

*On God and Dogs*, by Stephen H. Webb

reviewed by [Margaret B. Adam](#) in the [December 23, 1998](#) issue

By *Stephen H. Webb*, *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion*.  
(Oxford University, 222 pp.)

I hoped this book would help me resolve two animal issues that have been plaguing me: the decision to "put to sleep" our old and ailing dog, and our town's rampant deer population. I found much more than I had hoped for.

Stephen Webb presents a powerful and persuasive vision of God's peaceable kingdom, in which humans and animals live together in harmony. He challenges our tendency to dismiss animal concerns; he critiques our present animal rights discourse as inadequate to describe God's creation; and he presents an alternative story of gift and grace. This is less an ethical handbook on animal care than an outrageously faithful proclamation of the gospel: God's loving gift of creation is good, and harmony will prevail, despite the fall; Christ's death and resurrection redeem all creation from sin, suffering and death. These are truths worth living by.

Living in hope of the coming kingdom means working toward that kingdom's harmony. Our relationships with pets allow us to experience the excess of God's love, to respond with care, and to catch a glimpse of that which is beyond our own limitations. Therefore, according to Webb, "To pet a dog is not such a bad way to practice theology."

Rather than trying to adjust traditional readings of the Bible and theology to accommodate animal rights concerns or to dilute concerns about animals to fit traditional interpretations and teachings, Webb begins with his experience of grace through animal companionship. He explores the mystery of "our graceful relationship with companion animals, a relationship that is, significantly, linguistically constructed, so that what we say about our pet animals shapes what we actually do with them."

Along the way, Webb engages such thinkers as Stanley Hauerwas and John Berkman on a biblical foundation for animal welfare; Andrew Linzey on a theology of animal

rights; Carol Adams on animals, feminism and rhetoric; Vicki Hearne on training; and Karl Barth on self-righteousness in regard to vegetarianism. He portrays the Hebrew Bible's presentation of animals as respectful and caring, and acknowledges the paucity of animal references in the New Testament. Webb extends Paul's end-time theology, including all of creation in the conviction that how we interact with each other matters.

Webb understands the Eucharist not as "a commemoration of animal slaughter" but as the last sacrifice, in which Jesus overcomes suffering, pain and death for all who suffer and die, including animals. "If the Eucharist is a messianic banquet, and if the eschaton means total harmony, then the Eucharistic anticipation of the end time simply must be vegetarian," Webb states.

Webb writes about his appreciation for the genre of animal fiction, his understanding of the significance of the incarnation for animals, his thoughts on animal afterlife, and his guidelines for making sense of nature. His book sparks the imagination, shifts the reader's perspective, and sets the stage for the Good News, so that we are better prepared to work through the specific responsibilities of our relationships with animals and each other.