

Animal Idolatry

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God says in Deuteronomy 8:11-14, 17, 19:

Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; . . . then you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth." . . . Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the LORD your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish.

God speaks in very plain, yet powerful language, telling us that if we "return to Egypt," we will perish. Just in case we think that God is speaking *only* to physical Israel, Revelation 11:8 indicates that Egypt and Sodom are ciphers for or types of evil. Christians must come out of Egypt spiritually, just as ancient Israel did physically.

When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, they were supposed to leave behind the many Egyptian gods, and we see from biblical history that this proved hard for them to do. For instance, the Golden Calf Aaron made for them at Mount Sinai copied Egyptian bull worship (Exodus 32). Obviously, Israel adopted quite a few of Egypt's gods during their long captivity.

When God sent the ten plagues on Egypt, He deliberately undermined and destroyed these deities in the eyes of all. Egyptians worshiped all aspects of nature: the sun, moon and stars; the Nile River; cats, dogs, cows, crocodiles—you name it, they revered it! Few people have ever been more superstitious. They even honored as gods the onions and leeks from their gardens!

Because the children of Jacob lost sight of the one true God, they picked up the beliefs of their taskmasters. We must be on guard against the same thing happening to us. Idols can come in various disguises, but we can learn from history and be prepared.

Plagues on Egypt

As mentioned before, the Egyptians held the Nile River to be sacred, as they did with many of its fish and the crocodiles that lined its banks. God punctured this belief when He turned the river waters to blood, making it unfit to drink or use (Exodus 7:14-15). Millions of fish died and stank, as did probably thousands of crocodiles.

The ancient Egyptians also had a god name Ptah, represented by a man's body with the head of a frog. Of course, for the second plague God sent an infestation of millions of frogs (Exodus 8:1-14). For the Egyptians, this was too much of a good thing! Moses writes that they got into the houses, into the beds and ovens and kneading bowls (verse 3). When God lifted the plague, these millions of frogs died and stank the country up for days (verse 14).

The third plague, striking Egypt unannounced, hit the Egyptians in their religious ritual: They were a scrupulously clean people, believing that dirt and vermin made them impure and defiled. They bathed and shaved their bodies regularly to maintain their purity and superiority, but infected with lice (Exodus 8:16-19), they could not worship in *any* temple. In addition, this plague struck the beasts also (verse 17), many of which were sacred animals kept in their sanctuaries. So, not only were the Egyptians defiled, but their gods and temples were defiled also.

Pharaoh's magicians could not duplicate this third plague in even a small way, so they admitted that Israel's God was greater than any of theirs (verse 19). God showed these pagan people that *He* controlled the creation and could do with it as He wished. The plagues on Egypt continued in this manner in sets of three, in which Moses and Aaron announced the first two and the third would descend unannounced.

Many do not realize the length of time over which these plagues occurred. Evidently, Moses and Aaron first went to see Pharaoh in late April or early May. The Nile turned to blood in June. The plague of frogs did not arrive until that September, and from that point on, the subsequent plagues came more or less monthly, culminating in the plague of the firstborn on the Passover. They lasted just about a year!

Could there be a prophetic parallel here? Will we soon face a similar kind of disruption to our lives? Might something significant and disastrous happen to strike down our gods, first deliberately and then in earnest? Might the plagues of the end time follow this pattern? It is something to consider.

Animal Rights?

One facet of ancient Egypt, a primary type of this world and its sinful ways, has a modern counterpart. We could consider them the forerunners of today's animal rights activists, since they honored nature to the point of making gods of all parts of it, especially the animals. Some in America and other Western nations are doing virtually the same.

Idolatry is far more than bowing down to a statue or practicing occult rites in a ring of standing stones. Human beings can make idols of anything, if they place it before God in their priorities and reverence (Exodus 20:3). When they begin sacrificing their time, money and energy to their passion, whatever it is—to the exclusion of God—people cross the line into idolatry.

Daily, it seems, the media bombard us with stories on the plight of animals and the cruelty of mankind to nature. For example, a dam that would provide water, electricity, recreation and jobs to thousands cannot be built because it would disturb the habitat of a snail almost no one knows even exists! Landowners cannot build homes on land inhabited by a certain species of mice. Homeowners cannot fill in low-lying, mosquito-breeding, swampy areas because they are "wetlands."

It seems that the inmates are running the asylum! During the filming of the movie *Joe's Apartment*—in which thousands of singing, dancing and talking cockroaches inhabit a low-rent room—the American Humane Society monitored the set to make sure none of the 5,000 live roaches were hurt. Even roaches have rights!

Do animals have rights? Actually, according to God, they do! Deuteronomy 25:4 says not to "muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." Proverbs 12:10 tells us "a righteous man regards the life of his animal." Exodus 20:10 gives cattle the Sabbath day off. These rights, however, never supercede the authority and responsibilities given to humanity.

As Christians, then, we are to act responsibly toward animals; our pets and farm animals should be cared and provided for. Acts of cruelty toward them are certainly out. However, animals are not human substitutes! Many of us have dogs or cats for pets. We love them, and they become like a part of the family. But they are *not* family.

We would be hard pressed to convince some people of this. While charitable gift giving actually decreases at Christmas time each year, 28.5 million Americans bought their dogs Christmas presents last year! June 25, 1999, is the first "Take Your Dog to Work Day." A writer for *Time* joked that June 26 will be "Why Does This Office Smell Bad? Day"!

Animals are not on the same plane with humans. They are not our equals, no matter how much some assert they are. God has not given animals the ability to think or to reason. They will not be part of His Family in the Kingdom. They are part of God's creation man has been given responsibility and dominion over (Genesis 1:26, 28). Psalm 8:6-8 repeats this principle:

You have made him [man] to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen—even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas.

This dominion does not give mankind the right to destroy God's creation. Man is to act responsibly, but unfortunately, this does not happen very often in this world. Animals are tortured, rivers and seas are fouled, whole areas are devastated of plant and animal life to fill the coffers of big business.

In Genesis 2:15, God tells Adam and Eve to "tend and keep" the Garden of Eden. They were to take what God had made and work to maintain it and help it to produce. They could harvest its bounty and eat of its fruit. Certainly, God allowed certain trees to be cut for their wood, and certain animals could be killed for their meat. In no way, however, was any part of His creation to be equated with man or to be worshiped.

Worshipping Nature

Deuteronomy 12 is especially appropriate in this regard. When Israel went into the Promised Land, they were to destroy completely its inhabitants' idols. These idols were often set up outdoors in groves. Were the Canaanites worshipping nature? Yes, their gods were often nature gods. Baal, for one, was the god of storm and thunder, while His consort Ashtoreth was the goddess of fertility.

Verse 15 allows the Israelites to eat meat, a permission also mentioned in verses 20-22. In the 1960s, Americans looked askance at India, where millions of people were starving while sleek cattle wandered the streets, sacred and untouched. Is Western culture much different now? The late Linda McCartney received positive media attention for her outspoken vegetarianism. Many Eastern religions, gaining a foothold here, also advocate meatless diets. Notice God's instruction in verses 28 and 30:

Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God. . . . [T]ake heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them [the practices of other nations] . . . that you inquire after their gods, saying "How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise."

As verse 31 mentions, these nations went so far as to sacrifice their children. The ancient Egyptians sacrificed a child to the Nile to ensure fertility to their fields. Is that so far from our "modern" practice of abortion, now nearing 40 million babies since 1973, by which people "sacrifice" the unborn so they can worship the gods of money, career, sex and the like?

Recently, my wife Carol heard an interesting exchange on a radio call-in show. A woman wanted to have her cat fixed, but it was already pregnant. If she had the procedure done, the cat would lose her kittens. The lady was being chastised by her coworkers, several of whom had had abortions themselves! What was being said is that the life of a kitten is worth more than that of a child, a future member of the God Family!

Though we have been given so much, we have failed to "dress and keep" the blessings we once acknowledge were God-given. In fact, now we seem to have a national guilt-complex for having received such bounty. The proper, godly reaction is gratitude, not guilt, but since we are a disobedient people and far from God, we assuage our guilt with stupidity!

A few months ago, an otter in a nature park near Miami, Florida bit a 17-month-old girl on the finger. The park had four otters, and which was the guilty party was unknown. These otters' lives were spared when the child's parents opted to have the little girl undergo rabies shots instead of killing and testing the animals. Though otters are perpetually cute, the pain and suffering this child endured during the ordeal with the shots is inexcusable.

Jay Montfort of Fishkill, New York, wanted to keep rattlesnakes off his property, a totally reasonable desire. So he began building a four-foot, tightly meshed wire fence as a first line of defense. However, his enemy, the Timber rattlesnake, is a threatened species in New York, and the state claims the fence violates the federal Endangered Species Act. State lawyers argued that the fence should be torn down before the snakes stir out of hibernation because it crosses their migration path. To avoid a contempt hearing, Montfort tore down his fence on April 13.

Though these true examples may seem extreme, they are symptomatic of a larger problem, that of ascribing human emotions and characteristics to animals. This, in effect, raises them to the human plane. And when the courts and lawmakers give rights to animals ahead of humans, a kind of worship has begun.

A Matter of Balance

So much of a Christian's life seems to come down to balance. We must be able to keep things in their proper perspective. Though God gives certain "rights" to animals, though He charges us with certain responsibilities for their care, He did not give them human abilities, human rights or human obligations. He did not make them in His image, so there is nothing wrong with saying that a human life is worth infinitely more than an animal's.

We do not need to feel guilty about using the land God has given *us* to tend and keep. He has not given it to the snails, mice, otters and snakes, but to us, men and women who are learning the ways to govern far more than land and animals in God's Kingdom!

God warns ancient Israel—and us in antitype, "Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them"(Deuteronomy 11:16). If we, as a people, were to turn from God like this, His "anger [would] be aroused against [us]," and we would have no rain, the produce of our fields would diminish and He would take the good land from us (verse 17).

Could this nation's elevation of animals to near godlike status be the fulfilling of this prophecy? It is something we should consider.