options with relative ease have a greater responsibility to adopt this ethic.⁶¹ Furthermore, it is those Christians who are able to adopt this ethic but refuse to do so that bear the burden of proof for their choice, not the vegetarians or vegans who are often put on the defensive. In contrast, Christians living in areas of the world who depend on meat for their health and survival, or who have limited access to meat-free alternatives might live out this disruptive ethic in different ways. They might refuse to eat factory farmed and cloned meat, use farming methods that minimize animal suffering, consume animal byproducts like eggs and milk but not meat and/or kill animals later rather than earlier in their lives whenever possible. In observing the tension that they share value with the sparrow but that their lives are more valuable nonetheless, these Christians will continuously seek ways to minimize their meat intake without sacrificing their lives in the process.

⁶⁰ Stanley Hauerwas and John Berkman, “The Chief End of All Flesh” in *Theology Today*, Vol. 49, no. 2 July 1992), 207–208.

⁶¹ Heinning, *Livestock’s long shadow*, 269. Indeed this report even notes that, “it may well be argued that environmental damage by livestock may be significantly reduced by lowering excessive consumption of livestock products among wealthy people,” though the idea is not fully explored.

At its heart, a disruptive kingdom ethic of meat seeks to live out “the scriptural witness that humans and other animals share in the ultimate end, which is God’s peaceable kingdom” and express in our diets the belief “that each and every creature is created to manifest God’s glory.”⁶² By confessing that human and nonhuman animals share a common destiny in God and living out as best as we are able in the contexts we find ourselves, we challenge the world’s call to dominate nature and the animals whose lives God calls us to tend. By confessing that *all* creatures are valued by God and made for God’s glory, and expressing that confession each time we fill our plates, we make a statement against *human and nonhuman* oppression. For if God values the life of a single sparrow how much more does God value women who are abused, discriminated against and devalued in a patriarchal society. If God values the life of a single sparrow, how much more does God value people of color who are discriminated against and dehumanized in a racist society? Extending our ethics to nonhuman animals need not dilute or commitment to liberation for all people—if anything it can enrich and deepen this important work.

Conclusion

In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that, “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” As such, the invitation to extend Christ’s mission is awaiting God’s people. Although adopting a disruptive kingdom ethic toward meat is not the only way in which we can reject the structures that thwart God’s will for nonhuman and human animal life, it is a relatively easy place to begin. The pressing question is will we choose to respond to the call?

⁶² Hauerwas and Berkman, “The Chief End of All Flesh,” 204.

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