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Animals in the Qur'an

The Islamic tradition has always held animals in high esteem, deserving the same level of consideration as humans. The Qur'an opines that "there is not an animal in the earth nor a flying creature flying on two wings, but they are people like you." This fascinating and highly original book examines the status and nature of animals as they are portrayed in the Qur'an and in adjacent exegetical works, in which animals are viewed as spiritual, moral, intelligent, and accountable beings. In this way, the study presents a challenge to the prevalent view of man's superiority over animals and suggests new ways of interpreting the Qur'an. By placing the discussion within the context of other religions and their treatment of animals, the book also makes a persuasive case for animal rights from an Islamic perspective.

Sarrah Tlili is an assistant professor in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Florida.

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*To my mother,
To the memory of my father,
To my husband*

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وَمَا أُوتِيْتُمْ مِّنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيْلًا

And of knowledge, you have been given but a little!

Qur'an, 17/al-Isrā': 85

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Preface

This book is an eco-centric reading of the Qur'an, focusing mainly on the animal component of the natural world. I argue that although the Qur'an – being “guidance to humankind” – addresses humans, situates itself within human understandings of the world, and is deeply preoccupied with humans' destiny, the message it communicates is that status depends on spirituality rather than rationality, or for that matter, on any feature that is assumed to belong exclusively to humankind. The Qur'an, I conclude, is a theocentric document: Any being that worships and obeys God obtains God's pleasure and is rewarded in the hereafter. The Qur'an presents these two elements (God's pleasure and afterlife reward or punishment) as the clearest indications of meaningful status. My eco-centric reading is thus situated within a theocentric worldview that has long been perceived in the Islamic scripture.

This book also seeks to challenge the assumption that only humans or the so-called rational beings are capable of engaging in meaningful relationships with God. Islamic tradition generally categorizes creation into two groups: rational beings, consisting of humans, angels, and jinn; and nonrational ones, consisting of all other creatures. Although in this conception God is admittedly not considered part of creation, He, somehow, seems to fit with, or at least to engage with or take interest in, the first more than the second group. It is as if God and the so-called rational beings are the only *active* parties in the scene of existence, whereas the rest of creation simply acts as a setting and decorum. This conception of the world may be inferred from the Qur'an, however, only at the cost of reducing certain enigmatic phenomena described in it to understandable ones, for example, by resorting to figurative interpretations. Opting for

such interpretations, however, is a *human* decision that may be motivated by anthropocentric ideas and feelings.

This conception of the world also seems to impose limitations on God. One of its possible implications is that God differs from the so-called rational beings in degree rather than in essence. God's knowledge, it is true, is understood to be infinite, whereas the so-called rational beings' knowledge remains extremely limited; however, the rational/nonrational division still seems to suggest that both God and rational beings more or less partake in the same type of knowledge, whereas other beings are thought to have none. The Qur'an strongly suggests, however, that the natural world engages with God in ways that are deeply meaningful yet generally inaccessible to humans. A reader who is willing to approach this scripture without certain prevalent assumptions about the human and nonhuman worlds will find a vibrant nature. The cosmos of the Qur'an is highly interactive with its Creator: It makes choices, experiences emotions, takes divine commands, prays, and hymns the praises of God. Naturally, nonhuman beings seem to interact with God in ways that are totally outside the realm of human experience and knowledge, thus, applying to them terminology that is used to describe human experiences is not without problems. The fact that humans do not have the language to describe or the means to perceive other beings' deeper realities, however, does not mean that such realities do not exist. Absence of evidence cannot be taken as evidence of absence. Acknowledging the enigmatic aspect of the natural world, furthermore, is not intellectually humiliating; rather, it is spiritually uplifting, as it may nurture feelings of humility and foster a sense of awe vis-à-vis God's creation.

I have been asked several times how warranted a non-anthropocentric reading of the Qur'an is. Is it truly necessary to place (or re-place) humans within the natural world? Could not the human being continue to remain above nature and still achieve a balanced relationship with the natural world, say, through the notion of stewardship? Needless to say, I am totally persuaded that a non-anthropocentric reading of the Qur'an is not only warranted, but also much needed. This is the case not only because such reading deepens our understanding of the Islamic scripture, but also for its (interconnected) theological and ecological implications.

In fact, assigning status on the sole basis of species membership seems to compete with the two most pivotal principles of the Qur'an: God's oneness and justice. As far as the first notion is concerned, placing humans above the natural world may lead (and has led) to their deification. As an illustration one need only to refer to Rashad Khalifa's translation of

Q. 2:30, in which he renders the Qur'anic word *khalifa* – which in the last century and a half has become overwhelmingly understood as “God’s vicegerent” – as “a temporary God”! Many modern Muslims would probably find the wording of this translation problematic, however, not the function it implies: the fact that humans act on God’s behalf among His creation. This function does seem to suggest that humans, unlike other creatures, are similar to God in fundamental ways. The phrase temporary God, therefore, is not inconsistent with this representational function, however, it appears to be totally discrepant with the Qur’an’s emphasis on the principles of God’s oneness and transcendence.

This alleged divine favoritism seems also to be incompatible with the Qur’anic notion of God’s justice. Many of course are able to reconcile the two notions of God’s justice and His alleged favoritism – be it at the level of race, gender, or species – by calling upon the principles of divine wisdom and/or freedom. God, it would be claimed, is free to raise someone above another either for reasons that are unknown to humans or for no reason at all. Although hypothetically this can be true, in my understanding this is not how the Qur’an describes God. Therefore, I hope that the distinction I make between the notions of “conferred” and “earned” status (last chapter) would enrich the discussion of the Qur’anic notion of divine justice and its impact on a number of issues, including, but not limited to, ecological matters.

The ecological impact of the exaggeration of humans’ status hardly needs to be elucidated. Many thinkers have, for example, identified the link between humanism, with its emphasis on humans’ centrality in the world, and the current ecological crisis. Similarly, the biblical notion of dominion has often been blamed for nurturing despotic attitudes toward nature. Regardless of whether or not such despotism was intended in the Bible, the notion itself has often been taken as a license for tyranny. In an Islamic context, there seems to be a correlation between the exaggeration of humans’ status, which has peaked in modern Islamic thought, and Muslims’ deteriorating attitudes toward nature in the last century or so. The aim of this book, however, is not to devalue humans; rather, it is to place them amidst a natural order that God seems to value greatly. Such an outlook, in my opinion, is spiritually more fruitful and practically more conducive to a healthy attitude toward nature.

Finally, I need to note that this study is not an exhaustive treatment of Qur’anic animal themes – such treatment proved to be beyond the scope of one book. It is, however, my hope to pursue this and related topics in forthcoming projects. The primary audience of this book would initially

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consist of students of Islam and the environment, particularly animal studies. Considering the nature of the questions it raises, however, I hope that it has something to offer to those who are interested in gender studies, ethics, and related fields.

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Working on this book has been intellectually and spiritually transformative, an experience for which I am deeply indebted to all those who helped me in the process. My thanks go first to my advisor, Professor Joseph Lowry for his stimulating ideas, support, encouragement, kindness, and for never failing to be there for me whenever I needed him. It has been a real privilege to have had the opportunity to work under the supervision of someone of his caliber. My sincere thanks also go to the other members of my graduate committee, Professors Everett Rowson, Roger Allen, and Jamal Elias. I am equally thankful to Professor Barbara Von Schlegell for her support and academic advice during my first years at the University of Pennsylvania. Professor Badredine Arfi from the University of Florida meticulously read and commented on my entire manuscript, providing excellent feedback on it, for which I am also very grateful. The University of Florida generously provided me with a grant that allowed me to prepare the final draft of this book.

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