

SARAH WITHROW KING

ANIMALS Are Not Ours

(No, Really, They're Not.)

AN EVANGELICAL
ANIMAL LIBERATION
THEOLOGY



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(No, Really, They're Not)

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Animals Are Not Ours
(No, Really, They're Not)

*An Evangelical Animal
Liberation Theology*

Sarah Withrow King



The Lutterworth Press

*For Isaiah—may the world you inherit be one of justice,
kindness, humility, and love*

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PETA—Feeding the World infographic

ESA—Peace Begins on Our Plates (reprint from PRISM Magazine)

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Contents

Acknowledgments | vii

Introduction | 1

- 1 Stealing Chickens in Austria (It Was an Accident, I Swear) | 9

PART ONE Looking at the Word through an Animal Lens

Introduction to Part One | 15

- 2 Creation (or, Using Animals Says to God, “I Don’t Think You Got It Quite Right in Genesis”) | 17
- 3 What It Means to “Have Dominion” | 21
- 4 The Prophets | 29
- 5 Jesus, the Prince of Peace | 34
- 6 I Think Jesus Dug Birds, Too | 39
- 7 The Good Samaritan: Animals as Neighbors | 41
- 8 The End and the Now | 44
- 9 The Bible Tells Me So . . . | 47

PART TWO Intersections and Bridges (The Oppression Connection)

Introduction to Part Two | 57

- 10 Do Animals Suffer? (And Does It Matter?) | 61
- 11 The Trinity and Community: Being in Right Relationship with Animals | 72
- 12 What Is a Human? | 81
- 13 The Heresy of Hierarchy | 93

CONTENTS

14	Stewardship of Creation (or, Changing Light Bulbs Isn't Enough)	101
15	Can You Be a Peace-Loving Meat Eater? (Pssst, No, 'cause Using Animals Necessitates Violence)	114
16	Whose Bodies Matter?	121
17	Liberate Your Language	128
18	Undercover Investigations: Hell on Earth Exposed	131
PART THREE	Now What? The Basics of Treating Animals Well	
	Introduction to Part Three	139
19	Don't Eat Them	140
20	Don't Beat Them (or Pay People Who Do)	143
21	Your Animal Companions	145
22	PETA's Community Animal Project (and How You Can Help Animals in Your Own Community)	149
23	Buying Cruelty Free	154
24	Public Policies	157
25	Frequently Asked Questions	163
	<i>Epilogue</i>	172
	<i>Glossary</i>	173
	<i>Bibliography</i>	177

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Introduction

An Ode to Meat

I LOVE MEAT. L-O-V-E it. I used to eat a couple of sausage-and-egg McMuffins for breakfast and a Dagwood-style deli sandwich for lunch every day (is there really anything much better to eat than a perfect sandwich?). For dinner, I loved all God's creatures, right next to my mashed potatoes (or French fries) and some limp broccoli smothered in cheese sauce: salmon, trout, halibut, crab, clam, lobster, shrimp, cow, bison, deer, rabbit, chicken, turkey, pig, and lamb. My favorite snack was salami and cheese on crackers, most abundant around the holidays. When we were young, we often went to a buffet restaurant with my grandma and grandpa for dinner on Fridays. It was a smorgasbord of meat, all different ways. My favorite salad was a Cobb—two kinds of meat, plus eggs and cheese. Church cookouts and pot-lucks and Wednesday night dinners were always satisfying.

When I was around ten years old, someone handed me a leaflet outside of the Albertsons where we did our grocery shopping. It described where veal came from, and I felt pretty bad for the baby cows, tied up for weeks in little cages, so I never ate veal again . . . well, until I really wanted a calzone that had a little veal mashed in with the sausage and beef. "No big deal," I thought. Under the influence of a nerdy-cute camp counselor, I gave up meat for Lent one year—but forgot my vow when I went to Subway for lunch with my girlfriends. I didn't think of my turkey sub as having meat on it. For the first six months I was vegan, all I wanted, every day, was a bacon cheeseburger.

I really like meat.

Confusion to Contempt to Compassion

I didn't just really like meat; I thought it was bizarre that anyone would choose not to eat it. At my seventh-grade birthday party, all we could think of to feed my one vegetarian friend was salad. What else do vegetarians eat, right? I have been paid back for that early ignorance in spades—every time the vegetarian option is a plate of steamed vegetables, or I am asked to bring my own food to a function, or someone offers fish instead of “meat.”

Eventually, I moved from confusion to contempt, making fun of my friend Beau when he ordered a meatless burrito from a fast-food taco place, and mercilessly mocking my vegan friend Matt when he refused to eat a bean burrito that had mistakenly been made with cheese. Now, I smile graciously when someone learns I'm vegan and takes extra pains to describe their carnivorous ways, or when, for the 195th time, a jolly grandfather type at church invites my husband and me over for steaks (sigh).

So how did this meat-loving evangelical girl from Idaho end up working at the world's largest and most notorious animal rights organization, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)? I've been an activist since I was old enough to walk. At four, my parents took me to a pro-life rally at the Idaho capitol building, and our picture made the front page of the Boise newspaper. In middle school, I was president of a drug education club with the unfortunate acronym OSSOM (Oregon Student Safety on the Move). In high school, I presided over the local Teens for Life group, tabled for Oregon Right to Life at local events, performed pro-life songs and plays at rallies, and attended statewide pro-life conferences. I had a strong sense of justice, of the clear line between right and wrong. Though some of that righteous indignation was the byproduct of teenage know-it-all-itis, it was also fueled in part by my evangelical beliefs. I was raised in the church, had read the Bible front to back multiple times, spent all my spare time in youth group, was baptized, went on mission trips, prayed a decent amount, and thought I understood the Bible clearly. I also knew that God had called me to stand up for justice and life in the face of a culture that systematically finds ways to prevent lives from flourishing.

During college, when my brother was vegan, I went to a vegan restaurant with him and picked up a pamphlet that was left out on our table. I started to read about factory farming and the way that billions of animals that end up on North-American plates are raised and slaughtered. My images of happy animals on Old MacDonald's farm were shattered and replaced with dark new ones: miserable lives all ending in the same

INTRODUCTION

nightmarish way, hung upside down on a fast-moving slaughter line, throat slit, waiting to die. It took about a year, but eventually I stopped being able to look at the chicken on my plate as food and started to realize that when I ate meat, my meal had stopped a beating heart. I lived on death.

Animals Are Not Ours

By the time I graduated from college, I had a fair bit of painful life experience behind me: a series of moves, multiple bouts of serious depression, a marriage broken beyond repair, and mounds of personal and student debt. The years since high school had also radically shifted my faith. My relationship with Jesus was personal now—raw and real. I'd been through the valleys of the shadow of death and Jesus had walked beside me, picked me up and carried me through to another side. The overflow of mercy and grace helped me show others mercy, as well. I was (am) still a judgmental jerk, but less so, and with a great deal more humility. Some folks say that not eating animals makes them kinder, less angry, more compassionate. Jesus did that for me . . . well, I'm a slow learner, so Jesus is still doing that for me, day by day.

Both of my parents had jobs in the insurance industry, and I, being young and judgmental, wanted to do something different, to work for a cause. Thankfully, I don't mind being broke all the time. I started my job search by making a long list of organizations that I thought I would feel good working for, then ranking them. My friend Matt (the vegan one that I made fun of in high school—he was nicer to me than I had been to him and kept being friends with me) told me about this organization called PETA, and I went to their website to see what they were all about. My life changed that day.

I was sitting in my mom's office in the house I had grown up in, in Eugene, Oregon. It was a warm August morning and her desk was cluttered with my organizational research and résumé material, household bills, correspondence, and photos. My heart started racing when I read the PETA motto: "Animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use for entertainment." My face felt flush as I read it over and over again, and I began to feel a deep joy, a connection with the words, which articulated what my soul had understood for so long already. They're not ours. It would take me nearly eleven years to articulate in theological terms the Spirit-truth that overpowered me that morning.

INTRODUCTION

Orientation

PETA moved to the top of my list of organizations I wanted to work for. On October 4, 2002, I wrote, “On the day after my birthday, I’ll be flying to Norfolk to interview for a policy research position with PETA. I’m *very* excited and, well, rendered a little speechless that I landed an interview at my dream job so quickly and from so far away. Anyway, it’s a big blessing. This is something that I’m *very* passionate about, but have always felt so helpless . . .”

By the last day of the three-day interview, I was more determined than ever to work for PETA. I had met with PETA President Ingrid Newkirk on my first day in the office and shown her my portfolio, dutifully prepared and printed on (I can’t believe I’m admitting this) Noah’s ark-themed paper. To demonstrate my commitment to the mission of the organization, my portfolio claimed, “While many injustices of the world inspire a passionate response from me, none is stronger than the pure, visceral dismay registered at the thought of various human abuses of animals.” I showed her the aforementioned front-page picture of bundled and bespeckled four-year-old me on my dad’s shoulders at a right-to-life rally in Boise (activist cred!). Four days after I returned home to Eugene, I wrote in my journal, “!!!!!! I GOT IT!!!!”

Two weeks later, I checked two big boxes and carried my cat, Max, through security at Portland International Airport. That Thursday, I started at PETA. I had never felt more secure, more confident, and more certain that I was living into God’s call for my life. I felt God’s presence and careful watch every day and night. With no car, no apartment, no furniture, and few belongings, I began a brand new life in Norfolk, Virginia, completely dependent on God to provide. And God provided in abundance. A tiny attic apartment, hand-me-down furniture, frequent rides to thrift stores and grocery stores and the vet, friends who became my nuclear family, and a church family who eventually introduced me to my husband and encouraged my journey to Palmer Theological Seminary.

My date book from that time is full until December 16 and 17 of 2002. On those days, starting at noon each day, is simply written “ORIENTATION.” During orientation, each of the major departments came to give a brief presentation on their work to new employees, not so different from the orientations I had received at various hotels where I had worked. But, since a picture is worth a thousand words, the presentations at PETA were frequently accompanied by videos.

INTRODUCTION

I should pause here—before this, even when I ate animals, I did not watch animal movies. Or read books about animals. I knew the animal always got the short end of the stick. At a youth-group lock-in, when the first few frames of *Where the Red Fern Grows* popped up on the movie screen and I saw two sweet-looking dogs, I forced myself to sleep in the middle of a packed, fully lit room to avoid watching the film (I've still never seen it but can guess that it doesn't end well for the dogs). I excused myself from a friend's living room when her family sat down to watch *Old Yeller* together and hung out on her front porch for the duration of the movie.

What I saw during those two orientation days has stayed with me for more than a decade.

Baby elephants in Thailand, dragged screaming from their mothers, tied up and beaten with nail-studded sticks for days until their spirits and bodies are so broken that they can be trained to carry tourists. Elephants, tigers, and lions used by circuses here in the U.S., beaten with bullhooks, punched, and burned to force them to do stupid tricks in front of throngs of screaming children, who would scream in horror if they knew the pain endured by the animals they love.

Cats in China, boiled alive and skinned, tossed back into pots of water, air bubbles from their noses indicating that they are still alive, slowly dying. Mice, heads cut off with a pair of scissors by a lab assistant. Mother rats shoved into tubes and forced to breathe cigarette smoke to prove again what we already know.

Beagles in a pharmaceutical lab, slowly being poisoned to death—struggling to stand, foaming at the mouth, given only the insufficient grace of a loving touch by the hand of an undercover investigator. Mother dogs in stacked wire cages in puppy mills—matted and filthy, pus and blood oozing from wounds. This is what we do to dogs, the human's closest and most loyal companion.

A beaver struggling for ten minutes in an underwater trap before finally drowning. Foxes, wolves, dogs, and squirrels mangled by leg-hold traps, finally bludgeoned or stomped to death when the trapper returns to check the line. Minks in cages, spinning wildly, out of their minds with boredom, then anally or vaginally electrocuted so their skins can be made into coats for the very wealthy or fur trim for wealthy wannabes.

And thirteen long minutes of standard agricultural practices like castration, dehorning, tail docking, tooth pulling, branding, and debeaking (all without anesthetic); overcrowding; gestation crates and veal crates;

INTRODUCTION

packed and terrifying transport trucks; and bloody, dark slaughterhouses where, no matter how loud the animals' screams become, the line never slows . . .¹

After those two days, there are no more notes, no more to-dos, and no more appointments. Those two afternoons turned my adventure into a focused, desperate attempt to stem cruelty and abuse, the depth, breadth, and depravity of which I had never fathomed.

A few years later, I was representing PETA at a Christian music festival in central Washington. My colleague and I were showing the same thirteen-minute video that I had watched during orientation and talking to attendees about why animal issues mattered to us and melded with our faith. I explained to one man (a chaperone) that twenty-seven billion animals were killed for food in the U.S. alone each year. His response to me was “thank God for that.” I realized that although my personal faith was stronger than ever, I had no theological framework from which to articulate what I knew to be true—that animals aren't ours.

I hope this book can be a resource for those who care about animals and hate what humans do to them, yet aren't sure how to stop contributing to cruelty or how to talk about the issues from a Jesus point of view. And I offer thanks to the theologians who have come before me, especially Andrew Linzey, who has been a pioneer in this field for decades, and David Clough, who recently wrote the first systematic animal theology. While this book represents my best thinking on the subject today, I know I have much to learn still and am grateful for these and other teachers.

My Cre(e)d

I don't eat meat, a choice that is consistent with my understanding of the nature of Jesus's life and death as it relates to the coming of the kingdom of God, in which all creation will be reconciled to the Creator. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, suffered through and triumphed over death. Jesus's life and ministry inform my own. His living, dying, and rising brought the kingdom of God to earth, though we are not yet fully reconciled to one another or to the Creator. We created beings therefore have the extraordinary opportunity and immense responsibility to be agents of kingdom promises—we look forward to a time when “the people who walk in darkness [will see] a great light” (Isa 9:2) and “they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain”

1. To watch this short, disturbing documentary, see www.meat.org.

INTRODUCTION

(Isa 11:9). In this “already, but not yet” world, I try to make choices that reflect a reconciled creation, including a rejection of the violence and death necessary for the consumption of meat.

I am the firstborn child of recent Christian converts and was reared in a conservative, English-speaking, United-States-of-American, middle-class household. I was a longtime member of a conservative evangelical church and now belong to a community associated with the Brethren in Christ, but I was raised and still identify as “nondenominational.” My theology and praxis continue to clarify with experience and insights from the Holy Spirit.

I believe that the Bible is an inspired word of God. Through the course of its narrative, scripture systematically reveals the nature and purpose of God’s kingdom and clearly communicates God’s plan to reconcile creation.

I believe that Jesus was God-enfleshed and that the Holy Spirit is God-in-us. God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are three names for God. When I worship, I typically think of God. When I meditate, I most often ask the Holy Spirit to come or the Lord Jesus to be my guide. When I seek to understand how best to live in the world, I try to follow Jesus’s example. But whether I call the name of Jesus, Holy Spirit, or Lord God, I am reaching out to the one true God.

I believe that Jesus was crucified, died, and rose from death. I believe that on the cross, Jesus carried my sin and the sins of all the world, from all time. I believe Jesus is with me in struggle and pain and joy and frustration and love and celebration and birth and death and every experience in between.

I believe that God created the world and that it surely stretches far beyond human awareness. The eighth chapter of Romans tells us that all of creation will be reconciled to God. I believe that God is reflected in and glorified throughout creation. While God’s original creation was perfect and peaceful, human sin marks the created world with struggle, suffering, and the joy of grace given freely. We struggle against a propensity for selfishness and sin, and we offer joyful thanksgiving for the grace that leads to reconciliation.

I believe that humans are made in the image of God and given a special responsibility for stewardship of the whole of creation. Human arrogance, among other sins, leads us to justify the horrific abuse of God’s creation for our own selfish means.

I believe that through grace, created beings have the opportunity to be reconciled with one another, with creation, and with God. Grace is a gift

INTRODUCTION

from God, not earned or deserved. Grace is evidence of God's deep desire both to be in intimate relationship with us and to see us experience the joy of being in right relationship with the good creation and God. These questions of human nature, human destiny, and relationship among created beings have been foremost in my spiritual journey and have developed through reading, dialogue with other believers, and prayer.

I believe that God will continue to teach me, and am deeply aware of how much I have yet to learn. But I know that even when I am hardheaded and ill-willed, Jesus loves me deeply. Jesus also loves you deeply. And Jesus deeply loves the folks that you and I have a hard time loving. Like slow left-lane drivers and tailgaters.

Stealing Chickens in Austria

(IT WAS AN ACCIDENT, I SWEAR)

IN 2004, I WENT to London to work with PETA UK. As a wannabe world traveler without two dimes to rub together, this was a dream come true. Close to the end of my time in London, I realized that I had spent far too many weekends wandering the same streets and watching DVDs by myself in a tiny rented flat, and I booked myself a ten-dollar weekend flight to Salzburg, Austria.

I arrived late, past dark, but managed, with the help of a Londoner in town for a dance-school audition, to find the hostel where we were both staying. There was a short walk after our bus ride, and though it was raining, we passed an outdoor sausage festival where a German band was playing the UB40 version of Elvis's "Can't Help Falling in Love," one of my all-time favorite songs. I took it as a sign that I was in God's hands, despite my travel jitters.

The next morning I set out to discover the city, found a vegetarian Indian restaurant, visited the free museums and Mahler's birthplace, and strolled on the north bank of the river. I wandered into the nineteenth-century evangelical *Christuskirche* to sit in silence and prayer, my back against the cool wooden pew, while the organist rehearsed for the next day's service. I had a deep sense of peace, of Christ next to me and accompanying my steps—perhaps the only way I could have managed a weekend trip to a foreign country alone.

On my second day in Salzburg, I took the obligatory *Sound of Music* tour (FYI, the gazebo is closed for those wishing to reenact a certain plucky dance scene, as some numbskull broke a leg attempting the feat) and

navigated my way to a vegetarian festival that happened to be taking place in one of the city squares. In the category of “it really is a small world,” I ran into an old acquaintance in a city five thousand miles from my home in a country where I barely spoke the language. As the festival came to a close, my friend—we’ll call him Martin—let me know that a local grassroots activist group was going to do an undercover investigation at a nearby chicken factory farm that evening. He asked if I wanted to come along.

The nature of undercover investigations is that they are stealthy. I am *not* stealthy. I am big and klutzy and bookish and a rule-follower. But I said yes, I want to come along on this investigation. When in Rome . . . or Salzburg.

So Martin and I went to a meeting where the plans for the evening were carefully hashed out. In German. More fancy German than I know, which is the high-school-discussion kind, mostly relating to the name of my uncle and the location of the nearest bathroom.

After what seemed like hours of talking, we finally all piled into cars and drove for miles and miles, out of the city and into the surrounding countryside. At this point, I started to question the wisdom of my tagging along on this adventure. What if I got separated from the group and was left to wander the Austrian countryside alone, in the dark (this was pre-iPhone, mind)? If we were caught, would I be deported? Would I be sent back to London, or to the U.S.? I was *terrified* that because I worked for PETA, I would drag the organization into my poor choice. When I realized that I was carrying my reflective messenger bag emblazoned with the PETA logo, I kicked myself a little harder.

Eventually, the drivers turned their lights off and pulled onto a gravel road. We parked in a clearing and walked back down a path to a giant warehouse filled with captive egg-laying hens. I told Martin I didn’t want to go inside, pondering whether I’d claim he kidnapped me when the police caught and interrogated us under a harsh spotlight. Martin and a few of the others climbed through a vent and disappeared into the warehouse. I waited by stacks of crates. I knew what was inside—row upon row of cages, each packed with hens, stacked one on top of the other; the stink of ammonia, feces, dead and decaying birds would be overwhelming. Dead birds would be in cages with live birds, some of whose feet would have grown around the cage wires, since their movement was so restricted. I was afraid of being arrested, but I was also horrified to come face to face with the real-life suffering that, to this point, I’d only seen on video.