

ANIMALS AT THE MANGER

CATTLE!

Cattle come from animals called aurochs. They were domesticated later than goats and sheep were – perhaps in the Neolithic period (around 10,000 BC).ⁱ Wild oxen would have been about six feet tall so domesticating them would have been no easy feat. They were first prized for their meat and later milking, hides, and ability to pull plows and carts. To turn a wild bull into a working animal, one needed to castrate them to make them more docile. Can you imagine approaching that task in 10,000 BC against a strong, six foot high creature with no modern equipment to help?ⁱⁱ

Once cattle were domesticated, it was easier to maintain a settled, agricultural life as opposed to a nomadic one. Being able to work with cattle changed human society and the courses our lives could take. By the time we enter the biblical stories of Genesis, cattle were well-established and different breeds had been developed to accommodate many different climates around the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the Bible, cattle were important markers of wealth and stability, they satisfied needs for food and clothing, and they aided farm work. In addition to pulling a plow, they also helped thresh wheat by pulling a sledge. The cattle in the Bible may have derived from the same line as the zebu, pictured below.^{iv}

1. When you think of cattle, what Bible stories or Christmas carols do you think of?
 - a. Golden calf (Exodus 32), “the calf and the lion will lie down together” (Isaiah 11:6), Fatted calf (Luke 15)
 - b. “Away in a Manger” (“the cattle are lowing; the poor baby wakes”), “Infant Holy, Infant Lowly” (“for his bed a cattle stall”), “Once in Royal David’s City” (“stood a lowly cattle shed”), “What Child is This?” (“Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?”)



“Zebu in Wukro, Ethiopia,” photographed by Bernard Gagnon, 2012.



“Holy Cow!” – a Zebu photographed in Pune, India by Ville Miettinen, 2006..

ISAIAH 1:2-4, 15-20

²Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:

I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.

³The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.

⁴Ah, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken the LORD,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged!

¹⁵When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;

cease to do evil,

¹⁷ learn to do good;

seek justice,

rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

¹⁸Come now, let us argue it out,
says the LORD:

though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow;

though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.

¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;

²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

1. In verse 2, why do you think Isaiah prophesies to the heavens and the earth?
2. We talk about “raising” and “bringing up” children. The Hebrew words here also literally mean to grow, raise, even to make great.^v What does it mean to say that God raises us like parents raise children?
3. Verse 3 is the reason that almost all nativity sets include oxen and donkeys. There is a non-biblical book called “The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew” from the 7th century that tells this story of Jesus’ birth:

And on the third day after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, Mary went out of the cave, and, entering a stable, placed the child in a manger, and an ox and an ass adored him. Then was fulfilled that which was said by the prophet Isaiah, "The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib." Therefore, the animals, the ox and the ass, with him in their midst incessantly adored him.^{vi}

What do you think it means to say that oxen and donkeys know their owners? What important traits do they have?

4. The scriptures that were commonly read in Jesus’ day were translated into Greek, called the Septuagint. That translation uses the same word for “crib” as we find in the nativity story for Jesus’s “manger.”^{vii} As we strive to be faithful, how do we recognize God’s crib or Jesus’s manger? How is it different from other sources that might feed us?
5. What happens when we sin? How does it impact our lives? How does it impact God?
6. According to this passage, what does the Lord require of us?
7. In verse 18, why do you think God invites the people to “argue it out”? What is our argument?
8. After promising mercy and complete forgiveness, God urges us to be, “willing and obedient.” The first word can mean to breathe, be content with, obey, or to accept. The second word is the same as “hear” in verse 2. It means both “hear” and obey” at

the same time.^{viii} What does it mean to be content with God? Does that make us more likely to listen and act?

1 CORINTHIANS 9:1-12A

¹ Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? ² If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

³ This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴ Do we not have the right to our food and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷ Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?

⁸ Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law also say the same? ⁹ For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Or does God not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more?

1. Paul is writing to the church in Corinth and he's upset because some have been questioning and undermining his teaching. The word for "examine" in v3 can also mean questioning in order to solve a crime or even torture.^{ix} What is the wrong way to question a teacher/spiritual leader and what is the wrong way?
2. With many examples, Paul is arguing that he is truly an apostle and that workers deserve their pay. Do preachers/teachers/spiritual leaders deserve to be paid for their work or should they be tentmakers like Paul was (i.e. have a separate source of income)? What is reasonable payment for ministry?
3. In verse 9, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, part of the law of Moses. It is part of a larger passage of miscellaneous laws that includes: not withholding wages, not depriving the vulnerable of justice, and not reaping the entirety of your field, but leaving a corner with food for the alien, orphan, and widow. What is the significance of there being laws about caring for animals in the holy Law?

4. What symbolic meanings does it have to say, “you shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain”?
5. The Greek word for hope in verse 10 can mean expectation, trust, confidence, or faith.^x What do ministry leaders owe congregations and what do congregations owe ministry leaders? Does it feel wrong for Paul to say that he should, “reap material benefits”? Is it better to say that God reaps the benefits or that the needy and vulnerable do?
6. What should congregations expect to get from being a church community?
7. What do cattle/oxen teach us about our faith given these two passages? How do they guide us to the manger?



Nativity by an unidentified Kenyan artist, perhaps early 21st century.

ⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cattle> & <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neolithic>

ⁱⁱ G.S. Cansdale, “Cattle,” in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney and Moises Silva (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 797-799.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v See <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/1431.htm> & <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7311.htm>

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- vi https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nativity_scene#Components
- vii See <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/18.htm> & <https://biblehub.com/greek/5336.htm>
- viii <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/14.htm> & <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8085.htm>
- ix <https://biblehub.com/greek/350.htm>
- x <https://biblehub.com/greek/1680.htm>