

## ARTICLES

# Animals and Humans: Some Perspectives from an Eastern Christian Tradition

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*The article looks at the relationship of human beings to animals as seen from the Syriac Christian tradition. In the absence of any detailed discussion of the topic among Syriac authors, the focus of attention is on the general approach of two influential writers, the poet-theologian Ephrem (died AD 373) and the monastic author Isaac the Syrian (7th century), as illustrated above all by their interpretation of the two parts of Gen. 1:26 and the relationship between the “image of God” in which humanity is created and the “dominion/authority” conferred upon it. Also considered is the effect of sanctity upon animals.*

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**KEY WORDS:** animals, creation, Ephrem, Genesis, image (of God), Isaac the Syrian, sanctity, Syriac

Christianity is usually understood as comprising of two main traditions, the Latin West, consisting of the Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches, and the Greek East, represented by the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches. Such a dichotomy ignores a third Christian tradition, that of the Syriac and other Oriental Churches of the Middle East, which were cut off politically from the other two traditions in the seventh century because of the Arab invasions and the advent of Islam. It is with this third tradition, which for convenience can be described here as that of the Syriac Orient, with which the present contribution is concerned.

As is widely known, thanks to Mel Gibson’s film, the everyday language of Jesus was Aramaic. This Semitic language, related to both Hebrew and Arabic, had already been around for more than half a millennium as the lingua franca of the Middle East, and in the course of the first millennium AD, several different literary dialects developed, the most important being Jewish Aramaic and Syriac. It was the latter of these that early Christianity adopted as its literary language when it spread eastward. Over the centuries, an extensive Syriac literature was produced, and Syriac remains today an important liturgical language of the different Syriac Churches.

At the outset, it needs to be pointed out that Syriac literature has no equivalent discussion of animal rights such as that in Book 3 of Porphyry's *On Abstinence from Animal Foods*, written in the third century (Clark, 2000, pp. 80–100), or in the tenth-century Arabic *Dispute of the Animals versus Man* (Goodman & McGregor, 2012). In the absence of any direct discussion of the topic, the present paper focuses on two leading Syriac authors: the poet theologian Ephrem, of the fourth century, and the monastic writer Isaac of Nineveh (also known as Isaac the Syrian—though in fact he came from the Qatar region), of the seventh century. Both of these authors offer us an approach that, by implication, demands an attitude of respect and compassion on the part of human beings toward animals.

### EPHREM'S PARROT

In a poem that seeks to illustrate how God teaches human beings about himself bending down (as it were) and allowing himself to be described in human language in the biblical text—sometimes even using anthropomorphic terms that are totally unsuitable and in no way true of God's real being—Ephrem employs the analogy of a human being trying to teach a parrot how to talk:

A person who is teaching a parrot to speak  
hides behind a mirror and teaches it in this way:  
when the bird turns in the direction of the voice speaking  
it finds in front of its eyes its own resemblance reflected;  
it imagines that it is another parrot, conversing with itself.  
The man puts the bird's image in front of it,  
so that thereby it might learn to speak.  
The bird is related to the man,  
but although this relationship exists, the man beguiles and teaches  
the parrot something alien to itself by means of itself;  
in this way he speaks with it.  
The Divine Being, who in all things is exalted above all things,  
in his love has bent down from on high and acquired from us our own customs:  
he has laboured by every means so as to turn all to himself.

*(Hymns on Faith 31:6–7; as cited in Brock, 1992, pp. 61–62)*

What is also at issue here is the place of human beings within creation. The human thinks of himself as separate from, and superior to, the parrot, whereas the gap, or “chasm” as Ephrem describes it, between God and both the human and the parrot, each a member of the animal world, is immensely greater. In a wider context, it is not a case of human versus nature, but of human as part of nature. The way one classifies animate creatures will affect one's attitude. Thus, for example, one way of classifying animate beings, which is found in several Syriac authors, is to have a basic divide between animate beings who eat grass and those who eat flesh; here human beings simply constitute a subcategory of the latter.

At this point it will be helpful to take a glance at the Greek philosophical background that has had a strong influence on all early Christian writers,<sup>1</sup> including most of those writing in Syriac. They relied on two main approaches. For Aristotle, followed later by Theophrastus and others, there was a continuum among animate beings (i.e., those endowed with *anima*, or “soul,” here understood as an element of life). This graded scale started with plants, continued through animals, and reached an apex in human beings. The scale was quantitative, so the boundaries between the plant and animal world, and between the animal and human world, were not at all sharp. By contrast, the view of the Stoics, which became predominant in the early centuries AD (with a few exceptions like Plutarch and Porphyry), made a clear-cut distinction between human beings and animals. What distinguished the former was the presence of *logos*, “speech” or “reason.” Most early Christian writers took over and adapted this Stoic view: For them, “reason” was not just an intellectual quality, but a spiritual one as well.

### A KEY PASSAGE

For both Jewish and Christian traditions, there was another, quite different, basic distinction between human beings and animals: According to Gen. 1:26, only the former are created in the image and likeness of God. Needless to say, this verse has given rise to an enormous number of different understandings, but what is of concern for us here is the way that Ephrem understood the passage.<sup>2</sup> His interest is focused not on the similarity or difference between the “image” and “likeness,” but on the relationship between the first half of the verse and the second. In the Syriac Bible (translated from Hebrew) Gen. 1:26 reads:

And God said, Let us make the human in our image and according to our likeness, and let them have authority over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, and the cattle, and all the animals of the earth, and all creeping things that creep on the earth.

The Hebrew verb *radah*, usually translated by “have dominion,”<sup>3</sup> is rendered in Syriac by a verb (*shlat*) that points more to the nature of the office rather than to the mode of exercise of that office. The different nuance is significant, for “authority” implies responsibility, as is pointed out in Wisd. of Sol. 9:2–3, which states that this authority is given in order to rule “with truth and justice.” Thus, to Ephrem’s mind, the link between the two halves of the verse was of fundamental importance: God, as Creator, has authority over all, but by making humans in his image, he makes them, as it were, his agents acting with a deputed authority.

For the exercise of this deputed authority, human beings are endowed with another element that distinguishes them from the rest of the animal world: namely, free will. Thus, they have the ability to make moral choices, and for making these choices they also have the ability to reason. Here, Ephrem draws on the Greek Stoic view that humans are distinguished from animals by their possession of *logos*, whose Syriac counterpart,

*meltha*, has the same double sense of “speech” and “reason.” Ephrem adds yet a fourth distinguishing feature, once again based on the biblical text at Gen. 2:7, where God “breathed into them the breath of life.” Since this is not said about any of the rest of the animal world, Ephrem sees this as pointing to a spiritual dimension in humans that is absent from animals “which cannot form in themselves pure thoughts about God” (*First Letter to Hypatius*; as cited in Mitchell, 1912, p. ii; cf. *Nisibene Hymns* 44:1).

These differences between human beings and animals serve a particular purpose: Humans were created to provide a link in the hierarchy of the created world between the spiritual world and the material world. Thus, human beings share with angels the gift of free will, but angels are not created in the image of God; they share with the rest of the animal world bodily sensation. Placed in this middle position within the hierarchy, thanks to the gift of free will and depending on the way they use it,<sup>4</sup> humans can either raise themselves up and become like the angels—angelic—or lower themselves down and become like “wild beasts”—“bestial.” In their role as intermediaries between the spiritual and material worlds, humans are intended to constitute “the bond of love” (cf. Col. 3:14).<sup>5</sup> In other words, they should aim to reflect God’s own love in their exercise of the authority deputed to them, and their possession of *meltha*, the ability to reason and make use of free will, is “so that, by our actions, we become like God, the Giver of the ability to reason” (*First Letter to Hypatius*; as cited in Mitchell, 1912, p. ii). Therefore, the intention is that human beings should reflect the image of God in which they are created.

This is, of course, the theoretical ideal, fulfilled only in Christ, and Ephrem is well aware how the image has been corrupted, and he reflects on various degrees of the misuse of the God-given gift of free will and the ability to reason, situations where humans fail to fulfil their intermediary role in the hierarchy of being. It is a matter, Ephrem says, of “great shame if a human being is not clothed in the likeness of God,” but a much greater rebuke is deserved when human beings resemble animals and fail to resemble God in their actions. “The torment,” however, is multiplied immensely “when this intermediary being abandons the Good One above him, and from the rank to which he belongs by nature, he debases himself in his conduct so as to clothe himself in the likeness of animals” (*First Letter to Hypatius*; as cited in Mitchell, 1912, p. ii)—that is, he acts without any moral sense. The refrain to Ephrem’s 34th *Hymn on Faith* reads “Blessed is God who taught Adam (= humanity) by means of wild animals, so that he would not become like them.”

It is precisely because animals come lower down in the hierarchy of being that, when Ephrem adduces examples of animals, these are usually negative in character. In later texts, stories about animals often serve a moral purpose; this is especially the case in the collection of animal stories of Indian origin, entitled *Kalilah and Dimnah*, which were first translated into Syriac in the sixth century, and which in due course came to enjoy huge popularity in both the Middle East and later on in Europe. Syriac translations were also made of the *Physiologus* and of *Aesop’s Fables*. In the 13th century, the polymath Barhebraeus included a section of stories and sayings attributed to animals in his collec-

tion of amusing stories (Budge, 1897). On a rare occasion, an animal is given a voice in a Syrian Orthodox liturgical text: At Palm Sunday there is a short dialogue with the colt which carried Jesus into Jerusalem, where the colt takes on a teaching role:

O Colt, foal of an ass, who tied you up to a vine in the land of Judah and offered you to the Lord?

[Colt] The prophets tied me up and the apostles loosed me, and the Son of God was escorted on my back, while the children with olive branches cry out, saying “Hosanna to the Son of David, Hosanna in the highest.”

The poet Narsai, who lived a century later than Ephrem, compares the image of God in human beings to a depiction, or image, of a king:

A king is held in honour in his depiction, as if he were close by, even if he is distant.  
The Creator, with the image of Adam, wanted to instruct rational beings:  
in the world, a royal city, the Creator placed His image,  
and by the visible image he makes known the might of His hiddenness.  
With his image the Creator provided a bond (Col. 3:14) in creation when He  
constituted it so that through His own love towards Adam, humans might imitate  
His love.

(As cited in Gignoux, 1968, IV:1–6)

When something of the image of God is made visible in the person of an individual human being, this serves to reveal to the rest of the world something of God’s own Being. In other words, the purpose of the image of God is to be theophanic.

As is frequently found in Syriac poetry, the narrative of Gen. 1–3 serves as a paradigm for human experience, with Adam representing humanity. In Narsai’s view, the whole purpose of human beings being created in the image of God, with the potential to reflect something of the Godhead, is in order to reveal not only an aspect of God’s hiddenness, but also of his love.

What is of fundamental importance here is the intimate link that Ephrem, along with Narsai and other poets and exegetes, makes between “the image of God” in humans and the instruction that they should “have authority over” animate creation. Authority, deputed by God, carries with it the responsibility above all to reflect God in the exercise of this authority, that is, to exercise a right use of free will. Since the fundamental characteristic of God is compassion and love, the clear implication is that human beings, as God’s agents in rule, or “dominion” over the rest of the animal world, should themselves act with compassion and love toward animals, not least because they too have feeling. Although Ephrem specifically states in his *First Letter to Hypatius* (as cited in Mitchell, 1912, p. xix), that they have “feeling, sensation” (*rgeshta*), he does not go on to draw out the obvious implications from this, which is likely because virtually all writers in premodern times never looked at the question from the viewpoint of animals.

For Ephrem, one of the consequences of the disobedience of Adam and Eve to God’s commandment (Gen. 3:3) was a change in the relationship between them and animals. In a prose work he made the point succinctly: As a result of the Fall, Adam (humanity) lost his

authority over “wild” animals, and they received this authority over him after he had sinned (*Fourth Letter to Hypatius*; as cited in Mitchell, 1912, pp. lxxxv-lxxxvi). A related change that was also brought about was the appearance of “thorns and thistles” on the earth (Gen. 3:18):

The sprouting of the thorns  
 testified to the novel sprouting of wrong actions,  
 for thorns did not sprout  
 as long as wrongdoing had not yet burst forth;  
 but once there had peered out  
 hidden wrong choices made by free will,  
 then the visible thorns began to peer out from the earth.

(*Hymns against Heresies* 28:9; as cited in Brock, 1992, p. 165)

## SANCTITY AND ANIMALS

These contrasts in the relationships of humans with animals and with the plant world, brought about by the wrong use of free will, provide a bridge to the second part of this article, the restoration of the original pre-Fall relationship of harmony between human beings and the animal and plant world. In Syriac literature, as in many other literatures, this recovery of a harmonious relationship with animals, where “the wolf will dwell with the lamb” (Isa. 11: 6), is normally associated with sanctity and is seen as an anticipation, in this temporal life, of the Kingdom of God. An early fourth-century author from what is today Iraq illustrates this point with a delightful description of the way the lions received the prophet Daniel in their den (Dan. 6):

The lions stretched out their paws and caught Daniel so that he would not fall on the ground; they embraced him in their arms and kissed his feet. . . . When Daniel dozed off and wanted to sleep, the lions lowered themselves so that he might sleep lying upon them, and not on the ground.

(Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4; as cited in Brock, 1989, p. 13)

In a similar vein, the Syrian Orthodox Morning Office for Tuesdays provides an adaptation of the Greek myth of Orpheus (perhaps reflecting an awareness of mosaics depicting Orpheus surrounded by “wild” animals, such as the two, dated AD 194 and 228, from Edessa, the heartland of early Syriac Christianity). “At the time of morning, King David used to sing to his harp songs of the Holy Spirit, and the wild animals would gather and come along at the sweet sound of his words.”

The same sort of idea is not infrequently found in lives of saints: St. Mamas, for example, went around riding on the back of a lion (which proved not a little disconcerting to the inhabitants of the villages he visited). In Western Christian tradition, the motif is familiar from depictions of St. Jerome and his lion (though it originally belonged to another saint, Gerasimus, with whom he was confused). To most modern readers, these hagiographical narratives will seem purely mythical, but there is more to it than that, as is illustrated by the experience of an acquaintance who works in a factory and who likes to spend his holidays in monasteries in different parts of the world. In a talk about

his spending some months in a hermit's cave attached to the Monastery of Mar Mousa near Nebek in Syria, which was founded by the Italian Jesuit Fr. Paolo dall'Oglio,<sup>6</sup> he happened to mention that in the early part of his visit the local birds and animals had shown fear of him and flown or run away from him, but by the end of the visit, when he had acquired a certain spiritual stillness, they would come freely into his cave, showing no fear or hostility.

A seventh-century monastic author, St. Isaac the Syrian, also known as Isaac of Niniveh (modern Mosul, Iraq), describes the same phenomenon:

The humble person approaches wild animals, and the moment they catch sight of him their ferocity is tamed. They come up and cling to him as to their master, wagging their tails and licking his hands and feet. They scent, as coming from that person, the same fragrance that came from Adam before the transgression, at the time when they were gathered together before him and he gave them names in Paradise (Gen. 2:19–20): this fragrance was taken away from us, but Christ has renewed it and given it back to us at his coming.<sup>7</sup> (Discourse 82; as cited in Wensinck, 1923, p. 386)

Elsewhere, Isaac reminds his readers “that you share in stink of (the fallen) Adam” (Discourse 5; as cited in Wensinck, 1923, p. 54). In another oft-quoted passage, he gives an account of what happens when the image of God in an individual truly reflects divine compassion and love:

An Elder was once asked, “What is a compassionate heart?” He replied, “It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for the demons and for all that exists. At the recollection and at the sight of them such a person's eyes overflow with tears owing to the vehemence of the compassion which grips his heart; as a result of his profound mercy his heart shrinks and cannot bear to hear or look on any injury of the slightest suffering of anything in creation. This is why he constantly offers up prayer full of tears, even for irrational animals, and for enemies of the truth, even for those who harm him, so that they may be protected and find mercy. He even prays for the reptiles as a result of the great compassion which is poured out beyond measure—after the likeness of God—in his heart.” (Discourse 74; as cited in Wensinck, 1923, p. 341; also quoted in Linzey & Cohn-Sherbok, 1997, pp. 101–102)

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Although it is to be regretted that no Syriac writer ever takes the imaginative leap in order to consider the relationship between human beings and animals from the perspective of animals, what is of value in the Syriac tradition that is still applicable today is the stress on the intimate and essential link between the two parts of Gen. 1:26, namely the image of God in which humans are created, and what this implies for the authority, or “dominion,” given to them over the rest of the animate world. This is an aspect that is also stressed, but from a different perspective, by Murray (1992, p. 98). The essential point is that the dominion or authority ought to be exercised in a way that reflects the essential characteristics of the Godhead, namely, compassion and love.

Basically, what is at stake here is a question of attitude. Many modern writers have made this or similar points, noting how a desacralizing attitude toward animals and the natural world has led to their exploitation, among them a notable Syrian Orthodox bishop from India, Paulos Mar Gregorios (1922–1996). In his excellent short book, *The Human Presence: An Orthodox View of Nature*, written for the World Council of Churches, he writes:

A totally fresh attitude is necessary, one which is different from our objectifying analyzing technique. We shall call it the reverent-receptive attitude. It is the attitude of being open to the fundamental reality as it manifests itself to us through visible, audible, sensible realities in the creation. (Gregorios, 1971, p. 86)

He goes on to stress that this is *not* to be seen as an alternative to what he calls “the scientific-technological attitude,” but as complementary to it. As so often proves to be the case, it is not a question of either/or, but of both/and.

### Notes

1. A helpful summary can be found in Dierauer (1997) and more detail in Sorabji (1993).
2. Ephrem’s main discussions of the topic are in his *Commentary on Genesis, First and Fourth Letter to Hypatius* (as cited in Mitchell, 1912), *Hymns on the Church* 28, *Hymns on Faith* 34, *Hymns on Nisibis* 44. An introduction to Ephrem can be found in Brock (1992).
3. For a good rebuttal of Lynn White’s (1967) much-cited article, see Barr (1972). For the exegetical history of the related verse, Gen. 1:28, see Cohen (1989, pp. 223–265). For the Patristic evidence and for Augustine, see Clark (1998).
4. Ephrem sees the natural world and the Bible (“Nature and the Book”) as the two witnesses to God:

“In his book Moses described the creation of the natural world  
so that both the natural world and his Book might testify to the Creator,  
the natural world, through man’s use of it,  
the Book, through his reading of it.  
They are witnesses which reach everywhere, they are to be found at all times,  
present at every hour, rebuking the unbeliever who denies the Creator.

(*Hymns on Paradise* 5:2; as cited in Brock, 1990, pp. 102–103)

5. “Il vincolo della compassione” (“the bond of compassion’compassion”) is the heading of a collection of relevant patristic texts in Bianchi, Chiaranz, and Michon, 2011, pp. 130–135.
6. Fr. Paolo was kidnapped in eastern Syria on August 29, 2013; his fate remains unknown.
7. Syriac numbering; the Greek is different. The translations here and below are my own.

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