
‘AND WHEN HE SAW HIM, HE HAD COMPASSION’:
FOLLOWING JESUS AND RELATIONSHIP
TO NON-HUMAN CREATURES

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the concept of following Jesus can be ethically applied in the sphere of the treatment of non-human creatures. It shows three possibilities of grasping the theme: accommodating Jesus to a preconceived idea, using the sayings and actions of Jesus that involve animals, and adhering to a characteristic feature of his approach. The article points out the problematic character of the first two options and highlights the third – it proposes that the relationship to non-human creatures should be based on the criterion of compassion accompanied by care for the suffering.

Keywords

Following Jesus; Non-human creatures; Environmental ethics; Compassion; Parable of the good Samaritan

DOI: 10.14712/25363598.2023.13

Following Jesus is a theological topic that has been the subject of much reflection as well as a powerful inspiration for committed action throughout the history of Christianity. Both historical and biblical studies and contributions oriented theologically or ethically have been devoted to the question of following. The aim of this article is to show how this concept can be applied to a specific area of activity, namely the relationship of humans to non-human creatures. I will first introduce the theoretical foundations of the idea of following Jesus, which will form the starting point of this paper, and then discuss in more detail three possible ways of applying it.

The first way is a more or less strained attempt to fit Jesus into the framework of one's own ethical ideas. The second approach is to rely on the sayings and actions of Jesus that relate to animals.¹ I find both of these approaches problematic, though each for different reasons. While the first way exemplifies the triumph of a preferred thesis over probable reality, we run into many hermeneutical and other difficulties with the second. The contentiousness of these methods is the springboard for the proposal that the core of the appropriate treatment of non-human creatures, seen through the prism of following Jesus, should be a creative, imaginative application of a distinctive feature of his teaching and actions.

1. Theoretical Background

I base my reflections regarding the fundamental importance of following Jesus on biblical and theological-ethical foundations. In the area of biblical scholarship, I draw on the work of New Testament scholar Richard A. Burridge, who points out that the Gospels are close in genre to the ancient *bioi*. In depicting individual characters, the authors of these medium-length narratives provide basic biographical information (birth or arrival on the public scene and death) and fill out this framework by recounting deeds, words and anecdotes they find important. Death usually has a special significance in their works because they consider it to be the culmination, the sealing of a life, which reveals the true character of a particular person.²

The apparent analogy between the approach of the gospel writers and the biographers, the fruit of which is the formal similarity of their works, leads Burridge to the conclusion that the canonical Gospels should be interpreted in terms of the genre of *bioi*. That is to say, the Gospels cannot be considered merely as a collection of Jesus' teachings, but attention must be paid to the totality of Jesus' life, including his actions. It is precisely because the canonical Gospels do not focus

¹ This method is not, at least as far as I know, used in such a manner as to create a moral system on the basis of the biblical material. Theological works make use of particular words or actions of Jesus of this sort rather than a complete set of them. It should also be noted that this approach is an alternative to the former only up to a point, because here too we can encounter interpretations in which a strong preunderstanding is evident.

² See Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 24.

only on Jesus’ teachings that they differ from writings which are pre-occupied, as in the Gospel of Thomas, with Jesus’ sayings rather than actions.

The second important implication of this perspective is that the gospel writers present Jesus to their readers as an exemplary figure. Burridge does not thereby limit the purpose of the Gospels to a moral-pedagogical ‘lesson’. The authors of the ancient *bioi* were attempting to show the character of the persons in question and to preserve their memory. Biographical accounts served, among other things, polemical and apologetic purposes (criticism or defense of the individuals whose lives they depicted). Central to the idea of following Jesus, however, is the fact that many *bioi* were also intended to serve the moral education and transformation of the reader by placing a particular person-role model before his or her eyes:

[...] many Lives were written explicitly to give an example to others to emulate: thus Xenophon composed his Agesilaus to provide a paradigm (παράδειγμα) for others to follow to become better people (ἀνδραγαθίαν ἀσκεῖν, 10.2). Equally, Plutarch aims to provide examples so that by imitating (μίμησις) the virtues and avoiding the vices described, the reader can improve his own moral character (*Pericles* 1; *Aemilius Paullus* 1).⁵

In addition to this approach to the Gospels, which interprets them in light of the ancient biographies, the theoretical background of my paper is formed by theological positions that are Christocentric. Specifically, I am referring to those conceptions that regard the life of Jesus as ethically normative. This, of course, does not mean, at least for me, the exclusion of other sources of moral knowledge. But these sources are always secondary in the sense that they are measured against the criterion of the basic features of Jesus’ teaching and actions.

Theologians who have emphasised the ethical normativity of Jesus include John Howard Yoder, William C. Spohn, and David P. Gushee with Glen H. Stassen. The first of the theologians listed above, Yoder, recognises that the idea of such normativity is far from self-evident and discusses the reasons raised against it. In his view, if the normativity of Jesus is rejected,

⁵ Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 73.

there must be some kind of bridge or transition into another realm or into another mode of thought when we begin to think about ethics. [...] A certain very moderate amount of freight can be carried across this bridge: perhaps a concept of absolute love or humility or faith or freedom. But the substance of ethics must be reconstructed on our side of the bridge.⁴

It goes without saying that Yoder is one of those who do not want to approach ethics from ‘our side of the bridge’. On the contrary, he regards Jesus as the cornerstone and the point from which to start.

Like Yoder, William C. Spohn points out that the centrality of Jesus is by no means a shared position in theological ethics. For example, Roman Catholic theology, in his view, has long relied on the idea of natural law. He himself does not want to go down that path, nor does he want to go down the way of some evangelicals and fundamentalists who look to the New Testament for clear moral instruction based on the specific words of Jesus. Spohn’s intention is to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of these positions, and he comes up with a proposal ‘in which Jesus plays a normative role as the concrete universal of Christian ethics. Through faithful imagination his story becomes paradigmatic for moral perception, disposition, and identity’.⁵

David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen similarly insist that Jesus is central to moral reasoning. Whereas in the first edition of their *Kingdom Ethics* they attributed crucial importance to Scripture, in the second edition they revise this approach and argue that ‘Jesus Christ himself is the sun around which other sources of authority orbit’.⁶

I do not mean to suggest that Yoder, Spohn, Gushee and Stassen all have exactly the same views on ethics and moral issues. But I share their underlying premise, which is the ethically normative status of Jesus. In my view, this key position of Jesus follows from Christology. Although Jesus cannot be reduced to a mere moral exemplar, he is the definition of true, authentic humanity.⁷ As Petr Gallus states, ‘Jesus fulfilled the determination, purpose, and goal of humanity: to be the

⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids – Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 8.

⁵ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York – London: Continuum, 2007), 2.

⁶ David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 54.

⁷ Cf. Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 198–199.

place of God’s presence for the others. His humanity became the place of God’s presence *kat’ exochen*. And he did it in an exemplary way, being true human and living in common conditions of our world.⁸

Such a conception implies that Jesus is the fundamental measure or rule of ethics. While Christian ethical reasoning can and should gratefully draw from many sources, it already has its cornerstone. Values such as caring for the marginalised or loving one’s enemies are not guaranteed to be arrived at by mere rationality or experience, but they can be grounded in the way of Jesus Christ.⁹ Christian ethics thus has a specificity that makes it a guide and inspiration for a life that has alternative features.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, the idea of Jesus’ ethical normativity involves a number of highly complicated hermeneutical issues, but these are beyond the scope of this article. What I want to focus on is a particular question: if we are to use the idea of this normativity to reflect on our relationship to non-human creatures, what approach should we take?

2. Vegetarian Jesus?

Some writers, for whom Jesus plays a central role and who at the same time advocate a kind relationship to animals, take the route of subordinating Jesus to the desired point. This is evident, for example, in the reflections of the Czech Christian humanist and pacifist Přemysl Pitter (1895–1976). Pitter is best known for his social action. In the 1930s, he organised the building of the Milíč House in Prague, named after the medieval reform preacher Jan Milíč from Kroměříž. Pitter worked there as an educator of children, whose difficult life situation affected him deeply. During World War II, he hid Jewish children, and after the war ended, he focused on helping German children, even

⁸ Petr Gallus, *The Perspective of Resurrection: A Trinitarian Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 247.

⁹ Cf. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (2nd ed., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 46–50.

¹⁰ The emphasis on the specificity of Christian ethics and the alternative life of Christian communities can be found, among others, in Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Way of Jesus Christ* and *The Ethics of Hope*. Moltmann expressed his view succinctly: ‘Christian ethics should first and foremost put its stamp on a form of living which accords with Jesus’ way of life and his teaching. That is where its identity lies. The question about general relevance then follows, but it cannot take first place.’ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Ethics of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 26. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 116–136.

though, during this tense time, caring for them aroused strong hostility in a part of Czech society. Later, in the 1950s, he worked in the very tough conditions of Valka refugee camp in Germany.

Less known is the fact that Pitter was a pioneer of animal protection and vegetarianism in Czechoslovakia, which he tried to defend from religious positions. To a certain extent, he could draw on his theological education, but the expertise he had acquired was only fragmentary. Because he wanted to devote himself to practical activities, he dropped out of his studies at what was then known as the Hus Czechoslovak Protestant Theological Faculty after two semesters. He took away from the faculty some thought stimuli (he was particularly interested in lectures on the New Testament), but also a distrust of too much theorising. As his biographer Pavel Kosatík writes,

whenever Pitter commented on the work of such abstract theologians as the Swiss pastor Karl Barth between the wars (with many followers also in the Czech lands), he spoke of them as people who rather did the faith a disservice: they made it an intellectual problem about which new and thicker books could be written all the time, but they took away its ability to help people in difficult life situations.¹¹

In 1928, Pitter acquainted his readers with his impressions of the visit to the British Animal Defence and Anti-Vivisection Society and the conference it hosted,¹² as well as with his arguments for animal protection and vegetarianism.¹⁵ In his appeal, he relied mainly on biblical

¹¹ Pavel Kosatík, *Sám proti zlu: život Přemysla Pittera (1895–1976)* [*Alone Against Evil: The Life of Přemysl Pitter (1895–1976)*] (Praha – Litomyšl: Paseka, 2009), 55.

¹² Přemysl Pitter, *Ve jménu zvířete: přátelům zvířat své londýnské dojmy líčí Přemysl Pitter* [*In the Name of the Animal: Přemysl Pitter Describes to Friends of Animals his Impressions from London*] (Praha: Hnutí pro křesťanský komunismus v Československu, 1928). In this brief work, Pitter made no secret of his criticism. What he found particularly repulsive was the dedication of the modern, mechanised abattoir at Letchworth, built by this organisation: ‘I wondered how tender-hearted ladies suddenly looked on calmly and with interest at these murders, and revelled in how nicely, smoothly, and supposedly painlessly the slaughter was going on. Nice theatre where you can’t see backstage. With what appetite will the pork roast be eaten now, when we know that the killing of the animal was done in a modern, humane way under the protection of the society for the “protection” of animals ... [...] After the tour there was a solemn dedication ceremony, during which there was to be much talk again. I then thought it better to disappear, as I would have been embarrassed to see a priest dedicating a slaughterhouse.’ Pitter, *Ve jménu zvířete*, 13–14.

¹⁵ Přemysl Pitter, ‘Náš poměr k přírodě s hlediska náboženského a sociálního’, ‘Ježíš a vegetarismus,’ in Ctibor Bezděk and Přemysl Pitter, *Vegetarism – pro a proti; Náš*

texts, such as the parable of the good Samaritan. Since in this story the neighbour is the one who shows mercy, Pitter concludes that animals must also be considered neighbours, as humans have depended on their help since the dawn of history.¹⁴ What is more significant in terms of the theme of this article, however, are the author’s reflections on Jesus. Pitter sees Jesus as the saviour and liberator of all creation¹⁵ and is convinced that he himself did not eat meat. In his view, Jesus grew up amongst the Essene community, which, he believes, was vegetarian and determined Jesus’ actions in this way. Biblical passages that might conflict with the notion of a vegetarian Jesus are not mentioned by Pitter or are interpreted symbolically.¹⁶ He assumes that

we find in all the actions of Jesus something much deeper than we can understand with our fleshly reason. Hence the eating of the lamb with the disciples, or the distribution of the fish and loaves to the multitudes, has an allegorical, mystical meaning to which the gospel indirectly refers.¹⁷

Pitter’s lens in interpreting the New Testament is also evident in his commentary on Jesus’ statement that what defiles a person is what comes out of the mouth, and thus ultimately out of his or her heart – ‘evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander’ – not what goes into the mouth (Matt 15:18–19).¹⁸ He concludes that the eating of meat would not in itself be objectionable; the problem lies in what precedes the act – namely, the slaughter of the animal, i.e., as he suggests, the very murder condemned by Jesus.¹⁹

Pitter does not refer to any authors on whom he bases his opinions. It is likely, however, that in some of his claims – for example, about the

poměr k přírodě s hlediska náboženského a sociálního; Ježíš a vegetarismus [Vegetarianism – Pros and Cons; Our Relationship to Nature in Religious and Social Terms; Jesus and Vegetarianism] (Praha: Hnutí pro křesťanský komunismus v Československu, 1928).

¹⁴ See Pitter, ‘Náš poměr k přírodě s hlediska náboženského a sociálního,’ 44–45.

¹⁵ See Pitter, ‘Náš poměr k přírodě s hlediska náboženského a sociálního,’ 49–50.

¹⁶ It goes without saying that Pitter can draw on a long church tradition in symbolic or allegorical interpretation, and in some cases, including the miraculous multiplication of the loaves, such an approach may be plausible. However, Pitter seems to gravitate toward such an interpretation precisely because it fits a vegetarian image of Jesus that is close to his heart.

¹⁷ Pitter, ‘Ježíš a vegetarismus,’ 52.

¹⁸ All biblical quotations in this article are from RSV.

¹⁹ See Pitter, ‘Ježíš a vegetarismus,’ 53

Essene origins of Jesus – he draws on other (albeit even then rather marginal and speculative) sources or creatively synthesises and elaborates them. The notion that the Essenes were vegetarians (which may have been influenced by Josephus Flavius’ comparison of the Essenes to the Pythagoreans²⁰), that Jesus was educated by the Essenes,²¹ or claims or even fictional evidence that Jesus was himself a vegetarian appeared before and after Pitter’s works. Two supposedly ancient gospels, in fact modern fictions, are proof of this. In the first of these, *The Gospel of the Holy Twelve*, the vegetarian perspective is so defining that it alters New Testament passages that conflict with it – Jesus does not multiply bread and fish, but bread and wine; at the return of the prodigal son, a calf will not be served at the feast, but bread, fruit, oil, and wine.²² Richard Alan Young believes that this work was created by Gideon Jasper Ouseley (1835–1906), a vegetarian who worked for several years as an Anglican clergyman. Edmond Bordeaux Szekely (1905–1979), the author born a few decades later, in turn, claimed to have discovered *The Essene Gospel of Peace* in the 1920s. As Young notes, ‘Szekely alleges that this ancient Gospel is authentic and that the canonical Gospels are forgeries. However, no one besides Szekely has ever seen the manuscript. This and other reasons prompt scholars to conclude that *The Essene Gospel of Peace* is a disreputable forgery.’²³

Pitter did not go as far as Ouseley or Szekely, but the views and interpretations found in his work seem to be determined by an interest in Jesus fulfilling the desired vegetarian ideal. Whether he was the conveyor, creator, or compiler of these views, his approach falls into

²⁰ Although the Pythagoreans espoused vegetarianism, Josephus makes no mention of the Essenes following the same practice. On Pythagorean practice, see, for example, Michael Rosenberger, *Wie viel Tier darf's sein?: die Frage ethisch korrekter Ernährung aus christlicher Sicht* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2016), 54–55.

²¹ See Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 38 ff., 143 ff.

²² See Richard Alan Young, *Is God a Vegetarian?: Christianity, Vegetarianism, and Animal Rights* (Chicago – La Salle: Open Court, 1999), 5. In this context, it is worth mentioning the view of the Ebionites and the *Gospel of the Ebionites*: ‘The Ebionites consistently refrained from eating meat and also attributed the same attitude to the leading figures of the Gospel. Instead of eating wild honey and locusts (ἀκρίς, Matt 3:4), John the Baptist eats only honey, “the taste of which was that of manna, as a cake (ἔγκρις) dipped in oil” (frag. 2). To their question where they are to prepare the Passover lamb the disciples receive the dismissive answer: “Do I desire with desire at this Passover to eat flesh with you?” (frag. 7).’ Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 53.

²³ Young, *Is God a Vegetarian?*, 5.

the category of subjective projections of Jesus that became the target of Albert Schweitzer’s critique.

The attempt to fit Jesus into the framework of a preconceived view of the proper relationship to non-human creatures is also found in Andrew Linzey, who, unlike the less-known Pitter, is widely considered to be one of the leading and most prominent theological defenders of animals. Linzey’s argument is more extensive and convincing in its main emphasis. Yet in one of his key works, *Animal Theology*, he puts forward a hypothesis that is quite problematic. His position differs from the basic premise of Pitter, Ouseley, and Szekely in that he considers Jesus’ vegetarianism unlikely. He bases his opinion on the gospel texts that depict Jesus eating fish. However, since he himself advocates vegetarianism, and the image of Jesus as a generous, compassionate Prince of Peace is crucial to his perspective, this fact is an obvious difficulty. In his view, the question of how to reconcile this image of Jesus with the gospel accounts can be addressed in four possible ways: (1) the canonical Gospels are wrong, (2) Jesus was not perfect in every way, (3) killing fish is not morally problematic, or at least not as serious as killing mammals, (4) in necessary cases, killing fish for food is justifiable. Linzey does not go down the road of questioning the canonical Gospels – he considers writings like *The Gospel of the Holy Twelve* to be modern fictions – nor does he attempt to cast doubt on Jesus’ moral exemplarity or belittle the moral status of fish. What he finds most convincing is the last proposition:

The fourth answer is that sometimes it can be justifiable to kill fish for food in situations of necessity. Such a situation, we may assume, was present in first-century Palestine where geographical factors alone seem to suggest a scarcity of protein. Such a view would on the whole be more consistent with the biblical perspective that we may kill but only in circumstances of real need. Hence we may have to face the possibility that Jesus did indeed participate in the killing of some life forms in order to live. Indeed we may say that part of his being a human being at a particular stage and time in history necessitated that response in order to have lived at all.²⁴

In his later essay ‘Animals and Vegetarianism in Early Chinese Christianity’, in which he discusses the Xi’an Stele (also known as the

²⁴ Andrew Linzey, *Animal Theology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 134.

‘Nestorian Stele’ or ‘Nestorian Stone’), Linzey even muses on whether Jesus might have been a vegetarian after all. He acknowledges that he is aware of serious evidence to the contrary but nevertheless considers the debate still open. He assumes that ‘it is possible, at least *thinkable*, that early Jewish-Christian groups have faithfully preserved Jesus’ example of vegetarianism and his objection to animal sacrifice, and that is the same tradition which the Ebionites represent in their Gospel, and which in turn is reflected in the Jesus Sutras.’²⁵

This and the previously quoted passage reveal that Linzey’s perspective is driven by a desire to have Jesus conform to his ethical view. He does not make any case that there was a protein shortage in Palestine, and the type of reasoning about having to kill animals only when necessary seems anachronistic given the Jewish environment in which Jesus grew up. As for the idea of a vegetarian Jesus, it is so unlikely that the notion of its *thinkability* seems to be mere speculation.²⁶ As I will point out later, the core of Linzey’s approach is much more plausible and theologically stronger than the hypotheses just mentioned. These are characterised by an effort to promote an idea that will make Jesus, in a very concrete sense, followable, or at least to show that such an idea is possible. Although Linzey is much more sober in his reflections than Pitter, the view of both authors is burdened with similar preconceptions. The way in which Linzey, Pitter – and even more so Ouseley and Szekely – address the issue I have outlined here exemplifies a path that is too ideologically loaded to be viable in terms of following Jesus.

3. Words and Deeds of Jesus

An alternative to the above approach would be to base the concept of following Jesus on his words and deeds that relate in some way to animals. It is these sayings and actions that New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham has addressed in his studies ‘Jesus and Animals

²⁵ Andrew Linzey, ‘Animals and Vegetarianism in Early Chinese Christianity,’ in Andrew Linzey, *Creatures of the Same God: Explorations in Animal Theology* (Winchester: Winchester University Press, 2007), 126.

²⁶ Cf. David G. Horrell, ‘Biblical Vegetarianism? A Critical and Constructive Assessment,’ in *Eating and Believing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vegetarianism and Theology*, ed. David Grumett and Rachel Muers (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 47–49.

I: What did He Teach?’²⁷ and ‘Jesus and Animals II: What did He Practise?’²⁸ Bauckham takes into account Jesus’ Jewish background and shows the affinity of his views with the perspectives of the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish tradition. Regarding Jesus’ teachings, he focuses on three areas in particular: Jesus’ assumption that domesticated animals can be helped even on the sabbath (Matt 12:11–12; Luke 13:15–16; Luke 14:5), the belief that God provides for non-human creatures (Matt 6:26; Luke 12:24), and the view that God is mindful of even the sparrows, which are little valued by humans (Matt 10:29–31; Luke 12:6–7).

In his analysis, he presents a number of interesting details. For example, he points out that Jesus’ view on helping domestic animals on the sabbath – a view that he apparently assumes his listeners would share – is in sharp contrast to the attitude of the Qumran community. The *Damascus Document* explicitly forbids pulling an animal out of a pit on this day, and even opposes providing assistance to an animal while it is giving birth. What is particularly significant, however, is that Bauckham notes a common feature of the sayings of Jesus discussed by him, namely, that they

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.²⁹

That Jesus attributes a higher value to human beings than to animals is, in Bauckham’s view, reflected in the account of the exorcism of the possessed man in Gerasa (Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39; Matt 8:28–34).³⁰ As he argues, this narrative should be understood on the

²⁷ Richard Bauckham, ‘Jesus and Animals I: What did he Teach?’, in *Animals on the Agenda: Questions about Animals for Theology and Ethics*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (Urbana – Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 33–48.

²⁸ Richard Bauckham, ‘Jesus and Animals II: What did he Practise?’, in *Animals on the Agenda*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto, 49–60.

²⁹ Bauckham, ‘Jesus and Animals I,’ 44.

³⁰ While the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke mention Gerasa, the Gospel of Matthew refers to Gadara. The author of the latter Gospel was probably aware that

basis of demonological ideas of that age: the demons are looking for a suitable 'abode', and if they have been without one for a long time, they might return to the place from which they were cast out, i.e. back into the possessed; they are also connected to specific locations, and therefore see the pigs as a suitable refuge. Jesus, who allows or commands the demons to enter the pigs, according to Bauckham, 'permits a lesser evil'³¹ in order to save a human person who is of greater value in his eyes.³²

In his second study, which focuses on Jesus' actions, Bauckham addresses the question of whether Jesus ate meat and offers an interpretation of a short passage from the opening of the Gospel of Mark (Mark 1:13). He convincingly concludes that the hypothesis of Jesus' vegetarianism is highly unlikely and would have to be constructed against a number of plausible assumptions and gospel texts: a vegetarian Jesus would not have participated in a sacrificial cult, as was common in Judaism; he would not have eaten the Passover lamb with his disciples, as might be deduced from the Synoptic Gospels (but not

Gerasa was a geographically problematic location in terms of the story.

³¹ Bauckham, 'Jesus and Animals I,' 48.

³² Bauckham's interpretation did not go unchallenged. David G. Horrell critically comments that the story says nothing about Jesus noticing the suffering of the pigs and gives no indication that it was a 'lesser evil' (Horrell, 'Biblical Vegetarianism?,' 48). Alternative perspectives emphasise the symbolic or political elements contained in the narrative. For example, John Dominic Crossan points out that the demon is both one and many, bears the name 'Legion,' which can be seen as an allusion to Roman military power, enters pigs – considered unclean animals in Judaism – and finally drowns in the sea, which reflects the desires of Jewish opponents to Roman rule. Crossan believes that this story is not a true historical episode in the life of Jesus, but rather a critique of Roman colonial rule, depicted as demonic possession (See John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* [San Francisco: Harper, 1995], 90. Cf. Richard Dormandy, 'The Expulsion of Legion: A Political Reading of Mark 5:1–20,' *The Expository Times* 111, no. 10 (2000): 335–337, doi: 10.1177/001452460011101004). Regardless of whether we find Bauckham's or Horrell's view more persuasive, or whether we lean with some scholars toward a symbolic interpretation, it is worth noting that the eminent ethicist Peter Singer, in his groundbreaking work *Animal Liberation*, presents a simplistic and entirely one-sided view of the relationship to animals in the New Testament and he refers to this story in his argument. In his opinion, 'The New Testament is completely lacking in any injunction against cruelty to animals, or any recommendation to consider their interests. Jesus himself is described as showing apparent indifference to the fate of nonhumans when he induced two thousand swine to hurl themselves into the sea – an act which was apparently quite unnecessary, since Jesus was well able to cast out devils without inflicting them upon any other creature.' Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), 199. Cf. Charles C. Camosy, *Peter Singer and Christian Ethics: Beyond Polarization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 107.

from the Gospel of John);⁵⁵ the feasts to which he was invited would have been meatless; and the stories of multiplying fish or eating fish after the resurrection (Luke 24:42–45) would have been created in contradiction to his real attitude toward animals.

Thus, the idea of not killing non-human creatures for food can hardly be directly inferred from Jesus’ practice. Rather, the underpinning of the idea of non-violent coexistence could be the biblical passage which recounts that Jesus ‘was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him’ (Mark 1:13).

As Bauckham and other scholars point out,⁵⁴ the coexistence of Jesus with wild animals mentioned in this verse can be understood as an evocation and anticipation of the final, messianic peace (cf. Isa 11:6; 65:25).

But can these conclusions be related to a moral practice whose guiding idea is following Jesus? Bauckham, as a New Testament scholar, seeks only to reconstruct Jesus’ views and actions in these studies, not to apply them in a modern social and cultural context.⁵⁵ It is this application, however, as well as some hermeneutical difficulties, that confront us with serious problems:

- (1) Bauckham’s analysis shows that nature and animals are not a distinct theme in Jesus’ sayings but rather serve as a means of expressing another point, such as the character of the kingdom of God or the appropriate relationship to fellow human beings.

⁵⁵ However, the question of whether the last supper was a Passover meal is disputed. According to Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz ‘Jesus probably celebrated a farewell meal with his disciples on the day before the Passover – in the awareness that his life was in danger, but also in the hope that the imminent breaking in of the kingdom of God would perhaps save it. In so doing he interpreted a simple meal (probably not a Passover meal) as the celebration of a “new covenant” with God, aimed at impressing God’s will directly on human hearts.’ Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 436.

⁵⁴ Erich Grässer, for example, does not assume that the animals in this episode are merely a part or feature of the wilderness, that they underline its or Satan’s hostile nature, or that they represent Jesus’ enemies. In his view, ‘Jesus’ sojourn with the animals in Mark 1:13 is a reference to the paradisiacal state of the end time.’ Erich Grässer, ‘KAI HN META TON ΘΗΡΙΩΝ (Mk 1,13b): Ansätze einer theologischen Tierschutzethik,’ in *Studien zum Text und zur Ethik des Neuen Testaments: Festschrift zum 80. Geburtstag von Heinrich Greeven*, ed. Wolfgang Schrage (Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), 152. Cf. Michael Rosenberger, *Der Traum vom Frieden zwischen Mensch und Tier: eine christliche Tierethik* (München: Kösel-Verlag, 2015), 124–125.

⁵⁵ Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 78.

- (2) Although some of Jesus' ideas about the proper treatment of animals can be inferred from the Synoptic Gospels, these views are conditioned by time and cultural environment. They do not answer contemporary issues such as intensive factory farming, genetic engineering, zoos, vegetarianism, or veganism.
- (3) If we focus only on Jesus' actions and sayings that somehow relate to animals or nature, we may be blind to the above questions because Jesus' words and deeds do not directly address these issues. On the contrary, we risk overlooking other gospel texts, such as some parables, which can be creatively applied in this area.
- (4) In at least some, if not all, of Jesus' actions and words of this kind, it is not clear what is the historical core and what is the literary and theological expression of a particular 'claim'. Among the episodes in which the theological dimension is particularly evident are the sojourn in the wilderness with the wild animals, the story of Gerasa, and the eating of the fish after the resurrection.

4. Essential Feature(s) of Jesus' Teaching and Actions

The approach I present here as an alternative is based on two ideas. The first is that following Jesus does not mean imitating his specific deeds and actions, but it does imply a key inspiration for moral practice. Some theologians, such as Jon Sobrino, have emphasised that following – as opposed to imitating – takes into account the ever-new historical context in which it takes place.⁵⁶ Jesus can thus be understood as a normative paradigm for imaginative following, not copying. In this vein, William C. Spohn speaks of an 'analogical imagination' whose

⁵⁶ See Peter J. M. A. van Ool, *Befreiende Praxis der Nachfolge: biblische, historische, und befreiungstheologische Impulse zur Nachfolge Jesu, des Christus* (Würzburg: Seelsorge Echter, 2000), 147–148. Of course, one must always pay attention to how the terms 'following' and 'imitation' are defined and in what context they are discussed. Many theologians understand 'imitation' in a dynamic sense. For example, when Jason B. Hood writes about the apostle Paul, he emphasises the creative, not slavish and unimaginative, nature of imitation: 'In the Bible imitation is rarely about precise copying. Consider how Paul uses imitation. He does not imitate the Messiah by fishing, wearing his hair in a particular fashion, fasting forty days in the wilderness or collecting precisely a dozen disciples. He rarely speaks Jesus' native language, Arameic. Even when he recommends celibacy (1 Cor 7), Paul does not appeal to Jesus' celibate lifestyle as a model.' Jason B. Hood, *Imitating God in Christ: Recapturing a Biblical Pattern* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 11–12.

application would allow Christian ethics to remain both faithful and creative.³⁷ Seen in this way, the analogical imagination is

the main bridge between the biblical text and contemporary ethical practice. Jesus did not come teaching timeless moral truths or a uniform way of life to be replicated in every generation. Rather his words, encounters, and life story set patterns that can be flexibly but faithfully extended to new circumstances. These patterns lead us to envision analogous ways of acting that are partly the same and partly different.³⁸

The second idea that I am drawing on is that we need to start from some more general feature of Jesus’ attitude. Returning to Andrew Linzey, the theological strength of his position does not lie in the hypotheses I discussed above; it lies in his imaginative application of what he understands to be characteristic of Jesus in general. This perspective is well reflected in his words: ‘If we are to ask how it is that we humans are to exercise our dominion or God-given power over non-human animals, then we need to look no further than to Jesus as our moral exemplar: of power expressed in powerlessness and of strength expressed in compassion.’³⁹

A similar view, namely, that the relationship to nature is to be based on the pattern of Jesus’ life of service, not tyrannical violence, can be found in other theologians such as Douglas John Hall and Norman Habel.⁴⁰ This kind of approach is fruitful as it allows us to avoid the problems I have outlined in the previous section and provide a basic criterion for relating to non-human creatures. My own view is that such a fundamental criterion, derivable from the body of gospel material, may be *compassion accompanied by care for the suffering*.⁴¹

³⁷ See Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 56.

³⁸ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 49. For the relationship between analogy and normativity see page 55.

³⁹ Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 71.

⁴⁰ See Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (rev. ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans – New York: Friendship Press, 1990), 210–211; Norman Habel, *An Inconvenient Text: Is a Green Reading of the Bible Possible?* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009), 74–77.

⁴¹ The question of compassion, sympathy, empathy or ‘fellow-feeling’ in relation to animals has been reflected by several theologians. These include Martin M. Lintner, Daniel K. Miller or Michael Rosenberger. See Martin M. Lintner, *Der Mensch und das liebe Vieh: ethische Fragen im Umgang mit Tieren* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 2017), 21, 104–105; Daniel K. Miller, *Animal Ethics and Theology: The Lens of the Good*

The Synoptic Gospels repeatedly recount Jesus' compassion when confronted with human affliction. Jesus is touched when he meets a leper (Mark 1:41) and two blind men (Matt 20:34). He is moved when he looks at a mother mourning the death of her only son (Luke 7:13), or at a crowd of people who are like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34; Matt 9:36; Matt 14:14) and starving (Mark 8:2; Matt 14:14). In all these cases the verb *σπλαγγίζομαι* is used to indicate that Jesus is inwardly affected by the suffering of others.⁴² The same verb occurs in some parables, such as the parable of the prodigal son, where it expresses the father's emotion when he sees his son from afar (Luke 15:20), or in the parable of the unforgiving servant, where it denotes the master's compassion for the debtor (Matthew 18:27).

Jesus, as New Testament scholar Dale C. Allison, Jr. asserts,

did not proclaim the wonderful things to come and then pass by on the other side of the road. He rather turned his eschatological ideal in an ethical blueprint for compassionate ministry in the present, which means that, in addition to saying that things would get better, he set about making it so.⁴³

E. P. Sanders even argues that 'the overall tenor of Jesus' teaching is compassion towards human frailty'.⁴⁴ Similarly, Marcus J. Borg notes that compassion played a crucial role for Jesus. In his view, 'for Jesus, compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered in God'.⁴⁵ Borg refers to Luke 6:36, which he views as an early tradition, and suggests that this verse should be translated as 'be compassionate as God is compassionate' rather than 'be merciful as God is merciful'. As he observes, in English, 'mercy' and 'merciful' usually connote a relationship of superiority and

Samaritan (Abingdon – New York: Routledge, 2012), 62–66, 70–71; Rosenberger, *Der Traum vom Frieden zwischen Mensch und Tier*, 143–147. Michael Rosenberger also points to research showing that ethically motivated vegetarians and vegans feel more compassion and have a better ability to empathise with animals than meat-eaters. See Rosenberger, *Wie viel Tier darf's sein?*, 40–42.

⁴² Cf. Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (Garden City: Image Books, 1982), 16–17.

⁴³ Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids – Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 113.

⁴⁴ E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (2nd ed., London: Penguin Books, 1995), 202.

⁴⁵ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again, for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 46.

subordination, as well as a situation where a person has done something wrong, while ‘most commonly compassion is associated with feeling the suffering of somebody else and being moved by that suffering to do something’.⁴⁶ However, I believe that the meaning of ‘mercy’ depends on the specific context in which it is used and that the term ‘compassion’ can sometimes denote a mere emotion that does not lead to acts of practical help. In my proposal for the basic criterion, I prefer the formulation ‘compassion accompanied by care for the suffering’ precisely to avoid this misunderstanding.

In setting this criterion, I find myself not only close to Andrew Linzey’s position but also to that of liberation theologian Jon Sobrino, for whom mercy is a characteristic feature of Jesus and therefore of crucial, guiding importance for Christians and the church.⁴⁷ Sobrino’s concept of mercy is in many ways similar to how I understand compassion accompanied by care for the suffering. He himself explicitly writes that for Jesus, mercy (*miseriordia*) or *compassion* (*compasión*) is central, and he regards mercy not only as a feeling but also as an action that is aimed at helping and defending victims.⁴⁸

Sobrino focuses primarily on the poor, but his approach can – and, I believe, should – be extended to non-human creatures. Again, it was none other than Andrew Linzey who stated that ‘there can be no liberation theology without the liberation of creation itself [...]’.⁴⁹ And Sobrino himself leaves the door open to this idea as he writes that ‘the place of the church is with “the other”, and with the most radical otherness of that other – his suffering – especially when the suffering is massive, cruel, and unjust’.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 47.

⁴⁷ See Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 15–26; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 90–92.

⁴⁸ Jon Sobrino, ‘Jesus of Galilee from the Savadoran Context: Compassion, Hope, and Following the Light of the Cross,’ *Theological Studies* 70, 2 (2009): 454, doi: 10.1177/004056390907000211.

⁴⁹ Linzey, *Animal Theology*, 72. Several authors have recently addressed liberation theology in relation to environmental issues or specifically to animals. See, for example, Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009); Clair Linzey, *Developing Animal Theology: An Engagement with Leonardo Boff* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); Julia Blanc, ‘Arme Tiere: die Option für die Armen als möglicher Anschlusspunkt einer christlichen Tierethik,’ in *Mensch – Tier – Gott: Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen an eine christliche Tierethik*, ed. Martin M. Lintner (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021), 219–239.

⁵⁰ Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 21.

Compassion accompanied by care for the suffering is such a general value that it leaves ample room for ethical creativity and imagination but at the same time provides a very clear optic or filter for looking at particular problems. Its use does not mean the exclusion of specific words and stories from the Gospels. These are not only the source from which such compassion is drawn but also serve as an inspiring and evocative supplement to ethical reflection based on this criterion.

An example of a biblical story with such evocative and inspirational potential is the parable of the good Samaritan. The Samaritan is driven by compassion in helping his neighbour (Luke 10:33),⁵¹ and the narrative thus illustrates a perspective that I see as decisive. At the same time, it can channel ethical reflection in a more specific direction – for example, it shows that compassion accompanied by care for the suffering involves other values and therefore criteria, namely self-limitation for others and moral sensitivity, which is the antithesis of self-centredness, narcissism, and ‘moral blindness’.⁵² As Spohn notes, moral blindness is not total in most cases but selective – the eye is often fixed on certain problems while others are morally ‘invisible’. These and similar questions and stimuli that emerge from reading this parable can then be applied to the realm of non-human creatures and used ethically through analogical imagination.

In this context, it is worth noting that there is an apocryphal story about Jesus that bears some similarities to the parable of the good

⁵¹ Here, too, the term *πλαγχνίζομαι* is used. Given the theme of following Jesus, it should be mentioned that this parable has also been interpreted Christologically. François Bovon remarks on this: ‘Ought we simply to reject the patristic and medieval equation that made of the Samaritan an image of Jesus Christ? I do not think so, since the parable draws on a model in picturing what the love of one’s neighbour is like. For the Samaritan adopts the feelings of Christ himself and repeats Christ’s acts. Was not Jesus – he too, he before all others – “moved with pity” in the face of human beings’ suffering, solitude, and grief (cf. 7:13)? Did he not come as a physician to care for and save what was lost (cf. 5:31–32)? And behind Jesus’ active compassion, there is the symmetrical and programmatic “good pleasure” (the *εὐδοκία*), the plan of salvation, the active goodness of God (cf. 10:21). Thus, although I maintain the ethical orientation of the passage, I do not underestimate either the Christological element, containing an especially exemplary Christology, or the theological rooting in a theology of the plan of salvation.’ François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 64.

⁵² Cf. Johann Baptist Metz, ‘Compassion: zu einem Weltprogramm des Christentums im Zeitalter des Pluralismus der Religionen und Kulturen,’ in *Compassion: Weltprogramm des Christentums; soziale Verantwortung lernen*, ed. Johann Baptist Metz, Lothar Kuld and Adolf Weisbrod (Freiburg am Breisgau: Herder, 2000), 17.

Samaritan and explicitly involves an animal.⁵⁵ The animal, like the man who fell among the robbers, is beaten, and Jesus is not oblivious to the suffering creature but actively helps it:

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 that 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 complains 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.’⁵⁴

The origin of this work is shrouded in mystery,⁵⁵ but the narrative demonstrates the author’s desire to extend to non-human creatures what he or she considers to be characteristic of Jesus’ attitude. If Jesus was compassionate and helped the suffering, it is likely that he would have acted similarly in the situation depicted in the apocryphal story – he would not have viewed the suffering creature as a mere object or possession, would not have been insensitive to its pain, and would have devoted his time to remedying the situation. However, this story need

⁵⁵ See Erich Grässer, ‘Kirche und Tierschutz – eine Anklage,’ in *Tierschutz: Testfall unserer Menschlichkeit*, ed. Ursula M. Händel (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), 61. Cf. Lintner, *Der Mensch und das liebe Vieh*, 30–31.

⁵⁴ I quote Richard Bauckham’s translation that is based on a German translation of a Coptic source. Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, 86.

⁵⁵ See Grässer, ‘Kirche und Tierschutz,’ 61; Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, 87; Andrew Linzey and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *After Noah: Animals and the Liberation of Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1997), 86, n. 18.

not be regarded merely as a narrative grasp of how Jesus would probably have acted under such circumstances. It can also serve as a model for how Jesus' followers should properly treat non-human creatures. Understood in this way, it is an outstanding example of an analogical imagination based on a fundamental feature of Jesus' practice – the criterion of compassion accompanied by care for the suffering.

It is this criterion – or similar criteria that can be drawn from the body of gospel material – that establishes a plausible connection between following Jesus and ethical attitudes toward non-human creatures. Not only is this criterion a counterbalance to certain forms of sin, such as sloth (indifference, insensitivity) or cruelty, but at least in some cases, it can lead to quite specific ethical attitudes. While particular issues may be subject to dispute, if we accept compassion accompanied by care for the suffering as the guiding ethical perspective, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that wherever our actions or inactions cause or enable *unnecessary suffering*,⁵⁶ we find ourselves in conflict with this Christologically grounded criterion.

Conclusion

The foundation of my argument is that the concept of following Jesus, coupled with the theologically grounded claim of his normativity, can provide a basic framework for ethical considerations about the appropriate treatment of non-human creatures. In taking this approach, we can avoid the danger of creating a 'green' Jesus or facing serious hermeneutical and other difficulties associated with trying to apply Jesus' words and actions in a direct way. The alternative I suggest is to

⁵⁶ Determining what is avoidable suffering would, of course, merit a more detailed discussion, which I cannot pursue here. Such a consideration would have to include the plight of non-human creatures as well as human beings, the fate of individual animals as well as biotic communities, and take into account their interconnectedness and interdependence. How complex this issue can be is suggested, for instance, by Rosemary Radford Ruether, who writes: 'Environmentalists see animal rights activists as operating out of a misplaced sentimentality for particular favorite animals, which often results in greater hurt to these animals. Thus, for example, in cases where monitored culling of herds of deer or horses in state parks has been stopped on grounds of sentimental feelings for these types of animals, the result has been ecological disaster. Not only have proliferating herds of horses or deer stripped the forests and grasses for food, but finally have died in large numbers from starvation, a form of death more painful than if their numbers had been kept within limits through periodic shooting.' Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1994), 221–222.

follow the path laid out by the key feature or features of Jesus’ teaching and actions. If we use these as a starting point for an analogical imagination, what comes into play is not a problematic attempt to copy the ways of Jesus, but a creative yet clearly demarcated ethical reflection.

I have proposed compassion accompanied by care for the suffering as such a feature, and I have based this suggestion on specific gospel passages and the views of some New Testament scholars. While it by no means needs to be the only ‘rule’, I believe that the approach I am highlighting in this paper is a valid one and provides a fundamental principle for considering a wide range of issues such as intensive factory farming, animal research, genetic engineering, zoos, etc. Applying this criterion is unlikely to lead to a consensus on how we should appropriately treat non-human creatures in each and every case, but certain types of behaviour will appear questionable or unacceptable in its light.

That is not to say that the value of compassion accompanied by care for the suffering needs to be expressed in the form of a prohibition of specific acts. In the first place, this ethical principle represents a positive perspective that leads to the development of considerations about what can be done to embody it. The use of this value is always linked to the responsibility of each moral agent, who cannot simply appeal to the fact that Jesus did this or that particular deed or uttered this or that particular word. But he or she can appeal to the basic attitude of Jesus, drawn from the Gospels, and thus meaningfully connect following Jesus with a kind relationship to non-human creatures.

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