



Natural partners

Theories about how human beings formed settled communities in the dim and distant past include the study of the domestication of animals and the cultivation of plants. But one aspect of this process is not so much mentioned: animals and plants have also changed us. Domestication and cultivation have made us who we are. The process has changed our eating habits, altered the way we organise our community life, made it possible for us to form friendships and partnerships with animals and to live and work alongside them. This means that working with animals, breeding them, being involved in farming, agriculture, fishing or even just tending a garden or keeping pets, shapes and changes who we are as people.

The bible actually tells us a lot about this process. The Old Testament tells us about the gradual settlement of nomadic communities moving about the land with flocks of grazing animals. Flocks require shepherds and cattle herders; wheat fields require sowers, reapers, threshers and gleaners. Fish are taken by fishermen, vines are grown and cultivated. Travel is made possible by

camels and donkeys. These animals and plants exist amicably with human beings, but the world of the bible is also full of wild untamed nature: bears, wolves, lions, weeds, thistles, snakes, vultures. In such a dangerous world, the partnership between human beings and domesticated animals and plants becomes ever more important and mutually supportive. Animals cannot help us bear our burdens or provide our food if we do not invest time and effort caring for them, feeding and protecting them.

This is underlined by the place of animals and plants within the story of God revealed to us in the bible. Fighting off bears and wolves as a shepherd surely taught David how to use stones. Mary cannot get to Bethlehem or escape Herod's soldiers without a donkey, nor can Jesus make his prophetic point in Jerusalem without one. Jesus is indeed born in the midst of animals; his cradle is a manger. Balaam cannot know he stands in the presence of an angel without his animal to put him right, and Jesus' parables of shepherds and sowers make no sense except in terms of a profound partner relationship between people and animals and plants. Scriptural writers also show God himself asking nature to work in partnership with the

divine will. God uses a burning bush to attract Moses' attention. A fish swallows the drowning Jonah. Another appears with a coin in its mouth when Jesus says it will. Lions do not devour Daniel and a fig tree withers at Jesus' command.

All this throws a new light on familiar stories such as Eden and Noah in Genesis. The creation of animals and plants by God is not to serve or be dominated by human beings but to create a context which will enable human beings after the fall to survive, learn, and eventually prosper. Not for nothing are Cain and Abel symbolically a plant cultivator and a keeper of sheep. Similarly, the story of the Flood is not necessarily just a story of a man saving animals, but of God making it clear to this family that they cannot survive, cannot overcome calamity and disaster and know more of God's purposes, unless they have animals with them afterwards. Without the dove, Noah cannot know what is going on outside. A new earth without the partnership of animals and plants is no existence at all. ■

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