

And many beasts: reframing our relationship with animals



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“ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

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This ending seemed inconclusive to me, but I think, as many commentaries included, that the ending is meant to put agency upon the audience to answer God’s question themselves and put themselves in the role of Jonah. For me, the main focus of an exegesis of Jonah revolves around the dynamic rhetoric structure, including the use of parallelism, irony, and hyperbole. Having been raised with little biblical education, however, I had to read the chapter multiple times before even beginning to strip down the plot to the moral and then to the rhetorical devices used. I, subsequently, passed over the ultimate phrase the first few times that I read the passage; the three words did not stand out to me as I was focusing on this question posed by God. I was reading Jonah too broadly instead of diving into the niceties of the text, but the devices mentioned above were so prominent that it was hard to look elsewhere for inspiration.

The role of animals in this book, therefore, tends to get tossed aside as an agent of these rhetorical devices. When looking at the role of animals in the Bible as a whole, however, more themes come to light, and we are able to look more critically at a story first regarded as absurd and humorous. In a way, this peroration contains the clarity that God provides to cut through the chaotic hyperbole that is the rest of Jonah, which is further supported by the construction of the prose. The entire response of god can be separated into

two parts: that of 4: 10 and 4: 11. These two verses follow the exact same structure, as God is walking Jonah and/or the audience through the logic of this moral. The last line, however, and the crux of this entire essay stands alone, without a paired line from 4: 10. This draws special attention to the three words and emphasizes their importance within the covenant. ^[1]

Philosophers such as Kant and Descartes ask, “ what is the place of human beings in the natural world?” This question about man’s place in nature among earth’s other creatures, which is still discussed today, exists within scripture as well, dating the argument as far back as two-thousand years ago. The very last three words of the book of Jonah, wrapping up the moral of the story and ending in a question, for the audience to ponder are “ and many animals.” In this essay, I will argue that the inclusion of animals in this covenant is extremely intentional and how a little exegesis may change how we view our moral obligations in interactions with nature.

Not all scholars agree on how to interpret these final words of Jonah; many don’t believe that the role of animals is even relevant in context. Either these scholars don’t believe that this brief mention of other creatures is important or they wrap up the words to signify God’s scope of power, as in God can and will *even* spare the animals of Nineveh. Most commentaries on this section of Jonah, in fact, do not even acknowledge these crucial three words at the end of verse. Other scholars may say that the story of Jonah is so absurd in its irony and hyperbole that it is difficult to take a small detail such as “ and many animals” (or “ beasts” or any other translation), at face value. These same people have chosen a stance wherein the inclusion of animals is used

as a device merely to demonstrate the vastness of God's dominion. This argument may be supported by the use of the fish in Jonah because in choosing a fish as God's agent, the author is expanding God's rule over the most expansive, mysterious, and frightening thing to the intended audience: the ocean. [2] After Jonah gives the prophecy to Nineveh, however, the king not only issues a decree to his subjects, but also to their animals in order to repent. This ties "man and beast" together under the same religious bond, with the same obligations to God and further supports the notion that these animals hold more agency as God's creations than as symbols of His power. [3]

Another argument as to the significance of this passage is that God is including animals in the covenant. Animals are very present throughout both the Old and New Testament. Their roles are ever-varying, but continuously contributing to the narrative, whether it be as a messenger, omen, or agent of the Lord. [4] Animals and humankind, in fact, can be seen as one and the same with the common usage of the word "flesh" or "all flesh." [5] This specific word choice, joins all creature together under the eye of God. Additionally, the Hebrew word *nephesh*, refers to the life, will, or soul of both man and animal. And when *nephesh* is combined with the Hebrew word for life, we get the translation for "breath of life" or living creatures." [6] Both of which are used to describe both animal and man in Genesis. [7] Only mankind, however, is created in the image of God and distinctions are frequently made between man and beast, such as the cautionary advice of Psalm 32:

*“ do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.” [8]*

In a way, however, these distinctions are also what bind us to animals as well. In this verse in Jonah, those fools in Nineveh who don't know their right from their left are put on the same plane as the animals. We compare our behavior to that of other species, because to a certain point, we share basic characteristics with many other creatures. We, as in human beings and all other animals, cohabit this earth and thereby have always been intertwined, whether it be through sharing spaces, both wild and domestic, participating in the natural food chain, or through our shared instinctual actions.

The Bible, too, recognizes the role that we as species play in each other's lives and occasionally points out mankind's failing in forgetting our own place in this natural order of things, where animals remain loyal and patient under the rule of God. [9] Anthropocentric mankind tends to believe themselves above all the other inhabitants of this earth, but as seen most keenly in the book of Job, God's reign is over *all* creatures and men must be reminded of their ignorance in that regard. [10] In the book of Exodus, God even gives a reason to observe Shabbat as so “ that your ox and your ass may have rest” among other things. All of God's creatures hold importance and demand recognition and respect for He created all living things on this earth. [11]

Frequently, the authors of the Bible place importance on this role in nature, wherein human beings are expected to revere, yet fear the wild beasts and care for the domesticated ones. ^[12] This nuanced relationship with animals, divided by the distinction of feral or tamed; however, doesn't begin to show up in the Bible until after the flood, which may signify a failing in this 'second best' world. ^[13] As seen in Genesis, the garden of Eden cultivated a harmonious relationship between man and animal. In fact, we may even infer that the inhabitants- including the animals- of Eden were vegetarian; a trait also seen in the book of Isaiah, while delivering the prophecy of the Messiah and the peaceableness of his kingdom. ^[14] This is a very utilitarian world that is depicted in the Bible, wherein no harm is done to any living beast or creation.

So what does this all mean? And how does God's three words in Jonah 4: 11 alter how we approach our role in nature among animals? Through the word choice seen throughout the bible and this intentional addition of animals in God's retribution and salvation of Nineveh, the authors of the Bible attempt to encourage the readers to treat animals as fellow creatures under the dominion of God. These other species, too, are included within the covenant and no harm must come to them unless under sacrificial rite, just as with humans. This can be understood by how God's logic forms this question meant to teach Jonah and the audience the moral of the story. For it seems as though Jonah can be more appreciative of plants and animals, the non-human beings on earth, than he can be of the people of Nineveh. The object of this final dialogue between God and Jonah is to persuade Jonah to care for others, in the same way that he has cared for the plant that provided him

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shade or the fish which saved him from the sea. ^[15] Using the parallel structure so often seen in this book, God poses the question that if He has created and loves both man and animal, and Jonah is able to love animal, then should Jonah not also be able to love mankind as God does, including those in Nineveh? This passage is meant to bridge that connection between man and animal which God has constructed, but which men do not recognize due to their deeply rooted anthropocentrism. ^[16]

The consequence of this shift in mindset would have the entire earth converting to vegetarianism, including the animals because they, too, would have to live under the ten commandments which includes “ thou shalt not kill.” While this sounds like the perfectly peaceful world Isaiah describes, it is highly impractical for the survival of all animals. This vision, however, is not completely unique to Isaiah, for many people (including the utilitarians who similarly value each life the same as the next) believe that we are meant to live in a vegetarian world, free from murder. For an additional perspective, it may be useful to look at this ideology from a Christian standpoint as well as a Jewish perspective and if, indeed, Jesus is our Messiah, then maybe the natural order of things is to have the bare minimum of killing for the sake of survival as animals live today. We may not need to take these three words from Jonah to influence the dietary habits of the world, but a revisitation of man’s place in nature and his relationship with the animals within may be in order.

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[1] Sasson, J. M., *Jonah: A New Translation with Introduction, Commentary, and Interpretation* (AB, 24B; New York: Doubleday, 1990), 319. As referenced in “ And Many Beasts” by Yael Shemesh.

[2] Shemesh, Yael. ““ And Many Beasts” (Jonah 4: 11): The Function and Status of Animals in the Book of Jonah.” *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* , vol. 10, 2012, pp. 12.

[3] Note from “ And Many Beasts” by Yael Shemesh: “ several midrashi, even suggest that sometimes the Lord saves human beings only because of animals that are blameless.” So animals abide by the covenant much more faithfully than we do. And as I’ll note later on, animals surpass some of the Israelites in practice.

[4] Moses’ staff that is turned into a snake (Ex 4: 3), Dogs refraining from barking before the Israelites departure (Ex 11: 7), and yes, the fish in the story of Jonah. (All referenced by Yael Shemesh, in his article “ And Many Beasts”)

[5] Frear, George L. “ Caring for Animals.” *Good News for Animals? Christian Approaches to Animal Well-Being* , edited by Charles Robert Pinches and Jay B. McDaniel, (Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 5.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Gen 1: 20, 21. 24; 2: 7, 19

[8] Ps 32: 9 via Frear, George L. "Caring for Animals" — and also look to 2 Pet 2: 12; Jude 10; and Prov. 25: 11 for other examples of this

[9] As seen in Jer 8: 7 and Is 1: 3

[10] Job 38

[11] Psalm 150: 6, as referenced by George Frear in "Caring for Animals"

[12] Gen 37: 20, 33; Ex 23: 29, Dt. 7: 22; 8: 15, as referenced by George Frear in "Caring for Animals"

[13] Frear "Caring for Animals." *Good News for Animals?* , pp. 8.

[14] Isa 11: 6-9

[15] Abusch, Tzvi. "Jonah and God: Plants, Beasts, and Humans in the Book of Jonah." *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* , vol. 13, no. 2, 2013, pp. 150.

[16] *Ibid.* pp. 151