

## Jesus and Animals I: What did he Teach?

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A cursory reading of the Gospels might well leave the impression that there is very little to be said about Jesus and animals. This impression would seem to be confirmed by the fact that modern New Testament scholarship has given virtually no attention to this subject. However, this chapter will show that there is in fact a good deal to be learned from the Gospels about Jesus' understanding of the relationship between humans and other living creatures. This will only be possible by relating Jesus and his teaching to the Jewish religious tradition in which he belonged. All aspects of Jesus' ministry and teaching, even the most innovatory, were significantly continuous with the Jewish tradition of faith, especially, of course, with the Hebrew Bible. Many features of this religious tradition Jesus presupposed. He did not argue, for example, that the God of Israel is the one true God, but everything he did and said presupposed this. Similarly, he presupposed the religious and ethical attitudes to animals which were traditional and accepted, both in the Old Testament and in later Jewish tradition. In his teaching, he adopts such attitudes, not for the most part in order to draw attention to them for their own sake, but in order to base on them teaching about the relation of humans to God. But this does not imply that he took them less seriously than other aspects of Jewish faith and religious teaching which he endorsed and developed. But it does mean that, in order to appreciate the full implications of Jesus' references to animals in his teaching, we must investigate the context of Jewish teaching to which they belong.

### *Compassionate treatment of animals*

A duty to treat animals humanely and compassionately, not causing unnecessary suffering and whenever possible relieving suffering, was well

established in Jewish tradition by Jesus' time, though it was applied largely to domestic animals – those animals owned by humans as beasts of burden, working animals, sources of milk and food, and therefore also offered in sacrifices to God. These were the animals for which humans had day-to-day responsibility. They were not simply to be used and exploited for human benefit, but to be treated with respect and consideration as fellow-creatures of God. Proverbs 12.10 states the general principle:

A right-minded person cares for his beast,  
but one who is wicked is cruel at heart<sup>1</sup> (REB).

In later Jewish literature, an interesting instance is the Testament of Zebulon,<sup>2</sup> which is much concerned with the duty of compassion and mercy to all people, exemplified by the patriarch Zebulon himself, and understood as a reflection of the compassion and mercy of God.<sup>3</sup> Compassion is probably here an interpretation of the commandment to love one's neighbour (Lev. 19.18), taken to be the central and comprehensive ethical commandment of God and interpreted as requiring compassion for all people. In other words, the love commandment is interpreted much as Jesus interpreted it. But in Zebulon's general statement of the ethical duty of compassion he extends it not only to all people but also to animals:

And now, my children, I tell you to keep the commands of the Lord: to show mercy to your neighbour, and to have compassion on all, not only human beings but also irrational animals. For on account of these things the Lord blessed me . . . (T. Zeb. 5.1–2).

Another interesting, if not perhaps very representative, passage from the Jewish literature of Jesus' time occurs in II Enoch (the Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch) in a context of ethical teaching which again has many points of contact with the ethical teaching of Jesus. Chapters 58–59 deal with sins against animals. Uniquely, they teach that the souls of animals will be kept alive until the last judgment, not, apparently, for the sake of eternal life for themselves,<sup>4</sup> but so that they may bring charges, at that judgment, against human beings who have treated them badly (58.4–6). There seem to be three kinds of sins against animals: failing to feed domestic animals adequately (58.6),<sup>5</sup> bestiality (59.5),<sup>6</sup> and sacrificing an animal without binding it by its four legs (59.2–4). This third sin may seem at first sight to be purely a matter of not observing what the author understood to be the proper ritual requirements for sacrificial slaughter, and it is not obvious

why it should be considered a sin against the animal. The reason may be that an animal not properly bound would struggle and die with unnecessary suffering. More probably, the idea is that if the animal struggled, the knife used to cut its throat might slip and damage the animal in some other way.<sup>7</sup> The animal would then not satisfy the ritual requirement that a sacrificial victim be without blemish, and could not be a valid sacrifice. In that case, its life would have been taken to no purpose. This passage of II Enoch is evidence that some Jews in Jesus' time gave serious thought to human beings' ethical duties towards animals.

Of more direct relevance to material in the Gospels (as we shall see) are Jewish legal traditions, in which the law of Moses was interpreted as requiring compassion and consideration for animals. Later rabbinic traditions understood a whole series of laws in this way (Ex. 22.30, 23.4–5; Lev. 22.27, 28; Deut. 22.1–4, 6–7, 10, 25.4).<sup>8</sup> In many of these cases, it is not obvious that the point of the law is compassion for the animals, and modern Old Testament exegetes often understand them differently.<sup>9</sup> Ancient Jews could also do so. For example, the law of Deuteronomy 22.6–7, which requires someone taking the young birds from a nest (for food) to let the mother bird go, was evidently understood (probably correctly) by the Jewish writer known as Pseudo-Phocylides (lines 84–85) as a conservation measure: 'leave the mother bird behind, in order to get young from her again'.<sup>10</sup> But it was also commonly understood as a matter of compassion for the bird (Josephus, *C. Apion.* 2.213; Lev. R. 27.11; Deut. R. 6.1). The rabbis deduced from such laws a general principle that all living beings should be spared pain (the principle of *sa'ar ba'aley hayyim*).<sup>11</sup> The rabbinic material, of course, post-dates the New Testament, but there are enough pieces of early evidence of the same kind of interpretation for us to be sure that this way of interpreting the law, as concerned with compassion for animals, was well established by Jesus' time. For example, Josephus, in a remarkable passage in which he is trying to represent the law of Moses in the ways most calculated to appeal to Gentile critics of Judaism, explains that Moses required that the Jews treat strangers and even national enemies with consideration, and then argues that Moses even required consideration for animals:

So thorough a lesson has he given us in gentleness and humanity that he does not overlook even the brute beasts, authorizing their use only in accordance with the Law, and forbidding all other employment of them [cf. Ex. 20.10; Deut. 5.14, 22.10]. Creatures which take refuge in our houses like suppliants we are forbidden to kill.<sup>12</sup> He would not suffer us

to take the parent birds with the young [Deut. 22.6–7], and bade us even in an enemy's country to spare and not to kill the beasts employed in labour [perhaps cf. Deut. 20.19]. Thus, in every particular, he had an eye to mercy, using the laws I have mentioned to enforce the lesson (*C. Apion.* 2.213–14).<sup>13</sup>

Here the principle of compassion for animals apparently leads to the formulation of laws not to be found in the written Torah at all.

A very similar treatment, though restricted to laws actually found in the Torah, is given by Philo of Alexandria, who sees the gentleness and kindness of the precepts given by Moses in the fact that consideration is extended to creatures of every kind: to humans, even if they are strangers or enemies, to irrational animals,<sup>14</sup> even if they are unclean according to the dietary laws, and even to plants and trees (*Virt.* 160; cf. 81, 125, 140). He expounds in detail the laws which he understands to be motivated by compassion for animals: Leviticus 22.27 (*Virt.* 126–33); Leviticus 22.28 (134–42); Exodus 23.19, 34.26; Deuteronomy 14.21 (142–4); Deuteronomy 25.4 (145); Deuteronomy 22.10 (146–7).

This line of interpretation of the law cannot be explained merely as an apologetic for the law of Moses by diaspora Jews concerned to impress Gentiles. It can be paralleled in later rabbinic literature.<sup>15</sup> One striking instance, which almost certainly goes back to New Testament times, is found in the Palestinian Targum. It concerns the law of Leviticus 22.28, which forbids the slaughter of an animal and its young together. According to the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan, which frequently preserves Jewish exegetical traditions from this period,<sup>16</sup> God, when giving this commandment, says to the people: 'just as I in heaven am merciful, so shall you be merciful on earth' (cf. Luke 6.36). Behind this statement probably lies Psalm 145.9: 'The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.' God's compassion for all creatures is to be imitated by the people, and the laws requiring consideration for animals are given to this end.

The idea that compassion for animals is a general principle of the Torah explains why acts of compassion for animals were permitted on the sabbath, even though they involved what would otherwise be considered work. On three occasions in the Gospels Jesus refers to such generally recognized exceptions to the prohibition of work on the sabbath. He does so in the context of debate about his practice of performing healings on the sabbath, to which the Pharisees (Matt. 12.10–14; Luke 14.3) and others (Luke 13.14, 14.3) objected. In each case his point is to argue that, since his opponents

agreed that relieving the suffering of domestic animals was lawful on the sabbath, how much more must relieving the suffering of human beings be lawful. The statements are:

Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath (Matt. 12.11–12).<sup>17</sup>

If one of you has a child<sup>18</sup> or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day? (Luke 14.5).<sup>19</sup>

Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day? (Luke 13.15–16).

Not all Jews would have agreed with Jesus' account of what it was permitted to do for animals on the sabbath.<sup>20</sup> The written Torah, of course, makes no such explicit exceptions to the sabbath commandment. Therefore the Qumran sect, whose interpretation of the sabbath laws was extremely strict, categorically forbade such acts of mercy: 'No man shall assist a beast to give birth on the Sabbath day. And if it should fall into a cistern or pit, he shall not lift it out on the Sabbath' (CD 11.12–14).<sup>21</sup> On this latter question, addressed in Matthew 12.11 and Luke 14.5, later rabbinic opinion was divided as to whether it was permissible to help the animal out of the pit or only to bring it provisions until it could be rescued after the sabbath (b. Shabb. 128b; b. B. Mes. 32b). We may take the Gospels as evidence that the more lenient ruling was widely held in Jesus' time. As to the example given in Luke 13.15, it is very much in line with the Mishnah's interpretation of sabbath law in relation to domestic animals, though not explicitly stated as a rabbinic ruling. The point is that tying and untying knots were defined as two of the types of activity which constituted work and were generally unlawful on the sabbath (m. Shabb. 7.2), but provision for domestic animals was one kind of reason for allowing exceptions (m. Shabb. 15.1–2; cf. b. Shabb. 128a–b; cf. also m. Erub. 2.1–4, where it is taken for granted that cattle are watered on the sabbath).

These exceptions to the prohibition of work on the sabbath are remarkable. They are not cases in which the lives of the animals were in danger, and so they cannot be understood as motivated by a concern to preserve the

animals as valuable property. Rather they are acts of compassion, intended to prevent animal suffering. It was only because the law was understood as generally requiring considerate treatment of animals that the sabbath commandment could be interpreted as not forbidding such acts of mercy to animals on the sabbath. Moreover, it is clear that Jesus understood the issue in this way. His argument is that, since his hearers agreed that acts of compassion designed to relieve the suffering of animals are lawful on the sabbath, surely acts of compassion designed to relieve human suffering are also lawful. According to Matthew 12.12–13, rescuing a sheep from a pit on the sabbath is ‘doing good’, and so healing a man’s withered hand on the sabbath is also doing good.

Of course, in all three texts, the law’s requirement of compassion for animals is only the presupposition for the point Jesus is making. But his argument is certainly not merely *ad hominem*. He is arguing from a presupposition which is really agreed between him and his opponents. Jesus, in his recorded teaching, does not teach compassion for animals, but he places himself clearly within the Jewish ethical and legal tradition which held that God requires the people to treat their fellow-creatures, the animals, with compassion and consideration.

#### *An apocryphal story*

A little-known apocryphal story about Jesus is unique in showing Jesus engaged in an act of compassion for an animal:

It happened that the Lord left the city and walked with his disciples over the mountains. And they came to a mountain, and the road which led up it was steep. There they found a man with a pack-mule. But the animal had fallen, because the man had loaded it too heavily, and now he beat it, so that it was bleeding. And Jesus came to him and said, ‘Man, why do you beat your animal? Do you not see that it is too weak for its burden, and do you not know that it suffers pains?’ But the man answered and said, ‘What is that to you? I may beat it as much as I please, since it is my property, and I bought it for a good sum of money. Ask those who are with you, for they know me and know about this.’ And some of the disciples said, ‘Yes, Lord, it is as he says. We have seen how he bought it.’ But the Lord said, ‘Do you then not see how it bleeds, and do you not hear how it groans and cries out?’ But they answered and said, ‘No, Lord, that it groans and cries out, we do not hear.’ But Jesus was sad and exclaimed, ‘Woe to you, that you do not hear how it com-

plains to the Creator in heaven and cries out for mercy. But threefold woes to him about whom it cries out and complains in its pain.’ And he came up and touched the animal. And it stood up and its wounds were healed. But Jesus said to the man, ‘Now carry on and from now on do not beat it any more, so that you too may find mercy.’<sup>22</sup>

Since nothing is known of the source of this story, preserved in Coptic,<sup>23</sup> it is impossible to know whether it derives from an early Gospel tradition. However, it does seem to presuppose the Jewish legal tradition which we have discussed in the last section. Specifically, it relates to the commandment to relieve an animal which has fallen under its burden (Ex. 23.4; Deut. 22.4), interpreted as requiring compassion for an overburdened animal.<sup>24</sup> So the story may go back to a Jewish-Christian source in which Jesus’ teaching that love is the overriding principle in interpreting the law was extended, as it is not explicitly in the canonical Gospels, to concern for animals as well as people. Jesus’ final saying in the story extends to the treatment of animals Jesus’ general principle that ‘the measure you give will be the measure you get’ (Matt. 7.2; Luke 6.38), as well as the thought of the beatitude: ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy’ (Matt. 5.7). If people do not show mercy to their animals, they cannot expect mercy from God.<sup>25</sup> Whatever its source, the story is at least a kind of testimony to the impression the figure of Jesus in the Gospels can make on their readers. This – we may agree – is how the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels would have behaved in such a situation.

#### *God’s provision for creatures*

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matt. 6.29).

Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! (Luke 12.24).

In this saying, as in the corresponding exhortation to consider the wild flowers (Matt. 6.28; Luke 12.27), Jesus adopts the style of a Jewish wisdom teacher, inviting his hearers to consider the natural world, God’s creation, and to draw religious lessons from it (cf. Job 12.7–8, 35.4; Prov. 6.6; Sir. 33.15; I Enoch 2.1–3, 3.1, 4.1, 5.1, 3). What he asks them to notice – that

God feeds the birds/ravens – is drawn directly from the creation theology of the Old Testament, especially the Psalms, in which it is a commonplace that God the Creator supplies all living creatures with food. Psalm 147.9 is one example among several:

He gives to the animals their food,  
and to the young ravens when they cry.<sup>26</sup>

It is probably impossible to tell whether, in Jesus' saying, Matthew's 'the birds of the air' or Luke's 'the ravens' is more original, but the latter gives a more precise Old Testament allusion to Job 38.41 or Psalm 147.9. The reason why both these Old Testament texts single out the ravens is that the cry of the young ravens, to which they both refer, was especially raucous. Young ravens 'squawk for food with louder and longer cries than almost any other species'.<sup>27</sup> In the context of Jesus' saying, it might also be significant that, according to the dietary laws, the raven is an unclean animal (Lev. 11.15; Deut. 14.14). The point would then be that God takes care to provide even for an unclean bird like the raven.<sup>28</sup>

The Old Testament creation theology, which Jesus here echoes, includes humans among the living creatures for whom God provides. The great creation Psalm 104, where humans are included among all the creatures who look to God for food (vv. 27–28), is notable for its depiction of humans as one species among others in the community of creation for which the Creator shares. Psalm 145.15, which echoes Psalm 104.27–8, does so, as the context makes clear, in order especially to highlight God's provision for humans. Like Jesus, the psalmist points to God's care for all living creatures in order to assure humans who turn to God in need that God provides for them. The same point is made, in dependence on these psalms, in a later Jewish psalm (from the first century BC):

For if I am hungry, I will cry out to you, O God,  
and you will give me (something).  
You feed the birds and the fish  
as you send rain in the wilderness that grass may sprout  
to provide pasture in the wilderness for every living thing,  
and if they are hungry, they will lift their eyes up to you.  
You feed kings and rulers and peoples, O God,  
and who is the hope of the poor and needy, if not you, Lord?  
(Pss. Sol. 5.8–11).<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, in arguing from the Creator's provision for birds to provision for people, Jesus' words belong firmly within Jewish tradition. The point that is not from the tradition is Jesus' observation that birds do not sow or reap or store their food in barns. This observation has been variously interpreted. Jesus has sometimes been thought to contrast the birds who do not work with people who do: if God feeds even the idle birds, how much more will he provide for people who work hard for their living. He has also been thought to compare the birds who do not work with disciples who do not work either, but as wandering preachers depend on God's provision by way of receiving charity. It is improbable that either of these alternatives is the real point. Rather the point is that, because the birds do not have to labour to process their food from nature, their dependence on the Creator's provision is the more immediate and obvious.<sup>30</sup> Humans, preoccupied with the daily toil of supplying their basic needs by sowing and reaping and gathering into barns, may easily suppose that it is up to them to provide themselves with food, and neglect the fact that, much more fundamentally, they are dependent on the divine provision, the resources of creation without which no one could sow, reap or gather into barns. The birds, in their more immediate and obvious dependence on the Creator, remind humans that ultimately they are no less dependent on the Creator.

Once again, as in the sabbath healing discussions, what Jesus says about animals is a presupposition from which to argue something about humans. But it is a necessary presupposition. It is not, as some modern readers tend to assume, just a picturesque illustration of Jesus' point, as though the point could stand without the illustration. Rather Jesus' argument depends on the Old Testament creation theology evoked by his reference to the birds. Humans can trust God for their basic needs, treating the resources of creation as God's provision for these needs, only when they recognize that they belong to the community of God's creatures, for all of whom the Creator provides. Only those who recognize birds as their fellow-creatures can appreciate Jesus' point. It is noteworthy that, although the argument, like that in the discussions of sabbath law, is an argument from the lesser to the greater, it is not an argument which sets humans on a different plane of being from the animals. On the contrary, it sets humans within the community of God's creatures, all of whom are provided for. Apparently, they are regarded as particularly eminent members of that community (a point to which we shall return), but they are members of it, nonetheless.

*God's concern for every creature*

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows (Matt. 10.29–31).

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows (Luke 12.6–7).

Evidently sparrows were sold in the market, either in pairs or in fives (which for Jewish counting in tens would be equivalent to our half-dozen), as food for the poor, who would probably rarely be able to afford any other form of meat. That sparrows were the cheapest birds for sale in the market – and for this reason selected by Jesus to make his point – is confirmed by a decree of the emperor Diocletian (late third century AD) which fixes maximum prices for all kinds of items and lists sparrows as the cheapest of all the birds used for food.<sup>31</sup> The cheapness of birds, in general, is interestingly confirmed by a passage in the Mishnah relating to the law of Deuteronomy 22.6–7, which, as we have already noticed, forbids taking the mother bird together with her young from a nest. The rabbis were struck by the fact that, very unusually, this law specifies a reward for keeping it: 'that it may go well with you and you may live long' (Deut. 22.7). They concluded that if such a reward attaches to 'so light a precept concerning what is worth but an *issar*', then how much more will a similar reward be given for observing 'the weightier precepts of the law' (m. Hull. 12.5). The commandment is here considered trivial, compared with others,<sup>32</sup> because it concerns only a bird, which is worth only an *issar*. The *issar* is the same small copper coin as Matthew's and Luke's 'penny' (*assarion*).<sup>33</sup>

Thus Jesus has selected a creature which is valued very cheaply by humans, of course on the basis of its limited usefulness to them. Even a creature which humans think so unimportant is important enough to God for it never to escape caring attention. Matthew's and Luke's versions of the saying make the point in slightly different ways. Matthew's is the more specific and relates to the capture of sparrows for food. The sparrow's fall to the earth is not, as modern readers often suppose, its death,<sup>34</sup> but what happens when the hunter's throw-net snares it (cf. Amos 3.5).<sup>35</sup> It will then be sold in the market. The sparrow's capture cannot happen 'without

(*aneu*) your Father' (Matt. 10.29), i.e. without God's knowledge and consent. There is a remarkably close parallel, not only to this point but also to the moral which Jesus draws from it with regard to God's care for the disciples, in a later rabbinic story, which must show that Jesus is drawing on traditional Jewish teaching. The story concerns Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai (mid-second century AD) who at the end of the second Jewish war spent thirteen years hiding in a cave with his son.

At the end of this period he emerged and sat at the entrance of the cave and saw a hunter engaged in catching birds. Now whenever R. Simeon heard a heavenly voice exclaim from heaven, 'Mercy!' [i.e. a legal sentence of release] it escaped; if it exclaimed, 'Death!' it was caught. 'Even a bird is not caught without the assent of Providence,' he remarked; 'how much more then the life of a human being!' Thereupon he went forth and found that the trouble had subsided (Gen. R. 79.6).<sup>36</sup>

Rabbi Simeon realizes that his fate is in the hands of God, to whom he can therefore entrust himself, when he realizes that this is even true of each bird.

If Jesus drew on traditional Jewish teaching, this teaching was itself rooted in the Old Testament, which says that

In his hand is the life of every living thing  
and the breath of every human being (Job 12.10)

and

You save humans and animals alike, O Lord (Ps. 36.6).

It is God who preserves the life of each creature, animal and human, and who likewise allows that life to perish when it does.

Luke's version makes the more general point that not a single sparrow ever escapes God's attention ('forgotten in the sight of God' is a Jewish reverential periphrasis for 'forgotten by God'; cf. Matt. 18.14). But in both versions the point is God's caring providence for each individual creature. God is not concerned only with the species, but with each individual of the species. Nor does God simply superintend what happens to each without concern for the welfare of each: this would provide no basis for Jesus' assurance that the disciples need have no fear. The point is that since God actually cares about and takes care of each sparrow, how much more must



God care about and take care of Jesus' disciples. Of course, Jesus does not raise the problems of such a doctrine of providence:<sup>37</sup> Why does God let one sparrow escape and another be captured and killed? Why does God allow righteous people to suffer? Here Jesus is content to affirm that the disciples, like all God's creatures, are in the hands of God who cares for all God has made.

### *Humans are of more value than animals*

All the references to animals in the sayings of Jesus which we have considered belong to a form of argument from the lesser to the greater (*a minore ad maius*, or, in rabbinic terminology, *qal wa-homer*). Since, it is stated or assumed, humans are of more value than animals, if something is true in the case of animals, it must also be true in the case of humans. If acts of compassion for animals are lawful on the sabbath, then acts of compassion for humans must also be lawful. If God provides for birds, then God can be trusted to provide for humans also. If not even a sparrow escapes God's caring attention, then Jesus' disciples can be sure they are in God's care.

This form of argument is used in rabbinic literature, and so we can probably conclude that it was already an established form of Jewish religious argument in Jesus' time. In addition to the passage quoted (from Gen. R. 79.6) in the previous section,<sup>38</sup> the following are examples of it:

m. Qidd. 4.14: R. Simeon b. Eleazar says: Hast thou ever seen a wild animal or a bird practising a craft? – yet they have their sustenance without care and were they not created for naught else but to serve me? But I was created to serve my Maker. How much more then ought not I to have my sustenance without care? But I have wrought evil, and [so] forfeited my [right to] sustenance [without care].<sup>39</sup>

b. Qidd. 82b: R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: In my whole lifetime I have not seen a deer engaged in gathering fruits, a lion carrying burdens, or a fox as a shopkeeper, yet they are sustained without trouble, though they were created only to serve me, whereas I was created to serve my Maker. Now, if these, who were created only to serve me are sustained without trouble, how much more so should I be sustained without trouble, I who was created to serve my Maker! But it is because I have acted evilly and destroyed my livelihood, as it is said, your iniquities have turned away these things [Jer. 5.25].<sup>40</sup>

y. Ber. 9.3.13c: Elijah asked Rabbi Nehorai, Why had God created in his world tiny insects and worms? He replied, 'When human beings sin, He looks on the lower forms of creation and says: "If I sustain these tiny useless creatures, how much more must I preserve human beings who are useful."' <sup>41</sup>

Deut. R. 6.5: Another comment [on Deut. 22.6–7]: R. Hiyya said: If a bird that has neither ancestral merit nor covenants nor oaths to rely upon, can be atoned for by her children, how much more will the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who have ancestral merit to rely on, if any of them sin, be atoned for by their children in the time to come.<sup>42</sup>

All of these passages use the phrase 'how much more', which Jesus also uses in other examples of *qal wa-homer* argument in his teaching (Matt. 6.30 par. Luke 12.28; Matt. 7.11 par. Luke 11.13; Matt. 10.25: *posoi mallon* in all cases except Matt. 6.30). But this expression is not used in the arguments from animals to humans (except in Luke 12.24). Instead, expressions employing the verb *diapherein* are used:

How much more valuable (*posoi diapherei*) is a human being than a sheep! (Matt. 12.12).

Are you not of more value (*mallon diapherete*) than they [the birds of the air]? (Matt. 6.26).

Of how much more value are you (*posoi . . . mallon diapherete*) than the birds! (Luke 12.24).

You are of more value (*diapherete*) than many sparrows! (Matt. 10.31).

You are of more value (*diapherete*) than many sparrows (Luke 12.7).

It might be a preferable translation of *diapherein* to say that humans 'are superior to' animals. The reference is probably to the kind of hierarchical superiority which is implied in the Old Testament's notion of human dominion over the animals (Gen. 1.26–8; Ps. 8.5–8). Humans are of superior status in the sense that a king is superior to his subjects. At least in biblical thought, a king is not of greater value than his subjects. However, we cannot rule out the idea of a difference in intrinsic value. Certainly the

law of Moses treats human life as more valuable than animal life. A human being or even a domestic animal that kills a human being is subject to death, but a human being who kills a domestic animal is required only to make financial restitution to its owner (Ex. 21.28–35; Lev. 24.17–21; cf. Gen. 9.5–6). In these laws animals seem to be treated only as property, but it should also be noted that the prohibition on eating meat with blood in it (Gen. 9.4; Lev. 3.17, 7.26, 17.10; Deut. 12.16, 23, 15.23) is a kind of recognition that animal life is valuable (it is the gift of God and must be returned), even though there are permissible reasons for taking it. Jesus' arguments certainly presuppose that animals have intrinsic value for God. Otherwise it could make no sense to say that humans are more valuable.<sup>43</sup>

Two observations on Jesus' arguments from animals to humans are appropriate. In the first place, they do not employ certain ideas that we find in some of the rabbinic passages quoted above. In the saying of Rabbi Simeon b. Eleazar (m. Qidd. 4.14; b. Qidd. 82b), animals are said to have been created only to serve humans. This non-biblical idea – which is certainly not implied in Genesis 1–2 and is clearly refuted by Job 39 – entered both Jewish and Christian thought from Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy.<sup>44</sup> There is no reason to think that it is presupposed in Jesus' sayings. The saying attributed to Rabbi Nehorai may well reflect the kind of discussions which the Stoic notion that all other creatures exist for the sake of their usefulness to humanity provoked. Many creatures seemed of no obvious use to humanity at all, and ingenious explanations of their usefulness had to be found.<sup>45</sup> Rabbi Nehorai admits that some tiny creatures are useless (presumably to human beings), but gives them a kind of use in reminding God to preserve human beings, who, by contrast, are useful (presumably to God). The only point at which Jesus refers to the value of creatures by the standard of their usefulness to human beings is when he cites the price of sparrows in the market (Matt. 10.29; Luke 12.6), but he does so in order to contrast this human estimate of the value of sparrows with their importance to God. Thus, if Jesus' sayings do imply a kind of hierarchical superiority of humans to animals, it is not the kind of hierarchy implied in these two rabbinic sayings, in which animals exist solely to serve humanity and humans to serve God. It is a hierarchy within the community of creation, in which humans and animals alike exist for God's glory, and in which there is a mutuality in fellow-creatureliness, such that, if some animals do serve humans, humans also have responsibilities of care towards those animals (Matt. 12.11; Luke 13.15, 14.5).

The second observation is very important. It is that Jesus never uses the superiority of humans to animals in order to make a negative point about

animals. He does not argue, as some later Christian theologians influenced by Greek philosophy did,<sup>46</sup> that because animals are inferior to humans, humans have no ethical responsibilities towards animals. He does not argue that because animals are inferior to humans, God does not take as much trouble to provide for animals as in the case of humans. He does not argue that because animals are inferior to humans, God's providence does not extend to individual animals, but only to species.<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, in every case, his argument is that because such-and-such is true in the case of animals, it must also be true in the case of humans. The arguments actually depend more on the idea that humans and animals are all creatures of God than they do on the idea of a hierarchical difference between them.

Perhaps this is the appropriate point at which to mention the incident of the Gerasene (or Gadarene) swine (Matt. 8.28–34; Mark 5.1–20; Luke 8.26–30), since, at least since Augustine, this has often been understood to demonstrate that Jesus set little value on animal life. Augustine argues, against the Manicheans, that it is not wrong to slaughter animals, since Jesus himself did so when he sent the demons into the herd of pigs. But Augustine shows the presuppositions on which his reading of the story depends, when he says that Jesus did this 'on the ground that there is no community of rights between us and brutes'.<sup>48</sup> This is the Stoic doctrine that, because humans are rational and animals irrational, there can be no question of justice or injustice in human relationships with animals.<sup>49</sup> Animals have no rights which can affect human treatment of them. This Stoic principle was to have a long history in Christian thought,<sup>50</sup> but it would not have influenced Jesus.

We should observe that in the Markan and Lukan versions of the story Jesus permits the demons to enter the pigs, in response to their begging him to let them (Mark 5.12–13; Luke 8.32), and although Matthew makes the permission into a command of Jesus, it is still a command to do what they have begged to be allowed to do (Matt. 8.31–32). The story can only be properly understood in terms of the ideas of the demonic prevalent in Jesus' time. The demons fear being without a living being to inhabit, and would certainly not have remained without a habitation for long. According to contemporary Jewish ideas on the subject, if they could not readily find an alternative home, they would be liable to return to the one they had left (Matt. 12.43–45; Mark 9.25). Moreover, demons were thought to be associated with particular locations, and would naturally see the nearby pigs as a suitable refuge.<sup>51</sup> Their destruction of the pigs manifests the inherent tendency of the demonic to destroy whatever it possesses (cf. Mark 5.5, 9.22). Finally, although only Matthew's version attributes to the demons



when they first encounter Jesus the alarmed question, 'Have you come here to torment us before the time?' (Matt. 8.29; cf. Mark 1.24), the thought underlying this question is certainly implicit in all three versions. It is that the eschatological 'time' – the day of judgment – when God will abolish all evil and destroy the demons has not yet come. Jesus' ministry of victory over evil anticipates that time; he can deliver people from the power of the demonic; God's destruction of the evil forces that oppress people has decisively begun (cf. Matt. 12.28); but nevertheless Jesus does not yet abolish the demons or send them back to the abyss (Luke 8.31). Until the end of history evil can be deflected and diminished but not abolished (cf. Matt. 13.24–30).<sup>52</sup>

Thus Jesus, in this story, permits a lesser evil. There is no reason at all to suppose that he sets no value on the life of the pigs or values it only for the sake of human beings. But the destruction of the pigs is preferable to the destruction of a human personality. The principle that human beings are of more value than other animals here operates to the detriment of the latter, in a case, unique within the Gospels, where a choice has to be made.