



Prologue
Scriptures for all Species

THIS IS A DIFFERENT KIND OF BIBLE, BUILT according to the same principles that Noah may have used in constructing the ark. Unlike that antique life raft, this book is not made of gopherwood. But my intent is, like his, to include every species. For sacred scriptures are like a boat—a vessel designed to carry a culture’s accumulated wisdom across the sea of time, ferrying knowledge to coming generations of how we should live. And the knowledge we need most at this point in history is how to live in tune with the natural world, in harmony with the other creatures whose well-being is vital to our own survival.

The Bible is a very old document, which makes it extremely pertinent to those interested in preserving the planet. For over three thousand years, the myths and maxims within its pages have helped the Jews maintain a continuous cultural identity, despite

wars, pogroms, and persecution. And for fully two millennia, Christian civilization has been based on the unbroken transmission of holy writ. Admittedly, these are not the oldest spiritual traditions in the world. Aborigines in Australia can decipher the petroglyphs of their ancestors dating back forty thousand years. But any spiritual heritage that has managed to guide people and enabled them to endure over the course of many lifetimes deserves a large measure of respect. So many of our current problems stem from short range thinking. It would be foolhardy to simply discard teachings that have proven their viability over the long haul.

Yet part of what keeps the tradition alive is the ability to change and grow. Indeed, the Bible is not a single text, but a collection of writings that were compiled over a span of centuries, in dialogue with each other and with us. Interpretation is ongoing. Feminists have combed the scriptures to correct for bias against women. Liberation theologians have discovered the revolutionary message of the Exodus and learned to read the provocative parables of Jesus from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed. Such efforts can be applauded. But up until now, only a few have reviewed our sacred teachings to see what they say—or what might be criticized—from the animals' perspective.

That the Bible reflects the customs of a patriarchal culture is now well accepted, but that our religious traditions are anthropocentric—human-centered, as well as male-dominated—is not so widely recognized. But consider: although ours is only one of millions of species on the planet, few of the stories from either the Hebrew or Christian scriptures involve animals at all.

The relation between God and *Homo sapiens* is foremost, while other creatures are background figures, relegated to the periphery of the action. Think for a moment of the book of Job. We are told at the outset of the tale that the protagonist was a wealthy man:

There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.
(Job 1:2–3)

All of the supporting cast are killed rather unceremoniously in the very first chapter. The oxen and donkeys are carried away by marauders, the sheep and servants get burned up by celestial fire, the camels fall victim to Chaldeans, and the sons and daughters are all crushed when the house where they are feasting collapses under a desert storm. In the final chapter, however, Job's fortunes are reversed so that he has "twice as much as he had before," including fourteen thousand sheep and new sons and daughters. Justice, the reader is to presume, has been restored. But children and servants are only slightly more important than livestock in the context of this fable: fungible goods that function as mere possessions of the main character, who happens to be male.

Over time, individuals previously considered property—including women, minors, and those in bondage—came to be looked upon as persons, with legitimate rights and interests of their own. The Bible played a central if sometimes contentious role in that process—used to condemn slavery and to give it

sanction, quoted with comparable fervor by advocates of equality and proponents of privilege. But for animals, the struggle to be treated with dignity has only just begun. Whether the scriptures can assist in that effort, or will merely serve to keep other creatures invisible and on the margins of our moral concern, remains to be seen.

So many centuries of doctrine and so many follies and fallacies have been rationalized from the reading (or misreading) of the Bible—the subjugation of women, our sense of shame at our own bodies, the exploitation of the Earth. If only we could start afresh, with a narrative that could offer a New Beginning. In this book, I want to revisit a few of the more familiar stories from the Bible—Noah and the ark, Abraham and Isaac, Jonah, Job and others—to see if a more balanced and “sustainable” theology can be found, one where all creation is honored.

Hints of a different attitude toward animals can be found throughout the scriptures. The prophet Elijah is fed by ravens when he retreats to the wilderness. Balaam is saved when the donkey he is riding spies a sword-wielding angel astride their path; as the animal veers from danger, Balaam strikes the creature, who then speaks out in protest, finally awakening Balaam to the apparition that is before his eyes. Daniel is unscathed in the lion’s den. Did the authors of such tales know that ravens actually do share their food in the wild? Were they aware that, whether or not they can actually see angels, animals can sometimes sense oncoming danger—from earthquakes to *grand mal* seizures—that people just can’t detect? Would the author of Daniel have been surprised to learn of cases where people really have been rescued by the king of beasts?

In *My Soul Amongst Lions*, Gareth Patterson tells how he adopted three of the last “Born Free” lions: “Initially, I was their protector. Then came the day when they saved my life,” fending off an attacking leopard. Other creatures feed us, teach us about unseen realities, and can inspire us with their loyalty and the fierceness of their love.

A new appreciation of animals is desperately needed at this moment. God’s injunction in Genesis to “fill the earth and subdue it” seems to be the one divine commandment the human race has truly taken to heart. According to a year 2000 report by the Worldwatch Institute, eleven percent of all 8,615 known species of birds living on earth and thirty-four percent of all fish are now endangered. Twenty-five percent of all mammals are at risk. Will future generations ask why people permitted such a decimation of God’s creation? The world has changed tremendously with the growth of population and technology and the problems we face in the new millennium are unprecedented. Meanwhile, the wisdom traditions and holy books we have inherited from the past have not evolved as quickly. Surely the myths and legends that have guided our culture and brought us to the present crisis could use a new twist . . . a change of plot . . . an environmentally friendly edition. The challenge is to reclaim what is healthy and revise what has become outdated and dysfunctional in our own spiritual inheritance.

What would our new Bible look like? What lessons would it impart? Would the snake still be the one who introduced evil to the world, or would animals become purveyors of grace instead of sin? Would a whale still swallow Jonah, or would these singers of the sea become agents of hope and redemption instead? In the

congregation of which I am currently the minister, our children are invited as part of their “Bible Stories” curriculum to learn some of the more familiar tales from scripture. In their introduction to Genesis, fourth-graders are asked, “If you were God, what might you do differently when creating humankind?” My daughter’s response was that she would give people tails and a good coat of fur, very sensibly observing that the appendages would be good for balance and staying warm. Really, who could argue? So much of our vaunted superiority is based on prejudice, inherited and passed along for hundreds of years until it has acquired the aura of revelation.

A new creation story should acknowledge that our species is not set apart from nature. Our humanity is inextricably intertwined with the existence of other creatures, and it’s not so much eating of the fruit as imagining that we are separate from the Tree of Life that gets us into trouble. Like Adam, whose Hebrew name is derived from the root *adamah*, meaning “the dust of the ground,” we need to understand that we are born of the earth and related to all earth’s children not as masters but as siblings. Humility comes from *humus*: simple as the soil.

This book is called *The Bible According to Noah* because I want it to have room for the whole menagerie of creation. Mine is a biocentric Bible rather than a human-centered one. People are a part of the narrative, but other creatures are also important characters with major roles to play. And while I would not want to rewrite the entire Hebrew or Christian scriptures (there is so much good within those pages!) there are significant passages I’d like to change, beginning with the very beginning, as in this Jewish midrash:

And God saw everything that He had made, and found it very good. And He said, This is a beautiful world that I have given you. Take good care of it. Do not ruin it. It is said: Before the world was created, the Holy One kept creating worlds and destroying them. Finally He created this one, and was satisfied. He said to Adam: This is the last world I shall make. I place it in your hands. Hold it in trust.

Those who treat the Bible as an inerrant document whose every word is sacrosanct may be scandalized by the idea that these old stories could be given a new rendition. But that is the nature of midrash; to adapt familiar story lines to changed circumstances or to dramatize new principles is a time-honored approach to scripture in itself.

Each chapter of *The Bible According to Noah* opens with a well known story from the Jewish and Christian canon and concludes with a revised version of that same tale—one that embraces the unity and diversity of life. My hope is that, when rightly understood and freshly interpreted, the Bible can awaken us to a new sense of appreciation for the gift (and the responsibility) that has been placed into our care.

